



The Singer Acts, The Actor Sings: A Practical Workbook to Living Through Song, Vocally and Dramatically

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Singer Acts, The Actor Sings: A Practical Workbook to Living Through Song, Vocally and Dramatically, by Glenn Seven Allen, London/New York, Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury, 2019, 128 pp., U.S. \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781350043077

The title of Glen Seven Allen's book, *The Singer Acts, The Actor Sings: A Practical Workbook for Living Through Song, Vocally and Dramatically*, is a window into the personal inspiration Allen drew from his own lived experiences in compiling this book. Provoked by his struggle as a student to reconcile the "binary nature" (iv) of his singing and acting training and further influenced by his prolific twenty-five-year career as an actor and operatic tenor, he has developed methods to integrate the two disciplines. His aim was to create a process that could allow the technique to be invisible and storytelling to take precedence (1). In the preface, Allen, who is currently a Lecturer at the Yale School of Drama, compares the purpose of his book to a strand of DNA. Here two separate ribbons of singing and acting are bound together to create a living strand or "code" that will "transcend the challenges of performing in song" (x). He further specifies the book is a response to what he found to be a categorical lack of resources on "acting *while* singing" (iv original emphasis) and has framed it for both students and professionals working across disciplines and genres including musical theater and opera.

Divided into three parts "The Singer Acts," "The Actor Sings" and "The Artist Puts It All Together," Allen chooses to begin the book with "The Singer Acts" to underline the importance of the singer/performer as a storyteller. Here he defines sung expression as an extension of speech and contextualizes it as "what we do when speech is no longer adequate to express what we want to say" (5). He introduces this section by contending that acting while singing should aim to be "no less truthful than any other style of acting" (5). He maintains it is vital that the performer includes both the imaginary circumstances of a scene and the additional "given circumstances" of the song (pitch, rhythm, and accompaniment) and partner both with the given circumstances or the "facts" provided in the text. Next, the chapter outlines exercises in text analysis as it applies to a scene or song. These include: identifying the action/objective, finding (and using) obstacles, establishing internal and external beats, employing tactics for overcoming the identified obstacles, and using explicit and implicit given circumstances. The remaining short sections include the importance of imagination, physicality, and also a description of a method he terms "Go to the zero," which is intended to encourage the performer to be spontaneous and available to impulse. Another section titled "Three circles" (identified as "underplay, interplay, and overplay") discusses the physical and mental state required to be active in performance. The chapter is rounded out by a discussion on the connection between breath, thought and feeling in acting; breathing for sung expression is not addressed here. The final section is titled "Target, intention, and truth" and discusses the importance of committing to acting with intention.

The second chapter "The Actor Sings" introduces the reader to basic singing concepts. Allen describes the elements of singing as a combination of "*the primal and the specific*" (34 original emphasis) and offers the model of a wailing baby to illustrate how vocal technique should best function. Through analyzing how efficiently babies engage muscles in their bodies, maintain open throats to facilitate unrestrictive airflow, and create potent vocalizations without undue physical tension, Allen reminds his audience of our innate ability to

make free and unrestricted sound. The chapter further includes short sections on the importance of sustaining a legato line, delaying diphthongs, and finding a single point of resonance. Descriptions and figures of the vocal tract and soft palate (rendered by Grace Field) are followed by discussions and exercises on support, the role of the diaphragm, and *appoggio*. Sections that follow first focus on the activation and employment of “kinetic chains” as a means to attaining a consistent and reliable sound and then on the importance of avoiding a high laryngeal position when singing. The chapter continues with a more substantial section titled “Breath” and further continues with short sections on vibrato, straight tone, the use of dynamics, vocal range, chest voice, tactics for navigating the middle voice or *passaggio*, head voice, and belting.

In the final chapter “The Artist Puts it all Together,” Allen frames his methods and the importance of fully developing an integrated process as an actor-singer around the notion of being an artist. Defining an artist as “one who makes choices” (79), he asks the reader to examine their own motivation in aspiring to be an artist, asking, “do you aspire to be a performing artist? Or, are you simply a performer?” (79). Allen himself defines a performer as someone who seeks to draw attention to his/herself and a *performing artist* as one who is concerned primarily with telling a story. He contends that “if narcissism is at the core of what you are pursuing, you’ll never be a true artist” and invites those who are aspiring performing artists to “continue reading the chapter to learn the *art* of living through song” (80 original emphasis). The following 19 pages offer exercises focused on more fully integrating singing and acting. Some examples of these integrated exercises are; “Identify the Four Moments” (85) which outlines a process for incorporating physical movements into a song, and “Explore Movement and Stillness” designed to challenge the habitual movement from which performers can sometimes find themselves unable to break free. This exercise involves exploring a song physically as a “rubber-limbed mime who conveys every thought with a gesture (97) then conversely, exploring the same song in complete stillness as if a statue.

At 128 pages (including the Appendix, index, and all supplementary pages) Allen’s book is compact and not nearly as comprehensive as other recent publications concerning the integration of acting through song. Nevertheless, he introduces readers to useful exercises that may provide beginner actor-singers with a firm foundation in their practice. There are 26 video resources included via online links (provided after the Appendix) of select exercises described in the book, as well as a few that give a general commentary on the core aims of Allen’s method. Some of these videos function as essential extensions of the written text with Allen physically demonstrating the exercises. (“Sing with a Focused, Gathered Sound” and “The Diaphragm” are two examples that may be particularly helpful for the reader to gain a broader understanding through auditory and visual means.) Other videos, however, such as “What is Acting” and “What is Singing?” serve simply to summarize what is already in the written text.

Allen has generously interspersed personal stories throughout this practical workbook, making it both relatable and easy to read, and perhaps providing some motivation and inspiration to young performers on the brink of a career. While *The Singer Acts, The Actor Sings: A Practical Workbook for Living Through Song, Vocally and Dramatically* would be useful for performers across disciplines, the first chapter would likely prove too elementary for trained actors and the second far too basic for trained singers, leaving the third and final chapter as the main point of interest. Nevertheless, Allen presents his readers with practical methods in becoming a more holistic performer who aspires to tell stories through song. He efficiently addresses the challenges of navigating singing with a solid technical foundation while living truthfully through the song as a means of revealing authentic sung vocal expression.

Notes on contributor



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 part-time faculty in the Theater Department at Concordia University.

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The Dramatic Text Workbook and Video: Practical Tools for Actors and Directors 2nd ed., by David Carey and Rebecca Clark Carey, London, Methuen Drama, 2019, 264 pp., U.S. \$26.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781350055056

David Carey and Rebecca Clark Carey's latest book *The Dramatic Text Workbook and Video* is a rich and detailed roadmap for developing an embodied sensitivity and proficiency with text from exploring individual speech sounds to performance. An updated version of *The Verbal Arts Workbook*—with a revised introduction, updated reading lists, and links to online videos—this work aims to investigate a character's language as the primary source to guide an actor in bringing their character to life. The Careys emphasize how this exploration and understanding is not an intellectual activity for a performer, but primarily a physical one.

Workbook explores this premise through a progressive structure. The main body of the book is divided into six chapters: Sound, Image, Sense, Rhythm, Argument, and Putting it All Together. Each chapter begins with an introduction to the chapter's thematic framework followed by an exploration of the concept, several exercises, follow-up reflection questions, additional suggested texts for each exercise, and a further reading list. Videos of selected exercises are posted on Vimeo (links given in the book), and the videos help to bring the book to life. This aids in overcoming some of the limitations of teaching embodied concepts in writing.

While written with actors, directors, and teachers in mind, this workbook is particularly useful for teachers looking to design a curriculum or further develop a particular aspect of working with text. Of particular note is the section addressed directly to students with dyslexia, offering strategies for working with text. Each chapter is filled with teaching tips, acknowledgment of limitations or risks when applicable and estimated time allotments for each exercise. The follow-up questions in each chapter may facilitate discussion opportunities or journal assignments for students. Appendices at the end of the book provide a sample warm-up to precede the exercises, an explanation of parts of speech and punctuation, descriptions of Rudolph Laban and Laban Movement Analysis, suggestions for curriculum planning, and details of each author's background. While some of the exercises build on