I USED TO LIKE MUSICALS:
A CURMUDGEON GRIPES ABOUT THE LYRICS

Delivered by Bernard Wurger

Here's one I'll bet you've heard: The bear went over the mountain to see what he could see."

The extended metaphor applies to all of us to some extent. We strive for and get to a fairly high place, and we look out there and see the hills and dales we've passed. There on the right is the slough of despair and there on the left is the pass we were headed off at. A smatch of honor here, and a blush of shame there. The lives we've touched, and those we've blighted. No wonder we turn around and look forward. There's the golden sun of hope, and the cold wind of impossibility. The distance and danger ahead to be braved with a body hardly able to bear the slings and arrows of hitting the snooze button. No wonder we turn forward and backward like the two-faced god, and hope that one side or the other will look pleasant and easy and profitable and will offer riches and a snooze in the late afternoon sun.

A writer may look back on his works and rejoice or despair as is his wont, but I am an actor. Yes, it's true I'm a teacher, too, but I have taught other actors to act. I do not create the words; I am expected to <u>say</u> them. I do not conjure the scenes; I play them. It is my desire and life's work to bring the words, the ideas and the emotions of the writer to realization. If I write at all, it is as a brief and breathing chronicle not only of our time but of all time, and it is this which gives life to the poet we serve whose words are ploughed into the fallow field by the actor who intones them planting them in the tiny part of the brain where sympathy lives.

My work is only partially scholarly. I can imitate the real by observation and study. I can comprehend and communicate the poet's art by a secondary means. I can study intentions and language to tell students that the real meaning of "wherefore" is "why" and not "where," and I must explain that "cracko jacko" was invented by an author to sound like gangster slang of sixty years ago, and is incomprehensible to a student who thinks that "sick" means "impressive" and "ice grilling" means "repressing facial expressiveness."

I've been doing this for a lifetime. I observe not only the famous and the near famous, but also people like you. I study your walks, your verbal inflections, the way your eyebrows hop up your foreheads when you hear a lie and the half-smile of satisfaction when your kid reads her first word by herself. It is only fair that from this lifetime of studied memory, or this bear-crossed mountain if you will, that I should raise my own eyebrow and half-smile at the accomplishments, not only of my own, but those of the poets and musicians and composers and directors and producers of the past. I should see a glowing path, radiant in my own sunset so that I can turn my face forward once more. Such a farewell is only fair.

But that is not what I see. And, I trust that you will, on closer observation, see as well, that the living words you write and read have been trampled on to make a path that does not shine like a yellow brick road from the past to the place where your feet stand now, but a road which, once filled with promise, now has crumbled to rock and rubble, to detritus, to that remixed and common concrete whose stability and long life depend more on wind and weather than on the minds of men. Can the path before me continue gold while the path behind me has turned to dross?

Now, all men have at one time or another bewailed the failings of the popular culture that surrounds them. Often it is man's own dissatisfaction at the decline of art or culture or civilization that inspires him to create something new, or to rip up the wrecked and recreate the right. Socrates whined at the ingratitude and lack of manliness of the youth of his generation, and Demosthenes and Machiavelli despaired of ever finding goodness in man. Who has not heard modern pop music on the radio or watched pop television or shaken one's head at the shallowness of the billion-dollar movie that wins an award for being the most like last year's award winner? Who has not heard lines like, "Show me the money," or "Say 'What' again," repeated as if they were on a par with lines like "There is a tide in the affairs of men,which, taken at the flood lead on to fortune."

Whenever I long for a time when the writer's art could change the mind of man, I recall the story of the audience at the original – and only sanctioned - performance of "The Eumenides" by Aeschylus. When the actor who portrayed all the parts – that's right, there was no pretense at reality – put on his three-faced mask to sing the song of the furies to the cursed Orestes, women were reported to have been so terrified that they miscarried in the audience. Compare that sort of reaction to today's audiences who offer standing ovations to the most banal and trite of offerings – the 440th performance of a microphone-aided, musically synthesized, scenically automated, intimation that that at one time, an author may have thought, "Here is a cool thing that will kill two hours."

All of the elements of the drama, or the novel, or the poem, or the song should come together for one purpose only. These powerful elements, cobbled together by those of you fortunate enough to be blessed or cursed with the talent, have only one

goal. That goal of the artist is simple enough, and sure enough, and from the first time our ancestor dipped his hand into color to outline an antelope on a cave wall, that goal has not changed.

What is the reason we make art? Why paint? Why compose, sing, act, design buildings, fashion clothing, sculpt, write poetry or plays or novels or essays? There is one reason alone to make art:

To evoke emotions from our audience.

There isn't anything else. At least there is nothing so worthy for the artist to attempt. The driest book of mathematical equations should have this as its goal no less than the works of Keats or Schopenhauer or Pyncheon. It is a gift to be able to stir real emotions. And think that so many of us here in this room try to do it with the most abstract of symbols – the symbols farthest away from the emotions we wish to evoke – words.

Does it amaze you from time to time what single words can do? Where there is no trouble at all, the single word accident or disaster or crippled or epidemic or miracle can create an emotion. Coupled with another word like accident-free or disaster-relief or crippled-enemy or epidemic-proportion or Miracle-whip – suddenly the emotion changes.

Given this power, one would think that writers of lyrics would exercise control over the listeners and their emotions, offering a fulfilling and thoughtful and sincere and cleansing experience like the fabled catharsis of the Aristotelian Greeks. I must say that there are lyrics, only a few words of which, inspire us with emotions so deep that they can only be expressed or experienced in the words used by the poet. Can you say, "I would I were a glove upon that hand that I might touch that cheek," any better than Romeo could?

Can you express despair at your own physical shortcomings better than Cyrano's ". . .then I see my shadow on the wall?" Is there a more amusing list of incongruous accomplishments than "I am the very model of a modern Major General?" Has any cash-strapped father ever coupled the word with music better than Billy in Carousel, and cried, "I'll go out and make it, or steal it, or take it, or die?" With the power of the lyric, and the added power of music underscoring it, why would any poet succumb to the lowest possible use of the words, and have his characters speak as if they are inarticulate?

This is the triumph of the willfully, arrogantly stupid, and the defeat of the ability to evoke emotions. It is anti-art.

This is the broken path that is right underneath my bearish feet right now.

One does not have to look far back in history to see great lyric art besmirched at first and accepted later. The riot in 1913 caused by Schoenberg's "Verklarte Nacht" and Stravinsky's "Sacre du Printemps" provide ample evidence. One eyewitness claimed that Debussy was in the audience involved in a fistfight over the music. Rossini's "Barber of Seville" was hooted at on its premiere, and the audience followed the composer home and stoned his house all night. Brecht and Beethoven and Beaumarchais wrote works that have found favor eternal life, even when they caused anger at first. This is not the misuse of music and words — lyricism if you will — that I address.

Understand that I do not mean to denigrate the depiction of the quotidian: without an heroic display of the drama of daily life, we would have no Death of a Salesman, no Long Day's Journey Into Night, no Glass Menagerie, no Dark at the Top of

the Stairs, no Waiting for Godot. The broken path of which I speak is the one that accepts – or rather, embraces – the decline of the lyric theatre, replacing it with the banal, tawdry, pedestrian chirpings of throwaway music, rhythms to dance to one time only, melodies attached syllable by syllable to words so vague, so extemporaneous, so day-to-day and so fearful of masculine rhyme that they might be the hummings of a 19th century peasant tilling the master's field while he goes hungry or the laundress starching her mistress's petticoat while her children go naked.

When did it become acceptable for song lyrics like "Some Enchanted Evening, you may see a stranger across a crowded room," to be superceded by "I am the Walrus, goo goo ga joob?"

Did you know that there are over a million words in the English language? A million. And yet, the common pop lyricist uses fewer than 10,000 in his writing. Only an actor who is compelled to say the words of the poets of today may be viscerally aware of their paucity of power and their lack of learning and their avoidance of actual emotion. That is right. When the emotion a lyricist is able to evoke goes no farther than the outward show of that emotion, the song is no more moving than a video game. It is virtual emotion. It is a sham. It allows our audiences to pretend to feel while they escape without feeling anything. This is the very antithesis of the poet's purpose. Remember that we make art to evoke emotion, not to avoid it. Such shadow emotions are only remembrances. They do not evoke tears from the heart; they evoke tears that remember other tears. These modern lyricists demand nothing of the audience but the echoes of tears. Was the Roman poet Virgil speaking sardonically when he wrote the pathetic half line: "Sunt lachrymae rerum – there are tears in things."

Do audiences notice?

You bet they do. Longing for a wrenching experience, waiting for the catharsis that changes them from ice-cold jagged-edged individuals, from self-encased "ouch" factories, they wish for the socializing experience that turns them, even briefly, into humanity. In lieu of this, they listen to "all by myself" rhymed for the umpteenth time with "alone on the shelf" and in homage,offer a standing ovation.

When I was a young fellow, no shows received standing ovations. Outpourings like that were legend. They were the result of an emotional experience so overwhelming that there was no way to express our common humanity than by standing together.

Now, we are as we were when we entered the theatre. We came in as individuals, divided from our fellows as people are who shut out the world to listen to their Personal Music on their Personal Ear Buds and we go out the same way; what could be more event-killing than slipping the earbuds back into the ears the moment the performance is over?

The dictum of musical theatre, dating back to Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides and Aristophanes was this: when the situation becomes too emotional for words ~~without music~~ only, add music.

When was the last time you, in a lyric theatre production noticed this formula followed? Now, it seems that the rule from on high sounds like this: "Say, you creative team fellows have talked for 3 minutes and 30 seconds. Isn't it time for a song? I mean, after all, you can't expect to hold an audience for that long without a pounding, electronic, inhuman rhythm, a series of computerized tracks playing at once to simulate

complex harmones, a melody consisting of two or three notes repeated over and over again to a simple tag line which does not change or rhyme with anything but itself? I mean, let's treat the audience as if they were autistic, and charge them $100 for a ticket. Then they will give us a standing ovation."

What's more, like the crowd applauding the naked emperor, none will say that the spectacle is empty of anything of value, even though all they've seen is a theme park viewed from a distance. Can anyone having seen Andrew Lloyd Webber's Phantom of the Opera call it more than well-dressed ephemera? Is Larson's Rent really Puccini's La Boheme, or is Spring Awakening really the shocking equivalent of Wedekind's play? Is Cats really West Side Story?

Let me take you down a short review of some lyric poetry of the theatre, just through the last hundred and fifty years to show you the decline of the poetry. I don't mean to be didactic – oh, all right, of course I do – but see if you cannot hear the difference between what was offered, and what was accepted by audiences, even less sophisticated than the ones we make up ourselves. I don't intend to sing for you – music analysis is best left to musicians – but these lyrics sing themselves.

By the end of the 19th century, musical theatre had come slowly out of the marriage between Handel's biblical oratorios and John Gay's Beggar's Opera, only to meet with the bombast of Wagner's two-beat meter joined to the stunning lyricism of Lohengrin, and the concise power of Verdi's librettists to spawn the light opera genius of William S. Gilbert paired with the word-serving music of Sir Arthur Sullivan. Gilbert's lyrics, many aphoristic, many silly, live on in a way the songs of modern lyricists can probably never hope to live. "My object all sublime / I shall achieve in time / to

let the punishment fit the crime . . ." and "I've got a little list/of society offenders who never would be missed. . ." "I thought so little, they rewarded me/ by making me the ruler of the Queen's Na-vee." These are more than simply diversions; they rise unbidden to the tongue and the memory, their melodies fitted to them like the finest pair of boots.

Aided by soaring melodies, even comparatively benign lyrics reach romantic heights. "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody" or "Overhead the moon is beaming / white as blossoms on the bough / From the Student Prince. . .". Even wit can flourish in lyrics chained to rhyme and regular rhythm. Lorenz Hart wrote the lyrics after Richard Rodgers wrote the tunes and still came up with "beans/could/get no keen/er re/cep/tion/ in a bean/ery." Or "When love congeals/it soon reveals/the faint aroma of performing seals/the double crossing of a pair of heels/I wish I were in love again." He even manages to slip the subjunctive "were" into a conditional clause – I'm sure that's all over the place in modern lyric which continually tells us that the singer is "by herself/on the shelf," or "If I was you/here's what I'll do."

As an actor who has to say these things, I am acutely aware of their banality. We all long for another Sondheim to write longingly "The sun comes up/ I think about you / the coffee cup / I think about you / I want you so/ it's like I'm losing my mind." When the piano bench yields the songs that the story must be fitted to, we have piano bench musicals. We have photo albums – not sentimental ones like grandma's, nor Kodak moments like dad's, but digital ones, thousands and thousands of ephemeral, moment-to-moment recollections of thoughts too shallow or feelings too fleeting to care about deeply.

Which leads to the next problem with the lyric – the rhythm. The songs you grew up with are gone: my students are embarrassed to listen to melodies, just as they avoid masculine rhyme. They tap unconsciously to The Beat, that incessant, inhuman, mechanically produced, and regular-to-the-point-of-madness drum. Perhaps you've never noticed the ubiquity of drum tracks.

Music, at its origins, must have some kind of rhythm. That's how we keep it together. Group singing cannot exist without it, and dance is mostly rhythm. But dance without story is like a rave party – sound and fury without any other significance than the desire to exhaust oneself into a feeling that all behaviors are forgiveable. The one-night stand, the casual closeness in a closet that such insincere rhythm-driven sound inspires deserves to be denigrated.

The lyricists and musicians of Broadway were schooled by evangelists and the Chatauqua lecturers and by the radio. Yip Harburg who wrote "Brother can you spare a dime," and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and Ira Gershwin longed to get their verse published by Franklin P. Adams' "Conning Tower" in the New York World. Can you imagine picking up one of the few remaining newspapers and finding clever, pithy verse featured in it?

These people worked at and polished their verse so that it not only danced in time with the melody – it made sense, it set the scene, it developed the character. Tim Rice who writes the words – they are not really lyrics – for Andrew Lloyd Webber's cantata musicals likes to exhibit what Webber biographer Jonathan Mantle called "a relaxed attitude to his craft. . . he wrote the lyrics off the top of his head." This ignores, as Mark Grant reminds us in his book "The Rise and Fall of the American Musical" Alexander Pope's "True ease in

writing comes from art, not chance/As those move easiest who have learned to dance."

Theatre lyricists, like today's pop lyricists change the rules as they go along. They will accept false rhyme or no rhyme at all, rather than stay within the constraints of clear versification. Yes, Maxwell Anders's lyrics for Lost in the Stars do not rhyme at all, but they lead from the specific to the general. Lyrics like those for Phantom of the Opera are all general – anybody in the show could sing them. Against, to quote Mark N. Grant: "Instead of putting elegance above expression, they put expression before elegance."

It must be clear to anyone who has had the experience of riding in a car trapped with a teen and the radio that the rhythmic imperatives of rock music rebuff storytelling, development and even verbal logic. They are insincere, and leave all the work of sincerity to the performer, giving him no baseline to stand upon. Even T. S. Eliot's poetry for Cats is set to fragmented, jazzy melody with little relationship to the words. William Walton's Façade is more in touch with nonsense poetry.

Melody, which has been reduced to a two-three or four-note vamp used to be the driving force – the thesis, if you will – of the lyric. Words wedded to a memorable tune create a power that the early church usurped, even as its pagan forebears did. The early church forbade strict rhythms, ~~in fact~~, for fear that the music would lead to dreaded dancing. As music and song developed, the rhythm became part of the song, but was never allowed to dominate it. When composers learned that harmony could inspire emotion, the church forbade too much of it on the grounds that it would obscure the text. Hence the endless repetition of lyric in contrapuntal music. How many times does Bach's B

Minor Mass say "Kyrie eleison" in the first movement? Someone in this room is probably planning a doctoral thesis to count the repetitions. With the advent of dance music in the theatre, rhythm, which had always been lying under the surface of – in fact was dictated by – the lyric and the melody, began to emerge as the driving force of dance songs, but almost became submerged as songs were more ballad-like. Even in classical music – and I want you to think of some very rhythmic classical music – the Can-Can from Orpheus in the Underworld, or the toreador song from Carmen or even the Ride of the Valkyries – think of them now, and tell me if you can remember a drum beating out those rhythms. You can't, because the melodies carry the beat. Think of some very rhythmic show tunes and tell me if you can hear the drums in "Stout Hearted Men" or "Tonight" or "Tea for Two." You shouldn't be able to because those melodies carry the beat internally.

When the beat carries the lyric, the lyric becomes secondary. "Ooh la ga-ga ro-ma-ma," and "Oo-ee-oo-aa-aa." Are not lyrics. The repeated wail of gospel music may be beautiful but "aaah" is not a lyric. And lyrics are the reason we laugh or cry or feel pity or terror in the great darkened chamber where grownups pretend for other grownups. The reason we sit in those uncomfortable seats breathing in the stinking breaths of our neighbors is that we hope for an emotion – an elevating moment where we rise above the quotidian and the savage to be better or even ennobled. Yet, we are willing to listen to singers who could not be heard in a shower pound out the same "baby, baby, baby" over a sound system – that is IF they choose to sing in real time – accompanied by or drowned out by the computer-generated confabulations of twenty cacophonous keyboards imitating the contrapuntalism of real genius and all held together, or split

apart, if you will, by a drum section as unforgiving and regular as an alarm clock.

I have thought lately of the number of ADHD-diagnosed students and mildly autistic cases who have sat before me in classrooms, their musico-lyrical taste generated by the electronic production of a magical IPOD. How many expectant moms have had the soulless electronic beat of some brainless thumping lyric vibrating physically against their eardrums? Ever been to a party where the bass is pounding through the floor. Every heartbeat gives up its natural rhythm and must succumb to the pulse of the communal drumset. How much more must a baby in the womb give up listening to its mother's irregular but loving heartbeat to accept the unemotional, mechanically constructed thumping of a drum machine. No wonder the sympathy of the next generation is more easily won by a video game than by the plight of its living brothers and sisters.

Now, I am an old curmudgeon admittedly, and I do draw distinctions between repetitive lyrics and functional melody of the past and the present because I have lived through both. The *jejeune* argument that songs like "There's a bright golden haze on the meadow," are equivalent. They aren't. Alan Jay Lerner, who wrote the lyrics after the melody had been sketched out, locked himself into a hotel room for a weekend and produced "I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night and still have begged for more." This prosaic poetry may not sound like much more than "Rollin down the river," but it is one of the deathless lyrics of musical theatre.

Why? Because it is linked to a shifting melody, because it is harmonized differently. The meaning changes as the melody shifts – The first "I could have danced," is in the tonic – the original key, a

safe ground, strong, hard and triumphant. The second, drops a major step into a more uncertain country – the singer asks, "did I just say that?" and then the song finds a transitional step for "I asked for more," as it sequences into a minor sounding key for the next line which launches into a more lyric discussion of the physical feelings of the singer who could have "spread her wings and done a thousand things, she never did before." This sequences – not back to the original key, but shifts to a new one for the middle section of the song. By the time the singer repeats the first line, the melody and harmony have helped it meander back to the original key for the final lines, which are – "I could have danced all night." Now, I'm sure many of you can remember the melody without being reminded of it, and you may even be tapping your foot to the remembrance of listening to the recording on your old "hi-fi." Listen closely to that memory: the beat is strong isn't it? Do you remember a drum track? Come on, think – you don't hear one do you? Your memory is not lying. The melody creates a rhythm that no drum need assist.

Not only has the art of repetition been overthrown, the power of words to shock when they mean ONLY words has also undergone a sea change. I am not defending the brilliance of Gertrude Stein or T. S. Eliot or even the Bloomsbury Group – they have attackers also, but there is a difference between "A rose is a rose is a rose," and "Goo Goo Ga Joob." These poems – such as they are – are lyric in that they do not need to press the story that they tell into forward gear. Neither of these, nor their brothers are theatrical poetry.

Nonsense is permissible; parody is permissible; even some – a very little – obscurity should be permissible. But remember that a theatrical lyric needs to be as fully understood as possible as soon

as it is said. The audience in a theatre – ideally – does not get to stop the show and turn back the page to study what it did not absorb the first time. If a poet wants a more complex idea to stick, she has rhyme and rhythm and melody to commit ideas to the memory; a pop song which is intended – or hoped – to be played and replayed until it is tired out may be absorbed at a rate commensurate with the taste that chose that song in the first place.

I could, of course, go on griping about lyrics that I've had to sing, and you may claim that "Cats" uses the poetry of Eliot and is therefore a modern show that breaks the mold. It was modern in 1982 when it premiered, but did it create the sensation of Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire," or Stravinsky's Rite of Spring" or Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase?"

Are you truly moved by the new musical theatre? Did you stand at the end of "In the Heights," because your were wiping away a tear of recognition at your own life and the human condition or because you had dropped a couple of C-notes for tickets to a mishmash of pop music and barely shaved 20-year olds?

With the advance in self=publishing has come the onslaught of self=producing. Pop stars with a poetic bent, a guitar and a sound studio take the place of critical ears. Shoddy, simpering songs fall over one another, million sellers today, that fly forgotten like last November's leaves, past the abused ears of a public that demands new and more and improved.

Henry Pleasants claimed in 1955 that modern music was not modern and was rarely music. It breaks apart the western tradition of song. Is that

source of expression truly so exhausted that we can no longer sing?

Earlier this evening, I compared myself to a crotchety old bear, who, having reached the top of the mountain decried the deterioration of the once-shining path that had led him there. It is true that the path behind me shines no longer the way it did, but neither does my champagne sparkle that was poured yesterday. The bad news of the journey for my weary feet, and yours, is the same as the good news. Bears, all of us, have gone to the top of the mountain to see what we can see — and what we see is another mountain. Tired as I am, I choose to climb that one, too. Who knows but that the roadway there will gleam with lyrical brilliance or that the depths of the soul and the grandeur of the human condition will be revealed in a lyric by a writer yet unborn?

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