

A Concise Introduction to Musical Theatre

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INTRODUCTION

This is a comprehensive introduction to Musical Theatre. This guide:

- Offers a detailed analysis of Musical Theatre in an essay, followed by a list of references, written by Joe Deer, Distinguished Professor of Musical Theatre, Wright State University.
- Includes guidance on other useful related resources on Digital Theatre+ such as information on key productions, essays, and interviews.
- Provides key materials useful for individual student-led research and in-classroom discussions.

MUSICAL THEATRE

Joe Deer, Distinguished Professor of Musical Theatre, Wright State University

INTRODUCTION

Musical Theatre has steadily become the world's most popular live theatre form and the dominant lyric theatre form since the mid-19th century. Encompassing a range of styles and genres, Musical Theatre has also been called Operetta, Opera Comique, Musical Comedy, Musical Drama, Music Theatre, and simply 'a Musical' since its inception. Each of these terms refers to a dramatic stage work that alternates spoken dialogue with songs and dances to convey a story. Unlike its close cousin, Opera, Musical Theatre has traditionally favored working-class characters and highly accessible stories with ample doses of romance, comedy, pure entertainment, and often spectacle over tragic stories of gods and aristocrats. Musical Theatre's close relationship to popular music and entertainment forms has helped keep it highly accessible to its audiences. For all its connections to popular music, Musical Theatre is distinct in that every song and dance moment is tailored to serve a specific character in a very particular dramatic moment, in order to communicate the struggle and actions of that character in a unique, dramatic world. For almost two centuries, Musical Theatre was dominantly an English language form. Now, it has grown to include successful productions of both translated Broadway/West End works, and nationally specific, original musicals from across the globe.

HISTORY

The term 'Musical Theatre' is relatively recent, dating to the mid-20th century, when what we now call the 'Golden Age of Musical Theatre'

began to replace the dominant term, Musical Comedy. Today, 'Musical Theatre', refers to the many variations of the form that continue to be created or presented. As has nearly always been the case, these terms are often developed as marketing tools for their current audience, or are devised many years later by scholars as a way of organizing like works of art. The broad term 'Musical Theatre' now refers to a number of genres, listed here in roughly chronological order:

Comic or Ballade Opera – (began in early 18th century England, eventually falling out of fashion by the end of that century, though its influence is still felt in satiric Musical Theatre). Ribald, often subversive stories involving characters from lower social classes and incorporating popular melodies with new lyrics suited to the story. The best-known example of this genre is *The Beggar's Opera*.

Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Savoy Operas' (a.k.a. British Operetta – began in mid-19th century and continues in popularity today). These were hugely influential and popular comic operas written by Sir William S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan between 1871 and 1896. These social satires simultaneously poked fun at the upper classes while gently affirming them. Popular examples are *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Mikado*, and *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

European Operetta (a.k.a. Light Opera – mid-19th to mid-20th century). Romantic-comic musical works featuring symphonic scores, and an emphasis on beautiful singing, nostalgia, and light romance. It was eventually appropriated for use as an American form. Examples include: *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *Die Fledermaus*, *The Merry Widow*, *The Student Prince*, *Rose Marie*, and many others.

Musical Comedy – This brash, populist form began in the early 20th century and continues to the present day, in an evolved form. It is

heavily influenced by the Vaudeville stage. Examples include: *Little Johnny Jones*, *Anything Goes*, *The Producers*, *The Book of Mormon*.

Musical Drama – (began in the late 1920s, but gained hold in 1940s and continues to the present). Dramatic works that appropriate some elements of Verismo Opera to create a more serious and integrated popular musical drama. Often referred to as the ‘Golden Age of Musicals’ because of the prolific, rapid expansion and development of the form during the years from roughly 1942–1962. Examples include: *Oklahoma!*, *The Music Man*, *Bridges of Madison County*, *Guys and Dolls*.

Rock Musical – (began in the mid-1960s and continues to the present). Musicals that utilize the instrumentation and express the often rebellious cultural attitudes of Rock music. Examples include: *Hair*, *Grease*, *RENT*, *Memphis*.

Rock Opera/Pop Operetta – (began in the late 1960s and continues to the present). Predominantly sung-thru Musicals using contemporary musical vocabulary to tell serious, often epic stories. Examples include: *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Tommy*, *Evita*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, *Hamilton*.

Juke Box Musical – (began in musical films of the 1940s and continued onto stage work in the 1990s). Theatrical productions that incorporate an existing, typically well-known catalogue of songs into a new, adapted or biographical story. Examples include: *Mamma Mia*, *All Shook Up*, *Beautiful*, *Jersey Boys*, *Ain’t Too Proud*.

Music Theatre – (1980s to present). A hybrid of Contemporary Opera and Theatre forms that seeks to explore non-commercial integration of music, dance and drama.

Musical Revue – (began in the early 20th century, continues to this day). Originally a non-dramatic form of Variety Stage entertainment in which a collection of songs, sketches and specialty acts are organized around a theme, often with a score created specifically for it. More recently, this has been a place to celebrate the collective work of a composer.

Examples include: *Folies Bergère*, *Ziegfeld Follies*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Side by Side* by Sondheim, *Forbidden Broadway*.

Dance Musical – (began in the early 1980s, continuing to the present). A narrative musical form that is told exclusively or significantly through a choreographic text. Examples include: *Cats*, *Contact*, *Movin' Out*.

Contemporary Musical Drama – (1970s to present). Works that tackle contemporary social and personal issues from a more complex psychological perspective. This genre's great writers include Stephen Sondheim (*Company*, *Follies*, *Sweeney Todd*), Jason Robert Brown (*Parade*, *Bridges of Madison County*), Adam Guettel (*The Light in the Piazza*), Jeanine Tesori (*Caroline, or Change*, *Fun Home*) and Michael John LaChiusa (*Hello Again*, *The Wild Party*).

Although most of these forms have a relatively clear starting point, it is difficult to discern a distinct end to their prominence, as they are often absorbed by or blended with other genres and continue to have deep, sometimes subtle influence. This is particularly true of Operetta and Musical Comedy, whose enduring impact is present even in many of the most contemporary works. These genres are often repurposed and given a facelift with contemporary musical stylings, but continue to embody the central principles of their form. For example, Operetta is ever-present in musicals like *A Little Night Music*, *Beauty and the Beast* (Disney), *Wicked*, and *Anastasia*. Musical Comedy continues as *Avenue Q*, *Aladdin*, *The Book of Mormon*, and *Urinetown* (itself deeply indebted to Ballad Opera).

CRITICISM AND THEORY

Musical Theatre has always been an art of assimilation, appropriating each new popular musical, dance, or dramatic form, as well as the characters and traditions that enter American and British cultures from around the world to tell its perpetually contemporary stories. From its earliest roots with John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* to Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, current popular songs or song forms have been incorporated or echoed to tell the comic, contemporary, and often subversive stories that form the mainstay of this form. Musical Theatre has often been a refuge and a sphere of excellence for artists from marginalized groups (particularly immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities), who have found it a widely receptive platform for their talent and points of view. Virtually every popular song form, from early Jazz and Rock to Hip-Hop and Bluegrass, has been theatricalized to tell stories that reflect current or recent values and stories. And each successive evolution on the dramatic stage, television, and film has influenced writing, direction, and performance styles in Musical Theatre.

For most of its existence, Musical Theatre has been a fundamentally commercial form, depending on ticket sales, rather than patronage to survive. Its very structure and evolution have been driven by popular tastes and commercial successes. Those musicals that have been both innovative and popular have spawned imitators and driven patterns in composition, structure, and performance conventions. Each of the genres listed above originated with a single innovative success, and eventually created a whole industry of imitators and followers. For more than a century, much of the popular songbook originated in Musical Theatre. While that is distinctly not the case today, Musical Theatre still reflects recent trends in popular music and utilizes those styles selectively to tell contemporary stories and to engage its audience. Although much Musical Theatre now originates in subsidized theatre companies, it is still

an expensive form to develop, necessitating genuine popularity and mass ticket sales to survive even one or two seasons. Thus, popular tastes and values are often central to the subjects and styles of music and dance presented in these works.

As lyricist-librettist Tom Jones (*The Fantasticks*) has aptly noted, Musical Theatre continues to be deeply influenced by two early forms of 19th-century popular entertainment: Operetta and the Variety Stage (which includes Vaudeville, Burlesque, Music Hall, and Minstrel Shows). Operetta celebrated the primacy of beautiful melodies, bravura vocal performances, noble virtues, and romantic stories. The Variety Stage provided the influence of Jazz music, popular dance and highly accessible comedy. The marriage of these two great influences has provided a varied palette from which to craft seemingly endless stage works. Even the most celebrated contemporary composers, like Stephen Sondheim, Jeanine Tesori and Lin-Manuel Miranda incorporate these alternating and complementary artistic influences as their formal basis.

Musical Theatre, like most popular art forms, reflects the constantly evolving dominant values of its time and the cultures from which it emerges. Although many of the most popular and durable works in the form may now appear to represent deeply traditional values in works like *Guys and Dolls*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and *The Music Man*, Musical Theatre has often championed a more progressive social order. As far back as 1927, Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern created a masterwork in *Showboat* that consciously examined the costs of America's attitudes toward race in the decades following the Civil War and Reconstruction. Hammerstein's impulse to scrutinize and question underlying darker values was carried forward by successive generations of writers and theatre makers who continue to challenge the limitations of acceptable subject matter in works like *South Pacific* (racism), *West Side Story* (race and gang violence), *Fiddler On The Roof* (religious

hatred), *Cabaret* (the rise of Nazism), and more recently *Falsettos* (the AIDS crisis), *Assassins* (political assassination), *The Color Purple* (lesbian relationships in the Black community), *Fun Home* (gay and lesbian relationships), and *Hamilton* (representation and Hip-Hop culture). These two concurrent strands of writing that continue to both affirm traditional values and to challenge them are integral to the evolution of the form.

LANDMARK WORKS IN MUSICAL THEATRE

Showboat (1927) – Oscar Hammerstein II (lyrics and libretto) and Jerome Kern (music) created what is often referred to as the first modern musical because of its inclusion of serious dramatic situations, contemporary social and political subject matter, and a richly textured score that utilizes many of the compositional and dramatic conventions of recent Verismo Operas. *Showboat* is based on the enormously popular novel of the same name by Edna Ferber, which traces American culture from the years shortly after the Civil War to the 1920s (then the current day). *Showboat* utilizes a wide range of popular music styles to tell the intertwined stories of three generations of former slaves, show people, and star-crossed lovers through their interactions on a Mississippi River showboat. Listeners will recognize the influences of Ragtime, Vaudeville, Gospel, European Operetta, Musical Comedy, and interpolations of actual late 19th century American Popular Song. This show was revolutionary in its inclusion of an interracial cast. Though it would take another 15 years for these innovations to become conventions for most new musicals, *Showboat* stands as a landmark in the development of Musical Theatre.

Oklahoma! (1943) – With book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II and music by Richard Rodgers, *Oklahoma!* essentially created and codified a new artistic agenda, initiating what we now call the ‘Golden Age of Musical Theatre’. *Oklahoma!* departs radically from the usual urban,

cynical musicals of the early 1940s by adapting Lynn Riggs' drama, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, into a heartfelt paean to a pre-Dust Bowl, rural America. This innovative musical struck a wildly popular chord with both British and American audiences who were confronting the harsh realities of a war that threatened the world. *Oklahoma!* beautifully brought to life in music and dance, forms that gently evoked the American vernacular forms of the early 20th century. Choreographer Agnes DeMille infused the show with exceptional contemporary concert dance and a complex feminist perspective, both of which continued to be central to many of the new musicals of the next two decades. Her innovative, psychologically insightful 'Dream Ballet' revolutionized Theatre Dance and radically increased technical and choreographic expectations for Musical Theatre.

Into The Woods (1987) – Composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and librettist James Lapine created an exceptional example of contemporary Musical Theatre in their examination of the fairy tale myths we teach our children and the lessons they subtly convey. Sondheim and Lapine wove a series of well-known fairy tales and their own new fable into a moving examination of the ways the moral lessons we teach our children fail to address the unintended, and often devastating consequences of our actions. Sondheim is one of the most important composer-lyricists of the last half century because he brought psychological complexity and ambiguity to his musically and lyrically rich stories of darker, more adult human experience. His protagonists include a Victorian serial killer (*Sweeney Todd*), an ambivalent bachelor confronting middle age alone (*Company*), married couples facing their lost youth (*Follies*) and the people who have attempted to assassinate US presidents (*Assassins*), among others. Sondheim was the protégé of Oscar Hammerstein II and incorporated an intimate and highly practiced mastery of traditional Musical Theatre into his new and innovative works.

Hamilton (2015) – Composer, lyricist, and librettist Lin-Manuel Miranda flipped traditional assumptions about Musical Theatre with his landmark Hip-Hop sung-thru musical, *Hamilton*. By adapting a rather conventional biography of one of America’s lesser-known founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, Miranda created a galvanizing parable of the meteoric rise of a talented immigrant, his hubris and ultimate downfall. By marrying his powerful knowledge of both the structural and compositional traditions of Musical Theatre with a deep fluency in Hip-Hop music and culture, Miranda delivered an innovative experience that reached across cultural lines to tell the story of America’s past, through a score that sounds like America’s present, with a cast that looks like America’s future. *Hamilton* both fulfills our expectations of a great Musical Theatre experience and surpasses them by infusing the story with the broad palette available in contemporary popular music.

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KEY PRODUCTIONS ON DIGITAL THEATRE+

This section provides links to some key productions of Musical Theatre. These are followed by a list of other materials on Digital Theatre+ which will be useful for considering the practice in a wider critical context, and from the perspective of those who have been involved in the development of the form. Quotations from the essay are included to facilitate connections between the content and the critical writing.

From the essay:

“Theatrical productions that incorporate an existing, typically well-known catalogue of songs into a new, adapted or biographical story.” (Deer, p.6)

42nd Street



© Brinkhoff/Mogenburg

- Produced by: BroadwayHD, Liberator Film Services
- Written by: Mark Bramble, Michael Stewart
- Directed by: Nick Morris, Richard Fitch
- Theatre: Theatre Royal Drury Lane
- 2018 production

- Run time: 02:14:54

From the essay:

“Musical Theatre has often been a refuge and a sphere of excellence for artists from marginalized groups (particularly immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities), who have found it a widely receptive platform for their talent and points of view.” (Deer, p.8)

Allegiance



© Matt Murphy

- Produced by: Sing Out, Louise! Productions, BroadwayHD
- Written by: Marc Acito, Lorenzo Thione, Jay Kuo
- Directed by: Lorenzo Thione
- Theatre: Longacre Theatre
- 2016 production
- Run time: 02:09:59

From the essay:

“The Variety Stage provided the influence of Jazz music, popular dance and highly accessible comedy. The marriage of these two

great influences has provided a varied palette from which to craft seemingly endless stage works.” (Deer, p.9)

An American in Paris



© Johan Persson

- Produced by: BroadwayHD, Liberator Film Services
- Written by: Craig Lucas
- Directed by: Ross MacGibbon, Christopher Wheeldon
- Theatre: The Dominion Theatre
- 2017 production
- Run time: 02:18:05

From the essay:

“Composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and librettist James Lapine created an exceptional example of contemporary Musical Theatre in their examination of the fairy tale myths we teach our children and the lessons they subtly convey.” (Deer, pp.11-12)

Into the Woods



© Catherine Ashmore

- Produced by: Digital Theatre+
- Written by: James Lapine
- Directed by: Timothy Shader
- Theatre: Regent's Park Open Air Theatre
- 2010 production
- Run time: 02:33:24

From the essay:

“Musical Theatre has always been an art of assimilation, appropriating each new popular musical, dance, or dramatic form, as well as the characters and traditions that enter American and British cultures from around the world to tell its perpetually contemporary stories.” (Deer, p.8)

Peter Pan



© Craig Schwartz

- Produced by: BroadwayHD
- Written by: J.M. Barrie
- Directed by: Gary Halvorson, Glenn Casale
- Theatre: La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts
- 2000 production
- Run time: 01:44:24

From the essay:

“...continue to challenge the limitations of acceptable subject matter in works like South Pacific (racism), West Side Story (race and gang violence), Fiddler On The Roof (religious hatred), Cabaret (the rise of Nazism), and more recently Falsettos (the AIDS crisis)...”
(Deer, p.10)

Falsettos



© Joan Marcus

- Produced by: BroadwayHD
- Written by: James Lapine, William Finn
- Directed by: Matthew Diamond
- Theatre: Walter Kerr Theatre
- 2016 production
- Run time: 02:22:34

MUSICAL THEATRE IN THEORY & PRACTICE

Below is a list of further materials on Digital Theatre+ which explore Musical Theatre. Quotations from the essay by Joe Deer are included to facilitate connections between the content and the critical writing.

From the essay:

“Theatrical productions that incorporate an existing, typically well-known catalogue of songs into a new, adapted or biographical story.” (Deer, p.6)

'From Stage to Screen': Lecture given by Phyllida Lloyd with Fiona Shaw



© Directors Guild

- Run time: 00:59:14

In the second annual Directors Guild Peter Brook Lecture, Phyllida Lloyd CBE reflects on her career to date. Through a series of funny, heartfelt and deeply personal anecdotes, Lloyd explores the differences between working in theatre and film, with reference to the extraordinary journey of *Mamma Mia* from the West End to Hollywood.

From the essay:

“Musical Theatre has often been a refuge and a sphere of excellence for artists from marginalized groups (particularly immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities), who have found it a widely receptive platform for their talent and points of view.” (Deer, p.8)

Musical Matters: LGBTQ+ Artists on Inclusivity

- Run time: 00:43:10

Musical Matters explores inclusivity and representation in American musical theatre with artists from historically marginalized communities. This exclusive five-part series is hosted by actor, writer, and advocate for inclusion, Christine Toy Johnson.

Tony Award-winning writer Lisa Kron (*Fun Home*) and actress Aneesh Sheth (*Bombay Dreams*) discuss their work championing queer stories, power structures within the industry, and how to create more inclusive spaces.

Musical Matters: Black Artists on Inclusivity

- Run time: 00:50:44

Musical Matters explores inclusivity and representation in American musical theatre with artists from historically marginalized communities. This exclusive five-part series is hosted by actor, writer, and advocate for inclusion, Christine Toy Johnson.

George C. Wolfe, five-time Tony Award-winning writer and director (*Caroline, or Change*, *Shuffle Along*), and actress Nikki Renée Daniels (*Hamilton*, *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*) discuss their involvement in seminal musicals, breaking ground and developing an inclusive curriculum.

From the essay:

“...many of the most popular and durable works in the form may now appear to represent deeply traditional values...” (Deer, pp.9–10)

Funny Girl: Backstage



© Paul Coltas

- Run time: 00:10:06

Actors Darius Campbell and Rachel Izen, who played alongside Sheridan Smith in the West End revival of the classic musical *Funny Girl*, discuss their respective processes when bringing the characters of Nick Arnstein and Mrs. Brice to life.

Campbell considers the relationship between Nick and Fanny Brice, explaining why the concept of traditional masculinity leads Nick to make bad decisions in order to become the ‘leading man’ in Fanny’s life.

From the essay:

“Sondheim is one of the most important composer-lyricists of the last half century because he brought psychological complexity and ambiguity to his musically and lyrically rich stories of darker, more adult human experience.” (Deer, p.12)

Into the Woods: A Critical Introduction

From the essay:

“For all its connections to popular music, Musical Theatre is distinct in that every song and dance moment is tailored to serve a specific character in a very particular dramatic moment, in order to communicate the struggle and actions of that character in a unique, dramatic world.” (Deer, p.4)

Musical Theatre: A Handbook of Practical Exercises

From the essay:

“Sondheim and Lapine wove a series of well-known fairy tales and their own new fable into a moving examination of the ways the moral lessons we teach our children fail to address the

unintended, and often devastating consequences of our actions.”
(Deer, p.12)

Activate Sondheim: *Into the Woods*

“Composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and librettist James Lapine created an exceptional example of contemporary Musical Theatre in their examination of the fairy tale myths we teach our children and the lessons they subtly convey.” (Deer, pp.11–12)

Into the Woods: Study Guide

Digital Theatre+ Study Guides are specially commissioned from leading theatre academics and practitioners, with expert knowledge of the texts that they explore. The guides examine plays from literary and contextual, as well as dramatic perspectives, to provide a thorough and manifold access point to key texts, from the classical to the contemporary.

FURTHER CONCISE INTRODUCTIONS

Below are links to other concise introductions on the platform which relate to key concepts and practitioners mentioned in this guide. They provide more in-depth biographical and critical information, as well as links to key productions and further resources available on Digital Theatre+.

A Concise Introduction to Bertolt Brecht

Former Reader in Drama and Theatre at the University of Birmingham, Robert Leach, outlines the work of one of the most influential playwright-directors of the 20th century, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Leach considers how Brecht sought a theatre that would intervene with human affairs and

aimed to create a practice that would not only interpret the world but change it.

A Concise Audio Introduction to Bertolt Brecht

Providing an overview of the life and work of Bertolt Brecht, scholar Robert Leach unpacks why Brecht is one of the most influential director-playwrights of the 20th century.

This audio resource, narrated by Jason Langley, can be used alongside the written Concise Introduction to Bertolt Brecht, which includes key dates, a reading list, discussion questions and related content to inspire research.

A Concise Introduction to Dance

Natasha Fedorova, Teacher of Pure Movement at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Rose Bruford College, provides an introduction to dance. Fedorova details the many different types, styles and forms of dance including participatory dance and theatrical dance, and highlights how it is used as a way of self-expression and a means of social communication.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Looking at the four important musicals discussed above, do you see any connections between them?
- 2) Look at a clip from *Into the Woods*, *42nd Street* or *Peter Pan* and identify the ways it adheres to the conventions of the popular music form it utilizes and the ways it adapts those for use as a dramatic musical text.
- 3) Pick a popular musical from a period before your birth and identify the values it supports. Look at how it addresses: romantic love, expected gender roles, our relationship to authority figures, attitudes about race or ethnicity, and any other values you might see as significant. Some good examples might be: *Carousel*, *Grease*, *Silk Stockings*, *Showboat*, *West Side Story*.
- 4) Musical writers often adapt plays and novels into musicals. Look at the pairings of *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, the novel and musical of *Les Misérables*, or *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*.
 - a) Identify a scene or speech from the play/novel and the adapted musical sequence based on it.
 - b) Discuss how the composer and lyricist used that source and what they chose to emphasize or change to serve the musical.
 - c) Are there places where the lyricist used actual phrases, images or ideas from the source? How do the musical qualities of that song support the ideas and character experience from the source?

5) Pick a novel or non-musical play the entire class is familiar with and create an outline for how you would adapt it into a musical.

Consider the following:

- a) Where would you place the songs?
- b) What kind of song would you put there?
- c) Who would you pick to write the music?