**WASHINGTON SCHOOL SHOW WRITERS WORKSHOP GUIDE**

**(UPDATED MAY 2010)**

**SCRIPT GUIDELINES**

A copy of the script guidelines is an important companion to this document. The basic requirements of the show are listed in the guidelines. These include the number of chorus numbers, the number of dance numbers, requirement for tap numbers, kick lines, men's (drag) number, the use of 'muck and mire' and other components.

**THE WRITER'S JOB DESCRIPTION**

After being selected, the Writer's job is to produce a typed script and computer file of dialogue, stage directions and lyrics, copies of all music, (solos, chorus, and dance) and a CD of the musical numbers of the show. Scripts should specify what scenery should be used. Flats permit 3 different scenes with Mindowoskin Park being one of them. (This is not an absolute, but it is really nice and has been used for several years.) Scenes must be planned to allow exit and entrance of performers, opening and closing of curtains, flipping of flats to alternate scenes and set up and removal of props.

The Writer's final job is to cast, produce and direct an exciting skit of about 15-20 minutes. This 'sample' of the show is presented at the Fall Social (formerly known as the Pot Luck Supper) in mid-October to generate enthusiasm and participation by the parents.

**WRITER'S EGO**

**The Writers create the ideas and visions, get selected, do all the work described above, and then hand off to the Directors and some 170 parents. At that point, all creative control passes to the Directors and their decisions are final. This may include addition/deletion of songs, character changes, revised endings, new dialogue, etc. While it may be difficult for a creative writer to accept, the Directors are charged with making objective decisions that benefit the entire production. It's important that writers are able to accept this.**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF PERFORMANCE**

Our children love seeing their teachers and parents on stage. If you create opportunities for all kinds of talents to be displayed, they will be. Do not limit your vision.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF MOOD**

It's winter…dark and dreary…post-holidays…and Puxatawaney Phil has only bad news to deliver. Sure, Tolstoy and Dostoevky were great writers…but…we want to be happy, bright, funny and positive in this show. This means upbeat numbers, excitement and energy! (Sweeny Todd? Fahgedaboudit!)

**THE LIMITS OF ROMANCE**

Somehow, Mr. Smith embracing Mrs. Jones and singing, "Some Enchanted Evening" just doesn’t work in these shows. A lot of great love songs don’t make it into the Show unless it's a parody or a 'camped-up' situation.

**CHICKEN AND EGG**

The original shows were talent/variety shows and/or series of skits. A lot of the shows use this successfully. Some writers start primarily with song and dance selection and arrange numbers in an energy building order for each act. Once they have it in place, they may add a Master of Ceremonies or a version of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland's, "Let's put on a show in the barn!" as a way of bridging from number to number. Often a story will grow from this process.

Other shows start from a story to be told. Songs are then chosen that tie in (however loosely or contrived) to the story. Lyrics are altered to fit the story if necessary.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION**

Some people can write alone. If you know how and read this, please insert some information on your approach.

Many of us though, need a sounding board to try ideas out and see if they work. Many of us have 3/4 of a good idea for some scene or character but need the other 1/4 to really be effective. Many of us are hypercritical of our own product and need immediate enthusiasm and support to prevent writer's block. Some of us get wildly sappy, or dark, or over the line of decency, taste or anger and need to be reined in.

A good collaboration needs driven, committed participants with a lot of time to devote to meeting, writing, getting shot down and coming back and sticking with it. Typing and printing must be immediate. E-mailing dialogue is often essential if it's hard to meet at the same time. If you are interested in finding co-collaborators, attend the script guidelines meeting or a workshop meeting.

The collaboration should be fun in and of itself. Even if your show doesn’t get picked, the time is not wasted. Just imagining character names and listening to old tunes is good stuff. Again, check your egos at the door.

**CREATION OF A STORY**

Stories are strange. You start with an idea, but what do you do to make the audience care about what happens? As you answer this question, develop a story arc. (Story, 1997, McKee, R., Regan/Harper Collins.) There are protagonists. There is a discovery of a problem. There is a journey to take. There are obstacles to overcome. There is a resolution or climax. Finally, there is closure and celebration. Ask yourself, who are the protagonists? What is the problem?

In most conventional stories, there is a central character or group. In Houligan's Island it was the Castaways. In How We Totter, it was the senior class. In It's A Wonderful Place, it was Wilson Wychwood and Mabel. In Welcome to the 60's, it was the teenagers. In Superhero's Reunion, it was the heroes. In Stick to the Status Quo, it was the various cliques. In Ghostwriter, it was the creative friends. In Life Is A Highway, it was the two friends. They all made a journey of some kind to:

* Get back home
* Find the Talisman/cooperate
* Appreciate what you have
* Claim autonomy from parents
* Rediscover their powers
* Reach outside themselves
* Discover one's talents
* Learn to balance pursuits and friendship

The journey can be from past to present, from vice to virtue, from frustration to satisfaction and from dependency to autonomy. The journey may occur in physical space, time, attitude or other area. Along the way, there are zany characters, helpers, and villains.

Our shows have a typical premise: "Once upon a time, they lived happily ever after." Everyone knows it is going to end in success. They want to go along for the ride.

**THE USE OF WELL KNOWN STUFF**

From plots and themes to characters, the Show borrows liberally from iconic culture images. In recent shows, we have had the following well known characters - slightly twisted or thinly disguised: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Fran Dresher, Elvis, Bruce Springstein, Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams, Jack Nicholson, Aladdin's Genie, Major Nelson's Genie, Fairy Godmother, Samantha Stevens, the Ghosts of Christmas past, present, future and the Men's number, Marilyn Monroe(s), Gilligan, Skipper, Maryanne, Ginger, Professor, Thurston, Lovey and Cloueseau, Spock, Kirk, McCoy, the Blues Brothers, Yogi Berra, Ed Sullivan, Rodney Dangerfield, Abbot & Costello, Danny Kaye, Houdini, David Copperfield, George Baily, Clarence, Voldermort, the Sopranos.

What's good about these characters is that they become ready-made and carry meanings and memories outside the story line. Some impersonations are hilariously good and some are hilariously bad.

Plots also use well known stories: It's a Wonderful Place combined "It's a Wonderful Life," "A Christmas Carol" and "The Sopranos." Houligan's Island combined "Gilligan's Island," "The Pink Panther," "The Blue Angel," and "The Odyssey." Ghostwriter combined "A Christmas Carol, " with "American Idol."

**THE PROBLEM OF SETTING**

Many shows are set in Westfield ad have Westfield references. There's nothing wrong with using Westfield but there are several cautions:

1. Don't make a real interest group in town into the villains or the object of ridicule in a malicious manner. Satire is fine, but use a very light touch.
2. Be even-handed and avoid mockery and scorn. A negative vibe is a no-no.
3. If Westfield is the only setting year after year, the stories should search out a new setting - if only for a refreshing change.
4. Beware of put-down humor. The Insult Comic Dog, South Park and Howard Stern may be popular. In this context however, we make no jests that may be taken as bias against anybody. This is true no matter what the setting.

**CHOICE OF MUSIC**

We've broken away from using ONLY traditional Broadway Music of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Lowe, Sondheim, etc. Popular and not-so-popular music from everywhere (Disney, Elvis, Rock-n-Roll, movies) has been adopted for the WSS. One thing about the music - if it's a chorus number, it has to sound good with a group of 30-50 year olds (give or take a few years) doing it. Rap would not work too well and, as much of a fan of Classic Rock you may be, many of those numbers just don’t sound great in our setting with 30-40 voices trying to sing it.

Everyone's taste is different. Consult the library for song books and recordings. Consider everything you can. That means hundreds of songs. Remember lyrics can be changed. Slight arrangement changes can make a song work differently. Consider the Internet for Billboard charts and song lists.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF BREVITY**

(Did we mention the importance of irony?) Shows that run two hours or less including intermission usually have the correct pacing. (Not counting curtain calls, speeches and PTO song.) How much of that is dialogue, storytelling part? **Only 22 minutes should be spent to read through the straight dialogue script. Only 22 minutes should be spent to read through the straight dialogue script. Only 22 minutes should be spent to read through the straight dialogue script. Was that said sufficiently?**

If you have ten scenes, that is only 2 minutes and 12 seconds per scene. This is not a lot of time to get your characters set up, the problem found, the journey made, the obstacles overcome, the climax and the celebration. The other approximately 83 minutes is all dance and song. Let the songs convey as much of the emotion and meaning as possible.

Scenes should be short and have definite purpose in getting from point A to point B. Each time this happens, you've accomplished a "beat" of the story.

The faster the beats move, the more likely you are to hold the audience's attention. Director's can always add stuff to allow for costume changes but you must get the story told as economically as possible.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF EXCITEMENT**

From the opening number, you want to get the audience on your side. Make that opening number bright, cheerful, powerful and inviting and the audience just might want to know what the show is about. At the end of Act I, send the audience to intermission with a sense of anticipation, excitement and happiness so they'll come back to Act II. At the beginning of Act II, get them excited again with a big number. Finally, as the show reaches the climax and celebration, give them back-to-back power in song, dance and presentation that keeps building. A fast paced flowing story with minimal curtain closings and appropriate upbeat songs and dances is the key to success.

**GETTING YOUR SHOW SELECTED**

The Producers, Directors, Music Team and PTO Presidents need to select a show and a group of writers that they have confidence in. The criteria they use are subjective but contain most of the things mentioned above. They also want to make sure that the students can relate to the story and will enjoy learning the songs along with the folks.

How complete does the presentation have to be? This is the tricky part. Certainly you should have more than - "The Beverly Hillbillies Move to Wychwood." At a minimum (and highly subject to later changes):

1. Tell your full story in one page (or less)
2. Bring a list of all song numbers
3. Bring a list of all dance numbers
4. Bring a list of all characters and a description of their personalities
5. Bring your best (or only) completed scene which combines all the elements including scenery, stage directions, music, dance parody, etc.
6. Bring 10 copies to pass out at the meeting
7. See Script Selection Guidelines for official rules

You do not have to have a full script. But, as with most anything, the better prepared you are, the better your presentation will be.

**GOOD LUCK!!**