

EDUCATIONAL GUIDE

THE CREATORS

ANDY BLANKENBUEHLER (*Original Director and Choreographer*).

Mr. Blankenbuehler is a three-time Tony Award-winner for his choreography in the Broadway productions of *Bandstand*, *In The Heights* and *Hamilton* for which he also received London's Olivier Award. The recent production of *Bandstand* (director/choreographer) also received the Drama Desk and Chita Rivera Award for Best Choreography. Other Broadway credits include *Bring It On*, *9 to 5*, *The People in the Picture*, *The Apple Tree*, *Annie* and the recent revival of *Cats*. Upcoming theatre projects include the new musical *Only Gold* with British singer/songwriter Kate Nash and the musical *Five Points*.



Andy Blankenbuehler, Richard Oberacker, and Robert Taylor. Photo by Caitlin McNaney.

On television, Mr. Blankenbuehler's work has been seen most recently on the Emmy Award winning FX series "Fosse/Verdon," and his choreography will be seen in the upcoming Universal Studios film of the musical *Cats*. Andy is very proud to have made his concert debut earlier this year with a piece entitled *Remember Our Song* for the Tulsa Ballet Company. As a performer, Mr. Blankenbuehler has danced on Broadway in *Fosse*, *Contact*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Steel Pier*, *Big* and *Guys and Dolls*. Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, Mr. Blankenbuehler resides in New York City, with his wife Elly and two children, Luca and Sofia. Mr. Blankenbuehler is a recipient of a special 2015 Drama Desk Award for his achievement in the theatre. Mr. Blankenbuehler received the 2018 Kennedy Center Honors for his work on the musical *Hamilton*.

RICHARD OBERACKER (*Book, Lyrics, and Music*). Conductor, composer, lyricist and librettist Richard Oberacker is the musical director for Cirque du Soleil's *KA* in Las Vegas. Prior engagements include conductor, arranger and contributing composer for Cirque's world tour of *Dralion* and conductor of the national tours of Disney's *The Lion King*. As a composer and lyricist, Mr. Oberacker's original musicals include *A Little Theater* (Aurelia Theater), *In That Valley* (National Alliance for Musical Theater Festival of New Works), *Dracula* (CCM Corbett Theater) and *The Gospel According to Fishman* (Signature Theatre). With co-lyricist and co-author Robert Taylor, Mr. Oberacker has collaborated on several new musicals including *Ace* (National Alliance for Musical Theater New Works Festival, The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, The Old Globe, Signature Theatre), *Journey to the West* (New York Musical Theater Festival), *The Parenting Project* (Cincinnati Fringe Festival, Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati) and *The Sandman* (NAMT Festival of New Works, Fredericia Theatre in Denmark). Their musical *Bandstand* opened at The Paper Mill Playhouse and premiered on Broadway at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre. Mr. Oberacker recently composed the score for a new musical adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* which premiered in Tokyo, Japan before a Japanese national tour. Next in development, *Bruce*.

ROBERT TAYLOR (*Book & Lyrics*) Robert Taylor began writing poetry and lyrics around the same time he picked up the violin at age 8. His love of music, languages, literature and nature has led him to a lifetime of study and travel. A graduate of Holland's Royal Conservatory, Union College, the University of Bonn and Princeton University, he has taught foreign languages and ornithology in New York, English and music in China; served as music critic to the *Albany Times Union*; worked as a freelance musician and writer in Manhattan, a translator in Europe and Asia; and has lectured extensively on opera, literature and art history.

Mr. Taylor is the co-lyricist/librettist with Richard Oberacker of several new musicals, including *Ace* (National Alliance for Musical Theater New Works Festival, The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, The Old Globe, Signature Theatre), *Journey to the West* (New York Musical Theater Festival), *The Parenting Project* (Cincinnati Fringe Festival, Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati) and *The Sandman* (NAMT Festival of New Works, Fredericia Theatre in Denmark), their Tony Award-winning musical *Bandstand*, which premiered on Broadway at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre in April of 2017, and their newest project, *Bruce*. A principal player with the New York Chamber Soloists Ensemble and the Mozart Orchestra of New York, Mr. Taylor is a member of the Dramatist's Guild, and leads birding and nature tours around the world for the Audubon Society.

THE STORY

It is 1945, and the boys are back! U.S. soldiers are returning home after the conclusion of World War II, but many are struggling to readjust to civilian life. Among them is Donny Novitski, a gifted pianist who was stationed in the south Pacific and is now back in Cleveland, Ohio. Donny hears a radio advertisement for a nationwide swing band competition hosted by NBC that will pay tribute to military troops and decides to assemble a band of veterans to compete. He recruits a team of skilled musicians, all of whom are vets dealing with some sort of post-war trauma, and they form The Donny Nova Band.

After the band's first performance, Donny goes to meet Julia Trojan, the widow of his best friend Michael from the army. Julia has been facing her own post-war challenges as she tries to adapt to a life without her husband beside her. Donny joins Julia and her mother for dinner, and they connect over some of his memories of Michael.

Donny goes to hear Julia sing in church and encourages her to come to his band's performance later that evening. Julia performs a song with the boys and eventually joins the band. She shares her journal of poems with Donny, which he uses to compose a song that leads the band to victory in the preliminary statewide competition. Despite their success, the band is discouraged to learn that they will have

to pay their own way to New York for the final competition.

The Donny Nova Band begins playing more gigs around town to raise money and support, and Julia and Donny grow closer. After Donny shares more information with Julia about Michael's death, she nearly quits the band. She eventually returns, having composed a new poem that details the brutal truth about the struggles veterans are facing back at home. Donny turns it into a "welcome home" song from a wife to her returning husband, and it becomes another hit for the band.

With the support of their hometown, the band travels to New York City to compete in the final broadcast. At the last minute, they discover that the contest is a ploy designed to profit off people's support for the military. To make matters worse, they will be forced to give up the rights to their song if they win. Donny convinces his bandmates to perform the original version of Julia's poem, stripping away the contest's sentimental façade and exposing the nation to the hardships that the veterans are enduring. In the years that follow, the Donny Nova Band sees continued success for their musical virtuosity and honest depiction of post-war life, and Donny and Julia begin a new life together.

THE CHARACTERS

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| • DONNY NOVITSKI- a young war veteran and gifted pianist, who is wrestling with survivor's guilt after a traumatic loss | • DAVY ZLATIC- the bassist, who has turned to alcohol and humor to cope with the memories of war |
| • JULIA TROJAN- a young widow with a beautiful voice, who is struggling to navigate life while she grieves the loss of her husband | • NICK RADEL- the trumpet player, who has returned from war with anger and trust issues |
| • JIMMY CAMPBELL- the saxophone and clarinet player, who has immersed himself in law school to keep his feelings at a distance | • JOHNNY SIMPSON- the drummer, who is suffering from chronic pain and memory loss due to injuries sustained in battle |
| • JUNE ADAMS- Julia's mother, and her strongest supporter | • WAYNE WRIGHT- the trombone player, whose OCD is tearing his family apart |

CREAM RISES TO THE TOP

The Making of *Bandstand*



Bandstand national tour rehearsal. Photo by Jeremy Daniel.

When writing partners Richard Oberacker and Robert Taylor were thinking of ideas for a new musical, they asked themselves a question—what would happen if you merged the style and passion of a golden age musical, like *South Pacific* or *On the Town*, with the grit and reality of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, William Wyler’s Academy Award-winning film about World War II veterans attempting to adjust to civilian life? So, the two men began to explore what that could be. The result was the musical *Bandstand*, which combines a rich swing-inspired score, with the story of a group of veterans and a war widow, who form a band to compete in a national broadcast radio contest. Each character is dealing, in their own way, with moving past the trauma, guilt and wounds they suffered, as a result of the war.

“We began with a series of recognizable story beats and then we basically followed the truth,” says Richard Oberacker, who wrote the music for *Bandstand* and collaborated with Robert Taylor on the book and lyrics. “What would veterans who came back from that experience, with all the emotional challenges they would be dealing with, and, if they were musicians, what would they need to make themselves feel back at home in society again? What would they have to say? What would their music sound like?”

To stage the piece, Oberacker turned to an old friend from theater camp in Ohio: Tony award-winning director/choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler. This was before he did musical staging for the worldwide phenomenon, *Hamilton*. “I had been looking for a piece to do about World War II,” Blankenbuehler says. “I’m really passionate about the 1940s and passionate about that generation of Americans, and all the sacrifices made because of war.” He adds, “Also, I love the fashion, I love the sense of work, integrity, and the American spirit. And, of course, I love the music and the dance that came with it. So, I was really excited about it.”

The trio did a deep dive into not only the period, but the kind of unexpressed emotional life of members of the Greatest Generation. Oberacker points out that post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is a contemporary term. He says many World War II vets “didn’t understand what it was they were grappling with, because there was no vocabulary with which to even begin to address it. There’s no Oprah, there’s no Wounded Warriors organization, there’s none of that.” The two writers got in touch with non-profit called Got Your 6 (military parlance for “got your back”), who arranged for them to meet veterans who told their own stories and looked over the script for inaccuracies. “It was a match made in

heaven,” says Oberacker. “In those conversations, we were able to find nuggets of more truth, more reality, more humor.”

Blankenbuehler explored ways to physicalize the veterans’ experiences in dance and movement. He took swing dance steps and slowed them down. “All of a sudden, you see the stress in somebody’s shoulders,” he explains. “You notice how deeply dug into their legs they are. They’re so low to the floor that they look physically like they’re in so much angst.” And, in one stunning transition, he also came up with the idea of the veterans literally carrying their dead comrades on their backs. “What is weighing them down? Mostly it’s their fallen friends. Every step I take, this ghost is taking this step with me.” Broadway professionals were taken with Blankenbuehler’s complex, impressionistic choreography, awarding him the 2017 Tony Award for his dances.



Andy Blankenbuehler accepts his Tony Award for Best Choreography. Photo by Getty Images.

The creative team points out that while contemporary audiences may look on swing music through the lens of nostalgia, in the 1940s, it was cutting edge. “When it was actually happening, swing music was the rap and rock and roll of its day,” says Richard Oberacker. “It was the youth culture. It was transgressive. It was naughty. It was angry. It was sexual.” Andy Blankenbuehler adds that the exuberant musical idiom works perfectly for the show’s troubled characters: “For these servicemen, they find this passion in swing music and putting into music things they can’t say in normal conversation.”

It’s not surprising that the lead characters in *Bandstand* are musicians—both Richard Oberacker and Robert Taylor are professional musicians themselves. Oberacker is music director for Cirque du Soleil’s Las Vegas hit, *Ká*, while Taylor regularly plays violin and viola in Broadway pit orchestras and chamber ensembles. Taylor says the interpersonal dynamic is something he can completely relate to: “When you are a member of an ensemble and everyone is dealing with their own family issues or personality problems, you find a way of meshing and creating music and actually coalescing as a unit. You find a way through the music and through humor.” But in making their major characters actual

musicians, who can play the score and improvise jazz licks—as well as act, sing and dance—they created a true casting challenge. “The important thing is the *emotion* the audience is getting,” says Blankenbuehler. “And ultimately, that’s also the hard part of casting, because in *Bandstand*, we had to find these men and women who could play music really well, who could speak. But there has to be something inherently emotional about them.” He says it was a long but rewarding process to put together the cast for the Broadway show and it’s been an equally long and rewarding process to find the cast for the tour.

Much of the emotion of *Bandstand* comes from the relationship between the two lead characters, Donny Novitski, a pianist and songwriter, and Julia Trojan, the singer/lyric writer who joins the band. Donny was the best friend of Julia’s husband, and was right beside him when he died in combat in the South Pacific. And he is carrying massive guilt about the circumstances of his buddy’s death. So, needless to say, their relationship, which grows from friendship to collaboration to genuine love, is fraught. Blankenbuehler says Donny is a complicated, driven character, who’s initially hard to embrace. “That was always an obstacle working on it, because we wanted to not make him unlikable, but we wanted to understand how broken he was inside,” Blankenbuehler explains. “So, there has to be something about him that has a yearning, that is pure and not egocentric.”

What brings Donny and Julia together is the way they work out their feelings, by writing and performing songs together. The first song they collaborate on is called “Love Will Come and Find Me Again.” “I found the story about art healing the soul the way in,” says Blankenbuehler. “So, for these men and these women, yes, they were dealing with these deep, deep, deep wounds. But the story that I want to tell is there is a way out. There is a way forward. In our lives today, if we’re really stressed about work or if we really feel like we’ve hit a dead end in life, there are ways forward. There are therapeutic things that make our hearts and our souls turn to fire and they lead us forward. That’s the story that I wanted to tell.”

And it’s a story which the Ohio-born Blankenbuehler says resonated for New York audiences, which included young people, who discovered the show through social media, to veterans. He hopes it will resonate for audiences across the country, as *Bandstand* tours. “We always believed that this show would have a big impact in Middle America, especially to a very patriotic audience. And so, I’m excited for it to play places like Texas and Oklahoma and Ohio. I know that there is an openness through the middle of our country that’s gonna be really moved by the piece.”

Written by Jeff Lunden

FIRST STEPS FIRST

*A conversation with director-choreographer
Andy Blankenbuehler*

Q: Let's just start at the very beginning. How did you become involved in the project? And what was it about the subject matter that appealed to you?

BLANKENBUEHLER: It's actually a great sort of circle story. I grew up with a kid named Dave Kreppel. He and I attended a summer theater camp the mid-1980s and we met Richard Oberacker. I did a couple of shows where Dave was in the orchestra pit or Richard Oberacker (music, book and lyrics) was playing the piano in the orchestra pit. So, our paths sort of crossed and I was doing a new musical in Dallas about six or seven years ago and got a call from David. And he said, "Richard and I would love to talk to you about this piece." And so, they pitched me what became *Bandstand*.

From the beginning, Richard and Rob (Taylor, book and lyrics) said, "we think this is definitely a director/choreographer vision and so that's why we thought about you." We did the normal sort of process that you do; you work on the script with the team, then you get a music stand reading together. Our first music stand reading was amazing; it was Faith Prince, Laura Osnes, Jeremy Jordan, Josh Henry and a great cast. It was so much fun and the piece had so far to go, but it still had bones of something that was really exciting.

What was interesting is Richard and Rob wanted to create, like, our mom and dad's golden age musical. They wanted to make it an homage to the musicals that we grew up with; the MGM movie musicals. But, at the same time, everybody wanted to make a contemporary musical. We did two or three readings and then we did the show at the Paper Mill Playhouse. We were doing it as a traditional musical and so, we took these huge clippers to the piece and started gutting it and mashing it up and overlapping moments; making it more contemporary. The movement became more impressionistic, with how I use the soldiers in the show, and the memories and the ghosts of their fallen friends.

This is the first theater piece I've seen that deals with the impact of having been in World War II and survived it. In creating this story with the guys, how much did you talk to vets? Did you talk to people about PTSD?

AB: Usually period pieces are done in a pastiche way. I love the idea that this could feel like swing music, feel that like authentic music, and tell a real story. That way you did not have to suspend your disbelief; "Oh, that person couldn't possibly love that person." This wanted to be a dramatic piece, but have the robustness of a musical. Rich and Rob always had that as a priority: dealing with the real issues of war and the real issues of the aftermath.

What happened to these men and women who came back



Andy Blankenbuehler in his studio. Photo by Lexie Newman.

from the war, they felt they couldn't communicate. They didn't want to relive the hell they saw. And they definitely couldn't recycle it and tell their spouses about it or tell their parents or kids about it. Many Americans of this era were just quiet at the dinner table. So, then it was a double whammy of people coming home from battle and of course we're not going to communicate.

People were putting things into music that the general populace felt deeply about but just couldn't say. That's what happened in this era. These swing bands made an impact and that's why people went onto the dance floor and just let it all out, because the music they were hearing mirrored somehow what they were feeling inside.

So, let's talk about the dance. Swing dancing is a very distinct genre, but you use it in very different ways. You certainly tip your hat to it, even as you play with it.

AB: In musicals, what I love is when the movement really is from a time and place. For example, *In the Heights*. If there's a salsa club, that's a salsa club. They do salsa. In *Bandstand*, if you're in a jazz club and they're playing swing music, I want to do authentic swing movement. But I don't want to do that all night long.

We have a few numbers in the show where it's legit swing dancing. But that vocabulary taken out of context still is an amazing storytelling device. Swing is not very different from its African roots in tap dance, in drumming, which then went to hip hop. Hip-hop movement often brings the lyric to life almost in a closed captioning way. That's what I learned in *In the Heights* and in *Hamilton*. Swing actually does very much the same thing. So, for example, I'm able to go into slow motion in swing dancing.

I'm not the person who says "I know everything about everything." And so, for *Bandstand* we brought in an amazing group of swing dancers; Mark Stuart Eckstein, Jamie Verazin, and Marc Heitzman, who's working on the tour. They know the ins and outs, they know the handholds that have been done for 60 years, the foot patterns, the rhythm

patterns. People a long time ago made those up and now we just rearrange them.

And you can create great variety of expression. That enables a cast to really experiment with choreography and turn into different things. To me that's what's really exciting, because any show should be an ensemble of individuals and all those individuals should be telling the same story as the principals.

It was interesting to read biographies of Richard Oberacker and Rob Taylor and realize they're both working musicians, because it's such a literate musical from that standpoint; from just understanding musicians and understanding the jazz world, understanding how it works. But, of course, you've gotta find six guys who can really play instruments well...and act and dance and sing.

AB: It's really great is when you can base a piece of theater or art, whatever it is, off of really specific literal things. So, in *Bandstand*, you've got behavior of musicians, you've got music theory, you've got the history of World War II, you've got the history of jazz music, you've got the history of TV. You have all these things and what our obstacle is to do is use them as building blocks, and then forget them

That was our biggest takeaway from *Bandstand*, is that it wasn't going to be a Swing revue or just a recollection of what that sentimental time was. This was gonna be a dig in, put your heart on the line story about people's lives that really mattered. The casting process was intensely difficult. I mean it went on forever finding people who had these skills but who had this robustness that made you care about them. And you know we've been very lucky along the way to have amazing people. The casting process for this upcoming tour was no different; it was really, really difficult. But the writers and the director have to set the actors up; you know they have to provide a track that has emotion built in.



Bandstand First National Tour photo by Jeremy Daniel

The opening sequence goes on for quite a while—there's a lot of information that we get. The audience is thrust into both the middle of a battle and the reality of returning to the home front. In that number, "Just Like It Was Before," you cover A LOT of ground.

AB: As is the case with most musicals, the opening number is the hardest thing to find. We gutted it, we threw it

away, we did it again. The final version is eight minutes long and it really was, like, fifteen when we began. When you start a musical, you have to figure out how to bring your audience onboard to where you are. So how much information do you have to give them to set the scene? We remember the picture of the sailor kissing the girl in Times Square. But what was it *really* like? There are things about World War II that people who are 20 to 50 don't know about.

The characters in the story are challenging—they're dealing with various levels of guilt and trauma. And the central character, Donny, is not that easy.

AB: No, he's not. There were versions of the show where he felt very egotistical. He felt very demanding and he wanted stardom, but we need to understand that his want for success is because he's trying to justify and he's trying to make things better for everybody else. So, it's like how far can you make this character pushy. And yet, at the same time, not lose our affection for him.

From the very beginning, I always made a comparison of Donny Novitski to Justin Timberlake. These people, these young Elvises, they had something to say and they were so cool. Young people have loved Donny and Julia, because, when you can reset your lens to see what life was like back then, you realize this is the person whose poster you would put on your wall. When we were writing the show, we were imagining Donny making it and being the groundbreaker. Every new art form has to begin someplace. It wasn't always in the past. It's actually happening right now. I mean we witnessed that with *Hamilton*. Something was just breaking open right in front of us and the audience was seeing things in a new way. They were open to things in a new way. Which is really wonderful, because as artists, ultimately the reason we do it, is because we feel things passionately and we want to show them and we feel we have a gift of communication. *Bandstand* is about art reaching people and making people feel like their lives can be better because of it.

I'm curious. Did vets come to see the show on Broadway?

AB: The vet response was unbelievable. We ended up dedicating the show to the vets at the end of the night, which was so emotional, it was so beautiful. But also, we started recognizing people who we knew were there; announcing them or introducing them. And almost every day vets were coming backstage: Korean War vets, Vietnam War vets, current vets from Iraq and Afghanistan. And the reaction was almost the same from all the generations. The cast was getting it every night and it was really emotional for them. It was really great for us to know we were making a difference, but also educating. Younger audience members are getting a peek into real people's history.

*This article has been edited from a longer interview
by Jeff Lunden*

THE SWING ERA

The music and dancing that defined a culture

Contemporary audiences may look at jazz as an outdated style of music, or view it with a sense of nostalgic affection, but in the early to mid-1900s, it was groundbreaking. It is difficult to trace the origins of jazz music because of its wide pool of influences, but it draws heavily from African music traditions as well as earlier American styles. Developed in the years leading up to World War I, “Dixieland” jazz drew inspiration from marching bands and ragtime to create a loose, swinging style that emphasized group improvisation. The style was popularized by the all-white group The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, but this genre is also where the legendary Louis Armstrong rose to prominence.



Bandstand First National Tour photo by Jeremy Daniel

Musicians began to experiment with the forms and structures of jazz as the 1930s began, leading to the birth of a new genre referred to as “swing.” In contrast to the smaller bands and group improvisation of Dixieland, swing music typically involved large bands and solos. The music often consisted of repeated riffs that gave it a driving, danceable rhythm. This style stemmed from the popular but uninspired neo-jazz and enlivened it with sophisticated harmonies and exciting improvisation. Swing styles varied from the bluesy Kansas City swing performed by Count Basie to more orchestral big-band arrangements popularized by Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller.

Because of its accessibility, innovation, and popularity, swing grew to be a defining element of pop culture in the 1930s and early 40s. Beyond music, it influenced clothing, slang, and especially dancing. Swing dancing encompassed a wide range of styles, the most popular of which was the Lindy Hop. The Lindy Hop had developed in Harlem as a mixture of other popular dance styles that married the movement and improvisation of African dance with the eight-count structure of traditional European partner dances to create a freewheeling, energetic new style that paired well with swing

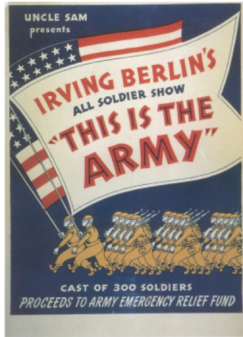
music. It was a vibrant, youthful style of dance that rebelled against the more formal structure of older styles and also contributed to the widespread popularity of swing culture.

The story of *Bandstand* takes place towards the end of the swing era, as musicians began to experiment with more challenging, artsy styles that characterized the “bebop” jazz of the 1950s. Even still, the influences of swing culture are evident throughout the show. For the veterans, the physicality of swing dancing is an outward expression of their inner turmoil, and the improvisational solos in the music that they play provide them with a chance to be creative while collaborating with their band. The impact that the Donny Nova Band has shows how influential swing was on the general public at the time while hinting at the fanaticism of rock-and-roll fans that would develop in the next decade. From generation to generation, music has been a massively influential part of pop culture, and looking at the music of a specific era can often help uncover deeper truths about what people were going through at that time.

Written by Mason Diab

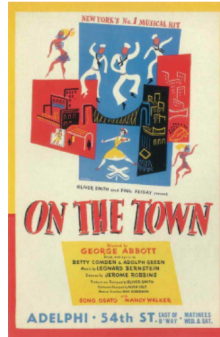
SOLDIERS ON THE STAGE

These other Broadway musicals also feature the men and women of the armed forces.



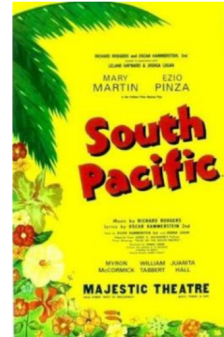
THIS IS THE ARMY (1942)

Veteran and composer Irving Berlin adapted his military base musical revues into this popular revue, which was performed entirely by U.S. armed forces members on special assignment during World War II.



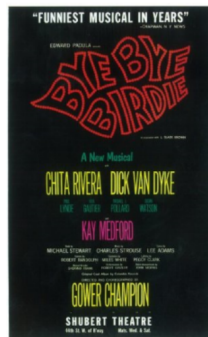
ON THE TOWN (1944)

This Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins collaboration follows three sailors as they find romance and adventure in New York City during their 24-hour shore leave.



SOUTH PACIFIC (1949)

Rodgers and Hammerstein's Pulitzer Prize-winning musical tells the story of a group of military men, nurses, and native residents on a Polynesian island during World War II.



BYE BYE BIRDIE! (1960)

This classic show follows a popular musician as he stages a farewell concert before being drafted into the Army.



MISS SAIGON (1989)

Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil's adaptation of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* sets the story of a doomed romance between a Vietnamese woman and her American lover in 1970s Saigon, at the height of the Vietnam War.



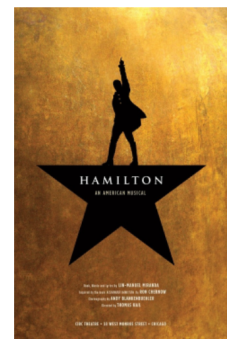
WHITE CHRISTMAS (2009)

This holiday musical, based on the 1954 Irving Berlin film, follows two performing veterans who stage a holiday act at a lodge owned by their former military commander.



AN AMERICAN IN PARIS (2015)

Based on the 1951 film, this musical uses songs from the Gershwin songbook to tell the story of a World War II veteran who finds love and friendship in post-war France.



HAMILTON (2015)

Lin-Manuel Miranda's blockbuster musical mixes hip-hop music and the Founding Fathers to tell the story of the American Revolutionary War and the political conflicts that followed.

AFTER THE WAR

Looking at the struggles that veterans faced back home

War is brutal. Audience members at *Bandstand* can see that from the first notes of the opening number, where soldiers are in battle and some do not make it home to see their families. What is less obvious, though, is how that brutality affects military members in the months after their return home.

Nowadays, the general public is relatively aware of the toll that war takes on servicemen and women. Back at the conclusion of World War II, however, people had no idea. Just like the ensemble sings in *Bandstand*'s opening number, there was an expectation that things would go right back to normal when soldiers came home. As evidenced by Donny and his friends, this was not the case.

In addition to having to adapt to a life that has moved on without them, many soldiers have to deal with long-lasting mental health issues related to their time at war. There are accounts of research on military trauma dating back thousands of years, but it was only as recently as the American Civil War (1861-1865) that doctors and scientists really began to look into the problems that veterans faced after returning from combat.

Early studies, like the one carried out by U.S. doctor Jacob Mendez Da Costa, observed symptoms such as troubled breathing, anxiety, and a rapid pulse, but treatment usually consisted of providing a soldier with drugs and sending them on their way. Around the same time, European medical professionals began to take note of psychological problems that developed in patients who had experienced traumatic injuries. By the end of World War I in 1919, the phrase “shell shock” was being used to describe some of the psychological problems faced by soldiers in combat, but treatment was often limited to a few days of rest.

By World War II, the term had evolved into “Combat Stress Reaction,” which was the diagnosis of nearly half the soldiers who were discharged. Treatment was slowly improving as public understanding of war-related trauma increased, but it



Bandstand First National Tour photo by Jeremy Daniel

was still limited in its scope. One major improvement was the recognition of the importance of strong relationships in military units, which is reflected in the camaraderie seen between the band members in *Bandstand*.

Over the next few decades there was continued progress as the American Psychiatric Association began to document different issues in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), but it was not until the DSM-III in 1980 that Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was recognized. This groundbreaking addition, which was influenced by researching war veterans, Holocaust survivors, and other trauma victims, was the first major acknowledgment of post-war psychological struggles that veterans dealt with.

PTSD is not limited to veterans, but it is extremely common among that demographic—more recent studies involving military members in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars suggested that 10-18% of the troops were likely to have symptoms of PTSD upon returning home. Some common symptoms include avoiding processing the trauma, feeling detached or emotionally numb, being frequently alert or on guard, and experiencing flashbacks to the traumatic event. Patients suffering from PTSD also face a higher risk of other mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, alcoholism, and suicidal thoughts.

Think about the members of the Donny Nova Band. All of them display one or more of these symptoms in some way, and their only outlet for it is the band. The 70 years of research that have occurred since World War II allow contemporary audiences to look upon those characters with compassion, but they weren't met with much of that at the time due to the general lack of understanding about what they were dealing with. What the boys deal with in *Bandstand*—and what thousands of veterans deal with every day—is not uncommon or inherently bad, but it can be escalated by the lack of a support system, minimal treatment, and poor coping methods.

What veterans—and all who suffer from some form of PTSD—need to remember is that they are not alone, and that there is hope for recovery. The veterans of the Donny Nova Band find healing in their music, in the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences, and in their connections with each other. Many others dealing with PTSD find that pleasant activities, especially artistic ones, can be therapeutic and provide an outlet for their feelings. Others find that therapists and peer support groups provide them with safe spaces to discuss their struggles. There are more resources available today for those dealing with the aftereffects of trauma than ever before.

Written by Mason Diab

REMINDERS AND RESOURCES

The boys of *Bandstand* did not have many resources available to them as they struggled to work through their PTSD. With the progress that has been made over the last 75 years, those struggling with similar issues today no longer have to fight their battles alone. If you or someone you know dealing with PTSD or another similar mental health issue, here are some reminders and resources that may help:

- Remember that you are not alone. Fear and anxiety may seem isolating, but they are not uncommon problems.
- Find a community to support you. Julia and the boys in the band found hope and healing when they came together to work through their problems. This can be a support group, a team, or a close group of friends who you can talk openly with.
- Pursue hobbies that distract you and bring you joy. For the characters in *Bandstand*, it is playing music together. It could be baking, exercising, painting, or even volunteering somewhere that's important to you. Everyone finds different outlets.
- Don't be afraid to seek professional help. Doctors and therapists may be able to provide you with more information about your problems and help you on your path to healing.
- When you are comfortable, share your stories. This can be through songs or poems like in *Bandstand*, a blog post or journal, or simply conversations with people you trust. Getting your story out of your head can play a significant part in helping you process.
- The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (the VA) has a whole section of their website dedicated to PTSD, specifically how it affects veterans.

www.ptsd.va.gov

- The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Alliance website offers statistics, general information, links to professional help, and resources for further reading.

www.ptsdalliance.org

- The American Psychological Association website provides in-depth information about PTSD, trauma, and other related disorders, as well as steps for treatment and recovery.

www.apa.org

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about the show after you've seen it!

- The Donny Nova band provides a safe place for its members to chase their dreams and process the difficult events in their lives. Where do you find community and healing? What activities help you deal with hard or stressful things?
- The contest hosted by NBC seems to be designed to celebrate the U.S. armed forces, but it turns out to be an inauthentic attempt to profit off the public's sentimental feelings about the military. Why do you think the network wanted to do this? Can you draw parallels between this event and the way that things are portrayed in the media today?
- *Bandstand* gives audiences a glimpse into the way that swing music and dancing impacted American culture in the early 1940s. Think about what is on the radio now—what music do you think will be remembered in 50 years for the way that it influenced culture and represented what life was like in the 2010s?
- Part of why WWII veterans struggled so much with readjusting to civilian life was because people were unaware of the effects of combat and didn't want to discuss the harsh realities of military life. Why do you think that was? How do you think things have changed since then? Are we more aware and willing to talk about these challenges?
- The creators of *Bandstand* aimed to create a show inspired by classic musicals that also presented a more realistic version of life. How does this show compare to Golden-Age musicals from the 1940s and 1950s? Do you think it is more authentic?

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