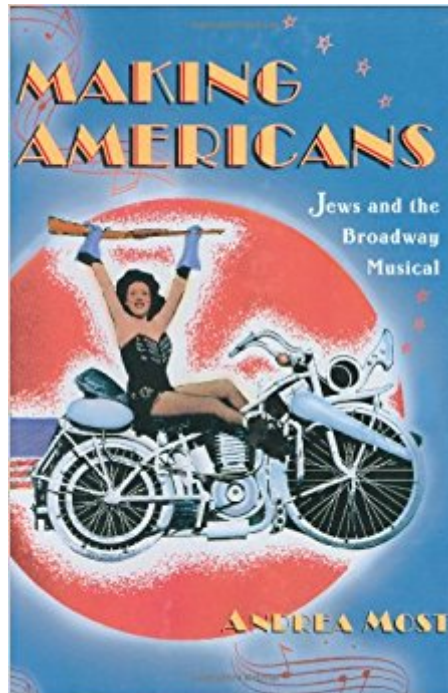




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Making Americans: Jews And The Broadway Musical



Synopsis

From 1925 to 1951--three chaotic decades of depression, war, and social upheaval--Jewish writers brought to the musical stage a powerfully appealing vision of America fashioned through song and dance. It was an optimistic, meritocratic, selectively inclusive America in which Jews could at once lose and find themselves--assimilation enacted onstage and off, as Andrea Most shows. This book examines two interwoven narratives crucial to an understanding of twentieth-century American culture: the stories of Jewish acculturation and of the development of the American musical. Here we delve into the work of the most influential artists of the genre during the years surrounding World War II--Irving Berlin, Eddie Cantor, Dorothy and Herbert Fields, George and Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein, Lorenz Hart, and Richard Rodgers--and encounter new interpretations of classics such as *The Jazz Singer*, *Whoopee*, *Girl Crazy*, *Babes in Arms*, *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*. Most's analysis reveals how these brilliant composers, librettists, and performers transformed the experience of New York Jews into the grand, even sacred acts of being American. Read in the context of memoirs, correspondence, production designs, photographs, and newspaper clippings, the Broadway musical clearly emerges as a form by which Jewish artists negotiated their entrance into secular American society. In this book we see how the communities these musicals invented and the anthems they popularized constructed a vision of America that fostered self-understanding as the nation became a global power.

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Customer Reviews

The Broadway musical is a unique American art form, and many of its creators and most famous practitioners were Jews. Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein and George and Ira Gershwin, among others, defined this illustrious medium. Most, a University of Toronto English professor, reveals how Jewish artists established a new sense of what it means to be Jewish in America and a new understanding of the meaning of America. She shows how one must appreciate the subtext behind classic songs and love stories: the assimilation of outsiders into a community and the utopian dream of America as a liberal meritocracy. Superbly conveying sociopolitical history between 1926 and 1951, Most notes how current events affected the American Jewish psyche. The succinct overview dovetails with her in-depth analysis of seminal classics such as *Girl Crazy*, *Babes in Arms*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma!* But the book is not an uncritical love letter. For example, Most honestly tackles the complex messages about race in *South Pacific*, comparing the words of "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," which promote racial harmony, with characters who are ethnic stereotypes. Of special note is her talent for interpreting lyrics, illuminating deeper significance in "Doin' What Comes Naturally" from *Annie Get Your Gun* and "She's So Fair" from *Babes in Arms*, reminding readers that language helps to construct identity. For lovers of musical comedy as well as those interested in the Jewish contribution to the cultural life of America, this well-researched effort is an invaluable read. Illus. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I think I argued with the author, Andrea Most, on just about every page of *Making Americans* and came away richer for the experience. What a stimulating book! (Sheldon Harnick, author of the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*) Andrea Most's book makes the case for the core of the American musical. She outlines and illustrates how specific images of difference are translated, flattened, and transformed to create an America in which the ethnic becomes American. What "becoming American" means--she shows with intelligence and panache--changes from the 1920s to the 1950s. And she illustrates this change with singular ability based on readings of the major musicals of the day. (Sander Gilman, author of *Jewish Frontiers* and *Jewish Self-Hatred*) *Making Americans* is a groundbreaking work that will redefine the study of America's most popular and distinctive form of theatre, the Broadway musical. Andrea Most brilliantly analyzes the cultural struggles taking place in and around the musical during its golden age and demonstrates its indispensability for any analysis of American culture. (David Savran, author of *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre*) It has been long understood that the classic musical is virtually a Jewish-American art form, and Most lays the historical and theoretical

foundations for this understanding with expert authority. (Stephen Banfield, author of *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*) Hands down, the most incisive and original analysis of American musical theater yet published. Who says brilliant writing can't be compulsively readable? Lovers of musicals won't want this book to end. Students will thank their teachers for assigning it. The entire landscape of American culture looks different through the lens of this book. No one who reads it will ever again dismiss the Broadway musical as trivial. (Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Specialist in American Musical Theatre, Brown University) For lovers of musical comedy as well as those interested in Jewish contributions to the cultural life of America, this well-researched effort is an invaluable read. (Publishers Weekly 2003-10-20) One of the major strengths of the book is that Most is an excellent social historian. Between her analyses of musicals, she deftly and economically chronicles an American living and changing from the Roaring Twenties to the Depression, World War II, and social upheavals of the post-war years. (Tom Tugend Jerusalem Post 2004-07-11) Andrea Most, in her perceptive new book *Making Americans*, answers the question of how Jewish immigrants and their sons created the iconic myths of an America they never intimately knew... Most examines the images and songs in such classics as *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Babes in Arms* and *South Pacific* to show how Jewish immigrants imagined America on the musical stage. Demonstrating how musicals shaped and were shaped by the shifting status of immigrants assimilating into a new culture, Most makes a case that the American musical was really a means by which the authors attempted to forge a new, accepting community... This book enlarges the perspective of anyone interested in the history of the American musical. (Wendy Wasserstein American Theatre 2004-07-01) Most makes original and coherent arguments... She's a shrewd and thoughtful writer with a cultural reach that easily bridges the distance from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Her not-to-be-missed footnotes are more engaging than the main texts of many academic writers on popular culture. She carefully braids together two interdependent events, the absorption of Jews into America and the rise of the musical as a celebration of democracy. Jews, while defining themselves in the new world, helped America define itself as an egalitarian democracy--precisely the kind of place Jews wanted to live. (Robert Fulford National Post 2004-08-03) Andrea Most has produced a fascinating book which uncovers how Jewish artists established a new sense of what it means to be Jewish in America... *Making Americans* looks at the period 1925 to 1951, concentrating on the stories of Jewish acculturation and the development of the American musical. (Jewish Telegraph 2004-10-15) As Andrea Most, points out in her lively history of the Jewish contribution to musicals, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway*, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein drew on the themes of Jewish exile to depict the evolution of

American culture in Oklahoma! According to Most, the message they conveyed was: 'Cowboys must settle down and become farmers; the frontier must be 'tamed' into a useful agricultural resource; young people must marry and bring up new Americans.' Together with others like Irving Berlin and George and Ira Gershwin, Rodgers and Hammerstein transformed the American musical from dancing chorus lines to something resembling European opera. (Alan Wolfe Chronicle of Higher Education 2005-06-03)

This is a thoughtful, provocative book about Jews assimilating into mainstream American culture, and what Broadway musicals (which were mostly written by Jews) say about that process. Most has some quirky theories I don't entirely agree with (I don't think the character of Judd in Oklahoma! is supposed to represent a Black man, for example) but she's always lively and fun to read. What she has to say about Eddie Cantor in the film Whoopee! and images of Jewish men and their sexuality, and what she says about the political content of the original version of Babes in Arms is really interesting.

If someone told me that this was the author's dissertation, I wouldn't be surprised. Even though there were some interesting points, this book was not easy to read. My book club all agreed on the above points. My copy previously was on a library shelf in Oregon, but pulled from the shelves (another book club member had a book from another library that he got from). What does this tell you???? I wouldn't recommend reading this book.

I really enjoyed it. It's not too dense or difficult. I imagine anyone interested in show music would be able to profit from the book. She really has a treasurehouse of new ideas about what the makers of Broadway musicals might have had in mind, subconsciously or otherwise. I had never really thought about BABES IN ARMS, for example, and the way she deconstructs the lyrics shows that somebody, somewhere was doing a bit of overdetermination considering the ostensibly slight plot of the show--and yet the lyrics insist that a "war" is going on. Professor Most writes clearly and firmly, and yet she is intuitive enough to gently squeeze the meanings out of the most opaque surfaces. I thought I knew OKLAHOMA, and yet I had never really looked at the way the main (white) characters are a bit smug when compared to the "racially different" characters like Ali Hakim, and yet how much Hakim and say Jud, and even Aunt Eller, yearn to be like the better integrated characters (Curley, Laurey, etc). It might be because the Jewish writers of the show were composing an elaborate allegory about assimilation and difference. ANNIE GET YOUR GUN I didn't

expect to find a chapter about. And yet, it makes perfect sense when you consider that Annie herself is a radical outsider, not even knowing how to read, knowing really only one thing (how to shoot), she's almost the "wild child" of legend. Her contrajuxtaposition vis a vis the native peoples ("I'm an Indian Too") for the first time doesn't seem racist, just makes sense. All in all, a book which will give you something new to think about on every page.

In "Making Americans", Andrea Most has crafted a fascinating, if flawed, treatise based on the premise that the Jewish influence on Broadway Musicals was also a major force in the creation of the American way of life in the 20th century. Since it is, first and foremost, an academic work, some of the flaws are inherent in the genre (e.g. a highly repetitive introduction; little of the "razzle-dazzle" that fans of the musical have come to expect from books on the subject; a selective use of sources to prove her point-and a bit of stretching at times to make the selection do its duty, etc.). While I find it difficult to subscribe to the totality of her argument, and have serious questions about whether a given interpretation of facts is, indeed, the most correct (or even intended) one the authors she discusses had in mind, I cannot fault her over-all premise as a POSSIBLE one. What sets the work apart, however, is NOT the whole, but the sum of its parts. Within the over-view, Most presents detailed examinations of a handful of theater works that often offer new insights to these works AS WORKS, whether or not one feels they ratify the over-riding concept. It is for these insights that I recommend the work to any lover of the Musical theater, regardless of race, creed, or religion.

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