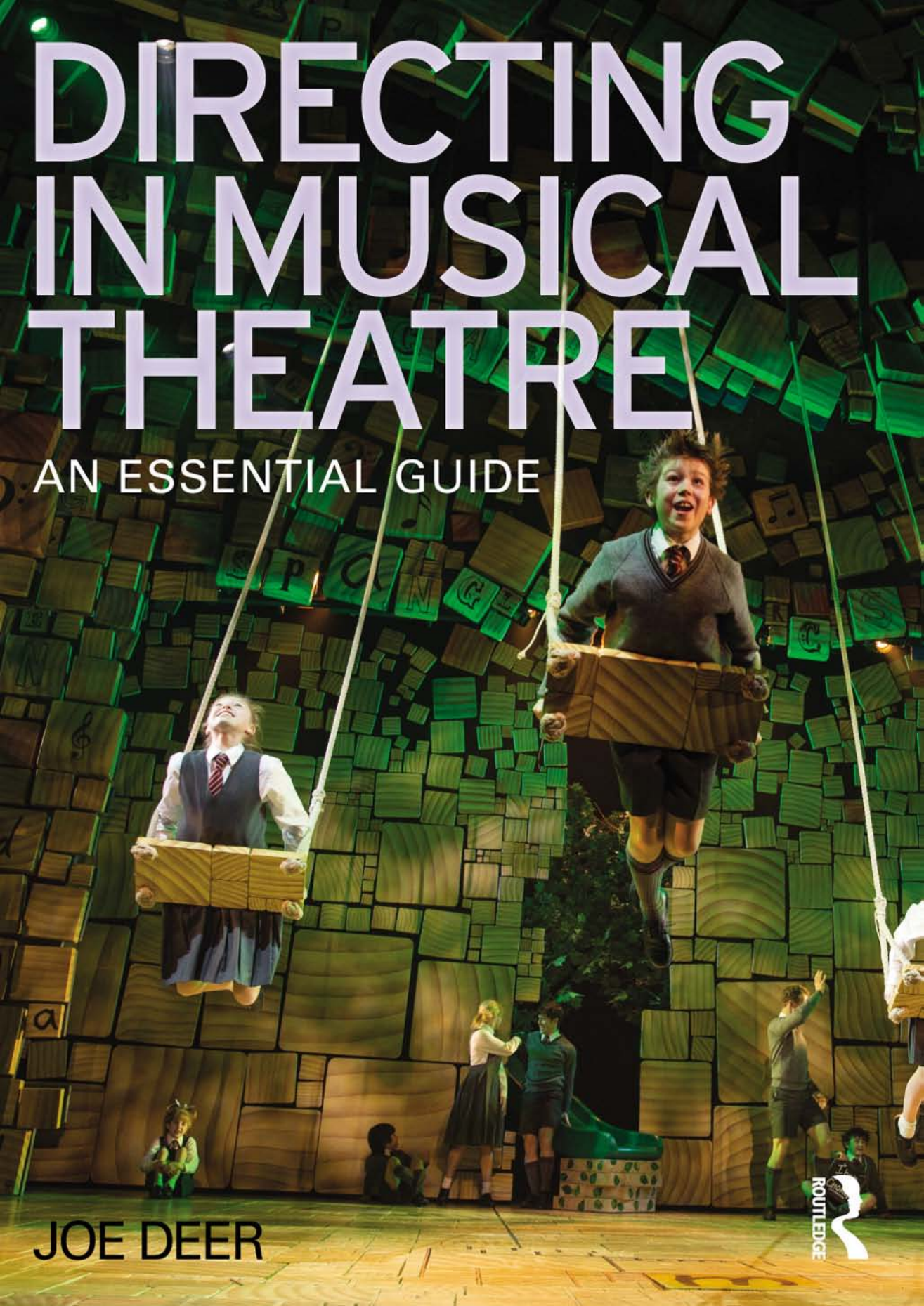


DIRECTING IN MUSICAL THEATRE

AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE



JOE DEER

ROUTLEDGE

Directing in Musical Theatre

This comprehensive guide, from the author of *Acting in Musical Theatre*, will equip aspiring directors with all of the skills that they will need in order to guide a production from beginning to end. From the very first conception and collaborations with crew and cast, through rehearsals and technical production, all the way to the final performance, Joe Deer covers the full range.

Deer's accessible and compellingly practical approach uses proven, repeatable methods for addressing all aspects of a production. The focus at every stage is on working with others, using insights from experienced, successful directors to tackle common problems and devise solutions. Each section uses the same structure, to stimulate creative thinking:

- Timetables: detailed instructions on what to do and when, to provide a flexible organization template
- Prompts and investigations: addressing conceptual questions about style, characterization and design
- Skills workshops: exercises and "how-to" guides to essential skills
- Essential forms and formats: Including staging notation, script annotation and rehearsal checklists
- Case studies: well-known productions show how to apply each chapter's ideas

Directing in Musical Theatre not only provides all of the essential skills, but explains when and how to put them to use – how to *think like a director*.

Joe Deer is Distinguished Professor of Musical Theatre and Director of The Musical Theatre Initiative at Wright State University. He is also an experienced director, choreographer, actor, dancer, stage manager and artistic director. He is the award-winning director or choreographer of productions from Off-Broadway to America's finest regional, summer stock and university stages. Joe has been a musical theatre educator for almost thirty years, teaching in New York City at Steps Studio, Dance Theatre of Harlem, The American Dance Machine and many regional studios. He is a frequent contributor to theatre publications including *Teaching Theatre Journal* and *The Voice and Speech Review*.

Endorsements for *Directing in Musical Theatre*:

"This will be an essential handbook for anyone faced with the challenge of directing a musical. Deer writes from a wealth of experience in directing, and a thorough knowledge of the musical theatre repertoire."

Dominic Symonds, University of Portsmouth, UK

"Finally! A step-by-step handbook on how to direct musicals. Joe Deer's *Directing in Musical Theatre* is the perfect book for aspiring and experienced directors alike. The craft of directing can be quite mysterious, but as Joe masterfully tells it, with thoughtful insight, extraordinary detail and great passion, the director's role becomes vividly clear. This book is sure to become a valuable resource for anyone working in the theatre."

Marcia Milgrom Dodge, Tony Award-nominated director and choreographer, *Ragtime*

"A terrific analysis of how to mount a musical. From reading the script, right up to opening night, Joe Deer's insights are practical and inspiring."

Walter Bobbie, Tony Award-winning director, *Chicago*

"Joe Deer's book is an eloquent and accurate analysis of what a director in the musical theatre actually does. He understands the many components of a musical and how to coordinate and integrate them. I highly recommend it to anyone contemplating directing a musical."

Jerry Zaks, Tony Award-winning director, *Guys and Dolls* and *Smokey Joe's Café*

"*Directing in Musical Theatre* is a splendid text for anyone wishing to explore directing for the musical stage. It deals with every essential aspect of this daunting task, and explains each with singular clarity and intelligence. The work is well organized, thorough, and completely accessible. Finally, here is a book that gets to the heart of this art."

Gregory Lehane, Professor – Former Head of Directing, Drama and Music, Carnegie Mellon University

"Joe Deer's *Directing in Musical Theatre* is a well-informed exploration of the musical theatre directing process that is filled with heart, intellect and spirit. If every director was required to read the chapter on staging alone, we would be blessed with productions more truthful, entertaining, and ultimately satisfying. This book, which equally balances craft with artistry, will be helpful to beginner and seasoned veteran alike."

Cary Libkin, Professor, Head of Musical Theatre Degree Programs, Penn State University

"Directing is a somewhat 'ethereal' job – those who do not do it have a hard time articulating what it is we exactly do as directors. I think this book is both practical and asks the right questions so that directors do not merely 'replicate' another show."

David Gram, musical theatre teacher, USA

Directing in Musical Theatre

An Essential Guide

Joe Deer

Foreword by Eric Schaeffer

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For Caitlin, who makes it all possible

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Foreword

I still remember that first moment when I became enthralled with the American musical. I was in my early teens, sitting in the orchestra of the Minskoff Theatre in New York City seeing my first Broadway musical, *West Side Story*. In a flash, colored ribbons dropped from the endless ceiling and flew out instantly to reveal the Jets and Sharks dancing at the gym. It was a magical moment that would change my life forever. From that moment on, I always knew that I wanted to be part of theatre.

There is no formula to directing a musical. This book will give you many ideas and suggestions but not the ultimate answer on how to direct a musical. It's impossible. Musical theatre is that unique animal that embraces emotions larger than life and turns them into a song or dance or both. It's a thrilling art form that uses more collaboration than any other. That can be both invigorating and challenging or exhausting. I never set out to be a director in the theatre. And I think that is a good thing. I learned my craft from every side of the footlights – acting, painting sets, designing props, designing costumes and producing. Having been part of every aspect of the theatre gave me a greater understanding not only of the director's role but also of the contributions that everyone makes to bring a production to life. I learned more by being in the trenches with everyone and I have a great appreciation of the role that each person plays in creating theatre. I learned so much from observing shows, watching rehearsals and seeing the way artists work. Musicals are all about collaboration – more than any art form. As the director, you're the captain of the ship. It's your job to make sure that everyone is rowing in the right direction. In creating musicals, everyone needs to leave their ego at the door so you have an open sea – a safe environment to create. It's the most important aspect of the creative process.

XVI FOREWORD

The wonderful thing about being a director is that no two projects are the same. There's no time to get bored in a job because each project brings about a different set of requirements for you to collaborate with artists. You have the opportunity to use their talents and ideas, ask the hard questions and be willing to take big risks. With all of these ingredients comes the most exciting creativity. You can't worry about failure. It's about creation and having limitless imagination. And with that, comes success.

As you begin to direct a show, the last thing that should be driving you is "making a hit"; hits aren't manufactured, they're created. In the end, it's all about storytelling and the clarity of that storytelling. If you tell the story and let the audience feel the emotion of the characters, the story will unfold itself. So many people want to add more sets, more lighting and more special effects. But, it has to all start with a great story and how you communicate that to an audience. As a director, we get to choose how to tell that story. We get to create a world for the musical to live in and discover a soundscape that will support the emotions of the piece.

Each show is different, which is what makes our job so exciting. Every day, writers are trying to break the mold and rediscover a new way to communicate with audiences. As directors, we get to be part of that process. We get to be pioneers as the form continues to change and evolve. But in the end, it goes back to the simplest of ideas and one basic question – what is the best way to tell the story? That is what makes great musical theatre. And that is why there is no formula.

Eric Schaeffer

Eric Schaeffer is co-founder and artistic director of Tony Award-winning Signature Theatre in Washington, D.C., where he has directed dozens of new and classic musicals. On Broadway he directed *Follies*, *Million Dollar Quartet*, *Glory Days* and *Putting It Together*. In London, he directed *The Witches of Eastwick* and *Million Dollar Quartet*.

Online content for ***Directing in Musical Theatre***

Many readers will use this book as an independent guide to help refine their directing process. And it works extremely well that way. But others will use this in a formal educational environment as part of a course they either teach or attend. For those readers, we have provided dozens of exercises, teaching guidelines, lecture slides, syllabi and checklists for assignments to help organize a course around this subject. You'll see an icon in the margins throughout this book that indicates a related exercise online at the *Directing in Musical Theatre* section of the Routledge website. You'll also find the syllabi, lecture notes and teaching tools there. Independent readers of the book may also find these exercises useful as they work through their own self-guided course.

Visit the website at www.routledge.com/cw/dalvera

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Many people helped make the journey of writing this book possible. I must start with Talia Rodgers, Ben Piggott and everyone at Routledge for supporting this project from the beginning and making me feel like a member of their publishing family. I also want to thank Don Corathers, Jim Palmarini and Julie York Coppens at the Educational Theatre Association, *Dramatics* magazine and the journal *Teaching Theatre* for opportunities to try out many of these ideas on their readers and members.

Directors learn by directing. A producer takes a huge leap of faith in hiring even a very experienced director, let alone a beginner. So, I offer my most gracious thanks to everyone who took that chance and let me learn to direct on their stage, but especially Teresa Stoughton-Marafino (Mountain Playhouse), Charles Tranter (Struthers Library Theatre), Michael Licata and Ron Iannone (West Virginia Public Theatre), the staff at Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma, and Kevin Moore and the late Marsha Hanna (Human Race Theatre Company).

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Directing is largely a visual medium. It would be impossible to express certain ideas without photographs to support them. So, I want to thank the photographers and theatres that helped provide these images. Laura Peters and Larry Pry (St. Louis MUNY), Joel Ferrell (Dallas Theatre Center), Scott J. Kimmins (Human Race Theatre Company), Matthew Benjamin and Don David (Wright State University), D. Lynn Meyers and Ryan Kurtz (Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati), Paul Kolnik and his assistant Courtney Collins (*The Producers* photos), Søren Møller (Fredericia Teater) and Ted Pappas (Pittsburgh Public Theater). Thanks, as well, to Brian Yorkey (Theatre Communications Group) and Zach Chotzen-Freund for use of a portion of *Next to Normal*.

It is no surprise that most directors were once performers and assistants to other directors. I acknowledge a deep debt to those directors and choreographers who taught me their craft by hiring me in one capacity or another, or by letting me simply watch them rehearse: Henry Scott Baron, Rick Conant, Marcia Milgrom-Dodge, Gerald Freedman, Jamie Jamison, Bobby and Sandy Karl, Neal Kenyon, Teressa Wylie McWilliams, Gary Slavin, Lee Theodore and Jerry Zaks.

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A few people have made a profound contribution to this project and to my work as a director. I have reserved them for last. My special thanks go to Steven Beckler, who generously opened many doors to the top levels of the musical theatre world. He has been a great supporter for so many years and changed my journey as a director. Similarly, Ira Weitzman at the Lincoln Center Theater has always supported my endeavors and made many connections possible in writing this book. My dear friend and trusted colleague Rocco Dal Vera offered his usual insights and encouragement along the way, as well as simply teaching me how

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Susan Stroman's staging of "*I Wanna Be a Producer*" from *The Producers* appears by permission of the director/choreographer.

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Gregg Barnes' costume design sketches and renderings for *The Drowsy Chaperone* appear courtesy of the designer.

Dunsi Dai's scenic design sketches, renderings and draftings for *Big River* appear courtesy of the designer.

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Introduction

A director's job in a musical

Directors tell stories. While others usually write those stories, the director guides their telling. He or she decides what's important to highlight in the text and how the story will be expressed, and then takes the audience on a journey into and



Figure I.1 Cast of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, Dallas Theater Center (director: Joel Ferrell; photo: Karen Almond).

2 INTRODUCTION

through that world. In a successful production of even the most complex script, the story emerges clearly and richly for the audience. Arriving at that kind of clarity takes a great deal of preparation and craft. In the musical theatre, this task can be geometrically more complex than in many plays. Yet, the obligation to guide your production with clarity remains. This book is for those of you who take on this task.

Directing a musical involves everything directing a play does – and more. The multilayered texts, logistical concerns and elevated performance styles of many musicals create a complex puzzle for the director to solve. These complexities, while essential and undeniable, can distract you from the central thrust of your job. The premise of this book is that your mandate, as director of a musical, is to guide the crafting of a *body* for the *spirit* of the musical to live in. The word “craft” is deliberate here because this book will help you develop skills and techniques to realize your ideas through collaboration with designers, actors, creative collaborators and everyone else you guide in the making of a production, which is the body that animates the spirit of your show.

This book is organized to follow the five phases of creating a successful musical production:

1. **Conception** – the period when you research, fantasize, analyze, conceive and articulate the theatrical world of your musical. Though a great musical production seems to spring full-born onto the stage in a way that suggests there is no other possible version of that story, someone read and listened to it and made choices about what story to tell and how everyone involved would tell it.
2. **Collaboration** – a director leads the charge for a small army of co-interpreters to tell the story he or she has drawn from the script and score. Designers, choreographer, musical director and all the many people who function with them need to have a clear sense of where they’re headed and whether they’re on the right track as they take the director’s inspiration and express it in their own discipline. This all begins in the second phase.
3. **Rehearsal** – when you assemble a cast to inhabit the detailed and amply realized world you’ve constructed with your partners. The cast is the newest group of collaborators to enter this world. While many people contribute great ideas in rehearsal, someone ultimately has to select the performance choices that add up to your production. For a musical, this also requires creating musical staging, which constitutes an entire new set of storytelling opportunities. In a talented group, you’ll have a lot to choose from. But, without an effective editor, your production will lack cohesion.

4. **Production** – when you bring the show you’ve rehearsed into the theatre and marry it to the physical and technical elements in ways that fulfill the imaginary world of your show. No single collaborator is responsible for maintaining and reinforcing an overall vision of the show in the same way as the director. And, though the musical director, choreographer and designers all have a myriad of details to attend to, none of them is expected to guide a show through the reefs and shoals of auditions, studio rehearsals, technical production and opening in the same way a director must.
5. **Performance** – when you bring an audience into the fully realized world of your show, and adjust performances and technical elements to maximize the audience experience. Although the greater part of a director’s job is completed by opening night, the last major part of your work is the important job of calibrating every element of a production and maintaining the intention and integrity of performances.

These are the functions you’ll prepare for as we work through the entire process of creating your musical. The goal of this book is to give you at least one way of doing everything required clearly and thoughtfully as you move from the fateful day of receiving the script to the end of the journey where you place that tattered binder on your shelf to gather dust.

What is a musical?

Musical theatre is a curious animal in the world of live performance. On one hand, it is exactly like a play, where you create an imaginary world for actors to play out the story. This involves interpretation and expression of the text, decisions about movement and behavior for each character, and visual communication of the world of the script through design and composition. Yet, with all these similarities, there is a great deal of difference in the theatrical world of most contemporary drama and that of musical theatre. Those differences fall into a few central areas:

Heightened text – Musicals require characters to sing their most passionate experiences. This simple act thrusts artists and their audience into another theatrical world. The effort that much contemporary drama exerts to make everything seem “like real life” gets tossed aside when a group of musicians begins playing underneath the stage and characters begin singing. And the text itself is sometimes poetic, intentionally witty, powerfully emotional and always tightly constructed. It is not Kitchen Sink Realism.

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Heightened behavior – Not only do characters express themselves in vocally different ways, but they often employ stylized behaviors that involve facing the audience directly, moving in highly organized choreographic patterns and abandoning the logic of typical daily activity for a vocabulary that leans more closely to concert dance. Yet, this is part of what makes a musical powerfully a musical.

Heightened visual expression – There are certainly no rules for how one expresses a play or a musical onstage. But, we tend to identify certain patterns and practices with different forms. Among these in the musical theatre are the ideas of amplified theatrical design and the elaborate use of bodies to create an imaginary world that invites the other conventions we talked about.

Heightened reality – All these heightened elements really add up to an elevated sense of reality. All theatre, film and television are artificial and carefully selected imitations of reality. But, musical theatre often puts artificiality downstage center as one of the appealing features of the art form. So, as some entertainments seek to convince us that things are completely “real,” the musical theatre embraces its own “un-realness” and makes a virtue of it.

The musical theatre is not for everyone. Detractors point to just this set of theatrical conventions as reasons they dislike musicals. Typically, they also rankle at the pure emotionality we associate with many musicals. But, those who like musical theatre, in all its forms, are often attracted to these theatrical opportunities and expectations. We go to the musical theatre to experience something big and to be swept up in the passion of the event, even in its most intimate moments. If you direct a musical, you’ll need to come to terms with these expectations. This book embraces them with the strong insistence they be employed with an equally heightened sense of truth and passion behind them. Good acting, spoken or sung, is not a negotiable element in any production. But, there are many forms of good acting, dance and singing.

Conventions of the musical theatre

In directing musicals from all periods, you’ll also discover their writers understood a few more central premises and expected them to be embraced.

Music tells the story – What makes a musical a *musical* is the practice of having characters burst (or gently slide) into song and dance to express their most passionate experiences. The pure emotionality of seemingly spontaneous singing, musical accompaniment and dance are the defining features of the musical theatre.