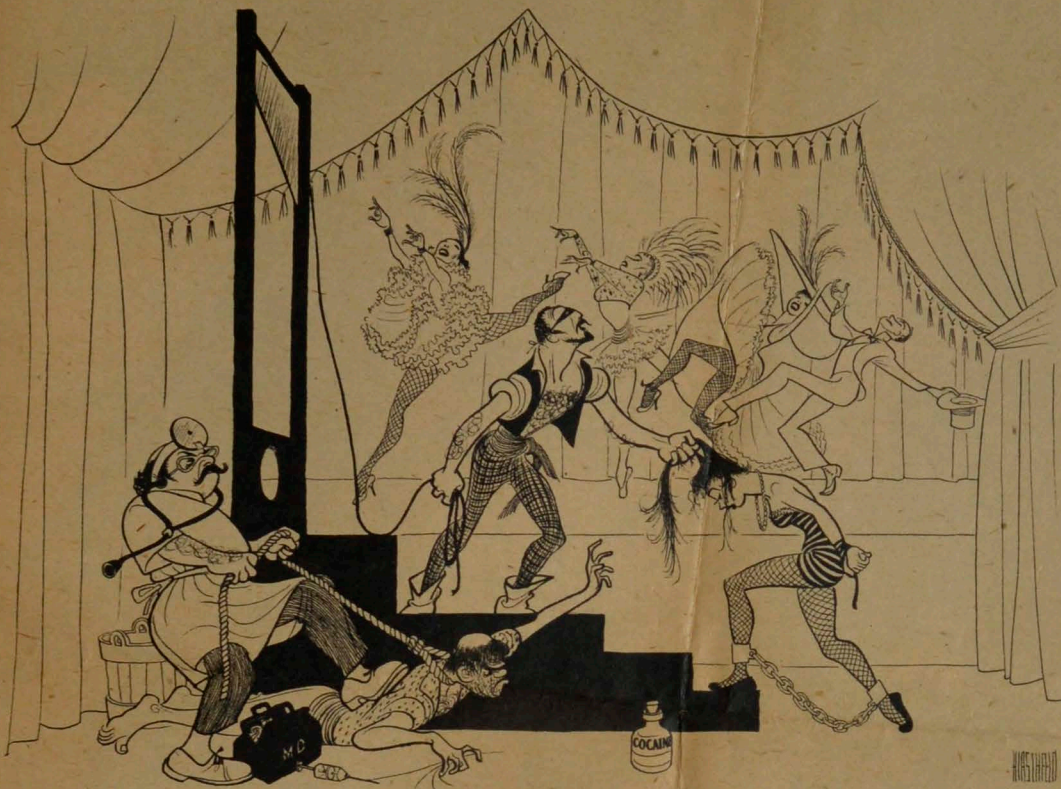


# Musical Comedy—or Musical Serious?

Musicals used to be boy and girl, song and dance, humor and happy ending. But now you can't see the chorus boys through your tears. Where will it all end?



Drawings by Al Hirschfeld.

The dire occurrences, awful agonies and aberrations of the new musicals are pushing the old song-and-dance shows off the stage.

By **GEORGE S. KAUFMAN**

**A** FUNNY thing happened to a musical comedy on its way to the theatre the other night. It met a joke. Then, before it realized the audacity of such behavior, it took it along to the theatre, and presently there it was in the show.

Well, sir, the audience was pretty surprised, I can tell you that. Conditioned to musical versions of O'Neill and to teen-agers fighting each other with switch-blade knives—and killing the hero, to boot—they were naturally taken aback. Most of them, embarrassed, had the good taste to look the other way and pretend it never had happened. Quite a number broke down and cried, having grown accustomed to crying at musical comedies in recent seasons.

But a few people with long memories had the temerity to laugh. Admittedly, they didn't feel comfortable about it. Laughing at a musical comedy!—whoever heard of such a thing?

Time was, of course, back before musical comedy became musical serious, when the musical shows were just full of jokes. True, the jokes were frequently something less than Grade A—for

several seasons it was enough to have the comedian pull out his cigarette lighter, strike it into flame with a quick movement, and say to the audience: "It worked!" (But at least they had comedians.)

Even the plots were something of a joke in those days—there were long years when the outcome of the romance depended on which lad won the big football game, or the foot race, or the automobile race, or the boat race, or the airplane race. Naturally, the fellow who won the race was given permanent possession of the ingenue. This was known as Dillingham's Law—no other qualifications were considered necessary. For the next thirty or forty years, presumably, the winner would wile away the long winter evenings telling and retelling his bride how he had emerged victorious despite the heavy's dastardly attempts to sabotage him by removing a wheel from the auto, or poisoning the football, or moving the centerfield fence farther back so that he couldn't hit that home run.

**Y**OU may well have felt that the successful outcome of the boat-automobile-airplane-foot race was hardly a foundation for a happy and enduring marriage, but by that time you were either safely at home or else sitting in front of another musical comedy—the one in which the whole thing was resolved at 11:10 when the heroine said: "You mean it

was your sister you were kissing all the time?" And there you were, with a reprise of the love song, a bit of hooping, and curtain. No drama, no tragedy, no deep thoughts.

I am not writing this out of a nostalgic longing for the past—I realize fully that those shows would be hooted off the stage these days, and rightly. But surely the playgoer who wants a musical comedy should know at least what kind of show he is going to see. And just as surely there are still those who want a musical show that has gaiety and fun and lightheartedness in it—yes, and tunes, if I am not asking too much—a show that makes no attempts to delve into either psychological or sociological depths.

**P**ERHAPS some such designation as musical drama, or even musical tragedy, would help to guide the questing entertainment seeker. As things stand now, the innocent musical-comedygoer is likely to find himself up to his elbows in problems. Both of the shows to which I have obliquely referred—"New Girl in Town" and "West Side Story," not to make too big a secret of it—are excellent entertainments and highly successful. But where will the trend end?

I read, for example, that "The Jest" is to be made into a musical show. Now, I remember "The Jest" moderately well and I seem to recall that the protagonist spent most of the evening chained

to a pillar—a pillar, moreover, about six feet across and forty feet high. This will certainly hold the dancing to a minimum, to say the least. Speaking of dancing, a friend of mine who greatly admires Gwen Verdon as a dancer went to "New Girl in Town" and waited an hour and twelve minutes before Miss Verdon danced a single step. She finally twinkled a foot or two in the first-act finale. This is fine if you want it that way, but a lot of people, impressed by the show's success, are going to try doing that sort of thing *without* Gwen Verdon, and the results will almost certainly not be happy. (I am sure that at this moment producers are combing the other O'Neill plays, trying to find one sufficiently grim and unhappy to form the basis of a musical show. Will "Long Day's Journey Into Night" be next on the list?)

**"O**F HUMAN BONDAGE," I'm told, is also to be made into a musical comedy. Yes, I said musical comedy. "Of Human Bondage," you will recall, is set against a hospital medical student background, and has a clubfooted hero just for good measure. I have not yet read that it is going to be called "Gimpy," but nothing would surprise me. However, "Of Human Bondage" is in expert musical comedy hands, and will probably emerge as a hit. I can see that big dance number now:

*It's easy if—  
You keep your right leg stiff—  
Doing the rig-or mort-is!*

Looking back, I am not sure how it all started, but I suspect that it began with Noel Coward. In "Bitter Sweet," along about 1930, Mr. Coward killed off his hero at the penultimate curtain. In "Carousel," of course, Billy Bigelow was killed in the first act, but at least he came back later as a ghost—better, of course, than an altogether dead hero, but not exactly conducive to belly laughs. Again, in "Allegro," Rodgers and Hammerstein, unless my memory is faulty, killed off the hero's mother early in the proceedings, but as things wound up she had one of the biggest parts of the show (more ghosting, of course).

**W**HAT next? As matters are now going I would say that mental health is a highly promising theme for the musical comedy theatre. The scene will be a sanitarium, naturally, and it will begin with the hero insane and the heroine perfectly sane. Then, as he slowly recovers his sanity, she starts to lose hers. The romantic problem is clear: will they meet midway on a happy plateau? The big love song? "I'm Just Crazy About You," natch.

Or will there be a return to gayer and lighter musical fare? The theatre is a law unto itself, of course, existing from show to show, and reasonably independent of economic or any other kind of trends. Presumably, if enough good musical dramas are written, people will go to them. Just as certainly, there will always be those who want the lighter and more amusing variety.

Vote for one.

**GEORGE S. KAUFMAN** is one of the theatre's most prolific playwrights, with almost fifty shows to his credit since 1925. He is director of the current comedy "Romanoff and Juliet."