



Lowell Milken Center for
Music of American Jewish Experience

Jews in the Invention of the American Musical

by Rabbi Dr. J.B. Sacks and Dr. Lorry Black

סיפורי מוסיקה
Stories of Music

UCLA

Herb Alpert
School of Music



Scholars have pointed to a significant history of the use of music in theatrical presentations. Music has been part of theatrical experience since ancient times, most notably with Greek comedy where the opening and closing sections (the *agon* and *exodos*, respectively) included a song-and-dance routine. Of course, within Eastern European Jewish tradition, the *purimspiel* is not only well-known, but has been described as “the only genuine folk theater that has survived a thousand years in European culture.” [NOTE: For more on the *purimspiel*, see [here](#).] Nonetheless, modern American musical theater stems more directly from developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This lesson focuses on those more recent developments, and the involvement of Jews at each stage. We do so because it is this period which lays the foundations of the American musical theater as we tend to think of it, and for Jewish involvement with it.

In this lesson, we focus upon songwriters. For clarity, we have placed an asterisk (*) in front of a person’s name to denote that that person was Jewish. We do so the first time that person is mentioned in the lesson and where that person is explored more fully.

We also focus upon shows on Broadway. When shows are mentioned, we list in parentheses the year the show opened on Broadway and the number of performances for the run of the show, not including previews.

To get further bibliographic information on references cited in this Lesson, please see the accompanying Resource Guide.

Timing This Lesson

This Stories of Music lesson is designed to be presented over multiple sessions, and is easily adaptable to meet your needs.

- ◆ For those completing the lesson over two sessions, we have marked where the instructor might break and provide bullet points that can help review the opening session before the break and/or when resuming after the break.
- ◆ If electing to teach this in more than two sessions, the instructor will need to decide where the breaks will best occur.
- ◆ If completing this material in one session, the instructor will have to decide what material to omit and yet still transmit the essence of the lesson. This can be done with some preplanning.

How many sessions will be best for your cohort can depend upon many factors, including but not limited to the length of your session, the number of learners, how much of the content you wish to include, the number of videos and audios you might include and how much of each you want your cohort to experience, and how many of the interactive elements (e.g. discussions, pair shares) to include and how long to allow for each.

Preparation

I. Content

We have built a rich lesson for you, so some pre-planning will be useful and necessary. We have offered a substantial number of links in order to provide biographical, historical, and cultural context. Some of this will serve as helpful background material for the instructor; some may be worthy of incorporation into the presentation.

The instructor will also want to consider time management, and may need to make decisions about breadth (presenting excerpts of musical selections to give attention to context, interactivity, et al.) versus depth (presenting all of the musical selections and limiting contextualization and interactivity). For this, each instructor will want to gain clarity for themselves regarding their goals for their particular cohort.

II. Your Cohort

We Jews have had a wide breadth of lived experience and have lived in many places. It is quite possible that you have some people in your class whose professional life has been in musical theater. Such people may serve as good resources. If so, check in with them in advance to see if they feel comfortable sharing their personal experience.

Finally, we recommend that the class sings together (at least) one song per session. Whether the song is un/familiar, the singing together gives a flavor of the experience and gestalt of these songs in a way that watching a video cannot. The Stories of Music Project can help build the class community, and singing is just plain fun! This can even be done in online formats, whether only one person is singing, or taking turns unmuting willing participants.

Enduring Understandings

- ◆ The American musical, as we think of it today, is the result of the evolution and amalgamation of several different types of performing arts.
- ◆ At the same time, the American musical is a startling creative development and achievement.
- ◆ Jews have been central figures at every stage of the development of the American musical form.
- ◆ Jews have contributed to all levels of Broadway productions throughout history (i.e. composers, writers, choreographers, etc.). [NOTE: The lesson focuses on composition.]

Essential Questions

- ◆ How did the American musical first emerge?
- ◆ What kinds of musical works did theatergoers experience before the American musical? What was the Jewish involvement in those musical forms?

Lesson Outline

- I. Prelude
- II. What Played on Broadway Before the American Musical
 - A. Operetta
 1. Emmerich Kálmán (“Finale” from *Countess Maritza*)
 2. How Operettas Are Un/Like Both Operas and Musicals
 3. Sigmund Romberg (“One Flower” and “One Alone” or “The Drinking Song” from *The Student Prince*)
 - B. Other Forms of Musical Entertainment on Broadway
 1. Tin Pan Alley: Albert Von Tilzer (“Honey”)
 2. Vaudeville: Sophie Tucker
 (“Nobody Loves a Fat Girl But Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love”)
 3. Musical Revues: Dorothy Fields (“I Can’t Give You Anything But Love”)
 [EXTENSION IDEA: Dorothy Fields’ Family]

Summary of the first half (“My Yiddishe Mama”)

Resumption of the Lesson (“Here in My Arms”)

- III. Towards the American Musical: Americanizing the Imports
 - A. Edwardian Musical Theatre
 - B. *The Girl from Utah* (“They Didn’t Believe Me”)
 1. Responses to “They Didn’t Believe Me”
 2. Importance of Jerome Kern
- IV. The New American Musical: Beginnings

Watch Your Step (“Play a Simple Melody”)
 [EXTENSION IDEA: The Berlin Quodlibet]
- V. Developing the American Musical: The Princess Theatre Musicals
 - A. Show: *Oh, Boy!* (“Till the Clouds Roll By”)
 - B. Importance of the Princess Theatre Musicals
- VI. The Refining of the American Musical: *No, No Nanette* (“Tea for Two”)
 [EXTENSION IDEA: American Musical Theater Music Beyond the Theater]

- VII. The Arrival of the American Musical: *Show Boat*
 - A. The Music of Show Boat (“Overture”)
 - B. Background to the Novel *Show Boat* by Edna Ferber
 - C. Background to the 1927 Musical *Show Boat*
 - D. Show and Song: (“Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man”)
 - E. Importance and Originality of *Show Boat*
- VIII. Weaving Our Threads Together
- IX. Coda/Outro

The Lesson

SLIDE 1

I. Prelude

SLIDE 2

PLAY (as students arrive and settle in): “Ol’ Man River” from *Showboat*  (Music by *Jerome Kern and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II)

As you settled in, we saw a clip of [Paul Robeson](#) as Joe singing “Ol’ Man River” in the 1936 film version of *Show Boat* with an African American chorus portraying dock workers. Robeson had starred in the 1932 revival of the 1927 musical, in the role that was actually written for him. This 1936 film was the second of five film versions, and it is considered the most faithful to the original.

The song, as Hammerstein described it, is a “song of resignation with protest implied.” (Hammerstein, *Lyrics*. Rev. ed., 1985, quoted in Hischak: 1995, 259). Joe and the workers, all Black, lament their oppression, and remain in awe of the mighty Mississippi River that is indifferent to and transcends human troubles. The workers express themselves with eloquence and dignity while remaining true to their characters. The ballad, infused with Southern folk flavor, was the first song written for the show.

Portraying the humanity and dignity of Black Americans’ lives was new. Black actors sharing the stage with white thespians was new. Music derived from American folk traditions with lyrics that approximated actual speech was new. A musical dealing with difficult subjects like racism was new.

Show Boat mesmerized audiences, and critics and theatergoers alike raved. Yet where did this new form of entertainment, the American musical, come from? This lesson explores the emergence of the American musical form between 1900–1930. We will explore the experience theatergoers had on Broadway *before* the invention and during the rise of the American musical.

Immigrant Jews and their children, along with others, played a central role in the production and musical composition of all musical entertainment then playing on Broadway. About 10% of the 25 million immigrants to the U.S. between 1870 and 1920 were Jewish. Most came through Ellis Island, and many were enthusiastic supporters of Yiddish theater. They would form a brand new audience and artistic base for the American musical. [For more on the general immigration boom, see [here](#). On the three waves of Jewish immigration, see [here](#). On Ellis Island, see [here](#).]

II. What Played on Broadway Before the American Musical?

SLIDE 3

At the end of the 19th century and in the early decades of the 20th century, the United States and Europe maintained a rich musical theater culture. Operettas, vaudeville shows, and music revues all existed concurrently, with all playing a role in the development of Broadway.

A. The Operetta: Emmerich Kálmán (1882–1953)

SLIDE 4

We will begin our musical journey with operetta, a form that is not fully opera, and not fully musical. Many Jewish artists contributed to the world of operetta, both in Europe and the United States, sometimes creating multiple language versions of their shows with the intention of performing them on both sides of the Atlantic.

Let's look at an example of this phenomenon. *Emmerich Kálmán rose from the lower-middle class in Budapest, to achieve worldwide artistic renown. His story captures the power and popularity of this style in the first years of the 20th Century.

- ♦ Hungarian-born *Emmerich Kálmán composed in the last era of Viennese operetta. While at the Academy of Music in Budapest, fellow students Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, famous composers, began incorporating folk music of their homelands, something Kálmán would pursue as well.
- ♦ Kálmán's works were inventive, displayed great variety in compositional techniques, and incorporated Hungarian folk music.
- ♦ His reputation as a composer of operettas was made by his first stage work, *Tatárjárás* (1908; *The Gay Hussars*), which already displayed a strong Hungarian tone. It was performed throughout Europe and the United States (1909; 24) to great acclaim.
- ♦ Kálmán moved to Vienna and found success composing German-language theater. His greatest worldwide success was *Csárdáskirálynő* (1915; *The Czardas Princess*); it was performed worldwide, often enjoying runs of thousands of performances. In the United States it appeared in 1917 as *The Riviera Girl* (78). There are seven film versions.
- ♦ Productions of his shows were so popular and lucrative, they even rescued several theaters from bankruptcy.
- ♦ With the Nazi occupation of Austria, Kálmán and his family fled to Paris (1938) and then to the United States (1940). In 1945 he returned to Paris.

Countess Maritza (Gräfin Mariza) (1926; 318)

The story concerns Tassilo, the new bailiff on Countess Maritza's estate. He is an impoverished young Baron who has taken the job incognito to pay for his sister's education. Temperament and pride along with numerous complications delay the inevitable happy pairing-off of Maritza with Tassilo, and his sister Lisa with another nobleman from Maritza's set of friends.

The 1924 libretto was written by *[Julius Brammer](#) (1877–1943) and *[Alfred Grünwald](#) (1884–1951). The 1926 English adaptation was penned by the prolific [Harry Bache Smith](#) (1860–1936), who wrote over 300 librettos and over 6,000 lyrics.

Consider While Listening and Discuss:

- ♦ What elements are like opera and not like opera?
- ♦ Which elements are like and not like typical Broadway musicals?
- ♦ Consider:
 - **Song type:** Is it a march? Waltz? Something else?
 - **Vocal style:** What words might you use to describe the vocal style? Is it dark? Bright? Boomy? Chest or head voice? Etc.

PLAY: [Finale from *Countess Maritza*](#)  (2:26:45–2:31:45)

This is from the 2004 *Seefestspiele Mörbisch*, the annual operetta festival at Mörbisch am See, in Austria.

How Operettas Are Un/Like Both Operas and Musicals

SLIDE 5

Operettas show similarities to both opera and musical theater. For most listeners acquainted with art music, many of the connections will be apparent from the get-go; the use of classical (or operatic) vocal style and the casting of trained opera singers, the use of a classical orchestra, and virtuosic writing overall all relate closely to opera. However, unlike traditional opera, operetta includes dialogue and dancing, and is far shorter than opera, much like musical theater.

Pair Share:

Casting agents often hired vocalists with operatic training, but who had little to no background in acting for roles in operettas. Conversely, many Broadway shows featured great actors with little formal vocal training.

- ❓ **Share with your neighbor an experience you had with either: a) an opera with a great singer who was not a great actor/actress, or b) a musical that had a great actor/actress but who was not a great vocalist.**

We will now turn to another whose prolific contributions to operetta are still seen today.

Sigmund Romberg (1887–1909)

- ◆ Hungarian-born Romberg worked as a pianist in cafes after moving to NYC in 1909, and formed his own European salon and light music orchestra in 1912.
- ◆ Some of his early compositions attracted the attention of *the Shubert Brothers, important Broadway producers. They employed him as their house composer. By 1917, Romberg had composed 275 songs for seventeen musicals and revues.
- ◆ He collaborated with some of the great composers and lyricists of the time, including Oscar Hammerstein II and Otto Harbach for *The Desert Song* (1926; 425), and the musical *Rosalie*, co-written with George Gershwin, and with lyrics by Ira Gershwin and P.G. Wodehouse (1928, 335).
- ◆ With significant influence and contributions to operetta, American musical theater, and film, Romberg exemplified a transitional figure that led directly to the future of the Broadway musical.

The Student Prince (1924, 608; 1931, 42; 1943, 153)

The most successful of Romberg's operettas is *The Student Prince*, a romantic tale of a young royal who attends university and falls for a commoner. Dorothy Donnelly wrote the work's book and lyrics.

PLAY: "Drink, Drink, Drink (The Drinking Song)" 

[NOTE: It is Mario Lanza singing, but he departed after recording the soundtrack, and his part was given to Edmund Purdom, who lip-synched Lanza's singing.]

Discuss:

-  **In your opinion, where does this work sit on the spectrum between opera and musical theater?**

EXTENSION IDEA: Yiddish Operetta

We mentioned that Jewish audiences were ready and primed for musical theater and operetta. Prior to, and concurrent with the time period we are exploring, Operettas in Yiddish were being produced for Yiddish-speaking populations in the U.S. Most famous among the American composers in this genre was *Joseph Rumshinsky (1881–1956). His operettas share many similarities with their English and German contemporaries, while also having their own unique qualities, such as the inclusion of Eastern European modes (melodic scales) and harmony, akin to those found in *hazzanut* and heritage (folk) music of the region, as well as story lines that connect to Jewish culture and history. [NOTE: For a short documentary on Rumshinsky, see [here](#).]

Listen:

Play one of the following pieces:

- ♦ “Hamavdil” from the operetta *Der Rebetsns Tokhter*  (*The Rabbi's Wife's Daughter*, 1922) Recorded by Cantor William Robyn-Rubin (1894–1996)
- ♦ “Fifty-fifty” from *Op-to'un un da'un-to'un*  (Uptown-Downtown, 1917) by Yosef Rumshinsky and *Louis Gilrod (1879–1930). Sung by Joanne Borts.

B. Other Forms of Musical Entertainment on Broadway

SLIDE 7

Operetta was not the only form of entertainment on Broadway.

The music of Tin Pan Alley (TPA) was among the most prolific repertoire to support the rise of musical theater. The composers and lyricists of TPA produced new, popular music at a feverish pace during the early years of the 20th century. The music of TPA would feature heavily in vaudeville and musical revue stages, which propelled the development of American musical theater.

Tin Pan Alley

SLIDE 8

Tin Pan Alley (TPA), a term coined by songwriter and journalist *Monroe Rosenfeld, refers to both a geographic area and the style of popular music from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The term evokes the sound of all of the clanging pianos in the publishing houses.

- ♦ Publishers would hire songwriters to create popular songs that could be sold as sheet music. As the demand for popular music grew, publishers began to congregate in the area around West 28th Street, and a vibrant music scene emerged.
- ♦ TPA became the center of the American popular music industry from the 1890s to the 1950s.
- ♦ Many songs from TPA played prominently on the vaudeville stage and in most musical revues.

Tin Pan Alley Songwriter: Albert Von Tilzer (1878–1956)

Many of the most famous American songwriters and performers of the early 20th century got their start on TPA, including *Irving Berlin and *Jerome Kern, both of whom we'll explore later in this lesson. These composers wrote songs that became popular hits, and their music helped to shape the sound of American popular music.

- ♦ Born in Indianapolis, early on *Albert Von Tilzer (*né* Albert Gumm) served as a music director for a vaudeville company as well as a shoe buyer for a Brooklyn department store.
- ♦ Music was a family business. Albert was hired as a staff writer at brother Harry Von Tilzer's music publishing company and, in 1903, formed his own publishing firm with brother Jack.
- ♦ Von Tilzer composed the scores for the musicals *Honey Girl* (1920, 142), *The Gingham Girl* (1922, 322), *Adrienne* (1923, 235) and *Bye, Bye Bonnie* (1927, 125). He also contributed songs to films in the 1920s and '30s.

- ◆ Highlights from Von Tilzer’s creative output include “Honey Boy” (1907, with [Jack Norworth](#)), “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” (1908, with Norworth), “I Used to Love You But It’s All Over Now” (1920, with *[Lew Brown](#)), and “I’ll Be With You in Apple Blossom Time” (1920, with Neville Fleeson).

PLAY: “Honey Boy”  (Music: Albert Von Tilzer; Lyrics: Jack Norworth)

This is a 1907 recording sung by [Billy Murray](#) (1877–1954), star of vaudeville, and the best-selling recording artist of the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Vaudeville


SLIDE 9

- ◆ Vaudeville was America’s first big-time show business, a coast-to-coast enterprise that reached as many as 5,000 theaters and employed as many as 50,000 people full- or part-time as entertainers and a nearly equal number in related business and crafts.
- ◆ A vaudeville show comprised unrelated variety acts such as comedy, singing, dancing, juggling, acrobatics, illusion, ventriloquism, and puppetry performed solo or in groups.
- ◆ Some early shows were so popular that they toured to other cities, and thus started the thirty-year growth of the vaudeville industry that flowered in the 1880s, crested in the 1910s but began fading during WWI as the public shifted its patronage to phonographs and silent films during the 1920s.
- ◆ By 1932 big-time vaudeville was dead except for a handful of big city venues, although small-time vaudeville lingered.

Vaudeville Performer: [Sophie Tucker](#) (1887–1966)

Many performers got their start and/or learned the craft on the vaudeville stage. We now highlight one of the greatest of those stars.

- ◆ Ukrainian-born *[Sophie Tucker](#) (*née* Sonya Kalish), was among the many Jews, and among the great female stars in vaudeville. [For more on [Jewish women in vaudeville](#), see here.]
- ◆ She started singing in her parents’ kosher restaurant, where she met such figures as *[Jacob Adler](#) and *[Bertha Kalich](#), both from the Yiddish theater. She ran off to NYC seeking a career.
- ◆ Tucker’s 1917 recording of W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” was the first blues recording to sell 1 million copies.
- ◆ Tucker possessed a powerful and versatile voice. Her musical numbers were the platform for a variety of things such as offering advice or doing off-color humor (she was known as “the Last of the Red-Hot Mamas”).
- ◆ Tucker performed in the Ziegfeld Follies (see below), but was so popular with audiences that the other female headliners refused to perform.
- ◆ Tucker continually updated her act and so remained a popular figure for 50 years.

- ♦ She inspired the character of Matron “Mama” Morton in the musical *Chicago* by *[John Kander](#) and *[Fred Ebb](#) (1975, 936; 1996, 10,000+). [NOTE: Her bawdy number “[When You’re Good to Mama](#),” sung in the 2002 film by Queen Latifah is here.) 

PLAY: “[Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, But Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love](#)” 

Discuss:

- ? **How do you think vaudeville audiences might have reacted to a song like this? To what degree does having a performer of Tucker’s size (physical and stardom) add to the messaging?**
- ? **To what degree does this kind of humorous approach help us to confront preconceptions about body image (or other prejudices)?**
- ? **Are there contemporary performers who use this kind of humor to disarm us or challenge our thinking? How are they similar or different from this song’s humor?**

This song was written by composer *[Ted Shapiro](#) (1899–1980), who worked as Tucker’s pianist and musical director for 40 years, writing some of her most bawdy material.

Musical Revue:

SLIDE 10

A revue is a theatrical work which combines song, dance, sketches, and production numbers. The contents of a revue are sometimes linked together by a common theme. Although a revue can have a storyline, this is usually weak and is considered as secondary to the content of individual pieces and performances within the show. Revues often featured comics, dancers, emotive singers, and show girls. They had their heyday from the end of World War I until the Great Depression. During the 1920s over 150 revues opened on Broadway. The revue form remains popular today.

A number of these revues had multiple editions. Some of these included:

- ♦ **The Ziegfeld Follies** (1907–1931, 1934, 1936, 1943, 1957) These lavish revues were produced by [Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.](#) (1867–1932) something between high class vaudeville and variety show, on the one hand, and later Broadway shows, on the other. They featured chorus lines of beautiful women. Performers included *[Fanny Brice](#), *[Eddie Cantor](#), *[Ed Wynn](#), and *[Nora Bayes](#).
- ♦ ***George White’s Scandals** (1919–1939) [George White](#) (né [Weitz](#); 1892–1968) broke off from Ziegfeld, differentiating his revues by featuring a single composer each revue. He had an eye for sleek design, emerging talent, and the latest dance crazes. These launched the careers of many, including the *[Three Stooges](#) and *[Bert Lahr](#).
- ♦ **Blackbirds** (1928, 1930, 1933, 1939) *[Lew Leslie](#) (né [Lessinsky](#), 1888–1963) presented Black artists on the Broadway stage, primarily through these revues. Most successful was the 1928 edition (518 performances), with music by composer [Jimmy McHugh](#) and lyricist *[Dorothy Fields](#). [NOTE: For Jewish collaboration with Black artists in jazz, see our Stories of Music lesson, “[Tzedek, Tzedek, \(Tashir v’\) Tirdof: Music in Doing Justice, Part 2.](#)”]

Music Review Songwriter: **Dorothy Fields** (1905–1974)

Many Jewish songwriters—both composers and lyricists—wrote songs for the various music revues. Here we highlight one lyricist whose career was launched with a music revue.

- ♦ Dorothy Fields was one of the first successful female TPA and Broadway songwriters.
- ♦ She wrote over 400 songs for Broadway musicals and films. Among her credits and achievements, she co-wrote the book for *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946, 1,147; 1966, 1999, 1,045); the idea for the musical was hers!
- ♦ She also wrote the lyrics and co-wrote the book for *Redhead* (1959, 452; music by *Albert Hague).

SONG: “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” from the musical revue *Blackbirds of 1928*

One evening Fields and composer Jimmy McHugh were strolling down Fifth Avenue and saw a young couple window-shopping at Tiffany’s. They realized that the couple could not afford to buy jewelry from Tiffany’s, but nevertheless drew closer to them. It was then they heard the man say: “Gee, Honey, I’d like to get you a sparkler like that, but right now, I can’t give you nothin’ but love!” Hearing this, McHugh and Fields rushed to a nearby subway tunnel and within an hour they came up with “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love, Baby.”

SecondHandSongs.com lists 733 cover versions of this song.

PLAY: “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love”

Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996) sings and pays tribute to Louis Armstrong, recorded on April 25, 1958, but only released in 1988 as *Ella in Rome: The Birthday Concert*. On piano is jazz pianist *Lou Levy (1928–2001), who played with Ella from 1957–1962.

SLIDE 11

EXTENSION IDEA: The Fields Family


Dorothy’s family was committed to musical theater. Her father *Lew Fields (né Moses Schoenfeld, 1867–1941) formed (with *Joe Weber, 1867–1942) Weber & Fields, a celebrated vaudeville act. He later became one of the most influential theater producers of his time. [NOTE: For more on Weber & Fields, see [here](#).]

Dorothy’s brother *Herbert Fields (1897–1958), was a celebrated gay librettist and lyricist. He wrote the book for most of the Rodgers and *Hart musicals of the 1930s and later collaborated with Dorothy on several musicals, including *Up in Central Park* (1945, 504, with music by Sigmund Romberg), and *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Dorothy’s other brother *Joseph Fields (1895–1966), was a heralded playwright, best known for co-writing with Jerome Chodorov the book for *Wonderful Town* (1953, 559; 2003, 497; music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by *Betty Comden [1917–2006] and *Adolph Green [1914–2002]), and co-writing with Oscar Hammerstein II the book of *Flower Drum Song* (1958, 600; 2002, 169).

SONG: “Big Spender” from *Sweet Charity* (1966, 608; 1986, 369; 2005, 279)

Sweet Charity tells the story of a down-on-her-luck dance hall hostess at a seedy ballroom who longs to find love. “Big Spender” is sung by the dance hostess girls. Legend Bob Fosse (1927–1987) choreographed it. The clip we’ll see is from the 1999 musical revue *Fosse* (1,093), which highlights Fosse’s work.

PLAY: “Big Spender”  (Music by *Cy Coleman; Lyrics by Dorothy Fields)

[NOTE: For those teaching this lesson in two sessions, please use the Summary and Outro for this first session. Others should skip to “III. Towards the American Musical: Americanizing the Imports.”]

Summary

We are nearing the end of our time for this first session. This week we explored the forms of musical entertainment that preceded the invention of the American musical. Next week we’ll dive into the development of the American musical. However, now let’s take a moment to think about what we’ve learned today. [NOTE: The instructor might catalog responses to the prompts in a place where all can see, and then add to those responses from the bullet points.]

? What is something you learned today about operetta, Tin Pan Alley, vaudeville, or the musical revue?

? What have you learned about Jewish involvement in these forms?

- ◆ The operetta is a form that is like opera in that it features a full orchestra with classically trained vocalists, but is like a musical in that it incorporates some dialogue and dance, and runs much shorter than classic operas.
- ◆ Jewish composers such as Emmerich Kálmán wrote many operettas that were performed in Europe and in the United States, with the latter usually in an English version (i.e. *Countess Maritza*).
- ◆ Jewish composers such as Sigmund Romberg wrote many operettas specifically for American audiences (i.e. *The Student Prince*).
- ◆ Many Jewish songwriters got their start with Tin Pan Alley (Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Albert Von Tilzer), and contributed a wealth of songs (“Honey”), including many that are well-known even today (“Take Me Out to the Ball Game”).
- ◆ Sophie Tucker was among the great figures of vaudeville, an early model of an independent woman and performed proudly as a Jew.
- ◆ The rich tradition of Yiddish theater inspired some to a career in theater (Sophie Tucker) and provided a huge audience pool for the emerging American musical.

- ♦ Many Jews were involved in musical revues, either as performers (Fanny Brice) or as songwriters (Dorothy Fields).
- ♦ Producer Lew Leslie put on shows that provided a platform to Black artists.

Discuss:

 **Why might Jews have been so heavily invested and involved in musical theater?**

Outro to First Half

SLIDE 12

We mentioned that Jews comprised a large share of the audiences for all of the forms of musical entertainment on Broadway. So, as we go, we present one of Sophie Tucker's signature songs that came out of TPA, "My Yiddishe Mama." She started including it as a standard part of her vaudeville act after her mother died (1925), and she sang it in Yiddish when she sensed a significant share of the audience was Jewish, which was quite often. She recorded it in 1928, with English on one side, and Yiddish on the B-side.

It was written by composer *Lew Pollack (1895–1946, also known for the rag "That's a Plenty") and lyricist *Jack Yellen (1892–1991, also known for his collaborations with *Milton Ager [1893–1979], that produced the well-known "Happy Days Are Here Again" and "Ain't She Sweet.")

PLAY: "My Yiddishe Mama"  sung by Sophie Tucker (0:00–2:47, English; 2:49 on, Yiddish)

Break

Welcome back to our Stories of Music lesson: Jews in the Invention of the American Musical. As we settle in, let's listen to a song from the 1925 musical *Dearest Enemy* (1925, 286), the first of more than two dozen musicals by *Richard Rodgers and *Lorenz Hart. The book was by *Herbert Fields, Dorothy Fields' brother. The musical takes place in 1776, during the American Revolutionary War, when Mary Lindley Murray, a Quaker, detained British troops long enough in Manhattan to give George Washington time to move his vulnerable troops. This audio is from the New World Records 2013 recording of the reconstructed score, and features James Cleverton and Annalene Beechey.

As you listen, and based on this song, think of what factors might render this show an operetta and what factors might render this a musical.

PLAY: "Here in My Arms"  [NOTE: If time is a factor, the instructor might play from 0:59–3:27.]

Discuss:

- ❓ Does this sound like an operetta or like a musical? What is your evidence? [Some ideas: Rodgers' music sounds "grandiose" and challenging to sing. Cleverton, in fact, is a baritone whose career has mostly been in opera. In addition, the setting of the Revolutionary War period, while American, would feel distant and something rather "exotic" to a play-goer. On the other hand, Hart's lyric avoids sentimentality and feels conversational. The setting is American, and the heroine is an everyday kind of person. This gravitates to a more musical setting. The fact that we can see both sides helps render this a transitional work. It has been referred to as an operetta, a musical, and even a comic opera!]

III. Towards the American Musical: Americanizing the Imports

SLIDE 13

A. Edwardian Musical Theatre

The European tradition of operetta was not the only imported form of entertainment appearing on Broadway in the first decades of the twentieth century. British musical theater also affected the development of the American musical. In fact, a form known as "Edwardian musical comedy" is the most immediate antecedent to the American musical, not just chronologically, but structurally and stylistically as well.

Edwardian Musical Comedy

- ♦ The name refers to King Edward VII (1841–1910), although this type of theater is said to encompass the period from 1892–1917.
- ♦ This form of British theater gained prominence when the dominance of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas had ended and the Gaiety burlesque went into decline. [NOTE: A burlesque was a form of theater that parodied established entertainment forms.]
- ♦ The public wanted something lighter than even an operetta, but more coherent in construction than burlesque, one that featured modern fashions and the culture of the day. [NOTE: Recall how operettas often used exotic locations.]
- ♦ These works captured that age's optimism, energy, and good humor.
- ♦ Their chief glory, however, lies in their musical scores. These combined the delicacy and sophistication of operetta with the robust tunefulness of the music hall.
- ♦ Edwardian musical comedy fell into decline with the rise of the American musical. None have had a major revival since the 1960s and are virtually unknown today.

Pair Share:

- ?** What musical do you think captures well the age in which it is set? [NOTE: If some students seem to have trouble with this, the instructor may wish to encourage them to think of movie musicals or otherwise open this up to a full group discussion.]

B. Show: *The Girl from Utah* (1914; 140)

SLIDE 14


One example of Edwardian musical comedy was *The Girl from Utah*, often regarded as a seminal work in the transition to the American musical.

- ◆ *The Girl from Utah* had music by songwriter and librettist *Paul Alfred Rubens (1875–1917), with additional music by Sidney Jones (1861–1946). Lyrics were penned by Rubens, Adrian Ross (1859–1933), and Percy Greenbank (1878–1968). All were major writers of Edwardian musical comedy.
- ◆ Producer *Charles Frohman (1856–1915), one of the famous *Frohman Brothers who owned many theaters (on Broadway and beyond), brought over *The Girl from Utah* and revamped the show, i.e. “Americanized” it.
- ◆ Frohman hired a young *Jerome Kern (1885–1945) to give the music a fresher, more current feel. From this point on, Kern became known as “the Red Cross for the imported musical comedy.” [NOTE: We’ll discuss Jerome Kern more below.]
- ◆ Moreover, since the musical was being launched at the beginning of WWI, Frohman asked Kern for some material that wasn’t as lighthearted as typical Edwardian musical fare and much of his material that had previously been interpolated into other works.
- ◆ In this new type of American musical, remote figures of operetta—countesses, princes, et al.—were replaced by “plain folk.” The language therefore, had to change. The dialogue had to reflect the diction of these “plain folk.”
- ◆ This new American style of musical now required actors who could sing, rather than singers who were often non-actors (read, “bad actors”!!!).

Song: “They Didn’t Believe Me” (Music: Jerome Kern; Lyrics: Herbert Reynolds)

- ◆ Previously musicals had waltzes; “They Didn’t Believe Me” was, in 4/4 time, the first “modern ballad” of the musical. The song seamlessly moved from dialogue to song and back to dialogue. This has long been standard, but it was revolutionary at the time.
- ◆ The lyrics by Reynolds (pen name of Michael Elder Rourke, 1867–1933) present a smooth yet conversational commentary on a beloved one, describing their fine qualities and yet repeating the title phrase that no one else sees those qualities.
- ◆ The lyrics, while not slangy, evince an everyday speech pattern: “*Well, who can say*” and “*And I cert’nly am goin’ to tell them.*” This latter move of making cert’nly into two syllables, due to the demands of the music, seemed quite bold at the time in the world of musical theater.

- ◆ Kern’s music showed: a) unusual harmonic influence on the melody, b) the use of quarter notes in the refrain to build up to the climax that is a key change, and a melody line that is, as musicologist Alec Wilder states, “as natural as walking.” (Wilder: 1972, 35)

[NOTE: Kern and Reynolds went on to collaborate many more times over the years and serve as an example of an Irish-Jewish songwriting collaboration, which was common from 1890–1930. Indeed, the popular TPA song, “If It Weren’t for the Irish and the Jews,”  written by the Irish-Jewish collaborators, William Jerome and *Jean Schwartz, says it all! See [Professor Mick Moloney’s talk on this topic here.](#)]

PLAY: “They Didn’t Believe Me” 

Responses to “They Didn’t Believe Me”:

- ◆ Critics did not initially comment on the song (the musical was so “American”), yet the public sensed something special: It sold over 2 million copies of sheet music.
- ◆ Richard Rodgers, on hearing it, stated that he knew it was a new day for musical theater. Similarly, a young George Gershwin first heard the song at a wedding, and decided on the spot that he wanted to write for the Broadway stage.
- ◆ This song is sometimes referred to as “the single most influential song in the history of the American musical” (Sidran, 2012, 52).

Who was this youngster Jerome Kern who broke the mold and helped shape the modern American musical?

Jerome Kern (1885–1945)

SLIDE 15



- ◆ *Kern dropped out of high school in his senior year and entered his father’s business. When he mistakenly ordered 200 pianos instead of 2, his father realized that his son was better off on the songwriting side of the music business!
- ◆ Between 1905–1912, nearly 100 Kern songs were interpolated into Broadway shows. Kern composed 16 Broadway scores between 1915 and 1920, in addition to contributing to other shows. The most notable of his scores were those for a series of musicals written for the Princess Theatre. Later on we will discuss these important shows.
- ◆ Kern’s music evolved in sophistication and into a more American style. Indeed, he is credited with breaking the hold that European music and theatrical forms had on Broadway. He is considered “one of the most forward-looking composers in the history of the musical.” (Bush Jones, 2003, 46)
- ◆ In the 1920s, Kern was credited with at least one show every single year of the decade. Kern met Oscar Hammerstein II in 1925, and they maintained a lifelong friendship and collaboration. We’ll explore their most celebrated work later on in this lesson.

- ♦ Hammerstein and Kern were working on a musical based on the life of Marco Polo. Hammerstein questioned Kern, “Well, here’s a story set in China about an Italian and told by an Irishman. What kind of music are you going to write?” Kern answered, “It’ll be good Jewish music, of course.” (Sidran, 2012, 73)

IV. The New American Musical: Beginnings

SLIDE 16

Irving Berlin (1888–1989, né Israel Baline)

- ♦ Russian-born *Irving Berlin came to New York city at age five to escape pogroms. His father, a cantor, was unable to find comparable work and so took a job at a kosher meat market and gave Hebrew lessons on the side to support the family. He died when Irving was thirteen years old.
- ♦ With little education and no formal musical training, Berlin grew up dancing for pennies on the Lower East Side. Using the black keys on the piano, he became a TPA songwriter.
- ♦ He eventually co-owned a music publishing company, for which he wrote such ethnic comedy songs as “Cohen Owes Me \$97.” 
- ♦ In 1911, his song “Alexander’s Ragtime Band”  was introduced and, within days, it became the top-selling sheet music in the U.S. Berlin was hailed as “The King of Ragtime.”
- ♦ He became America’s songwriter laureate, writing thousands of songs, including 17 complete scores for Broadway musicals and revues, including *Annie Get Your Gun*. [For Berlin’s song “God Bless America,” see our Stories of Music lesson “Jewish Music 101: Sounds, Setting, Significance.”]


SHOW: Watch Your Step (1914, 175)

SLIDE 17

- ♦ Berlin’s first musical, *Watch Your Step*, served as a vehicle to introduce and showcase dancers Vernon and Irene Castle. [NOTE: Instructor may wish to recall that dancing was one feature of operetta that moved away from opera. The American musical continued that trend.]
- ♦ With no previous connection to the stage, the untrained Berlin composed the entire score, integrating his songs into dramatic situations and tailoring them to specific characters.
- ♦ The eminent librettist Harry B. Smith (1860–1936; over 300 books of musicals, over 6,000 song lyrics, and 123 shows produced on Broadway) recycled an old French play to provide a wisp of a story involving a man and woman who try to win an inheritance by proving that neither had ever been in love. They of course fall in love with each other while wandering about Manhattan together.
- ♦ This was the first Broadway show to feature ragtime music and, as Berlin himself realized, this was “the first time Tin Pan Alley got into the legitimate theater.” [*New York Herald Tribune*, May 16, 1948, cited in Furia: 2022, 66.]

- ♦ The show opened to critical and popular rave reviews. Berlin always felt that the opening night of *Watch Your Step* was the greatest thrill of his life. During the encores, the audience called him to the stage with cries of “Composer! Composer!”



SONG: “Play a Simple Melody”

- ♦ Berlin’s songs in *Watch Your Step* were more complex than anything he had previously written. Several songs shifted between major and minor keys (sometimes in the space of a few bars).
- ♦ In “Ragtime Opera Medley,”  he created a musical collage out of several operas: *Faust*, *Carmen*, *La Bohème*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Pagliacci*, *Aida*—in a scene where the ghost of Verdi pleads, in a sequence of songs based on *Rigoletto*, “Please don’t rag my melody—let my *Rigoletto* be.”
- ♦ The most enduring song is *Play a Simple Melody*, a great example of counterpoint (a melody running against a second melody, each with independent lyrics). This was the first of Berlin’s famous “double melodies.”
- ♦ Each of the two melodies argues for the benefits of a different type of music—established (simple old melody) and modern (rag), with each epitomizing/symbolizing different value sets (Victorian gentility vs. liberation and even libertinism). Let’s listen to it.


PLAY: “Play a Simple Melody” 

This is a movie clip from *There’s No Business Like Show Business*. The film was a 1954 tribute to Irving Berlin. The song is performed here by Ethel Merman and Dan Dailey.

Discuss:

-  **Neither melody predominates; both promote an idea. What is gained musically and thematically by having two melodies in counterpoint?**
-  **The song points to musical change, from older, “simpler” melodies to the new, syncopated, seemingly more “complex” works of rag. What other musical changes do you remember being introduced in your lifetime (folk music revival, rock, punk, hip hop, et al.) and feeling that it represented something new? How so?**


Pair Share:

-  **Musically, what kinds of “traditional” forms of music do you enjoy? What kinds of more contemporary forms do you enjoy? What do you like about these? Why do you think you gravitate to some forms more than others?**

EXTENSION IDEA: The Berlin Quodlibet and Beyond




SLIDE 18

We spoke of “Play a Simple Melody” as a type of counterpoint. It is one specific type of counterpoint called a quodlibet. Irving Berlin used the form to not only musically advance the role’s character, but to bring out what the character was emoting at the time. Berlin had one character sing one melody, followed by a second character singing a second melody, after which both characters sang their songs together. He wrote at least 15 such quodlibets for Broadway shows. [NOTE: For a study of the quodlibet in the light of Alcalde’s framework of musical hybridity, see here. For more on Berlin’s quodlibets, see here.]

PLAY: “(I Wonder Why?) You’re Just in Love”  (performed here by Ethel Merman and Russell Nype) [NOTE: Instructor may wish to stop at 2:23]

This song is a musical highlight from the original Broadway production of *Call Me Madam* (1950; 644), a satire on politics and foreign affairs. It was choreographed by *Jerome Robbins (né Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz [1918–1998]). Ethel Merman had requested a song with Russell Nype be added to the show. Berlin wrote the song in 4–5 days. Merman reportedly was lukewarm on the song, but on its opening night in Boston the crowd called for seven encores! And it became somewhat of a signature song for Berlin.

Discuss:

-  What was each character trying to tell the other?
-  What emotion was the character expressing?
-  How did the music help convey character and/or emotion?

V. Developing the American Musical: The Princess Theatre musicals

SLIDE 19

In 1913, various artistic parties, including the Shubert Brothers, opened the cozy 299-seat Princess Theatre, located on 39th Street, off Sixth Avenue in New York city (it was torn down in 1955). After a brief stint with a dramatic repertory company did not succeed, it was decided that the space present small, low-budget musicals as alternatives to the lavish productions then dominant on Broadway. Kern and librettist Guy Bolton (1884–1979), limited production expenses to \$7,500 (because of the small number of seats), and launched a series now referred to as The Princess Theatre Musicals.

Because of its small size and budget, the Princess Theatre musicals could not rely on huge sets or a huge cast of dancers and singers. Rather, space considerations forced more focus on:

- ◆ coherent plots and realistic dialogue, more akin to what theatergoers found in dramatic theater,
- ◆ stage settings that were both effective *and* simple,

- ◆ characters that were contemporary and had understandable motivations,
- ◆ comedy that evinced American sensibilities (with regard to both situations and character),
- ◆ and songs that would help propel the plot.

A. SHOW: *Oh Boy!*

SLIDE 20

(Music: Jerome Kern; Lyrics: Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse)

The most successful of these shows was *Oh Boy!* (opened in 1917; 463 performances), set on Long Island. The plot concerns recently wed George, whose wife Lou Ellen travels to visit her parents. He gives temporary refuge to Jackie, a madcap actress on the run. When his wife returns, all sorts of comic misunderstandings and complications ensue. By the end of the show, every problem has been solved and every challenge overcome.



SONG: “Till the Clouds Roll By” (Music: Jerome Kern; Lyrics: Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse)

“Till the Clouds Roll By” was the big hit song of the show. George and Jackie sing the song, pledging to platonically help each other out as they wait for the rainstorm to “roll by.”

The song is melodically simple, with a minimal number of notes—every one of them counts—and no key changes in the refrain. It’s a Kern “pure” melody, and it captivates (see Wilder: 1972, 42). The lyrics help us to both sense the rain and give us the confidence that we can overcome it, particularly when we have someone to help us get through it.

PLAY: “Till the Clouds Roll By” (M: Jerome Kern; L: Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse)

Please choose one of the following versions:

- ◆ [Anna Wheaton and James Harrod](#)  (recorded 3/13/1917) Anna Wheaton sang it in the original production
- ◆ [Bing Crosby](#)  (1945) [NOTE: This setting uses the chorus only.]

Discuss:

- ❓ How do you react/respond to the music and/or the lyrics?
- ❓ While “rain” could be taken literally, the word also signifies the difficulties that we face in life. Considering that this song was written while World War I still raged on, how do you understand “rain” and the song’s possible meaning?

Pair Share:

- ❓ Music often helps people through difficult times. What song/s have you listened to repeatedly to help you through difficult times? (The song does not have to be from a musical.) Explain why that song has meant so much to you.

B. Importance/Significance of the Princess Musicals

- ◆ Prior to the Princess Theatre musicals, shows were set in faraway times and places, or in small towns. From here on, the most common setting for contemporary Broadway musicals would be New York. [NOTE: It's possible that this phenomenon occurred, at least in part, because NYC had become a "land of milk and honey," a secure, new home for the Jewish people, to which many aspired to immigrate to and live.]
- ◆ Every element was organic, developing naturally from story and character. This allowed these shows to dispose of the star turns, interpolated songs, and forced comic characters found in previous shows.
- ◆ These were the earliest American musical comedies that were so well written that they can still entertain. The comedy was not imposed onto the story, but emerged from the plot and characterizations.
- ◆ Previously music was written to lyrics. Starting with these, lyrics were written to music. With this style, the lyrics could be just as witty as the music. Moreover, following the music's rhythm, the lyrics could sound like casual conversation rather than metric poetry.
- ◆ Musicals previously built up to a few minutes of genuine delight. These musicals sustained delight for two and a half hours.
- ◆ The Princess musicals inspired a generation of songwriters that would reach Broadway in the 1920s, including Richard Rodgers and George Gershwin.

Pair Share:

- ❓ **That Kern so inspired others reminds us of the concept of "I'dor vador," "from generation to generation." How does one generation of artists, songsmiths, songleaders inspire the future generations?**
- ❓ **Think of a musical artist you have admired over time. Can you think of which artist/s may have influenced this artist by listening to your artist's music? Who has your artist in turn influenced?**

VI. Refining the American Musical: *No, No Nanette*

SLIDE 21

During the 1920s, many continued to write musicals in this new American vein. An average of more than 50 new musicals premiered each season of the decade. In one six-day period in 1925 alone, four major hits opened:

- ◆ *No, No, Nanette* (9/16, M: Vincent Youmans; L: *Irving Caesar & Otto Harbach, 321 performances)—hits include "Tea for Two" and "I Want to Be Happy"
- ◆ *The Vagabond King* (9/18, operetta by Rudolf Friml, 511 performances)
- ◆ *Sunny* (9/21, M: Jerome Kern; L: Oscar Hammerstein II and Otto Harbach, 517 performances)

- ♦ *Dearest Enemy* (9/22, first hit of *Rodgers & *Hart, 286 performances; we listened to its hit song “Here in My Arms” earlier).

Three of the four hits of that historic week were new American musicals. Let’s look at one of these.

SHOW: *No, No, Nanette* (1925, 321; 1971 revival, 861)

- ♦ *No, No, Nanette* has been hailed as the most popular musical of the twenties. It sustained two road tours, and was exported to London’s West End (565).
- ♦ Its story concerns a married Bible publisher supporting three young women living in three different cities. When the publisher and his wife are joined at their Atlantic City cottage by their friends, a sassy housekeeper, and—you guessed it—all three young women, no end of comical embarrassments ensue.
- ♦ *No, No, Nanette* was the first show that became an international hit before its Broadway debut. It played for a year in Chicago, and played to great success in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Melbourne before its Broadway debut.
- ♦ Despite its winning record, producer H.H. Frazee ordered composer Vincent Youmans (1898–1946) and lyricist *Irving Caesar (né Isidor Keiser, 1895–1996) to come up with two hits—and they obliged with two enduring songs: “Tea for Two” and “I Want to Be Happy.” Those songs joined an already jaunty, welcomed score.
- ♦ Choreography was provided by the innovative *Sammy Lee (né Samuel Levy, 1890–1968). His work involved the entire body in fast, complicated, and exuberant routines. [Henderson: 1986, 128.] Two years later he would choreograph *Show Boat*. More on this show later.

SONG: “Tea for Two”

- ♦ “Tea for Two” is one of the best in a long line of songs in which a pair of lovers imagine a simple yet blissfully happy life together.
- ♦ It was inserted into the Chicago run and became a nationwide popular hit by the time the show opened on Broadway.
- ♦ Most unusual, Youman’s music consists of almost all staccato notes (particularly the refrain), yet the melody does not feel monotonous.
- ♦ Caesar’s lyric is the most famous “dummy” lyric in American theater. A dummy lyric is a rhythmic but nonsensical collection of words a lyricist quickly dashes off to help him remember the cadence of the music until the polished lyrics are written. In this case, Youmans liked the dummy lyrics better, so, with a few slight revisions, it was retained and has been sung that way ever since.

Let’s listen to the Boston Pops, as they recreate the original orchestrations, with performers Jason Graae and Rebecca Luker. This was from May 28, 1990.

PLAY: [“Tea for Two”](#) 

EXTENSION IDEA: American Musical Theater Music Beyond the Theater

Previously we spoke of how early American shows, whether vaudeville or revues, mostly consisted of interpolated songs from TPA (and elsewhere). Yet, music written specifically for musicals also found its way into other forms of American music, including jazz, which was growing in popularity at this time. “Tea for Two” from *No, No, Nanette* demonstrates this.

Hundreds of recordings of “Tea for Two” have been made over the years in dozens of languages, and in a variety of musical styles. Let’s listen to a jazz version without vocals, to hear how the simplistic (but not simple) composition can be heard, expanded upon, and celebrated.

PLAY one of the following two versions:

Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra  (1958, swing version)

Aki Takase, with Rudi Mahall  (2008, piano and jazz bass clarinet)

VII. The Arrival of the American Musical: *Show Boat*

We have seen how Jerome Kern paved the road toward the American musical form. His own efforts culminated in *Showboat*, which definitively announced to the world that the American musical was something different from all that preceded it, and that this new type of theater had a lot to say and offer, and would endure.



A. The Music of *Show Boat*

Before we explore this work, let’s talk about the music. The score was unlike anything before, covering various musical styles: Black (“Negro”) folk songs, spirituals, operetta music, Vaudeville, interpolated TPA originals (including *Charles K. Harris’ 1891 “After the Ball,” the best-selling TPA song in history), a torch song (“Bill,” actually written for Kern’s 1918 *Oh, Lady! Lady!*, but which was pulled before that show opened).

Few composers could have mastered such a broad range of musical styles, and Kern was the only leading Broadway tunesmith comfortable with interpolating vintage tunes to give a show genuine period flavor. Let’s listen to the overture to get the flavor of this rich work.

PLAY: Overture to *Show Boat*

Play one of the following versions of the overture:

- ♦ 1946 Broadway revival  (4:23)
- ♦ 1994 Broadway revival  (2:48)

As you heard, we are now far away from opera and operetta, and firmly into what was then the new fertile ground of musical theater. Even by today's standards, this music is glorious. So let's explore this pioneering musical.

B. Background to the 1926 novel *Show Boat*:

- ◆ Novelist and playwright *[Edna Ferber](#) (1885–1968), considered by critics to be the best writer of her generation, overheard some old actors reminiscing about life on a show boat. [NOTE: To learn of [Jewish influences on Ferber's work](#), see [here](#).]
- ◆ A show boat is a two-story rectangular wooden theater sitting on a barge, holding 700 or more seats. Performers lived on the show boats.
- ◆ With the rise of silent film (after 1915), the demand for show boats diminished. Yet Ferber was intrigued and located one still working in Chesapeake Bay, the James Adams Floating Theatre. She traveled with the company for several weeks to absorb a disappearing tradition. [NOTE: For her description and experience, see [Hay: 1989, 320–2](#).]
- ◆ Ferber had never set eyes on the Mississippi, yet she came up with the 50-year fictional saga chronicling the lives of three generations of performers.

C. Background to the 1927 musical *Show Boat*:

- ◆ While reading the novel, Jerome Kern sensed its potential as a musical. He immediately called Oscar Hammerstein, who was reading the book at the time and having similar feelings. Kern reached out to Ferber, who granted permission after being assured that her novel would not be turned into the typical frivolous Broadway fare. [NOTE: This shows the power of *hevruta* (“collaboration”), which has been part of the creative spark throughout this lesson!]
- ◆ In the 1920s, work on a musical began after obtaining two things: the rights to the material and the financial involvement of a producer. Yet Kern and Hammerstein experimented by each independently plotting out a musical treatment. Their outlines proved to be nearly identical. Kern and Hammerstein threw caution to the winds, and dove into the writing.
- ◆ At some point, they knew they were on to something extraordinary and began lining up the necessary commitments. They turned to impresario [Florenz Ziegfeld](#). The day after their meeting Ziegfeld wrote to a friend, “This show is the opportunity of my life.” (Kantor and Masion: 2004, 112) Since Ziegfeld had other ongoing commitments, he had to delay the timeline, giving Kern and Hammerstein time to rewrite and polish their daring project.
- ◆ While Ziegfeld wanted a show adorned with beautiful girls and spectacular production numbers, Kern and Hammerstein had more adventurous ideas, and were in complete sync with Ferber's epic sweep and grand themes. Ziegfeld let them have at it.

D. Show: *Show Boat* (1927, 572 performances; 1946 revival, 418 performances; 1994 revival, 947 performances)

- ◆ The story's arc hovers over Magnolia Hawks, born and raised on a Mississippi show boat. Magnolia survives romance, fortune, heartbreak, poverty, renewal and Broadway stardom, while seeing others broken by bigotry, gambling, alcoholism, and the passage of time. At the end she returns to life on the river.
- ◆ Critics recognized this immediately as something new—and made it clear that they welcomed this new kind of Broadway musical.
- ◆ Kern and Hammerstein kept revising the score and libretto for as long as they lived, giving different generations fresh takes on the musical. In 1988, conductor [John McGlinn](#) recorded every note that had ever been used in the score. He wound up with three hours and forty minutes of music—more than enough for two full stage scores.

SLIDE 24

SONG: “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” (Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II)

- ◆ The song is mostly associated with Julie, the biracial leading lady of the showboat *Cotton Blossom*. When Queenie, the black cook, comments that it is strange that light-skinned Julie knows the song because only black people sing it, Julie becomes visibly uncomfortable. Later, we learn that this is because Julie is “passing” as white—she and her white husband are guilty of [miscegenation under the state’s law](#).
- ◆ Kern’s music demonstrates both tremendous power and economy. It also puts on display blues in the verses and the standard 32-bar formula in the chorus. This may well point to Julie’s double racial background.
- ◆ Hammerstein’s lyrics employ repetition to heighten the emotion. The first two renderings of the title phrase do not rhyme with anything that precedes them, and thus stand out. Only at the beginning of the refrain does “mine” rhyme with “fine” and “shine.” And yet the sentiment belies the concern for the secret Julie harbors: It’s hard to believe that everything will work out fine, even if her love for Steve endures.
- ◆ The song received some controversy when Queenie’s lyrics speak of her husband as “shiftless.” Since the song was identified in the story as sung only by Blacks, the lyric could be understood as tainting all Black men. In the height of the Civil Rights era, Lincoln Center presented rewritten lyrics (by an uncredited writer), and those lyrics are now universally sung. [NOTE: For a look at how one opera company dealt with considerations of race in staging a contemporary version of *Show Boat*, see [here](#).]

Let’s watch a clip from the 1994 Broadway revival, with Lonette McKee as Julie, Michel Bell as Joe, Gretha Boston as Queenie, and Rebecca Luker as Magnolia. This appearance is from the PBS Great Performances *Some Enchanted Evening Celebrating Oscar Hammerstein II* from March 7, 1995.

PLAY: [“Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man”](#) 

E. Importance and Originality of *Show Boat*

- ◆ Previously musicals covered at most several days of action or used a few different locations. *Show Boat* used novelistic storytelling, using action hurtling through multiple locations and a number of decades.
- ◆ *Show Boat* deals with racism, marital desertion, and alcoholism leading to self-destruction, subjects no other musical had ever dared to cover.
- ◆ Here there is no actual villain, characters had flaws, and happy endings don't come to many of them.
- ◆ We already spoke of the groundbreaking score, which included many types of music to help convey the epic scope of the story.
- ◆ During the Depression shows closed right and left. Yet a revival of *Show Boat* in 1932 ran for 181 performances, with critics raving that the show was better than before.
- ◆ Original dialogue included the N-word, but that fit the racist characters uttering it. Yet in addition, the original show opened with black stevedores singing:
 - "N-s all work on the Mississippi!/N-s all work while the white folks play!"
 - These words were changed to "Colored folks work" and eventually to "Here we all work..." (Film versions dropped the chorus altogether!)
 - No other musical opened with a word that remains controversial even today. This says a lot about the courage of songwriters willing to be true to how people (rightly or wrongly) actually speak. Of course, the controversial nature of the use of a single word also says a lot about the racial conflicts that continue to plague American culture and society. [NOTE: The show has not infrequently been questioned about its depiction of race. Here is [one description of its racially charged history and what renders the show enduring](#). For a [rebuttal to common criticisms of the depictions of race in Show Boat, see here.](#)]
- ◆ This, of course, leads us to the new American musical, because European operettas were highfalutin' and gave "elevated" speech that no one had actually ever used!
- ◆ *Show Boat* (1927) is sometimes considered the first "integrated musical" in which the songs were no longer ancillary to the plot, but reveal the characters and tell their story. Nonetheless, the next fully integrated musical was *Oklahoma* (1943). [NOTE: While British and Viennese models had some sort of thin through-line, they did not have a developed "book," or backstory.]
- ◆ Previously the action would stop and the hero might wander off to sing about...anything they wanted! Afterward the action would resume. Kern's genius lay in understanding that, if used properly, music can deliver the sentiment and backstory of the narrative much more effectively and substantially than any amount of exposition.

Discussion:

- ?** There's a teaching of Rebbe Nachman that the chazzan is called so because they "nurse from the place where prophets suckle." Perhaps Kern tapped into this forward consciousness. What evidence from our study of Kern suggests that this is true?

Pair Share:

Kern may well be seen as "nursing from the place where prophets suckle." What other songwriter in American musical theater history do you also consider a prophet or visionary? Explain your response.

VIII. What We've Learned: Weaving Our Threads Together

SLIDE 25

- ?** What is something you have learned or wish to highlight (as important, interesting, relevant, surprising, et al.) from our session(s) on the role of Jews in the development of the American musical? [NOTE: The instructor should catalog responses in a place where all can see (such as a white board), and then add to those responses from the following bullet points based upon class experience.]

- ◆ The Edwardian musical comedy was the most immediate predecessor to the American musical.
- ◆ Many British shows were brought over and Americanized (e.g. the Edwardian musical comedy *The Girl from Utah*)
- ◆ Some of the new features of the American musical included American settings, music integrated into the show's storytelling, actors who could sing, coherent plots, and natural dialogue. (*The Girl from Utah*; *Oh, Boy*; *No, No, Nanette*; *Show Boat*)
- ◆ Jerome Kern propelled the development of the American musical ("Ol' Man River," "They Didn't Believe Me," "Till the Clouds Roll By," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man")
- ◆ Irving Berlin's *Watch Your Step* introduced ragtime music and counterpoint to Broadway. ("Play a Simple Melody")
- ◆ Even early on, songs written for American musicals entered other forms of American musical culture ("Tea for Two").
- ◆ *Show Boat* featured bold and important themes, told a story over decades, incorporated a broad range of music, and featured a racially integrated cast.
- ◆ After *Show Boat* (1927), "musical comedies" became "musicals." (Gottlieb: 2004, 22)

[NOTE: Instructor might consider asking the class to choose a favorite musical and discuss what similarities that musical has to *Show Boat*, particularly choosing features of the American musical learned in this lesson that the chosen musical exhibits.]

We have finished our journey exploring the beginnings of the American musical form, and the role that Jews played in it. This provided the foundation for the future of all musical theater in America, and Jewish engagement with and involvement in it.

As we go, let us pay tribute to the first fully integrated, distinctively American musical *Show Boat* and its creators Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II by playing “Nobody Else But Me.” This song was written for the 1946 Broadway revival of *Show Boat* (418). Indeed, the entire score was revised for that production, and it featured a new overture and new orchestrations. “Nobody Else But Me” was the last song written by Jerome Kern; he died shortly before that production opened. Hammerstein had already been working with Richard Rodgers — their groundbreaking show *Oklahoma* opened on Broadway in 1943. Rodgers and Hammerstein would become synonymous with the American musical.

Here we listen to [*Dinah Shore's 1965 version of “Nobody But Me,”](#) and as we listen, it's hard not to think how much we owe to Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, and a slew of others for the American musical — nobody but them could have given generations of musical theater creators such inspiration, and given generations of musical theater audiences such joy.

PLAY: [“Nobody Else But Me”](#) 