

The Art of Writing for the Theatre

Luke Yankee

Critical Points to Consider: Choreography and Musical Direction

Choreography

- 1) Does the choreography support the story and help to move it forward? Or is it simply pretty dancing?
- 2) What does it tell you about the characters?
- 3) Does it have the proper style for the period and the show?
- 4) Does it play to the strengths of the performers? Or are they trying to do movements beyond their capabilities?
- 5) It is important that you know the difference between what has been recreated from an original Broadway production or tour and what has been created by the choreographer. Sometimes it will be listed in the program—sometimes not. There are many wonderful productions that use original choreography and while it is hard work to recreate and translate that choreography to the stage, it should not be judged as that choreographer's original work.
- 6) Sometimes, a play will have stylized staging underscored by music used to facilitate set moves and scene transitions. This is a form of choreography. Is it artful and imaginatively conceived?
- 7) Is the choreography bold, impressive, and innovative? Does it make you feel something?
- 8) Is there fight choreography? If so, does it seem realistic and exciting, with an element of danger? Is it well executed by the actors?

Musical Direction

- 1) The musical director is ultimately a collaborator. They need to combine musical taste, leadership, and a collaborative sense of storytelling.
- 2) The musical director can be a combination of any or all of these facets: rehearsal pianist, “répétiteur” (from opera—the person who goes over the notes for the singers to learn), conductor, accompanist, therapist, and colleague. Their collaboration starts with the director to make sure that the musical story is told, making sure all the words are heard and being sung appropriately, which means they look after the lyricist and composer as well.
- 3) Is the production an original work? If so, the musical director’s job is much more involved. They had a much bigger hand in the “sound” of the show.
- 4) Did the musical director do any of the arrangements (vocal, dance and/or music)? The musical director should be given more credit if they produced some great arrangements.
- 5) Is the musical director also the conductor? If so, give a little more credit to a conductor who gives a spirited performance. How tight does the orchestra sound? Much of that is at the mercy of the sound designer but nonetheless, it should be considered.
- 6) Very important: In a musical, the vocal performances of the actors should count for 50% of their work. How is their diction as a group? Can you understand the lyrics that are being sung, especially in big group numbers? Again, if the sound is bad, you can't penalize the musical director, but all those factors need to be considered.

- 7) Outstanding musical direction is more than just having taught the notes and playing or conducting the songs. Is the cast inspired musically? Does difficult music seem easy? Is the cast competing with the orchestra (or band, or accompanist) or supported by them?
- 8) Does the music sparkle? Is the band “hot” or “flat?” Does the show flow with the music or stop every time a song comes along? Does the music seem part of the musical (almost like another cast member) or are you taken out of the story by the music being dull and clueless about what is happening on the stage?
- 9) Weak musical direction is loud, unconnected and has no musical focus. In essence, everyone seems to be out for themselves. Is this the case?