

Learning in the Digital Era E-Portfolio

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Reflective Essay – Performance Class

On Tuesday 25th January, I participated in a weekly Performance Class led by Eilir Owen-Griffiths. This class is dedicated to refining vocal skills, emoting through song, and building repertoires. Over the course of this module, I received generally positive feedback but was critiqued for focusing on the quality of my singing over emotional depth. This can be a hindrance as the messages of songs can be lost and the audience may disengage. So, during this Performance Class, I hoped to learn how to better connect with my audience and convey this character's dismay authentically.

For this session, I chose to perform 'Funny Girl' with music by Jule Styne and lyrics by Bob Merrill from the 1964 musical *Funny Girl*. Coincidentally, I was already familiar with Styne's compositional work from *Gypsy* and *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*. I was also aware of Bob Merrill's contribution to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. What's more, I had viewed the 1968 film adaptation of *Funny Girl* some time ago, so had a basic understanding of the storyline.

In preparation, I researched the narrative context of the song using Konstantin Stanislavski's 'given circumstances' pillar. Set primarily in the 1920s, *Funny Girl* explores the themes of misogyny, power, and the cruelty of show business. The plot centres around Fanny Brice (loosely based on the real-life performer of the same name) and her unprecedented rise to Broadway stardom. Not being a conventional beauty, Fanny is rarely taken as a serious performer and her natural talents often go dismally overlooked; she is always the butt of the joke. In 'Funny Girl', Fanny reveals her deflation when she is still called 'a funny girl' despite rightfully earning her fame.

For me, making a character profile is essential to better understanding a character. So, I used Stanislavski's 7 questions: 'Who am I?', 'Where am I?', 'What time is it?', 'What do I want?', 'How will I get what I want?', 'What do I need to overcome to get what I want?'. In

the words of Stanislavski himself, 'we must have, first of all, an unbroken series of supposed circumstances in the midst of which an exercise is played'. (Stanislavski, 1939). In this instance, my character is Fanny Brice, she is in her dressing room, it is evening, she wants respect, she must earn respect, and she will do this by proving her talents.

Due to time limitations, a vocal warm-up was not carried out in this class. Though understandable, it is my opinion that a short vocal warm-up would not only ensure vocal safety, but also mentally prepare participants for their coming performances. However, this did not affect me as I was able to do my own singing exercises beforehand.

As other students performed before myself, I absorbed guidance given by Eilir and hoped to apply it. Pieces of his advice that stood out to me included: 'consider how your breathing punctuates', 'imagine who the character is singing to', and most importantly, 'find the truth in it'. Previously, finding the truth in a performance has been a common critique of mine.

Before my first run of the piece, Eilir asked me to consider the context and I gave the 'given circumstances' accordingly. Moreover, I shortly discussed alterations in the dynamic markings with the accompanist. I needed my interpretation to be more understated than Broadway actors Beanie Feldstein and Lea Michele, who had recently played Fanny, utilising only the '2nd Circle of Attention', because I wanted the song to feel more intimate. Hence, I only installed the pianissimo dynamic to the mezzo-forte dynamic for optimum intimacy. As Ludwig Mies van der Rohe once said, sometimes 'less is more'. (Rohe, 1947).

During my first running of the song, I found myself engrossed in the music. I was pleased with my vocals and felt that I was accurate to the notation and was dynamically appropriate. To add, I believe that I made suitable eye contact with the audience but could have allowed myself to be more candid. However, I realised that I struggled to connect with the character.

Eilir complimented my singing, stating it was 'lovely' and 'very disciplined'. However, he recommended that I attach a 'personal meaning' to the word 'funny' because the connotations got lost in its repetition. Thus, I employed Stanislavski's 'emotion memory' technique, where the performer calls on a similar experience to their character's situation. This emotional recall is supposed to create a truthful presentation. On this, Stanislavski

stated, 'to know is synonymous with to feel'. (Stanislavski, 1961). So, I recalled a time when I felt ridiculed of and attached it to the character.

My second run was more impactful. Giving the song personal meaning had unlocked a level of honesty in my performance like never before. In fact, I almost cried as I felt that I was experiencing the character's pain; a revelation for me. Some feedback from classmates pertained to: 'very realistic', 'emotional' and 'convincing'. Moreover, Eilir noted that I communicated the character's feeling 'authentically'. These positive comments filled me with pride as they validated the success of my aim.

Succeeding this, Eilir asked me to put a spin on the word 'funny' and to 'channel more anger than sadness this time'. Thus, I affixed personal experiences with frustration, using 'emotion memory again, to evoke a sense of anger in my portrayal. Some more feedback from classmates entailed: 'this breathed more life into it', 'I saw the intention in your eyes', and 'I felt the anger'. Eilir said he found this version 'quite interesting'. For me, I felt the emotion of anger didn't encapsulate the writer's original vision but did unleash new facets of the character which I would like to explore further.

Finally, Eilir challenged me to recognise the word 'funny' as hilarious. I struggled to take myself seriously due to the absurdity of the angle. Soon, it was unanimously agreed that humour was inappropriate for this specific piece. Though, it was certainly worth trying.

Now, I will attempt to find an equilibrium of the two 'sadness' and 'anger' feelings. It is my belief that this would make the character appear multi-dimensional and allow for a more intriguing emotional journey. Perhaps, I will utilise Vonnegut's 'emotional arc' to assist me in finding fitting peaks and valleys within my performances.

In conclusion, I feel that this Performance Class gave me a new perspective on character exploration. Character personalisation it is now a tool in my musical theatre skillset, and I intend to infuse it into future performances.

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Task 2 (Live Performance Review)
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Live Performance Review – Dreamgirls

On Wednesday 28th December, I visited The Birmingham Alexandra and was privileged to watch the current touring production of ‘Dreamgirls’. Fresh off London’s West End, with an Olivier and Tony-winning director and choreographer, and accredited lead actors, this production’s glittering reputation certainly preceded it.

Premiering in 1981, ‘Dreamgirls’ was devised by librettist Tom Eyen and composer Henry Krieger. The show was originally choreographed by 7-time Tony winner Michael Bennet. Set in the 1960s, the story is loosely based on the real-life experiences of The Supremes. Many characters in the show were modelled off actual industry professionals such as Effie from Etta James, Deena from Dianna Ross, Lorrell from Florence Ballard, Jimmy from James Brown, and Curtis from Berry Gordy. The plot explores the themes of ambition, hope, and betrayal as the black Motown group - ‘The Dreams’ - navigate the racially biased music industry. The production I am reviewing was directed and choreographed by Casey Nicholaw.

On arrival, I found the exterior of The Birmingham Alexandra to be unassuming. There were few advertisements for productions on the building and ‘The Alex’ sign was unclear, making it difficult to identify immediately. Outside was also rather dirty, surrounded by litter, blemishing the enticement expected of a theatre.

As showtime neared, queues expanded around the block. This was a positive indicator of the show’s popularity but a negative reflection on the venue’s organisation. Upon a short investigation, it soon became evident that the venue was understaffed, making bag checks inefficient. Atop of this, the staff only utilised one of two possible sets of doors: an obvious oversight.

Venturing inside the theatre, the interior was much improved. With modern furnishings and clear signposts, I found the box office and bar visually appealing and easy to navigate. In the bar, a live pianist was tickling the ivories of an impressive Steinway grand – a decedent touch, one might say.

The auditorium was much more traditional, ringing true to its original 1901 Victorian style. I enjoyed the steep camber of the tiering seats as it permitted fantastic views of the stage from all angles. As the curtain rose, so did the audience's anticipation.

The choreography initially included Swing dancing; featuring classic 60s moves like 'The Swim', 'The Mashed Potato', and 'The Hitch Hike'. In tandem with the narrative's progression into the 70s, the choreography incorporated iconic Disco moves such as 'The Elbow Pull', 'The Snap, and 'The Disco Finger'. The ensemble executed dance routines with vim; however, a stand-out star was Josh Singleton. Singleton showcased a precise kinaesthetic awareness whilst encapsulating each song's emotional intent. He is an extraordinary dancer and I look forward to following his theatrical career.

Largely, the vocals were splendid. The ensemble harmonies were superbly symbiotic with the lead vocalists. I would like to give special recognition to Sharlene Hector, who understudied Effie White for this performance. Her rendition of 'And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going' received a well-deserved standing ovation before the song's end. As I'm sure any critic would concur, this is a rare sight in the theatre. The timbre of Hector's voice was comparable to Aretha Franklin and Jennifer Hudson. Not only were her vocal skills transcendent; Hector had soul, Hector had grit, and Hector was born to play Effie White.

Unfortunately, Natalie Kassanga, who played Deena Jones, lacked in diction, breath control, and pitch accuracy. When duetting with powerhouse Hector in 'Listen', Kassanga simply could not compare. For a character modelled from the legendary Diana Ross, this portrayal simply did not 'Reach Out and Touch' the audience on this occasion. (Ross, 1970). Aside from this, there were no other notable faults in the production.

The acting was convincing from the lead cast; particularly, Matt Mills who played Curtis Taylor Junior. With his intoxicating suave, Mills illustrated a compelling antagonist and

supplied sufficient suspenseful moments to the audience. Furthermore, Brandon Lee Sears, who played Jimmy Early, provided comic relief with his ostentatious characterisation. Sears successfully embodied the spirit of James Brown and his dynamic live performances.

The design elements were dazzling throughout; credit must be given to the show's creative team for their flawless visuals. The set, made by Tim Hatley, was simple but effective, allowing for smooth transitions. The costumes, also made by Tim Hatley, were expertly fashioned, vibrant, fun, and enabled the performers to move seamlessly. In *The Dreams*' costumes, there was a nod to Bob Mackey's designs – the designer for *The Supremes* – which was a stroke of genius. Additionally, the lighting, made by Hugh Vanshone, perfectly conceptualised the character's emotional journeys; especially, the clever repetition of the on-stage rigging pieces. Moreover, the sound design, made by Richard Brooker, was audibly optimal. Universally, the creative team was exceptional.

Though often overlooked, I give my sincere admiration to the orchestra. To my knowledge, not a single mistake was made by the orchestra. Together, they meticulously accompanied the cast and created symphonic euphoria for the audience. These instrumentalists proved themselves to be adept at playing rhythm and blues, gospel, smooth pop, disco and more. I was beyond impressed.

Importantly, this production employed a primarily black cast. It is vital to be reminded that black performers have fewer opportunities in musical theatre. Though the industry detests to confess, there are fewer roles written for POC performers and systemic racism is still active casting. From my research, I found that 79% of POC performers feel roles continue to stereotype their ethnicities, 71% feel that hair and make-up departments cannot cater to their heritage, and 55% have experienced racist behaviour in rehearsals. Despite this, the cast of *'Dreamgirls'* seized their opportunity like no other I have witnessed. Their performance was a lesson in black excellence. Truly, this cast showed everyone that they belong on stage.

In my opinion, this production of *'Dreamgirls'* was spectacular. Astonishingly, tickets are priced at as little as £25, allowing the important social messages in *'Dreamgirls'* to reach a broader audience. Without hesitation, I would recommend this show to anyone who wishes to be thoroughly entertained.

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