

**Larry Stempel. *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (College Edition). New York: Norton, 2011. 848 pages. \$39.93.
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**Stacy Wolf. *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 320 pages. \$99.00.
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Musical theater topics can be taught in many ways: as free-standing “History of Musical Theater” classes, in units or lectures within either period courses or sweeping surveys, or through graduate seminars devoted to a particular niche of the genre. No matter the specific forum, Larry Stempel’s *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* and Stacy Wolf’s *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* provide new and engaging material for any study of the musical. Stempel’s 685 pages of text are certainly daunting, while Wolf’s approach, by contrast, may at first glance appear somewhat limiting. In both cases, richly construed contexts and overarching themes are beautifully balanced with enough detail and focus on specific shows (or songs) to offer a meaningful look at the genre and be extremely effective in a variety of teaching situations.

Showtime is a systematic, largely chronological presentation of the Broadway musical. Basing his research primarily on the shows themselves, Stempel deftly integrates biographical information on creators and performers with discussions on the relationship between art and commerce, definitions of various types of musicals, and background on how shows are created. In doing so, he provides a holistic approach to the genre.

While providing focused analyses of essential musicals, Stempel thankfully avoids the all-too-tempting Trinitarian approach to musical theater

history: *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, and Sondheim. *Show Boat* is not discussed until page 192, *Oklahoma!* is treated within the larger context of “The Script Angle” (Chapter 9), and Sondheim’s work does not take center stage until the second chapter (“The Metaphor Angle,” Chapter 13) of the book’s third section, “Toward the New Millennium.” What emerges is a finely nuanced narrative that exudes both breadth and depth.

Stempel organizes his book into sixteen chapters grouped in three large parts: “Out of the Nineteenth Century,” “Into the Twentieth Century,” and “Toward the New Millennium.” Each chapter begins with a useful list of the most significant musicals to be investigated in that chapter, including data on their runs, creators, casts, and most important songs. The volume is amply illustrated, with black-and-white images throughout and two sections of glossy color plates.

Especially laudable is Stempel’s extensive coverage of pre-*Show Boat* works. By providing substantive coverage of this repertory, Stempel begins to fill a lacuna in the history of the Broadway musical. For example, he informs readers that at the turn of the twentieth century, New York engagements were limited bookings (p. 124)—a strong reminder that in this era, unlike the present, the number of Broadway performances was not considered a definitive indicator of a show’s success or failure. Likewise, in his discussion of early musical comedy, readers glean crucial yet often forgotten information about this distinctive genre: performers were hired before writers, and books (the written libretti, including the dialogue between songs) functioned more as blueprints for performance than as unalterable scripts (p. 225).

Topic-focused chapters appear as needed in the grand narrative. For example, the third part of the book, “Toward the New Millennium,” chronicles various subgenres of the musical, all of which became paramount in the latter part of the twentieth century. The first chapter, “Away from Broadway,” concerns off-Broadway productions not just in terms of theatrical size or location but also aesthetic approach. The next three chapters each investigate a particular approach to the genre: the concept musical (Chapter 13, “The Metaphor Angle”), the dance-based musical (Chapter 14, “A Dancing Place”), and the so-called megamusical (Chapter 15, “Distancing Effects”). Reprises of material from earlier in the book provide historical contexts for these late twentieth-century developments.

In *Changed for Good*, theater historian Stacy Wolf investigates how women were treated as characters in Broadway musicals from the 1950s through the early 2000s. Each decade-based chapter takes a discrete theme and begins with a socio-cultural exposition of feminine constructs in the decade before investigating how these attitudes are reflected in well-known musicals. The chapter on the 1950s treats female duets in *Guys and Dolls*, *Wonderful Town*, and *West Side Story*, while the one on the 1960s focuses on

assertive central female characters who appear in large-scale choreographed numbers in *Sweet Charity*, *Cabaret*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Mame*, *Oliver!*, and *Man of La Mancha*. The ensemble number and the role of women in ensembles is the focal point of the chapter on the 1970s, which includes coverage of *Company*, *Godspell*, *The Wiz*, and *A Chorus Line*. In her chapter on the 1980s, Wolf effectively demonstrates how the spectacle of megamusicals pushes female characters into the background to the point where, in *Les Misérables*, they must die after singing a powerfully dramatic signature solo number. *Cats* and especially *The Phantom of the Opera* are also discussed in this context. The final chronological chapter, on the 1990s and 2000s, looks at the first and last numbers of female protagonists. These are often sung by women defined in part by their ethnicity in shows such as *Parade*, *Caroline, or Change*, *The Color Purple*, and *In the Heights*.

The final two chapters focus on *Wicked* (2003). An image from the musical graces the book's cover and its title, not incidentally, comes from one of the songs in the show. One chapter offers a queer reading of the musical and the other provides revelatory insights on its reception history among girls, many of whom are now college age. Whereas most musicals use gender to create binary difference, *Wicked*, in its reshaping of *The Wizard of Oz*, instead employs skin color. Elphaba, the future Wicked Witch of the West, is green; her skin color functions as "a synecdoche for her other differences from Galinda and the other students: she is independent, a free thinker, exceedingly intelligent, unafraid to rebel, politically progressive" (p. 204). But Elphaba is also an individual, and her green skin does not act as any sort of racial signifier. Wolf employs insights such as this to ascertain the substance and popularity of *Wicked*. An epilogue to the volume provides further thoughts, including brief discussions of recent Broadway musicals.

Both books have strong pedagogical applications. Stempel's evocative prose moves the reader along very quickly and, even with its massive size, *Showtime* could be used as a text for a course dedicated to the history of the American musical theater. Its musical analyses require only an elementary knowledge of music theory. Wolf's book might also function as a stand-alone text for a semester-length course, though many teachers may want to cover a wider range of material than Wolf provides. As a complementary text for a general course on musical theater, however, *Changed for Good* deserves to be essential reading.

Showtime and *Changed for Good* can also be extremely effective in courses not dedicated exclusively to musical theater. For classes in twentieth-century music, American music, or gender and music, to name but a few, selections from both books can provide meaningful insights on a multitude of topics. The first part of *Showtime* could likewise be integrated into courses that include coverage of nineteenth-century music. The organization of *Changed*

for Good allows teachers to assign (if not the entire book) decade-based chapters or even material on specific shows. The last two chapters, those on *Wicked*, could find their way into courses on historiography and critical method as exemplars of particular approaches in the field.

From the point of view of scholarship, both books are landmark works. *Showtime*, which won the 2010 Irving Lowens Book Award from the Society for American Music, has already become the premier single-author history of the genre. (A hardback version is also available.) *Changed for Good* offers crucial perspectives on an immensely significant popular cultural product. One thinks about the entire idea of the “Broadway musical” differently after reading these two books. Stempel explores the rich tapestry of the musical through the various complex threads that hold it together, while Wolf illuminates the presence of female characters in Broadway musicals and their shifting constructions and meanings. Both authors provide serious treatments of the Broadway musical and infuse their writing with the vibrancy and sense of enjoyment associated with their subject matter.

Whether or not readers who teach musical theater history (either as free-standing courses or within other classes) incorporate these books into their curricula, they will definitely gain new insights from what these esteemed authors have to say about the topic. *Showtime* and *Changed for Good* reflect a superior level of scholarship that is user-friendly and content-substantive, providing narratives that students will genuinely enjoy reading. Both are welcome additions to the ever-increasing literature on musical theater.