

# **LIFE IS A CABARET, OLD CHUM! INVESTIGATING THE PROCESS OF BRINGING THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE SKILLS FROM THE STUDIO TO THE STAGE.**

Judith Elizabeth Brown  
Central Queensland University

## **ABSTRACT**

There are many who see stars in their eyes at the thought of treading the boards in the professional theatre, but so few successfully manage the precarious transition from the privacy of the studio to the exposure of the public stage.

This paper will investigate the nature of live public performance – with particular reference to theatrical performance in the specialised area of music theatre – examining the links between the various types of performance practice from music theatre productions through to cabaret. It will investigate what it means to be a successful performer from both the audience point of view and that of the industry professional, as well as considering the research evidence in the areas of public communication in the arts.

Furthermore, this paper will examine the process of preparing the performer for a lifelong career in the professional music theatre industry through the development of the individual skills that make up the craft of music theatre and the process of combining these together to produce a confident performer and communicator for the music theatre and cabaret stage.

## **INTRODUCTION**

*What good is sitting alone in your room?  
Come hear the music play;  
Life is a cabaret, old chum,  
Come to the cabaret* (Ebb & Kander, 1966).

Implicit in the lines of this well-known music theatre show-piece, and the underlying theme of the whole show *Cabaret* by Fred Ebb and John Kander, is the fact that nothing in show business is what it seems. The process of theatrical performance is complex and subjective. It involves a large element of risk-taking on the part of the performer (Bromiley & Curley, 1992) but is underpinned by strong elements of concentration, years of muscle memory that has been acquired through particular and dedicated practice, and a strong motivation on the part of the performer to bring together all that has been studied in the training to a public performance that inspires and entertains the audience who are the ultimate judges in the performance process.

Liza Minelli is well remembered for her performance in the film version of *Cabaret*, and has inspired many potential performers to venture into the specialised field of music

theatre where all three performance skills, singing, dancing, and acting are brought together in a unique way.

In order to effectively study the process of bringing theatrical performance skills from the studio to the stage, a wide-ranging approach that takes into consideration the vast amount of research in optimising sporting performance and training can bring much to bear upon the training of music theatre performers.

Green & Gallwey (1987) state that music and sport share a number of similarities with respect to the notion of performance. In their book 'The Inner Game of Music', Green and Gallwey propose that

"People 'play' sports and 'play' music, yet both involve hard work and discipline. Both are forms of self-expression, which require a balance of spontaneity and structure, technique and inspiration. Both demand a degree of mastery over the human body, and yield immediately apparent results which can give timely feedback to the performer. Since both sports and music are commonly performed in front of an audience, they also provide an opportunity for sharing the enjoyment of excellence, as well as the experience of pressure, fears and the excitement of ego involvement" (p.7).

By examining the physical, psychological, and cognitive processes of music theatre performance and the theory, and research that has been applied in the fields of performance training in voice, dance, acting and sport, a best practice model for lifelong learning in music theatre can start to be developed.

## **THE NATURE OF LIVE PUBLIC PERFORMANCE IN MUSIC THEATRE**

Roger Sessions (1971), a noted American composer, states that the notion of the ideal performance or the authoritative performance of any given musical work is, in fact, illusive. He claims that the idea of the composer is not fully expressed in any single performance, but rather in the sum of all possible performances. Liza Minelli's rendition of *Cabaret*, although seen by many as definitive, cannot and does not embody all that Ebb and Kander have to say in this piece of music.

Live performance is in its essence a transient art form that occurs in real time, and is never truly repeatable. Furthermore, according to Rubidge (1996), Taruskin (1995), and supported by Epstein (1996), the criteria upon which we make judgements about a work in the area of the performing arts are significantly affected by the times and culture in which the work is made and are "inextricably linked to the work's history, which is formed and informed by its previous performances" (Rubidge, 1996, p. 219). Rubidge further argues that theatre is in itself an intensely rich medium by virtue of the plot, the dramatic discourse, the cast of characters, and the various channels of communication. Those who intend to become theatrical performers and to perform at their best need to prepare themselves in a number of ways. In the area of music theatre, the notion of the all-round, triple-threat performer is asserted by Allen (1999) to be the only road to long-term success. Furthermore, Allen suggests that anyone who purports to be a successful performer in music theatre without a high level of skills in all three of these areas is "really short-changing themselves" (p. 11).

The other important fact in the whole business of theatrical performance is to realise that the ratio of time taken in preparation to the time in performance is enormously high in favour of the preparation time. Public performances are short-lived and transitory. The preparation involves a lifetime commitment and it needs selfless dedication to survive this long and often lonely process of physical, psychological, and cognitive groundwork. However, in order to achieve success as a performer, the preparation process must always keep in mind the public performance goal. Therefore, a model of learning that keeps the final goal in mind while paying attention to the complete physical, psychological, and cognitive development of the performer is one that has been shown to achieve the greatest long-term success, enabling the performer to sustain a lifelong career in the performing arts.

I will now examine separately the three areas of performance training, and in so doing, examine this model that takes the performer successfully from the privacy of the studio to the openness of the public stage.

## **THE PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSIC THEATRE PERFORMER**

The very first issue that faces anyone in the performing arts is the development of technique, and the music theatre performer must address the whole issue of a vocal, dance, and acting technique that will enable healthy performance throughout a long career. It is not within the scope of this paper to consider all aspects of pedagogy relating to the development of technique for singers, dancers, and actors which often begins at a very young age when young bodies are supple and gaining in strength. However, as strength is developed, researchers in areas of the performing arts, and also in the area of sports training, have consistently found that relaxation, together with strength, brings about results that are sustainable in the long term.

Consistent with Gruner (1991) in his paper on voice production,

"the right relationship between poised breath and relaxation is one of the main features of voice production. In many ways the problems are similar to sports training. A good singer will have learnt how to 'support' his voice without involving other parts of the body which should remain in a state of relaxation" (p. 61).

Relaxation, in accordance with Salmon & Meyer (1992), is an elusive concept, especially when applied to musical performance skills. The interplay of mind and body in this area of physical development cannot be underestimated. Therefore, performers need to develop cognitive strategies that will enable them to deal with the interplay between physical and technical development in their voice and body and the relaxation of all of these muscles through their thought processes. Salmon and Meyer go on to say that an understanding of the basic ideas of thinking can give us clues to how thoughts affect our behaviour, including performance skills.

"Practicing when you are excessively mentally or physically tense makes those states more likely to recur when the music is performed later. In other words, we learn a great deal more than simply the music we're practicing: feelings and

sensations that become associated with the music can be evoked when the music is later recreated during a performance" (p.195).

Taking the practice situation to the actual public performance, the control of both tension and relaxation by the artist is paramount in achieving both excitement and intensity in performance. Grindea (1991) shows this in his work on the positive and negative effects of tension in performance and practice.

Landers & Boutcher (1998) have researched finding the right balance of both tension and relaxation in performance in their study of the relationship between arousal and motor performance. They have suggested that maximum performance occurs at moderate levels of emotional arousal, while poor performance occurs at both low and high levels of emotional arousal. (See Figure 1 below). They go on to show that tasks that require complex decision making in a highly structured environment, such as sporting competition, are best performed at moderate levels of arousal.

Applying further the relationship between athletic performance and arousal, Cox (1990) states that "preparing an athlete for competition involves more than psyching up. It involves finding the optimal level of arousal for each athlete" (p.98). He goes on to comment on the fact that this inverted-U theory for arousal and performance has been well researched throughout the twentieth century and has been applied directly to improving the performance of players in a range of team and individual sports.

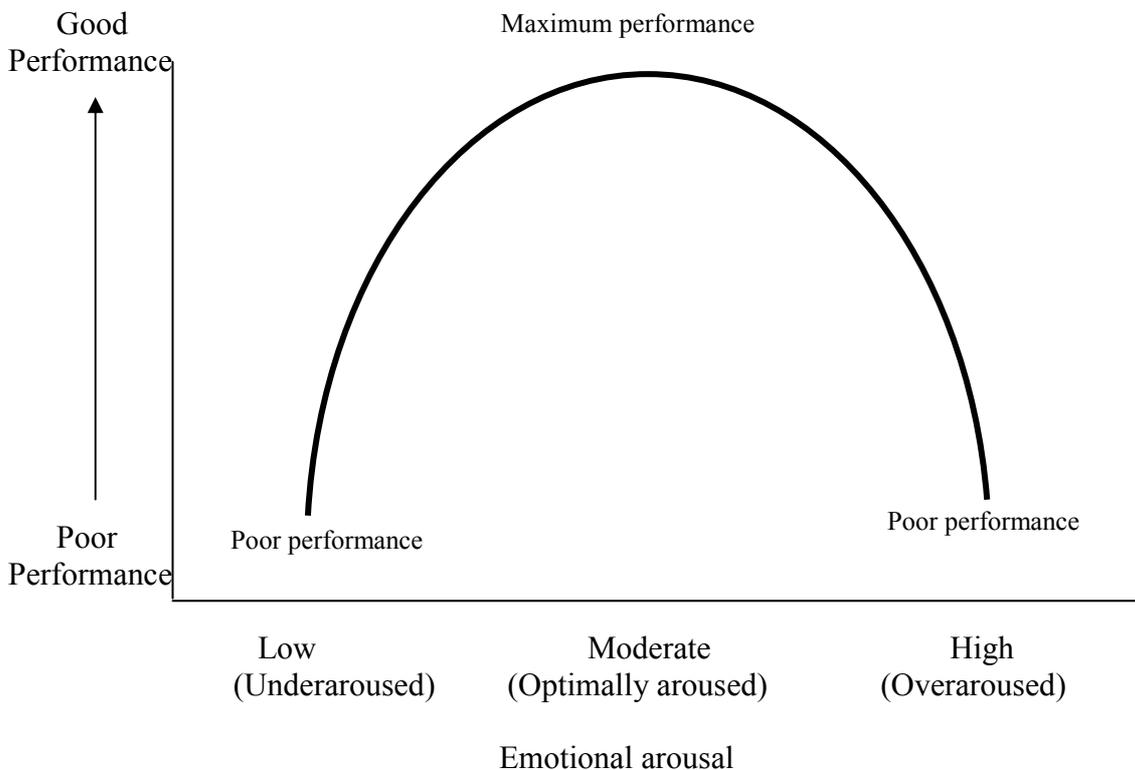


Figure 1. The inverted-U relationship between arousal and performance (Landers & Boutcher, 1998, p. 203).

Anecdotal evidence in the field of music and theatrical performance suggests that this inverted-U theory can be applied equally well for performers in a range of situations and genres. It also depends on the skill level of the performer and the complexity of the task that they face. Applying the work of Cox (1990, p.99) to theatrical performance, highly skilled singers, dancers, and actors need a moderately high level of arousal for maximum performance, but once the task becomes more complex, or the skill level of the performers decreases, a relatively low level of arousal is needed for maximum performance to occur.

Anecdotal evidence suggests specifically that over-arousal can produce memory loss, hyperventilation (Gregg, 2000) and loss of muscular control for the music theatre performer. This supports Grindea's (1991) notion that "too much tension at the wrong moment and in the wrong places prevents the player from expressing himself with ease and with the necessary control" (p. 98).

## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSIC THEATRE PERFORMER**

There has been considerable research conducted in the area of sports psychology in order to maximise performance outcomes for athletes at all levels of competition. Moreover, aspects of this theory and research in sports psychology can be applied effectively to performance development in music theatre training, linking to technical development of the performer with an appropriate psychological and cognitive preparation for performance.

The great violinist Fritz Kreisler once stated that technique is more an issue of the brain rather than the body. As accounted by Lochner (1951) in his biography of Kreisler he tells that Kreisler never practised before a concert performance as this was numbing to the brain and deadened his sense of alertness. Needless to say, this did not mean that Kreisler never practiced, but rather that he was careful in the way that he practiced so that it did not extinguish the flame of creativity in the process of endless repetition.

Bonetti (1997) asserts that there is no substitute for thorough preparation when facing an imminent public performance of any kind. She goes on to say "performance fears are surely lessened when we have prepared securely and wisely in the months before the performance" (p. 61).

This notion of finding the careful balance between physical and mental preparation of the performer has been shown in the results of research by McPherson (1997). The results of his study conducted with high school instrumentalists over a three-year period found that "aural and creative activities, such as mentally rehearsing music away from an instrument, and playing music by ear, from memory and by improvising, may well be more important to musical development than has commonly been assumed" (p. 213).

According to David Roland (1997), the combination of mental and physical rehearsal in the performing arts has also been shown to be an effective way to build self-confidence, reduce anxiety, and increase skill development. Physical rehearsal has always been acknowledged as an essential part of the preparation for any performance in the arts, but

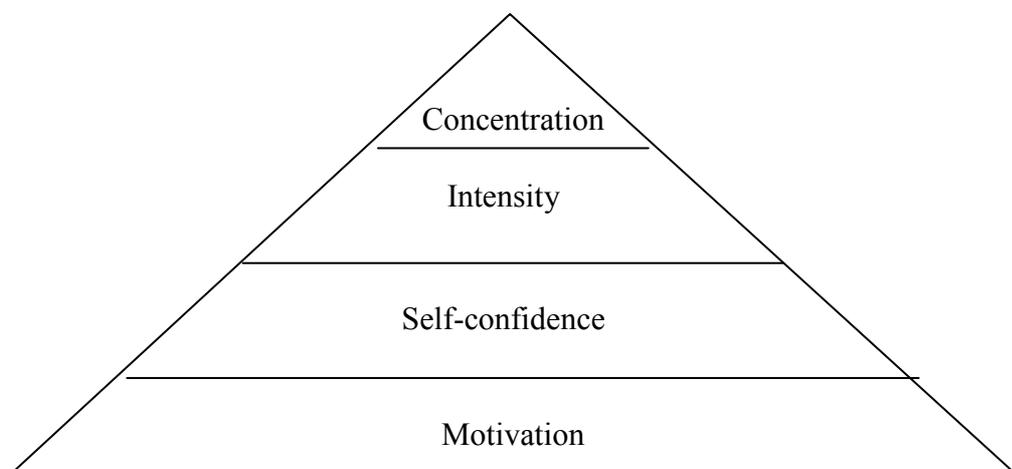
according to Havas (1973) "few people realise that faulty practising is, more often than not, the deepest and greatest cause for stage fright" (p. 120). She goes on to say,

"the root of the problem is that if the physical actions are artificially conditioned or (as in so many cases) forced, they do not afford any real assurance. Instead, the constant and recurring breakdowns at the same passages (in spite of the hours of practice) tend to envelop the player with a feeling of inadequacy. And to make matters worse, once this feeling of insecurity is established the dependency on the hours of practice becomes even greater" (p. 120).

Mental rehearsal as described by Roland (1997) involves the creation in the mind of the performance itself, bringing together all of the senses, but without actually performing. Roland states that it is possible to "train yourself to complete a performance perfectly even when you're still not able to do it perfectly in reality. It can be used to enhance your memory of words, music, or steps without having to go through them physically" (p. 43).

Aside from discussions on the nature of practice and the importance of building a solid technique, the process of taking the work done in the studio to the public performance stage is still fraught with pitfalls for the music theatre performer. One of the key areas addressed consistently by sports psychologists that have particular relevance to the music theatre performer is the area of building confidence. According to Butler (1996) there are four different components of confidence and they are all linked to a performer's self-concept: self-image, self-esteem, self-vulnerability, and self-belief. Although not hierarchal, Butler's examination of the components of confidence can give teachers and instructors insight into the psychological preparation needed for performers in music theatre.

Taylor & Taylor (1995) have developed a dance-training program that applies equally to any area of the theatrical performing arts based upon his paradigm of the Performing Attitude Pyramid (see Figure 2). Like Butler, Taylor and Taylor have developed a paradigm to explain the psychological development of the performer. Unlike Butler's four components of confidence, Taylor and Taylor see these components as building upon one another.



*Figure 2. The Performing Attitude Pyramid of Taylor & Taylor (1995, p. 4).*

Taylor and Taylor explain that

"At the base of the pyramid is high motivation, which ensures a dancer's total preparation. Preparation leads to high self-confidence and truly believing in their ability to perform their very best. Self-confidence in turn leads to an ideal level of intensity as your dancers begin a performance. Ideal intensity then produces focussed concentration during performance. The pyramid's apex is the development of the performing attitude and the ability to perform at the highest level" (pp. 3, 4).

Rodgers (1997) further expounds on these concepts of self by stating that the way one sees oneself, the awareness of how one's own characteristics change with time or are affected in stressful situations, will promote confidence in performance. Various studies have also concluded that successful performance raises expectations for future success and that conversely, failure will lower these expectations (Rodgers, 1997, p.91). Accordingly, it is evident that the training for music theatre performers needs to provide ample opportunities for successful performance so that the confidence in performance is strengthened throughout the training.

Another key area, as identified as important in music theatre performance (Taylor & Taylor, 1995; Roland, 1997), is the area of concentration and attention. Moran (1996) asserts that " 'divided attention' refers to the mental process which governs our ability to perform two or more concurrent tasks efficiently" (p. 49). Moran raises further questions about how many things we can do at one time. He cites James (1890) who answers "not easily more than one (thing), unless the processes are very habitual; but then two, or even three, without very much oscillation of attention". However, people's ability to divide their attention effectively depends on two key factors (Eysenck & Keane, 1995, also cited by Moran, 1996): the amount of practice or experience gained by the person in performing the tasks simultaneously, and whether or not the tasks to be performed use different senses.

Crittenden (1999) in his discussion of bringing opera to a full artistic expression comments on the balance between developing all the techniques needed for the stage – musical and dramatic. He states that

"It is possible, though, to work on each of these areas separately if one approach is not as well developed as the others. If a singer is musically sensitive with a responsive vocal instrument, the only approach that is necessary to concentrate on is the dramatic approach. When a singer is totally committed to expressing the character's thoughts and feelings, the other two approaches will automatically be involved. It can be observed that the musical approach is the one that seems to be least evident in aspiring singers perhaps because they are concentrating on so many other skills. It is making beautiful and meaningful music in conjunction with the voice and the drama that can lift opera to unparalleled artistic expression" (p.42).

His paper gives further insight into what is considered a complete technique for the stage. He alludes to the fact that, a mere physical technique that reproduces the correct notes, rhythms, text, and movement without a full understanding of the theatrical work

as a whole cannot hope to produce performances of artistic excellence. This approach is supported by many who have researched the nature of performance preparation, and have considered the preparation that goes beyond mere technical development.

Moran (1996) goes on to say that we routinely use multi-task performance skills and that they are integral to many jobs performed everyday. Furthermore, the successful music theatre performer needs to cultivate ways to increase their ability in multi-task performance. The implications for music theatre performance training, where the notion of the competent triple threat performer shapes the performance training, are of paramount importance. It therefore becomes evident that the work done by performers in both private practice and in lessons with their teachers of singing, dancing, and acting needs to always direct itself towards a combined performance construct. This construct has as its key element the music theatre triple-threat performer, who is capable of multi-task skills at the highest level of competency, and with the appropriate levels of motivation, self-confidence, intensity, and concentration (Taylor & Taylor, 1995) that will result in the maintenance of a professional lifelong career in music theatre and the performing arts.

## **THE COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSIC THEATRE PERFORMER**

The close link between the cognitive and psychological processes for the theatrical performer, in particular, the actor, was addressed at the beginning of the twentieth century through the work of the innovative Director of the Moscow Art Theatre, Constantin Stanislavski. His optimistic ideal of a "life in art" stands behind all the major theories of theatre which have been developed this century (Wiles, 1980). Stanislavski spent his life searching for the secret of inspiration, and according to Moore (1991), the Stanislavski System "enables the actor to stir in himself the emotions of his character every time he performs. It is the solution to spontaneity and the key to inspiration" (p.11). Through the application of his Method of Physical Actions (Stanislavski, 1958) – developed towards the end of his career – Stanislavski trained his actors to realise that "there should be no physical actions created without faith in their reality, consequently a sense of truthfulness. All this bears witness to the close bond between physical action and all the so-called 'elements' of the inner creative state" (Stanislavski, 1958, p. 46).

Stanislavski also sought to bring performer's to an understanding of the unique bond between music and action (Stanislavski, 1963), following on the ideas expressed by Richard Wagner, the nineteenth century composer and theoretician. Wagner wrote extensively on the role of the actor-singer in his essay 'On Actors and Singers' (*Über Schauspieler und Sänger*) notated in 1872. According to Skelton (1991), his respect for actors was genuine, but he had become disillusioned with the superficiality of acting that had become the order of the day in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. This was, of course, the theatrical malaise that faced Stanislavski, which convinced him to seek a remedy through his work with the Moscow Art Theatre in the early decades of the twentieth century (Worrall, 1996).

By seeking to understand and define instinct by means of cognitive processes, Stanislavski was not trying to devalue it. His experiments merely led him to try to find a way of enabling the performer to act truthfully and artistically, every time he performs.

Stanislavski's work on creating truthfulness in performance has had wide-reaching effects in modern theatre and has influenced many and diverse schools of thought on the nature of theatre and the roles of its participants.

Leading on from the cognitive work of Stanislavski, performers must also face the immediate concerns of controlling their thought patterns while in performance and thus achieving a successful transition from the comfort and safety of the studio to the openness of the public stage. As stated by Horsley (1995) the dilemma that faces young athletes in performance is very similar to that of the music theatre performer: gaining control of involuntary and spontaneous thoughts.

"Positive self-talk and positive images are the hallmarks of confident athletes. They say positive things to themselves, imagine themselves being successful and in control, and keep their attention focussed on achieving the task at hand rather than worrying about the possibility of failing or of possible negative consequences" (p.323).

The importance of self-talk applies equally well in the area of theatrical performance and mirrors the psychological and cognitive processes of performance in music theatre. Horsley goes on to say that performers need to understand how the mind works and the significance of self-talk in relation to difficult performance situations.

Much cognitive research has been done by Howard Gardner (1983) and, according to his work completed in 1991, he states that individuals approach learning with a unique profile of intelligences. By using their own dominant learning styles, or combination thereof, which are brought to bear upon the task or problem at hand, the cognitive process of transforming technique to performance will be different for all individuals. In sport, many high level performers use a pre-prepared performance routine of thoughts and actions that enhance their forthcoming performance. Boutcher (1990) states,

"These athletes may also go through a pre-planned sequence of imagery, arousal setting cues, and other cognitive strategies as part of their complete routine. These routines can be used before or after skill performance or while waiting on the side-lines. Thus performance routines focus specifically on what the athlete is thinking immediately before, during, after and between each skill performance" (p. 231).

Every performer in music theatre will have developed their own tailor-made process for bringing their technique and the physical and psychological preparation to fruition on the stage, often in the form of a self-developed pre-performance routine. For many, it is arriving at the theatre early to establish a feel for the space and the stage, and then working through a carefully paced warm-up routine for voice, body, and mind. This routine needs to be fine-tuned over the years so that appropriate cognitive processes are used to assist with the approach to performance during the performance, or while waiting during breaks in performance. Without such a unique cognitive approach (Gardner, 1991) the performance cannot hope to reach its highest potential, and there can be no lifelong sustainability in the performing arts. It is therefore the task of the teacher to help the student to recognise and formulate their own personal performance preparation routine that will be flexible to the growing emotional and physical needs of the performer and the tasks that are set before them in theatrical life.

## **THE SUCCESSFUL MUSIC THEATRE PERFORMER**

Consequently, the successful music theatre performer will be able to optimise all elements of their physical performance, as well as control their mental and emotional states so that the performance reaches the highest standards to which they are capable, and indeed, opens the way for lifelong development of the art of performing in music theatre.

The role of teachers in bringing students through the process of honing their craft and bringing together all the elements of performance to a professional level cannot be underestimated. According to Candy (2000) the structure of undergraduate curriculum is vital to the fostering of a lifelong-learning ethic. Of particular interest is his insistence that such programs include an incremental development of self-directed learning.

"The 'staged withdrawal' of faculty over the period of three or four years, however, should be both explicit and agreed, so that students recognise this as a legitimate part of the educational experience, rather than regarding it as an abdication of responsibility on the part of the academic faculty" (p. 12).

Furthermore, Candy suggests that academic faculty should be actively involved themselves in continuing the lifelong-learning process, thus modelling for their students a way of life and learning. In a music theatre faculty, this emphasis should not only be found in intellectual activity but in the continuing performance training and practice of faculty members. Those teachers who 'practice what they preach' and continue to develop their own performance skills are ideal role models for young performers to follow.

From the audience point of view, a successful performer provides a unique service. Schneiderman (1991) states that the performer provides the audience with a precious gift that can nourish the soul.

"The artist's offering is a gift not only to the composer and to society in the broader sense, but to one's particular audience. The gift is enormous – hundreds, perhaps thousands of hours of study and training beforehand and now, one's own vitality reaching out to communicate with other human beings in a binding of artist with audience" (p.21).

From the point of view of a professional music theatre director, producer, musical director, or choreographer, the successful performer is one who is known as a 'triple threat'. Allen (1999) explains that in professional music theatre, the most sought after performer can perform superbly as a singer, dancer, and actor. They are versatile, flexible, and confident in all three performing skills. The well-rounded performer, states Allen, will be able to generate more work, create more opportunities and achieve better financial security.

The internationally successful music theatre performer is in reality a very rare phenomenon, for indeed, there are very few to compare with Liza Minelli and others of her ilk. However, this does not seem to be a deterrent to the many that strive to become

expert triple-threat performers and gain some measure of success in music theatre and other related fields such as cabaret. Performing arts courses in Australia and the Western world abound, fuelled by the forces of passion and ambition. The task facing the educators in this area is to take the skills and disciplines pertaining to performance in music theatre, and indeed to any performance on the stage, in the concert hall, or in the recording studio, and find ways to enhance a lifelong approach to learning in the performing arts. Performers need to see that there is no 'quick-fix' method for training, but that the whole body, mind, and spirit need to be nurtured and trained to see the long-term approach.

The truly successful performer develops lifelong learning that continually hones all aspects of their craft: physical, emotional, and mental. This holistic approach to performance is central to many studies on the nature of musical and theatrical performance (Allen, 1999; Bonetti, 1997; Dunsby 1996; Hamilton, 1997; Roland, 1997). Furthermore, managing the transition from the privacy of the studio and the daily practice routines to the public arena of the stage also requires a clear understanding of all the physical, cognitive, and psychological processes involved in the art of music theatre.

The range of strategies that performers develop for themselves to optimise the quality of their performances throughout their formal training years, and for the rest of their careers as performers and teachers, are the most important lifelong-learning skills that can be acquired.

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