

Progressions

One of the strongest characteristics of musical theater songs is that they often carry the story forward.

There's action in the song. The character goes through change. Characters are different at the end of a musical theater song from where they were at the beginning.

This is quite different from a pop song, for instance, where the verse-chorus-verse-chorus is designed to keep the emotion in a narrowly defined hue. A pop song is designed to be a particular shade of emotion and stay there. Whereas in musical theater, you actually start in one place and end up at another. Maybe there's action, a decision, conflict. The conflict gets inflamed or resolved, or there's a change in location. Or perhaps moving to "I'm going to do this" or "I'm not going to do that."

So, to that end, what you want to do is look for the change when you're deciding what structure to use. You want to look at the content of the song and take a little blueprint survey of the function of the song. Is the character, for instance, trying to decide between two things to do? Is the character saying, "I could do A or I could do B. A is good for me that way, B is better for me that way, I just can't decide." You can just feel there's an A-B-A-B structure there. Whereas, if the character actually does make a decision, the implication is an A-B-C or maybe an A-A-B-A in which the final A is different.

The plot, the psychological plot, will often lead you directly to the structure that you're after.

There are lots of different kinds of structures. There are two biggies in musical theater, are the AABA and the ABAB. But you can find others. You can find AAA, where the same chunk of music is repeated over and over again. That's a possibility.

I encourage you eventually to play around with your structures and invent your own, but not to be apologetic about borrowing one from the past and see if that works for you, or a variation of an already-tried-and-true structure.

Many contemporary musicals do just this. In particular, they've taken a lot of the traditional AABA and sort of put some other stuff in between the A and B. It's sort of A, dialogue, B, dialogue, A, etc. So I encourage exploring that approach. But before you start making the variations, it would behoove you (he said with his gigantic 16-ton Acme sledgehammer) to learn the traditional classical ones and why they're powerful, why they have evolved the way they have. Then take from them what's useful to you and cast aside that which isn't.

With those caveats behind us, let's look at some progressions.

What is a progression?

A progression is an underlying organization which gives shape or movement to the idea of a lyric. That is, the lyric with a progression will take the listener on a journey from the beginning of the song through some action, some change, some drama, some conflict, some inflammation of conflicts, and resolution, and deliver them to an end that's measurably different from the beginning.

Let's explore some progressions in some musical theatre songs, including some from the Golden Era in which the structure is solid but old-fashioned, but extending to more contemporary examples in which the structure is less sturdy (and often less powerful) but more dynamic.

I'd like to look at five tried-and-true progressions.

Problem-solution

Viewpoint

Calendar

Pronoun

Geographic

There are plenty more, but the first two, in particular, will cover the bulk of a lot of musical theater songs. And once you get a handle on these five, you'll understand the concept, and you'll start to create your own progressions. Each of these is supple enough that you can hang a lot of songs on these five.

Taking contemporary Broadway songs and exploring them to try to learn how an AABA song works is difficult because they're much more amorphous now than they were back then. That's a good thing and a bad thing. It's a good thing because the songs have unexpected turns. It's a bad thing because one of the powerful things about AABA songs is that they have an inevitability to them. You feel like you know where they're going. So it's a double-edged sword studying the old fusty, formulaic things. It's easy to roll your eyes at an old song as being so paint-by-numbers. On the other hand, if you study contemporary musicals, you often can't find the numbers. It's harder to learn from contemporary works.

So I advocate looking at them both. Study the old ones, study the old forms, and say, "Oh, I see how they did that. Got it!" Once you see the tricks, once you see how it's structured, you would hear yourself saying, "Oh, now that I know what I'm doing, that's easy. Now I'll do my variations." And then study the contemporary songs and see how you dig out the old AABA that's

underlying it. Pull away the stuff which isn't AABA, and ask yourself why is that in there? Why is the additional stuff helping, or why is it hurting? Do you like the flexible form which begins with A and a little bit of dialogue, and then something else, and then a protracted B, and then much later return back to the A? Or slightly changing the form? I'm finding that once you strip away some of the fillagree, many contemporary Broadway songs still are ABAA.

What I'm saying is, I don't apologize for the examples that I'm having you take a look at from the old Golden Age stuff because they're just so much clearer to learn from. And it's hard to find examples from contemporary stuff to study, to teach, to point out to you, "Here's how they're doing what they're doing." So that's why I advocate that you dip into both worlds.

The Problem-Solution Progression

In an AABA structure which uses the Problem-Solution Progression, the first A states the problem, the second A explores why it is a problem. Then the B section explores possible solutions, maybe just one solution, maybe a handful of solutions. And then the final A takes the character to take an action, to make a decision.

For instance,

First A-section: State the problem: "I've just committed a crime. Maybe I've robbed something, maybe I've killed something."

Second A-section: Explore why this is a problem: "The police are after me."

B-section: Explore possible solutions: "What can I do about it? I could run. I could, you know, turn myself in," etc.

Final A: Make a decision. "I'm gonna turn myself in."

State the problem, why is it a problem, possible solution, taking action.

A - state the problem

A- explore the problem and how you got there

B - examine some solutions

A - Action/decision

Problem-Solution in action

"I Can't Say No" from "Oklahoma"

Let's look at the problem/solution song "I Can't Say No" from *Oklahoma*.
First the lyric, followed by an analysis.

I'M JIST A GIRL WHO CAIN'T SAY NO,
I'M IN A TURRIBLE FIX
I ALWAYS SAY "COME ON, LET'S GO"
JIST WHEN I ORTA SAY NIX!
WHEN A PERSON TRIES TO KISS A GIRL,
I KNOW SHE OUGHTA GIVE HIS FACE A SMACK.
BUT AS SOON AS SOMEONE KISSES ME,
I SOMEHOW, SORTA, WANTA KISS HIM BACK!

I'M JIST A FOOL WHEN LIGHTS ARE LOW
I CAIN'T BE PRISSY AND QUAIN'T
I AIN'T THE TYPE THAT CAN FAINT
HOW C'N I BE WHUT I AIN'T?
I CAIN'T SAY NO!

WHUT YOU GOIN' TO DO WHEN A FELLER GITS

FLIRTY,
AND STARTS TO TALK PURTY? WHUT YOU
GOIN' TO DO?
S'POSIN' 'AT HE SAYS 'AT YER LIPS'RE
LIKE CHERRIES,
ER ROSES, ER BERRIES? WHUT YOU GOIN' TO
DO?
S'POSIN' 'AT HE SAYS 'AT YOU'RE SWEETER
'N CREAM,
AND HE'S GOTTA HAVE CREAM ER DIE?
WHUT YOU GOIN' TO DO WHEN HE TALKS THAT
WAY,
SPIT IN HIS EYE?

I'M JIST A GIRL WHO CAIN'T SAY NO,
CAIN'T SEEM TO SAY IT AT ALL
I HATE TO DISSERPOINT A BEAU
WHEN HE IS PAYIN' A CALL!
FER A WHILE I ACK REFINED AND COOL,
A SETTIN ON THE VELVETEEN SETEE
NEN I THINK OF THET OL' GOLDEN RULE,
AND DO FER HIM WHAT HE WOULD DO FER ME!
I CAIN'T RESIST A ROMEO
IN A SOMBRERO AND CHAPS
SOON AS I SIT ON THEIR LAPS
SOMETHIN' INSIDE OF ME SNAPS
I CAIN'T SAY NO!

First A: The problem: "I can't say no." So in the first A, you want to state the problem. Where does she state it? She says, "I'm just a girl who can't say no." Well, there's the problem right up front.

Second A: (Explores why it's a problem and a little bit of how I got there and who I am.) "I should say no, but when somebody says 'I want some,' I should smack him." So why is that a problem? "I should smack him right in the ear." But I don't. "Soon as someone kisses me, I somehow oughta kiss him back. I'm just a fool." "How can I be what I am not?"

B section (possible solution). It takes Ado Annie a while to come up with a solution. She says, "What, what are you gonna do?" Suppose he says, "Your lips, two cherries. What are you gonna do? What are you gonna do? You're gonna spit in his eyes." That's all she's got? Spit in his eyes?

Final A: (action/solution) "I can't resist a Romeo in a sombrero and chaps. Soon as I sit in their lap, something inside of me snaps. Can't say no, I kiss him. That's what I do."

You can dismiss the song as not dealing with either a contemporary problem or suggesting a solution acceptable by today's standards, but at least it has a very clear structure.

"Requiem" from "Evan Hansen"

"Requiem" from *Dear Evan Hansen* is sung by a sister who's lost her brother, and she is not as broken up about it as the world is expecting her to be. So her problem is everybody around her wants her to grieve. Why is that a problem? She says, "I can't do that. It's not me. It's not who I am. I'm just not a grieving girl." What's the possible solution? "I could hide in my room. I could fall to pieces." And the action she takes is, you know what, "I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna do it. I'm not gonna sing a Requiem." Let's look at the entire song's lyrics, and then dig through it to find "problem/solution" material. Spoiler alert: We'll find that material, but it's in a different order.

WHY SHOULD I PLAY THIS GAME OF PRETEND?
REMEMBERING THROUGH A SECONDHAND SORROW?
SUCH A GREAT SON AND WONDERFUL FRIEND
OH DON'T THE TEARS JUST POUR.
I CAN CURL UP AND HIDE IN MY ROOM
THERE IN MY BED STILL SOBBING TOMORROW
I COULD GIVE IN TO ALL OF THE GLOOM
BUT TELL ME, TELL ME WHAT FOR
WHY SHOULD I HAVE A HEAVY HEART?
WHY SHOULD I START TO BREAK IN PIECES?
WHY SHOULD I GO AND FALL APART FOR YOU?

SO DON'T TELL ME THAT I DIDN'T HAVE IT RIGHT
DON'T TELL ME THAT IT WASN'T BLACK AND WHITE
AFTER ALL YOU'VE PUT ME THROUGH, DON'T SAY
IT WASN'T TRUE
THAT YOU WERE NOT THE MONSTER THAT I KNEW,

'CUZ I CANNOT PLAY THE GRIEVING GIRL AND LIE
SAYING THAT I MISS YOU AND THAT MY WORLD HAS
GONE DARK
I WILL SING NO REQUIEM
TONIGHT
'CUZ WHEN THE VILLAINS FALL, THE KINGDOMS
NEVER WEEP
NO ONE LIGHTS A CANDLE TO REMEMBER
NO, NO ONE MOURNS AT ALL
THEY LAY THEM TO SLEEP
I WILL SING NO REQUIEM TONIGHT.

First A: (problem) "Here's the problem, everybody wants me to grieve."

B-section (why is that a problem?) The WHY is actually another stanza later. There's a bunch of "possible solutions" offered right after the first A, including things like "I can curl up and hide in my room." Do you see that? That's the possible solution. This particular structure goes from problem immediately to a possible solution. It's

going from A to B lyrically, and then goes back to an exploration of "why is that a problem?" "Everyone wants me to grieve -- and that's a problem because I can't play the grieving girl. Don't tell me that I have to lie, saying that I miss you and that my world has gone dark."

I point this out not to criticize it, but to identify that the traditional content of the second A is occupying the musical spot of the B-section. This order is a variation of the traditional blueprint. This song goes straight to the solution and then backs up and talks about why is it a problem. The song concludes with the action.

Oddly, and as an aside, the material which provides a contrast is set to the same music as the first A. This song takes the content normally found in a B-section and placed it into the A. Then the music changes (into B-material), but the lyric does not reflect that contrast. To my ear, that's a mismatch. To my ear, I would suggest that when the text takes a shift, as it does in that second stanza, "I can hurl, I can curl up and hide, I could sob, I could do that," that's the chunk that should be set to different music. You decide whether you think that was a missed opportunity or it's a daring, creative variant of the form.

"Papi Hears the Ocean" from "The Band's Visit"

Let's look at "Papi Hears the Ocean" from "The Band's Visit." Here's the text, followed by an analysis of its problem-solution progression.

I DON'T KNOW, WITH THE GIRLS, I DON'T KNOW
WHAT TO DO
I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START
I'M SMARTER UP HERE THAN I AM DOWN HERE
AND UP HERE, I'M NOT TOO SMART
THEY MIGHT SAY ONE THING OR ANOTHER
THEY MIGHT HAVE SMILED AT ME ONCE OR TWICE
IF THEY HAVE BREASTS AND THEY'RE NOT MY

MOTHER

THEN ALL I HEAR IS- [HE MAKES AN OCEAN
NOISE]

AND THE HANDS GET HEAVY, OH THE HANDS
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THE HANDS OR
THE FEET
FROZEN IN FEAR LIKE A DEER WITH THE LIGHTS
IN THEIR EYES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET
SHE MIGHT BE WANTING TO GET TOUCHY-FEELY
SHE MIGHT BE TALKING TO ME REALLY NICE
SHE MIGHT AS WELL BE SPEAKING SWAHILI
'CAUSE ALL I HEAR IS- [HE MAKES AN OCEAN
NOISE]

AND MY TONGUE GETS BIG
AND I CAN'T MOVE MY KNEES
AND MY EYEBALLS FREEZE
AND ALL I SEE'S A TUNNEL
AND THERE'S COTTON IN MY HEAD
MY LEGS ARE FULL OF LEAD
AND MY BRAIN GOES DEADER THAN THE DEAD SEA
DEAD, DEAD
DEAD IN THE MIND AND I FIND THAT I KIND OF
GO INTO AN INFANTILE TRANCE
I'M PEEING IN MY - NOT LITERALLY - PEEING IN
MY -
BUT, YOU KNOW, I MAY AS WELL BE - PEEING IN
MY -

THEN I LOSE MY WITS
AND MY LIGHTS GO OFF
I GET ALL STICKY IN THE PITS
AND I SMELL LIKE FALAFEL
AND MY EARS GET HOT
AND I FEEL REAL AWFUL
AND ALL I HEAR IS-
DEAD, DEAD, DEAD!
BELLY UP, GOING ROUND
SINKING DOWN, DOWN, DOWN
LIKE A SCHMUCK
DEAD IN THE HEAD
DEAD IN THE WATER
DEAD IN A MAGICAL SEA
FULL OF SUCK!

GO AHEAD AND TELL ME I SHOULD KEEP ON TRYING
GO AHEAD AND TELL ME I SHOULD BREAK THE ICE
I'LL BE STANDING HERE, DEAF AND DYING
AND ALL I'LL HEAR IS...
[THE SOUNDS OF THE OCEAN]

The problem is, "I don't know where to start with girls. I have no idea what I'm doing." And why is that an issue? It's because "when I'm around them, I freeze up. My hands are heavy, I lose my wits." So here's a possible solution, this is the B section: "I keep trying, that's all I got." And the action is, "You know what, I'm not gonna try anymore. I'm done. I can't, I can't, I'm not gonna tempt fate." Let's go find that in the lyric.

First A: (problem): "I don't know where to start with girls." Well, look at that first line, "I don't know with the girls, I don't know what to do." The song states the problem right up front, in classic problem-solution progression form.

Second A: (Why is that an issue?) The whole middle, most of the song, is about why this is an issue. "I freeze, my hands get heavy.

I'm frozen in fear. She might want me to get touchy-feely, but all I hear is nothing. My tongue gets big, my eyeballs freeze. I go dead in the mind, I lose my wits. I smell like falafel." That's, of course, the bulk of the song. The content of this progression focuses lopsidedly on "Why is that an issue?"

B-section: (possible solution) The content of a typical B section is very late in the game, occupying the real estate of the final A section. You can find the traditional B-section content in the song's last four lines: "Go ahead and tell me I should keep on trying, God, and tell me I should break the ice." That's the content of the B section, the contrasting possible solution.

Final A (action) The second A and the B-section occupy the majority of the real estate of this song, leaving us with the last two lines for taking an action. "I'll be standing here, deaf and dying, and all I hear is...." Silence. Meaning: "I'm not going to take an action."

So, although the traditional content of the B-section and the final A are way, way late, fundamentally this is still an AABA progression-solution progression.

I have just compared a classical problem-solution progression to a little bit more standard one where they've moved the parts around, to a very asymmetrical one. I hope that was interesting to you and encourages you to study more classic examples as well as contemporary one.

Other examples of Problem/Solution Progression:

"Defying Gravity" from "Wicked"

"Being Alive" from "Company"

"Should I Tell You?" from "Rent"

"On the Steps of the Palace" from "Into the Woods"

"Far From the Home I Love" from "Fiddler on the Roof:"

The Viewpoint Progression

In a viewpoint Progression, state your thesis, elaborate on it, question it, then commit to it or abandon it.

First A-section: State your thesis. "This is what I believe. I think this."

Second A-section: Elaborate on your opinion. Mentally precede this section with the phrase "This is why I think it, because..." If you stick with the word "because" at the beginning of the second A, you'll see how it follows the first. "Because" will imply you have further to add on the subject.

B section: Explore, analyze, question. Mentally begin this section with the words "On the other hand..." Then contemplate contrast; something you haven't thought about, or a viewpoint which you have rejected in the past. But the end of the B section delivers the character right back to,

Final A section: Reaffirm your thesis. "And this is why I believe, and that's why I say so." Or conclude the opposite is true, and you've seen the error of your ways.

A generic example of the Viewpoint Progression:

First A: I think you and I are over. I think we're done. Right? This is what I believe. I think I believe we're done.

Second A: Because furthermore, because you cheated, you cheated on me.

B section: But on the other hand, but I want to stay.

Final A: This is why I say I'm leaving. I've made up my mind.

Here's a cheat. You write down some parenetical words at the beginning of each section, to get the content started, and then delete the parenthetical words. This will help keep the progression on track:

First A: (This is what I believe)

Second A: (Furthermore) or (Because)

B-section: (On the other hand)

Final A: (That's why I believe) or (That's why I say this is what I've come to believe:)

Viewpoint progression in action

Let's take a look at something from *A Chorus Line* and something from *Waitress*. First, here's the lyric "What I Did for Love."

"What I Did for Love" from "A Chorus Line"

KISS TODAY GOODBYE, THE SWEETNESS AND THE
SORROW.

WISH ME LUCK. THE SAME TO YOU
BUT I CAN'T REGRET WHAT I DID FOR LOVE.
WHAT I DID FOR LOVE.

LOOK, MY EYES ARE DRY. THE GIFT WAS OURS TO

BORROW,
IT'S AS IF WE ALWAYS KNEW,
AND I WON'T FORGET WHAT I DID FOR LOVE,
WHAT I DID FOR LOVE.

GONE, LOVE IS NEVER GONE.
AS WE TRAVEL ON, LOVE'S WHAT WE'LL
REMEMBER!

KISS TODAY GOODBYE, AND POINT ME TOWARD
TOMORROW.
WE DID WHAT WE HAD TO DO.
WON'T FORGET, CAN'T REGRET
WHAT I DID FOR LOVE.

She thinks, "I have no regrets, I'm good. I know this because my eyes are dry." But in the B section, she concedes: "I haven't forgotten you, I will remember our love." But she comes to the conclusion that she's at peace with what she did for love, although she's moving on. Let's go find that in the lyric.

First A: (This is what I believe) I can't regret what I did for love. Here's my thesis, this is my viewpoint. I don't regret it.

Second A: (Because) I don't regret love, because, look, my eyes are dry. See, see, I'm not regretting it. If I were regretting it, I'd be crying. Still, I won't forget what I did. I did it for love.

B-section: (On the other hand). This B-section is very short here. You know, love, it's never gone. I told you, I won't forget it. I will remember what we had fondly.

Final A: (That's why I say this is what I've come to believe:) That I have to move on. I'm kissing today goodbye. I'm looking towards tomorrow. And I'm not gonna regret what we did in the past. I did it for love.

"What Baking Can Do" from "Waitress"

Let's look at "What Baking Can Do" from "Waitress." First the lyric, then the analysis.

MAKE IT WORK
MAKE IT EASY
MAKE IT CLEVER, CRAFT IT INTO PIECES
MAKE IT SWEET
CRIMP THE EDGES
WE'LL MAKE IT SOUR AND SERVE WITH LEMON
WEDGES
EVEN DOUBT
CAN BE DELICIOUS
AND IT WASHES OFF OF ALL THE DIRTY DISHES
WHEN IT'S DONE
I CAN SMILE
IT'S ON SOMEONE ELSE'S PLATE FOR A WHILE

I'LL PLACE IT ON DISPLAY
AND THEN I'LL SLICE AND SERVE MY WORRIES
AWAY

I CAN FIX THIS
I CAN TWIST IT INTO SUGAR, BUTTER COVERED
PIECES
NEVER MIND WHAT'S UNDERNEATH IT
I HAVE DONE IT BEFORE
I'LL BAKE ME A DOOR TO HELP ME GET THROUGH
I LEARNED THAT FROM YOU
MAMA, IT'S AMAZING WHAT BAKING CAN DO

MAKE IT UP
AND SURPRISE THEM
TELL THEM ALL MY SECRETS BUT DISGUISE THEM
SO THEY DANCE ON THE TONGUES
OF THE VERY PEOPLE THAT THEY'RE SECRETS FROM
MAKE IT SOON
MAKE IT BETTER
THOUGH, BETTER NEVER LASTS FOREVER
I'LL MAKE IT SMALL SO IT FITS

EVEN THIS
EVEN NOW
EVEN AS THE WALLS COME TUMBLING DOWN
EVEN AS I CAN'T STOP REMEMBERING HOW
EVERY DOOR WE EVER MADE, WE NEVER ONCE
WALKED OUT
SOMETHING I NEVER GOT THE CHANCE TO ASK
HER ABOUT

SO WITH FLOUR ON MY HANDS
I'LL SHOW THEM ALL HOW
GODDAMN HAPPY I AM
SUGAR, BUTTER, FLOUR
DON'T LET ME DOWN
LET'S SEE THE NEXT AMAZING THING BAKING DOES
NOW

First A: (This is what I believe) I think making pies is good therapy for me. I bake my secrets in the pies and I give them to other people. It's down toward the end of this section. "It washes off all the dirty dishes. When it's done, I can smile. Somebody else's problem now. I put in a pie. It's not in my psyche for the moment."

Second A: (Because) Because, furthermore, because, never mind what's going on here, I can fix it. I've done it before. I learned that from you, Mom. "Make it up, surprise them. Tell them my secrets but disguise them. So they dance on the tongue of the very people that their secrets came from." So,

they're literally eating the stuff that I'm not gonna tell them. That's what I think about that.

So, you see the insertion of Mom here. That's going to be important in the final A. But she says, "I want to go back to that, I think. And because I think making pies is good therapy, because it works for me. I hide my secrets in the pie, and I heal." That idea starts at the end of A and then continues on through the second A.

B-section: (On the other hand), I know, this is not a permanent fix. I have some unfinished business with Mom, so I can't do everything through her my pies. The actual B section starts with that, "Even this, even now, as walls come tumbling down." But the content of the contrast actually starts a little bit at the tail end of the second A. Look at the end of the second A, do you see how it's actually beginning the contrasting "on the other hand"? "Better never lasts forever." See that though, that's the but. You can feel the change.

Here's an interesting variant. That the B section is anticipated at the end of A, and later the music catches up with it. "Though better never lasts forever, I make it small so it fits. Even this, even now, as the walls come tumbling down, I can't stop remembering how every door we made something I never got a chance to ask her about. We never once walked out." So, she has some unfinished things she didn't get a chance to resolve with her mom.

Final A: (That's why I say) Baking works pretty darn good for me, and that's why I say I'm going to keep baking. I'm gonna show him, "Look at me be happy. Look at be me bake." You can feel in that last A how happy she is when she bakes. And she's happier when the pie's in the oven. There's a psychological progression or a psychological amplification. She starts off the song saying, "I love my baking, I really enjoy it." But she comes to the conclusion, "Don't let me down." It's a cheerleading thing. She really has an emotional journey from the beginning to the end.

Other examples of Viewpoint Progressions to study:

"The Impossible Dream" from "Man of La Mancha":

"Corner of the Sky" from "Pippin":

"There's a Fine, Fine Line" from "Avenue Q"

"I Have Confidence" from "The Sound of Music"

"Something's Coming" from "West Side Story"

"Maybe This Time" from "Cabaret"

Time Progression

Let's look at the time progression, past, present, and future. This one's pretty straightforward. It doesn't take a lot of elaboration to understand. The first A could correspond to the past, and then the next A would be the present. Then the B section contrasts the two eras, maybe past and future, or present and future, present to past, that kind of thing. And then the final A explores the future.

First A: (Past) "I used to hate you."

Second A: (Present): "But my feelings have changed. I feel differently from what I used to."

B-section (Comparison of times) "Can we put the past behind us now?"

Final A: (Future) "Maybe we can be friends. Maybe we can be lovers. Maybe there's a future for us."