

4. The Inside Dope

("The Gentleman Is A Dope")

In This Lesson

- *Content in the book of a musical and why every beat of a scene should relate to the scene's emotional center.*
- *Content in the score and why a complete piano-vocal score is important to defining the feel of each song in the show.*
- *Content in the lyrics and how to keep the character(s) in the moment of the play and focused on the topic of each song.*

Overview

What should a musical be about? What sings?

- A barber who slits peoples' throats – *Sweeney Todd*
- A male chauvinist king asking a female English schoolteacher to help bring his primitive country into the modern world by teaching his children – *The King And I*
- An elocution teacher who claims he can turn a flower girl into a duchess – *My Fair Lady*
- A white boy who falls in love with a Puerto Rican girl and then kills her brother – *West Side Story*
- A flamboyant woman who raises her nephew, wanting him to be adventuresome when he wants to be traditional -*Mame*
- A cowboy who wants to take a girl to a box social - *Oklahoma*
- A provincial girl from Little Rock has misgivings about marrying a French plantation owner in the pacific islands because he was once married to a native woman – *South Pacific*
- A pair of recent graduates who are not friends are sent on a mission. *The Book of Mormon*

All of these ideas have been at the root of successful Broadway shows, although many of them might be rejected out of hand as ideas, per se. It's not the idea, it's what the writers *and the production* do with the idea that makes a show succeed.

The song that accompanies this chapter, *The Gentleman Is A Dope*, by Rodgers and Hammerstein, is from the musical *Allegro*. I chose it because it sticks to its topic (the gentleman) and illuminates the character who sings it (the gentleman doctor's nurse/secretary.) The song tells a story without being narrative – listen to the lyric to see what I mean. If you have a copy of the libretto, listen to the song in that context and it will be an even stronger example of this effect.

Content in the Book

There are some parameters that are common to most musicals. The form prospers when the story is simple rather than complex. Musicals are more like screenplays and short stories in this regard. They are single effect stories, unlike novels that have a tendency to be complex and convoluted in their plots, often involving several sets of characters. Certainly some novels have been the source for successful musicals: *Showboat*, *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*. But a much greater number of successful shows have been about a single event or a single relationship, like the ideas we discussed.

This is not to say the *plot* cannot be complex. In fact, the lighter the story, the more complicated the plot tends to be. In more serious shows, the plot tends to be simple. In *West Side Story*, for instance, boy meets girl, there's a dance at the gym, a rumble that ends in death, a planned escape that ends in death. Not a lot of complications in the plot beyond the racism that causes Anita to lie and make Tony think Maria is dead rather than on her way to keep their appointment to run away.

In *Oklahoma*, the plot is similarly simple, yet universal and important. Laurey would never toy with Jud's feelings if she knew how deep they went. When she accepts a date to the box social with him, it is only to rile Curly. This quickly becomes a matter of life or death for her, and Curly has to kill Jud to keep the worst from happening.

Yet, in *The Boy Friend*, a frothy boy-meets-girl story, absolutely nothing like death is going to happen. The show is very light weight. Consequently, the plot is farcical and complicated. If a juggler is juggling machetes sharp enough to cut paper falling through the air, he only needs three of them to hold our attention. But if he's juggling ping-pong balls, he has to juggle six or eight to keep it interesting.

Whether the plot is simple or complicated, the story will be told in a series of scenes. Each scene, like the show itself, must have a beginning, middle and end. The endings of scenes, however, are not conclusive. The ending of a scene completes a moment or beat of the play, but does not come to a halt. It leaves a door open for further action, or flat out promises further action. Scene endings raise questions in the mind of the audience. The trick is to predetermine

what those questions should be and then write the scene so the audience asks the right ones.

When one character ends a scene by making a decision, the audience usually asks, “now what’s the other person going to do?” When the scene ends with an event that requires a decision from the character, but before the character takes action, the question is “What is the character going to do about this?”

Many other questions can power the forward motion of a show: Will he get there in time to save her? Will she find out who he really is? Will her mother prevent him from seeing her? Will she tell him the truth? As long as these are the questions that will be answered later in the show, everything is fine. The purpose in raising the questions is to keep the audience interested. It goes wrong when the audience asks a question that is not going to be answered. The unanswered question gnaws at the audience. People start thinking, “Are we ever going to find out if he won the poker game or not?” instead of focusing on the action of the play, where, it turns out, winning the poker game is not relevant. Answer the questions, or make them go away by not raising them to begin with. Period.

Another way to keep the show moving is to give signposts along the way as to where it is going. One character says to another, “I’ll meet you at Chez Femmes at midnight.” Now the audience is looking forward to seeing this place, and when the set of Chez Femmes appears they will assume it’s midnight or thereabouts. This pointing forward in the action is standard fare in the musical theatre. It’s a road map for the audience, and the audience is used to it. Beware. Never point to a location or an event that is not going to occur. Audiences will not forgive you for it. Can you imagine *Hello, Dolly* without the scene at Harmonia Gardens? *West Side Story* without the dance at the gym? *Les Miserables* without the barricade?

Every scene must have a beginning, middle and end. Every scene must point forward in the action in some way, however small. It’s not unusual for the whole show to be pointing forward to an event we know is coming. We may want to see this event (*Oklahoma*), or dread it (*Sweeney Todd*), but if we know it’s coming we will wait for it. No matter what happens during *Titanic – The Musical*, we are waiting for the ship to sink.

Each part of a scene, or “beat,” presents an opportunity to reinforce what the scene is about. The conversation may drift from topic to topic as language leads the characters from one idea to the next. However, at least one character in the scene is going to be after something, and no matter what topic comes up in the conversation, he or she is going to try to achieve that objective. How to write these moments or beats is further complicated by the dynamics of the moment. Who knows what? Does the audience know what Curly wants in the first scene? Does Laurey know? Does Aunt Eller know? What people know and what they

want other people to know about their desires dictates what they will say, what the topic of conversation will be and what turns the action may take.

If a character has a secret agenda that the audience knows about, this creates one kind of tension. If the audience doesn't know the secret, the scene becomes a puzzle for everybody, and this creates a different kind of tension.

Whatever happens in the scene it must somehow relate to and contribute to the ultimate emotional high point of the scene. There may be histrionics along the way, but those heightened moments must somehow be preparing us for what follows. It is not always constantly rising action during a scene. Action and tension rise and fall as the moments dictate, as the action gets closer to or further from a character's agenda.

Let's examine the beats of a scene from the second act of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro*. The scene is set in the foyer of Dr. Joe Taylor's upscale home where a cocktail party is brimming with some of his more wealthy and influential patients.

1. Emily interrupts a cocktail party at her boss Dr. Joe's home to call his attention to an x-ray she believes shows a problem the doctor may have overlooked..
2. Joe enters, bringing her a highball which she declines and she shows him the discrepancy in the x-ray when his wife Jenny calls him to return to the party to attend to his wealthy clients.
3. Jenny offers to stay with Emily so Joe can return to the party which he does, in order to appease Mrs. Lansdale, a patient worth 20 million dollars, an insomniac who might be a sponsor of a new wing at the hospital..
4. As he returns to the party, Joe decides he should take a closer look at the x-ray and asks Emily to leave it with him.
5. Emily apologizes to Jenny for interrupting the party, acknowledging somewhat ruefully how important it is to cater to wealthy clients.
6. Jenny admits her husband is not always practical in these matters – and Emily notes that Joe is a “softy.”
7. Jenny pushes her criticism of Joe further, saying he often attends to the little things and ignores the big things, but Emily ironically assures her she feels Joe is learning fast. She downs the drink Joe brought her in a single swallow and leaves quickly, clearly upset.
8. Trying unsuccessfully to catch a cab in the rain, Emily sings “The Gentleman Is A Dope.”ⁱ

Much is left unsaid in these beats, but this much is clear: Emily harbors feelings for Joe and she doesn't like Jenny (Joe's wife) a whole lot. As Emily criticizes the gentleman for being a dope, it becomes clearer and clearer how much she cares for him. At the end, when she gives up trying to hail a taxi and decides to walk in the rain, we realize she is willing to settle for second-best. Lots of story

material and lots of character in the song, which is not at all narrative. Rather, it is a single woman's musings about a man. This is important because the audience has seen Dr. Joe become enslaved by his wife's ambition to the point that he has forgotten his own humble beginnings and his desire to be like his father, and help people in need. The audience empathizes with Emily because the audience also wants Dr. Joe to wake up and get real.

Relating each beat of the scene to the emotional center of the scene is an important skill for the bookwriter to develop.

Content in Music

People usually have an emotional response to music. One piece of music makes us feel nostalgic, another makes us sad, yet another is thrilling. This emotional reaction is seldom related to the music, per se. More likely we associate the music with an event or time in our lives and it is this association that evokes the feeling. This is because music, by itself, has the power to evoke emotions, but no means of specifying the emotion.

There is no lexicon of music that says a minor seventh chord with a flatted fifth played against the sixth tone of the scale will make people feel sad or happy or angry or excited. Music doesn't work that way.

It is only when music and words happen together that the emotion can be specified. And when the song occurs in the context of a musical, the context itself can help to intensify the emotional response. The words in the context of the moment create a specific emotional reality. Later, only the music is needed to evoke a specific response because we can remember the original moment and feel accordingly. When the music of a happy moment is reprised in a sad beat, we will feel *sadder* because we remember how happy this person once was.

You have probably heard the apocryphal story about Mrs. Oscar Hammerstein and Mrs. Jerome Kern at a tea party. The hostess pointed out Mrs. Kern while whispering to Mrs. Hammerstein, "That's Mrs. Jerome Kern. Her husband wrote Ol' Man River." Mrs. Hammerstein replied, "Oh, no. My husband wrote Ol' Man River. Her husband wrote (singing) dah dah **dah**-dah. ."

The story is, of course, much too good to be true, but it illustrates the point. The words make the music mean something specific. And once the words and music are heard together, the meaning can be evoked by the music alone.

Remember that the composer is a dramatist first, telling a story. It is essential for the composer to get inside the mind and heart of the character to find that character's music at any given moment in the story. What is the character feeling? Why? What kind of music will let us know what's going on inside the character? Is this a place where the music needs to underline the emotion of the

moment or make an attempt to cover it up? Most importantly, if you are the composer, what is the music you hear when you think about this character in this moment? That's what you need to write.

All the musical tools will come into play whether the moment is light or dark, carefree or serious: Melody, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, form, and orchestration. Many songwriters think of composition as a melody line supported by harmonic progressions; others think of a song as an interesting chord progression over which a melody can be placed. This is not the whole job, however. The music has vertical components, yes – the melody notes and their attendant harmonies. But the music has horizontal components beyond the melody line. The base line and the movement of the inner voices creates the sound of a song and makes it unique. Many melodies can be sung to any given chord progression, and there are many different ways to harmonize a single melody line. If the composer does the complete job, however, there is only one way for the music to sound.

Most people have heard the song “Happy Days Are Here Again,” and most of us think of it as a sprightly tune heard at a political rally or some other celebratory occasion. Most of us have also heard Barbra Streisand's landmark recording of the song where the tune is played like a ballad, with long extended notes evoking something very different. Same words, same tune, different “feeling.” If you looked at a lead sheet (melody line only with chord symbols written over the notes) you wouldn't necessarily know which version of the song to play.

Only a piano vocal score with complete vertical and horizontal information about the music that supports the vocal line can tell the pianist exactly what to play, how fast to play it, and whether it is to be bouncy or smooth. If you are a songwriter who does not play the piano, you should begin now to learn the rudiments of a piano vocal score. If you are a pianist but are traditionally disinclined to take the time to “write out” the piano vocal score, train yourself now to do it right away, at least making a sketch of the piano part showing the important musical decorations that help define the feel of the song.

If you are not a pianist: find a song in the standard musical theatre literature that has a similar “feel” to the song you are writing. Listen to the original cast recording of that song. Purchase or borrow a copy of the vocal selections from that show. Read the piano reduction of the score as you listen to the song. See how the music you hear in the orchestra is suggested by the piano part. Use similar pianistic devices in your piano vocal score.

The mistake most non-pianists make in trying to write a piano vocal score is to write too much music. That is, they ask the pianist to play too many notes at one time, often in configurations that ten fingers simply can't accommodate. Sometimes all that is needed is a base note and a countermelody or a single

chord tone, usually the third or the seventh tone of the chord because these are the notes that define the tonality.

Think simplicity rather than simplistic-ness. A piece of music is simple when the composer chooses to make it so, but simplistic when it is limited by the composer's musical understanding. One does not need to have studied at a conservatory to become an effective musical theatre composer, but this does not excuse the novice composer from learning everything within reach about composition. Those who have not already done so should plan to study Harmony and Music Notation at the very least. Courses are available at most community colleges in the United States, and at many private music schools, even some online schools like the Dick Grove School Without Walls, which I recommend highly. Check it out at www.dickgrove.com.

Once you have written a musical you will want to have it performed. If you cannot write a piano vocal score you will be at the mercy of whoever is engaged to play the piano (most first productions occur with piano accompaniment only). You might get lucky and find a very savvy pianist who is sensitive to your musical intentions. Then again, you might not.

Initial attempts at piano vocal scores by non-pianists may be very simplistic. That's fine. It's a start. Novice composers can begin to accumulate pianistic figures for their tool box, one at a time. This is a *learnable* skill, and anyone who wants to write for the musical theatre must learn it or forever be at the mercy of someone else's skills.

Writing a piano-vocal score that clearly defines the “feel” of a song is an important skill for a composer to develop.

Content in Lyrics

The lyrics of a theatre song have a single topic. There may be a succession of images in a lyric, but they will all be related to what the song is about. In *Allegro*, consider the song, The Gentleman Is A Dope. When the lady sings this song, we know she is in love with the guy. The song is about the fact that the relationship is most likely doomed because the guy is married to another woman. But the topic of the song is The Gentleman. The phrase “the gentleman” appears six times in the lyric. The pronoun “he” appears 10 times. The words “Man,” “Joe”, “guy,” and “lug” also refer to the gentleman. The words “I” and “me” and “my” appear 8 times. That's 20 to 8 for the guy versus the singer. The wife appears as “somebody else” and “she” a total of 3 times. This lyric never gets very far from the gentleman, since its 32 lines refer to him 20 times. And it is filled with imagery about the man:

Oscar Hammerstein II

7/12/1895 – 8/23/1960

Bookwriter and Lyricist



Oscar Hammerstein wrote with many composers, including Jerome Kern, Vincent Youmans, Rudolph Friml, Richard A. Whiting and Sigmund Romberg, but his best-known work was with composer Richard Rodgers, with whom he wrote *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *Flower Drum Song*, *Me and Juliet*, *Pipedream*, *Cinderella* and *The Sound of Music*. He won 8 Tony Awards and two Academy Awards (“The Last Time I Saw Paris,” and “It Might As Well Be Spring.”).

Quote: I know the world is filled with troubles and many injustices. But reality is as beautiful as it is ugly. I think it is just as important to sing about beautiful mornings as it is to talk about slums. I just couldn't write anything without hope in it.

- Man of many faults
- Clumsy Joe who wouldn't know a rhumba from a waltz
- Not my cup of tea
- He'll take a crumb and never ask for more
- Somebody else's problem
- Just a lug you'd like to hug and hold against your heart

Don't confuse the topic of the song with what the song is about. The song is about the fact that this woman loves the man and doesn't think it's going to work out. Similarly, in *Oklahoma*, the topic of *The Surrey With The Fringe On Top* is the surrey, but the song is about Curly wanting to take Laurey to the box social.

It is interesting to compare “The Surrey” with “The Gentleman,” because they both have the same lyricist. The language in each song is very different, though. Chicks and ducks and geese and isinglass curtains have very little to do with a clumsy Joe who wouldn't know a rhumba from a waltz. Why? It's the voice of the character that pervades these songs. And not just the language the character uses, but the attitude toward the topic that the character has at this moment in the play. Curly is trying to convince Laurey she will be missing out if she doesn't go to the box social with him, so he paints a very attractive picture designed to lull her into accepting a date with him. In the *Allegro* song, Joe's nurse is trying to convince herself to put her feelings for the man aside because he can never be hers. Consequently her language is rueful and self-aware.

When characters are alone on the stage, they can reveal their truest feelings, even when they are trying to banish those feelings. There is nothing to inhibit their expression. When other people are present, however, characters must sometimes hide their true feelings for reasons of politics, to avoid confrontation, to bring them closer to their goals, or simply because the presence of other people makes it impolite to let their feelings out.

Different characters will deal with the presence of other people in different ways. Rude people won't care how offensive they are, for instance. Sad people who are socially adept may not want to burden other people with their sadness. A character's attitude in any given situation must match what we know about that character or it won't be believable.

Think about the song, *The Gentleman Is A Dope* and the beats of the scene that precede it. Why is it sung now? How does the lyric relate to the character in the moment? The importance of the relationship of the lyric to the character in the moment cannot be overstated.

Remember, characters have agendas, things they want and need. These things are always on their minds, to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon what is happening to them at the moment. It is the thing that is uppermost in the character's mind that will produce the song. This may not be the topic of the song, but this is what the song will be about.

Here's a tip: In most situations, the topic can be *anything* so long as the character's attitude to the topic is consistent with what we know or can come to understand about the character in the moment of the play.

Here's a joke for which the punchline includes a nasty word – but the nasty word has very little to do with the humor, if you laugh at the joke:

A man needs to get from Chicago to New York. He's at the airport that has just closed down because of a snowstorm. This is terrible; he has an important meeting in New York tomorrow morning. "My entire future depends on my being in New York by 10 a.m. tomorrow morning," he cries. The airline personnel suggest an overnight train.

The man dashes to the train station in Chicago and gets there just as the train to New York is leaving the station. "Why, why?" he moans. "Can't you call the train back somehow?" The ticket seller at the train station suggests a bus.

The man hurries to the bus station to buy a ticket, only to find out the bus won't get him there in time. "What am I going to do?" he wails. He is totally frustrated when he turns away from the ticket window and sees an old lady bent over, tying her shoe. He kicks her in the behind, sending her sprawling to the floor as he shouts, "And you! You're always tying your *@^#-ing shoelace!"

Now, there is nothing wrong with tying a shoelace, and the poor old lady is not responsible for his predicament. But from his point of view, *everything* is conspiring to keep him from his important appointment in New York tomorrow

morning. It is not the old lady or her shoelace that is funny in this rather violent joke, but the insane attitude of the frustrated man who has the audacity to hold the poor old lady responsible for...well, for being there and not helping him get to New York somehow.

Notice that the entire joke is about the man trying to get to New York (topic) and the punchline comes from his frustration (the joke is *about* frustration) at not getting what he wants.

Keeping the character in the moment with a consistent attitude toward the topic of the song is an important skill for a lyricist to develop.

ⁱ Brief outline taken from libretto of *Allegro*, book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, music by Richard Rodgers