



# Telling a story in three songs

*A musical theatre exercise*

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Last year, by the end of the first quarter, my theatre classes had completed their first major project—an evening of short plays. They were feeling pretty good about themselves and I was proud of them. But I was also concerned they were in danger of early school year complacency.

I'm sure you know what I am talking about. Your theatre students have worked really hard on a project or performance. Energy is high and they are riding a wave of audience commentary that is constructive, supportive, and positively glowing. But then, instead of building on the positive groundswell, they decide to sit on the beach and bask in the sunshine of all that praise. That's why I decided to begin second quarter with a brand new project and challenge them to look at the process of making theatre with fresh eyes.

The idea for this project came to me, like many good ideas, while I was driving in my car. I was flipping around to find a song on a CD mix, concentrating on snippets of songs as I searched. I listened to Carol King start "I Feel the Earth Move," Simon and Garfunkel sing "The Boxer," and the Beatles begin "Help." I chuckled to myself as I tried to imagine one musical with all three of those songs in it. What would the storyline be? Then I had a thought: could I embed these songs in dialogue and come out with a mini-musical? Would such an effort help me understand how difficult it is to actually write a musical from scratch?

It was challenging to think it through and I started to formulate a lesson about it for my theatre students. What if I gave my students three random songs on a CD, and asked them to find the thread of a storyline, write some short scenes to

link it all together, block it, and perform it for the class, lip-synching the songs? It was a tall order for sure, but definitely a project designed to shake them up and get them thinking in new ways about musical theatre.

To get started, I asked my own college-age kids for some help. We chose songs from a wide variety of eras and genres. We burned only three songs on each CD.

We tried to find songs that were very different and put them together knowing that it would be very challenging to find a strong storyline to link them together.

For example, one disk had “Ugly Girl” by Fleming and John, “Pump It” by the Black Eyed Peas and “Incomplete” by the Backstreet Boys. Another had “People” by Barbra Steisand, “Insects” by Oingo Boingo, and “She Loves You” by the Beatles. Another CD included “Don’t Funk with My Heart” by the Black Eyed Peas, “Yellow” by Coldplay and “MmmmBop” by Hansen.

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After selecting the songs the students would use as the cornerstones of their musicals, I organized a handout with requirements and an explanation of the project. It read as follows:

### **Three songs on a CD playmaking experience**

*Your mission, should you decide to accept it (of course you will—your grade depends on it) is to listen to the three songs on this CD and find a story thread or theme that connects them. The songs will be embedded in a script that you and your group will write. One song will be at the beginning, one will be at the middle, and the other will be at the end. The story should have a*

*character who wants something and is prevented from getting it (which leads to conflict). This conflict is resolved at the end. This resolution must be unique, creative, and contain a strange twist of fate.*

*The script, along with songs and blocking, lip synching, and choreography, must run a minimum of fifteen to twenty minutes. You only have to lip synch and choreograph the first verse and the refrain to each song. If you wish, you may choreograph the entire song.*

*You must find a copy of the words to each song and include it in the group’s packet to be handed in and graded. The packet should also include a complete and good copy of the libretto with basic blocking, a list of costumes and props used, and a drawing of the set. (Set pieces and changes must be kept simple.)*

*The script should be organized like this: dialogue/song/dialogue/song/dialogue/song/dialogue.*

*Every person in the group must be in the cast. Due dates will be announced and must be met in order to maintain your grade. Your final performance will be for the class.*

### **Getting started**

This was the preliminary sheet that I gave to my Theatre One (ninth grade), Theatre Two (tenth grade), and Advanced Theatre (eleventh and twelfth grade) classes. In my mind, I wondered how each grade level would approach the process. I was pleasantly surprised by the outcome.

I presented the project to each class in the same way. The handout was passed around. I reviewed it point-by-point, answering any questions that they had and altering some of it as we discussed the fine points. They asked if they could choreograph a dance number for the song. I said yes. They asked if they all *had* to dance. I said no. They asked if they could add extra songs. I said no. They asked if everyone had to be in it. I said yes.

We also set what we thought at the time were reasonable deadlines, hoping to begin final performances in three weeks. With illnesses and interrup-

tions in the school schedule, it actually took a month to complete the project.

The next thing I did was to break them up into groups of six to eight. Generally, I organize students in advance and try to put people who work well together. Sometimes, though, I just pull names out of a hat, figuring that theatre is a collaborative art and they must learn to work with everyone. For this project, I pulled their names out of a hat. I wanted the groups to be composed of a really random sampling. I also wanted to tell them that it was truly a chance grouping. That way, when they had trouble getting along they knew that they had to make it work and they had no one to blame but themselves if it didn’t.

I had borrowed enough CD players for each group to have their own during the entire three- to four-week period. The only exception to this rule was my Theatre Two class of seven students. This class would only get three songs and work together as one group.

Each group took their CD and listened to the three songs. They groaned and laughed then brainstormed for possible storylines. I told them that they should write down every idea, no matter how foolish it might seem. Later on in the development process, many groups would be glad to have all of the brainstorming ideas as they were incorporated into the final script. For example, one group decided that they wanted to do a story about a rock group, The Insects, that finally makes it big. When they became disenchanted with their storyline about halfway into the project, they went back to their original brainstorming ideas and found one that carried them through.

To give you an idea of how it all went, I’m going to review the work of one group from each class.

### **Advanced Theatre**

The members of one of the groups in Advanced Theatre arrived upon their idea almost immediately. Their three songs were “She Loves You,” “Insects,” and “People.” They spent almost half of the project time pursuing an idea that eventually went sour. They would

drag themselves into class and work halfheartedly on it. At about the same time, I decided to call a halt to the project and take some time out to watch some excerpts from about eight musicals. I chose the opening numbers from *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and even *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and the Disney cartoons, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*. We talked about the techniques used for introducing characters and conflict, how to use dialogue to show and *not* tell, and what specific elements they could use in their own productions. After two days of watching a wide variety of musical numbers, I asked them to answer the following questions:

*Name three musicals you saw in class and give me a technique from that musical used to introduce a song and explain how it is used to draw the audience into the story/song. Be specific. How would you apply these techniques to your group project? Be specific.*

Some of the students answered like this:

1. In *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, there was a narrator to introduce topic, which makes the audience ask questions. This brings the audience into the story.

2. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle sings a song in the beginning that reveals many different aspects of her character, foreshadowing the story. It shows conflicts in the plot and in the character's life before any action really occurs.

3. In *West Side Story*, there are no speaking parts in the beginning. However, the audience is drawn in by the choreography and notices the conflicts between the groups.

Our musical could use some type of introduction, even with a narrator. We need to establish why this day is different from any other day in the storyline. I also think choreography will be key in our project because our songs don't completely tie things together the way we like.

Another group responded this way:

1. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the initial song sets up many conflicts. Gaston

likes Belle, Belle's head is in the sky, all the other girls like Gaston, and the Beast is under a curse and needs to find true love.

2. In *West Side Story*, the characters develop before anyone says a word. The Jets snap and rule the playground. The conflict with the Sharks is introduced. The leader of each group is established, as they are the center of the choreography.

3. In *Aladdin*, Prince Ali's arrival makes the day different from any other day. He has come to meet Jasmine and they go out carpet-riding, provoking a change in Jasmine's life.

We could make the day our musical takes place special by having a climactic event take place that changes the main character's life.

After taking this break to observe a series of musical numbers and reflect on them, the advanced theatre group I mentioned above returned to their original brainstorming notes and changed their idea completely. I warned them that taking such a radical chance and starting over from scratch would require them to work twice as hard to catch up to everyone else. *West Side Story* had turned them on and they concocted a tale about two groups at a school, the Insects and the Mathletes. They blocked their opening number borrowing shamelessly from the movie version but instead of fighting, they had a war with calculators. Of course, two members from the rival "gangs" fell in love to "She Loves You" and "People" became the song that brought them all together at the end. They improvised blocking and choreography, working in record time to complete the script and run the show.

With a lot of intense rehearsal time, a sense of humor and some quick adaptation, this group really pulled it off. Taking time out to watch some examples of great musical theatre really set them on fire and they turned in a polished piece that made everyone in the group appreciate the effort that goes into the creation of a new piece of theatre.

## Theatre Two

As I mentioned before, Theatre Two was the smallest class I had. They were seven extremely talented and committed members but definitely a class of strong individual personalities. They listened to their songs, "Don't Funk with My Heart," "Yellow," and "MmmBop" and decided that they would go with a hospital setting and a doctor whose secret desire was to be a plumber. One of his assistants, a nurse named Brunhilda, realizes his unhappiness (and also his incompetence as a doctor), falls in love with him, and together they leave health care for plumbing.

This group came up with a very strong preliminary outline. Three distinct scenes had each song firmly ensconced at the beginning, middle and end. But developing the dialogue that connected them was another issue. Almost immediately, they began to butt heads as they tried to work together. They began to argue about everything. They had reached an impasse.

I made a suggestion that they split into groups of two or three to work on each scene separately. Everyone knew the storyline so they would know what to include in the dialogue. Then they could all come back together and work on the transitions so the flow from scene to song would be smooth. They agreed to give it a try. They worked for about a week on their dialogue and then came together for a read-through. They argued again but now they were in rewrites and there was less of a struggle. After they agreed on a final script they went into rehearsal, made more adaptations, improvised, and rewrote some more. The initial chaos of their strong personalities was turned into a positive thing when they split up and then came back together with a clever, creative libretto. The song placement was hysterical. "Don't Funk with my Heart" was about a heart patient who didn't want the inept doctor to work on her, "Yellow" was about a patient in liver failure, and "MmmBop" reunited the entire cast as the dead patients

rose to do a choreographed ending. It was one of the best-constructed pieces performed.

Here is what two of them, Isaac and Alex, said in their reflections:

“To take three completely and purposefully unrelated songs and somehow use them to form a coherent and enjoyable musical is a difficult task... The overall experience was a good one. The musical as a whole truly tested our abilities to work with one another.”

“I did learn a lot... The most difficult part was actually getting our story line together to make the script. It required a lot of attention, focus, and thought in order to connect ideas throughout the plot.”

I was grateful for these student reflections and in the future, their suggestions will change the process of the unit. For example, I would emphasize using the lyrics of the song to drive the storyline, let them add a song of their own, and possibly have one of the students become the director of the production once the script is completed.

### **Theatre One**

This particular group of ninth graders tackled the project with energy and excitement. What they may have lacked in experience they made up for with eagerness. They were fortunate enough to have one member of their group who was a musical theatre junkie. He had seen a wide variety of shows and had learned a lot from them. This group’s dynamic consisted of trying to keep a lid on “Mr. Cecil B. DeMille” from running roughshod over their ideas while understanding that some of his ideas were usable and even spectacular. It was an interesting balancing act to observe.

The group’s songs were “Money” by the Flying Lizards, “I Believe I Can Fly” by R. Kelley, and “Twist and Shout” by the Beatles. They came up with their storyline rather quickly and started work on the script as an entire group. They had a lot of disagreements but worked them out within the group through compromise and by dividing

up the work. The story was about a group of waitresses who sang as they worked and dreamed of a time when they could leave the food service business and become a singing group. A big opening dance number that they rehearsed endlessly captured the audience’s attention immediately. The opening song was “Money” and it was upbeat and had the waitresses dancing on tables. The study of the musical numbers on DVD really convinced them that the opening had to grab the audience and pull them into the story. Two wealthy patrons eventually show up and offer the girls life on a silver tray. They all sing “I Believe I Can Fly,” but after the song, they find out the promise of fame and fortune is all a lie. They decide that they should leave the big talker and strike out on their own, becoming the Spectacular Singing Waitresses complete with glitzy trays and aprons. The end song, “Twist and Shout,” is the opening of a big concert, merged with an original hip-hop lament.

This group did a great job with the project because they threw themselves into it with conviction and determination. They had the most fun out of any group and that light-hearted attitude showed up in their performance. They spent a lot of time on the dance numbers. Their storyline suffered a bit, but the excitement and precision of the dances moved it along.

In the words of Rubina, a student in the Theatre Two class, “I am now more aware of what it takes to write/produce/stage a musical and will consider that when viewing other shows. This insight should prove valuable throughout my life, and at the end of the day it was a learning experience that I will remember.”

Some of my other students made recommendations that will help me to perfect the approach, timeline, and requirements in the future. I am considering adding more musical watching time, selecting scenes that show how certain aspects of the story are handled by the professionals. By observing more musicals, the students will not only gain ideas to use in their produc-

tions but gain knowledge of the history of musical theatre. The timeline I used also needs to be extended from one month to two months and I really think I could give them a choice of using the three songs I pick and one of their own choosing. At the same time, I really liked the idea of challenging the students to work within certain limitations. It forced them to come up with creative solutions. Some students didn’t enjoy the restrictions but they all worked hard to find solutions to clarify storylines, make bold decisions, and incorporate the songs smoothly. I learned a lot as I moved around asking questions and making suggestions. The dynamic of working as a team of creators was an incredible lesson and many students commented on the fact that, after the exercise, they looked at musical theatre with fresh and more appreciative eyes.

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