Making and Meaning in the American Musical

MUS24417/TAPS28467/SIG26009

Winter Quarter, 2019
Logan Arts Center 901
T/Th 9:30-10:50

Professor Thomas Christensen, Wieboldt Hall 402. tchriste@uchicago.edu. Office Hours: Monday 10:00–12:00; Thursday 11:00–12:00; or by appointment (Wieboldt 402).

David Womble, Teaching Assistant. daw23@uchicago.edu. Office Hours: Tuesday 11:00–12:00 in Logan Café or by appointment.  

The history of the American Musical in the 20th century is paradoxical. While the genre is one often denigrated as staging lyric utopias of romance and adventure allowing audiences to escape depressing quotidian realities, many musicals did seek to engage some of the most pressing social issues of their day. In this course, we will look—and listen—closely to four differing musicals from the last one hundred years, studying their creative origins, while also analyzing their complex social meanings and reception as revealed through the story, music, lyrics, staging, dance, and film adaptations. Musicals to be covered: Show Boat (1927), South Pacific (1949), Sweeney Todd (1979), and Hamilton (2016).

Requirements: This will be an interactive class, with viewings, in-house performances, and above all, robust discussion. There will be weekly readings (found on the class Canvas site) and some home viewings (mostly on You Tube), which you will be expected to complete, take notes on, and be ready to discuss in class. In addition there will be film screenings of the first three musicals scheduled during selected week day evenings. There will be no final exam. But over the course of the quarter, there will be four short writing assignments or original projects and a final paper due in the 11th week (end of 10th week for seniors). Guidelines for these assignments and final paper will be given in class. Finally, regular attendance and active participation will be factored into the final grade. We will include in some classes a performance of a song or scene from one the shows under discussion. All class members will be encouraged to participate in some way with one of these stagings (as singer, actor, pianist, or “director,” depending on your talents and interests). Details to follow.

Thanks to special funding from the College, the Course Arts Resource Fund (CARF) and the Department of Music, we have acquired deeply-subsidized tickets for all class members to a live performance of “Hamilton” on March 7 at the Chicago
Privatebank Theater! **You will be asked to contribute $30 to the cost of the ticket.** It is not cheap, we know. (But it is a LOT cheaper than if you tried to get the ticket on your own!) If any of you will have difficulty paying the full price for this ticket, please contact me personally to let me know.

**Required Textbook:** *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber*, by Geoffrey Block (Oxford Univ. Press). Available at the Seminary Co-op.

**Regular attendance** to class and screenings is expected of all students. If you have a conflict that will require you to miss a class, you will need to let us know ahead of time unless it is an emergency. Papers are due at the required dates without exception unless—once again—permission and arrangements have been made ahead of time.

**Grading:** 4 short assignments (50% of grade); Final paper (40%); participation in class discussion, attendance (10%).

**Disability statement:** We will do our best to make the accommodations necessary for you to flourish in this class. Please inform one of us as early as possible about anything that may affect your performance and/or attendance. For information on University policies regarding disabilities, please contact the office of the Dean of Students or consult the Disabilities Services web page: [http://disabilities.uchicago.edu](http://disabilities.uchicago.edu).

**Academic integrity statement:** All work you submit must be your own. If you draw on the work of others (book, website, or otherwise), you MUST cite your source(s). **Failure to do so will result in a failing grade for the assignment in question.** Please use Chicago-style citation format, as delineated by the Chicago Manual of Style (available online via the U of C Library website). Here is a helpful page for if/when you get stuck in your writing, and information on what counts as plagiarism: [http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/but_what_if_you_get_stuck.htm](http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/but_what_if_you_get_stuck.htm).

**Registration:** Registered students must confirm enrollment by attending the first two classes. Unregistered students who attend both classes during the first week will be given priority for any spots that become available. Among unregistered students, priority will be given as follows: graduating students and fourth years, Majors in music and TAPS, third years, second years, first years. The class roster will be finalized by the end of week 1. Unregistered students must fill out a pink slip in order to be added to the roster. For more information on this process, see: [http://college.uchicago.edu/academics-advising/course-selection-registration/add-drop](http://college.uchicago.edu/academics-advising/course-selection-registration/add-drop).

Readings: All readings are on the Canvas site, either under Library Course Reserves, or organized by week in the Course Materials tab.


2. Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris, “Tin Pan Alley Songs on Stage and Screen Before World War II.” Chapter 6 of The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical (OHAM), pp. 81-96. (Note: to access the musical examples tagged in all articles for OHAM, go to www.oup.com/us/oham. Access with username Music2 and password Book4416; follow links to the appropriate chapter.)


**Film Screening of Showboat:** TBA (Logan Screening Room). (Possible second screening TBA.)

**Paper Assignment #1:** Analysis of a scene, song, or character in Show Boat. Details to be handed out in class. Due Tuesday January 29.


3. **Watch:** clip from “Broadway: The American Musical” (PBS, 2004), on YouTube. Search for “American Musical South Pacific.” The clip is 4.49 minutes.

Week 5. February 5, 7. **South Pacific (2).** Politics and production Characters and plot. Romance in the Musical. Film Musicals: style, technology, diegesis. Song anatomy: “Bali Ha’i,” “Happy talk,” “You’ve got to be carefully taught,” “I’m gonna wash that man right out of my hair,” “Younger than spring time,” “Some enchanted evening.”

**Film screening of South Pacific, TBA. (Possible second screening TBA.)**

**Paper Assignment #2:** Comparison of race treatment in Showboat and South Pacific. Details to be handed out in class. Due February 12.


1. Ethan Mordden, On Sondheim, pp. 1-18; 66-76.


3. Sondheim, Finishing the Hat, pp. xvii-xxvii; 330-76, passim. (Browse the lyrics and read Sondheim’s insightful commentaries.)

4. Watch: clip from “Broadway: The American Musical” (PBS, 2004), on YouTube. Search “American Musical Stephen Sondheim” (c. 5.55 minutes) and “American Musical Sweeney Todd” (c. 7.40 minutes)


Film Screening of Tim Burton’s Adaptation of Sweeney Todd. TBA Logan 201. (Possible second screening TBA.)

Paper Assignment #3: Original lyrics/song-writing project. Details to be given in class. Due February 26.

2. Sondheim on Burton’s film adaptation (TBD).


**Abstract** of final paper project due on February 26.


5. Various newspaper reviews of Hamilton.....tba

**Live performance, March 7, 7:30, Privatebank Theatre on Monroe Street.** Students will be asked to contribute $30.00 each to the cost of the ticket covered by CARF grants and the Music Department. Tickets to be distributed in class.

**Paper Assignment #4.** Review of the live production of Hamilton. Due March 12.


1. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 328-64.


3. Additional readings or viewings TBA.

4. Performances? Wrapping up.

**Week 11. Final paper** due on March 19. Guidelines to be given in class.