“The Broadway Beat:
2011 NYU Broadway Percussion Seminar / Summit”

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The New York University Percussion Studies Program, under the direction of Jonathan Haas, recently hosted the 5th annual Broadway Percussion Seminar/Summit. The event brought together an array of renowned Broadway percussionists and participants from around the world, for a five-day intensive study of the skills, experience, and know-how necessary to succeed in the world of Broadway percussion. Several shows were presented each day by the percussionists who developed the books, in addition to panel discussions with leading percussionists, conductors, and contractors who are actively pursuing careers on Broadway. Participants were given the opportunity to view two Broadway shows from both the perspective of the audience and from the pit. This article is a compilation of short essays written by Seminar participants, to reveal the basic concepts they gleaned from the Seminar that would be of interest to students and educators worldwide.

Jonathan Haas, Zach Redler and Simon Boyar – Opening Session and Concert:

New York University kicked off the 5th annual Broadway Percussion Seminar/Summit with a bang! The session began with a welcome and introduction by Jonathan Haas (Director of the NYU Percussion Studies Program) and Sean Statser (Adjunct Faculty Member). Students introduced themselves and were given an overview of the week's events.

Following the welcome, Professor Haas introduced a former student and NYU graduate Zach Redler. Mr. Redler explained the life of a play writer and went into great detail the events that lead up to the creation of a successful production. He explained the difference between a Broadway show and an off-Broadway show, and that it is possible for one to become the other. Mr. Redler currently has a show that is being prepared for it’s off-Broadway debut.

Following this informative discussion was a fantastic solo performance by NYU faculty member Simon Boyar. Mr. Boyar played arrangements of music by artists’ Frank Zappa and Mike Garson, as well as some of his own original compositions. By the end of the night, everyone was enthusiastic and ready for the exciting events to take place over the next few days.
Dan Haskins and David Ratajczak – *Mary Poppins:*

The first day of the Seminar began with Dave Ratajczak and Dan Haskins of *Mary Poppins*, who wasted no time in showing us the fun and exciting side of their work with a "documentary" video from behind the scenes. It was clear that making a successful career on Broadway requires more than the ability to have a good time playing the same music every night for years. The choreography of switching between the many instruments, while still watching the conductor, was a big point of discussion. Execution of this dance relies on several factors, including the tricky business of arranging the instruments in the pit, mallet choice, practicing the parts and some of the technology that is now being used on Broadway. Several years ago, at the first NYU Broadway Percussion Seminar, we were introduced to the MalletKAT as an up and coming MIDI controller shaped like a mallet keyboard instrument, that represented both a new world of artistic possibilities and a small fear of machines replacing performers. Now, the MalletKAT is quite common and an almost essential element of a percussionist's setup in a Broadway pit. Another big help is the use of cameras and video monitors to better see the conductor at all times, even when facing the opposite direction. We were able to play our excerpts while watching a recorded video of the conductor, which also allows prospective substitute players to practice at home before coming in to play a show for the first time.

Besides the importance of all these efforts to make sure the show runs smoothly every night, what was most stressed was the importance of variety to a professional musician. Dan Haskins and Dave Ratajczak explained to us that they do many other things besides play *Mary Poppins*, and this is partly made possible by the ability to take time off from the show. Even having a job where you can take time off from the show came from being excellent musicians with a diverse background, they told us. Musical theater repertoire draws from a large variety of musical styles, and it's important to be well versed and not just the notes on the page. While they told us many, many stories and offered an array of valuable lessons, perhaps the most important was to play a variety of genres and styles; not just to be better candidates for musical theater jobs, but to be better musicians and lead a fulfilling career.

Erik Charlston and Paul Pizzuti – *How to Succeed in Business:*

The clinic for *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* was given by drummer Paul Pizzuti and percussionist Erik Charlston. Not only were the participants shown how the music is to be played, the clinicians described in great detail what it takes to play for a musical such as *How to Succeed*. The score for this musical is extremely jazz-oriented, which could prove to throw off some of the more "classically trained" percussionists. Erik Charlston used this to demonstrate the point that as a working musician, you must be very well rounded. A seemingly simple bongo part could be played in a way that would either blend and add to the music, or stick out and distract from the music. Having a heightened musical sensibility, and understanding how your part fits in with the orchestra, is of the
utmost importance. Seeing the ease at which Mr. Charlston switched from playing timpani and xylophone, to playing guiro and bongos in several different musical styles, was just a glimpse into the amount of effort he has put into becoming a well-rounded musician.

Paul Pizzuti, the show’s drummer, also demonstrated the need for a musician to be versatile, as well as explaining the best way to play this music specifically, in the style desired. From simple grooves to drum fills, the style of the tune was always noticed. Being a jazz-oriented musical, the drummer plays a huge role, not just in keeping time, but also portraying the desired musical style. Having these very talented musicians as clinicians was not only very informative, but also proved how devoted they are to their job as entertainers.

**Ben Herman – Studio Recording:**

On Monday night and Tuesday night of the Seminar, Ben Herman gave two sessions in the brand new James L. Dolan Recording Studio at NYU. Ben Herman, a veteran of the recording world, who has performed on countless movie soundtracks and commercial jingles, brought with him the fast-paced environment of true studio recording sessions. He emphasized that on the job, an ensemble recording a movie score or a soundtrack is rarely given the luxury of practice time and endless takes. If the producers are going to pay for two hours of studio time, then that is all of the time they have to get the “perfect take.” Throughout the sessions, he spoke about how to prepare for sight-reading situations and about some of the experiences he has had playing in recording studios. The recording workshops, although not strictly associated with Broadway, brought up many of the same techniques and issues discussed throughout the Seminar. As Mr. Herman pointed out, proficiency in sight-reading and the ability to, at a glance, discern the best setup or page turn, are fundamental aspects of being a musician.

The sessions began without pause. The groups were split up in to smaller sections, and section-by-section they were each given a few passes to sight-read the scores of different movies before having to move on to the next score. Everyone played with the soundtracks and each take was recorded, so that afterwards they could watch the scene or commercial and hear their takes in context of the final product. Mr. Herman began the recordings with the soundtrack to the animated film, *Anastasia*, knowing well that the surprisingly difficult and complex parts would keep the group on their toes. The state-of-the-art studio provided a fun atmosphere, as those not playing could watch the performers on monitors and everyone could experience the processes involved in creating the movie and commercial soundtracks that they had seen. At the end of the sessions, everyone gathered in the control room to watch clips and commercials and talk about the experience.

**Monte Hatch – NYC Opera: A Quiet Place:**
Monte Hatch, a percussionist for the New York City Opera, gave his clinic on Leonard Bernstein’s opera *A Quiet Place*. This opera is extremely contemporary and the percussion parts are very challenging. There were many xylophone parts, which seemed to have never-ending runs, and numerous sections with frequently changing odd-meters. He played each of the excerpts first, and then invited students to try them. He was very instructional, always helping the students with some of the choreography that goes along with playing in a pit.

Aside from the music, Mr. Hatch spoke for roughly half the clinic on what it’s like playing for the NYC Opera and how it differs from playing in a Broadway pit. Unlike a Broadway musician, one that plays in the NYC Opera can become tenured, making it a full time job. Broadway musicians always have the fear that their show will close, where an NYC Opera member plays many different operas at the same time and, once tenured, cannot lose their job. The audition process for the NYC Opera is just like that of any regular orchestra, except they only ask for excerpts from operas. After a few days of strictly talking about Broadway, it was a nice change of pace to see a different aspect of being a pit musician. Monte Hatch was not only a very impressive musician, but was able to answer many questions and talk about his field with endless knowledge and passion.

**Bill Hayes and John Meyers – Anything Goes:**

The second clinic on Tuesday was given by Bill Hayes and John Meyers, percussionists for Broadway’s hit revival *Anything Goes*. Each had different experiences to discuss throughout the session. Mr. Hayes began the clinic by talking about show business as a larger entity than playing percussion in a pit orchestra. Last year more than 12 million people went to shows, making the Broadway business a $1.03 billion industry. Because of this, there are numerous opportunities to be a part of theater, be it regional, off-Broadway or even on Broadway.

He then went on to discuss key abilities that he uses to take advantage of such opportunities. First on his list was sight-reading. As many of the clinicians during the Seminar pointed out, sight-reading is indispensable for a musician, especially because your place in a pit orchestra can rely on how well you are able to execute your part on the first day of rehearsals. The next skill he discussed was quite different from the first. Repetition; how can you, as a player, stay engaged in the performance after the hundredth or hundred and fiftieth show. Both Meyers and Hayes discussed this, their hundredth show is still the first for those in the audience, and the audience deserves the same energy that was given on opening night. The third skill that he discussed was the ability to setup his instruments. Often times in a Broadway show, the percussionist will only have a limited amount of time to see their parts before they have to setup, and a setup can make or break a performance. Simple things like identifying the most important instrument and making sure that it faces the conductor can go a long way towards a better show.
John Meyers talked a great deal about playing in different feels. Often times drum set parts for a show only indicate time and important hits. Because of this, it is important to play the appropriate feel for the particular show. In the case of Anything Goes, which was first debuted in 1934, the feel is an interesting mix of a classic Broadway two-beat and swing. He also discussed the importance of being able to prepare quickly, while setups for drum set parts are typically far simpler than percussion parts, the drummer is rarely given a reprieve and knowing how to arrange pages and when to turn them is an art of it’s own. As the participants played, each of the clinicians took turns discussing aspects of the performances, providing insightful feedback. The experience was a spectacular one.

Javier Diaz – Hands On Session:

In a slight departure from the other sessions, we split up into two groups for some hands-on sessions with Javier Diaz. While the other group was with Ben Herman in the recording studio, we let Mr. Diaz take us on a short tour of the basic rhythms of Afro-Cuban percussion. We quickly dove in with everybody picking up a cowbell, or a drum, or a handheld instrument, and he verbally instructed each person to start playing a different pattern.

Since Javier Diaz has a background in both Latin and Western classical music, we had a very interesting discussion about the different perceptions of rhythm that each tradition emphasizes. Most of us had come into this class with the idea that Latin rhythms are “hard,” and we talked about how we had come to think so, since for people who live surrounded by that music, it’s as natural as walking.

Following this discussion and a brief history of Afro-Cuban percussion and its applications, we had a big jam session together with singing, some improvisation, and a lot of drumming. I think that as percussionists we occasionally forget why we got into this field when we’re in the middle of our intense efforts to be better, but it seemed to me that this part of the class definitely reminded us all.

A great number of percussion parts in professional gigs today make use of these rhythms, but Mr. Diaz reminded us that it is not enough to simply develop a passable technique on hand drums for the purposes of getting hired. We were only able to scratch the surface in our discussion of where Afro-Cuban rhythms come from and their place in world cultures, but it did inspire in us an interest to learn about music in its practice and context.

A Glimpse into Broadway – Broadway Shows and Pit Experience / Union Dinner:

On Wednesday, the morning began with a discussion with an NYU admissions officer. This brief break in the otherwise hard-hitting schedule, proved to be a very insightful one. Everyone gathered in the NYU Percussion Penthouse wearing all black, in anticipation of the pits the participants would be visiting later in the day. The session focused primarily on what admissions officers look at throughout the
application process and what students could do to set themselves apart. It also gave
them an opportunity to see the process from the other side.

After the admissions session, the whole group took the subway up to the theater
district to see Broadway shows. Everyone had the opportunity to see one show from
the pit and one from audience. Most saw the show of the clinic they had played in.
The group was split, those who saw the shows from the pit in the afternoon would
see a show from the audience at night and vice versa. The opportunity to see how
the players and conductors interact in the pit, with the background knowledge of
having learned the books in preparation, was a fantastic experience from which the
students gleaned much knowledge.

Following the matinee, everyone met at Local 802, the local musicians' Union, for
dinner and a discussion with local Union representatives Ray Marchica and David
Nyberg (Mamma Mia). Throughout dinner, the representatives talked about the
purpose of the Union and what services the Union has to protect working musicians.
Students also had the opportunity to ask questions about the operations of the
Union and the varying unionized gigs in New York. The session answered many
questions the Seminar participants had accrued during the previous days. The group
left with an optimistic outlook on job security, knowing the Union is successfully
doing their part to protect it.

On the way to the evening show the skies opened up and a torrential downpour
ensued prompting everybody to make a dash for their next show. Despite the
weather, everyone was ecstatic at the events of the day and the shows were an
incredible experience for all.

**Kory Grossman – Broadway's Super Sub:**

On Thursday the students attended a session with Kory Grossman Broadway's
Super-Sub. If anyone was to be giving a class on Broadway subbing, this was the
man. Mr. Grossman, who is currently subbing five shows on Broadway, started off
by asking if anyone had experienced subbing in a musical performance and how
they felt about it. Those that answered all agreed that it was a very stressful, but a
great learning experience. He continued the discussion and told great stories of his
subbing experiences, emphasizing the fact that he has to directly imitate the
musician plays the show on a regular basis. He spoke of how challenging it is to find
time to get behind the actual setup and run through parts that require extra
attention. In some cases, he would only have an hour before each show to get a feel
of how the original player executes these questionable areas in the show. Some
students had the opportunity to perform a few Broadway tunes from Catch Me if You
Can and Baby it's You, two of the many shows Mr. Grossman subs on.

Mr. Grossman also explained how much goes into getting a book up to performance
level in a short amount of time. Some of his techniques include attending run-
throughs of the show and asking numerous questions about tone and choreography.
He even shared the idea of creating a makeshift pit in his own living space, just to become familiar with how things might play out. One thing that surprised many of those attending the seminar was that it is okay to say “no”. Mr. Grossman explained that if the main percussionist does not take the time to prepare sub to the best of his ability and the sub feels that this may hurt his career, he has the right to decline the offer.

Out of all the important things discussed in the class, a topic that repeatedly came to light was that there is more to the music than just the notes. Subs must be able to run down a book in the same way the main percussionists does, and that the best thing for a sub is to have been unnoticed by anyone when the curtain goes down.

**Roundtable Discussion / Seminar Closing:**

The last event for those participating in the seminar was a roundtable discussion and it was certainly a great way to conclude the experience. All the percussionists who held master classes over the past week returned for a large group discussion with the eager students, waiting with a variety of questions that had come up throughout the Seminar. The three-hour session, which without a doubt felt significantly shorter, was filled with discussion that covered numerous topics. The professionals replied with very considered responses; most interestingly was how they bridged the gap between theory and reality based on their personal experiences. Although the discussion was professional and focused on serious topics, occasionally the discourse broke into laughter over the anecdotes, which, time and again, gave life and personality to our chosen profession.

Before going their separate ways, the students and those involved in the week’s activities exchanged numbers, email addresses, and other social forms of contact. Within days, these strangers became friends and realized there were others all over the world that are just as eager to jump into the music scene as they were.