

Music 150, Theatre 150, Film 150
Dr. Jessica Sternfeld

The New Musicals: Broadway and Film

Course description:

Welcome to “The New Musicals: Broadway and Film”! In the last few years, musicals – especially movie musicals – have enjoyed a new surge in popularity. In the 1940s and 50s, musicals on stage and screen were synonymous with pop music; musicals generated hit songs, and musical movies were respected and beloved. Then came a phase when stage musicals were old-fashioned and movie musicals were barely made at all. Now, the genre is back, with up-to-date music, innovative techniques, and vast audiences.

In this course, we’ll study some musicals of the last several decades, focusing particularly on film musicals available for viewing. We’ll examine how they work as drama and music: how are these pieces structured? What are their musical features, styles, and elements? How are they put together in terms of story, character, and emotion? We’ll also study the cultural circumstances of the works: what do critics think of them? What sorts of audiences do they draw? What social messages do they convey, and how are these messages received?

As a class, we’ll study at least most of these works: *The Producers*, *Rent*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Chicago*, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, *Evita*, and *High School Musical*. You will also have the opportunity to choose your own stage, film, or TV musical to study and write about or talk about in class.

Required materials, assignments, grading policy:

You will have a reading and/or viewing assignment for each class meeting. Some of the films are on reserve in the library, but you are welcome to find the films anywhere you like – you can buy them, rent them, borrow them. I strongly encourage you to purchase both those that we’ll be studying in depth (though you are welcome to share with a classmate), as well as the work you study individually. Consider these DVDs to be the “textbook” for this course. The readings will be available on reserve, as copies in class, or online from databases.

The main ingredients of the class (and of your grade) are watching the musicals, doing the reading, and coming to class prepared and ready to discuss. There will be short written assignments for most class meetings, some of them handed in, others posted on the course website. There will also be two short papers, and one longer paper on the musical of your choice. Grading:

attendance and participation: 20%
short homework assignments (reviews, bullet points, postings, etc.): 30%
short close reading paper: 15%
short close reading paper with sources: 15%
independent paper/presentation and related work: 20%
TOTAL: 100%

Syllabus

Week 1: Introduction to the “new” musical: romance, history, and parody

T 9/5 [assignments are due on the day they’re listed, so before Thursday’s class, do the work listed for Thursday]

Th 9/7 -- write bullet points describing a song from a musical

Week 2: *The Producers*, politics and comedy

T 9/12 -- watch *The Producers*, write a newspaper-style review

Th 9/14 -- read reviews of *The Producers* by Scott, *New York Times*; Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*; Puig, *USA Today*

Week 3: *The Producers*, critics and creators

T 9/19 -- read Brooks, “Springtime for the Music Man in Me,” and Rich, “Springtime for Adolf and Tony,” in *New York Times*; post a web response

Th 9/21 -- take close reading notes on one scene, include a thesis

Week 4: *Chicago*, questions of fame and talent

T 9/26 -- watch *Chicago*; post your informal review

Th 9/28 -- read selected reviews of *Chicago*; read excerpt from Muir, *Singing a New Tune*

Week 5: *Chicago*; reading musicals and reception history

T 10/3 -- bring a working draft of close reading paper

Th 10/5 -- short close reading paper DUE in class today

Week 6: *The Phantom of the Opera*, romance and sets

T 10/10 -- watch *The Phantom of the Opera*

Th 10/12 -- read selected reviews and articles about *Phantom*; write bullet points

Week 7: *Phantom*: horror, music, and the world of opera

T 10/17 -- write recurring musical themes list

Th 10/19 -- read musical analysis from Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*

Week 8: *Rent*, rock opera and social commentary

T 10/24 -- watch *Rent*; post your review online

Th 10/26 -- read selected reviews and articles about *Rent*

Week 9: *Rent* continued; analyzing with sources; begin independent projects

T 10/31 -- choose a musical for your independent project, write proposal, start research
-- work on medium paper, due the next time we meet

[Th 11/2 no class]

Week 10: *Rent* and politics

Th 11/9 -- medium paper DUE (on *Rent*, *The Producers*, or *The Phantom of the Opera*)

Week 11: *High School Musical*: the new musical, the new audience

T 11/14 -- watch *HSM*, post your review online

-- continuing homework assignment: work on your independent project

Th 11/16 -- read selected reviews of *HSM*

Week 12: *High School Musical*: political correctness vs. musical theater

T 11/21 -- thesis and annotated bibliography for your independent project DUE in class today

Week 13: *South Park*: shock, parody, and musical theater history

T 11/28 -- watch *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*; bring your review notes

Th 11/30 -- read selected articles and reviews of *South Park*; write bullet points

Week 14: *South Park* continued; Independent projects

T 12/5 -- work on your independent projects

Th 12/7 -- workshops and presentations on your independent projects

Week 15: Independent projects

T 12/12 -- workshops and presentations on your independent projects

Th 12/14 -- workshops and presentations on your independent projects

Depending on how many of you choose to present your independent projects and how many choose to write a research paper, we'll work together to decide a final due date for your work. The absolute last day to hand anything in will be Friday December 15th, the last day of classes this semester.