

Performing America: The Broadway Musical

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BRAUN MUSIC CENTER, ROOM 105 WEDNESDAY/FRIDAY 11:30AM-12:50PM



In many 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. Besides such important elements of continuity, we’ll also consider new themes explored in Broadway musicals: gender fluidity, disability, mental health etc.

In addition to learning more about classic (“golden age”) musicals by Rodgers and Hammerstein (et al.) and comparing trends of the last 20 years, we’ll revisit 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 the 2024 Ram’s Head spring show:
The SpongeBob Musical

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. From 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"). It 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. Among other things, 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 elements of this story. Issues of race, class, gender roles, sexual identity, and "the performance of self" 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 *Mamma Mia*, *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*, or *MJ: The Musical* use classic pop, soul, R&B etc. to tell stories (mostly, but not only, about performers). Increasingly, issues of mental health, media and youth culture, disability and difference have found a voice on (and off-) Broadway, often balancing humor and pathos in a way musicals seem very good at doing.

A core topic is identifying recurrent "song types" and structures across different eras. Other topics include: the musical-cultural ingredients of Broadway music from the early 1900s to the present; the dynamics of live theater vs. the "movie musical"; the impact of Disney animated musicals and their stage transfers; interactions of American and European musical theater since the 1980s (*Phantom*, *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*); film versions of stage musicals, the impact of new social media; and how songs from musicals 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 represented 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 in musical theater?

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

Follow the **weekly modules in Canvas** for information on readings, audio/video examples, study Pages and Discussion page assignments, and Quizzes.

Reading materials

There is no assigned textbook for the course, but a few selections are recommended for getting started (Kat Sherrell, *Experiencing Broadway Music* and Laurie Winer, *Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical*). Selections from these and other texts will be available on Canvas ("Files"), and posted in Modules where relevant:

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 (1) **in-class small group projects** (smaller breakout groups and 1 final group presentation) and (2) 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, as well as factual and historical material. Quizzes 1 and 2 will be given in class, Quiz 3 will be online Canvas after the last class of the quarter. Topics and repertoire for quizzes will be announced a week before.

Course Outline

Week 1 (3, 5 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 (10, 12 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 (17, 19 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*, *Heathers*, *SpongeBob*)

Small group project 2: Opening Numbers

Week 4 (24, 26 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 (1, 3 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 (8, 10 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: Broadway history and song types

Week 7 (15, 17 May) – **Growing up with musicals: the Disney effect and “the High School” musical**

- 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*: from the Disney franchise to *Dear Evan Hansen*, *Heathers*, and *Mean Girls*

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

Discussion page 3: Disney musicals, “High School” musicals

Week 8 (22, 24 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 (29, 31 May) – Jukebox musicals and film-based musicals in the 21st century. **Begin final group projects**

Week 10: (5 June) – **final group projects** (continued)

Quiz 3: more song types, contemporary Broadway genres and shows
On Canvas: **available by 7 June and due by 10 June, 11:00pm.**

Local productions

Ram's Head Theatrical Society spring show:

The SpongeBob Musical (Weeks 2-3?)

Also: we'll plan to attend one of the following

American Conservatory Theater (San Francisco)

***A Strange Loop* (18 April-12 May)**

BroadwaySF productions:

Hairspray (Orpheum Theater, 16-21 April)

***Funny Girl* (Orpheum Theater, 30 April, 26 May)**

Company (Orpheum Theater, 5-29 June)

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.