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COURSE: BA Theatr Gerddorol

MODULE CODE: ADPB4007

Theatre Laboratory Reflective Essay

During Level 4 we attended Theatre Laboratory classes with David George Harrington. In these lessons we had the opportunity to work as an ensemble, whilst also exploring different eras of musical theatre.

During our first lesson, we were introduced to "The Golden Age of Musical Theatre", which was the period between 1930 and 1960; consisting of works by Cole Porter, Lerner and Lowe, Rogers and Hammerstein, and many more. I learned that the theatre was a form of escapism during the Golden Age, as it followed the Wall Street crash of 1929, which resulted in The Great Depression. Ten years later, came World War 2, that lasted six years. Consequently, the entertainment industry had to ensure that audiences were distracted from the harsh reality of their lives, by watching Fantasy shows that depicted the perfect life, rather than hold a mirror up to society, as we see in theatre today.

We were asked to research a Golden Age Musical from our choice and present it to the class. I chose "Pal Joey" by Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart. I found the process of researching this musical to be very valuable as I found the genre to be particularly interesting; the music is written in the style of jazz which reflected the music that was popular at the time; although quite rare in the Golden Age, as the music would usually replicate that of a Vaudeville or Opera production.

Our first Laboratory Showcase repertoire would consist of songs from The Golden Age.

The First song we learned was "Make Them Hear You" From the musical "Ragtime". This musical was written in 1997, so technically it is not known as a Golden Age Musical, however its style is very similar to that of a Golden Age show, therefore it suited our performance.

I was placed on the mezzo soprano harmony for this song. I am usually a top soprano; however, I enjoyed the experience of learning a relatively low part compared to what I am used to singing in an ensemble setting.

The next song we learned was "Oklahoma!" from the musical of the same title, by Rogers and Hammerstein. This song was split into a 5-part harmony and was certainly more difficult than the previous song. As I have experience in a choir, and classical singing, I am used to sight-singing, however I loved practicing this technique, to further improve my skills.

David George Harrington taught us the first half of this song, and then recorded each harmony individually, so that we could learn the rest independently. This process was used in the class. I found this to be very valuable, as I believe it will help me prepare for similar situations in the industry.

We had to use a very exaggerated Southern American accent for this song. A few members of the class and I had been given a solo line each for the beginning of the song. I believe this was very helpful as it allowed me to further develop my comedic acting.

We also used comedic acting in “Ascot Gavotte” from “My Fair Lady”, this time speaking in a very exaggerated British accent. This was also a very valuable experience, as it allowed me to explore my acting capability.

We also learned songs from the genre of “Jukebox Musicals” for the first showcase. (Shows that consist of songs from popular culture that already exist, for example: “Rock of Ages”, “&Juliet”).

David George Harrington arranged 2 Jukebox musical medleys for us to sing in the showcase; the first being “Mamma Mia!”. This arrangement was incredibly effective at providing a juxtaposition from the Golden Age repertoire, as it opened with a 4-part minor chord, which is very different to Golden Age, as everything was very melodic and mostly in a major key. The medley also explores different tempos; with every section inspired by different songs from the show.

David George Harrington wanted someone to sing the solo for “waterloo”. The part was described as *pop belt*. My voice suits contemporary pop therefore, I put my name forward, and sang the part on the spot. I did receive the solo and was very thankful for the opportunity to further develop my ‘belt’ technique. David George Harrington said my solo was consistent every week, which made me value myself as a performer.

We were also given an “Epic Queen Medley”, arrangement. This was a fantastic arrangement, that explored many different textures. There were quite a few solos in this song, as well as some accompaniment by the rest of the class.

The end of the song felt triumphant, as we sang “We are the champions” in harmony. I felt it was a very appropriate end to the showcase.

Before every rehearsal, we would do an extensive vocal warm up to ensure that we were prepared for long hours of singing. One of my favourite warmups was the melody of “Somewhere over the rainbow”, sung on “A”, using a full, operatic vocal quality. This exercise was very helpful for improving my vocal agility, as well as developing a fuller sound in the lower part of my voice. I also found the counting exercise to be very helpful; It was a scale exercise, using numbers.

This exercise took a few weeks to grasp, as it is very fast, however, it has certainly helped me to improve my concentration and focus. I use all of the vocal warmups frequently.

After 11 weeks of preparing for the showcase, we then had a full week of all day rehearsals. Some members of the class choreographed the showcase: Everyone worked very well together. I found that singing and dancing simultaneously was difficult at the beginning of the week, however by the day of the showcase I felt excited and ready to perform.

After Christmas we started preparing for our second Theatre Laboratory Showcase. This time, the theme was Sondheim and Shakespeare. I was extremely excited to sing Sondheim as an ensemble because the harmonies are infamously difficult.

Firstly, we were introduced to a little bit of Sondheim’s history. *“Composer and lyricist, Steven Sondheim was the most important figure in American Musical Theatre of the last half century” (News. NYT, 2021)*

He wrote musicals such as “Into the woods”, “Follies”, “Merrily we roll along”, “Company” and countless others. His music is known for dissonance, melisma and complex rhythms.

The first song was David George Harrington’s wonderful arrangement of “Wait” from Stephen Sondheim’s “Sweeney Todd”. This song was split into a five-part harmony, starting as homophonic and then into a polyphonic texture. This piece was significantly harder than the pieces from our first showcase, as we had proven our capability as an ensemble. The main challenge of the piece was dissonance, as clashing harmonies can often sound wrong if one person is flat or sharp. I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of this piece, as it pushed us to further show our potential.

Our second song was also from “Sweeney Todd”, which was “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”. This song is notoriously difficult for its polyphonic texture, as well as its mixture of incredibly high and low notes. I was a top soprano in this song as David George Harrington was eager to have strong sopranos singing the infamous top C#. There are also many lyrics to this song, which was another challenge.

One thing I found particularly interesting about this song, was that the melody for “Swing your razor wide Sweeney” follows the same notes as the Dies Irae melody, which is the Latin Requiem by Verdi about Judgement Day. This is very powerful, as it sets a sinister tone for the musical, which gave us as performers the opportunity to use our acting skills to further bring this narrative to life.

This is also a huge juxtaposition from our first showcase, where the songs were much lighter in timber.

The students from the BA Perfformio course were going to be performing some Shakespeare pieces. Therefore, our next song needed to have a connection to Shakespeare. Cole Porter’s “Kiss Me Kate” is based on Shakespeare’s “Taming of the Shrew”, therefore being the perfect choice for our showcase.

This song was completely different from the Sweeney Todd pieces, which provided a rich variety in our repertoire.

This song consisted of many solo parts, which gave us the opportunity once again to develop our acting through song skills. There were complex harmonies throughout the song, which I enjoyed singing, as I believe our choral skills had improved since the first showcase.

We also sang “Still I will love” by Shaina Taub. This gave us the opportunity to explore a new genre of music, as we had not sung Gospel before. I was also given the opportunity of “riffing” over the rest of the ensemble at the end of the song, once again getting to explore a contemporary style of singing.

I was also given an ensemble piece with two other girls from the class. The song was “Could I Leave You” from Sondheim’s “Follies”. The melody of this song does not go higher than a Bb. I normally pick soprano ballads, so I loved singing this song as it was completely different to anything I had sung before. The song also challenged my ability to act through song, as the character is acting out violent fantasies on her partner. This experience undoubtedly caused a huge development that I was very proud of.

“Differences in musical dialect and style can help us see the nature and function of a character within a show” (Deer. J and Vera. Rocco, 2021, p.63)

We had the opportunity to work with director, Angharad Lee whilst staging the showcase. Her ideas brought the production to life; pushing us out of our comfort zones whilst also allowing us to share

our own input and ideas. The staging allowed us to show our pieces in a creative way, without impairing the harmonies or vocals.

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