

## The Development Of The American Musical.

*The American musical was a main type of entertainment in the twentieth century. They were always full of lively plots, remarkable songs. The musical provided a way of escaping from everyday life into a world of fantasy, especially during the sombre days of world war two. Musicals today are different today the issues, orchestration style etc have changed dramatically over the years by looking at a variety of shows we can see exactly how they have changed.*

*First I will look at 'SHOWBOAT'. Showboat was written in 1927 by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, and was described as "Perhaps the most successful and influential Broadway musicals" It was the first novel to be turned into a musical making a stamp in the history of American Musical history. The novel was originally written by Edna Ferber about the lives of the people who lived on the Mississippi and was already a success, kern and Hammerstein were able to place songs into it that would help to clarify and jazz up the plot Kern said " songs must be suited to the action and mood of the play" and in showboat his songs helped us to see certain aspects of the characters and also to create certain moods during the play. This was completely different to the vaudeville musical with the unnecessary songs and weak storyline.*

*Showboat went against convention by starting the play with a group of negro Americans singing about their lives on quite a sombre note instead of the expected "scantly clad chorus girls". This was a play that was dealing with severe issues and realistic problems that included racial prejudice kern helped to show the theme of racism with the clever use of Negro rhythms, ragtime numbers and the sound of the banjo.*

*Kern also used "leitmotifs" (A distinct melodic fragment that represents an emotion, idea object or person) to help us to get a good idea of character and mood. An example of this is when he represents the river as a perfect fourth this is an interval associated with nature.*

*Also kern used a three-note theme in the melodies sung by the people who are most closely connected to the river. Kern added an extra note to the perfect fourth thus keeping the link with nature while creating a new idea.*

*This idea is then upturned to create the opening melody line for "Ol Man River". This song was written for Paul Robeson, it contains effective, emotive words to communicate the difficulty they were having thus emphasizing the racial theme again.*

*Showboat was a hit with the critics claiming it was a "fine and distinguished achievement" as it included music and drama, created realistic characters, and had a realistic unconventional storyline. Although the critics liked it it was criticized for keeping the expected happy ending.*

*While showboat was being constructed, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart were also working on a success. When their partnership ended Rodgers approached Hammerstein to help on a piece called "Green Grow The Lilacs" The name of the play was later changed to "Oklahoma!" Their partnership turned out to be one of the most successful, partnerships in the history of American musicals, Rodgers and Hammerstein. They wanted to give the audience a way of escaping every day life and to developing the musical further.*

*One of their successes was "Carousel" written in 1945. It has been described as "the most glorious of the Rodgers and Hammerstein works" Like showboat, this was also based on an existing novel called LLILIOM By Fernec Molnar. Carousel was one of the first to have a likeable villain as a hero and had tragedy as part of the key plot. The storyline reflected the new realism; serious issues such as violence, crime and death were shown for the first time on stage.*

*In carousel, Rodgers made a musical "in which songs were thoroughly integrated into a dramatic whole". For Rodgers and Hammerstein it became tradition to break the norm, linking the songs to the spoken dialogue and using dramatic realism shows such as south pacific (1949-war in the pacific) the king and I (1951-asian influences) and the sound of music (1959-nazi Germany). They raised the expectation of the American musical, creating a new era. Thus meaning in the future composers could not simply be musicians but also had to be dramatists. Music became an essential part to a strong plot.*

*In 1950s, they turned down the opportunity to write a musical based on the play Pygmalion, this offer was soon accepted by another team Alan Jay Lerner and Fredrick Loewe, and created the musical "My fair lady". This was described as one of the most "Perfect musicals ever written". Much of the libretto is from the original show play, but the music and songs combined created a seamless whole. One critic said that Lerner "Didn't make Pygmalion into a musical, he made a musical into Pygmalion."*

*My Fair Lady was the first musical to have no obvious love plot but instead dealt with more serious issues of society and class. These issues are integrated into the music an example of this are in the two songs "Why can't it be English?" (Higgins) and "Wouldn't it be lovely?" (Eliza) Eliza's song is lively and dreamlike this helps to reflect her cockney optimism it is also dreamlike as she is of low class and imagining what it would be like, where Higgins song is about language and intellect and has a classical feel showing how he is of a higher class. Another thing they managed to successfully do was to show the emotions of the characters through the music. An example of this Eliza's tension and anguish, this is shown clearly in the staccato notes and dotted rhythms in the song just you wait.*

*They also managed to show the development of the characters. For example Higgins turns into a more tender man can be seen by comparing his two songs, "I'm an ordinary man" and "I've grown accustomed to her face". In the first Higgins makes strong statements, tempo and orchestral effects show the confusion of his emotions as he describes letting a woman into his life.*

*In the second song his words are a lot calmer and gentler.*

*My Fair lady was a big success, showing amazing orchestration, outstanding costumes and unforgettable melodies.*

*The next major musical was "West Side Story" in 1957. It was written by Bernstein, he had already become a great success in the classical field. His classical training can be seen in the musical with the operatic style and complex orchestration. Also working with him he had lyricist Stephen Sondheim, choreographer and director Jerome Robbins and Librettist Arthur Laurents. It took a long time to get there but it was truly a hard-hitting tragic show.*

*West Side Story was based on William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, updated to show the conflict between New York Gangs. It was a musical about "real people; real life, real love."*

*West side story was different from the usual musical as it contained a large quantity of dance. Robbins choreographed some of the most complex dance sequences to accompany Bernstein's changing time signatures and complex compositions. As a result of this the cast of west side story had to be quite extraordinary, they had to sing, dance and act! Bernstein used leitmotifs well, using the unresolved tritone as the "hate motif". The first time we see this is in the prologue.*

*This also comes back in the jet song "How long does it take" to emphasise that the Jets are being filled with hate.*

*But during the play the mood changes from hate to love, Bernstein is the very clever and then changes the “hate motif” from an augmented fourth to a perfect fifth, thus showing harmony and a change in the atmosphere.*

*Bernstein also used various styles of music to show the racial conflict. He uses Latin rhythms in “America” to reflect the Puerto Rican gang, while the jazz style in “cool” reflects the New York gang. This show has an unexpected ending, as it has no music, Bernstein felt that he could not produce a piece of music sufficient enough for the scene. Some of the critics, criticised Bernstein for this, and said it was a flaw in the music, while others have simply said that it added to the unhappy, unconventional ending. This was one of the most of complex musicals of its time and has been described as the height of the American musical.*

*By the time this amazing show had been produced, musicals had vastly developed, dance was now seen as a key point, realism was now popular, songs were no longer random they had become part of the plot and the musical score had become more complex. Another great composer of the American musical was Stephen Sondheim, he used music to represent the different characters and the atmosphere on the stage, an example of this is the character Dot in Sunday in the park with George. This show was based on a neo-impressionist painting by George Seurat. The character is musically illustrated by singular dots of sound. Also the atmosphere of the painting is shown by detached melodic phrases and arpeggios. The critics had different views and some heavily criticised Sondheim for “his apparent disinclination to fill his shows with hummable tunes” on the other had, others thought it had a “lovely, widely inventive score” and said it was the most “daring and surprising musical that the American musical stage had seen for some time”. Sondheim’s music is too unusual for many so it has a limited audience. His music is extremely different from the music from shows such as my fair lady.*

*Even today the American musical is still developing and people are still experimenting with new ideas. Even though we have new musicals, shows such as West Side Story, Showboat, My Fair Lady, are still as popular as they were, and will continue to be with the place of the musical assured its place in musical theatre.*