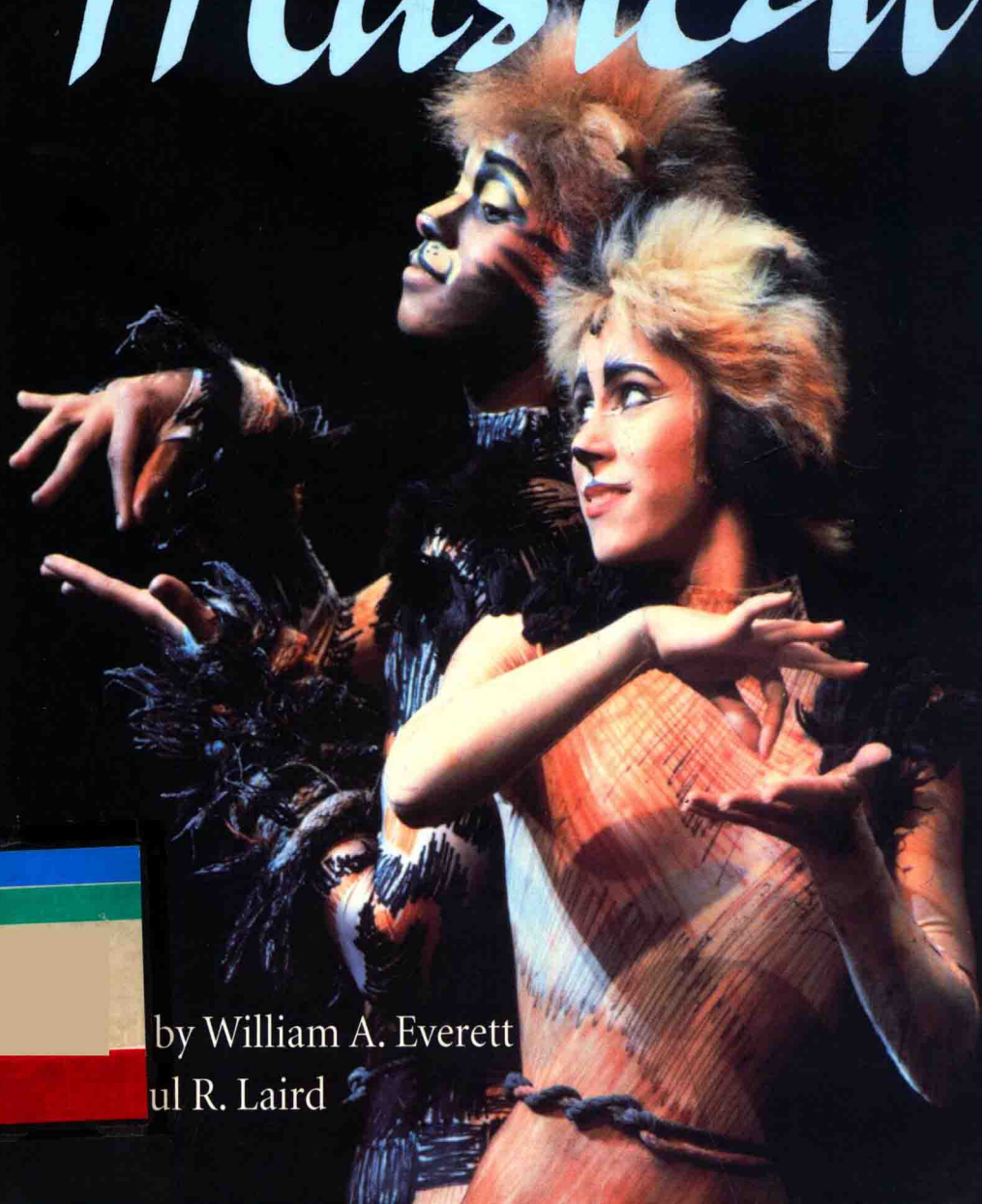




The Cambridge

Companion to the

# Musical



by William A. Everett  
and Paul R. Laird

The Cambridge Companion to the  
**MUSICAL**

.....

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## The Cambridge Companion to the Musical

*The Cambridge Companion to the Musical* provides an accessible introduction to one of the liveliest and most popular forms of musical performance. Written by a team of specialists in the field of musical theatre especially for students and theatregoers, it offers a guide to the history and development of the musical in England and America, including coverage of New York's Broadway and London's West End traditions. Starting with the early history of the musical, the volume comes right up to date. It examines the latest works and innovations, and includes information on the singers, audience and critical reception, and traditions. There is fresh coverage of the American musical theatre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British musical theatre in the middle of the twentieth century and the rock musical. The *Companion* contains an extensive bibliography and photos from key productions.

**William A. Everett** is Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Missouri–Kansas City Conservatory of Music. His articles and reviews have appeared in a number of journals including *American Music*, *Opera Quarterly* and the *Journal of the American Viola Society*, and he is also the author of *British Piano Trios, Quartets, and Quintets, 1850–1950: A Checklist* (2000).

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## Preface

In the four weeks that are needed you get about two hours of sleep a night. But it's fun. You can't really start doing the orchestration until the rehearsals begin, because until you know who the singers are going to be, you don't know which key to choose for each number. The American musical is a custom-made job. KURT WEILL<sup>1</sup>

Those who love American and British musicals know how they are created. Whether first conceived for Broadway or for London's West End, successful musicals are monuments to collaboration between composer, lyricist, producer, director, choreographer, costume designer, lighting designer, orchestrator, dance arranger, actors and others. As Weill notes, basic issues are left unsettled shortly before a show goes into rehearsal. Any aspect of a show's content might change before opening night. In some shows, such as *Camelot* (1960), wholesale changes were made after opening night in New York.

Some theatrical figures make their reputations as 'play doctors', experts who come in at the last moment and make the best possible product out of existing material, finding that which will most please an audience. The goal of the frenetic activity that constitutes Weill's 'custom job' is to make a show entertaining. Those who enjoy a show tell friends about it, selling more tickets. Musicals are part of the so-called entertainment industry, ruled by a brutal bottom-line philosophy: the 'angels', or the show's financial backers, wish to have their investment returned, if possible with a profit.

Surely this is a crass way to begin a history of the musical in the English-speaking world, but it is where we must begin. Those who created this book, and many of its readers, think of the musical as art. In a good musical, a play, or 'book', combines with songs, dances and stagecraft to create a whole, artistic entity. In the insane weeks before a show opens, however, at least as important as artistic concerns is the need to entertain. Wonderful scenes, songs and dances are cut because they do not fit into the whole. No successful figure in the history of the musical worked for artistic reasons alone: a career is based on the ability to entertain. Artistic concerns are secondary and often only recognized later. Michael John LaChiusa, a composer and lyricist currently active on Broadway, recognizes this basic truth when naming models for his own work: 'we're free to borrow from both European operatic tradition and American musical tradition, toss out what we don't need and

<sup>1</sup> Weill spoke these words after the opening of *One Touch of Venus* (1943); quoted in Jürgen Schebera, *Kurt Weill: An Illustrated Life* (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 288.

invent whatever creature we want, whatever we choose. *And above all else, entertain.*<sup>2</sup>

These basic truths have existed for the entire period described in this book. Most musicals went through the crucible that Weill describes. Figures in the musical theatre often describe the agony of opening night, when, even with all of their experience, they really do not know whether a show will be a hit, a flop or something in between. Much of the history of the musical described here is made during the weeks before an opening night. At the premiere the creator finds out if the show works. These experiences unite each of the creators described in these pages from the eighteenth century to the present and give the theatre much of its breathless quality.

The history described in this book is built upon such commonalities of experience as they relate to what creators, actors, and audience feel as participants in live musical theatre. What brings people back to the musical theatre is the genre's magical ability to entertain and help one experience life afresh, if only for a moment. The possibility of such experience is almost an unwritten contract between a show's presenters and their audience. What we offer here is a history of that contract's consistent renewal and reinvention. The details of the contract differ in various types of musical theatre, including ballad operas, operas, minstrel shows, operettas, revues, musical comedies, more serious shows that some call musical plays, megamusicals, various types of song and/or dance compilations, and even revivals of earlier shows.

The relationship between drama and music in the musical theatre encompasses a broad range of approaches. The 'book musical', where a narrative libretto provides the plot, is perhaps the most common type of musical theatre on Broadway and in the West End. When creators divert from this 'standard' approach, it is viewed as a departure from the norm. Whereas book musicals emphasise the linear progression of time, non-book musicals tend to eschew it. This breadth of creative approaches is what makes the musical theatre such a fascinating genre and simultaneously such a difficult one to arrange into neat, definable sub-categories. Its very nature along with its potentially inexhaustible creative possibilities thankfully keep it from being too easily demarcated.

Weill's description of a musical as a 'custom job' implies a genre with a rich, diverse history. As Katherine Preston demonstrates in the first chapter, the history before 1900 goes beyond rich and diverse to the chaotic, and in some ways the musical theatre has never outgrown its messy adolescence. In the midst of such variety and confusion, it is our intention to try to bring a modicum of order and describe as many of those 'custom jobs' as possible,

<sup>2</sup> Michael John LaChiusa, 'I Sing of America's Mongrel Culture', *New York Times*, 14 November 1999.

placing each show in the incredibly rich tapestry that is the musical theatre in the United States and Great Britain.

This book is another monument to collaboration. We thank each of the writers who shared their knowledge and love of various topics in the chapters of this book and who responded without fail to our editorial requests. We would also like to thank Victoria Cooper and the staff at Cambridge University Press without whom this book would never have appeared. Thanks as well to the people and institutions who made illustrations available for use. We thank Jay Martin and Kathleen Roley for helping to compile the bibliography. We also thank our families and colleagues for putting up with us while bringing this book to fruition.

William A. Everett  
Paul R. Laird

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PART I

**Adaptations and transformations: before 1940**