



Jerome Kern

# Why Study Musicals?

...because *Stephen Banfield*, a newly-appointed Professor in the Music Department, believes that a Jerome Kern theatre song and a Bach chorale have much in common.

Jerome Kern (1885-1945) is often thought of as the father of the American musical. He wrote some of the world's best-known and most enduring popular songs, including 'Smoke gets in your eyes' and 'Ol' man River', yet only one of his 44 stage musicals, *Show Boat*, is known today. Furthermore, all but a handful of his thousand published songs are out of print, hundreds more were never published, and none of the major books on him contains a bibliography. With rare exceptions we do not even know what his musicals sounded like on Broadway in the 1920s and 30s, for in those days anything approaching an original cast album was a British eccentricity rather than an American standard product.

Two broad problems have to be addressed by students of musical comedy, who range from undergraduates (yes, it is on our syllabus at

Bristol) to professors. The first is why musicals, as an opportunistic and commercial art form, are worth studying at all. The current intellectual climate is all in favour of popular culture, but music and literature students trained in the classics do not always know how to handle vernacular products critically, for there are few models to guide them (those books without bibliographies do not help). Nevertheless, I firmly believe that a Kern theatre song and a Bach chorale have more in common than you might think and can probably be approached in the same way. Bach's day-to-day environment was pretty opportunistic too, but left us a canonic legacy all the same. But how was that legacy established and transmitted to us? This raises the second problem, for researchers of the American musical are in much the same position now as editors of the great collected editions of

literature and music in the 19th century: reclaiming for posterity repertoires that had fallen out of use. 'Sheep may safely graze' would have remained unknown without the intervention of scholars.

Similarly, many obstacles stand in the way of conserving not so much Kern's songs, but the shows for which they were written. Musicals are ephemeral and interdisciplinary products, with no governing authority except money. In opera, at least ideally, the composer sets an entire libretto to music; the score, including all the words and stage directions, is the definitive artefact, henceforward available for a variety of productions. A musical, on the other hand, is the commercial property of the producer who may have good reasons for not publishing it at all. Long runs at prestigious metropolitan theatres, with all the attendant merchandising, is achieved by not letting the performing →

→ materials circulate freely. To give a contemporary example: you still cannot buy a complete piano/vocal score of Phantom of the Opera.

The same applies to scripts, without which musical comedies cannot be understood, for they are spoken plays with songs and finales and the odd extended musical scene. A script and a score have to be studied side by side

Britain is in The Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection in the Manuscript Room of the British Library.

I am particularly interested in Kern's British profile, for his appropriation to American cultural history sidelined it. He learnt much of his trade in Edwardian London, then the musical theatre capital of the English-speaking world. More importantly, Kern wrote

Musicians take a different, historically informed view, that the work in a sense no longer fully exists without the original full score.

Those scores may yet turn up; things do. I could hardly have written a book on Kern's musicals at all were it not for the treasure-trove of discarded Broadway materials discovered in a Warner Bros New Jersey warehouse in 1982. On a more modest but personal note, I can report that the day before giving a public lecture on Kern in Bristol last October, I was phoned by a local bookseller. Was I interested in a cache of research material on Kern which dated back to the 1950s and represented the collection and investigations of an amateur from South Wales? I was round there in a flash. The sheet music covers gracing this article are taken from the 321 published songs included in the collection, many of them sufficiently rare that the only other known copies in this country are in the British Library or the Bodleian, Oxford. The Bristol suburbs do us proud. ■

## Conservation was an accident of British theatrical censorship

before you can see what is going on, and whenever you manage to do this, discrepancies between them quickly arise because you are reading materials that were never reconciled in print for posterity, but lived a hand-to-mouth existence in the theatre. Ironically, as with the cast recordings, it was when Kern's musicals played in far-away England that his scripts were nationally conserved, due to an accident of British theatrical censorship. Every script offered to the London and provincial stage had to be passed by the censor who, for example, insisted that the phrase 'He's had her' be omitted from Kern's *The Cat and the Fiddle*. Consequently, the best place to study the history of the musical in

four major shows for London in the 1920s and 30s, none of which transferred to Broadway, and all of which have been done scant justice by American commentators. Studying its script in the British Library, I was amused to see that in the first of these, *The Cabaret Girl*, with book and lyrics by PG Wodehouse and George Grossmith, the first-act dialogue, set in a London music shop, begins with Sir Edward Elgar at the other end of a phone. Alas, none of his British shows is properly performable because the orchestrations are lost. Theatrical practitioners tend to make light of this and regard wholesale re-orchestration as comparable to a new production: taken for granted, indeed desirable.

[www.bristol.ac.uk/Depts/Music](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/Depts/Music)

*Stephen Banfield is currently researching a book on Jerome Kern for a new Yale University Press series, Yale Broadway Masters. The book is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the British Academy.*

