

**Outline the main changes and developments in
American Stage Music from “Showboat” to “West
Side Story”.**
**Choose appropriate musicals to support your
argument.**

The modern musical has been an important form of entertainment throughout the 20th century, still enjoying a good degree of popularity now. In its earlier days, a musical was often simply viewed as “something to fill the void between dinner and the call for last orders at the bar”. There was no link between each piece of music; the shows were structured more like variety shows than actual stories. It was in the mid 1920’s that significant change in American stage music began. In a genre so great in its content, it is difficult to pinpoint which shows really changed the direction of the American musical, but in order to answer this question I will identify and examine which productions were principally responsible for altering the audiences’ perception of issues that affected them at the time, and also the shows that revolutionised musical content and appear years later, as fresh as they were when first drafted. These will be examined later in the essay, along with other productions that changed the direction of the musical in different ways, such as “Oklahoma!” with its innovative writing technique. A good starting point for this study is “Showboat”; a production, which just about every stage music enthusiast has agreed, redefined the genre. It included issues such as drink addiction, gambling problems, and the recurring issue of racism, a theme that would feature quite prominently in later productions such as “Porgy & Bess” and “West Side Story”. As Mike Krueger put it; “The history of the American Musical, quite simply, is divided into two eras: everything before “Showboat,” and everything after “Showboat”.

The arrival of “Showboat” shattered and rebuilt almost every aspect of American Theatre Music. From the moment the curtain was raised on the show’s opening night, the audience could quite clearly see that it was no stereotypical show. The lines of chorus girls, synonymous with any work of the show’s producer Florenz Ziegfeld, were absent. Instead, the audience were greeted not by smiles and long legs, but by sad-looking Negroes working on a cotton plantation. Even the orchestra weren’t as would be expected, but were now onstage with the action. So how else did the show’s creators Jerome Kern and Roger Hammerstein II change things?

Kern had spent his earlier years working as a rehearsal pianist, and would write occasional pieces for shows he was with. It was here in his fledgling years that he stumbled upon the formula for making instant hits. He realised that if he kept the songs simple enough for the audience to understand, without losing their interest, he would keep penning instant classics. Another important aspect that Kern identified was the relationships and connections between music, song and dance. In combining all that he

had learnt and discovered, Kern had the tools to write songs and pieces of music that would be known as “infectious” in their appeal to audiences.

His musical abilities allowed Kern to be very dexterous with his use of musical techniques. He helped forge links between classical and popular music by using predominantly classical musical forms, such as a fugue with “Showboat”. One of the most important aspects of the “Showboat” melodies was the use of Kern’s ‘Three Note Themes’. The five pieces in which he used them with were ‘Cotton Blossom’, ‘Ol’ Man River’, ‘Captain Andy’s Theme’, ‘Queenies Ballyhoo’, and ‘The Misery Theme’. The large river ‘motives’ all appear in the main opening theme, and are all short figures which Kern would use to make a transition to a perfect 4th with by using one additional note. Examples of this are the use of ‘Cotton Blossom’ as the chorus line to ‘Ol’ Man River’. When rearranged, this becomes ‘Captain Andy’s Theme’.

Cotton Blossom

Musical Quote

These are all in C Major

Ol’ Man River

Musical Quote

Examples of ‘Three Note Themes described above

Captain Andy’s Theme

Musical Quote

Among the musical devices implemented by Kern, his leitmotifs gained the greatest praise of all. He managed to enhance the dramatics of the lyrics by weaving smoothly in and out of the underscore, conveying the mood of each scene to the audience with great effect. His carried out theme transformations by manipulating the previously well established ‘Tritone Themes’ and his addition of the perfect 4th. Robert Russell Bennett’s orchestration was overlooked until the late 1970’s, but this too was significant to “Showboat” changing the genre. His addition of ‘local’ instruments to the score such as the banjo and the tuba helped to set the scene, as both instruments are indigenous to the American Deep South.

Hammerstein’s lyrics certainly touched upon subjects that were quite clearly taboo at the time for many people. It was the issue of racism that raised the most eyebrows, with

Hammerstein's depiction of the cruel treatment towards the black slaves and coloured people in general. Allegedly, during the early days of the show, the chorus refused to sing the word 'niggers' and were promptly replaced by the Ambrosian Chorus. Some productions tried to skate around the issue by minimizing the role of blacks. It was not always well received by audiences, something that later dogged "West Side Story" as it tackled the same subject. He did not stop there, however. He delved into murky subject matter with his scrutiny of alcohol addiction unhappy marriages and also gambling problems. These did cause a stir among audiences, but gained better acceptance than the racial matters. It was Hammerstein's writing technique that made the story flow along so fluidly, as the songs would continue to narrate the story rather than simply being musical interludes from the plot as in previous shows. This was an important development for American Theatre Music.

Following "Showboat", the musical form continued to develop rapidly. Composers would use trends to progress musical structure and change was more often than not the result of individual composers moving off in new directions, causing small musical revolutions along the way. Kern remained a part of this, along with other prolific composers of the time such as Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, and Richard Rogers. Above all, composers began to write music for what the people wanted, and not what the times called for. This partly involved greater use of merging classical styles with newer, more jazz associated rhythms and blues influences.

The American musical took another great step forward in 1935, when George Gershwin composed "Porgy & Bess". He took the elements of the New York 'street' sound consisting of blues, jazz, and ragtime and fused them into a newer, more popular art. Gershwin was by no means a newcomer to the scene; he had spent many years working on "Porgy & Bess" and had enjoyed success with productions such as "Of Thee I Sing" and "Girl Crazy". Along with his brother Ira, Gershwin made the production a success with his musical-dramatic instincts and varied tunes and melodies. These aspects coupled with Ira's compassionate lyrics made the transition from play to musical a success for "Porgy & Bess", but not immediately. An interesting development to come from this show was that Gershwin had the lyrics for 'I Got Plenty o' Nuttin' written first, something that would later become standard practice in the wake of "Oklahoma"! Gershwin described his work as a 'folk-opera', something that was rejected by many, who simply perceived his work with contempt for depicting out-dated, stereotypical views. Some claimed it gave 'a white man's view of the Negro' and 'was not free of some of the stereotypes associated with that view.' One critic challenged Gershwin's work, claiming "Folk-lore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself." This was certainly not the case with coloured folk in the USA at the time. This was slightly unfair criticism to be levelled at such a man, who having grown up in the Jewish community, had experienced a great deal of discrimination first-hand. The operatic and the manner in which it is staged made the show arguably the first true American opera. It was torn apart perhaps due to the inability of the critics to 'pigeonhole' the show; it was neither jazz nor popular music. A clear link to "Showboat" from here is the use of a central theme leading to development of a tune into other themes. Porgy and Bess's love duet isn't a far cry from both 'It Take A Long Pull To Get There' and also 'I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'. He also

develops the Loneliness theme and fits it into the ‘Buzzard Song’ and ‘Bess, You Is My Woman Now’. Gershwin’s connection to Porgy’s central theme is most prominent with ‘Oh, I Can’t Sit Down’, where the rhythm and syncopation also connect with the Loneliness theme. Sporting Life’s melody uses a perfect 5th and ends with a ‘blue’ 3rd to stand out from the other themes within the show. This is not dissimilar to that of Captain Andy’s wife Parthy in “Showboat”, someone else who does not fit within the ideals of the other characters.

Loneliness Theme

Loneliness Theme in “Buzzard Song”

Loneliness Theme in “Bess, You Is My Woman Now”



When Rodgers and Hammerstein collaborated for the writing of “Oklahoma!” they both decided that the lyrics would come first. Although Gershwin had done this with the writing of one of his songs in “Porgy & Bess”, the writing of an entire show using this technique was a significant development; no one had ever undertaken such an idea to this

extent. Using this would make the songs much simpler to integrate as part of the plot and would make them efficient vehicles to move the story along quicker, rather than diverting from the plot unnecessarily. Hammerstein really showed maturity with his writing approach, creating conversational-style pieces to fit the plot and character requirements. Preceding “Oklahoma!” composers and lyricists were, in essence, just songwriters. Afterwards, they had to become dramatists and use very song and dance to flesh out characters and press on with the action. Unlike previous productions in many ways, “Oklahoma!” was very linear in its format. This meant that any details that were insignificant to the plot were discarded in order to maintain fluidity.

The show enjoyed great success, and people took the characters to heart. This was mainly because the characters were convincing, believable and struck a chord with ordinary people.

Here is a quote displaying the intercourse between characters during songs, something frequently used in the show.

With the introduction of “Oklahoma!” the songs were such a standard that they could be taken out of the show and still enjoyed. This is perhaps testament to the skills of Rodgers and Hammerstein, both masters of their crafts, as they also introduced dance as an important aspect of the storyline, something that was broadened in “West Side Story”. The 1950’s saw the popularity of the American Musical continue to grow and with it came the epic “West Side Story”. One of the most well known musicals of the genre, it brought together the talents of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. Bernstein’s music managed to forge new links between classical and popular music genres, particularly in “West Side Story” with his use of the fugue form. He also used the “Three Note” technique popularised by Jerome Kern in “Showboat”, particularly to represent the tension between the rival gangs. He would on some occasions build entire pieces from just the first three notes. It is best displayed in the prologue below.

Musical Quote: “Prologue”

Bernstein constructed a dance from ‘Cool’, and used the fugue form in it, passing the theme from one instrument to the next. The use of jazz rhythms in certain pieces created a ‘street’ flavour, similar to those written by Gershwin in “Porgy & Bess”. Dance was integral to “West Side Story”, a feature that was to be present in later musicals. This was an important development, as dance could now be used to assist in narrating the storyline. The variety of dance styles used ranged from blues-rock to mambo and cha cha, crucial to establishing scenes. ‘Cool’ is an example of this, it contains carefully choreographed routines that bring the scene to life and creates great atmosphere. It is also noticeable that the “Three Note Theme” from the Prologue is present in ‘Cool’, along with the blend of old with new e.g. the fugue structure with jazz rhythms.

Musical Quote: “Cool”

He would also use both ensemble and solo parts, and wrote with a distinct contrapuntal style that again reinforced the connections to a more classical style.

Sondheim is well known for his strict following of original plots when transcribing stories from page to stage. This may have been the reason that Arthur Laurent enlisted him to write the lyrics for “West Side Story” at the relatively young age of 25. Having studied under Hammerstein for a few years, Sondheim had the knowledge to write good, entertaining storylines and lyrics. Bernstein’s influences came from his love of jazz, which he integrated with classical styles.

The theme of racism is central to the plot and illustrated a problem that had received a great deal of recognition in previous shows. It didn’t cause the controversy that “Showboat” and “Porgy & Bess” did, but still raised similar issues such as the white man’s view of supremacy over coloured people. It contained a fair representation of the divide between black and white, more so than the white man’s view of Negro life that had weighed down the other productions.

Much change and development occurred after the watershed production of 1927. The American Musical has undergone many musical fashions and trends, some of which passed without significance, others leaving the blueprints for future shows and hits. It has blurred the edges between popular and classical music, with form and devices from all musical periods. Through the power of these shows, composers can amend our perception of subjects and educate the masses as well as entertain. Development and change have forever be a part of the genre; they went hand-in-hand and have never been separated. This has been shown by newer composers taking the ideas of the older generation and modifying them for the issues of the day, while adding ideas of their own at the same time.

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