

# 42<sup>nd</sup> Street

## Study Guide

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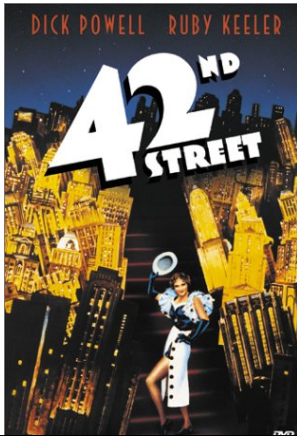
## THE STORY OF THE PLAY

Based on the classic 1933 movie musical of the same name, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, tells the story of a starry-eyed young actress named Peggy Sawyer who has come from Allentown, PA to audition for the new Julian Marsh musical that is about to open on Broadway. Unfortunately, Peggy can't seem to work up the courage to walk through the stage door until it's too late – the auditions are over. However, all is not lost; Peggy soon catches the eye of the famous director, and when the chorus turns up one girl short, she gets her big break. But all through the rehearsals Peggy just can't seem to stay in the good graces of the show's leading lady, Dorothy Brock. And when on opening night, another dancer accidentally pushes Peggy into Ms. Brock who falls and breaks her ankle, the furious director fires Peggy on the spot. Discouraged and ready to give up all of her dreams, Peggy packs her bags and heads for the train station. But fate has other plans. With the show doomed not to open, panic spreads through the company, until the cast and producers convince Mr. Marsh to give Peggy the lead role. In only two days, Peggy learns twenty-five pages of dialogue, six songs, and ten dance numbers, and a star is born!



*42<sup>nd</sup> Street* premiered at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in July, 1980, and then moved on to Broadway a month later. It was an immediate hit, but the opening night triumph was overshadowed by tragedy. Following eleven curtain calls, producer David Merrick came onstage to announce that director/choreographer Gower Champion had died of cancer just hours before the performance. The show went on to win the Tony Award for Best Musical and many other accolades. A 1984 London production also was voted Best Musical and a Broadway remounting in 2001 won the Tony for Best Revival of a Musical.

## DISCUSSION IDEAS AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES



42<sup>nd</sup> Street Movie Poster

### 1. THEME

The 1933 film on which the play is based was strictly escapist entertainment. It contained very few of the interpretative thematic elements which serious works of art offer, and the 1980 show was designed to resemble its predecessor. But both *42<sup>nd</sup> Streets* carefully camouflage a theme which had particular significance for its 1933 audiences, and perhaps today again, as well. This is the idea that if someone worked hard at what he or she did well, then success would result. Peggy Sawyer rises to the front of the chorus line and into the starring role because she is the best dancer in the company. Julian Marsh's show is a hit because he is a skilled and imaginative director. Even Dorothy Rock achieves happiness by retiring from show business and marrying the man she loved for years. In the worst year of the Great Depression, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* offered encouragement to those who were struggling. Its optimism suggests that there was hope for those who were willing to work for it.

Discuss with your class why this might be a good time to once again revive *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Have students research the Great Depression and draw contrasts and comparisons with the nation today. Have them specifically look into Franklin Delano Roosevelt's W.P.A., the largest new Deal agency that, among other things, operated large arts, drama, media, and literacy projects. Do they think that is something incoming President Obama should consider? Ask students to think of different reasons why art, especially "escapist entertainment", might thrive during times of crisis.



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt

### 2. CHARACTER

None of the characters in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* has the complexity of those one would find in the literature usually studied in school. Rich characters grow and change in ways that flat characters, such as Billy Lawlor and Pat Denning of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* do not. But these characters each fit the stereotypical requirements of the stock situation around which the plot of the play revolves. The fading director needs a hit show; the unknown dancer needs a vehicle for fame. Such axioms predetermine the characters' traits.

Have your class define the following terms: character, plot, stereotype, stock situation, and axiom. After seeing the show, ask your students which characters were the most interesting to them and why. Often the way a character develops or changes may be the major action of a play. After two decades of playwriting Maxwell Anderson came to the conclusion that discovery was the most important thing in all drama. He meant the discovery by the main character of something about the world or about the self that made

him or her, even in failing, a better person. Have your students compare any character in the play to one they are reading in a novel or play at school. Ask which is the more compelling character and why they think that is so.

### 3. The “BACKSTAGE MUSICAL”



A statue of George M. Cohan, stands opposite Times Square, the inscription quotes his most famous song “give my regards to Broadway.”

The stock nature of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'s characters does not diminish the play as a high quality example of its genre. In fact, it is perhaps the archetypal “backstage musical.” This genre has been a part of the history of musical theatre since at least 1909. That was the year that vaudeville veteran George M. Cohan (who performed at the Fulton Opera House) turned maker of book musicals by creating *The Man Who Owned Broadway*. The idea of writing an original book for a musical was still young. Up to that time, bookless vaudeville or musical extravaganzas based on epic stories like *The Wizard of Oz* dominated the Broadway stage. But around 1904, Cohan began to domesticate musicals, to make them less operetta and extravaganza-like. And a backstage musical was a natural subject for a man who'd been in the theatre since he was born.

It might be interesting for your students to compare two backstage musicals that were both adapted from movies. Coincidentally, the Broadway revival of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* opened within a few weeks of the opening of the huge Broadway hit *The Producers*. Like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* this second musical started as a film of the same name, though of a much more recent vintage. Since the musical version of *The Producers* is available on DVD, you can have your class compare and contrast the two shows. Your class may discover that while both shows have Busby Berkeley style production numbers, they are very different in emphasis. *The Producers* has some extravagantly staged numbers, but is a comedy in which the book drives the songs and dances. *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, on the other hand, is all about great dancing and songs, with book and cleverness taking a back seat. If time allows, your class might even benefit from comparing the musical and original non-musical film versions of the Mel Brooks piece. They can look for the changes Brooks made when converting his straight comedy to a musical and examine their thoughts on his reasons for those changes.

### 4. SONG WRITING.

Good musical theatre composers use their songs to set mood, develop character, capture a time and place, and further the story.

After coming to see *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* have your students discuss the effective of the music in the play. Then they can try their own hand at song writing, or at least at being lyricists.

The title song of our play is the name of a very famous street in New York City where one can “come and meet those dancing feet.” 42<sup>nd</sup> Street at Time Square is at the heart of the theatre district in the city. Have everyone in your class think of an interesting street in your city. It can be a busy main thoroughfare or a quiet residential block. Have them write a short rhyming poem about their pick, trying to capture its character.

## **OTHER THEATRICAL OPPORTUNITIES** **on *Prince Street***

### **School Day Performances**

*The Unexpected Guest* - Feb 10, 2009 10:00

*The Spitfire Grill* - Mar 24, 2009 10:00

*The Foreigner* - May 12, 2009 10:00

To reserve a school day performance for your school, please contact Michelle in the  
Fulton Box Office at 717-397-7425.

## **REFERENCES**

### **BOOKS**

Barrios, Richard. *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film.*

Bush, Jones John. *A Social History of the American Musical Theatre.*

Green, Stanley. *Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre.*

Howard, Donald S. *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy.*

Miller, Scott. *Strike Up The Band: A New History of Musical Theatre.*

Rubin, Martin. *Showstoppers” Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of the Spectacle.*

Sennett, Ted. *Hollywood Musicals.*

Smith, Jason. *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works.*

### **ON THE INTERNET**

*All Musical website*

*Curtain Up: The Internet Magazine of Reviews, Features, Annotated Listings website*

*Musical Heaven website*

*Musicals 101 website*

*Broadway Database website*