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# Cabaret Story-Telling: Building Your Act

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## **Cabaret Story-Telling: Building Your Act**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Building Your Act.....	7
Chapter 2: Putting on a Cabaret.....	26
Chapter 3: Casting Director Interviews.....	40
Chapter 4: Interview Feedback Analysis.....	52
Chapter 5: Cabaret Story-Telling (In One Semester).....	58
Conclusion.....	62
Bibliography.....	65
Appendix A: Sample Syllabus.....	66
Appendix B: Student Feedback.....	71
Vita.....	76

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## **Abstract**

### **CABARET STORY-TELLING: BUILDING YOUR ACT**

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This thesis adduces the benefits in teaching undergraduate theatre majors the competency to create a cabaret. It expostulates that doing so during college gives students an advantage in marketing themselves professionally. It substantiates the general lack of cohesive undergraduate training in this area. The results of a survey of casting directors, assessing the worth of implementing the study of cabaret into theatre curricula, are incorporated.

Those that responded agreed that performing cabarets can play a role in a performer's career, even if the opinions varied as to what that specific role is. There was general agreement that the study of cabaret could benefit students in ways which potentially go beyond securing immediate employment.

I have included a sample syllabus for a course focusing on the construction, and performance of a cabaret. It is anticipated this would serve for a performance class taught during a student's fourth year of undergraduate study.

## Introduction

“Before Beatlemania swept the country, Manhattan nightlife was a cabaret, and New York City was the land of discovery” (Gavin, jacket copy).

One of my favorite songs in the Stephen Sondheim songbook is *Another Hundred People* his musical masterpiece *Company*. It is sung by the character of “Marta” who is one of three girlfriends of the protagonist “Robert”. In the original casting breakdown, her character was described as being “hip and vulgar; loves New York”. The song has a driving tempo, soaring melody, and unique rhythms, all of which I appreciate. But more importantly, to me, the song captures perfectly what it is like to be a new resident of New York City. The dynamic of hundreds upon hundreds of fresh faces pouring into “The Big Apple” day after day after day, struck home for me during my first year out of college.

My first “day job” was waiting tables at a restaurant in Penn Station—so I literally saw another hundred people get off the trains several times each day, and I began to have contextual understanding of what “Marta” was singing about. When I wasn’t waiting tables that first year, I was auditioning for everything I could. On more mornings than not, I would get up before dawn and take the subway to midtown to stand in one line or another, hoping to get an audition slot for something—anything. Those lines

were often hundreds of people long, as if each new face coming “off of the train” came to New York seeking the same thing I was. Donald Oliver describes the experience this way in his book, *How to Audition for the Musical Theatre*.

*The first professional audition most people encounter will probably be an “open call—commonly referred to as a “cattle call.” At this time, you will be one of hundreds competing for just a mere handful of whatever chorus positions are available. (83)*

Everybody in line sought the same things: to be noticed, to get called back, to procure an agent, to gain admission into the actor’s union, to get a job! Most of the lines I stood in yielded none of those things. I was occasionally offered a compliment or two that indicated my talent was at least noticed. I was even called back a few times. And I did book one, count it *one*, job from standing in line. And that job granted me membership in the Actor’s Equity Association and helped me to freelance with my first agent. But despite my moderate success, I am certain that many of my co-line standers (several of whom assuredly had as much or more talent than I) were not so lucky.

So what could they have done to increase their chances of success? How can a young talent make their face be the one that stands out from the hundreds that get off the train each day? These are questions that artists and performers have been asking since the advent of theatre. And there is certainly not one answer. There is one tactic, however, that many of my contemporaries attempted. In that first year alone, five of my friends staged their own cabaret, and I attended several more presented by friends of friends. Being new to the city and eager to network, I attended as many of these one-person performances as I could. There are a few well known venues: *Don’t Tell Momma’s*, *Studio 54*, and the *Duplex*, among others, where performers could, and still

do put up shows on the cheap. Of all the cabarets I attended, not once did the performer in question advance their career significantly—at least not to my knowledge. Moreover, having sat through these theatrical events, it wasn't hard to understand why they did not yield their desired results—every single one of them was poorly done.

The lack of quality was not due to a scarcity of talent (at least not usually). Rather, it was often a combination of poor planning, poor structure, poor song choices, weak transitions, and lack of attendance due to poor marketing. The consistent failure of these attempts from my colleagues scared me away from attempting my own one-man show, something which I have always regretted. I remember thinking that I would like to create something that could show my capabilities, but my thoughts never got more specific than that.

Now, twenty some years later, it occurs to me that I would not have had the first idea where to begin, in terms of putting together a well-organized performance that could effectively showcase my talent and individuality. In summary, my hypothetical one-person show would have almost certainly been as poorly done as that of my friends.

But why? I had just graduated with a Bachelors in Fine Arts from a preeminent, top ten Musical Theatre program. More than that, I had been very successful as an undergraduate: starring in multiple mainstage productions, earning awards, even playing a lead in the regional affiliate LORT theatre (LORT is League of Regional Theatres). While in school I was taught how to act, how to sing, to dance, and to audition for someone else's show or production—just as all the other people standing in line in mid-town Manhattan had been. The talents that I had worked so hard to cultivate



within myself over the past four years were seemingly mirrored back at me from every other person in line. I realized then, that the training I received as an undergraduate, as strong as it was, was missing something. I was never taught how to create a show of my own.

Bob Harrington agrees that universities are largely an untapped resource when it comes to cabaret. “Every college has a music department and a theatre department. These students would love cabaret—if they knew about it.” (155) Which undergraduate programs offer the best in musical theatre training depends largely on who you ask. Several publications, both in print and online, have published various opinions over the past several years. Among them is [musicschoolcentral.com](http://musicschoolcentral.com) who published a list of their top ten musical theatre departments in 2014. The institutions they chose to include seemed consistent with what I have been told and I have observed over my eighteen-year professional career in the business. Their list is as follows:

1. University of Michigan, School of Music, Theatre, and Dance
2. Carnegie Mellon School of Drama
3. New York University, Tisch School of the Arts
4. University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music
5. Penn State School of Theatre
6. Ithaca College
7. Boston Conservatory
8. Syracuse University, College of Visual and Performing Arts
9. Oklahoma City University
10. Elon University

This list should certainly not be considered definitive. There are dozens of other programs around the country that offer extremely high quality training in the musical theatre field. Rather, this list should represent a cross section of training that serves as a small sample test case.

Of the ten schools listed, only The University of Michigan School of Music offers an entire year of cabaret training as part of their full-time musical theatre curriculum on a consistent basis. Boston Conservatory dedicates a unit (or part of) one semester to the study of cabaret during their student's sophomore year. And The Cincinnati Conservatory of Music offers something similar to their students during their junior year. Penn State University and Oklahoma City University also offer sections of classes that deal with cabaret in part. By contrast, Carnegie Mellon University, Elon University, Ithaca College, New York University, and Syracuse University all offer no courses dedicated entirely to the study of cabaret.

This thesis focuses on the benefits of teaching undergraduate BFA musical theatre majors how to create and perform a one-person show. Those benefits will be explored in both the university and professional setting. I will investigate every aspect of making a show happen: from writing the script, picking songs, finding a space, procuring accompaniment, rehearsing, technical needs, and marketing.

As part of my research, I have contacted and queried several of New York's top casting directors. Their answers, I hope, will help to illuminate the ways in which a cabaret, honed and perfected during college, can help students once they attempt to enter the professional world. For this purpose, I conceived and subsequently taught a class, *Cabaret Story Telling*, to undergraduate BFA theatre majors at Virginia

Commonwealth University during the spring semester of 2017. This one-semester class is a truncated version of the year-long program I propose in this thesis. One semester is not sufficient for each of the twelve students enrolled to create an entire cabaret. However, the initial goal was that by semester's end, each student would have thoroughly prepared three songs, which they would then weave into a narrative, thus constituting a fifteen to twenty-minute show. At semester's end, each student would be given an opportunity to perform their (mini) cabaret for the public, and that performance would serve as their final. My goals in teaching this class are for my students to better understand the process of making a cabaret, to spark the creativity within them and inspire their own show construction, and to help them to identify any potential pitfalls in the process.

When you get off the train in New York City, it's a safe bet that the 99 people who got off with you all have talent. They are willing, eager, and ready to stand in line. I hope to give my future students some extra tools in their toolbox to help them stand out.

## Chapter 1: Building Your Act

*The electric world of cabaret is unique in the entertainment industry. It allows artists to connect with an audience in an intimate setting. Today, the clubs are ripe with new, rising and mature talents and the beginners who want to make it. But who are today's torchbearers? Who will make their mark?... Time will tell... In today's schizo music world with live music battling cyberspace, iTunes, downloads, etc., cabaret still remains unique. It's live. And that stands for something (Hoglund 1).*

One of the first tenets I remember being taught as a theatre student is that a theatrical event requires three things: a performer, an audience, and a story (Bentley 43). If you remove the performer you have a convention. If you remove the audience, you have rehearsal. And if you remove the story you are left with something on the spectrum between a concert and voyeurism. The latter is the reason that I consider storytelling to be at the center of all theatre training. This idea might seem obvious, yet many novices forget that their primary job is to tell the story.

Fashioning and performing a cabaret is no different. The first pitfall many performers fall victim to is they assume a cabaret is simply a collection of songs being sung. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. If it were true, the radio is only a button push away. People attend cabarets, whether they realize it or not, to be told a story. Andrea Marcovicci, a seasoned veteran of cabaret, describes the medium this way.

*...an evening of song and stories in an intimate space that shatters the "fourth wall". Part stand-up comic, part balladeer, part evangelist: today's*

*performer often has a theme that unifies the evening, knows a great deal about the music they're singing, and shares that information in witty and inventive ways. At its best, cabaret can amuse, entertain, and inform... it can dazzle you, catch you unawares and make you weep. The audience participates in a direct, emotional conversation with the artist... (qtd. in Williams 1).*

For someone looking to build their own cabaret, the next question is obvious: *what story do I want to tell?* This is a simple question, yet it can be the most difficult to answer. Every writer in every genre has asked themselves this question at one point or another, with a realization that few things can be as daunting as a blank page. Fortunately, a student performer has a logical progression of questions, that when answered can serve as guide posts that can potentially help get them started.

Before asking “What story do I want to tell,” a student should ask themselves another question: *Why?* More specifically, “*What am I hoping to achieve by building and performing this cabaret?*” The answer to that question could be as varied and individual as the people answering it. However, for our purposes, I shall focus on the challenges addressed in the introduction—that of helping a professional newcomer gain an advantage in building a career in the theatre arts. In her book *Auditioning*, Joanna Merlin has an interesting take on the importance of cabaret.

*When asked whether performing in a cabaret categorizes you as a cabaret performer, Marin Mazzie, who started out as a young performer in cabaret, says she feels it is valuable to work in the intimate setting of a cabaret, where you are face-to-face with the audience. As a leading performer in many Broadway musicals, it certainly didn't ruin her career (128).*

Ms. Mazzie certainly isn't alone in using cabaret as a tool in building a successful career in the performing arts.

*The stories of stars who used cabaret as a stepping stone to their future go back a long time. For instance, Marlene Dietrich and Barbara Streisand got their first recognition in piano bars and later cabaret rooms... Tony Bennett was a singing waiter in a restaurant—where he was first discovered. Lady Gaga used to perform with a keyboard at The Bitter End. Harry Connick Jr., played piano at Chez Josephine on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and The Knickerbocker Bar on University Place before his official debut at the Algonquin. The ultimate cabaret star of our day, Michael Feinstein came to cabaret after working piano bars in Ohio and Hollywood like the Chateau Marmont prior to his Algonquin debut in 1986... Other iconic stars who followed their dreams in and out of cabaret include: Woody Allen, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Joan Rivers, Bea Arthur, Dorothy Loudon, Kaye Ballard, Phyllis Diller, Lenny Bruce, Carol Burnett, Chita Rivera, Phyllis Hyman, Don Rickles, Rosanne Barr, Jimmy Webb, Morgana King, Sylvia Syms, Liberace, Johnny Mathis, Doris Day, Chris Rock, Billie Holliday, Billy Joel, and Robin Williams—just to tip the iceberg. (Hoglund 1)*

If we accept that a student's primary objective in building and performing their own cabaret is to showcase their talent and individuality, then we should recognize that objective can serve as our first guide post in getting started. "*What story do I want to tell?*" I want to tell a story that showcases my talent and individuality. I shall treat this last statement as if it were a math equation, which is to say, I will separate the variables, and solve them individually. Identifying and showcasing talent is more obvious, and easier to put a finger on, so I will address that challenge first. *I want to tell a story that showcases my talent.*

In a cabaret, talent can manifest itself in several different ways: dance, acrobatics, juggling, even magic. In fact, any special or unique talents a performer possesses could and often should be incorporated into their one-person show. "It's an awesomely all-encompassing genre, welcoming with equally open arms singing styles from jazz to country-western, magicians, comics, book shows, revues, variety acts, and people who just stand there and tell stories" (Harrington 14). But, the foremost indicators of talent are usually vocal ability, and musical theatre performance (acting of

the song). The acting choices that a performer makes between songs could be considered talent as well, but I shall explore that when discussing showcasing individuality.

In New York City, the auditions I referred to in the introduction, where hundreds of people wait in line to be seen, are known as “open calls”. There are several different types of open calls. But more often than not, at an open call for a musical, the first and often only thing an actor will be asked to do, once in the audition room, is to sing sixteen bars of music from a song of their choice. Different directors and casting directors will look for different attributes during these hundreds of mini-performances, but for the most part, the first box to be checked off for them is: *can this person sing?* For someone not in the theatre business, sixteen bars of music might seem insufficient in determining someone’s vocal ability. However, most casting directors will tell you they have a good sense of a person’s “chops” within the first three or four notes out of an auditioner’s mouth. “Musical directors can tell after hearing only a few bars if they want to take you to the next step in exploring your voice, or want to call you back” (Merlin 125). Knowing this, it is incumbent upon the person auditioning to highlight their abilities to the fullest, while downplaying or masking any vocal shortcomings.

It is basic then, for an actor to know their own instrument, and to pick songs accordingly. Within the sixteen bars of music, an actor should sing a section of a song that establishes vocal authority, utilizes dynamics, and demonstrates the breadth of their vocal range (Merlin 125). Demonstrating the breadth of vocal range means knowing what notes are within an actor’s command and can be sung consistently. To

put it another way, an actor should know what their “money note” is, and find songs that showcase it as often as possible.

The principles that go into selecting songs for a cabaret (especially one intended to showcase talent) are similar to those used for standard auditions. The obvious difference is that in a cabaret an actor will have between six and twelve full length songs to demonstrate their vocal abilities rather than sixteen bars. However, the goal should be the same—picking songs that establish vocal authority, utilize dynamics, and demonstrate vocal limits. While a cabaret will afford an actor the chance to demonstrate variety, and context within their song choices, any director or casting director attending will be looking to check the same first box as in a 16-bar audition—*can this person sing?*

If we assume that a student has a firm understanding of their instrument, knows their strengths and weaknesses, can identify their money note, and has chosen songs accordingly, then it is time to focus on musical theatre performance, or the acting of the song. “Singing is acting on pitch...it’s not enough to merely learn the words and notes. You must completely understand what the song is saying and figure out how to communicate its meaning” (Oliver 57). Unlike pure vocal quality, showcasing a student’s ability to act a song is much different (and more demanding) than in a 16-bar audition. In his book *Audition*, Michael Shurtleff discusses the nuances of performing songs.

*The great singers of popular music are not those with the greatest voices but those who know how to communicate feeling: Peggy Lee, Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra... Since most of us are inexperienced with relating to groups, the singing actor needs to make a relationship that is highly personal and real to him (146).*



The acting of a song within a cabaret is unique. It's not quite like musical performance within a show, nor is it like singing songs in a club. It's not the same as singing in an audition, whether it be sixteen bars or a full length song. Rather, performing a song in a cabaret is a unique combination of all these types of performance. Critic Lisa Martland describes cabaret like this:

*Within a cabaret, an artiste might choose a composition originally written for a Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Sondheim show etc., but he or she will then go on to discover a fresh emotion in the lyrics/melody and one which resonates with every member of the audience present. This quality allows an individual to engage with an artiste in a way no other art-form offers (qtd. in Williams 172).*

In a cabaret, the character and the performer are one in the same, even if it has been written for the actor to inhabit different characters within the show. The level of suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience is not as heightened as it is within a scripted production. Which is not to say that it doesn't exist at all. An audience at a cabaret might be completely willing to take the theatrical journey along with the performer, but no matter how talented and committed the performer, the audience at a cabaret will always see the actor on stage, in addition to the character they are playing. "In cabaret, the audience must buy the *performer*—even when that performer has adopted a persona very different from his or her offstage personality" (Harrington 15).

The result is that while the performer can and should embrace their actor training, and base their performance in truth, they also have to allow for an increase in the heightened reality, even beyond what would be expected in a staged musical. There is no fourth wall in cabaret. The performer acknowledges the audience, and the

audience acknowledges the performer. When the audience acknowledges the performer they are admitting (often subconsciously) that this is not a character *in* a story, but rather a person *telling me* a story. This results in the cabaret performer becoming a narrator, as well as a character. Therefore, it is incumbent on the performer to figuratively reach out to the audience during their act. In a good cabaret, a performer often gives the impression that they are singing *with* the audience, rather than *to* the audience. “I’ve been listening to actors sing for many years, and I know there is nothing more wearing... than being sung to” (Shurtleff 147)!

Once a performer knows how to choose songs that allow for vocal authority, utilize dynamics, and demonstrates vocal limits; and they have songs that allow for strong musical theatre performance unique to the cabaret medium, I believe it is safe to say they have the makings of a one-person show that showcases their talent. But as was discussed at the outset, talent is only half the equation. The other half is to showcase a performer’s individuality.

The paramount asset that every actor has is themselves. No two people are exactly alike. An actor, let’s call him “Joe,” no matter his ability as a performer, can never be anything other than his authentic self—the unique being that is himself and none other. Similarly, none of the brilliantly talented performers in the history of the theatre can be this Joe. Not Lawrence Olivier, not Charlie Chaplin, not even Meryl Streep—only Joe can be this Joe. The actors that have the most success professionally are not only the most talented, but are those that also know how to reveal their individuality.

So what makes us, us? What separates Joe from the other thousands contemplating cabarets? The answer comes back to the concept we started with: story. There's an old saying: "We all have a story to tell." If we accept that saying as being true, then we have our second guidepost in structuring our cabaret, bringing our tally to two: 1. I want to tell a story that showcases my talent and individuality, and, 2. I want to tell *my* story.

A cabaret aimed at showcasing individuality has to be about the individual. It has to be *their* specific story, or at least part of their story. This can be tricky, especially for a theatre student who has spent the majority of their collegiate career learning how to portray someone else. As discussed, in a cabaret, the character and the performer are one in the same. With that being said, it is remarkable how many performers find playing themselves to be their most challenging character. I believe this is true because many actors feel they can hide within a character, even while bringing themselves to the role wholeheartedly. It is still someone else. In a cabaret, it is you. Lennie Watts agrees. "The person attempting cabaret just needs to be open and willing to put themselves in an incredibly vulnerable, yet truly satisfying position." (qtd. in Williams 13).

Being honest is an act of bravery—especially so when one is being honest about themselves. Good cabaret must be honest. Therefore, creating a good cabaret requires courage. Standing up in a room, surrounded by strangers, singing and acting alone can be daunting. But most people who study theatre in hopes of becoming a professional have the capacity and the willingness to do it. However, it is harder to stand in that same room, and bare something true, something revealing, something

embarrassing, or even something sacred. Only the courage to do so will help a cabaret performance showcase a performer's individuality. To a certain extent, our flaws are what make us who we are. If a performer is unwilling or unable to expose those flaws, then they will not be able to share part of themselves, and their individuality will remain hidden. Being honest is an act of bravery—and it is very difficult. The difficult is what makes it great.

If we assume that an actor is brave enough to honestly tell their story on stage, then I believe the actor has the capacity to create a cabaret that showcases individuality. The next question that follows can be the most difficult to answer, because it is different for every individual: how? More specifically: Yes, I am in fact brave enough to be honest and tell my story, but *how* do I do it? For every artist, the answer will be uniquely their own. There is no one way to figure it out. But I believe there are clues that can help point students in a positive direction.

A good first step for a student is to write about something that is important to them. Something important doesn't necessarily mean it has to be earth shattering. Nor does it have to be something society deems important. It need not be sad, or tragic. It doesn't have to be triumphant or courageous. It could be something as grievous as losing a parent, or something as wonderful as having a first child. It could be as simple as reconnecting with an old friend or earning the first ever "A" on a math exam. But no matter what the choice, it has to be something truly important to the person performing. If the "something" is important to the performer, it should inherently become important to the audience.

How do you decide if something is important? An easy litmus test to determine if something is truly important, is to ask if the person has been changed as a result of it. Let's suppose earning an "A" in math class for the first time gave a performer the confidence to continue on with high school, when they were considering dropping out, that would constitute a huge change in that person's life. No two examples are exactly the same, but in general terms, the bigger the change in someone's life, the more important the event. Often times, the most seemingly innocuous events in a person's life, when retrospectively examined, turn out to be among the most momentous.

The "something important" also doesn't necessarily have to be a single occurrence. The change could have taken place over a week, several months, or a lifetime. An actor could write their cabaret around being tormented in high school, or raising a puppy, or living with cancer. A good cabaret could focus on a performer's life-long dysfunctional relationship with their mother, or the special bond forged between a father and a son. The possibilities are truly limitless—so long as the subject matter is important to the performer and changed them in some way.

Once a student has identified the "something important" for them to write about, the next step is to figure out *what they are trying to say* by writing about that something. Most stories, whether they are plays, musicals, novels, movies, or children's books are all trying to say *something*. The author of almost every story ever written has a truth (or something they believe to be true) about this world that they want to express. There are countless ways to express truth, but artists, and specifically writers, often demonstrate their truth through story.

In this respect, a cabaret is like any other story. If a student has decided that they want to create and perform a cabaret, and they know something truly important that they want it to center around, the next step is to decide how that something demonstrates what they believe to be true. A student, who is still in college, is likely to be in the process of figuring out who they are and what type of person they want to be. Therefore, it is probable that the way in which that student has been changed by life's important events could still be in the process of occurring. This, in and of itself, doesn't necessarily mean those events should not be written about. However, the "something important" should demonstrate an idea that the performer believes to be true, even if all the answers aren't perfectly clear yet. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if what a student believes to be true is in fact true. Their truth doesn't need to be verifiable. It only has to be something the performer (student or seasoned veteran) *believes* to be true.

For a young person, figuring out "something important" to center a cabaret around and demonstrating truth through story can be very daunting and can be quite time consuming—but these elements alone are still not sufficient to showcase individuality. As earlier stated, a cabaret that showcases individuality has to be about the individual. It has to be their story. As a result, the final task is to decipher how a performer's truth reveals their own character. What does a performer's "something important" tell the audience, about who the performer is? If a student were to break down their story on paper like a math equation, they might start with, "This event (X) is truly important to me. Because of this important event (X), I believe this (Y) to be the truth. And because I believe this (Y) to be true, you should understand this (Z) about me." Bob Harrington describes it this way, "...there should be a structural *purpose*

behind even your basic considerations. Nothing should just happen—an act must be planned carefully, and the plan should reflect your overriding goal, whatever that may be.” (115)

Once a student has filled in this math equation with their own events, truths and characteristics, then they are ready to start writing a cabaret that showcases their own individuality. However, even with all these variables in hand, it can still be challenging for students to put pen to paper and get started. Fortunately, there are few simple writing exercises that can help students get their mental gears turning in the right direction.

The most basic exercise is just to write down a list of ideas. They don't all have to be considered good ideas. They need not be smart, clever or inspired. Rather, anything that pops into a student's head should be jotted down. The longer the list, the more likely it is that a good idea will emerge—often times the best ideas come at the very end of this procedure. When a student has exhausted their list, they should take a step back and try to consider it as a whole. Often times, two or more seemingly unconnected ideas can work together, or complement each other in a way that is truly inspiring. I view this process as channeling one's instincts. ([myonepersonshow.com](http://myonepersonshow.com))

Another good jumping off point is to have a student ask themselves the following questions: “If you could be in any show, (one that exists or is imagined) what would it be?” Or, “If you could play any character, which would it be?” One of the gratifying things about cabaret is that a show can be whatever you imagine it to be. The same challenges that have been addressed thus far, in regards to creating, writing, and directing a one-person performance are the same elements that can make the process

so liberating. Students should day dream about their ideal performance, and try not to edit their thinking. In their mind's eye, they should be able to fulfill every performance fantasy they have ever had. Once they have an idea of what could be, then they will have a goal to work towards ([myonepersonshow.com](http://myonepersonshow.com)).

Another exercise that can spark a student's creativity in their writing is to have them list five things that make them feel various emotions. An easy emotion with which to start is usually frustration. Most students can tell you five things that "piss them off" without thinking about it too hard. Upon completing their five frustrations, have them write five things that make them uncomfortable. When that list is finished, add five things that scare them. Then add five things that warms their heart. Next add five more that excite them. A student could make a list of five topics for every emotion that they can think of. Once all the lists are complete, have students scan the entire output, and see if one occurrence in particular stands out, or speaks to them in some particular way. When they have identified the one topic from all their lists that stands out, have them write about that topic for five minutes. Their writing does not have to be structured—it should be more stream of conscience ([myonepersonshow.com](http://myonepersonshow.com)). When this process is complete, students usually have something, or at least part of something, that they can use in the story telling of their cabaret. At the very least, a student should have should have identified something they want to delve deeper into in order to tell the story.

The next challenge performers are often faced with, after they have a good sense of their narrative structure, is finding songs that fit into or complement the story they are striving to tell. "Music may have charms to soothe the savage breast, but



finding the right piece of music could drive a person crazy” (Harrington 74). As has already been discussed, finding material that showcases talent in vocal ability and musical theatre performance can be challenging in itself, but finding songs that check all those boxes in addition to helping to tell the story might seem almost impossible.

An easy way to meet this challenge is for a performer to understand that a given song doesn’t necessarily have to fit the narrative of their story in the same manner that it would in a scripted musical. In fact, in a cabaret the music choices that a performer makes can fit into the theme of the story being told in any number of different ways. The songs could further the plot, or they could compliment the plot. The songs could even expose a theme within the story itself. With this in mind, it is often a good idea for a performer to contemplate song choices for their cabaret individually from the story that is being told—at least initially.

A good first step in picking songs for a cabaret is to choose from the music types that a performer likes. Remember, in cabaret, the performer is singing with the audience, rather than to it. If a performer doesn’t enjoy the material they are singing, the audience will be aware of it quickly. If, for example, a performer hates country music, they shouldn’t sing a Garth Brooks tune, no matter how well it fits their narrative. Whether the audience realizes it or not, it will sense something missing from the performer: the result being that the song won’t make sense, even if the words do.

One strategy that can make choosing songs easier is to self-impose a limit on the types of songs to be incorporated. For example, a performer could decide they are going to tell their story using only 80’s rock songs. Or, they could try to demonstrate the truth of their story using nothing but Frank Sinatra covers. These limitations not only

make the task of picking the “right” songs more manageable, but could help to make a theme emerge in the story telling.

In my own cabaret entitled *Hello, I Love You, Goodbye* (which I co-wrote with my father), the first determination that we made in structuring the show was that we would use songs composed by George Gershwin, exclusively. My father and I made this decision for no reason other than we both really loved Gershwin’s music. Immediately, the pool of possible song choices went from near infinity to just over five-hundred. Five-hundred songs still constitute quite a daunting list to sift through, but it gave our work focus, and also allowed us to incorporate Gershwin’s writing style into the story structure of the show.

If a performer doesn’t want to impose such a limit, there are other steps that can be taken to help hone in on their eventual song choices. Much like the listing of story ideas, it can be helpful for a student to brainstorm a list of every song they have ever sung in public—whether it be in class, in performance, for an audition, or even at karaoke. When that list is exhausted, the student should list every song they have ever planned on singing, but have not yet, based on their type. And finally, when that list is complete, the student should list every other song they might ever want to sing if type were not an issue. One benefit that cabaret affords that most scripted musicals do not, is that a performer can sing pretty much whatever song they want, regardless of type, age, race or gender.

Again, when all the lists are as complete as the student can make them, they should view the list as a whole, and try to see if any connections can be made. In the case of possible song choices, organizing them by types is a good way to get started.

Songs can be categorized by style, music type, composer, upbeat vs. ballad, or time period (Williams 33). Most songs can fit into several categories depending on how you go about it. But no matter the categories, once the songs start to get organized, patterns usually emerge.

At the point where a student has an exhaustive list of organized song choices, then they are able to put it aside and refocus on the question we started with: *what story do I want to tell?* As they move through their script searching to answer that question, instances will inevitably arise where a certain type of song is needed. Having the list as a reference allows the performer to “plug in” a song, and move on with their writing. In this way, a well-organized list affords the performer broad freedom. For example, the performer might not even need to finalize a song choice to continue building their story. They could simply say, for example, “at this point, I will use one of these three songs.” Once a working draft of the story is complete, it is much easier to go back and decide which songs are most appropriate.

Perhaps the most efficient shortcut in structuring a story is for a performer to use a framework or template (Williams 34). A template could be taken from any number of sources. A performer could structure their story telling similarly to their favorite movie or book. They could watch old TV shows for inspiration, or copy patterns from other performers seen on YouTube. It doesn't matter the source for the template, and copying structure does not constitute plagiarism. A performer is simply looking to plug holes for the beginning, middle, and end of their story. “Whether they realize it or not, most artists follow a set of tried and tested rules when creating their shows.

Understanding these rules will demystify the process and give you a basis from which to work.” (Williams, 34)

Using my own cabaret as an example, in *Hello, I love You, Goodbye*, the template my father and I decided to use was the second choice we made (inspired by our first—the use of George Gershwin’s music exclusively) and that template is represented in the title.

When we considered Gershwin’s musical canon as a whole, we immediately thought about all the iconic love songs that he composed, and more specifically, how many of those songs were embodied in the great black and white movie musicals of the 1930’s and 40’s. With that imagery in mind, it became clear to us that many, if not most of those movies incorporated a similar story structure. The details were always varied and unique, but the basic plot lines (the beginning, middle, and end) were the same: *Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love with girl. Boy loses girl.* Once we had solidified that concept, we not only had our title, but a methodology by which we would structure our cabaret. That simple template of beginning, middle, and end did more than half of the work for us in terms of how to shape our story. When this idea was firmly in place, song choices were obvious, transitions were natural, and a “plot” naturally emerged.

Here’s the tricky part: our “plot” (a hero meets a girl, falls in love with her, and then loses her) was not really what our cabaret was about. The plot was not something we truly cared about, it did not demonstrate our truth through story, and by itself, did not reveal anything about my character (or my father’s character, for that matter). If my father and I had tried to make our story about the plot, the audience would have lost interest quickly. Our plot was a template, nothing more.

What our story was really about is the special bond forged between a father and a son. More specifically, how that bond manifested itself during my childhood over a shared love of musical theatre. This reality allowed us to pick the songs we wanted; songs that furthered the plot while showcasing my talent as a singer and performer. At the same time, I was able to tell the audience stories about the songs, and why they were important to me. The love that I have for my father was evident in the story telling, as was his for me. It was clear that our relationship was truly important to me. So too, that my life was changed significantly by our relationship. And because it was a cabaret, I was able to be a narrator as well as a character. My narration afforded me the opportunity to tell the audience that the show was co-written by my father and I, which helped to underline our theme. I like to think the stories I told, and songs I sang demonstrated something we believed to be true—that musical story-telling can help forge a loving relationship. In my opinion, that belief reveals a lot about who I am. My individuality was showcased well.

To build an act, a student is faced with several challenges. Getting up and simply singing a bunch of random songs is no more a cabaret than it is a Broadway musical, Hollywood movie, or a performance of the Ice Capades. Building and performing a well-made cabaret takes talent, careful planning, creative thinking, strategic song selection, and a big dose of bravery. We are all wonderfully unique. One of the biggest challenges is to write and perform a one-person show that is as uniquely wonderful as the person writing it. However, I firmly believe that understanding what a cabaret is, and having an idea of how to structure a story can give a student a huge

advantage in creating a one-person show that showcases their talent and individuality.

“Remember, it’s your show—you can do what you like” (Williams 71).

## Chapter 2: Putting on a Cabaret

“Nothing will work always; some things work only some of the time. And almost anything can work a little bit. But until they are tried consistently and with a little business, we are never going to know what’s what in cabaret.” (Harrington 156)

So we have ourselves a show! 1. We have built an act that is painstakingly structured. 2. Our songs have been carefully chosen. 3. Our theme has been thoroughly examined. 4. We know what our show is about: we picked something truly important, we know what we are trying to say by demonstrating our truth through story, and we are aware of how that truth reflects our character. We are ready to showcase our talent and individuality. We are ready! So now what?

If we go back to the three essential elements that constitute a theatrical event (a performer, a story, and an audience) we find that we are still one element short. First, we have what we started with: a performer. After all our hard work, we now have the second element: a story. At this point, all we are missing is the third element: an audience. No matter how polished and finely tuned our work is, without someone there to watch our one-person performance, our cabaret will never be anything beyond a rehearsal.

Within the academic setting (where a student will be building their act) this challenge should be relatively easy to overcome. A university’s theatre department has

a built in support system, filled with fellow thespians, both students and faculty, welcoming to any product created from within. At the university level every student within the drama department is given the opportunity to make themselves known amongst the faculty and student body—through school productions or work done in class. It is usually a relatively small pond where every fish will happily co-support each-other if for no other reason beyond their own artistic enrichment.

Furthermore, if one were to look beyond the expense of their tuition, everything needed to rehearse and present a cabaret is relatively inexpensive. While still in school a student doesn't have to locate and then pay to rent a venue. Nor do they have to procure rehearsal space, and pay an accompanist to rehearse. The drama department is usually full of theatre tech students who are willing and eager to design and operate lighting and sound elements, expecting no compensation beyond the experience of doing it. And finally, a student doesn't have to bear the cost of financing the marketing of their show. They do not have to send out mailings, or have professional pictures taken. They do not have to pay to print posters or flyers, and they certainly needn't worry about the cost of a press agent.

I think all these reasons and more, make a compelling argument for a student to build their act while still in college. As with most things in life, becoming a competent cabaret performer demands practice. But practicing performing is different from simply rehearsing. To practice the actual *performance* of a cabaret requires that people be there to watch it, and there's no better place to do that than within the relatively safe confines of a theatre department.



It is important at this stage, however, to remember our original objective in creating this one-person show. Which, of course, is to showcase a student's talent and individuality so that when that student becomes a newcomer to the profession, they gain an advantage in building a career in the theatre arts. The key in this last statement is "a newcomer to the profession". We must bear in mind the purpose of all our hard work in building our act, as well as practicing the performance of it in college, is to then be able to transport our cabaret to the professional world.

Once a student is no longer a student, but rather is an aspiring professional, all the aforementioned conveniences of a theatre department will no longer be available to them. As such, all the elements that were once free of charge: a venue, various technical demands, and marketing, will now come out of the performer's (likely shallow) pockets.

Perhaps, the most important lesson for a novice performer to be mindful of is to budget their cabaret wisely and conservatively. In any profession, it can be a jarring experience for anyone (not born into wealth) to enter the professional world directly out of college. One of the biggest shocks for aspiring artists (especially those new to New York City) is how quickly and easily money can disappear. For many, this will be the first time that they pay all of their own bills and living expenses—which there are always more than anticipated. Many first year professionals have to work full time at their day jobs, just to get by financially, leaving little if any time to focus on the real reason they moved to New York City in the first place. Knowing this, it is imperative that a young performer not spend a single dollar more than is absolutely necessary on their one-person show.

Fortunately, several elements of staging a cabaret in New York City can actually work in favor of a performer trying to control its costs. First, it's important to understand that there are generally modest expectations amongst cabaret attendees in terms of production value. Most people understand the "starving artists" situation and are not looking to be blown away by a performer's set, sound, or lighting design. Rather, most patrons will be focused on the performer and the story that the performer hopes to tell. Secondly, there are several venues in and around Manhattan that specialize in small scale concerts, workshops, and cabarets. Most of these venues, are accustomed to dealing with artistic newcomers who are working on a limited budget, and are priced accordingly. The other benefit of having this abundance of potential venues is that most (including all the venues listed below) are registered with either ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers), BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.), or NMPA/HFA (National Music Publishers' Association/the Harry Fox Agency, Inc.), if not all three. These agencies (along with the European version, SESAC) provide the licensing of *small rights* to almost every published song. Clubs, or cabaret venues pay a fee to these agencies, and that fee is then distributed back to the various song writers (Harrington 85). The small rights license is what allows performers to sing material without express permission from the person or persons who authored it. It is important to note, however that if a song is *not* published it is not likely to be registered with ASCAP or BMI, and is therefore not free to be performed without express permission from the author (Harrington 85). The Copyright American Association of Community Theatre website clarifies the issue this way:

Songs performed without any reference to the original staging (no costumes, dialogue, or choreography referring to the context of the show) can be cleared through the music licensing organization representing the particular song or composer. The sheet music normally lists the organization representing the particular song (normally at the bottom of the title page.)

The simplest point of contact for both ASCAP and BMI is via their websites, which provide licensing information and allow you to submit requests for performance of authors whom they represent. Both sites have search forms, so you can search for particular songs or songwriters.

This is a list of Thirteen registered venues that can accommodate a novice performer's cabaret at a reasonable cost (NYC.com). This is certainly not a definitive list, as there are dozens of venues that can and have hosted cabarets. However, these thirteen are all fairly well-known, and would be a great place for a novice performer to start their search:

- House of Yes
- Zinc Bar
- Iridium Jazz Club
- The Metropolitan Room
- Uncle Charlie's, The Duplex
- Barbes
- Parkside Lounge
- The Monster
- Don't Tell Momma
- Joe's Pub
- 54 Below

Perhaps the most well-known amongst this list 54 Below.

*Today, 54 Below (which once housed Studio 54) packs endless stars, including Patti LuPone who has become a regular there, from Broadway to this refurbished, plush cellar. The roster is long and impressive. Cabaret has played a relevant part in launching rising and reinventing stars and has always been the land of discovery—and comebacks; a melting pot (Hoglund 2).*

Finding a venue and renting it is only the first step. Every performer, no matter how intimate their act may be, will inevitably need at least a few people to assist in the performance. In most cases, people cost money. However, there are ways to avoid having to hire (at least, for money) every person who might be needed in the producing and performing of a young person's cabaret. This is the time to call in favors; suck up, and barter services with friends. If an actor's day job is waiting tables, and at work, there is a piano player, for example, they could offer to cover their co-worker's shifts in exchange for playing their cabaret. "Anyone who plays piano is a potential accompanist" (Oliver 25). If a performer went to college with a sound designer, they could offer to buy them dinner in exchange for running the soundboard. If an actor has a room-mate that is a visual artist who happens to owe the actor some money, that debt could be forgiven in exchange for a flyer design.

The best trades are the ones that don't cost a thrifty artist any money. A performer could let someone crash on their couch for a week, or offer to paint someone's kitchen, or watch their cat for free—any service that could be redeemed when the time comes to stage their cabaret. The possibilities are limited only by a performer's creativity and resourcefulness.

The young performer should be focused on procuring the minimum amount of resources necessary that affords them the best chance to showcase their talent and individuality. A cabaret is about the person performing, not all the bells and whistles surrounding them. Creating the best conditions to showcase a performer's talent and individuality means being as prepared as possible. In effect, this one-person performance should be treated like an audition, remembering that the objective is to give the actor a jumpstart in building their professional career. "There is no substitute for preparation and really knowing your stuff...The only reason I'm not terrified when I walk out on a stage, is because I do everything possible to prepare myself" (Williams 15). It would be a shame to have a young person work diligently to build an effective act, and invest their time and money into staging their act, only to not be at their best during the performance. If we assume that our student formulated their cabaret during their time as an undergraduate, then we know that they had ample opportunity to prepare their work both in rehearsal and in performance. However, even if all the necessary steps had been taken initially, and the show was considered a success in the collegiate setting, it is still imperative for the performer to remain diligent in their rehearsals leading up to the performance in the professional setting.

Rehearsal space can be expensive. Because this is cabaret, however, a performer can generally rehearse on one's own—even at home. Ideally, whomever accompanied the performer's cabaret while in college will continue on in that capacity in the professional setting. Whether this is the case or not, it is a good idea for the piano player to record their accompaniment for every song of the cabaret, so that the singer can practice with the recording in the accompanist's absence. This system allows for

just a brush up rehearsal or two with the actual piano player, helping keep costs down. If, on the other hand, the cabaret will be accompanied by someone new, it is imperative to schedule adequate rehearsal time with that person—even if they have to be paid for their time. Every accompanist is different, and it will inevitably take time to adjust to someone new. This is not a place to cut corners financially. There are few things that can doom an otherwise high-quality cabaret, then an accompanist and performer who are not in sync.

Of course, not all performers will need to hire (or barter for) an accompanist. Many famous cabaret performers have accompanied themselves. George Shearing, Michael Feinstein, and Bobby Short (who appeared in cabaret at The Carlyle for close to 30 years) all played piano during their cabaret performances. Nat King Cole started by playing piano with the Nat King Cole trio, and they started out as a strictly instrumental group. It was only after a few years that Mr. Cole began singing to help their act. If a young performer is a truly proficient piano player, and accompanying themselves would support their performance, rather than distract from it, then doing so could potentially be a big money saver.

Another area where spending money could be considered a wise investment is in the recording of the event—both on video and in stills. “Every booker I spoke with says in most cases it’s the show reel that gets the work. It stands to reason that it’s worth spending the time and money to get it right” (Williams 153). A young actor new to New York City (or Los Angeles or Chicago) will undoubtedly be looking to acquire quality headshots, if they don’t have them already. It is important that these pictures be in hand well in advance of the performance. If we are in agreement that this cabaret

within the professional setting should be treated as an audition, then not having a quality picture for a flyer or program, would be akin to showing up for an open call audition without a headshot. A performer should have a handout for every patron that bears a professional shot that represents the performer at their best. “Your flyers are an essential adjunct to your show, your calling card to the cabaret community” (Harrington 101). However, once a performer’s one-person show has been performed, simply having a good headshot is not enough. It is important that quality video and stills have been taken during the event for further marketing purposes—both of which can be utilized on a performer’s website.

The proliferation of the internet, and especially social media, has altered the way every business has been conducted over the past two decades. Certainly, the theatre business is no exception. Perhaps no aspect of the theatre business has been affected more by this than the auditioning process as it relates to casting. More and more auditions are being submitted electronically. Casting directors are free to sample performers’ work via YouTube. There are even rumored stories about call-back and casting decisions being influenced by the number of followers an actor may or may not have on various social media outlets.

With this knowledge in mind, it is incumbent on those new to the theatre profession to have at least a minimal knowledge of social media, and how to apply it to their advantage. In addition to having an account on at least one (preferably more) of the social media outlets, an actor should have their own website.

*Take a quick glance over any performer’s website and you’ll find that they are the “most exciting”, “most talented”, and generally “the most remarkable” talent that has ever walked the earth. Every click of the*

*mouse reveals yet more testimonials bursting with superlatives” (Williams 129).*

Building and maintaining a website is now easier and less expensive than it has ever been. There are multiple web based companies that allow individuals to design and organize their own sites for free. These companies are getting more and more user friendly, and consumer oriented. Having a personal website provides a young artist with several benefits. At minimum, it puts a performer’s headshot and resume at the fingertips of anyone who might be looking to cast them. But beyond that, a website also allows the performer the capacity to add an abundance of favorable information and demonstrable proficiency regarding their career and abilities; far more than they could ever include on a hard copy of a resume and picture.

A huge advantage of a website is that a performer can integrate into it video clips of various performances. This gives directors and casting directors the ability to sample a performer’s work at its best. “90% of the time I’m considering seeing a performer I don’t know, I’ll look online for video clips” (Coris qtd. in Williams 152). However, union rules set in place by Actor’s Equity Association can make this problematic. Actor’s Equity mandates that no video recordings be taken at a live performance of a union-affiliated performance. A cabaret staged and produced by the performer themselves is under no such union limitations. Not only that, but as was discussed in chapter one, musical theatre performance within a cabaret is a unique combination of performance within a show, and of that for an audition. Cabaret’s lack of a fourth wall permits the performer to sing *with* an audience rather than to them. This concept results in cabaret performance being ideal for recording, and subsequently being incorporated into the



performer's website. Part of what makes a performance recorded at a cabaret so effective is the presence of an audience. The energy provided by people who were there watching has a tendency to breathe life into the recording, even if they are not actually heard or seen in the video itself. The audience's presence allows the performer to be experienced at an actual performance rather than at a staged rehearsal. It is for these reasons that a performer should spend whatever part of their budget is necessary to procure a quality videographer. If an actor has put in the amount of time, effort, and money to build and produce a quality cabaret, then they should demand that the recording of that event be held to the same high quality standard.

To ensure that an audience can provide the energy needed to support a recording, an actor must first attract an audience to attend the event and experience the fruits of his or her hard labor. However, it is not enough to simply get the "butts in the seats." Our objective from the outset has been to give a performer an advantage in building a career in the performing arts. Therefore, a performer is tasked with getting the "right" audience to attend. As a result, the cabaret's final expense will be in the marketing of their show. Performer Hector Coris offers this take on hiring a publicist:

*Personally, I've never hired a publicist to promote my work, but I have worked alongside them in the professional theatre and cabaret community. It's expensive and—in my opinion—nebulous. If you have the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars to gamble with, then have at it (qtd. in Williams 118).*

Fortunately, marketing is significantly easier (and cheaper) than it was before the evolution of social media. Simply having a Facebook and Twitter account are not

enough. However, a performer can use these forums (as well as Instagram, LinkedIn, and others) to build interest well in advance of the performance of their cabaret. Networking socially through the internet will likely yield a good portion of a performer's potential audience. Unfortunately, the respondents will likely not be in the position to further the performers career—at least not directly. That does not mean that they are not valuable audience members—quite the opposite. It is vital that a performer (especially a professional newcomer) have a large and vocal contingent of family and friends in the audience. In effect, a performer needs some “ringers” to yell, scream, and applaud at every opportunity. An overall positive response from the crowd will favorably frame the performance for those attending that *do* have the ability to further the performer's career. Also, most performers feed off of positive feedback—it encourages them to relax, and be at their best. Finally, the energy from a zealous crowd will come across on the video discussed earlier.

While having an online presence is essential, it is not a substitute for having something tangible to help market a cabaret. A performer should still invest in print media—specifically a quality postcard. Designing and reproducing a suitable postcard is much easier and more cost effective than it was even ten years ago. When designing their postcard, a performer could call in one of the favors we discussed earlier, or they could simply do it themselves. “In the cabaret world, your show postcard or flyer is your best business card” (Williams 121). Once the design is finalized a performer should order ample hard copies, as well as having a digital copy available to be emailed and displayed on social media. A performer should distribute copies to every talent agent and casting director in town. If a performer sends out 50 postcards, they might be lucky

to get one or two responses. But those are one or two people that could potentially be in the position to further the performer's career. In addition to a mass mailing, a performer should be compiling an email list. Every casting director and agency's email is available online. Also, there are cabaret websites, local newspapers, and theatre websites that all have staff that could potentially be interested in attending a cabaret. Once a suitable list of email addresses is assembled, a performer should send out news of their cabaret treated as if it were a press release.

New York City, like many major cities has its own cabaret organization. The *Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs*, or "MAC" was established in 1983 and started accepting performers as members in 1985. MAC serves as an advocate for its members in New York. And it has held their own awards show since 1986. Membership in MAC allows a performer to access their website's "members only" page where a digital postcard can be displayed. Being a member of MAC is also a good resource for researching established cabaret performers. It could be a resource for a newcomer to solicit tips and advice. There are similar organizations in other major cities around the United States, including, but not limited to: the *Boston Association of Cabaret Artists* or "BACA", the *Washington DC Area Cabaret Network*, or "DCCN", the *Chicago Cabaret Professionals*, or "CCP", the *Texas Area Cabaret Artists Association*, *Cabaret West—West Coast Cabaret Association*, *The Pacific Northwest Cabaret Association*, and the *International Cabaret Association*. All of these associations are wonderful resources for a performer who is looking to stage their act in a city that is located within their jurisdiction.

Building an act that is about something important; that demonstrates truth and reveals character is a challenge. But even when that challenge is met, a young performer still has a sizable task in presenting their act to the professional theatre community in a way that increases their chance of success. However, a student can make that task significantly more manageable by doing the lion share of preparation while still within the safe confines of a university theatre department. By the time the student graduates, the foundation of the story telling should already be in place, while allowing for improvement and growth. Having a well-made act in hand will allow a performer to focus on the various tasks associated with producing their act. Having a working knowledge of how to procure a venue, compile assistance (both artistically and technically), and how to market themselves, will assuredly make the resulting product of a higher quality. An actor's confidence in their presentation can also make the producing process far less stressful for a professional newcomer who undoubtedly has enough to worry about.

### Chapter 3: Casting Director Interviews

At this point countless hours and dollars have been invested in our one-person show. We are confident that it is well crafted. It meets the objectives that we put in place—it showcases talent and individuality. It is worth seeing. In addition, we have investigated tirelessly how best to present our act—both within the university setting and at the professional level. We have budgeted wisely, and spent judiciously. We have come up with a smart marketing plan—one that targets directors, casting directors, agents and producers: all who could potentially provide positive influence in a performers career. And we have painstakingly recorded all of our efforts on video and in print, to maximize the potential benefits of our efforts. We have done all our work. We have done everything we could do. Only one question remains: *Does it work?*

As part of my research I interviewed six of the top casting directors in New York City. The questions were framed so to test my hypothesis regarding the value of cabaret preparation at the university level. I asked for feedback regarding the value of cabarets in finding talent; whether cabaret skills translate into audition skills, and whether presenting a quality cabaret could give an advantage to a young performer. I asked thirteen questions in all, but every query was aimed at evoking a subjective answer to our initial question: *Does it work?*

Following is the list of the casting directors whom I invited to participate in my thesis interview:

- Rachael Hoffman, CSA. Telsey and Company Casting
- Joy Dewing, CSA. Joy Dewing Casting
- Geoff Josselson, CSA. Geoff Josselson Casting
- Jason Styres, CSA. Jason Styres Casting
- Michael Cassara, CSA. Michael Cassara Casting
- Andrea Zee, CSA. Stewart Whitley Casting

All of these casting directors are based out of New York City, and deal primarily with theatrical casting (although they all work with TV and film as well). In the following section I will iterate the thirteen questions asked as well as several of the casting director's responses. Their replies do not constitute a complete list—rather, my goal is to provide an overview and summation of the range of opinions shared.

Question 1:

How many cabarets/one-person shows do you attend per year? For business? By choice?

- *I attend about 12 a year, most of which are for business. Perhaps 1 or 2 of those 12 are for personal entertainment. (Andrea Zee)*
- *Maybe 3-5? Usually it's when an actor I know well and is a friend is doing a one person show/cabaret. (Rachael Hoffman)*

- *5 to 10, but I can't really differentiate between business/entertainment – that line-has been blurry for a long time. (Michael Cassara)*
- *It is hard to differentiate between business and entertainment for me, ha! It is always a bit of both in our line of work. I would say I am at a handful every month. (Jason Styres)*
- *I don't attend cabarets. (Joy Dewing)*

Question 2:

Have you ever called in an actor for an audition after seeing them in a cabaret?

Cast them?

- *Yes, absolutely – many times. (Michael Cassara)*
- *No. (Joy Dewing)*
- *I have. It is a great way of seeing people in a more performative atmosphere (versus the stark lighting and pressure of an audition room). (Jason Styres)*
- *While I have called in several actors to audition after seeing a cabaret of theirs, I have not cast an actor when the first time I've seen them is at that cabaret. I have cast actors and then have gone to their cabaret, but not the other way around. (Andrea Zee)*

Question 3:

Are cabarets generally a good representation of an actor's talent?

- *Yes, I think that cabarets are a great opportunity to showcase an actor's range if the variety of songs is a smart selection. They are only a good representation if you make the best of the time and resources that are available to you. (Andrea Zee)*

- *I think they CAN be... it also allows us casting folks to see a different side of you. A lot of cabarets also incorporate newer material that is less often done in auditions, which is nice. But I think it is important to remember that as anything can be... it could be a double-edged sword. So make sure you are really investing the time into making your performance smart and high-quality. (Jason Styres)*
- *Yes and no. It can be helpful to see a broader expanse of a performer's work and get a stronger sense of their personality, but – depending on the cabaret – it can be limiting in genre and not always show acting skills. (Geoff Josselson)*
- *Yes... Usually. (Rachael Hoffman)*

Question 4:

Are attending cabarets a valid way of finding talent?

- *Valid, yes; but not the best bang for your buck because you can only see one person at a time. (Joy Dewing)*
- *Here's the truth: what I need to do to be able to do my job well is maximize my time. So – seeing ONE person for 60-90 minutes isn't always the best use of my time. By the nature of what I do, I've made an assessment of an actor's skill set within a few minutes of seeing them. So when I'm going to a cabaret, I'm not going to FIND talent. I'm going to support the performer and/or enjoy myself – and if it's the latter of those two, I'm seeing someone of whom I am a fan. I see SO MANY SHOWS (as a Tony Voter, and as well as covering all of the shows Telsey casts on and*



*OFF Broadway, and also covering MY shows when understudies go on, etc.), that going to a cabaret or one-person show is not high on my list of priorities. (Rachael Hoffman)*

- *This is a tricky question, as it is often hard for me to justify spending a whole evening, plus often a cover charge and food/beverage minimum costs, to explore just one actor. This is why actual shows, showcases, and concerts with a variety of actors are often a more appealing way for me to spend my night. That being said, if there is a great buzz around a certain actor that I haven't had time to meet in the audition room, then yes, it is a great way for me to get to know that actor better. (Andrea Zee)*
- *In this day and age, there really isn't a "bad way" to find talent. There are definitely more enjoyable ways, but... I think it does get hard, though, to be out super late or have to spend crazy amounts of money on food/beverage minimums. (Jason Styres)*

Question 5:

Of the cabarets you've attended (especially those performed by newcomers), how was the quality, in general?

- *In general, good quality. (Goeff Josselson)*
- *Most everybody pulls it together pretty well. I would say you (as an artist) should always have folks in your circle who can be the "outside eye"... people whose taste you respect, who also feel safe to let you know when things are going well... and when they aren't. (Jason Styres)*

- *It varies greatly – I've seen extremely polished/well-produced cabarets in top venues, and I've seen shoddily-produced cabarets in tiny little rooms – and, though production values are always nice, they're rarely an indicator to someone's actual talent/ability. (Michael Cassara)*

Question 6:

Do you think mastering the skills needed to perform a cabaret can translate into better audition technique?

- *There's a certain intimacy to the cabaret venue – and the way it requires the performer to build some sort of connection with a (generally nearby) audience. So, in that sense, perhaps the skills are valuable to the auditioning performer. Also, the act of creating a cabaret act often requires in-depth research and study of material/rep – skills that can be extremely useful to someone creating their audition rep. (Michael Cassara)*
- *Maybe? I don't really know. (Joy Dewing)*
- *To be honest, I haven't thought about it. I actually think it's quite a different skill over all. Doesn't mean one can't apply the same tools/skills/craft to both. So, I guess my answer is POSSIBLY. Regardless of that, I think having the skills to be a cabaret performer is VALUABLE. We were required to take a semester of a class in Cabaret at Michigan (where I earned my BFA in Musical Theatre). The class was taught by Joan Morris & William Bolcom – and it was invaluable to learn the art from such legends of the cabaret world. (Rachael Hoffman)*

Question 7:

What do you look for in an actor if you are attending a cabaret?

- *Honestly – at a cabaret, I’m just looking to enjoy myself. (Rachael Hoffman)*
- *I view it as a nice opportunity to know who they are and what they have to say – beyond the basics I might discover in an audition environment. (Michael Cassara)*
- *If they have the personality and voice that I might want to spend a whole evening watching and what genre of music they sing. (Goëff Josselson)*
- *I am looking for variation, the unexpected, and entertainment. I am looking to see a different side of the actor than I normally would. (Andrea Zee)*
- *I try not to “look for” anything specifically. This is a time when we can sit back and allow you to create a narrative about whatever you are wanting to create. Again, the parameters are just different. It is more like attending a lecture hall of sorts... I try to be as open to whatever it is you are trying to create. And then I can use that information to make a decision later on (in regards to a project or the likes). It can also allow me the leverage I need when a team says, “Well, I have never seen this actor do THIS sort of thing.” If your cabaret had that sort of quality in it, then I can say, “You know, they don’t normally do roles with that, but! I saw them do their own show where they did X, Y, and Z.” (Jason Styres)*

Question 8:

What advice would you give a newcomer to NYC who is looking to stage a cabaret?

- *Join MAC and network with other cabaret artists. (Joy Dewing)*
- *You have to have a strong WHY. A reason for doing it. It's a HUGE undertaking and a lot of time/effort. I admire that kind of work/commitment. (Rachael Hoffman)*
- *I might suggest, for starting out, to do shows with friends or other performers you like/admire, so that you can diversify your audience and not have the responsibility of carrying a whole show. (Goeff Josselson)*

Question 9:

How could a newcomer convince you (or any casting director) to attend their cabaret?

- *That is a challenge, as I can be reluctant to commit an entire evening to a cabaret show of a performer I've never heard of and know nothing about. I would suggest, if there were more than one performer in it, it would be more enticing – and if I was able to see any video ahead of time, I'd be more apt to go. (Goeff Josselson)*
- *I think their best bet would be to target Assistants and Associates at casting offices who might have more free time than I do. Because I already spend about 200-250 nights per year in the theatre, I value my nights off, and if I need to meet/see a newcomer, I'll bring them in for an audition where I get to spend a few minutes with them and see how their skill sets fit within the shows I'm casting. (Rachael Hoffman)*
- *It really comes down to timing, availability, etc. But also helping us to avoid the sometimes high costs of them is a great start. (Jason Styres)*

- *Without mincing words- it's difficult. Attention grabbers include citing creative team members that I know or have worked with, a link to a teaser video on what I could expect to see, and noting a specific show that I am casting that you would be right for. (Andrea Zee)*
- *Eh... it's tricky, there are only so many nights in a week. In all honesty, if it's someone I've never encountered, it would have to seem really interesting (i.e. an evening of a favorite composer/writing team, with those folks in attendance, or something like that). If it's someone I know and like, I'd be more inclined to attend, if possible. But, in either instance, getting video footage is a terrific outcome and I'll be much more likely to check that out and forego the opportunity to nurse a flat Diet Coke. I would also make sure they make it EXPLICITLY clear how I can reserve tickets, directly through them, and optimally with both a cover AND drink minimum comped/waived. So often we get invited to things and – though I'm sure I could reach out and they'd be happy to comp me in, they haven't made it extremely clear how to reach them (i.e. direct phone #, e-mail, etc.) and that they're inviting me as their guest, and I don't want to be presumptuous (but I also don't want to pay for it). (Michael Cassara)*
- *It would be very difficult. I barely have enough time to keep up with Broadway shows. Attending an actor's cabaret would not be a good use of my time. (Joy Dewing)*

Question 10:

What are things to avoid when putting together a cabaret?

- *Avoid going on too long. Keep the show at a manageable length. Really think through when you want to say in your patter and transitions. Don't try and show off everything you can do – make sure it feels like a cohesive show and not just you singing from your book. (Geoff Josselson)*

- *It depends... Nothing off-hand.* (Michael Cassara)
- *Don't pander to your friends when it comes to material selection. There is nothing worse than an entire night of feeling like I am on the outside of an "inside" line-up. (I don't want to sit through Michigan's fight song at the end. THERE. I SAID IT.)* (Jason Styres)
- *Being too self-indulgent (remember that you are there to entertain an audience, and not just sing a bunch of songs that you like), a negative attitude (telling stories that are complaining or trash talking in nature, even if you think they're funny), a show that is lacking variety (singing only jazz or only standards).* (Andrea Zee)

Question 11:

Do you think students who learn how to structure and perform a cabaret during their undergraduate studies would be at an advantage upon entering the professional world?

Why?

- *It couldn't hurt – there are so many songwriter showcases, etc. it would be good to have the experience.* (Joy Dewing)
- *I think spending the time in planning and structuring a cabaret show can be a helpful skill in many ways, however I'm not sure it really applies to auditioning and acting in theatre.* (Goeff Josselson)
- *I think it allows you an inside look into what it takes to deal with the business demands, so I always would advocate for that. It also allows you to understand so many of the other moving parts of our business, and provides for a direct connection to your audience (whether they be ticket buyers, directors you want to work with, casting directors you want to become more familiar with, etc.).* (Jason Styres)

- *I could see a case being made that it would add greatly to their autonomy as a performing artist and gets them into the mindset of \*having something to say\* - something that many newly-minted BFA grads are sorely lacking these days. (Michael Cassara)*
- *As with all forms of education, the advantages depend greatly on the quality of the experience. Having a hands on approach will give actors a chance to not only appreciate other aspects of the business, but also non-theatrical jobs such as marketing and hospitality. (Andrea Zee)*
- *I'm not sure. Hopefully yes? In terms of commitment and work ethic and seeing something through, those are all skills that I think work well in the professional world. (Rachael Hoffman)*

Question 12:

Do you enjoy cabarets? Why? Why not?

- *Cabarets are not my preferred type of show. I enjoy the opportunity to see a great variety of actors at the same time, and appreciate a strong story line that a show can provide more than a cabaret. (Andrea Zee)*
- *Yes, when a performer is exciting and wonderful. No, when they're not. (Michael Cassara)*
- *When they are truly done for the sake of creating something – not just as a weird pseudo-publicity stunt. There needs to be a REASON for you putting together a cabaret. It almost needs a full business model... What are you trying to create? Is there a demand for it? Who needs this thing you are trying to create? If you can't answer these sorts of questions, maybe it isn't the right time. (Jason Styres)*
- *No. They're self-indulgent and just not very good. Exception: Patti LuPone, Donna McKechnie, etc. – pros. (Joy Dewing)*

- *Depending on the performer, yes. It can be a great opportunity to get to know a performer and enjoy their take on songs (or hear new material) – as long as it's not too indulgent. (Goeff Josselson)*

Question 13:

Do you use online videos of performers as a tool in casting? If so, would a well-constructed cabaret be an asset for an actor looking for online material to post?

- *Yes, online videos are very important in casting – especially if I haven't seen the actor before. (Goeff Josselson)*
- *Yes. Not necessarily... I wouldn't watch more than a minute or two of it. Often videos from cabaret shows tend to be noisy and there's a lot of audience reaction that detracts from the performance. (Joy Dewing)*
- *I think videos online are valuable, but I try not to let them be limiting. Be aware that everything you have out there can be put into the frame of "evidence..." and sometimes that it is evidence that you are NOT right for a role. You can't control that, really, so just make sure you are making QUALITY work that represents you and the career you want to have. (Jason Styres)*
- *Absolutely. Totally vital part of our process these days, and students graduating without footage are definitely behind their competitors with good footage. (Michael Cassara)*
- *Yes- online videos are a great way to get to know an actor better. I believe that reels and video selections should be precise and to the point, so while an entire cabaret is not going to be useful, a single song selection or a selection of cuts of 3-5 songs is a great way to see an actor in action. (Rachael Hoffman)*



## Chapter 4: Interview Feedback Analysis

After analyzing the responses that these casting directors were generous enough to supply, we have narrowed our focus. We have considered their various views, and are ready to answer the primary question: Does it work? And the answer is: *sort of*.

In the theatre teaching business we are fond of celebrating our student's individuality. I spent the better part of chapter one discussing how best to highlight that uniqueness. A common cliché I often hear is that every performer is like a snowflake—no two being the same. What is often forgotten is that the people sitting on the other side of the table (directors, casting directors, agents, and producers) are snowflakes as well. To that end, I feel certain that if I were to hand this thesis (upon completion) to two separate casting directors, one might find in it valuable input, while the second would discard it in the nearest waste basket at their earliest convenience. From the very first question asked in chapter 3 (regarding the number of cabarets attended annually), the answers ranged from never (Joy Dewing) to a handful every month (Jason Styres). The theatre business is one where “right and wrong” rarely exist. By its nature, it is a business of opinion (and perhaps perspective and personal aesthetic, which means multiplicity and variety). The answers to my questionnaire clearly demonstrated that principle.

However, there were certain areas of discussion that elicited a relative consensus of opinion. Because opinions varied so widely in certain areas of discussion, when I found commonality, it seemed of significant importance. It is therefore, those areas that I would like to highlight and discuss further.

While the casting directors varied greatly on how many cabarets they attend each year, among those that do attend a substantial amount, there was agreement that they have indeed called performers in (ranging from rarely to absolutely) for auditions based on their cabaret performances. Anyone who has spent any amount of time in New York City as an aspiring actor can tell you that getting into the audition room is often half the battle. I think it fair to say that the chance to go in for more auditions makes staging a cabaret worth the effort on its own merits.

I found the answers to question number 7: “What do you look for in an actor if you are attending their cabaret?” to be particularly telling. The way the casting directors answered the question varied markedly. However, to my ear, they were all saying something similar, and indeed something that echoed what was written in chapter two of this thesis. Though none used these exact words, they all seemed to be looking for talent and individuality.

The question that seems to be at the heart of our discussion thus far more than any other is number 11: “Do you think students who learn how to structure and perform a cabaret during their undergraduate studies would be at an advantage upon entering the professional world?” The answers to this question were all similar in their lack of specificity. While the respondents all agreed that learning to build and perform a

cabaret would be helpful, they had trouble identifying why. I think this uncertainty is due to a lack of tangible evidence that a cabaret performance can lead directly to success on the Broadway stage. However, I was bolstered to read that all of the responses indicated that the skills learned in a cabaret class could be beneficial beyond the direct link to obtaining immediate employment. Joy Dewing sighted the possibility of networking with new song writers, for example. Others talked about gaining a better understanding of how the theatre business, and all its various parts work as a whole. Most responders felt that building a cabaret was a good exercise in self-awareness and discipline. I thought Michael Cassara's response was of particular interest when he said, "that it would add greatly to their autonomy as a performing artist and gets them into the mindset of \*having something to say\* - something that many newly-minted BFA grads are sorely lacking these days." The ending portion of the last sentence gives credence to the theory that educating our students in cabaret construction can result in an advantage in the professional sphere.

Perhaps the strongest area of agreement centered around procuring quality video footage of the event. Some casting directors warned of the dangers of relying too heavily on digital evidence, but all agreed it is a necessity. Andre Zee went as far as suggesting that a performer should link a video teaser to the cabaret invitation email that they send out to casting directors. This idea is not only smart, but also supports the theory of building and performing a cabaret while still in college is essential. Michael Cassara echoed that assertion by saying that he believes students graduating without quality footage are at a disadvantage.

There was also a fair amount of agreement between the casting directors on what *not* to do. Almost all of the responders warned against self-indulgence at some point in their answers. This can be problematic when an actor is performing by themselves and about themselves. However, I think it is advice that a performer would be wise to heed. Almost all of the casting directors gave specific ways to avoid being indulgent, and I believe each assessment to be fair. Geoff Josselson urged performers to not make their show too long. I would echo that sentiment, and add if an actor is on the fence regarding whether to keep a song or section of their show, they should almost always error on the side of making the show shorter. Andrea Zee cautioned about being too negative in the narration portion. In this regard, it is good to remember that there is a fine line between demonstrating a struggle to overcome obstacles, and whining about things not going your way. Both Jason Styres and Rachael Hoffman emphasized the importance of having a strong understanding of *why* the cabaret is being performed. They seemed to indicate that if it was being performed simply for its own sake, and with no basis in truth, the show would not have the desired effect.

It became clear to me, after reading all the responses from the various casting directors, that the absolute biggest obstacle facing a novice performer staging a one-person show in New York City is convincing prominent people within the industry to attend. Every responding casting director made it abundantly clear that finding time to attend a cabaret, especially one staged by someone unknown to them, is a huge obstacle. Rachael Hoffman put things in perspective when she sighted that she spends between 200 and 250 nights of her year in the theatre. It is easy to understand why

someone in this position might not want to risk a rare free night on something that might not be worth their time.

Some of those that responded offered possible ideas to help overcome this challenge that went beyond what I have suggested in the marketing section in chapter 2. Both Jason Styres and Michael Cassara, for example, suggested comping special guests (casting directors, agents, etc.) and making it abundantly clear that the costs to them will be minimal or non-existent. Many of the clubs that host cabarets for a low rental fee help make up their costs by charging a two drink minimum from the bar. In New York City, two drinks often cost the same as four drinks anywhere else. “Over the years few situations have changed so drastically as that of the cover charge—in New York they have gotten completely out of hand” (Harrington 58). Comping a casting director’s admission as well as their bar costs could go a long way towards attracting their attendance.

Rachael Hoffman suggested targeting marketing efforts towards assistant and associate employees within a casting office. This thinking is logical not only in that an assistant will likely have more free nights, but also that any assistants may be relative newcomers to New York themselves, and will likely be more eager to search out new talent.

An idea repeated by several casting directors was for an actor to team up with one or more fellow newcomers for a night of performance. Of course, a performance under this guise would no longer be considered a one-person show. However, all the same principles in structuring and presenting a cabaret would be the same—just on a

more limited scale for each performer. While this approach could potentially have drawbacks (sharing the stage and attention with other performers), it does give potential attendees more bang for their buck. It is logical that a casting director who wants to play the odds would be more likely to find talent at a performance featuring four or five actors, than they would one with a single performer.

With regards to staging and performing a cabaret in New York City, the only way to truly answer the question, *does it work*, is first to try, and then see what happens. It is often difficult to predict exactly what circumstances and which connections may lead to a breakthrough in a performer's career. It is usually not until events have played out that the road map to success is made clear in retrospect. It is entirely possible that two casting directors sitting at adjacent tables at the same cabaret could hold completely opposing opinions of the person performing it. It is a business of opinion. Knowing this to be true, a performer only needs one person: one casting director, one director, one agent, or one producer to reach a determination such as: "Hey, that kid's pretty good. I should call them in." If a performer can accomplish that, then all of their hard work will be worth it.

## Chapter 5: Cabaret Story-Telling (In One Semester)

During the spring semester of 2017, I have had the privilege of teaching a class of twelve students at Virginia Commonwealth University that I have affectionately called “Cabaret Story-Telling”. This class has been a truncated version of the class structure described in this thesis. It was initially proposed to the theatre faculty as a class that would be coordinated with this thesis. It was delineated as a class to serve as a theatre elective for BFA theatre majors on a first come, first serve basis, regardless of class year. In an ideal situation, the class would be offered in the fourth year of a four-year musical theatre performance curriculum for BFA musical theatre majors. In these circumstances, students would utilize the work of their first three years as an undergraduate student as building blocks in the cabaret creation process. They would use the fourth year to build their story, pick their songs, and culminate their education with a performance of their 45 to 60-minute one-person show.

As I started to assemble the syllabus for the shortened version of Cabaret Story-Telling, it quickly became clear that a single semester would not afford sufficient time for all twelve students to compose a full length cabaret. A large part of the time spent in class was devoted to song coaching, as I felt it essential that every student be given the opportunity to work on each of their songs a minimum of two times. With these parameters in place, there simply was not enough time for the students to work on more

than three songs each. Knowing this, I set up class with the goal that each of the twelve students would construct a 15 to 20-minute one person show that incorporated three (or possibly four) songs. The semester would culminate with performances over two nights of all the student's cabarets.

Prior to the first day of class, I emailed my students instructing them to bring in a YouTube clip of a cabaret performer or two that they admired. We sat as a group and watched many of their selections over the three-hour class. I used this assignment as an opportunity to assess the students taste in performance, as well as their understanding of what cabaret is, and what it is not. Not surprisingly, most of the students selected clips of well-known Broadway performers singing at open mic events, or shared concerts. In almost every case, their chosen performers showcased their considerable talents—both singing and acting. Their performances did not disappoint in terms of pure vocal ability, and stage presence. However, few of the clips chosen were from a true cabaret—meaning a song or story from a full length one-person show. As a result, few of the clips viewed were particularly helpful in demonstrating how to showcase individuality. We, as an audience were not given any idea of what was truly important to the performer, or what they believed to be true. As a result, there was nothing in the performances that revealed character.

As part of my class preparation I researched material for information that I hoped would give my students a thorough understanding of my approach to the building of an act. I poured over as much reading on the subject as I could, including several of the references cited in this thesis. Hard as I tried, however, I could not find any reference



that expressed my thinking cogently. My solution was to assign the first draft of the first chapter of this thesis as a reading. Students were to read the entire chapter (omitting the section on writing exercises) prior to our second class meeting.

When our second class convened we reviewed the reading, and addressed any areas that seemed unclear. I was gratified to learn that the students found the writing to be comprehensible, and the theories presented to be of value. We then put into practice all of the writing exercises outlined in chapter one. I intentionally omitted the exercises from their reading assignment so that when we undertook them in class, their thinking would be organic. The exercises yielded immediate results, with many students summoning ideas on how they might structure their act. After each writing exercise we would go around the room and share our ideas.

This in-class discussion yielded benefits that I had not anticipated. The concepts that each student had regarding their own show were then subject to comment and collaboration amongst their classmates. In essence, each student was given their own “think tank” in which to let their ideas ruminate. This structure allowed each student’s ideas to form more fully at a much faster rate than they likely would have in an individual setting. An additional benefit of having a classroom of collaborators, at that early stage, was that there was substantial brainstorming regarding song choices for each member in class. Many students suggested songs that neither I, nor the person whose show was being discussed had thought of. We left the second class period with every student having a basic foundation on how to structure their show, and at least five or six song choices that could potentially serve them well.

Once the foundation was set on how the class would be organized, and how students would go about building their respective shows, class time started to flow naturally. We utilized most days coaching various songs, and discussing how to best incorporate them into a student's narrative structure. Invariably, most student's found that their stories developed and their themes became more well defined as they progressed through the semester.

In my teaching of Cabaret Story-Telling, I have learned that the students do indeed find value in creating their own show. Moreover, their response has gone beyond what I initially envisioned. The class has become a useful tool for the students in terms of self-exploration. During their theatre studies in college they have been learning how to tell *a* story, but rarely how to tell *their* story. I've found that the focus on unique individualism has really been liberating for the students, especially those getting ready to graduate.

## Conclusion

This thesis endeavors to validate the study of cabaret, that is to say the construction and performance of a one-person show that incorporates music, as an integral component of a musical theatre major's training as they pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. This training will provide students with the tools for creating and performing a cabaret both within the university setting, as well as the professional world. Several young professional hopefuls decide to present cabarets or one-person performance pieces within their first year after graduation as a means of marketing themselves to casting directors, directors, agents, and producers. The majority of these performances are constructed and performed without any guidance regarding how to do so. As a result, many are poorly done. The failure of these performances often has little to do with the level of talent of the performer. Having a system in place that can aid in the structuring of a story and provide a strategic means of choosing songs that effectively showcases their talent as well as their individuality would undoubtedly give a student an advantage in garnering favorable attention from those with the influence to help their professional career in the future.

Beyond the skills learned that could potentially benefit a young performer's career directly, there are several other advantages to studying story-telling through cabaret.

*Of course, there are advantages to cabaret that have nothing to do with its*

*financial rewards. It is the best teacher and the best training ground for any performer. Because you have to do it all yourself, you can learn every aspect of the business. You have complete artistic control...*" (Harrington 27).

More and more, young professionals are being called upon to create their own work. That is to say, they are making the decision to generate their own opportunities professionally, whether it be in live performance, making their own films, or producing content online. The creation of a cabaret forces a student to do in depth self-exploration. It requires, not only discipline, but also ingenuity and creative thinking to build something out of nothing. Often times, recent college graduates struggle to adapt to the professional world—particularly those that majored in theatre. It takes a great deal of determination and self-confidence to continually pursue a career that rejects individuals ten times more often than it accepts them. Studying cabaret can teach a student how to manage the inevitable rejection that is part of being a professional actor. A student's ability to effectively tell not just a story, but *their* story can be of tremendous value. This holds true even if that student becomes a professional who chooses self-produced work that turns out to be something other than cabaret.

The diversity of the questionnaire responses from various professional casting directors pointed out an interesting actuality. Although their opinions varied widely on the value of performing cabarets as a marketing tool, they all agreed that many self-made performance pieces are being produced in New York City with the intent of further career potential. And while the number of cabarets attended also varied greatly amongst the responders, most admitted (sometimes begrudgingly) that they do indeed attend cabarets and are often looking for talent.

This thesis is intended to illustrate the need for more comprehensive training in the field of building and performing a cabaret. The construction of a show performed by a single person that should last between 45 and 60-minutes, and can encompass anywhere between eight and fifteen songs, requires a minimum of two semesters of study to accomplish with competency.

When a young professional is trying to make it as an actor in New York City there is no telling when an opportunity might present itself. A common mistake young performers make is that once an opportunity is missed, they assume it will come again. Personal experience and anecdotal verification teaches us that this is not necessarily the case. That one opportunity could be as random as running into someone on the street, or as fortuitous as understudying someone who gets sick the night that the “right” agent is in the audience. That one opportunity could also present itself when a casting director is dragged to a cabaret by their friend—a cabaret that they had no interest in attending. That cabaret could be our student’s cabaret. Why not help them be prepared?

It takes courage to get on a train headed for New York City. It takes even more courage to get off. Once you do, you just need to look around, and you will likely see 99 other fresh faces full of the same hopes and dreams that you have. If you wait around for a while you will see another 100 people get off of the train. And another 100 hundred people get off of the train. And another 100 people. And another 100 people... How many of those people are trying to make a career for themselves in New York City?

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## Appendix A

### Sample Syllabus

**Fig. A.1.** Below is the syllabus I used for my cabaret class. It covers all techniques, as well as performance schedules. VCU supplementary material has been removed due to relevance.

### INTRO TO PERFORMANCE: CABARET STORY TELLING

Spring 2017

THEA 491

PAC Room B72, F 1:00 – 4:00

Instructor: Timothy Fitz-Gerald

Email: [Fitzgeraldta@VCU.edu](mailto:Fitzgeraldta@VCU.edu)

[Office Hours—by appointment \(Shafer 207\)](#)

#### **Required Text**

Fitz-Gerald, Tim; various handouts from *Cabaret Story Telling*

Williams, Gary; Various handouts from *Cabaret Secrets*

Harrington, Bob; Various handouts from *The Cabaret Artist's Handbook*

#### **Required Daily Materials**

-Notebook, writing utensils, audition binder, sheet music.

\*Students are also required to have reliable access to a printer!

#### **Course Description**

This class will help student artists to create a solo musical cabaret performance or “one person-show”. Students will be encouraged to approach musical theater performance as actors first, and to embrace the concept of telling the story. At the end of the 15 weeks, all students will be expected to have thoroughly prepared and performed three different solo songs, of varying styles and mood. The three solos should have the potential to remain in the student’s repertoire for future auditions or performance. In addition, the three songs chosen will fit into a larger

theme or narrative that can support a through line. The course will culminate in a 15 to 20 minute performed cabaret of the student's making.

### **Grading Breakdown**

Participation/ Discipline	30%
Written Work	10%
Performance	60%

### **Learning Objectives**

- To gain experience performing songs in front of an audience
- To apply acting philosophies to musical theater and cabaret
- To develop an understanding of cabaret structure
- To strengthen audition technique
- To expand vocal range and authority
- To develop a desire and methodology for a strong work ethic
- To apply methods for effective “cutting” of music
- To expand student's song repertoire within their audition books
- To learn an effective vocal warm up

### **Written Work**

All students will be required to submit a three-page written analysis of the main stage musical presented during the spring semester. You must attach a ticket stub as proof you saw the show. All papers must be typed in 12—point font, double-spaced, and stapled together. Pick one song from the show (*Spamalot*) and create a fictional cabaret plot around it. The plot doesn't have to be fully realized. Rather, it should read like a 3-page “treatment” that could be pitched to a producer. Please use the guidelines discussed in class.

### **Attendance Policy**

Musical Theater, and Cabaret Story Telling in particular is most effective in the presence of an audience (your fellow students). Therefore, attendance is mandatory. Students are allowed a total of one (1) unexcused absence. *Each additional absence will result in the loss of a full letter grade.* Two tardies (more than 5 minutes late) qualify as one (1) absence. Each additional tardy results in the loss of half a letter grade. If you arrive more than 15 minutes late, you will be counted absent. You are responsible for all work missed due to an absence. In case of emergency or illness, please notify me by email at least one (1) hour prior to class.



## **Final Project: Two Nights of Cabaret**

Wednesday and Thursday, May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>

7:30pm Shafer Street Playhouse

- Six students will perform their finished cabaret each night

### **Classroom Policies**

- **Late work:** All assignments must be completed on time. Any assignment not turned in at the start of class on the date it is due, will be considered late. Assignments turned in late will be deducted one full letter grade for each class period past its due date.
- **Plagiarism:** Any plagiarism will result in an automatic fail grade for the course. No exceptions.
- **Cell phone etiquette:** Please turn your cell phones OFF before entering the classroom. This class is performance oriented and I expect everyone to show their fellow classmates the respect they deserve.
- **Food/drink:** No food is allowed. Water is allowed (and encouraged) in a CLOSED container.
- **Professionalism:** Students found to be intruding on the learning process of their classmates with behavior deemed unprofessional by the instructor will be dismissed from class and will have their participation grade directly affected.

### **Grading Scale**

A—91- 100

B—81- 90

C—71- 80

D—61-70

F—60 and below

### **How Papers Are Graded**

- **A paper:** Well-written and organized; clear with nice transitions. No grammar or spelling errors. No slang or social media terms.
- **B paper**  
Fluid; well-organized; articulate; strong conclusion; well-supported. May have some minor grammar or spelling errors.
- **C paper**  
Clear thesis statement but paper does not support it; paper dwindles out at the end without conclusion; choppy, does not flow.
- **D paper**  
Typically, less than the minimum required pages; basically plot summaries or text regurgitation; a large number of grammar and spelling errors; unorganized and difficult to read.

# WEEKLY SCHEDULE

- Jan 20                      Syllabus Overview  
                                    Discuss classroom etiquette  
                                    Hand out reading  
                                    **Assignment Due:**  
                                    Bring in a Cabaret performer you enjoy
- Jan 27                      Teach Vocal Warm up  
                                    Discussion: What a cabaret is/ isn't  
                                    Writing exercises  
                                    **Assignment Due:**  
                                    Have read Tim's pages 1-16
- Feb 3                        Discussion: Story themes  
                                    Song choices  
                                    Pick first Song  
                                    **Assignment Due:**  
                                    Lists of all song possibilities and story themes
- Feb 10                      First song showing, 1 through 6  
                                    **Assignment Due:**
- Have an outline for story with any ideas for special talents to be incorporated
  - Categorized Song List
- Feb 17                      First Song showing, 7 through 12  
                                    **Assignment Due:**
- Second song choice
  - Have your "Something Important"
- Feb 24                      First Song Showing, 1 through 12  
                                    **Assignment Due:**
- Know what you "Believe to be True"
  - Know how your truth reveals self
- Mar 3                        TBA  
                                    **Assignment Due:**
- Third Song Choice
  - Rough Draft with songs included for editing

Mar 10

**SPRING BREAK!!!**

Mar 17

Second Song Showing, 1 through 6

**Assignment Due:**

All songs Finalized

***MARCH 24th is LAST DAY TO WITHDRAW with a mark of "W"***

Mar 24

Second Song Showing, 7 through 12

**Assignment Due:**

Second draft of script

Mar 31

Second Song Showing, 1 through 12

**Assignment Due:**

Final Draft of Script

Apr 7

Space for your show/ selling your show /rehearsing you show

Third Song Showing, 1 through 6

Apr 14

Putting it together: transitions

Third Song Showing, 7 through 12

**Assignment Due:**

*Spamalot* analysis paper

Apr 21

Third Song Showing, 1 through 12

Apr 28

In Class Rehearsal/Special Problems

May 5

In Class rehearsal/Special Problems

Class wrap up

## Appendix B

### Student Feedback

**Fig. B. 1.** Below is feedback from students upon completion of THEA 491: *Cabaret Story-Telling*, at Virginia Commonwealth University. Students were asked to respond to two questions.

Question 1: *What is one takeaway you have had as a result of taking this class regarding your own work?*

- The musical theater cabaret class has given me many tools to utilize in my future work. One thing I found to be extremely helpful, as a performer, is learning having the confidence in my own individuality. Creating your own cabaret gives you the freedom to do anything you want and to do work you truly love. More often than not as actors, we have to fight to bring our own selves to characters and it is such a refreshing feeling to be able to push all of the aside and just be yourself. I also believe that creating your own cabaret and finding yourself helps for future work in that you are able to bring more of yourself to your characters and have the confidence in doing so.
- The most important thing I have taken away from this class is how to bring myself into my work, but not in the “be yourself” way that is always brought up but never explained. Writing this cabaret has forced me to examine how I can make these songs unique to my story. In that exploration I figured out a lot about who I am and how that fits into the work that I do. I also think I now have a solid 20 minute of proof of what I do.
- This class definitely help me with my individuality. I was able to really showcase myself, and my talent. I think as a whole I really learned how to be a better storyteller. In terms of my story, but the musical pieces I chose as well. This class pushed me to go further with my acting, and really helped me express myself.

- At one point during this semester I really began to consider what the difference was between a performer and an actor. I realized that my approach to the cabaret class was that it was a performance. But during class when I would sing and then be given notes and especially when I would sit and listen to the notes other students were given I began to see that when singing these songs, we are acting. We are telling a story. Prior to this class I never considered the idea that musical theatre is about discoveries, and I think that concept has helped me a lot.
- I would say one take away I had from the class was making a 1% change in a performance, makes a 100% difference to the audience. Along with Each time my statements lead to a new question, it needs to land on it and needs to be a bigger shift (letting the answers to my questions inform my next question).
- Tim Fitz-Gerald's cabaret storytelling class gave me new insight into dynamics. The biggest takeaway will be the importance of playing the opposite by not dwelling on the mood of the song. The emotion will come through, if it's there. Playing an action that differs from what the character is truly feeling creates dynamics.
- I've learned a lot about finding my best self and showing that off. I often focus too much on what I should do or what something should sound or look like. The beauty of a solo cabaret is that I simply get to be myself on stage, so there's no need for me to edit myself out. I've learned a lot about speaking my mind and not being afraid.
- One takeaway I have from class about me as a performer is, although it is scary to do a one man show, it is possible, and I am good enough to do it. With your guidance Tim, you motivated me to throw away all my fears of the cabaret and it made my process so much more calm and easier.
- This class has helped me become more comfortable with bringing more of myself to my work and not trying to manufacture a performance that I think is worth giving to others. Being able to construct a piece that is about me and my life and my experience has given me the context to know that what I think and feel and

how I think and feel is compelling enough fodder for an honest performance.

- One takeaway I've had from this class as a performer is that it's okay to be you. I know that sounds corny and ridiculous, but I think it's such a huge deal in this industry. I believe that this is a great class to take in a college setting because I feel like in drama school, actors can lose sight of why they're doing this and what they have to offer, and I believe that this class could reaffirm it for them as it did for me.

Question 2: *What is one takeaway you have had as a result of taking this class from observing one of your classmates?*

- Taking a class like this should be required for all students seeking to find a career in musical theater. It is rare as performers that we are able to be the writers, directors, and producers of our own work and it is such a fulfilling experience to be able to create a piece and perform it all on your own. The process of learning how to tell stories through both songs and monologues has been extremely helpful. Taking these storytelling skills and applying them to my own work will only improve my ability to show clearer intentions and goals in whatever I am doing.
- I have also learned a bit about how to “direct myself” from watching my classmates work. Like being able to see people get and take notes and seeing how those apply to me. Also, switching between a director brain and an actor brain so that I can create a cohesive piece. I found I could tell when people in the class had considered the whole picture and also taken on the role of director and when they hadn't. Also, I learned how hard it is to fake an emotional connection to a story or a fact, and it is really evident when a story simply doesn't fit.
- My classmates each had varying levels of experience, and understanding. I think Corrine's ability to tell stories is phenomenal. She's able to make it personal without getting into too many details.

- Something that has really improved as a result of this class is my storytelling ability. I learned from the notes you would give other students that an audience cares about relevant details that move the plot forward. Exposition is unnecessary. So when I would share my stories in class I very much considered that and I believe that is why my stories have been pretty good.
- It was said to Shelby by you, sometimes you don't need to do anything more than think and sing your thoughts in the music-it will get through (we don't always have to do movement).
- Cabaret story-telling has amplified my understanding of acting and performing completely. Discoveries and decisions are paramount to keeping the material fresh. The illusion of the first time is especially important for musical storytelling because what you sing must seem spontaneous.
- My biggest takeaway from my classmates has been to trust the process. Preparation is key, but so is accepting that something won't happen right away. I've watched a lot of my classmates allow their nerves to get in the way of being their true selves.
- One takeaway I have from class about my classmates is that everyone has a different story, and it is so prevalent in hearing everyone's cabaret. I'm so proud of my friends, and it takes a lot of courage to go up there and talk about yourself and sing. My classmates definitely inspire me to keep going.
- I've seen Marcelo in both an acting class setting and this class setting. It has been very inspiring for me to see how he has been able to blossom in his performance through just allowing more of himself in the work. I have watched him restrict himself before, and here, in this class, has been the most unrestrained and impressive work I have seen him do. Therefore, I know all of this work must be worth something great. Marcelo is one of those people who can make a beautiful career out of his personality. This class has pulled more of his personality into his performing. It's simple math to me.
- A takeaway I've had from my classmates is honestly just seeing a piece of them. Again, so much of theatre and drama school is maintaining an image, and

staying 'active' within the department, but seeing everybody in this class, I feel as if I'm actually getting an idea of who they are, and what they're trying to figure out. It's humbling and relatable, and I can only sit in awe at those I get the honor of working amongst.



## Vita

Timothy Alton Fitz-Gerald was born October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1974 in Albany, New York. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre from Syracuse University. As a performer, Timothy has appeared professionally in several productions around the country, and created the role of “Chris Bell” in the original Broadway production of *The Boy from Oz*. He has directed or associate directed several productions, including *The Wicked Rocky Horror Show*, which was a benefit concert produced with the cooperation of the first National Tour of *Wicked*. The show raised over \$200 thousand dollars for Broadway Cares/ Equity Fights AIDS. Timothy served as an instructor for Acting I and II, Directing II, Voice and Speech, Acting for Web Content, Effective Speech, and Cabaret Story-Telling at Virginia Commonwealth University, and has taught workshops and master classes on audition technique and musical theater performance all over the country. He lives in Richmond, Virginia with his wife Brenda Hamilton and daughter Maira Fitz-Gerald.