

John Kander, Fred Ebb and Broadway

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John Kander and Fred Ebb were two of the greatest collaborating musical minds in musical theatre. Although not appreciated by all, their contribution to Broadway and the musical are recognized as a key influence to the genre. In this paper I will analyze the lives and collaboration of John Kander and Fred Ebb, their contribution to Broadway.

John Kander and Fred Ebb are two of the greatest partners that Broadway has ever seen. At first glance no one would have expected these two to create masterworks for the stage because they are so very different. The family lifestyles and musical backgrounds of these two are almost opposite of each other. But, their love for the stage and music and their friendship drove them to success.

John Kander was born March 18, 1927 and grew up in Kansas City, Missouri.¹ Kander had the picturesque American family. His father and mother showed off their affections for one another and passed this on to the rest of the family. Music was a common thing in Kander's family. In the evenings you would see the family gathered around the piano, his father would sing, "he had a big, booming baritone voice", mother would dance, and he would play the piano.² His family was always supportive of his musical endeavors.

¹ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. (New York: Grove's Dictionary, Inc., 2001); s.v. "Kander, John."

² Kander, John, and Fred Ebb, *Colored Lights, Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz, Collaboration, and All That Jazz* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2003), pp. 5.

Kander first started piano lessons with his aunt and moved on to Lucy Parrot when he was six. She was the neighborhood piano teacher, just a couple blocks down the road. She introduced Kander to new music and helped expand his knowledge of the musical repertoire. As Kander got older, he studied at a conservatory in Kansas City. It was there that he had his first experience with improvising, he had forgotten the last couple pages of Rachmaninoff's E-flat Major Prelude during a recital. His experience in front of crowds, such as recitals, was one the sparks that got him into writing.

The other spark was the musical theatre. Growing up his family would take him and his brother to musicals. The first musical Kander experienced was *Pins and Needles*. After that, he and his brother could not get enough of the theatre. He experienced *Aida*, *Madama Butterfly*, and when the family finally took a trip to New York, *Carousel*. From the start, music was a huge part of John Kander's life and his family's life. They are a big part of why he became so great.

Fred Ebb's childhood was different from Kander's. Fred Ebb was born April, 8 1932 in New York³. Ebb grew up in New York compared to Kander's Midwestern experience. Unlike Kander's parents, Ebb stated that "[he doesn't] believe his parents ever touched each other in [his] presence".⁴ Ebb's parents were not outwardly affectionate like Kander's. His father

³ *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. (New York: Schirmer Books, 2001); s.v. "Kander, John and Fred Ebb.

⁴ Kander, p. 7

worked all day selling clothes and he would come home and sit and read the paper. His parents would not speak until dinner was ready. His father was a blue collar kind of man that just wanted to make sure his family was fed and clothed.

No one in Ebb's family was musically inclined or interested in music. Ebb became interested in music by listening to records. He stated that he would "play and play [his records] until they turned white".⁵ This was the start of his future career. When he was old enough to go on his own, Ebb would pay to see Broadway shows, standing room only. *The Glass Menagerie* was the first show he saw on Broadway.

As a teenager and later college student Ebb started to write. He wrote lyrics, short stories, and poems. He heard of a man named, Phil Springer. Phil Springer was a well known composer for musicals and movies. This was an attempt to see if Springer thought that Ebb had any talent. Ebb had scribbled some lyrics on a matchbook and gave it to Springer. "He didn't seem particularly impressed, but at least it was a way for me to start a conversation to see if I had any talent or not" says Ebb.⁶ Springer was impressed though when Ebb wrote out the lyrics to *I Never Loved Him Anyhow*. Springer was so impressed that he sent it to a publisher and it was recorded by Carmen McRae.⁷

⁵ Kander, p. 8

⁶ Kander, p. 15

⁷ Kander, p. 15

Although Kander and Ebb were finding success individually, their big success would come when they meet and start to work together. Kander had been finding success on his own by saying “yes”. At an after party for *West Side Story*, Kander met Joe Lewis, the pianist for the company. After some time Lewis asked Kander for a favor. He needed a fill in for a show that he couldn’t make. Kander jumped on this opportunity. One thing led to another, and one day when he was accompanying for some auditions for the show *Gypsy* under Jerry Robbins, Jerry asked, “Would you like to do the dance arrangements on this new show with me?”⁸ Of course, Kander accepted and his name started to get out there.

For Ebb, he had already gotten and in with Phillip Springer, but Springer eventually had to move on. Ebb had success though with writing for a show in Chicago, *Put it in Writing*. The inspiration for Ebb’s lyrics to that musical came from his mother. She was so enamored by Elizabeth Taylor and her conversion to Judaism and the filming of Cleopatra. “That song really kept me in show business” Ebb comments on one of his numbers in the show.⁹

Both Kander and Ebb’s names were out there and they would soon meet. Tommy Valando, Kander’s publisher thought that Kander and Ebb would make a great partnership. In 1962 Valando set it up so Kander and Ebb could meet at Ebb’s apartment. “I was nervous the

⁸ Kander, p. 16

⁹ Kander, p. 18

way I always am, and you came to the door with a copy of the *Herald Tribune* under your arm.

It wasn't like you had brought me roses, but I thought that was rather nice", stated Ebb.¹⁰

This was the start of a beautiful friendship and partnership. The night that they met they sat down and wrote the music and lyrics to *Take Her, She's Mine* just to see how well they could work together. "It was the case of instant communication and instant songs" said Ebb.¹¹ This friendship would last a very long time. Of course as any relationship, they would have their quarrels.

Ebb: I don't remember anything being horrible. I remember it being unpleasant, but I don't remember screaming matches or anybody walking out of rooms—The kind of legendary stories you hear about other musicals and other people. I don't, unless I've forgotten something. I do tend to forget the bad stuff, but I don't remember anything being that bad.

Kander: I have an instinct—which Fred has always partly envied andd partly accused me of—of being able to sense when things are going to get really terrible and knowing when to leave the room.¹²

¹⁰ Kander, p. 20

¹¹ Kander, p. 21

¹² Jackson R. Bryer and Richard A. Davison, eds., *The Art of the American Musical* (New York: Grove's Dictionary, Inc., 2001).

Kander and Ebb never had a quarrel that hurt or hindered their relationship and writing. They did not want that stuff to get in the way of their careers. Because of this, they were able to write their first musical, *Flora, the Red Menace*.

Flora, the Red Menace, Kander and Ebb's first musical, is what really got their names out there. The musical is about Flora Mezaros, a wannabe fashion designer amidst the Great Depression. She finally finds a job at a department store and falls in love with Harry Toukarian. Harry tries to convert Flora to communist ideals, but this would cost Flora her job. Flora is stuck in a dilemma of choosing between her job and love. The musical featured Liza Minnelli, Judy Garland's daughter, as Flora and this was also Liza's big break. Liza almost did not get the part though. George Abbott, the show's director, did not like Liza when he first met her. He thought she would be good for a movie, but not a musical. Kander and Ebb on the other hand loved her the minute they met her. Abbott decided that she would not get the part and Ebb had to call Liza and give her the bad news. A few weeks later, the actress that Abbott hired could not do the show and they called back Liza upon Kander and Ebb's request. The show premiered May 11, 1965 and ran for only eighty-seven performances.¹³ Liza received very good reviews as the show ran. She was even compared to Jackie Kennedy by the *Daily News*.¹⁴ The rest of the show did not receive as warm of reviews though. Some critics described the writing as "childish" and

¹³ Kander, p. 35

¹⁴ Suskin, Steven. *More Opening Nights on Broadway "A Critical Quotebook of the Musical Theatre 1965 Through 1981"*. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997).

“simple minded”. The show was short-lived but it was a start and in got Liza her first Tony Award and it got the names of John Kander and Fred Ebb out in the public.

A musical that was considered a hit by Kander and Ebb was *Cabaret*. *Cabaret* is a musical within a musical. It is about the life of a cabaret performer, Sandy Bowles. The scene is set back in Berlin, Germany when the Nazis first start to rise to power. The musical follows the relationship of Sandy and Cliff Bradshaw, an American writer. *Cabaret* was considered a musical within a musical because on the musical comments that the character did not “notice” was being made by chorus during a scene.

One of the great things about *Cabaret* was the little “inside jokes” or the “poking fun” at the government and even the Nazis. Kander and Ebb loved to make there music fun. Being dark and serious was not their style. They were able to take a bad thing that happened in Germany and put it in an enjoyable musical. The song “Sitting Pretty”, while being an upbeat tune pokes fun at how Politicians and Military Leaders around the world are living the high life while the everyone else is poor and starving. We can see the connection with the military because of the use of “military drums” during an interlude in the song. The drums are given a cue to “march” while Emcee pulls out and American dollar to symbolize America “Sitting Pretty”. We also see Russia and Japan being poked at by the use of the “Russian Dance” and a gong cue when Emcee pulls out rubies and yen during the musical interlude.¹⁵ These are all anecdotes of how the Politicians and Military Leaders were “sitting pretty” while everyone else suffered. Not only did

¹⁵ John Kander and Fred Ebb. *Cabaret*. (New York: The New York Times Music Corp., 1968).

the music make fun of the rich and comfortable, but the original poster for the production also points out the overindulgent lives of the rich.



In the background among the patrons at the club, there is a pig in a suit sitting at the table. His formal wear points out that he is rich and living comfortably. The pig symbolizes the politicians, the rich, and the Nazis that were living the high life.

Cabaret premiered on November 20, 1966 in the Broadhurst Theatre. The original show ran for 1,165 performances.¹⁷ This won Kander and Ebb “Best Score” and it received eight

¹⁶ Kander and Fred Ebb, p. 1

Tony Awards. This musical was considered one of Kander and Ebb's finest. Critics did not have much to criticize when it came to the music and lyrics of *Cabaret*. Although the musical became a hit, the first premier was a flop. Ebb said, "Intermission came and that place nearly emptied out. They just left in droves. All you could hear outside was frantic screaming, 'Taxi! Get me out of here!' They just really hated it".¹⁸ It wasn't until the critics gave it good reviews that people came back. The musical was revised multiple times and songs and dances were added. The first revival only had 262 performances.¹⁹ It also made its way to the big screen. Liza made another appearance in Kander and Ebb's lives by starring as Sandy in the movie production of *Cabaret*.

Chicago is the production of Kander and Ebb that has mixed feelings by critics and audiences. *Chicago* is about a cheating wife, Roxie Hart, who murders one of her lovers. Roxie is sent to a women's penitentiary until her trial. While there, she meets her role model Velma Kelly, a Cabaret singer who murdered her sister and husband. The two women are both being represented by Billy Flynn. Flynn has never lost a case and his strategy is to make the public love the women and have sympathy for them. Roxie ends up taking the spotlight by faking a pregnancy and makes Velma jealous. When Roxie and Velma both get off for their crimes with an elaborate scheme only known about by Flynn, they pair up and become a two woman act in

¹⁷ Kander, p. 59.

¹⁸ Bryer, p. 102

¹⁹ Kander, p. 59

theatres. The show mocks the judicial system at how popularity in the public can get celebrities an easier sentence or completely free, like Roxie. The idea of mocking the system was part of the reason the show did not sit well with audiences. They thought it was a little too scandalous.

The musical was not a total hit with critics. Brooks Atkinson commented that one of the reasons that it wasn't a favorite was because it "[wasn't] realistic, [it was not] inconclastic...[it was] no more serious than a conspiracy between the authors and audience to have a good time."²⁰ Some critics thought that the show was just for kicks and giggles and lacked a sense of realism. They don't believe that it was a good representation of real life and it's only purpose was for entertainment. Some would say the musical was realistic because of the use of media that creates popularity and celebrities out of criminals and conspirators that are caught in scandals, like politicians. We even see this now with celebrities and politicians who do not get the same sentence as someone who is not the center of the media. One of the numbers in the musical, *Razzle Dazzle*, speaks to this issue. In the scene Billy Flynn is explaining to Roxie how to get the media on her side and get off on her crime. The song refers to giving the media and jury the "razzle dazzle...and they'll never catch wise", implying that they just need to pull the wool over their eyes and they will not know the difference. It also refers to how the media will "make you a star" if you just give them a good story, which is exactly what Roxie Hart did.²¹

²⁰ Mark N. Grant. *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

²¹ Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse. *Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville*. (York: Chappell Music Company, 1975).

Hints of mocking the “system” is found everywhere in this musical. Almost every number has some kind of pun in it that refers to working the system. The number “When You’re Good to Mama” is one of them. This number makes fun of the faulty system within the jails. It talks about how the jail warden, Mama, will do favors for you if you do favors for her. One line states, “the system works, the system called reciprocity” it goes on to say “there’s a lot of favors I’m prepared to do”.²² This is referring to how the warden would get publicity and other items such as cigarettes and make-up if the women in the penitentiary would pay her. The musical also picks on the lawyers. The number “All I Care About is Love” is a piece that sarcastically states that the lawyer that would get Roxie off only cared about love and not money. Obviously lawyers are out for more than just love, they mostly just want to get paid at the end of the day. They are not that interested in your sob story.

The critics of *Chicago* picked on more than just the realistic aspect of the musical, but they also picked on its “resemblance of *Cabaret*”.²³ Walter Kerr from the *Times* compared it to *Cabaret* because of a lot of the scenery and aspects of the girls. The story-line is based on Germanic Chicago, just like *Cabaret* was based in Germany. Next, Kerr compared the use of a Cabaret. A Cabaret is where Roxie wanted to end up, she wanted to be a singer. Kerr thought that *Chicago* was just a repeat of *Cabaret* with new songs and a slightly different story-line.

²² Ebb, p. 22

²³ Suskin, p. 165

Although critics thought that the show was overdone, cynical, and unrealistic, it still managed to run 923 times when it opened in the summer of 1975.²⁴ It was able to recover from the critics and later turn into a movie that Ebb collaborated on. After over 25 years, the big screen version of *Chicago* came out in 2002.²⁵ Unlike on Broadway, the movie was a big hit. It featured big actors such as Catherine Zeta Jones, Renee Zellweger, and Queen Latifah. Even though the musical did not win any Tonys, the movie received six Academy Awards.

Due to their great collaboration and endurance through hard times, I believe that John Kander and Fred Ebb deserve a spot as one of the greats in Broadway. Their use of witty lyrics and catchy tunes show their uniqueness in the business. They have been able to write great musicals that have stood through the ages and proved themselves in time. I would go as far to say that they were ahead of their time in their writings. They were not received as well in their time as they are now.

²⁴ Kander, p. 119

²⁵ Kander, p. 207

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