

B. MUSICAL THEATRE HISTORY

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Tuesdays, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m. Norris University Center

ATTN: The 9/29 class will be held in Scott Hall - SEE INSERT

Flowing from 19th century roots in vaudeville, burlesque, and minstrelsy, in dialogue with jazz, operetta, music hall shows and more, the musical has taken a variety of shapes over the past 130 years. As follies, revues, “integrated” musicals, dance-driven musicals, rock musicals, concept musicals, megamusicals, jukebox musicals, and more, the landscape of US musical theatre has undergone vast shifts over time. Yet each wave of new approaches also restages musical theatre conventions from the past. As we work to gain a deeper grasp of the shows, people, stories, and sounds that have come to define the form, we will also consider the ways that musicals themselves tell musical theatre history. Across each era, what do musicals and musical theatre artists have to say (or sing!) about their times, beliefs, and social contexts?

NOTE: Supplementary course material will be available. Previewing is optional, but doing so will enhance your lecture experience. To access the material, go to NUalumnaecourses.org Under Course B, click on the Learn More button. Then click on the Course Materials button, which will take you to a Google Drive folder.

Sep. 29 How A Musical Tells History

From *Show Boat* (1927) to *Pacific Overtures* (1976) to *Ragtime* (1998) and beyond, musicals often take historical stories and figures as their subject matter. At the same time, as we’ll examine, they also restage musical and theatrical forms from days gone by for contemporary audiences—whether reimagining 19th century “floating theatres” on the Mississippi River, melodrama of the same period, classical Kabuki performance practices from 17th-century Japan or turn-of-the-20th-century US popular song. This session includes an overview of the approach to the study of musical theatre history in this course and the lectures to come.

Oct. 6 How A Musical Originates

Despite its reputation as a sparkly, wholesome, and pleasantly all-American entertainment, the US musical theatre sustains delightfully motley origins in lowbrow 19th century popular forms such as bizarrely comic blackface minstrelsy, the risqué stylings of burlesque, and vaudeville shows innovated by recent immigrants. When combined with more highbrow forms such as European operetta as well as European music hall, the turn of the 20th century brought American stages new amalgams of music and theatre including the famed Ziegfeld Follies.

Oct. 13 How A Musical Does Jazz

Ragtime music had already invested popular songs with the syncopations of vernacular speech, and in the 1920s and 30s, the sound of hot dance bands and the sight of long-legged chorus girls came to define the musical in fast-paced revues and zippy musical comedies. With shows like the hit, all-black musical *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Anything Goes* (1934), the rhythms of tap dance also made an indelible mark on the art form. The cosmopolitan content and modern styles of these musical comedies coexisted and contrasted with the epic tales of royals in exotic locales set to soaring classical melodies in the American operettas of the period.

Oct. 20 How A Musical Integrates

In the 1940s, the celebrated musical theatre authors and businessmen Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II famously described their approach to making musicals as one defined by the seamless integration of song, story, and dance. Despite some scholars' subsequent critiques of this framing, there was no doubt that a new and wildly successful kind of musical storytelling was launched with shows like Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) and Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* (1956). This kind of show is typical of the era known (not without controversy) as the "Golden Age" of the Broadway musical.

Oct. 27 How A Musical Dances

For energetic tap routines and the ballet in Agnes De Mille's choreography for *Oklahoma!*, Broadway had long cast dancers as well as singers. But *West Side Story* (1957) broke new ground with performers who did it all—what we would now call "triple threats." Nearly two decades later, *A Chorus Line* (1975) forever reshaped the musical's definition of an ensemble and humanized the labor and lives of Broadway dancers. It also ushered in a new kind of musical built not around dramatic narrative but an overarching theme: the concept musical, presaged in years prior by *Cabaret* (1966).

Nov. 3 How A Musical Rocks

From the mid-1960s on, the sound of Broadway musicals generally departed from the chart-topping pop tunes of their times, with a few notable exceptions. *Hair* (1968) is the first musical with a rock score to make a genuine impact on the trajectory of the genre, preparing the way for shows such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1975), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998) and *Passing Strange* (2008). As microphones improved from the 1970s into the 1980s, expectations for theatre singers also shifted. Further, both *Hair* and *A Chorus Line* were developed in a model that was new for their time if taken for granted now—the off-Broadway workshop.

Nov. 10 How a Musical Goes Mega

In the 1980s and 90s Broadway was flooded with grand pop operas imported from London, beginning with *Les Miserables* (1987) and continuing with many works by composer/lyricist Andrew Lloyd Webber, most famously *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988). With large casts, spectacular scenery and special effects, plus consistent staging and branding worldwide, these shows were known as "megamusicals." Extending this trend, Disney began bringing its successful film musicals to the stage with the global hit *The Lion King* (1997). We can also profitably consider the impact of *Hamilton* (2015) through the lens of the global megamusical.

Nov. 17 How Sondheim Does a Musical

Perhaps no single artist contributed more to late 20th-century musical theatre than composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim. Writing at a time when fewer new musicals were being produced, and with an artisanal approach that contrasted with Broadway's increasing commercialization, Sondheim's luminous artistry can be felt in shows like *Company* (1970), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), and the Pulitzer-winning *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984). Beyond his intricate rhyme schemes and evocative musical landscapes ranging from the minimalist to the cinematic, Sondheim is beloved by performers for his songs that are supremely "actable" – rich in nuance, musically specific and yet generously open to the performer's interpretation.

Nov. 24 How a Musical Does a Jukebox

Beginning with *Mamma Mia* (2001) and *Jersey Boys* (2005), a new kind of musical has sprung up that stages the hit works of famed recording artists. Whether inserted into a new storyline or propelling an autobiographical narrative, well-known songs animate this fast-proliferating form: the jukebox musical. Shows like *Beautiful* (2014), *& Juliet* (2022), and *MJ* (2022) allow artists (or their estate managers) to solidify their legacy and enable audiences to feel new forms of nostalgia. Every season, musicals continue to tell – and sing and dance! – their own versions of musical theatre history on Broadway and beyond. We'll close by considering some current Broadway musicals in this light, such as *Cats: The Jellicle Ball* (2025) and *Schmigadoon* (2026).