9 : Immigrant Broadway

A. The Shadow of Europe

1. Class title 1 (*West Side Story*)

The title slide shows a stage production of *West Side Story* (1957) by **Leonard Bernstein** (1918–90); I'll feature a scene or two from it at the end of class. But first, as a kind of overture, let me give you a song from his later musical *Candide* (1974, in the current version), that might stand as the theme song for the entire class. The singer, called only the **Old Lady**, was born in Russia, moved to Germany then Paris, and now finds herself in Spain. But, as she says, she is "so easily assimilated." The singer is **Patti LuPone**.

2. Bernstein: *Candide*, "I am so easily assimilated"
3. Section Title A (The Shadow of Europe)

I couldn't possibly do a course called "Music on the Stage" without including Broadway, the subject of this class. The trouble is there is so much of it, and I have to find some way to select. So I am starting from the observation that the vast majority of composers, lyricists, and directors in the American musical theater are either immigrants themselves, like **Victor Herbert**, **Rudolf Friml**, **Sigmund Romberg**, **Irving Berlin**, and **Kurt Weill**, or the children of immigrants, like **George** and **Ira Gershwin**, **Jerome Kern**, **Oscar Hammerstein**, **Leonard Bernstein**, or **Jerome Robbins**. The ony major 20th-century figures I can find whose families had been in this country for at least two generations are **Cole Porter**, **Richard Rodgers**, and **Stephen Sondheim**. So I am leaving them out, despite their great works. I also find I have to give Herbert no more than a mention, omit Friml entirely, and represent the brilliant Gershwin brothers only as a footnote. So this class makes no claim to be a balanced overview of Broadway, so much as a series of observations by one who can say, like a character in one of Kurt Weill's musicals, "I'm a stranger here myself."

4. Europe and *The Merry Widow*

In 1907, an operetta opened on Broadway that ran for a then-astounding run of 416 performances. This was *The Merry Widow,* not by an American but by an Austro-Hungarian, **Franz Lehár** (1870–1948), who virtually defined Viennese operetta. His success opened the doors to similar works by European composers who had come to America to stay. I call this section "The Shadow of Europe" because of this persistent influence of European operetta, which lasted basically for the first quarter of the century. If you leave out last week's **Gilbert and Sullivan**, there are two basic strands to operetta in Europe, the **French** and the **Viennese**. The French style is typified by **Jacques Offenbach** (1819–80)—another immigrant, incidentally, coming to France from Germany. It is high energy and very much in the moment—think Can-Can. Lehár's *Merry Widow* has moments of this too; here is a clip from the Met.

5. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, "We're the ladies of the chorus"
6. — still from the above

The French style, as I said, is very much in the present. Lehár, who was half a century younger than Offenbach, tends to write in the past, or maybe the future, but less often the present. Viennese operetta always seems to be filtered through a veil of nostalgia or wish-fulfilment; it takes you somewhere older, distant, unattainable. You can hear this clearly in the *Viljalied*, sung by the title character; it is about a young man's longing for a wood spirit, who of course belongs to another world, and is indeed unattainable. This is **Renée Fleming** in the Met productionr.

7. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, "Vilja"
8. Covers for *Naughty Marietta*

The first of my immigrant composers, **Victor Herbert** (1859–1924), was the product of Anglo-Irish birth and German training. He had emigrated to America in 1886 with his opera-soprano wife; she was engaged by the Met, and he became its principal cellist. Besides composing a cello concerto and other classical works, he was drawn to Broadway, and would end by writing over 30 operettas. *Naughty Marietta* (1910), which is set in 18th-centry New Orleans, is probably the best known; it also happens to be one of the only three American musicals I have ever directed (the others being *Annie Get Your Gun* and *A Little Night Music*). Unfortunately, I cannot find a stage performance, and the 1935 film with **Jeannette Macdonald** and **Nelson Eddy** uses a substantially different story. So I am not going to go there in any detail, but I will give you snatches of Herbert's two most famous numbers, which show the same dicotomy between in-your-face energy and wistful yearning that we saw in the Lehár and will continue to see throughout this class. They also show the two sides of Marietta, who in the film is a foreign princess disguised as a servant (don't ask). One is a Neapolitan street song, showing her peasant persona; the other is a song of yearning, with the simply dreadful words "Sweet mystery of life, at last I've found thee!" When the tenor joins in with the refrain, we know he's got the girl!

9. Herbert: *Naughty Marietta* (film 1926): Marietta's two songs
10. Friml and Romberg on Broadway

During the War years, Broadway lost its taste for European operetta; what flourished were the patriotic works of **George M. Cohan** and others (Cohan had Irish blood, but third-generation). After the war, though, the old tastes came back. Both **Rudolf Friml** (1879–1972), who had come over in 1906 from Czechoslovakia, and **Sigmund Romberg** (1887–1951), a 1909 émigré from Hungary, had hit musicals on Broadway throughout the 1920s. I wish I had time to cover both in detail, but I find Romberg the more interesting, so I'll focus on him.

11. Romberg's *Student Prince*, title animation

Romberg's biggest hit *The Student Prince* (1924, running for 608 performances) returned to the European escapist vein. The title character is heir to the throne of some fictitious principality. To give him experience of the real world, his father sends him incognito to Heidelberg, where of course he makes his own romantic attachments, not those prescribed by the King. I'll play two clips, which once again show the familiar dicotomy between energetic and romantic. The first is the well-known drinking

song, showing the newly-arrived Prince going through initiation rituals in a Heidelberg *Bierstube,* and clearly already making a hit with the ladies. This comes from the 1954 film, originally scheduled to be made with **Mario Lanza**, who recorded the sound-track, but physically he was replaced by the British actor **Edmund Purdom**, who lip-synchs to Lanza's recording.

12. Romberg: *The Student Prince* (film 1954): drinking song
13. — poster for the above

I have been using films a lot because they are all I have. But here is a biopic on Romberg, *Deep in my Heart,* that at least shows most of its numbers on the stage. So the segment on *The Student Prince* has the curtain rise on the other hit number of the show, the Serenade, here sung by a tenor I have never heard of, **William Olvis**.

14. Romberg: *The Student Prince* (film *Deep in my Heart*): Serenade

B. Contemporary America

15. Section title B (Romberg "It")

That was another section from *Deep in My Heart.* The song is called "It." Odd though it may seem, it originally occurred in another of Romberg's fantasy musicals, *The Derert Song* (1926), but he resued it later in a revue called *Artists and Models.* I played it because the dancing performance by **Ann Miller** is simply stunning, and also to show that Romberg did not confine himself to escapist fantasy in other times and places, but could also reflect the contemporary party scene of the Twenties. Everybody danced the Charleston, and the up-to-date shows all contained at least one tap routine. Here's a tiny snatch of another.

16. Kern: *Show Boat* (film 1950): "I might fall back on you"
17. — poster for the above

That short number, danced by **Marge and Gower Champion**, comes from the 1950 film of *Show Boat* (1927), the Broadway musical that changed everything. The insertion of the tap number is not original in itself; the setting is a floating variety theater, after all, giving the authors the ability to slot in just about anything, with a lot more plausibility than Romberg used in slotting the "It" number into *The Desert Song.* Nor was it unusual that it was a show created largely by second-generation immigrants; what *is* unusual is that they *all* were. The composer, **Jerome Kern** (1885–1945) was the son of German-born parents, as was the librettist **Oscar Hammerstein II** (1895–1960), the author of the book (**Edna Ferber**), the choreographer (**Sammy Lee**, born Levi), and the impresario **Florenz Ziegfeld**. The only exception was the designer, **Joseph Urban**, who has emigrated himself in 1911. But the real originality of *Show Boat* was that, despite its use of a theater within a theater, despite the period setting of its ealier scenes, this was not an escapist fantasy but a meaningful story that made a real comment about American Life. It

opens, for example, on the levée in Natchez, Mississippi, where a group of Black men are loading the boat, the *Cotton Blossom*. One of them, Joe, sings a song about the wise old river….

18. Kern: *Show Boat* (SFO, 2014): "Ol' Man River"
19. — still from the above

That was **Morrris Robinson** at the San Francisco Opera in 2014. If you look online, you will find more or equally interesting versions of every clip I play, but I want to stick with **Francesca Zambello's** San Francisco production, partly for continuity, partly because it is on an actual stage. Now putting a group of Black Americans onstage, and attributing to them some kind of folk wisdom, is nothing new, and we'll get on to the White folks soon enough. But Show Boat's handling of Race is altogether more subtle. Shortly after this, there is a scene between the two sopranos: Julie (**Patricia Racette**), lead singer with the troupe, and Magnolia (**Heidi Stober**), the Captain's teenage daughter. She has just fallen for a handsome gambler, Gaylord Ravenal, on the levée, and tells Julie that she can always break off with him if it turns out he is no good. But Julie tells her that true love is for life…

20. Kern: *Show Boat* (SFO, 2014): "Can't help loving that man"
21. — still from the above

Did you see why this song is so important, and why Kern includes that interjection by the Cook, Queenie? The syncopation is a give-away. Queenie tells her that this is a song for "colored folks," but Julie knows how to sing it because, as we shall discover, she is half Black passing as White. But that is unacceptable in Mississippi in 1887. Julie is discovered, and has to leave the boat with her white husband. They go to Chicago, as do Magnolia and *her* husband, Ravenal. Yes, Magnolia takes Julie's role as lead singer, and marries Ravenal. But Chicago does not turn out to be too good for any of them. Both women are abandoned by their husbands, who blow through their savings and leave town. Jump forward to a Chicago nightclub on New Year's Eve, 1900. Julie has become so dependent on drink that she is a liability. A friend brings in Magnolia to audition for the owner, which she does with "Can't help loving that man." Overhearing this, Julie packs her bag and leaves, so that the job can go to Magnolia. In the remaining scenes, Magnolia goes on to become a major star while Julie fades out—but I find this scene of the changeover very moving, not least because Magnolia never knows.

22. Kern: *Show Boat* (SFO, 2014): Magnolia's audition
23. Eric Owens and Angel Blue in *Porgy and Bess* (Metropolitan Opera, 2020)

This is the cue for my all-too-brief mention of **Ira** and **George Gershwin** (1898–1937). Their individual songs and brilliant, but their musicals are little more than flashy vehicles to contain them, as though *Show Boat* had never happened. But then in 1935 comes *Porgy and Bess,* a through-composed opera with an entirely Black cast that treats African American life with a seriousness that Broadway itself never provided. Yes, being the Gershwins, it had its hit songs, many of which have subsequently become standards, such as "Summertime." Yet in a good production such as that at the Met, even these contribute to a quite realistic atmosphere—a far cry from *Marietta* and *The Student Prince.*

24. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess* (Met, 2020): Golda Schultz sings "Summertime"
25. Class title 2 (still from the above)

C. A Kid at Ellis Island

26. Section title C ("God Bless America")
27. Posters for Berlin, Weill, and Bernstein musicals

This hour will feature the three musicals above, all from the baby-boom decade, all in some way about the immigrant experience, and all by immigrant composers. The difference lies in when they came over. As the child of prosperous immigrant parents, **Leonard Bernstein** was already well established in this country. **Kurt Weill** came over mid-career, when he was 35. **Israel Beilin**, later known as **Irving Berlin** (1888–1989), was brought over by his parents at the age of five. So, like Romberg, Friml, and Weill, he was a first-generation immigrant. You might call the others Hungarian, Czech, or German, or even Hungarian-American and so on—but nobody would dream of calling Berlin Russian or even Russian-American; he wrote the unofficial national anthem for heaven's sake! "For me," Berlin wrote, "*God Bless America* was not just a song but an expression of my feeling toward the country to which I owe what I have and what I am." You can hear that in his voice.

28. *Alexander's Ragtime Band*

Berlin was primarily a composer for **Tin Pan Alley**, not Broadway. That is to say, he wrote mainly stand-alone songs, even though many of those songs first appeared in stage revues and were later used as the basis for entire films. Such was "Alexander's Ragtime Band," which became one of his first successes in 1911, sparking the country into a craze for ragtime, which was of course condemned by puritans as idiocy and degeneracy. I could play a scene from the movie, but to give a sense of its infectious power, let me offer instead an instrumental version, played by the Swedish jazz ensemble, **The Carling Family**.

29. Berlin: *Alexander's Ragtime Band*
30. Posters for *Yip, Yap, Yahank!*

Berlin was an ardent patriot. He was drafted into the US Army in 1917, and stationed at Camp Upton in Yaphank, NY. His assignment, howevr, was to write songs. He actually wrote "God Bless America" for an all-soldier revue called *Yip, Yap, Yahank!*, later produced on Broadway, but didn't publish it until 1938. This kept the tempo of the show very upbeat, such as this ending number "We're off to France." I'll follow it immdiately with a similar number from a show and follow-up film Berlin wrote with a similar purpose in 1942 (though no longer as an enlisted man), called *This is the Army.* Here is the title song. Take a look at the recruits that enter in the middle; what do you think is their purpose?

31. Berlin: *Yip, Yap, Yahank!*
32. Berlin: *This is the Army*
33. Posters for *This is the Army*

What did you think of those recruits? For me, they represent Berlin himself, an awkward young man coming from who-know-where, finding a purpose in embracing a national identity. His success owed much to his ability to define that identity, even though it is occasionally a collage of images from a mostly-imaginary past, as in his famous song "White Christmas."

34. Posters for *Annie Get Your Gun*

I said that my three featured musicals this hour were all about the immigrant experience in some way. But what is remotely immigrant about *Annie Get Your Gun*, his feel-good postwar musical about a real sharp-shooter from Ohio called **Annie Oakley** (1860–1926)? Let's find out. She tours the country with **Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show**, which gives the whole production a show-biz setting, much like Jerome Kern's *Show Boat*. Indeed **Kern** was originally slated to compose it, but he died shortly after beginning work. *Show Business* is not merely a setting for the show, it is the text of its most famous number, as Annie is recruited join the troupe; this is the 1950 movie with **Betty Hutton** and others.

35. Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun,* "There's no business like show business."
36. — still from the above

So how might this story have appealed to an immigrant like Israel Beilin? Because Annie is him: a naïve nobody from an out-of-the-way place, who nonetheless works hard and makes it big. The spirit of competition runs all through it, as in this closing duet between her and fellow marksman Frank Butler (**Howard Keel**). Yes, this is indeed a love duet!

37. Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun,* "Anything you can do, I can do better."

D. Man without a Country

38. Section title D
39. Brecht, Weill and *Happy End*

That brief video makes the obvious point that **Kurt Weill** (1900–50), as a Jew, fled Germany when Hitler came to power, spent two years in Paris, and then emigrated to the United States. But I'd like to suggest something more: that Weill—in contrast to Irving Berlin—was temperamentally a man without country for his entire life. That song you've just heard is "Surabaya Johnny" from *Happy End* (1929), the third of his collaborations with **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956). Surabaya Johnny is a drifter, moving from port to port in Southeast Asia; he strings the singer along, but she can't get him out of her hair. Here is the third verse from that performance by **Angel Blue**. Needless to say, *Happy End* is *not* happy.

40. Weill: *Happy End,* "Surabaya Johnny," verse 3
41. *Mahagonny Songspiel* and *Die Dreigroschenoper*

Brecht and Weill were not alone in feeling rootless. They lived in Weimar-era Berlin. Perhaps there were no longer so many wounded WW1 veterans in the street, as in the center picture by **George Grosz** (1893–1959), but this was still a disfunctional country in search of an identity. Weill's most famous collaboration with Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* of 1927, indeed depicted the poverty and corruption they would have seen in the big city, but it was translocated; the piece was basically an update of the 18th-century *Beggar's Opera*, and set nominally in London. And their first collaboration, a half-hour

work called the *Mahagonny Songspiel*, is set in an imaginary but highly flawed Utopia, which seems suspiciously like the United States of America. Brecht even wrote a lot of the text in his idiosyncratic version of slang English. Here is a sample, although in the slightly more elaborate operatic version that Weill made later. The singer is **Nadja Mchantaf**; her breasts are fake.

42. Weill: *Mahagonny,* "O Moon of Alabama"
43. Lys Gauty

In 1933, Hitler came to power, seemingly answering the need for a German national identity. Weill fled to Paris. He stayed there two years, but they were not especially productive ones. He wrote some songs for French singers like **Lys Gauty**, shown here, and put together the music for a play called *Marie Galante.* The Weill Foundation says it is not available for performance, but apparently the Rome Opera did a production of it in 2007; here is the first minute or so of their trailer.

44. Weill: *Marie Galante,* trailer
45. Mattheiu Amalric: *C'est presque au bout du monde*

The tango you heard playing there was only an instrumental interlude. But a writer called **Roger Fernay** approached Weill about writing words for it, and the result is a song, *Youkali,* which is probably the most evocative evocation of not-belonging that I know. Youkali is a little like Mahgonny, an imaginary Utopia, but unlike Mahagonny there is nothing corrupt or sleazy about it; I find it especially moving that he should have written it while he himself was quite literally stateless, in transit between the old world and the new. I am showing it sung by **Barbara Hannigan**, in rehearsal with the conductor **Sir Simon Rattle**. It is part of a film by **Matthieu Amalric**, showing Hannigan in her dressing room, Hannigan warming up, and scenes from a society party—don't ask me why; I'll put the whole thing on the web. Some of these moments find their way into this clip too, but listen for that earworm of a tune, Hannigan's perfect French, and the haunting way it ends.

46. Weill: *Youkali*
47. Weill's American shows

Weill is the only composer I have mentioned today to have written a substantial body of musical theater work before coming to New York. So he was a known quality, and much in demand. Here are some of his shows. Most of them, however, were relatively light confections now remembered for individual songs rather than as compelling music drama. One piece that promised more was *Lost in the Stars* (1949), his last completed work. It is based on **Alan Paton's** book *Cry the Beloved Country,* about South Africa under *Apartheid.* For some reason, though, it has seldom been restaged, perhaps because the Broadway musical of the time was not well adapted to such tragedy. But the show's title, which is also that of its best-known song, perfect fits my thesis of Weill as the **Laureate of Loss**.

48. Weill's *Street Scene* at the Teatro Real, Madrid, 2017

The Broadway musical may have been a poor vehicle for serious realism, but Weill could come very close in opera. His 1946 opera *Street Scene* does have a few Broadway-like numbers, it is true, but is absolutely rooted in the tenement life of immigrant New York—the kind of life Weill and his wife might

have been living if they had arrived earlier in their careers. The book by **Elmer Rice** (Elmer Leopold Reizenstein, 1892–1967, a third-generation immigrant) puts together Jewish, Italian, German, Swedish, and other families; you can see some of their interaction from the opening scene.

49. Weill: *Street Scene,* opening

E. Jets and Sharks

50. Section title E (*West Side Story*, 1961)

I was stretching a point to make *Annie Get Your Gun* an immigrant subject. I was on much firmer ground with *Street Scene.* And with *West Side Story,* there can be no doubt: the idea of making Shakespeare's Montagues and Capulets into rival gangs of Italians and Puerto Ricans places the immigrant experience front and center. The idea came from **Jerome Robbins** (1919–98), who choreographed and directed the show. Robbins (Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz) was a second-generation immigrant, like **Leonard Bernstein**, who composed the music; **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021) who made his Broadway debut as lyricist, was third-generation. Nobody coming straight off the boat, but it was clearly a case of the children of immigants writing about their modern equivalents. I don't have time for more than one example, but rather than show another scene of pent-up violence, let me give you the last truly joyous moment in ths show; this is the song "America" in the 2021 film made by **Stephen Spielberg** (third generation). The choreography is by **Justin Peck**, based on Jerome Robbins' original (which he danced himself when he was younger), but moving it into a new age.

51. Bernstein: *West Side Story*, "America" (2021 film)
52. Class title 3 (still from the above)