



MTEA

MUSICAL THEATRE
EDUCATORS' ALLIANCE



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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

As my term as President of the Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance came to a close at the end of last year, I am filled with deep gratitude for this organization and for the people who sustain it. It has been a privilege to lead MTEA during a time of reflection and renewed purpose, and to be continually inspired by the extraordinary work happening in musical theatre pedagogy.

What has always grounded me in this role is the understanding that our teaching does not exist in a vacuum. We are constantly responding to evolving pedagogies, shifting professional landscapes, and the complex and very human lives of our students. MTEA has remained a space where those challenges are not only acknowledged but thoughtfully engaged.

One of my primary goals during my presidency was what I often referred to as "steadying the ship." As MTEA has grown from a small, emerging organization into one that serves a broad and increasingly international membership, it became clear that our processes, policies, and structures needed to reflect who we are now, not who we were when we began. Much of my work focused on strengthening the infrastructure that supports our mission so the organization can continue to thrive well beyond any single term of leadership.

In collaboration with the Executive Committee, we clarified and formalized job descriptions for our volunteer leadership roles, built an organizational chart to more clearly distribute responsibility and accountability, and established an Ethics Committee and reporting structure so members have clear pathways to address concerns at MTEA events. These efforts were rooted in care for our members, our students, and our shared professional values.

We also took important steps to modernize and expand how we connect. Our website refresh is ongoing as MTEA continues to evolve. Devon Hunt's leadership in spearheading the MTEA Directory has made it easier for members to find and support one another. MTEA's involvement in developing the Musical Theatre Common Prescreen requirements has further positioned the organization as an active voice in shaping more equitable and transparent practices in the field.

I am especially proud of the programs that directly support our members' professional lives. Elizabeth Benson's thoughtful development of the Mentorship Program has provided a meaningful lifeline for those navigating academia and the profession. The New Works Collaboration Catalog continues to grow as a vital space where writers and educators can connect and explore new possibilities together. And of course, this journal, led with care, rigor, and vision by Michael McKelvey, has become an essential scholarly home for our field. Ensuring authors receive DOI numbers for their work is no small feat, and it reflects MTEA's commitment to recognizing musical theatre pedagogy as serious, citable scholarship.

None of this work happens in isolation. Every member of the Executive Committee contributes countless hours to keep MTEA running smoothly, and I am deeply grateful for their trust and collaboration. Lauren Haughton Gillis and Aaron Brown deserve special recognition for their tireless work in conference planning. They are often juggling multiple events at once thanks to my enthusiasm for conferences. Their leadership has helped MTEA remain a vibrant, in-person, and global community.

And finally, I want to name what many of us already know: Rose van Dyne, our Operations Manager, truly is the heart of MTEA. Her care, institutional knowledge, and steady presence make all of this possible. The organization simply would not function as it does without her.

As I step away from this role, I do so with confidence in the leadership ahead and immense pride in what we have built together. Thank you for allowing me to serve this community. I look forward to continuing the work alongside you as a member, an educator, and a lifelong learner.



With gratitude,
Jessica Humphrey
President, Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance

LETTER FROM THE INCOMING PRESIDENT

Dear MTEA Community,

To borrow a phrase from Little Red, I am both “excited and scared” to step into the role of President of the Musical Theatre Educators’ Alliance. It has been an honor to serve as Co–Vice President of Conferences for the past three years, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to continue serving this organization in a new capacity.

Our work during this period was strengthened by exceptional leadership and collaboration. Jessica Humphrey’s inspired presidency set a powerful example, and I remain thankful for her generosity, vision, and collegiality. Devon Hunt made significant advancements as Vice President of Membership, and I am continually grateful to have worked alongside a Co–Vice President as thoughtful, steady, and organized as Aaron Brown. At the center of it all, Rose VanDyne provided unwavering support and leadership through years marked by growth, challenge, and meaningful success.

Working in higher education and the arts is a profound privilege. Each day, I am grateful for the opportunity to mentor and guide the next generation of musical theatre artists. Since transitioning from a professional Broadway career to academia, the Musical Theatre Educators’ Alliance has served as both my compass and community. From my first conference in 2019, I recognized MTEA as a professional home. I owe much to the educators who have offered guidance, encouragement, and inspiration as we collectively navigate the opportunities and challenges inherent in arts education.

As I begin my three-year term as President, my goal is to continue strengthening the organization in the spirit of those who have led before me. I am particularly grateful for the mentorship I received on the Executive Committee under Matty Teague Miller, Alisa Hauser, and Jessica Humphrey. Looking ahead, I hope to support growth not only in membership, but also through strategic partnerships with aligned organizations.

In my work as a director and choreographer, I often center each production around a single guiding word. For my presidency, that word is connection. In an era increasingly shaped by digital engagement and isolation, I am committed to fostering opportunities for live interaction, collaboration, and community gathering, ensuring that MTEA remains a vibrant and connected professional home for its members.

With service and gratitude,



Incoming President, Musical Theatre Educators’ Alliance
Lauren Haughton Gillis





LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear MTEA Colleagues,

As I transcribed the notes from the last executive committee meeting, I thought back on my membership with MTEA. I joined MTEA while attending a conference at the University of Texas at Austin, which I believe was over fifteen years ago. At that time, the organization was much smaller, and musical theatre education was not in half of the colleges and universities that now boast BFA, BM, BA, and MFA musical theatre programs. MTEA was not an international organization by any stretch of the imagination, nor did it have the wonderful affinity groups and programs, such as Voice, New Works, Mentorship, DEI, and the MTEA Journal, which are so integral to the vibrant and diverse organization we are today. Upon reflection, the primary reasons for our success and growth are community and service.

As we celebrate 2026 with the return of our annual conference to beautiful San Diego, California and our host school, San Diego State University, we usher in a new chapter for MTEA. Along with incoming president Lauren Houghton Gillis, we welcome fresh leadership with our newly elected vice presidents and appointees to the executive committee. Having had the pleasure of serving on the E.C. for the past three or four years as a member-at-large, and then secretary and editor-in-chief of the journal, I can say without pause that it has been one of my most fulfilling periods of my career in academia. For some of us, we may be the only musical theatre instructors at our institutions, where no one truly understands what we do. I experienced this at three schools myself, and thanks to the MTEA community, I always knew I had a network of friends and colleagues around the world who were available to answer questions or provide any kind of help.

For me, the journal is one of the most important extensions of our organization into the world of academia, as well as the professional world of musical theatre. It allows our tenure-track or promotion-seeking members an opportunity to express what they do in the classroom, on stage, or through research, in a medium that is relatable to their academic colleagues in other areas. It offers members not affiliated with academic institutions a way to share their advancements in musical theatre practice and education with our members. As the editor, I encourage you to read the articles in this, the 7th edition of the MTEA Journal, and enjoy the work of our colleagues. Then, if you are so inclined, become part of the journal by submitting an article or serving on our editorial staff.

Sincerely,

Michael E. McKelvey
Editor-in-Chief
MTEA Journal



Training Tomorrow's Artists

*Cross-Canada
Conversation with
Musical Theatre
Program Leaders*

Tahirih Vejdani

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Canadian musical theatre training faces renewed uncertainty amid program suspensions, shifting demographics, and declining public investment.¹ As the performing arts landscape continues to change in response to social, financial, and industry pressures, so too must the institutions and leaders responsible for training the next generation of Canadian musical theatre performers.

I had the pleasure of speaking with four leaders from both public and private institutions across the country: **KYLE BLAIR**, Program Coordinator and Professor of the Musical Theatre Performance program at St. Lawrence College (SLC) in Brockville, Ontario; **DANIELLE MEUNIER**, Director of Education at the Canadian College of Performing Arts (CCPA) in Victoria, British Columbia; **DAWN SADOWAY**, Chair of the MacEwan Theatre Department and Associate Professor of the Music Theatre Performance program at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta; and **ERYNN BROOK**, Program Manager of Randolph College for the Performing Arts program in Toronto, Ontario.²

Together, we discussed their philosophies, current challenges, and hopes for the future of musical theatre training. While each program has its own pedagogical and structural identity, the conversations revealed shared themes of a commitment to student resilience, wellbeing, collaboration, and reimagining educational models in a post-pandemic era.

These interviews were conducted virtually between September and October 2025 and are cited throughout as personal communications. The feature article presents selected highlights from those conversations, with a summary of each program's pathway to higher education in music and musical theatre provided below.³

¹ As of fall 2025, St. Lawrence College has paused intake for its Music Theatre Performance Program pending program review, and Sheridan College has discontinued its Performing Arts Preparation Program.

² Regrettably, two other leaders at major institutions in Canada that also offer musical theatre training programs were not available to be interviewed for this article, but I have listed them here as they warrant mention. They include Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario and Capilano University in North Vancouver, British Columbia.

³ **St. Lawrence College** is a public college that offers a 3-year Ontario College Advanced Diploma in Music Theatre – Performance with the option of a 4-year collaborative program with Queen's University for a Bachelor of Music Theatre. **Canadian College of Performing Arts** is a private college that offers a 2-year conservatory-style Performing Arts Diploma, an 8-month Performing



Kyle Blair



Danielle Meunier



Dawn Sadoway



Erynn Brook



WHAT DRIVES YOU IN THIS WORK?

TAHIRIH: *What's meaningful to you in the work you do with students?*

KYLE: What's most meaningful to me is the opportunity to help shape the culture of the program. That includes celebrating student success, highlighting inspiring industry practitioners, creating room agreements, keeping students informed of industry developments, organizing trips to professional productions, and bringing in guest artists with diverse experiences and perspectives. I initially thought teaching would be the most exciting part of this role—and it is—but coordinating has become equally special. It gives me a broader perspective on how the program operates and how I can help it evolve in alignment with the values I believe in. Ultimately, my mission is to empower students to show up with confidence as their authentic selves.

DANIELLE: My role is Director of Education at CCPA. I oversee all of the education programming, curriculum development, and student learning experience here. What's always been meaningful to me in the roles I've had in higher education is witnessing the learning journey the students go on, what they learn through their training, and the discoveries that surprise them.

DAWN: My current role is as chair. I've been in a leadership position either as chair or program coordinator for quite some time. What I like about this role is being able to impact structure, scheduling, have an understanding of the university as a whole, be a part of committees in a different way at the university level and within the faculty, and bring this experience to not only the current faculty in theatre but to the students. I have enjoyed having that ability to lead but also provide advice and mentorship to younger faculty and to students, and to help promote the program.

ERYNN: I do a lot of things. I'm the program manager, and I often describe my role as "I make school go." For me, it's the alchemy of the whole thing, like when you think of exactly the right musical for this group of students, or figuring out just the exact wording to tweak a rubric so that it's really clear. It's sort of the same as when you have that moment as a teacher where you give that one slight redirect, and it was exactly the right thing to say to that person at that moment, and you've unlocked something. That's what I love most about my job.

GUIDING PHILOSOPHIES

TAHIRIH: *What core values or philosophies guide musical theatre training today?*

KYLE: I think it's important to recognize that our art form is inherently collaborative. We work to create brave spaces where students feel empowered to take artistic risks, balancing rigor with collective well-being. I firmly believe we can create exciting, relevant, and daring work while also caring for ourselves and each other.

DANIELLE: One of our values at CCPA is to empower students to self-advocate, follow their passion for the arts, and apply this drive to the discipline and level of training required by the industry. Respect for self-advocacy and awareness of wellbeing is growing in the professional industry. Student wellbeing must sit equally beside the discipline of training. Our focus at CCPA is student-centred learning. It's about what will support the students to achieve their best, and that has meant we look at curriculum development holistically and consider the entire learning experience of a student. ... As such, I'm going to mention our use of an inclusive model of learning, working towards what's called a universal design for learning model. Essentially, this model encourages faculty to consider small ways they can shift teaching approaches to accommodate multiple methods of sharing or demonstrating skills and information. This supports students in engaging with and demonstrating that knowledge. It's a huge goal, but one worth working towards.

DAWN: There's a real need to build resilience in our students. I think it's necessary to develop collaboration skills and conflict resolution practices so that we have not only skilled people, but people that are great at working and collaborat-

Arts Certificate, and a 6-month Applied Performing Arts Diploma. The 2-year Diploma program also has a transferability pathway with Yorkville University for a degree option.

MacEwan University is a public university that offers a 4-year Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music Theatre or a 2-year Diploma in Music Theatre Performance. Various other pathways are currently under development, one such program being a minor in Community-Engaged Arts Practice.

Randolph College for the Performing Arts is a private college that offers a 24-month Career College Diploma in Performing Arts and offers degree pathway agreements through Wilfrid Laurier University for a Bachelor of Music and Yorkville University for a Bachelor of Creative Arts.

Sheridan College is a public college that offers a 4-year Honours Bachelor of Music Theatre Performance.

Capilano University is a public university that offers a 3-year conservatory-style Musical Theatre Diploma.



ing with other people. I like the idea of breaking down barriers so that the director isn't always God. So that we are really encouraging students to explore what it might mean for different people to take leads at any given time.

ERYNN: I think what's really exciting about the core values and the philosophies that I'm seeing today is how opposite they are from the ones that I went to school in. That we seem to really be moving towards a more personalized approach to training and development, that we're really trying to find "What is it about this person? What can I help them bring out?" Because that's the thing that's going to really help them in this industry. Whereas I came up in the early 2000s and it was very much: "Here's the mold, fit yourself into it." And that really doesn't come up very often anymore, which is kind of nice.

REFLECTIONS ON CHANGE

TAHIRIH: *What changes have you observed in students, training practices, or the field more broadly over the past few years?*

KYLE: We're in constant evolution, and part of our responsibility as educators is to adapt and equip students with the tools they need to succeed. I see this responsibility as twofold: to prepare students for the industry and to empower them to help shape its future. They are the next generation, and they should feel able to push against the status quo in productive ways. It's my job to be honest about the realities of the industry while maintaining a training environment that is safe, brave, and responsive to students' needs.

DANIELLE: Lot less resiliency certainly since the pandemic, although I can say we are starting to see that come back again... For the first two to three years post-pandemic, students who were isolated and unable to attend high school where key communication skills are gained at that age were struggling to adjust. The current generation of students appear to need more explicit instructions or explicit descriptions or explanations... Some students really struggle if we don't go: "Okay, this is what we're talking about," or "Okay, and this is why we're doing this." So, I'm noticing more directive teaching is needed by faculty.

DAWN: Thankfully, I am beginning to see a more resilient student enter the program. The last five to eight years have been full of challenges with regard to students who are struggling with high levels of anxiety. It's two things: the pandemic played a large role in creating this but also so do our social media practices. Some of my research has been in resilience lately because of what we have seen. We're now incorporating resilience training into the work and have very clear step-by-step practices to follow when it comes to collaboration and conflict resolution, which is helping. It's really, really helping.

ERYNN: I'm an alum of the program, and I started working here about five months before COVID hit. And I think it's kind of impossible to talk about a question like this without talking about COVID. They've all been impacted differently depending on where they were in their development when COVID hit. I, at the time, sort of thought that the group most impacted by COVID would be the first group in person... each subsequent cohort has taught me that that was not the case, that they've all been impacted differently depending on where they were in their development when COVID hit.

CURRICULUM EVOLUTION

TAHIRIH: *How has your program's curriculum evolved in recent years to meet the changing demands of the musical theatre industry?*

KYLE: Self-tapes became widespread during the pandemic, and it seems they're here to stay. To support this shift, we invested in self-tape equipment for students to use for both in-class assignments and external auditions. We've expanded professional connections through on-campus workshops and intensives, bringing in practitioners from diverse disciplines and backgrounds in musical theatre. I'm especially proud that we've developed new works, giving students the chance to be involved at the ground level—some of which have gone on to premiere at the Shaw Festival. Last year, we also refreshed our professional advisory committee to better reflect a diversity of experience and perspective among working artists. Their insight helps ensure the program evolves in step with the industry.

DANIELLE: Certainly, attention to wellbeing and strategies for self-care are now embedded into our programs. The integration of equitable practices and conversations around equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility are also now embedded into our curriculum, in our faculty conversations and professional development training. I'm very proud of that and it's an ongoing process, of course. Intimacy training also has a strong presence in our curriculum. Not only do we work with an



intimacy director when there are production needs, we now also invite them to run workshops with the students in the context of mentorship projects. Each student has an opportunity to submit a proposal to develop a short performance in the discipline of their choice with the support of a professional industry mentor (directing, playwriting, choreography, composition, etc.). As emerging creative leaders, learning to run a rehearsal room with empathy and awareness is vital for today's industry. What we teach today will influence industry practices in the future.

DAWN: One of the most significant changes is we schedule very differently than most theatre schools. We run a nine to five program in year one, Monday to Friday. And then we run a nine to six in year two through four, Monday to Friday. And if you're in a show, then you're rehearsing on Saturdays as well. Evenings are off. We're trying to adhere to more of a humane work week. Tech rehearsals will go into the evenings, but then they do not have to be in class in the mornings during tech week. We're finding that everyone's mental and physical health is better. When you research resilience, you find that resilient people take time for rest and recovery. And theatre training practices in the past do not allow for that. So we decided to build that right into our program. We threw out our schedule and just started again and said, what happens if we allow for some rest and recovery?

ERYNN: There are so many things that are still the same about the expectations [of the industry itself]. And so, it's really more about, "How do we scaffold you from where you are to where that benchmark is?" And that is, I think, a more direct and more open conversation. We're trying to be more conscious and more active between departments. Because we have the three departments [acting, singing, and dancing] and they're somewhat separated, and they have been siloed in the past. So, we're actively pointing out: "This thing that you're working on in dance class is the same as this thing you're working on in scene study class," "The skills that you're learning in your Shakespeare class apply to your musical theater presentation class," that these things all integrate and are working towards the same thing. They're not three separate things. That's something that we've been more conscious of, actively naming and pointing out and trying to reinforce for each other as faculty, as well as for the students.



PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS, COLLABORATIONS, AND LEARNING FROM OTHERS

TAHIRIH: *Are there any pedagogical innovations, program developments, or collaborations you've been involved in recently that you're excited about? Have you seen any practices at conferences, in conversations, or at other schools that you admire or are learning from?*

KYLE: In the third and final year of the program, students take a two-semester course called Original Performance, where they devise, produce, direct, and perform an entirely new work, taking responsibility for every element of its creation. This year, we're partnering with St. Lawrence Lodge, a long-term care home in Brockville. Each student has been paired with a resident, and their stories will serve as source material for a new musical that will tour care homes throughout Brockville.

DANIELLE: We are part of one of the first group of institutions to be involved with PACT [Professional Association of Canadian Theatres]. They've started a working group of theatre and performance educators across Canada to engage in conversation with PACT, and be included in the wider industry conversations. So that's quite exciting, and incredibly encouraging. Recently, CCPA has nurtured a relationship with a local voice and swallow clinic. Our students have the option to see a Speech and Language Pathologist for an endoscope exam and medical report which offers a baseline of their vocal health. This is particularly helpful if a new student is found to have a small vocal issue, we can then form a multi-disciplinary team with the SPLs, laryngologist, singing teachers, and voice and speech teachers to support the student in their recovery plan.

DAWN: Besides the development of the BFA, which has been a big endeavour, one of the things that I like about our BFA program is that it includes, as a key component, interdisciplinary studies. These interdisciplinary courses are designed to include art, music majors, arts and cultural management majors, people from different disciplines that come together to take these courses and talk about art together. So that's, I think, really cool. And there's plans now that this interdisciplinary study will actually become a degree program at MacEwan. That is exciting.

ERYNN: Phone bins is my big thing. We've got these bins and students put their phones in them at the beginning of class. It's a clear plastic bin and people put their phones in the bin. We're looking to integrate some more direct support into the actual curriculum itself, talking about social media detoxing and how our phones are affecting us and some journaling, because you just need time. You need time away from this [phone] to develop that side of yourself as an artist ... that's something I'm really excited about right now that seems to be working.

CHALLENGES FACING MUSICAL THEATRE EDUCATION

TAHIRIH: *What are some of the biggest challenges facing musical theatre education today, either for students, educators, or institutions?*

KYLE: Our biggest emerging priority—and challenge—is government funding. The Ontario government is actively defunding public education and diverting money from public colleges to the Skills Development Fund, which supports non-college training providers and projects. We're witnessing, in real time, an effort to privatize a once robust and reliable system. Ontario ranks last among Canadian provinces in operating funding for public colleges, yet since 2020, Doug Ford has committed \$2.5 billion of taxpayer money to this fund. The result has been thousands of layoffs and hundreds of program closures across the sector. Publicly-funded education is essential because it ensures accessibility, equity, and high-quality training for all students—not just those who can afford private options. It strengthens communities, supports economic growth, and preserves programs that are vital to cultural and social development.

DANIELLE: The overall funding and grants situation in Canada, is resulting in the lack of arts funding, etc. And what it's creating is a narrower funnel resulting in less student and institutional support. And these are not just CCPA issues, these are issues I see across Canada for not only musical theatre training, but any arts training. Institutions are cutting arts train-

ing for lack of funding and income. We are in a time when courses and institutions who offer performance training need to collaborate and cooperate—to make network links and create a system that can speak across institutional credits so that students can transition between programs or transfer to another program easily if their personal circumstances change. This would benefit students and institutions helping to ultimately support and retain students in their field of study. This is a long-term goal but worth considering.

DAWN: Ultimately, most things that are challenging are financial... the cost for students to do a degree is exorbitant. We're trying really hard to acknowledge that the career is not just one path forward, and that it's a portfolio career. Exploring what each student's portfolio will look like after they graduate is important to us. What does it mean to be creative over a lifetime? I think we have to address these questions in a thorough and meaningful way. And then, from a business point of view, how do we continue to pay for these expensive training programs at the university level? And how do we keep our administrators at the higher levels supporting our arts programs? How do we keep our work front and centre and of real value to a university?

ERYNN: We're a private career college. So, we're not exactly facing some of the same challenges that the public post-secondary programs are facing right now. We never got funding from the government for students. So, tuition freezes didn't affect us. I see these shifts in the public institutions, and that in itself is a challenge for musical theatre education across the board. Because what we do isn't just about a pipeline of professional performers into the industry. What we do is a deeper education and appreciation for performing arts. Every one of these programs is not just pumping out professional actors. We're pumping out future producers, stage managers, people who move back to their hometown and open a studio. Even, you know, we've got alumni who've gone on to a career in academia. And I'm sure that the way they present at conferences is directly related to what they learned in theater school. And particularly, I think most importantly, what we create in these programs is future performing arts teachers who go back into the K to 12 public school system and they're out there making a musical happen with nothing but duct tape and a bit of glitter and fostering each future generation's love of this art.

PROGRAM SUCCESSES AND LOOKING AHEAD

TAHIRIH: *What excites you most about the future of musical theatre education in Canada? Are there any recent success stories you would like to share?*

KYLE: I see our students leaning into energy, activism, and empathy, and it reminds me how powerfully artists can shape change. It reaffirms the importance of the arts—the courage to lean in, be creative, and use our voices. Our students are embracing that, and it's thrilling to witness. Yes, they're training in singing, acting, and dancing, auditioning, booking work, and signing with agents. That's exciting. But beyond individual success, there's a larger story—the power of artists in society. We're seeing, even in high-profile moments like Jimmy Kimmel's removal and reinstatement, how artists can speak truth to power. Theatre and the arts are radical acts. We do what others often fear to do: lean into truth, sit with discomfort, and hold up a mirror to humanity. Watching my students do this—persisting in the face of challenges—is deeply inspiring. It fuels my own commitment to this work.

DANIELLE: Our Applied Performing Arts program nicknamed "Studio Ensemble" provides a very unique advanced training opportunity for emerging professionals and students with prior performing arts training credentials (e.g. post grad). For six months students work as an ensemble with leading industry directors and mentors on all aspects of performing and producing three full-length productions, including one musical. As part of this program, we are also able to offer time for a composer or playwright to workshop a new work with the students, giving them valuable experience and supporting emerging Canadian work. Between productions students spend valued time with guest artists/practitioners leading advance training to enhance the students' skillset. Most important is the opportunity for students to build strong network links with well-established directors, producers, and artists. This program takes the training wheels off and gives time and space for students to excel to a high standard, being seen and supported by leading artists. Graduates from the program have a high success rate of employment in the industry. So, this is quite exciting and something we're very proud of.

DAWN: Audiences are back. Our ticket sales are great. The quality of our applicants have really grown and we're seeing a much more competitive applicant. I'm seeing lots of our graduates on the stages in this community and elsewhere, so that's exciting. I'm seeing our graduates also in administrative positions, making differences in the way theatre is being developed and created and in what's being shown on our stages. I'm seeing lots of our graduates write their own work. That's the best thing.



ERYNN: We have so many alumni everywhere who are doing so many amazing things that I'm so happy for them. We have three alumni in *& Juliet* at Mirvish, which is fantastic. One of them booked the show before graduating [and said,] "Just listen to them [teachers]. It's exactly what they say it is. And like you'll always be scared, and you'll always be nervous. But it turns out what they are teaching you [is] what you need to know." And that was really great for all of us to hear.

BONUS QUESTION

TAHIRIH: *What is your favourite Canadian musical?*

KYLE: *Come From Away*

DANIELLE: *Come From Away* and *Ride The Cyclone*

DAWN: *Come From Away*, *Drowsy Chaperone*, and the works of Jonathan Christenson and Catalyst Theatre.

ERYNN: *Beautiful Scars* by Tom Wilson & Shaun Smyth

FINAL WORDS

In conversation with each leader, it became evident how deeply they value their roles and the immense responsibility they carry in ensuring a fulfilling, high-quality educational experience. Each articulated a clear commitment to creating spaces that centre the students' experience guided by the expertise of leading industry professionals while upholding rigorous educational standards.

The impact of ongoing social and political changes, particularly the federal government's recent changes to the international student permit program, has exacerbated the financial pressures facing Ontario's public training institutions already strained by longstanding provincial underfunding.

Amid these discussions, however, the theme of cultivating resilient students and adaptable performers resonated strongly in this post-pandemic era.

While many of these programs are well-established, each leader expressed palpable excitement about developing new initiatives that encourage students to become creators of original Canadian works. They underscored the importance of students seeing their own stories reflected on stage, and of understanding the complex journey from conception to production. What was especially moving in the deeper conversations with each leader was the shared recognition for greater collaboration and knowledge exchange among institutions. This spirit of mutual learning and collective advocacy could help strengthen the future of musical theatre education nationwide.

It is my hope that this article serves as the beginning of those conversations.



BIOGRAPHY

Tahirih Vejdani (she/her) is a Toronto-based actor, singer, and educator. She teaches in Sheridan College's Bachelor of Musical Theatre Performance program and is an MA candidate in Vocal Pedagogy at the University of Essex and Voice Study Centre. Her research explores evidence-based voice training in musical theatre.

With A Little Help From My Friends

The Two-Year Degree Connection



By Anthony Romeo-Adcock

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When one thinks about musical theatre training in higher education, it is easy to immediately think of a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) program. While other four-year degree programs exist, such as a Bachelor of Music (BM) or a Bachelor of Arts (BA), it is the BFA that comes to mind first and foremost. Some academic scholars have stated there are around 150 Musical Theatre BFA training programs active right now within the United States (Alonso, 2025). However, there are other programs in higher education that also help to train aspiring new musical theatre performers: the Associate degree. Often forgotten, this two-year degree, whether it be an AS (Associate of Science), AA (Associate of Arts), or AFA (Associate of Fine Arts), can help to prepare students for whatever their next steps might be. It is difficult to find an exact number of Associate degrees in musical theatre, but it is safe to say that there are significantly fewer than that of the Bachelor degree training programs (College Factual, 2024).

In preparation of this article, musical theatre and performing arts educators (some wishing to remain anonymous) who instruct in either two-year or four-year degree training programs, as well as a couple of students who graduated from two-year degree programs and successfully transferred to a four-year training program, were interviewed. The purpose was to begin a narrative about the level of importance of two-year degree training programs and the relationship that they have with four-year degree programs.

HOWEVER, THERE ARE OTHER PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION THAT ALSO HELP TO TRAIN ASPIRING NEW MUSICAL THEATRE PERFORMERS: THE ASSOCIATE DEGREE.

MOVING ON

"Traditionally two-year... colleges are really focused on the student who might not know what they want their major to be." Raymond Sage, Head of Voice for Musical Theatre and Head of Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy for the Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance at Indiana University¹ said this about two-year degree programs, and this seems to be the consensus about Associate degrees. He further explained that while this may be what the traditional understanding of a two-year degree is, there has been more conversation at IU about the prospects of accepting additional transfer students. "Part of what the acceptance process would be is trying to determine if that student would come in at a higher level than the normal first year, and where that might be depending on the training that they had and what institution the training was at."

Richard Biever, Associate Professor of Music Theatre, Music Theatre Music Director at Baldwin Wallace University, shared similar sentiments. "There's a little more attention paid to those who are transferring... it's not people applying for the freshman class. That's going to be several hundred, whereas people applying for transfers are going to be much fewer." Richard has a history with transfers from two-year schools, while his time at Nazareth University and now at BW

¹ Raymond Sage is also Professor Emeritus at Pennsylvania State University.





has seen mostly transfers from four-year institutions, when he was faculty at Wichita State University it was a different story. "The majority of the class were transfers from two-year colleges, because around Wichita State, there were probably four two-year colleges."

So, while it appears that proximity is a factor in the AA transfer, it doesn't exclude the students from making that transfer to a bigger school outside of a particular recruitment area, and that audition process can be daunting. Skylar Dowman, a current performer and teaching artist who works out of the state of Florida, was able to make a successful transfer from an AA in Performing Arts from Daytona State College to a BFA in Musical Theatre at Reinhardt University. "When I was in high school, I didn't have the resources to audition and didn't understand the process." The extra time in a two-year training program really helped prepare her for those next steps. "The transfer process was stressful, but so well worth it. Applying academically and artistically was very tedious and could be heartbreaking when you get in one way, but not the other. However, once I found the school I wanted to transfer to, it was so rewarding."

Skylar's comments about not feeling ready for the audition process in high school but finding the ability to complete those steps once completing her Associate degree is a prime example of why some students may decide to complete a two-year degree first.

THE AUDITION SEASON

Skylar is not alone in her plight of not feeling ready for college auditions. It can be overwhelming. College Audition Coaching has become something that is almost required for students to feel competitive in the BFA Musical Theatre College Audition cycle. There are 68 colleges utilizing the Common Musical Theatre Prescreen through Accepted (2025). Other colleges and universities utilize different or unique requirements for their individual programs. The University of Indiana goes to four mass auditions a year that work like a live prescreen. Baldwin-Wallace goes to five separate unified auditions nationwide and then holds a series of in-person auditions. Unified Auditions has 24 schools in three cities across the country ready to receive student auditions (For undergraduate B.F.A. programs..., 2025). According to the Common Musical Theatre Prescreen, if students were to be prepared for all options of videos, they will need to correctly frame and slate a minimum of 3 separate singing auditions, 2 separate monologue auditions, and a minimum of 2 separate dance audition videos (Accepted, 2025). All of this preparation is just to have the ability to get the opportunity to audition for a four-year program.

In contrast, it appears that two-year programs have a less stressful audition process. Russell Franks, Instructor of Musical Theatre at Florida School of the Arts (which offers both an AS in Technical Theatre, Musical Theatre Focus and an AA



in Musical Theatre) stated that their AS and AA programs don't have a prescreen process for their school. They submit their audition either virtually or in person with no prescreen necessary. Prospective students only need to audition on campus if they are interested in receiving a scholarship. Western Wyoming Community College has open enrollment for all majors, so any student can register for the AA in Musical Theatre Degree Program, and be accepted. However, students must audition for scholarships, which could be as much as full tuition to the college.

If a high school junior or senior doesn't have the knowledge of what the expectation is for a college audition season, it is easy to see how the ability to move into a two-year program could be an easy alternative and cost effective. When Carly Cramer², recent graduate of Stephens College with a BFA in Musical Theatre, was asked about why she started at a two-year school (Western Wyoming Community College) before transferring, she had this to say. "Affordability was a big factor. I was also a non-traditional student easing back into school after being in the workforce for a number of years, so a two-year school seemed like a great place to start." She said the transfer process was easy and all her credits were accepted at Stephens. This isn't necessarily the case for all BFA programs. When discussing the viability of transferring to a larger four-year institution, one of the instructors stated, "I think there is a bias... in a BFA program from the faculty that 'I want to train you, I want to be responsible for the artists that you might become', and more than likely, it's going to take three to four years to do that, as opposed to a limited number of two."

² Author's Note: Carly Cramer was a graduate of Western Wyoming Community College before I was employed there.

THE FUTURE

Josh Grisetti, Associate Professor of Musical Theater at California State University, Fullerton, has been extremely vocal about the over-saturation of BFA Musical Theatre programs (Alonzo, 2025). And while we have seen some BFA programs beginning to close down, and in turn that has caused an influx of additional transfer students coming from those schools to other institutions, one begins to ponder what is next for Musical Theatre training in higher education and how these two-year degree programs can help to bolster and grow some of the four-year degrees.

Graduation Numbers

Some of the instructors interviewed have not seen pressure to raise their graduations numbers. "Our BFA Musical Theatre degree is always filled, and our administration is not interested in expanding our BFA MT student capacity," stated one of these professors. Others have not seen this same understanding. Raymond Sage has stated that state minimums have changed the number of students that need to be accepted moving forward. "The goal is to recruit 12 to 14. The state mandate has just gone up to 15 or more. So, we will probably in the next year... up it to between 14 and 16, as opposed to 12 and 14. Which doesn't sound like a big deal, but when you're dealing with one-on-one voice lessons, it's a big deal."

This extends to two-year programs as well. At Western Wyoming Community College, the Musical Theatre degree was at risk of being removed when only eight students over both years were enrolled in the major. Now, two years later, the department consists of 23, which is a heavy load for only two full-time faculty members for the entire degree program.

Educational Accountability

On July 4, 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act passed through Congress. Located in section 84001, Ineligibility Based on Low Earning Outcomes under Subtitle E, is a new provision that may change the musical theatre training program moving forward. This section of the bill states³ that "if the program awards an undergraduate degree... or graduate certificate, for which the median earnings... are... less than the median earnings of a working adult... [that] has only a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent" then federal government funds are not eligible to be used for this degree program, which includes FAFSA (One Big Beautiful Bill Act, 2025).

This requirement that academic programs are reliant on proof of salary post-graduation could pose a significant issue for undergraduate Musical Theatre programs, especially because the bill does not stipulate how students with one degree who transfer to a higher degree program will be calculated. The bill states that census data will be used to prove income. Richard Biever wonders how feasible it will be to track the salary. "The vast majority of the music majors are music [education]. Most of them are going to go out and get jobs. Right away. It's harder to track the regular income of a BM in Musical Theatre [graduate] just because it's not steady." When Raymond Sage was asked if Indiana might be open to more transfer students to help keep enrollment numbers up for graduation to have a bigger pool of graduates to grab data from, he said, "It's possible. It is definitely possible. And I think that you know the only thing you're really looking for in a four-year institution with a BFA program is that they have a certain level of training."

With these new regulations regarding post-graduation income, colleges and universities are now going to need to look at more than just the training being presented to the students, but will also need to be able to defend the salary amount of alumni.

CONCLUSION

The main perception of a two-year degree is that it is for individuals who may not be sure what they want to do in their careers and need a little more time to figure out their future. However, there is also the discussion of finances. Both Skylar and Carly discussed the financial benefits of starting at a two-year school and transferring to a four-year program after completion of their AA degrees. With these current Associate degrees in Musical Theatre continuing to educate throughout the United States, there needs to be a pipeline for these students to matriculate. Rising pressure from administration for graduation numbers, increased financial burden of tuition at a four-year institution, students leaving programs before completion, and the importance of proving income for your alumni base are all strong reasons to consider the acceptance of transfer students not only from other four-year institutions, but also those who have completed their two-year degree.

While there may be more questions than answers about the future of higher education musical theatre training pro-

³ This is a highly abridged version of what is stated in the bill. I highly encourage you to read this section of the bill yourself to see all of the language and stipulations for this specific subsection on educational accountability.

grams, and hopefully some of those answers will come after July 1, 2026 when the new One Big Beautiful Bill Act provisions take effect, one thing is clear: The passion and desire for the instructors in higher education to do right by their students is evident. And hopefully, we may all get by with a little help from our friends.



BIOGRAPHY

Anthony Romeo-Adcock, Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre with an Emphasis in Dance at Western Wyoming Community College, holds a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction with a Concentration in Theatre Pedagogy from Southeastern Oklahoma State University. He also serves as Performing Arts Department Chair at Western Wyoming Community College.

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SOMETHING ROTTEN! | APRIL 2025
Bing Theatre at the USC School of Dramatic Arts
Photography by Craig Schwartz



SCAFFOLDED APPROACHES TO BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN BEGINNING ACTING STUDENTS

DOI #10.62392/BWRS8091

by **Courtney Corey**

In the acting classroom, confidence goes beyond simply feeling sure of oneself. It is the ability to take risks and trust one's instincts, allowing actors to fully inhabit a character in front of others. Confidence also involves comfort with vulnerability and the willingness to make choices without fear of judgment. When mistakes happen, students learn to stay present rather than retreat, understanding that missteps are a natural part of the creative process. Developing confidence in acting means engaging in exploration, whether through emotion, movement, or voice, and doing so with a sense of intention. Students use their bodies and voices to communicate a character's truth and begin to build resilience when a scene or choice doesn't land the way they hoped. This resilience supports fuller participation in ensemble work and encourages open, generous collaboration. Confidence is crucial to the classroom because it allows students to engage fully, learn from one another, and grow as performers in a safe, supportive environment. Ultimately, it is about embracing uncertainty and showing up authentically, turning vulnerability into creative expression.

Building confidence in beginning acting students requires more than teaching craft. It requires seeing the whole student. In the acting classroom, students embark on a journey that moves them from tentative first steps to the thrill of fully inhabiting their stories in front of an audience of peers. A scaffolded approach lays the groundwork, beginning with trust-building and gradually guiding them toward confident public expression. Each phase is designed to ease fear and normalize vulnerability, creating a space where risk-taking is celebrated and discovery is at the heart of learning. Here, the classroom becomes more than a rehearsal space. It becomes a laboratory for creativity, a stage for experimentation, and a sanctuary where students can ultimately find their own voices.

Last year, I began tracking students' confidence growth to see whether the work we do in class truly has the impact I hope for. In the first week of THEA 115 Acting for Non-Majors, beginning acting students articulate their goals for the semester in a 150-word written statement. For most students, building confidence stands out as one of their greatest goals in ways such as:

- "Speaking out, even when I'm scared to do so."
- "Finding the courage to speak, let alone perform, in front of crowds and audiences."
- "Gaining the confidence that I didn't have as a child and prove to myself that I can do it."

As the semester unfolds, students submit short, journal-entry style reflections examining their personal journey by documenting their experiences, challenges, insights, and growth in the acting process. These reflections provide a window into each student's experience, allowing me to notice when someone struggles with a particular tool or exercise and respond, either individually or by adjusting the class approach to better support the group. By the final self-evaluation, a remarkable transformation is evident: 100% of students aiming to build confidence describe a newfound sense of empowerment, often describing breakthroughs that ripple far beyond the classroom. Much of this success can be attributed to a four-part scaffolded approach to learning, which gradually builds confidence throughout the semester.

This process begins with Laying the Foundation. In this part of the construction of confidence building, a safe and supportive environment is established, where ensemble games, class agreements, and low-stakes participation build trust and community. In the Framing the Structure phase, students gain tangible tools in voice, movement, character exploration, and text work without the pressure of immediate performance. Once these skills are established, students are invited to expand their comfort zones in the Building Out phase, where gentle risk-taking in partner and small-group settings, supported by feedback structures, prioritizes curiosity and imagination. As students grow, Ownership becomes central. They select material, experiment with style, and take creative risks, developing autonomy as artists with unique voices. By scaffolding confidence in this way, educators not only cultivate resilient performers but also empower students to embrace vulnerability as a source of strength, onstage and beyond.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

One way to build confidence in the acting classroom is to consider the physical and relational dynamics at play between the teacher and the students. Beginning acting students may be new to the craft of acting, but they are not new to storytelling. Each of them carries a lifetime of experiences, memories, and perspectives, full of stories that have shaped who they are. Some may have grown up performing in school plays or youth theatre, while others have engaged in storytelling through sharing family anecdotes, travel adventures, writing, telling jokes, or leading projects. Every student has a personal journey that has led them to this classroom, bringing with them a wealth of narrative insight and imagination. Recognizing that they are already storytellers allows both the teacher and the students to build on what is familiar and a shared human experience. Shifting the focus away from the teacher as the central authority places students at the center of the learning process. By positioning themselves as a *guide* rather than the source of knowledge, the teacher fosters a supportive environment where students feel empowered to take ownership of their learning. Students are no longer passive recipients. They become active agents in their growth, discovering not only how to perform but also how to make choices and tell stories with authenticity and intention. The teacher observes, provides feedback, and intervenes strategically, but the energy of the room comes from the participants' exploration and engagement.

On the first day of class, I invite students to move their chairs into a circle. This simple shift from rows of chairs lined against the back wall to a student-driven circle immediately signals a different kind of classroom: one built on collaboration and shared focus. For the next month, we will spend the majority of our time in this circle configuration, whether in chairs, standing, sitting on the floor, or in smaller breakout circles. Activities in the circle begin with a conversation about students' personal goals for the semester. The prompt "What do you hope to learn?" provides an easy entry point, and



as each student shares, we begin shaping the collective identity of the class. Once we've discussed goals and reviewed the syllabus and course expectations, we turn our attention back to the students, giving each an opportunity to express how they are feeling in the moment. Responses often range from "ready," "energized," or "excited," to "shy" or "nervous." The word *nervous* emerges again and again, opening the door to an early conversation about what it means to feel nervous, and why embracing that vulnerability is not only normal but essential to the acting process.

I ask, "What does nervousness feel like?" This question always opens the floodgates, one that even the quietest voices in the room are eager to answer. Nearly everyone wants to contribute, describing the ways their bodies betray them when nerves take hold. Typical responses include:

- "Nervousness makes me feel hot. My head feels hot."
- "My hands get sweaty. Even my feet!"
- "I have a hard time breathing."
- "I feel dizzy. Nauseous, even."

Then, we discuss what nervousness actually is. Nervousness is the body's way of telling us we are about to do something awesome. It is a natural physical and emotional response to a situation where there is perceived risk and uncertainty. It is perfectly normal to feel nervous the first few days of a beginning acting class. I would expect it. Once we have this conversation, I can sense the class communally exhale and now I know we are ready to get started.

The Foundations phase is primarily focused on developing a consistent warmup routine and participating in improvisation exercises and games inspired by Viola Spolin, a theatre practitioner who designed theatre games to naturally teach the rules of theatre. My goals for this phase are for students to have fun, connect with one another, and cultivate a sense of trust within the classroom. We begin creating our warmup routine on the second day of class. I ask the students, "What does your body need to feel ready to act?" Their answers culminate in a warmup that includes:

- Increasing the heart rate to deliver more oxygen to the muscles
- An articulation of the full spine
- Stretching large muscle groups such as the hamstrings, gluteals, and quadriceps
- Mobilizing key joints, such as the hips and shoulders
- Activating the parasympathetic nervous system to reduce fight/flight/freeze responses
- Practicing intentional deep breathing
- Stretches for the neck, jaw, and facial muscles
- Engaging in vocal exercises to warm up and strengthen the voice

Over the years, my diverse life experiences have shaped a unique warmup toolkit, drawing on practices from dance, Pilates, yoga, swimming, fencing, martial arts, rock climbing, shiatsu, and singing. My students bring their own experiences as well, enriching the process. Together, we create a warmup that meets the needs of each individual while supporting the group as a whole. Each day, we begin in a circle and over the first month, the warmup evolves. First, I lead without music, focusing on connection and presence. Then, music is introduced, helping students explore movement and imagination. Next, we scatter across the room, practicing the warmup individually as we would on a rehearsal day. By the end of the month, we return to the circle, with each student leading one element, fostering leadership, ownership, and confidence within the ensemble.

As we lay a concrete foundation for learning, we explore the work of Viola Spolin. Her book, *Improvisation for the Theater*, changed the way acting is taught in the United States, and her methods, discoveries, and writing directly shaped the modern improvisational theatre movement.

She wrote, “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise.” I echo her philosophy in that we learn through experiencing. Spolin was an early pioneer in decentering the classroom away from the teacher and placing focus on the students as agents of learning. Spolin suggested that “anyone who wishes to play in the theater” can learn to become “stageworthy” (Spolin). So, this is how much of our time in the Foundations phase is spent: by playing.

Each semester, I rotate through different games in the Spolin canon (Spolin et al., 2000), all of which follow a similar scaffolded sequence:

- Non-verbal exercises done in the circle, such as Pass the Clap or Energy Ball
- Verbal exercises done in the circle, such as One-Word Story
- Non-verbal partner exercises done in breakout circles that focus on concentration such as the Mirror Exercise
- Verbal partner exercises done in a spotlight circle that focus on teamwork and shared experiences such as Yes, Lets!
- Verbal partner exercises done in a spotlight circle that center on adaptability and spontaneity such as Space Jump

In the Foundations phase, we gradually reshape the structure of the classroom. We begin in a full circle, where all participants, including the teacher, are equally positioned. From there, we move to breakout circles, smaller groups of four to six participants, and eventually to a spotlight circle, in which a few participants take the center while observers remain on the perimeter. Even as observers, students stay actively engaged. After each game, I ask them, “What did you experience?” This keeps the entire group involved in the activity at all times and introduces a system for responding to performance, which we will explore more deeply in the next phase of learning. See Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3.

FRAMING THE STRUCTURE

“This house has good bones.” It sounds like something a realtor might say, but I also think of beginning actors this way. As I discussed in the Foundations phase, we are already storytellers. In the Framing the Structure phase, I build on that idea by highlighting the incredible instruments we already possess: our bodies, minds, and voices, which allow us to tell our stories. Our skeletons are remarkable, designed to stand upright, respond to gravity, and move through space. Some students may need additional support, such as a power chair or wheelchair, which itself is an amazing invention that enables movement in new ways. Our brains think in diverse ways through a variety of intelligences and learning styles, and our voices give us the power to express ourselves fully. Every actor enters the room already equipped with extraordinary means for creation.

In the Framing the Structure phase, we begin intentionally adding new skills to our acting toolkit. My hope is that by the end of the semester, actors leave with a comprehensive toolkit rather than just a basic set of tools. This allows them to

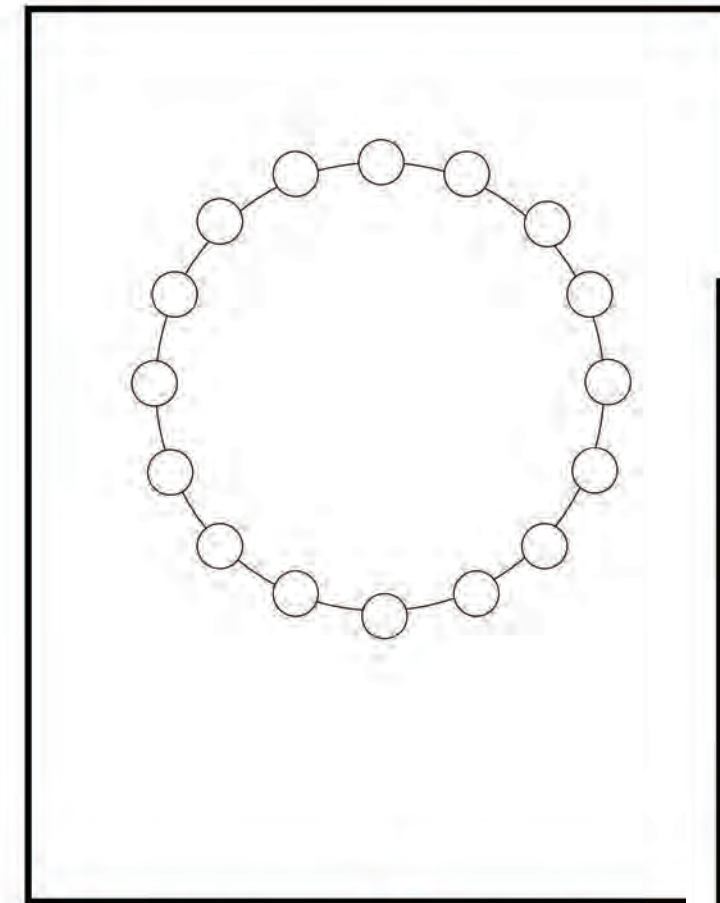


Figure 1-1.
Students and Teacher (participate and observe) positioned in a CIRCLE.

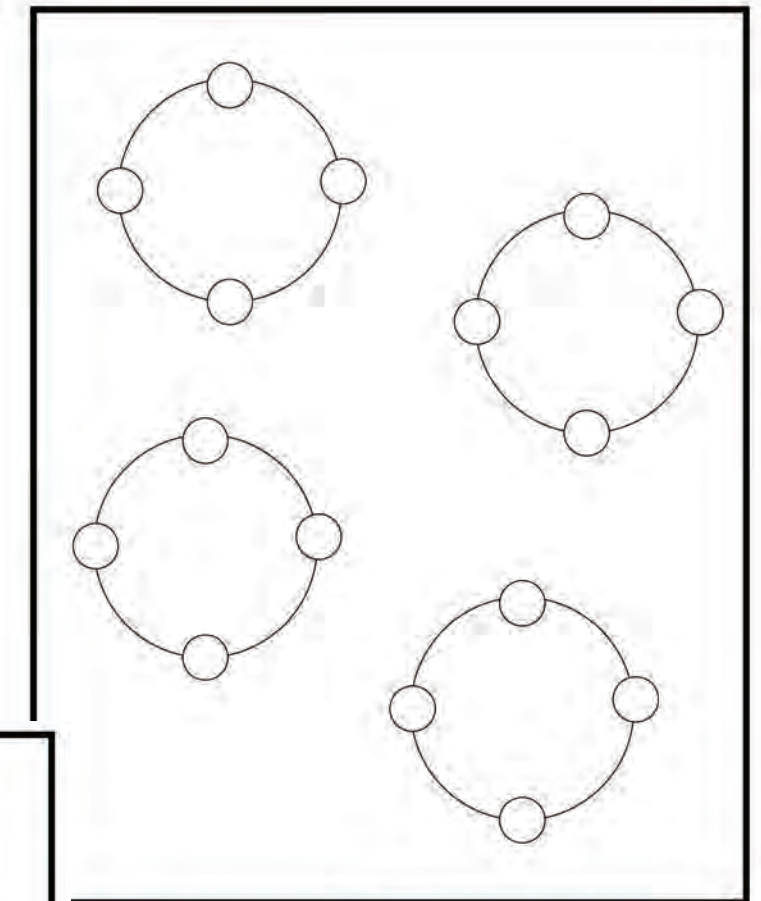


Figure 1-2.
Students (participate and observe) positioned in BREAKOUT CIRCLES.

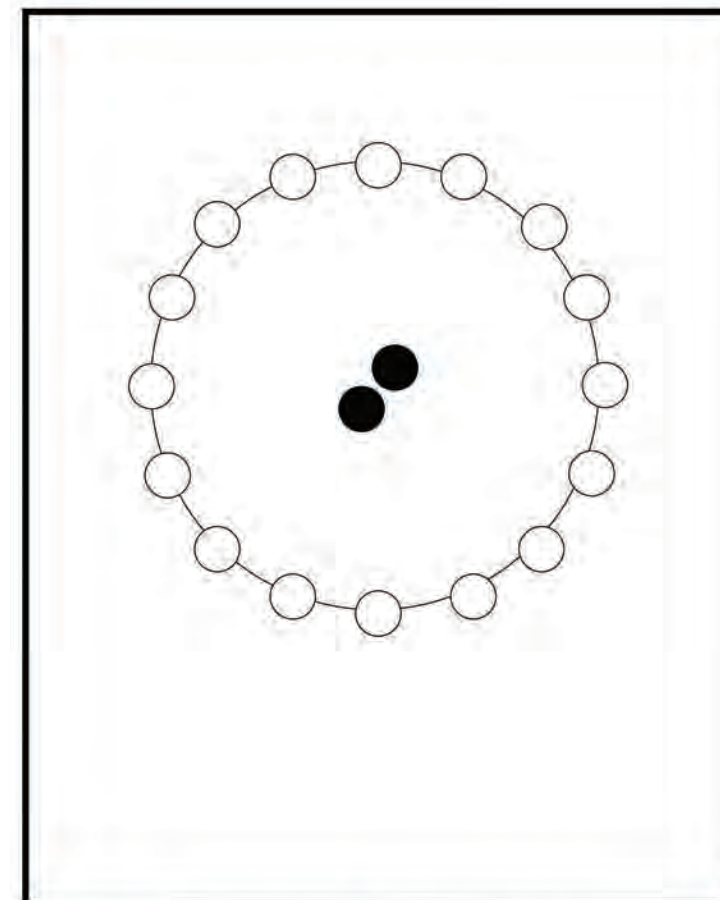


Figure 1-3.
Participants (black) and Observers (white) in a SPOTLIGHT CIRCLE.



Pictured Above: Courtney Corey with student Bobby Cone



Pictured Above: Students Quetzal Alcaraz, Harper Nooney, and Katie Emily



Pictured Above: Students Harper Nooney and Katie Emily

build on the foundation they already have, much like caring for and improving the first house they own, and equips them to face creative challenges with confidence. In the second month of class, new ideas are introduced such as:

- Viewpoints, originated by Mary Overlie and expanded by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau (Bogart & Landau, 2014)
- Sanford Meisner's *Repetition Exercise* (Meisner et al., 2019)
- Rudolf Laban's *Eight Efforts* (Laban & Ullmann, 2011)

With Viewpoints, which outline a physical vocabulary for actors, students explore the nine core principles:

- Time-Based Viewpoints
 1. Tempo—The speed of movement or action.
 2. Duration—How long a movement or action lasts.
 3. Kinesthetic Response—How an actor reacts physically to another's movement or stimuli.
 4. Repetition—Repeating a movement, gesture, or phrase to explore emphasis, rhythm, or meaning.
- Space-Based Viewpoints
 5. Spatial Relationship—The distance and interaction between objects or actors in space.
 6. Shape—The contour, form, or body shapes created in space.
 7. Gesture—Small (*personal*) or large (*communicative*) physical actions.
 8. Architecture—Awareness of the environment and how the actor moves through or interacts with it.
 9. Topography—The path, floor pattern, or design of movement through the space.

Through this exploration, students gain nine practical tools that draw on vocabulary they already know in everyday life, now transformed into instruments for theatrical creation. By discovering how to apply these principles in the world of theatre-making, these words become more than abstract concepts. They become sturdy, reliable tools actors can use throughout the semester and beyond.

We then move on to Sanford Meisner's Repetition Exercise (Meisner et al., 2019), a tool designed to develop actors' spontaneity, listening, and truthful emotional responses. Here's how the exercise is typically structured:



Simple Observation:

- Two actors face each other.
- One makes an objective observation about the other such as “You have brown eyes.”
- The other actor responds with a reflective statement such as “I have brown eyes.”
- This statement is repeated back and forth between the two actors, many times.
- I mention that the repetition for this statement might become tedious or frustrating.
- This desire to change the statement arises from that initial frustration, and over time we introduce the idea of adjusting the statement whenever the impulse or need for change naturally arises. A natural change might be, “You have *blue* eyes.”

Focus on Behavior and Emotion:

- The repetition continues, but actors are encouraged to notice small shifts in behavior, tone, or expression.
- Observations often evolve naturally as actors respond to each other’s changes.
- As this happens, we gently move into more subjective statements such as “you’re scowling” or “you crossed your arms” or “your jaw is tense.”

Incorporating Emotional Truth:

- As the exercise develops, the repetition begins to reflect emotional responses rather than just words.
- This flows fully into more subjective statements, or even questions, such as “you have a nice smile” or “why do you look angry?”
- Actors focus on reacting truthfully to what is happening in the moment, rather than planning or performing.

This work unfolds over two to three class sessions. Once we begin using more subjective language, I remind actors of our week-one class expectations: this is a safe, supportive space to practice our craft. While hateful language is certainly discouraged, I acknowledge that this work requires a heightened level of vulnerability. At the conclusion of the exercise, we take a moment to breathe, physically shake off the work, and offer gratitude to both our partner and ourselves for the exploration.

A common concern among actors, one that often leaves them feeling uncertain is, “What do I do with my hands?” To address this, I introduce Rudolf Laban’s Eight Efforts (Laban & Ullmann, 2011), a methodology that transforms movement into expressive storytelling. By examining different combinations of Weight, Time, Space, and Flow, performers can create eight distinct actions: Punch, Slash, Dab, Flick, Press, Wring, Glide, and Float. These actions enable them to convey emotion, develop character, and communicate intention with clarity and nuance.

We begin by exploring each concept individually. Seated in a circle, students experiment with how to physicalize a Slash or vocalize a Punch. Gradually, we stand and move, integrating the Eight Efforts into larger patterns, eventually navigating the room while exploring all the concepts together. Though we are not physically touching, we remain deeply connected, responding to each other’s energy and presence. Next, I introduce short, open scenes of no more than four lines, giving students the opportunity to experiment with a script while supporting the text through the Eight Efforts. These lines are deliberately brief and neutral in terms of gender and age, allowing students to play and explore without feeling overwhelmed and to bring movement and intention into their text-based work.

During this second month of work, I continue to explore the classroom’s physical structures, moving seamlessly from exercises in a circle, to exercises in breakout circles, and then to a spotlight circle. I also introduce a formation where observers create a closed arch with the participants positioned at the apex. This prepares them for the next phase of class where observers assume a more traditional audience role in rows of chairs and participants will “take the stage” in front of them. Observers are consistently encouraged to stay actively engaged, participating in scaffolded discussions that build on the tools they have been developing. For example, when two actors engage in a Meisner Repetition Exercise, I might invite observers to notice spatial relationships through a Viewpoints lens or gestures through Laban’s Eight Efforts. Over time, rather than directing attention to specific elements, I pose questions like, “What did you experience?” Observers then respond naturally, drawing on the tools they have acquired. For example: “I noticed how the tempo shifted when the statements became more subjective during the Repetition Exercise.” As students begin to easily integrate acting vocabulary into conversation, they build confidence in themselves as artists. See Figure 1.4.

BUILDING OUT

By the third month, actors are eager to dive into scripts, building on the playful exploration of open scenes at the close of

the second month. Their excitement isn't just enthusiasm: it's readiness. The confidence they've cultivated over the past weeks gives them the assurance to take on more challenging material, stepping into performance with curiosity and agency rather than being pushed into a situation they feel unprepared to handle. In this Building Out phase, actors are ready to expand their craft, standing on the solid foundation of confidence they've built and using the tools they have acquired. It is here that I introduce two more approaches to acting and art making:

- Uta Hagen's *The Six Steps* (Hagen & Frankel, 2023)
- Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process* (Lerman, 2025)

One of the most influential acting teachers of the 20th century, Uta Hagen developed The Six Steps to help actors analyze a role with depth and intention. Her framework encourages clarity in performance and invites actors to anchor their work in believable human behavior. Each question opens a different doorway into the character, revealing motivations, situational pressures, and the emotional currents that shape the role. The Six Steps are:

1. Who am I?—Understanding the character's present state of being, self-perception, and how they present themselves to the world.
2. What are the circumstances?—Establishing the historical, seasonal, and temporal context of the scene.
3. What are my relationships?—Exploring the character's relationships with other characters, objects, and circumstances.

4. What do I want?—Identifying the character's objectives and immediate needs in a scene.
5. What is my obstacle?—Examining the conditions, facts, and contextual forces that stand in the way of the character's goals.
6. What do I do to get what I want?—Determining the actions and tactics the character uses to pursue their goals.

I divide the class into small groups and offer each a short selection of scenes to choose from. While I encourage students to memorize their scenes, I never require it. Many have never tackled scene work before, much less memorization. Instead, I ask them to become as familiar as possible with the text. The scenes are intentionally brief, so no one feels overwhelmed. Once groups have made their selections, we dive into The Six Steps, with the actors asking the questions themselves and discovering the answers through exploration and discussion, rather than me directing them. While seemingly simple, the questions create an entry point to profound exploration for actors. This process of inquiry and experimentation is at the heart of the Building Out phase, where actors take creative risks and begin to find their own voices within the work.

We spend several weeks developing these scenes, first in breakout groups without an "audience," and eventually in front of the full class. Once every group has had the chance to share their work for the first time, I return to a guiding question from throughout the semester: "What did you experience?" This question sparks a richer conversation about critical response, building on the active engagement students have practiced since day one, both as participants and as observers. We now take this exploration further by formally introducing and implementing Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, which provides a clear, supportive framework for giving and receiving feedback (Lerman). This structured approach has four components:

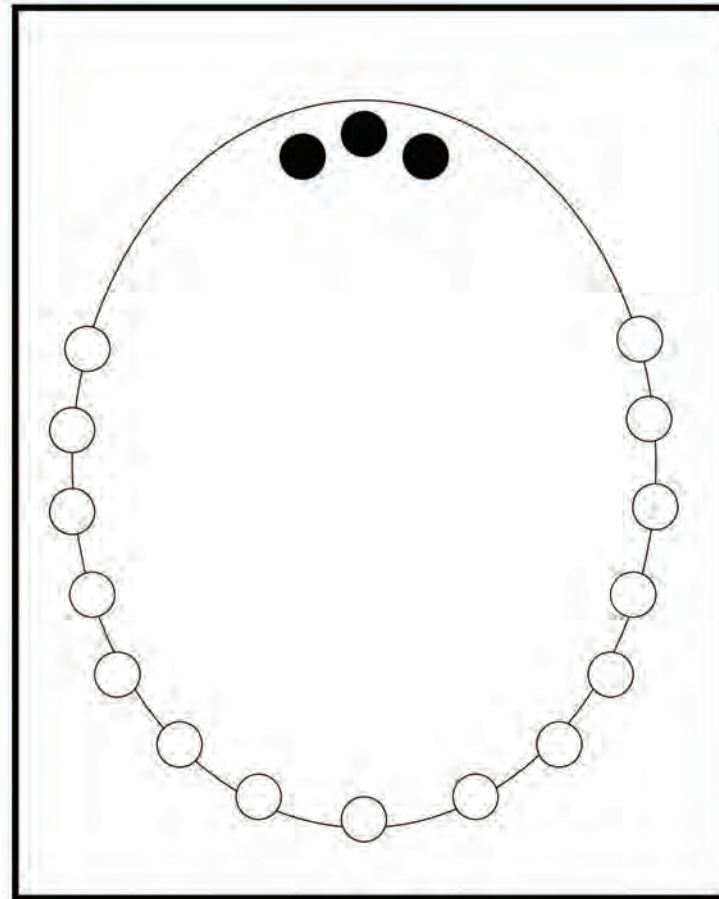


Figure 1-4
Participants (black) at the apex of a CLOSED ARCH as
Observers (white) form an audience.

1. Who am I?
2. What are the circumstances?
3. What are my relationships?
4. What do I want?
5. What is my obstacle?
6. What do I do to get what I want?

- Step 1.** Statements of Meaning—Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work they have just witnessed.
- Step 2.** Artist as Questioner—The artist asks questions about the work. In answering, responders stay on topic with the question and may express opinions in direct response to the artist's questions.
- Step 3.** Neutral Questions—Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them.
- Step 4.** Opinion Time—Responders state opinions, subject to permission from the artist. The usual form is "I have an opinion about _____, would you like to hear it?" The artist has the option to say no.

By regularly applying Lerman's process, students learn not only to observe, but to reflect, articulate, and provide thoughtful, constructive feedback, deepening both their understanding of the work and their confidence in discussing it. At this stage, we move beyond the roles of "participant" and "observer" and step into the expanded identities of "artist" and "responder."

OWNERSHIP

Like receiving the keys to a first home, students in this fourth and final month of the semester are ready to step fully into ownership of their craft. They have built a foundation brick by brick and now have the tools and confidence to inhabit their artistry in a way that feels personal and authentic. This phase circles back to the foundational truth that they are all storytellers, but now they return to that idea with greater awareness, richer vocabulary, and an expanded sense of what it means to create.

Here, creative autonomy is not imposed but emerges naturally from the scaffolded structure that has shaped the class. Students begin to recognize themselves not merely as learners practicing techniques, but as artists with distinct voices and perspectives worthy of being heard. For many, this transformation is profound. What once felt intimidating, such as speaking up in discussion or standing before their peers, now becomes an opportunity approached with curiosity and courage. Supported by the confidence they have steadily built, they are ready to step into the spotlight as artists claiming their space. At this point, monologues become the focal point, giving students the space to embody a character, assert their creativity, and perform with presence before an audience.

Students take all the tools they have acquired throughout the semester and apply them to their monologues, choosing for themselves which techniques best serve their work. Whether it's exploring gestures through Laban's Eight Efforts or grounding a performance in Hagen's The Six Steps, they have the autonomy to select and integrate tools in a way that aligns with their artistic process. But, there is one final step in their journey. It is here that I share with the students different memorization tools such as:

- **Chunking**—Dividing lines into smaller, manageable sections or "chunks" focusing on memorizing one chunk at a time before moving on. This helps reduce overwhelm and makes recall easier, because the brain can process smaller units more efficiently.
- **Repetition**—Repeatedly saying the lines out loud, writing them down, or performing them in context reinforces memory. Repetition strengthens neural pathways, making recall more automatic. Actors often combine this with physical movement or gestures, which helps anchor lines through muscle memory.
- **Memory Palace**—A mnemonic technique that helps you memorize information by associating it with specific physical locations in an imagined or familiar space. The idea is to "place" pieces of information in different rooms or locations in your mind and then mentally walk through that space to recall them.

Not every memorization technique works for every student, which is why I introduce three distinct approaches. In this final month of class, students are expected to fully memorize their monologues, confidently supported by the tools they've developed over the semester and empowered to choose the methods that work best for them. This is a moment where autonomy, skill, and creativity converge, allowing each student to take full ownership of their performance. Once memorized, each student has the opportunity to take stage in the classroom and present their monologue on two or three different occasions. This process allows for the whole class to engage in critical response and allows each actor to continue to refine their work using their most trusted tools. This final month is both a culmination and a launching point, a moment for students to recognize how far they have come and to glimpse what might be possible as they continue to build on this work beyond the classroom.

The scaffolded approach to teaching beginning acting students demonstrates that confidence is not an innate trait, but a skill that can be cultivated through intentional practice, reflection, and guided exploration. From laying the foundation with trust-building exercises and warm-ups, to framing the structure with tools like Viewpoints, Meisner Repetition, and Laban's Eight Efforts, to building out and finally taking ownership of their work, students progress through a carefully designed arc that supports both skill acquisition and personal growth. At each stage, the classroom becomes a space for experimentation, risk-taking, and creative inquiry where vulnerability is normalized and celebrated.

By the final month, students are no longer tentative participants. They emerge as autonomous artists with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to make choices, inhabit roles, and tell their stories authentically and effectively. They are equipped not only to perform, but to observe, reflect, and engage critically with the work of themselves and their peers. The end of semester written reflections come pouring in with words of students' newfound confidence:

"I have so much more confidence about my acting process now that I have been equipped with a tool belt of skills to call upon from our lectures and practice."

"My goals and takeaway for the future are to be yourself, go with your gut, and have fun with the process!"

"I feel more confident and comfortable with the acting process and with myself."

"I feel more confident in myself and my abilities."

"I'm really glad I have a tool belt that I can now use if I want to audition for a show."

"I have never been taught methods to reflect, analyze emotions, thoughts, and speak or act them out, until this class. This class has helped in the healing process, but it also excites me to learn how to create a space and do the same for the communities I am part of. I would have never guessed that theatre could do that."

Ultimately, this scaffolded model illustrates that building confidence in acting is about more than technique. It is about empowering students to discover and claim their artistic voices, developing resilience, agency, and self-assurance that extend far beyond the walls of the classroom. This approach not only nurtures performers but also cultivates individuals who can step into the world with a grounded sense of purpose and possibility. It is my profound joy to see them leave class on the last day of the semester carrying themselves differently, aware of their growth and ready to meet whatever comes next.



BIOGRAPHY

Courtney is an MFA Musical Theatre candidate at San Diego State University. One of *San Diego Magazine's* "50 People to Watch," she is the founder of Theatre Arts School of San Diego. Courtney performed the roles of Elphaba in *Wicked* and Maureen in the original tours of *Rent*.

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MONOLOGUES from Musicals for Musical Theatre Program Auditions

A proposal by David W. Eggers

DOI #10.62392/ZAQO2378

As a tenure-track assistant professor in the musical theatre program at the University of Utah, I have had the pleasure of attending several rounds of musical theatre program auditions: days of auditions on our campus for prospective local students, Utah State Unifields, New York Unifields, and Pittsburgh Unified Auditions. Because I am not our main recruiter—that would be our esteemed musical theatre area head, the remarkable Erin Farrell Speer, who is in charge of our recruiting—I only participate from time to time as needed, or when we host our local Utah Unifields. Still, I have seen enough college auditions, hundreds at this point, that I feel compelled to begin a discussion regarding the monologue component of the auditions we invite students to do for our musical theatre programs.

While in these auditions, eagerly looking for dynamic candidates for our next cohort, and rooting for each student as they take to the front of the room, it seems material choice is frequently the trickiest factor in students' success. For the songs, if too obscure, the adjudicators are often left scratching their heads, wondering, "What was that?" instead of focusing on potential skills and performance. If the song is too common, overdone, or well-known, adjudicators are likely to be dismissive, quickly tuning out and lumping those students into a crowded pile of "Thank you, next." The familiar, but



not presented too frequently, well-performed songs seem to be the standouts, and many students succeed in finding this material. However, it is their choice of monologues for the monologue component of their auditions, which is sometimes optional but more often required, that musical theatre students seem to struggle with the most.

MUSICAL THEATRE COMMON PRESREEN

If you are not familiar with the Accepted Musical Theatre Common Prescreen (MTCP), it was launched in 2019 after Paper Mill Playhouse, a Tony Award® recognized regional theatre with significant education and training programs, held conversations with key musical theatre college programs and partnered with the online arts platform Accepted, to create universal criteria for college musical theatre program auditions. Initially, this guide was used only for MT programs to standardize their pre-screening requirements, before inviting students to audition for their programs, but because the guide covers the fundamentals any program audition would likely need, it has been adopted by nearly all college MT programs, streamlining their audition requirements and language, whether they pre-screen or not.

Thus the Accepted Musical Theatre Common Prescreen (<https://getaccepted.com/musical-theater-common-prescreen>), which nearly all students preparing for college musical theatre auditions end up adhering to, states the following for monologues, allowing schools to specify if they will expect Options A, B, or C:

Monologue Requirements

Option A

- One monologue from a published play or written by a professional writer. (A professional writer is someone whose plays have been produced, but may not have been professionally published.)

Option B

- One contemporary monologue (typically written after 1950) from a published play or written by a professional writer. (A professional writer is someone whose plays have been produced, but may not have been professionally published.)

AND

- One classical monologue (typically written before 1950) from a published play or written by a professional writer. Classical monologues should have heightened language. (*Heightened language often has poetic elements as found in Shakespeare. However, it may also include Molière, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Kyd, Aristophanes, August Wilson, Tony Kushner, Suzan-Lori Parks, Mike Bartlett, George the Poet, Andrea Gibson, or contemporary adaptations of classical plays that still utilize heightened language.*)

Option C

- No monologue required.

At last look, only a single college on the list of schools using the Musical Theatre Common Prescreen for pre-screening selected Option C for their audition requirements. All other schools selected Option A or B for perspective students. This means almost every single student planning to audition for and hoping to be admitted to a musical theatre program is preparing at least one, but likely two monologues.

Navigating through the detailed pre-screen monologue requirements language, students find both specific and supportive guidance. I suspect the stipulation that the monologue be, “from a published play or written by a professional writer;” was added to prevent students from choosing texts from film/TV or from writing or improvising their own texts. I find the age-appropriate *Monologue Tip* to be of tremendous benefit to these young students, many of whom may be seeking and preparing a monologue audition for the first time. Additionally, I agree that active monologues, with clear needs that take

place in real time, tend to be more effective in these auditions, as are monologues that do not demand extreme emotional states.

However, when our nervous, anxious, hopeful future musical theatre students read the above MTCP guidance, they take the specific words in the instructions quite literally and begin searching for one or two monologues, each one “from a published play” or “written by a professional writer.”

“From a published play,” to students who do not want to accidentally break the rules or be disqualified when they step in front of the room to do their college audition, means quite literally *from a play*.

These students are, in most cases, already deeply devoted to and heavily invested in musical theatre. They often live, breathe, and sleep musicals—studying their scores, listening to their recordings, following and engaging with the social media accounts of currently performing musicals and favorite musical theatre actors, checking the shows’ websites, looking for their “slime tutorial” videos, catching all their press performances, following Tony Awards® buzz and awaiting the telecast, getting up early for the MACY’S THANKSGIVING DAY PARADE® performances, and attending or participating in all the live musical theatre they possibly can at their high schools, in their local communities, and beyond, whenever they can.

These students are consistently and constantly demonstrating a tremendous amount of passion and devotion to a complex, rich, established art form unto itself: musical theatre. To them, the requirement to find a monologue “from a play,” means they have to abandon all of that which they are already devoted to; it means they have to ignore everything they are deeply passionate about and fully immersed in, the world of musical theatre, to venture into parts unknown, into the world of “straight plays” to find one or two acceptable monologues.

Yes, as educators, we would love to encourage our musical theatre students to eventually become familiar with as many classic, standard, and contemporary plays as possible, by numerous well-known playwrights, such as Sam Shepard, Harold Pinter, Anton Chekov, Neil LaBute, Oscar Wilde, Martin McDonagh, Tennessee Williams, Suzan-Lori Parks, Edward Albee, David Mamet, Lynn Nottage, Paula Vogel, and many others. However, at this point in their early development, most students end up stumbling through the task of finding a monologue from a play, and in the process, likely suffer through much anxiety, insecurity, and imposter syndrome.

Monologue Tips

- *It is recommended to choose monologues that are age-appropriate (generally within 5-10 years of your actual age) and that feel authentic to your culture, background, and lived experience.*
- *Active monologues are often better for auditions; an active monologue takes place in real time and focuses on what you want and puts you in direct communication with an imaginary scene partner. This is often more successful in an audition situation than pieces that are a story or remembrance. Additionally, it can be helpful to avoid monologues that rely on extreme emotions as it can be hard to believably justify those responses in a short piece.*



Since the MTCP guidance does not explicitly state that “a published play” would include a published musical libretto, most of our musical theatre students do not know or realize that they could choose a monologue from a musical, and that auditioning with a monologue from a musical libretto would be acceptable (or that it may even be a welcome relief!). It probably never occurs to most of them to even look in published musical librettos. All they know is that they have to find one or two *play* monologues, to be able to audition for the *musical theatre programs* they want to get into.

Instead of drawing from some of the knowledge they already have or looking further into the area they wish to study and work within (and demonstrating, as best they can, their potential in musical theatre within the monologue portion of their auditions), they often end up attempting monologues from play texts they know little about or have barely studied, severely exposing their lack of knowledge about the world of “straight plays.” These admirable but frequently misguided attempts often result in choosing play texts that deal with advanced extreme emotional depth, or inappropriately mature themes or characters, or challenging heightened language (which is admittedly unavoidable for Option B of the MTCP).

Completely lost, overwhelmed, and uncertain where to begin searching for achievable and appropriate monologues from plays, it seems many students all but abandon the effort by resorting instead to making quick choices from a few seconds of internet searching for “monologues for teenage boys,” or “good monologues for young adult women.” The sites most frequently visited, with the highest number of hits or traffic lead to the same limited lists and recommendations that result in yet another student spending valuable hours, effort, and money coaching and working up the “cancer dancer” monologue from *Dance Nation*, by Clare Barron, or Allegra’s monologue from *Pretty Theft* by Adam Szymkowitz. While these are wonderfully well-written plays, these example monologues and many others like them have become but low-hanging internet fruit, and are thus, overdone (quite common and therefore mostly forgettable) at theatre program auditions.

Musical Librettos

What if, instead, the Common Prescreen monologue requirements stated that the monologue text “must be from a published play, musical libretto, or written by a professional writer”? It would tell musical theatre students a monologue from a musical is acceptable; it would communicate that finding a monologue from a musical is possible (an idea that many students and teachers alike may not have considered); it would give permission to these students to stay within their area of passion and interest; and it would acknowledge that audition-worthy and acting-worthy monologues exist in musical librettos.

Additionally, it may alleviate some of the stress, challenges, and anxiety that comes with navigating college program auditions. Imagine if students had the freedom to look at roles in shows from the canon they were already familiar with and wish to work in, study, and portray. By tapping into some of their current knowledge and using some of their current strengths, this could lessen some of the challenges of preparing program auditions, decrease some of the potential “imposter syndrome,” increase confidence, and enable more students to put their best foot forward in their auditions, all of which aligns with the original intent behind the creation of the Accepted Musical Theatre Common Prescreen.

I realize it may not even occur to most teachers, coaches, or students that there could be monologues within musical librettos. We naturally assume that songs, especially the “I want” type of songs, tend to function in place of what would likely be a musical character’s monologue. This is a logical assumption, but I can assure you from extensive research that there are plenty of well-written monologues within musicals throughout all the decades of musical theatre.



Ava Neudeck '28
University of Utah Musical Theatre Program student



Mason McCarthy '28
University of Utah Musical Theatre Program student

Students could work on and bring in Alison from *Fun Home*, Cornelius from *Hello, Dolly!*, or Jerusha from *Daddy Long Legs*. They could bring in Laurie from *Oklahoma*, Matt or Luisa from *The Fantasticks*, or any number of characters from *A Chorus Line* or *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Or they could bring in deeper cuts like Ursula from *Bye, Bye Birdie*, Violet from *Violet*, Isle from *Spring Awakening*, Samuel Byck from *Assassins*, or dozens and dozens of others.

Beyond the direct impact on students, the consequences of programs requiring monologues be from *plays only* are that it inadvertently delegitimizes the writing in musical theatre librettos, and by extension, silently adds to a persistent stigmatization of *acting in musicals*.

First, let’s consider the writing. Incredible writers have penned books for musicals throughout the decades and many of these writers also wrote plays. Look at the many librettos written by Neil Simon: *Sweet Charity*, *Little Me*, *Promises, Promises*, *They’re Playing our Song*, and *The Goodbye Girl*. Arthur Laurents, the author of the plays *The Time of the Cuckoo* and *The Home of the Brave*, also wrote the librettos for *Gypsy*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *West Side Story*, *Do I Hear a Waltz*, *Nick & Nora*, and *Hallelujah, Baby!* Dominique Morisseau, celebrated playwright of more than nine plays already, wrote the book for the musical *Ain’t Too Proud*. Think of some of the famous librettists whom we are ignoring when we exclude books of musicals, like Alan Jay Lerner, Oscar Hammerstein II, Betty Comden, Lyn-Manuel Miranda, James Lapine, Lynn Aherns, George C. Wolfe, Gretchen Cryer, Craig Lucas, Terrance McNally, David Henry Hwang, George Furth, John Weidman, to name but a few!

Second, let’s talk about acting in musicals. The musical titles listed earlier, and dozens, if not hundreds more, contain texts worthy of acting auditions, coaching sessions, and class work. For several years of teaching acting class for our second-year musical theatre students at the University of Utah, I required students to use monologues from musicals for at least one of their pieces. We approached these texts using the same meticulous examinations and acting tools that we utilized on texts from plays. The work was deep, rich, and thoroughly detailed, and the results were honest, compelling, and often moving or hilarious.

When treated as legitimate as work on any play texts or characters, the work on texts and characters in musicals can be just as intricate, detailed, challenging, and rewarding for students. Scoring the text of a monologue from a musical can be as thoroughly specific as scoring the text of a monologue from a play; relationships can be as entangled; and characters can be as fully human. The acting in full productions of musicals can be approached with the same amount of craft, care, attention, and commitment as one may give to acting in a play, and when done so, the work can be every bit as rich.

While musicals obviously require additional techniques and skills for singing and dancing, *acting is acting*, whether it’s in a play or in a musical. Arguably, yes, there have been times in the history of musical theatre in which “more spectacle” was thought to increase commercial value, perhaps overshadowing or even reducing the desire or need for decent acting ability. But

those times and those shows have largely passed, and they have thankfully been eclipsed by many more musicals that require tremendous acting ability. Consider some of the classics as well as some of the more dramatic musical titles, like *Showboat*, *Oklahoma*, *Cabaret*, *Gypsy*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, *A Chorus Line*, *Assassins*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Fun Home*, *The Color Purple*, *Kimberly Akimbo*, *Hadestown*, *Next to Normal*, *Hell's Kitchen*, and this list could go on and on.

Just as acting in a play is not somehow more than acting in a musical, acting in a musical is not somehow less than acting in a play.

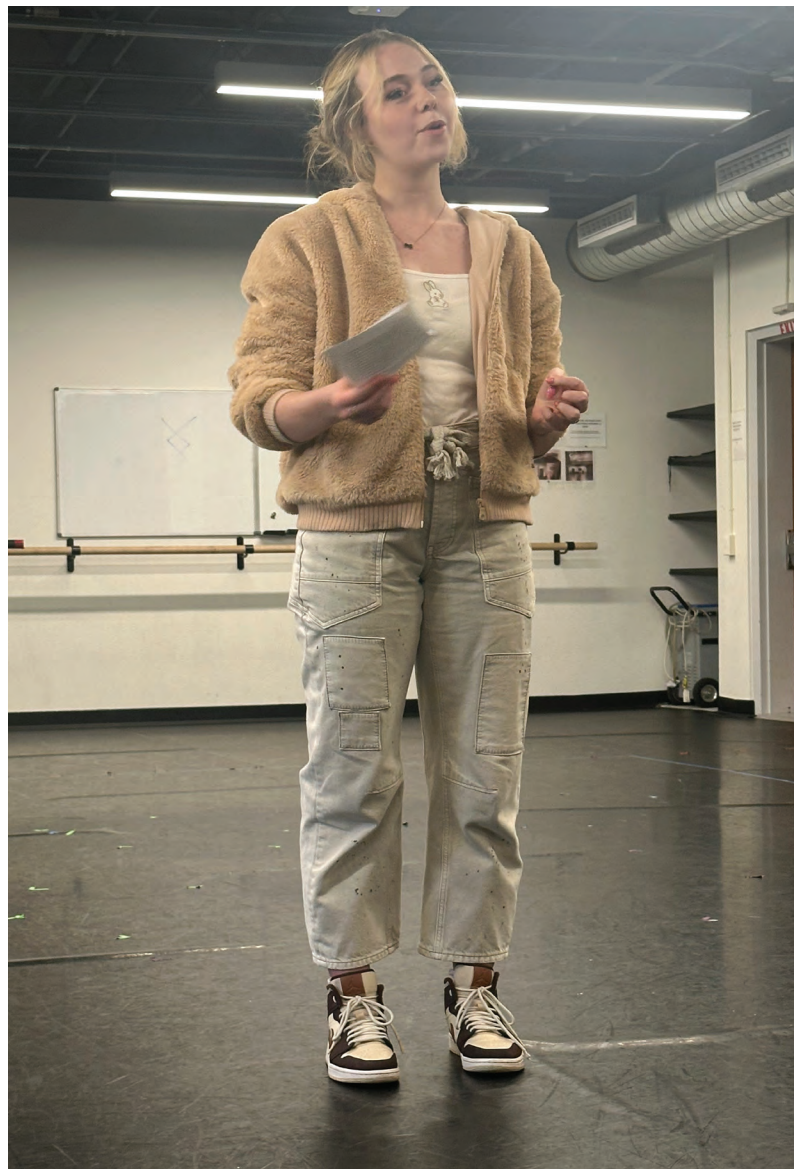
CONCLUSION

Acting is acting. We can do our part by allowing and encouraging our musical theatre students to bring in monologues from musicals to their auditions. As teachers and coaches, we can help legitimize the writing in librettos by selecting and using these texts for our acting classes and coaching sessions with our young musical theatre students. As directors and teachers, we can continue to strengthen the acting in our musicals by giving the acting as much thorough attention as we give to the singing, staging, and choreography. By doing so, we can help refute that acting in musicals is any "less real" than acting in plays. And furthermore, when and if we hear colleagues or students make comments that acting in straight plays is somehow more "real acting," we can ask them to explain what they mean and engage them in a thoughtful conversation.

Let's help our young, aspiring future musical theatre students put their best foot forward in their preparation for and execution of their college program auditions by allowing, encouraging, and supporting them to focus within their area of passion and to use monologues from musicals in their auditions. Once they are in our programs, under our guidance or that of our colleagues, that's when students can expand their knowledge into the world of "straight plays," and playwrights.

My aim with this article is to create a dialogue with fellow MT faculty members. Before finishing the article, I reached out to a few colleagues from various universities, for their thoughts on my proposal and my position. Here is a sampling of the generous contributions I received:

"Many musicals feature books written by established playwrights who excel in their craft, often moving fluidly between plays, musical theatre, and film/television. The current language in the musical theatre common prescreen, which requires monologues from published plays or professional writers, was created to help students find quality audition material grounded in context. This approach ensures students can reference the original source for character development, given circumstances, and relationships within the text."



Sophi Keller '28
University of Utah Musical Theatre Program student,
with David W. Eggers, Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre in foreground

Allowing students to select monologues from published musical librettos aligns perfectly with this objective. It provides auditionees the opportunity to work with material they know and are passionate about, while maintaining access to fully realized characters and narratives. Since the Musical Theatre Common Prescreen (MTCP) aims to simplify the college audition process and foster equity, permitting quality published material from musicals would enhance accessibility for all students, especially those without the resources to hire audition coaches or extensively search for suitable monologues.

Let's be honest: would any head of a program disqualify an exceptionally talented auditionee simply for using a monologue from a musical? I sincerely hope not. Instead, by restricting this choice, we risk erecting unnecessary barriers that do not serve the process or the students."

- Erin Farrell Speer

Head —Musical Theatre Program, Assistant Professor Musical Theatre, Department of Theatre, The University of Utah

"I have no problem with an actor using text from a musical libretto for monologue work. At the end of the day, I just want to see how naturally they can deliver text. As long as it's professionally vetted, there is usually something valuable to mine. The problem tends to be that everything important in a musical sings, by default, so if students are pulling text out of librettos the material tends to be interstitial and less interesting. There will be exceptions, of course, but I suspect they're rare and more or less prove the rule."

- Josh Grisetti,

Associate Professor of Musical Theatre, Department of Theatre & Dance, Musical Theatre BFA program, Cal State Fullerton.

"I have no issue with students doing monologues from musicals for their college auditions, and I think that the clarification of criteria makes sense for students who are already navigating the treacherous waters of the BFA audition landscape. What's most important to me is that students are able to be comfortable and excited about the material, so that we can see them really sparkle. That said, I am skeptical that quality musical theatre monologues are as abundant as suggested. It seems to me that when the stakes are high enough to justify a quality monologue, musical theatre creators tend to turn those monologues into songs."

- Matthew Teague Miller,

Professor of Theatre, Musical Theatre Program Coordinator, California State University, Chico.

"A monologue is a monologue, and I had worked in both plays and musicals as an actor, and now direct both plays and musicals. On one hand, I understand that a young actor may more closely identify with material from a musical libretto as an audition piece, but I must say that my work on monologues from non-musicals over the years profoundly broadened my awareness, knowledge, technique, and talent. I have seen the stigmatization of actors who have worked primarily in musicals as less proficient and talented in their craft than those who typically work in non-musicals, from both industry professionals and also those actors themselves, who can often convince themselves that they are not non-musical actors.

I think a monologue from a published musical libretto carries the same weight and importance as a monologue from a play script. I think Tom Jones, Nicholas Dante and James Kirkwood, George Furth, Arthur Laurents, John Weidman, Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse, Lisa Kron, and many others would all agree.

I reiterate that I believe a common prescreen monologue can come from either a libretto or a script."

- Richard Roland,

Director of the BFA in Musical Theatre Program, Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre, Department of Theatre & Dance, Indiana University Bloomington.

If you have opinions, agreeing or disagreeing, with any of the ideas put forth here, I ask you to please join the conversation by submitting or sending a response to the MTEA Journal. I look forward to engaging our community and thank you for considering my proposal.



BIOGRAPHY

David W. Eggers, assistant professor musical theatre, University of Utah, is a director/choreographer, frequently as associate to Tony Award® winner Kathleen Marshall. He's performed in 10 Broadway musicals. Upcoming: *Crafting an Intentional Career for the Musical Theatre Performer* (Routledge, Oct '25). Ongoing podcast: *The Mental Game of Musical Theatre*. Follow @profeggers.

Hey Actors, You're Already Singing!

By Allison Moody and Sarah Wigley

DOI #10.62392/MHAE3833



HOW DO YOU CONVINC ACTORS IN A BFA ACTING TRAINING PROGRAM THAT THEY CAN SING IN MUSICAL THEATRE?

This article examines how an embodied knowledge of the acting voice habilitation method, Linklater Voice, can enhance an actor's confidence in the singing voice studio. Allison Moody is a Designated Linklater Teacher and the Teaching Associate Professor of Voice and Speech at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Sarah Wigley is an Estill Voice Master Trainer and Clinical Professor of Voice for Lyric Theatre at the School of Music at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Their shared research focuses on the integration of Linklater Voice and Estill Voice Training. Through their cross-campus collaboration, they have discovered that intentionally incorporating the Figures of Estill Voice Training into the Linklater Voice Progression provides acting students a clearer understanding of their vocal anatomy and physiology. In return, Linklater Voice offers Estill Voice Training an embodied experience of imagination and intention. For the BFA Acting student, this integration has also sparked new possibilities for awareness, vocal freedom, and confidence in the singing studio. This article will highlight two specific examples of how the knowledge of the Linklater Voice Progression led to breakthroughs in singing musical theatre repertoire. While this article primarily focuses on the experiences of acting students, a few examples of BMA Lyric Theatre students' successes will also be shared. The authors will provide recommendations on how further cross-collaboration could be achieved through curricular design. The authors recognize that music theatre educators possess extensive knowledge of various voice habilitation methods. However, brief overviews of Estill Voice Training and the Linklater Voice Progression are provided to ensure that all readers have the same foundational knowledge and understanding.

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U OF I ACTING VOICE AND SINGING VOICE OVERVIEW

Music courses such as Musicianship, Musical Theatre Repertoire, and private voice lessons are traditionally reserved for BFA Musical Theatre programs and, at the University of Illinois, the Bachelor of Musical Arts with a major in Lyric Theatre—this interdisciplinary degree housed in the School of Music incorporates training in dance and theatre in addition to music. BFA Acting programs often do not intentionally integrate singing and music courses into the curriculum. Because of this, BFA Acting students may have insecurity about the craft of singing and the many details that accompany it (pun intended!). Adhering to a score's specific rhythms might seem familiar to an actor who is also exploring the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare's text. But adding the additional parameters of pitch frequency, sustaining said frequency, and working with a live accompanist, can fill the student with apprehension and even anxiety. By incorporating the familiar lighthouse of the Linklater Progression, the singing BFA actor has a safe starting place for their vocal folds, body, and mind. In the BFA Acting program in the Department of Theatre at the University of Illinois, students currently undergo five semesters of acting voice training. Three semesters are based on the Linklater Voice method and its series of exercises known as the Linklater Progression. The other two semesters explore accents/dialects and voice-over acting. In their final four semesters, they lead themselves through the Linklater Progression every morning in the daily integrated voice and movement class known as Dynamics. By combining professor-guided exploration with self-led exploration, these acting students have a thorough and embodied understanding of the Linklater Voice method. While the BFA actors do have one semester of Acting in Musical Theatre in their final year of training, they also have the opportunity to take musical theatre voice classes as electives within the Lyric Theatre curriculum.

LINKLATER OVERVIEW

In 1963, a young Kristin Linklater came to the United States from London. She started training the voices of Method actors.¹ These actors were incredibly gifted at embodying the emotions of the character but were unable to fill the large

¹ Lee Strasberg once said, "Method Acting is what all actors have always done whenever they acted well" (Foy, 2019). He created The Method™ from the theories of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Arts Theatre. The work is a series of exercises that develops the actor's physical, emotional, and imaginative life while also analyzing the psyche and intentions of the characters of the play. "The Method™ trains actors to use their physical, mental, and emotional self in the creation of a character and stresses the way in which personal experience can fire the actor's imagination" (Foy, 2019). Notice the voice is not a part of that equation! Notable musical theatre actors from the Method Acting tradition include Bea Arthur, Jesse L. Martin, Robert Morse, Jerry Orbach, and Barbara Streisand.



Photo Credit: Te Kawau Toi

houses of the American regional theatre. She was a perfect trainer of these actors' voices because her work is meant "to produce a voice that is in direct contact with emotional impulses" (Linklater, 2006, p. 8). By establishing herself as a complementary voice trainer to one of the leading acting methodologies at the time, Linklater Voice became a leading voice methodology in acting training programs (Kristin Linklater > Vocal Pedagogy, 2020).

Kristin's book, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, documents the sequence of exercises known as the Linklater Progression. The work was developed primarily to train actor's voices, but Kristin maintains that the work, "is intended for use by professional actors, student actors, teachers of acting, teachers of voice and speech, singers, singing teachers, and interested lay people" (Linklater, 2006, p. 7). Kristin reminds us of Jacques' words from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players..." (Act II, scene 7), and therefore she refers to all voice users reading the book as actors.

ESTILL VOICE OVERVIEW

Jo Estill began her career as a successful professional classical singer in the 1960s and evolved into a research associate and lab technician focused on speech and hearing science research at the Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, New York. Further research with Dr. Kiyoshi Honda and Dr. Eiji Yanagisawa between 1986 to 1991 led to the Estill Voice Model. Jo Estill translated the complexities of vocal production into the categories of "craft," "artistry," and "performance magic." Craft is physiology, artistry is aesthetics, and performance magic is metaphysics (Steinhauer et al., 2017). Estill Voice Training focuses primarily on craft because Jo Estill realized that the study of voice is a craft anyone can learn no matter how they choose to use their voice. Craft consists of 13 Figures that relate to specific structures of the vocal anatomy and the movement options available for each of those structures, which may be seen, heard, and felt. These Figures consist of True Vocal Folds: Onset/Offset, True Vocal Folds: Body Cover, False Vocal Folds, Thyroid Cartilage, Cricoid Cartilage, Larynx, Aryepiglottic Sphincter, Velum, Tongue, Jaw, Lips, Head/Neck Anchor, and Torso Anchor. These Figures and their movement possibilities combine in specific recipes called "Qualities," which are Speech, Falsetto, Sob, Twang, Opera, and Belt (Steinhauer et al., 2017).

ESTILL AND LINKLATER IN THE CLASSROOM

The Linklater Progression guides the actor from an initial exploration of relaxation through phonation, resonance, and range, ultimately arriving at articulation. In *Freeing the Natural Voice*, the work is divided into 19 workdays. Teaching the whole Progression could be done quickly in one semester, but ideally, the students would have two semesters to really learn and embody the work. By taking more time with the Progression, complementary projects such as self-written poems or voice-focused acting exercises can be integrated into the coursework to deepen the students' learning. By doing so, the student actor can also examine how voice work is acting work.

A brief overview of the workdays is below. It's helpful to understand how each workday builds upon the previous. By examining the workdays, we can investigate how the singing voice might be strengthened through the Progression and how Professor Moody intentionally integrates the Estill Voice Training into the Linklater Progression.

PHYSICAL AWARENESS: This foundational workday explores the release of tension and the relaxation of the body. Additional attention is given to alignment of the legs, pelvis, spine, and head.

BREATH AWARENESS: The relaxation of the body is focused inward as actors are encouraged to release their abdominal muscles and other deeply held tensions around the diaphragm. The anatomically correct movement of the diaphragm is explored, and students tune into the moment-to-moment rhythm of their breath. The sigh of relief, one of the central practices of Linklater Voice, is introduced here.

TOUCH OF SOUND: The free release of breath is then applied to the release of the voice as phonation is added to the sigh of relief. Students explore one little touch of thought/feeling vibration—"huh"—and begin to investigate how easy and efficient that little exchange of breath and voice can be. That investigation is advanced by adding pitch frequency from the teacher or a piano.

FREEING VIBRATIONS: The "Touch of Sound" is then brought to the lips to encourage vibrations into the front-most part of the mouth. Tongue height and velum height are also examined during this process. Students can begin to investigate which positions of the tongue and velum elicit the most vibrations in the front of the mouth. Once the vibrations

are felt at the lips, the lips then part to release the sigh of vibrations into the studio. The ease of this phrase—“huh-hummmuh”—is again investigated as pitches are added from the teacher or the piano. It is in this section that Professor Moody introduces the Estill Voice Training Figure, “True Vocal Folds: Body Cover.” The class explores sighing with relief through all four possibilities within this Figure (Thick, Thin, Stiff, and Slack) and discusses which body cover produces the most vibrations at the lips. In most cases, students recognize that the “Thick Folds Body Cover” evokes the most vibration on the lips; they are encouraged to release a “Thick Folds” sigh of relief in order to exercise the speaking voice (and indeed, “Thick Folds” are part of the recipe that make up the Speech Quality). This section of the Progression continues as the humming phrase is paired with circling the head and neck, dropping down and rebounding up the spine, and other movements of the body designed to keep the voice and body free during speaking.

JAW AWARENESS, TONGUE AWARENESS, and SOFT

PALATE: These three workdays make up the section of the Progression known as “Freeing the Channel”. An overarching goal of this section is to release habitual tensions in the muscles of these areas of the vocal tract. Actors explore the geography of the lower jaw and then shake the jaw to loosen its muscles. They stretch and relax the root and back of the tongue, loosen the middle and blade of the tongue. And they exercise the movement of the soft palate. The final exercises of this section combine jaw, tongue, and soft palate movement to create an open vocal tract through which the students sigh with relief and vibration. Pitch is also added here. The extreme opening of this movement can often make students feel quite vulnerable, and they might attack the onset of the sigh or end the sigh with abrupt glottal closure—perhaps to balance the extreme opening with some feeling of control. To encourage the continued sigh of relief, Moody incorporates the Estill Voice Training Figure, “True Vocal Folds: Onset/Offset.” Students explore the aspirated, smooth, and glottal offsets to discover which offset allows for the greatest release of the sigh and invites the next incoming breath with the least amount of effort possible. Students are encouraged to use the aspirated offset in order to relax and abduct the vocal folds so the breath can automatically be replaced for the next thought.

THE RESONATING LADDER: In “How the Voice Works,” an introductory chapter of *Freeing the Natural Voice*, Kristin offers that the vibrations of the voice are resounded through the body as they bounce off bone, cartilage, and even well-toned muscle. In Moody’s Designated Linklater Teacher Training, Kristin said that “the resonators are there to give strength to your voice,” and she encouraged the Trainees to remember that the strength of a person’s voice is in their bones, not their muscular effort (Orkney, January 10, 2019). This part of the Progression focuses on strengthening the voice by tuning in to the individual frequencies that can be felt or imagined within the various resonating cavities of the body. In the lower three rungs of the Resonating Ladder, “Chest, Mouth, and Teeth,” the actor can feel the deeper frequencies of their speaking range resounding in their chest, and the middle speaking pitches in the bones of their mouth and upper teeth. The actors blend the sensations of these three resonators by sighing on a “Hey” and begin to feel how the strength and power of their speaking voice can be paired with free and relaxed phonation. Actors then release the voice from the body by calling out “Hey!” to feel an even more heightened expression. Finally, they release the “Hey” on sliding fifths and add the momentum of the Trish Arnold² arm and leg swings. The exploration of the swings activates the actors’ breath while also engaging the muscles of the torso, head, and neck. Here, the Estill Voice Training Figures of Torso and Head/Neck are introduced. The actors explore the two options available in each Figure (Relaxed and Anchored) so that they can engage this activation without the swings. This additional body support is beneficial for calling or yelling onstage during scenes of heightened expression. The Estill Voice Training Figure of Larynx is also explored as students begin to feel how the larynx instinctively rises in calling, and they are encouraged to allow the rising to happen.

² Trish Arnold was the Movement Teacher at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, while Kristin was assisting Iris Warren, also at LAMDA. The arm swings that accompany the sliding fifths, or the leg swings that assist the arpeggiated octaves in the section Extending Range were a part of Trish’s Pure Movement work. This work grew out of the changing landscape of the theatre in London in the 1950s, which required the actors to create different physicalities onstage. “She was adamant that her work was about enabling actors, rather than giving them a rigid lexicon of exercises” (Snow, 2017).



Photo Credit: Latrelle Bright

The exploration of the Resonating Ladder continues as students explore expanding breath capacity to support the higher frequencies and energies of the Sinus resonator, the Nasal and Upper Sinus resonators, and the Skull resonator. Moody revisits the Estill Voice Training Figure of True Vocal Folds: Body Cover here so that students can identify the changing sensation as they move higher through their vocal range. They know physiologically that the vocal folds are lengthening and the contact between them is becoming thinner. But they are encouraged to think of it as one speaking voice as they sigh with relief and find greater potential through all parts of their vocal range.

RANGE AND ARTICULATION: In Linklater’s Sound and Movement work, she introduces what is known colloquially as “Zoo, Whoa, Shaw.” This exercise can be found in her second book, *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice*. “Zoo, Whoa, Shaw” adds consonants to the vowel scale and moves these speech clusters through the body. An actor encounters the playful, imaginative sensation of speech sounds, pitch, and resonance living in their knees, pelvis, and rib cage, all the way up through their cheekbones, and up and out through the top of their head. While technically not a part of the Linklater Voice Progression, it is often integrated in Range and Articulation to provide another imaginative, sensorial experience to what otherwise could be a stiff or stodgy study of speech.

STUDENT EXAMPLES

In a way, the Linklater Progression almost tricks students into exercising their voices. While they are focused on relaxation and playful, imaginative movement, the repeated phrases strengthen their voices. The students connect to the intention of the imagery and text, and the byproduct is an expanded, more flexible vocal range. The students are so used to connecting their voices to their bodies and their imaginations that, in the singing studio, all they need is a prompt to return to that playful, embodied expression. In almost all cases, their voices will follow.

The BFA Actor

The following examples illustrate how the knowledge of the Linklater Progression can bolster confidence and advance the musicianship of the singing actor:

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- In a Musical Theatre Repertoire studio class, a BFA actor was not achieving his desired results while singing “Blue Moon” (Rodgers & Hart). This led to high effort levels, accompanied by false vocal fold constriction and difficulty matching pitches on the given intervals. After being given several unsuccessful prompts from the singing voice perspective, such as “release the larynx” and “retract your false vocal folds,” the student was invited to connect to Linklater’s “Zoo, Whoa, Shaw.” The student released the given pitches of the piece solely on “zoo” with its corresponding movement of circling the bent knees. The familiar experience of resonance and range in his body gave this student the ability to relax into the lower frequencies of his singing voice and to feel his natural vibrato for the first time. His pitch accuracy, vocal power, and freedom increased immediately after connecting with his embodied knowledge of the Linklater Progression. He exclaimed, “Wait—it can’t be that easy! I can apply this to singing?” He went on to say that his effort level had “significantly decreased.”
- In a private lesson, a BFA acting student was applying too much muscular effort and subglottal pressure while belting “The Last Midnight” from *Into the Woods* (Sondheim). After pedagogical cues such as “let’s play with use of a thinner vocal fold body cover” and “what if we brought in more twang to assist in providing support to the true vocal folds” she was offered the prompt to call, “Hey!” while also reaching her arm up in the air, just as she might if she were calling out to a friend. She was able to recall her embodied knowledge of the section, “Releasing the Voice From the Body” from the Linklater Progression, and in this context, was reminded that calling out to a friend is the same low effort/high intensity vocalism as the belt quality of a musical theatre song. She immediately transferred the reactive nature of “hey” into a given pitch frequency and into the compositional structure of the song selection. This instance led to further replication of low effort/high intensity vocalism in other musical theatre selections that demanded high frequencies of resonance.

The BMA Lyric Theatre Singer

Although BMA Lyric Theatre majors do not receive training in the full Linklater Voice Progression, they collaborate often with Professor Moody in workshops and in production. Their beginning knowledge is advanced by the Linklater Voice/Estill Voice Training collaboration in the students’ applied voice lessons with Professor Wigley.

- In a private voice lesson, a BMA Lyric Theatre

major shared frustration about feeling “locked up” and “in their head” about singing the title role of Anya in *Anastasia*. Struggling to find full-bodied expression, trust in the release of vocalism, and an ability to connect with the intention of text during “In My Dreams” (Flaherty/Ahrens), the student was led through the Skull, Upper Sinus, Nasal, and Sinus resonators of the Linklater Progression. Although the Skull resonator is the last rung on the Resonating Ladder, Professor Wigley suggested it first within this exploration to elicit a Thin Folds Body Cover, or head voice dominance. The breath and vibration were released on an “ee” vowel, which immediately activated a high tongue dorsum. By starting at the end, the Skull resonance ensured that a mixed voice could be approached “from above” with buoyancy and ease without risk of excessive effort or constriction. After completing this segment of exercises, the student returned to the song selection with a noticeable increase in confidence, a full-bodied connection to the text, and the ability to sustain pitches with consistent airflow and freedom of vibrato.

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- In another instance, a BMA Lyric Theatre student was growing increasingly frustrated with the constriction in the false vocal folds when belting in “Fly Into the Future” from *Vanities* (Kirschenbaum), stating that she felt she had to exert greater effort as the pitch rose. She “didn’t know what else to do” as the body was anchored, the dorsum of the tongue was high, and the AES (aryepiglottic sphincter) was narrowed, allowing for a higher laryngeal height. The student was guided through the Sinus, Nasal, and Upper Sinus portions of the Linklater Progression, then put the text of “Fly Into the Future” into the actions of “mee-mee-mee, may-may-may, mah-mah-mah, MYYYYY” (Nasal/Upper Sinus) and immediately voiced a newfound sensation of release, vocal “opening,” and sustainable, embodied expression.

INTEGRATED CURRICULUM—POSSIBILITIES

In a BFA Acting or BFA Musical Theater program, the intentional integration of these two voice methodologies might allow the singing actor and the acting singer to shift seamlessly between speaking and singing.

We propose that two sequential, semester-long courses in a BFA Acting or Musical Theatre program would be the ideal integration to best support the overall training of the performer’s voice. This course would be team-taught by an acting voice specialist and a singing voice specialist. The class would ideally meet four hours a week, two hours per class, with time between the two faculty members divided equally over the semesters.

In the first semester of the course, actors would spend the first half of the semester in part one of the Progression—Freeing Vibrations—focusing on the relaxation of their body and voice and connecting their impulse to breath and voice. This knowledge would then be integrated into singing voice by exploring speech-level singing with songs like “Send in the Clowns” (*A Little Night Music*), “There Are Worse Things I Could Do” (*Grease*), and “I Met a Girl” (*Bells are Ringing*). The singing actor begins to learn that the freedom of speaking can easily be applied to singing, and that singing is merely just speaking on pitch. The acting singer explores how easy it can be to communicate the intention of the text while singing. Estill Voice Figures such as True Vocal Folds: Body Cover and True Vocal Folds: Onset/Offset will also be introduced to explore specific possibilities within the anatomy that naturally accompany part one of the Progression. The second half of that first semester continues through Freeing the Channel, the beginning of the Resonating Ladder, and finishes the semester with Releasing the Voice from the Body on the sliding fifths. The sliding fifths help train the actor’s voice to sustain longer thoughts on moving pitches. This will be applied to the singing voice by lengthening the musical thought: speech-singing a longer musical phrase, exploring a legato musical line, or sustaining the release of pitches for a longer period of time. Estill Voice Figures such as Larynx, Torso, Head/Neck, and AES will accompany and enrich the science behind the natural ease of Releasing the Voice from the Body and the Resonating Ladder. Each student would explore two or three selections of 16-32 bars each in this first semester. A low stakes sharing of the semester’s exploration could be offered to audience members of the students’ choosing.

In the second semester of the integrated acting voice and singing voice class, students finish the Linklater Progression and exercise the flexibility and responsiveness of their vocal range. There is also time dedicated to exploring the specificity and efficiency of articulation. Exercises that awaken the imagination’s connection to text are also explored as students discover how the voice can reveal images, feelings, emotions, and memories. The voice physiologically becomes stronger, but so does its ability to uncover the nuances of thought and intention within the given circumstances of the text. The students are now prepared for more challenging songs from an acting AND singing perspective. The second semester finishes with full storytelling songs like “Stars and Moon” (*Songs for a New World*), “Meadowlark” (*The Baker’s Wife*), or “Soliloquy” (*Carousel*). A more public sharing of this semester’s exploration for the community could also strengthen learning outcomes.

With this foundation, the singing actor and the acting singer are technically prepared for whatever shows might be presented within the program’s production season. If a specific style is required, workshops for those particular styles can be offered, and specific techniques can be addressed using shared terminology. More inclusive spaces will also be created as more perspectives are empowered to engage with the material. Plays and musicals are now open to both actors and singers and everyone in between.

CONCLUSION

Our perspective is based on these two specific voice methodologies; we hope that this article will, of course, spark interest in Linklater Voice and Estill Voice Training, but we believe that any “cross-cultural” voice pedagogy is beneficial for the students. With more conversations about the similarities in approaches and how differences can supplement methodologies rather than separate them, we provide more possibilities for our students and more inclusive learning environments.



BIOGRAPHY

Allison Moody is the Teaching Associate Professor of Voice and Speech in the Department of Theatre at UIUC. She is a Designated Linklater Teacher and is working towards Estill Voice Training® Figure Proficiency. A member of AEA, her favorite MT roles include Mazeppa in *Gypsy* and Richard Henry Lee in *1776*. Recent coaching credits include *Oklahoma!*, *RENT*, and *Cabaret*.



Sarah Wigley is a Clinical Professor of Voice for Lyric Theatre at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. As a contemporary voice specialist and certified Estill Master Trainer, Ms. Wigley frequently presents workshops concerning flexible voice technique and crossover training. Recent engagements include ICVT, NATS, VASTA, Illinois Music Education Association, Iowa Choral Directors Association, Minnesota Music Education Association, and Estill World Voice Symposium.

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CATHERINE WALKER

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An Interview with
Catherine A Walker,
University of Michigan
Associate Chair of Musical Theatre
and Clinical Professor of Music



Strategies for Rehearsal Planning in the Related Contexts of Musical Theatre and Choral Music Education

by Robert C. Jordan

ROBERT C. JORDAN Catherine, you and I have talked before about your background—you've had one foot firmly in traditional choral music and another in musical theatre (MT). I encourage readers to refer to Jordan & Walker (2022) for a detailed discussion of your background and work at the University of Michigan, but could you get us started with a summary?

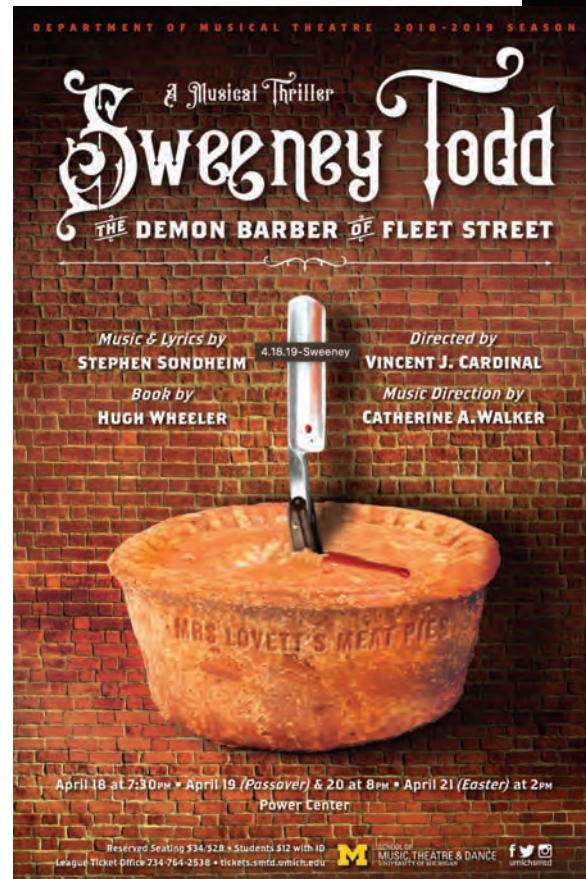
CATHERINE WALKER I trained as a band director but began teaching in elementary general music. I started music directing shows professionally and realized that I didn't know a lot about the voice; I wasn't really able to talk to singers. I realized the best way to combine my interest in music education and musical theatre was to complete a M.M. in choral conducting. I taught choir at Portage Northern High School (Portage, Michigan) from 1994–2007, and because of my instrumental background, I also conducted their musicals. These experiences parlayed into a move to the University of Michigan in 2007 where both vocal music and conducting were needed equally. I've continued to develop my skills as a vocal coach by studying vocal pedagogy, voice science research, and contemporary vocal techniques.

RCJ Could you describe your current responsibilities at the University of Michigan?

CW I'm a Clinical Professor of Music and the Associate Chair of the Department of Musical Theatre. As one of the Department's music directors, vocal coaches, accompanists, and conductors, I music direct one production each year and assist on Showcase and special events. Additionally, I teach Ensemble Techniques, MT Music Theory I and II, and Music Fluency. I also serve as the Curriculum Coordinator for Musical Theatre.

RCJ In this interview, I'd like to share advice for professionals crossing over from choral music to musical theatre, and vice versa, but before we do, could you tell us how you prepare for and facilitate musical theatre rehearsals?

CW Well, it depends on what you're teaching, right? For example, Michigan's production of *Sweeney Todd* was a heavy lift. I knew the cast's voices, so I pre-assigned voice parts, provided rehearsal tracks, and developed a detailed schedule of what music we were rehearsing and when. *Sweeney Todd* is a huge show, so I didn't want to ask them to learn the whole show at once. Next, it's important to break down rhythms and reveal their hierarchical organization to the cast—typically without using numbers because they can be confusing. It's best to start this way and then add the text. Then, I look for tricky places: accidentals, chromaticism, blue notes, a shift to other keys, an implied key signature, a meter change, etc. It's Sondheim after all—all of these are relevant. For early rehearsals, I work without piano support as much as possible—being led with piano encourages dependence regardless of the singer's experience level. I create a structural framework for the rehearsal process, addressing the rhythmic and harmonic challenges I've identified to help the cast see the broader structure as well as what is expected and when. This approach will make the show's granular elements meaningful as they think about the musical work as a whole.



RCJ Why do you start with rhythm?

CW I believe the fundamental musical element is rhythm. Singers that don't understand the rhythm usually struggle with pitch. I often say, "A wrong note at the right time is half right; a right note at the wrong time is all wrong." Rhythmic integrity comes first and facilitates learning pitch.

RCJ Can you explain how you plan for and manage rehearsals?

CW I estimate how long it's going to take me to teach everything, e.g., I rehearse this section for twenty minutes and then review another section for ten minutes. I'm not always right, but I'm closer than I was 35–40 years ago. I maintain my schedule unless I absolutely have to finish a certain section of music that night. Usually, I take notes and return to it later.

This is especially important for the Sitzprobe. I acknowledge that I will not have enough time in a three-hour call for the entire show. So, I have an assistant closely watching the clock and my schedule, giving me one-minute warnings before my time is up on a particular section. If I don't use all ten minutes, the surplus time goes into "the bank" to use when needed. If I run out of time and there's nothing in the bank, I move on, or if I go over my scheduled time, I subtract it from the next section. You have to be disciplined. If not, rehearsals have a tendency to meander. It's important to remember that if the cast finds a section challenging, staying on it longer may not help—there's a point of diminishing returns. The cast may develop an aversion to that section, and the end product may suffer. You have to be perceptive and adaptive. Ask yourself, "What does the energy in the room feel like?" Check in with them. If the section is particularly challenging, there's a slowness that takes over, and the rehearsal energy downshifts. Students fall out of the learning groove and zone out. You may need to divide into sectionals, give them a break, or switch their seating arrangements. If the cast has a practice track, I may say, "Go back and look at this one before our next rehearsal," or if not, I make a track as soon as I can. When rehearsal slows, move on or make a change.

RCJ Do you have an example of sectionals being the best solution?

CW After a year of teaching mainly online, we came back and began working on *Godspell*. Because of virtual instruction, our students had been practicing with tracks for a year, and suddenly, they're face-to-face, masked, distanced, and sight-reading the updated choral arrangements from the 2011 Broadway revival—rich in rhythmic and harmonic complexity. The rehearsal was unusually slow, and I began to process what was happening. I knew they couldn't hear well because they were masked and socially distanced, spread out in a large lecture hall. I suspected there were additional issues, and then a cast member said, "I'm realizing that besides not hearing well, I'm learning slowly because my music reading skills are rusty." My colleague and I were co-music-directing the show, so I said, "They're struggling; we need sectionals."

Sometimes you can't end the rehearsal early, so I accomplished as much as I could and said, "Let's put this on the list for next time and move ahead." When you're in a cycle of diminishing returns, you're not going to get what you want,

but more importantly, you're losing the cast. Now, maybe I'll come back to it that night. Because of the way the brain processes work like this, a second pass after a brain break can make a big difference. But if you belabor the process, you'll slow down and lose the room. They'll disengage, even at the college or professional level; they're bored. Find strategies that will physically engage them before they shut down; kinesthetics stimulate thinking and learning. It might be as simple as asking them to bend their knees and sit for a decrescendo. Take a short break, or give half the group a break while the others work, and then switch. You can ask the treble voices to turn and face the lower voices or mix them even more. Make sure you're still accomplishing something. Maybe you're not nailing all of the notes, but make sure the rhythm is solid. There are many options, but whatever you do, change something.

With *Godspell*, our original rehearsal space was cavernous and made hearing difficult. I asked for a room change and rehearsed in a large circle rather than rows, and everything surged forward. The small-group sectionals, change of venue, and group set-up all contributed to a noticeable shift in the process.

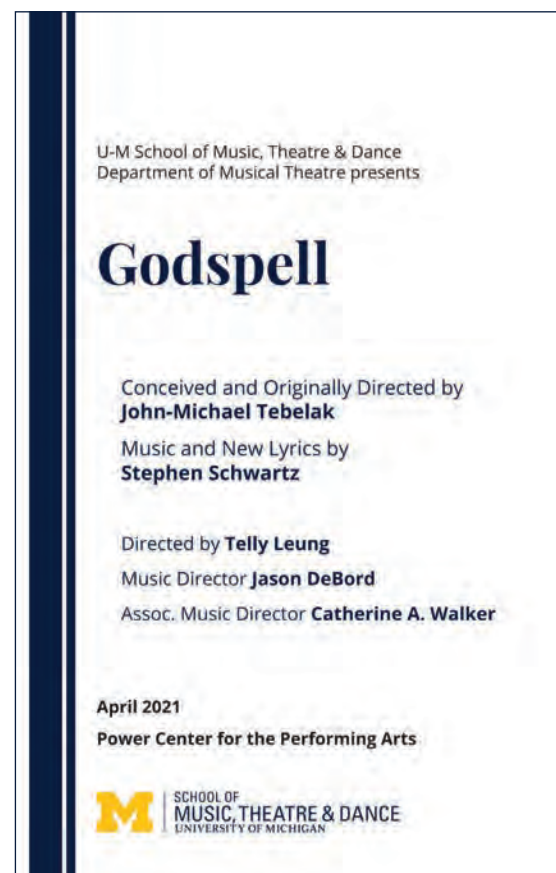
RCJ What else can you do?

CW Eliminating text is another useful rehearsal strategy. Lyrics add an extra layer of distraction for singers. Instrumentalists don't have this challenge. A trumpet player has two things to worry about: pitch and rhythm. Of course, they must consider other elements such as dynamics, expression, articulation, etc., but singers have those plus text. The singer's eyes go to the text first because it's the most attainable of all the information on the page. In other words, if I don't read rhythms well, where do I look? Well, I can read words, so I'll just follow the text. Much of the rhythmic information is in the stems and, more importantly, the beams. The beams are furthest from the text, so when you eliminate text, you can help them digest the rhythms. Begin by verbalizing the rhythm on the counting system of your choice, whether you use numbers or another strategy. Then verbalize the rhythm with the text. Then pitch with rhythm (without text), and ultimately add the text in with rhythm and pitch as the final step.

When the ensemble is not rhythmically tight, I use a rehearsal strategy called bopping that I learned as a band director. They perform their part by singing a staccato on every note and attempt to stay rigidly accurate. If you can do that accurately, when you go back to the written rhythm, [snaps] you're instantly clean. It reduces approximation toward accuracy.

RCJ Do you have other examples of when Rehearsal A changed your plans for Rehearsal B? And do you have an example when you were working with both instrumental and vocal musicians?

CW A good example would be the University of Michigan's production of *Brigadoon* in 2011. Like most theatrical settings, our production timeline is compressed, and the music director doesn't have a lot of time during tech to deal with sound levels and balance. During this particular process, the orchestra sounded terrific in rehearsal, but when we were arranged in the new location—a pit that was very shallow and wide—the players' ability to hear changed dramatically. The woodwinds were on my extreme right, and the strings on the extreme left. With this orchestration, they needed to hear each other but couldn't. I kept feeling like our house was made of bricks, but no mortar. These were good players from both the University and community, but they grew timid. Nothing was coming together—just disaggregated parts. The instrumentalists' insecurity flowed on to the singers, who also became insecure. I don't want to say I was panicking, but I had that cold chill of knowing I had only one dress rehearsal left to solve the issue. So, I said to the sound engineer, "You may not like what I'm about to say, but I feel that the entire production rests on us having this conversation. We have to change the pit setup so the orchestra can hear themselves and each other better. I'm willing to come in and work with you," because my solution meant moving all the mics. When you're changing a pit setup, I can't just move clarinets to where the trumpets were; it's the wrong mic. My solution was a complete game-changer and honestly saved the show. I had resisted the change because I knew the sound designer might be angry and refuse me. But I took responsibility, offered to work with him, and stressed that





the change might be the only way for us to have a successful production. Fortunately, it worked beautifully.

RCJ Let's switch gears. What advice would you give to an experienced choral music educator as they plan for their first-ever MT chorus rehearsal? They don't have any MT experience, or maybe have some experience as a singer in a musical. But they're well-established in the choral world.

CW Well, I would start by asking how the show will be performed. Will there be a live band/orchestra or a pre-recorded track? If you're doing an MTI Broadway Junior show and using the provided accompaniment tracks, that needs to come into the process right away. Students need to understand the relentlessness of a non-correcting accompaniment track, which may not be all bad. It can provide a predictable and secure sense of pulse.

I would also ask about the style of the show. Are they doing *Carousel* or *Legally Blonde*? The vocal preparation will be different.

RCJ Let's say it's a classical musical.

CW A choral educator is going to have the shortest journey to the vocal quality needed because classical MT is most closely aligned with their choral music training and the work that's already happening in their choir classroom.

I think learning a show in order is probably the least effective approach. I suggest selecting a song that's accessible, homophonic, up-tempo, or familiar that will jumpstart the rehearsal process with momentum. Chances are, the first song you learn will not be the first number in the show. It might be, but just starting at the beginning and proceeding in order is not necessarily the most efficient strategy. Instead, you need to pace the learning process using logic and scaffolding. By beginning the rehearsal process with an accessible, full-ensemble number, you'll establish future rehearsal expectations. Should they bring a pencil? Are they using their mobile phone to record the rehearsal for future reference? You may want to begin with a small excerpt: listen to a recording and then learn to sing it. You don't need to do the whole song. Sing the excerpt with the ensemble while they record it, find success, and tell them, "Tomorrow night, we're starting with this."

RCJ What if the director wants to learn the show chronologically?

CW If the director wants to stage the show chronologically, it doesn't mean the music director has to. At the beginning of the process, you should have a series of music-only rehearsals—no blocking, no choreo. If you have three or four days for music only, you'll get to what the director needs for their initial rehearsals. For the first music rehearsals, pick from Act One. I love operating from a schedule, but I think people often don't. They might think, "Let's just see how far we get." You need to know you're rehearsing everything; otherwise, you reach the end of the rehearsal process, and the latter part of the show is not thoroughly prepared.

Even if some choreo or scene work begins in the first few days of the process, you will have had time to front-load what the other members of the creative team need. If the choreographer wants the cast to sing while learning the dances, suggest that they play the cast album as they teach steps, and then later they can gradually layer in the vocals. This will help to prevent the development of careless musical and vocal habits.

RCJ As a music director at Adelphi University, I often rehearse in the theatre where the performances will take place. But rehearsing in the performance space is not always possible, and in many cases, we may benefit from rehearsing in different spaces. I think it's important for music directors (and directors and choreographers) to understand that singers will sing well when standing still in a rehearsal room, but the singing quality will inevitably decrease when they first move

into a larger space. Directors may grow impatient with singers when things go poorly during this transition, but often the problem is that the director and music director didn't properly scaffold the transition from rehearsal room to stage. As a high school MD, I was fortunate to use a large choir room and band room for music rehearsals—the latter had a scale version of the auditorium stage designed right into the floor tiles. [Those with smaller facilities or less access may be able to use a cafeteria or similar and temporarily tape out the stage boundaries.] After we learned the music, I asked the cast to sing and mark their blocking or choreo in the rehearsal room, and end the rehearsal with one or two reps, full out. We discovered how the physicality of their show affected their vocal performance and made adjustments before leaving the rehearsal room. Vocal pedagogy comes into play as students notice how their vocal performance is aided by choreography, or students may ask for ways to change their vocal approach when fatigued by combining music and dance.

Young singers benefit from an additional step when moving onto the stage, and this added step may be essential if your rehearsal room isn't conducive to marking the blocking and choreo while singing. Singing (and hearing) in the larger performance space is very different from the smaller rehearsal room. On the first rep, ask the cast to do all of the choreo and blocking (but not the singing) while the rehearsal pianist plays or the audio track is played. Follow this with a second rep with the cast singing and standing still. Then, gradually combine all the performance elements, working together to address the challenges. You may find it necessary to repeat one of these steps more than once.

CW Right. I try to prepare the director and cast for this transition. I might say to the director, "I need you to understand, if the cast does not sound as good on stage as when they were standing still in the Sitzprobe, they will lose confidence and panic." The creative team and cast should expect the performance level to drop about thirty-five percent when moving onto the stage—maybe even fifty percent. If they're expecting it, they won't panic. Cast members' performance qualities will improve as the performance elements learn to coexist in their body and brain. You're asking the brain to do so much.

Also, the creative team can make the mistake of asking performers to do a lot of reps without telling them when they can mark. So, they sing everything full out and wonder why they're tired. To help, I'll say, "Make this run full out for sound." If you go back to address spacing, then ask them to mark vocally; it isn't about the singing at that point. To be clear, marking doesn't mean whispering; it means singing in a lighter, sob quality. My focus is lining up my brain and voice with my body and spacing, and I don't need to sing full out to do that. If I'm distracted by these other elements, I'm probably not singing in a sustainable way.

RCJ What concepts from vocal pedagogy or choral methodology might be new for the experienced MT music director when crossing over into choral music? One simple example: when teaching voice parts, I never start with the melody.

CW Yes. I agree with that. The other thing I would suggest is having everybody sing all parts. It keeps everyone involved and learning from each other.

Having people sit silently while you're teaching parts is boring. They lose interest if not involved, but if everyone sings every part, it accomplishes two things. (1) They're learning the rhythm, articulation, and style. And (2), when they know what the other parts sound like, they might realize that they can find their pitch from another voice part, or realize that they're in unison with the basses on a pick up. So, yes, you're only learning one part at a time, but in the process, you're making sure everyone's engaged and learning about the piece's rhythmic and harmonic vocabulary.

RCJ Catherine, I can't thank you enough for sharing your strategies and advice with us!

CW It was my pleasure!



BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Robert C. Jordan, Assistant Professor of Music Education at Adelphi University (Garden City, NY), holds degrees from the Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University (B.M.E.); Western Michigan University (M.M.); and Teachers College, Columbia University (Ed.D.). Robert has music directed more than 30 musicals in university and secondary school settings.

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Illustration courtesy of Vecteezy

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY ON MUSICAL THEATRE RECRUITMENT

by Megan Richards

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Two colleagues are discussing the coming year's recruitment goals for their musical theatre (MT) program. The first colleague is new to recruitment and wants to know, "What should I look for in a prospective student?" The veteran colleague suggests a good place to start: "Are they breathing? Do they contain carbon?"

In a world of tighter scholarship purse strings, competing budgets, and a saturation of programs to compete with, many in higher education might relate. MT programs in higher education continue to grow as high school seniors flock to this popular option (Cox, 2020; Edwards, 2011; Osatinski & Coleman, 2022). However, there is limited research on how such programs navigate the recruitment process; so, for my doctoral dissertation, I wanted to examine how one program recruits first-year MT students over the course of a recruitment cycle.

START WITH WHY: THE CONCEPT BEHIND THIS CASE STUDY

Simon Sinek's *Start With Why* (2011) posits that decisions filtered through a clear vision (WHY) reduce time, energy, and money wasted on products and services (WHATs) and mission statements (HOWs) out of line with the vision (see Table 1). (The capitalization of WHY, HOW, and WHAT when addressing Sinek's concepts throughout this document is taken from Sinek's own approach to distinguishing them.)

Table 1
Sinek's WHY, HOW, and WHAT Explained

WHY	The WHY is the vision that describes the organization's purpose, beliefs, and culture.
HOW	The HOW is a mission statement that reflects the building out of the vision. It explains how the organization's product is better or different than that of other organizations.
WHAT	The WHAT describes the product and services the organization has built out of the vision and mission statements.

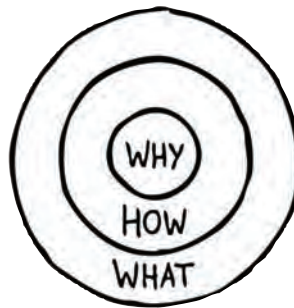
The scenario presented at the beginning of this article, with the colleague quipping that anyone breathing should be recruited for their MT program, illustrates what Simon Sinek (2011) would describe as “a world that doesn’t start with WHY” (p. 9). In such an organization, “uncertainty increases for buyers [in our case, students], instability increases for sellers [in our case, MT programs and faculty] and stress increases for all” (2011, p.65). But Sinek offers an alternative: To start with WHY.

Decisions filtered through a clear WHY reduce time, energy, and money wasted on products and services out of line with the organization’s vision. In relation to recruitment, starting with WHY may allow the recruitment team to better discern and attract students that are the right fit for their program, who share a similar vision.

THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

Sinek (2011) argues that what sets inspired companies and leaders apart is their commitment to thinking from the inside out, which he calls “The Golden Circle,” inspired by the golden ratio found in mathematics (p. 38). The Golden Circle reflects how they “think, act, and communicate” (p. 39), placing WHY in the center of their bullseye, HOW in the next ring, and WHAT in the third ring.

Figure 1
The Golden Circle
(Sinek, 2011, p. 38)



Following this model allows leaders and organizations to ensure that their HOW and WHAT are consistent with their WHY.

Sinek believes that most of the problems that leaders and organizations run into are from thinking from the outside in: Starting with WHAT. When WHAT leads the way, buyers (in this case, students) are determined by the success of a company’s gimmicks, such as price manipulations and promotions; tactics that fail to build a trusting relationship between customer and business. The challenge is often the fact that the WHAT of an organization is often the easiest aspect to identify, since it describes the tangible “product or services a company sells” (Sinek, 2011, p. 39). WHY they offer those particular products or services, and HOW they are better or different from competitors may be harder to articulate.

THE CELERY TEST

Sinek (2011) brings home his conviction that WHATs (products and services) must be in line with an organization’s WHY with what he calls “the Celery Test” (p. 166): You are at an event with people in your field of work, accomplished and successful in their organizations. Someone approaches you with advice.

“M&M’s are going to be the key to your organization’s success,” they declare.
 “No, in this economy, you need rice milk,” a second person interjects.
 “Oreo cookies are what you need—that’s how we made it big,” says a third.
 “Celery. It’s all about celery,” the final voice chimes in.

Who do you listen to? The advice they gave you worked for them. But if you go to the supermarket and buy all of those products, time has been wasted wandering the supermarket looking for each item, money has been wasted buying them all, and when you go to check out, “nobody can see what you believe” (Sinek, 2011, p. 167). So, you evaluate each person’s advice through your WHY, which you had already decided was to help people take care of their bodies. When you go to the supermarket, you only buy rice milk and celery.

If you consider your time, money, and energy investments through your WHY first, you find value in everything you invest in. And when all that you are holding in your arms at the checkout are the products in line with your WHY, it will make it easy for “those who believe what you believe to find you” (Sinek, 2011, p. 167).

METHODOLOGY

The research study began upon receiving Internal Review Board (IRB) approval and receiving the signed consent forms from each of the four participants. The MT program and individuals have been anonymized. Identifying information has been eliminated from public versions of documents, with names of the four participants removed and non-gendered pronouns assigned: Faculty 1: MT Voice; Faculty 2: Musical Direction; Faculty 3: MT Dance; Faculty 4: Head of MT Program

INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS

To understand the WHY, HOW, and WHAT behind one MT program’s recruitment process required not just asking those involved in the recruitment about their process and opinions but observing within their recruitment setting whether their actions matched their statements (Bailey 2017, p. 89). Also referred to as field research, ethnography facilitates the interaction and observation of participants “over a sustained period of time” (2017, p. 9). The methods used for data collection primarily involved interviews and observations. The questions focused on each faculty member’s role, experience, and perceptions on recruitment for their program. Observations of the MT recruitment faculty included nearly every facet of their recruitment process and practices over one recruitment cycle (see Table 2).

Table 2

MT Recruitment Cycle Timeline

Year-Round	Adjudicating for high school musical theatre awards
	Teaching workshops and master classes at various high school programs
September	Prescreen submissions begin rolling in
October	Off campus conference auditions begin in various sites around the country
February	On campus live auditions
March	Audition decisions and calls are made to accepted recruits
March - April	On campus visits for accepted students
	Steady stream of emails sent to accepted students promoting various program news and products (current students signing with agents, virtual showcase release, features of former students on Broadway)

My observations included:

- Prescreen auditions
- A two-day audition conference off campus
- Discussions amongst faculty
- Three on campus auditions, which each included:
 - Information session
 - Dance call
 - Group voice warmup
 - Singing auditions
- On campus visits with accepted recruits, which included:
 - Private campus tour
 - Auditing of classes
 - Private information session
 - Lunch with the head of the MT program

As is common for qualitative research, the research design was chosen to make space for the existence of multiple realities (Bailey, 2017, p. 66). In the case of this study, this means there is more than one way to recruit for a MT program, and more than one WHY on which to base recruitment practices.



RESULTS & DISCUSSION

WHAT (Products and Services)

As Sinek states, the WHATs (products or services offered) are often the easiest to identify, so that is where I began categorizing data. To discover themes, I created data reduction tables with a column for each of the four participants and marked how often each theme that I found was mentioned or demonstrated (see Table 3).

Table 3
Cross-Participant Data Reduction for WHATs (Products and Services)

Faculty 1: MT Voice	Faculty 2: Music Direction	Faculty 3: MT Dance	Faculty 4: Head of MT
No cookie cutters	No cookie cutters	No cookie cutters	No cookie cutters
Have fun & cheer each other on	Have fun & cheer each other on	Have fun & cheer each other on	Have fun & cheer each other on
Spirit of mentoring	Spirit of mentoring	Spirit of mentoring	Spirit of mentoring
			Connecting through recruitment travel
Personal phone calls to accepted students	Personal phone calls to accepted students	Personal phone calls to accepted students	Personal phone calls to accepted students
On campus post-acceptance visits	On campus post-acceptance visits	On campus post-acceptance visits	On campus post-acceptance visits
Contenders in New York	Contenders in New York	Contenders in New York	Contenders in New York
Building strong dancers and movers		Building strong dancers and movers	Building strong dancers and movers
Curriculum changes that reflect current Broadway trends	Curriculum changes that reflect current Broadway trends	Curriculum changes that reflect current Broadway trends	Curriculum changes that reflect current Broadway trends
Broadway-informed educators	Broadway-informed educators	Broadway-informed educators	Broadway-informed educators
	Connecting to people in the industry		Connecting to people in the industry
Keeping a finger on the pulse	Keeping a finger on the pulse	Keeping a finger on the pulse	Keeping a finger on the pulse
Getting student ready for New York work	Getting student ready for New York work	Getting student ready for New York work	Getting student ready for New York work

No cookie cutters

This phrase might have been the comment I heard and saw demonstrated most frequently during my time in the field. It meant that the faculty were looking for unique individuals.

Faculty 3: *You saw within the auditions, we're looking for such individual people. It's not like a conveyor belt sort of situation. Yes, they wanted students who had foundational work in singing, dancing, and acting, but individuality, spark, and sense of self were their barometer.*

Faculty 4: *We're not looking for cookie cutters. I want individuals that want to make their own marks in this industry, that want to really challenge themselves and work hard ... Someone who knows who they are and has a sense of themselves. They go out of their way to make it clear before the singing auditions begin that they want the students to take ownership in the audition room.*

Faculty 4: *Today, I want you to sing your two favorite songs in your book. I don't care if they're both contemporary up-tempo songs ... Do what you do best right now ... You are far more interesting than what you think we want you to be, so be yourself.*

Have fun & cheer each other on

The faculty values hard work done with a sense of fun and mutual encouragement. This brings a certain kind of audition day energy that encourages students to let down their guard, which lends to the sort of personal, face to face, meaningful

They need the red-carpet treatment... [We need] to show these kids what it would be like to be here.

connection that seems to be another large part of their overall identity as an MT program.

Faculty 1: *When we do that group voice warm up, we try to make it fun. We hope it is a different experience for them ... As I'm warming them up and getting them dancing and moving around as they sing ... you have an idea if they're gonna be ready to play and have fun when they get here in the program.*

Faculty 3: *I think if we make [the dance call] fun ... they'll kind of let that guard down ... I wanna see who they are and how they handle that environment.*

Faculty 1: *... while you're here today, make friends. In the bigger scope of the world ... you're not each other's competition. Lift each other up, love on each other. Enjoy the rest of your audition experience.*

Faculty 3: *So, what is it like to take dance [here]? We're kind to each other. We cheer each other on!*

Spirit of mentoring

The final value I saw reflected most on audition days was a spirit of mentoring. It was seen and heard in the information sessions, dance call, group voice warm up, and singing auditions.

Faculty 3: *If you don't even have a single pirouette, you're coming to school to learn. Don't freak out. Just show me your balance instead.*

Faculty 4 concluded an information session with,

Faculty 4: *My final words for you are ... grow where you're planted. Make a decision [about which school you choose] based on what's best for you. [Not because someone said some particular program is the school you're supposed to want to go to.]*

Connecting through recruitment travel

Recruitment travel falls mostly on Faculty 4, as the head of the program, although future recruitment locations are a conversation that all four faculty participate in. Faculty 4 views recruitment travel in the spring of high school students' junior year and early fall of their senior year as the first opportunity to lay the framework for face to face, meaningful connection.

Faculty 4: *That's a really big part of this job.*

Personal phone calls to accepted students

Once decisions have been made on the students they will accept, the faculty make personal phone calls to every student. While it is a time-consuming process for which all four of them are in the room, it is part of the personal touch that they value so highly. Additionally, they find it to be instrumental in helping them assess if they are on the same page as those they have accepted.

Faculty 3: *We called everyone ... and we're all there as a team ... It's so important to hear their response.*

Faculty 4: *It's just a really cool personal touch that we do ... You totally get a read on whether or not they're interested.*

On campus post-acceptance visits

All accepted students are invited to return to campus for a two-day visit.

Faculty 3: *I want to see them here, and I think vice versa, you know? Because it's sort of disconnecting when we audition and then they go out into the abyss. We wanna make sure we keep that connection because it's so personal and individual.*

These visits are tailored to each student, with two separate dance class auditing options (determined by their dance audition score), a half hour private lesson or coaching with Faculty 1 or Faculty 2, and lunch with Faculty 4.

Faculty 3: *... they're very individually tailored ... we're gonna look at making sure that they're in with groups that ... push them ... but also don't scare them ... It's a constant change to make sure that they're getting what they need ... so that they can see everything in such a quick stint, what we can offer.*



The faculty also provide the recruits ample time with current students, who serve as tour guides and lunch mates.

Faculty 3: *We're always like, 'Guys, tell them what it's like to be here. Your perspective is super important.' I can tell [recruits] what we're doing in the curriculum, but what is the culture like? Let them immerse themselves in that too.*

These on-campus visits are a large part of the recruitment push for the faculty. There were prospective students on campus nearly every day in March and April. It's a lot of work, but these visits are of high value to the faculty and seen as a major selling point.

Faculty 4: *We always win the campus visit ... They need to take class, to observe class. They need the red-carpet treatment ... [We need] to show these kids what it would be like to be here.*

Contenders in New York

Not only did all four faculty utter this phrase in my interviews with each of them, but my observations also further revealed how much of their recruitment practices hinged on this goal.

Faculty 4: *I knew exactly what I wanted the program to be and the kind of student I wanted to go after ... people that are contenders in New York.*

Curriculum changes that reflect current Broadway trends

To make sure that the curriculum they are offering potential recruits aligns with the goal of being contenders in New York, they often examine and make changes to courses and content.

Faculty 4: *We got the curriculum changed so that there would be acting every semester, there would be private voice lessons every semester ... and ... a minimum of two dance lessons [per semester].*

Another change they made was eliminating Western Classical repertoire requirements in voice lessons.

Faculty 1: *There is no need for them to sing classical music in order to be a good musical theater performer. We focus solely on what they're trying to do for their career.*

The pandemic introduced a self-taping module into their coursework.

Faculty 4: *It is our job to keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening in this industry and to be able to change our curriculum accordingly. For example, when the pandemic happened, everything went to self-taping, and that's not going anywhere, so we now have modules in our classes that talk about successful self-taping.*

And while showcase has been a priority for a while now, changes have been made to increase student exposure to agents and casting directors, including adding a virtual showcase and a dedicated two semester showcase course.

Building strong dancers and movers

The current standards for dancers and movers on Broadway inform this product. The challenging but fun dance call at auditions is a strong indication that this is an end goal.

Faculty 1: *It kind of tells everybody that if you're a dancer, you can come here and get really great dance training and then the movers also come here, and they become really good movers.*

The curriculum offers six different track levels, depending on a student's ability.

Faculty 3: *You'll be in the dance studio at least four days a week. We have six levels within our dance department that we interchange [so that we] are able to get you in a space that you will grow.*

In every level, dance and movement trends on Broadway feed the course content.

Faculty 3: *... you have to do all of the genres, all of the things, so I'm gonna get you in hip-hop, and then we're going to be working on some ballet technique ... We'll focus on different choreographers, looking at Fosse styles as well as preparing you for Hamilton ... I want to make sure that you're ready for anything.*

Faculty 3: *I do an exercise in MT [dance] styles ... where they learn seven tracks for the combo, and the day that they perform it, when we film it, they pick a number for the track out of a hat ... They have five minutes to go over their notes and then we're on it.*

Broadway-informed educators

They aim for a team of full-time and adjunct faculty who are in touch with what is happening on Broadway, either because they have worked in the industry or have a thorough and up-to-date understanding of its current expectations, trends, and styles.

Faculty 4: *I wanted people that were not only great educators, but that know this business; that understand the ins and outs because they've been ... in the trenches, so to speak.*

One of the first adjustments made was who would teach the MT voice lessons.

Faculty 1: *When I first got here, the classical voice faculty were teaching some of the musical theater majors... I knew that I needed people who are going to the casting director and agent workshops, watching what was being asked of our students, listening to new Broadway recordings all the time, paying attention to the trends...*

An additional asset that the faculty have found in making this sort of hiring their goal is an innate shared vision, which they attribute to sharing the same sort of understanding, work ethic, goals, and shorthand.

Faculty 3: *We all have a vision and it's similar and we're working towards the same thing.. There's a bit of understanding as to why I work the way that I work.*

Connecting to people in the industry

This is a theme that bleeds over from bringing in educators who are Broadway-informed people. Agents and casting directors are frequent visitors to campus, engaging with seniors in workshops, serving as guest artists for productions, and teaching courses as adjuncts.

Faculty 4: *We love bringing in guest artists that will help you get industry connected. This past year, [a Broadway professional] directed [one of our musicals]. Next year, we're the college premier of [a recent Broadway show]. [A Broadway profes-*

sional] is ... coming to direct it. We have a wonderful ... casting director in New York City and [they] teach a course ... about [utilizing social media presence and marketing] and how to do your taxes ... We hire [another top casting director to] oversee our virtual showcase ... to me, the [on]boarding and the outboarding [of students] are so important.

Keeping a finger on the pulse

The faculty are aware that to be in service of their students, they need to keep their finger on the pulse of what is happening in the MT industry.

Faculty 3: We know what we want the program to be, we know the kind of student we want, and collectively, we all have that same vision ... we want to continue to stay with what the industry is doing ... We need to know what is happening and then how we can set the students up for success.

Getting students ready for New York work

A lot of preparation goes into getting seniors ready for agents, casting directors, and showcase, and the faculty talk about all of it during their time with recruits. Faculty 1 mentions that they use microphones in the studio so that students are aware of how to sing eight shows a week with a microphone on Broadway.

Faculty 2: I teach [a class] in your senior year. This class builds a[n] [audition] book for you of all styles of music. We try to create an individual book for you with medium cuts and 16 bar cuts ... I try to do arrangements for [each student].

Faculty 3: I work with the seniors to make sure that [their dance reel] aligns with their branding... I want to make sure we're preparing you for shows that you would actually be right for ... I don't want you to be something that you're not, so ... we work with all of our seniors to make sure that you're set up for shows that are appropriate for you.

Faculty 4 makes it clear that getting every MT student in their program work and maintaining relationships with them for this purpose after graduation is a high priority.

Faculty 4: If you make the commitment to us, we're gonna make the commitment to you. It's a lifelong degree, not a four-year [degree].

HOW (MISSION STATEMENTS)

After I determined all the WHAT themes, I categorized them into groups (represented by the color coding in Table 4) that seemed to go together and formulated a mission statement (HOW) for each category.

The products and services in purple all seemed to center around the culture that the MT faculty seek to create as they recruit. "Emphasize a culture of individual branding and personal connection" was the HOW (mission statement) I assigned to this first category of WHATs.

Table 4
Finding the HOWs for the WHATs

WHATs (Products and Services)	HOW (Mission Statements)
No cookie cutters	Emphasize a culture of individual branding and personal connection
Have fun & cheer each other on	
Spirit of mentoring	
Connecting through recruitment travel	
Personal phone calls to accepted students	
On campus post-acceptance visits	
Contenders in New York	
Building strong dancers and movers	Emphasize curriculum designed to develop contenders in New York
Curriculum changes that reflect current Broadway trends	
Broadway-informed educators	
Connecting to people in the industry	Make it clear they are all-in for their students from day one
Keeping a finger on the pulse	
Keeping a finger on the pulse	
Getting student ready for New York work	



The WHATs in blue pointed toward another missional aspect in recruitment: “Emphasize curriculum designed to develop contenders in New York.” I want to pause and note that this mission statement is not a reflection of how the faculty define the success of an MT program. It is simply the avenue that they feel inspired and best equipped to focus on in their program. Thinking back to the grocery store metaphor, this is their celery and rice milk, and they were very clear throughout my field research that there are many paths for an actor to take and thrive outside of New York, and many ways for an MT program to support their students in a less New York-specific curriculum. As mentioned near the beginning of this article, the research design for my case study was chosen to make space for the existence of multiple realities (Bailey, 2017, p. 66), meaning there is more than one way to build and recruit for a MT program. Because of the participant faculty’s confidence that a New York contender curriculum focus is the lane for them, they do not waste energy trying to be all things to all recruits. They present themselves and their program clearly and trust that this clarity will draw recruits with similar vision.

The final section of WHATs, colored in green, was developed into, “Make it clear they are all-in for their students from day one” as its HOW (mission statement).

WHY (VISION STATEMENT)

After all the WHAT themes were umbrellaed under one of three HOW themes (mission statements), what remained was to determine an overarching WHY (vision statement). I kept in mind the WHAT and HOW codes detailed above and also went back to the raw data, looking for indications of their purpose, cause, or belief on display in recruitment practices. I determined that the faculty’s WHY could be summed up as: “To find unique individuals who will be contenders in New York” (see Table 5).

Table 5
Determining the WHY

WHATs (Products and Services)	HOW (Mission Statements)	WHY (Vision Statement)
No cookie cutters	Emphasize a culture of individual branding and personal connection	To find unique individuals who will be contenders in New York
Have fun & cheer each other on		
Spirit of mentoring		
Connecting through recruitment travel		
Personal phone calls to accepted students		
On campus post-acceptance visits		
Contenders in New York		
Building strong dancers and movers	Emphasize curriculum designed to develop contenders in New York	
Curriculum changes that reflect current Broadway trends		
Broadway-informed educators		
Connecting to people in the industry	Make it clear they are all-in for their students from day one	
Keeping a finger on the pulse		
Keeping a finger on the pulse		
Getting student ready for New York work		

CONCLUSION

With MT studies being a popular option for today’s college-bound students, the purpose of this study was to contribute to a research gap regarding how MT programs navigate recruitment. The results indicate that the recruitment practices of the MT faculty in this study follow a clear WHY, carried out by their HOWs and WHATs. Although the purpose of this study was not to measure the success of their products, it is worth noting that the vision that the faculty are operating through seems to be working. They meet their recruitment numbers each year from their original pool of accepted students, and they are graduating unique individuals who are consistently signing with agents, and, yes, contending in New York.

There is no need for them to sing classical music in order to be a good musical theater performer. We focus solely on what they’re trying to do for their career.

Again, the purpose of this study is not to judge the success of a program by enrollment numbers, students signed to agents, or students working professionally after graduation. Rather, the measure for success in this study is whether the HOWs and WHATs of the program come out of the WHY for the program. If time, money, and energy are being used efficiently, the answer is likely, “Yes.” The basic recommendation for practice would be to start with a vision statement (WHY) and allow the mission statements (HOW) and products and services (WHAT) to be informed by that WHY.

Keeping in mind that there is more than one WHY in which to operate, Sinek (2011) challenges leaders to find “the people who believe what you believe,” who match the culture that you feel called to foster for your program (p. 90). It is up to each individual program to decide what their culture is, and then to find faculty and students who share those values and, subsequently, a sense of belonging. On the feeling of belonging, Sinek says, “Our need to belong . . . is a constant that exists across all people in all cultures. It is a feeling we get when those around us share our values and beliefs. When we feel like we belong we feel connected and we feel safe” (2011, p. 53). MT programs should foster a sense of belonging for their students, as the final transitional space between a person being a student of MT and a MT professional. College students are beginning to solidify their identity and calling in life, which may be a smoother process when they feel connected and safe. It is the ethical responsibility of each program to create a clear culture for themselves and their students, and to recruit with integrity the students (and faculty) that share those values and beliefs. We do more harm than good when we recruit for numbers or talent without considering shared values and beliefs. The clearer programs are in their WHY, the better they will be able to connect with, care for, and equip for success the students they exist to serve.



BIOGRAPHY

Megan Richards is a voice teacher who is also active in the professional musical theatre industry as an actor and director. Megan has taught at several universities, including New York University, University of Utah, and Baylor University, and maintains a private studio. Recent professional projects include *White Christmas*, *Little Women* and *Beehive: The 60’s Musical*. As a researcher, Megan is interested in the processes and journeys of those in the voice and musical theatre industry. Baylor University (BME), NYU, Steinhardt (MM), Certificate in Vocology from NCVS/University of Utah, Shenandoah (DMA), PAVA-Recognized Vocologist. Colossians 3:17.

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by Joshua Robinson

SCRAP!

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“Scrap!”

The Full Monty and the Middle of the Theatrical Ecosystem

The Full Monty opened on Broadway on October 26, 2000, after a successful run at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre that same year. Based on the 1997 movie of the same name, the musical garnered several positive reviews, both in San Diego and in New York. Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* declared "...is it any good? Well, put it this way: the Eugene O'Neill Theater won't have to look for a new tenant for a long, long time" (Brantley, 2000). That prediction didn't prove to be terribly prophetic as the production closed less than two years later after scoring nine Tony nominations and winning none. You see, *The Full Monty* opened a few short months before the juggernaut *The Producers* would take Broadway by storm, racking up 15 Tony Award nominations and winning 12 awards. Brantley had praise for David Yazbeck's debut score, calling it "winning" and "ear-catching" (Brantley). His enthusiasm for the score was countered by subtle critiques of the show's book, calling Terrence McNally's work "... sometimes as lame and pandering as a midseason replacement sitcom" (Brantley). Despite this, Brantley and many of his journalist colleagues found something quite moving in the tale of economically disadvantaged men becoming stars, for even just a moment. At the end of Brantley's review, he suggests, "A loser becomes, for just a few minutes, a winner. That's the transformation that *The Full Monty* trades on, frankly and unpretentiously" (Brantley).

The musical closely follows the plot of its film predecessor; the greatest deviation is that the musical moves the film's setting of Northern England to Buffalo, New York and that most of the names have been changed. Jerry and his best friend Dave are among the workers who have been laid off from the once successful steel mills that drove the economy of Buffalo, NY. Jerry gets the idea to start a strip act after his ex-wife and her friends are spotted at a strip show. Jerry sees the strip act as an opportunity to make a quick buck to pay back child support so that Jerry can continue to see his son. Slowly, Jerry collects a group of six men to complete his act with Harold, his former boss, acting as the group's choreographer and a showbiz vet, Jeanette, acting as the group's collaborative pianist. A series of complications appear, from Dave, Jerry's fat friend, opting to take a security job rather than perform with "Hot Metal," the group name for the strip act, to Jerry himself deciding he can't perform at the last minute. By the final curtain, all six men have decided to not only perform, but to do "The Full Monty" in front of the mixed-gender crowd as the audience celebrates the group's success. Several questions are left unanswered at the show's end, most notably whether Jerry makes the money to keep seeing his son, but the resolution lies in the men's decision to make good on their promise, despite their own insecurities.

The Full Monty's depictions of men caught in the middle of a financial crisis has been performed nearly 1,000 times when accounting for amateur and professional productions combined and hundreds of times by amateur theatre companies across the globe. STAGETwo Productions of Evansville, IN produced the title in May 2025. Among the many reasons for the decision to produce the musical, director and STAGETwo Board President Toni Schaperjohn cited the show's message of body positivity as a main motivation, particularly given the company's emphasis on theatrical intimacy education. The musical's message of men caught in the middle of an economic crisis also appealed to the board in general, particularly given that the company tends to pull on more male-identifying candidates in auditions than female-identifying actors. STAGETwo Productions itself occupies a middle space similar to the men in the show. Not only is the company geographically located near the middle of the country, its location in Evansville, IN marks it at a crucial central geographic point in the tri-state area. STAGETwo also occupies a middle space in the theatrical ecosystem of its community, producing lesser-known works and edgier fare than the larger Evansville Civic Theatre, which celebrates its 100th season this fall. STAGETwo leases its own space and makes that space available to a large number of independent artists, musicians, stand-up comedians, and other theatrical groups, making the building itself home to a fascinating mélange of artistic identities and programs. As such, the STAGETwo space operates almost as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a space othered by the more traditional fare offered and methods embraced by its fellow local theatre programs.

I look at STAGETwo's decision to produce *The Full Monty*, and the production itself, in concert with the unique attributes of the organization itself. I argue that the producing entity in many ways exists in and mirrors the same "middle ground" that traps but ultimately liberates the men who appear in the musical. While STAGETwo generally produces one to two musicals a season, its offerings are diverse and not limited to musical theatre. That being said, their impetus in their musical theatre offerings tends to fall in line with their philosophy in general, focusing on titles that aren't immediately considered canonical or mainstream. In

looking at a community theatre that produces musicals, this study is indebted to Stacy Wolf's monumentally important text *Beyond Broadway* which explores musical theatre production outside of the NYC-centric model. Her work pinpoints the human investment as "organisms" in the musical theatre ecosystem and elevates other venues of theatre as legitimate fodder for the study of musical theatre production (Wolf, 2019, p. 5). I lean on Wolf's ideas to not only legitimize the work of a community theatre existing on the fringes of a local theatrical ecosystem, but also to help understand their decisions and processes within the larger ecosystem of amateur theatrical performance, particularly in the production of a musical like *The Full Monty*. In understanding the text of the musical less in terms of its Broadway production and more as it reflects STAGETwo's values, ideals, and processes, I argue for a type of re-evaluation of musical theatre texts as reflective of their circumstances of production in amateur settings, working with many of the ideas in Bruce Kirlie's *Unfinished Show Business* regarding the "openness" of musical theatre texts (Kirlie, 2005, p. 3). In particular, I look at the brief history of STAGETwo Productions, emphasizing what makes the organization unique in its fringe status on the edges of the Evansville theatrical ecosystem. Next, I look at their production of *The Full Monty*, produced last May, and propose differing ways in which the text was read and interpreted in a mid-sized midwestern town that may have differed from original critical reception of the show. Finally, I propose that these re-evaluations of theatre texts as interpreted by ama-



teur productions may serve as a means for understanding the ways in which certain texts can provide variations on the ways in which they were originally interpreted and read.

Although this paper focuses on a community theatre production of *The Full Monty*, this form of analysis has greater implications that could have an impact on casting in both the college classroom as well as the productions produced by colleges. A reconsideration of the legibility of musical theatre texts in amateur settings is just as germane to the academic casting process, and the production process, as it is for a community theatre. Texts become both complicated and deepened with meaning when considering the narratives college students bring with them into the rehearsal process and into performance. Their place in the ecosystem of their department, their embodied histories and stories, and their own personalities and gifts, all have impacts on the way a story is viewed or perceived by an audience that may make the musical theatre text read differently than it would in a Broadway or regional performance. Further, the audience attending a college or university performance also brings a set of circumstances and expectations that may further complicate their relationship to the material being presented. The differing legibility of musical theatre texts based on the context of performance could also have far-reaching implications for casting in scene and song classes, in Acting in the Song classes, and

P20



in coaching material from audition books, as the emphasis shifts squarely on the performer's circumstances in rendering their material legible for an audience.

STAGEtwo Productions and Its Relationship with Evansville, IN

STAGEtwo Productions was born out of another organization. Previously known as simply STAGE, which stood for Stage Theatre Actors of Greater Evansville, the original organization was almost solely interested in the production of new works. Working largely in former movie theatres, STAGE was an itinerant company that developed the work of local and semi-local playwrights at the nascent stages of their works. The company transitioned into STAGEtwo Productions with a performance of the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Show*, which saw the company evolve in terms of both leadership and board membership. STAGEtwo is going on its tenth season and annually produces *The Rocky Horror Show* as an homage to its inception point. While the emphasis has changed to a producing model, the company still hosts an annual Playwriting workshop and competition, with the winner being produced in the following season. Additionally, STAGEtwo became a permanent resident at the Studio building which they now call home. While the space is largely programmed with the shows and events extending from their annual season, the space also plays host to many independent theatre companies

and artists. In fact, it is this aspect of the company, providing a space and support for outside groups, that Board President Toni Schaperjohn says is at the heart of what makes STAGEtwo unique. "We put everyone else's air mask on before our own," she says, commenting on the array of offerings that both the company and independent artists offer at the venue, as well as the company's own community partnerships and sponsorships, such as LGBTQ+ organizations and other community advocacy and awareness projects, which are individually highlighted for each of the season's production. Schaperjohn also emphasizes the company's championing of those who are "other" in the community, calling to mind again the idea of Foucault's "heterotopia" in a theatrical context (Foucault, 1984).

STAGEtwo Productions' mission, as stated on their website, is to "...cultivate comprehensive, safe, and inclusive performing arts experiences through outreach, collaboration, support, and production." This spirit of inclusivity and safeness was one of the many factors that led the board to produce *The Full Monty*. The company had begun a relationship with Theatrical Intimacy Education during the previous season's production of Steven Sater and Duncan Shiek's *Spring Awakening*. For Schaperjohn, *The Full Monty* was a natural extension from that experience. The show, which traditionally requires both partial and full nudity from its six male-identifying principals and a sexy strip tease from a secondary character at the beginning of the show, relies heavily on the work of an intimacy director or coordinator. Both Toni Schaperjohn, who directed the production, and Jondi Soper, who serves on the STAGEtwo board, are certified intimacy coordinators and both highlight the fact that, when they attend training and conferences, they are often the only participants who are working in community-based theatre. This training, and the "safe space" mentality associated with intimacy work, would prove vital in producing the final result that Schaperjohn and her team wanted from the amateur actors working on the show.

Schaperjohn noticed early in the process that her six principal male-identifying characters shared a unique and

noticeable bond. While Schaperjohn went into the process with a concept of body positivity, she was surprised by how that spirit permeated throughout the entire process, leading to a supportive environment for men to embrace their physical shapes and sizes within the context of the musical. Schaperjohn commented that previous productions she had witnessed, including images from the Broadway production, all seemed to largely feature men's bodies that were somewhat typical of the so-called "gym body" with the usual exception of the actor who plays Dave. It was important for Schaperjohn that her members of "Hot Metal" look like everyday male-identifying people with bodies and shapes that ran the gamut. The trick of this idea was that Schaperjohn and her team would have to create a safe, brave space in which the men felt comfortable with not only removing their clothing but finding joy within the celebration of their unique bodies. This could have proved especially difficult in an amateur, community theatre setting where the men would know each other, either personally or by reputation. This is one of the complications with producing *The Full Monty* in a community setting, where actors aren't necessarily protected by their contracts or unions. Through a series of intimacy exercises, Schaperjohn created an environment that not only allowed the cast to feel comfortable losing their clothing but also created a place where the men were rooting for each other. The emphasis on body positivity does not seem to be an explicit factor in the positive critical reception of the Original Broadway production. Rather, it seems that the

unique constraints and possibilities inherent in an amateur production, where the sense of community among the cast becomes part of the overall experience, allowed for this theme to resonate much more strongly with the audiences that attended the production at the STAGETwo home venue.

The role of “Dave” is an avenue to understanding how the theme of body positivity became central to the STAGETwo production. The role, played on Broadway by John Ellison Conlee and in the STAGETwo production by local actor Patrick Litteken, is usually played by an actor of size in contrast to Jerry’s more normative frame. Dave initially has the hardest time being a part of “Hot Metal” and towards the end of the musical, he decides to take a security job rather than participate. He changes his mind, however, in the 11th hour and performs with his friends during their one-night only show. Early in the first act, Dave performs the duet “You Rule My World,” a somewhat crude ballad that recounts Dave’s relationship with food. On Broadway, the song was played largely for laughs at the expense of both the character and the actor playing Dave. In the STAGETwo production, the number was still largely comic, but also took a heartbreaking turn, emphasizing that Dave’s food addiction, particularly considering his being laid off from the steel factory, was fueling both his depression and his inability to connect physically and emotionally with his wife, Georgie. It is possible that the audience’s reaction to this number, more heartfelt than comedic, was fueled by their knowledge of who Litteken was as a member of the theatre community at large, causing a reorientation of the number’s purpose within the fabric of the show. Additionally, near the end of the show, Jerry calls Dave a “fat bastard,” a cruel nickname he has mentioned previously over the course of the musical’s running time. Dave’s response in the script is to approach Jerry in a way that threatens violence as he tells Jerry to never call him that again. The moment is poignant but seemed to carry a greater weight in the STAGETwo production as Dave’s journey over the course of the musical seemed to, in some ways, take precedence over that of the lead character Jerry. Litteken’s performance, with his voice cracking as he threatens Jerry, follows a trajectory set up during the number “You Rule My World” to see Dave’s plight as relatable and universal. The payoff was palpable as Dave ends the show with embracing his body by performing with “Hot Metal” in the show’s finale.

The location of STAGETwo in Downtown Evansville also creates a special relationship with the characters, themes, and locations of *The Full Monty*. Often called “River City” based on its location on the banks of the Ohio River, songs like “Breeze Off the River” hold a complicated double meaning for audiences and performers alike when witnessing and performing the show. While the location of the musical, namely Buffalo, NY, has many differences from Evansville, IN, there are also notable similarities. Both communities are working class and feature large factory systems that operate as the principal employment opportunity for citizens of the cities. That economic uncertainty in the face of recent downfalls in the manufacturing sector have a special resonance for an audience watching *The Full Monty* outside of the New York City area. More specific to the producing theatre in question, STAGETwo has a large crop of men in their casting pool, often outnumbering the female-identifying auditioners. This factor, uncommon for many community theatres or theatres in general, made an interesting situation for the musical’s topicality, particularly in terms of its representation, and perceived repudiation, of toxic masculinity, particularly in the lead character of Jerry. Again, this is a theme that critics don’t pick up on in their initial reviews of the musical on Broadway. But within the context of the STAGETwo production, the journey Jerry goes on to understanding his own toxic masculinity, particularly in terms of his relationship with his son Nathan, is very present.

Conclusion: Legibility of *The Full Monty* in Different Contexts

There are many factors that could result in this emphasis on the themes of body positivity and toxic masculinity being more present in the STAGETwo production than the Broadway production or subsequent professional productions of *The Full Monty*. But I argue that the unique situation of the amateur community theatre, with its emphasis on community building and inclusion, create an environment that allows these themes to become more central to the plot of the musical. In particular, STAGETwo’s emphasis on inclusivity and being a “home base” for those othered by the community at large helped create an emphasis on these themes in their production of the musical. While it may go without saying that a musical’s legibility is dependent on the circumstances in which it is produced, there is a special consideration to be made for musicals that are produced by amateur, community-based organizations as the impetus behind production and the methods used to actually produce the musicals are markedly different from the motivations and processes used in producing musicals professionally. First, there is an emphasis on the geographic location of the musical’s production, and the geography’s relationship to the material in general, that may impact the way a musical is received and read by a local audience. Second, the approach toward the material is colored with the emphasis of community-building that tends to unify most community-based theatrical organizations. Finally, the cast, who are known as members of this community, bring their own engendered histories and personalities into the fabric of the performance.

The intricacies of STAGETwo and its unique place in the Evansville community has unique implications for the role of



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amateur theatre, whether in the community realm or in the academic realm. Academic productions are products of their departments. The geographic location of the department, and the location of the local audience, has a profound impact on the ways in which the text will be read, presented, and processed. Second, the material is impacted by the circumstances of the producing apparatus, particularly an academic theatre department, and its philosophies and processes. Finally, the students themselves, embodied with their own histories, personalities, and expectations in the ecosystems of their departments, temper the language and music of the production with their own embodied narratives as they bring these circumstances with them under the auspices of their performance. While *The Full Monty* has seen fewer college productions given its gender breakdown, the lessons from STAGEtwo's production of the musical have far reaching effects that have implications for other musical theatre titles in more amateur venues and producing systems.

While this paper is concerned largely with a reading of the musical *The Full Monty*, it is likely that other titles also find a different legibility within the world of community-based theatre. Certainly, there has been plenty of scholarship on the ways in which site-specific theatre changes the legibility of theatre texts. The question remains, then, about the unique situation of the amateur theatre, whether it be community or academic, and its ability to provide multiple readings of a musical theatre text, or any theatre text, given its situation as both a community gathering place and a haven for both community members and students.

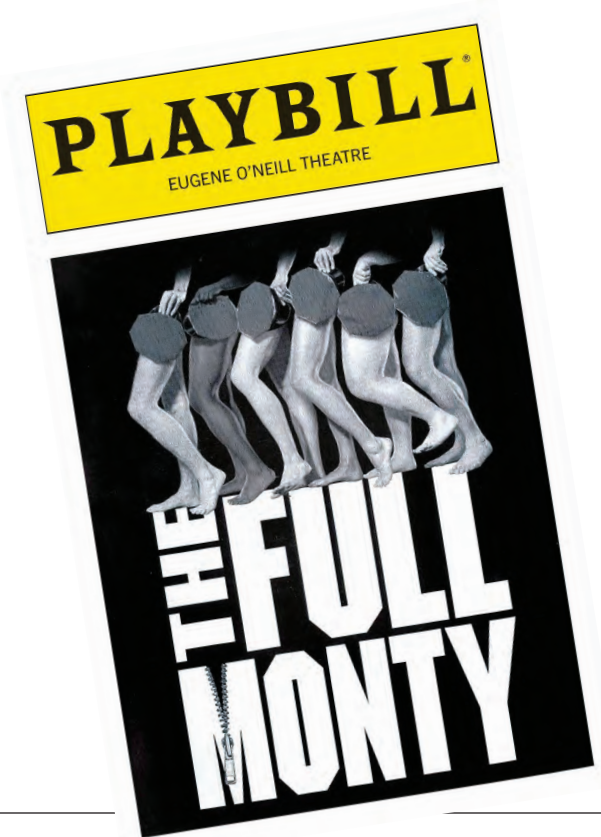


BIOGRAPHY

Joshua Robinson is an Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre at University of Southern Indiana. He holds a Ph.D. from Indiana University. In addition to his career as director and performer, his research can be found in Theatre Topics and Studies in Musical Theatre. His book, *Michael John LaChiusa: A Critical Companion* was published in July by Methuen Drama.

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Beyond the Audition Room

History and Theoretical
Frameworks for
Reimagining Access in
Musical Theatre Education

Jessica Humphrey

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IN RECENT DECADES, musical theatre has become one of the fastest-growing disciplines within higher education, reflecting both the art form's cultural prominence and its professional demands. Assorted coursework has now evolved into a large field with specialized Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) programs, conservatory-style training, and national visibility. While there were only a few musical theater degrees in the 1970s, now 50 years later there are roughly 150 BFA in Musical Theatre programs. This expansion includes an increasingly competitive and costly audition process that often privileges students with financial resources, access to coaching, and prior exposure to high-quality training. Especially for many underrepresented students, the audition functions less as a gateway to opportunity than as a reminder of structural inequities in both higher education and the performing arts. As someone who has not only witnessed hundreds of college auditions but also interviewed students for a dissertation on the college audition process, I have seen how these inequities play out in real time.

Understanding the dynamics of access and equity in musical theatre admissions requires attention not only to the field's historical trajectory but also to the lived experiences of students navigating auditions. The evolution of programs reveals how institutional growth has been shaped by cultural shifts, industry pressures, and neoliberal values of branding and marketability. Now, every program is encouraged to post performances by their students on social media for prospective students to gauge which schools will provide the best training. Since around 2010 and even more during 2020, the audition process itself has transformed, moving from local in-person evaluations to prescreens, digital platforms, and Unifields—each innovation carrying both opportunities and barriers.

To analyze these developments, this article applies two complementary theoretical frameworks: Laura Rendón's Validation Theory (1994) and Tara Yosso's Cultural Wealth Theory (2005). Validation Theory underscores the importance of affirmation during the pre-college transition, where the audition often becomes a pivotal moment of belonging or exclusion. Cultural Wealth Theory challenges deficit-based views of applicants, highlighting the multiple forms of capital—aspirational, navigational, familial, social, linguistic, and resistant—that students bring to the process. Together, these frameworks shed light on how the structures and audition practices we design as faculty and staff intersect with questions of identity, equity, and representation. By examining the emergence of musical theatre as an academic discipline, the evolution of auditions, and the application of equity-centered frameworks, this article seeks to reimagine admissions practices that truly welcome and support students.

THE EMERGENCE OF MUSICAL THEATRE AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

In its earliest form, musical theatre training was fragmented and its recognition as a distinct academic discipline emerged gradually. Students interested in musicals often studied voice within music departments or acting within theatre departments, with little crossover between the two. Many early programs were "patchwork-y," combining existing coursework rather than developing curricula designed specifically for the integrated art form of musical theatre (Knox, 2025).

The expansion of musical theatre training parallels the professionalization of other artistic fields in academia. Just as universities created degrees in jazz studies, film, and animation in response to evolving cultural and industry needs, musical theatre became formalized when its popularity and professional demands grew in the mid-20th century. The University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) conferred the first Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Musical Theatre in 1969, legitimizing the field as worthy of serious academic and conservatory-style training. Helen Laird's advocacy for validating belting as a legitimate vocal technique within higher education was central to CCM's establishment of the program. When the program's first graduate, Pamela Myers, was cast in the original Broadway production of *Company*, CCM's credibility as a training ground was secured (Pender, 2010). This moment was more than symbolic; it signaled to other universities that musical theatre training could achieve academic rigor.

From the 1970s onward, the number of programs grew slowly, but the most significant expansion occurred in the early 2000s. Popular media such as *Glee*, *American Idol*, and *High School Musical* drew widespread attention to musical theatre, inspiring a generation of young performers and driving demand for professional training. The increased attention and demand led to some musical theatre programs becoming "cash cows," emphasizing recruitment and branding while not always investing in the infrastructure required for comprehensive training (Knox, 2025).

Many BFA Musical Theatre programs adopted a conservatory model, emphasizing the cultivation of "triple-threat" performers—students trained equally in singing, acting, and dance. The notion of the triple threat, popularized by Jerome Robbins' casting practices in *West Side Story*, became codified in BFA curricula. By the early 21st century, the triple-threat standard was not only an artistic expectation but also a framework guiding curriculum design (Kay, 2009; Stempel, 2011). As collegiate musical theatre training expanded, new challenges emerged regarding access and equity. High-quality training prior to college became increasingly necessary, with high school students arriving at auditions more polished and professionalized. National competitions like the Jimmy Awards elevated visibility for certain students. It also reinforced inequities for those without access to regional awards or strong high school theatre programs. In this way, the very forces that helped musical theatre gain academic legitimacy also entrenched barriers for underrepresented students. As educators, we continue to grapple with this paradox: expansion without equal access.





THE EVOLUTION OF THE COLLEGE AUDITION PROCESS

The process of auditioning for musical theatre programs has evolved alongside musical theatre training itself, reflecting broader cultural, technological, and ideological shifts. In earlier decades, the process was relatively straightforward: students submitted paper applications and performed a monologue and song at in-person auditions. During the 1980s and 1990s, the expectations had become more formalized, and *Dramatics* magazine regularly published advice columns emphasizing authenticity and repertoire choice (McNally, 1987). For students, this meant auditions felt accessible—intimidating, but manageable.

A major turning point came with the creation of the Unified Auditions (“Unifieds”) in the early 2000s, which allowed students to audition for multiple schools at a single event in cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. Initially conceived as a cost-saving strategy, Unifieds grew into massive audition events hosting thousands of students (Borrelli, 2020). At the Chicago Unified Auditions, it’s not uncommon to see long lines of students rehearsing songs in hotel hallways or studying their schedule of different auditions each hour. While Unifieds reduced some travel costs, the sheer scale and competitive intensity created new pressures for students and families. Many students I’ve interviewed describe Unifieds as exhilarating, yet overwhelming.

During the 2010s, prescreens (video submissions required before students were invited to live auditions) became a standard part of the college musical theatre application

process. What began as a practical way to manage large applicant pools quickly added significant cost and preparation time, contributing to the growth of a multi-million-dollar private coaching industry. Because each program set its own prescreen requirements, students often ended up recording dozens of nearly identical videos to meet slightly different guidelines. In 2016, Stephen Agosto introduced the Musical Theatre Common Prescreen (MTCP) in an effort to bring greater consistency and equity to this stage of the process, particularly for students from under-resourced schools (Agosto, 2019). The MTCP provides suggested guidelines for institutions—time limits, labeling instructions, framing and lighting expectations, and standardized requirements for songs, monologues, and dance submissions. When programs follow these guidelines, students are able to reuse materials instead of generating twenty or more versions of the same four or five pieces. Many students have told me that creating those variations is the most exhausting and discouraging part of audition season.

Although the MTCP represents meaningful progress, it still has limitations. The guidelines allow three different options for songs, monologues, and dance submissions, reflecting ongoing disagreement among both participating and non-participating institutions. Even after multiple rounds of feedback, where MTEA was invited to contribute, there is still no consensus. Some programs maintain that their auditions are “different” and require specific materials to evaluate whether a student should advance. I often wish those faculty members could hear directly from students about the hours required to produce even one additional video. What some faculty frame as a test of dedication often becomes, for students with limited time or resources, another barrier that has nothing to do with artistry or potential.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated further innovations. Virtual auditions, Zoom interviews, and wild card video submissions became commonplace. These adaptations reduced travel costs for some students but introduced new inequities related to access to technology, quiet rehearsal space, and editing tools. This shift fundamentally changed what “preparedness” means for students and educators alike. At the same time, the rise of digital platforms like TikTok and YouTube shifted expectations, as students increasingly curated personal brands and online followings to demonstrate

marketability. As Stith (2017) notes, students now enter college auditions already engaged in self-branding as “micro-celebrities,” reflecting how market-driven culture has seeped even into the audition room.

The audition process has unfortunately transitioned to favoring students with financial resources, access to coaching, and cultural capital. The average applicant now applies to 15-20 schools, often spending thousands of dollars on travel, coaching, and materials (Tatham, 2018). While efforts like MTCP and virtual auditions have aimed to level the playing field, systemic inequities continue to shape how auditions are experienced. These realities call for educators to rethink not only how auditions are structured, but whom they truly serve.

THEORETICAL LENSES FOR UNDERSTANDING ACCESS AND BELONGING

Laura Rendón’s Validation Theory (1994) underscores the importance of external validation in shaping student confidence, motivation, and belonging. While originally developed to address persistence in higher education, it has particular resonance in the pre-college context of musical theatre auditions. Unlike traditional academic admissions, where validation often begins after enrollment, the audition process requires students to seek affirmation before arriving on campus. In audition settings, this might look like a faculty panel that smiles and encourages, versus one that is silent and detached. These small cues that can dramatically affect a young performer’s sense of worth. Acceptance into a program serves as confirmation of artistic legitimacy, while rejection or silence can be deeply invalidating.

For many students, the people around them during the audition process become crucial sources of validation. Coaches, high school teachers, and audition panels shape how students interpret their own potential. A prescreen pass, callback, or offer does more than open the door to a program; it signals that someone in the profession sees ability and promise. On the other hand, a rejection with no explanation can deepen self-doubt and reinforce a sense of exclusion. In conversations with students, I’ve seen how even a brief acknowledgment from faculty (a kind note, a moment of encouragement, or transparent communication) can significantly change how they view both the program and their place in the field. Because auditions are highly subjective, students often struggle to understand why one panel praises something another panel critiques. What reads as “raw potential” to one program may look like “lack of polish” to another, and that ambiguity carries emotional weight. Embedding validation into auditions does not require elaborate feedback systems; sometimes it is as simple as clearer communication or a small gesture that affirms a student’s artistry. While I do not know of any program that formally sends individualized thank-you notes to every applicant, I suspect some faculty already engage in this quietly and informally.

Another layer to this dynamic is the role of private coaches. When coaches have close relationships with faculty at certain institutions, their confidence in a student can serve as a form of borrowed validation. Students often feel that these relationships signal preexisting belonging, and some coaches market this insider access as part of their service. For students with limited resources, this exclusivity becomes yet another barrier to equitable access.

Tara Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Theory (2005) reframes how institutions perceive student assets, shifting from deficit-based evaluation to recognition of the multiple forms of capital that underrepresented students bring to educational spaces.

This framework has encouraged me to view student preparation through a wider lens. In the context of musical theatre auditions, aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital are frequently overlooked in favor of traditional markers of elite training. For example, a student who learns repertoire from YouTube, rehearses in community spaces, or records prescreens on borrowed equipment demonstrates significant navigational and familial capital. Similarly, students who incorporate cultural identity into audition material showcase resistant capital by asserting their voices within historically Eurocentric audition norms. Yet these forms of capital are often undervalued by audition panels accustomed to evaluating polished, conventionally-trained performers. Applying Cultural Wealth Theory invites faculty to adopt a more holistic approach, recognizing diverse pathways to artistry and potential.

Challenges remain in implementing this framework, particularly in figuring out to how make evaluations equitable while also keeping in mind the industry-driven definitions of “talent” and “preparedness.” However, when faculty adopt equity-minded practices (Bensimon, 2005) and actively question how institutional norms privilege certain applicants, they create space for recognizing nontraditional forms of excellence. When programs value authenticity over polish, they cultivate a generation of artists who reflect the world we live in.

WHERE HISTORY AND THEORY INTERSECT

The history of musical theatre’s professionalization and the evolution of auditions illustrate how the marketing of programs, rankings, and institutional growth have produced both opportunity and inequity. The pressure to arrive as a polished, “market-ready” performer has disproportionately benefited students with financial and cultural privilege, while marginalizing others. I also hear the concern from faculty of students arriving too polished and not prepared to play or have the expectation of needing to always be perfect. Validation Theory helps illuminate the psychological toll this process takes, particularly when rejection is experienced as invalidation of both talent and identity. Cultural Wealth Theory, meanwhile, reframes the conversation by highlighting the assets students already bring from their communities, families, and lived experiences.

Together, these frameworks underscore a critical tension: while the growth of musical theatre programs has expanded opportunities, the structures of access remain deeply inequitable. This tension is one that many of us in musical theatre education feel every audition season. To address this, educators and institutions must intentionally incorporate practices of validation and equity-minded recognition of cultural wealth. When we do, our classrooms and productions begin to look and sound more like the world around us. By critically examining the past and applying theoretical frameworks that center equity and belonging, musical theatre educators can reimagine admissions and training practices.

TOWARD MORE EQUITABLE PRACTICES IN MUSICAL THEATRE ADMISSIONS

What would it look like if auditions themselves modeled the values of inclusion we teach? By drawing on Validation Theory and Cultural Wealth Theory, educators and institutions can reimagine auditions as moments of support, affirmation, and access rather than as gatekeeping.

1. **Holistic Evaluation Practices.** Programs should adopt admissions processes that recognize multiple forms of student potential beyond technical polish. In my own work, I’ve seen how resilience and adaptability predict success just as much as technique. Evaluators can be trained to identify cultural wealth such as navigational skill, social capital, or resourcefulness as indicators of future success. A holistic review values lived experience as much as technical skill. Programs can make auditions more equitable by clearly stating that they welcome applicants without private lessons or formal training, and that creativity, storytelling, and authenticity matter as much as years of studio work. This lowers the unspoken pressure that the “ideal candidate” must come from expensive training pipelines. Auditions can also honor a student’s lived experience by encouraging material that reflects personal identity, cultural heritage, or linguistic diversity. Allowing repertoire in multiple languages or giving students the option to include a brief context statement signals that the program values the full human behind the performance, not just industry polish. Transfer students, community college graduates, and those with alternative training backgrounds should not be penalized by redundant coursework or unclear transfer policies. Clearer articulation pathways help legitimize the many routes students take into our field.
2. **Faculty Training in Equity-Mindedness.** Faculty and staff must examine how their assumptions about excellence may privilege certain groups. Regular workshops on implicit bias, culturally responsive evaluation, and equity-minded decision-making (Bensimon, 2005) can support more inclusive decision-making. These sessions also remind faculty of their core purpose: nurturing talent, not policing it.



3. **Expanding Access to Preparation Resources.** Many inequities emerge long before auditions begin. Institutions that offer low-cost or free audition workshops, broaden their recommended repertoire lists, and avoid prescreen requirements that demand professional-grade technology open doors for students who might otherwise opt out. Partnerships with regional theatres or community centers can function as affordable preparation pipelines. Programs should use shared resources such as the Musical Theatre Common Prescreen and remain mindful of the time and financial demands placed on applicants. These are modest but meaningful steps toward a fairer audition process.
4. **Reducing or Removing Hidden Costs.** Programs can review their audition expectations to identify cost barriers. Proactively offering fee waivers signals welcome rather than hesitation. A fee-free audition day for local or regional students can strengthen connections to the surrounding community. During recruitment season, providing on-campus taping support for prescreens can ease both cost and stress. Programs should also consider whether they truly require professionally edited videos or if phone-recorded submissions are equally effective. Flexible, culturally inclusive, and low-cost clothing guidelines can further reduce unnecessary burden. Together, these changes communicate that financial resources should not determine opportunity.
5. **Transparent Communication and Embedding Validation into the Process.** Even within highly selective environments, small acts of affirmation (personalized communication, clear expectations, and brief encouragement) can make the process more humane. A simple note after Unifeds thanking students for their work can leave a lasting impression. While individualized feedback may be unrealistic, acknowledging effort, providing accessible resources, or offering general feedback sessions can validate a student's artistry. Transparency also matters. Clear rubrics, publicly accessible timelines, and detailed checklists help applicants plan ahead. Sample prescreens demonstrating framing, lighting, and expectations, along with videos from faculty or student ambassadors walking through the audition process, support students who learn best visually. Being explicit about fees, waivers, and optional elements reduces unnecessary fear and aligns with Validation Theory by affirming that students deserve to be here.
6. **Rethinking Dance Auditions to Value Everyone.** Dance auditions often privilege students with years of studio training. More equitable alternatives include offering two combinations: one for advanced dancers and one for beginners or movers, and providing a short tutorial video in advance for students who learn at different paces. Allowing movement-based or storytelling pieces drawn from cultural traditions acknowledges the navigational, linguistic, and resistant capital many students bring.
7. **Creating Supportive Physical and Emotional Environments.** Small environmental shifts can communicate belonging. Programs might provide trained student guides to welcome auditionees, encourage faculty to remain visible and approachable throughout the day, and offer warm-up rooms or quiet spaces where students can prepare or decompress. These gestures reinforce that the audition is a place where students are invited, not tested for worthiness.

These practices offer a roadmap for aligning admissions with the values of equity and inclusion. Rather than reinforcing barriers, musical theatre education can actively dismantle them, creating a training ground that not only prepares students for the stage but also models the justice and representation that our industry aspires to reflect.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of musical theatre as an academic discipline and the transformation of the audition process reveal both the remarkable growth of the field and the inequities that persist within it. From its patchwork beginnings to the establishment of rigorous BFA programs, musical theatre has earned a place in higher education as a discipline that integrates artistry, technical training, and professional preparation. Yet this institutional success has also introduced challenges. The rise of Unified Auditions, prescreens, and the increased use of outside "college audition coaches" reflects how neoliberal pressures shape not only how programs recruit but also how students prepare, often privileging those with greater financial resources and access to coaching. Each year I meet talented students who embody both sides of this story, both the promise and the pressure.

By using frameworks such as Validation Theory and Cultural Wealth Theory, we as educators can better understand how these structures impact students' sense of belonging, identity, and opportunity. Validation Theory highlights the power of affirmation, and the harm of its absence, at a critical pre-college stage. Cultural Wealth Theory urges educators to reframe how talent and preparation are defined, recognizing the multiple forms of capital that students from diverse

backgrounds bring to auditions. Together, these frameworks remind us that auditions are not merely evaluative checkpoints. These formative experiences shape students' trajectories in higher education and beyond.

The call to action is clear: musical theatre educators and institutions must resist models that commodify students or reinforce systemic barriers. Instead, we should pursue holistic evaluation, equity-minded faculty training, accessible preparation resources, and affirming audition practices. By doing so, programs can create admissions processes that not only identify talent but also nurture resilience, honor lived experience, and expand access to those historically excluded from the field. Ultimately, the health of musical theatre as an art form depends on its ability to reflect diverse voices and stories. A more equitable audition process is not simply a moral imperative, it is essential for the relevance musical theatre in higher education.



BIOGRAPHY

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Breaking the Silo: Knowledge Integration in Musical Theatre Education

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Consider the following vignette...

a student arrives on a Monday morning for their first dance session of the week; later, they head to a voice workshop, where they learn about the physiological makeup of a “speech quality” posture; after lunch, they have a singing lesson and continue to work through a song they’re preparing for their music theatre repertoire class (which is on Thursday); and finally, it’s off to an acting rehearsal with their full cohort for the upcoming play. We might look at this eight-hour stretch and think, “what a terrific day of rich and varied musical theatre education!” We may also recognise that each component of learning is treated as discrete from the others, leading to a focus on individual units of specialisation within each “silo” (Stolz, 2021, p. 98). On this latter point, many of us will be familiar with potential pedagogical consequences of the siloed approach—students feel overwhelmed by the constant unfurling of new “content”; some students may not be able to synthesise the different messages and information they are receiving in each session. All of this may lead to (perhaps most frustratingly of all) the dreaded retort on Thursday in repertoire class: “But [insert tutor’s name] told me to do it like this.”

The only-partially imagined anecdote above speaks to a tension at the heart of music theatre training: improving skills in clearly defined areas (i.e. acting, singing, and dancing), whilst working towards a seamless blend in performance contexts. Unsurprisingly, authors have advocated for forms of “Knowledge Integration” within musical theatre (and related disciplinary) education contexts. Some studies, particularly as relating to dance, have explored the alignment of performance disciplines with other subjects from the STEM subjects (Risner & Anderson, 2008; Vexler, Merzel, Zhi Li, & Walter, 2024); others call for shared methodologies for learning across different disciplines (Gates, 1998); others still explore the co-alescence of sub-disciplines, sometimes framed as “teaching [insert topic] through [insert second topic]” (Accetta, 2013; Franceschina, 2015; Kisida, Goodwin, & Bowen, 2020). This trend reflects neoliberal pressures on the higher education sector—a two-for-one subject bargain looks attractive on a balance sheet, as does the allure of garnering more students via the promise of interdisciplinary crossover. More than that, the emphasis on integration speaks to the pervasive constructivist ideologies within broader arts education circles (Shivley, 2015; Vexler et al., 2024; Wiggins, 2015). From this perspective, bringing together different disciplines of musical theatre education makes sound pedagogical sense, implying as it does that learning in one area can be built upon, and thus reinforce, the knowledge and skills learned in another.

This article discusses our experiences of synthesising practices, language, and concepts from the Stanislavski System for acting and Estill Voice Training. In essence, we join the chorus above in calling for knowledge integration as a guiding principle in teaching musical theatre students. Having touched on the principles of each pedagogy, we sketch several short case studies of the integration in practice. Ultimately, we advocate less for a specific combination of teaching methods—even if we believe that the aforementioned approach can serve musical theatre students well. Rather, and as distinct to related studies, our contribution is about exploring the strategies and environments that enable such integration to occur in the first place—what is involved in this process? What are the contextual requirements? What are the implications for those involved? Moreover, we offer an alternative perspective on pedagogical integration by focusing on alignment at a *team* level, whereby knowledge is held individually, shared collectively and disseminated in varied teaching contexts. This complements previous research, such as the studies cited above, that focus on integration as undertaken by a *single* tutor within the framework of a particular module. We conclude by considering where the benefits accrue from this approach. We suggest that this is not simply about improving the quality of education for students; team integration can provide valuable upskilling for teachers as well, enhancing their own capabilities and, most importantly, satisfaction in their vocation.

Before addressing the pedagogical material, we will briefly sketch our teaching context. Our workplace is a tertiary institution located in a mid-sized New Zealand city. Our students are enrolled in the Performing Arts stream of a bachelor's degree in Music and Performing Arts. Several characteristics of this setting have informed our shift towards integrated teaching methods—in part, the emphasis on shaping multifaceted graduates who can work towards a “portfolio” career (Clague, 2024; Munnely, 2022); in part, the diverse prior experiences of our incoming students and the consequent need to bring them onto the same disciplinary page. Most importantly, we comprise the full-time teaching staff of the programme. Notwithstanding several itinerant tutors, we lead the majority of teaching hours and project-based assessments (e.g. musicals, showcases, plays, etc.), a situation that has become entrenched for primarily economic reasons. We all have elements of musical theatre training and experience—one as a performer/director; one as a musical director; one as a performer/voice coach—but the combination of programme breadth with limited personnel resources means that our individual teaching requirements often extend beyond respective specialisations. Put simply, we have found ourselves thrust into lesser-known classroom territories, a situation that encourages cooperation and sharing of skills. None of these contextual factors in and of themselves demand an integrated approach, but they illuminate how, as teachers, we have been led towards this point. For many readers, we suspect that our experiences are not unique within higher education. And thus, we hope that the following sections stimulate others' thoughts for constructing their own take on this philosophy.



STANISLAVSKI SYSTEM AND ESTILL VOICE TRAINING: PRINCIPLES AND EXAMPLES

Following Accetta (2013), our approach to knowledge integration has primarily synthesized principles from the Stanislavski System and Estill Voice Training. In the early years of our degree teaching, the Stanislavski System was the basis of acting classes, while Estill Voice Training would sit squarely in voice classes and singing lessons. Individual teachers would lead their siloed content (acting, voice, music), effectively passing around the students to get the different “fixes” as needed. While we have not dismantled this particular division of modules (i.e. students still take “Acting” and “Voice”), an integrated approach has seen each tutor build capabilities to apply, where necessary, tools from the different pedagogies, as well as more consistently utilising shared vocabulary and ideas across different classes and performance projects. The Stanislavski System remains the basis of acting classes, but a student is now equally as likely to encounter these principles in a voice class or a music coaching session; the same applies for principles of Estill Voice Training outside of voice classes and singing lessons. Moreover, we have increased opportunities within the teaching environment whereby a student may encounter both philosophies in order to address a performance-related challenge. As we illuminate below, it is not to suggest that each individual can teach any course interchangeably; nor is it that a little bit of “everything” in one bundle represents a desired pedagogical outcome. Rather, adopting the integrated mindset on our behalf opens up fresh possi-

bilities for *adding* to what we already teach on a regular basis—that is, the music coach who brings Stanislavski vocabulary to the room (see Example A) helps the student take more steps towards a complete performance, but does not override the need for nuanced exploration of acting choices with another teacher outside this session.

Before describing this integration in practice, let us turn to the methods under consideration. Both the Stanislavski System and Estill Voice Training (hereafter, EVT) will be familiar to many readers; we focus on how each is utilised in preparing students for performances. The Stanislavski System assists actors in locating the essence of a given character and their situation. From the outset, students are introduced to the fundamental notions of objectives, actions, and given circumstances (O'Brien, 2009, p. 1ff), which are expanded upon as the course progresses. These operate concurrently with the idea of the “magic if,” whereby an actor fully places themselves in the textual world, and thus embodies what that character is experiencing in that moment—a state of “I am being” vis-à-vis the character (Stanislavski, 2009, p. 89). From a teaching perspective, this framework provides a powerful and, crucially, *methodical* process for developing layered and truthful characters and narrative worlds. It gives students a sequence of steps and prompts—in basic form: who/where am I? What do I want and why? How am I going to achieve it?—that can steadily be deployed in more complex imagined settings. Fundamentally, we find that it helps students eliminate guesswork or approximation in developing their characters and how they might respond to other characters and circumstances.

The principles of EVT stem from Jo Estill's famous dictum, “Everyone has a beautiful voice. You just have to learn how to use it.” Following the structure of EVT, our students learn about the mechanics of voice physiology, starting with the division between Power, Source, and Filter; moving to the thirteen Figures of the Voice, which then lead to the six primary Voice Qualities, namely, Speech, Falsetto, Sob, Opera, Twang, Belt (Accetta, 2013, pp. 10-14). This leads on to a lesser-known component of the Estill model, Diction at a Distance,² which focuses on the mechanics of diction and storytelling. Underpinning this sequence is learning how to isolate and control individual parameters that shape the sound of a voice. In doing so, the student gradually acquires greater mobility and flexibility to use their voice in a multitude of ways in response to a specific requirement (whether performance-based or not). Knitted throughout this exploration of EVT is a focus on how control of vocal qualities and mobility support and facilitate more varied and sophisticated artistry—crucially, though, the qualities themselves do not represent the artistic outcome, so much as ingredient that interact with the text and other performance factors (e.g. style, context).

Both the Stanislavski System and EVT are, obviously, far richer and more complex than outlined here, with multiple constituent parts that enable practitioners to fully realise performance ambitions. Nonetheless, we see a natural synergy between the two. If the Stanislavski System provides the actor with analytical tools and concepts needed to locate appropriate character choices, then EVT offers an equally powerful array of tools for realising these choices in the voice. This is, in essence, how we approach the integration of the two methods—neither is taught so that it requires the other, per se; rather, we find opportunities to place the varied language and concepts in different contexts and alongside other moments of learning. This means that students are exposed more regularly to the fundamental ideas of Stanislavski and EVT (thus enhancing comprehension); in turn, this enhances their ability to see how each philosophy productively complements the other. We turn now to three short case studies that illuminate this approach in action. These vignettes do not necessarily capture the nuances of each philosophy nor the full extent of integrated possibilities; instead, they paint a preliminary picture as to the types of scenarios in which this practice occurs. A richer exploration of the connections between Stanislavski and EVT principles in these teaching contexts could well serve as the basis for future research.

Example A: “See I'm Smiling,” Enhanced Music Coaching

One author is coaching a student on Jason Robert Brown's “See I'm Smiling” from *The Last Five Years*. The student has a strong command of the song's musical content, in particular the metrical shifts and modulating and angular melodies in the second half of the song. She glides through the climactic phrase (“en route to the sky // and I”). From a musical perspective, there is little the teacher needs to do; however, there is an opportunity to help the student find the character arc of the song, beyond a rapid shift from pleasantries to anger.

Using Stanislavski terminology, the teacher can guide the student through the song's outer actions (Cathy trying to maintain a conversation/relationship with Jamie) and subtext (Cathy becoming increasingly despondent and furious with Jamie). Articulating this conflict leads the student to the fundamental “play against” that builds the tension of the song. From this, the teacher helps the student shape the second half of the song, suggesting they hold the state of “play against”

¹ See the headline on the landing page for Estill Voice, <https://estillvoice.com/welcome/> (accessed 24 July 2025).

² This concept has been developed further by Anne-Marie Speed, building from the original primer by Jo Estill. An overview of Speed's work can be located at <https://www.thevoiceexplained.com> (accessed 20 August 2025).

when the argument escalates at the shift to A minor (“You know what makes me crazy...”). By holding, as long as possible, onto Cathy’s objective of saving the relationship and resolving the fight, the student renders the dissipation of this sentiment in the final section ever more potent and raw. Turning to the song’s opening half, the focus is on ensuring that the subtext does not come through the outer actions—the trap for the student is not making Cathy seem too disconsolate too early. Again, understanding this distinction between external and internal actions leads the student to finding a somewhat forced bubblyness, a state of being that feels authentic to how one might behave in that situation.

Example B: Aging Down and Shifting the Voice

Two of the authors are working with a cohort on a play, the characters of which are children. One student is delivering their (male) character’s lines in a higher register, which is understandable, but they have fallen into an acting/vocal trap whereby “youth” is simplistically equated with “high pitch” and a thin, non-modulating tone. The voice does not “carry” well and sits in a one-dimensional emotional space—that is, tentative and nervous. From the voice perspective, there is minimal variation in the delivery of lines; from the acting perspective, the character’s motivations and objectives are not coming through.

Using EVT terminology, the student is encouraged to thicken the sound—greater vocal fold contact—which immediately fixes the problem of projection. This also appears to break the heuristic noted above; now, the actor does not seem to feel as beholden to limiting the range of voice to match the child-age of the character. Again, drawing on the broader application of EVT principles, the student is encouraged to explore greater variety in terms of phrasing and weight, while still remaining in a slightly elevated (child-like) register compared with their typical speaking tone. With this increased vocal mobility in prominence, the second teacher (in the role of director) works with the student to align vocal choices with the subtext of the character’s lines—rather than a sense of constant hesitancy, the character now comes across more appropriately as awkward, but sweet, earnest, and excitable.

Example C: Shaping the Song

A student is preparing “When I Look at You” from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, to be performed as standalone number. The student has been working with one teacher on her vocal mobility and setup, which is reflected in the high quality of her singing. Technically, she has strong control of a lyrical posture and is displaying mobility through the range and dynamic levels to match the structural and harmonic trajectory of the song. Even though it is to be performed *ex situ*, the student has also been diligent in acquiring a general understanding of the song’s context—namely, Maguerite looking wistfully at her husband, Percy, and questioning the loss of love in their marriage. Everything is, in essence, working well.

Coming to a session with two teachers—the vocal specialist and the directorial specialist—integrates the refinement of both vocal control and the preliminary acting choices. Specifically, there is scope for smoother transitions in dynamics, as well as variation in the length of the melodic lines, especially earlier in the song. These vocal shifts can be framed immediately in terms of character circumstances and subtext, specifically as relating to the layers of disguised identities and past relationship betrayals. This helps the performer bring nuance to the yearning ballad, with more subtle ebbs in dynamics and melodic flow, before the climactic second half. The dialogue within the session jumps back and forth between the two teachers and the student, relying on mutually reinforcing prompts—if the character’s action shifts in this way, what impact does that have on the vocal choices? If the music and voice is shifting at this moment, what does this reveal about the character’s evolution?

Synthesis

These examples highlight different realisations of the integrated philosophy—one beginning with a task, before overlaying new content in an additive manner; one utilising varied techniques to fix a potential problem; and one fusing different vocabulary and concepts within a singular context. Some examples of integration are undertaken by one person; some involve



two teachers. Some are planned as a pedagogical strategy for the classroom setting (e.g. “Now the music is learned, let’s incorporate the acting!”); others happen in an improvisatory manner. All of these—and, indeed, other—situations are valid and revealing of contrasting ways in which teachers might contemplate drawing together different parts of their performing arts curriculum.

The cases also illuminate the often-symbiotic relationship between vocal mechanics and acting choices. As a hypothetical alternative for the second case, providing the direction “your lines are not carrying” may be misinterpreted as a need to only increase volume; likewise, if the actor is stuck in a vocal position, they may find themselves unable to adjust acting patterns. This can leave students frustrated, as they sense an inability to address what is being asked of them. We have found that integrating EVT terminology into these acting contexts efficiently equips the student with more tools to both make the necessary fixes and offer more creative solutions as rehearsal processes continue. As teachers, we clearly believe in the efficacy of this integrated model, but, ultimately, we would recommend that exploring *any* type of integration is better than remaining in silos. Accordingly, what this directs our attention towards is how a single tutor or a team might reach this particular place in their teaching journey.

KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION AND PRACTICAL MEASURES

In the final sections, we offer several responses to this prompt. The responses differ by degrees of tangibility—the first section

focuses on “practical” steps; the second section addresses institutional culture. These strategies stem from the systems and processes at play in our institution and therefore may not be precisely applicable elsewhere. But the reflections are intended to be adaptable, especially in other learning contexts similar to our own (e.g. size, type of location, student body). Moreover, these findings may stimulate thought for those in the classroom or in management roles.

1) Peer-Learning and Flexible Schedules

It is all well and good to suggest that the musical director should get to grips with Stanislavski and the director should have a command over Estill Voice Figures. Yet one might reasonably enquire as to when this is going to happen, particularly if teaching and administrative loads are already at capacity. Our degree was setup to align with project-based learning models; in each eight-week term, three weeks (“Project Zone”) are dedicated to rehearsals for one performance project, rather than the regular array of classes. From a teaching allocation perspective, however, one’s regular hours are treated as continuing through the Project Zone. In essence, there is no measured change in the quantity of teaching over this time; rather, the singular teaching focus and decluttered timetable (due to less variety of classes) means there is now better capacity for teaching hours to be traded, combined, or shifted around in a flexible manner. It is during these weeks that integration opens out as a viable possibility. Pedagogical collaboration “on the floor” is more likely, thus embedding the mutually beneficial interrelationships between different philosophies. And if not always a case of working together, this approach to scheduling simply allows time (or, at least, more time) for one to be observing and learning from other teachers in an authentic and practical setting.

Related to this, we benefit from shared teaching allocations—namely, splitting the hours of one course (or segment of a course). In many cases, it is financially unviable for two or three tutors to be assigned to a course, even if musical theatre education screams out for this kind of human resource. Co-teaching discrete, but consecutive, blocks of a class facilitates opportunities for overlap of time—pursuant to which are the same possibilities of collaboration and peer-learning—without imposing unrealistic expectations of one teacher giving up their time “for free.” In a recent shift, we trialled the integration of vocal technique (drawing on EVT) with musical theatre repertoire development, which itself is integrated with historical analysis of the form. For the weekly three-hour class, the first half was assigned to the voice teacher, the second half to the musical director, both having their time officially recognised and valued within the institutional framework.

This division of time implies that each teacher, over the semester, contributes approximately half of the directed hours, whether lecturing, coaching, accompanying, or teaching music. There are ebbs and flows to this pattern: some weeks require one teacher to be more involved than the other, but this is planned for and balanced over time; other weeks, both teach the class together, combining their hours for a more intensive and focused session. Moreover, we found that on weeks where content was split between the pair, there remained an incentive to be present in the classroom space for the full duration—even if some of the 90 minutes was used for silent work (emails, grading), each could gain knowledge from listening in, playing the role of observant student. Over time, and via repeat iterations of the course, the shared knowledge between the pair meant each teacher could incorporate more language and ideas from the different subject strands (i.e. voice, repertoire, music theatre history) into their own content.

In these instances, adopting a flexible mindset towards timetables, staffing allocations, and semester structures lays a foundation for greater learning from one's peers, which, we have found, steadily brings about a more integrated pedagogical underpinning to a programme. Two caveats are important to stress. Firstly, implementing these measures has been successful when conceived as amendments *to* rather than a departure *from* the existing staffing structures. We emphasise the importance of personnel resources remaining appropriately valued in an institutional system; individuals should not be required to simply “do more”. That is, rather than trying to add hours to teaching loads—during which individuals can co-teach or observe—we consider how the existing quota can be distributed in more creative ways. Secondly, any temporal flexibility should be viewed as a tool or method for working towards an integrated teaching ethos, rather than being an outcome itself. This distinction ensures that there remains a *choice* to work in this collaborative and open manner, where necessary and possible. Just as we emphasise being creative with time structures, our teaching developments have not arisen from a compulsion to collaborate, so much as identifying and testing moments where this could prove a fruitful pathway.

KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

In what kind of environment, then, do people *want* to work in this way, choosing knowledge integration as a pedagogical cornerstone? Continuing as per above, we can only speak to our own experiences, but these are contextualised via existing literature, so as to invite applicability elsewhere. Firstly, we put a spotlight on leadership. In part, this concerns the relationships between teaching staff and proximal layers of management, which, in turn, informs decisions about what can and cannot be done. Within our programme context, management (i.e. heads of department, heads of school) have sat closest to a “Distributed Leadership” model, whereby expertise is recognised at varied levels of an organisation (Nanjundeswaraswamy, Nagesh, Bharath, & Vignesh, 2024). Rather than a central figurehead (cf. the “Charismatic Leader”), this model emphasises the experience-based insights from people “on the ground.” This is not the same as a teaching team doing whatever they wish. Rather, it is about empowering teachers to offer new approaches and methods (e.g. flexible teaching allocations) within the institutional structure. Consider leadership more widely, we can point to the values disseminated through an institution. The notion of reflective practice, via Donald Schön (1992), is fundamental to our teaching activity. In tandem with the models of “distributed leadership,” not only are we encouraged to reflect on the efficacy of our teaching, but furthermore, the evidence and recommendations gathered from this self-assessment are recognized and validated by those with the requisite decision-making powers. To return to the opening vignette of this paper, the broader educational environment has fostered our ability to recognize the pedagogical implications and consequences of a siloed approach (for better and worse); and the distributed leadership models has then encouraged us to search for necessary solutions.

Finally, what of the individuals within a teaching team? What makes them realise the opportunities afforded by the wider contextual environment. Closely intertwined with the ethos of self-reflection, we have found that it is necessary for individuals to want to learn and to see the value in acquiring knowledge from a colleague. From our perspective, this latter part of the equation is the trickiest: that is, we would all consider ourselves keen learners but previously may not have seen each other's skills as something that we individually *needed*. This is undoubtedly a consequence of the silo system—“I don't need to know about...; that's their area.” Alongside a willingness to reach out for knowledge, there is also the sentiment of wanting to gift knowledge to one another and allowing someone else to take that mantle. Again, a silo-inspired psychological hurdle might emerge (“This is *my* area” ... “They can't teach ... the right way”). It is difficult to pinpoint what changes this mindset. Sometimes, the imminent pressure of leading a new project helps. Away from last-minute planning, however, it is likely a matter of time; continual reflection and refinement of teaching practice; and the building of professional trust amongst a team, all of which gradually entails a certain sublimation of the ego and elevation of the collective.





We could probably dig further into personality types—and certainly an element of humility is required—but, above all, it is at the confluence of all the aforementioned factors that knowledge integration in a musical theatre context is made possible and is fully realized. For some, this may look like an insurmountable task: massaging the institutional structures, in relation to the leadership types and cultural factors, whilst identifying the pertinent educational overlaps, to be implemented by the right personnel. It is for this reason that we do not advocate specifically for combining any particular theatre-based models or theories, so much as for educators (and leaders) being open to the exploration of novel possibilities in the first place. Even seemingly small steps of developing self-reflective practice or putting in place a single co-taught session or distributing a small leadership decision to others in a team may be sufficient to light an initial spark. From seven years of working through this (ongoing) process have demonstrated, we have found that pedagogical success may be sporadic and not immediately apparent, but also, that it does beget more success.

CONCLUSION: THE BENEFITS OF KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION

We conclude with the inevitable matter of efficacy. To return to the first paragraph of this paper, the challenge with a completely siloed approach is that it requires students to do the conceptual weaving and stitching themselves—individual tutors may provide excellent ingredients, but it is up to the students to figure out how the vocal quality connects to the music which connects to the acting choices (and so on). The integrated approach, on the other hand, jumpstarts this layering process, sometimes providing prompts for further exploration, sometimes marrying different components together instantaneously—but, above all, making more *explicit* how the different ingredients coalesce, inform and shape a complete performance outcome. We are sure that many teachers can relate to seeing these pennies drop for students when such integration becomes apparent, but beyond these informal observations, can we measure the success of such

pedagogical shifts? Even more fundamentally, what *are* the measures of success? An immediate answer may be in terms of looking grade averages of different cohorts (Accetta, 2013, p. 58). While this data should not be dismissed out of hand, it is questionable as to whether subtle and gradual changes in teaching approaches have a causal relationship to student marks. One could point to instances of a revamped module and compare the outcomes with previous iterations of the same module. But discrete aspects of a curriculum, we would argue, constitute only one variable that contributes to an individual student's success. Moreover, when considering the general shift in our teaching practices, it is almost impossible to locate a single point at which these changes started, thereby rendering longitudinal comparisons less effective again. Going forward, one could take a scientific approach—teaching half a class with an integrated approach, the other half with a more siloed approach—thus *potentially* allowing stronger data trends to emerge. Yet aside from the significant ethical and logistical problems of this idea, it is counterintuitive that we would want to return to a mode of practice that we have been arguing against.

Perhaps we are looking at this wrong way. Rather than focusing on explicit student outcomes, as might be expected from this kind of research, what if we flipped the narrative? We believe this might be our key conclusion: the implication of knowledge integration, as we have described above in our musical theatre team context, is that it makes us *better teachers*. The benefits are numerous:

- We have each acquired new knowledge about other strands of musical theatre education;
- We have had to confront and reflect on the nature of the methods most familiar to us—not only what they offer but what their limits are;
- We have more tools at our disposal to help students achieve successful performance outcomes;
- There is greater consistency across the team in how we train students.

Above all, from our perspective, adopting an integrated approach within co-taught modules has seemingly opened up *more* time to unpack and deliver material. A Voice class, previously, covered physiological content, Estill figures, and their application in spoken and sung contexts. Now, instead of a singular weekly block, the content is spread across different classes, freeing up more space in any given session for varied applications. The teacher is thus under less pressure to race through her delivery and has the scope to reinforce key learning ideas across the week. It is not that teaching time has actually increased; rather, there is a perception of increased freedom, which is crucial for empowering the individual teacher to feel dynamic, responsive, and in control while leading the class.

Ultimately, this leads to an enhanced level of professional satisfaction, individually and collectively, as well as a greater degree of confidence in what we deliver. In focusing on the benefits for teachers, first and foremost, we are concerned with the variable in an educational exchange that we have the most control over. Besides, it follows that better teachers improve the likelihood of better outcomes for students. For those for whom this conclusion feels unquantifiable, then we agree—but also encourage you to test the knowledge integration approach for yourself and enjoy the experience.



BIOGRAPHY

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Weaving the Strands:

A Curricular Framework for Musicianship Pedagogy in Undergraduate Musical Theatre Programs

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Students training in musical theatre navigate a wide range of musicianship demands reflective of common professional practice. They must interpret vocal lines with dramatic nuance, sight-sing complex harmonies, prepare audition materials with minimal rehearsal, and collaborate efficiently with a range of music theatre professionals, including practicing musicians such as music supervisors, music directors, and collaborative pianists.



In many undergraduate programs, musicianship instruction unfolds across isolated courses. For example, written theory may be taught in one semester, keyboard in another, and aural skills in yet another, or sometimes concurrently without explicit integration. Such compartmentalization might challenge students to apply the technical skills they learn in these courses to the interpretive and collaborative demands of contemporary commercial music theatre settings.

Even when content is made practical, it can remain decontextualized (Cowan, 2018; Riley, 2020). As Cowan explained, “If the student is not regularly engaging with the material as it is being taught, the likelihood that the student will be able to integrate the concepts into a real-world setting is doubtful” (p. 10). This concern reinforces the importance of instructional models that build connections between technical content and practical application from the outset.

Moreover, Cowan’s (2018) concern about classroom disengagement might also suggest that students perceive musicianship as a disconnected academic task rather than an essential part of their artistic growth. When technical skills are taught without meaningful connections to creative, interpretive, or ensemble-based work, students may have difficulty understanding how musicianship supports their success in auditions, rehearsals, and performances. Addressing this issue requires more than thoughtful teaching at the individual course level; it calls for intentional curricular design that fosters integration across the entire degree program.

In some programs, musicianship coursework for musical theatre majors is housed within larger schools of music. As a result, musical theatre students might often be routed into general music theory or fundamentals sequences designed primarily for music majors—such as those pursuing degrees in instrumental or vocal performance, music education, or composition—rather than courses tailored to the performance demands of musical theatre. Objectives in such courses might include tasks such as analyzing formal structures (e.g., sonata-allegro) or composing short chorales in four-part harmony. While these aims provide valuable grounding in tonal theory and harmonic practice, they do not directly engage with the analytic, collaborative, or stylistic practices that define musicianship in musical theatre.

Educators may also face challenges related to student musical background, course scheduling constraints, and limited rehearsal integration. Students often enter programs with varying levels of prior training, requiring faculty to differentiate instruction while maintaining rigorous expectations. Music theatre faculty may also experience pressures to prioritize performance outcomes over skill-building processes, particularly in programs where departmental goals emphasize production volume or recruitment metrics. Furthermore, instructors navigating institutional structures may find themselves isolated from colleagues in other disciplines, limiting opportunities to collaborate across coursework.

The design of effective musicianship instruction for musical theatre students presents a significant pedagogical challenge. Faculty must account for diverse student backgrounds, institutional constraints, disciplinary separation, and evolving professional expectations in order to prepare students for the field of contemporary commercial music theatre. Accordingly, it is important to develop ways of organizing and visualizing the multiple, overlapping factors that influence how musicianship is taught and learned.

The present article introduces strand curricular theory as a tool for structuring integrated musicianship instruction in undergraduate musical theatre. Originally developed in literacy education, strand theory treats curricular development as interdependent rather than linear (Scarborough, 2001). When adapted to music education, it provided a model for designing instructional experiences that reflected how students learn and apply skills in overlapping and contextualized ways (Ruthmann & Dillon, 2018). While specific strands may vary across institutions or be closely guided by curricular policy, the framework encourages educators to identify the interrelated skills that require intentional weaving across time and contexts. This article investigates the question: How can strand theory inform the design and integration of musical theatre musicianship instruction in undergraduate musical theatre programs to better support student development whose musical training and experiences are quite varied?

In this article, I first apply strand theory as a framework for examining musical theatre musicianship pedagogy. I then explore a high school musical theatre ensemble curriculum and two undergraduate musicianship course syllabi to consider how they reflect (or resist) the kinds of integrated, developmental learning emphasized by strand theory. By viewing these materials through the lens of the framework, I identify potential points of alignment and disconnection. Finally, I reflect on how strand theory might inform future approaches to curriculum design that promote coherence across a degree program and expand access for students with varied musical backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Musicianship instruction in undergraduate musical theatre programs is shaped in large part by accreditation standards established by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) and the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST). These organizations articulate broad expectations for student competencies in areas such as music theory, sight-singing, and piano. For example, NASM requires that students be able to “hear, identify, and work conceptually with the elements of music” and demonstrate “functional performance abilities in keyboard and sight singing” (NASM, 2021, VIII.C.5). Similarly, NAST calls for “basic competence in music theory, sight-singing, and piano,” along with broader musicianship skills appropriate to the professional field (NASM, 2021, IX.I.1.c).

While NASM and NAST guidelines clearly articulate what students should know and be able to do, they leave considerable room for variation in how institutions and music theatre programs interpret and implement these standards. They also offer little guidance on how such skills might be sequenced or integrated. This is consistent with their role as accrediting bodies, which set policy-level expectations rather than prescribe the pedagogical pathways through which programs should meet them. Scholars in the broader field of music education have identified the same persistent challenges related to instructional alignment, curricular coherence, and the transfer of musicianship skills into rehearsal and performance settings (Schivavo et al., 2020). As the literature review below illustrates, existing scholarship offers limited insight into how musical theatre programs structure, sequence, or integrate musicianship learning. Such gaps carry particular weight

in musical theatre training, where musicianship is widely understood as foundational to professional success. Although practitioners increasingly discuss curricular alignment and student preparation, peer-reviewed research has rarely examined how undergraduate musical theatre programs interpret accreditation expectations or embed musicianship instruction across coursework. No empirical studies have systematically documented how programs implement NASM and NAST musicianship standards or the degree to which instructional practices align with professional demands. In the absence of large-scale studies on musicianship outcomes, the extant literature includes content analyses (Cowan, 2018), course textbooks (Bell & Chicurel, 2008; Franceschina, 2015; Gerle, 2018; Riley, 2020), curricular sketches (Hanlon, 2019), and small-scale investigations (Ozaki, 2015; Sabey et al., 2015) that begin to illustrate how musicianship is currently being taught and conceptualized in musical theatre programs.

Cowan (2018) conducted a comparative analysis of two traditional music theory textbooks and two musical theatre-specific instructional resources. He found that while all four texts met the general musicianship competencies outlined by NASM, the traditional texts prioritized theoretical rigor over practical relevance. The musical theatre-specific materials better addressed the needs of MT students yet still lacked comprehensive strategies for applying musicianship in rehearsal and performance settings. Cowan argued that many existing materials either exceeded or bypassed the applied needs of musical theatre students, especially when it came to skill transfer into professional contexts.

Since Cowan's dissertation, newer instructional resources have more explicitly connected musicianship content to the demands of contemporary musical theatre performance. Riley's (2020) textbook challenged instructors to move beyond traditional theory pedagogy and instead address students whose musical experiences are often "embodied, intuitive, and dramatically motivated" (p. X). Her text integrated character-driven score analysis into every topic, covering aural skills, written theory, and sight-singing through examples drawn from Golden Age musicals, works by Stephen Sondheim, and

contemporary scores by Lin-Manuel Miranda. For example, instead of treating rhythm as a matter of duration alone, Riley suggested students to consider why a character might sustain a note, hold a word, or respond to shifts in tempo or articulation. She used these questions to help students connect notational details to dramatic choices and interpretive nuance.

Hanlon (2019) outlined a curriculum that integrates musicianship training with explicit instruction in professional rehearsal practices and communication. While many contemporary musical theatre musicianship textbooks recognize the value of understanding the roles and responsibilities of music directors, arrangers, and composers, Hanlon placed this knowledge front and center. He emphasized skills such as efficiency in learning unfamiliar music, fluency with professional vocabulary, and effective collaboration with music directors, all of which are often underrepresented in traditional music theory instruction. His curriculum sketch includes detailed week-by-week objectives, a sample lesson plan, and clearly defined learning outcomes.

Beyond textbooks and course outlines, a small number of empirical studies have examined how pedagogical priorities in musical theatre training become visible through assessment. Ozaki et al. (2015) surveyed faculty at twenty undergraduate musical theatre programs to examine how institutions deliver musicianship instruction. The study found widespread use of internal accountability measures but reported limited standardization across programs. Although not focused on musicianship specifically, Sabey et al. (2015) similarly analyzed assessment practices through a continuous assessment model that used weekly progress-based marking across acting, dance, singing, speech, and performance projects. Gerbi (2023) produced the most comprehensive empirical study to date on musical theatre musicianship education. Her mixed-methods research included a review of 41 community college curricula and surveys from 34 stakeholders representing secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, private studios, and industry contexts. She identified broad consensus on the importance of voice instruction, music literacy, and production experience. However, respondents expressed little



PEER REVIEWED

agreement on how to sequence or scaffold these components. Only one-third of stakeholders believed that two-year programs adequately prepared students for professional work or transfer to four-year institutions. In response, Gerbi designed a prototype curriculum aligned with the State University of New York (SUNY) standards. Her model emphasized scaffolded coursework, embedded general education, and holistic advising, with a strong focus on serving first-generation, low-income, and historically marginalized students.

Taken together, these contributions underscore a pressing need for musicianship pedagogy that meets NASM and NAST competencies while also preparing students for the particular musical demands of professional musical theatre. These demands include not only foundational skills in Western music theory, but also interpretive insight, rehearsal efficiency, and the ability to communicate effectively in fast-paced professional environments. Earlier scholarship and instructional materials (e.g., Bell & Chicurel, 2008) often leaned on classical theory models, applying them to musical theatre repertoire without fully reimagining their pedagogical frameworks. In contrast, more recent work calls for a curriculum grounded in the dramatic, embodied, and collaborative nature of the genre.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strand theory originated in literacy education, where scholars described early reading development as “a process of weaving together multiple strands of knowledge and skill” (Scarborough, 2001, p. 97). These strands include phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension strategies. Rather than unfolding in a fixed sequence, these components develop concurrently and reinforce one another over time. Scarborough used the metaphor of a rope to illustrate this process: “Each strand represents a distinct domain of reading, but skilled reading emerges from their interweaving” (p. 97). No single strand ensures success on its own. Instead, reading proficiency develops as learners integrate and strengthen these strands through repeated and varied engagement.

This framework treats learning as recursive rather than linear. For example, vocabulary knowledge reinforces comprehension strategies, just as phonemic awareness supports decoding. The model allows for instructional flexibility. Educators can emphasize different strands at different times while still promoting coherent skill development. The framework accommodates differentiated instruction and recognizes that students build fluency by revisiting and recombining skills in meaningful contexts.

Ruthmann and Dillon (2018) extended strand theory into music education. They identified aural fluency, theoretical knowledge, physical coordination, and creative responsiveness as parallel domains of musicianship. These domains develop in tandem rather than in isolation. Ruthmann and Dillon explained, “Musical understanding is not the outcome of one kind of knowing but the integration of multiple types of musical experience” (p. 313). For example, improvisation engages a performer’s harmonic awareness, instrumental technique, aural skills, and expressive instincts at once. The authors advocated for pedagogy that both strengthens individual skills and fosters their synthesis in authentic musical tasks.

Further, strand theory encourages recursive engagement and instructional designs that reflect the interdependence of musical competencies. Ruthmann and Dillon (2018) argued that educators should “design environments where students interact with multiple strands of musicianship simultaneously,” enabling students to draw connections and transfer learning across contexts (p. 313). The framework supports learner variability by allowing students to strengthen different strands at different rates, ultimately reinforcing one another through application and integration. Given the needs of musicianship pedagogy in musical theatre, as well as the framework’s prior application in adjacent disciplines, a more robust investigation of its potential application is warranted.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

I used qualitative document analysis (QDA) to investigate how strand theory can illuminate current practices in musical theatre musicianship pedagogy. Bowen (2009) described QDA as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” that prioritizes “interpretation and meaning-making” over frequency counts or coding reliability (p. 33). This method supports the goals of curriculum theory by examining how documents construct meaning, sequence learning, and reflect instructional priorities (Pinar, 2004; Eisner, 1994). Rather than evaluating student outcomes or generalizing across institutions, the analysis focused on how selected documents might embody principles of strand theory. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people construct meaning from their experiences” and how context shapes that meaning (p. 6). Pedagogical documents, especially syllabi and curricular maps, offer insight into how educators frame content, prioritize skills, and organize instruction over time.





I used three core principles of strand theory to guide document selection and analysis, drawing from Scarborough's (2001) foundational model and Ruthmann and Dillon's (2018) extension of the theory into music education. First, recursive skill development refers to the process by which students revisit and deepen skills over time. Scarborough described this as "a progression of increasingly sophisticated strategies that build on one another" rather than "a step-by-step mastery of isolated skills" (p. 98). Second, domain interdependence recognizes that musical understanding arises from interactions across domains such as aural fluency, theoretical knowledge, physical coordination, and expressive response. Ruthmann and Dillon argued that music learning "depends not on isolated acquisition but on the coordination of multiple strands in authentic musical practice" (p. 313). Third, differentiated pacing acknowledges that learners develop strands at different rates depending on their background, experience, and context. Scarborough noted that "students vary widely in how and when they strengthen each strand," which points to the need for flexible sequencing and multiple entry points into the curriculum (p. 100).

I analyzed three documents to explore how musicianship instruction in musical theatre reflects or diverges from these principles. The first document, Social Reconstructionist High School Musical Theatre Ensemble Curriculum, was a curriculum project I designed as part of doctoral coursework (see Appendix A). This document served as a macro-level example, presenting a comprehensive curricular map that articulated instructional strands and their subcomponents across successive years of study, structured to accommodate multiple annual enrollments in the course. Rather than prescribing day-to-day lesson plans, the curriculum articulated broad pedagogical goals, repertoire suggestions, and scaffolded strand development to support technical, interpretive, and social-emotional learning in a justice-centered ensemble setting.

The second document is a syllabus for a musical theatre musicianship course offered at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFAU), a regional public institution (Appendix B). Only the course objectives were included to highlight how learning aims are framed and communicated rather than logistical details such as grading policies or topic sequencing. These objectives provide a concise representation of the pedagogical values and disciplinary assumptions embedded in the course design and allow for consistent comparison across institutions.

The third document, THTE 205: Musicianship for Musical Theatre Actors II, is a publicly available syllabus from the University of Southern California (USC), an RI research university (Appendix C). This syllabus complements the SFAU example by offering a contrasting institutional context; USC differs in size, mission, and structure but likewise situates musicianship instruction early in the BFA curriculum, prior to advanced courses in acting through song, audition technique, and production. This shared sequencing reflects a broader trend in musical theatre programs of establishing foundational musicianship before performance specialization. The analysis does not aim to generalize across all programs or assess effectiveness but instead treats these syllabi as artifacts for examining how strand theory can inform the design and alignment of musical theatre musicianship instruction.

FINDINGS

Macro-Level Example: Social Justice Music Theatre Ensemble Curriculum

The Social Reconstructionist High School Musical Theatre Ensemble Curriculum functioned as a macro-level example that incorporated elements of strand-informed design. The course outlined a full semester of instruction for a high school ensemble and structured learning around four interwoven strands: Musicianship, Dialogue, Embodiment, and Devised Theatre. While the curriculum was not written with strand theory as an explicit framework, it reflected the theory's core principles in several important ways.

Rather than organizing the course into discrete or hierarchical units, the curriculum emphasized recursive engagement with multiple domains of learning. Each strand appeared across several weeks, with activities designed to foster layered skill development and cross-strand integration. For instance, the Musicianship strand introduced vocal technique alongside listening and analysis tasks, such as exploring curated playlists of protest music to examine how vocal delivery can express resistance. These insights were intended to logically lead into scene work, where students would author and stage original material exploring themes of injustice and defiance.

Firstly, the dialogue strand emphasized textual analysis, sociohistorical context, and collaborative meaning-making. Students revisited this strand through script annotation, peer interviews, and reflective writing, often using their discoveries to revise interpretations of ensemble repertoire. Secondly, the embodiment strand highlighted physical storytelling by encouraging students to explore how posture, gesture, and physical proximity communicate meaning. This work was closely connected to the development of stage presence and expressive agency. Finally, the devised theatre strand focused on creative authorship and ensemble-based scene building. Students devised original work and also reimaged existing musical theatre repertoire, challenging canonical narratives through performance.

Viewed collectively, these strands reflected all three of strand theory's central principles. First, recursive skill development was evident in the repeated return to musicianship, interpretation, and collaboration across multiple contexts and projects. Rather than acquiring skills in isolation, students revisited and deepened their understanding through varied applications, reinforcing core competencies over time. Second, the curriculum emphasized domain interdependence by embedding technical tasks such as learning new material, analyzing vocal style, or refining physical presence within broader interpretive, social, and collaborative projects. This integration mirrored the real-world demands of musical theatre and enabled students to connect discrete skills with expressive performance. Third, differentiated pacing was supported through multiple points of access and varied levels of scaffolding. Students with diverse musical backgrounds were able to engage meaningfully through layered assignments, flexible modes of participation, and structured opportunities to revisit essential content.

Rather than positioning technical musicianship as a prerequisite to artistic expression, the curriculum integrated skill development into projects with social, emotional, and aesthetic significance. This approach illustrates how strand theory can inform holistic and equitable instruction by embedding technical learning within meaningful artistic processes. It also challenges the assumption that integration must occur within a single course or semester. Strand-based design encourages educators to adopt a program-wide perspective, mapping where and when strands are introduced, revisited, and ultimately synthesized across time. This broader approach can promote both curricular coherence and pedagogical flexibility.

Micro-Level Examples: BFA Musicianship Courses

The SFAU syllabus illustrates several strand-based design principles in clear and applied terms, though not all of its objectives reflect them equally. Its outcomes interweave technical, cognitive, and collaborative strands, asking students to demonstrate accurate sight-singing, identify and reproduce intervals and harmonic progressions by ear, perform rhythms with precision, and connect these skills to applied performance settings. Two objectives in particular exemplify strand-based integration because they extend technical skills into professional and collaborative contexts. Students are asked to develop musical memory to learn and retain material efficiently for auditions, rehearsals, and performances, and to integrate aural skills into score study and rehearsal preparation to support collaboration with music directors, collaborative pianists, and other musical theatre music professionals. These aims connect perception, memory, and interpersonal musicianship in ways that exemplify strand theory's emphasis on the integration of distinct skill domains through authentic tasks. Rather than isolating aural or theoretical abilities, such objectives encourage students to coordinate listening, analysis, and communication as interdependent processes that mirror professional rehearsal and performance practices.

However, the syllabus does not explicitly address the interpretive or dramatic aspects of musical theatre performance, which limits the extent to which its outcomes reflect strand-based integration. Some objectives, such as "perform

rhythms with precision through clapping, chanting, and singing exercises,” instead emphasize technical accuracy in isolation and therefore align more closely with non-strand-based design.

The USC syllabus demonstrates strand-based integration in several important ways. Its learning objectives situate musicianship within ensemble performance and rehearsal practice, emphasizing musical techniques applicable to singing in the company of a musical production. This framing connects technical, theoretical, and interpersonal dimensions of musicianship, aligning with strand theory’s focus on interconnected skill domains. Objectives such as “identifying musical subtext and storytelling devices through music” and “understanding and using musical vocabulary” extend this integration by inviting students to interpret how theoretical and expressive elements shape dramatic communication in musical theatre contexts.

At the same time, some listed objectives lean toward non-strand-based or skill-isolated design. Items such as “precise rhythm,” “attention to cutoffs and dynamics,” and “visual and aural identification of harmony and intervals” emphasize technical accuracy and recognition tasks without explicitly connecting them to interpretive or collaborative application. These elements are foundational, yet their integrative potential depends on how instructors weave them into rehearsal, reflection, and performance tasks.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS



This analysis examined how strand theory can inform the design and evaluation of musicianship instruction in undergraduate musical theatre programs. Through qualitative document analysis of one macro-level curriculum and two micro-level syllabi, the study explored how the principles of recursive skill development, domain interdependence, and differentiated pacing appeared in existing pedagogical materials. None of the documents explicitly referenced strand theory, yet each reflected elements of its logic through the sequencing of skills, the organization of learning experiences, and the treatment of musicianship as a collaborative and interpretive practice. The findings therefore highlight not only whether strand theory is evident, but also how its underlying principles manifest in various instructional contexts.

At the programmatic level, the high school ensemble curriculum illustrated how strand-informed design can create coherence across multiple learning domains while remaining adaptable to students’ needs. Its four strands—Musicianship, Dialogue, Embodiment, and Devised Theatre—encouraged students to return to technical, interpretive, and social dimensions of artistry through recurring projects. This structure reinforced skill development while expanding expressive and critical understanding. The curriculum also balanced rigor and inclusivity by offering multiple points of entry for students with varied levels of experience. Although designed for secondary education, the model provides insights that can inform higher education programs seeking to integrate professional readiness, artistic depth, and equitable access within a unified framework.

At the course level, the undergraduate syllabi reflected a shared emphasis on professional preparation but differed in how clearly they applied strand-based thinking. The USC syllabus highlighted ensemble coordination, rehearsal discipline, and interpretive communication. These aims enacted strand principles implicitly through collaborative work rather than through stated objectives. The SFAU syllabus articulated distinct yet complementary competencies in sight-singing, score analysis, keyboard proficiency, and audition communication. This design made the interdependence of technical and applied skills more explicit. Both syllabi were situated early in the degree sequence, framing musicianship as a foundation

for later specialization. However, neither described how students would revisit or extend these skills across subsequent coursework. From a strand theory perspective, the lack of a longitudinal arc limits opportunities for recursive learning and sustained integration.

Several implications emerge from these findings. Strand theory provides a framework for viewing musicianship development as cumulative and integrative rather than linear or compartmentalized. Programs that identify where and how each strand is introduced, reinforced, and synthesized can coordinate instruction across faculty and clarify expectations for student growth over time. The principle of differentiated pacing further emphasizes the need for instruction that accommodates varied levels of preparation. Because musical theatre students often enter programs with uneven backgrounds in rhythm, harmony, vocal technique, and keyboard literacy, curricula that offer multiple opportunities to engage with core material at increasing levels of complexity can promote equity while maintaining rigor.

The concept of domain interdependence also challenges traditional separations between theory and practice. When technical instruction occurs through collaborative rehearsal, ensemble performance, or production processes, students experience musicianship as an expressive and communicative act rather than as an abstract exercise. The syllabi in this study demonstrated this principle to different degrees. The SFAU syllabus connected applied skill-building to professional contexts, while the USC syllabus embedded musicianship learning within ensemble work and interpretive performance. Both illustrate how strand-informed design can link cognitive, technical, and performative learning within authentic musical theatre settings.

Although the sample was limited, this study suggests that strand theory can guide educators in creating musicianship instruction that is integrative, recursive, and responsive to student diversity. Future research could examine how strand-informed curricula function across institutional types, how students perceive integrative learning over time, and how these approaches contribute to artistic and professional readiness. Using strand theory as both an analytic and a design framework may help faculty articulate the pathways through which technical mastery, interpretive understanding, and collaborative skill converge within the complex training demands of musical theatre.

CONCLUSION

Rather than proposing a fixed curricular model, this study positions strand theory as a conceptual tool for critically examining and improving musicianship instruction in undergraduate musical theatre programs. The framework offers a way

**APPENDIX A
Social Reconstructionist High School Musical Theatre Ensemble Curriculum Excerpts**

Learning Strands	
	MUSICIANSHIP
	DILOGUE
	EMBODIMENT
	DEVISED THEATRE
Daily musicianship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students work daily to refine their singing and stage voice in order to meaningfully contribute to their rehearsals and performances. Students frequently investigate theoretical and musicological aspects of a variety of musical genres and styles to gain a deeper understanding of how those aspects influence musicality and interpretation.
Weekly collaborative dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members (both students and educators) engage in collective inquiry about social justice topics and provide each other with academic and social support.
Embodiment projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students author their own monologues and scenes around social justice themes and perform them in class. Choreography for social justice-themed dance pieces is developed in small groups and performed in class.
Devised theatre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A culminating theatrical performance incorporating music and dance is devised by a large ensemble based on social justice themes. In the instances of community performances, depending on its theme, the piece could be performed in a variety of settings (e.g., in a park raising concern for climate justice, or in a library for a piece that investigates censorship and book bans, and so forth).

to identify and interrelate key areas of learning, such as technical fluency, interpretive insight, and professional rehearsal practice, across the full arc of a degree. When educators map how these strands emerge, recur, and evolve over time, they gain a clearer view of the curriculum's structure and its capacity to support sustained student development.

Strand-informed design not only reflects how students typically learn but also responds to the complexity of musical theatre training. It recognizes that meaningful learning occurs through recursive and contextualized experiences rather than isolated units. By offering multiple points of access and embedding musicianship within authentic performance settings, this approach supports more equitable and professionally relevant instruction. Ultimately, strand theory invites faculty and program designers to reconsider not just what students need to know, but how, when, and why those skills are taught.

Intertwining Knowledge Strands

	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	YEAR THREE
MUSICIANSHIP – VOCAL TECHNIQUE	Students will examine how they might benefit from vocal warm-ups built upon principles of CCM voice pedagogy as they prepare to sing in the variety of styles found in contemporary musical theatre.	Students will explore CCM vocal production during sight-reading, embodiment workshops, and rehearsals/performances of devised theatre.	By having more familiarity with their own voice and the genre of the repertoire, students decide what kind of vocal production (CCM or otherwise) is required.
DIALOGUE – CURATING PLAYLISTS	Students will explore how music can speak to issues of identity and personal experiences.	Students will articulate how, if at all, social movements connect to their personal experience and how their song selections express the experience identified.	In cases where students have already identified how personal experiences connect to larger narratives (e.g., anti-Black racism), they will curate a playlist about the issue.
EMBODIMENT – SCENE WORKSHOP	Students will identify themes or issues for which they feel strongly and consider ways in which the scene can effectively convey such messages.	Students will consider how to structure their scenes around elements of dramatic structure (e.g., conflict, ending) and utilize peer feedback to determine whether such messages are being effectively conveyed.	Students help identify and refine which aspects of the scene do not yet convey the message (e.g., the content, the dramatic structure, the style of performance).
DEVISED THEATRE – REVISING THE CANON	Students will analyze and state the problems of the material and consider in what ways revisions might help to work toward fixing them.	Students will analyze and state the material's problems, specify an action plan for fixing them, and work collaboratively toward their performance.	Students help select material in need of revising, specify an action plan for fixing it, and work collaboratively toward its performance.

APPENDIX B

Stephen F. Austin University Course Objectives

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate accurate sight-singing of melodies using solfege, numbers, or other established systems.
2. Identify and reproduce intervals, chords, and progressions by ear, applying this knowledge to musical theatre repertoire.
3. Perform rhythms with precision through clapping, chanting and singing exercises.
4. Develop musical memory to learn and retain material efficiently for auditions, rehearsals, and performances.
5. Integrate aural skills into score study and rehearsal preparation to support collaboration with music directors, accompanists, and fellow performers.



BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Brandon Magid is a music director, educator, and scholar. He recently served as Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre and Choral Director at Ohio Northern University and Visiting Music Director at Indiana University, alongside previous industry experience on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theatre. He holds master's and PhD degrees in music education from the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University.

APPENDIX C

University of Southern California Musicianship Course Objectives

Learning Objectives

We will study, learn, and rehearse an array of musical ensemble numbers from the musical theatre canon. We will practice musical techniques applicable to singing in the company of a musical production. In addition, we will identify and study musical subtext found in these numbers in order to strengthen our foundational understanding and use of music as form of communication. In class, we will practice these objectives in a setting akin to a production rehearsal or recording session.

Practical and Theoretical techniques for this course specifically include:

- Precise rhythm and adherence to tempo and groove
- Unified vowel production and vocal placement as a collective ensemble
- Attention to cutoffs
- Attention to dynamics
- Diction, articulation
- Sight-singing
- Visual and aural identification of harmony and intervals
- Identifying musical subtext, storytelling devices through music
- Understanding and use of music vocabulary (time and key signatures, phrase markings, dynamic markings)

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For the seventh volume, we have changed our submission policy. Please note the following:

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PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES: Because these submissions will be subject to a double-blind, anonymous peer review, articles must be fully researched, written, and submitted by July 31, 2026 for consideration. This will allow us time to line up peer reviewers, get feedback, notify authors as to the status of the articles, and execute the editing, formatting, and registration processes, so we can publish on January 1st, 2026.

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- Please follow APA style guidelines for in-text citations, works cited, and formatting. Make sure that all quoted material is appropriately cited and credited to its source. For more information, see: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/index.html
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- Include a 50-word bio for each author.



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- Book/Cast Album/Performance Reviews: Non-peer-reviewed reviews, subject to editing for format, style, and length.





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