

The Musical Actor Between Art and Science

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Abstract

When someone sees a theatre performance—argued director Andrei Șerban at the Ipotesti Traveling Academy, which I attended in the summer of 2013—it must reach three thresholds to be truly captivating: one should understand the plot, like it and, above all, believe it. But can anybody believe a character who, on the verge of death, begins to sing or a chorus of dancing cats? This is where the fascinating world of Musical Theater begins: a world with its own rules, with a special language, with performing techniques different from those used in classical theatre and special skills requested from the performing artists. The article aims to analyse the complexity of this theatrical genre, as well as the process of the Musical Actor through which he or she can go from the libretto and score to a performance in which his/her character is alive and totally believable. Since this form of theatre requires that performers have various skills and knowledge like acting, singing, and dancing, the article also aims to highlight the importance of developing a teaching method dedicated to the specific needs of the Musical Actor.

Keywords: Musical Theater, Musical Actor, musical, theatre, music, dance, performance, singing, acting, technique, training, method, composer, score, lyrics, libretto.

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Introduction

When we talk about Musical Theater, we should elaborate that this is a generic title that sums up genres that have changed, influenced, and evolved or regressed over centuries. We are thus talking about Opera, Farce, Comic Opera, Pagliacci, Vaudeville, Cabaret, Operetta, Revue, Melodrama or Musical. The modern musical became the most popular form of American theatre and gained popularity around the world, while also becoming the most dominant form of lyrical theatre of the 20th century. Musical Theater is considered a form of total theatre, a special artistic system that pays special attention to the non-verbal elements of projecting dramatic ideas. In such a performance, the story and the entire emotional content are equally communicated through words, music, and movement. Songs complemented by spoken dialogue and expression through movement become a whole and form a separate language.

Musical Theater is distinct in that each song and dance moment is tailored to serve a specific character at a very precise dramatic moment, to communicate that character's thoughts and actions. Dramatic situations combine with music and dance revealing to the audience the deepest feelings and inner life of the characters. If, as Ludwig van Beethoven stated, "music is a higher revelation than any wisdom and any philosophy" (as cited in Giuleanu, 1986, p. 8), and "dance is the hidden language of the soul", according to Martha Graham¹, we can affirm that Musical Theatre, which includes both dialogue, music and dance, as integrated forms of expression, is an extremely complex theatrical genre that requires special attention and understanding. In a Musical Theater performance, when words are no longer enough to convey the dramatic intensity of some scenes, or when the emotions of some characters become so intense that words alone are not enough, music appears. And as a form of total expression, when neither music nor words are enough, the characters use body language, dance, to communicate to each other or to the audience what they feel or think.

Being such a complex theatrical genre, with a specific language, Musical Theater also requires a certain type of performers with special training and a series of physical and interpretive qualities that help them to express themselves using all the means imposed by the genre. In the present research, we will use the term

¹ (1894-1991) – American dancer and choreographer regarded as one of the pioneers of modern dance

Musical Actor, defined as the actor who must combine in his play vocal skills with physical ones and with techniques of acting, mastering all three languages of expression very well.

Elements specific to Musical Theater

To better understand this form of performance, to understand its aesthetics and to finally determine the skills and knowledge that a Musical Theater performer must cultivate, the structure and specific elements of such a performance must be analysed.

The book

The book is the basis from which a Musical Theatre performance always starts and represents the totality of the text and ideas of a performance communicated through the words spoken by the characters. It can be said that this is the most important element of a musical performance, being the key that ensures the narrative structure of the entire performance. The book is essentially the script of the musical, containing the plot, characters, and dialogue. This not only provides a structure for the music, but also serves as a guide for the performers, giving them information about situations and characters. After the development of the book, the creation of music and lyrics follows, and from the basic text from which it started, the final written form is reached, which is called a libretto, containing both the spoken dialogue and the lyrics of a musical performance.

Music

Musical Theater is a unique art form that combines text, dance, and music to create an unforgettable experience for the audience. The score of a musical, however, is not just a set of musical numbers. American professor and musicologist Raymond Knapp puts forward a theory and claims that:

The addition of music over a dramatic scene, which would otherwise have been played in a realistic style, serves to exaggerate, and heighten the drama of the situation. This type of artificial dimension has precisely the role of introducing the receiver into a deeper reality that is only accessible through music. (2005, p. 12)

He also argues that music has the effect of drawing the viewer's attention in two completely opposite directions and that, thus, he can simultaneously perceive both the emotional message of the music and the message conveyed through the acting of the Musical Actor on stage. Knapp argues that the effect of this double attention is to help the audience penetrate behind the performer's mask, into the essence of the character's inner life. Music, in the form of arias, duets, choral moments or just illustration, complements the story to express the inner life of the characters most of the time. Almost all plot and character development are resolved with the help of music. The musical score of a musical thus becomes as important as the script, and the task of the composer or team of composers is to create music to complement the story and characters.

Songs are "strategically" placed at the emotional climaxes of the story to evoke the desired emotions in the audience, with the music and lyrics working together to convey the emotions and thoughts of the characters. Once the text is complete, composers and lyricists step in and begin placing the songs within the story. That is, they decide at what moments, by which characters and for what purposes the songs will be performed. The decisions will determine the flow, the musicality, and the very meaning of the performance. During this process, composers and lyricists look for dramatic or comedic climaxes in the script to turn into musical numbers.

Lyrics

In Musical Theatre, lyrics must be relevant to the plot of the performances and even carry it forward. Moreover, it must be consistent with the character who is singing and must fit into the style and structure of each performance.

The lyrics make the meeting of the dialogue with the music a harmonious one, because through their very form and symmetry, through rhyme and rhythm, the lyrics approach the quality of the music. In many cases, the lyrics are even more important than the music itself, as they provide the context and meaning necessary for the music to be effective in expressing the drama of certain situations. There are situations where the music is written to complement the message of the lyrics or to emphasize it, but there are also situations where the lyrics are written to emphasize a state of the character that is expressed through musical chords.

A musical needs lyrics that express the dramatic situations very clearly, emphasizing at the same time the appropriateness of the language for each character. Musical Theater lyrics work because they are specific to situations, and the more specific they are, the more dramatically successful they will be. (Woolford, 2013, p. 127)

The lyrics in a Musical Theater performance can be categorized according to their role in the dramatic structure of the performances, namely these:

- convey emotions;
- communicate the thoughts of the characters;
- advance the plot.

Therefore, the lyrics give meaning to the music and represent the connection between the book and the music.

Dance

Dance in Musical Theater is an overarching category that includes any type of movement, dance, or dance sequence that, used in conjunction with music and acting, moves the action of a performance forward. Choreographies are part of Musical Theater performances, but they are not an indispensable feature.

Dance provides the audience with a visual experience and often has a symbolic role. It can be classified, depending on the choreography used, into several categories such as ballet, historical dance, classical or society dance, modern dance, contemporary dance, or urban dance. Each category, in turn, is divided into several sub-genres, and Musical Theater has developed over time its own language with styles that complement the books and express the dramatic situations.

Musical Theater Aesthetics

With all these specific elements, we can talk about a special aesthetic of the Musical Theatre. Here, the reflection of the real world is achieved through prose, spoken, or sung dialogue, music and dance.

Musical Theater thus becomes the most "collaborative" form of theatrical art and tends to become a form of total theatre. The creation of such a performance involves a collaboration between several arts and the participation of several creators, including composers, librettists, versifiers, directors, choreographers, set

designers, actors, vocal soloists, lyrical-choir performers and dancers. Each component becomes essential to complete a whole, and this whole is a form of total theatre that can be viewed as superior to all the art forms it contains. Total theatre aims to achieve extraordinary goals by combining the arts that make it up, in order to offer the audience a unique experience that they perceive with all their senses.

Musical Theater has the quality of being able to arouse strong emotions among the audience. From upbeat and energetic numbers to soulful and heart-breaking ballads, music and dance alike can take audiences on an emotional journey. The effect of emotional response can be attributed to a combination of factors. First, the story told in the musical can play a significant role in producing an emotional response. A well-constructed story with relatable characters can strike a chord with the audience and make them emotionally involved in the outcome of the story. In addition, the characters' song and dance can also evoke an emotional response. A skilled performer can convey a range of emotions through his voice and movements, which can resonate with the audience, leaving them feeling moved. Finally, the music and dance itself can produce a physiological response. There are studies that have shown that music can activate the emotional centres of the brain and trigger the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. The combination of these factors creates a powerful emotional experience for the audience, making Musical Theater a truly unique and unforgettable art form. Broadway is known for producing some of the most emotionally charged musicals of all time, and it's no wonder audiences continue to love this theatrical genre. The audience's emotional experience in Musical Theater is a complex interaction between the story being told, the characters singing and dancing, and the music and dance itself. All three elements work together to create an emotional journey for the audience, from the first note to the final curtain call.

But, in order to convincingly reproduce this particular spectacular aesthetic, actors who understand its mechanisms are needed, actors whom I will call Musical Actors.

The Musical Actor

As the various methods of the Art of Acting and various theorists describe, this art can be learned and developed through techniques and exercises. It is true, however,

that talent cannot be taught and there will always be those who possess an instinctive aptitude for certain art forms. The candidate for the Musical Actor profession must possess several such skills because Musical Theater is a complex art form that combines several forms of expression. Obviously, those who want to become Musical Actors must be able to sing and have developed motor skills, specific characteristics that differentiate Musical Theater from dramatic theatre. Often in the preparation of actors for a musical, more emphasis is placed on their vocal and physical training, acting being left on the back burner. But, as important as these two elements are, the present research starts from the premise that the Musical Actor is, first of all, an actor and acting techniques should be the basis of the study.

Musical Theater can be a difficult art form for a dramatic actor because, as I have stated before, this form of theatre comes with a number of specific challenges. The difficulties of the genre are not few: the performer must build his character on the basis of the libretto, being, at the same time, constrained by the rhythm of the music, accents and pauses. The lives of the characters are thus also determined by the composer's vision, by the musical measures he wrote. Obviously, it is the composer who dictates the tones, rhythms and dynamics of musical arias or dialogues. Consequently, the actor is faced with an extremely complex test: he/she has no other solution but to let himself be guided by what the score imposes, but to keep the illusion that every musical thought is spontaneous and free. The music, as designed by the composer, expresses the feelings of each character, and controls the manner and pace in which these feelings are displayed. In the case of the Musical Actor,

the cry of the violins comes from the heart of the character. The drums are the character's pulse or thread of thought: when one of them quickens the beat, the other must do the same. The character is the music (More and Bergman, 2008, p. 15).

Another test that the performers have to overcome in a Musical Theater performance is the transition from prose to song, with a transition that is natural, makes sense and does not seem out of context. Sometimes in a span of eight measures, for example, the character is required to speak his last words, then say goodbye to his loved ones—in sung verse—and die. These eight measures are the

law, and the actor must find his "truth," calculate his time, and mathematically execute every time, but at the same time retain his brilliance and stage truth. In a Musical Theater production, a correct musical intonation or flawlessly executed dance will not move the audience if these do not come from a believable character who truly expresses his inner feelings. Acting is the binder that unites and gives meaning to forms of expression. Good acting has the gift of bringing the audience into the character's experience.

Patricia Birch (American dancer, choreographer and director of theater and film), offers a definition of the qualities that a Musical Actor should possess, stating the following:

What we Americans demand is first and foremost the credibility of the singing. We are not totally stuck on just the quality of the sounds, and we are not isolated in every area. Our performers can do it in all areas: they can act, they can sing and, although they don't always have training as dancers, they can dance very well. That's what the American musical is about. Ethel Merman², although she did not have a beautiful voice, certainly managed to convey the meaning and excitement of every moment played, and the American musical is a lot about excitement. (as cited in Mitchell, 1982, p. 41)

To reach this kind of performance by American Musical Theater actors, it took years of trying, the development of an industry that demanded better and better trained actors, the development of professional schools that trained actors to be able to cope with all the rigors and demands of the genre.

We can therefore call a Musical Actor that actor who succeeds, by acquiring a set of interpretive techniques, to build credible characters by integrating in his game the three distinct aspects of Musical Theater: singing, dancing, and acting.

Complementary to the techniques of acting, discovery of the situations, goals, motivations, obstacles and thoughts of the characters, Musical Actors must analyse the musical score and understand the meaning of the music, the rhythm of the scenes and even the inner world of each character, as they are dictated by the musical score. By deciphering the score, the Musical Actor must understand why certain words are emphasized by the music or why certain words are placed on high

² (1908-1984) – American actress and singer.

notes that need to be sustained for a longer time. What symbolizes the vocal explosion written by the composer in the case of high notes or in the case of notes that are to be played *pianissimo*? To answer these questions, the world of music must be deciphered.

Music analysis

"The key elements that distinguish Musical Theater from other theatrical forms are the songs, and these often represent the most emotionally intense moments in the lives of the characters." (Deer and Dal Vera, 2008, p. 51)

The score of a Musical Theater performance is not just a compilation of musical moments (arias, duets, trios, musical ensembles), but rather a guide to the emotional journey of the characters.

All music in Musical Theater—the melodic line as well as the accompaniment—should be considered as coming from the character. In other words, whether the orchestra sounds heavenly flute or trombone low, both must be considered as coming from the needs of the character and the circumstances in which he finds himself. (More and Bergman, 2008, p. 15)

The musical composition, whether we are talking about the melodic line or the accompaniment, becomes the expression of the personal experience of the characters. The Musical Actor must analyse each moment musically and from an acting point of view and must answer a series of questions about the situation they are in and the importance of that musical moment. First, can certain arias or duets be played without music? Why is music vital in that moment and what does it add? Does the musical moment bring a climax to the scene it is in? Will the music introduce an overall mood to the scene? Does the information in the song further the story or show the audience traits or thoughts of the character?

After an actor answers these kinds of questions, he can then continue to look for clues introduced by the composer. In the process of analysing these clues, you will need to work with the director and musical director to understand the choices that the composer and librettist made for each character and each individual scene. The words that were chosen for the character, the musical notes that support each word or syllable, the accompaniment for certain prose scenes that the character has

and which was written to convey something as specific as possible about the inner life or the context, all these are important details that are the basis of building a role in a Musical Theater performance. The music becomes part of the dramatic experience of the piece and not only propels the action but becomes part of the action itself. And, in order to understand all these specific aspects of the music and to be able to render the information that the authors put into the score, as a text is rendered, the Musical Actor must learn how to analyse a role in terms of music.

The musical analysis of the songs involves identifying the way in which the music expresses the emotional experiences of the characters because Musical Theater has this special peculiarity "of raising issues and exploring life, only it does it through music and dance, expressive and sometimes exaggerated gestures of the body and human voice that excites, stimulates and delights us" (Taylor and Simonds, 2014, p. 2).

In the process of searching for information about the character that can be extracted from the musical score, Musical Actors must understand a number of fundamental principles and rules of music and the first three, without which the understanding of a score cannot begin, are melody, rhythm, and harmony.

A melody is created by combining sounds of different pitches and durations that form musical phrases often separated by cadences.

The melody is composed of a chain of musical notes, each signifying a different duration requiring certain pitches to be held longer than others, not only for musical variety but also for dramatic emphasis of the lyrics. Notes are not just musical tones; they also represent the duration of tones relative to time. (Franceschina, 2015, p. 17)

Melody is what gives music its unique voice and structure, while harmony provides the aesthetic colour or mood. Finally, the beat serves as the backbone of the music, providing the necessary tempo.

By understanding these basic components, one can gain a deeper understanding of music and its complexity. Knowing the basic principles of music theory, as well as specific terminology, will help actors in understanding and interpreting music. Through practice and awareness of the language and message of the music, actors can enrich their acting, offering nuances that, in tandem with the music and vocal expressiveness, can have maximum impact on the audience.

Conclusions

The Musical Actor is both an actor and a musician, he is a stage professional who has a thorough knowledge of several areas of the performing arts and manages to introduce several forms of expression into his stage play. It needs well-structured theoretical and practical training and preparation, following a well-established method. Through hard work and extra-curricular individual study an actor can become a Musical Actor or can face some roles in a Musical Theater performance; however, if we want to really develop this profession and offer the chance to young aspirants to the title of Musical Actor, special attention must be paid to their training through well-structured university programs dedicated to Musical Theater.

In conclusion, in order for Romania to become a truly competitive country, which aligns with the international standards of Musical Theater productions, I believe that investing in the training of future generations of Musical Actors is essential and necessary.

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