
UNIT 4: WHAT IS A MUSICAL?

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

- It reveals the socio-political background through light entertainment.
- It exposes the assumptions, biases, aspirations, racial, and sexual attitudes prevalent at that time.
- If interpreted through historical lens, it unravels the culture of a particular society.
- It can inculcate a sense of social awareness.
- It provides emotional relief

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Musicals can be considered as a subgenre of theatrical performances. It is pop- theatre with decorative stage-settings, accompanied by pop-songs, and dance to narrate a story. It has striking resemblances with opera. A musical must tell a compelling story in a compelling way, by blending song, dance, and other entertaining visual arts to evoke an intellectual, emotional response.

An artist, a medium, and eventually audience are the preliminary requirement for performing arts. A popular or commercial art form has to fulfil the same criteria with an additional requirement of paying audience who can afford the expenses to make the act of expression profitable. In postmodern era, art is a commercial endeavour, a hybrid of taste, attitude of the audience, and popularity. Audience's demand is the key determiner in the development of the product; since there is a mercenary motif behind as popular art.

Musical theatre has undergone a sea change throughout centuries according to changes in audience's popular taste. While such innovations are stimulated by a desire to reap greater financial profits, commercial successes that innovate new trends and styles. The rise of consumerism serves as de facto tool behind the rise of twentieth century American musical. Joe Deer declared that

The spectacular growth in business and commerce and the development of technologies geared to mass-market production made available a vast range of consumer goods. In this heightened consumer economy, instalment purchases became the norm, enabling ordinary Americans to purchase not just necessities but specialty goods as well. Spending was celebratory: when Henry Ford announced the Model A early in 1928, "500,000 people made down payments without having seen the car and without knowing the price" (Leuchtenburg 187). With consumerism came hype. Ad men switched from extolling a product's virtues to emphasizing its effect on the buyer's looks or status. This new approach to selling products ranging from laundry soap to sporting goods to automobiles suggests a link between spending and the narcissism that underscored much of what people saw on the Broadway musical stage in the 1920s. (Our Musical Ourselves, 21)

4.3 MUSICAL THEATRE AND ITS KIND

The musical theatre can be divided into three distinct categories:

- Musical Comedy
- Musical plays
- Concept Musicals

Musical comedies usually have energetic zeal, upbeat, and are often witty in tone. It must be entertaining and humorous. Dancing and singing are the part of the story it specifically aimed to the comedy written before or middle of the twentieth century. Some examples are *Anything Goes*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Guys and Dolls*, and *Hello, Dolly!* Musical plays deals with more serious subjects and emphases are given on the 'book' (the story, characters, and plot). Instead of entertainment, it is intended to advance and deepen the story. Such examples of musical plays include *Show Boat* (1927), which highlighted the human cost of interbreeding of humans of different races; *Pal Joey* (1940), which displayed intellectual and unemotional "romantic" traits; and *Lady in the Dark* (1941), which found a novel experience of psychoanalysis. Richard Rodgers (music), and Oscar Hammerstein II (books and lyrics) developed this genre in 1940s and 50s through shows like *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951). The combination of melody, narrative, psychological traits of the character and social issues, represents the verisimilitude of the society in an entertaining way.

The word "concept musical" was coined in *Company* in 1970 and is used to explicate musicals that fixed on a particular theme or idea. The primary purpose is to express a point rather than maintenance of the plot. *Assassins* (1990) and *Avenue Q* (2003) are some examples of concept musical.

4.3 HOW MUSICAL THEATRE IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER SUB-GENRE OF PERFORMING ARTS

While distinguishing between musicals and other genre like opera, it would be naïve to ignore the complications which arise from the fact that the musical is a highly collaborative art form. Musical is a perfect amalgamation of dialogue and song. A musical is a sort of drama where both dialogue and song are used to uphold the story. In an opera, generally a song is sung without any dialogue. Musicals are humorous and lighter in matter.

In Musicals, the director, choreographer, and designers play main roles and partake more in the artistic procedure. They can have an impact on the work that ends up not just on the stage but in the published play script, like the visit of the Prince to Yuri Lyubimov's Taganka theatre, which resulted in an absolute reform of the opening number in *Cabaret*. Musicals are somewhat shaped in the rehearsal room.

4.4 KEY ELEMENTS OF MUSICALS

Great musicals not only enjoy its craze for a limited span of time, but also survives and that popularity can last long even after several years from the original production. Several dozen musicals premiered on Broadway in 1927, but only *Show Boat* is still performed today. The "golden age" of musical theatre, saw rise of many musicals but only *Damn Yankees* is still remembered and its glory is not yet faded. These two musicals are different in matter and manner, but by long-standing popular acclamation, they are among the greats.

From a purely technical point of view, all musicals consist of certain key factors:

- Music and lyrics—the songs
- Book/Libretto—the story (plot of the narrative), expressed in script or dialogue
- Choreography—the dance
- Staging—all stage movement
- Physical production—the settings, costumes, and technical aspects.

In the musicals like *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Les Miserables*, dialogues are accompanied by lyrics (song) and both are given the same priority. In dance-based musicals like *Contact*, and *Movin' Out*, choreography and staging become synonymous and equilibrium is maintained.

4.5 STRUCTURE

To gain the popularity as well as commercial success these different key components have to be knitted in a well organized manner.

Fundamentals of Acting in Musical Theatre: It refers to approach the imaginary circumstances of musical, by keeping a pace with objectives, obstacles, tactics, relationships, beats and personalization, simultaneously.

Libretto Analysis: It explores the music, lyrics and libretto of a musical and indicates the character development by listening to these components.

The Journey of the Song: It reveals the process how the song develops to build character development, intensify the character's need. Therefore, the tempo will be maintained as per the progression of the plot.

Making It a Performance: It focuses on the actor's performance from rehearsal hall to the stage. Building a performance, using gestures, exploring musical phrasing should go hand in hand. It provides the actor with a specific method to assess various styles of musical theatre.

4.6 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF MUSICAL THEATRE

Classical background of Musicals: The genesis of Musical theatre is very complex. Though America is well known for musicals, its origin lies in ancient Greece. There is a common notion that *Oklahoma* is the first integrated musical theatre, but musical theatre can trace its root back to the religious ritual of Dithyramb. Dithyramb means hymn to Dionysus, the god of poetry, wine, and fertility. It was first created by Arion in Corinth and became popular at Athens, where it was danced and sung by fifty men or boys. A flute-player stood in the midst of dancers. As Musical Theatre is communal activity, where acting is accompanied by lyrics (song) and often dance, the attic theatre may be considered as the first form of musical theatre. The theatre was divided into four parts – the audience sat on the tiers of seats, carved out of the hill side. The seats were circular. In front of the seats, which were known as 'theatron' there was the 'Orchestra' (the dancing place). It was a circular space, set apart for the dancing of the chorus. In short, the early Greek dramas were musicals, and while they had little direct effect on the development of modern musical theatre, it is reassuring to know that the first theatre was musical—and that show tunes have been around for 2,500 years. In 414, B.C.E, Aristophanes' *The Birds* can be considered as an example of Musical theatre.

Though in England, the Puritans closed the theatre house, forbade acting, bringing a halt to performing arts that lasted until 1660, the demand remained the same. The French introduced a formal dance instruction in the late 17th century. During this time the plays were performed in the American Colonies.

4.7 AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU

In 1664, the British navy, forcibly, established a colony in New Amsterdam that was renamed as New-York in the honour of King's brother, Duke of York. As High street was the widest boulevard city, the English called it Broadway. Plays and comic operas were regularly performed for the purpose of entertainment in the colonies like Charleston, Philadelphia, and Williamsburg. Though in 1732, something was performed in the Manhattan store-house, there was no recorded proof. John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* was the first professional performance that took place on third December

1750 in a simple wooden theatre at Nassau Street, of Broadway. In 1667, the infrastructure of theatre house was renovated and as a result an elaborate theatre house was inaugurated on John Street. In 1796, *The Archers*, a comic opera, was performed. Some critics opine that it was the inception of American musicals. On the Other hand, in 1767 David Douglass's seasoned American Company tried to perform *The Disappointment*, which can be considered as the earliest American- born musical theatre on these shore. Since it contained "personal reflections, it was banned. After a year, *Pinafore Fever* (1878) flourished and achieved a nation- wide popularity. The soaring popularity of *Pinafore* not only attracted a lot of audience but also fostered a group of musical's audience. It was the first model for form, content, and motif of American Musical theatre performance. With the increasing population of Manhattan Island, Broadway became the cultural and commercial of the community.

The plot was the main cause behind its huge mass appeal. It revolves around the love story for egalitarian marriage. It is significant to note that *Pinafore* upholds social issues in an entertaining manner. The irresistible rise of *Pinafore*, attracted the American audience for musical theatre, while the show itself became a model for the form, content, and even intention of American musicals ever since, especially socially relevant musicals. It not only develops a taste for musical theatre in United States, *Pinafore* also influenced the writing of subsequent American musicals. Because of its unparalleled success, many contemporary musical tried to imitate *Pinafore*. John Philip Sousa, was best known for this trend. His early comic opera *The Smugglers* (1879) was incredibly influenced for of its structure and content to *Pinafore*. Though in recent time *The Little Tycoon* (1886), *The Mikado* lost the popularity, in that prevalent time it had a healthy run in Philadelphia.

In mid 18th century American Saloon keepers used the performing art as a commodity that may be circulated between sealed circles. To fetch customers and keep them coming back, they innovated an idea of providing entertainment. Probably, performances were done on a makeshift elevated stage or in the middle of a barroom floor. The group consisted of comedians, acrobats, clowns, jugglers, animal acts, specialties, and an occasional singer—to provide entertainment. To draw the attention of customers, P. T. Barnum (1810–1891) offered a different approach to bring variety at American Museum that stood on the southeast corner of Broadway and Ann Street in New York City. Inspired by Barnum's success, some of the larger variety saloons evolved into well-appointed theatres, that is attached to highly profitable bar.

Advertisements and playbills used various terms to describe musical shows, but none had conceived the idea of playing a song while acting and calling a show with songs "a musical." *The Magic Deer* (1852, 5 performances) advertised as "*A Serio Comico Tragico Operatical Historical Extravaganzical Buletical Tale of Enchantment*," to assure that ticket-buyers comprehended it was a lyrical drama. In the mid nineteenth century, most Broadway theatres maintained resident stock companies who to continue the ongoing repertory, so musicals of this period rarely played more than a week or two of continuous performances.

The longest New York run of the 1850s was *The Elves* (1857, 50 performances), presented by Laura Keene (1826–1873) was one of the bestseller, a successful actor-manager, a lady with business prowess, provides a momentum to American theatre. She possessed a theatre at 622 Broadway, and achieved extraordinary success for seven years. She reached the zenith when *The Seven Sisters* (1860, 253 performances) came to the stage. The plot revolves around seven female demons leaved hell to take a sight-seeing tour of New York City. The existing song with ‘Dixie’ added a new flavour though the audience were not at all bothered about the connection between the song and plot.

America’s Civil War led a disastrous effect on New York’s economy as well as theatrical performances. Keene sold off her theatre and toured with a repertory of her biggest hits. Since *The Seven Sisters* involved excessive stage machinery, it could not travel long. Instead, comedies like *Our American Cousin* that was performed at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C, on the night that John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in 1865, got an acclamation. Keene’s name became so closely associated with that tragedy that she was compelled to leave the stage, and her magnum-opus *The Seven Sisters* soon went to oblivion. According to John Bush Jones – “With its magical themes and special effects, it was the clear precursor of a show that many incorrectly hail as the first Broadway musical. It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of timing”. (*Musical Theatre: A History*, 62)

The thriving culture industry of American Musical Theatre reached its zenith when the companies offered a wide assortment of imported and home grown entertainments. Acts were performed frequently, several times in a day, with performances running from early afternoon through the middle of the night. As per the audience’s interest the actual number of performances varied from place to place, as did the number of acts. The content of a variety show could be adjusted, omission and addition in content depended on the taste of the audiences. And many of them also expressed their opinions. It became a beneficial business for the performers because they earned about fifteen dollars a week, and in the mid-1800s that was more than most farmers earned in a month.

Broadway already had a collection of full length musicals that burlesqued popular plays and operas of the day. Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* was sent up in *Shylock: A Jerusalem Hearty Joke* (1853, 4 performances), and Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* inspired something called *Kill Trovatore!* (1867, 30 performances). Such spoofs usually played for a week or two and no longer survived. Even scriptures were lost, so the contents are not very clear, but surviving reviews give no indication that gender-based or sexual comedy was involved.

Broadway soon produced a different kind of burlesque musical. Edward Rice (1849–1924), can be considered as the pioneer of this new genre. He produced, directed, and wrote songs for a series of popular hits. While Rice was inspired by Thompson, his shows did not challenge any popular notions about gender roles. The main point was to offer easily digestible fun designed for family audiences.

Billed as “an American Extravaganza,” *Evangeline* (1874, 14 performances) was loosely based on an epic poem by Longfellow. The title character and her lover Gabriel (played by a woman in tights) seek each other in a series of locales, ranging from Newfoundland to Africa to the American Wild West. The musical also featured a dancing cow (two men in an animal suit), a spouting whale, and a seriocomic silent character called “The Lone Fisherman”—none of whom are found in Longfellow. Confusing as all this sounds, it gave audiences a great deal of pleasure. *Evangeline* was one of the first American musicals to have an entire score.

After the 80s the musical theatre took a new turn. According to John Kenrick:

Early American musicals were advertised as everything from “burlettas” to “extravanzas.” Indistinct labels can cause confusion, even among theatre historians, some of whom claim that British producer George Edward’s invented *musical comedy*. To support this view, these scholars insist that the 1891 Broadway hit *A Trip to Chinatown* does not count, nor does a popular series of New York shows that starred Ned Harrigan and Tony Hart in the 1880s. After all, those works were labeled “musical farces,” which means they were not musical comedies, right? (*Musical Theatre: A History*, 96)

On 24th October 1884, Tony Pastor’s “Clean Variety” bill was presented on New York’s 14th Street. It was commercially successful. In 1883, Benjamin F. Keith and Edward F. Albee reaped the benefit of Gilbert and unauthorized popular productions and gave it a form of theatrical performances. Though they boasted that they pioneered a new genre ‘Vaudeville’ (French slang meaning – songs of the town).

With the appearance of Harrington’s *The Mulligan Guard Ball!* (1879, 152 performances), the lower and middle class families swarmed to it. In 1896, Weber and Fields opened their own Broadway musical hall, where comical parodies like *Cyranose de Bric-a-brac* (1899), and *Quo Vass Iss* were performed. These were once most imitated acts of Vaudeville. One of the American hit performances that earned a huge amount of money from Britain also was *The Belle of New York* (1897, 56 performances). In 1898 it was performed in London (697 performances).

“Webberfield Shows” proliferated throughout 1901 to 1930. It refers to a one-act musical spoof, with a collection of vaudeville acts. Perhaps, the mocking title like *Hoity Toity* (1901, 225 performances), *Higgeledy Piggledy* (1904, 185 performances) are responsible to create a fandom for Webberfield Shows. *Hockey Pockey* (1912) became extremely popular.

1920s saw the rise of ‘Black Musical’ as a separate branch of this particular genre. The African – American musical manifested some positive changes in employment and income and bestowed a sense of equality. After 1921, the zeal of black musical was rekindled when the *Ziegfeld Follies* of 1922 opened on 5th June, Gilda Gray introduced “It’s Getting Dark on Old Broadway”, as a proliferation of Black entertainment. *Shuffle Along* not only served as a model of Black musical, but also legitimized the black musical. *Shuffle Along* dissolved apartheid to a certain extent and marked the beginning of the end of segregation in New York’s legitimate theatres. “With each succeeding black show produced during the 1920s, seating restrictions gradually disappeared”(Woll 73).

The noteworthy fact is that Black Musicals might be tailored for African-American performers and the targeted audience were the same, but it had been written by the White. It was revealed by John Bush Jones:

Still, most of these white-written shows for all-black or predominantly black casts gave African American performers both employment and the chance to play realistic, non-stereotypical characters. The list of such shows is distinguished and long, from *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1940) in the earlier years to *Dream girls* (1981) and *Once on This Island* (1990) later in the century. (*Our Musical Ourselves*, 69)

In the 1930s Jean Rosenthal introduced what would become modern stage lighting, changing the nature of the stage as the Broadway musical became a phenomenon in the United States. *The 42 nd Street* (1933), *The Merry Widow* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Swing Time* (1936), *Meet me in St. Louis* (1944) are some popular musicals of between 30s and 40s.

The immense popularity of *Oklahoma!* attracts a huge number of audiences. In 1943 it was first staged in Broadway. The craze for pop-music demands a new diversion to retain the popularity . The big studios of 1950s led by MGM , with its extraordinary technique, new widescreen formats, skilled theatrical performances create a extravaganza in musical theatre. *The American in Paris* (1951), *Singin' in Rain* (1952) are some examples.

1960s marked the re-emergence of intimate musicals both on and off-Broadway. A disarming fable called *The Fantasticks* (1960, 17,162 performances) started its career as a seven character one-act college musical by composer Harvey Schmidt and lyricist librettist Tom Jones . The original production of *The Fantasticks* became an institution, running in the basement of its producer's townhouse for forty-one years. In that time, there were more than 11,800 other productions of the show worldwide. Another musical theatre *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960, 607 performances) was a youthful farce.

Champion and Stewart took a very different approach with *Carnival* (1961, 719 performances), which borrowed its heart warming story of a naïve girl learning about love and life. *Carnival* marked Champion's first collaboration with producer David Merrick, a frequently contentious relationship that both men realized was to their mutual advantage. They also worked together on *Hello, Dolly!* (1964, 2,884 performances) which is a musical version of Thornton Wilder's comedy *The Matchmaker*.

Between 1964 and 1966, six new American musical blockbusters appeared. Each ran for more than a thousand performances and became a lasting international favourite. Beginning with the aforementioned *Hello, Dolly!* ,became the longest running Broadway musical—a distinction it would hold for less than a year.

The change was really astonishing when major Broadway musicals became no more than local news for New Yorkers. *The Happy Time* (1968, 286 performances) brought together the director- choreographer of *Hello, Dolly!*, one of the stars of *Camelot*, and the composers of *Cabaret* to tell the story of a world-famous photographer who causes an uproar when he

visits his family in a small French town. *Darling of the Day* (1968, 31 performances) performed on the same month and gain positive reviews, boasting for its exceptional score. *Dear World* (1969, 132 performances), a musical adaptation of Giradoux's comedy. *The Madwoman of Chaillot* with music and lyrics by the creators of *Mame*. *Dear World* quickly ran through its advance sale and closed at loss.

The decade of 1970 can be considered as a dark phase in the history of American musical theatre. By the 1970s, the Times Square theatre district had become saturated with seedy strip clubs, adult bookshops, illegal drugs, and prostitution. Those who worked in the area rubbed elbows with the dregs of society. The buildings were poorly maintained; the sidewalks grimy, the once-vaunted theatres of 42nd Street all serving as shabby movie grind houses. On the streets just to the north where most of the active legitimate theatres stood, violent crime became a regular phenomenon — muggings, stabbings, and worse. Vagrants slept in unused doorways, and trash was everywhere, creating a nauseating stench in hot weather. Going to a Broadway show now became dangerous and risky.

Yet, 1970s saw a heated three-way battle for stylistic dominance in the musical theatre among rock musicals, concept musicals, and the conventional post-*Oklahoma!* book show. All three subgenres had their strengths and flaws, and each had its champions, with some staggering new talents coming to the forefront.

The performance of *Hair*, in 1971 can be seen as a landmark in the history of American musical theatre. Barnes acclaimed *Hair* as “the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than that of the day before yesterday,” and made it his mission to encourage more of the same. The trouble was that *Hair* was so unique, so lacking in formula that it proved impossible for others to follow its example.

Producers Edgar Lansbury (Angela's brother) and Joseph Beruh commissioned a tuneful rock score by songwriter Stephen Schwartz (1948), and *Godspell* (1971, 2,645 performances) opened to cool reviews and several years' worth of packed houses. It depicted Christ as a loving, clown-like teacher leading a youthful troupe of disciples through lessons in life and faith. Instead of inspiring controversy, the show was widely embraced for its inoffensive simplicity. *Day by Day* and *Turn Back, O Man* became pop hits, and the opening anthem “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord” became a fixture in the liturgies of various denominations.

In the 1980s and 90s, a series of bold, commercially successful musicals arrived on Broadway from London's *West End*, with *Evita* followed by *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Me and My Girl*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Starlight Express*, *Miss Saigon*, *Aspects of Love*, and *Sunset Boulevard*. This created a dilemma for the New York theatre industry and critics as well as for traditional Broadway theatregoers. In 1980s, *Barnum* (1980), *Women of the year* (1981), *Dreamgirls* (1982), *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), *Nine* (1982), *My One and Only* (1983), reiterates that American musical theatre was thriving.

With the arrival of *Once on this Island* (1990, 469 performances), American musical theatre gained a new momentum. There was a core group of regular

theatre-goers, consisting of aging suburbanites, tourists, and gay men. At sixty dollars a ticket, no one else had the disposable cash required. Students often had access to discounted tickets, so their enthusiasm could fill seats. The most successful American hits of the early 1990s were aimed at one or more segments of this core audience. *The Will Rogers Follies* (1990), *Secret Garden* (1991), *Crazy for You* (1992, 1662 performances), *Carousel* (1994), and *Showboat* (1994) provide the familiar product under the camouflage of a new stylish revival to seek the theatre-goers attraction.

The year 2000 found the Broadway community unsure of what the future of musical theatre could be. The first Broadway musical of the twenty first century was James Joyce's *The Dead* (2000, 111 performances), written by men with no experience creating musicals. It showed. The plot: after sharing a subtext-laden Christmas celebration with friends, a Dublin couple realizes that their longstanding marriage is a loveless sham. The fact that a cast of musical stage and screen veterans took part in such a dull project was symbolic of how desperate actors had become for a chance to appear in a new Broadway musical.

Disney scored a tremendous commercial hit with *Aida* (2000, 1,852 performances). Audiences flocked to this reworking of the classic Verdi opera. In the year of 2002, *Movin'Out* (1202 performances) got a great admiration, but with the flip of 'time's winged chariot' its glory was gradually faded. *La Boheme* (2002) follows the same route. On the other hand, *Hairspray* (2002) sets a trend for the new musical comedy. It is based on a popular film of 1988, by John Walters, and the story revolves around Tracy Turnblad, a Baltimore teen, whose dream to singing career led to romance, stardom, and racial segregation on local television show that reflects the culture industry of early 1960s.

According to J.S. Hischark: "*Hairspray* became the third American musical comedy in a row to win the Tony for Best Musical—and all three had been based on decades-old movies."

In 2003, *Gypsy*, and *Urban Cowboy* was performed, but soon went under oblivion.

The soaring popularity of *Avenue Q* (2003), and *The boy from Oz* (2003) perplexed the audience and soon both won Tony award. The Muppet style puppets and humour of *Avenue Q* influenced *Assassins*, performed in 2004. *Jersey Boys* (2005) was a collection of pop hits that made the audience ecstatic. It was the first jukebox musical to win Tony. The adaptation of the famous novel *The Colour Purple* into musical, kept the strong publicity of musical theatre intact. *Grey Gardens*, *Spring Awakening*, are some hit performances of 2006. With the publication of chief of New York Times theatre critic Ben Brantley's 'The Day the Musical Died' raised a scrupulous question – Is the Musical a dead art? Simultaneously, it created an uproar among the theatre critics and audiences. For a long time, there was a notion that the residents of New York were the consumers of Broadway products.

Latest, popular American musical shows are *Mrs.*, *Caroline*, or *Change*, *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Plaza Suite*, *Flying Over Sunset*, *How I*

Learned to Drive, Take me Out, The Music Man. Nowadays, the film adaptation of this particular genre, gives a new impetus with a diagetical audiences. *A Star is Born* (2018), *Mary Poppins Return* (2018)

4.8 BROADWAY AND OFF-BROADWAY MUSICALS

Broadway, and American musical theatre are intertwined. ‘Broadway musical’ refers to a highly polished, highly popular theatre, mainly designed with a pecuniary motif. It has always been the most expensive, most decorative American theatre meant for the elite class. Thomas. S. Hischak views “Moreover, Broadway is a state of mind. It is the illusion that Broadway represents the American theatre. Yet, there is still glamour to the expression “Broadway” that has not been replaced by theatre elsewhere.” (*Broadway Plays and Musicals*, 1)

The term “Broadway” was an umbrella term that refers the commercial endeavour of different theatre houses. In the year of 1919 it became a brand; represent a hallmark for American theatre. Though there were nightclubs, hotels, and restaurants that were known as “Broadway chop house” or a “Broadway night spot,” the word ‘Broadway’ became closely associated with theatre, just as “Hollywood” and movies are inseparable. .

“Broadway house” is a collection of forty theatres in midtown Manhattan combined by the various unions for a “Broadway contract”. Thomas. S. Hischak views that:

The sizes of the house and its contractual obligations rather than location determine which theatres are classified as “Broadway.” Most of the theatre activity was finally centred in the Times Square area as new playhouses were built in the district and older, outlying theatres were considered Off Broadway (although that term would not be widely used until the 1940s). For example, the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center on 66th Street is a Broadway house; the smaller Mitzi Newhouse Theatre in the same building is classified as an “Off Broadway” house. (*Broadway Plays and Musicals*,1)

As a complement of Broadway, the term “Off Broadway” came into prominence in 1930s with Little Theatre Movement. In 1909 the playwright Percy MacKaye wrote in *The Playhouse and the Play* about a “theatre wholly divorced from commercialism” and termed it “civic theatre,” though soon that expression was replaced by Little Theatre. According to the Viewpoint of Thomas S. Hirsch:

In New York City this movement manifest itself in small, amateur theatre groups with radical ideas, often of a socialist nature. The Progressive Stage Society, the Liberal Club, the Theatre League, and the Socialist Press Club were among the short-lived organizations that sought to offer an alternative to the for-profit Broadway. (*Broadway Plays and Musicals*, 1)

Broadway was familiar as Theatre District situated in Longacre (later Times) Square, and these Little Theatres were situated at the outskirts area. The Washington Square Players, a branch of the Liberal Club, plays a significant role Little Theatre Movement, and to a certain extent was responsible for

the development of “Off Broadway.” Thomas S. Hirsch in his book *Off Broadway Musicals* declared that:

By now fully professional, the Players performed in the undesirable Bandbox Theatre on 57th Street and Third Avenue, geographically and philosophically removed from Broadway. New American works and rarely seen foreign plays were produced with growing success, promoting early works by playwrights such as Eugene O’Neill and Elmer Rice and introducing such performers as Katharine Cornell and Rollo Peters. The group disbanded in 1918 when most of its creative staff founded the Theatre Guild, a long-running theatre institution that flourished on Broadway for many decades. Other early Little Theatres to have an impact on the New York theatre scene included the Provincetown Players and the Neighborhood Playhouse, both founded in 1915 and located in Greenwich Village, Manhattan’s Left Bank—the breeding ground for innovative creativity in all the arts. (*Broadway Plays and Musicals*,1)

Since Broadway was not only centre of the American musical, but also a centre of money making and a culture industry, the Little Theatres lost its to produce musicals without any profit, only for entertainment. After all, they saw themselves as an alternative to produce art as commodity with a mercenary motif. Yet both the Provincetown Players and the Neighbourhood Playhouse make an attempt on musical revues, for profit at the end of a season of “serious” theatre or to have fun spoofing to make it more comic. Until 1940s, Broadway was the main centre for musicals. A very few Musicals came from “Off Broadway”.

4.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

1. What is a Musical Theatre? Mention some important features of Musical Theatre?

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2. Can we consider Pinafore as a relevant social document of that prevalent era? Explain.

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3. What is the significance of Black Crook in the corpus of American Musical Theatre?

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4. How American Musical Theatre flourished as a successful commercial endeavour according to the socio-cultural background?

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5. Give a brief sketch of Broadway and Off Broadway?

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6. What is “Vaudeville”? Is it a musical farce? Give reasons to support your answer.

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7. What is Black Musical? When did it evolve?

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8. What is musical comedy?

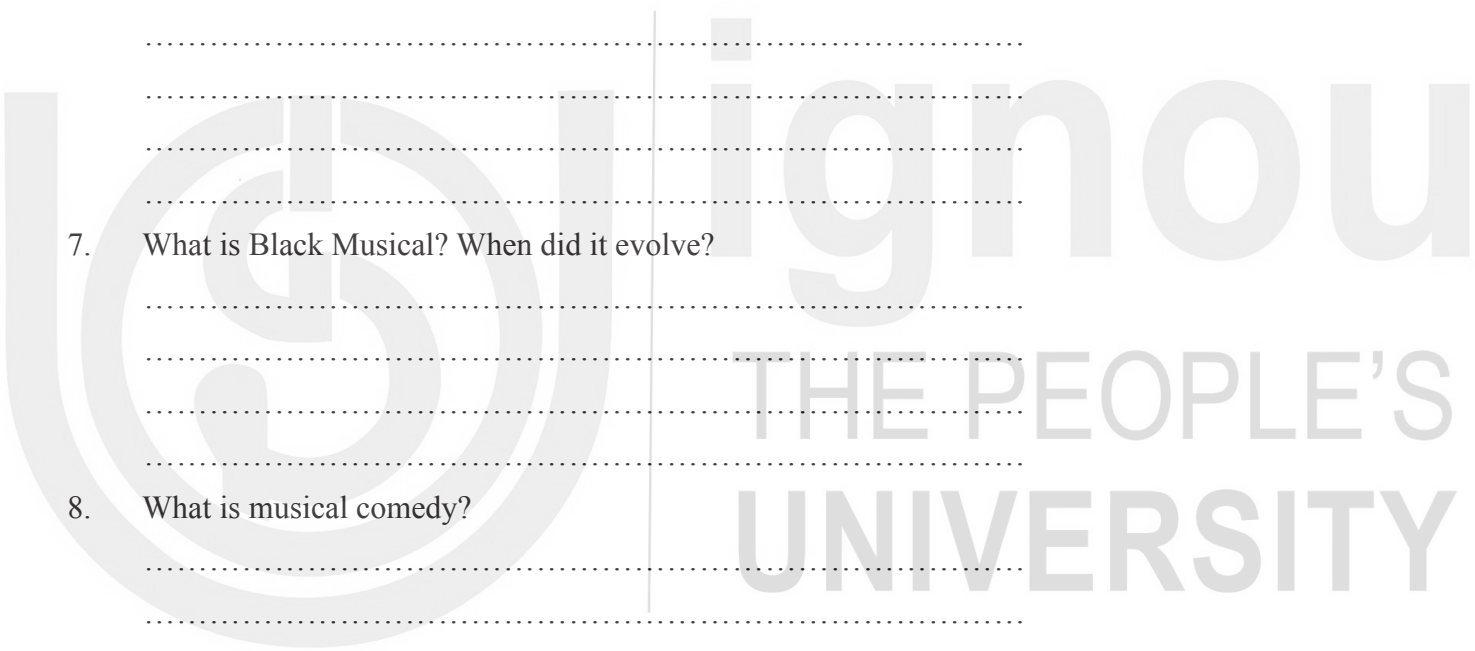
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9. What do you mean by “Webberfield Shows”? Give some examples?

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10. Narrate the classical background to the study of Musical Theatre.

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11. How has the American Civil War affected the Musical theatre?

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12. What was the condition of the Broadway theatre houses in 1970s?

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4.10 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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