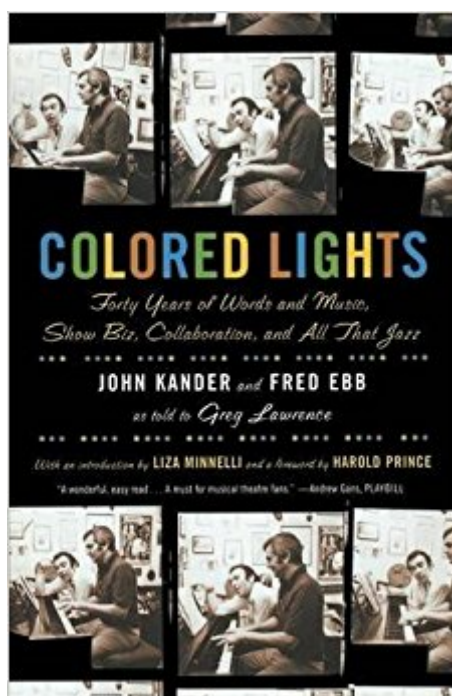


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Colored Lights: Forty Years Of Words And Music, Show Biz, Collaboration, And All That Jazz



Synopsis

Composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb are the longest-running song-writing partnership in Broadway history, having first joined forces in 1962. The creators of such groundbreaking musicals as *Chicago*, *Cabaret*, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Kander and Ebb have helped to push American musical theater in a more daring direction, both musically and dramatically. Their impact on individual performers has been great as well, starting with the handpicked star of their first musical: an untested nineteen-year-old named Liza Minnelli (who writes of this experience in her introduction). *Colored Lights* covers the major shows of Kander and Ebb's partnership, from *Flora*, the *Red Menace* (starring a then-unknown Liza) to *The Visit*, their newest show, which is set to star another Kander and Ebb favorite, Chita Rivera. The pages and musicals in between reveal what has made theirs such an important and long-lived musical partnership--and one so valued by the artists they have worked with. In recounting the genesis and controversies of *Cabaret*, reflecting on the superstar mentality of such artists as Frank Sinatra and Barbra Streisand, and recalling their work with Bob Fosse on *Chicago* (as well as their thoughts on the Oscar-winning film version), John Kander and Fred Ebb provide a history not only of their own lives but also of the American musical theater of the late twentieth century.

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Customer Reviews

Anyone who enjoys musical theater will delight in this anecdotal memoir by an accomplished musical team who began their partnership in 1962. The text, a series of conversations told to

Lawrence (*Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins*), reads like an extended gossip column written with style and wit. Composer Kander and lyricist Ebb collaborated on many Broadway shows including their first, *Flora the Red Menace* (1965), *Cabaret* (1966) and *Chicago* (1975). Their recollections bring the golden age of musical theater to life and reveal the nuts and bolts of creating a score for a successful musical. The two reminisce freely about stars such as Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand and Bob Fosse, with whom they had close working relationships. They lavishly praise Minnelli's talent and charm (often to the point of overkill) and are compassionate about her emotional ups and downs. Streisand, however, is damned with faint praise, and Ebb recounts abusive treatment from Bob Fosse, who had undergone a recent heart bypass operation, while they were working on *Chicago*. In another vignette, Kander and Ebb describe how they came to write the title song for the film *New York, New York* for Martin Scorsese. Although they were offended when Robert DeNiro criticized their first attempt, the new version was the one that became their greatest single hit. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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Light, chatty interviews readably, if hardly exhaustively, survey the work and lives of two of Broadway's more successful practitioners, longtime song-writing collaborators John Kander and Fred Ebb. Each of the team's shows, misses (*The Act*, *Steel Pier*, *Flora the Red Menace*) as well as hits (*Cabaret*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *And the World Goes 'Round*), is discussed, with special attention paid to *Chicago*, a bomb when it opened in 1975 but a worldwide hit in its 1996 revival and as an Oscar-winning movie. As-told-to coauthor Greg Lawrence has made the book resemble conversations between Kander and Ebb that readers just happen to be listening in on, to utterly beguiling effect. The collaborators speak with the ease of men who have slogged through thick and thin and still very much enjoy one another's company. The talk flows so freely, it is easy to forgive the constant digressions, occasional outbursts against critics, and frequent slighting of hard information in favor of funny, gossipy stories about such friends as Liza Minnelli. Jack Helbig

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Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz, Collaboration, and All That Jazz An absolutely fascinating look into the hearts and minds and working habits of two men who contributed so much to the American Theater over the last half century. Fred Ebb is no longer with us, so we can be truly thankful that he and John Kander collaborated on this book while he was still alive. As a

songwriter myself, I always find such memoirs interesting and valuable.

As the song says, start spreading the news -- this memoir in dialogue form by John Kander and Fred Ebb really is a surprising gem. I didn't expect to enjoy a book that is mainly conversation but I went through it in one sitting (on a flight from NY to LA) and didn't want it to end. These two geniuses of musical theater are totally engaging, and their breezy dialogue is often as provocative (and sometimes hilarious) as their best musicals and songs. It's like being in the same room with the two of them and having a chance to eavesdrop on their wry insights into the shows and various personalities they've worked with, including Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand, Frank Sinatra, Lauren Bacall, Bob Fosse, Shirley McLaine, and Anthony Quinn. The anecdotes in the book, even the dishiest ones, are told with wit and intelligence, and without the usual celebrity tell-all pretensions. Kander and Ebb come across as two very different personalities as collaborators, yet both seem very earthy and wise about life and show business. Anyone who was wowed by Chicago or Cabaret will be delighted by their reminiscences. And there are some surprising revelations, like the fact that their biggest hit, "New York, New York," would never have been written if it hadn't been for Robert Deniro, who they say disapproved of their first version of the song and made them rewrite it for him. I was also surprised by the down-to-earth side of Liza Minnelli that comes across in the Introduction -- not at all like her usual media image. This book is like a little play itself, and what a great way to experience forty years of Broadway history and backstage lore. Definitely, a unique 'must read' for theater lovers.

Good for Greg Lawrence for facilitating this oral history and thinking of the right questions to get these two chatterboxes off and running, to the races! Lawrence wrote an OK biography of Jerome Robbins, and an as told to "by" Gelsey Kirkland which was good, but this book is terrific fun. The only thing is, aren't Kander and Ebb a couple? Or was that something they didn't want to talk about? Maybe they're not, who knew! But discussion of their personal lives is totally not on the menu here. Maybe after they are dead the whole story will come out. They tell some great stories here about working with Bob Fosse, maybe the best sustained account available of the great choreographer's ambitions, dreams, desires, and mania. I like the way that Liza Minnelli and Harold Prince also jump in to give their two cents here and there from the bleachers. It's a technique you often see in journalism, and here it works just fine. Liza is subject #1 of Kander and Ebb's discussions. They are always trying to make her look good, or rather to bring her natural talents to the fore. But in doing so they paint a picture of a talented actress who was thwarted by the commercial failure of THE RINK

and therefore never tried to be anything but "just Liza" again, and being "just Liza" is pretty messed up what with having a mother who tried to take over her life in a drunken haze and at least one boyfriend (Martin Scorsese) who attempted to direct a whole show for her (THE ACT) via Moviola. Kander and Ebb also discuss writing for Lauren Bacall and the differences that affected WOMAN OF THE YEAR when Raquel Welch came in and replaced Bacall. It's all very illuminating and will make you laugh out loud as well. Their post mortems for their flops THE RINK and STEEL PIER, which they consider among their best shows, are not convincing, but their account of work with a sour kvetching Frank Sinatra and a controlling Barbra Streisand have the bitter ring of truth. This is not a particularly light-hearted book but I think anyone who's interested in musical theater will get a charge out of it. I wish there had been more in it about the mysterious ingenue Jill Haworth who, after a string of movies for Otto Preminger, took the Sally Bowles part in CABARET and got crucified for it--and had a "thing" with Sal Mineo (!!!) -- and then left show business. She is one of the most intriguing personalities of the 1960s and Kander and Ebb mention her only briefly (though very sympathetically).

This was a book I wanted. My only comment is this came from Second Run Books and took almost a month to get. John

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