

SOLO MUSICAL THEATRE—JUDGING/COACHING SEMINAR

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

So—musical theatre—solo and ensemble—are my favorite categories of all times!

So! Let's start with **Solo Musical Theatre**—because we just have the one...and then we'll add more as we go.

Obviously there are *two important words here*—

MUSIC (voice/dance) and *THEATRE*.

So—let's start with

MUSIC

I doubt many of us were music majors and are really equipped to talk specifically about voice and what a performer needs to do to improve the singing.

As a judge, I don't find myself making a lot of notes on the ballot about the voice.

If I notice they are going sharp or flat—or if they lose breath on faster sections, I'll write things like

“Hey—make sure you are really supporting so you can stay on top of those pitches in such and such a section.”

“Remember to really spit out those t's and d's so that I can grasp all the lyrics on this section”—that sort of thing.

I'll also make comments in terms of *the vocal range of the student*

—and I'm going to encourage coaches to try to play to the strength of your students—and GET IT IN THE KEY that is right for them. (Praise team example)

This is a crucial step—and there are so many tools available to us anymore to do this. I've often made a comment like

“Hey, I noticed you struggled to reach some of those high notes. It might be more comfortable for you in a lower key.”

The race is halfway over with the right key.

Another Problem with Solo Musical Theatre:

CORRECT CASTING:

This is something as a judge that we have no control over.

As directors—it’s really our responsibility to find the right fit for a student. I’ll give you a few examples here:

A lot of times a kid will have a great voice, so their music or theatre teacher will dig out a really awesome, powerful, moving song from some musical and say, “Hey! You could sing this really well!”

Well singing a song “really well” in a concert—and singing it “really well” AS A CHARACTER are two dramatically different things.

Consequently, I find myself often judging a student who is not well-matched with a song.

So another thing I find often in judging is, of course, the ability to believe they are the characters.

CHARACTERIZATION: ACTING / INTERPRETATION

- * Core question: Do I believe them?
- * Am I drawn in by the essence of the character and the material or am I just thinking, “Nice voice”?
- * The performance should make me feel something beyond an appreciation for the song.

I’ve had a lot of kids in all shapes and sizes over the past 30+ years of directing and I have featured them in starring roles just because I know how to cast correctly. I search for the roles that fit the talents and the strengths of the students I have. (Examples)

So what typically happens is you'll have a kid that's maybe –frumpy? Or a very skinny scared freshman—and yet they are singing a romantic lead/dashing leading man type of song....and so as we were halfway through our race with the right key....and now we are not even wearing our spikes and in the starting blocks yet.

And so I've had a lot of these kids singing these big robust songs...and they sing it beautifully...but I BELIEVE....*NOTHING*.

Their hands aren't engaged, their posture is slumped, they don't move with authority, they come across as uncomfortable.

So—when it comes to characterization, that's where I find a lot of my judging comments. So, if I have a kid and he has that kind of song and it's a district contest, then I try to find what I could give him or her to do physically so that I can believe the character more.

“When you gesture with those hands, do it with more energy”

“Make fists, sit tall, walk differently, walk with purpose”

At district, I get up and illustrate it for them—not all of us feel comfortable doing that—but to give them a way to sort of” jerk with energy—to help me believe their character”

If I don't believe “selling of the song”—then that's all about *CHARACTER*. And remember the noun is *theater*. *Musical* is the adjective. So—

We've got to make sure that the songs are fitting them and that you believe them.

The next crucial component and the *Precursor to Staging* is the

THE LYRICS:

So, first of all, can I understand the lyrics?

Because I may not know the song or the musical—I've only got one shot to hear this song and get an impression.

SO the lyrics are the big *KEY* to staging for me: The Holy Grail.

What are these words telling me to do?

As a coach—a judge, how can I help these kids *share the message* of these words?

They've got to be *doing something* with a word that will help me *understand* the song.

So—let's look at those lyrics and what can we DO as we share those words—to help *share the meaning* of these words with the audience?

Lyrics = Most powerful tool for staging. Select the meaningful words and DO something physically to drive the meaning home.

Be careful, of course, of repeating too many of the same movements—so mix it up, either by where you do them, on what levels you do them, with which had you use them, etc. (Avoid songs that have too much repetition of lyrics!)

Sometimes stillness sometimes works—with more subtle staging elements— but then the energy level and the focus of the performer must carry tremendous conviction.

BEFORE I GAZE AT YOU AGAIN

I should leave that solo performance moved in some way. I should either be laughing or I should be sad or I should be energized or angry. I should feel something. Musical theatre is written to move us emotionally in some way.

So—did you believe it? Did you feel it? Did you almost feel it? Tell them where in that song they had you...and tell them where they lost you. So, just react to the song with your comments.

****Judging Tip:***

Another thing I do—is I don't write right away. I usually give that first minute-90 seconds where I am just all in. I am listening, I am concentrating, I am watching this like all I have to do is get lost in this performance. And kids want us to do that. They don't want the very

first 30 seconds of a song for you to be writing. They want you watching them. They can feel your energy. You'll get enough impressions in that first 90 seconds to start to know where to guide your comments. So full on attention right at the beginning. Then start making your comments.

I don't put my comments in categories. I just do a fluid write. Whatever impression I have, whatever thought pops in my mind, if there's something I love—I'll make a specific note there. (examples.) And I always start with what I like. I start positive, sprinkle the negative in the middle or near the end...but I always lead with love.

Now let's talk

STAGING:

Here's my caution—and here's my problem as a judge. However, when I'm critiquing the staging...who am I critiquing? The kid or the coach? Well—regardless, the staging is a big component.

My favorite thing to do in IHSSA is when schools ask me to come help polish...and I always, always, always.....give staging suggestions. Here are some of the keys to the kingdom. I mean if this were a coaching seminar, I'd easily fill an entire day.---the tricks of the trade I could share with you that I learned and stole from all the people that I saw that were succeeding---what are they doing that I'm not? I go to Broadway and I watch to see how they are staging this! Oh my gosh—

I like to do a lot with staging solos in my directing.

Here are some of the tips I've picked up along my 35 years of directing:

1. Use of focus is an essential tool
2. Let the music AND the lyrics drive the action
3. Play with a host of staging tools:
 - a. How can we use the hands, the shoulders, etc?
 - b. How can we use the chair(s)? (Note how many stage pictures we can create with just one.)
 - c. Where should the performer look—and when?

- d. What expressions should accompany the words?
 - i. Caution: Avoid having students close their eyes to illustrate “emotional depth”
 - ii. Avoid having students look at the floor too often
- e. Does each note need to be “sung” perfectly?
- f. When to sit, to turn, to cross?

SECRET GARDEN: RACE YOU TO THE TOP OF THE MORNING

FILLING THE MUSIC INTERLUDES WITH STAGING:

The Instrumental Music

The lyric-less parts of the song!!!! How to fill those!

Well that for me is the hardest part of staging in musical theatre—when it’s only the music and no lyrics to help me figure out what to do.....not to leave my performers “out to dry” when only the music interlude is happening.

We have to think about how to use every single beat of the music—the measures leading to the first lyrics, the measures in between, on the bridge....

Make sure the interludes are FILLED—with energy, presence, staging

Don’t allow performers to “let down” during the parts where they aren’t singing

What to do in the silences—AND what to do with the ebbs and flows—when the music builds or decrescendos... you’ve got to build with the build.

Not just the lyrics drive the movement choices. The music itself might be telling us to MOVE. It’s driving us. When I hear a good song, I can’t help but want to move with it. It’s wanting me to do something.

So we’ve got to listen to where is the progression of the music. Lots of comments come from here—

“Hey, I really wanted you to move faster on that one section”

“I felt like you were just frozen and waiting for your song to start.”

“Please fill the space with energy from the very opening note.”

LARGE GROUP MUSICAL THEATRE

The same precepts that drive the staging of any kind of theatre apply to musical theatre as well.

Create / Look for Stage Pictures:

They need to use the space! (Footprints on floor analogy I use)

Play to the diagonals—not just straight out to the audience

Use upstage and downstage positions correctly

- * Keep the “reactors” an integral part of the stage picture.

- * Don’t have a singer come DC and leave the ensemble upstage—switch it

Make sure to use the Power of the Ensemble—***Reactions—

- *So keep them close together...not across the stage from each other

Use as many key staging elements as possible: Elevate / Indicate/ Isolate / Frame

Play to the strengths of the students:

If they can’t sing, don’t have them sing.

If they can’t dance, don’t have them dance...or keep the dancing simple and polished.

If directors can’t choreograph—then get assistance or simply to just “block” the song instead to highlight the meaning of the lyrics.

Pay Attention to Details:

Think of stage business, think of energy

Don’t leave singers “out to dry” with no blocking to help convey the message of the scene...and help singers know what to do with their hands

Remember there's a big difference between singing and selling a song, between a musical theatre presentation and a choir concert, between conveying notes and conveying meaning

A good singer does not equal a good actress—the best way to help a singer go to the next level is to teach them to convey the *message* of the lyrics—this comes through acting experience and training, not just learning proper breathing and singing techniques

Make Sure the Meaning Drives the Movement

Let the lyrics be your initial springboard to blocking choices

Think of the music—the swells, the beats, the accents—as your lines to block. They are as important as the lyrics themselves

Feature and Enhance the Talents Students bring to the process—For Coaches

Thoughts on selecting your ensemble cast—some may be featured; others may be in supporting roles

Find really terrific solo song scenes with strong acting opportunities

I Confess / Can you Find it in your Heart from Footloose

Hold On / Race You to the Top of the Morning from Secret Garden

Find strong duets or small ensembles to feature just a few of your more talented singers

My Friend--The Life / One Boy--Bye Bye Birdie / In Lily's Eyes--Secret Garden

If you do not have students who can dance, enlist the help of a dance teacher—or a cheerleading captain.

Good choreography in musical theatre does not have to achieve the level of professional dancers. Some basic movement patterns can be very effective, easy to polish and can be the highlight of a scene if they are executed with precision and energy.

I Need a Hero—I'm Free....from Footloose

Just because some in the ensemble might dance does not mean that they all need to. You can feature some and use the others as “reactors”.

Final Note:

Above all, remember that musical theatre should produce good theatre—not just a good choral blend or a great vocal performance.

We should leave thinking of the scene and the characters and the mood of the piece, not thinking, “Oh, she’s got a really great singing voice.”