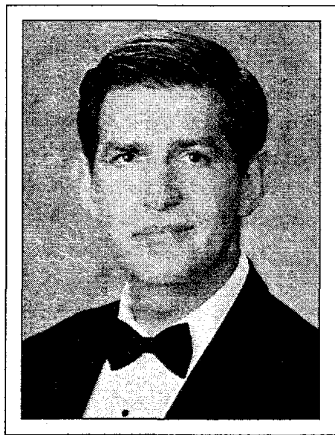


"Should My Child Major In The Performing Arts?"



Robert Edwin

Even in economically healthy and stable times, a parent may have issues with his or her child's desire to pursue a performing arts career: "What are the chances for success in this very risky business? What will be there to fall back on? Are we wasting our money?" In an unstable and troubled economic environment, these issues may intensify significantly, making such a career decision even riskier. A post-Christmas phone conversation this teacher had with a concerned parent might be of some interest to fellow pedagogues who are also being asked their advice and counsel on students wishing to sing for their supper.

The father was inquiring about his seventeen-year-old daughter who had successfully auditioned for my studio the previous week. He wanted straightforward and honest answers regarding her potential for a career. He had been down this road before; his talented son was finishing up a

music theater major at a highly rated college, and now his talented daughter wanted to follow in her brother's footsteps. The father was not sure, however, that as a female, she would have the same opportunities.

His first question to me was more a request for clarification. "It's easier for a boy to succeed in this business than a girl, right?"

"Right," I said. "There are far more females than males interested in a professional performing arts career, but it is by no means an easy career for either."

"Is it realistic for her to major in music theater in college? What do you think?" he asked.

"It's very realistic for her to attend college as a music theater major. As in professional sports, high school graduates rarely succeed in professional theater without post-high school development. Most teenage roles go to actors in their twenties who look like teens, but who possess the advanced skills and experience professional-level theater demands. One of my students is twenty-four years old, four feet eleven inches tall with a child-like face, and playing fourteen- to sixteen-year-old characters. By going to college, your daughter would have the opportunity to develop and hone those singing, acting, and dancing skills required to compete in the marketplace, and earn a degree as well."

With regard to his daughter's potential to be a music theater major, I suggested the decision should come

down to two basic factors: talent and motivation. The second factor, motivation, is irrelevant without an ample supply of the first factor, talent. As Sergius Kagen wrote in his 1950 book, *On Studying Singing*: "It matters little how ardently one may desire to learn to sing beautifully or how long and strenuously one may be willing to study to attain this goal. If one's natural endowment happens to be inadequate, no amount of wishing or working will change it. Study can make a gifted person use his gifts more efficiently—it cannot make an ungifted person less ungifted."¹

I assured the father that his gifted daughter definitely had the talent. "She is a superior singer with a strong physical and emotional presence. She has a legitimate soprano and a good, healthy belt, and in my opinion sings well enough to be competitive at most college auditions."

Satisfied with that answer, the father quickly moved on to the second factor, motivation. He realized that, although she had other abilities, math especially, her passion was for theater. Passion and motivation go hand in hand. Human nature says one will work harder to develop skills if one is passionate about the subject.

I shared with him three potential scenarios: one, his daughter goes to college, majors in music theater, graduates, pursues a career and finds gainful employment as a professional performer—a storybook ending to her dream, and a father proud and pleased.

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In scenario two, his daughter goes to college, majors in music theater, graduates, pursues a career and, unfortunately, joins the majority of aspiring performers who can not make a living in show business. Having given theater her best shot, she takes her college degree and uses that as an entry into the myriad opportunities our capitalistic society has to offer people with a higher education. Although saddened by her failure in theater, she feels good about her attempt to "make it," and is thankful to have had the chance to pursue her passion and her dream.

In scenario three, she goes to college, but is denied the opportunity to pursue her passion of music theater, and instead, majors in math. She graduates, gets a job, and forever wonders whether she could have developed into a professional performer. To paraphrase a famous quote, "'tis better to have tried and lost than never to have tried at all." "Would've, could've, should've" often becomes the mantra of those who do not follow their passion. I half-jokingly said to the father that he didn't want a neurotic, thirty-year-old daughter on his hands.

There was silence at the other end of the phone. The father said he'd never thought in terms of passion but realized that, despite his resistance and discouragement, his daughter had continued to plead her case. She was indeed passionate about doing this theater thing, and with affirmation of her potential from an unbiased, professional third party, presumably was going to be allowed to follow her star.

I assured the father that I was extremely realistic about the chances for success in the theater, and knew all-to well the risks, frustrations, dis-

appointments, and traps that stand in the way of success. I also knew, after more than twenty-five years of teaching and fifty-five years of living, that if one stomps on a dream, both the dreamer and the stomper can pay an awful price.

A college degree with a major in music theater, acting, dance, or vocal performance can be a ticket to a fine performing arts career. It can also be a ticket to any number of possibilities in the world of business whose only concern is that the degree holder had enough intelligence and discipline to earn the degree. The father especially liked that bit of "realistic thinking." He seemed satisfied with my comments about talent and motivation and was ready to support his daughter's dream.

Realistic to the end, his last request was for me to try to steer her to a good, inexpensive college or university. I replied that I had a few in mind.

NOTE

1. Sergius Kagen, *On Studying Singing* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950).

Robert Edwin, baritone, has sung Bach cantatas in cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village coffeehouses. He has performed in New York City's Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, toured throughout the U.S.A. and abroad, recorded for Avant Garde and Fortress Records, and published as an ASCAP lyricist and composer.

His diverse performing career has been paralleled by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on nonclassical and child vocal pedagogy, he practices

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