Undergraduate Music Theater Education: Integrating Musical and Theatrical Skills

Maarten Mourik

Music theater is a complex art form: it is music, drama, and dance amalgamated into one. A music theater performer, therefore, is required not only to master singing, acting, and movement as stand-alone skills, he or she also must be able to integrate and align them. In many undergraduate music theater programs, however, the basic classes that educate the future performer are exactly that: singing, acting, and dancing as stand-alone skills.

Participating in school productions does offer students an opportunity to learn how to amalgamate their individually acquired skills; however, there is often a substantial gap between what is needed on stage and what is taught in class. On stage, for example, performers need to deliver words fitted to notes, rhythm, and dynamics, whereas in acting class students usually practice spoken words only. On stage, movement needs to be meaningfully linked to the text and the score that the performers sing. Yet in dance classes students rarely practice routines that involve singing. And in voice class, students may develop technical vocal skills and musicality, but often do not learn how to sing in character, nor are they taught how to sing in a theatrical space.

So, for students to learn how to integrate music theater skills, a “close to real life” stage production alone is not enough. It is too big a leap from the classroom situation to the stage, and typically school productions focus on delivering and not on learning. Finally, the approach to integrating the separate skills is usually not methodic enough for students to acquire their own set of integration skills that they can independently apply once their formal education is completed.

Thus, it is important that a music theater curriculum covers not only basic skills like singing, acting, and movement, but also actively teaches how to integrate these skills. With this as our aim, we reengineered our undergraduate music theater curriculum in two ways: first, we developed and implemented a new class aimed at methodically teaching future performers integration skills, called Integrating Musical and Theatrical Skills. Second, within the existing classes, we sought ways to connect the stand-alone skills to each other: we initiated crossover lessons, where students had to combine any two skills (dancing and singing, singing and acting).
In this article I explain our ideas and methods concerning integration skills for undergraduate music theater students, beginning with our method class, Integrating Musical and Theatrical Skills.

**INTEGRATING MUSICAL AND THEATRICAL SKILLS**

We developed a new group class, aimed at methodically teaching future performers how to connect and align singing, acting, and movement. Part of the class was dedicated to analyzing lyrics and music and connecting these already in the preparatory phase. Most of the class, however, was a “hands on” approach to integrating their stand-alone skills on stage.

**The Sung Word in a Theatrical Space**

The aim was to have students experience first hand what it takes to be a “complete” music theater performer: singer, actor, mover, and storyteller. We therefore worked with songs or “sung words.” This could be any kind of music theater repertoire: musical, opera, cabaret, theatrical pop songs. The exact choice of repertoire, by the way, is quite important. I dedicate a separate paragraph to use of repertoire below.

By designating one end of a large classroom or studio as the stage, one student as the performer, and the teacher and other students as the audience, we transform an ordinary classroom into a basic theatrical space: stage, performer, audience. No lights, curtains, or rafters are needed. Also, students alternate as performers and as critical, self-learning audience, using what they see in others for their own benefit.

So, by working with sung word in a theatrical space, we can create a setting that closely resembles a professional music theater environment, and thus already start to bridge the gap between classroom and stage.

**Thinking Music Theater**

In our class, the student-performer has prepared a music theater piece “for the stage” and performs it in front of a live audience of peers and teachers. Important learning tools are feedback from teachers (and sometimes peers), self-reflection, and ample opportunity to do it again. Adequate feedback for an integration class is sourced from an integrated perspective: a thorough understanding of music, singing, acting, and movement, coupled with insight into character, theater, and storytelling. Most important for the teacher is an understanding of how these can be brought together and the pedagogic skills to transfer the insight to the students. Integration of musical and theatrical skills can take place only if teachers and students approach the repertoire from both perspectives simultaneously, searching for dramatic elements in the music and musical elements in the drama. More than a skill, this is an attitude, and a consistent approach is instrumental for students to develop understanding of and skills in integration.

Concerning self-reflection, we have found that students generally give an accurate report on how their performance was, and if they are stimulated to reflect from an integrated perspective, that greatly improves their understanding and mastering of integration skills.

**Integration Is Connecting**

Integration is a matter of establishing connections between musical material, theatrical material, and the self, thus “becoming one” as a performer. Teaching integration skills, therefore, means constantly pointing out the underlying relations between all music theater elements. We coach our students to establish the following connections.

- **Connecting the voice to the material.** The voice is the instrument, the musical medium, if you wish, and its use determines a great part of music theater storytelling. Therefore, acting cannot be left to the body alone; the voice, too, must act. The use of phrasing and emphasis can be used to convey the exact meaning of sung lyrics. In sung words this is done just as in spoken words, and within the dictates of the score there still is great freedom to interpret sung lyrics. Musicality—dynamics, line, and tempo—can be used to weave emotions into the lyrics. Choice of and variation in voice quality can be used to flesh out a character and highlight the changing of his or her emotions: from belt to whisper, from legit to pop, to the use of thin vocal folds, the vocal palette with which one can paint a character is formidable. Why not use it? All this we call acting through voice. And again, it is not about a completely new set of skills or methods, it is about learning to use already acquired stand-
alone skills outside a classroom setting and in the broader context of music theater.

• **Connecting the body to the material.** As the voice is the musical medium in music theater, so the body is the visual medium, the vehicle. Everything the body communicates—posture, facial expression, focus, movement—will be interpreted by the audience and read as part of the story told. Therefore everything the body does, the whole physique, must also be in alignment with the repertoire. Posture can determine several things, amongst others status (an acting term referring to social hierarchy), energy state, and emotion. Movement and choreography convey a host of information: who you are, what you are feeling, what you want to achieve (motivation), and how you go about getting there (actions). The use of focus—a term we use to refer to the direction of the eyes and the thought behind them—can create a theatrical space, suggesting you are looking down into a peaceful valley from a mountain ridge, or out a window onto a cold winter garden. It can clarify whom the performer is addressing: the antagonist, right there in the same room; an absent father; a shadow in a long forgotten memory; even him- or herself. Focus also can communicate intimacy: whether the performer is reminiscing and focused inward, or is focused outward on his or her direct surroundings. Facial expression is all important. We people are highly trained readers of faces, and in our daily lives as well as in the theater we constantly read both obvious, primary emotions (joy, anger, fear, peace) and secondary, obscured emotions: whether someone is not telling the truth, is unnaturally happy, is trying to hide nervousness, is distracted, is faking it. The audience cannot be fooled (at least, not without its own consent), so in order to convince the audience the performers must make sure their physiques are consistent with the story they want to tell.

The above, all taught in acting and dancing classes, is essentially nothing new. But acting with spoken word is different than acting with sung word, and moving and dancing to music is different when the performer is the music. It is important that students practice acting and dancing to sung words, and learn how to time their actions to the beat, how to improvise freely within the merciless progression of the score, how to move and dance in character, and how to align choreography with acting with singing.

• **Connecting oneself to the material.** As in all art forms, music theater reflects life. In order to be able convincingly to reflect life, the performer must, on some conscious or subconscious level, understand life and connect this understanding to the repertoire. This is a very big challenge, especially for a young college student who has just left a sheltered home, who might never have kissed before, has not yet experienced the pleasures, trials, and tribulations of a long time relationship, let alone a break up, the fear of growing old or death (all popular themes in music theater). Yet, everyone in his own way has experienced loneliness, pain, joy, shame, serenity, and these personal experiences can be matched to the universal experiences the characters go through on stage. Since what the writers have to say about life is interwoven at different levels both in and in between the lines, it takes thorough analyses and sometimes long discussions truly to understand the repertoire and infuse it with the right personal experiences. The process is definitely aided by some general knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in. (Next to life experience, literature is a good source for that.) Also, imagination, which I believe to be a key creative talent, is essential. Finally, students should be encouraged to pick repertoire they believe they truly understand.

• **Connecting to the moment.** After long, hard preparation and practice, the time has come for the performer to go on stage and “be” the character. It is time to stop thinking (particularly difficult as the preparation has been so methodic and thorough), to stop worrying (equally difficult as all sorts of performance fears start rearing their ugly heads), and just channel the story. It all comes down to concentration: concentrating on the words and what you mean to say; concentrating on the world you are in, the space, the co-actors, receiving and following impulses; believing that on some level you are the character. When the right concentration is reached, the performer gets into a flow, a natural train of thoughts, feelings, and actions and will channel the material as truthfully as possible. The audience will recognize this concentration as it will be utterly convinced by the character. The performer also will recognize this concentration,
as these are the magic moments where one loses oneself completely, where the world just falls away, where one gets wings and flies.

**Pedagogics**

The methods we used to teach students integration skills were many, and not essentially different from methods generally used in performance education. We used all the tricks of the trade we had accumulated by teaching many years. Also, developing a new class, some insights came through trial and error, while others emerged through peer feedback. A few pedagogic insights and guidelines that proved particularly useful are mentioned below.

- **Reducing complexity.** Music theater is a complex art form and students can get bogged down easily if they attempt to tie everything together at once before mastering the separate parts. Therefore it is quite useful to break down classroom assignments into digestible bites and move on only when these subskills are mastered. For example, we focused first on “what we hear,” and when that was at an acceptable level we moved on to “what we hear and what we see.” We worked on posture first, added the use of arms, then added movement. And if a student still had trouble integrating the bite sizes, we took even smaller steps. If the use of arms is too difficult standing up, have the student sit down. Have students take one step at a time, if possible at their own speed, thus reducing confusion and also teaching students how to help themselves prepare a song step by step.

- **Modular repertoire.** One of the most effective ways of controlling the complexity of student assignments is by careful and deliberate selection of repertoire. Starting with songs that require only beginner’s skills, and moving on to increasingly complex songs that require first intermediate and then advanced skills, students learn to integrate skills step by step, in a modular way, adding new skills to those already mastered. Parallel to our modular treatment of connections described above, we categorized music theater repertoire in the following way:

  1) **Narrative repertoire** (“this is what I have experienced”)—a song touching a subject that the student can relate to, sung as the stage version of himself or herself (meaning it is sung outside of character, or outside of the context of the plot). The performer narrates, tells a story, about something that has happened in the past. Raw emotions already have been processed by the character, so the tone is somewhat neutral or subdued. Examples: “Hello in There” (Bette Midler); “Stars and the Moon” (Songs for a New World); “Frank Mills” (Hair); “Feed the Birds” (Mary Poppins); “Loose Ends” (Witches of Eastwick).

     This kind of repertoire is a good starting point for students: the subject matter is close to their hearts, so it is easy for them to attribute meaning to the words and the music, and phrase the words when singing. They can use a voice quality that is close to their natural singing voice. They are not involved in any distracting acting or action. They can experiment with the use of focus, concentrate on using a neutral facial expression and posture (still quite difficult for some students), and only basic use of arms and body is needed.

  2) **Emotional repertoire** (“this is what I am undergoing here and now”)—a song touching a subject the student can relate to, now spanning a wider spectrum of emotions that the character is experiencing here and now as it sings. Once again, it is sung “as themselves,” out of context. Examples: “I’m Still Hurting” (The Last Five Years); “Tonight” (West Side Story); “Papa Can You Hear Me” (Yentl); “Moving Too Fast” (The Last Five Years); “Maybe This Time” (Cabaret); “Barrett’s Song” (Titanic); “One Song Glory” (Rent).

     Adding on what skills they already acquired working with narrative repertoire, students now need to dig deeper in their life experiences to understand and match emotions. In music, dynamics and line become more important. Because with this repertoire they are “in the moment,” they learn how to sharpen concentration, how to follow impulses. Facial expression and movement need to be aligned with the greater emotional spectrum, and different voice qualities need to be used, too. They might also have to interact with co-actors that share the same space and time.

  3) **Character repertoire** (“this is what I, as another person, am undergoing here and now”)—students must transform, as actors and as singers, into someone else, usually within the context of the music
theater piece. Examples: “Just You Wait” (My Fair Lady); “Children and Art” (Sunday in the Park with George); “Schmuel Song” (Last Five Years); “Don’t Tell Mama” (Cabaret); “Mister Cellophane” (Chicago); “Popular” (Wicked).

Concentration, imagination, and use of the body are stretched further, as the performer convincingly must transform into a character distinctly different from him- or herself. It does no longer suffice to “be” in the moment, the performer must “be someone else” in the moment. This can involve movements and voice qualities the performer might not use normally. He or she might have to interact with co-actors from the character’s point of view.

We have found that the introduction of modular repertoire helps students considerably to develop integrations skills, build confidence, and develop a self learning system to tackle all kinds of repertoire.

- **Deconstruction versus whole.** One of the setbacks of our modular system is precisely that it is so systematic and methodic that one must be careful it doesn’t start bordering on the rigid, weighing students down instead of inspiring them. We must not forget that much of art is about freedom, about crazy, about breaking the rules. Performing art is also about bringing things together, not taking them apart. We therefore make sure to have plenty of fun and creative “follow your own inspiration and forget about the rest” projects and assignments interspersed among the more methodic assignments. Also projects that concentrated solely on musicality, like a stage concert with the school orchestra, proved to be not only fun, but also propelled students forward without consciously needing to use integration methods.

- **Exploration, independence, and individuality.** An important part of the learning process is through exploration. The student should not be told what is expected, but encouraged to try things out and to learn from personal experience, mistakes, and from student-audience feedback about what works and what doesn’t. Only in this way can students become self-reliant in applying acquired skills. A teacher’s task is to coach students in their exploration process, channel feedback, and share experiences. For a truly unique performance, it is important that the student have a personal need and motivation to communicate the song, in other words, “to have something to say.” We therefore encourage our students to make their own interpretive choices, to make use of their own personal sources and to share this with the audience.

**SCHOOL WIDE INTEGRATION**

With our integration class we felt we were offering students a good foundation for becoming a complete music theater performer. We also felt that, in order for our method for music theater integration to be truly effective, it should not stand alone. Using opportunities within the existing structures, we wanted to get all our colleagues involved in a school wide effort to take a more integrative approach to music theater. We started visiting each other’s classes, first just looking and listening, afterwards discussing, exchanging ideas, methods, and experiences. We tried to connect to each other, tried to develop a common idiom, introduced team teaching, and started to set up joint projects: have students learn songs in choir class that we consequently choreographed in dance class; prepare vocal repertoire in voice classes, then use it for sung words in acting classes. Obviously,
the way we set it up, connecting to colleagues was hugely time costly and could not be undertaken without both support from the school and extra personal commitment from the teachers. But it was immensely inspiring, not in the least for the teachers, who grew as a team and learned a lot as individuals, but students, too, benefited as their teachers worked more as a team, all pulling the cart in the same direction.

CONCLUSION

We have found that treating integration layer by layer, connection by connection, and in a structured, modular way, our students acquired complex skills more easily, more securely, and more consciously. In doing so, students developed their own methods of taking a song, giving it form on the music theater stage, and communicating it from the heart. We saw our students grow into strong and unique performers. We also experienced that integrating with colleagues boosted the quality of the education as teachers grew together as a team. This strengthens my belief that this method can be a useful and important part of music theater training.

We are still developing and fine tuning this method, learning from our successes and mistakes. We would very much like to connect to other teachers and schools that are developing similar programs. We hope to grow further in this field by exchanging ideas and experiences with colleagues across the world. We therefore warmly invite all comments, questions, and contact.

Maarten Mourik, singer, songwriter, and music theater director, is cofounder of the Dutch a cappella theater group Montezuma’s Revenge. This award winning music theater group toured extensively throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada. After a period as singer/songwriter, Mourik started directing music theater productions (from opera to musical to comedy to avant-garde), and has recently directed the awarded Netherlands production of Jason Robert Brown’s The Last Five Years. He has been teaching at the MusicTheater Academy of the Rotterdam University of Arts Education since 1998 where, together with colleague Mony Wouters he developed a method for integrating musical and theatrical skills. He also has worked as an education and curriculum consultant for several institutes of higher education. Mourik was recently on sabbatical in Sydney, Australia, preparing new music theater pieces and working as a guest lecturer at NIDA and the UNSW. info@maartenmourik.nl

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