

Performing America: The Broadway Musical

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BRAUN MUSIC CENTER, ROOM 105 – TUESDAYS/THURSDAYS 3:00-4:20PM



After the unprecedented disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, musical theater has been steadily returning to the stage on Broadway, around the country, and around the world. In some ways “the Broadway musical” has remained a remarkably consistent phenomenon for over a hundred years now. Yet now, as always, musicals hold up a mirror to the tastes, values, social identities, politics, and cultural memory of its audiences, tracking what is new and paying homage to the past.

This quarter we’ll take stock of the contemporary Broadway musical as it has returned to the stage “post-“pandemic” and the continued impact of shows from the last decade such as Hamilton or Dear Evan Hansen. We’ll also think about how issues of race and ethnicity that defined the origins of musical theater a century ago in the form of minstrel shows and vaudeville are more than ever relevant to the writing, casting,

performance, and critical reception of shows today. We can see this in the case of revivals of “golden age” shows such as Oklahoma! or Funny Girl, newer revivals (Parade), and such new titles as A Strange Loop or Paradise Square. We’ll also consider the legacy of the recently deceased Stephen Sondheim, whose work has been a defining presence in musical theater for more than half a century.

*Also we will spotlight **A Chorus Line**, the 2023 Ram’s Head spring show.*



Course Description

Musical theater developed across the twentieth century as one of America's most distinctive cultural products, always in dialogue with American culture at large. At the beginning, the popular musical theater centered in lower Manhattan, around Broadway and Times Square, together with the nearby music publishing business ("Tin Pan Alley"), merged the influences of European operetta, African-American ragtime and jazz, the marches of John Philip Sousa, Anglo-Irish folk ballads, and the musical voices of immigrant communities of all kinds. This seminar looks at how the themes, characters, stories, and songs of the Broadway musical reflect ideas of American identity over the last hundred years. Intersections with jazz from the 1920s on, with the movies from the 1930s on, with rock and pop music from the late 1960s on, and with hip-hop and developments in sound engineering since the 2000s are all key sonic elements of this story. Issues of race, class, gender roles, sexual identity, and performativity all play a central role in the themes and content of musical theater.

Early "musical comedy" reflected social and class issues more indirectly, as a by-product of the emergent popular musical styles it put on stage, including the new music of African-Americans. During and after World War II the team of Rodgers and Hammerstein promoted a new kind of thematically integrated "musical play" that engaged (cautiously) with contemporary social issues of the day, while still providing a series of popular tunes and dance sequences expected by Broadway audiences. Since the advent of rock and pop idioms on Broadway after the late 1960s and the "concept" driven shows of Sondheim and others since the 1970s and '80s, Broadway shows continue to expand the range of subjects and musical styles. In the 21st century films have become the most common source material, while "Jukebox" musicals like *Jersey Boys*, *Mamma Mia*, *Beautiful*, *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*, or *MJ: The Musical* use classic rock, soul, R&B, and other pop repertoire to tell stories (mostly, but not only, about performers).

A central topic is that of basic song types and structures that define the "show tune" across different eras. Other topics include: the diverse musical-cultural ingredients of Broadway music from the early 1900s to the present; the dynamics of live theater vs. the "movie musical" or filming of live stage shows; the impact of Disney animated musicals, their stage transfers, and other Disney products; interactions of American and European musical theater since the 1980s (*Phantom*, *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*); musicals on television and in contemporary media (*Glee*, *Smash*, *Idol*, *The Voice*, YouTube and TikTok); and how songs from shows continue to circulate in the entertainment and media mainstream.



Course Objectives

Above all: learn about the ways music, lyrics, story, choreography, and staging work together to make a successful “show.”

- How these ingredients were developed in the original production, and have been re-conceived for revivals, film adaptations, etc.
- How has musical theater “constructed” personal and community identities over the last century?
- How does it project values, negotiate social conflicts?
- What is the relationship between commercial success and artistic or social value?

To understand the workings of Broadway musical theater we analyze:

- musical formulas used by some of the best songwriters of different periods (especially the lasting role of traditional “song types”)
- elements of effective lyrics and “book” or spoken dialogue
- contributions of choreographers, directors, producers, music arrangers/directors, and tech crew.

In addition to classroom discussion of musical theater materials (including breakout-groups of 3-4 students formulating responses to some pre-assigned examples and questions), we’ll try applying to assignments some of the skills you may have honed during Pandemic-era remote learning: Podcasts, YouTube style video presentations, Canvas Discussion pages.

Canvas modules

Keep an eye on the **weekly modules in Canvas** for information on readings, audio/video examples, study Pages and Discussion pages, Quizzes and other assignments.

Reading materials

There is no assigned textbook for the course, but we will read a few selections from the recently published book *Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical* by Laurie Winer. The Canvas Discussion pages will sometimes reference readings as well as performance clips. Selections from these texts will be available on Canvas (“Files”), and posted in Modules if specifically assigned:

American Musical Theater by James Leve (Oxford University Press, 2016)

[*Cambridge Companion to the Musical*](#) ed. William Everett and Paul Laird (Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition 2008; 3rd ed. 2017)

[*Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*](#) by Stacy Wolf (Oxford University Press, 2011)

Experiencing Broadway Music: A Listener’s Companion by Kat Sherrell (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)

Oscar Hammerstein and the Invention of the Musical by Laurie Winer (Yale University Press, 2023)

Assignments

Assignments will take the form of **in-class small group projects** (smaller breakout groups and 1 final group presentation) plus three Canvas **Discussion pages** with prompts and specific deadlines for entering responses. Both formats will be ungraded, but consistency and quality of your participation will figure in final course grade. Watch for Canvas announcements on these assignments, as well as in Canvas modules.

Quizzes

There will be **three Quizzes** identifying song repertoire and commenting on features discussed in class. Quizzes 1 and 2 will be given in class, Quiz 3 will be online Canvas, following the last class of the quarter. Topics and repertoire for quizzes will be announced a week before.

Course Outline

Week 1 (4, 6 April) – **“The Musical” (what, why, how?)**

- What makes a “musical”? –
- What is “Broadway”?
- Three eras of the Broadway musical

READING: Kat Sherrell 2016, chapter 1; Laurie Winer 2023, introduction

Week 2 (11, 13 April) – **Starting the show**

- The establishing song: I am / I want
- Verse-Chorus structure
- *Oklahoma!* (1943), the integrated book musical in the “Golden Age”

Small group project 1: “I want” or “I am” songs

Discussion page 1: “I want” songs

Week 3 (18, 20 April) – **The shape of a show**

- Opening numbers: Where, when, and who are we?
- How do songs or other musical numbers “advance the plot,” and more?
- Act 1 vs. Act 2 (strategies from *Oklahoma!* to *A Chorus Line*, *Hamilton*, *Dear Evan Hansen*)

Small group project 2: Opening Numbers

Week 4 (25, 27 April) – **Origins of the American musical**

- Operetta, minstrelsy, ragtime-blues-jazz, the vaudeville tradition
- Visiting lecture and discussion, **Elea Proctor** (PhD candidate, Stanford University): the “minstrel show” and its legacy in vaudeville and musical comedy
- *Show Boat* (1927), two concepts of “integration”
- Ragtime and *Ragtime* (1998)

READING: Laurie Winer 2023, Chapter 3: “The Invention of the Musical”

Quiz 1: Verse-chorus form, opening numbers and establishing songs

Week 5 (2, 5 May) – “The Invention of the Musical”: *Showboat* and *Oklahoma!* in the age of “musical comedy”

- The golden age of Musical Comedy: Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers and Hart

READING: Laurie Winer 2023, Chapter 5: “Thus the World Broke Open”

Discussion page 2: Concepts of “integration” in *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma!*

Week 6 (9, 11 May) – **Broadway song types since the “Golden Age”**

- The List Song
- Ballads and Torch Songs
- I am / I want (again)
- Dance types
- The Anthem, the 11 o’clock number ... and more

Quiz 2: Song types

Week 7 (16, 18 May) – **Growing up with musicals: the Disney effect**

- R&H's "television musical" *Cinderella* (1957, 1967, 1997, 2013) as prototype? Princesses and Princes, friends and enemies
- The Disney "renaissance" (1989-99) and the move to Broadway
- *High School Musical*: musicals, TV, and "real life"

READING: Laurie Winer 2023, Chapter 11: "Cinderella and Other Myths"

Discussion page 3: Disney and the modern musical

Week 8 (23, 25 May) – **Big and Small: the "Mega-musical" vs. Off-Broadway and the "Concept" musical**

- *A Chorus Line* – as "concept"
 - The mega-musical as European import and commercial investment:
 - "Concept" musicals off and on Broadway (Sondheim to *A Strange Loop*)
- 21st-century legacies of the "mega-musical" and the "concept musical"

Week 9 (30 May, 1 June) – Jukebox musicals and film-based musicals in the 21st century. **Begin final group projects**

Week 10: (6 June) – **final group projects** (continued)

Quiz 3: song types, repertoire, contemporary Broadway genres

On Canvas: available by 10 June and due by 13 June, 11:00pm

Local productions

Ram's Head Theatrical Society will continue its return to annual (live) spring musical productions in Memorial Auditorium this year with *A Chorus Line*. Plan to attend and discuss in Week 3

Also: we'll plan to attend one of the following (probably *Book of Mormon*):

BroadwaySF productions:

Come From Away (Golden Gate Theater, 11-23 April)

Pretty Woman (Orpheum Theater, 25-30 April)

***Book of Mormon* (Orpheum Theater, 23 May-18 June)**

Into the Woods (Curran Theater, 20-25 June)

Broadway San Jose productions:

1776 (16-21 May)

Beetlejuice (1-6 August)

Grading

As a freshman-preference Stanford Introductory Seminar, Music 34N is oriented towards enrichment, cultural engagement, and the acquisition/improvement of some basic musical, presentational, and writing skills. The only specifically graded material will be the Quizzes, but your course grade will be based on:

- (1) Regular presence in class meetings: 25%
- (2) Discussion page responses: 15%
- (3) Quizzes: 45%
- (4) Group project participation: 15%

Academic Accommodations

If you have a letter from the Office of Accessible Education requesting any academic accommodations please submit that during the first weeks of the quarter.