

American Musical Theater

American musical theater had its origins in the comic opera of France and Italy. One of the earliest composers of musical theater pieces was Victor Herbert (1850–1924). Some of his important contributions to this genre were *Babes in Toyland* and *Naughty Merrietta*. Other important early musical theater composers were Sigmund Romberg (*Student Prince*) and Jerome Kern (*Showboat*).

The composers of this type of music chose their plots and their song materials with future listeners and viewers in mind. Generally, the early musicals had romantic plots with aspects of comedy thrown in. The melodies had to be catchy. They had to be melodies that the audience would leave humming or singing. When this occurred, the success of the musical was usually assured.

Many of the early musicals had plots that were designed merely to show off the popular songs of the day. Often the songs would come before the musical was ever conceived. As musical theater developed, the plots improved and became more intricate and complex in order to help the story and the situation be more believable. Many of the later composers used famous literary works as the basis for their musicals. For instance, *Kiss Me, Kate* was based on Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *My Fair Lady* was based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

Richard Rodgers composed a tremendous number of works and worked with two of the most talented songwriters and lyricists known to the world of musical theater. His first partner was Lorenz Hart, and together they wrote nearly 30 shows. Following Hart's death, Rodgers teamed up with Oscar Hammerstein and produced a number of well-known and long-lived musicals such as *The Sound of Music*, *The King and I*, and *Oklahoma!* They composed together from 1943 until about 1960. In the 1970s and '80s Stephen Sondheim became the leading force in musical theater with his works such as *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Into the Woods*.

Another important element of musical theater, rock musicals, began in the late '60s and '70s. These incorporated another style of popular music known as *rock* and did away with the romantic, sometimes sappy, songs of the earlier musicals in favor of less tuneful songs. However, Andrew Lloyd Webber, the famous British composer of musical theater works, helped to bring the element of beautiful song back to the musical with such works as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Cats*. With the arrival of Andrew Lloyd Webber and the contribution of Claude Michelle Schonberg's *Les Miserables*, American musical theater was taken over by European composers. There have, in recent years, been a number of revivals of the old musicals, such as *Guys and Dolls*, *Showboat*, and *My Fair Lady*. These revivals have helped rekindle the interest in and production of American-made musicals, such as the grand-scale *Beauty and the Beast*, an adaptation of the animated Disney film.



The cast of Richard Rodgers' and Oscar Hammerstein's musical, *Oklahoma!*

Name _____ Date _____

All Mixed Up

Unscramble these words.

1. oirhbtectevr (two words) _____

2. inommrusbgdro (two words) _____

3. eeeremorkjn (two words) _____

4. hoastbow _____

5. kemistakes, (three words) _____

6. pongymail _____

7. charedsrdgoirr (two words) _____

8. enorrazlth (two words) _____

9. slimcaus _____

10. hmoaloakl _____

11. speenthsmdohi (two words) _____

12. missclockaur (two words) _____

13. werdnoydrlewbab (three words) _____

14. smearbleslise (two words) _____

15. rpueenaprmocsseo (two words) _____

WORD LIST

Andrew Lloyd Webber
 Kiss Me, Kate
 musicals
 Richard Rodgers
 Sigmond Romburg

European composers
 Les Miserables
 Oklahoma!
 rock musicals
 Stephen Sondheim

Jerome Kern
 Lorenz Hart
 Pygmalion
 Showboat
 Victor Herbert

Name _____ Date _____

Questions for Consideration

1. What were the origins of American musical theater?

2. What early composer of musical theater pieces composed the music for *Babes in Toyland*?

3. What was an important ingredient of a successful musical?

4. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* was the basis for what musical?

5. Some of the most well-known musicals such as *The Sound of Music* and *Oklahoma!* were created by what team?

6. What style of musical tried to do away with romantic, sappy songs?

7. What British composer brought the element of beautiful song back to musicals?

8. Name three recent musicals written by foreign composers.

9. What has rekindled interest in American-made musicals?

10. *My Fair Lady* was based on what literary work?
