

Curtain Up! Get the Rights!

Choosing the 16 greatest musicals of Broadway's Golden Age.

by Laurence Maslon



Oklahoma! on Broadway in the 1940s.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress/Wikimedia Commons.

What are the greatest American musicals of the Golden Age? It's an enjoyable enough parlor game to be played in a post-show reverie over Manhattans and gin-and-tonics on the red-checked tablecloths of Joe Allen's. Answering that question for posterity is another matter entirely.

When I proposed the task of selecting and editing 16 musicals in print for the two-volume set of *American Musicals (1927–1969)*, published by the **Library of America**, I knew it'd be a challenge. The American musical is one of our greatest and most ebullient art forms and any fan of the medium would be grateful to see 16 beloved shows restored to print (or, as is the case of several musicals, in print for the first time) in a handsome edition and given the respect that the Library of America imprimatur inevitably conveys. But, as the editor for such an anthology, I faced a tricky proposition: I would have to create a canon while potentially facing battalions of musical theater fans ready and eager to train their canons on me. To quote Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*: "It isn't easy."

For the record, the first volume of the anthology contains *Show Boat*, *As Thousands Cheer*, *Pal Joey*, *Oklahoma!*, *On the Town*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, and *South Pacific*; the second features *Guys and Dolls*, *The Pajama Game*, *My Fair Lady*, *Gypsy*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*, and *1776*. Most of those titles—*Show Boat*, *South Pacific*, *Gypsy*—have critical and popular bona fides that are unassailable, unlike other musicals I considered, rendered vulnerable by some aesthetic Achilles' heel to unanimous approbation. Musicals—much like baseball teams, sports cars, and comic book superheroes—attract passionate defenders and equally passionate detractors.

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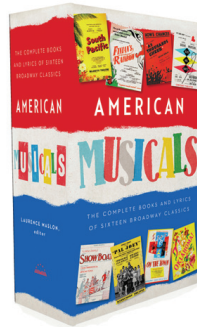
Take, for example, the first question you might have upon seeing the list, and the question posed to me in an email by a hero from my younger days, the playwright John Guare: "What happened to *West Side Story*?" Sigh. *West Side Story* (1957) is, without a doubt, one of the most exciting evenings one can have in the theater; repeat: in the theater. Leonard Bernstein's music and Jerome Robbins' original choreography were electrifying (and can still be enjoyed in the 1961 film version). Yet even Stephen Sondheim has disavowed some of his lyrics from this show and, as for Arthur Laurents's book—well, has anyone sat down and read it lately? An admirable adaptation of Shakespeare, but its barrage of simulated "teen speak"—"Cut the frabbajabba," "Womb to tomb!/ Sperm to worm!"—seemed artificial and contrived without Bernstein's pulsating beat to drive it along. Devoid of its music, its dancing, and its performance components, *West Side Story* simply isn't a good read.

Another hero talked me out of a show I always admired: Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, which made national headlines in 1937 when Orson Welles' Broadway production had its own explosive opening night performance in defiance of the federal authorities. The show had a provocative book, and was the most axiomatic of the political-minded musicals of the 1930s—a genre that was important to represent. (The Depression-era Gershwin/Kaufman classic *Of Thee I Sing* had already been published by Library of America in an edition of Kaufman's comedies.) However, one of our informal advisers on the *American*

Musicals project, the legendary lyricist-composer-commentator Tom Lehrer, wrote to me: "I do not see how this can possibly be called a classic. It was a flop show, which has never had a major revival. It had NOT ONE MEMORABLE SONG (nor lyric, for that matter) and a simplistic, agitprop cartoon of a book. But perhaps I'm being too easy on it." I was swayed.

Meanwhile, *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Damn Yankees* (1955), and *Funny Girl* (1964)—all fine and serviceable shows—seem a little dimmer without the incandescent performances of Ethel Merman, Gwen Verdon, and Barbra Streisand to illuminate them. Coleridge famously wrote about the 19th-century British actor Edmund Kean that "seeing him act was like reading Shakespeare by lightning": Reading these musicals without those great dames is like attending a matinee during a blackout.

In the selection process, it was important to make sure that every major contributor to the musical theater form during this period was represented in some way. Although Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Leonard Bernstein (and Jerome Robbins) were slighted by the exclusion of *West Side Story*, their respective achievements on other great musicals are represented elsewhere. And sometimes there's an embarrassment of riches: Among the landmark musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, surely *Carousel* (1945)—Richard Rodgers' personal favorite—and perhaps *The King and I* (1951) would merit inclusion in an anthology of great musicals. However, Rodgers and Hammerstein (as a team) already had two groundbreaking entries in the anthology and each writer had a third entry with other collaborators (Lorenz Hart and Jerome Kern, respectively).



From a chronological point of view, it would be hard to argue against *Show Boat* as the first real landmark in the development of the American musical, back in 1927. The closing parenthesis, however, was a subjective matter. The musical 1776 (which debuted in 1969), with its witty and dramatic look at our Founding Fathers, seemed a felicitous way to conclude an anthology called *American Musicals*. More the point, the following season on Broadway produced *Company*, the first of a series of storied collaborations between Sondheim and director Harold Prince that both embraced and rejected decades of musical

theater tradition. And, as the decade of the 1970s fragmented so much of American culture, *Company* too had its dissonant effect on the traditional narrative musical. (What might a post-1970 anthology include? I'd vote for all six Sondheim/Prince collaborations; after that, I leave it to you.)

And, finally, there's a matter of editorial discretion (or, as it's known around my house, my perverse opinion). *As Thousands Cheer* (1933) has never been revived on Broadway or even filmed, but it represents the best, and one of the last, examples of the revue form—a potent genre that dominated Broadway for two decades. It also provides a platform to appreciate Irving Berlin and Moss Hart working at the peak of their powers. I was preferential to shows that spoke directly to contemporary American concerns; that's why I chose *The Pajama Game* (1954), with its gentle satire of McCarthyism, as an exemplar of 1950s musicals over *The Music Man* (1957)—a show whose corn-fed Middle American nostalgia had little effect on a Jewish boy who grew up a 45-minute train ride away from Times Square. But, lest readers think that I am peculiarly perverse in my tastes, I will own that one acclaimed musical theater writer refused to allow his show in the Library of America anthology if Pal Joey were also included. Discretion forbids me to name names, but he is no longer with us and he wrote the book for *West Side Story*.

Now that *American Musicals: The Complete Books and Lyrics of 16 Broadway Classics (1927–1969)* has hit the shelves, I will do what the gifted men (and woman) who wrote these musicals frequently did when the curtain went up on their shows: I will retire to the bar across the street and nervously nurse a Manhattan, awaiting the reviews. If you want to sing along to *The Cradle Will Rock*, you're welcome to join me.

Correction, Oct. 31, 2014: A headline on this article misstated the number of musicals in the anthology. There are 16, not 12.

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