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Nicole Stinton  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# Monologuing the music: A new actor training practice for new times

Nicole Stinton<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The myth that musical theatre actors cannot act is alive and well. Director, musician and lecturer Dr Zachary Dunbar asserts that the industry frequently chooses between actors who cannot sing or singers who cannot act (2016, 71). Popular blogger WestEndProducer purports that the musical theatre ‘twirley’ is often considered as a jack of all trades but a master of none (2017). In conservatoire style training, could traditional triple-threat skill-focused courses include more holistic educative approaches that integrate the three disciplines of acting, singing and dancing and, longer-term, contribute to dispelling the aforementioned myth? Whilst this question cannot be answered without the passing of time, contemporary conservatoire-based training seems to be moving in the right direction with classes in scene-to-song and acting-through-song. In a new Musical Theatre course at The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), we have also adopted several other integratory methods to promote more authenticity from our students during performance. These include firstly embedding discipline-specific content within classes that are not normally associated with that discipline, secondly students writing original music theatre works and finally enabling them to monologue the music, not just the lyrics. This last technique is an acting, not a singing, tool that enables students to rigorously explore *what* is being said (the verbal text), as much as *how* it is being said (the musical text).

## Keywords

Musical Theatre; Music Theatre; Triple-threat; Acting; Monologue the Music; Monologue the Lyrics; Conservatoire Training

When I started my actor training over twenty-five years ago, I quickly discovered there was a stigma attached to me simply by merit of my course of study. That is because I was training in musical theatre I was not considered a ‘real’ actor, whilst the real actors were those doing the straight acting course. Upon graduating I quickly learnt that this perception also permeated the entertainment industries. In fact, I remember a conversation that I had with an agent back in the 1990s who recommended I not list my

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✉ Nicole Stinton: n.stinton@ecu.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University, Australia

music theatre credits, nor skills, on my CV if I was going for a film and television role, because it was most likely I would then not be given an audition. Ever since I have worked hard, both in my professional and education practices, to debunk this myth. I have pursued any means I could find to generate work built on believable and authentic acting, whether the actor was speaking, singing or dancing. Two and a half years ago, when I first started my PhD research, I was disheartened to read in an article by music theatre educator Dr Zachary Dunbar that directors and educators are still often having to choose between ‘actors who can’t sing’ and ‘singers who can’t act’ (2016, 71). A fortnight later I came across a Blog article by WestEndProducer who purported that the perception of the musical theatre artist as a ‘twirley’, one who is often considered as a jack of all trades but a master of none, still virulently permeates the UK theatre industry (2017). Then, rather than dismiss this perception as a myth as I had done since my twenties, I began to actively investigate what else might I do to be a better director and teacher of music theatre, one that helps actors to be as believable and authentic on stage as they possibly can be.

By the end of 2017, I had become confident that today’s music theatre training programs needed to expand upon the traditional triple-threat conservatoire-style training that myself, and many of my teaching colleagues and industry peers experienced as young adults: I believe that training today would benefit from a far more holistic and integrated approach to skill development and experiential learning. Moving forward I advocate that program design shifts away from curricula that rely heavily on teaching acting, singing and dancing in separate classes as independent skills that are almost mutually exclusive to one another. In saying that, I certainly do not mean that the disciplines of acting, singing and dancing should not be taught to students, nor that they should not be taught at least some of the time in autonomous sessions to students, but that much is to be gained if educators can rethink, rework and/or expand the methods of each skill acquisition. For the purposes of this article to support this notion I will draw largely on anecdotal observations from my teaching practice and rehearsals made over the last two years, as well as some data gathered from formal workshops that were conducted specifically for the purposes of research in this area. I argue that the dominant practice of using theatrical productions as the main vehicle for integration is no longer enough to meet the demands of theatre-with-music industries. That by taking a more holistic approach to musical theatre actor training, and building in multiple methods of integration across the curriculum, future industries will not have to choose ‘actors who can’t sing’ over ‘singers who can’t act’, but simply great ‘actors’ who happen to sing really well.

The idea of integration in actor training is, of course, far from new. There are many innovative music theatre educators who are not only implementing, but also actually creating effective contemporary acting practices that embrace a unified skill approach, especially in melding acting with musicianship: Dr Paul Barker in the Masters program at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London is teaching students to proactively consider the music when making character and song interpretation choices; author Jeremy Harrison in the Actor-Musicianship program at Rose Bruford in London is enabling actors to characterise and express meaningfully through instrumental as well as vocal sound; Professor Joe Deer, Chair at the Creative Arts Center at Wright

State University in the USA, is assisting students to listen for clues in the music when acting a song through a range of diverse activities, as seen in his co-authored book *Acting in Musical Theatre* (Deer & Dal Vera, 2016). At the Victorian College of the Arts in Australia, the new Head of Music Theatre Tyran Parke is working with students on being more responsive to the multiple texts of a song (the verbal, musical and physical texts) in their interpretations.

In my own teaching practice, I have asked, *What can I borrow from such specialists and then build on to design an effective, integrated music theatre actor-training program, whilst still providing students with the specific discipline skill development they need?* It should be said that the course I manage at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) is not a Bachelor but a Diploma, and it is not three but one year in length. Most Diploma students are hoping to continue further music theatre studies through one of the many Bachelor courses that are now available across the country. As this Diploma was only launched last year, it is unencumbered by historical institutional and course practices, and similarly it is not bound by conventions of traditional conservatoire-style training. Because of this, it has been relatively easy to incorporate several holistic-training approaches and cross-content focuses into the course design. These include:

1. Embedding discipline-specific content within classes that are not normally associated with that discipline
2. Students writing original music theatre works
3. Monologuing the music, not just the lyrics, as an acting tool

The third of these is the cornerstone of the Diploma's acting through song class. It is an integrated music-acting technique that I have been developing over the past two years which incorporates a series of activities that enable actors to identify and then explore how they can utilise specific musical elements within a song to characterise, build relationships with other characters, to realise dramatic action and to make other acting choices. Before I discuss this in detail, as I will later in the article, I would like to explore the first integration focus; the embedding discipline-specific content across classes. This involves the transference and/or repetition of components that are usually found in one class, within another class. For example, acting content would not only be found in an acting class but also in non-acting classes, singing would be taught in voice class as well as non-voice focused classes, aural would be included in non-music skills classes, et cetera. This is with the aim for students to not only transfer knowledge from one subject to another, but more importantly to meld components of the disciplines together, to value this amalgamation and use this synthesis to inform their rehearsal and performance processes. Like traditional conservatoire-style training, our Diploma students undertake specialised discipline-based classes, including in acting, jazz dance, music skills, song and dance, and voice, with each class focusing on a particular discipline. However, components of the prescribed Vocational Education and Training (VET)<sup>2</sup> units which sit underneath the Diploma curriculum design are not restricted to

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<sup>2</sup> Vocational Education and Training Package units from the CUA50213 Diploma of Musical Theatre

roll-out within only the most logically-matched classes. Rather VET content is clustered<sup>3</sup> across classes which then requires students to think cross-disciplinary and continually transfer the knowledge and skills from one discipline to another. For example, the VET CUAMLT501 unit “Refine Aural Perception Skills” (Commonwealth of Australia 2017) is not merely restricted to being taught within the Music skills class. Parts of the unit’s outcome criteria are embedded into an additional two classes:

- a. Song Repertoire
- b. Acting through Song

For example, “Refine Aural Perception Skills” outcome 2.5 is split across two classes, as seen in Figure 1. As could easily be expected one of these classes is music skills, whilst the second is an acting through song class. Another outcome however, number 3.4, is not covered at all in the logical music skills class, but rather is covered in acting through song, as well as in song repertoire, as outlined in Figure 2.

|                       |   |                           |
|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|
| VET<br>element<br>2.5 | <i>“Develop aural identification of instrumental timbres, textures, formal structural elements and other aspects of musical expression”</i> | Music skills class        |
|                       |   | Acting through song class |

**Figure 1.** MS(Dip) Elements Evidence (Stinton, 2017).

|                       |   |                           |
|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|
| VET<br>element<br>3.4 | <i>‘Discuss and apply aural perception skills relevant to own music practice’</i> | Song repertoire class     |
|                       |   | Acting through song class |

**Figure 2.** MS(Dip) Elements Evidence (Stinton, 2017).

By requiring students to analyse, apply, question and discuss music aural components in other classes, they engage more holistically as artists with song material. This is then assisting in an integrated, connected approach on the rehearsal room and performance floors. For example, in an analytical acting through song class late last year, without informing the students what the song was, I played on the piano the opening underscore of “Nothing” from *A Chorus Line* (Hamlisch, 1982). Without recognising the song, just from listening to the underscore the cohort of twenty-six students were able to identify appropriate clues about character, relationship, tension, situation, setting, theme, etc. From that group, Student 9 said:

*I loved the exercise in tonight’s class and found it so ‘mind blowing’ because we found so much information in just the music about character, setting, situation, etc which I usually have to spend so much time researching the show to find out. Especially when it comes to context, it’s hard to find much without reading the actual script (which is always hard*

<sup>3</sup> Clustering is the term utilised in VET to describe the process of grouping together a number of competencies (focus areas) within a class, which were not originally grouped together in the Training Package curriculum documents provided by the Department of Education and Training.

*to find!) so this is a helpful new approach I can take. (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

Student 19 said:

*By listening to only the accompaniment of a completely unfamiliar song, I was able to discern feelings or emotions that I felt the music implied. After then hearing it with the lyrics, which showed the more explanatory intention of the song, I realised how it’s not the only the music that seems to heighten the meaning of what the character is feeling or saying, but also how what the character is feeling or saying can influence the music. This interaction of the music and lyrics made me explore the idea of, ‘When is the music eliciting a change in the characters feelings, and when is the characters feelings or thoughts driving a change in the music?’ (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

The week before writing this article the same group of students were asked music aural questions in a practical acting through song class which required them to consider how compositional musical elements informed their acting choices. Student 6 who, prior to entering the Diploma, had studied music as an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) subject in Year 12 was asked, “What is a change in the music that helped you create your character?”. They replied with

*There is one bar before the final section where it returns to the theme at the beginning [student sings the musical motif] which is reminiscent of a dance theme which comes back later in the show ... where the mother talks about how she was seduced as a child herself. So that change in music [in ‘Open Your Heart’ from Carrie] really helped to show a more humane side to herself where she changes from being a very aggressive force in the song to really being able to show her vulnerability and regret. (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

Conversely Student 3, new to music theory training, was asked, “When it went into the main melody section, how did that change help you to build your character as the Babe in *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change?*” This student answered with

*It [the melody section] was a lot more connected ... than the staccato section. That contrast flicked a switch to get myself into the smoothness of the Babe. (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

Whilst there is a difference in the sophistication of their responses that is at least partially informed by the extent of their music theory and aural knowledge, both students were still able to identify specific music elements in their songs and to discuss how the use of these elements helped them create character.

The second integrated approach that is part of the course is the writing of original music theatre works by students, largely explored in a class called creating work. Across the year, students undertake four writing projects, indicated in blue in Figure 3.

### ASSESSMENT DETAILS:

| Assessment                            | Description  | Due Dates               |
|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Practical Assignment x 3 (PRO)        | The student will establish themselves as a sole trader and provide evidence in project form that they can manage their financial affairs in order to be financially viable as an artist  | Sem 1<br>Week 9         |
|                                       | Working in a small group the student will create and perform from memory an original 8 - 12 minute a cappella musical.   | Sem 1<br>Week 15        |
|                                       | The student will create a website and a networking plan to promote themselves as an artist who is about to graduate from WAAPA   | Sem 2<br>Week 15        |
| Portfolio x 2 (PF)                    | Across five weeks, the student will create a portfolio that documents their process as they complete your OBS1 Fringe World Duet task and collates marketing material to promote themselves.   | Sem 1<br>Week 6         |
|                                       | Across thirteen weeks (including two non-teaching weeks), the student will create a portfolio that documents their process as they work in a group of 3 – 4 artists on a Creative Development project to create, perform and project manage the opening 10 - 15 minute excerpt of a drama-with-music piece | Sem 2<br>Week 11        |
| Observation of Presentation x 2 (OBS) | The student will present from memory, on one occasion, with a partner a performance of a found-song with original lyrics.  | Sem 1<br>Week 5         |
|                                       | Working in a small group the student will devise, write and perform from memory a 10 – 12 minute Theatre-in-education play.  | Sem 2<br>Project week 1 |

**Figure 3.** CW(Dip) Clustered Class Plan v6 (Stinton, 2017).

Whilst having to write music theatre works was literally terrifying to almost all the students at the beginning of the year, especially as half of them entered the course musically illiterate, they agree the process has since proved invaluable to them. This is not merely as potential future writers and composers of new works, but as holistic, purposeful actors able to create believable, authentic characters when working with both original and given (non-original) plays. This advantage should, longer-term once students enter the industry, result in them having an increased likelihood of getting acting work.

When writing the final song of a mini-musical for the creating work class one student, Student 2, was struggling with writing something that worked well dramatically. It was only once they focused on character and their purpose that “writing the song became easy” and the selection and treatment of the chords they chose “came to say so much about the character of [and] focus during the piece” (“Workshop Data” 2018). When composing for their original mini-musical Student 7 made some highly specific and extremely insightful observations about their musical theatre creative writing process:

*Our group really focused on building characterisation through melody and rhythm throughout the first section of the piece. The scene starts with a percussion section followed by a vocalised chord progression. In this part of the musical the girls [characters] are creating the percussion with various props such as buckets and brooms, to demonstrate the manual labour taking place. The use of 4/4 in this section, along with a straight descending chord progression creates a methodical and droning like sound. The use of accidentals in the harmony line also created a dissonance to represent the girl’s misery. Solo lines were then layered over the top, which started off low and syncopated. The line ‘inside the*

*institution no one can hear the girls scream' was written with quaver and dotted quaver beats. This syncopation layered over the top of the straight chord progression was written with the intention to demonstrate the girl's internal suffering, the contrast and clash conveying their inward struggle and outrage toward the surroundings, wanting to fight the system however giving in and returning back to the chord progression.*  
 ("Workshop Data" 2018)

When then reflecting on how they would use their writing experience to create characters in given, non-original scripts, this same student described the process as eye opening because they

*became aware of the immense detail put into every section of a piece music that is sometimes overlooked by the actor. ...Being able to breakdown the music from the opposite perspective was a really valuable lesson, and I was able to understand some of the smaller details the composer chooses for the song that which could tremendously help the actor (such as the use of tempo and dynamics etc.). It demonstrated how much each character is really represented through the music and how an actor can use all of the individual elements to find out more about their character.* ("Workshop Data" 2018)

The third inclusion in the Diploma program that is integration focused is Monologuing the music. This is comprised of a series of acting activities that encourage the actor to characterise drawing on more than merely those clues found in the verbal (lyrical) text of a song. Typically, an activity that many actors currently undertake when preparing a role for performance is to monologue the lyrics. This is where they separate the verbal text from the musical one, removing the music entirely and then workshopping the words as if they were a spoken monologue. This practice is commonly accepted by many experts to assist the actor in uncovering characterisation, relationship and other dramatic action insights, in order to create a multi-layered, purposeful character (see Clark 84; Craig 1; Dunbar 66-67; Henson and Pickering 55-56; Kayes 175; Lucca 42; McWaters 49-50; Moore 160-164; Richardson 12-13). Only after the actor has undertaken lyric-monologuing explorations, is the music then added back in for the actor to sing the song. Whilst lyric-monologuing is a relatively popular component of many musical theatre actors' preparation and rehearsal processes, and certainly is useful in building character, very few actors undertake reverse activities to explore only the musical text of a song in order to uncover acting clues. Focusing so heavily on the lyrics when characterising creates an explorative dependence on "What am I saying?" to inform acting decisions, but also a devaluing of "How am I saying it?" as being a useful part of this process. I propose that when actors, as part of their regular acting processes, undertake investigative activities to purposefully uncover characterisation clues in the music, not just the lyrics, of a song, they expose insights that are almost certainly overlooked without such enquiry. Both my professional practice of two decades as a musical theatre director, actor and teacher, and my current research as a PhD candidate, support this hypothesis.



Monologuing the music, as previously stated, employs activities that enable actors to identify specific clues in the music that they then utilise to characterise, build relationships with other characters, realise dramatic action and make a range of acting choices. Just as one removes the music of a song and speaks the verbal lines aloud to focus on the lingual text and *monologue the lyrics*, when music-monologuing the actor removes the words of a song and expresses the vocal lines aloud to focus on the musical text. When undertaking the latter, instead of verbalising words, the actor uses non-lexical sounds, such as "mah" or "toh", or an open vowel such as "ah" or "oh", to sing the musical lines. Similar to the way in which emphatic words, key phrases and lyric repetition become more evident in the absence of music when lyric-monologuing, key musical elements, such as rhythm, pitch and pause, become more apparent in music-monologuing. Although I have observed that some actors may already remove the lyrics and vocalise to non-lexical sounds, their primary purpose in doing so is to learn which notes to sing, for how long and in what way to sing them, rather than to uncover characterisation or other acting insights. Data contributing to the development of this music-monologuing technique has been gathered in both in formal workshops that were conducted specifically for research purposes, as well as in teaching and rehearsal situations when observations have been anecdotal. Regardless of the formality of the data gathering, when working with professional and student actors I have found that by monologuing the music, it is not simply *probable* that insights helpful to the acting process are identified, but that often such insights are not perceived *until* the verbal text has been stripped away and the music is left exposed.

For example, in 2017 I was directing a newly graduated professional actor in a cabaret for the Perth Fringe World festival and she was singing the song "I want to go to Hollywood" from *Grand Hotel* (Yeston 1990), where the German character Flaemmchen is expressing her desire to become a film star in Hollywood. Only after the actor removed the lyrics and monologued the first verse, did it become apparent that the writer was shifting between having the first word of a phrase sometimes fall on and at other times after the first and strongest beat of a bar. Beat one, the strongest beat of the bar, is indicated in bold here:

[PAUSE] *I want to be that girl in the mirror, there.*  
 [PAUSE] *I want to be that girl with golden hair*  
*UP on the silver screen most ev'rywhere*  
*IN the world*  
 [PAUSE] *I want to go to Holly-*  
***-wood***, *Talkies ... I mean the pictures. (Yeston 1990, 117-118)*

Whilst of course it is not possible to know what composer/lyricist Maury Yeston's intention was through this musical device, the actor decided she would use the small musical pause (quaver rest) at the beginning of phrases one, two and five to suggest that she was chasing a dream that is beyond her reach. She then chose to juxtapose this elusiveness with a moment of definitiveness: She emphasised the strong starting beats of phrases three and four to purposefully and enthusiastically describe her Hollywood goal. Similarly, after removing the words and vocalising the middle section later in the song where the character describes the bleak destitution of her reality, each phrase

starts with a silence or pause in the music that was followed by a very short phrase, the actor then built further on her earlier aching for an unattainable dream by first leaning into each silence and then immediately attacking its subsequent phrase:

*[PAUSE] My cold water flat,  
 [PAUSE] The sofa that I sleep on  
 [PAUSE] Behind the screen,  
 [PAUSE] The noisy lodger in the  
 NEXT room,  
 [PAUSE] My broken hand mirror,  
 [PAUSE] My broken coffee pot  
 [PAUSE] If things get broken, they  
 STAY broken (Yeston 1990, 122-123)*

Whilst the actor had only a simple music literacy, it was only once the lyrics were taken away she was able to clearly hear musical clues and then utilise them as part of her song interpretation. Should the actor have not taken an integrated music-acting approach, it is possible that she would not have made the characterisation choices that she did.

Last year when working with Natasha's material in *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* (Molloy, 2016) as part of a performance practice workshop series, Diploma Student 21, with limited prior music theory knowledge, made a series of musically-driven character notes. These are notated in Figure 4 in blue alongside the song's lyrics in black.

In working on "Pierre" from the same play, Student 20, who was a self-taught pianist and guitarist, shared the following insights:

*The song is written in 12/8, along with some of Pierre's other songs and sections of songs. In this number, I found that it is essentially Pierre is explaining his insecurities and situation and what he is like as a person. The music often pulls Pierre back in an awkward off beat fashion. There are duplets following a lyric that Pierre sings and this is jarring because it doesn't sound musically right. This is relatable to his questionable morals. Those being a pushover and giving people money to make them happy or to make up for something he did. ("Workshop Data" 2018)*

Once able to apply techniques that encourage an integrated acting approach, such as music-monologuing, students are able to uncover acting clues that are only available in non-verbal musical texts and, as such, could be overlooked if they were not implemented.

This shows that by providing student actors with training that focuses on both specific specialised skill development, whilst also embedding some elements from other skill disciplines into these same classes, and by equipping them with techniques to effectively listen to, analyse and experiment with the musical elements of their songs as an important part of the acting process, they are able to more easily take a holistic acting approach than those actors of previous generations. I am also confident that

when these students eventually become professionals, they will then be better equipped to build connected, believable and authentic characters and meet the acting demands of the music theatre industries. Longer-term this may shift perceptions about industry having to choose between ‘actors who can’t sing’ and ‘singers who can’t act’ (Dunbar 2016, 71), and rather great actors who happen to sing well.

I hate you Sonya!  
I hate you Roza!  
I hate you, I hate you!  
You're my enemies forever!

[NATASHA]  
And without a moment's  
reflection  
I wrote the answer to Princess Mary  
I'd been unable to write all morning

All our misunderstandings are at an end  
Forget everything and forgive me  
But I can't be  
Andrey's wife

**Letters**

Dear Andrey—  
What more can I write  
After all that has happened?  
What am I to do if I love him and the other one  
too?  
Must I break it off?  
These terrible questions

Dear Princess Mary—

Oh, what am I to write!  
How do I choose?  
What do I do?  
I shall never be happy again

**The Ball**

I am seized by feelings of vanity and fear  
There is no barrier between us  
Whispers and moans, and ringing in my ear  
There is no barrier between us

This whole section is off the beat and the melody and rhythm is all over the place, which displays her temper tantrum. When she says 'I hate you' it is off the beat – showing that she doesn't actually mean it.

This is very fast and almost monotone which displays that she is acting quickly with anger but not necessarily doing the right thing

Instead of continuing to write, she's silent, because she has no clue what to say.

This rhythm is in very quick triplets, which reveals her scattered thoughts

This whole section has quite a sexy feel to it – it is written with a waltz rhythm. The melody is slurred on the words such as "moans" and "divine" which give off sexual connotations.

Figure 4. Title (“Workshop Data” 2018).

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## About the author

Nicole Stinton has worked as a director, vocal coach and actor for over two decades across Australasia, specialising in music theatre. She has taught acting and singing at a tertiary level for over 10 years, including at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) (Australia) and Lasalle (Singapore). Other industry experience includes being Artistic Director for four seasons of Short+Sweet in Singapore, as well as the inaugural Malaysian festival. She has published several drama textbooks that are widely used in the West Australian education system. Nicole holds an MBA in Entertainment and Arts Management (Deakin) and a Bachelor in Musical Theatre (WAAPA). She is studying her PhD in music theatre acting at WAAPA. Nicole is currently Course Coordinator of the new Diploma of Musical Theatre at WAAPA.