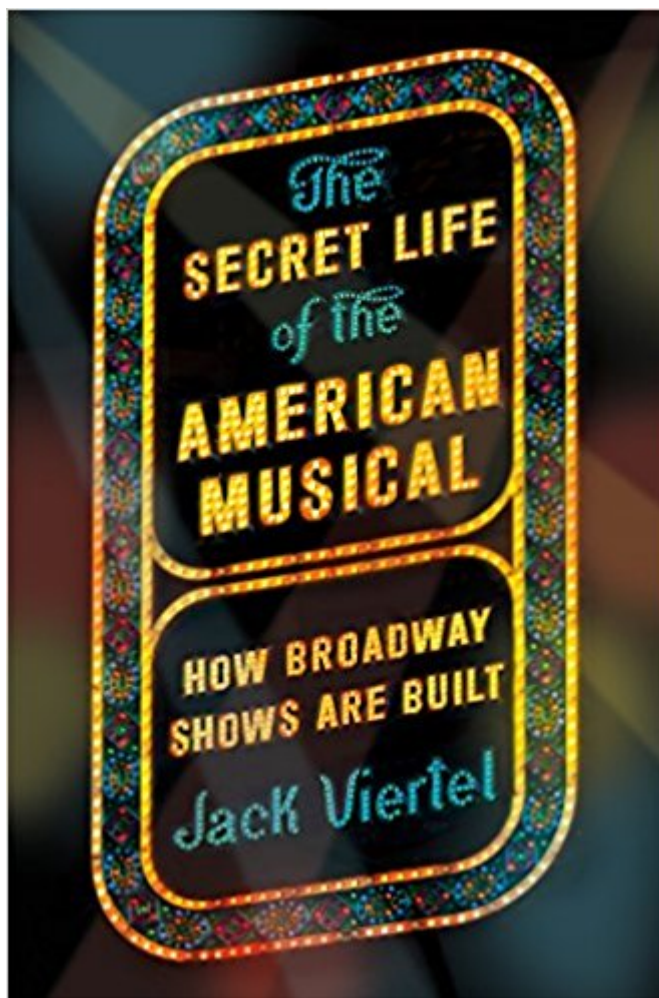


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# The Secret Life Of The American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built



## Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller For almost a century, Americans have been losing their hearts and losing their minds in an insatiable love affair with the American musical. It often begins in childhood in a darkened theater, grows into something more serious for high school actors, and reaches its passionate zenith when it comes time for love, marriage, and children, who will start the cycle all over again. Americans love musicals. Americans invented musicals. Americans perfected musicals. But what, exactly, is a musical? In *The Secret Life of the American Musical*, Jack Viertel takes them apart, puts them back together, sings their praises, marvels at their unflagging inventiveness, and occasionally despairs over their more embarrassing shortcomings. In the process, he invites us to fall in love all over again by showing us how musicals happen, what makes them work, how they captivate audiences, and how one landmark show leads to the next—by design or by accident, by emulation or by rebellion—from *Oklahoma!* to *Hamilton* and onward. Structured like a musical, *The Secret Life of the American Musical* begins with an overture and concludes with a curtain call, with stops in between for “I Want” songs, “conditional” love songs, production numbers, star turns, and finales. The ultimate insider, Viertel has spent three decades on Broadway, working on dozens of shows old and new as a conceiver, producer, dramaturg, and general creative force; he has his own unique way of looking at the process and at the people who collaborate to make musicals a reality. He shows us patterns in the architecture of classic shows and charts the inevitable evolution that has taken place in musical theater as America itself has evolved socially and politically. *The Secret Life of the American Musical* makes you feel as though you’ve been there in the rehearsal room, in the front row of the theater, and in the working offices of theater owners and producers as they pursue their own love affair with that rare and elusive beast—the Broadway hit.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Both revelatory and entertaining. Viertel combines a scholarly approach with a light touch that enables us to see anew familiar songs and musical theater moments we'd long taken for granted." [The New York Times Book Review](#) "Viertel's knowledgeable, engaging blueprint of [the] Broadway musical framework is instructive fun for cognoscenti and general readers alike." [The Washington Post](#) "A lively manual for writers and public alike on how the songs suit the story and how the story needs the songs." [The Wall Street Journal](#) "The best general-audience analysis of musical theater I have read in many years." [The Charlotte Observer](#) "Jack Viertel changed my theater-going life, and he might change yours . . . 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." [The Dallas Morning News](#) "Viertel is well-steeped in Broadway culture, lore and productions . . . An enlightening trip for lovers of musicals." [Kirkus Reviews](#) "A valuable addition to the theater lover's bookshelf." [Publishers Weekly](#) "[An] engaging, insightful anatomy of a singularly American art form . . . There is much to savor." [MORE](#) "Viertel articulates his rules of commercial success so lucidly that even seasoned hands will come away with a clearer understanding of why some shows work while others flop." [Commentary](#) "Thoroughly interesting . . . There's just something very pleasant about reading someone intelligently and affectionately look at what make a show tick, beat by choreographed beat." [The A.V. Club](#) "Viertel has written what will become a classic textbook on the architecture and construction of the American musical . . . What Harold Bloom did for Shakespearean exegesis and Peter Drucker for management, Viertel has done for theater: written a definitive work by raising the curtain and laying bare the work of playwrights, composers, librettists, choreographers, and directors." [Barry X. Miller, Library Journal \(starred review\)](#) "Viertel is well-steeped in Broadway culture, lore and productions . . . An enlightening trip for lovers of musicals." [Kirkus Review](#) "Jack Viertel writes about the master craftsmen of the American musical, past and present, and reveals his own mastery on every page of his knowledge of the Broadway

musical and of the intricate formula in the making of a show (or the breaking of it), and his passion for Broadway and the citizens who make the street come alive. I've been schooled. Patti LuPone "In The Secret Life of the American Musical, Jack Viertel, a Broadway producer and dramaturgical swami, has broken down Broadway's greatest musicals into their constituent storytelling parts (a sort of anatomy of joy) and delivered a showstopper: one of the best-written, most illuminating, and most infectiously entertaining books on the genre I know. Delight and insight vie with each other on every scintillating page.

It's boffo! as they say on the Rialto. John Lahr, author of Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh "This is unfair: no one who knows so much should be able to write so well. And no one in the world knows as much about the shape and substance of the classic American musical as Jack Viertel. His book is a treasure. Daniel Okrent, author of Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition "Jack Viertel's remarkable book has the uncanny effect of making us see something we thought we knew everything about in a way that makes us feel as though we are seeing it all for the first time. He invents a way of thinking about musicals that is utterly fresh and insightful, and while doing so he makes us remember exactly why we love them so much by somehow re-creating the overwhelming, heart-stopping feeling we had when we were likely ten years old and fell in love with them the second our first overture began. By simultaneously (and brilliantly) embracing and deconstructing a beloved American art form, he brings us back to our most innocent selves, and all we can do is be grateful to him for reminding us of who we used to be. Scott Rudin

Jack Viertel is the senior vice president of Jujamcyn Theaters, which owns and operates five Broadway theaters. He has been involved in dozens of productions presented by Jujamcyn since 1987, including multiple Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winners, from City of Angels to Angels in America. He has also helped shepherd six of August Wilson's plays to Broadway. He is the artistic director of New York City Center's acclaimed Encores! series, which presents three musical productions every season. In that capacity he has overseen fifty shows, for some of which he adapted the scripts. He conceived the long-running Smokey Joe's Cafe and the critically acclaimed After Midnight and has been a creative consultant on many shows, including Hairspray, A Christmas Story, and Dear Evan Hansen. He was the Mark Taper Forum's dramaturg and the drama critic and arts editor of the Los Angeles Herald Examiner, and he has spent a decade teaching musical theater at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University.

I'm a big Broadway fan and go to theater often. *The Secret Life of the American Musical* was a great read. It's obvious that Mr. Viertel really knows and loves his subject matter. It's written in a conversational tone and I found myself having to limit myself to a chapter a day because when I first received the book I was afraid I would finish it in two-three days and I wanted to really savor it because I was enjoying it so much. In addition to being thoroughly entertaining, this book really helped me understand why some musicals work for me and some don't -- and gave me a vocabulary to talk about it. It inspired me to listen to 'new' soundtracks for shows I wasn't familiar with as well as re-listen to familiar soundtracks with a different ear. And I love that Mr. Viertel shares personal experiences with his decision making behind the scenes as well as looks at shows within the context of the history of musical theatre. I've given this book as a gift to a few friends and they love it too. If you're a fan of musical theatre, you will love this book.

Excellent book, a really nice companion piece to *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway* that I finished last week. Whereas the earlier book made me want to read more about theatre history, *The Secret Life*.. made me want to listen to and/or go see some shows that I have missed. There were a few places where I felt that the conceit fell apart a little bit (the book is structured like the musical structure it is teaching), but overall it works. This is a textbook, and at times it reads like one, but overall a fun read and very informative. I really loved the recommend cast albums section at the end.

and insights on how all entertainment works. Although the American musical theater tends to lack the heritage of throwing tomatoes, there is always the threat of rustling programs and distracted coughs. This book shows how structure and inventiveness work together to keep that from happening as they move audiences and bring them to their feet. It is an enjoyable magical book by a practitioner who knows how to teach.

What a delight! Jack Viertel leaps through Broadway history -- right up to Hamilton -- like a professorial Pan. Classic songs from the great (and debatable) shows of the past century will overflow your head as you read, which is even more pleasant than it sounds. What's more, Viertel's friendly prose -- sometimes jesting, sometimes studious, sometimes trenchant, and always incisive -- can rival the writing of his librettist heroes. All the sounds of the earth really are like music, at least on the wonderful planet

Viertel inhabits. I was very sorry to leave it.

Viertel's love of the musical theater comes across loud and clear. A more in-depth analysis of the actual music would have been helpful because he is after all, discussing musicals. I appreciated the sections on Frank Loesser, a major lyricist/composer (Guys and Dolls, Most Happy Fella and more) who should never be forgotten.

This is an interesting take on the inner workings of musical theater shows from an industry insider. From the placement and purpose of the "I want" song, through reasons for secondary character conflicts, to structural difficulties that can lead to empty seats, this is well worth a read.

Writing a musical without previous success in that very expensive field, is like climbing Everest without a lot of mountain experience. You have to believe it can be done, or you'd be crazy to try. This book is your group of expert Sherpas, with all the stories, experience and wisdom you may lack, in a quick read and entertaining book. Most, or all, you need to know, with great, illustrative stories are included here. Even if your interest is not professional, it is a wonderful read.

What a useful book! It lays out both the traditional musical format and how modern musicals have diverged from that format, some more successfully than others. This is a great read for anyone who wants to open the machine and see how the gears fit together inside--enriched (to mix metaphors) by great Broadway stories and vivid portraits of Broadway personalities.

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