

EVENTS

Love theater? Here’s a book that explains why

BY MICHAEL MERSCHEL  
THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS  
(TNS)

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE AMERICAN MUSICAL: HOW BROADWAY SHOWS ARE BUILT, by Jack Viertel; Sarah Crichton Books (336 pages, \$28)

Jack Viertel changed my theatergoing life, and he may change yours.

A few years ago, I had the extreme good fortune to sit in on a couple of the Broadway veteran’s lectures. Over the sessions — one in a classroom and one in a living room, where he was accompanied by a singer and a pianist and a wine bar, which is really how these things ought to be done — he delivered terrific trivia, dry humor and a fascinating explanation of the architecture that holds up classic musicals.

I saved my recordings of those sessions and have listened to them repeatedly, always marveling at his insight. My only complaint was that I couldn’t share the experience with anyone who hadn’t been there.

Now I can. “The Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built” is a delightful, accessible guide to why your favorite productions work. It’s a little bit history, a little bit memoir, a little bit criticism and, for any

theater fan, a whole lot of fun.

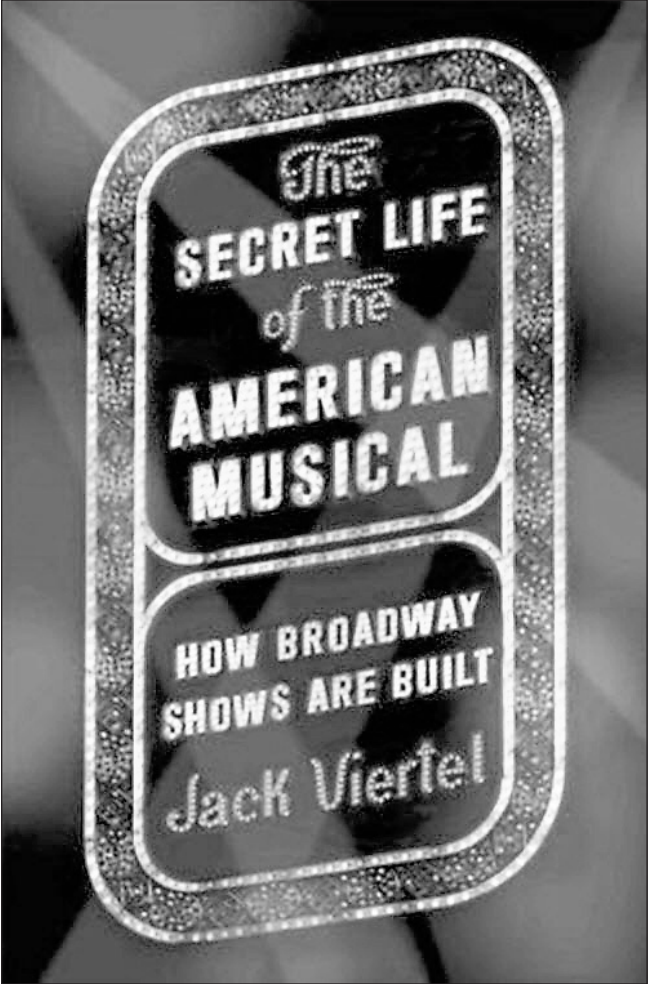
Musical theater, he tells us, is “the intersection of craftsmanship and the irrationally thrilling.” The book explains the craftsmanship that goes into making those thrills.

As a man with stage credentials dating back generations — his grandfather built Broadway theaters, and Viertel has been hooked since he was 5 and saw Mary Martin in “Peter Pan” — it’s no surprise that he focuses on Golden Age musicals, which he defines as the era from “Oklahoma!” in 1941 to “A Chorus Line” in 1975. But he’s no fuddy duddy and celebrates shows as contemporary as “Book of Mormon” and “Hamilton.”

His basic premise boils down to this: Successful musicals share key ingredients that make them work. Failed musicals can be explained by their deviation from the pattern.

For example: Great shows share a great opening number that explains what the audience is in for. Classic case studies would be “Comedy Tonight,” which turned “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum” from a flop into a hit, and “Tradition,” which caused a complete reworking of “Fiddler on the Roof.” (I can pause if you need a moment to finish humming.)

Next, a show needs a sympathetic character and a goal. Think of Little Orphan Annie, aching for



her parents in “Maybe.” (“Won’t you please come get your baby ... maybe.”) Or Eliza Doolittle, longing for “a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air.”

Viertel explains why this matters: “The hero has to want something that’s hard to get, and go after it come what may.” A contrast between Eliza’s eternally compelling “My Fair Lady” with the same composers’ subsequent,

less-enduring “Camelot” explains the power of having leads that the audience cares about: Eliza, a simple woman, longs for love and warmth; King Arthur and the “elegant, overbred and deeply entitled Guinevere” sing about how they want to be left alone, “and our instinct is to oblige them and let them go get a drink.”

Once the plot is in motion, audiences are ready

for a big song and dance number — because “the energy in a theater has to move in both directions. The audience reacts to shifts in tone and mood and tempo by sending out its own burst of applause, laughter and even tears. ... Theater is about engagement in the moment.”

Viertel can make these declarations — and many more, about love songs, showstoppers, star power and other key elements — because of his credentials. In addition to his family lineage, he has worked as a theater critic and dramaturge, and is senior vice president at Broadway heavyweight Jujamyn Theaters. He played key roles in developing shows from “Angels in America” to “Smokey Joe’s Cafe.” So he has firsthand anecdotes about crucial decisions that made them work — or not.

Part of the book’s charm is that he’s as willing to discuss his brilliant moments — in “M. Butterfly,” his observations reshaped the climax — as his mistakes.

You can trust a writer who acknowledges that his “first dramaturigical note” was delivered when he was 16 and seeing “Man of La Mancha” during try-outs. His unsolicited advice to the producer: Cut “The Impossible Dream.”

Is he saying there is a

simple formula for Broadway success? Well, no, or there would never be a flop.

He reminds us that theater is more than just words: “It’s the word made flesh. Sometimes a light cue can make you cry. Sometimes an actor turning toward or away from another actor can tell more of the story than all the words a playwright could think up.”

His analysis is never academic, but in order to enjoy it you’re going to need to know your show tunes. If you come across one you’re unfamiliar with, he provides a discography detailing every show he mentions and a separate one for all the shows he leaves out. (If you’ve already spent your allowance on a theater subscription, I found almost all of them on Spotify.)

It would be easy to adore any book that gives us an excuse to blast a good tentpole number in the middle of a commute, but here is the true secret behind why I’m applauding Viertel: In a world where, in some quarters, Doritos ads pass as serious entertainment, “The Secret Life of the American Musical” makes us appreciate the art of making art. It’s more hard work than mystical, but when it comes together, it’s lovely indeed.

Things to Do

BANGOR — “Search Images,” wood block prints by artist Amy Guadagnoli, through April 14, Robert E. White Gallery, Husson University. Amy Guadagnoli, 370-9202 or art@amyguadagnoli.com; Kathi Smith, smithk@husson.edu.

BLUE HILL — “The Art of the Book” exhibit, during library hours through March, Howard Room glass cases, Blue Hill Public Library, 5 Parker Point Road. 374-5515.

BLUE HILL — Rainbow Warriors writing group for ages 12 to 18, 4-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Blue Hill Public Library. Open to artists, gamers, readers, movie enthusiasts, bakers, crafters, social justice warriors and more. Discussion, writing prompts, games. Libby, 374-5515.

BROOKLIN — Soup, chili and chowder challenge, 5:30-8 p.m. Saturday, March 12, Brooklin School, Bay Road. Benefits school’s Parent-Teacher-Friend Association. facebook.com/Brooklin-School-PTF-289729314409929/ or mollybdesigns@gmail.com.

BRUNSWICK — Concerts for a Cause, featuring Ellis Paul, 7:30 p.m. Saturday, March 12, Unitarian Universalist Church of Brunswick, 1 Middle St. \$20 in advance; \$22 at the door. Tickets available at the church office, 729-8515; Gulf of Maine Books, 729-5083; or uucbpaul.brownpapertickets.com. Benefits church and local nonprofits.

BRUNSWICK — Maine Jewish Film Festival: “Touchdown Israel,” 8 p.m. Saturday, March 12; “Frank Vs. God,” 2 p.m. Sunday, March 13; “Rock in the Red Zone,” 5 p.m. Sunday, March 13, Frontier Theater, 14 Maine St. 523-3422 or filmfest@mjff.org.

BRUNSWICK — Ninth annual Dinner to Fight Hunger to benefit Mid Coast Hunger Prevention Program, Monday, March 14, Henry and Marty Restaurant and Catering. All proceeds,

including drink sales and tips, benefit MCHPP. Features three-course prix-fixe menu of locally sourced food for \$50 per person. Reservations required. 721-9141.

EASTPORT — Knights of Pythias Anchor Lodge 41, 6:30-7 p.m. Fridays, March 11 and 25, Eastport Youth Center, Barren Road. 904-7663 or anchorlodgeno41@yahoo.com.

EASTPORT — Sunday Afternoons at the Eastport Arts Center series, 3 p.m. Sundays, except Easter: Fraser-Allard family recounting their seven-month-long sailing journey to the Bahamas and back, March 13; staged reading by Stage East, March 20. Free and open to all. Hot drinks and refreshments offered. Donations accepted.

HAMPDEN — Hampden Kiwanis Club monthly Texas Hold’em Poker Tournament, 11 a.m. Saturday, March 12, Hampden Kiwanis Civic Center. Doors open 10:30 a.m. \$103. Benefits Hampden Kiwanis charities. Keith, 346-9949.

HAMPDEN — Baked bean supper, 4:30-6 p.m. Saturday, March 12, Hampden Goodwill Riders Snowmobile Club, 844 Western Ave. \$7; \$3 children.

HINCKLEY — Author Naya Clifford talking about her book “Into the North Woods,” 6 p.m. Thursday, March 10, Moody Chapel, Alford Campus, Kennebec Valley Community College, Route 201. Free and open to all. David Smith, 453-3507 or dsmith@kvcc.me.edu.

HINCKLEY — Beatles for Sale, a Beatles tribute band, 7 p.m. Friday, March 11, Moody Chapel, Alford Campus, Kennebec Valley Community College, Route 201. BeatlesForSale.net.

MACHIAS — Passamaquoddy Bay Symphony Orchestra Music for Children Program production of “Hansel and Gretel,” dress rehearsal, 3 p.m. Sunday, March 13, University of Maine

at Machias. Admission by suggested donation of \$15; free to children. June Gregory, 213-9145 or june.gregory@gmail.com.

OLD TOWN — Wednesday trivia nights, 7-9 p.m. Wednesdays, through April 6, Old Town American Legion Post 75, 20 Water St. \$1. Teams will be set up. Food, drinks and 50/50. Open to public. 827-4378.

PORTLAND — Maine Maritime Museum’s fifth annual Voices of the Sea, 7 p.m. Thursday, March 10, Bull Feeney’s, 375 Fore St. Doors open, 6:30 p.m. Cash bar. \$12 museum members; \$15 others. 443-1316 or info@maritime.org.

ROCKLAND — Snow Day Camp available to children ages 5-10 on days school is canceled because of snow, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., First Universalist Church, 345 Broadway. Breakfast, lunch and two snacks. Organized activities. Deposit of \$15 per child to reserve space and \$15 per child per snow day. If there are no snow days, the deposit will be returned. Limited to 30. 370-7887 or uursnowdaycamp@uurockland.org.

WATERVILLE — Maine Jewish Film Festival reception, 6:30 p.m.; screening of “Touchdown Israel: Tackle Football in the Holy Land,” 7:30-9 p.m. Saturday, March 12, Railroad Square Cinema, 17 Railroad Square. Festival will feature 25 films. Other venues include Nickelodeon Cinemas, Maine College of Art and Portland Museum of Art in Portland; Bates College Olin Arts Center in Lewiston; Frontier Cafe and Cinema in Brunswick. Tickets available at Brown Paper Tickets or by phone at 800-838-3006. mjff.org.

WATERVILLE — Maine Jewish Film Festival: “Once in a Lifetime,” 7-9 p.m. Thursday, March 17, Railroad Square Cinema, 17 Railroad Square. 523-3422 or filmfest@mjff.org.

WINTER HARBOR — “Fly

Away Home,” 3-5 p.m. Sunday, March 20, Moore Auditorium, Schoodic Institute, 9 Atterbury Circle, Acadia National Park. Rated PG. \$3 at the door. 288-1310 or info@schoodic-institute.org.

For a complete listing of calendar items or to submit your event, visit www.bangordailynews.com.

Thursday prime time

MOVIES

	7 PM	7:30	8 PM	8:30	9 PM	9:30	10 PM	10:30	11 PM
BROADCAST	2 NBC 207 Inside Ed.	You, Me and		Law & Order: SVU	Shades of Blue (N) [R]	News			
	4 CBC The Nature of Things [R]	Firsthand (N)		The National (N)	CBC Coronation	At the Table			
	5 CBS Big Bang	Broke Girl	Big Bang	Life in	(:01) Mom [R]	Broke Girl	Elementary (N) (HD) [R]	News	
	52 CW Family Guy	Family Guy	DC's Legends		The 100 (N) (HD) [R]	Seinfeld [R]	Cougar		
	6 NBC 207 Inside Ed.	You, Me and		Law & Order: SVU	Shades of Blue (N) [R]	News			
	7 ABC Wheel	Jeopardy! [R]	Grey's Anatomy (N) [R]	Scandal (N) (HD) [R]	Get Away With Murder	News			
	WAGM FOX The Insider	Ent. Tonight	American Idol Six finalists perform. (N) [R] (HD) [R]		News	Big Bang	Big Bang		
	8 ABC Wheel	Jeopardy! [R]	Grey's Anatomy (N) [R]	Scandal (N) (HD) [R]	Get Away With Murder	News			
	MPBN PBS PBS NewsHour (N) (HD)	Tribute to Downton Abb	Doc Martin [R]		ADD and Loving It! [R]				
	9 IND Get Away With Murder	Big Bang	DC's Legends		Goldbergs	News-Lisa	CTV News	Daily Show	
KIDS	13 CBS Ent. Tonight	The Insider	Big Bang	Life in	(:01) Mom [R]	Broke Girl	Elementary (N) (HD) [R]	News	
	22 FOX Mod Fam	Mod Fam	American Idol Six finalists perform. (N) [R] (HD) [R]		Happy Days	Laverne	FOX 22 News at 10 (N)	Mentalist	
	33 IND M'A'S'H [R]	M'A'S'H [R]	Andy Griffith	Andy Griffith			Hogan Hero	Hogan Hero	C. Burnett
	38 IND Big Bang	Big Bang	The Mentalist (HD) [R]		The Mentalist (HD) [R]		WBZ News (N) (HD)	Seinfeld [R]	
NEWS	NICK Paradise	Henry	** Diary of a Wimpy Kid (2010)	Zachary Gordon.			Full House [R]	Full House [R]	Friends [R]
	DISN Bunk'd [R]	Bunk'd [R]	*** Up (2009)	Voices of Ed Asner.	K.C. Under.		Best Fr.	Liv-Mad.	Bunk'd [R]
	FREE	** John Tucker Must Die	(:15) *** Grease (1978, Musical)	John Travolta, Olivia Newton-John. (PG)					700 Club
LEARN	HIST Vikings [R]	Vikings [R]	Vikings [R]	Vikings [R]	Vikings (N) [R]	Join or Die			
	DISC Fast N' Loud (ESP) [R]	Fast N' Loud (ESP) [R]	Fast N' Loud [R]		Fast N' Loud [R]	Fast-Loud			
	TLC My 600-Lb. Life [R]		My 600-Lb. Life	Extreme Weight Loss [R]			Fat Chance		
	A&E The First 48 [R]		The First 48 (N) [R]		60 Days In Civilians become undercover inmates. (N) [R]		The First 48		
SPORTS	ANPL River Monsters [R]	River Monsters [R]	River Monsters [R]		River Monsters	(:02) River Monsters [R]	Super Croc		
	CSNE SportsNite	Early	Blazers	Mt. Report	Game 365	Check	Sports	SportsNite	Check
	ESPN College Basketball: ACC Tournament				College Basketball ACC Tournament	-- TBA vs. Miami. (N) [R]			
	ESPN2 College Basketball				College Basketball Big Ten Tournament	-- TBA vs. Wisconsin. (N)	Basketball		
NEWS	NBCSP College Basketball: Atlantic 10 Tournament				College Basketball Atlantic 10 Tournament	-- TBA vs. Davidson. (N)			
	NESN NHL Hockey Carolina Hurricanes at Boston Bruins. (N) [R]				Bruins	Sports	Instigators	Sports	
NEWS	CNBC The Profit		Shark Tank [R]		Shark Tank [R]		Shark Tank [R]		Greed
	CNN Erin Burnett OutFront (N)		Cooper 360	CNN Republican Debate (N) [R]					Post Debate
	FNC Greta Van Susteren		The O'Reilly Factor (N)		The Kelly File (N)		Hannity (N)		Kelly File
	MSNBC Hardball		All in With Chris Hayes		Rachel Maddow Show		The Last Word		Hardball
VARIETY	AMC (5:30) The Italian Job		*** The Bourne Identity (2002) (ESP)	Matt Damon. (PG-13)		Terminator 3: Machines			
	BRV Top Chef [R]		Top Chef [R]		Top Chef (N) [R]		Recipe for Deception (N) [R]	Happens	
	CMT Last Man	Last Man	Last Man	Last Man	Party Down South (N) [R]		Redneck Island (N) [R]	Down South	
	COM South Park	South Park	Tosh.0 [R]	(:27) Tosh.0	Tosh.0 [R]	(:29) Tosh.0	Workaholics	IdiotSitter [R]	Daily Show
	E! E! News (N) [R]		Hollywood Medium		Hollywood Medium		Hollywood Medium		E! News [R]
	FOOD Chopped [R]		Chopped [R]		Chopped [R]		Beat Bobby	Beat Bobby	Beat Bobby
	FX (5:00) American Hustle (R)		* Grown Ups (2010)	Adam	Sandler. (PG-13)		Baskets (N)	Baskets [R]	Baskets
	GAC You Live in What? [R]		You Live in What? [R]		You Live in What? [R]		Treehouse	Treehouse	Treehouse
	HALL Last Man	Last Man	Last Man	Last Man	The Middle	The Middle	The Middle	The Middle	Green Girls
	HGTV Flip or Flop	Flip or Flop	Flip or Flop	Flip or Flop	Flip or Flop	Flip or Flop	Hunters	Hunters	Five Day
PREMIUM	LIFE Project Runway All Stars [R]		Project Runway All Stars [R]		Project Runway All Stars [R]		Child Genius: Battle		All Stars
	MTV Ridiculous. (c:45) Ridiculousness [R]		Ridiculous. (c:45) Ridiculousness [R]		Ridiculous. (c:45) Ridiculousness [R]		Ridiculous. (c:45) Ridiculousness [R]		Ridiculous. (c:45) Ridiculousness [R]
	OXY (6:00) ** Burlesque (2010)		Cher.	(:40) ** Burlesque (2010, Drama)	Cher, Christina Aguilera, Eric Dane. (PG-13)				
	SPIKE (6:00) ** Sherlock Holmes (2009, Action)		(PG-13)	Lip Sync	Lip Sync Battle [R]		Lip Sync	Iron Man 2	
	SYFY (6:30) *** The Fifth Element (1997)		Bruce Willis. (PG-13)		*** The Rundown (2003, Adventure)	The Rock. (PG-13)			
	TBN Drive	Potters	Trinity	Joel Osteen	Prince	Hillsong TV	Praise the Lord		
	TBS Seinfeld [R]	Seinfeld [R]	Broke Girl	Broke Girl	Big Bang	Big Bang	Broke Girl	Broke Girl	Conan (N) [R]
	TCM A Thunder of Drums (NR)		** M (1951) David Wayne. (NR)		(:45) ** The French Line (1954) Jane Russell. (NR)				
	TCM ** Meet Joe Black (1998, Fantasy)		(ESP) Brad Pitt, Anthony Hopkins. (PG-13)		*** Kate & Leopold (2001) (PG-13)				
	TNT Castle [R]		NBA Basketball Chicago Bulls at San Antonio Spurs. (N)				NBA Basketball		
SHOW	TRAVEL Mysteries at the Museum		Mysteries at the Museum		Mysteries at the Castle [R]		Mysteries at the Museum		Mysteries at the Museum
	TRU Imp. Jokers	Imp. Jokers	Imp. Jokers	Imp. Jokers	Imp. Jokers	Imp. Jokers	Those Who		Late Snack
	TVL Andy Griffith	Andy Griffith	Everybody Raymond		Raymond	Raymond	Raymond	Raymond	King
	USA NCIS [R]		WWE SmackDown! (N) [R]				Colony (N) [R]		Law-SVU
	VH1 Mob Wives [R]		Larger Than Life		Love & Hip Hop [R]		The Jacksons: An American Dream [R]		
	WGN-A Elementary (Part 2 of 2) [R]		Elementary [R]		Elementary [R]		Underground [R]		How I Met
	ENC Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible Day		*** The Nutty Professor (1996, Comedy) (ESP)	Eddie Murphy. (PG-13)	(:40) *** Stir Crazy (1980) Gene Wilder. Two innocent inmates spend their days plotting escape. (R)				
	HBO (6:15) ** Beauty Shop (2005) Queen Latifah.		*** Spy (2015) Melissa McCarthy. An undercover CIA analyst becomes an unlikely secret weapon. (R)		Together-ness [R]	(:45) Girls (ESP) [R]	A Girl in the River		
	MAX (6:00) * ** Gone Girl (2014, Mystery) (ESP)		Ben Affleck, Rosamund Pike. A woman disappears on her fifth wedding anniversary. (R)		*** Children of Men (2006, Science Fiction) (ESP)	Clive Owen. (R)			
	SHOW *** Pride (2014) (ESP)		Bill Nighy. Lesbians and gays lend their support to striking miners. (R)		Billions Pressure starts to take its toll on Axe [R]		Shameless Will has one of Carl's guns. (ESP) [R]		Dark Net (N) [R]
STARZ	(:05) *** 30 Days of Night (2007) (ESP)		Josh Hartnett. Hungry vampires descend on an Alaskan town. (R)		*** Point Break (1993) Patrick Swayze. An FBI man turns surfer to nab rubber-masked bank robbers. (R)				(:05) The Terminator