

Department: Physical Education

Course No.: U1390

Title of Course: The Film Musical

Revision: Fall 1999

- I. **Catalogue Description and Credit Hours of Course:** A study of the integrated components of dance, music, and theatre in film musicals, placed within their American socio-historical contexts. (3)

- II. **Interdisciplinary Nature of the Course:** This 300-level course integrates subject matter and approaches from the categories "Artistic Expression" and Social Systems." It does this by tracing the evolution of the three artistic components of film musicals--dance, music, and theatre--throughout twentieth century America in their socio-historical context decade-by-decade. For example, soon after the birth of the film musical (1927, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*), the Great Depression set in and transformed the way people lived and worked in society. Subsequently, the need for escapism and distraction from life's struggles directly contributed to the development of thirties film fantasies--most notably the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musical comedies that were staged within sophisticated yet fantastic art deco sets. The course integrates detailed discussion of the social forces at work throughout the decades--World War U, post-war and fifties prosperity, the development of mass-produced television, Rock and Roll and the sixties Vietnam-era turbulence, the seventies Me generation, the selling of videos through Music Television (MTV) in the eighties, etc.--with the numerous artistic developments within the film musical during its heyday (30s, 40s, and 50s), its decline (60s and 70s), and its strange transformation into today's (80s and 90s) visual-and-sound byte MTV generation.

- III. **Prerequisite(s):** Minimum one 100- or 200-level University Studies course in dance, music, or theatre AND one course from the following Social Systems category list: AN-101 "Observing Other Cultures," MC-101 "Mass Communication and Society," or SO-102 "Society, Culture and Social Behavior."

- IV. **Purposes or Objectives of the Course**
 - A. Acquaint students with the history and precursors of the contemporary film musical through minstrel shows, vaudeville, revues, and Broadway. (Objectives 1, 4, 5, 7, 8)

 - B. Assist students in understanding the uniqueness of the film musical as an essentially indigenous American art form as well as its value to and reflection of specific subcultures (African-American influences, Jewish, Russian, and European immigrants) and agendas in American society. (Objectives 2, 4, 5, 6)

 - C. Investigate compositional features of the major components of the film musical: directors, producers, composers & lyricists, choreographers, actors/singers/dancers, production elements. (Objectives 1, 4, 5, 6, 9)

- D. Encourage and assist students in applying descriptive, interpretive, evaluative, and contextualized aesthetic critiques of the American film musical within its decade-by-decade sociohistorical contexts. (Objectives 2, 3, 7, 8)
- E. Assist students in their ability to engage in in-class and out-of-class active learning experiences with professional film musical practitioners, as well as through informed discussions and written and oral analyses of seminal film musicals, issues, themes, narratives, choreography, music, and theatrical elements. (Objectives 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9)

V. **Expectations of the Students**

- A. View, critique, discuss and write on videos of selected excerpts from film musicals. (No more than 25% of class time will be devoted to viewing; the remaining time will involve lecture, critique, and discussion.)
- B. Attend class regularly with active participation.
- C. Prepare outside assignments for class discussion, presentations, and written work.

VI. **Course Outline (Objectives / Hours)**

- A. Social systems and film (1,2,4,7,8 / 5)
 - 1. Structural functionalism - perpetuation and reinforcement of the status quo
 - 2. Symbolic interactionism - negotiation of differences and conflicts
 - 3. Culturally interpretive - contextualized situations
 - 4. Social issues as portrayed in film
 - a. Gender roles
 - b. Social and economic class
 - c. Race and ethnicity
 - d. Mediated images vs. "reality"
 - e. Age-ism
 - 5. Historical accuracy and period trends
- B. Pre-cursors of the film musical (1,4,5,7,8 / 2)
 - 1. The United States
 - a. Theatre - 19th to early 20th century
 - 1) Minstrel, circus, and traveling shows of the nineteenth century
 - 2) Vaudeville of the early twentieth century
 - 3) Revues, pantomimes, and variety shows
 - 4) P. T. Barnum
 - b. The influence of Broadway (Ziegfeld Follies, others)
 - c. The silent film (late 1800s to 1927)
- C. The Film Musical Throughout 20th Century History (1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9 / 18)
 - 1. The Twenties: Roaring Into an Era

- a. Silent films as precursors
- b. The Jazz Singer (1927)
- c. Broadway Melody (1929), Hallelujah (1929), others
- 2. The Thirties: The Great Depression & the Public Need for Fantasy
 - a. The first surfeit of film musicals
 - 1) 1930-1933
 - b. The film romance: 1933-1939
 - 1) Puttin' On His Top Hat: Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers
- 3. The Forties: More Escapism, Then Prosperity
 - a. The War Years
 - b. Post-War Boom
- 4. The Fifties: Perfection On the Screen vs. the Rise of Suburbia
 - a. The last great Hollywood musicals
 - b. Gene Kelly
 - c. The influence of television
- 5. The Sixties: End of an Era and the Rise of Rock 'N' Roll
 - a. The, Age of Innocence
 - b. The Vietnam Era
 - c. The Age of Aquarius
 - d. Experimentations and the R-rating
- 6. The Seventies: The "Me" Generation & Age of Cynicism
 - a. End of an era
 - b. Disco
 - c. Punk
- 7. The Eighties, Nineties, and 21st Century: Rap, Heavy Metal, and Alternatives
 - a. Music Television (MTV)
 - b. Anomalies & throwbacks

D. Components of the Film Musical (1,2,4,5,6 / 10)

- 1. Directors
 - a. King Vidor (1920s - 1930s)
 - b. Rouben Mamoulian, Dave Gould, others (1930s - 1940s)
 - c. Vincente Minnelli (1930s - 1950s)
 - d. Gene Kelly (1940s - 1950s)
 - e. Jerome Robbins (1950s - 1970s)
 - f. Bob Fosse (1950s - 1980s)
 - g. Others
- 2. Producers
 - a. Chaplin, Pickford, and Fairbanks, Jr. (1920s - 1930s)
 - b. Samuel Goldwyn (1920s - 1950s)
 - c. Arthur Freed (1930s - 1950s)
- 3. Composers/Lyricists
 - a. Rodgers & Hart
 - b. George and Ira Gershwin
 - c. Irving Berlin

- d. Rodgers & Hammerstein
 - e. Ruby & Kalmar
 - f. Jerome Kern
 - g. Others
 - 4. Choreographers
 - a. Seymour Felix
 - b. Albertina Rasch
 - c. Onna White
 - d. LeRoy Prinz
 - e. Fred Astaire & Hermes Pan
 - f. Katherine Dunham
 - g. Gene Kelly
 - h. Jack Cole
 - 5. Actors/Singers/Dancers
 - a. Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor
 - b. Judy Garland
 - c. Gene Kelly and partners
 - d. The Nicholas Brothers
 - e. Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth
 - f. Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, and Gene Kelly
- E. Seminal Artists in the Field (1,4,6,7,8 / 10) - As presented in their socio-historical context--see A above
- 1. Directors
 - a. Busby Berkeley
 - b. Vincente Minnelli
 - c. Gene Kelly
 - d. Others
 - 2. Producers
 - a. The Big Five Studios: MGM, Warner Bros., Paramount, Fox, Universal
 - b. The lesser studios: United Artists, Republic, others
 - 3. Choreographers
 - a. Fred Astaire
 - b. Hermes Pan
 - c. Gene Kelly
 - d. Katherine Dunham
 - e. Jack Cole
 - f. Jerome Robbins
 - g. Bob Fosse
 - 4. Composers/Lyricists (see above)
 - 5. Performers
 - a. Fred Astaire and partners
 - b. Judy Garland and partners
 - c. Gene Kelly and partners
 - d. The Nicholas Brothers

- e. Jeanette McDonald and partners
- f. Other women
- g. Other men

TOTAL: 45 HOURS

VII. **Textbook:** None. Specific readings will be assigned from the following reference books and articles on reserve.

- A. Barnum, P. T. (1927). *Struggles and triumphs: Or, the life of P. T. Barnum, written by himself*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf
- B. Cantor, E., & Freedman, D. (1934). *Ziegfeld.- The great glorifier*. NY: Alfred H. King.
- C. Elsaesser, T. (December 1969). The American Musical. *Brighton Film Revue*, 15, 15-16.
- D. Gilbert, D. (1940). *American vaudeville: Its life and times*. NY: Whittlesey House.
- E. Green, S. (1981). *Encyclopaedia of the musical film*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- F. Green, S. (1990). *Hollywood musicals: Year by year*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation.
- G. Hirschhorn, C. (1981). *The Hollywood musical*. NY: Crown.
- H. McNamara, B. (March 1974). The scenography of popular entertainment. *Drama Review* 18, 16-24.
- I. Mueller, J. (1985). *Astaire dancing: The musical films*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- J. Riis, T. L. (1989). *Just before jazz: Black musical theater in New York, 1890-1915*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- K. Rubin, M. (1993). *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the tradition of spectacle*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- L. Scheurer, T. J. (Fall 1974). The aesthetics of form and convention in the movie musical. *Journal of Popular Film* 3, 307-325.

VIII. **Basis for Student Evaluation:** Students will be evaluated on the basis of performance in the following areas:

- A. Engaged class participation (active learning experiences, large and small group discussions, individual responses) - 25%

- B. One short analysis and reflection paper (2 - 3 pages) and one short oral presentation identifying and briefly exploring a specific social issue as portrayed in a film musical - 25%
- C. Research paper (10 - 12 pages) analyzing in detail the relationship between a social issue and film element (composition, theme, song-dance number, etc.) - 50%

IX. Justification for Inclusion in the University Studies Program

- A. Objective 1: Demonstrate the ability to locate and gather information
 1. Emphasis: Significant
 2. Content: The ability of a student to locate, gather, and organize information from the library, popular and scholarly journals, books, newspapers, and videos is a prerequisite to further inquiry into film musicals. Sources such as Dance Magazine, Dance Research Journal, Dance ink-, dance films, and interviews with primary individuals in the field are all necessary in the development of a clear understanding of the available literature.
 3. Teaching Strategies: A discussion and question & answer period regarding the available resources in Kent Library, interlibrary loans, internet work, and contacts in the film musical field will occur during the first week.
 4. Student Assignments: Students will be required to seek out one resource concerning a musical, director, choreographer, performer, or production through written, oral, and/or computer research, and present their findings in a written and oral fashion in class.
 5. Evaluation of Student Performance: Students will be evaluated on the basis of their thoroughness of research, organizational and grammatical skills, accuracy, and quality of their written and oral presentation.
- B. Objective 2: Demonstrate capabilities for critical thinking, reasoning, and analyzing
 1. Emphasis: Significant
 2. Content: Developing the ability to distinguish between the complementary and autonomous components of film musicals, and their relationship to particular social themes, are the central objectives of this course. Identifying and enumerating these components in a clear and lucid fashion is essential to the development of students' critical thinking skills.
 3. Teaching Strategies: The instructor will use lectures, class discussion, and viewing experiences of excerpts from selected film musicals in order to present examples of these complementary and autonomous components.
 4. Student Assignments: Students will be required to recount, reconstruct, and analyze numerous film musical excerpts in class discussions (large and small groups) and in their final paper.
 5. Evaluation of Student Performance: Evaluation of the student's ability to think critically will be accomplished through subjective determination by the instructor of qualitative class discussion and intelligent composition, content, and synthesis of their research paper.

C. Objective 3: Demonstrate effective communication skills

1. Emphasis: Significant
2. Content: Film musicals include examples of verbal (spoken and sung text) and non-verbal (dance) communication, as well as production values such as lighting, color composition, and visual art designs. As a composite of a wide variety of artistic elements and styles, students need to be able to synthesize their experiences from Objective 2 in a cogent and coherent fashion. "Translating" these divergent and converging artistic elements into both written and oral means is the task of this objective.
3. Teaching Strategies: The instructor will provide numerous in-class individualized, small and large group discussion opportunities, as well as lectures on and excerpted scenarios from selected film musicals. Representatives from theatre, music, and art departments, as well as performing colleagues of the instructor, will be included in class as resources and presenters of master classes and other studio work.
4. Student Assignments: Students will be expected to participate in master classes and engage guest lecturers and performers with appropriate questions and comments, as well as responding in written and oral formats through response papers and small and large group discussions.
5. Evaluation of Student Performance: The instructor will evaluate student performance in their oral communication skills through a subjective assessment of their involvement engagement, clarity and conviction of their comments. Written work will be assessed on the basis of content, structure, and the compelling nature of their arguments.

D. Objective 4: Demonstrate an understanding of human experiences and the ability to relate them to the present

1. Emphasis: Significant
2. Content: As elaborate fictions and fantasies, film musicals reflect human experiences as they might wish to be versus as their actuality in daily life. Nevertheless, human actors inhabit these works during particular social periods in history, and necessarily mirror human foibles, emotions, and thoughts. Considerable attention is paid to these characterizations in order to develop an appreciation and understanding of their influence on their time and our present lives. In addition, because the passing down of artistic skills and techniques of the film musical is forever available on celluloid, an understanding of its progress and evolution is illuminating.
3. Teaching Strategies: Lectures, video presentations with accompanying voice-over narration and commentary, and in-class exercises and rehearsals of musical theatre experiences will be used by the instructor.
4. Student Assignments: Students will be required to identify and briefly discuss, through one short paper and oral presentation, a specific social issue in relation to its representation in a film musical (or over time in a particular theme), as well as briefly contrast the issue to our present time (if different).

5. Evaluation of Student Performance: Evaluation of the written and oral work will be done based on accuracy of issue identification as well as clarity of presentation and relation to the present.
- E. Objective 5: Demonstrate an understanding of various cultures and their interrelationships
1. Emphasis: Some
 2. Content: Film musicals are an indigenous art form of the United States. While the occasional musical has been created in other countries, most notably in England, the art form originated and found its apotheosis (and subsequent downfall) in Hollywood, California. Evolving out of traveling minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, including the wholesale appropriation of black slave culture within the predominant ethos, the film musical simultaneously reflects and refracts our societal mores. Understanding this country's singular art form will better help students appreciate the unique role our culture plays as a model for fantasy, experimentation, exuberation, and creativity.
 3. Teaching Strategies: After an in-depth presentation of 19th and early 20th century minstrelsy, revues, circus, and vaudeville, the instructor will follow a systematic decade-by-decade programme of presentations, analyses, discussions, research, and syntheses of the major American film musicals. Their socio-historical contexts include but are not limited to the Roaring Twenties and the advent of sound, The Thirties and the Great Depression, the Forties World War II effort and post-war prosperity, the development of television and Rock and Roll in the Fifties, the MTV generation, and many others (see Course Outline A).
- F. Objective 6: Demonstrate the ability to integrate the breadth and diversity of knowledge and experience
1. Emphasis: Significant
 2. Content: A film musical is a unique art form comprised of the collaborative efforts of skilled directors, producers, choreographers, performers, lighting and costume designers, and numerous production teams. Understanding the manner in which all of these extraordinary technicians and artists are integrated is both daunting and worth the effort. True collaboration, with all its clashing visions negotiated compromises, is a rare and capacity. In order to understand such a process and product, students must be able to appreciate each of the musical's constituent elements independently and then in tandem. In addition, the manner in which a film musical sustains or undermines specific social assumptions of the time period (African-Americans as second-class citizens, women as sex symbols, men as autonomous and macho leaders, etc.) reflect a tightly bound relationship between film as mediator and realities of our society.
 3. Teaching Strategies: Discussions, lectures, master classes, and narrated examples of individual directors, producers, choreographers, singers, actors, dancers, and other seminal members of production crews will be presented

by the instructor. Excerpts from generally-acknowledged masterpieces of the genre will be highlighted, rehearsed, discussed, and analyzed from films as diverse as *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *Top Hat* (1935), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Cover Girl* (1942), *Singin' In the Rain* (1952), *The Band Wagon* (1953), *The Pajama Game* (1958), *West Side Story* (1961), and many others.

4. Student Assignments: Students will be required to actively participate in studio workshops and master classes with on- and off-campus representatives from the film and Broadway musical pantheon, as well as share their responses and critiques in small, group, and individual oral discussions, in their short paper responses, oral presentations, and final paper.
5. Evaluation of Student Performance: Analysis of student accuracy in identifying and discussing issues embedded in specific film sequences will provide evaluation of student performance for the short paper response and oral presentation. Careful analysis of the student research paper, with an eye towards composition, clarity, accuracy of facts, and sophistication of integration of the social issue within its cinematic context, will provide the guidelines for evaluation of the final project.

G. Objective 7: Demonstrate the ability to make informed, intelligent value decisions

1. Emphasis: Considerable
2. Content: Much of the traditional and contemporary research on film musicals has already determined their value, context and meaning in our society. Nevertheless, revisiting this research and experiencing first-hand the films in question will help students come to agree or disagree with established judgments.
3. Teaching Strategies: The instructor will provide detailed examples of situations in film musicals where social issues are clearly marked. Explanations of the relationship between these issues and their representation will be presented, discussed, and interrogated.
4. Student Assignments: Through class discussions, students will be required to carefully examine and question established determinations on these films by relating their own feelings, thoughts, and responses to each other and the instructor. Examples: Did the Astaire-Rogers fantasy pictures during the Depression provide audiences with pure escapist entertainment, or did they inadvertently reinforce class notions through stereotyped behaviors between men and women of the time? In what ways did the 20th Century Fox pictures of the early 40s sustain or undermine American perceptions of exotic, foreign locales just prior to Our entering World War II?

H. Objective 8: Demonstrate the ability to make informed, sensitive aesthetic responses

1. Emphasis: Considerable
2. Content: As an indigenous art form that merges a number of artistic sensibilities, the film musical represents a particularly unique aesthetic project. idealized notions of beauty in song, dance, theatre, and visual design

come together in the film musical to create a purely cinematic vision of fantasy, release, and entertainment for a large segment of the population. Articulating this aesthetic in a clear and accessible fashion is an integral part of this objective.

3. **Teaching Strategies:** In conjunction with master classes, in-class discussions will focus on the collaborative nature of the medium, with the instructor identifying numerous examples of individuals, through video excerpts, hands-on experiential rehearsals, screenplays, and story-board drawings, who have created routines and entire films that are far more potent than the mere sum of their parts.
4. **Student Assignments:** Full, active participation in in-class studio work with professional artists in the field will be assigned. In their short oral and written responses, as well as in their final papers, students will be required to take an aesthetic stance, based on personal physicalized and viewing experiences, with or against conventional aesthetic assessments of film musicals.
5. **Evaluation of Student Performance:** Evaluation will be subjectively based on the plausibility and conviction of arguments presented by the students in their papers and oral presentations. In other words, rather than evaluating the students on whether they agree or not, how convincing are their own aesthetic judgments? What supportive documentation, based on their research and notes, makes them say what they do?

- I. **Objective 9:** Demonstrate the ability to function responsibly in one's natural, social, and political environment
 1. **Emphasis:** Insignificant

X. **Background:** The instructor(s) will need to have extensive background in one or more of the following disciplines or fields of study: dance history (20th century); musical theatre; popular composers of the twentieth century; and Broadway/film musicals. A background in social theory, history of 20th century America, and specific issues pertinent to particular periods (the Depression, gender and race, World War II, post-war prosperity, etc.) is essential.

XI. **Class Size:** Optimal size for this class is 20, with a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 30. It is intended that the class be treated in a seminar, lecture/demonstration/video format, requiring small and large group discussions that involve frequent personalized exchanges.