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Give My Regards to the Book

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Abstract

This project is an analysis of the construction of American Musical Theatre. The research for this project has been drawn from direct quotes and writings from Musical Theatre writers, scores and scripts, and from historical books. Reading of these sources reveal principles of Musical Theatre writing which the authors use and the audience expects. This project analyzes how the book, lyrics, and music to a show are written and demonstrates that the writing of Musical Theatre has developed its own unique craft which is grounded in the book.

Keywords

Musical, theatre, theater, music, Broadway, book, script, musicals

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Give My Regards to the Book

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This project is an analysis of the construction of American Musical Theatre. The research for this project has been drawn from direct quotes and writings from Musical Theatre writers, scores and scripts, and from historical books. Reading of these sources reveal principles of Musical Theatre writing which the authors use and the audience expects. This project analyzes how the book, lyrics, and music to a show are written and demonstrates that the writing of Musical Theatre has developed its own unique craft which is grounded in the book.

When Stephen Sondheim was fifteen years old, he had finished writing a musical to be performed at his high school called *By George*. At that time, Sondheim had met Oscar Hammerstein II who became like a second father to the boy. When Sondheim had finished writing his musical, he brought the show to Hammerstein and asked him to tell him what he thought. Hammerstein answered honestly and said, "It's the worst thing that's ever crossed my desk." However, after making this declaration, Hammerstein said, "I didn't say it wasn't talented," and proceeded to take the young Sondheim through the musical and show him moment to moment what was wrong and how it could be fixed. To this day, Sondheim calls that lesson the biggest he has ever learned about writing musical theatre. As Sondheim learned, the process of writing a musical is much like any other creative endeavor and requires a knowledge of specific principles commonly used in the practice. In musical theatre, these principles are all derived from the need to tell the story, which is also called the book. The craft of writing dialogue, lyrics, and music for musical theatre are derived primarily from the book.

Musical theatre has now existed for well over 100 years. Within that time, its structures and conventions have become more and more

dictated by the book. The emphasis upon the book came largely from change in musical theatre brought about by Hammerstein when he introduced the concept of the “musical play” as opposed to the “musical comedy.”¹ Hammerstein changed the perspective of what a musical could be by focusing more on writing plays that told stories with songs rather than just spectacles with entertaining numbers and comedy. Up to this point in time, musicals were typically comedic, romantic stories with songs forced into them. Hammerstein, however, introduced shows focused on more serious material such as racism in *Show Boat*, or shows more driven by the story than ever before, such as *Oklahoma*. Because of Hammerstein’s emphasis on the book, musical theatre as it is known today emerged with all its conventions. This emphasis on the book has persisted even into today. Whenever Sondheim is asked which comes first, the music or the lyrics, his response is the book.² The book of a musical is the foundation from which music and lyrics can be written. Without the book, there is no story. The book is the overarching narrative of a musical. It is not just the dialogue of the show, but also the characters, plot, and structure.³ Before the expectations of music and lyrics can be analyzed, the expectations the audience has for the book must be understood.

The two main components that make up the book before music and lyrics can be added are characters and conflict. First, the main character in a musical must either be larger than life or actively pursue an ambitious goal.⁴ For example, Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof* has a larger than life personality even though his career as a milkman is mundane. His conversations with God are unlike prayers most people are used to hearing and his charisma commands the people of Anatevka (with the exception of his wife) in spite of his being poor. In another example, Finch, from *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*, pursues an ambitious goal by deciding he is going to climb to the top of the corporate ladder while he is just a lowly janitor. The reason the book for a musical must have a character that is larger than life or has an ambitious goal is that music heightens anything it

¹ Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 292.

² Thomas S. Hischak, *Boy Loses Girl: Broadway’s Librettists* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2002), vii.

³ David Spencer, *The Musical Theatre Writer’s Survival Guide* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

accompanies. If a musical was about a character whose goal was simply to have a happy home with his family, the addition of song to the story would only satirize the unfolding events due to the mundane nature of the material. However, when song accompanies a character with a goal which is larger than life, such as Finch's climb to the top of the corporate ladder, the music appropriately heightens what is on stage and feels like it belongs.

Second, musical theatre requires conflict.⁵ Conflict is created by anything or anyone that gets in the way of the main character's pursuit of his or her goal, causing the main character to develop tactics. The introduction of conflict into a story provides direction to the narrative so that the main character cannot simply achieve his goal without any trial along the way. Without conflict, there is no show to watch. Sweeney Todd, for example, is first thwarted in his goal of exacting revenge on the judge for unjustly exiling him. This conflict is an obstacle that requires the character to alter his tactic for pursuing the goal. A tactic is any method the character chooses to use in order to overcome or get around an obstacle. This can be demonstrated by Sweeney Todd who, later in the show, uses his own daughter to lure the judge to his barbershop so he can take revenge. Using his own daughter as bait becomes his tactic in this scene.

Character and conflict come together in order to create a book with drama which can be put to music. The best books in musical theatre introduce the main characters and place them in conflict very quickly so that the audience may become engaged with the plot as soon as possible by seeing how the characters react and adapt to the obstacles thrown their way.⁶ *Into the Woods* is a prime example of this principle. Within the show's first number, all the main characters are introduced and almost immediately given their objective: Cinderella must meet the prince, Jack must sell a cow who is his best friend, Red Riding Hood must deliver her goodies to granny, and the main characters, the Baker and his Wife, must receive an object from each of the other characters in order to reverse a curse which prevents them from having children. This leads to a complex arrangement of interactions which lead to conflict between the characters as each strives toward his or her goal. In

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶ Lehman Engel, *Words with Music: Creating the Broadway Musical Libretto* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), Kindle edition, Ch. 5.

West Side Story the same technique is used, though in reverse. The opening of the show sets the conflict between the Jets and the Sharks while the main characters, Maria and Tony, are introduced afterward.

This use of character goals and conflict leads to character progression which is another expectation for the book. Unlike some other forms which deliver narrative, such as film and nonmusical theatre, musical theatre requires a story which is driven forward by its characters.⁷ Obviously, musical theatre is not the only medium which can tell character-driven stories, but musical theatre is unique in that purely plot-driven stories rarely work in a musical. Plot-driven stories are pushed forward by what happens from moment to moment rather than by how those moments affect the characters. Generally speaking, action movies are an example of plot-driven stories because they push the story forward with what is happening rather than with how the action affects the main character. Plot-driven stories rarely work in musicals because characters can sing, but plot points cannot. A plot point may incite a character to sing, but it is ultimately the character that reacts to a situation and sings. Because of the necessity for characters to have strong goals followed by conflict, musical theatre is character-driven. Throughout the course of a show, the audience must see the character change in some way. As Sweeney Todd is thwarted from achieving his goal, he becomes even more ruthless and bloodthirsty. In *Into the Woods*, when the Baker and his Wife fail to get the materials they need from the other characters, they begin to abandon their ethics and adopt a Machiavellian view. All the change in these characters is due to the conflict which causes them to alter their tactics. Ideally, each scene in a musical ends with dramatic emphasis through the introduction of a new conflict or change in the character and points toward future action.⁸ In a musical, it is primarily the book which provides the conflict necessary to tell a story.

The emphasis in musical theatre upon character-driven plots requires that the book be at least conceived and plotted, if not written, first. Though the dialogue may be written after the music and lyrics, the character arcs and conflicts that make up the book must be determined before any songs can be written. The book is the foundational element upon which every song must be conceived and written.

⁷ Spencer, 31.

⁸ Engel, *Words with Music*, Ch. 4.

As musicals have developed, a number of general guiding principles have emerged for writing the songs. These principles are all rooted in the book-centric approach started by Hammerstein and include basic song categories, song placement, and dramatic function. The songs themselves must be constructed as an intrinsic part in telling the story of the musical.

Though songs in musical theatre can vary greatly in terms of genre and style, they tend to fit into one of three categories: ballad, charm, and comedy songs.⁹ Each one of these three categories helps to tell some specific aspect of the story. Ballads tend to have tuneful, legato melodies and are used to set love songs and soliloquies. Ballads can be heard in songs such as the love duet “All I Ask of You” from *Phantom of the Opera* or in songs like the soliloquy “Many Moons Ago” from *Once upon a Mattress*. Charm songs, on the other hand, tend to have more rhythmic accompaniment and often are used to make the character singing them more likeable. Songs such as “Moving Too Fast” from *The Last 5 Years* demonstrate a charm song. The song’s lively accompaniment and lyric content are designed to introduce and make Jamie a likable character. Lastly, comedy songs are songs which are intended to be humorous. “Prima Donna” from *Phantom of the Opera* is a prime example of a comedy song. Its over-the-top lyrics and exaggerated music serve to create a humorous moment in the show. Though these three distinct categories exist, many of musical theatre’s songs combine aspects of two of them. “Epiphany” from *Sweeney Todd* is a combination of both the ballad and the charm song. “Epiphany” serves as a soliloquy for Sweeney as he laments the loss of his chance to kill the judge, but its rhythmic drive makes it similar in many ways to a charm song, though no one would call Sweeney “charming” in this moment.

Song placement refers to the moments in the show which are set to lyrics and music. When finding the place in a story to put a song, the creators have to think first about where emotion or tension is high enough for the characters to sing and second about where that emotion or tension begins and ends.¹⁰ When songwriters begin searching for places to write songs in a show, they must look through the plot to

⁹ Lehman Engel, *The Making of a Musical: Creating Songs for the Stage* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 6.

¹⁰ Spencer, 70.

decide where the dramatic high points are. Andrew Lloyd-Webber, for example, will begin creating a draft of the score before the dialogue for a show is written by looking at the plot of the story and sketching songs for the moments that stick out to him.¹¹ Once the songwriters have found the dramatic high points, they must decide where within the scene to start and where to end. In order to determine the starting and stopping points of a song within the scene, songwriters have to keep most songs to a single topic.¹² Unlike dialogue, songs come with words and music which makes it potentially more difficult for the audience to follow. Because of this, songwriters have to focus on one aspect of a dramatic scenario if the audience is to understand new information from a song. Additionally, the songwriters must be careful where they place a song within the scene based upon what the audience already knows. If the audience has already been told or shown something in the show, it should not be repeated in song.¹³ For example, if Sweeney Todd had already said “everyone deserves to die” in dialogue before he sang “Epiphany,” the song would have no point. The audience must experience that point of decision in song; otherwise, it is only patronizing them by repeating what they already know.

Musical theatre has developed expectations for a few kinds of structural songs based upon their dramatic function. These songs are the “I want” song, the opening song, and the closing song. These classifications differ from the categories mentioned earlier as these terms are specific to a song’s structural and narrative purpose. For example, the “I want” song could be a comedic, ballad, or charm song as those terms only refer to the basic category and not the dramatic function. The “I want” song typically occurs fairly early in a show. It tells the audience who is the main character and what is his goal.¹⁴ In *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle presents her “I want” song in “Wouldn’t It Be Loverly” as she literally sings, “All I want is a room somewhere/Far away from the cold night air/With one enormous chair/Oh, wouldn’t it be loverly.” Throughout the song, she lists all the things she wants which would be

¹¹ Stephen Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber: The New Musical* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 191.

¹² Spencer, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁴ William Squier and Noel Katz, “Writing I Want Songs for Musicals,” *Musical Writers*, accessed October 31, 2014, <http://www.musicalwriters.com/write/stephen-schwartz/songs/i-want-songs.htm>.

“lovely,” which, in turn, informs the audience that Eliza wants a comfortable life. Another example could even be the reprise of “Belle” from the Disney movie, and later Broadway musical, *Beauty and the Beast*. In the song, Belle declares that she wants to live a life outside of the plans already made for her by those in her provincial village. Opening songs introduce the show and set up everything in the story that will follow and thus are often the last thing written.¹⁵ The opening number can either create or sabotage the proper audience expectation for the show. For instance, when *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was on its pre-Broadway run, the show opened with a song called “Love Is in the Air.” During its run before the show reached Broadway, *Forum* was not doing well with its audiences. However, after the creators changed the opening number to “Comedy Tonight,” the audience was given permission to laugh by the opening and created the proper expectation for the rest of the show. The closing song is as important as the opening for similar reasons. It will be the song the audience remembers most and it will leave the audience with whatever theme the creators emphasize with that song. In the case of *Sunday in the Park with George*, the audience is left with the song “Move On,” which emphasizes the artist’s need to continue moving forward in spite of disappointments and continue creating art.

These general guiding principles for creating songs for musical theatre are based upon the needs of the narrative. These principles have formed and developed as musicals have matured. Knowing what kinds of songs to use, where to place them, and understanding their dramatic function is critical for the musical theatre writer. If the songwriter is to write songs that the audience will understand, he or she must first understand these expectations that the audience holds when it walks into the theater.

Once the placement and function of songs within a show is understood, the songwriters must do what obviously comes next and actually write the songs. However, musical theatre also has its own unique rules of craftsmanship when it comes to the details of lyrics and music. These rules still come from the needs of the narrative as they are designed to deliver information as clearly to the audience as possible. Jason Robert Brown, creator of *The Last 5 Years* and composer for *Parade*, said, “The commercial musical theatre must ask of itself that the audience respond to and respect the work that we’re doing in a way that more

¹⁵ Engel, *Making of a Musical*, 64.

experimental theatre does not have to.”¹⁶ In other words, musical theatre, if it is to be commercially viable, must respect the conventions its audience expects and deliver the material in a way which it can understand. The lyrics and music of a show must be written with the audience in mind so that the narrative of the book may be presented clearly and effectively.

Because of the need to be understood, theatre lyrics often are fairly simple in terms of the amount of material a single song will cover. Songs are heard quickly, and if the audience does not understand the lyric the moment it is heard, the lyric is missed and the audience has lost its place. Since lyrics must be understood the first time they are heard, they must have natural accents and perfect rhymes.¹⁷ Natural accents are the rhythmic settings of words which flow with normal human speech. For example, to set the word “migration” naturally, the songwriters must emphasize the word so it sounds like “mi-gra-tion” when sung. When set as “mi-gration” or as “migra-tion,” the word feels unnatural and sticks out of the music. This natural accent applies further into the actual sentence and phrase structures of a lyric. Perfect rhyme is those rhyming words which not only have the same ending sound, but also have the same emphasis on it. For example, fin and tin are perfect rhymes. However, when words are similar yet different, they are misrhymes such as fin and trim. Musical theatre comes from a tradition of using perfect rhymes, which has persisted today. The use of misrhymes feels awkward in most shows unless their use makes sense within the specific style.

In addition to being written in a natural way, musical theatre's lyrics must be written like a miniature drama with an introduction, development, and resolution.¹⁸ A single song must carry a character or situation from point A to point B. In order for that movement to happen, the song itself must tell the story of how that happens. In *Songs for a New World*, Jason Robert Brown writes many songs which tell a small story. “Stars and the Moon,” for example, tells the story of a woman who wants to be rich, turns down many men until she marries a rich

¹⁶ Jackson R. Bryer and Richard Davison, *The Art of the American Musical: Conversations with the Creators* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 30.

¹⁷ Spencer, 73.

¹⁸ Engel, *Making of a Musical*, 32.

man, and then discovers that she will never have “the moon.” Another example is “Lonely Room” from *Oklahoma*. Within the song, Jud despises who he is and how he has lived and, by the end of the song, swears that he will have a wife. These rules of lyric writing facilitate in writing lyrics which are clear and which continue to tell the story of a show. Both the craft and structure of lyrics is dictated by the needs of the book for the audience to understand the story.

Similarly to lyrics, music in musical theatre is subject to the needs of the audience and the book. In general, the music for a show must be understandable, relate to the character or narrative, and respect the audience. In order for the music to be understandable, musical theatre's melodies must be somewhat memorable.¹⁹ A memorable melody, however, does not necessarily mean that the audience leaves the theater able to whistle a song from the show. Rather, it means that the music is simple enough that the audience can quickly understand the music and whenever it reuses a theme so that they can pay attention to the lyrics and dramatic insinuations made by the music. Additionally, the music must reflect either the characters or the narrative of the show. While this point may seem obvious, the more depth to which a composer can write music in this way, the better the music. Stephen Sondheim, for example, when writing the songs for *Sunday in the Park with George*, invented his own musical system for pointillism which he used for the show.²⁰ The system Sondheim developed was based upon the work of painter Georges Seurat on whom the musical was based. The music in the show often uses rhythmic ideas which suggest dabbing rapidly at a canvas as Seurat paints. Additionally, motifs are often repeated in the music, but in the minor mode. Sondheim wrote these contrasting motifs to reflect the nature of Seurat's pointillist technique in which the eye combines colors to create a new color. Lastly, at the end of the show, the song “Move On” combines parts of motifs from throughout the show suggesting a pointillist approach to the melody.

In addition to writing music which reflects the characters and narrative, songwriters must respect their audience and treat it in a way which makes it feel respected. One way songwriters do this is by using conventions musical theatre audiences understand, like the button. The

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

²⁰ Mark E. Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2010), 93.

button is the small bit of music at the end of a song which signals the audience to clap.²¹ The button is simply the last slam of a chord or conventional series of chords that end a song. By using the button, the songwriters acknowledge the audience's desire to applaud and provides them the opportunity. Jason Robert Brown attributes *Parade's* failure on Broadway partly to the lack of any buttons. The creators of the show, Brown included, purposefully wrote the songs so that the audience had no chance to clap within the first thirty minutes of the show.²² A number of years after the show closed, Brown said that if he and his collaborators had provided the convention of the button and allowed the audience to clap, they likely would have invited their audience into the story with them and might have received a different response on Broadway.

Musical theatre, like any other creative medium, has specific principles of craft which a writer must know. The unique craft of writing the dialogue, lyrics, and music for a musical are derived primarily from the book. Every aspect of how a show is written must be done in service to the story being told. The book must create a character-driven story with conflict to push the narrative forward. The songs in a show must fit the appropriate category, placement, and dramatic function in order to tell the story. The lyrics must be clear and feel natural so that the audience can understand what is being sung. The music must be understandable, relate to the story being told, and respect conventions the audience expects when they come to see a show. As Sondheim learned when he was only fifteen, writing good musical theatre requires a knowledge of the craft and principles of writing a show. These unique principles are derived from the need to tell the story provided by the book. The book is the foundational element from which all dialogue, songs, lyrics, and music are conceived.

²¹ Spencer, 79.

²² Bryer, 32.

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