Acting through song workshop
with Dr Zachary Dunbar

On February 18th a group of Music Theatre enthusiasts (teachers, students and friends) spent a wonderful day with Dr. Zachary Dunbar from the Victorian College of the Arts, and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music where he is Senior Lecturer in Theatre.

The new Music Theatre Syllabus calls for singing teachers to go beyond vocal technique, and add dramatic understanding to help their students 'bring the song to life'. It seems we are often guilty of spending 50% of our time worrying about what is ahead, 25% judging if what we just did was right or not, and only 25% to the important part of being in the moment.

Drama is the on-going conflict between objective and obstacle. Actors, or in our case, singers make the mistake of showing the obstacle rather than their fight against it, e.g. the character is sad/angry, therefore I show sadness or anger. A better way is to define the objective. For example, in Hodel's 'Far from the Home I Love' (Fiddler on the Roof) the obstacle is Tevye's insistence on tradition, and her objective is to get her father's blessing.

What action can she take? The character can react to the obstacle from moment to moment using active verbs. She can tease,

charm, challenge or reject. The tactic will change depending on whether she is getting closer to, or further away from, her objective.

This was a very hands-on workshop, so we paired off and teased, charmed and challenged each other to a variety of songs. Our favourite was Marilyn Monroe's 'Happy Birthday, Mr President!'

Other techniques included literally 'pointing' to emphasise the important words, having a 'place' for each occurrence, and building the character by answering 70 questions. It can be surprising how your answers affect your stance, movement, accent etc.

Some of the challenges were a little confronting, but I for one was glad to learn more techniques to help our students achieve their dreams. Thank you Zachary.

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