

HOME THEATER

Broadway musicals on screen



'Guys and Dolls' (1955)

Joseph L. Mankiewicz's color-saturated widescreen adaptation of the Broadway hit often resembles a filmed stage musical. Not a complaint. "Guys and Dolls" is big entertainment — Michael Kidd's enthralling choreography is off the charts — and once you grow accustomed to its almost cartoony look and rhythm, you are swept away.

The stellar cast has Marlon Brando (in his only movie musical) as slick gambler Sky Masterson; Jean Simmons as the mission worker he woos on a bet; Frank Sinatra as "floating crap game" organizer Nathan Detroit; and Vivian Blaine as Nathan's not-getting-any-younger fiancée (who thinks 14 years is long enough for an engagement).

Sinatra made it clear that he wanted the Sky Masterson role. Perhaps as a message, the crooner kept Sky's signature song, "Luck Be a Lady," in his nightclub act.



'Oklahoma!' (1955)

In Fred Zinnemann's "Oklahoma!" (1955), strutting peacocky cowboy Curly (Gordon MacRae) pursues snooty beauty Laurey (Shirley Jones), who is also being stalked by sweaty hired hand Jud (Rod Steiger).

Meanwhile, Laurey's BFF Ado Annie (film *noir* queen Gloria Grahame), who "cain't say no," is caught between a fast-talking peddler (Eddie Albert) and a down-to-earth cowboy (Gene Nelson).

Steiger is a most improbable musical performer. But one year after "On the Waterfront," he sings a few lines and participates in choreography during a dream sequence.

Songs in this Rodgers and Hammerstein classic include "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," "The Surrey With the Fringe on Top," "Kansas City," "I Cain't Say No," "People Will Say We're in Love" and "Out of My Dreams."



'South Pacific' (1958)

Joshua Logan's "South Pacific" (1958) is a gorgeous musical soap opera in a World War II setting. Military nurse Nellie (Mitzi Gaynor), a gal from Little Rock, is courted by suave French planter Emile (Rossano Brazzi). The U.S. military brass want to use Emile's island for reconnaissance, and ask Nellie to spy on him.

Meanwhile, the Marine who sets up the lookout, Joe (John Kerr), falls hard for island girl Liat (terminally adorable France Nuyen), who is practically pimped off to him by her mom Bloody Mary (Juanita Hall).

Here's a plot point that plays oddly today: Nellie is ready to commit to Emile, but when she learns his late wife was Polynesian, it turns her off. The song "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" is about the handed-down resistance to mixing with someone of another ethnic background.



'Funny Girl' (1968)

How many people can you say conquered the movies in their film debut? Barbra Streisand did.

Reprising her role from the '60s Broadway musical based on the life of comedian Fanny Brice, Streisand is radiant and completely at home in front of the camera.

Omar Sharif co-stars as Nicky Arnstein, a suave gambler who recognizes early that ugly duckling Fanny is emerging into a swan. (There are nose jokes, and in "Sadie, Sadie," Streisand sings: "To tell the truth/It hurt my pride/The groom was prettier than the bride.")

We know Nicky isn't good husband material, but for Fanny, love is blind. The subtle emotion in one confrontation — more is unsaid than said — no doubt helped Streisand snag her Best Actress Oscar for "Funny Girl."

Walter Pidgeon is nicely spiffed up as Flo Ziegfeld.



'Grease' (1978)

Randal Kleiser's 1978 adaptation starring hot property John Travolta and Australian singer Olivia Newton-John is an anachronism. Though set in the late 1950s, "Grease" is a '70s experience at heart, recognizable as such from the opening strains of its radio-friendly disco theme song written by Barry Gibb and sung by Frankie Valli.

Setup: Macho Danny Zuko (Travolta) and sweet-natured vacationing Aussie Sandy Olsson (Newton-John) share an intense, fleeting summer romance. The lovebirds part ways hoping this won't be the end. But when Sandy unexpectedly remains in the United States and transfers to rowdy Rydell High School (which Danny attends), the couple's re-meet is less than lovey-dovey.

"Grease" is no "Top Hat," but it's fun and fast-moving, and Travolta and Newton-John have authentic chemistry.



'West Side Story' (2021)

Steven Spielberg's dazzling 2021 remake of the unforgettable 1961 production is less an update than a correction.

The "Romeo and Juliet"-inspired tale concerns star-crossed lovers from opposite sides of a turf war between rival gangs in 1950s New York: the (white) Jets and the (Puerto Rican) Sharks. No longer are Caucasians with darkened skin playing the Sharks and their girlfriends.

Spielberg remains true to the original despite taking some liberties. The songs are the same, for the most part, but the dialogue is new. The sets, color schemes, camera work and dancing are amped up. The soda shop proprietor, originally a white man, is now played by Rita Moreno from the first film. Luminous Ariana DeBose took home an Oscar as Anita, the same role for which Moreno won the award.

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