ETHAN MORDDEN

ANYTHING GOES

A HISTORY OF AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

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INTRODUCTION

When the composer-lyricist Frank Loesser became famous, in the middle of the twentieth century, two forms dominated Broadway music theatre, musical comedy and the more ambitious musical play. Loesser's form, in *Where's Charley?* and *Guys and Dolls*, was musical comedy. But he wrote his next piece, *The Most Happy Fella*, as an opera. True, much of it conformed to the practices of musical comedy, for example in the hoot-and-holler dance number "Big D" and the use of spoken dialogue. However, the romantic portions of the score were extremely lyrical, even ecstatic, and some of the ensemble writing surpassed even the standards of operetta. Then, too, the overture was no song medley but a prelude of leitmotifs, so volatile that it jumps from *Allegro giocoso* ("joyous") to *Moderato e misterioso* to *Largamente* ("grandiose") to *Allegro* and so on every few measures, as if only the most expansive composition could prepare the public—not merely to see a show but to *listen* to it.

Then the curtain rose on a restaurant at closing time. The music is marked *Dolente* ("pained"), but it is actually rather noncommittal in tone, strangely unevocative after, say, *Oklahoma!*'s tiny tone poem of dawn on the prairie or *Wonderful Town*'s orchestral tweaking of a thirties piano riff. But then a vamp breaks in, *Pesante* ("Heavy"), in brisk 4/4: grumpy and resentful, the very sound of endless trudging under the weight of laden trays. A waitress takes stage for the evening's first vocal, "Ooh! My Feet!," sarcastic and almost bitter yet, in its gamy honesty, likable.

This is Cleo, the sidekick of the heroine, Amy (who is called "Rosabella" till one spoken line before the show's finale). A customer Amy can't recall has left a note and a bit of jewelry for her—object: matrimony—and, after a longish musical scene with Cleo made of dialogue and *arioso* mixed together, Amy gets the Heroine's Wanting Song, "Somebody, Somewhere." It aches with vulnerability, not only in the lyrics but also in the hesitantly soaring music. Partway through it, Amy moves downstage, the traveler curtain closes behind her, and stagehands rush in to clear the restaurant set for the show's first full-stage location and the title song. Now we meet

Amy's secret admirer, Tony, who is not the shy young man she has imagined but a much older specimen, ebullient and generous at *Tempo di Tarentella* but, we sadly realize, too unattractive physically for a love plot.

Thus, three songs into the narrative, we are caught up in a worrisome conflict, not least because Amy and Tony have been *musically* presented to us as appealing personalities. The next number, "Standing on the Corner," brings out the musical-comedy Loesser and introduces Cleo's incipient mate, Herman. "Saturday," he sings, disarmingly, "and I'm so broke": so he and his buddies hang out and cruise instead of dating. The number is almost pure pop, easy listening in its close-harmony quartet—but Herman's solo sections give us, once again, a character in the tune as well as in the words: affable and eternally optimistic, a soft target for the others to pick on. As two girls pass by, Herman and Clem pointedly look them over, and Clem then tells Herman, "Yours was awful!"

A plot point: Amy has sent Tony her picture, and he must send his in return. She won't like what she sees, he fears, and now Loesser sings his fifth principal to us—Joe, Tony's foreman, a friendly hunk with, nevertheless, "something cold and possibly brutal," as Loesser warns in the stage directions, "behind the smile in his eyes." Tony is going to send Amy Joe's picture, turning his courtship into a fraud—but we don't know that yet. All Loesser gives us is "Joey, Joey, Joey," Joe's own particular Wanting Song, scored with slithery, unstable harp and celesta runs. The music is sensitive yet dominating: beautiful and disturbing, like Joe himself. And so Loesser concludes his chain of establishing numbers. Now we know everyone in the story, what he or she needs or is capable of.

This is what the American musical had been working up to for some one hundred years, and all its artistry dwells in the historian's key buzz term "integrated": the union of story and score. Once a mere collection of songs and now a pride of fully developed numbers supported by incidental music, intros and development sections, and musical scenes mixed of speech and song, the score not only tells but probes the story, above all unveiling its characters. As we'll see, there were integrated American shows around the turn of the twentieth century—*Robin Hood*, *El Capitan*, *The Prince of Pilsen*, *The Red Mill*. Yet the business model continued to tolerate specialty material to spotlight performers and extramural interpolations to humiliate the evening's designated authors. Even *Show Boat*, more or less officially America's first great musical, in 1927, includes specialties and interpolations. Still, when *Show Boat* was integrated it was *very* integrated, and the practice of integration was already catching on. *The Student Prince* and *The Desert Song*, directly preceding *Show Boat*, are absolutely integrated shows . . . in their scores. For the historian recognizes other aspects of integration—of dance as a thematic and psychological

instrument, experimental in the 1930s and fully executed in *Oklahoma!* in 1943; of production style, introduced in *Allegro* and *Love Life* in the late 1940s and revisited in *Cabaret* and *Company* a generation later.

Much of this may seem like ancient history to some readers. But I was there for a good deal of it, and I vividly remember certain bits of staging that one cannot glean from surviving documents. When very young, I memorized a show's score through its cast recording and became so intimate with its continuity that I could so to say photograph the stage action in my mind when I saw the play itself. I still remember being startled when the original *Most Happy Fella* Cleo, Susan Johnson, sang, about her littlest toe, "the big son-of-a-bitch hurts the most!," because on the disc she left out the no-no term. Years later, interviewing Agnes de Mille for a book on Rodgers and Hammerstein, I found her wary—her relationship with them soured on *Allegro*—but I won her confidence by recounting, second by second, the opening sequence of one of her later shows, *Goldilocks*: how the curtain rose on a theatre exterior that then broke into halves sailing off into the right and left wings to reveal the Boys and Girls paired off and, upstage, Elaine Stritch sitting on a moon. Mollified (actually, I think she was a little shocked), de Mille grew voluble.

So there is more to "research" than ransacking the archives. As other interviews for the Rodgers and Hammerstein book revealed, one quickly learns who Knows Stuff and who is carving a graven image of himself or has no memory function. The dowager empress Dorothy Rodgers didn't know stuff: her relationship with her husband's career comprised no more than attending the premieres with him. But Stephen Sondheim knew plenty; better, he knew Oscar Hammerstein. John Fearnley, a Rodgers and Hammerstein production associate, was rich in recollection about putting on and even writing the shows. Jamie Hammerstein, Oscar's younger son, assisted on and thus knew much about *Flower Drum Song*. But more: he revealed that his father complained that, in the 1930s and 1940s, organizations were constantly springing up, recruiting Names for their advisory board. These outfits invariably claimed to be politically progressive, but many were communist fronts and even those that weren't were simply drains on Oscar's concentration time for his work. It was the reason he wrote *Allegro*—to show how life in the Great World lures a man away from his purpose on earth.

Such insights from those who were in one way or another part of the history obviously help fill out the chronicle. Further, Ted Chapin of the Rodgers and Hammerstein organization gave me access to material relating to the early composition of such works as *Show Boat* and *The King and I*; seeing what the authors rejected brings one closer to what they discovered about a show as they felt their way into it.

I should mention as well the unique figure of the gay mentor, who in my case were former chorus boys and stage managers who carried with them a treasury of anecdotes and recollections and were glad of a new audience for them. My descriptions of shows that precede my own theatregoing owe everything to them, for, make no mistake, the chorus people have a larger perspective on a show than the leading players do, distracted as they are by the demands of their parts. And no one knows a show like its stage manager.

Elaine Steinbeck, for example, had a story about *Oklahoma!* Eventually John Steinbeck's wife, she was in 1943 Elaine Anderson, one of *Oklahoma!*'s stage managers; the story finds her at a Saturday rehearsal when, for the first time, director Rouben Mamoulian and choreographer Agnes de Mille decided to "put Act One together." In those days, musicals were cast with separate singing and dancing choruses, to be combined on stage to appear more or less versatile, though in fact the singers sang (and moved a little) and the dancers danced (and lip-synched or so). They rehearsed separately, the singers and principals with the director and the dancers with the choreographer, each squad unaware of what the other squad would be doing.

Of course, at some point early on, the two "halves" of the production would be brought together, and this was the day. Keep in mind that, while *Oklahoma!* proved to be a unique and influential piece after it opened, at this point the cast thought of it simply as an unusual show (because of its frontier setting and dialect) with wonderful songs. De Mille's dancers scarcely even knew what the plot was about.

So, when Will Parker followed the "Kansas City" vocal by showing off the new two-step—"the waltz is through," he announces. "Ketch on to it?"—and the watching cowboys joined in, the cast saw something more than a dance. *Oklahoma!* looks in on a community in transition, its tribal folkways to be suppressed in favor of statehood and membership in an ethnically diverse nation. The Oklahomans' world will change, and "Kansas City" illustrates this as much in dance as in song.

A bit later came the heroine's feminist anthem, "Many a New Day," and *its* follow-up dance, a mixture of caprice and tenderness, expressing in movement what lyrics and music cannot. As Mamoulian and de Mille ran the rehearsal, Elaine noticed how astonished the performers had become. What marvelous experiment had they fallen into? *Oklahoma!* was more than unusual: enlightening. Even at this early stage, in a bare room to an upright piano, it was unmistakable that *Oklahoma!* was going to make fabulous theatrical history.

Hammerstein was in the country that weekend, but Rodgers was in town, at home, and Elaine ran to a telephone, rang him up, and said, "You better get down here quick."

CONTENTS

PART ONE

The First Age

CHAPTER 1

Source Material

The first musical was *The Beggar's Opera*, produced in the theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields in London, in 1728. To give the work modern billing, its book and lyrics were by John Gay and its music was by Johann Christian Pepusch. Or, more precisely, either Gay or Pepusch selected sixty-nine popular airs of the day and Gay fitted to them new words to express his characters' thoughts, to develop atmosphere, or even to advance plot action. Perhaps because the script continuously slips in and out of mostly very short vocals, Gay at first wanted the actors to sing without accompaniment, but in the end Pepusch gave them instrumental backing, becoming the first orchestrator in the musical's history.

Or was *The Beggar's Opera* the very first? It was certainly the first lasting success in its form, **ballad opera**. There had been light musical-theatre pieces before 1728, but not till ballad opera can we speak of works like unto what we think of as a musical: an enacted story bearing some relationship with our daily life and "lifted" by songs that *belong* to the story.

Gay's intention was to satirize the Italian opera that had monopolized the interest of London's trend setters. This mode of the moment, the *opera seria* of the émigré George Frideric Handel, treated the amorous and political intrigues of nobles in exotic places: crusaders, sorceresses, the high hats of Greek mythology. John Gay's "opera" reversed the terms. In place of heroes: criminals. In place of arias in Italian: ditties in English. *Opera seria* delighted in the rivalry of princes: Gay's protagonist is Macheath, a bandit, and his rival is the underworld boss Peachum (a pun on "Peach 'em," meaning "Turn the felons in for the forty-pounds-a-head reward").

Riffraff! *Opera seria* featured triangle love plots, again among the courtly; Gay offered Peachum's daughter, Polly, and the daughter of the keeper of Newgate Prison, Lucy Lockit—both wives of Macheath, who has at least six that we know of. To the tune of "Oh, London Is a Fine Town," Gay wrote "Our Polly Is a Sad Slut!," and, when the two women meet in confrontation, "Good-morrow, gossip Joan" turns into Polly's "Why how now, Madam Flirt," to which Lucy replies, "Why, how now, saucy Jade; Sure the Wench is Tipsy!" Theatre historian Simon Trussler likens *The Beggar's Opera* to a print by Hogarth: "so rich in incident, interpolation, and low-life impropriety as to upset conventional expectations of dramatic art, but . . . thought-provoking in its simultaneous likeness and unlikeness to life."

Above all, *The Beggar's Opera* is a remarkably consistent work; as we'll see, many musicals before, say, the 1890s were if anything superb in their lack of consistency, especially in America. Minutes before *The Beggar's Opera*'s final curtain, with Macheath about to be hanged, two members of the company come forth to debate this dire conclusion in a piece determined to be popular:

> PLAYER: The Catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an Opera must end happily.
>
> BEGGAR: Your Objection, Sir, is very just; and is easily remov'd . . . in this kind of Drama [i.e., in Handelian opera], 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about. —So—you Rabble there—run and cry a Reprieve.
>
> . . .
>
> PLAYER: All this we must do, to comply with the Taste of the Town.

The Beggar's Opera tickled London, to put it mildly. It played 62 performances in its first season, unprecedented for the age, and all but commanded imitation. Benjamin Britten scholar Eric Walter White noted that "at least 120 ballad operas were produced during the period 1728–38." But ballad opera began to evolve. Inevitably, musicians would realize personal cachet in composing rather than arranging and in constructing musical scenes instead of a chain of songlets.

This leads us to the so-called **Savoy Operas** of Arthur Sullivan and W. S. Gilbert, which appeared over a quarter of a century, from 1871 to 1896.* These comprise, almost inarguably, the most influential suite of musicals the English-speaking world was to know for seventy years, till the age

*"Savoy" denotes the theatre built for their production, in 1881.

of Rodgers and Hammerstein and, after, Sondheim-Prince. One notes traces of *The Beggar's Opera* in Gilbert and Sullivan, in the satiric tone and the close relationship between script and score. Further, the music in both really suits the characters. Just as Polly and Mrs. Peachum duet, in "O Polly, You Might Have Toy'd and Kist," in tones of mother and daughter, the one forgiving and the other beseeching, so does, for instance, Sullivan's setting of the Mikado's "My Object All Sublime" mark him as ponderously implacable. Yes, it's in the words. But the number's relentlessly marching rhythm intensifies their meaning, with a jumpy little vamp that suggests how eagerly this ogre looks forward to his next grisly exaction of justice. Thus, the composer is a dramatist, even if *The Beggar's Opera*'s "composer" was a miscellany of prefabricated melodies.

At that, it is worth pointing out that Gay's lyrics are very much in character for his various principals, an amazing achievement considering that the profession of lyricist for the popular stage did not truly exist till Gay invented it. *Opera* had librettists, of course—poets more often than not. But keying popular music into character songs started with *The Beggar's Opera*; even Gilbert didn't specify his characters' lyrics as keenly as Gay did his. True, Gilbert's wit is a summoning concept in the musical's history; in his own way, he has never been outdone. Still, many of his people sound like each other—or, rather, they all sound like Gilbert.

Nevertheless, the Savoy titles are highly evolved from ballad opera, most particularly in grander musical structures. They usually start with a chorus featuring one or the other gender—*HMS Pinafore*'s men in "We Sail the Ocean Blue" or *Patience*'s "Twenty Love-sick Maidens We"—then build through the first act to a bustling finale full of many distinct parts. Further, the chorus work is crucial to the action, whether gondoliers, bridesmaids, or even ghosts. The vocal demands on nearly all the principals are well-nigh operatic, whereas actors can fake their way through some of *The Beggar's Opera*'s roles, even Macheath, which has been played by such non-musical actors as Michael Redgrave and (on film) Laurence Olivier.

In 1871—again, the very year in which Gilbert and Sullivan launched their partnership, with the now mostly lost *Thespis*—Gilbert made an English translation of Jacques Offenbach's *Les Brigands* (The Bandits, 1869). It was not performed (either in London or New York) until 1889, but it suggests an early link between English "comic opera" and Offenbach's form, which he dubbed "***opéra bouffe***," a French translation of the Italian *opera buffa* (literally, "comic opera"). However, *opéra bouffe* is nothing like *opera buffa*. Nor is it like French *opéra comique*, a genre that varied in style from era to era but was never in any real sense *comic*. "It is impossible," says critic Martin Cooper, "to find any English translation [for] the term *opéra comique*.

'Comic opera' suggests something quite different." Indeed, a popular confusion mistakes the French *comédie* as meaning "comedy" only, when it in fact means "drama" generally.* The difference between opera and *opéra comique* is not that one is serious and the other comic but that *opéra* is purely musical and *opéra comique* a dramatic work with music.†

Yes, *opéra comique*, depending on the era, might include a comic part, usually the Ridiculous Servant. In André Grétry's "beauty and the beast" piece *Zémire et Azor* (1771), the menial Ali dithers in fear or nods off when he is needed, and that may have been amusing enough for the age—but his music is just like that of everyone else in the work, devoid of comic character. Later, in the early 1800s, an outstanding *opéra comique* like *La Dame Blanche* emphasizes the sentimental and mysterious, but still there is no comic content.

And yet, after John Gay's deliriously wicked jesting in ballad opera, is there nothing in *French* music theatre before Offenbach that can truly be called funny? Fun is the soul of musical comedy—and there is an Exhibit A, Jean-Philippe Rameau's *comédie-ballet Platée* (1745). Here, at least, is an overtly absurd plotline: a benighted though harmless swamp monster believes herself beloved of Jupiter. In the fashion of bygone times, the work has a lot of fun at the expense of this mythical cocktail waitress to the stars, and ends by flattening her self-esteem as if she were a villain. Rameau, an extremely resourceful composer, does place some musical silliness here and there, such as animal sounds, from frogs to donkeys. Even so, not till our own times, in a 2002 staging by Laurent Pelly at the Paris Opéra, could *Platée* emerge as a *funny* piece, at that entirely through Pelly's ingenious interpretations of ancient operatic usages. Setting the action entirely in a theatre-within-the-theatre, Pelly crazed everyone up: Mercure was all silver, from shoes to hair glitter, and the diva La Folie wore a gown made of music sheets. In her solo showpiece, she enjoyed a particular note of such round and golden tone that she signaled the conductor, Marc Minkowski,

*Thus the name of the French National Theatre, the Comédie-Française, not a house of comedy per se. This usage applies to Romance languages in general. In Italian, the chief of a theatre troupe is the *capocomico*, and Dante's *Divina Commedia* is not a jokebook, but a poetic "drama" about the afterlife.

†The famous difference between the two—that *opéra* has recitative (in effect, "sung" dialogue) and *opéra comique* speech between the numbers—is a generic technicality of no importance. *Opéra* had the more glamorous voices, with characters drawn from the leadership class, striving for glory. *Opéra comique*, for less imposing voices, dealt with middle-class or peasant characters striving for love. Thus, Gounod's *Faust*, originally an *opéra comique* (1859), was revised as a grand opera (1869)—for a number of reasons but, really, because its subject, drawn from one of Western Civilization's most exalted classics, was too vast for the smaller form.

not to interfere even as he tapped his watch (though he did blow her a kiss when it was over). Or: Act Three couldn't begin till a frog, sitting in a stage box, signaled Minkowski to get going.

All this creates a marvelous show without the slightest editing of what Rameau wrote. Still, it derives from Pelly's imaginative responses to the music and not from the music itself. *Platée* as written is droll, just as *The Beggar's Opera* is scathing in the thrust-and-parry style of Restoration comedy and Gilbert and Sullivan is occasionally biting but more often simply whimsical.

But Offenbach is *zany*: in his music. For the first time, the uproarious and sexy and even transgressive attitudes that identify the musical throughout its various ages move into the voices and pit—yodeling, crazy "wrong" notes, tone-deaf bands, vocal evocations of a train trip, a blizzard, kissing. Any composer would call up a military march when warriors tread the stage; Offenbach was the first to concoct goofy ones.

Above all, it was Offenbach who instituted pastiche composition and the quoting of other composers as essential to the very sound of a musical. He loved Spanish characters, because Spaniards sing boleros, and of course Germans supply the yodeling. If no Germans are handy, anyone can yodel, as the tenor Paris does in *La Belle Hélène* (1864), to evoke a Bacchic air as he abducts Helen. In Offenbach's upside-down world, the two leads in *Orphée et Euridice* (1858) torture each other sadomasochistically. They gleefully reveal adulterous liaisons—and, boy, does she hate his music. "Mercy!" she cries, when he launches his "latest concerto"—and, he gloats, "It lasts an hour and a quarter." And he proceeds to fiddle it: a sugary, droopy thing, pretty if you like to hear salon music and grotesque if you'd rather die—which, of course, Euridice eventually does.

Thus Offenbach overturns the rules for decorum and beauty in art and for, above all, a reverence for the classics. "No more nectar!" the gods cry in the same work, during a Mt. Olympus uprising. "This regime is boring!" When Jupiter's thunder fails to faze them, he asks, "What about morality?"

Morality? From *him*? One by one, Diana, Venus, and Cupid review his erotic capers in music that has the uncanny sound of children blackmailing a grownup. With its mincing little steps and hip-swivelling after-phrase, it is infantile yet knowing, the wagging finger of your comeuppance. There simply hadn't been music like this before.

Now, isn't this Simon Trussler's aforementioned "simultaneous likeness and unlikeness to life"? It's the transformation of believable human behavior into exaggeration and fantasy. And that will prove to be the sine qua non of the American musical in its Golden Age—*Of Thee I Sing, Du Barry Was a Lady, On the Town, Finian's Rainbow, Guys and Dolls, Hello, Dolly!*.

Offenbach's use of pastiche was especially influential, giving the American musical a variety of texture and a wealth of "meanings" not found in comparable genres of other cultures. It keeps the musical fresh, mischievous, adaptable. When Victor Herbert defines his Italian heroine (naughty) Marietta with the ebullient "Italian Street Song," or when John Kander gives *Chicago*'s prison matron a Sophie Tucker number in "When You're Good To Mama," they expand their soundscape while referencing memes that help the audience place the character more or less instantly. We get it: Marietta has brought to the French America of New Orleans the zest of Italian life; the matron is tolerant of the appetites of the human condition, especially her own.

Pastiche takes many forms. Sometimes the music toys with a spoofy citation, as when George M. Cohan quotes "Yankee Doodle" in "The Yankee Doodle Boy"; when Cole Porter unveils another of his parody country-western numbers (as in "Friendship"); when *The Pajama Game* sets a scene in a place called Hernando's Hideaway just so it can program a Latin number because Latin numbers were trending at the time; or when orchestrator Jonathan Tunick studs *A Little Night Music*'s "A Weekend in the Country" with a quotation of the first seven notes of Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*: the most romantic of operas gracing the most romantic of musicals.

And note how vigorously *My Fair Lady* pursues this use of styles to capture Edwardian England. The clash of social orders that informs the action is given voice when Doolittle's "With a Little Bit Of Luck" and "Get Me To the Church On Time" brawl with the impeccably ducal languor of the "Ascot Gavotte" and the sheer whirling richness of the "Embassy Waltz." Doolittle is music hall, rough and rash: honest. The fine folk sing en masque but dance with abandon, as if they can be honest only in a ballroom, where no outsider can see.

Then too, "The Rain in Spain" executes a musical pun in a *Tempo di Habanera* that breaks into a jota for the ensuing dance, for the age's social cautions are so rife that Eliza and her two protectors can bond only in music so "foreign" that it protects them from their own intimacy. Similarly, the narrative about the interfering Zoltan Karpathy in "You Did It" rings in Lisztian Hungarian Rhapsody, right down to a *spiccato* violin solo and outright quotation, isolating Karpathy as not a Hungarian but a schemer, a villain, a creature outside the community of musicals, where opposites like Eliza and Henry Higgins meet cute, wage war, and fall in love. This musical imagery extends to even a quotation of "London Bridge Is Falling Down," in the strange little buskers' dance that opens the show. Why? To sound out the show's title: "My fair lady!"

Gilbert and Sullivan had no rivals; is the same true of Offenbach? There was—to a very limited extent—one, Florimond Ronger. Working