

STRATEGIES IN ACTING FOR OPERATIC PERFORMANCE:
EMPOWERING THE POWERFUL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis intends to explore the strategies, consequences and goals of acting in one of the most celebrated western artforms: opera. Told primarily through a first person narrative, and project based, the research of this piece culminated in three semesters teaching Oprea Workshop through the Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University. Research methods included: Directing work before graduate school; Interviews and surveys with collaborators; Personal observation; and Scholastic work surrounding historic acting teachers.

The main finding: My goals as a director and educator mimic many of the acting teachers before me: to connect gestures to the internal life of the performer and to strive towards a more perfect amalgamation of music, text, and stagecraft in presenting both new work and inherited repertoire for opera.

I found disparities not in the goals, but in the “how”. My findings through my work are that the “how” is in bravery, kindness, and empowerment of the singer. Through scaffolded and varied techniques, each performer can cultivate their own collaborative strategies when developing characters and integrating movement into their vocal performances and storytelling. An empowered singer is an effective singer that can live and advocate for better art holistically in this world.

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Dedicated to Mom

who gave me the love of this artform, the support to pursue creating it, and the ethics to create it well.

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

Writing this thesis was one of the reasons I decided to go to graduate school.

While at Third Eye Theatre Ensemble, we were creating (what felt like) a new way of making opera. As I started talking with singers and directors in other parts of the United States, the unique nature of our work became increasingly apparent. Yet, I didn't have the words to describe what I was doing or trying to do. I knew I needed continued education to put these thoughts as a director and educator into words. When I told Professor McShaffrey that I was looking for a mentor in my studies, he told me, "I can't be your mentor but I can give you a room to experiment." He graciously mentored me anyway. I met Professor Marcus Giamatti after starting at Temple University. He had the grace to encourage me to continue my dogged pursuit of furthering the operatic stagecraft and documenting it. As my thesis advisor, he continued to be my biggest cheerleader, asking questions that the talented director and acting coach could ask. Professor Steven Gross and Professor Peter Reynolds challenged my definitions of music theatre, encouraging me to explore the American Musical but encouraging my constant return to the form of American opera.

This document is a reflection of these professor's encouragements and of my exploration of the art from Chicago through my graduate studies at Temple University. Parts one and three are in a narrative format where the second part of this paper is purely historical research and reflection. Part one documents my discoveries as a staging director at Third Eye Theatre Ensemble. During my first year of graduate school, I invited my collaborators to fill out a self-created survey regarding our time together. Several of them graciously agreed to be interviewed. The transcripts of these interviews

are available in Appendix A of this document. My reflection in the first part is an amalgamation of my notes, memories, and realizations from these interviews and survey responses. The second part of this document aims to contextualize the acting education in the United States regarding opera. I chose to focus on Francois Delsarte because we can see the children of his teachings in many of the current coaching tactics in the artform, though it should be noted he also planted the seeds of Modern Dance and other acting techniques. I also researched Konstantin Stanislavski because of his pervasive influence on acting strategies across many genres. Stanislavski's influence on opera is inescapable. The third part is a result of two years assisting and teaching the graduate and undergraduate opera workshop classes at Temple University. The information gathered here is an amalgamation of memory, notes, issued handouts and recovered emails. The goal of teaching these courses was to contextualize acting strategies developed through my work with Third Eye Theatre Ensemble within a pedagogical setting. Someone who deserves deep credit for my work with Temple's opera workshop is Professor David Ingram, who taught me pedagogical theory for higher education and was a deep influence on me as a teacher in general. I would not have been as prepared to teach vocal performance students within a University setting if it were not for David Ingram.

Although this document is a reflection of my journey in operatic education, I know there is more to explore and learn. My hope with this thesis is to lay the groundwork for future work and call others to action for a better way of creating an artform that can be a beautiful all-encompassing agent of change.

CHAPTER 2.

DISCOVERING THE INTIMACY OF OPERA: THIRD EYE THEATRE ENSEMBLE

I fell in love with opera when I was seven years old. In an effort to raise “well-cultured” children, my mother splurged on front row tickets for the family to the Milwaukee Florentine opera house. Wrapped in my mother’s coat, I experienced the overwhelming visual and aural telling of stories. As the sonic blast of operatic voices soared over my head and the orchestra vibrated my feet, I began to understand why a disfigured Rigolletto vowed revenge, or how exactly the seductively charming Carmen could convince the hapless soldier to run away with her. With each distracting wave to the orchestra musicians and a whispered “what’s happening, mama?” that was met with a “just watch, honey...”, I found myself falling deeper into a fascination with theatre performed through music, and in turn, music presented as theatre. Being so close to the action showed me the brutal strength, skill, and tenacity that opera required of its performers. It was not until adulthood that I would come to understand the amount of work required to accomplish such feats. My mother had unleashed not only a life-long fan of the artform, but a dedicated practitioner.

As an undergraduate, I studied directing under the mentorship of Sheldon Patinkin at Columbia College Chicago. My studies focused on the pragmatic; directing my peers in one acts and full length plays with various degrees of technical support, while minoring in Columbia College Chicago’s flagship playwriting program. A program which consisted of writing original plays, workshopping productions, and directing new pieces in workshop settings. My heart still yearned to play with opera, which my

undergraduate program advised that I continue to explore, but cautioned that I learn first “to walk before running”. Combining my passions for new works and music theatre at Temple University through my simultaneous work in developing new musicals and working in the opera department under the tutelage of Brandon McShaffrey is the natural conclusion of these interests.

Columbia College Chicago’s focus on creating theatre in pragmatic terms left me with a focus on Chicago storefront theatre, a specific form of theatre where its practitioners occupy and convert literal storefronts into small black box theatres: Theaters with intimate stages and 30-100 seat houses. The flying sweat and spit of performers telling stories less than 5 feet away from the audience sparked a childhood memory in me causing me to wonder: what would happen if we staged operas in such spaces?

When Third Eye Theatre Ensemble’s Artistic Director, Rena Ahmed asked me to join her company in the inaugural staging of Gian Carlo Menotti’s *The Medium* in 2014, we enthusiastically went to work. We quickly found that opera staged in this kind of intimate setting required methods of staging and performance that were outside of the standard practices of regional opera in the United States. We needed something deeper that was also a joy to create. From the beginning of this company, I was integrated as an ensemble member and we collectively endeavoured to foster an equitable environment. As a fellow founding member, Rena and I worked towards a company culture that fostered bravery and supported artistic risk from the very beginning and I continue to support this environment into our seventh season as of writing this. In our 2019 interview, Rena Ahmed (full transcript available in Appendix A) describes our goal of the company culture:

When we built the company, we talked about how we wanted it to be very ensemble-based. We have a no-divas policy basically. Everybody is equal and is an equal part of what's going on onstage. We've hopefully done a good job of making people feel that and I think it's a big reason why people want to work with us and enjoy working with us. In terms of how we've accomplished that, some of it is the exercises we do with the movement stuff and flocking. Part of it is an attitude. I've had a lot of negative experiences in the field of opera and so I tried to build a company around the kind of experience I would want as a performer. I want everybody to feel supported and that they are free to explore what they are doing onstage. There's no judgement, they can experiment, they can make strong choices or just choices. It doesn't have to be the right choice, but feeling the freedom to do that without judgement or fear of looking like a fool.

Our company of opera creators were unsatisfied with a hierarchical staging technique where the music director's word was law, and the staging director's work went unquestioned. We expanded the rehearsal timeline from the traditional two week music rehearsal, followed by another 2 weeks of staging, and an additional week of technical rehearsal--to a six week, fully incorporated, process. Instead of singers being expected to come into the process completely memorized, with independent character analysis influencing their vocal qualities, and *then* expected to immediately change these choices in rehearsal based on the whims and separate analysis of the directors, we instead worked toward collective choices that were made by all parties involved in the production's staging. As a staging director, I quietly sat in on select music rehearsals, notating how the music director was teaching and coaching the score. During the music rehearsal period, we held two sessions focused on textual analysis of the libretto with the maestro present. Though the music director and I were in agreement regarding interpretation of the piece

before rehearsals started, we wanted the singer's interpretations as well and wanted to collectively discover them through table work sessions. As cast and directors analysed the score for story in all aspects, how the piece would be staged became clear to the collective, allowing for ease in the staging rehearsals. In the interest of equity, we scheduled several music rehearsals for the cast during our staging rehearsal, weeks as well, or allowed for extra time in the rehearsal itself when there was a specific musical moment that needed more attention. Due to the opera being collectively examined, staging techniques could now be varied. We were no longer saddled with the traditional 'director telling the performer where to stand' but instead could use a combination of text analysis, physicalization dramaturgy, and performer-led staging choices. The results of this heterarchical approach and multilateral staging technique in the staging of Menotti's opera led to raw, honest performances that did not compromise vocal technique.

The three main components in opera – music, text, and dramatic spectacle (stage scenery, stage decor, special effects) – are constantly in conversation with each other. As styles and fashions progress through time, various elements took dominance. In early opera, text was the primary focus, with compositions being more suggestive. In the 18th century, singing (*prima voce*) became the focus, and French Grand opera in the 1800s resided in spectacle. However, in the United States, the voice reigned supreme, with the staging director in the 1980's taking on an auteur role that imitated that of a film director, focusing on spectacle in a silent tug-of-war with maestro.

In Chicago storefront opera, this is not possible. The accessibility afforded by presenting opera in an intimate space with low ticket prices, demands less of a focus on booming orchestra and spectacle based-stagecraft (which is prohibitively expensive and

potentially dangerous in small venues), leaving creators with their bodies (which include the voice), the reduced orchestration, and the text. Suddenly acting comes into sharp focus. The complicated subtext and colors that an orchestra provides are stripped away, leaving the singer to carry the weight. A singer's character analysis and acting choices are now as important as the vocal technique. This rebalancing of focus in an artistic medium that continuously grapples with audience engagement (in the United States) promised a potential new way forward in operatic performance. A way that could expand interest, provide affordable means of production, and provide agency to the singers who are creating the work with nothing more than air and their physical bodies.

As a storefront opera company, Third Eye Theatre Ensemble continued to pursue our discoveries in this staging technique as much out of practicality as for artistic curiosity. Singers and directors worked on stipends, making our time commitment to the process one of the more affordable aspects of creating the production. Performers eager for a seat at the decision making table were enthusiastic participants, willing to set aside pre-conceived notions of their characters in pursuit of a collective dramaturgy. Where we lacked resources for technical spectacle, we would utilize the resource of artistic contribution and time. The stagecraft discovered through acting could come into focus.

I recognize that expanding a rehearsal period is a luxury afforded through storefront opera companies like Third Eye Theatre Ensemble. Often the common practice of a rehearsal room working within a strictly hierarchical model of music director and director telling the singer what to do without question, is generally a result of time constraints. As soprano and Third Eye Ensemble member Mary Lutz Govertsen explains in our December 30th interview, "the opera industry has gotten so far away. There's a

three week rehearsal process, administrators aren't willing to offer more time. Performers come in with decisions already made and they don't want to think any harder about it.”

Time constraints are in place out of respect for the singer's time commitments, and of course financial compensation. However, I would argue that by putting a rehearsal process on to a tight time constraint, artistic leadership is forfeiting their most valuable resource: the singers themselves. This practice also disenfranchises singers from the creative process as well as puts the onus of memorization on singers before the production process begins without feedback from a music staff. This solo memorization process without feedback encourages costly consults from coaches and accompanists while the singer is still in the process of learning their role, which could be accomplished within the rehearsal process itself. Govertson goes on to say in our 2018 interview, “I much prefer this [The Third Eye process]. I've had singers tell me that the singing is more important than the acting, and that just sounds so boring. For me, you can't take the acting away from the singing. It makes the music that much more amazing when the singing and the acting are fantastic.”

In my time working with singers in Chicago's blossoming storefront opera scene, I found these singers were holding advanced degrees from prestigious institutions yet were not being given an appropriate or healthy acting education to accompany their vocal education, and then being blamed for this lack of acting technique by staging directors and audiences. By not giving singers time in a room to collaborate with their castmates and directors or tools to utilize their collaborative skills, directors inadvertently rob the production of an ensemble of singers that can bravely perform as a collective ensemble and tell the opera's story holistically.

The further I delved into a rehearsal process that focused on collaboration, ensemble development, and enthusiastic consent from the performers, the more dedicated I became to the ethics of making opera in this way. I live in great admiration for my collaborators. In my 2019 interview with collaborator and soprano, Caroline Shaul, she discussed the culture around her vocal education and performance career:

“Being trained as a classical singer in undergrad, there was a dichotomy of valuing the art of opera and how hard it is to understand and do, making you incredibly special to be an opera singer... .. We were the REAL musicians. We are taught about how special we are and how special the art form is. But within that world, you are constantly told you are replaceable, that it doesn't matter how hard you work, or how pretty you are, there is always going to be somebody better than you. Even if they don't teach you that, they let you know that you are not unique enough to hold space in the operas you are in. If you are cast and you get sick, you're out. Nobody is given any sense of what you bring to the process which is a unique artistic voice that no one can replicate.”

I fundamentally disagree that singers are replaceable. Each individual ensemble member of a production has value and a contribution. I argue that it is only in a time-constricted, hierarchical staging process that the performer becomes commodified and siloed, so that they are a replaceable cog in a machine, rather than a holistic artist and member of an ensemble.

Commodification of singers, when the ability to support their artistic voice and contributions to a production are available, strikes me as not only wasteful, but an unethical approach to operatic work. Considering the amount of time, money, and dedication to their craft, we owe it to singers to have a say in how they are creating and presenting their work. In my January 2019 interview with Evita Trembley, mezzo soprano, she discusses performer enfranchisement as a holistic experience:

It gave me freedom as an artist... ..when I felt most empowered because it was a moment of choice in either following or leading and it was up to us and our comfortability. And being informed by other people's movements helped me understand what I wanted to do in the music and what I didn't want to do. There is something powerful in doing movements together, moving as one, but also empowering about what ideas you can come up with on your own. I had never thought I had my own ideas about movement but I guess I did!

In addition to performer agency, collaborative, singer-led staging fully connects the acting and singing to both the performer and story. At Third Eye, audience response was enthusiastic in our subsequent productions, and singers enthusiastically applied to work with us despite our meager compensations for those fulfilling artistic experiences.

Through our subsequent productions, the singers and I built an ensemble of performers with a standard set of expectations and knowledge. The knowledge base included collaborative storytelling, Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints*, Uta Hagen's Method, Chekhov, and basic actioning of scenes. This ensemble allowed for shortened rehearsal periods, with new singers coming in and learning from their castmates; learning that they were free to make choices bravely and efficiently without mockery or reprimand while also listening to their collaborators with equal respect and vulnerability. As Evita continues in her interview on an ensemble singer led process,

It was difficult because it seemed like everyone already knew what was happening. I felt weird at first because I didn't understand what the point was but that's just because I had not done it before and everyone else seemed very informed of what it meant. Once I realized that it was your own interpretation of what should be happening, then I felt more free to move and let go. Letting go of the notion of 'am I doing this right' because there was no right way.

Ironically, by lengthening and integrating rehearsal time to weave physicality, libretto analysis, and music through a singer empowered process, the singers fed off each other and created a more efficient process. It is through the ensemble that the now empowered singer can make revolutionary choices.

Creating the Ensemble

“You’re not just up there alone”

An integrated process enfranchises singers to quickly make strong collective choices with each other and their (both staging and music) directors that more fully connect the performance to the story being told on stage through music. Singers are empowered to be holistic artists and directors are freed from micromanaging the artform so as to focus on ‘big picture’ elements. Fantastic. How does a director do this in opera? A better question is: how does a director create an environment for this type of opera to flourish in?

As opera is an inherently collaborative medium, I find that to create work that equally honors music, stagecraft, and text, we must look towards collaboration itself. The singers collaborate together to form a cohesive ensemble. As Third Eye Theatre Ensemble artistic director, Rena Ahmed observed, “More often than not in opera processes, there isn't ensemble building”. I propose that we shift our focus in opera creation to that of an ensemble based collaboration. I further propose that this ensemble is built through a scaffolded approach to text, music, and physicalization. All three approaches must weave together, and reinforce the ensemble for performers and their enfranchisement in their collective performances.

First Rehearsal

First rehearsal with the entire cast present starts physically and in recognition of the entire team. My preferred method is a simple physical gesture collectively performed that signifies the start of rehearsal, recognizes the humanity of collaborators in the room, and utilizes spatial awareness. This physical action is performed in reverse order at the end of rehearsals and by those leaving rehearsal during staggered calls as a way to separate the human from the work of the performer. I implemented the physical gesture after directing *The Medium* because the cast was carrying the performance home with them, and into their daily lives. The cast reported not sleeping well and feeling emotionally burdened. Opera grapples with sex, rape, violence, death, abuse, love, inheritance, and many other giant emotional and traumatic feelings and issues. I wanted my cast to have a way to leave the show in the rehearsal room.

When delving into the physical and emotional manifestations of these elements, the truth of the character can leak into the truth of the person portraying this character. A physical opening and closing gesture can create a sacred time for work on that character. I personally utilize the *Hands to Heart* gesture, which I learned from Chicago based director and scenic designer, John Wilson (who learned this gesture from the School at Steppenwolf- as many elements of theatrical education are handed down through oral tradition and study). This simple gesture incorporates elements of Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints* (specifically soft focus, which I will delve into later). The instructions are simple: allow your eyes to relax to take in as much of the peripheral vision as you can. Observe the entire circle. Then as a collective ensemble, without a leader or follower, the entire group brings their hands to their heart chakras and then extends those hands to the center of the circle, giving their "hearts to the ensemble", and then dropping their hands

to their sides. Of course, *Hands to Heart* has multiple functions for singers. Caroline Shaul found the physicalization to be very effective (though frustrating): “I hate *Hands to Heart* because it makes me live in my body and makes me be responsible for the movements I make. It's the same thing as why it's terrifying as a performer to have a director give you freedom. *Hands to Heart* is a way of pulling us into our bodies. Singers aren't in our bodies, we're in our heads. You start every rehearsal getting everyone in their bodies through physical gesture.” Of course this can be terrifying and frustrating, but it is an immediate physicalization and centering gesture instilling participation. Furthermore, the gesture is reversible: the actor reaches out and puts their hand to their chest at the end of rehearsal as a way of “taking their heart back” and remembering their personhood. In several rehearsal processes, this final step becomes so integral for singer-health in subsequent productions that often a cast member released from rehearsal early would scamper out the door, as their remaining castmates would call after them, “we have your heart!” and the fleeing cast member would dutifully return, grab the air and shove it into their own chest before racing away again. This practice starts and ends every rehearsal and performance.

Adventures in Text Analysis

Text Analysis is also a primary aspect that must be addressed collectively with the cast present. Although music informs the dramatic subtext of each scene in opera, it is the words that come first. As Lehman Engel writes in his book, *Words with Music*, “Since words have always been important in opera, audiences should understand them.” (Engel, 1972, p. 195). I argue that a singer should understand these words first-and this goes beyond a translation. If the text is not in English, I always ask my performers to come

with the text translated. In early rehearsals, we read through the libretto or our personal translations of the libretto. We do not sing the work. We speak it. As Engel (1972) continues to write, “one thing more that all singers must learn. We sing as we speak.” Though observing notes, fermatas, and tempo, we are mostly looking at what we are *saying* and *doing* within the context of the opera. This is the point where I turn to Uta Hagen and the practice of actioning text. We read through the entire libretto, discussing take-aways and important moments in the production. We take into account the music as we tell the story of the opera and who each character is from beginning, middle and end of the opera. Once the identity and wants of each character is defined by the performer playing that character, we can start delving into each character's tactics, often going scene-by-scene and using actions to define what each line is doing to overcome obstacles and achieve each character's goal. This is done through applying action verbs. In the forward of *The Actor's Thesaurus*, the authors write, “actioning provides the stimulation for the actor to directly play each line of text, discouraging him or her from monotonously and automatically replicating a tone” (Caldarone & Willaims, 2003, p. xiii). Though in opera, the tone is literally dictated through music, the ability for specificity still lies in the character. The specificity of not just what a character is singing, but what they are doing through the action of singing, is especially useful in foreign language operas. This must be clear beyond the subtext provided by the underscored music or overtones dictated by the score, as observed by tenor, Matt Peckham in my self issued 2018 survey:

Interestingly, it's very helpful with operas in other languages. I've had directors in the past put a bunch of emphasis on letting the audience know that you know what you are singing, and that becomes way too presentational and icky. Understanding is super important, but only to understand which verbs to attach to specific moments. It ends up being much clearer.

Of course, there is discomfort in speaking the lines, but the ensemble further cements in this shared discomfort and vulnerability. The singers must be invited to share in the collective vulnerability and trust in the process that they will invariably sound silly speaking lines meant to be sung. Caroline Shaul describes the table readings of *The Medium*:

All you made us do was sit at the table and read the entire opera. It was great because it forced everyone to start the process as an equal. It was the first step in creating an ensemble in a show that had no ensemble. It was truly the first time I was in a collaborative environment. It started with the idea that we were all on the same footing. You treated the score like a script. Everybody had an equal voice. We talked about the script and why people were doing things. Everybody had the chance to contribute to every part of that show. Within the first week or two of rehearsals, you created such a strong bond between all of us. Because of that, there was nothing we weren't going to do for you in that show. That's why that show was so successful: you created an ensemble.

What Shaul is describing is singer empowerment and collective support through text analysis.

Physical Dramaturgy

Of course text analysis cannot be done only through discussion. The physical dramaturgy of a piece must also be explored. For this, I turned to Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints*, as well as a warm up I learned in 2012 from staging director, Elizabeth Margolus, called *Flocking*. *Flocking* is a wonderful way to inspire singers to create self-generated movement to music through collective decision making. The procedure is simple: divide the cast into diamond shapes consisting of 4 performers to each diamond. Have all participants face the same direction, announce "if you think you're the leader, you're the leader!" and turn on some music. The movements may start slowly, and tentatively, or they may be quick and hard to follow, but the objectives are the same: move to the music and empower your body-and the shapes. Often from these 15-20 minute warm ups, I would be inspired by the shapes and choreography they would unintentionally create and incorporate it into the scenes we developed that day in rehearsal, of course crediting the singers. I found this final step integral in singer empowerment and celebration. *Flocking* can have additional guidance through textual references. Simply stating a theme or line from the opera before beginning the *Flocking* session with music from similar origins as the opera can generate shape inspired by text while still empowering singers. The act of turning to a performer and saying, "you came up with that" can be transformative in how a cast thinks of themselves as collaborators.

Another essential aspect of singer-led staging is having the performers wordlessly perform the entire opera's text. I say wordlessly perform because this allows room to

incorporate melody, grunts, and other non-verbal communications that would not be allowed in pantomime. I am uninterested in holding a rehearsal that mimics an expensive game of charades. An essential part of this exercise is a return to the text through discussion and highlights of discoveries that were significant through the process. Because this exercise is physically vulnerable for some performers, I recommend a *Flocking* warm up before beginning.

Another staging technique that I have found integral for forming ensembles, exploring physical dramaturgy of the opera, and empowering performers is Anne Bogart's Viewpoints method. *Viewpoints* "...offer an alternative to conventional approaches to acting, directing, playwriting, and design. They represent a clear-cut procedure and attitude that is nonhierarchical, practical and collaborative in nature" (Bogart & Landau, 2012, p. 15). This method also counters the Americanization of the Stanislavski system. Bogart writes that "the inherited problems and assumptions caused by the Americanization of the Stanislavski system are unmistakable evident in rehearsal when you hear an actor say: 'If I feel it, the audience will feel it,' or 'I'll do it when I feel it' When a rehearsal boils down to the process of manufacturing and then hanging desperately onto emotion, genuine human interaction is sacrificed." (Bogart & Landau, 2012, p. 16). This system of staging is particularly useful in opera, as other methods often rely on acting as a discovery of breath, which is not possible in opera where breaths are planned. Instead this allows for planned, "outward in" methods of performance while also furthering collective decision making within the cast. The first step in viewpointing for performers is entering a soft focus and a place of observing the entire room with all senses, not just sight and sound, fostering genuine kinesthetic response to stimulus on

stage that is repeatable. Singers particularly understand this basis of acting as Govertson describes this state of noticing in relation to choral singing, “It's almost like the difference between actual listening and trying to listen for balance. When you're trying to listen for balance, you're not only trying to be aware of other people but you're trying to be aware of your relationship to other people. It's an expanded awareness”. Although *Viewpoints* looks away from Uta Hagen's methods, I aim, in opera, to have the two methods complement each other. Exploration of topography, gesture, rhythm, architecture (among others) can all be informed by text analysis, character development, and the “want”. The “want” just doesn't have to be the constant primary focus. As opera often plays with and manipulates time on stage, *Viewpoints* recognizes that sometimes shape is as integral to the story we are telling as any other aspect of the production.

Though Anne Bogart warns that music can deaden *Viewpointing*, I find that with opera singers, it allows for inspiration and a sense of home when navigating the work in this way.

The ensemble can create great work in these guidelines. I find creating games, landmarks of blocking in pivotal moments in the opera, and cemented relationships are all that is needed for creating the operatic work. Armed with text, physicalization, each other, and the music, the cast will fill in the blanks and only need accountability and encouragement from their director.

CHAPTER 3.

HISTORY OF ACTING IN OPERA

Going into graduate school started with an essential primary question: why were my singer-collaborators holding advanced degrees from reputable universities and still unprepared for rigorous and diverse acting techniques? These collaborators proved continuously that they were capable strong performers, yet often professed lack of security or experience in the acting part of their performance. I repeatedly heard from performers in my rehearsal room that they had never had agency over their acting choices, blocking, or character choices. They continuously would misuse (dangerously) *Method* acting or think of the storytelling in superficial external gestures instead of connected or rooted acting technique to accompany their incredible vocal technique. Once given basic tools and techniques for characterization, these hard working intuitive artists would quickly master techniques usually studied for years within a few weeks. Of course, there was much fear in this unknown, but once that fear subsided, the work quickly flowed and each performer developed their own styles of working and adjusting within a collaboration over the years of working with me. What was happening in vocal education? As Shaul describes her education in her interview, “Singing is such a cerebral existential craft. When singing, you open your mouth and just hope that what you want to come out comes out”. Something is not happening in vocal performance education to adequately prepare singers for acting and singing in opera in a collaborative form where the events of the evening feel as if they are happening for the first time to the audience.

Often singers mentioned to me that they had little to no acting training in undergrad and reflective performance and feedback sessions from a singular opera

director in their graduate program. Performance experience in their school's opera was their acting training and was left to the whims of the resident or hired director. Coaches and vocal teachers would give specific suggestions of movement (i.e. move your arm on this note) without reasoning behind these gestural commands. Sometimes in a rehearsal process, a singer would exclaim mid exercise "oh I've done this before!" but never had a name for the activity. As a consequence, telling singers that we were going to use a *Viewpoints* focused rehearsal process would mean nothing to them until they were wandering around a space examining their topography. Most disturbing in this regard, is gestural instruction without basis. This breeds dependence on teachers and coaches instead of empowering a singer to make choices for themselves in their preparation of a role. The connotation of these singers' off-handed remarks regarding their experiences is that they are not receiving a codified acting education. That is not to say there is not a codified acting technique. There are many. Most notably, the first modern western technique was developed by an opera singer: Francois Delsarte.

The Bastardisation of Delsarte

The most influential acting teacher before Konstantin Stanislavski was an opera singer with a damaged voice: Francois Delsarte. Beginning his vocal studies in 1825 at the Paris Conservatory, he briefly spent time as a tenor in the Opera Comique before damaging his voice. He then turned his attention to coaching theatrical performers on oration. In his teachings, Francois Delsarte developed a codified system of voice and movement. This system went on to be ingrained in how we look at performance and became the foundation for a language in modern dance. As Delsarte's pupil, L'Abbe'Delaumosne wrote in a compilation on Delsarte's system of oratory: "After

several years of diligent study, he discovered and formulated the essential laws of all art; and, thanks to him, aesthetic science in our day has the same precision as mathematical science.” (Delaumosne et al. 1893, p. xvii) This system included pictures of emotive gestures and movements as well as multiple charts and graphs of vocal technique and the correlating effect on the orator’s intended audience. This system proved very popular, spreading to teachers around Europe, Russia, and the United States. With this dissemination of Delsarte’s theories, the intent behind them became progressively diluted, leaving a faint glimmer of the gesture without any technique behind it. Delsarte saw acting (for stage and opera) as “expressing mental phenomena by the play of the physical organs.”(Delaumosne et al. 1893, p. xxvii). He focused on the physical technique of a performer but not without the emotive and connected consequence of the movement. He also considered humans and their physical forms to be “*en rapport* with the physical world, with the spiritual world, and with God” (Delaumosne et al. 1893, p. xxvii). Ironically, one of the western world's first acting teachers prioritized gesture that generated an emotional response (as opposed to generating feelings which cause action), and specifically applied this style to opera, which is an en vogue technique for staging today. His pupil goes on to write, “The myologic or muscular machinery, or gesture, is the language of sentiment and emotion. When the child recognizes its mother, it begins to smile.” (Delaumosne et al. 1893, p.xxvii).

Francois Delsarte studied the gestures and looked to their generating conditions. He believed that in applying these gestures with their intended sources, they could generate strong techniques of acting on stage. He codified every possible detail of the voice and body, observing every cause and correlating movement and documenting them

religiously. As a result, some potentially universal conclusions appeared. The remarkable element of the Delsarte method (later called applied aesthetics as it disseminated) is its attention to detail:

All movements which severely affect the head, the hand, the body and the leg, may affect the whole. Thus the movement of negation is made by the hand. This movement is double. There is negation with direct resolution, and negation with inverse resolution, which is elliptical. The hand recoils as the head recoils, and when the head makes the movement of impatience, the hand rises with the head and says 'Leave me alone, I do not wish to hear you' (Delaumosne et al. 1893, p. 68).

The above description can be seen in the melodramas and silent movies of the recoiling actress. We can laugh at that stereotypical gesture, but when a snake appears in real life, we indeed recoil our hand and head in horror, then the above described double movement does not seem as silly, but instead is an incredibly accurate description of our reality. Delsarte can describe the stereotyped superman pose found in the elbow juxtaposed with the afraid person making themselves as small as possible. "The elbow turned outward signifies strength, power...the elbow drawn inward signifies impotence, fear, subordination..."(Delaumosne et al. 1893, p. 90). When using physicality to create characters, Delsarte has clearly documented every possible movement and its correlating cause or interpreted meaning.

The popularity of this method was its downfall. Empty gestures used as shorthands make empty performances. Without spiritual breath or investigation into the physicality, the emotion and action never get connected and the audience can feel that. Delsarte's careful description of a clenched outstretched hand of power becomes a laughable trope. The clawed contorted hand of anguish becomes the disconnected claw

many baritones are mocked for discovering in their performances, regardless of the truth behind it.

94

GESTURE.

CRITERION OF THE HAND.

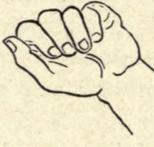
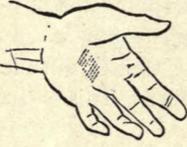
SPECIES.		1	3	2
GENUS.	I	1-II. Ecc.-conc.  Convulsive.	3-II. Norm.-conc.  Tonic or power.	2-II. Conc.-conc.  Conflict.
	III	I-III. Ecc.-norm.  Expansive.	3-III. Norm.-norm.  Abandon.	2-III. Conc.-norm.  Prostration.
	II	1-I. Ecc.-ecc.  Exasperation.	3-I. Norm.-ecc.  Exaltation.	2-I. Conc.-ecc.  Retraction.

Fig. 1 One of Delsarte's charts on gesture and its correlating emotion (Delaumosne et al. 1893, p. 94).

Opera singers are often told to raise an arm at a high note of an aria without reason behind the physicalization of yearning. They are asked to open a hand at a specific moment without the coach or singer fully understanding that this motion often

accompanies exaltation. Instead all parties involved are working off impulses or elements of inherited tropes from teachers past. It should be noted that much of vocal and acting teaching is passed via oral tradition, so much is lost in generational inheritance through misunderstanding of previous teachers or skipped bits of essential information. The result is sometimes hollow action in pursuit of truth or status quo.

Delsarte's legacy lives on in operatic acting, but often misses his most essential element: that "Gesture is the direct agent of the heart" (Delaumosne et al. 1893, p. 44).

The Deification of Stanislavski

The inspiration for the most commonly taught acting system in the United States, Konstantin Stanislavski, would agree with Francois Delsarte's need for gesture to be connected. As he writes in his book *An Actor's Work*, "There must be no gestures for the sake of gestures onstage" (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 362). Founder of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, Stanislavski developed psychological realism and pioneered acting techniques that focused on naturalistic stagings. Unlike Delsarte, Stanislavski started his acting training and studios with theatrical actors and did not develop an opera studio until the last few years of his life.

The first part of Stanislavski's writings, *An Actor Prepares*, took off in the United States. This was a truncated translation by Elizabeth Hapsgood, which eliminated the diary-like nature of the original text and lent itself more toward being treated like a manual than its intended musings and documentation of his methodologies.

The American inheritance of Stanislavski's system in the United States rested on *The Actor's Studio* and its associated teachers, Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and Elia

Kazan among others. Lee Strasberg's methods are similar, but different from Stanislavski's in Strasberg's emphasis on *Emotional Memory* as the center of the acting process, a strategy Stanislavski rejected though he recognized it to be part of his methods. This spread throughout acting studios in the United States, inspiring strong performers for film and stage. Troublingly, Stanislavski did not set out to write any scriptures or set a singular way to act, but there is dogmatic adherence to his writings and methods. The brewing rivalry between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. and their disparate value systems created another problem: in the United States, individualism was held in utmost regard so acting training focused on the singular star preparing for a great role away from the prying eyes of colleagues. While in the Soviet Union, metaphor was considered dangerous and so emphasis on dreary Stalinist naturalism was highlighted. Neither of these quite capture Stanislavski's experimental emphasis on the ensemble-built work and disregard his further writing's emphasis on physicality. Instead they persevered in their respective propagandas.

Often the Americanized interpretations of Stanislavski's methodology are the most readily available acting classes to young opera singers looking to embody a character. As learning Stanislavski's acting styles take many years of intense study to master, what is garnered from these classes tend to heavily emphasize both ends of the U.S.S.R. and U.S. propagandization of Stanislavski's work while also highlighting Strasberg's emphasis on *Emotional Memory*. *Emotional Memory* relies on an actor drawing on past real-life experiences to generate an emotional state similar to that demanded of the character. The idea behind this tool is to bring naturalistic, "real"

emotion into the scene. The problem with an *Emotional Memory* centered acting technique is that it leans toward *Naturalism*, and for opera this is multifold.

Firstly, Opera isn't *Naturalism*. Even Richard Strauss' use of tight librettos and continuous music or Wagner's insistence on "music dramas" disrupting the previous forms of recitative and aria are not *Naturalism*. In my 35 years of life, I have rarely had a musical score underscoring my subtext and actions to anyone who happens to be observing me from the safety of the fourth wall. Subtext can exist in opera librettos, but the word and music live together in equal footing:

In opera, from its very inception, composers were impelled by the word in the writing of their music; but it was the music-when it was full grown-that became the more important to the listeners. Today the two prime elements-the words or libretto and the music-work together in importance. (Engel, 1972, p. 195).

Music often is what provides the undercurrent of subtext for the audience. Operatic stories often encompass large complicated myths, events, and emotions. The form is *meant* to be larger than naturally replicated life.

Secondly, the act of singing and losing oneself in an emotion is physically impossible and gratuitous. Stanislavski spent several years in the 1920s working exclusively with a studio of opera singers and directing them. He disagreed with falling completely into the emotional depth of the character and not referring back to both text and music. When directing *Eugene Onegin*, he told the singer playing Tatiana to look back to our accompaniment: "The orchestra here repeats your theme with thunderous power. But you must come to this point with great caution...when there is a rise it is followed by slightest reaction...until you reach the highest, the culminating point" (Stanislavski & Rumyantsev, 1975, p. 90). The acting-singer is working in conjunction

with music to tell a story and that singer is working hard. As Caroline Shaul reflects on her job as an opera singer:

We are asked to do Olympic feats with very small cartilages and muscles. While we're doing that, we are told to make it look like we are having nuanced emotional reactions. You have to think about your technique and your art. Your technique is not your art. Your technique is your breath support, your diction, releasing tension. I have really bad tongue tension and I always have. Its on my mind every time I sing. There's like twenty things you're thinking about when you're producing a sound. That's your technique.

The physical demand of singing technically well is already incredibly taxing. There are olympic feats occurring internally; pushing air and vibrating muscles at incredible volumes. These physical feats and mental demands of operatic singing do not allow for getting lost in an emotional state. In an opera, you have to return to your technique, the waving baton of the maestro, or to what is happening with your scene partner. “Of course you cannot forget even for a moment that you are onstage...the actors who say that they immerse themselves so completely in their roles that they don’t remember anything...are just making hysterical remarks. An actor laughs and cries but never loses control of himself” (Stanislavski & Romyantsev, 1975, p. 67).

Thirdly (and perhaps most importantly), text analysis and work on operatic theatre is about breath and external rhythm simultaneously informed by the music “This music gives the tone of your feelings...you have to hear in it the reason for what you are doing and how you are to do it, so that your movement will be in harmony with the music” (Stanislavski & Romyantsev, 1975, p.12). He knew that singers were striving for “...a union of their musical, vocal technique and of living their parts in the flesh. This latter required a subtle sense of musical rhythm in order to produce fluent physical

movement of the actors entire physical make up” (Stanislavski & Romyantsev, 1975, p.12). Many of the American acting methodologies spend large amounts of time on discovery of breath and internal rhythms within the moment as spurred on by the text. In opera, the physical demands of singing the repertoire is all about breath and rhythm, but that information comes to the singer from multiple sources. Acting teachers are simply wasting their time worrying about a singer discovering breath when their breathing is already dictated by the demands of the music and their own bodies. An exclusively Americanized Stanislavski based acting technique is insufficient training.

I don't write this to discredit the essential work of Stanislavski and the subsequent teachers of his methods. He transformed the role of the director during his time at the Moscow Opera Theatre. He found common language with singers content to remain devoted to old routines and in the belief that “if a singer has a real voice he does not need any training in acting” (Stanislavski & Romyantsev, 1975, p. 2). I use his methods of sense memory, action, text analysis, and physicalization in operatic work every day. I’m merely positing that focusing exclusively on this method (or *Method Acting*) is insufficient, not to mention potentially psychologically dangerous when emotional memory is so highly prized that a singer/actor traumatizes themselves by reusing difficult memories for each performance. Stanislavski and Delsarte were of similar minds as he writes: “Gestures are not refined. They are muscular” (Stanislavski & Romyantsev, 1975, p. 66). I am positing that there is more than this for the singer and that this methodology of acting in the United States may not be the most effective acting strategy for the singer to utilize when building a character, collaborating, and performing as an artist.

CHAPTER 4.

EXPLORING ACTING EDUCATION WITHIN THE INSTITUTION

I came to Temple because of Brandon McShaffrey. As a director, I have always found the delineation between opera and theatre in academia to be a result of the intensive separate studies required, as opera is a form of theatrical convention, but understand the necessary and complex study of music required of the practitioners of the artform and how the segregation has occurred over the years. However, Professor McShaffrey provides a strong bridge between the two artforms as the teacher of Boyer's Opera Workshop class to both graduate and undergraduate vocal performance majors as well as serving as an instructor in the theatre program. Professor McShaffrey also shares my ideals in singer empowerment in his Stanislavskian goal of "... the absorbing task of molding them into a synthesis of singer-actor-musician" (Stanislavski & Rumyantsev, 1975, p. 1). My goals for my time at Temple were not just to become a better director of music theatre, but to answer the question developed during my formative years at Third Eye Theatre Ensemble: Why were trained opera singers so often unprepared for the demands of staging rehearsals in their training?

I became Professor McShaffrey's teaching assistant in my second year of graduate school at Temple, eagerly observing and assisting his class of both undergraduate and graduate students. Professor McShaffrey's stated goal of the course is to transform singers into singing actors as well as 'citizen artists', meaning highly trained, creative and deeply informed individuals committed to making a difference in the future of our human community through applied artistry; citizens who support and promote the use of artistic expression as a valued tool for creating and sustaining a culture of enlightened and

compassionate citizenship and civility. The class is more about giving singing actors tools to develop their craft independently and to encourage a new way of thinking about their craft. Because the students had a wide variety of prior knowledge and would be going forth to an even wider variety of environments in which they would be required to independently develop characters and perform, the focus in Opera Workshop needs to be on tools they can use that fit their bodies and minds best. Many of these singers had spent their lives training to suppress their feelings in a western culture that prizes stoicism and have complicated relationships with their bodies. The work in the class could not simply be on technique delivery. This class was three equal parts tool discovery, application, and group therapy.

To sufficiently teach acting to opera singers, I utilized an integrated approach that provides a variety of methods without prioritizing a singular avenue of developing character. Furthermore, as instructors we need to celebrate the performers' available tools (their bodies), and -most importantly- scaffold physical training and text based training in an interlocking methodology. Acting and singing are both mental and physical acts. Teaching acting to singers can be best done in an approach that interweaves physical and text based techniques so they can practice multiple strategies towards developing character and applying them to their current projects in the low-risk environment of the class room. However, students first have to unlearn some beliefs about the craft and themselves.

Unlearning First

Overcoming and leveling prior knowledge is the first hurdle. The students in Opera Workshop have a wide variety of acting and performance experience on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. With that variance, they have many misconceptions of what is required of the human body to act as well as final product oriented thinking. Many students focus on emotion or general feeling of a scene instead of the process of acting. Some students coming into their first acting class after years of exclusive vocal training think of acting as a magic moment instead of the result of carefully honed craft that prioritizes performance choices inspired by music, text, and body. Many of these singers come in with potentially toxic misconceptions of acting that obviously came from the realism-based acting methods prevalent in the United States. On the other end of the spectrum, some singers had no stage experience at all. “Assume they don’t even know stage left from stage right” was Professor McShaffrey’s recommendation for my first class. This means that the first day of class’s goals echo the goals of the first day of a rehearsal: physically establishing a shared language and shared set of goals.

My first class with undergraduate actors went beyond reading the syllabus. We defined acting for ourselves and found no sufficient answer, listed our fears about the class, and established some tertiary and basic staging terms in theatre. By basic staging terms, I mean upstage/downstage/cheating out, crossing, etc. However, as the class progressed, I was careful to build an environment where students were free to ask about terms they did not know without shame of lack of prior knowledge.

Telling the class that each methodology brought to them were optional tools and sectioning each method in a “just experiment” attitude allowed for full commitment into

each technique and pulling from what that particular singer needed to further their work. The essential aspect of teaching acting to singers was to give permission to fail.

The larger unlearning that needed to happen with the students, involved a more intimate part of themselves: their complicated relationships with their bodies. As singers, their physical form is their instrument. Their time training as vocalists has been spent within themselves, yet outside of vocal production, there are myriad beliefs surrounding their ability to move, transfer energy, or connect their phonations to their movement. I often hear the words “I can’t dance” or “I’m stiff” from singers. What they mean is “I struggle to imitate choreography” or “I’m so focused on singing, I’ve put all my tension into the rest of my body so I can phonate properly”. Prior experience with toxic performance environments, fat phobia, clumsiness, or strict instruction of hollow gestures from frustrated teachers and directors left singers with uncomfortable (or often hostile) relationships with their instruments. My students were no exception.

The best remedy for discomfort with movement is body celebration through social dance, which is a warm up exercise I learned from Sam Pinkleton. I’m sure hearing this exercise announced as the day’s activity from a grinning professor about to hit play on a music player is absolutely terrifying, but these students chose to major in vocal performance, which is the height of risk and vulnerability to most people. Singers are inherently brave people. They just need to be reminded of that sometimes.

To celebrate bodies in movement, I have everyone form a perfect circle. When students inevitably ask what a perfect circle is, I tell them the circle should be perfect to all of them. Then I put on low, comforting music and lead them in some basic running stretches or a sun salutation. The stretch should not be anything difficult, just something

to awaken the body. While we are stretching I explain that we're going to dance together, that each person is going to lead the dance and if the person leading does not want to anymore, they can shoot their energy towards a new person and then it becomes the new person's job to lead the dance. For these transitions of power, I ask two things of the group:

- 1) Make it clear to whom you are wordlessly passing the leadership
- 2) If you think you are the leader, you are the leader and you need to make an instantaneous choice. Do not just stand there looking panicked. Move! I do not care if it is *The Macarena*. We will call it pastiche.

For those holding leadership, I ask that they warm up the entire group and do what they want the group to do. If you need a slow stretch, that is now dance. If you want to do a 70s dance move, that sounds really fun. For those following the leader, I emphasise the most important part of this exercise: **It is about embodiment of movement, not imitation.** Your body moves through the world differently than any other body so you cannot imitate another person's movements exactly. One must instead strive to embody the gestures and make them their own. If someone has a bad knee and cannot go fully into the lunge that the leader is going into, that is okay. Can they embody the arm movements or intentions of the hips? That is just as important. Additional important aspects of this exercise:

- 1) Make a really fun playlist of music that the participants could not possibly be working on in other environments. In the year 2021, this meant lots of Earth Wind and Fire, Lizzo, Beyonce, and Le Tigre'. It is helpful that many lyrics in these songs focus on joy, self empowerment, and generally being awesome.

- 2) **Do this exercise with them.** In undergraduate school, I was told by one professor that I moved like a post menopausal woman and by another professor that I danced like a muppet. Moving with singers and being honest about my own insecurities around movement is an equivalent vulnerability that I ask of them. They deserve as much. I also always start the dancing as warm-up and demonstration of how leadership and transference of leadership works. I always cheer on leaders, and my fellow movers as we work, giving permission to have fun with their bodies.
- 3) Non-hierarchical and student-led work starts with the playlist. Before a movement session, let them make requests and put in their own music. Have them make it known during a session when their song comes on.

These guidelines are just the beginning of this exercise. I do this exercise regularly with students and singers, encouraging travel through space, announcing themes, and utilizing the collective dance as a way to introduce *soft-focus* from *Viewpoints*. I find that singers discovering their body's ability to generate good feelings, togetherness, and empowerment through movement is a multilateral way for body celebration to begin while also learning spatial awareness, self listening (i.e. my shoulder is sore today so I need to be gentle with my shoulder), movement in conversation with music, energy exchange with other performers, and kinesthetic response.

There are many other elements that need to be unlearned through an acting-for-opera class, but unlearning body hate and learning body love through movement to music is a good place to start.

Unlearning “emotional constipation” is Professor McShaffrey’s specialty. He elegantly guides his students through energy transference through the body, utilizing biomechanical approaches to invoke feelings in performers. He looks at breath patterns and physical gesture as a source of storytelling, pointing out that the breath pattern for laughing and crying are often similar. However, he knows that “Thoughts are embodied in acts...and a man’s actions in turn affect his mind” (Stanislavski, K. & Romyantsev, 1972, p. 4). It’s during these lessons, that Professor McShaffrey has mastered the art of discussing the American prizing of stoicism and suppression of large emotions. With the understanding that feelings are not reality, but instead a potential reflection of reality, an acting instructor can use biomechanical responses to discuss how to separate oneself from one’s feelings and look on those responses analytically. The student has to unlearn stuffing down their feelings or powering through something (“if it hurts, you’re doing it wrong” is a favorite cry of Professor McShaffrey’s and mine) and instead let the big-ness of something flow through, knowing it will pass and it might not necessarily be a crisis. This is reflected in our discussions with students after energy or movement exercises, where we warn students that they may experience sudden crying or exhaustion the evening after class, simply because they have been holding large amounts of tension and feelings in their bodies and this is going to be a biomechanical relief. Professor McShaffrey assures me that these discussions and warnings are now ardently gone through in classes due to years of experience with “freaked out” singers having major biomechanical responses for the first time after years of “stuffing it down”.

It should be noted that these three unlearnings of untruths (acting as magic, body as scary, feelings as permanent) are not a singular event in class. These three discussion

varieties, exercises, and movement focuses must be ongoing and constantly folded and reinforced back into the curriculum as methods are taught and applied throughout the student's learning process.

Demystifying Text

Uta Hagen and Friends on Actioning a Libretto

The first step in teaching text analysis to singers can be found in demystifying the libretto. Just as singers can read music, they can read the words accompanying it. If they can't read the words, they would be advised to translate the score first. David Ball writes in his manual, Backwards and Forwards, that "A play is a series of actions" (Ball, 1983, p. 9) and this is applicable to librettos as well. Even long winding arias are action, either to scene partners, the heavens, or the self. Once a singer understands the physics of a libretto (that each action has an opposite and equal reaction), they are able to look at the movement of the piece in a new light, breathing fire into music that could threaten to be stagnant. One of the first reading assignments my students were given was the first chapter of Backwards and Forwards for this very reason. This is demonstrated through group discussion that looks at the reactionary answer of "fine thanks" to "how are you today?". I then ask the student what was my action, to which they say "you asked me a question?" and I say "what was your reaction?" They tell me they answered me and of course I ask if their reaction was to tell the truth or lie. Either answer leads into motivation and discussion on character. They told the truth because it was the truth. They lied because they wanted the interaction to go smoothly with their professor and avoid emotional vulnerability in a scholastic setting. We immediately turn to scenes in opera, asking why characters do what they do and looking at the structure of an opera as a holistic series of actions.

It can be said that Temple University's theatre program is an Uta Hagen (or Method) based acting program. Many of the acting students have Hagen's *Respect for Acting* as an assigned textbook in multiple classes and return back to her methods of text analysis. Not only an accomplished actor, Hagen is considered one of the greatest acting teachers in United States history. Many of her methods can trace back to Stanislavski and both her books, *Respect for Acting* and *A Challenge for the Actor*, considered essential reading for the blossoming actor. Hagen's teachings are a deep influence on acting pedagogy throughout the United States and there is no exception to acting work. When working with monologues and character building, many of her techniques can be referenced in an operatic acting class, but time constraints beg faculty to be specific about what part of her work can be highlighted the most. I find her most useful and immediate teaching is in the 24th chapter of her second book, *A Challenge for the Actor: Scoring the Role*. In this chapter, we get an applicable method that is "founded on the exploration of all the whos, whens, wheres, whys, whats, and hows that are inherent in the how they relate to the role" (Hagan, 1991, p. 257). Although it seems crazy to point to the final chapter of a book for guidance, its summary can lead us to the other materials in tasking singers with developing character. From this chapter, the following worksheet is distributed to the students:

Uta Hagen's 9 Questions
Worksheet

Uta Hagen's - 9 Questions

1. WHO AM I?

(All the details about your character including name, age, address, relatives, likes, dislikes, hobbies, career, description of physical traits, opinions, beliefs, religion, education, origins, enemies, loved ones, sociological influences, etc.)

Name:

Physical traits:

Relationship with other characters:

Education:

Beliefs:

Fears:

2. WHAT TIME IS IT?

(Century, season, year, day, minute, significance of time)

3. WHERE AM I?

(Country, city, neighborhood, home, room, area of room)

4. WHAT SURROUNDS ME?

(Animate and inanimate objects-complete details of environment)

5. WHAT ARE THE GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES?

(Past, present, future and all of the events)

6. WHAT IS MY RELATIONSHIP?

(Relation to total events, other characters, and to things)

7. WHAT DO I WANT?

(Character's need. The immediate and main objective)

8. WHAT IS IN MY WAY?

(The obstacles which prevent character from getting his/her need)

9. WHAT DO I DO TO GET WHAT I WANT?

(The action: physical and verbal, also-action verbs)

Fig 2. Handout from Brandon McShaffery for Opera Workshop

As teachers, we can ask our students to constantly refer back to this as a sort of checklist in forming their character. Furthermore, I ask students to act as detectives when going through their score and libretto. Often the answers to these above questions are in the text and the clues pointing us to these answers are in the music. The impulse to make up answers is there, but if these worksheet is kept with their score and used as a text analysis tool, suddenly action in the scene is not coming from nowhere or elements of their choices are not extensions of the performer, but instead extensions of the characters in the opera.

The last three of Hagen's questions (what do I want, what is in my way and what do I do to get what I want) are a launching pad for the next element in teaching text analysis for opera singers: actions.

One of the wonderful things about opera is its inherent structure. Once you know who your character is and why they are in the scene, you can start breaking down the libretto into bits of action or tactic, just like an actor would for a play. Armed with The Actors Thesaurus, blossoming singing actors begin the scouring of their words for clues, identifying their tactics and giving them playable actions. The essential part of this table work with the singers is to have them return to the music as a check-in. If I think my first verse is a lure and my next verse is a challenge in my character's efforts to seduce my scene partner, does the music support that? What is required of my body to sing the notes asked of me by the composer? Due to opera being a marriage of text and music, this "check-in" is essential, as the two motivators keep the performer honest to the text.

An exercise I did with my students to culminate the text analysis unit was to look at a 10 minute opera. The ability to look at a shorter work in its entirety gives the students

space to read the opera, look at the music, and break down the opera into chewable pieces. Worksheets, thesaurus, and libretto in hand are their tools as they play detective. They first look at the entirety of the piece and answer as much of Uta Hagen's questions as they can. The singers look at what they think is happening in the opera as a whole and what they think their character is doing there. Then, they break it down into bits, reading out the libretto and marking when they think a tactic has changed. They highlight their clues and fill in their worksheet as they learn. Students are instructed to think of their objective, and look for tactic changes when they think they have accomplished their immediate goal or when there is no way for their current tactic to continue working. After the first three or four bits have been identified and tactics have been applied, we check these findings with the music. What are our clues? What have we found? Of course, with permission to fail, we start again; changing answers and trying new elements, building our arsenal with possible choices when staging and singing the opera as we go, knowing that the characters being built are inseparable from the choices those characters make and the world those characters inhabit.

This is only one of many ways to tackle text. Uta Hagen's methods are excellent for *Realism*, but we often are not working in the style of *Realism* and understanding character through text may be better understood through physical dramaturgy. Another method for tackling text is to look at the language itself, seeing the sentences in a libretto as one would look at a musical phrase. Upon the recommendation of Professor McShaffrey, we look at monologues out of Shakespeare plays and the structure of the language. This has a dual pedagogical purpose: the poetry of the writing reflects many librettos and the old English isn't how modern English speakers use language so it forces

students to translate the text into words they personally understand. Taking away the distraction of the language forces the students to ask: Where is the punctuation telling me to breath? What are the feelings of the words themselves and what am I actually saying?

After a translation, the words are tried again, looking at the mouth feel and language. I then begin *Bodyscripting*.

I developed *BodyScripting* as a tool for directing and choreographing burlesque. This was jokingly called “rose-ography” by my collaborators. I met Tamar Radoff, a choreographer who had (much) further developed the technique and called it “bodyscripting” during my 2017 participation in the LaMama Umbria Director’s Symposium. Capitalizing on her understanding of Bodyscripting, I cast aside the term “rose-ography” and applied Tamar’s *Bodyscripting* method to text analysis and devised movement for music theatre.

Bodyscripting is an examination of specific body parts in relation to other specific body parts or surrounding architecture and building a script of these correlating movements, applying timing to these bodyscripts from the text or music. The specificity of the body part is the most essential aspect of this technique. It must go deeper than to script the left index finger’s exploration with my right hip. Firstly, practitioners must recognize the three dimensionality of the body; that the right hip has a front, back, and two sides and that the hip bone itself is three dimensional. Within this understanding, can the practitioner of *Bodyscripting* say “ the inner pad of my left index finger’s distance from the outer front top part of my hip bone” is the first line and the second line of the script saying “my middle inner pad of my left index finger to inner side of my right thigh bone” and so on.

Once a performer has read through and “translated” their monologues, they break it into playable chunks. Then, they set the monologue aside and develop a body script. The number of bodyscripts can add up to the number of bits the monologue has been already broken into, but does not have to. This script is thoroughly “written” and performed as movements while saying the script out loud. Once this has been thoroughly explored, the Bodyscript is applied to the text of the monologue, with the duration of each movement being informed by the meanings of the words in the monologue. These body scripts can then be explored in size, creating either subtle or exaggerated movement that correlates with text and is singer driven gesture instead of gestures pasted on after memorization. Of my students, I found the biggest change to be in Marie.¹ She started the course struggling converting verbing and text analysis to physical action in her spoken work, but with *Bodyscripting*, she was allowed to experiment with how her body *wanted* to move and was then able to embody the text. She could then use her *Bodyscript* to intuitively find the changes in tactics in her monologue and explore them from an “outside in” perspective. Another student found this technique to be valuable in creating larger physical choices and exploring extremities in gesture, instead of keeping her work small and subtle, afraid of “doing too much”.

These two methods of examining text in opera require consistent return. Each new project tackled in class required a return to Uta Hagen’s work, actioning, and *Bodyscripting*, always in concert with each other.

¹ Names of students have been changed to protect identities

Singer as Athlete

A singer's task of performance is as much physical as it is scholarly. Aside from the physical requirements of singing, there are the physical requirements involved in performance that are athletic in nature. "The ability to govern the use of one's arms and hands are musts for the singer-actor" (Stanislavski & Romyantsev, 1975, p. 4). Building physical stamina and control of one's body is integral to learning how to effectively perform the story while also executing the astonishing physical feats required for effective operatic singing. Developing a strong scholar athlete that is needed for effective operatic performance is a twofold pedagogical approach: teaching physical tools of developing characters and teaching singers daily exercises they can implement to strengthen their acting muscles.

Singers, just like actors, need to have a set of exercises within their toolbox that they can apply to their practice sessions so as to strengthen their physical bodies in the practice of acting, just like they practice their scales. Professor McShaffrey introduced me to Micheal Chekhov's techniques. Chekhov's acting technique focuses on external gesture informing the internal world of the performer, creating a healthy sustainable feedback loop of informed, performer driven gesture, continuing the quest of Delsarte and Stanislavski.

My favorite exercise Professor McShaffrey taught our class focused on this external/internal body work through something that can best be described as radiating. After a series of tension releasing exercises, the students develop a neutral standing position with unlocked knees. They are then asked to imagine a small golden orb of energy in their center. They are instructed to imagine this orb as a perfect golden light and

then asked to move it throughout their body, up their chakras and through their limbs, each part of themselves until returning to their center. They are then asked to expand the imagined orb of energy into something the size of a softball and move that around their body. This expansion continues until the energy is filling their entire body, then the golden perfect light can go beyond their body, careful to remember the singers' three dimensionality, sending that energy into the ground above their head and through both their back and front. Once this is mastered, the energy is contracted back into their bodies and then manipulated, changing in color (and correlating tone) and location. This begs what is a red energy shooting out of the top of your head or green energy trailing off your back and what this does to your intentions and body. My student, Joshua, who had previously studied martial arts, found this to be incredibly valuable and didn't just use this as a daily meditation before vocal practice, but incorporated this technique into his acting.

Another Chekhovian technique is an exercise within a poem, having the singing actors recite back the poem with large correlating gestures. This effectively awakens the body and allows for connectivity.

Another examination of this energy movement as athletic work within the body, is the understanding that there is physics to action. Having an actor pull their energy back before going forward, imaging resistance to their steps forward through specified imagery, or other physicalizations of energy work within their bodies create powerful performance tools and exercise their acting muscles so they can perform without compromising their vocal techniques.

As for physical techniques for exploring character, I am going to focus on two methods taught to singers at Temple University: *Laban* and *Viewpointing*.

Utilization of *Laban* Movement Analysis is another powerful codification of physical effort for singers, allowing them to combine efforts of movement to create physical storytelling. I learned this technique from Temple professor, Maggie Anderson in my graduate studies. Singers find *Laban* useful as it quickly codifies specific gestures outside the context of text analysis or emotion generation.

Effort	Weight	Time	Space	Imagery
PRESS	firm	sustained	direct	firm, sturdy, pull, squeeze, massive, powerful, deliberate, muscular tension.
FLICK	gentle	sudden	indirect	quiver, sparkle, crisp, flutter, whisk, twitch, ripple, frisk, jump, turn, leap.
PUNCH	firm	sudden	direct	vigorous, pierce, spurt, impact, thrust, lunge, jolt, tough stamp, jump, clap.
FLOAT	gentle	sustained	indirect	stir, gentle, undulate, buoyant, vaporous, hover, roundabout, caress, soft, legato, gather.
WRING	firm	sustained	indirect	torturous, convoluted, powerful, twisted, knotted, writhe, screw, gnarled.
DAB	gentle	sudden	direct	dart, shoot, crisp, pointed, spritely tap, patter, bouncy, staccato, agitated, disjointed.
SLASH	firm	sudden	indirect	hit, whip, beat, swipe, throw, fling, splash, sprawl, rip, tear, scatter.
GLIDE	gentle	sustained	direct	smooth, calm, lullaby, soothing, stroking, straight, legato, linger, silence.

Fig. 3 The Eight Efforts of Laban

The Eight Efforts of *Laban* allow for experimentation in gesture within text without compromising the voice. When teaching this exploration, Professor McShaffrey and I first had singers look at each gesture separately and then apply it to their monologues, creating scripts of efforts similar to the scripts in *Bodyscripting* before application. The crucial jump is when then applying the efforts to an aria, as this portion involves careful

scaffolding. I find giving the singer permission to not concern themselves with their vocal technique when first applying the scripts is essential for implementation, otherwise all is lost in the name of proper singing.

A personal favorite physicalization is a modified workshop focusing on Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints*. During my time teaching Temple's Opera Workshop course, I have implemented three *Viewpoints* workshops with the combined graduate and undergraduate classes. The workshops consisted of 2-3 classes and focused on a performer's relationship with space, time and each other. Heavily utilizing Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's *The Viewpoints Book* as a handbook for leading the workshop, I modified the workshop for use in opera to further the concepts of body celebration and singer empowerment. For this section, I will not go into details of Bogart and Landau's techniques, because those looking for the specific exercises can refer to their guide, but rather will focus on my modifications and their effects on the students at Temple. I start my Viewpointing with my singers with Sam Pinkleton's devised dancing I described in the Unlearning section. While stretching and before putting on the music, I separate myself from the group, instead moving around the space and discussing how we receive information. I invite the group to examine the non visual and non aural listening methods available to them. I ask them to recognize that they receive and react to information through smell, taste, touch, and their internal selves. I ask them to focus on movement and touch, that movement across the room or a breeze isn't heard or seen, but instead felt by their skin. This is an integral part to beginning a *Viewpointing* session for a novice, especially one who has spent most of their life living in an aural or visual information receipt environment that

values analytical logic. Once this is accepted and explored by the individual, we can move on to soft focus. I often explain soft focus as it was explained to me by Leon Ingulsrod in the two *Viewpointing* workshops I took from him: It is being in a state of noticing and by listening; you are halfway there. Now allow your focus to literally soften, embracing the peripheral. You can take your hands and put them together in front of your face. Then separate them pulling them around your head while they are on the outer limit of your periphery. Breathe through this and relax. You are now in a state of noticing. You are in soft focus.

After *softfocus* is established, we dance. The class listens to each other utilizing their *softfocus* to stay together. It livens the bloodstream, tires the body so it can react instinctively, and is a lot more fun than running in a circle together as Bogart recommends. After a bit of dancing, I turn off the music and let them get water, practicing the return to the “perfect circle” and *softfocus*. After the return, the group is instructed to jump collectively as a performance piece, with no leader or follower. This instruction is often returned to. After their perfect jump, they are invited to explore the space.

From here, I immediately jump to *tempo* and *topography*, combining spatial relationships with understandings of rate of activity. As musicians, singers understand variances of tempo faster than most performers. The *topography* and *tempo* can also be utilized in conjunction with relationships to each other and the other *Viewpoints*.

Over the class periods, we explore each of the nine *viewpoints*, remembering where it is fun or interesting and when we are starting to create story. We sometimes work in silence and sometimes turn back on the music, learning how to move in

conversation with music instead of concert. Singers with any group singing experience quickly understand the kinesthetic response required and take to *Viewpointing* quickly. The stickiest point is getting the students to think non-literally about architecture and shape. I'm often finding myself in these workshops with opera singers returning to shape with different instructions in order to get different understandings and explorations from them.

One aspect of leading these sessions is to focus on what they are doing right, not what they are still working to understand. Many of these singers are feeling strongly outside of their element and are taking great physical risks in front of their colleagues. Any shame or self judgement coming into the room is antithesis to the goals of creating strong empowered and educated singers capable of making bold acting choices from an informed position. They need encouragement and positive reinforcement as they tackle these ethereal concepts.

In the final 30 minutes of the final class, I review what we've covered and give the final assignment: they are to collaboratively develop a 5 minute performance to a piece of music of their choice that incorporates a highlight of each of the *Viewpoints* we covered. I normally leave out some inspirational props such as parasols, fabric, heavy rope, baby dolls, balls, or fans around the room as well. They are to create this piece wordlessly but collaboratively, using *Viewpoints*. Then I put the music on repeat and I leave the room. I could not tell you what my students do in that 20 minutes because I leave it up to them. To be empowered, people need to accomplish the task themselves without worried "mama birds" chirping on the sidelines. What I do know is that there is

normally a request for some Philip Glass and when I return, there are some pretty creative and cohesive performances that the students are proud of.

Aside from these techniques, we also incorporate traditional dance, Grotowski, and Pachinko style clowning, all in an effort to explore movement and empower singers to make strong choices and understand their bodies' capabilities.. An informed singer is a singer that can make healthy choices and combine their methods to build strong characters and effectively collaborate with their directors and fellow singers.

Creating the Citizen Artist in Opera

One the second day of class, I utilize an old Stanislavski exercise: I have the singer stand, walk up to a chair, sit, look at their audience, stand and return to their original seat in the audience. We then reflect on how it felt, what the actions involved in doing the exercise entail, and what others observed. The goal of the exercise is twofold: to be comfortable in the simple action without adding any flourish or self-consciousness and to face their audience as they truly are. In Professor McShaffrey's Opera Workshop syllabus, he states the following:

As an artist and an educator I strive to instill in my students an ethical aspiration to become true Citizen Artists; highly trained, creative and deeply informed individuals committed to making a difference in the future of our human community through applied artistry; citizens who support and promote the use of artistic expression as a valued tool for creating and sustaining a culture of enlightened and compassionate citizenship and civility (McShaffrey, 2020, P. 3).

In my time studying teaching acting methods to vocal performance students at Temple under the tutelage of Professor McShaffrey, I have adapted this ethos. I firmly believe that to create strong singing actors, they must be fully empowered in their education in a

holistic manner. The pedagogical goals I have adopted with singers have created admittedly a variety of results based on the singer's willingness to explore, take ownership of their artistry, and look at their world as compassionate citizens. We return to this chair exercise at the end of the end of the semester, asking ourselves if we are more comfortable with ourselves as we are in simple action? Are we more willing to face our final collaborator, the audience?

This is not the only time we interact with the chair as a scene partner. Professor McShaffrey has the students build a duet with their chairs and in a Pachinko clowning exercise they sit as their clowns. Under the microscope of performance, we find ourselves often returning to a piece of furniture we spend much of our time interacting with.

I find that as an arts educator, you can deliver as many techniques for them to pull from as you know, but that is meaningless without scaffolded integration and the purpose behind it. The techniques constantly return to each other and often coexist harmoniously. Rarely can you fully develop a character or act in an opera on Uta Hagen's Method or through *Viewpointing* alone, but rather through a combination of two or more of these techniques. Careful scaffolding and technique dovetailing in application to role studies, arias, and scenes is integral for the information to settle and become master-able. Furthermore, the temptation to return to the comfort of prior knowledge is strong, particularly in regard to the belief that acting is magic instead of a carefully honed technique or a belief about one's body and emotional state. The unlearning tactics must be revisited almost every class through discussion, body celebration, and analysis.

As for purpose, Professor McShaffrey is fond of asking, "where's the BEEF?" He's borrowing from Chekhov's concept of the 3 brothers: Beauty, Ease, and Form and

adding entirety so the whole self and piece is engaged. He teaches this through the chair duet, leading the students through discovering the beauty of their assigned chairs, exploring what can be done with the chair with a sense of ease, how it can engage the whole self as a duet, and finally the form as a beginning middle and end complete. Taking this to the entirety of the artform through the lens of the citizen artist is how we create whole artists through the opera workshop class, leaving me with the only remaining desire for more semesters with the singers so they can more fully hone their techniques and individual physical voices.

CHAPTER 5.

THE FUTURE OPERA DESERVES: CONCLUSIONS

During my time with Third Eye Theatre Ensemble, I found seven ethical components to creating ensemble work: **bravery, honesty, listening, consent, kindness, vulnerability, and dignity**. Any rehearsal process that does not prioritize these elements takes the incredibly skilled singer, strips them of their unique voice, and gives them a sense of being replaceable. Disempowering the singer robs the opera of the artists' valuable insight and enthusiastic consent in staging the work. It is also mean-spirited. Singers deserve better.

This is also true in the educational setting. Vocal students deserve to learn their craft in environments where they are able to be brave, honest, listening, consenting, kind, vulnerable, and dignified.

Students must be in environments where they can cultivate their whole selves and hone their techniques as citizen artists. Stanislavski writes, "Technique is only of value on the stage when you forget all about it" (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 68). To release technique, one has to trust one's body and so many performance pedagogies focus on technique to the point that singers no longer trust their bodies, but instead are reliant on being fed dramaturgy, gesture, and notes. We must teach singers to trust themselves, their impulses, and their technique so that they can live truthfully in their imaginary circumstances and wash us in the cascade of aural and visual storytelling that is inherent to opera. This can be done through empowering and informing the singer so they no

longer need a teacher or coach, just themselves and their collaborators. Stanislavski, Delsarte, Hagen, and Chekhov strove to connect the outward gesture with the inner life of the artist and the artist deserves the chance in their education to take ownership of their gesture and connect it with whatever technique suits them best.

One ensemble of singers in Chicago creating vulnerable raw work in intimate venues and a cohort of students under the guidance of Professor McShaffrey in Philadelphia is insufficient. Opera and her creators deserve to have the historic blending of stagecraft, text, and music fully interweaved respected and fostered industry-wide through brave, honest, listening, consenting, kind, vulnerable, and dignified environments.

In order for this to become a reality, I propose that opera and opera education in the United States refocus a portion of its energies to singer-led staging and collaborative world building so as to create strong vulnerable performances from singers in myriad venues to myriad styles that operatic staging provides. As much as the singer deserves to be able to approach the chair fully as themselves and stare back at their audience, the artform and the audience deserve to see that singer fully themselves, which is the most beautiful element the artform can offer.

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APPENDIX

COLLECTED COLLABORATOR INTERVIEWS

Personal Interview.

Interviewed by Rose Freeman 10 January 2019.

Transcribed by Ann Krietman February 2019

Rena Ahmed

Artistic Director of Third Eye Ensemble. Performed in *The Medium*, *Dark Sisters*, *With Blood*, *With Ink*

Mezzo-Soprano

So we know each other from Third Eye which is in it's sixth season, collaborators for 5-6 years. Let's start with The Medium. What do you remember about that process?

First, we did a music rehearsal. Early on, we all sat on the floor and wrote about different emotional experiences we had had and could share them with the group or keep them to ourselves.

You write down a specific moment in your life and a way it changed you and then who you were after that moment in your life. And then you pick a repetitive task and you shared that story. Was that useful at all?

To some extent. Some people aren't in touch with their emotions at all. So in terms of getting in touch with your emotions and who you are, it can be useful. Depending on the person. Everything depends on the person. What works for me might not work for someone else. It helped me learn about my cast mates. Some people did share their moments. I remember Angie shared hers, I don't think I shared mine. Mine was too deep.

Can you talk about how the Third Eye Process uses ensemble building?

When we built the company, we talked about how we wanted it to be very ensemble-based. We have a no-divas policy basically. Everybody is equal and is an equal part of what's going on onstage. We've hopefully done a good job of making people feel that and I think its a big reason why people want to work with us and enjoy working with us. In terms of how we've accomplished that, some of it is the exercises we do with the movement stuff and flocking. Part of it is an attitude. I've had a lot of negative experiences in the field of opera and so I tried to build a company around the kind of experience I would want as a performer.

So what do you want/not want as a performer and how does Third Eye achieve that?

I want everybody to feel supported and that they are free to explore what they are doing onstage. There's no judgement, they can experiment, they can make strong choices or just choices. It doesn't have to be the right choice, but feeling the freedom to do that without judgement or fear of looking like a fool. I've been very focused on casting and having double-casts. I want people to feel equal and not one better or favored cast. We do that by speaking about the casts without hierarchy (no A & B).

We normally just diversify the cast.

Yea I don't think we even name them. I think for all performances, we always have different people together.

Freedom to make choices in the room as a performer: Were there specific exercises that facilitated that?

Yea, flocking and a lot of the movement exercises helped facilitate that. Building relationships with the people you're onstage with and feeling like you can trust them is so important. It's about going beyond trusting your director so you know you won't look like a fool but trusting the people you're onstage with and feeling comfortable enough that you can make mistakes. The field of opera can be very competitive with backstabbing and trash-talking. There's a sense of judgement on perfection.

And you don't feel like we have a lot of that in our rehearsal process

I do not. I think it's part of the culture we've created. I don't know how exactly, but part of it is that we're focused on it. There's multiple components: we try to pick people who we think are going to play well together, that's a big part of it. Our audition process is super valuable because its going to tell you, when you're in a room with a bunch of opera singers who have never moved before, if they're willing to play or not. If they're apprehensive, then you talk to them about it and you find out what's going on and why its scary.

Audition process: Music + personality + willingness to explore

I've not sat on the other side of the table at any other company so I can't say for sure if what we do is unique but in opera, obviously the voice is very very important. In my mind, it has to be the number one thing, because without it, you can't have anything. The voice has to be there. But beyond that, it's how does the person present themselves dramatically. Its more than what they do while they're singing their aria.

What is that? What are we looking at there from your perspective?

We look at how they take direction. Do they make a choice when given direction? Can they make two different choices? They don't have to make the most brilliant choices, but they should at least be willing to try something else. That's part of what we look for. To me, it's a willingness and an openness that not everybody has.

Callbacks: Open Viewpoints: shape, topography, physical listening. What are we looking for there?

What I look for is someone's body language, how are they taking in the information. I watch how they respond to what you are telling them. I watch how they interact with each other. You can tell if somebody is really uncomfortable with something. We've had those people.

But if they have the emotional honesty - willingness to try again, they're cool

The one big fail we had, she did not go through our callback process. Had she gone through it, would we have had a clue.

Performer is consenting to process as much as director is consenting to having them be a part of the process

Callbacks are like an interview: two-sided. The company is interviewing you, and a lot of people focus on that, but truly you should be interviewing the company as well. You should be finding out about their culture, do they value work/life balance? I equate it to that because I have experience in the corporate world. But I don't think it's how a lot of artistic organizations operate.

There are a lot of organizations that hold onto the power of picking people. It happens in theatre and musical theatre too, it's not specific to opera. I am a performer, I know what it's like to go into an audition and I have tried to create a welcoming atmosphere where we listen to people, we're not just "out to lunch."

I've been in auditions where you think people are not paying attention to you, and whether or not that's happening, you can't control that. And I've heard enough audition horror stories of directors where they put performers through 100 different pieces for no reason. But I feel like we try to at least be nice and kind.

How do we build trust through the process?

At this point, part of the performer's trust for us is reputation. Word on the street is that people want to work for us.

You're usually very honest about acknowledging that something might change or not work. Because there's a willingness on your end to work on things, it's a collaborative process rather than a director saying "go there and stay there." You can't build any trust ordering performers about. It's a collaborative process and a two-way street so they learn to trust what the director is saying.

Lack of choreography is our strength. And a willingness to admit when I'm wrong.

You have a vision even if you can't always articulate it. You don't have a plan but a vision. Some directors come in with very specific ideas, you have some idea of what it should look like...and I get the sense that that idea changes throughout the process as more information becomes available based on what's happening on the stage.

Do you think the singers know that they are "the information" that becomes available?

I think some of them do. Some are probably clueless.

Building connections with your ensemble

More often than not in opera processes, there isn't ensemble building. That's something that happens more in theatre and sometimes musical theatre. I find it very valuable to work as an ensemble and gain trust.

Is it doing something together that's scary?

That could be part of it. Even being aware of one another and aware of spatial relationship is helpful. Any ensemble-based exercise where you're having to interact with another person. We've done a lot of different things.

It's more than what you get elsewhere. Just doing an exercise at the beginning of every rehearsal where you have to tune in to the people around you sets you up for being part of an ensemble. You're not just up there alone.

Is it valuable that we do that every rehearsal or a workshop prior to the rehearsal period?

Every rehearsal. With Jen, we did some movement at the beginning but as we went through staging, we never revisited it. I didn't really like that. Somehow it all came together in the end and we had a great cast that got along and played well with each other. But for myself as a performer, I wanted to do something at the beginning of rehearsal to put me in touch with the people in the room.

Sometimes we would do hands to heart. I don't personally love hands to heart but apparently other people do. Sometimes I don't think people understand what it is or how it should be used, and that's my frustration with it.

Gotta do viewpoints or soft-focus early on

In the most recent rehearsal process we didn't talk about soft-focus at all. There were a few people who didn't want to wait for the impulse, they just wanted to lead.

How did you learn to just let something happen and let go of leading?

Its been a process. I've never had a moment of just getting it, its a journey that I'm following. Flocking can help people understand how that works. Give and take...that there's not always the same person leading or following.

Personal Interview.

Interviewed by Rose Freeman 10 January 2019.

Transcribed by Ann Krietman February 2019

Caroline Louisa Shaul

Lyric Soprano

Forest Fantasies/Lingerie Lyrique, The Medium, Filthy Habit, Shaulshank Redemption, Punk Punk, Cornerstone

Lets talk about Lingerie Lyrique and Armeida

The first "Rose Rehearsal" was well into Armeida, which makes me think you were more concentrated on Mary.

While Forest Fantasies was your first time doing opera, it had all the hallmarks of your processes. You set up a unique environment of collaboration and giving performers agency and yet you were still clearly the leader and director. The first thing I remember is that we would be wearing white lingerie with nothing underneath and getting wet. All of us were resistant and uncomfortable. But as the rehearsal process continued, we became more comfortable and you gave us the agency to make decisions to be comfortable with the art we were making. At first, none of us felt comfortable enough in our own bodies as performers to pull it off. There were burlesque performers in the show and comparatively, they were so comfortable in their bodies and themselves. But as the process went on, you kept making us feel strong, enfranchised, and beautiful. By doing that, you made this very risky thing our own choice.

You have a very clear vision. Even though you knew you would be met with resistance from your performers, you didn't force anything on us. You provided the suggestion and when you met resistance, you offered solutions. We thought we were saying no, but you helped us get us to the point where we wanted to say yes.

The performers were in a scary place. We didn't know you, we were working with an unfamiliar medium. The idea of burlesque is fun but the actualities of being under contract to do it is different.

Your style of opera directing has bloomed from that one scene.

How did you get that comfortable?

It comes back to you loving us until we love ourselves. There has been a moment in every show we've done together where you loved me until I loved myself, and that's when the art starts happening. When we get to the point where we love ourselves with or without you, that's when the art starts getting made. Its even more important in opera because the culture of opera is very contradictory.

Being trained as a classical singer in undergrad, there was a dichotomy of valuing the art of opera and how hard it is to understand and do, making you incredible special to be an opera singer. We were better than the musical theatre kids because of all the theory, grand tradition, and seriousness of our craft. We were the REAL musicians. We are taught about how special we are and how special the art form is. But within that world, you are constantly told you are replaceable, that it doesn't matter how hard you work, or how pretty you are, there is always going to be somebody better than you. Even if they don't teach you that, they let you know that you are not unique enough to hold space in the operas you are in. If you are cast and you get sick, you're out.

Nobody is given any sense of what you bring to the process which is a unique artistic voice that no one can replicate.

I grew up with Renee Fleming being the most famous soprano in the world. But when she put out albums that weren't exactly what we thought she should do, we all crucified her. She was our idol but when she put out that blues album, we all made fun of her. When she got older, we were awful to her. And she's the best Mozart singer of her generation.

We are taught to believe we are better than everybody else but in our own world, we're not good enough for anything.

Vocal training wears you down?

Vocal training is so different depending on the teacher you have. Its not just personality differences, its major pedagogical differences. Singing is such a cerebral existential craft. When you're playing piano, you can see your instrument, and you know the keys will produce the note you're expecting to come out. When singing, you open your mouth and just hope that what you want to come out comes out. You can't show anybody what you're doing with your voice because nobody can see your vocal chords. My teacher can't show me what her vocal chords are doing, she can't see what mine are doing. Everything we do is based on the assumption that you open your mouth and sound comes out.

Living in your head a symptom of vocal training?

Yes. We are asked to do the impossible. We are asked to do Olympic feats with very small cartilages and muscles. While we're doing that, we are told to make it look like we are having nuanced emotional reactions.

You have to think about your technique and your art. Your technique is not your art. Your technique is your breath support, your diction, releasing tension. I have really bad tongue tension and I always have. It's on my mind every time I sing. There's like twenty things you're thinking about when you're producing a sound. That's your technique.

How do you marry technique with acting?

That's the great question as a performer: how much are you thinking about singing while you're onstage vs losing yourself in the story? Your job is to have the audience suspend disbelief. To convince them that not only are you in a different location, but that what is happening has never happened to you before. While trying to sing. And trying to push out every personal foible you've encountered while being taught to sing. You have these extra layers of neuroses from teachers, directors, conductors, or cast members.

What is the job of the singer when performing opera?

My job is to...

- 1- Technically sing well
- 2- Follow the orchestra/piano/conductor
- 3- Manage the ego of the conductor who thinks they are in charge
- 4- Surround self with castmates doing the same thing
- 5- Words
- 6- Blocking
- 7- Art (emoting, becoming the character successfully)

Simultaneously.

Something always has to give. You'll have technically perfect singers who can't act. Singers who let go of technique to invest in the acting. Maria Callas is famous not because she was the most beautiful singer in the world but because she was brave enough to make ugly sounds during ugly moments.

That's the kind of singer I am. I think ugly sounds should be part of your vocal repertoire. Opera deals with intense emotions. Opera is what life would be like if we felt and never thought.

It's hard. Opera singing is hard. It made the transition into straight theatre easy. Its so much easier to just act. Cornerstone put me through the ringer but my only job during that show was to act. I didn't have to think about anything else.

Acting as meditation...

It's like step five for opera singers if you're doing it right. If you take your job to completion, it is a meditation that you lose yourself in. While you are doing ten other things.

Lets circle back to opera. Can you talk about The Medium?

It was the first time I had ever done a table read before an opera. I hated every minute of it. It was awkward and nobody knew what they were doing. It was the first rehearsal so everybody was already sizing each other up. People are used to the usual pissing contest of the first couple rehearsals of who is the best singer, actor, or who knows the director/conductor.

All you made us do was sit at the table and read the entire opera. It was great because it forced everyone to start the process as an equal. It was the first step in creating an ensemble in a show that had no ensemble. That led to the double casting being a collaboration instead of a competition or a threatening replacement. My double was a younger version of me, we had gone to the same undergrad, she was prettier than me. I was playing mind games with her at the callback, I knew exactly who she was but I didn't let her know that. I let her figure out who I was in the way I wanted her to know who I was. I was five years older so I knew how to play the game better.

But the minute we started that show, she didn't become my competition, she became my collaborator. It was truly the first time I was in a collaborative environment. It started with the idea that we were all on the same footing. You treated the score like a script. Everybody had an equal voice. We talked about the script and why people were doing things. Everybody had the chance to contribute to every part of that show.

Within the first week or two of rehearsals, you created such a strong bond between all of us. Because of that, there was nothing we weren't going to do for you in that show. That's why that show was so successful: you created an ensemble.

Ensemble.

Its the director's breath, it breathes life into your process. If you don't have an ensemble that's working, nothing's going to work. I've seen that with all the shows I've done with you. You somehow even built it into my one-woman show. With you and the conductor,

we wrote the script. You got me into a place where I wasn't defending myself. Without judgment.

Lets talk about casting.

Getting cast is just one level of the game.

Can you talk about double casting?

You had one cast do a scene and immediately make the other cast do the same scene. Somehow, instead of it creating competition, you started having Angie and I go in a corner and talk about the experience and what was working. And we switched off who got to do the scenes first.

It got to a point where immediately after doing a scene, Angie and I would run to a corner and immediately start talking about it. We eventually started coaching each other through the scenes.

I had down shows where I hated when my double cast was in the rehearsal with me because they would steal things from what I had done. It infuriated me. It made me very possessive with everything about my performance.

But with Angie and I, we created those characters together. We still had two very distinct interpretations but they supported and informed each other. It was a new level for me. I was able to see my performance through the eyes of somebody who knew exactly what I was doing.

You as a director will never truly know exactly what I'm doing because you're not a singer and you're not doing the role. Because you created this feeling of collaboration, ensemble, and we knew we weren't getting replaced, we could work together.

In other places, you're always one bad rehearsal from being replaced. Its very common in opera. Every rehearsal and performance is a new audition. Its very stressful. And stress affects your vocal technique. It contributes to burnout.

That's why The Medium was so special. You created something intangible with the ensemble. You helped us take care of each other.

The other thing you do that very few directors do is actually direct. Dramaturgically. You give us emotional checkpoints. Most directors in opera are exclusively staging directors.

Most rehearsal for operatic directors consists of doing the scene once after being given blocking and then not touching it again until you do a run-through. No one takes the time to talk to you about what you're doing.

No Blocking

That's a huge difference in the way you direct, you don't give anyone blocking.

Good? Bad?

It's frustrating the first time you do it because it's such a dramatic change. Humans just want to be told what to do, we don't want to go figure it out. As a performer, you want your director to tell you where to go because you're because thinking about all the music. In reality, what's the most fun is when you create it from your own emotional place rather than a dictated academic place.

So the change is uncomfortable. But then you start realizing that you have emotional agency. And that you do have opinions about what you should be doing and where you should go.

From working together, I've gone from being terrified of reading a score with you to arguing with you about where I wanted to go onstage. It's because of the agency you gave me.

It's agency in a safe space. You can't hurt yourself and you can't let anyone down but you, the director, are there to make sure everyone is good. What you do is so wildly complex, but because it is an extension of who you are as a person, it doesn't seem complex to you. You treat your performers as human beings rather than pawns on a board. That's the key. With all the exercises, it gives us our identity.

Can you talk about Hand to Heart and Flocking?

I hate Hands to Heart because it makes me live in my body and makes me be responsible for the movements I make. It's the same thing as why it's terrifying as a performer to have a director give you freedom. Flocking and Hands to Heart is a way of pulling us into our bodies. Singers aren't in our bodies, we're in our heads. You start every rehearsal getting everyone in their bodies through physical gesture.

It also levels the playing field because nobody is actually good at flocking. There's no way to be good at it.

Can impulse exist in opera?

Its the first thing you ask us to do when you ask us to block our own scene. All we're doing is going on impulse. That's your blocking method. Doing it that way connects us to the emotion of the scene. Opera singers are already so in their head about the technique and language. By the time rehearsal starts, a good singer will have already translated the language, so you have false reactions to what other people are saying to you. Acting is different because its all reactionary.

You build your blocking on everyone's raw impulses.

I remember doing a show for a different company and during one rehearsal, I saw that there was a ladder on the set so I climbed it and did half the aria on the ladder because it was my impulse. That never would have happened if I hadn't worked with you. Because you taught me to follow my emotional impulses. Almost all of my blocking with you stemmed from my feelings about the music.

The Medium - realizing you are tied to your first impulses?

I did not think about that.

Blocking is more like The Rules?

Not exactly rules, but agreements between castmates.

How was that decided ?

Through the ensemble-centric rehearsal process. I knew what my castmates needed to have ready for the next scene. Because we all came up with it together, I knew what everyone needed from me before they needed it. And that kind of process is rare.

Mental overload?

Yea. All of your shows are a mental and emotional overload. The Medium, we were all having trouble sleeping. You were figuring it out with us.

But you lead us to it. By showing us that there's nothing you would ever do that would put us in any real harm. You gave us the safe space to be able to be the performers that we want to be.

Ok lets talk about the straight play we did together. Lets talk about Cornerstone.

To be fair, you had no idea that was gunna happen. You knew we were going to fuck with people, but you didn't know that they would get violent with us. Also, it was a new work. Because of that, I don't think you realized where we were going to go with our characters.

That character was rough for me but I was the one who decided to make her what she was. You gave me all the tools, agency, and confidence to do that.

My choices as a performer were different from everyone else as a performer. You helped me realize that I am an actress before anything else. The narrative and emotional attachment to my character is what is most important to me. That's unique, that's what I do. The only way I know that is because I was given a space to find that out.

I pushed myself to my emotional limits with my characters because you showed me that I could and that's what I wanted. You never convince anybody to do anything, you convince them that they can do anything that they want to do.

How?

Part of your book has to be psychology. You have to start talking to therapists.

I'm not saying you're a therapist, but part of what you do is therapy for people. Giving people agency, letting them discover who they are as a performer, letting a group of people be an ensemble who in every other professional part of their lives would be competition, how is that not psychology?

The creating of a community. Getting people to feel comfortable and share with each other. And you do it in two months.

Its a healthier way of making performers, theatre and opera aside. That was always the thing that was so amazing to me, was that conductors and artistic directors who are not singers, could treat me like a set piece.

You're one of the only directors I've met who has recognized the fact that the show isn't happening without me. What you do, is create trust. Through that trust, you get us to trust you, to trust your process, and then the natural outcome of that, is that we trust ourselves.

And that's how you know you can change blocking, follow impulse, etc..

And we don't get mad at each other for changing things up. Or if we do, we know how to talk to each other about it.

Cornerstone: things happened but I was able to talk to my castmates and tell them they couldn't do something to me. I felt empowered to do that. I started physically reacting to the way that an actor would touch me when that character was abusing my character. After the scene, the actor came and checked on me to make sure I was okay with what

happened. And I was, I was making acting choices. We were having full conversations that didn't stop once the show opened. Cornerstone developed every performance.

How did you create the panic attack in Cornerstone?

Inner monologue. I created an inner monologue for the whole show. I didn't stop acting the entire show, none of us did. Which is the difference between actors and singers. Singers are never taught inner monologues.

We aren't taught acting techniques, we're taught singing techniques. The concept that when you're not singing, your character doesn't stop, is not taught very much. No one tells us that we need to have a thought in your head that makes us sing the thing you need to sing.

There's the whole what happens before and after the scene, but no one ever says "why are you saying this?" Opera singers don't dramatically inform themselves because they aren't given the tools to do that.

So the panic attack in Cornerstone was happening internally and that character was hard because it was very difficult to turn it off. I have a habit of negative self-talk anyway.

How did you turn it off?

I couldn't after awhile, that's why that show was so hard. That show really fucked me up.

There's an inevitable thing about making art is that the best art you're going to come up with is going to hurt you. Pain is the ultimate motivator. Every great thing you have done for yourself has been born out of pain.

Art is empathy, art is pain. Art is trying to show everybody that they understand your pain so you don't feel so alone in the world. A hand print in a cave to everything we have now.

Does a director have to be honest about their own shit to do this?

To a degree. The best example I can give is the therapist I'm with right now. The way she got me to trust her enough to really open up was that she told me that she had been at the bottom too. She gave me no details as to what that was but she let me know that she understood exactly where I was coming from. Because of that, it validated everything I was feeling. And I felt safe to feel anything around her.

So as a director, I do think you should let people know, to a degree, that you've gone through things or whatever makes sense to tell them.

I also think there also has to be a limit to what you give them. In the relationship you have with your performers, you're holding the mirror. You can't be the reflection. If you make it too much about yourself, you're never going to get what you want out of your performers. Because all they will be doing is showing you what you want, because that's what a performer wants to do.

The greatest gift you give performers is that you let them see themselves.

As a director, its a fine line to walk, I do it with my students. I have to be vulnerable and available to them to let them know that they're not alone, but I also can't be so specific and selfish about it.

Or what's the point, you might as well be doing the play yourself. You've hired these performers because you want them and their opinions. And you have to let them know they are in a safe space to do that.

What isn't helpful?

When you tell me where to stand. Like when you butt into the creative process too late in the game, then you mess up the agency of your actors. If we're doing runs and things have been established and I'm on a clear track of what I'm doing, I'm going to fight you. Even if that's your job description.

You can't decide to be the director 50% into the process. Part of me wonders if its just me, but you haven't done much that I don't agree with.

I've never felt like you wasted my time. You read us very well. You know when you're being helpful and when you aren't.

Directors do need to create stage pictures

It's not when you tell people, its how. You have to acknowledge the choice and work with your performers to create something together.

You can't start with the "you have agency" and then take it away. It's like sailing, every sailor is important but there's only one captain. You run your shows like you run your ships.

Gotta explain reason for blocking

That happened in Armeida, you told us to pull the sexy way back at the end of the scene just as we were really getting into it because we were detracting from the actual acting of the scene.

Agency: if performers think the director is wrong about something, how do you or do you not change something once they've left?

Sure, but if you have framed the notes with reasoning, there's understanding. Even if something is fun, we don't want to take focus away from what's really important and ruin another collaborator's performance. If its a true, empathetic ensemble, the reason will govern us. I respect my colleagues and ensemble. If I want my ensemble to treat me with respect, I need to do the same.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Personal Interview by Rose Freeman on 30 December 2018.

Transcribed by Ann Kreitman February 2019

Mary Lutz Govertsen

Soprano

Company member, Third Eye Ensemble

Ok Mary! What was our first show?

Our first show together was the *Lingerie Lyrique*, *The Forest Fantasies*: a burlesque/opera fusion. It was my first experience to your directing style which was a lot more collaborative and holistic than I was used to. Most opera you get in, the director tells you what to do, you're supposed to have some idea of your character but basically its the "page on the stage" version of directing. With you, I don't remember if we did flocking and Viewpoints for *Forest Fantasies* but we certainly had a day where we just played. You told us what you had in mind. The nymph/pleasure palace/wet t-shirt contest scene that we did for *Armeida*, none of us had ever done anything quite like that. So you took us to your living room, and you had plastic matting down and me and the other nymphs and we basically had an in-house wet t-shirt contest and played around with materials and the proximity to each other and the interpersonal relationships. It was this really nice time when we just got to discover things without having to worry about singing the music or someone watching us or a pianist. It was an in house discovery moment.

We just explored the concept of the bubbles and the suds and being wet around other people with that you're not romantically involved with, but clearly in the opera everyone is romantically involved with everybody. I always compare it to what we did with the first *Lingerie Lyrique* show, which you were not directing on, where there was a stylized orgy scene and they were just like "go for it!" And I remember feeling, not traumatized, but uncomfortable. There was not a lot of time to explore the physical part and the interpersonal relationship part of it before we had to do it as a performed scene. Your approach really helped because by the time we got the music in, and we had everyone in the theatre, we had the experience of it and opportunity to play and relationship of collaboration with each other. It was a nice experience, especially for something like burlesque, which can be dodgy if its not handled well.

So when we did that physical exploration, you had already been working on music for quite some time. This was the beginning of staging

You, me and Matt had spent so much time in rehearsal doing the tenor and soprano stuff but it was really nice to have that time to figure out what everybody else was doing, because that's what made up so much of the scene. The scene wasn't just about my

striptease, it was about the ensemble work. If it was just me, it wouldn't have felt as wonderfully hedonistic, which was kind of the ultimate product.

Sumeida's Song was all Viewpoints

Sumeida's Song was interesting. My strongest memories of a lot of the flocking and Viewpoints we did with you in rehearsal being incredibly relevant in Dark Sisters.

Dark Sisters?

Dark Sisters was a great opera but I can't picture it being directed by someone who works any differently than the way you worked. Its about fundamentalist LDS sisterwives. All these women are individuals but on some level, they are sharing one mind. The composer has written in the individuality but then they are this unified front, which becomes so horrific for Eliza at the end. She knows all these women individually, including her daughter, but at the end they are this monolithic unit: Family capital F. A lot of the work we did with Viewpoints and flocking and soft-focus was hugely helpful. If you think about these women, they live with each other day in and day out. They have this familiarity with each other. So being able to work outside of strict blocking that heightened our awareness of other people without looking and engaging directly with them was great.

Kinesthetic Response/Listening with your body: What's that for you?

For me, it feels like the area from the nape of my neck to right under my shoulder blades is just prickly. Its the same feeling I get when I'm asleep but some part of my brain knows that my son is tip toeing through our room. He's not being loud and I can't really hear but its like the back of my head is listening. You can feel the pull. You know that person is there without having to look. It requires a different sort of listening. It requires being aware of the whole space behind you.

I've hear you say Viewpoints feels like Choral Singing.

It's almost like the difference between actual listening and trying to listen for balance. When you're trying to listen for balance, you're not only trying to be aware of other people but you're trying to be aware of your relationship to other people. Its an expanded awareness.

The other thing your approach has helped me with is in aerial arts. When I do group numbers with performers on different apparatus, we have to be in sync. Its like flocking but you're spinning in the air at the same time. You start figuring out ways of being aware of your ensemble and how to get cues. You're not just watching, you're listening to shifts in the air or the sound of the shackle or the tail whipping around. Flocking helped a lot with that. Frequently I'm up with people who have to work a little harder at wrapping. So

its a give and take of who's in control, who need to catch up, who is following. It feels just like flocking. Not only do you have the constantly rotating perspective but you figure out when to let go, when to get caught up and how, when to take initiative to be the leader.

For me, Viewpoints helped the most with the collaborative approach but flocking helps as well. There's nothing worse than wanting to move on an impulse and not having the guts to do it. Flocking has helped me to follow my impulses and jump on them. It gives you the confidence to go forward with it in a way that other people will go with you.

Impulses: How do we follow impulses with an understanding of the show?

Having worked with you, I think if I went back to the three week opera rehearsal process, I'd be ruined for it. For me, a lot of it is based on my colleagues. The biggest memories I have of Sumeida's Song is not the process but the fact that each night was different. Sumeida's Song was a tough nut to crack. Difficult music but (paraphrasing-white people playing POC). There was an otherness in those characters that I was keenly aware that I was out of my depths. Not only were they older women, or older in life, but from a different culture with a set of physical and emotional customs. These were much stiller women than any of us naturally were so it was an ongoing adventure. My understanding of those characters changed all the way up to closing night, more than anything.

Exploration of Stillness and Tension that wasn't stagnant

The first couple weeks of rehearsal, especially Erin and I, were running all over and you said "no, this time you don't get to move." And it was really hard. I also remember you didn't let me make extra noises in the rests, you picked on me a lot about that. I get real uncomfortable with the silence and the stillness because that's not how I am naturally. Sumeida was trying to get comfortable with the silence and just being.

There was a lot of having to read the other singer's intent. The constant readiness to see where she was going next did help with stillness because I had to be patient and wait. I'm glad the part was not vocally taxing because that role forced me to live completely in the moment the whole time. There was no thinking about anything else. Not in an unsafe way, I never felt unsafe, it was exciting and authentic. A lot of the process was learning to wait and watch for each other, we had a few landmarks but it was very improvisational.

Before I worked with you, I worked with a director named Michael O'Ture (sp?) who was once of the first directors who ever told me "you are the one making the music happen." So what's going on when you're not singing is just as important as what's going on when you are singing. When you're thinking about your character you need to think about what the music is saying in addition to what you are saying. This sounds simple but

a lot of opera singers just do not think about this. To the point where it was setting me up to work with you with your landmarks: physical, musical, and emotional. The first time I remember working with landmarks was the aria Gobemose (sp?) in *The Medium*. I had a hell of a time with it because her breakdown seemed to me out of nowhere and I didn't know how to build to it. So what we worked on was acknowledging that the character was recreating the scene in their mind. You also gave me a little boat and a bag.

For me personally, I've got touchy points too: things that make warm and squishy, things that make me feel awful. With the landmarks, its finding those places in the character. Having things that register, regardless if its immediately clear to the audience what that thing is, it keeps you on track.

Like when you gave me the boat and bag of stuff, I had no idea what to do with stillness, so gave me something to do that fit with the character. The landmarks can be emotional stuff, physical things that are there or that the character is seeing in their mind's eye, they can be from the text.

I had to do a show last year with a very short rehearsal process with a rather perfunctory director so I had to pull on "what would Rose Freeman do?" The whole thing was English but my character was someone who didn't speak English, so when she was speaking with her son, it was understood that she was speaking Polish. So I had to go through the score and figure out what the character was actual understanding that's being said. How am I going to react to the words my character understands when clearly I as a singer understand everything that's being said? She has a big aria and I had to find moments to picture the places that would set her off emotionally. She was very stoic and calm but during this aria a switch flips and she freaks out.

Justify emotional landmarks.

How does the staging use the dramaturgy of the music?

Its almost like opera singers are taught to look at the character in a way that creates blocks of emotion as opposed to a wash. In life, you can go suddenly to one emotion to another but if we're being honest, there's always some precipitating stuff. As well as a singer, there's always this idea that you have to be very careful about your voice. Yes, if you are singing over an orchestra in a 3,000 seat house you have to take some care, but if you're singing anything under 1,500 seats and its a smaller orchestra, you don't have to be quite so careful. The movement and your directorial process helps you find where the marriage of the music and wash of emotion happens. If the music all of a sudden becomes extremely loud and chaotic, where did that start in the music before? The movement helps as well because its physically uncomfortable to go from absolute stillness to complete frenzy suddenly. There's tension of the muscles, or an increase in

breathing, so you start to become very aware of all the little things that can signal a change in emotion. Because you are singing, you have to find the ways that aren't just complete physical insanity. You have to be a lot more aware of the music.

In Sumeida's Song, the last scene, she walks in and knows something is not right. The music has not cleared from what's happened before. There is a little squirrely line in the violin or piano and it continues through the scene as the music builds. Its a little kernel of "oh shit." Its like playing music for little kids, most of them will move to the music exactly how it sounds, but there's also a quarter of the kids who move to some part of the music I wasn't even aware of. They're just playing. And they don't want to be like everybody else and they're independent. So what we're doing is finding the inner five year old, who can find the different things going on in the music and add that to what you think the character should be doing.

The Rape of Lucretia, the horrible scene right after she gets raped, where the mezzo and soprano come out and talk about the lovely morning, there's a petal tone in the deep bass telling us something isn't right. Being able to move and explore the different layers musically, not just the main beat. It hearkens back to the way kids react to things, which is not always what you expect. What they find appealing or scary....

I played Romeo and Juliet for the kids and asked them what they thought. And they all said "something bad is going to happen..." I played the 1812 Overture and watched their faces when the cannons went off, but its an authentic reaction...It goes back to what you always say acting is, an authentic responses in a controlled space. Yes, you've rehearsed it but we're trying to find ways to making it look like its happening for the first time. Your process where you're constantly listening [41:34](#) (Mary talking to teacher)

This summer, I got training in this music methodology called "Orff." Its a music education philosophy and its motto is "Think, Create, Play, and Move." The idea is that the music you make is highly improvisational, no sheet music, creativity is very encouraged. The movement part of this class was flocking, the teacher noticed that I had done it before. We talked about levels, speed, topography. The whole approach is very Rose. The idea of acting out stories and using instruments to help inform the story. Composing your own music...

That's what you are doing as singers, you are moving instruments

What the opera industry has become has gotten so far away from that. There's a three week rehearsal process, administrators aren't willing to offer more time. Performers come in with decisions already made and they don't want to think any harder about it. I much prefer this (Rose's work). I've had singers tell me that the singing is more important than

the acting, and that just sounds so boring. For me, you can't take the acting away from the singing. It makes the music that much more amazing when the singing and the acting are fantastic.

They should be integrated

The opera singers I love to watch, Diana Dahmross, you can tell she is thinking about what the music is telling her to do, she's got landmarks. Christine Gerky, she's one of those people, she's got a huge voice. When she was in her 20s, she was singing big Mozart, big Handel. I remember she was doing The New Prioress in Dialogues of the Carmelites and I read an interview where you could tell she was thinking holistically about the character. You can see it when she performs, she is out of her head. There's stuff going on with the character that is never fully explained but it makes it really interesting. She's got the landmarks.

You don't get it a lot in opera. And I wish I'd been able to do more comedies with you.

Personal Interview by Rose Freeman on 9 January 2019.

Transcribed by Ann Kreitman February 2019

Katherine Bruton

Performed in Little Women, Cosmic Ray and the Amazing Chris

Soprano

Hi Katherine. Lets dive in. What do you remember?

Hand to Heart is great. Even just in workshops. CVAC did an intimacy workshop about a month ago and we did Hand to Heart beforehand and it was great. There's a definite difference when you don't enter the space that way. Not that its negative or prevents work but everyone in the room acknowledging what we're here to do and how is super helpful and allows for more openness. It's very much a permission thing.

Talk more about that in the context of rehearsal

I have an improv background, so its an understanding that your colleagues are going to make different choices than you and you get to play off of that choice but also that you have permission to make choices. Especially in the operatic canon, we have these old, iconic productions and its expected you will make the same choices. In an art form that's so rooted in tradition, as young performers, we don't always give ourselves permission to make different choices. When you have permission to let your current feelings influence the character, in a way that doesn't contradict the music, that's great. Once you understand you don't have to carve the same neural pathway every time, you're able to make new choices and understand that you colleagues are going to respond well to those choices. There's nothing worse than being in a show and making a really cool choice and your colleague doesn't acknowledge it at all or freaks out and stops making choices as their response. Or you make a really bad choice and your colleague just doesn't know what to do with it. It's like you try something and then get left out in the cold. As opposed to all pushing and pulling, making choices, a hive mind. When the group commits to the practice, you know you can make a choice and they will be there for you.

Permission to create as individual/ensemble

You're giving yourself permission but also the ensemble has been given permission. There are performers who always give themselves permission and they are pretty inspirational, but if you understand that you can give the ensemble permission, it gives an opportunity to "yes and" each other so fiercely that the ensemble becomes better than the sum of its parts.

Little Women - where did the permission come from?

There were a few performers in the cast that always gave themselves permission. Doing the table work and crafting the characters from the beginning-

Table Work!

The table work had several parts. First, we worked to understand your character in relation to the other characters. I played Beth: she was a sister to 3, daughter to 2, friend to 1, acquaintance to 1. Then we went through and action-verbbed the score: every phrase, we had to assign an action verb to what our objective was. Nothing was flat, you were always pursuing a goal. My character had a lot of deceptive words because she was pretending to not be sick. So I got to track how hard she was working to deceive people and how that escalated as well as the relationship to how sick she was throughout the show and who knew and who didn't. Or who did she want to know?

Some opera singers struggle with what action verbs are, so it was good to clarify and hone in on what the character wanted. After that, we all understand what each other is doing and what we know and when we know it. It was cool to track the realization of information because that show is all about the distribution of information. So we identified the pivotal moments and what builds up to them.

That work fueled how we were able to interact as well as the pacing of the show.

Table work and movement alternated- how did that inform each other?

Knowing what the sisters' relationship was during each scene informed how they moved. At the top of the show, they are more together, so maybe more spritely or innocent. The information from table work also informed how we would interact with the floor or objects. And because we knew where we were going and how they aged, we played with bringing in stiffness or maturity. So we were asking ourselves how our bodies changed and how a new quality could create new movement. It was cool to move through visceral reactions after having distilled down the characters to what they want in every scene. It became involuntary, what you wanted would inform your body's behavior towards the people who were obstacles or allies.

Ok lets tackle Viewpoints

Through Viewpoints and flocking, we often found things that were not in the script, but they came about because you were in tune with what your character wanted. In the wedding scene, we did Viewpoints to release some of the stillness, so I played on my negative relationship with one of the characters to move away from him. That wasn't in the script, these two characters actually don't interact, but understanding the stakes of the

world, I knew there was danger between these two people. Without analyzing the script like we did, I never would have made that connection.

Can you talk about your Beth's death scene?

Each night, Jo came into the scene in different emotional states: panicked, over-confident, distracted. So as Beth, how Jo came into the scene really changed my reaction, we had to listen to each other to collaborate. Every time, we did exactly what was on the page but it felt different and new each time because we were listening and responding to each other. The listening didn't lower the stakes or change the outcome but we could play off of each other. Because we were so connected, it was very emotional each time.

What did that do musically?

The music becomes very organic. Its not easy music but it made it feel authentic. Because we were living in the moment, waiting for your entrance built up the emotion of what you had to say next. It was the same music, we never missed entrances but it felt different every time. The intention with which the same thing was said was fresh every time. It never got stale.

Cosmic Ray -Can you discuss the process and Character Development?

The singer playing my love interest would sit down and talk about what our characters wanted and created an entire backstory in intimate detail. Hands to Heart helped because this singer and I had a friendship, so we could enter this space, do the challenging work, and leave the space and not carry any of it with us.

My totem was how I navigated that show. A totem is an idea, ritual, or practice that transitions you from offstage to onstage. I had an enormous sweater that I only wore when I was offstage. It helped me understand that my character onstage was not myself. My character was very similar to me so it would have been easy to blur the boundary. So I had to separate them.

If you were doing another role like that, would you use the same totem, the sweater, to bring you back to yourself?

Definitely. Its comforting and normalizing and I think it always will be.

Because it was such a vulnerable show, having the support of the ensemble and a mutual understanding that we had all agreed to be this vulnerable was so helpful.

Lets shift to ensemble building in Cosmic Ray

The movement for Cosmic Ray was very stylized. It brought to life the comic book world, and a lot of the cast was not familiar with that. So we had to do a lot of our own research and exploration. The stage combat influenced the movement, we worked backwards. A lot of us had done movement work previously, which was helpful.

The ensemble dynamic was unique for this show. In Little Women, all of the characters knew each other. For Cosmic Ray, there was a clear delineation between the ensemble and leads. In terms of movement, we were not a cohesive unit but instead breaking off into smaller groups. We were able to look at the other groups and borrow ideas. We created a physical language that translated into different characters and bodies.

Do you use any of what we did in your current/future work?

I definitely still assign active verbs. With so much repetition it can give each phrase intention.

Within a performance setting - "If you think you're the leader, you're the leader." I don't wait for the permission to make a choice. And trust that your collaborators are going to be with you.

"The process doesn't care about your feelings." That realization was important to realize that I still had to do the work. It was understood that you bring all of yourself to a rehearsal process but you are still in a rehearsal process. Back to permission, you can bring whatever you're feeling to the character and it can lead you to some cool new depths that you can later access.

Do you look at the music?

Sometimes. If I look at the score and it tells me to sing something softly, I may use a different tactic to get what I want than I would if it said "loudly." The conductor will make me sing it the way its written so I try to be responsive. You can think about it in terms of changing energy of the intention: diffuse, focus, sharp.

The music doesn't dictate but it does color the words.

Story first before music?

The music is there to serve the story. Master storytellers like Verdi, they understood the music would inform intention. The music is the narrator. It confirms subtext.

It's not about making choices against the music but there is room for juxtaposition. You can deepen characters with that breadth. Listening to the score narrows your choices but the music doesn't give you everything.

Table work - Physicality - Rehearsal -has this changed your collaboration?

I am now frustrated when a director does not leave room for exploration or doesn't trust singers to do that exploration. Both music and staging directors, can be very prescriptive and closed off to other interpretations. My job is to follow their direction but its limiting artistically.

With conductors/music directors, I have choices to bring to the table so I can be a collaborator, not just execute how they want me to sing every phrase. I have more agency. I still take feedback but I can optimize material and choices for myself, not just doing the character how its been done before.

Relationship with audience

I don't think about them.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Personal Interview by Rose Freeman 10 January 2019.

Transcribed by Ann Kreitman February 2019

Evita Trembley

Freischutz

mezzo-soprano.

Let's talk about Der Freischutz and what you remember of the process.

Sure. I remember that we started off with talking about the words. And I believe we did a lot of the English translation of the lyrics, we didn't really go through the German, at least that's what I remember. And I really appreciated that because I feel like so often I go into shows and I feel like we don't really get a sense of what the whole picture is so I remember going through all the scenes and really figuring out what everything meant, that was really helpful for me and I got a really full picture of the story. I remember overall a lot of collaboration, even if I wasn't in a scene, I still had a sense of what was going on in the story line and big picture. There was a lot of give and take, not just "go over here and do something" and I really appreciated that because it gives me freedom as an artist. I don't remember all the names for the stuff but we walked around the room. We had that whole session with Caroline where we walked around the room and had to do various things, I thought that was really cool and definitely something I had never ever done before.

Do you remember first rehearsal?

There were a lot of activities in that night, you had to walk different ways and stuff like that, I don't fully remember. Overall, I liked the quirkiness of it all, there was a lot of added features, we were all forest creatures. I really appreciated that, I thought it was a cool different twist on Der Freischutz. Oh and a lot of gender playing.

Let's go back to the book work. We went through the entire score as an ensemble.

Yes.

How did your overall understanding of the piece inform your performance or your musical choices?

As we went through the piece, I realized that were elements of magic of piece and I definitely used that in my characterization of my badger. I definitely knew we would be creating a more fantasyland kind of thing. So I used it to inform my body. I'm not great with movement and I knew I would have to move my body in unusual shapes and take myself out of my body. I did not feel it was a real land, more like a fairy-tale land so I had to show that in my body and use my body more freely.

Were you able to take the book work we did and translate it into the physical exercises we were doing?

Yes. Especially when you ask a lot of questions, like "what does the chorus want there" which informed my body in how I was going to relate to the other characters.

What was the physical work like for you? Scary, Hard?

It was difficult because it seemed like everyone already knew what was happening. I felt weird at first because I didn't understand what the point was but that's just because I had not done it before and everyone else seemed very informed of what it meant. Once I realized that it was your own interpretation of what should be happening, then I felt more free to move and let go. Letting go of the notion of "am I doing this right," because there was no right way.

When you're in a room where everyone else has done something and you are worried you're going to look stupid and you don't know how silly you are supposed to be or whatever, it's hard.

Let's talk more about how you got over that? What was the moment of "I'm getting a hang of this"?

For sure, there was a moment in flocking, that was when I felt most empowered because it was a moment of choice in either following or leading and it was up to us and our comfortability. And being informed by other people's movements helped me understand what I wanted to do in the music and what I didn't want to do.

There were some movements that I was groovin' to for awhile and then it would change to something uncomfortable for me or changed to something that didn't fit into the music or my vibe so I would just do my own thing. That's what I noticed, there was a lot of clingy movement and after awhile I wanted to do something more rigid. So I broke away and did my own movement that represented what I was getting from the music.

So it was a give and take. There is something powerful in doing movements together, moving as one, but also empowering about what ideas you can come up with on your own. I had never thought I had my own ideas about movement but I guess I did! So that's was very cool to find out!

Did any of that translate to how it was staged?

Yes, totally. In that show, because of those exercises, we were all talking to each other, feeling each other's vibe, and feeding off of each other, especially as members of the chorus. We talked to each other through movement and made group and individual

choices. There were many times on stage when we didn't have lines but we thought about our bodies and the picture we were painting.

So you developed a language with each other that didn't involve speech

Exactly.

Did you continue that development through performance or was it set by the time you hit the stage?

We had hit on a groove and kept things the same except for the last scene. Every night the last scene was a little different because we had played with it so many different ways. We knew what we were going to do before we did it just by looking at each other.

Yea, we didn't freak out, it was always different. We had moments when we had to create a new picture. We reacted as a chorus and moved accordingly.

Did the movement work and book work changed how you approached the music?

It did. Obviously as a singer you need to know what you are singing about but in that show more than ever, because of the work done all together, I knew what I was singing about and it helped me become my creature. Because I knew how the chorus was reacting to what the lead character were saying, I was able to create body movements and reactions and really play with it, which I had never had the opportunity to do before. In a lot of opera, its very strict, whereas this had a lot of play. It allowed me to let go and not just know what the words meant but what the words meant to me.

Was it a permission of freedom or something imposed on you?

Oh no, I was excited to figure it out. It was an invitation to let go and do something that mainstream operas don't allow. I had creative freedom, it was so much fun. I shoved money down my shirt in an opera! I'll probably never get to do that again.

Were there parts that you hated? Or weren't useful?

No, there were physical challenges: being on a ladder, singing, moving, which were hard. But I practiced and figured out how to feel safe. I was worried I wasn't doing enough but I had to fight that internal battle and won.

Have you been able to use anything we did in that process in your other work?

Definitely the movement portion. I think about how I walk as a character. I had a realization that changing the way I walk as a character gives me more freedom and there is so much possibility there. Especially after exploring walking different ways when exploring different emotions, it opened me up to more possibilities. In Patience and

Sarah, I made the choice to change my walk for my character, to embody a 40 year old woman with seven kids. A simple walk, it can really get you into your character.

And how a physicality can be an efficient way to create a character?

Exactly. And my walk and how I stand changes how my singing sounds. In Der Freischutz, because I was in weird positions, it wasn't even a conscious choice, I had a more creepy or pointed sound. Whereas playing Ma in Patience and Sarah, and having my body in a more uptight place, I had a more full, round, and direct sound.

Was there a moment where you discovered your sound changing because of your physicality? If so, how did you feel and did you collaborate with maestro?

Definitely, when we were grabbing all the money in Der Freischutz, and I was watching Kathy for counting, and I remember the sound moving. Alive, not stagnant. I felt it coming from my gut and it felt real. I felt the raw emotion of going after the money. I was entirely focused on it, not in my head about how I sounded. I was in the moment.

It's not a bad thing that physicality changes the sound, and I want to talk more about navigating that as an artist. What decisions did you have to make in marrying your sound with your physicality?

I think it was something that just happened. In the moment I didn't realize. Looking back, I knew the music incredibly well, so I felt like I could do anything and it would be fine. There was a moment where I was blocked to step off the stage, and it was really freeing. And even something that simple allowed me to sing how I wanted to sing. I felt more casual, less pressure. You're doing so much with your body that you don't have time to think about what sounds are coming out of you. Its a marriage of knowing the music, knowing that you have the right notes, and your body then informing you how to sing. I hate just standing there and singing. So in this process, my sound was free because I was able to move and to change my body and feel a little silly and it helped me relax.

So you could be more than just an instrument

Yea, exactly.