

That's Entertainment:

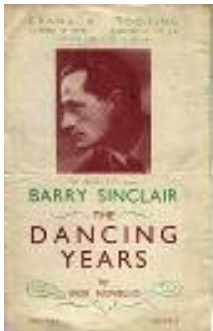
What is it that makes a man or woman go out into the snow, walk, drive or ride several miles, then pay quite a lot of money to sit still in a seat for a couple hours? It is the desire to be entertained!

In medieval times, the only entertainment for the majority of people were at the fairs or markets. Here a few times a year, they could relax while listening to a minstrel or watching acrobats, jugglers or animal acts. The theatre, which matured in Tudor times, was only in the largest towns and mainly for the more wealthy. The nineteenth century saw the growth of the Music Hall, from a drinking hall with informal acts, to the Variety Theatre (or Vaudeville in the USA) at the start of the Twentieth Century. Just as the theatre was available for the masses, with halls suitable for performances in even the smallest towns, a new invention made entertainment available even for the poorest of people, the cinema. This meant that the best actors (or most popular) and the best shows could be seen by everyone. Before only those who could get to New York or London could experience the better performances. The cinema was at its peak in the middle of the twentieth century and had improved from the original flickering black and white screens to full colour three dimensional screens of the 1960s. However by then a new form of entertainment had at last taken the hardship out of entertainment. Television had brought it right into the living room, and the video cassette recorder had given the individual absolute choice and control.

Fortunately both the cinema and the theatre survived, albeit, with far fewer available. But people can still get the thrill of enjoyment with others who are complete strangers. Neither the cinema nor TV can give the excitement of the live theatre, especially in musical performance. One particular excitement is the "show-stopper". This is where the audience shows their appreciation so much that the performance is stopped and extra verses or an encore is sometimes given before the show resumes. My definition of a hit is a musical piece that is remembered and played long after the show has had its final performance.

This article is about such numbers in the musical theatre in the middle and second half of the twentieth century. I have been particularly lucky in seeing many of the more popular shows both on Broadway and in the West End of London. But I have enjoyed, just as much, those that I have seen "on the road" and even those given by amateur and semi-professional performances in Rep' companies. A collection of theatre programmes dating back to 1949, and numerous original cast recordings have helped to keep these memories fresh in my mind. I will attempt to discuss what it is in a song or show that makes it click with the audience, particularly in those shows I have seen. One difficulty for analysis is, that when you are in the theatre, you are subjected to stimuli from both sight and sound and the intangible effect of the rest of the audience. This is also true in the cinema, but as the film cannot be stopped, nor are the artists getting the acclamation, so there is little applause.

The earliest show I can remember, was not at the theatre but an early TV performance. I was twelve year old, I was allowed to stay up and watch a London Show on our new TV. This was in 1939 and the TV technique was to take a single camera up to the front row of the balcony, focus on the stage and leave it on. This resulted in the same view as the audience with little close-ups or following the action by the camera, as is typical of today's TV. The show was "Me and My Girl", the show stopper was "The Lambeth Walk" which was the most lively music in the show . The audience participation in singing the chorus helped. However there was another show-stopper which was completely visual. This occurred when the star, Lupino Lane, did a routine involving putting on and wearing a ducal cloak and crown. Such performances are seldom seen outside the circus clowns' routines.



The earliest programme in my collection dates to 1949 and is for Ivan Novello's "Dancing Years". This was an operetta type musical with a definite anti-Nazi theme. Most of the music was light and Vienna-like. One piece, for which the audience demanded an encore, was "Wings of Sleep", a duet sung by two contrasting female voices. The two ladies who sung in the production I saw, were not well known. They produced a clear and beautiful duet, which the audience loved.

Jerome Kern's "Show Boat" was probably a milestone in musical theatre. I believe it to be the first of the modern operettas. I am not old enough, however, to have seen the original production, which was staged in 1927. I have read that Helen Morgan's rendition of "Bill" was the most popular song in the show. By the time I saw the show, "Ol' man river" had been made so popular by Paul Robeson that it was the main showstopper. Show Boat has often been called the 20th century opera. It has dialogue so it is not really opera, but It was probably the first of the super-musicals. From the opening "Cotton Blossom" to the finale (which was a reprise of "Ol' Man River"), the show was one hit after another.

The Merry Widow is an operetta which I have seen performed in three different languages, German, French and English. In each of these version, the same tune had encores. It was the septet on women in the second act ("Girls, Girls, Girls" in the English version) . Can this indicate that it is the music alone that has an effect? Or maybe that the lyrics with the music were sufficiently on the same level in all three languages. Again the liveliness of this number could have been a reason for its popularity.



More recently I saw "Cats" twice in London about four years apart. The first time the song "Memories" was the main show stopper. The second time, however, "Memories" passed with just the normal applause, but "Mr Mistoffolees" brought the house down. In the intervening period, "Memories" had become a popular ballad on the radio and disks, and overexposure coupled with the long continuous run of the show had diluted its impact. In spite of liking the music of Andrew Lloyd

Webber, I must admit that from the point of melody, there was only one tune in the show (Memories). Cats, like many of the present day musicals is highly visual. These musicals rely on stage craft and visual effects. Earlier in the century, producers had to get by with

little more than a painted drop curtain and a few props which could be easily moved by hand onto the stage. Today most theatres have turntables, hydraulic lifts and moveable structures, so that the spectacular is commonplace!

Electronics and mass lighting have completed the change. Electronics have had a huge effect on the acting profession. In 1900, an actor had to project his voice by lung power right to the back of the theatre. This could only be done by facing the audience while speaking. In the middle of the century, microphones were placed in strategic positions. The artist's position was planned to be facing one of them when speaking. Today, however, each person that has a speaking or singing part, has a mini-microphone and transmitter in his clothing or hair. This is able to pick up even a whisper no matter where he is facing. In fact the controller has a very big part in making a show successful. This has had the effect of reducing the development of Stars. Many of the earlier performers were able to project their personality in a way that had the audiences eating out of their hands. Some like Ethel Merman overshadowed everyone else on the stage. On the English Music Hall at the turn of the century, Marie Lloyd projected herself thus to the audience. She was so loved by the theatre-goers that after her death in the 1920s, her funeral was almost a national affair.



Up to the second world war, musicals nearly all followed the "Girl meets boy - girl gets boy" pattern. There were a few like Noel Coward's "Bitter Sweet" which ended on a sad note with the hero being killed, but generally they were lively and happy. This sad note became more and more noticeable. In "Carousel", the hero is killed early in the show, although he is able to enjoy his fatherhood in another life. "West Side Story" being a musical adaptation of "Romeo and Juliet" manages to kill the leading parts. In "Les Miserables" very few characters survive for the final curtain.

The songs in these three shows also indicate a development in music of a variety of moods within a single production, which was found less often in some of the earlier works. The haunting "I'll see you again", the gypsy "Zigeuner" or the drinking song "Tokay" in Bitter Sweet show some of the contrasts. In West Side Story, compare the love song "Maria" with "Tonight" or the lighter "America!" and "Gee, Officer Krupke". Some contemporary shows have greater contrast; the pathetic "I dreamed a dream", the heroic "Can you hear the people sing?" and the black comedy "Master in the house" all from Les Miserables. Each of these help set the stage and bring the audience to the desired mood of the particular scene. "Master in the house" stopped the show, but this was helped by being the only comedy song in what was otherwise very intense drama.



In many shows, the song which changes the predominant mood will often interrupt its action. The main mood in "Gypsy" is lighthearted, but the forceful mother, Rose, lets her frustrations come out in "Coming up Roses". Ethel Merman took the part of Rose in the original production and was able to stop the show. However her personality and ability to 'belt out' a song could have done the same with a lesser piece of music. Not so obvious is in "Music Man" where the introduction of a barbershop quartet rendition of "Lida Rose" interwoven with a love

song "It is you", give a complete change of pace to the other tunes.



The song which is often enjoyed in many shows, is the principle comedy item. Examples of these are many. "Get me to the church on time" from "My Fair Lady"; "Brush up your Shakespeare" from "Kiss me Kate"; "Little Tin Box" from "Fiorello! "; and "I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair" from "South Pacific". All lighten the action. On the other hand the classic comedy "Where's Charlie" (a musical based on "Charlie's Aunt") had the semi-serious love song "Once in love with Amy" sung by Ray Bolger which even caused interruptions in the film version! Even shows that start life as semi-profession like "The Boy Friend" can have a song like "You're never too old to fall in love". This was guaranteed to make the audience call for more verses. Could it be in the last mentioned was a success because of the unusual characters singing it, an elderly gentleman with a young flapper.

A number of musical that I have seen have been enjoyable at the time of seeing, but a year after I can barely remember anything about them. Some of them do have a redeeming feature in that they have one song that becomes popular. This is particularly true of the shows from London in the 50s and 60s. "Stop the world I want to get off" had Anthony Newley singing "What kind of fool am I", but who can remember the other tunes? Similarly only the title song from "Half a Sixpence" is remembered. On the Broadway at the performance of Man of La Manche, most of the music was enjoyable. Only "The Impossible Dream" has survived to be still heard on the radio today. Although it ran in London for several years Lloyd-Webber's "Aspects of Love" and had about a dozen numbers in it, few can name even one of them. So it can be seen that the music in a musical is not necessary a measure of its success, nor is a show's success, a guarantee of any of the music having future popularity.

Some shows are so packed with music that becomes popular, that it is impossible to gauge the top song. In "My Fair Lady", "I could have danced all night", "Wouldn't it be lovely", "Get me to the church on time" and "The rain in Spain", all have my vote, but many people would chose others. Returning to "Show Boat", there were eight such songs. "Make Believe", "Why do I love You" and "Can't help lovin' dat man" closely following the two already mentioned. Other shows that started in the fourth and fifth decade of this century like "Any Thing Goes", "Pal Joey", "Roberta" and "No No Nanette" all have multiple hits.

Some theatrical productions are later made into films, often with altered scores. The "Unsinkable Molly Brown" had several of the popular songs removed in the film version, while in the other direction, the film of "Gigi" became a musical with many excellent songs in it. Of course it had as a leading player, one of the Stars who projected personality in the person of Maurice Chevalier. His three songs, "Thank Heaven for little girls", "I'm glad I'm not young any more" and "I remember it well" all would have stopped the show in a live performance. I can not compare the stage and film version of "Sound of Music" as I only saw the film. It is difficult to imagine the singing without the spectacular scenery of the film. However the trick colour effects used in the film version of "South Pacific" were upsetting to many people, including myself.

Sometimes the combination of the song and who is singing it will trigger the audience. In "Damn Yankees" the devil singing "Those were the good old days" or the sexy witch singing "What ever Lola wants" were both show stoppers, but then so was "You've gotta have heart" sung by the whole cast. The song "When I'm not near the girl I love, I love the girl I'm near" in Finagan's Rainbow was sung by a Leprechaun who was becoming too human. This was a catchy tune, but the play of words in the lyrics probably were the main reason for its success.

If the number of times a show is revived is an indication of success, then the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan must head the list. There is hardly a year passes by without one of them playing in each of the main english speaking capitals. "Pirates of Penzance" can be used as an illustration. It has a 'patter' song in "Modern Major-general", the melodious "Poor wandering one" complete with voice tricks, and the comic "When a felon's not engaged in his employment". Each has a different appeal but the applause on each is usually equal, so maybe the form of the song has little importance. If this is so, then can it be the position of the tune in a show?

My Fair Lady was, in its time, a great success, running over 2700 performances on Broadway alone. If you look at the position of the hits "Wouldn't it be lovely" and "With a little bit of luck" . Both are early in the first act, while "The Rain in Spain" and "I could have danced all night" are in the middle. "Get me to the church" is in the middle of the second act and the show closes with the lower key "I've grown accustomed to her face. In Anything Goes, the opening number is "I get a kick out of you", which in reprise, closes the show. "You're the tops" and "Easy to Love" are in the middle of the first act. This closes with the title song "Anything goes" , but early in the second act is "Blow Gabriel Blow". It would appear that most shows have their hits in the first act, in fact "Fiddler on the roof" had no hit material in the second act at all. Most first acts are much longer than the second, so it is understandable that there are more hits in them. Also the producers do not want people leaving the theatre at the interval. This does not mean that there are not some shows with many hits in the second act, ""Oliver" is one of them, having four hit songs, which together with reprises gives it a uniform level. "Chorus Line" is an exception as it was performed without an intermission and that its two hits "One" and "What I did for love" were both late in the show.



The way a song is performed can give considerable different effects. One of the most startling examples of this is given in the film version of "Cabaret". The opening shot is of the head and shoulders of a 'small boy' singing of his future, slowly he is accompanied by a chorus which get larger and more military. The camera is allowed to broaden and pan to show the boy in Hitler Youth uniform singing to masses of Nazis. The effect is from peace and hope to horror and evil is obtained by staging alone. The song is "Tomorrow belongs to me".

Over the years I have managed to see over two hundred musicals and operettas on stage, film, or TV. It is impossible for me to pick out a favourite show or piece of music. Why something appeals to me, appears without form or reason, so how can I identify what makes a hit for others? The only thing that can be said is, that when a piece is performed, its music, the words, the performer, its position in the show and its staging all meld together and the result is something that the audience likes. The only thing these songs have in common is that they are HITS!