

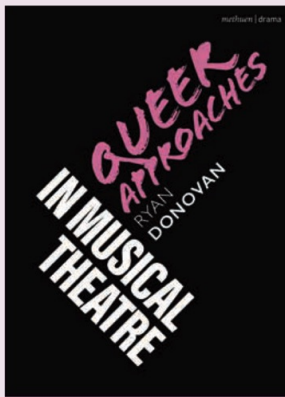
surely live on in the theatre community and beyond. By analysing *Carrie* through its enduring fan culture, it actually spins the traditional 'flop' narrative, instead celebrating the musical for its artistic courage and bravery to highlight that the show was simply ahead of its time.

Sophie Thomas

## Queer Approaches in Musical Theatre

Ryan Donovan

Paperback, 136 pages



“The book charts the representation of queer characters, attitudes and coding through theatre history”

**Methuen Drama**  
PUBLISHED 27 JULY 2023

This new volume by Ryan Donovan examines the impact and interpretation of Musical Theatre from a queer perspective. We're not talking about sequin-studded episodes of *Busby Berkeley* camp here – well, not just that.

Instead, Donovan's book charts the representation of queer characters, attitudes and coding through theatre history. These range from the offstage characters whose lives are alluded to but never seen in early 1930s musical comedies to openly queer characters and situations in musicals such as *Rent*, *Falsettos* and *A Strange Loop*.

Although Donovan's approach is more academic than emotive, it does prompt the reader to think about how queer representation

has evolved – and still is evolving – within the genre.

Kander and Ebb's musical *Cabaret* is used as a case in point, exploring the gradual tweaking of the show from the 1966 Broadway premiere to the 1972 Fosse movie and then the 1993 Donmar production starring Alan Cumming.

Each version adapts the script and production style to edge closer toward a queer-centric, decadent Weimar cabaret style. It's the type of show that would never have been allowed in the mid-1960s, when *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Hello, Dolly!* were notching up record audiences.

Understandably there is a major nod to the Aids crisis, which tragically cut a swathe through so many practitioners both on Broadway and in the West End. Donovan examines how the period has been commemorated within Musical Theatre – most notably but not solely through Jonathan Larson's ground-breaking 1996 musical *Rent*.

It's also fascinating to observe the different attitudes globally to Jerry Herman's ground-breaking 1983 *La Cage aux Folles* [see the August/September issue for our feature on this landmark musical]. The show garnered great critical and commercial acclaim on Broadway, winning six Tony Awards. It is believed, however, that homophobia and public ignorance around the Aids pandemic may well have led to the musical's initial failure in the UK and Australia.

Donovan's almost forensic study of the construction of Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori's *Fun Home*, which follows a lesbian protagonist on her complex coming-out journey, not only lends insight into the development process but also how Musical Theatre – good Musical Theatre – can push the boundaries of both form and content.

*Queer Approaches in Musical Theatre* may not offer any absolute solutions to unlocking queerness in musicals, but it does push the reader to explore beyond the text and score. Donovan's scrupulous breakdown of

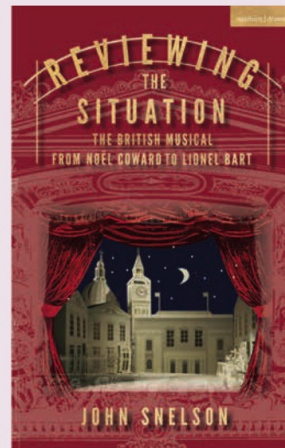
history, text, production and public reception makes this a must-read for any director or producer considering a revival, whether the production is considered queer or not.

Paul Vale

## Reviewing the Situation: The British Musical from Noël Coward to Lionel Bart

John Snelson

Hardcover, 208 pages



“Snelson uses a 3D analysis to piece these forgotten shows together; he must have had fun in the archives”

**Bloomsbury**  
PUBLISHED 5 OCTOBER 2023

*Reviewing the Situation* is based on musicologist and cultural historian John Snelson's PhD on British Musical Theatre. An eloquently written and rigorously researched academic book with a hefty price tag (such is the nature of academic publishing), it explores a mix of well-known and 'forgotten' repertoire through its historical and social context – and, along the way, disproves some prevailing myths.

The book comprises seven case studies over three decades: Noël Coward's *Bitter Sweet* (1929), Noël Gay's *Me and My Girl* (1937), Ivor Novello and Christopher Hassall's *The Dancing Years* (1939), Vivian Ellis and AP Herbert's *Bless the Bride* (1947), Sandy Wilson's *The Boy Friend*

(1953), *Expresso Bongo* (1958) by David Heneker, Wolf Mankowitz, Julian More, Monty Norman *et al*, and Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* (1960). As Snelson explains: 'All arose from the recognition of a good idea that suited a time and a place and an audience.'

It isn't easy accessing many of these shows today, as film versions tend to be bowdlerised, and often only excerpts of the scores were recorded. When Stephen Fry and Mike Ockrent revised *Me and My Girl* in 1985, there was no fixed version of the original book to refer to (not unusual with musical comedy of this period).

Snelson employs a multi-faceted '3D' analysis through music, dramaturgy, design and technological and media dissemination to piece these works together, and must have had a lot of fun in the archives.

Apart from *Expresso Bongo*, all these shows were set in the past (though *The Dancing Years* is framed by the very contemporary Anschluss) and Snelson interrogates generalised ideas about 'nostalgia'.

Furthermore, British musicals are often unfavourably compared to their American counterparts, which Snelson argues isn't helpful as the context is so different. *Bless the Bride* opened in the West End at the same time as *Oklahoma!* and he explores the eclectic European influences found in the former in relation to the musical education that many theatregoers of the 1940s would have received.

As Snelson shrewdly comments: 'Canonical works often start as rebels and end up as the Establishment' – as exemplified by the way in which *Oliver!*, the most enduring of the seven, was 'impressionistic' in its original staging, while major revivals have attempted to imitate the scale and aesthetics of the lavish 1968 film.

Snelson's depth of knowledge is surely unparalleled, and while this book is a touch too dense for armchair reading, it's a hugely valuable resource for students and academics that demonstrates how British Musical Theatre has always had a talent to amuse *and* to innovate.

Julia Rank