

NATS Spring Meeting – March 2018
Nathan Gunn & Sarah Wigley

In March 2018, the Minnesota Chapter of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) featured international opera and musical theatre performer, Nathan Gunn, and musical theatre performer, Sarah Wigley, both from the University of Illinois, Champaign – Urbana Lyric Theatre Department. Both Nathan Gunn & Sarah Wigley, an alumnus of the University of Minnesota, have teaching roles in the new Lyric Theatre at Illinois with a new curriculum. The degree is designated the Bachelor of Musical Arts in Lyric Theatre. In order to design this new curriculum and degree, the faculty asked themselves the important questions of what does the industry need, where is it going, what do we need to train singers to do? Singers are being asked to perform opera, operetta, and musical theatre. Nathan Gunn had recently sung *Trouble in Tahiti* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago with Susan Graham and judged the Schubert Club all day prior to giving a masterclass for Minnesota NATS.

According to Gunn and Wigley, students now are missing vocal and physical training to become performers and experiencing greater rates of vocal fatigue. Acting, movability, aspects of singing, and performance are different now than twenty or even ten years ago. The University of Illinois – Champaign wished to create a program that focuses on music and health and gives students the opportunity to have a wider view of the performing arts, singing dancer, dancing singer, etc.

In the Lyric Theatre degree, the faculty do not set a specific theatre program, they train you to be a singing actor that can really move. Music is the foundation with required courses in aural skills, music theory, music history = musicianship. The new Lyric Theatre degree is a proactive program, not reactive, as well as experimental.

50% of the core classes are in the School of Music. One class per semester must be movement. And 70% of the curriculum is advising students to their best degree format. Each student must take four theatre classes before graduating and students may create concentrations in the areas offered in the School of Music.

How do you train voices to do all of this? According to Sarah Wigley, healthy technique is healthy technique. If a student cannot fully phonate throughout their range, they can't learn to do anything else, specifically belting.

Each new student registers for classic Musical Theatre with one year of foundational technique, and through advising decided where to go from there... Each student is required to take three semesters (1.5 years) of foundational voice technique, then assess where their voices want to go and to what they are best suited. Movement and acting are also part of the program up to this point.

The Lyric Theatre degree offers three mainstage productions per year; one opera, one operetta, and one musical theatre production. They also produce one offsite NYC workshop and a workshop on campus. Graduate students are cast more often than undergraduate students. Lyric Diction is required right away in Italian lyric diction.

Masterclass Notes:

Nathan Gunn: The dirt under your fingernails is the simple answers to simple questions.

As a masterclass technician, he believes in stopping a lot, when you get something right, stop and repeat it and it grows from there...

Maddie – “In my Dreams” from *Anastasia: The Musical* (Kirsten Thayer – teacher)

- Sarah Wigley (SW) – Mainly head dominant production for Maddie
- Speak low parts, hand on the chest – C# - A below the treble staff
- “Feel like you’re a reception for DisneyWorld” – more mixed voice, less chest dominant vocal production
- “Put your hand on the larynx and swallow, feel like your larynx is chilling out, attempting to lower the larynx a little, less nasal resonance”
- “More head dominance than chest dominance”
- SW worked with the breath and release of the sound in a mixed voice
- Plug noise and say words – keeping the sound out of the nasal passage/resonance
- Nathan Gunn - “The sound is all interconnected, release more in your actual body to send the sound out. Don’t work too hard to send the sound out”
- Nathan Gunn is more practical – where does the sound come from? – Your throat.
- “When you are more nasal, you are cutting off resonance somewhere...” (NG)
- “All the pitches that come out of your head, are being made by your mouth, tongue, and articulators...”
- “Trust the feeling, not the sound you hear”
- “Don’t work harder than you have to... don’t put extra air in places where it isn’t needed”

David Timm – with Mark Bilyeu – teacher Teresa Tierney

“Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen” – Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*

Nathan Gunn worked with David Timm

- What are the three things he needs?
- Birds help him get the three things he wants... Food, wine, women
- What is singing? – Making sounds and music with your voice

- Simplify it more – using breath to fill resonance
- Speaking on pitch – sustained speaking on pitch
- Tell us a story.
- When your hands want to come up, drop them...
- In between the first and second verse – more drinking, more heated/adamant
- The opera was written for Emmanuel Schickanader who owned the theatre and sang the part of Papageno
- Think of something you just love...
- Have a movie going on in your head of the scenario you are in... very clear, something you want the most, the thing you really like
- He's finding his Papageno
- Everything he wants in life... Do you have anything in life that is kind of like that?
- Think about your favorite food... and go with that...
- Plain cheesecake with graham cracker crust with raspberry preserves on it, the fireplace is on, candles are lit, etc.
- Spongebob Squarepants doesn't get a promotion and goes on an ice cream bender in the ice cream parlor, that is this song!
- You have to see it, smell it, taste it.
- When you get nervous before you sing, there are things you can do with your body to help you relax.
- Rest on one of your legs, your posture looks more athletic, you look more relaxed
- The breath in your oasis.
- Narrow your eyes, you become predator rather than prey
- Changes in the ocular (eye) muscles will change how you think
- If you can't wrap your mind around it, wrap your body around it

Lauren Senden with Jesse Beulke (teacher Stephanie Thorpe)

“On the steps of the palace” – *Into the Woods* by Stephen Sondheim

Sarah Wigley worked with Lauren Senden

- So healthy, very even [vocally]
- You make this song look so easy
- Tricky acting-wise
- Teachers are doing wonderful work with these young students
- 17 years old
- Raise the stakes all the time
- Greater sense of urgency
- Needs more urgent feeling
- More intensity
- Life and death
- Play a little game – sandwich game
- When she claps, change your emotional situation
- You're such a great little actress, so nuanced
- Feeling like there's a lot of speech going on, that's something you've obviously worked on

- [The character] She's fancy, but not really...
- What just happened right before the song starts?
- What are your options? Run through the options in your head
- The second you inhale, you need to be part of that world
- Everything Sondheim puts on the page or leaves off the page is specific – Nathan Gunn
- Is it ok to be me, or should I be the thing he desires and his princess? Nathan Gunn
- It's so hard to stop you because it's going to well and you're so involved Sarah Wigley
- You have permission to move - SW
- What do you learn at the end? Nathan Gunn – clarify the phrase – what did you learn? Did you avoid the collision?

Josey Poppin – “Elegie” Massenet - Sonya Grimes – teacher

Nathan Gunn worked with Josey Poppin

- Legato – bound and connected
- What happens because of phonation – sound
- Simplest denominator...
- More dynamic difference.
- There is an intimacy in piano (dynamic) that you don't get in forte.
- Don't get lazy jaw, say the words
- Let your mouth move, it's like eating
- French: It's delicious, taste the words
- WE put armor on ourselves – we put barriers up. Keep the look that we're communicating on the same level with our audience.
- A voiced consonant should be enjoyed while you're doing it.
- You can decide what kind of alliteration you want to use...
- Allow yourself to breathe... let your body move.
- Put the consonant on the pitch.
- No scooping to the pitch...
- The phrases are longer thoughts than they were before, than you thought they were...
- Let the air fly like an arrow and sing! Don't lead/lean into it.