

## **It Started Out Like a Song: The Art of Musical Theatre**

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When people think of musical theatre, they often envision the loud, spectacular song-and-dance numbers that characterize classic Broadway hits and large-scale extravaganzas. But musical theatre encompasses a wide variety of styles and motives. As a genre, it has been developing since the early eighteenth century, only recently becoming a focus of serious academic study. This seminar will explore musical theatre in all its varieties. What makes musicals so popular? Where did this wacky form come from? How do musicals differ (significantly) from opera? From serious drama? Even *The Sound of Music* asks us to think about what it means to combine music and text, but can musical theatre have the depth of literary and operatic masterpieces?

Because musical theatre is such a large and varied genre, this seminar could head in many different directions. Ideas include tracing the historical development of musical theatre from opera, through operetta, to what we see on Broadway today. We could also explore the mechanics of musical theatre: How do music, text, and theatrical spectacle function together in musicals to create a unique art form? What happens when musical theatre recognizes its own (bizarre) construction involving songs interrupting narrative? Musical theatre is not always seen as substantive, but in fact many musicals contain social critique and political messages. Can musical theatre convey portray issues of race, class, or Imperialism differently than opera or drama? (*The Beggar's Opera*, arguably the origin of modern musical theatre, is both parodic and serious in its focus on the poorest segments of eighteenth-century London.) Is musical theatre an effective form for such messages?

The study of musical theatre will allow us to explore the interdisciplinary fields of music and literature through a medium often overlooked in traditional academic curricula. This seminar can incorporate many different elements of academia, but might be of particular relevance to people interested in music, literature, theatre, history, politics, anthropology, sociology, or American/British studies, though of course this list is in no way inclusive. The ability to read music is not at all required. Anyone with a love of musical theatre is encouraged to apply! This seminar could involve trip(s) to relevant performances in Philadelphia or New York.