

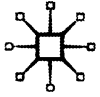


*Allen Cohen and Steven L. Rosenhaus*

**WRITING MUSICAL THEATER**

**ALLEN COHEN  
AND  
STEVEN L. ROSENHAUS**

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WRITING MUSICAL THEATER

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# CONTENTS

<i>Permissions Acknowledgments</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>Introduction</i>	xi

## PART I: THE ELEMENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	<b>THEATER BASICS</b>	<b>3</b>
	Stages and Theaters	3
	Types of Stages	3
	Theater Size	6
	Stage Geography	7
	Scenery, Props, Lighting, and Costumes	8
	Orchestras	8
	Types of Musicals	10
	Book Shows	10
	Revue	11
	Musicals for Children	12
	New Genres	12
	Adaptations and Originals	13
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	<b>THE IDEA</b>	<b>15</b>
	Why a Musical?	15
	What Makes a Good Story for a Musical?	17
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>THE LIBRETTO</b>	<b>23</b>
	Dramatic Essentials	24
	What Makes Drama?	24
	The Needs of the Libretto	27
	A Golden Rule (and its Corollaries)	29
	Forms and Formats	33
	Modes of Storytelling	35
	Theatrical Styles	37
	Balancing the Elements	39

Translating the Story into a Script	40
Adaptations of Plays and Movies	41
Adaptations from other Literary Genres	52
Adaptations of Myth and Folklore	59
Originals	60
Subplot	62
Functions of Theater Songs	63
Song Spotting	69
Conventions of Musical Theater	72
Establishing Time and Place	74
Script Conventions	76
<b>CHAPTER 4 THE CHARACTERS</b>	<b>81</b>
Establishing Characters	81
Cast Size	81
Main Characters	82
Secondary Characters	82
Ensembles	83
Bringing Characters to Life	83
Physical Types and Vocal Ranges	84
Psychological and Emotional Makeup	85
Speech Patterns, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Dialect	86
Practical Considerations	89
<b>CHAPTER 5 THE LYRICS</b>	<b>91</b>
Before Writing	91
Terminology	91
Types of Songs	93
Ballads	94
Comedy Songs	94
Rhythm Songs	95
Charm Songs	95
List Songs	96
Musical Scenes	97
Song Structure	97
Ballad Structure	102
Comedy Song Structure	104
Rhythm Song Structure	105
Charm Song Structure	106
A Note on Musical Scenes	106

Titles	107
Rhyme	108
Three Principles	113
Concision	113
Comprehensibility	113
Particularization	115
The Balance of Illusions: Poetry versus Conversation	117
<b>CHAPTER 6 THE MUSIC</b>	<b>121</b>
Song Basics	121
Melody	121
Setting Lyrics	127
Accompaniments	129
Adding Subtext	137
Variety	137
Voice Leading, Step Motion, and the Long Line	140
Formats	142
Writing for the Voice	144
Ranges	144
Lyrical Considerations	146
Breathing	146
Writing for More than One Voice at a Time	147
Keys	149
Beyond the Songs	150
The Musical World of the Show	151
Suggesting Time and Place	151
Theater Music and Popular Styles	153
Unifying the Score	155
<b>PART II: WRITING A SHOW</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 7 GETTING STARTED</b>	<b>161</b>
Sample Project A: An Adaptation	162
The Story	162
The Characters	164
The Libretto	168
Sample Project B: An Original	178
The Story	178
The Characters	180
The Libretto	185

<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	<b>WRITING THE SCORE</b>	<b>191</b>
	Song Spotting	191
	The Adaptation	192
	The Original	197
	The Next Step	202
	Writing a Ballad	205
	Writing a Comedy Song	217
	Writing a Charm Song	237
	Writing a Rhythm Song	245
	The Rest of the Show	254
<b>CHAPTER 9</b>	<b>REWRITING</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>		
<b>A.</b>	<b>A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW</b>	<b>259</b>
	Beginnings	259
	The Song Era	260
	The “Golden Age”	260
	Rock and the Concept Musical	261
	Pop Opera	263
	The Present Outlook	263
<b>B.</b>	<b>TOOLS</b>	<b>265</b>
	For Everyone	265
	For Librettists	266
	For Lyricists	267
	For Composers	267
<b>C.</b>	<b>LOGISTICS AND LEGALITIES</b>	<b>269</b>
	Collaboration	269
	Collaboration Agreements	272
	Adaptation Rights	273
	Copyrighting Material	275
	Writing Workshops	275
	Auditioning a Show	276
	Agents	277
	Production Possibilities	278
	Readings and Staged Readings	278
	Workshop Productions	278
	Showcases	278
	Educational Productions	279

Regional Productions	279
Full-scale Commercial Productions	279
<b>D. REQUIRED READING (AND LISTENING)</b>	<b>281</b>
Classic Shows of the Golden Age	281
Other Important Shows	282
Important Songwriters	282
<i>Index</i>	283



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## INTRODUCTION

This book is not only for people who want to write musical theater. It is for anyone interested in musical theater, anyone who would like a better understanding of how musicals are put together and how they work—or don't work.

When we started out as aspiring musical theater writers, we found no textbook or reference work to help us learn our craft. We were each fortunate enough to learn essential principles and techniques from teachers, writing workshops, and experience—but this remained a sporadic process, as it has been for most writers. When we began to write our own shows, we often wished we could find a book that analyzed musical theater from the writer's point of view, a comprehensive guide that presented the rules of the craft in a systematic and thorough manner. More recently, when we started to teach musical theater writing at the college level, we were still unable to find a suitable book for our students. Of the few books published on the subject, most are poorly organized and incomplete, and none discusses the music in any depth. At last we decided to write a book ourselves, like the one we wished we could have found.

Student and novice writers will find a great deal of practical information in this book, but it should be of equal value to more experienced writers, providing them with a set of basic principles and standards, as well as tips and suggestions, all within a general reference work. Writing musicals is a craft, or rather a set of several crafts, each with its own principles and techniques, and these crafts can be taught. Writers who wish to create musicals of quality need two things: an understanding of good craftsmanship, and practice. This book explains the former and offers opportunities for the latter.

Part I is an analytical survey, in which we separate musical theater into its various component parts and examine each of them. We discuss both general principles and specific techniques, and illustrate our discussions with many examples from the field.

Part II is a guide, a “how-to” tutorial that leads you step by step through the initial stages of creating a musical, based on the principles elucidated in Part I. Using two musical projects that we have created for this purpose as models, we

take you through the writing process: finding the initial idea, developing the characters, working out the details of the story, planning the score as a whole, and starting to write songs. Finally, we point the way toward the later but equally important processes of rereading and rewriting.

At the end of the book are four Appendices with additional information. Appendix A is a brief history of musical theater in America; Appendix B contains lists of reference books and other tools for musical theater writers; Appendix C covers practical issues such as adaptation rights, collaboration agreements, agents, and possibilities for production; and Appendix D lists the classic works in the field, with which anyone who loves or wants to write musicals should be familiar.

In order to discuss music, we need to show it, as we do in chapters 6 and 8, and to assume that you know some basic musical terms like pitch, interval, tempo, the names of chords, and so on. But even if you don't know these terms and can't read music, you will still be able to understand almost everything in the discussions. We also assume that you have at least some familiarity with most of the classic musicals listed in Appendix D.

We'd like to make clear what we mean by *musical theater* in this book. We distinguish modern, commercial *musical shows*, or *musicals*, from plays with music on the one hand, and opera on the other.

Many plays such as Shakespeare's include songs and dances, but they differ from musicals in several respects. In plays, most of the running time is taken up by speech, while in musicals the balance between spoken portions and musical numbers is approximately equal. (Of course, this distinction does not apply to recent "pop operas," in which everything or almost everything is sung.) Another difference is one of function. In plays such as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*, the songs are mostly *intermezzi* or diversions; most of them could be cut without affecting the telling of the story at all. Except for revues (shows without a central plot line), the songs in a musical are part of the narrative framework; most or all of them further the telling of the story and the revelation of character.

Opera is also musical theater, and many operas are structurally indistinguishable from musicals. In both *The Magic Flute* and *Carousel*, for instance, the story is told through both song and dialogue, with some dancing as well. Again, however, there is a difference in the balance of spoken and sung words. While in plays the balance is weighted toward the spoken word, and in musicals the balance is usually equal, in operas the balance is usually tipped more toward the music. In a musical most of the emotional high points are sung or danced, but in opera, *all* of these points are musicalized, and most of them are sung. There is also a difference of expectations. Opera audiences expect to hear a

traditional, unamplified orchestra and singers with highly trained voices. Musical theater audiences have become accustomed to smaller, amplified orchestras with nonsymphonic instrumentation such as saxophones, drum sets, electric guitars and basses, and electronic keyboards. They accept that the singers' voices may be amplified, and that those amplified voices may be less than operatic or even untrained. The dividing line is still hard to draw; Stephen Sondheim, whose shows have appeared both on Broadway and in opera houses, has said that when *Sweeney Todd* is performed in a Broadway theater it is a musical, but when it is performed in an opera house it is an opera. Much of this book will apply to opera as well as musical theater—but our focus is on the latter.

All of the concepts and techniques discussed within this book are based on experience and analysis. Many of them come from experience gained during the creation of our own shows, those of colleagues and friends, or other new shows with which we have been involved professionally. Many come from the experience of renowned professionals, from whom we have had the good fortune to learn. Our analyses have also built upon the wisdom of these veterans, as well as upon our own teaching experience. There are exceptions to almost everything, and all of the principles we state are generalizations, as we will occasionally remind you. But each one has a great deal of experience behind it.

One final thought: Whatever the economic and artistic state of musical theater may be, there is still need for excellence and innovation in the field, now more than ever. We hope this book will help aspiring writers to become leaders and innovators in tomorrow's musical theater.

**PART I**

**THE ELEMENTS**

## THEATER BASICS

This chapter explains the basic facts and terminology of subjects such as theater spaces, stage geography, and types of musicals—information that anyone interested in understanding musical theater needs to know, and that is referred to throughout the book. If you are unfamiliar with these basics, you should read this chapter. Otherwise, you can skip it and proceed directly to chapter 2.

### Stages and Theaters

#### TYPES OF STAGES

There are three common types of stages. In large commercial theaters the most common type is the *proscenium*. The word comes from Latin and means “in front of the scene,” which refers to the rectangular arch that frames the front of the stage. The stage lies behind an opening in one wall of the theater space, with entrances and exits usually made from the wings (the sides of the stage). This rectangular opening between the stage and the audience is often called the “fourth wall,” because when the stage setting represents a room in “realistic” plays and productions, the opening is treated as one of the room’s walls. Sometimes the stage is separated from the rest of the theater by a curtain that is lifted—or by two curtains that are pulled apart—to reveal the stage for each act or scene. The proscenium arch is the frame for all of the action, and it allows a wide variety of scenic elements and backdrops. (A *backdrop* or *backcloth* is the scenic element at the rear of the stage, a piece of canvas that is usually hung like a curtain and painted. When used purely as a screen for lighting and sky



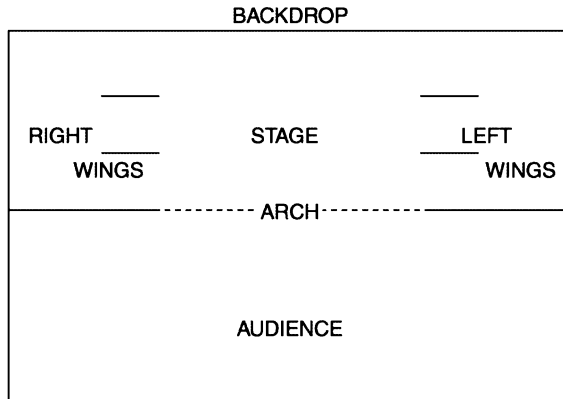
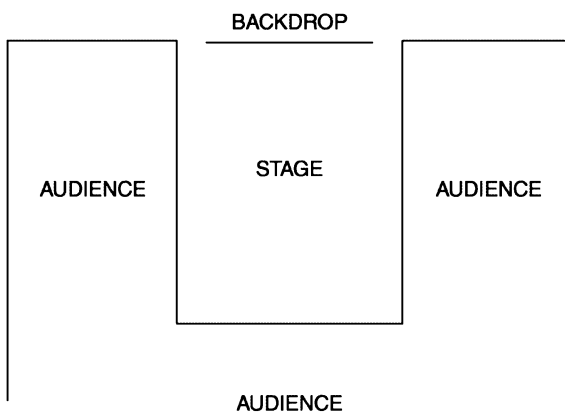
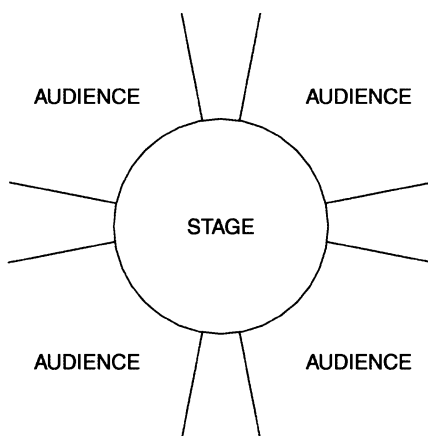


Figure 1.1

effects it is called a *cyclorama* or “cyke.”) Figure 1.1 shows an overhead view of a proscenium stage.

The second most common type of stage is called *thrust*, and is possibly the most ancient of all stages; the classical Greek theaters had thrust stages, and Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre also had a type of thrust stage. There are no traditional Broadway theaters with thrust stages, but several institutional New York theaters have them, as do many off-Broadway theaters. The ancient Greek theater was an open-air amphitheater with a circular stage; the audience sat in curved rows that extended about two-thirds of the way around it. In a modern thrust theater, the stage extends out from one wall (which is sometimes used for scenic backdrops), usually in a rectangular shape, and the audience sits on either side of it as well as in front (see figure 1.2). Entrances and exits are usually made from either side of the rear wall. There is no curtain and no frame, and usually there is little scenery except for some furniture, some set pieces in front of the backdrop, and the backdrop itself.

The third common type of stage is the *arena*, which may date back to the outdoor circuses of the Roman Empire, such as the Colosseum. There are no Broadway theaters with arena stages, and even off-Broadway they are rare, but they can be found off-off-Broadway, in many college theaters, and in many regional and outdoor summer “music circuses” around the country. The stage is usually in the center of the theater space, and entrances and exits can be made from any aisle or corner (see figure 1.3). There is no curtain and no frame, except the boundaries of the stage. While arena stages are square as often as they are circular, arena staging is often called “in the round.” There is little or no scenery; even a piece of furniture will block sightlines from somewhere in the audience. But the stage seems close to the entire audience, and minimal

**Figure 1.2****Figure 1.3**

scenery leaves more to the imagination, which can make even small shows seem magical. The opening number of Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt's *Philemon* pays tribute to the almost infinite possibilities available when drama is performed "Within This Empty Space."

There are other, less common types of stages and theaters that could be called "site-specific performance spaces." Some, like old nightclubs or dance halls, can be appropriate places for the presentation of musicals, as the old Studio

54 discothèque was for the 1990s Broadway revival of *Cabaret*. Others are clearly unsuitable for live music, such as when plays or performance pieces are staged throughout the rooms of a large building. This has never been done with a commercial production of a musical, because the problems of where to put the musicians and how to coordinate them with the singers would probably be insuperable.

#### THEATER SIZE

As defined in contracts with the theatrical unions, New York City's "Broadway" theaters have five hundred seats or more. This group is sometimes divided into two categories: large Broadway theaters with more than a thousand or so seats (like the St. James, the Winter Garden, and the Majestic), which tend to house big musicals with large casts, and smaller Broadway theaters (like the Golden or the Booth) which usually house straight plays or small-scale, intimate musicals.

Off-Broadway theaters have between 99 and 499 seats. New York also has a third, unofficial category of theaters called off-off-Broadway. These theaters have fewer than 99 seats, and are rarely used for commercial productions.

Experienced musical dramatists have at least some idea of the size of the theater for which they are writing. In most successful shows there is some correlation between the scale of the show and its theatrical home. In part this is a matter of practicality; for example, a big show with a large cast and a mammoth set like *Les Misérables* would be almost impossible to mount in an off-Broadway theater. On the other hand, *Godspell*, with its small cast and simple set, worked extremely well off-Broadway but closed abruptly after it transferred to a large Broadway theater. We use the term "scale" rather than size because it is not simply a practical matter of large casts or elaborate sets. Scale is difficult to put into words, but easy to feel in a theater. Many theatergoers have seen shows that seemed too small or intimate to "fill" the space of a large theater. The Broadway shows that get the harshest reviews from critics are usually not the worst-written shows, but the ones that feel too small for the theater in which they open.

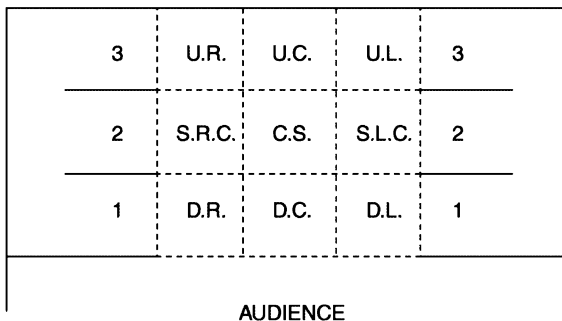
The writers' conception of the show as a whole determines its scale, which is only tangentially related to the size of the theater. For example, Jones and Schmidt's *I Do! I Do!* had a cast of two, while the same writers' *The Fantasticks* had a cast of eight. But as Tom Jones himself has said, *I Do! I Do!*—with its stars Mary Martin and Robert Preston, its somewhat broad, emphatic style, and its fanciful dancing set—was a large-scale "Broadway" show, while *The Fantasticks*—with its unknown actors, its quiet poetic style, and its simple unit set—was a small-scale "off-Broadway" show. Of course these two categories are not necessarily exclusive. Using nonstar casts and simple sets, *I Do! I Do!* has

played successfully in countless small theaters. But *The Fantasticks*, even with stars in the cast, has rarely played successfully in a large theater; it is simply too small and intimate a show.

Yet neither physical size nor the size of the budget has a direct correlation with emotional scale or power. There have been many big, elaborate Broadway productions that left audiences cold, while *The Fantasticks*, in a tiny theater in Greenwich Village, charmed audiences for decades. Indeed, it was more effective, more magical, in that tiny space than anywhere else.

### STAGE GEOGRAPHY

When talking about an ordinary proscenium stage, theater people commonly refer to a nine-cell grid in which the stage floor is split in thirds from left to right and from front to back, giving each cell of the grid a name: up right, up center, up left, stage right center, center stage, stage left center, down right, down center, and down left (see figure 1.4). (In the theater, unless otherwise indicated, “right” and “left” mean “stage right” and “stage left”—that is, right and left as seen from the stage facing the audience; stage directions are always from the viewpoint of the actors, not the audience. “Up” means toward the rear of the stage, and “down” means toward the audience.) Sometimes numbers are used to denote the front-to-back split of the stage, including the offstage wings, with the number one denoting the downstage area, two the area behind it, and so on. This is the origin of the old term “in one” to denote scenes or numbers that were done in the frontmost area of the stage with a curtain shutting off the rest, usually to cover a scene change. Because scene changes have become faster and more fluid, the need for scenes or numbers “in one” has disappeared, but many famous songs began that way, such as “There’s No Business Like Show Business” from *Annie Get Your Gun*.



**Figure 1.4**

## SCENERY, PROPS, LIGHTING, AND COSTUMES

Ordinarily writers don't need to know about the technical aspects of theater production; the people who specialize in them know far more than writers will ever need to know. A playscript usually includes no more specific scenic or lighting directions than are absolutely essential to set the scenes, no matter what the style of the show may be.

Once in a while there may be a place in a script that calls for a specific scenic effect. But usually the script will only describe the effect desired, not the means to achieve it. The means will inevitably change as the technology changes. Most other technical terms are similarly unnecessary for the writer to know.

The most common references to lighting in a script are cues to indicate the end of a scene. The most common one is "lights down" or "lights out," in which the speed of the dimming of the lights is assumed to be moderately fast. Sometimes a specific effect is called for: "lights out quickly" or "blackout" for a fast ending, or "the lights fade slowly" for the opposite. When the end of a scene has no lighting indication, it usually implies either a "lights down," or a crossfade to the next scene. Each director will have his or her own ideas.

Experienced writers usually try to avoid what Lehman Engel, the celebrated Broadway conductor and teacher, called "green sequin numbers." A green sequin number is one that needs specific sets, lighting effects, props, or costumes in order for it to work, so that when the songwriters present it to anyone they must preface it with a detailed explanation: "You have to understand that when she sings this number, she's wearing a fabulous dress with green sequins and an eyepatch, and standing in a purple spotlight under a crescent moon. . . ." A green sequin number, even a good one, is a potential liability, because it is hard to present outside the show—for instance, when trying to interest a producer. Sometimes it is hard to present *in* the show, when the budget is smaller than the writers anticipated, and nowadays many shows go through smaller productions before they hit the "big time." Because of the required effects, a green sequin number is also less likely to have a life after the show in recordings, revues, club acts, and so on.

## ORCHESTRAS

As with scenery, props, and lighting, the details of the arrangement of the orchestra and the orchestra pit are not usually needed for the writing of musical theater. There are certain exceptions, of course, one being the need for everyone in the orchestra to be able to play their instruments and see the conductor.

Another is the necessity for the conductor to see the singers, and vice versa, for cues and tempos. And sometimes the conductor needs to be visible to the audience, either for comedic purposes (as in certain parts of *Chicago*) or for dramatic ones (as in the chaos sequence at the end of the original version of *Follies*).

In many recent shows the orchestra has been backstage, or offstage right or left; sometimes it is in the orchestra pit but the pit is covered, as in *A Chorus Line*. In these cases, the only visual contact between the conductor and the singers is through television: The conductor has a monitor in front of him showing the stage, and three or four monitors showing the conductor are hung on the front rail of the balcony so that the singers can see his image when they look out front. Any changes in the position of the orchestra add to the problems of transmitting the sound of the orchestra to the audience, and balancing it with the sound of the singers. Often these changes are not due to the script but to directorial concepts or practical constraints.

Thrust and arena stages pose even more problems for musicals. The biggest problem in such theaters is where to put the orchestra. Sometimes in thrust staging the orchestra is under the stage; often it is on a platform above or at the back of the stage, which poses additional problems of acoustics and coordination. Arena theaters often have an orchestra pit running along, or under, part of the circumference of the stage, but again this makes it inevitable that from many angles the singers will not be able to see the conductor—and there is usually no place to put television monitors for them. Ways have been found around these problems, especially with modern video and audio technology—but the bigger the show and the orchestra, the bigger the problems. For instance, when the musical *Starlight Express* came to Broadway, because of its basic concept—performers on roller skates skating around the theater pretending to be trains—it was decided to put the entire orchestra in a room on an upper floor of the theater building. Thus the conductor had to watch the action on a video monitor, and all the sound had to be transmitted between the theater and the orchestra room. Several times the curtain had to be held because there was a problem with the cables between the room and the theater. Until it was fixed, the orchestra could not be heard in the theater!

Decisions about the size and constitution of the orchestra can almost never be made before an actual production takes place. Even then, while a fortunate composer may be given a say in the question of orchestra size, it is really the province of the producer, and it is often dictated by union rules. As for which instruments will be included in the orchestra, this depends to some extent on the writers' concept of the show, but often it is dependent on the director's concept as well. In any case, the task of arranging and orchestrating the show is almost never done by the composer, but by another musician hired specifically

for that task. This is not only because many composers don't have these skills, but because of the pressures of time. The best key for each song (except chorus numbers) can only be chosen definitively after the singer has learned and rehearsed it, and—given the realities of rehearsal time—there is at most six weeks for the entire score to be arranged and scored. The composer is usually much too busy with rehearsals and rewrites to do this mammoth job as well. The only Broadway composer who did all of his own orchestrations was Kurt Weill.

## Types of Musicals

### BOOK SHOWS

A “book musical” has a central story line and a consistent cast of characters. (The text of this type of musical is its *book* or *libretto*.) Traditionally the story is told as a linear narrative in which speech, song, and dance alternate smoothly and unobtrusively. The musical numbers usually occur at crucial points in the story—that is, at emotional high points. They are also often found at significant structural points, such as the beginning and the end of each act.

The book show has always been the most common type of musical. It includes every one of the most popular and acclaimed shows of Broadway's “golden age,” a period that began in 1943 and lasted for about twenty years. Within this category there are three special cases worth mentioning.

The first special case is known as the “concept musical.” Concept musicals differ from other book musicals in that, as a rule, speech and song do not alternate smoothly. Instead, the differences and the seams between speech and song are emphasized, to deliberately create a disjunctive effect. In a concept musical the songs stand outside the spoken scenes; they comment in some way, often with irony, upon the story that they interrupt. The show as a whole is usually arranged according to some overall concept or metaphor. For instance, because both of the lead characters in *Chicago* are performers whose dream is to headline in vaudeville, the show tells its tawdry story of infidelity, greed, and murder in the “Roaring Twenties” as a series of vaudeville acts. Sometimes the narrative of a concept musical is not linear but fragmented or recursive, as in *Company*. Because of their discontinuous nature, concept shows are usually less emotionally involving, and less successful with audiences, than traditional book musicals.

*Love Life*, from 1948, is often considered the earliest concept musical. (Some people would nominate *Lady in the Dark* from 1941 or *Allegro* from 1947.) The German musicals by Bertolt Brecht with Kurt Weill and other composers, such as *The Threepenny Opera*, are often cited as immediate ancestors.

But the genre truly flourished in the late 1960s and 1970s with such shows as *Cabaret*, *Company*, *Follies*, *Chicago*, and to a lesser extent *A Little Night Music* and *Pacific Overtures*. *Cabaret*, the earliest of these, could be considered a tentative step from the traditional book musical toward the concept musical: The score is split almost evenly between the concept numbers in the Kit Kat Club and the more traditional songs within the scenes, such as “So What?” and “Meeskite.” When Bob Fosse directed the movie of *Cabaret* several years later, he eliminated the songs within the scenes, leaving only the Kit Kat numbers. Unlike the original show, the movie is a pure concept musical.

The second special case is the “through-composed” musical. The term comes from art music; when applied to an opera, it means that the music continuously flows and develops without any break from the beginning to the end of each act—as in the late dramas of Richard Wagner—rather than being constructed from discrete songs with repeated sections or stanzas. Commercial musical theater is never truly through-composed, but the term is often used loosely to denote shows with little or no dialogue, such as those with scores by Andrew Lloyd Webber or his imitators. Through-composed musicals differ from other book shows in that they are entirely or almost entirely sung, and even the brief spoken portions are usually accompanied by musical underscoring. *The Golden Apple* of 1954 is an early isolated example, but more direct ancestors are the recorded “rock operas” of the late 1960s such as The Who’s mini-opera “A Quick One” and their full-length *Tommy*. The genre really came into its own in the 1970s beginning with *Jesus Christ Superstar*—which, like *Tommy*, was an audio recording before it had a stage production—and such shows are still sometimes called rock operas, “pop operas,” or “poperettas.”

The third special case can be called the “anthology” musical, which is simply a group of short book musicals that are intended to be performed in a single evening. The component shows are usually linked by a common theme. Anthology musicals are rare; the best-known examples are *The Apple Tree* and *Romance Romance*.

## REVUES

The *revue* is a show without a narrative story line or a consistent roster of characters. It can include scenes as well as songs, and the songs can be either within scenes or self-contained. The revue is at least as old as the book show, with antecedents stretching back through vaudeville and variety shows to minstrel shows and beyond. There have been many types of revues in the history of musical theater. The three most common types were large-scale extravaganzas like the Ziegfeld *Follies*; variety shows built to feature particular stars such as



Bert Lahr or Beatrice Lillie; and shows built around a particular theme or concept, like *As Thousands Cheer*, *Pins and Needles*, or *This Is the Army*. All three of these types have virtually vanished, although *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk* is a recent revival of the thematic revue. In the last few decades, almost all successful revues have been retrospective anthologies. Most of these featured a particular songwriter or songwriting team, and two of them, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* and *Fosse*, surveyed the work of a director-choreographer.

#### MUSICALS FOR CHILDREN

The musical for children is often put into a category of its own. It is usually a book musical in one act, and no more than one hour long. (This category does not include Broadway book shows with children's themes such as *Peter Pan*, *Annie*, or *Beauty and the Beast*, which we will discuss in chapter 3.) There are at least two general types. Shows for very young children tend to be based on fairy tales or fantasies. They use simple language and songs, a good deal of action and broad physical comedy, and often some degree of audience interaction, such as a character asking the audience for help in finding another character. Shows for older children, on the other hand, tend to be much more verbal, and to have as the subject matter either the life of a famous person or a real-life situation common to the target age group. Often these latter shows are extremely similar in storytelling technique and craftsmanship to regular book musicals. The main differences lie in the subject matter, the sophistication and frankness of the language, and the length.

#### NEW GENRES

In recent years, there have been a number of musicals that do not fit into any of the traditional categories, but may be the beginnings of new ones. One new genre could be called the “cover” or “jukebox” musical, in which old songs appear within a new story. Examples include *Mamma Mia!*, which uses songs recorded by the pop group ABBA to tell an original story, and *A Class Act*, which uses theater songs written by Edward Kleban to tell the story of his life. (*George M!* from 1968 is an early show of this type, with songs by George M. Cohan.)

Another new genre might be called the “dance” musical—not a revue, but rather a modern equivalent of the classical ballet, a show that tells a story (or stories) through dance. An example is *Contact*. Because it has no singing, it is not truly a musical in the usual sense of the word, but it was marketed as one.

Another example of this genre is *Movin' Out*, which tells a story by combining pop songs by Billy Joel, sung as narration, with choreography by Twyla Tharp. While these shows were reasonably successful, neither the dance musical nor the cover show is very relevant to songwriters, because both types are almost always based on pre-existing songs.

There are other recent "movement shows" that have little or no dancing, but rather choreographed movement with or without musical accompaniment. The best-known of this genre is probably *Stomp*, although new variants continue to appear. With these hybrid genres, however, we approach the "no man's land" between musical theater and other types of "performance art." It's safe to assume that as time goes on, other genres will evolve and emerge.

Because children's musicals are essentially book musicals, revues other than retrospective anthologies are rare, and new genres by their nature are hard to define or discuss, *Writing Musical Theater* will focus on book musicals. The book show is by far the most common genre of musical, and many of the principles of dramatic structure that we discuss will be applicable in obvious ways to the other genres.

#### ADAPTATIONS AND ORIGINALS

Book shows can be classified as either *adaptations*, which are based upon dramatic or literary works, or as *originals*. An adaptation often provides the writer with a ready-made, usable plot and characters. In addition, the plot and characters of an adaptation have already demonstrated their appeal. An original requires more effort to cast in dramatic form, because it has not already been a dramatic or literary work. But originals have two tremendous advantages over adaptations. First, there is ordinarily no necessity to investigate, or pay for, the rights to the material. Second, a musical based on an original idea is the first presentation of the idea or story in dramatic form, and does not have to compete with a successful original version.

## THE IDEA

An idea is the genesis of every work of art. Often the idea for a musical comes from a movie or play. Sometimes the inspiration is a book, as Washington Irving's *History of New York* was for *Knickerbocker Holiday*; sometimes it is a painting, as Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte* was for *Sunday in the Park with George*; and sometimes it is a poem, as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were for *The Golden Apple*. The idea for a musical may also come from incidents in a real person's life, as Eva Peron's career inspired *Evita*; from historical events, as the history of Japan's foreign relations from 1853 to 1976 inspired *Pacific Overtures*; or from a satirical perspective on current events, as the Elvis Presley phenomenon inspired *Bye Bye Birdie*. The idea for a revue can come from the desire to showcase the work of a particular songwriter or choreographer, or simply to entertain an audience.

### Why a Musical?

Before we take a look at the kinds of ideas that make good or bad musical theater, let's consider a more fundamental question: Why write musical theater at all? In other words, what is special about this hybrid of drama, song, and dance? Does it offer an aesthetic experience that cannot be found in as potent a form in any other genre? And if so, what kind of experience is it?

Musical drama seems to be as old as drama itself. We know that the plays of the ancient Greeks were not simply spoken, but were sung and danced as well. Chinese drama is at least eight hundred years old, and only in the last century has it included spoken plays. Throughout the Middle Ages, traveling performers

presented combinations of theater and music. Opera was invented in Florence shortly before 1600 by a group of writers who deliberately modeled their works on the Greek tragedies. And modern musical theater, which is usually given a birth date of 1866, is still going strong after one hundred and fifty years.

Clearly, musical theater of some sort has been one of the most popular art forms in history. As with any popular art form, however, different aspects of musicals appeal to different people. Some people love musicals for their fantastic aspects, the spectacle and the glamor. Some like striking dance routines with pretty girls or boys. Some like to hear beautiful or powerful singing.

But while all these things are prominently featured in many musicals, and none of them can hurt, none of them is essential. For example, there is neither glitter nor glamor in shows like *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Little Shop of Horrors*. There is virtually no dancing in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* or *A Little Night Music*. And as important as singing has always been to musical theater, there are only a few opportunities for great singing in either *The King and I* or *A Chorus Line*. So when we talk about what's essential to musicals—what makes the good ones good—we are referring to something else that these and all the great musicals have in common.

Our fundamental premise is that the essence of musical theater is the representation of human emotions onstage, and the evocation of emotions in the audience, through the union of drama and music. This union may include spectacle, and often includes dance or choreographed movement; but the unique aspect of musical theater, whether dramatic or comedic, is the heightening of the emotional impact of a story or idea through music and song. We believe that there can be no great musical theater without strong emotion. What is the point of adding music to drama unless it is to embody, enhance, and illuminate emotion? Professionals in the arts know that music is one of the most powerful ways to enhance the emotional content of a story, which is why almost every film ever made, silent or talking, has had musical accompaniment. For most of us the great operas and musicals are the ones in which we have not learned things, but *felt* things—shared other people's pain or joy, laughed at other people's foibles—as confirmations or illuminations of our own feelings.

Many people love the excitement and razzle-dazzle, the pizzazz of big Broadway production numbers with dozens of dancers and flashing lights. But razzle-dazzle is a momentary phenomenon, and without something emotionally meaningful to sing and dance about, it's just glitz and sequins, "only a paper moon."

Our next premise is that writers who cherish musical theater at its best seek to emulate its best writers. The great theater songwriters and librettists—such as Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, the Gershwins, Lorenz Hart,

Rodgers and Hammerstein, Frank Loesser, Lerner and Loewe, Leonard Bernstein, Bock and Harnick, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents, and Terrence McNally—have aimed high, holding themselves to a standard of originality in conception and excellence in craft, and resisting the temptation to get away with slipshod workmanship. Even if some people *have* gotten away with it, there is no reason for new writers not to try to be their best. Nor would there be any point to a book that didn't hold up the best as the standard against which writers need to measure themselves. In this book we focus on, and use as models, examples of musical theater at its best.

### What Makes a Good Story for a Musical?

The resumé of every experienced theater professional includes flops as well as hits. If even the most talented and experienced writers have had unsuccessful shows, then clearly talent and experience are not enough to guarantee a success, either artistic or commercial. There is a different story behind every unsuccessful show, but bad shows usually happen for one of three reasons.

The first reason is incompetent execution. This type of failure is rare, now more than ever. There are more professionals singing, acting, dancing, directing, playing, and designing musical theater than ever, and there are fewer opportunities. So the level of performing and designing talent available to a first-class production is extremely high. It is true that shows have been ruined by directors who were incompetent or simply unsuited for the material, but even this is comparatively uncommon.

The second reason is bad writing, or insufficient talent in the writing. This is a much larger category. There are many talented people who are writing musicals and trying to get them produced, but not everyone who gets produced is talented. As in every other artistic field, bad musicals tend to outnumber the good ones by far.

The third and most heartbreaking reason for failures is that good writers make bad choices. Since experienced writers have usually learned to avoid mistakes in the techniques of stagecraft and songwriting, we venture to say that the most common bad choice made is the most important and basic one: the choice of a project.

A desire to write musical theater and an idea are not enough. The question remains whether the idea should be made into a musical—whether it can even work as a musical. If the writers do not have strong reasons to believe that the idea is better as a musical than as a play, a novel, a film, or something else—that having it performed onstage with singing and dancing will enhance the idea

rather than dilute or ruin it—then they would be wise to forgo it and look for something else.

But what makes a good subject for a musical? Although there are no absolutely right or wrong answers, there are some subjects that are inherently more suitable for musical theater than others.

Since musical theater is about the expression and enhancement of emotion, it follows that stories that contain and evoke strong emotion, serious or humorous, are more suitable for musicalization than those that do not. As for emotional content, there are two general requirements. First, the emotions must be strong enough that it feels appropriate for the characters to sing. In the words of producer Stuart Ostrow, the most important question the writer must answer is whether the story “sings”: “Will a song add a deeper understanding of character or situation?”

The second requirement is that the story must contain enough emotional content for an audience to care about the characters and be willing to follow them to the end. As Oscar Hammerstein II advised the young Stephen Sondheim: “I want you to say: ‘Can I interest an audience in this to the extent that I am interested in it?’” Writers must consider what it is in the idea that appeals to them, and how likely it is to appeal to large numbers of other people. This has nothing to do with a story’s milieu or subject matter. Before shows such as *Oklahoma!*, *West Side Story*, or *A Chorus Line* came to Broadway, few people thought that audiences would come to see a musical about cowboys and their girlfriends, or urban youth gangs, or the childhoods of show dancers. It is not the subject matter but the emotional content and skillfulness of its treatment that determine how good a show will be.

Some say that, because of the larger scale that music adds to emotional situations, the characters and the situation must be “larger than life.” But the characters in *Oklahoma!* are not particularly larger than life, nor are those in *Carousel*, *Brigadoon*, *West Side Story*, *A Chorus Line*, or many other shows. Rather, they are amenable to larger-than-life *treatment*. The characters are presented as distinctively individual, yet universal enough for many people to identify with them. Each major character is depicted imaginatively and vividly. As Hammerstein said, the smallest story can feel important “if the characters are examined closely enough . . . and if the narrative of the incident is told with enough depth and human observation.”

It follows, then, that a bad idea for a musical is one in which there is not enough emotion to sing about, or in which the audience does not care enough about the characters. Let’s consider the potential of a classic play, *The Front Page* by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, for musicalization. It is tremendously funny, and it has an interesting, fast-paced plot with many serious moments