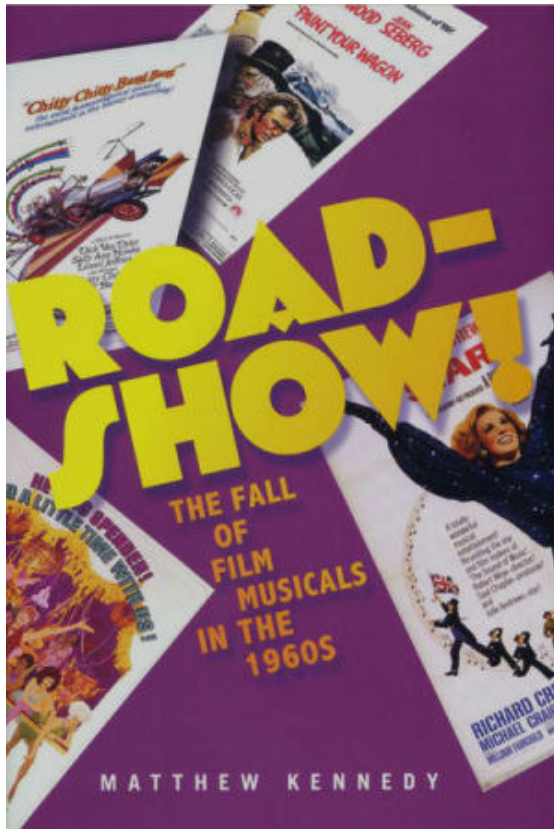


'Roadshow' describes bygone era

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"Roadshow! The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s" by Matthew Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 307 pages, \$35.



“The Sound of Music” legitimized the hit-driven blockbuster mentality that had come to rule Hollywood since “Oklahoma!,” Matthew Kennedy explains in “The Musical That Ate Hollywood,” the first chapter of his new book, “Roadshow! The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s.”

Much more than an entertaining foray into the rise and fall of a distinctly American art form, “Roadshow!” is an insightful and often discerning look at who we once were and how our values, priorities and tastes evolved during the turbulent decade of the 1960s. Indeed, social commentary is infused throughout the book in a way that brings the historical significance of musicals into sharp focus. Ultimately, entertainment has always been driven by economics, and nowhere is this more evident than when one studies the trajectory of the roadshow as a cultural phenomenon.

“Rather than rely on a steady output of mid-budget modestly profitable movies, one studio could feed off the meaty carcass of a super-hit for years,”

Kennedy writes. “And with the diversification of American entertainment, the potential for secondary markets was enormous. Besides profitable afterlives on television, successful roadshows could spawn reissued novels, comic books, clothing and toys. The soundtrack sales alone were breathtaking. ‘Mary Poppins,’ ‘Funny Lady’ and ‘The Sound of Music’ all sat comfortably on Billboard’s annual top 10 best-selling albums list; ‘Music’ remaining there for three years.”

When “Funny Girl,” which starred Barbara Streisand, was released in 1968, the average cost of a movie ticket in America was \$1.30, Kennedy reminds us in “Battle of the Girls,” the book’s 11th chapter. First-run reserve orchestra seats for “Funny Girl” at the Criterion in New York, however, cost \$6 for weekend and holiday screenings. At the time, this was the highest price ever charged for admission to a commercial film.

My, how things have changed since the 1960s, and that is one of the central themes of Kennedy’s enthusiastic jog down memory lane.

As most readers know, the decade was a time of immense social, political and cultural change. When the 1950s ended, musicals were arguably the dominant genre on the big screen.

They were lavish production numbers accentuated by big-name stars. By the beginning of the 1970s, the art form was in precipitous decline. Audience tastes dramatically evolved during the 10 years that constitute the backdrop for “Roadshow!” A clue to the inevitable makeover in the industry can be found in a careful consideration of the events transpiring around the time “Funny Girl” premiered:

“‘Funny Girl’ was never about anyone but Streisand, and in service to her, it was an unexpurgated triumph,” Kennedy writes. “When it opened, all jokes about her nose died overnight, and who cared if this movie was an inaccurate biopic about somebody named Fanny? And the time was right to embrace someone removed from the conventional idea of good looks. Less than two weeks before ‘Funny Girl’ debuted, hundreds of feminists descended on Atlantic City to protest the Miss America pageant, calling it a cattle auction with ludicrous standards of beauty.”

It is obvious Kennedy knows his subject matter. There are 18 pages of references and a five-page bibliography at the conclusion of the 18 chapters that comprise the main text. Most of the characters populating the book are no longer with us. For those who grew up during the 1960s, the book is a sentimental look back at a special time in their lives. For those who only know the era through various forms of media augmented by the recollections of their friends and family members, “Roadshow!” provides a complete course in the cultural transformation that took place during this revolutionary period in our nation’s history. Personally, I remember going to see many of the movies mentioned in the book, although at the time I was oblivious to their inherent sociological implications.

We only had one movie theater in my hometown, and I usually went to whatever happened to be showing on Friday night.

Kennedy is a writer, film historian and anthropologist. The recipient of a Fulbright Research Fellowship and a San Francisco Cable Car Media/Journalism Award, he has degrees in theater arts from UCLA and in anthropology from UC Davis. His previous books include “Marie Dressler: A Biography,” “Edmund Goulding’s Dark Victory: Hollywood’s Genius Bad Boy” and “Joan Blondell: A Life Between Takes.”

“The roadshow died so that New Hollywood could live,” Kennedy writes in “Exit Music,” the concluding chapter of the book. “The great early work of Robert Altman (“M*A*S*H”), Francis Ford Coppola (“The Godfather”) and Peter Bogdanovich (“The Last Picture Show”) rose from the ashes of an industry bankrupt of money but not ideas. As for the musical, it didn’t die. Instead, it bled a lot. It shrank in numbers, budgets and audience. It moved into niche markets and became ever less relevant on the pop culture landscape.”

As Bob Dylan put it so succinctly and accurately (and I’m paraphrasing here), the times seemed to be changing. Occasionally, the musical resurfaces and ignites some of the old passion and excitement – note the success of “Grease,” “All That Jazz,” “Moulin Rouge!” and “Momma Mia!” By and large, though, the roadshow is a remnant of a bygone era. Still, understanding its popularity then helps us understand who we are now. I recommend it highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.