

James Leve, *American Musical Theater*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 448 pages. \$59.95. ISBN: 9780195379600. E-book available through Redshelf.com. \$29.95. eISBN: 9780190643461.

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James Leve's *American Musical Theater* addresses a considerable gap in musical theater texts and provides an excellent foundational survey for music and theater students alike. Intended for use in a one-semester introduction to musical theater, Leve's text is suitable for teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The task of choosing a representative sampling from the American musical theater repertory is certainly a daunting one and forces an author to favor some works at the risk of neglecting others, but Leve has skillfully chosen works that exemplify the many generic and stylistic innovations of the American musical from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. In so doing, he also introduces students to several forgotten gems by figures whose works are integral to the American musical including Jerome Kern and Otto Harbach, whose works are rarely performed today.

The text begins with two introductory chapters that first present an overview of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) and a discussion of two important genres that developed in the late nineteenth century, namely, the story-oriented genre of early operetta and the variety-like formats that later developed into Vaudeville. The text then proceeds chronologically through a survey of each decade, before exploring several other integral concepts such as the development of Black musical theater. In his preface, Leve notes that his decision to start with *Oklahoma!* stems firstly from a desire to focus on the integrated book musical as a defining point in the development of musical theater. Secondly, he argues that *Oklahoma!* is a useful case study for students that aids in the introduction of cultural concepts that recur throughout the book, including the importance of Jewish composers and the important role that theater plays in the representation of race relations in the United States (xvii).

The layout of the text is clear and easy to follow, organized firstly by decade and with subsequent chapters focusing on specific concepts. Chapters 2–13 each highlight the major developments of a given decade and then turn to a careful analysis of a particular work, followed by questions for discussion and classroom engagement. The remaining chapters 14–17 focus on such diverse topics as the Off-Broadway theater, the Black musical, the phenomenon of the star performer, and the genre of the rock musical—bringing to the fore specific examples for students to consider. Because these final chapters span the entire chronology of musical theater, Leve suggests that they can be taught in any order and inserted into classroom study where needed.

Each chapter closes with a work that presents a counter example to its main concepts, introduced in a brief section titled “And Bear in Mind.” These examples offer a differing perspective on the concepts introduced in the preceding section. In the first chapter, for instance, the “And Bear in Mind” section presents Cole Porter’s *Kiss Me Kate* (1948), Porter’s most significant book musical, as a counterpoint to his analysis of *Oklahoma!*. This allows Leve to demonstrate the ways in which Porter responded to the overwhelming influence of Rodgers and Hammerstein, thereby connecting the discussion of the integrated book musical with reception history.

Arguably, the most innovative pedagogical feature of his text is the idea of a case study in which students can explore key concepts while becoming acquainted with a canonical musical theater work. This approach eschews the traditional organization of musical theater texts, for example, Ethan Mordden’s multiple volumes on the musical, which are organized by decade and in which a survey of works is presented in chronological fashion with musical analysis scattered throughout. Instead, Leve first presents the historical background of each decade, then biographical information for a given composer, followed by an in-depth examination of a single show. He also explicates specific formal and musical developments of a given show, along with a discussion of staging, choreography or orchestrations.

The strength of the text in terms of teaching in the musical theater classroom lies in its ability to be taught as a stand-alone text or alongside complementary scholarly texts. Leve’s text is both straightforward and easy to use in either a musical theater or music history classroom, and it can easily be supplemented with or taught alongside other musical theater texts. Some supplementary texts include Raymond Knapp’s *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Sheldon Patinkin’s “No Legs, No Jokes, No Chance”: *A History of the American Musical Theater*, Scott McMillin’s *The Musical as Drama*, or Bruce Kirlé’s *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals As Works-in-Process*—each of which provides detailed discussions of form, generic development, historical background, social issues, and the collaborative process of the American

musical. Leve introduces students to the work of key scholars in the field, including Stacy Wolf, Elizabeth Wollman, and Jessica Sternfeld, while the extensive bibliography provides a useful starting point for student research projects and papers. The one drawback to the text is the lack of a score and recording anthology that would be typical of most music history textbooks. However, as Leve remarks in his introduction, the expense of reproducing musical materials that are currently under copyright makes such an anthology impossible (xix).

Central to his pedagogical approach, which combines historical and cultural analysis with production and reception history, Leve's textbook provides detailed musical history that explicates style elements of musical theater through formal, melodic, motivic and harmonic analysis. A good example of this appears in Chapter 9, where he skillfully connects the musical sound of "Willkommen" from *Cabaret* (1967) to the "decadent pleasure" of the German cabaret (184). The harmonic analysis might prove to be slightly too detailed for students with little previous exposure to musical notation, necessitating explanation on the part of the instructor. However, Leve's straightforward method of analysis encourages students to engage with the salient points of a given musical number.

Because of the wide range of repertory presented, the author is able to integrate analysis of several key songwriters' musical styles, enabling the student to recognize specific works. In Chapter 10 he focuses on Stephen Sondheim, outlining aspects of Sondheim's musical style. These musical markers include the dark, brooding waltz style heard in "The Last Midnight," the "motive-oriented" melodies in "The Little Things You Do Together," and the accompanimental "vamp" style heard in "Send in the Clowns" (195). Further, Leve contextualizes points of musical analysis within the genre or historical moment of the chapter. In his discussion of the megamusical in Chapter 11 he draws a parallel between musicals such as *Evita* (1978) and *Phantom of the Opera* (1986) and opera. He explores the integration of recitative and aria forms that Andrew Lloyd Webber employs as formal linking material throughout his works. He also outlines the connections between the show's main characters that are created by the underlying harmonic progressions and provide a sense of musical unity, much like a Puccini opera (229). These analyses encourage students to connect musical styles to genres beyond the musical and to situate these styles within the larger context of musical and cultural history.

Using the same analytical lens, Leve discusses the ways in which social change influences the reception of musical theater. Whether he is focusing on Cole Porter's lyrics as a reflection of Porter's personal identity (Chapter 6), the United States government's support of the musical as a means of defeating communism in the 1950s (Chapter 8), or the rise of the rock musical as a statement of social protest beginning in the 1960s (Chapter 16), the text aims to

connect the historical development of the musical with broader cultural shifts. Leve's discussion of the Black musical is particularly poignant, as he argues that this sub-genre of musical theater developed because of the segregation of the Broadway stage (318). He traces the Black musical's evolution from minstrelsy through *The Wiz* (1978). In other chapters he also confronts the perceived racism and exoticism of musical theater works that feature blatant stereotypes of Asian culture, including the multiple versions of *The Mikado* in the 1930s that featured different racial casts and later Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* (1951).

In addition to the discussions of social issues throughout his text, Leve emphasizes the collaborative process of musical theater, which involves not only the composer but also the lyricist, producer, director, and performer. He does so by incorporating significant figures spanning several generations of musical theater history, including choreographers such as George Balanchine, Bob Fosse, and Agnes de Mille, producers such as Florenz Ziegfeld and Cameron Mackintosh, set designers such as Oliver Smith, orchestrators such as Ted Royal and Robert Russell Bennett, and figures who worked in multiple areas such as director and choreographer Jerome Robbins. Leve further highlights the significant contributions of less-known songwriters in the Rodgers and Hammerstein generation such as Harold Arlen, and the work of contemporary composers such as Jason Robert Brown and Stephen Flaherty.

Incorporated in his analysis of individual shows, Leve also introduces students to the commercial mechanics of Broadway productions, including the trajectory of early Broadway as American theater moved from a primarily touring institution to works that were conceived for staging in a specific New York house during the time of George M. Cohan. By focusing on the shifts in commercialism brought about in the late twentieth century by producers like Cameron Mackintosh, Leve is able to sketch the history of Broadway theater effectively and to speculate as to the causes of the commercial decline of the musical that began in the 1970s.

Although he confronts the prevalent notion of the commercial decline of Broadway that began in the 1970s, and posits several valid reasons for this decline, such as the effects of outside political influences on theater and the rise in performance costs (190), there may be other factors, including shifts in performance styles and trends. Further, Leve does not mention other performance venues that frequently stage canonical American musicals, including light opera companies throughout the country that stage classic musicals such as *Show Boat* (1927) or *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) or the vibrant community theater scene that comprises both amateurs and professionals. A brief section summarizing these performance trends might provide a good counterpoint to the prevailing narrative of theatrical "decline." It should also be noted that

Leve devotes a considerable portion of Chapter 13 to recent developments in musical theater brought about by composers such as Tony Kushner (*Caroline, or Change*) and Adam Guettel (*The Light in the Piazza*), which have aided in the revitalization of the art musical.

In order for students to understand better the widespread issues involved in musical theater production and dissemination as a cultural product, historical narratives in future texts will likely challenge the idea of Broadway as the only significant forum for professional musical theater in the United States. Nevertheless, Leve does provide an concise overview of the challenges of mounting musical theater in the era of the juke box musicals and Disney on Broadway, and presents several significant examples of contemporary musical theater aside from the jukebox musical, including *Wicked*, *Spring Awakening*, and *Fun Home*.

Although Leve provides an otherwise detailed history of the commercial theater in the United States, the text would benefit from more discussion of the crossover between the British and American stages. Leve does briefly mention significant British contributions to the musical beginning in the 1960s with shows such as *The Roar of the Greasepaint—The Smell of the Crowd* (1964), although there are numerous examples before this that point to the extensive crossover that led to formal developments in both countries. This omission might be somewhat problematic for students, because it suggests that the only significant works of musical theater before the advent of the large-scale British musical in the 1960s, beginning with *Oliver!* (1968) were the works of Gilbert and Sullivan, with no mention of works by Noël Coward and others that were performed on Broadway before World War II. While the focus of the book is the “American” musical, the concept of musical theater is so much a product of both England and the States that it might be beneficial to include a more detailed narrative of the interactions between the two.

Rather than replacing previous textbooks, Leve’s is an excellent addition to the burgeoning field of scholarship on musical theater. Because of the eclectic and ever-evolving world of musical theater, it is impossible to provide a single definitive text for the classroom. As scholars inevitably continue to confront social, political, and historical shifts onstage, more texts will be written that address these issues. Nevertheless, Leve’s text addresses a vast lacuna in the field of musical theater pedagogy, and it is therefore a welcome addition to the classroom. In his innovative approach, which incorporates a chronological overview with in-depth musical analyses and a strong conceptual focus, Leve succeeds in providing a substantial foundation for musical theater students at the undergraduate and graduate levels alike.