Broadway Book Musicals: Crash Course Theater #50

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta, and this is the last episode of *Crash Course Theater*. So get ready for, like, nine curtain calls at the end. But for now, we're grabbing our playbills and our Twizzlers to spend an episode with America's greatest theatrical invention: the singing, dancing, orchestra-in-the-floor sensation that is—wait for it—the Broadway book musical.

Why does the Broadway book musical matter? Well, it's changed theater as we know it. Along with Hollywood movies, it's America's most influential entertainment export, a billion-dollar industry that has zoomed its way across the world to every continent except Antarctica. And onto cruise ships too.

Today we'll focus on the golden age of the Broadway musical, trying to figure out how song, story, and the occasional dream ballet come together to create this singular sensation. Lights up!

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

Theater and music have always been closely intertwined. Greek tragedies were mostly sung and danced; liturgical dramas had key musical components; melodrama was originally a musical form; and most styles of traveling or folk theater were strongly musical; not to mention the 19th-century rise of the opera and pretty much every style of Asian theater we've studied.

American theater, of course, has its own musical theater traditions, including the troubling and unfortunately very popular minstrel show, which we looked at in an earlier episode. In terms of imported forms, America also went big for vaudeville, pantomime, operetta, and comedy burlesque—which is different from the modern tell-dirty-jokes-and-take-your-clothes-off sexy burlesque.

In the 1860s, we got what some consider the first American musical, *The Black Crook*. *The Black Crook* basically happened because a theater burned down and a Parisian ballet troupe was stranded, so some enterprising producers were like, "Well, we can't just put French girls in flesh-colored tights on stage and leave them there. The people demand a story!" Do they? Anyway.

The producers paired the dancers with a totally incomprehensible play about black magic and fairies and a really weird New Year's Eve, and they tricked it out with scenery and songs. The total package lasted five hours and made no sense.

The first American musical comedies on Broadway were created in the 1870s by a duo called Harrigan and Hart. They started with a variety act that made fun of drunk neighborhood militias—armed and hilarious—and then expanded these sketches into song-filled shows like *The Mulligan Guard*.

They poked fun at all sorts of working-class types, and they never met an ethnicity that they couldn't mock. Stereotyping was huge, and the songs didn't have anything to do with the plot, but these shows made audiences hungry for more, more, more musical farces with more, more, more irrelevant songs.

At around the turn of the 20th century, there was a vogue for African-American musicals, which we discussed in our episode on the theater of the Harlem Renaissance.

In 1907, the Follies were born, and musical theater got very leggy. The Follies were evenings of loosely linked sketches and popular songs, but the big draw was the chorus of Follies girls. Each year, producer Florence Zigfeld assembled a group of beautiful chorines who had to have, he said, "beauty of face, form, charm, and manner, personal magnetism, individuality, grace, and poise".

The scripts... not great. In the first Follies, Captain John Smith and Pocahontas drop in on 1907 New York and meet all kinds of people. Yeah.

The Follies walked the line between titillating and classy pretty much perfectly. They were girly shows that men could perv out to while sitting next to their wives—because middle-class wives enjoy a kick line too?

Between 1907 and 1931, there was a Follies every year, each leggier and more sumptuous than the last. Oh, and Ziegfeld's Follies were the tame version. Other producers just threw a bunch of nude showgirls and raunchy comics onstage and called it a day.

Broadway could have gone on forever with classic girly shows and questionably hilarious ethnic stereotyping, but, thankfully, instead something wonderful happened: the birth of the book musical. The father, that would be Jerome Kern, a guy who got his start fixing up imported British musicals. The songs he contributed were really good, usually a lot better than what he'd been handed. The melodies were catchy, and the lyrics conversational.

At the Princess Theater, Kern and the lyricist Guy Bolton started writing charming, low-key musicals which became even more charming when comic mastermind P. G. Wodehouse joined them. Notable shows include *Oh Boy!* and *Oh Dear!* Oh wow!

Maybe they seem like piffle now, but at the time, book musicals were revolutionary. The characters were recognizable; the situations were contemporary; the plot, lyrics, and style of song actually went together. Bolton told an interviewer, "Every line, funny or serious, is supposedly to help the plot continue to hold." Whoa!

Now, I know what some of you are thinking, that Gilbert and Sullivan already did this. And you're not wrong, but those were operettas, mostly sung through, and they involved fantastical situations. The Princess Theater musicals were different.

By the late 1920s, this newfangled idea that maybe the songs should have something to do with the plot—and the plot could be minimally coherent—was really catching on. More than fifty revues and musicals crowded Broadway every year.

And there were so many new composers and lyricists, like Richard Rodgers, or the romantic Lorenz Hart; or the astonishingly witty Cole Porter, a man who could rhyme anything; and—oh my god—George and Ira Gershwin. 'S wonderful, people! And hey, look, Irving Berlin!

Probably the first thoroughly modern musical was the 1927 *Show Boat*, which is tricky to revive today because its racial politics are a mess. But as written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein and set on a Mississippi showboat, it pushed the musical in a more serious direction, towards an honest examination of racism. It offered rich roles for African-American actors and gave them character-driven songs like "Old Man River" and "Can't Help Lovin' That Man", which are still standards.

The Broadway musical made it through the Great Depression, and while World War II was being waged, the musical leveled up again, entering a twenty-year golden age. The musicals of this era were defined by their wit, sophistication, extremely hummable songs, and dazzling, often athletic choreography. And by their willingness to allow genuinely complex characters to exist.

Now we're going to take a look at the American musical that finally put it all together—music and lyrics and book scenes and ballet—to tell a distinctly American story. Welcome to *Oklahoma!* Notice the exclamation point; this one is exciting. Even though it's set in Oklahoma. No offense to my Okies out there.

This 1943 musical, written by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, is based on Lynn Riggs's 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*. The exclamation point was all they added. The play opens in 1906, when Oklahoma is still a territory and a surrey wagon is a plausible way to get around town.

Help us out, Thought Bubble.

Cowboy Curly comes forward and sings "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" as though chatting to the audience. The Times critic, Brooks Atkinson, wrote that after a magnificent song like that "the banalities of the old musical stage became intolerable."

Curly and a farm girl, Laurey, clearly like each other but can't seem to get along. Laurie has another suitor, loner farmhand Jud Fry, who is basically a golden-age incel. This guy is bad news. To make Curly jealous, Laurey agrees to go to the box social with Jud, even though she's kind of afraid of him.

Curly takes the news well, so well that he goes to see Jud and sings a joke/not joke song suggesting that Jud kill himself. Jud, also a really mature guy, decides that he's going to marry Laurey, whether she wants to or not.

Laurey is so confused she buys a magic potion from the Persian peddler Ali Hakim. She takes it and falls asleep, and that's when we get a fifteen-minute dream ballet, where Laurey imagines marrying Curly and Jud murdering Curly. That is a bad dream. And a good ballet.

When she wakes, Laurey is too frightened to reject Jud, so they go to the box social. There's a scuffle between farmers and cowmen, and some comedy subplot stuff. Jud and Curly fight over Laurey, and Curly sells all of his things to win her heart. Jud confesses his feelings. Laurey rejects him and then fires him.

Curly and Laurey are married, but drunk Jud shows up and tries to kill Curly, which is not good wedding etiquette. They tussle, and Jud falls on his own knife. And Curly and Laurey get to go off on their honeymoon—a happy ending, except for the dead guy.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

It's hard to get across how innovative *Oklahoma!*—a musical that includes a number like "The Farmer and the Cowman"—actually is. Rodgers's melodies had a distinctly American sound. And Hammerstein wrote the lyrics first, which meant that the songs were way more integral to the story, and were written in the voices of the characters.

Even more than *Show Boar*, every song had a purpose, and so did every dance number. Agnes de Mille's dream ballet took the musical to a daring, expressionist place. The story was allowed to exist with a level of tonal and character complexity that no one thought a musical could handle. But the musical could handle it! It's so good.

As we're filming this in late 2018, a number of American theaters have recently staged *Oklahoma!*, interrogating its depictions of sexuality, violence, conflict, and community. These are radically different interpretations, but maybe that's one of the signs of a great work of art: that it can stand up to all kinds of interpretations and still tell us something truthful. With a fringe on top.

Oh, and this was also the show that pioneered the original cast recording, which is not a small deal. So, you're welcome, all you *Hamilton* fans out there.

After *Oklahoma!*, the golden age continued until the early 1960s.

Maybe there were no other great musicals named after states or territories, but Rodgers and Hammerstein followed *Oklahoma!* up with *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The King and I*. Shall we dance? Ooh, good Yul Brynner impression!

At the same time, Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe wrote *Brigadoon* and *My Fair Lady*. And also, let's not forget *Guys and Dolls*, *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, *Damn Yankees!*, *West Side Story*—because somewhere there's a place for us—and *Gypsy*.

Whew, there is so much more we could talk about: the counterculture musical, the mega musical, the concept musical, Sondheim—there is so much to say about Sondheim. Yorrick loves Sondheim. I'm lukewarm myself, but no shade. Well, except maybe literal shade, because it's time for out curtain call.

This is our final episode of *Crash Course Theater*, and yet we have forty or fifty years of theater history and contemporary performance still to go. Maybe we'll meet again for a reprise down the road. Still, we wanted to leave you with the book musical, not just because it's a hugely popular and influential theatrical form, but also because it's how a lot of us who make *Crash Course Theater* got hooked in the first place. We saw a musical or a movie musical when we were kids and it just knocked us out. That's right, musicals are the gateway drug. First *Guys and Dolls* and then Artaud.

Book musicals are sometimes sexist and sometimes racist, sometimes really dumb, but their also virtuosic and hopeful and big-hearted. Like many of the things in life we love, they're big and they're complicated.

Speaking of love, we can't actually see or hear you but you've been a great audience. Thank you for staying in your seats while we explored more than two thousand years of people trying to put their world on stage. We wish we could sign at the stage door, but you may have to settle for, like, VidCon or Twitter, I guess.

We've seen sad theater, funny theater, dangerous theater, avalanche theater, theater that wants to burn it all down, and theater that wants to build a new and better world. So give yourselves a hand. Take a bow, Yorrick. That's right, cue ball, you earned it. And now, for the last time, curtain.

[roll credits]

Crash Course Theater is filmed in Indianapolis, Indiana, and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Café.

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Thanks for watching.