

Reflection on RaFotBBC Songwriting

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What is this document?

At the beginning of the semester, when Ben and I decided to write a musical, one of the things which we both agreed upon was that we wanted to write an original plot. Even award-winning musicals rarely have original plots anymore. Realizing that this was something we both viewed as important to making our work our own, we set about creating a new story for our musical.

Soon into plot creation, we realized that some of the things we had thought of felt right or wrong for what characters would do, or how the audience would react to events in the story. The idea of story writing being just as much a science or set of rules as an art was intriguing to us, and we said we would write a reflection on what we found at the end of the semester.

As we continued creating the script and score for our musical, it also became clear that we were making a lot of decisions—ones that ultimately made our work stronger. But without documentation, they would perhaps be overlooked or forgotten by those who only see the finished product. Because this was a great learning experience, and others could benefit from seeing it, I also decided to document our considerations in writing and editing songs.

So it is those things you should find in this document.

Considerations in Creating an Original Plot

When Ben and I started creating our plot, we were curious as to whether or not we could define a set of rules to say what would make a story good or bad. By story, I really mean *all* aspects of the story—the characters must be believable, the events must seem realistic, and the problems must be ones that draw the audience in, and then get resolved in appropriate ways. In other words, we were wondering if writing a good story was more an art, where it would be incredibly difficult to predict what would be well-received or believable, and take much divergent thought to generate, or a science, where rules would govern how “good” a story was, and it would theoretically be possible to create better stories just by putting these rules together.

We found that generating a story is both art and science, but leans towards the direction of science more than we had initially imagined.

While others might reach a different conclusion, through our research and personal experience, we have found that good stories, by and large, follow a set of generalizations. There are good stories that break these rules, but in general, those small violations are done so an even more fundamental principle of storytelling can be emphasized more.

I think the most fundamental lesson I came away with is that a story is about change. Something ends different than it started, or if it ends the same way as it started, there are many changes in the middle and the character has a different outlook or maturity. In fact, not only the broadest level, but at every successively smaller level is a story also about change. Even in our own story's first act, Dennis' change was apparent. Over the course of the first act, he goes from being the fourth generation bar owner of the staple of the community to being ready to ditch it for the glorious and uncertain prospects of entrepreneurship. His relationship with Richard turns from one of distant amusement, to curiosity regarding his business acumen and social craziness, to jealousy of his talent and carefree way of life.

The key lesson I learned with change is to take all of these changes and to make *these* the body of the work. Scenes shouldn't be inserted unless they advance one of these goals. Even individual lines have a reason for being included. And if down to every line has a reason for being in the script, then everything will constantly move forward to the inevitable resolution.

Another big lesson I learned is that resolution is incredibly difficult to pull off. The old Greek thematic element of *Deus ex Machina* seems to have very limited place in a modern story. In our story, this situation was complicated by the fact that it was the character's own defaults that brought the conflict, as opposed to an external force. If the characters are shortsighted or flawed enough to bring about serious conflicts on their own, how can they be resolved by the same characters, in a way that is realistic and draws the audience's sympathy? This was something we struggled with quite a bit with Dennis—he has sort of hit rock bottom in the middle of Act II, and it was hard to think of a way to bring him out of it. Although the script for our solution isn't written, we believe we came up with something that worked (an extended conversation with his father which reveals that his father knew all along what sort of path Dennis would go down with the business and how it was the only way he could totally be happy at the Blackbird), but even this required edits to numerous other places in the script. In other words, resolution is both hard to think of and hard to fit in.

One way to look at the idea of story writing being an art or science is to examine whether or not a computer program could write a good story, or a good-sounding plot summary. And my answer is definitely no, not in the sense that a person could. Any plot event has too many implications and connotations for a computer to handle. However, the process of evaluating if a certain event works is rather algorithmic, and seems like something computers could approximate. For example, we were considering the merits of having Richard buy 1% of the company beyond the 50% he already owned. We decided this was good because it added tension in Act I, making Dennis' split from Richard in Act II more realistic. I don't think a computer could evaluate that, but seemingly nebulous changes to the plot can be evaluated as good or bad.

And in this sense, writing a story—or perhaps, more specifically, evaluating a story—seemed to be something that was not as unpredictable and indescribable as we had imagined. It's certainly not a *science* in any strict definition of the term, but it is something that can be done in fairly rigid ways.

Songs and Their Considerations

I wrote five songs for The Rise and Fall of the Blackbird Brewing Company. Here is a bit about the main things I took away or think about regarding each one of them.

The Blackbird Public House

- **Ragtime Feel:** One thing we certainly wanted to avoid in this song was making it sound like a ragtime. A lot of the left hand has (and to a greater degree, used to have) rhythms emphasizing the upbeat. We also worried a bit about the accidentals that seemed particularly prone to be in rag. I think we did a good job dealing with this. Also, although the MIDI really has a honky-tonk kind of feel to it, when we play the song on a real piano, it sounds much better.
- **Opening Song:** This is the opening song, and as such, it has a lot weighing on it. It needs to be catchy, because it's the first song the audience will hear, and, in my opinion, if the audience isn't drawn in by the first song, the entire musical is at a serious disadvantage. Also, the lyrics need to say all the most important things, since they are the first lyrics that audience will hear. With such in mind, we tailored the opening chorus and verse to address a few salient themes about the bar—it is constant, it has been around for generations, and it is well-liked.
- **Liking the bar:** At the end of this song, we want the audience to love the bar as much as the patrons. In doing research for the song, Ben and I visited a pub in Cambridge, and after taking in the feel, we were caught with the idea that we wouldn't really care if the place were torn down. There was nothing inherent about it. This spelled some doom for our plot, because at that time, the motivation for starting the business was that the bar itself was in financial trouble, and the audience needed to feel like it couldn't just move to somewhere where property taxes were cheaper and be done with it. Fortunately, we found a way around that, but we still wanted the audience to love this bar like their own. So we added humor to the verses to give it as homey a feel as possible. We think it works out pretty nicely. It has a bit of edge to it too—a bar that wouldn't have survived if it *weren't* for prohibition, or an old bartender who started more fights than he broke up. We think these little details draw the audience in and give them some amount of loyalty to the place itself.

The Usual

- **Repetition:** One of the big things we tried to do with this song was bring down the amount of repetition of ideas and dialogue. In our original draft, there was a chorus and a few entirely spoken verses that were highly generalized and really didn't refer to anything too specific. However, now, we have eliminated a lot of the repetition. The first verse is a barfly's dramatic introspection on teaching history, Chicago sports, and his chair at the Blackbird which leads to his duet singing of the first chorus, accompanied by the bartender himself. All of these little details take away from the monotony of the song and add personal flavor to the lyrics.
- **Barflies:** This song is where the regular patrons of the bar are introduced. It is important that this song accurately portray the way we want the audience to feel about them, since it is their first impression of the patrons. We want them to come off as sort of a chorus-like bunch, and really have a feeling of being personal and friendly and caught up in each other's business. This song gets the first two better than the last quality, but we still think we are able to distinguish

the identity of the patrons. Especially of note, we love Marina's spunkiness, and Stephen's verse is undeniably cool. In my opinion, it has a very "musical-esque" sound to it.

Nothing We Can't Do

- **Structure:** My favorite part of this song (and perhaps its coolest part) is its structure. The structure perfectly mirrors the development that happens over the course of the song. The chorus contains these words of encouragement, "We will make it through, / Not alone but two," which are sung first by Claire as a response to her husband's despondency about his father's illness. He goes on to sing the second verse about their daughter's premature birth, which was a time that was difficult, but Dennis' encouragement of Claire helped them get through it. This inspires *him* to sing the second chorus. Finally, Claire tells him to look to the future in the third verse, singing "We both have a road to go, you and I, we can say," which transitions directly into the final chorus, in which Claire and Dennis sing "We will make it through" together in a beautiful harmony.
- **Slowness of the Chorus:** One of my main concerns for this song, and something I would edit had I more time, is the half-note-based chorus. It seems to drag compared to the rest of the song, and since it occurs so frequently, I would love to tighten it up a little bit.
- **Beauty:** One thing I think this song gets right is its delicateness and beauty. Both characters are singing about personal matters and times of wanting to give up. The piano part is also somewhat sparse. I don't think it sounds too sparse, since there should be heavy pedaling, and lots of full chords, but it's enough to not overpower what the characters are already putting out there for the audience to hear. In many ways, this song is the essence of a good marriage, and it just goes to contrast the changes that we see in Dennis and Claire in Act II.

On the Road

- **Traveling Feel:** One thing I really went for with On the Road was trying to get that feel of traveling down the highway in a car with the windows down and the radio up. Actually, the idea of cruising with the windows down is explicitly mentioned in the lyrics, but the overall quasi-rockabilly feel is present in the 7 chords (emphasizing the flat seventh on the subdominant was something Ben came up with in vocal improv, and really adds to the feel), the heavily pentatonic melody, and the almost implied swing rhythm of the song.
- **Bar Rep Music:** The verses of this song have very different styles of music, and we think that it really added to the entertainment value of the song. The goal was to have several verses, each with different music and people, and together represent this blur of the traveling experience, tied together by choruses about being on the road. The part with Garrett is good, and although I originally thought it moved along too quickly and Richard seemed too dishonest and unlikeable, Ben did a reading of it which sort of softened things up. For some reason, Ben's conception of the verse made Richard seem not terribly dishonest, and actually made Garrett sound not unbelievable (though Garrett definitely sounded a bit dumb). The second verse is another thing I'd change if there were more time. It's fine, but I'd like to experiment with doing three verses, or with figuring out some other reason why Michael and Jane don't buy from Richard. In any case, all of the transitions back into the chorus also work out decently, and I

think the steady (or slightly, slightly swung) eighth notes in the acoustic guitar as this E7 chord builds up are a great effect.

- **Piano:** In the chorus, I really tried to have the piano stay away from the melody line and not really take up too much attention. I think I achieved this, but also, when the voice fades out at the end of the chorus, it has the best effect of transitioning keys and musical styles as the verse starts, and I really am pleased with this.
- **Ending:** I was definitely concerned with making convincing endings for each of these songs, and this is one where I was pleased with the result. It was actually coincidence that the two melodies from the chorus fit nicely on top of each other, though with them being both thought of in the same session, and both relying so heavily on the pentatonic (which is hard to make sound dissonant), it really should be no wonder. In any case, that harmony, along with a strong piano ending, makes this one of my favorites.

Fermentation (Reprise)

- **Contrast of musical styles:** There are really two big things going on in this song. In the verses, Dennis is reflecting on what his wife has just told him about not wanting to sell the bar and his future, and in the chorus, rather violently demands his own freedom of choice to himself. It is this self-focused side which, in a sustained note of intensity, ends the first act. In Act II we see what effect the business really is having on his life.
- **Too intense:** One concern I have about this song is that it's too intense given what the audience has seen of Dennis so far. To go from being sort of content with a bar and wanting to start a business to singing about being a rat in a cage is a great shift, and I don't want it to be unrealistic. However, this song is a reprise of the version of Fermentation that comes right after On the Road, which is where we see these feelings in a much earlier and less intense form. So compared to the other songs I've written, this is a huge leap in emotion, but when you consider that you see these emotions stirring within Dennis in the first Fermentation, as well as his conversation with his dad (and New Things in Store, in which he could excitedly mention all the great things this business can do) and his deal with Richard (which he begins losing out on), it may be fine. In any case, these new emotions within him should also draw in the audience by making them want to see what he will do, or if this trend of his obsession with the brewing company will continue. Indeed, they will find that it does.
- **Piano Part:** The piano in this song is relatively simple—for the chorus, the right hand plays staccato 12/4 eighth notes and the left hand plays octaves. For the verse, it's a sometimes smooth, sometimes dizzying waltz in the lower registers. However, I think that the piano part is still very strong, and I'm pleased to say that it came almost entirely from improv sessions.
- **Lyrics:** Also of note—I really like that Dennis does not give the cliché “the future is mine,” but the slightly more nuanced “*my* future is mine,” which much more accurately describes what he is feeling with regard to the whole thing. And I definitely like the idea of his thoughts fermenting in the same way as the beer he is brewing.

For Next Time

Ben and I have talked briefly about the degree to which we want to keep working on this musical. Obviously, it would have been great to write an entire musical in one semester, but from the beginning, we wondered about the plausibility of that. In retrospect, if we had gone in with a finished plot, a roadmap of the songs, and a low load of homework, clubs and activities, I think there is a possibility we could've finished. If week one of the musical is generating an enormous amount of improv to comprise all of the numbers and characters, I think it might be possible to write 15 songs in a semester (at the course's expected load of 12 hours/week or slightly above, which is obviously far lower than the 40+ hours of week professionals would work).

Also, on reflection, I feel as though if I ever were to attempt to write another musical, I would put a lot more thought into what the plot was. In this case, Ben and I picked a plot that we both enjoyed (it was actually inspired by a cell phone commercial, by the way http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqkJYtt5vBs&feature=player_embedded), and it was totally enjoyable working with the idea of entrepreneurship and a talented, flamboyant salesman and his troubled partner, but to quote the movie *Walk the Line*, "If [I] was hit by a truck and [I] was lying out there in that gutter dying, and [I] had one time to sing *one* song... One song that people would remember before [I'm] dirt... One song that would let God know how [I] felt about [my] time here on Earth. One song that would sum [me]up," this musical wouldn't be it.

In other words, I do want to write a musical again, but if I could only write one, I would pick something that summed everything about me up and took my most important outlooks on life and condensed it into one story. And even though *The Rise and Fall of the Blackbird Brewing Company* has been fun and a great exercise in composition, it's not totally me. Some of this is a function of having 3 months to write it rather than the rest of my life, some of it is because I'm working with a partner and for a grade, and I certainly don't regret working on the project, but it's given me a better idea what I do and don't want to do in my music composition in the future.

All in all, this has been an incredible learning experience, and it has been rewarding to have a chance to think outside the normal bounds of engineering classes in an engineering school. It's been incredibly hectic working on this project at times, and I haven't been able to go a day without thinking or worrying about for the last six weeks, but it's been an incredibly worthwhile thing to do, and I'm glad I chose it as my AHS capstone project at Olin.