



When you're
writing lyrics,
how
important
is finding
the perfect
rhyme?

Masi Asare

CHICAGO, IL

I used to be a rhyming purist, but I have to say my approach has evolved over the years. I do believe (as the purists do) that sometimes a less-than-true rhyme can be symptomatic of a certain kind of laziness in the writing. In that sense it can be similar to how I feel about cursing in lyrics, or using the word “love,” you can always find something more specific if you just put more time in. On the other hand, sometimes the cleverness of the rhyming can get in the way of the character. You can end up establishing your own character as a clever lyricist and not the specifics of the character who is using those words on the current of the song. I also think it depends on the terms and rules of your show. If everyone in the show sings in true rhymes, then a character who rhymes less, or who eschews true rhymes—well, that says something about the character.

In today’s context, sometimes a lyric laden with true rhymes can seem a bit pretentious. Someone who can get her point across with rhymes that land a little more obliquely...well, that says something about who she is and how she understands her world. Maybe she lives closer to the ground, maybe she comes from a working-class background, maybe she is kind of stoic and reserved and has a hard time saying what she really means. Or, maybe she lives more in a pop or folk music world...and as a composer/lyricist I also think very specifically about musical style as a function of character.

So ultimately, I think the use of rhymes (true or not) is a character choice. Some characters I write rarely rhyme at all, as in the case of the West African grandmother in my musical *The Family Resemblance*. Her oratory is not overly dependent on rhyme. For my work as a lyricist on the musical adaptation of the film *Monsoon Wedding*, I began by reading a book on Urdu poetry, which often uses intricate two-syllable rhymes, but also carefully placed repetition. Repeated words can have some



of the same impact as a rhyme in binding a song together and making it easily decipherable to the ear.

I think overall, these days I simply don’t view the rhyme as the jewel of the lyric. I actually often use very simple, one-syllable rhymes, because what is sparkly to me is the starkness of the character’s emotion, or the imagery she has to use to convey her point...and that matters to me more than the rhyme.

MASI ASARE is a composer, lyricist, and playwright. Shows include *Sympathy Jones* (music/lyrics/concept), *The Family Resemblance* (book/music/lyrics), in development with Playwrights Horizons, and the Broadway bound *Monsoon Wedding* (lyrics). Awards: Billie Burke Ziegfeld Award, Georgia Bogardus Holof Lyricist Award, Paulette Haupt Composition Prize. PhD, NYU Tisch. She is an assistant professor in the Music Theatre program at Northwestern University.

Kat Eggleston

VASHON, WA

I love a perfect rhyme, but I also love the imperfect ones and implied rhymes, along with other kinds of word-play; it’s always seemed more important to pair the music of the language itself to the musical structure that carries it. With that approach, a half-rhyme can work beautifully if it falls in the middle of a verse or on a descending melodic line. I like to



look at the pairing of lyric and melody as if it were part of a natural conversation, in the sense that a spoken exchange contains rhythm and the rise and fall of speech; this works in constructing songs outside of a theatrical context but is particularly important when combined with stage action.

I wrote a play with music called *The Cyclone Line*, set partly in the Oklahoma dustbowl. There's a song in it where a small boy describes what rain looks like, to other kids who've never seen it before. True story. It was a difficult and wonderful task trying to put that scene in words, and part of what I tried to do was to match the music with the feel of a soft rain. The first two verses have more 'perfect' rhymes than the third one, and by the time that last verse came around I felt that a pattern had been established and I could play with the words a little. The finished piece seemed to do the trick. I've [indicated] the internal and external rhymes here to show where they fall:

*Every week, someone else gone.
Every week we pass a farm,
All their possessions all out for auction on what had
once been the lawn.
And the dust can ride on a sunbeam.
It piggybacks on every breeze.
It's lighter than thought, but it crushes the crops
And fills the air that we breathe.
Maybe I'll tell my grandkids
Someday – if I get old –
How all the kid's eyes opened up real wide at the tall tales
I told
About rain.
Stand under it as it comes down
With your head tilted up, your eyes squinted shut,
Tasting the drops on your tongue.*

KAT EGGLESTON is a singer, guitarist, songwriter and actor who has recorded, taught, and performed internationally for more than thirty years. Her latest project, *The Cyclone Line*, is an original play with music: the story of her father as an old man recalling his childhood in the dustbowl.

Shelia Payton

MILWAUKEE, WI

While I do pay attention to and search for good rhymes, the most important thing for me is whether the words work for the story/narrative. This applies whether I'm writing lyrics for a love or social commentary song, or lyrics that will be part of a theatrical work.

What moves me when I hear a song is how it touches my heart and/or speaks to my mind. It could be (in part) because the musical soundtracks I grew up with came from the 50s and 60s. But I think it's based more on examples I've seen over time of the ways music (and the arts in general) can make us more aware of our common humanity; and the impact this recognition can have on our lives and on the lives of others.

Here is an example (chorus and bridge) from a copyrighted song my musical partner (Maurice Cotton) and I wrote titled "Too Many Young Men Gone."

Chorus

*Young men dying needlessly
in a world blind to their humanity.
To save them we must see
That there're too many young men gone.*

Bridge

*Each time a young man dies the whole nation is harmed
by the loss of true potential that will never fully dawn.
He might have been a teacher who turned young lives
around,
a craftsman, gadget geek, civic leader—someone of re-
nown.*

SHELIA PAYTON is an author, playwright, lyricist and librettist living in Milwaukee, WI. Musical credits include lyrics for R&B and faith-based songs, an upcoming social justice concept album, and a libretto for an African/African American-themed opera: *Black Caesar*, scored by Neal Tate, the first African American music director on Broadway.





Anais Mitchell

BROOKLYN, NY

I'm new to the theater and have spent most of my life in the indie folk/rock music world and traditional balladry, where I find none of the obsession with perfect rhymes that music theater folks seems to have! So I'm thrilled to write in praise of slant rhymes, which, when they are used artfully (and not lazily) I often find more "perfect" than perfect rhymes. Here's a stanza I never ended up using, but I always loved the sound of these slants: "How he moved among the lambs / Iodine was on his hands / How his breath was white and warm / Winter was inside the barn."

The sound of words is everything to me (alongside meaning and image). I spend most of my time looking for relationships between words, but looking for perfect rhymes is just one small part of that. There are so many subtle, intuitive, ancient relationships! I love repeating consonants, internal vowel sounds, the stacking up of words with a similar sonic "shape" like "shadow / meadow." To me, a perfect rhyme is thrilling for its sense of resolution, like going from a five-chord to a one-chord, and this is sometimes exactly what is required in song or scene. I love the perfect rhyming couplets that cap off the ends of scenes in the old iambic

plays. I just wrote this couplet for *Hadestown*: "I knew you before we met / And I don't even know you yet." That one had to be perfect because it is about this cosmic union. But in general, I prefer the four chord to the five chord, I love to dwell in a suspended, emotional, complicated world musically, and I feel the same with language.

The last thing I'll say is—and I say this as a constant reminder to myself as well as an offering for other writers—for a long time I had a "note to self" above my desk that said this: "wordplay is not the same thing as poetry." Because it's easy to get so caught up in the cleverness and the left-brain side of writing that we lose sight of this. I try hard to stay in touch with—if a line gives me shivers, if a line gives me tears—there's poetry there. And the soul is hungrier for that, than for any display of technical skill.

ANAÏS MITCHELL is a performing singer-songwriter who comes from the world of narrative folksong and balladry. Her musical theatre show Hadestown enjoyed record-breaking runs at New York Theatre Workshop and Edmonton's Citadel Theatre. The show moved to London's National Theatre in 2018, before its anticipated transfer to Broadway in 2019.

Sandra Hodge-Hampton

MABLETON, GA



For me, finding the perfect rhyme is not as important as finding the perfect words to musically convey the meaning of my story.

SANDRA HODGE-HAMPTON is an award-winning writer/director/producer for stage, film and television. Her work has graced the hallowed halls of Lincoln Center in New York and The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Amanda Yesnowitz

NEW YORK, NY

Perfect rhyme is my religion. Lyrics are meant to be heard, and on stage, they will be heard once. Given that constraint, we, as technicians, need to help the audience as much as possible. I'm not advocating for passive listening but in terms of mechanics, perfect rhyme is a practical conduit to coherence. Full stop. And in the theatre, sonic legibility is simply non-negotiable. How can I expect listeners to absorb fully in emotion if they're busy trying to figure out, literally, what they are hearing? Of course, there are exceptions (when the conventions of the genre dictate otherwise, à la *Hamilton*) but most writers who commit an imperfect rhyme do so out of pure laziness. As a professional cruciverbalist, my puzzle brain sees perfect rhymes as pieces to complete a word mosaic. Naturally, no

rhyme should predetermine idea but I confess to doing exactly that occasionally: writing to a rhyme. In my show *Some-where in Time* we needed a diegetic song circa 1912 (i.e. channel my inner Irving Berlin). I wanted the lyric to play with clichés so I made a list of all relevant words/phrases. I stared down “hackneyed,” determined to rhyme it with, um, “slack-kneed.” This song came music first so there were very few places I could fit them and I suspected that aligning them in a tight couplet would draw attention to the lyricist trying to be clever. So here's what happened:

*Write me a tune,
Under the moon,
And fill it with a bevy of old clichés.
Woo me with a platitude, stale and hackneyed,
Apples and honey,*

*Anything sunny.
I'll be your gal,
If it's banal.
Don't wanna hear a seminal turn of phrase...
Keep your fancy newness,
I prefer the trueness of a shopworn serenade.*

*Bouncy and bright,
Joyously trite,
Delivered with a passionate savoir faire.
Praise of famous places will leave me slack-kneed,
Paris or Rome, I'd
Welcome the bromide.
Common is swell!
Why undersell
The value of a solid, enduring air?
Novelty is heinous,
I prefer the plainness of a shopworn serenade.
My darling, voguish can be roguish
Not to mention a bore
I crave a classic point a view
Poetry and melody from masters of yore,
I've heard it before,
With you it'll soar...anew*

*Pen me a lilt,
Sturdily built
To guarantee the romance will never fade...
Throw a pretty chord in,
Long as it's an ordinary shopworn serenade.*



LIFE AS A PLAYWRIGHT

A Survival Guide

By Jon Klein

The song got cut from the show, but I adored this delicious confection, so I added another bridge and coda and we rearranged it as a jazzy standalone that I perform regularly at concerts:

My darling, pitch me or bewitch me

At the top of a hill,

And I am set to bill and coo.

It's not that I object to a delectable thrill,

But who needs a frill

When run of the mill will do?

Sing me a song,

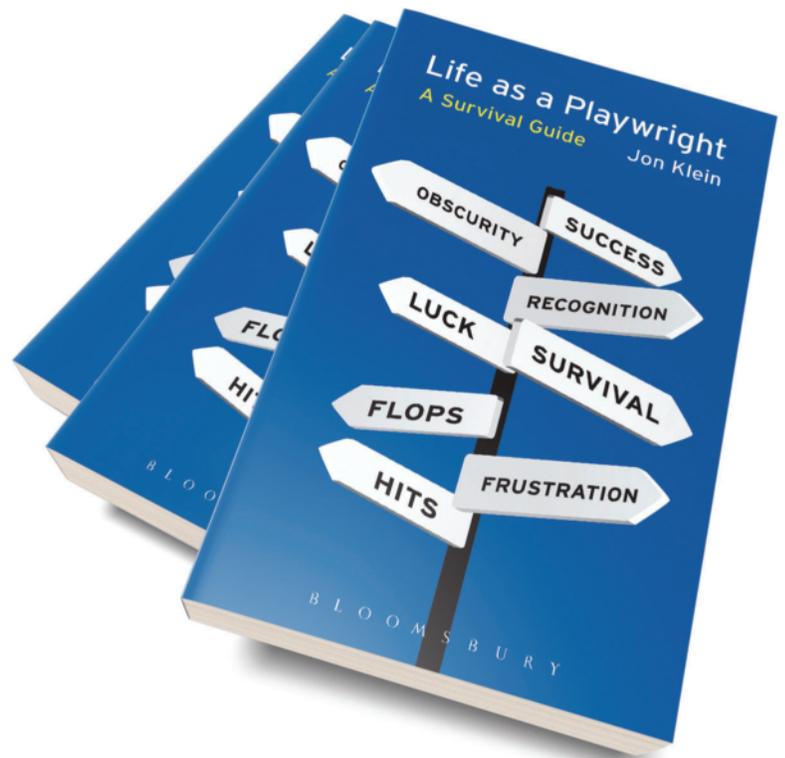
Three minutes long,

Conventional and tired and overplayed...

I'll keep things exciting,

Long as you keep writing me that shopworn serenade.

AMANDA YESNOWITZ is the winner of 2018 Kleban Prize, Jonathan Larson Award, Dramatists Guild Fellowship, Dottie Burman Award, Jamie deRoy/ASCAP Award, and 8 MAC nominations, all for excellence in songwriting. Currently working on *Do No Harm* (Davenport Theatrical), a musical based on Margaret Bulkeley, a 19th century Irish woman who lived her life as James Barry since that was the only way she could practice medicine. 



Addressing the questions central to any playwright's career and identity, Jon Klein offers you a glimpse into a career writing for the theatre. As well as an account of the day-to-day life of a writer, he also discusses what an aspiring playwright should expect as they navigate the industry and how to make yourself stand out from the crowd. Furthermore, the book looks at situations that the emerging playwright is likely to encounter, including: handling rehearsals, workshops, castings, re-writing, venues, reviews, successes and failure. The book concludes with seventeen interviews with other USA-based playwrights, representing a wide range of experience, from writers just starting to make a name for themselves to seasoned, award-winning veterans such as Sheila Callaghan, Steven Dietz, Keith Glover, Lauren Gunderson, John Pielmeier and Jen Silverman

"Jon Klein is an amazing playwright, but more importantly he is a unique and extraordinary artist who's pursuit of artistic excellence through the craft of writing can serve as a useful tool to the benefit of artists and students. His wealth of knowledge and skill when it comes to writing is not to be debated. He has truly lived a full life as a successful playwright."

— Kenny Leon, Tony-award winning director

May 2018 • 192 Pages

PB • 9781474285094 • \$24.95

methuen | drama

www.bloomsbury.com

Copyright of Dramatist is the property of Dramatists Guild of America, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.