

Side Show: The Musical Direction

A Senior Project
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by
Morgan D. Hurd
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-Introduction-

Throughout history the wise have preached on the dangers of letting opportunities pass you by. From Roman Stoic philosophers¹ to Italian Renaissance writers² to to American rappers³, many have extolled the value of capitalizing on one's opportunities. It is important to prevent opportunities from being lost into endless loops of nostalgic what-ifs.

To share an example, I can think of no better experience than when a colleague of mine, Racquel "Rocky" Jarman, a theater major who was going to direct a musical for her senior project, began to look for a musical director.

This paper is the story of my experience as musical director of *Side Show*. I will discuss the show itself, my personal preparation, the rehearsal process as well as my idealized expectations versus realized conclusions. I will also show what I would have done differently and, most importantly, what I gained from this opportunity.

1 "The best wrestler[...]is not he who has learned thoroughly all the tricks and twists of the art, which are seldom met with in [actuality], but he who has well and carefully trained himself in one or two of them, and watches keenly for an opportunity of practicing them" Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *On Benefits. VII.* [c.63?] N.pag. Web. 1 Apr. 2013. <<http://thriceholly.net/Texts/Benefits4.html>>.

2 "...[In regards to great men] one cannot see that they owed anything to fortune beyond opportunity, which brought them the material to mould into the form which seemed best to them." Machiavelli, Nicolo. "Chapter VI." *The Prince*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Machiavelli: The Prince: Chapter VI*. Web. 1 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince06.htm>>.

3 "You better lose yourself in the music, the moment
You own it, you better never let it go
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime"
"Mathers, M., J. Bass, and L. Resto. "Lose Yourself." Eminem. Eminem, 2002.
<<http://www.elyrics.net/read/e/eminem-lyrics/lose-yourself-lyrics.html>>

Upon receiving a recommendation from professor Erma Stauffer, the director with whom I had worked for *The Phantom Tollbooth*, produced at Cal Poly the previous year, Rocky approached me about working on her senior project as musical director. I agreed to do so almost instantly. I didn't know all the facts and was given minimal information, but I had a feeling that I wouldn't want someone else to take what might become a potentially life-altering experience from my grasp.

She was ecstatic! And impressed at how quickly and emphatically I agreed to work with her. At the time, I didn't know that this would end up being my senior project, but I took on the opportunity that presented itself and ran with it.

-Background-

The musical *Side Show* first premiered at the Richard Rogers Theatre in New York City on October 16th, 1997 and 91 shows later, it closed on January 4th, 1998. It was in that year, 1998, that *Side Show* was nominated for four Tony Awards. The nominations included Best Musical, Best Book (Bill Russell), Best Original Musical Score (Henry Krieger) and Best Actress. The actresses that played Violet and Daisy Hilton were together nominated for Best Actress.ⁱ This is the only time in history of the Tony Awards where two actors have been nominated together.

-Composer-

Henry Krieger was born in New York City on February 9th, 1945. Throughout his career he composed music for three Broadway shows including *Dreamgirls* (1981), *Tap Dance Kid* (1983) and *Side Show* (1998). Krieger had previously received a nomination for Best Original Musical Score for *Dreamgirls* in 1981. Although he did not win that award, the original cast recording of that show won a Tony in 1982.ⁱⁱ The film adaptation of *Dreamgirls* had three of his songs nominated for Best Original Song at the Academy Awards in 2006.ⁱⁱⁱ

-Lyricist-

Krieger's *Side Show* counterpart, Bill Russell, is an American lyricist, poet, playwright, manager, and director. Although he wrote a number of shows with Krieger,

including *Up in the Air*, *Kept* and *Lucky Duck*,^{iv} none of these garnered the level of acclaim *Side Show* received.

-Plot-

Russell based *Side Show* on the life of Daisy and Violet Hilton, early-20th-century conjoined twins who performed in sideshows and in vaudeville^v.

The show begins in a sideshow tent where the audience is experiencing a “freak show”. The character known as The Boss, welcomes those in attendance and introduces each of the freaks, the characters that make up the ensemble for the first act. Watching the freak show with the audience are the characters Buddy Foster and Terry Connor. Buddy is a musically talented stagehand who works with the twins and has brought Terry, a talent agent, to come to the show especially in order to meet the twins. Although the sisters are together as one, they have drastically different characters and dreams. Violet is more introverted and has always dreamed of having a husband and home...of settling down. Whereas, Daisy, the extrovert, maintains dreams of stardom, flashing lights and glamour.

At first, Terry isn't convinced of the twin's current marketability but gives Buddy a chance to help the girls transform their act. As the twins train in private, away from the Boss's oppressive presence, Terry comes to realize their star potential. He offers to take the girls away from the sideshow in exchange for a supposed life of glamour and stardom. Hearing the news, a fellow performer, Jake, warns them about the pitfalls a life of fame can bring. The girls do not heed his advice. Instead, they invite him to leave the sideshow and become a stagehand in association with their new career. He pretends to

begrudgingly accept their offer. In reality has harbored secret feelings for Violet for some time.

The twins are soon swept into the whirlwind life of a star performer. This has been Daisy's longtime dream: to be a star. Her dream becomes as reality as they experience their first performance and first press conference. Violet, though, has her dreams of love put on the back burner. That is, until Buddy, who also has had feelings for Violet, kisses her after one of the twin's performances. Unfortunately, Violet's elation is quickly quelled by Daisy's cynical assessment of the reality they share: that no one could truly love a Siamese twin. However, they end the first act in a beautifully touching duet, singing about the fact that they will always be there for each other.

Act two begins the same as the first with the audience experiencing a performance starring the twins. This time, instead of a freak show tent, the twin's are performing in a New York theater. We finally see the twin's finalized transformation from sideshow act to legitimate stars of the stage. Additionally, we see a transformation from a simple life to one filled with emotional roller coasters

As act two moves forward we see that Buddy has become a performer along side with Daisy and Violet; Terry has become their manager. Buddy has taken his feelings for Violet to another level as well. At a New Year's Eve party for the social elite of New York, Buddy asks Violet to marry him. Although there is some expected debate and hesitation, Violet ultimately agrees. Terry immediately sees the marketable potential in the wedding and national fervor that would ensue and decides that it should be made

public the very next day. All the while, Terry is realizing that he has budding feelings for Daisy.

Brimming with confidence, Terry is full of charisma and charm, but he crumbles whenever the topic of a potential relationship with Daisy is brought up, something Buddy does often. Contrasting his level of confidence, Terry is equally shallow. The thought of being with a Siamese twin is too much for him to bear, no matter what feelings he may have. He realizes his true desire in the song “Private Conversation”. In this song Terry dreams that Daisy is a single person and that he gets to express his feelings for her. She reciprocates his sentiment, and they share a moment where they are together and more importantly, alone. It is the only time in the show where we see Daisy and Violet separated. The scene ends with Terry and Daisy waltzing together and Daisy slowly fades out of his arms and only when she is off stage does Terry fully realize that he has been dancing with no one.

In the next scene, we see the romantic house of cards begin to collapse. After a performance, Jake overhears a conversation between Buddy and Terry when Buddy confesses that although he loves Violet, he is more interested in the fame he will receive and how it will positively affect his career rather than altruistic reasons. Terry reacts by demanding that Buddy keep things on track, “keep playing your part, keep Violet content, keep the happy couple happy.” After that revelation, Jake storms off and confronts Violet. He never shares what he heard, but he does share his feelings for her and his opinion of her current relationship in the aptly titled “You Should Be Loved.” Violet is shocked to

hear Jake's feelings, and even though they have always been close, she has never thought of him anything more than a brother.

The wedding stays on track and is planned to be in a football stadium during the Texas Centennial celebration. The carnival nearby the stadium attracts Terry, Buddy and the twins, and they decide to take the Tunnel of Love ride. While on the ride, we see Terry and Daisy's passion rise while Buddy and Violet's falls short. This is the beginning of the end for the betrothed couple. After the ride, we find out that Jake has decided to leave and take a job in Chicago. Deciding to be totally frank, Buddy confesses that he has been playing a part and that he can't go through with the wedding any longer.

Right in the middle of this emotional firestorm, Daisy is granted her largest wish, a movie offer by a Hollywood producer, Todd Browning. (Unfortunately, there always seems to be a catch.) Browning's offer is also connected to and counts on the wedding to happen due to the amount of publicity it will bring his future movie stars. As destiny would have it, Mr. Browning stumbles upon this tragic scene between Buddy and Violet expecting elation and happiness but is confronted by a confusing series of events.

First, the wedding between Violet and Buddy that had been joyfully anticipated is called off due to Buddy's confession. Then Mr. Browning makes his pitch but reverses the offer once he hears the wedding is over. Daisy then tries to convince Browning that twins could still be in his movie. However her attempt to persuade fails. Daisy then tries to convince Terry to marry her, but when Terry refuses she becomes irate and demands that Violet and Buddy follow through with the wedding, stating that Buddy will get his

fame and that Daisy will get her movie deal. Sadly, it is a lose-lose for Violet. The only person who truly benefits from this situation is Mr. Browning.

After making four right turns the wedding between Violet and Buddy is back as planned, and the show ends with Buddy and Violet and Daisy on the altar, with Daisy and Violet singing a reprise of “I Will Never Leave You” followed by a reprise of the ensemble number, “Come Look at the Freaks”. Musically the show comes full circle with “Come Look at the Freaks” book-ending the show. The twins also come full circle, holding on to the fact and one benefit of being Siamese twins, knowing that no matter what happens, they will always have each other.

Daisy and Violet begin the show with lowly social status, but are happy, then reach a point where they are famous, yet unfulfilled, and then finally reach a point where happiness again takes priority over fame. It’s a cyclical feel, the idea of a return, which really lends itself to musical composition. Krieger used the idea of a return with a heavy hand throughout *Side Show*.

-Song Analysis-

My childhood piano teacher always told me, “It doesn’t matter what you do in the middle, it’s the beginning and end that people will remember.” Russell and Krieger must have heard this, too, and put their money where their respective mouths were by using the same song for the beginning and the finale. That song is “Come Look at the Freaks”.

“Come Look At The Freaks”

Some distinguishing elements of “Come Look at the Freaks” are its use of syncopation, thematic repetition, and the way the vocal line lends itself to a natural speaking rhythm. The song begins in B-flat minor with arpeggiated chords in the piano. Although the piece is in a simple-quadruple meter throughout the piece, the beginning theme has the chords being repeated in a “3+3+2” pattern. That pattern is a theme used heavily throughout all of “Side Show”. Above the piano there is an oboe drone and a pair of violins playing a tremolo. The dynamic is pianissimo and the combination of the piano with the violins and oboe gives a serene yet eerie feel to the beginning of the show. The ensemble enters after this short intro singing the “A” section of the piece. This section leads into The Boss singing the entire “B” section.

In this part of the song, The Boss is introducing each of his “freaks” from the sideshow. He maintains similar musical sound and rhythmic feel, which is very heavily syncopated. In order to give an idea of change and separation between the character

introductions, modulation is used. After The Boss' "B" section, the ensemble joins him in singing the A section again. The form of this song is "ABA", or ternary.

That ternary form is also echoed in the key selection. We begin with B-flat minor, but then it moves to E-flat minor, F-sharp minor, to C-sharp minor and finally back to B-flat minor. It is that return to the original key that also supports the feeling of ternary.

"The Devil You Know"

Another song in *Side Show* that maintains those elements is "The Devil You Know". This song comes in the first act when Jake attempts to persuade the twins to stay in the sideshow, instead of chasing stardom with Terry and Buddy. The line that Jake repeats in the song is "The devil you know, beats the devil you don't." Jake believes that although living under the oppressive thumb of The Boss may be bad, it may be better than something unknown...potentially worse...just around the corner. Ultimately his attempts are deemed futile, however he does divide the rest of the freaks into two camps: those who support the twins exploring new options, and those that think it would be smarter to stay in the sideshow.

Jake was originally portrayed as an African-American and this piece, more so than any other song in *Side Show*, contains the largest amount of African-American musical style. The prolific syncopation, heavy use of pentatonic scales, and the call and response section in the latter half of the song, is reminiscent of early African-American Jazz, and field songs. Looking specifically at the call and response aspect of "The Devil You Know", we see that the divide between characters lends itself to this style of song.

Despite all of its imitation of other styles and forms, I consider this piece to be through composed. There is much imitation thematically as well as there being two vague sections of the piece. But due to the lack of binding material tying musical themes and elements within their respective sections together, I see it as through-composed. [One could consider it binary but I still believe that the amount of variation is progressive and cannot be successfully bound by concrete sections.]

“One Plus One Equals Three”

If it is music with concrete sections that you want, you need not look further than that Act Two hit, “One Plus One Equals Three”. This piece is broken down in the score into three sequential parts with Buddy singing in the first part, the twins and Buddy singing in the second part, and some new characters called the Vale Sisters joining them in the third. The Vale sisters are a play on the real life Andrews Sisters, early-to-mid 20th-century popular music singers. The music sung by the Vale Sisters directly imitates the Andrews Sisters’ sound, distinguished by tight harmonies with frequent parallel and similar motion.

Judging from the three separate parts of this song, you may immediately assume that this piece is in ternary form. However, there is not enough musical differentiation between the three sections in order to be considered ternary. The sections merely repeat with a different key and more singers added to the mix. I believe that it is a modified strophic form (A-A’-A’’) because although the addition of extra singers differentiates

each section, it is mainly adding to the original formula, not changing or developing it in any large way.

This song may not develop a great deal musically, however it is a turning point in the development of the plot. It takes place right after Buddy proposes to Violet, and even though things may outwardly appear , things aren't always what they seem. To show this duality, "One Plus One Equals Three" has an extremely light-hearted feel with the notes and lyrics tripping smoothly along, but some of the lyrics belie Buddy's expressed outward feelings. In the intro of the song, Buddy speak-sings the line "... I met my sweetheart...She put me in the spotlight, now I'm a happy pup." Buddy isn't happy because he has Violet, but rather because she has brought him fame. He may have maintained feelings for her while they both were still working the sideshow, but his love for her now cannot be completely attributed to altruism.

"Tunnel of Love"

Love, deception, intrigue...If you thought "One Plus One..." hinted at it, this next one is made of it. The "Tunnel of Love" is the title of this next song as well as the name of a ride at the Texas Centennial fair. When everyone arrives in Texas for the big wedding, Terry notices that Buddy, Violet and Daisy are tired from work as well as the stress of the wedding. He decides that they need a little down time, and the decision is made to go on the Tunnel of Love.

This song is all about the exposition of false romances and hidden romance coming to fruition. We experience the passion between Terry and Daisy as well as the

dishonesty of Buddy's words from "One Plus One..." all coming to the forefront. Terry is very conflicted with his feelings for Daisy, and there is much tension in the music to exemplify this. The frequent accents and staccatos as well as dramatic brass orchestration gives a perfect backdrop for Terry's inner conflict.

Daisy is conflicted as well, but her musical line and accompaniment is entirely different from Terry's. Where Terry's music was masculine, aggressive, tense and largely minor, Daisy's is hopeful and largely major while still maintaining that tense, nervous energy.

On the opposite side of the bench, we see Buddy fully realizing that whatever love he thought he had turns out being smoke and mirrors. He has two lines that portray his inner feelings perfectly: "out there in the spotlight, never had a doubt I loved her, why do I feel panic, down here in the dark?" and "I can't even try to pretend [that I want her]".

Daisy and Violet share a physical connection, and it is possible for them to sometimes feel what the other is emotionally and physically feeling. The fear and frustration Violet is feeling from Buddy's lack of interest and passion is contrasted by Daisy's intense requited passion for Terry. This is creating a sense of jealousy as described in Violet's line: "I want what she's got, what I'm feeling she's got, everything he's [Buddy] not yet feeling with me." This is the first time in the show where we see jealousy of a relationship.

Like all rides, you more or less end up in the same place you got on. It is the same in this song. We begin with Terry wanting to get on the ride, then when the ride reaches

its conclusion, we hear the same music come back but Terry is asking if it (the Tunnel of Love) was a mistake. Everyone else shares his mentality in some way: Buddy wants to forget, Violet is questioning what happened, and Daisy is hoping for it to continue in the real world. The “Tunnel of Love” is a rough ternary with both “A” sections being on the cusp of the real world, one leaving it and the other returning to. The “B” section is the longest part of the song and contains all the time spent inside of the ride itself. Although this is mainly a piece for the four leads, there are ensemble chorus parts, which chant or echo what the characters are feeling. We know we are in the B section when the ensemble first sings, and we leave the B section when the ensemble sings their final notes. Musically, this piece is romantically ominous, and the hushed chants of the ensemble contrast wonderfully with the dramatic and, at times, sporadic musical exclamations of the lead characters.

“I Will Never Leave You”

Like all good musicals, there is one big show-stopping number close to the end. In *Side Show*, that number is “I Will Never Leave You”. Daisy and Violet have gone through so much in this show, from having a simple, albeit happy, life to a complicated, glitzy life of fame where love was promised but not delivered. Nevertheless, this song is about them walking into the emotional lion’s den, getting mauled and then bravely clinging to each other as they walk out, battered but ultimately closer than ever. I love this example in the lyric: “[Daisy] When the day is filled with shadows, that stretch into the night. [Violet] I am filled with your sweet comfort, as morning fills with light”. It perfectly describes

what they have been through, and how they have overcome by relying on their love and friendship. The song ends with the twins singing a spine-tingling harmony that marches towards a hugely dramatic end. It is nearly impossible to stay in your seat.

-A Look Back-

I live for that spine-tingling, standing-up-the-hair-on-your-neck, chisel-a-permanent-smile-on-your-face feeling that great music can give you. And more than that, I love seeing that happen to other people. It lets me know I'm not crazy. But looking back I was crazy taking on this endeavor. I wasn't prepared mentally, I didn't have the required work ethic and I didn't immerse myself in the score. I didn't do a lot of things correctly. However, I know that I wouldn't have had as great a Cal Poly experience unless I learned these hard lessons. And I learned them the hard way. By diving in, head first, being baptized by fire, I didn't allow myself to wallow and complain. I had responsibilities, people looked to me for answers, and failing to deliver wasn't an option. However, it took me a while to figure that out.

The key to being a great conductor and musical director is to know the music inside and out, backwards and forwards and upside down and around. You must know the music better than anyone else. To do that you must pour over the score, study it wholeheartedly, months and months in advance. I received the score months and months in advance. At that point in time, Rocky had already done all of her pre-show research and knew the production inside and out. Initially, I didn't attempt to match her research nor her knowledge. I took a very laissez-faire approach to my background research, and naturally, I soon wished I hadn't.

I listened to the accompanying CD and scanned over some of the larger numbers thinking, "Eh, no big deal". If I could go back, I would throw away the cast recordings I

was given. Without properly studying and knowing the score, I allowed the recording to influence entirely my decisions. So much so, that some aspects of our performance turned into putting my interpretation by the wayside in the subconscious (or not) attempt of copying what was recorded.

From, the beginning, I procrastinated in organizing my audition plan. By the time auditions came around, I still had no idea what would be good audition pieces for the various characters. So I ended up just arbitrarily selecting music, not knowing whether or not it was the best possible example for the musical abilities needed for the role. It turned out that the music I chose was OK, everything worked out, but I got lucky. My lack of preparation for the musical selections would end up being overshadowed by the audition drama that would follow.

Thankfully, I had not procrastinated when it came time to procuring a pit orchestra, or in our case, a percussionist and piano player. It was surprisingly easy finding the people I was to work with, since they, like me, saw this as a rare opportunity and jumped at the chance.

In the weeks leading up to auditions for *Side Show*, our marketing representative on the production team had produced a lot of hype on the Internet and through word of mouth. Over 100 people alone RSVP'd to the *Side Show* auditions Facebook page. The actual turnout was much smaller. Only 30 people came on the first night. We were planning for a number twice as many, but as we would soon find out, these thirty proved to be plenty.

The first night of auditions consisted of our Choreographer, Natalie Roy, teaching everyone a short dance for the first hour, just to see who had some rudimentary dance skills. Next, I did a vocal warm-up for everyone, and we had them split up into groups of 10. In those small groups they came and sang their pieces. After this, they performed the dance again. Once all three groups had finished we let everyone go home, and we began to deliberate on the callback list. This next step was rather easy.

We agreed on almost everyone. The rule we used was that if any one of the three directors wanted someone to be called back, they were put on the list. At the end of the night we had cut the callback list down to twenty.

For the callbacks, we had a new short dance that was added at Natalie's behest. After that I taught everyone a short choral section of "Come Look at the Freaks". I was looking for people that could learn music quickly in a group situation, and could hear and accurately sing their own parts. For the men auditioning for the character Terry, I taught them a segment of "Private Conversation", and for the character Buddy "1 + 1 = 3".

Regardless of their own voice type, I gave the men the choice of either part to audition for. Sometimes people who think they are a bass, can end up having a fantastic high range and for tenors, a great lower range.

The teaching entailed myself singing the section while also playing the melody on the piano, then had them join in the second time. I stopped singing for the third time, then had them sing it once again without any piano accompaniment. This was a successful technique: it was easy for me and it required very little time to do. We were spending so

much time in that room I think everyone involved was happy that something was happening quickly and efficiently.

Our production team didn't want to "pre-cast", but we had a pretty solid guess as to who our actors for Terry and Buddy would be.

For Buddy, we cast someone who showed up on call back night and wanted to audition, but he ended up dropping out on the day of the first scheduled cast meeting. We ended up casting our original Boss as Buddy, and with minor finagling, we were able to move around some actors so that all the male roles were covered without having to redo auditions.

The biggest problem we had was casting the characters Daisy and Violet. They are twins so that means they have to blend under some rather vocally demanding parts. We knew it wasn't going to be easy. I just underestimated how difficult it was going to be.

For these roles, I taught the ending section to "I Will Never Leave You," and after they learned and performed that piece, we ended up having about 8 actresses who would be good as Daisy or Violet.

I selected one pair as the twins, and in my mind I believed them to be the only option. To this day I believe the same. However no one else saw things the way I did. (I was the lone male on the production team and I could count the number of previous encounters with my production teammates on one hand. I tried as best I could to seem firm but not domineering in my decision.) I discovered in her audition with me that the

girl they wanted had difficulty matching pitch. Everyone else on the audition panel attributed it to the fact that she had taken a break from singing and was just starting again. However, in the spirit of not wanting to come off as rude and stubborn, I let them cast their selection. I know now...and knew all too soon after auditions...that I should have held my ground.

What I learned the most from this thirteen-hour process is that I should have not backed away from my decision. While I understand the importance of compromise in arguments. I had issues with the “majority” decision in the casting of the twins. I went as far as I thought I should, arguing my point, and didn't want to appear foolish. If I knew then what I know now, I would have been the biggest thorn in my Director's side, and lobbied more heavily for my opinion.

As a result, it was hard not to be bitter. And even harder not to take it personally, but like I said before, I didn't have time to complain. I had to forgive and forget, because I was stuck with what we had cast and I had to get things done.

Thankfully, I had a production team to help me with time-consuming tasks, which I (perhaps wrongfully so) considered menial. Some of those tasks included making a rehearsal calendar with a rough plan of what to teach and when. By the time scheduling came around, I had a partial idea of what the more difficult choral numbers would be so I was able to plan accordingly. I should have been at least that far along in my planning, before the auditions, not after.

The assistant stage manager was great. She made it so I could dictate what I wanted to do and would make sure my time frame matched what our director and choreographer needed to do as well. It really showed me that it is OK to rely on people, even when you are in a leadership role; I don't have to take on everything by myself. Thankfully, there were little to no conflicts with making our combined rehearsal schedule. However once rehearsals actually began, some severe challenges arose.

The rehearsal space I expected wasn't available until a few weeks before the show opened. That meant that we had to rehearse in a classroom in the Computer Science building, a location nowhere near the theater building, nor anywhere near a piano. So, we had to be satisfied with a mediocre electronic keyboard for a month and a half. It ended up suiting our purposes just fine because as rehearsals continued, we realized in order to maximize efficiency, it would be beneficial to work in multiple rooms. Though unfortunately, even all the space in the world couldn't make up for poor rehearsal time management.

In addition, I allowed musical rehearsals to be dictated by someone who didn't understand the musical process. The Director has a time and place to make decisions, and the musical rehearsal is not such a place. In addition, too much time was wasted for "cast conditioning"; our Director wanted our cast to be fit. Although that is a noble goal, I believe that her decisions took away from valuable rehearsal time and caused unrest within the cast.

Unrest and loss of respect was something of which I was very concerned. Having to compensate for the Director's ever-loosening grip on the cast's respect, I tried very hard to be understanding. With hindsight, I see that I went too far and became less of a Musical Director and more of an equal. The fact I was directing others of my own age and older, added another element of self-doubt. I also knew that in the cast, there were actors with more musical theater experience than I. Rather than that being a hindrance, I used it to my benefit by reminding myself that I needed to maintain confidence and do my job to the best of my ability.

The abilities of the final cast proved challenging. We had a few members who had an equal amount of singing experience, compared to their acting history. The majority, however, had larger amounts of acting experience with less singing experience. They challenged my way of using musical terms in communication and had to make my thoughts and ideas understandable using non-academic language.

As rehearsals progressed, instead of knowing the choral music beforehand, I grew lazy by often relying on my musicianship and sight-reading abilities to pull me out of jams. Jams that should have been taken care of through score study. Basically, I would learn the songs with the actors, but just learn faster than they would, while giving the outward appearance of doing it for their benefit.

I am embarrassed to say that not until three weeks before opening night did I feel fully comfortable with all aspects of the score, instead of being at that level three weeks before rehearsal started.

I may have been a musical director with below average preparation and with a bad case of procrastination, but I was generally pleased with the results of the rehears. I loved showing the actors (especially ones with less musical experience) that they have the ability to learn something greater than what they expect. The look on their faces when something finally clicked was amazing. However, when working with inexperienced singers, reaching that point of being comfortable with the notes, let alone memorization, is a slow process.

I found that the most efficient method was repetition. Let the actors hear their part multiple times, then allow them to sing their part multiple times. Then slowly add parts together. I learned quickly that if you move too rapidly, things that you thought were learned could somehow become “un-learned” through musical overload. It wasn’t the most elegant teaching method, but it gave us the best percentage chance that the actors would remember the music for ensuing rehearsals. Also, when dealing with actors who had poor or no sight-reading ability, I used common knowledge songs to teach them intervals so that they could learn on their own easier. For example, to teach a Perfect Fourth, I told them to sing: “here comes the bride”. That way they would have a tool to help them remember if they couldn’t find the pitch.

Once we made it through the learning process and were dealing with character development more so than “note checking”, I was really excited to help people develop a vocal dynamic that fit their character. However, I was often overruled by the director and seldom asked for my opinion regarding musical decisions. It even went as far that some

of my artistic decisions were overruled due to the director wanting things to be accurate to the CD recording.

Granted the CD recording can be beneficial for people who can only learn by ear, but some people, no matter how many times they hear something, cannot physically maintain the correct pitch. That is a problem I had with one of the twins that was cast against my wishes and in spite of my warnings. The pitch problems turned out being more than vocal rustiness and a tangible problem that I didn't have the time or experience to alleviate. Finally, two weeks before opening night our director came to realize that she had made a grand mistake and had a small breakdown. The director and I met with her advisor in his office and had a private meeting as to what we were to do with our troubled actress. I will never forget the first words that came out of his mouth: "I think you owe Morgan an apology." He was there at the auditions and observed how I fought for other casting options. Although happy and feeling vindicated, I kept a professional demeanor. The result of the meeting was that it was too late to change any parts and that we had to make the best with what we had.

Once tech week rolled around, I still needed to help people with parts, and still do rudimentary directing. However, just in time for opening night, I finally took off all semblances of training wheels and let the show roll. It was exciting to see something work smoothly after such a rocky start to our rehearsal process. I was then "demoted" to our accompanist's page-turner and got to enjoy the show in a cramped space big enough for a folding chair and my four limbs. I never understood the meaning of focus until I had

to turn 300 pages and not lose track of the music. But it was an experience that, if nothing else, let me know that I never want to turn pages for a long show again.

-Final Thoughts-

Looking back, I believe that the final performance was impressive. I know that I could have taken the show to another level if I had been fully prepared. Also, I would have rather understood my role as musical director from my director's point of view from the start, rather than learning it the hard and embarrassing way as we progressed through the rehearsal process. Proper communication from the onset should have been a focal point that was discussed, not just blindly taken for granted. If Rocky and I could have better understood each others vision for the show and been on the same page we perhaps could have sidestepped a lot of the issues we faced late in the production.

But it's easy to get caught up in what-ifs. This has been an invaluable experience for me in more areas than just musical direction. The opportunity to be a leader to my peers facilitated a maturation process that I don't believe would have happened for a very long time if I had told Rocky "No Thanks!" Knowing that having months of management and supervisory experience in your chosen field isn't something "fresh out of the box" college graduates tend to have, ever, would have definitely altered my awareness to the gift I was given by Cal Poly. I honestly thought it was an unnecessary burden, but of course, hindsight is 20/20.

I believe Cal Poly has the senior project to allow their graduating students a venue to explore beyond the realm of the classroom while utilizing the tools and abilities they have developed while in one. I can honestly look back and see my project and its processes outside of the realm of production-focused judgment and say that from my

four-plus years at Cal Poly I have learned what it means to be a college graduate. Which, by my definition is: to take a remarkably un-rememberable amount of knowledge, a panoply of experiences, and translate all the above into the betterment of ones self. And ultimately, three very important things I take away from my project, is to work hard, especially in preparation, flexibility is close to godliness, and be gracious and thankful to those who you have been blessed to work with.

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- ii "Henry Krieger." *IBDB: The Official Source for Broadway Information*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 May 2013. <<http://www.ibdb.com/person.php?id=12011>>.
- iii "Dreamgirls (2006) - Awards." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 18 May 2013. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443489/awards>>.
- iv "Bill Russell." *Samuel French "Licensing Plays and Musicals to the Theatrical Community*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 May 2013. <<http://www.samuel french.com/author/1990/bill-russell>>.
- v Jensen, Dean. *The Lives and Loves of Daisy and Violet Hilton: A True Story of Conjoined Twins*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed, 2006. Print.