

The Theatre Song

TYPE (not an exhaustive list)

The Overture -- in olden times, as in Opera, and Operetta, the Overture was a separately composed, self-contained melody meant to get us ready for the action. Its transition to Musical Theatre enabled the composer to tease the audience with 'gems' from the score. And who is not happily teased by one of the greatest overtures in all Musical Theatre: GYPSY.

The Showtune -- (a particular type of Theatre Song, usually with a score full of them, and can appear in any of the forms below)

The Reprise -- a repetition of a song in the show to echo or remind us of the Protagonist's, (or other character's) want or need, or stumbling block.

The Dance Number -- a sung song with inherent need for dance, accomplished in a dance break and while singing. Dance will usually lift a number emotionally, past what it could be on its own.

The "Ballet" -- usually, it is NOT sung, it is danced only and tells a story, illustrates a point of dramatic action, or heightens the emotion of a stage situation.

FORMS

The Opening Number -- the song that gets our attention and lets us know what the show will be about, who the main character(s) is(are), and what we can expect -- we must expect something to happen; either a change or a fulfillment. "I Put My Hand In" from HELLO, DOLLY, give us everything an opening number can have. It explains, character, current existence, and expectations for the future. It sets up the show splendidly as we watch everything that Dolly Levi talks about take shape and play out.

The I Want Song -- explains what the protagonist needs (wants) "In My Own Little Corner" sets up the expectations for Cinderella nearly perfectly, while letting us in on wants, needs, hopes and current situation. It gives us somewhere to work from to either achieve the goal, or fall short.

The Charm Song -- any song which uses humor to convey its message, it can come in any format with any purpose, it is not, however, restricted to purely COMIC numbers, it can merely have a fresh approach that must contain some humor. It should be optimistic, it can be delicate, its music should be rhythmic in nature. The Charm Song, more than any other form, depends on just the right lyric to help convey its message. Maybe it has a unique construction, as well. A good example is "A Puzzlement" from THE KING AND I. Another, "The Sadder But Wiser Girl" from THE MUSIC MAN, "I Whistle A Happy Tune" from THE KING AND I, "The Surrey With the Fringe On Top" from OKLAHOMA. I did not mention MY FAIR LADY, but it has more Charm Songs than any other musical. We owe this term to Lehman Engel. He feels that this type of song is most often able to stand on its own, apart from other comedy songs, which depend on their lyrics.

The Ballad -- usually about loss or hope, it is the LOVE SONG, or TORCH SONG, but it can also be a narrative, a soliloquy, or a character song. Rodgers and Hammerstein popularized, if not invented, the "Conditional Love Song" in "People Will Say We're In Love" from "OKLAHOMA, and "If I Loved You" from CAROUSEL.

The Production Number -- A large group of singers and dancers will usually perform this number. “*Mame*” and “*Hello, Dolly*” really typify this form, but there are many other worthy entrants as well.

The 11-o’clock Number -- A specific placement of a song that leads us to the resolution of the musical. Its name derives from the nearness of its positioning as related to a clock-face containing 12 numbers -- just before the ending. Today it can be sung by any number of performers, but classically, it was a solo signifying that the Protagonist finally got it! It is usually shaped around the talents and strengths of the original “Star” who sang it. But then it lifts any performer who attempts it. It allows authors to supply a late-in-the-show “Lift”. “*Sit Down You’re Rockin’ The Boat*” from GUYS AND DOLLS, “*Anything You Can Do*” from ANNIE GET YOUR GUN, “*So Long, Dearie*” from HELLO, DOLLY!, “*Send In The Clowns*” from A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC, and “*Being Alive*” from COMPANY, are all excellent examples of solos that occupy the “late” spot. “*Krupke*” from WEST SIDE STORY, is an example of a group 11-o’clocker. A “*Ballet*” in CAROUSEL, and “*The Small House of Uncle Thomas*” are other group versions of this form, accomplished through dance.

The Musical Scene -- Song and Dialog interspersed from the beginning to the end of the scene. “*If I Loved You*” (a conditional Love song) from CAROUSEL, is a near perfect example of this form. “*Pore Jud Is Daid*” from OKLAHOMA, is a comic musical scene.

The Comic Number -- its inclusion is just to make us laugh, sometimes as a break to previous action, sometimes placed in line to heighten the action. “*Gee, Officer Krupke*” is a fine example of a song used to lighten the moment and distract us from the drama, while still focusing on character and attitude. “*I Cain’t Say No*” from OKLAHOMA! is not just a funny song as the last phrase of each lyric stanza drops a bomb, but it beautifully outlines Ado Annie’s character and philosophy. There are two major forms of this song: the Short Joke, usually using a for bar phrase to set up, the extension and the punch line; and the Long Joke, which may take the entire verse or even song to deliver the punch line, but the action and story and set up keep you involved until the end. “*Adelaide’s Lament*” from GUYS AND DOLLS is a brilliant long form comic song.

The Rhythm Song -- propelled by a regular, musical beat. “*Luck Be A Lady*” from GUYS AND DOLLS or “*I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair*” from SOUTH PACIFIC are excellent examples of this form.

DEFINITIONS

- Introduction -- begins the song, but not all songs have an intro
- Verse (Part A) -- usually is the first sequence of musical phrase in a song, free in form, it sets up the subject and is melodically secondary to the Chorus
- Refrain (Part A) -- another name for the Verse.
- Chorus (Part B) -- usually the second sequence of musical phrase, but sometimes a song leads with the Chorus. This part introduces and develops the main theme.
- Release (Part B) -- another name for the Chorus, which is meant to release us from the melody of the Verse/Refrain.
- Bridge (Part B) -- yet another name for the Chorus, which is meant to bridge us back to the melody of the Verse/Refrain.

CONSTRUCTION

- Verse/Refrain (A) - Chorus/Release/Bridge (B) - Verse/Refrain (A)
- A-B (original Classic), coming from the Viennese Operetta, adopted by most of the early Musical Theatre composers prior to, and slightly into, The Jazz Age, OR
- A-B-A, an intermediate construction, still sometimes used, OR
- A-A-B-A (Classic now) is the most satisfactory of the constructions as it gives completion to the form as the most prominent (A) is repeated 3 times and the (B) then gives release (relief) from it.

Each A or B:

8 bar phrase -- *Bali Ha'i* from SOUTH PACIFIC -- *It's Today!* from MAME

16 bar phrase

32 bar phrase -- *Melody* from Maury Yeston's PHANTOM has one of the best rising statements in the business

Each Phrase, no matter how many bars:

statement -- *restatement* -- *rising statement* -- *2nd restatement*, make up one Verse or one Refrain, or One Chorus, or one Release, or one Bridge

Bali Ha'i has two 4/4 measures as each statement, needing four statements to complete the 8 measure phrase. *It's Today!* is similar. *Someone To Watch Over Me* is also constructed in this manner, as are most of the songs from the 20s, 30s, and 40s.

Melody has eight waltz-time measures that comprise each phrase and each phrase perfectly fits the statement-restatement-rising statement-2nd restatement model. Textbook.

THE MUSICAL PROGRAM

This is the job of the entire creative team, but primarily falls on the Composer and the writer of the Book(script). Ballads should not follow ballads. There should not be several production numbers coming one after another. A show full of comedy songs, becomes a comic revue, not a musical. If every scene is a musical scene, there is no variety. Setting up the musical program of your show (and it is different for every musical) can help to assure that, as you mix the various forms and types of songs available to you, you will have a satisfactory program of varied music by the end of the show. The beats in each show will be different, hence the need for a different song program for each show.

HOW DO YOU BEGIN COMPOSING THE MUSIC

I know that I have approached this in several different ways, sometimes very consciously and deliberately, other times quite by accident. I love it when a melody is thrown at me out of the cosmos by whatever muse is there. For some it is God, for some it is not. It doesn't matter, as long as you acknowledge the source, for that acknowledgement lends a certain perpetuity to the process, and the melodies keep coming. I have awoken from mid-sleep with a fully formed melody in my head. I get up and write it down, thankful for the happening. Do NOT ignore these gifts. Sometimes, it is just a snatch of a melody that comes at me, leaving me the rest of it to discover at the piano. I love this, too, because I am searching for the creative input and using my skill and talent to assist the Muse.

Sometimes, I get an idea for a musical motif. it may be a bass riff, or a rhythmic lick expressed in some sort of

musical figure. I write that down. Entire songs have developed from these outward musical experimentations. Sometimes it takes a long time before the lick develops into something useable. Just keep at it.

It is sometimes easier to accomplish after a long collaborative session with your co-writers. You have invoked the Muse, invited her in through discussion. Now -- sit back and listen. There is profound solution in silence. Don't be afraid to adjust the little things, including melody, phrasing, and accompaniment -- especially accompaniment. That is what gives your music an emotional subtext, much like the underlying meaning (subtext) in dialog. The craft of the composer, lyricist and playwright are very similar, just using different media.

I know that some composers write a lot of the songs based on the 'Scenario with songs' put together by the Book Writer. (Or maybe this is put together by the entire Creative Team?) This can be very valuable, but it will always be malleable. The scenario, like the future script, is not written in stone. So, you compose a melody for a moment in the play that is cut. So, what -- another song in the trunk. I have a very large trunk. I once had the pleasure of working with Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, authors of "The Fantasticks", "I Do! I Do!", and "110 In The Shade." They mentioned that they had written over 150 songs -- music and lyrics -- for "110 In The Shade." They only used 25 musical numbers, plus an occasional 5 or so because of who is producing the show, or who is starring in the show.

Besides, we love this work! Writing a song is one of the greatest joys, for when someone sings it and it works, your heart is full; you got it right.

We must remember that what we create has an intended life beyond our piano, or our office, our studio. It is intended to be performed -- in a theatre -- in front of an audience -- who just may love it as much as you do.

by C. Michael Perry

© 2018 by C. Michael Perry ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

May be used in the classroom for educational purposes.

NEXT TIME: The Theatre Lyric