

ROB WIELAND

# Encore

SERIES PITCH OF THE MONTH





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# Encore

—Rob Wieland

*“Which comes first, the music or the lyrics?”  
“The check.”*

## Nutshell

A bus full of dreamers, has-beens, and never-will-bes tour the United States mounting a musical. The characters express their feelings through song, as they deal with hardships, tense relationships, petty rivalries, and economic uncertainty.

## Characters

All traveling shows include a mix of actors, actresses, tech, and support staff. Many of the crew took part in the show while it ran in a larger venue such as Broadway or Las Vegas. When a show goes on the road, the staff shuffles: supporting actors become leads and chorus actors fill supporting roles. A similar process occurs on the backstage side, though often tech crews come off the road from one production to head back out on another.

Onstage:

- lead
- ingenue
- heartbreaker
- faded star
- reality show winner
- perpetual understudy
- drunk
- serious artist
- old ham
- diva
- last-minute replacement
- no-talent relative
- ambitious chorus member
- stiff
- rock star

Backstage:

- slumming musician
- director
- stage manager
- assistant stage manager
- prop master
- costume designer
- lightboard operator
- sound engineer
- intern
- set dresser
- union shop steward
- front of house
- intern
- producer
- stage parent
- choreographer
- bus driver

## Setting

Jukebox musicals feature previously released songs, often a collection of pop tunes sharing a common artist, era, or musical style. A dramatic plot weaves them together. Jukebox musicals are popular because audience members are already familiar with the music. The plots often truck heavily in nostalgia. Many people who go to live theater do so under the same drives that force them to purchase plastic surgery and sports cars.

Your story features a classic literary device: the play within a play.

*What is your show-within-a-show about? Is it about a specific genre of music? Does it center on a single time period? Does it feature a single artist's work?*

Often, in musicals, breaking out into song is an accepted reality. While the musical you create is expected to have music, the songs the characters sing outside of the show convey their inner feelings. Those songs may be sung



to reveal an unwanted truth, with arrangement altered if necessary to convey the right emotion.

Nobody bats an eye when a heated argument turns into a sing-off. This is why musicals often lean toward comedy. It's an accepted part of the genre, like how all smugglers have hearts of gold.

Another musical convention is the fantasy number, taking place in the singer's head. It lets players cut loose with their imagination budgets, shifting the series into other worlds, times, and genres. The clash of a peppy pop song with scenes of Arthurian valor can be fun to play with. This device allows those who prefer genres like fantasy and sci-fi to bring their tropes into the mix without altering the reality level at the core of the series.

Most shows start in a large city, often New York, and build an audience. Then, either at the end of the first run or concurrently with an extended run, a second version of the production opens elsewhere—London, Toronto, or increasingly, Las Vegas, or Branson. Later a touring version hits the road to tour smaller markets. That's where you come in.

Musical tours crisscross the country on a daily basis. Only the most wildly successful shows maintain more than one touring company at a time. In the modern era, setting up a second show in a tourist destination such as Las Vegas or Branson is far more lucrative.

Tours feature a bus for the actors and crew. The stage equipment is loaded up into a large truck. A tightly wound schedule usually means a show arrives early at a destination on production day where the crew unpacks the show and sets it up. Actors get a little rehearsal time in the space if they are lucky. Once the show ends, the crew puts it all back on the truck and the company heads out again. Shows booked for a large city for a night or two do happen, but usually a show is booked out throughout an area to maximize coverage for those who wish to see it. Touring shows don't get held over; when a run sells out, it's much easier to book a later return engagement.

## Themes

- **Hope:** Everyone thinks this show is a better step. Later, when they are accepting that award, those on their way up hope

to look back on this time fondly. Those on the way down want to keep acting for a living and not have to get a realtor's license to keep paying the bills. Either way, on those lonely, cold nights outside of Fargo, doubt and despair set in.

- **Romance:** While there's plenty of drama to be had in the hookups, breakups, and makeups that happen on tour, this theme also applies in the broader sense of the word. Traveling musicals harken back to the glamorous times of yesteryear but at the same time highlight how much the tradition has faded in the interim. The rise and fall of the musical can be reflected by characters who were once famous or well-respected but now have to earn a living headlining a touring company.

- **Travel:** The road giveth and taketh away. It allows a chance to see places and meet different people. It also makes missed birthdays and time away from families. Some people dream of seeing the world. Others get beaten down by hotel room after hotel room after hotel room. It can make you do desperate things to put down roots.

- **Art vs. Commerce:** The jukebox musical lives and dies on the box receipts, the sales from the merch table, and how much people are willing to see talented unknowns perform songs they already have bought multiple times. Putting on a show is fulfilling for the actors, but making that show sell out keeps them on the road.

## Tightening the Screws

These events track the life cycle of a show from first auditions to diminishing receipts. Later seasons may start over with the same cast and crew members in a new production.

- **Audition:** Starting at the top, the audition brings everyone in under the stress of competing for roles in the show. Old rivalries may flare up as well as old romances.
- **Rehearsals:** The slog from reading off a script (which you refer to as the "book")

to acting wears on everyone. The tech crew busily builds the set in and around the actors. (Forget the reality that most rehearsal happens in a drab rental space, and much of the construction in a separate off-site warehouse. This conceit lets you imagine interesting visuals and keeps the cast in one place for easy scene calling.)

- **Previews:** Before the show officially opens, it sets up shop in a nearby city to run shows for audience members. Changes can still be made at this point, leaving actors in fear for their jobs. Equipment is supposed to be working by now so any tech screw-up could likewise lead to backstage firings.
- **Opening Night:** A natural moment to bring together multiple plotlines. Anything can happen in live theater. An actor actually breaks a leg. A light goes out. A door jams shut on stage. You might resort to procedural resolution to determine what the reviews sound like the next day, or narrate the notices into scene preludes.
- **First Night on the Road:** Journeys begin on a note of freedom and possibility. Being stuck together in a bus hasn't set in yet. People choose hotel buddies enthusiastically. It won't last, but a raucous hotel party can have repercussions down the line.
- **A Brief Stop Home:** The tour winds through an ensemble member's hometown. This puts the character's previous life in the spotlight as well as offering chances for other characters to clash with people outside the show.
- **The Road Takes Its Toll:** Not every performance is perfect. What happens when the crew puts on the worst show of the tour and they know it?
- **A Few Days Off:** After a long stand in a big city, the schedule relents for some time to recover. This is a chance to explore relationships outside of putting on the show, as well as introduce some story factors from outside the show bubble.
- **The Empty House:** Nothing hurts more

than playing to a small audience. The show might not be bad; it could be the economy, or the weather, or poor planning on the part of management. How does the crew cope with knowing nobody is out there listening to their songs?

- **Crossed Paths:** The tour gets close enough to one of the show's ongoing parent productions for the casts and crews to get together to drink it up, bringing old rivals and lovers to the fore.
- **Holiday Snow Storm:** Time spent with family is precious gold. The grind of production makes the holidays even more exciting to those on the road. What if an ill-timed blizzard traps the crew in an airport?

## Musical Play

Incorporating actual music into *Encore* fits the premise. At the same time, asking a table full of friends to get up and sing is expecting them to fire sniper rifles during an espionage game. Not every group is comprised of karaoke sharks, nor is every person mortified by the thought of belting out a favorite melody. Decide which of the options below suits your group.

- **Acapella:** Nobody sings in this mode. No songs will be harmed in the playing of this game. Many people can't carry a tune which is perfectly acceptable. They can still describe the type of song their character would be singing in a moment, either through genre and style or citing a specific example of the type.
- **OST:** Turn laptops and smartphones to your advantage at the table. When a character is looking for a pop song, it's usually no more than a web search and video link away. The GM can describe the action as the character sings. The player can lip-sync along and chew some scenery. Excellent song selection might even sway the rest of the group when it comes time to determine who got what they wanted out of a scene. An excellent choice for mixed groups of music lovers.
- **Music and Lyrics:** If players are willing to look up songs on the internet or their



personal electronics, taking the step to singing them is natural. There are karaoke versions available, but singing along to a video clip running on a laptop works just as well. Anyone singing a song in a scene, be it dramatic or procedural, gains a drama token in addition to any they would after the evaluation of the scene. Most scenes feature one song only, but groups confident in their mashup or point/counterpoint singing abilities can bend this rule.

- **Playback:** Thanks to a fad from five years ago, many game hosting areas have access to a collection of plastic rainbow buttoned controllers and hard drives full of downloaded songs. This may limit the choice of music in a game, but it allows for motifs and theme songs for certain characters.

## Names

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Kevin Schwartz  
Greg Pendzick  
John Faust  
Chris Klopateck  
Brent DeHut  
Brian Allman  
Tony Clark  
Matt Leonardt  
Mike Kirkpatrick  
Bonnie Scholz

Lindy Eller  
Jennifer Kramer  
Jackie Davis  
Jodi Schwalbach  
Melissa Hughes  
Jocelyn Ridgely  
Jennifer Higgins  
Andie Miller  
Rochelle Starr