

Stephen Schwartz on Musicals and His Strategies for Making Musicals

This PDF archive file includes

SECTION 1 – Past, Present, and Future of Musicals

SECTION 2 – Other Songwriters

SECTION 3 – Music or Lyrics Preferences

SECTION 4 – Film vs. Stage Musical

SECTION 5 – Starting a Musical

SECTION 6 – Musical Writing Strategies

SECTION 7 – Collaboration

SECTION 8 – Lyrics

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following questions and answers are from the archive of the StephenSchwartz.com Forum.

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SECTION 1 – Past, Present, and Future of Musicals

The Future of Amateur Productions

Question:

What's your view on Amateur (Volunteer) musical societies and the role they play? Will they still exist in 10 years time given the high costs involved in staging productions, the time taken for new material to be released to amateurs and the increase in professional touring productions? [question sent from Ireland]

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I would expect there will always be amateur musical societies. They are certainly thriving in the States, despite the obstacles you mention. Some of the best productions I have seen of some of my shows, including a huge show like CHILDREN OF EDEN, have been by amateur groups.

New Show/Old Music: Dragging songs into a story

Question:

The new trend in musical theatre of taking existing music and writing a show around it (Mamma Mia! and Moving Out, as examples) is slightly disturbing to me. I can't see how writing a show to fit what are usually pop songs written independently from a story can be as satisfying and good story telling as a musical written as a whole. I have to admit that I love singing along with the Mamma Mia sound track, but I cannot honestly form an opinion of such shows until I have actually seen one. I am curious to know what you think, being in the business of writing musicals yourself.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I agree with you that it is very difficult to construct a satisfying "book show" using songs not originally written to tell that story. That's why very few of them succeed. Remember that MAMMA MIA has succeeded by making fun of its story -- when they tried to do the show seriously in previews in London, it didn't work at all, and it was only when they started kidding the premise that it worked. I haven't seen MOVIN' OUT yet (though I have heard positive reports about it), but it is a dance concert, so the story doesn't have to function much more than the story ever does in a ballet (how cogent do you think the "book" is for THE NUTCRACKER, for instance?)

On the other hand, attempts to make a new story out of Stephen Sondheim's songs, for example -- in PUTTING IT TOGETHER and MARRY ME A LITTLE -- even though devised by very talented people, have not really worked. I have seen a couple of similar attempts with my songs, and again, I feel it is a very difficult feat to pull off. As a writer, I feel it is much less work, frankly, simply to write new songs for a new show. But I can understand how directors and producers, and other people who aren't songwriters but are looking to do a new musical, might be attracted by the idea of organizing the songs of a composer they like into some kind of story. To me, it would be better for them to try to come up with an interesting revue -- like AIN'T MISBEHAVIN' or AND THE WORLD GOES ROUND -- and not try to drag the songs kicking and screaming into a story. So anyway, that's my opinion, for whatever it's worth. Thanks for asking, Stephen Schwartz

Rock Musicals

Question:

What is your opinion of using authentic rock music in the theatre? Has it ever been done properly? Does it work? Did "Tommy" for example, sound better on B'Way or when the Who was bashing it out in 1970? Who are the leading composers of "rock opera" or "rock theatre"?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The issue of rock music and rock songs in the theatre is an interesting one. First of all, rock songs are to a large extent based on repetition -- the return to a repeated chorus, for instance -- whereas theatre songs are essentially trying to move action or character development forward so that the audience is in a different place at the end of the song than when it started. True, I have done songs with repeated hooks ("Corner of the Sky" or "No Time at All" from PIPPIN for example), but you can't get away with it too frequently in a show or the songs start to stop the action too often. Another consideration is the sound of the music and the fact that in an "authentic" live rock performance, you can't really understand the lyrics unless you already know the songs. So the mix and balance of music to vocals is of necessity different in the theatre. So in TOMMY for example, it's not really a matter of Broadway being better than the Who or worse, but that it has different story-telling requirements. I have recently seen an off-Broadway performance-art-style show, HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH, which has authentic (and I thought very good) rock music; the trade-off was that you couldn't understand most of the lyrics. In this particular case, the show worked without it, but in shows where major plot and character points are being advanced in the songs, this would be a real problem. So it's kind of a compromise -- use of rock instrumentation and musical genres (as in RENT), but use of theatre song structure and sound balance. Of course, this is all only my personal take on it, but that's how I see it at this time. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Translating Pop/Rock to the Stage

Question:

What aspects of rock/pop music translate most easily to the stage, and why? What aspects translate least easily, and why?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In my opinion, the most effective part of pop/rock music on stage is the energy and the infectiousness of the rhythm. The thing that doesn't translate well is a song structure that relies on repetition and repeated "hook" choruses, because stage songs have to be constantly moving forward dramatically. The generic quality of many pop lyrics also doesn't work well on stage, where specificity of character is vital. As an over-simplification, I think what works well are theatre lyrics set to pop/rock music.

Shows in Competition

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, While viewing the latest Broadway version of "Jesus Christ Superstar", I couldn't help but be reminded of Godspell, especially since JCS now has a contemporary look and feel in regard to its stage design and costumes. I had often wondered what you thought about such alternate presentations of the same subjects that you have tackled. I have heard recently that there are two other HUNCHBACK shows in progress. As a writer, do you view these as "healthy competition", or as new and different approaches to the same material?

As a fan of both, I have always felt GODSPELL was the happy, friendly version, with JCS being the darker, meaner approach. I happen to think there is a nice balance between the two. Did it concern you at all that both Jesus stories were originally presented at about the same time (in the early seventies)? If I recall correctly, both even had concurrent chart hits ("Day By Day" and " I Don't Know How To Love Him").

Would it have been more of a nuisance if someone else had written a musical about Charlemagne's son at the same time you presented Pippin? Here's to an eventual resurrection of GODSPELL when it also reaches its thirtieth anniversary. All the best, Tony

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Tony: I have never felt that JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR and GODSPELL were in competition -- they are such totally different shows. Both have often been running simultaneously in cities, and if anything, I think they may actually help one another commercially because the comparison of the two approaches is interesting. The HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME issue is different -- I do think the presence and success of the French version (NOTRE DAME DE PARIS) and its production in Las Vegas and upcoming London production may have influenced Disney not to go ahead with the English-language version of DER GLOCKNER VON NOTRE DAME. And I can't really blame them. That's not a subject you'd want to see two musicals of, and there's only so different one's approach can be. It's sort of like the way the Lloyd Webber PHANTOM OF THE OPERA obliterated the chances of the Kopit-Yeston PHANTOM from coming to Broadway (though they have had a very successful life for that show in regional theatres here in the States.) It's interesting you should ask about PIPPIN -- the year PIPPIN opened on Broadway, there had already been two other musicals open about young-men-in-search-of-themselves (DUDE and HURRY, HARRY.) We were worried that we would feel "de trop" by the time we got there, but of course, that didn't happen. I guess the basic lesson is that if your show works, it works, and it doesn't really matter what anybody else is doing. Thanks for asking. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

What has happened and what will be the future?

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, this is not a question aimed directly at your work specifically. But I'd really like to know your opinion: what has happened to the world of 2-D animated musical comedies? Disney, obviously, gave stature to this art form and so has Dreamworks. It started with THE LITTLE MERMAID back in 1989 and continued throughout the 90's. But at some point, their popularity fizzled out and have now become abandoned. Why? I've heard some say that animated musicals became like Happy Meals; you knew what you were going to get. But was it because they were being made yearly and got into people's faces too much? What has happened to them? Animation has been one of the last safe houses for Musicals and to see them go makes me wonder: is Broadway next? Will there be a time when people

loose interest in musical theatre entirely? I'm deeply sad to see such a wondrous thing die out. I hope one day the love for animated musicals is rekindled again. Thank you for your time and talent.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I wouldn't be worrying too much about the death of the musical. The Broadway theatre just had its most profitable season in memory, and there are more and more instances of producers both in New York and in regional theatres around the country being willing to take a chance on new up-and-coming composers and lyricists. So it seems that live musical theatre is actually healthier right now than it has been in decades.

In terms of the 2-D animated musical, however, I would say that you are correct that it is dead for now. I would say that some of the reason is exactly what you cited -- they became predictable. And in general, the new technology of CGI animation seems fresher to contemporary audiences. But these things go in cycles. First of all, I wouldn't be surprised to see some CGI animated musicals; and of course, there has begun to be some interest from the studios, again for the first time in decades, in live action movie musicals. I'm actually currently working on one myself. And eventually, perhaps as happened in the 90's with the Ashman/Menken movies, the cycle will change and people will want to see 2-D animated musicals again. The forms of musicals and the media in which they are presented will go through ebbs and flows of popularity. But there always seems to be an audience ready to see a good musical if one comes its way, so as I say, I wouldn't be too worried about the extinction of musicals just yet. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

The Content or Lack Thereof of Today's Shows

Question – [question not available]

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: There is nothing that bores me more than "being entertained". I personally find shows that are just meant to be a lot of "fun" singing and dancing so tedious that I try to avoid them at all costs. That's why my list of favorite musicals would include shows like "King and I", "My Fair Lady", "Fiddler", "Sweeney Todd", "Gypsy", "Sunday in the Park", etc. I don't mind a show without a ton of philosophical content if it really makes me feel something or care about the characters. But smiley people singing and tap dancing -- that's my version of "No Exit." Obviously I'm not in the majority, but it's how I feel, since you asked. Enjoy your trip to New York. Best, Stephen

Schwartz on Parody Musicals

Question:

As you're a creator of a popular traditional book musical, what do you think of all the parody musicals that are open? The Producers, Drowsy Chaperone, Fame Becomes Me, Spamalot, Curtains...

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Some of them I like better than others. I am a huge fan of "The Drowsy Chaperone", which I found clever and charming, also (for obvious reasons) of "Bat Boy", less so of some of the others. I have to say I am really tired of musicals that make fun of musicals because the writers aren't good enough to write a real musical. (I do not include "Drowsy Chaperone" in that category, obviously.) But it's always harder to do something than to make fun of it, a fact that seems to escape many critics (but why should this be different?) Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

[note: Stephen's son, Scott Schwartz, directed Bat Boy]

The Hobbit - A Broadway Musical

Question:

After becoming a Wicked fanatic (more of a Wicked MUSIC fanatic than a Wicked fanatic in general), I have really come to appreciate your work! The music in Wicked blows me away sometimes, even after hearing the songs time after time. The lyrics are true and honest, the tunes are...everything you could ever want and exactly when its wanted in the song.

Anyway, past all of my feeling about your music...a dream of mine is to see a musical production of The Hobbit, on Broadway. I myself do not feel capable of making something like that happen, though I would fight for it. The only way I can think (at this point in my life) to see the Hobbit on Broadway is to throw the idea to someone who IS capable of making it work. You, of all people, would be someone I would love to see "musical"ize Tolkien's book. I honestly think the book is very well capable of working as a musical!

So, even though I know you are probably too busy to just say "Oh that sounds fun, lets do it" (I don't expect that kind of response), I'd love to hear your feedback on it, things like: would it be a job you'd be interested in, do you think it would work, and is there any way you could put the idea out there to people? Even if you yourself can't do it, if you could just throw the idea to some people who would have the capability of making it happen. I would love to see it become a reality on Broadway because the story itself is amazing, and it could easily be Broadway-tailored while still keeping the original story. Bilbo and Gandalf's relationship could be exploited in a way similar to Elphaba and Galinda, just as one idea I've had.

Ok...well, I know you may not read this, and may never respond to this. But that's ok. I just want you to hear my thoughts, and...I would forever be grateful for any action you took on it, small or large. J. Noah Taylor

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. Taylor: Thanks for the suggestion. I have always been a fan of Tolkien's, though I have to admit to preferring the "Ring" trilogy to "The Hobbit". I have to say that I feel adapting "The Hobbit" would present some practical problems -- it's difficult to pull off episodic "hero's journey" stories as musicals, though "Big River" was able to succeed to some extent. An imaginative director who found theatrically inventive ways of doing Smaug and the other "special effects" required would also be a necessary requirement, I would think. As you suspected, I have too many other projects on my plate for the next couple of years to undertake a major new one such as this, but I will keep it in mind and share it with anyone who seems appropriate whom I come across. Above all, I appreciate your thinking of me to share an idea about which you are so passionate. Thanks again and best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 2 – Other songwriters

Other Composers/Lyricists

Question:

Hey Stephen, first of all I want to say that you are my absolute favorite composer/lyricist in all of the history of musical theater. I was wondering who some of your favorite living composer/lyricists that are writing musicals for theater right now? A couple of my favorites are Jason Robert Brown, and Ahrens/Flaherty. What are yours? Thanks!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks, Jack. I think there are a lot of superb songwriters and songwriting teams writing for the theatre contemporarily. I agree with you about Jason Robt. Brown (there's brilliant stuff in THE LAST FIVE YEARS) and Ahrens and Flaherty (I love ONCE ON THIS ISLAND, and I saw RAGTIME three times -- I thought it was one of the best musicals of the last twenty years.) I also recommend, if you don't already know these scores, Andrew Lippa's WILD PARTY, Adam Guettel's FLOYD COLLINS, Lawrence O'Keefe's BAT BOY, and Janine Tesori's scores for VIOLET and CAROLINE, OR CHANGE. In my capacity as artistic director of the ASCAP Musical Theatre Workshops, I also get to hear a lot of extraordinarily talented up-and-coming composers. Two to watch for are Peter Mills and the incredibly gifted Eric Whitacre. And lastly, I guess I would cite two friends of mine whose talents I am always in awe of: Craig Carnelia and John Bucchino. There are definitely people I'm leaving off this list, but those are some of the composers who come to mind. As I say, there's a lot of amazing talent out there. Stephen Schwartz

Modern Musical writers

Question:

What are your opinions on the modern musical (i.e Lloyd Webber/Schonberg/Mackintosh) and do you watch their work?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I tend not to comment on other people's work. I find it only gets me into trouble, no matter how complimentary I may be (I'm sure you can understand why.) So I just go about my business trying to do my own work to the best of my ability and let other writers worry about themselves. Sorry to duck this one a little, but I've learned from experience.

Do You Know or Have You Met Andrew Lloyd Webber?

Question:

My favorite composers (in addition to yourself) in musical theater and film would be Andrew Lloyd Webber, John Barry, John Williams, and James Horner. Regarding, pop/rock music, I tend to enjoy people who have been around a while, such as Paul McCartney and Carly Simon. In reading the interview with you that is posted on this website, you noted you and Lloyd Webber were the same age, and that many people of your generation were not interested in musical theater. I recently heard Lloyd Webber make a similar comment during a concert in his honor in London. He said that people told him musical theater had no future, and so musicians all had to be Beatles or Elvis Presley. As Lloyd Webber's contemporary and fellow composer, what do you think of his work? Have you met him?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the EMail and welcome to the forum. In answer to your question: I know Andrew Lloyd Webber only slightly, but I have always appreciated the care he took when he recorded his former wife Sarah Brightman singing my song "Meadowlark". He was extremely gracious about playing it for me and seeking to change anything I was unhappy with. I am a great admirer of EVITA, particularly the first act, which I think is just about perfect. I think a lot of people take cheap shots at Andrew because he is so successful, but it seems to me there is no denying his great musical talent, his gift for melody, and his extraordinary theatrical instincts. Hope this answers your question and thanks again for taking the time to write. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Phantom of the Opera

Question:

Dear Mr Schwartz, Have you seen the Phantom of the Opera movie or on stage? If you did, what did you think. And, have you met Andrew Lloyd Webber.

In Music, Ryan Parker

Dear Mr. Patrick: I have met Andrew Lloyd Webber on a couple of occasions, the most memorable being when he played me the rough mix of the recording of "Meadowlark" he produced for Sarah Brightman on her "Songs that Got Away" CD. He has always been extremely gracious to me, which I very much appreciate. I try not to comment publically on other people's shows which are currently running, but I will comment on one of his other shows to say that I have always found EVITA a very brilliant work indeed. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Fred Ebb

Comment:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, When you get back from your vacation I'd like to know what you think of what I thought was a shocking death, the one of Fred Ebb. Were you inspired by any of he and John Kander's work? Thanks. Hope your vacation went well!-John

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear John: I just learned of Fred's death today, and I was very saddened by it. I didn't know Fred very well, but I always very much enjoyed his sense of humor on the occasions when I saw him. I am a great admirer of the work he and John did, including some of their less well known projects (I have always been a fan of 70, GIRLS, 70, for instance.) In answer to your question, I don't know that I was particularly influenced by his work in terms of my own, but I greatly appreciated the wit and heart of Fred's highly skilled lyrics. Thanks for asking, Stephen

SECTION 3 – Music or Lyrics Preferences

Music or Lyrics - Which Is Your True Love?

Question:

Dear Sir, I'm very much surprised at your openness to e-mailed questions. If it's not too offensive, are you the REAL Stephen Schwartz? (Sorry, I'm still in the phase of denial!) If indeed you are, please know that I am one of your most avid fan here in Asia. I just wish that your other CDs (aside from your works with Disney and Dreamworks) would be easily accesible in our part of the world (esp. in the PHILIPPINES)! Now, my question on songwriting: My first encounter with your work was on POCAHONTAS where you collaborated with Alan Menken (also my favorite). Consequently I thought you were only a lyricist. I was just wondering, which of the two (music vs. lyrics) is your real first love, your gateway to the wonderful world of songwriting? Thanks! Trex

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Trex: I often wonder myself if I am the REAL Stephen Schwartz. In terms of your question: I find writing music easier than writing lyrics, and I suppose music is my "first real love", as you put it, but I have come more and more to appreciate the craft of writing lyrics and enjoy the challenge. I have learned that the lyrics have a great deal to do with the listener's perception of the music. A case in point: I wrote two other versions of the lyric to Charles Strouse's music for the song that ultimately became "Children of the Wind" from RAGS. No one particularly responded to the music in the two earlier versions -- one of them was called "I Will Find a Way" and I no longer remember the title of the other. Charles offered to write a new tune, but I insisted that his music was beautiful; I just hadn't done it justice yet. Finally I found the title "Children of the Wind" and wrote that lyric, and instantly people responded to the MUSIC of the song, even though all that had changed was the LYRIC.

That was a very telling lesson for me. Thanks for your message; I regret that you are finding it difficult to get more of my work over in Asia -- what's wrong with those record companies!?

What's Easier - Music or Lyrics?

Question:

Okay, this one's from my husband. I'm innocent! As we were riding to pick up our daughter from her dance classes, he was driving along whistling, when he suddenly blurted out, "I think it would be easier to be a lyricist than a songwriter. I mean, how do you write melodies? Where do they come from? How do you make something new?" Well, who would know better than someone who does it for a living?

So which do you think is easier, if you had to choose between one or the other? I know when you do both, it's a back-and-forth thing, but what's it like when you just do one or the other? And where do the melodies come from? Do they just kind of start playing in your head, or do you have to sit down and figure out something that's new? Your response will help us continue this fascinating subject on our way to pick up our daughter from future dance classes.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In my experience, music is WAY easier to write than lyrics. This is because I think you can either write music or you can't. It's just something you're born with. I think composers just have music bouncing around in their heads all the time. I know I do. Sitting down and finding the appropriate tune and feel and so on for a given dramatic situation is not always easy, but it tends to flow after a little while. Lyrics, on the other hand, are a constant agony. At least they are to me. Maybe for people like Richard Wilbur or Paul Simon, word geniuses, they come easily (though I bet they don't.) But I always find them pesky and elusive. A tune can take minutes. Lyrics tend to take weeks. I can only speak for myself of course, but that's how I see it. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Preference

Question:

Do you prefer writing lyrics or music?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I find music easier to write, but I don't know that I would say I had a preference.

Which comes first – Music or Lyrics

Question:

Dear Stephen, I just to let you know that two of your works (Pippin and Wicked) are on my "top 10 Broadway scores of all time" list. What I wanted to ask is how you work when you compose a song? Do the lyrics or the music come first, or do they come pretty much at the same time?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Many people often ask whether music or lyrics come first in writing a song, but if I'm doing both words and music, the answer is that I take the path of least resistance. That can mean either music first, or part of a lyric, or an accompaniment figure. In almost every case, though, I like to start with a title -- not always, but usually -- because it helps to define the landing place of the lyric and the feel of the music.

Thank you all for your interesting questions and your enthusiasm for WICKED and my other work. I really appreciate it, Stephen

Just A Lyricist? Process of Translations

Question:

How do you work differently as a composer/lyricist instead of just a lyricist? I was reading in the biography of Sondheim how he was unfulfilled as "just" as lyric writer. What is your take on this? Have you ever been the composer, but worked with an outside lyricist?

I just bought the German "Glockner von Notre Dame" and enjoy it a great deal. How does the process of having your work translated work? Is it like working with a lyricist? How much German do you speak, or do you take the translators word that the translation is true?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Interesting questions; thanks!

1. While I prefer somewhat to write both music and lyrics, I do not have the same feeling as Mr. Sondheim about being unfulfilled by my collaborations in which I have served as just lyricist. To the contrary, I have enjoyed enormously and learned a great deal from my collaborations with Alan Menken, Charles Strouse, and Leonard Bernstein (the three composers I have written with.) I have often cited my writing with Charles Strouse on RAGS as being the experience that taught me the most about the craft of lyric writing. In working with Charles and Alan, we tend to work music first, which is slightly different from the way I work on my own, when some of the lyric can come first or when both begin more or less simultaneously. But even when I'm writing both music and lyrics, the music is almost always finished before the lyrics. I have occasionally collaborated with lyricists when I've done just the music: for the show PERSONALS, for which I wrote three songs, the lyrics were by Marta Kauffman and David Crane (of FRIENDS fame) and Seth Friedman. I have also written a couple of pop songs with other lyricists, perhaps most notably Dean Pitchford (FOOTLOOSE, FAME), with whom I wrote the song "More Than This" that I recorded on my "Reluctant Pilgrim" CD.

2. I speak a little bit of German, but not nearly enough to translate my own work for DER GLOCKNER. The translator, Michael Kunze, an extremely brilliant and accomplished writer, worked by providing me with three-column pages -- the first column was my original lyric, the second was his German translation, and the third was a literal translation of the German back into English. That way I could see not only the flow of the German words and the rhyme scheme, but what he had changed or modified in order to make the lyrics work in German. In the rare instances when I was unsatisfied, Herr Kunze was extremely accommodating about rewriting. This collaboration was my favorite part of the DER GLOCKNER experience, as it was something I had never done before. Thanks again for the interesting questions. Hope these answers have proven satisfactory. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Composer writing own lyrics

Question:

I have always thought it strange that more composers don't do their own lyrics. To me, the music is the hard part. If you have the musical expertise to write down the melodies, fitting words to the notes is not such a tough job. (I have written some songs for public school shows, so I'm allowed to say this.) Once you have figured out what the song is about, you should have a good idea what ideas you want the song to express. Also, you don't have to worry about matching your music to someone else's previously written lyrics. As a rule, would you prefer to do your own lyrics or work with someone else on your scores?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Well, words and music are two very different things and, I think, come from different parts of the brain or different areas of talent. I can never remember which is "left brain" and which is "right brain", but music is very instinctive, pre-conscious and pre-verbal, whereas lyrics are much more conscious and by definition verbal, more like little puzzles to solve. Some composers have far more affinity for the former than the latter. I do agree with you that some composers are probably better lyricists than they know -- for instance, I encouraged Andrew Lippa to write his own lyrics when he was beginning work on THE WILD PARTY, and he turned out to be extremely skilled as a lyricist as well as a brilliant composer; similarly John Kander is now writing his own lyrics to complete projects he began in collaboration with the late Fred Ebb. But some composers are not as verbally oriented as they are, apparently, you are.

In terms of myself, I like to do my own lyrics, but I have enjoyed my collaborations with other lyricists, as in the case of the songs for the revue "Personals" or several of the pop songs I've co-written with other lyricists. I think for a theatre project, particularly one which originated with me where I feel strongly about its content, I would always want to do my own lyrics however. I hope these responses at least partially address your questions. Thanks for writing, and again, for your enthusiasm for my work. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Lyrics and Music

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

... Actually, I don't tend to write lyrics first, other than a short amount sometimes to get me started -- perhaps a title or a first verse. When I collaborated with Alan Menken on POCAHONTAS and HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, we almost always started with the music. Even though this is more difficult, I find that the natural progression of music has its own emotional logic and that this ultimately is what audiences respond to. As you say, you have melodies in your head, and others that come when you think about an idea or an emotion; you can put words to them that help to describe what you are feeling, but can't really get at the essence of it the way music can.

When I write both music and lyrics, there is a sort of back and forth process between the music and words, but I do find that music tends to lead. Like you, I also write a lot in the key of D, but my favorite key for the piano is D flat, just because I find it the richest sound on the keyboard. But often, if I'm stuck on a tune or melody, I'll try writing in a different key to see where it takes me. I don't know if I've been as articulate with these answers as I wanted, but I hope they partly answer your questions and at least give you something to think about. Thanks for writing, Stephen Schwartz

Communicating with music

Question:

Hi, Stephen. I figured I'd jump on in and try out this new forum by throwing out a question to you. Nothing like being my guinea pig, eh?

Anyway, I was remembering your comment in one of your posts on the old forum about how you tried to make sure you communicated the message of a song as clearly as you could. I can understand this as far as lyrics go, since you can use dictionaries, etc., to make sure you're using the words that will most clearly express a thought. But music and melody and chord progressions etc. are a different type of language, so I'm wondering how you write the music to express a message as clearly as possible. Do you just let the theme of a song move you and then play whatever you feel and then write it down? Or perhaps you go about in a more methodical way that someone who's studied music for a long time

would know how to do, but those of us who just listen and enjoy wouldn't understand? It seems like music and lyrics would be written from totally different parts of one's personality (lyrics from the head, and music from the emotions or subconscious or whatever), so I'm just curious how you make sure the musical part of your compositions express a theme as clearly as the lyrics. Okay, let's see if I can get this posted without breaking anything

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: Actually, you have a very accurate understanding of how it works, at least as far as I've experienced. Music is much more instinctive, as you surmise. Your description: "Do you just let the theme of a song move you and then play whatever you feel and then write it down" describes it quite well. Best, Stephen

Comment from Forum visitor:

As a lyricist, I disagree with the notion that lyrics are written from the head and music from the heart. I guess it varies from one composer and lyricist to the next. But, think of lyrics (from musicals and pop songs) like "Love, Look Away," "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," "I'll Be Seeing You," "Something Wonderful," "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face," "I'm a Brass Band" These are clearly lyrics from the heart! Of course, there are intellectual technicalities involved, liking rhyming & meter, but if the "heart" of the song isn't the motivating factor, a lyric will sound contrived. Some lyrics are, in fact, too clever for the characters who sing them in musicals (Sondheim is sometimes guilty of this.) You can see then, that the lyricist led with his head more than his heart. Those songs are entertaining, but strike a false note. I believe you can get away with that sometimes in comic songs, but not in serious songs. Just my opinion.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I didn't mean to imply that lyrics are not written from the heart. I was trying to say that, to me, lyrics are more of a "craft" than an "art" -- one must take the raw emotion and find a way to communicate it articulately and artfully. But when the craft is well-executed, the emotion of course remains and is communicated. The whole purpose is communication. I find it rare that lyrics come pouring out fully-formed, whereas that is very often the case with music, at least in my experience. But I think both music and lyrics, at their best, come from the heart.

SECTION 4 – Film vs. Stage Musicals

Writing for Stage or Movies

Question:

Hello, Stephen! First I'd like to say that Wicked is wonderful! What is the difference between writing songs for a movie and writing songs for the stage?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

On the most basic level, there really is no difference -- you're still trying to tell a story or illuminate character using songs. But I think in a movie, one needs to be aware of the visual demands -- that motion pictures are, by definition, about motion. On stage, an actor simply standing in a spotlight singing a ballad can be the most exciting moment in the show. On film, and particularly in animation, you have to keep moving visually. If an animated character is going to sing a ballad, she better be going over a waterfall in a canoe!

Preference –writing for Stage or Film

Question:

Which do you prefer writing music for films or musicals? Is one more challenging than the other?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Both are challenging in their own ways, and both also can be fun. So far, of course, I've only done animated films. I am very interested in writing an original live-action film musical, but as of now the opportunity has not presented itself. I have been asked on occasion about the difference between collaborating on animated and live stage projects, and whether I have a preference.

On the most basic level, there really is no difference -- I'm still trying to tell a story or illuminate character using songs. But the big difference with animation is the addition of the visual artists. The cross-pollination between their story boards and the structure of the songs can really be fun. For instance, in the case of the opening number from THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, the storyboard artists (Paul and Gaeten Brizzi) had come up with an entire scenario; I incorporated the story structure of their drawings into the lyrics. Similarly, in PRINCE OF EGYPT, the opening number ("Deliver Us") includes the trip of Baby Moses' basket of rushes down its perilous Nile journey; I waited till the story artists had worked out specifically what sort of dangers they wanted the basket to encounter before scoring that section of the song. In a way, the story artists sometimes function like the book writer of a stage musical.

The other major difference is that on stage, an actor simply standing in a spotlight singing a ballad can be the most exciting thing in the show. On film, and particularly in animation, you have to keep moving visually. If an animated character is going to stop and sing a ballad, she better be going over a waterfall in a canoe! But as I said, I enjoy working in both media. The stage is great for seeing what can happen when a good singer or choreographer or director gets inspired by a song and takes it to a level I hadn't imagined. For instance, on the CHILDREN OF EDEN album, Darius de Haas as Cain is singing notes in "Lost in the Wilderness" I had never thought of, but his great voice and intensity make the song doubly exciting.

SECTION 5 – Starting a Musical

Potential: Musical or Just Good Entertainment?

Question:

Hi, Stephen. I was thinking about some of the shows you've done, in particular Working and The Magic Show, and it got me wondering: How do you decide that something has the potential to become a musical, as opposed to being just a good book or talented person. How did you decide that a talented magician and an interesting novel were more than just that? What do you look for in things to decide they're material for a musical? Does a story start to form in your head, or is it that you want to share the magician's talent and the great novel with others and that's your medium for doing so? Just curious, as usual. :) - Peggy

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

That's an interesting question. I can't speak for others, but for me it's an instinct, and it happens almost immediately, like falling in love at first sight. As soon as I read a small excerpt from WORKING in an ad for the book, I think I knew I wanted to adapt it. Similarly, the project I'm working on now, I knew as soon as someone described the book to me that it was something I wanted to adapt as a musical. It's a feeling like: "That's my territory; I have to write that." It really is like being smitten. On the other hand, people can suggest ideas to me and I can see how they would be viable musicals that I might enjoy

seeing one evening, but I just don't want to spend three years of my life writing them. I trust my instincts about what appeals to me. Of course, sometimes jobs are assignments, and then you have to find the passion for them as you work on the material. That was certainly true in the case of POCAHONTAS, for instance -- I would never have chosen to do that idea on my own, but once I really went to work on it, I found much in it that I was passionate about writing. But other ideas, like CHILDREN OF EDEN, just feel like "mine" from the get-go, even if I didn't think of them originally.

Passion for "Just an Assignment"?

[Peggy continues her inquiry]

Question:

Hi, Stephen. Yes, that answers my question, but it brings another one to my mind: How do you find the passion for something that's just an assignment, that you wouldn't have chosen in the first place? How did you find something specifically in Pocahontas that gave you the necessary inspiration to do the work so well?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Good question. The answer is that you have to find in any assignment the thing you really care about that makes you want to write it. In the case of POCAHONTAS, it came about through my research into Native American philosophy and language -- basically the point-of-view and locution embodied in "Colors of the Wind". It also came from emphasizing in the songs the aspects of the story that personally resonated in me. I don't know if that's particularly clear, but the point is I can't just write something on assignment. I have to find a way to make myself care about the characters and the subject matter. There are some assignments where that wouldn't be possible, and I turn those down. But it's amazing how you can find in nearly any subject and group of characters things that really speak to you personally. Best, Stephen

Process for writing Songs for Musicals

Question:

I was just wondering what your process was for writing songs for musicals. What do you start with? How do you pick the right 'moments' for songs? which comes first music or lyrics? any information you could give a budding songwriter would be greatly appreciated.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for your message. Your questions are ones which could use a book to answer them (and some day I may actually try to write one), but for now, here are some brief thoughts:

To me, musicals are about structure. Therefore, before I do any writing of songs at all, I try to get some idea of the structure of the show. This can be in the form of an outline, or a story-board with note cards to show the story beats. The outline gets refined and clarified until the writers have a sense of how they want to structure the story.

For instance, on WICKED, my bookwriter, Winnie Holzman, and I, spent almost a year devising and revising the outline before we began writing dialogue or songs. That's not to say the specifics didn't change enormously as we worked on the show, but oddly enough, the basic outline really never changed in its essentials since the beginning. By that I mean, it still begins and ends in the same way and the basic story progression has not changed.

Anyway, once there is an outline to work from, I begin to figure out what portions of the story should be

musicalized. Obviously, there are no hard and fast rules, so instinct plays an enormous role. But clearly, the moments of higher emotion and the moments where characters need to express their inner desires and conflicts tend to be among those chosen. Often, I will know that a specific place needs to be musicalized, but it will take me a few tries to get the right song for it. I tend to start at the place of least resistance -- that is, the song that I am clearest about and that comes easiest for me. That gives me a way into the score and the musical world of the show. It is not necessarily the first number in the show (in fact, opening numbers tend to have to be rewritten many times as the overall show becomes clearer; often, the final version of the opening number is one of the last things written for a show!) And I keep proceeding by doing the songs that reveal themselves to me. Eventually, of course, there will be those moments which I know need to be musicalized but I don't really know what to do with, and for those, I simply have to write something, find out what works and doesn't about it, and then write something else, until I solve the moment.

I have addressed the issue of music or lyrics first (it's listed in the Frequently Requested Information section of my website), but what I would add is that the story-telling purpose of the song is the most important, but one can find one's way into it through whatever process works best.

I hope these brief and general thoughts prove helpful to you, and again, I wish you the best. Sincerely,
Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 6 – Musical Writing Strategies

Songs for Characters

Question:

Hey stephen. I had a question on when you write a musical how do you create a musical number for a character? How do you come up with the titles and the general feel of the songs?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's like acting. I try to "become the character" -- really see through his or her eyes and internalize what he or she may be feeling. Then I investigate how that expresses itself musically, and that usually leads to the feel of the song. Arriving at the song title is a process, since the choice of title is so important (I usually try to arrive at a title before beginning to write the song.) It can come from general brainstorming, talking with my collaborators, writing a long prose sketch of what the song is about and seeing if a title is contained somewhere in it, etc.

Composing process

Question:

Hi Stephen! I'm from Sweden and a fan of your music, especially Wicked! I love the whole score, and I can't wait until autumn when I come to NY to see the musical live on stage!! My question is: What is your "composing-process"? Do you hear a song in your head or do you sit by the piano, trying to find a melody? Keep composing great music!!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks, Martin. I generally write at the piano. I find I can let my fingers express the emotion I'm trying to convey, and I'm often surprised at what comes out. I have on occasion written, or begun to write, songs away from the keyboard, but those are the exceptions.

How Long Does It Take You To Write A Song?

Question:

Here's another question for you. I was wondering how long it takes you, more or less, to compose a song. My guess is that it would depend on the song and whether it was personal enough to you to come easily, or whether it was about a subject you needed to research. What would you say your shortest songwriting time was? Are we talking days? Hours? Minutes? (Seconds???) And how about the longest time? Are we talking years? I imagine you have deadlines for songs for shows, and once you write them and meet that deadline, that's it. But what about your personal songs? Do you ever go back to them long after first writing them and revise them based on your experiences since writing them? Or do you leave them as they were so they'll be sort of like a journal for you to remember how you thought/felt at the time of their writing? Okay, that's enough for one post. Peggy

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: Interesting questions, as usual. I would say the average time for me for writing a song, once I know what the title is going to be and have a basic idea of the content, is about five days to a week. If it's a song that involves a lot of research, it can take a bit longer. Once I'm really into working on a show and I have a clear grip on the characters and musical style, songs can come pretty fast for me, say three or four days.

On occasion I have written something really fast. "The Virginia Company" for POCAHONTAS took about five minutes, but that doesn't really count as a whole song. But for instance, "West End Avenue" from THE MAGIC SHOW came more or less fully formed in a matter of hours. On the other hand, the longest for me, if I am really focussed on a song and working on it every day, would be about two weeks. This tends to be for songs like "If I Never Knew You" from POCAHONTAS, where I am trying to find a new way of saying something a lot of other songwriters have already written about. I have discovered that if a particular song takes longer than that and I am still stuck, there's something wrong with the conception of the song and I should simply scrap the whole thing and start over, which I have often done. I do revise songs for shows occasionally for new productions, but once a personal song is done, it's done, and I don't think I've ever gone back and rewritten one. This is because these songs are, as you say, a reflection of how I felt at the time, whereas a show song is about getting the moment in the show right and I occasionally can find a better way to do something long after the show has been "finished". And yes, as far as I am concerned, deadlines are a writer's best friend. Sincerely, Stephen

Composing AFK (Away from Keyboard)

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In terms of writing at the piano: I understand the value of writing away from the keyboard, but I don't do that. I always write at the piano and kind of follow where my fingers take me. I find writing while playing allows me to follow my emotional impulses and musical instincts more immediately, whereas writing away from the keyboard becomes more of an intellectual exercise. Just my personal style though; as I say, I appreciate how writing away from the piano can lead you to make less "automatic" choices.

Opening Numbers

Question:

.... My first questions are about lyrics:

While the opening of news stories needs to cover who, what, why, where, when, openings of creative works aim at hooking the audience rather than presenting the basics of a situation--or do they? In a

musical's opening number does there always need to be some foreshadowing of conflicts to come along with a bit of who's who? I'm reminded of the line from "The Bells of Notre Dame" that poignantly introduces a major issue:

Who is the monster and who is the man?/Sing the bells...of Notre Dame.

Then there's "Chanson" which is, perhaps, the most subtle as an introduction, on the order of "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning" in OKLAHOMA.

In my reading about movie story structure, many story openings introduce the ordinary world of the hero or protagonist and then reveal the call to adventure or at least part of the central challenge to be presented. In opening songs' lyrics do you consciously try to set up the story through any rules such as those you might share with workshop participants at ASCAP?

Martin Gottfried writes in his book *SONDHEIM* about a tendency to make opening numbers as long as possible to fully establish the musical convention, e.g. the opening number for *INTO THE WOODS*. Do you try to establish a musical convention? I'm not sure if Martin means music as opposed to lyrics, but I'm specifically wondering about the music--whether or not you try to do this? While e-chatting with Shawn McCarthy about openings, Shawn wrote this about *Magic to Do*: "The two chord vamp that begins the song and that is heard throughout it, (Am9 and D6/A) hooks the listener right off the bat! Hooking the listener or the audience watching a musical of course is extremely important to the success of any production." I believe you wrote "Magic to Do" in a weekend. Was the process pretty spontaneous? Was "Corner of the Sky" the original opening number in your earlier version?

I suppose in some way you try to distill the show's spirit and express it in the opening number, right? It certainly worked with "Deliver Us." – Carol

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Entire books could be written on the subject of the opening number for a musical. In many ways it is the most important number in the show. I feel that it is imperative for the opening number to let the audience know the world of the show and what the theatrical rules for the evening are going to be.

This would certainly include setting the musical style, and might include setting up the central characters, story, or conflict. It depends. A number like "Magic to Do" is all about tone and style -- you don't learn what the story is about until afterwards. "All the Livelong Day" and "Chanson" (two vastly different numbers stylistically) are both essentially establishing the theme of the show. "The Bells of Notre Dame" basically tells the back story, so that once the opening number is done, you're ready to begin the story in the present. And so on. Often, one doesn't write the opening number until late in the writing process, because it is only then that one really knows what the story-telling will require. On the other hand, "Deliver Us" was the first song I wrote for *PRINCE OF EGYPT*, because I was very clear from the get-go of the project what needed to be done to set up the story (set the style of the music, establish the plight of the Hebrews that needed to be solved, and use the conflict of the mother putting her baby in the river to show that the story was going to be told with an emphasis on the emotions of the characters going through it.) I could go on and on discussing the reasons for and differences in successful opening numbers from various musicals, such as the openings of *OKLAHOMA*, *CAROUSEL*, *KING AND I*, *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*, *A FUNNY THING HAPPENED*, *GYPSY*, *FUNNY GIRL*, *A CHORUS LINE*, etc. They all work extremely well for their particular shows. But in all cases, they draw their audience immediately into the worlds of their shows.

I realize that in some instances it's not just the opening number, but the opening TWO numbers that really set the show. (For instance the opening of POCAHONTAS includes "The Virginia Company" and "Steady as the Beating Drum".) Now in the movie, there is an action sequence between them, but it is those two numbers in tandem that set up the show -- the culture clash between the English sensibility and the Native American sensibility. In a related vein, the opening number of GODSPELL is really two numbers -- "Tower of Babble" and "Prepare Ye", and it is the contrast between the "black-and-white" world of the "Tower of Babble" and the burst into "color" of "Prepare Ye" that sets the tone of the show (John-Michael and I always compared the Prologue of GODSPELL to the black-and-white section of THE WIZARD OF OZ.

Where Do You Stand on Trunk Songs?

Question:

Where do you stand on the practice of using material written for one show in another show? Some writers frown on the practice of "raiding the bottom drawer," but if it's a strong song and works, why should it matter?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Good question. I don't see any harm recycling trunk songs if the music is appropriate to the current project. I don't do it very often because usually the music for one of my shows would not translate well to another because of specific style, period, ethnicity, etc. (imagine a song from GODSPELL in THE BAKER'S WIFE? I don't think so.) However, there are many famous examples of trunk songs showing up in successful shows, such as "You'll Never Get Away from Me" in GYPSY, the music for which was originally a song called "I'm in Pursuit of Happiness." Some of the songs in RAGS involved themes Charles had written for other shows. One of the few times I can remember doing it is the music for "The Goldfarb Variations" from THE MAGIC SHOW, which I originally wrote as a song called "The New Society" for a college show called NOUVEAU I did at Carnegie-Mellon. In this case, it was because I wanted a four-part Bach-like fugue, and since I had already written one that worked, I thought it was silly to kill myself writing another. The other famous example of mine I can't tell you about, since I'm afraid I might be sued, but I will reveal the secret someday. Thanks for an interesting question. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Performers Engaging Audiences

Question:

Dear Stephen: The other night at a New York Fringe Festival panel discussion, participants spoke of the special ability of theatre to be engaging and involving. Someone from L.A. said that particularly there it was essential to make theatre distinct from TV and movies by engaging audiences. The term "engage" has a range of meanings in this context including the nature of the immediacy of the art form, but I'm wondering your thoughts about it. In some of your shows actors bridge the distance between performers and audience by turning to them as if to involve them, such as at the end of PIPPIN, or in GODSPELL's "Turn Back O Man." I notice that you like to engage audiences when you perform in concerts in the sense of bridging the gap, making them feel they are involved with the evening. It must also be related to some philosophy of the value of connecting with individuals, each of whom have worth. I'm wondering when you noticed that you had that kind of orientation, what experiences might have helped inspire it, and how you like to apply it. Anything along those lines. Thanks in advance for your time and commentary. Warmly, Carol

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Carol: I remember seeing The Weavers in concert when I was a kid and the audience singing along with "Goodnight, Irene". That experience led directly to my wanting to do an audience sing-along with "No Time At All" in PIPPIN. That being said, I am one of those audience members who is extremely squeamish about contact with actors during a performance (I made sure I was seated WAAAAY in the back when I went to see DAME EDNA.) I think there is a difference between a concert, when one is appearing as oneself and is engaging directly with the audience, and a show, where the audience has a right to feel anonymous. I have never been a fan of Living Theatre type theatrical experiences where some naked actor comes up and screams "I am not allowed to smoke marijuana!" in my face. But in some shows, and it is true in many of mine, the audience is a character of sorts. In GODSPELL, the audience is the final ingredient in the formation of the community that is the underlying journey of GODSPELL. In PIPPIN, the subtext is that the Players are doing the show, and particularly their Grand Finale, for that night's audience, in the hopes that some of them will be seduced into joining. In WORKING, the actors treat the audience as their Interviewer, and the extent to which they are comfortable and open speaking to the audience reflect how they feel about the interview. In CHILDREN OF EDEN, the audience is being told this story by the company as part of a ritual to hand down the story as oral history from generation to generation. And in BAKER'S WIFE, we are playing with the idea of making the audience tourists -- visitors to the cafe in this small Provencal village. My other shows, including WICKED, treat the audience in the more traditional role of passive spectators. I do think there's something to be said for giving the audience a "role" in the show, as long as it doesn't impinge on their comfort level and privacy. Thanks for asking, Stephen

Larger than life characters

Question:

Dear Stephen: At a recent musical theatre workshop I chatted with an aspiring "librettist" about ideas for a musical. He said to be sure my protagonist is "larger than life." Otherwise there's not a good excuse for the show to be musical. One could probably argue that any fictional hero needs to be larger than life, but I'm wondering how you feel about applying this to the genre of musical theatre.

I know you're often quite involved with the book of your musicals. Can you remember a time in the revision process when a character who was smaller than or same as life had to be enlarged? And particularly with PIPPIN, is that show kind of almost playing with this idea in a conscious way? Any comment with regard to your other shows is welcome, such as with the three central figures of THE BAKER'S WIFE. Then what about WORKING which is closer to nonfiction? Thanks in advance for your thoughts!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Carol: It's an interesting question about larger-than-life characters and musicals. I'm not sure it is as simple as the form demanding larger-than-life characters. I can think of several successful musicals whose characters are exceptions: in addition to WORKING, which you mentioned, COMPANY, FALSETTOS, and A CHORUS LINE come to mind, and I'm not sure even the characters in OKLAHOMA or WEST SIDE STORY are what one would call "larger-than-life". What all of those shows share, however, is that they are more ensemble pieces, and the larger-than-lifeness that allows characters to burst into song comes from the locale and/or the idea behind the shows.

And then there are a couple of musicals about characters who are deliberately "smaller-than-life", in the sense that Paul Simon says his songs are often about people who are "smaller-than-life". You mentioned the character of Pippin, and I would say that is true and virtually the point about him (though the troupe of Players surrounding him is certainly larger-than-life); the same might be said of the leading

characters in PROMISES, PROMISES (though I have to admit that is far from my favorite show) or the afore-mentioned A CHORUS LINE.

I think the time when it is important, or at least very useful, to have a character or characters who are larger-than-life is when the musical is built around one or two people. And I would agree that most successful musicals are. The list is far longer than the few I mentioned above; obvious examples come to mind: GYPSY, FUNNY GIRL, MY FAIR LADY, SWEENEY TODD, THE KING AND I, FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, GUYS AND DOLLS, even BAT BOY, and on and on. And certainly the characters in WICKED could not be much more larger-than-life (I'm not sure that sentence is grammatical, but you know what I mean), and it has certainly helped in writing songs for them. So as I say, I don't think the rule is so clear-cut, but I would agree that it is a tougher task to make characters sing if they aren't larger-than-life. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 7 - Collaboration

On Collaboration

Question:

I was wondering how hard it is to collaborate with someone on a song. I mean, what if you don't like the music/words the other person writes? Are there times when someone writes lyrics that just don't inspire music in you, or when someone writes music that you're supposed to write lyrics to and make them fit into the music, and try as you might, it just won't work? Do both parties sometimes just have to go back and start from scratch to get something they both like? It must be a lot harder to write with someone than alone, isn't it?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Interesting question. In my experience, collaborating on a song is not necessarily harder than writing it alone, but it is different. This is because, yes, there can be a lot of back-and-forth about both the music and the lyrics until both collaborators are satisfied. Sometimes that means giving up something I like that my writing partner doesn't. But on the other hand, often my collaborators have good suggestions which make my process easier, as well as bringing their own talent to the song, so that it goes somewhere I couldn't have taken it myself. My rule in collaboration is that both collaborators must be completely happy with the result, and since there is always another solution to something, I will always rewrite until my partner is satisfied, and I will expect the same from him or her. (Of course, sometimes I try to persuade them to my point of view before going off to rewrite.) I value both the process of solo writing and collaborating, each in a different way. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

About cutting songs and collaboration

Question:

Lets say you write a new song and you and your collaborators really like it, later you come to the conclusion, after watching it be performed on, Broadway, movies, etc., that there is something you know in heart is wrong with the song and it doesn't make any connection to the storyline, even if you and your collaborators agree on it after seeing it, you realize something doesn't make sense. What do you do when you realize this?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Cut it immediately. As Tom Jones (author of THE FANTASTICKS) famously said about musicals: "Everything is more important than anything." In other words, every decision must be about what best serves the show as a whole. The song, if it's strong enough, can be recycled as a cabaret piece or

perhaps be adapted someday for another project. I have been planning, if and when I ever get the time, to do a whole CD of cut songs called "Murdered Darlings". In the case of these songs, I feel they're pretty good or I wouldn't be planning to record them, but I had no compunction about cutting them from the shows (or movies) when they didn't work well enough in context. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Collaboration on a Film vs. Musical

Question:

What are some of the ways that the process of collaboration differs between creating the score for an animated feature film VS. a musical for the stage? Do you have a preference one over the other?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Frequently I get asked about the difference between collaborating on animated and live stage projects, and if I have a preference. On the most basic level, there really is no difference -- you're still trying to tell a story or illuminate character using songs. But the big difference with animation is the addition of the visual artists. The cross-pollination between their story boards and the structure of the songs can really be fun. For instance, in the case of the opening number from THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, the storyboard artists (Paul and Gaeten Brizzi) had come up with an entire scenario, including the gypsies sneaking into Paris under the docks; I incorporated the story structure of their drawings into the lyrics.

Similarly, in PRINCE OF EGYPT, the opening number ("Deliver Us") includes the trip of Baby Moses' basket of rushes down its perilous Nile journey; I waited till the story artists had worked out specifically what sort of dangers they wanted the basket to encounter before scoring that section of the song. In a way, the story artists sometimes function like the book writer of a stage musical. But usually, the songs comes first and the artists use the feel of the music and the content of the lyrics for inspiration.

This is what happened in the songs from POCAHONTAS, for example. The other big difference is that on stage, an actor simply standing in a spotlight singing a ballad can be the most exciting thing in the show. On film, and particularly in animation, you have to keep moving visually. If an animated character is going to stop and sing a ballad, she better be going over a waterfall in a canoe!

As for my preference, I truly enjoy them both for their own reasons. The stage is great for seeing what can happen when a good singer or choreographer or director gets inspired by a song and takes it to a level I hadn't imagined. For instance, on the new CHILDREN OF EDEN album, Darius de Haas as Cain is singing notes in "Lost in the Wilderness" I had never thought of, but his great voice and intensity make the song doubly exciting. But I have to admit I get a special kick at seeing where the talented artists I get to work with at Disney and DreamWorks will take a song of mine. Those Devil-monks in "Hellfire" -- amazing! Stephen Schwartz

Songwriting Questions and Collaboration

Question:

Dear Stephen: One thing that fascinates me most about musical production is the practice of collaboration, the way the work is being distributed to many persons. I guess that is precisely what makes (or unmakes) huge productions like the musicals that you work on. Consequently, there are so many people working on a single song that I am quite confused as to what each of these persons' roles are.

Like, how is an arranger different from an orchestrator, or a contractor from a conductor, etc...?

Another thing, (particularly in your collaboration with Alan Menken), did you have any hand in the music (even a tiny bit), being a musician yourself?

I know that in most cases the music comes first. In that case, were there instances wherein you had to suggest a little change in the music to suit the lyrics you had in mind? In other words, if there were one thing ought to be changed, would it be the music or the lyrics?

Also, some books on songwriting suggest that one must come up with a title first before writing the music. Do you do that? Do you conceptualize your songs FIRST before you proceed to writing the music? (Of course, I presume here that you write the music before the lyrics.)

Finally, you have mentioned in one of your posts that a person can either make a tune or not. Does this mean that it cannot be TAUGHT?

As a songwriter myself, I've worked hard to find ways to explain (and teach!) to my friends the art/process of making a good tune... but so far, I haven't really got one successful attempt. In fact, I have attended many workshops on songwriting just for this purpose, and I have noticed that songwriter-teachers tend to shy away from explaining music-making and instead focus more on lyric-making. Must I simply admit to my friends that I am given this wonderful gift, a gift that they cannot achieve through study or practice (like skills in basketball or chess)?

Thanks again! Trex

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Trex: What a bunch of interesting questions! Taking them in order:

1. Personnel on a song -- In addition to the actual writer(s), a song can have an arranger (who puts together the basic chord structure or re-orders choruses and verses, etc. -- I never use an arranger on my songs for their initial presentation, but some of my songs which have been released as singles have had pop arrangements done to make them more radio-friendly); an orchestrator, who writes the specific instrumentation based on the composer's piano part and input (I always use an orchestrator on show songs, rarely on pop); a conductor, who conducts the orchestra; and a contractor, who hires the musicians to play in the orchestra. There is also the role of vocal arranger, if a song uses chorus vocals (I almost always do my own vocal arranging.) There is also, of course, the recording engineer, who is in charge of the technical aspects of recording the music. I'm leaving more out, such as musical supervisor, but I have a feeling I've more than answered your question already.

2. Working with another composer -- I did not have a hand in ANY of the music Alan Menken wrote for the songs we did together, nor did I in the case of Charles Strouse's music for RAGS. But since, in both cases, the music came first, I did express my opinions and preferences while the music was being written, as did Alan and Charles about my lyrics when I had written them. So our tastes come into play even in the areas we didn't actually write.

3. I do tend to start with a title first, and yes, I pretty much always "conceptualize" a song before writing it. I think this is truer of show writers than pop writers. I find it helps me to be more specific and get a better handle on the structure of the song, so I make sure it's really doing the job in the show it's supposed to be doing.

4. Yes, I think you have to tell your friends that being able to write a tune is just a gift. I think you can learn music theory and song structure, and be influenced by other composers that broaden your horizons and so on, but I think being able to write music is just an inborn gift that we can't really take

any credit for, but have a responsibility to use if we've been given it. Lyric writing, on the other hand, I see as a craft that can be learned. To me, composing is akin to painting (an art), whereas lyric writing is akin to pottery making (essentially a craft.) Both require talent and hard work, but one is more learnable than the other.

Thanks for the questions and giving me an opportunity to be so opinionated, one of my favorite things to do. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 8 - LYRICS

Rhythmic Scheme

Question:

How do you plan the rhythmic scheme in your songs? It seems, that in a lot of songs (They don't come to mind right now, but part of A Balancing Act), with no music, I can't make out the scheme of the rhythm for myself. Why is this? (is it a lack of rhythmic sense, in me?)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think nearly everybody has trouble figuring out the rhythmic scheme of most songs without knowing the music, at least songs that are rhythmically interesting. In the case of a song like "Balancing Act", the music came before the lyrics, so that when I wrote the lyrics, I already knew what the rhythm of the song was and matched the words to it.

Role of Lyrics

Question:

I feel, and wonder if you agree, that good, indeed surprising, lyrics, are the poor relations in modern songwriting where the beat and the music is everything? That's what struck me about your lyrics in Wicked. Your brilliant use of unusual rhyming couplets, perfect scansion etc. Mr. Schwartz, I totally admire your talent.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

To some extent I agree, but not entirely -- country music is still strongly lyric driven, and of course rap music, whatever you may think of it, is only about the lyrics, since there is no tune, though your point about the beat subsuming everything else certainly applies there. There are many fine new lyricists working in musical theatre these days as well. So happily, I think the craft of lyric writing remains, if not completely healthy, at least surviving. Thank you for your compliments about my own work, and all best wishes to you, Stephen Schwartz

Repetition Used in Lyric Writing

Question:

Dear Stephen, I am primarily a musician, but just a year ago, I fell in love with the craft of lyric-writing. One thing that struck me about your lyrics is your use of repetition. To illustrate my point, let me quote some of examples:

from Colors of the Wind:

"How can there be so much that YOU DON'T KNOW YOU DON'T KNOW..."

"You think you own whatever LAND you LAND on..."

"YOU THINK the only PEOPLE who are PEOPLE are the PEOPLE who look and THINK like YOU..."

"You'll learn things YOU NEVER KNEW YOU NEVER KNEW..."

"You can OWN the EARTH and still all you'll OWN is EARTH until..."

from Just Around the Riverbend:

"...for a HANDSOME STURDY husband who builds HANDSOME STURDY walls"

from Deliver Us:

"There's a LAND you PROMISED us, deliver us to the PROMISED LAND"

"...you're SAFE now and SAFE may you stay"

"Send a SHEPHERD to SHEPHERD us..."

from When You Believe:

"WHEN YOU BELIEVE, somehow YOU WILL... YOU WILL WHEN YOU BELIEVE."

I've looked around in lyric-textbooks and I can't find the technical name for this kind of device. (Could it still be alliteration? or is it simply repetition?) How do you call it? Did you devise it yourself? Is it a device that you are consciously fond of? I think two of the examples I mentioned are particularly peculiar since the words (or sounds) are arranged symmetrically. Do they have another name? I know this may sound silly (or trivial), but please bear with me!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I don't know the official name for that device of repetition of words (I'm fairly sure it would not be classified as another form of alliteration), but it is indeed one I consciously try to use, particularly in a situation such as "the only land you land on", where the words take on different meanings each time. Because lyrics, unlike poetry, are meant to be received in real time and have to be understood immediately as they go by the ear, I find this device useful for clarity of meaning and intellectually stimulating at the same time. One of my proudest achievements ever as a lyricist is the line you cited: "You'll learn things you never knew you never knew". Thanks for noticing, and best wishes with your own lyric writing. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Rhymes

Question:

Sondheim many times uses no rhymes for lines and lines. Especially (where I noticed) in Sunday In The Park With George. How can you not rhyme so many lines, Is that possible, or am I just not finding all the rhymes?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It depends on the song and the situation. Rhyming is a matter of instinct and taste. Certainly Mr. Sondheim tends to rhyme very often -- a lot of his lyrics are based on the cleverness and suppleness of his rhymes. But I guess in the case of the songs you are citing, his instinct told him not to. I am another writer who tends to rhyme pretty heavily, but I have also occasionally written a song that is virtually rhymeless -- an example would be "In Whatever Time We Have" from CHILDREN OF EDEN. The reason in that case was that I wanted the song to feel very honest, very simple, and very real, and rhymes tend to have a bit of artifice to them, so I decided not to use them in that case.

Question:

You said Mr. Strouse helped you a lot and completely changed your writing. Can you tell me a little about that?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz: One of the challenging things about writing with Charles (Strouse) was that we always worked music first, and just as you have suggested, sometimes the rhythmic scheme of the music was difficult to figure out how to put words to. But having to work hard at that really helped

me, in my opinion, to hone my craft as a lyricist. I hope this has been informative, and I wish you the best with your own writing, if that is why you were asking. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Writing Lyrics

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, I've recently seen "Wicked" on tour in LA, and I was completely and totally blown away. It is SUCH an enormous show! The first chords are absolutely flabbergasting and definitely set the mood. Now, I'm very very big into theatre, and I'd give anything to be on Broadway, but I've always enjoyed writing songs.

Do the lyrics just come to you? I mean, I can sit there for half an hour trying to think of a good rhyme or a good rhyme scheme and nothing will happen, but occasionally, when I'm not trying to write a song, a fabulous set of lyrics will just come to me. Of course, I'll forget them in about a minute. But does this always happen to you? For instance, in "Defying Gravity", each line was so carefully pieced together that it actually told a story and made sense, rather than in an old Motown song for example, "how is the weather" is put in directly after "so happy together"....Do you have any techniques that you use? You have quite a unique talent, and you have no idea how thrilled I was to see this show. Thank you for sharing your interest, Cathryn

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Cathryn: Thank you for your compliments about WICKED and about my songwriting. In answer to your question, I certainly would not say lyrics "just come" to me, although I know of songwriters for whom that is true. But where my songwriting is concerned, I am usually trying to tell a story or part of a story, and therefore I generally do a lot of preparation before trying to write a particular song -- I try to figure out what the character is doing from an acting point of view, and also to know how the character speaks to express him or herself, etc. I also try to figure out -- sometimes in prose, or by jotting down lines or phrases as they come to me -- what the song is about and what the "journey" of the song is (where it starts emotionally and where it ends.) And as I've said before, I generally like to know what the title of the song is going to be before I get too far into trying to write it. A lot of this is instinct and experience of course, and once the process gets started, lyrics do come sometimes unbidden or flowing up out of the unconscious, but my point is that it takes a lot of preparation for lyrics to start "just coming".

As to your other question, about good lyrics coming to you when you are not trying to write them, that again is of course your unconscious at work. You might consider carrying a small notebook with you (as many writers I know do), so that if something comes to you unexpectedly, you can jot it down before you forget it. The unconscious is very powerful, but it is evanescent, and therefore we need to get things down sometimes before the ideas evaporate again. I hope you find these responses helpful, and I thank you again for your questions and your compliments. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Reply:

Thank you so much! That does help, and I always carry a notebook around, just not really for that purpose. Well as for one more question, if you don't mind, that I've realized within the last two days. You say that there are hidden homages to the "Wizard of Oz" in "Wicked", and of course you know the song "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead". In this song, the lyrics following "the house began to pitch" all rhyme, but the lyricist used "sit--uation for the wicked witch", just as you do in, say, "Popular": "now that I've chosen to become a pal, a sis-ter and advisor". This isn't, perhaps, a hidden homage, is it? Just wondering! Thank you for your previous response, Cathryn

Answer from Stephen Schwartz

Actually, I don't know that specific lyric is an homage to Harburg (it wasn't intentionally), but my admiration for Harburg goes so far back that he has certainly been an influence on my writing all my life. I think the most overt tribute I've ever given him in my work is in HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, the lyric to "Topsy Turvy", specifically: "Scurvy knaves are extra scurvy/ on the sixth of Januervy, all because it's Topsy-Turvy Day." The word "Januervy" is definitely a conscious Harburg-ism. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

High Speed Patter Songs

Question:

Admirers and critics alike appreciate "Bravo, Stromboli!" both for its "fiendishly clever" lyrics (as Tom Moore described them in Geppetto CD notes) and for the fabulous performance by Brent Spiner. Twenty-nine years ago, did you get a similar reaction to "It's All for the Best" from Godspell? It's interesting to me that "clever" is so admired. I gravitate towards the more emotional songs, but since entertainment is largely meant to amuse and delight us, it's fair to rejoice when it does.

What I like most about "Bravo, Stromboli!" are the abundant internal rhymes. How long did that take you to craft them? Have you ever eaten a cannoli? I had to look up imbroglio. Pinocchio and "here to Tokyo"--once we hear them, it seems so obvious but I'm sure it wasn't at first. Great fun. Both the lyrics and spirit of the song entertain so well and with them you managed to silence the scoffers. Well done!

Most people find it irresistible to make a Gilbert and Sullivan connection to such songs. Have you admired their patter songs and others? Would you class your similar songs as patter songs or not exactly? Have you ever tried to rapidly sing "Modern Major General" (or whatever that song is called)? Do you sing your own as you compose? Lastly, any stories with regard to Gilbert and Sullivan in your life? When did you first see one of their shows and what impression did it make?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The closest thing I have done to a Gilbert-and-Sullivan pastiche is "War is a Science" from PIPPIN, which was deliberately written in that style. I did like their work very much as a kid (I still do, and I loved the movie of TOPSY-TURVY last year). I fondly remember my parents taking me to see somewhat tattered Doyly Carte productions of H.M.S. PINAFORE and PIRATES OF PENZANCE.

But actually "Bravo, Stromboli" is meant to be a pastiche of the famous Figaro aria from THE BARBER OF SEVILLE (since Stromboli is Italian after all, not British.) In fact, the orchestration of "Bravo, Stromboli" is written for precisely the same orchestra as Rossini used (and even includes some of his riffs!)

As for "All for the Best", I sort of thought of it as an Irving Berlin homage -- like "You're Just in Love" or "Old-Fashioned Wedding", with the two parts that fit together yet stand well on their own.

In terms of the difficulty of coming up with "clever" rhymes -- it's actually easier for me to write a song like "Bravo, Stromboli" than, say, a song like "If I Never Knew You" from POCAHONTAS, which took a long time to find a way to say things that have been said before but make them feel fresh and specific to the characters. In any event, I'm glad you enjoyed "Bravo, Stromboli" -- I certainly had fun writing it!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

See the other sections of this Stephen Schwartz Forum archive for more comments about musicals.

Stephen Schwartz was interviewed for "Heart and Soul: The Life and Music of Frank Loesser" and his comments are included on the DVD.