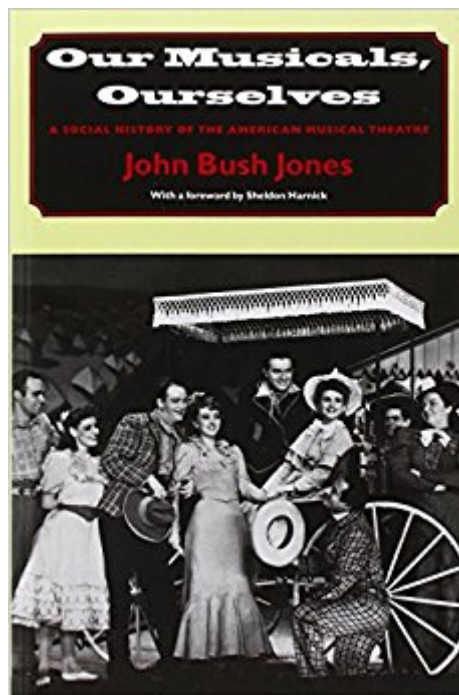




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# Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History Of The American Musical Theatre



## Synopsis

Our Musicals, Ourselves is the first full-scale social history of the American musical theater from the imported Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas of the late nineteenth century to such recent musicals as The Producers and Urinetown. While many aficionados of the Broadway musical associate it with wonderful, diversionary shows like The Music Man or My Fair Lady, John Bush Jones instead selects musicals for their social relevance and the extent to which they engage, directly or metaphorically, contemporary politics and culture. Organized chronologically, with some liberties taken to keep together similarly themed musicals, Jones examines dozens of Broadway shows from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present that demonstrate numerous links between what played on Broadway and what played on newspapers' front pages across our nation. He reviews the productions, lyrics, staging, and casts from the lesser-known early musicals (the "gunboat" musicals of the Teddy Roosevelt era and the "Cinderella shows" and "leisure time musicals" of the 1920s) and continues his analysis with better-known shows including Showboat, Porgy and Bess, Oklahoma, South Pacific, West Side Story, Cabaret, Hair, Company, A Chorus Line, and many others. While most examinations of the American musical focus on specific shows or emphasize the development of the musical as an art form, Jones's book uses musicals as a way of illuminating broader social and cultural themes of the times. With six appendixes detailing the long-running diversionary musicals and a foreword by Sheldon Harnick, the lyricist of Fiddler on the Roof, Jones's comprehensive social history will appeal to both students and fans of Broadway.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“The strength of this sweeping thesis is its scope. It seeks to demonstrate and analyze how Broadway and Off-Broadway have held up a mirror to political and social currents in American society at large. But the fun comes from showing how events and trends in widely separated decades all sprang from similar currents of thought. By looking at the entire continuum of musicals as a single ongoing dialog between Broadway and America, the book serves up fresh insights and eyebrow-raising parallels on each page. It starts in the 19th century and runs right up to 2001’s *Urinetown*, from which it concludes that the political musical remains alive and well.”

•Playbill “Our Musical, Ourselves . . . may foreshadow a new era in the study of the musical . . . [an] accessible read . . . [a] must read for the musical theatre scholar... a text that finally fills the void of a needed comprehensive history of the musical that, more importantly, places each musical squarely in the context of the time in which it was created.”

•Theatre History Studies “[An] overview of the American musical for the entire twentieth century . . . a strength of the book, in addition to the author’s obvious enthusiasm for his subject matter, is that it has something to say about dozens of shows not even mentioned by [other] authors.”

•Kurt Weill Newsletter “The very fact that [Our Musicals, Ourselves] looks at potential interfaces between social and political developments and the Broadway musical is laudable . . . The study’s expansive scope, its attempts at connecting historical narrative with a narrative of genre evolution, as well as Jones’s near encyclopedic knowledge of social and political themes in Broadway productions provide an excellent starting point for further analysis of specific periods, sub-genres, and issues in American musical theater.”

•American Studies “[An] excellent survey... Recommended.”

•Opera Journal “Chicago’s haul at the Oscars and the box office makes this an auspicious time for three new surveys of American musical theater. Our Musicals, Ourselves is the most interesting of the bunch. Author John Bush Jones pairs the history of musicals with that of America itself.”

•Variety

“An excellent overview of the American musical, its history, its significance and its influence, told in a most entertaining way. A truly admirable work.” (Joseph Stein, playwright, *Fiddler on the Roof*)

I found that the author really stretched the point on the social relevance. In fact his discussion at times was almost forced. It is well written and had some insight but it was far too aggressive in shaping his argument. In many places one can agree but the musicals he often chose to make his point were hardly pieces of theater that made an impact. for example "Woman of the Year" as a "women's lib piece was a stretch. A mediocre musical is just that and social relevance did not help it. He talked about 'cabaret" and its revival as being socially more accurate in later versions but that is what good theater does it re-invents itself in new thinking all of the time. His thesis just was too forced to be true.

I've been teaching from this book for four years now. Rather than meandering around in the early days blathering about THE BLACK CROOK, Bush Jones immediately identifies the twin roots of today's American musical theatre: Gilbert & Sullivan (specifically PINAFORE) and Vaudeville. From there he's off and running. He gives us successors to those roots: Ziegfeld - vaudeville, Cohan - G&S with an American twist and gives us sparkling details and cogent WHYS. He gives SHOWBOAT, OKLAHOMA!, WEST SIDE STORY and COMPANY their due as landmark, game-changing pieces, without fawning excessively over them, and credits The Princess Theatre Musicals (VERY GOOD EDDIE etc.) as a cauldron of experimentation, PAL JOEY, and URINETOWN as tinkerers that improved the form. I wish he'd update it, but it's VERY good as it is.

great book for they who want to know about Musicals History

I was very excited when I found this book, subtitled "a social history of the American musical theatre". Mr. Jones covers over a century of theatrical works, and his analysis doesn't only include the major hits. He does a great job exploring the influence of African-American and Jewish theater on "mainstream" Broadway entertainment, and his analysis of the importance of the legal battles around "Hair" was very informative. While I don't agree with every point he makes, I think it is an important addition to any theater-lover's library. One complaint (more for his editor or publisher than for himself) is the inconsistent presentation of lyrics, which sometimes appear in all caps. The first time this happened (over halfway through the book, in a section about "Purlie"), I assumed it had some purpose. But it doesn't seem to, and the rest of the book goes back and forth in style (sometimes on the same page!).

This book by a long-time professor of theatre arts at Brandeis University is a fascinating study of the social forces influencing the evolution of the Broadway music. Starting with the early part of the 20th-century and working his way slowly to the present day, John Bush Jones groups musicals according to their themes and intent, calling some simply 'diversionary' (the sort that is so often thought to be aimed at the 'tired businessman') and others 'issue-driven,' (those with a theme which somehow mirrors the society at large). Clearly his interest is primarily with the latter, although he does discuss some of the unconscious thematic issues of the former. He does sometimes tend to get a bit caught up in his own premises and oversell them, but by and large this is a scholarly, and entirely readable, history of an art form that was invented on our shores and brought to its peak here, although it has been imitated prolifically elsewhere. He makes the point that most of the creators were Jewish (as he is) but doesn't offer much of an explanation for why this might be so. He focuses repeatedly on such things as shows with African-American, Jewish, political, sociological and psychological themes. He offers a fine analysis of the so-called 'concept musical' (e.g., 'Company' or 'Chorus Line') which he prefers to call 'fragmented musicals,' a description which points out their lack of an ordinary linear plot line. One could argue with some of his emphases and analyses, but one has to respect the depth and breadth of his research and knowledge. He analyzes sociopolitical themes at length in such musicals as 'Show Boat,' 'The Cradle Will Rock,' 'Pal Joey,' 'Oklahoma,' 'South Pacific,' 'Carousel,' 'Sweeney Todd,' 'Fiddler on the Roof,' and others. Sometimes he finds hidden meanings that I had a hard time agreeing with, but I can only admire his imaginative look at some musicals that many of us tend to see as primarily 'diversionary.' The book includes appendices listing the most popular or important musicals grouped roughly by decade and the number of performances they achieved. And there is also an extensive bibliography. I've read many books about the musical theatre and this one is unique in its perspective; it brings an interesting slant to the subject. Thus, it is a worthy addition to the long list of important books about the art form. Scott Morrison

I loved this book. Ever since my high school English teacher chastised me for trying to put Miller's *The Crucible* in the context of the McCarthy era, I have been fascinated with the social context surrounding the creation of art. Jones focuses on the political as well as social context that has given birth to the great...and the mediocre...of the American musical. First, his use of terms such as "diversionary" ring so true for those of us who love mindless fluff when we go to the theatre. Second, I was shocked at how little I had appreciated the contributions of African-Americans, inter

alia, to the American stage prior to reading this book. But, mostly, I liked how he articulated how a writer's gestalt accounts for the end product on the stage and his description of how copy-cat musicals come into being. The book gave me the backstory to many of the original shows I had the good fortune to see on Broadway. I, for one, would love a Volume II of this book to be Jones' next foray. I especially offer this to aspiring young actors, writers, directors and songwriters as a required read before embarking on a life in musical theater. If you want to create art, you must know from whence you came.

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