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# Consent-Based Considerations for the Musical Theatre

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**About the Author:**

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I am currently directing a musical with big brass band-sized plot holes with a group of very dramaturgically-canny student artists. When we hit one of these moments of inconsistency, everyone pulls out their understanding of plot structure, historical context, and their character to find a way to make the moment make sense. When that fails, someone chants, “it’s a musical!” (*Something Rotten*-style) and we instead find a way to work around it that lives in the genre and holds dramatic truth, if not necessarily *exact* coherence (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, n.d.). This is the strange and wonderful world of musical theatre, balanced in the tension between realism and impressionism, truth and fact, the everyday and the extraordinary; it is a theatrical form with capacity for deep sociopolitical and emotional resonance and a reputation for a lack thereof.<sup>1</sup> Calling the American musical a “deceptively potent form,” scholar Warren Hoffman (2014) is an expert in the relationship between musical structure and the real-world identities that such structures obscure, privilege, and protect. He explains that the musical “sings, dances, and performs its politics in plain sight, but we the audience are so mesmerized by the spectacle that a show’s social context and ideologies may become difficult to see” (3) even though most musicals are making arguments about large-scale social realities all the time.

As a musical theatre scholar, I’m interested in the ways we can use both the text and music on the page as well as their thoughtful manifestations onstage to shape those arguments in more meaningful and responsible ways. Musicals, as pioneering queer and feminist musical theatre studies scholar Stacy Wolf (2002; 2011) argues, often use romantic relationships as the centers of their plots and as the vehicles through which they explore broader social realities; this means that shaping these arguments on stage almost always means thoughtfully shaping the romantic and sexual relationships of the musicals’ characters. As someone who studies queer musical theatre (musical theatre centering LGBTQ+ narratives and experiences) specifically and who began directing in the Bible Belt, I have always been keenly aware of the need for balance between working within actors’ boundaries and being intentional and specific about the stories we are telling with their bodies in space. My second directing assignment included directing two

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straight male actors in a moment of musically-informed intimacy, and I remember agonizing about making sure the actors were okay with the content but also finding choreography that would make it clear the relationship was unambiguously romantic (a hard ask for queer intimacy in 2009 in Bowling Green, KY).

In the years since, more professionals in the field are having conversations about what it means to be responsible for the content on our stages and the boundaries of the artists creating that content. I first encountered Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard's work on intimacy choreography in a workshop Pace offered during my first semester of my doctoral studies. The workshop gave me new tools for translating my scholarship about queer characters in musical theatre into practice-as-research production contexts; working with actors to perform the artistic interventions I suspected would be effective in an academic consent-based process would provide the opportunity to experiment and gather data to further my research. In the subsequent five years, I've been at the intersection of growing practices as an intimacy choreographer and educator (I pursued additional intimacy training throughout my PhD and was a part of Theatrical Intimacy Education's first graduate assistant cohort; I am now an associate faculty member with the company and an intimacy choreographer working, so far, exclusively in musicals and plays with music), a musical theatre artist-scholar (my current position is as a visiting assistant professor of musical theatre), and an instructor of primarily practical theatre courses. Operating at this intersection has caused me to reflect on the question: how do we cultivate consent-based practices in our undergraduate musical theatre programs while telling stories that harness the musical form's full potential to offer arguments and insights about the human condition as well as entertaining, and what do those practices look like specifically in musical theatre?

This article isn't an answer to the question—that's the work of several careers—but it *is* an attempt to offer some information about:

1. Why it is particularly important to be conscious of consent-based processes in undergraduate musical theatre education and the ways in which some consent-

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based best practices help address particular problems/challenges common to the field

2. Practical genre-specific tips/tools and suggestions for potential anticipatory problem solving
3. Ways that choreographic choices around intimate storytelling can be a part of shaping the argument of a musical (including adding nuance where it may be lacking).

Moving forward, I'll offer information about why some may be tempted to ignore best practices in musical theatre contexts and why it's extra important that they don't. Then, I'll use the Three Big Ideas from *Staging Sex* (Pace 2020, 9) as a framing structure to share musical-specific tips, challenges, and considerations.

Before we hop in, some caveats and clarifications: first, I am writing about musical theatre training and production in an academic context because that is the context in which I most frequently encounter the work. At the same time, academic contexts are likely the most cautious level at which this work operates with adults. The "you" to whom I speak in second-person address is assumed to be someone in an artistic leadership position responsible for handling intimacy in an undergraduate musical theatre context. Most of what I share, however, will be applicable to many musical theatre contexts. Second, while I am writing about considerations that are *specific* to musicals, I am not necessarily claiming they are *exclusive* to musicals (microphones, for instance, may also need to be considered in nonmusical contexts). Finally, my training is with Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE), and the tools and best practices I reference are theirs; I attempted to give each tool enough context to translate the ideas to your own intimacy practice if it differs. Further context for those tools can be found in *Staging Sex* or in a TIE in-person or digital workshop.

### **“And You Didn’t Though You Shoulda”: A Case for Consent-Based Musical Spaces<sup>2</sup>**

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Musical theatre has always held a strange seat at theatre's broader table. While music was almost certainly present in the earliest forms of ritual performance and has remained an important element of theatre throughout the field's tenure, musical theatre as we contemporarily understand it is a relatively young art form. Scholars most commonly cite the first musical (that is, the first musical that functions in our current imagining of the form, with a book, music, and lyrics that work together to form a coherent narrative) as *The Black Crook* (1866), occasionally *Showboat* (1927), or *Oklahoma!* (1943) (see, for example, the musical theatre history texts of Hurwitz 2014; Kenrick 2008; Mordden 2013; and Reside 2011). Musicals' status as popular entertainment and frequent reliance on formulaic structures with light plots, especially in the mid-century, made it easy to discount musicals as fluffy fun rather than legitimate art, an attitude both combatted in much early musical theatre scholarship and reflected in later significant entries to the field (e.g., Hoffman 2014; Knap, Morris, and Wolf 2011; Wolf 2002, 2011). Illustratively, in the 104 years the Pulitzer Prize for Drama has been awarded, only ten such awards went to musicals. Musicals have grown increasingly nuanced and complex over time, but it is clear that there is still expectation that the musical theatre default is productions that are pleasant and inconsequential. Concord Theatricals, for example, one of the major musical rights holders, places "edgy musicals" in their own collection ("Edgy Musicals" 2022). It is still not unusual to hear scholars or practitioners who don't create or study musicals casually hand-wave them as a less-serious theatrical form unworthy of specific attention or requiring genre-specific performance training (beyond, of course, singing and dancing). "Ah, musicals," a grumpy new acquaintance once quipped after I mentioned that I was a musical theatre scholar, "where you can go watch people act, sing, and dance at the same time, all worse than you could watch them do any of them one at a time."

Musicals are also expensive and resource-intensive to produce, especially in academic institutions that may or may not be set up to handle the scale of a musical production. The rights to musicals almost always cost more than the rights to plays and often by significant (read: another entire decimal place) margins. Musicals require a

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music director and, depending on the show, often also require a choreographer. These collaborators may not already exist in a theatre department and, therefore, may represent additional costs on top of any musicians who need to be hired to play the show. Musicals often have more bodies onstage than plays, meaning they require more costumes and there are more humans to juggle within the audition and rehearsal periods. Finally, many academic programs add an additional week or two to their production processes when producing a musical. This often translates to having a week or two to learn music and choreography and then spending the usual production process length blocking and rehearsing the musical as a whole, which also must include time for cleaning music and choreography, something that wouldn't be necessary in a straight play. There's a lot going on in a musical process!

It may be easy for the people programming seasons to look at all of the demands of finances and time and decide that the musical doesn't *really* need a consent-based process if that means devoting extra time or resources. They likely wouldn't say that, of course, and they probably wouldn't mean it. Most people in academic theatre care deeply about our students and want good things for them, but they might say things like "do we *really* need copies of the casting disclosure forms for all 70 people at callbacks?" or "this guest director has done beautiful work on really important productions, we were lucky to get them, we can't expect them to change their process for this college show" or "we're already paying for a dance choreographer, they can just do the sex scene if the director doesn't want to, it's all movement, right?" or "that moment has been staged that way in every production for a decade, if the actor didn't know about it when they were cast they didn't do their homework" or "it's sung in a song, how traumatic can it be?"

The reality, though, is that musicals don't just need fully consent-based processes the same ways plays do, and musical theatre students don't just need to be trained in boundary setting and self-advocacy the same way nonmusical actors do. I suggest that the specific dynamics of the field mean that it's *extra* important not just to have someone on hand to stage physically intimate moments in a consent-based way but to put

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structures in place (as much as possible) for a fully consent-based production process that encourages and empowers self-advocacy. Here are a few reasons why:

- **Having more people in power in the space makes it more important that each of those people wield their power well and that consent tools are baked into the process.** It isn't ideal for a production with even a single director to rely solely on the rapport between the director and their team to ensure that cast members and other collaborators feel able to self-advocate in the space. As Pace writes, a director can't "give [their power] away by being approachable" (Pace 2020, 9), and without solid systems in place to make sure actors have real ways to set boundaries, they may not be comfortable telling even the best-meaning director "no." More people in creative power (music directors, choreographers), though, means more pressure. If looking at one person they've been trained to value pleasing and telling them "no" is high-stakes for an actor, how much harder is it to say it to three of them, all of whom have put significant work into scheduling this one brief moment they can all be in the space? More people in power in the space also make it less likely that, without the support of some tried and tested tools, all of those people are going to be equally skilled at crafting a consent-based space. Having one collaborator who isn't ready to support artists in setting and maintaining boundaries can make a big difference in the overall experience of the production. Finally, even in a process in which each collaborator is *deeply* invested in making consent-based spaces and skilled at doing so in their individual practices, having different expectations for how things like raising concerns work with each member of the creative team means that artists have to not only self-reflect to know what they need and get up the courage to ask for it, but they then have to remember the set of rules under which they're operating. A common consent framework in a process—an agreed-upon self-care cue and specific language around setting boundaries, for example—ensures everyone is on the same page, has efficient access to appropriate

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tools and language, and has consistent expectations no matter which artistic leader is facilitating a given rehearsal.

- **Scarcity thinking is a particularly prevalent problem in collegiate musical theatre, which means collegiate musical theatre needs to be particularly intentional about taking steps to combat it.** The entire theatre industry is guilty of training actors to worry that there are too many people for too few jobs and that they should contort themselves into exactly who and what creative leaders want. “Actors are taught,” Pace writes, “that they are replaceable” (Pace 2020, 8), and that fear of being replaced if they are perceived as “difficult” (read: have boundaries around what they are and aren’t willing to do onstage or experience in a professional space) makes it really challenging for actors to be secure enough in a creative process to self-advocate and offer real, meaningful consent. The nature of musical theatre as an art form makes this even harder. The plucky, willing ingenue who’s willing to step into the shoes of a difficult leading lady and submit to the morally ambiguous people in power to do so is a trope of the field, and the structure of having a few prominent starring roles and a sizeable ensemble (full of actors who are often expected to be efficient and interchangeable) means performers can’t forget that there are, indeed, lots of other people who would be willing and able to step into their role if they made choices that led the creative team to decide they were no longer suitable for it.<sup>3</sup> By the time they first step into a college classroom, most musical theatre students have gotten a taste of their alleged precarity in the industry firsthand: in an article for the International Thespian Festival magazine, college audition coach Tim Evanicki (2018) explains that recent years have seen a major increase in applications to college theatre programs, with BFA musical theatre programs being particularly competitive. Carnegie Mellon’s musical theatre program, he offers as an example, admitted less than one percent of applicants in 2017. Even if you aren’t teaching in a highly competitive audition-requiring BFA program, your students likely either applied for some or watched friends go through the



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lengthy, stressful process of doing so and are likely entering your program with a freshly reinforced understanding of themselves as one actor in a sea of competition. If musical theatre performers are going to be prepared to wade into that sea with their boundaries and values intact, it is essential that collegiate programs do everything in their power to empower their students to understand themselves as artists with agency.

- **Musical theatre performers are extra likely to find themselves in professional contexts where separating life and art is particularly challenging: they need all the tools at their disposal to rise to the challenge.** I'll talk in the next section about why musical theatre as an art form can pose specific challenges to separation between character and self even in production processes or classroom contexts where students are playing characters in existing works. The reality of post-graduate employment for many students who study musical theatre is that they *aren't* immediately employed in productions with the helpful containers of coherent plots or characters who can be clearly differentiated from themselves. Theme parks, cruise ships, and entertainment venues at various tourist destinations often employ musical theatre actors for revue-style shows in which performers are asked to deliver virtuosic, high-energy, emotionally expressive performances across a range of styles at breakneck speed without characters to hold onto. In an entertainment venue in Pigeon Forge, for instance, a singer-dancer may be asked to embody romantically intimate relationships with multiple scene partners, express an extended moment of profound religious devotion, engage with the grief of war, and clog to "Rocky Top" over the course of a 90-minute show. Afterwards, they're expected to immediately adjourn to the theatre lobby to pleasantly interact with patrons. Being able to step into each of those performance moments truthfully requires incredible craft, and most musical theatre acting training manuals I reviewed (as well as my own training as a musical theatre performer) encourage actors to use personalization, connection with one's own lived experience, to access truthful performance.

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(See, for example, Thomas de Mallet Burgess and Nicholas Skillbeck's *The Singing and Acting Handbook*, 2000; Tracey Moore and Allison Bergman's *Acting the Song: Performance Skills for the Musical Theatre*, 2008; specific exercises in Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera's *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course*, 2008; and Gerald Lee Ratliff and Suzanne Trauth's *Onstage: Producing Musical Theatre*, 1988.) This makes it really easy for performers in these contexts to find themselves in a place where boundaries get blurry both in staging physically close moments with fellow performers *and* in navigating their way through the emotional and intellectual landscape of the production. Making sure that performers have solid technique for physical, personal, and professional boundaries in more straightforward performance contexts helps them to be equipped to extrapolate their skills to stranger circumstances.

I am not, of course, the first person to suggest that emerging musical theatre artists need support to develop healthy practices for protecting themselves and others. Even in 2008, musical theatre training scholars like Tracey Moore and Allison Bergman (174, 289) and Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vara (6) cautioned performers to set physical boundaries and respect the physical boundaries of others, to be careful to only work on productions that can accommodate one's boundaries, and to be intentional about separating life and art. I am also not nearly the only person to align contemporary movements towards consent-based performance with musical theatre. In January 2020 the Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance journal featured "Theatrical Intimacy: Creating a Culture of Consent," an article in which Andrew Barratt Lewis (currently an associate faculty member with Theatrical Intimacy Education) offered a comprehensive rundown of the recent history of theatrical intimacy. In addition, many of the intimacy professionals both choreographing and writing today do so in both musical and nonmusical theatrical contexts.<sup>4</sup> My aim in the following pages is to help bridge the gap between musical theatre directors and educators working hard to make consent-based musical spaces and the tools intimacy professionals are already using in musical and nonmusical spaces

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alike, offering the musical theatre professional who is new to this particular flavor of consent-based performance or the intimacy professional delving into musical theatre a head start on anticipating some of the ways in which these processes work together.

### **“Apparently This Happens in Musicals as Well”: Consent-Based Considerations<sup>5</sup>**

In *Staging Sex*, Pace (2020, 9-12) presents the essence of her system as three big ideas:

1. Create a Culture of Consent
2. Desexualize the Process
3. Choreograph It

In this section, I use each of these big ideas as an umbrella, offering insight into some of the ways the tools in each of them apply to musical theatre in the form of suggested considerations.

Before diving into specific tools, one general tip that is especially helpful in collaborator-heavy processes like musicals: work with your collaborators before actors enter the space to set clear expectations regarding each artist’s responsibilities, where you’re collaborating, and what that collaborative relationship will look like. Musical collaboration can be *messy*. Musicals sometimes contain moments of loaded content (content engaging intimacy, violence, or other sensitive topics) that could, depending on the preferences, personalities, and competencies of the collaborators in a process, fall under the purview of a director, a fight choreographer, a dance choreographer, an intimacy choreographer, or some combination of the set.<sup>6</sup> Having a conversation about the handling of those moments at the beginning of the process prevents it from being blocked later in the process without adequate time or care.

#### **1. Create a Culture of Consent**

In Theatrical Intimacy Education’s Best Practices curriculum, we position consent in theatrical spaces as informed, contextual, freely given, revocable permission. Creating

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this culture begins with ensuring actors are fully informed of what they'll be asked to do in a production at the time of casting; we do this through the use of clear casting breakdowns and audition disclosure forms. It also includes tools for setting boundaries (physical boundary practice, which offers language for setting other kinds of boundaries) and allowing actors to self-advocate when they experience a moment of heightened concern (a self-care cue). Here are some suggestions for incorporating these tools effectively in a musical context:

*Make Sure That You Are Using Casting Breakdowns and Audition Disclosure Forms  
and That They Are Specific to Your Production*

Because musicals tend to have widely available material like cast recordings and video recordings (Tony performances, television spots, etc.), it can be tempting to assume that those auditioning know what they're getting into and consent to everything in the show. This is a dangerous assumption to make in any process, but the distribution patterns of musical librettos and the staging conventions of musical theatre make it an especially risky game in this genre. Most plays for which rights are publicly available can be purchased if an actor wishes to read the play in advance of their audition; that isn't necessarily true for musicals. There is no legal way to access many musical librettos without officially requesting a perusal copy from the rights holder, an option that is often unavailable to performers who aren't themselves affiliated with a theatre. Contractual language on most musical materials prohibits making copies or scans, so there are few legal ways for a theatre or department to make the full material available to review in advance short of letting people check out a physical copy. Even if it was realistic to expect every auditioner to read every piece of the material in advance (and it is not, especially at institutions where students audition for a full season's or semester's worth of productions at once), reviewing the full libretto often simply isn't possible for musicals. Other ways that performers often get visual context for conventional stagings of intimate moments (bootlegs, YouTube videos uploaded by actors in a production without the consent of the rights holders, etc.) are illegal, and it simply isn't ethical to require that

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potential auditionees break the law in order to be able to offer fully-informed consent at the time of auditions.

For many musicals, the cast recording is the only legally available resource. Cast recordings *are* often easily accessible, many are available on services like Spotify, but it isn't always clear from the music what is happening on stage. In *Spring Awakening*, for example, nothing about the repeated refrain "I believe/there is love in heaven/all will be forgiven" in the song "I Believe" (Duncan Shiek, n.d.) would suggest that two teenagers are sharing a sexual encounter of ambiguous consent throughout. Furthermore, musical theatre is a genre that has space for a wide variety of directing styles and production stylizations as compared with nonmusical realistic drama. The inclusion of music and movement necessitates a certain departure from realism, and it is within both the production conventions and licensing agreements of musical theatre to have productions of the same musical that vary wildly in their proximity to realism (and decisions around nonrealistic stylized elements) in terms of design and performance. Depending on the established conventions in a given production of *Spring Awakening*, for example, "*I Believe*" (the previously referenced narrative moment in which the characters of Melchior and Wendla engage in intercourse in a hayloft) could be staged as an impressionistic dance moment or with the now-conventional choreography that features realistic simulated sexual intercourse, often including baring the chest tissue of the actor playing Wendla and a portion of the rear pelvic area of the actor playing Melchior. An actor who consents to the moment expecting one style and comes to rehearsal to find that the plan is to stage the other didn't actually get an opportunity to offer fully-informed consent at the time of casting.

This means that musical theatre directors have a responsibility to fully inform actors of the stylistic conventions they will be employing to tell loaded stories at the time of casting. This ensures not only that the production's narrative content aligns with the actor's boundaries, but that the actor fully consents to the way they will be asked to embody that content. Even with musicals that now have codified conventional staging for sensitive moments, even in productions where your intention is to maintain the spirit of that conventional staging, actors need complete information about what they're being

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asked to consent to. If a director or choreographer isn't prepared to offer that information at the time of auditions, they must commit to a process where they will modify their vision to align with actors' boundaries, not the other way around.

*Make Sure Actors Have Tools for Setting Physical Boundaries Before Choreography Rehearsals Begin If Choreography Is Happening Before Other Staging*

It is not unusual for a musical process to devote several days to music and choreography rehearsals early in a production process, sometimes before a director ever begins working with actors. Depending on the content of the show and the personal philosophies of the collaborators in a process, it may or may not be necessary to have dancers engage tools like a full physical boundary practice right away. "Boundary practice" in Theatrical Intimacy Education parlance is a process in which performers who may engage in physical contact in a scene give each other specific and detailed instructions about where they are and are not open to receiving touch in a scene. This is accomplished through a system in which, first, one performer shows their scene partner the areas of their body available for spontaneous in-scene contact by silently demonstrating contact to those areas with their own hands on their own bodies. Then, this performer guides their partner's hands over the same areas to reinforce their boundaries before their partner verbally clarifies and confirms the boundaries they observed (Pace 2020, 24-31). Those areas that remained untouched are framed as "fences," spaces that cannot be touched without explicit conversations about whether a specific moment of contact with those spaces works for both performers' boundaries (Pace 2020, 24-31). If performers watch the choreography as it's taught and know that each choreographed moment works for their boundaries—that they are willing to offer their dance partner contact to and receive contact from their partner at the destinations (a term TIE uses to reference specific, preset, mutually-agreed-upon locations of touch) (Pace 2020) dictated by the choreography—then information about whether either partner would be open to contact at locations that won't be touched in the course of the performance may not be necessary or relevant during choreography rehearsals. It *is*, however, essential for a consent-based process for performers to know that their bodily

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autonomy is going to be respected in the space. In my experience, even if (as is almost always the case!) actors have felt great about everything they did in music and dance rehearsals, if actors have spent the first couple weeks of a rehearsal process without being invited and reminded to check in about their boundaries it becomes much more challenging to instill that kind of self-search as a habit in the rest of the process.

*Emphasize the Physical Component of Your Self-care Cue When Initially Teaching the Tool and Be Sure to Include It When Reminding People That the Self-care Cue Is Available so They Have Access to It If They Can't Be Heard.*

Theatrical Intimacy Education teaches the word “button” or a double clap/double tap as a self-care cue, a tool actors use to pause the action in a moment of heightened concern to give themselves space to self-regulate and advocate for their needs (Pace 2020, 17-23). In my practice I have found that most artists attach to the verbal version of the self-care cue, which is perfectly fine... until it turns out that they can't be heard over the band during tech. Consistently reminding actors of the physical component of the self-care cue makes it more likely that, in a moment of heightened concern when they can't be heard well, they will remember they have other options for signaling that they have needs that need to be immediately addressed.

*Be Prepared for Performers to Use a Self-care Cue a Little More Often than They Might in a Play with Similar Content*

All acting is intensely vulnerable—that's why theatre educators invested in their students' well-being as humans as well as creative artists are working to develop and engage ethical and effective tools for training our students to do it healthily and well. Musical theatre requires performers to act truthfully in high-stakes moments, as all theatre does, but it also requires actors to sing and, often, dance. These additional elements bring with them not only additional challenges of training and rehearsal time allocation, but additional layers of difficulty for an emerging actor learning to balance appropriate artistic availability with a physically and psychologically healthy process.

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Music invites additional levels of vulnerability in the room; musical theatre teaching texts like Burgess and Skillbeck's (2000) acknowledge this in underscoring the need for curating what they termed a "safe environment" (20) for the sensitivity of musical exploration. In his book *The Actor Sings*, Kevin Robison highlights the ways in which even accomplished actors are often intensely nervous about sharing their singing voice in a space, worrying whether it is good enough (2000). That question is likely particularly present for young performers in contemporary musical theatre who are comparing their own unamplified, piano-accompanied voices in the rehearsal room to carefully produced cast recordings. Strong feelings affect vocal production—see, for example, musical and vocal scientists Pauline Larrouy-Maestri and Dominique Morsomme's work on the deleterious effects of stress on vocal production (2014) and affective scientists Klaus R. Scheerer, Johan Sundberg, Lucas Tamarit, and Gláucia L. Salomão's research demonstrating the effects of emotion on vocal tone in singers (2015)—even as the demands of music prevent singers from freely using their breathing as a regulatory tool. Musical theatre training encourages even artistically young actors to work with some degree of personalization, using feelings from their real life or substituting personal given circumstances for a character's to shape artistic expression (de Mallet Burgess and Skillbeck 2000; Moore and Bergman 2008). This, combined with the delivered wisdom in musical theatre that all songs come at moments of high character emotional intensity, creates a perfect recipe for at least a few moments in a rehearsal space in which an actor may need to re-regulate. This may happen when the combination of an actor's feelings and the character's feelings make continuing to work on a song without taking space unproductive. An artistic leader who is able to anticipate the occurrence of such moments and respond positively to them can discourage shame in the space and encourage additional brave play.

*Be Prepared for Other People in the Room to Potentially Need to Use the Self-care Cue  
a Little More Often, Too*

The self-care cue as a tool is available to everyone present in a creative process, and it isn't only the actor who is singing a particular song who may find themselves in a



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heightened state in a musical rehearsal space. *All* theatre has, we hope, an affective impact on those who watch it, and while the research around audience reception is focused on audience members who are unaffiliated with the rehearsal process watching a final performance, it seems reasonable to extrapolate that performances in rehearsal contexts also have the potential to produce affective responses in others in the space.<sup>7</sup> Musicals, however, engage those viewing them in specific ways that may mean that the director, stage management team, or others in the room may have stronger affective experiences of the work unfolding in the space than with nonmusical theatre. As such, these artists need both the space to engage in self-care and the reminder that they are entitled to the tools to allow them to do so.

In a book chapter on audience reception, musical theatre historian Michelle Dvoskin (2013) explains that musical theatre invites a particularly embodied mode of performative spectatorship in which viewers physically align themselves with performers by moving their bodies along with the music as they watch. The Nagoskis' research (2019) suggests that co-movement – like tapping at the same time, but also, presumably, like sharing larger choreographic movements – invites not only experiences of empathy, but physiological emotional alignment of physical conditions like breathing and heart rate. This effect is not only due to visual stimulus, but aural as well; data scientist Pieter Coussement and musicologists Michiel Demey and Marc Lemen (2010) suggest that listening to shared music also synchronizes heart rates.

A wealth of both qualitative and quantitative research demonstrates that music both expresses emotional content and produces emotional responses in listeners. Scherer's chapter in *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control*, coauthored with music psychologist Eduardo Coutinho (2013) offers a deep dive into "emotion induction" (121). Here, they explore the ways music causes predictable emotional responses in most people who listen to it and describe the mechanisms by which it does so; Linda Phyllis Austern's work explores the same from a musicological perspective (2002).

What does all this mean? Musical theatre has the potential to invite strong emotional responses from everyone involved, and that may result in the need to take

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extra time or care to make sure that cast and crew can navigate their processes in a way that keeps those responses productive and manageable.

## **2. Desexualize the Process**

In Best Practices, this idea has been expanded to include not only a desexualized process but also a deloaded process; this acknowledges the fact that not all sensitive or intimate content is necessarily sexual. Tools under this big idea include practices for clearly delineating the actor and the character in the space, avoiding referring to moments of intimacy/violence/other sensitive content with loaded language, and offering performers access to closure processes to help them leave the character at the theatre rather than carrying them into their daily lives. Here are some suggestions for incorporating these tools effectively in a musical context:

*Make Sure Your Collaborators Are on Board with Having a Deloaded Process and That You All Share an Understanding of What That Means for Your Particular Show. Come to Collective Agreements with Your Collaborators about How You Will Refer to Heightened Moments in the Show.*

There are lots of ways to have a deloaded process that differentiates character intention from performer action. This ranges from speaking only about character intention in moments of intimacy/violence while doing table work to simply asking actors to toss in an “as [character name]” before speaking from a first-person point of view. Taking a few moments to check in with your collaborators and make sure you’re on the same page about handling this for your process allows you to offer student artists a consistent experience. If there are moments of intimacy, violence, or other loaded content that will need to be referenced for choreographic purposes, it’s helpful to decide early on what those moments will be called to avoid miscommunications as they pop up in various rehearsal and production contexts.

*Remind Actors of the Availability of De-roling Practices and Other Closure Practices Throughout the Process. Be Aware of the Ways in Which Some Young Artists’ Musical*

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*Theatre Fandom Experiences May Make Art-life Boundaries More Challenging to Enforce*

In Theatrical Intimacy Education's Best Practices workshops, facilitators often point out that staging intimacy in a process with clear boundaries between character and actor (including, ideally, some sort of closure process) is necessary because intimacy is part of most people's lived experience, and it lives truthfully in one's body in a way that other choreographed elements don't." You don't pirouette to your car, as fun as that would be," Laura Rikard offers as an example. In the foreword to *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course*, Lynn Ahrens suggests that "the essence and the contradiction of musicals" is that "in real life, people don't dance down streets, snapping their fingers and singing at the top of their lungs" (Deer and Dal Vera 2008, xxi).

In the parts of real life in which people are students studying theatre, musical theatre practitioners, or simply enthusiastic musical theatre fans, though, people *do*. (The people trying to enjoy an evening on the patio across the street from the Denny's the roving musical ensemble just left probably wish they *wouldn't*, but they do.) Musical theatre is not just a theatrical genre but a fandom, with musical theatre lovers integrating the musicals they like best into their daily lives in the forms of playlists, video viewing, and car sing-a-longs. One of the great delights of season planning at an academic institution is the ability to plan with an understanding of your casting pool and their interests; it's exciting to be able to put a show on the season that students have been singing in your green room for the past two years and to know they'll be excited to audition for it.

This space at the center of the fan/artist Venn diagram, however, in which an actor holds a strong personal association with a musical before approaching it as an artist, can present a challenge for healthy separation of life and art once a production process begins. Just before the pandemic hit, I was directing a production of *The Last Five Years*. One day Ella Galbraith, the actor playing Cathy, asked me to meet with her outside of rehearsal. We'd talked about de-roling as a concept and were careful about separating actor and character in rehearsal, but she was still having a really, *really* difficult time not

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constantly holding onto the feelings of the character in her daily life. When we met, she shared that she'd loved *The Last Five Years* for a really long time and had often sung Cathy's music in her car as a channel for her own strong emotions before being cast in the role. She had years of experiences built up in which there was no distance between her own lived experience and the words and melodies of the character. She experienced those songs when she was in personally emotionally difficult places, and it was proving difficult to live truthfully under the character's incredibly heavy personal circumstances in rehearsal day after day. She was, in essence, carrying the weight of both the character's relationship to the music *and* her own outside the rehearsal space. We had a long conversation about several tools she might use to have a better-partitioned process and, in conversation with other collaborators on the piece, shifted the ways we ended our rehearsals to make an easier off-ramp (more on that shortly).<sup>8</sup>

Being aware that this might come up if you're doing pieces that are well-known or if you know you've cast an actor who's wanted to play the role for a long time can help you be intentional about making closure practices available, the same way you might if an actor shared they have any other lived experience that aligns with a role in complicated ways. I often find that actors pay little attention to the offer of closure practices early in a process; in a musical where early rehearsals are marked by endless stops and starts and technical clarifications, it can be difficult to imagine a need for them. However, I almost always have at least a couple of actors who reach out for support with closure once runs begin. Anticipating this need and simply reminding people that there are tools available for their use again partway through the process can be a kindness for actors who might not have realized that the after-rehearsal feelings they're experiencing during a demanding process are partly due to a lack of closure.

*If (and Only If) the Idea Is Exciting to the Collective, Consider Collaboratively Creating a De-role Dance Playlist to Throw on at the End of Rehearsal While Striking the Space*

This is in no way a best practice, but it *is* an offering. In addition to the TIE tools of

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de-roling and springboard gestures, I regularly refer student artists to Wellness researcher Emily Nagoski and music professor Amelia Nagoski's (2019) work on completing stress cycles as a useful source for potentially helpful post-rehearsal practices to shake off the day. Among other tools, the Nagoskis suggest that engaging in physical activity, engaging with art, and engaging in laughter and emotional connection with others are effective ways to deal with accumulated stress. Looking for a way to fold some of these tactics into our end-of-day processes, my *The Last Five Years* collaborators and I came up with the idea of adding everyone's favorite dance music to an inside-joke-titled playlist ("The Last Five Queers De-Role Dance") and turning the last five minutes of rehearsal and the strike afterwards into a participation-optional dance party. This worked really well for a few reasons: first, the music people chose had *nothing* to do with the show, increasing the likelihood that the song that was stuck in their head as they went home wasn't an emotional moment they were struggling to shake off but instead was a castmate's most annoying attempt at ear worm infiltration. Second, it created an opportunity for the actors playing Jamie and Cathy (and everyone else in the process) to reconnect as humans who were not, in fact, fancy New York people in a complicated love affair but friends in a college in Kansas with the impressive ability to race to the bottom of a who-can-dance-more-ridiculously contest. This meant that most days by the end of rehearsal they were engaging in the deep belly laughter that is associated with stress reduction (Nagoski and Nagoski 2019). In a more movement-intensive rehearsal process, this tool could also function as a movement cool-down, letting people find a transition between the intensive physical movement of choreographed dance and sitting in their car. (While a lot of what I'm discussing here can apply to both academic and other theatrical contexts, this probably *is* a purely academic theatre tool unless you're part of a very particular process where actors are specifically looking for this kind of silly shared closure experience.)

### **3. Choreograph It**

Choreographing intimacy means that, at some point in the process, the intimacy is set to counts and documented as a repeatable piece of choreography, intended to be

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able to be performed exactly the same way each and every time. Here are some things to consider when choreographing intimacy in a musical theatre context:

*Music Offers Choreographic Timing Constraints That Don't Exist in Nonmusical Plays  
and Time Moves Strangely in Musicals*

Discussing the ways in which music directs actor expression, de Mallet Burgess and Skillbeck (2013) explain, "The fixed nature of musical time can dictate when you sing a word, when an action takes place or when an emotion is felt. It can construct the framework within which you initiate and complete an action or within which you reveal and resolve dramatic tensions" (5-6). Likewise, while you and the actors with whom you are working get to decide what physical action happens during a song, the song will dictate how long the moment can last and will inform tonal shifts. Music not only limits when things can happen in time, but time as a plot function can operate oddly in musicals, with one four-minute song taking place in the space of a second or two of time in the world of the play and another spanning decades. Knowing how time is operating in the specific song in which a moment of intimacy occurs is important to being able to develop choreography that feels coherent.

*Musicals Often Rely on Choreographic Conventions...But Before You Borrow from  
Them, Consider the Meaning Those Conventions Are Communicating and Whether  
That Meaning Serves the Argument Your Production Is Making*

The croquet mallet moment of "Dead Girl Walking (Reprise)" (*Heathers*), the flowing white sheets of "Contact" (*Rent*), the scrub brushography of "Hard Knock Life" (*Annie*): musicals love an iconic visual moment that echoes not only through early prominent productions, but every production thereafter. In the musicals I study (specifically, musicals including the narratives of queer characters of faith like *bare: a pop opera*, *Head Over Heels*, *Heathers*, and *Spring Awakening*), the convention looks something like this: there are queer characters who engage in some kissing (who may be the protagonists or may be funny secondary characters). Then, there are cisgender straight characters who have a full scene of simulated sexual intercourse along the

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following predictable lines: they kiss, they undress themselves and/or each other from the waist up, his pants are opened or removed, there is a moment of insertion, and both characters climax simultaneously at the song's...well, climax. This sequence of events makes some pretty clear claims about whose intimacy is fit for public consumption, whose pleasure we culturally care about and are willing to witness, and which intimate acts in a progression of simulated sexual intercourse are most essential in a fast-forwarded moment of intimacy.<sup>9</sup> As Susan Bennett (1997) writes, "cultural assumptions affect performances, and performances rewrite cultural assumptions" (2); thinking critically about the cultural assumptions that have affected the conventional staging of a performance allow for the creation of performances that work harder to rewrite those assumptions. (While I am outlining potential choreographic interventions in the kinds of shows with which I most often engage, these kinds of questions about choreographic interventions can apply to any production.)

If you're directing a musical like *bare: a pop opera*, *Head Over Heels*, *Heathers*, and *Spring Awakening* and the claims represented by the conventional choreography outlined above align with your vision, that's absolutely fine! (And, to be clear, those musicals each use their intimacy for very different purposes.) If they don't, however, I encourage you to be creative about how you use the allotted music and cues within it to stage moments of intimacy in a way that better fits your production's point of view. That could look like changing the details of the action onstage within whatever space is afforded by the text referencing that action; if potential pregnancy isn't a plot point, for instance, does the simulated sexual intimacy in a scene that's written as a moment of heterosexual intercourse between cisgender characters *have* to be intercourse? Could the moment at the end of the song that necessitates a big final note be caused by some other kind of simulated sexual moment, or could the lead-up to the moment of intercourse take longer so that the final moment represents the point at which intercourse initially occurs to give room for more nuanced storytelling before that moment? That could also look like shaping additional moments onstage; are there, perhaps, opportunities to make space for more moments of affectionate contact

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between the queer couple when they're onstage in other scenes? Are there ways to build in a world of the play outside the main characters' context that offers a more nuanced perspective on the kinds of relationships that are built into the script through the relationships within the ensemble? To offer a practical example, when I directed *A Man of No Importance*—a show about a closeted gay bus conductor in 1960s Dublin, Ireland—the ensemble included two women who were subtly coded as the kind of queer couple who would likely have been able to fly under the social radar given understandings of queer femininity in that time and place. They didn't affect the plot, but they did offer a subtle historically appropriate flicker of hope for queer joy for the audience members with the cultural context to read their interactions as intended.

It isn't possible to change characters or characterizations without written permission from the rights holders, but it *is* possible to be creative and specific with the stories you're telling, even within the high-structure environment of a musical moment.

*Be Aware That Actors Singing Challenging Material May Need to Think about Holding Their Bodies in a Way That Allows for Optimal Vocal Production*

Performers know their bodies and can share what they need to be able to make the sound they're required to make at a given moment; it's helpful to have a choreographic plan that is flexible enough to allow you to work with actors to find the movements that both honor the story and accommodate their vocal needs.

*Remember That Performers Are Likely Wearing Microphones*

It is not unusual in college theatre contexts for the departmental convention to be that nonmusical plays are performed without microphones and musicals are performed with microphones. If your department uses the kinds of microphones that tape to performers' faces, planning ahead to know which side the microphone will be on and avoiding choreographic gestures that might hit the microphone can save both some stress and some notes once microphones are added later in a process. Additionally, consulting with costumes and sound about the placement of mic packs early in the process can allow for either choreographing with mic pack placement in mind (avoiding,



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for example, a quick transition backwards onto the ground for a performer who would, in the context of a production, be rolling back onto a hard piece of plastic) or choosing mic pack placement in conversation with set choreography.<sup>10</sup>

*Consider Choreographing to Musical Counts.*

Choreography is always eventually set to counts—that’s part of how it remains repeatable—and musicals have counts built into the music. While you certainly *can* choreograph with whatever numbers and tempo of counts you like, setting your counts at the tempo of the song and making them align with the counts inherent in the music makes it easier for actors to juggle counting for intimacy choreography and counting for musical purposes at the same time.

*For Particularly Complex Choreography or Choreography Where the Exact Musical Timing Is Important, It May Be Useful to Record Documentation for Performers Outside of Rehearsal in Addition to During It*

Intimacy choreography is never videotaped, but Theatrical Intimacy Education advocates for voice recording the intimacy choreographer talking through the moment in choreographic language as actors work through the choreography with their lines onstage (Pace 2020, 70). This practice is perfectly functional in a musical, just as in a nonmusical play. It may also be useful for the intimacy choreographer to take a preexisting audio file of actors singing and saying lines and record themselves speaking the set intimacy choreography over it. This is particularly helpful when actions need to be timed at very precise musical moments (or when precise musical moments are absent from the rehearsal space due to a singing ensemble being excluded from a limited choreography rehearsal). A very clean, clear recording is an extremely useful tool in a context where it isn’t as convenient to pause to figure things out as it would be in a nonmusical play.

**Finale**

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Musicals have always tended to center romantic relationships, engaging these relationships both as a plot in their own right and, often, as a metaphor for broader social considerations. Despite a historical understanding of the form as light, many contemporary musicals engage explicit sexual content, and the formal conventions of all musicals means that even non-sexual content may feel particularly intimate for performers (Deer and Dal Vera 2008, 352-353). Musical theatre is a field that expects high levels of vulnerability and availability, but it also tends to magnify the broader industry's challenges of scarcity thinking and high pressure for actors to be easy to work with and eager to please. If actors are going to be able to navigate the tensions of the field with health and grace, they need the support of consent-based processes in their training institutions.

When all is said and done, basic best practices for curating consent-based spaces apply across all genres of performance; one doesn't need special training to have an amazing, ethical process in musical theatre as an artistic leader. The additional layers of song and dance, the genre's weight of convention, and the increased number of collaborators in a musical process *do*, however, add complications to a process. My hope is that this article will help you to spend less time in a rehearsal process running into these complications for the first time so that you have more time to devote to other considerations; after all, "it's a musical!" and there's a lot of work to do (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick n.d.).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera dig more into the ways these contradictions inform the craft in the introduction to *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course*. For further reading on musicals' position as reflections of their cultural context, see, for example, Larry Stempel's *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theatre* or Raymond Knapp, Michell Morris, and Stacey Wolf's edited volume, *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*.

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<sup>2</sup> Lyrics from Betty Comden and Adolf Green's "If You Hadn't But You Did," written for *Two On the Aisle* and popularized by [Kristin Chenoweth](#).

<sup>3</sup> Consider, for instance, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, or *Gypsy*. Both [42<sup>nd</sup> Street](#) (with music by Harry Warren, lyrics by Al Dubin, and a book by Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble, based on the novel by Bradford Ropes) and [The Phantom of the Opera](#) (with music and book by Andrew Lloyd Webber, lyrics by Charles Hart, and additional lyrics and book by Richard Stilgoe, based on the novel *Le Fantome de l'Opéra* by Gaston Leroux) offer the most archetypal version of this narrative. In *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, Peggy Sawyer is a young aspiring actor who gets off the bus in New York and takes on a chorus role in the musical *Pretty Lady*, in which the star is an older diva cast primarily to secure the show's funding from her producer romantic partner. When a dance accident renders the older actor unable to fill her part, Peggy Sawyer steps into her shoes and into a grueling rehearsal process in which the director falls in love with her before she steps into stardom. In *The Phantom of the Opera*, Christine Daaé is a young actor in the company of the opera where a woman named Carlotta is the soprano prima donna. Christine studies music under a mysterious "angel of music," a phantom who haunts the opera house. After a series of mysterious Phantom-provoked events and conflicts between Carlotta and the producers of the opera, Christine is elevated to the role of a star at the Phantom's insistence before, eventually, being kidnapped and taken to his lair. While productions vary in their interpretation of Christine's feelings towards the Phantom, his romantic/sexual feelings towards her certainly influence his decision to support her artistic elevation. In [Gypsy](#), the musical adaptation of Gypsy Rose Lee's memoirs (with music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and a book by Arthur Laurents), Louise's mother manages a vaudeville act including her but starring her younger sister; when her sister runs away and vaudeville begins to decline, she begins working in a burlesque venue and becomes an incredibly successful burlesque performer. While Louise doesn't take over the position from a more difficult female performer, her likability is still a part of her success and is still contrasted with the failure that comes from being classed as "difficult" in the entertainment industry (her mother is depicted as a challenging woman who never quite manages to wrangle the stardom for her children that she wants) and the industry's fickleness is still underscored in the way other burlesque dancers speak about the industry to Louise.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive literature review of the field, see Amanda Rose Villareal's "The Evolution of Consent-Based Performance: A Literature Review" in *The Journal of Consent-Based Performance's* Spring 22 volume.

<sup>5</sup> Lyrics from "It's a Musical" in Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's *Something Rotten*.

<sup>6</sup> As an example, in the musical *Heathers*, the song "Big Fun" takes place at a high school party and includes several references to intimacy, both consensual and less so;

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depending on the director's choices around how those moments are staged, it is possible that all four collaborators listed in the previous sentence might have a role in collaboratively staging moments of the song in which an unwanted intimate touch is offered during a dance and the character offering the touch is shoved away.

<sup>7</sup> For a user-friendly guide to theatrical audience engagement research, see Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, Theatre& (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Special thanks to Ella Galbraith for allowing me to share this story and reviewing an early draft of this article to verify its accuracy from her point of view!

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent breakdown of not only the mechanics of staging simulated intercourse and outercourse but also the dramatic implications of each, see Pace's "Intercourse" and "Outercourse" workshops through Theatrical Intimacy Education.

<sup>10</sup> Thank you to the reviewer who offered the suggestion of factoring mic pack placement into the conversation around microphones in intimacy.

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