

Unit Three: Rhythm Background

Rhythm is the foundation of much of theatre and even more so musical theatre. The vaudevillian roots of the form presented short comic vignettes between songs all of which were built on a quick rhythmic tempo. You may have heard that comedy is built in threes. That is a function of rhythm. People who tell jokes well have a mastery of the rhythm and pacing of comedy — even if they do not know enough about rhythm to identify it as such.

Similarly musical theatre has grown out of a strong sense of rhythm. The reason *charm* or *Rhythm/Up-Tempo* songs are so predominant is the strong sense of rhythm which drives them. Frequently they are in common time so that the audience can easily fall into the rhythmic patterns of the moment. This function is analogous to the hook in a pop song, although the hook is a more obvious element in songwriting. Often audience members do not think consciously about falling into the rhythm of a song, but they definitely notice if it never quite happens or if it is broken once it is established.

Of course, composers break a rhythmic pattern all the time after it is established in a musical theatre song, though normally for a specific reason. Often a rhythmic pattern is broken at the end of a song in order to move into a conclusive ending. Other times, there may be an emotional, dramatic, or comedic reason to interrupt the rhythm. If you observe an interruption, can you articulate a reason why it occurs?

Comedy songs clearly function on rhythmic terms. If you have selected a comic song in your musical modelling, examine it closely for the pairing of musical and comedic rhythms. If you have not selected a comedic song, go back into your show and examine one. Does every interruption of the comedic/musical rhythm correspond to a punch line or a heightened comic moment? Does the comedy build through the song? If so, does each interruption top the previous one? (In other words, each interruption should be successively funnier.) Examine the final rhythmic interruption in the song. Does it both present the climax of the comedy and prepare for the musical ending of the song?

Common meters in musical theatre traditionally have been 2/4, 3/4, 4/4 and cut time. Contemporary composers do not need to use only these meters, but getting started with these meters might be a good idea for the following reasons:

- Common time corresponds to the iambic nature of the English language.
- Learning to develop a lyric into a final song form is probably easiest in four.
- Choose good prosody over complicated rhythm — again, perhaps, easier in four.
- Remember that even rhythmically complex scores like *West Side Story* use syncopation that pulls against a common meter — either three or four.

If you get comfortable setting lyrics in a simple meter, then more complex meters will be easier to work with.