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Marcus Nance as Caiaphas in *Jesus Christ Superstar*



Melissa Rivera as Wendla Bergmann in *Spring Awakening*



photo by Matthew Lopina

Justin Glaser and Liz Shivener as the Beast and Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*



photo by Joan Marcus

The Path Less Traveled?

BY MICHELLE LATOUR

Three classically trained singers who have successfully transitioned into musical theatre share their insights for others wishing to do the same.

The term “crossover singing” has become quite trendy as of late. Many classically trained singers have successfully transitioned into musical theatre careers, and even the National Association of Teachers of Singing has made an attempt to accommodate this growing group of singers, launching its first-ever national musical theatre competition for the NATS National Convention this past summer.

But do singers who embark on this journey really know what they are doing? How difficult is it to have a career in musical theatre? Do you need a totally different technique and vocal timbre? I spoke with three singers who have found success in musical theatre. Their backgrounds are diverse and their paths to musical theatre unique, but they all had sound advice for those contemplating a career move.

Melissa Rivera

Melissa Rivera, currently pursuing a masters of music degree in opera/musical theatre performance at Southern Illinois University, followed a musical path many singers can easily identify with. Prior to enrolling at San Diego State University as an undergraduate music major in 2003, Rivera had sung in choirs, had been in musical productions, and had sung pop tunes in talent shows.

“I never really intended to be a classical singer,” Rivera says. “I chose to study voice because I knew I wanted to sing, but I had no idea what the training was going to be like. I struggled at first, and it was clear that my voice would never be a large operatic voice.”

So how did Rivera discover that she could sing musical theatre? “I heard about auditions at a local community theatre doing *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady*,” she explains, “so I asked my voice teacher to help me prepare for the

audition. We realized that my belt voice was not only pretty strong, but had a lot of potential. That is when I knew for sure that musical theatre was my niche. I received a callback for a leading role and was cast in both shows.”

For Rivera, making the transition to musical theatre was a combination of luck and hard work. After finishing her bachelor of music from SDSU in 2008, she took a few years off to continue her training in both genres with Liz Frazer at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. She found success working at both the professional and community theatre levels, and even won first place in the musical theatre division at the NATS Mid-Atlantic Regionals.

“I was very fortunate that I had done musical theatre in the past and had a decent dance background,” she explains. “My voice took to musical theatre very well once I began to understand the differences between operatic and musical

theatre styles. The most difficult part, vocally, was developing my middle mix as it is different depending on the musical style and time period. I can sing these types of roles, but I have to be very well prepared. Belting, however, was easier. I started out belting B-naturals very comfortably, and learning how breath and vowels work differently when belting allowed me to extend my belt even higher.”

The most painful part? “Convincing the theatre world that I wasn’t a music snob and that I could act.” Rivera took this challenge head on. “By taking private acting lessons, enrolling in acting classes, studying Meisner and Stanislavski methods, and even attending a week-long acting intensive in New York with the LAByrinth Theater Company where I studied with Philip Seymour Hoffman, Stephen Adly Guirgis, and Maggie Flanigan. Yet, it still wasn’t enough to shake the ‘park and bark’ stigma classically trained performers are often stuck with. I have the acting world telling me my voice is my strength, and the music world telling me my acting is my strength. I have to work twice as hard as the singers and twice as hard as the actors to be considered for the same roles. It can be very frustrating.”

When asked about the differences between pursuing a career in musical theatre as opposed to opera, Rivera provides these helpful insights. “Classical singers have an advantage due to the existence of Young Artist Programs. As a classical singer, you can often get paid to train, which is wonderful. These sorts of things do not exist for musical theatre. You have to pay for everything. It is very expensive.

“Secondly, finding a classical voice teacher is much easier than finding a knowledgeable musical theatre voice teacher,” she continues. “Many teachers claim to teach musical theatre techniques when in reality they only stick to the classics. Finding someone who is not afraid to teach you how to belt and mix in a healthy way can be a daunting task.

“Thirdly, you are given more time to mature in opera and have a higher chance of career longevity. In musical theatre, you are at a huge disadvantage if you don’t start training early.

“And, finally, type is very important. You may have the perfect voice for Maria in *West Side Story*, but if you are not young,

petite, and Hispanic looking, forget about ever playing that role professionally.”

Rivera also has advice for aspiring singers contemplating a career in musical theatre. “I cannot stress [enough] the importance of continuing voice studies and the impact it has made on my budding career!” she says. “It has made my voice flexible and resilient, and it is so much more fun to sing. Take as many acting and dance classes as your body and schedule can handle. Make friends with the theatre department faculty, even if they do not get along with the music department. Audition for them and ask questions.

“Many classical singers think they are above musical theatre singers because of their focus on technique, but this is not true,” Rivera concludes. “Musical theatre singers have to use different techniques—one is not superior to the other—and thinking so can get you thrown out of an audition or fired. Most importantly, do not choose musical theatre over opera because you think it is easier. Trust me, it is not.”

Justin Glaser

Lyric baritone Justin Glaser followed a much different path to musical theatre. Unlike Rivera, he did not have very much experience with high school choirs or musical theatre productions. In fact, it was not until his later years in high school that he sort of stumbled into acting. “People took notice of the quality of my speaking voice and suggested I start singing,” Glaser says. “However, I was very shy and held a great deal of tension in my throat. I also didn’t sing around the house or listen to much music. These factors created many roadblocks for me. Singing felt very unnatural. By the time I entered college, I decided to begin formal vocal training. Since then, I’ve studied with numerous teachers, each helping to gradually bring out my voice.”

Several years after graduating with a degree in theatre, Justin discovered the world of non-equity tours and did three tours over the course of four years, one of which included singing the Beast for 15 months in the national touring company of Disney’s Broadway musical *Beauty and the Beast*.



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The Path Less Traveled?

Similar to Rivera, however, the majority of Justin's vocal training has been classical in nature, yet his singing career has been exclusively in musical theatre. "I'm physically a big guy, and the size and quality of my voice match my appearance," Glaser says to explain this contradiction. "Most musical theatre singers today sing with a lighter, thinner quality, so people in auditions seem to be surprised by the size and richness of my voice. I think my legit sound makes me stand out more. People in the musical theatre world frequently want to label me as an opera singer, but I'm not technically proficient enough to pull that off."

Glaser admits that he stays away from contemporary shows that are heavily influenced by pop-rock styles that require more straight-tone, lighter singing, and less legit singing. "I've always found singing contemporary musical theatre to be a great challenge for me," Glaser says. "I don't listen to much pop music, so to manipulate my voice to conform to a pop sound feels very unnatural. I'm not very good at it, and I don't enjoy doing it, so I usually don't pursue roles that would require me to sing in that manner."

Glaser learned this important lesson during his stint with the most recent national tour of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which starred Ted Neeley in the title role of Jesus. Glaser was cast as an ensemble member in addition to being the understudy for the roles of Pilate and Jesus. Pilate is a great role for Glaser, whereas Jesus is definitely not.

"I learned very quickly the error I had made in accepting the Jesus understudy track," Glaser explains. "That tour existed because people wanted to see Ted as Jesus one last time. Ted Neeley is a bona fide rock tenor who can still deliver the goods. I am a classically trained lyric baritone. I spent six months of my life terrified that circumstances would arise where I would have to go on for Ted. I had visions of being booed, tomatoes being thrown at me, and the inevitable lynching by an angry mob of 'Ted Heads' at the stage door. Thankfully, Ted never called out, and I was spared the humiliation. Lesson learned? It is important to know what you're best suited for."

Glaser has a few other recommendations for those wanting to launch a successful career in musical theatre. "I think it is really important to know yourself, your abilities, and your limits," he says. "I have found it helpful looking to other men whose careers I could emulate, such as Richard Kiley, Alfred Drake, John Raitt, and Brent Barrett. Granted, the first three are long since deceased, but the major roles they played—which required big, legit voices—were in shows that are revived all of the time.

"And never stop taking voice lessons," he concludes. "Never stop trying to understand your voice better."

Marcus Nance

Bass Marcus Nance's original training was strictly classical, yet he just finished a highly acclaimed run as Caiaphas in

Marcus Nance



Jesus Christ Superstar at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, the La Jolla Playhouse, and then on Broadway, where the show was nominated for a Tony Award. “Marcus Nance booms with a thrillingly powerful bass-baritone as Caiaphas,” according to the *New York Times*, and the *New York Post* states, “His bass voice resonates with silky menace.” Nance also has produced a CD, *The Voice Next Door*, that consists of jazz standards and theatre songs.

How does a Fresno State clarinet performance major from Monterey, Calif., end up on Broadway? “I just kind of fell into it,” Nance says. “I was an ‘opera snob’ for a long time, but I was one of the many opera singers hired to be in Hal Prince’s revival of *Show Boat*. That experience was eye opening to what a career in theatre could be: the long contracts, the weekly paychecks. I also loved the immediacy of the stories and the challenge of doing eight shows a week.”

Nance was not only an opera snob—he had also spent many years building a successful career in opera after finishing a voice performance degree at CSU Fresno and graduate studies at the University of Texas–Austin and the University of Illinois. He has per-

Melissa Rivera



photo by Paul Savage

formed leading roles with New York City Opera, Hawaii Opera Theatre, Pacific Opera Victoria, Chicago Opera Theater, Santa Fe Opera, and Glimmerglass Opera, just to name a few.

It was during this time that he spent two years doing *Show Boat*. “Eventually I started accepting more and more theatre jobs until theatre took over my schedule along with concerts, cabaret, and a bit of film and television,” Nance says. “I made my Broadway debut in Baz Luhrmann’s production of *La bohème* in 2002.”

But this evolution wasn’t as easy as it may sound. “No, it was not easy. If you walk into an audition and sing Andrew Lloyd Webber like an opera singer sings Mozart, you will not go far,” Nance says. “I kind of did that at first, but eventually I did change the quality of my voice. I kept the basics of opera singing, but I had to eliminate some of the resonance. I use straight tone from time to time to add tension to the text, I open my high notes so not to have a ‘covered’ operatic sound, and I have learned that not every sound I make has to be beautiful. My sound is probably still considered unique for musical theatre, but I have been working for a long time, and casting direc-

tors have seen my work in the big houses, so it’s not an issue.”

To build his theatre résumé, Nance initially accepted theatre ensemble positions, even though his résumé was full of leading roles in opera. “That really worked out for me,” he says. “Musical directors loved my voice and they got to know me while I took the time to safely figure out how to adjust to a new art form.”

When asked if he continues to take voice lessons, Nance says, “I do. I am well aware of my strengths and weaknesses, but I feel that it is important to always have an outside ear. I am a bass, and my voice is in its prime, so I need to make sure it is in the right place technically so as I get older it doesn’t start to sag or wobble. And after spending a year singing Caiaphas, which is lower than Sarastro, Sparafucile, and Gremin combined, I needed to be sure that my voice and range stayed flexible.”

Nance offers three things as parting advice: perfect your vocal technique, learn to act, and listen to recordings. “Singing eight shows a week is not natural, and if there is a flaw in the voice it will show over time,” he says. “Go to the acting department in your university and sign up every semester for some kind of acting class. Opera is very difficult, and it’s understandable that most of the energy in a conservatory is focused on learning how to sing—but that is not enough in theatre. And, finally, listen to recordings of the best jazz, pop, and theatre singers and become familiar with the different styles.”

Soprano Michelle Latour is part of the full-time voice faculty at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas and is the NATS Nevada State Governor. She is active as a singer, teacher, writer, adjudicator, and workshop presenter throughout California, Nevada, and the Midwest. Visit her online at www.michellelatour.com. ©