

*“Reading the Great White Way: Performance and Commercial Scripts of the American Musical Stage”*

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Last summer I went used book shopping in Chicago. As the cashier was ringing up my purchases she noted, "People don't usually buy our stuff in bulk!" I was buying up scripts for musical plays and comedies at a store that typically catered to actors who needed something to study prior to an audition, rather than to graduate students who study musical theater.

There are two main types of musical theater scripts in my collection. First are the performance scripts. As the name implies, these scripts are geared toward performers and directors. What is fascinating about these texts is that they include lighting cues, costume requirements, basic set designs, cues for actors, and even black and white set design photographs. While these scripts contain all the text and lyrics for a show, they do not include any musical notations. The music is reserved to performance scores, and comprises a whole other avenue of collecting that I have thus far managed to resist. As someone who is interested in understanding how musicals are performed as well as the actual written text itself, these scripts are invaluable. If nothing else, these scripts demonstrate that collaboration is central to musical theater. It is rare that a musical is the product of one person. The scripts also tend to be found in the unlikeliest of places. I found the performance script for Irving Berlin's *Call Me Madam* in a pile of opera music scores at a used bookstore in St. Andrew's, Scotland. It is such an American musical (a female ambassador—Ethel Merman in the original production—causes havoc in a fictional European country); I cannot help but wonder who originally owned the script and why.

The second type of musical theater scripts is much more common and commercialized. In contrast to the cheap paper and standardized covers, commercially published scripts—by such publishing houses as Random House—often have eye-catching covers, and may include introductions by luminaries of the theatrical world (theater critics, producers, lyricist, etc.). These scripts contain less technical information than performance scripts, and can be viewed as yet another form of tie-in merchandizing. Liked *The Producers*? Why not buy the mug and the script? These scripts are often valued by collectors for their covers, especially when the musical itself is rarely performed or if the musical has undergone revisions and the revised script has supplanted the former script. Ebay is the place to go if you want to pay upwards of \$80.00 for Steven Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*. I got lucky at yet another used bookstore and paid \$25.00 for mine.

I buy these musical scripts for practical reasons: I am writing my dissertation on the ways in which musicals deploy nostalgia, and thus shapes how Americans view their past. You just never know when a script will come in handy or when it will go out-of-print and become impossible to find. But I also buy these scripts because they are, for lack of a better word, nifty.

