

**Learning in the Digital Era ADPA4001
Assessment Tasks 1 & 2**

University of Wales Trinity St. David

Musical Theatre BA

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Assessment Task 1 – Reflective Essay

During my one-to-one singing lesson with David Laugharne on the 18th of November 2022, I worked on *Get Out and Stay Out* from *9 to 5: The Musical*. David had challenged me to find a song that intimidates me: something that would require work on a technique, genre, or style of voice that I am less confident with. As I am accustomed to legit styles, I decided upon this song as I was aware of the vocal strength required and the consistent fast tempo which would challenge my use of belt and breath support.

Directed by Joe Mantello, *9 to 5: The Musical* premiered in Los Angeles in 2008. With music and lyrics by Dolly Parton, it is an adaptation of the 1980 movie of the same title. It explores:

‘an iconic story of three women from widely disparate backgrounds who join forces to overthrow their male superior and to turn their company into a non-discriminatory and employee-centred working environment.’ (Sollish, 2009, p.331)

These themes are adequately summarised in *Get Out and Stay Out*, as Judy comes to a tumultuous end. The Guide to Musical Theatre (n.d.) explains how Judy Bernly is characterised as a naïve woman in her 30s, recently divorced and heartbroken as her husband left her for his secretary. The song occurs during Act Two; her ex-husband surprises her with news that his affair has ended and he hopes to reconcile. Judy exclaims during this song that she is no longer a timid housewife and kicks him out as she sings about how mistreated she was. Judy eventually finds her independence and strength which manifests in this song.

During my one-to-one singing lesson with David, I noted that I had previously sung sections of the song and had seen the production and listened to the track many times prior, so was

familiar with the melody and context. We decided to jump straight into singing it through to gain perspective of the stamina required and take note of any other challenges I faced.

I ensure to audio-record every session I have with David, to take thorough notes and for my own self-reflection. When listening back I noticed that I sang the first verse with a speech-like quality to my voice. I brought this piece to Performance Class, the next week, with focus primarily on acting-through-song where we discussed the character's objectives in more detail. I understood that Judy ultimately wants to find her own voice and stand up to Dick, evident in the opening verse 'no you stand there and take it, there's no love to hide behind'. Therefore, I had feedback that the speech tonality I used effectively portrayed Judy's conviction whilst also allowed somewhere for her frustration and strength to build from, as she grows and nurtures this self-assurance whilst the song builds.

When running through this song with David the first time, I struggled with the stamina required to reach every big note with such ambition and drive. David noted '(the audition panel or audience) are going to want you to slam that door', referring to how Judy is kicking Dick out of the house and that the audience are going to expect to feel this turbulent outburst and the passion that maintains. To work on my stamina and characterisation, with David's advice, I identified three key aspects: healthy voice placement and support; an assertive tone of voice; and focussing on the objective.

David asked about my own use of voice when being in an angered position such as Judy's, whether I shout forcefully or with a high-pitched tone. I noted that I previously worked as a teaching assistant where I often had to raise my voice to gain attention and respect from noisy pupils. Often yelling "boys!", for example, had to be in a firm and confident tone to be successful. I found that this tone of voice was familiar as I practised shouting "boys!", focussing on the resonance in my chest and the support that was required to make this

sound. David instructed me to take the pitch up but keep the definition in my voice as I transitioned into using a “yeah” sound, which would be more relevant to the dialect of the song.

Using the word “yeah” I sang through the melody of the climax of the song, where there were the hardest belt notes. I found these notes far easier to reach using this open-vowel sound, David noted this is due to the space made available in my mouth and throat where the sound can easily resonate. Additionally, he recommended I ‘think down’ to support this sound properly. I found this very successful and easily reached the notes I struggled with previously. It took a couple of times to fully embody this chesty sounding voice, as I thought about yelling “boys!”. Listening back, I noted a huge difference in the power behind the sound and the intention, accurately showing the character’s intensity. However, I did struggle again with some of the more challenging notes once we reintroduced the lyrics. We noticed that the articulation, especially the “g” in ‘get’ was blocking my trachea and minimising the space available. My further research informed me that ‘the tongue touches the soft palate and stops the air from escaping’ (Palmer, 2020, p.139). Although, I was confident in my ability to reach this note, as I previously had done with ease on the “yeah” sound, the glottal sound was significantly harder to project from. To practise getting my tongue out of the way, David suggested I sing through the chorus whilst biting my tongue and holding it away from the throat. Though, I felt that this exercise didn’t allow much space in my mouth at all for resonance or lyric articulation.

I have since investigated sound projection and articulation as I practised both “guh” and “yuh” sounds, noting how they feel within my mouth and throat. Ultimately, I discovered that considering the “ge-” sound to be more of a “g-yeah” has been considerably helpful as I

can easily project from the “y”. This is because the tongue gently reaches the soft palate but doesn’t close it off as much as the “g” glottal would.

Within Performance Class, I gained positive feedback on my diction and characterisation. I was advised that this piece suited me well, the character was embodied effectively, and her intentions were portrayed. I will, therefore, continue to work on this piece, using vocal exercises to further develop my stamina and confidence, eventually adding it to my repertoire.

Assessment Task 2 – Live Theatre Review

Harvard Law School's *Elle Woods* from the 2007 Broadway musical *Legally Blonde* appeared on the Stanwell School stage in Penarth last December. The musical is based on the 2001 movie with the same title, which follows the tale of a bubbly blonde making her way through law school in the pursuit of love, ultimately battling limiting expectations to discover a passion for justice. This feminist musical-comedy was performed by the students of Stanwell School and on Thursday the 22nd of December I went to see their long-awaited first production since the hit of COVID-19. It was directed and designed by Mr Owain Sullivan, head of the Drama department, with choreographers including Mrs Kate McCusker. Stanwell School is renowned for the professionalism of their annual productions, having held the UK's first school performances of Cameron Mackintosh's *Les Misérables* in 2002 and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* in 2011. I visited Stanwell School to see *Legally Blonde* performed in their 400 tier-seated auditorium, a spectacle in itself for a Comprehensive school's amateur performance.

The production design did not disappoint, from the tickets which were adequately pink-themed, to the large-scale set pieces that filled the stage. The poster immediately showed me the girly and overstated 'chick-flick' genre of the show, due to the use of bright colours, bold lettering, and sparkles. A few members of the principal cast were also featured in character. However, I did notice that the costumes on the poster were lacking, as temporary bold character pieces had been placed onto the students, including a garish pink tie around Elle's neck. I would advise them to mirror the professionalism of their productions onto the advertisement also, to benefit their ticket sales in the future.

I learnt that Sullivan was influenced by *Regent's Park Open Air Theatre's* 2022 production of *Legally Blonde*, directed by Timothy Sheader and James Pidgeon, in its emphasis on

significant themes and simplistic set design. The key themes of this storyline are feminism and independence, both of which were shown by Isabelle Edmund's confident interpretation of Elle Woods' character and the largely female ensemble. This production featured a balcony set with curved staircases either side, accurately shown on a smaller scale on the Stanwell auditorium, adding a mural of a bright pink sorority house on the wall at the back and double doors beneath it. This allowed for many differentiating scenes and a level for the omniscient 'Greek Chorus' to visibly look down upon Elle from their ethereal state.

An effective use of budgeting was that the school's Art department and Maintenance team were credited for set-building and creating pieces. Although the set was simple, alongside the usage of lighting and set pieces the story came to life on the stage, and I could easily follow along. For example, each time a scene took place within Harvard Law School, a large emblem 'H' would be placed on the balcony. Classroom and courtroom scenes were also clearly represented by a layout of chairs and minor additional props. Although to contest this, at times I did believe that the stage seemed quite empty and could have been filled with additional set pieces or more background actors to bring the scene to life and to make the setting cue more obvious. This would have been effective when Elle first entered Paulette's hair salon, as there were salon chairs and blowout machines, but they were unused at the opposite side of the stage to the action. Therefore, a large open space caused little atmosphere to be created as only the two of them feature in the scene.

The lighting design had massive implications on the mood and themes conveyed to the audience. The romantic and feminist themes allowed frequent uses of pink lighting. I noticed harsh spotlights were used to create the isolation of Elle as she didn't fit in amongst her Harvard peers. A moment that stood out to me was during *Serious* when Elle expects a

proposal from her boyfriend. The audience is also led to believe this as a romantic scene is conducted: warm overhead dim yellow lighting, a gentle disco ball effect swirls around the stage as it is filled with a wash of pink lighting. Yet, Elle is shocked to discover that Warner is breaking up with her and this moment was revealed quickly by a stark white overhead light, with the pink instantly becoming more muted. This choice was very successful as the revelation became so exaggerated as Elle screeches in horror, amply fitting the comedic element of the show.

I was familiar with the Broadway production prior that was filmed in 2007 by MTV, as well as the Broadway cast recording. Therefore, I knew of the large-scale numbers and highly choreographed scenes required. I felt that Stanwell took on this challenge well, successfully adapting choreography for the different ability levels which overall still created an outstanding visual display. For example, during *Whipped into Shape*, Brooke Wyndham sings powerful notes whilst simultaneously skipping for almost the whole song. Broadway's Nikki Snelson would have trained for months for such a challenging performance, whereas choreographer Kate McCusker had Brooke stagger her exercise throughout the song as she instead paraded amongst the ensemble. This was still impressive and did not take away from her characterisation or the energy level of the scene. Though, I do believe there were some large-scale numbers that lacked in energy. During some big numbers, unfortunately the energy was diluted by the number of less-enthusiastic ensemble members featured onstage. Although I bear in mind that this is an amateur production with younger cast members, I do believe that smaller groups could have been used, spread throughout the songs or scenes, to keep the atmosphere consistent and motivate those ensemble members with more significant roles.

Overall, I believe that this production was proficient in its representation of the story of Elle Woods and the feminist theme. I often forgot that there were no professional actors, musicians or directors involved due to the expert execution of the show. It was easy to forgive any mistakes made by the actors, including a late cue and a missing prop, considering the work ethic of the students overall. There were also minor issues with coherence and diction, which I believe were due to the use of American accent and the technology acquired with an amateur budget. Despite this, the talent was so evident, that an exciting and humorous production still sufficed. This venue provides a perfect view from every seat and I had a professional experience for such an affordable price.

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