**HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN MUSICAL**

*A summary based on a three-part lecture for the Art Seminar Group by*

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**GOLDEN AGE OF THE GREEK THEATRE** (525 BC- )

Dionysus—God of theatre. His festivals are the driving force behind the development of Greek theater.

**MIDDLE AGES**

Christianity outlaws the theatre; the church excommunicates actors. Church, however, recognizes power of theater and presents liturgical dramas to teach bible stories to congregants in the form of **mystery, morality**, and **miracles plays**.

**RENAISSANCE** (15TH-16TH centuries)

**Elizabethan Theatre—Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare**

Elizabethan Plays included songs, underscoring, incidental music, and social, court, and theatrical dances in comedies and dramas alike.

**17TH CENTURY**

Puritan Parliament under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell closes theatres, (1644) burns down the Globe Theatre, actors are seized and whipped, and anyone attending a show is fined.

**Restoration Theatre** (1660-1685): King Charles reinstates; bawdy Restoration comedies.

**17TH - 18TH CENTURIES**

**Merging of French, Italian, and British theatre**:

**Continental masques**: tremendous spectacle, paying homage to one central figure ––frequently the king; include declamatory speech, ballets, music, opulent costumes, and scenery, with strikingly advanced scenic effects and mechanics.

**Pantomimes:** staged ballets based on classical mythology.

**Italian Opera:** spreads throughout Europe; most popular theatrical form for British upper classes and sung in Italian or French; based on mythological figures or characters of royalty; opera *seria* and opera *comique*, which includes spoken dialogue.

**Ballad Opera:** serving as a satirical response to Italian opera; **THE BEGGAR’S OPERA** (1728) by John Gay; creates a new business model for musical theater;

holds record for the longest running play or musical for almost a century

**Colonial America:**

-**FLORA** (1753) first full-length musical (ballad opera) in U.S.; performed at The Playhouse on Dock Street in Charleston, S.C.

-THE TEMPLE OF MINERVA (1783): in style of European court masque; created by signer of Declaration of Independence, Francis Hopkinson.

**19TH CENTURY AMERICA**

**Minstrel Shows**: based on European tradition of masking and carnival; comedian Thomas Dartmouth Rice, Daddy Rice, performs “Jump Jim Crow,” a song and dance in blackface; Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels; consists of exclusively white actors performing in blackface.

**Burlesque:** from Italian word—*burlesco* meaning to “mock”; variety show utilizing cultural and political satire; training ground for 20th century performers Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Mae West, Eddie Cantor, Abbott and Costello, WC Fields, Al Jolson, Burt Lahr, Sid Caesar, and Danny Kaye.

**Vaudeville: Tony Pastor**—(1837—1908) the father of vaudeville; family-friendly entertainment; Harrigan and Hart; Weber and Fields.

**Pantomime: George Lafayette Fox**—Humpty Dumpty.

**Extravaganza/Spectacle:** Emphasis on scenic effects, costumes, and music; presented in huge venues such as NYC’s Hippodrome.

**THE BLACK CROOK 1866:** Birth of the American musical; combines melodrama THE BLACK CROOK with ballet LA BICHE AU BOIS; tours the US for 70 years.

**Comic operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan:** HMS PINAFORE NY debut (1879); Pinafore fever; plot drives the show—no variety acts included; Gilbert—first star lyricist.

**European operetta:** DUCHESS OF GEROLSTEIN (1868) Jacques Offenbach.

**20TH CENTURY**

**1900-1920**

**Revue**: vaudeville spin-off; lavish spectacle; dramatic arch created by order of songs, acts, etc; Producers—Florenz Ziegfeld, George White, Earl Carroll; Performers—Bert Williams, Fanny Brice, George M Cohan.; Composers **Irving Berlin** introduces ragtime to musical theatre (“Alexander’s Ragtime Band” 1911) and **George Gershwin** “Swanee” (1919 Al Jolson).

**SHUFFLE ALONG** (1921): first all-Black written, performed, and produced musical

**1920s**

**Great American Songbook era** and songs take precedence over plot.

Rising popularity of American musical comedies: **Rodgers and Hart, George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Noel Coward, Dorothy Fields, Yip Harburg.**

**Walter Winchell:** nicknames Broadway—Baloney Boulevard, The Big Gulch, The Big Apple.

**American Operetta:**  ROSE MARIE (1924) Rudolf Friml; THE STUDENT PRINCE (1924) Romberg.

**SHOWBOAT** (1927)-**Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein**; integration of song, comedy, production numbers into a single artistic entity creating new theatrical genre; Producer Ziegfeld’s final triumph.

**1930s**

Great Depression, Broadway writers, lyricists and performers head to Hollywood, but eventually return to NYC:

**George and Ira Gershwin** OF THEE I SING (1931)—first to win Pulitzer Prize for musical, PORGY AND BESS (1935);

**Rodgers and Hart** ON YOUR TOES (1936), **Cole Porter** ANYTHING GOES (1934);

**Mark Blitzstein** THE CRADLE WILL ROCK (YouTube link for John Houseman recounting of first performance--very inspiring!) **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_LDb0fn4Uek**

**1940s**

Reality begins to invade Broadway musical; transforms into serious art form: **Rodgers and Hart’s** PAL JOEY (1940); **Kurt Weill** LADY IN THE DARK (1941).

**Rodgers and Hammerstein OKLAHOMA!** (1943) first fully integrated musical play; dance plays key role in characterization and plot; CAROUSEL (1945), SOUTH PACIFIC, (1949).

**Leonard Bernstein** ON THE TOWN (1944).

**1950S**

Broadway musical continues to flourish: **Frank Loesser** GUYS AND DOLLS (1950);

**Lerner and Loewe** MY FAIR LADY (1956); **Meredith Wilson** MUSIC MAN (1957).

**WEST SIDE STORY (**1957) Bernstein and Sondheim: fully integrated singing, dancing, and acting-triple threat; **director/choreographer Jerome Robbins** masterpiece.

**GYPSY** (1959) Styne and Sondheim, directed by Robbins.

Dominance of director/choreographers**: Jerome Robbins, Gower Champion, Bob Fosse**

**George Abbott**—leading Broadway musical director

**1960s**

Traditional book musicals: BYE, BYE BIRDIE (1960), FANTASTIKS (1960), FUNNY GIRL (1964), HELLO DOLLY! (1964), FIDDLER ON THE ROOF (1964), MAME (1966)

Late 60s-Broadway reflects social and political unrest:

**HAIR** (1967)

**CABARET** (1966) Kander and Ebb: laid groundwork for concept musical; featured the artistry of set designer **Boris Aronson.**

**1970s**

Musicals reflect nation’s new focus on younger demographic: JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR (1970) first released as album; GODSPELL (1971); GREASE (1971); PIPPIN (1972); THE WIZ (1974).

S**ondheim 70s** (collaborates with director Hal Prince):

COMPANY (1970) **first fully realized concept musical;** FOLLIES (1971),

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC (1973), PACIFIC OVERTURES (1976), SWEENEY TODD (1979).

**CHORUS LINE (1975)** **Michael Bennett**-director/choreographer; first musical created in workshop setting.

**EVITA** (1978) **Andrew Lloyd Webber**; portends style of 80s mega-musical.

**1980s**

**British invasion and the mega-musicals**: bigger is better; spectacle, special effects.

**Andrew Lloyd Webber,** composer and **Cameron MacIntosh,** producer: CATS (1980), PHANTOM OF THE OPERA (1986),-MISS SAIGON (1989)(1985)

**LES MISÉRABLES** (1985) **Schönberg and Boublil** (Cameron MacIntosh, producer)

**Sondheim** working on smaller scale, beginning in off-Broadway theatres:

MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG (1981), SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE (1984) wins Pulitzer Prize, INTO THE WOODS (1987).

**1990s**

**Corporate musicals:** Broadway is focus of NYC PR tourism campaign;

Disney renovates Amsterdam Theatre, spawning renaissance of NYC theatre district and Times Square. And produces BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (1994), LION KING (1997)

**RENT** (1995) funded by smaller corporate entity

**POST 9/11- PRESENT**

Escapist musicals adapting movies screen for the musical stage: **THE PRODUCERS** (2001); **DIRTY ROTTEN SCOUNDRELS** (2005), **HAIRSPRAY** (2002); WICKED (2003).

Musicals display irreverent sense of humor: AVENUE Q (2003), SPAMALOT (2004), BOOK OF MORMON (2011).

Musicals deal with serious issues: SPRING AWAKENING (2006) NEXT TO NORMAL (2009); IN THE HEIGHTS (2008).

Jukebox musicals: scores comprise pre-existing pop songs: JERSEY BOYS (2005), MAMMA MIA! (1999), AMERICAN IDIOT (2009), BEAUTIFUL-THE CAROLE KING MUSICAL (2013).

**HAMILTON** (2015) Lin-Manuel Miranda; mega-hit receives unprecedented 16 Tony nominations, wins 11 of those nominations, as well as the Pulitzer Prize.