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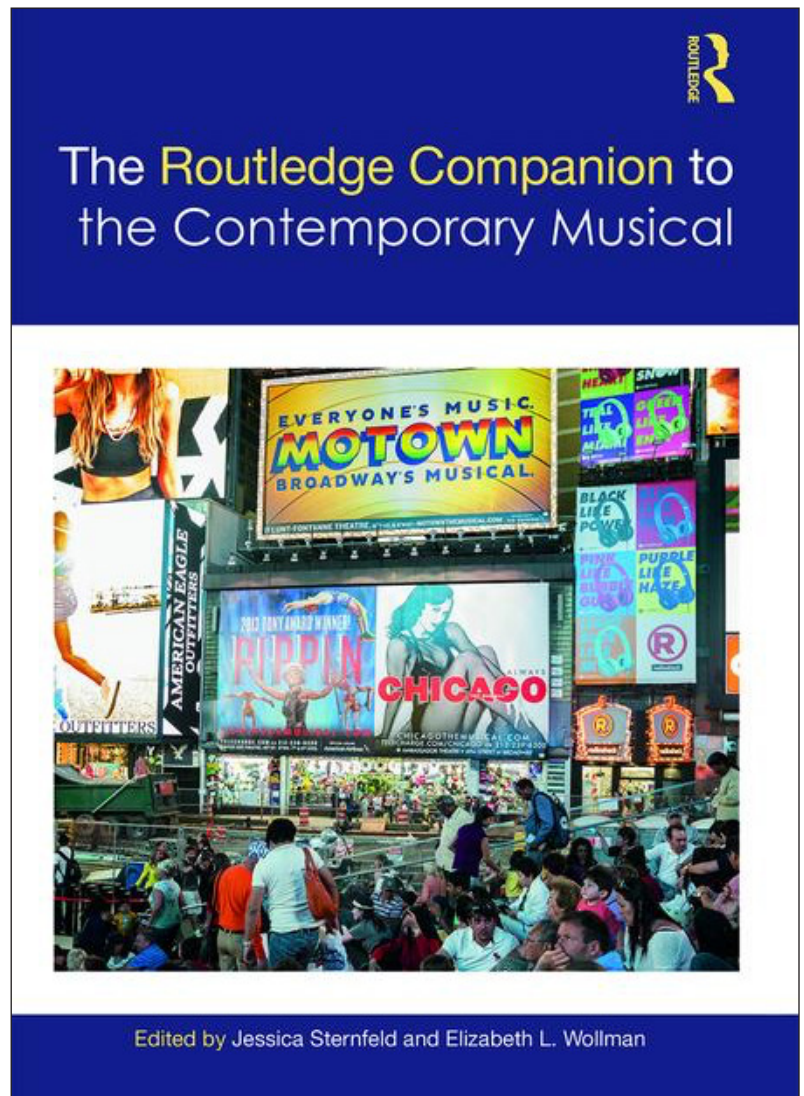
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Turning Attention to the Contemporary Musical

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The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical (New York: Routledge, 2020), edited by Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman, brings together forty-four essays that examine the American musical in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from a range of perspectives and disciplines. As the editors point out in their introduction, it is only relatively recently that the musical has been recognized as worthy of scholarship, thanks in large part to the work of several scholars who contribute chapters here, and that scholarship has primarily focused on the so-called (and still contested) “Golden Age,” variously considered to begin either around 1927 with *Showboat* or in 1943 with *Oklahoma!* and ending somewhere between the mid-1950s and early 1970s. This collection therefore helps correct the misconception of the contemporary musical as “the less artistically exacting, more crassly commercialized, less intelligently conceived stepchildren of comparatively brilliant, inspired works by the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Stephen Sondheim” (3).

As a whole, this companion examines the contemporary musical as both formed by and formative of an ever-changing culture. The editors providing a framing introduction for each of the nine sections that often implicitly reiterates their case for the value in scholarly consideration of the contemporary musical. “Setting the Stage: An Introduction to Analyzing the Musical Theater” opens the volume with “Musical Theater Reception Theory, Or What Happens When You See a Show?” by Katie Welsh and Stacy Wolf and “[Title of Chapter]” by Millie Taylor—both written in an anecdotal style that offsets their heavyweight theoretical groundings in reception theory, sociology, anthropology, and postmodernism. The open subjectivity of these essays offers a more lively descriptive entrée than traditional academic fare by acknowledging the importance of the scholar’s own experience of their subject matter.



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“Starting with the ‘70s” focuses on the decade “often dismissed as dark, dirty, and depressing” (27). These pieces observe the musicals and/or trends born in the 1970s that continue to shape current musical theater. Bryan Vandevender examines how “the me-decade” influenced Broadway, drawing on case studies that feature relatively cynical, isolated protagonists in search of self-actualization. In a related vein, Ryan Bunch looks at adolescence and coming of age in the musicals of Stephen Schwartz. In “Style as Star: Bob Fosse and Sixty Seconds That Changed Broadway,” Ryan Donovan argues compellingly that the choreographer/director exerted a transformative influence on Broadway through his artful and unprecedented use of television advertising, which in turn played a significant role in establishing the Fosse style as recognizable and profitable. James Lovensheimer breaks down Broadway revivals since 1970 that “relate to or exploit” nostalgia into six types, including a final category he names “hybrids” (60, 64).

The title of the third section, “Aesthetic Transformations,” is self-explanatory, though as the editors point out, the rapid evolution of technology in recent years renders its aesthetic value a more hotly contested issue than the seemingly straightforward practical advantages of technological innovations of yore. The essays avoid puritanical complaint or zealous advocacy, and generally offer thoughtful analysis of major transformations. Ben Macpherson, Arreanna Rostosky, and Dominic Symonds consider the reciprocal effect of microphones and amplification on vocal aesthetics and audience reception, making space for a reevaluation of sometimes derided features of the contemporary musical (for instance, in megamusicals like *Starlight Express* and *Phantom of the Opera*, explored by Symonds). Alex Bádue’s essay is an outlier in this section, dedicated to Michael John LaChiusa’s signature aesthetic that “nods to the past and leans to the future” (104). Matthew Lockitt and Christin Essin move away from aesthetics to consider the industry. Lockitt debates the increasing commercial pressure for stage musicals to collaborate with the “chart-toppers” of pop music and the question of authenticity such collaborations prompt on both sides. Essin extends the conversation of the impact of automated technologies on scenic and sonic design to consider the labor, economics, and accessibility of stagecraft.

The next few sections are explicitly organized around different interpretive lenses. “Reading the Musical through Gender” and “Reading the Musical through Race and Ethnicity” center on questions of identity that establish key concerns in musical theater studies. The musical holds a multivalent relationship to gender and sexuality—on the one hand, a celebration of heteronormativity is deeply embedded in the musical’s genealogy, while on the other, the female heroine (and the diva who embodies her) holds an unusually dominant position, despite the fact that female creators continue to be outnumbered by men on Broadway. As D.A. Miller has famously explored in *A Place for Us*, the musical has also long held a special place for gay men, ambivalently expressing and obscuring sexuality and gay male identification with the heroine.¹ The essays by Mary Jo Lodge and Trudi Wright shift the conversation on gender into the eras of #metoo, the Bechdel Test, and second wave feminism. Aaron Thomas focuses on casting and sexuality in an essay that reflects the heightened—and necessary—awareness of casting in both artistic and academic circles, homing in on the particularly complex dilemma of less visible identities. John Clum analyzes the visible representations of homosexuality and contested masculinity through costuming and drag.

Casting is also the core question of two essays centered on race and ethnicity: Todd Decker’s exploration of “multiracial” musicals; and Sissi Liu’s piece on the industry and societal impact of all-black and all-Asian productions of *Hello, Dolly!*. Stefanie A. Jones and Elizabeth Craft respectively challenge the racial politics of the purportedly progressive musicals, *Avenue Q* and *Hamilton*. Raymond and Zelda Knapp turn to scripted characters and narratives examining the weighty legacy of *Fiddler on the Roof* in *Falsettos*’ treatment of Jewish characters and stories.

As the editors rightly note, “dancing is often undervalued as a key factor in musical theater meaning and history” (235). “Reading the Musical through Dance” seeks to redress that omission with three

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essays: Joanna Dee Das's exploration of the controversy surrounding *Contact*—a 2000 dance musical that prioritized dance to the extent that it destabilized the definition of a musical; Liza Gennaro's examination of how choreographers approach revivals; and Phoebe Rumsey's look at *Hamilton* that presents an especially strong case for the consideration of dance as meaning-making. Rumsey considers choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler's "nearly perpetual movement vocabulary" and purposeful inclusion and hybridization of dance styles, which include not only its celebrated hip hop, but historic social dances, jazz, and contemporary dance (235). She concludes these factors play an indispensable role in the storytelling, reinforcing and commenting upon the musical's self-aware historicity.

Although the entire volume—like its subject matter—is essentially interdisciplinary, "Reading the Musical through Interdisciplinary Lenses" groups essays that look to fields not ordinarily associated with musical theater. Jake Johnson offers a provocative discussion of religion and secular idealism in the Broadway musical (though his conflation of "post-truth" and utopian fantasy worlds is slightly questionable). Sarah Taylor Ellis dips into speculative fiction to explore the non-linear—"warped"—time in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*.

Aleksei Grinenko's "The Eye of the Storm: Reading *Next to Normal* with Psychoanalysis" is one of several compelling essays from newer scholars that trace the roots and evolution of "golden age" models as they play out in contemporary musicals. In this case, Grinenko focuses on "the presentation of interiority in fantasy sequences and dream ballets around an increasingly explicit focus on psychoanalytic formulations of subjectivity" that took root in the 1940s and finds itself embedded in the topical 2009 musical through its bipolar heroine. The result is a reciprocal illumination of both the historical and contemporary material through insightful analysis. Paul Laird and James Leve both choose to focus their discussions on the evolution of a single creator's work, with Laird examining the recurrent theme of parent/child relationships in Stephen Schwartz's musicals, and Leve expounding on the "late style" of John Kander. Elissa Harbert considers the particularity of "history musicals" and the distinctive expectations with which critics receive them.

The contributors to "Beyond Broadway: New Media and Fan Studies," have a unique opportunity not afforded in scholarship of early musicals. Not only are the fans currently active and available for study, but new media has shifted fans' "parasocial interaction" with the subject of their adoration into something more truly intimate and influential. Jessica Hillman-McCord delves into this phenomenon in her piece on Lin-Manuel Miranda's mobilization of social media, while also providing a record of fandom, open to analysis. Kelly Kessler discusses fandom in the form of live tweets (325), tying Linda Williams's concept of bodily excess to the seemingly contrasting digital interactions of fans with protest musicals, as well as to the new phenomenon of hate-watching. Holley Replogle-Wong examines the influence exerted by fans on film adaptations of stage musicals. James Deaville provides an exposition of superfandom, using the first-hand accounts of superfans themselves.

Renée Camus considers how Joss Whedon's "geek musicals" have drawn musical fans and "geeks" (here defined as obsessives with some outsider status) into the same cultish sphere. Similarly, Aya Esther Hayashi demonstrates how the young production teams Team StarKid and AVbyte use YouTube to distribute their parodic musicals, taking advantage of the platform's more immediate connection to their viewers, and have thus succeeded in tapping into younger, dedicated fans and niche subcultures, neglected by mainstream Broadway. Robynn Stilwell applies film scholar Rick Altman's notion of "dual-focus narrative" to argue that it is the dramaturgical key to fitting musical numbers into the serial narrative of the TV shows *Nashville* and *Smash*.²

The volume concludes with "Growth and Expansion: Across the Country and Around the World," combatting the assumptions perpetuated in the historiography of the musical that Broadway, Off and Off-Off Broadway, regional theaters, and the West End operate in sequestered spheres, with Broadway largely and justifiably indifferent to all the rest. The first three essays tackle regional theater. Amanda McQueen

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examines the strategies and struggles of the regional musical theater scene in Milwaukee, while Jeffrey Ullom explores the increasingly significant and influential role of regional theater, particularly as a testing ground for pre-Broadway productions and as a potential pipeline for increased equity and diversity in the theater. Steven Adler discusses the development of hit musical *Big River* at La Jolla Playhouse and its role in shaping producing practices and boosting the acclaim of La Jolla.

Frédéric Döhl and Hyunjung Lee both look further back than the asserted starting point of the volume in order to trace how the current state of musical theater came to be in Germany and South Korea respectively. Döhl provides a clear overview of the third largest musical theater market in the world, while Lee digs into how Broadway functioned “as a mode of reconstructing the ‘Korean self’ through an American system,” reconciling the urge to replicate American popular culture as a potent symbol of affluence and modernity with the conflicting objective of preserving and expressing South Korea’s own cultural pride and heritage (443). Finally, Susan Bennett’s essay on *The Lion King* explains how that mega-production came to be the site of theatrical innovation not merely on stage, but also in the marketing and export of Disney musicals as a global concern. Some of the most interesting parts of her clear-sighted essay center on Disney’s problematic ancillary strategies to market itself as “a good corporate citizen” (450).

Musical theater is a subject especially well-suited to the essay collection format, since it is inherently multidisciplinary. The inclusion, therefore, of voices from musicology, theater studies, and dance studies, as well as feminist and gender studies, cultural history, and other disciplines, opens the subject up to more probing consideration. The collection is a satisfying mix of well-established and emerging scholars. Some do the necessary work of documenting, categorizing, and providing a vocabulary for reading this comparatively neglected area of recent performance history. The most successful chapters accord serious attention to those elements distinct to the contemporary musical yet little analyzed—a neglect initially attributable to their newness, but now more likely due to negative connotations with crass commercialism or globalization (like many of the musicals themselves). Others build on such taxonomies, with the most exciting essays offering engaging new perspectives on sometimes familiar material. The editors appear to have envisaged a readership that—like the contributors—may specialize in one facet of musical theater and wish to engage perspectives from other fields. The authors write with an eye towards this accessibility and several of the essays will be effective as teaching texts. Specialists seeking a deep dive into their particular field may find the essays lacking in technical or theoretical rigor, but they are not this book’s audience. As with any such collection, researchers may have to seek out those contributions that will further the conversation for them. *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* is varied and expansive. Not each piece will hit its mark, but the collection fills a significant gap in scholarship bringing different disciplinary voices together as a foundation for further serious consideration of the contemporary musical.

Notes

1. D. A. Miller, *A Place for Us: Essays on the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 1998).
2. Although it doesn’t fit the dual-focus narrative, the omission of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* from the small-screen musicals referenced in the *Companion* is surprising, as this TV series adheres closely to musical theater convention without being a backstage musical or a one-off musical episode.