

Class 4: Anti-Depressants

A. An Evening Out

1. Class title 1 (*Anything Goes*)

The photo shows a scene from today's featured work: *Anything Goes* by **Cole Porter** (1891–1964). I'll show one clip before the break and a large chunk of the first act after it. But my point now is that Porter wrote this in 1934, when America was still in the grip of the Great Depression. So my question now is: *How, if at all, did Broadway reflect the Depression?* The answer is: Not much; it largely tried to give people a break from worry—though a few shows that did acknowledge the political situation.

2. Section title A (*Follies*)

The picture is actually a revival at the National Theatre in London of **Stephen Sondheim's** *Follies* (1971), which is about the reunion of performers from a fictionalized version of the annual variety show, the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Sondheim fictionalized it as *Weisman's Follies*, but the slogan, "Glorifying the American Girl," is Ziegfeld's own.

3. Ziegfeld and his *Follies*

Florenz Ziegfeld II (1887–1932) was active as a producer even before the turn of the century, and continued to produce regular shows for the rest of his life—*Show Boat* was his. His idea for the *Follies* was based on the *Folies Bergère* in Paris, though his shows were less *risqué*. But the fact that he continued them annually from 1907 to 1931, showed that the public had an appetite for escapist entertainment. The *Follies* were not a response to the Stock Market Crash of 1929, but the fact that they continued for two years after, and had new versions in 1934 and 1936, showed that the public welcomed the distraction.

4. Stage and film posters

I can show you two clips. The longer one comes from the 1945 movie, with **Fred Astaire** introducing a parade of **Ziegfeld Girls**, including most of the stars in the MGM firmament. In Hollywood style of the period, it is way over-the-top. But you have to assume that the stage shows were over-the-top also; you can gather as much from this poster for the 1936 revival, after Ziegfeld's death. However, I do have a clip of a rehearsal for the 1931 show, with the real women going through a routine in ordinary clothes to piano accompaniment; it is a fascinating counterbalance to all that excess in the Hollywood version

5. *Ziegfeld Follies*, 1931, rehearsal clip

6. *Ziegfeld Follies* (movie 1945), "Bring on the beautiful girls"

B. Political Spoofs... and not so much

7. Section title B (*Of Thee I Sing*)

I want to move on now to two musicals that don't put their heads in the sand and pretend that life is not really happening. One of them, **Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing*** (1931)—you heard the song “Love is sweeping the country” in the background—is still intended as entertainment, but it is a satire on Washington incompetence and political maneuvering. The other, **Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*** (1937), is a very different kettle of fish, and its encounters with Washington were very real.

8. George and Ira Gershwin

The book for *Of Thee I Sing* was the work of playwright and director **George S. Kaufman**, working in collaboration with **Morrie Ryskind**. As with most of his shows, **George Gershwin** (1898–1937) collaborated with his elder brother **Ira Gershwin** (1896–1983), who wrote the lyrics; he was one of the wittiest wordsmiths in the business. The plot is entirely trivial. **John P. Wintergreen** (allegedly, the “P” stands for “peppermint”) is running for President. But he lacks a platform. So he asks his hotel chabernaïd what is most important to her. “Money,” she replies, “and Love.” So Wintergreen decides to run on the Love platform, and the song you've just heard, “Love is sweeping the country,” becomes his campaign song. His people organize a beauty pageant in Atlantic City, the winner of which will become the First Lady. But John falls for the quiet sensible pageant organizer, **Mary Turner**, instead of the actual winner, the vapid Southerner **Diana Deveraux**. I'll play you two clips from the 1972 CBS television production with **Carroll O'Connor** as Wintergreen and **Cloris Leachman** as Mary Turner. In the first of them, he proposes to her in a live rally at Madison Square Garden—but the whole thing is staged; they have held similar rallies in every other state on the way to New York!

9. Gershwin: *Of Thee I Sing*, Madison Square Garden

Wintergreen, now married to Mary, is elected in a landslide. But the beauty queen Diana Deveraux is not going to take this lying down. So there is a move in the Senate to impeach him. Diana comes in as the first witness, with her ballad “Jilted.” The man in the chair is the harmless but totally incompetent Vice-President **Horace Throttlebottom**. **Michele Lee** is Diana.

10. Gershwin: *Of Thee I Sing*, US Senate

11. Marc Blitzstein

Now let's get serious. **Marc Blitzstein** (1905–64) originally had no time for Broadway composers, whom he saw as prostituting their art to please the public. He was a *serious* composer, making the pilgrimage to Europe to study at the fountainhead of modernism, with **Arnold Schoenberg** and later **Nadia Boulanger**. While in Berlin, however, he met **Bertolt Brecht** and played for him a song he had written to a text by **Polly Jean Harvey**, “The nickel under the foot.” Learning that it was about a young woman forced into prostitution, Brecht urged him to write an entire opera addressing *all* kinds of exploitation; the result was the musical play *The Cradle Will Rock*. Here is the introduction to that song, sung by Blitzstein

himself, and then in a 1985 production featuring **Patti LuPone**. There is no doubt that this was musical theater, if not actually opera, responding to real life in the waning years of the Depression.

12. Blitzstein: “A nickel under the foot,” intro, sung by the composer

13. Blitzstein: “A nickel under the foot” (Patti LuPone)

14. Orson Welles, John Houseman, and poster for *The Cradle Will Rock*

The Cradle Will Rock was actually sponsored by the **Works Progress Administration**, and was scheduled to premiere in 1938, as this poster advertises. But the money was tight, and if something had to go, it was bound to be a play about labor unions, coming dangerously close to communism. Only hours before the scheduled opening, Federal agents seized the scenery and costumes and shuttered the theater. But nothing daunted, producer **John Houseman** and director **Orson Welles** found an alternate theater 25 blocks uptown, met the audience outside the original venue, and led them on a march towards Harlem, where the work was presented without orchestra, without decor, and the performers all singing from the auditorium to avoid union rules that would have prevented them from stepping onstage.

15. Poster for *Cradle Will Rock* (Tim Robbins, 1999)

In 1999, **Tim Robbins** made a film about that premiere and similar cases of censorship. So you will see his reconstruction of the opening, intercut with scenes of fat cats at the Met Museum costume ball, and the destruction of some leftist murals painted by **Diego Rivera** for the Rockefeller Center in NYC.

16. *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), scenes of the Blitzstein premiere

C. Anatomy of a Number

17. Section title C (De-Lovely)

The image is a poster for a bio-pic about **Cole Porter** (1891–1964). The music is a band version of his song “It’s de-lovely.” Although he originally wrote it for a different musical—it was the big hit of *Red, Hot and Blue* in 1936—it was added to the 1962 revival *Anything Goes* and remains there in the 2021 London revival that I am going to show. The very fact that you can slot numbers in and out like this says something about the way musicals of that date were constructed.

18. Hope and Reno

There are two leading ladies in the show. The *ingenue*, **Hope Harcourt (Nicole-Lily Baisden)**, is a rich débutante who is crossing the Atlantic on the SS American to marry an English Lord. But the principal role by far is **Reno Sweeney (Sutton Foster)**, who is—utterly improbably—an evangelist turned nightclub singer. Both are in love with **Billy Crocker (Samuel Edwards)**, but Reno has the maturity to realize that though they are old friends, Billy really loves Hope, not her. When Billy enters, he is in one of his frequent disguises, because the crew believe him to be **Snake Eyes Johnson**, the notorious gangster.

19. — the above, with questions

So here's what I want you to listen for. How does the dialogue set up the number? How does the number become a duet? What is the relationship between verse and chorus? How much depends on the words—and do these need to be *real* words? How many different moods are there in the dance break? What is the effect of the other dancers? And how does the number end?

20. Porter: "It's De-Lovely"

21. — still from the above, with questions

So let's discuss. There's one question I didn't ask: what would you call this, comic or romantic? And if it is a bit of both, how does the balance work? There is one further question, which you won't be able to answer until after the break, but I'll pose it now: How does it fit with the other numbers in the act?

22. Class title 2 ("It's de-lovely")

D. Let's Go to the Show!

23. Section title D (DVD cover)

I am now going to give you the principal numbers in Act I of *Anything Goes*, in the 2021 revival at the Barbican Theatre in London, choreographed and directed by **Kathleen Marshall**. I wish I could play the whole act, but that is impossible. But in fact I am leaving out only two minor numbers, plus "It's De-Lovely," which I have already played. The main thing I am cutting almost completely is dialogue. Most shows start off with a musical number to get things going, but this begins with a set-up scene consisting of 3 minutes of dialogue before we get the first song. Indeed, timed out minute for minute, this act has 40 minutes of music plus 41 of dialogue. But it is a complicated farce plot, written originally by **Guy Bolton** and **P. G. Wodehouse**, and needs a lot of exposition get a handle on the various characters. Anyway, let's cut to the end of this opening scene, set in a bar in Manhattan, to where **Reno** comes in and tells **Billy** how he affects her in the first of the show's hit songs, "I get a kick out of you." It's a good tune, but the words—as with all Cole Porter lyrics—are something else again.

24. Porter: *Anything Goes*, "I get a kick out of you"

25. Main set for *Anything Goes*

The second scene is place where anything by Offenbach, Gilbert and Sullivan, or most of their followers would begin: an ensemble scene introducing the milieu where all the rest of the action will take place: on board the SS American. The whole scene is over 11 minutes, but 8½ minutes in the middle is dialogue, as all the characters come aboard and the various plot points are established. I am playing just the opening and closing choruses. The first, "There's no cure like travel," was written for the original show, then cut. This production restores that opening and ends with the song that *was* written—"Bon voyage," a wonderful play on American pronunciation of Fench words—and then a reprise of "There's

no cure like travel” in a cha-cha rhythm. I don’t know if this variant is by Kern himself, or the arranger for this particular production.

26. Porter: *Anything Goes*, “There’s no cure like travel” / “Bon voyage!”

27. “You’re the top” epithets

The next number in this production (it moved around in different revivals) is a quintessential example of a Porter speciality: the list song. It has a good tune, but its main attraction is the brilliant epithets Porter thinks up as comparisons—all part of contemporary culture, but wonderfully unexpected in the way he puts them together. It is sung by Reno as a way of bucking up Billy’s confidence to go after Hope.

28. Porter: *Anything Goes*, “You’re the top!”

29. — still from the above

The next number in this production is a duet for Billy and Hope, “You’d be so easy to love.” It has a history, which I’ll tell you about in a moment, but first I want you to hear it, and compare it to the duet you have already heard, “It’s de-lovely”:

30. Porter: *Anything Goes*, “You’d be so easy to love”

31. — still from the above

Same question I asked of “It’s de-lovely”: Is it romantic or comic? It has some comic lines like “*So sweet to waken with | So nice to sit down to eggs and bacon with,*” but on the whole I would say romantic. Here’s the interesting thing: Porter wrote it for the 1934 show, but cut it in rehearsals. He used later for a movie in 1936, but it was not reinstated into *Anything Goes* until the 2011 Broadway production upon which this London revival is based. It would certainly be unusual to have two duets for the same couple in the same act—but take out “So easy to love,” and you would have nothing romantic in the act at all. There are a couple of short numbers in Act Two, solos for Hope and Billy respectively, but Porter is known more for getting it on than for lingering. I don’t know if this reflects Porter’s own strengths or simply the taste of the time. Without this duet, however, the idea of Hope and Billy being in love would simply be another fact you are given; with this duet, you *feel* it.

32. Robert Lindsay and Sutton Foster

Billy, like Hope, is the *ingenue* in the show; the male headliner is the gangster **Moonface Martin**, Public Enemy #13, who is traveling in disguise as a pastor. He is played in this production by the great English character actor **Robert Lindsay**. And of course there has to be a comic duet in which he teams up with his female equivalent, Reno Sweeney. This was also written for another show and only included in *Anything Goes* in revivals. beginning in 1962. Its place in the original was taken by “You’re the top.” Again we get clever images that are deliberately over the top, and made-up words like “blendship” to rhyme with “friendship.” But the main idea is that every verse ends up with a line or two of scat singing, with nonsense syllables. This leads to an interesting device in this production. In the original version, after singing to each other, the two turn to the audience on the last line and sing “Hello, friends!” In this version, Moonface and Reno disagree on the words of the last scat section, and the brief moment of them breaking the fourth wall is extended into a marvelous bit! Watch.

33. Porter: *Anything Goes*, “Friendship”

34. Words for “Anything Goes”

The act finale also includes quite a bit of dialogue. The Captain, still believing that Billy is Snake Eyes Johnson, has him arrested. But the passengers are complaining there are no celebrities on board, so instead of putting Billy in jail, he makes him the guest of honor on the ship—along with Moonface Martin, who says he is a Public Enemy too. I mean, not even Cunard can boast of having *two* notorious gangsters on board! The moral reversal of this is the admittedly flimsy cue for the title song, “Anything goes.” It is another list song with a neat skewering of contemporary behavior. But there is nothing flimsy about the huge production number that brings down the curtain.

35. Porter: *Anything Goes*, dialogue before Act I finale

36. Porter: *Anything Goes*, Act I finale, music

37. Class title 3 (still from the above)