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PROMOTING VOCAL HEALTH IN THE PRODUCTION OF HIGH SCHOOL MUSIC THEATER

Music Theater is Valuable

The annual production of a music theater work is one of the most popular events on the calendar of most high school music departments. Many music programs experience an upsurge of interest due to such projects, and there often are financial rewards—a significant point in a time when performing arts budgets are being cut.

There are a number of positive educational values in the production of a school musical. First, American music theater certainly deserves serious study, for it is well established in the canon of American music. Second, as a school project, the musical usually requires that the choral and instrumental music departments combine their talents and efforts with a number of other departments—art, drama, industrial arts—achieving a school spirit often reserved only for athletic or social events. Third, the production of a musical demands of the students a high degree of discipline and responsibility, so, with the right direction, it can be the impetus for discovering and nurturing student talent and creativity.

Potential Difficulty

One serious concern and major drawback for high school music theater productions—the possibility of damage to adolescent voices—bears careful consideration. Music theater is written for professional actors and singers, generally well trained and highly seasoned performers. Frequently, parts and songs are written with specific actors or voices in mind and are modified in rehearsal so that they fit the performer perfectly. Sometimes hundreds of voices are auditioned until the right voice or actor is found for the part. Music theater, for the last half of the century, has been an electronically amplified medium—a most important point in how the voice is used. Young students should not be expected to do the same things that major Broadway performers do. If established, vocally trained Broadway stars suffer vocal strain during the rehearsal period or run of a Broadway show—and they *do*—how much more could this occur in young, immature, high school-aged voices? Vocal issues must be a priority when teachers are contemplating the production of a musical, choosing the musical, casting the parts, determining the length and structure of the rehearsal period, staging the show, and choosing the accompaniment to

be used. It is imperative that music departments undertaking such a project include voice instruction for their students from within the department or from qualified outside voice teachers—particularly those familiar with music theater.

How to Proceed Safely

First, the work must be chosen carefully. A choral/vocal director should have some idea of his/her students' abilities and the show's vocal and dramatic parameters even before casting begins. Musicals do not make equal demands of the voice or acting ability. If the potential talent pool seems small in any given year, a show with few characters or a student-developed show with a review-type format might be a good choice. It might be

necessary, particularly in small schools, to educate the administration not to expect a music theater production automatically each year if it is not in the best interest of the students or overall music program. Some shows have demanding choral parts or ask singers to dance while singing, and some require heavy or cumbersome costumes that may interfere with vocal production. Some shows are written well for the voice and some are not, in that the music makes demands on the singer that are unreasonable even for a seasoned, experienced professional. A show should be examined for all these factors as part of selecting it for production. Additionally, any show can be examined for potential cuts and alterations. Some performance contracts may pro-

hibit this, but many do *not* and sometimes special permissions can be granted for amateur performance. A cut verse, a rewritten out-of-range finale, a key transposition—all can go a long way toward lessening vocal strain without damaging the integrity of the show.

Second, vocal considerations always should be paramount in casting. It is tempting to seek the ideal look for a particular character, but it should not be assumed that any actor can be taught to sing something beyond his/her vocal capability. Whenever possible, double casting or even triple casting should be attempted for leading roles, especially if the covering singers can be guaranteed one performance in the run and are themselves cast in regular, smaller roles.

Alternate casting allows emergencies to be covered, and singers can be substituted for each other at the first sign of vocal strain in rehearsals (which can be more taxing vocally than an actual performance). Whenever possible auditions should be held in the auditorium where the performance is to take place and with some sort of sound system in effect—avoiding the need for volume to be a major consideration. Casting will probably be a composite decision of the production staff, but ideally the final authority should rest with the choral director/voice teacher who can best assess the vocal requirements of the parts and corresponding abilities of the student.

Third, rehearsals should be planned for maximum efficiency and minimum vocal strain. Rehearsal times should be scheduled thoughtfully and generally are best when limited to not more than two hours of singing. Allowances must be made for creativity and spontaneity, but certain physical and musical requirements are built into the score of any music theater work. It is best not to wait until the rehearsal itself to work out these requirements. Once it is understood just what each rehearsal is to accomplish, it can be determined how much time that rehearsal will take or how many repetitions of a specific rehearsal unit are necessary. Vocal strain also can be avoided if the same students are not required to sing in every rehearsal. In certain cases, some singers may not need to be present at all rehearsals, especially when the show is double or triple cast.

Fourth, a flexible attitude toward staging can help avoid strain in young voices. Good posture is a requisite for good voice production. A simple shift in stage position, a move from sitting to standing, a turn of the head to a more comfortable position—seem-

ingly small and insignificant factors in an overall production—can go far toward avoiding vocal strain. The choral director/voice teacher needs to remain vigilant about this, particularly if professional directors and/or choreographers are brought into the school to help with the production.

Fifth, accompaniment and amplification are very important in high school musical productions. In the developing years of American music theater, houses were often small with excellent natural acoustics. Orchestras tended to be small with a predominance of strings and relatively light scoring throughout most of the show. For the past half century, most professional music theater productions have used electronic amplification and many scores call for electronic instruments. If the full instrumental score, rather than a reduction, is being used, and the instruments are amplified, the singers must *also* be amplified. It is then also absolutely necessary to have a qualified sound engineer set levels for the speakers and to provide

good monitors so the singers easily can hear themselves. Poor placement or sound production in monitors in an amplified show is a primary cause of vocal fatigue in young singers. If the school does not own adequate equipment, it can be rented or possibly borrowed from within the community. Even with amplification, instrumentalists need to be reminded about dynamic levels; they need not overpower to be exciting.

A Positive Experience

Adhering to the above suggestions should ease the truly critical problem of voice abuse. Any music teacher who has produced a musical knows the once-in-a-lifetime experience it provides for many young people, and the interest and excitement it generates for active participation in a student world increasingly dominated by media-induced passivity. If it can be done with a sincere regard for good voice production, it can be a beautiful, valuable, and above all, healthy experience.