

Directing Basics for Musical Theatre

by Jim Sohre



Jim Sohre

Where might a novice begin when staging a musical for the first time? A primary consideration when embarking on producing it should be to know when it was written, in order to know staging conventions of the time. Will you embrace them? Can you meet the de-

mands? Or must you depart from them, given your resources at hand?

Other questions posed by studying the premiere stagings:

Are there "signature moments" to deal with, like the floating hands from *Pippin*, *Will Rogers Follies*' minstrel number, or *Bye Bye Birdie*'s telephone number? Special casting demands like the quartet for *The Music Man*, or the operatic quintet for *A Little Night Music*?

Assess the production requirements: multiple sets, unit set, special effects? If your show requires a Kansas house to be carried by a tornado to Oz, can you accommodate the scenery and changes required without compromising the look or pace of the show?

A musical show "lives" on the music, so realistically assess the musical demands. Does it have extensive choral work? Wide-ranging solos? Does it need an orchestra, specific instruments like a title *Fiddler*, or actor/musicians like *Pump Boys and Dinettes* to make its effect? Is playback (prerecorded music or computer generated music) legally available and is it an option?

Assemble an effective team of collaborators, once you have documented the requirements. For most major musicals you will need a Stage Manager, Assistant Director, Choreographer, Music Director/Orchestra Conductor/Pianist, and a team of Designers:

Costume, Lighting, Set, Props, Sound, Special Effects.

Before rehearsals begin, make clear work assignments and outline expectations. Collectively define a vision and timetable. Maintain an understanding of how the parts will fit together. Keep the leadership chain and progress reviews current with frequent production meetings. Lack of communication is one big "avoidable" problem in the collaborative effort required to mount a musical.

Regarding casting, is it an open audition process or are you pre-casting any role(s)? For star-driven shows like *Evita*, *Mame*, *Ragtime*, it is usually important to know that you have "someone" who can play the part, and who may show up for auditions. If you do pre-cast, be up front before auditions. If after tryouts you are still shy a leading actor or two, the title is a money-maker you need, and the rest of the cast is solid, it is likely worth your while to push to fill the other couple of roles. However, if you know you can't cast it adequately, it is probably wiser to choose another show considering the people who did audition.

Plan on six weeks to stage a musical. Start with the desired end result (opening night, first dress, etc.) and work the schedule backward to get there on time. Consider the rehearsal needs of each element, performers and technical, determine a goal for each rehearsal, and use people's time well and efficiently.

Don't wear out participants with too intense scheduling or inadequate rehearsal time. Allot enough time to work out special challenges, and if you are ahead of schedule, you can always give everyone a night off.

Musical considerations include teaching and coaching the singers. The key of the published score is what showed off the original cast member's talent. Don't be afraid to transpose songs and make minor re-writes to accommodate each person's unique vocal range, and to maintain the character and spirit of the song/moment.

Above all else, do everything you can to make the singer comfortable and confident of the range, the style, the cues and entrances, and the relationship of the singing voice to the speaking voice. As regards group numbers, consider whether unison singing may be better than attempting part singing.

The pianist and/or conductor needs to know how the singer has been performing the song in rehearsal. If you have a separate conductor, (s)he should first conduct along with the pianist who is familiar with tempi and cues. Nothing is worse than having this critical collaborator come in production week and undermine the performers' confidence by doing the music differently than they have learned.

In technical areas, as you develop floor plans, be sure you don't over-design. Movement of scenery and

★ . . . Discover the Magical World of . . . ★

Classics On Stage!

Exceptional Playscripts For Young Audiences

Quality stageplays created with humor and distinctive style

By Shubert Award-Winning Playwright Michele L. Vacca

Professionally Developed & Performance Proven

- Visit Our Online Catalogue -

www.ClassicsOnStage.com - 1 773 989-0532

pieces will impact traffic management of actors, and pace of the show. Introduce scenic elements and furniture as soon as possible to discover problems early enough to be able to solve them.

Are you going to use amplification or not? Miked singers became the norm on Broadway in the 60's. Shows post-1965 have built-in orchestral balance issues for un-miked singers, so plan solutions and compromises that will allow the singing to be heard.

Staging the show means creating illusions and making them your own. It helps to ask again, what kind of show is it, and where does it fit in performance history? [See "Look to the History of Musical Theatre" on page 23] If there are stage directions in the published script, black them out! They may have worked for Yul Brynner and Gertie Lawrence in *The King and I* at the St. James in 1951, but you have a whole new cast, design, and facility.

As with a play, allow time for table work where the entire cast starts by defining their characters, understanding the scenes, and learning how the whole show will fit together before fragmented rehearsals begin. As you pull the various elements apart and put them back together, always know where the focus is.

Characters' opening numbers usually give a solid foundation of who they are and where they are going. Ensure

actors keep acting when singing or dancing (accents, physical traits), and time musical transitions and cues in support of the pace of the drama.

Explore how a song moves the scene, or comments on it. While the movement should reflect the text or sub-text, don't act out the words (we can — hopefully — hear the words). While there are "busy" songs like "Where's My Shoe" in *She Loves Me*, unless the action is required by the text, be judicious and adhere to the adage: "Don't just do something, stand there." Harold Prince raised this stasis to a signature staging device with "Ladies Who Lunch" (*Company*) and "Would I Leave You?" (*Follies*).

Good Housekeeping note: a quick fix to make shows immediately better without changing a thing is to make sure there is a good "button" on the musical numbers. Button: a visual and/or musical "punctuation" at the end of the song which cleanly ends the musical moment and cues the audience to applaud. As applause wanes, the actor(s) breaks out of the pose and blends back into the scene. For group numbers, cast should be clear about who/what signals for them to break the pose.

A final tip: bows are the last impression the audience has of the show. Tableaux are fine, or doing them in character, or just plain bows, but keep them clean, fast-paced, and well-rehearsed.

Good shows for beginners?

The musicals of the Golden Age have large casts, but usually a manageable size of principals, with separate units of singers and dancers. If you are a strong leader, heading a team with well-defined division of labor, and can meet the technical requirements, it is hard to go wrong with well-known classics.



Small scale shows can be deceptively "simple" and may rely on strong star-quality performances (*I Do, I Do*), delicate and tricky styles (*The Fantasticks*), or concepts which require singers who play instruments (*A Day in Hollywood — A Night in the Ukraine*). But, if you have the right performers, they can be rewarding and effective.

Musical revues require Pace, Personality, and Presentation.

Usually a string of songs and/or a series of skits, related thematically or not, they often highlight the work of a composer/lyricist. Some published revues work beautifully as theatre (*Ain't Misbehavin'*), others less so (*The World Goes 'Round*), and some are quite weak (*Eubie*). All need strong song stylists who can get inside a tune, a solid accompaniment, clever production elements, and an eye for variety and pace.

Concept shows are hardest for novices since they require an impressive sense of directorial style, and a unique creative point of view since the material was devised to act as a springboard for creativity. That said, among shows that are frequently done successfully by inventive directors are *Pippin*, *Godspell*, *Evita*, and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. If you have an itch to put your stamp on a piece that will allow a lot of freedom for you to make it your own, these are top picks. ■

Jim Sobre has directed and music directed numerous musicals. He is the Army Europe Command Entertainment (Theatre and Music) Director in Heidelberg, Germany and the Region X Rep on the AACT Board.



www.customticket123.com