

*Trigger: A Musical Theatre Actor's Guide to
Belting at Gunpoint in the Audition*

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Michael N. Ferraro

Thesis Advisor

Jodi Cotton

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**Ball State University
Muncie, IN**

May 2014

Expected Date of Gra

May 2014

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Abstract

In the world of Musical Theatre performance, auditioning is the first way for anyone to get a foot in the door. My thesis spends time figuring out a simple, helpful way in which actors can jump into their work within an audition setting through an audition trigger sheet that builds upon technique and tools that are easily accessible in an actor's armory. These 16 to 32 bars of music are what show directors and casting directors what an actor can do, and whether or not they are right for the part. Most of my time over the next few years will be spent auditioning for countless musicals. I will need a wide range of songs to choose from at a moment's notice, whether I am auditioning for a Golden Age Rogers + Hammerstein show or a contemporary Jason Robert Brown musical. This project includes a list of songs that I have in my book at every audition with all of the required analysis done. Each song has with it the trigger sheet that I have developed in order to activate a solid, compelling audition. The songs themselves each possess a specific internal audition cut. The trigger sheet I developed will be extremely helpful to me when I am at an audition, standing outside the door waiting for my time to enter. I can spend my time identifying with each of these songs and focusing on the story I want to tell. It will be an invaluable tool for me over the beginning years of my acting career.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jodi Cotton for agreeing to be my advisor for this project and for being an amazing teacher and friend.

I would like to thank Michael Elliott for helping me choose my repertoire and training my voice to be what it is today.

I would like to extend many thanks to Dee Dee Batteast, Wendy Saver, Karen Kessler and Drew Vidal for giving me valuable coaching as a singing actor.

I am extremely thankful to the Department of Theatre and Dance co-chair, Eva Patton, for exposing me to the realities of auditioning in the real world.

I would like to thank Sutton Foster for being an amazing teacher and mentor, for teaching me the artistry of making a song personal, and for teaching me that I am enough.

Finally, I am eternally grateful to all of my past and present theatre professors for their infinite wisdom and guidance, for always challenging me to find the strength inside of me, and for giving me the courage to be myself.

Author's Statement

The average time in an audition room for an actor is approximately 2 minutes, but it is said that the casting directors have made their decisions about the actor within the first 20-30 seconds. The audition is the first step in getting a job in which you can utilize all of your training in the most extensive of ways. Auditions for shows can pop up at a moment's notice, and it is important to be prepared to audition for many roles and shows at any time. The pieces in one's book should capture an actor's versatility and range. Within the typical actor's training, there is a significant amount of emphasis that is placed on technique, analysis, and actor methods, which are imperative when approaching a script and music for the first time. There is not as much time, though, spent on the idea of jumping into story telling with only a moment's notice. Based on the fact that casting directors make their decision quite quickly in an audition room, the first 10 seconds in the space are the most crucial moments for an actor (Wallace, "Those First 10 Seconds"). **My thesis spends time figuring out a simple, helpful way in which actors can jump into their work within an audition setting through an audition trigger sheet that builds upon technique and tools that are easily accessible in an actor's armory.**

Throughout four years of training in Ball State University's Musical Theatre program, I have heard a wide array of viewpoints from professors as to how an actor should approach the work. I have learned countless acting, voice, and movement techniques that have helped to aid in truthful story-telling through song and text. These techniques seemed to be most helpful for an actor when they approached a role in rehearsal and full-length performance, as our work as actors generally revolves around

a finished product. It is the audition, however, that is the first step into booking projects and performances. An actor acts, but auditioning is the actor's job. There were a few classes at Ball State that really helped me to focus my energy on auditioning and being successful in the audition room. Some of those courses included workshops with professional actors, agents, classroom work and performances that have helped to form my audition technique.

In my fall semester of 2013, I was registered for a cabaret class under the direction of Two-Time Tony Award winner, Sutton Foster, with help from our department chair, Bill Jenkins, and our voice teacher/accompanist, Jodi Cotton. It was through this class that I was able to build my work as an artist and utilize my creative choices as a way for me to mold and market myself how I wanted to. This class is what has helped me to take all of the tools I have learned and utilize them in a way that is truly unique and authentically myself. The weekly exercises from Sutton allowed me to explore through different boundaries that I had and stretch myself past those limitations. I was able to utilize this course in a specific way through professional auditions and performances. I believe that I have opened my horizons immensely when approaching work in the future. I have found a new sense of play in my work as well as a significant level of truth.

There were weekly challenges and exercises in Sutton's class, but the ones that helped me most happen through taking the songs and rearranging them in a new way, whether that be through tempo, through time signature, or through changing the gender. This helped me to explore and approach the pieces in a new, unique way. Learning to not strictly play by the rules is something that I have come to embrace as an artist.

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There are few moments in this profession when doing things by the rules gets you recognized. Making things become my own has helped me so much as an artist. I have been able to figure out new ways to approach songs and not be afraid of whether or not something is overdone. I have learned to take the overdone, common songs and put a new, unique spin on them. This has helped me so much as an actor in regards to creating my own given circumstances and character.

On top of this class, I was also in our department's Chicago Senior Showcase which consisted of a weekly class during the fall semester, culminating in a performance in Chicago on December 2, 2013. Through this class, I had one-on-one work sessions with my advisor, Jodi Cotton to dive in and polish my song for the showcase. I also worked with acting faculty members Dee Dee Batteast and Drew Vidal. It was through working with these three people that I was able to figure out the best way to approach singing and acting in a way that was interesting for the audience. They taught me that I was more than enough and I did not need to add anything to my performances in order to please the audience. Finding that trust in myself was something that very much changed my approach to acting throughout the rest of my senior year. Performing in Chicago with the Showcase, and in Indianapolis and New York City with the Cabaret was completely eye opening. The responses from the audience after these performances reiterated the simple, solid choices that I had made as an actor and artist.

Spring semester of senior year, I spent a bulk of my time auditioning for professional productions. The cabaret and showcase classes were what helped to shape my audition as well as build my confidence as an artist. I went on auditions in Chicago, New York, Atlanta and Indianapolis throughout that semester. The trick to a

having a solid audition is to simply perform and rehearse it over and over again. There are so many varying factors that occur on an audition site, however. Sometimes, you are auditioning in a room you have never been in, or you are auditioning in a completely new city, you could have been sitting in a room waiting for your audition for four hours, or you could also sitting surrounded by twenty people who look exactly like you. These variables are less than comforting, so having a way to ground myself in my work and remind myself of what my goal was that day was something I felt like I needed to develop and work on.

Auditioning for the musical theatre requires you to have a binder full of different songs that show off what you can do as a singing actor. When auditioning for a musical, it is your time to show the casting directors your voice, acting technique, and ability at its best. You have anywhere from 16 to 32 bars of music to show that off. With the short nature of this, it is important to utilize this time in the most efficient and effective way possible. As an actor, it is important to remain confident in the work you bring into the room when auditioning. The main way to do this is to remember our job as actors- to move people, to entertain and tell stories, to express in ways one may not always get to in real life. An audition is a performance, no matter how short it is, so it is important for an actor to revel in it, to entertain, engage, soak it in, and make it their own (Veenker). In an audition setting, however, there are so many things going on, that it seems impossible to enjoy this short performance. It is as if actors have no time to focus and prepare themselves in the same way they can for a show. It is this struggle in particular that my thesis is attempting to combat.

As actors, the number one rule is to always be prepared for anything so that you can make choices in the moment. Once you get to this point, however, things begin to become so natural that actors sometimes forget the basis of what they are trying to do. They forget the basic fundamentals that are supposed to be used within performing a short song or monologue. After having numerous workshops over the past year, it seems that any problems that the guest artists expressed all stemmed from people forgetting their basic fundamentals within their pieces. "Auditioning is: showing you can make choices. Showing you can adjust. Showing you are BRAVE" (Turner). The case was not that the actors had neglected doing that work; it was simply that those pieces of the work were not what were thought of immediately. So, I thought that making a trigger sheet with all of this information was something that I could personally do to make a seamless transition into an audition.

The first step that any musical theatre actor must take is to prepare their repertoire. I have taken into account two resources to compile my audition book in which I will apply my trigger sheets. One of these was the Ball State University Musical Theatre Repertoire Guide that features a list of recommended composers and genres that students should explore throughout their voice training in the department. The other guide I used is from Roberta Duchak who is an accomplished music director and vocal coach from the Chicagoland area. I found that after completing my training in voice from the University, I was able to fill almost all of the categories in Roberta's book checklist. I have included both of these sheets in appendix A. These slots have provided the actor with a way to ensure that no matter what audition is occurring, they can go in confident that they have something to sing for the casting directors. Although there are twenty-

one categories, it does not necessarily mean that an actor needs that number of songs in their book. When compiling my book, I found that I had a few songs that covered two or more sections on the list. Because of this, I thought it beneficial to color code my songs so that they were readily available for the actor at a moment's notice. It is quite common in an audition setting for the auditors to ask for a second piece, so being able to find these pieces quickly is important. When choosing songs to put into the book, it is important for the actor to find songs that fit into their range and also are accessible to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. It is also important that the song has an internal thirty-two bar cut that includes these guideposts. Finding ways to separate yourself from the other twenty people at the audition who look like you is imperative.

“One of the ways is through the choices that you make. Your choices should represent the qualities in your personality that connects you to the material with ease and commitment. These choices need to be a reflection of who you are, how you feel and what you think. This is a key step in letting the casting director get to know you. They need to offer a window into your personality and leave no doubt as to what you, and only you, have to add to the role” (Wallace, “FAQ”).

Making sure that you bring your best self into the audition room at all times will guarantee confidence regardless of the outcome from the audition. If you do not book the job, you can always say that you did everything that you could, and that the decision was out of your hands. If you end up booking the job, that only reiterates your hard work and dedication.

Having a solid foundation to look back to in any audition setting inspired the basis of my trigger sheets. In our training here at Ball State University, the musical theatre

and acting faculty have provided us with tools of analyzing songs through the character, story, lyrics, music, subtext, and objectives. These components help the actor to flesh out the piece in the most specific of ways so that informed choices can be made about the piece. With all of this specific work, it is easy to forget the main purpose of what needs to be done with the pieces. My trigger sheet uses five basic principles of acting that anyone can look at to trigger all of the in-depth work that they have done for a song. These basics include the relationship, conflict, moment before, objective, and the button. Each of these basics comes with a question that must be answered and are as follows:

RELATIONSHIP: Who am I talking to?

CONFLICT: What am I fighting for? What do I want?

MOMENT BEFORE: What has my partner done or said?

OBJECTIVE (ACTIVE VERBS): How am I going to solve this problem?

THE BUTTON: Do I get what I want at the end of my song?

Many people may take this and find small choices to answer these questions, but one must remember that when doing something that is a small blip in a casting director's day, it is important to be as interestingly you as possible. "Exciting truths can be truthful, too. Learn to prefer those. Don't stick to the everyday. If we see it every day, who will go pay money to see it?" (Shurtleff, 155). A crucial thing for actors to do with this trigger sheet is to utilize it with a sincere amount of imagination and play in order to showcase the best of their abilities.

The basic musical details about the song have also been in order for the actor to categorize this song according to style, range, and tempo. Having these specifics

readily available provide the actor with a less stressful way to look through their book at a moment's notice. The style is helpful in moments when an actor is asked to sing a specific type of song. The range is written on the trigger sheet so that the actor knows exactly what is required within the song. This is helpful for multiple reasons: an actor easily knows how high or low they need to warm up their voice, they know how large or small of a range the song goes so they can make an informed decision depending on the type of show or role they are auditioning for. The tempo is key component of this audition trigger sheet. So many times in an audition, I have given the pianist a tempo, but because of a variety of factors, not the least of which is nerves, the tempo has been lost in translation from actor to pianist. With first saying what the general tempo is (up-tempo, ballad, moderate, etc.) having a metronomic marking on the sheet allows the pianist to know exactly how long a note is. It is also possible for an actor to have a metronome app on their phone that they can use prior to walking into the audition room that allows them to get the tempo in their body from the beginning. Any time that the actor can take more responsibility for story-telling, and less for the minute details guarantees a smaller margin of error on the actor's end at an audition. With all of these components within easy access, my trigger sheet reduces stress for the actor.

Perhaps the most important part on this trigger sheet, however, is the final question: "HOW AM I GOING TO CONNECT TO THIS STORY TODAY?" Within this section, it is important to have a story you want to tell: something very specific and current to your life today. The key to tapping into this section of the trigger sheet is to truly understand what the story of the song is. For example, in my book, I have the song "Boy With Dreams" which is originally about a boy who wants to be an inventor and

impact the world. This is very specific through the text, however as an actor, it is very possible to take these ideas and boil them down to a very base level. In this instance, the story would be something along the lines of being about someone who wants to move on and make a difference and be a part of something larger than him. For me, it is most actable if I relate the song to me wanting to leave school and go out into the world to create art. Though the lyrics are not explicitly about this, there is definitely room for the intention and subtext to lie in my particularized situation of graduation and moving on. The approach of a song can vary from day to day depending on the actor's personal life and mood that day. It is our job as performers to be story-tellers, and there is definitely an option to take and channel those feelings into our songs. Actors are constantly advised to not bring their personal baggage into the audition room, however, that statement relates to when the baggage hinders a performance and pushes it away from the actor's intention. If that baggage can be helpful in some way, then using that as a method of triggering the piece is definitely encouraged. The audience hears words and reads intention. They cannot, however read your mind and tell what you are actually thinking. Because of this, subtext and personal connection can be very helpful in an audition situation, especially when you do not have a tangible, real life person in the room with you to share energy and engage with.

The trigger sheet that I have developed has become something that I have utilized a few times already since its development. All of the pieces that I have compiled in my book have been memorized and polished vocally. Sometimes, I will not touch a song for a while, but will continue to use a few songs over and over. If I have lost any connection to the song over the period of not singing those other songs in my book, that

is when the trigger sheets become the most practical. The great thing about this project, and an audition book is that it's always a work in progress. Voices are always growing and changing. People are always growing and changing. Connecting to a song, as a result, is also always changing. Having a book that is organized in an efficient manner helps an actor to build upon their repertoire and change songs based on where the actor is emotionally and how they can connect to a piece.

This thesis was an invaluable project for me, as it forced me to really prepare myself for entering into my chosen career as an actor. My repertoire is now all in one place and is immediatelyactable. I now feel as though I can go into an audition room and have a huge array of stories that I can tell to the auditors. This project truly culminates my training at Ball State, and I cannot wait to continue to utilize this audition binder in the future and share my successful trigger sheet with friends, colleagues, and professors to share with future students at the university.

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THE ACTOR'S AUDITION TRIGGER SHEET
(INSERT SONG TITLE HERE)

STYLE: (genre/year) **RANGE:** (lowest-highest notes) **TEMPO:** (metronome)

THE BASICS:

1. **RELATIONSHIP:** Who am I talking to?
2. **CONFLICT:** What am I fighting for? What do I want?
3. **MOMENT BEFORE:** What has my partner done or said?
4. **OBJECTIVE(ACTABLE VERBS):** How am I going to solve this problem?
5. **THE BUTTON:** Do I get what I want at the end of my song?

THE FINAL QUESTION:

HOW AM I GOING TO CONNECT TO THIS STORY *TODAY*?

Have a story you want to tell: Something very specific and current.

THE AFFIRMATION: They *want me* to be the solution to their problem.
I am here to tell a story.
Do what you do. Love what you do. Deliver more than you promise.
BREATHE.