

BROADWAY; THE AMERICAN MUSICAL
Updated Paperback Edition
By Michael Kantor and Laurence Maslon

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

I placed this hefty volume on my bathroom scales. It weighed in at exactly five pounds. If you intend to put the book on a coffee table, be sure it is a sturdy one.

Well, it has to have lots of pages because it is crammed with glorious pictures, narrative about select shows, a couple dozen pages of lyrics, posters, designs, rehearsal shots and more. As you read, you must allot time to sing a song or two when you encounter those lyrics. You'll be surprised how many of them are forever etched in your brain.

This is an updated paperback edition of the Emmy-winning PBS documentary series of the same name that looks at the American musical from the turn of the century through the 2009-2010 season. It approaches each historical time frame with a block of significant shows that reflect the cultural influences of the time on the audience and the musical creative team. "Team" is the operative word. All theatre is a collaborative effort but cobbling together a great big Broadway musical just doesn't happen unless there is a harmonious corps on every front.

As Julie Andrews says in her introduction, "We'll start at the very beginning." Looking through the album of time from 1893-1919, we discover people like Fanny Brice, W.C. Fields, Will Rogers and Eddie Cantor over a span of years. In 1918 one is surprised to have Jerome Kern's "Bill" pop up. As we go through this lively account of musical theatre, it becomes clear that Kern is the composers' composer. As Oscar Hammerstein said, "Kern was his own man. As the first truly American theatre musician, Kern has survived all tastes from operetta through rock and roll".

Since this BROADWAY THE AMERICAN MUSICAL attempts to cover some 110 years of American musical theatre, some of your favorite shows, stars and tunes are sure to be omitted. However, the writers have tried to capture the total relationship of American social eras and Diversity with the music that came forth during the times at hand. Nonetheless, we are given a treasure trove of anecdote, gossip and hints of the craft of creating the great songs that make up the American song book. The stories that are told are of value not only of interest to musical theatre lovers, but to social historians and students.

Many of the recent shows have suffered from what one critic has called "a case of emphysema." In short people are overdoing everything. Painfully loud sound and lots of lights jumping around disguise the fact that there is really little substance to the lyrics or music. This, too, may be a reflection of where we are. We've stopped reading newspapers and listening in many cases. Will this unfortunate trend evolve and change? I think (and fervently hope!) so.

I highly recommend this book as text for musical theatre major programs of study. Recently I noticed that the august Yale School of Drama has a musical division added to its curricula. This book would be a good purchase for their library.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.