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Sing and Ding: Become a SAVI Singing Actor

by Charles Gilbert

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The 7 Secrets of SAVI Singing Actors

Musical theater performance is a highly competitive field. To succeed, you'll need to be "savvy," armed with practical and useful knowledge. SAVI singing acting starts with this fundamental principle:

"When I sing, I will create behavior that communicates the dramatic event with Specificity, Authenticity, Variety and Intensity (SAVI)."

1. The SAVI singing actor has the mindset of an athlete in training. He knows that daily practice will result in gains in expressive range and power, stamina and coordination.

2. The SAVI singing actor recognizes that a song is not a single event but a journey through a series of varied phrases, and approaches each phrase as a unique opportunity to create specific expressive behavior.

3. The SAVI singing actor doesn't "go with the flow." She recognizes that there is great potential value in making each new phrase as different as possible from the preceding phrase.

4. The SAVI singing actor knows the eyes are the mirror of the soul, and that it's no disgrace to use your face. He is able to coordinate the use of his face and eyes to convey the thoughts and emotions in a song.

5. The SAVI singing actor uses no more physical effort than necessary. Even when engaged in strenuous vocalism, he maintains a sense of ease and buoyancy in all parts of the body not involved in producing sound.

6. The SAVI singing actor has an incisive

understanding of every lyric she sings. She studies the text for clues about the dramatic event and the given circumstances, and pays close attention to the ways in which a phrase differs from the preceding phrase.

7. The SAVI singing actor is able to successfully embody the unique impulse that accompanies the onset of each new idea or phrase.

Chapter One: Overture

A Song of Singing

I sing a song of singing. Gather round and we'll sing a song of songs:

From deep, deep within me,
A song begins to grow.
My feelings rise and find a voice.
I sing because I have no choice!
Hear my song!

Hear My Song

to be sung as a round

Charles Gilbert

From deep, deep with - in me, a song be-gins to

4
grow My feel - ings rise and find a voice. I sing be-cause I

8
have no _ choice! Hear my song! (From)

Singing onstage is a glorious experience, an opportunity to express powerful feelings and ideas in a way that deeply moves the listener.

Great singers have the ability to enchant us, casting a spell that transports us "out of the commonplace, into the rare."

Since the dawn of mankind, we 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.

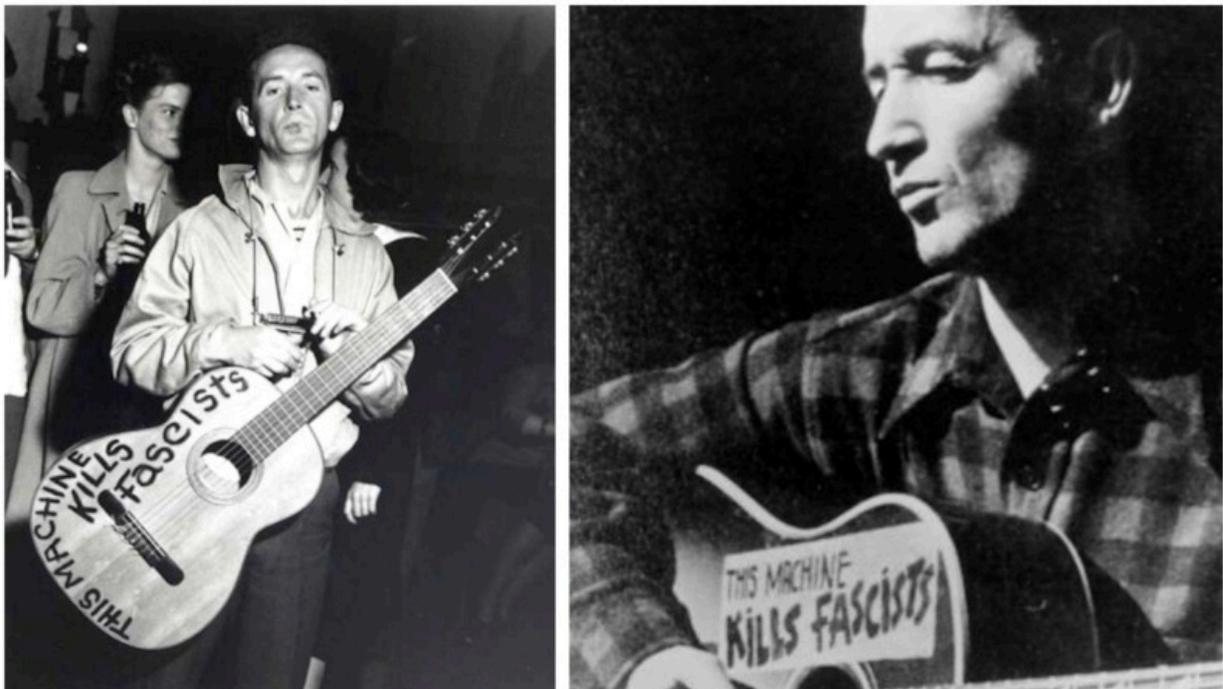
Can a song change the world?

Maybe you didn't know that songs had the power to change the world, but they do. The best songs, when skillfully sung, have a powerful magic, an enchantment that transforms those who hear and see it.

Songs cast a spell that makes important stuff happen.

Think about Orpheus, whose songs of lamentation melted the hard heart of Hades and earned him the chance to escort his beloved Eurydice back from the Underworld.

Would you prefer a less mythological example? Perhaps you recognize this dude:



Woody Guthrie was a legendary American folk singer and social activist who raised his voice not only to oppose fascists but racists and oppressors of all sorts. No fascists were actually killed by Woody's guitar, but his impact on American society and the progressive social movement of the 30's, 40's

and 50's was substantial.

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.

The spells that songs cast are so strong that they reach across time and space. A phrase of a familiar song can instantly evoke the circumstances when we first heard it and the feelings that it stirred. A song can make strangers into soulmates, revealing the shared truth in our hearts.

Songs are powerful. Yip Harburg famously observed that "Words make you think a thought, music makes you feel a feeling, but a song makes you feel a thought." And when passion and emotion ignite an idea, important things happen.

Harburg's lyrics for "Over The Rainbow" combine with Harold Arlen's music to make you feel Dorothy's thoughts of yearning. Set to Jay Gorney's music, his lyrics for "Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?" not only makes you feel the anguish of the down-and-out during the Depression but provokes you to consider the reasons for their plight. Songs create empathy, making it possible not only to feel a thought but also share that feeling.

Songs deliver information in the most powerful and effective way possible. Songs have the power to change the world: a strong song, properly performed, penetrates the mind and the heart and makes an indelible imprint. A large part of the reason for this is that a song is a structured form of expression, whose form (employing rhyme, repetition and word play) beguiles the listener, awakens his thoughts and feelings and arouses his brain in ways that lead to the formation of new neural pathways.

And musicals? Man, oh, man. Musicals are stories told in song, songs that make stuff happen. 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 up tomorrow, that no one is alone and that when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true.

In a recent interview¹, George C. Wolfe, the director and co-creator of *Shuffle Along*, amongst many other masterpieces, recounted a seminal experience he had as a singer in his elementary school² chorus.

I remember at one point we were invited to perform at this other school, and we were singing this song. And I remember very specifically the lyrics:

"These truths we are declaring,
That all men are the same.
That liberty's a torch,
Burning with a steady flame."

And [our principal] told us that when we got to the line, "That liberty's a torch, burning with a steady flame," if we sang it with full conviction, we would transform all the energy in the room, we would cause all the white people in the room to shed their racism. So I remember very specifically us singing this song, "These truths we are declaring, that all men are the same." And then we got to this line and we practically screamed it: "That liberty's a torch, burning with a steady flame." And it wasn't so much that it happened, the amazing thing about that story for me is that we believed it. I've gone on to work in theater and film and to become a writer, and her saying that to me, to us, at that time lives inside of me to this very day and informs the kind of work that I do and the kind of work that I believe in.

In his account of the tale, Wolfe adds, "I consider it the most astonishing thing because someone told me if I committed to the language, I could change the world. That didn't happen, but

I believed it, and so to this very day I believe it, so to this day when I go into the rehearsal room with actors, I pass on that the power of committing to the language, committing to the words, to them. And it informs how I do what I do."

This is the challenge and the opportunity you're faced with every time you sing a song. It is noble and important work. Done properly, it promotes compassion and understanding, awakens our hearts and minds to new possibilities. It brings comfort, joy and a sense of community in a world where all these commodities are in short supply.

If you're a singer of songs, then you've experienced this and recognize it as a sacred endeavor that requires both generosity and artistry. The pursuit of mastery, the ascent to ever-higher levels of expressiveness, the ongoing forays into new and more challenging repertoire – this is the life's work of the artist who sings onstage. It can be a rewarding vocation, but more importantly, it is a worthy calling, one that demands courage, discipline, imagination and a tireless commitment to excellence.

Maybe you've chosen this field as your vocation, and find it to be a challenging and rewarding profession. Maybe you aspire to a career as a singing actor, and find yourself on a path that you hope will one day lead you to that goal.

Either way, if you're like most singers who want to perform onstage, you know that getting good requires work.

And you know that getting good is important, not just to succeed and stand out in a crowded, competitive field, but because songs matter and performing them well is a glorious experience that makes the world a better place.

I've had the pleasure and the honor of working in this

field myself for forty years, creating new works, directing productions and training young artists to work on the musical stage. That's given me plenty of time to observe and to consider what makes a great performance. What's the difference between a song that arouses polite admiration for the earnest efforts of the singer and one that really stirs our souls?

Let me tell you what I've discovered.

You've overlooked something important.

You've overlooked something important.

You may be in a top school, or have a degree from one. You may have been working for years, or you may be struggling to break through and book your first big gig. But my experience tells me it's very likely you're forgetting something.

Despite the voice lessons and acting classes, the ballet and jazz and tap class, the countless hours spent in rehearsal, chances are you are overlooking something important for lack of a fundamental skill they seldom teach you in any of those places, the skill that enables you to put it all together into a powerful, expressive performance.

Like a novice wizard reciting a spell, you've been making all the right sounds - or maybe you've been trying to, or you think you are - but the magic isn't happening.

What's that missing ingredient? Find it, and you've discovered a secret weapon, the key to a puzzle that confounds many of your peers. For lack of this knowledge, there are scores of singing actors who flounder and flail about, groping cluelessly in the dark when they could be moving forward confidently, taking their work to new heights of artistic

achievement.

Singers who have this knowledge, who've discovered this secret ingredient, are SAVVY singers.

And you can be one too.

More importantly, you SHOULD be one.

You can learn to make important things happen when you sing. Wouldn't you like to be able to do that? And if you can do that already, would you like to be able to do it better, more consistently, more profoundly?

Because being able to sing beautifully and accurately is not enough. Feeling emotion and living truthfully under imaginary circumstances is not enough. Having a bulging binder with repertoire in all the right styles is not enough.

What I'm talking about is something else, a way of thinking and working that goes under and over and around all those other skills. It's a catalyst, a missing ingredient that will start an artistic chain reaction ultimately destined to create an explosive response in the minds and hearts of your audience.

What's stopping you?

What is it that stands between you and your desire to change the world with your songs?

Perhaps you haven't yet recognized this as the purpose behind what we do as singing actors, the true goal of anyone who sings a song in the presence of a listener.

More likely, you recognized the truth of my statement right away, and then found yourself puzzling over why that's not

happening for you, as fully and consistently as you'd like.

You may be hampered by fear, either consciously or unconsciously. You may be held back by lack of certain specific and learnable skills that 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.

If any of these apply to you, the book you're reading now is the solution to your problem, the answer to your prayers.

My life's work has been making musicals and training singing actors, mostly at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where I've been a faculty member since 1988. I've worked on dozens of shows and taught hundreds of students over the past forty years. I've worked with artists, educators and students not just in the United States but in Europe, the UK and Australia.

Over the years, I've developed the SAVI System of Singer-Actor Training to codify many of the techniques I've passed on to my students. Statements I've made over and over have been distilled into axioms in my System, and discoveries that seemed especially promising have been refined into techniques, procedures that can be routinely followed to attain reliable results.

That's what I've poured into the pages of this book – the secrets of being a savvy singer. A SAVI singer.

I'll explain this concept in the coming pages, and lay out a plan that will enable you to experience it for yourself and, with patience and persistence, put it to work.

The perils and plusses of being a polymath

So what makes me an authority in this subject? I want you not only to understand but to trust the information in these pages, and that means you need to know a little more about me.

I'm what they call a polymath, a person with a wide range of interests and skills. It turns out that the musical theater, being a multi-disciplinary art form, has a tendency to attract hyphenated artists, remarkable individuals whose skill set straddles multiple fields. Think of George M. Cohan, for instance, known at the beginning of the Twentieth Century as "the man who owned Broadway." An entertainer, playwright, composer, lyricist, singer, actor, dancer and produce, he created and performed songs like "Give My Regards to Broadway" and "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy." In our own day and age there's Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of the blockbuster musical Hamilton and winner of a MacArthur "genius grant," a more familiar example of the modern-day musical theater polymath. Artists like these (and like me) are uniquely situated to discern connections and re-mix the components of the musical theater inventively. In my case, that means my approach to song performance draws upon a lifetime of varied experiences and perspectives.

To begin with, I've been a musician all my life, since childhood, a pianist and, later, a music director who's conducted performances and supervised rehearsals for musicals in professional and academic environments. I've sung classical choral music, played in a steel band, rocked out on pop songs from Patsy Cline to Randy Newman, backed singers doing standards and played countless auditions. I'm a jazz musician as well, someone who can improvise and follow the changes, someone who

can jam as well as play what's on the page.

I discovered the stage in high school as an actor, and pursued my passion for theater through college, eventually earning an MFA in stage direction, and I've spent years using my training and experience as a stage director to help actors craft performances that communicate a dramatic story to an audience. What's more, I'm a dramatist who writes for the musical stage, both music and lyrics, with half a dozen musicals under my belt, and that gives me first-hand understanding of how songs fit into a dramatic event.

I see the big picture as well as the details. I can find meaning in a word, a rhythm, an interval, a chord - but I also know the importance of relating that single detail to the larger journey that a character undergoes during a song or a dramatic story. I understand the state of the art - the work that's being created right now, and what makes it tick - but I also have a comprehensive knowledge of the history of the musical and the ways in which today's work stands on the shoulders of its historical predecessors, and that enables me to approach repertoire of all sorts with intelligence and integrity.

And, most important, I have decades of experience as an educator. I know what works in the studio and the rehearsal hall, what procedures will lead to an effective result and which are less productive. I've thought long and deeply about the training of the singing actor, and what singing actors can learn from musicians, dancers and high-performance athletes. Because I've had the chance to do this over a period of years, I've come to understand the importance of building habits - the foundational attributes that build technique and produce reliable results song after song and show after show. What's more, I've been able to track the results of my approach over

time, seeing how the work pays dividends over the long haul.

The infinite variety of the musical

One of my goals in developing a pedagogy for the singing actor was to find an approach that would be comprehensive and repertoire-agnostic – in other words, a Swiss Army Knife technique, one that would be useful in any and all situations, all types of songs, all types of shows. I've made a special effort to determine what is essential and fundamental about the act of singing onstage, enabling the singing actor to build a technique that is both solid and reliable while offering a flexible adaptable framework.

Musical theater has an almost infinite variety. When I talk to people about the musical theater, I often cite the Hindu parable of the three blind men and the elephant, in which a group of blind men encounter an elephant, and each one, touching the animal in a different spot, gets a very different impression of the beast. One touches his side and declares the elephant to be much like a wall, while another, grasping a tusk, proclaims the elephant to be like a spear, and a third grabs the elephant by its tail and is convinced that an elephant is like a rope.

Like these three blind men, most people have only encountered one particular aspect of the musical theater, and have made a judgment about what the musical is on the mistaken assumption that this one part represents the art-form in its entirety. Thus, people are convinced that all musicals are frivolous, or that all musicals are sentimental, or that all musicals are enormous and elaborate. Some of this is the result

of inexperience – we can infer from the parable that those blind men would surely change their tune if they compared notes and got the grand tour of the beast. Likewise, we're all a bit blind when it comes to the pachydermal majesty of the musical, which is why it is so important to learn about the history of the musical and the vast range of its artistic potential.

Sometimes, though, it's a question of taste. Most passionate practitioners in the field have tastes, preferences and deeply held convictions about the relative merits of various sorts of musical theater repertoire. Enthusiasm for one type of musical theater may lead you to reject other types as unworthy, inferior or bogus. If you're an aficionado, you're likely to have strong opinions about classic and contemporary shows, Disney and jukebox and operetta and devised work and everything else that lives under the big big umbrella of musical theater. If we cling to those opinions, it can make it hard for us to talk to one another, to agree on any common ground.

But working with hundreds of students and doing dozens of shows over the past four decades has taught me to embrace the full spectrum of expressive possibilities this rich, diverse field has to offer. I am a man of catholic (small "c") tastes (and Unitarian values, for what that's worth). My experience is that the musical is as diverse as the world it mirrors, containing all sorts of moods, styles, tones and characters. Embracing that diversity makes you more employable, more creative, a better artistic citizen. The musical is not solely an American creation, not by a long shot, but it is characteristically American in its magnificent, unruly diversity and its relentless striving forever to re-invent itself.

The bigger picture

I'm assuming that you are someone who shares my passion for musical theater, but who is also a citizen of the world, with an ambition that extends beyond simply nailing the next audition, booking the next gig, doing well in your next class or lesson, and getting that next paycheck. You're looking for some larger gratification, a sense that your work as a singing actor and a musical theater artist matters, that it connects you to the world at large.

This is the most challenging and worthwhile part of writing this book. I am, as I said, a polymath, a man of many interests, and I'm often aware that those interests exert a sort of gravitational pull on one another. I am drawn to discover what connects my impulse to make musical theater with my impulse to be a good father, a loving husband, a generous mentor and a responsible citizen of the world. I look at history and I see how people like Oscar Hammerstein and Lin-Manuel Miranda, Bertolt Brecht and Stephen Sondheim, Rinde Eckert and Michael Cerveris, George C. Wolfe and Dubose Heyward, all used their skills as artists working in the arena of musical theater to have some sort of influence on the world, not just the world of the theater, but the capital-W World. They used musical theater as a platform to explore what it means to be human, to be compassionate, to be curious, to express their passion and their insights. And so have I. And so should you, and this book is meant to help you do that.

I know, this sounds crazy, at a certain level. I'd be the first to acknowledge there's plenty of frivolity in the musical theater, the land of glitter and jazz hands, kick lines and money notes. It may seem a bit delusional to speak of show tunes saving the world, but no matter how many folks you encounter

ready to throw shade in that direction, you don't have to subscribe to the notion that the musical theater is inherently frivolous. In my experience, the musical theater can be a gymnasium for empathy, a place where people come together and are transformed, their souls awakened and their sense of purpose rekindled. That's what draws so many people into the field, igniting their passion and intelligence. Composer Kurt Weill wrote, **"I believe that the musical theatre is the highest, the most expressive and the most imaginative form of theatre, and that a composer who has a talent and passion for the theatre can express himself completely in this branch of musical creativeness."** I don't know about you, but I'm down with Kurt.

Who is this book for?

As this overture draws to a close, I'll recapitulate its main themes: this is a book for people who are passionate about musicals, about songs and about singing-acting, those who are striving with each new endeavor to create work that is more expressive, more powerful, more life-changing. As I indicated in my opening paragraphs, I think that making and singing songs is magic, a kind of enchantment capable of healing a wounded world. Musicals are super spell-casting machines made of songs and stories and singers and spectacle, and a well-made musical can rock your world and change your life. If you share that belief, and you're ready to up your game, you've come to the right place.

Is that you? Ready to kill some fascists? Your songs can cast a spell that makes important things happen. All of us can "lift every voice and sing til Earth and Heaven ring."

Chapter Two: Opening Number

The SAVI National Anthem

Our overture is through, and now it's time for the opening number. Sing along with me, won't you?

A Song That's SAVI

The SAVI National Anthem

Charlie Gilbert

Majestic Gospel ♩ = 60

The musical score is written in 12/8 time with a tempo of ♩ = 60. It consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with the lyrics 'When I sing, I will cre - ate _____ be - hav - ior _____ that com -'. The second staff continues with 'mu - ni - cates the dra - ma - tic e - vent phrase _____ by phrase.' and includes the lyrics 'Each I'll My My I' on the right side. The third staff continues with 'time I raise my voice in song, I'll make a spe - ci _____ fic choice in song, And I'll sing with au - then - ti - ci - ty. _____ I'll al - ways ex - press my - self truth - ful - ly. _____ phrase by phrase va - ri - e - ty _____ will earn _____ me no - tor - i - e - ty _____ work will have in - ten - si - ty, _____ And when it is called for, im - men - si - ty. _____ won't play mood or at - mos - phere. I'll strive _____ to make _____ my ac - tions clear.' The fourth staff continues with 'sing a song that's SA - VI all of my days, all of my days.' and includes a first ending bracket for measures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The fifth staff concludes with 'days, all of my days. And I'll sing a song that's SA - VI all of my days, all of my days.' and ends with the instruction *molto rit.*

F A7 D7 Gm A7 Gm Dm

When I sing, I will cre - ate _____ be - hav - ior _____ that com -

3 B \flat F/C A7/C \sharp Dm G7 C7

mu - ni - cates the dra - ma - tic e - vent phrase _____ by phrase. Each
I'll
My
My
I

5 B \flat F B \flat B dim7

time I raise my voice in song, I'll make a spe - ci _____ fic choice in song, And I'll
sing with au - then - ti - ci - ty. _____ I'll al - ways ex - press my - self truth - ful - ly. _____
phrase by phrase va - ri - e - ty _____ will earn _____ me no - tor - i - e - ty _____
work will have in - ten - si - ty, _____ And when it is called for, im - men - si - ty. _____
won't play mood or at - mos - phere. I'll strive _____ to make _____ my ac - tions clear.

7 F/C B \flat /C F/C G 9 G7 B \flat /F 1, 2, 3, 4. F

sing a song that's SA - VI all of my days, all of my days.

9 Dm G7 F/C B \flat /C F/C G 9 G7 B \flat /F F

days, all of my days. And I'll sing a song that's SA - VI all of my days, all of my days.
molto rit.

Now I'm no fool – I realize that looking at this piece of sheet music, dots and slashes on a page, isn't going to do much to stir your soul. If you want the optimal soul-stirring experience, set down the book for a minute and go to [this URL] to hear this (and the other songs from the book), or better yet,

gather a group of students or fellow singers around the piano and play the accompaniment provided. This song is meant to be a multi-sensory experience; it has information and emotion embedded in every word and detail, and the act of singing it will enhance its impact. Mister Professor, if you please?

A Song That's SAVI

The SAVI National Anthem

Charlie Gilbert

Majestic Gospel ♩ = 60

F
A7
D7
Gm
A7
Gm
Dm

When I sing, I will cre - ate _____ be - hav - ior _____ that com -

3 B^b
F/C
A7/C[#]
Dm
G7
C7

mu - ni - cates the dra - ma - tic e - vent phrase _____ by phrase.

Each
I'll
My
My
I

5 B^b
F
B^b
B dim7

time I raise my voice in song, I'll make a spe - ci - fic choice in song, And I'll
 sing with au - then - ti - ci - ty. I'll al - ways ex - press my - self truth - ful - ly.
 phrase by phrase va - ri - e - ty. will earn me no - tor - i - e - ty.
 work will have in - ten - si - ty, And when it is called for, im - men - si - ty.
 won't play mood or at - mos - phere. I'll strive to make my ac - tions clear.

A Song That's SAVI

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system starts at measure 2 and ends at measure 8. The second system starts at measure 9 and ends at measure 16. The score includes a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. Chord symbols are provided above the vocal line. The tempo marking 'molto rit.' appears in the piano part of the second system.

2
7 F/C B \flat /C F/C G 9 G7 B \flat /F 1, 2, 3, 4. F

sing a song that's SA - VI all of my days, all of my days.

9 Dm G7 F/C B \flat /C F/C G 9 G7 B \flat /F F

days, all of my days. And I'll sing a song that's SA - VI all of my days, all of my days.

molto rit.

1. When I sing, I will create behavior
That communicates the dramatic event
Phrase by phrase.
Each time I raise my voice in song,
I'll make a specific choice in song,
And I'll sing a song that's SAVI
All of my days.

2. I'll sing with authenticity,
I'll always express myself truthfully.

3. My phrase-by-phrase variety
Will earn me notoriety.

4. My work will have intensity
And, when it is called for, immensity.

5. I won't play mood or atmosphere.
I'll strive to make my actions clear.

Can I get an "Amen?" Amen!

Our opening number is subtitled "The SAVI National Anthem," and now's a perfect moment to examine the spell-casting power of songs. An anthem is "a rousing or uplifting song identified with a particular group, body or cause," such as a national anthem, "a solemn patriotic song officially adopted by a country as an expression of its national identity." Similarly, the anthems in a church service are chosen to express the beliefs or ideals of

the assembled congregation.

The tune for The SAVI National Anthem was inspired by an iconic composition, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," whose lyric by James Weldon Johnson was set to music by his brother, John Rosamond Johnson in 1900, and which is sometimes referred to as "The Black National Anthem." Its churchy vibe feels like the perfect counterpart to the words I've crafted to articulate the foundations of my method. Just as a Sabbath visit to church provide an opportunity to re-visit and re-consider our most fundamental values and re-new our commitment to those values, every visit to the practice room or the studio should offer a similar chance to re-connect with the basic principles that guide us. When you sing this song, you make a promise, a pledge to put first things first and honor the most important of the values all singing actors share. The SAVI National Anthem is a series of affirmations, a declaration of intention voiced in the future tense, and when you sing it, you are changing the energy in the room, creating a future reality for yourself in which these principles will serve and guide you.

This is the spell-casting power of song at work, making its everyday magic. I often begin classes and lectures by having everyone sing this song; it gives me a memorable platform from which I can address the ABC's and the four key qualities of effective singing acting.

Axiom One

You Begin With ABC

"You begin with ABC"

"When you read, you begin with ABC, when you sing, you begin with do re mi," sings Maria in *The Sound of Music*, and I concur with lyricist Oscar Hammerstein that ABC is "a very good place to start." I have great empathy for the beginning singing actor, having been one myself, and having worked with so many of them over the years. I see how easy it is to get overwhelmed by the apparently infinite variety and complexity of the craft of singing-acting. So many songs! So many choices! So many skills to juggle! Where do I start? Who should I imitate? It's a prospect as daunting as it is exciting.

My work as a teacher of singing-acting has been an ongoing attempt to formulate its ABC, a finite set of fundamental components that can be learned and then be recombined in unlimited numbers of permutations to create a vast array of artistic and expressive effects.

More than a century ago, Constantin Stanislavski, the early-20th Century actor and director whose pioneering work

established the foundations of modern acting training, undertook a similar task. In his writings, Stanislavski spoke of his desire to establish a fundamental grammar, an ABC of acting to use in the studio. Searching for a model for his work, he remembered studying music as a young man and thought about the methods his music teachers used to cultivate the technique required to be a successful musician. The pedagogical precepts of musical performance helped to inspire Stanislavski as he developed his system, one that revolutionized the training of actors and has been in use for more than a hundred years.

The work I've done over the past decades has revealed a similar opportunity to me, a need to establish an ABC for singing acting, to articulate its basic principles in a way that will give you, the aspiring student or singing-actor seeking to improve your craft, the chance to improve your work through techniques that can be clearly identified, practiced and applied systematically. That's what I've done in the SAVI System of Singer-Actor Training, but before I unpack that four-letter acronym, let's spend a little longer getting to the ABC of it.

ABC = Always Be Creating

ABC = ALWAYS BE CREATING

The SAVI National Anthem begins with these words: "**When I sing, I will create behavior.**"

Creators are makers; when you sing, you must make something, a creation that is original and uniquely yours. I invite you to embrace the idea that the act of singing a song is not simply interpretative but fundamentally creative. For some singers, this requires a major shift of mindset, rethinking the very definition of what it means to sing on stage. Once you've

made that shift, however, you've opened the door to new levels of expressiveness and artistic satisfaction.

On stage, you never just "sing a song;" instead, your job is to **create a performance**. Don't fall into the trap of assuming that the songwriters have done all the creative heavy lifting and that your job is simply to be a conduit for their great work. Great artistry may result in a performance so natural that the singer's craft and technique seem to disappear, but in my experience, such results are achieved only through painstaking effort. It's tempting to think that singing a song is like riding the Metroliner, relaxing in a gleaming express train as it whisks you along a familiar route to a familiar destination. But it's more useful to imagine that singing-acting is 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.

Want a vivid illustration of that concept? Pick any song and watch three YouTube videos of performances of that song. (YouTube is an amazing resource, a game-changer when it comes to studying the art of singing acting.) In each video, the song is the same, so what's different? Itemize and analyze those differences, and you'll quickly discover the extent of the performer's creative contribution, the opportunities for creative "making" that any song presents. Your job as a singing actor is to learn to create your own unique performance. You will learn to read a song as a map that will suggest some possible routes, but undertaking the "journey of the song" will always require considerable energy and ingenuity.

Of course, that's hard work, and requires a great deal of focused effort. The good news is, your brain has an amazing amount of processing horsepower to bring to the task of creating

a performance; the bad news is, you're probably only be using a fraction of it. Working on the SAVI System is like getting an operating system upgrade, new software that lets you harness more of the innate capacity of the hardware we're all blessed with. With time and training, you'll expand your capacity for multi-tasking, and learn the best hacks to help you make the most of the capacity you've got. That's where the tools and techniques in the following pages will pay off, big time.

But let's agree on this right at the beginning: the art of song performance is a creative art as well as an interpretative art. A central tenet of SAVI singing acting is that the singing actor **CREATES** behavior to communicate the dramatic event. The behavior that you create is your unique, personal contribution, your chance to express your distinctive individual artistry. Anything less than that just won't move the needle; it won't change the world.

ABC = Always Be Choosing

ABC = ALWAYS BE CHOOSING

Let's dig a little deeper into Axiom One. **"When I sing, I will create behavior that communicates the dramatic event..."**

You create by making choices, trying this and rejecting that, knowing all along that "every minor detail is a major decision." What am I going to do? What's my contribution, what am I adding to the song? What vocal sound, facial expression, gesture, inflection, detail can I contribute that will add clarity and impact to this moment of the song? And the next moment? In Axiom One, you declare, "When I sing, I will create behavior..." The choices you make are choices of **behavior**.

With 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 default to making no choices, or making choices that seem familiar, safe or obvious as a way of minimizing risk. If you're a writer, you can't express adult ideas with a third-grade vocabulary, and the same is true for creating expressive behavior when you sing. Equally important, though, is that you relentlessly explore what Uta Hagen refers to as "the intersection of behavior and psychology."

Making choices means being specific, which requires both intention and concentration. Making choices also requires self-awareness, a way of making sure you're actually doing what you intend to be doing.

And last but not least, making choices requires some rationale, some intelligent basis for choosing one option over another and deciding which one is best. You have to have framework for making decisions about what choices you will make. Axiom One suggests the best possible framework for making choices: "...behavior that **communicates the dramatic event**, phrase by phrase."

At any given moment in a singing actor's performance, behavior can be either externally or internally determined. Externally-determined behavior is behavior which is "set" in advance; it can take the form of blocking, choreography, business or other behavior set by the director, choreographer or conductor, or behavior which the actor himself has chosen and planned prior to the performance. In contrast, internally-determined behavior is spontaneous and unplanned, occurring in reaction to some stimulus or change in the world of the play or

an intuitive process on the part of the actor. Choices that get discovered spontaneously during the rehearsal process often get "set" to make them consistently repeatable over multiple performances.

What comes first, the behavior or the feeling or thought it expresses? This is a debate that continues to generate endlessly lively discussion among pedagogues. Certain schools of acting state it as gospel that the inner life, the thought or feeling, must precede its external expression as behavior. This is confusing for singing actors, who confront the reality of external behavior choices made for them by the composer (pitch, tempo, duration, intensity, timbre), the lyricist, the choreographer and the director. This is a chicken-and-egg dilemma, one that Stanislavski resolved by formulating his notion of "psychophysicality," which stipulates that behavior could be both internal and external. Choices can legitimately originate either in the inner life or the outer surface, as long as the connection between those two worlds was scrupulously honored and maintained.

Making choices in the theater is a complicated business. It's an intensely collaborative art form, which means the rehearsal room and the stage are full of loud, bossy people with lots of opinions. In many cases, it feels like you don't even get a choice: someone is making it for you. The task of communicating the dramatic event began when the writers chose certain specific words, notes and phrases to express it. Then along comes the conductor, the director, the choreographer and an army of assistants and other ancillary personnel, all of them just bursting with ideas about what your choices should be. But all that choosing ends with you: in the moment of performance, it's just you up there, not the writer or the conductor or any of the creative team, and it must begin with you as well. When

you sing, you must always be choosing, and the foundation for determining the most interesting, creative, useful choices is a rock-solid understanding of the dramatic event. What's happening now? Who's doing what to whom, and why is it important?

The art of singing-acting is the art of making choices. Over the coming chapters, we'll study a variety of opportunities for the singing actor to make choices. Your ability to make clear, powerful, appropriate choices can be improved through patient, purposeful practice, and once you've attained a level of mastery in that ability, you'll be better prepared to serve the playwright, the production and the audience.

ABC = Always Be Communicating

ABC = ALWAYS BE COMMUNICATING

It's all there in Axiom One: "...behavior that **communicates** the dramatic event."

Song is a structured form of utterance, a medium of communication that uses words, phrases and sentences that have been organized into a auditory experience that unfolds in real time through tempo, pitch, rhythm and pattern. The words, of course, have meaning, but the musical elements of the song organize the listener's auditory experience of those words in a way that expands and adds to that meaning.

"Songs were made to sing," write Alec Wilder and Morty Palin in their song "While We're Young," and Oscar Hammerstein adds that "a song's not a song til you sing it." Songs are created by songwriters to live in the moment of performance; a song on the printed page is the blueprint for that moment of performance, a set of instructions that, while seemingly extensive and elaborate, are in fact incomplete. The elements

that a singer brings to the performance - tone and timbre, facial expression, gesture and body language - transform a song from a blueprint to a soaring cathedral, a recipe into a delicious meal. This is the artistic responsibility of the singing actor - to complete the process of communication that the songwriter(s) began when they set down those words and music.

Words set to music are enchanted, spells whose power to change the listener and change the world are enhanced by the ways in which music and language conjoin and enrich one another. Songs can indeed change the world, but only if the singer has to step up to the responsibility of presenting the song in a way that will unleash the power of the song as an experience of communication.

The words "Communication" and "Community" both date back to the 14th Century and shares a 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, presence - with everybody, with the "common crowd." The act of singing, the act of communication through song, is fundamentally generous. The SAVI Singing Actor learns to acquire that spirit of generosity, and comes to understand that a performance is a gift to be given to an audience.

ABC = Always Be Changing

ABC = ALWAYS BE CHANGING

Songs unfold over time, and the art of singing acting involves making not just one but 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. The SAVI singing actor is skilled at knowing WHEN to change and WHAT to change in order to keep the song unfolding as a living, dynamic theatrical experience.

Perhaps the word "always" in this phrase is a little misleading, so let me clarify. I don't mean to say "constantly," since constant change would result in random, chaotic behavior. It is more precise to say, "Every single phrase presents the opportunity for change, an opportunity to create a new choice that will reflect the dramatic event as it is unfolding in the PRESENT MOMENT." That's why Axiom One concludes with three words that are a powerful key to SAVI singing acting: **"phrase by phrase."**

In the SAVI System, it is AXIOMATIC that:

"THE SINGING ACTOR CREATES BEHAVIOR THAT COMMUNICATES THE DRAMATIC EVENT PHRASE BY PHRASE."

Your job is to be constantly creating, choosing behavior that conveys the essence of each moment, and changing that behavior whenever the song requires it, crafting a varied sequence of specific individual choices that unfold in coordination with the musical event of the song. Simple, right?

"Simple? Simple? Simple as ABC!" That's the chant of J. Bowden Hapgood, the mad Pied Piper who invades Hooperville in Stephen Sondheim and Arthur Laurents' 1964 musical "Anyone Can Whistle." Of course, as that song spins out of control, it becomes clear that nothing is as simple as it seems, and God knows there's plenty of complexity that lies ahead for the would-be artist. But my goal in these pages is to try to make things simple, and to create an ABC that can be grasped and mastered efficiently.

The SAVI Acronym, Explained.

Each verse of the "SAVI National Anthem" begins with the stirring words of Axiom One, a solemn vow to "create behavior that communicates the dramatic event, phrase by phrase." At the end of each verse, though, you'll find this recurring phrase: **"I'll sing a song that's SAVI all of my days."** Those uninitiated into the mysteries of the SAVI System may hear this as "a song that's savvy," and it's a no accident that the acronym "SAVI" is a homonym for the slang term "savvy," a word that comes from the Spanish "sabe," derived from the Latin "sapere," meaning "to be wise."



"D'ye savvy SAVI?"

You need not just wisdom but practical knowledge, "street

smarts," to guide you on your adventures in singing acting, and SAVI is a compass you can use to navigate the map of any song. What makes a brief, comprehensive, memorable list of the essential attributes of effective singing-acting so useful?

Earlier, I spoke of an "ABC" of singing acting, but when I use those three letters, I'm referring in fact to the whole alphabet, all 26 letters. Any and every word you will ever encounter is comprised of some combination of those letters and only those letters. In this sense, an alphabet can be said to be comprehensive. Another example of a comprehensive set is the Periodic Table of Elements, and Stanislavski invokes the Periodic Table as a metaphor when he describes his efforts to identify the components, the building blocks of acting. Science has identified 108 different elements, some common and abundant, some incredibly scarce and rare, but finite in number and therefore comprehensible - that is, you can grasp them in their entirety. While there may be an infinite number of possible compounds and combinations, there's never a doubt that any substance can be analyzed and understood as a combination of those fundamental elements.

If you are a singer who presents work onstage for an audience, SAVI is your Alphabet, your Periodic Table. The concepts represented by those four letters don't tell the whole story, any more than "ABC" is the entire alphabet, but they suggest a systematic, comprehensive approach to the craft of singing onstage that can be grasped and mastered in an orderly way. They provide a framework for making judgments about your behavior choices and an agenda for creating, developing and refining behavior choices. The four essential qualities represented by the SAVI acronym speak to the question of what what kind of behavior will I create and how will I know if it's any good? Is my choice sufficiently specific, and how can I make

it more specific? Is my choice truthful and authentic, or can its authenticity be more deeply rooted? How can I "sing a song that's SAVI all of my days?"

Ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, let's meet them now, the stars of our show:

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

Take the first letter of the four words in this quartet and you can arrange them into an acronym – easy to remember, convenient to refer to as a comprehensive set and gravid with homonymic meaning. It's a versatile term, too: you can use it as an adjective ("your work is very SAVI"), a noun ("Got SAVI?") or even a verb ("Do you savvy?"). The first four verses of "A Song That's SAVI" spotlight each these four concepts in turn, and that's what I'll do in the four sections that follow.

S is for Specificity

S is for Specificity

"There is so much more potency to be found in detail than in generalities, but most souls cannot train themselves to sit still for it."

— *The character Ambrose Pike, in Elizabeth Gilbert's "The Signature of All Things"*

When I sing, I will create behavior
That communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase.
Each time I raise my voice in song,
I'll make a specific choice in song
And I'll sing a song that's SAVI all of my days.

The S of SAVI stands for Specificity, and the ability to be specific is at the heart of successful singing-acting. Being Specific means making a choice, considering a variety of options before settling on one, and the singing actor who knows how to be Specific can avoid being random or general in performance.

To be specific is to choose, and root your choices deeply in the dramatic event, the given circumstances and the present moment. To be specific is to choose how you will communicate as well as what you will communicate, which requires an incisive understanding of the content and meaning of a particular phrase

and an awareness of how it differs from the previous phrase(s).

In considering Specificity, we have to ask: Specific about what? The answer can take a variety of forms:

- Specific to the dramatic event of the song and to this particular phrase or moment of that larger event
- Specific to the text, the precise meanings of the words and the implications of their syntax, diction and rhetoric
- 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
- Specific not only to the general meanings and emotional environments of the text and the music, but to the precise moments when changes occur (presenting opportunities to make corresponding adjustments in behavior)
- 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 is changing at any given moment.

All of these understandings lead, in turn, to specific choices made in performance that result in the creation of behavior. When you are specific, you make decisions about face, body and vocal expression that you must then execute with clarity and expressiveness.

It is equally important to be specific about the **inner life** of a song – the given circumstances, the psychology of the character, all the choices that go into building a vivid and usable subtext – and to be specific about the **outer life** of a

song – the vocal, facial and physical behavior that is an outward manifestation of that inner life. Each of these has the power to affect the other: a change in subtext or the inner psychological landscape of a song will (or, in any case, should) be apparent via some behavioral expression, and a change in behavior has the potential to alter the way you feel and your inner psychological. Stanislavski used the term "psycho-physical" to describe this interrelationship, and one of the goals of training should be to cultivate the pathways that interconnect the physical and psychological energies of the actor, so that an adjustment made in one can produce a corresponding change in the other.

Specificity means scrupulous execution of details that have been decided on in collaboration with a group of individuals that includes the composer, the lyricist, the director, the choreographer and the conductor, crafting a detailed set of behaviors based on thoughtful analysis and creative give-and-take. It means digging deep to arrive at a specific sense of meaning and event, which does not preclude the likelihood of that meaning being complex, ambiguous or multivalent. Creating a production or performance is a painstaking iterative process of arriving at those specifics and executing them in a reliable, coherent and powerful way.

Specific means being attentive to when two consecutive phrases, two choices, two sets of opportunities are:

- The same
- Are similar, alike in certain ways but different in others, or
- Entirely different from one another

This basic principle of repetition and contrast is one of

the fundamental building blocks of song structure. Optimal specificity begins with great analysis and relies on an iterative process of trial and error for continuous improvement: "let's try this," "that did (or didn't) work," "let's try again," until eventually you reach "let's set that."

Specificity from the Inside Out

The ability to be specific begins with a process of analysis, a forensic investigation of the text of the song and (when applicable) the musical it comes from. 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. Stanislavski's Fundamental Questions provide an excellent basis to begin this inquiry:

- Who am I? Physically, psychologically, in relationship to others. Where am I? Environment and your relationship to it.
- When is it? Time of day, year, season? What has just happened? What do I want? This is your goal or objective.
- Why do I want it? What makes it important? What motivates you? How will I get it? Express your answer in the form of action verbs.
- What must I overcome? These obstacles serve to create conflict and intensify the struggle of the character.

Analysis of the text of a song is complicated by the fact that songs rely on a manner of expression that is highly compact, often formal in its structure, and heavily reliant on association, implication and poetic imagery. This is why I like the term "forensic" to describe the process of song analysis:

it's a bit like detective work, gathering clues, filling in between the facts with inferences, and using your imagination to get a clear picture of the whole. Think of yourself as an archaeologist who's found a couple of bones and has to use them to construct a model of the whole creature; it's a fascinating and stimulating challenge, or anyway, that's how you should learn to think of it.

Arriving at a picture of the whole, a comprehensive understanding of the dramatic event of a song, is not sufficiently specific for the SAVI singing actor. It is important to examine the song PHRASE BY PHRASE, to "zoom in" on the song and look at it closely enough to be able to discern the individual phrases of the song and the ways in which those phrases differ from one another. We can begin to do this if we add a few additional questions to Stanislavski's list from above:

- What's happening now? And, most important,
- How does the present moment differ from the previous moment (or moments)?

The Journey of the Song

Imagine, if you will, that a song is a journey. This metaphor is useful and meaningful in a number of ways. Both a journey and a song have a particular duration; each lasts for an interval of time, and unfolds as a series of events during that interval. Of course, it is easy enough to think of a journey as a single thing: "the trip from Philadelphia to Copenhagen," for instance, can be thought of as a single event, which starts in a certain place, ends in a certain place, has a certain price, and so on. When I say "I am traveling from Philadelphia to

Copenhagen," the concept of that event takes on a certain singularity in my mind. That trip can be taken a number of times, and no matter how many times you undertake the journey, you will always begin in Philadelphia and end in Copenhagen. After you've taken a journey, you probably file it away in your memory as a single event, "that trip I took to Copenhagen."

But when it actually comes time to take the trip, you can only do it step by step: the taxi to the airport; checking in and getting a ticket; proceeding through the security scan; waiting to board your flight; the time spent in flight, which may include a meal, a movie, a trip to the bathroom or a snooze; landing and deplaning; transferring to another flight, with a sojourn in the liminal airport – and so on and so on, until you arrive at your destination. At the outset, you know where you are going, but you can only get there by going through a series of distinctly different steps that can only be undertaken in a certain order. You can't board the flight if you haven't checked in; you can't clear security if you haven't got your boarding pass. This series of events must be executed in the proper sequence, and each one must be done with sufficient attention to detail and to the specific circumstances of that part of the journey.

A song, as I hope you can see by now, is organized in very much the same way. It is easy to think of a song as a single thing. "Why don't you sing My Funny Valentine?" the voice teacher asks her student, and at that moment both teacher and student have an image of that song which is more or less singular: the classic elegance of a "standard" ballad of the sort that offers a particular anguished tug at the heartstrings. The title of the song is one of the elements that provides this singularity; it is a single track on a CD (though that track is made up of millions of individual bits of data), a single title

in the table of contents in the Rodgers and Hart songbook, and so on. But "My Funny Valentine" is singular only in that its title is a container for a sequential collection of individual and distinctive moments.

You can take the journey of "My Funny Valentine" (or any song) any number of times, and it will always originate in the same place and arrive at the same destination, traversing territory that is more or less familiar. Inevitably, the song will have a plaintive minorish introduction; inevitably, the singer will utter the title phrase as the first words of the song; inevitably, the song will be suffused with a particular mood of rueful fondness; inevitably, it will make that surprising modulation to the major in the final moments of the song, and the words "Each day is Valentine's Day" will provide a satisfying ending whose ingenious wordplay puts us in mind of where the journey began. The diligent singer will invent a dramatic circumstance (one that might be, but isn't necessarily, based on the circumstances of the story of "Babes in Arms," the musical for which it was originally composed), decide who's being sung to, patiently work through all the Fundamental Questions. And all this seems fairly specific, doesn't it? We wouldn't confuse "My Funny Valentine" with "Here's That Rainy Day" any more than we confuse a trip to Copenhagen with a trip to the library.

And yet: when it comes time to take the trip, that level of understanding is not sufficient. We must have a clear and specific understanding of the individual events within the song — the PHRASES — just as the traveler must know where to turn when navigating on the highway, what stop to get off the train, what address to give the taxi driver. I'm a huge fan of Google Maps and the kind of turn-by-turn directions it provides; while the app starts out by showing me a map, a single picture that

summarizes the trip I'm about to take, it then provides me with a list of individual steps that will be necessary to traverse that map. In the same way, the singer needs to progress from the map of the song (a map made clear by the answers to the Fundamental Questions and the forensic work of preparation) to the individual steps, the turn-by-turn details that will be necessary in order to get from the starting point (the first measure of music) to the destination (the double bar at the end).

In my years of working with singing actors, I have found this analogy and the insight it yields to be an exceptionally powerful, and those willing to put in the additional effort required to sing a song with specific phrase-by-phrase detail find themselves able to create performances that are a quantum leap better, more creative, more compelling, richer and more satisfying, than those who content themselves with the general answers of who, what and why. This is why it has become axiomatic for me to state, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that ding!" a motto that I explain in greater detail in a subsequent chapter.

"God Is In The Details" – Specificity from the Outside-In

In the preceding discussion, I've tried to show how being SPECIFIC in song starts with having a specific understanding of the content of the song, both its verbal and musical meaning and its implied, subtextual content, on a phrase-by-phrase basis.

But there's a further implication to the word SPECIFIC that deserves consideration here. Making a specific choice implies that you will consider a variety of choices, and out of that universe of possibilities, you will choose the one that seems best suited to your interpretation of a particular moment. This

entails another kind of specificity, that is, BEHAVIORAL specificity. This means taking painstaking control over the various forms of behavioral expression you engage in. Is the voice loud or soft? How loud? How soft? Are certain words to be accented? Are certain words to be 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? Yes, this barrage of questions gives you an idea of the number of different choices that a singing-actor faces for each phrase of a song, and for each phrase, making a choice implies being as specific as possible about these details.

"God is in the details," says the German-born architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Stephen Sondheim adopted this saying as one of his three fundamental principles of songwriting. (The other two, "Content dictates form" and "Less is more" are equally relevant to the craft of singing-acting, but we'll save them for another time, and in the meantime I'll refer you to the Introduction to "Finishing The Hat," the first volume of SS's collected lyrics, for more Godly details on what that maxim means to him.) Attention to details is the hallmark of specificity, and any artist's signature will be evident through the specific details he chooses.

The singing actor needs to activate, strengthen and coordinate those muscles and senses required to make specific vocal, facial and physical choices. This work is akin to the work of the musician or the dancer, who sculpts and shapes each individual phrase of a performance with detail and nuance, and like the musician and the dancer, the singing actor accomplishes this through purposeful practice. The SAVI System provides a

range of exercises designed to cultivate phrase-by-phrase specificity of behavior, exercising the voice, the face, the eyes and the body, separately and in concert, to achieve the fullest and most expressive range of specific choices.

How Specific?

Time for a reprise. How'd that first verse go, again?

When I sing, I will create behavior that communicates
the dramatic event phrase by phrase
Each time I raise my voice in song
I'll make a specific choice in song
And I'll sing a song that's SAVI all of my days.

SAVI starts with S, and the concept of Specificity in choice-making is an fundamental one for the SAVI Singing Actor.

Having put that concept in first place, I find that certain questions seem to follow: Specific about what? And, equally important, HOW specific? That is, is the SAVI singing actor called upon to be specific in ways that are different in both degree and kind?

The answer can be found at the end of Axiom One: phrase by phrase, that's how specific. One specific choice for each phrase will be just enough.

But I find again and again that students misunderstand or underestimate the challenge of working phrase by phrase. They want to be specific but in a general way, making one specific choice (of mood, action, focus, intention, vocalism or physicality) and then applying it across an entire song, or an entire section of a song.

So: a specific choice for every phrase. The concept of working "phrase by phrase" is so fundamental to SAVI singing acting that I've included it in Axiom One, which we sing in every class.

Every. damn. phrase.

Acting pedagogue Sanford Meisner talks about the importance of living in the moment, and working "moment to moment." Is this the same thing as working phrase by phrase? Can a phrase contain more than one moment? Can a moment contain more than one phrase?

When I speak of phrases, I refer to the way that the writers of a song have organized the expression of its content. Simply put, songs are made of phrases, and the challenge of crafting a song involves the ability to string together an effective series of phrases. Some phrases are quite short - a second or so, a single word - while others are longer, perhaps even longer than ten seconds. Each phrase has its own unique qualities, but a great deal of the impact of a song lies in the way it progresses from one phrase to the next from the first to the last.

When Meisner (or, speaking more generally, any acting teacher) speaks of "moments," I imagine that it's possible for there to be an infinite number of moments. Moments are, after all, created by our consciousness, not by the writer. A "moment" occurs any time we choose to open our senses and notice what's happening NOW, and there are an infinite number of "now's" available for us to notice.

Of course, there's something marvelous about the exquisitely fine-grained notion of an infinite number of "now's". Being able to live "in the moment" implies the ability to take in a rich array of sensory information and actively

process it. As I type these words, I hear the sound of my dog sighing on the floor and the faint racket of construction workers in a neighboring bedroom. I hear the whoosh of the shower and the noise of a car's tires on the pavement as it drives past the front of my house. The keys of my computer keyboard click, my sweaty t-shirt rubs against my torso, the sun shines through my window and casts shadows on the office floor. All of this is part of the wonder of "now," and I feel rich and full as I attend to all these sensations.

In the midst of all this, however, the singer usually has a job to do. Sometimes it is simply to attend to the sensations of the (imaginary, theatrical) "now" and convey them to the listener:

It's a lazy afternoon
And the beetle bugs are zooming
And the tulip trees are blooming
And there's not another human in view
But us two.

Sometimes the singer is being attentive to an inner environment (again, imaginary, triggered by the circumstances of the story) and trying to convey those details to the listener:

I'm nervous and upset
Because this girl I've never met
I'm going to meet tonight at eight...
I feel a combination
Of depression and elation.
What a state, to wait till eight!

And quite often, the singer is actually trying to make something happen within the context of those imaginary circumstances:

Don't talk of dreams
Filled with desire,
If you're on fire, show me!

Life is full of moments, as many of them as we care to notice. And it is unquestionably true that actors need to learn

how to discover a moment and let themselves be affected by "what's happening NOW."

But the challenge of singing a song is a particular one, because the songwriter(s) have organized those moments into a series of phrases for the purpose of conveying information in impactful bursts. Imagine all those "now's" as grains of sand that flow through an hourglass, one after another; so many of them, and of course they're not all identical (my "sand" metaphor is not entirely precise), but the sheer number of them makes it hard to differentiate among them or feel the weight of any of them.

The songwriter organizes a song into phrases to create weight, to manufacture impact. A song is effective when the phrases "land" on the listener, that is, when they have an impact. Which is likely to have more impact, a steady stream of tiny particles or a meteorite falling from the sky?

So "moment to moment" is not the same as "phrase by phrase" for me, and the two terms are not interchangeable. The actor - singing or non-singing - needs to learn to live truthfully in each and every moment, and the singer needs to deliver information in a way that has impact, often while living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.

A Is For Authenticity

"The whole truth, and nothing but..."

When I sing, I will create behavior
That communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase.
I'll sing with authenticity,
I'll always express myself truthfully
And I'll sing a song that's SAVI all of my days.

"I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, God!"

This is the oath that you're asked to take on the witness stand, with one hand on the Bible to remind you of the importance of that declaration.

It's also what is expected of you as an actor, or at least according to Stanislavski, whose "big thing," according to Bella Merlin (one of the expert scholars writing about his pedagogical approach for modern students), was "truthful acting." Though it was not always thus, for the past century actors have been expected to convey a compelling sense of personal truth, free from unintended behavior that cries "bullshit!"

It can be difficult to reconcile the notion of theatrical

"truth" with the sort of heightened and stylized theatrical expressions that characterize the musical theater repertoire. Yet it is precisely this paradox – finding a way to create and express oneself truthfully within the artificial strictures of song and dance – that lies at the heart of the training of the singing actor.

Authenticity is a quality of primary importance in effective singing acting. Audiences recognize authenticity as the "ring of truth" in a performance. The principle of mimesis is central to the art of the stage: we create by mimicking elements of the world we see around us, and our creations are judged, at least in part, by the extent to which they successfully imitate that world.

In our own day and age, much of the acting we see is on screens, particularly small screens like our televisions, laptops and tablets, but also large cinema screens where we gather together to watch films. Acting on the screen relies much more on this principle of mimesis. Generations of performers and theatergoers have had their notion of what seems "real" and "authentic" shaped by the ubiquitous presence of screen-based performance.

The notion of authenticity in musical theater is paradoxical, since there is no behavior in real life that resembles singing-acting. An excerpt from Tadashi Suzuki's book *The Way of Acting* contains a key to that paradox:

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.

Though the musical theater is an artificial and stylized

art form, a quality of believability and the presence of a sense of personal truth on the part of the performer is essential to its success.

The concept of authenticity is fraught with the potential for confusion, particularly for beginning singing actors, who are often encouraged in acting classes to draw upon their own experiences in their search for a "sense of personal truth." They expect singing-acting to "feel natural," when in fact it is an artificial construct. Think about when you were a toddler, and how walking was, at first, an unnatural act; you took a lot of falls before the ability to walk became habitual. With persistent practice, though, you got the knack of it, and many complex tasks which at first seem mechanical and artificial become habitual and seem natural in time. Authenticity in singing-acting is achieved, not by subtracting any effort that seems "unnatural" from a performance, but by practicing the behaviors a singing actor uses to communicate until they become habitual and "transparent," allowing the personal truth of the actor to shine through.

The importance of truthful singing acting and the role it plays in artistic and professional success has changed considerably over the past decades, in tandem with changes in ways in which musicals are written and staged. A major shift in approach occurred in the 1940's, coinciding with the success of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma" and their revolutionary "integrated" approach to creating a musical. Among Oscar Hammerstein's innovations as a librettist and lyricist was his understanding of the importance of subtext, and in many Hammerstein songs ("If I Loved You" is a perfect example), what is unsaid is far more important than what is said. Hammerstein's protege, Stephen Sondheim, embraced that fundamental principle and took it a step further, depicting modern characters who were

neurotic, ambivalent and ironic; the remarkable body of work he created challenges and inspires singing actors to express a complex, multi-layered sort of truth. Choreographers like Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, who studied the acting techniques of Stanislavski and his American acolytes, effectively incorporated subtext and intention in their dances for works like "West Side Story" and "Sweet Charity," and Michael Bennett's "A Chorus Line" was built on an ensemble of triple threats – performers who could act, dance and sing with compelling truthfulness.

So nowadays, audiences expect a substantial element of authenticity from singing actors. Not that we don't still dig virtuosic performances, money notes, flash moves and outsized personalities – it's just that also want to believe that the character we see onstage is an authentic human being, living truthfully under imaginary circumstances. It creates a tremendous challenge for the singing actor.

Cue the "Magic If"

For Stanislavski, the "magic if" was a core concept and a skill that could be developed. In his view, all actors needed to learn to act "as if" a certain circumstance or set of circumstances were true. How would you act IF it was cold? IF you were hungry? IF you were in the presence of your infant son or your brutal, intimidating boss? IF you were preparing to leave home and elope with your beloved? Having a specific understanding of the circumstances of a scene (or song) is important, yes, but something else is required: the ability to imaginatively behave as if those circumstances were really affecting you.

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. A variety of

pedagogies, from Stanislavski to Meisner to Spolin, incorporate a significant component of improvisation, and the experience of dramatic improvisation is unarguably useful for singing-actors in training. This is how you liberate your imagination and strengthen your ability to bring fantasy to life.

But how do you bring those experiences, and the knowledge gained from improv, to work that is highly structured and artificial in its manner of expression? This is where many students falter, in my experience; they can't marry the naturalness of improvisation to the artificiality of song, and need help learning how to integrate these two dissimilar skills.

Finding ways to understand and untangle this paradox was an important contribution of teacher and director H. Wesley Balk, whose seminal work "The Complete Singing Actor" was a bright light of insight for me in my own development as a teacher and coach. He brilliantly described the paradoxical, seemingly contradictory demands of the worlds of acting and music, and proposed a regime of training experiences that give students the chance to explore what happens when the two are intentionally mingled. (By all means, read his book, and the other two he wrote, if you can find them, but be prepared: some of my students have found his writing style a little daunting.)

As an experiment, for instance, construct an imaginary circumstance (using Stanislavski's Fundamental Questions as a framework) and then see what happens when you sing a song under those circumstances. 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.

Some of the most useful improvisational experiences a

singer can have involve introducing a second actor as a scene partner or provocateur. When you think about it, it makes perfect sense that many improv come to life because of the chemistry between two characters onstage; the give and take, the reactions and responses that occur when two individuals interact truthfully, are what give an improv vitality and excitement. The singing actor, on the other hand, spends an inordinate amount of time alone onstage, standing solo in front of a class or an audience, lacking the kind of provocation that brings a scene to life.

For this reason, another simple but effective procedure to experiment with is to reconceive a solo song as a scene, an interaction with another individual. This can be done randomly or with thoughtful preparation, and both can be useful for the purposes of discovery in the studio. If you're singing a song to your imagined beloved, find someone willing to pretend to be the object of your affections and sing the song to them. Better still, give them free rein to respond to what you're singing and doing to them, and then respond to their reactions as you sing.

Stanislavski described these exercises as "etudes" when they were applied to scenes being rehearsed. It's a kind of reverse engineering: you analyze the scene to determine the given circumstances, then take the scene away and practice living truthfully under one or more of those given circumstances until you hit on the knack of doing that believably. Next, you bring back the text of the scene and seek to incorporate what you discovered during the "etude." Do this as often as time permits, with thoughtful attention to detail and vivid imagination, and eventually your scene comes to life. It works for singing as well; you just have to make the time to do it.

It's possible, though, to speed the process along by

addressing a few fundamental technical issues that may be preventing you from living truthfully while you sing. Even worse, they may be causing audiences to think you're not living truthfully even when you've done your best to imagine the given circumstances, build a subtext and follow the psychological procedures that Stanislavski so insightfully laid out in his training regime.

Spotting a Fake (The Three Warning Signs of Inauthenticity)

It's been my observation that there are a few behavioral phenomena that occur while singing that scream "fake!" They are things that many of us can't help doing when we sing, and we may not even be aware that we're doing them, but by doing them we send a signal to the spectator that our behavior is inauthentic, not life-like. By becoming aware of them 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 a singer, you've surely experienced any or all of these as you work on your singing. Every one of these problems is entirely understandable, given the concentration and effort that good singing can require.

Notice that none of these phenomena are an issue for recording artists or concert singers. If you sing in the choir at school or in church, nobody cares what you're doing with your face, eyes and body, and if you sing in the recording studio, nobody will even know. Nor is every singer plagued by these problems; some people are blessed with a natural, intuitive

ability to remain alive and expressive while they sing. This, of course, is the great mystery of talent, a gift that is inexplicably bestowed upon certain lucky souls.

The good news, though, is that there are things anyone can do to address each of these, restoring a more natural and expressive use of the eyes, face and body when you sing, and we'll explore some of those procedures in the coming chapters. 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 mastery of the "thinking eye." You'll come to realize that "it's no disgrace to use your face," and experience ways to bring greater vitality, variety and truthfulness to your facial expression. All of this can be practiced, patiently and purposefully, on your own and in a group, and when you practice these things, you're conditioning yourself so that, when the time comes in rehearsal or performance, you're prepared to express yourself with greater authenticity.

V Is For Variety

The spice of life

When I sing, I will create behavior
That communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase.
As I begin to sing each phrase,
Variety comes when I ding each phrase,
And I'll sing a song that's SAVI all of my days.

The V of SAVI stands for Variety, which is not only "the spice of life," as the saying goes, but an essential ingredient of all successful singing acting. Singing with variety requires you to recognize the particular set of opportunities each phrase presents. Effective singing acting will have phrase-by-phrase variety, conveying the sense that the present moment is distinct from previous moments.

Change is the law of nature, and contrast creates meaning. 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.

Variety refers to the performer's ability to change his behavioral choices in response to the changes that take place during the course of the dramatic event. Drama is by its very

nature dynamic rather than static; it depicts characters propelled by forces of change to moments of crisis and, ultimately, climax. Effective stage behavior must have variety if it is to successfully project that dynamic quality.

"Generalization," the term used to describe an actor's behavior when it lacks variety and specificity, is referred to by Stanislavski as the actor's greatest enemy.

In a way, variety is part of the particular patrimony of the musical stage. 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 forms like vaudeville, burlesque, minstrelsy 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. Variety is a way of beguiling the audience by constantly introducing the new, the fresh, the unexpected. The art of successful musical dramaturgy is, in part, a balancing act, weighing the audience's appetite for novelty against the importance of maintaining focus and coherence in storytelling.

This same principle, one that operates on the "macro" level in the design of a musical and the contours of its "tunestack," can be successfully applied by the performer at the "micro" level, who faces a similar balancing act with each successive phrase. How much should what I do with the next moment be consistent with what I just did? What is the potential advantage of surprise if the next moment is different? Does it engage the spectator or confuse them?

Creating variety is an important component of making meaning. Variety in a performance provides the contours, the

highlights and shadows; in short, it means the difference between an experience that is flat and two-dimensional and one that has richness and verisimilitude. If our goal is to reproduce life on the stage, to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances, then it is important to recognize that the ability to bring variety and nuance to one's choices over time is a crucial element in delineating a life-like character.

Making a clear and specific choice for each phrase of a song is the most productive way of achieving variety in performance. It sounds simple enough, but there are forces at work that seem to make an actor disinclined to act upon the opportunities to make change when they occur. What are those forces? First among them, I think, is THOUGHTLESSNESS, a failure to be sufficiently attentive to the clues that present themselves in the text and the unfolding dramatic circumstances that surround the actor. Failure to be observant, or inattentiveness, can be the result of laziness or insensitivity, and it is imperative that the actor be both diligent and sensitive in looking for opportunities to create variety, to discover what is distinct and different about THIS CURRENT MOMENT in comparison with the PREVIOUS MOMENT.

Singers can often be DISTRACTED, which is another factor that impedes variety. It may be that the technical elements of singing occupy so much of the performer's awareness that inattentiveness to the dramatic event is the inevitable result. Or it may be that the execution of a particular passage is technically complex in a way that demands the performer's complete attention: a tricky bit of coordination with the accompaniment, or the interplay of overlapping lines and cues, or some detailed bit of blocking or choreography onstage that consumes the performer's attention, leaving little room in the actor's consciousness to be attentive to the ways in which the

next moment might be different than the present moment. Routine is both a blessing and a curse; as the performer practices to make something routine, it can be executed with greater ease and less deliberate attention, but the performer who makes the mistake of "going with the flow" of a well-routined performance will also miss out on those 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.

FEARFULNESS is another factor that can limit a performer's 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, the impulse to keep doing that thing is understandable, since it is done in the expectation that it will continue to be right. Similar to fear is the sense of PANIC that can seize a performer, that gnawing sense that, even though something may be going well at the moment, every new moment brings with it the likelihood that things will go wrong, that some kind of mistake will occur.

Is it possible to turn this notion inside out, and embrace the possibility that mistakes are our FRIENDS? When something goes in a way that you didn't expect, it brings the opportunity to discover something new, as long as you manage your panic and don't freak out. As musicians who are scrupulous and attentive to the myriad details and technical challenges that a score presents, we know there are countless ways to get something WRONG, and it is perhaps inevitable that we tense up slightly, bracing ourselves for the mistake that is lurking just around the corner. But as we brace up, stiffening ourselves for the disastrous error about to happen (even if only slightly), we diminish our ability to recognize the possibilities for creating

new life that inhere in the coming moment.

Performers often underestimate the degree of variety that can be successfully employed in a performance. Certain songs have a sort of singularity in their musical and verbal expression: the songwriter tends to strike a particular mood or tone or attitude and then maintain it for the duration of the song, developing and perhaps deepening that mood but not swerving from it. This is as true of Tin Pan Alley standards as it is of "emo" indie-rock songs, both of which present a certain trap that can ensnare the performer, who mistakenly believes they need to be ruled by the consistency and singularity of the song's atmosphere. This, in turn, may translate into generalized behavior choices, an excessive reliance on a single focus, facial expression or physical life.

It is my experience that any performance, even a performance of a song like this, can benefit from the thoughtful administration of a dose of variety, and that the song is enhanced, not marred, when the singer finds opportunities to "disrupt" the overall mood of the song with changes in focus or behavioral expression. These disruptions call attention to themselves, which in turn provide the highlights and shadows, the contours of expression from which a spectator will derive greater meaning from the experience. The wise performer knows not to fall under the spell of the music, even though the spectator in the audience will inevitably be subject to its enchantment. "Don't go with the flow" is worthwhile advice under such circumstances.

Of course, there are plenty of other songs in which the variety is "baked into" the composition, making them inherently more "quirky" and theatrical. In cases like that, the songwriter(s) have provided the performers with distinctively

useful raw materials, a vivid map full of possibilities for a vivid, varied and memorable performance. Such songs make the task of creating variety easier for the performer.

In addition, it is my observation that some individuals have a limited innate CAPACITY for variety. Let's say it bluntly – some people are dull. Think about behavior as a closet full of different options, different outfits that can be donned and doffed at will. The sad fact is that some folks' "behavior closet" is bare, stocked with only a few simple or over-worn choices. The Yankee virtue of thrift is of little use to the performer, who needs to be extravagant in stocking his closet, filling it with all sorts of options. Luckily, this can be remedied through the pleasant activity of SHOPPING, work done in the studio, either alone or in groups, which enables us to stock our behavioral inventory with a wider range of options, to fill our crayon box with a rich and diverse array of colors.

All the factors I have named – finding greater ease, being less fearful about mistakes, filling our behavioral closet with options and growing more proficient at switching between them, and becoming more attentive to the opportunities to change – can be addressed through the work of studio training separate from any particular piece of repertoire. These are muscles that need to be stretched and strengthened, and the would-be virtuoso will recognize the necessity of devoting considerable effort and time to that task, just like would-be olympian spends hours and days in the gym and on the training field.

Of course, the work of cultivating a capacity for variety continues in rehearsal, where the performer has the opportunity to open up her behavior closet and put this expanded capacity to work. A good director or coach will be attentive to the absence of variety, and try to identify which techniques and tactics

will be most useful to remedy the situation. Is it simply a lack of familiarity with the material? Is the performer distracted because memorization is insufficiently thorough, or because technical issues (diction, rhythm, vocal range, stamina, etc) have not been adequately prepared for? In this case, repetition is a key strategy. Both opera singers and ballet dancers know the value of working with the "repetiteur," the person whose job it is to be patient and steadfast while the musical score or choreography is mastered, gently guiding the performer a little bit closer to the desired result with each repetition.

This is a process that requires time, and time can often be a precious commodity in theater rehearsals (especially when working under the time and budget constraints of commercial theater in America). Good technique and studio preparation can help minimize the need for repetition. The SAVI singing actor comes to rehearsal with a fully-stocked inventory of behavior options. He has studied the "map" of the text and the score, doing his homework by scanning the text thoroughly in search of the clues that indicate an opportunity to create behavior and change it. He has trained his body to become flexible and fearless, buoyant and responsive and light on his feet, attentive to the environment and the behavior of his fellow actors and alert to all the stimuli that can provoke a change in behavior at any given moment.

I is for Intensity

I Go To Extremes

When I sing, I will create behavior
That communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase.
My work will have intensity,
And, when it is called for, immensity,
And I'll sing a song that's SAVI all of my days.

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

Extremely loud, extremely high, extremely big.

Musical theater is full of examples of people going to extremes. And I don't just mean the "spring fling beer bash extreme" in Legally Blonde. Characters pushed to the limit, pushed to their breaking point, to a breakdown or a breakthrough.

And it requires a vocal technique that can support extremes. Many types of theatrical singing provide the thrill of an extreme sport. We clap and cheer for singers who can sing higher, louder and longer than any mortal could reasonably be expected to sing, and the dubious parlance of the musical stage

acknowledges the value of this type of singing when we speak of "money notes."

The SAVI singing actor is able to create intensity by bringing "more" when needed: more volume, more behavior, more range. Conveying intensity means being comfortable going to extremes without unnecessary tension.

Intensity is the quality of heightened emotionality in a singing-actor's behavior. Many of the most memorable moments in the musical theater repertoire depict passionate characters reacting to significant events with strong emotion, and the best musical theater performances are characterized by a strong sense of passion. Music and song 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.

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, and I like to use the analogy of a car to explain the difference. Intensity is the force of the engine, 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 it is not only possible, it is highly desirable to achieve intensity without tension. The I of SAVI stands for Intensity, something that we innately crave as humans. All the arts are capable of delivering an intense experience, a distillation of feeling and insight that is heightened, capable of leaving the spectator moved and exhilarated. We crave the intensity of climax in a performance just as we crave it in our

intimate relationships; it's not a linguistic coincidence that we speak of "climax" in both dramaturgy and sex.

In order to create intensity, the performer needs to be capable of bringing MORE, and since the SAVI singing actor knows his job is to create behavior that communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase, he has the capacity for bringing MORE behavior, as much as he chooses or as much as is called for by the dramatic circumstances, the text, the musical score and the physical enactment of the moment. 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, one that the performer must train for like an athlete. In a way, this kind of training is most akin to the work of the athlete: if you can do 15 push-ups, then you must work yourself up to 16, or 17; if you can bench-press 100 pounds, then add another 10 pounds and try again. Intensity implies a kind of scale or measure of degrees of expression, and invites a kind of quantification, even though it may not be numerical. Sometimes the measurements or descriptors of intensity are linguistic: piano and pianissimo, angry and furious, happy and ecstatic.

Of course, it is paradoxically true that, in order to create the experience of MORE, one must also be able to create the experience of LESS. Our 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. 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. 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.

One of the challenges of creating intensity in performance is that we often (unconsciously) associate intensity with tension. There's good etymological reason for this – the two words share the same root, the Latin *tendere*, meaning "to strain or stretch tight." In order to achieve extremes of expression, it is not unusual for the performer to strain or push. Of course you can picture a singer with the veins bulging out of his neck as he strains to reach that high note, like a bodybuilder trying to lift an excruciatingly heavy weight. While it is true that we crave intensity, tension is more often than not a liability, an unattractive side-effect that distracts us from the ecstatic delight that accompanies climactic expression. Thus the performer is advised, "Never let 'em see you sweat!" We must train ourselves so that we have the capability to express ourselves at the extremes of our behavioral dynamic range without resorting to tension that reads as apparent discomfort and, even worse, exposes us to injury and potential damage.

Sometimes this is a problem of awareness or intention on the part of the singer, but sometimes it's the unavoidable consequence of the neurological effects of extreme behavior.

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

Because let's face it, the screamers and adrenaline junkies face an inevitable burnout. Our bodies, our voices and our souls have a finite capacity for intensity, and we can exhaust that

capacity with surprising rapidity.

Our culture has an ambivalent relationship with intensity, and that relationship can vary considerably depending on the region and environment you grew up in as well as your ethnic background. Our capacity for emotional expression is shaped substantially by the environment we grow up in. Down the block from my house in South Philly there's a family that's lived there forever, dyed-in-the-wool South Philly screamers who all express themselves at the top of their lungs, all the time. I can only imagine what it must have been like growing up in that household, where you probably had to scream just to be heard at all. Or perhaps silence was a useful defense in such an environment, since you knew that to raise your voice was to bring down the screaming wrath of your parents and siblings upon yourself. It's easy to make generalizations about the taciturn, unemotional Yankees of New England and the flamboyant, hyper-emotional Italian Americans of South Philly, but there are indeed patterns of emotional expression that are cultural as well as environmental.

Actors tend to be vivid and loud because they have a natural affinity for intensity of expression. It's fascinating to observe the students at my school on the elevator; the introvert art majors cringe in the corners when the noisy, extrovert musical theater types crowd onto the lift. 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 "loud," either. 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 them.

Intensity sometimes calls for immensity, but beware becoming addicted to those extremes. You must be able to provide "more" when that's called for, and if you can, you'll be adored for it, but do it too often and your listeners may become bored with it.

The Fifth Verse: The Importance of Action

I've introduced the S, the A, the V and the I, the four essential qualities of singing acting that serve as the foundation of the SAVI System, and we've covered a lot of important ground in our examination of the first four verses of The SAVI National Anthem. However, when I reached this point in creating the song, I couldn't shake the feeling that the job still wasn't finished. Before I could put down my songwriter's pen, there was still one more fundamental concept that needed to be addressed, and I created a fifth and final verse:

When I sing, I will create behavior
That communicates the dramatic event phrase by phrase.
I won't play mood or atmosphere
I'll strive to make my actions clear
And I'll sing a song that's SAVI all of my days.

The last verse brings us back to the idea of the **dramatic event** as a central organizing principle in the creative process of the singing actor. "I will create behavior that communicates

the dramatic event." A dramatic event presents us with a set of circumstances (either imaginary or real) in which someone 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. 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. 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.

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 needed for the job. A bias toward action supports all four of the essential qualities represented by the SAVI acronym. It is the most important form of specific choice-making to be able to answer the question, "What are you doing now?" 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 (new tactics, new action verbs) from phrase to phrase is a key strategy for achieving variety. Intensity is also supported by a clear sense of the dramatic event, not only what you are doing but what makes it important.

"Mood and atmosphere" are two qualities of the theater that I enjoy and respond to as much as the next guy, and especially when I find myself with a glass of single malt in my hand, I've been known to ascribe to the aphoristic wisdom that playwright Samuel Hunter voiced in *Pocatello*: "Lucidity is overrated." The singer has a number of means at his or her disposal for delivering mood, particularly timbre, phrasing, gesture and body language, but in my experience, the business of mood is best

left in the hands of other artists. The composer provided mood aplenty in the musical score, and with any luck, the accompanist (piano or otherwise) will be capable of delivering the goods. In performance, the lighting designer will add magic to the moment. It's always been my preference for singers to go easy on the fog, the miasma of mood in their performance, and instead to strive for clarity: clarity of intention, clarity of diction, clarity in choice and execution of behavior. Clarity may seem like an old-fashioned virtue, but without it, there is no drama; in the audience, the natives will grow restless because the spell of atmosphere will soon give way to boredom and confusion. For that reason, my advice to "make the action clear" is offered as the final and ultimate piece of advice for anyone who wants to "sing a song that's SAVI."