

THE HISTORY OF MUSICAL THEATRE

in 42 Minutes and 28 Seconds

Art Form: Theatre
Style: Contemporary
Culture: American

MEET THE ARTIST:

The History of Musical Theatre in 42 Minutes and 28 Seconds was created and is performed by members of the **Musical Theatre Guild**. The Guild is a non-profit membership company of theatrical professionals who produce and perform a variety of musical theatre works for the entertainment, enrichment and education of Southern California audiences. Since its inception in 1995, the Musical Theatre Guild has presented over two dozen individual concerts. Each concert is performed for one night only in a staged reading format with live orchestra at the historic Pasadena Playhouse. *The History of Musical Theatre in 42 Minutes and 28 Seconds* was written by Kevin McMahon and directed by Nick DeGruccio.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

The History of Musical Theatre in 42 Minutes and 28 Seconds is a revue of selected songs that encompasses the richness and diversity of a truly original American art form. A cast of four actor/singers and a pianist use selected costume pieces and props to trace the colorful history and development of musical theatre. Starting from the earliest shows, the company presents songs from the groundbreaking productions of *Showboat* (1927) by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, and *Oklahoma* (1943) by Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers. Moving forward in time, the performers continue to explore this unique art form by examining the music and songs from recent Broadway musicals, such as *Ragtime* and *The Lion King*. The song list also includes favorites from *Annie Get Your Gun*, *West Side Story*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Hair*, *Grease*, *A Chorus Line* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Musical theatre is an original American art form with three main defining elements: book, song (lyrics and score), and dance.

Book

In musical theatre, the term "book" refers to the actual script of a musical. It comes first, almost without exception. The book draws together the characters, dialogue, plot, placement of song and dance, and theatrical concept for the design elements into a kind of blueprint for a production. The written format is like that of a play with dialogue and stage directions, even though it is called a book -- a term that we normally associate with prose.

Song - Lyrics and Score

A song is comprised of the words (lyrics) and the music (score). A musical theatre lyric is a pattern of words that, when set to music, communicates essential information about the dramatic life of a show. Lyrics express the thoughts and emotions of characters, contributing to the mood and propelling the action or plot forward. The score or music provides the accompaniment for the lyric, giving it a time signature, rhythm and melody. Music can reinforce the emotion and dramatic action and establish the mood or tone. Music also can serve as a transition between the parts of a show, creating a bridge from one scene to another.

Dance

Music generates dance. Dance is a choreographed arrangement of positions and steps performed in a variety of styles (ballet, modern, jazz, tap, etc.). Like the lyrics and music, dance helps carry the action of the musical forward by revealing character and showing conflict and resolution through movement. Dance helps establish mood as the human body shows emotion through facial expression, posture and gesture. It can also express comedy or extend a dramatic moment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Had you ever heard any of the songs in *The History of Musical Theatre in 42 Minutes and 28 Seconds*? Which ones? Where did you hear them?
- What was your favorite song in *The History of Musical Theatre in 42 Minutes and 28 Seconds*? Why?
- What are the three main elements in a musical? (book, song, dance)
- If you could play any of the characters you were introduced to in the performance, which one would you choose? Why?
- The revue featured musicals from different time periods. Which musical took place in the 1950s? The 1960s?
- What similarities did you notice between the scene from *Romeo and Juliet* and the scene from *West Side Story*? How were they different? Describe.

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIES:

The musical *1776* is based upon the events of the American Revolution and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The characters in the play are based on historical figures, such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and George Washington. Study American history in the colonial time period prior to the revolution, focusing on the issues that led to the decision to separate from England (taxation without representation, the Boston Massacre, etc.). Have students research and report on our nation's forefathers, noting each one's major contributions. Locate the libretto to *1776* and the Broadway cast recording. Read the play aloud in class with students, taking turns in the various roles. Listen to each song in its appropriate place in the read-thru. Discuss and evaluate how American history was translated into a work of musical theatre. Look at pictures of the Broadway production and see how the costume design was based on colonial dress and how the set design reflected the famous painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

- Legend:
- ⊗ Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⊗ Watch a videotape of a musical that has been made into a feature film. Some examples are *The Sound of Music*, *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Music Man*, *Grease* and *Annie*. Discuss how music, dance and dialogue combine to create the art form.
- ❖ Select a core literature book to use as a basis for original musical scenes. Make a list on the blackboard of the main characters and key plot points. Analyze the characters' thoughts and motivations which might be revealed in song and/or dance. Divide the class into songwriting teams to create music and lyrics which depict and extend the story into a musical form.
- Research early musical entertainment and theatrical forms in America: minstrel shows, vaudeville and burlesque. Describe the key characteristics of each and find photographs of the actual performers and copies of posters and playbills from historical productions.
- ⇒ Develop a list of criteria for a review or critique sheet used to evaluate student performances. The list may include: the ability to create believable characters; the use of projection and articulation; the skill shown in the techniques of blocking and staging; and the appropriate choice of design elements.



- * Look at a program from a professional musical theatre production, noting the many different jobs credited in the making of a musical. Define the responsibility of each occupation: producer, director, composer, lyricist, writer (book), choreographer, set designer, costume designer, lighting

designer, sound designer, casting director, actor, musical director, orchestrator, conductor, etc. Jobs behind the scenes include: stage manager, technical supervisor, property master, production assistant and press associate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Ewen David. *Complete Book of the American Musical Theater*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, NY: 1970.
- Kislan, Richard. *The Musical*. Applause, New York, NY: 1995.