

# BROADWAY

## Broadway

THE AMERICAN MUSICAL



### Feature

#### Inspiration, Sleuth and Luck: A Filmmaker's Broadway Odyssey By Michael Kantor, series director/producer

The idea for a documentary on Broadway hit me while I was riding in a cab through Times Square. It was in the early 1990s, and the theater district was still very much in the doldrums. The trash in the gutter, the three card monte games and the drug dealers on the corners reminded me of all the times I'd heard people insist "Broadway is dead."

But as I whizzed past the stubbornly optimistic marquees and still-brilliant lights of the Great White Way, I realized that Broadway was as relevant as ever. There in the taxi, I decided that the story of Broadway's extraordinary 100-year history and its relationship to 20th-century American life was the story I needed to tell.

But where do you start? How do you possibly end?

#### Putting it together

The first thing I decided was what I didn't want. I didn't want a *That's Entertainment!* for Broadway; a catalog of great clips and reminiscences. On the other hand, no film about the American musical would be complete without George Gershwin's score for *Porgy and Bess*, Fanny Brice performing "My Man," Ethel Merman's "I've Got Rhythm."

I was determined to go beyond the "best" and confront the "why." Why did the musical spring up in New York, and not London or Paris? Why is it considered a uniquely American art form?

When I looked at the work of the unwaveringly patriotic Irving Berlin and considered the significance of his songs to our country at pivotal moments in American history, and then considered how "The Age of Aquarius" from *Hair* had come to define the 1960s, I knew I had found the framework for a documentary on Broadway.

#### "Listen to our songs..."

Across most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Broadway musical has reflected the social phenomena that have swept the nation. Prohibition. World Wars. The advent of television. The sexual revolution. Our obsession with nostalgia. No matter what's happening in America, it's reflected back in the stories acted out upon those stages, often with an optimistic spin, but always in an interesting way.

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“Yip” Harburg, whose “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” offers a more acute understanding of the Depression than any unemployment statistic ever could, once said, “Songs are the pulse of a nation’s heart. A fever chart of its health. Are we at peace? Are we in trouble? Are we floundering? Do we feel beautiful? Do we feel ugly? Listen to our songs...”

That quote is essential to the concept of this series. Broadway’s songs are everywhere in American culture, from wedding standards to television commercials. Whether we’re singing “Edelweiss” to lull our kids to sleep or belting out “Yankee Doodle Dandy” on the Fourth of July, Broadway’s soundtrack penetrates our lives and our times.

### **Hitting gold**

My greatest challenge as a filmmaker was figuring out how to capture Broadway’s larger-than-life energy in a way that would still “pop” on a television screen in someone’s living room. How could I possibly do justice to the most razzmatazz live art form that ever was? The answer: by fusing the various elements of musical theater – song, dance, sets, costumes – with the narrative techniques of documentary film – clips, stills, original cast recordings, interviews, voice-overs, and the occasional re-enactment.

Researching a documentary series is often akin to embarking on a treasure hunt – you turn over a lot of rocks before hitting gold. We pored over thousands of hours of archival footage, including newsreels, private home movies, and rare television and audio clips. We dug through innumerable boxes crammed with still photos, diary excerpts and personal letters, much of it long buried in archives near and far. Along the way, our team uncovered some magnificent footage, including color film from a 1929 Ziegfeld revue and a 1951 British kinescope featuring the stars of the original *Guys and Dolls* cast, Vivian Blaine and Sam Levene.

We reviewed literally 100 years of Broadway history and considered thousands of shows. With so much phenomenal source material, we agonized over what would stay and what would end up on the cutting room floor (though in this age of digital, there are no longer actual snippets of film curling on the floor). A panel of academic advisors, theater historians, writers, and consultants weighed in with their expert opinions, and we ultimately selected 1,000 clips spanning a century of theater history. As for the songs – the veritable heartbeat of Broadway – each 55-minute film contains 40 minutes of music.

Next, we needed a host. At the top of my wish list? Only one name: Julie Andrews. From her debut at age 19 in *The Boy Friend* to her iconic roles in *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot* and *Victor/Victoria*—not to mention movie musicals like *The Sound of Music* – Julie Andrews is musical theater. And her breadth of knowledge about theater is astonishing. We knew we had hit gold once again when Ms. Andrews came aboard.

### **“Will it or won’t it?”**

Today’s big Broadway shows are a multi-million dollar gamble. If the public loves it, it’s a hit. If not, it goes away fast. To illustrate that enticing, expensive game of “will it or won’t it?” we decided to chart the making of the biggest production of the 2003-4 season: *Wicked*.

We followed the cast from rehearsals in New York to out-of-town tryouts in San Francisco to opening night. Our job was to look at the process of making a show. The gamble of *Wicked*, of course, paid off, but even if it had flopped, the story would have been just as interesting – at least from a documentary standpoint. In any event, the *Wicked* segment closes the series with a

judicious look at how art and commerce intersect on Broadway today.

I thought it would take four years, at most, to make **BROADWAY: THE AMERICAN MUSICAL**. When I started, my wife and I had no children. Now, 10 years later, we have three. After we filmed *Wicked*, the kids saw the show and got to meet the stars backstage. For about a day, I was the greatest dad on the planet.

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Michael Kantor is a writer/director with 15 years experience in historical documentary filmmaking. He produced *The West* (executive producer Ken Burns) and worked on programs as diverse as *Lindbergh*, *Coney Island*, *The Donner Party*, *Margaret Sanger*, *Out of the Past*, and Ric Burns' *New York* series. His film *Quincy Jones: In the Pocket* aired in November 2001 as part of Thirteen's award-winning PBS series *American Masters*. Mr. Kantor has also created profiles of Arthur Miller and David Mamet for Thirteen's series *EGG the arts show*. In the recording studio, he has directed such talents as John Lithgow, Gwyneth Paltrow, Edward Norton, and Hector Elizondo, among others. He has published essays and articles in *American Theater*, *Newsday*, *TheatreWeek*, *Interview*, and *College 101: A Freshman Reader*, an educational textbook. He is co-author, with theater historian Laurence Maslon, of a comprehensive and lavishly illustrated companion book for **BROADWAY: THE AMERICAN MUSICAL** published by Bulfinch Press, and has written introductions to the companion three-disc DVD and VHS (PBS Home Video) and five-CD box set (Columbia Broadway Masterworks).