Acting the song

The actor's job inside the music

By Bruce Miller

EVERY YEAR I watch scores of hopeful high school seniors audition for our musical theatre conservatory program. At least once during each audition cycle, someone sings something from *A Chorus Line*. The two most frequent choices seem to be "Nothing" and "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three." No doubt most of you are familiar with material from *A Chorus Line*. It's one of the most popular musicals produced in the last twenty-five years. So you have, I suspect, been in or seen a production of it. For that reason, the two songs I mentioned are useful in the following discussion.

It may seem strange, but seldom do students performing the songs I mentioned make it to my A list. Why is it, do you think, that the singers using these great numbers rarely knock my socks off—despite having solid (maybe even great) voices, and the looks necessary to get many of the best roles in musical theatre? Before I answer that question, listen closely, because I'm about to sing a song just for you.

As you probably already know, today's theatre market is distressingly overcrowded. Even for those with looks, talent, and training, finding a paying job is difficult. Physically attractive performers who can sing and dance well are no longer necessarily holding a meal ticket to success; they are merely holding the lottery tickets that let them play the game of hope and wait. Casting agents and directors *assume* you can sing and dance. What they are looking for, what they have more difficulty finding, are good actors, those who can act while they're singing and dancing. The kinds of musicals written today, for the most part, demand real acting. So do the old chestnuts, for that matter, since they require a particular style and panache not always called for in contemporary musicals. Why, then, should a casting agent or a college audition representative settle for less when, as another song from *A Chorus Line* puts it—they "want it all"—and can get it too?

The reason those high school seniors usually fail to impress me with their renditions of "Nothing" and "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three" is because their auditions don't include a solid acting component. But how, you might be asking, is that possible if they sing their hearts out and put all the emotion they can into their singing? Isn't that what great acting is all about? The answer is "it ain't necessarily so," because, in most cases, these performers are *emoting* rather than acting the good stuff at the center of the song.

Sing the song, tell the story

A song, by its very nature, communicates emotion. When the singer puts her attention only on what the audience is already getting, the story contained in the song's lyrics and the given circumstances that generate the need to sing that song are, if not totally lost, going to be difficult for the audience to understand. My point is, it's always the actor's responsibility to tell the story going on at every moment of any performance, whether straight acting or singing.

In "Nothing," most of the time the auditioning student will sing her heart out, pouring every ounce of feeling she can conjure. She'll "dig right down to the bottom of her soul," to paraphrase the song lyric. When she has finished, she will likely look at me for approval, a satisfied smile stretching across her face.

"Very nice," I'll say. "You really put your heart into that. You've got a very nice voice."

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"Thank you," she will respond, still beaming.

Then I'll ask, "I wonder if you can tell me what that song is about?"

When I pose this question a student will often answer that "Nothing" is about a girl who can't feel what she's supposed to in her acting class, and that her acting teacher was mean to her. But the explanations seldom go further than that. When a singer has no true grasp of why she's singing a song and what it has to do with the story, she naturally plays the emotion of the song. In the case of "Nothing" that's hurt and anger, the same emotions that the music is already carrying so clearly.

But suppose my singer had responded in the following way: "Nothing" is about an actor who wants to make those listening to her understand how a bad acting teacher can destroy one's dream of being a great performer. More specifically, she wants those listening to her to know how that acting teacher, by demanding that the student feel things she was unable to feel, almost convinced her that she had no talent. But through praying and faith she finally came to realize that it was her teacher's instruction that was lacking, not her own talent. With the help of another teacher, she finally blossomed. When she later learns that her first teacher has died, she sadly admits that she "felt nothing."

Now isn't this story scenario more interesting and specific? Unlike emoting, it is also more playable, something that you can reliably do on stage. An actor who can effectively tell the story of a song to those listening to her, and make them understand just what her character felt as she describes each scene of her story narrative, is a student I want. As a great acting teacher of mine once said, "Who cares if you feel! The good actor gets the *audience* to feel." In fact, this song will do just that, if you, the actor, tell the story in the song.

"Nothing" is a sequential story, and a good one. It even has a surprising plot twist at the end. To tell a story well, you must focus on the listeners, not your own feelings. The irony here is that most actors choose to disregard the acting lesson at the heart of the song itself. They prefer to follow the advice of Mr. Karp, the song's acting teacher villain, and focus on their own emotion rather than on the more playable action suggested in

the lyric. To do so is usually a deadly error in any acting situation. On the other hand, if the actor plays her action or objective effectively, the audience will also *feel*—the goal of every good performer.

A song, then, is no different than a monologue or scene as far as an actor is concerned. Of course, the performer must prepare and handle all of the musical obligations of the song, but that is not the focus of this discussion. We're concentrating on the other things a singer/actor must do to successfully communicate with her audience.

Before you ever sing one note in any song you should consider:

- The given circumstances.
- The character's reason for singing.
- Throughline of action.
- Conflict, objectives, and obstacles.
- Specific words and phrases.
- Repetitions of words, phrases, and verses.
- The things the character feels good and bad about in the song.

Each one of these elements is critical to the successful rendition of a song. In the following sections I'm going to talk about each point in detail.

Play the given circumstances

Acting a song requires the same kind of background thinking that straight acting does, maybe more so. You need to decide, very specifically, the who, what, when, and where of your song.

Here is a list of questions to answer regarding the given circumstances:

- Who is the character you are playing?
- How can you demonstrate what you know about this character through the actions you take or do while singing your piece?
- Who, specifically, are you singing to?
- What does your character want from those you are singing to? How do the listeners react specifically to each thing you tell them?
- If you are singing to yourself: what are you trying to accomplish? What problem are you working through? What discoveries are you making as you continue to sing?
- When is this song taking place? Now? Sixty years ago? At night or in the morning? Winter, summer, spring?
- Where does the scene occur? Outside or inside? On a stage? In your bedroom? In Oklahoma, New England, or Victorian London?

Answering each of these questions fully and accurately is critical. It will affect every choice that you eventually make. Ultimately, these decisions will make the difference between a generalized singing performance and an acting performance that is beautifully specific and moment-to-moment effective.

Have a reason for singing

Musicals are built on a very unusual convention—the fact that periodically during the unfolding story, a character or characters will suddenly go from speaking to singing. That doesn't happen too often outside of a theatre. Yet when we do a musical, we ask our audiences to believe that it is *really* happening. Because an audience knows the conventions of musical theatre they tend to accept this occurrence. But if the actor doesn't make the jump from speaking to singing effectively, the audience is pulled out of their belief in the moment. The transition from speaking to singing is best made when the emotional content of the situation becomes too intense for words to carry. It is up to the actor to express the tremendous need to sing by acting every moment that leads into the song.

Watch an old Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly film and observe how they set up a song with their acting. Or note how Judy Garland or Julie Andrews prepares for a song by going through some internal thinking or decision-making process before that first note springs forth, and how, when it does, the audience understands fully her need to have done so.

Establish a throughline

Every song you perform must have a throughline of action, a journey that prompts changes in your character. Otherwise the piece will be one-dimensional and, perhaps, boring. Every dramatic situation requires a forward thrust. The character must not be the same at the end of that journey as she was at the beginning. The given circumstances you have already decided on will provide the reason for the journey, and by the end, your character will be in a different place intellectually or emotionally than she was at the beginning. She will have won, lost, or discovered something that will change, or has changed, everything. A problem will have been overcome, resolved, or evolved into something new to deal with. A song like "Nothing" features a built-in throughline because it really is a story. Most song lyrics, however, are less direct. It is usually up to you to find and communicate a song's throughline through your own acting choices.

Discover the conflict, objectives, and obstacles

The engine of every story is some kind of conflict. The story contains a problem that its central character must solve, resolve, or get around. This is true for a song too. A song requires an actor to resolve a conflict by playing out an objective or action by using the lyrics as well as any other available tools (such as physical action). You must decide why you are singing and make choices using the words of the song to fulfill your objective. In the case of "Nothing," Morales, the character singing, has already solved the problem of feeling "nothing," but in the song, she is trying to make her audience understand what she went through and what she learned so they can profit from her experience.

Songs in a musical are sung to another person or persons in the scene, or they are sung to the self. If they are sung to others, those others are listening and reacting. If the character is alone, the song consists of a continuing thought process through which the singer struggles to find an answer to something that is bothering her. As with a soliloquy in Shakespeare, you have the option to play the song as though your interior thoughts are spoken aloud, or play it by speaking directly to the audience because you are allowing them to share in your thought process. In either case, there is an internal or external obstacle standing in the way of finding a solution to your

problem. During the course of the song, that obstacle is overcome, or a strategy for overcoming the problem is found. It is up to you to find and carry out the thought process that will lead you to victory, defeat, or discovery. The clues to the throughline are in the lyrics, so you must study the words very carefully. Remember though, this thought process is happening *as you are singing*. If you are going to create a successful journey for your character, you must make all your discoveries and find your new ideas in the moment, as though they are as fresh to you as to those in the audience listening.

Here is an example of what I mean. Take a moment now to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Read on after you have sung the song. Were you focusing at all on the words and their significance as you sang? Probably not. Now sing it again as if you have just looked up at the sky and are rediscovering that the universe is a vast and unknowable place. Treat the stars as though each is a beautiful but unsolvable mystery. Talk to them individually as you sing, as though if you speak to each star just right, it might share something with you. Find each new phrase of the song as if it is an idea occurring to you for the first time. Read on when you are finished. Now compare the singing you just did to the first time through. What conclusions can you draw?

Understand the meaning of specific words and phrases

Let's take a look at some of the lyrics to another *Chorus Line* song, "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three," more commonly known as "Tits and Ass."

Here's the opening stanza:

Dance: ten; looks: three.
And I'm still on unemployment,
Dancing for my own enjoyment.
That ain't it, kid. That ain't it, kid.

And the final three stanzas of the last chorus:

Tits and ass.
Orchestra and balcony,
What they want is what cha see.
Keep the best of you.
Do the rest of you.

Pits or class.
I have never seen it fail.
Debutante or chorus girl or wife.

Tits and ass,
Yes, tits and ass
Have changed . . .
My. . .
Life. . . !

I have to admit that I have been embarrassed by the performance of this song on more than one occasion. Just last year a prospective student did this number for me as her audition song in my New York hotel suite, and it made me more than a little bit uncomfortable. I'm no prude, so don't think the subject matter itself is what bothered me. What flustered me was the fact that some young woman—still in high school no less—was standing in my hotel room shaking her uppers and lowers at me for no apparent reason, other than she wanted me to know that she had good uppers and lowers. She sang as though shaking her orchestra and balcony was the sole purpose of the song. My point is this: the girl performing the piece made no effort to tell a story with the song. There was no throughline of action, no progression, no obstacles to face and overcome.

If at this moment you are thinking that my discomfort is my problem because this song is nothing more than an ode to upper and lower body parts, then I invite you to go back and look at the lyrics very closely. Start with the song's actual title. In the first place the real title is not "Tits and Ass." It's "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three." The actual title suggests something very different than the more commonly used name does, and far better reflects the point of the song.

Dance: ten; looks: three, as the character Val tells her fellow auditioners, is what she used to be rated in audition after audition. Sure, she had the talent, she tells them, but not the looks. Then it dawned on her that she worked in a profession where looks *do* matter—a lot. And since she wanted to be a success, she would do whatever was necessary to make success happen. Her solution: plastic surgery.

Like "Nothing," "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three" is another "I'm sharing what I've learned, so listen good" song. But the singer Val is less concerned with telling her story than with getting her listeners to get the point. In a nutshell, the throughline goes from "this is what I used to think and it didn't work, to "this is what I finally figured out," to "and this is what I did about it and see it worked for me," to "it'll work for you too." If you analyze the first stanza for what it is really saying, and then compare it to the finale, you will understand the song's throughline.

A careful examination of the given circumstances and the words of the song will also reveal that there is a strong conflict, one that leads to a strong objective to play and obstacles to overcome. Trying to convince a group of young, still idealistic actors that success in theatre means fixing how you look is not necessarily an easy sell. The actor playing Val must overcome her listeners' tendency to believe that talent alone will prevail. Then she must convince them that altering their looks to the better will not change them inside, but will certainly help them succeed in the "business." That in turn will make them feel good all over. All of this is communicated tersely in the following lines from the last chorus:

What they want is what cha see.
Keep the best of you.
Do the rest of you.

The above lines are a far cry from the first chorus:

Dance: ten; looks: three.
And I'm still on unemployment,
Dancing for my own enjoyment.
That ain't it, kid. That ain't it, kid.

Songs, like other forms of poetic writing, tend to cut right to the heart of things. They talk directly about thoughts and feelings, sometimes using figurative and elevated language to make their point quickly and efficiently. The actor singing must note this kind of language and use it actively to make the points contained in those lyrics. "Orchestra" and "balcony," for

instance, are not generalized locations in a theatre. Tickets in the orchestra are considered better seats (and they cost more) than seats in the balcony. A balcony seat is nice, but people would rather be located in the orchestra. What does all this have to do with body parts? There is a connection that can make for a knowing joke, if played right by the singer performing the song. An actor singing about "orchestra and balcony" must find a way to include as much of that suggested meaning as possible. If you re-examine the lyrics I've included here, you will find other specific words and phrases that communicate far more than a cursory reading might suggest.

Song lyrics tend to be structured in the form of verse and repeated choruses. This means that you will have to say certain things several times. If you are to keep the story of your song moving along, every time you repeat a set of lyrics you will also have to make them suggest something different. The difference will probably be prompted by the verse lyrics that precede the repetition, but even if that's not the case, it will be your job to maintain the forward thrust of your storytelling. My young audi-tioner had many opportunities to repeat "T's" and "A's" when singing to me, but they all pretty much ended up being the same generalized cheesecake, rather than a new take on what her new body parts were starting to do for her as suggested by the song. Remember, you must use the words of the song to take the audience on a journey. A good throughline will go a long way toward making your piece work.

Know what your character thinks is good and bad

A good actor always tries to show as many levels of character and story as possible. This keeps her and the story she is sharing interesting. The music of the song being sung often lulls the actor performing it into a generalized or one-level interpretation. An easy and effective way of staying out of that trap is to ask yourself, "What does the character think is good in the song, and what does she think is bad?" By recognizing and making the distinction between the two, an actor can quickly add many colors to the song that were not apparent before the exercise was done. Finding what's good and what's bad also sets up many interesting contrasts in the song.

Go back to "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three" lyrics and read them aloud. When you have finished, decide from the character's point of view which things are good and which are bad. If the magazine is yours, you might want to put a little "g" above the good things, and a little "b" over the bad. Whether you choose to write or not, make sure you are very specific as you go through the text of the song. Once you have completed the process, reread the lyrics aloud. There was probably a lot more nuance to your reading this time through. What have you learned?

The most important point you need to remember about singing a song in general is that you must avoid playing the emotion the song suggests. Instead, you must find the reason for singing, and then make choices that will get you what you need, whether it's finding a solution to a problem or convincing someone else to do something. The words to a song are every bit as important as the music they sail on, and it is your job to make those words come alive by using them to tell the story the song contains. If you do the preparation work properly, when the time comes to work on the performing part of the song, you will be well armed for turning that song into the "knockout" number you want it to be.

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