

From *Les Mis* to *Annie, Jr.*: A Discussion of Dramaturgical Adaptation for Musical Theatre in Education and Accessibility of Musical Theatre to Youth

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ABSTRACT

As an arts educator, it is inspiring to have access to the spoils of the art of musical theatre to engage and captivate young minds and artistic hearts. In providing an artistic output, one affords both the satisfaction of involvement in a collaborative art coupled with the lasting gift of community and artistic inspiration. Regrettably, the endeavour towards providing an accessible dramatic medium can prove challenging for the best of theatre & music pedagogues and artists alike. Musical theatre becomes increasingly more difficult as both musical and dramatic requirements needed for its execution modify.

With these constraints, youth face obstacles in exploring many works of the genre they love faithfully. As educators, the responsibility in maintaining accessibility is tremendous. Improper attention to the usage of the vocal instrument without regard of these developments can cause irreparable damage. Limited access to works for youth and negligible adaptation risk staleness and disinterest.

How might the educating artist continually provide an accessible medium of musical theatre to the young performer? From a dramatic &

musical lens, this paper discusses the responsibility of the educator in identifying and addressing the unique challenges confronting young performers via the art of musical theatre.

Working as an arts educator with youth provides both parties with a privileged world of opportunity, exploration and discovery. Today, the genre of musical theatre provides youth with a dynamic outlet in which drama, music and dance are explored through an interdisciplinary world, constantly building on the pulse of the social world in which we exist. Musical theatre provides a relatable channel that youth identify with. This is a breath of fresh air to the artist tasked with finding material to satisfy their 21st century mindset. However, the educating artist has an increasing responsibility within this craft of sharing and exploring musical theatre with youth. Musical theatre offers a unique collaborative form, which requires the arts educator to teach a genre of drama that grounds itself symbiotically in music. With this, the arts educator must encourage the conscious usage of drama in execution of *music as drama*; otherwise risking dramatic staleness and disregard of the form.

The educator is also confronted with both an absence of research and support in musical theatre as dramaturgy, as well as in the vocal training of youth in this area. Despite research and data in adult vocal pedagogy towards the newly developed styles embraced by musical theatre (MT), there is an overwhelming lack of research and deliberation on the requirements for youth with regard to this new methodology of singing. Texts on singing instruction for youth largely model a classical framework inappropriate for full consideration of the ever-changing requirements of MT, and scientific and performative research have focused on the adult performer, largely ignoring the unique needs of the youth performer. Additionally, MT is becoming increasingly more demanding musically and inaccessible for younger voices as both stylistic and technical requirements needed for its execution modify. Inattention to the needs of youth in training can cause negligent damage.

How does the arts educator provide a continually accessible medium of musical theatre to youth? In this paper, I will undertake an exploration of the obstacles facing the youth performer in executing

musical theatre in consideration of the educator and their role. A cursory appraisal of the genre with attention on dramaturgical adaptation and youth focused works will be undertaken in providing insight to musical accessibility alongside dramatic integrity. A proposition towards additional research into the scientific support of vocal pedagogy and dramaturgy for youth in MT is supplemented by a manifesto supported through recent professional practice by which arts educators may craft their own work.

IDENTIFYING YOUTH INTEREST IN MUSICAL THEATRE

As a practitioner, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the recognition that the musical has earned amongst youth. Commercially, the Broadway market has successfully made the appeal to younger audiences who are arguably exposed to the Great White Way via family & adult influence. Numerically, it is evident that a strong market of youth access to commercial MT exists. Considering American statistics, the Broadway League published that in the 2014-2015 Broadway season, an impressive 1.14 million admissions of New York shows were of youth 18 or younger (Broadway League, 2016). This access to theatre is encouraging for youth and arts educators alike, as the importance of theatre education both within and outside of the school continues to be affirmed through research (Richardson, 2015; Rajan, 2017). Graduation rates of at-risk youth with access to drama double, and youth find higher levels in achievement and attendance in school (Catterall, Dumais, Hampden-Thompson, 2012).

With exposure, youth are enticed towards MT with pieces that encourage social development, expression and temporal awakening of their surroundings and existence through stories and characters, which explore themes not limited to childhood, discovery, love and friendship. In her book *Theatre & Feeling*, Canadian professor of drama Erin Hurley affirms the innate connections between feeling and our investment in the theatre. She maintains that “feeling draws us into the symbolic universe of theatrical performance by connecting us emotionally with its characters [...]; via emotional labour, theatre intervenes in how we as a society come to understand ourselves, our values, and our social world.” (Hurley, 2010, pg. 10) It is no question why youth of all ages identify so strongly with these vicarious experiences. With discussion of this evidence for theatre, it is worth

considering the current landscape and how musical theatre is (or is not) supporting youth access.

TRENDS, EXISTING REPERTOIRE, AND CONSIDERATION OF SUITABILITY

An effective method of further analysis is in consideration of the repertoire, and existent material that youth access, geared for both youth and adult productions. Dramatically, in discussion with professionals, the suitability of content for usage with youth is one of the overruling stipulations for selection of material. Interviewed practitioners with experience facilitating material for youth affirm that suitability of content is a vital consideration in selection (M. Johnson, personal communication, February 17, 2016; A. Merriam, personal communication, March 30, 2016).

The consideration of the developmental maturity of a character is a valuable one in choosing material. What journey does a character take through a piece of musical theatre? Would this be a journey suitable for the *youth* performer to endure as well? In application, it is of course unavoidable that many youth performers act the roles of adult characters. Inevitably, this may present youth with adult themes. A performer who is able to convincingly bring the audience on board in delivering the lines and story of an adult should be allowed to do so, provided the experience will not prove damaging to the youth. Careful consideration may be needed for characters whose storytelling journey encompasses mature themes that may be less believable for the audience, and more importantly emotionally problematic for the youth. Consider the tremendous difference in dramatic journey through two musicals adapted for youth in *Annie* (Kids, Jr.) & *Sweeney Todd* (School Version). This is not to say that it cannot be done without careful consideration; compare the content of some classic plays given to youth for study by none other than Shakespeare! (M. Johnson, personal communication, February 17, 2016).

In equal importance, role breakdown and consideration of adult versus youth parts is crucial. A brief consideration again at the role breakdown in *Annie, Jr.* helps illustrate this point. The overwhelming lean towards adult over youth characters shows that only an average of 24% to 30% of the characters in the production are under adult age, dependent on the number of additional orphans added. This statistic,

from a musical with a strong basis of youth characters & performers, gives a glance as to how even musicals featuring youth often overlook employment of a primarily youth cast.

One can see how in employment of a musical, it becomes nonviable to produce a show with only youth if one is concerned with placing youth in roles originally characterized and written with the intention of being realized vocally & dramatically by adults. In their consideration of this dilemma, *iTheatrics*, the company tasked with creation of youth accessible shows through Music Theatre International, has acknowledged this in their professional editing and consideration of each piece revised for youth performance. Respectfully, it is similarly requisite the educator consider this when placing youth into their roles. Who was the role originally intended for, and would the original content of the role (vocal tessitura, dramatic maturity, technical ability i.e. dance, et cetera) fit the capability of the individual?

ABSENCE OF ACADEMIC AND PRACTICAL SUPPORT IN VOCAL TRAINING

As a musical discipline, it is unavoidable to view the training of youth in part via the musical lens. As a genre heavily correlated with popular music, musical theatre has often turned to the style of its age to captivate its audience – arguably progressively so in the 21st century drawing on numerous mainstream styles and contemporary styles of production to convey its story.

Numerous texts and practitioners from New York, London and other hubs of MT have yielded texts and methodologies by which adult singers may be supported in undertaking a professional career as an actor or actress in MT. There is also encouragingly a great deal of evidence to validate the work of educators who support the craft, whether at the conservatory level, or in the working field. It is commendable to see the work of practitioners such as Jeannette LoVetri, as well as Jo Estill, Mary Saunders Barton & Edrie Means Weekly to name a few who have worked to both articulate the specific vocal needs of MT through both profession and text (LoVetri, Saunders-Barton & Weekly, 2014; Estill, 1988). Albeit not a closed chapter, the gap in comprehension has slowly closed as the craft develops and the educational need to support gains momentum.

Despite this, however, this has not disseminated to the youth community. The evidence and support for youth is negligible and worrisome. Academic and practical evidence supports an industry that is largely operated through the guise of the professional adult scene. The boundaries of vocal scope in MT have expanded with the maturation of the art, and present unique considerations for youth execution. New shows draw heavily on influences of varying stylistic forms, with strong emphasis on pop & rock in conjunction with the traditional Broadway show sound. The average range of male and female voices can span immensely in all three main foundational styles of MT vocal work. A specific approach to these styles of music in MT is recognized by vocal pedagogue Jeannette LoVetri, and identified through the term, Contemporary Commercial Music, or CCM (LoVetri, 2014). This turn to mainstream sound is characteristic of the plurality of musicals today, not only limited to those more accessible to youth.

The aforementioned expectations of the youth vocal mechanism in full adult range are not fully attainable and should not be expected in executing a vocal role that was originally intended for an adult apparatus. It is obvious that this differentiation must be acknowledged through work; neglect to do so in pushing beyond these boundaries could cause reckless harm of the youth instrument. These considerations are made in professional adaptation; a useful factor for the artist educator tempted to mount a musical without considering range or vocal style in execution. Improper imitation by youth of adult voices more equipped to sing difficult material is problematic. I maintain there is rationale behind the lack of practice-based and academic support, which I propose is not executed through malice, but rather in part through unawareness, both scientifically and professionally. Consider the following:

1. *Vocal health and production of youth singers has been academically explored; however, is still inconclusive in some areas due to biological limitations.*

In drawing on evidence (Skelton, 2007), there are many variables biologically in the youth instrument which present problematic obstacles for exploring its training.

2. *Youth in the profession are auditioned and recruited with different expectations than their adult counterparts.*

A durable voice seemed well suited stylistically holds potential to rule out over one trained professionally. A professional company will be mindful that a youth performer may not have previous access to training. This is particularly the case as professional companies may often provide an on-site practitioner who is considerate of the youth voice.

3. *Musical theatre as a still budding practice-based art has evaded some academic parameters, as practitioners who deal with its execution are less concerned with notating findings.*

Practitioners with an innate understanding of these difficulties are more frequently submersed in the practical world, with less attention to journaling their approach to working with youth voices.

A DRAMATURGICAL METHODOLOGY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ACCESS

I would like to briefly discuss the implications in the *drama* of musical theatre for the arts educator. In consideration of musical theatre as a total collaborative art, the potential dilemma of crossing disciplines is evident. The arts educator with an aptitude towards music may be less adept at looking at the same material through a dramatic lens in combination with music. This is problematic as the collaborative art of MT requires all pieces of the artistic puzzle complement each other; music serves as a dramatic device in depicting the story. In seeking to provide a dramaturgical approach to musical theatre that may be accessible to the arts educator, I would like to provide a framework in the realm of musical theatre dramaturgy. With this, an accessible method of approach can be determined through the lens of dramaturgy with the intention of serving all MT practitioners.

In approaching musical theatre as drama, one may consider its mature cousin in the realms of music as drama, which utilizes music in depiction of dramatic storytelling. One need look no further than opera for this example, and more specifically, the Wagnerian approach to total synthesis through the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, designed at telling all

action and character through musical ideals associated with character and theme through the *leitmotif* (Dawson-Bowling, 2013). Further from this start point, we can see from opera and into musical theatre that there is substantial work published on the usage of song and song as drama (considering *Acting the Song*, Bergman & Moore, Allowrth, 2008; *Acting in Musical Theatre*, Dal Vera & Deer, Routledge, 2015).

Despite establishment, there is an absence in academia on musical theatre dramaturgy specifically, likely due to the cross-disciplinary work required of its executors. Recent publication has shown that there is a desire for the development of this area. In the recently published *Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, American musical director Brian Valencia reveals a comprehensive and itemized account of the work of the musical director, and how this work relates to the dramatic curve of a musical.

In his exploration, Valencia touches on the difficulty in approaching the musical through one single biased lens as a practitioner, claiming that if a dramaturg on a project is not a trained musician, “components of musical theatre can seem arcane or intimidating” (Valencia, 2015, pg. 342). This can lead to mistreatment of content integrated with music, risking dramatic neglect. Consider his thoughts in the following statement:

Limiting musical functionality to these two narrative-based alternatives (forwarding plot or illuminating character) ignores the fundamental polymodal fabric of musical theatre, stuns the theatrical imagination, and results in replicative productions in which putative realism often exists uncomfortably alongside the musical’s inherently non-realistic conventions (Valencia, 2014, pg. 373).

In opposition to this staleness, Valencia prevents a series of questions, which through character intention and development allow the arts educator to consider MT from a truly collaborative approach. He proposes that the streamline effect and combination of elements [of a musical] create a dramaturgy of sorts, where all parts are effectively dramatically linked to one another and serve each other (Valencia, 2015, pg. 373). In considering questions such as these, the arts educator opens up channels for sensitive dialogue amongst youth in considering the full dramatic scope of musical theatre, alleviating the

likelihood of replicating musical theatre in a two-dimensional fashion with minimal investment and passion.

SCHOOL VERSION AS MODEL & PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH

With a view to the MT song as music as drama by means of the arts educator, I return once again to the School Version to endorse its suitability in the art as an accessible, artistically satisfying model through which to motivate and train youth. In examination of the suitable genres, I will gear comparison and discourse through consideration of the professionally published School Versions (Kids, Junior & School Editions) available for licence through Music Theatre International to support discussion. In discussion with *iTheatrics*, responsible for the creation of the commercially produced licensable School Version, there were numerous guidelines that were expressed as being paramount in converting the average musical into an accessible form – all being of use to the arts educator.

Dramatically, one of the largest themes that emerged out of discussion was the necessity in allowing an adapted form to act as a credible device for storytelling. This was stressed not only for the necessity of the piece itself dramatically, but also in consideration of the original artists' intention and artistic integrity. An emphasis on conveying storytelling may help ensure that a piece does not try to replicate lines artificially without depth. Consider thoughts from *iTheatrics*, which concisely approach this in mindfulness of the audience and reception.

“It is all about telling a story – we stress that with students and teachers; your job is to be a story teller. [...] If you have the right environment, the kids can learn and get something out of it in a different way. [...] I can honestly believe [...] what I am going to see [...] as long as they are a good story teller.” (M. Johnson, personal communication, February 17, 2016)

It was also important to emphasize that content suitable for youth was a key proponent of the need for the School Version; however, artistic license still requires that adapted or non-adapted musicals with what may still be considered unsuitable requirements such as number of cast and inappropriate material must be left unchanged in recognition

of the original artist's work and wishes. This may be a dilemma for the arts educator faced with wanting to produce a full work that may be considered questionable material. A proposal to this is indicated towards the paper's end.

Professionally, *iTheatrics* is in consideration of differences in the abilities between adult & youth performers. Musically, *iTheatrics* outlined that youth friendly considerations are undertaken with regard to keys, difficulty of all songs (regarding range, tessitura, et cetera), and show length (for vocal, physical & dramatic endurance). Specific considerations of these guidelines are additionally offered at paper's end.

A MANIFESTO FOR RESPONSIBLE PRACTICE

Deliberation on these approaches provides a method by which the arts educator must consider the delicate art of bringing youth musical theatre to the stage. I would like to propose a manifesto supplemented by personal practice by which the arts educator may consider all work suitable (or not) for youth. Keeping in the mindset of education, all of the suggestions listed here are done with the intention of best practices in mind, and highest consideration for the young performer and their unique needs.

1. Knowledge and passion of and for the genre

As an arts educator, knowledge of the genre is imperative. With a deeper comprehension of the craft, we are able to make further informed decisions that will enable youth to have access to sustainable, healthy repertoire which will maintain interest and peak inspiration. Inspiration in the arts comes through mastery; the more that we know, the better our students learn.

2. Capabilities of our youth

It is crucial that the arts educator be well aware of the capabilities of the youth they are working with, both musically and dramatically. Inattention to specific inabilities can cause youth to become disinterested with material, or worse and more vitally, may cause impairment. Focus towards ability will provide momentum and focus

towards success.

3. Appreciation of musical theatre dramaturgy and music as drama

A practitioner more familiar in music must have a broad comprehension of dramatic cohesion and function within form. Attention to items such as character, plot, setting and form via all lenses reinforce the paramount importance of the Aristotelian fundamentals! The educating arts educator must approach musical theatre as both a musical and dramatic form, and treat all elements of music within as storytelling. Grounded approach in teaching drama through the musical theatre song will ensure good practice.

In personal practice in development of the School Edition musical, this proved crucial. In reducing original material, it was crucial to allow material left to focus on telling the intention of the story, and to ensure material removed was secondary and not crucial to the dramatic arch and foundation of the storytelling. This enabled a more focused effort at direct communication of the main concepts.

4. Vocal qualities and stylistic requirements

With comprehension of musical theatre comes knowledge of the unique vocal requirements. As a genre, the reliance on the popular sound and employment of vocal qualities is large; this must be considered in selecting repertoire and determining range. It is suggested that music in undesirable keys undergo transposition in order to make this process more accessible for youth. As previously discussed, one of the main justifications behind creating abbreviated versions of the musical is to decrease the length of time youth are singing. This should be considered even in the interim during practice as youth rehearse.

Our consideration of this was also crucial in practical application. With music composed in a rock idiom, much consideration was made in creating pieces with optional keys for a lower range to prevent youth voices from reaching too high in a belt-focused sound that could be damaging. Changes were also made in inverting vocal parts to help alleviate this.

5. *Content and suitability*

Ethically, the discussion of content and suitability for youth is particularly important. We know the arts educator is ethically and professionally responsible for the well-being of their students in all facets when dealing with material. Some shows without School Editions may still be completely suitable for youth, or alternatively, may offer one or two musical numbers that may be suitable to be performed without the full show. It is up to the arts educator to decide what will be deemed appropriate or too sensitive on access based upon knowledge of the youth at their responsibility. The MTI school accessible repertoire is a useful tool for helping to guide these decisions as experts have appraised these pieces for their suitability. The final decision, ultimately, must still rest with the ethical judgment of the adult.

In revision of material in the original piece, it was necessary to consider the suitability of some pieces with their content and whether this would be suitable for a youth performer to speak or sing. Resultantly, select material was adjusted in sensitive consideration.

6. *Respecting creative license*

Perhaps the one of the most difficult and vital aspects of selecting and crafting material for youth is the aforementioned dilemma of copyright and artistic license. Educators may seek to alter material in order to increase accessibility. Regrettably, this creates issues as the material being edited is under copyright, and artistic license remains with the authors. It is worth considering that a simple change to a verse or an edit of material is still copyright infringement and unlawful, despite unlikely being done out of malice and only in best interest of the performer.

What may the arts educator do about this, and what are some tangible solutions for practice? In discussion on the issue with copyright with *iTheatrics*, I have provided an optimistically advantageous list for guiding principle.

The arts educator may...

- Make edits to a score with chorus parts harmonically; i.e.

remove parts to make a four-part harmonically more accessible to a smaller or less capable chorus

- Use a free standing score of an existing piece from a musical (i.e. in a choral partition) through an independent music publisher that will specifically meet the aforementioned requirements
- Use instrumental parts to supplement a youth production

The arts educator may not...

- Remove verses in a song in order to condense time
- Edit or remove text from a scene in order to condense time
- Make transpositions in a published theatre score to suit the performer

With limitations, it can be creatively disheartening in preparation for younger performers. However, it is worth consideration that all limitations are set in best interest towards preservation of the form, and that other accessible options help to protect copyright, which ultimately protects all artists in maintaining integrity.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION OF MAINTAINING ACCESSIBILITY

This article seeks to demonstrate the vast amount of evidence in support of having musical theatre within school communities and readily accessible to youth. There is, however, a great amount of research left to be done on restricted youth access to music theatre due to financial or demographic limitation. Consider the following in pursuance of theatre:

Musical theatre as a live performance medium is often frequently restricted to cities and regions where live theatre is abundant, accessible and financially supported in production. This can cause issues for many youth in external areas where theatre is not a cultural staple. Youth in urban areas potentially have an advantage in proximity over those in rural areas without access to theatre. Optimistically, MT is embracing new forms of production and replication, which may be of interest in exposure to the arts educator. One popular version of this are the live TV movie productions of musicals (*Grease Live!*, *Hairspray Live!*, et cetera), which are recorded in video in an attempt to share the

form with as many as possible in being far reaching. Although enabling accessibility to the form through the screen, it is far from a replacement for the live theatre experience.

Despite being in an urban setting, however, youth may also be limited due to financial access to the theatre itself. As mentioned before, youth access theatre primarily through adult attendance. Respectively, youth attendance is limited to the financial abilities of the adults who would take them. In the 2015/16 Broadway season, the average cost of a ticket was \$103.11 US (Broadway League, 2016). Quite the financial undertaking for providing a young audience member with a theatrical experience! Resultantly, youth may find themselves at the theatre on rare occasion.

Lastly, for the young theatre enthusiasts who do not access theatre as live performance, the issue of school or community access comes into play. The range of a licensing cost of a MTI Kids show is between \$395 and \$495, and a Junior title may cost between \$550 and \$645 (“Broadway Junior,” March 30, 2017.). This does not begin to factor in the costly undertaking of all aspects of production (costuming, props, set design, music, et cetera). This is an important consideration as many schools may be unable to afford such a cost. Potential cursory alternatives for access may include one of the options in the manifesto such as a free standing piece, or ambitiously, an original musical from the capable arts educator. However, it is evident that the financial and demographic consideration is an important study to be considered and undertaken.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is discernible that there is much work left to do in this arena. Musical theatre continues to be an art by which young performers appreciate, develop and grow. Musical adaptation has helped in ensuring youth are able to access many pieces that may not have been accessible prior. However, there is still work left towards creating a foundational framework in providing access to the repertoire and genre. Musically, scientific evidence is needed to supplement vocal training, and further exploration into practice-as-research may help to provide a clearer view into the minds of those working with youth for specific technique. Further work is needed in analyzing the process, training and development of the youth voice in application of

musical theatre to devise and develop a CCM training that is sound in practice. Dramatically, a further exploration into the field of musical theatre dramaturgy is crucial, arguably so from the lens of the arts educator. Professionals in the field need to acknowledge the need for additional entry into their craft as research.

It is up to the arts educator in application to determine whether material, designated for youth or not, is responsibly educating and guiding youth on the route of developmental performance. The educator must continue to perfect and provide a means by which musical theatre may be enjoyed. It is up to the expertise and passion of those working with youth to ensure that youth everywhere are able to fully explore the magical world of musical theatre.

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In academia, Sean enjoys a busy career in both teaching and writing, and holds degrees in Music & Education, as well as an MA in Music Direction. Select work has been featured at recent & upcoming engagements including the International “Putting it Together” UK Conference -Investigating Sources in Musical Theatre, the NYU Forum on Educational Theatre, and the Annual Conference for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.