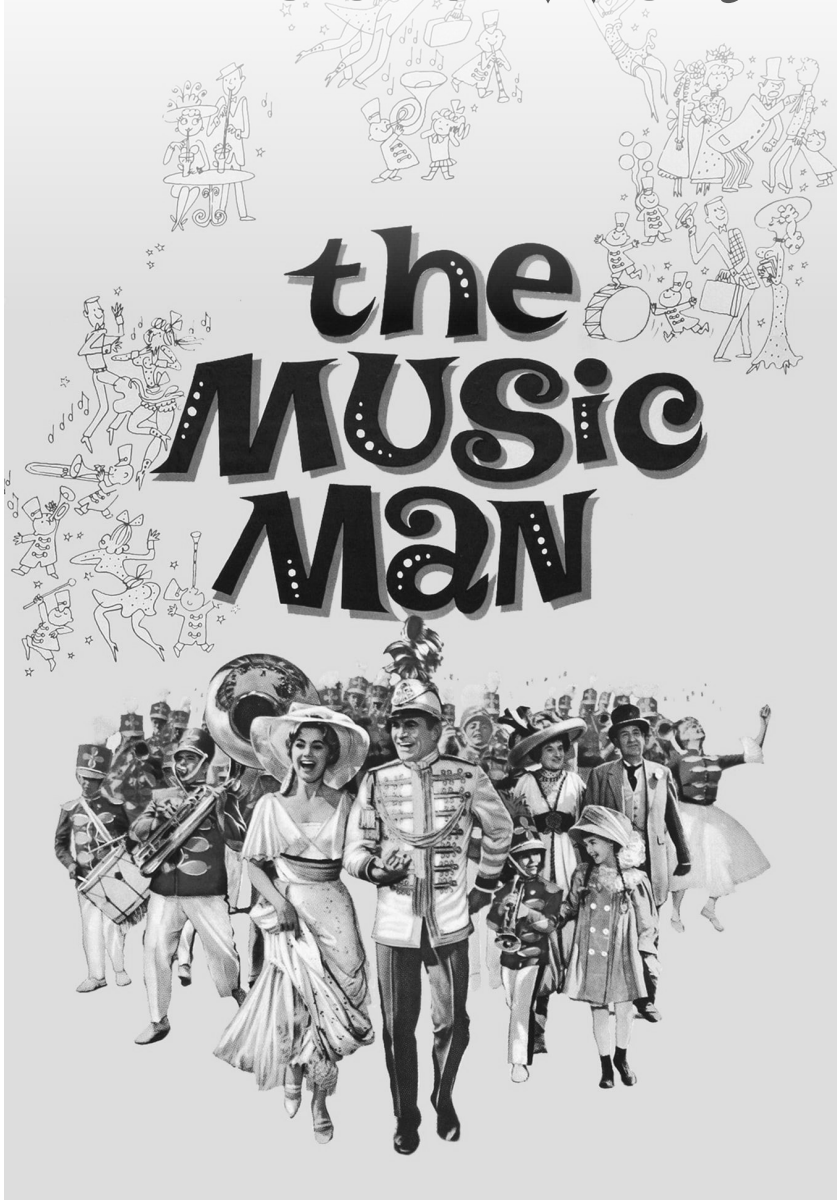


The Birth of Broadway



8. Middle America

April 8, 2025

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AS WE HAVE SEEN SO FAR, the European operetta tradition reveled in exotic environments that few could experience in real life. Some later American writers responded with urban settings that were all too real to many, but equally unknown for audiences who could afford a Broadway ticket. Then in the Fifties came along two shows that found charm in Iowa settings featuring middle-class Americans in Middle American towns. And both centered on the American preoccupation with business. *The Pajama Game* (1954), by **Richard Adler** and **Jerry Ross**, is set in a world of efficiency experts and worker's unions, and is surely the only musical to include a duet with a Dictaphone. *The Music Man* (1957), with book, music, and lyrics by **Meredith Willson**, opens with a bunch of traveling salesmen arguing in a railroad car, and the title character is a pitchman extraordinaire with a winning charm. *rb.*

A. Work for a Living

The Pajama Game is set in a midwestern garment factory. **Sid Sirokin**, the new supervisor, is immediately attracted to **Babe Williams**, chair of the workers' Grievance Committee. But she is also a staunch union member, and the union is agitating for a 7½ cent hourly raise that the owner, **Myron Hasler**, refuses to give. How can Sid maintain his relationship when he and Babe belong on opposite sides?

Adler & Ross: *The Pajama Game*, film 1957, credit sequence
(George Abbott & Stanley Donen, *directors*)

Adler & Ross: *The Pajama Game*, film 1957, "Hey There" (Doris Day, *Babe*; John Raitt, *Sid*)

Adler & Ross: *The Pajama Game*, film 1957, "7½ Cents" (Jack Straw, *Prez*; Doris Day, *Babe*)

B. Up the Corporate Ladder

As punctuation in our survey of *The Pajama Game*, we take a brief glance at a later show about American Business, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961), by **Frank Loesser**. Based on a satirical book by **Shepherd Mead**, it tells of the meteoric rise of **J. Pierrepont Finch** from window-washer to CEO.

Loesser: *How to Succeed...*, “The Company Way” (film 1957; David Swift, *director*; Robert Morse, *Finch*; Sammy Smith, *Twimble*)

Loesser: *How to Succeed...*, “The Brotherhood of Man” (Broadway 2011; Daniel Radcliffe, *Finch*)

C. Off Track and On

Many (even most) of the numbers in *The Pajama Game* have little to do with business and do not advance the plot. Yet these no-pretext insertions are often terrific tunes. We hear four of them.

Loesser (sic): *The Pajama Game*, “There once was a man” (Broadway 2006, Kelli O’Hara and Harry Connick Jr.)

Adler & Ross: *The Pajama Game*, “Steam Heat” (film 1957; Carol Haney, *Gladys*; Bob Fosse, *choreographer*)

Adler & Ross: *The Pajama Game*, “Hernando’s Hideaway” (B’way 2006; Megan Lawrence, *Gladys*; Kathleen Marshall, *choreographer*)

Adler & Ross: *The Pajama Game*, “Once-a-Year Day” (film 1957)

D. Three Keys to Success

The Music Man tells the story of a con man who, working under the assumed name of **Harold Hill**, comes to the fictional community of River City, Iowa, to sell instruments and uniforms to build the town’s boys into a band—even though he does not know music. The greatest threat to his scheme is the local librarian, **Marian Paroo**, who teaches piano in her spare time and knows how to check facts, so Hill must find

ways to neutralize her. But their relationship develops in ways that surprise them both.

We look at the first 15 minutes of the iconic 1962 film to discuss what elements of Willson’s treatment give the work its characteristic style and make the show such an outstanding success.

Willson: *The Music Man*, “Rock Island,” “Iowa Proud,” and “Y’all Got Trouble in River City” (film 1962, Morton DaCosta, *director*; Robert Preston, *Harold Hill*)

E. With Keys in Hand

Finally, we look at various later numbers from *The Music Man* movie to see how the three keys mentioned above work in practice.

Willson: *The Music Man*, “Pick-a-little, talk-a-little” (film 1962)

Willson: *The Music Man*, “Shipooopi,” opening (film 1962; Buddy Hackett, *Marcellus*; Onna White, *choreographer*)

Willson: *The Music Man*, “Marian the Librarian,” (film 1962; Shirley Jones, *Marian*; Robert Preston, *Harold*)

Willson: *The Music Man* (film 1962), closing sequence

Richard **Adler** (1921–2012, *American writer and composer*), Bob **Fosse** (1927–87, *American choreographer*), Frank **Loesser** (1910–69, *American writer and composer*), Kathleen **Marshall** (1962–, *American director and choreographer*), Jerry **Ross** (1926–55, *American writer and composer*), Onna **White** (1922–2005, *Canadian choreographer*), Meredith **Willson** (1902–84, *American writer and composer*)

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