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MTEA

MUSICAL THEATRE EDUCATORS' ALLIANCE

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FRONT COVER PHOTO:
INTO THE WOODS † FEBRUARY 2024
University of Utah
Directed by David Eggers,
Photography by Todd Collins

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MTEA WORKS: THE EVOLUTION AND IMPACT OF THE MUSICAL THEATRE COMMON PRESCREEN

The history of the Musical Theatre Common Pre-Screen (MTCP) goes back further than many educators realize. In 2016, Stephen Agosto, then Senior Manager of Artistic Engagement at Papermill Playhouse, began working on an idea to simplify the college musical theatre pre-screen process. Prior to his role at Papermill, Agosto had been writing curriculum and teaching musical theatre for the NYC Department of Education, where he saw firsthand the challenges his public school students faced while creating videos for each program, all of which had different audition criteria. In a 2019 interview, Agosto noted, "I noticed not only how exhausting it was, but also how exclusive the process had become." (Agosto, 2019).

By January 2017, Agosto had developed a draft of common requirements for pre-screen videos. In early 2018, he shared the idea of improving the college audition process with his colleagues at Papermill Playhouse and reached out to key leaders in the field, including Kaitlin Hopkins (Head of Musical Theatre at Texas State University), Amy Rogers (Director of Musical Theatre at Pace University), and Courtney Young (Coordinator of Musical Theatre at Ithaca College), for their input. This group spent nearly a year discussing possible solutions and addressing the most pressing issues facing prospective students. They also collaborated with Acceptd, the online platform hosting many pre-screen videos, which had strong connections with numerous college musical theatre programs.

By 2019, Agosto organized two roundtable discussions with educators from across the country, one in New York City and the other in Chicago. These conversations led to the creation of the first iteration of the Musical Theatre Common Pre-Screen, which began with 20 participating schools in June 2019 and grew to 40 by August 2019. When the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the audition process to a virtual format, the MTCP became a crucial tool for streamlining the pre-screen process and reducing stress for students.

Kaitlin Hopkins highlighted how the growth of virtual callbacks has led students to apply to over 20 schools, increasing the pressure. In October 2023, Hopkins sent an open letter to college musical theatre programs, urging them to reconsider their pre-screen and audition requirements, which she felt were still too inconsistent despite over 50 schools participating in MTCP. Differences in slate requirements, framing suggestions, and other criteria meant students were often recording just as many videos as before. Hopkins emphasized that any changes in MTCP requirements needed to be clearly reflected on program websites, which wasn't always happening.

After reading Hopkins' letter, I reached out to offer MTEA's support. Hopkins was excited about the idea, and she assembled a task force that included me as President of MTEA, Jerry Tsai (then CEO of Acceptd), Emily Hucle (Director of Operations at Acceptd), Erica Spyres (Marketing Services Specialist at Acceptd), and Mica Harrison Loosemore (Assistant Dean of Admissions at the University of Michigan). Our goal was to analyze the data Hopkins had gathered from interviews with students, college audition coaches, and musical theatre program directors to propose updates to the MTCP.

Following a roundtable discussion during the Chicago Unifieds in February 2024, Acceptd sent out suggested updates to the current MTCP members, and I forwarded them to our MTEA Executive Committee for further suggestions. The result is the 2024-2025 Musical Theatre Common Pre-Screen, which includes significant improvements. The updated guidelines streamline the process by standardizing video lengths to 60-90 seconds, requiring only one slate video, and making the wildcard video optional. Programs can now choose from three options to specify what they need to see in singing, acting, dancing, and ballet.

As Hopkins succinctly puts it, "At the end of the day, whether a pre-screen video is 16 or 32 bars, slate with the video or separate, 60 or 90 seconds—who cares! What really matters is that everyone gets the information they need: Do I want to see more in person or not?"

MTEA is proud to be actively involved in making the pre-screen process more accessible for students, while also addressing their mental health and well-being. We recognize the immense pressure that the college audition process places on students, and by streamlining the Musical Theatre Common Pre-Screen, we aim to reduce stress and create a more equitable pathway for all prospective students. At the same time, we are committed to meeting the needs of educators, ensuring that they receive the information necessary to evaluate applicants effectively. As an organization deeply rooted in advocacy and driving positive change in higher education, MTEA's involvement in this initiative felt like a natural extension of our mission. We believe that by improving the pre-screen process, we are not only supporting students but also enhancing the overall landscape of musical theatre education.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS IS THAT EVERYONE GETS THE INFORMATION THEY NEED: DO I WANT TO SEE MORE IN PERSON OR NOT?"

Agosto , S. (2019, August 29). Paper Mill Playhouse introduces Musical Theater Common pre-screen. ArtPride New Jersey. https://artpridenj.org/blog/paper-mill-playhouse-introduces-musical-theater-common-prescreen

Warm regards,
Jessica Humphrey

President, Musical Theatre Educators Alliance

NATASHA, PIERRE AND THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 | APRIL 2023
Fort Lewis College
Directed by Michael E. McKelvey
Photography by Jonas Grushkin

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear MTEA Colleagues,

As we came out of COVID, the decision was made by the MTEA executive committee to continue publishing the journal. Numerous members at large voiced their praise of the publication and its importance to our ever-growing membership. As the only educational organization catering exclusively to a musical theatre-centric constituency, many felt the journal was fulfilling a beneficial necessity for members. It not only provided a place to share practical information regarding teaching methodologies, book reviews pertinent to our field, and interviews with difference makers in the industry, but a forum to publish research to be shared across the various art forms which comprise the landscape of musical theatre.

As previously mentioned, the MTEA journal has prided itself on publishing a variety of articles ranging from scholarly peer-review submissions, applied and practical teaching, and case studies, interviews, book reviews, and special interest features. When it was suggested that we should focus solely on scholarly content to align with other academic journals, the membership, which is comprised not only of academics but also practitioners and professionals in the field, voiced its desire to continue with our varied content in an organization wide survey. Thus, the journal continued with the same variety of articles in our fifth volume. Volume five also ushered in a new era for the journal.

Our last edition, which came out January 2024, welcomed a professional copy editor, the incomparable Erin Wright, to ease the workload of our volunteer editorial staff, and continued our relationship with our fabulous graphic designer Andrea Weinreb. To make sure the peer-reviewed articles were searchable by academic institutions and researchers, we made some needed changes. Starting last year, the MTEA journal was officially registered with the Library of Congress, as well as all articles being assigned a DOI (digital object identifier) number, both of which are necessary for academic publishing and searchability. Because the journal is housed behind a paywall, our webmaster Mitch Aldrich went beyond the call in helping us providing in the needed space on the website to give all of our published articles their own URLs to be discoverable by outside researchers.

We welcome your input as we continue to make the MTEA journal everything you would like it to be. We will continue to explore other suggestions for journal content, such as video and audio, and streamlining the submission process. Please reach out to myself or any member of the editorial board if you have suggestions or, even better, ideas for articles you would like to submit in the future.

Sincerely,

Michael E. McKelvey
Editor-in-Chief

WHERE DID ALL THE GOOD PEOPLE GO? *Invisible Labor in Theatre Academia*

DOI 10.62392/LERN3119

MTEA FOCUS GROUP

MODERATED & EDITED BY
Gwen Walker

GUESTS
Jeanmarie Higgins
David L. Jiles, Jr.
Marty Austin Lamar

On July 8, 2024, the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for MTEA joined Jeanmarie Higgins, David Jiles, Jr., and Marty Austin Lamar online for a conversation about invisible labor in academia. The following is an edited transcript of that conversation.

GW: Good morning and welcome to our Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance DEI Focus Group series. My name is Gwen Walker (she/her) and I am a 50-something white woman with short white hair and glasses. I am the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for MTEA, and I will be your moderator today. "Invisible labor," or "invisible work " is a term Arlene Kaplan Daniels coined to describe women's undervalued labor within nuclear households and educational spaces. This concept has been adapted to describe faculty involved in the invisible labor of diversity, equity, and inclusion by women, the global majority, and LGBTQIA+ faculty. This invisible labor may consist of student-initiated mentorship and guidance or emotional labor that is expected but not rewarded. This type of good academic citizenship contributes to safeguarding and improving the quality and efficacy of academia and women and global majority folks engage heavily in making academic institutions a better place, which, in turn, prevents those student groups from leaving. However, this kind of labor is largely unrecognized and is heavily burdened on assistant professors and those just starting their academic careers. Additionally, it takes time. It takes time to do this invisible work, and that time may keep faculty from having the time to pursue more visible forms of productivity, like research and publication.

The academy is controlled by white men who encourage white privilege systems that entrench and perpetuate social inequalities that maintain white men as the default for scientific inquiry, objective observation, moral authority, and work ethic. Non-cis-white male faculty may need to appease the egos of other faculty members who perceive them to be too much, too opinionated, too outspoken, or acting above their station. We've all heard talk about and experienced "the leaky pipeline" or "the great resignation" in academia following the COVID-19 pandemic. Disparities in salary, promotion, and publication are obvious reasons why this occurs, but nearly a third of tenured female academics consider leaving academia every single year.

Speaking from my "I," the constant juggling act of balancing invisible labor with the demands of my job takes a toll emotionally, physically, and financially, and the burden of being an emotional backbone for the department, for colleagues, and sometimes entire organizations, leads to burnout, health issues, and isola-

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tion. It's a slow and silent drain on me as a human. It's not dramatic nor is it immediately visible—it's kind of like the pictures of the presidents before and after their terms. If you took a picture of me from when I began in academia and compared it to a picture of me now, you can see the toll that this labor has taken on me. It's damaged my health.

JMH: My name is Jeanmarie Higgins (she/her), and I am a 50-something white woman with white shoulder-length hair, and I wear big gray horn-rim glasses. I chair the Theater Arts and Dance Department at the University of Texas at Arlington. UTA is a public university that is Hispanic-serving, and veteran-serving, and is recently named a Research-1 University. Over half of our students are first-generation college students, and our diversity reflects what you might think of in terms of the diversity of the country or the world, certainly our region. I come at the idea of invisible labor as a chair in understanding how to guide my predominantly white faculty, with our incredibly diverse student body, into service roles and opportunities that will advance their careers without overburdening them at the same time.

MAL: My name is Marty Austin Lamar (he/him). I'm an Assistant Professor in the Department of Theater and Dance in the College of the Arts at California State University, Fullerton Campus. My principal responsibility is coordinating the BFA musical theater program with my amazing colleague, Sarah Ripper. Cal State is a Hispanic-serving institution. Last year, 50% of the student population was Hispanic, 22% identified as Asian or Pacific Island, 2.2% identified as Black, and .2% of the student population identified as White. I am the only African American on the faculty and one of only two Black tenure-track faculty within the entire college. The small percentage of Black tenured faculty at Cal State are eight beautiful, intelligent, overly supportive, iconic Black women.

It's interesting to hear the continuity in our stories as we talk about invisible labor and cultural taxation. Our systemically oppressive system has not advanced far beyond its founding principles of keeping folks out.

DJJ: My name is David Jiles Jr. (he/him). I am a 40-year-old Black man with a large beard and brother locks, and I am thrilled to be here. I'm an Assistant Professor in the Voice Department at Berklee College of Music. I'm celebrating 10 years there. I'm also an adjunct faculty member at Emerson College. There are no tenure-track positions at Berklee so contracts are year to year. Berklee calls itself a Global Campus, and it celebrates the idea that our students are from everywhere. The Performing Arts Department at Emerson is predominantly White students, and I look forward to talking about what that looks like for this Black, queer professor.

GW: How do we bury the idea that thinking, publishing, and extemporizing are the only jobs of an academic, and begin to value and reward the new facets of educating today's populace? For example, today our students have a lot more documented mental health issues. If we identify with any minority group, students will come to us for help.

MAL: At CSU Fullerton, diversity is still a very new conversation. I think diversity in higher ed has been in response to the cancel culture that was happening in 2019-2021, where we saw some of our colleagues lose their jobs because they said or did something that instead of the university offering support and beginning to dismantle these oppressive systems, they use it as a way to crucify one person, typically a woman, and then bring new people in. "We'll hire a few people of color and be back on track." What you forget is that the students who are not being served come in having had multiple decades of seeing violence, experiencing violence, and having to learn in modalities that none of us ever expected to have to navigate. And then every year, you see more and more of these things that were never resolved, and often it's because people don't know how to speak about differences. I don't use terms like "minority groups" because minor and major imply status. So I say global majority because, from a global perspective, White people represent a very small percentage of the world—white American people even less so. But it's not the same for White men in the academy. The perfect comparison is that I don't get the option to make errors. If I did make an error, it would cost me my career. White male academics do not suffer the same consequences.

If we were willing to have honest conversations where we share our biases; we create a space where everyone feels safe enough to do that—I think we could begin to move the needle forward. But that does not happen as long as we don't admit that many have benefited and also have caused detriment to others as a result of a systemically racist system.

JMH: So I have a very dull answer, because I'm a chair, and the answer is: policy. One of my big projects this summer is to quantify service assignments. If there is a faculty member who says, "I'm going to choreograph the musical." I ask, "How much time might be needed?" I quantify how much labor is put in by hours to the best of my ability and then write a description of what that course release entails in terms of time. Because of the emotional labor of all of the care work-related service that women and people of color do, one of the side effects of that isn't just that it takes your time, it's that it accelerates the pace at which you must work. And so that is terrible for people who create art, who write scholarship, who want to pay very close attention to a very individual student's needs in the classroom. So to me, it's about time, yes, but also about the pace at which people of color and women are asked to work. Because we have to have people of color on the committee, then that person must be on six committees. And that means that they have less time to grade their papers. That means that they have less time to write their articles and less time to do master classes. There's a lot of fallout in terms of pace. So the way that I am approaching this problem in my administrative role is to write it down. Make a policy that people can point to and say, "There's a policy for this that details the hours served and protects everyone."

IF THERE'S A TITLE NINE SITUATION WHERE STUDENTS ARE IN DANGER, THAT'S DIFFERENT. BUT A LOT OF ISSUES CAN BE SOLVED BY HAVING A RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION AROUND A TABLE, WHERE WE SAY DIFFICULT THINGS TO EACH OTHER AND KNOW THAT THE OTHER PERSON IS GOING TO LISTEN.

DJJ: I often feel that my emotional labor doesn't matter, because if no one in power sees it and puts a value on it, then I'm left shaking my fist at the gods saying, "I'm working so hard." And I think that speaks to the article that Gwen sent us with the economists quantifying what a Mom does to make a Thanksgiving dinner: What are the hours? And how would you value that in dollars and cents? I think the name of the game is policy change. One thing I wrote down as Marty was speaking is that one of the steps is for someone to write down what this invisible labor looks like day-to-day/minute-by-minute. The "We See You White American Theatre" (WSYWAT) document that was distributed around COVID was a wonderful model of Black artists in the theater industry saying, "We see you. Here are our grievances. Here are some solutions." And I think one of the things that needs to be done in a simple but direct way is "This is what invisible labor looks like on the day-to-day for our folks who are not cis White men, and this is what that costs in hours, dollars, and emotional labor for people." For me, the invisible labor becomes mental labor, and that has turned into mental unwellness. Which impacts my job, of course. How could it not impact my job when we are doing a career that is human-centered and human-focused? I am a human, right? It sounds so corny and simple, but I am a human, and the things that affect me in my humanness should be in consideration. This is why people leave. The number of times that as a Black queer man, I am asked to hold space for other Black students, for other Queer students. It's a lot. I'm a former college football player, so my physical mass becomes a thing to navigate in the classroom. And then to add Blackness on top of that, the invisible labor that I have to do minute-by-minute is inescapable. I've accepted that it is part of the experience, especially as a non-tenured assistant professor who wants to become a full professor.

MAL: Our faculty needs to reflect the diversity of our student body. I think that is another thing that will help a lot of other systemic issues we have. We have to be empowered to continue to hold institutions account-

able. We're living in a time where they are trying to erase the word diversity. What that does is it gives these institutions, and it gives these systemically racist policies and procedures, particularly as they concern advancement in higher institutions, it gives them a "Get Out of Jail Free" card. They say, we never have to consider the fact that Marty, like David, walks into a room with 14 White students, he's 6' 5.5", and weighs 278 pounds, and the institution assumes that the students will be open to Marty's way of approaching the process of creating a character or releasing voice. I'll never forget my first year at Cal State, I was accused of creating a culture of rape because I had a uniform policy. Now this is what I have since learned: that often we teach students these words but we don't give them the understanding, the definition of what they mean in practice. And then these terms become weapons, where students are fighting against faculty, and what we're all fighting against are these policies and procedures that have not been ratified, that have not been amended, or even discussed. We should be an equitable classroom where both students and instructors feel safe. But how is that possible? Like Gwen and David said, how do we begin to find any sense of normalcy when no policy holds folks accountable for implicit and explicit bias?

DJJ: One thought I had about EDI work when we started it is as a collective consciousness years ago. It was for everyone, right? And I often felt like, this ain't my work. I shouldn't have to go to this class because I know about that. This does sound a little harsher than I intend, but I often have thought that the EDI workshops that colleges and universities bring in—are for White men.

My boss should be at this class, not me. Not only do I know this, but these workshops often talk about my lived experience, and that creates more invisible emotional labor for me. Because we sit in these workshops, mindful of taking care of the whole room. We're taking care of those folks, those cis White men who might be offended by what we say, who might be offended by my presence. It's exacerbated by the fact that we teach in the arts. Our students tend to be more sensitive and tend to be in a state of emotional awareness. A lot of my

students are yearning for care and they are often the students who are from global majorities who don't see themselves represented in the faculty. I'm happy that representation can help folks who don't see themselves represented in the classroom, or in the material that we teach, or in the way that we talk about the canon.

GW: I hold many diverse leadership positions. I am marginally successful at it because I am a woman, and people feel free to come for me, and it's a regular event. I was accused of anti-White bias a couple of years ago, and recently I was accused of fat bias. When I talk about diversity issues in front of a group of people, there is almost always going to be a call to the hotline, and I'm going to be called to the chair's office, to defend myself for daring to speak about diversity as a White woman. I am at the point in my career where I am trying not to talk about it. Just yesterday I mentioned that if you're not Jewish, you probably shouldn't sing one of Lucille's songs from *Parad*e, and got called in to defend my statement. I want to promote diversity, it's my passion and my research agenda, but until there is a systemic change in the way I am protected, then it will always be about me speaking in a way that makes some students uncomfortable and those students feel free to report me to administration, and then I have to expend more mental, emotional, and physical energy defending myself.

JMH: I want to amplify what you're saying, Gwen, that there are also some things that David and Marty have said where the accusations against faculty have become free-flowing and increasingly difficult to understand or locate. Speaking as a chair in this space, my students have taught me how to do this in the past year. When a student comes to me and says that a faculty member says that a student who isn't Jewish can't sing this repertoire and that's racist, the power the chair has in that situation is to bring the two parties together with equal status in a conversation about what each of them wants to get from the conversation. You say to the student, "What is your goal here?" And if they need some prompting, "Do you just want this faculty member to listen to you? What do you want?" What you're doing is you're challenging that student to say, "I want them fired." When you're sitting at a table with them across the table in a nice conversation, in my experience, they won't say that. We had a lot of productive conversations last year that usually end with both the faculty member and student saying, "Thank you, and I'm sorry." Or "Thank you for listening." And this strengthens their relationship as teachers and students. It's important to teach them how to resolve conflict. I'm modeling it in a way that makes everyone feel safe and supported and important, and it works better than running a fire drill about it and letting the gossip go around and having separate meetings. If there's a Title Nine situation where students are in danger, that's different. But a lot of issues can be solved by having a respectful conversation around a table, where we say difficult things to each other and know that the other person is going to listen. And if we don't figure out how to do that, what we do is populate an industry of folks who can't converse and solve problems.

MAL: I've been on the stage most of my life. But I remember my first encounter in New York when an agent said to me, "Listen, you're amazing, but you're too big. You need to lose 30 pounds." He wasn't being mean. He had bigger plans for my life than maybe I understood at the time. If I were to say something like that now, y'all would see me on CBS sitting with Gail. But the truth is, if we don't tell them while they are in the process of training and development, the challenges that come with being queer, the challenges that come with being Black, the challenges that come with being full-figured or plus-sized, the challenges of being transgender and someone saying, "Yeah, but you don't sound like a soprano." They learn those consequences in such a toxic way after they leave.

I had a multi-ethnic student. Her father is Black and her mom is Latina. She was told that she shouldn't sing from the Wiz. Well, if not her, who? My response to that was, not only should she sing it, but we need to teach our wonderful blonde-haired, blue-eyed diva over here, who can sing everything, we need to

teach her how to be able to interpret story in that same way. This is not about color. This is about being able to interpret a conversation. It is making fragile, particularly cis-gendered White men in the performing arts, feel comfortable enough to say the real problem is that they might have a bias and that I'm afraid that I'm going to get in trouble. Now we're all on the same playing field. Most days when I am working, if I say the wrong thing, not only will I have this stain or judgment that permeates a department, but then I'm also quickly going to have some kind of file created about me, even if it doesn't go anywhere, that is still going to live somewhere—that I shamed the student when the truth is that I just told you the truth, and I lovingly told you the truth. Maybe you're not used to that. But this is not junior high school. This is higher education. This is a university. Our job is to prepare you to go out into a world that is fraught with oppressive systems and help you navigate those systems and achieve some margin of success. The last thing I want to say specifically about policy is one thing: what happened at Cal State was one of the wonderful Black leaders, Dr Fauci. She gathered Black faculty together and for five meetings, we met, we talked, we scrutinized, and we tried to come up with a beginning step as a concern to the tenure process and this idea of not only invisible labor but the explicit representation of cultural taxation. The caveat was this: I'm not doing it if they don't pay us. We showed up, we were on time, and we were ready to work. My thoughts, my intelligence, and my daily lived experience were valued monetarily. They told me that I was not a satisfactory teacher because I'd been evaluated by students who did not like my policies in my classroom. Making me say it again is making me live it again. Now I've got to live through it again. You have to pay Gwen and you have to pay David to get in the space and relive those experiences as they're helping you rebuild a system that you don't want to repair anyway. Let's just be honest.

GW: I have a few solutions that I wrote down. My first idea is that we pay non-male and global majority faculty the same as White men and make salaries public. I currently have to have a side hustle to afford to keep my job. We need to define emotional and invisible labor, and I know that's probably more committee work, but we shouldn't penalize people for not doing it. We should reward the people who are doing it. Maybe it's about rebranding tenure, where service, mentoring, and other invisible labor are credited and recognized for what they add to the academic institution. And then my final solution is mandatory annual training for White male academics.

DJJ: The tenure process is one of the foundational bricks of this oppressive system, and we are saying that we need to remove this brick and replace it with something more equitable. Make salaries public. Give people receipts—allow all faculty to see the complaints in a database where you can see the complaint lodged at cis-gendered White men against the complaints lodged against female, global majority faculty, and queer faculty. When you make things public and you have receipts, it's hard to dispute the evidence. Then an article or a publication can be made with that data.

JMH: I would support that by saying that there's something that chairs can do when faculty have a larger number of complaints. First of all, to recognize that the more care work-related service that you do, and the more invisible care work service that you do as a person of color or a woman, the more dangerous it is for you in terms of putting yourself out there. So a lot of the success of folks who don't do that is because they close themselves off as humans because it's safer and less time-consuming that way. And because the system allows them to do that.

As a chair, if there is something that is in the file, deans are busy, and the Dean is going to look at what that chair says, and if that chair says that this happened...let me contextualize this for you and say yes, this person did too much service—here's why. We're working on it. Yes, this person had negative course evaluations. That's due to this transition that's happening in their program, or something like that, and then amplify their research contributions, and talk about their student successes, because deans don't want to get in the weeds with you about this. They just want to say, "Okay, meets expectations, great, check," because they're busy. I know that sounds flippant, but that's been my experience.

GW: Jeanmarie said something to me once that stuck with me: "You know what you said because you know what you think." When it is reported that you said something you don't think, and then you have to defend yourself against hearsay, it's exhausting.

JMH: It's just hard to cancel people across the table from each other with a cup of tea and some cookies.

MAL: But I think the other side of that is to remind our White male colleagues that I'm not pointing a finger at you. I'm reminding you that you benefit from the systems that determine somebody's effectiveness as an educator. I have taught from elementary to high school, and it's been the same at every level. Those oppressive systems are everywhere in the professional world—be it at a community theater or on Broadway. I'm not pointing my finger at you, I'm reminding you that you are born into a system that supports you, regardless of your ability, your expertise, or the mistakes that you have made. You are still entitled in a way that the folks on this screen and the folks that we work with in the communities we represent do not, cannot ever be. Chairs and deans need to think about that before they make decisions about somebody's ability. Nobody goes to school all the years that we've all gone to school to get to a university in a so-called tenured position and be told that they're less than satisfactory because surveys came back and they were below 70%. Who does that? We don't get paid enough to deal with that. And it goes back to the policies and how we are evaluated that are only based on our responsibilities. Because people think: "Go see Marty. We read *Slave Play*, and they're just all upset." Well, you need to have that [conversation] because you shouldn't have been reading that play without getting your education first. Now you deal with it, because you created that environment, and you operated freely because you knew the system would support you and there wouldn't be any consequences. I cannot even bring *Ragtime* into the classroom without having a whole conversation about the uses of the N-word. "We should do *Ragtime*," when I said I wasn't doing it if we didn't leave the language in. Isn't that what it's about? It is a mirror for you. That's the story. It's not for me to tell the story. It's actually for you to come and watch it so you can be reminded of where we are headed if we don't begin to put it on paper, put it in policy, and have open conversations to change these systems.

JMH: I just wanted to say another incentive for everyone on the faculty is that, in my experience, regardless of the way you identify, or your gender or any kind of status, anti-racist, feminist, LGBTQ-allied, making inclusive theatre is more fun and exciting. You're throwing yourself into scary things with other people who care about the same things. There's a lot of reward for letting your guard down and doing this work alongside your colleagues who are bearing a lot of the labor for making change in this arena.

GW: When more people are included, we create more meaningful art. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your wisdom and for teaching me today, and please, let's continue this conversation.

BIOGRAPHY

Jeanmarie Higgins is a Professor and Chair of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her current project is *Teaching Writing in Theatre and Performance Studies: A Resource Guide* (Palgrave 2025), a textbook she co-edited with Samuel Yates. Jeanmarie is the 2021 recipient of the Oscar Brockett Award for Excellence in Teaching from The Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE).

David Jiles, Jr. (he/him/his) is a Black Boston-based professional actor, singer, and teaching artist. He is an Assistant Professor at Berklee College of Music where he teaches voice, acting, and musical theatre. He also teaches theatre and voice at Emerson College. David is in progress to designate in the Linklater Voice Method (2025); a training methodology on freeing the natural voice through psycho-somatic voice exercises and physical exercises.

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RODGERS + HAMMERSTEIN'S CINDERELLA | APRIL 2024
West Virginia University
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Photography by Alyssa Reves

Class Voice Pedagogy in Music Theatre: Northwestern University

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by Sarah Inendino
Michael Brown,
Melissa Foster,
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Providing increased access to singing at the university level can be challenging. The number of students who want voice instruction can often be far greater than the number of students who can be granted private lessons (DeBoer, 2012). One solution to providing more students with singing instruction is a group voice class. During the 2023-2024 academic year, every voice instructor in music theatre at Northwestern University taught a section of Class Voice. The class was open to all theatre students and geared towards underclassmen and students not in the Music Theatre Certificate program. These students were not enrolled in private voice instruction through the School of Communications where the Theatre Program is housed.

To provide context, Class Voice at Northwestern University is a group singing class where 12-15 students learn together and from each other. The class meets for two hours once a week, with one office hour provided for students each week. The structure of the class can look different between instructors. However, we have all found trusted practices that work for our students. The purpose of this article is not to compare the outcomes of a group voice class to those of private lessons or ensemble singing. Instead, the purpose of this article is to provide trusted practices for group voice instruction. As Amelia Rollings Bigler (2023) stated in an interview, "One-to-one pedagogy is not the same as group voice pedagogy. While the content may be the same, the pedagogy needs to be somewhat different to be effective." While we focused this article on a recurring class structure, these pedagogical practices can be used and modified when working in a master class, studio, or workshop setting.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

To develop a curriculum and learning outcomes for the group voice class, we used a Google Form to collect input from each teacher on the key topics that should be covered. We then discussed where our approaches and techniques overlapped and where they did not in order to establish the main content for the class. We also left room for personal style and approach, while ensuring that important foundational information would be covered. With this framework in place, the learning outcomes for the Class Voice course were designed to accommodate the diverse needs of students while maintaining a strong foundation in essential vocal technique and content.

The learning outcomes for Class Voice are structured to meet the individual needs of each student within a group setting. Every student enters with various skill levels and performance experiences, and we strive to build a community that develops confidence in group and individual singing. Robison (2001) recommends a narrow curriculum when teaching a group voice class, and we work to focus on foundational skills. Consequently, the students receive a basic foundation in vocal function and pedagogy, breathing techniques, navigating registration, resonance, musical interpretation, and how to take care of their voices to prevent injury and strain. These skills and concepts described are not an exhaustive list. Depending on the student, there might be times when one skill or concept becomes the central focus. There are also times when concepts or ideas that were not originally going to be discussed start to surface throughout the class. The ability to be flexible for the individual student while providing foundational learning to the class becomes crucial.

Additionally, one of the goals for our students is to keep learning outside of class. This learning can take many forms; however, one of the methods we have found helpful is teaching students how to practice what they have just learned or discovered in the group setting. Many students are still developing their practice skills, and providing them with strategies and suggestions to continue their work outside of class can aid in their growth as singers. Additionally, encouraging students to explore different genres and become critical listeners are goals that can lead to many benefits when they return to the classroom.

BENEFITS

The benefits of group voice instruction are vast. Singing weekly and learning exercises can help students increase range, flexibility, and overall vocal quality while focusing on particular concepts. Students can gain an understanding of how their voice works, more confidence in their singing abilities, and hopefully, a joy in music-making. Students can have continuous repetition with a skill as they are working their technique with their peers. It is an opportunity for students who do not have prior singing experience to increase their knowledge of repertoire and learn by observation and practice. We create a class playlist that had every song that was sung in class, so students can go back or continue to discover new repertoire. Furthermore, students can ask questions and are consistently engaged by the instructor.

Another benefit is the support of their peers and the environment created throughout the class. The students are invested in the success of their peers and encourage their fellow singers in their performances. They create a community that allows students to try new pieces and gain more performance experience in a supportive space. In an interview, Dr. Clifton Ware (2022) mentions the community built within a group voice class: "The other thing is, I consider group voice a kind of a therapeutic group. It's a therapy group. You become very supportive of one another. You learn how to give critiques in a very humane, kind way." This community is one that can be continued outside of class and into other performance realms at the university level.

CLASS ENGAGEMENT

In any class, student engagement is always on the instructor's mind. There are several helpful texts (Smith & Burrichter, 2023; Stanton, 2000; Ward, 2006; Vaughn & Dayme, 2024) that offer considerations for teaching vocal technique and provide exercise and repertoire suggestions for students. Some of these strategies could be used when teaching in a private studio as well. In this article, we tried to highlight class engagement strategies that were specific to learning in a group voice setting.

In group voice class, there are various strategies we use to engage the entire group. First and foremost, everyone sings in every class. This typically starts with a group warm-up and then asking volunteers to demonstrate and work through the exercises. We strive to build confidence by having everyone do warm-ups together without the fear of making a mistake. This not only engages the entire class but creates an "opportunity to nurture emerging artists and encourage collaborative learning in a supportive environment" (Sauerland, 2018, p. 527).

Central Topic

For many of us, there is a central topic for each class session. This central topic might carry over from week to week and engages the class to watch for a particular concept or idea while their peers sing. The central topic also allows for the instructor to do quick check-ins with the class to make sure everyone understands the concept and can apply their developing knowledge to their singing. This can be very helpful when the class setting is a master class or studio style. The entire class can be invited to give feedback, and the instructor can relate what a singer is working on to the whole class. The class has specific concepts that are built on from week to week that allow for more critical listening. The students can also break from the master class format to practice a concept and all stand in a circle and find a partner across the room. Each partner can take turns trying a new exercise or technique and then get feedback from their partner and teacher. This allows the instructor time to have everyone in the class try a new technique offered to the solo singer.

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Musical Theatre Group Song
Another strategy for class engagement is to learn a group song or duet offered in a few different keys for various vocal ranges. In this scenario, volunteers are invited to try the song, while everyone works through a specific aspect of vocal technique together. This is a useful way of teaching singing skills in a group setting and can eliminate nerves surrounding solo singing by learning one piece together as a group. There are multiple ways this can be done but two specific ways are provided below.

The first option is to choose a duet that is easy to sing and adaptable for nearly all voice types. For example, selections from the musical theatre repertoire like "If I Loved You" from *Carousel*, "People Say We're in Love" from *Oklahoma*, or "Suddenly Seymour" from *Little Shop of Horrors* are great choices. The group can be taught the song in one key, which is especially helpful for beginners. After singing the song together and discussing vocal technique, students can volunteer to sing the song on their own and have some individual time with the instructor.

A second option is to take a well-known song, like "Empty Chairs and Empty Tables" from *Les Misérable*s, and provide multiple keys for the students to choose from. The song can be taught in the original key, and students can then try singing it in an alternate key if it better suits their vocal range. This exercise takes the fear out of learning new songs, sightreading, and performing in front of others. It also provides new repertoire to students who do not already have a book of solo songs.

Pop-Rock
Many singers feel that they aren't suited for or are unable to excel at pop-rock. Despite listening to it on the radio and singing it at the top of their lungs in the car, their lack of formal training creates a sense of self-doubt. Group voice can be the perfect antidote for this apprehension. Starting from a place of comfort and familiarity can often help reduce inhibition. On the other hand, the introduction of something outside of familiar routines introduces the aspect of experimentation. Utilizing the pentatonic and/or blues scales in warmups blends the familiar concept of vocalise with an aural pattern that might not be commonplace in their singing routine.

Empowering students through physicality can also embolden them to embrace their inner pop star. For example, something as simple as having them sing into a pen and imagining it's a microphone can encourage different head or body positions to, with guidance, positively affect the vocal tract shape and/or breath support. While some students are releasing their inner pop star, other students can show their support and continue to build community in the classroom by being their live concert audience. This can be a fun way to get students out of their shell and provide energy in the room.

Trading Measures
In jazz, musicians will trade 4s and improvise every 4 measures. This can be fun to do in a modified way with Class Voice students as well. During warm-ups, we might have students trade off singing between voice types. This allows for smaller groups to sing, which can be helpful when listening for individual students. Students can also use a short part of a song and stand in pairs around the room. The first partner can sing 4 measures (depending on the phrasing of the piece), and then the next partner can sing the next 4 measures. In this way, they are still singing in a small group but to their scene or singing partner. This allows for the teacher to walk around the room and listen to individual voices as well.

Mirroring
The ability to have students watch themselves in a mirror can be very helpful. Sometimes the teaching space does not have mirrors, so it can be helpful to have students partner to become each other's mirrors. The students are not purposefully moving their face or body in any particular way, but instead, might be doing a vocal warm-up while another person mirrors their face or body. This can bring awareness to the student being mirrored if they are holding tension in a certain area of their body or face. It can also bring awareness to the person who is doing the mirroring if they do anything similar, and both students will focus on releasing tension or any physical habits they might have while singing.

Solfege Games
Another opportunity to engage the entire class is through singing games. These activities do not need to take a lot of time and can be as simple as playing a 2–3-minute solfege game. A few examples of solfege games include having students lead tonal patterns, having students take out certain solfege syllables from a pattern or scale so they have to audiate those notes, or having students build a solfege tonal pattern together and practice singing certain intervals. If a student is struggling with intonation, playing some of these games alongside singers who have more experience can help to build their confidence and ear.


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Discussions
Another unique aspect of teaching singing in a group setting is that you have the opportunity to have discussions. We can spend time watching short clips of how the vocal folds vibrate or how the shape of the vocal tract changes the sound of the singer. This often leads to very fruitful discussions and a greater understanding of vocal production. Additionally, students can complete reflections or journal entries for class. These provide opportunities for continued communication with the instructor and also allow for any misconceptions to be discussed as an entire class.

Guests Artists
Lastly, the opportunity to have guest artists can also increase student engagement. While the class is focused on vocal technique, there are opportunities to have a colleague who teaches movement work with singers to release tension and engage their whole body. This helps students make connections and not silo the different art forms of musical theatre. Also, inviting a colleague from the medical profession to talk about vocal health can provide students with important information and a connection to someone in that field.

DRAWBACKS

The main drawback we have found to group voice instruction is time. It can be hard to get through all of the material, both within a single class session and over the course of the term. However, using many of the class engagement strategies described above has provided us an opportunity to hear and give as much feedback as possible to each singer.

Another drawback is undoubtedly that students can also become focused on comparing themselves to others, which can impact their self-confidence. The range of experience entering a group voice class can vary greatly. Encouraging a mindset of exploration, experimentation, and personal growth can help combat self-doubt and varying ability levels in the class. Students with more experience can review the basics, explore new techniques, and revisit breathwork and vocalizations. Students with less experience can learn from their teacher and their peers.

One final drawback is that while students may be exposed to a particular concept or technique, they are not able to do it on their own before the term has ended. Helding (2010) refers to this as Master Class Syndrome. "It is common for a singer in a master class to execute a novel vocal task on demand quite well, even to the point of amazement by the auditors and the singer himself. It is quite another feat to be able to replicate the technique on one's own" (p. 75). We confront this drawback by encouraging students to record their vocal coaching or exercises done in class. This allows the student to identify specific language utilized by the teacher, listen to how they were guided through the learning process, and believe in their own voice. The ability to listen back to recordings can be a powerful tool when trying to recreate a sound, vowel shape, or another vocal concept. Sometimes repeating specific exercises multiple times in a row can get a concept to click, and the students can repeat this process through their recording.

NATASHA, PIERRE AND THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 | APRIL 2023
Fort Lewis College
Directed by Michael E. McKelvey
Photography by Jonas Grushkin

Another in-the-moment strategy is to ask the students how they felt physically or what they did differently when they achieved a particular sound in their own words. The unique way a student articulates how they created a sound helps not only themselves but can aid in the understanding of other students as well. Sometimes having the student repeat an exercise before providing any feedback or talking can also be very beneficial. Afterward, the student can write down what they did as another way to process the information. These strategies help to maximize student learning and growth. As teachers, we realize that we are laying the foundation and students may take more time with a concept before it becomes a natural part of the practice.

CONCLUSION

Although all of our instructors have autonomy in how we teach the course, our team has developed these trusted practices for class voice pedagogy through our shared classroom experiences. The goal of this article was to provide strategies that were recurring themes for all of us, as well as other pedagogical techniques that might only be used by a single instructor. By providing a wide range of ideas, we hope that one or many may resonate with the reader and provide ideas for their future group voice class, master class, or workshop.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Brown is an assistant professor of instruction in musical theater at Northwestern University. A versatile performer, he has sung with the Corpus Christi Symphony, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and in musical theater productions such as *Camelot* (Drury Lane Theatre) and *Into the Woods* (Mercury Theatre).

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Sarah Inendino holds a PhD in Music Education from the University of Michigan, with additional degrees from Northwestern University and Columbia University. Sarah teaches voice at Northwestern University, Roosevelt University, and Lake Forest College, and works with the Harper Festival Chorus.

Kelli Morgan McHugh, a gender affirming voice educator, is a teaching artist based in Evanston, IL. Kelli is an Associate Professor of Musical Theatre Voice at Northwestern University. Kelli works with singers of all levels, specializing in collegiate level musical theatre voice, vocal stamina for professionals, and gender affirming voice care.

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Classical Repertoire in the Musical Theatre Voice Studio: One Program's Shifting Mindset

10.62392/VCUG4221

by Brian Manternach

AMERICAN IDIOT | SEPTEMBER 2015
University of Utah
Directed by Denny Berry
Photography by Todd Collins

When the BFA musical theatre program at the University of Utah Department of Theatre launched in 2009, there were far fewer programs of its kind than there are today. Those of us who served as faculty during the inaugural years did our best to establish a robust curriculum based on successful existing models. Even so, this still left plenty for us to figure out on our own.

The person tasked with building the program, David Schmidt, was the right man for the job, considering his varied background in performance, private business, and academia. He understood the benefit of connecting our curriculum to traditional training methods, but also understood that we would have to prepare students for the industry demands of contemporary musical theatre. Therefore, he decided to follow a "classical foundation" model for the "triple threat" areas upon which the degree would focus—dancing, acting, and singing. For dance, this meant offering core classes rooted in ballet techniques before students would move on to classes in other dance styles. For acting, Shakespeare sonnets were used in the first-year acting courses to help establish principles of text delivery. For singing, Western classical repertoire (art song, oratorio, opera, etc.) was incorporated into studio voice instruction from the beginning. At least one classical song or aria was required every semester, which students would perform as part of their vocal juries.

In recent years, however, we have begun to reconsider whether or not the "classical foundation" is as necessary as we had previously believed. We have started to offer classes in more contemporary styles of dance, shifting away from such an emphasis on ballet. Our acting classes now incorporate a "manifesto" project for the first-year students, allowing them to write their own monologues on a topic that is inspired by their own lives and experiences. We have also gradually shifted away from the classical repertoire requirement in voice lessons. First, in 2019, we removed the requirement from the final two semesters, allowing seniors in the program more latitude in song selection and providing them the opportunity to focus on the repertoire in which they are most interested. Second, in 2022, for students in their junior year, we expanded the "classical" category to include operetta, allowing them to choose selections by Gilbert and Sullivan, Johann Strauss, Jr., Sigmund Romberg, and the like.

This academic year, at the urging of our voice faculty, alumni, and students, we have dropped the classical repertoire requirement entirely from our applied lessons syllabus. Students are still welcome to select songs and arias from the Western classical canon, and they are encouraged to do so if it is of interest to them. But those selections will only be incorporated into voice lessons if it is the students' choice rather than because it is a requirement of the program.

This article explores some of the reasons we kept classical repertoire as part of the program for nearly 15 years. It also examines why, after all this time, we finally decided to remove the requirement. As we explore below, a variety of factors influenced this decision, the most important of which is a desire to help our students find professional success.

ESTABLISHING BALANCE IN THE VOICE

One of the primary reasons we included classical repertoire in our studio requirements was to facilitate the development of a balanced, well-rounded vocal technique. Of course, the terms used to discuss vocal registration are far from codified among singers, vocal pedagogues, and voice scientists. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the finer details of the physiological and acoustic components that contribute to registration.[1] That being said, one of our goals in the voice studio is for students to use and develop their "chest-voice" registers (Mode 1, Mechanism 1, thyroarytenoid-dominant, thick fold, etc.) as well as their "head-voice" registers (Mode 2, Mechanism 2, cricothyroid-dominant, thin fold, etc.). Singing in musical theatre styles often requires skillfully moving between these registers or blending them in various ways to create the "mix" that is ubiquitous in the genre.

1 For a more thorough exploration of registration, and the lack of consensus surrounding terminology, readers are referred to Christian T. Herbst's appropriately titled article, "Registers—The Snake Pit of Voice Pedagogy: Part 1: Proprioception, Perception, and Laryngeal Mechanisms," *Journal of Singing* 77, no. 2 (November/December 2020): 175-190.

Anecdotally, we find that many of the first-year students who come into our program have fairly well-developed chest-voice registers and less-developed head-voice registers. Some of this is due to their previous vocal experience, but it may also be due to their perceptions of what constitutes a "Broadway sound." Vocal skill acquisition is dependent upon teacher instruction, student practice, and a certain degree of vocal maturity. Considering all of these factors, singers benefit from regularly exercising the parts of the voice that are less utilized and underdeveloped to establish balance throughout the vocal range and between the registers.

By means of comparison, consider those who spend countless hours at the gym developing the muscles of their upper body without giving the same attention to their leg muscles. Though it may earn them the physique they are looking for, it will likely result in a body that is out of balance. This deficiency may reveal itself when they engage in full-body athletic activities, like playing basketball or rugby. In the same way, a strong chest register may allow for impressive sounds in a certain part of the voice, but singers will have difficulty performing an entire song or an entire role if their vocal instrument is not well-balanced and conditioned for singing throughout the range.

One way to encourage development of the head-voice register, therefore, is to work on repertoire that encourages use of the head voice, either based on the style, range, or *tessitura*. Classical repertoire generally serves this purpose, since chest-voice-dominant belting is not part of the aesthetic of the genre. If, indeed, singing in "mix" is some combination of head voice and chest voice, the more of each component a singer has available, the stronger the overall mix will be.

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Of course, singing classical repertoire is not the only way to help students develop their head-voice registers. A variety of songs from the musical theatre canon can work just as well. For example, many of the songs from the Golden Age of musical theatre (roughly spanning from the 1940s to the 1960s) borrow elements from opera and operetta, including a more traditional orchestration, the prominence of lyricism, and higher vocal ranges and *tessitur*e. They also tend to call for a similar head-voice-dominant tonal aesthetic as is used in classical singing, especially when compared to the speech-driven nature of more contemporary musicals. Though it may not be an exact match ("I Could Have Danced All Night" is not quite "Je Veux Vivre.") singers can use Golden Age repertoire to work on the head-voice register while still exploring stylistic elements more appropriate for musical theatre.

Of course, there are also songs from more modern musicals that have classical characteristics. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* (1986), Maury Yeston's *Phantom* (1991), *A Light in the Piazza* (2005), and *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* (2012) are just a few examples of musicals from the last four decades that call for a more classical style of singing. Some contemporary songs also have belt or belt-mix moments but otherwise mostly utilize a head-voice quality, either due to range or a softer dynamic, including "I Don't

Need a Roof" from *Big Fish*, "No One Else" from *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*, "Another Life" and "Wondering" from *The Bridges of Madison County*, "I'd Rather Be Sailing" from *A New Brain*, and "Answer Me" from *The Band's Visit*. Therefore, while classical and operatic repertoire can certainly help facilitate balanced register development, this technical goal can also be achieved without straying from the musical-theatre canon.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Another primary reason we included classical technique and repertoire in our program is to help our graduates pursue a greater range of job opportunities. As we would point out to our students, an increasing number of professional opera companies are adding musicals to their seasons. When staging these shows, operatic musical directors generally encourage more of a classical sound from the singers they cast. As an example from our own community, the Utah Opera and the Pioneer Theatre Company (a professional regional theatre in Salt Lake City) both recently mounted productions of *Man of La Mancha* within a few years of each other. Both companies hired graduates of our program to sing in the ensemble and in supporting roles. Unsurprisingly, the singers in Utah Opera's production employed a decidedly more classical tone quality while the singers in Pioneer Theatre Company's production used a more contemporary musical theatre sound. The fact that our graduates could successfully navigate their voices in a way that satisfied both tonal goals reinforced the importance of a varied vocal technique.

Similarly, a number of companies (summer stock theatres, in particular) hire resident artists for an entire season, which may include shows like *Hello, Dolly!* alongside *Pirates of Penzance* alongside *Così fan tutte*. The Ohio Light Opera and the Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre are just two such companies with which our graduates have performed. Obviously, singers who can navigate between classical and musical theatre techniques could be desirable employees in these situations, especially if they have experience singing in languages other than English.

In addition, musical theatre singers with a classical technique could also be hired for other singing jobs, whether in churches, temples, or synagogues; singing in professional choirs (like symphony choruses); or even working in restaurants. One of my former students was a server in an Italian restaurant and was often asked by patrons to sing for tips. The handful of Italian songs and arias we had worked on in voice lessons proved quite useful in that setting.

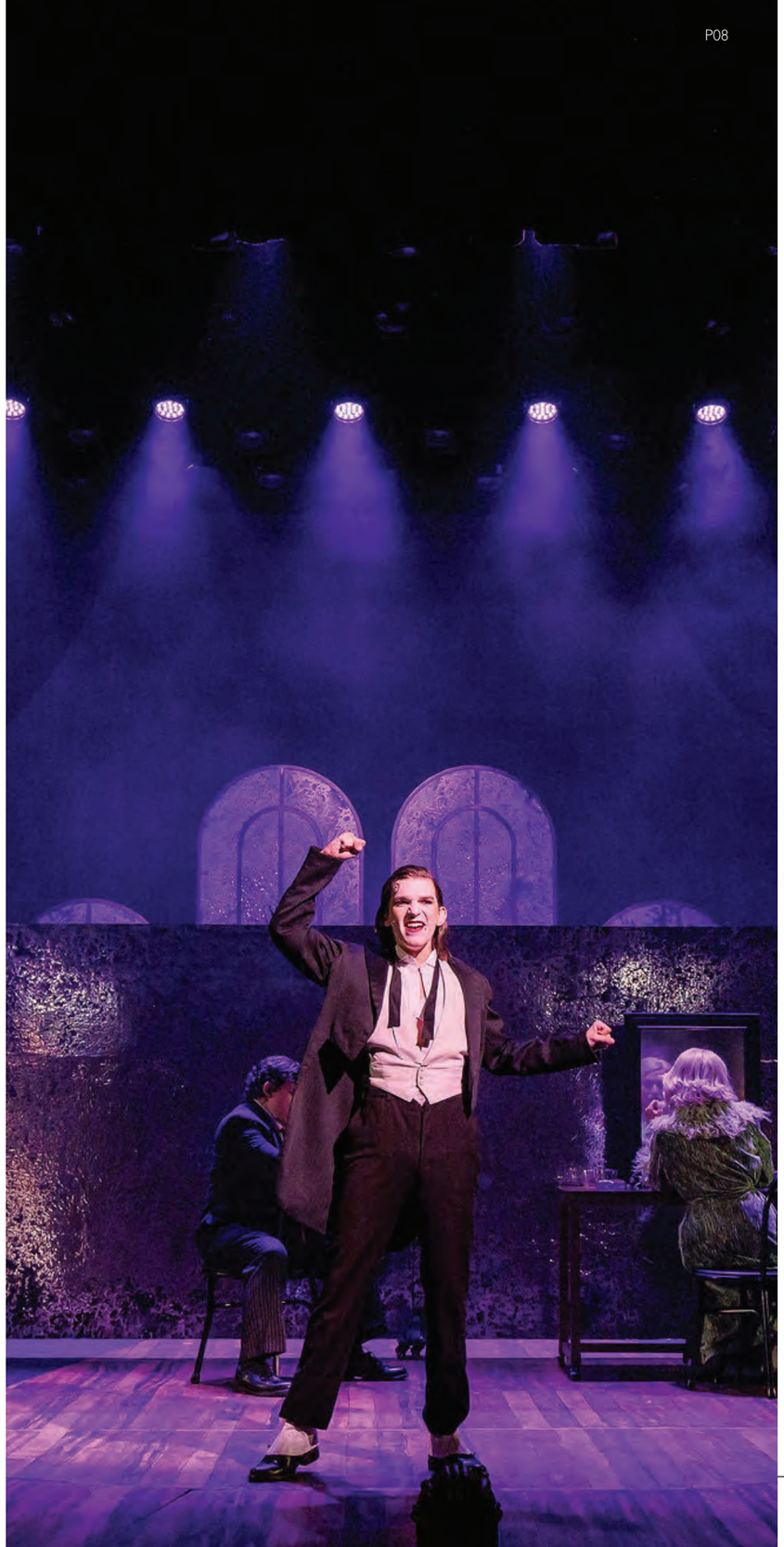
The reality, however, is that very few of our graduates have pursued these sorts of opportunities. Some have, but most have not. That could be because of a lack of interest in classical music, or it could be that the level of engagement we offer with classical repertoire is not really enough to allow most of our students to feel confident and/or competent to audition for these kinds of opportunities. After all, we do not offer diction classes, song literature, or opera history. Additionally, learning only one classical song or aria per semester cannot possibly provide exposure to and experience with all the categories of repertoire they would study in a vocal performance degree.

Certainly, we encourage students with a background and/or an interest in classical repertoire to work on it in voice lessons and to include it in their vocal juries. We are fortunate to have a voice faculty that is well qualified to guide our students in these pursuits. However, considering how few of our graduates actually seek classical singing opportunities, maintaining a classical requirement in our program would seem to adhere to a policy that provides little benefit to the professional careers of the majority of our students.

TIME AND ENERGY BETTER SPENT ELSEWHERE

Rock musicals have been part of the musical theatre canon since the late 1960s and early 1970s with the debut of shows like *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Therefore, for at least the last half-century, the musical theatre industry has depended on performers who can sing expressively and sustainably in rock styles.

Current compositional styles in musical theatre are increasingly influenced by pop and rock music. Besides the plethora of jukebox musicals that craft storylines around existing songs (*Mamma Mia, Rock of Ages, Jersey Boys,*



American Idiot, Beautiful: The Carole King Musical, & Juliet, etc.), originally composed music is also trending in a direction that blurs the lines between musical theatre and pop/rock. Indeed, pop stars are regularly tapped to serve as composers for Broadway musicals, including Elton John, Cyndi Lauper, Sting, Duncan Sheik, and Sarah Bareilles. For this reason, musical theatre audition calls frequently ask singers to bring in pop/rock selections, often with the expectation that they be sung in an authentic pop/rock performance style. This requires use of an appropriate tonal aesthetic as well as deviating from a "story-driven" musical theatre delivery.

Each spring, we bring two casting agents and one talent agent to the University of Utah to work with our juniors and seniors. They regularly note the increased influence of pop/rock styles in contemporary musical theatre. As such, they encourage our singers to add pop/rock songs to their audition books and to explore the authentic style and performance of this repertoire. Given these industry trends, spending time in voice lessons on classical repertoire leaves less time to focus on pop/rock repertoire. If our program is to truly prepare students for the business of show business (like no business I know), removing the classical requirement provides needed time to explore the styles that are currently in demand.

PLAYING POLITICS

In 2009, as our musical theatre program was getting off the ground, there was still a prevailing mindset among many vocal pedagogues that classical technique was the only "healthy" way to sing. Many voice teachers believed that belting, in particular, was risky and inherently injurious to the voice. I recall a conversation I had in the mid-2000s with a former president of the National Association of Teachers of Singing who told me how he tendered his resignation from the organization once it started to promote non-classical singing techniques, due to his belief that it would lead to the ruin of many voices.

Thankfully, times are changing. There are fewer strict adherents to the "classical = good" and "belting = bad" mindset as modern research and current practices demonstrate reliable ways to build viable techniques for contemporary musical theatre singing. As we were launching our musical theatre program in 2009, however, there were many more pedagogues advocating only for traditional methods. Therefore, to ensure university administrators that our program would not harm young voices—knowing that these administrators were likely being advised by tenured, classical-voice pedagogues—David Schmidt quite savvily emphasized the "classical foundation" that voice lessons would provide. He established the "a classical song at every jury" policy and backed that up with additional parameters for repertoire that kept students from working on more contemporary repertoire until their junior and senior years (presumably, after the classical foundation had been solidly established).

These policies actually benefited our recruiting, at the time. For any student or parent who had vocal health concerns or hesitancies about musical theatre-style singing, we could reassure them of the classical foundation we provided and could easily point to our repertoire policies as proof. In some minds, this likely set us apart from other programs that did not have similar policies.

Of course, any style of singing can lead to a vocal injury or voice disorder. Vocal health must absolutely be prioritized in any pre-professional training program that involves singing—whether its emphasis is classical, musical theatre, or any other genre of music. Singers should be aware of their daily vocal dose, should know how to pace themselves during times of heavy voice use, and should have an understanding of vocal hygiene and healthy vocal habits.

We no longer believe, however, that students need to have a classical foundation as a prerequisite for sustainable singing in musical theatre. What we claimed as an advantage of our program over others may actually have contributed to the prevalent but false notion that the only healthy singing is classical singing.

OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AND REACTIONS

There are other noteworthy elements that may have facilitated our move away from required classical repertoire at the University of Utah. For instance, musical theatre programs often have different requirements depending on whether they are housed within music or theatre and whether they are a Bachelor of Music degree or a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. As an example, Oklahoma City University offers a BM in Music Theater, which is housed in the Wanda L. Bass School of Music.[2] According to the university website, students in the program audition for all six annual stage productions—both operas and musicals. They also complete a junior recital "consisting entirely of classical repertoire and a senior recital focused on music theater repertoire and related styles." As stated on the website, "This vocal cross training makes our graduates competitive and versatile."

The Shenandoah Conservatory in Virginia, on the other hand, offers a BFA in Musical Theatre. Acknowledging their reputation as the "pop/rock school," they indicate that students spend the first three years in the program focusing on traditional and contemporary musical theatre repertoire in addition to a vocal styles course "to learn how to stylize songs from all the genres they will encounter as a musical theatre performer."[3] In addition, in their fourth year, students work with Matt Edwards—author of *So You Want to Sing Rock: A Guide for Performers*—for an "in-depth study of pop/rock styles." Nowhere on the website does it mention the use of classical repertoire.

At the University of Utah, our musical theatre degree program is a BFA that is housed in the Department of Theatre rather than in the School of Music. This may have contributed to the lack of resistance we experienced when dropping the classical repertoire requirement. We have our own voice faculty, separate from that of the School of Music, none of whom feel that classical repertoire is an absolute necessity in order to achieve the vocal outcomes musical theatre students need in the industry. The Area Head of the Musical Theatre Program had similar buy-in and quickly approved the change, understanding that we have to make the best use of the limited time we have in weekly 45-minute voice lessons. It is conceivable that dropping the classical

2 Oklahoma City University, "Music Theater"; https://www.okcu.edu/programs/music-theater (accessed October 22, 2024).
3 Shenandoah University, "Musical Theatre"; https://www.su.edu/conservatory/areas-of-study/bachelor-of-fine-arts-in-musical-theatre/ (accessed October 22, 2024).

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repertoire component of the degree would have been more difficult to pass through if the program was housed in our School of Music.

So far, both faculty and students have adjusted well to the change. Students appreciate greater autonomy in repertoire selection and the ability to dive deeper into the genres to which they feel the most drawn. Faculty have noted in the past that the one required classical song was often the students' least practiced/most procrastinated project each semester. They have articulated that it was sometimes "like pulling teeth" to convince students to give their classical repertoire equal attention as their musical theatre and pop/rock selections. Unsurprisingly, this would generally reveal itself in jury performances, where students' classical songs were often the least polished of their sets, minimizing any benefits the assigned repertoire might provide. For these students in particular, lesson time is now used much more effectively.

REMAINING RELEVANT

When looking through the course catalog of any musical-theatre degree program, the variety of topics covered in only four years of study can seem extensive. Indeed, at the University of Utah Department of Theatre, our musical-theatre program is structured to provide as many of the skill-building opportunities and experiences necessary for graduates to forge careers in theatre. In the classroom and in the studio, however, we never feel like we have enough time to go as deeply into the subject matter as we would like.

Both Oklahoma City University and the Shenandoah Conservatory highlight that their curricula are designed to lead to professional success in the industry. And, indeed, both schools have many accomplished alumni. Therefore, to say that one approach—vocal cross-training that includes classical repertoire versus a more contemporary and pop/rock focus—is objectively more beneficial would be a difficult case to make.

Of course, try as we might to provide as thorough an education as possible, there is no way to give students everything they might conceivably need before they graduate. Therefore, prioritizing the most relevant content is crucial. Although there are still arguments for including classical repertoire in the musical theatre voice studio, it seemed a change was needed for our program. Time will tell whether this was a wise move or not. Naturally, if industry preferences shift in favor of a classically-influenced sound, we may find ourselves reevaluating and reinstituting previous policies.

In our voice studios, we are constantly asking our students to make bold choices. We also teach them, however, that artists must be open to direction, sometimes making entirely different choices when circumstances call for something new. As faculty, we are compelled to follow the same advice—being decisive, but also being flexible. When we examine the available evidence, we have to be just as prepared to move away from previously held philosophies when they no longer serve our overarching goal, which is to serve our students in the best way possible.

BIOGRAPHY

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NATASHA, PIERRE AND THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 | APRIL 2023
Fort Lewis College
Directed by Michael E. McKelvey
Photography by Jonas Grushkin

Photo Credit: Chris Montgomery, courtesy of Unsplash

NO ONE IS ALONE: Integrating Asynchronous Video Discussions to Expand Classroom Community and Nurture Process-Based Training

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By Curtis Reynolds

INTRODUCTION

In musical theatre training, especially within higher education, time constraints and the need for individualized attention can create significant challenges. As educators balance limited in-class time with the demands of providing personalized feedback and fostering a collaborative learning environment, asynchronous video discussions offer a solution that addresses both time limitations and the need for reflective practice.

As a young artist pursuing musical theatre training, I often felt as if I was the only one in my class who needed to practice certain performance concepts and skills. I saw my peers present seemingly polished performances while rarely witnessing the processes that got them there. This led me to fear taking risks and to feel isolated in my challenges. Because I wanted to also be perceived as equally polished and poised, I hid my process from others out of fear that I would seem less naturally gifted. Asynchronous video discussions can help break down these barriers by creating a space where students share their progress, witness their peers' development, and feel less alone in the learning process. By expanding this sense of purposeful practice beyond the classroom, students realize they are part of a shared journey to hone their craft instead of an individual one.

Asynchronous video discussions provide a virtual space where students post videos to a shared forum for receiving feedback, providing self-reflection, archiving progress, and connecting with peers outside the classroom. Everyone can view and comment on each other's submissions, creating a collaborative in-class and virtual environment. These video discussions are similar to "studio blogs" or "discussion rooms" in other educational contexts, but the addition of video makes the interactions more dynamic. They also provide more objective visual and audio information to students on their work, rather than just relying on peer and instructor feedback alone. By extending learning into this digital realm, educators can offer more opportunities for growth and connection.

This article explores the benefits of integrating asynchronous video discussions into musical theatre pedagogy, focusing on four key areas: expanding the community beyond the classroom, nurturing a growth mindset through process-based practice, cultivating skills in giving and receiving constructive feedback, and addressing practical challenges in implementation.

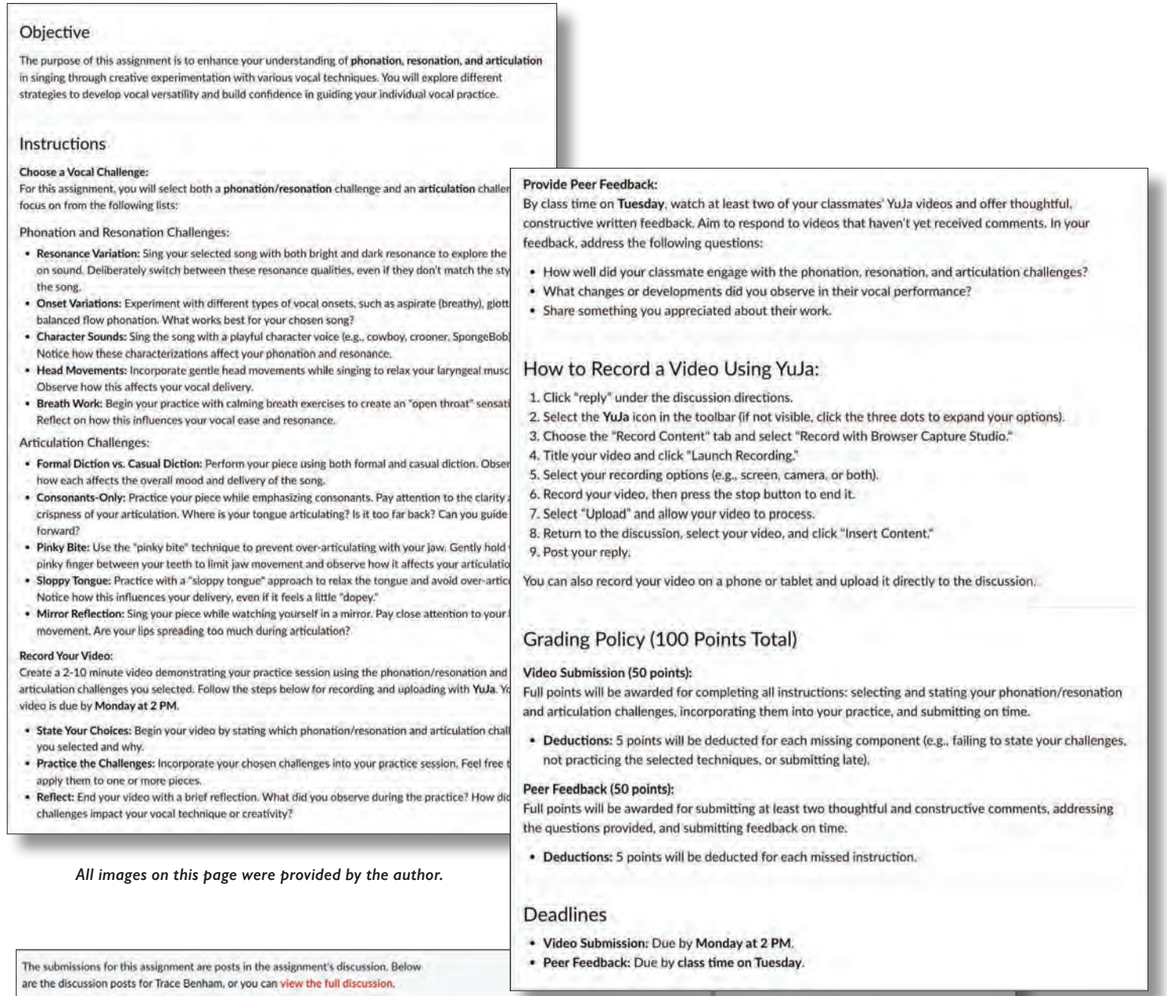
PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES

One of the strengths of this tool is its broad application to many performance-based classes. I have been able to integrate asynchronous video discussions into all the courses I have taught. While I teach mainly singing and performance-based classes, I can envision this tool working well for acting, dance, and even more "academic" courses like history or script analysis. In my Singing Techniques for the Actor class, I utilize weekly video discussions to align directly with the vocal concepts we cover each week. For example, after one of the weeks where we cover the systems of singing (breathing, phonation, resonation, and articulation), we have weekly practice prompts that allow students to experiment with concepts related to those systems in the context of the individual pieces they're working on. In these videos, students begin by stating their chosen practice strategies for that session, experiment with those strategies on camera (including the entire process, not just the "performance"), and end each video with a brief reflection of how the practice strategies went and what they will take away. For an example of a specific assignment, reference the screenshots at the end of this article.

This assignment structure is effective primarily because students are provided options within the practice prompts rather than simply asking them to practice generally. This helps to focus the students' practice sessions while also giving them the agency to choose exercises. Offering a choice of exercises also naturally creates a diverse range of practice techniques within the forum. If a student was curious about one of the strategies but tried a different one, they can still see that other strategy in a different student's practice video.

Furthermore, this style of practice aligns closely with Anders Ericsson's concept of deliberate practice, as students are engaging purposefully with chosen practice strategies that are designed to target specific areas for improvement (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Deliberate practice emphasizes structured, intentional efforts to enhance performance through well-defined goals and immediate feedback, which this assignment framework supports by encouraging students to reflect critically on their progress and adjust their methods as needed. Research by Arbaugh (2005) also supports this approach, highlighting how structured online discussions can extend learning outside of the classroom and provide avenues for diverse engagement. This shared forum paired with deliberate practice principles ensures that students not only develop technical skills but also build metacognitive strategies for ongoing growth.

University of Nebraska at Omaha student, Trevor Larsen, articulated this well: "In one discussion thread, we were experimenting with different styles of singing: country, rock, pop, jazz, etc. I tried singing my classical style piece in a rock style to experiment. Listening back, I personally wasn't too impressed by the vocal color. However, one of my peers made a positive comment on that particular effort, and it changed the way I thought about my 'rock' style. The peer indirectly taught me that no sound, no color is inherently bad—simply look for the color that fits the need of the piece." Had Trevor tried this "genre switching" assignment on his own, he might not have made the connection there actually was some quality to "borrow" from his rock style to put into his classical piece. The asynchronous video format allowed a peer to "peek" into his practice process to provide some affirmative feedback.



Objective

The purpose of this assignment is to enhance your understanding of **phonation, resonation, and articulation** in singing through creative experimentation with various vocal techniques. You will explore different strategies to develop vocal versatility and build confidence in guiding your individual vocal practice.

Instructions

Choose a Vocal Challenge:
For this assignment, you will select both a **phonation/resonation** challenge and an **articulation** challe
focus on from the following lists:

Phonation and Resonation Challenges:

- **Resonance Variation:** Sing your selected song with both bright and dark resonance to explore the
on sound. Deliberately switch between these resonance qualities, even if they don't match the sty
the song.
- **Onset Variations:** Experiment with different types of vocal onsets, such as aspirate (breathy), glott
balanced flow phonation. What works best for your chosen song?
- **Character Sounds:** Sing the song with a playful character voice (e.g., cowboy, crooner, SpongeBob
Notice how these characterizations affect your phonation and resonance.
- **Head Movements:** Incorporate gentle head movements while singing to relax your laryngeal musc
Observe how this affects your vocal delivery.
- **Breath Work:** Begin your practice with calming breath exercises to create an "open throat" sensati
Reflect on how this influences your vocal ease and resonance.

Articulation Challenges:

- **Formal Diction vs. Casual Diction:** Perform your piece using both formal and casual diction. Obser
how each affects the overall mood and delivery of the song.
- **Consonants-Only:** Practice your piece while emphasizing consonants. Pay attention to the clarity
crispness of your articulation. Where is your tongue articulating? Is it too far back? Can you guide
forward?
- **Pinky Bite:** Use the "pinky bite" technique to prevent over-articulating with your jaw. Gently hold
pinky finger between your teeth to limit jaw movement and observe how it affects your articulatio
- **Sloppy Tongue:** Practice with a "sloppy tongue" approach to relax the tongue and avoid over-artic
Notice how this influences your delivery, even if it feels a little "dopey."
- **Mirror Reflection:** Sing your piece while watching yourself in a mirror. Pay close attention to your
movement. Are your lips spreading too much during articulation?

Record Your Video:
Create a 2-10 minute video demonstrating your practice session using the phonation/resonation and
articulation challenges you selected. Follow the steps below for recording and uploading with **YuJa**. Yo
video is due by **Monday at 2 PM**.

- **State Your Choices:** Begin your video by stating which phonation/resonation and articulation chall
you selected and why.
- **Practice the Challenges:** Incorporate your chosen challenges into your practice session. Feel free
apply them to one or more pieces.
- **Reflect:** End your video with a brief reflection. What did you observe during the practice? How did
challenges impact your vocal technique or creativity?

Provide Peer Feedback:
By class time on **Tuesday**, watch at least two of your classmates' YuJa videos and offer thoughtful, constructive written feedback. Aim to respond to videos that haven't yet received comments. In your feedback, address the following questions:

- How well did your classmate engage with the phonation, resonation, and articulation challenges?
- What changes or developments did you observe in their vocal performance?
- Share something you appreciated about their work.

How to Record a Video Using YuJa:

1. Click "reply" under the discussion directions.
2. Select the **YuJa** icon in the toolbar (if not visible, click the three dots to expand your options).
3. Choose the "Record Content" tab and select "Record with Browser Capture Studio."
4. Title your video and click "Launch Recording."
5. Select your recording options (e.g., screen, camera, or both).
6. Record your video, then press the stop button to end it.
7. Select "Upload" and allow your video to process.
8. Return to the discussion, select your video, and click "Insert Content."
9. Post your reply.

You can also record your video on a phone or tablet and upload it directly to the discussion.

Grading Policy (100 Points Total)

Video Submission (50 points):
Full points will be awarded for completing all instructions: selecting and stating your phonation/resonation and articulation challenges, incorporating them into your practice, and submitting on time.

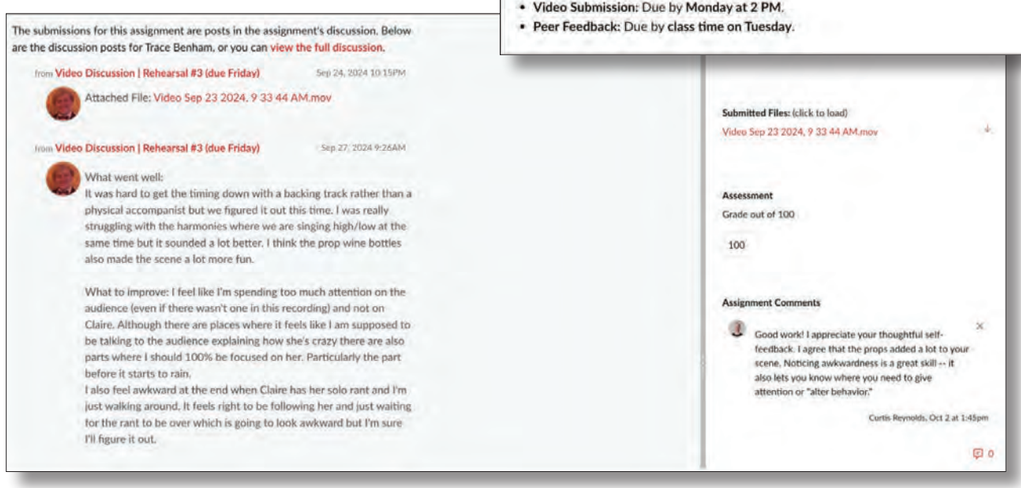
- **Deductions:** 5 points will be deducted for each missing component (e.g., failing to state your challenges, not practicing the selected techniques, or submitting late).

Peer Feedback (50 points):
Full points will be awarded for submitting at least two thoughtful and constructive comments, addressing the questions provided, and submitting feedback on time.

- **Deductions:** 5 points will be deducted for each missed instruction.

Deadlines

- **Video Submission:** Due by **Monday at 2 PM**.
- **Peer Feedback:** Due by **class time on Tuesday**.



The submissions for this assignment are posts in the assignment's discussion. Below are the discussion posts for Trace Benham, or you can view the full discussion.

from Video Discussion | Rehearsal #3 (due Friday) Sep 24, 2024 10:15PM

Attached File: Video Sep 23 2024, 9 33 44 AM.mov

from Video Discussion | Rehearsal #3 (due Friday) Sep 27, 2024 9:26AM

What went well:
It was hard to get the timing down with a backing track rather than a physical accompanist but we figured it out this time. I was really struggling with the harmonies where we are singing high/low at the same time but it sounded a lot better. I think the prop wine bottles also made the scene a lot more fun.

What to improve: I feel like I'm spending too much attention on the audience (even if there wasn't one in this recording) and not on Claire. Although there are places where it feels like I am supposed to be talking to the audience explaining how she's crazy there are also parts where I should 100% be focused on her. Particularly the part before it starts to rain.
I also feel awkward at the end when Claire has her solo rant and I'm just walking around. It feels right to be following her and just waiting for the rant to be over which is going to look awkward but I'm sure I'll figure it out.

Submitted Files: (click to load)
Video Sep 23 2024, 9 33 44 AM.mov

Assessment
Grade out of 100

100

Assignment Comments

Good work! I appreciate your thoughtful self-feedback. I agree that the props added a lot to your scene. Noticing awkwardness is a great skill -- it also lets you know where you need to give attention or "alter behavior."

Curtis Reynolds, Oct 2 at 1:45pm

0

All images on this page were provided by the author.

Providing structured peer feedback constitutes half the points for these assignments, underscoring its importance as both a skill-building and evaluative activity. Students are required to watch at least one of their peers' videos to ensure that everyone receives feedback. Within their videos, students are encouraged to ask for parameters as to the type of feedback that would be most helpful to them. To guide this process, students are instructed on how to offer constructive and specific feedback, avoiding general (or even harmful) comments. They are taught the difference between evaluative, coaching, and appreciative feedback as outlined by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen in their book *Thanks For the Feedback*. Evaluative feedback focuses on assessment and provides a benchmark for where the student stands in relation to expectations or standards ("Did I achieve the vocal color I was trying?"). Coaching feedback is designed to help the recipient improve by offering actionable suggestions and strategies for growth ("You might try swiveling your head to avoid bracing."). Appreciative feedback highlights what is working well, reinforcing strengths and motivating the recipient ("Experimenting with the rock style brought out an exciting darker belt I haven't heard before. Keep playing!"). This guided approach to virtual peer interactions ensures that feedback serves multiple purposes: it evaluates, guides improvement, and fosters encouragement.

Lastly, asynchronous video discussions offer the added benefit of enhancing students' technical and digital literacy—an increasingly vital skill for performers navigating the industry's growing digital demands.

While this example focuses on teaching singing concepts, the flexibility of asynchronous video discussions makes them widely applicable to acting, dance, and other performance disciplines. By adapting the prompts to suit specific course objectives, instructors can integrate these discussions into a variety of performance-based contexts. These assignments serve as a foundation for community building, growth mindset development, and constructive feedback, which are discussed further below.

EXPANDING COMMUNITY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

A strong sense of community is vital in both musical theatre performance and education, as ensemble work and collaboration lie at the heart of the art form. Asynchronous video discussions allow for community to extend beyond the classroom, empowering students to engage with one another regularly through video practice submissions, peer feedback, and reflections. If they are limited to only building community once or twice a week during in-person class, it's much more difficult for students to feel confident in sharing their work with each other.

Arbaugh's (2005) research, though originally focused on online MBA courses, offers valuable insights applicable here. He highlights how structured online discussions enhance community building and foster inclusivity in educational environments, principles that translate well into performance-based disciplines. By providing students with a digital platform to engage with their peers, these practice forums help to create a more inclusive learning environment. By building an online presence outside of class, there is also a sense of momentum between class meetings. That way, when students get to class to perform, their performance feels less like "the first time." They have often gotten their first drafts across in the online forum, which removes the pressure from their in-class work.

Creighton University student, Matthew Meyer, affirms this sense of connection: "I loved seeing other people in the class online and... how their work is made specific to them". Meyer's observation demonstrates how asynchronous video platforms can help students learn from one another's individual approaches and creativity. By witnessing others' unique artistic journeys, students feel less isolated in their own specific goals and gain inspiration from their peers' progress, which strengthens the ensemble dynamic. This approach also aligns with Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry framework, which emphasizes the importance of cognitive, social, and teaching presence in fostering effective collaborative learning environments.

The **cognitive presence** in this framework refers to the ability of students to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. In the context of asynchronous video discussions, cognitive presence emerges as students critically analyze their work, articulate their thought processes, and engage with peer feedback to deepen their understanding of the craft.

The **social presence** ensures that students feel connected to one another, creating a sense of trust and openness essential for effective collaboration and learning. When students share their progress and witness their peers' artistic growth, they develop a sense of camaraderie and ensemble identity. This shared experience fosters a supportive atmosphere where students feel empowered to take creative risks and embrace vulnerability in their performance practice.

The **teaching presence** encompasses the design, facilitation, and direction of meaningful learning activities. Instructors play a pivotal role by creating thoughtfully designed prompts that align with course objectives, offering guidance on providing constructive feedback, and ensuring that discussions remain purposeful and inclusive. By scaffolding these interactions, instructors help students navigate the balance between personal expression and collective learning.

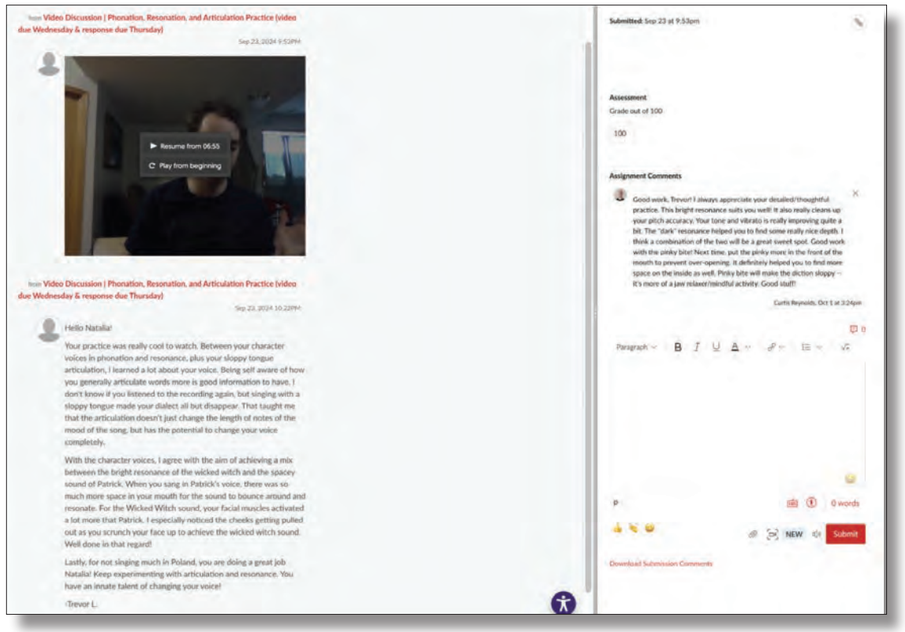
This integration of cognitive, social, and teaching presence not only supports individual growth but also cultivates a collaborative environment where students and instructors collectively contribute to the learning experience. This holistic approach leverages asynchronous video platforms to bridge the gap between personal artistry and community engagement, creating a dynamic and effective learning ecosystem.

Today's college students, primarily members of Generation Z, have grown up immersed in digital video platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, making asynchronous video platforms an intuitive extension of their communication habits (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Educators can leverage this familiarity to extend learning and foster community-building within a medium that students already embrace. By incorporating technology as a creative and practical tool, students develop technological proficiency while learning to integrate recordings into their independent practice. This approach reframes practice from requiring a formal 40-minute session in an (often in-demand or inaccessible) practice room to something as accessible as recording a five-minute video in their car. This shift in mindset encourages students to view practice as something that can happen anywhere they have a recording device, which will inevitably lead to more frequent engagement with material and concepts.

Lastly, asynchronous video discussions offer the added benefit of enhancing students' technical and digital literacy—an increasingly vital skill for performers navigating the industry's growing digital demands. With auditions increasingly conducted online through self-tapes, familiarity with digital platforms becomes not only a practical necessity but also an integral component of artistic training.

NURTURING A GROWTH MINDSET THROUGH PROCESS-BASED PRACTICE

Musical theatre education, perhaps understandably, often prioritizes final performances over the training process. After all, this is a performance-driven industry, and it is our responsibility to prepare students for the high standards of a polished "finished product." However, as educators, we recognize that true growth emerges from the messy and iterative creative process. Asynchronous video discussions offer students a valuable space to document and share their creative trial and error, allowing the messy process to be celebrated and given equal importance alongside the finished product.



Author provided image.

Carol Dweck's (2006) research on growth mindset underscores the importance of viewing learning as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. By allowing students to share incremental progress and reflect on their development through video submissions, asynchronous discussions help cultivate a growth mindset. Students begin to see improvement as the result of consistent effort, rather than talent alone. Reflecting on my own experience as an eighteen-year-old student, this approach would have been transformative. It would have helped me feel less isolated in my pursuit of technical and artistic growth, reinforcing that progress is built through persistence and dedication—not an illusion of effortless talent. Such a framework would have provided the support and perspective I needed to embrace the learning process within a creative cohort.

Student reflections highlight how this mindset manifests. University of Nebraska at Omaha student, Maya Diew, shared, "This has helped me feel more comfortable taking risks. I know how I did or remember, but I also have video evidence to reflect on. It's like having a time capsule of my growth. Watching my earlier videos, I see how much I've improved, even when I didn't feel like I was making progress in the moment." This recognition of incremental growth demonstrates how documenting and sharing work regularly can shift students' focus from immediate results to long-term development.

By reframing mistakes and experimentation as essential parts of the learning process, asynchronous video discussions cultivate a safer environment for creative risk-taking. Students are encouraged to explore new techniques, styles, and interpretations without the immediate pressure to deliver a polished product. This shift in focus helps them view imperfections as valuable learning opportunities, nurturing resilience and fostering a sense of curiosity and exploration—qualities that are fundamental to artistic growth. As students take risks in their work, they build the confidence to push their boundaries and embrace the iterative nature of their craft.

Asynchronous platforms also empower educators to address individual challenges that might not surface during in-class sessions. By reviewing video submissions at their own pace, instructors can provide detailed and personalized feedback tailored to each student's needs. This feedback helps students tackle specific hurdles, refine their techniques, and clarify areas of misunderstanding. Additionally, instructors can identify common challenges or misconceptions within the group and use them to tailor future in-class instruction. This combination of individualized attention and adaptive teaching ensures a more comprehensive and supportive learning experience for every student.

CULTIVATING SKILLS IN GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

As previously mentioned, another key benefit of asynchronous video discussions is their ability to cultivate constructive feedback skills. The performing arts inherently require collaboration, and the ability to give and receive feedback is crucial for success. Yet, many students enter musical theatre programs without formal training in how to offer or process critiques.

Structured video discussions provide a platform for students to practice this skill in a controlled environment. By asking students to specify the type of feedback they would like—whether evaluative, coaching, or appreciative—educators can guide them in framing their comments constructively. This practice not only benefits the recipient but also enhances the commenter's critical thinking and analytical skills.

For example, one student shared, "At first, I didn't know what to say other than, 'That was good.' But as I watched more videos, I started to notice specific details, like how someone's breath supported their phrasing or how their expression connected with the text. Giving feedback became a way for me to learn too." This highlights how observing and analyzing peers' work can deepen students' own understanding of performance techniques.

Beyond offering feedback to peers, students also learn how to critically assess their own work by recording and reviewing their videos. Some assignments ask students to record an initial pass, watch it back, reflect on their performance, and then record another take incorporating self-feedback. This process encourages them to develop a more objective eye, teaching them to identify areas for improvement and implement strategies for refinement. By practicing this cycle of self-assessment and revision, students build a critical skill they will use throughout their careers.

Similarly, learning to receive feedback with an open mind is a vital skill for performers. By normalizing the process of sharing incomplete work and seeking constructive input, asynchronous discussions help students separate their self-worth from their performance. This shift in mindset reduces defensiveness and fosters a healthier approach to growth and collaboration. Combining peer feedback, self-assessment, and instructor input creates a playful learning environment where students are empowered to take ownership of their artistic development.

ADDRESSING PRACTICAL CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

While the benefits of asynchronous video discussions are clear, their implementation is not without challenges. Educators may face resistance from students unfamiliar with this format, as well as technical or logistical hurdles. To address these issues, clear communication and structured guidance are essential.

Providing clear, detailed instructions for video submissions—complete with step-by-step technical guidance and examples of effective feedback—can significantly boost students' confidence in navigating the platform. Educators can demonstrate how to record and upload videos, share examples of constructive feedback, and explicitly connect these activities to the course's learning objectives. For added impact, instructors might consider submitting their own practice videos to the discussion forums, modeling the process and setting a tone of vulnerability and growth.

Establishing expectations early in the course is equally important. Clearly explaining the purpose and value of these assignments—such as fostering creative risk-taking, self-reflection, and community building—helps students see their relevance. This can reduce resistance and encourage engagement. Additionally, offering flexibility in submission formats—such as allowing phone-recorded videos or using alternative platforms—ensures equitable access for all students, regardless of their technical resources or expertise. By addressing these logistical and pedagogical considerations upfront, instructors create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

For instructors, reviewing multiple video submissions can be time intensive. One way to manage this is by "power skimming" videos—watching key sections where students are likely to demonstrate specific skills or areas of focus. Educators can also use playback speed adjustments, such as watching videos at 1.25x or 1.5x speed, to save time while still absorbing the content. Pairing these strategies with a clear rubric for evaluation can streamline the review process and maintain consistency in feedback. Rubrics not only help instructors quickly assess performances but also provide transparency for students about the criteria being used.

Ultimately, these strategies ensure that the workload remains manageable for both students and instructors while preserving the depth and quality of the learning experience. By addressing technical, logistical, and time-management challenges head-on, educators can maximize the potential of asynchronous video discussions to enhance performance-based education.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating asynchronous video discussions into musical theatre training offers a powerful tool for extending classroom community, fostering a growth mindset, and cultivating essential feedback skills. By embracing this digital platform, educators can create a more inclusive and process-focused learning environment that empowers students to take ownership of their artistic and personal development.

In a world that is increasingly socially isolated, the need to foster genuine connections and a sense of belonging has never been more urgent. As performers and educators, we often remind our students, in the words of Sondheim, that "no one is alone"—a sentiment that resonates deeply in the inherently collaborative art of musical theatre. Through asynchronous video discussions, this principle transcends the classroom, reminding students that their growth is not a solitary endeavor but a shared journey with their peers and mentors. These digital interactions help bridge the gaps created by physical distance, ensuring students feel supported, seen, and inspired by a vibrant and engaged learning community.

By integrating these practices, we prepare the next generation of artists to thrive not only in their craft but also in their ability to collaborate, adapt, and connect meaningfully with others. In doing so, we equip students with the resilience and lifelong learning skills necessary to navigate an ever-changing world—both on and off the stage.

BIOGRAPHY

Curtis Reynolds, Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, comes to academia with nearly a decade of regional, national, and international experience as an actor, music director, and singing pianist. He holds an MFA from Boston Conservatory at Berklee and a BM from New York University.

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CABARET | NOVEMBER 2024
Nazareth University
Directed by Richard Biever
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Resistance Training for Singers: Debunking the Myths and Benefits of Training

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by Ryan Townsend

As a young singer, I was told by some of my earliest voice teachers that I should refrain from working out. I wasn't given much explanation other than that certain forms of exercise, such as resistance training, would put strain on my voice. Being the compliant student that I was, I stayed away from the gym and most forms of physical activity aside from the dance classes in my curriculum. However, I started to question why physical activity could be harmful to my voice. I started to investigate different forms of exercise to find more acceptable ways to stay active and healthy while not detracting from my vocal studies.

Yoga and Pilates are two physical practices often accepted by voice teachers as they are centered around breath flow and use mostly bodyweight exercises. In fact, yoga systems have emerged to address the unique needs of singers (such as Mark Moliterno's YogaVoice.) The benefits of yoga and Pilates for the singer have been so embraced by voice teachers they many will use the meditation, breathing techniques, and specific poses within their teaching studios. While I have found much value in using concepts from yoga in my singing and teaching, my own fitness goals were not being met with yoga alone. My interests led me to become a personal trainer so that I could learn more about muscular training and apply it to my singing.

Singing is a muscular event. We use laryngeal muscles like the thyroarytenoid and cricothyroid to produce sound. We use other muscles in the body to support the muscles of sound production, such as our intercostals and abdominals. Voice teaching is a form of personal training. Emphasis on posture, form, and breath management are overlapping desires in good voice training and good personal training. Additionally, both training systems should focus on strength, flexibility, endurance, and recovery, via their respective lens (Lebourgne, 2021). We are aiming for muscle fiber changes that work with neural and metabolic changes that will result in adaptation to the new demand put upon them in both fields (Lebourgne, 2021). The word "load" is used in both methods of training to describe the degree of intensity that the body endures during the given activity (Lebourgne, 2021). While a personal trainer assists their clients with goals relating to body composition, a voice teacher assists their clients with goals of healthy, beautiful, and expressive singing. If the student can enjoy the benefits of developing a consistent workout routine, it may influence their drive to create a systematic voice practice routine.

Plenty of research has been done connecting the philosophies of strength training to voice teaching. In *The Vocal Athlete,* Lebourgne discusses the similarities between exercise science and voice training. Intensity, frequency, overload, specificity, and reversibility are the ways in which we find muscular development and coordination in proper resistance training (Lebourgne, 2021). Other articles confirm these findings. For instance, Maude Desjardins and Heather Shaw Bonhila's article "The Impact of Respiratory Exercises on Voice Outcomes: A Systematic Review of the Literature," AM Johnson's "Exercise Science and the Vocalist," and "Exercise Physiology: Perspective for Vocal Training" by Mary J. Sandage and Matthew Hoch. While their findings are valuable, they do not discuss how to make resistance training advantageous for the singer. Bruce Schoonmaker conducted a study by asking voice teachers three questions regarding their support for certain kinds of exercise: aerobic, neuro-muscular coordination, and resistance training. Voice teachers were overwhelmingly supportive of aerobic and neuro-muscular coordination training but were clearly divided in their opinions on resistance training with 59% of voice teachers being unsupportive of this type of exercise (Schoonmaker). After asking other professional voice users, I saw that concerns broke down into the following categories, which I will address in the following sections:

- Potential problems related to breathing and breath flow
- Potential vocal strain due to grunting
- Potential development of neck tension when lifting heavy weight that might impede free movement of extrinsic laryngeal muscles

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS REGARDING BREATHING AND BREATH FLOW

The Valsalva Maneuver is an approach that dates back to the 17th century (Biagioli, 2019). It is used in many areas outside of weightlifting but has become a standard breathing technique in the gym. The Valsalva Maneuver asks the lifter to inhale, hold the breath, perform the action, and forcefully exhale upon returning to the starting position (Biagioli, 2019). In recent years, this technique has come under scrutiny and is no longer encouraged by most fitness professionals, as it can lead to an excessive increase in blood pressure, dizziness, fainting, heart attack, or stroke (Biagioli, 2019). This is also not an encouraged approach for the professional voice user, as it will put several of the muscles in the neck under extraneous tension and discourage the action of breath flow.

Lifts consist of a concentric motion and an eccentric motion. A concentric motion is where the muscles are shortening, and an eccentric motion is where they are lengthening (Biagioli, 2019). For example, during the bicep curl as the fist rises to the shoulder, the bicep experiences a concentric contraction. When the fist is lowered, the bicep lengthens. This is an eccentric contraction. The breath should follow this flow. Inhalation should occur during the eccentric action, and exhalation should occur during the concentric action. With relation to the bicep curl, the lifter should first inhale and then rise the fist to the shoulder while exhaling. The lifter should inhale again as the contraction is released back to eccentric engagement. Following this flow of breath will not only keep the singing weight-lifter mindful of their breath flow but also allows for ease of execution of the exercise. My voice students who exercise via resistance training have said that they have been able to lift more successfully after following my advice on following a flow of breath. Not only are they reaching their personal goals faster, but they are consciously thinking about breath while performing their lifts which helps them to release tension in their neck muscles. This will hopefully carry over into their singing.

POTENTIAL VOCAL STRAIN VIA GRUNTING

We often associate weightlifters with grunting sounds made while performing their routines. While this is not a concern for the non-professional voice user, it is a valid concern from voice teachers. If we know that the voice student is weightlifting, we should check in with them about how they are using their voices while lifting. We should explain to them that grunting is a harsh and sudden closure of the vocal folds that isn't motivated by breath flow and could potentially cause issues with their singing. We should also remind them to be aware of their breath as they're lifting. I recommend releasing air on a [f] or [θ] when lifts become more challenging, as this keeps the lifter engaged in their breathing and minimizes tension in the neck muscles. Not only will this keep them mindful of breath use during their exercise, but it may aid in keeping them mindful of their breathing while singing, which could bring long term benefit.

POTENTIAL NECK TENSION DUE TO HEAVY LIFTING

Often, when we are weight-lifting, we are creating tiny tears in the muscle fibers which allows them to grow back stronger and larger. This is called hypertrophy (Biagioli, 2019), or muscle growth. Specific mobility, flexibility, and strength training can achieve hypertrophic goals without putting the target muscles under duress (Biagioli, 2019). Unfortunately, many people try to create their own routines or use workout apps without professional guidance. This may result in overtraining and muscle damage. It is important to work with a fitness expert, such as a personal trainer to avoid injury. It is especially important for a singer to work with a personal trainer so that they can share their concerns about vocal safety and, hopefully, the trainer can help navigate the singer through these concerns (Friedlander).

The voice teacher/student relationship is unique in that we spend one-on-one time with our clients. Naturally, we get to know our students more personally and we are able to develop rapport and a sense of trust. Addressing the potential risks of their fitness regime while offering solutions to support vocal health demonstrates that we are not only supportive of their fitness goals, but that physical fitness can be advantageous to their singing. And while there is a lot of research supporting the application of the principles of resistance training in the voice studio, there are fewer resources available as to how and what kind of resistance training can influence positive changes in vocal ability. Schoonmaker suggests exercises and while some of them are useful, Schoonmaker does not include detail as to what muscles the exercises are engaging, how to perform the exercise properly, and why/how these exercises can enhance vocal progress (Schoonmaker).

THE INTERCOSTALS

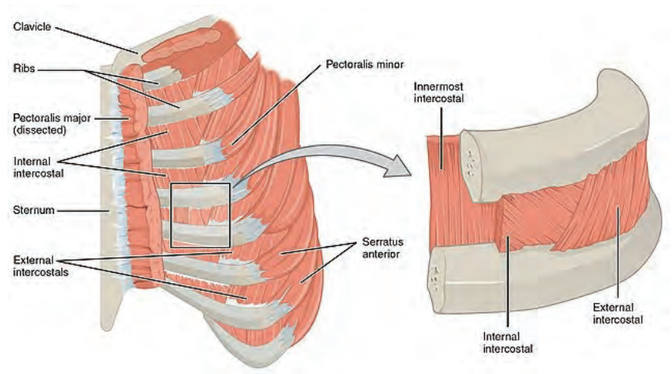

Figure 1-3. Anterior view of the intercostal muscles. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

When my singers have limited mobility in their ribcage as they breathe, I encourage them to find ways to mobilize, strengthen, and stretch their intercostal muscles. The intercostal muscles are no stranger to any experienced voice teacher. However, they are often an overlooked muscle when developing a weight-lifting routine. This group of 22 muscles found between the ribs, plays a vital role in the movement of the chest during breathing (Biagioli, 2019). The external intercostal muscles elevate the ribcage and are used for inhalation while the internal intercostals lower the ribcage and assist in conscious exhalation (Biagioli, 2019). Weight training these muscles for more mobility and strength can have an extremely positive impact on a singer's ability to intake and use air, especially if they suffer from any respiration disorders such as asthma (Biagioli, 2019). See figure 1.

An excellent way to find more flexibility and mobility in the intercostal muscles is by performing a dumbbell pullover. To properly perform a dumbbell pullover:

1. Lie face up on a horizontal bench with the dumbbells directly above the chest.
2. On inhale, expand the chest as much as possible while lowering the dumbbells behind the head.
3. Exhale to raise the arms back over the chest to come back to the starting position.

4. Complete the desired number of repetitions. Beginners should use light weight (ideally 50% of their one-repetition maximum) to aim for 12 repetitions within four sets (Biagioli, 2019).

To build strength in the intercostals, perform the same exercise with a barbell rather than dumbbells or double the weight and use one barbell with both hands (Biagioli, 2019). Using the barbell allows for heavier weight, but with the heavier weight, lower the rep count to six to eight repetitions per set (Biagioli, 2019).

To stretch the intercostals, the yoga asana "gate pose" or parighasana is a helpful tool to find flexibility before and after working this muscle group. To perform this pose:

1. Kneel facing the long side of the mat. Stretch the left leg out to the side and externally rotate the leg so that the heel is on the mat with the knee and toes pointing up. The foot should be flexed.
2. Gently press the right hip forward and open the arms out to the side parallel to the floor, palms facing up. Inhale, lengthen the side body and exhale, lower the left side body to the left leg, placing the hand down on the leg. Ground through the right knee.
3. On inhale, lift the right arm up and over to the left, still pressing the right hip forward, knitting the ribs in, and rotating the ribcage towards the ceiling. Look up, under the right arm or in front.
4. Stay for five to ten breaths.
5. To come out, extend through the top arm and come back to center on inhale.
6. Bring the knees back next to each other and repeat on the other side.

In the studio, I take my singers through these exercises on a yoga mat with either light or no weight and have them go through the motions of the lift. This process usually takes about five minutes. Afterward, I instruct them to breathe to expand their ribs, and the result is noticeable both visually and in terms of the singers' physical sensation. I encourage them to include these movements in their gym routines so that they can continue to make improvements in ribcage expansion outside of the studio. In a study described in Effects of Respiratory Muscle Training in Classical Singers, they found that the implementation of a respiratory muscle resistance training program resulted in an increase in respiratory muscle strength among the singers in the study, however, a generally agreed-upon training program with regard to frequency and duration was not established (Christin, 2018). These results prove that resistance training can be valuable with regard to assisting in vocal development, and there is a need for further research on what a "singers resistance training regimen" would look like.

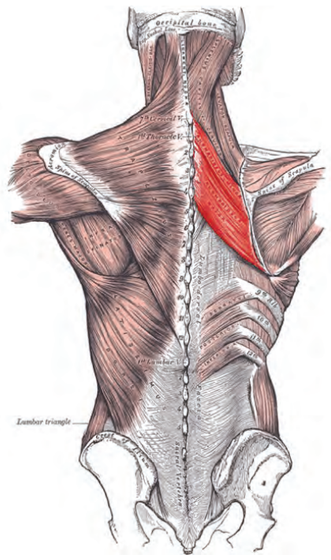

Figure 1-2.
Posterior view of the rhomboid muscle.
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

THE RHOMBOIDS

Often, students often come to their voice lessons wearing backpacks and with their phones in their hands. When we are working, their shoulders may remain impinged and rounded from the weight of their bags and slouched posture while texting. Weak rhomboids will contribute to this posture. In order to attempt to improve their alignment I will take them through a series of movements to engage, strengthen, and stretch their rhomboid muscles. The rhomboids lie between the shoulder blades and underneath the trapezius. They connect the thoracic vertebrae to the medial border of the scapula. The rhomboids retract, elevate, and rotate the scapula and are important to upper limb movement as well as maintaining the stability of the shoulder girdle and scapula (Biagioli, 2019). Dysfunction, weakness, or loss of nerve function can cause winging of the medial border of the scapula and inferior scapular angle rotation (Biagioli, 2019). The rhomboids are also vital to actions such as pulling and have been shown to play a large role in throwing and overhead arm movements (Biagioli, 2019). Strengthening and conditioning the rhomboids is one of the best ways to reclaim good posture and begin to correct shoulder impingement.

See Figure 1-2.

When asked to correct the slouched posture, the singer may throw their spine out of alignment, particularly the sacral spine, by over-emphasizing the natural kyphotic curve. Instead, the singer should keep their hips under their shoulders, maintaining a gentle kyphotic curve, and flex the rhomboid muscles by bringing them together. This will not only open the chest but also release the shoulders into the desired posture without over-correcting the spine. Singers may find this posture foreign, thinking they look too proud or that they are sticking their chests out excessively, but they may be simply standing in better posture for the first time.

A good exercise to gain coordination and mobility of the rhomboids is any sort of "reverse fly." The bent over reverse fly is fairly simple, as all one needs to perform this exercise is a pair of lightweight dumbbells. To perform the bent over reverse fly:

1. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart, holding the dumbbells at the side body. Press the hips back in a hinge motion, bringing the chest forward and almost parallel to the floor. Let the weights hang straight down with the palms facing each other while maintaining a tight core, straight back, and a slight bend in the knees.
2. Raise both arms out to the side on an exhale. Keep a soft bend in your elbows. Squeeze the shoulder blades together to pull them toward the spine.
3. Lower the weight back to the starting position on inhale. Keep the shoulders away from the ears and the chin tucked to maintain a neutral spine during the exercise.
4. Complete the desired number of reps. Beginners should use light weight (ideally 50% of their one-repetition maximum) to aim for 12 repetitions within four sets (Biagioli, 2019).

The body should remain parallel to the floor, otherwise the deltoids may be recruited to help with the lift.

To gain strength in the rhomboids, try the seated row. To perform a seated row:

1. Set the appropriate weight on the weight stack and attach a close-grip bar or V-bar to the seated row machine.
2. Grasp the bar with a neutral (palms facing in) grip.
3. Keeping the legs slightly bent and the back straight, pull the weight up slightly off the stack. Sit straight upright with the shoulders back. This is the starting position.
4. Keeping the body in this position, pull the handle into the stomach and pull the shoulder blades back, squeeze, and then slowly lower the weight back to the starting position in step three.
5. Complete the desired number of repetitions. Beginners should use a moderate amount of weight (ideally 75% of their one-repetition maximum) to aim for six to eight repetitions within four sets (Biagioli, 2019).

To stretch the rhomboid directly, sit in a flat, level chair. Move to the edge of the seat so the feet are flat on the floor and the knees are at right angles. Reach over and grab the left ankle with the right hand. With the left hand, press into the right elbow crease until a stretch is felt between the spine and shoulder blade on the right side. Hold the stretch for 15 seconds, breathing deeply. Then return to start and repeat. Do two to three repetitions then switch and do the same stretch on the other side. My students find incredible relief after performing this stretch. They also are able to improve alignment without overcorrecting their lower spine.

THE PSOAS

Releasing tension in one part of the body will often expose a weakness somewhere else. Tension in the psoas may reveal itself when the lower spine is hyper-extended and results in misalignment. The psoas muscles are long, ribbon-shaped muscles that originate at the lower back and runs through the pelvis to the top of each femur. They effectively connect the core to the hip girdle. Their primary function is to help assist in the movement of the lower back, hips, and upper legs, thus connecting many parts of the body to the core. They help to stabilize posture, move the hips, lift the upper legs, and stabilize the femur bone (Biagioli, 2019). If the singer experiences performance anxiety, they may find their progress stunted when they cannot access the psoas muscle. When a singer experiences anxiety during an audition or performance, it is common for the psoas muscles to lock up as a result of the nervous system's "fight or flight" response. When these muscles are not

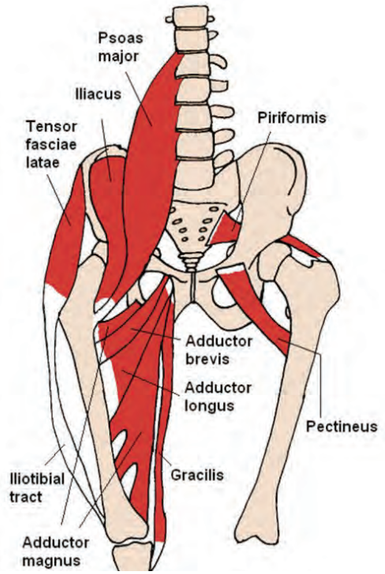

Figure 1-5.
Anterior view of the muscles of the hip.
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

functioning properly, the diaphragm can no longer descend, which limits the singer's ability to take in an effective breath to fuel their singing (Leborgne, 2021). Breathing into the lower back, and engaging the psoas, will help reduce the effects of the "fight or flight" response and may even prevent this response in the future. See Figure 1-5.

Learning to coordinate the psoas muscles should be a primary goal of any singer who has a weightlifting routine in order to manage any fear-based nervous system response. An exercise that can help find this coordination would be the lying leg raise. To perform this exercise correctly:

1. Lie on the back.
2. Lift one leg at a time, keeping the knee straight, and aim to create as close to a 90-degree angle with the legs as possible.
3. Switch the legs and complete the desired number of reps aiming for 12 repetitions within 4 sets.

Adding a barbell hip thrust to the weight-lifting routine will certainly help build strength in the psoas muscle. To perform this exercise properly:

1. Sit up with the back against an elevated surface like a bench or a box with the knees bent and feet flat on the ground.
2. The bench should hit just below the shoulder blades, and the feet should be about shoulder-width apart. Rest the elbows on the bench.
3. Keeping the chin tucked, push through the heels until the thighs are parallel to the floor, The legs should form a 90-degree angle.
4. Squeeze the glutes and then return to the starting position.
5. Complete the desired number of repetitions. Beginners should use a moderate amount of weight (ideally 75% of their one-repetition maximum) to aim for six to eight reps within four sets.
6. To make this easier for a beginner, replace the barbell with a dumbbell or a weighted plate.

Stretching the psoas is simple, yet important. A good lunge stretch can gently target this muscle when performed properly:

1. In a lunge position with the left knee resting gently on the ground, keep your chest upright.
2. Feel a stretch across the front of the forward hip.
3. Apply the same stretch to the opposite side with the right knee on the ground.

In the studio, I find taking my students through this sequence of movements not only releases tension in their hips but also their lower back. This improved alignment not only allows the students to feel more at ease, but they see improved vocal ability.

THE TRAPEZIUS

It is not uncommon to see a singer with their neck excessively extending forward. This may be due to their desire to communicate to their scene partner or to the audience. Addressing this issue directly may fix this habit, however, if muscular tension is causing this behavior, then no amount of willpower will be able to change this misaligned posture. In this case, engaging, strengthening, and stretching the trapezius muscle is needed.

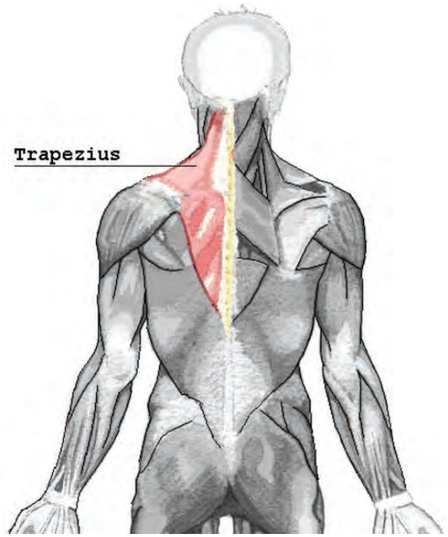

Figure 1-1.
Posterior view of the trapezius muscle.
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The trapezius is one of the widest muscles on the back and assists in providing upright postural support. It is the most superficial (closest to the skin) of the back and neck muscles. This triangle-shaped muscle is directly linked to many postural supportive bones that are important to singing, such as the dorsal spine, scapulae, clavicles, and ribs. Its primary job is to shrug, steady the shoulders, tilt and turn the head and neck, and twist the arms. Signs that the trapezius muscle is weak might include constant headaches, decreased mobility, neck spasms, sore shoulder blades, and generalized neck pain. A weak trapezius can also contribute to poor posture leading to a dowager's hump. This muscle is often under-utilized when a weightlifter focuses more on their front body than their back; or by those who spend a lot of time in front of a computer. An under-developed or tight trapezius can result in the neck craning forward (Biagoli, 2019). Asking the singer not to crane their neck may only be a temporary solution and may cause frustration in the practice room. Training this muscle to be stronger and more flexible is a long-term solution that not only may aid the singer's technique but also result in an overall healthier posture. See Figure 1-1.

A simple exercise to gain coordination and mobility of the trapezius is the dumbbell military press. This exercise can be performed seated or standing. To perform a seated dumbbell military press:

1. Sit on an incline bench that is set at a 90-degree angle. Rest one dumbbell on each thigh. Sit with the lower back, shoulders, and head firmly against the back of the bench.
2. Raise the dumbbells from the thighs and bring them to shoulder height.
3. With the dumbbells at shoulder height, rotate the palms so that they face forward and that the forearms are perpendicular to the ground.
4. Begin to press the dumbbells above the head until the arms fully extend. Hold the weight above the head for a moment and then lower the dumbbells back to shoulder height.
5. Complete the desired number of repetitions. Beginners should use light weight (ideally 50% of their one-repetition maximum) to aim for 12 repetitions within four sets (Biagioli, 2019).

The same exercise can be performed standing to recruit abdominal engagement, if desired.

If the goal is to build strength in the trapezius, try a barbell military press. To perform a standing barbell military press:

1. Set up the bar on the rack so that it sits just at or slightly below the shoulders.
2. Place the feet shoulder-width apart with toes slightly pointed out.
3. Grab the bar with the palms facing away.
4. Press the bar overhead and fully extend the arms. Lower the bar back down to the chest.
5. Complete the desired number of repetitions. Beginners should use a moderate amount of weight (ideally 75% of their one-repetition maximum) to aim for six to eight repetitions within four sets (Biagioli, 2019).

There are many ways to stretch the trapezius muscle, from shoulder rolls, chin tucks, and sideways child's pose (Biagioli, 2019). Whatever is most accessible to the singer is the correct way to stretch. If a student experiences neck craning in the studio, they should feel an immediate sensation of relief after going through this sequence. It's important to note, however, that the trapezius is probably one of the hardest muscles to properly train to release long-term tension because the neck craning can be a deeply engrained habit, and the trapezius muscle is quite large. If the student doesn't see an immediate adjustment, they should be encouraged to continue stretching and strengthening and reminded that muscular development takes time.

THE OBLIQUES

When I'm working with more advanced singers on high-belt or whistle tone singing, I encourage them to find more strength and flexibility in their oblique muscles. The external obliques function to rotate and twist the trunk as well as stabilize the core and move the spine (Biagioli, 2019). Despite the clear importance of these muscles, they often are not as valued as the more glamorous muscle, the rectus abdominus, so the obliques are often overlooked in both the gym and the voice studio. Engaging the external obliques in certain moments of singing is not only helpful but necessary. It's important to note that the singer should feel an extension of these muscles, not a flexion, during exhalation throughout the range. Using this extension while singing a high belt or even whistle tone/falsetto range creates a certain amount of abdominal pressure that supports the higher effort stretch of the laryngeal muscles that are producing sound (Leborgne, 2021). Claudia Friedlander offers valuable insight on how abdominal strength training is advantageous in her article "Sports-Specific Training for the Vocal Athlete." Having strong yet flexible external oblique muscles should be a consideration of any singer or voice teacher.

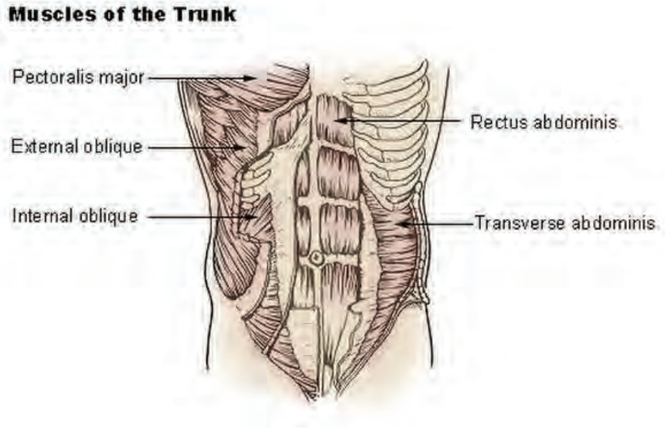

Figure 1-4. Anterior view of the muscles of the trunk. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Internal obliques are also important to singing as they work with the transverse abdominals to allow the singer to manipulate breath flow (Leborgne, 2021). They flex the trunk, encouraging compression which causes an increase in intraabdominal pressure which is vital for executing high-effort singing such as belt or falsetto/whistle tone (Leborgne, 2021).

Coordination of the obliques can be difficult, but with a few simple exercises, one can gain more mobility of these muscles and strengthen their engagement. Dumbbell oblique dips are a great exercise to enhance coordination with the obliques. To perform a dumbbell oblique dip:

1. Stand with feet a little bit farther than shoulder-width apart. Grab dumbbells in both hands with the palms facing inward.
2. Lift the arms so that the forearms run perpendicular to the floor and the upper arm is parallel. Palms should be facing away.
3. Keeping this engagement of the arms and upper body, lower the left dumbbell to the floor, stretching the right-side body (external obliques).
4. Return to the starting position by pulling the body upright with the right-side body (external obliques).
5. Repeat this process to the right side.
6. Complete the desired number of repetitions. Beginners should use light weight (ideally 50% of their one-repetition maximum) to aim for 12 repetitions within four sets.

To build strength in the obliques, the Russian twist is a great addition to any workout. To properly perform a Russian twist:

1. Root into the sit bones and lift the feet from the floor, keeping knees bent.
2. Elongate and straighten the spine at a 45-degree angle from the floor, creating a V shape with the torso and thighs.
3. Reach the arms straight out in front, interlacing the fingers or clasping the hands together.
4. Using the core, twist to the right, back to the center, and then to the left.
5. This is one repetition. Do four sets of six to eight repetitions.
6. To make this more advanced, hold a weight-lifting plate or a kettlebell between the hands and move the weight with the twist. This should begin as a light weight and could gradually move higher as coordination and strength increase (Biagioli, 2019).

Historically, training the abdominal muscles in the gym has been under the scrutiny of many voice teachers. The concern is that if the abdominal muscles are trained to be too taught, they will not be flexible enough to allow an expansive inhale. While this risk is certainly plausible, stretching these muscles pre- and post-abdominal workout will keep the abdominal muscles flexible and able to meet the demands of singing. Good muscular coordination includes flexibility, no matter if the individual is a singer or not.

Many abdominal stretches can target the obliques, but to isolate them as much as possible, try the following stretch:

1. Lie flat on the back with the knees bent and feet on the ground.
2. Put the hands behind the head and gently lower both knees to one side toward the floor. Breathe into the core stretch.
3. Repeat on the other side.

When I guide my voice students through this strengthening and stretching sequence and then have them return to the higher-effort singing, not only do they produce a healthier tone but they are often able to sing higher than they previous could. They are immediately encouraged by these results and develop confidence in their ability to meet the range demands of the song we're working on.

In conclusion, I share this information as I have found that these sequences are able to provide immediate and long-term enhancements to my students' and my own singing. Emphasizing the importance of breathing and breath flow, the consciousness of grunting, and the proper training process to achieve fitness goals are needed to ensure that as the singer continues in their resistance training, they are enhancing their singing. Applying these methods and sequences in the studio may increase awareness and strength of the aforementioned muscles. Since most voice studios do not have weights, even going through the motions of the exercises without weights is helpful to enhance a singer's alignment, breath management, and higher effort singing goals.

BIOGRAPHY

Ryan Townsend is a certified personal trainer through NCSF and has earned an MM from The Frost School of Music at The University of Miami and a BFA from Carnegie Mellon University. He is currently the Instructor and Coordinator of Musical Theatre Voice at Florida Atlantic University.

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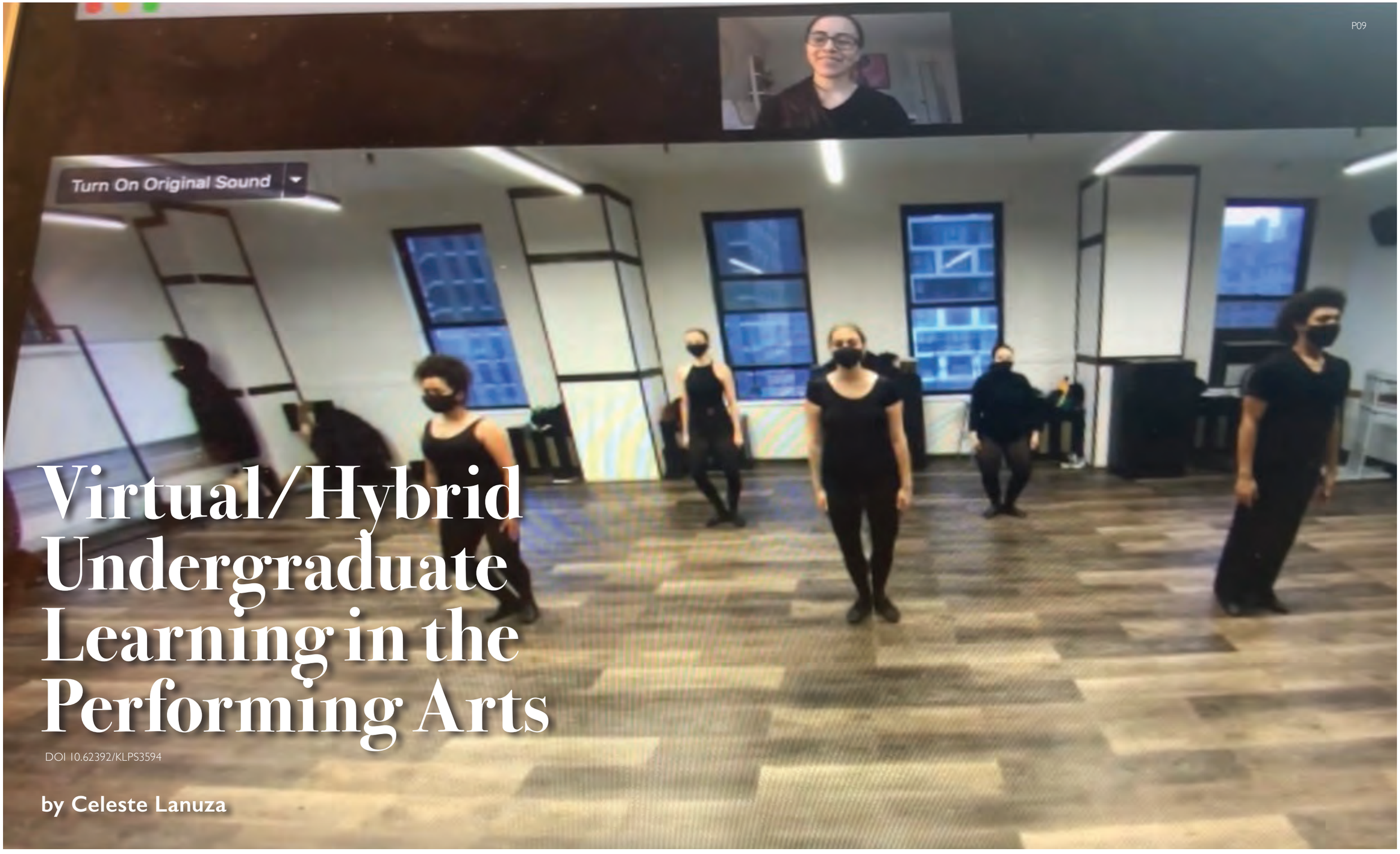

Virtual/Hybrid Undergraduate Learning in the Performing Arts

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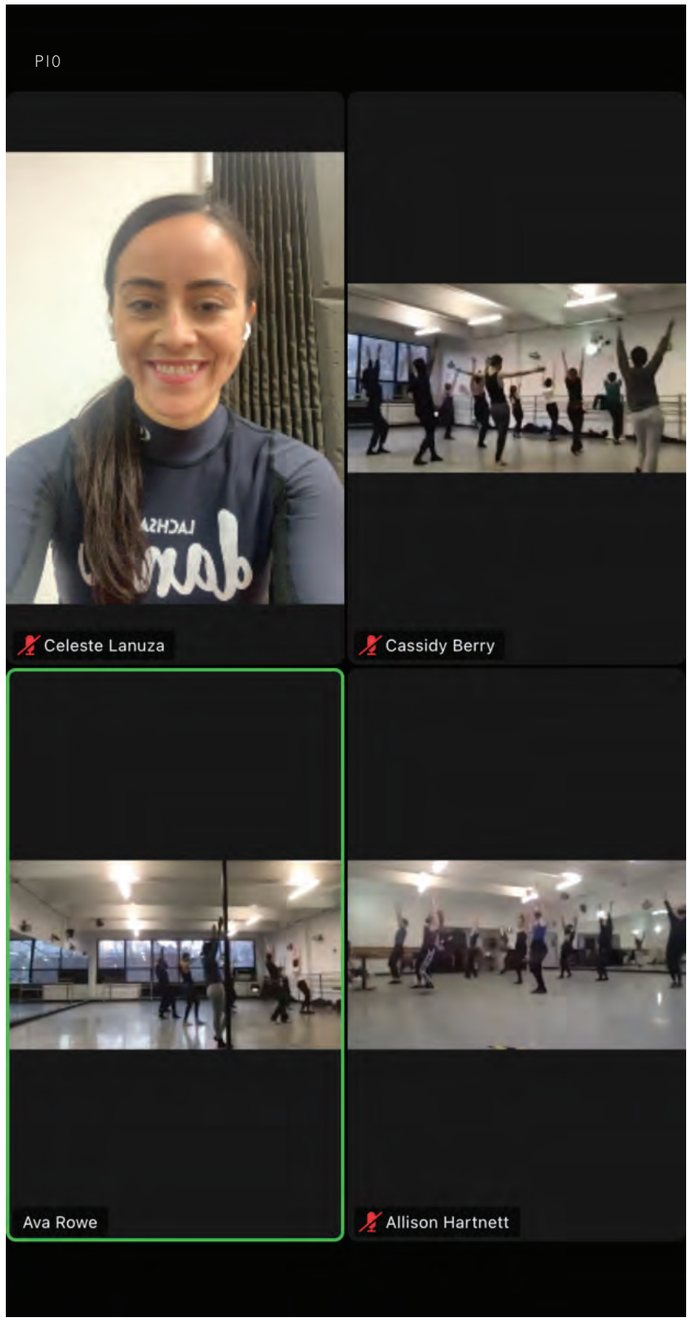
by Celeste Lanuza

NEW CHALLENGES ARISE: HYBRID AND VIRTUAL EDUCATION



The process of advancement in the university classroom is often met with challenges, especially when aiming to facilitate collaborative spaces in institutions that have a long history of deeply rooted norms that align with controlled performance embodied artistic expression. The COVID-19 pandemic, between 2020 and early 2021, brought upon unprecedented changes to the teaching space in my hybrid and virtual classrooms at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy (AMDA) in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively, that involved unlearning previous pedagogical standards. Previously implemented standards at the academy included mandatory uniformed attire, which prohibited students from wearing other clothing options, and implementation of a curriculum that emphasized exclusive teaching of preestablished combinations developed by the academy instead of supporting the creation of new, collaborative class content that was uniquely catered for the needs of the class. These previously adapted practices, developed prior to my arrival, solely followed the instructor's preferential direction and negated the opportunity to allow the student to express their individuality and individualism. Physical rigor was prioritized over awareness of health and wellness.

In response to the eight months of isolation brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, I found the need to experiment and shift these standards to create new customs that promoted a nurturing and stimulating environment that fostered community, inclusivity, and restoration of health and wellness. It was energizing to be invited to be allowed to teach with a shifted focus on wellness, community, and inclusivity. While issues of health and wellness did exist prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, departmental policies within the academy deemphasized this matter and prioritized on having faculty focus on guiding students through exam curriculum.

Among methods I incorporated in the classroom to improve key student learning outcomes were to authentically reach students through frameworks that (1) implemented intentional modalities that elevated access effectively and successfully, (2) celebrated physical space limitations, and (3) integrated interdisciplinary collaboration. Moreover, the classroom approaches and methods I sought to create were aimed to assist with learning outcomes (Reder, p. 60), and to encourage students to question established perspectives and rethink both traditionally and newly applied practices, as well as those organizationally prescribed in the dance classroom.

Functioning as a dance faculty instructor at AMDA who was concurrently completing Ph.D. coursework on indigenous teaching methodologies and their perspectives on community-centered learning, I began researching indigenous tribes who inhabited the lands now known as New York City to provide students with pedagogies that created an inclusive space for reflection, dialogue, and interconnection. As a curious emerging dance-scholar, I learned that these people were the Lenape people and their land was named Lenapehoking. In recognizing the significance of bringing this knowledge to the classroom, I encouraged students to acknowledge these people and their history of place-based and inter-generational learning, which connected the students to their land and community through historical knowledge, experience (spiritual, emotional, physical), and modern application.

Some of the questions that mobilized my classes were:

- How was each student's dance connecting to these peoples and those who had stepped foot in these spaces before?
- Were students able to feel those who had danced in these studios before, such as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company?
- If so, how were they connecting to these marginalized groups and how did these embodied stories carry on through virtual classes? How was our dance contributing to a decolonial mindset and approach of movement that invited the Lenape people, who had passed on to reenter our space and be present with us during our practice?
- What types of methods during our hybrid and virtual practice gave visibility to those who graced these lands before we entered?

I acknowledged indigenous methodology as a methodological framework that highlighted the Lenape people. As a result, the students learned briefly about the Lenape people and indigenous methodology. Before every class, we activated the space by acknowledging one another and intertwining methods that prioritized building community. This approach contrasted from the academy's initial request, which required masked students to stand in a straight line, facing the front classroom mirror, and take two steps forward in an embodied stance during their daily introductions, in which they often responded with a sense of defeat that resulted in inauthentic and performative postures. This was another policy that was established decades prior to my arrival, which resembled a scene from the musical, *A Chorus Line*. Recognizing that this method was causing anxiety among students, I discussed it with the department chair, who approved my plan to further develop an approach better suited to the students' needs at this time. As a result, classroom dynamics shifted to initiate with more group activities, such as moving through the space in collaborative teams that invited students to participate in individual introductions. Integration of these methods, guided by an indigenous lens, were also extended to navigating hybrid and virtual learning environments.

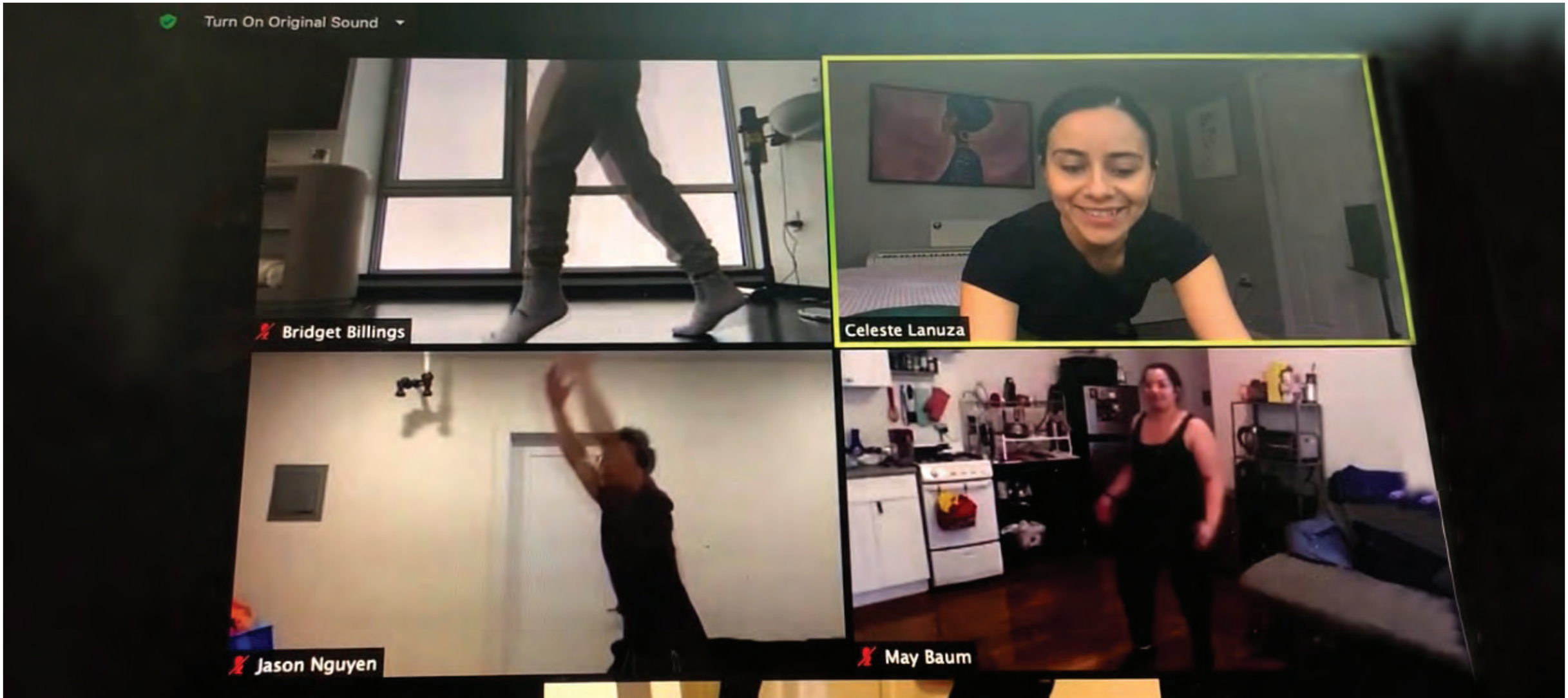
Isolation, resulting from COVID-19-dependent quarantines, created a pressing need to develop effective teaching methods that not only ensured students absorbing class content but fostered intentional and meaningful connection with one another in virtual spaces. Inspired by scholars Ali Leijen, Wilfried Admiraal, Liesbeth Wildschut, and P. Rober Jan Simons from their 2008 study, I was reminded of the imperative nature of critical thinking skills along with reflection, discussion, writing, and a more collaborative approach in virtual learning (Leijen, Admiraal, Wildschut, Simons, p. 148). Furthermore, I took the initiative to develop exercises for both Zoom and in-person settings, which effectively conveyed implicit messaging of critical thinking. For example,

one of the exercises that I implemented involved having each student lead a movement activity that required them to begin by verbally articulating the goals of the movement and writing down the intentionality of each specific phrase they guided. Students were also encouraged to reflect out loud with their classmates, seeking feedback and sharing insight about what each student gained from the class. Lastly, all students who led an exercise engaged in a verbal reflection with both the class and instructor, discussing their leadership process and addressing any questions or comments they had. For this exercise, I provided an introduction to guide the students, offering specific words and prompts to help them focus on key aspects to address and think about during each round or turn. These specific words were: truth, significance, methodology, and impact. These concepts were chosen as key, north stars for students to follow, allowing them to think about what exactly is mobilizing the way in which they are leading the class.

For example:

- What is truth according to each student? Is it truthful for students to be quiet and only dance?
- Is there more of a collaborative approach to teaching that integrates speaking during the dance practice, not only at the end during reflection?
- What type of impact is the student aiming to make? Are students only trying to share dance steps and, if so, how is this impacting their classmates?
- Or are students intertwining a specific message such as social justice to accompany their lesson?
- Are students aware of the significance of the class? How is this class significant to the student's trajectory?
- Is there a way that significance can be heightened at a socio-cultural level?
- What is the methodological framework that is leading each lesson?
- What is the student's methodological lens?
- How is their personal methodology formulating how they envision their world in the studio?
- How is interacting and developing a way of dance practice established amidst a specific student body?

These questions were all given to students before they led the class in short movement practice exercises. It was essential for each student to lead the class to build confidence, deepen their understanding of the movement at a higher level, while becoming more attuned to the types of environments that energized their dance practice. Responding to distance learning by fostering growth through creativity, imagination, and honoring each student's individuality, empowered a problem solving and sensible mindset that became the shared pedagogical framework that students embraced for dance teaching (Leijen, Admiraal, Wildschut, Simons, p. 149).

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Reflecting back on this period of virtual and hybrid in-person teaching, I found several commonalities of a study conducted by scholar Zihao (Michael) Li in which I noticed a sense of ownership of representation from students, which elevated the ways in which learning was happening. In our hybrid classrooms, students were encouraged to place the camera on specific parts of the body, such as the feet, arms, hips, face, legs, and hands. There began to be an exciting heightened awareness of intentionality embedded in each body part as they related to the dance style being taught. Students were able to notice if their faces were visibly representing ease or stress as well as if tension was being held in their hands. As we began to dissect and truly isolate the dance instrument of each student, we as a class began to cultivate a safe and brave space that was joyful, intentional, and communal. Similarly to Li, "students didn't fear failure or humiliation in the same way they did in face-to-face contexts because they were in control of their own image as cinematographers, directors, editors, and dancers" (Li, p. 7).

Later, during the first semester at AMDA (NYC), a strong sense of camaraderie had developed within each of the jazz, modern, and ballet classes I taught, both in person and virtually. Each class had experienced at least two quarantines, during which we met online via Zoom. Upon returning to in-person class, we faced a physical barrier to plexiglass between the student and myself as the instructor. By the latter half of the semester, every student had the opportunity to guide the class using content that they felt comfortable with, showcasing their own unique methods. The experience allowed each student, whether in-person or virtual, to understand what it felt like to facilitate a learning space. This activity significantly boosted their confidence in the material being taught, introducing a teaching approach they had not encountered in other academy classes. Additionally, Zoom also created opportunities for one-on-one meetings with students in a mask-free setting, fostering deeper connections and strong relationships with each individual. As reflected in course evaluations and a study by scholar Li (Li pp. 22, 2), students noted that the dance instructor's use of technology had a profound impact on their learning experience.

Throughout my time teaching virtually and through a hybrid model of embodied pedagogy at AMDA NYC, I gained several valuable insights. I learned the critical importance of building a sense of community in the classroom and how imperative it was to regularly check in with students. This approach was rooted in fostering a space of well-being while prioritizing collaborative exercises throughout the semester, which created a positive environment that empowered everyone. These lessons I learned have profoundly shaped my pedagogical journey as a professor in higher education, inspiring me to remain curious about the potential and uniqueness of every class I teach. For example, during the 2024-2025 academic year, as a Lecturer teaching several courses in the Theatre and Dance Department at Loyola Marymount University, I have become more attuned to the importance of listening and sensing what is needed within the teaching sanctuary space. I have also gained a deeper appreciation for the dance studio's innate potential and obligation to serve as a sanctuary for all who enter—a space that empowers, unites, fosters friendships, and reminds dance artists of the transformative power of embodied performance arts. Each Zoom session during the pandemic was approached with a sense of urgency, infused with support and healing transformations, that fostered positive outcomes, enabling a deeper sense of understanding and support as our discussions and collaborative play seamlessly translated into the studio environment.

Reflecting on the experience of sharing virtual space with students has been essential to my growth as a dance professor. This teaching experience provided invaluable insights that should not be relegated to the past as merely pandemic-era adaptations but rather embraced as part of ongoing experiential research that continues to inform and enhance dance education. I have found this reflection of sharing virtual space with students essential to my journey as a dance professor. Simultaneously, this article serves as an opportunity to continue to build on what it means to be truly engaged with students, both in person and virtually inside and outside of class. Many of the methods I integrated separately were virtual discussion boards, online blogs, access to class footage, and access to virtual meetings outside of class time. As each of these teaching strategies were posted separately on the course website, students were able to post online responses as well to begin sharing additional footage they felt would engage classmates towards further online conversations. This provided sufficient methods to submit and create a more transparent relationship with students to invite feedback and responses.

Lastly, I noticed a closer tie with students that resulted in students connecting with me via social media and wanting to create online collaborative projects together.

RE-SHIFTING THE FOCUS: HEALING AND EQUITY

Students were invited to use their bodies to create shapes, introducing them to the academy curriculum while integrating dance improvisation and group collaborative projects that emphasized moving as a collective. In course evaluations, students highlighted the significance of the present moment, describing it as a way to express their individuality (Lanuza, 2021). Through this process, I discovered that the limitations of spatial orientation in the virtual setting of Zoom created a shared experience that allowed both the students and myself to focus on being fully present for one another. This approach fostered a sense of equity among students, particularly those living in small dorm rooms on campus, by helping them find commonalities and connections with one another. Simultaneously, students also developed strategies for executing movement while reflecting on how they wanted each moment to take shape. By engaging in the task of creating shapes with their bodies through dance, students were encouraged to approach the exercise in a reflexive manner, allowing them to reclaim moments of separation and transform them into positive experiences. The methods I integrated align with contemporary scholarship, which, like my approach, shifts the focus away from prioritizing aesthetic lines in dance, and rather emphasize the embodied experience as a somatic, well being-oriented process that values collaboration and healing. "Tasks encouraged mindfulness and were designed to help students look beyond the external shape of their work or themselves as performers. Instead, they focused on meaningfully representing their kinesthetic and embodied responses through dance" (Huddy, Gibbs, May, p. 382).

During my second semester teaching virtually at AMDA for the Los Angeles campus, I adopted a distinct practice of delivering concise lesson plans tailored specifically for Zoom instruction. Leading classes entirely online, without sharing physical space, presented a unique challenge that I was prepared to take on. Specifically, one significant takeaway from the first week of classes was the need to slow down my teaching methods even further than I had during quarantine with the NYC campus. Simplified and clarified movement material, paired with precise verbal cues, created a learning environment that encouraged heightened attention to detail (Rugh, Humphries, Tasnim, Basso, p. 140). At times, we encountered technological difficulties during class, which could be frustrating. However, these challenges fostered a deeper sense of empathy as we worked together to problem-solve (Buck, p. 19).

Branfman (2022) conducted a study on teaching incarcerated individuals remotely, in which she developed a method that invited students to imagine the intangible. She asked them to write about choreographies they would create if they could meet in person. This method gave students the opportunity to design choreographic works and become artistic visionaries through writing, even though they could not meet in person or virtually (Branfman, p. 17). This study served as an inspiring example of what is possible when virtual, in-person, or hybrid teaching is unavailable. The research from 2022 reenergized my perspective on engaging with students during instances when I have had to call out due to illness. For example, I now provide prompts online using platforms like Canvas during such occasions. These prompts often include activities that encourage students to visualize movement sequences using descriptive language. This practice originated from an activity I introduced at AMDA, where students were asked to write choreographic sequences in their journals using poetic devices rather than traditional ballet terminology. Staying active asynchronously has proven highly effective, as incorporating journaling into the process often helps students achieve greater levels of creativity and engagement.

CHALLENGES IN LIMITATIONS INVITE TRANSFORMATION

In my virtual, hybrid, and in-person classes, students were encouraged to engage in floorwork to make the most of the space limitations that arose when classes transitioned to virtual learning during quarantine participate (Goletti, p. 23). Some examples of these exercises were floor barre, stretches, and conditioning work that integrated Pilates as a form of strength training to assist their process of learning dance before progressing to standing on their feet for standing movements. Unlike many ballet classes given in higher education that begin right away with the first exercise at barre, I found that it was necessary to begin with somatic exercises on the floor to truly center the body. This is something that I have continued to find applicable in my teaching assignments since. In my

classes, dancers were also taken through detailed self-massage practice for their extremities such as hands and feet to gain components of self-care and accurately activate their extremities as a necessary component of each movement completing the story or motif. What I found was that these practices deeply improved their awareness of their bodies especially as students who ranged with diverse abilities.

A component of engaging in sung vocalizations with each ballet class when sound difficulties were arising via Zoom, was met with a positive response through inviting a student to sing popular melodies to create a harmonious atmosphere that transcended towards a playful energy. This contagious virtual space resulted in significant embodied improvement existing in a fun environment that felt new for many acting and musical theater major students. Since many of these students were theatre majors who also enrolled in courses where they studied singing, the invitation to sing in the classroom as musical accompaniment with dance, steered the focus away from technical-embodied perfection. When the use of prerecorded music was not working properly due to connection difficulties, encouraging students to sing to their movement developed a unifying methodology. This invited a renewal of embodied ownership that reclaimed agency. I introduced this method by beginning to sing a song from one of my favorite musicals and split the students in two groups to have one group join in the song with me, then inviting a call and response where the second group joined in creating a choir of voices. This method encapsulated a freedom of expression that truly intertwined interdisciplinary components in the dance studio, thus combining singing and acting as integral pieces. Therefore, this method activated singing and acting for these theater students as a part of their necessary dance curriculum. This approach showed the students that these components can be integrated as a framework to assist their dance studies. In this way, the students developed a great appreciation of this integration and had a more positive journey throughout their dance education process during my classes.

The concept of access served as the core of each dance course that I taught at AMDA and other institutions since then. During my time at AMDA NYC and then LA, I truly began learning what accessibly meant when teaching virtually and through hybrid lessons. What I found to hold substantial weight in each class was the constant need to remind each student that they were capable of anything! Exciting happenings, particularly virtually, when each

student was seen on the screen and participating as a team in group choreography empowered students with a feeling of community. Student reflections stated, "We were never made to feel like we were any less than others who may have caught onto specific sequences quicker" (Student evaluations, 2021).

RESPONDING TO THE CLASSROOM THROUGH EVOLVING TEACHING MODALITIES

The backdrop to classes in AMDA NYC was the uproar that was heard outside of institution and apartment walls during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which at times created a tense feeling that would often need to be released through upbeat music choices as well discussion of social justice. This sound score of protest provided an urgency of the significance of dance and the power of performing arts as a tool of unity, community, and connection. As an example, there were exercises that were given at the beginning of class that would encourage each student to share an introduction of their journey to school and what they viewed on the way as an observation of how those interactions influenced or impacted how they planned to go about their dance practice. Students brought to the forefront how this exercise invited them to become more vigilant observers amongst their surroundings as they were engaging with social activity prior to attending class.

As one of the only universities open during the mandated pandemic quarantine, which resulted with many higher educational institutions solely holding class virtually, AMDA required faculty to keep all fans on in the classrooms as a way to better distribute air to keep all students healthy. During the winter of 2020/2021 in NYC, amongst a musical backdrop of fans blowing, faculty were also required to open windows to allow air to more effectively circulate throughout the classrooms to combat the rise of COVID cases. In my classroom, this motivated pedagogical shifts that responded to the outside chants and sirens that were being heard from social justice protests and ambulance sirens in response to real life circumstances that we were being confronted with during class. Many positive student learning outcomes came from this method, especially in a department where students were often putting into practice a 5-6-7-8 approach of previously recorded music being used in the classroom. Instead of opposing the natural sound score and temperature shift we were all experiencing, a more pedestrian representation of loose winter clothing was layered on top of leotard and tights, thus inspiring exercises where students embodied street house styles embedded in jazz dance technique during class. This gave me an opportunity to highlight specific movements in jazz dance that were rooted in Afro diasporic forms I am familiar with, such as the Katherine Dunham, Afro Cuban, and House dance techniques. Another method was integrating monologue scores where students were encouraged to speak while they danced as a device to motivate conversations with the sounds of the city as a visceral response of embodied knowledge. As being in the studio contrasted Zoom because we all were in the same location and heard the same sound score, previously practiced approaches such as students unmuting one at a time to respond with a verbal score or responding solely through movement invited a sense of play and presence that resulted in fun virtual memories.

The aesthetic representation of my classes rejected the usual one-size-fits-all mentality and welcomed every body type in the jazz, modern, and ballet studio learning environment. I noticed that simply by altering the wardrobe of students out of necessity, each class was also rejecting divisive ideologies that were normalized in students' previous experiences in dance training. These alternative set of beliefs that negated prioritizing a thin body frame and tight clothing, encouraged inclusive teaching methods with a goal to create a harmonious space of equity empowering students with all body types and abilities. Acting and musical theatre students shared their insecurities with required wardrobe attire at AMDA and collectively shared their newfound response to the unifying space that was created with allowing a wardrobe change, that inherently prioritized the embodied experience versus the aesthetic of body shape. Lastly, because air conditioning also needed to be on as another response to combat health regulations, a full cardio process activating the space such as traveling in locomotive movements in duos, trios, and solos around the class was implemented into our class ritual. This addition built a fun beginning to dance class as a verification that the students would not only stay warm but build a safe, inclusive space.

During a time that began with a lot loneliness, confusion, and fear, students left classes with conviction and determination to mobilize change in society outside of the dance studio. The following quote is taken directly from a student evaluation that I received at the end of the winter semester during early March 2021. "I feel more present and more aligned, both inside the studio and out in the world. I can feel myself carrying the power I have with my confidence, and more presence" (Student evaluation, 2021). Student evaluations highlighted a more visceral reflection of the influence dance can have on young individuals in higher education. Learning in person, virtually, or through hybrid lessons, student learning outcomes can be available for all if approached through a diverse lens that listens to student needs, while being open to shift teaching approaches. Below is another quote from a student evaluation that I received at the end of the semester in March 2021. "Discussing ideas and concepts with my peers made me more motivated, open, and strengthened the feeling of community within my cohort (especially considering COVID restrictions). When we danced, we would talk about how our bodies feel so we can help our bodies grow stronger, our minds to be ready, and our breath to be used the proper way" (Student evaluation, 2021). Dancers felt more comfortable in their bodies and an overall responsiveness towards confidence that they shared was a novel feeling in their dance trajectories so far. The tenacity and communal leadership qualities all the while building friendships and tight bonds with one another all resulted in a heavy wave of accomplishment, yet sadness that was accompanied by joy as we departed ways at the end of the semester was enormously present.

My aim in this article was to offer teaching modalities for hybrid and virtual learning that align with an indigenous methodological lens to empower both student and instructor with tools that invite a space for further pedagogical practice towards joyful celebratory dance praxis in higher education that seeks to honor a creative, inclusive space for all.

BIOGRAPHY:
Celeste is a Fulbright Specialist, Ph.D. Candidate in Dance. Lanuza holds an M.F.A. from UC Irvine in Choreography and a B.F.A. in Dance and Musical Theater from The University of the Arts. She is a Lecturer at Loyola Marymount University and a Visiting Lecturer at Scripps College in Dance.

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MATTY & KIKAU

Matthew Teague Miller & Kikau Alvaro

Matty & Kikau (@carefullytaughtpodcast) Instagram photos & videos

A Careful Conversation on Musical Theatre 'Podagogy'

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by Ben Lundy

PI6

This spring, Gregory Berg published "The Broadway Podcast Network" in *The Journal of Singing* as part of their "Media Gallery" section. In the article, Berg begins by citing the "dramatic rise of podcasting" and the approximately three million podcasts in existence today (2024, p. 491).

Berg's note on podcasting is not surprising given that podcasting is both a relatively new content form and an American pastime. The Pew Research Center recently charted the rise of the podcast sector through their "Audio & Podcasting Fact Sheet" (2023), which found a 53% increase in podcast listenership from 2006 to 2023. Patrick Leu of Statista (2024) reports that in 2023 over 70 million Americans listened to podcasts and predicts that by 2029 there will be 110 million listeners. Leu (2024) also states that over a third of people under the age of fifty use podcasts as a semi-regular news source. Crispin Dale and John M. Pymm forecasted this in their 2009 *Active Learning in Higher Education* article "Podagogy: The iPod as learning technology" which concluded, "Learners themselves will increasingly become more reliant on this form of communication."

Whether news or entertainment, podcasting seems to transform the landscape of digital media, bringing people into conversation. Berg (2024) notes podcasting "is a remarkably accessible medium in which one needs no credentials, connections, significant resources or even expertise to host. All that one really has to possess is the desire to do it" (p. 492). Though accessible, podcasting, in the wrong hands, can be a source of misinformation. In short, listeners should approach each podcast show and episode with caution, listening carefully.

Berg (2024) argues that podcast networks help listeners navigate the "tangled maze" of podcasts, adding credibility to a podcast show, and offers the Broadway Podcast Network as a recommendation to voice teachers (p. 491).

Started in 2019 by Dori Berinstein, a four-time Tony Award-winning producer, and Alan Seales, whose Instagram bio states, "Broadway producer, technology junkie. Born 300 years too early," the Broadway Podcast Network, a free resource, has grown to offer 169 podcasts spanning 17 channels, their self-imposed categories for musical theatre topics (Berg, 2024, p. 491). Berg mentions a few of their notable shows: *A Half Hour with Jeff and Richie*, *The Ladies Who Lunch* (with Donna McKechnie), *Out for Blood: The Story of Carrie-the Musical*, *Giants in the Sky* (with Ben Rimalower), and *Breaking Broadway* (with Tony-nominee Kerry Butler).

Other theatre sites have also suggested recommendations for theatre-specific podcasts. *On the Stage* (2022) offers a blog on this topic, and they promote *Minor Wisdom* as a podcast "by theatre educators and for theatre educators." Their article also mentions some of The Broadway Podcast Network's shows such as *Behind the Curtain: Broadway's Living Legends*, *Page to Stage: A Conversation with Theatre Makers*, and *The Ensemblist*. In 2019, Janine Buegen of *Creative Drama* offered "Five Fantastic Podcasts for Theatre Educators" which included American Theatre's *Offscript*, Folger Shakespeare Library's *Shakespeare Unlimited*, HowlRound's *Theatre History Podcast*, and *Broadway Stories with Todd Buonopane*.

Given the suggestions and the mere size of The Broadway Podcast network alone, we may think that the theatre podcasting market is saturated. Perhaps this consortium of Broadway and theatre podcasts predicates the punchline: "Everybody has a podcast these days."

In 2019, *The New York Times* published "Have We Hit Peak Podcast?" by Jennifer Miller which examines podcast start-ups. In 2019, Blubrry, a podcasting platform service, reported that there were over 700,000 podcasts with 2,000-3,000 new shows launching each month (Miller). Miller and her interviewees speculate that most podcast starters are attempting to get a piece of the pie and seek to go viral. Jordan Harbinger, who ironically hosts his own podcast interviewing innovative business experts, argues that there is a "podcast industrial complex." He gives a talk entitled "For the Love of God, Please Don't Start Another Podcast," but believes that what needs to be created is "a real conversation that benefits the audience, not the host" (Miller 2019).

Matty & Kikau (@carefullytaughtpodcast) Instagram photos & videos

Though the podcast market and listenership continue to grow, we have not hit "peak podcast," rather, we have entered a new moment in which podcasts should consider more specialized methods and topics. Given Harbinger's advice, podcast hosting goes beyond Berg's "a desire to do it" (2024, p. 491). A successful podcast must sustain real conversations repetitively, a concept that is not foreign to theatre practitioners. Though Broadway Podcast Network has great content for theatre students and educators, many shows are interviews relating to Broadway, the professional industry, and musical theatre historiography, not necessarily educational practices. Where are the podcasts that really speak to musical theatre educators and pedagogues? How might grassroots podcasting outside of a network create community among musical theatre educators, invite experts of the field into discussion, and spark new conversations and pedagogical practice?

CAREFULLY TAUGHT: TEACHING MT WITH MATTY & KIKAU

Enter Matty Miller, the immediate past president of the Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance (MTEA) and the musical theatre program coordinator at California State University, Chico, and Kikau Alvaro, most recently the Interim Dean of University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Matty and Kikau met at the MTEA Conference in San Diego, and in 2021, they launched a podcast, *Carefully Taught: Teaching MT with Matty and Kikau*.

I met Matty and Kikau at the 2023 MTEA conference in New York City and was interested in listening to their podcast, which deservedly was earning hype at the conference. At the time, I was a K-12 theatre teacher, and I remember binging their previous episodes. Their conversations and guests developed my teaching, equipped me with new resources, and, most importantly, instilled hope.

Shamelessly, I became a super fan and even sent in fan mail ("Episode 33—Victoria Bussert," 1:00). After Berg's article on The Broadway Podcasting Network (2024), I was curious to know how their podcast began and continues to successfully spark conversations for musical theatre educators. I reached out to Matty requesting an interview about their podcast and musical theatre "podagogy," and in a twist of events, he turned the table and invited me to interview him and Kikau in a podcast episode. Naturally, I was honored by the proposal and excitedly accepted the opportunity.

I have always wondered about the show's analytics and production regimen. Conisdering musical theatre pedagogy a niche enterprise, I was curious about their audience. Had it grown? Surely, they wouldn't keep podcasting if it weren't successful. As Maria from *The Sound of Music* says, "They must have done something good."

"I Believe"

In my interview with Matty and Kikau, what first became apparent was their belief in the medium of podcasting. Before *Carefully Taught*, Kikau had a Disney-themed podcast: *Main Street and Beyond*. Kikau's passion for podcast hosting is fueled by the political podcasts he listens to. He says, "I have always had this spirit and energy to use this particular media to get this message out there."

Matty is a devoted podcast consumer as well. Matty would often end phone conversations with Kikau remarking that the content of their debrief deserved recording. Ultimately, these calls became the basis for their podcast. Matty says, "In the early days, we would pull open a Zoom meeting, press record, and have a conversation and invite some of our friends. That's how it took off."

"IT STILL SURPRISES ME...BECAUSE IT IS A NICHE MARKET…NUMBERS AREN'T AS IMPORTANT TO ME AS A SENSE OF COMMUNITY, WHICH I DEFINITELY FEEL WE HAVE, BUT I WANT TO CONTINUE TO BUILD."

MATTY

"Title of Show"

A belief in the medium and a desire for continued conversation can't be the only factors sustaining a successful podcast. As Little Sally in *Urinetown* reminds us, "A bad title...could kill a show pretty good," (Kotis & Hollman, 2003, p. 10) but Matty and Kikau have arrived at a perfect title for their conversations: *Carefully Taught*, a showtune from *South Pacific* that comments on the proliferation of racism. Matty said they had compiled a list of possible titles, but *Carefully Taught* seemed to jump off the page. Matty recollects the sociopolitical climate that sparked the podcast, "It was at a moment that social justice and theatre and equity and inclusion within theatre was having some long overdue conversations... 'Carefully Taught' is a song about racism and being taught racism and oppression. It just felt very much in line with our hearts in that moment."

"Carefully" is an important term here. Of course, the word is used because it's a part of the Rodgers and Hammerstein song title, but it is also integral to the kind of conversations Matty and Kikau seek to have. In a classroom, we might call their conversations "critical," as Matty and Kikau use questions to reflect upon their teaching practice. "Critical" tends to have a negative connotation whereas "careful" promotes insightful conversation that is approached from the position of awareness. Matty and Kikau care about their students and their programs. They care about their teaching and have these critical conversations to analyze their own methodologies while advocating that other musical theatre instructors consider careful pedagogical approaches.

"Simple Little Things"

For Matty and Kikau, the careful conversations surrounding musical theatre education are the central focus of the podcast. When I think about podcasting, I am overwhelmed by the practical concerns—the technology, the scheduling, the organization, the analytics, the marketing—but Matty says, "We're pretty low-tech here. We get together with friends and chat like this on Zoom. Then, we take turns in GarageBand editing it together." Perhaps this simple approach is another factor contributing to their success.

Kikau says that they also have a straightforward approach to social media. Their only official platform is Instagram (@CarefullyTaughtPodcast). Kikau appreciates the picture format of Instagram, "I love that with each of our seasons or semesters, we've been able to give it a little personality. At first, we were going to go minimalist. It's just going to be their pictures. Then, I added color, and the presence has evolved over time."

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Evolution is also a key component of this podcast. Matty and Kikau continue to adapt and evolve the podcast to varying needs. Each of the podcast episodes flows organically. The only fixed element is the ending in which they ask their guest to make recommendations for resources, books, movies, or musings that the guest is currently into. Kikau recognizes the maturation of the podcast, which at the beginning was "built a little robotic." Kikau finds, "Our partnership has really evolved over time which directly correlates to the comfort level of the guests, but our curiosity has not shifted."

In his article on The Broadway Podcast Network, Berg (2024) mentions the varying states of technical production associated with podcasts. As with *Carefully Taught*, an engaging and insightful podcast does not necessarily need fancy production equipment or software, rather, it's got to have heart.

"Popular"

Though heart and enriching conversation can help create a meaningful podcast, an audience is needed to sustain it. In many cases, podcasts go beyond a target audience and begin to craft communities.

Matty and Kikau know that an expanding audience is crucial to their podcast's success. As *Oklahoma!* ushered in a Broadway Golden Age, "Episode 44—Aaron Lazar and his Impossible Dream" launched *Carefully Taught* to new heights. Aaron Lazar, a SAG Award winner and Drama Desk nominee whose career spans Broadway, television, and film, brought a larger audience to the podcast and set a record of listens. Matty adds, "We were cited in *People* magazine, *Playbill.com*, and *BroadwayWorld*. It was everywhere."

After "Episode 44," Matty says he stopped checking analytics, "The numbers got to a place that I never thought they could, if I'm being honest. Then, we gained a lot of new listeners from the episode."

I was curious to know more about the numbers, but upon reflection, I realized that the data is not the focus. As Harbinger suggests, the focus is the audience (Miller, 2019), and *Carefully Taught* is in service of its audience.

"Welcome to the Rock"

Though Aaron Lazar's episode may have brought the podcast into the popular culture scene, each guest brings their unique community to the podcast. Kikau reflects on the growth of the podcast, "We love that it's niche... and I do want it to grow. I don't want our conversations to exist in a tunnel. Our most listened to episodes really do become about the guests or the topic." For Kikau, hosting is always about "keeping it personal" and organic. In creating a litmus test for a good episode, Kikau says, "If it's a topic that's interesting for both of us, then it'll absolutely be a winner."

When Matty considers the success of the podcast, he says, "It still surprises me...because it is a niche market, but there are still a lot of people who teach musical theatre that don't know that the podcast exists. I would love to see us continue to grow so that everybody is a part of the conversation that we are trying to have here on *Carefully Taught*. Numbers aren't as important to me as a sense of community, which I definitely feel we have, but I want to continue to build."

Carefully Taught could easily be affiliated with a network like the Broadway Podcast Network or an organization like Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance, and though Berg (2024) implies that networks add credibility, there is something visceral and inspiring by episodes and shows that are not sponsored by an organization. For one of their series, Matty and Kikau interviewed several professors who were transitioning into new roles at new institutions. Not being affiliated with an organization, institution, or network, allowed for real, honest, and transparent conversations to take place.

In contrast, organizations and institutions have a prefabricated network and community in which a podcast may operate. Though I support Matty and Kikau's grassroots efforts, I am also intrigued by the conversations that could be wielded by a sponsored organization like Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance. How might organization-sponsored podcasting contribute to a growing community of pedagogues and a field of scholarship on the teaching practice?

"Consider Yourself"

Matty and Kikau always end their episodes with recommendations. Though I include only brief excerpts and insights, if you are interested in creating the next niche theatre education podcast, I recommend listening to the full interview on "Episode 59," which chronicles the creation and evolution of *Carefully Taught with Matty and Kikau*.

For other entry points to *Carefully Taught*, I suggest Matty and Kikau's interviews with Kristy Cates ("Episode 24"), Kaitlin Hopkins ("Episode 17"), and Aaron J. Albano ("Episode 15"). Matty recommends a recent conversation with the Texas State musical theatre program's co–heads ("Episode 52—Texas State Musical Theatre Program's Leadership"), Vicky Bussert ("Episode 33"), and "Episode 42—BFA Musical Theatre Auditions."

In distilling and reducing *Carefully Taught* into five potential success factors, I am reminded that a good podcast is like a good course, performance, book, film, or television series: a firm belief in your form and content, an intriguing title, a simple approach, an inciting surprise, and, not just an audience, but a community in need of your message.

Assuredly, like musical theatre, podcasting will diversify and innovate as the form matures. In fact, during my interview through Zoom, I remember thinking, "I wish Matty and Kikau posted videos of their recordings (vodcasting) because even more information can be sensed through the viewing experience."

As we consider podcasting in developing our pedagogy (and the term I have opted throughout is Dale and Pymm's (2009) "podagogy") questions remain. Berg (2024) notes the consequences of podcasting's accessibility can lead to content that is "amateurish in the worst sense of the word" (p. 491). Again, careful—a positive substitute for critical—consideration should be exercised when we listen to and examine podcasts.

However, this does not mean that podcasts should be a subjugated medium of which practitioners should be completely skeptical, especially in performance studies. Like any article or source, we should carefully consider the context, the credibility, the bias, and the limitations of what is being experienced. At the same time, we ought to value the conversations in which experts and leaders are challenged to wrestle with their ideas in the moment.

As we move forward, I wonder how institutions, scholars, pedagogues, students, and enthusiasts can uplift podcasting in the academy. This thought provokes further questions. How can a podcast be peer-reviewed? How might podcasted conversations be revered as scholarship? Could podcasts be added to a journal's review section and how might that be accomplished? In short, how can we promote "podagogy?"

I commended Matty and Kikau in 2023, and this article serves as an additional letter of support from a super fan. In performing a historiography of *Carefully Taught*, I realize I have neglected many other musical theatre podcasts that are doing this necessary work and drafting pedagogical practice through conversation. Despite finding a niche, *Carefully Taught* has also discovered other "niches" that may be deserving of their own podcast show such as theatrical intimacy, consent-based practices, and neurodivergence in the theatre. Matty finds that more conversations about senior showcase formatting, the BFA audition landscape, general curricular trends, and the reflections of recent BFA graduates could be particularly helpful topics for consumption among musical theatre educators.

By writing about podcasting, I invite readers to join this conversation. Make your podcast. Write your article. Present your research. Foster a community and continue sharing as that network expands. May our creative curiosities in pedagogical pursuits be renewed for many seasons and inspire a generation to collaborate with us through conversation, helping us to arrive at shared solutions together.

BIOGRAPHY

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Lynn University
Directed by Adam Simpson
Photography by Shirley Bazua

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A Queer Era Approaches: Head Over Heels and Explicit Representation

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By J. Austin Eyer

Ryan Donovan's book *Queer Approaches In Musical Theatre* (2023) signals that shift in queer musical theatre scholarship from coding to explicit representation. Because musical narratives have grown beyond gay and lesbian identities, queer has emerged as the more inclusive term (in theoretical and colloquial definitions), which contrasts a straight, heteronormative, binary, cisgender world in many forms. While musicals have a "historically gay form," Donovan argues, they have "not necessarily always [had] a queer one" (Donovan, 2023, p. 9). Donovan uses queer as a contrast to gay not only to include a broader spectrum of queer identities but also to signal a clash against heteronormativity and homonormativity (p. 8). A mainstream gay Broadway musical like *La Cage aux Folles* was a precursor to queer Broadway productions like *Fun Home* or *A Strange Loop*, which pressed against conformity both in explicit queer language and linear form. For Donovan, an out gay musical like *La Cage aux Folles* diluted queer experience in order to gain the empathy of a general audience, whereas queer shows like *A Strange Loop* and *Fun Home* subvert the straight structures of traditional musicals and speak more directly to a queer audience. In the conclusion of *Queer Approaches*, Donovan asserts that queer approaches will continue to push musical theatre forms in new directions, whether with thoughtful re-writes, experimental productions, or storylines that provide hope for queer audiences (p. 103).

While Donovan's *Queer Approaches* traces significant shifts in queer representation, one musical in particular is absent–*Head Over Heels*.[2] In contrast to earlier productions like *Lady in the Dark*, *Coco*, or *Cabaret*, which coded queer identity through tropes, *Head Over Heels* is unmistakably queer and pushes against tropes with its representation.[3] Its significance should not be overlooked, as it offers an impactful opportunity for schools and theatres that choose to produce the work today.

MUSIC THEATRE HISTORY AND QUEER TROPES

While Clum, Miller, Wolf, and Donovan all highlight musicals that feature queer or queer-coded characters, I have yet to see a comprehensive list of musicals that feature queer characters. Below is an ongoing list of

1 Wolf often uses quotations around "lesbian" to emphasize to readers that she is not claiming the sexuality of the character is homosexual, but rather a persuasive argument that they could be read as lesbian.
2 Although Donovan does not place *Head Over Heels* within this history, he has written on the musical and its representation of women and fat stigma. See Donovan (2019).
3 I will finish with a coda talking about how explicit representation in *Head Over Heels* is imperative for the mental health of theatre students living in vulnerable states with anti-LGBT legislation.

Broadway musicals with queer representation that I have been compiling over the past two years (see Figure 1). The musicals on this list feature at least one character in the show's text who is identified as queer, or there is at least one moment in each musical that explicitly addresses queerness as a part of a featured character's identity (even if the character's identity is used stereotypically as a punchline). I find this to be helpful as a resource for students who are researching queer characters in musicals or faculty looking for scene or song materials with queer characters.[4]

Figure 1: A compilation of Broadway musicals that feature a queer character.

This figure traces a growth in queer roles and storylines. What the colors help to point out is the slow but steady number of Broadway musicals that feature queer characters from 1941 to the early 2000s, when more consistent representation emerges. However, not all representations are positive. These musicals include jokes and stereotypes that are at the expense of the queer community. At its best, the Broadway musical normalizes queer characters as parents (*La Cage aux Folles*, *Falsettos*, *Fun Home*…) or as romantic storylines (*Rent*, *It Shoulda Been You*, *The Prom*…). At its worst, the Broadway musical plays into long-held tropes and well-worn jokes, with four common problematic themes. I want to highlight these tropes that have dominated queer representation in past decades to understand if a queer era of Broadway is approaching.

1. A tragic event, used as a major plot point, happens to a queer character, also known as the "bury your gays" trope.
2. Queerness is used for comedic effect or the punchline of a joke, often the foppish pansy or butch lesbian role.
3. Queer intimacy on the stage is desexualized or censored.
4. Cross-dressing is used for comedic effect (often by a straight, cisgender man), the "a man in a dress" punchline.

BURY YOUR GAYS

Early queer representation in literature and theatre began as an adaptation of the tragic "redemption" or "salvation" narrative reserved for female sexual transgressors like Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, commonly used in the 19th century. The "tragic homosexual" trope appears in plays around the beginning of the twentieth century and is understood as "the way narratives about queer people often end with terminal illness, murder, hate crimes, and other tragedies" (Ciba, 2020, p. 109). This trope was usually used as a ploy to squeeze queer characters past censors or to gain sympathy for the homosexual deviants. Under the self-imposed Hays Code

4 I am also working on a more extensive list to track musicals from the US and UK that had major productions or reviews over the past 100 years. These lists are a work in progress. A valuable resource for older queer productions that have soundtracks is the Queer Music Heritage website. See Doyle (n.d.).

(1934-1968), Hollywood films would sometimes agree to show queer characters "only when such images conformed with various scientific conclusions on gays as suicidal, homicidal, gender-inverted, or immature" (Wahlert, 2016). Whether a result of societal homophobia or the vigilant urge to uphold moral standards, diluting or queer-coding characters seemed to be the only option to queer tragedy.

The trope was well-worn in literature, plays, film, and TV before it made it into Broadway musicals with roles like Paul (*A Chorus Line*), Molina (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*), or Jason (*Bare: The Musical*). In the cases of these three characters, the story builds empathy for their journey, only to be cut short by tragedy in the final moments of action. During the AIDS crisis, there was a substantial uptick in storylines of queer people dying from complications of AIDS across all forms of entertainment. On Broadway, this was also well represented by characters like Whizzer (*Falsettos*), Angel (*Rent*), Leigh (*Taboo*), and Peter (*The Boy From Oz*). In each example, there is a dramatic, yet theatrical, death that stuns the action of the musical. There is no happy ending for these characters, but rather, a "we are grateful we had you in our life" celebration toward the end of the musical.

PANSY CRAZE

Since the 1920s, queerness has been visible on the stage through popular pansy acts in vaudeville, musical revues, and nightclub acts (*Chauncey*, 2019; *Curtin*, 1988). The pansy craze was a short era, alongside prohibition, when alternative queer lifestyles and mannerisms were put onstage for comedic effect. The pansy craze was a catalyst for the stereotype of the wickedly funny, witty, and sassy gay characters that deliver great one-liners. The foppish pansy device is seen in every decade of the Broadway musical and persists today. A handful of examples include characters like Russell (*Lady in the Dark*), Duane (*Applause*), Albin (*La Cage aux Folles*), Toddy (*Victor/Victoria*), Elder McKinley (*The Book of Mormon*), and Damian (*Mean Girls*). Having a fabulously gay character can set up a rousing comedy number like "Keep it Gay" from *The Producers* or break up the courtroom drama in *Legally Blonde* by listing attributes that help everyone judge whether the character of Nico is gay or just European. These queer stereotypes continue to initiate laughter from straight audiences, and gay musicals like *The Prom* take advantage of these perpetuated gay comedy stereotypes with roles like Barry and Trent, self-indulgent musical theatre pansies who are out of touch with anything non-theatre related, all for the sake of a laugh. The heart of *The Prom*, the romance between two young women who just want to dance together at their prom, is overshadowed by the narcissistic buffoons that naively invade Emma's Indiana hometown so they can, as Barry states in his use of a slur, "go help that dyke" (Martin, 2019, p. 16). This particular trope seems firmly in place as it quickly wins a laugh from the audience, and that laughter helps to diffuse a basic level of straight discomfort watching a queer love story unfold.

While the pansy is a common character trope across musical theatre history, the butch lesbian is the counterpart trope that appears more frequently in nightclub performances (Gladys Bentley), literature (Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker* chronicles), and recent television (*Orange is the New Black*). The image of the butch lesbian trope includes unfeminine or tom-boy attire like work boots, suits, overalls, and short crew cuts. Most of the time, this character trope is also used for a comedic effect. One prominent example is the character of the lighting designer, Shirley Markowitz, from the "Keep It Gay" number in *The Producers*, who is a two-dimensional stereotype with her deep voice and technical ability. However, there are also positive examples of this trope, such as the "old school butch" delivery woman whom Alison recalls in "Ring of Keys" from *Fun Home*. This moment is one of queer recognition across generations when a younger girl sees herself and understands who she could become. Despite this positive example, this trope tends to condense lesbian identity into a form that reinforces the idea that all gay men possess feminine traits and all gay women masculine ones.

DESEXUALIZED ROMANCE

While explicit queer sexuality was incorporated into mainstream TV shows in the early 2000s, like *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, musicals still shied away from queer sex on the stage. Whether behind a bedsheet like in *Rent*, mashed into an orgy scene like in *The Wild Party*, or completely devoid of queer sexuality in productions of *La Cage aux Folles*, *Mean Girls*, *Shucked*, or *The Prom*[5]—commercial musicals continue to ride a line of

5 Though it should be noted that in 2018, *The Prom*'s performance on the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, featured the first kiss between a lesbian couple during the televised event. See Henderson, 2018.

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Kennesaw State University
Directed by Timothy Ellis
Photography by Casey Gardner Ford

showing queer affection without explicit discussions or depictions of queer sex. While there have been several plays to push explicit sexual intimacy on the Broadway stage (*Angels in America*, *Slave Play*, *The Inheritance*), musical theatre writers seem reluctant to write queer sex into their shows.[6] Even in productions like *Spring Awakening*, a story of explicit sexual awakening, the queer side plot never moves beyond a gentle kiss (depending on directorial staging).

Donovan suggests that the reason so few musicals include queer romantic or sexual narratives is due to the financial motivations of the industry: "Musicals are the most financially lucrative of theatrical forms for producers, they are popular the world over, and are thus unabashedly capitalist–all of which rather flies in the face of queerness" (Donovan, 2023, p. 9). This point signals the underlying cause as to why musicals still make creative choices that reinforce queer stereotypes that are familiar, comfortable, safe, or funny with the hope of appealing to a mainstream audience. There seems to be a lingering fear among Broadway producers and creative teams to play to as broad an audience as possible–or else it spells doom for financial recoupment. Mirroring the production of *La Cage aux Folles* in 1983, the production of *The Prom* in 2018 is a prime example. Both are queer stories written to be easily digested by a white, cis-het, tourist audience, making them perfect to tour through the Midwest and the South. It can even be made into a movie where the gay Broadway actor is recast as a straight TV personality (Lee, 2020). While both musicals take a peek at queer romance, the action is surrounded by worn-out jokes as queer identity is used for laughs that never dare to queer mainstream ideology.

6 One stark contrast to this is the opening number in 2022's *A Strange Loop*, where the audience is told that "there will be butt-fucking" (Jackson, 2020, p. 2).

Photography by Tim Wildsmith, courtesy of Unsplash

THE MAN IN A DRESS

Pre and post-pandemic, there was a wave of musicals hitting Broadway that recalled Shakespearean comedic forms. Simply put–it's funny to watch a man in a dress try to be a woman. Shows like *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert*, *Kinky Boots*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *La Cage aux Folles* use drag within the queer community and put queer characters in the leading roles. Musical characters like Mary Sunshine (*Chicago*), Miss Trunchbull (*Matilda*), Margaret Meade (*Hair*), and Edna (*Hairspray*) are played by cisgender men in women's clothing, a casting choice not addressed by the plot, to subvert normative gender roles. In contrast, shows like *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Some Like it Hot* present a narrative where cis-hetero men cross-dress for comedic effect (and, at its worst, use transphobic or homophobic jokes for punchlines). *Some Like it Hot*, the last of this infamous trio to hit Broadway, updated the story by casting non-binary actor J. Harrison Ghee to play the role of Jerry. This casting and writing revision, where Jerry permanently embraces their new persona Daphne, helped to bring half of the disguised duo into the twenty-first century, post-transgender tipping point rhetoric.[7] Many theatre critics cite the re-write and casting of Ghee, a Black non-binary actor, as "an invitation, as is the show overall, to a new and intersectional stage of liberation" (Green, 2022). To many, these updates were all that was needed to bring the story into the current world; however, Broadway actor L. Morgan Lee saw the invited dress of the musical and feared, "They are going to get celebrated for this, when what's happening here is actually really irresponsible" (Paulson, 2022). As a trans woman, she wonders why these tropes need to be told at all today. *Tootsie* treats drag and gender expression as a unique way for a straight man to revive his acting career, and *Mrs. Doubtfire* features a straight man who puts on a dress to gain access to his kids with some "hilarious" results. The reluctance of the Broadway Industry to address or even acknowledge the implicit transphobia found in these shows has created a contentious relationship and lack of trust between commercial producers and the trans and non-binary LGBTQ+ community.[8]

Despite increased queer representation in Broadway musicals, the common negative tropes persist. Even contemporary musicals lauded for their progressive messages still have outdated structures found in the generation of musicals that came before them. Students and young fans of musical theatre are sensitive to how queer people are represented and cast onstage. By acknowledging these stereotypes, musical writers and directors can help steer new stories to Broadway as queer characters continue to rise in numbers. When musicals like

The Color Purple, *A Strange Loop*, or *Head Over Heels* are examined through the lens of these tropes, it becomes evident they are representing queerness in a different and positive way on Broadway.

MAKING A CASE FOR *HEAD OVER HEELS*

Head Over Heels, a queer re-telling of an Elizabethan romance by Sir Phillip Sidney set to the music of the 1980s glam pop all-women band the Go-Gos, featured the debut of Peppermint (the first out trans person in a leading role), queer joy without tragedy, a lesbian romance, and two examples of gender as a non-binary spectrum for exploration. *Head Over Heels* imagines a future where patriarchal rulers release their grips on the

7 The "transgender tipping point" is a term coined in a 2014 Time Magazine article. See Steinmetz, 2014.

8 Broadway actors, such as L. Morgan Lee, Ezra Michel, and Donnie Cianciotto, have spoken up in interviews about these issues. For a critical analysis of these tropes, see Lewis, 2021.

past to make way for a new generation of leaders whose tolerance and acceptance are a part of the "beat" of the community. This musical does more than represent gays and theys coming out; it presents a new world where acceptance of difference strengthens the queendom of Arcadia and makes way for a better future. The production uses familiar classic plot points of young love, disguise, mistaken identity, and four inescapable prophecies from the Oracle of Delphi to present a world where old archetypes and storylines converge to create a new way of viewing the expected; all while successfully navigating queer stereotypes and avoiding making jokes at the queer community's expense.

Rather than rely on scholars to queer-code characters, *Head Over Heels* marks a milestone in queer theatre history by including a non-binary character in the libretto. The Oracle character, known as Pythio, uses they/them pronouns and is the architect behind the whole action of the musical and inevitably helps to give birth to a new "beat" and queer matriarchal society for future generations. While Pythio in their previous life endured rejection from their husband Dametas, time has developed in him the openness to embrace his partner in any form they take. Pythio is reunited with their partner and their queer daughter, whom they were forced to abandon when they were banished from Arcadia. Like others in the realm, the audience sees a happy ending for Pythio, Dametas, and Mopsa in a kingdom that rejected them years before under patriarchal rule. Whereas previous queer representation more frequently ended in tragedy, this ending celebrates queer joy and community.

This trio of characters is not the only one to avoid tragedy, yet the musical uses tragedy to build toward a happy reunion. In Act Two, Musidorus, the humble, love-sick, eclogue-speaking shepherd, is stabbed to death by King Basilius. This is the only tragic event the audience witnesses during the show. Musidorus, as written, is a cis-gender young man who, with the help of Pythio, re-genders himself as Cleophila, an Amazonian sword-swinging warrior. (Casting choices might shift the categorization of this moment if a trans or non-binary actor played Musidorus.) Nevertheless, *Head Over Heels* eventually rejects tragedy when Musidorus flees Hades and, with the help of a stag named Hibiscus, is reborn after Gynecia is crowned queen and begins the new Arcadian beat. Musidorus proposes to Princess Philoclea, is accepted into the royal family, and shares that he wants to continue his gender exploration. If Musidorus is viewed as a non-binary character, the musical could momentarily traffic in the "bury your gays" trope but, in the end, refuses it. It affirms that queer people are deserving of love and not condemnation.

The show not only rejects tragedy and death; it is a celebration of love and, specifically, explicit sensual love among all its characters. There are several scenes that feature cisgender heterosexual couples Gynecia and Basilius and (depending on the casting of Musidorus) Philoclea and Musidorus. However, it is the musical's explicit representation of queer love that sets it apart from most of its predecessors. Queer romance and intimacy begin at the end of act one when Mopsa returns from Lesbos to proclaim her love for Pamela. The roles of Pamela and Mopsa showcase a central lesbian love story that, once revealed, does not shock the rest of the kingdom of Arcadia. The musical number "Our Lips are Sealed" features scripted intimacy between these two women. At the end of Act Two, Pythio and Dametas also share a scripted kiss, signifying their reunion. As Donovan argues, "On Broadway a kiss is not just a kiss–especially when it involves queer coupling" (Donovan, 2023, p. 1). By not censoring the queer intimacy, the musical moves the queer characters from the margins of the story and into the spotlight.

If queer love fills the stage, completely absent from the musical is the gay pansy or butch lesbian trope. While there are some jokes that involve Pamela and Mopsa's sexuality, they avoid the butch lesbian cliché. In Act One, Pamela writes three short couplets hoping to uncover why no male suitors have impressed her up to this point. One of them begins, "My beauty's known in many lands, from India to China. / If you desire to take my hand / You must have a…" (Magruder and Whitty, 2019, pp. 43-44). At this point, she pauses as she searches for the right word, unsure of her lesbian desire, but based on the rhyme, Mopsa (and the audience) quickly fill in the blank with a reference to female genitalia. This joke and the other couplets create a moment of dramatic irony in which the audience knows more than the character, but lesbian sexuality is the inspiration, not the brunt, of the joke. Later in the scene, Mopsa states that if she were butch, she would take more of a dominant role in their relationship, declaring, "Ha! Wore I breeches, O mistress mine, I / Would bend thee o'er my knee and spank some sense / Into thy backside!" (p. 46). This exchange suggests the idea that Mopsa is not in a dominant masculine role, and these women (even though they are princess and servant) become equals while transitioning from a latent coded desire to blatant queer flirtation.

When Musidorus is disguised as Cleophila, the "man in a dress" motif becomes a theatrical trope that *Head Over Heels* is vulnerable to. From ancient plays like Aristophanes's *Thesmophoriazusae* to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, there is a long list of plays that feature characters using gender performance as a disguise. Like the original source text, this convention is used for the role of Musidorus,[9] the poor shepherd boy who has fallen for his childhood friend, Princess Philoclea. In the song "Mad About You," Musidorus proclaims his love for Philoclea in front of the Arcadians, but King Basilius rejects his proposal and vows to murder him if he goes any further, stating, "Should'st thou further fancy her, / my sword shall 'take a shine' to thee! Be gone!" (p. 28). If Musidorus wants to pursue love and avoid death, his best option is to disguise himself as an Amazonian woman who assumes the name of Cleophila, a plan proposed by the non-binary oracle of Delphi. While there are moments that play up the physical comedy of Musidorus navigating life as Cleophila, the focus remains on winning Philoclea's hand in marriage and eventually learning more about his gender identity.

At first, Musidorus dresses up in a strategic disguise, but he begins to embrace his femininity in the penultimate scene. This twist brings a needed update to the man in a dress convention. After Musidorus is reborn, and his proposal to Philoclea is accepted along with the union of Pamela and Mopsa, Gynecia welcomes the new members to her royal family, saying, "To think I might have daughters three and one / New son—" To this gendered term, Musidorus offers another option:

> Or daughter four! For Cleophila
> I should like to keep around, I think, for
> disguised as she I found the she in me,
> And I'll include then he with she, and thus
> A son and daughter both to you I'd be,
> a Musidorus in totality. (p. 100)

This small section of dialogue adds a layer of complexity to the role of Musidorus/Cleophila, especially if a trans or non-binary actor plays the role. Musidorus/Cleophila demonstrates a new balance between masculine and feminine, which only deepens the queer representation in this musical. Gender is viewed as something that can be fluid or discoverable, as the audience sees Pythio and Musidorus on a journey of self-discovery and acceptance of gender identity. While this cross-dressing archetype creates tension in this category of positive queer representation, between the effort in the book to name Cleophila as part of a new identity for Musidorus moving forward, combined with casting and staging possibilities, *Head Over Heels* is a positive example of how queer love and identity can be celebrated and not feared.

9 Though it should be noted that in The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia two cousins, Musidorus and Pyrocles, both disguise themselves. Pyrocles becomes Cleophila to woo Philoclea and Musidorus assumes the role of a shepherd named Dorus to woo Pamela. The character Pyrocles is removed from the musical version.

CONCLUSION

In almost every decade since the 1940s, queer characters have appeared in Broadway musicals. While the study of queer coding held a significant role in queer musical theatre studies, Donovan's *Queer Approaches in Musical Theatre* points in a new direction as to how musical theatre critics and scholars discuss queer musicals. The tragic homosexual archetype seems to be fading from popularity; however, the use of comedic cross-dressing, desexualized romance, and gay pansy stereotypes still persist. An era of queer musicals seems to be following in the wake of the success of *Head Over Heels*, a queer musical meant to include a queer audience. As queer identity continues to define and redefine itself, we must be thoughtful about how we adapt our language as theatre makers to invite celebration of those who do not fit neatly in white, cis-hetero boxes. New queer approaches have the potential to expand representation within musical theatre further and welcome more intersectional identities to access the stage.

CODA

I am compelled to mention how the impact of coding versus explicit representation has a direct effect on us as musical theatre educators. Since accepting my current job at UT Arlington in the fall of 2020, I have tried to thoughtfully choose the musicals we produce each season to explore queerness on stage and reflect the students in our department. Over the last five years, I have directed shows with explicit queer characters like *Spring Awakening*, *Cabaret* ('98 version), and *Head Over Heels*, as well as musicals such as *9 to 5* and *On the Town*, in which queer people were consciously introduced into the narrative in our productions. Beyond my research interests in this subject matter, as of fall 2024, more than a quarter of the musical theatre students in our BFA program identify as queer. So, finding meaningful and positive musicals that address queerness is important to the program as a whole.

Before we secured the rights to *Head Over Heels*, we weren't sure if, in the wake of Texas State Bill 12, we would even be able to produce the musical in Texas. S.B. 12 would have banned "a male performer exhibiting as a female, or a female performer exhibiting as a male, who uses clothing, makeup, or other similar physical markers and who sings, lip syncs, dances, or otherwise performs before an audience" (S.B. 12, 2023, p. 3). I am thankful that the chair of our department promised we would find a way to produce the show for my research purposes and as a form of activism in support of queer students and the community. Luckily, a federal judge ruled that S.B. 12 was unconstitutional in September 2023.

However, S.B. 17, which prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion programs at public institutions, closed our LGBTQ+ program in January 2024 as we began rehearsals. The disappearance of university-sanctioned LGBTQ events on campus greatly impacted the mental health of students and employees. When the *Dallas Voice* came to view our production, their headline read, "In the Face of DEI Bans, UT Arlington Opens a Very Queer Forward *Head Over Heels* Musical" (Lopez, 2024). Seeing this headline brought joy to the cast and creative team. I believe that producing shows with explicit queer characters in states like Texas and Florida not only establishes brave spaces for queer students in our theatre arts and dance departments; it also supports queer students and employees by continuing LGBTQ+ programming on our campuses. The mental health of students is greatly affected by anti-queer legislation, and musical theatre offers a place where an audience member can see someone like them experience acceptance and joy. While coding may be the only option for some programs, positive, explicit queer characters continue to project an example of queer love, queer acceptance, and queer existence.


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BIOGRAPHY

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Black Musicals, White Composers

by Deonté L. Warren

How White Composers Have Shaped the Training of Many Black Singers In Musical Theatre and What We Can Do About It

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BROADWAY HAS A RICH HISTORY OF MUSICALS FOCUSING ON THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, FEATURING AFRICAN AMERICAN PERFORMERS, AND TELLING STORIES ROOTED IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE. HOWEVER, FOR MUCH OF THIS HISTORY, THESE MUSICALS HAVE LARGELY BEEN WRITTEN BY WHITE COMPOSERS, DIRECTED BY WHITE MEN, AND PRODUCED BY THE WHITE BROADWAY ELITE.
HOW DOES THIS PREDOMINANTLY WHITE PERSPECTIVE LIMIT THE MUSICAL EXPRESSION OF BLACK PERFORMERS IN MUSICAL THEATRE?

This article explores how the White lens has set the canon for musical theatre, defining any musical that does not directly deal with specific BIPOC cultures as a "White" musical while often defaulting to an all-White cast. Later sections will explore how this White lens has influenced the teaching of musical theatre history, leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes that Black singers are encouraged to embody to achieve commercial success. By analyzing the transition from *Shuffle Along* (1921) to *Porgy and Bess* (1935), this article will illustrate how White creators began shaping the representation of Black culture in commercial musical theatre. A look at *Dreamgirls* (1981) reveals how, half a century later, the tradition of White composers' interpretation of the Black experience through music continued to uphold stereotypes of "Blackness." While the problem persists in the professional industry, the solution may lie in the hands of musical theatre educators.

To explore how musical theatre education has perpetuated the racial problem, several successful Black musical theatre artists who were educated at different institutions across the country were interviewed. The interviewees included individuals who graduated between 2010 and 2024. These artists have Broadway, touring, regional, and community theatre experiences. I want to take a moment to formally thank these brave artists for sharing their experiences and insights. The perspectives these performers share will help illustrate the steps educators can take to better prepare Black (and other non-White) musical theatre performers for a life and career in the theatre. These perspectives and comments appear throughout this article. While some artists consented to being named, others will appear as pseudonyms to avoid causing any professional harm or backlash to participating parties.

It is essential to acknowledge that this paper uses terms like "White dominance" and "Whiteness," which some may find to be too straightforward or abrasive. Yet, it is crucial that educators and colleagues start speaking to each other and students with an honesty and truth that is often sacrificed to keep those in power from feeling the discomfort of having to face the reality of how some benefit from cultural and structural norms, especially in relationship to Whiteness. Consider the words of Deborah Bradley (2007, p. 143) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison:

> Taking the risk of talking about race is important both for the future of music education as a discipline and for our students who look to us for guidance on their journeys to becoming music educators. Until we can break the silence that maintains music education's complicity in perpetuating racism by leaving whiteness the undisturbed and undisputed cultural norm, our concerns about social justice in music education will amount to little more than lip service.

Substitute "music education" for "musical theatre education" in this quote, and it will become clear that the language used in this paper is not only necessary but critical to the process of evolving beyond the dominance that the White lens maintains over the creation, education, and sustaining of musical theatre.

WHITE DOMINANCE AND WHITENESS AS IT RELATES TO BROADWAY

In May 2015, Broadway historian and researcher Warren Hoffman gave a presentation on his book titled *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* at the Library of Congress. Hoffman made the strongest and most concise case for how Whiteness and the Broadway musical are intrinsically linked. He explores how musical theatre is very much invested in the racial politics of the United States and how musicals are powerful social tools because, while musicals often appear superficial, they are imbued with more profound social and racial implications, reflecting the broader racial politics of the United States (Hoffman, 2015). Whiteness operates the same way; it seems to be race-less. It seems to be the norm.

But musical theatre is not a monoculture, so when Whiteness is the perceived and understood norm, all those who identify outside that norm are not only othered but are also often harmed. But that is not even the most dangerous aspect of this issue. What is most perilous is when those who benefit most from this perceived norm fail to acknowledge the leverage that comes from being White in a White-dominated and White-centric culture. Building on Hoffman's analysis of Broadway's complex relationship with Whiteness, Robert P. Baird further illuminates the cultural challenges of addressing racial privilege. In an article for *The Guardian* titled, "the invention of whiteness: the long history of a dangerous idea", Robert P. Baird wrote that one subject of his writing, Christian Lander, was finding in interviews that "If they (White interviewees) weren't exactly clamouring to dispense with their racial identity, and the privileges that came with it, they were also not eager to embrace, or even discuss it, in public" (2021). Baird later writes:

> At the same time, this new focus on whiteness has prompted much confusion and consternation, especially among white people not used to thinking of themselves in racial terms. The Pew poll found that half of white Americans thought there was "too much" discussion of racial issues, and a similar proportion suggested that seeing racism where it didn't exist was a bigger problem than not seeing racism where it did.

So, if readers find themselves resistant to the language or subject matter presented, this reaction warrants critical self-reflection. And that is not to say that any resistance is unwarranted. It is an understandable response because when calls for equality, inclusion, and diversity come, it often feels like oppression for those who have benefited from the status quo. It feels like a loss. And it is a loss of sorts: a loss of privilege. But the net gain is so much more powerful than what is lost: the entire society, or in terms of the subject of this article, the whole industry is made better by the inclusion, respect, and accurate perspectives of all those who do not identify as White.

But musical theatre has yet to reach this goal of dismantling racial norms. It often does the exact opposite: it stokes the flames of racial norms, most commonly setting them so ablaze that the only things left are harmful, limiting, and damaging stereotypes. These are the stereotypes that most Black actors find themselves trained to perfect and perform. One recent musical theatre graduate interviewed, Sabrina Reed, recounts often hearing phrases like, "Be more sassy" and remarks that were meant to be encouraging, like "You're so mature" and "you're so wise." How often are Black women expected to be and portray "wise?" Reca Oakley, currently starring in *SIX* on the West End, recounts constantly being sent messages by faculty that "thick, black women couldn't be seen as vulnerable." Reca demonstrated her resilience and resourcefulness by finding material that

showcased her ability to portray vulnerability. This material is not often featured in the canon of musical theatre, which usually prefers to ask Black actresses to portray toughness and trauma. Too many (not all) shows that feature Black women and Black identities have been written from the perspective of white composers and feature many of these same harmful stereotypes perpetuated by often well-meaning musical theatre educators across the globe.

A look at *Shuffle Along* and *Porgy & Bess* will illustrate a pivotal moment in musical theatre history that led us to this practice and its commonality. The shows discussed here are among the best in the musical theatre canon, and it is important to note that this analysis aims to highlight a cultural issue within how musical theatre is taught, and to offer suggestions for evolving toward a more authentic exploration of diverse cultures beyond the White lens. It encourages us to examine the history of musical theatre and recognize the many phenomenal non-White artists who have been instrumental in its creation and evolution. And finally, it outlines many different ways, beyond history courses, to decolonize the teaching and practice of musical theatre. So, where to begin? With the pivotal and vital *Shuffle Along*.

A BRIEF LOOK AT HISTORY

Shuffle Along is heralded as the last great, truly Black musical before the trend set by Gershwin's *Porgy & Bess* where the Black experience is explored by White composers.

> Heralded in retrospect for its daring and innovation, it (*Porgy & Bess*) actually symbolizes the end of the black musical tradition that flourished in the early part of this century. While the faces onstage were clearly black, this musical version of the 1927 DuBose and Dorothy Heyward Broadway play revealed the height of white usurpation of what had initially been a black cultural form (Woll, 1989, p. 154).

In doing so, a trend began that would ultimately limit most Black theatre artists. *Shuffle Along*, written by then relatively unknown songwriters Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, hit Broadway in May 1921, with almost $18,000 in debt after failing to pay the bills in several cities prior. Despite being in debt, unknown composers and cast members, and the location of the 63rd Street Theatre, "*Shuffle Along* … proved to producers and theatre managers that audiences would pay to see black talent on Broadway" (Woll, 1989, p. 60) by becoming a smashing success. Blake and Sissle took a huge risk by challenging stereotypical portrayals of Blackness that stemmed from minstrelsy with songs like "Love Will Find A Way." Todd Decker explains what makes this moment particularly excellent:

> This love duet for the romantic leads is unmarked by tropes of Blackness and would easily fit into any operetta of the time. With a broad melody and sentimental lyrics in standard, rather flowery English, "Love Will Find A Way" characterized *Shuffle Along*'s black lovers as just like any other lovers—meaning white lovers—on the musical stage (Decker, 2011, p. 200).

These Black performers were allowed to portray people rather than singing stereotypical tropes to portray Black people. This sort of thinking that White equals normal is the basis for music theatre's—and American culture's —central, continuous race problem.

There were other musicals written by Black composers at this time. Appendix G of Henry T. Sampson's *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* lists prominent Black shows written, produced, and performed by Blacks on Broadway and all across America. However, the canon of musical theatre does not include any of these productions. In fact, the musical theatre canon is almost exclusively made up of musicals that played not just inside New York City but an even more confined area, Manhattan's Theatre District. In *Reframing The Musical: Race, Culture, and Identity*, editor Sarah Whitfield (2019) writes, "Musical theatre's tight focus on the geographical location of Broadway is problematic" (p xix).

The number of Broadway theatres has evolved over the century since the transition from minstrelsy to what is

SHUFFLE ALONG | MAY 1921
Original
Directed by George C. Wolfe,
Original book by F.E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles
Photo courtesy of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

now understood as musical theatre, but of all the musical theatre created across the globe, the canon consists primarily of shows that have played this small contingent of midtown Manhattan theatres. Decentralizing New York City as the only place to find musical theatre success could be a vital step to paving the way for more shows that are created from diverse peoples, perspectives, and lived experiences.

Following *Shuffle Along*, the next big hit in the canon for a musical featuring Black performers on stage was George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy & Bess*, which opened on Broadway in October 1935. After being inspired by Harlem's Black jazz musicians, George Gershwin blended traditional Western European musical themes with emerging American jazz elements in the opera, while Ira Gershwin's lyrics, reflecting the speech patterns of Southern African Americans, were incorporated into the libretto by author DuBose Heyward (Woll, 1989, p. 160). Central to the issue this article raises, George Gershwin's work is an interpretation of Black musical styles and reflects a White person's ideas of what it means to be Black in America, which results in those same stereotypes Blake and Sissle so deftly avoided in *Shuffle Along*.

"...DON'T START A-SINGING THE BLUES, BUT JUST YOU SHUFFLE ALONG, AND WHISTLE A SONG. WHY, SOMETIMES A SMILE WILL RIGHT EVERY WRONG. KEEP SMILING AND SHUFFLE ALONG."

Shuffle Along, Lyrics by Noble Sissle

THE TRADITION CONTINUES

Porgy and Bess established a practice of White composers setting the sounds that explore Black identities and Blackness, and almost fifty years later, *Dreamgirls* opened on Broadway, continuing the tradition. Composed by Henry Krieger, *Dreamgirls* opened on December 20, 1981, at the Imperial Theatre and received thirteen Tony Award nominations, including Best Musical, and won six. Instead of Gershwin's Black jazz sounds, Henry Krieger gives his take on other "Black sounds," making use of Rhythm & Blues, Gospel, and other popular music styles rooted in Black cultures to tell this compelling story. And while almost every face onstage is Black, Henry Krieger is White and so is the show's director and choreographer, Michael Bennet. *Dreamgirls* is arguably one of the most famous contemporary musicals, having made household names of several of its original Broadway and cinematic remake stars.

The show explores all the aforementioned music genres, which are meant to showcase Black culture and Black American musical styles, and many (including this writer) would argue that these styles are showcased well. Nevertheless, it is through Henry Krieger's White lens. This persistent trend has had a major effect on how the industry trains Black singers by not only setting the demands placed on these singers but also policing them through the lens of Whiteness. This White lens determines the boxes, or stereotypes, in which Black musical theatre performers find themselves trapped by educators, casting directors, creatives, and producers. In an article for *Theatre Symposium*, Shontelle Thrash (2022) provides a comprehensive list of the negative stereotypes of Blackness that persist in culture and entertainment. The list includes: "Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Fat, Servant, Loudmouth, Sambo, Coon, Darky, Lazy, Sapphire, Angry Black Woman, Welfare Mother, Jezebel, Prostitute, Video Vixen, Light-Skinned, Uncle Tom, Old Darky, Uncle Ben, Uneducated, Pickaninny, Nappy-Headed, Hoodlums, Thugs" (p. 110). This list aligns closely with Reca's and Sabrina's observations regarding expectations placed upon them in their respective programs of study.

Dreamgirls exemplifies many of these stereotypes and the sounds most often associated with these harmful clichés in its characters with emotionally intense belting, vocal distortion, and riffing. These roles often represent the limited options available to African American musical theatre performers. Although the industry occasionally celebrates exceptions like Audra McDonald, Norm Lewis, and Brian Stokes Mitchell, many Black musical theatre artists face pressure from well-meaning casting agents, producers, directors, and educators to conform to these predefined roles to achieve success. Thrash (2022) also writes, "As an educator, I do not want my students of color to portray the one-dimensional characters we have seen throughout history, thus perpetuating the negative stereotypes. As a director, I want actors to realize their full potential and worth and not let these negative stereotypes stifle their freedom of expression and creativity" (p. 111). Hopefully, every educator consciously aspires to encourage and guide artists in their care to develop their individuality in this way.

It is important to note that Black Americans are not the sole group whose cultural expressions are interpreted through the lens of White composers in this medium. Latin American and Asian American performers also find their cultures represented through the lens of White composers. Shows like *The King and I* and *West Side Story* are among the most celebrated in musical theatre history, and they are also written by White composers who are widely regarded as some of the greatest in the field.

> Not to say that performers with visibly Latin or Asian identities have not been similarly limited. In terms of musical style, however, Latin-inspired music has not affected the sound of the musical beyond its use as an exotic "tinge," and Asian-derived sounds have had little to no presence outside of "oriental" tropes drawn from European classical music and American popular song. Yet, as with every kind of twentieth-century American popular music, the musical stage and screen has been intimately linked to African American musical styles (Decker, 2012, p. 4).

Many factors come together to make it common practice for Whiteness to be the lens through which most non-White cultures are expressed in entertainment and media. Still, instead of continuing to analyze the past, it would be much more productive to use our understanding of history to change course for a better, more diverse future. And for that to happen, the default to Whiteness that led us here must be acknowledged and abolished.

WHITE AS DEFAULT

The prevailing culture of White dominance within musical theatre has had a significant impact on the education of Black musical theatre performers. One interviewee, Juwan Crawley (*Aladdin*, *Spamilton*), recounted not being given the chance to explore the human experience, because he was consistently assigned racially-charged material throughout his undergraduate education. Kolby Kindle (*The Wiz*), recounts auditioning for roles traditionally thought of as "White by default" even though race was not a part of the character description. Black musical theatre performers are regularly subjected to comments like: "You sound too White," "This character needs to sound more ethnic," or "This character needs to sound more urban." These reductive and microaggressive comments are usually framed as notes you cannot question lest you earn a reputation as argumentative and aggressive. When in reality, these comments are the result of White persons projecting their limited understanding of Blackness onto another human being who is Black, thus discounting that Black person's own lived experience. The lack of awareness of how harmful these reductive comments can be to students of color heavily impacts their humanity and what they learn about how their own cultural expression is often misinterpreted in musical theatre due to its constant default to Whiteness.

Even well-meaning educators can find themselves perpetuating "White as normal" messages. In Nancy Lafferty Chmielewski's article "Music Theatre In Black And White" (2009), written for *The Journal of Singing*, Chmielewski shares her experience teaching in a predominantly Black school and the challenge to find "appropriate" material for her students to perform. She "found the answer in both performing black shows (*The Wiz*, *Purlie*, *Once On This Island*) and putting a black cast in a traditionally white musical (*Guys & Dolls*, *Grease*, *Footloose*)" (p. 351). The flaw in this logic is that the musicals categorized as Black are actually rooted in Black stories, Black cultures, and Black musical expressions, so their categorization as Black shows is appropriate. Yet, the three musicals used to represent "traditionally White" musicals have themes that are neither specific to White culture nor have any sort of racial relevance, resulting in a default to being classified as White. This is an example of how even conscientious educators are impacted by musical theatre's persistent and pervasive centralization of Whiteness.

While there is an urgent need for greater representation of theatre educators of color, it is equally crucial for White educators and artists—operating within a predominantly White lens—to actively create space for diverse non-White perspectives. This involves granting agency to students and artists, thus acknowledging and valuing their unique cultural backgrounds. And while programs across the country are training for inclusivity and talking about creating "safe spaces" for their Black students, taking actual action is hard in this rigid structure, so the ending result is often more talk, less action. More on actions that could improve culture later, but one such action that can be taken in curricula is removing the "White as excellence" that is so prevalent in music and theatre education.

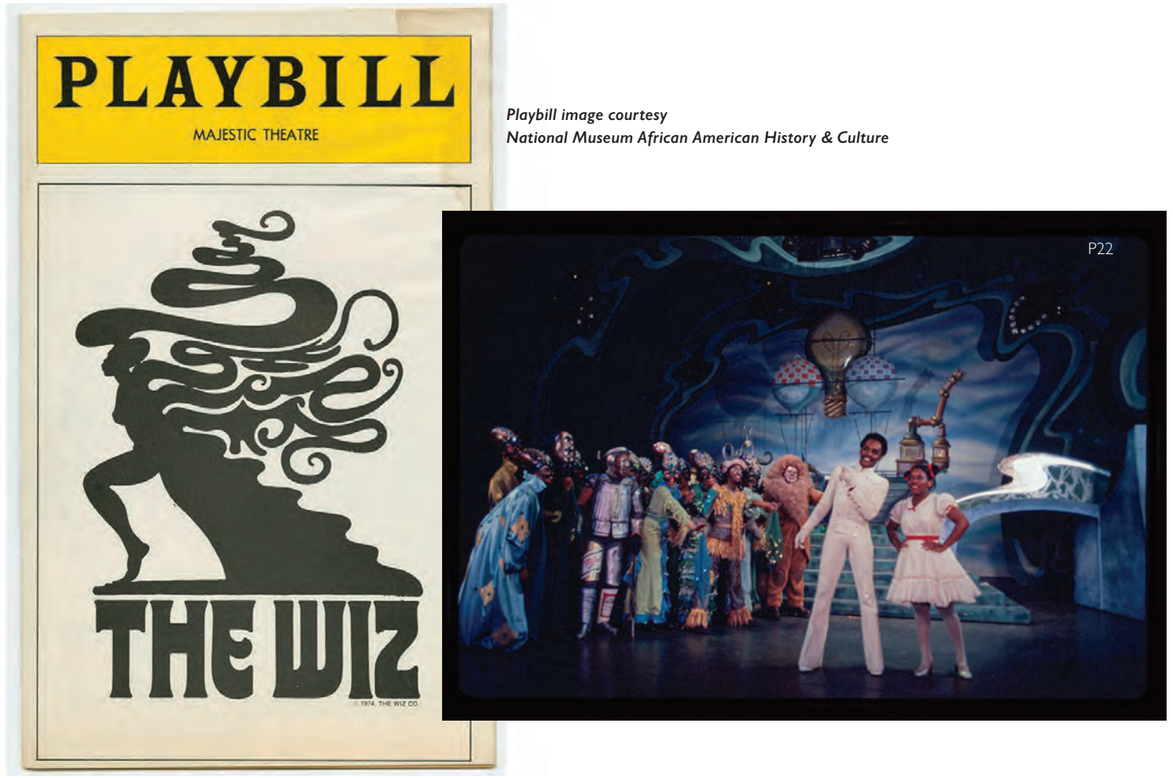
WHITENESS AS EXCELLENCE

"Whiteness as excellence" is not an idea that started with musical theatre. In *Music Theory and the White Racial Frame* (2020), Philip Ewell writes:

> The musical compositions that we teach in the music-theory classroom are written by white persons, overwhelmingly. This is to say nothing of the race of the people behind the theoretical premises that In fact, I do not know one nonwhite (or nonmale) music theorist whose music theories are regularly studied in undergraduate classes. (Sec. 3.1)

The lingering and ever-present effects of every non-male and non-White student learning music theory through this lens, means they are inundated with messages that musical excellence equals White. Similarly, vocal training in musical theatre is founded on or, at the very least, still extended from a Eurocentric lens. This often leads to teachers being ill-equipped to efficiently teach musical stylings that musical theatre composers have deemed "Black sounds." It can also send messages to Black students that their authentic expressions are perceived as technically inferior. In his conclusion, Ewell also writes, "It can be difficult to understand the subtleties of systemic and institutional racism if you are not on the receiving end" (2020, sec. 8.1). If one does not have to live with the consequences, it is easy to write the issue off as "this is the way it has always been done" or "If it is so bad, why don't you change it." So, White voice teachers are encouraged to examine their own practices and behaviors when faced with Black students and their authentic sounds. Black and other non-White students and artists are encouraged to hold fast to their convictions and consider the words of E. O. Wilson, who wrote, "Change will come slowly, across generations, because old beliefs die hard even when demonstrably false."

Music education is embedded in a system that posits Whiteness as the model of excellence. The framework of multiculturalism would have a robust impact on all music disciplines: theory, history, voice, education, etc. In her doctoral dissertation *I Sing Because I'm Free: Developing a Systemic Vocal Pedagogy for the Modern Gospel Singer*, Crystal Yvonne Sellers (2009) discusses how popular styles of singing have borne a necessity for the development of systemic approaches to teaching these styles. Despite Gospel music's roots in the early Work Songs and Spirituals of the African American slave and influenced by Blues and Jazz, pedagogues have failed to implement recent research that develops strategies for this contingent of vocalists (Sellers, 2009). This inanity seems particularly striking when one considers how much musical theatre has similar roots to Gospel music. Because of this, Black singers are all too often asked to sing in this style for musical theatre, yet very few teachers are prepared to guide Black singers through strategies to sustain the demands of authentic gospel singing despite the work done by researchers like Crystal Yvonne Sellers, Triniece Robinson-Martin, Dorothy Julia Hill, and others.



Playbill image courtesy
National Museum African American History & Culture

A ROBUST SOLUTION

Perpetuating Whiteness as the normative standard does not only exist in musical theatre; it exists in all the art forms that combine to create musical theatre. The following quote taken from a dissertation on how theatre is educated can be applied to any disciplines that could benefit from a reimagined educational model.

> In order to achieve true multicultural education, we as educators must address the following issues: first, the absence of cultural minorities on the stage; second, the lack of inclusion in the curriculum; third, the biases of Eurocentric aesthetics; and lastly, the minimal variety of evaluation and instruction methods (Rodrigues-Velez, 2013, p. 31).

Yes, decolonizing musical theatre history is a first and vital step in the right direction. Additionally, consideration needs to be given to how singing teachers educate students with Black cultural expressions. Continued efforts by colleges and universities to diversify their communities beyond what is seen onstage is another vital step. Colleges and universities could also lead the way by investmenting in new works created by diverse writers.

> Decolonising the musical theatre curriculum in higher education is much more radical and comprehensive than simply exposing students to a greater volume of commercially celebrated work featuring Black, Indigenous, and Asian artists. The process of decolonisation begins by understanding how we

> could make universities accountable to the circumstances of the real artists who create the work. The challenge for departments and professors in musical theatre is that they are preparing students for an industry that does not see decolonisation as an aim (Karantonis, 2023, p. 863).

Through conversations with professional artists, it has become apparent how frequently BIPOC artists are gaslit into silence on these issues. However, before any of the proposed call-to-action items can have an impact, it is important to recognize and prepare students for the cultural reality of the industry: As much as the theatre community preaches inclusion and tolerance, its practice often operates in opposition to that rhetoric. When challenging the norm or failing to perform perceived Blackness, Black performers are labeled as difficult, divas, challenging, too opinionated, etc. So being honest with students about the culture of musical theatre is a vital first step. What must follow is a dual approach: (1) making every effort to avoid replicating the industry's treatment of Black people and Blackness in educational spaces, and (2) equipping Black students with the skills to navigate industry culture without sacrificing their autonomy while striving to enact change from within. Deborah Bradley has already taught us silence is complicity. With that foundation laid, we can address bringing about changes to the curriculum and culture.

Decolonizing how musical theatre history is taught is an important and vital step that can lead to a more thorough decentralization of Whiteness. The suggested reading list also includes: *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* by Henry T. Sampson and *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* by Allen Woll, which lay out a more accurate and robust view of the contributions Black culture has made to the creation and sustaining of the American musical theatre. Also, Warren Hoffman's *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* lays out all the ways centralizing "Whiteness" has permeated musical theatre. Work these readings into your course materials, because teaching this more accurate and robust version of history is empowering. When teaching musical theatre history in this manner is the norm, perhaps teachers of singing, especially for musical theatre, will continue making a conscious effort to remove White, Eurocentric biases of excellence inherent in teaching pedagogies, practices, and rhetoric in the voice studios.

In the most recent revision to her 2020 book, *Rock The Audition*, musical theatre educator and activist Sheri Sanders says, "When we pursue singing popular music as it relates to auditioning for musical theatre, we need to keep this in mind: Black and Brown musics are the home base for almost our ENTIRE musical and theatrical pursuits" (2024, p. 6). Many Black students and performers are being trained in an education system that is based on opera styles and techniques and other Eurocentric pedagogies and sensibilities resulting in authentic Black musical expression being gaslit into believing it must fit within tight musical theatre parameters. These tight parameters are created mostly by White composers whose works explore Black culture and Black musical styles but only through their limited White lens. To combat this, educators like Dr. Crystal Yvonne Sellers and Dr. Triniece Robinson Martin have written guidelines and shared pedagogical practices that specifically help singing teachers with this classical and Eurocentric lens to be better prepared for gospel singers and singers of varying Black musical styles. See suggested reading list for additional resources.

Teachers of music and voice in musical theatre areas can choose to either remain silent and complicit to the stigmatization Black performers tend to face in our care, or we can choose to combat these stigmas with information, care, and practices that are actively anti-racist. It starts with educating ourselves by taking the works of educators like the ones mentioned above and making them common practice. So, while working to decolonize the history of musical theatre and the teaching of music and voice for musical theatre, the programs themselves need a transparent mandate to diversify. More diversity in faculty and staff, guest artists, and students is paramount to making our educational spaces and our industry safer for Black and all BIPOC students.

In his 2024 publication *Revenge of the The Tipping Point*, Malcom Gladwell coins the term "Social Engineering" to describe the process of alleviating isolation experienced by the rise of women being included on the boards of major corporations. These women felt they were being caricatured as representative of every stereotype held about women by the men around them (Gladwell, 2024, pp. 107-136). This is the same juxtaposition that Black artists expressed experiencing in musical theatre educational systems. When interviewed about his experience as an undergrad, recent graduate, David Norris (a pseudonym) noted with every passing day and year, he was facing how different his experience was from his peers, making him feel isolated.

This isolation existed even though he appreciated how some faculty and students in his musical theatre program were open-minded and sought to learn and do better. What David lacked was a sense of community or a peer group. Gladwell's concept of social engineering is a potential solution for students like David and every Black student in a predominantly White institution with an all-White faculty, using the concept of "The Magic Third."

The idea of "The Magic Third," finds that people tend to go from feeling like symbols that have to represent an entire outgroup, to feeling like they are a part of a peer group with all the protections and considerations that come from having numbers once roughly a third of the population shares a particular identity marker (Gladwell, 2024, pp. 107-136). The Magic Third is a kind of social engineering that combats the experience of "otherness." What could that look like in the education of musical theatre? Create a community containing roughly a third of various identity factors: race, gender identity, socioeconomic background, body size, etc. It is vital that faculty, staff, and student body are all considered. With this renewed focus on purposefully engineering the makeup of programs, we avoid furthering the very real monoculture of centering Whiteness (also gender norms and size norms, etc.) and create musical theatre communities that are culturally pluralistic in their very makeup. Purposeful and meaningful engineering of social structures could have a profound impact not only on individual communities but also on the musical theatre industry as a whole.

Another major element of this proposed robust solution is to conduct a serious investigation into the works being performed by university programs. Many musical theatre programs are currently highlighting the need to commission new works, uniquely positioning them to invest in new works created by BIPOC writing teams. This would expand opportunities for non-White cultures to be more authentically and substantively expressed in musical theatre. With the solutions proposed, the very real race problem in musical theatre gets robustly combated. Real change occurs when institutions confront uncomfortable truths and acknowledge that the status quo is unacceptable. True progress involves insisting on culturally pluralistic education across all fields so that BIPOC people can see authentic representations of themselves and their cultures in musical theatre rather than caricatures or superficial depictions created through the perspective of the White lens. When educational spaces evolve, industry evolves.

BIOGRAPHY

Deonté Warren serves on the musical theatre voice faculty at Texas State University and holds an MM in Musical Theatre Vocal Pedagogy from Carthage College, specializing in Gender-Affirming Voice Care and Equity in the Voice Studio. As a performer, they have appeared on Broadway, national/international tours, and in regional theatres.

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Photo credit: Tomas Eidsvold, courtesy of Unsplash

SUGGESTED READING LIST

REFRAMING THE MUSICAL: RACE CULTURE AND IDENTITY
Edited by Sarah Whitfield

BLACK MUSICAL THEATRE: FROM COONTOWN TO DREAMGIRLS
By Allen Woll

THE GREAT WHITE WAY: RACE AND THE BROADWAY MUSICAL
By Warren Hoffman

SO YOU WANT TO SING GOSPEL: A GUIDE FOR PERFORMERS
By Trineice Robinson-Martin

I SING BECAUSE I'M FREE: DEVELOPING A SYSTEMATIC VOCAL PEDAGOGY FOR THE MODERN GOSPEL SINGER
Edited by Crystal Yvonne Sellers

ON MUSIC THEORY, AND MAKING MUSIC MORE WELCOMING FOR EVERYONE
By Philip Ewell

BLACKS IN BLACKFACE: A SOURCEBOOK ON EARLY BLACK MUSICAL SHOWS
By Henry T. Sampson

SHOW BOAT: PERFORMING RACE IN AN AMERICAN MUSICAL
By Todd Decker

CREATING TIME FOR PLAY... GROUND

DOI 10.62392/AZJQ2402

By Michael E. McKelvey

INTRODUCTION

I recently had the great opportunity to attend a Q&A session with Leslie Odom, Jr. at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Drama. Probably best known to musical theatre aficionados for his Tony-winning turn as Aaron Burr in *Hamilton*, the CMU alum was asked by one student about how he spends his time when not actively involved with a project. Without missing a beat, he discussed his ongoing commitment to the betterment of his craft in developing his own projects through writing and reaching out to collaborators. Odom, known for both his on-screen and stage work, didn't distinguish between mediums; instead, he delivered a single message to the aspiring professionals. To survive in today's entertainment industry, one must CREATE their own content (L. Odom, talkback, September 23, 2024)!

Whether it is dance videos on TikTok, songwriters collaborating with vocalists across the globe to drop new songs on Instagram, or web series and original musicals created specifically for a platform like YouTube, the internet exposes us to far more original content hourly than we saw even a year ago. No matter one's attitude, this is our reality. Since we logged on to our first Zoom meeting, video content has reshaped how we do business as theatre professionals, practitioners, and educators.

Not only has the act of submitting self-tapes become the norm for auditioning, but we are now in the digital age of the independent content creator who has the internet as their virtual showcase. Whether it is a show, like *Be More Chill*, which gained enough online popularity to push through the drove of movie-based and jukebox musicals to plant its flag on the Great White Way, or an internet influencer gaining enough notoriety to be cast in a Broadway production, we are firmly in the age of independent promotion via virtual presence. Please understand, Odom's message was not about self-promotion over substance, but rather to encourage the young performer to not wait around for someone to cast them. To proactively create material that suits who you are as an actor and speaks to who you are as an artist. To find people who share your aesthetic and collaborate. Instead of waiting for the opportunity, make an opportunity happen. Artist, create for thyself.

In today's crowded entertainment landscape filled with original digital content, are we adequately training future graduates for the entrepreneurial demands of this ever-changing industry? Are curriculums so packed with "the essentials" that there is no room (or time) to add anything more? Beyond the annual new works program where students from the one or two playwriting courses get to show their wares, are there opportunities in the academic year to encourage students to create and show their work? Where do our students get to take creative risks?

Photo credit: Markus Spiske, courtesy of Unsplash

For the past 22 years, Carnegie Mellon University has afforded its students just such an opportunity to perform, write, compose, design, and play on their own terms, away from the scrutiny of the classroom. Welcome to Playground!

What is Playground?

Playground is a student-run program of the School of Drama (SOD) where students create and present original work: plays and musicals, experiential and art installations, design displays, and any other sort of creative output one can imagine. The event takes place over one week during a semester of the school year, either Fall or Spring, where all drama classes are canceled to allow students time to rehearse and then perform and present their work. Described as a "festival of independent work," (Zazzali, 2021, p. 73) students from every discipline of the SOD, including acting and musical theatre performance, dramaturgy, playwriting, directing, technical and costume design, and stage and production management, converge to share their creative voices.

As described in the 2024 Playground program:

> Students submit proposals to a committee comprised of students and faculty. Proposals range from live performances, short films, light shows, art installations, murals, and more. Students often collaborate with other CMU departments such as the School of Music, the Entertainment and Technology Center (ETC), and even students from other universities. Selected pieces are prepared over four days, followed by the festival of showings that run from Thursday through Saturday in and around the Purnell Center for the Arts (Playground XXII, 2024, p. 2).

The 11-person selection committee, which includes the festival manager, assistant manager, technical coordinator, assistant coordinator, two producers, three ad hoc student representatives, and two faculty coordinators, receives 80 to 100 proposals annually, and accepts 40 to 50 (M. Mongello, interview, 2024). Festival Manager Marion Mongello, a third-year Stage Management and Production major, shared that the committee looks for a student's "true passion" for the project. The committee tries to avoid pieces that are self-serving or cliquey. They also champion work from students who desire to work outside of their area or discipline (i.e. the designer who writes a play, a musical theatre or acting major who composes a musical, a stage manager who wants to return to the stage and sing, etc.). According to Mongello (2024), only SOD students can submit proposals; however, participants can include CMU students and others outside of CMU. Also, SOD students may propose a work written by someone not affiliated with Carnegie Mellon (C. Moore, interview, 2024).

One of the most important aspects of Playground is that it is completely original content conceived, created, and collaborated upon by the students during the week. A student may propose a work that is pre-existing or licensed, but since Playground participants receive no budget to produce their shows, there are no funds available to pay licensing and royalty expenses. Student participation is not mandatory. Besides attending the performances, faculty members are only called upon at the request of the students.

The two categories for proposals are performance and installation/exhibited works. Performance pieces have a time limit of 45 minutes. The proposal describes the piece's parameters (e.g., concept, cast size, technical needs), though sometimes a brief one- or two-sentence idea suffices. The committee also must consider if the concept is possible or realistic within the limited time frame, technical capabilities, and available performance spaces. They apply similar considerations when reviewing proposals for installations and design displays (Moore, 2024).

As mentioned previously, there is no budget extended to the students to create their work. This is to force the students to learn to work with limited means and rely on their talents and ingenuity, as well as those of their colleagues and collaborators. They may use the facilities and the technical resources of the venues. Restrictions exist on borrowing costumes and props. However, a reasonable supply is available. Resourcefulness creates the sets—using scraps of wood from the scene shop, acting cubes and door units from the classrooms, etc. The students are discouraged from spending their own money, although some may do this occasionally. Instead, they are commended for creating the world of their projects using only the festival's resources.

Ben Ferguson, a CMU alum and member of the nationally acclaimed PigPen Theatre Co., recalled they used "the extra bed sheets their parents had sent them, stuff from around the apartment, and pizza boxes" to create their shows, which used a great deal of shadow and makeshift puppetry (B. Ferguson, interview, 2024). The creativity within the limitations is one of the most inspiring aspects of Playground.

As participants conceive, propose, and realize pieces, only their imaginations and the constraints of the space (aka The Purnell Center) limit their execution. Purnell offers three theatre spaces of varying sizes, but performers may also use unconventional locations. Whether a performance or installation, the location can be as whimsical as the idea itself. There has been work presented in a bathroom, the hallways, the basement, parking lots, a traveling show with the audience moving with the play to various areas within the building, a piece that took place on the third floor and viewed from the second floor, the outdoor bridge that connects the School

of Drama and the School of Computer Science, and light installations in the lobby and the outside of the Purnell Center itself.

As for the installations, they are far more than exhibited design work. Many are more experiential. For example, stage management and design students created a Stage Management Karaoke experience where two people would call and execute lighting cues from a stage manager's light cue calling script to music ranging from pop to classical with varying degrees of expertise. Think Dance Dance Revolution for SMs. Other memorable recollections of Playground's past include an interactive ride that was a facsimile of flying over the countryside like a bird. The viewer or passenger would lie down on a mat of sorts, which moved up and down according to the video they watched. It was in every way a virtual reality experience. All the equipment was borrowed or otherwise procured for no cost. The "ride" was the brainchild of scenic design student Tom Kelly, who would become a theme park designer and worked in collaboration with Computer Science students (D. Block, interview, 2024).

Rehearsals consume the first four and a half days of the week, Sunday through Thursday, running from 9:00 a.m. each day to 1:00 a.m. Each performed work gets two hours of rehearsal per day. On Thursday evening, Playground kicks off three days of performances running from 7:00 p.m. to midnight on the opening day, followed by back-to-back-to-back events from 12:00 p.m. to midnight on Friday and Saturday.

Six rehearsal spaces run concurrently, while the theatres and performance spaces are being loaded with lighting and sound equipment. Shows are allotted roughly eight hours of rehearsal, however, extra time may be requested depending on availability, or additional rehearsals can be arranged outside of Playground's schedule. Each show will have thirty minutes of spacing time in their allocated theatre prior to the performance, and then a technical rehearsal lasting one and a half times the duration of their show immediately before their single performance (for instance, a 30-minute play will have 45 minutes of tech time). The brave festival management team handles all rehearsal and performance scheduling, accounting for the scheduling conflicts of approximately 80 performers, many of whom appear in multiple festival pieces (Mongello, 2024).

According to Mongello (2024), "Festival management oversees facilitation, scheduling, logistics, making sure the dots connect." She explained the maximum number of pieces a student can be in is eight because there are only eight (rehearsal) slots in a day. "Students have done nine, but I'm not really sure how."

To grasp the Playground experience from the attendee's perspective, audience members can experience 40 to 50 performances and installations in 24 hours spread out over two and a half days during the all-student "fringe" festival. All shows, productions, happenings, and experiences, are the creations of the CMU School of Drama students who program, schedule, build, facilitate, compose, conduct, conceive, devise, design, produce, and perform the work.

HISTORY OF PLAYGROUND

In October 2003, the first Playground festival debuted. The initial idea came from the Head of the School of Drama, Elizabeth Bradley, when she approached the faculty and proposed a week dedicated solely to student-created work in response to the strain being put on students rehearsing their own work late in the evening.

"At that time the students were constantly asking for time and space in the building to produce/perform a wide variety of activities–cabarets, readings, low-resourced (or no-resourced) productions," says Dick Block, Associate Head of the SOD. Block would become one of two faculty members who have dedicated themselves to this special event since its inception 22 years ago. "Liz suggested we cancel classes for a week to dedicate the time for this and asked if anyone was interested. Catherine [Moore] and I immediately raised our hands," (J. Levine, 2022, para 2).

Catherine Moore, a Teaching Professor of Movement, recalled that Bradley approached the faculty with the proposal in the Fall of 2002 or Spring of 2003. Moore, who had worked with Anne Bogart's SITI Theatre during a summer session where the concentration was on the "Relationship between the Actor and the Audience," was intrigued by the idea of new works created by the students. She shared that there was initially some pushback from a few faculty members because of the loss of a week of instruction, but most of it was hesitation if such a thing could work. Moore (2024) offered: "That first year, we were making it up as we went along." Moore and Block coordinated the inaugural festival and then received student help the following year. "Once people saw it was working and successful, there was complete faculty buy-in, and it was academically valuable."

Playground allows students an opportunity to spread their wings and explore all sides of their creative being, no matter their prescribed discipline. CMU alum Will Reynolds, who majored in musical theatre, wrote a musical for Playground, even though music composition or playwriting was not part of his course of study. Following that experience, Reynolds has gone on to win the Fred Ebb Award for Musical Theatre Writing, the Kurt Weill Foundation's Lotte Lenya Award, and the Dramatists Guild Fellowship for his musical theatre compositions (Levine, 2022, para 8).

Following in a similar path as Reynolds, Hudson Orfe, a third-year musical theatre major and promising composer, says: "I use Playground, and I always have used Playground, as that outlet to throw music up against a wall, try styles, orchestrate everything myself. Do everything that I can't do in the curriculum. To build those skills, to see what works and what doesn't work, what in my music is sticking and what is not, how it is received, a kind of trial and error in a space that I can't get anywhere else" (H. Orfe, interview, 2024).

Over the years, Playground has also served as a testing ground for solo work for budding performing artists, who have taken their work to audiences far outside the walls of CMU's Purnell Center. FringeNYC has produced several Playground shows over the years, including *Inexperienced Love* (2010) and *Sheherizade* (2012). Many other Playground pieces have received productions at regional theaters; Jon-Michael Reese's solo show *By Myself*, created for Playground in 2009, was recently produced in New York City with its original writer and music director. Lee Harrington's piece *Jellybean* has received numerous productions between 2015 and 2018 including FringeNYC and an Off-Off-Broadway run, and in 2018, Ars Nova presented Samora la Perdida's piece *pato, pato, maricón!* as part of ANT Fest (Levine, 2022, para 7).

Playground has also welcomed collaborations between institutions and outside collaborators. In 2007, Matthew Gardener arranged a performance of the University of Michigan musical theatre grads Benj Pasek and Justin Paul's song cycle, *Edge*s, which was subsequently attended by a "bus load" of U of M students, who traveled from Ann Arbor for the event (Moore, 2024). Gardener's exposure to Playground new works would prove part of his professional trajectory as the artistic director of Signature Theatre, which specializes in the development and production of new plays and musicals.

Since collaboration is at the heart of the festival, it would stand to reason that Playground's most noteworthy success is a group of actor-musicians, who honed their special brand of theatrical storytelling at CMU. PigPen Theatre Co, who recently made their Broadway debut composing the score for *Water for Elephants*, first banded together as freshman in 2007. Although they were not sure what Playground was, a few of the group's founding members put out a call for volunteers "to create something," unsure of what that something might be (Ferguson, 2024).

They met in their spare time to devise work, using what they were learning in their classes, such as Viewpoints and Laban. The first show they created was an original folktale, *The Hunter and the Bear*, which they performed using various forms of storytelling such as shadow puppetry and found object, as well as incorporating couple of originally composed songs. A few members of the group accompanied the songs, which would become a trademark of the group. They would later take two other Playground shows, *The Nightmare Story* and *The Mountain Song*, to the New York International Fringe Festival in 2010 and 2011, becoming the only group ever to win the festival's Overall Excellence Award in two consecutive years. Described as "*Once* meets *Peter and the Starcatcher*" (Adame, 2014, para 1) and noted for their unique "music, movement, and puppetry-group aesthetic," the seven-member ensemble of instrumentalist-puppeteer-storytellers has developed and performed new projects throughout the United States, such as *The Old Man and the Old Moon* at Williamstown Theatre Festival and the New Victory Theater in New York, *The Tales of Despereaux* at the Old Globe Theatre, *Phantom Folktales* for Virgin Cruises, and *Pericles* with director Trevor Nunn (S. Sinha, 2024 and Ferguson, 2024).

Arya Shahi, PigPen member and spokesperson stated: "Our training directly correlates to PipPen. The Playground Festival was the first time that the seven of us realized we were more than just actors . . . Playground allows students the freedom to fail. That is an important part of actor training in this country that often gets overlooked" (Zazzali, 2021, p.75).

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THE VALUE OF PLAY AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

As educators, we face the periodic task of creating and implementing program and course objectives and learning outcomes for our various programs. Traditional academic conventions constrain us to a system that asks us to measure the immeasurable and quantify the unquantifiable. How do we measure the growth of an artist by the assignment of a grade or a metric in a rubric?

Although Playground falls outside of the parameters of a class, it has become entrenched as an important educational opportunity for its participants. Like other classes within the SOD curriculum, the program has inherent learning outcomes. These outcomes might not be measurable by conventional academic methods (tests, memorization, etc.), but they are apparent in the work and growth of the participating students following the Playground experience, nonetheless.

Moore (2024) provided the following learning outcomes and attributes associated with the program: Playground…

- supports the student's development through risk-taking.
- supports social, group, and peer engagement and membership.
- offers autonomy from faculty/adults with support when needed.
- provides an opportunity for students to find their voices.
- students take part in creative exploration.
- creates an atmosphere of structure with empowerment.
- participants develop skills in leadership and organizational management.
- students learn to articulate artistic ideas and goals.
- encourages participants to collaborate with their peers.
- students practice entrepreneurship.

To put it in other terms, Playground allows these students to explore, create without judgment, and not suffer penalties if something fails. In actuality, it is through failing that the student may learn the most. It is often said that an actor cannot truly learn their craft until they practice it, on their feet, on the boards. However, in an academic setting, there is still faculty oversight and the realization that a student's performance on a project or in class may carry forward to future decisions regarding casting and recommendations. With Playground, the faculty is merely there to support the work as audience members. The student or creator may ask faculty members to perform, consult, or assist in other ways, but the faculty member acts as a colleague and collaborator, choosing whether to help.

Moore (2024) commented on the importance of the collaboration the students experience, not only in their work but within the Playground community as a whole. When discussing work she has seen over the years, she referred to it as "the bravest work I've seen in the building," and recalled how she has seen thematic shifts over time as generations of students react to current events, societal pressures, and other issues on their minds (Levine, 2022, para 5).

PLAYGROUND | Carnegie Mellon University
Photo courtesy of CMU Drama

Asked about Playground's value, an alumnus and current student offered similar, yet individual, responses. PigPen's Ferguson (2024) said:

> Playground teaches you how to work as collaborators, and theatre is a collaborative art form. It is impossible to do it alone, and you have to be able to work within the parameters of "these are the people I have; these are the resources we have, and what are we all trying to make together." It's sort of the definition of collective goals and teaching the value of them as artists…It's incredibly freeing. We are creating this piece, not for our teachers, not for a grade, but for our peers. We are making this for them, so we asked "what would be exciting for ourselves to see?"...There's nothing to gain other than something that we are looking for.

Marion Mongello (2024) may have summed up the program's value best:

> Playground gives students the platform to do what they are itching to share. The stories that gnaw at them and they know should be seen by people to fulfill their true artistic passions. It makes them better creators. Giving them the space, and sort of trying our best to take the scary part away and take the expectations and intimidations away so they can share what they've been working on. It makes the school a better place, it makes them better students, and it makes the audience aware of what these students want to be doing.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER—THE PLAYGROUND EXPERIENCE

So, with approximately 50 performances and experiences occurring in such a compact window of time, you may ask, how do you create a schedule for an undertaking like this? Besides the limited space, you also must consider that when scheduling the two-hour rehearsal blocks for each show, most of the performers, stage managers, and directors are in multiple shows and cannot be in conflicting rehearsals. To compound this even further, some creators may also be directing, music directing, or accompanying other productions. The job falls on the Festival Manager and her staff, who rely on their organizational and communication skills, much of which is learned and practiced in their stage and arts management courses.


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Festival Manager Mongello is an arts management major who wants to go into late-night television because of the fast-paced setting and multi-faceted management of production. Playground was among the factors that she mentioned when describing what drew her to Carnegie Mellon. Now, in her third year, she remembers the experience of her first Playground where she did some volunteer work behind the scenes, but for all intents and purposes was an audience member. "I watched every piece that year…the energy that is created in the space is not like anything I've ever seen…I was hooked" (Mongello, 2024). In year two, she took on the role of assistant manager, which groomed her for the festival manager role, which is a two-year appointment.

Her team includes 10 primary members: an assistant manager, a festival producer, an assistant producer, a technical coordinator, an assistant coordinator, two heads of visuals, and heads of video, lighting, and sound, as well as a team of tech volunteers and two faculty coordinators. The plan for the festival, currently programmed in the fall, begins in early to mid-August. At that time, they meet with the SOD's Director of Production, David Holcomb, to find a week that will fit within the packed CMU performance calendar. This year, the only available week fell between the end of Thanksgiving break and CMU's finals week.

Once dates are in place, the committee will choose a theme and then get the word out, which includes a call for proposals with an October deadline. In the planning, they also must identify potential rehearsal and performance spaces, and work with the School of Drama administration to coordinate publicity, facility usage, etc. After several four to six-hour review sessions of the 80 to 100 submissions, the committee announces the selected proposals that will fit into the 24 hours of the allotted performance time spread over the three-day festival.

Just as the staff will migrate to large roles on the production side, participants may also venture to wear new hats as they grow throughout the program. In an interview with Hudson Orfe and Greyson Taylor, two of the busiest participants in this year's event, they discussed the opportunity that Playground affords them to grow as artists and creators, but more importantly, leaders. Orfe and Taylor, high school friends and CMU musical theatre majors, began their Playground experience as performers, each participating in four to six pieces. Orfe, who is a talented pianist and aspires to write musicals, also accompanied several shows. In year two, Orfe composed a song cycle entitled *Mackinac*, which became the talk of the festival. Now, in their third Playground, both are serving in even more important leadership positions.

Taylor is taking a multi-hyphenated role (conceiver-creator-director-choreographer) with his semi-devised movement work, *Spheniscidae*. Meaning "a family of birds containing all extant penguins" (Playground XII, 2024, p.22), *Spheniscidae* is based on the real-life story of a gay penguin couple, Sphen and Magic, at the Sea Life Sydney Aquarium, who became a "symbol for equality and the conservation cause" (T. Turnbull, 2024). The piece focuses on the courtship, the colony's reaction to the relationship, the death of Sphen, and Magic absorbing the realization of this loss.

Taylor employed Orfe to score the piece, which he did for piano and flute. As for "semi-devising" the work, Taylor (2024) said that because of time constraints and the truncated devising process, he had to come up with ideas ahead of time as to the seminal points and touchstones for every movement of the non-verbal work for the performers to arrive. Storyboarding became a very useful tool in the creation process. He then allowed the cast members to devise their individual tracks between those points. Using Viewpoints and influenced by the choreography of Pina Bausch, Taylor and his 11-person cast seamlessly guided the audience through the tale with heart-wrenching effect, earning a well-deserved standing ovation.

Besides composing *Spheniscidae*, music directing and accompanying a few other Playground shows, and being a featured actor in a few more, Orfe composed one of the most anticipated pieces in the 2024 festival, a musical based on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match Girl*.

The folk tale was one he had heard as a child with a lasting impact. Taking place on New Year's Eve, a young girl, whose only means of income relies on the selling of match sticks, braves the bitter cold of the winter's evening to earn what little money she can to survive. We follow her "on a journey of Isolation, Mourning, and, above all, hope" (Playground XXII program, 2024). According to Orfe (2024), who views the dark/heartbreaking tale in a much more romantic and optimistic light than some, said, "As she strikes a match to get warmth, she experiences a vision of what her life could be." He said he had a similar cathartic experience each time he sat at the piano to write the piece.

In addition to a beautifully imaginative score, *The Little Match Girl* features a well-crafted narrative using Andersen's original text dispersed among the nine ensemble members. In the spirit of Playground, Taylor performed in the staged reading. As for the performance, Orfe's opus proved to be as memorable as Andersen's age-old tale with a poignancy and pathos rarely found in a work by a composer of such a young age.

As Orfe has aspirations to be the next Jason Robert Brown or Adam Guittel, with superlative piano chops and harmonic maturity to go with his sensitive lyric writing, CMU may also have a budding musical theatre collaboration in Noah Van Ess and Catcher Sanchez to soon rival the likes of Pasek and Paul or Kitt and Yorkey.

Like Orfe and Taylor, Van Ess and Sanchez are all-in for the Playground experience but view it as an opportunity to experiment and develop in their writing with each Playground. In only their second Playground, the songwriting team is growing from their first year when they wrote an original musical folktale about pirates using a variety of musical styles ranging from sea shanties to Motown and 80s rock. This year's project came out of a suggestion from a fellow collaborator who suggested a wedding as the setting. Thus, *There Goes the Bride*, a 2000s style musical rom com, was born. Van Ess and Sanchez, a musical theatre and acting major respectively, said that because of the freedom to create on their own terms, they could experiment with different styles and work on the craft of writing musical theatre.

Bride is a one-act musical featuring a cast of nine and scored for piano, guitar, and percussion. The show ran forty-five minutes and was performed fully staged and memorized. Quite an accomplishment considering the 8 to 12 allotted rehearsal hours to teach and learn the music and staging, as well as numerous edits and additions occurring throughout the process, particularly the final run-through. Besides the upbeat pacing and clever comedic writing, one of the most impressive aspects of this work were the songs featuring multiple characters articulating their juxtapositions within the story, displaying an advanced understanding of scenic structure and character development. The committed cast, mainly first- and second-year students, superbly executed these numbers.

According to Sanchez (interview, 2024), "I think the fact that we take the whole week off puts gravity upon the event, which makes people want to try hard and put in time and effort into creating stuff that is worth putting up, especially in these beautiful spaces where we have resources to lights and amazing design production friends." Van Ess (interview, 2024) added, "What's beautiful is how excited other people are about your work, and they put their best foot forward for your piece. They almost take it on as their piece too. It's a real team effort."

FINAL THOUGHTS

Having now experienced my first Playground, I can say without pause the experience left me with so many feelings and superlatives:

- Wonder for the creativity of these young theatre makers.
- Amazement of their energy, talent, and commitment to the festival, but more importantly to the community who makes this extraordinary event happen.
- Pride in the on- and off-stage work I witnessed by the acting and musical theatre majors turned composers, lyricists, playwrights, directors, choreographers, or producers.
- Astonishment at the selfless production staff who makes seven days of what most would view as chaos run as efficiently as any professional production.
- Compassion and empathy for the vulnerable and heart-wrenching plays written from personal and cultural experiences and shared as honestly and sincerely as a song from Billie Holiday.
- And joy that I get to experience this all again next year.

Although I am a member of this institution, this article is not a testimonial for Carnegie Mellon University, but rather an illustration of what is possible when we can think beyond "what we've always done." It is an encouragement (or call to action) to think beyond what we're allowed to do within the constraints of our institutions and articulate to our administrators what is possible as we near the end of the first quarter of this new century with an ever-evolving arts landscape. I hope Playground can demonstrate what is achievable if we address the needs of our increasingly numerous multi-hyphenate artists and theatre makers.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael E. McKelvey is an assistant professor of musical theatre at Carnegie Mellon University. He has run musical theatre programs at Fort Lewis College, Tulane University, and St. Edward's University, and the MT voice program at Point Park University. An award-winning director, Michael is the artistic director of Doctuh Mistuh Productions.

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OTHER COMMUNICATIONS

Leslie Odom Jr. talk with CMU School of Drama Students, September 23, 2024, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

INTERVIEWS

Dick Block, interview, November 15, 2024. Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Ben Ferguson, interview, December 6, 2024, Conducted via Zoom.

Marion Mongello, interview, November 26, 2024, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Catherine Moore, interview, November 15, 2024. Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Hudson Orfe, interview, November 26, 2024, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Catcher Sanchez, interview, December 3, 2024, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Greyson Taylor, interview, November 26, 2024, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Noah Van Ess, interview, December 3, 2024, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

PLAYGROUND XXII
a festival of independent student work

DEC. 1-7, 2024
MARION MONGELLO
festival manager
cmuplayground@gmail.com

Final Playground XXII Rehearsal & Spacing Schedule

CHANGES HIGHLIGHTED IN YELLOW

Sunday, 12/1/24

	Brown 313	Studio B 318	Studio C 314	Morie 306	Chesco 321	Wagner A41	
9am-10:30am	My Garden of JOJO's		Sitting in a Pool Life Crisis	Our Gay Apparel		Renovations...	9am-10:30am
11am-12:30pm	The Last Dog	Pasta On the Nile	Route 66(5)	"Real English"	Out of the Wings...	The Wait Between...	11am-12:30pm
1pm-2:30pm	Wonderland	FLIP FLOP		Dance of the Three Shorties	Serve		1pm-2:30pm
3pm-4:30pm	BLESS ME, BOWIE	Renewal...	The Little Match Girl	When We Begin Again	House of Phobic...		3pm-4:30pm
5pm-6:30pm	Thou Shalt Not Worship...	Sinking Ship	...Immaculate Heart	Praise is What We Do	Clay Horse		5pm-6:30pm
7pm-8:30pm		Another Star	Paradise Profound	Ephemeroptera	Half Of Me		7pm-8:30pm
9pm-10:30pm	There Goes the Bride	Our Gay Apparel	Another Star	Black Resurgence	Brand		9pm-10:30pm
11pm-1:00am	There Goes the Bride	Sublime Inheritance...	Dance of the Three Shorties	Beetlejuice Returns	A Train	Photobook	11pm-1:00am

Monday, 12/2/24

	Brown 313	Studio B 318	Studio C 314	Morie 306	Chesco 321	Wagner A41	
9am-10:30am	My Garden of JOJO's	...Immaculate Heart		Our Gay Apparel		Renovations...	9am-10:30am
11am-12:30pm	The Last Dog	Sitting in a Pool Life Crisis		Route 66(5)		The Wait Between...	11am-12:30pm
1pm-2:30pm	Brand	Wonderland		Dance of the Three Shorties	Serve		1pm-2:30pm
3pm-4:30pm	BLESS ME, BOWIE	Clay Horse		When We Begin Again	House of Phobic...		3pm-4:30pm
5pm-6:30pm	Thou Shalt Not Worship...	Sinking Ship		...Immaculate Heart	Praise is What We Do		5pm-6:30pm
7pm-8:30pm		Paradise Profound	Beetlejuice Returns	Ephemeroptera	Half Of Me		7pm-8:30pm
9pm-10:30pm	Photobook	Another Star	The Little Match Girl	Black Resurgence	Praise is What We Do		9pm-10:30pm
11pm-1:00am	There Goes the Bride	Sublime Inheritance...	Pasta On the Nile	"Real English"	A Train		11pm-1:00am

Tuesday, 12/3/24

	Brown 313	Studio B 318	Studio C 314	Morie 306	Chesco 321	Wagner A41	
9am-10:30am	My Garden of JOJO's	...Immaculate Heart		Our Gay Apparel		Renovations...	9am-10:30am
11am-12:30pm	The Last Dog	Sitting in a Pool Life Crisis	Half Of Me	"Real English"	Route 66(5)	The Wait Between...	11am-12:30pm
1pm-2:30pm	Beetlejuice Returns	Wonderland	FLIP FLOP	Dance of the Three Shorties	Serve		1pm-2:30pm
3pm-4:30pm	BLESS ME, BOWIE	Renewal...	Sinking Ship	When We Begin Again	Chance of Phobic...	Out of the Wings...	3pm-4:30pm
5pm-6:30pm	Thou Shalt Not Worship...	Praise is What We Do	Paradise Profound	Praise is What We Do	Praise is What We Do	BLESS ME, BOWIE	5pm-6:30pm
7pm-8:30pm		Another Star	Paradise Profound	Ephemeroptera	Chance of Phobic...		7pm-8:30pm
9pm-10:30pm	There Goes the Bride	Another Star	Brand	Black Resurgence	The Little Match Girl		9pm-10:30pm
11pm-1:00am	There Goes the Bride	Sublime Inheritance...	Beetlejuice Returns	Pasta On the Nile	A Train	Another Star	11pm-1:00am

Wednesday, 12/4/24

	Brown 313	Studio B 318	Studio C 314	Morie 306	Chesco 321	Wagner A41	
9am-10:30am	My Garden of JOJO's	...Immaculate Heart		"Real English"	Our Gay Apparel	Stay From	Renovations...	9am-10:30am
11am-12:30pm	The Last Dog	...Immaculate Heart		Route 66(5)	BLACK RESTAURANT			
1pm-2:30pm	Photobook	Wonderland		Dance of the Three Shorties	Serve			
3pm-4:30pm	BLESS ME, BOWIE	Brand	Half of Me	When We Begin Again	Chance of Phobic...		Renovat...	
5pm-6:30pm	Praise is What We Do	Thou Shalt Not Worship...	Sinking Ship	Praise is What We Do	Praise is What We Do		Out of the Wings...	
7pm-8:30pm		Another Star	Paradise Profound	Ephemeroptera	Chance of Phobic...			
9pm-10:30pm	There Goes the Bride	Sublime Inheritance...	Beetlejuice Returns	Another Star	Black Resurgence	Pasta On the Nile	The Little Match Girl	Beetlejuice Returns	9pm-10:30pm
11pm-1:00am	There Goes the Bride	Sublime Inheritance...	Pasta On the Nile	A Train					11pm-1:00am

Thursday, 12/5/24 - SPACING

	Wells	Rauh	Chosky	
9:30 - 10:00a	BLESS ME, BOWIE	"Real English"	Beetlejuice Returns	9:30 - 10:00a
10 - 10:30a		A Train	When We Begin Again	10 - 10:30a
10:30 - 11a	Renovations...			10:30 - 11a
11 - 11:30a	Thou Shalt Not Worship...	Sinking Ship	FLIP FLOP	11 - 11:30a
11:30a - 12p	Photobook	Black Resurgence		11:30a - 12p
12 - 12:30p	Paradise Profound	Another Star	The Little Match Girl	12 - 12:30p
12:30 - 1p	Route 66(5)	Dance of the Three Shorties	House of Phobic...	12:30 - 1p
1 - 1:30p	The Last Dog	Sublime Inheritance...	Praise is What We Do	1 - 1:30p
1:30 - 2p		Dance of the Three Shorties	Wonderland	1:30 - 2p
2 - 2:30p	Ephemeroptera	Serve	Pasta on the Nile	2 - 2:30p
2:30 - 3p	Renewal...	Half of Me	Out of the Wings...	2:30 - 3p
3 - 3:30p	Our Gay Apparel	"Real English"		3 - 3:30p
3:30 - 4p	Brand	My Garden of JOJO's		3:30 - 4p
4 - 4:30p		Sitting in a Pool Life Crisis		4 - 4:30p
4:30 - 5p	ephemeroptera	The Wait Between...		4:30 - 5p
5p-5:30		...Immaculate Heart	Wonderland	5p-5:30

INSTALLATIONS

Where	Lobby Display Case	Dressing Rm 2	Lobby Display Case	2nd Floor Mezz	2nd Floor Wall	Skinner
Room Code	A	A36	B	(lower safes)	(in front of Freight)	A05
	Grey	Threads of Memories	The Sum of Chance	Wondering Woman	Behind the Armor	max room
Where	3rd Floor Nook					
Room Code	(across from stairs)	PCA103				
	The Symp...	Composition Collaborative				

PLAYGROUND XXII
a festival of independent student work

DEC. 1-7, 2024
MARION MONGELLO
festival manager
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Thursday, 12/5

	Venue	Title	Length
7:00 PM	Purnell Lobby	PGXXII Opening Event	1h 15min
8:15 AM	The Philip Chosky Theater	*When We Begin Again*	15min
8:40 AM	The John Wells Video Studio	*BLESS ME, BOWIE*	30min
9:20 AM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*Lessons of the Immaculate Heart*	30min
10:00 PM	Chosky (Blackbox)	*Out of the Wings: a Non-Performer Cabaret*	45min
10:55 PM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*F Train*	45min
	11:40 PM - END OF DAY		

Friday, 12/6

	Venue	Title	Length
12:00 PM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*There Goes the Bride*	45min
12:55 PM	The John Wells Video Studio	*Renovations...*	30min
1:35 PM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*Sinking Ship*	30min
2:15 PM	Chosky (Blackbox)	*FLIP FLOP*	15min
2:30 PM	15 MIN BREAK		
2:45 PM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*Black Resurgence*	45min
3:40 PM	The John Wells Video Studio	*Thou Shalt Not Worship False Idols*	30min
4:20 PM	PCA 103	*Your Brain on Drama:* Trial	20min
5:00 PM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*Another Star*	45min
5:50 PM	Varies	*Installation Crawl!*	25min
6:20 PM	The John Wells Video Studio	*Photobook*	30min
7:00 PM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*House of Phobic: she wants revenge*	45min
7:45 PM	1 HR DINNER BREAK		
8:45 PM	The Philip Chosky Theater	*The Little Match Girl*	45min
9:40 PM	The John Wells Video Studio	*Paradise Profound*	30min
10:20 PM	The Helen Wayne Rauh Theater	*The Sublime Inheritance of Elsie Katzowitz*	45min
11:15 PM	The Philip Chosky Theater	*Praise is What We Do*	45min
	12:00 AM - END OF DAY		

Photo credit: Martin De Arriba, courtesy of Unsplash

MISS YOU LIKE HELL: Exploring the Impacts of Socially Conscious Musical Theatre on Audience Attitudes

DOI 10.62392/NEML2602

by Marissa Barnathan

'We are not rafts. We are not even islands. We are the ocean.'

In fall 2023, Arizona State University's Musical Theatre and Opera program produced the Arizona premiere of the musical *Miss You Like Hell* by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes (*In the Heights*, *Water by the Spoonful*) and singer/songwriter Erin McKeown. The musical originally opened at the La Jolla Playhouse in 2016 and had an Off-Broadway run at The Public Theater in New York in 2018. *Miss You Like Hell* is a contemporary musical about an undocumented Mexican American woman named Beatriz who is trying to gain legal citizenship. She and her teenage daughter, Olivia, travel the United States, from Philadelphia to Los Angeles, as they mend their fractured relationship. As part of my graduate study at ASU, I directed and choreographed this production and organized many complementary activities, including an interview and on-campus visit with composer Erin McKeown, community building events (i.e., a tamale-making event, a block party, etc.), and research activities to measure the impact of the musical on the audience. For context, this production took place after Arizona saw the negative effects of Senate Bill 1070, a controversial anti-immigrant law from 2010 which encouraged racial profiling of Latino immigrants in Arizona (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024). The landscape of immigration reform in the United States continues to shift, especially as presidential administrations change and local state laws evolve, making this research particularly pressing and important.

This research study consisted of pre-show and post-show audience surveys and post-show talkbacks to measure the musical's impact on audience attitudes toward immigration reform and interest in civic engagement around the issue. This study asked a critical question: How can we, as theatre-makers and artist-activists, utilize musical theatre to build community, impact attitudes, and increase civic engagement around social issues like immigration reform? My work with *Miss You Like Hell* is a foray into this curiosity.

This paper begins by detailing previous research about musical theatre and civic engagement in the United States, including a brief literature review which foregrounded my research on *Miss You Like Hell*. Then, I discuss the research design for my quantitative and qualitative components of the research and analyze the results. Finally, the paper concludes with a consideration of the research limitations and an invitation to future scholars to conduct further research at the intersection of musical theatre and social justice.

PERSONAL CONTEXT

The research conducted in this study was heavily based on previous research about the broader connection between musical theatre and social change. Prior to my graduate study at ASU, I trained as an applied theatre artist in Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed technique with Lisa Jo Epstein of Just Act in Philadelphia, PA and David Diamond of Theatre for Living in Vancouver, Canada. Both Epstein and Diamond worked directly with Boal prior to his death in 2009 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). Applied theatre work such as Theatre of the Oppressed is powerful and effective when it comes to making positive social change through theatre (Boal, 1993). This applied theatre training piqued my interest: could musical theatre similarly effect positive social change? If so, how? Therefore, a major goal for my graduate work, both artistic and scholarly, was to combine my musical theatre expertise with my applied theatre skills to investigate this inquiry.

SETTING THE STAGE: MUSICAL THEATRE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

In the early 2000s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the General Social Survey conducted several studies on the correlation between the arts and civic engagement. In 2002, the General Social Survey, a highly regarded source on American society, found that "individuals participating in community-based arts have higher rates of participation in civic activities that include advocating for arts and community causes, voting in elections and joining voluntary organizations" (LeRoux & Bernadska, 2013). In Nick Rabkin's article "Hearts

People attend a symbolic ritual named "Aquele Abraco" ("That Hug"), which represents a hug to the ocean, marking the World Ocean Day in Rio de Janeiro on June 8, 2023. Photography by Pilar Olivares/Reuters

and Minds: The Arts and Civic Engagement," he details two NEA studies from their 2002 and 2008 Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts, which both show that American people who attend arts events are more likely to volunteer, vote, and take part in community events. Later in his work, Rabkin clarifies that, while there are significant correlations between arts participation and volunteerism, these correlations are not evidence that arts participation causes civic engagement (Rabkin, 2017, p. 7-16).

Focusing more specifically on the performing arts, from 2004-2007, Professor Miriam Chitiga created and studied an impactful program called "Performing Arts for Effective Civic Engagement" (PAECE). Beginning in 2004, Chitiga's PAECE study coordinated 67 live performances across the United States, with an ensemble of college and high school student performers. These performances involved more than 13,272 students, faculty, and community members as both performers and audience members (Chitiga, 2014, p. 62). In the PAECE program, student performers conducted research on a civic issue (i.e., immigration reform, education funding, etc.) and then created monologues, skits, short plays, poetry, music, dance, and artwork based on that civic issue. The students rehearsed, revised, and performed their pieces, then engaged in deliberative dialogue with the audience at the end of each performance (Chitiga, 2014, pp. 59-67).

To evaluate the program's impact, Chitiga and her team used both quantitative and qualitative methods. After each PAECE performance, the researchers surveyed audience members, and 86.5% of the audience surveyed indicated that the performances had a positive influence on their future voting behavior. Many of the student performers also showed increased willingness to take up jury duty after their experience in the PAECE program. Further, many students became regular volunteers during elections and presidential debates after participating in the PAECE program (Chitiga, 2014, p. 69). These results from the PAECE study are a prime example of how theatre can be an incredibly effective tool to promote civic engagement.

While data exists on the unique impacts of theatre, music, and dance respectively, a limited amount of knowledge exists about musical theatre's particular impact on civic engagement. In 2012, Frederick J. Heide, Natalie Porter, and Paul K. Saito conducted a study about musical theatre and attitudinal change in which audience members watched a musical about hunting, and they were later surveyed about their attitudes toward hunting. In this study, the researchers found that the musical did in fact change the majority of audience members' attitudes, which is tremendously important, because it seems they were the first researchers to find this correlation (Heide, Porter, & Saito, 2012, p. 227).

These studies provided a foundation upon which to build my own study about musical theatre and its impact on audience attitudes and civic engagement. Furthermore, this literature broadened my understanding of the relationship between musical theatre and social change. The next section offers insight to the selection of *Miss You Like Hell* for carrying out this study.

WHY *MISS YOU LIKE HELL*?

After completing my initial research on musical theatre and civic engagement in 2021, I began looking for a socially conscious musical to test out my hypothesis. In this context, a socially conscious musical is defined as a musical that directly engages with a sociopolitical or social justice issue (i.e., LGBTQ rights, racial justice, criminal justice reform, immigration reform, etc.). Top contenders for this project included *Fun Home*, *Violet*, *21 Chump Street*, *Indecent*, and *Miss You Like Hell*.

Considering Arizona State University's proximity to the United States/Mexico border (about a 3-hour drive) and its designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), *Miss You Like Hell* quickly rose to the top as the best choice for this research. Written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes and singer/

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songwriter Erin McKeown, *Miss You Like Hell* had its first full production at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego in 2016 and had an Off-Broadway run at The Public Theater in New York in 2018. Prior to her commission at the La Jolla Playhouse, Hudes first wrote a non-musical play called *26 Miles*, which premiered at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia in 2009. With the help of her co-creator Erin McKeown, Hudes later adapted *26 Miles* into *Miss You Like Hell*. *26 Miles* includes the same lead characters as *Miss You Like Hell*, Beatriz and Olivia, but the play is set in 1986, Beatriz is Cuban, and she has become an American citizen by the play's start. In contrast, *Miss You Like Hell* is set in 2014 ("the late Obama years"), Beatriz is Mexican, and she is an undocumented immigrant, which becomes a major plot line in the musical which is not present in *26 Miles* (Hudes & McKeown, 2018, p. 1).

Miss You Like Hell follows Beatriz's journey toward gaining legal United States citizenship. At the start of the musical, Beatriz and her teenage daughter Olivia haven't seen each other in years, but when Beatriz sees Olivia's cry for help in a blog post, she drives from Los Angeles to Philadelphia to comfort her daughter. She convinces Olivia to join her on a road trip: seven days across the country. The journey starts off as a way to boost Olivia's self-esteem, clear her depression, and mend their fractured mother-daughter relationship. Midway through Act I, Beatriz reveals her ulterior motive; she wants Olivia to testify on her behalf for her upcoming citizenship hearing. Throughout this American odyssey, Beatriz and Olivia meet several delightful characters who help them on their way: Manuel, a Peruvian day-laborer selling tamales; Mo and Higgins, a retired gay couple trying to get married in each of the 50 states; and Pearl, a junior park ranger at Yellowstone National Park. By the end of the musical, Beatriz and Olivia have grown much closer, but unfortunately (spoiler alert), after a failed hearing in Los Angeles, Beatriz ultimately gets deported. In the final image of the musical, we see Olivia and Beatriz at Friendship Park, on either side of the United States/Mexico border, waiting to be reunited.

My vision for the 2023 ASU production of *Miss You Like Hell* was to create an evocative experience that changed the way audiences think and feel about immigration reform in America. At the very end of the show, Olivia has a line that became the central directorial concept. She says, "We are not rafts, we are not even islands, we are the ocean" (Hudes & McKeown, 2018, p. 92). This metaphor speaks to how we as people are all connected, a realization that helps Olivia feel less depressed and more hopeful about her relationship with her mother. By the end of this production, hopefully audience members would feel that they, too, are "the ocean" and want to take action in helping their fellow citizens.

In adapting *26 Miles* into *Miss You Like Hell* and moving the story from 1986 to 2014, Hudes and McKeown were intentional in making Beatriz undocumented. In 2014, the year in which the musical was set, there were 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Passel & Krogstad, 2024). Six million of these undocumented immigrants were Mexican, 56% of the total number of all undocumented immigrants (Rosenblum & Soto, 2015). While people from all over the world have been immigrating to the United States since its founding, a major shift occurred with the 1924 Immigration Act, which introduced numerical caps or quotas based on country of origin. These unequal quotas gave preference to Anglo-Saxon individuals from countries in northern and western Europe. In 1965, a new law put a cap on the total number of visas that the United States could issue, at which point, many Mexican immigrants who were previously working freely in the United States, suddenly became "illegal" (Little, 2019). In 2001, the U.S. Congress introduced the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act to provide a pathway to legal status for undocumented individuals who came to the United States as children (American Immigration Council, 2024). Since then, Congress has continued to work on many iterations of this bill to no success. In 2012, former President Barack Obama finally created the "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" Initiative, or DACA, which temporarily eliminated the possibility of deportation for many young people who would qualify for relief if the DREAM Act became law (Immigration Policy Center, 2012). By sharing this brief overview of the experience of undocumented immigrants in the United States (and Mexican immigrants specifically), Hudes and McKeown's choice to make Beatriz a Mexican American undocumented immigrant in *Miss You Like Hell* becomes more meaningful. Given this difficult backdrop of ever-shifting policies with people's lives at stake, our 2023 production of *Miss You Like Hell* at ASU strove to illuminate the struggle of Latinx American undocumented immigrants like Beatriz.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH: PRE-SHOW AND POST-SHOW SURVEYS

The quantitative research component of this study consisted of pre-show and post-show surveys, aiming to measure the impact of a socially conscious musical like *Miss You Like Hell* on audience members, specifically looking at their attitudes toward undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general. Would the experience of watching *Miss You Like Hell* make them more sympathetic to undocumented immigrants or immigrants in general? The initial hypothesis was that the experience of watching *Miss You Like Hell* would increase audience members' positive feelings and decrease their negative feelings toward undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general.

The survey design used in this study was inspired by the *Positive and Negative Perception of Immigrants Scale* (PANPIS) developed by Panno et. al. in 2023 in Italy. The PANPIS includes 14 statements, each garnering a response from 1-5, 1 = disagree, 2 = quite disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = quite agree, and 5 = agree (Panno et. al., 2023). For this *Miss You Like Hell* study, six of the 14 statements from PANPIS (three positive and three negative) were selected to be included in the pre-show and post-show surveys. The wording of three of these six statements was also changed to specifically address undocumented immigrants. The Panno et. al. study only discussed immigrants in general, given that they were speaking to an Italian context (2023). Given the American context of *Miss You Like Hell* and Beatriz's undocumented status, it was crucial to make this adjustment to include statements specifically about undocumented immigrants in the surveys.

Before each performance, two volunteers passed out quarter-sheets of paper with a QR code to both surveys. The duration of each survey was about five minutes, using Qualtrics as the software to collect data. The statements in the pre-show and post-show surveys were exactly the same, in order to measure any changes from pre- to post-. Participants were asked to respond on a scale of 0-4, with 0 = "neither agree nor disagree," 1 = "strongly disagree," 2 = "disagree," 3 = "agree," and 4 = "strongly agree." Below are the six statements given to audience members for both the pre-show and post-show surveys:

1) Immigrants make our country a better place in which to live.
2) The crime rate increases with the presence of immigrants.
3) Immigrants put our jobs at risk.
4) Undocumented immigrants contribute positively to our country's economy.
5) Undocumented immigrants should be given a path to legal citizenship.
6) Undocumented immigrants should be required to leave their jobs and immediately leave the US.

To incentivize participation, volunteers offered a free bag of chips or a cookie to anyone who filled out one of the surveys. Those who filled out both the pre- and post-show surveys were entered into a raffle to win one of ten $25 Amazon gift cards. After each performance, one volunteer went into the lobby again with the QR code quarter-sheets to remind audience members to fill out the post-show survey.

A total of 123 participants completed the pre-show survey and 80 participants completed the post-show survey. Across those respondents, 51 total participants completed both the pre-show and the post-show surveys. Because the study focused on attitude change from before watching the musical to after watching the musical, only the data from the 51 participants who responded to both the pre-show and post-show surveys was analyzed. Table 1 features four of the six statements where the most change occurred.

Table 1
Survey Results: Pre-Show vs. Post-Show Responses

STATEMENT	PRE-SHOW SURVEY RESPONSES	POST-SHOW SURVEY RESPONSES
Statement #2: The crime rate increases with the presence of immigrants.	25% Disagree 6% Neither Agree nor Disagree	25% Strongly Disagree 6% Disagree
Statement #3: Immigrants put our jobs at risk.	12% Disagree	12% Strongly Disagree
Statement #4: Undocumented immigrants contribute positively to our country's economy.	18% Agree 11% Neither Agree nor Disagree	18% Strongly Agree 11% Agree or Strongly Agree
Statement #5: Undocumented immigrants should be given a path to legal citizenship.	16% Agree	16% Strongly Agree

Note: The Pre-Show and Post-Show responses are based on the same set of participants, who answered the same survey questions at two different points in time.

Across this significant pool of 51 participants, it appears the performance had an immediate effect on audience members' sympathy toward undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general. In the pre-show surveys, the majority of these 51 participants responded sympathetically to the experience of undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general. This finding confirmed my instinct that most of our audience members attending *Miss You Like Hell* would already have a "pro-immigrant" sentiment prior to viewing the musical, as most of the current ASU theatre community leans liberal politically, a trend which is starting to be studied (Eberwein, 2024). By analyzing the changes from the pre-show responses to the post-show responses, the main trend that develops is a "moving the needle" of sorts.

While this production was mostly "preaching to the choir," these statistics show that audience members' disapproval of anti-immigrant stereotypes was deepened and reinforced by watching *Miss You Like Hell*. The data also shows that audience members' belief in the positive economic contributions of undocumented immigrants was deepened and increased by watching *Miss You Like Hell*. These trends from the survey data are incredibly encouraging, as they prove that a socially conscious musical like *Miss You Like Hell* can positively impact audience members' attitudes, at least around the topic of immigration reform. This data proves immediate effects after watching this musical, albeit potentially short-term.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: POST-SHOW TALKBACKS

After each of the three performances of *Miss You Like Hell*, the production's dramaturg Julio-Cesar Sauceda and I facilitated post-show talkbacks. Sauceda is a Mexican American theatre artist and an ASU alumnus, so his cultural knowledge was crucial to this production of *Miss You Like Hell*. The two main goals of these talkbacks were 1) to gauge initial audience reactions, and 2) to serve as a qualitative research complement to the quantitative data from the pre-show and post-show surveys. While Sauceda and I were successful in achieving these audience-focused goals, the talkbacks also served as a place of reflection for the actors and the production's music director, Lindsay Miller, who joined the talkbacks. About 30 audience members attended each talkback, meaning a total of 90 participants in this component of the study. All participants verbally consented to their comments being recorded in these talkbacks for use in this study.

The talkback script consisted of four questions for the audience, plus a moment at the end to field their questions. In the analysis below, I share a few highlights from across the three talkbacks. To synthesize the data from all three talkbacks, this section is structured by question.

QUESTION #1: "First off, we'd love to start with how you're feeling right now, after watching this piece. Just a word or a phrase that comes to mind."

RESPONSES:

- A rainbow of emotions
- A storm
- Moved
- Angry
- Surprised
- Proud
- Feeling of community
- Open-hearted
- Heartbroken
- Sorrow and joy
- Understanding
- Inspired to reach out to others
- "What could I do?"

This first question mostly served as an icebreaker or warm-up for the audience. In addition to the "rainbow of emotions" the audience members shared, the last two responses of "inspired to reach out to others" and "What could I do?" aligned with my hope that audience members would feel primed to do something at the end of seeing the musical. While a future longitudinal study would be necessary to follow up with audience members after the performances, hopefully these audience members who felt primed to do something did in fact do just that, whether it included further independent research, donating to an organization working on immigration reform, or another action step.

QUESTION #2: "Were there specific moments in the show that stood out to you? Or made you feel something? And can you identify why?"

RESPONSES:

- The ending, with Olivia on one side of the border wall and Beatriz on the other
- Olivia testifying in court on behalf of Beatriz
- The push and pull of the mother-daughter relationship in general
- Beatriz's line: "lying is like breathing to me"

Many audience members across the three talkbacks discussed the final moment of the show, seeing Olivia and Beatriz on either side of the United States/Mexico border wall, as well as the power and impact of the moment when the wall flew in. These audience members appreciated a truthful ending, rather than a stereotypically "happy ending." Four audience members identified the moment where Olivia testified on behalf of Be-

atriz, including the title song Olivia sings here, "Miss You Like Hell" (Hudes & McKeown, 2018). One audience member whose father is from El Salvador shared that this moment in the show made him think of his own parents and their immigration process. One Mexican American audience member said Beatriz's line "lying is like breathing to me" struck a chord with him because he lived this as well, being undocumented until just a few years ago (Hudes and McKeown, 2018, p. 37). This audience member's personal testimony from his experience being undocumented was impactful to the rest of the audience and to the actors. For some in the audience that night and for some of the actors, this was their first-time meeting someone who was undocumented.

QUESTION #3: "There's an important line Olivia says at the end of the show: 'We are not rafts. We are not even islands. We are the ocean.' I have a sense of what this means for me as the director, but we'd love to get a sense of what it means for you."

RESPONSES:

- "The power of people even in the face of a violation to human rights; understanding the ocean as a strong community of people looking out for each other. Connected, not separated."
- "Many Latinos come to the United States on rafts or are separated by islands (like Cubans). We're not just people who arrive here, but people who have been on a journey."
- "We're all meant to be part of the ocean that holds up the land that we live on. Just as the ocean connects all land masses, we are meant to extend to each other and connect to all people across the world, even across our differences."

By including this more open-ended, creative interpretation question about the concept of "we are the ocean," it allowed for me to co-create and collaborate with the audience on an artistic and metaphorical level. Many of these responses were consistent with my understanding of this metaphor—that we are all part of an interconnected community that need to take care of each other. A few of the audience responses brought new insights, like the Latino audience member who shared the unique connection to water for many Latino immigrants. This deepening of the central directorial concept for the musical was valuable to my research, and hopefully this collaborative dialogue was also valuable for the audience members and actors.

QUESTION #4: "As an artist and a grad student, I'm interested in how musicals can impact our attitudes, our emotions, and our civic engagement. I'm curious, by showing on your hands, using a 1-5 on your fingers, after seeing this show, how many of you would get involved around the issue of immigration reform? Just a show of hands with your fingers, 1 to 5. I'm just trying to learn. I appreciate the vulnerability."

For context, Sauceda and I tried to be quite careful about not taking a political stance or asking audience members to take a specific political action (i.e., calling their Member of Congress on behalf of a certain bill), so as not to breach a statute from the Arizona State Legislature, which prohibits the use of university resources for the purpose of influencing the outcomes of elections or to support or oppose pending or proposed legislation (15-1633 - *Use of University Resources or Employees to Influence Elections; Prohibition; Civil Penalty; Definitions*, n.d.). However, we were entitled to make an explicit connection between our conversation during the talkback and information about organizations supporting undocumented immigrants, with the hope of inspiring further action. In Sauceda's dramaturgy display in the lobby of the theatre, he had included information about these organizations.

At the first two talkbacks, in response to Question #4, there were several 5s and some 3s. At the third and final talkback, there were several 4s, several 5s, and a few 2s. While this was an imprecise gauge, as opposed to the quantitative survey data, it still proved to be an effective exercise, both for the audience members to start thinking about activism around the issue of immigration reform and for Sauceda and I to see how many audience members felt inclined to increase their civic engagement around this issue.

Ultimately, these talkbacks became an opportunity for audience members to engage actively with me, Sauceda, the actors, and each other. Through this invitation for the audience members to be in the role of subject rather than just passive object, their understanding of the topics and themes in *Miss You Like Hell* was deepened. In addition, these talkbacks hopefully increased their sympathy toward immigrants and undocumented immigrants and primed them further to become civically engaged around the issue of immigration reform.

LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research project saw many successes, there were also some considerable limitations which could be mitigated in future research. First off, as previously shared, this project did not have the resources for a longitudinal study to track audience members' attitudes or behavior days, weeks, or months past the performances; yet this type of study would be incredibly valuable. In the future, I plan to explore more creative and meaningful ways to foster communication and engagement with audience members post-performance.

This leads to another avenue for future research: tracking audience behavior in addition to audience attitudes. While ASU's resources contributed to this research, the project was still limited in how "political" it could be in its audience engagement efforts within the confines of a public university. Therefore, this study was limited to assessing only the changes in audience attitudes; this project did not attempt to also track changes in audience behavior after the performances because it was prohibited from explicitly offering post-show civic engagement actions. In the future, further research is needed to assess a socially conscious musical's impact on audience behavior, in addition to audience attitudes.

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For future studies, it could also be valuable to gather demographics from participants, both in the surveys and in the talkbacks. These demographics could include age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and/or political affiliation. This would allow for a better sense of how audience members identify, as well as provide helpful context when analyzing data from surveys and talkbacks.

CONCLUSION

Especially given ASU's proximity to the United States/Mexico border and its designation as an HSI, *Miss You Like Hell* was a particularly perfect musical for ASU to produce. By depicting the life of Beatriz, an undocumented Mexican American woman, I consider *Miss You Like Hell* to be a socially conscious musical, discussing immigration reform as a social issue. Therefore, directing and choreographing *Miss You Like Hell* provided a wonderful opportunity for my research, allowing me to assess the changes in audience attitudes as a result of watching the musical.

This research proved that a socially conscious musical like *Miss You Like Hell* can positively impact audience members' attitudes. In particular, the survey data showed that about 30% of participants became more sympathetic to undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general as a result of watching our 2023 production

of *Miss You Like Hell*. In addition, the responses from audience members in the talkbacks provided a qualitative component to the quantitative survey data. Major themes from the talkback data included sympathy for the characters in the story, particularly Beatriz and Olivia, a creative understanding of the musical's directorial concept, and an overall interest in getting involved in civic engagement around the issue of immigration reform. Moving forward, it might prove valuable to repeat this study with a production of *Miss You Like Hell* at a professional theatre company instead of at a university.

In my current position as an Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre at Rockford University, I will be applying this research to another socially conscious musical, *The Prom*, which I will be directing and choreographing in Spring 2025. While *Miss You Like Hell* focuses on the social issue of immigration reform, *The Prom* focuses on the social issue of LGBTQ+ rights. I plan to conduct similar research on audience attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community via pre-show and post-show surveys similar to the surveys used in this study. Given an overall lack of research on the impact of musicals on audience attitudes and behaviors, I encourage readers to consider staging socially conscious musicals and to conduct similar research. For like-minded musical theatre artists wanting to effect positive social change, further exploration is needed to investigate how musical theatre is uniquely situated to impact the attitudes and behavior of our audience members.

BIOGRAPHY

Marissa Barhathan is an Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre at Rockford University in Rockford, IL. She holds an M.F.A. in Directing from Arizona State University. She is a fierce advocate for using theatre to create positive social change.

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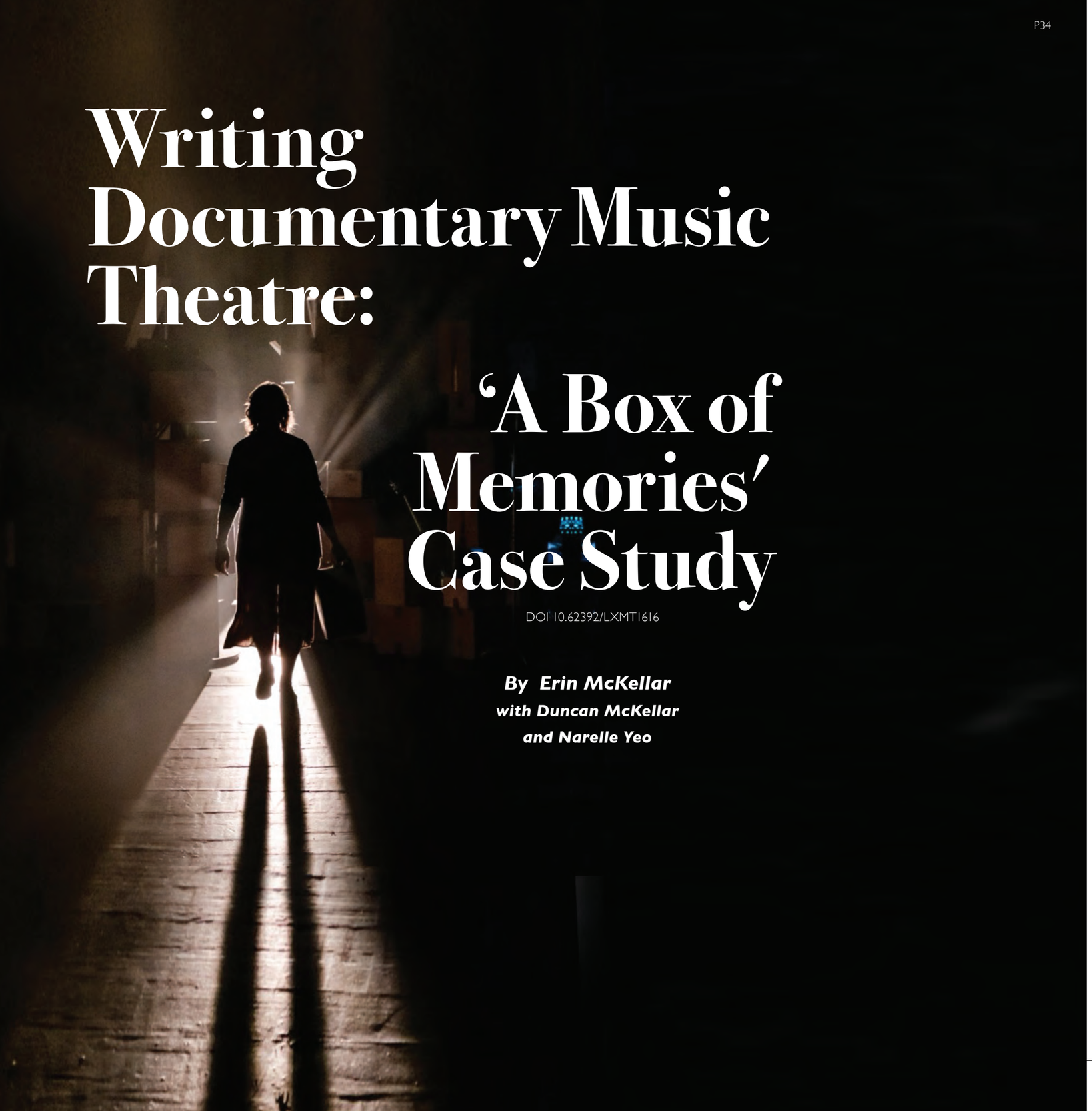
MISS YOU LIKE HELL | NOVEMBER 2023
Arizona State University
Directed by Marissa Barnathan
Photography by Clara Kundin

Writing Documentary Music Theatre:



'A Box of Memories' Case Study

DOI 10.62392/LXMT1616

By Erin McKellar
with Duncan McKellar
and Narelle Yeo

Music theatre research primarily relies on retrospective analysis of existing works (Taylor, 2019 p. 23). Music theatre is a skills-dense art form that warrants prospective practice-based explorations (Dunbar, 2014; Langabeer, 2024; Wollman, 2021). Whilst the last five years have seen an increase in practice-based output, there is a research gap in critically documenting the processes involved in developing new music theatre works. This article describes our collaborative process in creating *A Box of Memories*, as an autoethnographic documentary musical that depicts the perspectives of a person with dementia, their family member, and a healthcare provider, drawing on our personal experiences (Bartleet, 2022). We are a daughter-father creative team, and, as artist-researchers, we hope this case study, which describes our process, will assist other theatre-makers in creating authentic, socially progressive, and transformative documentary musicals.

Documentary music theatre is an emerging genre that integrates documentary and music theatre practices when conceptualising, writing, designing, rehearsing, and presenting the work. Documentary musicals should reflect social objectives, intentionally seeking to challenge and transform audiences' attitudes and beliefs by carefully narrating documentary evidence, events, and experiences through the conventions of narrative and song (McKellar, 2023). Music theatre-makers in the current era are drawing upon documented archives, real events and people to write new musicals. For instance, the musical *Come From Away* is a retelling of the events that took place on September 11, 2001, after the final grounded plane landed in Gander, Newfoundland (Broder, 2022); *London Road*, is a verbatim musical depicting the true events of the 2006 Ipswich murders; and the musical *Parade*, which is a dramatic staging of Jewish American Leo Frank's trial and imprisonment and his subsequent lynching, exploring issues of antisemitism (Stahl, 2016);. Whilst it is evident that documentary-based musicals exist, there has been no framework developed to guide practitioners seeking to authentically craft documentary musicals and, prior to our study, the form has not been clearly defined within the music theatre canon or scholarship.

A Box of Memories is a one-act, three-hander musical that presents Lizzy's story from her diagnosis with dementia to the end of her life. Lizzy's narrative draws on personal memories and documented events depicting Duncan's mother's/Erin's grandmother's experience of living with dementia. The show also depicts a first-hand witness perspective on issues arising from South Australia's landmark, *The Oakden Report*, which Duncan co-authored in his role as a geriatric psychiatrist, exposing critical failures in aged and dementia care services and leading to the Australian Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (Grenfell et al., 2021; Pagone & Briggs, 2018).

This case study documents our creative process in writing *A Box of Memories* as a collaboration between Duncan, the librettist/lyricist, Erin, the composer/lyricist, and Narelle, the dramaturg. We reflect on writing the libretto and musical score and how these were grounded in documentary theatre practices. This case study also introduces a documentary music theatre inventory designed to guide other creators in the development of similar works.

CONCEPTUALISATION USING THE DOCUMENTARY MUSIC THEATRE INVENTORY

The developmental process commenced with a reflective exploration of central themes emerging from lived experience and documented sources. This occurred through many hours of discussion, planning, and note-taking.

Drawing on historical and contemporary documentary theatre practices, Erin critically reviewed existing literature and synthesised a new documentary music theatre practice inventory, providing eight key practices to guide the creative process (McKellar, 2023) (Figure 1). Using this inventory and with assistance from Narelle as the dramaturg, we systematically integrated documentary evidence into the evolving narrative.

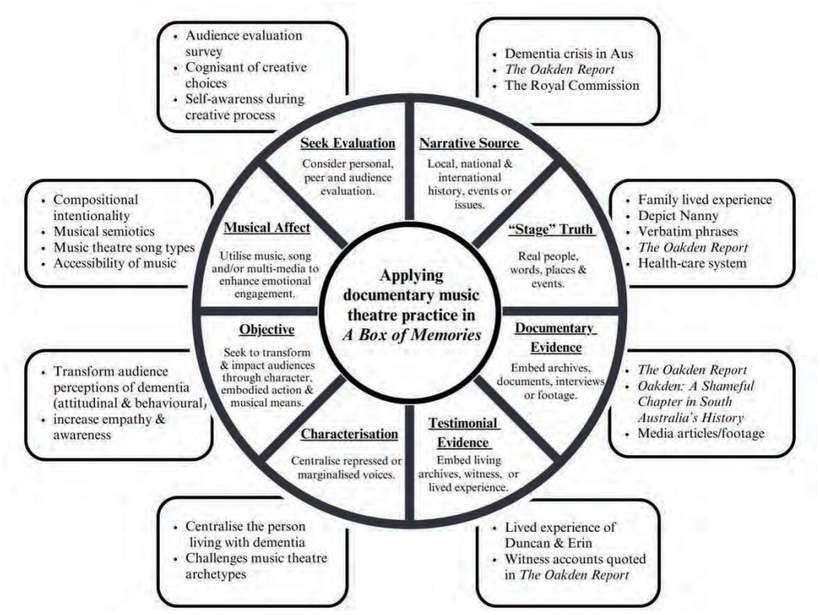


Figure 1: Applying the documentary music theatre inventory in the conceptual phase

Three key documentary sources informed the development process: Duncan's dual-lived experience as Lizzy's son and a geriatric psychiatrist, Erin's memories and experiences with her grandmother and as a witness to Duncan's experiences surrounding *The Oakden Report*, and a close reading and discussion of *The Oakden Report* and Duncan's experiences in the system-wide reform period following the report's publication (Groves et al., 2017). We explored our shared lived experiences and discussed the emotional impacts of losing Lizzy. We reflected on Lizzy describing to Duncan her experience of feeling dehumanised during her diagnostic experience when she could not recall "apple, table, penny" in the mini-mental state examination (Folstein, 1975). Duncan recounted a distressing incident when he found his mother arguing with her reflection in a mirror when she perceived it to be a hostile intruder. Duncan also recalled sitting with Lizzy, foraging through old photos and memorabilia. Erin remembered sitting on Lizzy's bed, holding her hand in the care home. These were juxtaposed against evidence from *The Oakden Report* and formulated into documentary scenes.

Dementia is a term that refers to a variety of neurocognitive conditions that progressively impact thought, memory, behaviour and function, ultimately becoming life-limiting. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia, but there are many others. Using Duncan's clinical background, as well as his observations of his mother, we created a list of symptoms of dementia that Lizzy exhibited. These symptoms and experiences included disorientation and confusion, repeating phrases, misplacing belongings, believing someone was stealing from her, losing words, becoming anxious, being physically defensive, losing mobility and function, and becoming unable to live independently. We reflected on clinical aspects of the final stages of dementia, including the loss of verbal communication, likely loss of recognition of self and others, and difficulties with essential functions like swallowing. We contemplated how we could dramatically convey these features of dementia on stage without appearing pejorative, sensationalist, or tokenistic, but while providing an honest and authentic depiction of Lizzy's experience.

ROY VANDERVEGT

Erin and Duncan McKellar, who created A Box of Memories, starring Kathie Renner and Lauren Henderson, at rear

In memory of so many forgotten

A Box of Memories article in The Australian, 9th September 2022, captured by Roy Vandervegt

We considered the impact that dementia has on family members, including accepting new responsibilities as carers and advocates, dealing with grief, the unsettling implications of possible genetic factors, and managing the complexities of the health and aged care systems. We discussed how to capture key aspects of these experiences through the character of Lizzy's family member.

From our reflections on *The Oakden Report* (Groves et al., 2017) and Duncan's experience following its publication, we identified key problems in care systems. Central to this was the dehumanisation and marginalisation of people with dementia, described in detail in the report. These findings had implications for organisational culture in care systems, quality and safety, and the use of medications and forms of restraint. References from the report were noted and added to our inventory of documentary evidence, including quotations such as, "many [staff] have stood by, incurious and disinterested" (p. 75) The dominant culture was described as "toxic" and "disrespectful" with "low morale" (p. 95). Staff were "lacking any humanity" (p. 78) and used "pejorative and demeaning language" (p. 98) when addressing patients and family members. "Excessive medication" was a recurring issue that reviewers stated was "an avoidable harm" (p. 85). The report noted that the "majority of residents [were] left with little stimulation" (p. 89). Personal "items [were] simply lost" (p. 88) with no resolution.

We acknowledged that *The Oakden Report* presented a specific case of service failure, but, with reference to other reports, such as the Australian Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (Pagone & Briggs, 2021), and the Report into the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust (Francis, 2013) we recognised that systemic failure in providing dignified, compassionate, and humanised care is an enduring and global issue. This informed the underpinning philosophical context for *A Box of Memories*, and our primary motivation, which was to advocate for the intentional development and practice of humanised, person-centred care across health, aged, and social care systems, where the person with dementia, or any other cause of disability or difference, was seen as remaining fully-human with rights to dignity, respect, and engagement in the community. We hoped the show would inform the community about dementia, challenge broad societal perceptions regarding people living with dementia, and resonate with and encourage people impacted by dementia in some way.

***A Box of Memories* rehersal, 19 August 2022, captured by Erin McKellar, directed by Narelle Yeo**

In the months following the publication of *The Oakden Report*, Duncan took a lead role in decommissioning the dysfunctional service and developing new services. His most personally impacting experience during this time was finding a box of personal items belonging to a woman called Lilly, left abandoned in a forgotten storeroom at the Oakden campus. Duncan inadvertently found Lilly's belongings the day after she died in his care, having been earlier moved from the Oakden campus to the newly established service replacing it. The box contained memorabilia, including an engagement ring, pictures with her children, a scarf, pearls, and handwritten notes. In the same storeroom, Duncan found numerous other boxes and suitcases containing lost belongings of other people whose lives had ended at Oakden. This experience became a powerful symbol of the systemic and human failure that characterised the Oakden narrative and provided the central dramatic concept and motif for the show, captured in the show's title, *A Box of Memories*.

Having collated and explored these documentary data, structurally supported by using the documentary music theatre inventory, we agreed on four intentions with transformative potential that would guide the subsequent phases of creating *A Box of Memories*:

1. Promote new understanding about and greater awareness of dementia.
2. Transform audiences' perspectives, attitudes, and behaviour towards dementia.
3. Champion the person with dementia whilst capturing the extended impact of the illness.
4. Utilise music as an emotive enhancer.

CRAFTING THE NARRATIVE ARC

After many meetings exploring ideas, we had numerous angles from which a narrative could lead. Our challenge was synthesising the stories, events, and experiences from the documentary sources into a one-act musical that would capture the multifaceted aspects identified. Rather than explicitly re-enacting one event or narrative, we endeavoured to draw upon multiple perspectives. This was because the impacts of dementia discussed were complex and far-reaching and were experienced differently by the person, the family member, and the health practitioner.

Writing a musical about dementia is difficult for several reasons, including dementia having social and political implications. Dementia is a stigmatised illness. In portraying a person with dementia on stage, we recognised a need to be consciously respectful, avoiding stereotypical gestures and portrayals that might trigger distress in audience members. Similarly, dementia is also associated with negativity, fear, and nihilism (Nguyen & Li., 2020; Phillipson et al., 2019) We did not want to present a bleak picture of dementia or reinforce hopelessness but, rather, wanted to represent that people live well with dementia and continue to contribute positively as members of families and communities, even with the changes that dementia may cause, whilst honestly acknowledging the challenges that people and their families face because of dementia, without glossing over these. This supported our decision not to centralise the narrative on the abuse and trauma experienced by people at Oakden, but rather to tell Lizzy's story, connected through the motif of the lost box of memories from

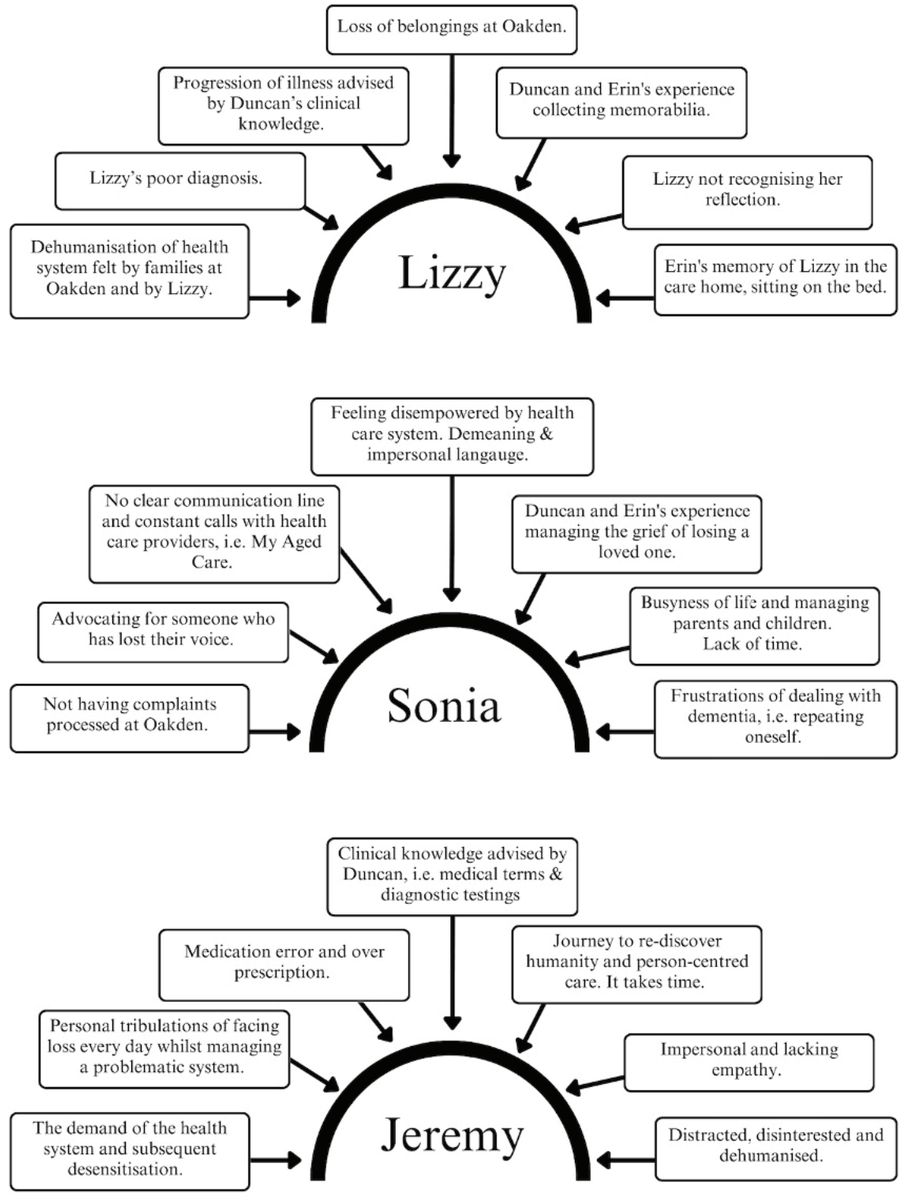


Figure 2: Documentary elements in character development

Lilly's story, with the underpinning philosophical and thematic concepts relating to compassionate, humanised, person-centred care, and the recurrent failure occurring in care systems that deviate from this, emerging from the Oakden data.

CHARACTER DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

We developed the show around three characters' perspectives, conceived from the documentary findings explored during the initial conceptual stage. These were the person with dementia (Lizzy), the family member/carer (Sonia), and the health practitioner (Dr. Jacobs). Pragmatically, a primary cast of three was also chosen to create a theatrical product that would provide a cost-effective and sustainable production suitable for smaller venues and touring, therefore optimising potential impact and durability. We decided the primary story arc would portray Lizzy's experiences from diagnosis to death, exploring the impacts on the person with dementia and experiences encountered by Sonia, as the family member navigating difficulties within health, aged, and social care systems. The show would also capture a parallel, internal perspective on the challenges occurring within the health system through Dr. Jacob's storyline.

Lizzy was an intentional representation of Duncan's mother/Erin's grandmother, including using her name. Her representation of living with dementia, specifically Alzheimer's disease, was directly informed by the documentary data from Lizzy's lived experience. Sonia, Lizzy's daughter, was developed to reflect elements of Duncan's relationship with Lizzy and Erin's connections with both Lizzy as a grandparent and Duncan as a parent. Specifically, the personal struggle experienced by Sonia during her mother's illness was informed by Duncan's journey and from inadequacy to advocacy, and through grief to acceptance. The health practitioner, initially named Dr. Jacobs, transitioning to Jeremy, as his character develops through the show, depicted the issues raised by *The Oakden Report*, and Duncan's experiences and insights into the medical profession. Figure 2 illustrates the development of the three characters using the documentary source material.

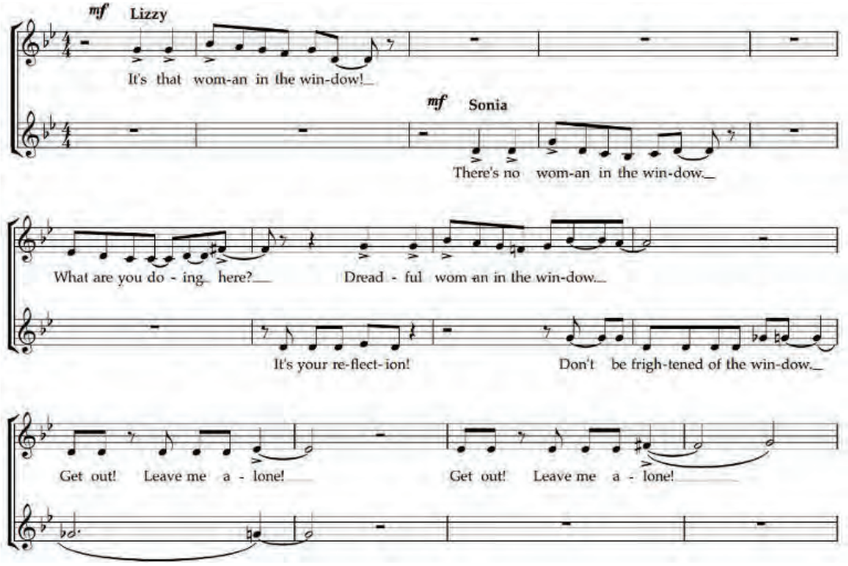


Figure 3: Score excerpt – "Woman in the window"

SONG COMPOSITION AS A DRIVER OF CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

We established a narrative timeline with a clear beginning, middle, and end based on the broad arcs of each character. A series of songs was written to address key moments on the timeline before crafting the script. As this library of songs grew, the narrative evolved. Eighteen songs were composed, initially as a song cycle, and linking sections of the script were retrospectively added by Duncan, ensuring narrative clarity and continuity. This deviated from the conventional process of writing a musical but reflects the organic way the show developed from ideas, through reflection and discussion, to the initial composition of key songs, through the more focused application of the documentary music theatre inventory and dramaturgy to the completion of a final product. Further, the process reflected Erin's role as the composer, with music as a driver of the creative work as she interpreted the evolving plot.

INCORPORATING DOCUMENTARY THEATRE PRACTICE IN LYRIC WRITING

Two main components were considered during the music-writing process. The first explored how elements of documentary theatre practice could be incorporated. The second ensured the compositions adhered to a musical theatre aesthetic and function. It is noteworthy that whilst composition, music, and mixed media have been exhibited in contemporary documentary theatre, this has not yet been implemented into the development of a musical (Forsyth & Megson, 2009; Martin, 2015; McKellar, 2023). Merging the two components of documentary theatre practice and a music theatre aesthetic required careful creative decisions.

Documentary theatre practices were implemented into the lyrics by using verbatim phrases, describing real experiences, embedding true events, and using accurate terminology. For instance, verbatim phrases were used during Lizzy's diagnostic assessment in "Just three words". This exhibited Folstein's (1975) mini-mental state examination, the most extensively used standardised screening test for dementia worldwide. The focal lyric was the exact testing phrase "apple, table, penny" (Folstein, 1975). Lizzy's negative lived experience of the diagnostic experience was depicted in this song, typical of many people.

The song "Vitamin H" captured the "old boy's culture" experienced at Oakden (Groves et al., 2017, p. 69), as well as the inappropriate use of chemical restraints (p. 105). It employed medication terms, including haloperidol, a sedating psychotropic medication. Incorporating clinical language was lyrically challenging due to the pronunciation, longer syllables, and limited rhyme options. However, this language was necessary for achieving authenticity, explicitly highlighting the inappropriate medication in non-person-centred healthcare cultures, such as Oakden.

Real experiences and moments were embedded lyrically in the song and reprise of "Silver memories and golden moments." Personal memories were recounted as lyrics enhancing the real aspect of parent-child connection in the song, including "I remember those red patent shoes," a memory Lizzy shared reflecting on Duncan's childhood shoes. Another lyric reflected Duncan's experience with his eldest daughter, "I remember when you snuck out at night skiving off with friends, breaking rules." One of the intentions of using real, specific, and personal experiences was to invite the audience to reflect on their own memories. This served as a tool to connect audience members with their sense of reality in conjunction with what they witnessed in the show.

The song "Woman in the Window" re-enacted Duncan's experience with his mother when she aggressively berated her reflection. Lizzy screamed at her reflection, "dreadful woman," "get out, get out, get out," "what are you doing here," "flibbertigibbet," and "leave me alone". These verbatim phrases were incorporated into the lyrics (Figure 3). Duncan's experience trying to calm Lizzy down, explaining, "there's no one there, it's your reflection," was depicted through Sonia. The song depicts paranoid ideation and the impact of delirium as a clinical factor to realistically portray the complexity of psychological symptoms of dementia.

MUSIC THEATRE SONG CONSIDERATIONS

Whilst documentary practices were implemented lyrically, it was also essential to apply musical theatre writing practices, such as writing the lyrics in the language of the character, developing lyrical motifs, and addressing elements of music theatre song function (i.e., "Narration" song, "I Want" song, "Soliloquy," "Eleven O-clock" song, and "I Am" song) (Bluestein, 2020; Cohen & Rosenhaus, 2016). The song "What's happening to me?" functions as the narration song, establishing the dramatic situation, introducing Lizzy as the central character, and giving the audience reason to be concerned and care about her. The expository language was implemented to convey narrative but also provide insight into Lizzy's experience and pre-empt the challenges to come.

An example of this is captured during the chorus of "What's happening to me?" (see Figure 4).

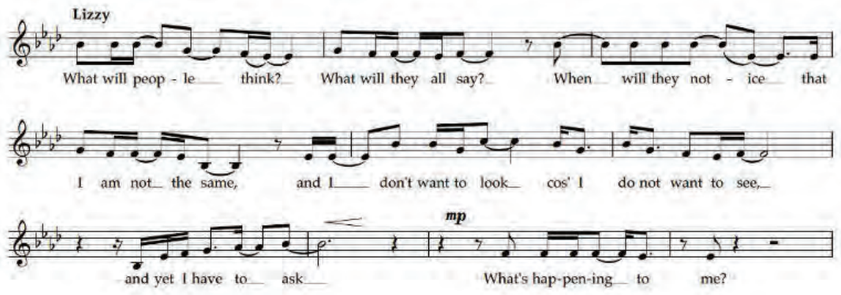


Figure 4: Score excerpt – "What's happening to me?"

Duncan highlighted that the title phrase, "What's happening to me?" is a recurring question asked by many experiencing early signs of dementia. We wanted this song to depict a struggle with a changing sense of identity and coherence. Thus, the phrase served as a lyrical motif, elucidating Lizzy's difficulties processing the changes she is experiencing throughout her illness progression, and giving insight to her interior world.

Dealing with a complex and difficult topic resulted in an overarchingly melancholic musical palate. It was necessary to embed moments of comedic relief. An example of this is Sonia's song, "I need a GnT" performed after waiting at the hospital for hours and feeling overwhelmed with life. Relatable phrases enhanced the humour, "I need a GnT, the tonic must be Fever Tree." Leaning into a comedic approach, simple and obvious rhyme patterns were used, for example, "it's been an hour...now five and I think I need a drink just to survive" Coarse language was a lyrical motif representing Sonia's character. This captured the flustered and overworked nature of Sonia's world.

Contrasting with Sonia, the lyrical language depicting Jeremy is initially clean and direct, reflecting his clinical role. However, lyrically, he evolves from unemotionally stating facts to using warmer and more relational language depicting the development of his character arc, as he rediscovers his humanity.

In the conflict song, "ABC(D)", Dr. Jacobs sings highly clinical lyrics (see Figure 5).

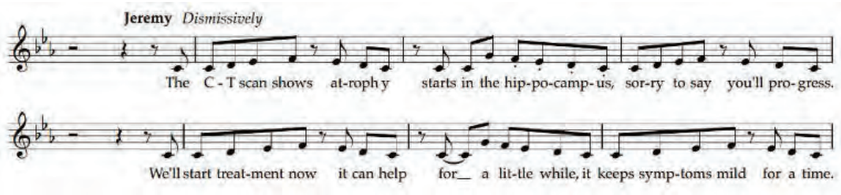


Figure 5: Score excerpt – "ABC(D)"

The use of clinical terminology demonstrates over-medicalisation and depersonalisation, and therapeutic nihilism illustrates a lack of sensitivity. In his later song, "What if this were me," there is evidence of greater empathy, emotional awareness, and personal growth. The work functions as a soliloquy, with lyrics providing a sung monologue addressed to himself (see Figure 6).

The work also reflects content from *The Oakden Report* (Groves et al., 2017). Specifically, the notion of "everything you do today is what you would want to have happen if it was your most loved one" (p. 82). This quote and Duncan's personal experience underpinned the writing of "What if this were me?"

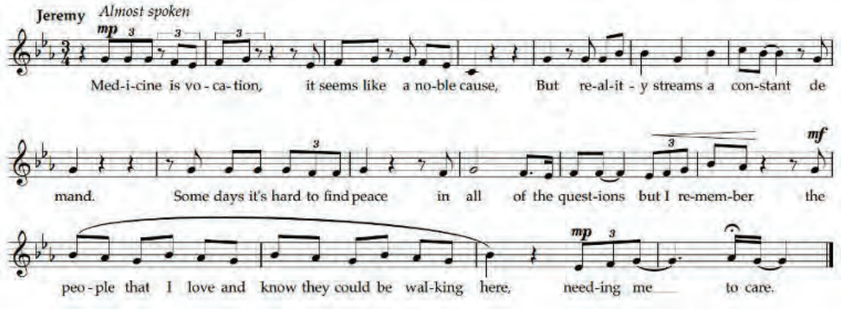


Figure 6: Score excerpt – "What if this were me"

Interweaving documentary practices in the lyrical writing of the music theatre songs enriched the depiction of dementia and its far-reaching impact. Embedding real experiences provided specific insight into dementia's impact on the person, the family, and the practitioner. The use of verbatim phrasing enhanced the realism of the work whilst correct terminology offered authentication.

COMPOSITIONAL INTENTIONALITY

Considerations of how music can enhance documentary narratives from the composer's perspective is novel. There is no right or wrong way to approach the compositional aspect. Instead, Erin experimented with different techniques, sounds, genres, and musical palettes to achieve a cohesive, emotionally impacting score. Underpinning the compositional choices is the notion that music adopts greater extra-musical meaning by encompassing various cultural, social, and psychological signs and symbols (Tarasti, 2002; Tagg, 2013). This is described as musical semiotics. Painter and Koelsch (2011) contend that "music can activate extra-musical meaning concepts and access semantic memory in a similar fashion to other domains, such as language" (p. 646). Music is a language with a unique structured syntax (Levitin & Menon, 2003; Patel, 2003). This musical syntax comprises notes, chords, melody, and rhythms with affectations, including articulation and dynamics. Yet the meaning of music "is not entirely contained in its organization of sounds" (Sergent, 2016, p. 2) in the material sense. Instead, meaning is communicated through musical semiotics associated with broader emotional, social, and cultural contexts (Way & McKerrell, 2017).

Erin intentionally drew upon concepts of musical semiotics to create works that serve a theatrical purpose and enhance the audience's connection to real and familiar emotional experiences. She implemented various techniques and genres to musically represent each scene's characters, narrative, and mood, to enhance the connection between the intended meaning and the audience's interpretation. The musical is designed for a broad audience, and the score is composed to be as accessible as possible to diverse listeners through an eclectic mix of genres, including pop, folk, rock, jazz, singer-songwriter, and music theatre songbook.

The genre of each song was matched with the context and sentiment of the scene. For instance, "How to decide" is a pop-infused music theatre ballad depicting Sonia's emotional climax. Another example is "David is that you?," which draws influence from a traditional jazz songbook waltz, reflecting Lizzy's belief that she was living in the past. The waltz physically embodied the emotional intertwining of Lizzy and Jeremy. Erin also experimented with pre-recorded tracks using post-production elements, including SFX, vocal distortion, and sonic treatment ("Falling"; "The demand"). This illustrated scenes beyond everyday reality, such as Lizzy's altered mental state, and the extreme system demands placed on Jeremy.

Pop vocal inflections such as stronger glottal onsets and subtle melismatic offsets were used to enhance the contemporary aspects of the melody and make them more palatable for a non-music theatre audience. Erin considered the tonality and motion of melodic passages as research demonstrates that minor modes, lower and descending pitches, are often associated with sadness and melancholy, whilst anger is correlated with faster

A Box of Memories stage rehersal, 6 September 2022, captured by Erin McKellar, directed by Narelle Yeo

A Box of Memories performance, 7 August 2022, captured by Robert Catto, directed by Narelle Yeo

rhythmic devices (Juslin et al., 2014, pp. 599-623). In contrast, major modes and ascending passages are linked with happier and more hopeful associations (Mohn, et al., 2011, pp. 503-517). The intentional use of consonance and dissonance reflected the fluctuating mood of the narrative arc. Characteristically, dissonance is associated with tension and angst, whereas consonance is associated with sweetness and happiness (Shapira & Stone, 2008). Moments of anger and distress were enhanced through musical dissonance.

Rhythmic consideration depicted the temperament of the characters. For instance, devices including cross-rhythm patterns, complex subdivisions, and staccato phrasing were used to generate tension (Vuust & Roepstorff, 2014). Similarly, rhythmic anticipation and offbeat patterns inferred a sense of urgency and haste (Machin, 2013). Elongated passages and legato phrasing are often identified as a "conflict-free" musical expression, and these were used in emotional uplifting and hopeful moments (Han, 2021, p.179).

Musical motifs were also used as signifiers. For example, in the opening song "Another day," the piano repeated a two-note phrase that resembled a clock ticking. This connected audiences with the familiar aural reference of time. The motif would speed up to symbolise a faster pace and slow down to infer a slowing in time. Similarly, through the score, a descending melodic motif was used to represent the deterioration of Lizzy's health aurally. In this way, the audience sees and hears her illness progression.

The orchestration was intentionally minimal, adhering to a pop band instrumentation, which included piano, guitar, bass, drums, backing vocals, and violin. The band arrangements adopted similar techniques implemented in the melodies. The soaring melodies of the violin created colour whilst also emphasising Lizzy's declining voice and her experience with dementia. This was particularly apparent in "David is that You?," where the violin and percussion create dissonant tension, resembling screeching sounds like fingernails clawing a blackboard. This occurred as Lizzy's condition worsened, aurally depicting her loss of cognition and internal distress as she tried to hold onto her coherence with her environment. Erin consciously arranged songs using consistent instrumentations for each character and their relationships. For instance, most of Lizzy's vocal solos were accompanied by violin and piano, whereas the acoustic guitar was used in songs between Lizzy and Sonia.

DRAMATURGY

Careful attention to dramaturgy was essential in adapting the documentary components to a theatrical context. A dramaturg is crucial in a theatrical work's development, ensuring that the artist's intention is dramatically matched with the outcome (Cadullo, 1995). This is implemented by asking key questions, challenging creative choices, and offering alternative theatrical solutions (Szatkowski, 2019). Having completed the initial libretto, Narelle provided expert input to critically analyse and prepare the show for a full production run. She asked questions that challenged the depth of each character arc and the work's overall narrative. This was a fertile but challenging phase for Duncan and Erin as writers, who had developed an emotional attachment to the rawness of the show's first iteration.

With Narelle's guidance, we addressed dramatic incongruencies. For instance, we intended that the box represent the lives lost in the healthcare system. However, this was not clear. Narelle discussed the theatrical rule of three, explaining how a motif is often repeated three times to ensure audiences comprehend the multiple layers of meaning intended. In this instance, three critical references to the box were embedded in the script, emphasising the metaphorical imagery, highlighting the problematic health system.

One of the difficulties we faced was illustrating that the doctor was not the root cause of the dehumanisation prevalent within aged care, but rather, his actions were a result of being constrained within a dysfunctional system. We sought guidance from Narelle to convey this theatrically without disrupting the existing work. The solution was that the system needed to be viewed as a character. Whilst it was not a physical body, it needed to be a significant presence within the show and play the antagonist role. This led to the inclusion of an additional character, The Orderly. This was a non-speaking role developed to manage stage requirements logistically and to personify the unvoiced "system" antagonist, signifying the institutionalised aspects of the healthcare system. Dressed in scrubs, The Orderly busily set the stage, placing boxes in the storeroom during pre-show as audience members walked in. The intent was for audiences to be aware that the boxes signified that there were other people in the system. The Orderly's unemotional presence stacking various boxes throughout the show, interacting in scenes without any deep connection to the other character's conflict and concerns, told an additional story about the way a system can co-opt functionaries who facilitate without moral or emotional engagement, but that this can inadvertently contribute to the dehumanisation of all involved.

Further amendments included script rewrites, additional songs, reordering scenes, and more apparent character development. This back-and-forth creative interaction shows the complexity of developing a work with personal testimony and the importance of naming perspective in making curatorial or dramaturgical decisions when workshopping a new piece. In general, the dramaturgy workshop provided insight into the questions that need to be asked, the techniques used to strengthen narrative, and character arcs and enhanced creative integrity.

EVALUATION AND SUCCESS

The intention of writing a documentary musical was to create a work of theatre that authentically represented the real-life experience of dementia, to centre the person with dementia, to enhance the audience's emotional resonance and to provide a transformative experience. Specifically, we aimed to test if documentary music theatre could increase dementia awareness, challenge negative stigmatisation, evoke empathy, and subsequently transform attitudes and behaviours towards dementia in audience members, from medical professionals to fam-

ily members, carers, and people with dementia. To do this, an online survey was employed after the premiere to explore audience perspectives and impact after viewing *A Box of Memories*. There were copious open-text responses providing ample data for thematic analysis and offering a deeper understanding of the way in which the musical emotionally and behaviourally impacted the audience. This is captured in a participant's response writing:

> Despite my family experience with dementia (as a carer) I don't think that I have ever empathised as much with the sufferer of dementia, as I did after seeing the musical. The musical really made me SEE the sufferer... probably more than I ever have previously. Previously, I had thought of what had to be done to care and assist, but I have never felt that I have "seen" the "person" as much as I did in the musical. The fear, the confusion, the loss.... I felt that I saw a totally new perspective, and it was from Lizzie's point of view.

After reviewing the results, there were three key aspects that contributed to the musical's impact. Firstly, *authenticity,* which refers to the realistic portrayal of dementia. Secondly, *resonance,* which captures the audience members' identification with their own and others' lived experience. Thirdly, *music,* which fostered emotional engagement beyond spoken text. These three components, authenticity, resonance, and emotionally engaging music, appear to be keys to documentary music theatre facilitating transformative audience experiences. Remarkably, within its first year of premiering, the musical earned a Bank SA Best Theatre Award in the Adelaide Fringe Festival and was commissioned as the opening performance of an innovation conference in the United States. This resulted in further interest from of dementia-focused organisations in supporting a production tour. Whilst this is the first study to explore the audience impact of a documentary musical, it demonstrates the significant potential of documentary music theatre as a catalyst for audience transformation. It also serves as an alternative practice approach for writers, performers and creative artists who seek create real and socially impacting music theatre.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

A Box of Memories serves as a case study in the emerging genre of documentary music theatre, illustrating how lived experiences, documentary evidence, and creative practice can coalesce to address complex societal issues such as dementia. Whilst the musical has continued its development through performances in Adelaide, Sydney, and Pittsburgh, the show remains in evolution as we continue to hone the story and score to better represent the lived experiences depicted through the theatrical narrative. As a work of autoethnography, which is grounded in highly personal lived experience, we acknowledge that further evaluation of audience impact and external critique of the work will be helpful in validating quality and impact. Nonetheless, the documentary music theatre inventory, employed through the genesis of this work, provides a tool that offers a tangible model for theatre makers seeking to create documentary works motivated similarly by issues of social change. Our process of integrating documentary evidence into the conceptualisation of the narrative, lyric writing, and music composition, enhanced the show's realism, emotional depth, and overall impact. This approach underscores the importance of integrating authentic narratives with artistic interpretation, creating a space for transformative audience engagement.

By systematically reflecting on and sharing the development of this work, we contribute to the broader field of music theatre research, which, as noted, has historically lacked prospective, practice-based documentation. Such reflective processes are crucial for fostering a deeper understanding of how contemporary music theatre can engage with pressing social issues, providing insights for both scholars and practitioners. Accordingly, this case study offers a model for future documentary musicals through which other practitioners might address challenging and socially important topics.

BIOGRAPHY

Erin McKellar, D.M.A., is an Australian composer and artist-researcher. A recipient of the Helpmann Academy Award for Voice and a two-time Downbeat Award winner, Erin holds a Doctorate of Musical Arts from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where she is a foregrounding music theatre academic and practitioner. Her work explores the intersections of artistic advocacy and contemporary approaches of music theatre-making.

Duncan McKellar, BMBS, is a psychiatrist and writer. As a psychiatrist, he specializes in the care of older people and, in 2017, was co-author of the landmark *The Oakden Report*, that documented profound failings of culture and care in a state-run residential older persons' mental health service in Adelaide. In addition to *A Box of Memories,* Dr. McKellar is the author of *An Everyone Story: Finding our way back to compassion, hope and humanity* and a range of academic texts.

Narelle Yeo, D.M.A., is an accomplished performer and academic. She is an associate professor and the program lead of the Music Theatre degree at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and senior lecturer in Voice and Stagecraft. With over 40 performance roles and extensive directing experience in Australia and the USA, she has premiered numerous Australian music theatre and opera works and continues to foster new and innovative ways to develop theatre.

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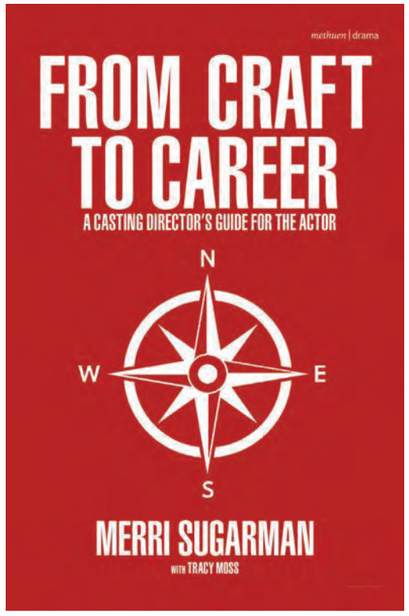
PIPPIN | NOVEMBER 2024
Kennesaw State University
Directed by Timothy Ellis
Photography by Casey Gardner Ford

BOOK REVIEW

From Craft to Career: A Casting Director's Guide for the Actor

Merri Sugarman & Tracy Moss
Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023
$24.25 PAPERBACK
DOI 10.62392/VIJB7170

Review by C.J. Greer



Choosing to become an actor is both exciting and daunting, as many aspiring performers quickly discover. Navigating the professional industry requires more than just talent—it demands motivation, discipline, resilience, and a plan for how to work your way to the top. The trouble with planning is that more often than not, things often don't unfold exactly as we envisioned or hoped. That is when we turn to our tools.

Merri Sugarman's book *From Craft to Career: A Casting Director's Guide for the Actor* is one of those tools every actor needs. It is straightforward, witty, succinct and full of inspiring anecdotes. She delivers practical information in easy, small bites while sharing personal experiences on her own path from actor to casting director. This is a guidebook to one of the most challenging aspects of our industry—the audition process—and there are references and resources for actors at any stage in their career. The Introduction states that her goal "is to demystify the casting process" and "break down the diverse casting needs of film, television and legit theater in a way that will be easy to understand. Promise." Ms. Sugarman delivers on that promise.

THE BREAKDOWN

The book begins with a beautiful foreword from Tara Rubin, followed by an invitation to the professional actor, and an introduction to the general contents. Chapter One then introduces us to Merri Sugarman's path from her own "craft to career"—from actor to casting director. As an enthusiastic child with a love for singing and parents who supported her love of the arts, Merri eventually found herself in New York pursuing her career as an actor. After a few fabulous tours, she moved from NYC to LA searching for something new. Without looking for it, she found casting; or perhaps it found her. Her passion for seeking new talent was soon overtaken by the corporate stakes of TV/Film, and she found herself returning to NYC. On her return, she began working for a non-profit providing after-school opportunities for youth to work with industry professionals, and one of them was interested in casting. On behalf of her student, she called Tara Rubin wondering if the office could use an intern and found herself with an offer to return to casting instead, this time for Broadway. Two passions colliding, and it stuck.

The book then breaks down into five sections discussing where to live, where to find the work, the tools you need and tips on finding fitting materials, what to expect in the audition room, what to do (and not do) after the audition, and how to be sure you are ready to rock on the "first day of school." The author shows the reader where and how the theatrical and TV/film industries are different, and where they overlap. As a musical theatre performer and teacher who never had much interest in pursuing the world of TV and film, Sugarman's book has filled in some of the gaps in my knowledge that I can now pass on to students.

Part 1
"First Steps on the Career Path"—starts with "Where," where to begin, where to live, where opportunities exist. She also offers some of the "How," how to develop or maintain your skills when auditioning is your full-time job, and a bit on how to balance this with your income-producing job when it is not acting. Chapter 4 emphasizes how the job of an actor is to audition. The author offers five actions to do every day to stay in the game. #1 on the list was a surprise— "Do a Mailing a day." In our world of advanced technology, she does not mean an email or a social media "like" or comment; she means snail mail—hard copies of headshots and postcards with a brief note (a sticky note will suffice) distributed with thoughtful research and specific intent on why you are sending your postcard or H/R (headshot/resume), whether as a way to introduce yourself, to self-submit, or as a casual reminder of who you are and what you are currently doing.

I particularly enjoyed Chapter 6— "Curious Kids" because it taught me new things. It is a guide for the parents of children who want to act, who know nothing about the performing industry but find their kids being whisked into the world of theatre, and how to keep them grounded. Having never thought about the delicate nature of auditioning children for roles that can potentially be traumatizing, I was mesmerized. The author relays the great care and concern needed when auditioning young children for specific projects…Gavroche in *Les Misérables*, an (approximately) 8-year old kid who is shot and dies on the barricade, or Tam in *Miss Saigon*, who must sit and color quietly, and not be traumatized by the sounds of gunshots flying over his head that send him running into his mother's arms. Her descriptions affirm that you are putting your child in the hands of someone who truly cares about their mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

Part 2
"Tools of the Trade"—lays out the tools every actor needs. This is a chapter of the essentials found in most "how to" books. It offers descriptions of headshots and resumes, and underlines the need for reels, websites, and a social media presence. Though visual examples might be useful, the author doesn't waste pages, including them when a quick Google search will provide the beginning actor with many options. Instead, she highlights which personal stats are important, and which are not. Here she offers one of my favorite quotes of the book—"There are so many dos and don'ts! Except…there aren't," and goes on to outline a simple framework but leaves the often over-regulated details up to an individual's personal flair. What magnificent freedom to be who you are. It was liberating.

Sugarman also includes your "team" as your tools, offering insight into agents and managers, and recommendations for when to join the unions. Her chapter on networking makes the complex, scary, and necessary act of networking far more palatable than I have heard it delivered before. Networking is often one of the most intimidating and challenging, but important aspects of the industry. Reluctant thoughts such as "I'm uncomfortable," "I don't want to be a burden," "I say the wrong thing," etc., are common. Ms. Sugarman offers a few "dos and don'ts" for a simple approach to networking, making it easy and relieving our insecurities. If you are teaching a Business of the Biz class and can only include one chapter from multiple books—use this one. Succinct. Accessible. Immediately applicable.

Part 3
To anyone with an interest in casting, Part 3, "The Casting Director's Role on the Creative Team," should be required reading. How many actors actually know what a casting director does on any given day? Many performers and teachers have dabbled in the casting process, but this section offers a more thorough perspective.

Actors typically engage with casting directors when they are being called in for an audition, in the audition room itself, in a masterclass setting, or hopefully when they call to offer the job. That was the extent of my knowledge of "a day in the life of a casting director." This section dispelled my ignorance and elevated my awe and respect for all that a casting director is responsible for. I had no idea that casting directors hustle for casting contracts the way actors do, or that the casting director (or associate) also runs for coffee and lunch for the creative team during a long audition day. Ms. Sugarman also sensibly explains what is within their purview as casting directors, and what is not. Understanding more of the behind the scenes work of a casting director gives the reader new appreciation for how hard they work for us, and how grateful we should be when they champion for us.

Part 4

In part 4—"Auditions" —The author steps us through the audition process from the expected levels of preparation to what to expect in the audition room, offering witty anecdotes all the way through. She "has a lot to say about [her] idea of what it truly means to be prepared for an audition versus what the actor thinks it means to be prepared for an audition." This section succinctly hits all of the typical big lessons—what to have in your audition arsenal, how to select appropriate materials, how to walk into the room (there's a good story here!), how to communicate with an accompanist (when applicable), what to wear, (etc.) and what might occur in a myriad of circumstances. She mentions the "meeting only" audition (for established stars) and the "internet presence" audition (for everyone). There are some wonderful audition stories that are fun to read. I particularly enjoyed her overview of self-tapes—elucidating the pros and cons—and the benefit of taking on-camera classes if only to successfully navigate the self-tape audition. She also offers her personal perspective on the ever present "feedback after the audition" question. Though she is explaining the "dos and don'ts…except when there aren't" (a wonderfully liberating and recurring theme), Sugarman reminds us to view the audition as an opportunity to practice our craft and "play."

"ALL THE TALENT IN THE WORLD WONT HELP YOU GET A JOB IF YOU AREN'T EFFECTIVE AT THE BUSINESS PART OF THE BUSINESS."

Personal sidebar! As a singer and voice teacher myself, I am grateful for the singing background Ms. Sugarman brings as a casting director, and her perspective on song selection—showing range (vocal and emotional), and taking care when choosing iconic/challenging pieces, because you will inevitably be compared to the icons who came before. She also offers valuable perspective on when to transpose…or not, and why. Thanks, Merri!

Part 5

"After the Audition"—Psychologically speaking, this might be the most important information actors need. Hearing and understanding the hard truths, good and ugly, is a very important aspect of this business. For the teachers who may struggle to pass on this valuable information because students often don't want to hear about the inequitable or seemingly unfair realities—allow this chapter to do it for you. Sugarman delicately balances hard truth with pragmatism and positivity. It's business, and there are a lot of considerations that come with business. The section on "Why Didn't I Get the Job" is a mental health hack for auditioners and should be required reading for every actor. If only our students (or ourselves) could embrace this perspective more readily it could free them from self-abasement and insecurities when they inevitably do not book the job.

Another important section, Chapter 18, takes us to the "First Day of School." For every kid, or adult, who has an attitude of "I deserve"—please read the opening of this chapter. It is a reminder of the hard work, grit, and passion the job demands before, during, and outside of the rehearsal space. Embracing and demonstrating this level of rigor will serve every performer well in their career.

Beyond the opening, where most chapters give a wider, fuller brushstroke, the examples in Chapter 18 are—at least from my own experience (specifically in theatre)—more specific to large scale Broadway and touring productions. As wonderful as social mixers would be, many regional theatres do not usually have the time or money to spare. These days, there might be a quick circle of introductions of the actors and creative team, and possibly a short design presentation, but typically music rehearsals begin right away, and there may or may not be a taped-out stage to work with, requiring our imaginations to be fully "on." That being said, Broadway-level theatre is where Ms. Sugarman lives, and she participates in these splendid kickoff events regularly.

Ending on an inspiring note, the final chapter—"That's a Wrap"—is a wonderful success story exemplifying the grit and rigor our industry calls us to rise to.

WHAT DID WE MISS?

As with every book that comes on the market, eventually some aspects become outdated. It is a testament to our ever-evolving industry that with a book published in 2023, already a few mentions are no longer true. As of this year (2025), the "Strawhat Auditions" no longer exist. The book also overlooks what I would consider one of our most important tools today—Actors Access. With Playbill and Backstage being cited, I was surprised that a profile on Actors Access did not receive a mention. This tool is a staple in the acting community now, whether to find auditions and self-submit, or to receive auditions through your agent and upload submission materials.

There are also a few bits of repeated paragraphs (some statements nearly verbatim) at the beginning and end, and as the reader you think "wait—why do I already know this?" Because it was said earlier in Chapter One. Perhaps that is intentional. But these are very minor critiques and should not deter anyone from acquiring this book.

WHY THIS BOOK

If you teach a Biz of the Biz class to undergraduate seniors, you are likely regularly looking for the latest book on how you "do the business." *From Craft to Career* focuses on one specific but vital aspect—the audition process. It is not "how you do life"—budgets, financial planning, goal planning, etc. And thank goodness, because who wants to buy that tome? It's too much. Totaling only 158 pages, this is a quick read. I particularly appreciate that the chapters are fairly short, making them easy to assign one or two at a time to a classroom of about-to-graduate seniors with severe senioritis.

If you are someone who wants to be on Broadway, then reading this book of gems is a no-brainer. You will inevitably find yourself in Merri Sugarman's audition room. Perhaps the most insightful information are the "dos and don'ts" in working with Ms. Sugarman herself. Gaining insight into her preferences in communication and preparation gives one a certain level of confidence and relieves the insecurity of the belaboring question "did I do something wrong?" It also begs the question; do all casting directors think this way? The theme of "there are dos and don'ts… except there aren't" plays out regularly throughout the book. The author offers strong suggestions and reasons why her "dos and don'ts" exist, but is sure to point out, "at least for me." My hope is that more of our esteemed and established casting directors are as open minded and that they will find ways to offer us a similar kind of personal insight.

THESE ARE A FEW OF MY FAVORITE QUOTES

"The key to taking the first (or next) step in your career is to constantly begin again."

Thanking her high school drama teacher… "you made me see that stepping out of my comfort zone might just be a gateway drug."' Ha! So true. I know it has been for me.

"By the way, the old adage 'Those who can't, teach' is bullshit. Those who can teach. Great teachers are the bedrock of *everything*." Thanks, Merri. I happen to agree.

IN CONCLUSION

If you teach performing artists, or desire to be a performer yourself (or currently are), this book should be your next read. Sugarman's extensive experience as a casting director of theatre, musical theatre, and TV/film is invaluable. While the title suggests it is a guide for the actor, *From Craft to Career* offers inspiration, ideas, and insights to a much wider audience—from parents of performing kids, to teachers, and even, dare I suggest, to current and future casting directors for how to care for the vulnerable people in your rooms. As a singer, I believe many of her insights would be beneficial for the operatic community as well.

As with every guidebook, readers will absorb and implement some perspectives, dismiss some, and choose others to ruminate on and return to at the appropriate time. In this vein, *From Craft to Career* offers a tremendous amount of vital material for beginning and advanced actors, teachers, casting directors, and performing mentors. I already find myself wanting to return to specific sections to further internalize her wisdom.

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect is that Sugarman offers us instruction but doesn't spoon feed us the already baked and frosted cake. She hands us the bowl, the whisk, a list of ingredients to get and says…now, go do it. So go…run, don't walk. Order it now, and then require your students or clients to purchase and read it top to bottom. It's important. It is both a memoir and a wealth of insight to anyone who wants to be a professional actor.

I finished this book with a smile and a sigh, because I know things now, many valuable things, that I hadn't known before. And when it comes to navigating this very tricky and challenging industry, knowing is half the battle ("G.I. Joe!"). So, pick up your copy or Kindle version today—here's the link. https://a.co/d/bpI9K7z

BIOGRAPHY
CJ Greer leads the Musical Theatre program at the University of Nevada Reno. Recently off the Broadway tour of *Company*, CJ performs and presents around the world in areas of Music Theatre performance, and integrative performance pedagogy. She is also faculty for the Trentino Music Festival (Italy).

Don't Sweat the Technique: A Performers' Guide to Hop-Hop and Rap

Melissa Foster
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2023
$95.00 HARDBACK, $36.00 PAPERBACK, $34.00 eBOOK
DOI 10.62392/XMDI7879

Review by Stephannie Moore

Melissa Foster is Musical Theatre faculty at Northwestern University and a voice pedagogue who brings a fresh perspective to the contemporary singing conversation. She is a highly-regarded clinician and consultant to an array of performing arts organizations such as the Contemporary and Commercial (CCM) Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah University, Lyric Unlimited (a division of the Chicago Lyric Opera), and the ArtsLink Foundation. Foster has been a guest artist at dozens of universities and has served as a vocal coach for numerous New York City and touring musical theatre productions. Her students perform on Broadway, in national tours, and in professional contexts across the world. In addition to these contributions to the theatrical arts industry, she has now organized and codified historical and stylistic understandings of the hip-hop and rap landscapes in her new book, *Don't Sweat the Technique: A Performers' Guide to Hop-Hop and Rap*.

Foster's book is a thorough reference and an extremely readable guide that makes connections between hip-hop's musical trends and the supporting culture in a way that's strikingly clear and digestible. I'm sure I'm not the only musical theatre educator who feels vastly undereducated about how best to train students in these styles, so Foster's book is a welcome resource.

I don't think it's presumptuous to say that many voice educators received little to no training in vocal technique outside of western classical music—even those with advanced degrees in pedagogy. Although we may have grown up immersed in popular music that was deeply influenced by pop and hip-hop, our formal education was likely based upon European and white-washed American musical history. Fortunately, contemporary vocal pedagogy has begun to be legitimized in the mainstream. It's been slow to come to the table, but it's not going anywhere.

Today, our musical theatre students are auditioning for or working within contexts heavily influenced by these styles—styles we ourselves may find intimidating or understand very little about. Oftentimes students enter our studios as the experts on contemporary genres, having far more knowledge than we do. We do our best to mentor them through their vocal exploration and experimentation, even though there is limited pedagogical information to consult. Foster's book is a welcome addition to our teaching tools. Her communication is frank, thoughtful, and inclusive of all who are interested in exploring hip-hop styles.

The book is organized into two distinct sections—
"Part I. History and Influence" and "Part 2. Vocal Technique."
Part I includes seven chapters and explores a concise historical timeline that follows the development of hip-hop from its earliest roots through to the present day. Foster highlights the most central cities to hip-hop's development and discusses stylistic offshoots and subgenres of rap that may be new categories to many of us. For each of these subgenres, she provides a brief discussion of key artists and connects the music to outside influences such as politics, religion, social trends, and social justice. Her writing style is refreshingly casual. In the introduction, she states that the book is "purposely written in the way you might talk to a friend." While based on a solid foundation of scholarly research (extensively footnoted at the end of each chapter) the content is delivered in a playful tone and, as a result, her writing will be approachable and accessible to teachers and performers of nearly any level or background. This is sure to eliminate some of the barriers that may prevent non-African American artists from learning about and performing hip-hop and rap-based music.

Foster's first two chapters are devoted to providing a context for hip-hop's rise as a musical artform and these chapters lay the groundwork for all of Part I. Chapter 1 explores its Bronx origins in the 1960s and the African American popular music genres that were most influential—R&B, funk, and disco—to name a few. The pre-cursors to hip-hop as a culture, however, began decades earlier with the urban renewal projects that contributed to the Bronx borough's economic and cultural devastation. A depressed community that saw a rise of drug use, rampant crime, a lack of public resources, or livable housing was primed for an artistic escape and a need for personal expression that became the backdrop for a new style of music, dance, and art. Thus, the "Five Pillars of Hip-Hop" were established, namely the traditions of MCing (oral), DJing (aural), Breakdance (physical), Graffiti (visual), and Knowledge (mental), categories coined by a hip-hop pioneer of the south Bronx, DJ Afrika Bambaataa.

In Chapter 2, Foster further explores the development of hip-hop culture, spanning the years 1973-1999 and she touches upon the visual expressions of graffiti and hip-hop fashion as supportive counterparts for the new style of music. "Old School" artists started the trend of "boom bap," the driving, rhythmic pattern named for the relationship between kick drum and snare that has underscored hip-hop "flow" for decades. "Old School" spoke frank truths about urban life and the oppression of African Americans, but it was the "New School" artists that brought hip-hop to mainstream American culture, with a deepened dimension of commercialization. In this chapter, Foster discusses some of the best-known artists of both the Old and New Schools and refers to rap's "Golden Age," sometimes knows as the "Middle School," where sampling, record spinning, and other new techniques flourished.

Chapter 2 also introduces hip-hop's sprawl to other parts of the country. Additional cities like Philadelphia and Brooklyn contributed to the "East Coast" hip-hop scene and "West Coast" emerged in the 90s as a genre of hip-hop that developed out of Los Angeles and California's Bay Area. The "Dirty South" style introduced local versions in areas such as Memphis, Atlanta, Houston, and other southern urban locations. Detroit, with its roots in Motown and on the heels of its own socio-economic devastation, produced yet another variety of hip-hop sound.

The role of hip-hop master producers is examined in the third chapter. Foster explains that the scope of a producer's role can be extremely broad, ranging from the management of an artist's publicity to making specific artistic choices about album content, composition, instrumentation, and studio engineering. Each producer likely has a signature "sound," one that can be recognized across the music of various artists that they manage. Six of the best-known producers are featured in this chapter.

Chapter 4 begins with a retrospective on the segregation of Black American music from the nation's popular music charts. *Billboard*'s Black musicians were initially relegated to representation on the "Harlem's Hit Parade" chart when it was established in 1942. Foster explains that the "segregation of the charts represents the segregation of how music was marketed and sold." She examines snapshots of the charts from 1975 forward, showing the gradual influx of b=Black and hip-hop artists to the mainstream "Hot 100," a transition largely influenced by Michael Jackson's 1979 hit album "Off the Wall," which was promoted across pop and R&B musical communities alike. By 2015, hip-hop could no longer be seen as "other" than mainstream music, and in 2017, hip-hop was recognized as the "most profitable and most listened to form of popular music." The conversation about the history of *Billboard*'s charts is highly condensed, obviously intended as a side discussion, but it's an effective way to illuminate the understanding that hip-hop music is not just an influence for trends of popular music culture, hip-hop culture IS popular culture.

An extensive listing of hip-hop genres and sub-genres is the focus of Chapter 5. Foster titles the chapter as a "Roadmap to Rap Styles," as it follows pathways to the development of primary and off-shoot styles of rap. She states that her listing is in no way exhaustive, but for many readers this chapter will be eye-opening in terms of just how many unique styles of rap have emerged so far. "Old School," "New School," and "Gangsta" may be familiar terms to some, but many of us will be newly acquainted with such categories as "Holy Hip-Hop," "Crunk," "Trap," and "The Native Tongues," to list just a few sub-genres discussed. Each category includes a basic description of the style, often including historic origins and sonic qualities, and a short list of popular artists we can point to as musical examples.

Only one chapter—Chapter 6—is devoted to the introduction of hip-hop styles to musical theatre, with an expected emphasis on *Hamilton*, Bronx-native Lin-Manuel Miranda's "love letter to hip-hop." Foster makes clear that some of the so-called "rap" found in Broadway repertoire is not truly hip-hop, but an amalgamation of popular styles of the last century. She emphasizes that while the content and context may vary, some aspects of hip-hop technique will absolutely be applicable to theatre performance. That said, she clearly states that patter songs in opera and musicals are not rap, as they "don't stem from the hip-hop tradition and can't be traced back to the contemporary urban Black experience." She cites the example of the witch's opening patter song in Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, something often mislabeled as "rap."

Foster's book is intended as an overview of hip-hop styles, not specifically geared toward hip-hop's representation in musical theatre settings. That said, further discussion about hip-hop styles on Broadway would be extremely valuable to musical theatre educators and performers, in terms of better preparing audition material suited to shows with a strong hip-hop musical base.

Part I of the book ends with a chapter on finding authenticity in performance. From the start, Foster addresses the common question of who is "eligible" to participate in hip-hop music from the point of view of creation, performance, and profiting from an art form whose original intent was to provide a platform for the voices and perspectives of Black Americans. The author stresses that she does not have a clear answer to this question

The author with Common.

and that the conversation is "complicated and ever evolving." She is emphatic about her view that all artists need to dig deep within themselves and determine what feels appropriate and authentic in their own circumstances. She also suggests that it might be more valuable to assess past examples of appropriating and inauthentic behavior, using those examples as guideposts for what not to do.

Foster looks at authenticity from multiple viewpoints, as it's hard to agree on a single definition of what authenticity should include. She provides brief discussion on subcategories of representational authenticity, cultural authenticity, and personal authenticity, and reflects upon the commercial trend of artists selling authenticity as a brand. Speaking from lived experience is of great importance, though not a possible entry point for everyone. Ultimately, the chapter only scratches the surface of these ideas, and the reader is left with many more questions to consider, but I believe this was Foster's intent.

"Part II. Vocal Technique" (chapters 8 through 18) is a guide for the performer, addressing the technical aspects of rap's musical building blocks as well as specific guidance for its performance. It begins with a chapter that includes a broad range of topics essential to the nuts and bolts of music and spoken lyrics. Foster gives descriptions of such musical foundations as beat, rhythm, and tempo and introduces "flow," a key feature of rap that can encompass "phrasing, rhythm, meter, rhyme, accent, patterning, and groove, not to mention the relations among these parameters." Flow is an enormous topic, and each artist develops their own flow style, which becomes a sort of sonic signature.

Three chapters of Part II focus on the fundamentals of alignment, breath, and articulation. While much of the material related to these mechanics can be found in other references, Foster includes her own perspectives and numerous exercises in each chapter that can be easily implemented by those with little understanding of voice science or physiology. She also includes a chapter on vocal health that might not be new information to those in formal education settings but will likely be enlightening to rap artists and other vocalists outside of academic contexts.

In the chapter related to pitch, tone quality, and resonance, Foster applies these fundamentals to rap's unique vocal nuances. For example, she explains the importance of locating an optimal speaking pitch for rapping—a pitch that will effectively tell a story while allowing for sustainability and ease of vocal production. For rap artists, pitch and tone quality are individualistic choices that become part of the performer's identity and recognizability. This will be a new concept for many voice educators. In most voice studio contexts, singers are trained to perform music according to pitch and inflection that someone else has already written. Unless we are part of a work's creation, we have little input related to pitch and inflection and are generally not asked to consider how we want to craft our voices to project our personal identity. The author offers many unique exercises for helping the rap artist unlock varied styles of voice use and vocal effects to convey emotional intent, groove, and atmosphere. There is a tremendous amount to explore on these pages and there is no doubt that these conversations about vocal shaping have a place in broader contexts of voice training.

Chapter 12 provides a basic understand of rhythm and flow, including a cursory description of existing models for notating rap. Examples using both western staff notation and bar charts are shown to demonstrate how rhythm patterns create a continuous pulse to underlie spoken text. Foster provides a detailed exploration of note values and subdivision that will be extremely useful to someone who lacks previous training in musicianship.

BOOK REVIEW

The chapter subtitled "Art and Authenticity of Storytelling" is packed with information related to the design of song content, finding dramatic intent, and thoughtful text delivery. Foster provides examples of frequently used subject matter, including themes of personal experience, humor, history, escapism, activism, and more. As discussed in prior chapters, she continues to stress the importance of authenticity—rapping about "things you can relate to and things you care about" so that "your performance paves the way for an ease of expression and emotion because it will naturally come from within." Some of her storytelling considerations mirror those of actors in other contexts, like finding a "moment before," having a clear objective in telling the story and deciding on the intended listener.

There is an entire chapter dedicated to microphones, providing a concise explanation of varying mic styles and exploring the pros and cons of each in terms of acoustical quality, price point, and singer/speaker proximity. For those of us who work primarily with non-amplified singers, this chapter is a great entry point to understanding mic technology, a topic that may feel intimidating to traditional voice teachers.

A chapter of final considerations follows, introducing additional terms that are essential to songwriting and offering suggestions for prioritizing and organizing a practice routine. Music educators know first-hand that inexperienced students often have difficulty establishing consistent practice habits. In my experience, vocalists tend to struggle more than instrumentalists when it comes to using practice time effectively simply because the voice is less tangible than a physical instrument you can see and touch. Although the conversation about practice is somewhat brief, it's helpful to see it addressed and the suggestions that Foster offers are applicable to any type of performing artist looking to continuously improve upon their skills.

Part II concludes with interviews of 14 rap artists. It's an effective way to end the book and feels like a welcome dessert after taking in a great feast of practical information. Reading about the experiences of industry professional helps to make the advice from Foster's prior chapters more personal. The interviews show a humanizing, down-to-earth glimpse of some of rap's superstars who are often seen only in larger-than-life portrayals.

Foster's book is a gigantic gift to the performing arts industry—a concise, well-organized and thoroughly considered reference that belongs on the bookshelf of any teacher who aims to provide relevant training to modern vocalists. Although it is by no means exhaustive, it's an excellent gateway into hip-hop performance practice that will bring to light the importance of its inclusion in formal and informal educational curriculum.

BIOGRAPHY

Stephannie Moore is a vocal coach with students across the US, UK, Europe and Asia. She is an active clinical researcher and specializes in strategies to prevent aund rehabilitate singing voice injuries. As a clinician, she has presented on topics including crossover singing styles, contemporary techniques for classical singers, vocal hygiene for the musical theatre artist, and mindfulness strategies for performance anxiety.

Photo credit: Zachary Nelson, courtesy of Unsplash

EDITORIAL STAFF

RODGERS + HAMMERSTEIN'S CINDERELLA | APRIL 2024
West Virginia University
Directed by Lee Blair
Photography by Alyssa Reves

FUNNY GIRL | OCTOBER 2024
Lynn University
Directed by Adam Simpson
Photography by Shirley Bazua

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[2024-2025]

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NATASHA, PIERRE AND THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 | APRIL 2023
Fort Lewis College
Directed by Michael E. McKelvey
Photography by Jonas Grushkin

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance was founded in 1999 as a means for teachers of young professional artists to come together and exchange ideas, methodologies, and solutions to common challenges in the academic settings of universities and conservatories.

We welcome submissions in a variety of formats (written text, digital, artwork). You do not need to be a member of MTEA to submit.

SUBJECT AREAS

Musical theatre education covers a variety of subject areas including, but not limited to:

- acting
- singing
- music
- dance
- movement
- diversity, equity, and inclusion
- career preparation
- social media and publicity
- direction
- music direction
- choreography
- design or production
- musical film
- digital entrepreneurship
- new media
- composition
- lyric-writing
- music theatre history
- repertoire
- new works development
- mental and physical health
- practicing
- career concerns
- tenure and promotion
- collaboration
- workplace issues
- audition techniques
- coaching
- recruitment
- industry trends

Our focus is primarily on the college level (undergraduate and graduate) research and practice; however, submissions focusing on professional practice and/or high school instruction are welcome if relevant to our mission and members. We also seek interviews with notable people, as well as book, cast album, or performance reviews.

SUBMISSION CATEGORIES

Note: When submitting your article, please indicate which category best fits your piece.

- Articles: Peer-reviewed (double-blind), scholarly pieces that include citations beyond online or anecdotal sources.
- Pedagogical: Non-peer-reviewed pieces that offer specific methods or techniques for immediate classroom use based on current best practices or established methods (e.g., Meisner). Pieces will be edited for format and length.
- Interviews: Non-peer-reviewed pieces that will be edited for content and length.
- Feature Submissions: Non-peer-reviewed, topic-specific columns, subject to editing for format, style, and length. (omitted Coach's Corner)
- Book/Cast Album/Performance Reviews: Non-peer-reviewed reviews, subject to editing for length.

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HOW TO SUBMIT

Note: For the seventh volume, we have changed our submission policy.

NON-PEER REVIEWED: Feature articles (non-peer reviewed), educational/applied/practical articles (formerly "Coach's Corner," now under the heading "Classroom to Studio to Stage"), Interviews, and Book Reviews may now be submitted via Abstract or Proposal (approx. 500-750 words). In other words, if you have an idea for one of these types of articles, you do not have to submit a fully written article in advance. The editorial board will review the submissions and then notify the authors to start work on the accepted articles. The submission deadline will be June 15, 2025 with final articles being submitted by September 15, 2025.

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 15, 2025 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.

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

- There is no limit or requirement on submission length; however, the editorial staff reserves the right to edit for length. A general guideline is 2500 to 5000 words.
- You are encouraged to submit professional production high resolution photographs (minimum of 2) with your piece along with show information (place, date, director, title of show) and photographer name.
- 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
- Authors are responsible to acquire all permissions including photographs.
- Please submit in a Word (.doc or .docx) file and send via email to journal@musicaltheatreeducators.org or submit online at www.musicaltheatreeducators.org/contributors.
- Include a 50-word bio for each author.

EDITORIAL DECISIONS

1. Accepted
2. Accepted with minor revisions
3. Accepted with major revisions
4. Recommended for re-submit after substantial rewrite for current or future issues
5. Declined

If your piece is selected for publication, you must sign a release giving permission for use by MTEA. If requested edits and rewrites have not been returned by the assigned deadline, the piece will not be published.

PLAYGROUND | 2023
Leg Lengthening
Photography by Hailey Garza

FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHY

Photo 01 | *Funny Girl,* Lynn University, October 2024
Directed by Adam Simpson, Photography by Shirley Bazua

Photo 02 | *The Addams Family,* Illinois State University, November 2023
Directed by Maggie Marlin-Hess & Matthew Vala, Photography by Clay Jackson & Maggie Marlin-Hess

Photo 03 | *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling* Bee,
Rockford University, October 2024
Directed by Marissa Barnathan, Photography by Ted Johnson

Photo 04 | Photography by Kyle Head, courtesy of Unsplash

Photo 05 | *Funny Girl,* Lynn University, October 2024
Directed by Adam Simpson, Photography by Shirley Bazua

Photo 06 | *Sponge Bob Square Pants* St. Lawrence College, April 2024
Directed by Steven Gallagher, Photography by Seanna Kennedy

Photo 07 | *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling* Bee,
Rockford University, October 2024
Directed by Marissa Barnathan, Photography by Ted Johnson

Photo 08 | *Cabaret,* Nazareth University, November 2024
Directed by Richard Biever, Photography by Ron Heerkens Jr

Photo 09 | *Author photo,* Celeste Lanuza

Photo 10 | *Author photo,* Celeste Lanuza

Photo 11 | *Author photo,* Celeste Lanuza

Photo 12 | *Author photo,* Celeste Lanuza

Photo 13 | *Author photo,* Celeste Lanuza

Photo 14 | *Author photo,* Celeste Lanuza

Photo 15 | *Author photo,* Celeste Lanuza

Photo 16 | *Matty & Kikau* author photo, Ben Lundy

Photo 17 | *Matty & Kikau* author photo, Ben Lundy

Photo 18 | *Head Over Heels* rehearsal photo,
University of Texas at Arlington, 2024,
Directed by J. Austin Eyer, Photography by J. Austin Eyer

Photo 19 | *Head Over Heels,* University of Texas at Arlington, 2024,
Directed by J. Austin Eyer, Photography by J. Austin Eyer

Photo 20 | *Cabaret*, University of Texas at Arlington, 2022,
Directed by J. Austin Eyer, Photography by J. Austin Eyer

Photo 21 | *Head Over Heels,* University of Texas at Arlington, 2024,
Directed by J. Austin Eyer, Photography by J. Austin Eyer

Photo 22 | Martha Swope (1928–2017)
Carl Hall and Stephanie Mills in the original Broadway production of *The Wiz: The New Musical Version of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz",* 1978
Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center

Photo 23 | *Playground* 2023, *Praise Is What We Do*
Photography by Hailey Garza

Photo 24 | *Playground* 2017, Photography by Louis Stein

Photo 25 | *Playground* 2010 | Pig Pen Theater Company
Photography courtesy of CMU School of Drama

Photo 26 | Photography courtesy of CMU School of Drama

Photo 27 | Photography courtesy of CMU School of Drama

Photo 28 | *Heathers,* Bowling Green State University, April 2024
Directed by James Stover, Photography by Michael Nemeth

Photo 29 | *Miss You Like Hell,* Arizona State University, Nov 2023
Directed by Marissa Barnathan, Photography by Reg Madison

Photo 30 | *Miss You Like Hell,* Arizona State University, November 2023
Directed by Marissa Barnathan, Photography by Reg Madison

Photo 31 | *Miss You Like Hell,* Arizona State University, Nov 2023
Directed by Marissa Barnathan, Photography by Reg Madison

Photo 32 | *Miss You Like Hell,* Arizona State University, Nov 2023
Directed by Marissa Barnathan, Photography by Reg Madison

Photo 33 | *Miss You Like Hell,* Arizona State University, Nov 2023
Directed by Marissa Barnathan, Photography by Reg Madison

Photo 34 | *A Box of Memories* performance, August 2022
Directed by Narelle Yeo, Photography by Robert Catto

Photo 35 | *Grecian Burns*, Slippery Rock University, Date?
Directed by Aaron Galligan-Stierle, Photography by Cassie Dietrich

Photo 36 | *A New Brain*, San Diego State University, Fall 2024
Directed by Josh Walden, Photography by Ken Jacques

Photo 37 | *Into the Woods,* Bowling Green University, April 2024
Directed by James Stover, Photography by Michael Nemeth

Photo 38 | *Funny Girl,* Lynn University, October 2024
Directed by Adam Simpson, Photography by Shirley Bazua

Photo 39 | *Cabaret,* Nazareth University, November 2024
Directed by Richard Biever, Photography by Ron Heerkens Jr

CABARET | NOVEMBER 2024
Nazareth University
Directed by Richard Biever
Photography by Ron Heerkens Jr

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