Broadway in the 1950s

Although much theatrical activity took place on the local and regional levels throughout the 1950s, New York City's Broadway—the Great White Way and the capital of legitimate theater—remained the home for most major productions. For most Americans, seeing a hit play with big-name performers meant seeing the movie adaptation. Fortunately, the film industry did just that, quickly translating Broadway's best into a string of movies.

Great Musicals of the 1950s

The biggest Broadway successes of the 1950s were musicals. Many of these musicals have become perennial favorites for local and regional theater productions, and many high school and college drama groups have attempted them as well. Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *The King and I*, Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*, and Bernstein/Sondheim/Laurents's *West Side Story* have become true American classics. These musicals have crossed the line from being plays seen by an essentially white, middle-class audience living in or near New York City to plays known by all—from rural to suburban to urban Americans of all races and all economic classes. They have become part of the country's collective culture and certainly qualify as leading products of U.S. popular culture.

Through extensive and well-promoted media interplay, public awareness of Broadway and its top productions achieved high visibility during the 1950s. The addition of names like Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and Lerner and Loewe assured box office success. And as soon as rights could be secured, Hollywood brought out glossy film versions of musicals that proved extremely popular. In the meantime, record companies released original cast albums, usually with extensive liner notes. Vocalists and musical groups, especially in the realm of jazz, created interpretative albums of specific musicals, further increasing the audience of Broadway show tunes. This flurry of recording activity carried over into radio. Disc jockeys pushed individual songs, and many a Broadway composition achieved hit status, both in its original form and in its many adapted versions.

Theater, Seriously

Many classic dramas were also performed for audiences during the 1950s. Poet T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (1950) starred young British actor Alec Guinness, who gained fame for his roles in such films as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *Star Wars* (1977). Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956) also received raves from critics but did not reach truly national audiences.


Taking a cue from its television success in 1957 (a *Playhouse 90* production that starred Teresa Wright and child actress Patty McCormick), Broadway staged William Gibson's powerful *The Miracle Worker* in 1959, starring
Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke in the dramatic life story of Helen Keller. The young Duke's starmaking performance as Keller and Bancroft's crucial role as Keller's teacher Annie Sullivan provided vibrant theater, but only when Bancroft and Duke recreated their stage roles in the 1962 movie version did the global mass audience finally experience this classic drama.

Bob Batchelor

Further Reading


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