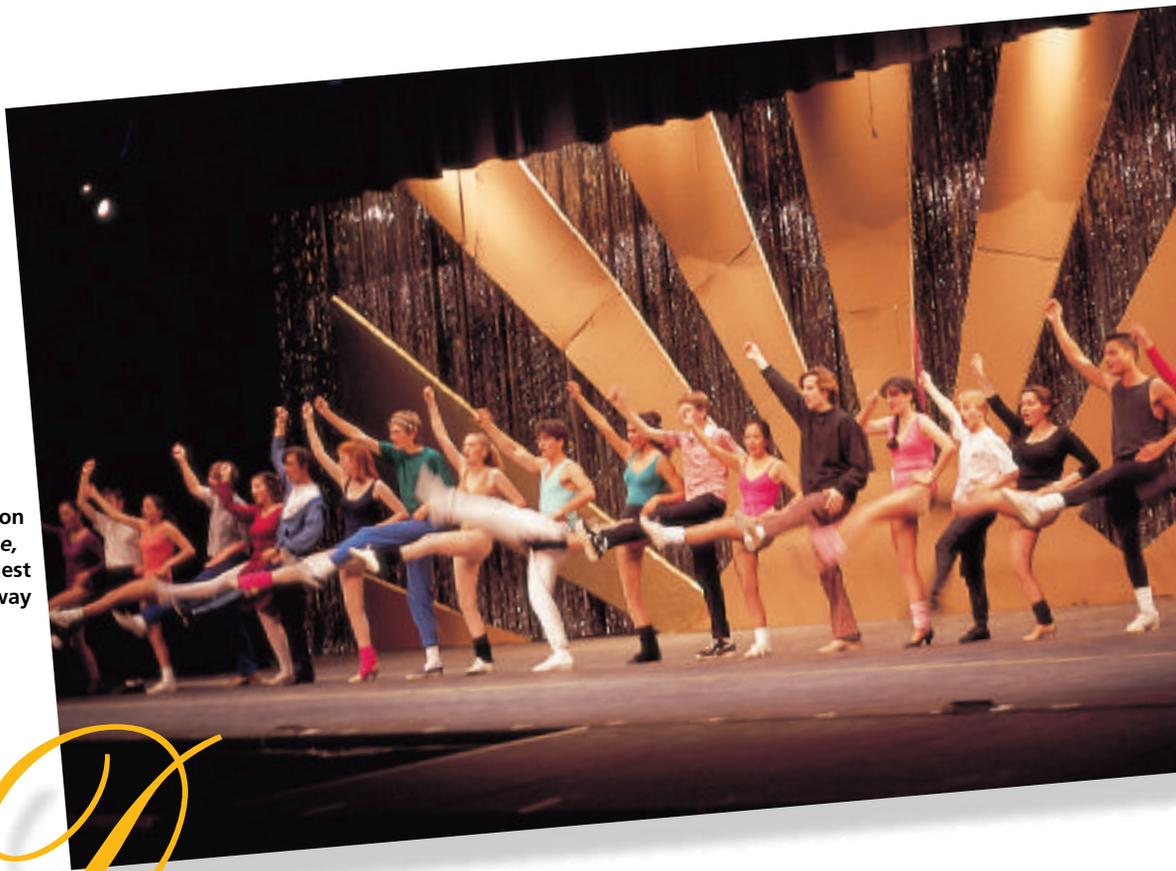




9

Producing the Musical Play

This is a high school production of *A Chorus Line*, one of the longest running Broadway productions of all time.



Deciding what is to be sung and what is not to be sung is really what writing a musical is about.

—STEPHEN SONDHEIM, COMPOSER

SETTING THE SCENE

Focus Questions

What are the types of musical theater?

What are the special concerns in planning and directing a musical play?

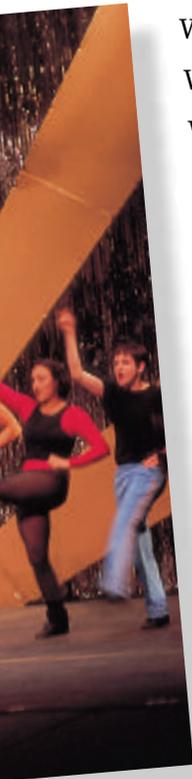
What techniques work well for performers in a musical play?

What are the special staging requirements of a musical play?

Vocabulary

opera	musical play	satire	backlighting
operetta	crossover	concept musical	reversibles
comic opera	change music	hanging plot	coordinates
musical revue	spoof	storage plot	combo
musical comedy			

The musical is a special type of theatrical performance that has become quite popular both in and out of the school. Theatergoers in the United States have long been attracted to the sound, color, and pageantry that go along with musical theater. Just as *The King and I*, *Oklahoma!*, and *South Pacific* thrilled audiences in years past, many of the current best-attended productions around the country are musicals. *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*, for example, consistently sell out as their traveling companies play across the United States. Musical theater comes in many types and styles. Some musicals are lavish, extravagant productions with spectacular scenery and costumes. Others are entertaining on a smaller scale. All have one thing in common, though—music.



In a musical revue, music is the focus of the production. The scenes from *Ain't Misbehavin'* consist of production numbers tied together with almost no plot to slow the pace.



Types of Musical Theater

Originating as an attempt to re-create ancient Greek theater, **opera** is one of the oldest forms of musical theater. Since in opera the voice and the orchestra are the only media of performance, opera is “total music.” Even conversations are sung, not spoken as in other forms of musical theater. The **operetta** includes lighter music and the singer/actor speaks lines rather than sings them. Operettas are usually built on light plots that serve only to connect one song to another. Plot, characters, and acting are secondary to the music. Some popular operettas are *The Student Prince*, *Babes in Toyland*, and *The Merry Widow*. An offshoot of the straight operetta is the humorous and satirical **comic opera**. For many years, the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan have been very popular as high school shows. Among the favorites are *The Mikado*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *The Pirates of Penzance*.

The **musical revue**, another form of musical theater, usually consists of a loosely connected series of sometimes lavish production numbers with virtually no plot. The Ziegfield Follies is the most famous example of this form of musical theater. *Ain't Misbehavin'* is a more recent musical revue.

As the name implies, a **musical comedy** combines music and humor. Music remains the most important element, and the plot still tends to be secondary. Musical comedy differs from comic opera in that the characters are more believable and the dialogue is clever. Some of the musical comedies popular with high schools are *Anything Goes*; *No, No, Nanette*; *Annie Get Your Gun*; *Guys and Dolls*; and *The Pajama Game*.

Oklahoma! is the production that introduced the **musical play**, a form of musical theater characterized by an increased emphasis on real people in real situations. In the musical play, acting and choreography are an integral part of the production. A well-written musical play contains a good story, clever dialogue, interesting characters, well-designed choreography, bouncy tunes, and meaningful ballads woven into an entertaining package of color and spectacle. Because it provides excellent opportunities for showmanship and talent, it has replaced many operettas and variety shows in high school theater.

The musical play has become a major part of high school theater for several reasons. The sophistication of contemporary audiences demands more than a stage full of people in a simple musical revue. In addition to having greater audience appeal, a musical play involves many students onstage, in the orchestra pit, and behind the scenes.

Musical Play Terminology

book: the script of a musical

cabaret style: a show produced in a small space with limited seating

change music: the music played between scenes while sets are being changed

choreographer: a person who designs dance for the stage

choreography: the dances designed for a production

chorus: the singers other than the principals

combo: a small group of instrumentalists

composer: a person who writes music

conductor: a person who directs an orchestra

crossover: a short scene played in front of a shallow drop or curtain while scenery is being changed

entr'acte: music that precedes the second-act curtain

lead-in line: the line or lines of dialogue immediately preceding a song

librettist: a person who writes the book (script)

libretto: the book, including lines of dialogue and lyrics

lyricist: a person who writes words to music

lyrics: the words to a song

overture: the music, usually a medley of the show's songs, played at the beginning of the show

principals: the named characters in a musical play

production number: a large-scale musical number involving many performers in lavish costumes; frequently a dance number

FROM THE PROS

"I don't know how many people begged me not to waste my time on something that could not possibly succeed. After all, how could we do a musical where there are two bodies lying on the stage at the end of the first act and everybody eventually dies?"

—LEONARD BERNSTEIN,
COMPOSER OF *WEST
SIDE STORY*, TALKING
ABOUT HIS WORK ON
THAT MUSICAL



recitative: singing style that is closer to speaking than to singing
score: the music of a show as composed
segue (sĕ•gwā): the continuation of music from one number to the next without stopping; a transition
sidekick: a secondary male lead, often a comic role and a friend to the lead; counterpart to the soubrette.
sides: booklets containing half sheets of paper on which the cues and lines for one character are written
soubrette: a secondary female lead, usually a comic role
underscore: music played to accompany dialogue
vamp: to repeat measures of music until a singer or scene is ready

Planning for the Musical Play

Staffing a musical play is considerably more difficult than staffing a straight play. A musical play usually needs a vocal director, an instrumental director, and a choreographer in addition to a play director, a costumer, a business manager, a technical director, and a publicity director. The play director, however, is in charge of the entire production.

The director of a musical play must know all aspects of musical theater: acting, singing, dancing, orchestrating, and set designing. This does not mean that the director needs to be an expert in all of these areas. She or he, however, must be sufficiently knowledgeable in each of these areas to visualize how they work together to produce a unified performance.

When selecting a musical play for production, careful consideration must be given to costs as well as to acting, technical, and musical requirements. Discovering midway through rehearsals that costs are running over budget or that the abilities of the performers are not suited to the musical demands can be quite discouraging.

Questions to Ask When Selecting a Musical

- Are the production costs within our budget limits?
- Do we have the staff to direct this show?
- Do we have the acting, scenery, musical, and lighting capabilities this show requires?
- Do we have the time required to prepare this show?
- Will this musical play please the performers *and* the audience?
- Is this musical play suitable for high school production?

Once the director and the staff have been chosen, a budget must be prepared. The total expenses for a musical are considerably more than for a straight play (two to ten times more). These expenses include costs not



associated with the production elements of the play. For instance, royalty and script costs are significantly more complicated. Before producing a musical play, you must contact the publisher of the work to request permission to hold public performances of that play. Every publisher has a different formula for calculating royalty costs, which may include or exclude certain rehearsal materials, such as scripts, in the fee quoted.

A royalty fee is normally based on the number of seats available for sale and the ticket prices charged. For example, if your auditorium seats 1,500, but you plan to use only the front section seating 500, report your capacity as 500. Have tickets for only 500 seats. Do not sell more than those 500 seats unless you contact the publisher of the play and make the necessary royalty adjustments for the additional seats you intend to sell. Some royalty fees include music rental for one month; some publishers charge music rental separately. An additional fee is charged for a longer rehearsal time. Most schools need the music for at least two months.

As the types of musicals have increased, directors have had to weigh an expanding number of factors in choosing a musical play that is appropriate for high school. Few directors can handle every type of musical available to them, and fewer still can satisfy the many technical demands that are critical to certain musical plays. Many recent musicals depend greatly on elaborate sets, lavish costumes, and high-tech equipment that is difficult to acquire or duplicate on a small scale. These technical demands must be considered as a director chooses a musical for production.



Peter Pan, with all its technical demands, might be too complex to produce on the high school stage.



West Side Story requires only simple sets and costumes, making it quite easy to stage if able and energetic dancers and singers can be cast.

Under the best of circumstances, a musical play is much more difficult to cast than a straight play. Singing and dancing abilities as well as acting skill must be considered. Some shows require that the leads be skilled in all three of these areas; other shows require skills in only one or two of these areas. Very often the musical play chosen is too complex for a particular school to do well. It may require more strong characters than can be cast, or the vocal requirements may be too demanding. Some shows call for instruments, such as bassoons and harps, that most schools do not own. There may not be sufficient time to train students in the special skills the show requires, such as tap dancing. Perhaps the best actor has “two left feet,” or the individual with the finest voice cannot act. Another often-forgotten factor in producing a musical is the effect interpersonal relationships can have on a production. Since there are usually more cast members in a musical than in a straight play, there are more interpersonal relationships to consider when casting. Be aware of the personality mixture. Many potentially fine shows have been marred by squabbling among cast members.

Once the casting is completed, a rehearsal schedule must be planned. The size and scope of a musical play are greater than those of a straight play and, therefore, require more rehearsal time. Most directors want a minimum of eight weeks of rehearsal. For the first few weeks, it is more efficient to rehearse several groups simultaneously. The orchestra can rehearse by itself. The dancers can rehearse with the choreographer to piano accompaniment or a rehearsal tape of the orchestra. The chorus can

rehearse with the vocal director. If possible, it is best to stagger rehearsal schedules so that the chorus members do not have to sit through an entire rehearsal just to sing one or two songs. The principals can rehearse with the play's director. Step by step, the separate elements are combined. Rehearsals of the vocal and dance numbers begin with the orchestra, then the vocal numbers are rehearsed in the context of entire scenes, and finally, all the groups join to rehearse the entire show. Because a musical play has so many elements, allow at least two weeks for rehearsal with the entire cast and four days for dress rehearsals.

Application ACTIVITY

Work with two or more classmates to analyze the nonproduction costs of a musical play. Choose a musical play and find out what the script and royalty charges would be. Compare your findings with the findings of groups investigating other musical plays.

Directing the Musical Play

Directing a musical play is a very complex task. The director must understand the structure of the play and the role music plays within that structure. Because lyrics are important to the development of action, theme, and character, they must be clearly understood.



Lyrics are more easily understood when sung directly to the audience, as shown here in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Musical plays usually have many scenes (ten to thirty or more). This means that some scenes must be played in front of a curtain or a **drop**, scenery painted on a piece of fabric that can be dropped like a curtain, on an eight- to ten-foot segment of the stage while scenery is being changed behind the curtain. This is called playing a scene “in one.” Musical theater stages are usually divided into three depths, each eight to ten feet deep. Performers may enter one, two, or three, depending on how deep, or upstage, the entry is made. Some “in one” scenes consist of characters walking across the stage together or entering from opposite sides and meeting onstage. Such scenes are called **crossovers**. Crossovers may also be played on the apron of the stage in front of the act curtain.

CUE

In professional theater, scene changes occur in a matter of seconds due to the use of turntables, moving belts, tracks in the floor, and other scenic equipment.

The director must work with the technical director to determine the exact scenery shift time so that the smoothness and rhythm of the production are not lost. Some contemporary musicals actually feature the changing of scenery and do not attempt to conceal it. Well-choreographed set changes can heighten an audience’s appreciation of the artistry of the theater. In more traditional productions the conductor may vamp the **change music**—the music played to cover the sound of scenery changes—if it becomes apparent that a shift cannot be completed quickly.

Stage positions are extremely important in directing a musical play. Center, down center, and down right are the locations for most solos. Since we are a left-to-right-oriented society, an audience always turns to its left (stage right) when there is a large open stage, as there usually is in musical plays. As a result, down right is a very strong solo position. The chorus must be blocked in groups to avoid solid lines that look like a school chorus onstage. Groups should consist of one, two, three, four, five, or seven people. Odd-number groupings are preferable, however. The asymmetrical look of odd-number groups provides a dynamic sight line, while the symmetrical look of even-number groups provides a static sight line. There is a tendency for the downstage end of a large chorus to “creep” too far downstage, shutting off the view for parts of the audience. Choruses must guard against this and maintain their groupings and positions. Otherwise, they will drift together into one large mass.

Getting these groups of chorus members on and off the stage presents a real traffic problem. The director must rehearse extensively on chorus entrances and exits to make them smooth and inconspicuous.

Another difficulty in directing a musical play is teaching the performers to project over the underscore. Actors sometimes feel overwhelmed by the orchestra. If the actors cannot project over the orchestra,



A mask of any kind, even if it doesn't fully cover the mouth, hinders projection and makes it harder to be heard over the underscore. The title character from *The Phantom of the Opera* delivers melody and lyrics to the audience despite a fully orchestrated underscore, a half mask, and his own bent-backed posture.

the director may have to ask the orchestra to play more softly. Other options are to cut back on the number of instruments playing the underscore, to omit the underscore entirely, or to supply soloists with individual cordless microphones.

Certain circumstances may cause a director to have a performer recite lyrics rather than sing them. In some cases, the director may seek to produce a desired effect. In others, a performer may have trouble reaching certain notes. Although some performers may feel embarrassed reciting lyrics, personal feelings must be secondary to doing what is best for the show. Reciting with strength and character is preferable to singing without these qualities. Some of the best-known numbers in musicals have been performed in the recitative style.

The cast should know which musical numbers are melodic and which are rhythmic. Melodic songs are those with pleasing sound combinations combined with moving lyrics, such as ballads and "theme" songs. "Memory" in *Cats* and "The Music of the Night" in *The Phantom of the Opera* are examples of melodic numbers. Rhythmic numbers, such as "Summer Nights" in *Grease*, focus on tempo, musical style, beat, and orchestration.

PERFORMANCE PRINCIPLES

Experienced directors have learned to remind the cast over and over again of certain simple but important principles for performing a musical play.

1. Stress the first beat of each measure.
2. Make the words intelligible.
3. Sing “through the eyes.”
4. Play out to the audience.
5. Keep the scene focused.
6. Be alive in character.
7. Play in a state of action.
8. Enjoy yourself—and look it!

Let’s examine each principle closely.

1. One of the secrets for putting life into a musical play is vocally attacking the first beat of each measure. Most show tunes are either lively, bouncy, driving numbers or emotional, heartfelt songs, and the key words come on the first beat. Melodic numbers in particular gain power and emotional impact through emphasis on the first beat. For crispness and strength, singers should attack each initial consonant instead of sliding into the vowels.
 2. Lyrics can be difficult to understand, especially when they are sung as high notes. Trained singers are taught to substitute “more singable” vowel sounds for certain vowels. Do not allow this substitution to make words unintelligible or strange to the audience.
 3. “Singing through the eyes” adds life to a musical number. By imagining that the singing is being projected through the eyes rather than through the mouth, the singer lifts the sound, making it stronger.
 4. It is especially important for the performers in a musical play to include the audience. Unlike a straight play in which the characters interact primarily with other characters, the musical play’s strength lies mainly in songs and dances that are played directly to the audience.
 5. Musicals usually require more stage space and more people than straight plays do. Therefore, the attention of the audience must be directed to the key characters in a scene. In a musical play, the key character is usually the soloist. This focus can be accomplished by the members of the chorus in several ways: shoulders that are closest

FROM THE PROS

“Lyrics reflect character through diction, grammar, and rhetorical patterns. An audience must assume that the words a character is given to sing reflect something about the character.”

—RICHARD KISLAN,
AUTHOR OF *The Musical*



To prevent a production from becoming static and uninteresting, chorus members should be involved in the action as they sing.

to the soloist can be turned upstage; downstage shoulders can drop slightly. Chorus members can also kneel on their downstage knees or even recline on the floor with their heads toward the soloist.

6. Members of the chorus often do not realize their importance to the total production. The director must stress the need for each chorus member to develop a well-defined character with a function in every scene. The "I'm just a chorus member" attitude must become "I'm Sam Tilsbury, owner of the corner drugstore in River City, whose wife, Martha Mae, just bought our son Freddie a double-belled euphonium from that fast-talking swindler, Harold Hill." Remember, the audience sweeps its eyes over the entire cast looking for someone really "alive" or really "dead." One "dead" chorus member can spoil an entire scene.
7. Standing erect and motionless may be appropriate for a choir or some opera choruses, but it is usually boring in a musical. Singing while moving or doing something is always stronger. Principals can learn to deliver their lines in an even more active state than they would in a straight play. They "set" their actions by momentarily freezing a gesture, pose, or movement before continuing on the line or business. This is particularly effective when the lead-in line is delivered just before the song is to be sung. Chorus members rarely stand straight and tall; they lean, crouch, bend their knees, gesture, move, and dance.
8. The final technique that the director should teach to the cast is to enjoy, enjoy, enjoy. Excitement, pleasure, and energy are contagious. An audience is eager to be drawn into the spirit of a play. When a cast appears to have fun, the audience shares the enthusiasm.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF MUSICAL PLAYS

Some types of plays are particularly difficult to direct, especially when presented as a musical play. A spoof is such a play. **Spoofs**, or light parodies, are farcical and poke fun at certain subjects or eras. For example, *Little Mary Sunshine* pokes fun at a style of musical film; *Once upon a Mattress* laughs at fairy tales; *The Boy Friend* ridicules the musicals of the 1920s and the mechanical style of acting that was popular at that time.

Satires are also difficult to produce successfully, especially in musical form. Satires criticize certain aspects of human behavior or society. For example, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* satirizes the shenanigans that often accompany getting ahead in the business world. To direct a satire effectively, the director must make sure that the audience clearly understands what is being criticized. The director must also pace a musical satire expertly so that the comic moments and the serious moments stand out at the appropriate times.

CUE

In the jargon of the theater, a “pace show” is a show with a brisk tempo, like *George M*; a “heart show” is a show that requires special sensitivity, like *Man of La Mancha*; and a “splash” is a musical with large production numbers, like *Hello, Dolly!*

Concept musicals are built around a single theatrical idea. Plot, if any, is secondary to situation. The production is usually a series of independent scenes loosely tied together. The director’s main concern is how the show is handled, not what it has to say. It is sometimes difficult to break away from the traditions of the musical play to make the “concept” of a production the focus. *Cats*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Starlight Express* are concept musicals.

In *Cats* the obvious concept is that the characters are cats. Not only must the performers look like cats, but they also must move like cats and think like cats. In *A Chorus Line* the concept is that of dance auditions. The actors play actors auditioning for a musical. *Starlight Express* features different types of train engines. Using costumes, makeup, and roller skates, the actors mimic trains competing with one another.

Some musical plays are controversial, and unless the director interprets such a work carefully, the audience may not be prepared for some of the disturbing elements portrayed through character, plot, song, and dance. *Cabaret* is such a play. There is a temptation to stress the surface aspects of the play, which are depicted quite vividly in the cabaret scenes. By overemphasizing the frivolous, titillating, and bawdy side of *Cabaret*, however, the director might fail to communicate the play’s serious commentary on the destruction of human lives and values and on the social structure during the time just prior to the rise of Nazi Germany.



In the concept musical *Starlight Express*, the performers portray trains, and the setting is an elaborate system of ramps and runways that simulate a locomotive roundhouse.

Application ACTIVITY

Choose a musical play to compare with one of the straight plays you have studied. Pay attention to how the use of music and dance affects the treatment of theme, character, setting, and action in the two plays. Do you think it makes a play richer to incorporate more than one art form, or do you think multiple art forms distract the audience's attention from the play's message? Explain your conclusions in a short written report.

Staging the Musical Play

Stage settings are discussed in detail in Chapter 10, but there are many unique staging decisions associated with musical plays. (Refer to Chapter 10 for the definitions of unfamiliar terms.) Scenery, lighting, and costumes require special consideration in musical plays. Moreover, the music adds an entirely new dimension to the staging. Not only must it be performed well, it must also be coordinated with the action onstage.

SCENERY AND LIGHTING

One of the director's first decisions is to determine the number of sets needed for the production. Few high schools can build as many sets as the script calls for; therefore it may be necessary to combine, eliminate, or reuse some scenery. Often the only choice is to play a scene in front of a traveler or the act curtain. After determining the number of scenes and set changes required, the director must decide which scenes will use drops, which will use wagons, which will use set pieces, and which scenes will be played in front of a curtain. (See Chapter 10 for information on sets.)

Professional theaters often have sixty or more counterweight lines on which to hang scenery. Few high schools have that many, and some schools have no fly system at all for hanging drops. Of those schools that have some kind of system for hanging drops, some do not have counterweighted or electric winch systems and must raise and lower scenery manually. However, the lack of such professional equipment should not be discouraging. Drops can be rented from stage scenery firms, and raising and lowering scenery manually can prove to be as quick and smooth as using winch or counterweighted systems.

Another way to handle scenery is by using revolving and jackknife wagon stages. These are especially effective when a scene calls for a lot of furniture or set pieces; with scenery mounted on them, these stages allow for quick scene changes. Wagons can also be mounted with walls that are hinged so that the flats can be flipped over, revealing the other side. Unfortunately, wagons take up considerable wing space, and many schools have limited side stage areas.

There are often special scenic demands that are difficult to handle on any stage: fog or mist, flying apparatus, carousels, Wells Fargo wagons, automobiles, and surreys, for example. Sometimes it is better to work around such problems if you cannot treat them adequately on your stage. Rather than try inadequate substitutes, it may ultimately be better to choose another show.

Once all the scenery decisions are made, the technical director or the stage manager makes a hanging plot and a storage plot for the play. A **hanging plot** shows all the fly lines and what is on each. A **storage plot** shows the wing areas and how the scenic units are to be stored during the show.

Because a musical play typically uses more stage space than a straight play does, a musical usually requires more lighting. Limited lighting equipment and range increase the likelihood of shadows appearing onstage. If the instruments are available, backlighting soloists and one- or two-character scenes is quite effective. **Backlighting** throws light on the performer

CUE

If your school's stage has limited fly space and wing areas, consider putting different scenes on opposite sides of a set and reversing them for various scenes. See the explanation of prism sets in Chapter 10.

from above and slightly upstage. This causes a glow, or halo effect, that makes the actor stand out from the background or chorus.

A **follow spot**—a spotlight that can be moved so that it follows a performer as he or she moves—can create another lighting effect. These spotlights make soloists stand out. However, follow spots can do strange things to the drop behind the performer; if the chorus is behind the soloist, the spot may cut off the heads of the chorus members. Also, some high school stage floors have a shiny surface that reflects a glare onto the scenery and chorus members behind the illuminated performer. Most directors dim the stage lights during a solo if a follow spot is used, then bring them back up after the applause. The audience recognizes this dimming as an acceptable theatrical convention.

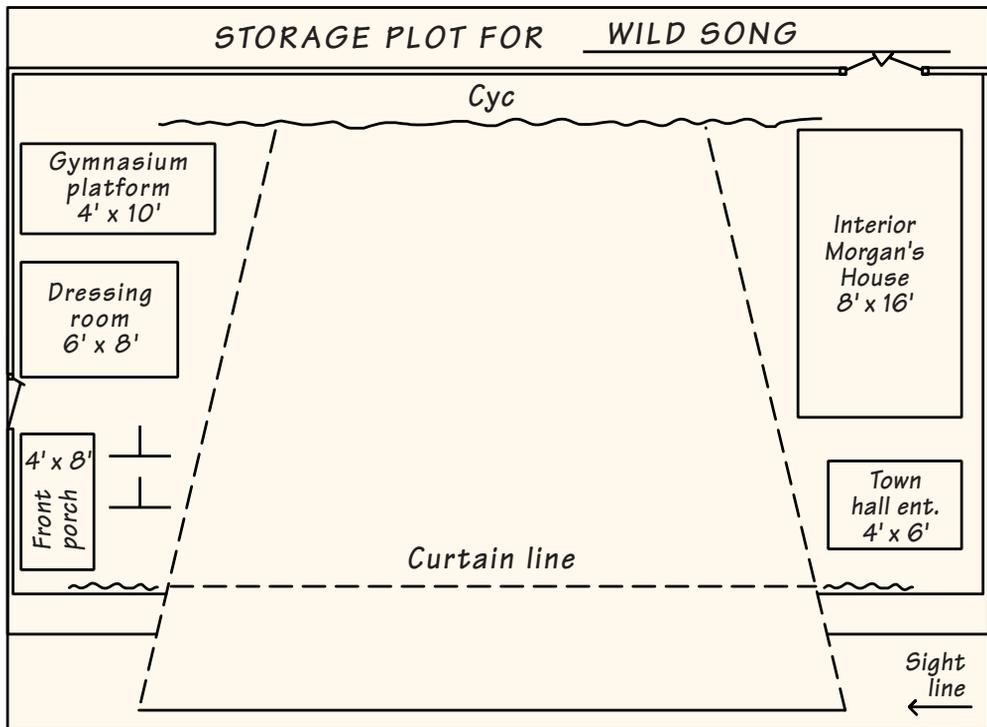
The lighting in this scene from *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* emphasizes the soloist, center.

▼ CUE

White or flesh pink follow spots work best. Amber, red, blue, and green turn costumes and makeup purplish or black.



HANGING PLOT FOR <u>WILD SONG</u>		
LINE NO.	USE	DISTANCE FROM CURTAIN LINE
16	~~~~ Cyc	24'
15	~~~~ Countryside drop	22'6"
14	~~~~ Gymnasium interior	21'8"
13	~~~~ Ballet drop	20'
12	E 4th electric (3rd border)	18'6"
11	X- Leg #2 (strike) garden drop	17'
10	~~~~ Teaser #3	16'
9	~~~~ Scrim	14'6"
8	~~~~ Traveler	13'
7	E 3rd electric (2nd border)	11'6"
6	~~~~ Teaser #2	10'
5	~ Garden portal	9'3"
4	X- Leg #1 (strike) town hall exterior	8'
3	E 2nd electric (1st border)	6'
2	X- Teaser #1 (strike) show curtain	4'6"
1	E 1st electric — X-ray—500 watt fresnels	1'6"
0	~~~~ Act curtain	0



COSTUMES AND MUSIC

Costumes for musical plays should be bolder and more exaggerated than those used in straight plays, since the many lights used in a musical play can deaden an actor's appearance. Costumes are more colorful and more highly stylized. Most musicals are bright, lively productions, and costume colors that would appear gaudy and unbelievable in a straight play are acceptable in a musical play. Costumes for a musical can be quite elaborate, so it might be wise to consider renting them.

Dance costumes, especially for shows with several large production numbers, should be reversibles and coordinates. **Reversibles** are garments such as vests, scarves, belts, and skirts that are made double-faced so that reversing one or more of these articles of clothing creates the illusion of a different costume. **Coordinates**, which can also be reversible, are separates or interchangeable. Costume coordinates such as hats, scarves, ties, vests, jackets, blouses, shirts, skirts, gloves, belts, spats, and shoes can be used in varied combinations.

The director and costumer should select or approve all costumes. This will prevent embarrassing situations that can occur when costumes are not in balance or when similar costumes end up side by side. A chorus member in a wonderful homemade costume may outshine the other people onstage, or a principal's costume may be too drab for the role.

CUE

Do not try to imitate a Broadway show where a character appears in a new outfit in every scene. This is too costly in time and money. One well-made, well-designed costume is far better than several mediocre ones.



The costumes in this production of *The Wiz* are colorful, flowing, and intricate, giving the stage picture extra interest.

Although musical plays can be presented with piano accompaniment alone, an orchestra can greatly enhance the quality and impact of a production. A full orchestra, however, is not always possible. There is a trend in high school productions to replace full orchestras with **combos** (smaller groups of musicians) or with electronic instruments that can replicate the sounds of a complete orchestra.

Most musical plays open with an overture that features a medley of the show's total score. A similar but briefer orchestral piece, the *entr'acte*, precedes the second-act curtain. Unfortunately, orchestras often play too loudly during acts, drowning out lines and lyrics, since few high school voices are strong enough to be heard over a "full pit." Good rapport must exist between the conductor and the director so that the priorities of the production can be met without creating animosity or sacrificing the quality of sound.

CUE

Choose a musical play that suits your budget, your stage, and your community's taste and values.

One of the most critical problems facing a high school musical production is the limited vocal range of young voices. Rewriting the music or transposing it used to be a last resort. However, there are now computer discs available for many shows that will transpose the music, print out copies for all vocal and instrumental parts, and prepare rehearsal tapes for vocal and dance numbers. When this service is unavailable, the best way to allow for any vocal limitations of high school singers is to choose a musical that requires a limited vocal range.

Using only a piano or a keyboard for one particular number rewritten in a transposed key weakens that number when the rest of the show is fully orchestrated.

Poor acoustics is another common problem in high school musical productions. Many schools do not have a recessed orchestra pit, so sound tends to attack the audience. Other schools have tile, brick, or masonry on the auditorium floor and the apron of the stage. Such hard surfaces act as reflectors, and sound cannonades into the audience with deafening loudness. Sometimes the sound can be balanced by carpeting the floor of the orchestra pit, if there is one, and draping sheets of acoustical material or old stage curtains over the front rows of seats. Some high schools solve their sound problems by building a shell around the orchestra so that the sound is slightly contained. Microphones for the actors can help if they are of high quality and are properly placed. Individual cordless microphones are often the best solution.

Communication between the pit and the stage is important. The conductor of the show, usually the instrumental director, must give clear signals to the performers onstage. These signals must not be confused with those meant for the orchestra. Most conductors lead the orchestra with



Sometimes the musicians are actually part of the play, as in this scene from *Smokey Joe's Cafe*.

their right hands and cue the stage with their left. The cuing system the conductor wishes to use should be made clear to the cast in early rehearsals. Giving the pitch to stage performers is also quite vital in pit-to-stage communication. Remember, the conductor is in charge of the pit *and* the performers onstage once he or she raises the baton.

Application ACTIVITY

Read the script or view a performance or movie version of a musical play. Choose one aspect to analyze: lighting, scenery, costumes, or music. Analyze this element in terms of its appropriateness for performing in your school and community. Make a recommendation regarding the musical's possible performance. Be prepared to defend your recommendation.



CHAPTER

9 REVIEW

Summary and Key Ideas

Summarize the chapter by answering the following questions.

1. Describe the following forms of musical theater: opera, operetta, comic opera, and musical comedy.
2. Why is staffing more difficult for a musical play than for a straight play?
3. What questions should be addressed when selecting a musical for production?
4. Name and describe three types of musical plays.
5. Identify and explain some key performance principles for musicals.
6. What unique staging problems do musicals present?

Discussing Ideas

1. Why does a musical play demand a good working relationship among these participants: actor, conductor, choreographer, and director?
2. Why are stage positions and movements so important in musical plays?
3. Listen to a recording or watch a video performance of a musical. Discuss several numbers and scenes in which you think the performers demonstrate one or more of the principles listed on pages 384–385.
4. Discuss some of the pitfalls of producing a musical play. What effect can each have on the production?

FOCUS ON

Music

Once you get a taste of musical theater, you may find yourself wanting more. Expressing yourself through music is a great, fun way to learn about yourself, explore your talents, and connect with the people around you.

Performing Musical Theater With a small group, choose a musical play to read. Make sure the musical is available on video so you can watch it, too. Then select a scene containing a song that your group can perform without accompaniment. Work together to present the scene informally to your class. For help with presenting the scene, see the Reference Section.

Exploring Careers Your involvement with music doesn't have to stop with high school. You may want to study music further—or even consider it as a career. Do some research on one of the following career options for professional musicians: music teacher, instrumentalist, vocalist, composer, or recording engineer. Then write a one-page report describing the training, skills, and discipline needed to become a professional musician. In your opinion, how should a person decide whether music is a good career option? Include your answer in your report.

REVIEW WORKSHOP

PRODUCING THE MUSICAL PLAY

INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY

Comparing Adaptations Read a play from which a musical has been adapted, and then watch a video of the musical. Some possibilities include *Romeo and Juliet/West Side Story*, *Pygmalion/My Fair Lady*, and *The Matchmaker/Hello, Dolly!* In an oral report for your class, make some comparisons between the structure and length of the play

and the musical. Which important plot ideas are conveyed through lyrics? Which form tells the better story? Which would make a better production?

As an alternative, make the same sort of comparison between a work of literature and a musical such as *The Once and Future King/Camelot*, *Tales of Sholem Aleichem/Fiddler on the Roof*, *Don Quixote/Man of La Mancha*, *Oliver Twist/Oliver*, *Les Misérables/Les Misérables*, or *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats/Cats*.

Cooperative Learning Activity

Rock Opera

Since *Hair* was produced in the 1960s, rock

operas, such as *Godspell*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and *Tommy*, have been popular musicals on and off Broadway. With a group of classmates, select five or six songs by a favorite performing artist or group. Devise a simple plot that connects the songs. Together, plan the staging of one scene of your rock opera. Decide what the set will look like, what lighting you will need, and what makeup and costuming will be necessary. Block the action of the central character and any chorus members. Present your ideas to the class in the form of diagrams and pictures.

Across the CURRICULUM Activity

The Living Arts

Theater, music, art, dance—all these arts, as they have each developed throughout history, have overlapped each other. The elements of which they are comprised, their components, the ways they communicate to their audiences, and their natures can all be compared.

Choose a specific culture or historical period and research the movements and trends in the arts. Also examine the broad scope of these trends, noting how and when they appear in the different art forms. You might want to choose a particular movement to investigate, such as realism, tracing its history from culture to culture and art form to art form. In your report, you should include examples of the different trends you find. If possible, supply photographs or books on your topic for the class to view as you give your presentation.