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Putting it Together: Musical Theatre as an Academic Discipline

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Putting it Together: Musical Theatre as an Academic Discipline

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Musical Theatre
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Abstract:

Musical Theatre is an art form that integrates singing, acting, dancing, and production for the purposes of storytelling. It is an artistic field that is extremely interdisciplinary, and it draws upon many different areas of knowledge for performance and education. Additionally, Musical Theatre has evolved into a viable academic field of study. It incorporates artistry and academic analysis as a way to enhance performance and higher education. This paper will use Practice as Research theory, creativity theory, and disciplinary discourse theory to explore the ways Musical Theatre successfully functions as an art form and an academic discipline.

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FROM THE TOP: AN INTRODUCTION

Musical Theatre has long been an acclaimed art form in western society, dating back to the late 1800s. The art form's unique integration of acting, singing, and dancing for the purposes of storytelling is what brought Musical Theatre to fame. It is also what distinguishes it from other classic theatrical forms such as ballet, a play, or an opera. When mentioning Musical Theatre, one may immediately see images of Broadway marquees and big city lights. High kicks and belting have become the ultimate spectacle of theatrical experiences. For years, Broadway stages have brought millions of people dazzling moments of grandeur and unrivaled beauty. Musical Theatre has helped societies forget the weight of life, as well as reveal the ugly underbelly of humanity. It has drawn upon history, psychology, art, literature, and even mathematics in the creation of new work. Musical Theatre's artistic interdisciplinarity is unparalleled, and its analytical capacity for academic study has rapidly grown. For this thesis, I will analyze Musical Theatre discourse from both analytical and performative points of view in order to prove that the art form functions successfully as an academic discipline as well as an art. I will draw upon disciplinary discourse, practice as research, and applied creative theories to prove this concept.

Within the last fifty years, Musical Theatre has evolved from a solely artistic field to one that is now also being documented as an academic field of study. Institutions began developing pre-professional programs to provide a space for artists to train and become proficient in the craft. The University of Cincinnati was the first college to provide an undergraduate BFA in Musical Theatre in 1968. It was the first of many to explore the education of Musical Theatre through an academic lens and aided in the curriculum building for future programs. This

university program style of training, while rooted in the medium of performance, incorporates various forms of standard academia and critical analysis. (“Musical Theatre”)

Professor of Theatre and Director of the Princeton Art Fellows Stacy Wolf claims that “Musical Theatre Studies’...presence as a viable academic field is not much more than a decade old,” but its advancement academically is substantial (Wolf, 1). Musical Theatre has found a place in higher institutions of learning alongside other established academic disciplines. It has transformed from a field that is strictly skills-based training to one that involves critical academic analysis. Wolf frequently highlights the exciting relative newness of academic analysis in Musical Theatre. She argues that educational institutions are “bolster[ing]... undergraduate curriculums” as a way to create academic scholars that have the skillset to examine Musical Theatre analytically (Wolf 1).

My time studying at Pace University has shown me what it means to be a well-rounded artist in the field. I have learned how to hone my skill sets as a performer, but with an informed understanding of how to also practice and cultivate academic analyses on my work. My education incorporated a rich study in pedagogical skill building such as dance classes, voice lessons, and acting classes. My music theory class taught me how to read and understand written music. My education also gave me the ability to engage in deep academic analysis with the art. I learned the full history and evolution of Musical Theatre in my History and Repertoire class. We also analyzed sheet music for specific composer and lyricist writing characteristics to be able to understand how to perform the song in that authorial style. My Script and Score gave me a space to explore my personal opinions and artistic understandings through a dramaturgical¹ lens. My Musical Theatre performance classes allowed me a space to synthesize everything into my

¹ Examining works of art through the way they are written and why they are written.

individual performance. I even examined Musical Theatre's industry as a business in the classes Navigating the Industry and the Art of Casting. We learned how to be entrepreneurs and informed artists by understanding the business side of the industry (navigating theatrical contracts, Actors Equity Association rules and regulations, management teams, and the casting process to obtain work).

My personal experiences as an upcoming scholar in this discipline sparked my need to further understand how it combines academics and artistry. Musical Theatre is a rich and thriving field of knowledge, and I want to break down what makes it successful. Perhaps a deeper understanding of interdisciplinary fields like Musical Theatre will begin to alter the ways we may or may not view the binaries of arts and academics.

METHODOLOGY:

I wanted to look at every aspect that made up the discipline of Musical Theatre, so I separated my research into two main parts: analysis in written work and analysis in creative spaces. Drawing from Ken Hyland's methodology of evaluating disciplinary discourses, I conducted a content analysis on written texts within Musical Theatre and assessed them in a similar analytical manner. With Hyland's definition of what constitutes a soft disciplinary discourse and his corpus analysis on soft disciplinary material, I discerned that Musical Theatre aligns more closely with the trends that are apparent in soft disciplinary domains of knowledge. From there, I determined that the best form of organization was to break down the analysis by linguistic and rhetorical themes. I organized the discourse analysis as follows: analysis of authorial perspective, credibility, and intertextuality in academic articles; analysis of praise and criticism in peer review; and documented theoretical framing and research. I compared two

works for each category. For each category, I used Hyland's process of examination and findings as a framework to identify if Musical Theatre followed the same standard principles of academic writing. Then, I identified the qualities of each forum that were unique to writing in and about Musical Theatre. Lastly, I used Lee and Carpenter's findings on writing for the arts and Dunbar's PaR theory to highlight how research is documented and manifested in Musical Theatre.

Secondly, I evaluated the way in which Musical Theatre interrelates artistry and academia in creative spaces. I extrapolated Dunbar's findings on PaR as it relates to Musical Theatre, Lee and Carpenter's findings on applied creativity, and Weaver's curriculum construction to evaluate how Pace University's department head Amy Rogers' curriculum synthesizes all of the material above to provide a comprehensive framework for student learning.

Although my methods are sound, there are blind spots to my work that should be noted. Musical Theatre falls in alignment with soft disciplinary research, meaning that there is more variability to methods of inquiry that are then subject to more potential bias. There are various potential interpretations of these texts, and mine is only one. Additionally, I did not read and investigate every single piece of material pertaining to Musical Theatre discourse or evaluate every single tertiary institution's curriculum, so there is still more evidence to study and develop upon.

UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES:

This section's purpose is to identify Musical Theatre as an academic discipline, as defined by scholars in the field of disciplinary studies.

WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE?

Ken Hyland's comprehensive book *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing* was the most formative resource in my understanding of what defines an academic discipline. He clarifies the distinctions between disciplines, discourse communities, and disciplinary discourse. He also explains the importance of understanding what it means to engage in discourse within written disciplinary work.

Hyland defines disciplines as "human institutions where actions and understandings are influenced by the personal and interpersonal, as well as the institutional and sociocultural" (*Disciplinary Discourses* 9). In other words, disciplines define the overarching umbrella of knowledge that is created by the human interaction in dealing with a single subject area. There are two main disciplinary distinctions in academic environments: hard and soft domains of knowledge. Hard domains of knowledge, or hard disciplines, refer to disciplines that develop their knowledge from more objective methods, with clearer cut ways to identify facts and new information (such as math, science, or engineering). Soft domains of knowledge, or soft disciplines, refer to disciplines that are more interpretive and lend themselves to more variant ways of research (such as the social sciences, literature, and humanities). It is worth noting that Hyland explicitly states that he believes these should be seen on a spectrum, rather than two rigidly separated categories, in order to fully examine the similarities and differences of various disciplines. (Hyland, "Hedging, boosting...knowledge" 360)

Going further, there are communities within these disciplines that aid in developing the social "norms, nomenclature, bodies of knowledge, sets of conventions, and modes of inquiry" (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 8). They are responsible for the distribution, approval, and acceptance of information within the discipline. These communities can be further defined by the

way in which they interact within forums (approved channels of discourse) as they determine the above standards. That interaction is defined as disciplinary discourse. It is the communication between individuals within a discipline through various modes of discussion. This could include publications, reviews, conversing in meetings; essentially anything that allows transmission of information from one party to the other. And although discourse communities provide a space for new knowledge, they also have the power to filter what is and is not deemed as acceptable material for the furtherment of the discipline. The acceptance of new ideas and material is dependent on whether or not the mode in which it is created falls acceptably within the established boundaries of the discourse community. All of this makes up the disciplinary culture that influences how a discipline specifically functions as a whole. (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 9)

DEFINING MUSICAL THEATRE AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE:

From reading Hyland's definitions, it seemed discernable as to how these definitions correlate with Musical Theatre. Musical Theatre is namely the discipline; the overarching field that encompasses all the various discourse communities within it. It falls more closely on the spectrum of soft disciplinary knowledge due to the interpretive nature of the field when dealing with information. Musical Theatre is also a hybrid form by nature that integrates the many elements of "dancing, singing, acting, orchestration, design, [and] production" together (Taylor and Symonds 3). This means that there is a considerable amount of discourse not only within communities that deal with a single element, but also across communities. Since the first integration of the musical play *Show Boat* (1927) and total integration of the musical *Oklahoma* (1943), the very make up of Musical Theatre relies on these cross-community discourses. Essentially, one cannot be a proficient member of the discipline if one does not comprehend

multiple community discourses. (Taylor and Symonds 2-3) It is not enough to understand how a musical is written if one does not understand how the music works in tandem with script, nor is it enough to know how to sing the material if one does not know how to act the intention of the song. This exact notion is what my Musical Theatre training has required me to cultivate over the last four years.

Although there are a multitude of ways in which one could categorize these communities, for my purposes three main divisions within the discipline emerged: the community dealing with performance, the community dealing with process, and the community dealing with pedagogy. These communities are defined by the discourse of their participants, allowing for the approval and dissemination of information to the larger community. In performance, this discourse involves those in the pursuit of the visual product. This could mean the discourse between performers, directors/choreographers, artistic producers, and even casting directors. In process, this discourse involves those creating material for performance. These discourses happen between participants such as composers, lyricists, writers, and dramaturgists. In pedagogy, this discourse is for the purpose of refining technique and theoretical practice. These discourses happen primarily between voice/dance/acting teachers, professors, or theoretical researchers. It is the overlap of these discourses, woven into a complex web, that defines the discipline as a whole. The study of this web, through written text and practical application, is what uniquely defines the discipline of Musical Theatre.

WRITTEN DISCOURSE VS. VERBAL DISCOURSE:

Written work is the most reliable documentation of the discourse within disciplines because it is impossible to be in every room of collaboration and/or research. Hyland's basic model to approach academic interactions through written text is therefore semi-replicable. His

methodologies exclusively deal with written discourse in various disciplines, claiming that not only is it important to highlight *what* is written, but *how* it is written (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 3). The basis for all that he discusses is as follows:

“In sum, the interactions of academic writing indicate the writer’s acknowledgment of the community’s epistemological and interpersonal conventions and connect texts with disciplinary cultures. Academic knowledge is not simply a databank of general, and generally agreed upon, facts, but networks of values, beliefs, and routines that guide practice and define disciplines” (Hyland 14).

Written text is therefore not an isolated piece of knowledge, but rather an interactive source of information to be experienced by other members of the discipline. (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 9) Analyzing the trends in accepted written work within a discipline provides a framework to understand how information is distributed within the field. New information, no matter how revolutionary, cannot survive if the community it must be approved by does not accept it.

Musical Theatre has a large amount of verbal discourse created in rooms where artistic collaboration and exploration happen; such as rehearsal spaces, classrooms, and theaters. As Musical Theatre has transitioned from a solely “skills-based vocation” to one that now necessitates a well-rounded academic discipline, there is now more written documentation on these verbal discourses (Dunbar 58). Additionally, there has been growth in the research one that now necessitates a well-rounded academic discipline (Wolf 1) Written discourse now serves a greater purpose in Musical Theatre than simply aiding in the performative end product. In fact, Dominic Symonds, Professor of Musical Theatre at University of Lincoln, originated the first

academic journal for Musical Theatre namely *Studies in Musical Theatre* for this purpose. This was the first journal in the field to codify academic research and study for Musical Theatre pedagogy and theory. Written texts in Musical Theatre display the appropriate requisites of standard academic discourse, as addressed with Hyland's framework, but also locate the unique "interdisciplinary and...holistic experience[s] of the field...[that give way to] multimodal forms of research" (Dunbar 72). That is why I have given emphasis to both modes of discourse in my analysis.

This brings to light the theoretical idea of intertextuality, as described by James E. Porter "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community." He defines intertextuality as "the principle that all writing and speech...arise from a single network" (Porter 34). He then splits this principle into two parts: iterability and presupposition. Iterability is the "repeatability of textual fragments" (Porter 34). This is most commonly seen when texts cite/quote other sources, or if they draw upon what Porter calls "unannounced sources," which can be clichés or traditions that the majority easily recognizes (35). Iterability suggests that no discourse is completely autonomous and all discourses have fragments of other discourses interwoven within them. (Porter 35)

Musical Theatre is extremely intertextual, and almost everything has a connection with something else. In order to analyze discourse in Musical Theatre, an understanding of how intertextuality functions within the discipline is necessary. Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds in their book *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice* explain in depth the need for understanding intertextuality in Musical Theatre written text. They believe "intertextuality suggests that each text and each instance of reading a text is open to interpretation by active, individual, and empowered readers" (Taylor and Symonds 203). This is crucial because this is

largely how collaboration, innovation, and artistic exploration are born in Musical Theatre. I will expand on this idea more as we continue to uncover written work within the field.

THE TABLEWORK: WRITING IN MUSICAL THEATRE

This section will illustrate the ways academic writing reveals many of the conventions of disciplinary discourse. It will also identify the unique ways in which written discourse functions in Musical Theatre. I will analyze written work for three functions: distributing new information, approval or disapproval of new information, and process of creative research.

CONSTRUCTING ACADEMIC MATERIAL IN MUSICAL THEATRE:

Establishing credibility and authorial perspective are two crucial components to creating a valuable piece of work for the discipline of Musical Theatre. If these two components are achieved by the writer with the proper established disciplinary standards, the writer's personal interpretation or addition to information in the field is more likely to be accepted.

As stated before, Musical Theatre academic writing aligns with softer disciplinary tendencies and also relies heavily on intertextual relationships within written work. Hyland attributes the higher number of intertextual references to differing community goals. Soft disciplinary work reexamines and reinterprets collective approved knowledge. Hard disciplinary community goals aim to disprove old knowledge and add new information. Musical Theatre more closely aligns with the former. (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 32) Authorial perspective is more necessary in softer disciplines because the author's viewpoint is as necessary to the argument as the evidence. Hyland states that "writing within [soft disciplinary fields such as] the humanities stresses the individual creative thinker, but always within the context of a canon of

disciplinary knowledge” (*Disciplinary Discourses* 37). Soft disciplinary writing requires the author to “provide a discursive framework” and adequate context for their argument (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 31). There is a greater need to establish credibility and “convince the readers that [their] argument is both novel and sound” (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses*, 37). I posit that these two components are crucial to Musical Theatre academic writing because it shows how information must be constructed in order to be approved by the community.

To highlight these trends, I used two articles: “All Hammed Up: How *Hamilton: An American Musical* Addresses Post-Racial Beliefs” by Kylie Umehira and “Music Theater Voice: Production, Physiology and Pedagogy” by Tracy Bourne, Maeva Garnier, and Diana Kenny. The articles serve different purposes since they are written for different communities within the discipline, but they both provide explicit examples of unique Musical Theatre disciplinary interactions. I come into contact with these types of articles very frequently in my training. In my Scene Study and History and Repertoire classes I am asked to evaluate material in similar ways as Umehira. For my voice training, I am asked to read similar voice articles as a part of my pedagogical improvement. The actual information being presented in each article has been beneficial to the discipline, but it was only able to contribute by presenting linguistic and rhetorical strategies through the proper forums to be accepted by the community. Additionally, it is important that scholars in the field understand how to construct material in a way that will be accepted in the discipline.

Umehira’s work is a critique on the claim that *Hamilton: An American Musical*² “is the paragon of post-racial achievement.” Within the article, she defends her perspective that more than diverse casting must be done in order for the perspectives of minorities and

² *Hamilton* is the 2016 musical based on the biography *Alexander Hamilton* written by Lin-Manuel Miranda. It was intentionally cast with extreme racial diversity as a modern re-telling of America’s history.

underrepresented groups of people to be fully represented onstage (Umehira). Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny's work is an article from the *Journal of Singing* that explores the Musical Theatre style of voice. They examine the pedagogy and style markers of Musical Theatre singing and examine the varying opinions on the health of Musical Theatre singing. They then provide perspectives for the progress of efficient styles of vocal training and continuing vocal health within Musical Theatre.

Soft disciplinary studies typically engage with less clearly defined problems, so they must construct the significance verbally. Additionally, their stances cannot solely rely on fact, but also their credibility or expertise within the field. (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 71) Umehira appeals to the community directly, which establishes her insider credibility as a knowledgeable participant of the community. (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 8) She also demonstrates a deep cross communal knowledge by examining the larger political and social ramifications of art, understanding the complex history of Musical Theatre and appropriate representation onstage, and the continual conversation within the community on this issue.

Although Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny are more objective in their authorial perspectives, they establish a deep insider credibility at the beginning of their article with the extensive amounts of intertextual material pertaining to the history and culture of Musical Theatre. They provide anecdotes about Celeste Holm and her vocal audition process for her role as Ado Annie in *Oklahoma*. They highlight key icons of the early Musical Theatre female vocal style such as May Irwin, Sophie Tucker, and Ethel Merman. They even discuss the vocal demand of "Defying Gravity" in *Wicked*. (Bourne et al. 437) Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny also implement iterable jargon³ such as "belt," "legit," and "sixteen bars" (437). Additionally, they choose specific vocal

³ as defined by Porter as a type of intertext that that is unique to the discipline's discourse and colloquially understood by the majority within the discourse community (34)

examples that the community could easily identify, such as: “It is still a required sound for some roles in music theater productions, such as Johanna in *Sweeney Todd* (1979) or Fabrizio in *Light in the Piazza* (2003)” (Bourne et al. 438).

Umehira’s authorial perspective is intertwined with the purpose of this article, and the way she constructs the presentation of the information being analyzed is therefore the justification of her specific point of view. Similarly to the discipline of Philosophy, Umehira’s discourse is a “mind to mind combat with co-professionals” to alter perspectives on a well discussed issue within the field (Bloor qtd. by Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 36). A key identifier of this is her frequent use of first person language to state her claims such as “I will disprove...,” “I will analyze...,” “I found...” and so on.

Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny, on the other hand, provide a more objective documentation of information while still providing perspective. They are documenting the results of surveys and studies for the sake of pedagogical improvement, which requires a slightly different approach to the information. There is more scientific evidence when dealing with the technical skills of the vocation, so the objectivity is helpful to distribute the varying opinions of voice teachers and professionals on singing technique. Here, the opinions of other scholars are just as legitimate to the purpose of the article as the writers. The purpose is to identify common views on the Musical Theatre voice. These two approaches to authorial perspective are valid, and they both establish the necessary credibility.

Soft disciplines, especially Musical Theatre, are also more likely to address the writer directly rather than stating their information and leaving names solely within the in-text citation. These strategies allow for a more “discursive space...to either exploit their opposition to the reported message or build on it” (Hyland, *Discourse Communities* 39). There is an interaction

between the writer and the authors cited that roots the new perspectives in previously accepted material. They can then either further support new evidence by aligning it with previously accepted points of view or by identifying how it disproves previous ideas. This way of citation also allows for the intertextual nature of the field. Umehira directly cites multiple people within her work as a method to set up her position: “Patricia Herrera also examined the importance of this...” “[Michelle DuRoss] contests that...,” “Foucault’s theory clearly explains why...” (Umehira). Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny also directly cite authors and use reporting verbiage as a means to identify the information as pertinent to their argument: “Lawrence suggested that...” (439) “Miles and Hollien further stated that there was...” (439) “Schutte and Miller and Bestebreurtje and Schutte support the pedagogic theory...” (441).

Musical Theatre relies heavily on the approval of material in order for it to contribute to the discipline as a whole. The material I have read within my four years of studying would not be the chosen texts had they not been constructed appropriately and approved by the participants of that community. All of the material I will continue to evaluate have many similarities to these two articles in the way they establish credibility and utilize their authorial perspective.

WRITING FOR PEER REVIEW:

Peer review is a common academic practice that “publicly sets out to establish standards, assess merit and, indirectly, evaluate reputations” within the discipline (*Disciplinary Discourses*, Hyland, 41). Hyland discusses the necessity of peer review and balancing praise and criticism through the standard book review. This is one of the only areas of written text that is uniquely

from the perspective of the peer group⁴. Book reviews are direct written documentations on how participants of discourse communities interact with each other's work.

The analysis of disciplinary discourse tendencies can be seen by the way writers interact with the material being evaluated. (*Disciplinary Discourses*, Hyland, 41) This includes how communities manage the balance of praise and criticism, semantics pertaining to praise and criticism, and the determination of the work's worth to the progress of discipline. (*Disciplinary Discourses*, Hyland, 47). There must be a delicate balance between offering valuable criticism that aids in the betterment of knowledge-making for the discipline, while also honorably acknowledging the author's contribution to the discipline. This varies from discipline to discipline. (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 44) Hyland notes that in most disciplines, positivity is the overall goal when evaluating work. This keeps the author in good standing with the community and mitigates negativity that may come from criticism. (*Disciplinary Discourses* 52)

New information or works of art within Musical Theatre heavily rely upon the approval of peer groups This ranges from standard book reviews on material in the field to peer evaluation on artistic pursuits, and even critic reviews of Broadway productions. The collaborative nature of this field requires an immense amount of peer critique, arguably more than most standard disciplines. Entire books are written for the purpose of analyzing and critiquing artistic works for their contribution to the field. Reviews from newspapers such as The New York Times or the NY Daily News can make or break the success of a new piece of theatre. Journals, newspapers, and public media all exhibit peer review of various facets of Musical Theatre.

Colleen Rua's book review on *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* by Stacy Wolf exemplifies the more conventional dialogue between participants of the

⁴ Referring to peers of the same community in which the writer comes from and is writing for.

field and incoming knowledge for the progress of the field as described by Hyland. The article adheres to the standard pattern of opening with praise to inherently give appreciation for the works' endeavor. Rumsey begins with praise for Wolf's work on "posit[ing] *Wicked* as an exemplary work that both embraces and eschews deeply entrenched conventions of the Broadway musical" (174). It is an overall positive critique and offers perspective on how Wolf's work can continue to be lucrative to study for the betterment of the field. Rumsey gives multiple praises on Wolf's trailblazing efforts to shift perspectives on Musical Theatre history. Her rhetoric implies an overall positive perspective on the book's contribution and originality such as: "*Changed for Good* is most provocative in its queer reading of the Elphaba/Glinda relationship in *Wicked*..." "Also fascinating is Wolf's analysis of female voices..." "One intriguing way Wolf sets her book apart from other musical theatre histories..." (Rumsey 174). Only the second to last paragraph offers stark criticism for Wolf. It highlights three minor points of weakness where more analysis on the groundbreaking musicals of *Rent* and *The Wiz* could be done, as well as a missed opportunity to elaborate on women in ensembles of the 1970s. Rumsey ends with her endorsement of Wolf's work as a worthy addition to any scholar, student, or musical theatre enthusiast's research. (175)

Even more unique to Musical Theatre not seen as frequently within other standard academic disciplines is the influence of the public eye. As much as this is a discipline, it started as a business to sell performative products. The public acts as an outside peer group in that their overall opinions are likely to sway the acceptance or denial of new works. The discourse between critic reviews and the public is a very crucial interaction for performance products in Musical Theatre. I have found these evaluations tend to be much more critical than the more standard book reviews. Hyland notes that soft disciplines tend to be "more extensive in their

evaluations and generally more critical in their judgments” (*Disciplinary Discourses* 49). This is generally due to the want for discursiveness in discourse to expound upon topics that will most likely continue to be addressed within discourse communities. (Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses* 50).

The New York Times has long been a big influence on the opinions of new pieces of work in Musical Theatre. I used two New York Times reviews about the original and revival productions of *Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville* to demonstrate how interpretation is a large part of peer review. The review of *Chicago* after its opening night on Broadway in 1975 was overwhelmingly negative. The review of *Chicago*’s revival on Broadway in 1996 is almost the opposite, and even reflects on how the revival’s artistic shifts created a more prosperous product. Director/choreographer Bob Fosse’s vision in the original production is ridiculed and deemed a worse version of his previous musical *Cabaret* which opened in 1966. The show’s entire production is picked apart from the artistic vision to specific performances. Fosse’s vaudeville look was deemed tired. Even the composer/lyricist team John Kander and Fred Ebb are critiqued for their plain rhyme schemes and boring melodies. (Kerr) The show still had a long run and closed in August of 1977, but the revival is still on Broadway today and does not seem to be closing any time soon. The revival’s review is overwhelmingly positive. Most of the article is spent praising director Walter Robbie’s fresh vision and choreographer/leading lady Anne Reinking’s style and performance. Kander and Ebb were even cited as writing music that is “gripping” and “tantalizing” (Brantley).

This is not to say that the review itself is what provided the show success, but rather that these reviews often reflect the public’s taste at the time and the interpretation of the production. That matters because if the public does not like it, they will not go see it. The musical’s book and

music were not drastically changed between revivals, but the production's imagery was drastically different. The revived polished and sophisticated *Chicago* was accepted, while the original *Chicago* was deemed incorrect. The 1975 article ends with stating that "*Chicago* is a very sleek show. It just seems to be the wrong one" (Kerr). The 1996 review ends stating that "this production isn't smoke and mirrors. It's flesh and blood shaped by discipline and artistry into a parade of vital, pulsing talent. If there's any justice in the world..., audiences will be exulting in that parade for many, many performances to come" (Brantley). The same musical is seen very differently due to artistic differences and public taste. Artistic reviews such as the ones in the New York Times greatly affect the community acceptance of the artwork in discussion.

WRITING AS A TOOL FOR CREATIVE PROCESSES

Hyland discusses the rhetorical patterns and trends that make up written work in already established discourses. In my aim to define MT as a holistic discipline, it is necessary to identify the most fruitful modes of research. Disciplinary research is extremely important to academic fields because it is where new knowledge is discovered and new products are made. Artistic disciplines have found quantifiable ways to understand and document creative research and methodologies that function similarly to standard disciplines. It is being documented more frequently within Musical Theatre, and these methods pose effective ways to combine standard academic research and creative processes.

There is creativity in the very core of research, as Sohui Lee and Russell Carpenter explain in their article "Creativity Across Disciplines: Creative Thinking for Twenty-First-Century Composing Practices." It is a chapter in the recent book *Writing In and About the Performing and Visual Arts: Creating, Performing, and Teaching* by Steven J. Corbett et al. These authors dive into the role of writing within various creative processes and highlight how

thinking strategies and analytics within the arts have the ability to create stronger cognitive processes for students.

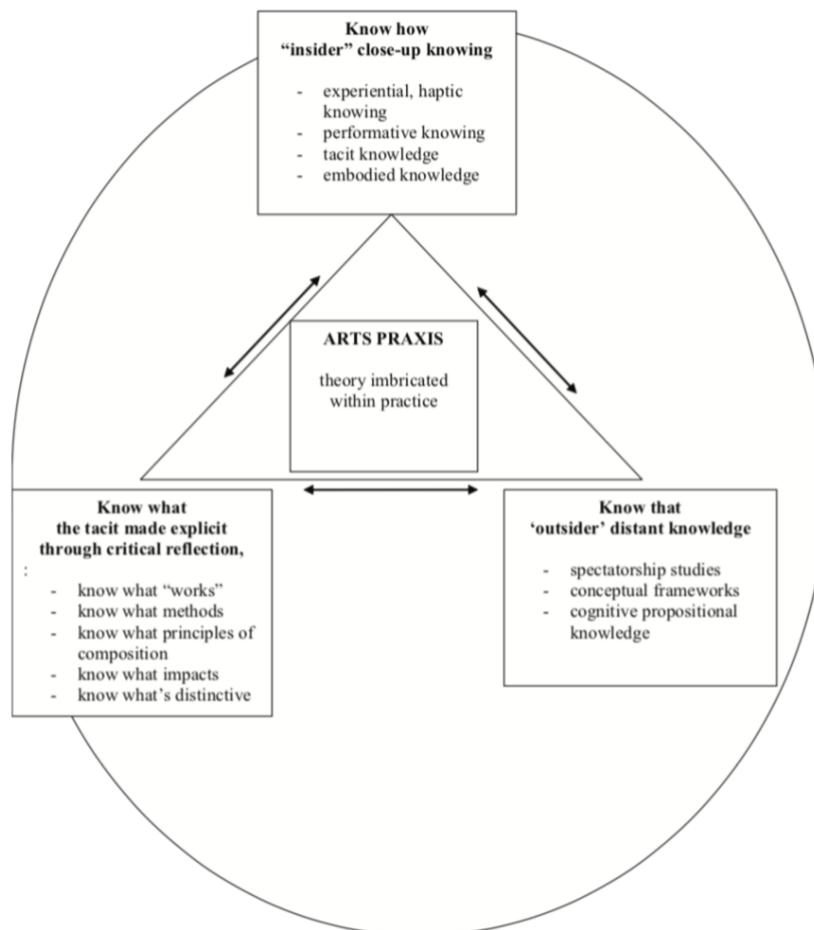
Lee and Carpenter reveal how creativity is extremely pertinent in the cognitive production of ideas, problem-solving skills, products, and the deeper understanding of concepts. They compare six different areas of study (Composition, Visual Arts, Engineering, Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities) and define how creativity actively functions within each one. They state that “the primary goal of academic creativity is one of purposeful problem-finding or problem-solving, but the nuanced disciplinary approaches...explored also reveal the multidisciplinary nature of creativity” (Lee and Carpenter 27). In summary, “creative thinking is a skill; a heuristic process; situated event; and a product of constructed environments,” which all exists within the idea of “transferable applied creativity” (Lee and Carpenter 27). Creativity does not only exist as “a by-product of theoretical or conceptual content delivery or technical performance,” but also as “a pedagogical product of deliberate learning” (Tutor qtd. in Lee and Carpenter 21).

In relation to research within Musical Theatre, Zachary Dunbar’s article “Practice as Research in Musical Theatre-- Reviewing the Situation” explores the tools and knowledge theories for Musical Theatre research. His findings express the multimodal ways of knowledge making in the specific field of Musical Theatre. Dunbar argues that Musical Theatre’s “interdisciplinary and...holistic experience of the field already prepare[s] the way for multimodal forms of research” (72).

Dunbar grounds his findings in the concepts of Robin Nelson’s ‘Practice as Research’, or PaR, in conservatory-style training programs for Musical Theatre and beyond. According to Nelson, PaR: “involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and

where, in respect to the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, [etc.]) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (qtd by Dunbar 59). Dunbar also uses Robin Nelson’s definition of ‘praxis’ as further grounds for his examination. Praxis is “the knowledge-generating activity that happens when theory converges with practice” (Nelson qtd. by Dunbar 62). It is split into three domains of knowledge: ‘know-how,’ ‘know-what,’ and ‘know-that.’ (See Figure 1)

Figure 1: Robin Nelson’s Model for PaR (Dunbar 62)



Additionally, Dunbar explores how these three knowledges manifest in musical theatre research. He argues that PaR enhances the three domains of Musical Theatre: pedagogy, process,

and performance, as I highlighted earlier with the three major discourse communities. (Dunbar 67)

Dunbar provides a framework for identifying creative processes in Musical Theatre, and Lee and Carpenter have linked similar processes to standard academic research. A discipline's research is the beginning of progress for the discipline itself. I found written material evidence that displays proof that Musical Theatre does have sound research methodologies, despite the perceived ineffable nature of the outputs. (Dunbar 64)

Musical Theatre deals with creation through mediums of melody, movement, and voice. That may sound simplistic, but in actuality there is a deep synthesis of knowledge needed in order to set up a comprehensive framework for creating artistic outputs. Dunbar's examples of artistic research in the field and composer Stephen Sondheim's self-reflection on his processes for creation in *Finishing the Hat* proved helpful to me in locating written documentation that showed people using theoretical hypothesizing and artistic impulsiveness as research methodology.

Dunbar provides three personal statements on how researchers describe their methodological approaches to their work. Researcher Jo Scott applies 'doing-thinking' strategies by highlighting the relationship between practice and idea. The idea sparks a theory, which is then tested through practice. While in practice, the idea is constantly in dialogue with the action. The results of this practice then affirms the theory or renders it artistically unfulfillable. (Jo Scott qtd. by Dunbar 69) Researcher Rebecca Reeves identifies her research as "in constant play with one another; one takes the lead and the other a more secondary role, only for [it] to be reversed in the next instance" (qtd. by Dunbar 69). Both approaches are common in Musical Theatre research and can be seen in Sondheim's creative process, as well.

In *Finishing the Hat*, Sondheim discusses the process of composing his various works of art. Not only does he provide insight on successful endeavors, but he also elaborates on processes that failed. The two I called attention to are *Company* (1970), the groundbreaking concept musical and first of its kind, and *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), a problematic satire that did not pass intensive peer review. Dunbar briefly examines composers and spotlights their utilization of the ‘know what’ praxis in his research. He clarifies that “‘Testing’ and ‘enacting’ shade into a methodology,” which is what I will highlight with Sondheim’s methods (Dunbar 68).

I began by exploring Sondheim’s methodology for *Company* using the vocabulary introduced above. The idea was to create a musical from a series of one-act plays by George Furth. The problem was “merging unrelated scenes into a unified evening” (Sondheim 165). The theory was that if the main character could be the pivotal character of every scene, these vignettes would have a central theme and a single evening could be feasible. The practice was creating a musical from this idea using the theory as a framework⁵. (Sondheim 65-65) What Sondheim created was not only a successful piece of art winning six Tony awards, but the first of its kind. It was the first of what is now called a ‘concept musical.’⁶ (Miller)

In his discussion on writing the music, he evaluates the multiple theories that were tested before understanding what worked best for the function of the idea. The integrated musical is when music and lyric further the plot of the story, and it is the form in which almost every musical prior to *Company* was written in. For the purpose of this idea, Sondheim decided he could not write music in this style. With pre-written “witty and fast but self-sufficient” scenes,

⁵ Sondheim calls this the notion of ‘content dictating form’ which is seen in many of his works with a source material. (166)

⁶ A concept musical is “when the central theme or metaphor is as important (or more so) than the story” (Miller)

there was no place for the music to go. Sondheim then decided on a quasi-Brechtian⁷ approach that had songs that “commented on the action...or *were* the action-- but [were never a] *part* of the action” (167). He had to utilize practice and intentional creativity by writing material and finding that it did not support his idea. Once he landed on a theory that was practiced and proved to successfully support his idea, the change in result then manifested artistically in his work. He decided to “hold the score together through subject matter” rather than a linear plotline (Sondheim 167).

In an opposite result, *Anyone Can Whistle*'s ideas and theories through practice did not yield successful products in the eyes of the peer group. The idea was to create a musical that was a sociopolitical satire. The theory was to construct the musical using free-wheeling form. The product was actually one of the first commercial absurdist musicals⁸. Sondheim analyzes the process and determines that there were major blind spots to the practice. While he and his co-writer Arthur Laurents thought their theory supported their idea, there was extreme criticism from critics and the public (the peer groups) that proved their theory to be inadequate. The show closed after only thirteen performances. (Sondheim 111)

He then begins an in depth musical and lyrical analysis which demonstrates that even if a product does not succeed, the practice is essential to the maker. He breaks down the song “Simple” and identifies it as such: “[the song] was my first substantial attempt to combine, song, musicalized dialogue, and action into a unified whole, a technique I refined later in shows...” (Sondheim 120). He then highlights how he began to experiment with dialogue that is intentionally timed with the music so that the lyrics interchange between sung and unsung

⁷ Referring to Bertolt Brecht's style of theatre.

⁸ Based in the Theatre of the Absurd: Dramatic works from the 1950s and 1960s that explored the idea that the human situation is purposeless. There tends to be no logical structure, and the characters' situations typically don't change. (The editors...Britannica)

language. Notice how even his unsung language seamlessly maintains the rhyme scheme of the sung language in figure 2.

SCHUB
But who on that line is what?

HAPGOOD
One is one,
Two is two,
Who is what
And which is who?
No one's always
What they seem to be.

CORA
(A crack at Schub)
That's certainly true.

HAPGOOD
Simple? Simple?
Simple as A-B-C.
Simple as one-two-three.

Figure 2: Sondheim's lyrics from *Simple* (Sondheim 120)⁹

This will later become a defining trait within almost all of his work written after 1970.

(Sondheim 120) Through these processes of trial and error, he is acknowledging his re-working of the theoretical framework in place. Had he not practiced and failed with *Anyone Can Whistle*, he would not have equipped himself as readily for *Company* six years later.

These examples of written text that identify clearly the methodologies of artistic researchers in the field prove that the discipline has abilities to ground art making in a systematic and replicable process. Additionally, these practice based methods allow for the artistic spontaneity necessary to still create art.

⁹ Indentation of text signifies a spoken line.

“LET’S PUT IT ON ITS FEET:” APPLICATION IN CREATIVE SPACES

This section will identify how all of this works in tandem in the spaces that creative processes and researching takes place. Musical Theatre relies on the discourse that takes place in the room, and this is the last key component to viewing Musical Theatre as a discipline.

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE WORKPLACE:

The remaining aspect of Musical Theatre I will explore is that of performance and application. The discipline relies on the discourse and community knowledge-making that comes from creativity, practice, and research in the room. Hyland claims that “the effects of professional and workplace contexts on academic literacy practices are largely unknown, but are clearly pertinent” (35). I argue that Musical Theatre greatly, if not solely, relies on these in-person contexts to build the practices that progress the knowledge of the field. Every written piece of material I examined either surveys the process that happens in the room, work that was created in an artistic space, or the pedagogy and technique of artistic endeavors that take place in the room. The spaces in which people physically create, engage in discourse, and refine methodologies is where the discipline takes shape.

From my analysis of written text in the discipline, it is clear that these discourses are happening within the discipline. Furthermore, Dunbar shows that creative processes are not unreplicable spontaneous occurrences without structure. Academic settings are providing the foundational understandings of how to become proficient participants of the discipline. What used to be a solely “skills-dense vocation” that did not have a documented discourse about methodology or an academic base to record the evolution of knowledge has now changed (Dunbar 58). There are curriculums that bolster scholars in the field. The classroom is where

students combine pedagogy, process, and performance as a means to cultivate a well-rounded artistry. Writing, PaR, applied creativity, and so many other tools are utilized in these spaces to create not only proficient performers, but also future scholars in the field. My time at Pace has brought me a deep understanding of the art and the discipline. I am graduating with a skillset that allows me to be a successful artist and also someone who can contribute to the field's future network of knowledge.

In Earl D. Weaver's article "Utilizing Circles of Attention in Musical Theatre Acting: A Personal Perspective," he highlights how he constructed an integrated class curriculum for acting in Musical Theatre through Stanislavski's "circles of attention" technique. This class curriculum is now representative of what most acting classes for Musical Theatre look like. This article lays out the specifics on how Musical Theatre's evolving pedagogy functions within higher educational settings. It also highlights the necessity for academic analysis in order to create multi-dimensional performance products. Not only is his approach interdisciplinary, but it also encompasses cross community discourse.

A larger sector of the written and academic work done within Musical Theatre happens in the analysis of performance pieces. Weaver details the very intricate process behind the performance of a song within this article. He also distinguishes what it means to act with the added elements of a song versus acting solely with text. In Musical Theatre, not only must one analyze a song for the text, but also for the emotionality the music provides for the song as a whole. The work being done in Weaver's classroom is reflective of Lee and Carpenter's evaluation of the theory of applied creativity. Weaver's system of teaching Musical Theatre acting presents a clear structure on how to craft a performance with specificity, honesty, and refined emotionality through academic creative analysis and evaluation.

Creative thinking is a domain-general skill that is now being applied in many disciplines, but in the performing arts it's a foundational tool. (Lee and Carpenter 25-26) Keith Sawyer argues that "disciplined improvisation" is one of the best ways to foster a skill in intentional creative thinking, which is a shared core belief in Dunbar's examination of practice (qtd by Lee and Carpenter 25). These problem-solving skill bases facilitate the growth of scholarly thinking within the field, as demonstrated in Weaver's and Pace Musical Theatre's class curriculums.

Amy Rogers, the director of Musical Theatre for Pace University, constructed a similar framework for her students. I learned much of my Musical Theatre performance technique in her Musical Theatre Performance Technique I and II courses. Rogers describes the course as such:

"Musical Theatre Performance Technique is a process-based performance class that will explore the synthesis of emotional life, singing, and movement skills as the foundation for a truthful and authentic interpretation of musical theater material. In this class, students will explore different styles of repertoire and will learn to develop a character within the context of each song." (1)

Although this is geared primarily to the performance of a song, she employs strategies to engage the student in analytical processes that foster the ability to research in the field, such as her song analysis paperwork and in-process exploration during class time. We learn vocational skills to successfully perform a song, while simultaneously understanding what it means to engage in praxis while exploring new techniques. This action of praxis in learning environments actually reinforces methodologies that work for the artist that can be used for more than just performance.

Weaver highlights a deep intellectual understanding of the acting and a thorough emotional understanding of the music creates proficient performance in Musical Theatre.

(246) Rogers' curriculum is centered around this idea. Rogers' framework allows students to lay a written groundwork of given circumstances and OOST (the objectives, obstacles, stakes, and tactics¹⁰) of each song and then demonstrate technical proficiency of the voice and body on their feet. This exploration begins with written paperwork that engages the students in creative discourse with themselves and the material. The paperwork enquires the student to explore the emotional state of the character, the moment before the song begins, how the music informs the emotionality of the action, and in depth lyrical analysis on the lyrics. (see Appendix A) This investigation requires the students to demonstrate proficient tacit interdisciplinary knowledge of acting techniques, music theory, and literary analysis. All of this constitutes 'know-that' research. (Dunbar 62) Additionally, when the song is performed there is a synthesis of this information with vocal technique, movement quality, and acting. This presents the application of 'know-what' knowledge. (Dunbar 63)

There is a significant amount of theoretical framing and praxis the artist must complete in order for the performance to feel both spontaneous and in-the-moment. Dunbar explains how this type of knowledge can seem inarticulable from the outside perspective when 'know-what' or 'know-that' knowledge is not taken into consideration. Since most of the synthesis is presented in a performative medium, not many people witness how the other two forms of knowledge are active in the performance. Dunbar uses the following example for reference:

“...a musical theatre performer in the middle of performing, for example, Diana's monologue-scene 'Nothing' from *A Chorus Line* (1975), would

¹⁰ Rogers' pedagogy. (see Appendix A)

fail to accomplish the fictionalizations and mimetic acts that the song demands without having embodied or practiced, in a structured way, the exterior and interior sensations and images prompted by the text. Yet, if you ask the actor playing Diana to tell us how she disassociated her real self from the character singing the song, she would have difficulty in articulating the whole rehearsed or performed event, let alone a step-by-step account of all the performance aspects. In a nutshell, ‘knowing-how’ constitutes an understanding that represents more than the (discursive) sum of (experiential) parts” (63).

This demonstration of praxis and written inquiry give artists skills that allow them to perform with an informed framework and also eventually be researchers in the field. There is proof that the discourse found in written work is also in action in creative spaces.

CONCLUSIONS: PUTTING IT TOGETHER

It is my hope that people begin to realize the level of talent, skill, and craft required to be a masterful participant in a discipline such as Musical Theatre. Additionally, I want Musical Theatre to be seen as more than just an art form. By expanding the understanding of how the field functions, Dunbar argues that this will continue to “collapse...the binary distinctions of intellectual and experiential activities” that Musical Theatre already demonstrates (70). The duality of art and academia can exist within a single field if there is an understanding that art flourishes with knowledge and academia is enhanced with artistic creativity.

My research is only a small stepping stone on a path towards radical recognition of artistic fields as legitimate academic disciplines. The time constraints and resources available

have kept my current findings condensed, but the work I have begun is work I hope to continue expounding upon. More research could be done on multiple aspects of my findings. A deeper analysis of specific syntactical trends in Musical Theatre could be conducted with a larger corpus analysis of many works. There is an opportunity to showcase the benefits of arts and academics working together in a seamless way in professional environments or institutions of learning. There is more discovery to be had in the research methods of Musical Theatre and how they affect end products.

I hope institutions continue to facilitate artists as artistic scholars. The growth of the academic perspective on the field is reliant on more individuals finding a passion in the research of the craft. The depth of creative work is only deepened by this academic understanding. A new definition is coming into view of a triple-threat Musical Theatre artist. While we still sing, act, and dance, we now press forward in pursuits of academic clarity, discovery, and artistry.

Appendix A: Musical Theatre Performance Technique Song Preparation/Paperwork

Given Circumstances

Song Title:

Composer/Lyricist:

Is this show based off of a book/movie, etc.? If so, what?

Name of the character:

Name of the performer in the show/any other people who sang it?

Original Circumstances:

Objective: What do you want?

Obstacle: What is in your way?

Stakes: What do you have to lose?

Tactics: List three tactics for you to get over your obstacle so you can meet your objective.

Show Circumstances:

Who are you talking to?

Where are you?

When does your song take place?

Time:

Date:

Weather:

Why: Why do you have to sing this right now?

Moment before: What just happened?

Essence: This is a song about what? Tell me in one word.

Your Circumstances: Use your imagination. The more specific and detailed you are, the clearer your work will be. You can think literally or in abstract-or both. Make strong, bold choices.

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