Cultivating Instincts in Our Musical Theater Students with Spectral Pedagogy

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Abstract

Many competitive musical theatre training programs prioritize the professional carry-over value of their teachings, and consider the immediate application of audition-ready singing, movement, and acting skills paramount. Accordingly, instructors on these faculties feel that they best serve students by indoctrinating them to the commercial realities of the industry (such as vocal and physical typing), although these directives may ultimately discourage or prevent the very sort of vocal and dramatic experimentation that ultimately allows actors to construct dynamic, layered, authentic characters. This unintended consequence may actually be worse for students who enter conservatory environments with considerable prior training, and thus have learned to perform by following the directives of teachers and coaches, mitigating their ability to make emboldened voice and character choices. This article examines the role of the voice educator in creating safe environments for experimentation, and the application of "spectral pedagogy" towards the critical deconstruction of peer performances. In addition, I provide practical guidelines to assist instructors in establishing a "workshop" dynamic in their classroom distinct from a "performance" space, which simultaneously contributes to the long-range benefit of student performers while permitting instructors much-needed latitude in their own professional development.

Keywords: live music; oncology; cancer; waiting room; mixed methods; music medicine

Introduction

As I near the end of my first decade as a college voice instructor, there are certain undergraduate archetypes I have come to cheerfully anticipate. For example, there are always singers who seem committed to proving to the audience that their flesh-and-blood physical assets are merely an illusion, and that the corporeal body they emotionally identify with is the one the audience ought to see. Unconsciously, their upper back may remain in a constant state of flexion, to demonstrate they are not, in fact, a 6-foot-one statuesque romantic lead, but the round-shouldered comic that they were cast as a freshman in high school (before their growth spurt and accumulation of a few varsity basketball letters). Indeed, once a student has been typed in their early years, perhaps having been told by an instructor they trust to consider themselves forever a sexy soubrette, a dancer "who sings a little," a "Maria Von Trapp," etc., it is a Herculean undertaking to expand their vision beyond those words, even if the truth would ultimately open up many more roles for them.

There are also students who are determined to fight tooth and nailagainst the *fach* that nature bestowed upon them. I find this is nearly always due to the influence of a well-meaning former instructor who, perhaps not coincidentally, generally produces singers of an identical voice type to their own.

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Invariably, this student will barricade himself or herself from acknowledging any sort of acoustic evidence to the contrary, asserting "I AM a soprano" or "I AM a bass," refusing even to leaf through a mezzo or tenor anthology on the basis of the editor's label. It can take a lot of convincing to show these students that singing is a muscular event, and that the voice can be trained to do a great deal—including, in some cases, to remain static, and only employ one register/timber/ habitual volume out of mental resolution, despite the unique size, color, and flexibility of their biological instrument.

The most common archetype I encounter, though, is a bit of a paradox: the student who has been *carefully taught* to disengage from their performance for purposes of "getting it right." I regretfully admit that this mindset is endemic throughout the majority of incoming freshman I've observed. A Deliberate Disengager (DD) often appears the embodiment of a disciplined, tenacious worker, and will practice their piece diligently; making bold, action-based choices that would have made their high school directors weep with pride. To the performance faculty, this student will appear a rising star from the day of their first audition, and will appear on every level the sort of student all voice instructors dream of having as a studio member.

After a DD sings a particularly well-prepared selection in one of my repertoire classes, their peers will applaud enthusiastically. Beaming with satisfaction, the student then turns to me for feedback, waiting for me to suggest the vowel modification or hand gesture that will further solidify their prowess. Instead, I will smile, praise them for their efforts, and ask them what they want out of a piece of music next, offering them some guiding questions to help specify the direction we should work in that day. For instance, are there areas in the music that feel less authentic to them, as the singer? What happens in their mind and body when they experience an emotional disconnect? Are all of the sounds they are making consistent with the story that they are trying to tell, or are they making "safe" choices to correlate with parts of their voice that feel comfortable right now? How do they think this piece should sound, and what changes would they like to make to realize their concept? And, perhaps cruelest of all, I might ask them how they FEEL.

The DD, who was previously delighted, will deflate before my eyes, more so than if I had offered scathing criticism. They will shift their feet, and alternate between avoiding eye contact and surveying my expression to see if they have answered "correctly or if I will take pity on them and answer my own query. If the DD speaks, they will answer questions with questions, terrified to speak declaratively lest they appear an imbecile in front of their classmates. Sometimes they panic, or, on rare occasion, bark back at the patent absurdity of my inquiries, as if their own feelings about the performance are the least important rather than the most important variable.

No matter what the reaction, it is clear in the DD's expression that any anxiety they feel must be indicative of failure and that in their mind I have clearly lost all respect for their performance skills that day. Despite my pains to deconstruct their performance into small, manageable bits of identifiable and repeatable phenomena, making every effort to use functional language for vocal events, and my pulling out every pedagogical trick in my toolbox to engage mindful reflection, I will often only get a despondent, "So, was it good or not?" in response.

It took me years of similar exchanges to realize why my classes were so challenging for these sorts of students. First of all, I was not telling them what pieces to perform, which caused tremendous apprehension among those who had listened carefully to their teachers every step of the way for repertoire recommendations. I would provide selection rubrics, or, in some cases, require purchase of a particular voice anthology, but would ultimately require them to make their own selections on the basis of their performance goals and repertoire needs.

In other words, I allowed for the potentiality of them choosing pieces that were poor matches for them, therefore placing them in a situation where this might be discovered in live performance, in front of their peers. I naively operated under the assumption that students would prefer the freedom to choose material that really expressed their current emotional lives. However, students did not perceive that potential as being equal to the possibility of public mortification at picking the "wrong" selection, especially as I, their professor, had the ability to save all involved time, pain, and effort by simply assigning appropriate selections. After all, why else had they sought out training but for the benefit of expert opinions that might spare them difficult experiences?

In fact, in the pursuit of becoming highly direct able, eager learners, these DDs inadvertently became followers, and were only comfortable proceeding if they had been given exact directives; flexible parameters were not advantages according to their worldview, but insurmountable obstacles. Coming of age in a culture where reality singing shows are more influential (and certainly more common) than school choral ensembles, these students learned that fine singing was more about error avoidance than engaging their imaginations, creativity, or unique expressive qualities, and they certainly lacked the tools to break vocal and dramatic choices down into specific musical terms.

To these students, the transformed Eliza Doolittle did not sing with perfect intonation and a reinforced head register because she was now a regal, elegant lady, but so she would not be labeled as "pitchy" by a curmudgeonly adjudicator with an ax to grind. Elphaba belted the end of "Defying Gravity" not because the character was experiencing euphoric self-actualization that needed to be broadcast across all of Oz like a trumpet call, but because Idina Menzel had set an artistic/commercial precedent. Lacking specific vocal concepts to guide their choices, DDs are accustomed to repeating what they hear on cast albums, thus at best becoming accomplished imitators rather than authentic performers. In the most fortunate cases, DDs might realize their weaknesses and establish a relationship with an instructor who can offer substitute directives for $60-300/hour, but even in these cases the actor as an interpreter remains at the mercy of another's insights.

So, faced with these factors, was the answer to change my assignments so students could enjoy more immediate success? Should I begin to assign specific repertoire, and provide the valuative judgments these aspiring singers were so hungry for? No, I argued. The answer was instead to change the *environment of expectation* so that students are given the freedom to fail without consequence for the first time in their performing lives.By designing assessments based other factors such as their effort/overall preparation, ability to perform specific vocal tasks, and insightful analyses of one another's performances, I might create an environment where new skills could be cultivated and applied, and allow students to engage mindfully in their own performance.

It takes a long time, often every minute of the four years we are allotted, to convey to most students that voice study is a dynamic, progressive, and frequently mercurial practice. One season you might find yourself being cast as a romantic, Golden Age ingénue, and the next the endearing-but-gullible best friend. What is interesting, though, is how desperate many of our students are to reveal their "true" type as one or the other; they rarely embrace the possibility that they may represent multiple types simultaneously, or that certain qualities may be magnified or dampened in relation to other actors. I recently enjoyed a fascinating casting process for a college production of *Rent*, which sent a flurry of students to my office wondering why they were called back for Maureen (the megalomaniacal performance artist) or for Joanne (the Ivy-League, responsible, principled ACLU lawyer), when they had long been told that they clearly represented the opposite type. In instance after instance, I had to explain, "yes, you do have the vocal chops for a _____, but compared to your scene partner, you invariably seemed like a _____."

Students left my office baffled, wanting to believe my feedback, but held in arrested development by their prior experiences that informed them that one or the other was the finite, inflexible truth. Some of this unyielding fixation on rules and typing might be due to the very sort of causal, methodical thinking that we are trying to promote in musical theatre students who wish one day to work on Broadway. After all, we've asked them to constantly consider and re-consider their physical type, and work with a voice teacher to unveil their golden *tessitura* so they know the exact keys to best feature their strengths and conceal their weaknesses. In fact, we have made auditioning for the musical theatre seem more like a series of determined protocols than what it is: an opportunity to bear witness to the magical, spontaneous amalgam of dramatic text and personal intention, eloquently defined by Ronald Willis in his guidebook for performance respondents as "fragile magic" (2012). I wonder if all of this excellent advice, designed to save students copious amounts of trial and error, might actually prevent them more empowering access to their internal barometers. Our efforts to fast-track students through these trials, averting hundreds of hours of struggling, not only prevents students from developing effective corrective techniques to deal with their weaknesses, but denies them the chance to identify singularly effective moments in their own performance.

This focus on expediting training might ultimately hinder some performers over the broader duration of their careers. Recently, Jennifer Hudson was interviewed on Play bill.org about her transformation from a twenty something, prototypical "Effie" in the film adaptation of *Dream girls*, to the slinky, sexual Shug Avery in the highly anticipated revival of *The Color Purple* on Broadway (Daniels, 2015).Although Hudson's dramatic weight loss may be related to the roles she is now offered, I am driven to look critically at her striking, confident features in both "before" and "after" photos; to me, both women are casting possibilities for her face, body composition, and soulful voice. After all, couldn't Shug be a voluptuous woman brimming with sexual confidence?

On the other hand, could Effie potentially be cast as a woman who is not corpulent, but who is trapped by a negative body image, so "appears" less commercially viable than the Deena (a "Diana Ross"-type), although shemight only be a few extra pounds higher on the scale?

I applaud both Ms. Hudson's versatility and inspiring adaptability, but I remain surprised at how few performers are successfully able to transcend the business' typing standards in a similarly organic manner. In the entertainment industry, it is an accepted notion that types only change chronologically, as stated in Sondheim's *Follies:*"First you're another slow-eyed vamp, then someone's mother, and then you're camp"(2010). However, it is highly unusual for an actor to make lateral moves within similar age categories the way Hudson has done. It is unclear what the ramifications on her career would have been if she held steadfast to either performance identity. How well could a woman who saw herself as the hedonist Shug portray Effie's sexual masochism? Might Hudson, if she followed an agent's assessments of her commercial assets, refuse an audition for Effie, asserting that she will only sing for Deena? Likewise, a performer who felt somehow that she only possessed an affinity with Effie's commitment to Curtismight be challenged to revel in Shug's polyamory. Fortunately, Hudson's ability to adapt to various changes in and around her career has, yet again, proven her both a survivor and a singer-actor to be reckoned with.

In order to promote this sort of career-spanning flexibility and authenticity in our own classrooms, we need to give students the practice in artistic autonomy noticeably lacking in the earlier stages of their training. Even if a student is fortunate enough to be able to afford a continuous stream of voice instructors, coaches, managers, therapists, and stylists, no amount of professional counsel can replace the gut instincts some of the best programs in the nation have unintentionally de-activated.

The very essence of self that makes for a compelling performance rests inthe artist's ability to hone in on their own narrative, and tell unique, engaging, personal, *real* stories—the kind that are generally defined by the enigmatic constancy of change.

By putting pressure on students to continually generate high-caliber performances, as is often the case in conservatory BFA programs, we reinforce a model where external cues trump internal instincts, and outside indications of mastery are far more important than a performer's own thoughts and feelings about their efforts. In a program where a student might only sing Effie or Shug, or Joanne or Maureen, because an instructor has labeled that character as their inherent "type," we deny students the innumerable benefits of the road less traveled. Therefore, it is essential that at least some of students' performing experiences are non-valuative and allow opportunities for critical deconstruction. In my teaching, I designate particular classes and activities as "workshop" spaces versus "performance" spaces: the former allows for pronounced risk-taking with very few academic, musical, or social stakes, while the latter, which is present in every main stage audition, showcase, and master class for an esteemed guest artist performance, is generally in no short supply.

Much like a well-oiled exposition of a Broadway show, in order to define a "workshop" space that invites constructive cognitive dissonance, we must establish the rules at the onset of instruction. The instructor should explain, preferably on the first day of class, that auditions are "performance" spaces, where students should bring pieces that have the best evidence for success… but that they will only find these sorts of pieces via trial and error, which will be the object of the "workshop" space.

The main focus in a workshop-based classroom, then, is to treat performances as a series of individual, quantifiable choices, that are not in and of themselves positive or negative, but that cumulatively yield appropriate or inappropriate responses from audiences when different ratios of these variables are achieved. In this way, they might be more similar to a cooking class than a standard performing arts lab course. For example, when a student sings a high note in a mixed voice as opposed to a full belt in a song where that same note is conventionally belted, that experiment needs to be evaluated on its own merits, asking if on this particular day, with this individual voice, in this unique interpretation of the piece, a mixed registration best serves the story.

In this setting, the class should not disregard the traditional approach, but compare the results of changing variables to the existing template. After all, cooks don't learn to make curries by always combining exact measurements; they train their palate to understand the role of certain tastes in tandem, and push the boundaries of their customers' palates by changing those proportions.

A little more cinnamon or turmeric one day might overwhelm the palate, but a different adjustment the next allows the chef to understand the effect of these tastes on a tangible, measureable spectrum of sweet, bitter, salty, etc. Once they understand this balance, signature dishes are only a few experiments away! In this vein, I have adopted a system of "spectral pedagogy" to help distill comprehensive experiences into their base, measurable components.

For example, in the musical theatre class, students should be invited to take individual aspects of their singing performance such as registration, volume, use of vibrato, and diction choices and place them on a spectrum, which can simply be designated a numeric value of 1 to 10.Thus, we have an easily understood model for isolating specific vocal functions, which involves only the addition of barely a dozen new vocabulary terms.

In my classes, I use the following categories: chest-dominant production (thyroarytenoid dominant) versus head-dominant (cricothyroid dominant) production; straight tone versus "spinning" (vibrato); "spoken" versus "sung" (legato) articulation; loud versus soft volumes; bright versus dark timbres; horizontal versus vertical vowels. Some voice pedagogues might notice that the first of term in each of these pairs are common "extremes" associated with contemporary belt production, while the second set collectively verbalize the musical values of most classical singing schools.

To apply this model, we begin by allowing the student to take educated guesses about where on the spectrum to begin, and then move towards either spectral extreme as the work develops. So, if a student brings in Maureen's *ode de* street performance art, "Over the Moon" from *Rent,* we might start by asking how much vibrato does it make sense for this character to employ? Should there be continual oscillation, in the manner of a classical singer (a 9 on our spectrum), or a rare event, only at the very conclusion of phrases (2)? What registration matches what we have come to know of this character's personality—does she sound more "Maureeny" with a head-dominant quality (3) or a chesty mix (7)? Volume-wise, is Maureen eager to be heard, or is her vocal quality covered and *sotto voce,* as if avoiding arrest from some passing mercenary policeman? Experimenting on this spectrum allows students not only to exercise enormous vocal control, but allows them practice in and the opportunity to be emboldened by their own interpretative decisions.

Another important element of this process is the deliberate employment of strategic opposites to establish the "wrong" direction. To break the ice, the instructor might ask students to make choices that contradict traditional readings of characters in order make new discoveries. An operatic "Greased Lightening" at an "8" registration and a belted "Glitter and be Gay" at a "2" can do wonders to instill in students a much-needed sense of humor about their efforts while cultivating the very playful environment which is so critical for musical theatre training (yet strangely absent in many of our classrooms). In addition, for students who are working outside of their vocal comfort zones, this can allow us to work along a spectrum of tonal possibilities, so even if a "3" is the desired outcome, they can inch their way backwards from a "7" towards their ultimate goal.

As the expression informs us, change is never easy. Opening a classroom up to this sort of trialing and experimentation might at the same time lead the instructor to a place of discomfort; just as we are asking our students to abandon their former methodologies, we must shed our authoritative instincts to provide the right answer for every query, lest we lose all credibility in our students' eyes. Through the process of leading students down side-roads, we allow ourselves the ability to stumble upon unexpected truths in the material. In addition, students will be given the gift of knowing their professors are artists both empowered and limited by their own experiences, just like their students. The only difference is that we as instructors have the power to positively affect the students' learning environments with the pedagogical insights afforded by more advanced age and accumulated "mistakes." To err is human, as they say. However, to passionately commit to error? That sounds like a musical theatre exercise I'd love to observe.

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