SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT: ACTING IN MUSICAL THEATER
ARTS–UG 1014-001
Gallatin School of Individualized Study
New York University
Fall 2015
Mondays, 12:30-3:15pm
1 Washington Place, Room 430

Instructor: Ben Steinfeld
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Course Description

The “American Musical”, as it has evolved over the last century, has become a remarkable model of interdisciplinary practice. From its early iterations and influences in burlesque, vaudeville, and operetta to the complex contemporary amalgams of book, music, lyrics, and dance – the American musical has proven a rich crucible for the exploration of identity and culture, form and content, and ideas and emotions.

This arts workshop will offer actors a technical foundation for acting in musical theater. We will deal broadly with the history of musical theater in context, by exploring both the process by which actors engage with musical material and the development and aesthetics of the form. Participants will work on songs and scenes taken from the giants of musical theater including: Rogers & Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, and more. How do we merge the receiving nature of acting with the giving nature of singing? How do we “justify” the decision to sing at all? How do we make these songs our own? Our survey of the evolution of musical theater will ask: what does the history of the American musical tell us about our cultural history? What do musicals teach us about interdisciplinarity in the arts?

All students in this course must be comfortable and confident singing actors. Everyone will be required to rehearse outside of class time, complete written and analytical assignments (3 short papers), and commit to a public presentation at the end of the semester.

Mordden’s *The Happiest Corpse I’ve Ever Seen: The Last 25 Years of the Broadway Musical*, Stephen Sondheim’s *Finishing the Hat*, and others.

We expect that before you perform your songs in class you will research the original context of the songs by reading the original script, or if that is unavailable, a detailed synopsis. You may absolutely choose an interpretation that is different from the original intent, but you can’t skip the step of understanding the context for which it was first written.

**Course Objectives**

- For each student to gain a real understanding of what it means to rehearse a song from an actor’s point of view.
- For each student to gain a thorough understanding of how form and content relate to meaning in the analysis of a song.
- To explore the risks and rewards of dynamic, honest, and brave rehearsal.
- For each student to find their own personal, specific, and confidently embodied interpretations of great songs from the musical theater.
- To build a generous, safe, encouraging rehearsal room and for the class to become a joyful, supportive, and thoughtful ensemble.

**Calendar**

September 14 – Intros, Themes, Ensemble building, Vocabulary, “A Song I Love”

September 21 – “16 Bars” – actors share selections, vocabulary continues
Essay 1 due: Something Worth Singing About

September 28 – *Rodgers & Hammerstein* – group work and songs
  Connecting to the lyric, letting the music “in”, shifting modes
  Reading: selection from Raymond Knapp’s *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*.

October 5 – *Rodgers & Hammerstein* – group work and songs
  Thinking and talking, discovery

*{everyone must attend DIAMOND ALICE, Oct 2-10}*  

October 12 – Columbus Day holiday – no class
TUESDAY, October 13 - DIAMOND ALICE lecture/demo
Essay 2 due: Diamond Alice analysis

October 19 – Rodgers & Hammerstein – claiming size and getting specific
Assign opening numbers and Sondheim solos

October 26 – “Opening Doors” – rehearse & share opening numbers
Stephen Sondheim – Form and Content, Less is More, God is in the Details
Reading: “Finishing the Hat”

November 2 – Stephen Sondheim – group work and songs
Taking in your partner, shared breath, listening

November 9 – Stephen Sondheim – group work and songs
Finding the size, physical choices, engaging “us”
Essay 3 due: Observation

November 16 – Sondheim and Modern composers

November 23 – Modern composers – how modern can a musical be?

November 30 – Modern composers - Uniting voice and movement
Essay 4 due: Form and Content

December 7 – TBD / presentation rehearsal…putting it together.

December 14 – FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Attendance

You must attend every class. Be ready to work. Be fired up. Care. Watch and listen attentively and actively. Support each other. Theater is a collaborative thing – we are all in it together. You must attend every class to get an A for your final grade.

Clothes

You must wear or bring appropriate rehearsal clothes to class. This means clothing you can move comfortably in, and don’t mind getting sweaty/dirty/etc. Please do not wear tight jeans or skirts. If you choose to bring rehearsal clothes, you must be changed into them by the start of class.

Grading
Grades is this class will be based on attendance, attitude, passion, and participation (see above). No one will be evaluated on “talent”, whatever that means. Your talent should not be your concern, and it certainly won’t be our concern. You will be penalized one half grade for every class you miss. You must attend every class in order to get a final grade of A. Participation is essential. You are expected to observe closely and generously, and to contribute meaningfully to class discussions at least twice every class. Be aware that a grade of Incomplete can only be given with permission from the instructor, and under approved circumstances.

Final Grade:

50% = attendance, passion, preparation
25% = written assignments
25% = participation

Academic Integrity

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)

For this course, watching a video of the song you are working on being performed by someone else will be considered a violation of the plagiarism policy. You may use audio recordings of your songs only as a tool to help learn them. Drew Wutke will be holding office hours to help you work on and learn your songs; nothing can match that, as you’ll soon find out.

Using NYC as a Resource

One of the main intentions for this course (and one of the main missions of Gallatin and NYU) is that you make New York City your oyster. Studying acting and musical theater in New York is an embarrassment of riches (and sometimes just an embarrassment), so take advantage of all the institutions, resources, and people that are available to you.

Some of these include:

The Performing Arts Library. Get a NYC library card if you don't already have one and check out the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center. Song index, archival videos, albums.
Student Rush Tickets and tdf.org  Get cheap tickets and see as much as you can. Begin thinking critically about how and why you did or didn't enjoy the show or the performances.