

TH200-15 Musical Theatre: Context, Themes, Analysis

26/27

Department

SCAPVC - Theatre and Performance Studies

Level

Undergraduate Level 2

Module leader

Freya Verlander

Credit value

15

Module duration

9 weeks

Assessment

100% coursework

Study locations

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry Primary

Warwick Arts Centre

Description

Introductory description

The Musical Theatre: Context, Themes, Analysis module is open to second-year students. The module is designed to develop students' understanding of one of the most popular forms of theatre, from its nineteenth-century origins, to Broadway, to the Westend, to the Fringe. It aims to do so by supporting students to read musical theatre and to read its components including weeks which focus on the book, songs/lyrics, choreography, and recordings of the whole stage show. More broadly, it encourages students to engage with Musical Theatre in its social, historical, and political context, as well as to consider themes including but not limited to gender, sexuality, race, and mental health. In so doing, it aims to help students to build their confidence to read musical theatre using different theoretical lenses and approaches. The module is a collaboration between the Theatre and Performance Studies department and – for the first time – the Music Centre in Warwick Arts Centre (WAC). The module focuses on performance analysis and on reading Musical Theatre, but it also offers students the opportunity to experiment with putting their critical analysis skills into practice. Students are invited, for example, to further understand songwriting and choreography through a process of developing small pieces in these areas. You don't need to be able to sing, or dance, but you do need a passion for Musical Theatre and a willingness to engage in some creative practice.

Module aims

The module aims to give students an opportunity to engage with one of the most popular forms of theatre and performance in an academic context. It aims primarily to give students an opportunity to study Musical Theatre in its different social, historical, and political contexts as well as to develop their skills of performance analysis.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

The Musical Theatre: Contexts, Themes, Analysis module offers an academic, theoretical, approach to the study of musical theatre its forms, themes histories, and practices. The module will be led by members of the academic teaching team across TPS and may feature guest workshops (for example from the Music Centre at WAC). The following is just an indicative outline syllabus for publication purposes only, actual content studied and sessions may vary:

Week 1: The (Very Short) History: What is a Musical?

Chapter 2 'Forms of Musical' in *How Musicals Work and How to Write Your Own* (2012), by Julian Woolford

Week 2: 'Stop the World': Politics & the Musical
'Come From Away'

This week's session focuses on reading the Musical Theatre book, with a focus on close readings and critical readings of the work in context.

BRODER, L., 2022.

"Come From Away and the (Re)narrativization of 9/11." *New England Theatre Journal*, 33, pp. 107-124.

Week 3: 'Where did you get that melody?' Song Writing

Hadestown soundtrack with a focus on 'Why We Build the Wall'

In this session students will focus on reading songs in Musical Theatre, before having a go at writing their own songs to put that analysis into practice.

VALERIE LYNN SCHRADER "'Why We Build the Wall': Hegemony, memory and current events in Hadestown" *Studies in Musical Theatre* Volume 16 Number 2

Chapter 9 'Songs' & Chapter 10 'Lyrical Matters' in *How Musicals Work and How to Write Your Own* (2012), by Julian Woolford

Week 4: 'Too Much Exposition': Money & Form
'Urinetown: The Musical' (2001)

This week returns to an analysis of the Musical Theatre book. It's looking to analyse the musical (and form) in relation to money. It will (re)introduce students to cultural materialism as a mode of reading and takes the "anti-musical" as its focus. Students will be able to draw connections

between the themes identified in their analysis of 'Why We Build the Wall' in terms of capital, culture, modes of production, and material. We will move from our thematic focus on money in 'Urinetown' towards a broader introduction to the economics of the Musical.

Chapter 4, 'Life is a Cabaret' Cultural Materialism (Reading Texts) in Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice, Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds

Chapter 6, 'I Wanna Be a Producer': Globalization, Capitalism and Consumerism, in Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice, Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds

Week 5: 'History has its Eyes on You': Casting Practices

'Hamilton'

'Shuffle Along'

'Showboat'

This week asks students to watch the recorded version of the stage production 'Hamilton'. It seeks to critically read 'Hamilton's' histories in line with casting practices, mindful of the legacies of African American influences on the musical form.

"Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Hamilton", Lyra D. Monteiro in *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America's Past* (2018)

Week 7: 'Dancing Through Life': Choreography

This week takes Musical Theatre choreography as its focus and asks students to consider how choreography can help tell stories within Musical Theatre.

The session will invite students to put what they have learned into practice via analysis of choreographic sequences but also, under the direction of Heidi Ashton, to develop their own short choreography.

Special Issue: Dance in musical theatre 'Introduction' Joanna Dee Das¹ and Ryan Donovan, *Studies in Musical Theatre*, Volume 13, Issue 1, Mar 2019, p. 3- 7, DOI:

https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.13.1.3_2

"How Choreographers and Dancers Work: The Laboring Bodies of Musical Theatre," By Joanna Dee Das in *The Routledge Companion to Musical Theatre* (2022)

Week 8: 'My Psychopharmacologist and I': Mind and the Musical

'Dear Evan Hansen'

'Next to Normal'

This week will introduce students to the assessment task by way of an example. It will ask students to read the complete book for 'Next to Normal' and 'Dear Evan Hansen' but will demonstrate how external theories can be applied to the works to present a critical argument about the pieces.

Chapter 7 "Sing a Song of Forgetting..." Listening to the Unconscious in Next to Normal' in *Seriously Mad: Mental Distress and the Broadway Musical*, Aleksei Grinmenko.

Week 9: 'You're going to be popular!': Adaptation

'Wizard of Oz' / 'Wicked' / 'Wiz'

This penultimate week considers the practice of re-reading and re-writing works of Musical Theatre with a focus on the adaptation of Musical works. Ahead of students' written assessments, it will ask them to think about the themes or new idea that are being pulled out in each new iteration.

'Telling the tale': Adaptation as interpretation', Robert Gordon¹ and Olaf Jubin², *Studies in Musical Theatre*, Volume 9, Issue 1, Mar 2015, p. 3 – 11 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.9.1.3_2

Week 10: Take Me for what I Am': Queer Approaches in Musical Theatre

'Rent'

This final week takes 'Rent' as its example and asks students to watch the live Broadway recording of the production, we loop back to Week 2 in terms of the ways in which Musical Theatre might respond to current/historic world issues. However, similarly to the previous week, we're really interested in approaches to reading musical theatre. Throughout the module themes such as gender, race, and sexuality will have been considered but this week asks students to work with Ryan Donovan's 'Introduction' in order to present a reading of one of the works considered so far on the course through the lens of queer theory. Students may practice their critical analysis skills through developing readings which celebrate sexuality, or they may choose to draw out the latent queer content in a production e.g. with 'Wicked.' Students will also be encouraged to introduce their own musicals as part of this session.

'Introduction' in *Queer Approaches in Musical Theatre* (2023) by Ryan Donovan.

Chapter 10: 'I Am What I Am': Sexuality and Queer Theory" in *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice*, Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- To demonstrate an understanding of musical theatres, its genres, histories and forms through the analysis of works in context.
- To demonstrate critical understanding and performance analysis skills through the reading and watching of different works of musical theatre.
- To put pieces of musical theatre in dialogue with one another and to be able to track themes, forms, and practices in, and across, works through practices of comparing and contrasting.
- Be able to use this understanding to develop arguments and readings of works of musical theatre on the module and, potentially, of works outside the module too.
- Be able to use strategies for reading different aspects of Musical Theatre. For example, through participating in song writing or choreography workshops students might demonstrate their understanding of theory within practical work and vice versa in their analysis of aspects of musical theatre.
- To demonstrate an understanding of different theoretical approaches and lenses for reading works of musical theatre and to be able to choose appropriate theoretical lenses/approaches for their own analysis of work.

Indicative reading list

Research element

Students will be required to undertake independent academic research for their written assessment . This will be alongside the critical and theoretical engagement with the musical theatre works and contexts on the module.

Interdisciplinary

This module is interdisciplinary in both its content and delivery. It draws on expertise from Theatre and Performance Studies and the Music Centre in WAC, alongside guest lectures and workshops from those with specialist skills or experience within the field of Musical Theatre. It is open to students across the University who will bring their own subject knowledge/approaches/thinking to the study of Musical Theatre.

International

This module positions Musical Theatre in an international context as it considers the evolution and movement of the genre from Broadway to the West End to the fringe. It is alive to, for example, Jewish and African American influences on the form. It is also an open invitation to students to consider works of Musical Theatre beyond the Western context.

Subject specific skills

By the end of this module, students should be able to demonstrate a critical understanding of:

1. The history of Musical Theatre and the emergence of particular forms, genres, and practices within the field.
2. What is meant by 'Musical Theatre,' and to be able to appropriately identify a range of different musical theatre genres, sub-genres, and forms.
3. How Musical Theatre might respond to world events, histories, and everyday concerns as well as how they might creatively/critically use this knowledge to create pieces of musical theatre to address particular thematic/historic/contemporary concerns.
4. Demonstrate the ability to use different theoretical lenses to read Musical Theatre and to develop arguments about works using these critical analysis skills.

Transferable skills

Transferable skills

- Analysis and decision making
- Cognitive ability
- Communication skills
- Creativity
- Performance skills

- Presentation skills
 - Confidence
 - Interdisciplinary awareness
 - Critical thinking
 - Independent research
 - Academic writing skills
 - Intrapersonal skills
 - Problem solving
 - Project planning and delivery
 - Self-management
 - Time management
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Study

Study time

Type	Required	Optional
Seminars	9 sessions of 3 hours (18%)	
Project supervision	1 session of 1 hour (1%)	
External visits	1 session of 5 hours (3%)	1 session of 4 hours
Other activity	2 hours (1%)	
Private study	65 hours (43%)	
Assessment	50 hours (33%)	
Total	150 hours	

Private study description

The time that should be spent with preparation for seminars and workshops in term 2. For example, reading and researching around a theme/work, it also includes watching pre-recorded musicals which might be up to 3hours at a time.

Other activity description

Invited guest speakers who are alumni of TPS who have gone on to work in Musical Theatre.

Costs

Category	Description	Funded by	Cost to student
Field trips,	Field trip. X 1 to Alexandra Birmingham to see a		
placements and study abroad	Musical. E.g., 'Miss Saigon' in November. TPS	Department	£0.00

Category	Description	Funded by	Cost to student
	estimated £250-£300.		

Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Assessment component			
Written Assessment	100%	50 hours	Yes (extension)
Individually, you will write a 4000-word essay on one or two works of Musical Theatre. You will have a choice of essay titles to respond to and you will also have the opportunity to develop a title of your own. The assessment asks you to develop an argument about a work(s) of musical theatre using the critical analysis skills that you have been developing this term. You might choose to focus your essay and analysis on an element of Musical Theatre such as lyrics, or choreography, in relation to an aspect of narrative. You might choose a particular theoretical lens to analyse a work(s).			

Reassessment component is the same

Feedback on assessment

Written feedback will be provided on all assessed work. Students will also receive ongoing verbal feedback throughout the course.

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- Year 2 of UTHA-QW34 Undergraduate English and Theatre Studies
- Year 2 of UTHA-W421 Undergraduate Theatre and Performance Studies