

Paving the Path for a New Theatre Musical (The Complete Journey from Concept to Curtain Call)

Introduction: The American Musical is a highly collaborative art form and the collaboration extend far beyond the book, the music and the lyrics. Keep in mind, as you review the steps below, that you will be collaborating with someone at every step. Initially your collaborator may be a writing partner or a dramaturgical guide or sounding board. Later as the initial draft progresses, all the pertinent collaborators should be present at every discussion. Until the initial draft is completed to the satisfaction of the creative team, no outside opinion should be solicited or entertained. The most essential skill needed to collaborate successfully is the ability to respect your collaborators. Artistic differences will occur and may be extremely heated, but without mutual respect the project is likely doomed.

The Journey

1. **Idea:** up to three narrative paragraphs basically outlining the beginning, middle and end of the idea, including language of time, place and style – can be used as a pitch to attract collaborators if none exist in the beginning.
2. **The Treatment:** The bookwriter their collaborator(s) discuss the idea and evolve a more detailed treatment, possibly 3 – 5 narrative pages to tell the story and define the major characters in the telling.
3. **Character Bios:** The bookwriter writes an in depth character profile of each of the major characters, making adjustments as the creative team reads and comments on the work.
4. **Outline:** The bookwriter creates a scene-by-scene outline. Each scene includes the who, what, when, where, why of the action in the scene and points forward to the next or a future scene in some way. There must be cause-and-effect relationships between the actions of the characters, not merely a chronicle of events (i.e. not; this happens, then this happens, then this happens – rather this happens, and as a result this happens which causes etc.
5. **Feedback System.** Once the team agrees on the outline they create a pact of silence. Talk to nobody outside the team (team could include writers, a director, a music director, a producer, an actor – whatever) because at this very vulnerable juncture outside opinion is poison. It is time for the team to close in and get the first draft done.
6. **First draft of the book:** With a good outline and good character bios, the bookwriter should be able to turn out a draft of the book in 2 or 3 days – maybe 60 – 90 pages of dialogue. There should be no notes about songs or music in this draft. Of course the bookwriter will have song ideas but these should be kept in the bookwriter's

margins, unseen by anybody else on the team. (The composer and lyricist also have song ideas based on the outline, but there should be no songwriting happening beyond a quatrain of lyric or an 8-bar sketch of a potential melody – and these notes should not be shared with the bookwriter at this point.)

7. **Song Spotting:** Now the team assembles and begins detailing song possibilities. Everyone on the team will have song ideas. Each idea needs to be discussed, merits and flaws, until the team agrees – yes, here is a song in scene 2 that fits the project, fulfills the needs of the character(s) involved and moves the show forward. Once an idea is agreed upon, the songwriters need to write the song.
8. **Integrating the songs:** Once a song is written and the team feels it “belongs” in the show, the bookwriter needs to revise the scene, writing dialogue that now not only tells the nuts and bolts of the plot but also leads directly and unwaveringly to the song – no left turns on the way – it should be a runaway freight train heading for the song.
9. **Table readings:** Once there are 6 or more songs, the team should assemble and read through the current draft. The songwriters should come to the reading prepared to perform the songs live or with recordings to play at the table so the team can assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the songs, the way the songs are integrated, and whether they are doing what the team feels is the job of keeping the audience engaged. It may take 3 or 4 table reads with the team before a complete draft exists. Each draft will contain the revisions based on the team agreements at the last draft – revisions in the book and the score.
10. **Complete draft table read:** Get some actors in to read the book while the songwriting team performs or plays a recording of the songs. See what the actors think a9this should be a cold reading – no preparation, no audience except the actors and possibly some trusted theatre people. The team may feel the need to do this several times. Caution: Never use the same group of actors and auditors, per Howard Ashman: If you took their advice they will think its better, if you didn’t, they still won’t like it! Howard told my workshop in LA they had several table readings of Little Shop, made adjustments after each one after he and Alan discussed the comments they received and decided what they needed to do – and then when rehearsals began for the off-off-Broadway debut, they hardly changed a comma before the show opened.
11. **Concert Reading:** Actors and directors are paid for this step, and a theatre-savvy audience is invited in an effort to find the right producer or producing team to take the show to the next level. There may be several concert readings, which sometimes function as backers’ auditions when there is a producer involved. These reading may be in a theatre, a rehearsal hall or a living room.

12. **Workshop Production:** This is an expensive step and is usually taken by a producer who sees serious commercial potential in the show. It might also be a smaller regional theatre who feels the show might tour well. Workshops are generally focused on the material, not the stagecraft (i.e., minimal scenery, sometimes only cubes and benches, a suggestion of costumes, minimal choreography, basic lighting plot). This is very useful to the writers because there will be time in rehearsal to make changes to the material and there will be several performances to help gauge the relative audience engagement/lack of engagement.
13. **Class A Productions** (both commercial and non-profit): This could be off-Broadway, on Broadway or in a large regional theatre as a pre-Broadway engagement with financial enhancement from the potential Broadway producer. General this level either defines a show for its entire future, but occasionally it leads to further work (Kiss of the Spider Woman for example). Sometimes this is the end of the road, especially the enhanced regional theatre pre-Broadway route. This is because, most of the important Broadway players will see the regional theatre production and may determine that the show will not work on Broadway, and when the regional production closes, the show is packed away and seldom if ever seen again.
14. **Leasing:** The Original producer and backers have some rights to the show's earnings once the show is listed in the catalogues that serve schools, community theatres and smaller theatre companies around the world. Generally a show makes a lot of money from leasing to these outlets if it has had a major success somewhere, especially Broadway – although these days Broadway successes tend to last so long it takes years for a show to get to the catalogues whereas in the past it would happen as soon as the Broadway production and subsequent national tour closed. Nowadays shows tour while still on Broadway and it can be decades before schools and community theatres are able to perform the shows. Some outlets, however, especially in the K-12 system, lease a lot of shows nobody ever heard of and it can be very lucrative. This is not part of the writers journey unless the writer is focusing on school or community theatre outlets.

Are you ready to write? Here are the criteria I use to determine if writers are capable of finishing a well-crafted project. Generally if people cannot answer these questions I recommend further study before taking on the task of writing a musical for the stage because it is difficult at best and heart-breaking along the way. It's important to have command of your crafts.

ADAPTATIONS

Bookwriter questions you ought to be able to answer with a resounding “Yes!”

1. Can you write a simple declarative sentence? An interrogative sentence? A metaphor?
2. Are you comfortable with theatrical truth as opposed to literal truth? Especially important if you are adapting a story you are personally attached to in some way, a biography of a family member, an event you personally attended etc. The “real” story may be literally true but not function dramaturgically.
3. Are you able to tell a good joke at a cocktail party, build the setup and deliver the punchline?

ORIGINAL STORIES (not adaptations)

Bookwriter questions you ought to be able to answer with a resounding “Yes!”

1. Have you ever taken a playwriting class?
2. Have you ever written a play and seen it performed, even if only in a staged reading?
3. Can you tell a story in three sentences, one each to faithfully indicate 1) the beginning, 2) the middle and 3) the end?

Be honest. If the bookwriter is not a bona fide playwright, do not attempt to write an original musical. Choose adaptation instead.

Lyricist Questions you ought to be able to answer with a resounding “Yes!”

1. Have you ever written a poem or a song lyric (other than a parody of a popular song)?
2. Are you aware of conversational rhythms – the way the lilt of a sentence or phrase impacts its meaning? (Are you talking to ME? Are YOU talking to me? Are you TALKING to me?)
3. Do you know the difference between true rhyme and near or slant rhyme?
4. Do you understand that musical phrases begin and end within a song, that music uses a kind of punctuation to indicate periods and commas in speech?

Compositional Questions you ought to be able to answer with a resounding “Yes!”

1. Can you create a piano-vocal score? That is, three connected staves in which you write the vocal line, the music for the left hand and the music for the right hand, each on a different staff? If not, can you create a complete lead sheet with language that indicates the appropriate “feel” of the music?
2. Do you play an instrument? If you play piano, you can manage to write a piano-vocal score. If not, you may play guitar in which case you should be able to create a lead sheet. If you play a single note instrument, this may be more difficult and you may need more training.
3. Have you ever studied music? Keyboard harmony? Walter Piston?

These questions are important. You may be a person with a very good ear for melody, but that does not make you a composer. Without a musical background you will be unable to create original musical ideas. Music is more than melody, and until a writer can control the melody, the bass and the important movement of the inner voices, that writer cannot claim to be a composer.

Songwriters, however, do not need to be classically trained musicians. Many were not. Irving Berlin comes to mind, and he managed to write *As Thousands Cheer*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and *Call Me Madam*, among others. He also wrote popular songs in the 20th Century that include *Blue Skies*, *Easter Parade*, *Puttin’ On The Ritz*, *White Christmas*, etc. He played piano by ear, using the key of F Sharp so he played mostly on the black keys. He owned self-transposing pianos so he could play in that key and have the music come out in whatever key the singer needed.

The questions are not meant to intimidate you – they are meant to let you know composing for the theatre is a serious business.