

Class 11: Musical Alchemy

A. Under the Shadow

1. Class title 1 (Tevye)
2. Section title A (darkening map of Europe)
3. Three posters (*The Sound of Music*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*)

I originally intended to divide this class more or less equally between these three musicals, from 1959 to 1966, all with iconic movies made between 1965 and 1972. All are beloved works of entertainment, yet all come up against the grim reality of the persecution of Jews in Europe in the first half of the 20th Century. How is this possible? What kind of musical alchemy can approach such darkness and yet keep an audience entertained? This is still my theme, but in working on it I came to realize that *The Sound of Music* is not in the same category as the other two. So I will play one scene from it, then move on.

4. Facts about *The Sound of Music*

The Sound of Music, the last collaboration of **Richard Rodgers** (1902–79) and **Oscar Hammerstein II** (1895–1960), based on the memoirs of **Maria von Trapp**, takes us right up to the *Anschluss*, or Nazi takeover of Austria in 1938. Maria’s husband, Captain von Trapp, is a former naval officer, and can thus be compelled to serve in the navy of the Greater *Reich*. But the Trapps have formed a singing group, and their manager Max, who has started a folksong festival in Salzburg, thinks he can use the occasion as a means to let them escape. Two of the three songs they perform at the festival are things we have heard before, but the folksong (entirely composed by Rodgers) is new; why do you think it is included?

5. *The Sound of Music*, Salzburg performance
6. Facts about *Cabaret*

So what about that folksong? Clearly, the Captain is trying to appeal to Austrian national sentiment before their identity is erased. Singing the song is clearly a subversive act, but it goes down well, and the Nazis are not yet in a position to do anything much about it. It is interesting because a similar innocent-sounding folksong (also newly composed) plays an important role in the 1966 musical *Cabaret*, by **John Kander** and **Fred Ebb**. We needn’t go into the full context right now; all that is important is to know that the setting is Weimar-Republic Germany, just before the rise of the Nazis to power, and we are in a beer garden outside Berlin. If you know this already—and I imagine that most of you do—cast your mind back to what you felt the first time you heard it. The film was directed by **Bob Fosse** in 1972.

7. *Cabaret*, beer garden scene
8. Stills from both shows

The first time you heard it, did you find this transformation as chilling as I did? Does it still have that effect on you now? I think you can probably see why I put the two shows together. But I hope you can

also see why I decided to drop *The Sound of Music* as a featured work. In *Cabaret*, the transformation of the German crowd from a healthy nature-loving people to committed Nazis can be seen before your eyes; more than that, it can be *heard, as it takes place in music*. The Nazi threat in *The Sound of Music* is external; it has been grafted on to what is basically a Cinderella romance and is barely expressed in music at all. Worse, it plays fast and loose with the real history to provide a dramatic ending—everybody knows that escape over the mountains. But while it is true that the real Captain von Trapp left the country with his family rather than serve the Third Reich, they simply took the train into Italy. Also, the *Anschluss* did not interrupt his honeymoon; he and Maria had been married for ten years.

B. Species of Sleaze

9. Section title B (*Cabaret* posters)

If you remember, the subtitle of this course is “European Fantasy to American Realism.” The range could hardly be better illustrated than in the gulf between *The Sound of Music* and *Cabaret*. *The Sound of Music* is about as close to an operetta as you could get in the postwar age. It is packed with glamor, and might even serve as an ad for Austrian tourism. [Actually, Austrians rejected the movie as a false depiction of Austrian life, until they discovered that Maria was bringing twice the number of visitors to Salzburg as Mozart did!] *Cabaret*, on the other hand, is anything but pretty; I have deliberately chosen six of the grittier posters for the show or the movie, but they are not hard to find.

10. *Die Dreigroschenoper*, 1927

Berlin in the Weimar era—that is the administration that was in power from the end of WW1 to the election of Adolf Hitler—was renowned for vast discrepancies between wealth and extreme poverty, its cabarets for those that could afford them, and its relaxation of traditional moral values. This was the milieu explored in the 1920s by **Bertolt Brecht** and **Kurt Weill** in *The Threepenny Opera*, and *Cabaret* composer John Kander wanted to achieve something like the Weill sound; they even gave Weill’s widow **Lotte Lenya** a part in the production. Although the original book *Goodbye to Berlin* by the English writer **Christopher Isherwood** (1904–86) takes place as much outside the cabaret as in it, it was the genius of choreographer **Jerome Robbins** (1918–98) to convince the writers **John Kander** (1927–), **Fred Ebb** (1928–2004), and **Joe Masteroff** (1919–2018) to use the Kit-Kat Club as the axis around which the whole show revolves. You see this clearly in the opening, whose soundtrack I have just played; on the stage, the 1972 movie by **Bob Fosse** (1927–87), however, intercuts the scenes for the **Emcee** (**Joel Grey**) with the arrival in Berlin of the Isherwood character, **Brian Roberts**, played by **Michael York**.

11. *Cabaret* (movie), opening

12. — still from the above

Note that distorting mirror behind the Emcee; when we see it again at the end of the show, it will reflect an audience in Nazi uniforms and armbands. The journey from one to the other is the trajectory of the whole show, but we have already seen it encapsulated in the beer-garden scene.

13. Otto Dix: *Metropolis* (1928, Stuttgart) central panel

The sleazy cabaret is absolutely right for Weimar-era Berlin. I call this section “*Species of Sleaze*,” for there is a paradox here. The sleaze of the cabaret milieu is not itself a symptom of Nazi evil, but almost its opposite; it is the cesspool the Nazis promised to clean up (and largely did). The fresh natural images evoked by the teenage singer in “Tomorrow belongs to me” is its polar opposite. And yet by some trick of musical alchemy that I don’t claim to understand, the authors of *Cabaret* manage to use it also as a symptom of the gathering Nazi evil that would burst out infinitely worse half-a-dozen years later.

14. Original stage and movie posters

These are the original Broadway and movie posters. Knowing the show as we know it now, it is hard to fathom why they originally advertised it in such a madcap night-on-the-town kind of way. But I show them because there is a more fundamental difference between movie and stage with *Cabaret* than with any other show in this course. The original stage production alternated commentary scenes in the cabaret with book scenes set in the outside world. Any music in in cabaret setting is performed in a realistic context; those in other settings, however, follow the normal convention of allowing the characters to express their feelings in song. When it came to making the movie, however, Fosse went all the way, removing all songs from the book-musical scenes, and many of the characters that sang them, but adding some extra numbers in the cabaret itself. “Tomorrow belongs to me” is the only non-cabaret scene to contain music, but that too is naturalistic since there is a small orchestra in the beer garden.

15. Alan Cumming in *Cabaret* (Sam Mendes production, 1993–)

Most of you, I would imagine, are pretty familiar with the film, so it is the stage version that I need to emphasize here. There is nothing usable from the Broadway original, but there was a celebrated production by **Sam Mendes** (1965–) starring **Alan Cumming** as the Emcee; it premiered in London in 1993, came to Broadway, and was revived in 1998 and 2014. All the available clips are of poor quality, but it is too important not to show. I will play you the finale to Act I. Musically, this is a reprise of “Tomorrow belongs to me.” But there is no beer-garden in the stage version; in the original, the song was sung by six young waiters; in the Mendes production, the Emcee plays a record of a boy soprano singing it on a wind-up gramophone. But this finale is the first time it becomes an ensemble. It comes about because one of the girls, **Fraulein Kost**, feels vindictive against their landlady, **Fraulein Schneider**, who has objected to her servicing sailors in her room. So she tells **Ernst Ludwig**, the black marketeer who keeps them all in supplies, that the landlady has become engaged to a Jew. Ludwig makes to leave, but Kost holds him back with the song.

16. *Cabaret* (stage), Act I finale

17. *Cabaret* (film, 1972): Joel Grey and friend

I’m not sure, but this may be the first time that Jewishness has been mentioned overtly in the script; it is certainly the first time it has been forefronted in the music. Both the stage show and the film use the cabaret songs as a means of commenting on the action outside. In both versions, the Emcee has a music-hall number with a dancer in a gorilla suit that is intended as a satirical comment on racial

intolerance. I won't play it all—it may seem tasteless out of context—but I will play the very end, where the implied satire suddenly becomes explicit. It is a very nasty moment, but the entire musical works by teetering on the edge between entertainment and repugnance.

18. *Cabaret* (movie), “If you could see her through my eyes,” ending

19. *Cabaret* (film, 1972): Michael York and Liza Minelli

I realize that I have totally ignored the romance story between **Brian Roberts** (the Isherwood character) and the cabaret performer **Sally Bowles**. This is because I have been pursuing the underlying theme of Antisemitism and the rise of the Nazis. Brian realizes that he has to leave Berlin for his own sanity, and invites Sally to accompany him to Paris, but she wants to stay, so they part. And so we get to the show's finale, which has a very different effect in the film and stage versions. I'll show both back to back, and then we can discuss.

20. *Cabaret* (movie), ending

21. *Cabaret* (stage), ending

22. Class title 2 (Grey and Cumming)

C. Everyone's Anatevka

23. Section title C (montage of non-Broadway productions)

Fiddler on the Roof broke box-office records in its first run on Broadway beginning in 1964, and it has been revived frequently since. I also read that it is one of the most frequently-performed of all musicals by regional, community, and even high-school groups. A fascinating documentary video about the creation of the show, *Fiddler: Miracle of Miracles*, says that there has not been a single day since the show first appeared that it has not been performed somewhere in the world; I'll put a link to the video online. The montage you have just seen was intended to demonstrate that **Anatevka**, the setting of the show, belongs to *everyone*. This is an important point that I'll come back to in a few minutes.

24. Facts about *Fiddler on the Roof*

But first let me do what I did for the other two works—play a 5-minute scene that I consider an important inflection point in the show, and ask for your comments. But first, a little background. *Fiddler on the Roof*, which premiered in 1964, was written by **Jerry Bock** (1928–2010) and **Sheldon Harnick** (1924–2023). The book by **Joseph Stein** (1912–2010) is based in turn on the Yiddish-language stories of **Sholem Aleichem** (Solomon Rabinovich, 1859–1916). We shall be watching the 1971 film directed by **Norman Jewison**. The setting is Anatevka, a fictional *shtetl* in Imperial Russia (present-day Ukraine), around 1900. **Tevye (Topol)**, the local dairyman, has successfully concluded the betrothal of his eldest daughter, Tzeitel, to middle-aged widower **Lazar Wolf**, a wealthy butcher. Toasting each other with cries of “L’Chaim” (to Life!), they adjourn to the tavern, which is frequented by Gentiles as well as Jews. As you watch this, see if you can isolate any one moment that seems particularly edgy.

25. *Fiddler on the Roof*, tavern scene

26. Facts about *Fiddler on the Roof* (repeat)

Did any moment particularly stand out? For me, there were two: the moment when the long-held note of the Russian tenor cut through the celebration of the Jewish group, and then even more when the Russian offered Tevye his hand. Is it an approach, or a threat—or perhaps both?

27. *Fiddler* collage

If this slide gives you a certain sense of overloading or vertigo, it pretty much represents how I used to feel about *Fiddler* myself. Believe it or not, the week I spent preparing this class was the first time (and the second and third) that I had ever watched the show through, whether on screen or in the theater. I had always avoided it, mainly because I always felt like a Johnny-come-lately to this particular party. Other people knew all the tunes, all the characters, all the accents; other people could compare different productions; many other people have even been in one. Normally, I am interested in a work of fiction that takes me into a new world, especially if it is as well realized as it is here. My problem was not just that it was a strange world to me, as a non-Jew, but that it seemed so familiar to everybody else. More specifically, it felt very much a New York work, the creation of people whose ancestors had come from *shtetls* in Russia, writing for others of similar background. The *Fiddler: Miracle of Miracles* documentary notes that for the first few decades, immigrants to New York had done all they could to be *American*. Now they were giving themselves permission to explore their own roots. At any rate, I looked on *Fiddler* from a distance, watching everybody else feel right at home in the world of the show, but not having the key to get through the gate myself.

28. Topol as Tevye

That feeling left me within five minutes of starting the movie. What changed it? Without a doubt, the charismatic yet down-to-earth performance of **Topol** as **Tevye the Dairyman**. In the marvelous introduction, he talks to the audience and to God with similar directness and humor, respecting tradition, but wanting to reason everything out for himself, even if it leads him to non-traditional conclusions. No doubt **Zero Mostel** was also good in the first production, and no doubt there have been many good Tevyes since, for the actors are responding to a first-class script, which in turn surely reflects the superb gifts of Sholem Aleichem in the original stories. Let's watch the whole of that sequence.

29. *Fiddler on the Roof*, opening sequence

The miracle that *Fiddler* achieves is to make a closed world—an Hasidic settlement in Imperial Russia—accessible to outsiders. My sense that everybody else felt connected to *Fiddler* except me is simply a confirmation of how universal that access is. But I shouldn't dismiss my earlier feeling of being an outsider, for it helps me to understand a real-life fact about history. The Russians in Anatevka no doubt considered themselves superior, but they still had to live with a group whose customs and language they could not understand. And lack of understanding can easily turn into persecution. The two groups in the taverns scene I showed recognize the great gulf between them, but both decide to bridge it in the spirit of common humanity. But later, when the Imperial bureaucracy decides that Anatevka should get rid of

its Jews, they raise no objections. It is no spoiler alert to say that *Fiddler* ends with the Jews of Anateva leaving their old homes—but many will go to America, where their stories will be retold.

30. *Fiddler* wedding scene, with bullet points

I am simply in awe of the construction of the wedding scene that forms the Act I finale. As an opera director, I have come to admire the construction of such finales in such composers as Mozart, Rossini, and Verdi, and this one is right up there with them. Think about these points on the screen as you watch; it is about 21 minutes long.

31. *Fiddler on the Roof*, wedding scene

32. Class title 3 (*Fiddler* logo)