



Elizabeth Stanley

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ROOTED IN THE MIDWEST, BLOOMING ON BROADWAY

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



Elizabeth Stanley's path to the stage did not go as initially expected. Beginning first as a classical singer with a vocal performance degree, she quickly realized her passion and place in the musical theatre world. Her career now includes Broadway national tours, revivals, and originating roles. In this *Classical Singer* exclusive, she discusses her process for creating many different vocal qualities and styles, what life is like in a touring company, and the necessity for singers to share their own unique talent free from outside influences.

Anyone who has ever attended a CS Music Convention knows that it encompasses much more than just classical singing. This year's convention in Chicago is no exception, promising events for opera, crossover, and musical theatre singers. In fulfilling this promise, CS Music has invited Broadway performer Elizabeth Stanley to offer masterclasses and to adjudicate portions of the musical theatre competition. Stanley's participation in the convention represents a bit of a homecoming for her. It was classical singing that served as her vocal starting point, just as it was her Midwestern roots that eventually led her to the Broadway stage.

Born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Stanley later moved with her family to Illinois where she attended high school. Her mother enjoyed singing and playing the piano and encouraged her daughter's musical activities, which included piano lessons, church choir, community theatre, and serving as drum major of the high school marching band. Since Stanley's high school was small and rural ("literally surrounded by corn fields"), she drove 30 miles to Quincy, Illinois, to take voice lessons and to sing in the local symphony chorus.

These experiences convinced the young Stanley to pursue what she believed would be a career in

opera. Therefore, she enrolled in the voice performance program at the renowned School of Music at Indiana University. The summer after graduation, Stanley booked her first professional engagement singing Menotti's *The Telephone* at the Seaside Music Theater in Daytona Beach, Florida. Little did she know, that would be her only professional performance as an opera singer.

The seeds for her transition into musical theatre were planted while she was still in college. As she explains, "I became really good friends with the theatre people and they were like, 'Come to the dark side!' [laughs] But then I realized how I just love the storytelling and

“It’s just a matter of really trusting your body and doing it in a way that genuinely feels good. It’s really exciting to know that you have the facility to make all different kinds of sounds and expressions.”

so many things about theatre. To really be able to combine the two was exciting to me.”

She also believes musical theatre was ultimately a better vocal fit for her. “At the end of the day,” she says, “I really think my voice is better suited for [musical theatre]. So, all the things led me in the right direction.”

After her summer in Florida, Stanley moved back in with her parents and worked in an office for a few months until she had enough

money saved up to move to New York. Once in the city, she quickly enrolled in acting and dance classes, knowing that she had not given as much attention to those skills up to that point in her training as she had her singing.

Even so, Stanley appreciates the solid background she received by studying classical vocal technique. “I know my voice so well,” she says. “I know what it’s going to do, I know what it’s capable of, I know how to sing safely.” This is especially



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Stanley and Andrew Samonsky as Francesca Johnson and Robert Kincaid in the national tour of *The Bridges of Madison County*, 2015

important given the tremendous demands of singing the music written for Broadway. “I think it’s tempting to sing unhealthily with some of the theatre repertoire. I feel really grateful that I had such a solid technique . . . that [I’m] not as tempted to fall into those traps.”

She also credits her classical background with instilling excellent musicianship, pointing out that learning to read music is often not required during theatre degree programs. “There’s a wide range [of backgrounds] within this profession, so it’s really nice to feel really professionally prepared as a musician,” she says.

The success of Stanley’s transition from opera to musical theatre is evidenced by an impressively diverse track record of performances. She originated the Broadway roles of Dyanne in *Million Dollar Quartet* and Allison Vernon-Williams in *Cry-Baby*. She performed in Broadway revivals as Claire in *On the Town* and April in the Tony Award-winning revival of *Company*, and she was in the first national tours as Kira in *Xanadu* and

Francesca in *The Bridges of Madison County*.

Her latest credit was playing Mary Jane “M.J.” Healy in *Jagged Little Pill*, a new musical that uses songs by Alanis Morissette from her album of the same name. After a successful run at American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the show is preparing to open on Broadway this fall.

Regardless of the role in which she is cast, Stanley relies on her own creativity to establish characters and performances that are unique. “Whether I’ve been in something that’s a revival or replacing someone in a tour where it had just been done on Broadway, I tried really hard not to watch anything that’s come before because I’ll be really tempted to copy that or emulate that,” she says. “You can only be you. I don’t want to be a lesser version of someone else . . .

the more influenced I am by outside things, it usually holds me back instead of propels me forward.”

This applies to her work in *Jagged Little Pill*, as well. Stanley says, “If I hear Alanis, I’m like, ‘No, no, no, turn it off!’ She’s so specific in the way she sings things that I don’t want to get caught up in that pattern.”

This approach was encouraged from the beginning of the project since, unlike characters such as Frankie Valli in *Jersey Boys* or Carole King in *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, *Jagged Little Pill* is not biographical. Stanley recalls, “I specifically remember in the audition they said, ‘Don’t try to sing like her. We’re not looking for an Alanis sound.’ So I think that easily lends itself to a departure, which has been fun—to hear her music in a completely different way with very different voices.”

Although this was a challenge for Stanley, it was less of an issue for some of her younger colleagues. “There are a lot of people who are in their early 20s in the cast—a couple of 18-year-olds,” she says. “They really have not listened to Alanis’ music, so it’s really cool to hear someone like that sing it who doesn’t even have a memory of her.”

Nonetheless, Morissette has still had a voice in the production, and getting to know her has been “thrilling” for Stanley. “She’s a really amazing person,” she says. “So generous, so kind, and really smart.”

Ironically, Stanley observes that most of Morissette’s input throughout the process has been about the storytelling and not about the music. “It became very clear that her mission as an artist is to really reach people, to touch them, to help them heal or mend or have

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James Snyder and Stanley as the title role and Allison in the La Jolla Playhouse's production of *Cry-Baby*, 2007

photo by Sean Masterson

a catharsis. It's really inspiring to be around an artist who has a personal mission statement around that rather than just 'I'd like to make a ton of money,'" she says, laughing.

The diversity of roles Stanley plays onstage depends upon a vocal technique that is flexible enough to make the variety of sounds necessary for each part. She believes the challenge lies in not manipulating her instrument to create a particular sound but to instead work to make it "one voice" as much as possible when moving between styles. "Your voice can make a bunch of different sounds in a really healthy way," she says. "It's just a matter of really trusting your body and doing it in a way that genuinely feels good. It's really exciting to know that you have the facility to make all different kinds of sounds and expressions."

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She has found, however, that making these sounds can be particularly difficult when performing multiple styles within the same concert. “I’ve learned the hard way that maybe I shouldn’t be trying to hit a high C and also singing very low jazz music at the same time,” she says. “That can be hard.”

Switching styles can also be difficult during the run of a show when the vocal demands are the same night after night. Case in point: Stanley toured for nine months with *The Bridges of Madison County*, which allowed her voice to settle into the sound that show required. “To flip and try and sing something that was pop/rock did take more thought,” she says. “My muscles were used to making this exact sound on a daily basis, but I have to work at remembering how to make this other sound. If you’re able to switch it up on a daily basis, I think that’s probably the best.”

Stanley believes that the ability to traverse multiple styles of music is not just a trend—rather, it is becoming an expectation. She recalls performing in a recent concert with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra that involved four vocal soloists: two from the theatre world and two from the opera world. The two opera singers related to Stanley that, even as primarily classical artists, the music they are engaged to sing is vastly more diverse today than it would have been even 20 years ago.

Regardless of style, one key element that allows Stanley to deliver performances that are consistently at a high level is establishing and following a routine. On a typical performance day, for instance, she will sleep in and enjoy a leisurely morning. “I feel like it’s the reverse of most people who come home and then unwind,” she says. “I like to have a slow morning.”

This often involves cooking a big breakfast and then completing everyday tasks like doing laundry or paying bills. Then, later in the afternoon, she typically attends a yoga class before arriving at the theater around 7:00 p.m. for an 8:00 p.m. show. She feels yoga helps warm up her body, which then reduces the time it takes to warm up her voice.

Maintaining this routine was more difficult for Stanley when she was part of a touring show. Since she stayed in hotels, she had to do some planning ahead. “Having that luxurious moment in the morning often meant having to go out and seek some coffee shop or cafe to be in, which sounds fun for a while, but after a time it’s not as glamorous,” she says. In some cities she was able to find local yoga studios to attend but at other times she had to settle for following an online yoga routine in her hotel room.

Touring also presented the opportunity to explore new cities, which can be exciting but also potentially hazardous for a performer. While sightseeing is an appealing activity, it can be physically fatiguing. “I do

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feel like I really pushed my limits in terms of being exhausted,” she says. “There’s so much to see, and when you’re there you want to get out and see it. I found tour to be difficult because it was hard for me to ever really be fully relaxed.”

Still, it was her ability to perform well while negotiating these changing conditions that allowed her to become the seasoned Broadway actress she is now. When she first moved to New York, she worried that her music degree would mean she was too far behind in other skills—like dance—that are often necessary for lasting success in musical theatre. Her message to up-and-coming singers in similar situations is simple: you still have time.

“I think that you shouldn’t limit yourself based on what you think you’re already great at or not great at when you’re quite young,” she says. “I think young students feel like ‘I already missed it if I didn’t become a YouTube star when I was 15.’ I think you don’t want to sell yourself short in that



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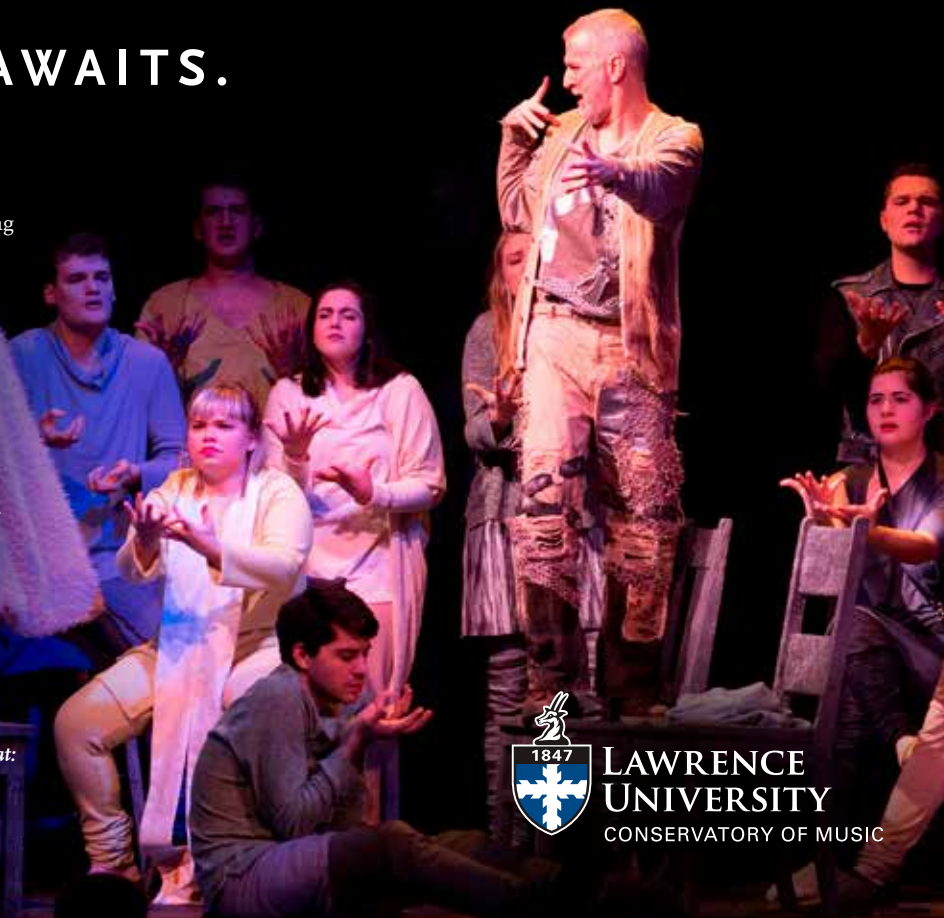
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Stanley as Claire de Loone, Clyde Alves as Ozzie, Deanna Doyle as Ivy Smith, Tony Yazbeck as Gabey, Alysha Umphress as Hildy Esterhazy, and Jay Armstrong Johnson as Chip in Barrington Stage Company's production of *On the Town*, 2013

photo by Kevin Sprague

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“I think you don’t want to sell yourself short in that there’s lots of stuff that you probably can do and will become great at, even if you’re not amazing at it yet.”

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She does, however, wish that she had spent more time in her early years familiarizing herself with different styles and genres of music. Even today, she must sometimes remind herself to expand her horizons and listen to something new. “You always want to be in the know as much as you can about all the different types of music,” she says. “It doesn’t mean you’re going to be [performing them], but just to have a knowledge of it is useful. I definitely feel like I got a little tunnel vision.”

As for finally landing her first opportunities to work professionally, Stanley believes it was due to several factors. “I don’t know that this has changed, but it really is a combination of working really hard, having the right

amount of luck in the right moments, and making great relationships with people,” she says. For this reason, she encourages young singers not to get discouraged if professional opportunities are not immediately forthcoming.

Although some performers do find work early on, it is often because their “type” (age, ethnicity, body type, and personality, as well as vocal quality and ability) is well matched to specific characters. “If that’s not your type, then you do have to grow into it” she says. “But it’s hard to see that when you’re younger.”

Practicing patience is advice that even veterans like Stanley need to continue following, as she rarely knows exactly what her next job may be. “I audition all the time,” she says. “I auditioned for *Jagged Little Pill* and now I’m auditioning for TV and movies . . . I don’t think it ends. I think even if you’re an A-list celebrity, you’re still going, ‘Why did *they* get considered for that? I would have been amazing at that!’ I think it just never ends.”

That being said, when preparing her taxes recently, Stanley realized that much of the work she has done over the last few years was offered to her without her having



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Stanley and Brandon Victor Dixon as the First Lady and Monster in Signature Theatre's production of *F**king A*, 2017

photo by Joann Marcus

Midwest may be metaphorically as far as a person can get from the neon lights of Broadway. Similarly, a degree in classical voice may not seem the most logical path to the Great White Way. But a life in theatre has encouraged Stanley to blaze her own trail. Although some of her experiences in classical music seemed to promote a black-and-white approach to “correct” singing versus “everything else,” as she says, “. . . in theatre it’s so not that way. People have a lot of opinions, but I don’t think that there’s as much of a consensus on what the correct way is.”

Some people fall into careers that follow a line of predictability as straight as a one-lane, country highway. Stanley, on the other hand, is doing just fine following her own jagged little path.

Brian Manternach is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah’s Department of Theatre. In addition to his contributions to Classical Singer, he is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing. An active singer, he holds a doctor of music degree from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Visit www.brianmanternach.com for more information or contact him at bmantern@gmail.com.

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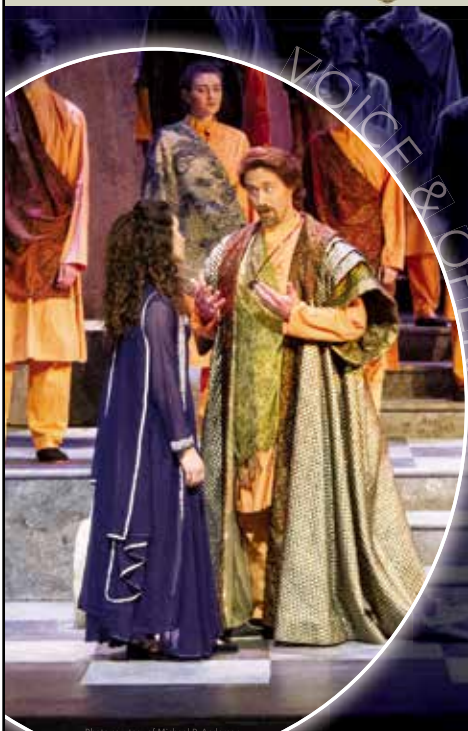
to audition. “I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I got all of these jobs because somebody gave them to me, basically,’” she says. “I just felt so filled with gratitude because I still remember when that was not the case. When I was first starting out, it was the complete opposite.”

Stanley may seem like an unlikely candidate to enjoy this degree of success, considering that life in the rural

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