

VOLUME 3 | JANUARY 2020

# MTEA

MUSICAL THEATRE  
EDUCATORS' ALLIANCE

# CONTENT

**FRONT COVER PHOTO:**  
LES MISERABLES | August 2019  
Queensland Conservatorium  
Griffith University, Australia  
Produced by Paul Sabay  
Direction by Alister Smith  
Conducted by Peter Morris  
Musical Direction by Heidi Loveland  
Set Design by Nathan Weyers  
Lighting Design by Nigel Levings  
Costume Realisation: Chloe Greaves  
Photography by Nick Morrissey



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# LETTER FROM IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT

Journal number three!

It's so exciting to me that Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance has now published three editions of its peer reviewed journal. I have taken such pleasure in reading the submissions these last couple of years and seeing how we are sharing our scholarly artistic work with the community. I'm so grateful to Tracey Moore for spearheading this thing and getting it off the ground successfully. I'm grateful as well to VP Boyle for his art direction and graphic design work, which is no small feat. As we transition to a new executive board, we will also be looking to our new Editor-in-Chief, Amelia Rollings, for the next few years of our journal's development, and I have no doubt that it will continue to grow in scope and visibility, just as this organization has done over the past decade.

## MTEA HAS PROVIDED BOTH A LAUNCH PAD AND A LANDING PAD FOR SO MANY OF US IN VARIOUS PARTS OF OUR CAREERS...

I have been extremely honored to serve MTEA over the last 8 years as Regional Director, Conference VP, and President. And as I transition to Immediate Past President and hand the proverbial keys over to Stacy Alley and the new board, I look forward to seeing where the next three years take us.

MTEA has provided both a launch pad and a landing pad for so many of us in various parts of our careers, it has given us a solid community, and it has created countless conversations that have no doubt impacted all of our lives. If you have not served as a board member of this organization, I urge you to consider it during the next cycle. In the meantime, please continue to read and share the work contained in these fabulous journals. And please continue to actively participate in the dialogue that is Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance.

Happy New Year!



Jonathan Flom  
Outgoing President, MTEA



# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Colleagues,

It is hard to believe that in January 2011, I attended my first MTEA Conference in Austin, Texas, and just nine years later, I am about to begin my term as President of this fantastic organization! During this seemingly short period of time, I have been fortunate enough to serve MTEA in other leadership capacities, was appointed Head of our Musical Theatre program as well tenured and promoted to Associate Professor at The University of Alabama, and have traveled to wonderful places to perform, direct, and choreograph various projects. Such opportunities were largely made possible due to the mentorship, inspiration, and support I have received from many of you. So, in this season of giving thanks, I want to formally express my gratitude to those of you who have not only been a part of my journey, but who undoubtedly make a huge difference in the lives of your colleagues and students every single day. I also want to express my gratitude to the passionate educators and professionals who have agreed to serve on our new Executive Board and who, along with our entire membership, are ready and willing to ride the wave of musical theatre as it grows, changes, and challenges us all.

I look forward to celebrating with you, learning from you, and hugging your necks in San Diego!



Stacy Alley  
President, MTEA

THE ADDAMS FAMILY | October 2019  
Wright State University  
Direction by Joe Deer  
Choreography by Dionysia Williams  
Sets by David J. Castellano  
Lighting by Matthew P. Benjamin  
Costumes by Zoe Still





# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I'm delighted to share the contents of this third issue with you.

In these pages, you'll find pieces from tenured and non-tenured faculty, community college instructors, grad students, and working professionals—a diversity of viewpoints that is reflective of our membership.

In addition to our regular features, there are articles that explore critical thinking, mental health, intimacy directors, and gender performance. As theatre educators, these are some of the myriad issues we face every day. I hope that discussions spark from the words on these pages.

This year, please consider contributing to the MTEA journal. Your thoughts, projects, and classroom solutions are valuable to others.

In these times, where problems seem so big it's hard to know where to start, we forget that small things can make a difference. Open a word doc, and jot things down as they occur to you. Write about something that worked in class, or a student comment that gave you an idea. If you read an article with a good quote, copy the URL and paste it there. Pretty soon you'll have something worth writing up.

This will be the last issue under my aegis. Starting the MTEA Journal was a dream project, and with this, the third issue, I am confident that it now has momentum. Long may she live.

**IN THESE TIMES, WHERE PROBLEMS SEEM SO BIG  
IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHERE TO START,  
WE FORGET THAT SMALL THINGS  
CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**

Thanks to everyone who has contributed in ways large and small, and to VP Boyle, who has been by my side since we started, making things pretty.

It has been a pleasure serving the members of MTEA in this way.

Tracey Moore  
Editor-in-Chief

# COACH'S CORNER

## THE INS AND OUTS OF SELECTING AUDITION REPERTOIRE

By Aaron Galligan-Stierle

For almost a decade, I have taught an audition technique class in New York City called *Advanced Build Your Book*. Every time I teach this course, I reconsider the challenges of constructing a binder of audition repertoire, since each song must serve many masters: it must highlight vocal strengths, showcase acting chops, embody type, and speak to the artist on a deeply personal level.

As a professional audition coach, I spend my days analyzing, discussing and dissecting the many assumptions surrounding musical theatre auditions. My methodologies often fly in the face of standard audition practices, yet they succeed. In this article, I'll offer up some of these unconventional insights regarding audition song selection.

### THE INDUSTRY STANDARD

A typical approach to building a successful audition book is to begin by breaking repertoire down into eras and styles: *Standard Ballad*, *Standard Uptempo*, *Contemporary Driving/Dramatic*, *Contemporary Ballad*, *Comedy*, and *Pop/Rock*.<sup>1</sup>

When I am hired as a professional coach, I make sure each of those boxes are ticked by at least one or two songs, and then I workshop material with the singer to fill any "holes." I use this strategy to make sure that actors have a musically-diverse book. For Broadway-level performers, my focus then shifts to how to make an artist authentically stand out from the crowd.

Another strategy that I offer my clients is to ask them to create a list of "dream roles," and

<sup>1</sup> *Advanced Build Your Book* and this valuable repertoire approach from *The Perfect Audition Song*, were both created and written by VP Boyle. Used by permission.



THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD | November 2019  
Trinity University  
Direction by Dr. Nathan Stith  
Photography by Siggie Ragnar

then choose songs that those characters sing. It can also be helpful to look at the actors who originated those roles, and then cross-reference those actors with the other shows/roles/songs that they've performed for more ideas. This strategy is good for gathering type-appropriate material, but it's rarely enough to book the job.

What's needed in addition to these starting points is a deeper understanding of what makes an audition succeed or fail. It's not enough to simply add the songs and cuts that we hear "everyone else" doing, or deferring to the commonly-accepted choice. Instead of accepting conventional musical theater wisdom at face value, we need to dig underneath the surface to see why some songs work and other songs don't for professional auditions.

### MINING THE SOURCE: AUDITION NOTICES

If you skim audition breakdowns, you'll see that one phrase crops up in almost every notice: "Please sing a song that shows range." Most young musical theater performers will interpret this as a directive about vocal range. They find a song that showcases their glorious high notes, and call it a day.

Here's my take: in this fast-paced industry, the creative team often doesn't have time to specify their needs in a casting breakdown. In fact, it's not unreasonable to assume that the team doesn't even know their needs until they're in the room seeing brilliant actors making inspired choices. But they can't simply request that auditioners, "Please sing a song." The extraordinary lack of specificity would be both cringeworthy and laughable! By requesting that actors "please sing a song that shows range," the team has a convenient shorthand to sound like they have more clarity about their needs than they may actually have. And now, this terminology has become industry standard.



P05

Does this mean that a team does not want to hear vocal range? Of course not. The music department will need to determine a contralto from a high belter, but most skilled music directors don't need to hear a High C at 8 a.m. to discern that you're a legit soprano with a range for days.

If you'll buy in to my theory that to "show range" implies more than high notes, a whole world of exciting possibilities opens up by tapping into a much more expansive understanding of "range" and its many connotations. I'd encourage the savvy young actor to consider choosing a song that expresses a more nuanced understanding of range: perhaps the narrative distance of a story arc, the emotional journey of a character, or an outside-the-box take on one's perceived type. A fully-realized story from indecision to action in "Moments In The Woods" will demonstrate a gifted actor; the emotional journey from vulnerability to joy in "Is It Really Me?" could show an available and willing performer. A character actor's type-defying rendition of "What Is It About Her?" might be a revelation about both song and performer. Such choices will allow the team to see more of your artistic heart and authentic humanity, thus revealing much more than just your high notes in "Get Out And Stay Out."

Don't get me wrong. I am, by no stretch of the imagination, against big belty endings. But I contend that showing vocal range is worth very little if it's not in service of the emotional and storytelling stakes of a song.

### THE DRAMATURGY OF THE CUT

I've clocked many hours sitting behind the table with casting directors. At some point, almost every one of them has said some version of, "I wish everyone would stop yelling their songs at me." Or, "I wish performers would sing less." Is this because New York City is plagued with bad singers? Of course not! It's because the team spends seven hours behind a table hearing performers sing the last 16 bars of "The Life I Never Led (Reprise)" at the top of their lungs.

Now, "The Life I Never Led" can be a quite valuable audition piece. As with any song, the catch is in the cut.

Most musical theatre singers, believing that "showing range" is about high notes, look for the spot of the song that showcases those high notes, which is usually the end of the song. From there, they simply count backwards the requisite number of bars, which means that they are usually singing the final chorus for a 16-bar cut or the final bridge and chorus for a 32-bar cut.

This approach, though logical, does artists the profound disservice of creating an emotional disconnect with their audience from the jump.

In order to illustrate my point, let's think about every moment of a song on an emotional spectrum from one to ten. The last moment of the song probably requires an emotional intensity on the level of a nine or ten. Working backward to the bridge, which is already more than halfway through the song, we're at, let's say, a six.

Every audience member—which, in the context of an audition, is the people behind the table—starts every story at the beginning, which is an emotional zero. If a singer's cut begins at the bridge (and therefore an emotional six), the audience immediately joins at an emotional

deficit. They don't know what the issue is yet, much less the stakes that call for so much vocal output. The end result is that they feel like they're being yelled at, and for no justifiable reason.

It's the responsibility of the auditioning artist to get the listener onboard right away, and to keep them on pace throughout the whole performance. Create the emotional buy-in at the top, and those big belty notes at the end will be earned. In order to do this, singers must begin their songs at the only place their audience is able to meet them: at an emotional zero.

The first way to accomplish this is to always use a musical introduction to ease the audience—and, just as importantly, the performer—into the story. Think of the musical introduction as the “on ramp” to the “highway

## BY TAKING THE "OVERDONE" CONSIDERATION OFF THE TABLE, AN ARTIST IS FREE TO PURSUE SONGS HE OR SHE TRULY LOVES.

speed” of the performance. This allows the audience time to understand the musical context and to prepare for the emotional journey alongside the performer. And whatever you do, please avoid bell tones. The only acceptable use of a bell tone is as a comic “lightbulb” that highlights a physical choice of discovery as the first moment in a song.

Next, start at a part of the song that sounds like the beginning of a story. The bridge will rarely allow for this. Consider, for example, the bridge of “Stranger To The Rain,” for which the lyric begins, “And for the boy who’s given me the sweetest love I’ve known.” Most inexperienced performers use this bridge as the start of their cut and yet there is no way to think of this lyric as anything but the middle of a journey, because it is so clearly a transitional phrase. Instead, consider starting at one of the earlier verses; perhaps even the very first verse. A cut that travels from the very beginning to the very end of a song in 32- or 16-bars can be challenging to find, but it’s worth the creative effort. You’ll have taken your audience from a zero to a ten in 32 bars. Talk about range!

As an example, let's look at “The Only Home I Know” from *Shenandoah*: check out the lyrics here: [LYRIC SAMPLE](#). Most singers want to show off the floated tenor notes at the end (“The only home I know”), and therefore start at the bridge to achieve 16 bars. However, without the starting verse, the lyrics of the bridge (“The memories I left behind”) have no context.

A much stronger cut will tell the full story. I suggest you start at the top of the song (8 bars), skip verse two, do the bridge (4 bars), and then do the last 6 bars of the final verse (starting at “A fireplace”). This cut tells a more complete story, works melodically, shows off the high notes



BONNIE & CLYDE | April 2019  
Nazareth College  
Direction by Aaron Galligan-Stierle  
Photography by Goat Factory Media

at the end, and is only 4 bars longer than starting at the bridge. (This is perfectly within the margin of error. As long as a song feels like it’s the approximate length of time it takes to sing most 16-bar cuts, no one will be bothered by an extra couple of bars.)

If for some reason you can’t avoid starting midway through the song, use the accompaniment to your advantage. For example, in “A Fine, Fine Line” from *Avenue Q*, if you emotionally connect with the verse two lyric about “fairy tales and lies” more so than the verse one lyric about “lovers and friends,” sing the verse two lyrics with the less full verse one accompaniment underneath. Or, sing the verse two lyrics and meld together the first eight bars of verse one and the second eight bars of verse two for the accompaniment. This will provide the full on-ramp from the simpler beginning-of-song accompaniment to the more musically complex verse two accompaniment, and it will launch you perfectly into the emotionally full bridge.



## THE MYTH OF THE OVERDONE SONG

In my work as an audition coach, I am frequently asked whether a particular song is “overdone.” This anxiety around overdone material stems from a belief that a professional artist shouldn’t, under any circumstances, bring an overdone song into the room.

First off, we have to acknowledge right off the bat that the notion of “overdone” admits a tremendous amount of subjectivity. Most casting directors do keep a running tally of songs they’d prefer never to hear again. But no two casting directors’ lists look exactly alike. In fact, a song that one person considers overdone is often a song that brings great delight to someone else!

In other words, what’s “overdone” is a matter of personal taste. And the moment we start worrying about pleasing everyone else’s personal taste, be they industry decision-makers or our peers, is the moment we start losing touch with our authentic personal artistry. By taking the “overdone” consideration off the table, an artist is free to pursue songs he or she truly loves.

For comparison, consider that Shakespeare wrote about 37 plays. Given this fixed pool of material, there is no way to avoid the fact that every single Shakespeare monologue is, by definition, overdone. And yet, casting directors don’t mind when the 55th person walks into the room and says, “I left no ring with her. . . .” Textually, they know exactly what happens next, and this serves to streamline their jobs. Secure in the embrace of Shakespeare’s good material, a casting team only has to adjudicate one variable: this artist’s unique performance.

The same holds true for musical theatre auditions. Every casting director has heard “If I Loved You” upward of a thousand times. But when those opening bars sound, they’re not having an internal debate over the merits of the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic. Instead, they’re free to focus on the artist’s unique interpretation of the material.

To clarify, I don’t mean “unique” in this context as bizarrely out of the box. When an artist is connected to his or her authentic truth, history, emotions, and desires, a performance is unique simply because no one in the world has those exact same personal experiences and ways of expression.

In fact, an artist can get in trouble by swerving too far to avoid overdone songs. Some singers think they will get bonus points for bringing in unknown songs. On the contrary: you will distract a casting director from your audition if you send them down the rabbit hole of “name that tune.” Their internal monologue may be: “Hmm. . . okay, the song lyric just mentioned red hair. . . is it from *Redhead*? Or maybe *Flora the Red Menace*? Oh, I’ve got it! Maybe it was cut from *The Little Mermaid*—Ariel has red hair, right?”

The finer details of a brilliant performance will be lost on a casting director who is shuffling through their internal playlist. Audition songs should be part of the standard musical theater repertoire — even if they might be considered overdone.

## EXCEPTION TO THE RULE: COMEDY

I constantly remind my coaching clients that there are about a hundred exceptions to every audition rule. Every time I say “Never ever do (fill in the blank),” there are a hundred real-world examples that prove the opposite is true.

So: when it comes to comedy and pop/rock auditions, you want to avoid the overdone.

In comedy songs, every artist is working at a deficit if the song is well-known. After all these years, it would take a miracle for even the most comically-gifted performer to elicit a laugh with “Tonight At Eight.” For this reason, there is great value in bringing in a new comedy song to an audition. The catch is that finding a virtually unknown comedy song is next to impossible.

Many performers go through a logic chain that resembles the following:

- 1) The team asked me to sing a funny song.
- 2) They didn't laugh.
- 3) Therefore, I was unsuccessful at that audition.

The implicit assumption in this all-too-common thought process is that an audible laugh is a necessary condition for a successful comedic audition. But that is not the case.

I'd like to offer a different metric for success in the context of a comedic audition. I believe there are two specific things that every comedy audition must include:

- 1) The ability to effectively and authentically exist in the comedic world of the song; and
- 2) The ability to land a punch line.

It's well worth an actor's time to try and find a diamond-in-the rough comedy song. But by focusing on the larger issue—the craft of comedy rather than the audible response—the actor is empowered to make other choices about material and presentation.

## EXCEPTION TO THE RULE: POP/ROCK

Pop/Rock is relatively new to the musical theater scene. In the lag time between the emergence of Pop/Rock as a musical theatre genre and the development of pedagogy around industry-preferred techniques—vocal styling, physical adjustments, and emotion-based acting—musical theatre actors developed a bad rap. Unfortunately, it is a current industry assumption that most university-trained musical theatre actors cannot live authentically in the world of Pop/Rock. So when a musical theatre actor walks into a pop or rock audition, they are often at a disadvantage before they open their mouths to sing.

This is where song choice becomes paramount. Step one is to avoid any Pop/Rock songs that have ever appeared in a musical. This includes Billy Joel, Carole King, Elvis, and even Green Day. When a performer sings one of these songs, it only serves to bolster the assumption that they have no true knowledge of Pop/Rock repertoire beyond Broadway original cast recordings.

In contrast to my advice regarding musical theatre rep, singers should avoid overdone Pop/Rock songs. No matter how well an artist sings “What's Going On?” by 4 Non-Blondes—a song that is done by just about every musical theater belter in NYC—they will often get a strike against them for picking such a generic, overused piece.

I encourage artists to find a deep cut on the B side of an album they love. Pick a song that the folks behind the table will love but haven't heard in years. Ideally, the artist's song choice should stir up longing and nostalgia in the listener, while also giving the singer authentic Pop/Rock “street cred” for their nuanced and innovative song choice.

## CONCLUSION

Many young musical theatre performers spend far too much time listening to and internalizing the noise and assumptions about what most people are doing. The tragic irony to this, of course, is that most people aren't booking jobs.

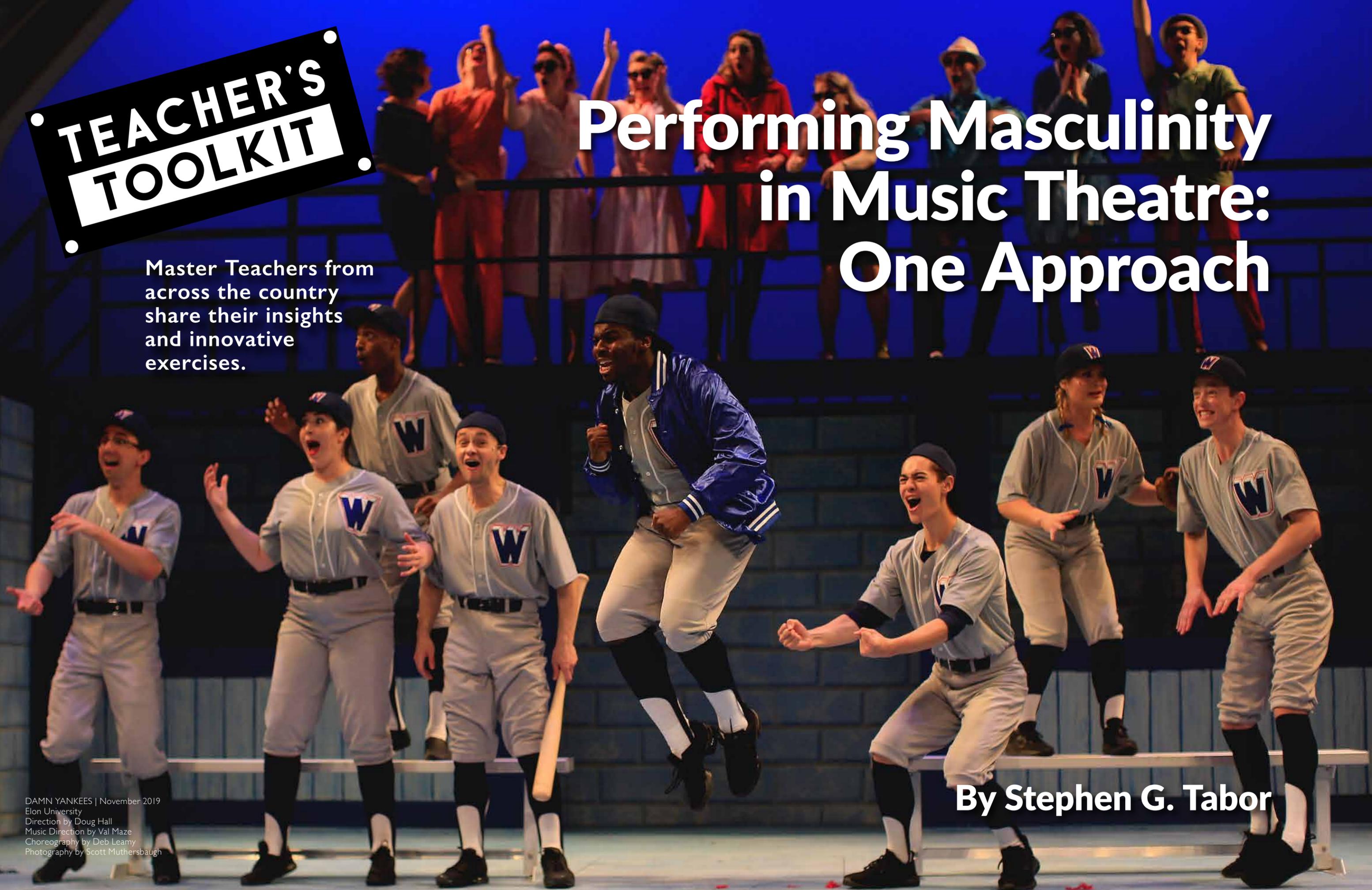
Those who do book jobs, on the other hand, are those who have found authentic ways to stand out from the pack. These people are willing to question the status quo and break the mold. As a Broadway audition coach, I believe it is my responsibility to educate performers about the genesis of and rationale behind some of the prevailing conceptions and misconceptions around auditioning. Once performers understand the reasons for these commonly-held beliefs, they are empowered to unleash their authentic artistry as they thoughtfully and strategically “build their books.”



# TEACHER'S TOOLKIT

# Performing Masculinity in Music Theatre: One Approach

Master Teachers from across the country share their insights and innovative exercises.



By Stephen G. Tabor

## INTRODUCTION

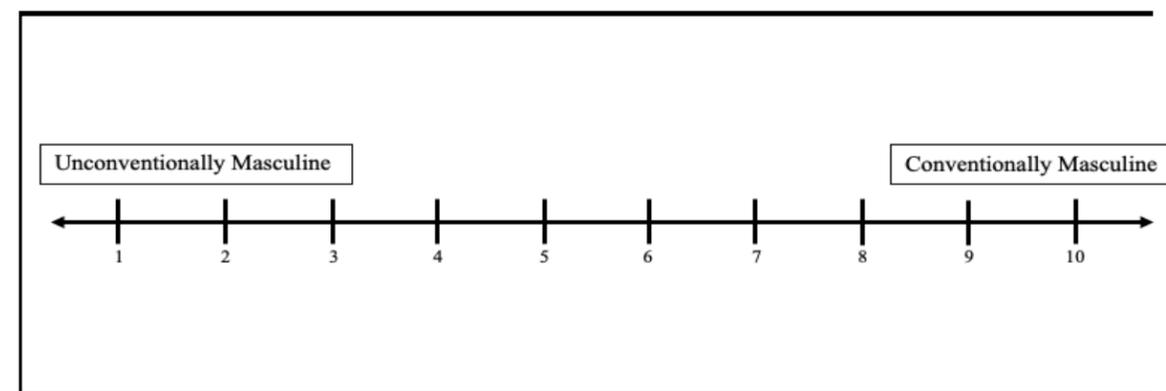
Evelyn Clark argues that while there is no singular American masculinity, many men still define masculinity as having "physical strength, economic success and reliability, logic, wild streaks, being unemotional, and never seeming feminine. Men are expected to be tough, never cry, provide for their families, and most importantly be heterosexual" (399). These same attributes ("Dominance. Aggression. Rugged good looks... Sexual prowess. Stoicism. Athleticism. Wealth") were named by teenage boys in a 2018 study in a very recent *The Atlantic* magazine article (Orenstein).

Those of us who work in the musical theatre understand that some of our favorite shows were written with this archetype in mind, but as our society becomes more inclusive of diverse gender identities, and as terms such as "toxic masculinity" begin to inform our perceptions of gendered behavior, these older, once-considered-normative masculine behaviors are changing, and may even seem foreign to younger students.

An understanding of the gender demands embedded in a role as well as empathy for the confusion that might be felt by younger actors led me to develop a classroom exercise I call Masculinity Workshop. My goal was to give younger actors a way to conform to a particular director's concept of masculinity, or to embody the gendered demands of a role as required by the script.

## THE CONTINUUM

In her essay, "On the Gender Continuum," Stacy Wolf suggests a continuum, where gender exists on a spectrum of 1 to 10 with masculinity being a "1" and femininity being a "10" (172). However, for my workshop, I modified this spectrum in order to specifically explore a range of masculine behavior. I labeled "1" with the term *unconventionally masculine* and "10" with the term *conventionally masculine*. (You may reverse these numbers if you prefer.)



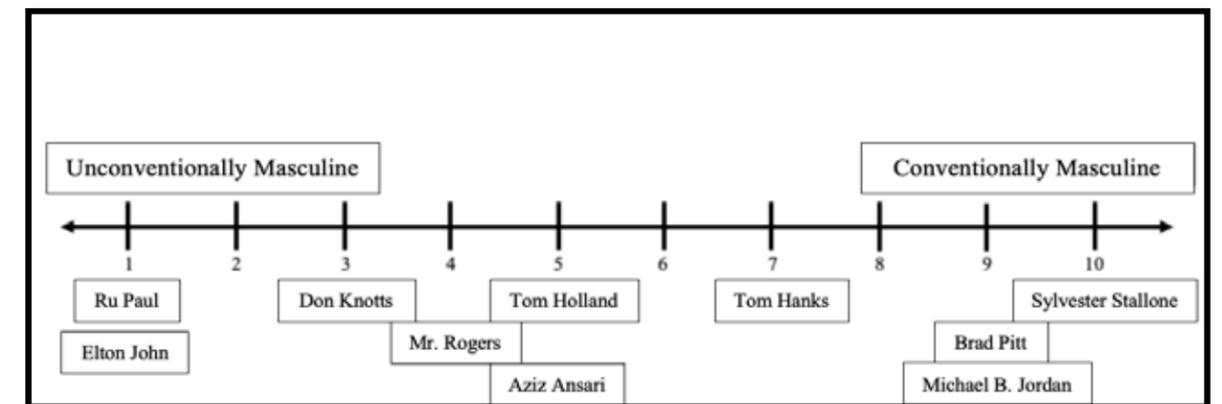
Conventionally masculine may be defined as socially valued traits and expectations that constitute a perception of "maleness," in ways similar to Clark's description, above. Conversely, unconventionally masculine may be defined as traits that differ from this traditional description of manliness and may in fact suggest effeminacy, but still allow the individual to be recognized

as male. It should be emphasized that this Workshop activity applies to gender, and should not be conflated with sexual orientation. While some performances of gender may coincide with certain stereotypes of sexual orientation, they are not exclusively tied to those identities.

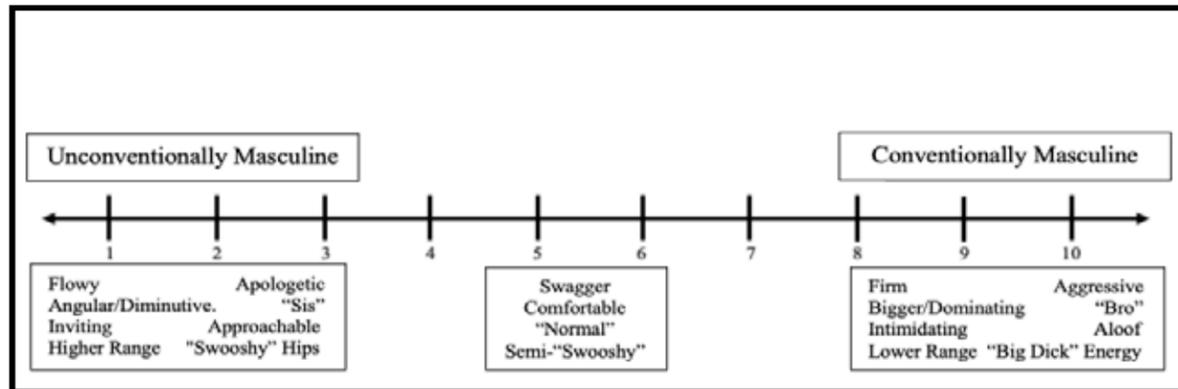
To begin the Workshop, this continuum should be posted on a blackboard or across several large sheets of paper to demonstrate the expanse and to allow for writing/contributions. It will be referenced throughout the workshop.

## STEP ONE

Participants begin by subjectively identifying male celebrities who express conventional masculinity (at "10" on the spectrum) or unconventional masculinity (at "1" on the spectrum). They should be encouraged to consider a variety of celebrities that encompass diversity in race and ethnicity in order to create a comprehensive representation; these factors can influence masculinity. The following table contains some responses from past workshops:



Participants are then asked to walk around the room exploring a “10,” embodying any of the traits they perceive in the conventionally masculine celebrities listed. After some time, I ask them to interact with each other physically and verbally. Once they have a reasonable experience as a “10,” they repeat the process as a “1,” using the unconventionally masculine celebrities. Finally, I instruct them to repeat the process as a “5.” After experiencing the three varying numbers, I ask for reflections on the experience and list participant responses under their respective numbers. Here are some responses from past workshops:



This combination of celebrities, numeric values, and traits creates a contextualized Masculinity Scale for the group. With masculinity now quantified, I ask volunteers to share where along the scale they personally fall in their performance of masculinity, keeping in mind that it may be a range rather than a precise number. (Always ask for volunteers; participants should never be compelled to share their personal performance of gender on the Masculinity Scale.) Ultimately, this creates a reference point from which to work as I segue into a discussion of characters in musical theatre and “The Gap.”

### THE GAP

An actor’s personal range of masculinity may be lower or higher than a character’s range of masculinity. A director might register Curly from *Oklahoma!* as an “8” on the Masculinity Scale, but her students auditioning might peak at a “6.” The issue becomes how to close this gap so that an actor can perform their character’s gender—as called for in the text and the story, or in the director’s vision—as accurately and comprehensively as possible. It may be unrealistic to expect an actor who performs a personal range of “2” to “5” to portray a believable “10.” Nevertheless, some adjustments might be made to bump up that actor closer to an “8.”

### CLOSING THE GAP: PHYSICAL AND VOCAL USE

Because gender performance relies entirely on the reception of mannerisms and other social cues by others, small adjustments can be made to change the perceived performance of



gender (Butler 419). In my workshop, I start by focusing on changeable physical traits with particular attention to where tension is held or released. This begins with the face, identifying where tension can be applied to the jaw, lips, and eyebrows. Frequent reference is made to the Masculinity Scale to remind the students of what it felt like to be a "10" as opposed to a "5" or a "1."

The next focus is posture, which encompasses the carriage of the head, shoulders, and arms. This also includes noting the presence or lack of tension in the hands, as well as their placement. The important thing to remember is that each body is different, and therefore, each performance of masculinity will be read differently, which is why a diverse list of celebrities is encouraged; not every student will adhere to the masculinity performed by straight, white, cisgendered men. Where engaged facial or shoulder muscles work well to convey masculinity for some students, others may register as more masculine by keeping those same muscles relaxed.

Next, explore where the actor holds their weight. Do they have a narrow or wide stance? Do they sit back on their heels or lean forward onto the balls of their feet? Are their knees parallel and relaxed or has the actor sunk into one of their hips? The alignment of the hips and the spacing of the feet can read differently. For example, standing on one leg with the hip popped

## THE ADVANTAGE OF ISOLATING THESE PHYSICAL TRAITS IS THAT BY ATTRIBUTING NUMERIC VALUE TO THEM FROM THE MASCULINITY SCALE, A DIRECTOR OR COACH NOW HAS A POINT OF REFERENCE FROM WHICH ASK FOR ADJUSTMENTS.

and the other slightly turned out might read as lower on the scale than treating a leg like a pillar with both feet parallel. Finally, engaging in a walk allows the actors to explore what it feels like to lead with the head, the heart, and the pelvis, each in turn, and also allows the rest of the group to reflect how each activity raises or lowers the perceived masculinity.

The advantage of isolating these physical traits is that by attributing numeric value to them from the Masculinity Scale, a director or coach now has a point of reference from which ask for adjustments. For example, she might now be able to ask of an actor to perform the face at a "4," the shoulders at a "7," and a walk from the chest at a "6" and, thus, quite literally build the desired physical/behavioral performance of masculinity for the character. Additionally, this helps eliminate problematic language often used by directors such as "play it straighter" or "be more macho," or "man up," which an actor might take as an affront to their personal performance of gender.

The voice is also a gender "marker," telling us a great deal about a character. What happens if the voice sounds brighter or darker? Changing the placement of the voice, such as bringing the sound forward, dropping it into the chest or throat, or sending it into the mask or head, all affect the resonance. As referenced in the chart of masculinity traits above, students tended to associate a lower vocal range with conventionally masculine people, and so playing with where sound will ring most authentically for an actor striving for said masculinity is necessary.

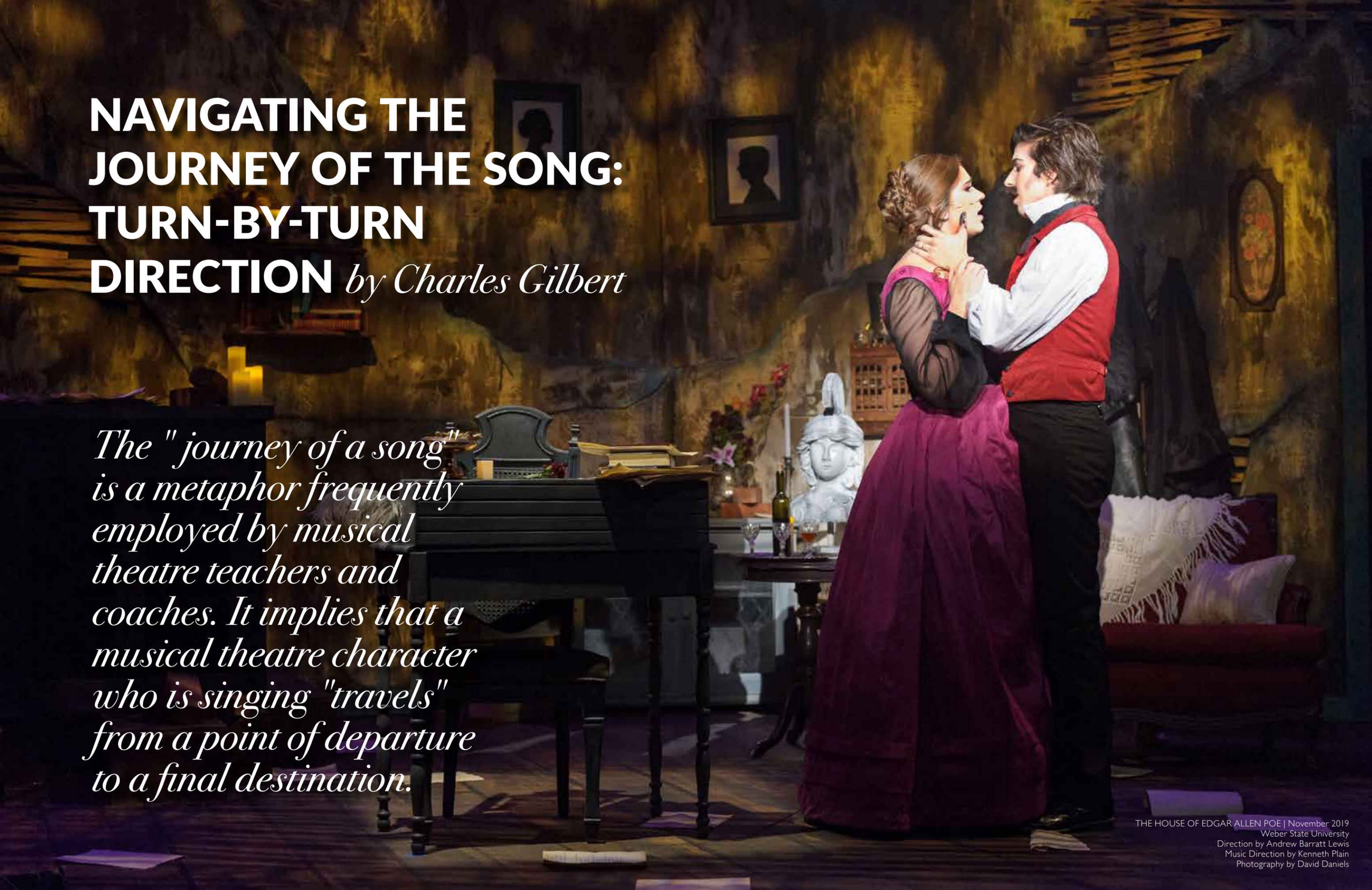
Finally, diction and cadence should be examined. Sibilance, plosives, and fricatives can translate greater or lesser masculinity depending on the delivery. Indulging in the word "freakin'" closer to the front of the mouth might convey less masculinity than a staccato delivery of the same word from further back in the mouth. Similarly, the cadence of speech affects perceived masculinity: sing-song speaking is often associated with femininity and monotone more commonly linked to masculinity. Although there are some "rules," results will vary with the individual actor.

### CONCLUSION

Characters in musicals will frequently have a different gender performance than the actor playing them. Identifying the required or expected behaviors for a particular character as well as the "gap" separating the actor from the desired character portrayal can create a shared vocabulary for actor and director. Working in this way also eliminates the need for any discussion of the actor's personal level of masculinity: it is understood that all gender is performative and created; it's not inherent in the person, and one behavior is not more or less valuable than another.

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**NAVIGATING THE  
JOURNEY OF THE SONG:  
TURN-BY-TURN  
DIRECTION** *by Charles Gilbert*

*The "journey of a song" is a metaphor frequently employed by musical theatre teachers and coaches. It implies that a musical theatre character who is singing "travels" from a point of departure to a final destination.*

It's not hard to discern that journey in songs of persuasion like "The Surrey With The Fringe" from *Oklahoma!*, "Some People" from *Gypsy*, "I'd Be Surprisingly Good For You" from *Evita*, or in narrative songs like "Opening Doors" from *Merrily We Roll Along*. But many theater songs are contemplative songs in which dramatic time "stops" so we can savor a moment. Pieces like "Easy To Be Hard" from *Hair* and "What Did I Have That I Don't Have?" from *On A Clear Day* give the character a chance to analyze what's happened, ask questions, and consider possible future actions; they give the dramatist an opportunity to deepen the listener's understanding and empathetic experience of the dramatic event.

These songs don't journey through actual time and space; rather, they explore an inner landscape of memory, fantasy, and desire. Sometimes that exploration can lead to discovery and change, but just as often, the character ends the song exactly where they began. Still, the listener always goes on a journey when a song is sung, so it's my contention that both persuasive and contemplative songs can benefit from being examined through the lens of the "journey."

One of the most useful aspects of the journey metaphor is that it calls attention to the way a journey is constructed: a series of individual segments or events (the so-called "legs" of a journey) separated by navigational maneuvers (the "turns") when a change of direction is required. Each segment of the journey must be completed before you can begin the next one. And, regardless of whether the terrain you travel is familiar or unknown, there's always the possibility of an unexpected occurrence that may require you to adjust your route.

Nowadays, all travel is made simpler by the use of GPS, which offers us a segmented route, broken down into "turn-by-turn" directions. This idea of turn-by-turn directions can be adapted for teaching the journey of a musical theatre song. For this discussion, I'll use "I'll Be Known," from the 2013 musical *Leading Lady*, which I wrote with playwright P. Seth Bauer. The song is an example of an "I want" song: a chance for the protagonist to sing of the deeply felt desires that will motivate their actions in the scenes that follow.

It appears in lead sheet form on the next page, and a piano/vocal version is available for download at [www.savingingactor.com/book-extras](http://www.savingingactor.com/book-extras).

You'll notice that there are a number of small triangle markings throughout the music. The triangle is the symbol for the Greek letter *delta*, which is used in the world of physics and math to denote change. A triangle is also a musical instrument whose sound is a distinctive "ding." For this reason, I refer to the moments of change in a song as "dings," and when I coach students, I often use the sound of a bell or chime as an actual, audible "ding" to indicate moments for change.

When analyzing a song, you'll find some common signposts that indicate a "ding" or moment of change. In the lyrics, punctuation marks (periods, question marks, commas) frequently warrant a ding, as do conjunctions (words like *but*, *or*, *unless*, *although*). The beginnings or ends of vocal phrases and long, sustained notes should also be considered as possible indications of a "turn" in the song.

Each new phrase - each "leg" of the journey, as it were - presents a unique opportunity for specific expression or communication. The delta can be used to mark where every phrase begins. It is helpful to write out the lyrics, with one line per ding, like this:

## I'll Be Known

from "Leading Lady"

Charlie Gilbert

Δ Growing up poor wasn't no picnic,  
Δ Not when the cupboard was bare.  
Δ Hand-me-down clothes,  
Δ Soup thin as water,  
Δ But plenty of hardship to spare.

Δ One in a litter of shanty brats,  
Δ Scratchin' and yowlin' like alley cats.  
Δ Ten of us crammed in a Southwark flat.  
Δ Well, I'll be damned if I'll live like that!

Δ I want more,

...and so on.

Next, at each "ding," make a specific choice about subtext, action, or paraphrase for that lyric that differentiates it from the previous lyric:

#### PHRASE & LYRIC

#### SUBTEXT, ACTION, OR PARAPHRASE

- |    |  |   |
|----|--|---|
| #1 | Growing up poor wasn't no picnic,            | Shock the listener with the harsh reality about your past       |
| #2 | Not when the cupboard was bare.              | Give a corroborating example                                    |
| #3 | Hand-me-down clothes,                        | Give a more specific example                                    |
| #4 | Soup thin as water,                          | Give a different kind of example                                |
| #5 | But plenty of hardship to spare.             | Make a bitter joke (melody in higher register adds intensity)   |
| #6 | One in a litter of shanty brats,             | Describe yourself using insulting language you heard as a child |
| #7 | Scratchin' and yowlin' like alley cats.      | Elaborate, use colorful details                                 |
| #8 | Ten of us crammed in a Southwark flat.       | Provide a contrasting detail                                    |
| #9 | Well, I'll be damned if I'll live like that! | Sharp turn: Enough of the past! You're done with that!          |

...and so on.

Just as there are a handful of common maneuvers that a driver makes during an actual journey, the "maneuvers" that one makes in the transitional moments of a song fall into some basic categories, including:





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Direction by Joshua Denning  
Choreography by Natalie Uehara  
Music Direction by Tyler Mabry  
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- “And” - an elaboration or intensification of the previous phrase, like phrases 3 and 4
- “But” - a new phrase that significantly contrasts with its predecessor, like phrase 5
- “New” - like a beat change, or a shift. In this case, phrase 6 changes the subject from hardship to family relationships, and phrase 9 closes the door on the past and introduces the new subject of the future.
- “Aha” - a discovery, revelation or insight, like phrase 9
- “Back” - a “callback” to the specific words of an earlier lyric (could be the title or “hook” of the song)
- “I Mean” - like “And” but with the goal of being more precise
- Change of Mode - occurs when a song shifts grammatically from declarative mode (making statements) to interrogative (asking questions) or imperative mode (giving orders).
- Parenthesis/Detour (“New” + “Back”) - a parenthetical expression, or a kind of detour, where the argument appears to take a new direction, only to return back to the previous direction a moment later.

Recognizing these common patterns helps clarify the relationship between consecutive phrases and identify appropriate behavior that will clearly communicate the transitions that take place during the song.

The final lines of the song “I’ll Be Known” are a dramatic re-statement of the title phrase: “Perhaps I won’t be famous/But dammit, I’ll be known!” A big build-up in the accompaniment and a climactic high note announce to the listener that they’ve arrived at the final moment, the culmination of the soul-searching journey of the song. Endings are always a big deal in a musical theater song, but for an ending to have its desired impact, the performer needs to have led the listener carefully through each “leg” of the journey.

Turn-by-turn directions for the journey of the song reduce stress for the performer even as they increase clarity and variety for the listener. If the listener gets lost, the journey of the song will be ultimately unsatisfying. Navigating that journey, one “turn” at a time, is a key skill for the singing actor to master. Thoughtful analysis and careful crafting of behavior are strategies that any singing actor can use to make a song a powerful dramatic performance.

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This article is adapted from *The SAVI Singing Actor* by Charles Gilbert.  
Learn more at [savisingingactor.com](http://savisingingactor.com).

# Interrogating the Musicals We Love:

## AN ARGUMENT FOR CRITICAL THOUGHT

By Nathan Stith

We are living in an age where we are often led to believe that our own opinions are the only ones that matter (reinforced by our like-minded social media bubbles, of course). We hold tight to our own biases; we rarely question our own deep seated opinions about things; we are hesitant to think critically or search out differing opinions. But, in an educational setting it is our duty to give our students the tools to examine art with a critical eye, especially the art they love.

The concept of critical thinking entered academia in the 1980s, and since then, it has become a buzzword for academics. However, as Julia Guichard notes in an article for Theatre Topics, “ask ten academics to define critical thinking and one is likely to get ten different answers” (146). Ralph Johnson, in his article, “The Problem of Defining Critical Thinking,” suggests that most theorists can agree on two aspects of critical thinking: First, “critical thinking requires many cognitive skills. Second . . . critical thinking requires information and knowledge.” Johnson, thus, defines critical thinking as “a form of reasoning that requires a combination of skills, attitudes, and information/knowledge” (51).

The problem for our students is that oftentimes, their opinions about musicals are based on a single set of skills (watching or perhaps listening) and shaped by their own opinions (or perhaps those of their peer group or online message boards). They lack information/knowledge beyond the printed page, cast album, or the witnessing of a live, ephemeral event. I have observed this to be especially true when it comes to the musicals students feel most passionately about. They make a deep connection to the music, the narrative, the characters, or perhaps the performances, but they neglect to explore beyond their opinions to examine the musical through a critical lens. And who can blame them? It’s much easier to form an opinion than it is to question it.

Scholar bell hooks acknowledges in her book, *Teaching Critical Thinking* that “most students resist the critical thinking process; they are more comfortable with learning that allows them



to remain passive” (10). However, our students enter institutions of higher education to learn about the world and about themselves, and it is imperative that they leave with the skill not only to form an opinion, but to understand and acknowledge their own biases about that opinion, and with the ability to analyze the validity of their opinion. In short, we must teach our students to think critically about the musicals they love.

The inability to question our own opinions of a piece of art we feel strongly about is not a new problem. I would wager that most artists, practitioners, and instructors have experienced this at some point in their lives. After I graduated college and moved to New York City, a friend told me about this new Broadway musical that was holding a lottery for \$20 tickets, but you had to get in line the night before to get a ticket. Only \$20 to see a new musical on Broadway? Waiting all night in a line on 41st Street, in the middle of Hell's Kitchen? Twenty-one-year-old me was convinced. We arrived at the Nederlander Theatre around 1:00 a.m., we were fifth in line, and by noon the next day we had secured front row seats to a matinee performance of a musical I had never heard of: *Rent*. As for many in my generation, that afternoon in the theatre had a profound impact on me.

*Rent* was everything I wanted a musical to be. The story was passionate, moving, dramatic, and smart. The contemporary rawness and power of the music was unlike anything I'd ever heard before in a musical. Not only were the characters more authentic and diverse than I had ever seen on Broadway, but they dressed like me and my friends, and as a new arrival to New York City, oh, how desperately I wanted to be a struggling bohemian artist in Alphabet City!

Jonathan Larson's *Rent* was a hit when it premiered at Off-Broadway's New York Theatre Workshop. Peter Marks of *The New York Times* called it "the story of the theater season, a surprise triumph in an industry short on sensations." By the time it won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and four Tony Awards, including Best Musical, it had become a cultural icon. When the two-CD cast album was released that August, I purchased it immediately and listened to it non-stop. I connected with Mark's desire for community and Roger's search for something meaningful he could leave behind. I deeply felt the loss of Angel's death and experienced a catharsis every time Angel told Mimi to "turn around and listen to that boy's song" (Larson 128). As a straight, white, cis-gendered male from the suburbs of Washington, DC, I was captivated by what I perceived of as authenticity in Larson's depiction of people who were different than me: people whose stories I had never seen on stage before. I believed, at the time, that *Rent* was a perfect musical. I never questioned any of the choices Larson made in the story, the characters, the music, or the lyrics. I was a fan and *Rent* was flawless.

Fast forward to 2011. I finished my Master's degree and started a Ph.D. program which included teaching a musical theatre history course. I was thrilled! Finally, I could share my love of musical theatre with my students. I immediately began to prep for the class and, of course, started with *Rent*. I knew I loved the musical, but what did the critics say? My opinions about the musical were reinforced by Jeremy Gerard's review in *Variety*. Gerard called it "the most sensational musical in maybe a decade" and "the real thing." He acknowledged the cutting-edge sound, noting that it was "one of the rare attempts at marrying rock 'n' roll to musical theater to successfully merge the visceral power of the former and the sentimental, emotional punch of the latter." Ben Brantley, in his review of the Broadway production, also supported my own strong feelings for the characters, noting that "Mr. Larson has conceived his show's surrogate family of fringe artists, drag queens and H.I.V.-infected drug users with such rich affection and compassion that it is impossible not to care about them" (1996). It seemed that the critics loved the musical as much as I did; however, as I dug deeper, I was surprised to discover that some disagreed.

Judith Sebasta's article in *Contemporary Theatre Review* was especially eye-opening. In the article, Sebasta acknowledges the rave reviews and cultural significance of the musical, before providing the reader with a detailed analysis of the negative responses to *Rent*. She refers to Robert Brustein's review in *The New Republic* in which he asserts that *Rent* is "badly manufactured, vaguely manipulative, drenched in self-pity and sentimental," and calls the score "the musical equivalent of wallpaper; the rock version of elevator music" (29). What struck me the most in Brustein's response and others mentioned by Sebasta is how differently many viewed the very things I found most impressive about the musical. I wanted to be like the characters Larson created. But as I read Sebasta's reference to John Clum's comments in *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture* in which he suggests that the musical "irresponsibly romanticizes heroin abuse; and makes AIDS 'cool' and being poor 'chic'" I questioned my own opinions about how "cool" these characters actually were (272-273).

Perhaps I was easily manipulated by the characters' "cool-factor" but they were authentic, weren't they? As David Savran notes in "*Rent's* Due: Multiculturalism and the Spectacle of Difference," the musical attempts to be authentic, but the characters who present themselves as poor or destitute aren't. "Several of Larson's [characters] have wealthy parents eager to help them out," says Savran. "Most are well-educated and have marketable skills" (8). They are, in Savran's view, poor by choice. They are squatting in East Village apartments, not because they have to, but because they want to. Their authenticity is a mirage.

Other writers took issue with Larson's attempts at diversity. In Sebasta's discussion of critical responses, she refers to Susan Schulman's book *Stage Struck: Theatre, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* in which Schulman suggests that the lesbian characters are two dimensional and incomplete. Schulman states, "*Rent* acknowledges that lesbians exist; therefore it claims to be tolerant. The fact that it repeatedly inscribes lesbian relationships as unstable, bickering, and emotionally pathological is the required conceit" (71). Savran agrees with Schulman's summation. He notes that, "five of the eight leads are coded as queer . . . and while (to Larson's credit) the representations may not be obviously homophobic, they function . . . as a sign of multicultural chic that gives the musical an air of transgression and danger" (8). Both assert that, ultimately, this is a musical that uses homosexual couples as backdrops to the "central romantic couple in the piece [which] remains heterosexual" (Savran 8). According to Savran, Larson is using race in much the same way. He suggests that "*Rent* completely sidesteps issues of racial



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discrimination, using its persons of color to provide a middle-class . . . audience with an exotic, multicultural experience guaranteed to make it feel liberal and hip” (7).

This, I began to realize, is exactly what it did for me. I was so blinded by the fact that I was seeing characters who were different from me on the Broadway stage that I neglected to interrogate the way(s) these characters were being depicted. I was so moved by the sentimentality of the story that I overlooked the way(s) I was being manipulated by the drama unfolding before me. In short, I had experienced such a profound moment in the theatre that I had neglected to think critically about it.

In 2015, I saw my students have a similar reaction to the musical *Hamilton*. They fell in love with it, just as I had with *Rent*. *Hamilton* is one of the most successful musicals Broadway audiences have seen in years—perhaps ever. Its success has reached far beyond New York, including two currently running U.S. National Tours, sit down productions in Chicago, San Francisco, London, and a planned 2021 opening in Sydney, Australia. The cast album won a Grammy Award, reached #3 on the Billboard chart in 2015 and became the first musical cast recording to ever reach #1 on the Billboard Top Rap Albums Chart (Romano 5).

## I WAS SO BLINDED BY THE FACT THAT I WAS SEEING CHARACTERS WHO WERE DIFFERENT FROM ME ON THE BROADWAY STAGE THAT I NEGLECTED TO INTERROGATE THE WAY(S) THESE CHARACTERS WERE BEING DEPICTED.

What makes this musical so appealing to younger generations is Miranda’s inspired choice to tell the story of America’s past using the music of America today. In addition, the creative team cast actors of color as the key figures in Hamilton’s life and our American history. This color-conscious casting allows the musical to become what Miranda calls “a story about America then, told by America now” (qtd. in Weinert-Kendt). The creative team’s casting choices have rocked the musical theatre world and created a cultural phenomenon which has reached far beyond Broadway and traditional musical theatre lovers.

In addition, the ways that fans consume new musicals has changed tremendously since *Rent*. Technology now allows fans of contemporary musicals to connect with the shows, their casts, and creative teams in ways that were unavailable in the late 20th century. Besides watching the musical live and listening to the cast album, fans of contemporary musicals like *Hamilton* flock to online message boards on Reddit, Tumblr, and other social media sites to connect with other “Hamilfans.” They can also watch YouTube clips of the show released by the producers, the numerous #ham4ham performances by the show’s cast, as well as bootleg videos, illegally filmed by audience members. These videos and message boards create a familiarity for the “Hamilfan” that was simply not available to us “Rentheads.”

In the spring of 2018, I began the section of my musical theatre history course examining contemporary musicals with an assignment to read several reviews of the off-Broadway and Broadway productions of *Hamilton*. The response to *Hamilton* from critics was, like *Rent*, almost universally positive. On *Hamilton*’s premiere on Broadway, Ben Brantley of The New York Times trumpeted, “Yes, it really is that good” (2015). David Cote, of Time Out New York, declared it “the greatest American musical in decades” while The New York Daily News’ Joe Dziemianowicz argued that with the opening of *Hamilton*, “Broadway is the coolest place on the planet. And the smartest. And most exhilarating.” Our class discussion reinforced all the things the students and critics loved about *Hamilton*: its powerful plot, the excellence of its culturally diverse cast, the brilliant use of hip-hop and contemporary sounds in the score, and the unbelievably moving, intelligent, and clever lyrics.

For the second class session, I assigned a series of recently published scholarly papers and book chapters on *Hamilton*. In these articles, theatre scholars and historians have begun to reevaluate some of the aspects of *Hamilton* which were initially praised as innovative. These academics have written that, despite being fans of the musical, they are sometimes troubled by the production’s color-conscious casting choices, as well as elements of the musical’s plot and character development.

The readings forced the students to view *Hamilton* with a more critical eye, to interrogate their own thoughts about the musical, and, most significantly, led to some difficult, yet lively class discussions. For example, with few exceptions, actors of color have been notoriously absent from the Broadway stage throughout its history. Miranda’s choice to retell the founding of our nation using a multi-racial cast is significant because it offers the opportunity for a group of artists to tell the creation story of a nation they are a part of, but one in which they have been, thus far, excluded from narrating. But *Hamilton*’s radical solution might generate problems of its own. In her chapter contribution to *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America’s Past*, scholar Patricia Herrera argues that “*Hamilton* creates a mirage of equity and inclusivity with its reverse casting,” an illusion of racial parity clearly at odds with the musical’s historical circumstances and what we read in the news today (270-271).

In addition, some scholars argue the multi-racial casting ignores the social realities of people of color in 18th century America. In “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*,” historian Lyra D. Monteiro points out the irony: “With a cast dominated by actors of color, the play is nonetheless yet another rendition of the ‘exclusive past,’ with its focus on the deeds of ‘great white men’ and its silencing of the presence and contributions of people of color in the Revolutionary era” (90). Although mentioned several times in passing, the issue of slavery is mostly elided in the musical (the subject is briefly acknowledged during one of the cabinet rap battles between Hamilton and Jefferson). Jefferson’s mistress, Sally Hemmings, is the only slave mentioned by name, and she does not speak. Some critics warn that the show’s color-conscious casting presents a visual image of our history that is both incomplete and misleading.

Miranda based his musical on Ron Chernow’s successful 2004 biography *Alexander Hamilton*, and Chernow was a historical consultant during the development period of the show. While much of the musical is historically accurate, like any historical drama, Miranda does take some liberties. Hamilton is painted as a man of the people, but as historian Sean Wilentz points out, he was “more a man for the 1 percent than the 99 percent” (qtd. in Schuessler). It is also likely

that Hamilton and Burr's relationship was not quite as acrimonious as depicted in the musical. These changes do make the main character more relatable and the story more dramatic. However, as Stacy Wolf notes in "Hamilton's Women," the depiction of the female characters in *Hamilton* might give one pause when examined with a more critical eye." Wolf suggests that the three central female characters, Eliza, Angelica, and Maria Reynolds are, alas, little more than the stereotypical "wife," "muse," and "whore." Eliza is loyal to her husband but then becomes "the sympathetic long-suffering wife" when she learns of Hamilton's affair (175). Angelica, who Miranda calls "the smartest character in the musical," is indeed sharp as a tack, but ultimately does little more than to inspire Hamilton and encourage him when needed (Allgor 101). Finally, according to Wolf, Maria Reynolds' sole role in the musical is to seduce Hamilton (176).

Despite the fact that Eliza and Angelica are intelligent and progressive-minded (Angelica quips she'll ask Jefferson to put women in the "sequel" to the Declaration of Independence) the female characters are comparatively underdeveloped. While one may forgive Miranda for his use of literary license when it comes to the character of Hamilton, it does seem that with respect to gender, his choices take as many steps backward as forward.

With this scholarship at their fingertips, the class discussion shifted dramatically. Like my own awakening after reading the scholarship on *Rent*, many of the students began to question their own opinions about the musical. Was the musical as progressive and innovative as they thought? Did the musical celebrate American diversity or did it ignore the realities of the story it was telling? Or both? The resulting debate was fascinating to witness. The students agreed with some aspects of the scholars' arguments and disagreed with others. They acknowledged their own biases about the musical but were able to articulate the idea that even if they agreed that some of the artistic and creative choices made by Miranda and the creative team are potentially problematic, it didn't change the fact that the musical inspired them and their peers in a way that no musical had before. This mirrors the conclusions I have made about *Rent*: it's okay to love a musical and acknowledge its imperfections.

## CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Throughout its history, the American musical has inspired and moved generations of audiences despite occasions of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. In order to assist my students to think critically about the musicals they love, I've developed an assignment which I use in my Musical Theatre History course that tasks them with exploring a beloved musical, examining the reasons for their biases about the musical, and then re-examining the musical with a critical eye.

### Step One

The assignment is in multiple parts and spread throughout the semester. The first part of the assignment begins during the first class session. After reviewing the course syllabus and discussing the pedagogical philosophy of the class (an examination of the history of the American musical through the lens of the socio-political history of America), each student then shares with the class their favorite musical and points to three things they particularly love about it. They are then asked to write a 3-4 page essay about their favorite musical. The essay can be structured in any way they desire (standard 5 paragraph essay with strong thesis statement, freely written stream of consciousness, etc.). In the essay they must discuss, with as



much specificity as possible, what it is about the musical that they love. They should attempt to address as many aspects of the musical as they can including the libretto (plot, narrative), character relationships, lyrics, music, and movement. They can point to specific productions or performances if they desire, but the bulk of the essay should focus on the musical itself rather than a particular revival or actor.

I read the essays and provide predominately positive feedback in order to validate their opinions about the musical, but I deliberately delay returning these essays until we have completed our discussions of Golden Age musicals. I explain to the class that the essays are the first part of a multi-part assignment and the essays will be returned when we are ready to move on to the next portion of the assignment.

### Step Two

On the day the essays are returned in class we begin a discussion of biases. As bell hooks notes, “keeping an open mind is an essential requirement of critical thinking . . . it [is] far too easy to become attached to and protective of one’s viewpoint, and to rule out other perspectives” (10). Therefore, an understanding of what biases are and how they can work to influence one’s opinions is vital. In class, I explore different types of biases as explained in *The Art of Critical Decision Making*, focusing on three which are especially relevant to our discussion of musicals: confirmation bias, anchoring bias, and availability bias.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of our discussion about biases is two-fold: first, to assist the students in understanding these biases conceptually, and then to find (as a class) as many different examples of these kinds of biases in our own lives and experiences. Once the students have a strong understanding of how the biases are applied to different situations, they are tasked with re-reading their initial essay about their favorite musical and then submitting a 1-2 page essay examining how their own biases may have influenced their opinions about the particular musical. It’s important that students understand that the goal of this part of the assignment isn’t to convince them to change their mind about the musical, but rather to think critically about the factors that may have influenced their opinions.

### Step Three

As stated in the syllabus the course focuses on the history of the American musical through the socio-political lens of the history of the United States. This objective is vital to the final component of the assignment. Throughout our discussions of early twentieth century and Golden Age musicals we pay special attention to the presentation and representation of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability. By the time we have completed our work with the Golden Age, students have a deep understanding of the ways in which so many of the musicals of this period expose or perpetuate the racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia of twentieth century America. They’ve navigated the sometimes troubling juxtaposition of a

musical which is both beloved by audiences yet extremely offensive from a twenty-first century perspective (*Annie Get Your Gun* comes to mind).

I then ask them to return to their favorite musical for the final part of the assignment by writing a research paper on their chosen musical. They must first read the libretto of the musical (and listen along with a cast album, if available). Then they are to research the musical by examining critical responses to the musical from both theatre critics and scholars (if available and applicable). The focus of their research and subsequent paper should be on the depiction of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and/or disability in the musical. Students can choose to focus on one, several, or all of these elements, depending on the musical. They are challenged in the assignment to acknowledge the opinions and views of experts through their research and to formulate their own ideas about the musical through a focused reading of the dialogue and lyrics. The hope is that by acknowledging their own biases about the musical earlier in the semester they can more easily set aside their opinions (at least for the moment) about the show in an effort to open their minds to other ideas, opinions, and ideologies espoused in the text.

### PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Over several semesters I have discovered three important factors which can greatly impact the success of this assignment. First, it has often been the case that there are few (if any) scholarly examinations of a student’s favorite musical.

Responses from theatre critics can sometimes be helpful, as well as the occasional message board. For the most part however, when a student is unable to find any scholarly research, I challenge them to focus more heavily on their own close-reading of the dialogue and lyrics in order to make their own scholarly analysis (which, in some ways, can be even more beneficial).

THROUGHOUT ITS HISTORY,  
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HOMOPHOBIA, AND XENOPHOBIA.

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<sup>1</sup> Confirmation bias, which Michael Roberto defines as the desire to hold on to and use the evidence which supports our already existing opinions while eschewing all other information, prevents us from taking a holistic view of a particular musical. Anchoring bias exists when we rely on an original point of reference to color our views, ignoring additional possibilities or ideas. This bias can be especially prominent when a student’s love for a musical is connected to the nostalgia of the first time they discovered a musical (their first Broadway production, or a musical they first saw with their grandmother, for example). Availability bias, sometimes referred to as the “recency” effect, occurs when one places importance only on the information that is relevant when making a decision (Roberto). In other words, a decision could be made about a particular musical without examining its relationship to the canon of musical theatre. I sometimes refer to this in our class discussions as the “popularity bias” where a favorite musical is chosen primarily because it’s currently the most popular musical among one’s peers or it is the musical the student saw most recently.

Secondly, it is important not to reveal what the next part of the assignment is until the previous assignment has been completed. Otherwise, the student is likely to be influenced by the knowledge of the final part of the assignment when writing their initial essay. This has also proven to be somewhat problematic when using this assignment from semester to semester. I know our students talk to one another about classes and assignments, so I ask them to keep this assignment to themselves, so that their peers will have the same experience they had on the assignment (this has worked to varying degrees, I think).

Finally, it should be reiterated both in the written handout of the final part of the assignment and in class discussions about the assignment that the goal of the assignment is not to convince students to change their opinion about a particular musical. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Our students should understand that it is possible to feel passionately about something while simultaneously acknowledging its shortcomings. Like my own experiences with *Rent*, it is significantly more powerful if students make these discoveries on their own.

## CONCLUSION

By asking students to investigate the critical and scholarly response to a beloved musical, students learn synthesize their own opinions with the opinions of others. Understanding the many sides of an issue is something that is sorely missing from our current cultural conversation. Perhaps if we can begin to model for our students the value of interrogating and questioning the very things we love, we can help them to become better adults and better artists.



P08

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P09



# The New Imperative: Addressing Mental Health Issues on Campus

By Gwendolyn Walker

We all want our students to be successful. Our overarching goal is to provide the tools students need to compete in the highly challenging business of musical theatre. Typically, college professors have four years in which to impart a vast amount of knowledge, technique, and skill to their students. Unfortunately, our pedagogy and industry-specific knowledge is unequal to the task of addressing the mental health issues on university campuses. But, without addressing those issues, our other teachings may have less impact.

The question is whether faculty should be wading into these issues at all and if so, what is the best way to do it?



## INTRODUCTION

The significant increase in mental health issues on college campuses is, by now, well-documented (Chessman). More students than ever before are seeking mental health counseling, in part due to a decrease in the stigma of doing so. Penn State's counseling center, for example, has experienced a fifty percent jump in applicants over the last decade (*If You See Something*).

The most recent data from the American College Health Association suggests a mental health crisis on American college campuses (Survey). In its 2017 survey of 26,000 undergraduates who had sought mental health treatment:

- 40% said that at some point in the previous year they had felt "so depressed that it was difficult to function."
- 61% had experienced overwhelming anxiety
- Nearly 13% had seriously considered suicide. That is 13% of college students who are already in treatment, but it is still an alarming statistic.

Studies have found that 95% of college counseling center directors report that the number of students with significant psychological problems is on the rise (Henriques). In 2018, one in three college freshmen reported a mental health disorder (Auerbach). The rate of treatment and diagnosis at college mental health services was up by 50% between 2007 and 2017, according to a 2018 survey by Healthy Minds Study that analyzed data from a sample of over 155,000 students from 196 campuses over a ten-year period. Anxiety, in particular, is on the rise among undergraduates (American Psychiatric).

Losing valuable educational time to mental health issues can create a gap in a student's education that can be difficult to bridge, and the number of students with mental health disorders creates special challenges in our studios and classrooms. Educators lament that they do not understand what is happening to our students and wonder aloud why students have become so fragile. Let's examine some of the reasons why educators are seeing such a spike in student mental health issues on college campuses.

## REDUCED STIGMA

In the United States, for certain demographics, the stigma of receiving mental health care has reduced significantly in the last twenty years, and more young adults are seeking professional treatment. This stigma reduction is not even across race, since African Americans and Hispanic Americans seek mental health services at about one-half the rate of Caucasian Americans, and Asian Americans at about one-third the rate (Substance Abuse).

This means that students with pre-existing mental health conditions are now attending college. In previous decades, these students might not have enrolled because their mental health issues prevented them from doing so, but the availability of mental health resources on campuses now makes it possible for them to attend. However, when these students

come to college, they are without their accustomed support system for the first time. Suddenly there is no one to take them to their appointments, no one to pick up their medications for them, and no one to remind them to take their medications and go to their appointments. This creates the impression that the mental health issues are not manageable when, in fact, they may be with some additional support.

## INCREASED ENROLLMENTS, INCREASED PRESSURES

Since 2016, applications to musical theatre programs have increased dramatically due to what has been called "The 'Hamilton' Effect" (Zeitchik). Teens of all ethnicities, who now see themselves represented on stage for the first time, are applying to colleges in record numbers. With such a large and diverse applicant pool, musical theatre programs have become more selective: they now expect students to be more skilled, so competition for acceptance has increased.

This has a trickle-down effect: students are under great pressure to achieve success and to perform at higher levels at increasingly younger ages. This is due to, among other things, parental expectations, long-standing industry beliefs about what it takes to be a successful performer, and the influence of social media. For example, students often mention in the college audition room that they started dance "late," only to reveal that they began taking lessons at age eight or nine. To hold the belief that you have been operating at a disadvantage since you were a child carries few mental health benefits.

Although a great deal of positive data about smart technology exists, excessive use of technology has been scientifically linked to a number of issues that impact mental health. On



social media, students typically only post positive aspects of their musical theatre journeys, not their struggles. This can create a perception in young performers that others are having greater success than they are, and can compound their stress.

Additionally, excessive technology use has been linked to disturbed sleep patterns, which can aggravate mental health issues, prevent the ability to learn and retain information, and lead to emotional breakdowns (Pantic). The impact of excessive technology use is also linked to problems with social interactions. If students spend too much time online, they will naturally spend less face-to-face time with their peers. This prevents them from developing relationship skills. Lack of social skills creates uncertainty in social situations, which can further exacerbate anxiety. Also, increased online activity corresponds to significantly less physical play, which has led to a rise in mental disorders (Grey).

Lastly, no matter your political affiliation, current world events have made the future more uncertain to all of us. Young adults may feel this uncertainty keenly. Natural disasters, and the intense new coverage of those events have increased. Fire zones are getting larger, and tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes are happening with increasing frequency (Mora, et al.). Dire predictions as to the length of time we have before our planet is in dire peril range from fifty years to five. These events weigh on students' minds.

## MUSICAL THEATRE EDUCATORS ARE NOT THERAPISTS OR PSYCHOLOGISTS. SIMILARLY, WHILE ACTING/SINGING TRAINING MAY BE, AT TIMES, THERAPEUTIC, IT IS NOT THERAPY.

Minority and immigrant students have reason to worry about their personal safety. Hate crimes have risen every year for the last four years to the highest level in a decade (Levin). Arts professions are notoriously unstable. The question of employment post-graduation, the increases in student debt burden, and the prospect of rents in large cities at an all-time high (Guerin) all lead to severe stress and worry for our students.

In short, the current generation has not suddenly "gone soft." They face significant challenges in their personal and professional lives, and many of which were not a factor for previous college cohorts.

### ACTION STEPS

Those of us in academia cannot ignore this mental health crisis. It is real and it is affecting our students' ability to learn, succeed, graduate, and have the emotional stamina required to build a successful career in the performing arts.

Musical Theatre educators are not therapists or psychologists. Similarly, while acting/singing training may be, at times, therapeutic, it is not therapy. Many educators think that we should not concern ourselves with this issue at all. But Dr. Dennis Heitzmann, Past President of the Association for University Counseling Center Directors and former Senior Director of Penn State University's Counseling and Psychological Services, had this to say:

Over the course of my four decades on college campuses, I have witnessed sweeping generational shifts in the cohort of students coming to our institutions.... While universities have come to recognize the value of creating a healthy emotional climate for our students, what remains is clear: it cannot be the singular task of the university counseling center.... Our primary partners remain the caring, informed members of the faculty and staff. One thing is clear: Every student, nearly every day comes before a faculty member in class, in offices, and informally. You are, in fact, the eyes and ears of the counseling center.

Teachers often see students more frequently than anyone else except their roommates, who may be too busy with their own struggles to notice the problems of others. Statistically, college students are most likely to tell their close friends about a struggle with mental health. The second most likely person they will tell is a trusted faculty member. Best practices recommends that educators should adopt three practical behaviors: Notice; Ask; and Refer (Gooblar).





**Recognize**

Educators typically see their students every day or every other day. This makes them well-positioned to recognize warning signs. Faculty members should be on the lookout for changes in a student's behavior that may indicate a problem with mental health. These include: absences, sleepiness, tardiness, rapid weight loss or gain, not engaging in class, or a change in hygiene.

**Respond**

If you notice any of these changes in the student's behavior or appearance, reach out in some way. Stay within your role as a teacher, but ask if everything is okay, send the student an email, or offer them an office appointment. Students need to know that they have a door to walk through if they need help. If you ask, they may tell you that they do not need your help; but if you do not ask, you may have missed an important opportunity to provide support.

If you have asked if the student is okay and they have said that they are fine, but you still have concerns, call your university counseling services. Reaching out to counselors and



advisers with concerns about a student's well-being is not a violation of privacy laws, especially when done out of concern for health or safety (If You See Something).

When dealing with young artists, acknowledging their uniqueness may be constructive. If a student's feelings seem deeper, bigger, and more intense than other people's, it may be because they are. Many performers fall into the category of highly sensitive people (HSP). (Fifteen to twenty percent of people can be categorized as HSPs, but among artists and creatives, the percentage is believed to be much higher.) In the past, this was often termed "artistic temperament." HSPs tend to process more of sensory input and pick up on more of what is going on in both their internal and external environments. Such people experience emotions on a deeper level than most and may be sensitive to bright lights, strong smells, large crowds, coarse fabrics, and loud noises. HSPs also startle easily, are very sensitive to pain, and tend to avoid violent theatre, TV, and films. Students may find it comforting to know that being an HSP is a documented psychological condition, and that there are resources that they may find helpful (Aron; Granneman).

## REPRESENTATION MATTERS AND SHARING YOUR HUMANITY WITH YOUR STUDENTS MAY BE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THAT YOU TEACH THEM.

### Refer

[A number of resources are listed at the end of this article.]

Keep a list of mental health support professionals on and off campus in your office and with you when you are teaching. Mention these resources on your syllabus and talk about them in class on more than

one occasion throughout the year. Have a mental health professional visit your class and talk to the students. Talk to students about the fact that mental health issues are the number one reason that students drop out of school (College Survey), and that the university has resources to help them if they are struggling. Online counseling resources and wellness apps may also be helpful to students if they cannot see a counselor due to financial or personal reasons.

Just as university counseling centers need to partner with teachers, we teachers can also make our students active partners in their mental health care. Dr. Bill Crawford, author of *Freeing The Artistic Mind - New Information on the Neuroscience of Clarity, Confidence & Creativity*, suggests that giving our students information and autonomy is an important part of their growth:

Students these days come from the "information generation" and they see their ability to access data on almost any subject as their "super power" ...[s]omething that sets them apart from all

generations that have come before them.... They also are a stage of life where they tend to see their own thoughts and opinions as more valuable than those in positions of authority. Therefore, given that they are certainly aware of the degree to which stress and anxiety are compromising their ability to access their best, I suggest making them a part of the process of addressing these issues. In my master classes with students in the performing arts, they have reported that learning the brain science behind why they are so anxious and being able to influence this process, as being the key ingredient to their ability to manage these negative emotions.

Crawford suggests that when students come up with ideas on their own, it increases the potential that the ideas will be put into use.

### CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES

Here are seven action steps educators can take to prioritize mental health in the classroom or studio:

- 1. Assign mindfulness homework** like learning a breathing exercise or going for a walk outdoors.
- 2. Start class with a meditation.**
- 3. Make students aware of mental health resources on and off campus.** Provide phone numbers or email addresses to make it easy for students to reach out.
- 4. Talk about your own mental health journey and what resources have helped you, if you are comfortable doing so.** Representation matters and sharing your humanity with your students may be the most important thing that you teach them. You can also share your personal self-care practices, such as: taking breaks; eating healthily and regularly; getting sufficient sleep; grounding practices like yoga, tai chi, or qigong; exercising regularly; volunteering or helping others; spending time with animals; breathing techniques, spending time with friends; spending time outdoors; listening to calming music or making art; having some silent time each day; and accepting help when you are overwhelmed. All of these are scientifically proven to reduce anxiety and stress.
- 5. Keep an eye on your star students.** Overachievers are often the most stressed people in the room and they work hard to hide it.
- 6. Encourage your students to take Mindfulness breaks.** These can be 3-5 minute breaks throughout the day.

**7. Talk to students about reducing negative thought patterns, and model this in the classroom.** Scientists estimate that 60-70% of our thoughts are negative (Raghunathan). The first step to countering them is to notice what triggers negative thoughts. The second step is to replace those negative thoughts with questions or kind thoughts. For example, if a student forgets the lyrics to a song they may think: "I'm such an idiot!" Examples of alternate, more positive, responses might be: "What could I have done differently?" or "What tools do I have for memorization that I could apply here?" Examples of kind thoughts might be, "I have time to figure that out," or "I know what I need to practice now." Suggest that students talk to themselves the way that they would talk to someone they care about deeply such as a younger sibling, parent, or close friend. As an Alexander Technique teacher, I also point out that negative thoughts cause physical tension that makes performing any activity more difficult.

## CONCLUSION

The situation may look bleak for mental health on college campuses, but there is reason to hope. Students are more likely than they ever have been to discuss their mental health journey with their peers and mentors and to seek professional help. Dr. Bill Crawford notes:

[W]e owe it to our students to give them all the tools they need to succeed. Sadly, if stress, anxiety, or depression are in the way of their learning, even the best information on technique will never be heard or acted upon and they will find the vulnerability so necessary to being a successful performer much too frightening. Our students need a foundation of clarity and confidence in order to access their creativity and

bring their best to life. Including them in the process of understanding their mental health is, in my opinion, the best way to do that.

Universities are expanding college psychological services and beginning campus-wide initiatives for positive mental health. Stigmas around seeking mental health treatment have greatly diminished over the last twenty years. Additionally, more and more resources exist to help educators learn appropriate steps to take when students are in distress. Today's musical theatre students are talking and making art about mental health - another positive development. Like it or not, faculty are the front line in the university mental health crisis.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Online Therapy

A recent study by the Berkeley Well-Being Institute reports that e-counseling may be as successful as in-person therapy and in some cases, lead to more positive patient outcomes (Enitan). Musical Theatre performers often have very busy schedules, and online therapy has the added benefit of convenient scheduling and eliminating the travel time to and from the therapist's office. There are many resources that offer online therapy with trained, licensed, experienced psychologists. The most prominent of these are listed below.

- **betterhelp.com** is an online therapy service that offers access to licensed, trained, experienced, and accredited psychologists.
- **pridecounseling.com** provides online counseling to the LGBTQ community from licensed, trained, experienced, and accredited psychologists. The first question on the intake form asks users to self-



identify as Female; Male; Transgender—female to male; Transgender—male to female; Non-Binary; Gender-Fluid; I don't know; or other.

- **online-therapy.com** is an online therapy program based in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) that offers support through consultant therapists, cognitive behavioral therapists, and practitioners.
- **teencounseling.com** provides online therapy by a licensed therapist to teens aged 13-19 and there is also a yoga option for reducing physical tension to reduce stress.

## MENTAL HEALTH APPS

- **Seven Cups of Tea** is a free app for teens and adults that instantly and anonymously connects participants to licensed therapists and trained listeners.
- **Talkspace** offers the opportunity for the participant to type out their problems through unlimited text messages to a licensed therapist rather than talking face to face.
- **Calm** is the number one meditation and mindfulness app which aims to help reduce anxiety, improve sleep, and help you to feel happier.
- **Headspace** is a teaching method for learning how to meditate in just ten minutes per day.
- **Happify** is an app that provides activities and games developed by experts in positive psychology, mindfulness, and cognitive behavioral therapy.
- **Curable** is designed by scientists, physicians, psychologists and neuroscientists for chronic pain, but has solutions that are also applicable to mental wellness.

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# Theatrical Intimacy: Creating a Culture of Consent

By Andrew Barratt Lewis



The word “intimacy” offers a plethora of connotations and may be interpreted differently from person to person. “Theatrical intimacy” frequently refers to physical contact of a sexual nature as performed on stage. Regardless of your preferred definition, there is an innate closeness associated with the word, and thus, “intimacy” may refer to physical, mental, or spiritual closeness between people. In professional and educational theatre, intimacy is typically considered a desired element and is worked toward as a goal in the production process.

Everybody seems to want intimacy, at least on stage; one advocate recently declared that “intimacy” should be one of the values that replace “excellence” and “growth” as a measure of a theater’s success. But what precisely do we mean? Most people these days understand intimacy to be: 1.) A euphemism for sex, 2.) A synonym for love, 3.) Physical closeness, 4.) Emotional closeness—or some combination of all four. (Mandell)

Such a desire for intimacy on stage suggests the need for specific tools to achieve it and procedures to keep it safe and ethical.

## BACKGROUND

Musical theatre educators work continually to provide better training, resources, and care for their students. The industry itself is in a constant state of change and can prove difficult for young performers to navigate. The area of theatrical intimacy is a complex one, as more and more students enter training programs with anxiety, depression, and emotional trauma. “In the U.S., one in three women and one in six men experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime” (National Sexual Violence Resource Center). Closer examination of these numbers reveals that:

- One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old
- 20% - 25% of college women and 15% of college men are victims of forced sex during their time in college
- 27% of college women have experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact
- Nearly two thirds of college students experience sexual harassment (National Sexual Violence Resource Center)

Given these startling statistics, it is inevitable that most of us will work with students who are sexual assault survivors.

The professional theatre industry also reports problems with unwanted sexual behaviors. In 2015, Lori Meyers, a Chicago based actor, posted her concerns regarding sexual harassment on Facebook.

It is very discouraging to me to continuously hear stories of sexual exploitation concerning young women in our theatre community. These women were sometimes underage, manipulated, and traumatized. If

your friend, sister, daughter, or coworker was working under a sexual predator—what would you do about it? (quoted in Lopez)

A 2018 survey by Southern Theatre Magazine asked Southeastern Theatre Conference Members if they had experienced sexual harassment in a theatre workplace; 33% responded that they had personally experienced sexual harassment, 43% had witnessed sexual harassment, 80% had heard rumors or secondhand reports of sexual harassment, and 10% responded “none of the above” (Lehmann and Morris 10). These statistics seem staggering, but given the unique nature of theatrical work, it is not surprising that successfully identifying and reporting sexual harassment can be difficult. Rachel Dart, a New York based director explained the situation in the following way:

Many of us work in theatre because it provides such a loving and supportive environment. We work incredibly closely together, and the rehearsal process can be intimate. Also, in many cases there’s not a defined workplace. You meet an agent or director or writer for coffee or a drink and they make you feel uncomfortable—are you “at work”? You’re rehearsing in somebody’s basement—to whom can you report? (quoted in Lehmann and Morris, 10)

## NEW POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

One way to clarify and combat these types of situations is to adopt a codified system for handling theatrical intimacy, as well as a public and transparent set of policies towards sexual harassment and assault. Meyers’ post started a much larger conversation that led to the founding of Not in Our House by Myers and Laura T. Fisher a few months later. This non-profit advocacy organization aims to support victims of sexual harassment in theatre workplaces, serve as a social justice reactive group, and create a set of suggested standards for intimacy, sexual harassment prevention, and reporting abuse in theatre (Fisher). The standards created by Not In Our House outline everything from audition protocol to theatrical intimacy and sexual harassment. They are meant to provide transparency and safety to actors working in Chicago theaters as well as to the creative and administrative teams producing these works. “When creative environments are unsafe, both the artist and the art can become compromised” (Not In Our House 3). These standards are freely available and can be found at [notinourhouse.org](http://notinourhouse.org). Since publication, many professional, community, and educational theaters in Chicago and beyond have adopted these standards.

As a young theatre artist, Chelsea Pace, now a Baltimore-based Intimacy Choreographer and educator, found the lack of information on staging intimacy odd. “I started asking questions about why there wasn’t a system for staging intimacy. I wasn’t worried about any of it; I don’t have some great trauma that all of this stems from. I was a very happy actor. But the lack of clarity was surprising to me” (quoted in Coen, 25). These thoughts, along with her interest in fight choreography, led her to begin creating a system of desexualized language for the actor.

Laura Rikard, a North Carolina based Intimacy Choreographer and educator, was in the middle of developing a process to instill self-care into actor training when she met Pace. The two discovered that their areas of interest were remarkably connected and began their collaboration by presenting at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). In 2017, Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) was founded to “empower artists with the tools



THE DROWSY CHAPERONE | February 2019  
University of Alabama  
Direction and Choreography by Stacy Alley  
Music Direction by Terry Moore  
Photography by Porfirio Solorzano

to ethically, efficiently, and effectively stage intimacy, nudity, and sexual violence” (Theatrical Intimacy Education).

Rikard says that TIE is unique in that “we don’t just train Intimacy Choreographers, but instead we train the people who are already in the room (actors, directors, stage managers) in what we call theatrical intimacy ‘best practices.’” Much like *Not In Our House*, TIE’s goal is to create a cultural shift in the theatrical world and they believe a big part of that change will come through the education of young artists. “This is how we create a cultural change. We hope to change the industry by educating the people who will soon be headed out into the industry, because those are the people who will end up really making the changes” (Rikard). TIE offers workshops for professionals, educators, and students alike. “We train the whole company, department, or ensemble in TIE Best Practices so that you aren’t on your own when the choreographer goes home. This is about culture change, not just choreography” (Theatrical Intimacy Education). More information can be found at [theatricalintimacyed.com](http://theatricalintimacyed.com).

Intimacy Directors International (IDI) was founded in 2016 by Alicia Rodis, Tonia Sina, and Siobhan Richardson. Claire Warden joined shortly thereafter and the four women have been working to “prevent the type of ambiguity and miscommunication that can give way to misconduct” in theatre and film settings (Duberman). Each of the these founding members have expressed that they either experienced inappropriate behavior in a theatre workplace themselves or have witnessed a mishandling of scenes involving physical touch. Their hope is to prevent this type of thing from happening to other actors. IDI’s major function is to train and certify professional Intimacy Directors for work in theatre, film, and tv. According to their website, “Professionals certified through IDI operate in a specific code of ethics, with a high artistic standard, while operating their rehearsals in a professional, respectful, appropriate, and amiable atmosphere” (Intimacy Directors International). This organization also offers resources for universities, including workshops, seminars, and Intimacy Direction for university productions. IDI’s philosophy for Intimacy Practices is based on their “5 Pillars,” which are “Context, Communication, Consent, Choreography, and Closure” (Intimacy Directors International). More information can be found at [www.teamidi.org](http://www.teamidi.org).

## POWER DYNAMICS AND CONSENT

The #metoo movement, which revealed sexually coercive behavior from people in power, started in the film industry, but has since expanded to the worlds of television, stage, and opera. Abuse of power is not a new phenomenon: in 1959, two social psychologists, John French and Bertram Raven examined the basis of power in relationships. They initially identified five areas from which power is derived and later added a sixth. They are:

1. Legitimate—This comes from the belief that a person has the formal right to make demands, and to expect others to be compliant and obedient.
2. Reward—This results from one person's ability to compensate another for compliance.
3. Expert—This is based on a person's high levels of skill and knowledge.

4. Referent—This is the result of a person's perceived attractiveness, worthiness and right to others' respect.
5. Coercive—This comes from the belief that a person can punish others for noncompliance.
6. Informational—This results from a person's ability to control the information that others need to accomplish something. (Mindtools)

It is clear that as educators, directors, choreographers, and music directors, most, if not all, of these power bases apply to our interactions with students and actors. Lehmann and Morris agree: "The hierarchical nature of the theatre industry—specifically, the disparity in power between well-seated producers, directors or designers and lower-ranking subordinates—provides an environment where that power dynamic can be abused" (9).

## DIRECTORS SHOULD NOT FEEL AS THOUGH THEY ARE BEING HELD HOSTAGE BY THEIR ACTORS' BOUNDARIES, BUT INSTEAD SHOULD REQUEST DISCLOSURE BEFORE THE PROCESS BEGINS.

In an attempt to equalize the power imbalance in theatrical spaces and prevent both willful and unintentional abuses of this power, we must acknowledge the power dynamics at play and develop tools and protocol

that help to minimize their effects. This starts by accepting that power imbalance affects and influences each interaction that we have with a student or actor. The imbalance exists in both the student-teacher and actor-director relationships, which is that the teacher or director not only has decision making power in the moment, but also has the ultimate say when it comes to grading and casting. Students or actors are acutely aware of the power held by the teacher or director and this awareness is compounded by the lesson that actors must be "easy to work with." Therefore, each action they make in class or rehearsal may be filtered through this lens. Often, we magnify this imbalance by teaching mantras such as "you are always auditioning" and "difficult actors don't work." These types of phrases serve as a constant reminder that current actions affect future opportunities.

While there is truth and importance in these statements, they make it harder for our students to disagree with us (and, by extension, those they will work with in the future). Ultimately, these power dynamics can create situations where students or actors give consent simply to save face when they actually would rather not. This type of agreement is not consent, particularly as it involves anything having to do with one's body. True consent must be "freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific (Planned Parenthood)." Unless these conditions are met, even in an educational setting, true consent is not possible.

When addressing power dynamics, it is important to remember that they cannot be removed. The best remedy is to shift some power back to the subordinate, or in other

words, give the least powerful people in the room some power, especially when it pertains to their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. This is the first step in creating a culture of consent. Consent in the theatre must adhere to the aforementioned stipulations with the ultimate goal being to ensure that each actor has voluntarily agreed to the physical, mental, and emotional demands of a role and the director's vision for executing it. Furthermore, when any touch occurs on stage, both the actor being touched and the actor who instigates the touch must agree to the specifics of the action. While this may seem like common sense, it is often overlooked.

Teachers and directors can introduce, promote, and protect the idea of consent. A first step is to begin by using language that gives actors an opportunity to respectfully decline, as opposed to merely eliciting an answer that perpetuates the existing power dynamic. For example, it might seem considerate and respectful for an educator to ask, "Is it OK if he/she/they touches your back during this scene?" While this is certainly better than not asking at all, the question includes an implied "yes" and may limit the actor's ability to object. The issue lies with the fact that most people want to be considered "OK", especially when surrounded by peers and asked by an authority figure. In these instances, many actors will answer "yes" whether or not they are comfortable with the choice. In order to remove this implied "yes" and the cultural implications associated with it, the educator might instead ask, "How would you feel if he/she/they touched your back during this scene?" Notice that this language does not include an implied answer, but instead solicits a lengthier response based on feelings. In short, this type of question starts a conversation which allows the actor to express their opinion and communicate any concerns they might have. As I've incorporated this type of language into my rehearsals and classes, I've discovered that it not only opens up room for consent, but also begins a more engaged dialogue around character, objective, and action.





Language shifts are an important part of creating a culture of consent. This will require some concentration and practice, but is necessary to help actors feel at ease and free to communicate regarding their comfort level. This is a shift away from a constant desire for things to be “OK.” Under a culture of consent, it is critical for students to understand that there are times when it’s “OK” to be “not OK.”

## BOUNDARIES AND SELF-CUES

I have recently recognized my own narrow interpretation of theatrical intimacy and have begun to learn more in order to alter my methods. As I contemplated directing musicals such as *Spring Awakening*, *Hair*, *Bonnie & Clyde*, and *Passion*, I realized that I had no specialized training to handle the thematic material, physical intimacy, sexual violence, and nudity included in these shows. Like most directors, I wanted to be sure that I could keep my actors safe and the rehearsal room as comfortable as possible while simultaneously giving the audience an accurate portrayal of the story. This led me to seek out specialized training in staging theatrical intimacy.

In 2019, I was able to attend both a workshop weekend led by Theatrical Intimacy Education co-founders, Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard and a one-day workshop led by Intimacy Directors International Lead Instructors, Jessica Steinrock and Rachel Flesher. At first, I thought I would rarely use these skills, but while attending these workshops I quickly discovered that was not the case; theatrical intimacy best practices extend beyond staging sex scenes, nudity, and other challenging material. These instructors offer a simple and effective way to communicate and manage both the classroom and rehearsal studio. Ultimately, they create a safe place where actors feel welcome, comfortable, and respected. In this type of environment, actors are more inclined to take risks and create vivid performances on stage.

“Your boundaries are perfect exactly where they are” is a major mantra of Theatrical Intimacy Education. Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard repeated this phrase over and over throughout the workshop weekend I attended. At first, I felt some resistance to the idea since I had always considered myself a teacher who could help students “get out of their comfort zone.” However, after several hearings and some soul searching, I realized the wisdom in their statement. This mantra suggests that it is not our job to change anyone’s physical or emotional boundaries, of course, we can push their abilities with their consent, but never at the expense of their physical and mental well-being. We should not aim to change the physical and emotional boundaries set by another person. We do not necessarily understand the origins of their boundaries nor are we always equipped with the skills to help them healthfully cope with these types of changes.

When first encountering this idea of accepting boundaries, whatever they may be, many express concerns that an individual’s personal boundaries may interfere with the artistic vision of a production. Rikard believes the opposite is true, stating that “we need boundaries in order to experience boundless creativity.” When an actor is confident that their boundaries will be respected, they feel more comfortable in the rehearsal room and are willing to take further risks.

Directors should not feel as though they are being held hostage by their actors’ boundaries, but instead should request disclosure before the process begins. Transparency is key. It should be completely acceptable for both directors and actors to have requests that are

non-negotiable. For example, if the production or the director’s vision of the production requires simulated sex, nudity, or a depiction of sexual violence, it should be carried out. However, the best practice would be to disclose this information before the audition. This allows actors to opt in or out of these situations before being cast, and it gives directors the ability to cast and work with actors who are open to fulfilling the demands of the piece. *The Chicago Theatre Standards* offer examples of appropriate disclosures that may be needed on an audition form.

- This production contains sexual content.
- This production contains nudity.
- This production contains violence.
- This production contains culturally sensitive content. (Not In Our House 27)

Casting decisions may or may not be affected by a student’s choices, so a discussion about choices and consequences may be in order. But allowing students choice and the ability to maintain their personal boundaries without fear of retaliation is critical. Educators have a responsibility to make it clear that personal and physical boundaries will be accepted and respected, while simultaneously maintaining the artistic “boundaries”—vision and integrity—of the production.

To help students navigate their experience, we need to talk about boundaries in our classrooms. Jessica Steinrock of Intimacy Directors International introduced a helpful device for setting boundaries and deciphering between discomfort, pain, and trauma, known as “The Discomfort Scale.” On one end of this scale lies comfort and not much further along, discomfort. This reminds us that comfort zones are generally small and some amount of discomfort is necessary in order to grow. The largest section of the scale is discomfort which can manifest itself in many ways and is critical for students and actors to explore. Nearing the other end of the scale we encounter pain, which in our work could be physical, mental or emotional. This is the area where we should be most aware as it warns us that, without redirection, damage will be done. Only slightly further down the scale lies trauma; when one remains in pain for too long or continually pushes past it, the results can be long lasting and traumatic. When students and actors understand this scale, they can use it to make informed decisions on personal boundaries. In my experience, I’ve found that my students are more willing to venture into discomfort for the sake of growth when they have confidence they can stop or redirect their action if they reach pain or a set boundary.

Theatrical Intimacy Education uses a verbal self-care cue to facilitate this need to stop or redirect. TIE likes to use the word “button” because it is a neutral word related neither to sex nor boundary. (You can choose any self-care cue as long as it remains neutral.) The self-care cue should be introduced at the beginning of the rehearsal process or the first day of class, and some practice of using the self-care cue as well as reminders of its availability should be given frequently. The verbal self-care cue can be used when

something is unsafe, uncomfortable, or forgotten choreography, if there is new material that wasn’t agreed upon before casting, or if encountering a psychological trigger. This allows the actor to call hold without feeling like they are high jacking the rehearsal. (Rikard)

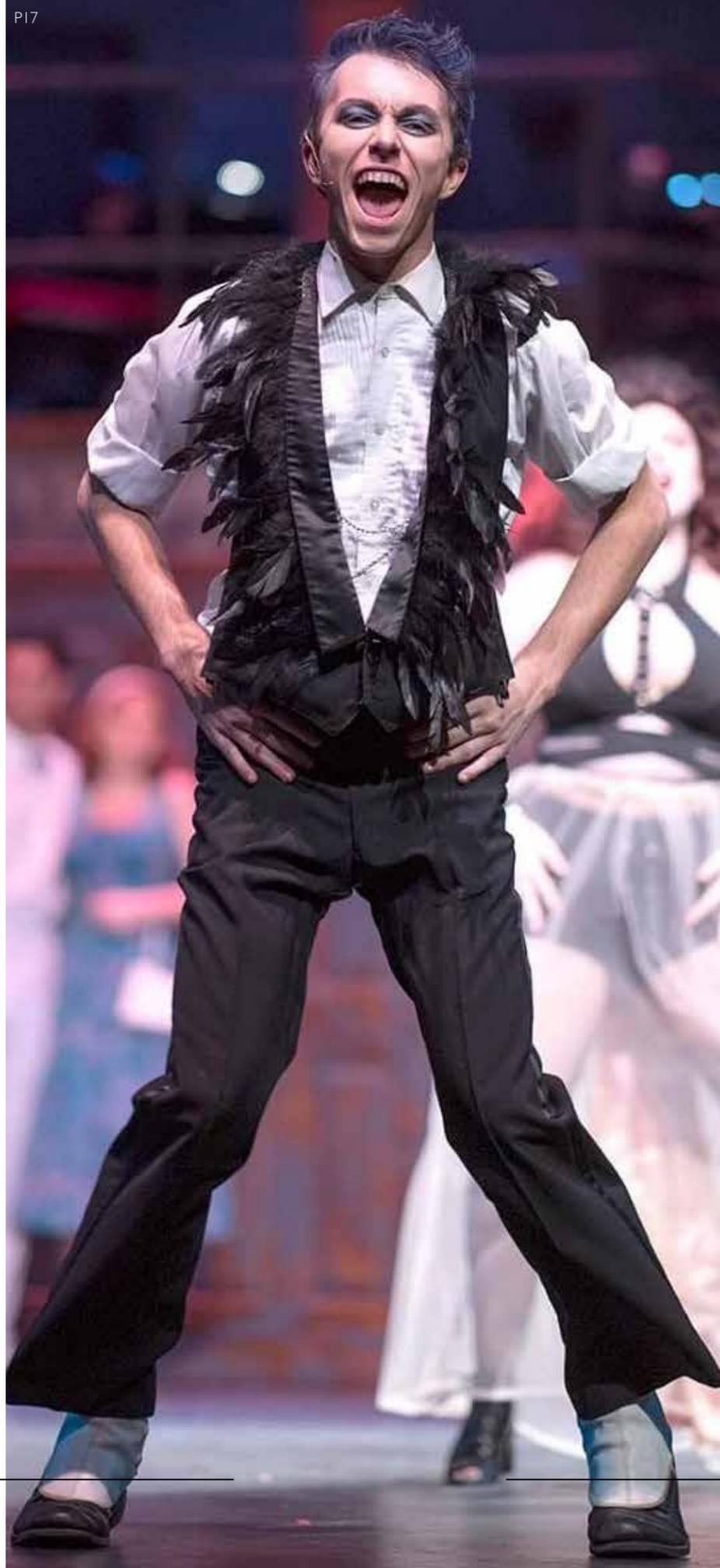
If speaking up is difficult, the cue need not be verbal. IDI employs a non-verbal self-care cue in the form of making an X with both forearms. Steinrock suggests that this symbol serves as a pause mechanism that allows the actor to communicate necessary information before continuing. She added that this tool is especially useful in improv settings or class activities where students are frequently changing partners. For example, if the class is working on an exercise that includes improvised encounters, upon meeting with a new partner a student could use this cue to pause and explain any boundary limitations and then resume the activity. Steinrock says that this cue means, "I still want to play with you, but there is information you need to know before we proceed."

This cue is not intended to shut down creativity, but instead to encourage communication and collaboration while protecting boundaries. IDI also introduced a physical exit strategy that allowed any workshop participant to turn and exit any activity if they ever felt it was needed, and then return when they were ready. This was taught early on and practiced by all so that a participant's first use of this tool would not occur in a moment of crisis. When first implementing any self-care cue, practice is essential in order for actors or students to obtain some familiarity before use.

When an actor uses a self-care cue it serves as a message to the director and scene partners that something is not quite right. This pauses the rehearsal or class activity for a moment and allows the director or teacher to assess the situation. Depending on the concern, one might ask any of the following questions:

- Should we try it again?
- Would a short break be helpful?
- Shall we discuss this right now?
- Shall we discuss this on the next break?
- Shall we discuss this after rehearsal / class?

Using a self-care cue should not be a big deal nor take a lot of time away from class or rehearsal. It exists as a tool for actors to more freely communicate their needs. When an actor uses a self-care cue, no apology should be required. Other actors will observe the way authority figures react to the use of the cue. If they do so with compassion and understanding others will feel more freedom to speak up. These moments are the building blocks of a cultural shift. However, if the director,



choreographer, or teacher brushes aside, mocks, or ignores the actor, the signal will be clear that their feedback is not welcome, despite any words to the contrary.

With a self-care cue in place and actors who are confident they can use it when necessary, rehearsals become safer and more productive. Teachers who implement this in their classroom find it freeing because once introduced and practiced, self-care cues are tools that allow students to pause when needed and permits the teacher to push students towards growth without fear of having pushed them too far or too hard.

We are trying to initiate new pedagogy, new tools, and new vocabulary that has not existed in a codified way before now. Instead of worrying if you've made a mistake, we are teaching the vocabulary and the tools to everyone in the room so they can speak up and speak out. We do this all the time with celebrities, we listen to their needs. Why not extend the same courtesy to everyone? (Rikard)

### IN PRACTICE

In 2019, Claire Warden of IDI worked as the first Broadway Intimacy Director on the revival of Terrence McNally's *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune*, starring Audra McDonald and Michael Shannon. Her work garnered a great deal of attention and has helped to raise awareness of the need for this type of specific position. The shocking fact is that it hadn't officially existed on Broadway before this production. Claire Warden explains the phenomenon with the following:

The most regular comment I get is, "How has it taken us so long to have this?" Yet, I was seeing the seismic shift in our society and in our industry that's finally made space for those in power to be made to listen. It's not that actors haven't been speaking up ever since acting has been on the stage, it's that no one has been listening—no one with the power to [enact] change has been listening. I think our society has been for the last 10 years or so in a wave of a socially driven need for change. I think this is part of that, and it started with Occupy Wall Street and Prop 8 and Black Lives Matter and

#MeToo. It is this tsunami of the people calling for our humanity back, and this is [the manifestation of that] in the theater and film industry. (quoted in Mink)

Audra McDonald spoke very highly of her experience working with Warden. She was especially struck by Warden's insistence that everything done on stage must be done with "not just consent, but enthusiastic consent" (McDonald). This production highlighted the need for theatrical intimacy best practices in order keep actors safe and at ease, but also showed its power to create vivid and powerful storytelling that can be executed time and time again. One audience member commented, "I found the [intimacy] staging highly effective and provocative, which is in tone with the text. I was very intrigued by how well-choreographed the sequences appeared to be" (Rivera-Sanchez).

I have been working to implement the tools I have learned and continue to search for the most effective and efficient ways to create dynamic work and keep actors as safe and comfortable as possible. Upon returning from my first workshop with Theatrical Intimacy Education, I jumped immediately into technical rehearsals for *Sunday in the Park with George* which I was directing. There had been a particular moment in the show that up to that point had never quite worked. Occurring towards the end of act I, it required the character Frieda to place the character Jules' hand on her breast while enticing him to follow her into some "tall grass" (Lapine & Sondheim). Both actors were willing and showed no outward reservations regarding the action, despite this, the moment never satisfactorily portrayed the intent of the scene even after my many attempts at fixing it. In a rare moment of quiet down time during Tech, I was able to spend several minutes with these actors and work on this small moment. Instead of spouting adjectives and re-describing the objective and emotional content of the moment, I implemented the tools I had learned, desexualized my language, and broke the movement down into simple choreography. The actors agreed to and performed the task; it immediately worked. It was natural, believable, and garnered a great reaction from the audience each night. It was a small victory, but showed me the power in shifting my directing style to one that is more aware and inclusive of theatrical intimacy best practices.

In the fall of 2019 after having attended TIE's workshop, my colleague, Tracy Callahan, and I held department wide Intimacy Training Workshops in order to provide students with needed information and a preview of the practices they would be seeing in classes and rehearsals. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Through an anonymous survey conducted shortly after the workshops, students provided the following feedback:

- I really loved how positive the workshop was and how safe it was. I wish I would've had this as a freshman versus a senior, but I'm happy that people after me will get to continue learning this.
- I liked how it was for everyone, you didn't exclude anyone because they weren't an actor or they were a technician. Everyone should know about this.
- I'm not afraid to speak up when I feel uncomfortable with something. It will definitely take some extra courage, especially the first few times, but I think it will get easier. (Lewis)

Implementing these practices and philosophies into all my work has been far simpler and far more rewarding than I had anticipated. I have been most proud as I have watched students immediately incorporate these practices into their own process. A recent example of this occurred as I was directing a new musical, *The House of Edgar Allan Poe*. I began our process by introducing these practices to the entire cast and did my best to ensure that I kept space for consent in every rehearsal. During a particular rehearsal, I suggested that an actor place her hand on another actor's leg. Before I could say anything else, she asked "is that alright with you?" to which he responded, "Yes, anywhere below here" while simultaneously showing with this own hand the approved places for touch. It was clear that they had internalized these practices and were committed to keeping them. Remarkably, this took no time away from rehearsal, but ensured that consent was obtained, communicated, and respected. Most impressively the students acted as if this were a completely common practice.

Further example of the dedication students bring to this cultural shift was demonstrated to me by Eliza Haynie, a Musical Theatre Junior at Weber State University, who was working on a play outside of the university. The show included a scene that portrays rape and Eliza was cast as the victim. After receiving the all too common "just go for it" and very little further direction, she suggested they try some of the intimacy practices she had learned. Despite lack of support from the director and other cast members, she and her scene partner, the actor playing the aggressor, took it upon themselves to check in with each other and implement these practices.

The director thought it was hokey and dumb, but all that matters is that I felt safe and my scene partner felt safe. Honestly, I probably would not have been able to do the show without these tools. (Haynie)

It is critical that people in power take responsibility for their actions and create spaces where consent and boundaries are accepted and respected. However, until that complete shift in our industry occurs it is comforting to know that we can train our students to use these tools to keep themselves safe and to give each other the respect they deserve.

## CONCLUSION

I am convinced that most theatre artists want our community to be a safe and inclusive one. Exploring best practices for intimacy, respecting boundaries, and teaching mutual respect and consideration can be eye-opening, and it may be tempting to be overly critical of our past actions. Take comfort in the beautifully simple phrase, "when you know better, you do better."

Intimacy practices are intended to create a safe environment for the education of theatre artists and the creation of theatrical works, while fostering compelling and engaging storytelling. It is no longer "good enough" to assume that all students bring the same experiences, biases, and personal boundaries to the table, so those of us in power positions should work to create culture of consent in our classrooms, rehearsal studios, performance spaces, and within our community as a whole. By introducing the need for theatrical intimacy training, assessing relevant resources, and examining practical ways to implement them, directors and teachers will gain the ability to shape the next generation of performers into empowered individuals who will know their rights, speak up when something is not right, and who are infused with respect and appreciation for consent and boundaries.

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# YOUNG, SCRAPPY, AND HUNGRY

## THE TWO-YEAR MUSICAL THEATRE PROGRAM

By Elizabeth Gerbi

### INTRODUCTION

My father once said to me that in uncertain economic times, there are always two reliable investment opportunities: liquor stores and community colleges. As I enter my third year as a Full-Time Instructor of Musical Theatre at a two-year performing arts program, the latter strikes me as an increasingly solid bet.

The economic juggernaut that is the American musical has managed to finally, at long last, establish true academic legs. Similar to the establishment of jazz as a legitimate area of study in the 1970s, music theatre (hereafter MT) is possibly the fastest-growing area of professional or academic performance art today (Alt 393; Fleming-DeBerger; Hall; Savran; Wolf). This accelerated growth has resulted in a proliferation of BFA and BA programs to which thousands of students apply annually (Considine 33).

But even as we breathe a sigh of relief for growing enrollments, we may have simultaneously underestimated how rapidly our medium has become a societal touchstone for historically marginalized groups, who, for the first time, have begun to pursue musical theatre training.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The MT medium has long inspired authors, performers, designers and producers to openly subvert social mores and antiquated assumptions through immersive “world building,” challenging audience members to empathetically engage with narratives told through alternate sociocultural lenses. Historically, this has often been at the hand of marginalized persons, whether they were Jewish immigrants like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, maverick artists of color like Josephine Baker, Bert Williams, and Paul Robeson, members of the LGBTQ community such as Jerry Herman, William Finn, and Stephen Sondheim, and female composers like Jeanine Tesori and Cyndi Lauper, or, most recently, differently-abled performers like Ali Stroker or the members of the Deaf West troupe. Community colleges, long familiar with the enormous range of advisement needs and critical support networks such students may require for success, are excellently poised to prepare such students to lend their voices to the increasingly diversified MT industry.

Community colleges have historically enrolled a disproportionately high number of students from these same marginalized groups<sup>2</sup> (Bailey 52), and two-year theatre programs can be an access point for students who have come late to training or lack the immense financial resources required for four-year baccalaureate matriculation. Yet, even as the entertainment industry struggles to find skilled, diverse practitioners (Musbach), there is no clear path for diverse, non-traditional two-year students to connect to the four-year American undergraduate MT training network. This is despite recent research that suggests the community college students who transfer to competitive four-year institutions frequently outperform students who enroll directly out of high school (Sanchez). Community college students' unique assets—as well as their fiscal and academic potential—are hiding in plain sight.

## POTENTIALITIES

What follows are eight guidelines for educators, policy makers, and stakeholders who seek to remove barriers for transfer-student access to their four-year programs, resulting in greater ethnic diversity and inclusivity in their student bodies.<sup>3</sup> There is both a potential for two-year MT programs to become integral partners in “2+2” networks (two years at a community college and two years at a partner four-year institution), and an opportunity to better structure the community college MT program so that a diverse population can graduate and compete in the field of musical theatre after two years of training.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nearly half of today's undergraduate students (many low-income, minority, differently-abled, first-generation, and non-traditional) will choose to begin and/or complete their postsecondary schooling at a community college. In the 2018-2019 academic year, the typical community college student was an adult learner of non-traditional age (28 years old, on average), a person of color (54% of the 2019 community college freshman cohort), and were increasingly likely to come from low-income households (34%), be first-generation college students (29%), or have accommodative needs (12%) (American Association of Community Colleges).

<sup>3</sup> Although strides have been made in this area, according to Data USA, as of the year 2017, 84% of four-year MT degree recipients identified as Caucasian, while 16% identified as belonging to minority populations (9% Black and 7% Hispanic); this presents in rather stark contrast to the share of “nonwhite students at all institutions... (which) has grown from 29 percent in 1966 to 47 percent in 2016” (Osei). A study conducted by the Asian Americans Performers Actors Coalition estimated that performers of color held 33% of Broadway contracts, more than double the percentage of students who had recently been prepared to enter the MT industry through available academic channels. This data, although demonstrating a slight decline from 2016, “mark(ed) the third consecutive year of exceeding a 50 (year) season average of 29.4% (of roles cast to ethnic minorities), suggesting the continuation of an upward trend in the casting of minority actors” (Musbach).

<sup>4</sup> A number of these suggestions were informed by the Community College's Research Center model for “Guided Pathways” (Bailey et al., 2015), which advocates vocational readiness through a combination of practical curricula coordinated with partnering baccalaureate programs, and accompanied by support networks that address the specific needs of community college students. Although research assessing the effectiveness of Guided Pathways in theatre, music or dance is forthcoming, the present widespread use of Bailey's (2015) Guided Pathways framework to determine curricular decisions within performing arts programs necessitates further study.

## I. Curricular alignment (2+2)

In a perfect world, the community college student, like other undergraduates, would complete their associate degree in two years and, if they chose to transfer, would complete the baccalaureate credential in four. Unfortunately, this rarely happens. The largest measurable barrier to bachelor's degree completion for transfer remains, according to current research, the number of redundant or unnecessary credits lost in the transfer process (Bailey 30), resulting in additional time to degree completion.

Two-year students typically begin by taking only general education (GE) credits, sometimes known as the “common first year approach.” This may appear a tidy solution for advising, but this precludes community college students—most of whom have not had access to years of voice lessons and dance classes like their wealthier peers—from acquiring the essential training they need to transfer to rigorous, competitive four-year programs.

Some states, particularly New York and Tennessee, are attempting to create more cohesive alignment, although currently only Theatre Arts and Music Industry Paths exist within a state bursting with aspiring MT practitioners (i.e., the State University of New York [SUNY] system). For those who fear that administrative gatekeepers will be resistant to curricular change, I can share that the opposite was true at my institution (Dutchess Community College, which is part of the SUNY system). The administrators merely asked for evidence to support potential growth and a survey of best practices, fair prerequisites for any program proposal.

Another tactic for transfer within “2 +2” policies is through individual articulation agreements between schools. These are notoriously difficult to produce between MT programs, many of which are happy to allow students to transfer general education credits, but who are highly reluctant to transfer 200-level acting and music courses *regardless of the ability level presented* at the initial audition. The failure to permit students to demonstrate their actual competencies in music, acting, and dance not only dismisses the rigorous training that exists at many two-year programs, but may perpetuate a culture already tacitly favoring privileged populations (Musbach, Dennard).

More comprehensive intake assessments, based upon mutually determined developmental milestones, would improve the validity and reliability of transfer placements, allowing four-year programs to place students in upper-level courses with confidence. Even if automatic junior standing for community college graduates is not possible, it might be feasible for schools to create intake protocols that assess voice, acting, dance, music literacy, and academic work separately in order for students to maximize their transfer credits and for BA or BFA programs to achieve their goal of admitting more diverse candidates.

The challenge for community college graduates seeking to enter the MT field is that, within the two-year MT program, time is limited. In the SUNY system, for example, the associate degree is limited to 64 credits, taken over four semesters. However, effective MT curriculum must balance classes that provide the traditional, core skill set required of the contemporary MT performing artist—singing technique, dance and acting training, music literacy, knowledge of theatre history and practice—with the newer, broader expectations

THE WILL ROGERS FOLLIES | May 2019  
Rider University  
Direction and Choreography by Robin Lewis  
Music Direction by Nathan Hurwitz  
Photography by Pete Borg



of the 21st century performer, who may need to have highly-developed tertiary skills ranging from playing the tuba to adeptness with aerial silks. Currently, these challenges exist for the four-year MT graduate as well. In fact, both types of programs could benefit from the establishment of semester-by-semester benchmarks.

## 2. Performing Arts-Specific Advisement Practices

An expanding body of research indicates that failure to declare an appropriate major early in a student's academic program to be one of the leading causes of student attrition, and that pre-transfer community-college students require increased amounts of hands-on guidance

# COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' UNIQUE ASSETS—AS WELL AS THEIR FISCAL AND ACADEMIC POTENTIAL—ARE HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT.

to select appropriate academic concentrations (Allen, et al., 344). Many states are examining the problem of credit mobility, and considering policy strategies, even curricular overhauls in order to prevent students from accumulating excessive elective credits (Hodara 333).

One of the advisement idiosyncrasies for MT majors is the relatively large number of applied performance courses required, including intensive studio classes in acting, voice, dance, music theory, and technical theatre. These are required to prime students for the daily expectations for either four-year conservatory coursework or successful employment in the field.

Rather than guiding students toward these classes, community college advisors tend to recommend that two-year students focus primarily on General Education requirements and/or default to general studies programs to facilitate degree completion. At my home institution, I have observed academic advisors deliberately steering students away from performing arts tracks in order to increase completion/graduation rates or, in some cases, to direct students to majors in which they feel more qualified to provide guidance, such as general studies. In these instances, my students must either 1) ignore their advisor's counsel, setting themselves up for the increased potentiality of unnecessary redundancies or curricular holes, or 2) follow their advisor's directives to focus on non-disciplinary campus requirements, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to receive the specialized training required for successful MT transfer auditions and/or industry employment.

To be fair, many advisors counsel 800 to 1200 students apiece (Bailey 59), and it is highly challenging to remain abreast of all the different transfer options. Four-year MT programs can be housed within either schools of theatre or music (each with their own curriculum), neither is curriculum standard across the country (Alt 390).

The Guided Pathway recommendation is that transfer centers designate specific program-or department-embedded advisors (Bailey 79, 159) in order to provide more directed transfer and career advice to students, but this may not be financially feasible for all institutions. When my own school (Dutchess Community College) created a half-time position for a performing arts advisor to oversee both our Associate of Science in Performing Arts and our Music Performance Certificate, our students' ability to enter and remain on-course for graduation was greatly increased without contributing to faculty work load. This benefited generalist advisors, who were able to direct performing arts inquiries to the specialist. My school was also among the first in the State University of New York System to provide advisors with specific Music and Theatre Arts tracks that outlined a linear, progressive course map leading to transfer or employment. The tracks provide lists of directed electives available on-campus, such as a 200-level Shakespeare seminar, which fulfilled a literature requirement and was of special interest to theatre students.

Finally, career advisors need more education about the variety of job possibilities within the MT field, perhaps including the compelling annual statistics compiled by The Broadway League demonstrating the recent expansion of the market (2018). They should also be aware that non-entertainment businesses are starting to recognize the marketability of theatre students' "soft skills": self-regulation, critical thinking, time management, communication, collaboration, empathy, creativity, and so on.

## 3. Professional and Academic Readiness Courses

Community colleges may find it beneficial to consider the addition of a required freshman seminar focused on transfer- or career-preparation for MT majors. These seminars would introduce professional self-marketing tools such as resumes, website development, job sites, and so on. Students could be given help to format their "audition book," and learn practical tips for maintaining good vocal hygiene and overall physical health while attempting to meet the demands of their first year of college study.

In addition to preparing students for either career or transfer, this course would facilitate the formation of a supportive cohort of peers. This is a proven variable in community college persistence (Fong, Davis et al) because it is a tangible "community within a community": a valuable asset for commuter students who, due to family or other commitments, are unable to engage with their peers on a social level.

Effective peer support also acts as an advisement filter to ensure students take the right, best courses (Bailey 92) and it encourages students to collectively participate in clubs, student-led theatre groups, and ensembles, which would further develop their skills. A course that requires students to draft their complete academic plan as a major assignment will not only increase the chances of timely completion (Bailey 203), but also allows students to see their future goals (e.g., transfer after two years) as a tangible, do-able plan.

## 4. Applied Private Study

The applied lesson serves many purposes, and should be an essential part of the two-year program. Not only is good vocal technique a requisite for admittance into a BA/BFA



THE GLORIOUS ONES | Fall 2010  
The Hartt School, University of Hartford  
Direction by David Watson  
Photography by Mike McMath

program, but the one-on-one lesson is a uniquely versatile mechanism to address other critical skill areas that cannot always be addressed at the course or program level. It allows for diverse, individualized learning outcomes in a manner consistent with individual needs. In addition to vocal technique, applied music lessons could include music literacy, aural skills, and even MT history and analysis.

Instructors can make highly effective use of students' critical thinking skills by spending even a few minutes a lesson on assigned analytic tasks such as rhythmic isolation and *solfeggio*, allowing students the tremendous satisfaction of having solved musical problems independently (Alt 392-393).

Although some of these applied credits may transfer as electives rather than required lessons within the new curriculum—many conservatories have firm limits to the number of applied credits that can apply towards their program—they may provide the foundation that a talented-but-unskilled student requires for more accelerated placement, eliminating the need for repeated coursework or prerequisites, post-transfer.

## 5. Mentorship

In the majority of accredited programs, it can be safely assumed that college faculty members are seasoned professionals with considerable teaching and academic experience. Although their counsel remains invaluable on many levels, the title of tenured professor also signifies a chronological reality: many full-time instructors of MT are relying, at least in part, upon industry norms they experienced while “cutting their teeth” decades ago in professional arenas.

A recent article in this journal addressed this deficit and identified a source of supplementary industry mentors: alumni (Sparling 36). In this digital age, it is easy for students to remain in periodic contact with mentors pursuing their own careers. For many first-generation college students, simply having an alumnus to speak to informally proves that graduation is, in fact, possible. This may provide critical motivation for students struggling with personal, financial, and academic challenges—not to mention the difficulties of artistic endeavors.

Without much effort, I was able to connect a dozen individuals, linking a developing playwright with a noted author and professor of playwriting, an aspiring pit musician with a local contractor who helped create business cards and a marketing website, and even a second semester student who began correspondence with a recent transfer student at their target school. This year, I even began matching first-semester students with second-semester mentors, whom I suspect will convey a very different sort of “soft wisdom” to their charges than I might be able to in a strictly formal capacity.

This contact with alumni also allowed me to collect dozens of testimonials and proof of our program's value/success. This information is helpful for general publicity as well as conversations with administrators.

## 6. Music Literacy

Although students may be able to learn musical lines by ear, the fact is that many young artists' first professional job will be to develop a new MT work, a task that requires lightning-fast reading skills and a general familiarity with extant MT forms and structures. Actors with fine voices but poor musicianship skills may find themselves occasionally hired, but are unlikely to be rehired when their more musically literate peers compete for equivalent jobs (Alt 390).

Similarly, students without sight-reading and score analysis skills may squeak by an initial transfer audition, but are unlikely to succeed in demanding programs without a reliable system for music learning. In order to be realistically considered for sophomore or junior placement within four-year MT programs that offer "blended musicianship" sequences, community college students will not only need to conquer a basic fundamentals of reading music course, but two years equivalent study in music theory, aural skills, and piano keyboarding, potentially a combined 14 to 16 credit requirement, far more hours than may be available within a 60 to 64 credit (two-year) program.

One approach may be to address some remedial needs within an applied lesson format, as discussed in suggestion #4. An additional instructional solution within a credit-truncated format may be to present these competencies in a manner that is relevant to the musical skill set required of a self-sufficient MT artist; namely, the ability to 1) read music with a clear understanding of melodic and rhythmic rudiments, 2) learn music independently by playing required melodic and harmonic lines at sight on a piano keyboard, coupled with an awareness of intervallic ("vertical") relationships in a score, and 3) be able to perform basic chord accompaniments to hear assigned vocal parts in relation to the musical whole (Bond 61-62).

Some of this work has already been accomplished by innovative theory pedagogues; for example, there are now several published music theory curricula for MT students, which emphasize necessary skills while eliminating other theory concepts with limited use or representation in the repertoire (Hanlon 20, Gerle 2018).

Finally, it is imperative to consider all remedial courses as critical opportunities to implement and practice metacognitive skills: such "habits of mind" will be essential in the upper-level course sections (Bailey 97). Although it seems pragmatic to include extensive drilling in these courses, instructors are urged to step away from the worksheet and consider comprehensive music problem solving skills, which for MT students should involve the same sort of idiomatic blend of singing, analysis, and keyboard skills required of working performers. For example, in order to reinforce rhythmic reading skills, Bond transcribes tap dancing solos juxtaposed over musical scores and "dancing counts" in order to have students integrate both rhythmic strategies (Bond 63); such innovative pedagogy also permits educators to consider rudimentary scaffolding in the other requisite MT areas: acting and dance.

## 7. Socially conscious season selection

Community colleges have a distinct demographic advantage over their four-year counterparts here: due to the diversity of our student body, we are able to program a season that is truly reflective of our students' ethnic, racial, social, cultural, socioeconomic, and religious identities.

This can be a hard sell for colleagues who are accustomed to more traditional casting practices, or who are not conversant in contemporary MT. Many SUNY two-year campuses, including SUNY DCC, SUNY Orange, SUNY Ulster, SUNY Sullivan and SUNY Westchester now employ the services of Diversity Officers in upper-level administrative positions, who can offer invaluable support as faculty, students, community members and audience members collectively begin to embrace a more inclusive notion of MT.

When my own campus programmed *In the Heights* in the Fall of 2018, we were surprised to meet with some resistance from Caucasian students, who were afraid they would be excluded from the project. Our Chief Diversity Officer sponsored a series of "privilege" workshops that not only created a more inclusive environment for performers of color and Caucasian students alike, but also gave the students a greater awareness of their peers' perspectives.

To begin this process, season selection committees may look directly to their students for guidance in repertoire selection, and allow student leaders a voice at the table to articulate what newer MT properties speak to their hopes and concerns. This gives students an insight into the economic, artistic, and social considerations involved in choosing a season and, even if not all of students' suggestions are practical or applicable, being awarded a critical voice can serve as potent validation and lead to further, more empowered engagement in campus leadership.

## 8. The Role of Action Research

As a newly emerging field of study, there is little extant research to guide policymakers in MT curriculum design or implementation. Rather than feeling immobilized, the dearth of data offers a critical opportunity for instructors to augment the existing literature by considering their classrooms as potential laboratories for action research, allowing individual instructors to explore and document pedagogical problems and solutions with the goal of affecting change at the classroom level (Abeles and Custodero 299). These instructors, as participant-observers in the natural setting of the classroom (295) can perform more contextually sound research than may be possible at the R-I university.

Pilot classes, service-learning projects, even student-initiated performances can prove critical case studies with which to inspire the next generation of educators and graduate students to become the researchers of tomorrow. Such individual reports documenting individual phenomena, even taking as humble a form as a diary or teaching journal, when collectively surveyed, may contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting causal phenomena between pedagogy and professional praxis. In collaboration with the efforts of other like-minded educators, these may ultimately enhance the validity of MT programs as a viable training ground for artists, educators, and many other fields.

## CONCLUSION

The two-year institution holds tremendous and unique value for the next generation of MT artists. With or without direct institutional support, an enormous variety of aspiring MT practitioners are coming to our doors, and it is time that all programs embrace this phenomenon. The industry is looking for the diverse, unique, intensely driven sort of talent that proliferates in community college settings; to my four-year colleagues, I borrow the cry of the Whos of Whoville, "We are here! We are here!" (Seuss, 1949).

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# *a conversation with director*

# DAVID CROMER

Interview by Jonathan Flom

**David Cromer is a Tony Award winning American theatre director and stage actor. He has received recognition for his work Off-Broadway and in his native Chicago. Cromer has won or been nominated for numerous awards, including winning the Lucille Lortel Award and Obie Award for his direction of *Our Town*. He was nominated for the Drama Desk Award and the Outer Critics Circle Award for his direction of *The Adding Machine*. In 2018, Cromer won the Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical for *The Band's Visit*.**

**JONATHAN FLOM:** I saw *The Band's Visit* on Broadway in January 2019 (during the MTEA conference weekend), and I loved it so much that I returned for a second time, catching the musical in its penultimate performance at the Barrymore. I have spent a good deal of time reflecting on my experience at the two performances, and while I wouldn't say the musical itself is necessarily my favorite piece, its Broadway incarnation is certainly the best production of any musical I have ever experienced. And it was no surprise to me that it was directed by David Cromer, who attracted mainstream attention for his 2009 revisionist take on *Our Town* at the Barrow Street Theatre. I reached out to Mr. Cromer and asked him if we could talk a bit about *The Band's Visit*, as well as the state of musicals in



general. What follows is a transcript of that conversation.

**JF:** Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I was thinking about writing an article about the state of musical theatre today and all the recent shifts in style. *The Band's Visit* really had a huge impact on me, and I feel like you're treading new ground with it. So, I wanted to talk to you about that process, to maybe see how we could incorporate that kind of work into more musicals.

**DAVID CROMER:** Thank you very much, that's very nice to hear. We definitely were aware that the piece was asking for different things. And the writers kept wanting to obey that. And it didn't yield a particularly pretty film musical, so we just kind of stuck with that. We didn't have anyone forcing us to do anything else, so that was nice.

**JF:** In terms of the acting style, is that something that was written into the script or is that something that was your touch? Specifically, the naturalism, and the silences, and the honesty. Because it never felt at any moment like we were heightened into musical theatre world and we were suddenly jumping into song or dance. It really felt like you didn't even notice that the characters were singing.

**DC:** I would say that it seemed like what the guys [music and lyrics by David Yazbek, book by Itamar Moses] were writing. And I think they were getting notes occasionally that said: "Shouldn't there be more group numbers?" or "Shouldn't there be a big scene with everyone?" or "It's so beautiful at the end when everyone sings. Let's do that all the time," or "Let's do that more." And I don't want to speak for them—I don't know. I came on part-way through the process, a couple of years in, and I spent nine months on it before we went into production.

But the silences, that started out from the film; the film has a lot of negative space, and it's very methodical. And I think the reason was that Eran Kolarin [the film's writer and director] was trying to paint a picture of what it was like to live in a world that was that slow, where there was that little going on. And how that can drive you crazy, or what that feels like.

And I think that there is always pressure in the theatre when they say, "Well, if it's supposed to be a boring town, you don't really want it to be boring. It's gotta be interesting." There is a conventional wisdom that says, "If the character is mean, they can't be too mean," or "If the town is boring, it can't be too boring." Otherwise people will be bored. And that's true to a certain extent.

But I always think you can go the other way—you can drive into what is the nature of boredom or what is the nature of stillness, what is the nature of stagnation. And within that, people want motion and they want things. People want things more and more passionately. If we're going to talk about how boring the town is, and the town isn't boring, then we're lying and the show isn't truthful. So you can just decide to stick to your guns and embrace what it is. And say that that has fascination too.

So I felt like the guys were writing that. I don't know for sure if they were confident that they should, but it's definitely something that I feel strongly about. So I would say that I encouraged them to let it be what they were writing. And I think that I said, "Silence is okay and stillness is okay." And so it ended up being a very fruitful collaboration. And I was always going too far one way; Yazbek wanted it somewhere else; Itamar was only ever doing the purest—he wasn't saying what it should be, his thing was just to show what it is.



And so between the three of us, the tension (and it wasn't an unpleasant tension, but there was a push and pull) worked well. So that when I was trying nine big silences in a scene to make my point, Yazbek would say, "That's fucking too many. I stopped listening." So that was good. So I would say that it all started with the material. I think it is what they were writing and I tried to encourage that. And I certainly pushed my own agenda. It's a thing I'm interested in.

I would only quibble with one word you used, which is "naturalistic" acting. And I know what you mean by that, but I would say "naturalism" almost doesn't exist because naturalism takes too long and it isn't interesting. Any piece of

theatre is always totally artificial and all events, all choices, all words, all moves are making a point. And since in real life, there is no point, I guess I want to use the term "truthful behavior." Truthful to the circumstances. You know, we all learned that in school: Living truthfully in the imaginary circumstances.

I just have a thing about musicals. The transition from scene to song has often been very jarring to me so I was very excited about the opportunity to work on *The Band's Visit* to try to solve that. Or to try to address that. I have addressed that in other musicals I've directed, to less success than with *The Band's Visit*. It's been something I've done for a while in the few musicals I've done. It often drains the energy and just turns the thing into a false naturalism.

ANY PIECE OF THEATRE IS ALWAYS  
TOTALLY ARTIFICIAL AND ALL EVENTS,  
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It does not exist in the world...I was doing things that don't exist in a world where people sing. So [with] *The Band's Visit*, I think finally, because I had such an experienced musical theatre writer in Yazbek as one of my partners, I was able to find the place that exists.

And so we were able to structure and to finesse how we get into "Omar Sharif," as the big example. Her speech had to start turning. She had this speech about when she was a little girl, these mysterious people she would never meet would come to her through the screen, Umm Kulthum and Omar Sharif. And Itamar rewrote that speech a thousand times, until it just floated into the song. And there was a long period of discussion about whether there should be any dialogue within the song. And we finally settled on these three lines about a river of love that they say in between the first and second verse. And that turned it into words that turned it into a song that stayed a conversation then turned into an experience, and then turned back into a conversation. So that was very rewarding to do. And I had the right partners to try to address that. That one I liked.

**JF:** This is great. You know, as I mentioned, we have this Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance, and we have conferences, and we have this journal and so much of the conversation and the dialogues we have are focusing on vocal technique or how to incorporate dance into musical theatre, and I'm just feeling, as an acting teacher and a director myself, that there's this thing that we call "musical theatre acting" and it sometimes can be anathema to me, and that's what struck me. I guess maybe this question is sort of already implied or answered, but I'm curious if you feel like, especially on the heels of *The Band's Visit*, can this approach, can this style be applied to musicals that already exist that aren't traditionally done like that? Is there a way to bring us closer to an honesty in the acting? Obviously it's heightened because it's a musical, by its very nature—they're singing and they're dancing, so it's heightened.

**DC:** You know what show already does it? This is just popping into my head. You know what show already does it really beautifully and did it a long time ago, is *Sunday in the Park with George*. I would say, I haven't seen many productions, but I don't feel like I have to see another production other than the original. Lapine's production is pretty spot-on to me. And it exists in a world that's a little like a painting, it's a little like a play. You know what I

# THERE'S SHITTY SHAKESPEARE CHOICES. THERE'S SHITTY MUSICAL THEATRE CHOICES. THERE'S SHITTY CHEKHOV CHOICES. THERE'S SHITTY ARTHUR MILLER CHOICES. THERE'S A SHITTY VERSION OF EVERYTHING. AND MOST OF THE TIME, THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE DOING.

mean? It has its own set of rules and it has its own... it's not naturalistic, but it has its own truth. It's absolute and it's seamless. And it flows in and out of songs and conversations. You know, sometimes Bernadette's a little big, but she has to get into a song. But they're doing these beautiful things with their bodies and their voices that sounds like singing even when they're not singing. So I guess I would say, I think it already existed.

I know exactly what you mean about the term "musical theatre acting," and one of the things I found is the actors who spend a lot of their time in musical theatre really know what you mean by that. There's a bad version of everything, you know what I mean? There's shitty Shakespeare choices. There's shitty musical theatre choices. There's shitty Chekhov choices. There's shitty Arthur Miller choices. There's a shitty version of everything. And most of the time, that's what you're doing. I don't know why. Maybe there's not a million artists, maybe there's only a thousand artists, but a million people doing it? I don't know. Maybe it's what people want. It still reaches people and it still moves people so it's all still valid, but so there's a shitty version of everything. So there's definitely a shitty version of musical theatre and the musical theatre actors I know, know about it.

There is often this conversation where we'll be trying to approach a scene in a slightly more truthful way or trying to justify the emotional trajectory of how it should go, or what the circumstances are that make it go from scene to song, in the same way that you have to justify a really major beat change in a Chekhov play. And they go, "Oh fuck, I have to do it, and you know, just go for a lot of results." You know, the books get whittled down because the audience gets restless. So the books are just borderline dialogue to lead you into the song and there's a bunch of jokes, and then once you get into the song you just start singing. And if you don't do that, a lot of times the pieces don't work. The shows don't work.

So I know what you mean—there's room to the extent that you're willing to do it or you think that it's going to serve the piece. You know, there's shows that can't quite bear it.

Now I just went back to Chicago to Writers' Theatre, which is a theatre that I've worked at a long time, and I just did a production of *Next to Normal*, which is a musical I love. But *Next to Normal*, the production we all know and love (and I saw it three times on Broadway and I listen to the recording all the time) is really at II the whole time. It's emotionally at II, it's vocally at II, because it's about this slow-motion train wreck of these people struggling with

this illness in this household. So I was super nervous about approaching it the way I tend to approach things, but I was curious coming out of *The Band's Visit* what was applicable.

We had a very satisfying experience doing it. The writing of the show, the detail...I would say that by treating *Next to Normal* the way we treated it, I heard a lot more of the plot and of the moment-to-moment changes in her illness—the evolution of the ways they kept trying to solve the problems they were facing—than I was used to experiencing with that show. People don't often remember that she attempts suicide in the middle of Act I. They say, "I love that show! Oh wait, she tries to commit suicide?" And you go, "Yeah, right in the middle of Act I." Things keep changing—the disease evolves past any of their solutions. The virus keeps mutating. And there's moments in the piece where those things change. And if it's just a big wash of brilliant singing, and high emotions, and lights flashing, you can kind of miss that.

That being said, is it as thrilling a night in the theatre if you don't do that? It might not be. So it's a trade-off. I was very proud of that production. I had this brilliant, brilliant cast that threw themselves at it and I thought they were doing gorgeous work. And it was very well received, but the way it was received was in that same kind of back-handed way that *The Band's Visit* was received, which is, "Well, it's not a regular musical."

**JF:** The funny thing is, in addition to *The Band's Visit*, you've now mentioned two of my favorite musicals. *Sunday in the Park* has always been my favorite show from that Broadway original one, until I saw *The Band's Visit*. And it could be that there's just a particular...you know maybe it's people who like both Chekhov and musicals?

**DC:** I would throw *Little Shop* in there too.

**JF:** Really? Interesting. So, that's my next question. In terms of your aesthetic, in terms of the kind of shows that you'd like to direct, in your style, are there shows that exist out there currently that you feel...obviously, what you did (and I know this is not a musical) with *Our Town*, I mean I hate to sound like a kiss-ass, but it was revolutionary. And people speak of that production as the "new way" to do *Our Town*. And it was so influential. Are there musicals—

**DC:** Purely accidental.

**JF:** Purely accidental?

**DC:** Purely accidental. I mean I had an agenda about the show. I wanted to strip it of the sort of "Pepperidge Farm" thing, and I wanted to hear it in a very pure way. So that was an agenda. But that it was going to have that kind of effect on people, that was purely accidental. We had no idea. We did it in a theatre basement in Chicago. And then of course you start pretending you did it all on purpose.

I mean, we know it's about life, the universe, and everything, and we wanted to make something that was really pure, so that was on purpose, but that's about it.

**JF:** One of the exciting things about coming out of Chicago is that you can take bigger risks and do bolder work, I think.

**DC:** Yeah, yeah.

**JF:** But are there other musicals that could use a revision with the “David Cromer Touch?”

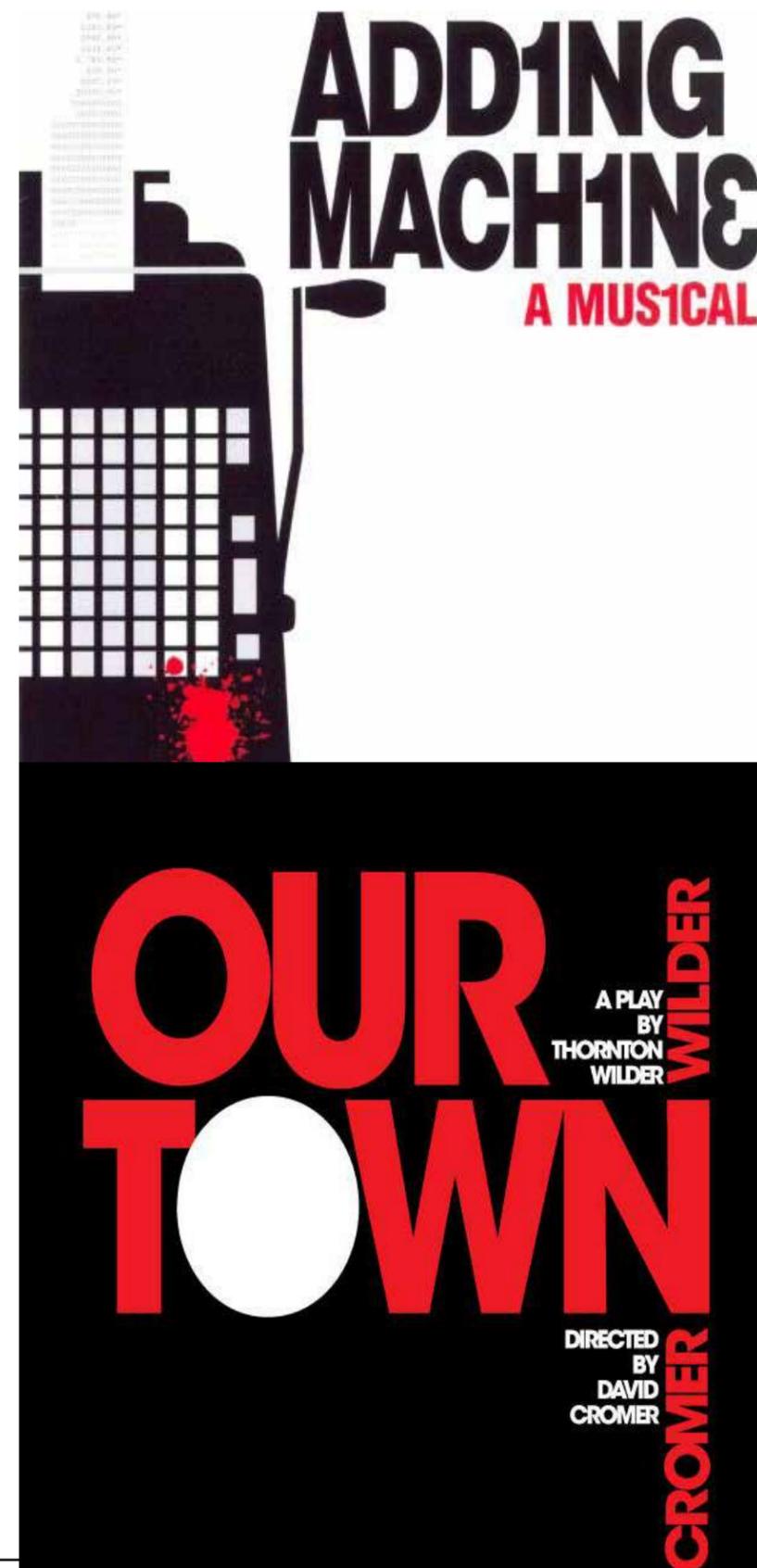
**DC:** There are musicals I would like to do. There’s a musical that I really love that I really, really want to do, and this is gonna sound like a bad idea, but it’s *Annie*. And the reason I want to do *Annie* is not because I want to make it dark and strange or kind of dull or naturalistic or anything like that. But what I’m fascinated by, what I love about *Annie*, is that it’s about a really defiant optimism in the face of really difficult circumstances, in like a Dickensian way. So, there’s a Frank Capra film called *Lady for a Day*, from the 30’s that is sort of the template for how I would approach *Annie*. And it’s beautiful and emotional and it’s really funny. But it’s really gritty—like *It’s a Wonderful Life*, it’s really gritty. There’s death, and he uses a legless man on wheels as a street beggar.

The Depression was a very brutal time in this country, and people were terrified. And it was scary. And these kids are all alone and they’re in the hands of dangerous people. And the stakes are high. You know what I mean? And the triumph over that is very moving. So I think the danger has to be real, the poverty has to be real. The attitude and defiance in the face of all that adversity is therefore much more inspiring than if you’re just in a fun little romp.

So that’s something I’m drawn to. I don’t necessarily know that I’m going to do a million more musicals. There’s only certain shows that would be well-served by the things I think are important. Some of them wouldn’t.

I don’t want to do *Sunday*, because like I said, I don’t know what else you do, you know? The ideal is never to say, “I want to do a show because something has to be done to it.” I’ve come to terms with the idea that there are trends in the way I work that people have identified. You know what I mean? People say, “I’ve seen a show that he directed and these are his concerns.” I’m not an invisible director, although I try to be more so. You try to just listen to the material. So it depends on the material.

You know there’s a really beautiful musical by the people who wrote *The Drowsy Chaperone* that is still in development that I’ve



been to some readings of that is something I really want to do because it’s about London during the Blitz. It’s a love story set during the Blitz, so that seems sort of fun. I guess I like the stakes to be real.

Have you seen the Daniel Fish *Oklahoma!*?

**JF:** No I haven’t seen it yet. I’m going to see it in September when I’m in New York. [This interview occurred in Summer 2019.]

**DC:** I think it’s pretty great. I think it’s pretty fucking great. It’s pretty fantastic. I would quibble with maybe 20 things about it, but also the things I would quibble with are, like, who gives a shit whether I didn’t like them or not? The show was awesome. Doesn’t matter, the fucking show is awesome. So it’s like, fuck my quibbles, the show was amazing. So that’s a show I’ve never liked because I’ve never bought it. Because I’ve thought, “Why are all these musical theatre people bouncing around pretending to be cowboys?” And this is about people who left the east and went to get free land in the middle of fucking nowhere, and lived in the wild and tried to build a community. So that’s what their story is, and that’s what this production is.

**JF:** I think the pushback, or the negative reaction is just because people are stuck on their grandmother’s *Oklahoma!*. There’s a certain preciousness to it because we all did it in high school or saw it at a high school.

**DC:** Good lord, have you seen the response to the trailer for *CATS*?

**JF:** My Facebook has blown up with it.

**DC:** Blown up. People are losing their goddamn minds. Which is interesting in a lot of ways because what did they think the movie *Cats* was going to look like? “It should have been animation!” Well first of all, it is animation. And second of all, if it was animation, you’d have said, “But, what about the dancing?”

**JF:** Right. Well, this is the society, unfortunately, I think that we’re stuck in now—especially with social media, which I’m a culprit of as well—but everyone’s opinion has to be heard and it blows up. Thank you so much for the time, and congratulations on the production, it was stunning.

**DC:** Well, thank you.



THE ADDAMS FAMILY | October 2019  
Wright State University  
Direction by Joe Deer  
Choreography by Dionysia Williams  
Sets by David J. Castellano  
Lighting by Matthew P. Benjamin  
Costumes by Zoe Still

## BLACK ACTING METHODS: CRITICAL APPROACHES

By Sharrell D. Lockett with Tia M. Shaffer (foreword by Molefi Kete Asante)

ROUTLEDGE, 2017; pp. 254. Prices Vary.

In her foreword to *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, Molefi Kete Asante proffers “In a manner different from Eurocentrism, which imposes itself as a universalism, Afrocentricity says that African people should examine all forms of knowledge and experiences from the standpoint of Africans being the makers, creators, inventors and actors in our own narrative.” In the spirit of gathering a variety of knowledge into one place, this book is an anthology that presents various points of view: “We anthologize to save classrooms from operating as one of the most culturally segregated places in the United States and to acknowledge that there are many ways for acting students to convey their ‘truth’ of a character.”

This anthology includes ten essays by twelve writers and is divided into four sections centering on the unifying methods of social activism, intervention, and cultural plurality. The importance of culture, community, spirituality, and legacy is a through-line for this anthology. The final two chapters offer reflections and words of wisdom by eleven of the nation’s most distinguished practitioners that include award-winning actors, playwrights, directors, educators, and others. In this section, they address issues of diversity, inclusion, and culturally responsive education.

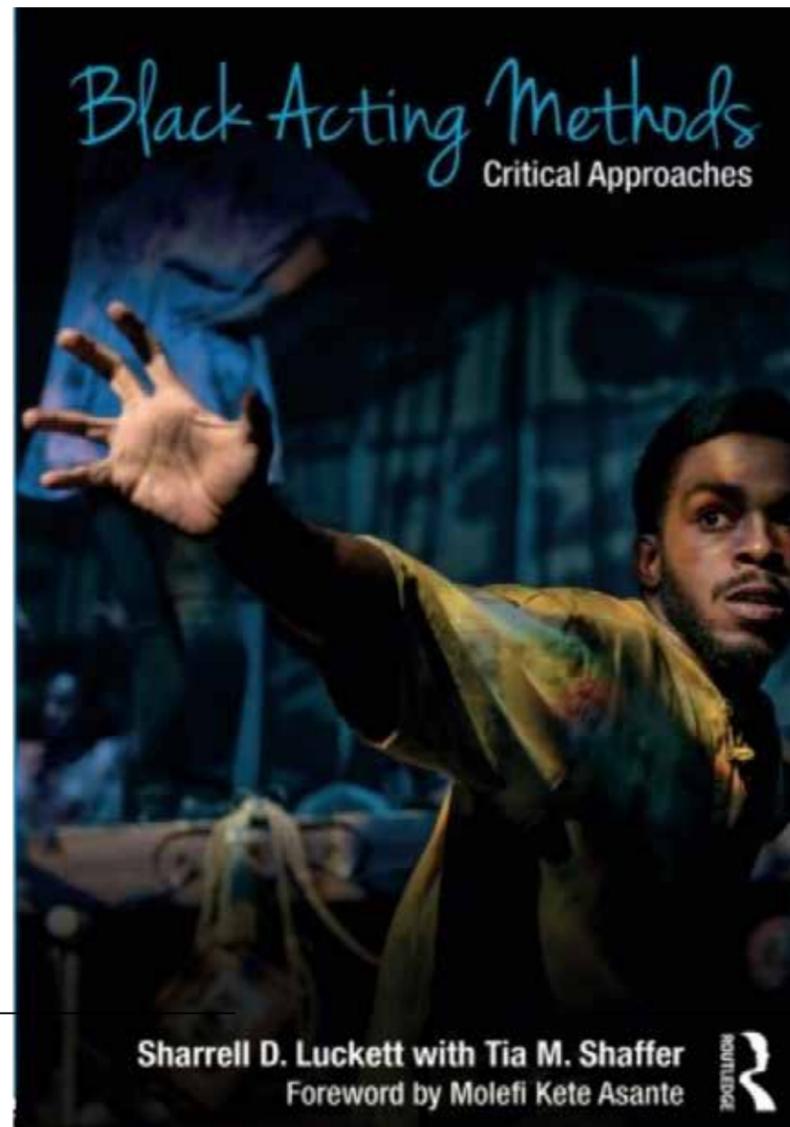
Lockett and Shaffer have designed “a text for all actors, simultaneously paying homage to Black pedagogy while highlighting the need for more culturally and racially diverse perspectives in acting classrooms.” As a working director and educator, many of the essays forced me to examine my own pedagogy, and its foundations: “Actors and directors are primarily taught to analyze plays using one Eurocentric dramatic form, as if plays cannot have alternate structures.” The writers offer practical methods for improving one’s effectiveness in equitably training the next generation of theatre makers.

Part One, “Methods of Social Activism,” outlines the work of Freddie Hendricks (The Hendricks Method), Cristal Chanelle Truscott (Progress Theatre and SoulWork), Rhodessa Jones’ work with incarcerated women (The Medea Project), and Rebecca Rice’s black feminist improvisation. The first two chapters are especially relevant to the informed educator. Culture and community are foundations of Hendricks’ Youth Ensemble of Atlanta which confronts social and political issues—racism, oppression, and discrimination—as experienced by the young participants of the Ensemble. The Hendricks Method offers tools for combatting the daily experience of “discrimination and prejudices at a very young age” through such theatrical devices as empowered authorship, ensemble building, and activism.

In Truscott’s SoulWork, the actor focuses on continuous and “endless exploration” and disrupts the traditional format of audience-as-spectator to that of collaborator. According to Truscott, the cultural institutions in the Black community that include singing in the church, formal acting and dance training, oral traditions of call and response, and the intersecting generations between elders and diverse communities, are all components of the method that engages the participant in the critical exploration of African ancestors and their enslavement.

Section Two, “Methods of Intervention,” explores Justin Emeka’s “Seeing Shakespeare through brown eyes,” Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates’ “Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum,” and “Remembering, Rewriting, and Re-Imagining” by Clinnesha D. Sibley. As an actor/director/educator, Emeka resists the concept of color-blind casting in both academia and the profession and encourages us, instead, to examine how race and culture impact the portrayal of a character as well as the audience’s experience of the role. Kenny Leon’s recent Shakespeare in the Park production of *Much Ado about Nothing* is, perhaps, the most visible example of Black actors employing “cultural memory” in their work. “If we ignore race, we ignore the persistence of White supremacy woven into the fabric and foundation of our collective consciousness.”

Readers may disagree with some of Emeka’s bold conjectures, yet he skillfully backs his arguments with such affirmations as “One’s artistry can never be separated from the totality of their experience and the legacy they present.” Pettiford-Wates’ essay on Ritual Poetic Drama (RPD) further advances this view by acknowledging that Black students often enter the profession deficient in what she calls “spiritual content or connection,” i.e. a general lack of knowledge in who they are and how their history influences their artistry. She cites seven practical strategies for implementing the concepts of RPD. Additionally, Pettiford-Wates reinforces the practice of *Sankofa*, a West African word meaning “go back,” in empowering Black actors to retrieve their “authentic voice.” Many professionals recall the moment in which they were forced to silence their metaphorical “voice” in order to comply with, and feel safe within, the confines of a predominantly White training institution. *Sankofa* places the



ownership and authorship back into the hands of the actor/practitioner. And in her essay, Sicre introduces a system of Afrocentric character analysis that incorporates oral traditions, body gestures, and nonverbal nuances.

In Section Three, "Methods of Cultural Plurality," the reader is treated to essays on the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative in "We the Griot," by Daniel Banks, "Global Crossings in the Theatre" by Aku Kadogo, and "#Unyielding Truth: Employing Cultural Relevant Pedagogy" by Kathi Johnson and Daphnie Sicre. Hip Hop theatre is the language that "addresses ethnicity, class, culture, gender, sexuality and generation" and embraces the intersectionality between culture and community, past and present.

"Reflections from Distinguished Practitioners" is the fourth and final section of the anthology—and my personal favorite. This passage offers words of wisdom from some of the nation's most experienced and inspirational artists and scholars. There is advice on teaching timeliness from a spiritual perspective, ownership of space through gratitude, the embracing of stillness, the practice of selfcare, and the lifelong search for mastery. Again, recurrent themes here include culture, community, history, spirituality, and legacy.

The book culminates with a two-page appendix of tips for teachers who "seek to provide equitable training." Included are suggestions for the incorporation of U.S. Black dialects into voice and speech training, and the navigation of cultural ineptitude in one's teaching. *Black Acting Methods* is an essential text for theatre instructors, as well as professional practitioners, from all backgrounds; it is a book "for all actors who are robbed of having a culturally diverse education, for we can all benefit from the 'warmth of other suns.'"

## BOOK REVIEW

by Raymond Sage

### THE ULTIMATE MUSICAL THEATRE COLLEGE AUDITION GUIDE: ADVICE FROM THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE THE DECISIONS

By Amy Rogers Schwartzreich

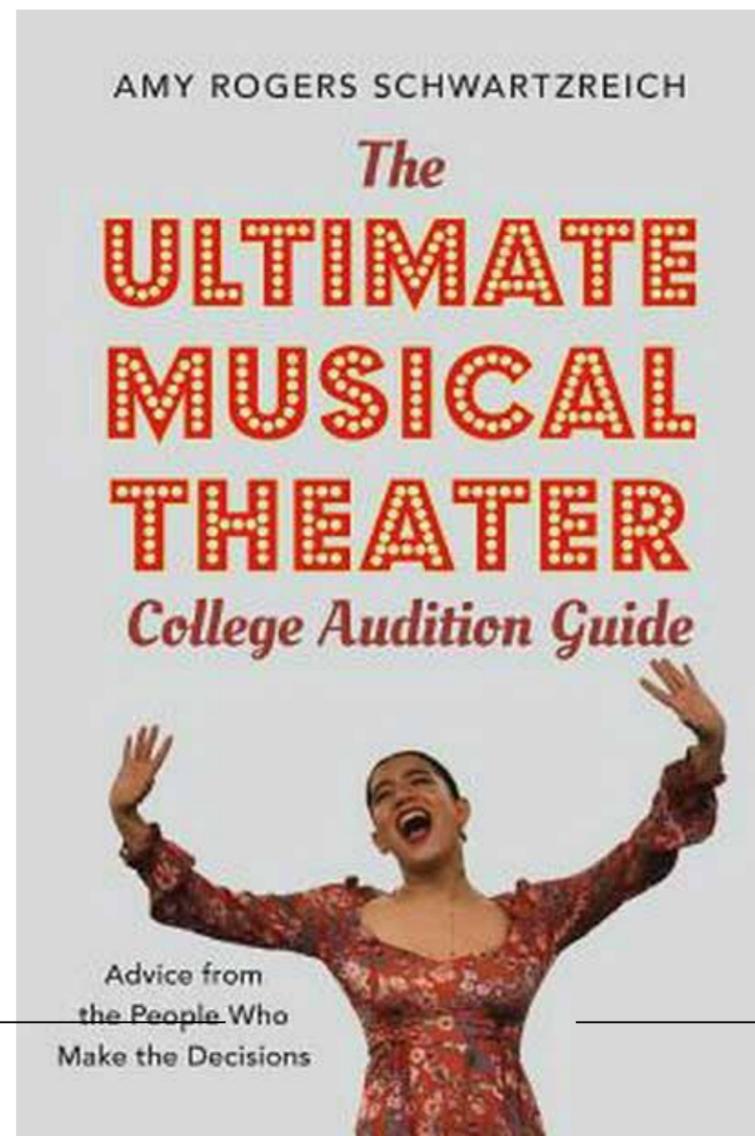
Oxford University Press, 2019;  
pp. 193. \$23.08 Paperback,  
\$13.99 Kindle, \$107.17 Hardcover.

*The Ultimate Musical Theatre College Audition Guide: Advice from The People who Make the Decisions* does exactly what it sets out to do: educate and inform a young performer about to embark on the college audition process. While this journey can be exciting, it is often filled with competition and lack of information. This book offers a contemporary view of the process in an accessible and well-organized manner.

The book provides a thorough breakdown of the most critical elements of auditioning for musical theatre programs. Chapters cover researching and applying to schools and programs, choosing and presenting appropriate audition monologues or songs, all the way through decision time. There is an up-to-date appendix of musical terms as well as tips on getting the best bang for your "8x10 headshot" buck.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters by Amy Rogers and others (Stephanie Layton, Sean McKnight, Grant Kretchik, and Wayne Petro), and contains practical advice and insights from professors at prestigious programs across the country. Each chapter is given a clever song title that describes various stages of the college audition process, such as Chapter 2 "Summertime" (Ways to Prepare), Chapter 5 "Say it Somehow" (monologues), and Chapter 8 "Another Hundred People," which is an apt title for the chapter on National Unified Auditions.

Each chapter begins with great advice from one of the academic professionals, who, as acknowledged in the title, are the ones who



will be "making the decisions." What follows are the nitty-gritty details that go into each step of the audition process, and tips are included in an outlined box for easy reference. One of the most useful tools found in this text is the "take away" section which appears at the end of each chapter. The result of this organizational structure is a step-by-step, how-to guide that serves to demystify the admittedly daunting college-musical-theatre audition process.

The specificity and comprehensiveness of the information offered in this book speaks to the years of experience on the part of all the contributors. As a long-time teacher of pre-college students, I found it very well done, and recommend this book as required reading for anyone planning to audition for a BFA Musical Theatre program.

## BOOK REVIEW

by Lauren M. Weber

### **TURN THAT THING OFF! COLLABORATION AND TECHNOLOGY IN 21ST-CENTURY ACTOR TRAINING**

**By Rose Burnett Bonczek, Roger Manix,  
and David Storck**

**Routledge, 2018; pp. 182. Prices Vary**

A timely and resonant book, *Turn That Thing Off! Collaboration and Technology in 21st-Century Actor Training* highlights the implications of rising technology use on a performer's ability to focus and collaborate. In particular, authors Bonczek, Manix and Storck address the struggle of training actors in our increasingly unempathetic and disconnected world. The text clearly states that personal technology has caused some problems for actor training programs, and offers tangible ways to foster a growth environment and re-establish human connections in our classrooms.

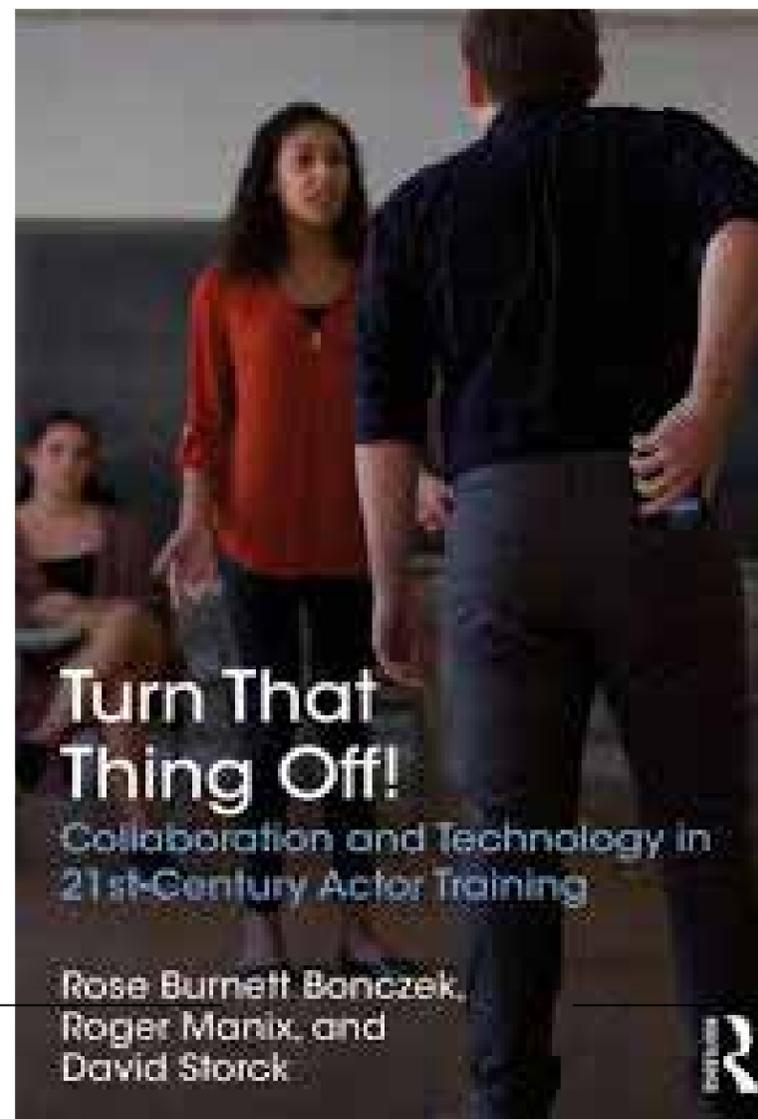
The authors speak to a recent shift in their own college classrooms over the last several years involving students' inability to connect with others on a personal, or intimate level. Teachers

of acting are the intended reader of this text, but the book inspires self-reflection for the reader's own engagement with technology, and provides concepts and exercises that can easily be applied to other genres.

Chapter 1 begins with an emphasis on the importance of the social skills necessary to work together. The authors call this the "Collaborative Gene." They pose the question of what happens when students arrive on the first day of class without this ability. Chapter 2 further explores the Collaborative Gene, and discusses concerns that today's students are lacking empathy skills and the ability to be present in the moment. Each author offers examples from their personal experience in the classroom in regards to these issues. Chapter 3 addresses the impact technology has on humans. If the book ended after Chapter 3, the situation would seem daunting and hopeless.

Thankfully, Chapter 4 begins to provide some solutions, and offers reflections from students that show they are aware of the "pull" of technology and, in many cases, regret it. In this Chapter, the authors introduce the concept of Digital Disconnects, a method for assigning students time away from their personal technology in ever-increasing amounts. Chapter 5 offers hope that we can reestablish the Collaborative Gene, and the authors explain how to incorporate Digital Disconnects and other activities into an acting class (the Appendices give detailed examples). Chapter 6 provides a wider view of the problem and reflects on the ability of theatre teachers and performers to address this problem on a broader scale.

An accessible read, the text encourages self-reflection. The authors provide anecdotes throughout, giving a personal touch and humanizing the problem. This up-to-date text provides specific guidelines for incorporating immediate change in the classroom, providing a detailed path beyond just telling students to "turn that thing off," making it a must read for anyone hoping to foster empathy and connection in their acting training.





THE WILD PARTY | November 2018  
Western Connecticut State University  
Direction by Tim Howard  
Choreography by Elizabeth Parkinson  
Musical Direction by David Baranowski  
Photo by Peggy Stewart

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**JONATHAN FLOM** has been President of MTEA for the last three years. He was Head of Musical Theatre at Shenandoah Conservatory from 2007-16, and has taught internationally in Norway and Denmark. He is currently building a new BFA Concentration in Musical Theatre at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania.

**AARON GALLIGAN-STIERLE** is a highly sought-after coach and an accomplished actor, director, and producer, with credits ranging from Broadway musicals to Shakespeare (Aarongs.com). As a teacher, he provides exclusive workshops and one-on-one training for professionals in the Broadway community (MaxTheatrix.com) and across the country at top universities (CollegeTheaterWorkshops.com).

**ELIZABETH GERBI** is a full-time Instructor of Musical Theatre at SUNY Dutchess Community College, has taught workshops at the International Thespian Festival, KCACTF, NYSTEA, NETC and ATHE, has written CCM features for the NATS Journal of Singing, and is a member of the Summer Doctoral Cohort in College Music Teaching at Columbia University.

**CHARLES GILBERT** is a composer, director, writer, and educator for the musical theatre. He teaches at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where he headed the Musical Theater Program for many years. A founder and past President of MTEA, he has presented at conferences in the US, Australia and Europe. [www.savisingingactor.com](http://www.savisingingactor.com)

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**RAYMOND SAGE** is Associate Professor of Voice for Musical Theatre and head of graduate programs (MFA, PhD) in Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy at Penn State University. Professor Sage is also a Guest Artist/Master Teacher at Indiana University as well as Director of MTEA-Voice.



JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH | April 2019  
San Diego State University  
Direction by Stephen Brotebeck  
Photography by Maya Campo

**NATHAN STITH** holds a Ph.D. in Theatre from the University of Colorado. He is currently an assistant professor at Trinity University where he teaches courses in musical theatre performance and history. Recent directing credits include *Into the Woods*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *39 Steps*.

**STEPHEN G. TABOR** is an MFA Directing student and a candidate for the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies graduate certificate at Southern Illinois University - Carbondale. He holds a BFA in Performing Arts with concentrations in Musical Theatre and Directing from Western Kentucky University. For his current and future projects, visit [www.stephengtabor.com](http://www.stephengtabor.com).

**GWENDOLYN WALKER** is an Assistant Professor of Voice and Alexander Technique at Penn State's BFA Musical Theatre program. She is certified by the Contemporary Alexander School as an Alexander Technique Teacher and she maintains a busy New York City studio. Her students can be seen in most shows on Broadway today.

**LAUREN M. WEBER** is a musical theatre voice specialist focusing on functional voice training and singing in various styles. As a current Lecturer of Theatre in Musical Theatre at Baylor University, she teaches musical theatre, musical theatre voice and serves as a music director.

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**Region 5 Director** | Tim Espinosa, Fullerton College, Fullerton, CA USA

**Member at Large** | Nathan Balsler, Cody Walker, Scott Susong, Kikau Alvaro, Jeremiah Downes

OKLAHOMA! | October 2018  
Rider University  
Direction by Nathan Brewer  
Music direction by Nathan Hurwitz  
Choreography by Robin Lewis  
Photography by Pete Borg



# SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance International 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

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

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

Our focus is primarily the college level (undergrad and grad), but we welcome submissions having to do with the professional career or with high school that are relevant to our membership or mission. We also seek interviews with notable people as well as book, cast album, or performance reviews.

## HOW TO SUBMIT

- The deadline for submissions for the third issue will be July 15, 2020.
- 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.
- Please submit photographs (minimum of 2) with your piece, along with show information (place, date, director, title of show) and photographer name if available.
- Please follow MLA guidelines for citations and Work Cited lists. Make sure that all quoted material is credited to its source.
- Authors are responsible for acquiring all permissions, including photographs. Please submit in a Word (.doc or .docx) file and send via email to: Amelia Rollings at [journalmtea@gmail.com](mailto:journalmtea@gmail.com). Charts or other artwork should be sent as a separate, high resolution .jpg file.
- Include a 50-word bio.

## SUBMISSIONS FALL INTO THESE CATEGORIES:

- Articles: These are peer-reviewed, scholarly pieces that include citations that go beyond on-line sources.
- Pedagogical: These are non-peer-reviewed pieces that offer specific methods or techniques for immediate classroom use that are based on current best practices or established methods (e.g., Meisner). There may be citations. Pieces will be edited for format and length.
- Interviews: These are non-peer reviewed pieces that will be edited for content and length.
- Feature submissions, such as Coach's Corner, are non-peer reviewed, and are subject to editing for format, style, and length.
- Book reviews: Non-peer-reviewed, subject to editing for length.

## EDITORIAL DECISIONS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

1. Accepted for publication, sent for peer review as appropriate (see above)
2. Assigned to a Subject Editor for editing and rewrites as needed
3. Recommended for re-submit after substantial rewrite for current/future issues
4. Declined

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





# FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHY

**Photo 01** | *Bright Star*, Fullerton College Photo courtesy of Tim Espinosa.

**Photo 02** | *Damn Yankees*, Elon University. Photo by Scott Muthersbaugh.

**Photo 03** | *The Glorious Ones*, The Hartt School, University of Hartford. Photo by Mike McMath.

**Photo 04** | *Hair*, Western Kentucky University. Photo by Jeff Smith.

**Photo 05** | *Rock of Ages*, Teenbroadway. Photo by Pic2you.

**Photo 06** | *The Life*, Illinois Wesleyan University. Photo by Pete Guither.

**Photo 07** | *Big Fish*, Indiana University. Photo by Reuben Lucas.

**Photo 08** | *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, University of the Arts. Photo courtesy of University of the Arts.

**Photo 09** | *Sunday in the Park with George*, University of Southern California. Photo by Nicholas Gingold.

**Photo 10** | *Curtains*, Illinois Wesleyan University. Photo by Pete Guither.

**Photo 11** | *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Trinity University. Photo by Siggie Ragnar.

**Photo 12** | *Beauty and the Beast*, California State University Chico. Photo by Jason Halley.

**Photo 13** | *Madagascar*, The Biz - Escola de Artes. Photo by Iara Pereira.

**Photo 14** | *MacBitch*, Dutch Academy of Performing Arts. Photo by Erick Kicken

**Photo 15** | *The Will Rogers Follies*, Rider University. Photo by Pete Borg.

**Photo 16** | *Madagascar*, The Biz - Escola de Artes. Photo by Iara Pereira.

**Photo 17** | *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, California State University Chico. Photo by Jessica Bartlett.

**Photo 18** | *Sunday in the Park with George*, Weber State University. Photo by David Daniels.



**MTEEA**

MUSICAL THEATRE  
EDUCATORS' ALLIANCE

[www.musicaltheatreeducators.org](http://www.musicaltheatreeducators.org)