



## Kander, John (b. 1927) and Fred Ebb (1932?-2004)

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Composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb are the musical poets of the polymorphous perverse. The stage (and, in two cases, subsequent film) versions of their commercially successful and critically lauded *Cabaret*, *Chicago*, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* glorify the creativity inherent in sexual ambivalence and celebrate the social renewal fostered by unorthodox forms of political action.

Surprisingly for many gay fans, however, neither man is willing publicly to discuss his own homosexuality. "I thought they made [a] spectacle of themselves, frankly," Ebb complained to interviewer Randy Shulman following the nationally broadcast kiss shared by song writing team and lifelong partners Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman while accepting a 2003 Tony Award for *Hairspray*. "Your bedroom is not the screen. And it is also not the stage." Instead, Ebb asserts, any statement that he and Kander wish to make about homosexuality has been made through their songs.

### Life and Career

Kander was born March 18, 1927, into a music-loving family in Kansas City, Missouri. After studying music composition at Oberlin College and Columbia University, he settled in New York City, where he worked as an arranger, accompanist, and conductor.

Ebb, a native New Yorker, was probably born April 8, 1932, though family members and reference books have given the year of his birth as anywhere from 1928 to 1936. Having attended New York University, where he earned a B.A. in 1955, and taken a graduate degree in English from Columbia University in 1957, he wrote for nightclub acts, revues, and television (*That Was the Week That Was*), before being introduced to Kander.

In 1965 Kander and Ebb joined forces with emerging theater powerhouse Harold Prince and legendary director George Abbott on *Flora*, *The Red Menace*, which both established their professional reputation as a song writing team and made a star out of their close friend, nineteen-year-old Liza Minnelli.

A string of huge successes, some near misses, and the occasional flop followed: *Cabaret* (1966), *The Happy Time* (1968), *Zorba* (1968), *70, Girls, 70* (1971), *Chicago* (1975), *The Act* (1977), *Woman of the Year* (1981), *The Rink* (1984), *And the World Goes 'Round* (1991), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), *Steel Pier* (1997), and *The Visit* (2001). They contributed as well to the film scores of Herb Ross's *Funny Lady* (1975) and Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977).

In 2003, Kander (who has lived for 26 years with one man, a choreographer and teacher) implicitly addressed rumors concerning the nature of his non-professional relations with Ebb by describing the latter to interviewer Jeffrey Tallmer as "his 40-year partner in creativity but never in domesticity, much less romance."

Ebb succumbed to a heart attack at his home in New York on September 11, 2004.

## Privileging Alternative Values

Kander and Ebb's songs make a powerful cumulative statement regarding the importance of alternative values, and are the more remarkable for making that statement in a theatrical form more easily given to escapism than to social comment.

"It's refreshing to meet someone odd for a change," Harry sings to Flora in *Flora, The Red Menace*, and Kander and Ebb's musical protagonists include such deviants from the social norm as a group of larcenous septuagenarian former vaudevillians surviving as best they can in a dilapidated residential hotel (*70, Girls*); an indifferently talented cabaret singer whose decadent sexual persona is her most successful performance (*Cabaret*); an effeminate window dresser imprisoned for "corrupting" a male minor (*Kiss*); "Chicago's own killer-dillers, those two scintillating sinners," Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly, and the six other "merry murderesses of the Cook County Jail" (*Chicago*); "the loveable prodigal," Jacques, whose return to his native French Canadian village quickens his family members' hearts with as much anxiety as love (*Happy Time*); and, of course, the title character of *Zorba*, who proclaims in dance and song his freedom from every conventional expectation.

Kander and Ebb write music for characters who, like Flora, have learned, or are in the process of learning, to resist any pressure to conform, particularly when the social system exerting that pressure is itself corrupt ("You Are You").

Kander and Ebb's interest in persons who are barely on the margins of respectability, or who have been left behind entirely by the American Dream, drives them repeatedly to skewer the hypocrisy of social orthodoxy. This is why so many of their plays are set in the Depression era when, following the wide scale collapse of American optimism, those individuals who survived proved themselves by keeping their hearts open and their imaginations alive. In *Flora* and *Steel Pier*, respectively, Kander and Ebb found in that period's bread lines and dance marathons apt metaphors for the indignities heaped upon individuals that shatter their conventional expectations but nonetheless offer them an opportunity to refashion themselves in a non-traditional manner; prison proves a similarly apt metaphor in *Chicago* and *Kiss*.

## Protesting Corruption; Seeing Things Differently

The corruption of power is lampooned in such songs as "A Powerful Thing" (*Steel Pier*) and "When You're Good to Mama" (*Chicago*), and the ruthless manipulation of the American legal system by its supposed protectors in "Razzle Dazzle" (*Chicago*). Social respectability is simply a matter of controlling the spread of gossip, Kander and Ebb chide in "Don't Tell Mama" (*Cabaret*), or of controlling the media ("Jailhouse Rag," *Chicago*).

The exploitation of buzz words by self-aggrandizing political activists is illustrated in "Sign Here" (*Flora*) where the professed aims of the Communist Party figure also as the American values that Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee claimed to be defending through their 1950s witch hunt for suspected communists: "democracy," "the rights of man," "everlasting peace," "milk and cookies for the kids," "a job for everyone," "do away with slums," and "save America." In Kander and Ebb's satire, anyone who sees a big-hearted eccentric like Flora as a "red menace" is as disturbed as the agitator Comrade Ada's much vaunted acts of disruption are senseless and petty.

Little wonder, then, that when political institutions, the legal profession, the news media, and correction facilities are under the control of self-interested parties, Kander and Ebb's hero is the person who, because of his or her generosity, is relegated to the margins of respectability, if not persecuted outright.

A number of the pair's best songs dramatize different ways of "Seeing Things" (as photographer Jacques sings in *Happy Time*), including several that directly challenge the audience's unthinking acceptance of

social stereotypes. "If you want to see old folks / You're in the wrong home tonight," a chorus of rowdy septuagenarians unexpectedly razzes the audience of *70, Girls* as they break into raucous vaudeville routines after first enumerating (and seeming sedately to subscribe to) younger people's stereotypical expectations regarding the aged. And, waltzing genteelly with a tutu-wearing gorilla, the Emcee of the Kit Kat Club in 1930s Berlin (*Cabaret*) complains comically of society's inability to accept his unorthodox love relationship, only to turn to the Nazis scattered among the audience at the song's end and taunt them that "If you could see her through my eyes, / She wouldn't look *Jewish* at all."

### Addressing the Darker Aspects of Social Experience

It is their willingness to address directly the darker aspects of social experience that distinguishes Kander and Ebb's music from that of their contemporaries. Jerry Herman's bright optimism easily wears thin, while Stephen Sondheim's wry irony often has the unanticipated effect of making his characters seem cold and distant. The darkness that colors Kander and Ebb's world, however, is tempered by their characters' willingness to make whatever accommodations are necessary for survival without growing bitter in the process.

No other Broadway score confronts the reality of aging and dying with such starkness as *70, Girls* ("The Elephant Song"). Likewise, the chorus's opening song in *Zorba*--"Life is what you do / While you're waiting to die"--proved so troubling to audiences reared on Rodgers and Hammerstein's "cockeyed optimism" that the original production of that show failed. (A successful 1983 revival starring Anthony Quinn carefully altered the line to "Life is what you do / Until the day you die.")

Kander and Ebb parody American audiences' expectation of "Happy Endings" in an extended number by that name that, although filmed, was finally cut from *New York, New York*. More trenchantly, Molina's partnering Aurora with the same casual elegance as Fred Astaire danced with Ginger Rogers ironically figures his death in the aptly titled final number of *Kiss*, "Only in the Movies."

Significantly, Kander and Ebb recognize the appeal of escaping life's difficulties through "too much pills and liquor" (as, for example, in the title song from *Cabaret* or in "The Morphine Tango" from *Kiss*). But ultimately, they insist, immuring oneself from possible adversity only means that one is not living fully. As protagonist Ida instructs her friends in the concluding number of *70, Girls*,

There's lots of chaff, but there's lots of wheat:  
Say "yes!"  
You might get mugged as you walk the street,  
But on the other hand you might meet  
That handsome stranger that you'd love to greet:  
Say "yes!"

Life must be accepted in all of its weltering ambiguity if any of its possibilities are to be realized.

Similarly, in *Cabaret* Fräulein Schneider, raised in luxury but reduced during the Depression to renting rooms and emptying chamber pots, sings of the need to lower one's expectations and "learn how to settle for what you get" ("So What?"). Kander and Ebb reject outright the *carpe diem* insistence that one enjoy life's pleasures now because they will end all too soon. Rather, the pair insists, enjoyment of the available light is heightened by one's awareness of shadow.

Thus, while Herman's Depression era characters are told to "Tap Your Troubles Away" (*Mack and Mabel*), Kander and Ebb use the 1930s dance marathon as a metaphor for finding joy in the sheer act of survival, no matter how demeaning the circumstances (*Steel Pier*). Herman asks his audience to accept that, in the best

tradition of the Busby Berkeley musical, life's problems can be forgotten when one is tap-dancing; Kander and Ebb, on the other hand, show the grimace behind the forced smiles of the marathon dancers.

This may be why audiences rejected Herman's *Mack and Mabel* for failing to deliver a happy ending, but have less difficulty accepting the tragedy in Kander and Ebb's plays: Mme. Hortense dies and the Widow is killed in *Zorba*; *Kiss* is set in a repressive South American regime's prison for political dissidents and sexual deviants, and concludes with the death of the protagonist; the Nazis gradually take control of Berlin in *Cabaret*.

It is, finally, this insistence that one's full humanity can only be found in the acceptance simultaneously of disappointment *and* success, in the ambivalent mixture of comedy *and* tragedy, that makes Kander and Ebb the premier musical poets of sexual ambiguity and of non-normative human relationships.

### **Sexual Ambiguities**

Contrary to musical theater convention, the boy rarely gets the girl in a Kander and Ebb show. Cliff abandons Berlin and Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*; Flora discovers herself only after being dismissed by her boyfriend, Harry; Roxie learns that "I am my own best friend" in *Chicago*; a men-less Angel and Anna reconcile in *The Rink*; Rita falls in love with Bill in *Steel Pier*, only to discover that she has been romanced by a ghost and finally must make it on her own; and while three generations of male voices may join in on "A Certain Girl," Jacques and Laurie part over "Seeing Things" in *Happy Time*.

Ironically, Molina's succumbing to the heterosexual allure of the Spider Woman figures death in *Kiss*. And in *Steel Pier* Precious McGuire is permitted to perform professionally "Two Little Words," a paean to heterosexual wedded bliss, as payment for betraying her husband sexually with the marathon emcee. *Woman of the Year*, the only one of their plays to deliver a traditional heterosexual romance, is also Kander and Ebb's least distinguished score.

In contrast, Kander and Ebb's scores admit the possibility of homosocial affection, the delights of gender confusion, and (in *Kiss*, at least) the self-sacrificing power of homosexual love.

"I never loved a man as much as I love you," Zorba tells Niko at the conclusion of that play's final number. Likewise, in a poignant moment in *Happy Time*, the first time that teenaged Bibi sings that he loves someone, it is to his free-spirited Uncle Jacques. The Emcee includes "boys" among the sexual attractions to be found in *Cabaret*; in the more permissive 1998 revival, the number "Two Ladies," which enacts on stage a *ménage à trois*, is performed not by a male and two females, as in the original production, but by a female and two males.

Extolling to a group of female prisoners the advantages of cooperating with her, Matron Mama Morton sings a song laden with lesbian sexual double entendres in *Chicago*: "Let's all stroke together, / Like a Princeton crew; / When you're stroking Mama, / She'll get hot for you."

In *Kiss*, Molina sings movingly of his love for Valentín in "Anything for Him." Strategically, Kander and Ebb give the only song in which homosexuality is accepted without reservation or qualification to a woman. In "You Could Never Shame Me," Molina's mother assures her imprisoned son that "I know that you're different, / I don't really care. / I would never change a hair."

### **Sexual Exuberance**

This refusal to feel shame in sexual matters extends throughout Kander and Ebb's canon, making them the most sexually exuberant song writers for the musical theater since Cole Porter. Their music deals frankly with such physiological dynamics of sexual attraction as body odor ("I sniff at a woman," Zorba exults) and crotch-watching ("Nowadays you look at bulging trousers, / Some boy with bulging trousers, / And it isn't

what you think, / He's got a gun," laments a group of neighbors in a declining neighborhood in *The Rink*).

"Everybody's Girl," which is Shelby's announcement of her sexual availability in *Steel Pier*, contains some of the most risqué lyrics written for the Broadway stage. The lines, "And so to reaffirm my status, / It's absolutely gratis / To use my apparatus," might have been spoken by Chaucer's Wife of Bath, while the asides that she makes during the song ("I could never be a cowhand's girl . . . I just can't keep my calves together" or "Men and me are like pianos. When they get upright, I feel grand!") are worthy of Mae West or Bette Midler.

Likewise, in "Wet" (also from *Steel Pier*) Rita coaxes Bill to strip to his skivvies to join her in a late night swim by cajoling him to "Show your nerve and show your shorts," one of the few times that the nude male body has been put on display in the American musical. In *70, Girls*, a pair of physically affectionate septuagenarians musically taunts the audience for its unspoken curiosity: "Do We? / That's what you want to know."

"Nothing need be spoken, / All taboos are broken," Rita promises the sexually reluctant Bill in *Steel Pier*. This holds true for every one of Kander and Ebb's scores. Ultimately, in their music relationships come down to a life-sustaining intimacy.

You and I, love, you and I,  
Take each minute for what's in it  
As it's spinning by.  
Win or lose, love, laugh or cry,  
We can weather life together,  
You and I. (*70, Girls*)

It is precisely because life is something to be "weathered"--because the world is a prison, a bread line, or a frenetic dance marathon--that every relationship is valuable, whatever the gender(s) of the persons involved. "Love, give me love, only love," Mme. Hortense sings in *Zorba*; "How good it is to feel, to touch, to care." It is risky to challenge the gender expectations of Broadway musical audiences, which are often composed of socially conservative people, but for Kander and Ebb, as Ida sings at the close of *70, Girls*, one must always say "Yes" to whatever opportunity presents itself, especially "Yes, I'll touch."

## Conclusion

Kander and Ebb occupy a curious place in American musical theater. Kander is as great a master of musical idioms as Sondheim, recreating the Kurt Weill-like sound of Depression-era Berlin for *Cabaret*, of the 1920s burlesque or vaudeville stage for *Chicago*, of an impoverished but lively Greek village for *Zorba*, and 1930s popular dance music for *Steel Pier*. His "The Happy Time" is as perfect a waltz as Richard Rodgers's title theme from *Carousel* or any of the numbers in 3/4 time that Sondheim fashioned for *A Little Night Music*.

Likewise, Ebb can be as tartly sardonic ("Nobody even says oops / When they're passing their gas. / Whatever happened to class?") as he can be lushly romantic ("Walking among my yesterdays"); his line "The hope of summer belies the frost" ("Yes," *70, Girls*) is worthy of Elizabethan poet Thomas Nashe.

Yet neither "The Happy Time" nor "Yes" has entered the popular musical lexicon, and the pair remains best known to the public ear for "Theme from *New York, New York*," a song that proved far bigger than the film that it was created to serve, and for "Cabaret," which, ironically, is a character song during which a woman decides that she will have an abortion, and not the hymn to unfettered sensual experience that its numerous popular renditions have mistaken it to be.

Gay theater goers, however, hold Kander and Ebb in a particularly high regard. This is, in part, because the pair has given such "divas" as Liza Minnelli, Chita Rivera, Gwen Verdon, Lotte Lenya, and Lauren Bacall some of their best stage moments, and the relation of gay audiences to the musical theater depends in large part upon gay identification with the diva, as John M. Clum observes. More importantly, whatever their restrictions concerning the details of their personal lives, Kander and Ebb lived their careers in collaboration with other major gay theater talents like A. J. Antoon, Rob Marshall, and Terrence McNally, and helped realize on stage works by Christopher Isherwood and Manuel Puig that have defined gay sensibility.

But, perhaps most importantly, their songs emphasize the importance of refusing to accept only those relationships allowed by society, of the need to take a risk connecting with someone, and of somehow going on even when rejected ("Maybe This Time," "Somebody Older"). Theirs is a poetry of "You and I" that erases the boundaries of gender and age.

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