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Broadway and American Theater - Let's Get On with the Show

In the 19th century major American cities competed in the number and design of new theaters. Playwrights produced numerous plays. Especially important, more and more theaters were opened on what was soon to become the main theatrical street - New York's Broadway, today home to 40 large professional theatres. While American theater searched for its own identity, it reflected political and economic troubles of the time. In 1849 street riots brought about by class tensions broke out outside the Astor Place Theater. Entertainment divided rather than united the American society with a division line between highbrow and lowbrow art.

Soon after that, however, American audiences were brought together. The so-called American Museum on Broadway - an idea of Phineas Taylor Barnum - which was a combination of a museum, lecture hall, a show, and a more serious "educational" drama - contributed to it. So did a uniquely American entertainment, minstrel show, which showed all tensions that challenged the young country: class, racial, ethnic, gender and political. But the greatest merit for uniting American theatergoers goes to a genre born in the second half of the 19th century - the musical.

Musical combines dance, music, and dialogue. While entertainment lies at its core, and it can be light, humorous, and witty, it can also be food for thought by

touching upon social or moral topics. Everyone can find something to their liking in a performance of this kind.

The 20th century, the century of the modern musical, was marked by productions which ran for decades. Performances were counted in thousands. The popularity of shows triggered the movie industry. Movie hits based on musicals are now commonplace (e.g. *Chicago*, *West Side Story*, *Mamma Mia* - originally based on Abba's hits.) Books with a good story become a canvas for new stagings. It works the other way around, too, a Hollywood musical production which proves a box-office hit can be adapted for the stage (for example *Dirty Dancing*, *The Producers*, *Hairspray*.) The musical has become an industry with its own stars, directors, producers, and choreographers. Popular musicals go on tours around the world.

Today, New York's Broadway and London's West End often mirror each other. With about the same number of venues, they offer similar repertoire. The two greatest "theatre lands," they offer the highest level of commercial theatre in the English speaking world, and have become a must for regular theatergoers and tourists who visit the two cities. Musicals such as *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, *West Side Story*, *The Fantasticks*, *Hair*, *A Chorus Line*, *Les Misérables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *The Producers* are the classics of the genre.



The cast and Abba members gather on the theater balcony prior to the premiere of the movie version of the musical 'Mamma Mia' in Stockholm, July 4, 2008, Photo © AP Images

From Tragic Romance to Social Novel

There is no set time-frame for a musical. It usually has two Acts and though some musicals last between one and a half to two hours, many will keep audiences in the theater for three hours or more. One of the reasons is that the plot of a musical is usually complex and has many turns in the story. The three synopses below show that a Shakespearean tragedy, a French Gothic horror story or an early 20th century American social novel can all be adapted into a successful musical.

The longest running Broadway musical is *The Phantom of the Opera* composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Based on a novel by a French writer Gaston Leroux, it tells the story of a beautiful and talented young singer, Christine Daaè, who is taught singing by a mysterious individual who hides his face behind a mask. Christine believes he is an Angel of Music sent to her by her deceased father, when in fact he is a musical genius, composer, and magician who lives in a lair under the Paris opera *Populaire* hiding his deformed face from the world. He is known as the Phantom of the Opera and claims the right to make decisions about the repertoire and cast. He falls in love with Christine and wants her in the major roles. He will not stop short of killing those who oppose his will. One night he takes Christine to his underground dwelling and she manages to see his face. She is repelled by the sight, but the Phantom is nevertheless close to her heart. There is one other man in love with Christine - her childhood sweetheart and now the patron of the opera, Raoul. The Phantom discovers their relationship and threatens to take revenge. In one of the final scenes the Phantom seizes Raoul and challenges Christine. If she stays with him in his lair, he will spare Raoul, if not, he will kill him. Christine kisses the deformed face of the Phantom, and he, overcome with feelings, releases Raoul and lets him take Christine away.

One of the most influential musicals of all time is the 1927 *Show Boat*, a musical that helped shape the genre, by giving a more serious tinge to what - before it - was closer to an operetta or a light musical comedy. The musical was based on a novel by Edna Ferber.

The story starts in 1880. The show boat *Cotton Blossom* drops anchor in Natchez, Mississippi, but the first "show" is a real fist fight between the leading man, Steve, and the boat engineer, Pete, over Steve's wife, Julie. Pete loses and leaves swearing revenge. Gaylord Ravenal, a handsome gambler catches

a glimpse of Magnolia, an eighteen-year-old daughter of Captain Andy. She is equally attracted to him. During the rehearsal for the show, Julie and Steve learn that the sheriff of the town is coming to arrest them. Steve takes a knife, makes a cut on Julie's hand and sucks blood from it. When the sheriff comes in the company of Pete, he wants to cancel the show on account of miscegenation, a marriage between a mulatto woman and a white man, which is prohibited by local law. Julie is pointed at as the culprit and she does not deny the charge. Steve, having sucked Julie's blood, claims that he too is a mulatto. Nevertheless, the couple leave the town, much to the grief of Magnolia who hates to see her friend Julie go. The vacant role of the leading man is offered to Gaylord and Magnolia is the new leading lady. They fall in love with each other and get married. Years later they move to Chicago with their daughter, but due to Gaylord's gambling, they can hardly make ends meet. Ashamed of himself, Gaylord leaves his family. Unaware of the secret sacrifice on the part of Julie who quits the *Trocadero* club so that her old friend can become a singer there, Magnolia gets a job and before long becomes a great musical star. More than twenty years later, in 1927, Captain Andy arranges a meeting between his daughter and Ravenal. Magnolia forgives him and together with their daughter they return to the *Cotton Blossom*.

With a plot based on William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, music composed by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics written by Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story* was a breakthrough in the history of the American musical. Hatred and rivalry between the Verona families of the Montagues and the Capulets became a canvas for depicting a conflict between two gangs in New York. Social and ethnic problems were featured in the limelight. Today this 1957 Broadway production is best remembered for its songs "America," "One Hand, One Heart," "Cool," "Somewhere," and "I Feel Pretty."



Rehearsal of *West Side Story*,
Photo ©AP Images

The musical shows the story of unfortunate love between Maria, an immigrant from Puerto Rico and Tony, an American. Two gangs, The Jets and The Sharks, are engaged in a ruthless fight for dominance. Maria's brother Bernardo is the leader of The Sharks. When he finds out that his sister is clandestinely dating a man from the rival gang, he decides to take revenge. In the next street fight Bernardo kills Tony's best friend Riff. Believing that Maria is dead, Tony takes reckless revenge and kills Bernardo. Maria suffers greatly, but she forgives Tony. At the end, Chino, who hoped to marry Maria, shoots Tony. Tony dies in Maria's arms.

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A Catwalk for ... Cats



And now it is time for pure entertainment, time for the musical *Cats*. The stage is taken by fantastically clad domestic animals; domestic, but not fully tamed... for cats have their own paths, habits, and matters. The colorful and vivid world of cats unfolds through stage antics, dancing, and singing of cats and by cats.

T.S. Eliot would have been overjoyed, if he knew of the success of the musical based on a collection of his poems *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. He would have been happy to know how many people worldwide have seen and admired this musical. He was aware of the potential for a stage performance, and it was his dream as a playwright to produce a drama that would draw long lines to the box-office, and while entertaining, would also educate the public. The plays he wrote for the purpose: *The Family Reunion*, *The Elderly Statesman*, or *The Cocktail Party* did not bring this effect.

But the musical *Cats* by British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber based on his collection of poems did. The musical *Cats* now holds second place for the longest-running musical in the West End (8,949 performances over 21 years), and on Broadway (7,485 performances for 18 years, from 1982 to 2000.) It was staged in cities such as Oslo, Stockholm, Johannesburg, Brisbane, Budapest, Vienna, Warsaw, Hamburg, Prague, Toronto, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Sydney, Paris, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, not to mention, of course, New York and London, where it broke records for number of performances and years of running. There are already plans for 2010: Sao Paulo and the Philippines.

The poems, rather than for the stage, were written for entertainment of friends (as well as their children) and himself. Eliot's father drew cats in his spare time, and he likely passed his interest on to his son. T.S. Eliot was very fond of cats throughout his life and had several cats as pets (Pettipaws, Wiscus and George

Pushdragon.) He certainly knew a lot about their ways.

Even if the poems were written in the form of the so-called nonsense verse, they create in a witty and humorous way a charming world in which cats live, work, play, and entertain. No one cat is like any other. They all have their unique character and different past behind them. They each bear a special, if a little strange, name: Skimbleshanks - the railway cat, Mungojorrie and Rumpleteazer - a pair of notorious cat-burglars, Asparagus (or Gus) - a theatre cat, Macavity - a villain, the "Napoleon of crime," The Rum Tum Tugger, a curious and contrary cat, who always does what he wants: *For he will do/ As he do do/ And there's no doing anything about it!*

During the day cats profess a rather leisurely lifestyle, but it does not mean they are inactive creatures. To the contrary, they are just *Reserving their terpsichorean powers/ To dance by the light of the Jellicle Moon*. The Jellicle Moon illumines an event the cats have been preparing for: the Jellicle Ball:

*Jellicle Cats come out tonight,
Jellicle Cats come one come all:
The Jellicle Moon is shining bright -
Jellicles come to the Jellicle Ball.*

Eliot's poems have what is important for a musical play: an underlying "thumping" rhythm, as can be seen in the quotation above, an inner melody which captures the reader, forming as if on its own into a melody. Composer Andrew Lloyd Webber admits that *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* was his favorite childhood book and that as he was reading it then, he already had an idea for the musical score.

So, if you are going to watch the musical, all you have to prepare for is pure entertainment. Sit back, relax and enjoy.

Click to watch clips from the musical on The Really Useful Group's website.

Musical Cats,
Photo © AP Images

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Activity Page

Win a Prize! January 2010 CONTEST

What was the name of the show boat from the 1927 musical?

Send the answer (with your home address) to: zoom@usinfo.pl

Deadline: February 5

Win a Prize!

The answer in the December contest was:

Rudolph Valentino went to America in 1913.

Thank you for participating

The winners are:

Arkadiusz from Krakow, Justyna, and Aleksandra from Michalowice

CONGRATULATIONS

The prizes will be sent to you by mail.

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Exercise 1 Reading comprehension

Scan the text on p. 2 and decide which musical the sentences refer to: a/ The Phantom of the Opera, b/ Showboat, c/ West Side Story

1. The musical was based on Edna Ferber's book.
2. Racial discrimination is one of the themes.
3. The main character evokes both sympathy and rejection.
4. This musical echoes one of the most famous dramas in the history of theater.
5. Leonard Bernstein composed music for this musical.
6. This musical has been the most popular Broadway production so far.

Exercise 2

Read the article on p.1 and decide which sentences below are true and which are false:

1. The division between highbrow and lowbrow art seriously divided American theater in the 19th century.
2. Blackface minstrelsy and the musical further divided American audience.
3. Mamma Mia is an example of a "jukebox musical," one based on a singer's/group's popular hits.
4. New York's West End and London's Broadway are the two greatest "theater lands" in Great Britain and the United States.

Exercise 3

The plot of a book or play is usually narrated in the present tense. Work in groups of 3-4 students and narrate the story of your favorite musical or movie to other students. To keep their interest interrupt the narration from time to time asking them what they think happens next, etc.

Exercise 4

You have been made a director of a musical theater on Broadway. Plan the repertoire for your theater for one season.

**The Readers have chosen!
The favorite 2009 Zoom cover came from the October issue !!!**

Thank you for sending us your choices!

The winners are:
Oskar from Krakow, Waldek, Jan from Stalowa Wola, Ewa from Krakow, and Przemyslaw from Nowogard.

The albums about the United States will be sent to you by mail.

