En Travesti: The Operatic Mezzo-Soprano as Leading Man

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Abstract

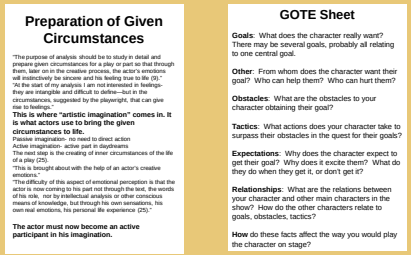
In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an operatic tradition began that some roles originally intended for male castrato singers were now sung by women. After the disappearance of castrati, these roles were sung entirely by women. Also, gradually during this time period, some composers began to write male roles expressly for female singers. Though the term "mezzo-soprano" (medium soprano) was not used until the end of the eighteenth century, that classification describes those women's voices: a strong middle register with both upper and lower extensions and a richer, darker sound than a soprano (similar to the sound and range of the male castrati). This research project explored how the tradition of "pants roles" began and a time line of the major roles of this type was created and compared to other non-pants mezzo-soprano female roles in the same period. The research team then created a written guide for preparing a "pants role" that includes character study and movement adaptations (how does a man move and how does a woman emulate that physically). The culmination of the project is a lecture recital in which five student mezzo-sopranos will perform examples of major pants roles to illustrate the team's findings on performing *En Travesti*.

Research Process

The research team created:

- **A lecture on the History of the "pants role"**
  - **The tradition of the *travesti* came from the decline of the male castrati and the need to fulfill the aesthetic of sexual ambiguity.**
- **Timeline of major mezzo-soprano roles and pants roles**
  - **In certain time periods the pants role thrived, while in others it was almost non-existent (i.e. Italian Baroque versus twentieth century American Opera)**
- **Guide – How To Wear Pants**
  - **Philosophies of three major acting pedagogues**
    - **Uta Hagen**
    - **Constantine Stanislavski**
    - **H. Wesley Balk**
  - **Acting exercises used to enhance the character**
  - **Introduction to Laban Movement**
  - **Psychology in Movement**
  - **Gender and Movement**
  - **Styles in Opera Acting**
    - **Realism versus Idealism**

Examples from How to Wear Pants



Preparation of Given Circumstances

"The purpose of analysis should be to study in detail and prepare given circumstances for a play or part so that through them, later on in the creative process, the actor's emotions will instinctively be sincere and his feeling true to life (9)."
"At the start of my analysis I am not interested in feelings- they are intangible and difficult to define—but in the circumstances, suggested by the playwright, that can give rise to feelings."
This is where "artistic imagination" comes in. It is what actors use to bring the given circumstances to life.
Passive imagination- no need to direct action
Active imagination- active part in daydreams
The next step is the creating of inner circumstances of the life of a play (25).
"This is brought about with the help of an actor's creative emotions."
"The difficulty of this aspect of emotional perception is that the actor is now coming to his part not through the text, the words of his role, nor by intellectual analysis or other conscious means of knowledge, but through his own sensations, his own real emotions, his personal life experience (25)."

The actor must now become an active participant in his imagination.

GOTE Sheet

Goals: What does the character really want? There may be several goals, probably all relating to one central goal.

Other: From whom does the character want their goal? Who can help them? Who can hurt them?

Obstacles: What are the obstacles to your character obtaining their goal?

Tactics: What actions does your character take to surpass their obstacles in the quest for their goals?

Expectations: Why does the character expect to get their goal? Why does it excite them? What do they do when they get it, or don't get it?

Relationships: What are the relations between your character and other main characters in the show? How do the other characters relate to goals, obstacles, tactics?

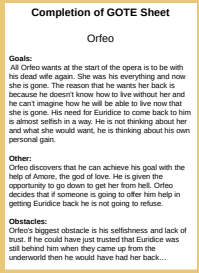
How do these facts affect the way you would play the character on stage?

Excerpts from H. Wesley Balk's *The Complete Singer-Actor*

Application

Based on the three phases of preliminary research, the team then selected and examined individual operas where the pants role was prevalent. The two operatic roles chosen were Serse from Handel's *Serse* and Orfeo from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Each team member filled out and completed the guide according to her character.

Completion of Guide



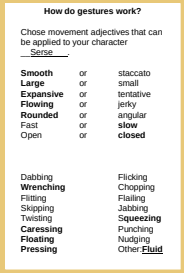
Completion of GOTE Sheet

Orfeo

Goals:
All Orfeo wants at the start of the opera is to be with his dead wife again. She was his everything and now she is gone. The reason that he wants her back is because he doesn't know how to live without her and he can't imagine how he will be able to live now that she is gone. His need for Euridice to come back to him is almost selfish in a way. He is not thinking about her and what she would want, he is thinking about his own personal gain.

Other:
Orfeo discovers that he can achieve his goal with the help of Amore, the god of love. He is given the opportunity to go down to get her from hell. Orfeo decides that if someone is going to offer him help in getting Euridice back he is not going to refuse.

Obstacles:
Orfeo's biggest obstacle is his selfishness and lack of trust. If he could have just trusted that Euridice was still behind him when they came up from the underworld then he would have had her back…

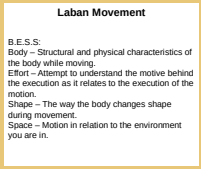


How do gestures work?

Chose movement adjectives that can be applied to your character
Serse.

Smooth	or	staccato
Large	or	small
Expansive	or	tentative
Flowing	or	jerky
Rounded	or	angular
Fast	or	**slow**
Open	or	**closed**

Dabbing	Flicking
Wrenching	Chopping
Flitting	Flailing
Skipping	Jabbing
Twisting	**Squeezing**
Caressing	Punching
Floating	Nudging
Pressing	Other-**Fluid**



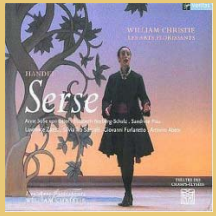
Laban Movement

B.E.S.S:
Body – Structural and physical characteristics of the body while moving.
Effort – Attempt to understand the motive behind the execution as it relates to the execution of the motion.
Shape – The way the body changes shape during movement.
Space – Motion in relation to the environment you are in.

Famous Mezzo-Soprano "Men"

- Kathleen Ferrier
- Brigitte Fassbaender
- Tatiana Troyanos
- Janet Baker
- Marilyn Horne
- Ferderica von Stade
- Ann Sophie von Otter

"Pants roles suit me, and my whole operatic career has been built around them. I'm tall, and my gait and bearing are not particularly feminine. I feel very much at home portraying male characters."
– Ann Sophie von Otter



Ann Sophie von Otter as Serse

Jonathan Dove's *Pinocchio*, written in 2007, is an example of a contemporary opera where the main male character is written for a female mezzo-soprano.

Timeline of Mezzo-Soprano Pants Roles

(Grove Dictionary)

After comparing the graph of major mezzo roles to the graph of major mezzo pants roles it was discovered that in the time from 1700 to 1800, where very few operas were composed compared to other time periods, the majority of the operas had a *travesti* role. These roles were originally played by male castratos, but when necessary female mezzos stepped into the role of leading man and continued to do so after the decline of the castrati.

Presentation of Research

Combining Research and Practice

The student researchers will present their final research project in a lecture recital along with a group of four volunteer student performers, displaying a variety of pants roles while discussing the history and development of the pants role in opera.

Researcher Angela Nieman as Cherubino from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro.*

Lecture Outline

- Presentation of the history of the pants role
  1. The reasons why women came to play men on stage
     - A. Decline of castrato
     - B. Vocal chords of castrated man same length as mezzo-soprano's vocal chords
     - C. Sexual Ambiguity
  2. Operas commonly performed today with *travesti* roles
- Styles in acting and how different techniques can be used to enhance the disguise of a woman playing a man
  1. Realism- What the world looks like
  2. Idealism- What the world *should* look like
- Psychology of Movement
  1. Beginning and end points
  2. Speed (Where, when and if the speed changes)
  3. Shapes of body parts
- Classifying movement
  1. Laban Movement
  2. Language of Movement

Conclusion

After careful examination of the origins of the female *travesti*, the research team discovered after the decline of the male castrati it was imperative that higher female voices take the place of the once beloved castrato. This maintained the aesthetic of the heroic male lead in a time where the lines of sexual ambiguity were blurred. Further examination of the *travesti* led to the discovery that the female "hero" is expected to fully embody the male character in present day practice, where realism is preferred to idealism. This ultimately led to the creation of the guide, which includes major acting techniques and exercises on how to "gender bend." No such source currently exists, making this a valuable contribution to the field. The researchers believe that it is crucial to not only understand the origins of the female *travesti*, but also to understand how to combine that knowledge with the techniques and concepts provided in the guide to be able to believably portray a male ion the opera stage.

Questions?

Contact us at msadegh@uwec.edu

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