Acting through song: a workbook for integrating singing and acting in musical theatre song preparation

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Student Number: 2335206

BMPF7074D

Word Count: 7905

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Component 1

Research Question

What practical strategies and reflective practices could support musical theatre performers and voice professionals with the integration of singing and acting during song preparation?

Introduction

This workbook presents singers and voice professionals with practical strategies and reflective exercises for developing an integrated acting through song (ATS) practice. It guides users through each stage of song preparation, from selection to performance readiness. Contemporary musical theatre (MT) performers are expected to synthesise dancing, singing, and acting simultaneously (Glasheen, 2017; Moore, 2024); however, practice-based observations suggest that these performers frequently prioritise the integration of singing and dancing, often relegating acting to the end of the process. My early training and teaching practices were grounded in a western classical music model of repertoire selection (Reynolds, 2000; Nix, 2014) which extended into my MT practice. As my practice evolved, repertoire selection became more exploratory and student led; therefore, the ATS workbook introduces a sequence of exercises designed to support performers in making informed repertoire choices grounded in emotional connection to the material (Purdy, 2016). In addition, I have often encountered singers' reticence to express emotion through believable and identifiable characters (Cuny, 2022) and have sought to ameliorate this by introducing ATS. However, many voice professionals are not trained in acting which introduces a knowledge gap, impacting both teachers and students (Cuny, 2018; Morgan, 2025) and results in siloed teaching and learning (Glasheen, 2017). The workbook, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap, offering an accessible and integrated approach to ATS rooted in reflective, practice based learning.

Planned Programme of Study

Theory and Best-Practice

Storytelling through song is a core principle of MT (Kafoa, 2025); however primary research data on the experience of triple threat (TT) performers while singing, dancing, and acting simultaneously suggests that it is often an afterthought despite its importance (Descher, 2025b). Because much of the literature on ATS is practitioner-based, the distinction between theory and best-practice can be blurred. Additionally, the determination of what is 'good' in MT is subjective (Flynn, 2022a), which is reflected in the differing perceptions performers

and audiences may have of a performance's success (Cuny, 2022; Morgan, 2025). In response to these challenges, the development of a practical ATS workbook may assist both performers at all levels of proficiency and voice professionals to integrate ATS as a central component of voice pedagogy. Exercises which incorporate character development, lyrical and musical cues, and personal reflection (Table 1) will be grounded in Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, which is the theoretical foundation for most modern ATS practitioners (Dunbar, 2016; Morgan, 2025). In this method, Stanislavski posits that that there is a reciprocal relationship between body and mind: the body responds to emotion while physical action can, in turn, generate emotional responses informed by the text (Moseley, 2013). Drawing on best practices from both widely recognised practitioners, for example Harvard (2013) and Deer and Dal Vera (2021), I will consider Wesley Balk with whom I have studied and whose methods are underexplored in the literature. Balk's (1991) methodology emphasises facial expression and gesture to elicit an emotional response which is directly descended from and correlates to Stanislavski's methodology.

Table 1. Selected exercises demonstrating Stanislavskian methodological influences

Activity	Exercise	Reflective Prompt
Character	Read the script.	Given circumstances (who, where, to whom, need, subtext).
Character	Outlook comparison.	Can you relate to the character?
Character		What happens right before you sing? Why do you sing?
Lyrics	Recite lyrics as a monologue.	What do the words mean? What emotions come up?
Lyrics	Sing the words like a monologue.	Do the words make sense? Any new emotions?
Music	Listen to cast recording and accompaniment only.	What do you hear and feel? Does it match the character?
Music		What do you know about the composer and the show's era?
Integration	Listen to the accompaniment and think the words.	Where do the words and music match? Differ?
Integration	Listen to the accompaniment and say the words.	Does breathing match? If not, how does that affect the story?
Integration	Sing with accompaniment.	What did you feel? What was different when you sang and acted?
Integration	Sing focussing on phrasing.	Was it different? Did you tell the story? Notice breathing differences.
Staging	Add emotions and practice with a mirror.	Which emotions worked?
Staging	Add gestures and practice with a mirror.	Which gestures worked?
Staging	Stage the song.	How did the staging feel? Do you need to adjust?
Staging	Sing with all staging elements.	How did it feel to embody the character? Did you like your choices?

Aims and Objectives

This study will contribute to MT pedagogy by offering a structured workbook that supports the integration of acting and singing throughout song preparation. These aims and corresponding objectives adhere to the S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) framework (Doran, 1981).

Aims

The workbook will:

1. Support the integration of ATS across repertoire, from song selection to performance.
2. Facilitate collaboration within the studio during lessons and independent study.
3. Consider inclusivity, accessibility, and student well-being.
4. Challenge performers to form a reflective practice during song preparation in order to more deeply understand their character choices and storytelling.
5. Serve as a research instrument or intervention for primary research in Module 6.

Objectives

1. Develop an artefact and accompanying report using an iterative process (Nelson, 2022) and reflexive practice (Braun and Clarke, 2021).
2. Define a taxonomy of users based on professional practice which will inform the exercises included in the workbook.
3. Incorporate the needs of a diverse set of MT performers through the design and language in the workbook.
4. Embed reflective practices in the workbook by drawing on reflexivity as a researcher, offering an enhanced methodological approach to ATS.
5. Analyse and synthesise peer-reviewed and practitioner literature and experiential knowledge into a workbook format.

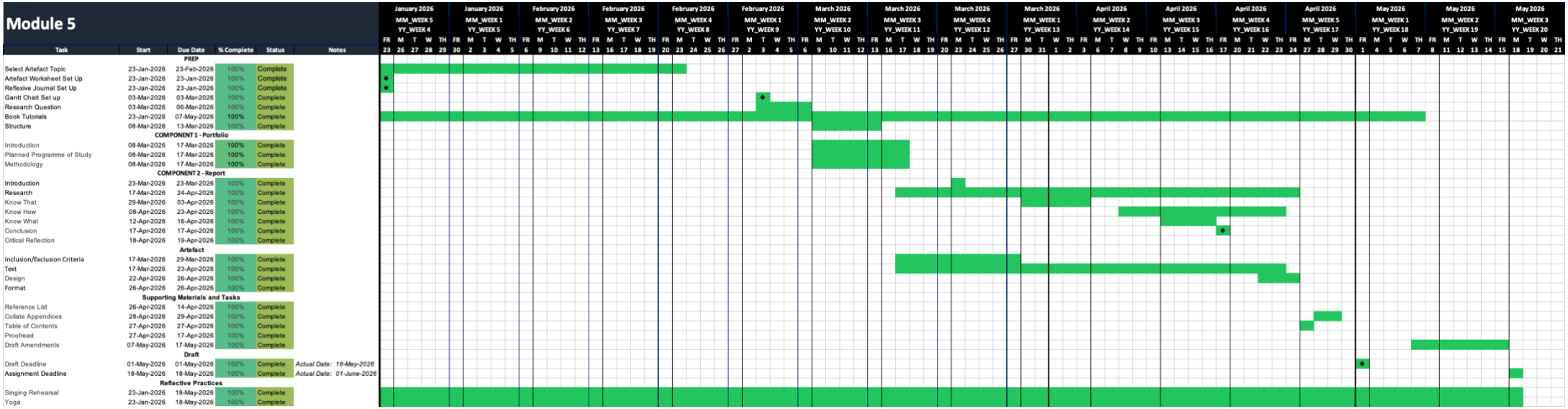
Expected Learning Outcomes

1. Develop additional skills as an insider researcher by utilising practice based research methodologies.
2. Establish a cogent set of ATS exercises for students and teachers.
3. Deepen reflexive practices in order fully engage with the research and to support students in applying these principles in their singing practice.
4. Apply foundational design principles to produce a workbook which is useable and aesthetically coherent.

Table 2. Activities and assessment criteria

Tasks	Sources	Assessment Criteria
Reflexive Journaling	Reflective documentation of the iterative workbook and report development.	Responsiveness to intuitive inquiry, development of ideas, and depth of engagement with the research process.
Planned Programme of Study	Embodied knowledge, research values.	Establish best practice influences, methodological framework, theory, and ethics.
Report	Workbook, reflexive journal.	Critical evaluation of artefact using know that (theoretical), know how (embodied), know what (conceptual) (Nelson, 2022). Reflection demonstrates self-awareness, preparation, and future application.
Literature review (know that) (Nelson, 2022)	Peer-reviewed and practitioner literature, podcasts, VSC short courses, university course syllabi.	Relevance, range, currency, critical engagement.
Workbook content	Literature review, embodied knowledge, best practice.	Alignment with literature, integration of practice-based knowledge, clarity, concision, ease of use.
Iterative Reviews	Report, workbook, reflexive journal (Appendix 2).	Application of theory and practice, awareness of limitations, benefit to practice.

Timeline



Module 5					
Task	**Start**	**Due Date**	**% Complete**	**Status**	**Notes**
		PREP			
Select Artefact Topic	23-Jan-2026	23-Feb-2026	100%	Complete	
Artefact Worksheet Set Up	23-Jan-2026	23-Jan-2026	100%	Complete	
Reflexive Journal Set Up	23-Jan-2026	23-Jan-2026	100%	Complete	
Gantt Chart Set up	03-Mar-2026	03-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
Research Question	03-Mar-2026	06-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
Book Tutorials	23-Jan-2026	07-May-2026	100%	Complete	
Structure	08-Mar-2026	13-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
		COMPONENT 1 - Portfolio			
Introduction	08-Mar-2026	17-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
Planned Programme of Study	08-Mar-2026	17-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
Methodology	08-Mar-2026	17-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
		COMPONENT 2 - Report			
Introduction	23-Mar-2026	23-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
Research	17-Mar-2026	24-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Know That	29-Mar-2026	03-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Know How	08-Apr-2026	23-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Know What	12-Apr-2026	16-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Conclusion	17-Apr-2026	17-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Critical Reflection	18-Apr-2026	19-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
		Artefact			
Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria	17-Mar-2026	29-Mar-2026	100%	Complete	
Text	17-Mar-2026	23-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Design	22-Apr-2026	26-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Format	26-Apr-2026	26-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
		Supporting Materials and Tasks			
Reference List	26-Apr-2026	14-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Collate Appendices	28-Apr-2026	29-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Table of Contents	27-Apr-2026	27-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Proofread	27-Apr-2026	17-Apr-2026	100%	Complete	
Draft Amendments	07-May-2026	17-May-2026	100%	Complete	
		Draft			
Draft Deadline	01-May-2026	01-May-2026	100%	Complete	*Actual Date: 18-May-2026*
Assignment Deadline	18-May-2026	18-May-2026	100%	Complete	*Actual Date: 01-June-2026*
		Reflective Practices			
Singing Rehearsal	23-Jan-2026	18-May-2026	100%	Complete	
Yoga	23-Jan-2026	18-May-2026	100%	Complete	

Methodology

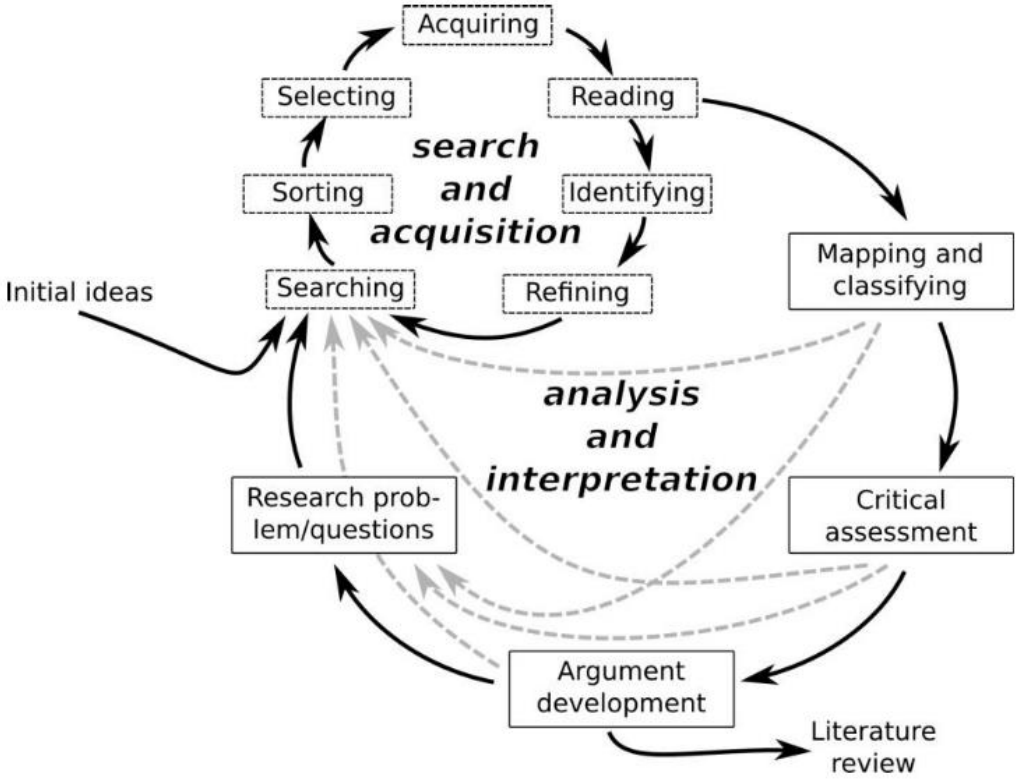
The research question (RQ) will be investigated through a practice based research (PbR) framework in which the development of the workbook functions as both the method of inquiry and the research output (Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Nelson, 2022). Qualitative research reflects my research values and my positionality (Braun and Clarke, 2021); therefore, the creation of the workbook will sit within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Roll, 2016; Scott, 2024), recognising that ATS is shaped by performers' experiences (epistemology) and the contexts in which musical theatre training occurs (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012; Scott, 2024). The RQ and subsequent artefact stem from previous qualitative inquiry. During the data analysis of primary research in Module 3, a theme emerged: "Acting through song enhanced performance but is often an afterthought" (Descher, 2025b). The theme was further explored through a literature review in Module 4 which has informed the focus of this artefact (Descher, 2025a). A pilot of the workbook as a research instrument or intervention in Module 6 could establish continuity across the research and further deepen both the understanding and the practice of ATS. The RQ also reflects Lipowski's (2008) recommendation that practitioner-researchers consider personal experiences and problem solving when developing RQs (Appendix 3), thereby adding rigour to the study and corresponding with the stated research values.

Candy and Edmonds (2018) define research as the generation of new knowledge which often encompasses the process and the artefact. While Nelson (2022) notes that not all arts practices constitute research, Candy and Edmonds (2018, p. 63) further argue that certain forms of knowledge "about practice that informs practice" may only be generated through a practice-based approach. Nelson (2022) posits that orthodox research models pursue answers and solutions; however, PbR models highlight the exploratory nature of pursuing knowledge, potentially producing different perspectives with each iteration. Therefore, the development of the ATS workbook will be undertaken as PbR through which knowledge about ATS practice can be generated. The concept of praxis or "being-doing" (Nelson, 2022, p. 48) and diffraction, the interplay of practice, theory, and reflection (Nelson, 2022) will frame the methodological approach. Praxis corresponds with my positionality as practitioner-researcher where I bring my experience as a voice professional into the design of the research (Roll, 2016; Scott, 2024) and diffraction describes the iterative process moving fluidly between artefact creation, literature, and reflexive journal. Additionally, a research methodology new to the researcher, intuitive inquiry, will provide guiding principles for the workbook. Intuitive inquiry attempts to reveal what is unrealised in the human experience to promote cultural change through researchers' attentive and compassionate engagement with themselves, others and the world (Anderson and Braud, 2011). This

definition of intuitive inquiry aligns with my research values, paradigm, and worldview, in particular, seeking transformative pedagogy for the voice studio anchored in the lived experience of singers (Anderson, 2019).

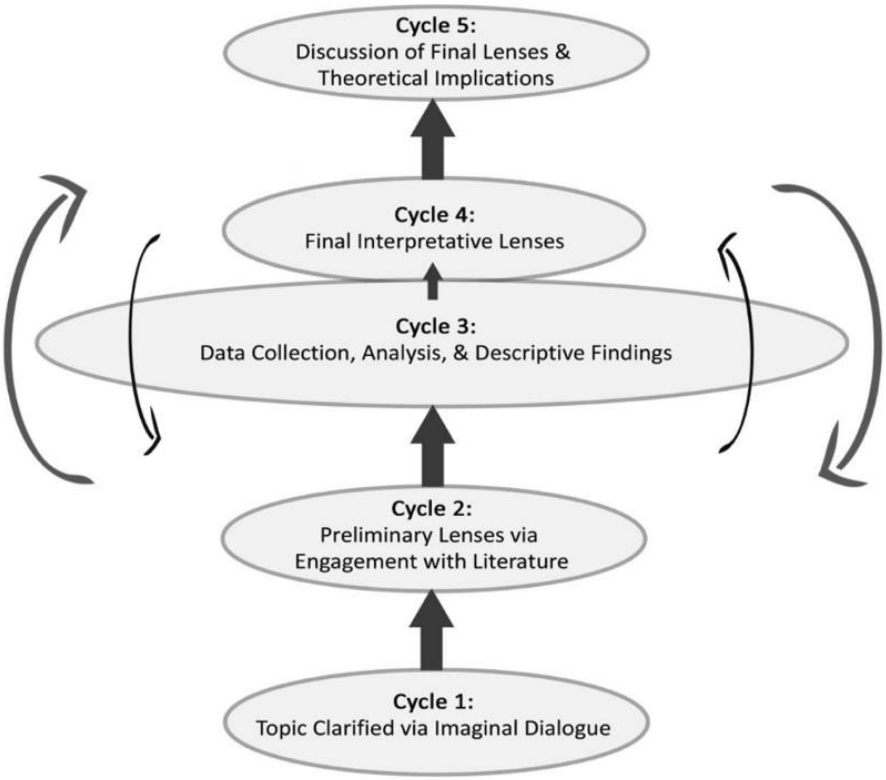
The iterative nature of PbR, diffraction, and intuitive inquiry necessitates a hermeneutic framework where movement between the whole and its parts is dynamic (Crotty, 1998; Laverty, 2003; Winter, 2023). As applied to literature reviews, the process of hermeneutics is often represented by circles (Figure 1) (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). However, in the case of this project, Anderson's (2019, p.316) "dynamic structure for the five cycles of interpretation" (Figure 2) will be adopted throughout both the creation of the artefact and the writing of the report. The reason for this is two-fold: to eschew familiarity and drive creativity through fresh perspectives and to ground the process in an intuitive epistemology.

Figure 1. A hermeneutic framework



(Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014)

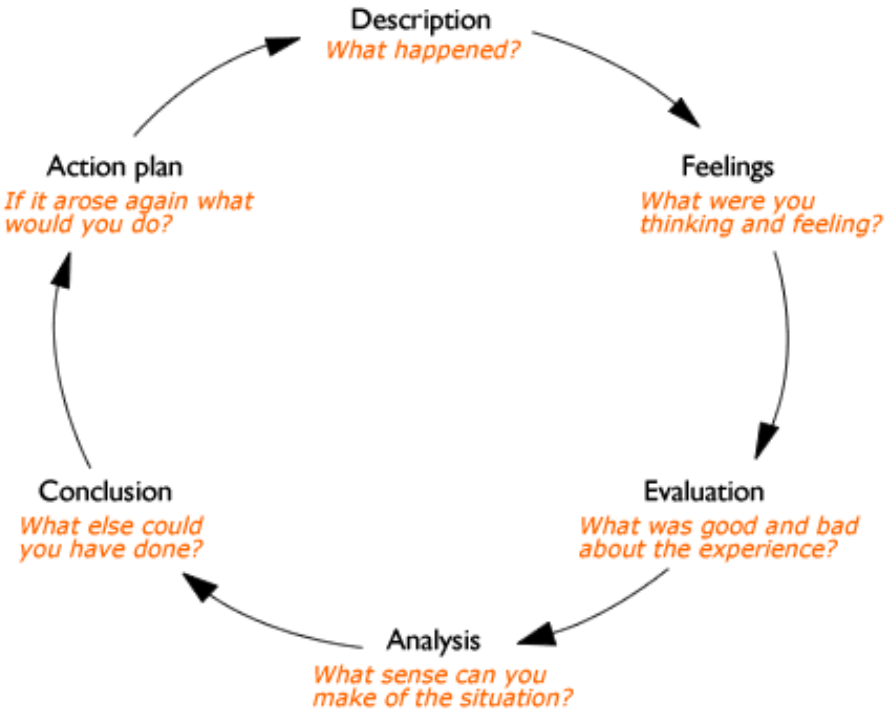
Figure 2. Intuitive inquiry: dynamic structure for the five cycles of interpretation



(Anderson, 2019, p. 316).

In order to demonstrate reflexivity, “the practice of critical reflection on your role as researcher and your research practice and process” (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 5), the Gibb’s Reflective Cycle (Figure 3), will guide and generate insights for the critical reflection component of the creative process. This iterative tool will facilitate the analysis of the data in the reflexive journal which could highlight the impact and consequences of the creative process of the artefact (Wisniewski, Zierer and Hattie, 2020; Pieper et al., 2021).

Figure 3. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle



(The Reach Approach, 2024)

Ethics

There are two areas of concern in the workbook: reflective practices and identity exploration. Reflective practices associated with mindfulness can evoke adverse emotional reactions (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Baer *et al.*, 2021) and identity exploration can prompt psychological distress (Sharma and Sharma, 2010; Waters and Fivush, 2015). To mitigate these potential issues, a 'trigger warning' is included in the preface to the workbook.

Artificial intelligence was used in a limited capacity in this project. Claude created Figures 8, 10, and 14 and Canva AI created the workbook cover based on prompts from the author.

Component 2

Research Question

What practical strategies and reflective practices could support musical theatre performers and voice professionals with the integration of singing and acting during song preparation?

Introduction

Acting through song (ATS) integrates two of the three core musical theatre (MT) disciplines: singing and acting. Harvard (2013) asserts that the song fully comes to life only when the singer starts to act which may highlight the essential nature storytelling in ATS . However, a number of complexities impede the integration of singing and acting: teaching the disciplines separately, prioritising singing and dancing integration, prioritising vocal technique in singing lessons, and experiencing technical challenges caused by the physical tensions which arise from emotional expression (Harvard, 2013; Coutinho, Scherrer and Dibben, 2014; Deer and Dal Vera, 2021; Morgan, 2025). In my voice studio, I have encountered these challenges and have sought strategies which would promote 'integration with ease,' which often meant consulting multiple sources. Using Anderson's (2019) Cycle 1 of intuitive inquiry, I identified the problem using self-awareness as a practitioner-researcher which led to the naissance of the artefact The workbook is designed as a single source which offers integration strategies for the singer-actor and their teachers from song selection to performance, potentially eliminating challenges before they are realised. Drawing on practitioner literature in the Stanislavskian tradition, the workbook asks the performer to reflect on each dramatic and musical decision to encourage individualised interpretation of the song. The first three sections of the report will rely on Nelson's (2022) concepts of know-that (literature), know-what (the artefact creation), and know-why (efficacy) to ensure an artefact grounded in iterative practice based research (PbR). Within each of these sections, themes which emerged from thematic analysis of the literature are explored within the context of Nelson's (2022) PbR methodology. The report ends with a critical reflection which will highlight reflexivity (Braun and Clarke, 2021) and intuitive inquiry (Anderson and Braud, 2011) which were integral to the process of creating the artefact. The workbook is a prototype which will evolve based on usability, technology, and further research.

Report

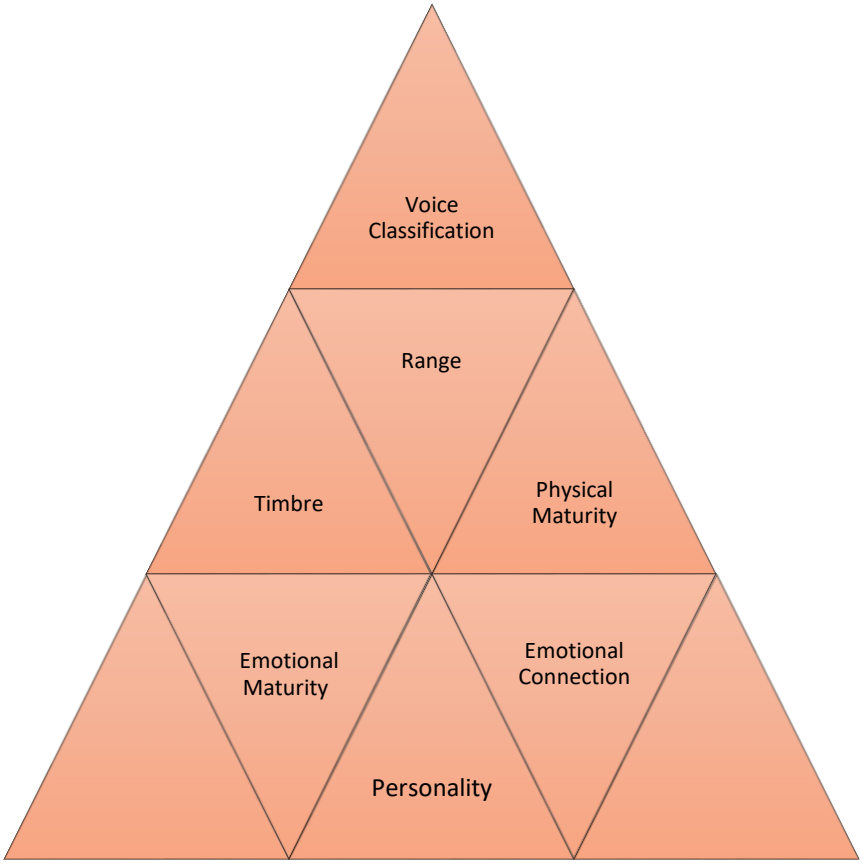
Know-That

The following section is based on Nelson's (2022) concept of know-that which is academic knowledge gleaned from reading. It is presented as a compact literature review of three themes which compose the ATS workbook.

Repertoire Selection

A component of ATS which is underrepresented in the literature is repertoire selection. In western classical academic settings, the onus often falls on the teacher to select music which conforms to a specified curriculum (Reynolds, 2000). Nix (2014) offers a number of typical criteria for western classical repertoire selection based on the singer's ability (Figure 4) but also includes some ATS principles such as a singer's connection to the music and emotional maturity. However, they also include a singer's personality type, implying that a timid singer may be less suited to performing a boisterous character which seems to disregard acting as a discipline.

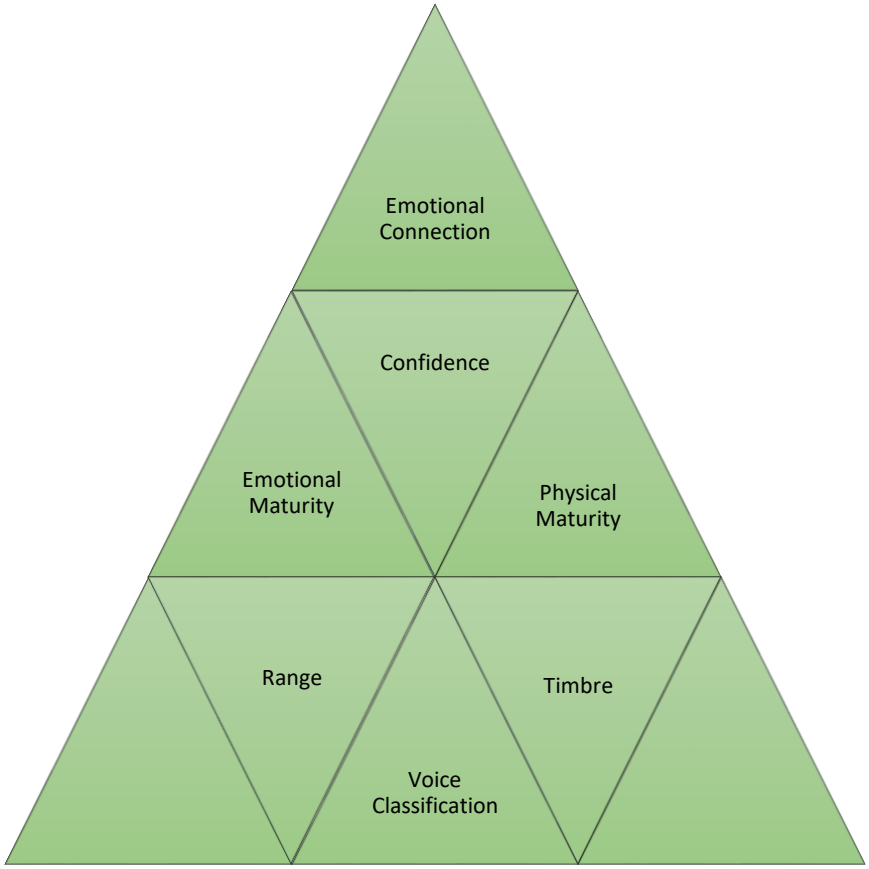
Figure 4. Hierarchy of repertoire selection criteria in western classical singing



MT singing tends to diverge from western classical through its integration of the acting discipline. Within this context, repertoire selection for ATS may involve a more complex negotiation between vocal and dramatic elements. This complexity is reflected in studio practice where, in my experience, reliance on the teacher and unfamiliarity with the MT canon often contributes to uncertainty among students about how and what music to choose. Much of the practitioner literature does not address repertoire selection (Balk, 1985; Harvard, 2013; Deer and Dal Vera, 2021; Campbell Albert and Lynch, 2022). Where it is

discussed, the approach largely mirrors that of western classical singing which relies heavily on voice type and experience (Hammond, 2009; Streeton and Raymond, 2014; Moore and Bergman, 2016). These texts could serve as a useful entry point into repertoire selection, providing the singer-actor a taxonomy of songs to support both exploration and choice. In contrast, Purdy (2016, p. 93) urges singers to consider the "me" when choosing a song. He argues that there is a correlation between emotionally connecting with the audience and the performer's emotional connection to the song; the former is predicated on the latter (Purdy, 2016). Furthermore, consideration must be given to the performer's confidence and ease when singing; for example, unlike in western classical music, keys in MT may be adjusted to suit the individual voice (Purdy, 2016). This approach may afford the performer greater autonomy given that many of the strictures associated with traditional song selection are not applicable. The relative freedom of this approach effectively inverts the hierarchy of selection criteria (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Hierarchy of repertoire selection criteria for MT performance



While emotional connection during repertoire selection sits at the apex in this hierarchy, it would need to be complementary to the standard subjects of MT performance training (Morgan, 2025) to prepare performers for the potentially complex conditions of auditions and

performance. The inclusion of repertoire selection in the workbook may be considered essential because it is a necessary component of ATS which challenges performers to increase their knowledge, reflect on their preferences, and make informed choices.

Storytelling

In ATS, integration of acting and singing is widely recognised as central to compelling storytelling through believable characters (Taylor, 2009). However, integration appears to be a challenge which many performers encounter when performing MT, because it is often the performer's responsibility to synthesise the two disciplines (Glasheen, 2017; Burgess and Skilbeck, 2020). While LoVetri and Weekly (2003, 2009) attribute this to gaps in voice teacher training, it may be argued that this explanation underplays broader institutional issues where singing and acting are considered separate skills rather than a unified practice (Cuny, 2018; Morgan, 2025). Consequently, performers are often taught singing and acting as discrete disciplines (Glasheen, 2017). In my practice, I have experienced the challenges of teaching acting alongside singing; therefore, the ATS workbook is designed for use both in the studio with a voice professional and independently by the student to encourage integration from the beginning of the didactic process.

In response to these challenges, it is necessary to situate ATS within its broader theoretical lineage. Most ATS practitioners can trace their methodological influences to Stanislavski (Merlin, 2024), particularly his psychophysical approach which highlights the relationship between mind and body (Carnicke, 2009). While this relationship underpins the integration of singing and acting, there is limited research into its efficacy (Morgan, 2025). Nevertheless, this framework may provide a valuable foundation for ATS, reinforcing the idea that vocal and dramatic expression are synchronous rather than discrete skills. Contemporary musical theatre training reflects this principle in its expectation that performers sustain vocal technique alongside authentic emotional expression (Dunbar, 2016), suggesting a continued relevance of the Stanislavskian 'system' within modern practice.

ATS practitioners commonly propose a structured process beginning with 'given circumstances' which answers the questions who, what, when, how, and why of character development (Dunbar, 2016; Weaver, 2019). This is followed by separate analysis of text and music before integration (Harvard, 2013; Deer and Dal Vera, 2021). Rather than reinforcing separation, this approach could offer a scaffold on which performers engage with each discipline before synthesising them. While practitioners differ in emphasis and organisation, their methodologies are mostly aligned (Table 3). Whether prioritising textual exploration (Harvard, 2013; Streeton and Raymond, 2014), musical engagement (Moore and

Bergman, 2016), or embodied practice (Balk, 1985), these approaches collectively reinforce the significance of integration to storytelling. The different methods might be perceived as a strength, offering performers choices based upon learning needs and contexts. Integration extends into staging where consciously chosen facial expressions, gestures, and movements contribute to the story (Balk, 1985; Deer and Dal Vera, 2021). Improvisation supports the process by enabling performers to integrate using exploratory exercises which allow imperfect technique (Balk, 1985, 1991; Ostwald, 2005). These practices forefront the dynamic nature of ATS where technique and creativity could be seen as reciprocal.

Table 3. Practitioners' views on integration in MT

Practitioner	Title	Summary
Balk (1985)	The complete singer-actor	Embodiment of the character and story through the integration of music and drama.
Harvard (2013)	Acting through song	Intense musical and textual analysis before integration.
Streeton and Raymond (2014)	Singing on stage	Monologuing the lyric as text to find dramatic content before integration.
Moore and Bergman (2016)	Acting the song	Focus on the music without text to uncover dramatic intentions before re-integration.
Purdy (2016)	Musical theatre song	Story and character analysis blends with music to find emotional truth.
Burgess and Skilbeck (2020)	The singing and acting handbook	Iterative process through character, music, emotional connection, and improvisation.
Deer and Dal Vera (2021, p.138)	Acting in musical theatre	Emphasis on storytelling and character to create "the journey of the song."
Campbell Albert and Lynch (2022)	The moment before the music begins: a T.E.A.M. approach to song study	Given circumstances transform lyrics, melody, and accompaniment into a character-driven performance.

(Descher, 2025b).

The literature presents a range of complementary methodologies in the evolving field of ATS. This provides a strong foundation for the development of practical resources which offer accessible strategies for their synthesis. In this context, the ATS Workbook is not a redefinition of current practices, rather it offers a consolidated resource which supports integration within the learning process.

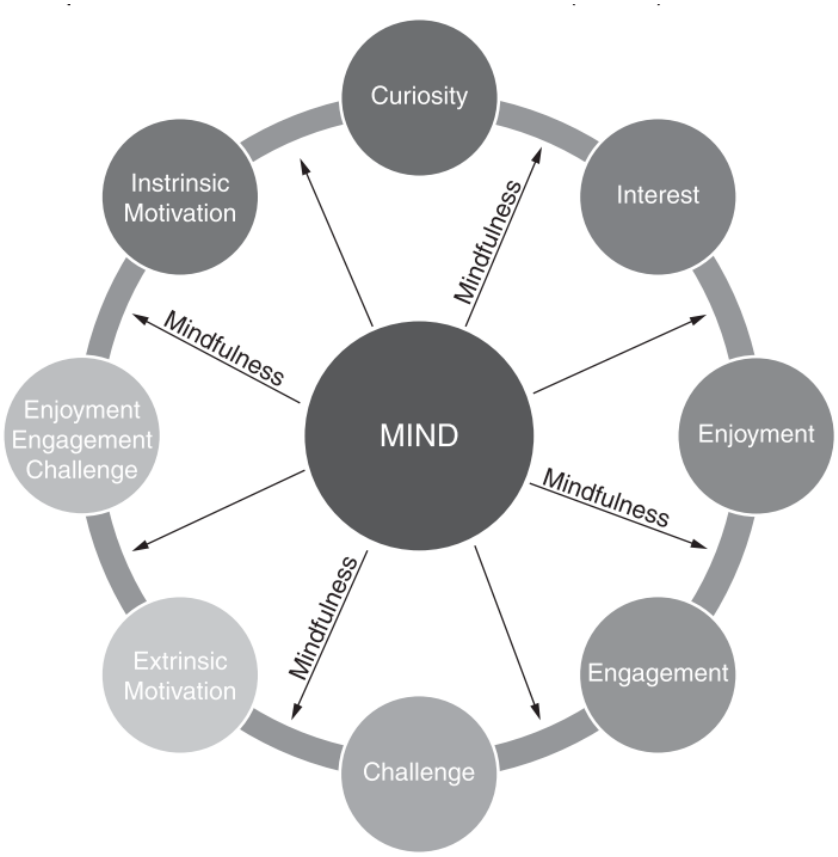
Reflective Practices

To support the integration of singing and acting, reflective practices may be used to create a deeper connection to the process. A dual approach of reflexivity and mindfulness could have the potential to enhance learning, cultivating purpose in the studio.

Reflexivity is a practice which entails a critical examination of our actions and the ways in which they shape experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Nelson, 2022). In contrast to reflection which centres on thoughts, reflexivity requires a critical awareness of the dynamic relationship of thoughts and feelings to inform practice (D'Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez, 2007; Bennett, Reid and Rowley, 2017). This distinction could be significant in ATS training where embodied emotion is a tenet, suggesting that reflexivity may offer a more specific model than reflection. Reflexive activities may enable performers to assess their experiences and connect them with actions (Benjamins, Roland and Bylica, 2022) which is synergistic with the process of ATS. However, while Bennett, Reid and Rowley (2017) suggest that reflexivity promotes transitions between study and work as a cyclical sequence, this may risk oversimplifying the iterative and non-linear nature of performance. Nevertheless, this cyclical framing offers a model which may extend to performers learning new songs or new roles. Although there is no research which address the use of reflexivity in ATS, reflexivity could map directly onto the integration of singing and acting, when devising given circumstances, during musical and textual analysis, and when assessing performances.

The use of mindfulness is frequently associated with music performance anxiety where it has demonstrated some efficacy (Diaz, 2018; Lecuona *et al.*, 2023). However, its benefits may also include improvements to focus, self-consciousness, and negative affect (Blyskal, 2022b; Lecuona *et al.*, 2023), indicating a broader role of psychological and emotional support for performers. Another indication that mindfulness could be a valuable tool for performers is its positive effects which includes greater focus, emotional expression, and creative exploration (Czajkowski, Greasley and Allis, 2021; Blyskal, 2022a). Patston (2016) proposes the MIND model (Figure 6), an inclusive pedagogical framework for instrumental and vocal lessons which incorporates mindfulness, physicality, cognition, and learning style of students. Although not specifically developed for the multi-disciplinary demands of ATS, the model's emphasis on positivity and reflexivity seems easily adapted to an MT context.

Figure 6. The MIND Model



(Patston, 2016)

Practices such as body scans (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) and breathing awareness exercises may offer strategies for performers in studio settings (Ingleson, 2022). While personal and studio-based application suggests these approaches can be effective, these observations are anecdotal and highlight the need for more research within MT training contexts.

Know-How

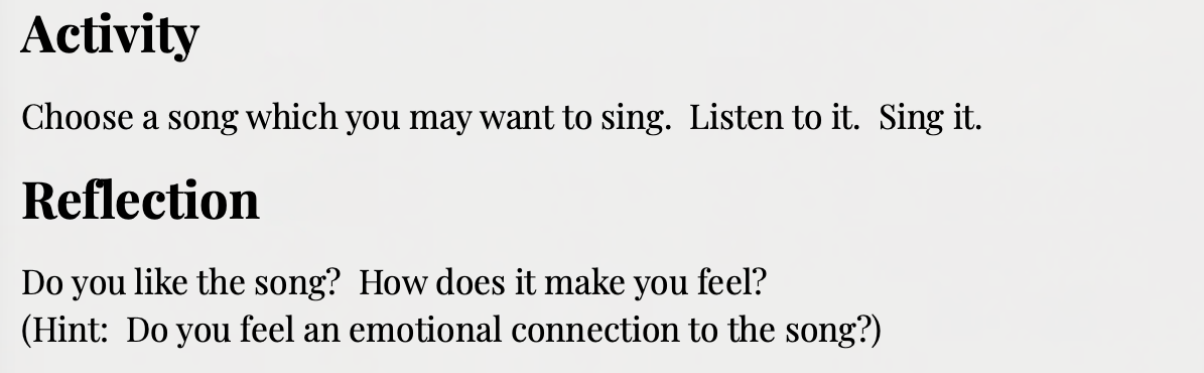
This section delivers a triangulation of best practice as delineated in the Know-That section with acquired knowledge through my own practice. Procedural and tacit knowledge are foregrounded in the ATS workbook, highlighting spontaneity and internalised knowledge (Schon, 1992; Nelson, 2022) for use by performers and voice professionals in studio and rehearsal settings.

Repertoire Selection

The first exercise in the repertoire selection section (Figure 7) sets the workbook apart from traditional approaches. The design decision was based on Purdy's (2016) progressive method of choosing a song based on the singer's emotional connection coupled with

practitioner knowledge gathered in the studio, following Anderson's (2019) cycle 3. This correlates with emotional expressivity which, at its peak, is the impetus to sing in MT (Campbell Albert and Lynch, 2022). Subsequently, an anticipated pedagogical outcome is that repertoire choice becomes an active and reflective practice based on meaningfulness rather than a predetermined outcome.

Figure 7. Excerpt from *Acting Through Song* - Repertoire Selection



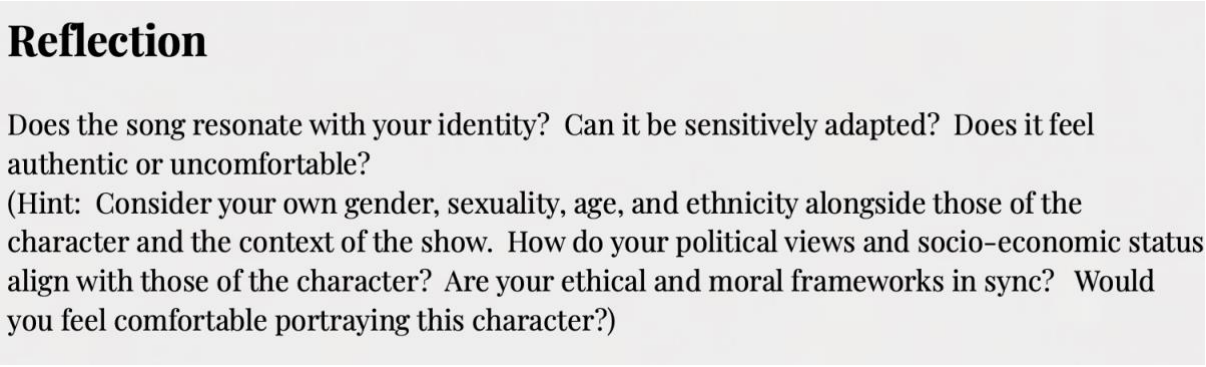
Only after establishing an emotional connection with the song does the process shift toward self-evaluation of vocal strengths and challenges, moving away from assessments based on voice and physical type (Purdy, 2016). As illustrated in Figure 8, the process moves inward from emotional connection to critical evaluation of vocal capabilities before directing outward toward an expanded repertoire choice. This approach aligns with the proposition that emotionally connected vocal expression may enhance authenticity and believability in performance (Juntunen, Arlin and Liira, 2023). In the studio, this could deepen students' awareness of character and storytelling.

Figure 8. Emotionally led repertoire selection process



Embedding inclusivity within the workbook was an intuitive design decision based on my values as a voice practitioner. This is reflected in an exercise which asks the performer to explore personal identity (Figure 9) requiring deep reflection in order to reveal aspects of themselves in relation to the character (Taylor, 2009). By its nature, identity constitutes a form of embodied knowledge intuitively shaped by the performer's lived experience and social position (Anderson, 2019). Such knowledge may not be easily codified and is meaningfully acquired through individual exploration. Engaging with this knowledge could support more informed and ethically aware interpretive choices, particularly where representation and authenticity are concerned, fostering inclusivity and expanded repertoire choices.

Figure 9. Excerpt from *Acting Through Song* – Identity



Reflection

Does the song resonate with your identity? Can it be sensitively adapted? Does it feel authentic or uncomfortable?
(Hint: Consider your own gender, sexuality, age, and ethnicity alongside those of the character and the context of the show. How do your political views and socio-economic status align with those of the character? Are your ethical and moral frameworks in sync? Would you feel comfortable portraying this character?)

Finally, there is a practice-informed consideration for repertoire selection in context because many performances such as recitals or cabarets are outside the parameters of a full production. In these settings, character, given circumstances, and emotional expression may be adapted for a stand-alone performance as exemplified in Table 4. This contextual awareness requires the performer to draw on their understanding of MT performance to make informed interpretive adjustments. Rather than simply extracting a song from its original context, the performer reconstructs the meaning for a new setting. This capacity to reframe repertoire may then be an extension of the agency and discernment introduced in the selection process.

Table 4. "If I Were a Bell" across performance contexts

If I Were a Bell (Guys and Dolls)	Full Production	Stand-Alone Performance
Character	Sarah Brown: Missionary, repressed, tipsy, morally conflicted.	Can retain or adapt the character aligning more closely with self.
Given Circumstances	Havana, late at night.	Adaptable to any place, even the space where they are singing.
Stanislavski's Circles of Attention (Weaver, 2019)	Singing to Sky Masterson (2nd).	Sing to self or to the audience (1st or 3rd).
Emotional Expression	Expression is transactional based on Sky's reactions.	Expression is more generalised.

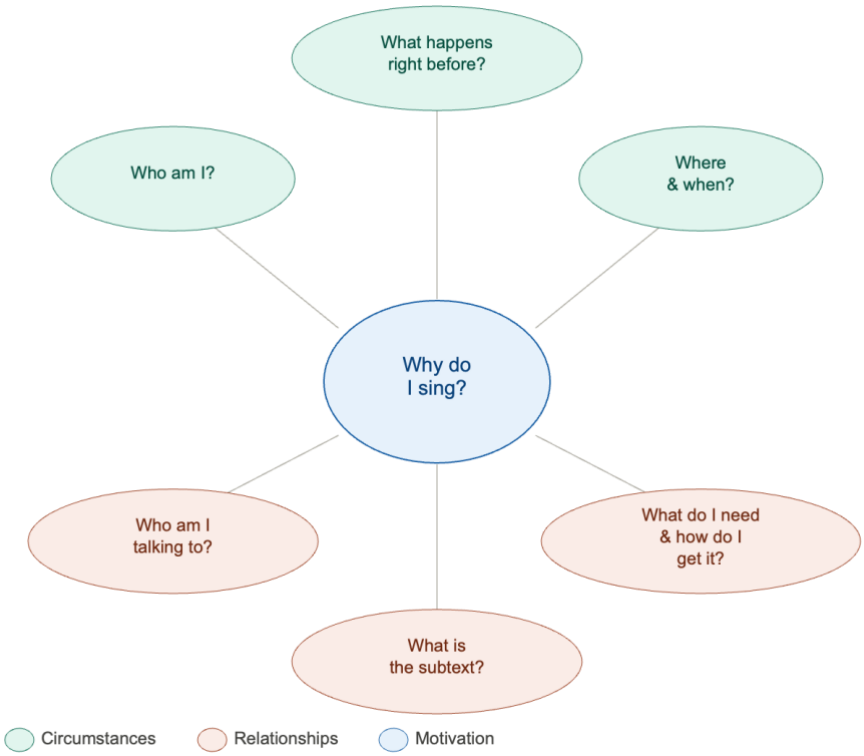
Storytelling

The song study (Campbell Albert and Lynch, 2022) section of the ATS workbook is grounded in best practice as delineated by a number of practitioners. As discussed in the Know-That section, these practitioners offer variations on how to approach ATS which include given circumstances, lyrics, music, integration, staging, and improvisation. The workbook offers exercises for each element which build cumulatively to facilitate the creation of a coherent story with characterisation through emotional expression (Taylor, 2009; Cuny, 2022).

Nevertheless, experienced performers or those who need development in particular areas can use the exercises independently to support individual needs.

Given circumstances are foundational for creating a believable character; therefore, inclusion in the workbook was essential. Informed by the methodology of Campbell Albert and Lynch (2022), augmented with Deer and Dal Vera (2021) and Harvard (2013), Figure 10 illustrates the characters' circumstances as an interrelated set of questions all converging on the moment before singing. The workbook takes the performer through these questions in depth and gives space for reflection. The confluence of the circumstances into a central motivation becomes the point at which speaking is no longer an adequate expression of emotion and singing is required (Campbell Albert and Lynch, 2022). When the given circumstances are interconnected, I would expect the performer to react as their character rather than acting the emotional expression, resulting in a specific and embodied performance (Hetzler, 2007).

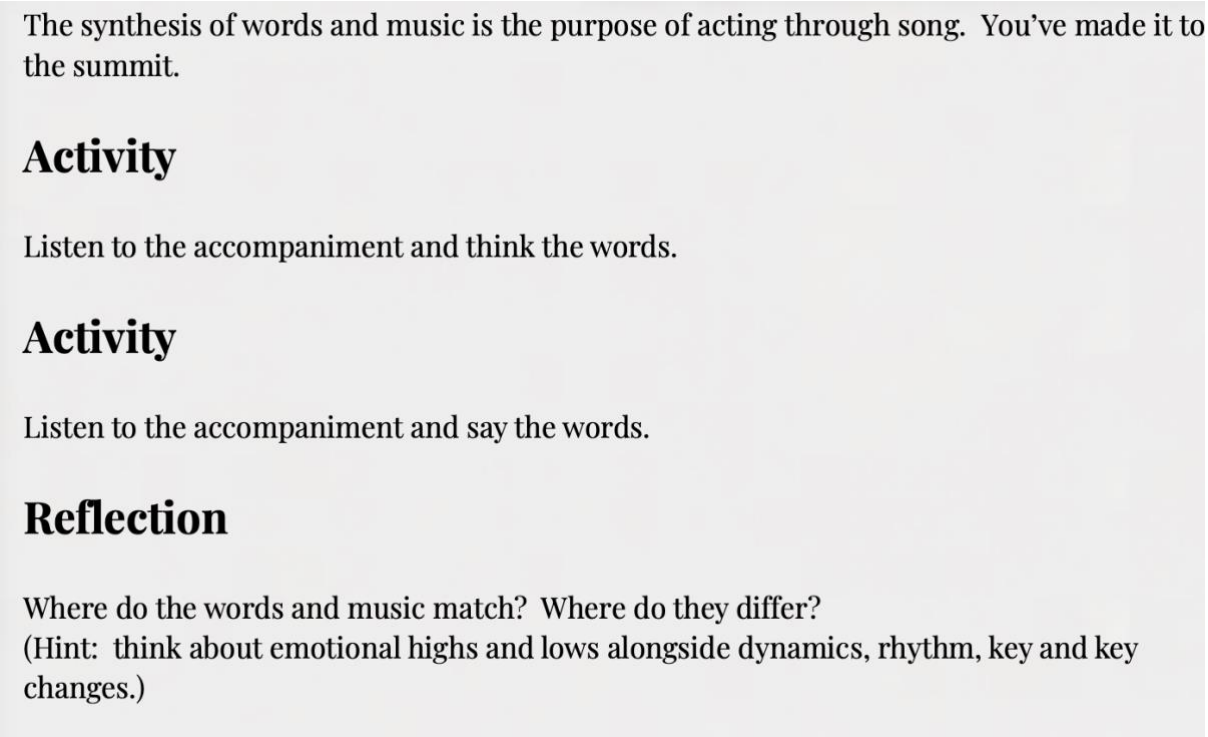
Figure 10. Constellation of given circumstances



After analysing the music and lyrics separately, the workbook presents an integration section where the design decision stems directly from practitioner best-practice. Practitioner literature offers a myriad of ways to integrate words and music; however, since most are

influenced by Stanislavski's psychophysical framework (Dunbar, 2016; Morgan, 2025), they could be considered conceptual variations . Using an amalgamation of these concepts as practiced in my studio, the workbook's integration section offers the performer exercises which foster synthesis. The first exercise (Figure 11) is directly informed by Deer and Dal Vera (2021) and Campbell Albert and Lynch (2022). Decoupling the words from singing, diverts focus away from the technical demands of singing and onto the lyrics as dialogue which express a character's most important emotions (Deer and Dal Vera, 2021). By drawing more awareness to speech patterns (phrasing) through the lyrics, students may become more aware of the totality of ATS, and as a result, deepen their emotional connection to both character and song.

Figure 11. Excerpt from *Acting Through Song* - Integration



The synthesis of words and music is the purpose of acting through song. You've made it to the summit.

Activity

Listen to the accompaniment and think the words.

Activity

Listen to the accompaniment and say the words.

Reflection

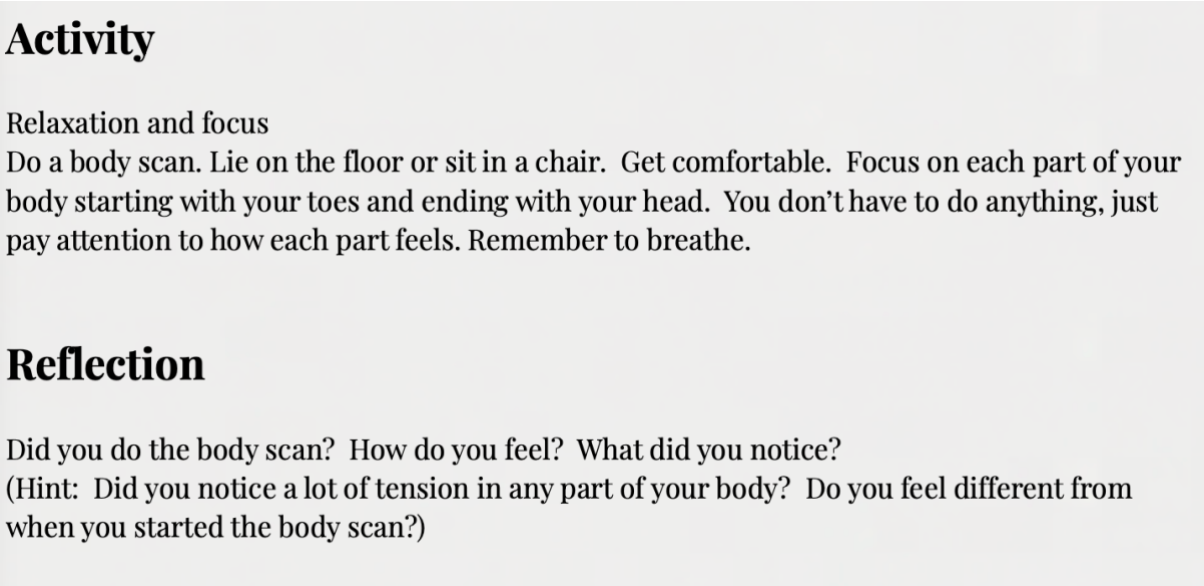
Where do the words and music match? Where do they differ?
(Hint: think about emotional highs and lows alongside dynamics, rhythm, key and key changes.)

Staging was added as the final dramatic element because it often leads to a song which has been comprehensively prepared. Drawing on Balk's (1985, 1991) taxonomy of facial expression and gesture and Deer and Dal Vera's (2021) approach to staging, page 27 of the workbook guides the performer through a series of cumulative exercises which contribute the physical actions to storytelling. The aim is to align with the character's emotional intensity while maintaining a naturalistic quality (Bennett, 2013; Deer and Dal Vera, 2021). Then, instead of adding staging as a set of prescribed movement instructions, I anticipate it should emerge organically, connecting the performer to the character's emotions.

Reflective Practices

Mindfulness and reflexivity guide the performer toward greater focus, emotional expression, and creative exploration (Czajkowski, Greasley and Allis, 2021; Blyskal, 2022a). The workbook opens with the body scan practice (Figure 12) which was included for two reasons: the success of my own mindfulness practice in alleviating tension and the impulse to enhance ATS pedagogy with reflective practices. Singers are prone to holding tension in predictable places, but as the body is an interconnected system, tension anywhere could compromise vocal expression and freedom of movement. The body scan can alleviate tension and anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 2013), establishing the conditions from which ATS work can begin. From this state, ATS becomes easier and freer without the constraints of self-consciousness and constriction (Blyskal, 2022b; Lecuona *et al.*, 2023) which would be the expected outcome in the studio.

Figure 12. Excerpt from *Acting Through Song* – Body Scan



Activity

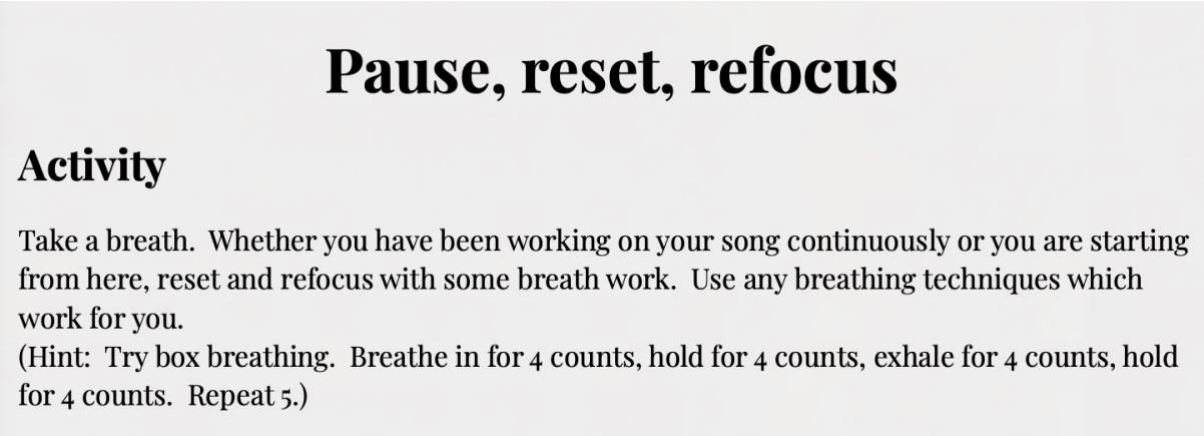
Relaxation and focus
Do a body scan. Lie on the floor or sit in a chair. Get comfortable. Focus on each part of your body starting with your toes and ending with your head. You don't have to do anything, just pay attention to how each part feels. Remember to breathe.

Reflection

Did you do the body scan? How do you feel? What did you notice?
(Hint: Did you notice a lot of tension in any part of your body? Do you feel different from when you started the body scan?)

When contemplating the design of the workbook, I realised through my own practice, that ATS work requires mental and physical energy which can cause tension; therefore, breaks for mindful breathing occur at strategic points (Figure 13). Since tension may negatively affect both body and mind (Deeter, 2005; Lemon-McMahon and Hughes, 2018; Gassull, Molins-Macau and González-Sanvisens, 2023), mitigating strategies can be seen as foundational for continuing ATS work. Box breathing is one suggestion, but the performer is invited to mindfully breath in a way that feels most comfortable. The intended outcome is greater attention in order to practice with intention, as the emotional demands of ATS suggest the value of somatic readiness.

Figure 13. Excerpt from *Acting Through Song* – Mindful Breathing



Pause, reset, refocus

Activity

Take a breath. Whether you have been working on your song continuously or you are starting from here, reset and refocus with some breath work. Use any breathing techniques which work for you.
(Hint: Try box breathing. Breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts. Repeat 5.)

The reflexive prompts are born from verbal practice I use in my studio. When I teach ATS, a student's connection to the song is immediately deepened, shifting from concerns about voice technique to vocal expression which is a result of internal feelings (Juntunen, Arlin and Liira, 2023). Often, their movements and facial expressions are freer and more closely aligned with the character. The reflexive prompts correspond with each activity in the workbook extending this verbal practice into written form. In the studio, shifts are immediate and responsive; however, time and privacy afforded by the written prompts potentially create a different kind of knowledge, one which encourages the mental imagery required to produce sensorimotor simulation (Muraki, Speed and Pexman, 2023). In doing so, the prompts encourage the performer to notice both emotional and somatic responses in relation to the interpretive demands of the song. The ultimate result of this connection to mind and body would be a deeper connection to the storytelling.

When performers first encounter the workbook, they are met with an invitation to develop their work through discovery. The body scan, breathing practice, and reflexive prompts bridge somatic readiness with interpretive insight. The performer encounters these reflective exercises in a specific order throughout the workbook; however, they are intended to allow for the formation of a reflective practice which requires them to be used in interaction with one another. Figure 14 demonstrates how they work in tandem to allow for intentional awareness, the essence of ATS, which drives the performer's ability to tell the story by integrating words, music and emotion (Cuny, 2022).

Figure 14. Word cloud representing reflective practices in the workbook



Know-What

Tacit knowledge becomes explicit in the know-what section through critical reflection on the reciprocal relationship between know-that and know-how (Nelson, 2022). An evaluation, using reflexivity as a tool, draws on practice-based observations to uncover alignment or divergence from the knowledge generated through the creation of the artefact. Specific areas for discussion arose in each of the three themes which were explored in the previous sections.

Identity

An aim of this PbR was to consider inclusivity, accessibility, and student well-being through reflective practices. Guided by Anderson's (2019) cycle 3 process of data collection and analysis and drawing on studio observations alongside the literature, I became concerned about how the workbook interrogates identity. In the workbook, the performer is asked to examine their identity in relationship to the character in order to inform repertoire choices. Exploration of identity has been shown to facilitate intuitive consciousness, knowing that operates below the threshold of deliberate thought (Bardsley, 2020), which may inform more nuanced choices. However, the reflection which interrogates identity asks the performer to consider gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, politics, socio-economic status, and morals. A negative identity narrative could lead to psychological distress (Sharma and Sharma, 2010;

Waters and Fivush, 2015) which could undermine the efficacy of what the workbook is attempting to achieve.

Identity in performance is a relatively unexplored area; therefore extrapolation from other fields is necessary. Identity formation is commonly associated with adolescence (Erikson, 1950; Arnold, 2017); however contemporary understanding positions it as a lifelong and contextual process (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen and Kokko, 2016). With this in mind, performers at any career stage may be in a process of liquidity (Palese, 2013) or fluid identity formation, making the workbook's identity reflection more complex than initially anticipated. This complexity is compounded when the performer is asked to compare a fluid identity alongside a character's dramatic identity (Purdy, 2016; Patinka, Peddle and Weber, 2025).

Although demographic analysis is complicated because of methodological limitations, the characters represented in MT repertoire have historically been predominantly white, cisgender, and straight as illustrated in Table 5. Reflection upon identity may then become fraught in this context when asking a performer from a marginalised identity to compare themselves with a character written from a position of dominant cultural identity. Conversely, the workbook provides no guidance for sensitively approaching cultural appropriation, in this case, performing repertoire which represents a culture not one's own without showing respect or understanding of that culture (Cherid, 2021). Both cases may require a carefully nuanced approach which diverges depending upon the identity of the performer and the repertoire in question which is outside the scope of the workbook.

Table 5. Character demographics in anthologized songs

	Category	Total	%
Gender	Cisgender man	1828	46.4
	Cisgender woman	1974	50.1
	Transgender or non-binary person	8	0.2
	Any gender	20	0.5
	Unsure	114	2.9
Race	American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.0
	Asian	59	1.5
	Black or African American	80	2.0
	Hispanic or Latino	66	1.7
	Middle Eastern or North African	56	1.4
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	18	0.5
	White	340	8.6
	Non-white race	47	1.2
	Unsure	3343	84.8
Sexuality	Straight	6195	67.4
	Queer	2699	29.3
	Unsure	304	3.3

(Patinka, Peddle and Weber, 2025, p. 263)

The reflection on identity was included because of its importance for selecting repertoire that is empathetically chosen. The preface to the workbook contains both an 'Inclusive and Equitable Practice' and 'Trigger Warning' sections which imply an intuitive awareness on the part of the researcher that sensitive subjects may cause distress. However, these place the responsibility for mitigation with the user, lacking guidance for how to navigate sensitive identity comparisons and the distress that may arise. Additional contextualisation within the reflection or a signpost of where to request support would strengthen the workbook's inclusivity and well-being aims. The workbook is a work in progress and identity represents an area for future development which subsequent iterations, informed by performer testing, will attempt to address.

Integration

The main premise of ATS is storytelling which requires the integration of singing and acting (Kafoa, 2025). Performers appear to integrate singing and acting successfully as demonstrated in professional, amateur, and student productions. Practitioner methodologies vary widely, concentrating on music and lyrics in a different order and integrating at different stages of the process (Table 2). However, in practitioner literature, a consensus on how to integrate the disciplines is lacking. Dunbar (2016) is even sceptical whether the synthesis of

words and music is feasible because of technical obstacles, questioning the effectiveness of MT practitioner literature. Engaging with this literature formed a preliminary lens (cycle 2) which shaped the design decision to include integration in the workbook (Anderson, 2019) because it is an often overlooked tenet of MT (Descher, 2025b).

In my experience, many students want to focus solely on vocal technique rather than fully engage with the piece using ATS. Therefore, the workbook is meant to develop awareness rather than prescribe a solution for integration. While the exercises draw on an amalgam of the available literature and exercises used in the studio, the approach is standard: words, music, synthesis (Harvard, 2013; Deer and Dal Vera, 2021; Campbell Albert and Lynch, 2022). The reflections seek to deepen awareness and open the performer to discovery of where words and music meet or diverge. The written reflections provide an original element of reflexivity which is meant to deepen the performer's connection to the storytelling

Balk (1985), posits that music and theatre operate along a stylistic continuum with their differing rates of progression generating a complex tension. This could suggest that MT performers engaging in ATS must integrate these disciplines while negotiating the tension between them during preparation and performance. Musical notation is fixed in time and space which places constraints on the singer-actor (Dunbar, 2016), breathing as per the musical score does not adhere to "one breath per thought" (Harvard, 2013, p. 108), and deleterious effects of emotion on the voice (Coutinho, Scherrer and Dibben, 2014; Morgan, 2025) exemplify some of the tensions which occur at the intersection of acting and singing. With the exception of breathing, the integration section does not mention the tensions which performers may face. In the case of breathing, the workbook asks where the difference occurs but does not offer a suggestion on how to navigate the disconnect if there is one. In future iterations, these tensions could be addressed with further information and structure.

An aim for the workbook is to support the incorporation of ATS across repertoire which includes the integration of words and music. This integration is a complex negotiation between a disparate lineage of practice and what seems to work in the studio. By design, the ATS workbook does not prescribe a solution for all possible scenarios because it is meant to be approachable and agile so that it can be adapted to continuous developments in MT (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Junker *et al.*, 2023). By exploring the exercises in the workbook, a performer will encounter tools with which they can develop integration because the synthesis of words and music is a key component of a robust ATS practice.

Body Scan

The workbook opens with an invitation to complete a body scan, an introductory mindfulness exercise widely considered as accessible (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Gan, Zhang and Chen, 2022). Its inclusion aligns with my own reflective practice which complements my singing practice through anxiety reduction and increased focus. However, mindfulness practices can elicit difficult emotions (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Baer *et al.*, 2021); therefore, opening with a body scan may be unappealing to some performers and may deter exploration of the workbook.

Several adverse effects associated with mindfulness practices have been observed, including: unpleasant or latent emotions, negative thoughts, sleepiness, and judgement (Baer *et al.*, 2021). Gilbert et al. (2012) reported that in some extreme cases, trauma responses, anxiety, and panic were experienced. While many of these unpleasant experiences are limited to the scope of the meditation and often are not sustained in daily living (Aizik-Reebs, Shoham and Bernstein, 2021), negative proprioceptive encounters are the opposite of what performers should gain from this exercise. In addition, a perceived religious or conversely, a secular or 'new age' association with mindfulness (Palitsky and Kaplan, 2021) could cause the performer to feel that the exercise is imposed rather than authentic.

Since mindfulness based practices (MBPs) and frameworks have become contextualised for mainstream contexts, inclusivity and cultural appropriateness are embedded in contemporary use (Crane *et al.*, 2017). Czajkowski and Greasley (2015) and Czajkowski, Greasley and Allis (2021) posit that for singers, in particular, the benefits of MBPs extend to include increased focus and creativity and more efficient practice. Leading from this, in the context of the workbook, the body scan is meant as a tool to facilitate structured noticing (Gan, Zhang and Chen, 2022) in order to prepare for an ensuing ATS practice which requires focus and self-awareness.

However, it seems that no single entry point to reflectivity suits every performer. While reflective practices are noted in the "Trigger warning" section of the workbook preface, future iterations could include both an explanation of purpose and alternative activities which would serve to elicit the same result. Some alternatives may include:

- Movement, such as walking, running, or yoga;
- Everyday tasks like garden weeding or doing dishes;
- Breathing exercises, for example, box breathing (included in the workbook);
- Writing or journalling;

(Clark, Schumann and Mostofsky, 2015; Flynn, 2022b; Baughman and Jordan, 2024).

Any chosen activity which fosters focus and awareness could be used as long as it is done with the intention of directing the resulting concentration toward the forthcoming ATS exercises.

One of the aims of the workbook was to challenge performers to form a reflective practice during song preparation. Through a final interpretive lens (cycle 4), the workbook was modified to reflect data gathered in intuitive enquiry cycles 2 and 3 (Anderson, 2019). While it now suggests some entry points to reflective practices, the workbook endorses flexibility which gives agency to the performer. Whether through the body scan or an alternative route, the goal is for performers to arrive at the ATS exercises present and focussed.

Conclusion

The ATS workbook resulted from a theme which emerged from primary research in Module 3 which was not part of the discussion in that paper (Descher, 2025b). On reflection, the theme was too important to my practice to overlook so it was explored in depth in Module 4's literature review (Descher, 2025a) which led to the creation of the workbook for MT song preparation. The workbook attempts to fill a gap in the practitioner literature through an iterative PbR project based on Nelson's (2022) taxonomy which lends the project rigour (Winter, 2021). Practical strategies contained in the workbook guide performers and voice professionals toward an integrated methodology for ATS based on studio practice and best practices. Reflective practices, both mindfulness based and reflexive writing, deepen performers' emotional connection with the song (Purdy, 2016). Creating believable characters who tell the story of the song (Taylor, 2009) using these strategies answers the RQ.

The culmination of intuitive inquiry is cycle 5, the final lens, which explores the impact of the workbook (Anderson, 2019). Studio observations suggest the workbook will shift how performers approach both repertoire selection and ATS practice. Rather than expecting the teacher to assign music, the workbook challenges the student to engage with repertoire using a fresh perspective based on emotional connection and personal taste. These criteria move the performer from a traditional western classical model to one based in the tenets of ATS where the performer communicates the story through emotional expression which the audience is able to perceive (Scherer et al., 2017; Morgan, 2025). Because performers often enter the studio with a clear idea that singing lessons are about singing, a second anticipated shift concerns the workbook facilitating a paradigm shift, raising awareness of what singing actually is in the MT context by incorporating ATS as an integrated practice. In

bridging the gap between singing and acting, the workbook offers a meaningful contribution to the evolving practice of musical theatre performance.

Critical Reflection

What happened?

Intuitive Inquiry

Intuitive inquiry, a research method which uses human experience to promote cultural change through compassionate engagement with oneself and others (Anderson and Braud, 2011), was new to me as a researcher. This methodology felt like a natural home for my research because the lived experience of the singer is of academic interest and a practice I bring into every lesson I teach. I felt excitement that there was a recognised methodology which seemed to align with my values as a researcher. I used my intuition successfully when creating a first draft of the ATS workbook which flowed from embodied and practitioner knowledge. However, as I moved through the assignment, the intuitive nature of the inquiry was often overshadowed by the writing requirements. I found that even my reflexive journal sometimes became descriptive and prescriptive rather than a deeper interrogation of my learning experience. In addition, the Know-How section of Component 2 which necessitates the description of embodied knowledge (Nelson, 2022) was the most difficult to encapsulate in writing. Upon reflection, I have realised that, as with any new skill, intuitive inquiry requires practice. Compassionate awareness and promoting cultural change are demanding because they require a sustained attention to self and others which is not always foregrounded in academic writing. It is in the 'doing' of this new type of research that it will become more embodied and reflexive. A simple *aide-memoire* such as a Post-it note on my desk could be a prompt to remember to add intuitive inquiry into my iterative cycle of experience and observation (Kolb, 2015). For future projects, I will continue to develop my use of intuitive inquiry to add depth to both my research and my voice practice.

Learning

My MA studies have introduced me to iterative methodologies which I have embedded in my research. Reflexivity (Braun and Clarke, 2021) and the double hermeneutic circle (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014) are two frameworks which have informed my research and writing up to this point. As a result of this assignment, I encountered learning theories such as Kolb's (2015) experiential learning and deep learning strategies (Marton and Säljö, 1976) including self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2017). During the lecture on these subjects, I felt profound overwhelm at the multi-modal approach to research. How could I incorporate yet another framework? The overload of theory threatened to derail my research and artefact creation; however, when examined, I realised that I was already incorporating these modes intuitively. Looking more closely at SDT, I could see that autonomy and competence were already embedded in my research design as tacit

knowledge. I had been doing this without naming it. Relatedness, however, was only included by means of tutorials, but I can address this in future iterations of the workbook by including peer and community review. Using reflective tools already in my practice such as breathing or stretching can help to focus on the fluid relationship between gaining knowledge and applying knowledge. Approaching future moments of overload with curiosity will allow me to integrate new theory more easily into my practice. Though it can be a challenge, embracing new ways of knowing and working can only deepen my research.

What now?

My Practice

The ATS workbook was created to fulfil a PbR assignment, yet in completing it, I realised that I had made something I want to use in my own voice studio. It was designed with my students in mind, but the research process relegated my own use of it to the background. While the exercises are rooted in tacit knowledge from my studio practice, I was genuinely enthusiastic on recognising that my students and I can benefit from using this resource as a practical tool. While some students may be time constrained or reticent to explore identity, I anticipate mostly positive outcomes from its use. For example, consider this exchange which most singing teachers will recognise:

> Teacher: "What would you like to sing?"
>
> Student: "I don't know."

Musical selection could become a student-led process which takes into account emotional connection (Purdy, 2016), solving a frustrating and time-consuming scenario in the studio. It is also an approachable introduction to the Stanislavskian tradition used by most MT practitioners (Merlin, 2024), providing a framework through which students can begin to synthesise vocal technique with authentic emotional expression (Dunbar, 2016). I now know that a deeper exploration of emotions and breathing could enhance the workbook which highlights the intriguing possibility that the workbook is alive and evolving. Piloting the workbook with students and teachers will reveal what works, what does not, and where it might grow in future iterations. It is a prospect I anticipate with the curiosity and openness that this assignment has taught me to embrace.

Future Research

The throughline of my MA journey has been MT research, because I work predominantly with triple threat performers and there is a paucity of research in this area. Originally, the artefact was conceived as an audition guide; however, reflections in my journal led me to pivot toward an ATS workbook, which I felt would better serve my students and was a natural

progression of the RQs I explored in Modules 3 and 4. Change is always a challenge for me, so I felt discomfort, but the logic of the change was compelling. When I committed to the new direction, I knew I had made the right decision which energised the project. While there was some time lost with the change, I incorporated this disruption into my process. This led to the realisation that my embedded knowledge of ATS is evolving, and that I could draw on it to create a strong artefact. Looking forward to the primary research in Module 6, I can utilise the workbook as a research instrument or intervention by piloting it with participants, beginning to shape the direction of that project. Building on this, I could refine the workbook through iterative testing, using participant feedback to improve usability. It is important that the workbook is clear and substantiated while remaining accessible. Looking further ahead, I would seek to publish the workbook as a resource for MT performers, making it widely accessible and contributing to the body of practitioner literature.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Artefact

Acting Through Song



Christine Descher

A Workbook for Musical Theatre Song Preparation

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Preface

Designed for performers and practitioners

This workbook is for performers who want to improve their acting through song (ATS) skills and for the voice professionals who teach them.

Suitable for all levels

The exercises in the workbook are designed for all levels of proficiency from beginners embarking on their acting through song journeys in the studio to students auditioning for university or conservatory places to musical theatre professionals. The workbook also provides voice pedagogues with accessible ways to incorporate acting into their teaching.

Use in the studio and in rehearsal

Performers can use the workbook for private rehearsal or in conjunction with their voice teacher or coach in lessons. It is intended to prepare singers for performances and auditions.

Ways to use this workbook

The workbook progresses cumulatively through a sequence of exercises, each contributing to an aspect of storytelling for a particular song. Each section contains activities and reflections. Reflective exercises support students in developing their ability to make choices which align with their preferences and abilities. By the end of the process, a coherent story with characterisation through emotional expression should emerge. However, each exercise can be used independently to support development of a particular area.

Inclusive and equitable practice

This workbook was created as an inclusive resource for all performers and practitioners. The exercises are adaptable and open to interpretation, recognising diverse identities, experiences, and ways of working. Users should engage with the material in a way that feels accessible, appropriate, and meaningful.

Trigger warning

Working with emotional expression, reflective practices, and identity may be challenging for some students and teachers. To mitigate risk of emotional distress, exercises should be modified or skipped to support individual emotional well-being.

Part 1 - Warmups

Warmups are really important because they provide focus and prevent injury. Let's get started.

Activity

Relaxation and focus
Do a body scan. Lie on the floor or sit in a chair. Get comfortable. Focus on each part of your body starting with your toes and ending with your head. You don't have to do anything, just pay attention to how each part feels. Remember to breathe.

Reflection

Did you do the body scan? How do you feel? What did you notice?
(Hint: Did you notice a lot of tension in any part of your body? Do you feel different from when you started the body scan?)

Activity

Physical Warm-up
Warm up as you normally would. This may include activities like star jumps/jumping jacks, running in place, planks, stretches, head/neck, and shoulder rolls. Only do what feels comfortable and meet your body where it is, today.

Activity

Vocal Warm-up
Warm up as you normally would. Start gently and increase intensity when it feels safe.

End of Part 1

It would be easy to skip the warmups but your body and mind need your attention to prepare for the exciting next steps.

Part 2 - Choosing a song

The music you sing reflects who you are as a person and as a performer. Let's try a new approach to song selection and choose songs you love rather than what you are supposed to sing.

(Hint: When searching for new music, listen and discuss. Use YouTube, Spotify, or wherever you usually listen to discover shows and songs you don't know. If you don't know where to start, ask someone who does know. Musical theatre folks love to talk about musical theatre!)

Activity

Choose a song which you may want to sing. Listen to it. Sing it.

Reflection

Do you like the song? How does it make you feel?
(Hint: Do you feel an emotional connection to the song?)

Activity

If you do not connect with the song, repeat the previous activity and reflection.
If you do, sing it again.

Reflection

Does the song highlight your vocal strengths? Is there anything in the song which feels vocally challenging?
(Hint: Don't typecast. Do you feel and sound good when you are singing the song? Consider vocal quality and range.)

Reflection

Does the song resonate with your identity? Can it be sensitively adapted? Does it feel authentic or uncomfortable?
(Hint: Consider your own gender, sexuality, age, and ethnicity alongside those of the character and the context of the show. How do your political views and socio-economic status align with those of the character? Are your ethical and moral frameworks in sync? Would you feel comfortable portraying this character?)

Reflection

What is the performance context for this song? Recital, cabaret, audition, full production?
(Hint: Can you adapt this song so it works for you depending on the context?)

End of Part 2

Congratulations, you have chosen a song based on your reflections and can start preparing it for performance. Let's move on to storytelling.

Part 3 - Who is your character?

The character comes to life for you and for your audience through a set of 'given circumstances.' They will help you develop a story for your character.

Activity

Read the script. If you have time, read the whole thing, including song lyrics. If you have less time, read the character description and the scene which contains the song you are singing (this is the bare minimum).

Reflection

Answer the following questions about the character with as much detail as you can.

Who are you?
(Hint: Consider age, time period, relationships, socio-economic status, gender, family, and anything else that seems important).

Where are you?
(Hint: Consider both place and time.)

Who are you talking to?
(Hint: What is your relationship to the person? Remember, you can talk to yourself or to God/the universe).

What do you need and how do you get it?
(Hint: What are you asking for from the person and will you know when you get it?)

Is there subtext?
(Hint: Is there anything you are thinking or feeling but not saying?)

Activity

Think about your general outlook on life and compare it with the character's outlook. What is the same and what is different?
(Hint: Consider location, gender, education, profession, politics, speech patterns, and anything else that defines you as you.)

Reflection

Can you relate to the character's outlook and experiences? Is there any further research you might need to do to understand them?

Reflection

What has happened right before you sing?
(Hint: Why do you sing?)

End of Part 3

Now that you know your character and how you relate to them, you can dive into song preparation, starting with the lyrics. But first...

Pause, reset, refocus

Activity

Take a breath. Whether you have been working on your song continuously or you are starting from here, reset and refocus with some breath work. Use any breathing techniques which work for you.
(Hint: Try box breathing. Breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts. Repeat 5 times.)

Part 4 - The lyrics

Separate the lyrics and music before reintegrating them. This analysis will help make sense of what matches and what doesn't. The lyrics are your first clue to storytelling.

Activity

Recite the song lyrics as if they were a monologue.
(Hint: Pay attention to punctuation and where you breathe. Forget the musical rhythm and use the character's speech pattern.)

Reflection

What do the words mean? What emotions come up?

Activity

Sing the words like a monologue. Don't use the accompaniment, yet.
(Hint: Pay attention to punctuation and where you breathe. Forget the musical rhythm and use the character's speech pattern and quality even though you are singing.)

Reflection

Do the words still make sense? Were there any new emotions? Was the singing easy or more difficult?

End of Part 4

It may seem like you haven't spent enough time with the words, but we will return to them in Part 6. Before that, let's look at the music.

Part 5 - The music

The music tells its own story. There are a number of elements which tell that story if you pay attention.

Activity

Listen to one (or several) cast recordings of the song. Now, listen to the accompaniment without the lyrics.

Reflection

Analyse the music in your own words. Don't worry too much about musical terminology.
What do you hear?
(Hint: Listen for emotion, tempo, rhythm, phrasing, keys and key changes, intros, outros, and musical breaks)

Reflection

How does the music make you feel? Does that match with what the character might feel?

Reflection

Extra Credit
What do you know about the composer and their style of music? In what period was the show originally performed?

End of Part 5

By now, you should have a sense of the emotional characteristics of the piece. A story is probably starting to form. The next step is to put the music and the lyrics together.

Part 6 - Putting it together

The synthesis of words and music is the purpose of acting through song. You've made it to the summit.

Activity

Listen to the accompaniment and think the words.

Activity

Listen to the accompaniment and say the words.

Reflection

Where do the words and music match? Where do they differ?
(Hint: Think about emotional highs and lows alongside dynamics, rhythm, key, and key changes.)

Reflection

If the music and lyrics don’t match, how does that affect the story you are trying to tell?

Reflection

Does the breathing match when you speak the lyrics and when you sing them? Where does it differ?

Activity

Sing the song with the accompaniment. (Phew! I bet you thought you'd never get here.)

Reflection

What did you feel when you sang the song? Did you notice anything different when you integrated acting with singing?
(Hint: Was it easy or difficult to sing? What about your breathing? Were you thinking about the music, the lyrics, or the character? Was there an emotional connection?)

Activity

Sing the song again, this time sing the thoughts (phrases) instead of the notes and words individually.

Reflection

What was different this time? Did you tell the story?
(Hint: It might be easier!)

Reflection

Did breathing with the thoughts match or clash with the music? Do you need to make adjustments? If so, where might you make them?

End of Part 6

Congratulations! You now have a character who tells a story using acting through song. Remember that the process is ongoing so you can revisit this section if you need a ‘top-up’ or if something doesn’t feel right. But wait, there’s more.

Pause, reset, refocus

Activity

Take a breath. Whether you have been working on your song continuously or you are starting from here, reset and refocus with some breath work. Use any breathing techniques which work for you.
(Hint: Try counting your in and out breaths. Start over when you get distracted and think of something else.)

Part 7 - Staging

Your face and body need to be part of the storytelling. This section will give you some ideas on how to incorporate emotion, gesture, and movement.

Activity

In your score, write an emotion for each phrase which corresponds to what your character is feeling. Sing the song while looking in a mirror, showing the emotion on your face.
(Hint: Be very specific. Is your character happy or elated?)

Reflection

How did you feel? Did you feel the emotion as a result of showing it or was showing it enough to tell the story? Which emotions worked? Which ones didn't work?

Activity

Sing the song while looking in a mirror with the emotions you have chosen. Try adding gestures which match the emotional expression of the song.
(Hint: You don't have to gesture all the time. When you finish your gesture, drop it instead of floating it down.)

Reflection

Which gestures worked? Why? Which ones didn't work? Why? Do you need more or fewer gestures?
(Hint: Write the ones that worked in your score)

Activity

Stage the song as if you were performing it as a solo (no one else is on the stage).
(Hint: Use the whole stage or space in which you are working. How and when would your character move in the context of the song?)

Reflection

How did the staging feel? What worked and what didn't? How was your timing in relation to the musical and lyrical ideas?
(Hint: Write what worked in your score.)

Activity

Put it all together. Sing the song using the music, lyrics, emotions, facial attitudes, gestures, and staging.

Reflection

How did it feel to embody the character? Did you like your choices?
(Hint: You can always make changes. Fresh perspectives and spontaneity will work in your favour.)

End of Part 7

You have a whole song which, with rehearsal, will soon be performance ready. Here is one more way to discover more and evolve your storytelling.

Part 8 - Improvisation

Some people may read that word and close the workbook. If you can, keep an open mind and try the exercises which encourage exploration and experimentation. You might be surprised by what you find.

Activity

Create a set of given circumstances (or use the ones you already have for your song). Sing a song which expresses how your character feels.
(Hint: Don't worry about vocal technique or singing beautifully, just sing safely. Sing in any style. Use words or syllables or sounds.)

Reflection

What did you feel? What emotions did your character feel? Did you use gestures and what were they? Did your imagination flow or did it get stuck?
(Hint: Improvisation is a learned skill. The more you do it, the easier and better it gets.)

Activity

Get or make a set of emotion cards. While singing a song you know well, draw cards and portray the emotion on the card until you draw the next one. It doesn't matter if it doesn't match what is happening in the song.
(Hint: This exercise works well with another person drawing the cards for you at random times during this song.)

Reflection

How did portraying random emotions feel? Were you able to be specific? Did it make you think about exploring emotions 'outside the box' in your song preparation?

Activity

Choose a song you know well. While singing it, switch randomly from the character you have developed to another completely unrelated character, including the voice.
(Hint: Use characters with distinctive voices like Julie Andrews as Mary Poppins, Kristen Chenoweth as Galinda, or Tom Hanks as Forrest Gump. Sing safely when mimicking these voices, but remember that perceived ugly sounds can be useful.)

Reflection

What did switching back and forth do to your character? To your voice? Was there anything better in the unrelated character you can now incorporate?

End of Part 7

Improvisation creates believability onstage by allowing you to be more agile, freer, and exploratory. Use these exercises as a way to experiment and broaden your choices.

Coda

This is the end, for now. You made it! While the workbook is not intended to be a complete overview, it will get you started with a set of tools for acting through song. Continue to practice and reflect on those practices to become a storyteller for whom audiences will cheer.

Reflection

Think about the process of creating a character who tells a story. What was easy? What was difficult? What have you learned about acting through song?

Reading List

These books were invaluable when writing the workbook. If you want to go more in depth on anything you encountered when doing the exercises, these practitioners will get you started.

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Appendix 2 - Artefact Iterative Development Process

25/03/2026

Wrote preface based on best practice/practitioner literature.

27/03/2026

Sketched sections of the workbook based on best practice and embodied knowledge.

29/03/2026

Wrote Part 1 – Choosing a Song and Part 2 – Warmups

30/03/2026

Changed Part 1 to 'Warmups', to start with a focussed mind and body. Included a body scan as per Kabat-Zinn (2013). This seemed like an accessible way to start from a place of relaxation, in my experience with mindfulness practices. It is a light touch. The entire warm-up section invites the performer to use exercises which suit. Part 2 is now choosing a song. Completed first draft

02/04/2026

Review of first draft based on embodied knowledge.

03/04/2026

User oriented revision based on Know-That section in the report.

04/04/2026

Refining hints in all sections to guide rather than command or instruct. Reflection on inclusivity has instigated these changes.

08/04/2026

Added consistency for the Activity – Reflection – Hint sequences throughout the workbook with useability in mind.

11/04/2026

Lightly revised hints in the Part 2 -Repertoire Selection. Added 'vocal quality and range' based on Know-How section. This is both embodied knowledge and based on Purdy (2016). I am also attempting to make the language more permissive keeping in mind the broad user base of the workbook.

12/04/2026

Revisited the Warm-up section, in particular the body scan, in order to add a holistic element of body – mind – voice which echoes Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis on which most ATS practitioner literature is based (Dunbar, 2014; Morgan, 2025). "Meet your body where it is, today" is the prompt which is a gentle and embodied way of introducing this concept.

15/04/2026

Reordered given circumstances in Part 3 based on further amendments to the Know-What section. What has happened right before you sing is the last element with all the other exercises feeding into it as demonstrated in Figure 10. The logical sequence of this was revealed as I wrote from both embodied experience and from Campbell Albert and Lynch (2022)

19/04/2026

In revising the Know-What section of the report, identity as presented in the workbook was foregrounded. Authenticity and alignment became important additions allowing interpretive choice rather than descriptive prompts (mine). Continuing to reflect on identity and how important it is and how difficult it is to distil into a few sentences. Added a prompt that should cause reflection on cultural appropriation. This is important and complex. I do not purport to have the answers but it is something singers should consider in order to foster an inclusive industry.

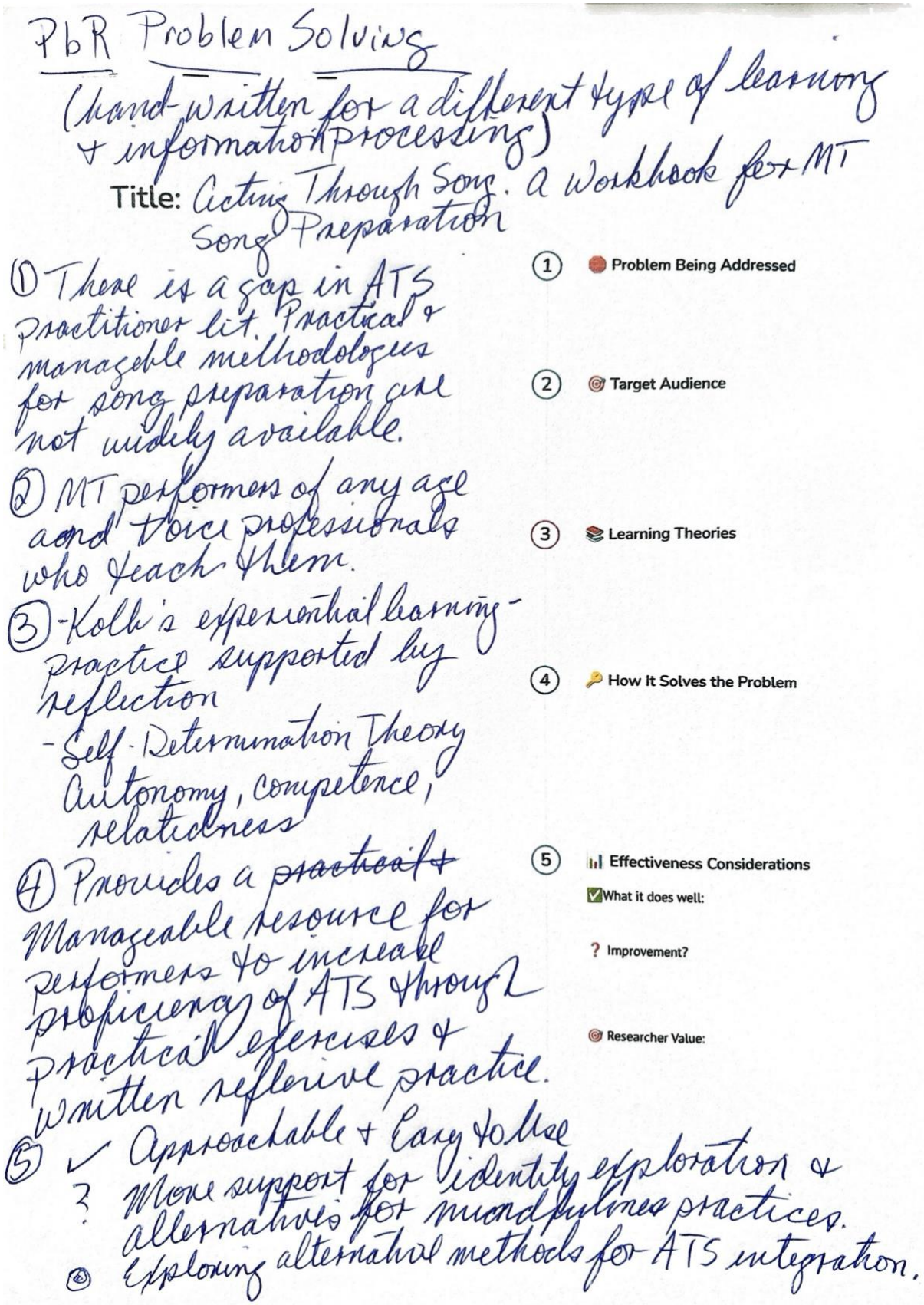
21/04/2026

Further refinement of the identity section to include socio-economic status, political views, and ethical/moral frameworks. This one question on identity more fully encompasses the deep reflexive work required to choose repertoire with care and compassion. The care and compassion directly relate to the intuitive inquiry which I am exploring within the PbR.

26/04/2026

Added a TOC, reading list, a brief description of how to find new music, and an introductory section to the warm-up section for consistency. Proofread. Formatted the workbook in Canva.

Appendix 3 – PbR Problem Solving



PbR Problem Solving

(hand-written for a different type of learning & information processing)

Title: Acting Through Song: a Workbook for MT Song Preparation

① Problem Being Addressed

① There is a gap in ATS practitioner lit. Practical & manageable methodologies for song preparation are not widely available.

② Target Audience

② MT performers of any age and voice professionals who teach them.

③ Learning Theories

③ -Kolb's experiential learning - practice supported by reflection
- Self-Determination Theory Autonomy, competence, relatedness

④ How It Solves the Problem

④ Provides a ~~practical~~ manageable resource for performers to increase proficiency of ATS through practical exercises & written reflexive practice.

⑤ Effectiveness Considerations

⑤ ✓ What it does well:
Approachable + Easy to use

? Improvement?
More support for identity exploration & alternatives for mindfulness practices.

◎ Researcher Value:
Exploring alternative methods for ATS integration.