

A SONG IS BORN

DIRECTOR'S PRODUCTION NOTES

Stage Direction · Props & Set · Scene Transitions · Layout Diagrams

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Reference Venue (Example) | Mandell Weiss Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, La Jolla, CA |
| Example Configuration | Proscenium Capacity: ~490 seats Thrust-capable apron (adapt to your venue) |
| Format | One Act, No Intermission Running Time: ~1 Hour 45 Minutes |
| Production Style | Jazz-propulsive Zero blackouts Actor-driven transitions |
| Script Version | Revision 6 — April 13, 2026 |

Written for the Stage by Daniel Pettus

Based on the 1948 Samuel Goldwyn / Howard Hawks motion picture

I. PRODUCTION PHILOSOPHY

A Song Is Born is not a play with music in it. It is music — structured, propulsive, improvisational — that happens to contain a play. The director's primary obligation is to honor that logic. Every scene transition, every piece of furniture, every light cue should feel like the downbeat of the next phrase. Whatever theatre you are working in, the audience should never feel the machinery. They should feel only the swing.

These notes use the Mandell Weiss Theatre at La Jolla Playhouse (proscenium, ~490 seats, thrust-capable apron) as a reference example throughout. All measurements, zone descriptions, and sightline notes are drawn from that configuration. Directors working in other venues — thrust, in-the-round, black box, or alternative proscenium — should treat every specific figure as a starting point and adapt accordingly. The zone-based approach at the heart of this production is format-agnostic: it works wherever you can differentiate areas of the stage with light.

THE CORE RULE: No blackouts. No curtain drops. No dead air. The musicians fill every transition. Light fades are 8–12 seconds maximum. Props must be pre-set or actor-carried. If it takes longer than 15 seconds, redesign it.

The 1948 film could cut between locations in an instant. The stage must achieve the same compression through carefully choreographed darkness, music, and the confidence of actors who treat set-dressing as part of their performance.

Reference Stage Measurements & Capabilities (Mandell Weiss Theatre — Example)

The figures below are drawn from the Mandell Weiss proscenium. Use them as a planning benchmark. Adjust all dimensions, sightline notes, and fly/wing references to match your actual venue.

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Stage Width (example) | ~60 feet (proscenium opening approx. 40 ft, full stage 60 ft with wings) |
| Stage Depth (example) | ~35 feet from proscenium to upstage wall; apron extends ~8 ft into house |
| Fly System | Full counterweight at reference venue — use for bungalow signs (Scenes 11–12), lighting specials. Adapt if fly capability is limited. |
| Wing Space | SR wing: nightclub tables pre-set; SL wing: inn props, bungalow pieces. Scale to your actual wing depth. |
| Grid Height (example) | ~55 ft — accommodates high-shelf bass drum rigging. Lower grids require redesigned drop mechanism. |
| Audience (example) | ~490 seats; front row at ~12 ft from apron edge. Adjust sightline notes to your house. |
| Acoustics | Reference venue is a live room — jazz ensemble needs no amplification for most passages. Assess your room's acoustic profile early. |

II. PERMANENT STAGE ZONES

The stage is divided into four permanent zones that coexist throughout the play. Zone lighting allows instant 'relocation' without moving scenery. Actors travel between zones; the audience's imagination does the rest. The zone positions described below are referenced to a proscenium layout (using the Mandell Weiss as the working example), but the principle translates directly to thrust, traverse, or in-the-round configurations — the zones simply shift to suit your sightlines.

Fig. 1 — Master Stage Layout: Permanent Zone Map (Reference: Mandell Weiss Theatre Proscenium — adapt to your venue)

| | |
|--|---|
| ZONE A — Foundation Main Room | USC/Center. Active in Scenes 1–3, 5–9, 13–16. The play's gravitational center. Full warm wash. Oak table, bookshelves, piano, stairs. |
| ZONE B — Jazz Nightclub | DSL. Active in Scene 4. Amber wash. Club tables roll in from SR wing during light transition. Bandstand at DSL edge. |
| ZONE C — Side Room / Inn Bungalow | SL. Active in Scenes 6 (side room), 11 (bungalow), 14–15 (forced wedding). Partial flat or scrim suggests separation. |
| ZONE D — Road / Travel | Center apron. Active in Scene 10. Four chairs form the car. Pure white-blue travel light. Maximum apron depth used. |
| MUSICIANS PLATFORM | SR upstage, raised 12". Permanently active. Raised so musicians are visible from all seats without blocking Zone A sightlines. Position and size will vary by venue — the requirement is visibility and acoustic presence, not a specific location. |

The musicians' platform is the production's north star. It is never dark, never silent between scenes. The ensemble plays at whatever volume the scene requires — and the volume is always precisely calibrated to the emotional temperature. When the Foundation is at work, they breathe at a whisper. When Flying Home erupts, they are a force of nature. In any venue, their placement must guarantee both visibility from every seat and the ability to fill the room acoustically without amplification wherever possible.

III. SCENE-BY-SCENE DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Fig. 2 — Scenes 1–3: The Foundation (full set). All seven professors at or near the research table.

Scene 1: The Totten Foundation — Morning

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Duration | 8–9 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Full warm ambient (2700K). Dust-mote effect via low-angle practicals. Bass drum shelf: tight special from above. |
| Props Required | Oak research table center; 7 chairs at table. Sandwich (Oddly). Papers/manuscripts piled high. Tea tray. Invoice (Gench's pocket). Ear trumpet (Magenbruch). Pencils (Elkon). Bass drum on high shelf — MUST BE VISIBLE FROM ROW 1. |
| Transition IN | PRE-SET: Table fully dressed before house opens. Musicians on platform in half-light. |
| Transition OUT | No transition — play opens here. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Open on stillness. Seven men who have not moved in nine years. The audience should feel the weight of that before the first word. Give it eight full seconds of silence after the lights settle.

Hobart is at the head of the table, SR of center. He is the gravitational center; all blocking should acknowledge this without being obvious about it. He never calls attention to himself. He simply is the room.

Gench delivers his 'nine years' lines while staring at the ceiling, not at anyone. He has said this before. He will say it again. The comedy is in the ritual.

Miss Bragg's entrance from SR door should be heard before it is seen — the door sound cue precedes her by two beats. She does not rush. She has never rushed. She sets the tray with a clatter that is entirely deliberate.

The invoice reveal (Gench) should land like a small grenade. Beat. Then everyone finds somewhere else to look.

Hobart's 'Look like it' is the first indication that he is, underneath the mild exterior, capable of command. Play it with quiet steel. The professors obey instantly. That's the joke — and also the truth.

MUSICIANS: Play the ominous phrase at measure end. Just four bars. It should sound like a court verdict.

BLOCKING NOTE: Siggie at upstage window, Magenbruch DS of platform, Tweed pacing SR of table, Elkon SL corner sharpening pencils. Distribute the professors so no two are adjacent during the opening tableau. They are seven men who have been in this room so long they have found their permanent grooves.

Scene 2: The Foundation — Later That Morning

| | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| Duration | 6–7 minutes |
|-----------------|-------------|

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Lighting Cue | Slight increase in ambient warmth as Totten enters — she brings the outside world with her. Warren's briefcase gets a subtle practical. |
| Props Required | Two visitor chairs (pre-set by Bragg at SR side of table during Scene 1). Warren's briefcase (practical, opens and closes). Handshake — physical, timed. |
| Transition IN | During Scene 1 finale: Bragg pre-sets 2 visitor chairs SR of table on her way out. |
| Transition OUT | Totten + Warren enter from SR door. No new furniture needed. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Totten's entrance should part the room. The professors don't stand on order — they stand on instinct. All seven, simultaneously, at the exact moment she clears the door. She's done this before. So have they.

Warren is a precision instrument. He lays out documents like a man laying out surgical tools. He loves the efficiency of bad news. He does not enjoy being hushed.

The grant speech from Hobart (his big moment in this scene) is the play's first indication that he is extraordinary at exactly one thing: making people feel that knowledge is worth protecting. He stands slowly. He does not pace. He speaks to her and only her. The other professors stop breathing.

Emmeline Totten holds his hand four beats longer than a handshake. The professors count. Gench literally counts aloud. This is simultaneously the play's first romantic beat and its first comedy beat — they must happen simultaneously.

Hobart's return to his work after she leaves should be slightly too fast, slightly too studied. He is not indifferent. He is a man who expresses everything through work.

TOTTEN'S EXIT LINE: 'Don't disappoint me' — delivered on the move, without turning. She has said this before. It has always worked. This time will be different, but she doesn't know it yet.

Scene 3: The Foundation — Afternoon

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 10–12 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Bright warm shift as Felix plays — add warm fill on piano area. Musicians join from corner and platform: gradual volume build over 2 minutes. |
| Props Required | Window (practical — at least the frame, US wall). Squeegees (Felix/Jerome carry in). Piano (must be practical and in reasonable tune). Felix's notepad. Various instruments emerge from corners (tuba, guitars) as musicians join. |
| Transition IN | No set change — continuous from Scene 2. |
| Transition OUT | This scene ends with Felix handing Hobart the list. Music swells. Direct dissolve to nightclub amber. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Felix and Jerome's entrance through the window should be physically confident and slightly absurd. They have done this before in this neighborhood. They are entirely comfortable climbing into a world-class musicology institute.

The boogie woogie must be genuinely played live and genuinely loud. This is the play's first great musical moment. The moment Felix's hands hit those keys, the production's contract with the audience changes. We are now in a musical play, not a play with music.

The professors' physical responses: Oddly sets down the sandwich FIRST (this is the stage direction equivalent of a plot twist). Magenbruch removes his ear trumpet — meaning the music bypasses whatever barrier deafness has built. Siggy grips the chair. Gench, for the first time, does not look doomed. These are specific physical beats. They must not be rushed or combined.

Hobart picking up his notebook and writing while the music plays is the production's thesis statement: he is trying to catch lightning in a jar. The absurdity and the beauty of this are the same thing.

Jerome's geographical breakdown (New Orleans → Chicago → Harlem/KC) is semi-academic lecturing, but delivered with the ease of a man telling you the best place for barbecue. Jerome is a teacher who doesn't know he's a teacher.

MUSICIANS: This is their introduction to the audience as a performing ensemble. The join from background presence to full performance should be gradual — first bass, then trumpet (muted), then full ensemble over approximately 90 seconds.

CRITICAL: Felix's transition to the piano. He must know the room the moment he enters — locate the piano with his eyes on his first line of dialogue, then move to it only on 'A footnote.' The audience should feel him deciding.

Fig. 3 — Scene 4: The Jazz Nightclub. DSL amber zone. Club tables roll in from SR wing during 10-second fade.

Scene 4: A Jazz Nightclub — That Night

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Duration | 8–10 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | MAJOR CUE: Foundation dims to 20%. DSL zone rises to full amber (2400K). Single tight special on bandstand microphone. House cool blue for 'outside world.' Transition: 10 seconds. |
| Props Required | Nightclub tables (3–4 round, pre-set in SR wing). Club chairs (6–8, with nightclub tables). Microphone stand (practical, DSL bandstand). Honey's dress prop (midnight blue, on singer's mic stand). Waiter prop tray. Harris's notepad. |
| Transition IN | TRANSITION IN: During light fade from Scene 3, prop crew rolls 3 club tables from SR wing to DSL zone. Musicians reconfigure from platform to bandstand positions. Hobart crosses DS while Foundation dims behind him. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Club tables strike to SR wing (2 crew, 15 seconds in darkness). Honey and Hobart exit SR. Foundation lamp comes up USC. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The nightclub transition is the play's first act of theatrical magic. Hobart walks forward into an amber light he is discovering for the first time. The Foundation doesn't vanish — it just recedes. This is deliberate: the two worlds coexist throughout.

Honey's entrance at the microphone should be preceded by the musicians establishing a groove for at least 30 seconds before she appears. The audience should be leaning toward the stage before they see her. Then she simply walks out. No announcement. No fanfare. She is already here.

Honey's song: this is the production's second major musical moment and its first emotionally serious one. The song is a blues — not a showstopper, not an anthem. It is a song about wanting something you can't name. It should feel overheard, not performed.

Tony materializes without entering — he is simply there when the song ends. This is how Tony moves through the world. He does not arrive. He appears.

Hobart's notebook scene: he writes 'Beautiful.' He stares at it. He crosses it out. He writes the scholarly substitute. He looks up again. This is three separate and specific physical beats. Do not rush any of them.

Harris's entrance DSR should be clocked by Honey across the room with zero visible reaction. She is good at this. The audience should see her see him. Hobart should not see either.

The exit: Honey steers. Hobart is bewildered but willing. This is the dynamic established here and never deviated from for the rest of Act One.

HONEY'S SONG: Director should work with the musical director to choose a period blues appropriate to the character. Suggestions: 'Am I Blue,' 'Trouble in Mind,' or an original piece in period style. The song must work dramatically, not just musically — it tells us who she is before she says a word.

Fig. 4 — Scenes 6–7: Round Table & Jam Session. Full stage active. Side room (SL) in simultaneous use.

Scene 5: The Foundation — Late Night

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 6–7 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Single practical lamp USC (warm tungsten). Everything else dim. Bass drum shelf tight overhead special — it should look like a sleeping animal. Musicians: single saxophone, barely above a whisper. |
| Props Required | Armchair (Honey). Blanket (from shelf — pre-set). Two teacups. Lamp (practical). Bass drum must remain lit. |
| Transition IN | TRANSITION IN: Club tables struck. Armchair rolled from SR wing to C while Foundation lamp rises. Honey sits; Hobart at kettle. 12-second transition. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Armchair remains. Lamp stays on. Time jump — light shift only. 4 seconds. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This is the play's first quiet scene. After the boogie woogie and the nightclub, this scene breathes. The director must resist the impulse to fill the silence. The lamp, the tea, the two people — that is the entire scene.

Hobart makes tea badly. This should be physically apparent. He is a man who has lived in a research library for nine years and makes tea by memory, not by skill.

Honey sitting in the armchair with her heels off is the play's first image of her at rest. She has not been at rest since she was introduced. The audience should feel the significance of her stillness.

'This is a research library. Being somewhere else is what we do best.' This is Hobart's best line. Let it land completely. Then let the laugh die completely. Then let her laugh.

The saxophone playing through the final moments should be barely audible — as if it's coming from somewhere in the building, not from the stage. It is the Foundation's unconscious.

Honey's face in the final lamp image: she is looking at the bass drum. The audience has seen it since Scene 1. They should wonder why she's looking at it.

STAGING: Honey and Hobart should end this scene on opposite sides of the stage — connected by the lamplight and the music, separated by everything else. The staircase is between them physically. This is not accidental.

Scene 6: The Foundation — The Next Morning

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Duration | 10–11 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Full bright celebration. Warm morning light through upstage windows. Zone C (SL) active simultaneously at 40% for side room. Special on piano (Felix). |
| Props Required | Extra chairs (6–8, from SR wing). Guest musician instruments (various — coordinate with band). Tambourines (2, from prop box under table). Tony's ring box (pre-set in side room, on shelf). Aprons for Honey (pre-set on kitchen hook). Side room: small table, 2 chairs, shelf. |
| Transition IN | TRANSITION IN: Overnight jump. Light rises from Scene 5 lamp with musicians' dawn phrase. Extra chairs set by Oddly/Tweed as they arrive (actor-driven, no crew). Guest musicians enter from both wings. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Continuous to Scene 7. Musicians thin naturally. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This is the play's most populated and energetically complex scene. Ten or more people, three active conversations, music. The director must establish clear lanes of focus.

The round table discussion happens at the main table. The side room scene (Joe, Monte, Honey) happens simultaneously at Zone C. The audience must see both without being confused. Light levels differentiate them: main room full, side room at 40%.

Felix at the piano during the Flying Home preview: his hands on those keys should produce physical reactions in every professor in the room. Magenbruch writes 'The horn is always talking' with the reverence of a man receiving scripture.

The ring box moment: Honey sets Tony's ring box on the shelf without ceremony, without looking at it again. This is a decision, not a pause. The actor should feel its weight and then deliberately not feel it. The shelf it lands on should be in clear sightline.

Hobart catching Honey's eye across the room: this should be the scene's final image before transition. Everything else has happened. The two of them, for one second, look at each other across a room full of music. Don't rush past it.

MISS BRAGG IN THE DOORWAY: She watches from the SR door frame, arms crossed, cataloguing everything. She does not enter Zone A. She is maintaining a perimeter. Her stillness should be funny in contrast to the chaos — and then, in Scene 7, she crosses it.

Scene 7: The Foundation — That Afternoon

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Duration | 8–9 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Warm festival light continuing from Scene 6. As Miss Bragg's confrontation begins, light on Honey increases slightly — she should feel like a spotlight is on her without one literally being on her. |
| Props Required | Tambourines in active use. Felix at piano throughout. Ring box remains on shelf. Hobart's notebook (practical — he writes). |
| Transition IN | Continuous from Scene 6. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Miss Bragg exits SR. Professors disperse briefly. Hobart and Honey remain. Quiet shift to Scene 8 'research room' light (single desk lamp C). 8 seconds. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The yum-yum kiss is the play's first unambiguously romantic moment. It must be handled with full commitment and perfect timing. The setup — Honey saying 'close your eyes,' Hobart's anxious 'is this a music —' — builds the anticipation. Then the kiss is real, not comic.

The professors' reactions: they forget to breathe. Oddly's sandwich hits the floor. These are sequential, not simultaneous. The audience should experience them as separate punchlines.

Hobart's 'I'll need to look that up' is perhaps the play's most perfectly balanced line — it is both funny and true and romantic. Let the laugh happen. Then let Hobart's face tell the rest of the story.

'She stays, Miss Bragg.' This is the second of Hobart's quiet steel moments (the first was 'look like it'). He is not defiant. He simply means it. Miss Bragg's jaw-working silence is her most important performance beat in the play.

Elkon's 'He's never done that' and Oddly's 'Neither have I and I'm starting to feel genuinely cheated' should happen while Hobart is already crossing back to his notebook. He doesn't hear them. We do.

COMEDY NOTE: The professors have been observing Hobart like naturalists studying a rare bird. When he does something unexpected, their commentary should have the quality of scientific observation, not gossip. Gench in particular should sound like he is updating his notes.

Scene 8: The Research Room — The Proposal

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 7–8 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Intimate: single desk lamp special, warm gold. Zone A dims to 30%. Telephone light (practical). Musicians: almost silent — single piano note sustained. |
| Props Required | Ring box (Hobart's pocket). Telephone (practical, on desk). Research books on shelf. Honey's engagement ring (practical, inside box). Desk lamp (practical). |
| Transition IN | Light shift from Scene 7 crowd energy to intimate pool. Actors clear naturally. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Phone rings. Tony's call. Light stays. Continuous to Scene 9. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The proposal speech is Hobart's most exposed moment. He is a man who has spent nine years organizing other people's feelings into categorical systems, and now his own feelings have escaped categorization. The actor should feel the literal inadequacy of his vocabulary.

The ring box: 'For my most significant discovery.' She reads it quietly. The silence after she reads it is the scene's most important beat. Hold it longer than is comfortable. Then the phone rings.

The phone call is a masterclass in comedic dramatic irony. The audience knows what Hobart doesn't. His delight at speaking to 'Daddy' — his earnest request for a blessing — should be played with complete sincerity. The comedy comes entirely from Honey's face and from what the audience knows.

When Tony speaks through the phone (actor offstage or via practical), his voice should be audible to the audience but not amplified enough to feel theatrical. The audience leans in.

Honey's 'You're enjoying this': this is the most important line in the scene. It tells us everything about the Tony-Honey dynamic in four words. He is. He knows she knows. And she knows she's going to go anyway.

STAGING: The desk lamp is between them during the proposal — both leaning toward the light. When the phone rings, the lamp is between them again, but now it's a barrier. The director should use this geometry deliberately.

Scene 9: The Foundation — Minutes Later

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 4–5 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Return to Zone A full warm. Miss Bragg's entrance gets a slight sharp overhead moment — she brings clarity with her. Closet door: practical light strip at bottom. |
| Props Required | Newspaper (pre-set on entry table, headline visible). Telephone receiver (practical, used as weapon — carefully choreographed). Broom closet (practical door that latches). Coat and hat rack near closet. |
| Transition IN | Continuous from Scene 8. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Hobart and Siggy drag Bragg to closet. Latch clicks. Full lights. Road music begins. Chairs form car on apron. 15-second transition maximum. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The newspaper reveal must be staged so the audience sees the headline at the same moment Bragg reads it aloud. The prop must be legible from the first row.

The telephone moment on Miss Bragg should be staged with precise physical choreography: Honey takes the receiver (not the base), hesitates a half-beat — the audience sees her decide — and then acts with light but decisive force. It must not look brutal. It must look necessary. Miss Bragg slides into a chair, almost peaceful.

The closet scene: Hobart's moral compass spinning is visible on his face. He looks at the unconscious Bragg. He looks at Honey. He looks back. He goes. 'Just until we're on the road.' This is the play's morally murkiest moment and it must not be played for pure comedy. He is complicit. He knows it.

Gench's 'I want the record to show' — delivered to the room at large while watching the closet door close — is his most important comic moment. He is not just pessimistic. He is archiving.

CRITICAL PROP NOTE: The closet must be a practical door that latches. The audience must hear the latch click. It is the sound of the world closing on Miss Bragg, and it's funny precisely because she is going to open it anyway.

Fig. 5 — Scenes 10–12: The Road (car = 4 chairs, center apron), The Inn (split stage), Miss Bragg's arrival.

Scene 10: The Road to New Jersey

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 5–6 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | TRAVEL CUE: Zone A and C dark. Apron center: cool white-blue 'road' light. Moving light effect optional (ripple gobos). Musicians: vaudeville traveling theme, medium tempo. |
| Props Required | 4 chairs (arranged as car on apron, pre-set during Scene 9 closet business). Overnight bags (small, actor-carried from SR wing). One detached steering wheel (Hobart holds). A hubcap (rolls from wing on crash cue — crew-released from SR wing). |
| Transition IN | TRANSITION IN (15 seconds max): As Gench's last line lands, two crew members set 4 chairs on apron. Zone A dims. Actors cross DS with bags. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: CRASH chord from band. Chairs jolt. Bags fly. Actors pitch sideways. Inn sign flies in from above (fly cue) as car lights dissolve to warm inn glow. 12 seconds. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The car is four chairs. This is not apologized for. It is celebrated. The audience's imagination is the car. The actors' physical commitment to the fiction of the car is what makes it work.

The professors in the back seat should be genuinely uncomfortable — elbows, bags, Magenbruch's ear trumpet in someone's face. Their back-seat business should be continuous and specific throughout the scene.

The crash: the MUSICIANS produce the chord; the chairs jolt (actors sell the physical impact); Oddly's sandwich defies all laws of physics by surviving; Magenbruch says 'Are we there?' The sequence is: CRASH → silence (2 beats) → Gench from under Siggy → Oddly on the floor → Magenbruch's line. Do not compress this. Each beat lands separately.

Hobart's speech to Honey during the drive ('I don't frighten easily — I know I look like a man who frightens easily but I —') must be interrupted precisely at its most sincere moment. The comedy comes from the fact that he would have said something true, and the road prevented it.

DESIGN NOTE: The four chairs for the car should be a distinct style — road trip / period appropriate — different from the Foundation's chairs. The distinction helps the audience locate themselves instantly. Consider slightly mismatched road chairs vs. the Foundation's matched set.

Scene 11: An Inn Near Kingston, New Jersey — That Night

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 12–14 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Warm night: two bungalow warm glows (practical practicals or projected). Telephone alcove: single tight cool spot (isolation). Miss Bragg closet intercut: Foundation dim, single overhead. Night-dark fill everywhere else. |
| Props Required | Inn sign (flown in or carried). Front desk (small table, moved from SR wing). Two bungalow door signs ('4' and '9''6'). Bedcovers (simple — sheet over a chair). Telephone (practical in alcove). Honey's ring (in her pocket). Coat hanger (in the dark — Bragg's). Two police officer coats (in SR wing for Scene 12). |
| Transition IN | TRANSITION IN: Inn sign in (fly or carry), desk table set from SR wing, during travel music crash aftermath. 12 seconds. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Tony/Joe/Monte arrive. Zone shifts. Continuous to Scene 12. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Scene 11 is the longest and most complex scene in the play. It carries three simultaneous dramatic threads — Honey's phone call to Tony, Hobart's bungalow monologue, and the Bragg closet intercut — and must be paced with the precision of a jazz arrangement: each thread gets its full time before the next enters.

The split-stage inn requires careful light management. When Honey is at the phone alcove, the two bungalows are dim. When the bungalows are active, the alcove is dim. The Miss Bragg closet intercut is a third separate light pool on the Foundation USC — it should feel geographically far from the inn.

The bungalow '9''6' gag: the door sign should be mounted on a simple swivel or hung by a single hook so it visibly droops into the '6' position. The audience must be able to see the number from Row 1. It should look exactly like the kind of thing that would cause this kind of confusion.

Honey at the phone: her back is to the audience. Her conversation with Tony is the most controlled and the most frightened thing she has done. The audience hears her jaw tighten. The ring moment (she slides it on, looks at it, takes it off) happens in silence with her back three-quarters to the house. It must be visible. Stage manager: pre-call the lighting operator.

Hobart's speech in the dark — 'she is like music that you hear once and cannot locate again' — is the play's most purely romantic speech, and it is delivered by a man who believes he is alone. Let the actor find the monologue's full length. Do not rush toward the reveal.

Honey's 'This isn't Oddly's room, is it' is the play's gentlest laugh. It is followed by its most tender moment. The dark between them is the scene's true space.

Tony's entrance: the door opens. The lamp goes on. This is the lighting punctuation mark. He should appear lit before Hobart and Honey have adjusted to the light.

THE CLOSET INTERCUT: Miss Bragg on her knees with a coat hanger, working a latch in the dark, with the determination of the righteous — this is the play's great intercut comedy moment. It should play in no more than 90 seconds, scored by the 'determined little march' from the band. Her final line ('you have made a very significant error, young lady') is the scene's punctuation.

Scene 12: Outside the Inn — Shortly After

| | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| Duration | 4–5 minutes |
|-----------------|-------------|

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Lighting Cue | Dark and cold. Single lantern special on Hobart. Side fill from DSR for Bragg's arrival. A blues that doesn't resolve plays underneath. |
| Props Required | Miss Bragg's traveling bag (small). Two police officer coats/badges. Bragg's hair must be slightly disheveled — first time this has happened. |
| Transition IN | Continuous from inn interior. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Officers withdraw. Hobart and Bragg alone in dark. Lights hold. Slow dissolve with morning blues to Scene 13 Foundation light. 15 seconds. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This is the play's emotional center of gravity. Everything before has been comic preparation for this moment: a man alone outside in a dressing gown, his world slightly destroyed.

Miss Bragg's 'Hobart' — using his first name — should land with the weight of everything that name carries. She has called him 'Professor Frisbee' for years. This is the one circumstance that strips the title away.

Her hand on his arm: this is not affection. It is something older and harder — the physical acknowledgment of a person's pain by someone who is constitutionally opposed to acknowledging feelings. It should be brief. And it should be everything.

'Not tonight. Let's — not tonight.' Hobart is not protecting Honey here. He is protecting himself — the possibility that what he felt was real, even if it was complicated. The director must hold this ambiguity.

The long, slow aching blues that doesn't resolve: this is the band's emotional commentary. It should be the last thing the audience hears before the morning transition.

BRAGG AS CHARACTER: Her arc from this scene forward is the play's quiet second story. From this moment, she is no longer an obstacle — she is a witness. Her final act (sitting down to listen) is the culmination of a conversion that begins here, outside the inn, in the dark.

Scene 13: The Foundation — The Next Morning

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Duration | 6–7 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Grey morning first, warming slowly. This is the same light as Scene 1 but sadder. No dust motes. Miss Totten's entrance gets a sharp, clean overhead. |
| Props Required | Table returned to center. All inn/road props struck. Hobart's notebook (open to the 'Beautiful' page — readable from first row). Miss Totten's coat and Warren's briefcase. |
| Transition IN | TRANSITION IN: 15-second scene change during final Bragg/Hobart moment. Table rolls back to C. Crew strikes inn pieces to wings. Light builds gray-morning. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Miss Totten and Warren exit SR. Professors sit in silence. Music plays melody from Honey's nightclub song. Then: JOE AND MONTE BANG ON THE DOOR. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This scene must be played against the memory of the Foundation's best day (Scene 6). The same room, the same people, the same table — and everything is different. The actors should feel the absence of every sound that filled Scene 6.

Gench not saying 'I told you so' is his greatest performance. The moment should be held for a full three seconds. The audience is waiting for him to say it. He doesn't. Elkon says 'Thank you, Gench.' 'I want credit for not saying it.' This is the most earned laugh in the play.

Hobart finding the word 'Beautiful' on the notebook page — the one he crossed out not hard enough — is a private moment that the whole theater witnesses. Let him look at it for a long time before he picks up the pen.

'I'm sorry, Emmeline.' Using her first name for the first and only time. She registers this — she registers what it costs him to say it — and it changes nothing, and she knows that too. This is the play's most efficient piece of adult writing.

Miss Totten's exit line: 'What a terrible waste.' This is not cruelty. This is grief. The actress must understand that she has loved this man for years and she cannot, within her own framework, say so. The encyclopedia was how she kept him close.

CASTING NOTE: Miss Totten must have genuine warmth that she wears like armor. The audience should understand her affection for Hobart from her first entrance and feel its weight in this scene's final moments. She is not a villain. She is a woman whose rules failed her.

Fig. 6 — Scenes 14–15: The Siege & Flying Home Climax. Split stage — main room (professors) and side room (forced wedding). Bass drum fall: rigged mechanism at USC.

Scene 14: The Siege

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Duration | 5–6 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Tense, sharp overheads — no warm fill. Gunmetal blue-white. Side room at 40%. Bass drum gets its own overhead special again — it is a character in this scene. |
| Props Required | Joe and Monte's guns (stage props — must be cleared with venue armourer). Bass drum on shelf (visible, overhead lit). Persian rug (center stage, slightly upstage of center). Dingle's book (practical). Tony's hand on Honey's arm (physical). |
| Transition IN | TRANSITION IN: Bang on the door. Immediate shift to siege cue. Joe and Monte enter SR. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Flying Home begins. Split transition — see Scene 15. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The siege begins at the fastest tempo the play has had since the car crash. Joe and Monte move quickly, position efficiently. They are professionals.

The professors arranged along the wall should look like a class photo — seven academics in a line, slightly surreal in their stillness. Their eyes communicate continuously with each other during Joe's monologue.

The bass drum overhead special is a visual signal to the audience: we haven't forgotten about this. Hobart's gaze traveling upward should be a slow, deliberate move — and the moment it lands on the drum, the audience should feel it connect.

Honey's 'No' to Tony: this is the climax of her dramatic arc. It is one word. It must be the most certain word she has ever said. Preceded by a silence in which she thinks of the dark room at the inn, and Hobart's voice, and the ring. Then: 'No.'

Dingle's serene comfort throughout the growing tension is the scene's constant comedy undertow. He has constructed a satisfactory wedding from whatever sounds he could hear, and he is entirely at peace with his construction.

DINGLE STAGING: He should be positioned so that the audience can see both his contentment and the chaos around him simultaneously. He reads from his book with the absorption of a man who has found a comfortable chair. Every time the scene peaks, cut to Dingle. Every time.

Scene 15: The Foundation — The Main Room — The Same Moment

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 8–10 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | BUILD: Start at siege cue. Felix's downbeat triggers a light surge — full stage, all zones, maximum warm. Bass drum fall gets a single flash special. Side room stays at siege level until Hobart enters. Fight sequence: tight overheads. |
| Props Required | Bass drum (rigged drop mechanism — see Technical Note). Persian rug (for Monte). Felix at piano from Scene 14. Handcuffs for Tony (arresting officer's prop). Harris's badge. Joe unconscious with drum on head (sell it hard). |
| Transition IN | Continuous from Scene 14 with Flying Home as the transition agent. |
| Transition OUT | TRANSITION OUT: Harris enters, Tony cuffed. Lights settle to warm evening (Scene 16). Musical transition: from Flying Home climax to quiet piano. 20-second settle. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Flying Home erupting: this is the production's climactic musical moment. It must be massive. A live jazz ensemble at full volume should fill your house completely — assess your room's acoustics early and work with your sound designer to achieve full presence without over-amplification. The audience should feel it in their chests.

The bass drum mechanism: this must be engineered precisely with the technical director. Options include a counterweighted hinge, a locking pin that releases on a decibel threshold, or a manual release by a stagehand in the wings on a cue from the conductor. The BOOM of impact must be synchronized with the music — the musicians incorporate it. Rehearse this with the full band present.

Joe going down 'like a building that has been professionally demolished': the actor playing Joe should commit entirely to this. It should be safe, but it should look catastrophic. The bass drum rests on his head at the end — this image must hold for a moment before the Elkon/Monte rug pull.

Elkon's rug pull: Professor Elkon has been the background professor — sharpening pencils, writing notes. His sudden agency in the play's climax is the ensemble's joke. He should drag the rug with the precision of a man who has been waiting nine years to do exactly this.

Hobart bursting into the side room: this crosses the room-divider established since Scene 6. The physical act of crossing it is heroic. He is not built for this. He does it anyway.

The punch: Hobart ducks (choreograph this carefully — Tony's swing must be clearly telegraphed, Hobart's duck clearly surprised even to him), and comes up with a right cross. Tony goes down. Hobart looks at his fist. 'I didn't know I could do that.' This is the play's greatest laugh.

Dingle completing the ceremony despite everything: he has constructed a wedding from the ambient audio. His 'Lovely ceremony. Very intimate.' exit must happen after Tony is on the floor, after the world has reassembled, delivered with absolute sincerity.

TECHNICAL NOTE — BASS DRUM DROP: This effect is the production's single most technically complex practical gag. The drum (full-size bass drum, approximately 28" diameter) must fall from approximately 8 feet, land on the actor's padded helmet (hidden under Joe's hat), and remain balanced on his head. Pad the actor's head fully. Rehearse the drop mechanism at least 20 times before technical rehearsal. The sound design team should have the BOOM pre-recorded as a backup in case the live drop sound is insufficient.

Scene 16: The Resolution — Flying Home (Reprise)

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Duration | 9–11 minutes |
| Lighting Cue | Warm gold full stage. Gradual rise from siege lights to full celebration over 90 seconds. Felix's quiet piano in the dark, then lights build with the music. |
| Props Required | Ring box (Hobart's pocket, returned from wherever it went). Tony handcuffs struck (he's led out). Oddly's sandwich (appears from somewhere — always has been there). Tweed on piano bench (Felix moves to make room). All instruments. |
| Transition IN | Continuous from Scene 15 arrest. Tony out SR. Officers clear. Musical settle. |
| Transition OUT | END OF PLAY. House lights rise slowly with final bars of Flying Home. |

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The resolution must be earned. The audience has been on a 90-minute ride. Give them air. Felix's quiet piano thinking to itself — not performing, just being music — is the right re-entry.

The ring speech: 'Let me decide what I deserve. That's my department.' This is the play's most important line. It is not gallant. It is not a romantic gesture. It is a man choosing, with clear eyes and full information. Let it breathe.

Honey reading the ring engraving a second time: she read it in Scene 8 and it frightened her. She reads it in Scene 16 and it's still frightening, but she stays. The actor should let both readings be true simultaneously.

The comedy as the ensemble returns: Oddly's sandwich appearing from nowhere is the play's final absurdist gift. He has always had a sandwich somewhere. He always will.

Tweed learning boogie woogie: it is terrible. It is the beginning of something. Felix's patience and Tweed's earnestness are the play's thesis statement in miniature — this is what the play is about.

Elkon: 'Jazz is not a subject. Jazz is a verb.' This lands as both a comedy line and the play's summary. Let the laugh happen, then let the line stand as what it is.

Miss Bragg stepping into the room and sitting down: this is the play's second ending. It must not be rushed or played for laughs. She is not converted. She is capitulating — which, for her, is the same thing as conversion. The lights should hold on her face for two seconds before the final music rise.

FLYING HOME (final): the joyful version. Not the battle version. Not the emergency version. The version that exists because people needed it to exist. The whole company, at full power, for every seat in your house.

FINAL IMAGE: Hobart and Honey at center, the ring on her finger. The musicians surrounding them. Miss Bragg in her chair. Oddly eating his sandwich. Gench smiling, pen in hand, and refusing to admit he is smiling. This is the encyclopedia. This is what they've been writing for nine years. They just didn't know it.

IV. MASTER TRANSITION CALLSHEET

The following chart summarizes every scene transition in the play. This is the production's logistical spine. Times are targets — technical rehearsal will establish final cues. Any transition exceeding 20 seconds requires redesign.

Fig. 7 — Scene Transition Master Chart: All 16 scenes with duration, light cues, prop changes, and staging notes.

TRANSITION HIERARCHY: Scenes marked with a bar (Sc.4, Sc.10, Sc.13) require active prop crew deployment during the light fade. These must be rehearsed as performance sequences, not tech fixes.

V. MASTER PROPS & SET DRESSING LIST

Permanent Set Pieces (Never Struck)

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Oak research table | 10 ft, center stage. Heavy — on locking casters for Scene 6 push to USC. |
| 7 matching scholar chairs | Around table. Period appropriate. Dark wood. |
| Bookshelves (US wall) | 5 units, floor-to-ceiling suggestion. Dressed with books and manuscript boxes. |
| Musicians platform | SR upstage. Raised 12". 18ft x 12ft minimum. |
| Upright piano (SL) | Practical and in tune. Period appropriate. Dusty for Scenes 1–3. |
| Staircase (SR) | Practical. Leads offstage to 'upper rooms.' |
| Broom closet (SR under stairs) | Practical latch. Interior light strip at bottom of door. |
| Bass drum on high shelf | 28" bass drum on shelf 8ft above stage, USC. Rigged drop mechanism. Lit from above. |
| Tuba (SR corner) | Decorative/practical. Moved by professors during Scene 6. |

Traveling Set Pieces (Wing-Stored, Rolled In/Out)

| | |
|--|---|
| Nightclub tables (x3) | Small round tables, club style. Pre-set SR wing. Roll to DSL for Scene 4. |
| Nightclub chairs (x8) | Period club chairs. With nightclub tables. |
| Bandstand microphone stand | Practical, Scene 4 DSL. |
| Inn front desk | Small table + ledger. SR wing. Scene 11. |
| Bungalow door signs ('4' and '9') | Scene 11. '9' mounted on swivel to read as '6'. Fly in or carry. |
| Persian rug (center) | Large period rug. Scene 14–15. Monte falls on this. |
| Armchair (Honey) | Comfortable period armchair. Scene 5. SR wing storage. |
| Extra chairs (x8) | Additional seating for Scene 6 round table. Both wings. |

Hand Props

| | |
|---|---|
| Oddly's sandwiches (x6 per show) | Practical food. Prepare 6 for replacements. Must be edible. |
| Magenbruch's ear trumpet | Practical prop. Large, period appropriate. |
| Hobart's notebooks (x2) | 'Beautiful' page must be visible from Row 1 in Scene 8. |
| Ring box — Tony's (diamond) | Impressive cold ring. Opened in Scene 6 side room. |
| Ring box — Hobart's (gold band) | Modest. Engraving visible. Returns in Scene 16. |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Miss Bragg's newspaper | Scene 9. Headline legible from Row 1. Period 1948 design. |
| Telephone (practical) | Scenes 8–9 and Scene 11 alcove. Period rotary. Practical ring cue. |
| Felix's notepad | Small notebook. Visible writing. Scene 3. |
| Squeegees (x2) | Felix/Jerome entrance props. Scene 3. |
| Tony's newspaper (Scene 11) | Showing Honey's photo. Pre-loaded in Tony's jacket. |
| 4 chairs for car | Distinct from Foundation chairs. Scene 10. |
| Detached steering wheel | Hobart holds during Scene 10. Comes apart on crash. |
| Hubcap (practical roll) | Released from SR wing on crash cue. Rolls across stage. |
| Joe/Monte guns (stage props) | Clear with venue armourer. Non-firing props only. |
| Handcuffs (Harris) | Practical. Scene 15. |
| Dingle's book | Small official-looking volume. Well-worn. Scenes 14–15. |
| Miss Bragg's coat hanger | Scene 11. She works the closet latch with it in the dark. |
| Tambourines (x2) | Scene 7. From prop box under table. |

VI. MUSIC CUE SHEET — KEY MOMENTS

The following cues require precise coordination between the director, stage manager, and musical director. The band is the production's nervous system. These are the moments where their timing is script, not accompaniment.

| | |
|--|---|
| Cue 1 — Opening | Half-light. Musicians at rest but visible. First light rise with first music: low, patient, expectant. Hobart begins writing. |
| Cue 2 — Ominous phrase | After 'Look like it.' Four bars, low and inevitable. Like a court verdict. |
| Cue 3 — Amused figure | After Gench counts Hobart's handshake. A knowing phrase — as if the band has known this for years. |
| Cue 4 — Boogie woogie (Felix) | Felix plays. Band joins gradually: bass (bar 4), trumpet muted (bar 8), full ensemble (bar 16). Build over 90 seconds. |
| Cue 5 — Traveling to nightclub | Transition music: jazz traveling phrase, club cool. 10 seconds. Band reconfigures during this. |
| Cue 6 — Honey's song (nightclub) | Full house band. 2.5–3 minutes. Blues, slow, searching. Must be dramatically chosen. |
| Cue 7 — Late night sax | Single saxophone, Scene 5. Barely above a whisper. Plays through Honey's final image. |
| Cue 8 — Flying Home (preview) | Scene 6. Pianist plays the head. Professors react. Stop before the bridge. |
| Cue 9 — Uneasy bass note | Scene 8, Tony on phone. Single bass note held long. |
| Cue 10 — Determined march (Bragg) | Scene 11, Bragg in closet. 60–90 seconds. Jaunty and relentless. |
| Cue 11 — Sustained note (inn) | Scene 11, Hobart and Honey in dark. Single sustained note — barely breathing. |
| Cue 12 — Blues (doesn't resolve) | Scene 12, outside inn. Long, slow, aching. No resolution. Hold through scene end. |
| Cue 13 — Honey's melody (half-remembered) | Scene 13, after Miss Totten exits. The nightclub blues, barely present. |
| Cue 14 — FLYING HOME (full) | Scene 15. All in. Maximum volume. BOOM of bass drum incorporated into the rhythm. Flying Home from top, full chart. |
| Cue 15 — Quiet piano | Scene 16 opening. Felix alone, music thinking to itself. Not a performance. |
| Cue 16 — FLYING HOME (finale) | Scene 16 climax. The joyful version. Full company. House lights rise with the final bars. |

VII. CASTING NOTES

Critical Casting Considerations

HOBART FRISBEE

The production stands or falls on this casting. He must be simultaneously comic and genuinely heroic, bookish and capable of real action. The character's comedy comes entirely from sincerity, not from mugging. He must be believable as a man who punches a gangster. Crucially: he must be able to carry the long monologue in the dark (Scene 11) without telegraphing that it is being overheard. He is speaking his truth for perhaps the first time. Let him.

HONEY SWANSON

In the 1948 film, Virginia Mayo was required to mimic Barbara Stanwyck, which didn't serve her. On stage, Honey must be genuinely her own person — not a moll, not a victim, not a prize. She is a woman making active choices under impossible constraints. The actress must be able to sing (her own voice, raw if necessary) and must be able to play seven different emotional registers in the same scene.

MISS BRAGG

The play's great unsung part. She is funny throughout, and then, at the end, she is moving. The actress must play both fully without tipping from one into the other prematurely. Her final moment — sitting down, listening — is a character transformation delivered in silence.

THE PROFESSORS

Each of the six supporting professors requires a specific, unvarying physical identity. The comedy of the ensemble depends on this specificity. They are not interchangeable background figures. They are six different forms of being a scholar.

FELIX AND JEROME

These characters are the play's energy engine. They should be genuinely musical — Felix must play the boogie woogie convincingly (or be staged so the audience believes he does). Their window-washer physicality — totally at home in a world that is not their world — must be established instantly on entrance.

VIII. FINAL DIRECTOR'S NOTE

In 1948, Howard Hawks assembled the greatest concentration of jazz talent ever put on a Hollywood soundstage — Armstrong, Goodman, Dorsey, Hampton, Barnet, Powell — and reportedly hated every minute of it. He was wrong to hate it. The music outlasted his indifference.

The stage version of *A Song Is Born* has a different obligation. We cannot assemble those musicians. We carry their legacy. What we can do — what we must do — is make music and story inseparable in the way the film only partly managed. The play works when its characters discover, in the act of performance, something about themselves that no amount of research could have produced.

Nine years in a library. Two days of something that turned out to be more important. That's the play. Give it room to breathe, the musicians room to swing, and every seat in your house a reason to be glad they came.

Director's Production Notes — A Song Is Born

Reference Venue: Mandell Weiss Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse | Proscenium, ~490 seats (adapt to your venue)

Revision 6 — April 13, 2026