

Musical Theatre Books

***Actor-Musicianship*. Jeremy Harrison. London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2016; Pp. 220.**

***The Complete Book of 1940s Broadway Musicals*. Dan Dietz. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015; Pp. 591.**

***Musical Theatre Song*. Stephen Purdy. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016; Pp. 284.**

A relative newcomer to theatre studies, musical theatre scholarship has proven a fertile and comprehensive field of inquiry, as three recent publications illustrate. Though none is a monograph, each makes an important contribution. Dan Dietz's *The Complete Book of 1940s Broadway Musicals* is a historical compendium that will prove a useful source for historians, practitioners, and enthusiasts, while the other two books, *Actor-Musicianship* by Jeremy Harrison and *Musical Theatre Song* by Stephen Purdy, are how-to guides for performers, each jumping off from a clear historical perspective.

Including *The Complete Book of 2000s Broadway Musicals*, published this year, Dan Dietz has now chronicled seven decades of Broadway musical theatre history. This period doesn't represent the entirety of the genre, but it does encompass its crystallization as a quintessential American art form, and *The Complete Book of 1940s Broadway Musicals* covers the decade often seen as, to use Dietz's own word, "seminal" (xi) in that development. In his introduction, Dietz repeats the common assertion that Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) represents the institutionalization of the so-called integrated musical (though he doesn't use the term), which "utilized plot, character, song, and dance to create a unified evening of storytelling" (xi). Scott McMillin, David Savran, and others have refuted this idea, pointing to the Kern-Bolton-Wodehouse Princess Theatre musicals of the 1910s, Sissle and Blake's *Shuffle Along* (1921), Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat* (1927), and shows with music and lyrics by the Gershwin brothers such as *Girl Crazy* (1930) and *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) as earlier examples of the integrated form. As Dietz's volume makes clear, however, no decade prior to the 1940s produced such a large number of canonical productions. These include *Cabin in the Sky* (1940), *Pal Joey* (1940), *Lady in the Dark* (1941), *Carousel* (1945), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Street Scene* (1947), *Brigadoon* (1947), *Finian's Rainbow* (1947), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1949), and early "concept musicals" like *Allegro* (1947) and *Love Life* (1948).

These shows, as well as the other 261 musicals that opened on Broadway during the 1940s, receive the same detailed consideration in *The Complete Book of 1940s Broadway Musicals* as in Dietz's other historical volumes. Listed in chronological order, each entry includes the following information about the musical: theatre name, opening and closing dates, number of performances, advertising tag lines, creative team and performer names, number of acts, setting information for book musicals, musical number titles, source material information where applicable, details on revivals or London transfers, award information, and publication and recording information. Most of this data is, of course, available online, but nowhere is it obtainable in such concise, accessible fashion.

What sets the series apart, though, is Dietz's expository critical writing for each entry. His mini-essays summarize critical reception of the plays and offer historical context. Unfortunately, there isn't much social or analytical commentary, which would be generative for a decade that included so many shows

that broke new ground for how they represented race and gender. In addition, the tome features a bibliography and several appendices, including chronologies by season and classification (revue, book musical, etc.), a list of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas performed during the period, a discography, a list of other productions of the decade that employed music, a list of published scripts, and a grouping of shows performed by venue. If the chronicle doesn't in any way trouble the notion of what qualifies as a "Broadway musical," the sheer amount of information on display and ease of use justifies its value.

Jeremy Harrison's much slimmer, practice-oriented *Actor-Musicianship* also employs a historical lens, but explores a performance convention rather than a specific time period. Exemplified in recent American theatrical production by John Doyle's Broadway stagings of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* (2005) and *Company* (2006), the phenomenon of the actor-musician, according to Harrison, is as old as the theatre itself. He traces its contemporary iteration in chapter one, "From the Bubble to Broadway," though to the "counter-theatre movement" embodied by Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl's Theatre Union (later Theatre Workshop) in 1936. There is an understandable British bias to the book; Harrison is a British performer-scholar currently running the Acting and Actor Musicianship program at Rose Bruford College in London. Littlewood and MacColl, who had extensive experience in the British folk tradition, sought to reverse what they saw as a separation of actor and musician, "informed by the gradual emergence of specialism in the processes of theatre making" (1). Harrison traces a line from the Theatre Workshop to the work of Glen Walford's Bubble Theatre in 1972, which toured to London's outer boroughs with *The Blitz Show*. Like the Theatre Workshop's *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, *The Blitz Show* had an explicitly populist political agenda and was designed to appeal to both working- and middle-class audiences. Harrison identifies the guitar-playing actor-musicians in *The Blitz Show* as being key to its populist appeal, because of the conceit's "simplicity and connection" (5). John Doyle's actor-musician staging of classic American musicals at the Watermill Theatre in Newbury emerges in Harrison's narrative as central to the institutionalization of actor-musicianship, previously a marginal, leftist practice, as "the British take on the American musical theatre form" (26).

In chapter two, "Jack and Master," Harrison attempts a definition of the actor-musician: is she "an actor who plays a musical instrument; or is she a musician who acts" (37)? For him, this question is of more pragmatic than phenomenological importance because it affects labor conditions and contracts, and the ways in which a performer positions herself relative to the "pervasive notion of specialism that has shaped the processes and pedagogies that apply to theatre and production" (37). He doesn't come down firmly on either side, but he acknowledges that this is a much more pressing issue in the UK than in the US; in the United States "musicianship has simply become another skill to acquire or brush up" (56).

Chapters three through six, filled with exercises developed by Harrison over the course of his long career as an actor-musician, make up the practical portion of the book: "Training the Actor-Musician: An Introduction," "Directing Actor-Musicianship," "Choreographing Actor-Musicianship," and "Musically Directing Actor-Musicianship." Chapter seven, "A Young Theatre," is somewhat capacious despite being only a few pages long. It is a grab bag of ideas that didn't fit elsewhere in the book, looking at youth theatre case studies, beatboxing as actor-musicianship, and Philip Auslander's *Liveness* as an argument for actor-musicianship. Actor-musicianship is clearly making inroads in professional practice; last season it was an essential component of both staging and story in two new musicals on Broadway, *School of Rock* and *Bandstand*. Harrison's volume should then be of interest to anyone studying, teaching, or training in contemporary acting practice.

Musical Theatre Song, by Stephen Purdy, is subtitled “A Comprehensive Course in Selection, Preparation, and Presentation for the Modern Performer.” The book also begins with a historical survey, this time of the musical theatre genre itself, from 19th century minstrelsy up to the 2013-14 Broadway season. Its title gives a good indication of Purdy’s verbose, welcoming tone: “Introduction to Song Selection and Historical Context: What You Should Know (and Why You Should Care).” Harrison makes the same specious argument as Dietz does about *Oklahoma!*, but this chapter, nearly a quarter of the entire book, makes a strong and refreshing argument for thinking historically as a performer.

Purdy’s presumed audience is “the modern professional and aspiring professional theatrical singing actor,” for whom the path to “stage worthiness...is...the mysterious concoction of labor and love that it has always been to dyed-in-the-wool devotees,” (xxi) but now requires a higher level of versatility and virtuosity than ever before. Purdy’s system is organized with the goal of de-mystifying that path. The book is divided into three sections: I. Song Selection, II. Song Preparation, and III. Song Presentation. Each chapter includes a portion called “Get It Done,” which has questions and activities based on the chapter’s content. Further chapters break the process down in minute, step-by-step detail, covering everything from table work to interior monologue and objectives to posture. Purdy employs song examples both canonical (“Maria” from *West Side Story*, “Much More” from *The Fantasticks*) and non-canonical (“Perfect” from *Edges*, Journey’s “Separate Ways”). The book’s contemporaneity is most evident in its discussion near the end about song performance on social media and YouTube. Far from bogging the performer down with minutiae, though, Purdy’s system is meant to help her “[B]e the pot of gold. Be the inexplicable ‘it.’ Be the surprise” (276, emphasis in original). With its combination of historicity and practicality, *Musical Theatre Song*, like *Actor-Musicianship*, will be of interest to both educators and performers.

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