

How did Jewish Lyricists and Composers Revolutionize American Musical Theater?

A Question.

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There is an old Jewish joke which goes something like this: a young boy wanders into the kitchen to ask his grandmother a question. “Grandma, why do Jewish people always answer a question with another question?” The grandmother looks at him and says, “Why? Who wants to know?”

In Leo Rosten’s The Joys of Yiddish, he tells a variation of the same story:

Mr. O’Neill and Mr. Pinsky were chatting. O’Neill said, “Did you hear about the fight between Cooley and McGraw?”

“How could I miss it?” said Pinsky. “Wasn’t it in front of my eyes?”

“I didn’t know you were there.”

“What then? I was maybe in the White House?”

“Whose fault was it: Cooley’s?”

“Who else?”

O’Neill sighed, “Pinsky, *why* do Jews answer every question with another question?”

Pinsky pondered. “Why not?” (143)

Rosten's anecdote confirms how common question-asking is in the Jewish-American dialect; after the introduction of Yiddish into American English, people came to recognize this syntactical pattern as a distinctly Jewish trait. Even more interesting is Rosten's placing the joke in the section of his book which attempts to define the difference between a "goy" and a "Jew." Rosten clearly sees question-asking as a conspicuous way of distinguishing between Jews and Gentiles.

But besides noting that the pattern of question-asking is typical to Jewish speech, not much more has been made of this phenomenon. Never before had this linguistic pattern been linked to or placed in a discussion of American musical theater, a field widely created by Jews. In the first half of the Twentieth Century, Broadway was pioneered largely by Jewish composers and lyricists, and it was Jewish writers, most specifically, who created their definition of America on the American stage for musical theater audiences.

The theater attracted Jewish writers. It may seem paradoxical, but it took a Russian-born cantor's son, Irving Berlin, to write "God Bless America" and the musical of quintessential Americana, *Annie Get Your Gun*. It was Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, both Jews, who wrote the American masterpiece *Show Boat*. George and Ira Gershwin composed *Porgy and Bess*, often considered America's first and best opera. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II created and defined aspects of the American landscape in *Oklahoma!* and explored American values in *South Pacific*. And, in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick wrote the prototypical "Jewish" musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*.

The composers and lyricists I focus on here were either born in Eastern Europe, came from immigrant families newly arrived in America, or were native to a society where Jews were outcasts. It is not a coincidence, then, that these “non-Americans” were the ones who clearly saw the American landscape, and who considered America a worthwhile topic to sing about on stage.

To study these writers as a group, it is necessary to illuminate some of the commonalities shared by the Jewish composers and lyricists. I would like to discuss a specific trait that all these Jewish lyricists had in common: their linguistic heritage of Yiddish and how that legacy formed the lyrics that pioneered the American musical stage.

Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein II and Sheldon Harnick all spoke and wrote in English throughout their careers. But what is more important is that they came from Jewish backgrounds in which Yiddish had an enormous influence. There is a very distinctive element in their collective work, one that has unquestionable ties to their Jewish culture and which is all but absent in the work of their Gentile counterparts. It is the simple syntactical form of asking a question, instead of making a direct statement. Especially in the new world of America, audiences began to understand this syntax as a specifically “Jewish” way of using language.

In the beginning of the Twentieth Century on the Lower East Side, Yiddish became a primary marker of the Jews’ newfound freedom. Newly-arrived American Jews infused Yiddish into every aspect of their community; indeed, it was one of the forces that bound the community together. Among the Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side, Yiddish literacy was extremely high, and texts written in Yiddish were readily available.

One historian claims that, “In New York City...over 150 different Yiddish newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals made their appearance between 1885 and 1914” (Steinmetz 18). These publications were not intended merely for the educated or upper classes: “Literally every adult Jew read a Yiddish newspaper. In the peak years of the 1920s, the circulation of the Yiddish daily press in New York City alone was nearly seven hundred thousand, and conservative estimates suggested that each paper was read by three adults, accounting for a readership of over two million people” (Gittleman 130-31).

It is important to understand that the Yiddish texts did not preach exclusion. The publications were not intended as a tool for the Jewish community to isolate itself but as an in-road into assimilation. Numerous publications “became famous for the beauty of their work and the particularly modern American view of life they held out. The Yiddish newspapers and magazines were as a rule openly in favor of assimilation to the American way of life, and had no scruples about freely admitting into Yiddish all types of Anglicisms” (Steinmetz 19).

This linguistic exchange was mutual; Yiddish became affected by American English, and the reciprocal occurred. We know that numerous Yiddish words became part of the English vernacular, but I argue that it is not only Yiddish *vocabulary* that changed the American landscape. The Yiddish *heritage* of the Jewish lyricists affected the songs they wrote and changed American musical theater as well.

Beyond that, Yiddish folk music influenced the American Jews. Of course, the immigrants brought with them the songs of their childhoods, and they continued to sing them in the new world. One example is the prototype of the Yiddish cradle song. The

following lyrics of a Yiddish lullaby are representative of an entire musical genre which began in Eastern Europe and flourished in America, into the Twentieth Century. Its form is especially significant; nearly the whole song is a series of questions:

My child, who will comb and caress you?

My child, who will clean your cradle?

Without a mother, there is no comfort!

My child, who will clothe and adorn you?

My child, who will take you to *cheder*?

My child, who will make a man out of you?

My child, who will bless you under the canopy?¹

(qtd. in Rubin 41)

But the question form is not limited to the cradle song. The following lyrics come from a protest song, also written in Yiddish. This song, written by David Edelshtat in the late Nineteenth Century, uses the question to incite a strong reaction in his listeners:

How long, oh, how long will you slaves yet remain

And bear the shameful chain?

How long will you glorious wealth create

For him, who robs you of your bread?

How long will you stand with your backs bended low

Humbled, homeless, and wan? (qtd. in Rubin 350)

¹ Though its earliest origins are unclear, this song is attributed to S. M. Ginzburg and P.S. Marek in the book *Yevreiskiya narodniya pesnya v'rosii*, published by Voskhod in St. Petersburg, 1901.

One reason the question-song was so natural to Jewish lyricists is that the rhetoric of question asking is absolutely pivotal in Jewish theology and ideology. From the earliest centuries of Judaism, human inquiry and analysis have reigned supreme, even in questioning the sacred texts. The Talmud specifically states, “As the hammer [striking a rock] causes numerous sparks to flash forth, so a scriptural verse engenders many interpretations” (Talmud, Sanhedrin 34a). Modern rabbis describe this essentiality of Judaism in less archaic terms, but the central message is the same. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes:

The questioning, searching and skeptical man is not excluded from the circle of believers; he becomes, rather, the spokesman of the central work of the Jewish religion, the prime source for *halakhah* [traditional Jewish law] and daily conduct. This very process creates the unique blend of profound faith and questioning skepticism that has characterized the Jewish people throughout the ages. (269)

The lyricists I discuss here were quite comfortable with question-asking as a core part of their discourse. Beyond the nuances of their everyday conversation, they were taught in both their formal Jewish instruction and in their casual contact with Jewish adults that they could reach the most profound truths through questions. By doubting all assumptions, and analyzing the world they lived in, they could create a new set of truths for themselves.

There is no question that the lyricists I discuss were familiar with and influenced by the nuances of Yiddish. For Irving Berlin and Ira Gershwin, Yiddish was the language of their first neighborhoods and certainly of the home. Even for Oscar Hammerstein II and Sheldon Harnick, who did not grow up in the tenements of New York, Yiddish would have been deeply ingrained in their psyches and in their ears, simply from their families' and social circles' knowledge and usage of it.

Each of these lyricists uses the pattern of question-asking. But it is important first to understand the pattern in general terms to provide a context for the specific examples. Though all of these examples illustrate the question form, the Jewish lyricists employ variations of the same pattern.

In some examples, Jewish lyricists write a series of questions but provide no answer. The song's content is communicated via a list of questions, left in a hypothetical mode, implying that an answer is either unknown, unnecessary or would be redundant. Hammerstein uses this pattern in Tuptim's song "My Lord and Master" from *The King and I* (1951):

He is pleased with me, my Lord and Master,
Declares he's pleased with me; what does he mean?
What does he know of me, this Lord and Master?
When he has looked at me, what has he seen?

and follows this pattern later in *The Sound of Music* (1959), when describing the protagonist, Maria:

How do you solve a problem like Maria?

How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?
How do you find a word that means “Maria?”
A flibberty-jibbit, a will-o’-the wisp, a clown!...
But how do you make her stay, and listen to all you say?
How do you keep a wave upon the sand?
Oh, how do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?

In these examples, Hammerstein leaves his questions unanswered either because there is no answer, or because the character singing lacks the power to obtain it. Tuptim, the slave, will never know what the King thinks of her, or means when he speaks about her, because he purposely leaves her in ignorance. The nuns, who exasperatedly sing about Maria, *cannot* answer these questions. They find that this rhetoric is the only way they can explain the free-spirited nonconformity of their new novice. This is the exact point. Hammerstein uses this very Judaic pattern to pose questions for examination, leaving the audience to understand that at times, questions do not have answers.

In other examples, the Jewish lyricists create a list of questions, and then answer them with a small but definitive word, phrase or sentence. This is a particularly effective technique; that final “answer” packs a large punch, providing closure to the song. Therefore, the character does find some answer to the question, brief though it may be.

Hammerstein relies often on this pattern. One example, which emerges from his collaboration with Jerome Kern, is the famous question-song, “Why Was I Born?” from

Sweet Adeline (1929). Notice how each stanza's long list of questions is answered by a simple half-line response:

What is the good of being by myself?
Why was I born? Why am I living?
What do I get? What am I giving?
Why do I want a thing I daren't hope for?
What can I hope for? I wish I knew.

Why do I try to draw you near me?
Why do I cry? You never hear me.
I'm a poor fool, but what can I do?
Why was I born? To love you.

Hammerstein later creates this pattern again in his collaboration with Richard Rodgers. In *The King and I*, this technique works perfectly in the mouth of the King, whose question-song replaces the traditional form of the soliloquy. Singing alone on stage, the King intellectually explores his options, wondering aloud how best to govern his ancient country in a modern age:

Shall I join with other nations in alliance?
If allies are weak, am I not best alone?
If allies are strong with power to protect me,
Might they not protect me out of all I own?
Is there danger to be trusting one another?

One would seldom wants to do what other wishes.
But unless someday somebody trust somebody,
They'll be nothing left on earth, excepting fishes!
Is a puzzlement!

* * * * *

Other than to recognize that they stem from Yiddish syntax, it is difficult to pinpoint why these language patterns exist in the Jewish vernacular, but there is no question that they do. The pattern of asking questions appears time and again as a standard lyrical form for Jewish songwriters, too many times to be ignored or disregarded as “unscientific.” Further, it is telling to consider the differences between Jewish and non-Jewish lyricists. Let us do a brief comparison of the Jewish lyricists’ work to the songs of their most prominent non-Jewish colleagues, Cole Porter and George M. Cohan.

Cole Porter was acutely aware of being a Gentile in a theatrical world that seemed to be dominated by Jews. He came onto the theatrical scene later than Berlin, Kern and Gershwin and felt he needed the key to success. There is an often-quoted conversation Porter had with his friend and colleague, Richard Rodgers. Porter told Rodgers that he had found the secret to writing successful theater music. “‘What is it?’ asked Rodgers. ‘Simplicity itself,’ said Porter. ‘I’ll write Jewish tunes’” (qtd. in Steyn 76-77).

However, even though Porter successfully emulates Jewish music by using minor chords and keys, thus creating many of his beautiful ballads, his pattern of writing lyrics is distinctly non-Jewish. Where Jewish lyricists use questions to communicate, Gentile writers use direct statements to create meaning in song. Porter’s lyrics are poetic,

extremely clever and often ironic, but are written in the exact opposite of the Jewish writers' patterns. Consider Porter's witty lyric from his 1948 musical *Kiss Me, Kate*:

From Milwaukee, Mr. Fritz

Often dines me at the Ritz.

Mr. Fritz invented Schlitz, and Schlitz must pay.

But I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion;

Yes, I'm always true to you, darling, in my way.

Porter relies on the form of the statement to push forward a song, even when it is the simple construction of a subject followed by a being-verb. The examples "*I'm* always true to you," "*I'm* in love again," "*It was* just one of those things" and "*You're* the top" make clear how some of Porter's most popular songs use a straightforward statement, much more an answer than a question. In sum, Porter writes, "That's why the lady is a tramp," where a Jewish writer might question, "Why is this lady called a tramp?"

George M. Cohan is another early Gentile songwriter who favors the statement over the question, also using the subject/being-verb construction. This directed syntax appears in his most famous songs: "*I'm* a Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "*You're* a Grand Old Flag." But Cohan even extends past the statement to communicate his message; in one of the greatest musical tributes to Broadway (1904), Cohan's lyrics are not just straightforward sentences, but commands:

Give my regards to Broadway,

Remember me to Herald Square.

Tell all the folks at Forty-Second Street

That I will soon be there!

This format of command-writing also appears in Cohan's World War One hit, "Over There" (1917), illustrating that Cohan still employs the imperative form nearly fifteen years later:

Johnny, *get* your gun, *get* your gun, *get* your gun.

Take it on the run, on the run, on the run ...

So prepare, *say* a prayer, *spread* the word to beware!

If we compare Cohan's lyrics to Oscar Hammerstein II's, we see that instead of demanding that the character follow a list of commands in the song, the Hammerstein character uses the Judaic form of asking a list of questions to communicate his desires:

Shall we dance?

On a bright cloud of music, shall we fly?

Shall we dance?

Shall we then say "Goodnight," and mean "Goodbye?"

Or perchance, when the last little star has left the sky,

Shall we still be together with our arms around each other,

And shall you be my new romance?

On the clear understanding that this kind of thing can happen,

Shall we dance, shall we dance, shall we dance?

If you remember this scene in *The King and I*, you know that the action, not the lyric, answers this series of questions, since Anna and the King actually polka around the hall as they sing this song. The scene would seem absurd if the lyrics were written in a statement form, since they would stupidly state the obvious. “*We shall dance/On a bright cloud of music, we shall fly*” would not form the magical scene that Hammerstein otherwise creates.

In the first few decades of the Twentieth Century, the distinction between the Jewish lyricist writing question-songs and the Gentile writing statement-songs was clear. It must be admitted, however, that this was not a longtime trend. These innovators knew each other, and studied each other’s compositions, to learn what became successful and popular. Soon enough, they began to imitate each other’s patterns, and the distinction became blurred.

Evidence of this change again lies in the example of Cole Porter. From the time Porter began publishing music with the song “Bridget” in 1910, and for *twenty* years following, all but three songs he published were statement-songs. However, in his later years, after watching the question-song flourish on Broadway, Porter regularly tried the question form himself. In the second half of his career, Porter averaged at least one question-song per show, including: “What Shall I Do?” (1938), “Do I Love You?” and “Well, Did You Evah?” (1939), “Who Would Have Dreamed?” (1940), “Could It Be You?” (1941), “Should I Tell You I Love You?” (1946), “Why Can’t You Behave?” and “Where Is the Life that Late I Led?” (1948).

Although some of Porter’s question-songs became quite popular, his composition of them was not entirely natural. Porter’s lyrics in his very late song, “I Love Paris” (1953)

illuminate his discomfort in shifting from the statement form to the question-song. Porter begins the song in his standard form of writing direct sentences:

I love Paris in the Springtime,
I love Paris in the Fall.
I love Paris in the Winter, when it drizzles,
I love Paris in the Summer, when it sizzles.

He then moves to the question pattern; however, when Porter writes in this form, it seems forced and does not further the audience's understanding of the song. In fact, his question lyrics become repetitious and cumbersome, slowing down too much the pace of the song:

I love Paris.
Why, oh, why do I love Paris?
Because my love is near.

To an even greater detriment, Porter's lyric of "Why, oh, why?" seems to be a direct appropriation of E.Y. (Yip) Harburg's lyric in *The Wizard of Oz*. Harburg, a Jewish lyricist collaborating with Harold Arlen, wrote this phrase in 1939, fourteen years earlier, in "Somewhere Over the Rainbow:" "Birds fly over the rainbow/ Why, oh, why can't I?" There is no question that Porter's "I Love Paris" has a hauntingly beautiful and memorable tune. But under deeper scrutiny, Porter's lyrical attempt to imitate his Jewish colleagues, indeed to write "good Jewish music," seems just that: an imitation. Porter wrote no more question songs after this attempt in 1953.

It must be said that the Jewish lyricists also transitioned into writing statement- and command-songs. Even though Irving Berlin wrote question-songs throughout his entire career, some of his most famous lyrics segue to use the basic subject/verb syntax of the statement song; consider his “This Is the Army, Mr. Jones” (1942), and *Annie Get Your Gun*’s “I Got the Sun in the Morning” and “There’s No Business Like Show Business” (1946). Some of Ira Gershwin’s statement songs became his biggest hits: “I Can’t Get Started” (1935), “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” (1937) and the final song he and George wrote together, “Love Is Here to Stay” (1938). Finally, the Rodgers and Hammerstein partnership created a list of very famous statement songs, including: “I Cain’t Say No” (1943), “You’ll Never Walk Alone” (1945), “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair” (1949) and “Climb Ev’ry Mountain” (1959).

Despite this ultimate blending of forms, the pattern had been set. Stemming directly from their Yiddish heritage, the Jewish songwriters introduced the question-song to Broadway, and its success turned the question-song into a standard.

Proof of this lies in an analysis of the most famous “Jewish” musical ever written, *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). Besides being written by a Jewish composer and lyricist, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, *Fiddler* has a distinctly Jewish plot. Based on the stories of Yiddish author Sholom Aleichem, the story follows the residents of the Jewish *shetl* of Anatevka, who live in constant fear of *pogroms*. Unlike the other musicals discussed here, *Fiddler* is a Jewish story that purposely “sounds” Jewish; the characters are consciously given a Jewish dialect. Having demonstrated that Jewish lyricists tend to use the question form, it is interesting to view this libretto as a litmus test. The result does not come as any surprise: from the very opening words of the show, the Jewish

question pattern we have come to know emerges. Harnick relies on the pattern of asking questions because it is an authentically Jewish mode.

The effect here is different than Hammerstein's prototypical question-song. Hammerstein uses the question to embed in his characters feelings of subservience, self-doubt or fear; and the actual act of questioning communicates these emotions to the audience. But Harnick writes question-songs for his characters because this is the way they would speak! When I myself asked Sheldon Harnick about how he came to use this linguistic pattern, he told me about his "own memories of going to a small synagogue in Chicago" which was "upstairs from a secretarial agency." He thought back on "the men who were there...how they were, how they talked." He concluded that the "rhythm of their speech... worked its way into the lyrics" (Harnick personal interview).

The lyrics of *Fiddler on the Roof* are centered on the form of the question throughout the show. The opening line of the prologue immediately establishes this pattern: "A fiddler on the roof...sounds crazy, no?," and from there, *Fiddler's* opening song, "Tradition," initiates the pattern of asking questions:

Who day and night must scramble for a living,
feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers?
And who has the right, as master of the house,
to have the final word at home?

As in all strong opening numbers, this song introduces the themes, characters and attitudes of the entire show. As the next verses continue to introduce the papas, mamas, sons and daughters of Anatevka, significantly, they do so in many series of questions.

As the musical develops, the major life events that occur in Tevye's family are also sung about in questions. When his eldest daughter approaches him about marrying the man she *loves*, versus the one he *chooses*, Tevye is scandalized – and communicates this through a barrage of questions:

You gave each other a pledge?...

Where do you think you are?

In Moscow? In Paris?

Where do they think they are?

America?

And what do you think you're doing?

You stitcher! You nothing!

Who do you think you are?

King Solomon?

This isn't the way it's done. Not here, not now.

Some things I cannot allow! ...

One little time you pull out a prop –

And where does it stop? Where does it stop?

Of course, we all remember that Tevye finds a way to justify and bless his daughter Tzeitel's wedding, and on that night, "Sunrise, Sunset" epitomizes the question-song:

Is this the little girl I carried?

Is this the little boy at play?

I don't remember growing older.

When did they?

When did she get to be a beauty?

When did he grow to be so tall?

Wasn't it yesterday when

They were small?

As the song continues, the parents ask, "What words of wisdom can I give them? / How can I help to ease their way?," and the younger siblings question aloud, "Is there a canopy in store for me?"

Later, in what could be the most heart-wrenching scene in the show, another of Tevye's daughters decides to leave her family to marry a rebel who is imprisoned in Siberia. When the couple approaches her father about their plans, he responds by falling again into his typical Jewish pattern of the question:

So what do you want from me?

Go on, be wed.

And tear out my beard and uncover my head.

Tradition! They're not even asking permission from the papa.

What's happening to the tradition?

One little time I pulled out a thread.

And where has it led? Where has it led?

When the daughter leaves Anatevka to follow her destiny in Siberia, the farewell lyrics she sings ring with the distinctly Jewish form:

How can I hope to make you understand why I do what I do?

Why I must travel to a distant land, far from the home I love?...

Who could imagine I'd be wandering so far from the home I love?

In the second half of the Twentieth Century, though the crossing-over of styles between the Jewish and Gentile lyricists still occurs, the trends set in the earlier decades still stand. In contemporary Gentile lyricists, we see the pattern of statement and command songs perpetuated. As passing examples, consider Gentile-lyricist Tim Rice's hits, "Close Every Door," "I Don't Know How to Love Him," and "Don't Cry for Me Argentina." Compare these to the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim, Fred Ebb, Mel Brooks and Adam Guettel. Doing so will illustrate how clearly the question-song was then and is now one of the major hallmarks of the Jewish lyricist.

One final example is Jonathan Larson, composer and lyricist of the Musical *Rent* (1996). Again, the show's opening song begins with a list of questions:

How do you document real life

When real life's getting more like fiction each day?

How do you write a song when the chords sound wrong

Though they once sounded right and rare?

Where is the power you once had to ignite the air?

How do you stay on your feet when on ev'ry street

it's "trick or treat"

And tonight it's "trick?" . . .

How we gonna pay? How we gonna pay?

How we gonna pay? last year's rent?

Despite Larson's tragic and untimely death the night before *Rent* opened off-Broadway, he had begun to display the trend of writing the question song and following the pattern of the Jewish writers who had come before him.

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Intrinsic in the theme of question-asking is my argument that the Jewish composers and lyricists who pioneered the American musical stage did so from a place of marginalization. As immigrants or sons of immigrants, they had huge obstacles to overcome in understanding American ways. They were outsiders and were often pushed to the sidelines. Perhaps because of their status as unknowledgeable newcomers, or because the Jews were discriminated against in the new land as they were in the old, they sometimes adopted the language of weakness. They often did not have the power or the confidence to use statements or commands. My earlier example of Tuptim shows how question-asking can reveal a powerlessness and a deep anxiety about being seen as wrong. In circumstances like these, asking a question is safer than making a definitive statement, and safety was a concern for the Jew. Along with finding a land of opportunity and success, the immigrant Jew found that he entered a lion's den of intolerance and discrimination upon his arrival in America.

Therefore, the question-song brings the listener into a world far beyond the scope of the play. It not only invites the listener into the song, but it brings him into the experience of the American Jew as well. Because these poignant question-songs are

written by a specific group, they insist that the audience listen to the subtext of the lyrics. The songs seem to plead, “Listen to what our experiences have been! Provide your own answers for it! What *are* your answers for my experiences of racism, isolation and marginalization?”

Jewish lyricist Yip Harburg once commented – and note the rhetoric of question-asking even in his quote: “A song is the pulse of a nation’s heart, a fever chart of its health. Are we at peace? Are we in trouble? Do we feel beautiful? Are we violent? Listen to our songs” (qtd. by Kantor). Jewish-American composers and lyricists grew into adulthood knowing their roots as well as feeling the sting of discrimination in their own lives. Stemming from their shared experience, they each grew to translate into their creative work the positive and negative experiences they faced in the new world. Their nuanced Yiddish mother tongue, their painful brushes with anti-Semitism and their rich Jewish heritage all combined to dictate the major themes of their musicals and ultimately, led to creating a renaissance on American musical theater stage.

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