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What do you mean, just speak it?

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What do you mean, just speak it?

Musical theatre performers should always consider the speaking of the text as a means by which to eventually sing the song. **David Henson, former Director of London College of Music and currently Associate Professor in Performance, outlines some ways in which students can begin to interrogate the text of the songs they are performing, creating the synergy between acting and singing which defines musical theatre.**

When the singing student is asked to speak the text of a song the immediate response is often, ‘What do you mean just speak it?’ (whatever ‘just’ might mean).

Despite many years in the teaching studio it still dismays me that when asked to speak a sung text, the student often:

- speaks the words in the rhythm of the song
- recites the words with little feeling or involvement
- speaks with little understanding of vocal variety, punctuation, phrasing and thought

The frequency of responses like this demonstrate how essential it is for the performer to first be an actor engaging with the text, before considering the musical structure and form of the song.

Here are some ideas you might like to suggest to the student to consider while speaking a text:

- Speak the words as if you want to speak them
- Give the words a ‘life’ of their own
- Enjoy what you are saying, to make the text meaningful to you
- Act out the words as if speaking to someone
- Think about why you want to speak these words
- Think about where you are — who are you speaking to?

All these suggestions will gather a variety of responses, and after time the message within the text will be explored in some detail. The most important thing to remember at this stage is that whatever the response to the task, something is being understood about the lyric being spoken and that is a positive.

Once the song has been sung, much of the creative work has been shelved and the product, rather than the process, has become uppermost in the performer's mind. By interrogating the text in detail before introducing the score, the performer will recognise the creative demands placed upon them, and will understand that exciting moment of transition where their personalised text becomes 'the song', created by another creative force — the composer/lyricist.

You can be assured that by being the actor and speaking the text, feeling the weight and structure of each word, the text will come to life. Because of the textual journey undertaken by the performer, their unique contribution and creativity will come through in the final sung performance. By understanding the thoughts within the text and then working with the final musical score, the various conflicts and resolutions within the phrasing and melodic patterns will challenge and continue to keep the work alive and interesting in performance. In

contrast to the actor, who uses text and words to express the ideas and natural rhythms within the spoken dialogue to communicate character and an emotional journey, as musical theatre performers we should understand the importance of both acting and singing — the synergy where text and score feed off each other, creating a unique and exciting art form.

Here are some tasks you might consider using with your students. For this article I have used *I'm Still Hurting*, which is included in the Grade 8 handbook, but I hope you consider using these ideas on any piece with your students, and see if anything magical happens... I truly hope so!

“Once the song has been sung, much of the creative work has been shelved and the product, rather than the process, has become uppermost in the performer's mind.”

Record a version of the song before carrying out any of the tasks below

Sing your version of the lyric with accompaniment. Record it and store it away for several weeks. Do not refer to this performance in any way! Now complete the following tasks on text work before returning to the original performance.

After each task write down

- all of your discussions with your tutor about the task
- the personal thoughts that you have had while completing the task
- any discoveries you have made after completing the task

Taking notes at the end of each task will ensure you are also well prepared for the Discussion component, particularly at the higher grades.

Task 1

Write the lyric out as a continuous prose passage, deleting all the capital letters and punctuation:

For example:

jamie is over and jamie is gone jamie's decided it's time to move on jamie has new dreams he's building upon and i'm still hurting jamie arrived at the end of the line jamie's convinced that the problems are mine jamie is probably feeling just fine and i'm still hurting what about lies jamie what about things that you swore to be true what about you jamie what about you

What significant features did you notice as you were writing out this lyric as prose?

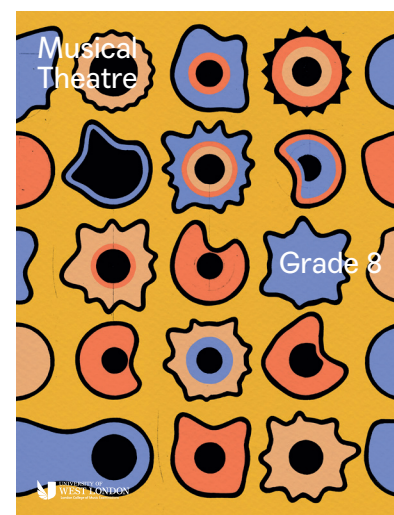
I'm Still Hurting, opening lyrics:

Jamie is over and Jamie is gone
 Jamie's decided it's time to move on
 Jamie has new dreams he's building upon
 And I'm still hurting

Jamie arrived at the end of the line
 Jamie's convinced that the problems are mine

Jamie is probably feeling just fine
 And I'm still hurting

What about lies, Jamie?
 What about things
 That you swore to be true
 What about you, Jamie
 What about you...



Still Hurting, from *The Last Five Years*, is included in our Music Theatre Handbook: Grade 8

Task 2

Read the passage out loud as a piece of continuous prose.

1. Read it FAST
2. Read it VERY SLOWLY
3. Read it VERY FAST
4. Read it with every word spoken in detail — with very clear articulation
5. Whisper the passage FAST
6. Whisper the passage SLOWLY
7. Read the passage at a variety of speeds, making sure you speak every word clearly and precisely

A word of warning: Always avoid trying to make sense of the thoughts and words at this stage.

Task 3

As you speak the text through, mark with a [/] where you pause.

For example:

Jamie is over and Jamie is gone Jamie's decided it's time to move on / Jamie has new dreams he's building upon and I'm still hurting / Jamie arrived at the end of the line / Jamie's convinced that the problems are mine / Jamie is probably feeling just fine and I'm still hurting / what about lies Jamie / what about things that you swore to be true what about you Jamie what about you

1. Why did you pause at the moments you indicated?
2. What were you thinking and why?
3. Was it a habitual pause or were you 'out of breath'?
4. Repeat the exercise several times until you are happy with your own pauses (thinking moments).
5. How many times is the name Jamie repeated in this section? What does this repetition communicate to you?
6. How and where are you indicated in the song lyric? How do you feel about this?

Task 4

Aim to put in your own simple punctuation. Use only commas, full stops, question marks and exclamation marks. Now speak the text obeying your own punctuation marks.

For example:

*Jamie is over and Jamie is gone,
Jamie's decided it's time to move on!
Jamie has new dreams he's building upon.
And I'm still hurting!*

*Jamie arrived at the end of the line,
Jamie's convinced that the problems are mine.*

*Jamie is probably feeling just fine!
And I'm still hurting?*

What about lies, Jamie?

What about things that you swore to be true?

What about you, Jamie?

What about you?

Task 5

Speak the lines as if:

1. Talking to a friend in a cafe
2. Talking with someone on the telephone
3. Whispering the thoughts to your pet dog
4. Talking to yourself in the mirror
5. Talking to a member of the family
6. Talking to Jamie

Some questions that might arise from this work could be:

- Are there some difficult moments in expressing the lyric?
- How do you deal with the final section of text above?
- What changes do you notice taking place within your vocal delivery in each of the above scenarios?
- Where do the changes happen in each of the above scenarios?
- Can you speak this text to the character Jamie? If not, why not?

Task 6

Speak your punctuated finalised dramatic monologue and notice the vocal energy when you speak each line.

Consider the following ideas as you speak the lyric:

1. Do you have different thoughts?
2. Do you have different reasons for speaking the text.
3. What has happened to you that makes you speak these thoughts out loud?
4. How do you find the energy to speak the first line?
5. Where are you?
6. What has made you start thinking like this?
7. What has happened before you are able to speak these words?

NOW, START TO WORK WITH THE VOCAL SCORE.

Task 7

Take the first section of the text and speak it over the musical accompaniment.

Consider the following ideas as you work through this exercise:

1. What do you notice about the timing of each phrase?
2. Do you use different speaking qualities in any of the phrases?
3. Did you note any use of vocal variety in any of the phrases?
4. Is there a gradual development of emotional response in this lyric? If not, why not?
5. How do you feel about the phrase "And I'm Still Hurting"?
6. Have you noticed anything about the melody for each phrase?
7. How are you going to make your ideas come to life when you sing each phrase?
8. Do you feel any tension between yourself and the music score?
9. What can you do about this tension?

(Maybe nothing — don't worry!)

10. How might you resolve this feeling of tension?
11. Compare your original phrasing to the phrasing of the composers: Are they different / the same? Does this matter?

Task 8

Listen to each phrase and clap the rhythm and speak the words at the same time.

Consider the following ideas as you work through this exercise:

- What do you notice in your personal interpretation of the lyric?
- Did you have any difficulty speaking and clapping the rhythm at the same time?

Keep going until the lyric and rhythm are absolutely perfect. Now sing each phrase without clapping the rhythm. Sing the first section using all the information you have gained throughout this process.

- How does it feel to sing these lyrics now?

Task 9

Sing and record the version you have worked on over the past few weeks.

Compare this with the first version you recorded before undertaking these tasks. Aim to discover the differences and similarities in your performance work. In addition to listening to the two performances, ask yourself:

- How do I now feel about singing this song, compared with the first time?

The intention of this work is to celebrate and enjoy the power of dialogue between tutor and student within the intimate learning environment of the teaching studio. These tasks will hopefully give all participants a realisation as to the synergy between acting and singing. It is hoped that a meaningful dialogue will encourage a sensitivity to the interpretation of text. The unlocking of ideas and thoughts will hopefully become an exciting and creative part of the total process.

David is currently doing research on the impact of dialogue within the learning environment and would value any feedback or observations that you might discover whilst embracing this work, so please do get in touch.

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