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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF  
DIRECTING & CHOREOGRAPHING  
MUSICAL PRODUCTIONS FOR  
PROFESSIONAL, ACADEMIC AND  
COMMUNITY THEATRES

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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May 4, 2009

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A COMPARITIVE ANALYSIS OF DIRECTING & CHOREOGRAPHING MUSICAL  
PRODUCTIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL, ACADEMIC AND COMMUNITY  
THEATRES

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA  
Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DIRECTING & CHOREOGRAPHING MUSICAL  
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By Alison Angelone, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Theatre  
Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

Major Director: Patti D'Beck  
Assistant Professor, Theatre

In my thesis, I plan to explore the realms of academic, professional and community theatre through the eyes of a director and choreographer. Highlighted themes will consist of the varying approaches to the script, music and choreography. This thesis will also include specific teaching and or non-existent teaching methods for professional, academic and community theatre. Included will be three definitive case studies which will consist of one musical production per academic, community and professional theatrical setting. I will focus on the director/choreographer's overall approach to the research, rehearsal and final



performance processes for the Pioneer Theatre Company's production of *My Fair Lady*, Virginia Commonwealth University's production of *Chicago* and St. Michael's Catholic Church production of *Starting Here, Starting Now*. This document was created in Microsoft word, 2009.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of directing and choreographing a musical may appear to be an effortless task, but in actuality it is an extremely complex process. The duties of a director and a choreographer are considerable in size. In many cases, an actor will play a variety of different roles over a specific period of time. The director/ choreographer must play numerous roles simultaneously. Similar to the way a circus performer finds a sense of balance juggling several balls in the air at the same time, the director/choreographer must maintain the same type of balance throughout the production process. Acting as a facilitator, guide, sculptor, acting coach, creator, mover, traffic cop, trickster, doctor and many more, the director/choreographer is essentially conducting his/her own work of art. He or she must also be able to communicate with the production team, assistants and the actors well enough to create a successful final product. All egos must be set aside on day one of the production process and all energy and decisions must be aimed towards a harmonious production. If this can be accomplished successfully, the main objective will be achieved.

Much of the director/choreographer's duties depend on the location and type of show being produced. Anything from the casting to the blocking and choreography relies heavily on the facility and budget. For instance, professional equity theatres are more likely to have a higher budget than would academic and community theatres. This may not

mean that the quality of academic and community theatre performances will be less than stellar, but it does mean that the director/choreographer may be limited to what they can do or use. The same can be said for casting. The casting pool is going to vary based on the theatre. So how do directors and choreographers create high quality productions in professional, academic and community theatre settings when the circumstances will inevitably be different for each? First and foremost it is the director/choreographer's number one priority to tell the story with the actors they have chosen to work with. No matter how experienced or inexperienced the performer is, it is the director/choreographer's duty to capture the truth onstage. If a piece of choreography or blocking does not seem to be working, it either needs to be taken away completely or changed to fit the actor's body. Director/choreographers will run into this problem repeatedly throughout the production process. This is why it is essential that he/she be able to recognize what works and what doesn't.

Over the past year I have had the distinct pleasure and fortune of assisting Broadway and regional director/choreographer Patti D'Beck. More specifically, we have worked on three different musical productions over the past nine months. These include: *My Fair Lady* at the Pioneer Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, Utah, *Starting Here Starting Now* at St. Michael's Catholic Church and *Chicago* on the Virginia Commonwealth University mainstage both in Richmond, Virginia. Having had the opportunity of working at the professional, academic and community theatrical levels, I have found that though there are indeed similarities between the three worlds, the director/choreographer's approach to the work is vastly different for each. Throughout my

thesis, I will compare and contrast *My Fair Lady*, *Chicago* and *Starting Here, Starting Now*. I will also explore the director/choreographer's approaches to the work through the pre-production, rehearsal and performance processes.

## CHAPTER 1

### Research/Pre-Production Work

In order to begin the pre-production process, it is essential for the director/choreographer to research whatever show he/she is working on. This includes facts about the time period, social status, dance styles, functions of the time, gender roles in society and occupations. Internet and library sources are an effective way of searching for detailed information. It may also help to look at pictures, paintings and videos of the time for visual purposes. Though it is often difficult to find VHS tapes and DVD's that truly depict the time period, search engines such as youtube.com are an extremely quick and useful way of finding short video segments that may enhance the pre-production process. Not only will the director/choreographer be able to read about the past, he/she is now able to visualize it. Through this chapter, I will discuss the research/pre-production processes that Patti and I took when working on *My Fair Lady*, *Chicago* and *Starting Here, Starting Now*.

#### **My Fair Lady: 1912 London, England**

When Patti and I first began pre-production on *My Fair Lady* we initially looked through books and websites for anything and everything we could find about the lifestyles

of men and women in 1912 London, England. The entire plot of *My Fair Lady* focuses mainly on social class and gender differences. Our heroine Eliza Doolittle, is a poor cockney flower girl who asks a very wealthy Henry Higgins for phonetic lessons on how to speak properly so that she can eventually be passed off as a “lady” in high society. Treating her as though she is a project rather than a human being, Higgins and his new found colleague Colonel Pickering spend countless nights teaching her how to speak “correctly.” When they feel she is ready to be introduced to their elite family and friends, Eliza attends several upper class events. As successful as their plan may have been, Eliza realizes that she would much rather be an independent woman than be treated for less than she is. As a result, she flees the home of Professor Henry Higgins leaving him to realize how lost he is without her spirit.

Since the concept of social class is so critical to this particular storyline, Patti and I focused on researching any and every difference between the two worlds. We also needed to find ways for those differences to read onstage. For instance, the segregation of upper and lower classes were far from uncommon in the early 1900’s. Lower class citizens were shunned from restaurants, streets, schools and social events. Everything from a hair style to a dance style was uniquely different from the upper class. Any audience member would be able to tell the difference in classes solely based on costume, make-up and dialect, but Patti and I searched for ways to create variations in the movement as well.

The production’s opening number takes place in a common marketplace. We are immediately introduced to groups of wealthy upper class citizens strolling around the marketplace observing and buying specific products. We searched for specialized

occupations that might help us to creatively depict the time period. There were a plentitude of pictures showcasing street performers at the time, also known as buskers. The buskers' daily routines would change based on the time of day, as well as the money or lack of money they received. Deciding that the buskers would be an interesting way to attract attention, we chose to pick three dancers to play the roles of street performers using variations of different hat tricks and acrobatic skills. While Eliza walks around the marketplace desperately seeking a wealthy buyer for her pitiful basket of flowers, the buskers are busy demanding their own attention. Suddenly in the midst of a hat trick one of the performers falls into Freddie who trips the poor flower girl and the audience is introduced to a less than pleased Eliza Doolittle. This sets up Eliza's angry reaction towards a nervous Freddie for accidently knocking her over. The upper class citizens are appalled at her "unladylike" behavior. Eliza is angered over the fact that half of her money for the day is now gone simply because someone wasn't paying attention. The movement onstage is extremely important in distinguishing the two classes. While the upper class citizens carry themselves with their heads held high in disgust, the lower class stay slouched around their stations desperately trying to sell what they can.

Another aspect of the difference in classes that we observed through our extensive research was in the area of celebrations and events. There are several events that take place in *My Fair Lady* that are different in tone, rhythm and movement. Specifically, there are two major events that involve the upper class patrons: the ascot and the embassy ball. The rhythm of the upper class is slow, stiff and steady. Facial expressions are vague and motionless. The way the wealthy introduce themselves at these functions is in an extremely

quiet manner with their heads held high. Women walk around with parasols secretly judging what the others are wearing while the men hold canes and carry on quiet conversations. On the opposing side, when the lower class is not working, they are sitting around drinking pints in and around the bar. Even though they are bombarded with stress, the lower class is ironically much more care-free than the wealthier parties. They laugh, joke, yell about their monetary situations and move with freedom and flexibility. Women aren't as careful about covering up their bodies or sitting upright with their legs crossed at the ankle like upper class women are. The simple difference in the body language of the two classes is imperative for audience interpretation. It is the director/choreographer's job to make sure the difference not only reads onstage but also that it is specific in detail.

After Patti and I had a strong enough grasp on how vastly different the upper and lower class lifestyles, occupations and body language were, we turned our focus to dance styles of the time. What kind of dance, if any, was the upper class interested in? Were they even encouraged to dance? Was it only a limited amount? Did the lower class citizens mock the upper class and re-interpret their dance styles in turn making it their own? These are the types of questions we asked ourselves before we did our extensive research. Choreographers should always ask themselves a series of questions before he/she does any research on dance styles.

In *My Fair Lady*, we found that the waltz, a basic three count step was the most respected style in early 1900's England. The slow waltz was an extremely popular dance that grew out of the Austrian/German "Viennese Waltz" in the early twentieth century. In England, it was practiced solely in high society. Upper class citizens were amorous of its



graceful and classy demeanor. Different waltz styles and dance steps that live in the same family as the waltz were recreated for our production of *My Fair Lady*. For example, factually speaking, the Viennese Waltz (a quick step waltz), virtually disappeared from England when World War 1 came into play. When the Austrians and Germans left England they took what they considered to be “their” music and “their” waltz with them. England was left to re-create a slower version of the Viennese Waltz. This turned into what we know today as the slow waltz. Though the Viennese Waltz was essentially nonexistent in 1912 England, Patti and I still chose to use parts of this waltz for our own choreographic purposes. The Embassy Ball scene where Higgins introduces Eliza, his lady in disguise, requires eighty sixes of a waltz. In order to save our audience from the boredom of watching the same type of waltz steps repeatedly throughout this number, Patti and I researched every possible variation of the waltz we could find. This is where a website like youtube becomes extremely useful in pre-production work.

Youtube is accommodating because we can type in something as simple as “basic waltz steps” as our foundation. Later, we can alter our search to more advanced waltz steps in order to vary the choreography. Once we find steps we like, we can begin recreating them to fit our own style. We can also start playing with variations in traffic patterns and formations.

Though we researched a multitude of waltz styles, our homework was still incomplete. It is established that the division of upper and lower societies is a highly popular theme in *My Fair Lady*. For this reason, we needed to figure out exactly what kinds of dance the lower class citizens engaged in. One of the styles we found is the polka.

The polka is a dance that was created by peasants in Eastern Bohemia, which is now a part of Czechoslovakia. The name of the dance is Czech for “half step” which refers to the prompt switch from one foot to another. The polka was introduced to English society in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, it never reached as high acclaim as the waltz did for upper class citizens. With all of this in mind, the fast paced tempo of the polka became a highly influential idea for the lower class choreography in our production. For instance, *Get me to the church on time* is the biggest dance number for lower class society. Considering the fact that these characters are un-educated and poor, faster styles like the polka are more relatable to this particular lifestyle. It also matches the tempo of the song itself. Due to the fact that these people do not have the ability or the freedom of learning the correct way to dance the polka, we took specific polka steps and “dirtied” them up so to speak. What I mean by this is that we took specific steps and changed the actors’ levels and bodies to be more grounded as they danced. This gives the essence of a Polka that may have been learned incorrectly, which makes sense for the lower class citizens. We also switched partners several times. Men and women were coached to be outwardly flirtatious with the opposite sex. This would never be accepted at high society events or gatherings.

It has become clear thus far that it is both the director and the choreographer’s responsibility to do research for the overall production. It is imperative for the director/choreographer to be aware of the location, character and circumstances surrounding each production number. These circumstances will inevitably change according to the production and research steps. For example, if the musical is one that is based on fact, the research process may be a completely different experience. Our

production of *Chicago* at Virginia Commonwealth University is a direct example of a show that has been based on an authentic story.

### **Chicago: 1924 Chicago, Illinois**

The original story behind *Chicago* centers around two women by the names of Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner. These women were arrested for the murders of Walter Law and Harry Kalstedt. Both Annan and Gaertner were found “not guilty” despite infinite amounts of controversy and speculation regarding the evidence in their cases. It is vital to remember that at the time, technology was underdeveloped. Scientific discoveries like DNA samples were nonexistent, making it a little easier to “get away with murder.” As long as the lawyer and the defendants say the right thing to the jury, everyone may be in the clear.

The facts as we know them are that Belva Gaertner, a cabaret singer, was accused of murdering her married lover on March 11, 1924. Walter Law’s body was found on the front seat of Gaertner’s car alongside a bottle of gin and a hand gun. Belva Gaertner was later found at home sitting next to her own pile of blood soaked clothes. She eventually admitted to driving with Law but she said she had no recollection of what happened or how he was shot. Ironically not even one month after Gaertner was arrested and accused of murdering Walter Law, a woman by the name of Beulah Annan was also taken into custody for the supposed murder of her secret lover, Harry Kalstedt. Annan admitted that she and Kalstedt had a drunken argument which resulted in a physical struggle for the gun.

Annan then shot Kalstedt in the back and sat in her drunken stupor for hours before she called her husband. Through the course of the next month and a half, Annan changed her story several times. The final version was that she told Kalstedt that she was pregnant with his child. As a result of his learning that she was going to have his baby, they both reached for the gun and she shot him in self defense. Both Gaertner's legal team and Annan's lawyer, W.W. O'Brien, were the ones who fabricated the facts of the cases in order to win the jury's sympathy. Needless to say, the all male juries voted "not guilty" for both cases and both women were set free.

The "roaring twenties" was the name given to the period of time after World War I when everything began to change for the better. People began to excel both socially and artistically, whatever their endeavors. Music, radio, big name trials and vaudevillian acts became the main source of entertainment. Anyone and everyone who had access to a radio would pay close attention to the media. Newspaper headlines and stories were also a prominent form of entertainment. Female murder cases like Belva Gaertner and Beulah Annan's cases were especially popular at the time. Chicago citizens would flock to newspaper stands to read the headlines and follow the cases. Trial lawyers and their clients were exceptionally famous. These trials provided entertainment mostly because television and film were not technologically developed yet. The murderesses, Gaertner and Annan even posed for pictures together while reporters fed off their changing stories. The obsessive behavior pertaining to these murder cases may seem disconcerting to the human mind. However, it is important to remember the types of roles women played in the early 1920's.

Women were finally given the right to vote when the nineteenth amendment was passed in the year 1920. America was changing for the better and women were beginning to express their freedom in positive ways. Women began dressing less conservatively and letting their voices be heard. Even women like Belva Gaernter, who sang in cabarets found pleasure and a life through the arts. Unfortunately, it was still difficult to find employment opportunities that paid as well as men were being paid. As a result, a vast amount of women continued to struggle with their own independence. Nine out of ten times women were forced to depend on a man for financial stability. This was unfortunately the case for Beulah Annan who was married and divorced once before choosing Albert Annon, a Chicago car mechanic. Though Beulah Annan found a small book keeping job at Tennant's Model Laundry, she could not afford to live on her own. Unhappy with her marriage to Albert, she began having an illegitimate affair with Kalstedt, who also worked at the laundry. Even when Beulah Annan was incarcerated for the murder of Kalstedt, she had no choice but to beg her husband to pay for her trial lawyer. When he did however, Beulah Annan became nationally known. Big time trial lawyers of the time became famous especially when they represented females. It was one big captivating production.

So the question becomes, how true is the script to the actual facts? This leads us to an even bigger question; how as directors/choreographers do we bring the story to life while keeping the authenticity alive? Without prior knowledge of the murder trials of Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner, one might think *Chicago* is a comical commentary on female murder trials and the justice system in the 1920's. It almost seems uncanny to think

of these stories as being accurate. The script itself may over-exaggerate the facts through song, dance and lyrics, but the story itself is not far from the actual truth.

Patti and I did extensive research on the authentic story behind *Chicago*. We made sure that all of our actors were well educated on the life and times of the era. Those in the cast who played principle roles were also instructed to research his/her own personal character. Everyone was assigned someone or something to look up. The first thirty minutes of the first week of rehearsals were devoted solely to a discussion of the information found. It is important for the cast and crew to begin the rehearsal process on the same page.

Since characters like Velma Kelly and Roxie Hart are based on real people, the actors playing these roles need to understand the factual story, so that they are able to understand the characters' mentality. With a show like *Chicago* where the ensemble makes up ninety percent of the cast, it is vital for everyone to understand the lifestyles of men and women at the time. In this particular case, the ensemble plays a variety of different roles such as, reporters, performers, prisoners, guards, detectives, mechanics and the list continues on. With an understanding of some of the previous aspects of early 1920's Chicago, it was also important for the cast to understand the concept of vaudevillian life. *Chicago* is a satire on the corruption of the justice system in the twenties. Every number in our production of *Chicago* is a vaudevillian number. Similar to the authentic story, that everything was one big "production," we worked to portray the same type of entertainment. The difference is we tell our story through actual song and dance.

Similar to the way we worked in *My Fair Lady*, Patti and I searched through books, videos and documentaries to find as much information on vaudeville as possible. Who were some of the most famous vaudevillian performers? Which of these performers mirror specific characters in *Chicago*? What were the most popular acts of the 1920's? It was almost difficult to pinpoint our favorites because there are so many fabulous acts. During pre-production rehearsals we ask ourselves what is happening at the exact moment in the number and that essentially leads us to the choreographed steps. For instance, in the number, *They Both Reached for the Gun*, Billy Flynn is explaining to an inexperienced Roxie that they will be attending a press conference. He gives her specific directions on what she is to say to the reporters. When she messes up on her first try he instructs her to "sit down dummy." The rest of this number becomes a ventriloquist act where Roxie becomes Billy's metaphorical "puppet."

Ventriloquism was invented in the late nineteenth century in the days of Vaudeville and was an extremely popular act. It was a comical act yes, but it was also meant to deceive the audience into thinking the ventriloquist's voice was actually someone else's. Similar to the way W.W. O'Brien fed reporters and jury members fabricated "facts," so does Billy Flynn. Needless to say, we created the metaphorical "press conference" as if Roxie was being mechanically operated by a ventriloquist. All her choreography as the puppet consisted of short, sharp defined movements. Roxie would fall lifelessly over Billy's leg as if he were dictating her every move.

The reporters on the other hand are hungry for information. They are always looking for the stories and headlines before anyone else can get them. We wanted their

movement to be quick and precise. Since we only have twelve reporters representing the several hundred reporters we would have seen in 1924, we needed to focus on the depth and levels on the stage. The reporters appear peppered on different angles of the stage facing Roxie and Billy. We asked our actors to actually write down information on their prop notepads so that they had something to physically read onstage. It is important for us as Directors/Choreographers that our performers always be truthful onstage. The reporters depend on these stories in order to make a living and put food on the table. It needs to appear to the audience that they are desperate to hear every single part of the story. It is through this desperation for “truth” that we were able to begin to think about the actual steps.

One of questions we asked ourselves was what are some period dance steps of the time that will fit the roles of the reporters? It is clear that the tempo is fast. It is also apparent that the reporters need to grow physically and mentally in their endeavors in order to get their information for the day. We decided the best style of dance for this number would be different variations of the Charleston. The Charleston is a popular dance that was made famous in the 1920’s. What is interesting about this style of dance is that it builds in rhythm and tempo, just like *Both Reached for the Gun*. By the end of the number, Roxie and Billy fool the reporters into believing their fabrications. Roxie is no longer Billy’s “puppet.” She has been captivated by the Charleston of lies and entertainment, just like everyone else.

With a show like *Chicago*, where every number requires the audience to believe another lie, there needs to be significant differences in the choreography. This is why



research is so vital to the rehearsal process. *Razzle Dazzle* is a song that is similar in meaning to *Both Reached for the Gun*. The reason being, that it is yet another way for Billy to explain that fabricating truth is easy. However, Directors and Choreographers must be able to tell the same story in a variety of ways. For instance, the text suggests that we “give em the old razzle dazzle,” which in other words means, we hand them a bunch of crap and pass it off as the truth. The question then becomes, how do we make it a vaudevillian number? When we thought of the words “razzle and dazzle” we instantly thought of “tricks” or “circus acts.” During the vaudevillian era, there were an abundance of magicians, jugglers and acrobatics who made their living by entertaining audiences. Since our concept behind *Razzle Dazzle* was to give the illusion of distraction, what better way to divert attention than using magic tricks? We decided that Billy would be the one to “control” the magic onstage similar to the way he controls the “facts” in the courtroom. Some of the actors used flash paper to create the illusion of fire, while others juggled, performed acrobatic tricks and created multiple configurations through black light. As a result of our decision to make Billy the mastermind behind the magic, we made the transition into the courtroom scene a part of the ending of *Razzle Dazzle*. The vaudevillian circus performers now become courtroom viewers.

What is interesting about researching the vaudevillian era is that because it was conceived in the 1800’s, there are so many acts to explore. By the late 1890’s, vaudeville had spread all over America with sold-out performances in almost every city. Since every number in *Chicago* is representative of a vaudevillian act, we have a lot of research to draw from.

When a director/choreographer is presented with a show that essentially has no background information, concerns may arise. Patti and I ran into this problem when we began pre-production work on *Starting Here, Starting Now*, a musical revue that explores the trials and tribulations of love. Performed with a tiny cast of three, *Starting Here, Starting Now* consists of twenty-five songs and zero scenes. Every song requires a different story and the actors are asked to play multiple roles. However, each act has a specific theme. Act one focuses on the heartaches and joys of city relationships, while act two consists of unrequited or unlucky love stories and songs that represent a new beginning or outlook on love.

### **Starting Here, Starting Now: 2008 New York City, New York**

When looking through the score of *Starting Here, Starting Now*, it is suggested that the action takes place in New York City. The script also suggests that the year is interchangeable. It is left up to the director/choreographer to decide what works best for their specific production. In our case, Patti and I chose to set the revue in New York City, in modern day time. It seemed natural for Patti and I to sit with the script and try to create a solid through line between all of the numbers and characters. After reading through each number several times, we realized that each song tells its own distinct story and it was intended to be that way. Nevertheless, we analyzed every lyric to every song and worked to create a solid story for each. This can be both frustrating and appealing for the

director/choreographer. It is frustrating in the sense that sometimes the song lyrics are not compelling enough on their own to hold an interesting story. If that is the case, building a more creative tale from the given lyrics becomes an arduous task. Yet, it becomes appealing in the sense that we have been given freedom to develop our own scenarios. Whatever the situation, the most important thing to remember is that it is our job to tell a story that will evoke feeling and emotion from our audience.

One specific number we worked on, *We can talk to each other*, focuses on the lack of communication between a man and a woman. The song is sung by the man who is explaining how relieved he is to finally be dating someone he can actually “talk” to. The irony of the situation is that while he sings, the woman is not able to speak a single word herself. She makes several desperate attempts to talk to him throughout the entire number, but he constantly dismisses her. In a note above the song lyrics, it is specified that the man should be absolutely sincere in his speech. He should be completely unaware that he is ignoring his partner. The script provides distinct choreography to this song. However, Patti and I worked to create our own choreography.

When tossing around ideas for this number, we asked ourselves how long this couple had been dating. The man blatantly expresses that he, “has been in love more than you.” He has clearly had strong feelings for other women in the past but has never been able to “communicate” with someone the way he does with her. As a result, the relationship between this man and this woman is fairly new. The next step we took was to discuss the location and given circumstances of where this couple may be having their “discussion.” In order to heighten the circumstances and raise the stakes, we decided that

they were on a date. It is vital for these characters to go on a specific journey throughout the number. In the beginning of our piece, the woman is content. She sits with her date and listens to him tell her how nice it is to be able to just talk to each other. As his excitement progresses, so do his physical movements. Through a series of actual “date moves” so to speak, we learn that she is not only being dismissed emotionally but physically as well. For instance, instead of holding her hand, he spins her through his excitement and she incidentally falls to the ground. He is too caught up in his own words to notice that she has fallen. Inevitably, the date is a failure. Her anger and frustration builds to a climax where she makes the decision to leave him. It is not until this end beat that he realizes she is gone. Yet he is so jaded, he has no idea why she has left him. We are left with a final look of surprise.

It is important for the characters to go on both an emotional and physical journey throughout the song. If the lyrics do not provide enough structure, it is the director/choreographer’s job to create the framework in order to tell the story. Audience members should leave the theatre having felt something for the characters. Patti and I worked to create detailed stories for all twenty-five songs with no background information given. Though it is a tedious task starting from scratch, it is an absolute necessity when directing and choreographing a revue.

It is important to remember that a character must go on a journey of discoveries even if he/she is onstage alone. For instance, *Crossword Puzzle* is another song that provides no background information. All we know is that a woman is working on her regularly scheduled crossword puzzle, while reminiscing about an ex lover. In order to

heighten the circumstances, we decided that this woman would be sitting in the comfort of her own home. The woman is found in her favorite chair attempting to figure out her normal Sunday morning crossword puzzle. However, on this particular day she can't seem to focus because her mind is elsewhere. As the woman realizes she is at a loss for answers because her ex ran off with a new lover, she begins to separate herself from her chair. Through the sad pursuit to find the words she is looking for, she begins to remember that Hecky, (her ex-lover) used to fill in the answers with her. Her anger begins to build, which leads her to lift her chair in the air as if she is about to break something. She has made another discovery. In the end, the woman realizes that if she wasn't wasting her time trying to figure out these crossword puzzles, maybe she wouldn't be thinking about this ridiculous man. The woman then tears apart her newspaper and walks away. Every movement happens for a reason and lends itself to a new discovery. The only background information we knew was that this man left this woman for someone else. It was up to us to create the rest of the information in order to give the actor what she needed to make self discoveries.

Whether or not you are directing/choreographing a musical that provides itself with an arduous amount of historical information, a musical based on proven facts, or a musical with no background information at all, it is the job of the director/choreographer to tell the story both emotionally and physically to the best of their ability. The research process is crucial to the overall success of the production.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Choreographic Process

Choreographing a musical can be an extremely complex process to say the least. Not only does the choreographer create dance steps, he/she also creates movement for the entire show. So how do successful choreographers begin the process of creating movement on the stage? As previously mentioned, the first step is always to research the time period and look for specified dance styles. Once that has been accomplished, the choreographer must find the dramatic action of the song. Just like a scene, a musical number is happening for a reason. Something has just happened to heighten the circumstances enough for the character to start singing. Figuring out the before and after moments in order to know what happens in the middle is essential for this process. Choreographers should always find the story first and discover the steps later. After we know what our story is, we search for a specific hook for our number. A hook is essentially the way we are going to present our piece, it is the thing we hang our “hat” on. A hook has to come from somewhere or something, the stronger the hook, the easier the work. Examples of hooks can be anything from a prop to a confined space to a specific dance style. Once we figure out what our hook is, we are ready to begin moving.

Using examples from our productions of *My Fair Lady*, *Chicago* and *Starting Here, Starting Now*,

I will discuss the process Patti and I took to create three specific dance numbers using the concept of the hook.

### **Get Me To The Church On Time**

After Patti and I did our research, we looked at the character of Alfred Doolittle who is the focus of attention in *Get Me To The Church On Time*. Alfred Doolittle is the poor yet scheming elderly father of Eliza Doolittle. He is constantly in search of money for the mere purpose of supporting his drinking habits. The pompous little man even attempts to sell his own daughter for a few extra pounds. Though Alfred Doolittle thinks he is a sleek man who is more intellectual than everyone else, he is often the one outsmarted. Before this number, Alfred Doolittle finds out that because of Higgins' practical joke, he is now a wealthy class citizen. Now he feels like he has no other choice but to get married.

Before creating this number, Patti and I were faced with one major obstacle; open space. We were told that there would be no set pieces on the stage. We immediately asked for some crates and barrels that looked like something that would have been found around the streets of London. Then we had the idea that we could use these crates and barrels to create set pieces for our dance. These objects became our hook. Throughout the song we used wooden barrels to create a "bar" where Doolittle progressively becomes intoxicated, until he falls down drunk at the end of the song. We also used wooden planks, both as a metaphorical jail cell and a church steeple, in order to represent Doolittle's fear of getting married. We found our hook which led us to the actual dance steps by simply asking for a

few barrels and planks. The reasoning behind our request was so that we would have something to play with during the number as opposed to choreographing on a bare stage. We set the limitations for ourselves to make the dance more interesting.

Earlier I mentioned that a hook could be a prop or a set piece like we used in *Get Me To The Church On Time*, but it can also be a type of physical movement. This is the kind of hook we explored when we began choreographing specific pieces in *Chicago*.

### **The Cell Block Tango**

*The Cell Block Tango* is one of the more well known numbers in *Chicago*. We wanted our version of this song to be different and interesting. Patti uses core energetic work in her movement classes. This is a system of body work that was created by John Pierrakkos in the 1970's. Core energetics were created in order to rid an individual of energy blocks that have formed over a person's life in response to emotional hardships and challenges. When thinking about the various back stories of the murderesses the only words that came to mind were "hurt" and "anger." These women have been subjected to lies and disloyalty, and out of the rage came murder. As a result, our hook became core energetics.

An exercise used in Patti's classes called the "towel exercise" is a core energetic experiment where two actors hold either side of a towel. The actors then pull their own sides while maintaining eye contact the entire time. The exercise focuses on the connection between scene partners. The actual physical movements evoke natural emotion and



impulse. When thinking about the dramatic action of the number and the reason why these women are behind bars, we came to the conclusion that core energetic work made the most sense. Each cell block girl wears a shirt that eventually comes off through the retelling of their stories. The shirts are symbolic of their deceased lovers.

When we were creating the steps, we played with actual towels. We did everything that could possibly be done with a towel. We slapped it on the floor, pulled it around our necks, threw it under our legs and even stepped on top of it until we had an entire choreographed section of dance. The girls beat the towels as if they were physically hurting their men. The dance steps evolved from our hook. It makes sense that these women are releasing rage and aggression onstage.

By choosing a hook, we are able to understand why movement is happening onstage. The focus becomes about the story and not about the steps. Listening to the song first and understanding the story is what led us to our hook in a group number that Patti and I choreographed in *Starting Here, Starting Now*.

### **Just Across the River**

*Just Across The River* focuses on three individual people who are ready to take off and find their future significant others. They have realized that there are plenty of people “just across the river,” who are single and ready to mingle. In which case, Patti and I wanted to create an essence of travel for this number. We wanted the actors to take a journey from one place to another and in order to do that we needed to make it look as

though the actors were traveling to a new place. We needed something to help us get to this new place but since the set was minimal we didn't have many things to work with. We immediately looked to what we had on our stage. Realizing that we had three stools for the actors, we chose to use these stools as our traveling "bus."

The actors danced with the stools and created an imaginary bus center stage. We used the stools to signify the actual bus seats. Once we had our story, we choreographed movements to show the different tempos and rhythms one experiences when riding on a large vehicle. When the bus stopped moving, we stepped away from our seats and walked off the bus to our new destination. Though we really didn't move very far on our stage, we were able to use our stools to show that we were traveling to a new destination. Using the stools as our hook was helpful in creating a solid story. As a result, the actual dance steps were derived from the story and hook, and were clearly implemented onstage. Not only did the audience understand the story, but they were also able to visualize the physical journey these characters took towards their destination.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Rehearsal Process

Regardless of what theatrical venue the director/choreographer is working in, he/she should consider research and pre-production work as a prerequisite prior to beginning the rehearsal process. Time is valuable and rehearsals should be used wisely. It is widely acknowledged that musicals are one of the largest money making commodities in the entertainment business. They require a substantial amount of commitment, dedication and energy from the cast, crew and design team. It is irresponsible to use rehearsal time to fully improvise choreography and blocking. If the director/choreographer has done their homework beforehand, he or she will make more progress during the rehearsal process. When I refer to the director/choreographer's "homework," I am not only talking about research, but also specific choreography, blocking ideas and traffic patterns. There is some blocking and choreography that will inevitably change during the rehearsal process. However, if there is a pre-planned shape to work with, we can direct, choreograph, fix problem spots, and proceed to the following musical number. Overall, the benefits of pre-production planning can lead to a more successful final product.

In the professional, academic and community theatrical worlds, differences in the artistic levels of the performers are to be expected. It is the director/choreographer's responsibility to make sure the actors can physically do the movement and choreography no matter what their level of experience may be. Just because something may have worked well during pre-production does not mean it will look the same on the actor's body during the rehearsal process. This is when we take the time to revamp choreography and blocking

to better fit the actors bodies onstage. The benefits of working with actors of different performance backgrounds, is that they may be able to do something unique and unexpected. This may add an element of surprise for the audience. Hypothetically speaking, if one of the numbers calls for some type of acrobatic trick and the performer knows how to do a back handspring, we can incorporate the actor's skill into the piece. This can happen in almost any production if the director/choreographer searches to find unique abilities within the actors.

Being open and aware of the actor's strengths and abilities is an intelligent way of working. Modifications to the director/choreographer's approach will have to be made during the rehearsal process depending on where the show is being produced. Throughout this chapter, I will explore the different approaches and modifications a director/choreographer must take when working in the professional, academic and community theatrical worlds.

### **Professional Theatre**

The Pioneer Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, Utah is located on the University of Utah's esteemed campus. Though it is situated in a college area, it is in no way affiliated with the school itself. The theatre is a LORT company which hires and houses nearly fifty to sixty percent of their performers from the New York City area. In August of 2008, The Pioneer Theatre Company hired Patti D'Beck to choreograph their production of *My Fair Lady*, and I was asked to assist her on the project. Our production consisted of twenty-six

performers. Out of those twenty-six, twenty-two of them are members of Actors Equity Association and five of those twenty-two have previously worked on Broadway.

If a director is not simultaneously choreographing his or her own production, it is vital to hire an artist with whom he/she has a good report. The director and choreographer must collaborate and communicate on a daily basis so that the same story is being told onstage. Having worked with Pioneer Theatre Company prior to *My Fair Lady*, Patti and director Charles Morey share a similar way of working. In the professional world, the rehearsal process is extremely demanding. The actors are called six days a week from 10am-7pm with a one hour break for lunch. Time is never wasted. While Chuck directs scenes with specific actors in one room, Patti is choreographing in another. When each are finished they come together and Patti shows Chuck the choreography. The two then work together to talk about what may or may not need to be changed or adjusted to better fit the needs of the story. Patti and I will then adjust and or create new choreography prior to rehearsal, during breaks and after rehearsal. The work is never finished. It is a progression all the way up to opening night.

In the professional world, the actors arrive on time and ready to work. The musical director and the rehearsal pianist, who are both present at all rehearsals, do not give the actors a vocal warm up. It is their responsibility to be physically and vocally in their bodies by ten o'clock am six days a week. If that requires a trip to the gym and a half an hour vocal preparation, he or she needs to handle it on their own time. The reason behind this decision is due to union laws which state that we are only allowed to rehearse the actors for

a total of eight hours a day. If time is taken away for warm up purposes we lose crucial rehearsal minutes.

The rehearsal process at The Pioneer Theatre Company is a four week period which includes tech week. With this in mind, the actors are expected to come in prepared. The stage management team provides the cast with a rehearsal schedule on day one of the process. They receive a scene breakdown explaining what scenes and or dance numbers they will be in along with precise times on when they will be needed each day. There is a silent mutual respect between the production team and the actors; you will not waste their time in rehearsals and they will not waste yours. The actors are only called when they are needed for a specific scene. In turn, they must know their music and lines for whatever they are working on that day. They must also know their blocking and choreography from the day before so that things never have to be re-taught.

The actors at Pioneer always came into rehearsal prepared. Most directors will state that it is exceptionally difficult to work with a script in hand. Relying on the text can be limiting for the performer. Not only will he/she have difficulty following impulses and making choices, but will also struggle with living in their head as opposed to their bodies. Professional behavior is something that is acquired through the actor's training process. These performers should already know how to learn lines and retain information quickly. At Pioneer, the actors not only knew their music and lines but they also came in with choices, tactics and objectives. Smart actors have impulses onstage. They do not wait to be spoon fed ideas. The boldest choice is always the right choice. If a director dislikes a

specific tactic or decision the actor has made, he/she will change it, it is that simple.

Ironically, the same can be said when working on choreography.

Though the actors are not expected to do our job, which is to choreograph specific dance numbers, we do want them to be alive onstage. Knowing their music before we teach them the choreography is essential. Whether or not the actor is a lead, principle or ensemble member, he/she must treat the dance number the same way they would a scene. They must know who they are, where they are, and what they want. While we are working, they are also expected to react and make choices within the dance. There is no time in the professional world to teach these things. They must already be learned. The performer may make a choice the director or choreographer does not agree with, and he/she may ask the actor to try it a different way. Whatever the case, there is a difference between being directed and being unprepared. If an actor is unresponsive and unprepared, they may be asked to leave. It is important for every actor to be aware that there is always someone else willing to take their place. This is a tough business.

Fortunately, the cast of *My Fair Lady* was responsible, respectful and professional on all levels. With such a considerable amount of experience and professional credits surrounding the cast, one may think ego would disrupt the actor's process. However, everyone was a complete joy to work with. Chemistry onstage is just as important as any other element of theatre. If the actors are not connecting to one another because of personal issues, the audience will notice. This is another part of what it means to be professional. If there is a problem between actors and or members of the production team, it should be

handled in a respectful manner so that it does not affect the production in a negative way. If the problem persists, the actor may be asked to leave.

As a director and choreographer, we need to practice what we preach. When working in a professional setting or any setting for that manner, we are also expected to come in with our homework done. As previously mentioned, pre-production work is a must. Theatre is a collaborative art form, and if we all do our job right, we may be able to create something wonderful.

### **Academic Theatre**

Training young actors is an arduous task. It requires patience, time and an understanding of the voice and body as an expressive instrument. Not only are we teaching our students the tools necessary to become strong actors, we are also preparing them for a world of professionalism. What many directors and choreographers fail to realize when working in academia is that they must also have the ability to teach and coach.

Virginia Commonwealth University is an accredited University and a member of the National Association of Schools of Theatre. The bachelor of fine arts curriculum for theatre performance students is highly demanding. The students receive conservatory style training, which means that the program is preparing them to enter the world of professional theatre. In which case, all BFA theatre students are required to audition for mainstage productions. Throughout the mainstage process, they will learn what it is like to be directed by both faculty members who have a professional past and present, and by professional guest directors. Students are cast as they would be in the professional world,



by type and by talent. When casting *Chicago*, Patti and I were specifically looking for seven principals and twelve ensemble members. After auditioning the entire department, the finalized *Chicago* cast consisted of four seniors, five juniors, five sophomores, four freshmen and one graduate student. The difference between an eighteen year old and a twenty-one year old actor is monumental. A first and second year acting student is learning foundational skills as well as an awareness of self. The third year students are applying the tools they acquired to an actual text. Finally, the fourth years are prepping to enter the theatrical world outside of the educational system. So how does a director/choreographer approach a production process when working with students of varying artistic levels? The director/choreographer must teach and discuss the concept of professionalism. The students need to know what it means to be a timely, prepared, open minded and collaborative actor.

The mainstage rehearsal process at VCU is demanding. Students are expected to rehearse Monday through Fridays from 6:30-11:00 pm and Saturdays from 10am-6pm for a total of three and a half months. Professional theatres rehearse their actors for approximately forty-eight hours a week for four weeks. Students at VCU are rehearsing only eighteen hours less than they would at a professional theatre while also attending classes. Though the schedule is difficult, students are receiving a taste of what their future in the arts may entail if they choose to continue with this career.

While directors in a professional atmosphere do not have to discuss the duties of a professional actor, it does need to be addressed in academia. Students need to be taught what is expected of them so that they can carry it with them when they graduate. Even

something as simple as promptness must be addressed. Students are expected to sign in to rehearsal when they arrive. There were quite a few times when actors and understudies were late and unprepared. Patti explained to the performers that in the professional world they will be expected to be off book for the scene/song they are working on that day. While understanding that they also have classes to consider, she told them to try their hardest to have their lines and lyrics memorized for the material being covered on a specific day. It is exceptionally hard to choreograph and direct when the actor is still relying on the script. Most of the actors in *Chicago* did a great job taking this note. Some of the leads struggled with lines for the first few weeks of rehearsal. With hard work and dedication, this eventually passed and by the fourth week of rehearsal they were completely off book.

The process of working with college students requires patience in the sense that the director/choreographer may not get what he or she is looking for right away. The students are learning how to apply the tools taught in their classes to the appropriate text. In which case, the director/choreographer must constantly ask the actor questions; what is the dramatic action in the scene? What do you want from your partner? What are you going to do to get what you want? Etc. As the student may have the ability to make choices and follow impulses, chances are they will need extra help. Choreographically speaking, the same rules apply. Most of the actors in our department have limited to no dance training. However, most of our cast members move extremely well.

When Patti and I first began teaching *All That Jazz*, we realized early on that we would have to break down the choreography into sections and repeated counts. Repeatability helps the actors to not only learn the movement but put it in their bodies as

well. Since VCU does not have a musical theatre degree, the students are not required to take dance classes. As a result of pure inexperience, learning and retaining choreography was difficult for the actors. There were several instances where we would teach sections of a dance that would be forgotten by the following day. We had to re-teach specific steps as opposed to moving on to the next section. However, towards the middle of the rehearsal process the students were picking up the movement at a much more productive pace. It helped that we made ourselves available to devote extra time to helping our actors learn the movement. The nice thing about our rehearsal process is that it allows for extra time. Directors/choreographers in an academic setting are in fact teaching young actors all the aspects of what it is to be in a musical.

If the actors are having difficulty learning choreography, there are several different ways to handle problem spots. Many people think that if actors are having trouble, the choreographer should change the step immediately. Personally, I believe this is poor advice. If there is time left in the rehearsal process, the director/choreographer should let the actors become comfortable with the step long enough to see if they can make it work. Repetition is key when teaching choreography. Repeat the dance section several times before questioning whether or not it should be cut. If it is clear after a significant amount of time that the movement is not working for the actors then it should be changed to better fit the performer. When Patti and I first taught *Both Reached For The Gun*, the ensemble had difficulty learning a fast paced version of the Charleston. Whenever we had free time we worked with the cast on repetition and counts. If Patti was directing a scene, I would take the ensemble in a separate room and rehearse the dance. Eventually, it came together

and the cast looked like they had been performing the Charleston for years. Sometimes it is just a matter of practice and other times original choreography needs to be modified to fit the actor's body. The director/choreographer must be able to differentiate between the two.

It is crucial during the process of preparing and training young actors for a professional career in the arts to help them to become more self aware. If a student is showcasing a negative attitude during rehearsals, they must be made aware of the impact it can have on their performance as well as the performance of their peers. As human beings we have a tendency to showcase our feelings without paying attention to how they are being viewed. Body language is an integral part of our everyday life. One wrong look or move may be interpreted the wrong way and may inevitably cost an actor his/her job. This is an issue that needs to be addressed with the students. This also includes the relationship between the actors and the design team/crew. Actors and designers must be respectful of each other during both the rehearsal and performance processes. Theatre is a collaborative art form. Everyone has bad days, but we must all learn to mask our personal issues and focus on the final product.

Directing and choreographing at the collegiate level is both difficult and rewarding. It takes a dedicated and patient individual to be willing to prepare actors for a life in the arts. Human beings by nature look to the person before them for guidance and knowledge. If we as directors, choreographers and instructors maintain a professional report and produce positive energy within our own surroundings, our students will want to take our advice and follow in our footsteps.

The approaches a director/choreographer takes when working in professional and academic settings are vastly different. However, they do share a similarity in that the rehearsal process is extremely structured for both. Community theatre on the other hand, is less structured and has a more flexible attitude towards their overall process.

### **Community Theatre**

Community theatre is monumentally different from professional and academic theatre in the sense that the majority of the people involved view it as a hobby as opposed to a career. Most of the people committed to community theatre have day jobs and or families which can only allow a specified amount of time devoted to a rehearsal process. Typically held after dinner, rehearsals rarely exceed a three hour time block. Though the time constraint may inevitably challenge the overall value of production, the director/choreographer should continue to work towards success regardless of any unforeseen obstacles.

In October of 2008, three members of St. Michael's Catholic Church in Richmond, Virginia expressed an interest in doing a musical revue called *Starting Here, Starting Now*. The church had previously housed several musical productions in their facility before our production but never chose such a risqué show before this one. Known for their family style musicals, *Starting Here, Starting Now* is the exact opposite. The show primarily focuses on adult relationships in New York City. Two of the three performers, a real-life married couple, favored the music in *Starting Here, Starting Now* and had always wanted

to star in a production of it together. They had also seen past productions that Patti had directed and approached her about directing/choreographing at St. Michael's. Patti was glad to accept the offer and that is when she approached me about assisting her on the project. Having just come back from The Pioneer Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, working in a community theatre atmosphere was extremely different.

St. Michael's church is a rather large facility which contains several classrooms used for choir practice, Sunday school, arts and crafts and various other rehearsals. There is also a small stage which is used for theatrical and church productions. However, because there are so many different activities happening during the week, we were often struggling for a rehearsal space. Disorganization can become detrimental to a rehearsal process if it begins to become a consistent problem. In academic and professional theatre, one of the stage manager's various duties is to verify space arrangements so that we always have a place to work. There are some cases in community theatre, like this one, where there is no stage manager to help with rehearsals or performances. Often times the director/choreographer is forced to play several roles including the stage manager, which can unintentionally take focus away from the rehearsal process. Luckily, one of our performers found a space to use at a community center a few miles away from the church. One of the benefits of working with such a small cast is that if we felt like we needed more time we could schedule extra rehearsals with specific people in the cast. Our cast was very good about making the extra effort to meet outside of rehearsals.

I have worked in several community theatrical venues in the past where a lack of dedication and seriousness proved to be a common theme. This was not the case however

in *Starting Here, Starting Now*. It was clear that our cast wanted the show to be successful and they were very committed to the work. However, like any other cast, the level of actor training varies greatly. Though two of our cast members are active members in the community in and around Richmond, they have day jobs that have little to nothing to do with theatre. The third member of our cast is a stay at home mother who dreamt of becoming an actor years ago but chose to stay home with her family instead. Though all three actors have theatrical experience, their training is limited. As mentioned earlier, in the professional theatre, actors will come into rehearsal with specific choices and tactics to play onstage. In academia, some actors will come into rehearsal with choices while others struggle with consistency. In *Starting Here, Starting Now*, the actors would almost always wait for us to tell them what to do. If we asked them to play with their impulses to see what might develop, they would often become insecure in their abilities. As a result, Patti and I spent a lot of time discussing the relationships and stories for each specific number. Since there is no scene work involved in this production, we choreographed moment to moment behavior in each song. We also spent time side coaching the actors into making constant discoveries. When rehearsal time is scarce, it is up to the director/choreographer to do everything he/she can to get the actors to tell the story. If that means we need to give a line reading, so be it.

Learning to be consistent onstage once we are closer to performance mode is something both young and inexperienced actors struggle with often. *Starting Here, Starting Now* requires three actors to perform twenty-five songs. Many of these songs need detailed choreography. Since each number tells a new story, the choreography must be

different for each. This means that the cast needs to work extra hard to learn their movement and traffic patterns. If one person makes a mistake, it is not easy to overlook.

One of the major struggles during the rehearsal process pertaining to the movement was the actors' ability to hold on to the choreography. There were many times we would teach choreography one day and be forced to re-teach it the following day. We found ourselves rushing to begin teaching a new number every night because of the time constraint. It was difficult for the actors to find the time outside of rehearsal to practice their choreography unless they were in rehearsal. Though they were good about writing out their steps and traffic patterns, they still struggled with the muscle memory. My theory behind this is that most community theatre actors do not have the benefit of practicing memory skills like professional and college actors do. They are not consistently doing shows or taking theatre related classes. Practice makes perfect. If the actors are not working on the movement, the quality of the work will show. Patti and I did our best to help the actors by breaking down the movement and running sections of choreography over and over again. We did this until it was evident that the movement was in their bodies. We found ourselves doing the same thing with their lines on occasion because they would often struggle with memorization.

Playing to the actors strengths is an intelligent way of working. We designed the choreography to fit their bodies so that they would look their best onstage. The actors seemed to really appreciate the moment to moment behavior choreographed into each song. I don't think they have experienced many directors who spend so much time detailing and working numbers so that the story is clear and has emotional truth. I have



seen so many community theatre productions where numbers are sloppily thrown together and the story is hard to follow. It does not matter where the show is being produced, the director/choreographer must help the actors tell the story as clearly and truthfully as possible.

I mentioned earlier that community theatres may or may not have the volunteers to help with rehearsals or performances. As a result, director/choreographers need to be prepared to play the roles of the stage manager, lighting designer, props manager, costume designer and possibly the set designer. Similar to secondary educational theatre, this can become stressful to say the least. While trying to make the show good, we have to also worry about the technical aspects. We were lucky in our production of *Starting Here, Starting Now* to have a cast of people who were extremely helpful in finding volunteers to help with technical aspects. Though we did not have a stage manager, we did find a student at VCU who designed our set. Undergraduate students always need the experience of working within the community. It is also a nice way to build their resumes. A couple members of the church offered to volunteer on costumes and lights. Like anyone who is not consistently working on productions, they had a difficult time understanding how to match the costumes and lights to the concept of our show. Therefore, Patti had to give them specific details of what she wanted. They would then come in with choices and we would modify them to fit the needs of the production.

A director/choreographer must always make sure their design team understands the concept of the show so that everyone is on the same page. When it comes to community theatre, the director may have to find a stronger way to explain exactly what is needed so

that the designers and volunteers understand what is wanted. Just like the actors, these designers are not practicing the craft on a daily basis. They do not always know how to come in with specific choices. We have to guide them into giving us what we need so we can successfully tell the story.

The overall goal for the rehearsal processes pertaining to professional, academic and community theatre should be the same. The focus should be on the final product. Though our approaches to the work differ depending on the type of theatre we are working in, our job as a director/choreographer is to do what we need to do to enhance the quality of the production, while telling the story.

## CHAPTER 4

### Final Performances

We have all heard the famous saying, “It’ll all come together in the end.” No matter how cliché this sounds at the time, hard work and dedication always pays off. The journey from the first day of pre-production work to the final performances is both difficult and rewarding. Throughout this final chapter, I will discuss the aspects of the performance processes of *My Fair Lady*, *Chicago* and *Starting Here, Starting Now*.

#### My Fair Lady

One of the first things I noticed about working on *My Fair Lady* was that the cast was exceptionally quiet. Though they were always prepared in rehearsals, I did not find that they shared a strong connection onstage. I think there is a common fear in the professional world that if there is too much socializing offstage, they may be penalized in future casting. There is a difference between talking during rehearsals and socializing between breaks. If a cast does not make an effort to get to know one another, it will transfer to the stage. I remember thinking this was the case especially for the actors playing Eliza Doolittle and Higgins. Their chemistry onstage is vital to the production as a whole. We must see that though they hurt each other and have their disagreements that they still care deeply for one another in the end. If a connection is missing, the audience will not feel

for the characters. Therefore, actors need to make a stronger effort to communicate offstage.

It wasn't until our first day off that I began to notice a change in the energy of the cast. They came together when they realized that if they did not communicate with one other, it may result in a lonely day off. Working in a professional theatre can be intimidating at times, but we all need to realize that it is not about what we may or may not have worked on in the past, it is about the present. We are all here to tell a truthful story.

By tech week, I noticed that people were laughing and joking with one another. If there was a mistake onstage, the reaction was not silent like the first week of rehearsals. They had finally formed an emotional connection and by opening night we had a show.

The audiences adored the show and the reviews were spectacular. The production as a whole was of Broadway caliber. Transitions were smooth, the acting was superb, and the choreography was beautifully danced. The connection and energy of the cast was believable because it was real. This is the type of theatre audiences want to see.

### **Chicago**

The rehearsal process for *Chicago* began in January of 2009 and was finalized in April. We had many ups and downs along the way but the old saying is true, "it'll get worse before it gets better." As we approached tech week in the actual space, we would learn all too soon that the work of a director/choreographer is never finished. Though our

original rehearsal room was taped to mimic the measurements of the actual stage, our movement patterns still had to be adjusted when we began working in the theatre.

*Chicago* was performed in the Hodges Theatre which is a thrust stage. Since the audience surrounds three sides of the theatre, it is our job to make sure we play to all sides of the stage. This meant that Patti and I would have to stand on all sides of the stage during spacing rehearsals to make sure everyone would be seen. We also had to adjust some of our traffic patterns in order to honor our set. If the set is there, it needs to be used. Our set consisted of three different levels. Two large jail cells are located on opposite sides of the band on the third level. Two smaller jail cells make up the second level and a stage, two side doors and a folding center door are located on the first level. This meant that we would need to make slight adjustments in order to make better use of our fabulous set. Patti and I accomplished this by making more use of the cells onstage. We assigned specific actors to sit in their cell blocks during scenes that took place in the jail. Exits and entrances were also readjusted in order to use the levels of the stage.

I think it is important when the band is visibly onstage to find a way to incorporate them into the production instead of ignoring that they are there. For instance, the character of Mary Sunshine sings her song on the third level of the stage. Mary Sunshine has several incredibly high notes that she must reach throughout the course of her song. The actor playing this role had a little bit of difficulty hitting one note in particular so the music director asked the trumpet player to create a loud noise in the middle of the note. Mary Sunshine then reacted angrily to the instrumentalist and sang back to him as if he were a

nosy audience member disrupting her time in the spotlight. It became a comic bit and our audience loved it.

Musicals that rely heavily on technical aspects may result in countless hours of work. When working in academia, we must remember that we are guiding and teaching our students how to create, problem solve, and provide solutions. One of our biggest obstacles during tech week was that because of budget cuts, we could not afford to pay the band to be at every technical rehearsal. Therefore, the sound designers could not practice matching their levels to the music's levels unless the entire orchestra was physically present. Patti also added several musical accents that were timed to specific acting beats. Timing is everything. If the band is not present to learn and implement sound effects that are not written in the actual score, the story may suffer. Not only was this difficult for the actors in the space, but it was also nerve racking to the production team as we questioned whether or not we would be ready to open by our scheduled date.

If there are major concerns during tech week, the director/choreographer needs to devise a plan that will help solve the issues. At the beginning of our tech week, lights and music were our two biggest concerns. As a result, Patti asked our music director to use an entire night to fix and perfect the music and the added accents. We gave them their own space away from the theatre to do this while Patti worked with the lighting designer fixing and setting cues. I sat on all different sides of the stage and took notes on spacing, acting and choreography. We each took on a different job and as a result we were more efficient with our time. When we eventually all came together, there were fewer problems to fix.

It is of the utmost importance for everyone involved in a musical to be on the same page regarding the director's concept. This means that everyone working on the show must attend production meetings and run-throughs of the show in its entirety. This is especially true when we are working with student designers who are just beginning to learn how to create and implement their ideas onto the stage. Those faculty members who are mentoring the students should also be in attendance to oversee how their students are working. For instance, we had many student designers working on *Chicago*. All mentoring faculty members were present through our technical rehearsals. This was helpful in speeding up a process that would have taken longer had they not been there to oversee the students.

Due to setbacks with music and lights, we decided to make the departmental opening a "preview night." Though the cast worked exceptionally hard, there were still some sound/music/lighting and costume problems to adjust. Everyone took notes that night and came together to discuss what we needed to fix for the following night. VIP night was sold out and the cast did a fabulous job. No matter what the technical mistakes were, the cast kept the energy high. Patti and I would take turns during the first couple of weekends of the run taking notes and giving them to the cast. Though some director/choreographers refrain from giving notes after opening night, Patti believes the work is never finished. The show was assigned a three week run. When working with college students, it is important to remember that maintaining consistency can be difficult for them, so giving notes once or twice a weekend will keep them in check. By the third weekend everything finally came together. Not only was the band comfortable, the actors shared a strong energy.

*Chicago* made box office history at VCU with sold out performances every night. The audience loved the show and the cast received standing ovations for their work. This shows that a combination of effort and collaboration can and will benefit the overall production.

### **Starting Here, Starting Now**

Working in an auditorium style theatre that is not fully equipped with the right instruments can be difficult. However, it is our challenge as director/choreographers to work within the constraints of what we are given. Though we did not have the proper lighting tools in *Starting Here, Starting Now*, we used what we had to tell our stories successfully. It is always beneficial to remain positive throughout a technical rehearsal. It is nearly impossible to avoid conflict when everyone's nerves are flowing, but it is possible to maintain a strong composure. No work will get done through negativity. Patti is a director who is able to possess a positive attitude no matter how complex the situation becomes. Designers like to work with her because she is a patient director who focuses on the final product. Though we had a few disagreements with our lighting designer in *Starting Here, Starting Now*, we calmly came to a compromise. The problems were eventually solved and the show did not suffer. If we had dealt with the situation in a negative way, we would have wasted more time arguing rather than fixing the problem.

The actors realized early on that they needed help with repetition. As a result, they scheduled extra rehearsal time before our dress rehearsals in order to work on



synchronizing the choreography. The tech itself was very simple. Since the cast is made up of three actors and we were working on a proscenium stage, spacing was easy. My only major concern was that audience members may disagree with the content onstage.

However, this was surprisingly not the case at all. We performed the show in a catholic church. Considering that the script focuses on all aspects of a relationship, including sex, the thought of upsetting a conservative audience crossed my mind. However, we were very tasteful with the choreography and it was showcased well onstage. Both performances were well executed and audiences truly enjoyed themselves. The show was a success.

The approaches Patti and I took for the pre-production, rehearsal and performance processes for *My Fair Lady*, *Chicago* and *Starting Here, Starting Now* were extremely different. However, we chose the most effective ways of working with our actors in order to tell a solid and truthful story. The overall success of our productions proves that hard work and dedication will result in a well received final product.

## **FINAL NOTE**

I have had the fortunate opportunity of working in the realm of professional, academic and community theatre. I have tested my abilities of working with different types of artists in various settings and locations. I have come to the overall conclusion that though we are working towards a shared goal, we still have to take different paths to get there.

If I have learned anything over the past three years it is that the ability to succeed requires motivation, determination and failure. I believe it is the open-mindedness and vulnerability within an individual that allows one to recognize and embrace failure so that he/she can learn to overcome it. Identifying our downfalls often requires the release of our pride and egotism which so often blocks the desire to move forward. It is through my own personal journey and my experiences with my mentors that I have come to recognize my strengths and weaknesses as an artist and teacher. It is through this recognition that I have found the courage to take the next step towards my future.



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## VITA

Alison Angelone was born in Providence Rhode Island. In 2005 she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in both Theatre Performance and English Secondary Education from Rhode Island College. In 2006, she moved to Virginia to pursue her MFA in Theatre Pedagogy with an emphasis in movement/music theatre. While in Richmond VA, Alison has worked with The Barksdale Theatre, The Richmond Triangle Players, The Firehouse Theatre, SPARC and TheatreVCU. She is part of the adjunct faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University and is currently working as an assistant to Broadway and regional director/choreographer Patti D'Beck.