

## INNOVATORS OF AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATER

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A unique set of circumstances combined to provide the impetus for what is known today as the Golden Age of the American Musical Theater, a period that spans the 1920s to the late 1940s. During this period, the form consolidated its outstanding characteristics and attained its full stature as an outstanding expression of American culture. In this paper, I will examine some of the major composers and lyricists of the American musical theater and describe the signal productions that resulted from their artistry.

Any discussion of American musical theater must start with New York City on Manhattan Island, and the 10-block theater district called Broadway.

New York City was the gateway for the 25 million immigrants, mainly European, who would flood the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Many of the newcomers settled there in impoverished, crowded tenements. By 1927, almost 75% of New Yorkers were foreigners or children of immigrants who added to the teeming, polyglot city.

From this throng of new Americans of diverse origins, a truly popular theater was forming, blending with indigenous elements. Burlesque, circuses, pantomime, and variety shows offered entertainment that could be understood and enjoyed by everyone, regardless of language or national origins.

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Melodramas and English farce dominated the theater offerings for the growing middle class.

Jerome David Kern (1885-1945) would change this portrait totally. When Kern began his career as a composer in New York in 1918, the musical was characterized by the pastiche — fragments borrowed from one or another source and loosely tied together with musical interludes. The minimal plots served as mere framework for jokes, comic routines, or extravagant numbers for the stars.

Kern was profoundly influenced by the theater traditions of England and wanted to transpose them to America. He began applying his ideas at the Princess Theater, a 300-seat house on the edge of the theater district. With his English collaborators, he created pieces with charming lyrics and music that was emotive and expressive without being sentimental. The Princess shows gained a small, but influential, public. Above all, the Princess Productions distinguished themselves through their attention to the text and integration of the plot, stage setting, and music.

In 1927, Kern began to consider a musical treatment for a novel he had just read titled *Show Boat*. It was the story of a floating theater called the “Cotton Blossom” that travelled up and down the Mississippi River and the lives and loves of the performers. *Show Boat* was written by Edna Ferber, an enormously popular writer of lengthy historical novels. With its dozens of characters and historical sweep *Show Boat* would be a challenge to stage in a straight dramatic production, much less as a musical. In fact, Mrs. Ferber felt it was an impossible task and at first refused permission for Kern to adapt it. Only his ardent and persistent urging compelled her to agree. One of his convincing points was that the assurance that Oscar Hammerstein, who was equally smitten with the book, would be the lyricist. And empresario Flo Ziegfeld’s agreement to produce the show guaranteed that there would be the financial backing sufficient for a project on such a grand scale.

Kern and Hammerstein labored for 14 months on the show, an unprecedented period for the standards of the time, on the challenging task.

The central unifying element of both the book and the musical is the Mississippi River. It is a profounding American symbol. The longest river in the continental United States, it is the body of water that demarcates the settled east coast with the then-wild frontier to the west, and its power inspired Kern to write music that tapped deep American roots.

How to incorporate the mighty Mississippi into the story? Kern's answer was triumphantly musical: the song "Ol' Man River," sung by one of the Negro dock workers where the "Cotton Blossom" is anchored in the opening scenes of the play. The slow, majestic cadence is paired perfectly with Hammerstein's simple but moving lyrics about the transience of life against the eternal forces of the river. The "Ol' Man River" theme appears in the overture, weaves itself throughout the score, and underscores the final reprise.

Upon hearing the song, Ferber wrote: "My hair stood on end and tears came to my eyes. I know that this was great music. This was a song that would outlast Kern and Hammerstein's day, and my day, and your day."

With a cast of over 100, *Showboat* was the musical's first epic in theme, physical staging and length. When it premiered in December 1927, it ran for three hours; over two hours of it is music. It opened to almost unanimous critical acclaim and ran for 572 performances, and toured the country for another year. According to theater historian Ethan Mordden, *Show Boat* was a unique contribution. He wrote: "It contains (all of the) contradictions of American life — the city vs. country; mobility vs. holding to roots; white vs. black; progress vs. stability; novelty vs. tradition."

Kern's insistence on the integration of plot, lyrics and music throughout his career permitted a more mature conception of the musical theater to develop. Like an orderly schoolmaster, he imposed norms of skill and good taste that were absent for the main part in the talented but undisciplined world of musical theater during its formative years. As the first American to have done all of this, he is known as the father of American musical theater.

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America in the 1920s and 1930s was experiencing a major economic, social, and cultural transformation. It was an era of economic speculation during which great fortunes were made and lost just as suddenly. Millions of young American soldiers had returned victorious from the First World War. America had acquired a new conception of itself as a powerful nation.

In this tumultuous atmosphere, the music of Kern, with its flowing melodies, was supplanted by a new spirit. The characterization of this period — “the Jazz Age” — indicates the influence of an emerging form of indigenous music. Jazz was controversial because its origins and development were undeniably black. Many composers were beginning to recognize jazz as America’s first, unique folk music, but this was resisted by many critics and teachers of classical music who thought that music from that source did not merit serious study or consideration. But the appeal of the music was irresistible, and growing. The white socialites who frequented the nightclubs in the black neighborhood of Harlem, such as the famous Cotton Club — where Duke Ellington presented his elegant and influential compositions — helped to popularize the new sound.

No one would express this sweeping new musical spirit more completely than George Gershwin (1898-1937). Gershwin represented a new face of the American musical theater — vigorous, experimental, and increasingly independent from European influences. Well-known as a classical composer, Gershwin’s contribution to the theater was equally vital and innovative. Throughout his brief, amazingly productive life, he composed musicals of unequalled greatness.

The syncopation and harmonics characteristic of jazz are clearly evident in Gershwin’s music. He had already established a reputation as a serious classical composer with the debut in 1924 of “Rhapsody in Blue,” to which one critic attributed the same significance as “The Rites of Spring.” But Gershwin had started his career as a composer for the stage, and he always returned to theater.

Reflecting his growing desire to move beyond the graceful but conventional musicals he had composed, Gershwin,

with the playwrights George S. Kaufmann and Morrie Ryskin, produced three intensely political and pessimistic works between 1929 and 1931. *Strike Up the Band* was a satire about financial speculation during a war; *Let 'Em Eat Cake* postulates a fascist revolution in the United States. *Of Thee I Sing* (the title is taken from a patriotic song) satirizes the inanity of political campaigns. Gershwin extended himself musically in these works; the music in *Of Thee I Sing* was “dark, compressed, contrapuntal,” according to his biographer, and in it Gershwin used recitative extensively for the first time. The work became the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1933.

Gershwin's last and greatest contribution resulted in America's first true folk opera. *Porgy and Bess*, whose story concerns the life of poor blacks living in a seacoast slum called “Catfish Row.” It is a love triangle between Bess, a prostitute, the lonely cripple Porgy, and Sportin' Life, a pimp and drug pusher. Though *Porgy* had been a well-known novel, many doubted that the sordid subject matter was suitable for musical treatment. Gershwin's music transformed it into a soaring theatrical experience.

The Broadway premiere of *Porgy and Bess* in 1936 was considered so monumental that both music and drama critics from the New York newspapers reported it. The critical reviews were mixed, but there was no question about the public response. Applause thundered for 15 minutes at the play's conclusion.

Sometime in 1937, Gershwin began to experience excruciating headache. His usual buoyant personality gave way to bouts of deep melancholy. Once while conducting, he had a memory blackout. In July of that year, he collapsed and was rushed to the hospital, where doctors discovered a tumor of the brain. The condition was inoperable and he died two days later at the age of 38.

Gershwin left an enduring musical legacy. History continues to discover him. In 1986, researchers found 70 boxes containing unpublished works of Gershwin in a warehouse in New Jersey. The boxes contained notebooks, songs, and scores considered lost forever. The Library of Congress of the United States is undertaking the task of publishing these historic works

through manuscripts and recordings, assuring future generations access to the riches of this creative musical genius.

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During the 1930s the conventional Broadway production was light and frothy – something to help the audience forget the misery of the economic depression. Usually set at the spas and resorts of Europe, these productions featured characters living in wealth and elegance. Enter Cole Porter, the undisputed king of elegance. Porter (1891-1964) wrote both words and music, and his lyrics brought a new level of wit and sophistication to Broadway musicals.

Porter was prolific; he wrote 800 songs during his career, the majority of them for the stage. His best songs were about relationships, and the titles reveal his light-hearted philosophy: "Anything Goes"; "Let's Misbehave"; "I'm a Gigolo"; "Find me a Primitive Man"; and "Let's Not Talk about Love." Porter's characters are rich, sophisticated and always, always stylish.

It would be very difficult for me to translate and catch the essence of Porter's lyrics; luckily, this has been done by a Brazilian lyricist, Carlos Renno, whose new book *Cole Porter: Canções e Versões*, captures the wit and playfulness of Porter's lyrics. During the centennial of Cole Porter's birth in 1991, admirers of literate lyrics and beautiful music celebrated him with reissues of recordings, revivals of famous Porter shows, and even a postage cachet with a drawing of "Night and Day."

Of course, the type of elegant escapism Porter espoused was not the only response to the misery of the Depression. The social protest ferment grew to maturity during this period as well, and gave birth to a variety of exciting theater experiments. Director Robert Porterfield created the Barter Theater in 1933 in the state of Virginia, which survives until today. At the theater patrons were charged 30 cents admission or the equivalent in work or food. In New York, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union produced a musical performed by union members – none of them professional actors – which ran for 2 1/2 years.

In 1935 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Federal Theater Project to create jobs for playwrights, musicians, and artists. The objective was to present productions in many regions in the interior free of charge. By the project's end in 1939, 13,000 artists had presented productions in 31 states to a total audience of 25 million.

The most significant work to emerge from the Federal Theatre Project was the musical play *The Cradle will Rock*. One critic called it "a relentless indictment of American capitalism and a fervent plea for unionization." With a plot that comes directly from the newspaper headlines, it was unlike anything the musical theater had ever witnessed.

Word of the show's controversial nature spread while it was in rehearsal, and the night before opening, military police were dispatched to shut down the production. They impounded the set and padlocked the theater. Actors responded by mounting a makeshift production in an off-Broadway theater. The playwright-composer Marc Blitzstein sat alone on the stage at an old upright piano and the cast performed without a set under a single spotlight. The show resurfaced to critical acclaim at the experimental Mercury Theater, founded by Orson Welles.

At the same time, the work of Freud was introducing new psychological insights into character development. German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht staged challenging productions which appealed to intellect, delineated the protagonists relation to societal forces, and used surrealist elements in a non-linear plot. The Freudian and Brechtian influences came together on Broadway in 1941 with the production of *Lady in the Dark*, with music by Kurt Weill and lyrics by Ira Gershwin. The play recounts the emotional conflicts of successful magazine editor, played by the legendary English actress, Gertrude Lawrence.

The innovative production design used four revolving sets to show the dream-like states and flashbacks as the heroine struggles to attain self-knowledge through an understanding Freudian analyst. Although the play's psychoanalytic conceits seems simplistic to us today, in its time it was a pioneering acknowledgement of the complexity of the psyche. In the

independent though conflicted character of Lisa Elliot, too, we are presented with one of the first modern female roles in musical theater.

Richard Rodgers (1902-1979) is a transitional figure, bridging the 1930s and the contemporary period. As a child he attend the Princess Theater productions, and his career as a composer continued until the end of the 1970s. A composer of great versatility, he was capable of writing both beautiful waltzes and jazz-influenced tunes. He is perhaps best known as the composer of *The Sound of Music* (*A Novica Rebelde* in Brazil), one of the most popular stage plays and movies of all time, with Oscar Hammerstein as his lyricist. But many do not know about his first, and longest, partner, Lorenz Hart (1895-1943). Many people, myself included, consider him one of the finest lyricists that musical theater has produced.

Though their partnership was prolific and successful , it was not a tranquil one. Rodgers was orderly, methodical, dependable, with a conventional family life. Hart was brilliant, erratic, and persecuted by periods of depression and alcoholism, during which he would disappear for days at a time. But the lyrics he crafted serve as a benchmark for all other lyricists thereafter.

A distant relative of the poet Heinrich Heine, Hart once earned a living doing German translations. Educated in Latin, he also used the English poets for source material. Yet his lyrics were colloquial, contemporary ; at times wisecracking and cynical. And always they matched perfectly with the story and Rodgers' inventive music.

Rodgers and Hart had already collaborated on 27 musicals when, in 1939, Rogers received a letter from the writer John O'Hara. He wanted to know if the composer and his partner were interested in dramatizing a series of short stories he had written for the *New Yorker* magazine about his character, Joey Evans. The stories, with their ambience of the harsh reality of backstage show business, intrigued the team. The result was *Pal Joey*, which has gained a reputation as the "quintessential" Rodgers and Hart play since its premiere in 1941. It marked a new level of maturity in musical theater, and was blessed with Hart's



acerbic, knowing lyrics and some of Rodgers most swinging music.

Joey is a good-looking, third-rate nightclub singer and dancer who pursues, exploits, and discards women. When he meets a rich society matron, Mrs. Simpson, he expects to make an easy conquest of her and get her to sponsor the nightclub he has always wanted to own. But Joey has met his match in Mrs. Simpson, who is just as unscrupulous and amoral as he. Though Joey initially makes his conquest, by the end of the play he is broke again, unreformed, and on the make for another victim.

*Pal Joey's* unheroic cast of characters, which also included strippers and gamblers, were rare types even for non-musical plays. Audiences were initially stunned by the frankness of the play. Some critics found the whole show morally objectionable. But no one disputed its achievement. *Pal Joey* was revived in 1952, and has been continuously popular ever since. As one critic wrote, "*Pal Joey* dislosed musical comedy's properties so basically that it defined the purpose of the form in its earthiness, its parodistic observation, its remorseless honesty."

The critical respect for *Pal Joey* did not ameliorate Hart's personal problems. His drinking grew worse. In 1941, he turned down Rodgers' wish to stage a musical from the novel, *Green Grow the Lilacs*. But he unhesitatingly recommended Oscar Hammerstein. The two went on to create *Oklahoma!*, which became a landmark when it premiered in 1943. Hart died that year from pneumonia complicated by alcoholism.

*Oklahoma!* was as different in subject matter from *Pal Joey* as could be. The play was about farmers and cowboys living in the territory of Oklahoma at the turn of the century. Rodgers used many folk themes in his music and Hammerstein's lyrics extolled love of nature and community. It was staged with perspective sets to suggest the vast, flat prairie. Most startling of all was the innovative choreography by distinguished dancer Agnes de Mille. She used free, naturalistic movements inspired by square dances and other traditional dances.

The success of *Oklahoma* was such that it played on Broadway for two years, toured for another four years nationally

and abroad, and continues to be staged in high school and university productions across the United States.

The postwar period produced few innovations in musical theater. Popular shows such as *The Music Man* enshrined the wholesome virtues of small-town life and reflected a nation that was prosperous and perhaps a touch complacent. But by the mid-1950s it was clear that all was not sweetness and light in American society. The so-called “baby boom” of the early fifties which produced 76 million babies presaged the first stirrings of youth rebellion. The movement for civil rights was awakening, and rock and roll hit the radio stations like a shock wave.

The musical *West Side Story* (released in Brazil as *Amor Sublime Amor*) exploded on the stage in 1957. There had never been anything like it before; yet the plot was very familiar to any reader of Shakespeare. The Romeo and Juliet story was transferred to New York City, where ethnic hatred and gang warfare doomed the two lovers.

*West Side Story* was the fourth musical by composer Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein's similarity to Gershwin has often been noted. Both wrote classical as well as popular music; both were exceptionally accomplished pianists; both conducted major orchestras throughout their careers. In fact, Bernstein intended to be a conductor. But in his senior year at Harvard University, he had an experience that changed his life.

That year he was chosen to direct the first performance of *The Cradle Will Rock* in Boston. The ever-controversial opera ran into trouble in that conservative city. Public officials banned the production on the grounds that it was obscene. So Bernstein staged it at Harvard instead. As it happened, the composer and librettist of the work, Marc Blitzstein, was in the audience. He and Bernstein became friends, a relationship that endured until Blitzstein's death in 1964. From that point on, Bernstein turned increasingly to the musical theater.

He had a **suces d'estime** with his score for the ambitious musical version of *Candide*. This production had a short run but achieved cult-like status with the release of its cast recording.

The choreographer Jerome Robbins was responsible for the idea of *West Side Story*. The creative team he assembled included Bernstein, playwright Arthur Laurent and lyricist Stephen Sondheim. Robbins also directed, placing his “stunning modern dance sequences in gritty, realist settings such as fire escapes and tenement rooftops. Bernstein’s score brimmed with Latin rhythms and “cool” jazz. The production demanded a large cast with singers young enough to be convincing as teenage lovers and hoodlums and capable of singing the demanding score.

After a long Broadway run, a movie version was made in 1961, directed by Robert Wise. The film was a triumph, winning 11 Oscars, including Best Picture of the Year.

Before concluding with some remarks on the current state and future of the musical I want to mention one short-lived but important development in American musical theater.

*Hair* called itself “the first tribal love rock opera.” Tribal because, although essentially plotless, it received input from various cast members in writing the storyline. It was among the first to use a predominantly rock score. It presented nudity, and tried to merge performers with audience – at the close of performance, the audience was invited on stage to dance with the cast members

*Hair* opened in In 1968 at the height of the so-called “hippie” movement when burning draft cards and American flags was absolutely in mode. It was the only major Broadway musical to address the anguish and deep divisiveness that the Vietnam War caused among all ages and classes in America. Coming at the beginning of the first wave of protest against the war, *Hair* delivered an anti-materialistic, anti-authoritarian message.

*Hair* influenced several similar musicals of the decade, such as *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and *Pippin*. The youth protest musical had died out by the end of the decade, but reemerged in 1975 with the musical *A Chorus Line* which employed a kind of group authorship in which cast members recounted their personal experiences.

We arrive at the present with Stephen Sondheim, today’s pre-eminent composer and lyricist. In him, one can see a direct

link with the great creators of musical theater. The integration of character, music, and plot that was inaugurated with *Show Boat* and fully realized in *Oklahoma!* reaches its ultimate expression with Sondheim. His songs unerringly reveal psychological dimensions of character. The acerbic wit and complicated internal rhyme of his lyrics make him the equal of Lorenz Hart.

Yet of all the composers and lyricists examined in this paper, Sondheim is the most difficult to classify. This may be because his restless artistry compels him to search for such variety in theme and execution. Consider the Sondheim canon: a comedy based on the works of the Roman comic playwright Plautus; the biography of the ambitious mother of a famous stripper; a satire on a town trying to trade on a phony miracle; a murderer who cuts up his victims' bodies & sells them to a butcher; an examination of the opening of Japan to the west, performed in kabuki style, and an exploration of the creative impulse told through the life of pointillist painter George Seurat, for which Sondheim earned the Pulitzer Prize. His most recent work, *Assassins* is a series of skits about political assassins through the ages.

These are not standard musical theater subjects. Yet, though strange or even sometimes repellent, Sondheim's artistry makes them fascinating and relevant.

Destiny placed Sondheim in the right place at the right time. Born into a prosperous family, Sondheim's next-door neighbor was Oscar Hammerstein. The famous lyricist became a kind of mentor to the youth, reviewing his amateur scripts and coaching him on lyric construction. As a teenager, Sondheim was a production assistant during the staging of the Rodger and Hammerstein play *Allegro*, typing script drafts and fetching coffee. Sondheim proved to be a talented composer. After he graduated from the university, he studied harmonics and composition with a private tutor but eventually directed his interest to musical theater.

He first gained fame as the lyricist for the stupendously successful *West Side Story*. But he wanted the freedom to write both words and music. He succeeded in 1973 with *Company* a cynical examination of marriage told through vignettes of

several, mainly unhappy, couples. It was set in New York City and used a jangling rock-ting (ed score to suggest the isolation and pressures of urban life.

*A Little Night Music*, 1980, was based on Ingmar Bergman's "Smiles of a Summer Night". The play was no less clear-eyed about the disappointments of family life, but this time the score was rich with dreamy waltzes and orchestral shadings reminiscent of Debussy and Ravel. The song structures used inner dialogues of the characters which blended into trios and quartets.

It would be difficult to predict what new challenge will engage Sondheim in the future. But his reputation as the finest modern composer/lyricist is secure. As one of his colleagues put it, "He is in effect the summation and an elevation of all the lyric writing that has gone before him."

### Conclusion

In concluding this brief journey through American musical theater, several characteristics emerge which may indicate what the future will bring.

In my opinion, four main factors have defined American Musical theater from its formative years in the 1920s through today. These are: the influence of Negro music; the importance of immigrants; the impact of communications technology; and the role of Broadway.

### Influence of blacks

In essence, our national theater is a theater made up of nations — that is, a fusion of the musical and linguistic heritages of the world's peoples. However, the bedrock of this development has been Negro music. From minstrels,\* to blues, from jazz to rock, to house and rap, this creation of the descendants of Africans slaves has been the wellspring of popular song. It was adapted by Americans of European origin who grafted the work songs, chants, and spirituals onto European models to create popular music. In fact, one could argue that they

**expropriated** this music without fair acknowledgement – much less financial compensation – for its originators

But the great innovators of American musical theater always acknowledged this debt. Kern, Gershwin, and Bernstein readily gave homage to the black roots of American music; they did not copy it but rather internalized its essence and expressed it through their own individual creativity.

Black music at the beginning of the century was the music of an outcast group – excluded and segregated. Today black music is so thoroughly integrated that it would be difficult to tell where black music stops and “American” music ends.

How will the continued assimilation of blacks into american mainstream affect this traditional source of inspiration to musical theater?

**Immigrants.** Every composer or lyricist described (except for Cole Porter and Stephen Sondheim) was a first– or second-generation immigrant. Whether as playwrights, actors, composers, or producers, these children of immigrants, mainly from Germany or Russia, dominated the musical theater for the past 60 years.

During the last decade, the U.S. has experienced its largest influx of immigrants since 1930. The majority – 85 percent – have come from Central America, Latin America, and Asia.

How will the influx of immigrants change/modify american culture – and how will that be reflected on our stages?

### Communications technology

Musical theater and communications technology grew up together. In the 1920s tunes from popular songs would be issued by music publishers for sale on player pianos, in sheet music form and later, the phonograph record. Radio theater was a popular form through the 1950s. When motion pictures were developed, actors from the New York stage comprised the first Hollywood “stars.” Many famous television actors, writers, and musicians got their start on Broadway.

The new technology of video enables millions of people to see — and re-see — classics of the stage and opera in their own homes.

Will this new technology alter and endanger the experience of live theater — and to pass this pleasure on to the next generation of theater-goers? Has instant access, fast forward, and 10-second visual editing damaged our ability to concentrate on scenes unfolding in “real time”?

### The demise of Broadway

For more than 60 years, the primacy of Broadway as the magnet for stage talent was unrivalled. Its productions defined the “American theater.”

But the last 20 years have seen a steady diminution in its role. The middle-class which traditionally formed the largest and most stable audience, has moved into the suburbs in increasing numbers. Costs are another factor.

In order to compete with cheap, readily available entertainments such as videos, Broadway productions have mounted larger and more lavish productions. As critic Thomas Disch writes in “The Death of Broadway,” “In the current age of tickets costing \$60 (or more), a night at the theater is becoming possible only once a year”.

Regional theaters are filling the role as Broadway’s influence wanes. The regional theater movement began 20 years ago and now theater companies in cities as diverse as Minneapolis and Louisville present first-class productions that attract top actors, writers, and composers. Supporters of regional theater argue that their productions are more responsive to community desires and provide wider opportunity to talent than is available in the cut-throat competition of Broadway.

While we can admit that regional diversity in the theater is good and necessary, the question remains: will it result in a “balkanized” theater in which regions develop in isolation from each other? Is it possible in a country that is increasingly varied culturally, economically, and ethnically to have one common theatrical expression?

This discussion of American musical theater ends with more questions than answers. The future, as always, is an unknown. But I believe in the power of the theater to combine many cultural elements in new, surprising ways. Whatever the future holds for the musical, I predict that it will provide us with more generations of plays to move, instruct, amuse, and astound.

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