

AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE – SAMPLE COURSE SYLLABUS

MW 1:45-3:15

BENN 322

David Fox (dfox@upenn.edu)

NOTE: This is a sample syllabus for reference only. Details will change in Fall 2025!



ABOUT THE COURSE

The American musical is an unapologetically popular art form, but many of the works that come from this tradition have had a major impact on the broader history of theatre and film – and on our larger popular culture. From dramatic works like *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess* that addressed issues of race and class, to the Depression-era wish fulfillment of *Top Hat* and *The Wizard of Oz*; from the biting topical music and lyrics of Stephen Sondheim and Cole Porter, to the sentimental optimism of Rodgers and Hammerstein, to the contemporary hip hop of Lin-Manuel Miranda – musicals and their creators have, quite literally, set a tone for America.

In this course, we will analyze theatre works as well as a few films – and specifically focus on music, lyrics, scripts and other documentary evidence in pursuit of understanding the musical in its many forms. Our survey will begin by looking at the early history of musical theater in works by Mozart and others; but the primary focus will be on American musical theatre – Broadway in particular – from the early '20s to the present.

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WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- The ways in which musicals are part of a larger culture and history.
- Analytical skills to interpret a work of theatre or film.
- How to listen to, think about, and discuss music.
- Similarly, how to analyze lyrics – and to consider how the two elements work together.
- How to “reconstruct” the sense of a theatrical experience from the evidence left behind.
- Good research and writing skills with a large range of source material.

COURSE FORMAT

This course is a discussion-based seminar – though I’ll have a lot to say, your input will help shape the mode and depth of inquiry. **I can’t emphasize enough how important the conversations around the table will be both in terms of what we learn, and in building our community.** Virtually all the materials need for this course can be found in the Canvas course modules. These include text material (reviews, short articles, some scripts, and song lyrics), recorded audio excerpts, and video clips. Students should plan to spend somewhere in the neighborhood of an hour each week reviewing these materials, followed by writing the required prompt and submitting it through Canvas.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES

- **Course Participation (25% of the course grade)**. First and foremost, this means your presence at the session. Be here. Be here on time. Be here through the session. Our conversations are the most important thing we do, and (I hope) what you’ll remember long after the class is over.
- **Discussion responses (25% of the course grade)**. These are prompts on a particular topic, and can be found in the modules and discussion sections. **They should be around 350 words** (roughly equivalent to three-quarters of a single-spaced page). They will assume you’ve spent time with the materials in the module but will not require research beyond that. Discussions are generally posted weekly. They are due the night before the pertinent session, and cannot be made up later. **Students are expected to complete 10 discussion responses during the course of the semester**; and can choose which topics to write on. Please note that these **responses are not graded individually**, though during the semester I will give some general feedback.
- **Paper #1 (25% of the course grade)**. A 2,500 word (roughly five single-spaced pages) paper on a topic TBA. This will be **due on Friday, March 1**.
- **Paper #2 (25% of the course grade)**. A second 2,500 word (roughly five single-spaced pages) paper on a topic TBA. This will be due on **Friday, May 10**.

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CLASS SCHEDULE

This will be adjusted as needed, but this should give a sense of some of the material we'll cover and the general order. Please note that a few sessions may be done through video and viewed asynchronously.

January 22: Introduction to the course

January 24: Theater through song 1 of 2 (in-class analysis)

January 29: Theater through song 2 of 2 (in-class analysis)

January 31: Roots of musical theater: Mozart's *The Magic Flute*

February 5: Beginnings of American musical theater 1 of 2: Operetta, Vaudeville, Revues

February 7: Beginnings of American musical theater 2 of 2: Vaudeville, Revues, Irving Berlin

February 12: Jerome Kern: *Show Boat*

February 14: George and Ira Gershwin 1 of 2

February 19: George and Ira Gershwin 2 of 2

February 21: Cole Porter: *Anything Goes* and more

February 26: Musicals at the movies: *Top Hat*; *Gold Diggers of 1933*

February 28: No in person class session: *Pal Joey* streamable from module

Friday, March 1: Paper #1 due

March 2-10: Spring Break!

March 11: Musicals at the Movies: *The Wizard of Oz*

March 13: Rodgers and Hammerstein 1 of 2: *Oklahoma!*

March 18: Rodgers and Hammerstein 2 of 2: *Carousel*... and Lerner & Loewe's *My Fair Lady*

March 20: Styne & Sondheim: *Gypsy* 1 of 2

March 25: Styne & Sondheim: *Gypsy* 2 of 2

March 27: Leonard Bernstein 1 of 2: *On the Town*, *West Side Story*

April 1: Leonard Bernstein 2 of 2: *West Side Story*

April 3: Weill, Brecht, Kabarett, and *Cabaret*

April 8: Kander and Ebb: *Cabaret*... and Bob Fosse

April 10: Strouse and Adams: *Bye, Bye, Birdie*

April 15: Rado and Ragni: *Hair*

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April 17: Blockbusters: *Les Miserables* & *Phantom of the Opera*

April 22: Sondheim and Prince: *Company*

April 24: Sondheim and Lapine: *Sunday in the Park with George*

April 29: Today's Broadway: *Hamilton* and beyond

May 1: Final session: Open Forum

Friday, May 10 – Paper #2 due