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When You Got It, Bump It: A Lost Showgirl's Cabaret

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For a student of the theatre, writing, directing, producing, and performing one's own show epitomizes the marriage between craft and academia. Creating a solo performance is both thrilling and terrifying, requiring extreme focus, persistence, and flexibility. Over the course of ten weeks this past winter, I strove to create a forty-minute piece that would showcase my talent and interest an audience. For me, a long-limbed dancer with a love for jazz music, it took the shape of the story of a showgirl. "When You Got It, Bump It: A Lost Showgirl's Cabaret" became this jazzy evening of theatre, complete with sequins, fishnets, and a top hat. It is a piece that I will take with me when I move to New York City next spring, hopefully to be performed again soon in a jazz club near the Great White Way.

ARTISTIC CHOICES

I wanted to create a cabaret, not to fulfill a requirement or complete a project, but rather to produce something that was my *own* – something that I could continue to use in the future. The value in having a piece of your own creation is priceless. I had the artistic freedom to perform whatever I wanted in whatever fashion I chose. Rarely does an actor have such a unique opportunity. Creating my own cabaret afforded me the chance to synthesize my skills as a writer, director, producer, *and* actor alike. An original piece has very few limitations, if any, which can be both a blessing and a curse. Most

importantly, without the words of a playwright or the precedent set by an original cast, the piece can be catered to highlight the performer's strengths. In a practical sense, developing a one-person show is hugely beneficial for an emerging theatre artist, as it is a work of theatre that one can individually perform. As I prepare to transition from a college training program to the real world of theatre, a personal cabaret is an invaluable tool to have in my back pocket.

I sought to create a piece that would highlight my affinity for vocal jazz and my long legs. My natural vocal quality is bright, clear and straight-tone, all of which lend themselves to the big band sound of the 1940s, a style that I love to sing. I also enjoy bending melodies and scatting, both of which are prominent in jazz music. Additionally, I am aware that my legs are perhaps my most defining physical feature, as they are one of the first things that people, and more specifically, casting directors, notice about me. Therefore, it quickly became clear that my cabaret should include jazz music, dancing, and especially, high kicks. As I began to think about concepts for my show, I discovered that I did not want to play myself in the piece, but rather portray a character or historical figure. While my original Capstone idea had been to tell the life story of a 1940s movie star, it seemed to compromise the implementation of dance. As I began to think about song choices, all ideas pointed towards taking on the persona of some type of showgirl. While I initially struggled to find a specific gateway

into this topic, I eventually concluded that I would portray one of the famed showgirls in the well-known musical, *Gypsy*. Although these three women, the characters of Electra, Tessie Tura, and Mazeppa, are quite iconic, their roles in the show are rather small, and therefore, underdeveloped. Choosing to portray Mazeppa provided me with a basis for a character, but still freedom to create a unique piece. "Gotta Get a Gimmick," the showgirls' main number in *Gypsy*, was immediately added to my song list. This was certainly a turning point in the development of this piece, as I then realized that I would like to add two female co-stars to play the other characters. This decision subsequently informed the basic structure of the show: we would each play our respective role throughout the cabaret. Each character would take on an extreme persona, and I would be the star of our act. As I began developing my character, one of my instinctive choices was to assume a jaded point of view, as those who know *Gypsy* are likely to remember more about Gypsy Rose Lee, the lead of the show, than Mazeppa. This then led me to wonder about how my character felt about *Gypsy*. As previously mentioned, because Mazeppa is a smaller role, there is little textual support to answer such questions, so I created my own story. Slowly but surely, a character began to develop, as did a relationship between that character and *Gypsy*. Ultimately, I made the choice that *Gypsy* had stolen Mazeppa's fame. This premise became a defining feature of the cabaret. It gave the characters the

motivation to sing and dance and provided the actors with clear given circumstances that would inform their characters' behavior. Once I made a conscious decision regarding Mazeppa's relationship with Gypsy, it was much easier to create a story. As my advisor suggested, I designed the cabaret, intended to be 35-40 minutes in full, in three separate acts. The first act introduced the concept and structure of my piece. I opened with a production number, "There's No Business Like Show Business," which not only introduced each character, but also introduced the presence of dance into the piece. Because I included choreography in the first number, I would maintain this element throughout the performance. This decision helped inform the shape of the rest of the piece, which I then knew needed a few more production-style numbers. I thus placed "Gotta Get a Gimmick" at the end of the first act and "All Girl Band" in the third act, both of which have similar production values as the opening number. Later on, I would place "There's Gotta Be Something Better," another production number, at the end of the second act. Establishing these anchor points was pivotal in designing the rest of the piece. As I began to add more songs, a typical story of love and heartbreak began to emerge. My advisor also suggested implementing the concept of the reprise, employed for comedic effects, emphasis, or to invoke an emotional quality within the audience. On my song list was "Stormy Weather," written by Harold Arlen and perhaps made most famous by Lena Horne. My advisor

suggested that, as Lena did in her one-woman show, I sing this particular song twice, with the second being my “eleven o’clock number,” a term used to describe the emotionally-driven song placed near the end of most musicals, many of which serve as turning points or epiphanies for the leading character. The first time I would sing “Stormy Weather,” it would be much shorter and embody a more literal meaning. The song is a woman’s lament, no longer being with the man that she loves. As I pulled from my own experiences, I was able to distinguish between the anguish experienced in physical, as opposed to emotional, detachment. In the first version of the song, I would seek to express the physical pain of being separated physically – those moments when distance keeps lovers apart. In the second version, however, I strove to illuminate the heartbreak of the emotional separation from the person that one loves. I worked closely with my pianist to develop this progression, as I relied heavily on the accompaniment style to help me create a journey within the music. The first version was much shorter and had a lighter feel than the reprise. The reprise was characterized by a more broad, soulful sound that matched the deeper emotional values that I intended to expose.

I included two other reprises, “Jimmy” and “There’s Gotta Be Something Better,” both of which were intended to strengthen the arc of my character. With “Jimmy,” the reprise had comedic effects. The first version of the song was included within what became known as

my "Tall Girl Medley," in which I changed several words of the songs to share the awkwardness of growing up taller than everyone else. The original, rather generic lyrics of "Jimmy" became about how he was the only boy who was tall enough to date Mazeppa, who stands five feet ten inches. Again, I used this opportunity to draw from a real life experience: the frustration of the tallest boys dating the shortest girls. At the end of the song, six-foot-four Jimmy makes it clear to Mazeppa that he "only dates girls under five-foot-four," thus ruining her dreams of romance. Later on in the cabaret, however, Mazeppa finds love in the five-foot-ten "Timmy," a reprise of "Jimmy."

A reprise of "There's Gotta Be Something Better" was included for two reasons: to allow me a break from the stage and to set up a greater emotional shift before "Stormy Weather." This number was originally a trio, sung by three dance hall girls in the musical *Sweet Charity*. My first thought about the piece in the context of my cabaret was that only my co-stars would sing this uplifting, hopeful song. I envisioned that it would provide the audience with a change of pace and more exposure to the other two women onstage. The reprise of the number would then be my solo, a slower, more thoughtful version of the song in direct preparation for "Stormy Weather," to which I would directly segue. After an initial viewing of this section, however, my advisor suggested that the reprise of "There's Gotta Be Something Better" could help create a stronger emotional journey if we

implemented the trio, as originally staged in the musical. The high-energy choreography would lead the audience to believe that Mazeppa was preparing to jump over an emotional hurdle rather than wallow in its pain and sorrow. Thus, when I did choose to slow the tempo and transition into a place of despair, it would have a stronger impact on the audience. It exposed a deeper emotional journey as the audience watched Mazeppa believe that she could move on from heartbreak immediately (“There’s Gotta Be Something Better”) and then discover that she was actually very hurt (“Stormy Weather”). This type of struggle typically resonates with audience members, and thus, keeps them interested. Proper use of the reprise in a cabaret is invaluable, which is certainly something that I learned to capitalize upon in the creation of this piece.

Selecting the opening and closing numbers of the cabaret requires a similar amount of diligence, considering they are two of the three most important songs in the entire piece, along with the eleven o’clock number. The opening number is crucial because it introduces the concept, mood, and style for the entire piece, not to mention, the performer’s voice. It establishes the premise for the evening to follow. When I discovered that I could use “There’s No Business Like Show Business” as an opportunity to play on the words “Show Business,” meaning the actual business of a *showgirl*, I was sold. Again, I worked closely with my pianist to create the concept that I had dreamt of –

beginning very slowly and gradually picking up the tempo into an upbeat Broadway style, complete with choreography. Similarly, the closing number needs to be equally as strong; as it is the final song the performer leaves with the audience. "When You Got It, Flaunt It," which I changed to "When You Got It, Bump It," serves as my closing number. I chose this piece for its playful, upbeat nature and exciting vocal line. As I did with previous numbers in my cabaret, I also changed some words for comedic appeal. This song title became the title of my entire piece, "When You Got It, Bump It: A Lost Showgirl's Cabaret," thus combining Mazeppa's trademark "bump" technique mentioned in "Gotta Get a Gimmick" with the intended message of the show: when you've got it, you may as well use it.

Another major concept that I considered while developing my song list was employing a variety of styles of music. I wanted to create a diverse show that would help highlight different aspects of my character. Many of my songs were jazzy and vampy, which suited me well, but I was concerned that they would evoke similar qualities throughout my performance. Therefore, I strove to include songs of different genres and points of time in a character's life. "The Tall Girl Medley," for instance, provided the audience with more information about the character's life as a young teen, thus providing me, as the actor, with a wonderful opportunity to create a younger version of Mazeppa. This allowed me to steer away from the sexy, vampy

qualities and more towards the young, dorky ones. Having an extreme physical characteristic – a large nose, long legs, etc. – generally provides an actor with a great tool for comedy. Therefore, the flip side of being long-limbed is that it is a great device for physical comedy. In my case, I'm often told I'm good at nerdy or awkward characters. Without the "Tall Girl Medley," the audience would have viewed Mazeppa only in her current age, thus watching similar vampy behavioral qualities throughout the show. Such an insertion, however, revealed Mazeppa's awkward teenage years and provided a different style of music. While I believe this was successful in creating a diverse piece, I also found it to be somewhat limiting. I sought to create a well-balanced set list, yet my concept and character were indeed, very stylized. In retrospect, I realize that it would be possible to expose different aspects of the character without sacrificing music that would be more fitting to the piece. Only two of my songs felt out of place: "I Feel the Earth Move" by Carole King and "Times Like This" from a contemporary musical called *Lucky Stiff*. Even though the "Tall Girl Medley" was comprised of non-jazzy tunes, it still blended more easily with the other songs, whereas the previously mentioned songs seemed to stick out in an ineffective way. Most of the other material stemmed from an older style of musical theatre or jazz, while both "I Feel the Earth Move" and "Times Like This" possessed some more contemporary, "pop" qualities.

Developing a cohesive order of songs relies heavily upon the story being told. My advisor did suggest that I avoid placing three ballads in a row, which for several drafts of my song list, was difficult to achieve. The point in the story in which I found it most difficult to fulfill this principle was within Mazeppa's heartbreak. There were several songs that I felt could illuminate the emotional state of the character, but I soon learned that too many ballads would result in a loss of momentum. In fact, within the final song list, there was only one place that I even had two ballads in a row. It is essential to remain slightly ahead of the audience and to keep them guessing what might come next, as the alternative is boredom. I hoped to achieve this through varying the song choice and constant interaction with the audience. Perhaps the most well received number of the evening, which certainly required audience interaction, was "Gotta Get A Gimmick." Our premise for the number included bringing an older man on stage to help him "get a gimmick." This strategy certainly woke up the audience and introduced the concept of audience *participation* as opposed to merely *interaction*. This brought the performance to a new level, opening up possibilities that left the audience curious as to what could occur next. Tessie Tura, Electra, and Mazeppa all had "advice" to offer the man, not to mention a gimmick, hat, and feather boa to bestow upon him. Our gimmicks were also very exciting – a toy trumpet that plays, tap lights strategically placed on lingerie, and

wings. Needless to say, the laughter coming from the audience was affirmation of their enjoyment.

Another artistic decision that strengthened the scope of my character was in the selection of sophisticated material. The songs that I chose were melodically and harmonically complex, which helped the character of Mazeppa become more than “just” a showgirl. The music lent itself to the creation of a human being, rather than a general caricature. With tight three-part harmonies, intricate jazz chords, variation of melody, and strong piano charts, this music brought Mazeppa and her friends to life. Simple songs with simple chord structures would not have added this vital dimension to my piece. As I continue to improve upon this show in the future, I would like to add percussion and brass to create even richer, big band sound.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

My desire to create a one-woman show developed several years ago after I saw singer-actress Quinn Lemley perform a piece chronicling the life of movie star Rita Hayworth. I enjoyed every aspect of the show; she sang jazz standards of the 1940s, had numerous costume changes, and sang while on a grand piano. Quinn assumed the persona of Ms. Hayworth and proceeded to tell the audience of her life through anecdotes and songs. This sizzling, jazzy show, along with my love of 1940s music greatly influenced my original ideas about the type

of show that I wanted to create. Like Quinn's, my voice is well suited for jazz and big band style music. The concept of portraying a famous movie star also appealed to me, so I knew from the beginning of the process that I wanted to play a character or historical figure, rather than myself.

Ella Fitzgerald was another significant influence in the creation of this piece. I listened to her material in search of song choices and artistic inspiration. For the past three years I have listened to her often, so I am very familiar with her sound and style. Her smoky and smooth tone, along with her ability to vary the melody, were all qualities that I sought to emulate. And although none of his material made it into my cabaret, the music of Cole Porter also greatly influenced the style of my piece. A few summers ago I did a short Cole Porter review, in which I sang fourteen of his songs, almost all in the traditional 1940s big band/jazz style. My relationship with this style of music led me to create a piece that highlighted this sound.

A third artist that I investigated for guidance and inspiration is Norah Jones, most notably for the song, "The Nearer of You." Her cover of this popular tune lends itself to vocal freedom and melodic variation. The simplicity of the instrumentation, a sole piano, allows the voice to become the prominent instrument. This smooth, simple style is typically very effective in a cabaret setting, which is often a restaurant, bar, or other intimate location. Similar to Ella, Norah also

has a smoky, straight-tone quality to her voice, which I sought to emphasize in my cabaret. While my natural timbre is much more clear and focused than either of these two women, I still sought to create a more relaxed sound than I typically produce in my musical theatre work.

In my effort to create a strong character, I looked to Liza Minnelli. I watched several of her videos, one of which directly influenced my opening number, "There's No Business Like Show Business." Liza does a version of this piece in which she begins the number very slowly, with only block chords supporting her, and then it gradually develops into a production number, which is exactly what I sought to do with my version of the song. Her commitment to the text and presence on the stage is powerful and undeniable. In creating the character of Mazeppa, I sought to exude a similar confidence and strength, which brought a brassy vocal and physical quality to my work.

OBSTACLES AND CHANGES TO BE MADE

The time frame for the creation of this piece was roughly ten weeks. I developed this cabaret in conjunction with a class taught by my advisor, which ended up feeling more like an independent study. Luckily a wonderful pianist was provided as a part of the class, but one of the major initial challenges was finding a desirable venue. An ideal

space for a show of this kind is one that is intimate, thus allowing ample opportunity for audience interaction, a key concept of “the cabaret.” Finding a space with decent acoustics is equally as important, however. Both of my ideal venues, Jazz Central (63-seat house) and The Red House (89-seat house), were not available for use. Ultimately, I ended up booking the Jabberwocky Café in the Schine Student Center. After seeing two of my classmates’ cabarets performed in that space, however, it was obvious that the sound was less than ideal. The style of the room is not conducive to good sightlines for the audience and does nothing to enhance the sound. Similarly, the sound system had several issues and was rather costly. Luckily, my private vocal instructor was able to secure her church as an alternative venue. Two weeks before the show, I changed venues to the First Unitarian Universalist Church on Waring Road. This couldn’t have been a better decision. The acoustics in the facility are nothing short of amazing, the stage is bigger than that of the Jabberwocky, there was a grand piano available for use, and the sound system was much better. One aspect that I did sacrifice in changing locations, however, was intimacy with the audience. While I was still able to interact with individuals, there were not enough people in attendance to fill the large space (200 seats). Physically, I was farther away from audience members than I would have been in the Jabberwocky. The acoustic gain, however, was simply far too great to consider sticking with my original venue.

Another challenging aspect of the process was collaborating with several different individuals to create a cohesive work of art. I learned a great deal about working with a pianist and how to better communicate my ideas to her as she helped me create my piece. I also gained experience working with my peers as a director *and* a scene partner. Typically, one would do one or the other, but in this case, I was required to do both. This was sometimes difficult and awkward in establishing how rehearsal would be run. Because it was a new work of art, I often asked for artistic input from my co-stars, but sometimes they were hesitant to offer advice because the overall shape of the cabaret was still in flux. Perhaps the most difficult part about collaboration was finding rehearsal time that worked with four different individuals' schedules. This required patience, flexibility, and great organization. All of these challenges were valuable learning opportunities for an emerging theatre artist, but also have an even greater impact as experience in planning for large projects in any arena outside of theatre.

In addition to facing technical and logistical obstacles, there were also several challenges to meet within the artistic process. One of my biggest problems in the development of my concept was trying to determine the story that I wanted to tell. A key question that I struggled to answer for several weeks was "Why is Mazeppa doing this performance?" After a few weeks of failing to establish a clear

premise, I finally realized that the answer is simple. Mazeppa, as a showgirl, is a performer, so to put on show would be a part of her lifestyle. For more specificity, however, I determined that she, Tessie Tura, and Electra, were “on the circuit” to reclaim the fame that Gypsy Rose Lee had stolen from them. Such a clear focus immediately helped my story take shape. These strong, given circumstances grounded my character and informed my choices. Another gray area that I initially struggled to clarify was the perception of time and place. While the characters we portrayed were originally created to live in the 1920s, I deliberately chose to blur the lines of time and space. While most of my music was of an older musical theatre or jazz style, it was composed within a variety of decades. Similarly, I chose to make references to the current time as well as the 1920s, with comments about Patti Lupone and cell phones, but also being “on the circuit.” It was important for me, as the actor, to feel as though I could freely interact with the audience, while still maintaining stylistic elements of my character. I think the premise of a 1920s showgirl performing with knowledge of the present time was effective.

With Mazeppa’s story of her youth, love, heartbreak, and resilience, I strove to illuminate a message of embracing one’s true self, thus the phrase, “When You Got It, Bump It.” I sought to create a journey that would lead Mazeppa to make this discovery about her life. In a technical sense, I knew that I wanted the eleven o’clock number to

serve as a release of her deepest emotional pain, thus framing clear moments of doubt, decision, and discovery as she ultimately decides to join her cohorts in singing the triumphant "All Girl Band." Mazeppa then affirms her decision to love and embrace herself with the title number, "When You Got It, Bump It." While literally, the text encourages the listeners to show off their physical attributes, I also hoped the audience would perceive a more figurative meaning. I intended for the song to serve as a celebration of individual gifts and talents. After all, one should celebrate and use her strengths to her advantage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There were several individuals who helped and guided me as I developed my own show this past semester. I would like to thank Rodney Hudson, my advisor and teacher, for working with me from start to finish. First and foremost, he helped me solidify my concept for the cabaret, not to mention offered a constant flow of ideas concerning my song list, dialogue, and acting choices. He provided guidance and advice, yet demanded excellence. This pushed me to work harder and to never settle for anything but my best work. Secondly, I would like to thank Rebecca Karpoff, my honors reader, voice teacher, and mentor, for her dedication to my growth as an individual within this project and throughout the past three years.

Without her constant support and guidance, I would not be the performer I am today. In addition to coaching my singing and helping me shape musical choices, she also secured her church for my performances and worked closely with me on my paper, thus resulting in an increased donation of her time. Next I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the wonderful Alice Muzquiz, my pianist and music director. Alice worked with me for countless hours helping me form ideas into reality. Without her talents and expertise, I would have been performing a senior concert, not a cabaret. Alice helped me create transitions from one song to the next, constantly underscoring my dialogue and adjusting flawlessly when I made mistakes. I owe her much more than I can express in words. She was my partner in creating this show and I am so grateful for her time and energy. In addition to Alice, I had two other partners working closely with me throughout the development of my cabaret: my co-stars, Olivia Gjurich and Katie LaMark. Their patience, ingenuity, stage presence, and impeccable musicianship were invaluable. I am so appreciative of their commitment to this project. I would also like to acknowledge Marie Kemp, who allowed me to copy some of her music; Mia Michelle McClain, who transposed several of my songs; and Dave Palmer, who recorded my Saturday evening performance. Lastly, I would like to formally thank my family for their never-ending love and support. To them, I owe everything.

Creating, producing, and starring in my own cabaret has been an invaluable experience that I will continue to learn from even as the years pass. The opportunity to develop an entirely original piece of work allowed me to learn so much about myself as a performer and leader. I not only cultivated my craft, but also my skills in collaboration, problem solving, and creativity. This is a project that I will continue to maintain and develop for years to come. I am excited to begin life after college with such a unique tool at hand. After all, when you got it, you should absolutely bump it.