

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by – MATTHEW ROBINSON – 2011 Churchill Fellow

THE GILBERT SPOTTISWOOD CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP to study
book-writing, composition and lyric-writing for musical theatre under
the mentorship of Stephen Schwartz - USA

I understand that the Churchill Trust may publish this Report, either in hard copy or on the internet or both, and consent to such a publication.

I indemnify the Churchill Trust against any loss, costs or damages it may suffer arising out of any claim or proceedings made against the Trust in respect of or arising out of the publication of any Report submitted to the Trust and which the Trust places on a website for access over the internet.

I also warrant that my Final Report is original and does not infringe the copyright of any person, or contain anything which is, or the incorporation of which into the Final Report is, actionable for defamation, a breach of any privacy law or obligation, breach of confidence, contempt of court, passing-off or contravention of any other private right or of any law.

Signed: Matthew Robinson

Dated: 12/12/11

INDEX

INTRODUCTION	PAGE 3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	PAGE 4
DIARY OF EVENTS	PAGE 5
REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 1	PAGE 9
STEPHEN SCHWARTZ – <i>STORY, STORY, STORY AND TONE</i>	PAGE 9
JACK DePALMA – <i>A DISCUSSION OF DRAMATICS</i>	PAGE 12
JERRY PATCH – <i>PLAY THE POLES</i>	PAGE 12
REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 2	PAGE 13
STEPHEN SCHWARTZ	PAGE 13
JACK DePALMA	PAGE 14
CONCLUSIONS – CONSTRUCTING A MUSICAL	PAGE 15
PREPARING THE STORY STRUCTURE	PAGE 15
WRITING SCENES	PAGE 18
WRITING SONGS	PAGE 18
READINGS	PAGE 19
FINAL TIPS	PAGE 20
RECOMMENDATIONS	PAGE 21

INTRODUCTION

Australia has no musical theatre writing courses. Therefore, the time-honoured adage applies: if you want to get better, surround yourself with people whose experience and skill level outweigh your own.

In 2009, following the World Premiere of my first musical *Metro Street* produced by the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Arts Asia Pacific and Power Arts, I embarked on a self-funded trip to London and New York City to observe the latest musical theatre developments. During this trip, a relationship with multi Grammy and Oscar-winning composer/lyricist Stephen Schwartz was cemented and this set the scene for my 2011 Churchill Fellowship experience.

In September 2011 I travelled to New York City for six weeks to be mentored by Stephen Schwartz using my second musical as a test case. I presented two readings at Playwrights Horizons featuring a combination of current Broadway performers and top local artists, with an audience comprised of Stephen Schwartz and a collection of Broadway producers and representatives from not-for-profit theatre companies. The first reading took place at the end of week one, followed by four weeks of rewriting, culminating in a second reading at the end of week five.

I would like to thank many times over both the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and Gilbert Spottiswood who is the namesake of this Sponsored Fellowship. Without both parties, my knowledge and my ability to share it with other Australian musical theatre writers would be at a distinct loss. Countless thanks go to Stephen Schwartz who has expanded my abilities in measurable and immeasurable ways. His generosity of spirit is truly something to behold. Thank you to Greg Schaffert for assisting the entire process, to Jack DePalma and Jerry Patch for allowing their feedback to be included in this document and to the members of the American musical theatre fraternity who were so willing to make space in their schedules to sit down and talk with me. Words and music are nothing without those who bring it to life and for that I thank Jenn Gambatese, Kevin Massey, Russell Fischer, Ellen Harvey, Fiona Choi, Tim Wright, Lindsay Northen and Joshua Stephen Kartes. Thank you also to Ken Mackenzie-Forbes for reminding me just in time that the Churchill Fellowship would be a perfect fit.

Finally, thank you to those who have supported my career so far, whether it be by listening to a song, seeing a show, providing feedback, emailing through my website, bestowing an award or indeed stepping forward and producing my work. These producers include Neil Gooding, Torben and Richelle Brookman, Power Arts, and Adam Cook on behalf of the State Theatre Company of South Australia. The information contained herein is due to a lot of people and I'm grateful to them all.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Name: Matthew Robinson

Address: 5/104 Alexandra St, St Kilda East, VIC, 3183.

Phone: 0402 487 911

Occupation: Composer/lyricist and actor.

Project Description:

I spent six weeks in New York City gaining insight into the writing and rewriting process for the book, music and lyrics of a musical under the mentorship of internationally renowned composer/lyricist Stephen Schwartz, using my second musical as a test case.

Highlights:

- Presenting two readings of my second musical, with a four-week rewriting process in between. The presentations took place at Playwrights Horizons, a highly regarded not-for-profit theatre company in Manhattan, with the assistance of Greg Schaffert from 321 Theatrical Management.
- Receiving detailed insight into the structure of a musical from Stephen Schwartz by analysing the successful and unsuccessful elements of my second musical.
- Receiving additional insight into writing for musical theatre from Jack DePalma, Jerry Patch and a collection of other Broadway producers and creatives.
- Watching nine Broadway musicals and comparing what I was incorporating into my rewrites with what I was seeing on Broadway stages.

Major lessons and conclusions:

- Musicals bear structural similarities to other theatrical forms, but they are inherently different and require specialised knowledge of structural, lyrical and narrative song-writing craftsmanship.
- Story structure is what lets most new musicals down.
- Focus must be given to: choosing the right idea, knowing your audience, creating one sentence that acts as the key phrase to hang the story from, song placement, a solid scenic breakdown, storyboarding, the tone of the piece, character wants, stakes, conflict, character arcs, making the dialogue and lyrics active, being specific to avoid cliché, focused clarity, economy of dialogue and lyric, and the use of rhyme.
- Australia does not have an industry for making new musicals. However, the Australia Council for the Arts has just completed its first two-year financial support of The Arts Centre Melbourne, Victorian Opera and Century Venues (representing New Musicals Australia) through its Music Theatre Initiative. In my experience on panels for New Musicals Australia this has created: an environment for new musicals to be tried out in front of audiences, an opportunity for writers to develop their craft, a community which discusses the art form and acknowledgement that musical theatre absolutely requires ongoing development support from government funding bodies. The Australia Council is now reviewing its funding for musical theatre development. The major imperative is that this funding does not disappear and that the Australia Council consults new musical writers and producers as to the best way to proceed.
- To pass on knowledge I have engaged in a number of discussions with Australian musical writing teams through the New Musicals Australia Writers Weekend and in one-on-one meetings back in Melbourne. I will outsource opportunities to workshop my new material with musical theatre students across Australia. Stephen Schwartz has also shown me what is possible when immense generosity of spirit is given to fellow artists at all times.

DIARY OF EVENTS

September 4th, 2011

ARRIVAL into New York City.

September 6th, 2011

GREG SCHAFFERT (*Producer, 321 Theatrical Management*)

Greg acted as a host for both readings, inviting guests, assisting with casting and helping provide legitimacy to those in the local industry. This first meeting was to discuss the piece itself, the timing of the first reading, the casting and the venue.

September 5th-12th, 2011

PREPARATION for the first reading.

Preparation for the Draft 3 reading with Kevin Massey, Jenn Gambatese, Russell Fischer, Ellen Harvey, Fiona Choi and Tim Wright. As the first Australian draft was set in Australia, we updated the libretto so it was set in New York City. Very little content was altered, the main changes were Australian sayings and descriptive nouns.

September 13th, 2011 (afternoon)

FIRST READING AT PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS (*Highly regarded not-for-profit theatre company*)

Reading of Draft 3 for an audience of thirteen people including:

Stephen Schwartz

Jack DePalma (Creative Director at NAMCO)

Pierce Cravens (Producer)

Jerry Patch (Director of Artistic Development at Manhattan Theatre Club)

Patrick Catullo (Theatrical Producer at Stone Productions, Inc.)

Greg Schaffert (Producer, 321 Theatrical Management)

September 13th, 2011 (evening)

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ (*Mentor. Composer/lyricist of Wicked, Pippin, Godspell, The Prince of Egypt*)

This was the thorough debrief of Draft 3. Details are in REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 1.

September 14th, 2011

MICHAEL BALLAM (*Founding General Director of Utah Festival of Opera and Musical Theatre*)

I met Michael by accident while watching Kevin Massey (who performed in our reading) go on in his understudy plot for the lead role in Memphis. We discussed his Festival activities.

September 15th, 2011

JACK DePALMA (*Creative Director at NAMCO, Fran and Barry Weissler's company*)

Debrief of Draft 3. Details are in REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 1.

September 16th, 2011

JERRY PATCH (*Director of Artistic Development at Manhattan Theatre Club, large not-for-profit theatre company*)

Debrief of Draft 3. Details are in REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 1.

September 19th, 2011

GREG SCHAFFERT (*Producer, 321 Theatrical Management*)

Meeting to discuss the feedback of creatives so far.

September 19th, 2011

JOSH FIEDLER (*Director of Creative Development at Aged In Wood Productions, co-producers of Avenue Q, In The Heights, American Idiot*)

Invitation to the second reading (Draft 4) for prospective feedback.

JOHN PINCKARD (*Producer, involved in American Idiot, amongst others*)

Invitation to the second reading (Draft 4) for prospective feedback.

September 20th, 2011

JENN GAMBATESE (*Broadway performer - Footloose, Hairspray, Tarzan*)

Jenn played one of the roles in the first reading. She is also an aspiring musical theatre book-writer and lyricist. We discussed Draft 3 at length, gaining insight from someone who was inside the presentation.

September 20th – 27th, 2011

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Various phone calls and emails to discuss the progress of the restructuring and re-storyboarding process.

September 21th, 2011

BOB ALWINE (*Associate Producer at Goodspeed Musicals, Connecticut – internationally renowned musical theatre company partly dedicated to producing new musicals*)

Invitation to the second reading (Draft 4) for prospective feedback.

September 22th, 2011

JOSHUA STEPHEN KARTES (*Musical Director/Pianist/Composer*)

I had met Joshua at the Festival of Voices in Hobart, Australia, in July 2011. Over dinner Joshua agreed to play for the second reading.

September 26th, 2011

REWRITES

After two weeks of wading through everyone's feedback, the new storyboard is complete and the rewrites begin in earnest.

PATRICK CATULLO (*Theatrical Producer at Stone Productions, Inc. – Patrick was responsible for developing Next To Normal from its New York Musical Theatre Festival beginnings to its Broadway debut*)

Debrief of Draft 3.

September 30th, 2011

JOSHUA STEPHEN KARTES

Rehearsal for the Draft 4 reading. Joshua is a musician with an incredible ear and wonderful style. He learnt to play the show with no sheet music, using his own hieroglyphics and listening to me play through the songs. He also played it five times better than I ever have.

October 6th – 10th, 2011

PREPARATION for the second reading.

Preparation for the Draft 4 reading with Kevin Massey, Russell Fischer, Ellen Harvey, Fiona Choi, Tim Wright, Lindsay Northen and Joshua Stephen Kartes.

October 11th, 2011

SECOND READING AT PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

Reading of Draft 4 for an audience of thirty people including:

Stephen Schwartz

Ken Cerniglia (Dramaturg and Literary Manager at Disney Theatrical Group)

Wayne Barker (Artistic Associate of New Musicals and Composer In Residence at New York Theatre Workshop)

Jane Caplow (Director of Creative Development at Davenport Theatrical Enterprises, current producers of Godspell on Broadway)

Jack DePalma (Creative Director at NAMCO)

John Pinckard (Producer)

Josh Fiedler (Aged in Wood Productions)

Greg Schaffert (Producer, 321 Theatrical Management)

October 12th, 2011

JASON EAGAN (*Artistic Director of Ars Nova, a theatre company dedicated to developing new writers*)

Discussion of writing processes for new musicals.

KEN CERNIGLIA (*Dramaturg and Literary Manager, Disney Theatrical Group*)

Debrief of Draft 4.

October 13th, 2011

JACK DePALMA (*Creative Director at NAMCO*)

Debrief of Draft 4. Details are in REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 2.

October 14th, 2011

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Debrief of Draft 4. Details are in REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 2. This was the final meeting with Stephen before my departure.

October 15th, 2011

GREG SCHAFFERT (*Producer, 321 Theatrical Management*)

Debrief of Draft 4.

October 17th, 2011

DANIEL POSENER (*Director of Business Affairs, Disney Theatrical Group*)

Discussion of writing processes for new musicals.

JOSH FIEDLER (*Director of Creative Development, Aged In Wood*)

Short debrief of Draft 4.

JERRY PATCH (*Director of Artistic Development, Manhattan Theatre Club*)

Final thank you for Jerry's generosity of feedback.

PATRICK CATULLO (*Theatrical Producer at Stone Productions, Inc.*)

Final thank you and goodbye before departure.

October 18th, 2011

DEPARTURE from New York City.

REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 1

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ – *STORY, STORY, STORY AND TONE*

Three hours after the first reading at Playwrights Horizons, I was sitting in Stephen Schwartz's Manhattan apartment. As always, he was incredibly generous with his feedback, speaking honestly and with pinpoint clarity. The following dot points are a combination of his comments and my interpretation of them.

- **DON'T PLAY PIANO FOR YOUR OWN READINGS.** You won't be able to feel the energy in the room or feel the response of the audience. The whole reason we invite people to readings and previews is to **SEE WHAT NEEDS TO BE FIXED THROUGH A FRESH PAIR OF EYES.** We sense through them what is flying or dying.
- You have six characters, but currently five of them are given equal weighting. We as the audience need to know **WHO ARE WE ROOTING FOR?** Who do we want to see succeed? Who is our protagonist?
- While you need to let us know who we're rooting for the most, it is possible to give the remaining characters something to want for and have them make decisions that will **DIRECTLY AFFECT EACH OTHER.**
- If the audience is going to sit and invest in this story for the next two hours, then one of the characters is going to have to step forward and let us know that they **WANT SOMETHING REALLY, REALLY BADLY.** Something has to be at stake and, you guessed it, others will have to try and stop them from getting what they want. Traditionally, the want/s of this protagonist will be reflected in the second or third song of the show. In this case it may be a collective 'I Want' number, like in *A Chorus Line* where twenty-five people collectively sing, "God, I hope I get it."
- These characters have been working together for a long time. So, let us know who desperately wants to stay and who desperately wants to get out, and if they want to get out, let them sing "I have got to get out of here." i.e. **BE CLEAR.** Also, this brings up the need to **BE ECONOMICAL.** In a musical, moments of extreme drama, passion, comedy, excitement, discovery are musicalised, so if there's dialogue it needs to get to the point clearly and succinctly. Likewise, each lyric needs to have a specific purpose.
- One of your characters is accused of making choices which affect the others adversely, but then she turns out not to be guilty of the accusations. Let her be guilty. Let there be **CONFLICT.** Let the others have something to rail against. Likewise, if some of the characters want to leave their jobs, make them contractually bound to stay. **MAKE IT INCREDIBLY DIFFICULT FOR**

YOUR CHARACTERS TO GET WHAT THEY WANT. Let their conflicting wants play out against each other.

- At times, these characters seem to be in a workplace flush with money. At other times, they seem to be on a shoestring budget. Clean that up. Make it CONSISTENT.
- The current third song, which is your I Want song, is poorly set up. The drama and tension which would make it more successful occurs in the scene following, so SET UP YOUR SONGS. The payoff comes from the dramatic tension leading up to that moment.
- Who these people are at the outset of the show should not be who they are at its conclusion. That is the point of a CHARACTER ARC. In this case, there is a vast opportunity for the characters to have masks and then let the audience slowly be allowed to see behind these masks.
- In line with knowing the wants and character arcs of each individual, you have two characters in the story who have the potential to be mirror images of each other – one wants to stay in the job, one wants to leave. So as the story progresses let their feelings towards the job shift so that the one who wants to stay ends up totally okay with leaving, and the one who wants out the most ends up terrified that it's over. Moreover, let these wants be magnified because of their interactions with each other.
- One device that is simple but effective is having a character appear to be one thing and then having the audience discover they are the opposite. Equally interesting can be having a character want something at the opening of a show and having them realise through the course of events that it isn't what they truly wanted at all.
- One of your characters, though quite funny, has no direct impact on the group at all, so why is he there? Even comic relief characters, if they are well written, do something that affects the story. Let your characters be ACTIVE. More than that, let your songs be active, let your lyrics be active, let your characters be active in pursuing their wants and overcoming their obstacles.
- Be crafty, not excessive with your RHYMING. There is a danger in sacrificing precision of meaning for rhymes. BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF. Take a step back and honestly assess if you have forced the phrasing of a lyric in order to achieve a rhyme. Excessive rhyming suggests the character is intelligent, self-aware or being artificial. It could also be that the piece you are constructing is quite 'arch' (e.g. A Little Night Music by Sondheim). Brutal honesty tends to rhyme less. Consider less internal rhyme the more real a situation gets.

This is an example from my second musical, occurring in Act Two when emotions are spilling over:

WE'RE REPRESSED AND TOO CONGESTED
BY ONE ANOTHER'S CRASS CONCLUSIONS.
WE DESERVE TO BE ARRESTED
FOR THE CRIME OF MASS DELUSIONS.

The sense is unclear here in favour of the rhymes. Crass conclusions and mass delusions is clearly forced. The following is an example Stephen felt that worked:

CHARACTER 1
MAYBE A DOCTOR'S WHAT YOU NEED.

CHARACTER 2
MAYBE A.A. IS MORE YOUR SPEED.

CHARACTER 1
YET SOMEWHERE DEEP INSIDE YOU KNOW I'M BRILLIANT.
SO DEEP THAT IT'S TOO MUCH TO BEAR.

CHARACTER 2
SO DEEP THAT IT'S NOT EVEN THERE.

CHARACTER 1
HOW DO YOU SLEEP AT NIGHT?

CHARACTER 2
I'M RESILIENT.

Here the language is more natural, arguably due to the fact that it's conversational, but the point remains the same. If the audience spends ten seconds working out what the lyric meant, that's another minute or so it will take to get them back on side and back in the story.

- TONE is the hardest thing to get right in a show, but you know when it's not right. The tone of your show is currently uneven. For example, the song that opens Act Two does not sound musically like the rest of the show. *Les Misérables* always sounds and feels like *Les Misérables*. The same goes for *Hairspray*, *The Book of Mormon*, *Next to Normal*. Evenness of tone makes the audience feel at ease. Unevenness of tone will distract the audience, even if they don't know why, but the result will be the same - they won't invest in the story and they won't leave the theatre talking about it, thinking about it and spreading good word of mouth.

JACK DePALMA – A DISCUSSION OF DRAMATICS

Jack DePalma is a Creative Director at NAMCO which is Fran and Barry Weissler's company. He recently completed a two-year term as Play Development Director at The Old Globe Theater in San Diego. We met two days after the first reading. Again, these are his comments combined with my interpretation of what they meant to me.

- The DRAMATICS aren't there. What took place in the story happened too easily. Set up the issues everyone has with each other, so that when the bust up comes, it's like fireworks as opposed to a flashlight. Let some of the characters withhold information from the others. It doesn't have to be entirely true to what you think happens in life. Far more shocking things take place than you could possibly imagine. It doesn't have to seem realistic to you. If it's going to help your story, let one of your characters be cruel. Think of what could go wrong and let it go wrong. You've set the end of Act One climax at a public event, but the event itself is not that big a deal by American standards. Set it at a more high profile event.
- CLARIFY the plot points. If two characters used to be married, let us know how long, why did they break up, when did they break up? Is there a familial tie within the group? Let us know.
- The premise for your show is one we know: people who present one way, but are something else behind closed doors. Don't rely on that premise being the only driver of the action or comedy. What makes these people different from the other versions of these shows we've seen before?
- Make it a one-act show. This should be fun, snappy and over in 90 minutes.

JERRY PATCH – PLAY THE POLES

Jerry Patch is Director of Artistic Development at Manhattan Theatre Club one of Manhattan's larger not-for-profit theatre companies.

- The joy of this show is seeing public figures who are entirely different behind closed doors. Rough them up. In a reference to the planet – PLAY THE POLES.
- You have one character significantly older than the rest. She provides you with an opportunity to express the concerns of an entirely different generation. Use her.
- The word playwright comes from the word wrought – shaping and moulding something. Enjoy getting your hands dirty.

REWRITING A MUSICAL – NOTES FROM READING NUMBER 2

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

- You have solved your TONE, overall STRUCTURE and CHARACTER development.
- One of your characters is still more interesting than we're currently getting. He is the most potentially explosive character you have. Let's see him explode.
- One of your characters is an amateur songwriter, but we only see him doing it once. Try to weave that into the storyline elsewhere, or else it feels like a device.
- The opening number goes on a little long, for five and a half minutes in fact, then you introduce your 'heart' character devoid of music. Make the opening number a little shorter and introduce this heart character within the body of the song.
- Your 'I Want' song deals with a career want and a love want, but the song comes after a dialogue moment only dealing with career. There is an opportunity to let the song come in two parts; the first half after a dialogue moment relating to his (lack of) love life and then the second half after the following scene which is a short dialogue moment relating to career and self-worth. Try it as an option.
- The older character's storyline could do with more STAKES. At the commencement of the show, we know she is quitting her profession at the end of the year. What if she wasn't quitting? What if the events within the show were crucial to her moving up within her profession. Make her WANT something bigger so that all that transpires increases her desperation.
- You have two or three plot points which are good, but don't land – the audience aren't getting it. When an important development is revealed, don't be poetic or obscure. Let us know.
- When the crisis hits, you can tell the audience is loving it, so let's have some more of it. Three dialogue moments of hilarious crisis could absolutely be expanded to five or six.
- You have moved forward as a lyricist. You are very used to rhyming at the end of lines with occasional internal rhyme. However, rhyming at the end of a line, but not having the rhyme be the end of the statement, is great. For example:

BOBBY, HE'S SO CRAZY.
BOBBY'S ALWAYS HIGH,
BUT BOBBY SAYS THE THINGS
YOU ONLY WISH YOU COULD, YES I

MAKE IT EASY FOR YOU,
SO EASY FOR YOU.

- You are still over-rhyming in one particular song. There are so many rhymes with one particular word that it is distracting and I lose the sense of what the character is saying. This is a breakdown moment for the character. Would there really be so much internal rhyming?
- Two of your songs take too long to understand what the song is DOING. You are in danger of losing your audience for a minute or so, which means it will take five minutes to get them back! GET TO THE POINT. Make the song ACTIVE upon the other character in the scene. Self-pity is difficult to write, difficult for an actor to play and impossible for an audience to invest in.

JACK DePALMA

- You have achieved an extraordinary amount of progress.
- Condensing the show into one act was the right decision.
- The piece moves rapidly, it is funny, the dramatics are there, so how about now we find out more about the characters themselves. Give us just a little more info or where they are now and what has built up between them over the years. Each character has a stake in the business, so even if some of them want to get out, let's see how serious this is for them. What have they given up to stay here?
- Some plot points are a little unclear because they are set up once and the actual ramifications come a number of scenes later. Can you infuse these points subtly into the scenes in between?

CONCLUSIONS – CONSTRUCTING A MUSICAL

This experience has changed the way I view musical theatre writing. Here in Australia we have some very passionate exponents of the art form, but few guide posts, few writers setting bench marks and very few conversations taking place about the craft of how to make a well-structured musical. My experience in Q&A forums and on panels for New Musicals Australia this year has aided my hope that the number of these conversations will continue to increase.

We work in a speculative business, but as long as there are producers (albeit mainly in the USA and England) willing to put money behind new projects, we need book-writers, composers and lyricists who are skilled enough to make audiences feel something, to suspend their disbelief long enough to affect their lives in small and large ways.

Amongst the many points listed here, my main lesson is *story, story, story*. If you have a talent for lyrics or melodies or concepts or dialogue then congratulations to you and write till your heart's content, but if you don't spend countless hours making sure you have a story with a great structure you will waste (though I know nothing is ever truly wasted) countless hours coming up with brilliant material that will never make it to a professional stage, or at least *shouldn't* make it to a professional stage. Winnie Holzman and Stephen Schwartz spent a year working on the structure of *Wicked* before they wrote one line. It's a serious business. I've relied on passion and good instincts for a few years, but it's time to get good at my *job*.

So, here's a summary of what I'll ask myself before I start writing my next musical. It's worth noting that most of these notes are about preparing story structure as that is where most fatal errors seem to be made. This is by no means every answer. There is no definition of what makes great art or what will make millions of dollars, but this is what I've taken away from my development so far and what may save me numerous hours at the computer or the piano in future.

PREPARING THE STORY STRUCTURE

- Have a great idea. If someone you don't know well isn't excited or intrigued by a one-sentence description of the premise, then why should a producer or theatregoer? If adapting an existing work like a book or movie, *get the rights*. This may be time-consuming, but it's imperative. Google the publisher if it's a book, or the production company if it's a movie. Better still, if you can get through to the original writer by finding out their email, go for it. There are plenty of stories of musical writers who cut the process of gaining rights by 90% simply by contacting the writer directly.
- Ask yourself, does the subject matter sing? Not everything does.

- While you're deciding which idea or existing work to choose, *make sure this is one you're in love with*, because you'll be married to it for an inordinately long time. It takes seven years on average to get a musical onto a professional stage somewhere. Often, it will take longer. Sometimes, it will never get onto a professional stage at all.
- Flesh out your idea and *be specific*. What is the time, place and surrounding circumstances in the world that's being imagined or adapted? Research it, get to know it: what it looks like, smells like and importantly, what it *sounds* like. Consistency of tone is essential. Hairspray always sounds like Hairspray. The Phantom of the Opera always sounds like The Phantom of the Opera. For that matter, Seinfeld always sounds like Seinfeld. I tend to ask what music my characters would listen to.
- Know who your audience is. This helps when pitching it to an eventual producer and definitely helps keep the tone of the piece in check. Is it a children's show? Is it a children's show that adults can appreciate? Is it a comic romp for baby boomers who love the music of ABBA? If your answer is 'everyone' you may need to re-think, or congratulate yourself and call Cameron Mackintosh immediately.
- Flesh out the characters. Put yourself in their shoes and answer the questions the actor playing the role will one day have to answer: Where am I in my life right now? Where have I been? What are significant moments from my childhood? What are my likes/dislikes? Who are the important people in my life right now? And of course, *what do I want more than anything in the world right now?* There are numerous acting texts that provide rich details of these important questions, but I find there is no substitute for actually going through what the character is feeling as I write their dialogue, lyrics and melodies.
- A note on character writing: The amount an audience cares about a character is directly proportional to the amount that character cares about something or someone else.
- Decide what you want this piece to say. What are the themes? Is it set against some form of historical backdrop that should permeate the colour of the writing? Once this has all been decided, work out one simple sentence that crystallises what the show is about. Finding this key phrase is critical as it is the line upon which every scene and song will hang.
- Choose the events that are going to be presented, i.e., prepare a scenic breakdown. This is a huge undertaking and of course it will be revisited time and time again. Consider:

*Which character or characters are the audience rooting for?
 What do all my lead characters want very badly? A lot has to be at stake.
 Which characters are stopping others from getting what they want?
 How will they go about this? Make every character ACTIVE.
 How will the characters change from the beginning to the end of the story?
 Mysteries and surprises are your best friend. What are the characters
 withholding from each other?
 What is the most economical way to tell this story? Pace is important.
 You're probably going to want a love story in there somewhere.
 Pack it with CONFLICT. We are voyeuristic creatures. We want to see things
 go wrong.*

- Pick your song points. There's no substitute for good instincts with this, but the general statement is – musicalise the emotionally heightened moments of the story. You'll almost certainly need a fantastic opening number that lets us know very quickly where we are, what style of show we're watching (the tone) and who the key players are in the story. Secondly, a number where one or more characters step forward to tell us what they *want* will be fairly helpful within the first three songs. From then on, let the exposition be swift and subtle and let the conflict begin.
- Now for the *storyboard*. The recommendation from Stephen Schwartz is to get a piece of cardboard (or cork board) thick enough to put a push pin through. Then get a pack of white and a pack of blue smaller pieces of card that you can write a sentence or so on. Each piece of card represents a song beat or a story beat. I use story beats in white and song beats in blue. For example:

Blue card: The town rejoices as the prodigal son returns home.

White card: The older brother verbally attacks the younger brother for his follies.

White card: The father chastises his oldest son for judging the younger brother.

Blue card: The female townsfolk perform their traditional dance of celebration.

Blue card: The returned son is jubilant, but privately expresses he has a secret that can never be shared.

This is an example of an opening number. One of the great things about using a storyboard for a musical is you can see the show's architecture. Too many blue cards in a row or too many white cards in a row (if it's a book musical with dialogue) is likely to be problematic. If it's a sung-through piece then they'll all be blue of course, but most importantly, no two cards should ever have the same sentence on them. At this stage it's valuable to add the statement *never let the audience get ahead of you*. If my mind ever wanders in the theatre I try to hit rewind and work out what was happening in the story

that wasn't gripping me. Usually, it's that I could see what was coming, there was no new information or there was not enough conflict.

WRITING SCENES

- Always keep in mind the one sentence you came up with near the beginning of the process. What is this show about? Every scene and song will hang from that, so if the scene you're writing isn't *actively moving towards that (or purposely away from it)*, ditch it.
- Know the characters you are writing for. What is their language, their inflections, their idiosyncrasies? What is their voice?
- What do the characters in the scene *want* from each other? Make them go for what they want. Make what they want *directly conflict* with what the other person wants.
- Not every scene needs to have a beginning and an ending. There doesn't always need to be an entrance and an exit. Start a scene five minutes into the conversation and see what happens.
- Don't let the audience get ahead of you. This will become clearer when the material is being performed in front of other people, but if there is enough *at stake* and you don't signpost the coming events, you'll be in a good place.
- *Be economical*. Chances are there's a song coming up which will blow a character's feelings wide open, so don't chitchat about it for pages on end. The audience has come to see a musical. Your scenes are critical, but they shouldn't contain the majority of the information or emotional detail. Remember the storyboard architecture. Too many white cards and you're not in a musical anymore.
- *Be specific*. Allow unique character traits and details particular to the time and place enhance the story.

WRITING SONGS

This is such a personal and subjective activity. It's interesting to note that in all the time I spent with Stephen Schwartz, he never commented on a melody or chord progression. There were lots of comments on the purpose of the song and lyrical choices, but it makes me wonder whether songwriters should tell other songwriters how to write a tune. So, the following notes are what I've been taught about writing songs outside of using melodic instinct.

- Be clear what the purpose of the song is. Know what you need it to *do*, where you need it to *go*. Let it start in one place for the character and end in another.
- Don't feel trapped into having dialogue and song appear separately. Play with the form, let songs be interspersed with economical underscored scenes, let characters interject through lyric.
- Let the *tone* of the song be consistent with that character and the overall world of the show.
- *Find a new way to explore old subject matter.* The way you tell this love story, ancient grudge, magical journey or party piece is going to be different to anyone else. So unless it's pastiche, make sure you haven't heard it before. It can be tuneful of course, but lyrics that talk about sadness as deep as an ocean, love that never ends or pain that cuts like a knife is not enough. Look at the topic or the moment you're about to musicalise and *find a new way in*. What is *unique* and *specific* that this character can express? The audience won't get ahead of you if their ears are kept fresh.
- Don't let the fact that it's a song fool you into thinking it needs to be poetic. Poetry is poetry, a lyric is a lyric, and a lyric for musical theatre is rarely a string of pretty words, especially in the 21st century where we are constantly bombarded with stimulus. Make it clever, make it heart-wrenching, but make it *active*.
- Be inventive with the use of rhyme. ABAB stanzas are fine, but consider internal rhyme. Consider rhyme that isn't the end of a statement, but the middle of a phrase that continues. Also, avoid being lazy. Imperfect rhyme like 'own' and 'home' has its place if it's right for the character or style, but if not, chances are it will sound like you're just not trying hard enough.
- Someone who speaks Swahili should be able to listen to a song and get a sense of what it's about. Otherwise, the music is not supporting what the lyrics are trying to achieve.
- Get someone to sing the song. Successful musicals inevitably have one or more songs that people love to perform. Find good people who will sing your songs in a public setting so you can hear how an audience reacts to them.

READINGS

Once you've completed a first draft, hold a reading. Get a number of actor/singers around a table or standing at music stands reading and singing through the whole piece. Of course, there's no need to wait till the whole draft is complete. Read through the first half an hour or first act amongst friends to get a

sense of whether the structure is working, the tone is right and whether the people who read it are enjoying playing the action they've been given.

Have some people present who aren't in the reading itself. These are the people through whose ears you will hear the shortcomings in the writing. It will become obvious if that plot point isn't clear enough or if that scene overstays its welcome. Sense if the audience is *feeling something* and if they're excited by the project.

Don't play piano for, or be an actor in, the reading. You won't sense the room and that's what you're there to do.

FINAL TIPS

Don't be precious about the work. Be willing to cut anything and everything to benefit the project. Likewise, avoid working with a lyricist, composer or book-writer who is unnecessarily precious about their work. They could hold you up, tie you down, or cost you the entire project by coming to creative loggerheads, effectively shelving years of work.

If you can, get representation. An agent or a manager that speaks for you speaks volumes about your skill level. However, choose wisely, get personal references, follow instincts and *always* have a lawyer look over any contract. It might cost one thousand dollars now, but it may save one million dollars by the time you're Andrew Lloyd Webber.

You are your own small business. Know what you're selling. Meet anyone and everyone associated with the business. Call it networking or call it loving the industry you're in, but you absolutely never know which producer, director, musical director, choreographer, designer, actor, writer, dresser, agent, general manager, company manager, stage manager, technician, instrumentalist, usher, marketing consultant, publicist, personal assistant, journalist, lecturer or housemate is going to turn around in ten years and help you in some way that will change your life.

And keep writing. And try to avoid starting sentences with and.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I used to chalk up comments like “We don’t have a musical theatre industry in Australia” to a lack of optimism. What I now realise is, it’s true. That doesn’t mean we can’t have one or don’t have a handful of people working tirelessly to create one, but if the Oxford Dictionary definition of industry is correct, “*economic activity concerned with the processing of raw materials and manufacture of goods in factories,*” then Australia has a long way to go.

So, we don’t make many musicals here. Neither do many countries. The New York City food chain of Broadway producing houses, independent producers, philanthropic support, numerous not-for-profit theatre companies supported by the government and private endowments, Broadway productions, Off-Broadway productions, Off-Off Broadway productions, constant new musical readings and live cabaret venues all suggest the same thing – there is a lot of love out there for the art form and *someone* thinks they can make money out of it. It’s true that Manhattan’s musical making machine is aided by a population of 8.3 million in New York City itself and the current yearly international and domestic tourist turnover of 48 million people.

Does this mean all we lack is an enormous population? No. What Australian musical theatre writers lack, apart from access to training, is strategy – the kind of strategy Australian producers have used to create the big budget musicals either made or tried out here in the past decade such as Doctor Zhivago, King Kong (forthcoming), An Officer and a Gentleman (forthcoming), Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Dusty, Shout and The Boy From Oz. The notable point amongst these is that none have original music and lyrics by an Australian, though the books (the structure and dialogue) for the jukebox musicals on the list were written or co-written by Australians. When it comes to smaller budget, totally Australian-written musicals, there are only a handful of artists gaining ground.

What to do? The Australia Council for the Arts has just completed its first two-year financial support of The Arts Centre Melbourne, Victorian Opera and Century Venues (representing New Musicals Australia) to workshop and develop new Australian musicals through its Music Theatre Initiative. In my experience on panels for New Musicals Australia, their program has created real opportunities for writers to develop their craft by exposing the work to a solid creative team, to actors and most importantly, to audiences. It has begun to harness a community that needs to discuss the art form in a public setting. It has also made clear to me the absolute need for the Australian Government’s arts funding body to ensure its ongoing support for the development of new Australian musical theatre. The Australia Council is currently reviewing how to proceed and it’s imperative that this funding does not disappear, that the Music and Theatre boards consult new musical theatre writers and producers as to the best way to proceed.

This has been New Musicals Australia’s model so far:

- Snapshot Presentations – Providing a space where new musicals can present thirty minutes of a show for a panel of practicing industry professionals, open to audiences.
- Workshop Presentations – Providing shows with resources for one week to do a workshop (with payment to actors and creatives) resulting in a reading or semi-staged presentation at the end, open to audiences.
- Writers Weekends – A two-day affair where there are Q&A panels with writers, Snapshot Presentations and a concert of Australian songwriters.

In addition to this, it's my belief that we need to develop relationships with overseas writers, the peak bodies that represent them and the producers who are interested in new work. Ideally this would include private and corporate involvement, not unlike ANZ Bank's support for the Rob Guest Endowment.

Finally, what will I do with my knowledge gained? I have engaged in a number of discussions with Australian musical writing teams through the New Musicals Australia Writers Weekends and in one-on-one meetings back in Melbourne. I will directly contact the writers I've met with to pass on this report and I will outsource opportunities to share and workshop my new material with musical theatre students across Australia. One of the greatest things I walk away with from this trip is Stephen Schwartz's generosity of spirit. It has inspired me to always be as available as possible to fellow writers and artists, especially those at the beginning of their careers.