

PERFORMANCE PRINCIPLES FOR MUSICAL THEATRE

AGES: Middle School, High School

DESCRIPTION

To familiarize students with essential performance principles that are directly related to the musical theatre genre. These principles have some application in solely dramatic presentations, but are meant to enhance the various performance demands of musical theatre.

FULL LESSON PLAN

Performance Principles

1. Stress the first beat of each measure

As most numbers in musical theatre tend to be lively, emotional, or driving, most of the key words tend to come on the first beats of the music. In order to make a strong and building impact on vocals, stress the consonant sound instead of sliding into the vowel sounds (this also helps with making the words in the song understandable to the audience).

2. Make the words understandable

Lyrics can be difficult to understand, especially when the notes are high and movement and dance is incorporated into a song. Practice singing lyrics and making the words as clear as possible, with a focus on clean vowel sounds that fit the music and are still understandable. Test yourself by recording yourself to hear how the words sound or use other people in your production/class to help be a test audience for your lyrical clarity.

3. Sing “through your eyes”

“Singing through the eyes”, as though the vocal are emitting through them, helps brings a liveliness to your performance and creates a stringer vocal sound. This principle also creates a presence onstage and within the actor that helps in the creation and believability of a scene/number.

4. Play out to the audience

Unlike a straight play where characters primarily interact with other characters and their surroundings, the strength in musical theatre lies in playing out to the audience, particularly during vocal and dance numbers. Be careful though to not lose focus of the setting/situation you’re in; that is still your principal focus.

5. Keep the scene focused

As musicals tend to require more stage space than plays, the attention of the audience must be directed to key characters in a scene (leads or soloists in a number). Use a variety of levels to create importance on specific characters or turn the shoulders of chorus members upstage to keep a focus on the main players in a scene. Strategic placement of cast members on set pieces can also achieve this effect.

6. Be alive in the character

When blocking or being directed in a scene, it is important to realize that your presence on stage has a purpose, whether you are the focus of that scene or not. A person who is not in character and has no purpose or objective stands out more to the audience and ruins the effect of the scene. As a chorus member, be sure that you have a well-defined character that is consistently portrayed on stage; keep this character alive and the scene will not be spoiled.

7. Play in a state of action

Standing motionless may be appropriate for some numbers in a musical, but usually tends to be boring in most situations. Singing while moving, dancing, or focusing on a certain action/activity is always stronger. A simple tactic is to think of a purposefully, hyperbolized state of playing the scene in contrast to how it would be played in a play. Punctuate movement throughout the scene but keep it continuous. For chorus members, create a variety of action by creating levels, gesturing, moving, and dancing.

8. Enjoy yourself and make sure others know you are!

A lot of the energy from a musical theatre comes from the excitement and pleasure one takes in playing the scene or performing the number. This energy is contagious and will spread through the cast and, most importantly, to the audience. This becomes particularly difficult, especially when performing the same role for long production runs. However, immersing yourself into the show and projecting your enthusiasm will serve your performance and the overall production well in terms of audience reception and enjoyment.

Lesson Activity

After teaching the performance principles to students, a couple of tasks that will demonstrate their understanding and application of the principles can be implemented.

- Allow students to block and choreograph a scene that leads into a number from a musical before teaching the principles. Allow all students to critique the work by giving them areas to look at or by creating a rubric for quick commentary and assessment. Instruct the principles of musical theatre and ask students to revisit their scene and number with them in mind. Students will perform and be critiqued again by the class and instructor and a formal evaluation will take place with a (hopefully) stronger product.
- Students will attend a performance of a musical and identify, with specific examples, the performance principles of musical theatre. Students will then write a short critique about how the employment of these principles enhanced the overall production and reception of the musical. Note: this is a small lesson to warrant an excursion to a musical. Some suggestions are to incorporate this task into a critique assignment or to watch a musical in class on video to allow students an affordable and accessible way to demonstrate their understanding of

this concept.