

The history of musical theatre essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Theatre](#)



The recently released *Les Misérables* earned £8.1 million in its opening weekend, making it the largest opening weekend for a musical film in history, proving that the genre is still alive. But how exactly did this powerful art form originate? And from then on, how did it evolve to become the spectacularly vivacious being that it is today? The oldest known forms of music theatre were the ancient Greek plays with music and lyrics, as well as music and dance being included within the Roman productions of comedies and tragedies. Despite their entertainment value at the time, the music of these eras stopped long ago, meaning they had little impact on the development of the modern musicals between the 18th and 21st centuries, both on-screen and on-stage. The Middle Ages then followed with the pioneering of musical “morality play”, staged by the congregation and pastors of churches.

This possibly stemmed from the combination of parables or the holy psalms, adding hymns as the musical element. However, these plays too had little influence on the development of fully integrated musicals as a medium of drama and storytelling. Although there were an abundance of musical stage productions in the 18th century, only a few of them were referred to as ‘musicals’. The earliest known English work of this particular period was John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, an operatic satire piece, poking fun at upper-class, reputable citizens who were compared to being no better than a common thief. The music featured within the play, however, was not entirely original: a selection of popular songs of the time was used as accompaniment to originally written lyrics. Various other ballad operas, burlettas and early versions of pantomimes made up the majority of the

musicals performed on stages through America, well into the early 19th century. Now, the musical as we witness it nowadays, primarily based on themes of comedy, romance, satire and occasionally tragedy, has some of its roots in the French 'operettas' of the early 19th century.

The satirical works of Jacques Offenbach, such as *Orphée aux enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld), as well as the romantic comedies of Johann Strauss, including *An der schönen blauen Donau*, (far more commonly known as *The Blue Danube*, the clichéd song for a $\frac{3}{4}$ waltz) were the very first musicals ever to accomplish acclamation throughout the world, translated for performance in London, Vienna and various other European cities.

European opera was rather well received in England, but audiences remained to still favour the broader 'variety shows' instead of the operettas.

While the modern 'Broadway' musical was also partially inspired from various Europe an operettas, its comedic soul was derived from variety entertainment shows that enchanted American from the mid-19th century and beyond. Simple variety shows and 'minstrel' shows began to settle down to introduce the more sophisticated pleasures of Vaudeville, as well as the boisterous force of Burlesque. *The Black Crook* was the first 'book musical', with the book written by American playwright Charles Barras. Its content was based on that of the story that had already been written, differing from Vaudeville and Burlesque, which simply had a series of sketches as opposed to a constant narrative. The entire production was an astonishing five and a half hours long, but still retained the audience's attention well enough to go on and perform over 474 performances on Broadway before setting off on a nationwide tour.

The accomplishments of the play gave way to the expansion of even more American productions, including extravaganzas, pantomimes more similar to the ones performed today, and the musical absurdities of Harrigan & Hart, the very first famous collaboration on Broadway and the first well-known Americans to use ethnicity as a major element of a character's development. The witty operettas of Gilbert & Sullivan were sharp, harmonious and expertly produced. This ultimately led to new, higher standards of dramatic production. Post-Gilbert and Sullivan, theatre both in the United Kingdom and the United States were reinvented, initially by imitation of others, but ultimately by originality. During the early 20th century, intercontinental theatre, including *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár, had a massive impact on Broadway, although American composers George Cohan and Victor Herbert made sure that the American comedic musical had a unique sound and style. P. G. Wodehouse, Jerome Kern and Guy Boulton took this even further, putting realistic characters and circumstances onto the musical stage. In the early 20s, the American musical comedy gained worldwide authority. Broadway saw the composing debuts of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein and numerous others.

Britain added many intimate musicals and produced Noel Coward: a composer, playwright, actor, director, singer and comedian, now well known for his humorous, flamboyant attitude. Kern and Oscar Hammerstein wrote the ground-breaking *Showboat* in 1927, the most enduring production of the 1920s. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 did not hinder Broadway. As a matter of fact, the 30s was witness to positive musical wit reaching its pinnacle. George Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing* was the first production ever to be the

receiver of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931. Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* and Rodgers & Hart *On Your Toes* contributed their share of lasting hit shows and songs, the former producing one of musical theatre's chart-toppers, the title track *Anything Goes*. The 40s began with fairly musical comedies, but Gershwin's *Lady in the Dark* and Rodgers & Hart's *Pal Joey* and Weill facilitated for far more realistic musicals.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma*, first performed in 1943 was the first completely integrated musical play, using every song and dance to develop the characters and the plot. It changed the face of musical theatre, becoming a medium of drama renowned for its complex storytelling through the three key elements: drama, music and dance. Key moments of the plot were not put aside to be told through traditional dialogue or direct address to the audience, but rather were thrust even further into the limelight with heart-wrenching songs, of which created the first ever American cast album that featured the original Broadway cast of the musical.

Following *Oklahoma*, musical theatre would never be the same again, its impact still influencing modern musicals today. However, composers such as Cole Porter, producing *Kiss Me Kate* in 1946 and Irving Berlin, *Annie Get Your Gun* in 1947, soon demonstrated that they were ready to become accustomed to the fully integrated musical. During the mid-1950s, Broadway musical albums became the most popular music in the western world. Each new season would bring a brand new batch of hit musicals, eagerly celebrated and awaited by the millions of fans. Fine storytelling, combined with catchy songs and impressive choreography were always on the agenda,

resulting in such unforgettable hits as *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *Gypsy* and dozens more. These musicals were shaped by three key elements:

Directors

- George Abbott (*Damn Yankees*, *The Pajama Game*)
 - Bob Fosse (*Redhead*, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, •
 - Jerome Robbins (*Peter Pan*, *Bells are Ringing*, *West Side Story*)
- Composers
- Rodgers & Hammerstein (*Oklahoma*, *The King and I*, *The Sound of Music*)
 - Frank Loesser (*Guys and Dolls*)
 - Leonard Bernstein (*West Side Story*)

Actresses

- Ethel Merman (*Anything Goes*, *There's No Business Like Show Business*)
- Mary Martin (*Annie*, *Get Your Gun*, *The Sound of Music*, *Peter Pan*)
- Gwen Verdon (*New Girl in Town*, *Redhead*, *Damn Yankees*)

West Side Story was the next widely influential work of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. Inspired by the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, spawning hit such as *Maria*, *Tonight*, *I Feel Pretty*, *America* and many more. Its combination of traditional Shakespearian story, modernized narrative, catchy melodies and well-written lyrics made it one of the most popular musicals in the world, retaining a huge cult following still today. At first glance, the 60s appeared to be more of the same: Broadway churning out record-breaking and record-setting hits, such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, with the still-popular *If I Was A Rich Man*, and *Hello, Dolly!* But as popular musical taste shifted, the musical seemed to be deserted. The “hip and happening” rock musical *Hair* was hailed as a landmark in 1968, but it only brought with it a period of uncertainty in the musical theatre world.

Meanwhile, on-screen musicals were rapidly becoming more and more successful, eventually generating far more famous ‘superstars’ and far more revenue, as television became a dominating force around the world. Many remakes of successful musicals were put into production, including Oklahoma in 1955, West Side Story in 1961, The Sound of Music in 1965, dividing the musical theatre world between people pleased that their work would reach grander stages, but others frightened that their stage shows would no longer be able to compete with the national and international reach of television and cinema. Composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, along with director Hal Prince reimagined the genre in the 70s with the introduction of ‘concept musicals’. These productions revolved around a specific idea or ideas, rather than a conventional plot. Productions such as A Little Night Music in 1970, Company in 1972 and Follies in 1973 succeeded, whereas rock musicals swiftly passed into the background. Concept musicals met their creative peak with A Chorus Line in 1974, written and directed by Michael Bennett.

No, No, Nanette initiated an abundance of popular revival musicals in 1973, but by the end of the decade, the ground was now being covered by either more serious new works, often heavily commercialized, externally-funded British ‘mega-musicals’, such as Evita, drawing on much darker subjects but retaining the comic value, such as Sweeney Todd. The general public greatly preferred the impressive ‘mega-musicals’, so the early 80s brought several long-running British productions to American Broadway: Phantom of the Opera, Les Miserables, Cats, Miss Saigon were light on much high-brow, intellectual content and particularly heavy on marketing, special effects and

commercialization. By the 1990s, new mega-musicals were seemingly no longer winning the public, and costs were so high, even popular hits such as *Sunset Boulevard* in 1991 and *Crazy for You* in 1992 were unable to produce any profit on Broadway. Newer stage musicals suddenly required multi-million dollar companies to support them in order them to succeed or even to be developed as a production, a trend confirmed by Disney's *The Lion King*. Even *Titanic* and *Rent*, both widely successful productions, were funded by smaller, Broadway-inspired corporations. As the 20th century ended, the musical theatre had an uncertain future, only relying on remakes and stage versions of old movies, such as *Footloose* and *Saturday Night Fever*, as well as the still-running 'mega-musicals' of the previous decade.

But starting in the year 2000, a new resurgence of American musical comedies took Broadway by surprise. *The Producers*, *Urinetown*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Hairspray* — funny, melodic and inventively staged, these hit shows offered new hope for the genre. Other, less story-oriented productions such as *Dancing in the Streets*, based more generally on the origins and fruition of Motown, and *We Will Rock You*, the Queen musical became far more popular as revisitations of older popular music. Other modern originals and remakes, however, such as *Wicked* and *Legally Blonde: The Musical*, began accumulating cult followings of younger audiences, either due to their remaining popularity from their on-screen form or their outbreak as a new, exciting musical, an art form that many young people had not witnessed first-hand. In conclusion, musical theatre has come a long way from the ancient Greek and Roman productions, making its way through more narrative-based musicals, all the way to the modern musical, fully integrated

with choreography, original music and lyrics and powerful performances from strong male and female leads, filled with gumption. Audiences and general public basked in the glory of the astonishingly talented playwrights, directors, composers, lyricists, choreographers, singers, dancers, actors and actresses, some of which were gifted enough to take on multiple roles as composers and lyricists, directors and choreographers, as well as starring in their own and others' productions.