
UNIT 6: THE NECESSITY OF MUSICALS

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- know about the origin and development of Musicals in American drama;
- comprehend *Musicals* as distinct dramatic art forms of United States;
- Understand broader picture of an American Musical Theatre through the ages.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

6.1.1 What are Musicals?

Musical theatre is a form of theatrical performance that combines songs, spoken dialogue, acting and dance. The story and emotional content of a musical includes humour, pathos, love, anger and they are communicated as an integrated whole. The aim of Musicals is 'to instruct' rather than to amuse the audience. Significantly, Music is an art practice used in the theatres and the roots of it can be traced back to primitive times and even now we have umpteen theatrical performances with the use of Music. Musicals emerged in United States as a distinct form to manifest social problems like racism initially, and later to showcase terrorism as well. Its functions are as varied

as the forms require and range in showcasing unrelated performances as in opera, to mere noise, filling a vacuum in imagination for some screen and stage presentations. Musicals evolved as a distinct style of performances and presentations that speak to the crowd with their own voice. With the use of story line, music added a flavour to the performance on stage.

6.1.2 Meaning and Origin

A form of theatrical entertainment originated from *operatta* that evolved chiefly in England and the United States in the 20th century. Along with the operatta, the chief forerunner of the musical in the United States was the 'revue', a variety show that included a series of unrelated musical scenes. Some revues like *shuffle along* (1921), the first all black revue, and *pins and needles* (1936) sponsored by international ladies garment workers union, had unifying themes but the great majority merely strung together a series of unrelated skits and songs. Despite these frivolous settings, many of the best American show tunes were composed for revues, including Rodgers and Hart's "Manhattan," Schwartz and Dietz's "Dancing in the Dark," and Cole Porter's "Let's Do It."

The first significant attempt to integrate the songs with the script and dialogue ("the book") was Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Show Boat* (1927), which dealt in its subplot with the theme of race. Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey* (1940), its leading character the first example of an anti-hero in a musical, set the stage for the musical's coming of age in the 1940s. Beginning with Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945), the next two decades saw the most impressive musicals in the history of the genre. In 2000, comedy came back to the musical with a vengeance in Mel Brooks's *The Producers*, one of the funniest shows in the history of the form. Film musicals were among the most popular American films from the 1930s to the 1960s. Aside from the adaptation of Broadway musicals, which have always provided the basis for the genre, movies produced a new and distinctive form of musical from their ability to create a fantasy world covering a range from real people in imaginary settings to animated cartoon figures. The demise of the Studio System and high production costs brought an end to the Hollywood musical, except for the occasional adaptation of a Broadway hit.

6.1.3 Difference between Opera and Musicals

Theatre music is all music composed to govern, enhance, or support a theatrical conception. Music composed for theatrical purposes obeys different laws than does the music for concert performance or conventional opera. The most significant difference is that Operas are generally entirely sung, while Musicals combine various amounts of spoken dialogue with a song. In Opera, Acting isn't really as important as the singing the emphasis in opera performance is on the ability to execute the difficult music well. If you are an amazing singer, but are a weak actor, that is forgiven more than the other way around. Acting is more important than the singing in musicals. Opera performances are typically not miked; the singers are expected to be able to project over an orchestra without any amplification. Musical theatre singers are typically miked when they sing.

6.2 NECESSITY OF MUSICALS: EVOLUTION THROUGH THE AGES

Musicals evolved throughout history, just as society evolved itself and it was a parallel road, where each influences the other. An introduction to musical history through the decades and that which moves from the 1900s and ends till the 2000s will give an insight into the role and function of musicals in different periods.

6.2.1 The 1900s and 1920s: The Glorious Decades of Broadway Theatres

Turning the pages of development of American Drama, Musicals play very important role. America was full of glory during the period of Musicals as the hub of Musical Theatre were 33 Broadway theatres during 1900s and the country evidenced growing popularity among the audience to embrace the new and vibrant born musicals. According to the information in Encyclopaedia, minstrel shows were the first to have imprint on the minds of the audience but it is also mentioned that an unacceptable chapter of the American musical history was that, during the Minstrel shows.

The Minstrel show was the first genuine American-born form, that became most popular during the early and mid of 19th century. The shows were popular before slavery was abolished, and the whole concept was based on prejudices that arose from slavery. The white performers coloured their faces with burnt cork to lampoon Negroes, and they performed songs and skits to satirise the slave life on Southern plantations. As professional entertainment the Minstrel shows survived until about 1910s and amateur performances continued until the 1960s in high schools, and local theatres. Minstrel's shows were not only acted by men but during the 1890s the shows were acted also by women performers. Women became a common presence on the Minstrel stage, but the form was gradually losing appeal. The particular shows had a different name, they were well known as the 'Creole shows', and offered a female interlocutor. During the many decades of its popularity, minstrels developed a unique format, Although, black face remained in use, the Minstrel shows were no longer commercially viable by 1920s. One of the most popular Minstrel shows of the era was that which was published throughout the 1830s and 1840s, and was called the 'Jim Crow', by Thomas Dartmouth, who was termed after that show as the "father" of the minstrels. The "Jim Crow" is the only of the Minstrels which is known now.

After the "Minstrel shows", a new era began in the world of the theatre. In a world where phonographs, films, radios and televisions did not exist, something new was needed to fill the gap. The novice style was called "Vaudeville shows", that were the invention of American theatre in the early 1880s. The word "Vaudeville" means in a simple way "the songs of the town". These shows were the by-product of the industrial revolution. This changed the rural face of America and it became a distinct theatrical genre in both towns and cities as affordable on regular basis. Many shows tried to bridge a social gap that had divided American audiences ever since the upper and lower classes were separated in the mid of 1800s. They showed that all were equal and all could have fun in the same way. They were just

like circus shows of India, which include acrobatics, ice and roller skaters, cyclists, songs and 'Dumb Acts' devoid of any talkers. One of the most popular songs of 'Vaudeville' shows were composed by the 'Vaudeville' team, Nora Bayes and Jack Norworth. Some "Vaudeville" shows are performed even in our times in several theatres on Broadway.

After the "Vaudeville" shows a new movement had developed around the early 1890s during the period of Musicals. The new form was called "Musical Comedies" or "Edwardian Musical Comedies". George Joseph was called as a "father" of musical comedies. Edward recognized the changing tastes among the musical theatre audiences and it led the movement away from "Burlesques" and "Comic Operas" to "Edwardians Musical Comedies". These have dominated musicals since the 1870s. They found success and showed that the audiences were ready to accept something new. One of the first popular "Edwardian Musical Comedy" was the "Florodora". It opened for the first time in 1899 in London and about a year later, also in New York City. It became even more popular than the musicals on Broadway. The "Florodora" was famous for its double sextet and its chorus line of the "Florodora Girls". It was a musical which was translated in many different languages because of its popularity. It referred to a young woman who was seeking romance and restoration of her stolen inheritance. The "Edwardians Musical Comedies" were the shows which offered optimism in a combination of energy and good humour after World War I.

6.2.2 The 1940's and 1950's: Musical as a Reflection of Socio-Political Issues

During the period mentioned, war loomed large across the whole country and people wanted to escape from their troubles in its wake. Everything had changed, even preferences of the audience. Because of it, the people who suffered were not able to attend other shows. The audience no longer had interest in Broadway's shows, and they started to follow the theatre shows that were cheaper than the Broadway shows. The musicals of 1940's were performed to entertain the people who were suffering from the evils of War. The type of musical that was popular in the forties was called the 'Black musicals'. The first black musical of the forties was called 'Swingin the Dream', that opened in 29th of November in 1939. The musical was a swing version of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream", as adopted in the book written by Gilbert Solders and Erik Charrell, and with music by Jimmy Van Heusen.

In 1943, another musical that came up was called "Carmen". It opened for the first time on December 2, in 1943 on Broadway and became famous within 503 performances. Reaching 1943, the coming decades were called the decades of "Hammersteins and Rodgers years". Rodger's and Hammerstein's ideology was that musicals could help the audience escape from their problems through entertainment. One of the nine most popular musicals of Rodger and Hammerstein was "Oklahoma!". It was the first of the musicals of Rodger and Hammerstein that opened on March 31, 1943 on Broadway. The second of the most popular musicals of Rodger and Hammerstein was "Carousel".

When the decade of 1940s passed and the Second World War came to an end with a lot of issues, the lights were drawn on the new decade of the 1950s, well known as the “Golden Age of Musicals”. On the one hand it was called, the “Golden” age of musicals and on the other hand, it soon became the opposite of that name. The Second World War followed by another war that upset the country. It was named the “Cold War”. The people experienced big problems, such as the fear of the international communism, paranoia and xenophobic sentiments, which didn’t exist before. We see this decade finishing with two performances that marked, in a way, the musical era of the fifties. Both were performed in the same period but they differed in months. The musicals were the “Westside Story” and the “The Music Man”.

6.2.3 The 1960’s: Revolution Era in Musicals

This age is characterised by the civil rights movement, emergence of Hippies and the Feminist movement. Inevitably the “Civil Rights” affected all aspects of life. As a result musical theatre was changed as well. In the new context, every musical was based on the revolution of people. The musicals based on a story with a theme, issue or polemical point of view. Famous was the ‘The Fantasticks’. ‘The Fantasticks’ was a musical that combined both funny and romantic elements. Cabaret Musical was also famous. After two years of ‘Cabaret’ musical, the first rock musical of the sixties took place in the Broadway theatre. The name of the musical was “Hair”. It has been observed that by the sixties started the “golden age” of rock music. The “Hair” was one of those musicals that combined music with the issues of the society during the sixties. In this period, musicals with rock elements were used for describing the movement of Hippies against the Vietnam War.

6.2.4 The 1970’s: Musicals as Reflection of ‘Me’ Generation

In contrast with the sixties, the anti-war position became more fashionable as it made use of the strong nostalgic element. People started to turn their attention from the public to the private. Due to the depressing sixties, they explored their own feelings and psyches. The motto “Let’s talk about me!” was famous and everyone was interested to speak about their feelings and beliefs. The new productions of musicals of this period were called ‘Fragmented musicals’. In them, the characters spoke about their selves and spoke directly to the audience. There was a strong element of narcissism since people enjoyed watching themselves. The famous production of the seventies goes on with the musical show ‘Pippin’. It was a musical containing hedonism, the revolution and the persecution of the war. Next, the seventies was an era of monologues that showed a person’s inner psyche and self-reflection. For this reason, it was referred to as “Me” generation.

6.2.5 The 1980’s and 1990’s: Decades of Release of Suppressed Emotions

These were the decades when many people talked and sang openly about sex and drugs. The musicals of the 1980s and 1990s contained more socially serious themes than before. While the previous shows of the seventies gave an opportunity to the audience to understand the message of the show, in the eighties and the nineties the producer wanted to let the audience think and discover the message of the show as also to infer the views accordingly. These shows were presented in “Off-Broadway” theatres that were theatres

that produced unique musicals and revues. 'Quilters' musicals became popular because of the queer and homosexual movement in U.S.A.

6.2.6 The 2000's: The Millennium as a Revival Era in Musicals

In 2001, the terrorist attack on World Trade Centre crushed the spirits of the musicals. People were shaken by the destruction of the terrorist attack. That explains, why a few days later when Broadway Theatres reopened, they preferred to open several shows, especially musical comedies. The shows helped the audience to escape from the stressful feeling of death, abuse and terrorism. Broadway Theatre offered to the people the opportunity to feel good again, like the old times. The revival of musical comedies became most popular in the 2000s. The millennium was in a flashback era, which combined fresh ideas in musical shows. That combination resulted in "Jukebox shows" based on films, movies with strong elements of humour and included popular songs. In the years we are talking of, the jukebox musicals were as well became more and more popular. One of the musicals was produced for creating a different taste in the jukebox "era" that was called "Rock of Ages". It was the first rock jukebox show that built around rock and metal hits of the eighties and made a huge fuss in the year of 2009. The decade of jukebox musicals, revivals and comedies did not end in the natural course, included this kind of musicals have continued until today. One of the best examples of the jukebox style in 2014 is that of the "Bullets Over Broadway" a musical produced during the periods of 2013 and 2014. The "Bullets Over Broadway" put to use a story based on Woody Allen's book as well as, music and lyrics by various creators, and it opened for the first time on April of 10th, 2014 to become a hit in 2014.

6.3 CHARACTERISTICS AND TYPES OF MUSICALS

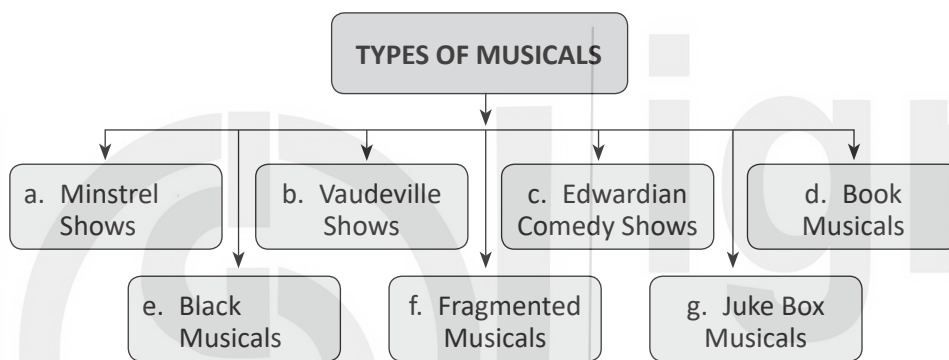
Musicals mark a new horizon in the development of American Drama. With the origin and development of it, one can infer that they began to 'instruct' rather to 'amuse'. Later developments mirrored different subject matters and motives. The **chief traits** of musicals are as follows:

- a. To manifest the nasty issues of racism after the First World War.
- b. To spread optimism and comic relief after the disintegration, pain and agony to the masses after the world war.
- c. To showcase freedom of expression and feelings during 70s.
- d. To provide entertainment of a breezy kind like our 'NukkadNataks'.
- e. To revive the old productions in the form of Juke Box Musicals.

Keeping in view the nuances of musicals, **its types** can also be described.

- a. **Mistrel Shows:** They emerged in 1900-1920s and were the first type of musicals with Bouncy tunes and upbeat rhythms. The subject matter centred on racism and its repercussions left their mark on the public.
- b. **Vaudeville Shows:** They gained popularity as 'song of the town'. The genre exhibited poverty-related issues with the use of lively rhythm.

- c. **Edwardian Musical Comedies:** this genre was the call of the hour to keep the public enthusiastic and optimistic after the destruction of the world war has caused.
- d. **Book Musicals:** They were based on several stories from the books and were simple portraiture. The impact could be defined under two heads: Escapist Entertainment Book Musicals and Satirical/ Comic book musicals.
- e. **Black Musicals:** They were prevalent during the revolution era of the civil rights. In them, the rhythm was syncopated even as they used jazz melodies became famous.
- f. **Fragmented Musicals:** The society of the time found peace by returning to the world of privacy and monologues. This was the fragmented style based on privacy portrayals on stage.
- g. **Juke box Musicals:** This was the return to the old productions during 2000s



6.4 WRITERS AND FAMOUR MUSICALS

Though musicals had been popular since 1930s, yet there were famous masterpieces that left an imprint on the minds of the public. Most famous minstrel musical was *Jim Crow* by Thomas Dartmouth. *Shine on Harvest* by Nora Bayes and Jack Norworth was another commendable Vaudeville Show. George Joseph Edward was the Father of Musical Comedies and *Florodora* became famous comedy in 1899. It was followed by *As a thousand cheer showcased in 1930*. Book musicals were also famous. Another work gaining importance, was the *show Boat* written by Oscar Hammerstein book based on Edno Ferber’s Novel *Show Boat*. The first Black Musicals were watched by the public in 1940s and the famous was *Swingin the Dream* which was based on Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It was written in the same year. The next was Carmen Musicals based on Hammerstein and Rodger’s versions and the popular one was *Oklohoma*.

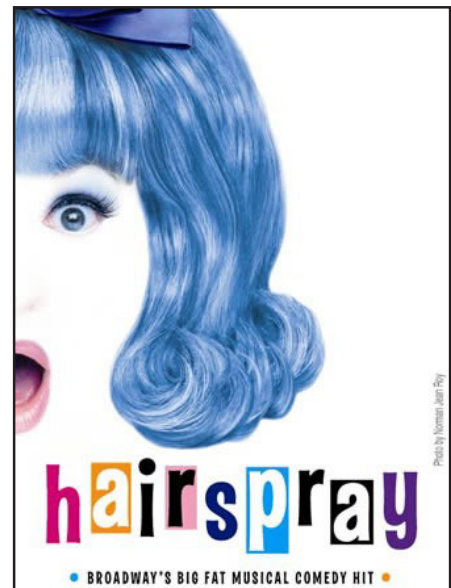
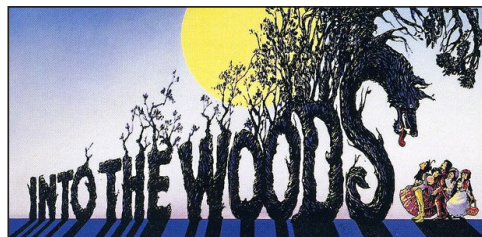
During 1960s’ some of the most popular musicals of the decade were, “The Fantasticks” which opened in Off-Broadway theatre in May 3rd 1960. Their plot was based on book and the lyrics by Tom Jonesbased. One of the most popular and well known musicals was created in 1966 called “Cabaret”. It opened on November 10th in 1966 on Broadway. During 1970’s, one of the most popular rock musical of the seventies was “The Me Nobody Knows”. It opened on Broadway on 18th of December 1970. The musical was a production of the book by Robert H. Livingston, Herb Schapiro and

Musicals and Farce

Stephen M. Joseph based on the anthologized writings of inner city youths. The music was by Gary William Friedman and the lyrics were by Will Holt. The next fragmented musical which is considered as one of the most characteristic and longest running shows of all time from the seventies was “A Chorus Line” and it opened on Broadway in 1975. It was a fragmented musical with jazz elements and it managed to present a non-plot musical. Based on the book by James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante, and with lyrics by Edward Kleban and music by Marvin Hamlisch, the musical refers to a group of twenty four young dancers who perform an audition for a musical on the Broadway theatre.

1980’s mark some of the most popular musicals of the eighties and nineties. These were “March of Falsettos”, a musical with comedy aspects based on homosexuality. The “Quilters” was a musical that opened on Broadway in 1984, and was directed by Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek. Its music and lyrics were by Barbara Damashek. “The Quilters: Women and Domestic Arts” was by Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen. In 1987, another style of musical was coming to the surface to change the feeling of the decades. The musical was called “Into The Woods” and it was different from the other styles of musicals of this time. “Into The Woods” was based on a book by James Lapine. This carried the influences of “The uses of Enchantment” by Bruno Bettelheim. The musical wove together the stories of famous fairy tale characters.

In 2000’s, one of the most popular shows with big audiences in the 21st century was, “Hairspray”. It was a jukebox musical with strong comic and anti-racism elements, based on “Hairspray” film of 1988, directed by Mark O’Donnell’s and Thomas Meehan’s book. Its music was by Marc Shaiman and the lyrics were by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman. In 2006. It was titled “Mary Poppins”. The musical was an adaptation of Walt Disney’s film of 1964 and “Mary Poppins” book series by P.L Travers, it was directed by Julian Fellowe. Another musical which became popular in 2006 was the “Spring Awakening”. The “Spring Awakening” was the rock musical production from book and lyrics by Steven Sater. It was based on Frank Wedekind’s play “Spring Awakening” in 1891





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6.5 SITUATING MUSICALS IN THE DOMAIN OF AMERICAN DRAMA

Musicals and their development can be regarded as an *avant garde* development in American Drama. It is generally agreed that the post–World War II period produced the most significant American drama and theatre. The works included Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955); Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953); and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1941). It was also the time when American theatrical production, characterized by a blend of realistic and modernist techniques known as “the American style,” was most influential. This period of extraordinary accomplishment would not have occurred without the particular theatrical developments that preceded it. American theatre had gotten off to a slow start during the 18th and early 19th centuries, partly because of an anti-theatrical prejudice in the puritan roots of the Northeast, where most US cities were located, and the copyright situation, which made it much more profitable for theatrical managers to pirate English plays than to produce new American ones. It was a natural development to create a drama that united music and dialogues and suffused them with expressionist techniques that made it possible to dramatize a character’s consciousness on stage. Now, musical theatrical performances have become the signature styles of America. From their subject matter to its unique execution of it, musicals have greatly impacted the growth of American Drama.

6.6 SCREEN ADAPTATIONS OF MUSICALS; STAGE TO SCREEN

The combination of stage and screen talent can sometimes exhibit a strange alchemy that makes truly great art possible. More than 12 musicals were shown on screen. For the better understanding of the nuances of the screen adaptations of musicals, links have also been provided here. Important among them and the most celebrated ones are: West side story: 1961; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhSKk-cvblc>, The Sound of Music: 1965; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXhu1ZKe5EM>, the Producers:2005; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u36iNj52rac>, Hairspray:2007, Into the woods; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqCsQCsinK4>

6.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS WITH ANSWER KEYS)

- a. What are Musicals and how are they different from Opera?

In answering this question, you have to understand that they stem from ‘Operatta’ and their nuances and subject matters are different from one another.

- b. What are the major developments in the Musical theatre of United States?

Your answer should take into consideration the types of Musicals from 1900s to 2000s. Also consider how musicals have distinct traits and thus United States asserts copyright in the origin and development of Musicals.

- c. What are the famous musicals that have been adapted into movies?

The answer would include the masterpieces of Musicals and how the screen adaptations have popularized them thereby filling the gap between the stage and the screen.

- d. How are Musicals significant in the development of American Drama of 20th century?

The response will take into consideration the socio-political background of US and how this genre helped in shaping the dramatic art forms like Jazz.

6.8 SUMMING UP

Musical shows initially wanted to give people a guiding path so that they could avoid the misery caused by war, a bad economy or xenophobia. It has been their “mission” to prevent chaos by promoting optimism and a sense of culture. It is a fact that music and theatre have the power to unite, to enforce ideas, and to excite. It left an impact on the mind of individuals and of musical performance can lead the audience to conclusion and can each and explain.

6.9 SELECT READING LIST

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