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Musical theatre: a workbook

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Introduction: About This Book

Who is it for?

This workbook is intended primarily for **students** embarking on the study of Musical Theatre at college, at university or in a private studio. But it also provides help, ideas and guidance for **teachers** and **instructors**, who can adopt the book as a required or complementary text for courses of study.

What levels does it assume?

The workbook consists of material suitable for students on the first **two years** of degree or diploma courses or their equivalent. The authors appreciate that Musical Theatre may be studied as an aspect of Performing Arts, Dance or Theatre in a wide variety of contexts but the material offered in this workbook will be of value as a substantial introduction to this area of enquiry.

What previous experience is required?

We assume that you have probably gained entry to a course of study through an audition or a 'tryout' and have had some experience of taking part in or singing numbers from musicals. The precise prerequisites will vary from course to course but you will certainly need to bring a passion and enthusiasm for Musical Theatre to your work. Ideally, you should read music adequately or at least be able to demonstrate general musicianship. You should have a good ear for music and be reliable when working in a chorus or small ensemble. You do not need perfect pitch but you do need to realise that time is always precious in rehearsal and the repetitions of instructions for music, text or movement are not common. Accordingly, you need a quick mind and, at audition, to be able to answer simple questions relating to pitch and intonation. You may well be asked to sing simple melodic and rhythmic phrases, recognise major and minor chords and sing notes from within a chord played twice on a piano or respond to other simple aural exercises.

Additionally, you should be able to move well, learn and retain simple dance steps and read a dramatic text with understanding.

It is, of course, possible that you are coming to Musical Theatre for the first time, perhaps having enjoyed other aspects of theatre and now wanting to enhance your experience and skills. You may have simply been an enthusiastic audience member for shows but feel that you have the potential to become

involved in performance. Someone has noticed this potential and now you are feeling a little apprehensive: there is plenty in this workbook for you.

How we shall ask you to work

This book may be used as a basis for or supplement to a taught class in Musical Theatre **or** for private study.

In this workbook we want to enter into a dialogue with you by encouraging you to respond to various tasks and questions. We shall sometimes supply answers but at other times suggest sources for answers. The emphasis throughout is on learning through exploration and discovery and that is why it is a **workbook** rather than a textbook.

The workbook is in **three parts**: in Parts **I** and **II** we provide activities and information intended to facilitate your **progressive mastery** of the **skills** of Musical Theatre. In **Part III** we offer activities and information designed to enhance your **understanding** of the whole field of Musical Theatre. **Part III** is specially designed so that it can be used **simultaneously** with Parts **I** and **II**.

How to use this workbook

There are as many ways of using this book as there are students and teachers who might have acquired it. Ideally, you should now **survey its entire contents** and then begin to work your way through **Part I**. However, because of your particular programme of study, needs or interests, you may find that there is material in Parts **II** and **III** that you can use at the same time. We assume a sense of progressive mastery but that may be achieved by the various routes that this book makes possible.

We would strongly recommend that you divide your time between acquiring the practical and artistic skills that form the contents of Parts **I** and **II** and the contextual and supporting material of Part **III**.

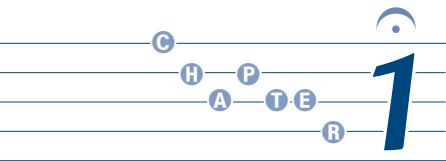
What if I cannot understand the terms being used?

In every learning situation, particularly in the rehearsal studio, you may hear other people using terms with which you are not familiar, and this may be embarrassing because you might think that you are the only person who does not understand. You may also feel that you do not fully understand the precise meaning of words used in this text or in other situations. We have provided a simple **glossary** to help you at the end of this workbook. If you are aware of unfamiliar words being used: (i) Look them up in the glossary and (ii) Make a note of them for your future use.

It is also possible that you feel baffled by all or some of the issues arising from reading a vocal score. We have provided a clear guide to this important aspect of your work in the form of a **Geographical Tour of a Vocal Score**. You will find this at the end of the book just after the **glossary**, and you should refer to it constantly if reading music presents a problem to you.

And a final thought to carry forward

We believe that one of the most misguided ideas of modern education is the labelling of young people as ‘gifted and talented’ and making special provision for them. In our view, everyone has gifts and talents, and it is our responsibility to nurture and develop them. You would not have been accepted as a student in this highly demanding and risky field had not somebody recognised that you have a gift and a talent: but that is only the beginning!



The Loneliness of the Young Actor-Singer in Training

Laying the foundations

The purpose of this book is to enable you to master the working practices associated with the study of Musical Theatre.

As a result you will be required to actively embrace the language of music and the music of language. In some ways, because of the nature of our existence and our means of everyday communication, our life's journey may prepare us to approach spoken text with more ease than the score and notation of the sung text. Our aim is to enable you to move easily between spoken and sung acting.

However good the quality of training and education you receive as an actor-singer, if your mind and body are not adequately prepared to acquire the necessary skills you will achieve little progress or sense of personal success, let alone gain the prospect of a performing career.

This book cannot replace a valuable and gifted teacher who inspires and encourages every action and observes and comments upon your progress. It can be used primarily for private study or as the basis for classes. Young actor-singers are not always provided with adequate tools to enable them to investigate the work prior to and during their advanced training, even if they have had many years of being involved in production work and/or study. Consequently, they may find the process of adjusting to full-time study a somewhat lonely experience.

Before we can begin to study the craft of performance and the intimate world of the actor-singer, we need to understand the world of the 'self' and perhaps even more importantly the relationship between the words we speak and self. If we are to be successful in a field where the playing out of truth is of utmost importance, then it is essential that each speaker should understand the nature of their own voice and their habitual patterns in order to identify other such patterns in the characters they may wish to play in their future performance career. We must understand the world of words and have humility and integrity in our investigation of language and action. We need to be able to interrogate every detail of the text and recognise the importance of the grammatical construction of each sentence. Yet we must also be able to explore aspects of our own physicality and develop these in a manner that reflects both the limitations and expectations of the character to be played.

Starting here. Starting now: Why am I here?

You may have been involved with this work for a long time in order to justify furthering your studies with the hope of entering the profession or you may have chosen to embark upon a subject which intrigues you.

So many journeys, influences, opportunities and life experiences bring us to the realisation that we have an ambition to study this area of work in a much more detailed manner. In the course of this search, you have undoubtedly been required to attend an audition and so have been tested in a thorough manner by those who are going to take on the responsibility of teaching you.

There will be many reasons why you and your fellow students were chosen and given a place on your course of study but you can be fairly certain that the one thing you all have in common is ‘talent’ – the one ingredient that cannot be taught!

The conclusion must be that all successful entrants to your course have different qualities and skills which now must be enhanced in order for the training to have some consistency and overall philosophy. It is in recognition of these varied experiences that this book reaches out to you all: to help and assist you in developing those areas that are, perhaps, not yet so developed. We hope that this book will contribute greatly to your style of study and provide you with strategies for acquiring skills that can promote your development as a performer. We aim to make your study and training an exciting time of realisation and personal growth.

Our basic premise is that you should now learn how to thoroughly embrace your skills. To scratch the surface is not sufficient: you must have the ability to maintain these skills and so develop them more strongly day by day.

Unfortunately, students sometimes are satisfied with success at a low level and never attempt to achieve more. Think about the training of athletes, who are always trying to surpass their previous personal record of achievement and success.

A new way of learning?

Up until this point in your education, most of your learning may have involved subjects where there is a clear ‘right answer’ or group of ‘right answers’ to a problem: now that you are embarking on the study of acting through singing – which is both an art form and a science – we need to embrace a new idea:

Paradox – a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true

The nature of an art form is that much of it is **subjective** rather than **objective** and this certainly applies to singing. We all have different opinions as to what makes a ‘good’ sound. A Musical Theatre singer might be expected to sing everything from Gilbert and Sullivan to John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* or *Rock of Ages* and other contemporary shows, so there is a vast range of sounds and styles which can be considered to fall within the spectrum of Musical Theatre. There is a great scope for *paradox* within such a broad vocal church.

While we may not all agree on what makes a ‘good’ sound, or an ‘attractive’ sound, we are more likely to reach consensus on what is a ‘safe’ sound.

Richard Miller, the American voice scientist/pedagogue, once said to a group of young singers, ‘every single singer has to make a choice: are you here for a good time or a long time?’

Our responsibility as teachers is to encourage all our students to sing in a way which will allow them to enjoy a lifetime of good vocal health. We are ethically bound to lead on the path of ‘a long time’ with your singing rather than encouraging or enabling you to choose the ‘good time’ route. The sounds that we encourage you to make may seem ‘boring’ or ‘limited’ based on what you hear on cast recordings or in live performance from some of your contemporaries; however, we demand that you trust that we are able to guide you towards a healthy long-term sustainable sound. If you choose to go off that path, to choose the ‘good time’ over the ‘long time’, then that is your choice, but you as the singer must accept the consequences of that decision.

During your training, you are likely to encounter ideas which seem to contradict each other. One teacher might tell you to pull in your stomach muscles, others might say to push them out, one might say to open your mouth two finger widths, while another says one finger width is optimal. **Don’t be frustrated by this.** See that this can be the paradox of an art form. Your job as a student is to take each of these ideas **and try them out for yourself!** Singing is also a science, an active process, and can only be learned from actively trying ideas out in an experimental way. So don’t dismiss any ideas even if they seem to contradict what you ‘think’ you know. Try it out for yourself and see how it fits your body and your voice.

We can’t teach you how to sing – We can only give you the information. It is you who must teach yourself to sing

A recent theory has suggested that it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill. Based on our experience, this is probably true. If you are given 12 thirty-minute lessons per semester, then you have 12 hours of one-on-one vocal tuition over the course of the year. Over a three-year degree, you will receive 36 hours of one-on-one vocal tuition. As you can see, these 36 hours fall far short of the 10,000 hours required to master the skill of singing. So it is up to you to be putting in the daily practice, applying the learning from your various classes and teaching your body to respond to your thoughts/commands. It is your responsibility to take the information we give you and use it to teach yourself how to sing.

One final paradox: your voice needs to be regularly exercised but it also needs regular rest. You must work in a way which gives your voice both of these things. Only then can you grow.

A pause for reflection

Consider what is actually required of an actor-singer in the field of Musical Theatre and how these factors should impact upon strategies for supporting your study in a positive manner.

Dance	Music	Acting	Performance
movement	sing	speak	good level of fitness
dance patterns – memory	sight sing	sight read	confidence
awareness of dance styles	general musicianship	inflection and articulation	mental agility
memory	memory	memory	
repertoire	repertoire	repertoire	
inspirational role models	inspirational role models	inspirational role models	

Perhaps you are now feeling a little overwhelmed by the realisation that you are to be working in a field where you need expertise and skill in each of these areas in order to be successful.

Don't be daunted: just congratulate yourself that you have convinced others that you have the ability to work at your weaknesses in order to become the consummate performer. However, do make sure that you continue to maintain and develop your strengths further just like an athlete seeking to break his or her personal record.

You are not alone

In the first few weeks of your study, you will be faced with many decisions to make and skills to learn. How can we help you develop a method of training that allows you to work on your own and yet support the work required by your teachers?

We hope that by offering you practical ideas of how to prepare for class in all aspects of the Musical Theatre world, you will have an opportunity to match your other skills with ease and, thus, achieve your goals with growing confidence.

The direction of the following exercises will allow you to prepare adequately for any form of improvisation or preparatory acting/singing work that you may be required to embrace within your studies.

Most of us have a good control over our vocabulary and spoken voice and have acquired some useful skills when tackling the world of performance. The problems often occur when actors are then required to match these skills at the early stages of the training in terms of the sung voice.

In the primary stage of your training, you will probably be required to have a good idea about yourself and possess:

- A flexible and responsive voice (spoken/sung), body and mind free of tension and judgement.
- A good knowledge and awareness of the world around you and how these events and observations then colour personal judgements and influence the quality of thought and action. A system that enables your observations and personal reactions to be identified in detail.

- A clear understanding of what ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are and how these impact upon your work as the actor-singer.
- A set of imaginative ideas (ingredients) that have been influenced and developed by the power of your observation.
- A sense of personal spontaneity.
- A truthful and meaningful relationship of self with events and actions to be played out.

Thinking about your ‘self’

To establish some of these points you might like to investigate your awareness of self and so interrogate your own work and current position as a student within the field of Musical Theatre.

It is necessary to have a platform from which to jump, and if you are a little more critical of your own work and have identified the appropriate language and vocabulary of performance then the ability to take criticism from others becomes a less frightening and demoralising experience and can indeed become fun and a positive force in your development as an actor-singer.

The following questions, in relation to the sung and spoken voice and movement, are to encourage you to think about yourself in some detail and with precision. The questions we have posed are deliberately not too searching but are to be used as starting points to establish a voyage of discovery and so allow you to accept criticism and observation with a more positive outlook.

Always remember that there are no absolute wrongs and rights in the world of performance – all work is subjective.

SPEAKING VOICE

How would you describe your own speaking voice?

Identify any of the following or add your own comments, if appropriate:

Rate of speech	fast	slow	just right
Articulation	excellent	just right	poor
Dynamics (volume)	too loud	too soft	just right
Pitch	too high	too low	varied
Inflection/pitch variety	monotone	sing-song	just right
Overall voice quality	excellent	moderate	poor

Identify any comments that have been made about your speaking voice during your voice classes.

1
2
3
4
5

Do you feel any of the following descriptive phrases might apply to your own speaking voice? If your vocal quality is not mentioned below, place a description of your voice in the appropriate space:

breathy/sexy tone	very resonant	gasps for air
pleasant sound	grating sound	heavy accent
clears throat regularly	growling sound	throaty
musical quality	nasal quality	raspy quality

SINGING VOICE

How would you describe your own singing voice?

--

Identify any of the following or add your own comments, if appropriate:

Breathing	feels too high in the chest	feels too low in the chest	varied
Articulation	excellent	just right	poor
Dynamics (volume)	too loud	too soft	just right

Pitch	strain for high notes	squeeze for low notes	
Inflection/pitch variety	monotone	sing-song	just right
Overall voice quality	excellent	moderate	poor
Posture	rigid	collapsed	just right

Identify any comments that have been made about your singing voice during your singing classes.

1
2
3
4
5

Do you feel any of the following descriptive phrases might apply to your own speaking voice? If your vocal quality is not mentioned below, place a description of your voice in the appropriate space:

breathy tone	very resonant	gasps for air
pleasant sound	grating sound	heavy accent
clears throat regularly	nasal quality	raspy quality

MOVEMENT

How would you describe your own movement? Do your physical gestures communicate any skills or activities, e.g. playing a musical instrument, fitness, weightlifting, running, dancing, etc.

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