

Class 8: Middle America

A. Work for a Living

1. Class title 1 (Larry Cook as *The Music Man*)
2. Section title A (Hasler's office)
3. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (movie 1957), credit sequence

That was the credit sequence of the 1957 movie of the 1954 musical *The Pajama Game* by **Richard Adler** (1921–2012) and **Jerry Ross** (1926–55), both collaborating on both words *and* music. I would rather not use a film, but it is the only complete performance available on video, although there are numerous high-school productions. However, it was made with almost all the Broadway cast, with the exception of the established film star **Doris Day** in the leading role and one other character, so it is as authentic as we are going to get. On the stage, the show opens with the character we heard, the factory's time-study man, **Vernon Hines (Eddie Foy, Jr)**, introducing the show by coming through the curtain, which then opens to reveal the sewing room. The opening shots of the film, however, are altogether more realistic, and undercut the quality of make-believe you would have got onstage.

4. Posters of today's shows

This matters, because one of the qualities we are tracking in this course, as you know, is realism. But I don't mean the visual realism of the settings, so much as the fact that the three shows shown here are set where ordinary people live and work. I am featuring *The Pajama Game* and *The Music Man* because both are set in Iowa towns. I am throwing in a clip from *How to Succeed in Business* because, like *The Pajama Game*, it acknowledges that most people go to work in some aspect of Corporate America. In my opinion, this kind of realism works best if you accept the theatrical context that contains it.

5. John Raitt as Sid Sorokin in *The Pajama Game* (film 1957)

That opening sequences showed the male lead **Sid Sirokin (John Raitt)** arriving at the factory to take up the job of Supervisor. He is handsome, as you see, and immediately attracts the interest of the women on the shop floor. Including **Babe Williams (Doris Day)**, the Chair of the Grievance Committee, who is called in to adjudicate a claim by one of the men that Sirokin assaulted him. She realizes pretty soon that the charge is groundless, and comes with her committee to Sid's office to tell her so. The others leave, but Sid asks Babe to stay behind. Listen to this dialogue and the musical number that follows it, then let's talk about the different kinds of realism you do or do not see.

6. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (movie 1957), "Hey there"
7. — still from the above ("So this is real?")

So this is real? Well, obviously not. The speed with which the romance develops between Sid and Babe is a pure Broadway fabrication, and the duet with the Dictaphone is off the wall. And yet, this is a show that acknowledges that people work in offices and use (or used to use) Dictaphones. And I found the

dialogue in which Sid comes on to Babe quite embarrassing, which is reality of another kind—a more important kind.

8. *The Pajama Game* (movie 1957), union meeting

Babe is not only chair of the grievance committee, she is an ardent supporter of the union, which puts her on a different side from Sid, who is management. The workers are demanding a raise 7½ cents per hour, and when the factory owner **Myron Hasler** brushes them off once too often, they stage a slowdown. Sid catches Babe sabotaging a machine and is forced to fire her. All realistic enough; what is not so realistic is his assumption that this needn't affect their relationship. But he works to help the workers anyway; looking into the books, he sees that Hasler wrote the 7½c into the accounts months ago, and has been pocketing the profits. So he blackmails Hasler with this knowledge and wins the raise. Here is the penultimate number. It is all fanciful, of course, but it deals with a real contemporary issue.

9. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (movie 1957), “7½ Cents”

B. Up the Corporate Ladder

9. Section title B (poster for *How to Succeed in Business*)

I'll return to *The Pajama Game* to play some numbers for their music rather than their subject. But before I do, I want to glance at a slightly later musical that makes Corporate America its main subject. *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* was a satirical book by **Shepherd Mead**, published in 1952. Nine years later, **Frank Loesser** (1910–69) wrote both the music and lyrics for the Broadway musical that opened in 1961. It is the story of a young man called **J. Pierrepont Finch** who rises from window-washer to CEO of the World Wide Wicket Company. Both the Broadway show and the 1967 movie starred **Robert Morse** as Finch—an actor I find rather weird in much the way I find **Jerry Lewis** weird. I'll play one song from the film, in which Morse appears with **Sammy Smith** as an old mailroom clerk who always follows “The Company Way.” Then, to take a break from all these movies, I will turn to **Daniel Radcliffe** and the cast of the 2011 Broadway revival for their presentation of the final number, “The Brotherhood of Man,” at the Tonys.

10. Loesser: *How to Succeed in Business* (movie 1957), “The Company Way”

11. Loesser: *How to Succeed in Business* (2011 revival), “The Brotherhood of Man”

C. Off Track and On

12. Section title C (Doris Day album cover)

I don't actually think that *The Pajama Game* is a very good musical. Oh, it has some terrific tunes. One of my friends at boarding school had the LP, and many of the numbers became so much a part of my personal soundtrack that I can still sing them today. But less than a quarter of those numbers actually advance the story; the rest are thrust in on the flimsiest of pretexts. Hence my title: this is a show where individual tracks are wonderful, but few of those tracks are actually *on track* to developing the story. I mentioned the issue last week in connection with Act Two of *Kiss Me, Kate* (and the second act of just about any other musical of the period you could mention). But *Pajama Game* has no-pretext numbers in Act One as well. For instance, "There once was a man," the sparkling duet between Babe and Sid after they have declared their love. They don't need one; "Small talk" does the job very nicely, and that is one of the few numbers that do actually advance the action through music. But this second duet is so infectiously upbeat, who could ever cut it? Plus those marvelous suggestions of yodeling in the delivery. Let's look at a stage performance this time: **Harry Connick Jr.** and **Kelli O'Hara** in the 2006 revival.

13. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (2006 revival), "There once was a man"

14. *The Pajama Game* (movie 1957), union meeting (repeat)

["There once was a man," incidentally, is not by Adler and Ross, but the uncredited work of their mentor, **Frank Loesser**.] The shot of the Union meeting I put up before comes just before the floor show begins. A floor show at a union meeting? Preposterous, I know. The song, "Steam Heat" is supposed to get the workers warmed up before they vote on action. But it is really there to give the dance-lead, **Gladys (Carol Haney)**, a major number, and it shows the choreography of **Bob Fosse** (1927–87) at its best—you will remember that he choreographed his own duet with Haney in the movie of *Kiss Me, Kate*. I am not sure if the gender-bending aspect was new at the time; she certainly does it marvelously.

15. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (movie 1957), "Steam Heat"

16. *The Pajama Game* (2006 revival), "Hernando's Hideaway"

Gladys gets another big number near the end of the show, perhaps the most famous of all, "Hernando's Hideaway." Sid is trying to vamp her into giving him the key to Hasler's account ledger, but *she* is enticing *him* into a date at a dive that I really doubt you'd find in Iowa in the fifties. But it is one of the best tangos I know, and leads to some wonderful special effects. Rather than showing Carol Haney again in the movie, let's return to the 2006 revival. **Megan Lawrence** milks Gladys for all she is worth, and **Harry Connick** plays the onstage piano once they get to the club, improvising each night within the general outlines of the Adler and Ross score. It is an eight-minute scene, and I'll put it complete on the website, but for now I am stringing together separate clips of the opening and ending. The choreographer is **Kathleen Marshall**, whose work we last saw in *Anything Goes*.

17. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (2006 revival), "Hernando's Hideaway" opening

18. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (2006 revival), "Hernando's Hideaway" ending

19. *The Pajama Game* (2006 revival), "This is my once-a-year day"

Finally, the big production number of Act One, the annual company picnic at a local park, and the catchy number “This is my once-a-year day.” It is not entirely unmotivated, and it advances the plot in at least one respect, for it is here that Babe finally responds to Sid. But what I like most about it is that it shows **the ordinary people of a Middle American town** having a day out at a local park. Taken out of the context of the factory, the sense of community is palpable, very much as in the park scene in *The Music Man*, which is surely a tribute to this. But that’s my subject for after the break.

20. Adler and Ross: *The Pajama Game* (movie 1957), “Once-a-year Day”

21. Class title 2 (still from the above)

D. Three Keys to Success

22. Section title D (chorus of 2023 revival)

When I was planning this course, I thought that in splitting the time between *The Pajama Game* and *The Music Man*, I would be dealing with equals. I love the music of both shows. But I discovered while working on it that, by my standards, *The Pajama Game* is not a very good musical. Conversely, watching the movie again after 20 years or so, I came to realize that *The Music Man* (1957)—with book, lyrics, and music by **Meredith Willson** (1902–84)—is not only a very good musical indeed, it may even be the perfect musical.

23. Opening train scene, with questions

I’m quite prepared to back up these assertions, but I would rather you watched a bit to make up your own minds. Although I had expected to juggle between the two different film versions and various revivals on the stage—including the 2023 Broadway version with Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster—I am going to stick entirely to the 1962 movie featuring the original star, **Robert Preston**. Although it has become iconic as a film, it is remarkably faithful to the original stage version. I will play most of the opening sequence. It begins with a scene on a train filled with traveling salesmen, most of whom we will not see again; the number is called **Rock Island**. The title character **Harold Hill**, a salesman of musical instruments and band uniforms, gets off on impulse at **River City, Iowa**, and meets some of the inhabitants; the number that eventually develops is called **Iowa Proud**. I’m cutting the dialogue in which he meets Marcellus, an old associate, and ponders a scheme to con the townsfolk of their money. Then I’ll pick it up with the big number, **Trouble in River City**. As you watch, I want you to consider three questions: How do the musical numbers advance the story? What picture do they build up of context and character? And How do they emerge from the dialogue?

24. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), opening

25. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), “Trouble in River City”

26. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), Harold and children, with question 1

Let’s break down those questions one by one. How do the musical numbers advance the story? Think of how much we have learned in just these three numbers. That Harold Hill is a salesman in musical

equipment, but that he is a con man, unable to play any instrument himself, or even to read music. And that once he gets an idea of how to work up a crowd, he can go to it with an inexhaustible flood of patter and invention. And all this happens *through* the music; this is not just a spoken play with music added. In the second act of *The Pajama Game*, and much of the first, I talked about no-pretext numbers like “Steam Heat” and “Hernando’s Hideway.” I counted through the 20 separate numbers in *The Music Man* and came across only one that I consider no-pretext; I’ll show you in a moment.

27. Grant Wood: *Stone City, Iowa* (1930, Omaha), with question 2

So to my second question: What picture do the numbers build up of context and character? One reason that I am fascinated by the first number is that this is an fraternity I know nothing whatsoever about: American commerce brought down to the level of traveling salemen, with their own camaradie and their own language. Then the second scene takes us into another closed world: the people of River City, Iowa, a **Grant Wood** vision of another place and time (1912), what Willson called “a loving Valentine to my home state.” As you go on through the show, whether on the stage, on screen, or on record, you will find a gallery of characters that are often funny, but never mean. And these add up to a truly loving portrait of community and place. More on that in a moment also.

28. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), with question 3

29. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), with audio

Finally How do they emerge from the dialogue? This may be the most important of all. Let me play a minute or so of the sound-track. Did you hear what I’m getting at? Each of the first three numbers (and many others) begins with regular dialogue, then a slight switch to a voiced delivery, then the addition of a rhythm, the entrance of the orchestra, and eventually a full-blown number. None of these three are great tunes in the way that “Seventy-Six Trombones” is a great tune. But I have heard musical numbers emerge so smoothly out of speech in only one musical since: *Hamilton*, where the transition between **spoken rap** and a sung number is virtually imperceptible. And here is Willson writing the equivalent of rap long before it was a genre.

E. With Keys in Hand

30. Section title E (images from all three earlier slides)

We have talked enough. In the last half hour, I want to give you examples from later in the show of how Willson puts each of these three keys into practice. For convenience, I am summarizing them as AMBIENCE, MOMENTUM, and the TALK/MUSIC relationship.

31. Subtitle: Ambience

The Middle American ambience is everywhere so present that I hardly need to illustrate it further. But there is one short number that also shows one of Willson’s favorite devices: to write two tunes that are introduced separately but can then be combined together. So when Harold asks the ladies a question

about the librarian **Marian Paroo**, their disapproving gossip sounds just like clucking chickens. But I don't think it is malicious on Willson's part, just another facet of his Valentine. Then the four members of the **School Board** come up to demand his qualifications. But Hill has already defanged them by proving that they are really a **barbershop quartet** who didn't know it. So all he has to do is launch into the traditional tune "Goodnight, Ladies," and lo and behold the two songs go together! [The film, incidentally, adds a visual analogy that could never be done on the stage.]

32. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), "Pick-a-little, talk-a-little"

33. Subtitle: Momentum

Willson places a high importance on maintaining the momentum of the plot. As I said, I could only find one no-pretext number in the entire score: the dance number "Shipooi" in Act Two. Here's the lead in; were it not such an infectious piece, you could easily do without it.

34. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), "Shipooi" opening

There is now about 4 minutes of dancing, but I have a longer dance number coming up. But I wanted to touch on this as a parallel to the "Once-a-year Day" number in *The Pajama Game*, which is also a dance in a municipal park. Set this against "Marian the Librarian," the big and quite unexpected dance number in Act One. Harold realizes that Marian, as the local piano teacher and an independent thinker, is his biggest danger in the town, so he mounts a campaign to get around her. This takes him to the town library. By contrast with "Shipooi"—or frankly most other numbers in most other musicals of the period—this is absolutely about advancing the plot, first in dialogue and then in music. And note how not only does Willson's music emerge from dialogue, as before, but the dancing sneaks in there too, before you even know it! The choreographer is **Onna White** (1922–2005), a Canadian.

35. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), library scene

36. Subtitle: Talk/Music

This might seem fanciful, but there is another reason why I think Willson's technique of having music grow out of verbal patter is so important. What is the whole theme of the play? That a con man with Pied Piper charisma and a brilliant imagination can come into a community and, whether the actual product he is selling is real or not, make real changes to the spirit of the town, bringing pride to the children and warmth to the cold community. When the band performs at the end, they are abysmally bad. But the parents are proud of the achievement of their kids, and that is every bit as real to them as if the 76 trombones had really come marching out of the school in full uniform. The stage musical leaves it there, but the film director has another trick up his sleeve. In front of their eyes, the marching band suddenly becomes real—as real as it is in their imagination. **Meredith Willson's own "think system," his ability to conjure music out of ideas, is more than a technique—it is the entire musical.** [In French, Spanish, and Italian, incidentally, the film is marketed as *The Seller of Illusions*.]

37. Willson: *The Music Man* (1962 movie), trial scene and ending

38. Class title 3 ("Only Imagine")