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MUSICAL THEATRE

SECOND EDITION

JOHN KENRICK

FOREWORD BY OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN III

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A HISTORY

FOREWORD BY OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN III SECOND EDITION

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BLOOMSBURY

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Foreword: Us

Oscar Andrew Hammerstein III

Now I know that many of my grad students at Columbia University took my class just to see what I was all about, this Hammerstein family historian on his maiden voyage into teaching. I had easy pass written all over me. All true. I began my class by asking this question: What is the most important factor in creating a hit musical?

The eager few in the front row, who saw their opportunity to polish this professor's apple, confidently proclaimed that, of course, it was the story aka the book aka the libretto aka the plot that was of singular importance to any Broadway musical's success.

Not so fast, bravely chimed a young woman in the second row. The plot is merely an armature; a handy synagogue for that magical wedding of words and music called the "Broadway song." And isn't music what audiences are supposed to come out humming? The second row then broke into argument with itself over words and music—who's more important and who comes first. Things were going great!

One unsentimental fellow in the third row, minoring in theatre on his way to a sensible career in finance, shrugged and said that it was the pragmatic marriage of money with star power that made the theatre world go round and that all creative efforts were secondary piffle. There followed a pained silence.

This was broken by a young man in the fourth row, who resembled my father, quietly insisting that without the guiding hand of a wise director you may as well take the whole mess and set it on fire. I liked his way with words. Next to him, a dancer held her tongue, but I knew what she yearned to express. Someone dressed as a giant rat, shouted, "You got nothin' without the unions!" Another pained silence followed.

Yes, yes, I said yes. But no. When we are staring at an actor on a stage, what is he staring at? A long silence was broken by my future assistant who quietly offered—"Us?"

Acknowledgment

In *The King and I*, Oscar Hammerstein II observed that "when you become a teacher, by your pupils you'll be taught." The new edition of this book reflects what I have learned from an additional decade of teaching this subject at New York University's Steinhardt School, The New School University, Philadelphia's University of the Arts, and Marymount Manhattan College, as well various libraries, museums, adult education programs, including the Center for Adult Life Enrichment in Hewlett, NY, and the Peninsula Library in Lawrence, NY. I dedicate this book to all the students and listeners of all ages who have questioned, enlightened, and inspired me over the years—including the fourth and fifth graders I taught at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School in Astoria in the early 1980s.

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You can expect the unexpected in this book. I have served as an assistant to six Tony Award–winning producers. I have worked with some legendary talents, and some monstrous egos. So I view musical theatre history as someone who has been there and done it. I know all too well that a lot of history winds up lost or forgotten—and that every stage production is shaped by human frailties that rarely make it into the written record.

Definitions and Key Ideas

Let's start by defining what we are going to discuss. What is history? Napoleon Bonaparte called it "a set of lies generally agreed upon." Philosopher Jorge Santayana described history as "a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren't there." Much of what is published as "history" reflects the prejudices and personal agendas of authors who either have reputations to defend or axes to grind.

It is particularly tricky to study the history of musical theatre. Many sacred truths in this field were invented by press agents. It is second nature for theatre people to reshape reality. A Broadway producer I worked for revised his bio every few months, saying, "No one in this business can resist fixing a script." In this new edition of *Musical Theatre: A History*, every effort has been made to brush away the cobwebs and fabrications, to get you as close as possible to the people and events that shaped this art form. I include a few questionable stories that are just too good to leave untold, but with appropriate disclaimers.

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While we are defining things, what is a musical? One dictionary defines it as "a musical comedy." That is just one of many genres within this art form. Here is my definition, one that far more inclusive:

> A *musical* (noun) is a stage, screen or television production using popular style songs to either tell a story (book musicals) or showcase the talents of songwriters and performers (revues)—dialogue optional.

And what is the point of studying the history of musical theater? For starters:

- *Musicals vividly reflect the popular culture of their time*—So musicals are an entertaining way to learn about the nations, cities, and eras that spawned them.
- *They help you know how the art form got to where it is now*—If musicals matter to you, then you should know how they have developed over time.
- *They aid in enriching your theatergoing*—Every musical makes more sense when you know its context.
- *They make you realize that your heroes/heroines are flawed and human*—If they could succeed, so can anyone—and that includes you.

When I was a teenager, aging theatre buffs insisted that the Broadway musical's "golden age" ended in the 1950s, as if all the *really* good stuff happened long ago. In fact, musical theatre has enjoyed several golden ages. Odds are there are more to come. A new one may even be starting as you read this.

History shows us that musicals thrive in communities that meet four essential criteria:

1. A population large and prosperous enough to support an active theatrical culture.
2. A thriving artistic community that nurtures successive generations of creative and performing talent.
3. A shared sense of optimism about the community and its future.
4. Freedom from extensive government censorship and political oppression.

This book examines how musical theatre has thrived in different cities over the centuries, and considers how each of its hometowns has placed its own unique stamp on the art form. As an art of the now, theatre defies second-hand appreciation. Photographs, films, videos, and sound recordings can preserve elements of a performance, but nothing yet invented fully captures the excitement, the visceral impact of live theatre. Each performance is unique—you are either there to share in it, or you can "do no more than guess" what it was like.

In these pages, I cannot hope to bring past performances back to life. If only there was a time machine that would allow us to whisk through time and attend the premieres of *Les Brigands*, *The Mikado*, or *My Fair Lady*! But we can go beyond statistics and plot summations by examining the people and environments that gave birth to these musicals. With such knowledge, we can better appreciate what led up to the musical theatre of our own time, and make some educated guesses about the future of this powerful art form.

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assets.

The primary job of a musical is to tell a story—or, in the case of a revue, to tell a number of brief stories through songs and skits. When all goes well, a musical's blend of song, dance, and the visual arts evokes an intellectual as well as emotional response, but in order for any of those elements to matter, a musical must tell a compelling story in a compelling way.

An art form requires an artist, a medium, and eventually an audience. A popular or commercial art form requires the same trinity, with one crucial difference: there must be a paying audience that makes the act of expression profitable for the artist. When the art form is a collaborative, multidisciplinary one like musical theatre, it must be profitable for everyone who helps to bring an artist's conception to life (producers, director, designers, actors, investors, etc.—and yes, investing is a talent). The taste and attitude of audiences play a tremendous role in determining the development of the product; demand helps to shape the supply. So we will consider how audiences have contributed to the development of musicals.

As a commercial art form, musical theatre reshapes itself continually to meet ongoing changes in popular taste. In the past few decades, those changes have ranged from the superficial (electronic amplification, hydraulic sets, etc.) to the essential (using recycled pop songs). Commercial success ignites new trends and styles. Who in their right mind would emulate a financial failure?

Elements of a Musical

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

- Music and lyrics—the songs
- Book/libretto—the connective story expressed in script or dialogue
- Choreography—the dance
- Staging—all stage movement
- Physical production—the sets, costumes, and technical aspects

Over the centuries, a great deal of creative energy has been spent in *integrating* these elements, making them all smooth-flowing parts of the storytelling process.

And what makes a great musical, one that delights audiences for generations? A great musical must have:

- *Brains*—Intelligence on the part of all the creative and performing talents involved.
- *Heart*—Emotional content that audiences can connect with, both on the opening night and generations afterward.
- *Courage*—The audacity to do something new and innovative.

And you thought that trinity was just a plot device in MGM's *The Wizard of Oz*? Well, from *The Mikado* to *Oklahoma!* to *Hamilton*, the best musicals all have these three assets.

Critics and awards do not make a musical "great." Condescending or negative reviews for *Cats, Les Miserables, Miss Saigon*, and *The Lion King* did not prevent those shows from achieving decade-plus runs. Critics may carp, but millions of theatergoers consider them great musicals—and so they are. (Though to be frank, I hate *Cats*.)

Am I suggesting that a flop cannot be great? Well, yes. A show without a large, lasting audience cannot have much of a commercial or artistic impact.

What to Expect in the Pages Ahead

Every chapter in this book has been revised since the original edition, and several chapters are entirely new. It examines the artistic, business, and social forces in various cities and countries that helped to forge important new ideas and trends—a process that continues today, in New York, London, and elsewhere.

Our journey begins in ancient Greece, where drama was invented as musical theatre. The Romans borrowed most of their theatrical conventions from the Greeks, adding several of their own. The Middle Ages brought musical dramatizations of Bible stories. Then came commedia dell'arte, pantomimes, and comic opera, all of which involved music. By the time grand opera appeared in the 1700s, a separately evolved popular musical theatre was already thriving in much of Europe.

In Paris during the 1840s, composer Jacques Offenbach turned operetta into an international sensation. After some developments in Vienna, London was home to the ingenious creations of Gilbert and Sullivan, and early burlesque. Meanwhile, the United States developed its own homegrown forms of musical theatre. New York saw the first blackface minstrel shows, and Broadway introduced "extravaganza." The rise of British music halls, American vaudeville, and burlesque contributed elements to a later genre that both England and America would lay claim to—the musical comedy.

After years of British theatrical dominance, American musicals gained worldwide popularity in the twentieth century. The groundwork laid by George M. Cohan and Victor Herbert made it possible for Jerome Kern and a succession of creative talents to turn Broadway into one of the world's primary sources of musical entertainment. Cole Porter, the Gershwins, and the team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart brought musical comedy to new creative heights. In the 1940s, Rodgers teamed with Oscar Hammerstein II to create the organically integrated musical, a variation that enjoyed worldwide acclaim for decades. Now labeled by many sources as "the golden age of the Broadway musical," this era came to an end with the rise of hard rock music in the 1960s.

Broadway was reduced to a side street of popular culture—still profitable, but rarely noticed by most of the general public. But musical theatre continued to thrive, on Broadway and beyond. The twenty-first century has brought a fresh wave of musical comedies, mega-musicals, adaptations of old movies, and a flurry of "jukebox musicals" (using established pop songs). As public tastes change, musicals must do the same.

This book discusses hundreds of essential musicals and creative talents. If some of your favorites are missing, my apologies; a 2,500-year chronicle crammed into one volume must be selective. My goal is to be informative, not exhaustive. For each

musical discussed in the text, you will find the year of its premiere and the number of performances listed in parenthesis. If not already clarified by the surrounding text, I also specify the city.

Rich in stories about great shows and the people who made them happen, *Musical Theatre: A History* is a celebration designed to delight new fans and veteran aficionados alike, a joyous book about a joyous form of entertainment. So curtain up, light the lights, and we will begin our story in an era when the first stage musicals were done without benefit of any curtains or artificial lighting.

A Note to Educators and Students

I considered including a list of performance videos links. But such videos have a tendency to come and go without warning. So I have posted those links on my website, where they can be regularly updated. You can find them at www.musicals101.com/mthvid.htm.

1

Ancient Times to 1800: "Playgoers, I Bid You Welcome!"

Theatre is a communal activity where one or more people act out a story for an audience. Musical theatre can trace its roots back to prehistoric religious rituals. These ceremonies involved costumes, makeup, props, choreography—and music in the form of chants, accompanied by drums and possibly other instruments.

However, there is little solid evidence as to what the earliest of these rituals were like. So we will begin our discussion with the earliest form of musical theatre to leave behind a substantial literature. As it happens, it is the earliest known form of drama.

"The Glory That Was Greece"

Anyone who thinks that *Oklahoma!* was the first musical to integrate music and dialogue is off by more than two thousand years. At the very beginnings of theatre in ancient Greece, the first dramas were musicals that used dialogue, song, and dance as integrated storytelling tools. Isn't it reassuring to know that show tunes have been around for two thousand and five hundred years?

You didn't know that the classic tragedies and comedies of ancient Greece were musicals? Small wonder! Many scholarly histories of theatre do not even mention the existence of musicals, so the last thing they would admit to is that drama began as musical theatre.

Some educators try to get around this by classifying early Greek drama as "lyric theatre." Well, that is just another way of saying "musical theatre." Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes were not only playwrights; they were also composers and lyricists. Their plays used music and dance as interwoven storytelling elements. Call these works "lyric theatre" or whatever else you like; they were musicals. When you envision the birth of musical theatre, don't picture the bright lights of Broadway—think of a sun-drenched hillside in Athens, fifth century BCE.

By that time, Athens was a thriving city-state with a population of approximately one hundred thousand. With trade ties that reached from the Mediterranean to inner Asia, it was one of the ancient world's business and cultural centers. By the fifth century BCE, the Acropolis, the massive, flat-topped rock that towers over the city at some five hundred feet above sea level, was adorned with a collection of temples and other public buildings. They included the world's first stone theatre, a semicircular open-air structure cut into the southern base of the Acropolis. This theatre was a place to honor the gods, dedicated to the divine patron of agriculture, wine, and joy itself—the god Dionysus.

The Greeks had a tradition stretching back to prehistoric times of honoring Dionysus with choral performances. These musical retellings of mythological tales were known as *Dithyrambs*. According to Aristotle, Thespis of Icaria was a writer-composer as well as a performer. In a moment lost somewhere between legend and history, Thespis became the first soloist to step out of a dithyramb chorus to enact a specific role by singing and speaking lines. So he is revered as the inventor of acting (actors are still called *thespians*) and of a new form of dithyramb called *tragedy*.

When Athens held its first tragedy competition in 534 BCE, Thespis won. This contest was part of the annual five-day celebration of spring known as the Dionysia, when Athens honored Dionysus with athletic and artistic events. Imagine the Super Bowl, Olympics, World Cup, and Tony Awards all taking place in the same week, and you have some idea of the excitement this festival generated.

Over time, three distinct types of drama evolved, each of which incorporated music and dance:

- *Tragedy* used stories taken from Greek mythology. These plays delved into the darkest subjects, including murder (*Electra*), revenge (*Medea*), and incest (*Oedipus*). The characters existed solely in their dramatic framework, never referring to current events. Dramatists could alter the details of legends in order to make a point. Violence was never enacted on stage, but could be described after occurring offstage.
- *Comedy* was lighter and usually provided a happy resolution to the plot. Characters addressed the audience, mentioning recent news events and current celebrities—even if the plot was set in the past. A separate comedy competition was added as of 487 BCE. Old or Attic Comedy took aim at specific issues and individuals; Middle Comedy (starting about 404 BCE) avoided political subjects and dropped the chorus; Late Comedy (from the mid-fourth century BCE onward) reflected a decline in Athenian culture by focusing on the cost of foolishness and moral weakness.
- *Satyr plays* involved a mythological race of half-man/half-beasts. Exclusively male, these creatures lived in a state of perpetual (and visible) sexual arousal, which made them perfect mirrors of impetuous masculine behavior. Although these plays gave "satire" its name, their content was not necessarily what we would call satirical.

Drama reached other cities, but the Dionysia competitions made Athens the center of theatrical activity in Greece. Athenians saw these contests as both a form of religious

worship and an expression of civic pride. Plays provided a chance to act out the never-ending moral and intellectual debates that were a defining element of Athenian democracy. Participation in the theatre, whether on stage, behind the scenes, or in the audience, was vital for self-respecting Athenians of every class.

The city's democratic government supervised the competitions. Before each festival, a magistrate selected a slate of competing dramatists. Initially, each dramatist served as his own director and leading actor, but over time those tasks became separate jobs. In a society where the only women with public lives were priestesses or prostitutes, men played all the stage roles. Early casts consisted of volunteers. By the later fifth century BCE all actors were professionals paid by the city.

All production expenses fell to a volunteer producer or *choregos*. The wealthiest men in Athens campaigned for this costly honor. The winning dramatist earned bragging rights and a modest cash prize, while a choregos won nothing more than the right to build a triumphal column to honor himself. Such was the perceived value of sponsoring a theatrical success.

Showtime in Ancient Athens

Depending on the city's finances, admission to the Theatre of Dionysus was either nominal or free. All performances were held in full daylight. Spending hours in blazing sunshine would have been pleasant in early spring, when daytime temperatures hovered around 60 degrees Fahrenheit (15.5 Celsius).

The front row of stone seats was reserved for priests, magistrates, and other dignitaries. Behind them, fifteen thousand spectators filled concentric marble benches that formed a bowl-shaped semi-sphere surrounding three sides of the flat, rectangular performance space known as the *orchestra*. This stone floor could be accessed from passageways on the left and right. Today, the location of the original theatre is filled by the ruins of a replacement structure built in Roman times. But surviving Greek theatres are acoustical marvels; words spoken from the performance space are audible in the last row. Behind the orchestra stood the *skene*, a tent or stone cottage that the actors used to change costumes and store props. It could also be used to represent a building in the play, and provided support for painted scenic panels called *skenographia*.

During performances, actors wore masks to make it easier for the audience to tell one character from another. These masks also made it possible for actors to play multiple roles without causing confusion. None of these masks has survived, but it is believed that they included small megaphone-like cones to help amplify the voice. Since masks rendered faces invisible, the actors relied on vocal pitch and physical gestures to express emotion. The male actors used padded body suits to depict female physical characteristics, as well as those of animals and mythical creatures.

During competitions, several plays were offered each day. Theatre audiences were enthusiastic. They responded to successful plays with laughter, cheers, and tears, and were known to express disapproval so vociferously that some performances were cut short. Each competition was judged by ten *kritai*, citizens elected by lot who were not necessarily experts (appropriate ancestors for today's *critics*). They voted on tablets that

were placed in an urn. To give the gods a say in the results, only five of the tablets were randomly drawn to select the winning play.

The chorus sang, danced, and provided their own accompaniment using the harp, flute, and other instruments. Bawdy humor, bathroom references, and even giant phalluses were common features on the Athenian stage. Songs allowed the chorus to comment on the play as well as take part in the dramatic action. Stretches of *monologue* (one speaker) or *dialogue* (two or more) were interspersed with musical contributions by the chorus. Since songs were often used to advance the plot and develop characters, it is fair to classify some of these early Greek dramas as artistically integrated musicals.

After Athens declined, most of its plays were lost. Of the more than seventy plays credited to Aeschylus, only seven full-length scripts survive. The texts of only four-dozen ancient Greek plays endured. While some evidence of ancient musical notation has been discovered, the melodies used in surviving plays are long gone, so we do not know what Athenian show tunes sounded like. The lyrics had to be audible to an audience of thousands, so the tunes must have lent themselves to vocal projection, and the accompanying instrumentals had to be relatively simple.

The Birds

One of the comic musicals familiar to ancient Athenians is *The Birds*, written in 414 BCE by Aristophanes (448–385 BCE). At age thirty-four, Aristophanes was already a past winner of the Dionysia and one of the most famous men in Greece. *The Birds* is an excellent example of how music was used in early Greek drama.

In this lighthearted fantasy, common citizens Eulpides and Pisthetaerus, fed up with life in Athens, set out in search of Epops, a mythical king who transformed himself into a bird. The two men offer the bird king a bold proposal: since birds rule the skies that sit between earth and the gods, why not build a magical wall to separate the two, and demand tribute from both sides? After all, gods need human worship as much as men need divine assistance! The birds (played by the chorus) gather in conference, and promise not to peck the two men to pieces—so long as the judges will grant this play a unanimous victory in the Dionysia. The birds then agree to erect the wall, and a nightingale proclaims their new power over both men and gods.

The nightingale appears in the form of a flute player who introduces the *parabasis*, a feature unique to Old Comedy in which the chorus offered three songs, alternating with three speeches. These could be integrated into the action of the play or offer departures from it. In this case, Aristophanes has the birds begin by retelling the creation story from their point of view, claiming that their origin predates the gods of Olympus. Their song then assures humankind:

> If you recognize our divine power,
> We shall be your guide and inspiration.
> Through us you will know
> The winds and the seasons,
> Summer, winter, and the temperate months.

We shall not withdraw like Zeus to distant clouds,
But shall be among you and shall give
To you and to your children
And your children's children,
Health and wealth, long life, peace,
Youth, laughter, songs and feasts;
In short, you will all be so happy
That you will be exhausted with pleasure.

Euelpides and Pisthetaerus are given wings and feathers as the massive walls of "Cloud-cuckooland" are erected. When Pisthetaerus sets himself up as dictator, Euelpides returns to earth in disgust.

The Olympian gods miss their earthly sacrifices and send Poseidon and Hercules to offer Pisthetaerus a chance to marry Zeus's beautiful handmaiden Basileia. Pisthetaerus accepts, realizing that this marriage will cement his power over both gods and mortals. The play ends as the bird chorus offers a hymn of praise to the bride.

What brought the golden age of Athenian musical theatre to an end? After decades of war, Athens was ultimately defeated by the Spartans in 404 BC, and the city's fortunes never recovered. It was ruled by a series of petty dictators who soon terrorized the life out of the theatre. By the time Philip II of Macedon conquered the city sixty-six years later, Athenian drama was a thing of the past—but what a past!

The Roman Empire

The Romans took good ideas from those they conquered, so it is not surprising that they co-opted most Greek theatrical conventions. The mixture of dialogue, song, and dance was retained. Romans also produced plays as part of festivals honoring their gods, but there was no government involvement. In fact, for several centuries, many in the Roman establishment saw theatre, with its reversals of social norms, as a dangerous influence.

As attitudes changed, the Romans built semicircular open-air stone theatres in their cities. But for many years, Roman dramas were presented in simple, temporary wooden structures. Prominent citizens had priority seating, with the general public scrambling for bench space or standing room. The performing area was a raised wooden platform. A drop curtain was lowered into a trough at the front of the stage to signify the start of performances.

There was no chorus in Roman plays, so casts were small, and there could be substantial interplay between the actors and boisterous audiences. To make dance steps more audible, actors attached metal chips (*sabilla*) to their sandals, precursors of modern-day tap shoes. Initially, all of the actors in Roman theatre were men, so a color code was developed to clarify who was who. Wig color signified age or status (black=young, white=old, red=slave), a yellow robe indicated a woman, and a yellow tassel indicated a god. Eventually, female slaves played women's roles, but the color codes remained in use.

craft guilds were taking an active role in these productions. There were various types of medieval music-drama:

- *Mystery plays* were dramatizations of Bible stories.
- *Miracle plays* involved the lives (true or fictional) of saints.
- *Morality plays* were allegories illustrating the seven deadly sins.
- *Folk plays* involved popular myths, such as the legend of Robin Hood.

Some of these works have survived, such as *The Play of Herod* and *The Play of Daniel.* Both are sung through, with instrumentation that includes recorder, harp, bagpipe, and rebec (a type of fiddle). Polished metal bowls could be used to reflect sunlight on performers—in effect, the first follow spots.

In the 1400s, *commedia dell'arte* developed in Italy, where it remained popular for the next four centuries. Itinerant commedia troupes toured all over continental Europe. Always on the move, these companies used no written scripts. They improvised performances using stock characters to enact various stock scenarios. Commedia performers used partial face masks to help define their characters.

Commedia plots usually involved a pair of young lovers (*inammorati*) thwarted by one or more elders (*vecchi*), but eventually outsmarting them with the help of a sympathetic servant such as *Harlequin* or *Columbina*. Actors mixed traditional jokes with topical references to current events. Comic stage battles were accentuated by using a slapstick, two flexible pieces of wood that simulated a loud "smack!" Although the slapstick has fallen out of use, its name is still used to describe knockabout physical humor.

During the Renaissance, Italian intellectuals rediscovered ancient Greek drama. Because of the extensive use of choral verse in the surviving scripts, it was assumed that these plays were sung-through. In the 1570s, this error led Monteverdi and a group of artists known as the Florentine Camarata to use Greek drama as the model for the first grand operas. So, instead of musical theatre being a descendant of opera, it turns out that opera is actually a descendant of musical theater.

Shakespeare included the occasional song in his plays, but none of these works could be described as a musical. In France, at the end of the 1600s, Moliere turned out several comedies with songs for Louis XIV's court at Versailles. Moliere's *Le Mariage Force* (1664) and *Le Bourgoise Gentilhomme* (1670) used music provided by composer Jean Baptiste Lully. However, these musical entertainments inspired no trends.

Comic and Ballad Opera

During the Age of Enlightenment (1715–89) the first stirrings of popular musical theater occurred in England, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and France. Each of these countries was enjoying different degrees of prosperity and cultural renewal. Coupled with the gradual growth of cities, this created a ready-made audience for new and more sophisticated forms of entertainment. Grand opera was popular, but primarily among the upper and newly formed middle classes. Other forms of stage entertainment enjoyed a popularity that appealed to the rich and poor alike.

In the 1700s, a typical theatrical evening anywhere in Europe meant a program of several varied works. After a brief one-act curtain raiser came a full-length play, followed by a shorter afterpiece. Any of these offerings might involve songs. Producers and publishers used various terms to describe musical stage works, which has led to some confusion among scholars. At least three separate genres of musical theatre developed during this period:

- *Comic opera* used operatic conventions and musical styles to amusing effect, usually involving a heavy dose of romance. Michael Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl* (1845) told the story of an Austrian noblewoman kidnapped in infancy, who, ignorant of her heritage, falls in love with the polish aristocrat who carried her off. The score included the aria "I Dreamed I Dwelt in Marble Halls," which became a staple in the soprano concert repertory. Comic opera was a precursor of *operetta*, a form that would come into its own in France during the mid-1800s (see Chapter 2).
- *Pantomime* included songs and dialogue, dance, physical comedy, acrobatics, and special effects. It retained several commedia dell'arte characters, including Harlequin. These works were popular with general audiences. The Pantomime tradition in the United States would reach its peak in the 1870s (see Chapter 3). A different form of pantomime evolved in England, where such shows are still presented as Christmas entertainments for children.

Ballad operas used existing popular ballads and operatic arias, usually in such a way that the original title or lyrics of a song added a subtext. The first ballad opera ever written is the considered by many to be the ancestor of English-language musical theatre.

The Beggar's Opera: Frustration as the Mother of Invention

People can react to unemployment in different ways. The world might be a far happier place if more followed the example of John Gay (1682–1732), whose thwarted job hunt inspired him to pick up a pen and invent a new kind of musical theatre.

British writers of the early 1700s had little income from their creative efforts and were dependent on political appointments or the patronage of wealthy aristocrats. As the youngest son of a youngest son, Gay came to London at age twenty-two with no title, no money, and only a few useful contacts. Thanks to a witty mind and an eloquent pen, he made friends among London's literati, including Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. Gay's connections in the Tory Party brought him government jobs during the reign of Queen Anne, but all that ended when her successor came to the throne.

German-born King George I left the everyday management of his new kingdom in the capable but corrupt hands of Sir Robert Walpole, who is considered Great Britain's first prime minister. As leader of the Whig party, Walpole blocked the careers of many Tories, including John Gay. This left the aspiring writer and his circle of discontented intellectuals drowning their frustrations in ale as they pondered the foibles and injustices of London society.

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It was widely known that Walpole enriched himself at the nation's expense. Under Walpole, corruption became systemic. Administrative posts were available to the highest bidder. Once in a job, purchasers felt entitled to profit on their investment. For example, after the keeper of London's Newgate Prison paid a princely five thousand pounds to obtain his job, he openly charged prisoners hundreds of pounds for accommodations with access to light and fresh air. The poor had to settle for dark, dungeon-like cells.

One of the most celebrated lawbreakers of the day was Jonathan Wild, a minor criminal who organized the thieves and pickpockets of London into a citywide operation. For more than a dozen years, he posed as a crime fighter, arranging for victims to get back their stolen property, for a fee—much of which wound up in Wild's pocket. Eventually arrested, Wild continued to run his criminal empire from a cell in Newgate. Executed in 1725, he left behind several wives and numerous children.

At the other end of the social spectrum, grand opera from Italy was all the rage among London's high society—some of whom had obtained rank and fortune through dubious means. Foreign composers and singers were imported at great cost. Feuding sopranos Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni each earned two thousand pounds or more for a single season in London. Fireworks were anticipated when both women were cast in the London premiere of Handel's *Alessandro* (1726), but the composer balanced their roles note for note, so that neither singer could complain.

When Gay realized that he would probably never receive another government appointment, he penned a theater piece designed to attack the corrupt system. If government administrators were no better than common thieves, Gay reasoned that respectability was nothing more than a pretense. Why not use the format and conventions of Italian opera, so beloved by the upper class, to illustrate that class's resemblance to low criminals? He borrowed operatic melodies as well as barroom ballads, and set them to his original and sometimes scathing lyrics. The result came to be known as the *ballad opera*. But the extensive use of dialogue and the profusion of popular-style melodies make it easy to see that his creation was a form of musical play.

Gay found London theatre owners uncertain about presenting his potentially controversial script. The management of the Lincoln's Inn Fields Playhouse took it on—at least in part because Gay's benefactor, the Duchess of Queensberry, promised to cover all costs. A curious crowd of thirteen hundred packed the theatre for the premiere on January 29, 1728, including Prime Minister Walpole. We can only guess if he had any idea that he was about to face a withering comic attack, set to music.

Plot Summary

The Beggar's Opera (1728) opens with a humble beggar explaining that he has written an opera. He boasts that it follows the required forms without being "unnatural, like those in vogue." In a reference to Handel's dueling divas, the beggar says that the two leading female roles are so equal "that it is impossible for either of them to take offence."

The plot involves Macheath. Clearly inspired by Jonathan Wild, this professional thief and murderer calls himself a "Capitan" and is "as good as a Lord." This charming

criminal has secretly married Polly, the not-so-innocent daughter of Mr. Peachum, a "respectable" businessman who fences stolen goods for the thieves of London.

Anxious to have his daughter's marriage annulled, Peachum learns that Lucy, daughter of the jailer Lockit, is another one of Macheath's romantic conquests. Worse yet, Lucy is pregnant. Peachum and Lockit arrange for Macheath's arrest, knowing that he will hang. In prison, Macheath pays a hefty bribe to obtain a better cell and complains: "The fees here are so many, and so exorbitant, but few fortunes can bear the expense of getting off handsomely, or of dying like a gentleman."

When four additional women appear claiming that Macheath is the father of their babies, the scoundrel tells the executioner that he is ready to die. But the play's beggar-author reappears. When scolded that "an Opera must end happily," he admits that "in this kind of drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about." And so, Macheath receives a pardon, swears to find partners for the women he has wronged, and publicly confirms his marriage to Polly, even while calling her a "slut."

Of the sixty-nine songs in *The Beggar's Opera*, forty-one used melodies taken from tavern ballads. The rest were taken from operas and other classical sources. British did most of their socializing in taverns, where customers joined in the singing of songs that ranged from the sentimental to the comic to the patriotic.

Barroom ballads remained a mainstay in Britain and its colonies for decades to come. In 1812, while American lawyer Francis Scott Key watched the British navy attacking Baltimore harbor, he was inspired by the sight of his country's flag waving amid the bombardment. He composed a poem, "Defense of Fort M'Henry," which appeared in a local newspaper. A music publisher made some adjustments and set it to the tune of the barroom ballad "To Anacreon in Heaven." The result was "The Star Spangled Banner," which the United States would adopt as its national anthem.

Although the melodies of *The Beggar's Opera* were borrowed, Gay's lyrics were original and quite specific to the characters and plot. In this scene, Peachum and his wife discover that their daughter has married Macheath. As it happens, the Peachums themselves were never legally married. The melody Gay used in this excerpt comes from "Grim King of the Ghosts," a ballad about a vain girl forced to marry a phantom. Audiences would have appreciated the connection between Polly's situation and that of the girl in the original song. The dialogue uses frank language:

MRS. PEACHUM: I knew she was always a proud slut; and now the wench hath played the fool and married, because forsooth she would do like the gentry. Can you support the expense of a husband, hussy, in gaming, drinking, and whoring? Have you money enough to carry on the daily quarrels of man and wife about who shall squander most? There are not many husbands and wives who can bear the charges of plaguing one another in a handsome way. If you must be married, could you introduce nobody into our family but a highwayman? Why, thou foolish jade, thou wilt be as ill-used, and as much neglected, as if thou hadst married a lord!

PEACHUM: Let not your anger, my dear, break through the rules of decency, for the captain looks upon himself in the military capacity, as a gentleman by his profession. Besides what he hath already, I know he is in a fair way of getting, or

of dying; and both these w
white. Tell me, hussy, are y
MRS. PEACHUM: With Po
person of distinction. Yes,
PEACHUM: What, is the we
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upon liking? (*Pinches Polly*
POLLY: (*screaming*) Oh!
MRS. PEACHUM: How the
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PEACHUM: Why, Polly, I sh
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AIR (To the tune of "Grim K

POLLY: *Can love be controlle*
Will cupid our mothers obey?
Though my heart were as froze
At his flame t'would have melte
When he kissed me so closely h
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MRS. PEACHUM: Then all t
PEACHUM: And Macheath
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POLLY: I did not marry him (
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of dying; and both these ways, let me tell you, are most excellent chances were white. Tell me, hussy, are you ruined or no?

MRS. PEACHUM: With Polly's fortune, she might very well have gone off to a person of distinction. Yes, that you might, you pouting slut!

PEACHUM: What, is the wench dumb? Speak, or I'll make you plead by squeezing out an answer from you. Are you really bound wife to him, or are you only upon liking? (*Pinches Polly.*)

POLLY: (*screaming*) Oh!

MRS. PEACHUM: How the mother is to be pitied who has handsome daughters! Locks, bolts, bars, and lectures of morality are nothing to them—they break through them all. They have as much pleasure in cheating a father and mother as in cheating at cards.

PEACHUM: Why, Polly, I shall soon know if you were married by Macheath's keeping from our house.

AIR (To the tune of "Grim King of the Ghosts")

POLLY: *Can love be controlled by advice?*
Will cupid our mothers obey?
Though my heart were as frozen as ice,
At his flame t'would have melted away.
When he kissed me so closely he pressed,
T'was so sweet that I must have complied:
So I thought it both safest and best
To marry, for fear you should chide.

MRS. PEACHUM: Then all the hopes of our family are gone for ever and ever!

PEACHUM: And Macheath may hang his father and mother-in-law, in hope to get into their daughter's fortune.

POLLY: I did not marry him (as 'tis the fashion) coolly and deliberately for honor or money. But I love him.

MRS. PEACHUM: Love him! Worse and worse! I thought the girl had been better bred.

At a time when London stage productions were lucky to run for a week, *The Beggar's Opera* reached sixty-two performances, making it the world's first long-running musical hit. Its lyrics were heard in every ale house and front parlor. So were its jokes, including a reference to "Bob Booty," a nickname for the unscrupulous Robert Walpole.

When Gay announced plans for a sequel called *Polly*, Walpole's government banned it. Although the published text of *Polly* became a bestseller, the author soon withdrew from London to a benefactor's country estate. Four years after the premiere of *The Beggar's Opera,* John Gay died at age forty-seven. Future ballad operas avoided political content. None of these later works are performed today.

The Beggar's Opera became one of the most frequently performed English stage works of the eighteenth century. A 1923 London revival ran for three years, igniting

fresh interest. Laurence Olivier sang the role of Macheath on the big screen in 1953, and rocker Roger Daltrey headlined a 1983 British television production. The text provided the inspiration for Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper/The Threepenny Opera* (1928), which updated the action to Victorian London. With an all-new score, this work became an international sensation in its own right. (We cover this in Chapter 12.)

Ever since *The Beggar's Opera*, British and American audiences have shown an affinity for musicals that tweak the establishment's nose. A long list of writers, from Gilbert and Sullivan to the creators of *The Book of Mormon*, can look back on John Gay as an artistic forefather.

Such are the earliest known roots of musical theatre. While some of these works are occasionally performed today, the modern musical's family tree can be traced no further back than the 1850s, when a new strain of lyric drama appeared in Paris.

2

Continental Operetta (1840–1900): "Typical of France"

On the evening of April 12, 1867, the cream of French society was packed into a Paris theatre for the premiere of *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*. While awaiting the overture, the glittering audience had no way of knowing that the premiere was on the brink of being cancelled.

Backstage, the star soprano Hortense Schneider received word that the French government would not permit her to wear a bejeweled medallion. It was a replica of those that actual royalty wore as a mark of rank. Schneider didn't care who would be offended, and refused to go on without the decoration. As she raised royal hell, curtain time came and went. Composer and producer Jacques Offenbach, who had frequently battled with her over the years, finally decided that the curtain had been held long enough. He strode out into the orchestra pit, and struck up the overture.

As Offenbach expected, when Schneider heard the ravishing melodies composed especially for her, any thought of letting an understudy go on evaporated. She went on without wearing the controversial bauble. But when Schneider posed for a portrait of herself as 'La Grande-Duchesse,' she made sure the medal was prominently displayed on her breast. And why not? The horde of royals crowding nightly into Schneider's dressing room (and her boudoir) soon led contemporaries to refer to her as "le passage du princes."

The French like to believe that everything of value in Western culture originated in France. Well, drama and great cooking were first cultivated in Greece, opera was invented in Italy, electric light was developed in the United States, and attitude was perfected by Asians when the ancient Gauls were still building mud huts. But what we now know as the modern musical first appeared in Paris, for which we can be eternally grateful. The composer most responsible for developing this new genre was not born in France. From the very start, the modern musical was an international art form.

Paris

The Romans built the first known settlement on the island that sits where the River Seine transacts with an ancient trade route. After the first Frankish kings made Paris

their capital, it gradually spread out on both sides of the Seine in a jumble of streets and neighborhoods. Realizing that uprisings would be impossible to control in such a city, monarchs preferred to spend most of their time at a safe distance.

Theatre thrived in the city by the 1600s, thanks in part the encouragement of courtiers and bureaucrats. The poor of Paris exercised their mob power with riots in the late eighteenth century, culminating in the upheavals of the French Revolution (1789–99). In the bloody years that followed, the blade of the guillotine rose and fell relentlessly, as did a series of governments, but Paris remained a center of the arts, including music and theatre.

When Napoleon Bonaparte was forced out of power in 1815, his illegitimate nephew Louis, who had been prince of Holland, was also deposed. More than three decades later, the revolution of 1848 led to the formation of a new French Republic. Louis Bonaparte used his famous last name to get himself elected president. Bored by constitutional limitations, he staged a coup in 1851. Out of respect to his dead cousin, who had technically ruled for a few days following the first Bonaparte's abdication, Louis declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. Historians call his eighteen-year reign the Second Empire.

While Napoleon III had little regard for civil rights, he instituted reforms and encouraged modernization of the French economy. He also had the luck to come to power just as the industrial revolution created new jobs for the working class and new opportunities for investors and entrepreneurs.

The emperor gave Paris a facelift, demolishing twisted old neighborhoods to make way for wide boulevards and grand public parks—not only ornamental, but allowing better crowd control. Napoleon III knew only too well that four predecessors had been forced off the throne by mobs barricading the streets of Paris. By deftly responding to shifts in the vox populi, he enjoyed extraordinary popularity.

The Birth of Operetta

Theater and opera had long been part of Parisian life, attracting talent to the city—not only from the rest of France, but from other countries. In 1833, a fourteen-year-old Jewish native of Cologne, Germany, arrived in Paris to study the cello. Preferring the excitement of making music to the tedium of classroom studies, he soon dropped out of the Conservatoire, developing a reputation as a soloist and composer. To be as French as possible, he converted to Catholicism and changed his first name from "Jacob" to become Jacques Offenbach (1819–80). He wanted to create a new kind of musical entertainment that would offer more fun than grand opera while retaining a degree of musical sophistication.

Florimonde Ronger was already attempting this, with limited success. He protected his career as a church organist by doing his stage work under the pseudonym Hervé (1825–92). In 1854, he presented more than thirty of his own operettas, and showcased several early pieces by Offenbach. So why is Offenbach celebrated while Hervé is almost forgotten? To answer that, let's start with a definition:

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> The *operetta* is a versatile form of musical that integrates songs and musical sequences to dramatize a story, retaining the vocal pyrotechnics and forms of grand opera (arias, choruses, act finales, etc.) but relying on more accessible melodies. The songs develop character and/or advance the plot, which can be comic, romantic, or a combination of both.

Hervé's librettos reflected his idiosyncratic sense of humor. The results are hit and miss, and none of his operettas have had lasting popularity. However, Offenbach chose plots that skewered social, political, and personal pretense. The blend of solid stories with Offenbach's infectious melodies have kept his best works entertaining, making him the father of operetta and the grandad of modern musical theatre.

Offenbach's First Hits: *"Entrez, Messieurs, Madames!"*

In 1855, Napoleon III mounted a world's fair designed to show the world that France was thriving. Realizing that this exposition would attract millions of visitors to Paris, Offenbach leased a rundown three-hundred-seat theatre by the Champ Elysee. A little paint, and the newly rechristened Theatre Bouffes-Parisiens was ready for business. It wasn't much, but it was near the fairgrounds and just the right size for intimate musical productions.

Offenbach would have preferred to work on a larger scale, but imperial law forced him to keep it small. To prevent competition with government-sponsored productions, independent theaters were strictly regulated. Offenbach's compositions could be no more than one act in length and utilize no more than three singing characters—an additional silent character could be added by special license. Rather than complain, Offenbach and a small team of librettists embraced these limitations.

The first program at the Theatre Bouffes-Parisiens opened on July 5, 1855. It consisted of four one acts, all with music by Offenbach. Playwright Ludovic Halvey (1834–1908), a civil servant who wrote stage works by night, provided the libretto for the opening prologue, and would coauthor scripts for many of Offenbach's hits.

The main feature was *Les Deux Aveugles* (*The Two Blind Men*), in which two Parisian beggars pretending to be blind squabble over a prime begging spot. Offenbach's style of operetta, which combined opera-sized singing with zany satirical plots, is specifically referred to as *opera-bouffes*. The music was lighter than the bombast one heard in grand opera. But it was still vocally demanding, requiring classically trained voices. Amid all the singing, *Les Deux Aveugles* allowed Parisians to laugh at themselves.

Offenbach's operettas became the "must see" events of the Exposition season. Everybody who was anybody made a point of attending, including members of the imperial court. Because these works had only refined hints of sexual innuendo and were staged with unfailing good taste, respectable women could attend, with or without their husbands. The Exposition had been a tremendous success for Napoleon III, but the most lasting legacy of that summer was the introduction of Offenbach's operettas.

When the Exposition shut down in the autumn, Offenbach leased a larger theatre in the enclosed walkway called the Passage Choiseul. At 668 seats, the auditorium was still

intimate enough to allow every audience member to see and hear clearly. Offenbach christened it Theatre des Bouffes-Parisiens, the name it is known by even today.

On December 29, 1855, Offenbach opened the new house with *Ba-ta-Clan*, the story of Alfred and Virginie, two Parisians shipwrecked in the fictional Far Eastern kingdom of Che-i-noor. Although they have become members of the imperial court, they want nothing more than to return to France. But Emperor Fe-ni-han wants Alfred to succeed him and thwart the royal ambitions of Ko-ko-ri-ko, a captain of the guard (who, in keeping with the legal three-character limit, is discussed but never seen). Alfred and Virginie discover that Fe-ni-han is another stranded Parisian who wound up ruling this Asian country even though he doesn't speak its language. Ko-ko-ri-ko turns out to be a Parisian too, and sends a letter informing the others that he is willing to take the throne and let the rest of them return to France. *Ba-ta-Clan* kept the new Bouffes Parisiens packed for months.

Offenbach composed with astonishing speed, providing audiences with a steady stream of fresh hits. The whacky plots were always rooted in social satire. In *Le 66* (1856), a peasant thinks he holds the winning lottery ticket 66, only to find out that he's actually got number 99. Offenbach's melodies delighted all classes of society, with his music equally at home in seedy taverns and gilded ballrooms.

As tourists visiting Paris brought these melodies home, Offenbach's songs swept Europe, with productions of his operettas sprouting up in Brussels, Berlin, and other theatre centers. Offenbach's own Bouffes company occasionally toured the continent.

The Offenbach "Bounce"

Offenbach lived well, and poured the rest of his profits into new productions and renovations. On one occasion, when two seats in the Bouffes-Parisiens needed repair, Jacques replaced every seat in the theatre. As a result, debt was never far off. By the time the French government lifted its restrictive production regulations in 1858, Offenbach was in desperate need of a money-making hit. Halévy and co-librettist Hector Crémieux conceived a full-scale burlesque of the Greek legend of Orpheus, which had already inspired several operatic versions, including one by Gluck.

In *Orphée aux Enfers/Orpheus in Hell* (1858, 228 performances in Paris) the musician Orpheus goes into the dreaded land of the dead to bring back his deceased wife Eurydice. But in this version he is a philanderer who loathes his equally adulterous spouse, and only makes the trip in order to placate a nagging character named "Public Opinion." Orpheus must first seek assistance from the gods of Olympus.

The gods are depicted as vain, capricious, and sexually amoral, just like Napoleon III's courtiers. And the womanizing Jupiter is a clear satire of the emperor. However, the government made no attempt at censorship. The intention was to evoke laughter, not to incite rebellion or, heaven forbid, to preach morality. So censorship would have looked bad, and displeased (you've guessed it) public opinion.

Initial response to *Orphée aux Enfers* was positive but far from overwhelming. About six weeks into the run, with ticket sales falling, a major critic published an article vigorously condemning the show for "profaning sacred antiquity." Offenbach

published a witty reply in a competing paper, and the public suddenly wanted to see what inspired this controversy. Ticket sales soared, and *Orphee* ran for seven months. The exhausted cast forced the production to close, protesting that it was "unnatural" for any production to run so long!

Orphée aux Enfers was soon revived at the Bouffes, where it passed the three-hundred-performance mark. Its "infernal gallop" remains the most famous can-can melody ever written, a universally recognized musical symbol of French culture. And Napoleon III attended a command performance, visibly enjoying the comic jabs at his court and himself.

Offenbach's melodies are sophisticated but never pretentious. His "upbeat" tunes have a quality that your humble author calls the "Offenbach bounce," an infectious, heady lilt that offers the sonic equivalent of drinking a few glasses of quality champagne. In *Orphée aux Enfers*, the god Mercury's *rondo saltarelle* ("E hop! E hop! / Look out! Look out!") sets feet tapping and makes listeners smile as much on the one hundredth hearing as on the first. Offenbach may not have invented such melodies, but they are a hallmark of his style and a key to his popularity. Imitations of the "Offenbach bounce" remained a permanent feature of European operetta.

Orphée aux Enfers marked the beginning of a dozen golden years for Offenbach. His full-length operettas from this period are sometimes called "Offenbachiades." These "celebrations" boast giddy music, delicious comic plots, and a frank attitude regarding sexual misbehavior.

Thanks to a lack of international copyright laws, American producers could present Offenbach's operettas without paying a penny in royalties. By the 1870s, it was common for ten or more productions of Offenbach to play Broadway during any given year. The composer was not overly concerned by the lack of royalties from the United States. After all, new hits just kept pouring out of his pen.

The year 1864 brought two more crucial talents into Offenbach's team. The first was playwright Henri Meilhac (1831–97), who teamed up with Halévy to create dozens of librettos spoofing everything from ancient mythology to contemporary Parisian society. Offenbach drew inspiration from Meilhac and Halévy's librettos. The resulting operettas were not plays ornamented with songs, but artistically integrated musicals that used songs as a vital part of the storytelling process.

Also joining Offenbach's circle at this time was the first great star of the musical stage, Hortense Schneider (1833–1920). She was no classical beauty, and her singing left something to be desired, but from the time of her Paris debut in Offenbach's *Le Violoneux* (1856), Schneider's charismatic performances made her a star. Offstage, a series of highly publicized love affairs with the rich and powerful only added to her celebrity.

In 1864, after deserting another manager, the petulant Schneider announced her retirement. Offenbach saw his chance and promptly offered her the lead in *La Belle Helene*. She resisted, until he offered an unprecedented salary of two thousand francs a month. Schneider was a true diva, terrorizing coworkers and managers with demands, tantrums, and walkouts. She often battled with Offenbach, who had a fiery temper of his own. Since each professionally needed the other, hatchets were usually buried in time for opening nights.

With gifted librettists and a charismatic star on his team, Offenbach presented a series of hits that would be enjoyed worldwide for decades to come:

- *La Belle Helene* (1864): The legendary beauty Helen is married to the boring King Menalus of Sparta. At the behest of the gods, she is seduced and carried off by Prince Paris of Troy.
- *La Vie Pariesienne* (1866): Two Parisian profligates set out to seduce a Swedish baroness. During a party where servants masquerade as aristocrats, a series of mistaken identities leads the baroness into her loving husband's arms.
- *La Perichole* (1868): A lovely Peruvian street singer must choose between marrying a poor artist or the powerful Spanish viceroy.
- *Les Brigands* (1869): A band of Italian bandits plan to rob a womanizing duke, who unintentionally echoes *The Beggar's Opera* by observing that "one steals in accordance with one's rank." Schneider refused the role intended for her in this show, and broke with Offenbach—only to find no one else could offer comparable successes.

La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein (1867) was the crowning achievement of the "Offenbachiades." It takes place in a fictional duchy ruled by a coquettish noblewoman. She has a weakness for men in uniform, and starts a war in order to find some fresh romantic prospects. She reveals her true intentions in the suggestive "Ah, que j'aime les militaire" ("Oh, How I Love the Military!"):

> Ah! How I love the military!
> Their cocky uniforms,
> Their moustaches and their little plumes ...
> I would like to be their canteen girl!
> I'd always be with them,
> And I would intoxicate them!
> With them, valiant and heady,
> I would launch into battle.

The "plumes" on military helmets at the time were usually stiff and upright. A canteen girl would be the only female among thousands of lonely men, leading to obvious sexual opportunities. Such refined innuendo delighted Parisians, but was expurgated from prudish English translations.

Attracted to the handsome but naïve Private Fritz, the randy Duchess promotes him through the ranks in a matter of minutes. She orders General Fritz (!) to lead her army into battle. This distresses several of her courtiers, including the acoustically named General Boum (the displaced commander), Baron Puck, and Prince Paul (her long-ignored suitor).

After Fritz pulls off a surprise victory by getting the enemy drunk, the Duchess sings the seductive "Dites-lui" ("Tell Him"), telling Fritz that a woman of the court is in love with him, and clearly suggesting that she is the woman. But the bumpkin fails to

get the royal hint and asks for permission to marry his girlfriend Wanda. The insulted Duchess sends him off to get married.

The Duchess then falls for Prince Paul's former tutor, the handsome Baron Grog, who arrives to encourage the long-delayed royal marriage. Grog explains that he can only stick around if the Duchess marries the Prince. The wedding is quickly arranged, and with the Duchess distracted, her courtiers send Fritz off to face a disastrous enemy ambush. The Duchess demotes Fritz, and he happily gives up army life. Grog reveals that he is married, and the newly married Duchess accepts her fate, observing that "when you cannot have what you love, you must love what you have."

La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein premiered at the Theatres des Variétés on April 12, 1867, carefully timed to coincide with Napoleon III's second *Exposition Universelle*. World leaders flocked to Paris—including Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm I and his "Iron Chancellor," Otto Von Bismarck—and all made a point of attending *La Grande-Duchesse*. The show became a massive hit, with productions all across Europe and the Americas. In the title role, Hortense Schneider enjoyed the greatest success of her career.

How Could They Miss the Point?

La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein was a merciless spoof of royalty indulging its desires regardless of the cost to their subjects. But real monarchs flocked to see the show and laughed along with the rest of the audience. Most of these crowned heads were infamous for their excesses. For example:

- Great Britain's Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) had several affairs that resulted in ugly scandals. His mother, Queen Victoria, had to pull all sorts of string to hush things up. That didn't stop the prince from ultimately engaging in hundreds of extramarital encounters. The British public didn't know all the details, but they certainly knew the heir to the throne was a rake.
- When King Ludwig of Bavaria called off his often-postponed wedding to the sister of Austria's Empress Elisabeth, he put the blame on his former fiancé's father. But the real cause was Ludwig himself. Torn between homosexual desires and his Catholic faith, he redirected his passions into building fantasy castles, and sponsoring spectacular productions of Wagner's operas. By 1885, he was millions in debt and planning to borrow more. The only thing that stopped him was his deposition and mysterious death.
- Napoleon III made much of his marriage, but Empress Eugénie was forced to look the other way as her husband indulged in an endless series of "little distractions," usually with women of the imperial court. Appearances were carefully preserved, but these affairs were public knowledge.

How did these men miss the fact that *La Grande-Duchesse*'s comic barbs were aimed squarely at them? Simple; the main character was a woman. When male royals looked into the mirror of *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*, instead of seeing themselves, they saw a hilarious attack on women in power. There are none so blind as those who will not see.

In 1870, Prussia maneuvered Napoleon III into a war. Parisian mobs shouted "Long live the Empire!" and serenaded departing troops with marching songs from *La Grande-Duchesse*. Thanks to inept commanders and outdated tactics, the French suffered a swift and humiliating defeat. When word spread that the emperor was a German prisoner, the same Parisian mobs shouted "Long live the Republic!" and marched on the Tuileries Palace. Empress Eugénie fled the city, and joined her husband in exile as a new republican government surrendered to the Prussians.

Paris refused to accept defeat and declared itself an independent commune. The Communards barricaded the city and held out until May of 1871, when the French and Prussian armies retook the town. Much of the city was left in ruins, and eighteen thousand Parisians were executed for treason. Paris was soon rebuilt, but in the wake of this turmoil, the gaiety of Offenbach's opera-bouffes rang hollow. The once-beloved composer suddenly found himself being vilified in the press as "a filthy German Jew."

In an effort to accommodate changing tastes, Offenbach composed the sort of fantasy extravaganza that was already popular in New York and London. *Le Roi Carotte/The Carrot King* (1872) involved a prince who is deposed by a government of magical vegetables. After this unlikely hit, the composer endured several failures before introducing a four-act version of *Orphée aux Enfers* in 1874. Despite a chorus of 180, this massive production made a profit; it is the text most frequently performed today. Jules Verne's fantastic stories of interplanetary travel inspired Offenbach's successful spectacle *Voyage dans le lune/A Trip to the Moon* (1875).

Hortense Schneider had a harder time of it. When her performance in Hervé's indelicately titled *Le Belle Poule/The Beautiful Old Hen* (1875) led some critics to comment that she looked her age, she retired at age forty-two. Schneider remained a prominent figure in Parisian society until her death in 1920.

At the time of Offenbach's death in 1880, he was hard at work on his only grand opera, *Les Contes des Hoffman*. Ironically, this opera is more widely performed than any of Offenbach's lighter works. Today, his operettas are rarely heard outside of France. Lovers of musical theatre should treat themselves to a taste of Offenbach—they may find him as intoxicating as ever.

Other French composers carried on the operetta tradition. Charles Lecocq's (1832–1918) most popular work was *La Fille de Madame Angot* (1872), the story of an orphan girl during the French Revolution who spurns a middle class marriage in hopes of winning her true love. While competing for that love with a former schoolmate, she gets entangled in a revolutionary plot. It premiered in Brussels, followed by productions worldwide. Several particularly catchy melodies helped to keep this work a favorite

through the end of the century.
Le Petit Duc/The Little Duke (18

Vienna: S

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Vienna: Strauss and *Die Fledermaus*

Vienna's glory days began in the Middle Ages when the politically ambitious Habsburg family made this city their home base. As capital of the Holy Roman Empire, it became an international center for business and education, attracting many great minds and creative talents. By the late 1800s, the waltz was Vienna's musical heartbeat.

As the nation metamorphosed into the Austrian Empire in 1804 and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867, Vienna remained a cultural hub. Its theatres, concert halls, ballrooms, and cafes were in constant need of new music to entertain a diverse and sophisticated public. In the kind of twist that has so often changed the course of theatrical history, Viennese operetta was born when necessity opened the way for talent.

A handful of Vienna's theatres concentrated on musical works, offering grand operas, burlesques, and farces. There was also *singspiele*, a German form of musical theatre which combined spoken dialogue with a mixture of arias, ensembles, and popular-style ballads. Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782) and *The Magic Flute* (1791) are among the best know examples of the genre. In these works, the music and stellar singing claim far more importance than plot and character development.

Franz von Suppé (1819–95) was one of Austria's most popular *singspiele* composers. Of Belgian descent but raised in Italy, he worked as a conductor at several of Vienna's leading theatres. By 1860, he had more than 120 musical stage works to his credit. That same year, a new owner inherited the eleven-hundred-seat Theatre an der Wein. Unable to afford the rights to any of Offenbach's operettas, he asked Suppé to create something in the same style. *Das Pensionat/The Boarding School* (1860) was the first noteworthy Viennese operetta.

Suppé went on to compose more than forty operettas, his most famous being *Die Schone Galathée/The Beautiful Galatea* (1865), which was based on a Greek legend. The sculptor Pygmalion creates a beautiful statue of a woman, names it Galatea, and begs the gods to bring it to life. The wish is granted, but Galatea ignores Pygmalion, flirts with his assistant, and causes havoc. Finding human life too complicated, Galatea gets the gods to change her back into marble. *Die Schone Galathée* became an immediate sensation. Unfortunately, Von Suppé's operettas had no extended life outside the German-speaking world, and are now remembered primarily for their overtures.

In the late 1800s, Vienna's Johann Strauss II (1825–99) was the world's best known composer. His dance music fueled an international craze for waltzes and polkas. Austria's revered Emperor Franz Joseph was not nearly as popular as "The Waltz King." It seemed only natural that Strauss should try his hand at operetta, but his early attempts had short runs. What he lacked was a solid libretto.

Playwright Franz Richard Geneé obliged by adapting *Le Réveillon*, a play by Halévy and Meilhac. *Die Fledermaus/The Bat* (Vienna 1874, 16 performances) involved

Dr. Valke, who seeks revenge for the night that a friend left him on the side of a suburban road, drunk and dressed as a bat. The prankster was Eisenstein, who happens to be facing a brief stint in jail for insulting a minor official. Valke persuades Eisenstein to put off jail for one night to attend a gala ball being thrown by a wealthy Russian, Prince Orlofsky. Eisenstein agrees, accepting the suggestion that he masquerade as a marquis. Valke has also invited Eisenstein's wife Rosalinda (who comes masked) and their housemaid Adele (who "borrows" one of Rosalinda's new gowns), as well as Herr Frank, governor of the city jail where Eisenstein is set to spend time.

At the party, Orlovsky warns that anyone who appears bored will be thrown out, so each must find their own pleasure ("Chacun a son gout!"). Eisenstein unwittingly tries to seduce his masked wife, and becomes his soon-to-be jailer's new drinking buddy. Throw in a few twists, like Rosalinda's onetime lover Alfred (an aria-spouting Italian tenor) barging into Eisenstein's house and getting arrested in his place, and you have enough mistaken identities to fill an evening. The next morning at the jail, everything is sorted out. Eisenstein will do his time, his wife's thwarted infidelity with the tenor is overlooked, Orlovsky becomes Adele's patron, and everyone blames their behavior on "his majesty, King Champagne."

Strauss filled the score with Offenbach-style bounce—and several irresistible waltzes. At the party, when Eisenstein accuses Adele of being his maid, she boldly treats it as a jest. In "Mein Herr Marquis," Strauss turns Adele's laughter into coloratura fireworks. A loose translation from the original German:

> My way of speaking, my self-command,
> My waistline, my figure ...
> You'll never detect the likes of these in a housemaid!
> You must admit that it's a laughable mistake.
> Yes, a funny story, ha, ha, ha,
> What a cause to ha, ha, ha,
> So funny, you'll excuse me, ha, ha, ha,
> If I laugh, ha, ha, ha!

The original Vienna run of *Die Fledermaus* at the Theatre an der Wein seemed cursed. Shut down by a booking conflict, after it reentered the theatre's repertory, the original Dr. Falke collapsed and died on stage mid-performance. Soon afterward, the production shut down at a total of sixty-eight performances.

It was not until the early twentieth century that better translations and changing tastes made *Die Fledermaus* an international staple. In both Europe and the United States, it is customary for opera companies to present it on New Year's Eve, with guest performers brought in to entertain during Orlofsky's party scene. Strauss composed a dozen more operettas, but *Die Fledermaus* remains his best known hit—and one of the defining cultural expressions of imperial Vienna.

Vienna's composers kept churning out operettas. Every now and then, one broke through to an international audience. Carl Milloker (1842–99) did it with *Der Bettlestudent/The Beggar Student* (1882), a tuneful farce involving a poor student

passing himself off as a wealthy nobleman. By the end of the nineteenth century, many assumed that the golden age of Viennese operetta had passed, but it would return again in the early twentieth century.

By that time, two other cities had become the creative epicenters of the musical theatre. And both of those cities enjoyed forms of variety entertainment that were very much reflections of their audiences.

3

Music Halls and Minstrel Shows: When Ribaldry and Racism Sang and Danced

If we could step into a London music hall of the 1890s, we would find a boisterous audience singing along and maintaining an active dialogue with the performers. There are cockneys in the top balcony, office clerks and their families in the stalls, and wealthy "toffs" in the mezzanine and box seats. Many in the audience are genially inebriated, and all are applauding male impersonator Vesta Tillie. Dressed in top hat and tails and twirling a silver-handled walking stick, she is as fashionable as any gentleman in the house. She finishes "The Girls I've Left Behind Me," and—after stepping offstage for a quick change—reappears as a bedraggled London hobo. The cheers are deafening, because this costume means she is about to sing her trademark hit, "Burlington Bertie from Bow." Rich or poor, no one is too good to be kidded on a music hall stage.

Across the Atlantic on the same night, Lou Dockstader's Minstrels are performing in Washington, DC for an audience that includes President Grover Cleveland and members of Congress. All of the spectators are white, and the performers on stage all appear to be black. There are banjos, tambourines, and jolly songs about the "good old days" of slavery on the plantation. In fact, everyone on stage is just as white as the audience. They've covered their faces with burnt cork ash to make their parody plausible. If any of the black stagehands were foolish enough to complain, they would be out of a job. After all, it was all just good clean fun. Who could possibly be offended by that?

British Music Halls

By 1840, the British Empire's network of colonies and protectorates extended to every hemisphere. With a mighty army and navy, and a thriving mercantile system, Great Britain was the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation. London was its capital, and with six million residents, it was the largest city on earth. The most extraordinary affluence and the most crushing poverty sat within a few blocks of each other. Similar contrasts existed in every major British city.

At the very top of Britain's social pyramid sat Queen Victoria. She came to the throne in 1837 at age sixteen, reigned for sixty-four years, and gave her name to the era. In those years, Britain saw wide ranging social change, much of which was ignited by the spread of new mechanical manufacturing processes known as the Industrial Revolution.

The expansion of factories and offices drew people from the farms to work in towns and cities. While this meant exchanging one form of drudgery for another, factory and office workers had the advantage of weekly leisure time and some disposable income—things they rarely enjoyed on farms. As manufacturing increased, London's damp atmosphere became embedded with coal smoke and industrial gas, creating a thick, grey fog (called a "London particular") that stung the eyes and made life miserable.

Since the rented rooms of the working class offered minimal comfort, many spent their evenings in pubs, but there was a need for something more. In the 1840s, music halls appeared in London. At first, these were taverns with a performance area, featuring a raised stage and possibly a piano or pipe organ. Concerts quickly evolved into more elaborate presentations, with jugglers, magicians, dance acts, and comic skits.

In 1854, London's Canterbury Arms was the first venue built to serve as a music hall. Some music halls had auditoriums as elegant and spacious as any West End theatre. By 1860, there were more than 250 music halls in London. Countless others with names like The Empire, Hippodrome, or Varieties sprang up in every city in the British Isles.

Music halls aimed at a working class audience, but wound up attracting all classes. While each hall catered to its particular neighborhood, all presented the same talents at one time or another. So everyone in England could enjoy the same entertainers and the same songs. Patrons expected beer with their entertainment. The bar was a central feature in every music hall.

Beloved Performers

Most music hall stars came from the working and lower classes. All a performer needed was talent, perseverance, and good health to make a living. Music hall acts represented the lives and concerns of the lower classes and frequently poked fun at the wealthy. In a nation as prosperous and secure as Great Britain was, no one was offended by a little good-natured ribbing—not even the highest in the land. Stars from the halls often entertained in the homes of noble families.

Almost any kind of variety or circus act was welcomed in British music halls. Jugglers, tumblers, magicians, and animal acts were common, but the most popular music hall stars tended to be singers and comedians. While explicit sexual content was never permitted, bawdiness was expected.

Marie Lloyd (1870–1922) was born and raised in London's East End. She started singing in taverns, and achieved music hall stardom at age sixteen. Audiences delighted in Lloyd's risqué songs, including "A Little of What You Fancy" and the craftily titled "She Sits among Her Cabbages and Peas." Her best known hit was the cockney housewife's lament "My Old Man":

We had to move away
'Cos the rent we couldn't pay.
The moving van came round ju
There was me and my old man
Shoving things inside the van,
Which we'd often done before,
We packed all that could be pa
In the van, and that's a fact.
And we got inside all that we c
Then we packed all we could p
On the tailboard at the back,
Till there wasn't any room for

REFRAIN:
My old man said: "Follow the
And don't dilly-dally on the wa
Off went the van with me 'ome
I walked behind with me old c
But I dillied and dallied,
Dallied and dillied;
Lost me way and don't know w
Who'll put you up when you've
And you can't find your way 'o

The final verse had a dose of subt

I'm in such a mess.
Don't know the new address—
Don't even know the bloomin'
And I feel as though I might
Have to stay out half the night.
And that ain't a gonnaa' to do
I don't make no complaint
But I'm coming o'er a faint,
What I need now is a good sub
And I sort 'o kind 'o feel,
If I don't soon have a meal,
I shall have to rob the linnet of

Years of generosity and reckless
bankruptcy. When her health be
on stage, fans thought it was part
introducing "I'm One of the Ruin
on stage in Edmonton, Canada,
kidney failure. Massive crowds at

We had to move away
'Cos the rent we couldn't pay.
The moving van came round just after dark.
There was me and my old man,
Shoving things inside the van,
Which we'd often done before, let me remark.
We packed all that could be packed
In the van, and that's a fact.
And we got inside all that we could get inside.
Then we packed all we could pack
On the tailboard at the back,
Till there wasn't any room for me to ride.

REFRAIN:
My old man said: "Follow the van,
And don't dilly-dally on the way."
Off went the van with me 'ome packed in it.
I walked behind with me old cock-a-linnet.
But I dillied and dallied,
Dallied and dillied;
Lost me way and don't know where to roam.
Who'll put you up when you've lost your bedstead,
And you can't find your way 'ome?

The final verse had a dose of subtle sexual innuendo:

I'm in such a mess.
Don't know the new address—
Don't even know the bloomin' neighbor'ood.
And I feel as though I might
Have to stay out half the night.
And that ain't a gonnaa' to do me any good.
I don't make no complaint
But I'm coming o'er a faint,
What I need now is a good substantial feed.
And I sort 'o kind 'o feel,
If I don't soon have a meal,
I shall have to rob the linnet of its seed!

Years of generosity and reckless spending habits eventually left Lloyd on the brink of bankruptcy. When her health began failing and she stumbled or appeared disoriented on stage, fans thought it was part of her act. Lloyd made the most of her misfortune by introducing "I'm One of the Ruins That Cromwell Knocked About a Bit." She collapsed on stage in Edmonton, Canada, and died days later at age fifty-two due to heart and kidney failure. Massive crowds attended her London funeral.

Music hall audiences heckled boring acts, answered back to their favorites, and (if they really loved you) sang along. So singers were always on the lookout for catchy songs. Harry Champion (1865–1942) became a favorite with this cockney (or "coster") refrain:

I'm 'Enery the Eighth I am,
'Enery the Eighth I am, I am.
I got married to the widow next door—
She's been married seven times before.
Ev'ry one was a 'Enery
She wouldn't 'ave a Willie or a Sam.
I'm her eighth old man named 'Enery—
'Enery the Eighth I am!

Some other music hall favorites:

- The passing of time has long since made the refrain of "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay" (repeated eight times per verse) sound innocent. But when Lottie Collins (1865–1910) introduced it in 1892, she delivered every "boom!" with a resounding high kick that left little doubt that she was suggesting a rather private activity.
- George Leybourne (1842–84) was an engineer who found fame in the music halls performing as a working man's spoof of an upper class playboy. While his best remembered hit is "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," audiences always demanded his signature song, "Champagne Charlie."
- Harry Lauder (1870–1950) was a Scottish singer and comedian whose genial performances in a kilt and tilted tam o'shanter cap delighted Brits and American alike. In 1911, Lauder became one of the first performers to sell more than a million recordings, with such songs as "I Love a Lassie" and "Roamin' Through the Gloamin'." One of the highest paid stars in British show business, he made about two dozen American tours.

British music halls declined during the Great Depression, and a few lingered on into the mid-twentieth century. Though the music hall tradition has faded, its songs remain familiar in Britain today.

French Music Halls

Paris evolved a rather different form of music hall entertainment in the late nineteenth century. The Folies-Bergère presented its first variety bill in 1869, the Olympia opened in 1888, and the Moulin Rouge with its landmark red windmill on the roof began operating in 1889. Each offered lavish variety productions featuring vocalists, can-can dancers, and underdressed ensembles. By the 1890s, men and women of the chorus regularly appeared naked on French music hall stages.

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The music halls of Paris introduced the world to such unique singing talents as Mistinguett, Maurice Chevalier, and Edith Piaf. African American performer Josephine Baker (1906–75) found colorblind acceptance in France. Some of these stars had vocal limitations; it was personality that gave them long music hall careers. While other forms of live variety entertainment have passed into the mists of time, the music halls of Paris are still in business—although they now cater almost exclusively to tourists.

The British were comfortable with verbal sexual suggestion, and the French with unveiling the human form. These things were unthinkable in the more prudish United States. But that slave-owning nation had no problem inventing and embracing a form of variety that celebrated racism.

Music Halls and Minstrelsy: Echoes on Stage and Screen

Many stage and screen musicals have relied on music hall numbers to invoke British atmosphere. Just a few examples:

- *My Fair Lady* (1956)—Cockney dustman Alfie Doolittle expresses himself in the music hall–style "With a Little Bit O' Luck" and "I'm Getting Married in the Morning."
- *Oliver* (1960)—The action is set in the 1830s, two decades before music halls appeared, but Nancy's "It's a Fine Life" and the innocent/suggestive "Oom-Pah-Pah" are delightful cockney fun.
- *Mary Poppins* (1964)—"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" is another fine innocent/suggestive music hall homage.
- *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968)—"Me Ol' Bamboo" has such a catchy melody that few notice the innocent/suggestive music hall lyric.

Minstrelsy faded more than a century ago, but musicals have often referred to it:

- *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944, MGM)—In 1903, properly raised middle class girls would have been familiar with minstrelsy. That is why Esther and Tootie Smith pick up hats and canes to sing "Under the Bamboo Tree," ending with a cakewalk.
- *Nine* (1982)—When the beach prostitute Saraghina tells a chorus of school boys that the secret to making love is to "Be Italian," they break out tambourines in a minstrel-style routine.
- *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991)—Will and the Ziegfeld girls form a minstrel line (including tambourines built into their straw hats) for the showstopper "Favorite Son."
- *The Scottsboro Boys* (2010)—Kander and Ebb used a minstrel show format, including a white interlocutor and black minstrel line, to dramatize the true story of nine black men falsely accused in Alabama of raping two white girls in 1931.

American Explorations: The Earliest Years

The high ridge that runs down the length of Manhattan Island had been used by the native Lenape tribe as a trade route. When the Dutch arrived in 1624 and established New Amsterdam, that ridge became the settlement's main thoroughfare, earning the logical name of "High Street." In 1664, the British navy forcibly took over the colony and renamed it "New York." Since High Street was also the widest boulevard in town, the English renamed it "Broadway."

The British brought with them a longstanding tradition of theatre. Plays and ballad operas were regularly performed in other British colonial settlements, including Charleston, Philadelphia, and Williamsburg. However, the mostly Dutch population of New York considered stage entertainment sinful, so Broadway did not see its first theatrical performances until the following century.

In 1732, a professional troupe from London presented plays in a jerry-rigged Manhattan storeroom. The first documented presentation of a musical in New York took place on December 3, 1750, when a resident company offered *The Beggar's Opera* in a simple wooden theatre which stood on Nassau Street. In 1767, a more elaborate theatre opened on John Street, and served as the city's primary performance space for the next thirty years. The British Army occupied New York City during most of the War for Independence. With professional troupes in exile, army volunteers staged performances at the John Street Theatre.

During the war, the Continental Congress officially discouraged play-going, and several states issued an outright ban. After the war, President George Washington frequently attended theatrical performances in both New York and Philadelphia, helping to lift the stigma. Professional companies either toured or set up residence in major cities. In a promising development, New York's Theatre on John Street hosted *The Archers* (1796), a comic opera that some scholars point to as the earliest American-born musical. Sadly, *The Archers* gave only a handful of performances and set no trends.

Most of the musical works performed on American stages during the early years of the new republic were British ballad operas and pantomimes. Genres were vaguely defined, so musical stage works might be publicized as "masques," "burlettas," or "parlor operas." Like most of what is seen on modern-day network television, the popular stage entertainments of the early 1800s were designed to be disposable—enjoyed today, forgotten tomorrow.

As the population of New York City spread northward along Manhattan Island, Broadway served as the community's commercial and cultural spine. Even in horse-drawn times, Broadway traffic jams were common. The importance of any business or entertainment venue was measured by its proximity to Broadway. To be anywhere else meant you were "less than." The ticket buying power of the upper classes eventually set the tone for most of the entertainment found on Broadway.

The working and lower classes found their pleasures on the Bowery, a shorter and somewhat scruffier avenue on the eastern side of the city. (It originally led to Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant's fruit farm, or "bowerie.") With a jumble of theatres, taverns, and brothels, the Bowery became a haven for "the common man." One genre

born on the Bowery in the 18
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born on the Bowery in the 1840s would enjoy international popularity well into the twentieth century.

Minstrel Shows

The early economy of the United States was so dependent on black slavery that the nation's constitution protected the practice, defining a slave as three-fifths of a person—for census purposes. Black slaves were considered property, with no legal rights. Slavery became the central American political controversy of the mid-1800s, literally tearing the country apart. So it is not surprising that America's first homegrown form of musical theatre, which developed during this period, should reflect the nation's obsession with race.

According to *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (1995, pp. 763–4) blackface acts were common features in circuses and traveling shows from the 1790s onward. In the 1820s, white entertainer Thomas Rice caused a nationwide sensation with a song and dance act that caricatured Negro slaves. A native New Yorker, Rice traveled the country as a one-man show, offering songs and humorous stories. Having no direct experience of plantation life, he claimed that he got the idea for his groundbreaking routine from a ragged black stable hand (some versions say it was a street performer) who danced a simple jig on a street corner while singing:

> First on de heel tap, den on the toe
> Every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.
> Wheel about and turn about en do j's so.
> And every time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow.

Over the years, Rice named several Northern cities as the location where he saw this display, and we can only guess if the former slave's name really was "Jim Crow." But Rice soon conceived a routine. Using burnt cork to blacken his features and costumed in ragged homespun, Rice added topical verses to the song and filled out the routine with a comic dance and "plantation-style" banter. Rice's "Jim Crow" act proved an immediate sensation. It won ovations all across the United States, including New York's Bowery Theatre. Within months, so many were copying the act that Rice had to bill himself as "the *original* Jim Crow."

In 1843 a troupe of four unemployed white blackface performers joined forces to present a full-length show. Since a "Tyrolese minstrel" family had just toured successfully, the blackface troupe called themselves "The Virginia Minstrels." Billy Whitlock, Frank Pelham, Dan Emmett, and Frank Brower donned blackface and sat in a semicircle with a tambourine player on one end and a "bones" player (rhythmically clicking either real cow ribs or wooden replicas) on the other. The program consisted of songs and dances interspersed with comic banter and skits. Performing in the Bowery Amphitheatre, the Virginia Minstrels invented America's first indigenous genre of musical theatre—*the minstrel show*.

Three years later, New York City had ten resident minstrel companies, and that number doubled within a decade. Numerous troupes toured the United States, including The Christy Minstrels, The Ethiopian Serenaders, and The Virginia Vocalists. Companies eventually ranged in size from half a dozen performers to more than a hundred. The presentation and marketing of minstrel shows brought a massive expansion of American show business, creating a nationwide network of producers, managers, and theatre personnel.

Minstrel shows soon developed a standard three-part format. After an overture came:

- The *First Part* or *Minstrel Line* began with a rousing opening number that brought the full ensemble onstage. In the center was a master of ceremonies called the *Interlocutor* (often the only performer not in blackface) who encouraged comic interplay between other performers. At the Interlocutor's ritual cry, "Gentlemen, be seated," all sat in a semicircle of chairs and launched into a loosely structured series of songs and jokes. The main comedians were the *endmen, Brudder Tambo* (playing the tambourine) sitting on the far right and *Brudder Bones* (playing bone-like sticks that clacked the rhythm of songs) on the far left. The rest of the line consisted of singers, dancers, instrumentalists, and specialty performers. After an intermission came ...
- The *Olio* was a variety show featuring members of the company offering songs, dances, comedy skits, juggling, and so on. Traditionally, one of the endmen delivered a *stump speech* which mocked political orations. Only clean material was allowed. The final part of the olio might be performed "in one" (in front of a closed curtain) to allow stagehands to set up for the final feature.
- *The Afterpiece* was a one-act play with songs. Initially sentimental plantation comedies, the afterpiece could also spoof a popular novel or play—such as an Offenbach spoof entitled *The Grand Dutch S*. Two stock characters played by the endmen were almost always featured—"Jim Crow," the country bumpkin ripe for humiliation, and "Zip Coon," the city slicker whose self-assurance led to his comic comeuppance. The afterpiece ended with a *cakewalk* dance involving the entire company. Performed with arched backs and high strutting steps, cakewalks had supposedly developed on Southern plantations when Negro slaves tried to imitate the way their white masters cavorted at formal balls. Plantation competitions offered a cake as first prize, giving the dance its name.

Within this template, an infinite variety of variations and specialties could be accommodated. So every minstrel show was both familiar and new. It was the first American-born musical entertainment that did not have any recognizable European ancestors.

Here is a sample of the sort of comic dialogue traditionally used in the First Part of a minstrel show.

BONES: Mr. Interlocutor, I had a narrow escape from the devil.
INTERLOCUTOR: Tell us all about it, Mr. Bones.
BONES: Last Saturday night, I started backslidin'. The tempter came and put an empty sack in my hand and started me toward Mr. Smith's chicken coop.

ALL: Amen, Amen.
BONES: I done my best to fight
on," and I kept getting closer a
ALL: Glory be, glory be.
BONES: But, praise the Lord.
chicken coop I see a possum u
ALL: Halleluiah, halleluiah.
BONES: And then the moon co
coop holdin' a big shot gun.
ALL: Praise the Lord.
BONES: Quick as a flash, I yell
that possum with both barrels.
ALL: Go on, brother.
BONES: All I can say is that
chicken coop—
ALL: Yes, yes.
BONES: We is lucky if Providen
ALL: Amen.

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"Old Folks at Home." The publicati
songwriter to earn a living from his

Dan Emmett, one of the original
"Jimmy Crack Corn," and "Dixie,"
tremendous popularity.

Oh I wish I was in the land of cott
Old times there are not forgotten;
Look away, look away,
Look away, Dixie land.
In Dixie land where I was born in
Early on one frosty morning,
Look away, look away,
Look away, Dixie land.

I wish I was in Dixie—hooray, ho
In Dixieland I'll take my stand

ALL: Amen, Amen.
BONES: I done my best to fight off temptation, but the tempter said, "Go on, go on," and I kept getting closer and closer to that chicken coop.
ALL: Glory be, glory be.
BONES: But, praise the Lord. Just as I was climbing the fence to get to that chicken coop I see a possum up in the apple tree.
ALL: Halleluiah, halleluiah.
BONES: And then the moon comes out, and I see Mr. Smith behind that chicken coop holdin' a big shot gun.
ALL: Praise the Lord.
BONES: Quick as a flash, I yell to Mr. Smith to shoot that possum, and he hits that possum with both barrels.
ALL: Go on, brother.
BONES: All I can say is that when the tempter shows us where there is a chicken coop—
ALL: Yes, yes.
BONES: We is lucky if Providence shows us a possum in a tree.
ALL: Amen.

During the 1850s, as the debate over slavery turned hostile, minstrel shows offered reassuring images of blacks either on the plantation obeying their "massah," or stuck in some Northern city ruefully asking why they had ever sought freedom. Abolitionists opposed to slavery grumbled, but many Americans accepted these stereotypes.

Minstrelsy's most lasting legacy was its songs. As minstrel troupes crisscrossed the United States, they became the first entertainment medium that could give songs quick national exposure. The Christy Minstrels turned Stephen Foster's (1826–64) "Oh, Susannah" into a popular hit in 1848, and the young composer followed with "Ring, Ring the Banjo," "Camptown Races," "Old Black Joe," "Beautiful Dreamer," and "Old Folks at Home." The publication of these songs made Foster the first American songwriter to earn a living from his craft.

Dan Emmett, one of the original Virginia Minstrels, penned "Turkey in the Straw," "Jimmy Crack Corn," and "Dixie," a tuneful mock plantation song that enjoyed tremendous popularity.

Oh I wish I was in the land of cotton.
Old times there are not forgotten;
Look away, look away,
Look away, Dixie land.
In Dixie land where I was born in
Early on one frosty morning,
Look away, look away,
Look away, Dixie land.

I wish I was in Dixie—hooray, hooray!
In Dixieland I'll take my stand

To live and die in Dixie,
Away, away, away down South in Dixie.
Away, away, away down South in Dixie.

A keen abolitionist, Emmett was appalled when "Dixie" became an unofficial battle hymn of the Southern Confederacy during the American Civil War (1861–65).

Minstrelsy also gave America the barbershop quartet. It was standard procedure for minstrel troupes to include a male quartet singing in four-part harmony. In communities all across America, men hanging out a local barbershops copied this, usually harmonizing *a capella*. Thousands of men and women of all races keep this tradition alive today.

After the war, the mass migration of Southern Negroes to Northern cities gave minstrelsy a new comic focus. Transplanted "Northern Negroes" were depicted as either preening dandies ("Zip") or shiftless blockheads ("Jim"). These stereotypes reassured white audiences that blacks posed no serious social or economic threat. In reality, the only threats were those blacks faced. White-hooded members of the Klu Klux Klan terrorized blacks with cross-burnings, beatings, lynchings, and murders. Southern states passed so-called Jim Crow laws to formalize racial segregation. Among other things, these laws barred blacks from appearing on stage—for a time.

Black performers got their first taste of mainstream theatrical success appearing in minstrel shows. All-black minstrel troupes appeared in the North as early as 1855. Troupes touring the South frequently snuck on black performers who were light skinned enough to pass as white. After the Jim Crow laws were adjusted, all-black troupes (billed as "Colored minstrels") became almost as common as white troupes in blackface (billed as "Nigger minstrels").

Unfortunately, the presence of real Negroes did not bring major changes in minstrelsy's content. Due to the yellowish hue of gas-fueled stage lighting, Negro performers had to darken their skins with burnt cork in order to look "black enough." Worse yet, the presence of black performers seemed to give credibility to the comic stereotypes. Early minstrel troupes were exclusively male, with women's roles performed by men in drag. After the Civil War, women joined minstrel casts, and in 1871 Madame Rentz's Minstrels became the first all-female troupe.

By the early 1900s, tastes and attitudes were shifting. Professional minstrel troupes disappeared by 1920, but echoes of minstrelsy would live on in American entertainment, particularly the use of blackface. Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor are often remembered for "blacking-up," but Bing Crosby, Irene Dunne, Joan Crawford, Fred Astaire, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Walter Huston, and James Cagney all performed in blackface on screen.

In any discussion of blackface, a sense of historical perspective is essential. Although it is offensive in our time, blackface was a widely accepted convention for more than a century. Most performers who used it were just trying to put on a good show, not make a racist comment. Suggesting that all performers in blackface were automatically racist is comparable to saying that anyone performing in drag must be a transsexual. Unfortunately, the old minstrel stereotypes are not dead. "Jim Crow" and "Zip Coon" are still seen in television sitcoms and movies, although with different

names. It may turn out that these characters are so deeply ingrained in America's cultural subconscious that we will never fully escape them.

Although popular, minstrel shows were only one part of stage entertainment in nineteenth-century America. Other native-born genres developed at this time, including the first recognizable Broadway musicals.

4

"The Music of Something Beginning": American Explorations (1624–1890)

What was the first homegrown Broadway musical? No one is certain, but one thing is clear: it was not *The Black Crook*. That much-talked about show was not so much a beginning as it was a culmination.

The American theatre was already thriving, with companies offering a wide assortment of imported and homegrown musical works, in various genres. In the wake of *The Black Crook*, musical theatre found a growing nationwide audience, becoming a multimillion-dollar industry.

To borrow a phrase from the title song of *Ragtime*, it was "the music of something beginning."

American Variety

It may have begun as an echo of minstrelsy's olio, or perhaps its roots lie in medicine shows or circuses. While variety's origins are obscure, there is no question that it had a tremendous and lasting impact on the development of musical theatre.

By the mid-1800s, saloon keepers in cities and towns of every size were providing entertainment to keep their regular customers drinking. Performances might take place on a makeshift elevated stage or in the middle of the barroom floor. The typical show included comedians, acrobats, clowns, jugglers, animal acts, specialties, and an occasional singer—the smaller acts one would have expected to see in a traveling circus. Musical accompaniment might be provided by a small orchestra, but was often handled by a lone club-thumbed pianist who took most of his pay in liquid form.

Variety acts performed several times a day, from late morning through the middle of the night. Testosterone levels ran high in these smoke-filled taverns, where heckling, fist fights, and even gunfire were common. Performers put up with the rowdiness to earn about $15 a week, which was more than most farmers could earn in a month.

Because saloon clientele was exclusively male, variety shows offered underdressed ladies in short dresses and tights. These damsels danced and sang in the show, then

wandered the room, encouraging the customers to buy drinks. The more booze the men bought, the more commission the girls collected.

Uninitiated variety customers assumed that the "waiter girls" sold sexual favors along with the liquor, but such was rarely the case. Instead, customers in search of sex were passed off to prostitutes working on the premises or in neighboring brothels—from whom the waiter girls collected yet another commission. In rougher halls, such as those found on New York's Bowery, naïve customers were often drugged, pickpocketed, and dumped in a nearby alley to sleep it off. Police were routinely bribed by saloon owners to make sure criminal charges were never filed.

Amid all the noise, variety comedians had a hell of a time getting noticed. Their material was coarse. One widely performed variety song was "Such a Delicate Duck":

> I took her out one night for a walk,
> We indulged in all sorts of pleasantry and talk.
> We came to a potato patch, she wouldn't go across;
> The potatoes had eyes and she didn't wear no drawers!

Note the use of a rhyme (across/drawers) requiring the mispronunciation of both words! The men in a variety saloon audience were not looking for lyrical craftsmanship. All that mattered was the lewd joke.

Late-night variety performances sometimes included racy skits, staged long after plainclothes law officers had either gone home or gotten too drunk to care. One common sketch involved a scantily clad farm girl crossing the stage and stepping behind a hay stack. A succession of men would then join her, one or more at a time, departing in increasingly disheveled condition. The girl finally departed, counting a hefty stack of cash.

In the 1850s, showman P. T. Barnum (1810–91) offered New Yorkers a refined approach to variety at his American Museum, which stood at Broadway and Ann Street. After seeing his collection of bizarre exhibits, customers could enjoy a selection of clean acts in a handsomely appointed auditorium. By labeling the shows as "moral lectures," he attracted the sort of family audience that normally steered clear of variety.

When it became clear that many customers were touring through the museum several times on one admission, Barnum posted a sign saying "To the Egress." Many did not realize "Egress" meant "Exit" until they found themselves standing on the sidewalk. The sign soon drew so much publicity that few were actually fooled by it. Despite fires and relocations, Barnum's Museum remained one of Manhattan's top attractions for more than a decade. After that, with his famous motto "There's a sucker born every minute," Barnum redefined publicity by promoting such acts as the elephant Jumbo and the midget he called "General Tom Thumb." His humbug drew the patronage of millions, including the crowned heads of Europe.

Inspired by Barnum's success, some variety saloons evolved into theatres, but always with a bar at the back. So booze remained a crucial presence in variety houses. As more venues opened after the Civil War, it became feasible for variety performers to tour the United States for months at a time, and the prospect of steady employment drew better talent.

From one town to another—and in larger cities, from one block to another—variety theatres were as diverse as the audiences they catered to. They went by various names; at one end of the spectrum stood "music halls" and "dime museums," while at the other one found "slabs" and "dives." Two rather different variety halls in New York City illustrate the contrast:

- By 1880, well-heeled locals and tourists watched the finest acts at Koster & Bial's Concert Hall on 23rd Street. When a new ordinance forbade the sale of alcoholic drinks in Manhattan theatres, the owners replaced their stage curtain with a folding fan, insisting that it was impossible to classify a curtain-less space as a theatre. The bar stayed open, and Koster & Bial's thrived.
- Downtown, working class stiffs could raise a glass and catch a show at Miner's Bowery Theatre, a small, no-frills auditorium. Aside from the usual acts, they could heckle unknowns competing for prizes in New York's first "amateur night" competitions.

In the 1880s, variety began to mature into a cleaner, family-friendly genre called vaudeville—which we will examine in Chapter 5.

Broadway Musicals of the Pre-Civil War Years

One of the advantages of the multi-act format of variety was that shows could be tailored to please a particular audience by adding or deleting bits, changing the running order, or dropping weak performers. So it is not surprising that American book musicals of the mid-nineteenth century were constructed in the same flexible hodgepodge manner.

> A *book musical* aims to tell a coherent story through a mixture of songs and spoken scenes—as opposed to a revue, which offers a disconnected variety of acts and skits. Both musical comedies and operettas are considered book musicals.

In the 1850s, no one in the American theatre called a show with songs a "musical." *The Magic Deer* (1852) advertised itself as "A Serio Comico Tragico Operatical Historical Extravaganzical Burletical Tale of Enchantment," just to make sure potential ticket buyers understood that it included songs. Most American theatres had resident companies that offered a repertory of tragedies, comedies, and plays with music. Broadway productions of this period rarely played more than a week of continuous performances.

The longest Broadway run of the 1850s was *The Elves* (1857, 50 performances). It was presented by actress-manager Laura Keene (1826–73), the first woman to excel as an actor-manager in the American theatre. She built a theatre at 622 Broadway, where she enjoyed seven years of success. As renowned for her talent as for her business prowess, she starred in many of her own productions, including the occasional musical.

Keene's longest running hit was the "musical burletta" *The Seven Sisters* (1860, 253 performances), which involved seven female demons on vacation from hell taking a sightseeing tour of Manhattan. A score was cobbled together from existing songs, with "Dixie" thrown in to provide a surefire finish. Who cared whether or not the songs had any connection to the plot or characters? The real attractions were several *transformation scenes* that used the latest hand-cranked stage technology to change scenery in full view of the audience. *The Seven Sisters* ran for eight months, dwarfing any other New York run up to that time.

At the start of 1861, several Southern states seceded from the Union, disrupting the cotton and tobacco trade and devastating New York City's economy. The Civil War erupted and Broadway ticket sales plummeted. Laura Keene sold off her theatre and took a repertory of her biggest hits on tour. *The Seven Sisters* involved too much stage machinery. Instead, Keene toured comedies like *Our American Cousin*. It was during a performance of that play at Washington, DC's Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, that actor John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln. Keene's name became so identified with that tragedy that she was forced to retire. *The Seven Sisters* faded from memory. But its magical themes and special effects made it the artistic precursor of a show that many incorrectly refer to as the first Broadway musical.

The Black Crook: "We're Midnight Fairies Roaming"

After the American Civil War ended in 1865, Manhattan's population soared. There were dozens of active theatres in the city, but few had state-of-the-art facilities. One was the Academy of Music on East 14th Street, which catered to the upper classes. Another was Niblo's Garden at the Northeast corner of Prince Street and Broadway. A combination of indoor beer garden and theatre, it was more egalitarian than the Academy of Music.

Every inventor must be both a dreamer and a realist. Such was the case with William Wheatley (1816–76), the actor-manager who ran Niblo's. His productions ran the gamut from Shakespeare to comic opera, aiming at the upper and middle class audience that frequented Broadway. Niblo's had the best equipped stage in New York. A series of mechanized trapdoors made it possible for set pieces, props, and people to appear or vanish on cue, and state-of-the-art riggings made swift scene changes a breeze. So Wheatley was always on the lookout for material that called for special effects and spectacle.

In the summer of 1876, Wheatley optioned *The Black Crook* (1866, 474 performances), a new melodrama by actor-playwright Charles M. Barras. Wheatley must have realized that this melodrama was a cliché-ridden stinker. It stole elements from Goethe's *Faust*, Weber's *Der Freischutz*, and several other sources.

The plot: sometime around the year 1600 in Germany's Hartz Mountains, the evil Count Wolfenstein realizes he will never win the affection of the lovely villager Amina while her handsome sweetheart Rodolphe is in the way. Wolfenstein calls in Hertzog, a *crook*-backed master of *black* magic (hence the show's title), who stays alive by providing Zamiel (the Devil) with a fresh soul every New Year's Eve.

Hertzog is leading the unk
hero saves a wounded dove fr
Stalacta, Fairy Queen of the G
Stalacta whisks Rodolphe to s
kissed, it will summon her. T
Wolfenstein's guards attack R
appears. With their help, the y
day before Rodolphe and Ami

ARMINA: There seems to h
the coming light.
RODOLPHE: Fear not—h
safe from all pursuit. (*Dis*
in the huntsmen. Let's go
they are suddenly confron
who enter quickly. Chord.)
WOLFENSTEIN: Ha—ha—
RODOLPHE: (*Starting bac*
seek safety with our peopl
AMINA: No, Rodolphe, we
WOLFENSTEIN: Alive—t
RODOLPHE: He who take
HERTZOG: Put up thy bla
RODOLPHE: False wretch
of mine, and though cow
with my single sword. Bu
once invoked, potent still
thicket in glittering full ar
ground!
WOLFENSTEIN: Though
way to reach you.
(*Music. Grand triple sword co*
and HERTZOG, DRAGO
mayed, flies. AMINA, wh
self into the arms of ROL
DRAGONFIN indulges in
and WULFGAR.)

Soon afterward, demons drag
and Amina are reunited.

Wheatley was probably wo
when promoters Henry C. Jar
arranged for a Parisian ballet
venue had just burned to the g
theatres. Stuck with a shiploa

Hertzog is leading the unknowing Rodolphe to this hellish fate, when the young hero saves a wounded dove from a snake attack. The bird magically turns out to be Stalacta, Fairy Queen of the Golden Realm. (Are you still following this?) The grateful Stalacta whisks Rodolphe to safety in her utopian kingdom, and gives him a ring—if kissed, it will summon her. The young man returns home and finds Amina. When Wolfenstein's guards attack Rodolphe, he kisses the ring, and Stalacta's fairy army appears. With their help, the young lovers escape. Act Two begins six months later, the day before Rodolphe and Amina are to wed.

ARMINA: There seems to be a lurking danger in the air—a cloud between us and the coming light.

RODOLPHE: Fear not—here in the deep seclusion of our forest home we are safe from all pursuit. (*Distant horn, and echo at back.*) Hark, 'tis Greppo calling in the huntsmen. Let's go on to meet them. (*Music. They are crossing stage when they are suddenly confronted by HERTZOG, WOLFENSTEIN and WOLFGAR, who enter quickly. Chord.*)

WOLFENSTEIN: Ha—ha—ha. At last, we meet!

RODOLPHE: (*Starting back and drawing his sword.*) Entrapped! Fly Amina—seek safety with our people. My arms shall bar pursuit.

AMINA: No, Rodolphe, we will die together.

WOLFENSTEIN: Alive—take him alive! Yield!

RODOLPHE: He who takes my sword must win it.

HERTZOG: Put up thy blade; she whom thou would'st invoke is powerless to aid.

RODOLPHE: False wretch, but that another's life hangs on the slender thread of mine, and though coward numbers swarmed on every side, I'd try this issue with my single sword. But know thou, thou still art juggled with the power I once invoked, potent still. (*Music. He kisses ring. STALACTA springs from the thicket in glittering full armor with DRAGONFIN.*) Behold, we meet on equal ground!

WOLFENSTEIN: Though environed by a thousand fiends, my hate would find a way to reach you.

(*Music. Grand triple sword combat. RODOLPHE and WOLFENSTEIN, STALACTA and HERTZOG, DRAGONFIN and WULFGAR. HERTZOG, wounded and dismayed, flies. AMINA, who during the combat has knelt in prayer, throws herself into the arms of RODOLPHE. They both kneel at the feet of STALACTA. DRAGONFIN indulges in grotesque exultation over the bodies of WOLFENSTEIN and WULFGAR.*)

Soon afterward, demons drag the evil Hertzog into the flames of hell, and Rodolphe and Amina are reunited.

Wheatley was probably wondering how to breathe life into this schlock-a-thon when promoters Henry C. Jarrett and Harry Palmer appeared at his door. They had arranged for a Parisian ballet troupe to appear at the Academy of Music, but that venue had just burned to the ground—a common problem in an era of gas-lit wooden theatres. Stuck with a shipload of imported sets, costumes, and shapely ballerinas,

Jarrett and Palmer wondered if they might lease out Niblo's for the fall. It is impossible to say who first thought of merging the ballet troupe with the Barass play, but Wheatley grabbed the idea and ran with it.

Wheatley later claimed that he lavished $25,000 on additional sets, costumes, and stage effects. That figure may have been inflated, but if true, it was far more than anyone had ever spent on a Broadway production. When Barass protested the idea of turning his "serious" play into a musical spectacle, a $1,500 "bonus" bought his silence.

Wheatley pepped up the proceedings with songs by various composers. Some numbers fit the plot, but others were irrelevant specialties. When British music hall star Millie Cavendish was cast in the relatively minor role of Amina's maid, Wheatley inserted a "Oh You Naughty, Naughty Men" for her. In Act One, Scene Four, the maid soliloquizes about her mistress's upcoming marriage, finishing with, "I declare, I am so happy I could sing for a month!" Cavendish then went into her bit:

I will never more deceive you,
Or of happiness bereave you,
But I'll die a maid to grieve you,
Oh, you naughty, naughty men.
You may talk of love and sighing,
Say for us you're nearly dying,
All the while you know you're trying
To deceive, you naughty men.

No one cared that the number didn't fit the storyline. In 1866, anything that added to a show's sense of fun was considered a plus. The few plot-based numbers weren't nearly as enjoyable. In one scene, dozens of fleshy ballerinas bounced about in a moonlit grotto while singing "The Song of the Amazons":

Gaily welcome from deep and dark blue sea,
And lightly we march through the world.
We're midnight fairies roaming to music of the waves,
And gaily wander 'til morning.

The lyric didn't make much sense, but at least it involved fairies singing about what it was like to be fairies.

The September 12 premiere performance of *The Black Crook* lasted a bottom-numbing five and a half hours, but the visual spectacle swept all other concerns from the audience's mind. One dazzling set followed another.

There were several spectacular transformation scenes. A mountain forest turned into "the grotto of the Golden Stalactites," with fairies sleeping on jewel-studded rocks beside a lake of sliver. Another took the audience into the depths of Hell itself, with Satan seated on an illuminated throne of skulls, and surrounded by (in the script's words) "vistas of Pandemonium, teeming with infernal life and wreaths of flame." The greatest effect of all was saved for the final moments, described in the libretto as

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RODOLPHE, AMINA GREPO
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Grand as the transformations wer
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> an elaborate mechanical and scenical construction of the Realms of Stalacta, occupying the entire stage. This scene must be of gradually-developing and culminating beauty, introducing during its various transformations STALACTA, the entire host of fairies, sprites, water nymphs, amphibians, gnomes, etc., bearing treasure. RODOLPHE, AMINA GREPO and CARLINE. Calcium lights, brilliant fires, and slow curtain.

Grand as the transformations were, they didn't get as much attention as the ballerinas of the fairy ensemble. Surviving photos of original *Black Crook* chorines may puzzle the modern viewer. These ladies were not classic beauties, and they most definitely are well nourished.

Why did audiences make such a fuss in 1866? Victorian fashions obscured the natural contours of the female physique with bustles, corsets, and other frillery. Women's clothing covered everything except the hands and face. So a stage filled with young ladies in tights and form-fitting bodices was a revelation. Even ballet fans had probably never seen so many underdressed women in one place at one time. After running businesses and hospitals during the Civil War, respectable women were no longer easily shocked. So the novelty of the unveiled, glamorized female form was of interest to both sexes.

At first, most critics accepted *The Black Crook* as a harmless diversion. Then word of mouth kept the show running month after month. Ministers started condemning it from their pulpits and editorials followed suit. Luckily for William Wheatley, controversy sells tickets, especially when the promise of seeing something sexy is involved. People who rarely went to Broadway shows made a point of seeing *The Black Crook*. Some cautious women attended the show heavily veiled.

The Black Crook became the first production in world history to run for more than a year. Wheatley periodically added new songs and scenic effects to gratify repeat customers. Marie Bonfanti, the company's prima ballerina, became an instant celebrity at age nineteen. Two years later, Wheatley presented Bonfanti in a sequel called *The White Fawn* (1868, 176 performances), which managed a profitable run but was no match for its predecessor.

Playwright Charles Barras should have enjoyed the success of *The Black Crook*, but it was not what he had intended. Six years after *The Black Crook*'s premiere, Barras died at age fifty-three in an accident that many considered a suicide.

For years to come, similar spectacles with fantasy themes, known as *extravaganzas*, played on Broadway and in the provinces. The songs had little to do with the stories, which always involved whimsical trips to fairyland. But the best extravaganzas provided relatively clean family entertainment.

If *The Black Crook* was not the first Broadway musical, why is it hailed as a landmark? Simple: it was the first Broadway musical to become a nationwide hit. Thanks to expanding railroads, *The Black Crook* toured with its mechanized effects and massive cast intact. Wherever the railroads went, *The Black Crook* followed, packing theatres all across the country. The profits were astounding, and musical theatre was suddenly an industry with vast, untapped economic potential. What Americans then referred to as "the show business" suddenly became big business. Productions of *The Black Crook*

continued touring profitably for the next three decades. Broadway would see more than a dozen revivals, with the score and staging changing radically each time.

What Set *The Seven Sisters* and *The Black Crook* Apart?

If *The Seven Sisters* and *The Black Crook* were so similar, why did one disappear while the other became a lasting favorite? The answer is an accident of timing.

When Laura Keene took her company on tour in 1861, there would have been plenty of nationwide interest in seeing *The Seven Sisters*. But the production was too bulky. Keene was forced to leave her hit musical behind and stick to a repertory of simple comedies and dramas.

By 1866, the Civil War had ended, and America's railroads were expanding. Trains reached more communities every year, and had no problem carrying the carloads of equipment, scenery, and costumes required by *The Black Crook*. Cities all across the country could now see the same spectacular effects—and scandalous leg displays—that had dazzled New York.

In time, railroads made it profitable for touring companies to reach any town with enough people to fill a theatre. Local theatre troupes could not compete with a show "as seen on Broadway." Broadway stars came to appreciate the adulation and profits that came with going on tour.

Early Burlesque

By the twentieth century, burlesque was a rundown form of variety show that mocked sexual values and relied on female strippers to sell tickets. But burlesque began as a form of legitimate musical theatre that spoofed Victorian society's rigid perceptions of gender.

At its most basic, *burlesque* means to make fun of something. As early as the 1840s, Broadway had homegrown burlesques that made fun of popular plays and operas. Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* was sent-up in *Shylock: A Jerusalem Hearty Joke* (1853, 4 performances), and Verdi's *Il Trovatore* inspired *Kill Trovatore!* (1867, 30 performances). Such spoofs usually played for a week or two and were then discarded. No scripts are known to survive, so we are not exactly sure about the contents.

A decade later, word reached America of a new kind of burlesque that was all the rage in London. These musical burlesques poked fun at popular legends or novels, but added a new dimension by letting women handle all the major roles clad in revealing tights. Thanks to *The Black Crook*, Broadway audiences were accustomed to seeing women in tights, but only as fantasy characters. In these new British "leg shows," women played male roles, and acted as sexual aggressors.

Lydia Thompson (1838–1908) was the most renowned purveyor of London burlesque, starring in productions that she produced. After an avalanche of advance publicity, Thompson and her troupe of "British Blondes" made their Broadway debut at Wood's Museum in *Ixion* (1868, 104 performances). Thompson played the title role, a

mythological king who faced eterna
not a remarkable beauty, but she ca

Thompson's burlesques invo
gags, improvisation, and borrowe
Blondes openly interacted with m
managed by its young female star!
dominated status quo drew capaci
favorable.

When ticket sales made it nece
larger Niblo's Garden, it was as if a
public morals suddenly howled in
offering a brazen display that threa
indignation did wonders at the bo
to tour, she had grossed a healthy $
Chicago, one journalist was so slan
The fine she paid was small price
mostly sympathetic to Thompson.

To prevent unauthorized produ
not published. In fact, the materi
Thompson's troupe did not bother
from operatic arias and popular so
sentimental effect. Copycat burlesq

Lydia Thompson's style of burl
over the management of burlesqu
into another form of variety, with
once made the form a hot ticket. B
directions.

Broadway Burlesques of the Lat of "The Formula"

Edward Rice (1849–1924) produce
hits. Although inspired by Lydia
gender roles, with both men and
tights were on hand, but only to pr
family audiences. The scores were
songs added for comic value.

Rice's *Evangeline* (1874, 14
Longfellow's well-known epic poe
by a woman in tights) seek each
Africa to the American Wild We
men in an animal suit), a hefty dr
a serio-comic silent character ca
found in Longfellow. Confusing a
of pleasure.