 TASK #2: ABOUT MUSICAL THEATRE
This task is designed to help you better understand the history of musical theatre, its history.
You will find most of the answers in the texts provided; however, some questions require you to do a little bit of research!

THE HISTORY OF MUSICAL THEATRE

Musical theatre's history stretches far beyond the limits one might assume. In fact, evidence suggest elements of this art form were used over 2500 years ago! During the 5th century B.C.E, most plays in Greece were set up with one to three actors and a chorus that responded to what the characters did. Both the actors and the chorus sang lyrics throughout the play. The actors incorporated not only the dialogue and song, but dance in their parts as well.

After the Greeks were taken over by the Romans, the popularity of theatre declined. The Romans, known for their military genius and stoic nature, didn’t care much for theatre. The Middle Ages were not a particularly bright time for theatre, either. Performers often went from city to city performing for whomever, wherever. However, they were not always well received.

Musical theatre still managed to advance in this time period through the Roman Catholic Church. Most people did not know Latin, the official language of the Church, so clever monks started adding music and art to spread their faith. This went even further when cycle plays developed. A cycle play is a biblical story that has been chopped up and divided between different groups. Each group would have a pageant wagon (a stage on wheels) and they would move about the city depicting biblical stories. Once one group was done the next part of the story would start. This caused religion not only to be widespread, but also entertaining. The cycle plays helped increase the popularity of theatre, which would soon skyrocket.

The Renaissance, which in French literally means "rebirth", re-awakened public interest in the arts. When King Louis XV of France demanded further entertainment, he called on playwright Molière to reform his plays to do this - so Molière added music and dance to his shows. This style grew, and by the 1700s, there were two main divisions of it: the ballad opera and comic opera. The ballad opera used popular songs of the day with new lyrics, while the comic operas had original songs and a more romantic plot development. Both these styles flourished, and the idea of incorporating music into plays grew and grew.

Although many people think of musicals as a very American genre, musical theatre actually has its roots in these ballad and comic operas and the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan (Britain), Offenbach (France), Johann Strauss and Lehar (Germany and Austria).

NAME: ____________________________ CLASS: _____________

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The early musicals, usually called musical comedies, follies or revues, were weak on plot, and strong on songs, dance and ensemble. Some had no plot at all (revues) and others used a skeleton plot as an excuse for a string of songs. George and Ira Gershwin’s Lady Be Good is a typical example, containing hit songs that endure today (The Man I Love, Fascinating Rhythm), although nobody remembers their context or the plot of the musical.

A turning point came in 1927 when Jerome Kern together with Oscar Hammerstein wrote Show Boat - a musical that explored the serious social issue of racism. Show Boat also fused significant popular music influences with a more traditional operetta style, using contemporary dance rhythms and elements of blues.

The “Golden Age” of musical theatre began in the 1940s with Oklahoma!. Oscar Hammerstein II’s lyrics and Richard Rodgers’s music combined the songs and the dramatic action together, so that the songs could now be used to move the action forward, not simply to comment on what was happening.

Oklahoma! was also the first musical to use dance to move the plot forward. Since the characters were cowboys and farm girls, the idea of them expressing their emotions through words seemed awkward. So the choreographer used everyday motions to express their ideas - such as butter churning! - rather than traditional showgirl dancing.

Rodgers & Hammerstein went on to write many successful musicals that are still performed today, including South Pacific, Carousel and The Sound of Music. Many of these were also made into movie-musicals.

In 1956, Lerner & Loewe’s My Fair Lady strongly influenced the style of singing employed in musical theatre when the actor playing the role of Professor Higgins - Rex Harrison - used spoken words over the music, because he couldn’t sing! This is sometimes known as “doing a Rex Harrison” and may well be one of the influences that led to the development of rap music.

By the 1960s, musical theatre was led by very different influences. Stephen Sondheim developed the idea of exploring the darker side of life with West Side Story - a modern day “Romeo & Juliet” that was considered so daring in the way it dealt with real issues of racism, immigration, teenagers and gangs that parents called for the closing of the show! Sondheim continues to be a leading musical theatre writer with shows such as Into The Woods, Company and Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street.

Rock music began to play an increasingly important part in the musicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, beginning with Hair in 1967 and then Jesus Christ Superstar in 1971. Jesus Christ Superstar is known as a rock “opera” because there is no spoken dialogue.
The 1980's and 1990's brought along the rise of the "mega musicals". These had very large casts, pop-influenced music, and more special effects.Audiences were wowed with The Phantom of the Opera's falling chandelier in 1986 and Miss Saigon's full-sized helicopter in 1991. Unfortunately this increased ticket prices, and also took away from the story and the performers. Jonathon Larson's Rent (1996) tried to change this when he added heavily stylized rock music and a young cast - and brought the focus back on the story and the characters.

The 21st century has brought a combination of many revivals of old musicals and completely new styles to musical theatre. The revivals of shows provide almost a guarantee to producers that people will support the show, but new shows - such as Spring Awakening and Avenue Q - stretch the limits of theatre with their challenging subject matter and theatrical style. Movie musicals are also enjoying a comeback with highly successful recent film versions of Mamma Mia, Hairspray and Les Misérables. Overall, musical theatre has had an interesting past, but the future seems just as unique.

NOW... ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

Theatre is considered to have begun in which century, and which ancient civilisation?
_______________________________________________________________________________

How did the Roman Catholic Church help the development of theatre through the Middle Ages?
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

Which two forms of opera grew out the Renaissance period?

(1)______________________________

(2)______________________________

Gilbert & Sullivan wrote many famous operettas that influenced the development of musical theatre today. Can you find out the name of one of their operettas?
_______________________________________________________________________________
The early forms of American musical theatre didn’t have very interesting stories. Which 1927 musical by Jerome Kern & Oscar Hammerstein changed that, by dealing with a serious social issue?

_____________________________________

The 1945 musical *Oklahoma!* was considered groundbreaking because it was the first to have the songs and dance actually move the dramatic action of the play forward. Which famous composer/lyricist team wrote this musical?

_____________________________________________________

Name three other musicals by this important musical theatre writing team:

_____________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________

Name another important musical theatre writer who came to prominence in the 1960s with his modern day “Romeo & Juliet” musical.

_____________________________________________________

What was the name of this famous musical?

_____________________________________________________

When you do not sing, but simply speak the words in time with the music, it is sometimes called “______________________________” after the actor who played the role of Professor Higgins in the musical: ________________________________.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, musical theatre started to incorporate rock music.

Name the first “rock musical”: ____________________________________________

Name any movie musical (ie. a musical that has been made into a movie)

_____________________________________________________

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WHAT IS MUSICAL THEATRE?

Musical theatre is a form of theatre combining music, songs, spoken dialogue and dance. A musical is different to other forms of theatre in that it usually devotes more time to music than to dialogue. Often the moments of greatest dramatic intensity in a musical are its songs.

Opera is also a form of musical theatre which is (most commonly) entirely sung; that is, there is no spoken dialogue. The story is carried forward by a form of sung dialogue known as “recitativo”. A musical, on the other hand, is typically a combination of music and spoken dialogue. However, of course there are variants - there are many musicals that are in fact entirely sung, including Les Misérables, Phantom of The Opera and Jesus Christ Superstar.

The main components of a musical are the music, the lyrics, and what is known as the “book”. The music and lyrics together form the “score” of a musical.

The “book” of a musical refers to the story, character development, and dramatic structure, including the spoken dialogue. It is also sometimes called the “libretto” - a term commonly used in opera. “Libretto” is an Italian word meaning for “little book”.

A “book” musical is usually built around four to six main tunes that are repeated (“reprised”) later in the show. Spoken dialogue is generally interspersed between musical numbers. The “book” can be based on a novel (like The Wizard Of Oz and Wicked), a movie (like Disney’s The Lion King and Beauty And The Beast), true stories or experiences (like The Sound Of Music), other plays or operas (Rent and Miss Saigon are both adaptations of the famous Puccini opera La Boheme; and West Side Story is a modern day version of Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet) or a completely new story altogether (like The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee).

There is no fixed length for a musical; however, most musicals range from one and a half hours to three hours.

Musicals are performed all around the world. There are two famous locations for musical theatre - the West End in London and Broadway in New York. However Australia is also becoming renowned for the quality of its musical theatre productions.

Who knows? Maybe you will be the next big musical theatre star?

NOW... ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS: (** = you will have to look this up!)
Musical theatre is a form of theatre combining what 4 elements?

(1) __________________________

(2) __________________________

(3) __________________________

(4) __________________________

Name another form of theatre that involves singing.
_____________________________________________________

What is “recitative”, which is commonly used in operas?
_____________________________________________________

What are the three main components of a musical.
(1) __________________________ (2) __________________________ (3) __________________________

What forms the “libretto” of a musical?
_____________________________________________________

What is the “score” of a musical?
_____________________________________________________

How is a musical different to other forms of theatre?
_____________________________________________________

Name two famous centres of musical theatre production - and their locations:
(1) ____________________________ (2) ____________________________

Name a musical whose “book” based on a novel.
_____________________________________________________

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Name a musical based on a movie.

________________________________________________________________________________

** Can you name any two other musicals *not* mentioned in this article?

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