

# THE *Current*

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Tom Jacobs

## **A history of Broadway musicals, in posters**

As every artist knows, one way to catch a viewer's eye is a jarring juxtaposition.

Take the original poster for Stephen Sondheim's 1976 musical "Pacific Overtures," currently on display at the UC Santa Barbara Library as part of the exhibition "Broadway Posters From the Golden Age." In it, a character from the show in traditional Japanese dress stands in the middle of New York City's Times Square. The cinema marquee in the background advertises "Jaws," suggesting this apparently astonished fellow has somehow found himself in a very different time and place.

In an oblique way, the image conveys the essence of the innovative musical, which depicts how Japanese culture was co-opted by the West after the once-isolated nation was forcibly integrated into the international trading economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While a poster can hardly get all that across, it can intrigue a casual viewer, and perhaps even nudge them into buying a ticket.

The striking poster is one of a dozen such works in the exhibit, which is drawn from the collection of theater producer and scholar Richard Norton. He is in the years-long process of cataloguing and turning over his huge collection of theater memorabilia to the library. It includes around 650 posters, along with thousands of recordings, scripts, sheet music, and around 150,000 programs.

“Richard’s collection is one of the best to document the history of Broadway musicals,” said Performing Arts Collection Curator David Seubert. “It puts UCSB library in a league with the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress in terms of comprehensiveness.”

Broadway musicals — especially the flops — are not documented as well as many other art forms. Because they are presented by independent production companies, their history is not archived the way an orchestra or opera company would document a world premiere. That’s why researchers like Norton, who wrote a three-volume set published by Oxford University Press that chronicles musical theater in the United States, are so invaluable.

“As I’ve grown older, I’ve come to think that collecting is actually a mask for hoarding,” Norton said with a laugh in an interview from his New York City home. He grew up in Boston, where he attended many shows in their pre-Broadway runs, including much of the Sondheim canon.

“I became fascinated with musical theater when I was 8 or 10,” he said. “Unlike my peers, I wasn’t really interested in the pop music of the day. That exiled me socially somewhat!”

His penchant for collecting started early: He bought his first poster in 1968, when he was still in his teens. “I’m looking at it right now. It’s from a very obscure show called ‘Ballad for a Firing Squad.’ It doesn’t have an artist credit, but the graphics are quite stunning.

“The show was a celebrated flop that played in Washington, D.C. under the name ‘Mata Hari.’ The creative team had the idea of doing a smaller, chamber version of it off-Broadway, which they did. It lasted a week.”

That poster isn’t included in this first group now on display, but many of the 14-by-22 inch “window cards,” as they were called in the day, are of artistic and/or historical interest. “I like a poster that tells a story,” Norton said, and a number of these posters do just that.

Take the collection of paired posters on display, which feature one from early in the show’s life, often when it was on a pre-Broadway tour, and a second that advertised a revised, sometimes retitled version. There’s one from the Los Angeles run of

“Odyssey,” a musical adaptation of the classic tale starring Yul Brynner, and another from “Home Sweet Homer,” a revised version of the show that limped into New York and closed quickly. The later poster features art by no less than Al Hirschfeld, but it wasn’t enough to save the show.

Similarly, the exhibit features a poster for a 1970s Liza Minnelli vehicle originally titled “Shine It On” when it played in San Francisco. By the time it came to New York, it had a new, much bolder poster, and a new name, “The Act.” Historical footnote: The director is listed as Martin Scorsese, which leads one to wonder what a Martin Scorsese musical might have looked like.

Seubert’s favorite of this initial group is the poster for “Berlin to Broadway,” a revue featuring songs by Kurt Weill from various musicals. “It’s a ‘70s show, but the poster references an earlier era,” he noted. “It’s classic Broadway in its iconography and design language. It’s colorful. There are a million things going on. There’s a mermaid smoking a cigarette!”

It’s a cheeky touch, one that reflects the newfound artistic license of a changing culture.

“Musical theater has always been a reflection of the times,” Seubert noted. “It’s a mirror we can use to talk about what was going on in the world at a particular time.”

How did these posters, and the rest of his collection, end up so far from the Great White Way? Norton credits a friend and fellow collector, mathematician Michael Miller, who dedicated his collection of opera, operetta and early musical theater memorabilia to UCSB. “Mike thought my collection would be an ideal companion to his,” he said.

Seubert agreed. “I visited Richard at his apartment in New York, where he showed me a lot of things,” he recalled. “His favorites were posters from shows that closed after two performances. Imagine how rare some of those are!”

Nicholas van Hoogstraten, author of a book about Broadway poster art who was on hand for the opening, said the collection “makes for a colorful visual history of Broadway.”

“Poster art,” he added, “can perfectly capture the spirit of the shows and the artists who make them happen, night after night.”

[“Broadway Posters from the Golden Age: Selections from the Richard C. Norton Musical Theater Poster Collection”](#) is on display through Dec. 5 in the Mountain Gallery, on the first floor of the UC Santa Barbara Library.

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