

HOW TO RUN DEVELOPMENTAL READINGS FOR YOUR NEW MUSICAL

With tips from bookwriter and lyricist William Squier | Interview by Carol de Giere

Musical writers have long known the importance of testing written work through readings, but not everyone is aware of the best approach. Can things go wrong? Yes, especially when working with unfamiliar directors or theater companies. There's much to learn from experienced musical writers about how to get the most out of time, money, and effort.

I recently sat down with William Squier to pick up his tips based on years of experiences with a dozen musicals. He shared practical ideas, surprises, and some disaster stories.

TABLE READINGS

Carol de Giere: Do you recommend doing a table reading as soon as you have one of the acts finished?

William Squier: I think it's really useful to do that. The only reason not to do it is that it might slow you down in terms of tackling the second act because you start looking at all the problems you have to fix in Act I. But it could give you real clarity in terms of how you've defined your characters, where the plot is headed, and also whether or not your song programming is working or if your style of music that you've chosen is really working. On balance, it's probably a better idea to do it than not because you can really get a lot out of it that can help you for writing the second act.

CD: I've heard of readings being done before the music is written, with the cast just reading lyrics.

WS: I have done that in a few cases where I've just brought in book and lyrics. I think it's a useful exercise in that music can disguise an awful lot of flaws in lyric writing outside from craft issues. If you don't have the music there to supply the big emotional element, you really have to focus in on what kind of job the lyrics are doing in terms of telling the story. If they are just filling in a gap so that you can have a nice piece of music there, you might want to rethink them.

CD: Are most table readings "cold" readings [unrehearsed]?

WS: If I know I'm going to bring people in cold to do that, I try to get them the script ahead of time so they can just read it and be able to approach the scenes in an informed way. And with email you can send somebody a PDF. That's really easy and it doesn't cost anything. It's up to them whether they want to look at it or just wing it when they come in.

CD: Is it every a bad idea for the writers to hear a cold reading?

WS: The risk that you take is that your cast just doesn't get the show on that initial read and they send you off in a wrong direction. Someone who doesn't understand what's going on in a scene and interprets it in a way that's far from what you had in mind isn't going to be particularly helpful. They might make you think, 'Gee, this isn't working the way I had planned it,' and it might not have to do with the writing. Or they will make you defensive and you'll say, 'Well they are just bad actors' and then you can't see the flaws in your own work. It's probably better if people at least get a peek at things, unless you're just bringing someone in to read a couple of scenes, and then they can just read it in the lobby before coming in.

CD: What's the best way for the writers to learn from the table reading? Do you record it and listen later? Do you ever invite friends or associates to hear it and give you feedback?

WS: I've never tried recording it. I always find that I get everything I need from just listening to it and my gut response to what's going on is pretty immediate. Also if you're not actively involved in the reading (not reading stage directions) there's plenty of time to take notes as you're going along, little quick things in the margin to remind you what you thought here, and 'look at this,' and fold down a corner of the page to go back and look at it.

As for friends, often the folks that I have reading at that stage are actors that I know. Or if a director who comes in to work on it, it may be somebody I've worked with before, so I tend to focus on their responses.

CD: Do you remember being really surprised hearing something read aloud?

WS: I've heard things really come alive that I wasn't completely convinced were working. The fun thing about adding actors to the process is that they bring their own perspective and they do find things that you don't even realize are there—little bits and pieces as they interpret it. They don't know what's in your head, whereas you look at the script and have in mind everything you've thought about this scene for however long it took you to write it, and every book you read as a reference. They are just responding directly to what's on the page. Sometimes it comes off in a way that makes you cringe, but in other cases they go some places where you go, 'Wow, that's really cool.' I know I have gone back afterward and rewritten things to emphasize some of the things that I've heard in readings.

STAGED READINGS

CD: Do you ever carefully select an audience rather than have it be open?

WS: I've never done something where it was all invitation, although I've had studio readings of things where the people who came were people the theater invited. I don't think it's necessary to be too selective about who comes in at that point because you want to get a cross section of response. If possible, you don't want it to be all people who are in the industry because ultimately they are not the whole audience for the show. If I'm given a preference, I'd rather have it something that's open to the public.

CD: Do writers need to talk in advance about what they want from a reading, such as what the script needs or what issues you are looking to resolve?

WS: I think having a specific goal for a staged reading is really important because it also determines how you are going to present the material and how much of the material you're going to present. You may not want to do a reading of the entire piece, especially the first time you are putting it up in front of any kind of an audience. It takes an awful lot of work to put together a reading of a full length musical in the short amount of time you usually have to do it. I always feel it's better to be selective about how much you are going to try to do, and try to decide what the objective.

This last August I did a public reading in a club in New York. We had finished the first act and were working on second act material, but we decided to just do the first act straight through because we knew we could get a terrific cast. Broadway people came in to do it and we had to be very respectful of the amount of time that they gave to it. We tried to make sure nobody had to learn a mountain of music so everybody had a reasonable job to deal with.


JOPRODUCTIONS & JOHN FORSLUND PRESENT

LOVE ON ICE


(ACT ONE)



BOOK & LYRICS
BY
BILL NABEL



MUSIC
BY
JEFFREY LODIN



LYRICS
BY
WILLIAM SQUIER

MONDAY, AUGUST 24 & MONDAY, AUGUST 31 @ 8:00 PM
THE WEST END LOUNGE, 955 WEST END AVENUE, NYC
TICKETS \$10 - \$15 FOOD & DRINK MINIMUM

Poster for Love on Ice reading of the Act I.

CD: How important is casting for a reading and do you have any casting tips?

WS: Obviously you want to get a cast who is going to show you the greatest amount about the work. Not everybody has access to a lot of actors, so you can't be too tough on yourself in terms of finding the right person. One of the shows I was developing, one of the characters was a very young girl, but until we actually did a production, she was always played by someone in their 20s because it was easier for them to tackle the material and give us an approximation of what it would be like for the younger actor playing it.

I don't like to audition people for readings. Actors already have to audition for every frickin' thing and I think you set a nice tone if you just contact people and say, 'I know

you would be great at this.’ And you take it on faith that they will be able to manage it. If you have a question about vocal range, the composer can just explain that the songs requires such and so a range, and ask the actor, is that a comfortable place for you? Actors will tell you; they’re not going to want to sound bad.

CD: So let’s imagine we’re at a reading. Do actors sit with their scripts on music stands, and then stand up when it’s their turn to speak or sing?

WS: I’ve done it a couple of ways. One of my shows is a very intimate family drama and the first couple of times we did public readings I actually did them as table readings with the audience on one side of the table. In that case, the actors only stood if they felt they needed it to support their breath for a particular song.

In most cases it is done concert style with several music stands in the front and a row of chairs behind. Usually you try to make sure that you use as few music stands as you possibly can because they get in the way of sightlines and things like that. You don’t normally need one for everybody because if it’s a big ensemble number and people are filling in, they can hold their books for the length of one song without having to have a stand. But you go through and figure out what’s the scene that has the greatest number of characters in it, how many stands do I need for that, and that will be your maximum.

CD: Let’s talk again about getting what you want from the reading. Do you audio or video tape them or does it depend on the actors.

WS: It depends on the actors who are involved because there are union restrictions for certain things, although if there are actors involved who are all members of the union and they are all agreeable to it, you can do things for archive purposes, so that you can reference it when you need to, as long as you don’t use it for any outside purposes. I tend to react to what’s right in front of me and get most of what I need from that, especially because you’re in all the rehearsals too, so you’re getting a lot from that process. By the time you get to the actual performance you’ve already had an opportunity to make a lot of notes.

CD: Do you make changes along the way?

WS: Oh sure. Depending on who the cast is, if there are changes that are easily manageable, we’ll do them on the fly.

CD: What are the pluses and minuses of having audience feedback, if that is done at the end?

WS: I have to admit I’m not a huge fan of talkback sessions because it’s very difficult to run them properly. If you just open them up for comments, basically all you are going to get are people who loved it and they just want to tell you they loved it, and also people who want to hear themselves talk and so they will pick apart some arcane thing that is just not helpful. If you’re going to have an audience feedback session you really need to go into it with three specific questions that you want asked. And hopefully there will be a moderator of some kind to lead the discussion so that you as the artist don’t have to be the one to draw stuff out of them. I think audiences find it helpful too if you have something specific that you want to know about the show, such as was such and so a point clear, or how did people respond to this particular character.

CD: I’ve heard some readings can be disasters, and what do you do about that?

WS: Oh yeah. Drinking afterward helps. [He laughs]. I can think of one instance where it was a reading that the composer and I weren’t involved in putting together. We flew in just for the day of the staged reading. It was so poorly put together that it was difficult to watch. I have to say in that particular instance it was the music director who was most at fault. It was someone who was overextended in terms of the jobs that they were doing and spent zero time on this particular reading, and the actors who were struggling to get through it needed all the support they could get. That was a case where I walked out feeling I got nothing out of it.

I can think of another instance where a reading of one of my works was being put together for a festival, and my collaborators and I got there a couple of days before it was going to be performed. For no real discernible reason the director of the piece had decided not to perform the finale of the first act! We got to that point in rehearsal and we said, ‘Where’s the first act finale?’ and he said, ‘Well, we’re not going to do it for this reading.’ That was very quickly resolved by us going into another studio (while the cast waited) with the director and music director and us saying, ‘No, you are going to perform it and here’s what we are going to do.’ We took charge of it and made sure it happened, and it was done the way it was supposed to be performed.

Don’t be shy in exerting your authority as an author and as a creative artist who knows what goes into putting something up on stage. You can step in and say, ‘Look, we have to do this.’

One of my biggest bugaboos about putting any reading together where you are not in charge is that more often

than not, people do not communicate with you about things. In this day and age of email and instant messages and phones of every conceivable shape and form, that there's no reason not to contact the authors and say, 'We might not want to do this,' or 'We're having a problem with this, how do we solve it?' It happens to composers more than to book writers and lyricists because they'll have some difficulty with music or difficulty playing something in terms of accompaniment and they will just not do it or fudge their way through it rather than talk to the people who wrote it. The writers usually have a good idea how to put it together.

CD: These are really good points. Do you have any last thoughts or tips?

WS: I would just say that a work of musical theatre almost more than anything else is a living, breathing organism and anytime you can get it up and play with it, and listen to it, and make adjustments, and get that spark that a cast can bring to it, I would encourage people to do it. More often than not it's worth it in the end.

A FEW EXTRA NOTES ABOUT SCRIPTS

Before copying the script for readers, Squier turns stage directions into narration. In other words, he'll rewrite what is essential and add the character name "Narrator" on top of that text. It makes a reading go more smoothly if decisions about that are made in advance. He makes sure the font size of the script is readable (12 or 14 point).

In the case of a reading for which the actors will be singing songs, the composer prints out sheet music with lyrics in a size that will fit with the rest of the script. Squier creates a new version of the libretto in which he deletes lyrics and arranges pages electronically, saving room for sheet music by beginning the subsequent dialog on a new page. He prints it out and then manually inserts sheet music for any ensemble numbers that involve most actors. The combined script is photocopied. Then he'll personalize scripts with the insertion of solos and duets performed by individual actors.

To further personalize a script, he will use yellow highlighter to mark off each actor's lines so they can open the script book and be ready to read.



William Squier is a prolific musical theater bookwriter and lyricist whose works have been featured around the country. Shows that have played regionally include *Route 66*, *The Three Scrooges*, *Merrilee Mannerly*, *Blindsided by a Diaper*, and *The Klemperers' New Clothes*, among others. He is a regular

columnist for *The Musical Writerzine* newsletter. Read more at www.musicalwriters.com/squier/



Carol de Giere is the editor and publisher of *Musical Writerzine* as well as the author of the Stephen Schwartz biography *Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked* and *The Godspell Experience, Inside a Transformative Musical*.