

“How Broadway became Broadway”

Course Syllabus, Winter 2024

UC Berkeley OLLI

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This course explores how Broadway became the focal point of American commercial theatre beginning with the city's expansion north of Wall Street in the 17th century to the tumultuous 19th century when immigration, economic upheaval, social divisions, industrial growth, and aesthetic changes led to Broadway becoming the heart of the professional theatre world. We will then trace how theatre became entertainment for the masses, and how industry sought to channel this success as both a means of social influence and political control, sowing the seeds for a new theatrical aesthetic, as well as commercial exploitation and audience manipulation, that would find a new home in the newest form of entertainment technology--film--leading inevitably to the decline of live stage in the mid-20th century.

The course offers a comprehensive exploration of the growth and development of professional theatre in New York City, specifically focusing on Broadway, from its inception to the turn of the 20th century. Through a combination of lectures, discussions, readings and audiovisual materials participants will delve into the key events, figures, and productions that shaped the evolution of American theatre, paving the way for the establishment of Broadway as a global theatrical hub.

Course Objectives:

1. Understand the historical context and societal factors that contributed to the emergence of professional theatre in New York City.
2. Examine the influential theatrical moments and styles that helped shape early American theatre.
3. Analyze the contributions of key individual and theatre companies in the development of Broadway.
4. Explore significant productions and their effect on the growth and reputation of Broadway.
5. Discuss the relationship between early American theatre and broader cultural, political, and economic developments.
6. Gain an appreciation for the artistic, social, and commercial aspects of theatre in early America.

Suggested Reference Texts:

Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Theatre & Drama*

Don B. Wilmeth, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Vol. I & II

Course Outline:

Week 1: Foundations of Early American Theatre

- Introduction to course and objectives
- Historical overview: From the first colonial performances to the establishment of the first professional theatre.

- Examining the influence of European theatre traditions on early American stages.
- Key figures in the early American theatre.
Play: *The Blockheads*, Mercy Otis Warren

Week 2: Theatrical Innovations and Early Successes

- The American Company and its contributions to the foundations of professional theatre
- The rise of the star performers and the influence on American theatre culture
- Romanticism and birth of American melodrama
- Discussion: The social and political implications of theatre in colonial America
Play: *The Contrast*, Royall Tyler

Week 3: Immigration, Minstrelsy, and the Rise of a Popular Theatre

- The establishment of a native aesthetic
- Immigration, caricature, and moral instruction
- Minstrelsy and racial representation
- The start of highbrow/lowbrow entertainment
- Discussion: How the city's growth changed theatre
Play: *Metamora*, Edwin Forrest

Week 4: The Theatre District and Entrepreneurship

- The emergence of the Broadway theatre district
- The Croton Aqueduct, Insurance, and theatre's firetraps
- Rise of the professional manager
- Case Study: The Astor Place Riots—Theatre as class and generational warfare
Play: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Week 5: Cultural Shifts and Artistic Movements

- Growth and spectacle—the rise of popular theatre
- Consolidation and combinations—Broadway moves west
- Paratheatrical amusement and the decline of “art”
- The rise of the female manager
- Discussion: How the Civil War changed theatre
Play: *The Poor of New York*, Dion Boucicault

Week 6: The Business of Broadway and How It Lost to Film

- The consolidation of Broadway's dominance
- The rise of monopolies and big business
- The rise of the director
- How cinema overtook the stage as the media of the masses
- Discussion: How we still see the 19th century in today's theatre
Play: *Margaret Fleming*, James A. Herne