A Song in Their Hearts
Lee Davis unveils the pioneers of musical theater.

Bolton and Wodehouse and Kern: The Men Who Made Musical Comedy
By Lee Davis '51
$29.95

At the turn of the century, musical shows on Broadway were just that: shows with music. Dialogue gave way to sudden bursts of song for no apparent reason. Many a rickety plot was based on operetta, with its tired conventions of romance among a singing European aristocracy. Almost randomly, producers or stars tossed in jokes, songs, sight gags—any bit of business to prop up often second-rate material.

Then came Bolton and Wodehouse and Kern.

Composer Jerome Kern began his career as a musical hired gun, “interpolating” new songs and music to the sagging scores of shows in New York and London. In 1914, he was hired to work with young playwright Guy Bolton on a show called Ninety in the Shade. During its first run in Syracuse, Kern and Bolton took their first steps toward creating an integrated play with music, using lyrics to propel the show’s action and music to reinforce it.

But it was their next play, Nobody Home, a critical and popular hit, that musical-theater historian Lee Davis credits as the first American musical, ushering in the modern genre in which story, music, and lyrics fuse so seamlessly that removing or adulterating any element would cripple a show.

“The opening of Oklahoma! in 1943 was vividly important to the American musical theater because it put dance, the last piece of the puzzle, into place,” writes Davis, who earned a bachelor’s degree in English from SU’s College of Arts and Sciences in 1951.

“But the original concept, the tightly expressed idea of a contemporary, integrated musical theater, was born in the mind of Jerome Kern 28 years earlier.”

Kern and Bolton, both frenetically ambitious, worked nonstop. Kern had few musical limitations, but Bolton, who trained as an architect and possessed a strong sense of play structure, needed collaborators to compensate for his lack of insight into characters. Neither excelled at lyric writing. The humorist P.G. Wodehouse, known as Plum, did. Between 1916 and 1924, the three collaborated on nine musicals.

The first fissures in the collaboration, which was never exclusive, appeared early. Wodehouse extolled Bolton’s talents in Vanity Fair, antagonizing Kern. Bolton then learned Kern was receiving a much larger percent of the gross of Oh, Boy! (1917) than he and Wodehouse.

Swept along by success and praise, they continued to work together, making the derivative, old-style music shows seem more and more obsolete. Each of the three worked with other theatrical luminaries: Bolton and Wodehouse with George Gershwin and Cole Porter, Kern with Oscar Hammerstein II.

The doted-on son of a successful department store owner, Kern was supremely self-confident. His greatest success, Show Boat, featuring the standard “Ol’ Man River,” was filmed three times. Kern composed the music for the song “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” and won Oscars for the songs “The Way You Look Tonight” and “The Last Time I Saw Paris.”

Bolton and Wodehouse regarded each other “as brothers, as confidants, as necessary extensions of the other.” Both were born in England and had unhappy boyhoods. The reserved P.G. (Pelham Grenville) Wodehouse wrote 96 novels—including a series featuring Bertie Wooster and his manservant, Jeeves—and the lyrics for 33 musicals.

Lee Davis, a journalist, playwright, and theater critic for several Long Island newspapers, draws on interviews with the three partners’ relatives and colleagues, scripts and archives, to bring each vividly to life. He recreates the excitement of a bygone Broadway peopled by tyrannical producers and voluptuous starlets as the backdrop against which Bolton and Wodehouse and Kern moved toward “conscientious integration of story and song” and the musical as we know it today.

—George Lowery
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