

Singing on stage, an actor's guide

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Singing on stage: an actor's guide, Jane Streeton and Philip Raymond, London, UK, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014, 176 pp., US\$24.65 (paperback), ISBN 978-1408145470

Jane Streeton and Philip Raymond are established and highly experienced voice teachers and performers who, between them, have a total of 55 years teaching at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Their book, *Singing on Stage: An Actor's Guide*, serves as a guide for actors looking to start singing training but, as the authors implicitly state, should not serve as a replacement for studying with a teacher. The book gives the reader a clear view of the “very particular approach” and “craft of teaching the actor/singer” that is part of RADA's curriculum and provides a comprehensive plan as well as useful advice for actors who are looking to add this essential discipline to their skill set. RADA's voice curriculum reflects the importance the academy places on singing in core actor training, and has been greatly enhanced by the expertise and dedication of Streeton and Raymond. The philosophy and rigor of the program has been distilled into this highly practical book.

The book begins with a short chapter on the history of singing training at RADA, which provides the reader with context regarding the development of the program and RADA's reputation for successfully training actors to sing. With a commitment to guiding each student to discover his or her own “authentic, expressive and ultimately beautiful vocal tone as a product of the highest music and theatrical values,” Streeton and Raymond focus on helping students make the connection between their speaking and singing voices. They describe their approach as “always engaging in a theatrical, vocal holistic and visceral approach to singing,” and their aim is to provide their students with skills that will serve them throughout their careers.

Short chapters on the role of the singing teacher, the vocal coach, and the student are followed by a chapter outlining good protocols for forming a sound individual training program. Next, vocal technique is introduced in the chapter “Fundamental Principals—Posture and Breathing,” where considerable emphasis is placed on the importance of reducing physical tension and undoing habits which may be inhibiting the production of a free sound. Streeton and Raymond teach singing in a way that is consistent with the techniques used in training spoken voice. In their words, it is “a technique founded on posture and breathing” and one which focuses on achieving a “free and balanced core sound.” There is a distinctly classical focus to their method but at the heart of their approach is their commitment to training actors to sing in “a robust and flexible way” while accentuating the student's natural abilities, and developing “what is already there.” Much emphasis is placed on making the act of singing less mysterious and daunting. Rather, it emphasizes that each student already possesses an expressive instrument, but may need techniques which may help them reveal and recognize a freely-produced voice.

Specific musical exercises are introduced in Chapter 8, “Ways We Work With Actors—Exercises” including written notation. The authors give valuable practical advice on how best to approach the written notes, stressing the usefulness of knowing basic keyboard skills: “If you can find your way around a computer keyboard there is no reason with practice why you can not do the same on a musical one.” They take into account that many actors do not have any previous musical experience, and they describe taking the time to acquire basic keyboard skills and music theory as “an investment.” Continuing with more physically-based exercises, the chapter goes on to describe some of their specific exercises that are aimed toward “general conditioning” and are

designed to promote mental, physical, and vocal flexibility which focus on strengthening the vocal instrument as a whole. These exercises include working on pitch function by focusing on “the breath speaking the word and the thought moving the note,” as well as exercises aimed at opening the throat, freeing the jaw, and finding ways to bridge the chest, middle, and head registers. All the exercises are offered in a context student actors should find familiar as they revolve around play and imagination and focus on developing an authentic individual response.

Subsequent chapters move the book into performance, starting with Chapter 10, “The Actor’s Solar System.” Here, the authors use the analogy of the singer as the sun and the planets orbiting around them as the composer, genre, lyricist, musical direction, style, and the other actors in stage. This analogy lends insight into the transformation required to sing different styles and how an actor/singer may use style to his/her advantage. Thoughts on choosing appropriate repertoire both for auditions and the importance of choosing songs to use strictly for developmental purposes are covered in Chapter 16, “Thoughts On Repertoire.” The authors suggest categorizing repertoire choices to include choices for long-term and short-term goals as well as immediate needs. Also included in this chapter is a diverse list (several pages long) of songs spanning multiple genres and different voice types to be used as a starting resource when searching for repertoire. The list includes short descriptions of why the piece may be useful as well as a rating of “beginner,” “intermediate,” or “advanced.” Practice and audition preparation strategies in Chapter 18, “Practicing And Taking The Reins” offers practical advice on learning strategies to employ when approaching a new song. Examples include the importance of learning the text as a separate discipline from the music and making goals to expand your exposure to new music. Chapter 21, “Rehearsals And Performances,” lays out in clear terms what to expect if and when you do land a role by outlining what your responsibilities will be, starting from learning your music to caring for your voice throughout the rehearsal process and throughout the run of a show.

Streeton and Raymond’s focus on relating the speaking voice to the singing voice is a wonderful way to demystify the singing process for actors. They encourage the students to explore their vocal instrument in a holistic way to reveal their own expressive and authentic voice. This, in turn, provides a sound foundation from which to embark on a journey in transforming not only their perception of their singing voice, but their ability to own being more than just an actor. They are encouraged to realize their potential as an actor/singer. The book is interspersed with quotes from former students who have gone on to successful careers. They describe their own singing journeys and give testament to the difference the training has made to them both personally and professionally. Another feature of the book is the listening suggestions infused throughout the text. Covering a broad range of styles and genres from tenor Jon Vickers singing an aria from the opera *Peter Grimes*, to Elaine Stritch singing “The Ladies Who Lunch” in a filmed rehearsal of the original cast recording of Sondheim’s *Company*, the recordings serve as wonderful examples of blending of the theatrical and musical that makes exciting and authentic performances.

Singing on Stage: An Actor’s Guide is an excellent guide for an acting student beginning their singing training. Additionally, as a voice teacher who works with actors and dancers making the transformation from single discipline to multidisciplinary performers, I found it to be an extremely useful resource in understanding and developing

strategies for working with actors and in the importance of drawing out each individual actor/singer's strengths.

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Notes on reviewer



Shannon Holmes is a Doctoral Researcher in Theater and Drama Studies at The University of Birmingham, UK, where her research includes investigations into somatic vocal methods that intersect the singing and speaking voice and explorations into the dichotomy of technical control and freedom in vocal expression. Based in Montréal Canada, Ms Holmes is a singer, actor, director, educator, and artistic director of SoMo (Sound In Motion) Theater, a multidisciplinary theater company dedicated to the creation of interdisciplinary performance that explores the intersection of singing and speech. Currently, she is a part-time faculty member in the Theater Department at Concordia University.