Teaching the song

By Tracey Moore

Singing and acting in the musical theatre class

Musical theatre education is a relatively new concept, but a burgeoning one. It seems like new musical theatre programs are starting up every day, and now aspiring singers, dancers, and actors have their choice of children’s programs, high school classes, summer camps, college degrees, and professional musical theatre workshops. Universities that offer a B.F.A. degree in musical theatre find themselves inundated with applications. Lots of people want to be in the musical theatre, and lots of people want to teach them how.

Yet in the many years I’ve spent in and around musical theatre, I’ve seen too many performances by young people that were lacking in musical theatre craft, which is not solely acting, singing, or dancing, but the successful integration of these elements—combined in a personal and individual way. The three main elements that make up musical theatre—singing, dancing, acting—subdivide into things like kinesthetic awareness, emotional connection, action, and so on. Each of those fundamentals divides further into the essentials of vibration, breath, balance, alignment, imagination, sensitivity, impulse, and more. Ultimately, musical theatre performers are responsible for integrating all of this stuff into a complete performance.

I believe the place for students to practice integration is the classroom, so I’m speaking here to those who teach musical theatre. And what an assorted bunch we are! We teach voice, dance, acting, literature, communications, and music. We have M.M.s, M.F.A.s, B.F.A.s, Ph.D.s, and S.H.K.s (from the School of Hard Knocks, of course). We are coaches, music directors, directors, and choreographers. We are actors, singers, and dancers ourselves. Whatever your discipline, my hope is that the thoughts and examples shared in this article will bring you to a deeper understanding of what’s involved in singing a musical theatre song, and give you some idea about how to pass that knowledge along to your students.
Developing the musical theatre artist

Often, musical theatre classes do not allow for the kind of freedom that one finds in acting classrooms. In an acting classroom, if a student is struggling or seems stuck, teachers will come up with creative solutions to the problem. Asking provocative questions, engaging the student in outlandish physical activities, having the students speak in gibberish, or asking scene partners to surprise each other are just some of the many techniques available to the acting teacher. However, these techniques are rarely used in the musical theatre classroom. Instead, the musical theatre class is dedicated to learning the notes, memorizing the words, and making decisions about blocking, choreography, and other aspects of the performance.

Ideally, the work in the musical theatre classroom (or music theatre workshop, as it is sometimes called) should have as its goal the exploration of the intersection between performer and material. If your students are spending the semester working toward a performance, a scene night, or some other showcase of their work, then they are not in class; they’re in rehearsal. Rehearsal has a whole different set of rules, and the most important one is to do what the director (or music director, or choreographer) tells you to do.

To develop musical theatre artists, it’s essential to spend some time in the classroom working specifically on exploration and discovery. The director should try to establish an atmosphere in the classroom where the highest value is not obedience, or finding the “right” or even the “best” performance. Instead, the class should be about trying all kinds of different things in an effort to develop the skills of the individual actor.

Some of these activities will work right away; others will take several tries. Some will work for some students and not for others. The main requirement is that the student must engage in these activities wholeheartedly and without reservation. Half-measures will do nothing, and if you allow students to get away with lukewarm efforts, it will be more harmful than not trying anything at all. They will end up disappointed in themselves because they were faking it, and they will miss the opportunity to experience the profound changes that are possible in a theatre classroom. Additionally, the half-hearted commitment of one student will pave the way for other students in the class to do the same thing. Don’t let this happen.

Create a laboratory environment

The first step in getting the students to a place where they can play with a song is to create a classroom in which that is understood to be the curriculum. Knowing that the goal is play will help students get past their reverence for the material, and allow them to make unusual choices.

In addition to letting go of reverence for the material, students must also overcome a certain amount of reverence for the accompanist (this can be daunting for students if the accompanist is the teacher). Here’s why: it is very important for the musical theatre performer to “own” the song. The music and lyrics must appear to be coming from the actor—to be something that the character is creating in that moment. This can be difficult if the teacher is accompanying and the student feels the need to defer to his or her authority. In technical terms, what will happen is this: the student will rely on the teacher to “lead,” allowing the teacher/accompanist to set tempos, initiate beginnings of phrases, and determine the length and manner of rubatos and ritards and dynamics. The singer will be hesitant and beginnings of phrases will be cautious and half-sung. His eyes will dart over to the piano, checking to be sure that everything is okay, that he is “doing it right.” He will be, in effect, waiting for directions from the accompanist/teacher. And that cannot be.

At left, Dames at Sea, produced by Floyd Central High School (Floyds Knobs, Indiana) at the 2006 Thespian Festival.
If a student is having difficulty with this concept, then have her sing the song with only a skeletal accompaniment (chords only, perhaps) and completely out of tempo. Each thought should be sung separately, with no worry about time, cohesiveness, or continuance to the next thought. Pauses for breath should be long and full of thought. The accompanist should move forward to the next chord only when it appears the singer has completely explored the previous thought. Ideally, the singer should know the music well enough that he or she is not counting on the accompanist for melodic help. If this exercise reveals that she does not, then the singer must work on the song until she can sing it a capella.

This is not to suggest that the role of accompanist is purely to wait and follow. There can and should be a more equitable collaborative relationship between pianist and singer. But in the classroom, the students must begin to understand in what way they are leading, or creating, the song, and they must be in charge of their own trial-and-error process. In addition, learning how to take the lead is crucial in auditions, and it can be a lifesaver in performance when something goes wrong and an actor must make a split-second decision about how to take control of the situation.

**Hold the applause**

Another way to create the atmosphere for vulnerable, daring self-exploration is to ask, on the first day, that students refrain from applauding each other. Explain that your class is not about getting the audience’s approval or about being “done” (applause being the socially agreed-upon symbol that something is over, finished, complete, and ready for judgment).

Instead, as my former acting teacher Charlie Kakatsakis once said, students must “dare to be bad.” Dare your students to do things they haven’t done before, to leap before looking, to make lots of big, outrageous mistakes, and go for it. You will find that students are reluctant and at the same time eager for this kind of opportunity—especially in these days of teaching to the test, where a student’s entire classroom experience can be spent in an end-gaining posture that eliminates any possibility for taking a risk or exploring creatively. Ask your musical theatre students to forget about approval, forget about the test for now, to experiment and reserve judgment (and applause) for later.

**Your role in the classroom**

The most effective teaching mode for this kind of work is based on the Socratic method, which involves asking lots of questions. The goal is to foster exploration and personal inventiveness. Students need your help to see where their work is lacking. You may need to push them to explore other possibilities. If you are inventive and uninhibited in your teaching, the students will follow your example. They will inherit your imaginative freedom, your focus, daring, honesty, and awareness. What a wonderful gift to give!

Sometimes, when the teacher begins to coach an individual student, there is a loss of focus among the other students in the class. You can help eliminate this problem by encouraging your students to use every moment to develop their observation skills. When you are working with Student A, it is a great opportunity for the rest of the class. Student A may be suffering acute nerves or performance anxiety. As a result, he may only hear about half of what you are saying. The rest of the students, on the other hand, are relaxed observers. They are in an excellent position to watch your work with Student A and learn from it. I ask listening students to keep good notes about what they are seeing, and sometimes give them writing assignments based on their observations.

**The world of the play**

Let’s take a minute to talk about the musical theatre world in general, and musical theatre singing specifically. One mistake that young students often make is trying to bring everything in musical theatre down to a casual, “realistic” level. It’s hard for students to find their way into a song, sometimes, because they say, “I would never do that!” But the point of musical theatre is that people do things they wouldn’t ordinarily do.

Now, even though musical theatre behavior may be outlandish by everyday standards, most musical theatre characters are singing songs that are grounded in accessible human experiences. It may take some thought to find the shared humanity that one can connect to in the song, but it’s almost always there. I’ll give you some ideas on how to do this—a way of personalizing the song—in a minute.

First, though, I want to talk about the larger scope of the genre. Let’s face it—everyone knows that teapots don’t really sing. And while we may sing in the shower or in our cars, we would think twice before breaking into song while walking down the street. But in a musical, people (and teapots) do that all the time. “I have often walked down this street before,” Freddy sings in _My Fair Lady_. This is part of the world of the musical, and in the same way that we accept Shakespeare’s verse or Mamet’s language or Pinter’s pauses as part of a character’s “reality,” we must accept that in a musical, the characters will, at some point, break into song.

But why do they do that?

There is an emotional hierarchy in musical theatre that can be viewed as three rungs on a ladder. On the first step, characters speak. This is the dialogue of a musical libretto. As in a playscript, characters in a musical have wants and intentions, and they use speech and action as a way to achieve those wants.

But in a musical, characters move up the ladder to the second rung—singing—when speaking isn’t enough. Characters in a musical break into song because something happens that heightens the dramatic moment, and they are in a place of more, more intensity, more action, more wants, more needs. In some cases there are more obstacles working against them, more problems to solve, more resistance to overcome.

The third step is when words fail the characters completely, and they must dance. Dance’s wordless physical explosion is a final attempt to communicate using every fiber of one’s
muscular being. It’s not enough to talk about something; it’s not enough to sing about it. Now the character must try to embody the thing itself. E.Y. “Yip” Harburg, who wrote “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and many other great songs, once said that what makes a musical theatre song so powerful is that it speaks both to the mind and the emotions. Words are thoughts, he said (I’m paraphrasing here), and music is emotion. So when you put the two together, a song is like feeling a thought. The director and acting coach Wesley Balk expressed a similar idea when he noted that words speak to the left side of the brain, and music to the right side. Merging the two unifies and uses all of the brain, and touches all of what makes us human.

So as you can see, singing in a musical is not intended to be casual or regular or everyday. To begin a song means that the character must be entering a place where mere words do not suffice. The singer must take into account the heightened emotional state that demands the combined contributions of music, rhythm, harmonies, and words to achieve full expression.

Thus the musical world is not “realistic” in the traditional sense, and it’s not in real time (people don’t really fall in love during the course of a single song, do they?), and it’s not real life. It’s something more. Therefore, trying to make things “real” is a futile endeavor. But we can—within the world of each show—make things truthful.

There are a couple of ways to do this.

As a teacher, I try to steer students toward an authentic, truthful, personal performance that is based in the theatrical traditions of Stanislavski, informed by the character’s relationships, and grounded in the notions of conflict and want. Working in this way means understanding the given circumstances of the script, identifying actions, filling in backstory with imagination and research, deeply investigating relationships to people and things, and providing subtext for everything.

It would be great if young students would really dig in and do this work, and they should. But sometimes the work distances students from the material, rather than bringing them closer. I’ll bet you’ve never had a student who was a princess promised in marriage to King Arthur, as Guenevere is in Camelot. And a half-baked attempt at recreating this (at least in my students) results in a Disneyfied, stereotypical, goofy-two-shoes princess—hardly the type of woman who would defy her family, break a contract with a king, brave the raw English weather and the perils of the forest alone, and run away to talk to an imaginary saint. Yet, this is exactly what Guenevere does.

But, you know what? I’ll bet you have students who have misbehaved. So I suggest you start there.

**Step one: personalizing the song**
The quickest road to truthful performance is through the students’ own lives. I call this student-as-character. When students sing from their own experiences, it’s much more difficult to lie.

Please note that I am not suggesting that students should never do research. They must! But I offer personalization as a first, important step. Students need to have the experience of singing as themselves in order to understand what truly “connected” singing feels like. Once they have felt it, they will never accept a substitute.

Let’s stay with Guenevere and look at her song “The Simple Joys of Maidenhood.” Remember, your role is to ask a lot of questions, and you need to find something to which your student can connect.

Begin by asking the student, “What’s going on in this song?” At this point, she may want to tell you the entire plot of Camelot. Try to avoid this by specifying that you are particularly interested in knowing what is going on right now, in this particular song moment. The explanation might be: “A girl is afraid because she has been sent away from home and she is worried that she isn’t going to get to have any more fun in life.” This will work because it’s a human experience to which the student might be able to relate, unlike the factual, but less accessible “I’m a princess who has been promised in marriage to the king in order to merge our lands.”

To help a student transform herself into student-as-character, you will need to think on your feet. You need to ask questions that will help clarify which are the most significant portions of the students’ answers. Possible answers to the question, “What’s going on in this song?” are:

- Guenevere is nervous and is talking to St. Genevieve.
- Guenevere has left her home to come and marry this king whom she has never seen.
- Guenevere wants an exciting life full of knights, danger, and romance.

To support the movement toward “student-as-character,” ask the student questions like:

- Do you have someone that you confide in?
- Have you ever confided in someone that you were scared or nervous?
- Have you ever moved to a new place and missed the place you left behind?
- Do you remember how you felt on the night before a big event?
- Have you ever been on a blind date?
- Did you ever want your life to be more exciting than it is?
- What is a crazy daydream or vision that you have had about your future?

After a sequence of these and similar questions, you will have touched on the circumstances that your student might have in common with Guenevere, and by listening closely to her answers, you can determine which commonalities have the most resonance for that particular student.

If, for example, the student admits that she’s always wanted the exciting life of a movie star, get some specifics from her about what that would mean.

- What would be fun about that?
- What would a typical day be like?
- Who would she date?
- What risks or dares would she undertake?

Have the student sing a verse or two with “movie star” impulses to get the feel of it. Be sure to demand full commitment for this experiment.

It is natural for students to hesitate...
to reveal themselves too much. They may be reluctant to make the personal connection, and shy about expressing raw emotion. This results in the artificial, superficial behaviors that give musical theatre a bad reputation. To avoid this, set up the classroom as a safe place for risk, and remind students that not everything they do will be usable. Not everything is a keeper. Not everything will be “on the test.”

The point is to come out and play. Using student-as-character eliminates the possibility of hiding, or at the very least, makes it very clear when the student is attempting to do so.

Step two: more questions
To achieve your goals of personal connection and to develop your students’ artistic impulses, the two questions that will yield the most immediate results are:

- Who are you talking to?
- What do you want?

The main difference between answering these questions for rehearsal and answering them for the classroom is that neither you nor the students need to feel bound by the context of the show while you are in classroom mode. In class, you are seeking a quick response that will propel the student toward a truthful and connected experience, not the “right” or “most appropriate” answer.

In my experience, most technical issues, whether vocal or physical, improve once the student has answered these questions in a clear, simple, and direct way. Voices grow stronger, feet become grounded, high notes are more supported, eyes become clear and focused, and the body begins to move naturally in response to instinct and impulses when the actor knows who he or she is talking to, and is engaged in a committed, urgent pursuit of a specific want.

Who are you talking to?
Ideally, the song should be directed to another person. That’s who the singer is “talking to.” They may want that other person to do something (“Why Can’t You Behave?”) or to say something (“Do You Love Me?”) or to feel about them in a certain way (“What Did I Have that I Don’t Have?”). For the moment, we are still dealing with student-as-character. That means that students are not yet researching the characters and the context of the show. So, to answer these questions, students should take the qualities of the show relationship (as much as can be gleaned from the song) and transfer them to a relationship in which the student is already personally invested. If choosing to sing “to my father” provides some truth for the performer, then use that. If a student wants to try singing a song to a potential girlfriend, a pesky younger brother, or an absent parent, let them try.

Let’s take the example of a song like “Whistle Down the Wind” from the show of the same name, “Anytime (I Am There)” from William Finn’s Edges, or “Not While I’m Around” from Sweeney Todd. After you have done some thinking about the lyrics, you will discover that these three songs share a common theme: “I will be beside you.” You can then ask the student whether they’ve ever wanted to tell someone, “You can count on me, don’t worry,” or “I will be there for you in times of trouble. I will not leave you.” Most human beings have had this experience. Having the student sing the song to someone in their own lives to whom they want to offer love and support will immediately move them from the general want of making “someone” feel better to the specific want of making “my mother” or “my younger brother” feel better. The specificity will immediately connect the singer to the song, the want, and provide a deep, personal relationship from which to draw.

Students sometimes choose to use a personal relationship that isn’t a match for what’s happening in the song. If this happens, you may need to help them figure out what is being expressed musically. This puts some burden on you to become familiar with shows and songs, but your instincts can guide you, too. The experiences of your own life and your own understanding of what it means to be human will be sufficient to help you divine the universal, emotional event of most songs.

Talking to myself
Students will often answer “Who are you talking to?” with the reply, “to myself.” While there are soliloquies in musical theatre (“Soliloquy,” from Carousel being the most obvious example), and instances when the character is singing while alone on stage, the acting choice of “talking to myself”—in the sense of an inner monologue—should be discouraged. The tendency in inner monologues is for students to become too reflective: energy and focus drift backwards into the singer; the voice becomes small, eyes stop communicating, and physical bodies curl into themselves.

First, be sure that “I’m talking to myself” is correct—that there are no other possibilities. Often, a best friend or someone equally familiar and intimate will work just as well, with none of the pitfalls. If “I’m talking to myself” is truly the best option (or if it’s simply something the student wants to explore), the student should place the “other self” physically outside themselves—across the room, if possible. This prevents the formation of a closed circle (self relating to inner self) that excludes the audience.

Even when characters are talking to themselves, one half is trying to convince the other half of something. I regularly have conversations with my “other self,” who has opinions and thoughts and needs that must be acknowledged. To help students visualize this exchange, you can place some kind of frame or imaginary mirror in front of them, and have them talk to this outside self. Have them come up with arguments that this outside self might use; this will reinforce the idea that the song’s lyrics are a response to something outside themselves. The energy will move out; the body will open up, and the voice and eyes will, too.

Talking to the audience
Because musical theatre can be presentationational, singers are often “talking to the audience.” Singing to the audience is a valid answer to the question “Who are you singing to?” but, still, the audience must have a personality. Singers must know whether the audience
agrees with them or doesn’t. Perhaps they are trying to get the audience to support them, to join them, or to think, “Hey, this character is a swell guy.”

To entertain the audience is always a part of what the actor is doing, but it cannot be the only thing. To entertain “in order to achieve something” provides a stronger activity for the singer. For example, “Betrayed,” Max Bialystock’s tour de force number in *The Producers*, is highly entertaining for the audience. But Max is also trying to get the audience to do several things: to side with him against Leo Bloom, to help him figure out how he ended up in this position, to admire all the work he did, and to agree that he has gotten a raw deal. The number will be all the more entertaining if Max is truly frantic to get the audience on his side. Again, personalization means that you help the singer connect Max’s wants to his own life experiences: has the student ever felt wrongly accused? Did a friend ever betray him? Did he ever want to get someone to be on his side? Did he ever feel he didn’t get recognition or admiration for a job well done? Has he ever been confused by the way someone treated him?

**What do you want?**

Characters sing because they want something. But when students begin to address the question of want, they usually start by being far too intellectual, offering you interpretations of events and meanings, themes, critiques, and symbolism. Nip this in the bud by asking students to answer this question as though you, the listener, are only five years old. That means they can’t use any words that are too big or any concepts that are too complicated. If they do, say to them, “I’m only five. What does that mean?” Keep repeating this statement until you get students down to the most essential level. Have students keep it simple, visceral, and direct. The more primal, physical, personal, specific, and urgent the student can be in defining the want, the better.

It is also helpful to state the want in terms of the other person: “I want Joe to love me/join me/kiss me/leave me alone/help me,” etc. One character generally wants something from another character. That want can only be achieved through the other person. If the student is having trouble naming the want, you can try rephrasing the question as, “What do you need to do to (or get from) the other person?” or “What would you like the other person to do (or say)?” Another good question is, “What must happen in this moment in order for you to go on living?”

Trying to answer these questions requires a willingness on the part of your students to be wrong. The only way to know whether a particular choice works is to try it. Prompt students to observe the results of choices they have made by asking them, “Did that want track all the way through the song for you, or did it seem to lose steam along the way?”

Some very good students get frustrated with this process because they don’t like to fail. To combat this fear of failing, I sometimes ask students to finish this sentence: “I don’t know, but I think maybe I might possibly want...” Framing the answer in this roundabout way often makes students laugh at themselves and their need to be perfect, and thus relieves the pressure of having to give the right answer. This preamble makes it clear that they’re just taking a wild guess. Usually, that guess is pretty good, and if not, it provides a great place to start teaching.