

# [Key industry, as theatre practitioners have to invest](https://assignbuster.com/key-industry-as-theatre-practitioners-have-to-invest/)

[](https://assignbuster.com/)[Art & Culture](https://assignbuster.com/essay-subjects/art-n-culture/), [Music](https://assignbuster.com/essay-subjects/art-n-culture/music/)

Key practitioners in musicaltheatre are writers, composers, lyricists, choreographers, directors and manymore, they are all part of the process of putting a show together and gettingit up on its feet. However, Tony Kushner argues that ‘ there’s such a differencebetween a really great composer and a really great theatre composer’ (Evan, 2014: 53) which is relevant to many other practitioners in the industry, astheatre practitioners have to invest time into the piece so that the musicrelates to the book, the lyrics and the style etc. In this case study, it willexplore why John Kander (a composer) and his partner Fred Ebb (a lyricist) are keypractitioners. This will discuss different critical accounts on a selection ofmusicals they have worked together on; Cabaret, Chicago and The Scottsboro Boys.

InAmericas Songs it states that ‘ In theflamboyant yet conservative world of the Broadway musical, John Kander and FredEbb wrote hit shows that were startlingly, dazzling innovative’ (Furia andLasser, 2008: 292-293). This comment states clearly that they are able to writehit shows whilst still having a deeper meaning to what you would normally seein a ‘ boy-meets-girl’ musical. Their work is discussed by many writers on whata great team they were, before Ebb passed away, and how they take true stories, and real life events, whilst highlighting specific problems; the Civil RightsMovement in Cabaret, vaudeville in Chicago and minstrelsy in The Scottsboro Boys. A key feature of their workis that a lot of their material is dark, yet this is what makes their pieces so’Kander and Ebb’ as they liked towork with rich material, full of problems and emotional  implications because they found it easier towrite about such problems over a regular ‘ boy meets girl’  scenario. Along with all these pieces beingdark, they are all set in the early Nineteenth Century, a different time periodto what their audiences’ are in. In an interview on Front Row, in 2014, JohnKander made a comment on how he thinks using distance from a different time theaudience is living in, can make them enjoy it more, as musical theatre is notwhat life is. He states ‘ maybe that’s why Cabaretwasn’t a big hit at the time’ (Front Row, 2014) as the audience were not readyto become socially aware to it all. Cabaretwasone of Kander and Ebb’s first hits, setbetween 1929 and 1930, which aided in them becoming ‘ arguably the mostsubversive practitioners of the concept musical.

‘ (Leve. 2015: 4), indicatingthey have had a huge impact on the changes in musical theatre, going from theintegrated musical to the concept musical. The concept musical would ‘ commenton the story metaphorically rather than advance it in dramatically expressivesongs.’ (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 286) howeverthey were not fully there and only used part of the feature; it had thenon-linear side in the ‘ Kit Kat Klub’whilst still having the traditional book musical style throughout. Harold Princewas the man who took this on as a project as he was interested in the CivilRights Movement, he could see the parallel between ‘” The spiritual bankruptcyof Germany in the 1920’s and our country in the 1960’s”‘(Furia and Lasser, 2008: 284). He wanted to make it contemporary and relatable to the audience. Thepiece is based on ‘ I Am Camera’, which is Jon Van Druten’s adaptation of Christopher Irshwood’s ‘ Berlin Stories’. Prince wanted to takethe important message from this book whilst still making it entertaining, hewanted it to create “ A musical that would be “ more than a musical”” (Furia andLasser, 2008: 284) which is the reason he asked Kander and Ebb to be part of thecreative team.

Instead of writing a dark score, “ they gave many of theirnumbers a gay, glitzy patina.” (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 285) making them veryupbeat, juxtaposing to the dark message the show was telling. When Sally singsthe song Cabaret; “ What good issitting alone in your room?/ Come hear the music play;/ Life is a cabaret, oldchum” the lyrics are underscoring ‘ her and much of Germany’s obliviousness tothe rise Nazism.

” (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 286) that was going on in Berlin atthe time. Cabaret was headlined with;’A ‘ Cabaret’ with fresh ways to make us squirm’ (Reid, 2017), backing up thatthe way this is performed is quite shocking and the matter they discuss can bedisturbing to viewers, however it is still entertaining which supports thembeing key practitioners. Well-known features in JohnKander’s compositions are his use of vamps, described to be ‘ among the mostrecognizable vamps in the musical theatre repertory’ (Leve, 2015: 25).

ChitaRivera says they ‘ are part of what defines’ (Leve, 2015: 25) their music andmakes it their own. The use of a vamp is a repeated musical feature in whichmarks the start of a song to form the mood, and can ‘ often define the rhythmicand melodic profile of the song” (Leve, 2015: 25). Kander started most of theirsongs with a vamp, then inside the vamp found the beginning of the melody ofwhich the lyrics would be sung to. His music expands the harmonic palette andis a ‘ more inventive use of the mirror mode.” (Leve, 2015: 28). Kander borrowedharmonies shifting between a major and a minor key whilst increasing the dramaticeffect. The song ‘ Maybe This Time’uses the inner ascending line to form the harmonic progression, whilst takingthe counter line to the repeated theme in the vocals to help build up thetension. This then makes the whole song develop and get stronger, bothmusically and characteristically, showing the character Sally Bowles’shappiness and self-worth of finally finding a meaningful relationship.

Through the years it hadbeen argued that “ The work of Kander and Ebb has shown a consistent Brechtianstyle…though their political impact is somewhat light”(Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 59)showing how they have been influenced and morphed the idea into theirown. In the original production of Cabaret, with Prince, he used ‘ a huge mirror in which they found themselves reflected'(Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 61), making them part of the performance not justviewing it. This is an example of Brecht’s theory of alienating the audience, known as Verfremdungseffekt. Theaudience are led into a false sense of security with the satirical show usinglight entertainment on heavy subjects. Brecht once said ‘ Art is not a mirrorwith which to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it.’ (Bbc. co. uk, 2018), which means that what the audience views on stage can be changed and itis up to them to take action.

This is seen in Cabaret involving the Civil Rights Movement, directly linking the Kit Kat Klub (which was an actual clubin 1920’s called Kit Kat Club) withthe white extremists ‘ Ku Klutz Klan’. Alsom this can be seen through their use of Cultural Materialism (‘ historicizing a cultural text’ (Taylorand Symonds, 2014: 61)), by relating it to the treatment of someone or group, beit by gender, race or religion. At the end of a production in the 90’s, thecharacter Emcee starts to remove hiscostume revealing a concentration camp uniform with a yellow badge and a pink triangleon. This signified the Jews and homosexuality, making the piece shape tocomment on a more contemporary issue bringing the impact of AIDS to light, where as in the 60’s it represented racisms instead. In a 2006 production thewhole cast stripped down naked, revealing their “ emaciated bodies vulnerablyawaiting extermination in the gas chambers” (Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 64), there is a clear portrayal to the context of the script here (the Holocaust).

This was also relative to the audience at the time, as the war with Afghanistanwas happening and it was literally telling the audience “ It could happen heretoo” (a line from the play) making their minds think about what they had justseen rather than just being entertained. A lot of Cabaret’s songs also have a deepermeaning, for example in the song ‘ If youCould See Her Through My Eyes’, sung by Emcee, a novelty vaudeville, agorilla in a pink veiled hat and tutu appears as the soft-show rhythm isplaying, this duet links to racial issue in the 60’s and the ethnic tension inthe 20’s/30’s. Whilst trying to remind the audience that ‘ love can happenbetween people of difference” (Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 63). Kander and Ebbwere portraying the Nazi’s views’ at the time, on how Jews are were closer tothe evolutionary chain, shocking the audience with the line ‘ She wouldn’t look Jewish at all’. Cabarethas been described as one of the musicals that still to this day “ speak to theheart of human experience- (Kendrick, 2017: 255) which is highly supported inthis song as they show the overcoming of societal barriers. They also comment on other issues such as money in “ Money makes the world go around”.

It hasbeen discussed that Ebb was “ capturing the crass cynicism of the cabaret butalso the hothouse environment of producing musical theatre on Broadway” (Knapp, Morris and Wolf, 2013: 351). This links to how much money can be put into theshow and how much money can be earned within a show, for example; the raise inticket prices every year at the box office. In their stage show Chicago, adapted from Maurine DallasWatkins’ play Chicago, there are alsothe use Brechtian techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall especially with thecharacter Roxie as a lot of her songsare set in her mind, not in real world.

They also have the band leader announceevery song just before it is performed which takes you out of the dramaticaction a touch. The musical is based on two 1924 murder cases; the murdererswere called Belulah Annan and Bleva Gaertner (who are Velma Kelly and Roxie Heartin the show). The pair, in the show, get out of jail because of a man namedBilly who ‘ transforms “ justice” into “ showbiz”‘ (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293). Nowadays it is argued that it is relevant to a more contemporary audience asthe media still makes celebrities from criminals ‘ while the public rebelsagainst attempts at legislating morality’ ( Miller, 1999) which is what happensin this musical as the media was the way Roxie won over people with her liesand is released from prison.

The music at the time of this piece was very jazzstyled so Kander and Ebb listened to a lot of the music from the era, Kanderlater describing the unconscious process of listening and ‘ letting your brainsoak it in and then writing'(Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293) much easier to actuallycreate a song, especially Chicago. Themusic throughout aids in ‘ the idea that jazz and its associated lifestyles havewarped Roxie'(Knapp, 2009: 114), which is put forward quite cynically, and hasmade Roxie a murderer and it is notreally her fault, trying to capture the public’s sympathy. Each song in theshow ‘ was in a particular style associated with show biz’ (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293) at the time, Ebb capturing the language of vaudeville throughout allthe songs written to create the metaphor of show business as life (just like itis in Roxie’s eyes). This was becauseBob Fosse (the choreographer for both Chicagoand Cabaret and who Ebb had collaboratedwith on writing the book for this show) hadthe idea of wanting to ‘ play on avaudeville stage so that all musical numbers would be “ justified”‘ (Gottfried, 2009: 305) so Fred ‘ made it vaudeville based on the idea that the characterswere performers’ (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293)and based them around someone else. For example; Roxie was Helen Morgan, Velma was Texas Guinan, Billy Flynn was Ted Lewis, Mama Morton was Sophie Tucker. Ebb wouldtake on Fosse’s suggestions and then go home to test things out. For instancehe might suggest adding in a the slap in a scene Ebb had written, so Ebb wouldtry and rewrite the scene with a new action to see if it would work or not.

The original idea from Fosse for the closingnumber was for there to be two solo songs, each for Kelly and Hart. The writerswanted a ‘ cheesy act in which Velma played the drum and Roxie saxophone’ (Furiaand Lasser, 2008: 294) however even with this idea in mind, Kander and Ebb boththought it neither of the songs written were working. So when Fosse asked themto make only one song for the characters, they were delighted and they managedto write ‘ Nowaydays’ in an hour! Inthis song they sing the line “ There’s life everywhere” suggesting conflictionwith showbiz in the idea that although it is quite sleazy, it is also excitingand full on ‘ life’.  The announcerintroduces the act is “ Chicago’s Killer Dillers”, whilst stating that histheatre is home to ‘ family entertainment’. In an article on this musical it isargued that this song can be made contemporary as it relates to ‘ today’sentertainment industry, as dozens of special interest groups complain thatmovies and television are corrupting our youth.

‘ This analysis makes clearidentification to the present as this is still happening; take OJ Simpson as anexample, the trial for the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and RonGoldman was televised live and was watched by thousands, becoming the ‘ trial ofthe century’ (Brown, Muldowney and Effron, 2017). Nancy Glass says in this newsarticle that it involves sex, murder and money which will always be on peoples’minds on whether he had killed them or not. This links directly back tovaudeville, as it would not be known without an audience and neither would haveChicago nor Simpson. Other serious accusations arefound in The Scottsboro Boys. Thisplay had hints of vaudeville in the show and used the device of having a playwithin a play (just like Cabaret and Chicago)whilst bringing out apolitical/social matter. The musical is about 9 black, male teenagers who werepulled of a train in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931 and are wrongfully accused ofraping two white women. The case goes on for 9 whole years.

Kander said in aninterview on Front Row (2014) that Fred Ebb had originally said that theaudience would pull away from this piece if they did not make it entertainingthey decided that they needed to sweeten the story in some way with the music. Unfortunately, Ebb had passed before this show was released so Kander took on the projecthimself along with David Thompson who wrote the book. The style of the songsare quite jaunty, juxtaposing with the dark matter at hand, reminding Kander of’Oh What A Lovely War’ with the style and intent of each song. Their songscreated a false, safe atmosphere where the audience could enjoy themselves but thekey feature in this was their use of Minstrelsy (black face) to bring forwardthe dark, underlining the issue of racism.

Minstrelsy was a form of comictheatre in America where white minstrels would paint their faces black ‘ whosematerial caricatured the singing and dancing of slaves.’ (Gorlinski, Parwani andTikkanen, 2010) in the eighteen hundred and later it would influence vaudevilletheatre and other sources on media. Kander and Ebb subvert the original portrayalof this and turn it on its head, by having a black actor playing a whitecharacter. By disrupting this they ‘ force history into the present'(Stahl, 2016; 75) but they can only push the audience so far in this sense.

A man calledSarfraz Manzoor commented on the piece on The Review Show in 2013, saying thatbecause of this use of the flipped minstrelsy the injustice of the ‘ rape’ islost as the audience are too shocked at the white character being portrayed bya black actor. Although, this is the exact reason they used it, as they wanted tomake the audience aware of the racism in the story and how racialdiscrimination is still happening to this day. It is argued on this show thatit is ‘ one of the worst Kander and Ebb productions'(The Review Show, 2013) asit doesn’t match the musical or political terms it sets out to show. However, Hoffman argues that ‘ While the musical engages with a variety of social topics, the issue of race takes precedence’ (Hoffman, 2014; 3), linking back to the JimCrow Laws which consisted of the separation of any person of a racial colourthat is not white. Ebb writes these lyrics ‘ Wheel about, turn about, and do just so/ Every time dey wheel about, dey jumpJim Crow’ which makes the spectators aware of  these laws and can make the audience shockedat the direct confrontation and how politically correct it actually is. At thevery end of the performance the cast put on black face makeup and ‘ sing aboutthe media frenzy surrounding their newfound notoriety’ (Stahl, 2016: 77) buttheir upbeat number is brought to a halt by the revelations of the boys” fates.

When they are asked to perform their usual ending number ‘ the Cakewalk’ butrefuse and remove their faces clean, leaving the stage. This offers the idea ofhope of change with the Civil Rights Movement. The minstrelsy helps with theway the show is constructed as well.  Theactors use chairs and tell their story with them (a semi-circle of chairs wereused in a lot of minstrel shows) using them to change the scene from a train toa cell etc.

‘ The actors become in charge of the structure: they build the set'(Perloff and Richard, 2012: 6). The end is left with the chairs in thesemi-circle are completely tipped over metaphorically showing how they have deconstructedthe minstrel form. The presence of both the minstrelsy and Brechtian elementsleaves the ‘ audience to think critically on this satirical commentary on theracist attitude in the South at the time of the Scottsboro trials and theminstrel tradition.'(Robson, 2017: 3), whilst making ‘ racism’ a key themethroughout to make the audience think of what is happening now compared tothen, and if there is much difference. To conclude, both Kander andEbb have adapted minstrelsy, Brechtian forms and interlinked this with the ideaof concept musicals.

They are both key practitioners because they manage tocreate intriguing entertainment whist still making the audience think. The pairhave used these forms as stepping points to create their own material, creatingin depth pieces with not-so-hidden messages. This essay has looked at threedifferent musicals that they have written together and commented on theinfluence they have had on the audience, which was their initial desire, as inthese pieces they wanted to make a contemporary audience analyse whether thingshave really changed in the world or not.