Stonewall National Museum & Archives
LGBTQ Theater and Dance in the United States Timeline

Introduction

The United States has had a long-standing discomfort with the transgression of sexual and gender norms. Influenced by religious ideals, society viewed people who had same-sex desires and engaged in same-sex practices to be immoral and sinful. As such, the US has long enacted laws to control and condemn those who betray sexual and gender norms. Since the nation’s earliest days, federal, state and local laws punished those who betrayed sexual and gender norms, often as a capital offense.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, commerce and industry flourished, causing people to move from rural communities to more developed urban areas. As a result of these social transformations, same-sex practices increased, as did organized efforts to suppress them. Accordingly, our examination of LGBTQ history in the United States begins after the Civil War and the growth of industrialization and urbanization. Despite insistent homophobia and transphobia in politics, culture, and society over the past 170 years, LGBTQ people have remained resilient, creative, and dedicated to the fight for rights and visibility. Rather than a comprehensive overview, this timeline is intended to provide a snapshot of significant moments in LGBTQ history so as to encourage further engagement and exploration.

Check out other LGBTQ history timeline selections that specifically explore visual art, music, literature, film and television, AIDS, sports, and more in this series.

1899   After her relocation to London, Isadora Duncan rose to prominence as a modern dancer across Europe. More
1926  American ex-pat Josephine Baker performed her “danse sauvage” in at the Folies Bergères in Paris, immediately becoming a celebrity. More

1934  Written by Lillian Hellman, *The Children’s Hour* was about two headmistresses accused by a malicious student of having a lesbian affair. More

1944  Jerome Robbins developed and performed in *Fancy Free*—a ballet inspired by Paul Cadmus’ homoerotic painting *The Fleet’s In!* (1934). The work featured a magnificent score by Leonard Bernstein. More

1948  Cole Porter’s musical *Kiss Me, Kate* was a huge hit, winning the Tony Award for Best Musical. More

1953  Openly broaching the topic of homosexuality in preparatory schools, *Tea and Sympathy* premiered on Broadway. More
1953  During his time at Black Mountain College, Merce Cunningham founded the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. [More]

1955  Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* explored familial obligation and homosexual desire. [More]

1956  With a libretto by Lillian Hellman, Leonard Bernstein’s operetta *Candide* premiered on Broadway. [More]

1958  Alvin Ailey started the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a path-breaking Black modern dance troupe. [More]
1959  After her landmark play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway, Lorraine Hansberry became the youngest playwright, the first African American, and the fifth woman to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play. More

1962  *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee invited queer interpretations. More

1964  Lanford Wilson’s *The Madness of Lady Bright* and Robert Patrick’s *The Haunted Host* premiered at the Caffe Cino in the West Village, boldly foregrounding gay stories and characters. More

1966  With music by John Kander and lyrics by Fred Ebb, the musical *Cabaret* brought to life the queer underbelly of 1930s Berlin. More

1967  Charles Ludlam founded his Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which became a hub of queer experimental performance. More
1968  Mart Crowley’s off-Broadway play *The Boys in the Band* was a turning point in American theater because of its heart-warming and heart-wrenching portrayal of contemporary gay life. 

1971  Stephen Sondheim’s *Follies* opened on Broadway. 

1971  Wayland Flowers’ erotic puppet show *Kumquats* premiered in New York City. 

1976  For his visionary direction and choreography of *A Chorus Line*, Michael Bennett won two Tony Awards. 

1979  Martin Sherman’s *Bent* examined the oppression of gays in Nazi Germany.
1980  Jane Chambers’ *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* became a touchstone of lesbian drama. [More](#)

1980  Split Britches, a lesbian feminist theater company, was founded in New York. [More](#)

1982  Harvey Fierstein’s off-off-Broadway play *Torch Song Trilogy* told the story of a gay Jewish drag queen and torch singer. [More](#)

1985  Two of the first plays to address the urgency of the AIDS crisis, William M. Hoffman’s *As Is* and Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* opened in New York City. [More](#)

1987  Influenced by the aesthetics of film noir, Holly Hughes’ *Dress Suits to Hire* told a lesbian love story. [More](#)
1988  BD Wong won a Tony Award for his performance in the play *M. Butterfly*. More

1989  Kate Bornstein developed her first play, *Hidden: A Gender*. More

1990  Centered on the Black queer experience, the Pomo Afro Homos, an ebullient theater troupe, was founded in San Francisco. More

1991  Titled *Millennium Approaches*, the first part of Tony Kushner’s masterpiece *Angels in America* premiered to immense critical acclaim. More

1992  William Finn’s musical *Falsettos* attended to the intersections of gay and Jewish experience. More

1993  With music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, and a book by Terrence McNally, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* had a queer storyline—and won the Tony Award for Best Musical. More

1993  World-renowned ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev died of AIDS-related illness at age 54. More

1993  Paul Rudnick’s play *Jeffrey* focused on the comedic aspects of HIV/AIDS. More

1995  Cherry Jones won her first Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play—*The Heiress*—and came out in her acceptance speech. More
1998   Alan Cumming won a Tony Award for the role of the Master of Ceremonies in the revival of the musical *Cabaret*. Joel Grey, who originated this character, won the same award in 1967. More

1998   With music and lyrics by Stephen Trask and a book by John Cameron Mitchell, the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Itch* opened off-Broadway. More

2000   Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* revolved around the aftermath of the murder of Matthew Shepard—a monumental anti-gay hate crime—in Laramie, Wyoming. More

2004   Doug Wright was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play *I Am My Own Wife*, a one-person show about Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, an East German transgender woman who collaborated with the Stasi. More

2008   Known for his performances in *The Producers*, *Guys and Dolls*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Nathan Lane was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame. More
2013 Based on Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel, *Fun Home* premiered as a musical developed by Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron, becoming a critically acclaimed Broadway hit. [More]

2015 Paula Vogel’s *Indecent* brought lesbian themes to the fore in her exploration of Yiddish theater. [More]