Collaboration: a performance showcase

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Bill Jenkins

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

Date: May 2010
Expected Date of Graduation: May 8th, 2010
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ABSTRACT

This project served as a laboratory for my classroom study of collaboration in conjunction with theatre production. As a performance major, I was required to take courses covering the non-performance aspects of theatre. This project was an extension of this study; allowing me to not only take on the role of the actor, but also the director, stage manager, marketing director, etc. Taking on these responsibilities enabled me to grow in my understanding of collaborative theatre, and more importantly, strengthened my skills as an actor to effectively communicate with future colleagues.

The outcome of this project was in the form of a Senior Performance Showcase. The Musical Theatre seniors performed a series of songs that represented their talent and growth made over the past 4 years. The material covered a variety of genres that we have studied in our respective voice labs, including contemporary musical theatre, golden age musical theatre, jazz, and pop.

The purpose of the Senior Performance Showcase was to present to professors and fellow theatre and dance students a compiled and brief representation of what we have learned at Ball State University. This included a thorough coverage of Broadway musical genres, how to pick material that emphasized our unique strengths and appropriately marketed us to industry professionals, and how to properly incorporate our vocal and acting training in a performance setting. Our target audience for this specific performance were not industry professionals, so we were not looking for employment; rather, we sought to entertain our family, mentors, and peers that were in attendance.

Serving as the coordinator of the Senior Showcase, my objective was to utilize my collaborative skills to produce the event. I gained experience in the non-performance aspect of a production to inform any future endeavors. Most importantly, this experience strengthened my communicative skills as an actor.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- I would like to thank Bill Jenkins for his advisement on this project. He not only oversaw the project, but participated in the opening number as well. More importantly, I’d like to thank Bill for his mentorship and friendship over the last 4 years.
- I would like to thank Dean Robert Kvam and Dr. Michael O’Hara for their surprise appearance at the showcase. The students warmly welcomed their sense of humor.
- I would like to thank Cody Ricks for being our accompanist and sharing his talents.
- I would like to thank Christie Zimmerman for choreographing the opening number.
- I would like to thank Justin and Christopher Swader for designing the poster.
- I would like to thank Duncan McIntyre for serving as our rehearsal accompanist.
- I would like to thank Ryan Prendergast for assisting me in the stage/house management responsibilities the evening of the showcase.
At the heart of theatre lies collaboration. The sights and sounds of a theatrical production draw the audiences to the seats and keep them full until closing. An audience recognizes the work of the actors, designers, and musicians for their tangible display of talent, but what is often overlooked by a general audience are the countless number of people that contribute to the development of a musical. These people include, but are most certainly not limited to: the director, marketing team, box office and house staff, and stage managers.

The acknowledgement of their work by theatergoers pales in comparison to the vital respect and appreciation needed to be shown by their fellow artists and colleagues. This mutual respect is necessary in the successful producing of a musical. Without it, the production ultimately suffers because of the artists’ inability to communicate and compromise to achieve a cohesive piece of art.

It is for this reason that I decided to coordinate the Ball State University’s Department of Theatre and Dance Musical Theatre Senior Showcase. As an actor myself, I not only wanted to participate in the performative aspect of the showcase, but wanted to experience first-hand the struggles and necessary characteristics needed to fulfill multiple roles in the theatre. This experience would provide insight as to how I can better collaborate with directors, designers, and staff in my future acting endeavors.

What I have come to count on as an actor is to expect the unexpected, and that belief was certainly solidified at the conclusion of this process. I approached the showcase with a variety of expectations as to how the final product would look and
sound. I realized fairly quickly that I was dealing with twelve different ideas from
twelve students of my age and experience. I was not naive to think that this process
would be similar to the ones I’ve experienced under the direction and care of our
faculty; the sole idea of each class producing their own spring showcase is to do so
with little faculty involvement. While I did not fully predict to what degree, I knew
my initial ideas would be altered once the desires of the other seniors were made
known. The balancing of my roles as coordinator, fellow actor, and student was
hands down the most challenging aspect of this project. This was not my showcase...
this was our showcase, and it was essential for me to understand that.

In looking back on the experience, I conclude that I was successful in certain
aspects of this balance, and less successful in other ways. I initially thought this
showcase would be equivalent to a professional showcase performed in New York
City, Chicago, or Los Angeles. I realized quickly that the group wanted an evening
dedicated to celebrating our approaching graduation and our time spent together,
and I was essentially forced to alter my approach to the project. What I found was
that creating an evening representative of a professional showcase became a
secondary focus to celebrating our class and our time together here at Ball State.
The wants of the seniors became more important to me than imposing any
restrictions on the group’s vision.

I excelled in my ability to organize a cohesive, themed evening performance
with smooth transitions. As decided by the group, we titled our showcase “The 1st
Annual Senior Tony Awards”. We created satirical awards specific to each senior.
Hosted by the Chair of the Theatre and Dance Department, Bill Jenkins, the evening stood as the presentation of these awards with the senior’s “acceptance speech” being in the form of their solo. Knowing our audience would be comprised of the faculty, departmental students, friends, and family, we assigned each award a list of faculty nominees to add to the personable, comedic, and celebratory purpose of the evening.

As my vision became our vision, keeping the group positive, productive, and cooperative became the main focus. This peacekeeping attitude is one that I apply to most other aspects of my life, and therefore, came naturally. As with any collegiate theatre program, certain student artists are fortunate enough to have more performance opportunities than others. I began to see the project as a perfect opportunity to showcase those artists whose talents were not highlighted during their time at Ball State. In receiving feedback from mentors, I realized this method of leadership blinded my ability to make appropriate and difficult artistic decisions that would facilitate a professional quality showcase. Specifically, I allowed each participant to perform a song of their choosing. While I ensured that the evening had an even mixture of up-tempo, ballad, contemporary, and classic music, I did not fully consider if each song showcased that individual’s strengths. As a result of a couple inaccurate material choices, the strengths of those individuals that I wished to showcase the most were not brought to light.

It was only after I discussed the showcase with my mentors that I was able to critically analyze how this was a result of my actions. I irresponsibly assumed each
performer had a well-developed sense of their strengths and weaknesses and the desire to present their strongest and most prepared work. I trusted each senior with this task, and felt confident I would not need to supervise this aspect of the process. I take full responsibility for focusing too much of my energy on the logistical necessities of the evening and not thoroughly investigating the material choices. For any actor to properly choose material for himself or herself, there must be a thorough and honest understanding of one’s abilities. At this stage in our development as artists, this undertaking can be incredibly complicated and vague. I have studied alongside my peers for the last 4 years, and am well aware of their work and their potential. I could have easily recognized their desirable song to perform would not draw attention to their best features as actors.

As proposed, I oversaw the responsibilities of the stage manager, which essentially meant I was in charge of all communication. After negotiating a time and date that would coincide with everyone’s schedules, I reserved the University Stage as our venue. I drafted a rehearsal schedule, sent out regular rehearsal reports, reminded the actors of their call times and responsibilities, and directed each rehearsal. On the evening of the showcase, I arrived early with student production manager Ryan Prendergast to prepare the space.

For advertisement, I called upon student designers Justin and Christopher Swader to design the posters that were displayed around the theatre building, and delegated the Facebook Invitation to fellow showcase participant, Bridget Gillenwater. I knew from the beginning that advertisement would not need much
attention, being that word-of-mouth and Facebook are the primary and most effective forms of communication throughout the theatre department.

The group agreed it would be powerful to open with a choreographed ensemble number, so after choosing “The Nicest Kids in Town” from the musical *Hairspray*, we asked dance instructor Christie Zimmerman to add her expertise. Being as it was so difficult to coordinate schedules, she taught the piece to dance captain, Dan Hurst, who then taught the group. With dance as Dan’s forte, this was a wonderful opportunity for him to gain experience in teaching large groups, and he handled the responsibility with grace and confidence.

Furthermore, the group hired former Ball State University student, Cody Ricks, to serve as our accompanist. Each actor was required to set up one-on-one rehearsal times to work with Cody. He was then added into later rehearsals to address the opening and closing ensemble numbers. In the meantime, fellow showcase participant Duncan McIntyre volunteered to play the piano as the group learned the ensemble numbers. The group decided to pay Cody, as he was the only contributor to the showcase not directly affiliated with the theatre and dance department.

As mentioned earlier, Departmental Chair Bill Jenkins hosted the evening and called upon his own performance training to be our featured soloist in the opening number. To everyone's surprise, the Dean and Associate Dean of the Fine Arts Department, Dr. Robert Kvam and Dr. Michael O'Hara had prepared a number of their own to present at the showcase. Dean Kvam was the root of many of our jokes
that evening, and when thanked for his sense of humor, he approached the stage alongside Dr. Michael O'Hara to even further demonstrate his ability to poke fun. The duo had changed the lyrics of the song “Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man” from the musical My Fair Lady to “Why Can't a Senior Be More Like a Dean”. With Dr. Michael O'Hara serving as Director and Dean Kvam as Musical Director for our spring production of My Fair Lady, their number was even more enjoyable to watch.

This process taught me that any leadership position requires a great deal of delegation. I was thankful to be in an educational environment that allowed me to work alongside multi-talented students who were willing to volunteer their services. My poster design skills and piano abilities would not have sustained the group throughout this process, and it was the generosity of those volunteers that allowed the showcase to go off without a hitch.

Not only did this process reinforce my understanding of theatre as a collaborative art form, but also deepened my respect and appreciation for those who are entrusted with the responsibility of putting it together. Rehearsals became tedious and frustrating when individuals would show up late or not attend at all. There were moments when I realized that nobody was listening to each others’ ideas or opinions fully before rejecting them. This disregard for artistic input shed light on the importance of effective communication. Witnessing the unproductive way my peers were collaborating gave me insight as to how to avoid similar behavior in the future.
Most importantly, I experienced first-hand that a successful collaboration requires a great deal of trust in each other’s work. Outside of the twelve seniors, I specifically chose the entire artistic team. I am aware that this freedom is rare in the “real world”, and can only imagine the multitude of struggles and compromises that need to be made throughout the producing of a full-scale musical.

In countless regards, this project was a mere glimpse of the magnitude of work needed to produce a musical. The project certainly was a bite-sized version of such a process, and was therefore, incredibly useful to my education. The safety of an educational environment, the generosity of volunteers, and the fact that I was a student directing fellow students made this project dramatically different than anything I might experience post college.

The demographic of the audience, the purpose of the showcase, and the desires of the seniors inspired my decisions, and I believe we fulfilled the purpose of the evening. While the experience was invaluable in many regards, I will graduate from Ball State University confident in my decision to be an actor.
The Order – Senior Showcase 2010

• Opening Number
  o "The Nicest Kids in Town" from Hairspray - 2002
  o Music by Marc Shaiman – Lyrics by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman

• Welcome – Bill Jenkins

• Eric Byrer
  o "Something’s Coming" from West Side Story - 1957
  o Music by Leonard Bernstein – Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

• Emily Behny, Jaclyn Hennell, and Bridget Gillenwater
  o "At the Ballet" from A Chorus Line – 1975
  o Music by Marvin Hamlisch – Lyrics by Edward Kleban

• Jonathan Jensen
  o "At the Fountain" from Sweet Smell of Success – 2002
  o Music by Marvin Hamlisch – Lyrics by Craig Carnelia

• Dan Hurst
  o "Role of a Lifetime" from Bare: A Pop Opera - 2000
  o Music by Damon Intrabartolo – Lyrics by Jon Hartmere

• Katie Friedel
  o "If You Hadn’t But You Did" from Two on the Aisle - 1951
  o Music by Julie Styne – Lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green

• Duncan McIntyre
  o "Along the Way" from Edges – 2005
  o Music and Lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul

• Colin Lee
  o "Why" from Tick, Tick... Boom! - 2001
  o Music and Lyrics by Jonathan Larson

• Chelsey Everhart
  o "Send in the Clowns" from A Little Night Music -1973
  o Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

• Brian Wagner
  o "Nice Work if You Can Get It" – 1937
  o Music and Lyrics by George and Ira Gershwin

• Brandon Arnold
  o "The Man That Got Away" from A Star is Born – 1953
  o Music by Harold Arlen – Lyrics by Ira Gershwin

• Devan O’Malilia
  o "Joey is a Punk Rocker" from The Black Suits - 2008
  o Music and Lyrics by Joe Iconis

• Closing Remarks – Jaclyn

• Closing Number
  o "If I Can Dream" from All Shook Up – 2005
  o Music by Elvis Presley
Senior Tony Awards

- Eric - Best Diva in Training
  - (Eric Bryer, Gil Bloom, Curtis Mortimore, and Dean Kvam)

- Emily - Most likely to dye her hair blue
  - (Emily Behny, Wendy Mortimer, Beth Turcotte, and Dean Kvam)

- Jaclyn - best rising understudy
  - (Jaclyn Hennell, Dustin Farris and Dean Kvam)

- Bridget - Opens her mouth the biggest when belting
  - (Bridget Gillenwater, Hyun Suk, Beth Turcotte, and Dean Kvam)

- Jon - Most likely to be a "guest artist" next year
  - (Jonathan Jensen, Terra Mackintosh, Tommy Bullington, and Dean Kvam)

- Dan - Peace, Love, and Happiness Award
  - (Dan Hurst, Karen Kessler, Jonathan Becker, and Dean Kvam)

- Katie - Most likely to be adopted by a faculty member
  - (Katie Friedel, Todd Sandman, South Africa, and Dean Kvam)

- Duncan - We're only friends with you because you play the piano
  - (Duncan McIntyre, Alex Kochosis, Jodi Cotton-White, Dean Kvam)

- Colin - Honorary AO Award
  - (Colin Lee, Harold Mortimer, Michael Worcel, Dean Kvam)

- Chelsey - Most likely to be drinking a vodka tonic while wearing gold from head to toe, while playing an old woman singing jazz music
  - (Chelsey Everhart, Jonathan Becker and Dean Kvam)

- Brian - Most likely to wear a uni-tard, leg warmers, and jazz shorts to a dance audition
  - (Brian Wagner, Michael Worcel, Dwandra Lampkin, Dean Kvam)

- Brandon - You are Black Award
  - (Brandon Arnold, Jennifer Blackmer, Jodi Cotton-White, and Dean Kvam)

- Devan - Stick Game MVP
  - (Devan O’Maillia, LouAnn Young, Aero Shawger, Dean Kvam)
The 1st Annual Senior Tony Awards

Sunday, April 11 at 8:00 p.m. in University Theatre