



Adapted for the Stage
By Matthew White and Howard Jacques

Education Pack for Teachers and Students
By Dominic Francis

Commissioned by Mousetrap Theatre Projects



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Introduction

This Education Pack has been written to accompany the world premiere of *Top Hat - The Musical*, with music and lyrics by Irving Berlin, based on the RKO Motion Picture, at the Aldwych Theatre in London.

It's aimed at enhancing both teachers' and students' understanding of the show and production, with suggestions for both practical and written exercises. The majority of activities are aimed at Key Stages 4 and 5, although they can easily be adapted for younger students. Equally, the exercises on approaches to text will be of interest to older students considering vocational training in the performing arts. Background information about the original film and its makers also helps place the piece in context.

The pack can be used before your trip to see *Top Hat*, to introduce students to the world of the show and its characters, and/or afterwards to reflect on the piece's wider significance.

Synopsis

Act One

Direct from the Music Box Theatre in New York comes Broadway sensation Jerry Travers, here in London to star in a new revue produced by his old friend and backer Horace Hardwick at the Prince's Theatre.

The two meet at Horace's stuffy London club, the Thackeray, where the irrepressible Jerry can't resist making mischief with an impromptu - and very loud - tap barrage, much to the annoyance of the elderly members. An embarrassed Horace whisks him away, first to dinner at the Savoy, then back to his lavish suite at the Hotel Excelsior, where they meet Horace's truculent valet Bates.

Over drinks Horace insists Jerry join him in Venice that weekend, following the opening night of the show. His wife Madge, a keen matchmaker, has someone she wants the young song-and-dance man - and eligible bachelor - to meet. But Jerry's happy with his 'no strings' life, breaking into a joyous tap routine right there in Horace's apartment.

In the room directly below, society model Dale Tremont is woken by Jerry's antics and calls the hotel manager to complain, who in turn summons Horace. Left alone by his friend, Jerry continues to dance around the hotel suite until an exasperated Dale appears in the doorway.

The song-and-dance man is instantly smitten and the striking young woman proves his more-than-equal with her sassy demeanor and witty put-downs. She returns to her room and Jerry, appointing himself Dale's 'official sandman', dances a gentle soft shoe above to lull her to sleep.



The following morning, as the exclusive hotel bustles with its wealthy clientele, Jerry buys all of the flowers from the florist in the foyer and has them sent up to Dale's room. The young woman is on her way to the riding stables and, intercepting the driver of her hansom cab, a disguised Jerry drives her there.

Having fallen for Dale, he cheerily admits he's 'putting all his eggs in one basket' and breaks into a swift volley of tapping on the roof of the carriage, alerting Dale to Jerry's true identity. They banter as they did the night before and later, taking shelter from a storm in a park bandstand, they dance together and agree, 'Isn't this a lovely day to be caught in the rain?'

Back at the hotel Dale's dressmaker and benefactor, the flamboyant Italian Alberto Beddini, inspects her flower-laden apartment with dismay, jealousy questioning the model about her 'afflicted admirer'. Realising she doesn't even know his name, Dale further angers Alberto when she tells him she won't be going to Venice that weekend to model his clothes, intending to stay in London and spend time with Jerry instead. Their argument is interrupted by the arrival of a telegram from Madge to Dale, who knows the model from a previous marriage to Dale's cousin. Now Mrs Horace Hardwick, she informs her young friend that her husband is staying in the same hotel and suggests they travel together to Italy. But Dale's only thoughts are of Jerry, recalling a 'lovely day' and that he's 'easy to dance with'.

She informs the hotel reception that she intends to stay longer, also enquiring whether there's a Horace Hardwick residing there? When Dale's told his apartment is the one directly above hers she's confused. Then she overhears Jerry asking reception for a telegram on Horace's behalf and draws the inevitable, but mistaken, conclusion... The man attempting to woo her is Madge's new husband!

She marches up to Jerry and slaps him on the cheek in the middle of the busy foyer.

The real Horace is once more summoned before the hotel manager. Warning Jerry off a clearly unstable Dale, his old friend is desperate to avoid any scandal, which could prove perilous to their theatrical venture. Using the ever-loyal Bates as a stooge, Horace blames the whole incident on him and promises the manager his valet will be punished. Bates is then enlisted to spy on Dale, to find out as much about her as possible, in order to save Jerry from a disastrous romantic entanglement.

Meanwhile, a disillusioned and devastated Dale prepares to check out, declaring she hates all men. The passionate Alberto reveals his secret feelings for the model when he offers to 'keel' (kill) Jerry for her. The best way for Dale to overcome her grief, he argues, is to go to Venice and face Horace's wife. Conflicted, Dale eventually concedes that Madge ought to know the truth about her philandering husband and agrees to leave for Italy immediately.

Seeing his flowers being cleared out of Dale's vacated apartment, Jerry is informed by a maid that the model has gone. But he's no time to ask questions as he and Horace have to get to the theatre for the opening night of the show.

While the chorus sing a meditation on romance - 'What is Love?' - Jerry is on the telephone in his dressing room making enquiries into Dale's whereabouts. He's interrupted by Horace, who comes backstage to congratulate him on the first half. The revue's a hit! Horace reads a telegram from Madge, who apologises for not being there and expresses disappointment that he and Jerry won't be joining her in Venice that weekend - she wanted to introduce the song-and-dance man to her friend, the society model Dale Tremont. Recognising the name, Jerry orders Horace to charter a plane at once... They leave for Italy in the morning! With a renewed spring in his step, Jerry rushes to the stage for the Act One finale - 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tails'.

Act Two

At the Hotel Venezia in Venice, Madge Hardwick relaxes with a drink while the other equally wealthy guests enjoy dancing to the music of the 'Piccolino'. She is joined by Dale, whose striking appearance catches the attention of several onlookers, and Madge asks her if she arrived with her husband, Horace. A clearly troubled Dale tells her old friend about Horace's unwanted advances and the more

mature Madge laughs it off, explaining that her husband flirts with all attractive women.

Meanwhile, Jerry and nervous flyer Horace are on their way in a privately-chartered airplane. The song-and-dance man talks excitedly about Dale while his anxious friend tries to warn him against the troublesome model, telling him all about Dale's undisclosed relationship with her benefactor Alberto Beddini. Horace knows of what he speaks, he explains - he too has been the victim of 'a designing woman'. He then tells Jerry, confidentially, about an imprudent afternoon spent in the company of a young woman called Violet, which ended with an illicit kiss. He is terrified Madge will find out.

Back in the courtyard of the Hotel Venezia, Madge is distracted by a familiar looking waiter - an undercover Bates. Ignoring this, she tells Dale her real reasons for inviting her to Italy. Alluding to Jerry, she explains that there's someone she wants the model to meet... But they are interrupted by the arrival of Horace's plane and, making her excuses, Dale hurriedly leaves, avoiding Jerry. The song-and-dance man reveals to Madge that he and Dale have already met, which suits the matchmaker's plans.

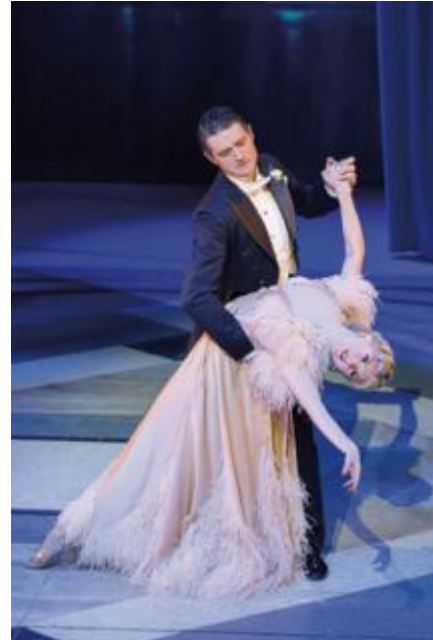
It transpires that due to a shortage of rooms, Horace and Jerry will have to share the bridal suite, the only room still available. Checking in, Horace is confronted by Alberto who - like Dale - mistakes him for his muse's 'afflicted admirer', warning him not to trouble the model further. Horace recognises the badly-disguised Bates, who says he has discovered nothing as yet about Dale, before resuming his disguise with the arrival of Madge. When she questions her husband about his encounter with the model, Horace says he hasn't even met Dale. A suspicious Madge asks him if there's anything he'd like to confess and an anxious Horace thinks she's referring to Violet, quickly avoiding the subject.

Later that day, Dale asks Madge about Horace and Madge confirms that her husband denied all knowledge of meeting the model. Determined to teach him a lesson, Dale calls reception and asks to be connected to Horace Hardwick's suite. Jerry answers, continuing the misconception, and Dale invites herself up to his room.

Jerry hastily hides Horace before the model arrives and declares she's 'wild about' the song-and-dance man, kissing him passionately. She insists they elope to Paris before her champion boxer - and completely fictitious - husband finds out. Shocked at first, Jerry soon notices inconsistencies in Dale's story, and the fact she isn't wearing a wedding ring. Playing along, he too reveals his passion for the

model, who, upset, rushes from the room. This confirms the hidden Horace's misgivings about the 'scheming' Dale, while Jerry is now determined to ask the 'goddess' to marry him. He agrees to wait, however, until his old friend can find out more from Madge about his intended bride.

That evening, Dale joins Madge on the terrace of the hotel. She tries to tell her old friend that her husband isn't as innocent as she thinks and Madge is intrigued, but they're soon interrupted by the arrival of Jerry. Thinking they've already met, Madge doesn't bother to introduce Dale and Jerry to one another, encouraging them to dance together instead. At first the model is shocked by Madge's apparent disregard for her husband's infidelity, but then declares, 'Well, if she doesn't care, then neither do I.' And so she and Jerry begin to dance, 'cheek to cheek'.



Afterwards, the song-and-dance man reveals his true feelings for Dale, asking her to marry him. Bewildered, she slaps Jerry again and rushes to Madge, telling her everything that's happened and declaring her intention to leave. A now confused Madge encourages Dale to stay, saying her departure won't solve anything, and determines to deal with her philandering husband once and for all.

Alone in her hotel room, Dale reflects forlornly on being unlucky in love, hoping for 'better luck next time'. A jubilant Alberto, buoyed by the success of Dale's modelling of his dresses, discovers the sad young woman by herself and, wanting to protect her, proposes to Dale himself. Upset and confused, the model accepts his offer, insisting they marry that night before she can change her mind, and Alberto hurriedly departs to make the arrangements.

Elsewhere, Jerry attempts to reconcile a black-eyed Horace - following an encounter with an irate Madge - with his temporarily estranged wife. Explaining that Horace has 'a little confession to make', the song-and-dance man encourages his backer to reveal the truth about his indiscretion with Violet. Thinking he's referring to Dale, Madge challenges her husband over the model's slapping of him at the Hotel Excelsior.

Jerry suddenly realises the truth - Dale's been mistaking him for Horace all this time! He must find the model and quickly. Especially as Madge's just received

a telephone call from the hotel manager requesting that her husband and his friend vacate the bridal suite - a Miss Dale Tremont is to marry Signore Alberto Beddini tonight...

Characters - Who's Who?



Jerry Travers **Tom Chambers**

A song-and-dance man and 'Broadway sensation'. Direct from New York, the handsome entertainer is in London to star in a new musical revue, and will soon be the talk of the town. The charming bachelor has an irrepressible sense of fun, enjoying mischief-making and his 'no strings' lifestyle. But all that's set to change when he meets...



Dale Tremont **Summer Strallen**

A society model and fellow American. Currently in London modelling her dressmaker's latest designs, she enjoys her equally single life, spending her free-time horse riding. The confident, independent young woman counters Jerry's charm with her dry wit, the two singletons relishing their sparring matches and flirtatious encounters.

Horace Hardwick **Martin Ball**

A wealthy English gentleman who invests in theatrical ventures, producing the musical revue in which Jerry's about to make his London debut. As an older man, the bumbling but well-meaning Horace feels a responsibility towards the young entertainer, but those closest to the entrepreneur tend to outwit him, especially...

Madge Hardwick **Vivien Parry**

The twice-married American socialite and amateur matchmaker. The tough and sassy Madge has Horace - and his wallet - firmly in hand, busying herself with the affairs of others, in particular her old friend Dale's love life. Her ill-fated attempts to match the society model with Jerry lead to unintended complications.

Alberto Beddini **Ricardo Afonso**

The flamboyant Italian designer with an affliction for malapropisms, also Dale's benefactor. He harbours a secret desire for his model and muse, a passion inflamed with jealousy when he discovers a rival for her affections, the newly-arrived Jerry.

Bates **Stephen Boswell**

Horace's long-suffering valet. His tendency for cryptic family sayings belies his shrewdness, and it's the butler's erratic flair for disguise and deception that ultimately triumphs over adversity.

Activity

Who are the other characters in *Top Hat*? Make a cast list, including the actors' names, and write a brief description of each character like the ones above.

Creative Team

Matthew White

Role on Production: Director

Previous Productions: *Top Hat - The Musical* (Aldwych Theatre), *Sweet Charity* (Menier Chocolate Factory and Theatre Royal Haymarket) - Three Olivier Award Nominations, *Little Shop of Horrors* (Menier Chocolate Factory and Duke of York's Theatre) - Three Olivier Award Nominations, *The Magic Flute* (British Youth Opera at the Peacock Theatre), *The Last Five Years* (Menier Chocolate Factory), etc.

Activity

Who are the other members of the Creative Team? Do some research and find out who does what behind the scenes. You can either look in the programme when you come to the theatre, or visit the official website for the production (see Further Resources). Create biographies for each member of the Creative Team, like the one above, using this template.

An Interview with the Principals of *Top Hat*

Can you tell us a little about your character and the journey they go on through the show?

Tom Chambers Jerry is a Broadway song-and-dance man - a star. He's very rich and famous and has a very carefree attitude to life. He sees everything as amusing or a challenge. He loves the ladies too! He goes from New York to London and then to Venice.

Summer Strallen Dale is a strong, confident woman, aged 25, travelling with Alberto Beddini as his fashion muse. Dale meets Jerry and it's love at first sight, but she's devastated when she's led to believe that he's married to her friend Madge. In the second half of the show, Jerry follows Dale to Venice in pursuit of her and she's not best pleased. As a result, she marries Alberto. When Jerry finally tells her who he really is, and Bates reveals she is not actually married, she's elated and able to marry the first love of her life.

Martin Ball My character is called Horace Hardwick. He's a wealthy theatre producer, a bit neurotic, with an eye for a pretty girl. He has an American wife who he finds rather demanding, particularly in a financial way. She has expensive tastes! He gets inadvertently mixed up in a plot of mistaken identity.

Stephen Boswell Bates is Mr Horace Hardwick's valet, very much in the mould of Jeeves from PG Wodehouse's *Jeeves and Wooster*. Like Jeeves with Wooster, Bates will not tolerate his master wearing the wrong style of bow-tie, etc. When Horace sends him on an assignment to trail Dale Tremont, Bates takes this task very seriously and becomes an international spy, writing coded reports and donning disguises - the final one saving the day and restoring Dale to the arms of Jerry Travers.

Vivien Parry Madge is married to Horace Hardwick. She's an incredibly wealthy woman and clearly loves her life and her wealth. She's kind, funny and bossy and incredibly understanding of her flirtatious husband until he, as she believes, oversteps the mark with Dale. Then she becomes very cross. Her journey is very light and she finishes the play with her desires achieved - Dale marrying Jerry - and

forgiving her erstwhile husband.

Ricardo Afonso I play the role of Alberto Beddini. He's a fashion designer madly in love with himself and his creations. He is all heart, and manages to find a place in it for Dale Tremont. His passion is second to none, so he thinks. And as the story develops we get to see exactly that... and much more!

What's one of the biggest challenges performing in this show?

Tom Chambers Stamina, discipline and commitment. Fred Astaire was the best in the world during the golden 1930s, so it's a huge challenge to recreate some of that magic.

Summer Strallen The biggest challenge is the demand on my voice. Talking within scenes is the hardest part, rather than the singing.

Martin Ball I have a lot of 'plot' dialogue, particularly in Act One, that I have to disguise as casual conversation. After that, the challenge is to keep the story-telling light and pacy, funny but also truthful.

Stephen Boswell Not to get carried away by the whole 'shebang', but to keep your character self-contained and serious about the farcical plot and to care for the outcome.



Vivien Parry The repetition of the same gags and script. I have to pretend to have never done this before and forget the previous night's performance.

Ricardo Afonso Being part of a brand new musical and making it truly new is always exciting and a challenge in itself. The tricky part is finding the middle-ground, of being truthful to the period with a modern pace and interpretation. In my opinion this is our biggest challenge.

Have you resisted watching or re-watching the original film?

Tom Chambers I've watched the film countless times over the years. It's always helpful to return to when you need to see if your dance style is improving. Every time you watch the style you notice something different!

Summer Strallen I watched it as a reference to the style of the period, but my approach to the role is completely my own. Well, with a little Ginger thrown in... It would be rude not to!

Martin Ball Yes, I have. I watched the film once, then have consciously avoided it since rehearsals started so that I play Horace my way and am not tempted to do an impersonation of Edward Everett Horton's wonderful original performance. I feel now that having discovered the character for myself I may be ready to enjoy watching the film again one Sunday afternoon.

Stephen Boswell No. I saw it before my audition. Eric Blore is a hard act to follow, but he is short, bald and tubby and I'm not. I've pinched a few mannerisms, and his pronunciation of 'hotel', but I want the stage Bates to be Stephen Boswell's.

Vivien Parry I haven't watched the original. I didn't want to copy any of Helen Broderick's character work and I believe her characterisation is markedly different. However, I have seen most of the dance routines over the years.



Ricardo Afonso I knew the film beforehand and did watch it once, before we started rehearsals, to refresh myself of the storyline and plot, and also to be certain of the style and period.

[An Interview with Matthew White, Adaptor-Director of *Top Hat*](#)

How did you go about adapting *Top Hat* from screen to stage? Obviously film and theatre are very different mediums, how did that inform the process?

Our intention has always been to stay as faithful to the original film as possible, but to expand the piece in order to make it viable for the stage. The original film has only five songs in it: 'No Strings', 'Isn't This a Lovely Day', 'Top Hat', 'The Piccolino' and 'Cheek to Cheek'. For obvious reasons our musical required a lot more! We were very fortunate in being allowed to plunder the Irving Berlin catalogue - luckily for us he wrote over 1,500 songs - and cherry pick numbers which we felt served the story and the characters particularly well. Our stage adaptation now has fifteen numbers, including several iconic Berlin numbers which don't feature in the original film: 'Puttin' On the Ritz', 'I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket' and 'Let's Face the Music and Dance'.

Film scripts tend to be economical. So much can be achieved with a look or an expression that the script tends to be on the lean side. It's fairly unusual for a film script to include 'speeches' for a character. Dialogue is generally succinct and to the point. In adapting this piece for the theatre, we discovered that the words needed to do more of the work for us, and sometimes it was necessary to embellish the script and flesh it out a little more. We also felt that some of the characters needed more back story, more history if you like. In addition, much of the humour in the film comes from the wonderfully expressive features of the principal actors. In the theatre, with some of our audience quite a long way from the stage, we couldn't rely on the subtleties of facial gesture alone. We found that we needed the script to be wittier and the jokes to come more frequently.

We decided pretty early on that if we were serious about turning this piece into big West End show, with a cast of 33 and an orchestra of 15, we would need to find more opportunities for the ensemble to be featured and also to dance. In the original film the chorus really only appear in 'Top Hat' and 'The Piccolino'. We felt that it would be madness with such a talented group of singer-dancers to feature them in such a limited way. They are now featured in six or seven of the numbers in the show and Bill Deamer, our choreographer, has devised some wonderful new dance sequences for them.

The process of adapting this piece was aided enormously by the fact that we were initially encouraged to workshop the script with a small group of actors.

This gave us pretty clear indications as to how the comedy was landing, and how the characters were coming across. Following this workshop many changes were applied to the piece in order to prepare it for the national tour. And once the show was on the road we were also in the privileged position of being able to get feedback from our large, enthusiastic audiences. In this way we were able to hone the piece and get rid of anything which didn't contribute to the successful telling of this particular story.





Songs in *Top Hat*

Act One

Puttin' On the Ritz

Jerry Travers and Ensemble

No Strings (I'm Fancy Free)

Jerry Travers, Shadow Jerry,
Hotel Maids and Porter

Hotel Sequence

Ensemble

I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket

Jerry Travers

Isn't This a Lovely Day (To Be Caught in the Rain?)

Jerry Travers
and Dale Tremont

You're Easy to Dance With

Dale Tremont

What is Love?

Soubrette and Female Ensemble

Top Hat, White Tie and Tails

Jerry Travers and Ensemble

Act Two

The Piccolino	Ensemble
Wild About You	Dale Tremont
Cheek to Cheek	Jerry Travers, Dale Tremont and Ensemble
Better Luck Next Time	Dale Tremont
Latins Know How	Alberto Beddini
Let's Face the Music and Dance	Jerry Travers and Dale Tremont
Outside of That, I Love You	Horace and Madge Hardwick
Finale	Dale Tremont, Jerry Travers, Madge and Horace Hardwick and Company

Top Hat - The Film

Top Hat is a film musical starring renowned song-and-dance duo Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, released by RKO Radio Pictures in 1935. The film features the music of the great American composer and lyricist Irving Berlin. Many of the songs, including 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tails' and 'Cheek to Cheek', have since achieved classic status as standards in the Great American Songbook. The film remains the most celebrated of Astaire and Rogers' enduring partnership.

Directed by Mark Sandrich, *Top Hat* was written by Dwight Taylor and Allan Scott. It is commonly described as a 'screwball comedy', a predominantly American genre that became popular in the 1930s during the Great Depression. Screwball comedies are characterised by fast-paced repartee, farcical situations and plots revolving around courtship and marriage. The film was largely based upon Taylor's Broadway musical *The Gay Divorcee*, which was adapted for the screen in

1934, again directed by Sandrich and starring Astaire, Rogers and many of the cast of *Top Hat*. This drew criticism from various reviewers, who claimed that *Top Hat* was merely a rewrite of the previous year's film.

The *Top Hat* screenplay was, however, the first written specifically for Astaire and Rogers. Initially, Astaire reacted negatively to the early drafts, complaining of its similarities to *The Gay Divorcee* and observing, 'I am cast as a sort of objectionable young man without charm or sympathy or humour.' Allan Scott was hired by Mark Sandrich to do the rewrites and never actually worked with Dwight Taylor on the screenplay, Sandrich taking on the role of script editor himself. Scott would continue to work on six further Astaire-Rogers films.

Top Hat was Irving Berlin's first complete film score since 1930, and Astaire recalled later how the film's success helped restore the composer's confidence. The two hadn't met before making *Top Hat*, although Astaire had danced on stage to Berlin's music as early as 1915. A lifelong friendship followed the 1935 film, with Berlin contributing music to more of Astaire's films - six in total - than any other composer. 'He's a real inspiration for a writer,' commented Berlin. 'I'd never have written *Top Hat* without him.'

Eight songs were discarded from the original film score as they weren't considered to advance the screenplay's plot. One of these, 'Get Thee Behind Me, Satan', was subsequently incorporated into the 1936 film *Follow the Fleet*. All five songs eventually selected for the score became major hits, featuring in the top fifteen songs of the 28th September, 1935 broadcast of *Your Hit Parade*, following the film's release.

Berlin reputedly couldn't read or write music, and therefore required an assistant to write up his piano parts. Astaire's rehearsal pianist, Hal Borne, took on this role for *Top Hat*, recalling working nights in Berlin's hotel apartment. 'Berlin went "Heaven..." and I went *dah dah dee* "I'm in Heaven" *dah dah dee*. He said, "I love it, put it down".' These parts were then orchestrated by a team led by American-based Austrian composer Max Steiner, who wrote the scores for numerous films, including 1939's *Gone With the Wind*.

An Astaire-Rogers film was also known for its lavish set and costume designs, the Art Deco inspired 'Big White Set' accounting for the largest proportion of the film's production costs. In *Top Hat* this comprised a winding canal, crossed by several bridges, and a hotel piazza on three separate levels - including dance floors, restaurants and terraces - all painted in vivid candy-cane colours. This vast set was built across two adjoining sound stages at RKO's Culver City lot under the

supervision of Art Director Carroll Clark, who worked on the majority of Astaire-Rogers films.



A famous incident, enshrined in Hollywood folklore, revolves around one of Ginger Rogers' costumes for the film. The actress took a keen interest in costume and make-up, working closely with dressmaker Bernard Newman to create evermore fantastical designs. For the 'Cheek to Cheek' routine they decided upon a blue satin

dress, low in the back, high in the front, with 'myriads of ostrich feathers'.

Due to the considerable labour involved in sewing each individual ostrich feather to the dress, Astaire - who normally approved his partner's costumes, suggesting modifications if necessary - saw it for the first time on the day of filming. During rehearsals he quickly became frustrated when the dress began shedding feathers with every twist and turn. 'It was like a chicken attacked by a coyote,' he recalled later. 'I never saw so many feathers in my life.'

Choreographer Hermes Pan remembers Astaire's extreme annoyance and an ensuing argument with Rogers, resulting in a stand-off between Astaire, director Mark Sandrich and several RKO crew and bosses on one side, and Rogers and her protective mother on the other. Eventually Sandrich relented, an additional night's work by seamstresses resolving much of the problem, and the routine was filmed with Rogers wearing the blue feather dress. (Close examination of this sequence on film, however, reveals feathers floating around Astaire and Rogers.) The tension between the song-and-dance duo eased a few days later when Astaire presented Rogers with a small gold feather for her charm bracelet, nicknaming her 'Feathers' thereafter.

Top Hat reportedly cost \$620,000 to produce, subsequently grossing three million dollars at the box office on its release and becoming RKO's most profitable film of the 1930s. It was nominated for four Academy Awards, including 'Original Song' (for 'Cheek to Cheek') and 'Dance Direction, but failed to win any Oscars, losing 'Best Picture' to *Mutiny On the Bounty* starring Clark Gable. The reviews were mainly positive. While the New York Times criticised the story for being 'a

little on the thin side', it praised the music and ultimately concluded, '*Top Hat* is worth standing in line for'.

[Top Hat - The Musical](#)

From Screen to Stage

Reviving a well-known and much-loved film for the theatre is ambitious, and potentially disastrous - with inevitable, often unfavourable, comparisons being made with the original. The production of *Top Hat* at the Aldwych Theatre is the first stage adaptation of the classic film in its 77-year history, the brainchild of UK-based producer Kenny Wax. 'Everything that was best about the Astaire-Rogers musicals was in *Top Hat*,' he explains.

The show's journey from stage to screen has been long and, occasionally, challenging. An initial approach by Wax to Ted Chapin, who manages the Rodgers and Hammerstein Estate while supervising the Irving Berlin back catalogue, was rejected. 'There are no Fred and Gingers around today,' read Chapin's e-mailed response. Undeterred, Wax made contact with Fred Astaire's daughter, Ava Astaire-McKenzie, who liked the idea and gave the producer a written endorsement.

Taking a risk, Wax took Ava's letter and travelled uninvited to America to engineer a meeting with Chapin. 'He could have thrown me out,' the producer admits. Fortunately, the President of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Estate was impressed: 'Kenny had the chutzpah to get on a plane and come to New York. Sometimes our business needs to take a chance.'

This led to the involvement of Irving Berlin's three daughters, Mary Ellin Barrett, Linda Emmet and Elizabeth Peters. Now in their seventies and eighties, the sisters meet once a month to discuss their father's estate. A readthrough of writer-director Matthew White and Howard Jacques' adaptation took place in London in November 2010, with both Berlin's and Astaire's relatives travelling to the UK to attend.

'It's a very nice continuity,' reflected Mary Ellin Barrett later. 'It's lovely to think a child of the Astaires and the daughters of Irving Berlin have come together to support the stage version of *Top Hat*.' The sisters were keen to offer practical advice, encouraging further development of the script. 'You need to pep it up a bit for nowadays,' they told Wax. Ava Astaire-McKenzie also recommended

choreographer Bill Deamer, who had previously worked on *Fred Astaire - His Daughter's Tribute* at the London Palladium.

With a unique knowledge of their father's extensive repertoire, Berlin's three daughters advised on the show's music. The stage version adds several songs from the Berlin back catalogue, including 'Let's Face the Music and Dance' from 1936's *Follow the Fleet*. The show's creators believe the added music enhances the characters' stories and, according to Linda Emmet, 'enriches' the score.



Top Hat opened in Milton Keynes in August 2011, the start of a seventeen-week tour of the UK - an extended 'out-of-town try-out' before coming to London in April 2012. This provided an opportunity for the producer and his Creative Team to make any necessary changes to the show. Following runs in Woking and Bristol in March this year, three weeks of intensive rehearsals took place, during which cuts and additions were made to the script before its West End transfer. Ted Chapin and Berlin's daughters watched the show again, offering further advice and support. A significant addition was the inclusion of one of Berlin's best-known songs, 'Puttin' On the Ritz', as the show's opening number.

Chapin's original observation - 'There are no Fred and Gingers around today' - will undoubtedly inform the critical reception to both the production and its principals, Tom Chambers as Jerry Travers and Summer Strallen as Dale Tremont. 'Fred and Ginger brought their personalities to these movies,' he comments. 'Our challenge is to establish who these characters are. After the first

readthrough, I told Kenny and Matthew White, “Do not watch the movie again. Now you have to work out what a theatre audience needs”.’

While hoping the new stage version would be true to the spirit of the original film, Ava Astaire-McKenzie didn’t want the show to be a mere tribute act. ‘There will always be comparisons to Daddy and Ginger, but I was hoping that whoever played Jerry Travers would play the character and not try to play my father.’ Kenny Wax acknowledges the inevitability of comparisons being made, but insists that both Chambers and Strallen do precisely what Astaire’s daughter advised, playing the film’s characters and not the actors who played them.

Having seen the show, Astaire-McKenzie praised the ‘marvellous’ new dancing duo. ‘I think Summer and Tom are so good,’ she said. ‘I hope it will boost their already successful careers.’ Berlin’s daughters were equally enthusiastic. ‘Fabulous, a beautiful production,’ commented Linda Emmet. Elizabeth Peters speculated on her father’s response to the new stage version - ‘I don’t think he would have imagined it would happen, but he’d be very happy.’ Emmet felt the show reinvigorated his music: ‘I think it could definitely give new life to these songs and to *Top Hat* for a younger generation.’

Activity

The following could be an individual written activity or the basis for a group discussion. Having seen the production of *Top Hat* at the Aldwych Theatre, watch the original film on DVD. What are the key differences in terms of plot, casting, set and costume design? Why do you think different artistic choices were made for the stage version? What are the challenges for a Creative Team in adapting a well-known film musical for the stage?

Irving Berlin (1888 - 1989)

Irving Berlin was an American composer and lyricist of Jewish heritage, widely considered one of the greatest songwriters in American history.

Born Israel Isidore Baline in 1888 in Russia, the renamed Berlin moved to America with his family in 1893 to escape Tsar Nicholas II’s anti-Jewish ‘pogroms’ - a violent riot against minority groups, particularly 19th and 20th-century attacks against Jewish people within the Russian Empire.



Berlin published his first song, 'Marie from Sunny Italy', in 1907, aged 19, and had his first international hit with 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' four years later. By thirty he'd achieved notoriety with a string of major hits. During his sixty-year career he wrote an estimated 1,500 songs, many becoming popular anthems, including 'White Christmas' and 'There's No Business Like Show Business'. Berlin wrote the scores for 19 Broadway musicals and 18 Hollywood films, including *Top Hat* in 1935. His music was nominated eight times for Academy Awards.

Berlin's songs have reached the top of the charts twenty-five times, having been recorded by numerous singers over the years, including Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, Al Jolson, Judy Garland, Doris Day, Ella Fitzgerald, Barbra Streisand, Diana Ross and Cher.

His career spanned seven decades, until his death in 1989 at the age of 101. Fellow composer George Gershwin called Berlin 'the greatest songwriter that has ever lived', while Jerome Kern commented, 'Irving Berlin has no place in American music - he *is* American music.'



[Fred Astaire \(1899 - 1987\)](#)
[and Ginger Rogers \(1911 - 1995\)](#)

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers are generally considered the most famous song-and-dance duo in film history. From 1933 until 1949, and still today, they were regarded as one of the greatest dancing partnerships in any art form, making a total of 10 films together - nine for RKO Radio Pictures and one for MGM, *The Barkleys of Broadway*, their only colour film.

Roger's made her first film in 1929, while Astaire's screen debut came four years later in *Dancing Lady*, starring Clark Gable. The pair first acted together in 1933's *Flying Down to Rio*, in which both had supporting roles, but the following year they co-starred in *The Gay Divorcee*.

By 1936, following the success of *Top Hat*, Astaire and Rogers were big box-office names. They made several more films together, including *Swing Time* (1936) and *Carefree* (1938), until parting in 1939 to pursue solo careers. In 1941 Rogers won the Academy Award for Best Actress in *Kitty Foyle*, while Astaire continued to

make musicals, including *Easter Parade* in 1948, the most financially-successful film of his career.

Astaire and Rogers were reunited in 1949's *The Barkleys of Broadway* - Rogers replacing an ill Judy Garland. It was to be their last film together. Afterwards, both continued to make films separately while maintaining a lifelong friendship. While Rogers' career began to decline from the mid-1950s onwards, Astaire still appeared in films and on TV until the early 1980s. Though both successful stars in their own right, Astaire and Rogers will forever be remembered as one of the most enduring cinematic partnerships of all time.

Activities for Teachers and Students

Practical and written exercises based on an extract from *Top Hat*

The following extract is taken from Act One, Scene Three of *Top Hat*. Song-and-dance man Jerry Travers and his producer Horace Hardwick return from an evening out to the latter's apartment at the Hotel Excelsior. They are met by Horace's valet Bates, who makes them both a drink before retiring for the night.

Over their nightcap, the two friends talk about their forthcoming collaboration - a new musical revue - and plans for the weekend. After Jerry breaks out into an impromptu tap dance, Horace is summoned to answer a complaint from the room below. While he's gone, Jerry meets the complainant - society model, Dale Tremont. The two spar and flirt and Jerry is instantly smitten.

1. Working as a group read through the extract and explore the staging of this scene.
2. For the purpose of the exercise use the stage directions referring to blocking as a guide only. It's more important that you find your own creative solutions to the staging, which will be determined by the space you're working in.
3. As directors reading the scene consider what atmosphere you want to create.
4. How would you direct the actors playing Jerry, Horace and Dale in order to establish their relationships?
5. You should also take into account the other elements of production. For example, what should the lighting be like? Is any specific sound required?

Once you've seen the production of *Top Hat* at the Aldwych Theatre consider how their staging of this scene compares with your own.

Top Hat

An extract from Act One, Scene Three

Horace (*Changing the subject*) Now Jerry, Madge has issued strict instructions for us to fly down to Italy for the weekend after tomorrow night's performance. Of course she has no idea how much a private plane will cost me to hire. She's hopeless where money's concerned. You know, Jerry, last year she had her cheque book stolen, but I decided not to report it.

Jerry Why ever not?

Horace Well, it turned out the thief was spending far less than she was!

Jerry (*He laughs*) Look, Horace, I can't fly down to Italy. I have a performance on Monday night.

Horace My word, Jerry, we have to go, she's counting on us. You see she's going to have a young friend visit her, and I suspect there's something in the air. You know Madge and her penchant for matchmaking.

Jerry Is she expecting me for a weekend or a wedding?

Horace The former, I think. As for the latter, it's actually our wedding anniversary on Sunday - three glorious years! Seriously Jerry, there'll be hell to pay if I don't make it over - you know how wives are.

Jerry No, I don't. How are they?

Horace Well, let's just say that a man is incomplete until he's married - after that he's finished! Look here, young fellow, I think it's about time you found out for yourself.

Jerry No thanks, Horace. Many a man who has fallen in love with a dimple makes the mistake of marrying the whole girl.

[*Singing:*]

I wake up every morning
With a smile on my face,
Everything in its place, as it should be.
I start out every morning
Just as free as the breeze.
My cares upon the shelf,
Because I find myself with...
No strings and no connections,
No ties to my affections,
I'm fancy free
And free for anything fancy.

No dates that can't be broken,
No words that can't be spoken
Especially when I am feeling romancy.
Like a robin upon a tree,
Like a sailor who goes to sea,
Like an unwritten melody
I'm free, that's me...
So bring on the big attraction,
My decks are cleared for action
I'm fancy free
And free for anything fancy.

Jerry breaks into an infectious, light-hearted tap routine which he performs with great dexterity. A Hotel Porter appears with a bottle of champagne; he is followed by Two Chamber Maids. Jerry dances with them. They exit. As Jerry continues to dance the lights come up on Dale Tremont, a beautiful young fashion model, who is trying to get some sleep in the room below. Exasperated she reaches for the phone.

Dale Hello, this is Dale Tremont, room 304. I'd like to speak to the Hotel Manager immediately.

The lights fade on Dale as the phone rings in Horace's suite.

Horace Hello... Who? oh, the manager, yes. There's a... what? At this time of night? Oh no, she can't come up here now. No, no, no, no. I'd better come down myself. *(He hangs up the phone.)* Jerry, there's a young lady downstairs says she wants to see me.

Horace exits swiftly. Oblivious, Jerry starts to dance with the hat stand. Dale, in an elegant negligee and house coat, appears at the door and knocks. He doesn't hear her. She opens the door and strides in. The moment he sees her the music stops.

Dale *(indicating the hat-stand)* You make a lovely couple.

Jerry Thank you.

Dale She's stylish.

Jerry Contemporary.

Dale Thin! Does she have a name?

Jerry *(placing his hat on the hatstand)* Hattie. Won't you sit down? I'm awfully glad you dropped in.

Dale I dropped up from the room below where I have been trying to get some sleep.

Jerry Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was disturbing you. You see every once in a while I suddenly find myself dancing.

Dale I suppose it's some kind of affliction.

Jerry Yes, my doctor's call it tapititus. *(He executes a swift tap move)*

Dale How very impressive - is there no beginning to your talents?

Jerry I think you are very unkind to make fun of me, especially at this time of night.

Dale Oh, I'm sorry. Next time I'll book an appointment. *(Indicating the hatstand)*. I take it the dance class is finished?

Jerry Yes, she's exhausted, poor thing. Time to hang up her hat.

Dale *smiles and turns to leave.*

I wish you wouldn't leave.

Dale Why not?

Jerry I can feel an attack coming on. Here it is!

He starts to dance.

Dale So I see.

Jerry There's only one thing that can stop me.

Dale You must tell me what it is.

Jerry My nurses always put their arms around me.

Dale Well I'll call the Hotel Manager - I'm sure he'll be happy to oblige.

She turns to exit.

Jerry Wait! Miss...you didn't say good night.

Dale No...I didn't.

She exits.



Questions on the production and further practical work

You may wish to work individually on answering the questions below, or they may form the basis for a group discussion following your visit to the Aldwych Theatre to see the production of *Top Hat*.

Make notes

During your visit observe every element of the production in the minutest detail. Make notes in the interval and directly after the show but not during the performance. You need to experience the show fully as an audience member. Making notes during the performance is distracting for both the actors on stage and those people sitting around you.

Questions

Consider the following, asking yourself why a Creative Team makes certain choices and how these impact upon an audience's interpretation of a show.

1. What do you **see and hear** on the stage and in the auditorium while you are waiting for the performance to begin?
2. What is your **first impression** of the set?
 - What shapes, levels, textures and colours are being used?

3. How does the **design** establish the world of the piece, in terms of its location and atmosphere?
4. How do the actors use the **set**? How does it hide or reveal them?
5. What shapes, colours and textures are used in the **costumes**?
 - What do they tell us about the characters, in terms of their personalities and background?
 - Compare the costumes of different characters. What stories do they tell?
6. How does the **lighting** show where we are?
 - Describe two contrasting locations. What colours and shades of colour are being used to create time of day, location or mood? What levels of brightness are being used and why?
 - Think about angles of light. Who is well lit and who is in shadow?
 - When do the lights change? What does this signify?
 - What atmosphere and emotions are suggested by the lighting?
7. What **transformations** take place within the main characters through the journey of the show? How do the actors embody these changes?
8. How effective is the transition from **speech to song**?
 - Give an example of a point in the show where this happens.
9. How do the company create individual characters for each guest at the hotel?
 - Describe the **characterisation** of one guest, to whose performance you were particularly drawn.

Improvise new scenes

Once you've seen the production you could improvise new scenes exploring the background to the show, taking the material within this Education Pack as a starting point. What discoveries do you make? How do such improvisations inform your ideas about the story and characters?

Activity

The following exercise is intended for younger students. Like the questions above, it aims to encourage them to think about the production and their own response to it.

On _____ we went to see a production of *Top Hat* at _____
While I was waiting for the performance to begin I noticed

My favourite character was _____ played by _____
What I liked about the character was

My favourite scene was

The lighting used in this scene made me think of _____
and it made me feel _____

The song that stayed in my head after the show was _____

The reason I remember that song is

Character through song

Taking two contrasting songs from *Top Hat* we are going to explore the actor's process of moving from text into performance - from page to stage.

The following exercises have been adapted from LAMDA's *Musical Theatre: Exploring the World Through Song*. They focus more on interpretation than execution of the individual songs but include suggestions regarding the technical preparation needed to perform.

The first song - I'm Putting All My Eggs In One Basket - is taken from Act One, Scene Five. Jerry, disguised as the driver of an old-fashioned London 'hansom cab', drives Dale to her riding stables. While the society model rides oblivious in the cab below, Jerry declares his love for her, claiming his life as a bachelor and 'man-about-town' are over.

I've been a roaming Romeo,
My Juliets have been many,
But now my roamin' days have gone.
Too many irons in the fire
Is worse than not having any;
I've had my share and from now on...
I'm putting all my eggs in one basket,
I'm betting ev'rything I've got on you.
I'm giving all my love to one baby,
Heaven help me if my baby don't come through.
I've got a great big amount,
Saved up in my love account, honey,
And I've decided love divided in two won't do...
So I'm putting all my eggs in one basket,
I'm betting everything I've got on you.

The second song - *Better Luck Next Time* - is taken from Act Two, Scene Eight. Alone in her hotel room in Venice, a heartbroken Dale sings of her despair, believing the man she truly loves - Jerry - is the husband of her old friend, Madge. In that moment she can see no future happiness.



For ev'ry rose that withers and dies,
Another blooms in its stead,
A new love waits to open its eyes,
After the old love is dead.
That sounds all right in a careless rhyme,
But there's seldom a second time.
Better luck next time,
That could never be,
Because there won't ever be
A next time for me (not for me).
Made up my mind
To make another start,
I've made my mind up
But I can't make up my heart.
I'd like a new lucky day,

That would be nice,
But this comes just once in a lifetime,
Not twice.
So don't say 'better luck next time'
That could never be,
Because there won't ever be
A next time for me.

In the first instance, approaching a song from a musical is similar to approaching a monologue from a play, in terms of placing your character and their story in context. You must bear the following questions in mind:

1. Who are you?
2. Where are you?
3. What has just happened/is happening to you?

You must look at all the elements of the song then use your acting skills to bring it to life. The disciplines of singing and dancing/moving will be added later. Explore the full potential of the lyric to ensure the song has real meaning. In musical theatre, singing the song alone is not enough.

Having listened to a recording of the song resist the temptation to play it again several times. You must distance yourself from that particular performance. It belongs to another actor or actress and a specific moment in time and place. You must now create your own unique interpretation of the same material - your own performance.

1. Begin your exploration by writing out all the words of the song by hand. Do not type and print them. You are endeavouring to make a direct connection with each word as you write it down.
 - Write out the full lyric as a 'stream-of-consciousness', i.e. in continuous prose without punctuation or reference to verse structure.
 - Imagine you are writing your diary or a letter to yourself.
2. Focusing on the text, underline what you think are the key words. When it

comes to singing the song this will help you remember the significance of the words in addition to concentrating on the notes. Meaning cannot be sacrificed to melody.

3. Try speaking this monologue several times, noting the various emotions the words make you feel.
 - You can repeat the exercise experimenting with different attitudes towards the text.
 - How does that alter your interpretation and performance of the piece?
4. Ultimately decide whether the monologue is about:
 - Your feelings.
 - Telling your story.
 - Communicating a special moment in your life.
 - Expressing a lesson to be learnt by your life experience.
 - Engaging the audience in something that moves you, that you want to share at that precise moment.
5. Returning to the published text - i.e. the song as written - observe the lyricist's punctuation and phrasing. How does it differ to your handwritten version?
6. Speak the monologue again, this time obeying the original punctuation and paying attention to every detail of the writing.

The following is a useful exercise to help you fully consider the punctuation of a song or speech and its impact upon meaning.

- Speak the monologue again while moving around an open space. At each punctuation mark change direction - the stronger the punctuation, the greater the change. For example, a comma might suggest a slight veer to the left or right, a semi-colon or colon a diagonal turn, and a full stop - or exclamation or question mark - should signal exactly that.
- Afterwards consider how many changes of direction you made. How much punctuation is there within the speech as a whole and what does that

suggest about the thoughts of the character?

- Repeat the exercise, this time ignoring the punctuation and only changing direction whenever you think the thought changes. People often talk about their thoughts being ‘all over the place’ or of going ‘round and round in circles’.
- Think of the song as a map designed to help you, the performer, navigate a complicated journey in the mind of the character. The aim is to plot this journey step-by-step, stage-by-stage, within the room. Is the journey of the song linear? Does it progress in a straightforward, uncomplicated manner? Or is the route circuitous and complex? What clues are there within the text to indicate a change in the direction of thought?
- Now speak the monologue again but this time remaining still while recalling the physical journey of the song in your mind.

7. You need to find your character’s motivation for speaking the first line of the monologue. What inspires you to sing at that precise moment? By doing the exercise above you should have a better understanding of the journey of the song, how your characters’ thoughts and the meaning of the lyric change.

8. You need to ask questions of every silence.

- Why the pause?
- What thought/feeling is being explored?
- Reflect on the detailed map of the song and consider what you are to do during each of the so-called ‘gaps’ in the music.

9. Having thoroughly explored the monologue in terms of its content you now need to examine the music. Ideally you should follow the score while it’s played by an accompanist or repetiteur.

10. Consider the following:

- Is the song in a major or minor key? Why?
- Does it change key? Where?
- What impact does this have upon the song?
- How many bars are there before I start to sing?
- What am I doing/thinking while the musical introduction is playing?

- What happens throughout the song when I'm not singing?
- What is happening in the accompaniment when I am singing?
- Do I sing until the end of the song or does the piano finish it?

11. Make sure that you are in control of the song and not the other way round.

Return to the text and the punctuation.

- Speak the song again, paying particular attention to the rhythms and rests within the music.
- Try walking in the rhythm of the song whilst speaking it.
- Consider the breathing points within the song and how the breath supports the notes and, as a result, the words and thoughts behind them.
- It is this technical preparation that will ultimately release the work, creating an original and personal interpretation of a familiar song.

12. With regard to the list of questions above, you should add to these in order to make your preparation personal and specific to your needs.

Further Resources

Top Hat

Directed by Mark Sandrich

Produced by Pandro S. Berman (RKO Radio Pictures, 1935)

The original film available on DVD

www.tophatonstage.com

The official website of the production, currently at the Aldwych Theatre, London. Includes information about the cast and Creative Team and photos and videos of the production.

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‘Puttin’ on that Top Hat’, Kate Youde, Independent on Sunday (08/04/12)

‘Shiny tappy people’, David Jays, Sunday Times

‘Not strictly Fred and Ginger but a top night’, Henry Hitchings, Evening Standard (10/05/12)

Mousetrap Theatre Projects offers young people with limited resources and access, the opportunity to engage with the best of London's live theatre. We are an independent charity, working with theatres in the West End and across London. Since 1997, we have taken nearly 100,000 young people to the theatre.

We create innovative and exciting theatre access, education and audience development programmes. Young people take part with their school, youth group, family or friends.

Mission Statement

We believe that all young people should have the opportunity to attend outstanding theatre, irrespective of their cultural, social or economic background. Our mission is to increase young people's access to the best of live theatre in London (particularly those young people with limited resources, opportunities or support) and to enable them to engage creatively with that experience.

As an independent charity, Mousetrap Theatre Projects is in a unique position to select the appropriate or relevant theatre productions in and beyond the West End that stimulate and inspire young people. We devise programmes that use theatre as a catalyst to explore ideas, learn new skills, develop creativity and offer new perspectives. At the heart of our education and outreach work is the desire to open doors to young people who might otherwise consider London's rich cultural heritage closed to them.

Areas of Endeavour

- Access:** To provide young people with limited resources, support or a disability, the opportunity to attend London theatre, often as a first-time experience: **TheatreOpeners, The ICAP Theatre Journeys for Special Schools, Family First Nights, Envision, StageSeen and StageXchange**
- Education:** To enable young people to engage actively with their theatre experience and to use theatre as an educational resource in and out of the classroom to stimulate creative work and to develop theatre-related skills: **CompanyWise DesignTasters, Insight Sessions, Play the Critic (Theatre, Dance & Music), PowerPlay, StageBusiness, StageSong, TheatreWorks and WriteThinking.**
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