
Writing Processes of Musical Theater Writers: How They Create a Storyline, Compose Songs, and Connect Them to Form a Musical

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Imagine this: you're in New York, standing in the Theater District, waiting. You've probably been waiting in line for several minutes, maybe even a couple of hours if you're really determined. You cheer, laugh, and listen as an actor comes out of the building that you're eagerly waiting to enter and makes a few statements about the upcoming show, encourages the people to have a good time, and thanks the audience for supporting the performance.

A few minutes later the doors open and you rush in with the rest of the crowd. Once inside, the atmosphere changes: the crowds get quieter and the rooms more elegant, refined. "This is a theater," you tell yourself as you try to hide your enthusiasm. "Compose yourself". As you enter the stage room, you can sense the excitement from other people that got there before you, and hear the rushed whispers of the people behind you. The stage at the front is covered by bright red curtains that range from the ceiling to the floor, hiding the scene that is about to become your source of entertainment for the next two hours or so.

Suddenly, the lights dim, you hear the silent roar of the audience in anticipation of the show, a single spotlight switches on, the curtains fall, and the first song in the Broadway musical begins!

...Now rewind.

Having the privilege to produce a musical on Broadway is life-changing. This is even truer for the creators of such shows, as it means that their work will be perpetuated in several of the most esteemed theater stages in the world. These masterpieces have been admired by even the toughest of critics because of their seemingly effortless way to tell a story through a combination of dialogue and song. For the writers, however, the creation of a song and its role in a musical—as well as its connections with different characters, melodies, and situations—are a product of meticulous invention and composition processes, performed over extended periods of time, to form a melodious yet significant contribution to an ideated storyline.

Every single musical theater piece—no matter the show, the theater, actors, attraction of the crowds, and the fame or recognitions obtained—starts out the same way as all the others on and off Broadway do: with a vision. Every play, at some point in time, was nothing, until someone came up with an idea that led that person to begin the process of making a musical out of the idea. That hunch, thought, or sudden burst of inspiration is the start that encourages writers to evolve an idea into a collection of perfectly planned, intertwined songs that are pleasing to the ear, actors, performances, choreography, lighting, and countless other factors which themselves compose a

larger story: a musical.

Achieving the goal of creating such a complex piece of art does not come easily. Writers need to be knowledgeable in a very specific set of musical skills to be capable of formulating the songs' rhythms and melodies and fill them with lyrics. In addition to that, composers also need the creativity of a novel writer to be able to form complete plots and subplots that are appealing to an audience. To have the capability to create and carry out a musical, a writer needs to use a series of writing processes. Writing processes can be defined as "the processes by which individuals put words on a page and attempt to make meaning—for themselves as well as for and with others" (Wardle and Downs 488). For composers and lyricists, the meaning that they need to convey is much deeper than just words on a page. They ought to be able to communicate emotion, an interesting storyline, visual stimulus, melody, and rhythm as a single entity that expresses meaning. Musical theater writers succeed at doing this by developing different small ideas that eventually lead them to the creation of the conjoined project.

Writing for musical theater is one of the most intricate activities in the entire writing scope, which is why I decided to study the different methods and processes that musical theater writers go through to get their art from their minds to the stage. The research performed encompasses different stages of the writing processes of four different musical theater writers, who each wrote a different musical that got high acclaims on Broadway: Lin-Manuel Miranda, Stephen Sondheim, Lisa Lambert, and Jonathan Larson. Their personal strategies were analyzed and used as a point of reference to demonstrate examples of different aspects of the writing processes that musical theater writers experience while working on a musical.

Invention

The writing process begins with the emergence of a concept. This applies to any play and is perhaps the only step that all plays have in common. The idea about a story, a melody, a rhythm, a beginning, an ending, or anything in between is what initiates the writing process. The first thought that inspires the author's mind to develop an idea that will eventually turn into something greater marks the beginning of that author's invention process. Trim and Isaac explain, "Invention can be understood as a process of discovery and creation . . . [It is] also a way to describe what happens when a writer searches for a topic, develops a specific idea about that topic, and then strategizes a plan for fitting that specific idea into the writing situation at hand" (107). This initial moment of inspiration that motivates composition, although leading to the same outcome—writing a musical—is very unpredictable. The reason behind this is that not all authors get the idea for a musical by first thinking about just the plot; rather, the nature of the idea itself may vary, as it can range from a song, a character, a line, or even a melody to thinking about a sequence of lights that the author wants to make use of on a stage. The circumstances that generate the idea are completely unique. Every author with every play experiences a different situation and moment when they get insight into a probable future project.

Lin-Manuel Miranda first got the idea for his now world-famous musical *Hamilton* while he was on vacation from performing in his first musical: *In the Heights*. He states: "I grabbed a biography off the shelf of Alexander Hamilton 'cause I wanted a big, fat book to read on vacation—and I found it deeply moving and deeply personal when I read it. It was just such a compelling ride" ("Hamilton's America"). Ron Chernow, the author of the biography that was the inspiration for the show, later commented on what part of reading the book aided to Miranda's idea discovery: "[Miranda] said, 'Ron, I was reading the book and hip hop songs started rising off the page'" ("Hamilton's America"). The surge of the idea for a musical was completely unexpected by Lin-Manuel Miranda, but once he had created a concept in his mind about what *Hamilton* could turn into, he felt the need and had the passion to see it through.

The initial creation moment for Miranda came from direct intertextuality. Intertextuality is

the idea that “writers do not make texts up out of thin air...[they] must always draw on other texts” (Prior 494). In his case, Miranda was able to create the idea for *Hamilton* by using Chernow’s book as an aid to transcribe Hamilton’s life in an original way. From there, Miranda was able to start working on a new set of songs and script that would later become *Hamilton*, the musical.

The same step was experienced completely different for Lisa Lambert, lyricist of the Broadway musical *The Drowsy Chaperone*. Her moment of initial creation was more ambiguous than Miranda’s in the form that she already had thought vaguely of writing a musical. In an interview about her play, she said, “We had the title of *The Drowsy Chaperone*—I’m not sure where it came from—and we had song titles, and we kept saying, ‘We should do this show, we should do this show.’ We had all these scattered fragments. . .” (Das 286). Lambert’s idea was more an incentive to create something that connected with the title of the play that she wanted to perform at a friend’s bachelor party. Her musical was born out of a very informal setting, with the mentality of performing a show solely for the amusement of a close friend group.

This situation caused Lambert to pursue a different approach in writing the musical. Instead of creating imaginary characters and then assigning them to real people (actors), Lambert did it in reverse: “We knew who was going to be at the party and who was going to be in the show. So that was the starting ground. We had a friend of mine, Jennifer, who ended up playing Kitty, the ditzy chorus girl. That part was conceived because we knew she could do a part like that really well. So casting, in a way, was the beginning of the process” (Das 287). This shows that there is not just one approach for a musical’s conception. The invention process does not necessarily start at the opening act of the play.

All writers and composers are able to come up with a new idea that allows them to create their own shows, with original music, casting, characters, etc. The exact way that an author creates the thought of a potential musical, however, is unique for every play. Many times, not even the authors are aware that they are going to imagine a new musical in the near future, and when ideas come, they come in so many different ways that the moments of creation of a piece is very seldom replicated.

The invention process continues far beyond the first creation moment of the show. It is the longest, most recursive step in the writing process as it persists for the entire time that an author is writing. The discovery of new ideas over time is what allows an author to elaborate on a thought or vision and create a music-incorporated storyline written for the stage (Wardle and Downs 489). The original idea of a musical quickly finds itself deriving into a million other ideas and possibilities of what to do with that initial concept, or how to continue, or add on to it. It is during the pursuit and discovery of these new ramifications that the writing styles, personal preferences, and levels of inspiration cause every personal writing process to start to diverge.

For Stephen Sondheim, one of the most influential writers of musical theater, having written timeless pieces such as *Sweeney Todd* and *West Side Story*, invention is more oriented toward the blending of characters, and figuring out how to combine one character’s life with another’s story. In a research article focused toward examining the manuscripts of several musical theater writers, it is mentioned that “Sondheim said: ‘[...] given a situation, I will have four or five central ideas, and if I can combine them and make them one piece without packing the trunk too tightly, I will use them and find a refrain line that is the central idea.’ Thus many of Sondheim’s numbers work on multiple levels and serve multiple functions” (Horowitz 277). This method allows Sondheim to develop each

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individual idea, and then be able to play with merging different ideas together, forming a plot. Over time, he may add, remove, or modify the process if he finds it necessary.

Invention is not a linear process, and it is also not a regular routine that an author can follow. It is messy, irregular, and disorganized: a writer can think about the end of the show, and then immediately after that start working on the development of a character, or the melody of a song. Invention is what ultimately gives content to the musical. All the different ideas, songs, characters, and stories, once connected, are the ones to provide meaning and communicate a central theme to the audience.

Composition

An idea can stay in someone's head for only so long, especially a writer's. After thinking about something that an author believes could aid to his/her play, the author has to write it down. Composition is the process of creating actual, concrete text, or "the product of the process of designing a text and its ideas" (Wardle and Downs 793). Paul Prior, in his research, includes the concept of inscription to be used alongside, but not instead of, composition. For Prior, "composing and inscription are separable" (495). Writing down something would be considered as inscription, and, moments before, thinking about what words exactly to write would be defined as composition.

When it comes to composition, songwriting is a very big part of writing in musical theater. Many people often wonder what comes first: the words or the music. When Lin-Manuel Miranda was asked about his songwriting process for *Hamilton*, he answered,

They're all different. Some of them come all at once. 'That Would Be Enough,' which is a song Eliza sings to Hamilton in Act 1, happened in about 45 minutes...I worked on the music and lyrics at the same time. You're very grateful when that happens. More often than not, it's an idea for a lyric. I think I had the lyrics for 'My Shot' way before I ever committed any music under them. And then once I committed music under them, I found that 'whoa whoa' that came out of music. I wrote one, which informed the other, which then doubled back and found the lyrical and harmonic underpinnings after the fact. Some of them, I'll find a beat I'm just crazy about: I'll create a beat on my computer and walk around with a loop and walk around with this one [*gesturing to his dog on the floor*] in the park until I've got some words... it's about trusting one to carry the other and hopefully having them work together as closely as possible. (Evans 83).

This detailed response shows that music is created in different ways, with different purposes, at different times. Each song has its own writing process, which later joins the bigger picture: the musical.

In a video posted by *The New Yorker*, Sondheim states the idea of creating a structure for songs so that they make sense, and are not repetitive. He also explains his own writing process, which he derives from composer Cole Porter: "Take his title line... and he would write it rhythmically: a music paper, but with no notes attached, and from that he would extrapolate the melody. The inflection of the title would give him the rise and fall of the melody, and the rhythm of the title would give him the rhythm of the melody." This is a different, more organized way of composing a song. Having the same structure in a musical is useful for Sondheim because it makes it easier to put all of the pieces together to form the play. However, this method still allows the composer to experiment with using the similar sounds of several words, which gives each song a distinct pattern of intonation, adding a clear rhythm to the piece.

Even though Sondheim already knows how to approach his writing, and which methods work for him when writing a play, different plays require different approaches because they are different styles. It all depends on the genre of the play: a very grammatically oriented and wordy play, like Miranda's *Hamilton*, is going to be written with a focus of rhythm and word choice, but a

more classical musical is going to rely heavily on long notes and words that are converted into melodies. Despite this, each author has his or her own writing style, which is noticeable in the plays that the authors write. Lin-Manuel Miranda, in the interview conducted by Suzy Evans, commented on how Sondheim's writing process and style influenced his own, stating, "It's what Sondheim does. When you hear this music, you know Burr's coming onstage... They have their own energy and their own pulse" (30). By using a part of Sondheim's way of writing and applying it to his own work, Miranda is borrowing or getting inspiration from other authors' methods and styles, which is a form of intertextuality. It happens recursively as an author influences how his/her play is written, but the style of the play influences how the author writes it. Other authors, in turn, influence the play by providing other plays and different styles that serve as inspiration to the musical writer.

Audience

All authors should create a play that entertains the audience, both in song and storyline, and thus satisfies certain rhetorical situations. A writer should write to respond to an exigence, or, according to Keith Grant-Davie, "some kind of need or problem that can be addressed and solved through rhetorical discourse" (351). A musical is required to have purpose, and be able to answer or present a question to stir a response from an audience. In general writing, reaching audiences should be the main focus of the writer because he/she is trying to start a discourse, or some kind of communication. However, musical theater takes audience to the next level. There are two main audiences in a musical theater play, and both interact with the piece very differently, yet, the author needs to write so that both audiences are able to respond in their respective and desired ways.

The first audience that an author needs to have in mind is the actors who are going to perform the play. They are the ones who directly interact with the manuscript that the author has written, and are a crucial part toward bringing the words to life on the stage. Actors, however, also need to perform the role of rhetors—"people who generate discourse" (Grant-Davie 347)—when they perform the words and communicate them to the audience in a certain way. In an interview with a theater major at UCF, I was able to identify which parts of a script several actors look for to be able to become a character onstage, and perform in front of the writer's second audience.

Marief Kitaif, the interviewee, has performed at several theaters, taking part in various musical and theatrical productions. As an actress, she is one of the main audiences for a script of a play, as well as a second-hand rhetor to the audience. Writers have to be able to write in a way that facilitates the actors the action of getting into character, that is, behaving in a way that the character that they have been cast as would. She believes that "if a play is written well, the actor doesn't have to do a lot of their own... no, they actually do have to do their own interpretation character-wise but they don't have to do a lot of their own work. If it is written badly, then it's all open to interpretation and it's a little bit harder."

The author needs to provide enough guidelines to guide the actor through a character, but not too many to restrict the character. One way in which writers usually achieve this goal is by trying to "focus on the psychology of his characters" (Horowitz 277). Sondheim, for example, has "described himself as an actor in song, and part of his approach is to become each character as he's writing them" (Horowitz 277). Another factor that influences the interpretation of actors in musical theater plays is the evocation of emotions in part of the actors. The author, when writing, needs to feel what the actors and characters should feel while on a stage. Miranda states, "Every time I wrote a song for a character, I was like, 'I want to play that character.' And that's the fun! If you're doing your job and you're really inhabiting these characters as you're writing them, you should want to feel the urge to play all of them" (Evans 31). Musicals are passionate, and the writers, as well as the authors, need to feel that passion as they write and perform.

The characters that authors are creating and authors are portraying bear the same emotions that all humans do; sometimes, the characters' emotions are even more heightened. This adds to

the amount of feeling that both the author and actor need to bring into the play for an accurate representation of the characters that also speaks to the audience. Kitaif expressed that “that’s the point of musical theater. You’re supposed to, like, when you sing in musical theater it’s because you have so many emotions that you no longer can speak them, you have to sing them. So the lyrics are just, like, continuation of your lines, just in a more dramatic form because you feel them in a very dramatic sense.” Writers need to work hard to inspire a sense of deep, dramatic emotion on this audience, which will, depending on the purpose of the play, cause them to perform in a specific way.

The other intended audience that the author needs to address is the spectator audience: the ones paying to see the show. The spectator audience usually is in charge of responding to the author’s exigence of making some emotional impact on the audience. The director cannot single-handedly communicate his ideas, so he uses an audience, the actors, to convey it to spectators, who in turn develop their own interpretations of each play. When writing for the spectator audience, the author needs to be very careful in being very clear about a character, as the spectators do not have the chance of immersing themselves as much into one character as do the actors. The author also needs to have a clear, easy to follow storyline, and music that will appeal to the spectators’ tastes. This clarity and awareness of audience is usually achieved by constant revision.

Revision

Just as invention and composition are present during the entire writing process, revision is a recurring activity in the writing process. Revision is, according to Nancy Sommers, “a sequence of changes in a composition—changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually within the writing of a work” (579). In musical theater, revision usually occurs when a musical is being

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written, and the actors are cast. The songs may be modified to fit the actors’ strengths, for example. Revision also occurs within the play itself, and the way that it is written. As mentioned before, musical theater writers need to have two audiences in mind: the actors and the spectators, and if the play does not reach any of the two audiences as it should, it should be—and often is—amended.

One of the most extensive revision strategies is the one that Jonathan Larson used for *Rent*. A research study that was based on the observation of manuscripts of different musical theater writers found that “there are approximately 30 drafts of the script for *Rent*, many of them handwritten in pencil. For the song ‘*Seasons of Love*’ there are at least 22 pages of lyric sketches—the folder they’re in includes lyric sketches for some of the other songs, and it’s sometimes hard to tell which notes are for which song” (279). In the process of revising the show, authors also define meaning, and are able to connect different ideas, new and old, to the storyline of the play. With each new draft, Larson was able to identify a cleaner, more direct way to communicate his central theme. By writing and rewriting the play, the songs, and the story, Larson and other writers perform a restructuring of the work and its meaning, which relates back to invention in that “each addition or deletion is a reordering of the whole,” which means that while revising, composers are also inventing new paths for the story to develop further (Sommers 585).

Another form of revision is adaptation, and it is one of the most common forms of revision in musical theater when a play is moved from one setting to another. This was the case for Lisa Lambert and *The Drowsy Chaperone*. Her play is one that evolved from being performed in a bachelor party as a family and friends gathering to being shown on several of the biggest stages in the world. Naturally, the rhetorical situations that Lambert had to respond to changed drastically

based on the scale of the show, where it would be performed, who would be the audience, and what is expected in regards to quality, language, fluidity, etc. The different atmospheres that the show was performed in required for it to morph into many adaptations of the same play. Lisa Lambert commented on her largest—and most important—change for the play: moving from off-Broadway to Broadway. She states:

When Casey Nicholaw came on as the director [for Broadway], it was a big job for him... we knew we had to rewrite a lot of songs. He was dramaturgically a huge force. From Toronto to New York, or to Los Angeles, we might have rewritten about six songs, and we reconfigured the order. He was really big in that. That was part of why we wanted to work with him too. When we first met with him, he wasn't afraid to say, 'This needs to change,' and we agreed. (Das 288).

This also shows that revision is part of the author's musical writing process, but often there are other people involved in the revision process who know what specific changes a piece must undertake to make the musical adapt to the new situations.

Revision is continuous, and just like every other step in the writing process, it does not end when a musical theater play has been written. The factors that compose a production of the story that the author invented are constantly changing. The actors, the lights, the motivation to perform, and even the lyrics to the songs may vary. Lisa Lambert expressed that the reason why revision is so important to her play is because "the show is very immediate. The narrator talks to the audience about current events. I have seen productions where they have changed little bits because they have to. It still feels like a work in progress, to some extent" (Das 290). Shows like these need to be revised constantly, as with each performance it has to adapt to the world, which is changing every day.

Revision has a lot to do with the actors cast, their vocal and theatrical strengths and skills, the choreography to different songs, the addition or exclusion of songs or lines, even characters, and the scale of the show and its ability to be presented in front of certain audiences. The refinement that comes from the creation, invention, and composition processes is a result that changes with each writer. Individually, writers use the methods and processes that they think fit to compose a musical theater piece, and they look toward the end goal in their minds to help them reach that completed musical.

While composing, the writers need to have a clear picture of what factors might influence the outcome of the play, which includes addressing and answering a rhetorical situation. In the writing situation, composers look to fulfill their exigence by creating meaning, and take into account two separate and very different audiences. To do that, they work within the constraints of music and need to be aware of what can be done with a certain melody and story to make sure that the final show successfully meets the expectations of everyone who interacts with the musical.

Conclusion

The songs that are incorporated into the musicals are not created in one sole way. They do not follow a single "song formula," and there is no telling if the lyrics or the words came first. Every song is a combination of creation, invention, composition, and patience. The author is even sometimes oblivious that he will be writing a song moments before something pops in his/her head. The same is true for the plot and storyline. Although the steps in the writing process that musical theater writers take are the same, the order and context in which the authors take these steps varies greatly.

Musical theater pieces are created to be extremely adaptable and receptive, allowing continuous, smaller writing processes to emerge at all times. What allows authors to create songs, storylines, connections, and a coherent entity that is a musical theater piece is the deep focus and detailed attention to overlapping ideas that are found during the writing process. The final product

is the perfect combination of songs and dialogue that follow a detailed, organized, and coherent storyline that aims to entertain. This combination and finalized process then enters the stage of production of the play, where the other factors that influence the musical, such as actors, choreographers, wardrobe, lights, etc. are incorporated and rehearsed into the musical. Once again, the piece changes, this time to resemble real life—not just a script. When the curtains come down in a theatre, and the music starts, the musical—which is a part of a process, and not just a product—comes to life!

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