

SpongeBob the Musical Dramatical Review

By Raphael Knauf



Introduction



Fourteen seasons, three movies, two-hundred ninety-six episodes and still counting, and one musical. *SpongeBob SquarePants* is truly a pop culture sensation. Since the cartoon released its first episode on July 17, 1999, on Nickelodeon, the show and its endearing characters have captured hearts. The multibillion-dollar franchise continues even today with the animated TV show recently being renewed for its fifteenth season in late 2023. *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the titular yellow sponge, was created by Stephen Hillenburg, a marine biologist turned show director. One must wonder if Hillenburg had any idea that his creation would one day make it to Broadway as a musical and acquire twelve Tony nominations. Originally

titled, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Musical*, the musical was later retitled, *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical*, for the national tour. Again, the musical's title has been changed from Brighton High School's production to *SpongeBob the Musical*. Regardless, this show is for all ages and audiences regardless of whether they are fans of the TV series or are a fish out of water.

From Sponge to Stage

Co-conceived by director, Tina Landau, and scriptwriter, Kyle Jarrow, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Musical*, was no easy feat. Landau refused when her agent asked if she was interested in directing a *SpongeBob SquarePants* musical. Only after she learned the show's creator, Stephen Hillenburg, wanted the musical to be as eccentric as the cartoon did she agree to be the director. On the other fin, Jarrow joined the team in a heartbeat, having been a fan of the show since his time in college. He claimed that he rewatched almost every single episode that was released at the

time to let the material set in. One of the biggest hurdles in creating the musical was forming a new plot. Jarrow and Landau desperately wanted to make an original story which led them to come up with the concept of the threat of the end of the world coming to the underwater city of Bikini Bottom where SpongeBob SquarePants and his friends reside. With the concept down, the show started to take form. As part of the process, Landau and Jarrow made the trip out to California to meet with the executive producers and animators of the show where they learned about the process behind the creation of the TV series and the characters. Jarrow recalls learning details about how the show never makes pop culture references, and



that SpongeBob would never fall in love which helped him further craft a plot of the *SpongeBob Musical*. There was a lot of responsibility laid on Jarrow and Landau's shoulders. Both worked to create a story that could only be told through stage and would be appealing to audiences. The pressure of meeting fans' expectations while still creating an original work of art was tough, and with many *SpongeBob* fans being older Jarrow had to find a balance in the humor present in the show. While *SpongeBob the Musical* is first and foremost a children's show and kid-friendly there is some subversive humor if you look for it much like the cartoon. Among the wonderful writing of the musical, there is so much to be said about the ingenuity of the costume and set design. Understanding many would be put off by the idea of a *SpongeBob Musical* with images of a person in a bulky foam costume led David Zinn, the scenic and costume designer, to reimagine all the characters as human with elements of their animated character design. From the color palette to the hair, Zinn brought the loveable characters to life. Instead of relying on prosthetics, Landau had actors attend circus-style workshops to help them transform into their characters through movement. In an interview, Jarrow referred to the production as a DIY, or Do it Yourself show. There is no better example of that than how the team decided to incorporate found objects into set

design. In the animated TV show, many of the locations are human objects that somehow made it to the ocean. SpongeBob's work, the Krusty Krab, is a fast-food restaurant created out of a lobster trap with its rival restaurant, the Chum Bucket, being a metal bucket. The Broadway production, in turn, made use of hula hoops, garbage buckets, and ladders in its set. The creativity doesn't stop there: the Broadway musical also boasts a live Foley artist to make all the sound effects present in the animated TV show and a stellar soundtrack with a story of its own.

Making the Music

When creating the music for *SpongeBob the Musical*, Jarrow, and Landau approached it as one would a movie soundtrack. Instead of having one artist write all the music, the team decided to have each song written by a different musician or band. The soundtrack consists of 18 songs with writers that include familiar names like Plan White T's, Sara Bareilles, John Legend, Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, and so many others. Jarrow remembers that he first outlined the show and song spotted meaning he chose the places where songs would be sung, detailed what would happen in the song, what it would be about, and who would sing it. After he would work with the team to figure out who would be a good fit to write it and how to connect with them. If an artist showed interest, they would be sent an outline and demos would be created by the artist which would be sent back. Demos would then be given to Tom Kitt, the show's musical director, who would then work with the orchestra and change things as needed. Kitt reported that allowing each artist to write with their voice was the key. One of the most famous artists to have their name on record as being one of the musical's songwriters is the chameleon of rock, David Bowie. When Landau reached out in 2012, the star didn't have enough time to write an original song and opted to have the musical team go through his old work and find a song to adapt. The song the team chose happened to be "No Control", from Bowie's collaboration with Brian Eno on the 1995 album *Outside*. Bowie had previously worked with the SpongeBob franchise as the voice of the character Lord Royal Highness in the episode "Atlantis SquarePants". Another famous contributor was the alternate rock band, They Might Be Giants, while many remember them as the singers behind the hit song, "Istanbul (not Constantinople)", those who read this can now remember them as the writers of Squidward's song, "I'm Not a Loser". Landau admitted that she was skeptical that the team would be able to achieve the vision they had for the soundtrack, but Kitt was not citing that SpongeBob is franchise that brings people together.



Performance History

The official plans for the SpongeBob musical were announced by Nickelodeon on February 25, 2015, through a presentation featuring the musical's opening number, "Bikini Bottom Day". Later that year, in August, it was revealed that the show would open in Chicago for try-outs before a Broadway run projected to begin in late 2016. During early 2016, Nickelodeon executives then met with Broadway theatre owners to secure the show's Broadway premiere. It was only until late May 2016 that the technical rehearsals would conclude. On June 19, 2016, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Musical* would have its first performance at the Oriental Theatre in Chicago. There is would be met with a glowing reception. After a successful try-out period in Chicago, the musical finally made it to Broadway where previews started at the Palace Theatre on November 6, 2017, before officially premiering on December 4, 2017. After 327 performances, the musical would close on September 16, 2018, due to the Palace Theatre being renovated and raised to make room for more retail space. Despite not being able to recoup its \$18 million budget, the show was nominated for twelve Tonys making the most nominated production along with *Mean Girls* at the 72nd Tony Awards in 2018. In September 2019, a non-Equity North American tour started, and the musical was renamed to *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical*. Unfortunately, it didn't finish due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Luckily, there was already a television special in the works. On October 17, 2019, Nickelodeon declared they were making *The SpongeBob Musical: Live On*

Stage! which aired on December 7, 2019, and was released on DVD on November 3, 2020. The show would make it over the pond and splash into international waters in 2022. Unlike many Broadway shows which first go to the United Kingdom, *SpongeBob* went to Germany first. The show was fully translated to German. It toured through Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, from October 1, 2022, through December 17, 2022. The United Kingdom tour was announced in October of 2022. On April 5, 2023, the tour finally started. It is reported the tour will finish on September 9, 2023.



Closing Comments

SpongeBob the Musical, at its center is a story about community. The show's main message of coming together during crisis and being kind is just as impactful as it was when the musical first premiered. The show highlights the importance of good friends, diversity, and positivity, while exploring issues of prejudice, governmental corruption, and the many ways people or fish respond to fear. Brighton High School is proud to present this musical to audiences. We hope this show makes your Bikini Bottom Day!

