

The background of the cover is a photograph of a stage. Red curtains are pulled back on either side, revealing a dark stage floor. A circular spotlight illuminates a patch of the floor in the lower center. At the top, a decorative valance with fringe and tassels hangs across the width of the stage.

# MUSICAL THEATRE

*A History*

*John Kenrick*

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continuum

NEW YORK • LONDON

2008

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc  
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd  
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

[www.continuumbooks.com](http://www.continuumbooks.com)

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kenrick, John.

Musical theatre : a history / John Kenrick.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-2860-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8264-2860-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Musicals—History and criticism. I. Title.

ML2054.K46 2008

782.1'409—dc22

2007039005

*This book is dedicated to  
Mary Pinizzotto Kenrick Marotta and Frank Crosio.  
Neither my life nor this book would be possible  
without their unfailing support.*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IT WOULD BE impossible for me to thank all the people who have inspired, assisted, and cajoled me in the process of creating this book, but a few curtain calls are in order. My first thanks goes to Hilary Cohen, whose eagle eye averted many a grammatical and factual disaster. Heaven be praised for Marty Jacobs, curator of the theatre collection at the Museum of the City of New York, who welcomed my offer to catalog George M. Cohan's eclectic archive. He then set me to work on the archives of Ethel Merman, Mary Martin, and so many others. Oh those joyous, dusty hours uncovering history! I am equally thankful for the existence of the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, which has been my home away from home since high school. I particularly thank Bruce Levy, whose friendship is even more priceless than his vast private collection of musical theatre recordings and memorabilia. Thanks also to those colleagues who have encouraged my efforts over the years, including Peter Filichia, Miles Kreuger, Kurt Ganzl, and Professor Meg Bussert.

A thousand thanks to the folks at Continuum Publishing for deciding that it was time for a new book on this subject, to the always elegant Ken Giniger for pursuing the idea, and to the York Theatre's dedicated and brilliant artistic director Jim Morgan for suggesting that these good people talk to me. The York is one of the true hopes for the future of musical theatre, and I am proud to be a friend and cheerleader for that resourceful company. I also thank my students at New York University's Steinhardt School and at Marymount Manhattan College. Their questions and enthusiasm made teaching a joy and helped to shape every chapter of this volume. It is *not* a very ancient saying, but it is a true and honest thought that "when you become a

teacher, by your pupils you'll be taught." I can only pray that they learned half as much from me as I did from them.

All of the photos in this book come from materials in my personal archive, and every effort has been made to give proper accreditation. And just in case it needs to be said, as author, I take full responsibility for the contents of this book. Any questions or comments can be directed to me via my website, [www.musicals101.com](http://www.musicals101.com).

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## *Introduction: “Let’s Start at the Very Beginning ...”*

... a very good place to start.

When I was a teenager, aging theatre buffs insisted that the Broadway musical’s “golden age” ended in the 1950s. Recent books and documentaries speak of that era extending into the mid 1960s, and an upcoming generation of writers is pushing that “golden age” into the 1970s. Within a decade, someone will push it further, always pretending that the *really* good stuff happened about thirty years ago. Theatre is very much an art form of the now, here one moment and gone the next, so it is no surprise that many fans and professionals seem to think that the only theatrical events of any importance are those that have occurred within their theatregoing lifetime.

*Musical Theatre: A History* is an attempt to sidestep this trend. The fact is that musical theatre has enjoyed several golden ages, stretching back more than two thousand years to well before the time of Christ. Those golden ages are not relegated to the distant past, and the odds are that more are to come—why, a new one may be starting already. Each of these creative surges occurred under special conditions. History shows us that musicals thrive in cities that are the “happening place” at a given moment. These communities must meet four essential criteria:

1. A population large and prosperous enough to support an active theatrical culture.

2. A thriving artistic community that nurtures successive generations of creative and performing talent.
3. A shared sense of optimism in regards to the community and its future.
4. Freedom from extensive government censorship and/or political oppression.

This book traces the way that musical theatre's golden ages have taken it from place to place over the centuries in search of such environments, by examining how each of its hometowns has placed a unique stamp on the art form.

As an art form of the now, theatre defies second-hand appreciation. Photographs, films, videos, and sound recordings can preserve elements of a performance, but nothing yet invented fully captures the excitement, the visceral impact of live theatre. It is in the room with the audience, and each performance is unique—you are either there to share in it, or the opportunity is lost forever so that you can “do no more than guess” what it was like. In these pages, I cannot hope to bring long-lost performances back to life. If only there were some magical phrase that would allow us to whisk through time and attend the opening nights of Offenbach's *Les Brigands*, Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, or Lerner and Loew's *My Fair Lady*! But we can go beyond cataloging the usual statistics and plot summations by actively examining the people and environments that gave birth to the great musicals of the past. With such knowledge, we can better appreciate what has led up to the musical theatre of our own time and make some educated guesses about the future of this powerful art form.

Theatrical history is littered with publicity and other forms of creative thinking that have gradually become accepted as fact through repetition and the passage of time. From Ziegfeld to David Merrick and beyond, denizens of the musical theatre have done much to revise and reshape reality. One of the Broadway producers for whom I worked made a point of revising his bio every few months, saying, “No one in this business can resist revising a script.” Songwriter Jerry Herman explained this tendency when he had two of the characters in *Dear World* (1969) sing that when you wear false pearls, “little by little the pearls become real . . . and isn't it the same with memories?” As much as possible, this book will stick to verifiable facts. Whenever

a “pearl” is even slightly open to question but too interesting to overlook, this book classifies it as either legend or rumor.

## What to Expect in the Pages Ahead

Although this book covers some topics found on my popular educational website *Musicals101.com*, this text is new and more detailed. It examines the artistic, business, and social forces in various cities and countries that helped to forge important new ideas and trends—a process that continues today in New York, London, and elsewhere.

The journey begins with a brief look at ancient Greece, where drama began as a form of musical theatre. The Romans later borrowed most of their theatrical conventions from the Greeks, adding a few tricks of their own, including the first tap shoes for dancers. The Middle Ages brought musical dramatizations of Bible stories and fables, which had been designed to make Church teachings readily accessible to a mostly illiterate populace. In time, these works led into a tradition of lighthearted pantomimes and comic operas that stayed popular across most of Europe for several centuries. By the time grand opera appeared in the 1700s, a separately evolved popular musical theatre was already thriving in much of Europe.

The musical as we know it first appeared in Paris during the 1840s, where composer Jacques Offenbach and a variety of collaborators turned operetta into an international sensation. After some developments in Vienna, the British revamped the form with the ingenious comic creations of playwright William Gilbert and classical musician Arthur Sullivan. Meanwhile, the United States developed its own slapdash but popular homegrown forms of musical theatre, as blackface minstrel shows were joined by such Broadway inventions as *extravaganza*. The rise of British music halls, vaudeville in the United States, and burlesque all contributed special elements to a form that England and America would both lay claim to—the musical comedy.

After some years of British dominance in the field, American musicals gained worldwide popularity in the twentieth century. The groundwork laid by George M. Cohan, Victor Herbert, and Jerome Kern made it possible for a succession of gifted songwriters and librettists to turn New York’s Broadway into the world’s primary source of musical entertainment. Cole Porter, the Gershwins, and the team of Richard Rodgers

and Lorenz Hart brought musical comedy to new creative heights. Then Rodgers teamed with the gifted Oscar Hammerstein II to create the organically integrated musical play, a variation that enjoyed worldwide acclaim for several decades. Now acclaimed by many sources as “the golden age of the Broadway musical,” this era came to an end with the rise of hard rock music in the 1960s. Before anyone realized what was happening, Broadway became a minor side street of popular culture—still profitable, but rarely noticed by an increasing percentage of the general population. Despite this dip in its fortunes, the musical theatre continues to thrive, on Broadway and beyond. The twenty-first century has brought a fresh wave of musical comedies and so-called *Pop-sicals* (musicals using already established pop songs), attracting new audiences to the theatre. For better or worse, public taste continues to change, and musicals must do so too.

This book discusses a few hundred essential works. If some of your favorite musicals are missing, my apologies; a chronicle of 2,500 years must of necessity be selective. My goal is to be informative, not exhaustive. For each musical discussed on the text, you will find the year of its premiere and the number of performances listed in parenthesis. Where necessary, I have also specified the city of origin.

## What Is a Musical?

This is as good a time as any to clarify a few essential terms. Let’s start off with a definition you will not find in any dictionary:

*Musical (noun): a stage, television, or film production utilizing popular style songs to either tell a story or to showcase the talents of writers and/or performers, with dialogue optional.*

As with any other literary form, the primary job of a musical is to tell a story—or, in the case of a revue, to tell a number of brief stories via songs and skits. When all goes well, a musical’s blend of song, dance, and the visual arts entertains, evoking an intellectual as well as an emotional response, but in order for any of those elements to matter, a musical must tell a compelling story in a compelling way.

An art form requires an artist, a medium, and eventually (one hopes) an audience. A popular or commercial art form requires the

same trinity, with one crucial difference: there must be a paying audience that makes the act of expression profitable for the artist. When the art form is a collaborative, multidisciplinary one like musical theatre, it must also be profitable for all the auxiliary talents that help to bring an artist's conception to life (producers, director, designers, actors, investors, etc.—and, yes, intelligent investing is a talent). As in any commercial endeavor, the taste and attitude of the audience play a clear role in determining the development of the product; since suppliers must meet consumer demand, the demand helps to shape the supply.

As a commercial art form, musical theatre has reshaped itself continually over the centuries to meet ongoing changes in popular taste. In the last few decades, those changes have ranged from the superficial (electronic amplification, hydraulic sets, etc.) to the essential (recycled songs). While such innovations may or may not be motivated by a desire to reap greater financial profits, commercial successes are what spawn new trends and styles. Who in their right mind would emulate a financial failure?

### *Elements of a Musical*

From a purely technical point of view, all musicals consist of certain key elements:

- Music and lyrics—The songs
- Book/Libretto—The connective story expressed in script or dialogue
- Choreography—The dance
- Staging—All stage movement
- Physical production—The sets, costumes, and technical aspects

Over the centuries, a great deal of creative energy has been spent in *integrating* these elements, making them all smooth-flowing parts of the storytelling process. Sung-through musicals (*The Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Miserables*) have led to all of the words—lyrics included—being referred to as the book or libretto. In dance-based musicals (*Contact*, *Movin' Out*), choreography and staging become synonymous.



But in defining the essential elements of a great musical, I gratefully borrow some imagery from MGM's *The Wizard of Oz*. Any great musical must have:

- Brains—Intelligence
- Heart—Emotional content and appeal
- Courage—The guts to do something in a fresh, new way

From *The Mikado* to *Oklahoma!* to *My Fair Lady* to *Crazy for You*, the best musicals—which do not always mean the biggest hits—all have these three qualities, and they must combine to generate a fourth key element: audience excitement.

It is not critics or awards that make a musical great. Even though the *New York Times* review is considered the holy grail for commercial success, condescending or blatantly negative *Times* reviews for *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*, and *The Lion King* did not prevent those shows from achieving decade-plus Broadway runs. Since *Man of La Mancha* debuted in 1966, most critics have dismissed that play as an oversimplified bowdlerization of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. However, the general public (which, by and large, has not read the original novel) has consistently cheered for this show, embracing its call to “reach the unreachable star.” As of this writing, *Man of La Mancha* has returned to Broadway four times, the same number of revivals achieved by such mid-1960s critical darlings as *Hello, Dolly!* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. The intelligentsia may carp, but millions of theatre-goers consider *Man of La Mancha* a great musical—and so, it is.

Great musicals enjoy the lasting acceptance of the ticket-buying public, and that popularity can last long after an original production is history. Several dozen musicals premiered on Broadway in 1927, but of them all, only *Show Boat* is still performed today. Of all the new musicals produced on Broadway in the “golden age” year of 1955, only *Damn Yankees* is still done. Two very different musicals, but by long-standing popular acclamation, they are among the greats. Am I suggesting that a flop cannot be great? Well, yes. A show without a large audience cannot have any tangible commercial or artistic impact. In rare cases, a musical that was ahead of its time has been revived years later with fresh energy, finally finding its audience—Bernstein's *Candide* died swiftly in 1956, but enjoyed a long run when creatively