

THE RIGHT STUFF

By Stephen Peithman, STAGE DIRECTIONS, May 2005

When a musical production goes well, audiences usually point to the acting, singing, dancing, directing, scenic design or costumes. But the reason these elements usually stand out is because the piece selected matches the performing group's ability to stage it. It's really that simple. Sometimes, finding the right musical is a matter of luck. But more often, it's the result of careful thought. Here are 12 questions to help jump-start that thought process, so you can determine what's right for you.

1. Is it a quality show? Look for strength in the story (or concept, if it's a revue), characters and music, as well as that intangible "something" that tags the piece as a standout. Now ever, don't confuse quality with name value. Learn all you can about a show's strengths and weaknesses, so you can make an informed decision when the time comes.

2. Is the show right for your audience? Consider who is likely to attend. Will they understand it? Will they approve of its message or language? If you're looking for a family show, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* or *Chicago* probably aren't for you. On the other hand, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* and *Anything Goes* have levels of meaning that can make them appealing to both young people and adults.

3. Does the gender breakdown match your talent pool? If your talent pool is composed mainly of women, you would be wise to choose *The Sound of Music* or *Chicago* instead of, say, *1776*. Check to see if a successful production of the show relies on one major role played brilliantly. *Mame* and *Hello Dolly!*, for example, both depend on a strong female lead, while *Into the Woods* and *Ragtime* are true ensemble shows.

4. Do you have the right voices? Some musicals demand strong voices from everyone, some only from a few. However, it's not always a matter of finding a great singer, but one comfortable singing in a certain range. Carol Channing is a tenor, thus perfect for the lead role in *Hello, Dolly!* Since that's the range in which Dolly's songs are written. Put a mid-voiced singer in that role, and the low notes will disappear altogether. Check the score carefully to see how difficult it might be to cast the most important roles. (Note that some publishers offer scores in compatible keys; Music Theatre Internationals even offers customized key changes.)

5. Can you handle the instrumental requirements? Some shows can be performed with a piano, bass and percussion. Others need a bigger sound: *Hello, Dolly!*'s big number, "Until the Parade Passes By," loses punch without brass and wind instruments, as does "76 Trombones" from *The Music Man*. In fact, most shows with big musical moments suffer without the weight of a pit orchestra. Many shows have large amounts of instrumental underscoring and lengthy dance routines. If that's the case, make sure you have musicians and dancers able to learn the music, and enough time to rehearse them.

6. Can you handle the dance requirements? Some musicals make few choreographic demands on performers; some demand a great deal. *South Pacific*, *She Loves Me*, and *Into the Woods* have no major dance numbers while *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* and *West Side Story* have lots of them. If you can't provide the level of dancing called for in a particular show, look elsewhere.

7. Can you handle the technical requirements? How many sets are required, and how realistic do they need to be? Do you have room to store sets offstage when they're not in use? For that matter, do you have room on stage to accommodate the sets and all the cast members comfortably? That's an important consideration in a large-cast show like *Ragtime*, for example. Are there unusual lighting or sound requirements or special effects? If you can't fly your Peter Pan or replicated the stage-sized painting in *Sunday in the Park with George*, your audience will be disappointed.

8. Can you costume the show? Period shows, such as *Oklahoma!*, *My Fair Lady*, or *Jekyll & Hyde*, demand more resources for costumes than musicals set in contemporary times, such as *Violet*, *Company* or *I*

Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change. And, of course, big shows like *The Sound of Music* require far more than small ones, like *Nunsense*.

9. Can you afford the show? Royalties and music rental can be expensive, as can lots of costumes and big sets. Sketch a rough budget as you consider each musical. Does it match the average expenses of show you're doing now, or is it a quantum leap into the unknown.

10. Is the show available? It surprises many to learn that not all titles listed by royalty houses are available for production in every area of the country, particularly shows playing in New York or those on tour. Check availability with the publisher or royalty house before you decide on your season.

11. Will the show appeal to your actors, designers and production staff? If it doesn't excite them, it's not going to get the support it needs to succeed. If the title isn't well known, then work on explaining why it's an exciting choice. Also, since *Cabaret* on stage is far different from its film version (as are *Funny Girl*, *Grease*, and *The Sound of Music*), make sure that everyone understands it's the stage production you're doing, not the movie. Educate and energize your people, then do the same for your audience.

12. Do you have a director who can do it justice? Putting on a show is not just a matter of enthusiasm, talent, and good organizational skills. You must also match the director with the material, I know a talented choreographer/director who was asked to stage a production of *She Loves Me*. She didn't understand or appreciate the show's delicate fabric and filled it with so much stage business that the central romantic story got lost in the shuffle. And yet her work on such productions as *Godspell* and *Anything Goes* was exemplary. As with walking shoes, the fit is everything.

Choosing the right musical may be an inexact science, but it needn't be a crapshoot. Answering these 12 questions honestly will help you focus on the essential elements that make for a successful production. It's like baking a dessert from scratch – use all the right ingredients, and the cake will rise to the occasion.

(If you're looking for more help in making your decision, we recommend Peter Filichia's *Let's Put on a Musical: How to choose the Right Show for Your School, Community or Professional Theater*, published by Back Stage Books.)