

IN FRONT OF AND BEHIND THE TABLE:
A CREATIVE ENDEAVOR IN MUSICAL THEATRE PERFORMANCE

by

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by

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Introduction

I've wanted to be a musical theatre performer since I was a child. I have always loved to sing, dance, and play pretend. Being able to formally study musical theatre as an adult in a university setting is nothing less than a blessing for me. I've learned that realizing my dream of being a professional performer takes so much more than just a talent for singing and/or dancing. There is a unique process each performer must develop in order to master skills for success. It varies from individual to individual, and it is crucial to the development of each and every artist. This project where I develop and direct a musical revue entitled *Home: A Night of Musical Theatre* as well as perform in the ECU main stage production (*Hands on a Hardbody*) is meant to help provide me with clarity and perspective for the processes actors must develop and use in rehearsal and performance, as well as confirm personal growth and insight from two different sides of the theatrical "table" as director and performer.

Background

The program musical theatre BFA concentration students delve into at East Carolina University is a four-year program entered into only by audition. If admitted, one quickly learns how extensive the program's course and work load are during freshman year. Upperclassman years are dedicated to specific courses of study dedicated to building technique for performance, and developing personal and business plans for the musical theatre actor beyond graduation. This is where the individual processes for each performer are made. It takes a lot of experimenting, and there are many successes and failures before each actor finds what specifically works for him or her. In most cases, the process of an artist is always changing and adapting. It can take years to find a system that works. In the meantime, each student must grapple with what works

to accomplish performance goals, especially in an art form that demands a proficiency in a broad spectrum of acting and vocal styles including; classical, jazz, blues, gospel, rock, pop, country, and urban rap. I am currently a senior in this program (my fourth year of training), and I sought opportunities for my Senior Honor Project allowing me to serve in a leadership role within the School of Theatre and Dance working alongside my primary faculty mentor, Associate Professor Michael Tahaney. The leadership goal was for me to conceive of a theme and direct a revue performance in ECU's Studio Theatre. The performance goal was to successfully realize a character on stage in a separate show. The two experiences provide comparison and contrast of performance process for assessment.

Purpose

The overall purpose of this project is to provide deeper understanding for the work and progress it takes for a performer to be able to reach his or her potential in performance. In the role of director, I crafted a showcase of performing arts students much like myself, that required students to collaborate efforts to shape an original revue in a cabaret-like show setting. Theatrical performances are judged by their results, but the process behind making what an audience sees as house lights dim is painstaking and meticulous. Though it's near impossible to calculate exactly how a performer gets to the place he or she needs to be in order to fulfill a specific role, this project attempts to shed light on the "behind the scenes" of theatrical performance. As a performer myself, I sometimes feel belittled by people who either cannot comprehend or refuse to comprehend the extreme dedication required for this work. Although, who can blame anyone for behaving in such a way? Actors are trained in their studies to make things look effortless on stage. That's the job, the illusion of ease no matter the task. The skilled performer can mask

countless hours of rehearsals, and intense amounts of dancing and vocal training to entertain and transfix an audience. Have you ever heard someone say after seeing a show that they forget they were in a theatre at all? A goal for actors is to provide audiences with an escape from the reality of the moment before a performance begins to a new, imagined reality (or fantasy). Weakness in skills supporting the imagined reality quickly breaks the desired illusion and the performance fails.

Approach

This project consisted of two objectives: the primary objective being the conception and direction of an original performance piece, and the secondary objective being applying knowledge and experiences gained from being on the production side of the table to my own process as a performing actor in *Hands on a Hardbody*. Extensive preparation was necessary for both objectives. First, I needed to obtain permission to direct the fall Night of Musical Theatre revue and properly lead such a project step-by-step to a performance of any kind. The idea was to develop a small cabaret or practicum where students of the School of Theatre and Dance audition songs based on a theme for a featured role, in this case *Home*. I took on the role of a director for the revue with guidance from my mentor. The performers were auditioned and evaluated as to their suitability for the roles. They were also evaluated on whether or not they were able to put forth the time and dedication for the project. Actors met with me individually to discuss performance techniques and the application of his or her own processes. Rehearsals provided further insight into how differently performers find their way to realize a role or song. As director, I gained perspective on how different actors react and respond to situations, songs, and scenes. Throughout the show's development, the actors kept small logs to document their

work on the project, as well as began working with technique worksheets similar to the ones we use to gather information on our processes in our musical theatre technique courses. At the end of the project, a final performance was presented, and the work of the students was showcased. From the many positive audience reviews and feedback from theatre professors/students and honors colleagues, I was pleased to see that a show like this helped those less familiar with the extensive work behind theatre see deeper into the often hidden side of performances.

During spring semester, in a role reversal, I brought what I learned from *Home* to my role as an actor in *Hands on a Hardbody*. From recent experiences of crafting and directing a show, it was gratifying to see two different sides of the performance spectrum come together. While the directing portion of this Honors project provided leadership opportunities and insights I had not anticipated, it confirmed that performance is what I choose to pursue professionally. It was an invaluable journey for my educational and performance processes.

Closure

In conclusion, I found great pleasure in working with each of the actors encountered in the project. I think it is important to note that among theatre performers especially, all sorts of creative projects change and develop with different results than first anticipated. Hence, I allowed myself room for the project and its intentions to shift and develop. As actors, we can't properly prepare performances to go exactly the way we'd like them to. The beauty and appeal of live theatre is that it is in-the-moment, fluid, and unplanned. Embarking on this project was one of the most memorable experiences of my collegiate career. It was unpredictable as theatre is itself. I look forward to the journey ahead as I embark on my first professional contract upon

graduation as a vocalist and pianist at Hershey Park in Hershey, Pennsylvania beginning May 10, 2018.

References

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