**Chapter 16**

**Musical Theatre**

Musicals are one of the most popular types of music in America today. Like opera, a musical is a way of telling a story through song. And, while the basic form and performing requirements are similar, the musical differs from opera in several ways. First, there is no recitative in the musical—the dialogue is spoken. Though not always true, the plots of musicals tend to be lighter than opera. And, they are realistic, for the most part depicting some aspect of life. Today’s musicals rely on a good deal of technology, less so in opera. Some of the music is prerecorded, and lighting and special effects are much more important in musicals than operas. Like opera the focus of musicals is the solo songs. And throughout history many of these songs from musicals have become hit pop tunes.

A musical is usually written by a team of a composer and a librettist. Some of the most famous creative teams include Rodgers and Hart, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Kandor and Ebb, Bernstein and Sondheim, and Lerner and Loewe.

In addition to opera and operetta there are a few other important precursors to the modern musical. In the late 19th century minstrel shows traveled the country. A minstrel show was often in three parts and was made up of a series of acts who told jokes, sang, danced, or performed other variety acts. Vaudeville was somewhat similar to this because it was a show of variety acts including songs and dances. Often there were acrobats, jugglers, and animal acts in vaudeville shows. In the late 1800s and early 1900s there was a so-called vaudeville circuit of theatres throughout the country’s medium sized cities. Acts would travel from city to city to present their shows.

The French revue also contributed to the development of the musical. It often had no real plot or script and revolved around a star performer’s abilities. These revues were similar to an American form of New York entertainment of the early 1900s called the Ziegfeld Follies. These lavish shows had silly or no plot lines, and included song and dance numbers with elaborate costumes and beautiful girls. Early Broadway musicals drew from each of these styles, but lacked real plots. Their focus was primarily on delivering great songs, some of which became standards.

In 1927 Jerome Kern wrote a new type of musical called a book musical. The work, called *Showboat*, had a serious plot line and the songs and dances were conceived to support the plot, not interrupt it. From this the modern musical was born. The book musical dominated musicals from the 1940s through the 1960s and some of the greatest American shows were written during this time. Shows that are standard fare now for high school and university musical theatres written during this time period include *Oklahoma!, Carousel, South Pacific, The King and I, My Fair Lady, Fiddler on the Roof, Hello Dolly, Man of La Mancha, The Music Man,* and *West Side Story*. In each of these works, song and dance are important contributors to the plot and actors must be equally skilled at acting, singing, and dancing in order to perform the roles.

Songs in modern musicals generally follow a standard form of verse, chorus, bridge, chorus. The verse is a sort of introduction and is often in free rhythm. The chorus is the part of the song we remember—the main melody, and it is often repeated three times with different sets of words. The bridge is the middle part of the song, usually a little shorter and often in a slightly different mood than the chorus.

Musicals are called Broadway shows because the theatres where many of them are produced are located on Broadway in New York City. And many Broadway shows have been made into Hollywood films. Recently, this trend has reversed as shows like *Beauty* *and the Beast or The Lion King* began as movies and were turned into musicals.

In the 1970s musicals began to diversify in terms of musical styles. They also began to include a good deal of technology. Music from rock and jazz began to be used in musicals. And, a good deal of prerecorded music and sounds, special lighting effects, and fantastic sets fueled by technology became important in the modern musical. A new group of composers emerged as the leaders of this eclectic style of show including: Andrew Lloyd Webber who wrote *The Phantom of the Opera, Evita, Cats,* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*; Claude Michel Schonberg who wrote *Miss Saigon* and *Les Miserables*; and Stephen Sondheim who wrote *A Little Night Music, Sweeny Todd, Company,* and *Into the Woods.*

Modern musicals draw plots from a diverse range of places. In addition to popular animated films like *The Lion King* being used as musicals, composers have also drawn on opera plots. The shows *Miss Saigon* and *Rent* are both retellings of the operas of Puccini: *Madame Butterfly* and *La boheme*. Elton John recently reworked Verdi’s opera *Aida* into a Broadway show.

One of the most popular of modern musicals is *Wicked*. It was written by Stephen Schwartz, who also has written Disney musicals and older style Broadway shows. Schwartz, in *Wicked*, pulls together most of the modern techniques of today’s Broadway show. Technology, special effects, recorded music, a mix of traditional and rock musical styles, and a very strong and interesting plot line are all used in *Wicked* and indicative of the modern successful musical.

Even with the addition of all the dancing, technology, and mix of styles, the most important thing about a Broadway musical is still the songs.