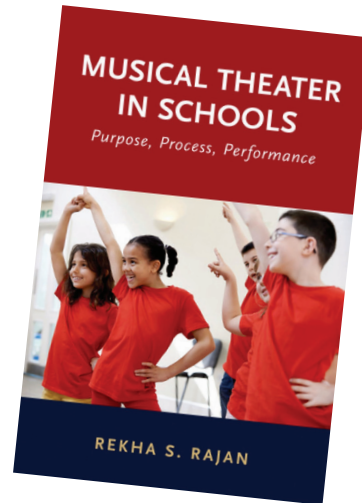


Reviewed by Jeaneau Julian

Musical Theater in Schools: Purpose, Process, Performance

Written by Rekha S. Rajan
Oxford University Press, 2019



My first experience with musical theater was as a senior in high school. I had the opportunity to see *The Phantom of the Opera* right after a band competition. The music was amazing, the set design was stunning, and even though my seat was at the very back of the auditorium, I was mesmerized. Later in my teaching career, this experience led me to ask, “How can educators share this type of experience with even our youngest students?” In *Musical Theater in Schools: Purpose, Process, Performance*, author Rekha S. Rajan shows us in four sections (three large “acts” and one shorter “encore”) how to bring musicals to life in our classrooms.

In Act One, Rajan shares her perspective on the purpose of musical theater. Is it something as simple as “a show on Broadway” or something more? She states, “Musicals at their very core, are the intersection between music, theater, dance, visual arts, and the multimedia arts.” According to Rajan, this is collaboration at its finest. She emphasizes, however, that rarely is this collaboration seen at the elementary and middle school levels. Students may sing songs from Broadway musicals in middle school or attend a show at the elementary level, but how are school curricula “drawing on the natural intersections between the arts (music, theater, dance, visual) and academics (gleaned from overarching themes of social justice, race, culture, and conflict)?”

Following a brief history of how musicals have evolved over time, Rajan discusses how they are deeply rooted in American history and culture. She

points out that, ironically, musicals are not included in core curricula of many school systems but are relegated to extracurricular or community settings. On a personal note, this brings to mind my friend’s daughter, who is actively involved in her local community theater. She enjoys it because of all the people she meets, making new friends and in her words, “the director is usually nice.” How many of our students would flourish in our classes if given the same opportunities within core curricula in school settings? If students have these opportunities, what should the repertoire be? Rajan offers suggestions for appropriate repertoire as well as how to connect the musicals to related subject matter and themed learning experiences for various ages.

Students may sing songs from Broadway musicals in middle school or attend a show at the elementary level, but how are school curricula “drawing on the natural intersections between the arts (music, theater, dance, visual) and academics (gleaned from overarching themes of social justice, race, culture, and conflict)?”

In Act Two, Rajan deconstructs musical theater down to its roots to help students make classroom and life connections. Using the 2014 National Core Arts Standards of Creating, Responding, and Connecting, Rajan provides lessons using the standards as examples of how to bring musicals into the classroom. Four lessons are provided for each standard for the following levels of instruction: early elementary (K–2), upper elementary (3–5),

middle school (6–8), and secondary school (9–12). Each lesson provides objectives, a materials list, corresponding standards, step-by-step procedures, extensions, and opportunities for and examples of assessment. Some of the lesson topics include: A *Beauty and the Beast* comparison (early elementary), STOMPing Around (upper elementary), A New Setting for *The Sound of Music* (middle), and What is *The Color Purple*? (secondary). This section of the book could immediately transfer to a wonderful lesson in the music classroom, a unit on musicals, or a collaboration with grade-level teachers. Using musicals is another great way to help our students connect to the world around them. Most of these lessons lend themselves to creative movement, rewriting lyrics, and connections to other subjects (history, language arts, and social studies). The lessons would be perfect for distance learning as well.

Act Three delves into the performance aspects of musical theater, providing multiple examples with unique contexts and settings related to auditions, casting, rehearsals, and performance. Included is a discussion of three different types of auditions (required, talent, and volunteer), with examples of students navigating the audition process of each through singing, dancing, and acting. Casting purpose and process is also discussed relative to the three types of auditions, as well as the role of the tech department. Act Three concludes with the rehearsal and performance process. Considering the multiple settings of rehearsals, Rajan suggests inclusion of the following processes: table read, acting rehearsal, characterization, musical rehearsal, dance rehearsal, tech week, and dress rehearsal. Each process is discussed in detail, giving examples for each part of the rehearsal as well as audience etiquette.

In the final Encore section of the book, Rajan challenges the reader with the realities of the life of a performer—the performer must show up or an understudy will be waiting to step in. Rajan also provides ideas for encouraging live performances, analyzing musical theater within the context of in-school learning, and attending and building professional development opportunities across disciplines. Inclusivity in casting shows is briefly addressed as well.

During my second year as a teacher, I had the opportunity to play clarinet in the pit orchestra of my school's production of *Les Misérables*. It was the first time I had ever been part of such a huge production. Music students held some of the main roles, and I was happy that my students experienced being a part of something bigger than themselves while still in secondary school.

In our ever-changing world, we must reflect on our political, social, and cultural climate. The lessons in this book have wonderful correlations to connect our students to this unique collaborative genre; I highly recommend it for all levels of teachers. Using musicals to express our daily lives can help our students become more empathetic to the experiences that exist in their communities around the world. ■

JEANEAU JULIAN is an elementary music educator in Little Rock, Arkansas. She completed her undergraduate degree in instrumental music education from the University of Oklahoma and earned a master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages from Arkansas Tech University. She has completed AOSA Teacher Education Levels I–III and currently serves as Region III representative on the AOSA National Board of Trustees.