the uncle pays the bill and everyone is reconciled, and they all live happily ever after. Needless to say, the plot was not the reason the show was such a hit. "To be sure," a Boston reviewer wrote in 1896, "Mr. Hoyt's humor smacks far more of the street and barroom than of the drawing room, this is undeniable. But," he had to admit, "it is excellent humor for all that." Loie Fuller's "Butterfly Dance," in which she swirled her skirts like butterfly wings, added another great attraction, as did the satires on current subjects like women's rights and the temperance crusade.

But the greatest reason for the show's success was the music that people hummed as they left the theater, songs that sold hundreds of thousands of copies of sheet music in the 1890s—the first time a musical show had so dominated popular music. When the show came in from its trial runs to open in New York, Hoyt realized it needed another strong musical number. With no time to write one for the production, he inserted a new song that he and his composer Percy Baunt, had just written, even though it had absolutely nothing to do with San Francisco, Chinatown, or a restaurant. The show's action simply stopped for this "musical interruption." Henry Conor, playing a country rube who had wandered into the Bowery, where he found him-
self surrounded by drunks and thieves, made his entrance and sang:

_The Bowery! The Bowery! They do such things, and they say such things On the Bowery! The Bowery!_ I'll never go there any more.

After he sang the six verses all the way through twice for the wildly cheering audience, the story in the San Francisco restaurant resumed. The production also featured another popular hit, "Reuben, Reuben, I've Been Thinking," and an early example of "payola," a bribe to plug or promote a song. Charles K. Harris' "After the Ball," which the show ultimately made a popular standard, had been a failure when introduced in vaudeville. But with an offer of $500 cash and a share of the royalties, Harris got his song into a _Trip to Chinatown_, even though it and its ballroom scene had nothing to do with the plot or setting. With the exposure the play gave it, the song, like many show tunes to follow, was a sensation, ultimately becoming the first American popular song to sell five million copies of sheet music.

Musical productions had come a long way by the 1890s. Lavish spectacles with large casts including chorus girls had become routine. Plots, characters, music, dance, and humor had all been Americanized. Popular music and hit songs now came from the musical stage as they earlier had come from minstrelsy. Shows took their pace and their content from city dwellers, reflecting the ever-spreading influence of urbanization on American life. The American musical comedy was emerging.

The first true master of the American vernacular musical comedy emerged in the early twentieth century. Although not born on the fourth of July as he frequently claimed, George M. Cohan was born on July 3, 1878, while his mother was touring in vaudeville. He grew up with show business in his blood and as his school, appearing on the variety stage as an infant with his song and dance team parents and remaining there for most of his life. The family act, the Four Cohans, including his sister Josie, became a leading vaudeville attraction by the end of the nineteenth century, with George writing all its material and acting as its business manager. With his eyes on the prestige that Broadway represented, he, in 1901, expanded one of his vaudeville sketches, _The Governor's Son_, into a musical comedy, secured the financing, and opened it on Broadway in a legitimate theater. But his dream was not yet to be realized.

The nervous cast, including the Four Cohans, was awed by Broadway, and the snappy vaudeville sketch had become an overblown, slow-moving full-length show. To make matters worse, George sprained his ankle in the first scene, hobbling through the rest of the production. After poor reviews and audiences to match, George took the show on a profitable road tour. The following year the Cohans again tried one of George's expanded skits on Broadway and again had to settle for a profitable road tour. But the ambitious, confident young Cohan, accustomed to stardom in the show business hinterlands, had eyes only for Broadway, which he called "the only Bell I wanted to ring."

His third effort at a Broadway musical, _Little Johnny Jones_ in 1904, did not set off an immediate chorus of bells or of accolades. And after a lukewarm reception, the show quickly followed its predecessors, although it contained two songs destined to become classics of the American musical stage—"Give My Regards to Broadway," and "Yankee Doodle Boy." By then, the Four Cohans had dis-
banded, and George worked hard on his new show, continually rewriting, honing, and quickening the pace. When he brought it back to Broadway, it enjoyed a good three-and-a-half-month run. In the play, an honest American jockey riding in England is unjustly accused of throwing a race after he refuses to co-operate with a gambler. But the jockey clears his good name in time to marry the girl of his dreams. The plot was much less important than Cohan’s breezy, rapid-fire action and dialogue, his catchy songs, his exaltation of Broadway, and his gimmick of wrapping himself in an American flag and singing patriotic songs. By putting an urban American “Yankee Doodle Boy” in England, Cohan achieved an updated version of the traditional, naïve country boy in the wilds of civilization. In this case the Yankee Doodle from the city represented all-American goodness and honesty in a foreign land. Urbanism, traditional values, and patriotism were to be Cohan’s major themes.

“Never was a plant more indigenous to a particular part of the earth than was George M. Cohan to the United States of his day,”
Oscar Hammerstein II later wrote of the artist who prospered during the flush years between the buoyantly victorious Spanish-American War and the disillusioning experience of World War I, years when the quality of life for common people began to improve, making even the rosiest predictions of further progress seem believable. "The whole nation was confident of its superiority, its moral virtue, its happy isolation from the intrigues of the 'old country,'" Hammerstein concluded. The modernization that so upset nineteenth-century Americans had concentrated on developing the basic industrial, transportation, and communication systems—factories, railroads, and telegraph lines—and brought few tangible improvements in common people’s lives. But by the twentieth century, modernization bore fruit for average Americans—sewing machines, ready-made clothing, canned goods, and telephones. Cohan made the city the new symbol of American progress, wealth, and power—the fulfillment of the nation’s democratic ideals. The twentieth-century Yankee Doodles emerged from the sidewalks of New York—not the New England woods—spoke in the rapid-fire pace of the city—not the slow drawl of the country—and had the brash, worldly knowledge of the metropolis—not the naïveté of the farm. Cohan embodied the new urban life styles and values, and he "sold" them to the nation. It was to be the American century, an unending parade of prosperity and progress. And Cohan was to lead the parade.

Cohan’s second successful play, *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*, which opened in 1906, continued his praise of city life, mocking New Rochelle for its suburban provincialism, for its rubes and its lack of even one cafe. The title, which measured the travel time from New Rochelle to Broadway, underscored
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the message that the city, not the country, was the place to be. The jibes at New Rochelle prompted its city council to sponsor a boycott against the play, officially protesting that it libeled the city. But the councilmen soon realized that the innocuous show did little more than put the town on the map. In the play, a rich man dies on his country estate, promising to leave his money to his maid, Mary Jane. But when no will is found, his only living relative, with an entourage that includes an ex-showgirl, her nagging mother, and his secretary Kid Burns, a somewhat coarse, ex-horseplayer, appears to claim the estate. By making Kid Burns and Mary Jane the only decent, appealing people in the play, Cohan effectively substitutes a city slicker for the traditional poor, but honest, country boy who shows up the pretentious as empty, dishonest people. After Burns and Mary Jane fall in love, the Kid finds the will leaving everything to Mary Jane. But when he refuses to marry an heiress, she tears up the will, preferring her love for Kid Burns to the love of money that obsesses the other characters. Besides the title song, the show's other hit was "Mary's a Grand Old Name."

As if he realized that he had left out an indispensable ingredient, Cohan produced another show that same year, his heavily patriotic George Washington Jr., which he billed as "an American musical play." As in his other shows, part of the plot reworked the well-worn intricacies of melodramatic love affairs, but his other major theme represented a morality play for the new age. The play opens with a former United States senator turning his back on his country by taking his son to live in England, where the Senator plans to buy his way into British high society and to marry off his son, George, to a Lord's daughter. Disgusted by this scheme, George transforms himself into Superpatriot. Taking the name of the "Father of His Country," George Belgrave becomes "George Washington Jr.," literally cloaking himself in the flag as he sings: "It's the emblem of the land I love, the home of the free and the brave." But even Superpatriot can make an honest, patriotic error. Cohan originally titled the song: "You're a Grand Old Rag," a title inspired by, he claimed, a Union Army veteran who had carried the flag in Pickett's charge during the Civil War. The old soldier, as Cohan told it with his best sentimental patriotism, looked up at the flag with tears in his eyes as he choked out: "She's a grand old rag!" But whether the title was authentic or not, early twentieth-century Americans, who otherwise loved Cohan's use of slang, were incensed to hear their flag called a "rag," and Cohan quickly changed the title to "You're a Grand Old Flag."

Cohan's simplistic, flamboyant patriotism echoed the same optimistic boosterism and belligerent rallying cries of the "manifest destiny" of the United States to rule the North American continent, if not the entire Western Hemisphere, that blackface minstrels, rustic Yankees, hardy frontiersmen, and bellicose Mose the B'howery B'hoi had trumpeted to the nation three-quarters of a century earlier. These optimistic sentiments, dampened by the Civil War and the shocks of early industrialism, again resounded around the nation at the turn of the twentieth century. In the 1840s, it was Kansas, California, the Southwest, and Oregon. In the early twentieth century, it was Cuba, the Philippines, the Caribbean, and the Panama Canal. Teddy Roosevelt might walk softly and carry his big stick, but not Cohan. Cohan strutted! His hat cocked down over his eyes, his nasal voice shouting out bursts of brash, confident boasts,
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his body exploding in cocky gestures and high-stepping dances, Cohan exuded confidence in his every move. Although certainly no country boys, and the farthest things from rubes, his heroes had many of the same basic qualities that their rustic predecessors had. Like Brother Jonathan, the Yankee, and the other anti-aristocratic heroes of the past, Cohan’s heroes scorned European elitism and its American advocates—even, when necessary, their own fathers.

Also like his predecessors, Cohan’s heroes were more popular with the common people in the galleries than with the critics in the boxes. Following Harrigan, Cohan boasted of bringing “actual living characters from the street to the stage.” And critics did not always like what he brought. Cohan, a critic huffed, is “a vulgar, cheap, blatant, ill-mannered, flashily-dressed, insolent, smart Aleck who, for some reason unexplainable, . . . appeals to the imagination and apparent approval of large American audiences.” He conveys “to the minds of ignorant boys,” the critic protested, “a depraved ideal for their inspiration and imitation.” Other less caustic critics were equally at a loss to explain why his “high-grade, second-grade productions” were so successful. The critics were using artistic criteria which were only partially able to account for his appeal. His shows, they realized, had an engaging new tempo and style, substituting the hectic, driving pace of the modern American city for the leisurely, refined elegance that characterized European-derived Comic Operas. “At times,” a critic gasped about one of his shows, “it goes so fast that it almost bewilders and gives the impression of a great machine shooting out characters, choruses, songs, dances with rapid-fire quickness and precision.” But his media was only part of his message. Critics failed to realize that the content of Cohan’s shows—his unique combination of street-toughness and sentimentality, of patriotism and optimism—was exactly what audiences wanted in the Progressive Era, the days of Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, when times were good and problems seemed solvable. In fact, “George Washington Jr.,” converted his father from being a pretentious, aristocratic Anglophile to a patriotic American democrat. The new redeemed the old by reasserting traditional values as part of, not the opposite of, the modern, urban world.

Cohan’s method of creating his shows added to their vitality. Like Harrigan, he did not write them. Once he had an inspiration, he assembled a cast and worked his idea out

Caricature of George M. Cohan in Yankee Prince (1908). NYLC.
THAT'S MY BOY!
on the stage, as the Four Cohans must have done with their song-and-dance act. All his life he had been learning how to appeal to audiences of average people. When he took what he had learned in vaudeville and brought it into musical comedy, it seemed a bold new development. "In the art of presenting musical comedy," a New York Dramatic Mirror critic admitted grudgingly, "Mr. Cohan is apparently without a peer." For a decade after the 1906 George Washington Jr., Cohan produced a new musical almost every year, making himself "Mr. Broadway" by reworking and repeating the same themes, techniques, and styles. During World War I, he became an even greater celebrity with his song "Over There," virtually the nation's theme song during the "War To End All Wars."

But Cohan never again recaptured his pre-World War I popularity. The most immediate and common explanation for this was his unflinching, union-busting opposition to the Actor's Equity Association's ultimately successful strike to win union recognition. Arguing the individualist position in opposition to collective bargaining as Henry Ford did for so long, Cohan led the management forces in the bitter struggle against union recognition. When Equity won and other producers made their peace with it, Cohan stubbornly closed down his production company and swore he would never do another Broadway show. But when he eventually did mount new productions, they failed or had moderate success at best. Times had changed, and like Harrigan, Cohan had not. The naive simplicity and buoyant optimism of the early twentieth century had been destroyed as Woodrow Wilson had been by the war and its disillusioning peace. Musicals too had changed, sparked in part by the new life Cohan himself had breathed into the tired old form. Everything had changed—everything but Cohan. Although he continued to win accolades for his past accomplishments and for starring in Rodgers and Hart's I'd Rather Be Right, show business was never again right for him because he was no longer singing his own songs in his own shows in his own way. When he went to Hollywood in 1932 to star in The
Phantom President, producers and directors had the effrontery to teach him—George M. Cohan, Mr. Broadway—how to sing and dance. They even tried to tell him how to do his patented flag routine!

Cohan could not change himself, but he changed the musical stage. Depending on definitions, there are a number of productions that can be said to represent the emergence of the American Musical Comedy as a distinctive national form. Cohan’s early shows are among the strongest candidates. Drawing on extravaganza for costuming and production numbers, on burlesque for satire and chorus girls, on operetta for romance and glamour, on vaudeville for stars, routines, and pacing, and on the public for American themes and images, Cohan’s shows were not the end of musical comedy’s development into cohesive, well-plotted, well-integrated shows. But they were an important landmark along the way. America came of age in the decades surrounding World War I, and so did the musical comedy, but not just in the Cohan mold.

The last major type of American musical, the Comic Opera or Light Opera, first took firm root in the United States in the late 1870s when Gilbert and Sullivan’s HMS Pinafore dazzled Americans. Beginning in 1880, other romantic Comic Operas from London, Paris, and Vienna joined burlesques, extravaganzas, farce-comedies, and urban shows as major staples of the American musical stage. In 1880, ten comic operas were produced in New York; in 1883, the total rose to thirteen. The high quality of the music produced by first-rate European composers—Gilbert and Sullivan, Jacques Offenbach, and Johann Strauss—
The young Lillian Russell in *HMS Pinafore*. HTC.

partially accounts for this success, but if the shows had not met American tastes and needs, they would not have proved so popular. Focusing on upper-class life, often on romance between dashing young military officers and lovely young women, the operettas provided Americans with a sense of beauty, elegance, and social order, a welcome diversion from the problems of modern life, much as Busby Berkeley’s lavish musical films served common people during the Great Depression of the 1930s. European comic operas remained a major component of the American musical stage well into the twentieth century, given new life by beautifully staged, waltz-dominated productions like Franz Lehar’s *Merry Widow* of 1907.

American comic operas, little more than poor imitations of the originals, appeared frequently after the late 1880s, as composers and producers tried to cash in on this show business fad as they did with every other. Perhaps the only noteworthy product of these nineteenth-century American comic operas was the emergence of Lillian Russell as one of the most popular stars of the American stage. Like Jenny Lind, her popularity derived at least as much from her beauty and grace as from her voice and singing. “From early girlhood to the hour of her death,” actor Francis Wilson observed in 1922, “she moved in a court of beauty of which she was the undisputed queen.” In no other period of American show business history has one actress been so unanimously acclaimed the queen of the American stage, “The American Beauty.” Having been raised by her mother to feel her beauty was a special gift that did not make her superior to other people and having had her voice trained by a leading New York musician, she was a composed, skilled young woman with a strong awareness of her own talent, beauty, and stature. Beautifully costumed and groomed, she regally promenaded through a series of otherwise undistinguished plays, later gracing American music halls and vaudeville houses with her presence and with selections from her operettas, adding dignity to every show she appeared in.

In the first decades of the twentieth century the American comic opera reached its peak of popularity and perfection because of men like Victor Herbert, who was born in
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Lillian Russell in a beautiful poster for *The Butterfly.* NYLC.

Guard Band, a post raised to national stature by his predecessor Patrick S. Gilmore, a man as responsible as John Philip Sousa for popularizing march music, Herbert leapt at the chance. Although he desired an even broader audience, wanting to write for the kind of folk theater that he associated with Harrigan and Hart, his training overpowered his instincts, and he soon found himself composing in the tradition of semi-classical Middle European operettas. In 1893, he wrote his first comic opera, designed especially for Lillian Russell, but it was never produced. The following year, his *Prince Ananias* opened in New York, and after that he produced a long series of shows featuring lyrical music and exotic settings—Venice, India, Afghanistan, Persia, and Egypt. After three years conducting the Pittsburgh symphony, he returned to Broadway in 1903, where he wrote a new show attempting to exploit the immense popularity of L. Frank Baum’s musical comedy adaptation of his *Wizard of Oz.* Herbert’s *Babes in Toyland* was set in “The Land of Mother Goose,” which allowed for a wide range of fantasy. Although written as a take-off on another hit, Herbert’s score was more enduring than its predecessor’s. When the two shows are revived, *The Wizard of Oz* uses the familiar score written for the film version, but *Babes in Toyland* relies on Herbert’s original music, including “Toyland” and “March Of The Toys.”

Herbert’s greatest musical, *Naughty Marietta,* set in Spanish-ruled New Orleans in 1780, is a typical comic opera centered on men in uniform, aristocratic ladies, flirtatious courting and courtly flirtation, highly involved but largely irrelevant intrigue and complications, and at least one grand ballroom scene—to say nothing of the inevitable happy ending: Captain Richard, on a mission to New Orleans to capture a pirate, meets and
falls in love with Marietta, an Italian noblewoman disguised as a commoner who had journeyed to Louisiana to marry a planter rather than submit to an arranged marriage with an Italian aristocrat whom she despises. And that is merely the background. Captain Richard refuses to admit to himself that he truly loves this flirtatious commoner, this "Naughty Marietta." Meanwhile, Adah, a beautiful light-skinned slave who loves her master Etienne, the Lieutenant Governor's son, realizes that he is beyond her reach and mourns in song. Then, the plot thickens. At a society ball, Etienne falls in love with Marietta, who has secretly fallen for Richard, who buys Adah from Etienne only in order to set her free, which infuriates the jealous Marietta, who agrees out of spite to marry Etienne, who is exposed as the pirate by Richard, who marries Marietta, who lives happily ever after. Somehow the plot allowed time for the cast to sing some of Herbert's loveliest songs, "I'm Falling In Love With Someone" and "Ah! Sweet Mystery Of Life."

In the next twenty years, Herbert poured out a number of lilting, carefully composed scores, replete with sentimental waltzes, charming melodies, and gay, quick tunes. Although no Strauss or Offenbach, Herbert was, up to that point, the greatest composer to write for the American comic opera, the first man to make it respectable as a unified, refined performing art. After that, Rudolph Friml, Sigmund Romberg, and others continued in this vein, as European comic opera with its fairyland settings and its heavy reli-
ance on the waltz enjoyed great popularity in the United States in the decades surrounding World War I. But it never became distinctively American.

Like Herbert, American-born Jerome Kern, the man who ultimately brought American musical comedy to its full maturity, received his formal musical training in Europe. After studying on the Continent in his teens, he worked briefly in London as a songwriter for a popular musical theater before returning to the United States in 1904 at the age of nineteen. In the next decade, while he worked his way up in musical theater, as a song-plugger, music salesman, and rehearsal pianist, he saw the American musical stage dominated by European waltz-based operettas—the major exceptions to this trend being Cohan’s shows and the lavish revues of Florenz Ziegfeld, the Shuberts, and others. Although these revues are discussed in depth in the last chapter, it is important to note that in the decades surrounding World War I the highly popular revues commanded the talents of a great many creative people. Many of America’s most beloved composers—George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin, for example—wrote for revues in their heyday.

After working to make European musicals pleasing to American audiences as a “score doctor,” Kern in 1912 began writing his own musicals. Joining with librettist Guy Bolton, he had his first success in 1915 with Very Good Eddie, an influential show that fourteen-year-old Richard Rodgers saw at least a dozen times, absorbing the sparkling and original music. In a much more sophisticated way than George M. Cohan, Kern was forging truly American music for the popular stage. “Kern was typical of what was, and still is, good in our general maturity in this country,” Richard Rodgers later wrote, “in that he had his musical roots in the fertile European and English school of operetta writing, and amalgamated it with everything that was fresh in the American scene to give us something wonderfully new and clear in music writing.”

Returning to the spirit of “everyday” farce-comedy, like Nate Salisbury’s The Brook, Kern and Bolton (joined by P. G. Wodehouse after 1915) created a landmark series of musical comedies known as the “Princess Shows” for the intimate Princess Theatre where they were given. With modern characters speaking and singing in familiar language about familiar subjects in believable, often double-entendre situations, the shows established a close rapport with their audiences. In the small theater, the shows necessarily shunned the large casts, spectacular scenery, huge orchestras, and fairyland-like aura that then dominated the musical theater. Rather than the plots being little more than the space between the production numbers, Kern, Bolton, and Wodehouse integrated dialogue, humor, and action with the songs and lyrics and made them emerge from the characters and situations. “Every song and lyric contributed to the action,” Bolton boasted of their hit Oh, Boyl. “The humor was based on situation, not interjected by the comedians.”

Very Good Eddie centers on two honeymooning couples taking a trip on The Catskill, a Hudson river steamer. The couples become separated and find themselves with the wrong spouses. When Eddie and Elsie pretend to be married to avoid attracting attention, they undergo a long series of embarrassing and amusing incidents, until their spouses, Percy and Georgina, rejoin them at the Rip Van Winkle Inn. The mere mention of that beloved character’s name would have evoked warm, nostalgic feelings for romantic bygone days, a fine ending for the light-hearted show.
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This boy-gets-in-embarrassing-but-innocent-situation-with-girl formula furnished the team with its standard comic theme, as Kern, Bolton, and Wodehouse created their series of successful plays integrating natural sounding songs and humor into plausible everyday situations. "I like the way the action slides casually into the songs," cheered critic Dorothy Parker. "I like the deft rhyming of the song that is always sung in the last act by the two comedians and comedienne. And oh, how I do like Jerome Kern's music!" "It is my opinion," Kern observed in 1917 at the height of the Princess Shows' success, "that the musical numbers should carry the action of the play and should be representative of the personalities of the characters who sing them. Songs," he concluded in what can still stand as a challenge to composers and writers of musicals, "must be suited to the action and the mood of the play."

With great prestige but not great profits from his three years of Princess Shows, Kern was tempted into writing conventional, disjointed Broadway shows by the lucrative offers of major producers, especially Florenz Ziegfeld, the king of the musical stage in the years after World War I when the Ziegfeld Follies was synonymous with big-time show business. Ziegfeld and other producers cared little for Kern's theories of organic integration in musicals. They wanted love songs, specialty material, production numbers, and hit tunes in every show regardless of the story, situation, or characterizations. In 1920, for example, Kern and Bolton wrote Sally, which Ziegfeld commissioned to star his current paramour Marilyn Miller after her success in the Follies. Sally had formidable credits: sets by Joseph Urban, the genius of American stage design; the humor of Leon Errol, a leading comedian; a "Butterfly Ballet" finale composed by Victor Herbert; Bolton's book, which took Sally from obscurity to stardom in the Follies; Kern's music, which included "Look For The Silver Lining"; and Miller's radiant beauty, lovely legs, and considerable dancing talent. The dazzling show was a hit, running for 570 nights in New York before going on a long national tour. In the next six years, Kern turned out another fourteen of these financially successful but, for him, artistically unsatisfying musicals. In the 1920s, Vincent Youmans, George Gershwins, Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart also wrote a number of notable musical comedies, shows that produced some of the nation's most enduring songs, including "Tea For Two," "Someone To Watch Over Me," "I Got Rhythm," "What Is This Thing Called Love?" "Thou Swell," and "Blue Room." Jerome Kern was certainly not the only person creating exciting new musicals, but he did produce the show that set a new standard for the American musical stage.

When Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II combined to make a musical out of Edna Ferber's popular novel Showboat, many of their friends initially warned the two men that a story dealing with the harsh realities of Negro life in the South, with two unhappy marriages, and with miscegenation was totally unsuited for adaptation to the musical stage and would turn out to be a financial disaster even if it were an artistic success. But with the assurance of financial backing from Florenz Ziegfeld, Kern and Hammerstein ignored the warning. They could not help themselves. "We had fallen in love with it," Hammerstein later recalled of those exhilarating, creative days in which the two men compulsively labored on the new production. "We couldn't keep our hands off it. We acted out scenes together and planned the actual direction. We sang to each
other. We had ourselves swooning.” The result of their work also left the public swooning and left musical theater a distinctively American performing art. After opening in 1927, the show grossed about $50,000 a week for two straight years in New York, toured the nation for years, returned for another long New York run in 1932, played in London and Paris, and became one of the earliest part-sound motion pictures in 1929.

Centered on the Mississippi River showboat Cotton Blossom, the show tells several related stories involving both blacks and whites in the 1880s and 1890s. Instead of opening with a conventional upbeat chorus-girl production number, Showboat opened with Negro dockhands lamenting the backbreaking work of loading cotton, which at least implicitly protested the inequities blacks suffered. When a Southern sheriff discovers
that Julie La Verne had a Negro ancestor somewhere in her past, he orders her and her white husband, Steve, off the showboat, but only after they melodramatically prick their fingers and mix their blood while swearing their eternal devotion to each other. The moving scene ends with Julie singing “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man.” In the most famous of the play’s many famous songs, Kern evoked the mood and tone of Negro spirituals to protest movingly blacks’ degraded and hopeless position and the society’s indifference to it:

Dere’s an ol’ man called de Mississippi
Dat’s de ol’ man dat I’d like to be;
What does he care if de world’s got troubles?
What does he care if de land ain’t free?

I get weary an’ sick of tryin’
I’m tired of livin’ an’ skeered of dyin’;
But ol’ man river
He jes’ keeps rollin’ along!

Although Showboat was certainly not free of the caricatured low-comedy black characters that had amused whites since the beginning of American show business, the show did give a new dignity and depth to Negro characters on the musical stage, greatly expanding and even challenging the time-worn show-business clichés about happy, carefree Southern Negroes.

The major plot of Showboat details the rocky marriage of the Cotton Blossom’s Captain’s daughter Magnolia. Magnolia’s husband Gaylord Ravenal, a sometimes reformed gambler, deserts his family, forcing Magnolia to seek a job in a Chicago Music Hall, a job that Julie, who has been off stage for three acts since she was expelled from the showboat, just happens to have. Julie dutifully quits so that her “better”—good ole Cap’n Andy’s daughter—can take her place. But Julie’s poignant rendition of “Bill,” which she manages to squeeze in before quitting, is too difficult an act for Magnolia to follow, and she is a failure until Cap’n Andy, her father, convinces her to sing Charles K. Harris’ old favorite “After The Ball.” Finally, Magnolia leaves Chicago and returns to the showboat, a repentant and reformed Ravenal rejoins her, and their daughter Kim becomes the star of the showboat’s own show.

Although the characters were rather simplistic, the plot rather predictable and corny, and the contrived “coincidences” almost laughable, the show deeply moved audiences in the 1920s and in its periodic revivals on stage and screen. Despite its weaknesses, it had the kind of emotional power that made Uncle Tom’s Cabin a standard. Kern’s marvelous score engaged its audiences at an unconscious emotional level, making the play
seem much more credible, much less cliché-ridden than it actually was. With “Bill,” “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” “Why Do I Love You?” “Make Believe,” and “Ol’ Man River,” the music was, in the fullest sense of the word, the heart of the production. With Showboat, Kern demonstrated that an American musical could combine native themes, characters, and music into a cohesive, moving performing art.

Showboat was a turning point in the development of the American musical. “Some of its best numbers are so successful in their combination of the theatrical elements, music, acting, scene,” critic Stark Young prophetically observed in his review of Showboat, “as to suggest openings for the development not of mere musical comedy, but of popular opera.” With Kern’s achievements, the European operetta had been naturalized and democratized. Significantly, Kern completed the process by using a subject—the interaction of blacks and whites on the Mississippi river—that had spawned the first distinctively American show business form, the minstrel show. But Kern took this mythic American setting, drew on Afro-American music, on his European training, on his experience with the musical tastes of common, white Americans, and created a show that brought the major elements of the American musical stage together to form an American “popular opera.”