

Literature Review

“Theatre isn’t just about which artists are in the room but about the work they’re making.”

- AJ Schwartz

Introduction

With my findings I wanted to see the reasons why vocal type casting exists. Because to me, voices are an actor instrument and a voice should not inherently have a type, if a song meant for a piano can be played by a violin, why can we not do the same for the voices in theatre? This goes for any gender presentation and identity within the theatre, and I think if we can work around set vocals in musical works, then we can find a way to make new theatre that slowly but surely can include everyone.

What is type casting? According to Caroline Gregor

“When an actor comes into audition for a role, “type casting” will most likely occur where actors are assigned roles based merely off what the casting directors physically see in the actor. Type casting, in a way, puts actors into a mold that in many cases can be challenging to break out of.” And sadly, this has turned into zeroing in on what the actor looks like rather than what the actor can do. Unfair casting has taken away roles from poc, and lgbtq+ actors.

https://www.redandblack.com/culture/theatre-professionals-talk-changing-nature-of-casting-process/article_f86990be-9183-11e7-905c-538508fa188f.html

To quote Meisner

“If acting is actually “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” as Meisner suggests, then any actor should be able to play any role. However, actors are constantly pigeonholed into roles that objectify them to a particular type.”

Yet that has been a consistent pattern that is prevalent enough, that everyone who has ever been cast in certain roles, has felt type casting in various ways. In a thesis for Boston College, Noelle E. Scarlett tackles this specific issue by calling out the fundamental portions of why type casting exists and summarizes the three base forms of type casting that have affected actors for generations:

Race, Sex, and Stereotypes that intermingle between these two very closely related issues. I only have enough time today to tackle gender-based type casting in relation to vocal types and the boxes these ideas are placed into it. And I am coming from a perspective of a white presenting and fem aligning AFAB individual. So, my specific research is the effect of type casting on all women, non-binary, and AFAB individuals, and the unique experience of that kind of typecasting.

And according to Scarlett this angle I am taking is justified because “Typecasting influences females differently than males seeking a career in theatre. There is an “unconscious” gender bias in actor training that reflects the gender imbalance of the industry (11).” And there hasn’t been much talk about how nonbinary or gender non-conforming individuals are included in the casting narrative as well. And that is why this discussion of gender identity and type casting matters so much, so no one is left out of the equation in the future. And so that casting will be framed in a way that does not misrepresent individuals who are seeking to be cast in roles that accurately reflect their identity and their own desire to play specific roles.

There have been examples where objectification goes beyond what's appropriate in many settings, "Actress Lena Headey of Game of Thrones reveals that in her 20s she was told by a casting director that "the men take these tapes home and watch them and say, 'Who would you f---?'" Headey believes she lost out on roles because she refused to flirt or use her feminine wiles in the audition room ("15 Actresses Who Spoke Out", 2017)". This is an experience that is distinctly objectifying and is a major side of why I'm covering this. If we are only valued on the basis of our looks and not our ability, we are not being given a fair playing field to measure up.

<https://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir%3A107893/datastream/PDF/view>

The history of typecasting and casting equity is new, it's within the last 200 years that we've seen how typecasting functions to put people in boxes or place labels onto people's heads. According to Pamela Wojick, playing type vs. Not playing type is all about audience perception and bias (2). An actor playing outside of a stereotype or their usual type will often be viewed as lacking the talent or being unfit to play the role by the audience. This stems from bias and limitations of viewpoint that anyone can have. These limitations are caused by constant presence of type in media, where lovers must be conventionally attractive, where audiences may just be used to seeing a heteronormative casting or casting that fits their ideologies, rather than deeply holding up a mirror to life. Because life has no type casting, yet theatre seems to struggle with moving outside of that; however, that theatre within the recent years has improved, but there is still a long way to go. A trivial improvement doesn't mean that we simply give up on where we're going, it means to keep moving forward and allowing for the full experience of acting outside of type. That being said, "an actor cannot stand on stage without standing for a type of humanity," and Wojick later goes on to say that she believes that casting should, "deepen and expand our understanding," and shouldn't just consistently repeat itself.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/23126345?seq=22#metadata_info_tab_contents

Our voices our powerful instruments, and in musical theatre they define how we are seen. And if our voices are instruments then we should be able to shift what instrument normally plays said song, we do it all the time with piano and violin. Why not with our voices too?

This goes for all genders in the theatre, if you have a specific vocal type you know generally where you're going to be cast. While vocal stereotypes go across all genders and are based in human nature. Today I am just talking about the voice of women. As women, we already face body type stereotyping, but we add another layer when it comes to our voices. And in times of changing societies, it is my firm belief there is no reason to have our voices be a limitation in casting. This presentation will be about redefining voices in theatre and show that casting based on vocal type is something we should leave in the past *Angels and Monsters: Male and Female Sopranos in the Story of Opera, 1600-1900*, we can see the beginning of our type casting. Ward discusses how the "angels" were characterized as having higher pitched voices, and thus the "good" guys were always sopranos, both male and females. Ward then goes on to state that the "monsters," were always sung by bases or altos. We can also see this in the role of the "fallen woman," with them being Mezzo-sopranos, and then they would die to serve the purpose of the Christian world they were pleasing.

Descriptions of Vocal tones as described by a vocal coach by the name of Ken Taylor

Soprano / Tenor – A high more classical sounding, Pingy and bright character example: Cinderella in *Into the Woods*, Gabe in *Next to Normal*

Mezzo-Soprano / Baritone – A Fuller more rich sound, usually characterized with a "belt". character example: Millie in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, Charlie Brown in *Your a Good Man Charlie Brown*

Alto / Bass – A very rich and deep voice, very full. Character Example: Sally Bowles in Cabaret, Judge Turpin in Sweeney Todd

The characters that sing in these roles reflect the consensus that if a character is innocent their voice reflects that. There have been cases where some shows go against this norm, but the vocal cast type is extremely common and usually adds another layer to the reasons why someone may be cast or not be cast.

Unexpected Challenges for Trans Actors

In recent years there has been a push to be more inclusive of trans, non-binary, and intersex people in theatre. So, there is theatre currently being done that is meant to include them. **Playbill** author Olivia Clement talks about the struggle that trans theatre actors face, and how they often times will be misgendered during the casting call or will be placed in a role that misgenders them. A trans man named Donnie talks about the struggle he faced before he was out. Just for reference Donnie Cianciotto is the creator of the Trans Voices Cabaret.

“Donnie says. “I have the voice of an ingénue, but I was never going to play one based on what I look like.” It wasn’t until a few years later, after being exposed to the transgender community, that things started to click.” And so even with a vocal type that normally would afford him bigger roles, it was due to appearance that he wasn’t cast in said roles. And then as he continued into his transition he was faced with another issue. “As Donnie weighed up transitioning, there were two things that posed the biggest challenges: would changing his name erase his footprint as an actor, and would he lose his singing voice?” Our names mean so much to us as actors, if someone midway through their career has to change their name, they often times will hyphen their old name with their new one; however, this creates a new issue for trans, non-binary, and intersex people. That being, deadnaming. Our names are attached to everything

we do as actors, so trans actors are faced with the challenge that they have to keep their deadname out there in order to keep their experience relevant.

Trans Broadway Representation

“According to [Production Pro](#), which compiles demographic data on Broadway employees, the 2018-2019 season had 365 titled characters. Of those, 61 percent were male, and 32 percent were female. An additional 7.1 percent had a gender that was “unspecified.” A new category made it onto the list year: .27 percent of actors were “nonbinary plural.” Those numbers reflect characters, however, not the actors themselves.”

And trans-actors just want to play good roles that may not have anything to do with transness. There shouldn't be a huge roadblock for trans actors to play roles generally played by cis people, and yet in a lot of places they still aren't given the opportunity in musical theatre.

Analysis of Interactive Intonation in Unaccompanied SATB Ensembles.

This work discusses how our voices have been defined since prehistoric times, and that has been how we are distinguished. This piece does not discuss gender specifically but the effects of vocal pitch. Pitch errors and how pitch functions in a work. The authors of this describe how in Western culture our tone effects how we are perceived and goes into more depth on bass voices. This piece is all about how voices interact with one and other in western pieces.

Angels and Monsters: Male and female Sopranos in the Story of Opera, 1600-1900

The angels and monsters were not female, they were men. Angels were the male sopranos of virtuosi, and this was done through castration of the men or Castrati. In this period of time, the male soprano voice was considered “more powerful” and more “virtuosic” than the female voice. So that was why the popularity of the castrati was so prevalent in Opera.

Female Soprano voices did not become popular till the sixteenth century, due to the churches influence over what was considered socially acceptable. Male and female sopranos were popular at around the same time, but Male sopranos were considered the more desirable (due to beliefs that women were impure).

The only vocal type that was considered acceptable by the church was soprano pitches, and altos simply would not have been allowed in the sixteenth century. Women did not sing in church because women were expected to be “silent.”

And thus, the idea of Angelic voices being associated with Soprano’s became engrained in our culture. The opera helped with this instillment that was led by the church.

Castrati Singers

“Castrati singers, with their angelic voices, were a perverted outcome of this ambition. It was the intention that these castrato voices with their supernatural sound would mesmerize audiences. At that time, it could be said that within certain society circles, an addiction to these voices existed.” The link to Angels and vocal pitch linked again, it’s engrained in Western culture that the higher the voice the more innocent it is.

This piece talks about the Castrati Boys, “Farinelli, Caffarelli, and Senesino, three of the most famous castrati, were the first musical superstars of the 18th century. Their voices moved decadent audiences to tears and standing ovations,” and how their voices were manipulated ultimately causing health issues for all the boys.

Once castration became illegal the end of the Castrati happened in the 18th Century

Why Sopranos tend to get the lead

Soprano's voices naturally lend themselves to volume, and thus dominate the chorus that take part in it. So, since their voices have a tendency to drown out others, in a show layout sense, a higher voice makes more sense to see as a lead. But a soprano voice loses strength without the backup from Alto's, Tenor's, Bases, etc.

How to make a theatre space trans inclusive

Little things like "All genders, races and abilities are encouraged to audition is a good start." The forms should start including a space for preferred pronouns, and the traditional place marker for sex could be removed all together because in some cases you are asking someone to misgender themselves to even audition.

Questions to ask during the creative process:

"Does this role have to be male? Identify roles in which gender has little to no bearing and consider making the character non-binary or female if the right actor comes along. There are more opportunities to have a solid cast if you're willing to cast women and non-binary people in roles not specifically written for them. Ensemble and supporting roles especially are often male by default, but gender changes have no real effect on the story in many situations."

If we can answer these questions in a more open-ended way, we can avoid turning talent away at the door. Also ask, "Is this role more powerful as female or non-binary? Whose story are you telling? Often a radical cisgender man from centuries ago makes more sense as a woman, non-binary person, or transgender man today."

Overall if there is a conscious thought to change our language from being gendered or giving things the connotation of male or female, the work will pay off and it'll become natural. But it takes effort and time and that's not always easy to do. Trying is what matters.

Based on my findings:

A lot of the reasoning for sopranos tend to be more popular is due to culture, and due to vocal power. Vocally a soprano is stronger and louder, but this isn't' always the case since altos are known for being stronger belters. I all has to do with the idea of misogyny and how women were not allowed to sing or perform for a long time, just due to the idea that women were sinners inherently. While the higher voice also meant a more angelic voice in the theatre, we can see the idea of angels and angelic sounds were something that the church engrained into our society and culture. There is a concern when it comes to time and money in the theatre, time of transposing songs into a new key, and the money it would take to pay someone to do so. Which is a shame, because if we want to create theatre that accurately represents everyone involved, and also will provide representation for newer audiences there is a financial price to pay. In the end, it is up to the theatre and their budget to transpose songs, and with new technology hopefully we may see more variety in the works of old and new for different vocal instruments to play other beautiful parts.

However, I will say, there is a reason why most of our audiences are not younger. We are still pandering in a lot of ways to an older audience. In new works, we're starting to see our audiences becoming younger. And that's who we should also work for. Our audience. Not just the people who bring in the usual sums of money, but new faces who will keep our art alive on more than just the stage.