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Preparing High School Acting Students for the Singing Portion of College Theater Auditions

Brian Manternach and Robert Scott Smith



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INTRODUCTION

Scene

A high school thespian decides to follow her passion and audition for college theater programs. The young actor diligently prepares contrasting monologues, obtains letters of recommendation, updates her headshot and résumé, and signs up for an on-campus audition at her school of choice. Then, upon a closer reading of the audition guidelines, she discovers that prospective students must be prepared to sing 16–32 bars of a song, preferably chosen from the music theater repertoire. “What? I have to *sing*?” she panics. “But I’m an actor, not a singer! What am I supposed to do now?”

End scene

Although many prospective acting majors are also experienced as singers—from performing in school musicals, singing in choir, and taking voice lessons—others do not consider themselves singers at all. In many cases, the need to prepare for the singing portion of a theater audition is the reason they seek out their first voice teachers.¹

How, then, do voice teachers best prepare these students, often on short notice?

As colleagues in the University of Utah Department of Theatre, Robert Scott Smith and I have seen auditions that run the gamut in terms of the actor’s ability and level of preparation. Some students demonstrate in their auditions that they would be equally adept in a music theater program as in an acting program. Others display a lack of understanding of the expectations for their singing audition, and their performances (and, thus, their prospects for admission) suffer as a result.

In my independent voice studio, I have helped many students prepare for the singing portion of theater auditions for various colleges and universities. Over the last few years, however, interactions and conversations with my Department of Theatre colleagues have changed the way I guide my current high school students who hope to become acting majors.

Therefore, in this article we will explore the reasons singing is often included in auditions for college acting programs. We will examine what a

singing curriculum in an actor training program may include and share what our department faculty looks for in the singing portion of the prospective student auditions. Based on this information, we offer recommendations for independent voice teachers who work with high school students on how to prepare potential theater majors for these auditions. Although, as co-authors, we come from different perspectives—one of us is a singer and voice teacher; the other is an actor and director—we both believe that the singing portion of an actor's college audition is yet another way to put a student's abilities on center stage.

WHY INCLUDE SINGING COURSES IN AN ACTING MAJOR?

All aspiring professional actors must be prepared to meet the demands of a career in the performing arts. Actors can and do have successful careers without ever having to sing onstage, but those hoping to find regular work will have more options if they have strong skills in more than one area. Therefore, singing training can help students be competitive and can prepare them to find more work in the industry.

As an example, a growing number of regional theaters in the United States program at least one or two musicals within their seasons, as well as plays that contain music (e.g., *Peter and the Starcatcher*). Sometimes the singing in these plays is written into the script, while at other times it is included as a result of a director's interpretive choices. Within these seasons, a wide spectrum of vocal abilities is needed. Some may require triple threat performers who consider themselves actor-singer-dancers, others may seek those who call themselves actor-singers, while still others may employ "actors who can sing." Regardless of how actors self-identify, the more honed and diverse their skills, the more opportunities they have for jobs.

In an essay titled "Sing Better, Work More: Integrating Singing Technique into Theatre Voice Training," author Joan Melton makes an additional case for teaching actors to sing.

It is possible to view singing as yet another use of the voice and to make the technical connections in the context of theatre voice work. When this is done, the actor tends to emerge "whole." The work on singing

enhances the understanding of breathing, diction and vocal range, while skills developed in the acting studio transform songs into powerful monologues that happen to be sung.²

Singing training may also provide actors a deeper understanding of rhythm and tempo, which applies directly to classical work, like the iambic pentameter apparent in so much of Shakespeare's work. It may further build musicality and inflection in the speaking voice. While encouraging a more engaging use of the breath, many actors also discover a more active use of resonance through singing. It can build confidence and provide yet another medium through which actors may express their characters and tell a story on stage.

Accreditation Standards

Despite the arguments above, there is no established standard for a singing curriculum within a BFA degree program in acting. The National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) is the accrediting body for more than 180 institutions that offer undergraduate and graduate degrees for theater and theater-related disciplines.³ Its national standards, however, do not explicitly include singing training. The guidelines for curricular structure in the *NAST Handbook 2018–19* recommend "studies in the major area" that include "acting (speech, voice, and movement)."⁴ The competencies this training is designed to build are articulated in the following statement:

A flexible, strong, and controlled voice with trained breath support; appropriate vocal range and freedom from vocal and postural tension in rehearsal and performance; demonstrated ability to use the voice effectively as an instrument for characterization together with the ability to project the voice effectively in theatre spaces of varying sizes and in media productions.⁵

Most theater programs accomplish this through voice and speech courses that primarily address the speaking voice. In some cases, these courses may include a singing component, or students may have additional courses specifically devoted to singing training. Other programs require individual study in studio voice lessons. However, as it is not specifically recommended in the NAST guidelines, a singing curriculum can vary tremendously among institutions.

Example of One Curriculum

At the University of Utah, the singing courses in the BFA Actor Training Program (ATP) carry this description in the course catalog:

Introduces singing/acting performance techniques through practical application and repertoire study. Students study how to learn material, develop a process to bring a song to performance level, and explore the musical theatre canon through sight-singing, workshopping, and performing.⁶

We work toward these goals in “ATP Singing” courses that have a three-fold focus: 1) develop basic music literacy through study in music theory with particular emphasis on sight-singing; 2) build knowledge of vocal function, anatomy, health, and wellness through studies in voice pedagogy; and 3) learn and perform songs, duets, and ensembles from the music theater canon. In the recent past, this was accomplished over three semesters; however, since new changes to the curriculum have pared this down to a single semester, we strongly encourage ATP students to enroll in private voice lessons, which are offered by the voice faculty in the Department of Theatre.

Co-author Smith is a graduate of the University of Utah ATP, where he now serves as Assistant Professor. He recalls that in his undergraduate years, the singing curriculum required five semesters of singing. At that time, in the sophomore year, students took two semesters of private voice lessons that culminated in an end-of-year group cabaret/final. During the junior year, acting students continued in private voice lessons, but also took a singing class consisting of music theory instruction while also learning and performing duets and ensemble numbers. Then, in the fall semester of their senior year, students had a final semester of private voice lessons and performed a 20-minute solo cabaret at semester’s end. Even Smith’s graduate studies in the MFA acting program at the Old Globe/University of San Diego included two semesters of private voice lessons.

These examples, as well as perusals of course catalogs from other university acting programs, further demonstrate that the amount of singing training provided can widely vary from school to school and can change over the years within a single program.

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE SINGING AUDITION

In our department, we do not expect prospective acting majors to have as much singing experience or ability as students auditioning for music theater programs. Of course, strong singing skills can certainly help students’ candidacy for admission and scholarship, but weaker skills will not by any means disqualify students from consideration.

We look for actors who are dedicated, focused, and motivated and who possess skills that we believe we can help build to a professional caliber. The singing audition, therefore, is one more way for students to put these budding skills and ambitions on display.

The first thing singing auditions allow us to see is how students present themselves, especially if singing is a medium in which they are not as strong or confident. Does their body language apologize for their performance or do they command the space? Do they make half-hearted, timid choices, or are they strong and decisive?

Second, we look for actors’ ability to understand text and effect change in their “invisible scene partners.” Have they embodied their characters? Is it clear that they know what their characters are trying to accomplish in the song? Do they have a sense of how the music helps tell the story?

Third, we look for how well students respond to instruction. After the initial presentation, we will usually ask them to try something different with their performance. Perhaps we will have them sing with an alternate motivation or while undertaking an unrelated physical task. We may give them a scene partner with whom they can interact, or we may suggest a new setting that differs from the song’s original context. In each situation, we begin to see whether students can fully and immediately embrace the instruction and give a different performance or if they hesitate and are reluctant to step away from the comfort of their planned performance.

Fourth, singing auditions offer an indication of how well students prepare. We have seen students come in with wrinkled, loose copies of sheet music that they hand to the pianist with the declaration, “I’ve never actually sung this with the accompaniment before.” This announces their lack of preparation to the audition panel and shows that they did not have the ambition or

resourcefulness to research standard audition protocol. Even if the subsequent audition reveals significant abilities, it still leaves us wondering whether this is the level of preparation we should expect from these students if they are accepted into our program.

Of course, singing auditions also give an idea of pitch-matching ability, vocal range, tone quality, and the ways students approach their voices. This all provides important information but, once again, they are only some of the many factors we are considering.

PREPARING EXPERIENCED SINGERS FOR AUDITIONS

For voice teachers who regularly teach acting students who have demonstrated reliable skills in singing, we recommend preparing them for their college acting auditions in the same way they would prepare for music theater auditions. Help students prepare two contrasting songs—ideally one ballad and one up-tempo song, with one of the selections from the “Golden Age” (roughly, musicals written before 1970) and one more contemporary. Students should have both full songs memorized and ready to perform but should be prepared to cut them down to 32- or 16-bar excerpts, as needed. Songs should fit their current vocal capabilities—students should avoid songs that go well *some* of the time but not all of the time. It is generally better to choose a song that is less technically challenging but that will still allow them to be expressive than to choose a song that is more outwardly impressive that they cannot consistently perform well. For example, students who have not developed a “belt” technique should not choose songs that traditionally require that sound.

Some programs ask that song selections also fit students’ character type. We definitely advise against singing a song that is written for a character of a different race or ethnicity. For instance, students who are not African American should not be encouraged to audition with Celie’s songs from *The Color Purple*. However, we are less stringent when it comes to age. We understand that, in any given year, 17 year olds across the country perform the role of the widow Dolly Levi in high school productions of *Hello, Dolly!* We would rather students bring in age-inappropriate songs that highlight their abilities than age-appropriate songs that present struggles for them.

Sheet music should be presented in a clean, professional-looking binder with all song cuts clearly marked and with the music arranged in a way that minimizes page turns. This is not an invitation to circumvent copyright laws; most music theater songs can be legally purchased online and printed on individual sheets that allow students to place them in a binder in whatever order will be easiest for pianists to read.

Students should also be coached on how to politely present their music to the pianist and how to set their preferred tempo (without clapping or snapping in the pianist’s face!). They should also practice announcing their name, song selection, and either the composer or the title of the show from which the song originates.

PREPARING BEGINNING SINGERS FOR AUDITIONS

As mentioned above, many students seek the instruction of a voice teacher for the first time when they learn that their acting auditions require a singing component. In such cases, time often is of the essence. While they may have been preparing their monologues for months, the singing preparation is sometimes put off until closer to the audition.

In these situations, teachers should quickly determine students’ baseline abilities. How well do they match pitch? What is their reliable range? What technical goals and improvements can be implemented in the time you have together? And, perhaps most pertinent for the audition, what repertoire will allow them to give their best showing?

Our guidelines at the University of Utah state that we *prefer*, but do not *require*, songs from the music theater canon. For us, choosing repertoire that fits singers’ abilities is more important than choosing music theater songs.

Many beginning singers who struggle with pitch accuracy are generally most comfortable and most accurate on songs with a limited range that stick relatively close to the notes surrounding their natural speaking range.

Students have auditioned for our program by singing a *cappella* renditions of “Happy Birthday to You!” Thinking they have selected an easy piece, many singers expose their weakness on the octave leap in the third phrase. Often, if the start of the song would have been pitched lower, they would have been better able to nego-

tiate that octave leap since it would not have occurred across a register shift. Therefore, the range of a song as well as its key are important considerations.

A song like “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” is generally more appropriate, since the entire song fits within less than an octave and the largest interval leap is only a perfect fifth. If a *cappella* performances are allowed (students should call each school to clarify), students can place the song in whatever key feels most comfortable. Teachers can show them how to provide their own starting note from a piano or a keyboard app on their phones. A quick Internet search reveals many verses to “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” that typically are not heard. Students can sing one or more of the lesser known verses to provide a difference in character and expression from verse to verse.

If students will perform with accompaniment, they can easily access public domain sheet music for “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” on the Internet in multiple keys, nearly all of which provide the melody in the uppermost voice of the piano to further aid beginning singers. If students prefer to perform with a recorded accompaniment of their songs, we encourage them to do so (although, once again, they should call each school to see if this is permitted). This allows them to practice in the exact same key and tempo that will be used in the audition. It also allows the student to set the volume of the accompaniment to a level that complements vocal production, and it alleviates the need to bring in sheet music and communicate an accurate tempo to a pianist.

Students who may not feel excited by the prospect of performing a song that is as “simple” as “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” should be reminded of the purpose of the singing portion of the audition. If the song allows them to sing in a range that is comfortable, allows greater pitch accuracy, allows them to be expressive, and demonstrates that they took the time to prepare with a song that fits their abilities, then even a simple song may be just the right choice.

CONCLUSION

In any audition situation, actors should always look to highlight their strengths and not their weaknesses. Actors will inevitably audition for roles to which they feel well suited and for roles that may require them to

stretch their skills. Indeed, the life of an actor requires a constant willingness to step outside established comfort zones in order to grow as artists and bring a wider range of abilities to their work.

College faculty do not expect prospective students to possess perfectly polished skills in all areas of performance. Rather, we hope to see potential, ambition, and a deep desire to learn and improve. While it is rare for students to feel equally capable in all the skills needed for an acting career, when they have given every aspect of their audition sufficient attention and preparation they generally perform with a confidence and authenticity that can make university faculty eager to spend the next four years with them.

NOTES

1. This article follows the example of the *Journal of Singing* protocol by using the term and spelling “music theater” instead of “musical theatre,” except in the case of quotes or official titles.
2. Joan Melton, “Sing Better, Work More: Integrating Singing Technique into Theatre Voice Training,” *Voice and Speech Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2001): 312.
3. National Association of Schools of Theatre; <https://nast.arts-accredit.org/> (accessed August 28, 2018).
4. *NAST Handbook 2018–19*; <https://nast.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/06/NAST-Handbook-2018-2019.pdf>, p.101 (accessed August 28, 2018).
5. *Ibid.*, 102
6. THEA2010—2nd Year Singing for Actor Training Program; https://catalog.utah.edu/#/courses/VJfY_JBAZ?bc=true&bcCurrent=2nd-Year%20Singing%20for%20Actor%20Training%20Program&bcItemType=Courses (accessed August 28, 2018).

Robert Scott Smith is a professional actor who received his MFA from the Old Globe Theatre Actor Training Program at the University of San Diego and his BFA from the Actor Training Program at the University of Utah. Currently, Robert Scott is Assistant Professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre.

As a professional actor, his NYC credits include *Kreutzer Sonata* (United Solo Festival); *Keeping Ishmael* (Workshop); *Pericles* (SLANT). SLC acting credits include *Two Henrys* and *Crucible* (PTC); *Saturday’s Voyeur*, *Climbing With Tigers*, *Rapture Blister Burn*, *Good People*, *CHARM* (World Premiere), *Swimming in the Shallows*, *Big Love*, *Batboy: The Musical*, and *Gross Indecency* (Salt Lake Acting Company); *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Our Town* (The Grand Theatre); and *Ice Front* (World



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Premiere), *Kreutzer Sonata* (World Premiere), and *BASH* (Plan-B). Film and TV credits include *Jewtah*, *Wildlife* (Official Selection Cannes Métrage Selection 2015), *Blessing*, and *Animae*.

Robert Scott is also Founder and Co-Artistic Director of Flying Bobcat Theatrical Laboratory. As a creative laboratory, FBTL pursues ongoing research and experimentation in source material, process, and performance and quest for ever greater expressivity in our use of movement, text, sound, technology and design. Past projects include the world premiere of *Jump* (a coproduction with Plan-B in partnership with The David Ross Fetzer Foundation for Emerging Artists), the world premiere of *Climbing with Tigers* (adapted for the stage by Troy Deutsch, based on the book by Nathan Glad and Dallas Graham, Salt Lake Acting Company in collaboration with Flying Bobcat Theatrical Laboratory and the Red Fred Project), and *Feast* (NOW-ID, Flying Bobcat, and playwright Troy Deutsch). www.flyingbobcat.org

Directing credits include credits include *Big Love* by Charles Mee with the U of U Department of Theatre; SLAC's NPSS *Reykjavik* by Steve Yockey; an All-Female Production of *Hamlet* with the U of U.

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