

# The SAVI Singing Actor

Your Guide to Peak Performance on the Musical Stage

**CHARLES GILBERT**



© 2019 Charles Gilbert [www.savisingingactor.com](http://www.savisingingactor.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law. ISBN 978-1-54397-263-4

*PRAISE for*  
**"The SAVI Singing Actor"**

**"The SAVI Singing Actor offers students and teachers an easy-to-grasp approach to some of the most common challenges singing actors face. In a series of handy exercises, loaded with mnemonic devices that make these techniques easy to understand and apply, author Charles Gilbert dissects and delivers the SAVI techniques in ways that translate quickly to classroom study and performance. Long a leader in Musical Theatre pedagogy, Charles Gilbert has finally delivered an essential text that belongs on every serious teacher's shelf. His ideas and exercises are certain to find their way into your studio, as they have mine."**

-Joe Deer

Distinguished Professor of Musical Theatre,  
Wright State University

*Author, Acting in Musical Theatre, Directing in Musical Theatre*

**"I've known Charlie Gilbert—as a producer, performer and pedagogue, as artist, academician and administrator—for 25 years and his SAVI tools are a perfect bridge to 21st century storytelling in musical theatre."**

-Forrest McClendon

Tony Nominee, *The Scottsboro Boys*  
Lunt Fontanne Fellow. Barrymore Award Winner

**“The act of singing one’s thoughts is unnatural and yet, when done well, it’s the most powerful form of expression. Great musical actors have therefore always seemed a sort of enigma. That is, until now. The SAVI technique has finally demystified this art form. It is a codified and accessible technique for any person wanting to learn the skill of great musical storytelling. For myself, it has been an invaluable part of my success as both a performer and a coach. It is my anchor when building a performance of any new song. It ensures that my choices are beat-by-beat specific, authentic to my own truth, interestingly varied, and intensely powerful.”**

-Kelli Barrett  
singer, actress and coach

**“A thorough and clear journey through the art of preparing both the singer and the song. The SAVI method is laid out in fun, easy-to-follow steps that illuminate the process of singing music theatre songs. The author draws from diverse sources and adds memorable axioms of his own to make this process both relatable and profound. With unique, original etudes and exercises, this is a valuable resource for anyone who teaches or performs in the music theatre.”**

-Tracey Moore  
Professor of Theater, Hartt School of Music, University of Hartford  
Author, *Acting the Song*

**“Charlie Gilbert’s groundbreaking book gives any teacher, student, or professional artist a clear, step-by-step method! Using exercises that train and condition Specificity, Authenticity, Variety, and Intensity - anyone can now become ‘The SAVI Singing Actor!’”**

-Lara Teeter  
Professional Actor/Singer/Dancer  
Head of Musical Theatre, Webster Conservatory of Theatre Arts

# Contents

<b>Chapter 1</b>	Introduction	1
<b>Chapter 2</b>	Quick-Start Guide	8
<b>Chapter 3</b>	The ABCs of SAVI	11
	S is for Specificity	18
	A is for Authenticity	22
	V is for Variety	26
	I is for Intensity	30
	The “Dramatic Event”	34
	<b>EXERCISE: Here I Am</b>	35
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Work on the Singer	43
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Training, Conditioning, Warming Up	53
	The Best Ways to Train	55
	The 8-Step SAVI Warm-Up	58
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Working Phrase by Phrase	70
	<b>EXERCISE: Short-Phrase Études</b>	75
	<b>EXERCISE: I Have a New Idea</b>	81
	<b>EXERCISE: (I Can) Ding and Sing</b>	82
<b>Chapter 7</b>	What is Behavior?	86
	<b>EXERCISE: Analyzing Behavior in YouTube Videos</b>	89
	<b>EXERCISE: Lip Sync</b>	93
	<b>EXERCISE: Gibberish</b>	95
	<b>EXERCISE: Speak and Sing</b>	97
	<b>EXERCISE: Content-Neutral Songs</b>	98
	<b>EXERCISE: The Mirror Canon</b>	101
	<b>EXERCISE: Active Listening</b>	108
<b>Chapter 8</b>	Your Face is Your Ace!	111
	<b>EXERCISE: Silent Eyes</b>	121
	<b>EXERCISE: Coordinating Focus and Music</b>	124
	<b>EXERCISE: Numbers on the Wall</b>	127

<b>Chapter 9</b> Voice and Music Choices	128
<b>EXERCISE: Breath Work</b>	139
<b>EXERCISE: Exploring Vowel Sounds</b>	143
<b>EXERCISE: Conducted Vocalise</b>	148
<b>EXERCISE: Vocalise and Songs with SAVI Cards</b>	149
<b>EXERCISE: Call-and-Response</b>	150
<b>Chapter 10</b> Body and Movement Choices	152
<b>EXERCISE: Gesture Shopping</b>	157
<b>Chapter 11</b> Input and Output	161
<b>EXERCISE: Following and Leading</b>	164
<b>EXERCISE: The Tap</b>	170
<b>Chapter 12</b> Work on the Song	173
Specimen Song for Analysis: "I'll Be Known"	173
<b>Chapter 13</b> "Max S" (Maximizing Your Specificity)	186
Understanding the Dramatic Event	186
Ding It Before You Sing It	189
Creating "Turn-By-Turn" Directions	195
<b>Chapter 14</b> "Max A" (Maximizing Your Authenticity)	202
Paraphrase	204
Personalization	206
The Imaginary Partner	208
<b>Chapter 15</b> "Max V" (Maximizing your Variety)	211
The Taxonomy of Dings	211
<b>EXERCISE: Silent Rehearsal</b>	221
<b>Chapter 16</b> "Max I" (Maximizing Your Intensity)	224
<b>EXERCISE: The "Three-Peat"</b>	228
<b>EXERCISE: More and More</b>	233
<b>Chapter 17</b> Conclusion	236
The Work Cycle of the Singing Actor	238
Finale Ultimo: The SAVI Anthem	249
<b>Additional Resources</b>	251
<b>Curtain Call</b>	276

## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

### Peak Performance

Almost nothing compares to the high you get when you're singing a song onstage and you know you're killing it.

Am I right? I'll bet you and I share a passion for making memorable work on the musical stage.



Charles Gilbert

Chances are you recognize the ecstasy on the face of the dude in the back, the one with no glasses and a bad haircut, playing Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls* in 1970. That's me, spreading my artistic wings back in eleventh grade! For nearly fifty years, the musical theater has been my life's work, and this is where the journey began.

And what an amazing journey it's been! I quickly discovered I had more to contribute as a director, a composer and an educator than a performer. I wrote music and lyrics for a slew of shows, one of which caught Stephen Sondheim's attention and provided the idea for his musical *Assassins*. I got to start the BFA musical theater program at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia and oversee it for nearly 20 years. I got to play Sweeney Todd in the movies years before Johnny Depp did (even if my total screen time in Kevin Smith's *Jersey Girl* was under 20 seconds). I helped found an international organization for people like me who teach musical theater at colleges and universities, which gave me an insider's view of the state of the art in musical theater training worldwide. And I had the chance to work with hundreds of singing actors, young and old, beginners and pros, each one of them looking for ways to make perform better.

Maybe you're a high school student or an adult amateur who's just been cast in a musical and you want to begin building a reliable performance technique. Maybe you're a student in a high school or college musical theater program, looking for a way to stand out in classes, auditions, and shows. Maybe you're an early-career professional who misses the discipline and the routines of your school days, or a working singer-actor always on the lookout for ways to keep your tools sharp, stretch your creative muscles, and stay on point in a competitive, challenging field. Or perhaps you're a teacher, a director, or a coach who works with any of the sort of people I named above. If any of these apply to you, we have a lot to talk about.

## **Common Ground**

There's really no such thing as a "typical" musical theater performer. There are as many types of performers as there are types of musicals: grand and intimate, silly and serious, mainstream and experimental, professional and amateur, bel canto and "can belto."<sup>1</sup> Many roads lead to the musical stage, including acting, dance, classical music, improv, stand-up comedy, pop and rock music, even sports. We musical theater performers are a remarkable, colorful and diverse tribe, one where all sorts of people feel at home, and we express ourselves in many different ways.

Even so, there are some things we have in common as members of this tribe. We know that singing for an audience is a glorious experience, an opportunity to express powerful feelings and ideas in ways that deeply move the listener. Great singers have the ability to enchant us, casting a spell that lifts us up out of our everyday, ordinary experience and transports us to something more rare and exalted. Since the dawn of mankind, humans have gathered together to make music and to experience it, an act that is at once communal and also profoundly personal, a magic that strengthens the connection we feel to one another and to our purest private essence.

Lyricist Yip Harburg said it perfectly when he wrote, "Words make you think thoughts. Music makes you feel a feeling. A song makes you feel a thought."<sup>2</sup> Because songs deliver information in such a powerful way, they can penetrate the mind and the heart, leaving an indelible impression.

This accounts for the incredible power of song and its ability to change the world. The legendary American folk singer and social activist Woody Guthrie knew about the power of song. Woody painted the slogan "This machine kills fascists" on his well-worn guitar, and he used his music to rally his listeners in opposition not only to fascists but also to racists and oppressors of all

---

<sup>1</sup> Beverly Patton and Mary Saunders Barton deserve credit for that felicitous turn of phrase.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Yip Harburg: Legendary Lyricist and Human Rights Activist* (Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 35.

sorts. "If the fight gets hot," Woody liked to say, "the songs get hotter. If the going gets tough, the songs get tougher."<sup>3</sup>

Woody knew what we all know, down deep: that a crying baby can be soothed by a lullaby, a grieving congregation can find comfort in a hymn, and a crowd at a rally can be whipped into a frenzy by a fiery song.

Musicals are stories told in song, and in musicals, songs make stuff happen. There are songs of wooing and songs of persuasion, songs that confront us with the truth, songs that make a joyful noise and lift every heart. Musicals make us believe that you can't stop the beat and that the sun will come out tomorrow, that no one is alone and that when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true.

This is the great work of singing onstage, and if it's to be done well, it needs to be taken seriously. Doing great work is important, not just to succeed and stand out in a crowded, competitive field, but also because songs matter. Performing them well is a glorious experience that makes the world a better place.

But chances are, if you're reading this book, there's something standing between you and the kind of work you yearn to create on the musical stage.

## **Is Something Stopping You?**

- Do you feel lost when working on your own, without a director, teacher, or coach to guide you?
- Does your work feel "hit or miss," haphazard, and unreliable when it comes time to present?
- Do you have the nagging suspicion that your work is "phony," "fake," or, worst of all, "cheesy"?
- Do you feel like good singing and good acting technique are at odds with each another?
- Do you struggle to find the kind of details that will make your work convincing and memorable?

---

<sup>3</sup> "Woody Guthrie's Biography," Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc., 2018, [www.woodyguthrie.org/biography/biography4.htm](http://www.woodyguthrie.org/biography/biography4.htm).

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

- Does the pressure of performance cause you to “go blank” and forget what you prepared?

It’s a gut-wrenching feeling when you blow an audition or a performance. Even if you’ve been lucky enough to experience success as a performer, nearly all artists also experience the “queer, divine dissatisfaction” that choreographer Martha Graham described to Agnes de Mille, the “blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.”<sup>4</sup> That’s why it’s crucial for you to be in top form every time you take the stage. Every time you’re in an audition, in rehearsal, or performing onstage, you want to be able to deliver great work and feel the pleasure of having “nailed it.”

Excellence in singing-acting is elusive, and the pursuit of it is frustrating, often daunting. Other performers—your classmates, your colleagues, your competition—make it look easy. When you’re alone in the practice room, you inevitably wonder, *Am I spending my time on the right things? What do the others know that I don’t? Or even, Why is my shit so lame?*

You may be hampered by fear, either consciously or unconsciously. You may be held back because you lack certain specific and learnable skills that will enable you to communicate more effectively when you sing. You may know those skills but be held back by ineffective self-management, so that there’s always a gap between what you intend to do and what you’re actually doing. Regardless of where you are in your journey as a developing singing actor, there’s a good chance that you’re missing crucial information.

## **The Guide You Need**

Don’t despair! In the following pages, I’ll be your guide on the journey from “meh” to “wow.”

Within these pages, you’ll discover secrets understood by an elite group of what I call “savvy” singing actors.

---

<sup>4</sup> Agnes de Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Random House, 1991).

Would you like to be one, too?

In the chapters ahead, I'll introduce you to the SAVI System, my signature approach to training the singing actor.

- Together, we'll define what "excellence" means in this challenging, competitive art form.
- Having defined your goals, you'll learn to train like an elite athlete: deliberately, thoughtfully, and with passion and persistence.
- We'll work on skills that are indispensable, regardless of song or genre.
- I'll show you new ways to look at a song, expanding and deepening your approach to roles and repertoire.
- You'll find new ways to get feedback and support while you work, as well as reliable tools for self-assessment, insight, and inspiration.

The SAVI System was created to help you in any kind of performance—regardless of whether you're in a Broadway show, an opera, a rock show, a recital, or a concert of any sort: any occasion where you're presenting vocal music in a dramatic context. It will give you a greater ability to plan, organize, and execute what you're going to do while you're onstage. As you work on the exercises and activities presented in the SAVI System, you'll discover tools to manage the process of creating behavior, making optimal choices, and executing those choices with ease and expressiveness.

The SAVI System will identify the four fundamental attributes of effective singing-acting contained in the acronym SAVI, and teach you to recognize whether your onstage behavioral choices are **Specific, Authentic, Varied, and Intense**. What's more, you'll learn exercises and procedures that will enable you to bring **maximum SAVI** to your performance.

You'll learn to think like an athlete, building strength, stamina, range, ease, and coordination. You'll build your **behavior vocabulary**, giving you an expanded range of creative expression.

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

You'll also learn to think like an artist, taking responsibility for the authorship of your performance, crafting a vivid and original set of behaviors every time you sing.

As you explore, you'll discover a way of thinking and working that wraps under, over and around all of these skills. This is the missing ingredient, the catalyst that will start the artistic chain reaction destined to create an explosive response in the hearts and minds of your audience.

Composer Kurt Weill said, "I believe that the musical theatre is the highest, the most expressive, and the most imaginative form of theatre."<sup>5</sup> I pledged my allegiance to the musical theater flag back in the days when I played "good old reliable Nathan," and the pursuit of that ideal continues to stir my soul many years later. Now I'm eager to share the fruits of my pursuits with you so that you can fulfill your own potential. If you want your work to measure up to Kurt Weill's lofty ideal, you need to Get SAVI!

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in David Ewen, *American Songwriters: An W. W. Wilson Biographical Dictionary* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1987), 430.

## CHAPTER 2

# Quick-Start Guide

There's a lot of ground to cover in the following chapters, so it's understandable if you're feeling a little daunted by the prospect or impatient to get to what's ahead. Here's a preview of coming attractions, highlights from the coming chapters (not necessarily in the order of the pages that follow). Think of the following as a handy "executive summary," a tablet of 10 commandments, to whet your appetite for what's in store:

### 10 Axioms for the SAVI Singing Actor

**Axiom 1:** When you sing onstage, your job is to create behavior that communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase. (Read more about Axiom 1 in Chapter 3 and more about Behavior in Chapter 7.)

**Axiom 2:** The behavior you create will be most effective when it is Specific, Authentic, Varied, and Intense—in other words, when it is "SAVI." (Chapter 3 is where we'll get to know these four words intimately.)

**Axiom 3:** For Maximum SAVI, you must work on the singer as well as the song. Train like an athlete to optimize your ability to create and organize behavior. (Jump to Chapter 5 to learn how you can "train to gain.")

**Axiom 4:** Learn to use your face, your most powerful organ of expression. (Chapter 8 is the place to read about the face.)

**Axiom 5:** Mobilize your eyes. They're a "window to your soul" that will reveal your innermost thoughts if you use them effectively. (Also explored in Chapter 8. Point your eyes there to read more.)

**Axiom 6:** Adjust your behavior at the beginning of each new musical phrase (the "ding"), and avoid distracting mid-phrase adjustments. These adjustments will create contrast, and contrast creates meaning. (Chapters 6 and 14 will teach you why "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that 'ding!'")

**Axiom 7:** A song must be understood and presented as a journey, a series of events that occur in sequence. Navigating the "journey of the song" is like following turn-by-turn directions. (Chapters 3, 6, and 14 are great places to read up on the Journey of the Song.)

**Axiom 8:** Don't rely on generalized mood or atmosphere to put your song across. Make shish kebab, not applesauce! (More about "applesauce" and Mood Sauce in Chapters 3 and 14.)

**Axiom 9:** Craft your performance carefully, the same way a song is crafted, with clarity and economy. Keep revising and improving your choices until your performance is the best you can make it. Your work needs the appearance of spontaneity, but you won't achieve that by winging it. (Read more about Crafting in Chapter 16.)

**Axiom 10:** Quality output requires quality input. Sentience is a key to success. (Chapter 11 explains you why it's so important to "come to your senses" and "get ouchable!")

## **Now What?**

There you have it, friends, the accumulated wisdom of nearly fifty years of teaching and musical theater performances, distilled into ten commandments, a minyan of axioms.

In the following chapters, I'll explain and explore each of these statements. I'll provide examples and evidence to back up my claims.

Charles Gilbert

Best of all, I'll share the unique exercises I've created that will help you put those principles into practice.

Bookmark this chapter so you'll come back and read these ten axioms again and again.

Ready? Let's get to it!

## CHAPTER 3

# The ABCs of SAVI

### **“Let’s Start at the Very Beginning.”**

The SAVI System of Singing-Acting is built on a handful of fundamental principles. These core concepts are derived from decades of experience, observing singing actors at work, making new work, and studying what teachers, songwriters and creators have said about the nature of song and the craft of performing a song. Later in this chapter, I’ll introduce an exercise—the first of many—where you’ll get a chance to apply these concepts, but first, we should spend a little time going over the basic premises of the SAVI System.

### **Axiom 1: The Job of the Singing Actor**

*When you sing onstage, your job is to create behavior that communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase.*

Axiom 1 of the SAVI System is a declaration of purpose, a single powerful statement that contains three important ideas:

1. The singing actor *creates behavior*.
2. That behavior is chosen for its ability to *communicate the dramatic event*.
3. Finally, those choices are organized *phrase by phrase*, because songs are made of phrases and each phrase

has its own particular role to play in the overall *journey of the song*.

When I say *behavior*, I'm referring to the ways you use your face, your body and your voice to express the drama of the song. *Behavior* includes the movements of your eyes, the expression on your face, your gestures, your movements, your phrasing, your timbre (or vocal color), the quality of your breath, and even the way you shape your vowels and enunciate your consonants. Behavior is what makes Ethel Merman's Mama Rose different from Patti LuPone's, Bette Midler's Dolly different from Carol Channing's, and your performance of any song uniquely yours.

Behavior is the heart of the SAVI System. Whether you're singing in a class, a rehearsal, a performance or the practice room, your job is to create behavior that communicates the dramatic life of the song. Your shrugs, sighs, glances and grimaces are like a painter's brushstrokes or the words in a poem. They give the audience important information about what's going on and how they should feel about it.

If you've been told there's "something missing" in your singing-acting, chances are you're failing to create behavior consistently while you sing. If you already understand what it means to create behavior while you sing, good for you! You can still learn to make a greater variety of choices and organize and execute those choices more optimally.

I recognize that singing a song well is no easy task, but that's only the beginning of your job as a singing actor. Singing well is a good place to start, and great singing is a special sort of thrill, but you know what? Broadway's stages are crowded with performers whose singing is not particularly awesome but who have something else—a presence, a vitality—that comes from knowing how to create behavior onstage while they sing. It's the intangible thing any director or conductor worth working with is counting on you to bring into the room: an ability to create behavior that will bring the drama to life.

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

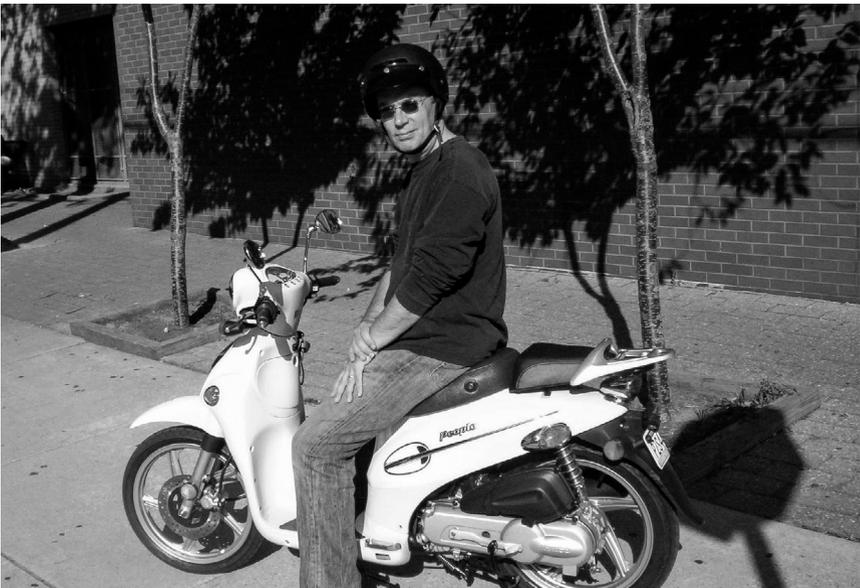
To help you understand the importance of Axiom 1 as a crucial first step on the road to successful singing-acting, here are a few additional principles that are so fundamental they're called the ABCs of SAVI Singing-Acting.

### **ABC = Always Be Creating**

Axiom One says, "Your job is to *create* behavior."

Creators are makers, and when you sing, you make something original, a creation that is uniquely yours. Embrace your role as the author of your performance, and you'll be well on your way to new levels of expressiveness and artistic satisfaction.

Every song is a journey, but not the kind where you ride the express train along a familiar route to a beloved destination. No, the art of singing onstage is more like navigating a crowded street on a little motor scooter, like the one I use to travel the streets of Philadelphia. You can't just be a passenger when you take the journey of a song; you've got to take the wheel and navigate its many twists and turns.



Singing well can be difficult, but creating behavior while you sing is even harder. It requires a complicated sort of multitasking that involves a number of different regions of the brain. Successful singing-acting requires focused, coordinated effort both prior to and during the performance. The good news is, your brain is capable of amazingly complex tasks, and if you're like most people, you're only using a fraction of its incredible capacity. Just like an operating system upgrade, the exercises of the SAVI System will expand your capacity for multitasking to help you make the most of what you've got.

### **ABC = Always Be Choosing**

The singing actor creates behavior by making *choices*. What vocal color, facial expression, gesture, inflection or particular detail will you choose to add clarity and impact to each moment in a song? Through an exhaustive process of trial and error, "bit by bit," you will assemble a performance from a series of choices, understanding that, as Sondheim observes in his song "Putting It Together," "every minor detail is a major decision."

With the proper training, you can acquire a wide range of vocal, facial and physical behaviors, an extensive *behavior vocabulary* to choose from at any given moment in a performance. Building up your behavior vocabulary is an important start because, without easy access to a range of options, you're likely to make choices that seem familiar, safe, or obvious as a way of minimizing risk. Even worse, you may make no choices at all. We've all struggled to express ourselves in a sentence, a paragraph or a written essay, and by now you've surely discovered that you can't express grown-up ideas with a child's vocabulary. The same is true for creating expressive behavior when you sing.

When I say the singing actor's job is to "create behavior," I'm not suggesting that just any kooky, random, arbitrary choice that occurs to you on a whim will do. Quite the contrary: you need to delve deep into what acting teacher Uta Hagen calls "the intersection of psychology and behavior."<sup>6</sup> Stanislavski scholar Jean

<sup>6</sup> Uta Hagen, *A Challenge for the Actor* (New York: Scribner, 1991), 50.

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

Benedetti puts it like this: “Acting is *created* behaviour, prepared spontaneity, something which looks like life but is, in fact, a selection from life, organized in such a way to make an audience participate in the events being shown.”<sup>7</sup>

Your job as a singing actor is to create behavior that is appropriate to a specific moment in a particular dramatic event, one that reinforces and reveals the soul of the character and the truth at the heart of the moment.

Making choices requires courage, since you’re sticking your neck out every time you choose *this* and not *that*. It requires self-awareness so that you can be sure you’re doing what you intend to do. It requires patience and a willingness to iterate, just like a writer or composer keeps revising until they’ve found the perfect way to express a feeling or idea. Last but not least, making choices requires intelligence so that you can tell which option is the best one when it’s time to decide.

### **ABC = Always Be Communicating**

Axiom 1 says it’s your job to create “behavior that **communicates** the dramatic event.”

A song is a structured form of utterance in which words, phrases and sentences have been organized by means of tempo, pitch, rhythm and pattern into a temporal experience, one that unfolds sequentially in the act of performance. While the words of a song have meaning—in most cases, anyway—it’s the song’s musical elements that organize the way we experience those words to give them structure, variety, emphasis and, ultimately, clarity and impact.

A song is like a blueprint for performance. It’s a set of instructions that, no matter how extensive and elaborate they may seem, remain fundamentally incomplete until you bring them to life. The elements that you contribute to a performance—tone and timbre, facial expression, gesture and body language—can transform a

<sup>7</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor: The Method of Physical Action* (London: Methuen, 1998), 4. I have retained Benedetti’s British spellings and emphasis.

song from a blueprint into a soaring cathedral. Your ability to do that, however, will depend on your ability to read that blueprint and take advantage of the clues the songwriter(s) incorporated in the music and text.

The French word for song is *chanson*, and words sung to music become, quite literally, *enchanted*. They are transformed into a powerful spell that has the power to change hearts and minds. Once you routinely and deliberately use singing as a form of *communication*, your songs will change the world.

The words "communication" and "community" have the same root word, "common," from the Latin *communis*, meaning "shared by all or many." One who communicates shares something of him or herself: words, experiences, insights, identity and presence. The act of singing, of communication through song, is fundamentally generous. As a SAVI singing actor, you'll learn to cultivate that spirit of generosity, and to understand that your performance is a gift to be given to an audience.

## **ABC = Always Be Changing**

Songs unfold over time, and the art of singing-acting involves making many choices in succession. **Moments of change**—the moments when you make a transition from one choice to the next—are the most important moments in the life of a song. You must know *when* to change and *what* to change in order to keep the song unfolding as a living, dynamic theatrical experience.

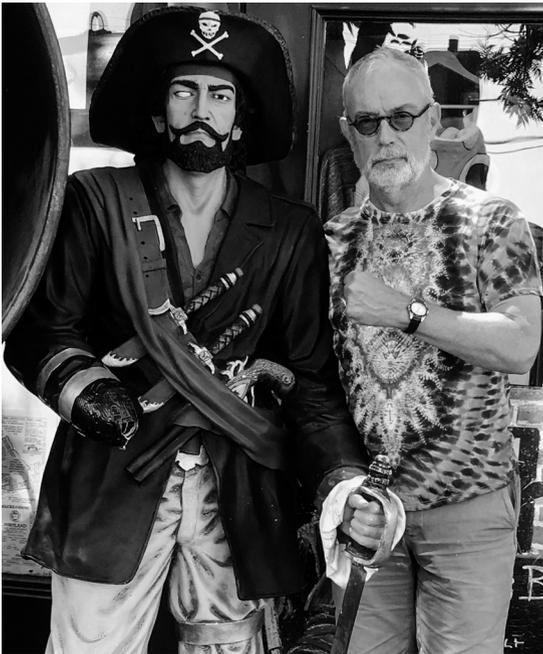
The word "always" in the phrase "Always Be Changing" doesn't mean "constantly," since constant change would result in random, chaotic behavior. It is more precise (but, alas, less catchy) to say, "At the start of each phrase in a song, there is a perfect opportunity to make an adjustment or change, and your new choice should reflect the dramatic event as it is evolving in the *present moment*." That's why Axiom 1 concludes with three words that are a powerful key to SAVI singing acting: **"phrase by phrase."**

## The SAVI Singing Actor

Your job is to be constantly creating, choosing behavior that conveys the essence of each moment, and changing that behavior when the song requires it. As you do, you'll craft a varied sequence of specific individual choices to be executed in coordination with the musical event of the song. It's as simple as ABC!

### D'ye Savvy SAVI?

It's a happy accident that the acronym "SAVI" sounds like "savvy," a word derived from the Spanish word *saber* and the French *savoir*, both of which mean "to know." Like the French term *savoir faire*, which means "expertise," "savvy" refers to a kind of shrewdness or practical knowledge.



You need not just wisdom but also "street smarts" to guide you on your adventures in singing-acting, and to know SAVI is to be savvy. It's a versatile term: you can use it as an adjective ("your work is very SAVI"), a noun ("Got SAVI?") or even a verb (though it's best to talk like a pirate when asking, "D'ye savvy?"). It's also a mnemonic, created to help you remember

the four fundamental attributes of effective singing-acting. Let's meet them now, shall we? Here come the stars of our show:

**Specificity! Authenticity! Variety! And... Intensity!**

## *S is for Specificity*

The S of SAVI stands for **Specificity**, and the ability to be specific is the first key to successful singing-acting. To be specific is to choose *how* you will communicate as well as *what* you will communicate.

Here are some of the most important ways a singing actor must be specific:

- Being specific to the dramatic event of the song and to each phrase or moment in that event.
- Being specific to the text, the precise meanings of the words and the implications of their syntax, diction and rhetoric.<sup>8</sup>
- Being specific to the music, which means both scrupulous attention to the details of vocal delivery specified in the score and an awareness of the information contained in the accompaniment.
- Being specific in your understanding of the ways in which the present phrase is both similar to and different from its preceding phrases.
- Being specific not only to the meanings and feelings created by the text and the music, but also to the precise moments when changes occur, since these moments present opportunities to make corresponding adjustments in behavior.
- Being specific to the other characters onstage and the environment, which requires an awareness of what's just happened and how the world of the play or musical is changing at any given moment.

An actor's choices must be deeply rooted in the **dramatic event**, the **given circumstances**, and the **present moment**. This requires an incisive understanding of the content and meaning of

---

<sup>8</sup> For starters, this means you must never sing a word whose meaning you don't understand. No, seriously. Take out your phone and Look. It. Up. This is a rookie mistake, and it continues to surprise me how often it happens.

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

each phrase and an awareness of how it differs from the phrase(s) that came before it.

Making a specific choice implies that you will consider a universe of possibilities and choose the one that seems best suited to your interpretation of a particular moment. This requires specific control over the various forms of behavior you use to express yourself. Is this phrase loud or soft? How loud? How soft? Are certain words to be accented? Are certain words best sung legato or staccato? What kind of timbre or vocal color is to be employed, and on which words? Where is your focus—that is, where are your eyes looking when you sing at this moment? What kind of facial expression are you using? Which muscles of the face are involved in making that expression? What is your stance like? Your body language?

I'm bombarding you with questions to give you an idea of the number of different decisions you must make for each phrase of a song. Considering how you're going to use your face, voice and body to express the feelings and ideas in each and every phrase of your song is exhausting work, but boy, is it important!

Being specific means scrupulously executing the details you've decided on in collaboration with the composer, the lyricist, the director, the choreographer and the conductor. In the parlance of the professional theater, you must routinely "hit your marks." In a show, you're a member of a large group of artists performing complex tasks in close quarters for audiences with high expectations. Under these circumstances, precise attention to detail is mandatory. You will be expected to "nail it" again and again, which requires exceptional concentration, intensity and awareness of detail in rehearsals and performances.

### **Inside Out and Outside In**

It's just as important to be specific about the ***inner life*** of a song—the given circumstances, the psychology of the character, and all the other choices that go into creating subtext—as it is to be

specific about the **outer life** of a song—the vocal, facial and physical behavior which is an outward manifestation of that inner life.

Inner and outer life have the power to affect one another. To use a fancy term, they have a **duplex relationship**, a line of communication in which signals can travel simultaneously in opposite directions. When there's a change in subtext or the inner psychological landscape of a song, there should be some sort of corresponding behavioral change; conversely, a change in your exterior behavior has the potential to alter the way you feel and your inner psychological state. Konstantin Stanislavski, the Russian actor, director and teacher who transformed actor training in the twentieth century, used the term **psycho-physical** to describe this interrelationship, and one of the goals of actor training is to cultivate the pathways that connect your physical and psychological energies. Ideally, an adjustment made in one will always produce a corresponding change in the other.

Axiom 1 instructs you to “communicate the dramatic event,” and that means you must know who is doing what to whom in your song, and what makes that action important. The singer must determine who is singing, who is being sung to, what the circumstances are, what is being done, and what is at stake.

Making specific choices requires analysis, a forensic investigation of the text of the song and, when applicable, the musical it comes from. In Chapter 12, we'll take a look at Stanislavski's fundamental questions as an essential component of song preparation.

## **Signs of Insufficient Specificity**

If your work is not specific, it will of course appear general, the quality Stanislavski declared to be “the enemy of all art.” If your work lacks specificity, every moment will seem similar to every other moment. Instead of creating behavior that communicates the dramatic event, you may be making one of these common mistakes:

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

- The work of singing and your sincere effort to do a good job may pervade every moment of your performance.
- Your shyness and lack of confidence may be the predominant quality of every moment.
- Conversely, the work of singing-acting and your eager desire to please, charm, or entertain your listener may be apparent in every moment.

Many actors hesitate to make a choice for fear of making the wrong choice. If you face that dilemma, here's a surprising bit of good news: there are many moments in a song when *any* choice will do. Seriously, you will come to realize there are any number of occasions where the simplest of choices—a shift of focus, an adjustment of your stance, an almost insignificant gesture—can be made effective and meaningful in the context of performance.

To know whether your work is sufficiently specific or too general, you need feedback. After all, it's difficult to judge without objective evidence. That's why I'm a proponent of using your phone, camera or laptop to record yourself if you're working alone. Video will make it abundantly clear whether you're being specific or general.

Even if you're working with a coach or teacher (or you're coaching someone yourself), video playback is still a powerful tool. Looking at the evidence together, you can discuss what's working and what's not with calm objectivity. It works for athletes of all sorts, and it'll work for you, too.

It's important to recognize that doing and judging are separate mental processes that can get in the way of each other. When you're living in the moment, give yourself permission to act freely and fully, without self-criticism. After the scene is over, get clear, objective feedback—either in the form of video or the personal comments of a director, teacher or coach—to help you evaluate whether you're making a sufficient number of choices and whether those choices are specific and useful. We'll dig deeper

into the notion of Specificity in Chapter 12, exploring procedures for song analysis and other ways to maximize specificity.

## ***A is for Authenticity***

"I've been told nobody sings the word 'hunger' the way I do. Or the word 'love,'" wrote Billie Holiday in her memoir, *Lady Sings the Blues*.<sup>9</sup> Lady Day distilled her painful life experiences into unforgettable vocal performances, and you can hear her compellingly authentic style in recordings of songs like "You Don't Know What Love Is" and "Strange Fruit."

The British actor, director, and writer Simon Callow recognized the same quality in the work of legendary singer and actor Paul Robeson, who sang spirituals like "Go Down Moses" and show tunes like "Ol' Man River" with a deep and powerful sense of authenticity: "The astonishing voice that, like the Mississippi in the most famous number in his repertory ["Ol' Man River"], just kept rolling along, seemed to carry within it an inherent sense of *truth*. There was no artifice; there were no vocal tricks; nothing came between the listener and the song. It commanded effortless attention; perfectly focused, it came from a very deep place, not just in the larynx, but in the experience of what it is to be human."<sup>10</sup>

**Authenticity** is expected of any actor in the modern era: you've got to "bring the realness" to your work. Truthful expression makes it possible for your audience to relate to you as a real person, and to understand and empathize with what you're singing about. Finding a way to create and express yourself truthfully within the artificial conventions of song and dance is a challenge every singing actor must face.

Nowadays, much of the acting we see is on screens, where the camera can zoom in for the most intimate of close-ups. This has come to influence our notion of what seems "real" and "authentic."

---

<sup>9</sup> Billie Holiday and William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006), 195.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Callow, "The Emperor Robeson," *New York Review of Books*, February 8, 2018, [www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/02/08/emperor-paul-robeson/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/02/08/emperor-paul-robeson/).

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

Stage performers, however, must be able to create behavior that projects to the back row of a large auditorium. When you're in a show, the director will exhort you, like Mama Rose in *Gypsy*, to "Sing out, Louise!" and "Smile, baby!" You'll be told to "cheat out," to face the audience rather than your scene partner onstage.

Of course, all of this seems fundamentally at odds with being truthful onstage. What's more, there is no behavior in real life that resembles singing-acting. Singing on the stage is inherently an artificial act; we don't do it in real life, so there's no way it can ever seem entirely lifelike. Director Tadashi Suzuki attempts to address this paradox in his book *The Way of Acting*: "The art of stage performance cannot be judged by how closely the actors can imitate or recreate ordinary, everyday life on the stage. An actor uses his words and gestures to try to convince his audience of something profoundly true. It is this attempt that should be judged."<sup>11</sup>

If you find this all confusing, don't worry. You'll get a lot of contradictory instructions in the course of your musical theater career, and finding ways to reconcile those contradictions is a big part of your job as a singing actor. Musical theater performance involves a number of highly technical component skills, including voice, music, dance and speech. Meanwhile, you may hear your acting teachers encouraging you to "be yourself," to draw upon your own experiences to achieve a sense of personal truth. How do you find the right balance between being too "stagey" and too casual?

Acting teachers who employ the pedagogy of Sanford Meisner can be very persuasive when they tell their students, "Leave yourself alone!" As a result, I've encountered many young actors who seem to think that doing *nothing* will eliminate everything "unnatural" from their performance. Instead, your goal should be to create only as much behavior as you need to communicate the dramatic event, and then rehearse those choices until your practiced ease makes them seem natural.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, translated by J. Thomas Rimer (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 5.

It takes time and skill to achieve authenticity in singing-acting. Many complex tasks, which at first seem mechanical and artificial, become habitual and seem natural in time, and it's no different with singing-acting. Think about how walking was mechanical and unnatural when you took your first steps as a toddler. You took plenty of falls at first, but with practice, you got the hang of it.

In our post-modern era, it's common to see musicals that mix elements of vaudeville, diegetic song<sup>12</sup>, and Brechtian commentary along with complex characters and compelling situations. Audiences want to believe that the character they see onstage is an authentic human being, living truthfully under imaginary circumstances, but they also respond enthusiastically to virtuosic performances and outsize "larger than life" personalities. You've got to bring the realness, but you can't leave out the awesomeness. What an incredible, exciting challenge!

## **Cue the "Magic If"**

As a singing actor, you must find a way to bring your authentic self to the fictional given circumstances of the song or play. Stanislavski recognized this as a core skill for any actor, and developed an approach to it he called the "Magic If." As an actor, you must be able to behave "as if" any circumstance or set of circumstances were true. This requires a specific understanding of the circumstances of a scene (or song), and also the ability to imagine that those circumstances are really affecting you.

The practice room is the ideal environment in which to explore the "Magic If." Construct an imaginary circumstance (defining who, what, where, and why) for yourself, and then see what happens when you sing a song under those imaginary circumstances, such as:

- an accused person pleads with a jury
- a lover woos his beloved

---

<sup>12</sup> The term "diegetic music" refers to music that is part of the fictional situation. A diegetic song is one in which the act of singing the song is part of the dramatic event, for example, when Sally Bowles sings the title song of the musical *Cabaret*.

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

- a timid employee challenges a brutal, intimidating boss
- a parent threatens a rebellious child
- a rebellious child confronts a strict parent

For training purposes, it doesn't matter whether the circumstances fit the song; indeed, there's much to be learned from stretching your imagination and exploring the wide diversity of possible behaviors that emerge from both appropriate and provocatively inappropriate circumstances.

Improvisation is an invaluable tool in the acting studio, giving students a chance to "playfully" experience what it's like to live under imaginary circumstances. Many of the SAVI exercises in this book incorporate elements of dramatic improvisation and fantasy to liberate your imagination and strengthen your ability to sing truthfully under a wide range of circumstances.

### **Warning Signs of Inauthenticity**

Though truthful performance can take an infinite variety of forms, there are a few common behavioral phenomena that occur while singing that inevitably scream, "Fake!" Many of us can't help doing them when we sing. We may not even be aware that we're doing them, but by making these choices, we send a signal to the spectator that our behavior is inauthentic, not lifelike. By becoming aware of these behavioral phenomena and addressing them at the technical level, it's possible to make considerable, rapid progress toward greater authenticity in stage expression. Here are three prime offenders:

- a rigid, fixed gaze
- a blank, distorted or frozen face
- a tense, braced-up body

If you're singing in a recording studio, these don't matter, of course. Performing in front of an audience, however, requires you to overcome these challenges. Even recitalists and choral singers need to remain alive and expressive while they sing.

The exercises and procedures you'll read about in the coming chapters will help you address each of these, in turn restoring a more natural and expressive use of the eyes, face and body when you sing. You'll learn to "get ouch-able" so that you can initiate behavior impulsively at the onset of a phrase. You'll learn to "mobilize your eyes" and develop a "thinking eye." You'll find ways to bring greater vitality, variety and truthfulness to your facial expressions, and discover that you "play your ace when you use your face." With patient and purposeful practice on your own or in a group, you'll condition yourself so that, when the time comes in rehearsal or performance, you'll be prepared to express yourself with greater authenticity.

### ***V is for Variety***

The V of SAVI stands for **Variety**, the so-called "spice of life" and an essential ingredient of all successful singing-acting. The variety show is one of the ancestors of the modern musical, and to this day, variety is an important consideration in the construction of most musicals. In the late nineteenth century, variety shows like vaudeville, burlesque and revue enjoyed great popularity with audiences, who experienced a performance as a banquet offering multiple "courses" of sensory pleasures: a pretty girl followed by a beautiful singer, followed in turn by a magician or a comedian or a talking dog.

To sing with variety, you need to recognize that each phrase offers you a unique set of opportunities to create behavior. The best singing-acting gives listeners the impression that each new phrase or moment is somehow distinct from previous moments.

Things that are alive are always in a state of change, and the reverse is true as well: things that do not change don't seem lifelike. Drama is by its very nature dynamic, not static; it depicts characters propelled by forces of change to moments of crisis and, ultimately, moments of climax. Effective stage behavior must have variety if it is to successfully project that dynamic quality and reflect the changes taking place as the dramatic event unfolds.

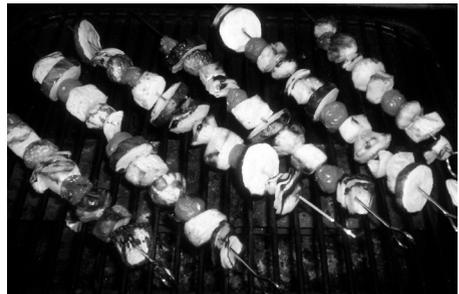
## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

Variety creates contrast, and contrast creates meaning; that's the natural law at the heart of Axiom 6. When spectators detect a change onstage, there's a part of their brain that begins to puzzle over its significance: *What just happened? He was looking there, but now he's looking here! She was singing softly, but then she suddenly got loud! What's it all mean?* Our brains are hardwired to seek that information, and if we don't get it—if there's no change, no new information detected by our senses—we as an audience become disengaged from an experience very quickly. How quickly? In my experience, if you haven't made any sort of change in twenty or thirty seconds, your listener is already becoming less fully engaged.

Variety is a way of beguiling the audience by mingling the familiar and the surprising, knowing that introducing something fresh and unexpected is a surefire way to grab an audience's attention when it starts to wander. By crafting your performance using the same fundamental principle that is used in the construction of a musical, your work is guaranteed to become more engaging and more meaningful.

### **Applesauce and Shish Kebab**

Ready for a snack break? Take a look at these two pictures of food and tell me what's different between them.



The first is a dish of applesauce, the second a Middle Eastern dish of skewered meats and vegetables called shish kebab.

Applesauce is delicious, of course, but with just one ingredient, every sweet and smooth spoonful tastes just like every other spoonful.

Shish kebab is a different sort of dish. One look tells you that it's made up of a bunch of different bits, and the skewer serves an important function in organizing them all into a unit.

Your job is to create performances that are like shish kebab, not applesauce. An "applesauce" performance is general and mood-driven, while a "shish kebab" performance is carefully conceived to highlight the specific content of each individual phrase.

"Applesauce" performances aren't always sweet. I've seen eager applesauce, angsty applesauce, angry applesauce, sexy applesauce; there's all sorts of ways to generalize. If every bite tastes the same—if the phrases aren't differentiated—then there's a fundamental flaw in your singing-acting technique. What you're striving to achieve is not a smooth flow in your performance, but something that is appealing in its variety of textures and flavors.

## **Reasons for a Lack of Variety**

Making a clear and specific choice for each phrase of a song is the best way to maximize variety in your performance. If it's that simple, why doesn't it happen routinely? Maybe you haven't paid enough attention to the clues in the text and the music or fully understood the dramatic circumstances. By being diligent and thoughtful in your pursuit of opportunities to create variety, you'll discover what is distinct and different about each moment and what makes it different from its predecessor.

Do you get distracted by the technical challenges of musical execution and vocal production? Singing can consume so much of your awareness that you're left with no attention to devote to the dramatic event. If a passage is especially complex vocally or musically, you may find yourself unable to pay attention to the ways in which a new moment might be different than its predecessor.

When you learn a piece of new material, you practice it until it becomes familiar, like a habit, so that you can execute it

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

with greater ease and less conscious attention. However, routine can be a curse as well as a blessing. If you get into the habit of “going with the flow” in a well-rehearsed performance, you’ll miss out on the opportunities that bring it to life. It is the onset of new thoughts and events, the occurrences that disrupt the flow of the drama, that bring the performance to life, and result in work that is varied and truthful.

Fear is another factor that may be limiting your capacity for variety. We all have an understandable tendency to stick with what is known; if we hit upon a choice that feels right in a particular moment, we want to keep doing it, since our expectation is that it will continue to be right. As musicians and vocalists who are scrupulously attentive to the myriad details and technical challenges that a score presents, we know there are countless ways to get something wrong, and inevitably we tense up slightly, bracing ourselves for the mistake that is lurking just around the corner. But as we brace up in anticipation of a mistake, we diminish our ability to recognize the possibilities for creating new life in the coming moment.

What’s more, many songs have a kind of uniformity or consistency in their musical and verbal expression that can mislead you as a performer. This is true regardless of genre or when a song was written, though a statistical analysis of half a million songs from the past 50 years finds that pop songs have grown more homogenous in their timbre and pitch transitions.<sup>13</sup> There are songs of all sorts whose singular atmosphere seems to put us in a kind of trance. As we fall under the spell of the song, we resort to generalized behavioral choices and rely excessively on a single focus, facial expression or physical life.

Any song is more interesting when it is performed with attention to behavioral variety. Your song is enhanced, not marred, when you find opportunities to break the spell and “disrupt” the overall mood of the song with changes in focus or behavioral

---

<sup>13</sup> Honest, this isn’t a tiresome geezer rant. See Joan Serrà et al., “Measuring the Evolution of Western Contemporary Popular Music.” *Nature.com*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/srep00521> (accessed 5/10/2019)

expression. These disruptions will provide highlights and shadows, contours of expression from which a spectator will derive greater meaning. Let the audience be enchanted by the song, but learn to stay fully present and alert to the opportunities to avoid “going with the flow.”

One of the things that makes certain songs “theatrical” is the way that variety is integrated into the musical composition itself. You’ll see musical notation like the caesura (“railroad tracks”) and fermata used to disrupt the temporal flow of these songs. In addition, wordy, rhythmic phrases might be contrasted with others that are simple and sustained, and accompaniments will change texture, key and register abruptly. These musical “quirks” are the stock-in-trade of the theatrical composer, making their songs dramatically effective but too eccentric to be successful away from the stage. (Examples abound, but the work of Mr. Sondheim serves as Exhibit A.)

As a performer in training, you’ll want to continually expand your capacity for creating variety. Think about behavior as a closet full of different outfits you can put on or take off when you choose. If your “behavior closet” is bare, stocked with only a few simple or overworn choices, you’ve got your work cut out for you. Many of the activities and exercises described later in these pages are designed to give you a greater array of choices and to help you feel more comfortable switching from one choice to another.

### ***I is for Intensity***

Humans love extremes. Extreme sports, extreme challenges, extreme accomplishments.

Musical theater is full of examples of people going to extremes: of characters pushed to the limit, pushed to either a breakdown or a breakthrough, and of performers pushing the limits of what is possible, challenging the boundaries of skill and endurance in displays of virtuosity. ***Intensity*** is the quality of heightened emotionality in a singing actor’s behavior. Many

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

memorable moments in the musical theater repertoire depict passionate characters reacting to significant events with strong emotion. Music and lyrics serve to intensify emotion on the musical stage, and the successful singing actor must be able to rise to those emotional heights without sacrificing believability or specificity.

All of the arts are capable of delivering an intense experience, a heightened distillation of feeling and insight that leaves the spectator moved and exhilarated. We as an audience crave the intensity of a performance just as we crave it in our intimate relationships. It's no coincidence that the word "climax" shows up in both dramaturgy and sex.

The SAVI singing actor is able to create intensity by bringing *more* when more is needed: more volume, more behavior, more range, more detail, more "wow." Conveying intensity means being comfortable with going to extremes without unnecessary tension. The capacity to create *more*—to sing louder, to sing higher, to be more furious or more tender, to reach farther, move faster, leap higher—is part of the Olympic challenge of singing acting, and you must train for it like an Olympian.

### **Intense? Or Just Tense?**

Students and professionals alike tend to confuse intensity with tension. For instance, in the pursuit of a high level of vocal intensity, a singer may create a great deal of tension in the vocal mechanism. In fact, tension is the opposite of intensity. By way of analogy, think about a car. Intensity is the force of the engine, while tension is what you experience when you apply the brakes, the result of two forces in conflict. Many performers unconsciously associate the sensations of tension with the experience of intensity, but if you take the brakes off, you'll strain a lot less and achieve a better result.

Sometimes excessive tension is a problem of awareness or intention on the part of the singer, but sometimes it's the inevitable consequence of the neurological effects of extreme

behavior. When we go to extremes as a performer—singing very loudly or in a high register—that physical act also triggers intuitive responses in the nervous system. These cries awaken the “fight or flight” response in our primitive “lizard brain,” causing additional adrenaline to flow, muscles to tense up and sensory awareness to diminish.

Let’s face it, all screamers and adrenaline junkies face inevitable burnout. Our bodies, our voices and our souls have a finite capacity for intensity, and we can exhaust that capacity surprisingly quickly.

Actors tend to be vivid and loud because they have a natural affinity for intensity of expression. That’s not to say that you have to be loud and flamboyant offstage in order to succeed onstage, but it is unarguable that the capacity for extreme expression is essential to the performer, and an affinity for extremes of expression sure doesn’t hurt, either.

Intensity doesn’t just mean “be loud,” of course. Being able to create intensity onstage is the ability to create *more*, but “more” doesn’t always equate to “loud.” *More* can mean more subtle, more delicate, more tender. An actor needs to have *more* facial mobility so that his face can be more expressive even when silent. *More* can refer to a more dynamic use of breath, more ease in movement, more lightness and buoyancy. Any sort of *more* is a form of intensity, and the singing actor needs to be comfortable with all of them.

Thus, the “I” of Intensity also implies dynamic range, the ability to consciously vary how much of a certain ingredient or behavior you choose to bring to a particular moment in a performance. The experience of intensity is based on contrast: it’s difficult to create the experience of loudness as a musical effect if you play everything loud. It’s not enough to build your strength and stamina to be a screamer instead of a singer; you need the ability to sing expressively at every dynamic, at every level of intensity.

## **Common Intensity Problems**

There are several common problems I see students have when it comes to intensity. The first of these is weakness. Lack of intensity is often a lack of strength, either physically (weak muscles and/or vocal cords) or psychologically (a weak will). Of course, the way you get stronger is through exercise, and many of the exercises and études in this book were designed to make you physically and mentally stronger.

As with variety, intensity can be negatively impacted by fear. Sometimes we don't go "all out" with our performances because we're afraid: afraid that something will go wrong, that we'll make a mistake, that we'll seem ridiculous. Patient, persistent work in a supportive environment where your successes are recognized and praised will help you conquer your fears and bring more of what you've got to your performance.

Laziness is another psychological concern facing our intensity as singing actors. Legendary diva Patti LuPone writes, "It's hard, eight shows a week, it's extremely hard. But that's Broadway and it takes muscle to perform on Broadway, eight shows a week.... As they say, 'Broadway ain't for sissies.'"<sup>14</sup> Achieving intensity means being willing to do the work, to train hard and bring your "A game" every single day.

Excessive physical tension can limit your range of motion or range of expression. It's often an unwanted side effect of trying too hard. Deliberate, purposeful practice can help you reduce habitual tension and extend your range as you acquire the habit of bringing more ease to your performance. It may seem counter-intuitive, but by allowing yourself to relax into your performance, you will be able to achieve greater intensity.

Finally, a lack of dynamic variation can spoil one's intensity. Intensity sometimes calls for immensity, but beware of becoming addicted to extremes like loud/soft, smooth/staccato. You must be able to provide "more" when it's called for, but don't be that

---

<sup>14</sup> Patti LuPone, "Ramblings from the Road," *Patti LuPone*, [www.pattilupone.net/ramblings65.html](http://www.pattilupone.net/ramblings65.html).

person who “turns it up to eleven” all the time. Listeners get tired and tune that out.

### ***The “Dramatic Event”***

The singing actor is a singer who *acts*, and the ability to undertake an action rather than express a feeling is central to the skill set you need to succeed. A bias toward action supports all four of the essential qualities in the SAVI acronym. Your *Specific* answer to the question, “What are you doing now?” is the most important choice you can make. Focusing on action rather than emotion also supports *Authenticity*, since truthful acting is rooted in the reality of doing. Modifying and modulating your action choices from phrase to phrase is a key strategy for achieving *Variety*. Finally, *Intensity* is supported by having a clear sense of the dramatic event, not only of what you are doing in that moment but also of what makes it important.

Axiom 1 acknowledges the **dramatic event** as a key organizing principle in the creative process of the singing actor. A dramatic event presents us with a set of circumstances, either real or imagined, in which a character wants to make something happen. When we frame a song as a dramatic event, when we view it through this lens, it immediately becomes clear that dramatic action is the dynamo that propels the song forward.

Stanislavski refers to the text of a play or song as “verbal action,” by which he means that the language you use is active and deployed to make something happen. The amount of effort you use in the course of the phrase corresponds to the action you are undertaking. In other words, within the imaginary “given circumstances” of the world of this song, what do you need to accomplish? How much effort will such an accomplishment take?

Sometimes, in the parlance of the acting studio, we speak of “playing an action,” and often acting is playful (with a childlike sense of “make believe”), but when we play an action, we play in earnest. We play to win.

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

To act, to take action, is to do something, to try to make something happen. Acting Is Doing. A singing actor plays an action. Simple as that.

Let's take a break from theorizing and put these ideas into practice. The SAVI Étude that follows is the perfect way to explore the concepts of Specificity, Authenticity, Variety and Intensity in action.

### **EXERCISE:** Here I Am

In the SAVI System, it's axiomatic that you create your best performance when you work **phrase by phrase**, that is, by giving your full attention to one phrase at a time. "Here I Am," an exercise that consists of a single phrase of music repeated many times, is a way to practice taking advantage of the choice-making opportunities that are found in each individual phrase.

"Here I Am" can be a powerful experience when sung with others in a group, but let's consider it first as a solo exercise.

# Here I Am

Charles Gilbert

Slowly, with feeling  $\text{♩} = 60$

The musical score for "Here I Am" is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Slowly, with feeling" with a quarter note equal to 60 beats per minute. The key signature starts in C minor (one flat) and changes to D major (two sharps) in the second system, and finally to F# major (three sharps) in the third system. The piano accompaniment features a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in triplets. The vocal line is simple, consisting of three notes per measure. Chord progressions are indicated above the vocal line, and first and second endings are marked with triangles and "1-2" and "4-1-2".

The melody for “Here I Am” consists of three pitches arranged in a two-measure phrase. It’s intentionally rudimentary to remind you to pay attention to the basics, the fundamental building blocks of singing-acting. It’s not as effective to do this exercise a cappella, because the pulsing triplets of the accompaniment provide an important foundation of tempo and continuity to support the melody. (There is a karaoke-style accompaniment track available for download on the SAVI Singing Actor site, which is a good resource to have on hand if you want to work on this without an accompanist. See the Appendix for details.)

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

When you work on the exercise “Here I Am,” your first priority should be to become and to remain fully **sentient**, capable of thought and feeling and able to respond to and express those thoughts and feelings while you sing. Sentience starts with acknowledging your environment, the actual place in which you are practicing.

Look around. Take in the appearance of the room and the objects in it, and allow yourself to be aware of how you feel in that room. Use your other senses as well: be aware of the sounds you hear in the background and the smells in the air. Reach out and touch the objects around you as well; feel your face, rub your hands together and stroke the fabric of your clothing to awaken your sense of touch. Come to your senses!

It’s also important to take into account how you’re feeling when you do this exercise. Are you feeling pressed for time? Tired? Hungry? Annoyed because you just had a quarrel with someone? Scared about singing? Relaxed and well-rested? Open your thoughts to how your day has been so far and the way events in your day have made you feel. Give yourself permission to acknowledge your actual feelings and to express them in your voice and behavior as you work on the exercise.

As the music for “Here I Am” begins to play, don’t feel pressured to sing right away. Instead, breathe in and out in time to the music, inhaling quickly at the moment you would breathe if you were beginning to sing and exhaling steadily during the time you’d be singing. Use the first few repetitions of the accompaniment to *think* the words “Here I am” in your inner monologue. Say to yourself, “Here I am, right here, in this particular room at this particular moment, feeling these feelings I am feeling right now.” Your goal is to bring your authentic self to the moment. With each repetition of the two-measure musical phrase, take a breath, reawaken your senses and shift your gaze so your eyes fall on something else in the room as you begin the next moment.

When you feel ready, begin to sing the phrase “Here I am,” maintaining that quality of sentience, authenticity and connection

to the present moment. Pay attention to how each phrase has a *beginning*, a *middle* and an *end*. Notice how each of these three aspects has its own unique properties:

- Each phrase *begins* with a thought, an impulse to express something, and that impulse leads to an almost instantaneous intake of breath in preparation for **phonation**, or vocal sound. Be conscious of breathing “all at once,” quickly and efficiently, in a way that fully prepares you to express that impulse.
- While you are singing, you are in the *middle* of the phrase. Physics teaches us that it takes a lot of energy to launch something, but once it’s in motion, inertia and momentum help to keep it going. It took an initial impulse to animate you, but now you’re in flight, like an arrow that flies from a bowstring on its way to the target, and you need a different kind of energy to keep the phrase alive.
- The phrase *ends* on the final note, which is often held out. The energy that propelled you as you traveled through the phrase is used up, and you’ve reached your destination. Allow yourself to release whatever physical effort was required to maintain the phrase and assess whether you have reached your desired target. You’re done with output for the moment, and you need some input. When you sing “Here I am” again, that statement must be informed by the awareness that “here” may not be the same place you were previously.

Having sung the phrase once, let yourself be silent during its next musical repetition, but continue to think “Here I am” as you go back to noticing your inner and outer environment. (If you’re in a group, notice the others with you, too.) Alternate a phrase of singing and a phrase of silent inner monologue. Bring your conscious awareness to the rhythm of input and output that is a part of this exercise: taking in information from your environment; allowing yourself to notice the quality of your thoughts and the

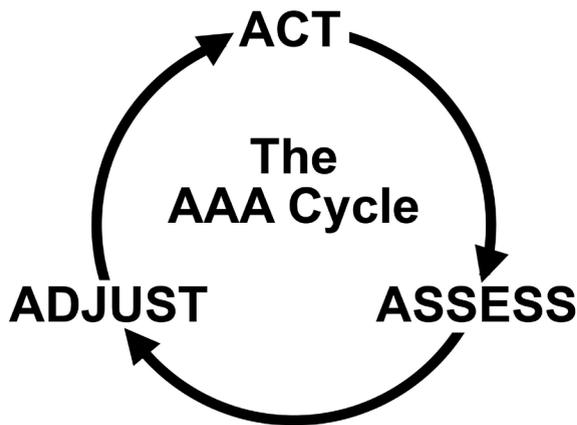
## The SAVI Singing Actor

intake of breath; then sending out sound and expression into that environment.

- As you go through this process again and again, you are moving through a cycle of Action, Assessment and Adjustment—the **AAA Cycle**, for short—that is the heart of singing and living truthfully in each moment.

When you start to sing, you begin with an impulse, an *Adjustment*, that propels you from inaction to take your first *Action*. As you reach the end of the phrase, your attention shifts to your partner's response in order to *Assess* the success of your action. (If you are practicing alone, this is an imaginary partner whose response you'll need to invent.) Did you get the response you wanted? Based on your Assessment, you'll make a new *Adjustment*, a choice about the next Action you want to take. Assessment will help you decide what's next. Do I intensify, back off, or try a different tactic?

The three phases of the AAA Cycle correspond to the beginning (Adjustment), middle (Action), and end (Assessment) of your phrase. Pay attention to how each phrase begins with an adjustment, a choice, a decision you make at the beginning of the exercise that moves you from silence to song, and impels you to sing again when it's time to repeat the phrase.



When you're ready, take the pauses out and sing "Here I am" on each repetition of the musical phrase. Though you now have a much shorter period of time between the end of one phrase and the beginning of the next, continue to focus your attention on that moment as a moment of change when it arrives.

After you've gone through a few cycles, you're ready to kick things up a notch and Modulate! When you're working with a live accompanist, you can repeat the first three measures as many times as you want before you start to modulate. (When you're working with a recorded track, the number of repetitions will be predetermined, of course.) As the exercise continues into the fourth measure, you'll be singing in a higher key, which requires a different kind of effort and produces different sensations. Does singing higher change how you feel? Does it lead you to make different sorts of behavior choices? Does it affect your ability to remain sentient?

In the seventh measure, the exercise will modulate to an even higher key. As you ascend to this third level of intensity, you may start to focus more exclusively on your singing and to neglect sentience and behavior. If you find this to be the case, try to focus your awareness on reincorporating those elements that you were neglecting. Remain as sentient and as connected to the AAA Cycle as you are able through the final notes of the exercise.

### **"Here I Am" with Imaginary Circumstances**

To make this exercise a deeper acting experience, invent an imaginary circumstance for yourself. This might be the story arc of a character you're rehearsing, a dramatic situation from a favorite play or musical, or a circumstance you develop on your own. Use the following fundamental questions to delineate the particulars of that circumstance:

- Who am I?
- Where am I?
- What am I doing?
- Why is it important?

## *The SAVI Singing Actor*

- How is this moment different from the preceding moment?<sup>15</sup>

This is an effective way to practice living truthfully under imaginary circumstances while remaining sentient and active—the work I described in the preceding section. Effective singing-acting requires this sort of multitasking every time you sing, and “Here I Am” helps you strengthen those skills by practicing them apart from the musical and vocal demands associated with a specific piece of musical theater repertoire.

Think of “Here I Am” not a song to be performed but as an exercise, like push-ups or planks. It compels you to be truthful and natural while inhabiting a musical structure and making specific choices at the onset of each new phrase. In the next chapter, I’ll introduce some new tools that you can use to make this exercise more Specific, Authentic, Varied and Intense.

### **Summary**

Congratulations! You’ve reached the end of the longest chapter of the book. I’ve packed a lot of information into this chapter. What have you learned?

- Your job as a singing actor is to create behavior that communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase. (That’s Axiom 1.)
- As a singing actor, you’re always Creating, Choosing, Communicating and Changing. Remember your ABCs!
- Effective singing acting is Specific, Authentic, Varied and Intense. In other words, it’s SAVI! D’ye savvy?
- There’s a duplex relationship between what you feel and think and the behavior you create to express those thoughts and feelings. It’s a two-way street, Inside-Out and Outside-In.

---

<sup>15</sup> More on Fundamental Questions in Chapter 13, when we discuss maximizing Specificity.

Charles Gilbert

- Great singing acting is shish kebab, not applesauce. Every phrase is its own unique opportunity to create behavior.
- “Here I Am” is a great exercise not just for exploring these fundamental concepts but for putting them into daily practice.