

What if Romeo didn't like musicals?

by Tom Martin

On Friday night my wife suggested we go to a movie, "Music and Lyrics."

The suggestion came with a warning: the characters repeatedly burst into song.

I like songs well enough, but I hate it when characters burst into them. I'm not a fan of musicals. I don't want the story interrupted by people singing and dancing.

I remember my disappointment with "West Side Story." As a kid I thought I was going to see a gritty movie about big city gangs. There were gangs, all right, dancing and singing gangs. They're the kind that live only on film. That's the thing, I guess. The whole bursting into song just isn't realistic.

Actually, I burst into song at home all the time, but I'm always short-circuited by not knowing the words. Plus, there's no choreography. It's not a coordinated effort like on "The Sound of Music," the mother of all musicals. My mom took us to see it in the theater, and she bought the soundtrack and the music, so she could play the songs on piano. I got to "climb every mountain" again and again.

A few years ago, I was stuck assembling a kitchen island and from the living room I could here "The Sound of Music," which my wife was watching on television. My wife couldn't understand my protest. I told her it was bad enough to have to read a manual, but the musical was making the job unbearable. For God's sake, that von Trapp girl has been "16 going on 17" since 1965. Can we just call it 17 and move on?

My wife thought perhaps the Nazis in the musical would butch up the picture enough for me. It didn't. She watched the movie anyway, and I turned screws, gritted teeth and acknowledged that, indeed, the hills were still alive.

Our marriage has had to weather our disparate views on musicals, and sometimes it's been rocky, like when my wife rented "Moulin Rouge."

She was moved by the musical, but I couldn't get through it. I went to bed. There are times when spouses should lie and put up a front for the good of the marriage. This would have been one of those times. Instead, I grunted and stared at the walls.

To me "Moulin Rouge" was just like every other musical, except maybe worse because it actually messed up some decent pop songs in the process. There was also a fork in the road the night we watched "Magnolia," a 1999 movie starring Tom Cruise. I liked the movie until frogs started falling from the sky and people universally broke into song. I wondered how such a thing could happen. My wife was left wondering how she could have married a man who doesn't like musicals.

But it's not been all thorns. There was a time early in our relationship when we came up with our own songs to a musical about my cat. I had parked my truck outside the newspaper office one night with the windows down. I returned to the truck to discover a white cat. It looked like my farm cat, Whitey, who may have stowed away before I drove to town, but I couldn't tell for sure. So I had a dilemma. Keep the cat and risk stealing someone's pet, or leave the cat and know I might never see Whitey again. This was the basis for the homespun musical, with songs of both melancholy and hope, such as "Whitey, Is It You?" I got the cat out of the truck that night and found Whitey back on the farm where I'd left him. Still, my wife and I sang those songs for a couple more weeks.

Twice, I've taken my wife to Chicago to see live musicals. We saw "Cabaret" and "Chicago," and I didn't mind at all. My wife thinks the women's outfits had something to do with it, but I think it had to do with expectation. I went there expecting a show, not a movie. Watching people sing and dance live is better than having them interrupt my movies with such nonsense.

Which brings me back to Friday night's movie, "Music and Lyrics." We went and, contrary to the movie review my wife had read, no one burst into song. Songwriting was part of the plot. I was relieved.

What my wife hadn't told me, however, is that the movie is a romantic comedy, but that's a whole other column.

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