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A Problem Like Maria: Gender And Sexuality In The American Musical (Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance)



Synopsis

Subverting assumptions that American musical theater is steeped in nostalgia, cheap sentiment, misogyny, and homophobia, this book shows how musicals of the 1950s and early 1960s celebrated strong women characters who defied the era's gender expectations. *A Problem Like Maria* reexamines the roles, careers, and performances of four of musical theater's greatest stars—Mary Martin, Ethel Merman, Julie Andrews, and Barbra Streisand—through a lesbian feminist lens. Focusing on both star persona and performance, Stacy Wolf argues that each of her subjects deftly crafted characters (both on and offstage) whose defiance of the norms of mid-twentieth-century femininity had immediate appeal to spectators on the ideological and sexual margins, yet could still play in Peoria. Chapter by chapter, the book analyzes the stars' best-known and best-loved roles, including Martin as Nellie in *South Pacific*, Merman as Momma Rose in *Gypsy*, Andrews as Eliza in *My Fair Lady* and Guinevere in *Camelot*, and Streisand as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*. The final chapter scrutinizes the Broadway and film versions of *The Sound of Music*, illuminating its place in the hearts of lesbian spectators and the "delicious queerness" of Andrews's troublesome nun. As the first feminist and lesbian study of the American Broadway musical, *A Problem Like Maria* is a groundbreaking contribution to feminist studies, queer studies, and American studies and a delight for fans of musical theater. Stacy Wolf is Associate Professor of Theatre and Dance, University of Texas, Austin.

Book Information

Series: *Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance*

Hardcover: 312 pages

Publisher: University of Michigan Press (July 9, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0472097725

ISBN-13: 978-0472097722

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (6 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #6,292,808 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #61 in [Books > Gay & Lesbian > Literature & Fiction > Drama > Lesbian](#) #2391 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Musicals](#) #9134 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Gay & Lesbian](#)

Customer Reviews

With Stacy Wolf's *A Problem Called Maria*, musical theatre scholarship finally grows up. Wolf's study of four female icons of the musical stage (Mary Martin, Ethel Merman, Julie Andrews, and Barbra Streisand) is rooted squarely in performance, something many musical theatre historians claim but seldom accomplish. Not only will the book fascinate musical theatre buffs, it will also appeal to a wider audience interested in twentieth century popular culture. Wolf's slant here is the exploration of these female stars through a feminist lens, which offers new insights into the appeal of the mid-century Broadway musical, a genre that until recently has often been associated with gay men, at least in terms of gender studies. Wolf makes clear that the musical, as a cherished American art form, rightly belongs to everyone. More than that, her approach extends beyond the usual emphasis on the written text and score to discuss what these great performers actually did onstage, which is a refreshing approach, to say the least. I would recommend this book without reservation to anyone interested in the golden age of the Broadway musical, and, more broadly, to those interested in the performance of gender within a cultural studies context.

Too many times Ms. Wolf maintains that the performers are making things up as they go along (to give the musicals a lesbian slant or code) rather than following a script. I do understand that when the star is also the co-producer as Martin & Merman were in several of the musicals discussed, especially Martin in "Peter Pan" and "The Sound of Music," all bets are off. I originally wrote a much longer review, but decided that my seeing Martin, Merman, Andrews and Streisand in most of their Broadway roles was getting in the way of the review. (Ms. Wolf was apparently too young to have actually seen these actresses in person in these musicals). But, this is a valuable book otherwise and I recommend it highly. If this book is ever revised, please take out all but one of the references to Merman as someone whom most people thought was Jewish or lesbian, or both. It was annoying & confusing because Ms. Wolf discusses Merman in "Gypsy" as if she was Jewish. (Merman was mostly German Protestant -- her name was Zimmermann, shortened for the stage to Merman).

I only wish I had read this book earlier. So often the world of musical theatre in LGBTQ culture seems to be the turf of gay men. Stacy Wolf's book reveals the inherent queerness in this all-american genre. I didn't realize how much this discussion was missing until I noticed that reading this book felt a little bit like going home.

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