The Art that is Melodrama

The Mantorville Theatre Company has been producing melodramas since 1973. While there are a few non-melodramas in the collection on our Mantorville Theatre Press website, most of our scripts are a testament to the many talented playwrights who have contributed to our melodramatic success.

There are many aspects of melodrama that do not differ from other theatrical forms. However, there are some distinct differences that deserve some discussion. Please do not think of this essay as a hard and fast formula. Every script is different and every director's approach to a script is different and every actor's response to both is different. However, particularly for the thespian who is new to melodrama, it might be educational to see how we present melodramas in Mantorville.

The Overture and the Musical Role:
We begin each production with our pianist playing a couple of ragtime era solo pieces. Live music is an important part of our productions and the pianist helps to set the mood for the audience. This tradition started with our earliest productions with a pianist (Robert Anthony Sorenson) who was so good that many people came first and foremost to hear him play and then stayed to enjoy the show.

Our pianist provides three key aspects of our performances. The first is the aforementioned overtures. The second is as an accompanist for any songs that may be interspersed within and at the end of the show. The third is the "sound track" underplay. The pianist helps the actors to cue audience reaction, sets the mood of the scene, and helps to keep the flow of the show on track. This means that the pianist is a key member of our cast and attends most rehearsals to get the feel of the underplay. Many of our musicians will select one or two measures of "theme" music for the characters on stage. These themes can come from any and all musical genre - - whatever fits.

A note on music copyrights:
Just as scripts are likely to be copyrighted, so also are both musical compositions and accompanying lyrics. Current copyright laws say that anything created prior to 1960 has a 95 year copyright unless the composer failed to renew a copyright (very difficult to determine) or chose to place their works in public domain. Thus, as of 2025, anything composed prior to 1930 is in public domain. (Works created after 1960 have longer periods before going into public domain.) There are several good sources of music written prior to 1930. imslp.org is a service that specializes in public domain music. Other sources include https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/cht-sheet-music/, http://www.ragtimepiano.ca/, and https://ragpiano.com/index.html.

Warmup and Audience Participation:
A typical preshow curtain speech includes pointing out emergency exits, requesting electronics to be turned off, recognizing sponsors, and asking patrons to send their friends to upcoming shows. Of course, these things are also important for a melodrama, but there is much more.

In a melodrama, we invite the audience to verbally participate in the show. Everyone, audience and players alike, benefit from the audience reacting to the action on stage with cheers, sighs, boos, hisses, and sometimes other verbal ad libs. This is foreign to many theatre goers, who are used to sitting back, occasionally laughing or clapping, and generally being an observer rather than a participant in the show.

To that end, the “curtain speech” should also be a warmup for the audience participation. Some playwrights will actually pen a warmup as a part of the script. Others leave it to the director to create something. The warmup is sometimes delivered by the director, sometimes be one or two cast members, and occasionally by someone else. They work in partnership with the pianist to help the audience understand when they should sigh for someone in dire straits (or perhaps deeply in love), cheer and applaud loudly for heroic moments, or boo and hiss for villainous actions. Warmups are most effective if the audience is asked to practice, so people get used to being more vocal than they would be at any other type of show.

The Fourth Wall and asides:
In traditional theatre, there is a virtual wall at the edge of the stage that separates the audience from the actors. This “wall” is present for much of the melodrama, as well, but also disappears from time to time. When the actors are interacting with each other, they should be as earnestly ignorant of the audience as they would be for any other genre. Jokes are most effective if the speaker doesn’t “know” they are funny. The same can be said for tales of woe and heroic moments. There are some exceptions to this that will be discussed under the Timing heading.

Melodramas typically make frequent use of the aside. When a character has an aside, the fourth wall evaporates and the character interacts directly with the audience. Sometimes they even break (or more likely change) character. The actor signals the audience that the wall is gone by physically turning to deliver the line. Frequently the director will ask everyone else on stage to freeze, since this is a moment that is not a part of the action on stage. The audience knows the wall has returned when the actor shifts back to their previous position and the action continues. Unlike the rest of the action, it is quite possible that an actor will “know” that they are being funny during an aside and will visibly share that with the audience.

Note that when the audience is verbally reacting to the action on stage, they are actually also breaking the fourth wall to “help” the actors to emote. Some directors will ask or allow their actors to acknowledge this with an “aside motion” while others will ask them to appear to ignore it.

Audience Control:
Cast members and the pianist can cue the audience into when they should react and when they should stop. When an aside is taken that deserves a reaction, the piano player can signal to the audience that it is time to react with some definite musical cue. Delaying the return to normal action allows the audience time to react and the movement back to action tells them that it is time to stop and pay attention. Villains and villainesses have a particularly easy time of this, as they can laugh or cackle and prance while the audience is booing and then make an abrupt change to get back to the action. Heroes and heroines have similar opportunities with standing strong, batting eyelashes, gazing longingly, and the like. These techniques can be employed during the regular flow as well as from asides, by taking a clearly intentional pause for the audience reaction and then making it clear that the flow of the play is continuing.

Occasionally an audience member might become over-enthusiastic in their reactions. While the temptation may be to attempt to quell this with ad lib asides, it is best to ignore this and to allow a house manager to deal with it if it becomes distracting to the other patrons.

Timing is Everything:
In melodramas, as in every theatre genre, the timing of line and action delivery is very important. In melodrama, there is the added complexity of reading audience reaction and determining when it is best to pause for the reaction and when it is time to move forward. Moving too fast will lose part of the context of the show and will make the audience react more timidly the next time. Moving too slow will make it seem like the play isn't flowing well. And of course, one audience might react raucously to a particular bit while the next audience might just smile.

Language plays an important role in melodramas. There are plays on words, puns, and absolute groaners that may require special delivery techniques. For example, if the villain gets doused with a pail of water, the hero's line might be "Face it, Snidley [pause 2 beats] You're all washed up [pause 2/3 through the combination groan/cheer]." The initial short pause tells the audience that something is coming without really breaking the flow of the action and the latter pause allows them to react before continuing the flow. Note that this does not involve breaking the fourth wall and letting the audience in on the joke – it simply provides them the opportunity to appreciate the joke.

Olios and Finale:
In traditional theatre, scene breaks may be accompanied with some background music to help pass the time. In melodrama, this is typically a more active time with the performance of an "olio." Olios can be an integral part of the plot of the show, or a song that is somehow related to the personality of one or more characters, or a complete departure from the show (We once had the villain sing a love song to a person in a gorilla costume.) Sometimes the playwright will include ideas for olios; sometimes the director will need to both select where to insert olios and what the olios should be.

Ending a show with a rousing finale sung and/or danced by the full cast has proven to be an excellent way to initiate a curtain call. It allows the audience celebrate Good's success in conquering Evil (It IS a melodrama, after all) and acknowledge the members of the cast, the pianist, and the crew.

Post Show:
Following the finale and curtain call, we typically have the cast members come off the stage and exit through the audience, to form a receiving line as the audience exits. This allows for a final audience/cast interaction that has proven to be very positive for all concerned.