

Theatre Laboratory

Module code: ADPB4007

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Reflective Essay

This module was taught by David George Harrington, for group singing, and Luke Hereford, who taught us the history of musical theatre throughout the ages. The aim of these classes was to widen my knowledge and understanding of the history of musical theatre throughout the ages; alongside guiding me to analyze, research, rehearse, and perform a variety of musical theatre genres. My personal goals for the module were to push myself outside of my comfort harmony line, to challenge myself, and broaden my vocal range.

In the first half of level 4, we explored Post-Golden Age songs as well as jukebox musicals in the form of medleys. 'Oklahoma' from the 1943 musical 'Oklahoma' book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein and music by Richard Rodgers. This was the first song we learned in the theatre laboratory; I was placed on the alto harmony for this song. From this song, I learned the importance of focusing and staying on your own harmony line. This was difficult for me, to begin with, as I my harmony group never had the tune. At first, I would default back to the tune but, with practice and reassurance, from the musical director David, I went into the performance confidently. The song 'Oklahoma' is sung during a wedding reception, between two main characters 'Laurey' and 'Curly'. Our musical director wanted to honor this in our performance but with a twist: we are all guests who have had a little too much to drink. I had two solo lines within the piece for my first line 'starting as a farmer with a brand new wife' I had the note of instilling cheerfulness and to respond to the previous line. My second solo line was 'plenty of heart and plenty of hope' and, for this, I was directed to act as if the alcohol had just hit and my character is toasting to the newly weds. A vocal note was to 'chest the notes' as much as I could in order to project more without shouting the line.

Another song we performed was an original 'Mamma Mia' medley, by David George Harrington, based on 'Mamma Mia' the 1999 musical book by Catherine Johnson, and with music and lyrics by Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus. The musical is about a young girl with three potential fathers whom she invites secretly to her wedding; on a Greek island much to her mother's dismay when she learns of their attendance. I was a part of the Soprano 2 harmony line in this medley. This was particularly hard because I had to relearn these popular songs, rarely having the tune, similarly to 'Oklahoma' again. Nevertheless, I was able to feel confident and secure in my harmony with practice and focus. During the rehearsal process of this medley, I learned that, even though I was part of an ensemble, I still had to act through song to unite the harmony lines into a collective performance of a story. An example of this was in the 'just one look' section, where the harmony lines have a confronting conversation, almost in call and response. During this, Soprano 1 and 2 conjoined into a semi circle, with altos mirroring across the almost complete circle. Doing this helped drive the section as everyone could see the opposing adjacency partners and imagine the intense confrontation.

Having finished the first Theatre Laboratory showcase, I was able to evaluate our team work as well as my individual contribution. In this showing, we lacked a movement director but I do not think this impacted the overall performance in a negative way. In

fact, it brought us closer as a group as we brainstormed our own blocking and choreography, building our teamwork skills. I contributed an idea for the choreography during 'Oklahoma', where I curated a cannon of all the drunken wedding guests, following the newly weds under the arch. This idea wasn't fully used but, instead, adapted to just one couple going through the arch; aesthetically, this was more cohesive. Our Theatre Laboratory teacher David also served as our Musical Director; his role was to ensure the standard of singing was upheld when choreography was added. I think that this was imperative in this particular performance as the choreography had to be altered after full runs to allow for vocal control. I found that the project was successful because we executed the songs accurately alongside appropriate choreography.

In the second half of level 4, we moved on to our second Theatre Laboratory rehearsals. In this half, we delved into classical musical theatre through the work of Stephen Sondheim in Sweeney Todd as well as some Golden Age pieces from Kiss Me, Kate by Cole Porter. The songs consisted of 'Another Op'nin' Another Show', 'Still I Will Love', 'Wait' and 'The Ballad Of Sweeney Todd'. This section of the module I learned how to switch between harmony lines within the same song; this applies to 'The Ballad Of Sweeney Todd' where I originated on the soprano 1 line switch to soprano 2 just before the C#6, this was to aid the volume balance between vocal lines. I found this confusing to navigate when reading the sheet music as the shaping of the notation of the changed completely; however upon learning the song off copy I naturally remembered the switch.

I was fortunate enough to open the showcase with a solo line 'Another Op'ning Another Show', this was both exhilarating and daunting when initially informed of it. The plot synopsis, for our rendition of the song, was that we were under the influence of both legal and illegal substances just before we had to go on. As the song progresses, the characters get progressively more anxious and hectic to make the thirty-minute call. A note I was given for my solo was that I need to be 'stressed'. To make this come across in my voice, I applied more vibrato. This was to give the illusion of nerves and my panicked facial expressions solidified the mood of being 'stressed.'

During the rehearsal of 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd', our Musical Director asked for a 'dark sound' throughout the song. We did this by using a low larynx placement and using opera quality; this was coupled with intense sibilance which was aimed to imitate the slashing sound of Sweeney's razor. In the homophonic introduction, we also used speech quality with added breath to make it sound like audible whispering. This contributed to a sense of secrecy and gossip surrounding the infamous Sweeney Todd. Later in the song, this piece becomes polyphonic with three overlapping melodies that create a chaotic atmosphere. These vocal lines all crescendo and unite into dissonance

harmonies; this is challenging and took a lot of practice as the notes all clash with each other.

Reflecting on the completion of the second Theatre Laboratory week, I feel like this performance was a more of a challenge compared to the first; this was due to the further introduction of vocal colour, vocal quality, and dissonant harmonies. In this week, we got to work with both a Movement Director and a Musical Director. With the introduction of a Movement Director, the transitions between songs and monologues were smoother and cleaner. The songs within this showcase I found more challenging than the last; Angharad Lee took this into consideration within the movement piece.

In summery, this module has improved many of my skills including teamwork, choral singing, vocal production, co- ordination, performance skills and my knowledge of the history of musical theatre; all of these skills can be applied to my other university classes as well as further performances in the future.

Bibliography:

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