

Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years*

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From Practice to Preach to Performance: The George Tsambis Story

The Last Five Years by Jason Robert Brown is hands down, one of my favorite musicals of all time. The score is immaculate, it moves me in ways that can only be described while listening to the show. Not to mention, the plot is transcendent—an interpersonal look at the lives of two artists in New York. For the past couple of months, I've been learning the music and falling in love with the story all over again each time I sing it. Already that is the most exciting part about working on this show. I will never get sick of it; the music is just too good.

My first experience with the material that is *The Last Five Years* was the 2015 movie adaptation with Jeremy Jordan and Anna Kendrick. My first thought was “Wow, the music is so beautiful,” while the second was, “What is happening right now?” The show blew my mind in terms of linear storytelling. I didn't understand it at first but when I realized Cathy starts the end and Jamie at the beginning, I thought of other stories I've seen that include a similar timeline. There was none, except for *The Assassins*, which just skips around time periods. I think the experience I had, the confusion turned amazement, can parallel that of any first-time audience member seeing this show. At the opening of the show, lights are up on Cathy as she discovers the note her husband, Jamie, has just left for her, explaining to her he is leaving for good. Cathy, at the end of their five-year relationship is devastated, then less than five minutes later Jamie is on-stage having the time of his life as his career and love life skyrocket. The realization hits that these two are not in the same story—that is my favorite part of the show—how the first song “Still Hurting” and second song, “Shiksa Goddess” contrast so harshly with each other. Cathy and Jamie have problems and those problems lead to the failure of their relationship. That is what I personally find the most resonant within the genetics of the show itself. Our production, which we are mounting during the season of the pandemic, highlights this motif of the failed

relationship. Jamie and Cathy never saw how far the crack had opened, and the trouble in their relationship finally catches up to them. Due to social distancing guidelines, the two performers cannot be within twelve feet of each other. Although our stories intersect once, the vastness between Jamie and Cathy's two worlds resonates quite starkly. In our production the closest we ever get together is still worlds apart. Theatre is not the same as it used to be, but I look forward to the opportunity to tell such a stunning story, even with a mask on.

Back when the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in America in March of 2020, Playbill—a popular musical theatre journal—released a list of 'socially distant' shows that if performed could follow the CDC six-foot, social distance protocol. At the top of the list by Playbill was none other than mister Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years*. Although no one could have predicted the Covid-19 pandemic, our choice of a show could not have been better structured to handle such stringent safety restrictions. With only two characters, who most of the time are never on stage together, I am glad that we chose this show. The pressure to drastically alter our production will hopefully never hit however, I do have questions about blocking and singing with masks. Even so, I want to go into this project with an open mind in regard to CDC guidelines and maintaining a twelve-foot distance while singing. The most serious challenge will be deciding what to do in the very center of the musical, during the song, *The Next Ten Minutes*, where Cathy and Jamie both appear on stage, for one time only in the same story, in the middle of their five-year relationship. How are we going to stage this? In the stage directions not only does the couple dance together but they kiss! I am excited to see what creative solutions we will develop in order to solve this hiccup.

As a composer for the theatre, Jason Robert Brown has been in my repertoire since 2013, when I was in a local community theater production of his brilliantly witty *13 the Musical*. In

high school I went on to sing a selection of songs from *Parade*, another Brown musical, about the antebellum south and its xenophobic population. During high school I was also able to dip my toes into *The Last Five Years*, when during my junior year, I sang the song, *The Next Ten Minutes*, in singing class. Looking back, my work and my connection to the song were very superficial. I played at relationships, love, betrayal, and desperation, but never took hold of any real wants, desires, or given circumstances. At the time, I had just discovered my voice was a much more efficient and generous instrument than it ever was previously and due to that, I was fixated on trying to recreate feelings and sensations, hoping it would lead me to the right sound. I made recreation my number one priority and everything else sank.

I am lucky to return to the material that started it all— to the music that helped me discover my voice in the first place. Jason Robert Brown’s work has always inspired me; his music is exquisite, and his stories weave intricate personal lives into luscious melodies that engulf the body in a trance. Jason Robert Brown’s demeanor is also similar to mine. We both expect the best and give it because we can- a character trait, Jamie, the character I am playing, shares as well. I am excited for the opportunity to address such a powerful and dynamic story, this time with honesty and sincerity, better vocal technique, and a willingness to engage truthfully where and when I can.

In the world of musical theatre, there are musicals and there are pop operas, or sung through musicals. *The Last Five Years* is a pop opera or popera, if you will. Which means it is a musical in which the plot is solely derived from composition and lyrics— there is no “book.” However, the “book” usually serves as the plot. The story is moved by song and the lyrics are driven by narrative. Easier said than done, a pop opera is no easy feat, and is, in my view, one of the greatest challenges a performer can face. Pop Opera shows are relentless, exhausting, and

grueling not only to the voice but the entire body as well; think *Les Misérables*, a pop opera in which the show is centered around the building of a barricade (although they have a cast to support their production, while ours is just two of us). *The Last Five Years* is not only an emotional roller coaster but a vocal one as well. I am nervous to take on such a massive responsibility as a performer. When one thinks of Broadway, dazzling ensemble tap numbers, dance breaks, and an eleven o'clock power ballad all come mind. And yes, although these ideologies are captured in essence in *The Last Five Years*, it is not your typical Broadway musical. In a larger picture of things, I think this goes to show that quality of material outweighs anything, proving that any good show will always triumph.

In an acute observation I make when looking at titles of contemporary musicals (i.e. *Mean Girls*, *Escape to Margaritaville*, *King Kong*, *Frozen*, et.) Broadway tends to lead towards commercialism, which makes sense of course. But I have always wondered why some shows last longer than others. I think the answer is simple, ticket sales. Electricity costs aside, it's as if shows that arrive on Broadway have no hopes of recouping or returning their investment. In co-producing *The Last Five Years* I want to weigh the quality of material with the acclamation the show has received. This story is not your typical Broadway narrative and I wonder how that effects the way show must be done.

For as long as I can remember knew I wanted to study musical theatre. Since I was a child in elementary school—that's how long I have been doing theatre. When I was sixteen years old, after a rigorous audition process, I was invited to attend the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities (SCGSAH)- a public arts boarding school whose aim was developing the minds of young artists. When I got accepted, I had a big decision to make, go to the school whose curriculum was solely drama (acting), or stay where I was and continue to do

community and professional musicals. I ended up attending the SCGSAH and for two years we fine-tuned the craft of acting. The school shaped me into the individual I am today, but it never quenched my thirst for musical theatre. As a drama major at the school, I dedicated every second to work. Through voice and speech courses, over years of study, I not only learned how to speak with distinction and veracity, but how to command language; using words and sounds to evoke feelings in others. In acting class, I stepped into the shoes of others, and empathetically learned about the problems of people whose identities vastly differed from my own. During this period in my life, although I was exhausted night after night, I learned that loving what you do makes all the difference in the world.

During my senior year I took a different path than the members of my studio and decided to audition for musical theatre programs for college instead of acting programs. I went in practically blind, naive as hell, and headstrong as ever. I got into not a single musical theatre program but subsequently got into Point Park University's Theatre Arts program. I enrolled in the school with a longing for musical theatre—it was never met. I then transferred to Purchase, knowing how brilliant the music, dance, and acting program here are and was ecstatic to be able to create my own major and blend the offerings of all the Conservatories. I have always longed to truly be a musical theatre major- and I hope this show will give me the opportunity to show just that. I want the audience to come to the show and say 'Wow. That kid studied musical theatre. I did not know we had a musical theatre program at Purchase.' I've never felt like I belonged at any school I've attended, but I hope this show will help me find where I belong at Purchase and pave the pathway for other students as well.

In creating my own major through the BALA program at Purchase College, I was able to choose my own curriculum and decide what I deemed most necessary in my education studying

musical theatre. Yes, I took dance classes and theatre making classes, but perhaps the most prominent, consistent, and most enriching field of study in my curriculum is the voice.

For as long as I can remember I have always had a fascination with my instrument—the larynx. During my studies I have learned about the larynx and its anatomy, the proper way to breath (and all its variants), the international phonetic alphabet, everyday voice care, and a mountain more of vocal knowledge. My primary focus in my musical theatre education has been the voice and its capabilities. Ultimately, what I am looking forward to most in embarking on this journey that is *The Last Five Years*, is the opportunity to use all my training, to combine the philosophies I have learned in order to perform to my highest caliber. I hope to rely on breath support in order to sustain my voice throughout the production. I hope to make good sound, with overtones and undertones and lots of color. I hope to sing outside of my mouth with forward placement. I hope to blend my physicality into my voice and let my actions inform my sound.

If there is one thing I have learned from my B.A.L.A. in Music Theatre Studies it is that in order to sing one needs three things: a deep, low breath- a breath that comes from the pelvis, not the chest, lots of soft pallet space¹ in order to create the right shape for the sound to flow through easily, and forward placement that comes from above one's eye sockets. I like to pretend I am a unicorn when I sing, the placement of the horn is right where the placement of sound should be. All of this to say, these are the three things I will strive to have during my performance.

Looking forward to the show, I have some concerns- although concerns maybe the wrong word-I am really worried I am not going to be able to sustain this show vocally. After taking the

¹ Take your tongue and move it across the roof of your mouth, starting at the bumpy gum ridge. Slide your tongue back until the roof of your mouth gets softer and you cannot bring you tongue back any further. You have found your hard and soft pallets, respectively.

fall semester of 2020 off from school due to financial and Covid-19 related issues I realized I did not use my voice in the healthiest way. I spent most of my time not singing. I will say however, a lot of times a vocal break is more beneficial than harmful. It gives the chords time for rest and relaxation- every minute you don't spend singing is a minute the chords are resting. And although this much needed recovery time may be great, I am worried because I have taken so much time off, I won't be on it for the show. I am also worried the material of this show is going to be hard to tell truthfully. The first half of Jamie's story is upbeat and wild- his life during that period is similar to mine at the moment. However, Jamie and Cathy get married, and they experience relationship issues- I have no experience getting married or having a wife. I don't know what the expectations to get married are. I think the second half of the show will require me to dig very deep. I am excited to try some Michael Chekov technique in the second half of the show. At the SCGSAH we spent our time learning about Stanislavski and his methods of acting that focus on action, wants, and desire. Instead of focusing on actions that I may not be able to grapple with, seeing as that isn't my life experience, I hope to turn towards inner objects and atmospheres as defined by Michael Chekov. Chekov is a disciple of Stanislavski who went insane studying under Stanislavski, he in turn created his own acting technique that required less of the performer's heart and more of their imagination. Chekov's work hinges on pictures and outward expressions from the actor that inform intent and desire, but these outward expressions are put inside the character. I think the Chekov technique will be a key into Jamie's marital world, something I don't know much about. I want to explore the different methods of acting and use them to help further the story I get to create. I cannot say for certain where each ideology of acting will be placed, it is something I will have to explore as we rehearse.

Another aspect of this production I look forward to taking on is that of scenic designer. The two other seniors on the show and I decided to take on the role. I took this challenge on because of my building background. My father's favorite pastime is to buy, flip, and sell houses and the two of us have torn down and built at least five houses. I've learned all about wood and tools and wiring. Also, scenic design allows me to lend my natural keen eye for aesthetic and design.

I am collaborating with Juliana Giannessa and Westin Hicks on *The Last Five Years*. Juliana has the same major as me and we have had countless hours conversing about the curricular differences between our two paths. I am very excited to work with these two because I know they are passionate about theatre. Juliana is a brilliant singer and it inspires me every day to work harder to be a better singer myself. I am also excited to fall in love with Juliana's character, Cathy. I am gay, and acting straight is always a challenge for me. In choosing what musical to do for my senior project the other seniors and I held open auditions for students on campus to see prospective talent. But I'm glad we settled on a production with just the two of us. Never have I faced such a challenge, to sustain an entire storyline with one other person on stage.

I am very passionate about my B.A.L.A. curriculum and the possible opportunity for other students to be able to do what I do. Performance aside, I really want to leave my mark at Purchase, by creating a major that other people can also pursue. Initially, I didn't think I had to write a paper and my plan was to make a B.A.L.A. Music Theatre Studies guidebook- where I could explain, step by step, how I made my curriculum and what I think a well-rounded musical theatre curriculum should consist of. I dream of passing down the guidebook to other Purchase College students for years to come, all with the hopes that some other kid who wants to study Musical Theatre here could find a way to do it. Unfortunately, this is not something I have been

able to do because learning Jason Robert Browns music is incredibly tedious and I have pinned it as the most important thing to work on, which in turn has left the guidebook at the bottom of my thoughts. But I hope this show leaves a mark at Purchase. My education here has been a tumultuous, self-advocated journey and part of my Purchase Music Theatre studies education has been the re-chartering of the Purchase Musical Theatre Club. I have served as president for the past two years and was one of the people to get the long-lost club off the ground again. A lot of my musical theatre work has been seen in things I've done with PMTC because it's the only true outlet at Purchase College that will sponsor musical theatre whole heartedly. Ironic that the person giving space for the musical theatre outlet is me. Through the club I have made ample connections with other Purchase College students whose passion in musical theatre has been stifled since arriving on campus. I have been lucky enough to work with these students and explore their musical theatre muscle memory, while still preaching the philosophies I have been learning throughout my education. I hope my B.A.L.A. Music Theatre Studies journey is inspiring to other students and I hope someday other students will pursue this same type of cross-disciplinary major.

Lastly, I hope I get out of this performance a cathartic goodbye to theatre. My whole life has been dedicated to the theatre: countless hours spent rehearsing, thousands of hours of unpaid professional 'volunteer' work, and random texts memorized—I would not trade any of it. The lens that theatre has given me to view the world with is a tool I will cherish forever. The theatre has given me perspective, a way to view individual lives as whole, and it has given me hope. I have discovered a different path in my life, law, and I hope that this production of *The Last Five Years* will be a strong culmination of my theater education over the past twelve years. Just three

short months after graduation I will be attending law school! I know over the next three years I will be vigorously studying and there won't be time to make theatre.

In doing theatre for years, I've been able to start at the ground level, to make change through people. In practicing law, I will be able to work from the top down and hopefully make change on a more international level. However, the tools that studying theatre has given me: to communicate and collaborate with people, to speak well publicly, and to tell a powerful story, are all strong attributes in a good prosecutor. When I stand in front of a courtroom, a judge, a jury, a plaintiff, and a defense attorney, I will be thinking about theatre the whole time. It will influence me and the way I think and behave for the rest of my life and I am eternally grateful for everything I have learned through the theatre. The way I approach problems, see individuals, and relate to others is all from an actor's point of view. The first professional theatre piece I was ever in was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where I played Jem. Every night for an entire month I listened to Atticus implore us, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb in his skin and walk around in it," and it is this phrase that stuck with me the most. It paralleled the work of the actor— to become somebody else while still getting at the idea of truthfulness. It is the previous quote that fuels my compassion and consciousness, something great actors and lawyers have in common.

The Contemporary Musical Theatre Canon and the Voice

Since its innovation, Broadway has been hailed as the center of the theatre world for over a century. But where did the ‘Broadway’ in Manhattan, as we know and love it, come from? The first ‘Broadway’ Theatre in America was built in 1732. The Theatre on Nassau Street, as it was called, only produced plays and operas, primarily Shakespeare. During the middle of the Victorian era, roughly the mid nineteenth century, there was an economic boom, perhaps intrinsic of the industrial revolution, and for the first time ever, theatre became increasingly more accessible because the masses could afford it. It was this accessibility that in turn led to the development of the Broadway Musical as we know and love today. The first musical ever to premiere in the United States was *The Elves* in 1857. The music closely resembled that of ‘classical’ opera. The musicals that range from the late Victorian era (1850’s) to the early twentieth century are often categorized as ‘traditional’ and ‘golden age’ musical theatre. Important and common melodic motifs included operatic intonation, luscious and grandiose orchestration, and large ensemble casts. Compared to their contemporary musical theatre counterparts of today, Golden Age shows were limited by technology and access to global media—microphones, synthesizers, and LED screens had not yet been invented, nor had text messages, or television.

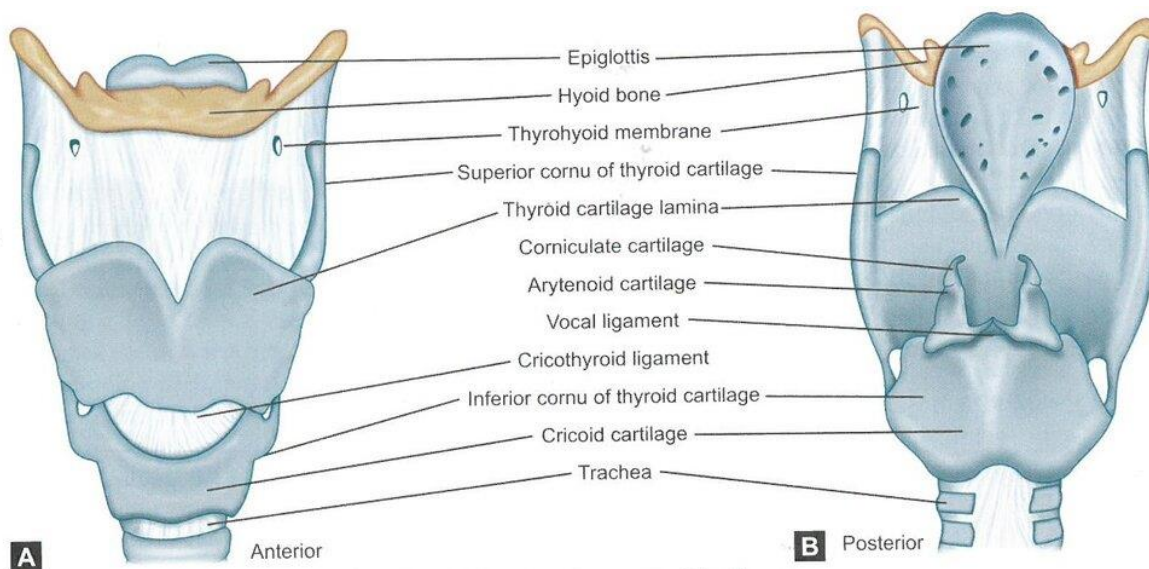
Since *The Elves* premiered, Broadway has become a more fickle industry. With over 80,000 people employed by the Great White Way, New York City’s biggest tourist attraction rings in upward of eleven billion dollars to the American economy each year. There is no doubt then that capitalism and money are primary motivators for Manhattan’s theatre district. With a massive conglomeration of technicians, musicians, performers, directors, and many others employed by the theatre, there is no lack of resources or replacements for cast and crew.

Producers and industry professionals have learned that risky business and commercialization is the key to their financial success. But at what cost?

Anytime a new show premieres with its sights set on Broadway, I like to sit down and listen to the any of the cast recordings I can get my hands on. Normally, after two months of a run, Broadway shows will release their Original Broadway Cast album, which I too get my hands on and listen to. While listening, more and more I notice songs that push the demands of performers to their vocal limit. With major commercialized contemporary musicals like *Mean Girls*, *Beetlejuice*, *Heathers*, *Carrie*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, etc., the discerning listener can hear, in all the female power ballads, high belting above an A4 (five steps above middle C) for an elongated period, as well as lyrics with oceans of words, one hundred of which must be sung in ten seconds (an exaggeration that feels like no exaggeration), not to mention a growing discomfort in the voices of constant bookers, or performers who get cast on Broadway regularly. In listening to these albums, sometimes the same actor from a previous recording appears again, in a new show. Each show however, requires different demands from the singer and their vocal health is yet again reevaluated by me.

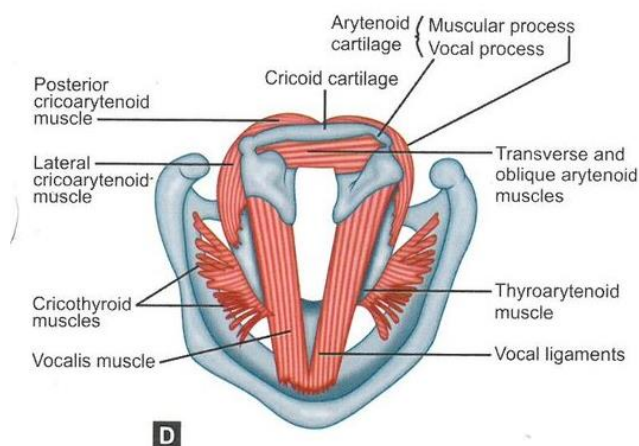
In this essay I plan to facilitate a contemporary argument that runs in circles of musical theatre performers in response to the contemporary musical theatre cannon's demands on the voice and the effects it yields. Musical theatre performers have been deemed 'athletes' for the amount of work, stress, and training required to become a well-rounded and seasoned performer. They depend on their vocal health and habits in hopes that their voice will treat them well in return. However, as the demands of Broadway continue to fluctuate so does the vocal health of performers.

For all intents and purposes, I will consider “contemporary musical theatre” as any show that was written after 1996, specifically after Johnathon Larson’s *Rent*. This essay will get abstract, for that is the nature of the voice and its teaching. I will define terms I use throughout the essay. However, I want to start this dialogue with a preface on the larynx, voice, and breath. Do keep in mind though, that science knows less about the voice than any other part of the human body. Only within the past fifty years have we been able to understand what is going on inside of our throats. As with any advancement in the scientific field, we have technology to thank. The knowledge we have about the larynx and the vocal folds it houses can be seen as half a century of mindful study, a decade of microscopic video laryngostroboscopy, and thousands of years of myth and trained human condition. All of this is to say, there is still much unknown about our voices. However, each voice is unique to the individual and although I will be generalizing vocal habits and traits, they may differ per person. With that in mind I will use ample references, ranging from industry professionals to ENT Doctors.



The larynx. From Sataloff, R.T., Chowdhury, F., Portnoy, J., Hawkshaw, M.J., Joglekar S. *Surgical Techniques in Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery: Laryngeal Surgery*. New Delhi, India: Jaypee Brothers Medical Publishers; 2013 without permission.

The above figure is of the larynx, or the voice box. This is where phonation, or sound, is made. The larynx sits at the top of the trachea, or the windpipe, and can be located individually by finding one's thyroid notch, or Adam's apple. Adam's apples are usually more prominent in cisgender men than in cisgender females but, none the less, if you locate it, you have found your larynx. Right behind the thyroid notch is where the vocal folds are located (in this essay I will use the words chords and folds interchangeably, particularly prioritizing folds, as that is their scientific name). The folds are basically a microscopic² rubber band in the shape of a "V"; the convergence of the "V" being the thyroid notch. The vocal folds are muscles and just like any other muscle, they too can be worked out, stretched, and even become tired. At rest, the folds should sit slightly ajar.



A zoomed in image of the vocal folds and its surrounding muscles and cartilages. From Sataloff, R.T., Chowdhury, F. Portnoy, J., Hawkshaw, M.J., Joglekar S. Surgical Techniques in Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery: Laryngeal Surgery. New Delhi, India: Jaypee Brothers Medical Publishers; 2013 without permission.

Now, the impulse to make sound occurs from the brain and triggers the breath. There is an inhale as the diaphragm lowers, and the lungs and ribs expand. Once the body is filled with breath phonation can occur. The breath comes up from the lungs and blows through the glottis (the open space between the chords), where the Bernoulli effect takes place. The Bernoulli effect, in turn abducts³ the folds anywhere from two hundred to five hundred times per second. It

² The typical size of a human vocal cord is roughly 12-24 millimeters in length and 3-5 millimeters in thickness.

³ Abduction refers to movement away from the midline of the body and in this case specifically refers to the way the vocal folds move together and apart at quick rates.

is important to note; however, one can make sound with vocal folds that are together, or closed; this is called a glottal onset, which serves purposes at times but ultimately, is not healthy for singers.

With some clarity about the instrument and how sound is made, we can take a closer look at what exactly is meant by “trends in the contemporary musical theatre cannon.” In an article published in *The Journal of Singing*, in March of 2015, entitled *Deciphering Vocal Demands for Today’s Broadway Leading Ladies*, the authors categorized the current musical theatre repertoire into four categories: legit/classical, contemporary, pop/rock, and traditional. The categories were adopted from job listings on popular audition notice websites. As part of their study, they found that “over 55% of all paying jobs in music theatre requested that the performer bring in a contemporary pop/rock song,” also noting that the highest paying jobs “requested far more pop/rock audition material than lower paying jobs” (Freeman, Green, Sargent 491). This is exactly the kind of trend in musical theatre right now that is plaguing performers vocal health. The pop/rock song serves as a test; casting directors are looking to see how high a performer can ‘belt their face off’.

In singing there is a concept called ‘registers’. The four registers include chest voice, mix (chest and head), head voice and falsetto, although depending on who you ask some may disagree. Classical opera singers believe in the traditional four register system, while some contemporary singers believe in three. Falsettos are exclusive to the male gender, while head voice is used to describe the female vocal tract. Each register serves a role in aiding a singer in singing all the notes in the song’s tessitura, or range.

Each register has their own range of notes in which parts of the voice reside. Around E4, there comes a break in the voice, called the *passaggio*. This is where singers have an option to

open or close the sound; open meaning from the chest, and closed meaning switching registers (from chest to mix, from mix to head). If one chooses the first option, to open, then they have entered ‘belting’ territory. Belting is a vocal technique that involves bringing one’s chest voice up past the passaggio (E4, F4, F#4, G4) into the realm of a mix. The most important thing to note is that the person is still in their chest voice. The history of belting stems from the American musical. Around 1920 singers began realizing the voice could extend beyond the passaggio. It’s hard to say exactly how much belting was used throughout the twentieth century but it is safe to say that there is a hell of a lot more of it in contemporary musical theatre than in the past. As noted by Neil Semer in article entitled *To Belt or Not Belt: Does Musical Theatre Damage Your Voice*, Semer argues that although there are many ways to navigate the development of a healthy belt, the popular contemporary training techniques, “create unnecessary throat tension, locked breathing, high larynx, and a tinny sound lacking amplitude, expressiveness, and warmth” (Semer). Semer’s comment directly contradicts the ideologies behind popular belt theory and practicum. There’s a very popular philosophy that belting involves engaging the muscles around the vocal folds in order to stretch them further apart. Furthermore, this popular ideology also suggests that minimal airflow is the key to a belt. This form of belting, which I like to call screlting (screaming + belting), holds its place in the world, as does any phonated sound, but doesn’t belong in a repeatably healthy vocal practice.

Now is when we come full circle. The contemporary musical theatre cannon is filled with high belting and screlting for the duration of the show. When that show is performed eight times a week by the same person, vocal damage may occur. Since Jonathon Larson’s *Rent*, a sung-through musical based on the opera *La Boheme*, belting has become more common place amongst almost all contemporary musical theatre compositions. A majority of the score for most

characters exists above the traditional passaggio (E4). *Rent* was the first musical to have characters voices exist beyond their passaggio for entire songs. Not to mention the score incorporates rock and popular composition, demanding a grittiness in the voice. Since *Rent's* conception, musical theatre scores began extending far beyond the passaggio for longer periods of time. There is an increasing demand for belting and with ample global talent searches, performers are quick to belt their faces off, no matter the vocal costs, in hopes of booking the job.

In 2014, the 'Journal of Singing' published an analysis on *Deciphering Vocal Demands for Today's Broadway Leading Ladies*, which undertook research to determine the demands on the voice in twenty-six- of the then- current musicals on Broadway. After looking at the tessitura of one song from each of the twenty-six shows a 'tessigraph'⁴ was made to show the exact duration a singer sings each note. What was discovered was that "less than half of the average audition time was spent in a low range, E4 and below. Over half of the total singing time is spent above E4 and 14% of that time is in what could be called 'high belt', C5 and above" (Freeman, Green, Sargent 493). Although singers have the option and tools to turn their chest voice into a mix or head voice, it's important to note that of the twenty-six audition notices, sixteen of them enforced the need to belt. This data lines up perfectly with what is heard in contemporary Broadway musicals.

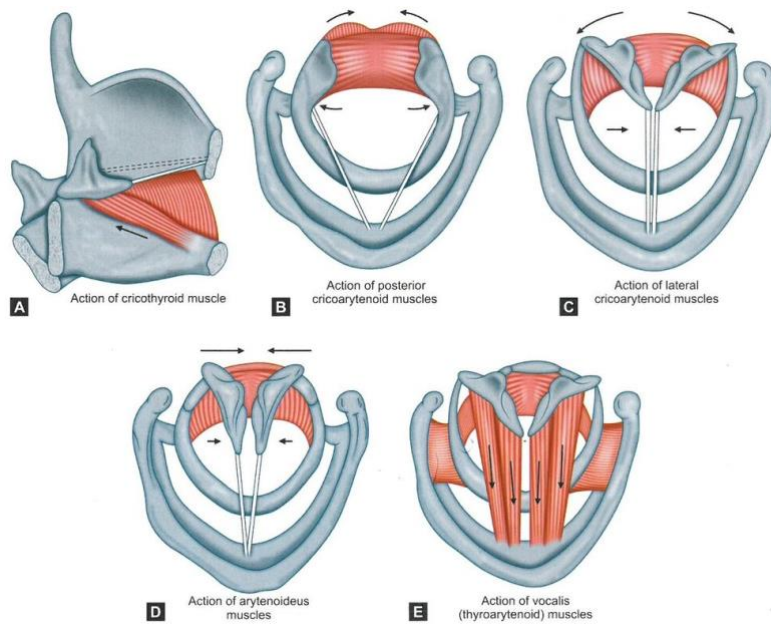
In an article published by Broadway News called *Speaking Out About Vocal Injuries on Broadway*, Caitlin Huston sat down with some of Broadway's most seasoned veterans, one of whom is Alex Brightman, and asked them to openly talk about their vocal injuries from the job. After nine months of shows for Andrew Lloyd Weber's "School of Rock", Brightman, who

⁴ A term created by Philip Sargent, an associate professor of music at Shenandoah University.

played Dewey, whose vocal demands were gritty and resemblant of Aerosmith (a prime example of screeching), one night had a vocal hemorrhage. Brightman with a strict vocal rest and vocal health regimen took a week off the show and returned. However, once he returned, he could only sustain five of the eight performances- his understudy would go for both matinees. Brightman later lamented, “I just didn’t realize the toll it was going to take.” Actors always have choices to make, but most importantly, the health of the actor’s voice is crucial. As actors, one’s instrument—their body and voice—are necessary for a career. As vocal degradation occurs, the longevity of one’s career does as well.

Brightman isn’t the only Broadway star to open up about vocal damage. George Salazar, during previews for Joe Iconis’s *Be More Chill*, suffered a vocal fold hemorrhage as well while singing the most popular and perhaps most iconic number of the show, “Michael In the Bathroom.” George recalled the fateful experience, “It was so painful to do the song. My voice was so thin,” and thin it was, for a vocal hemorrhage restricts the folds from vibrating and tilting⁵, and any singing after that point is going to inflict even more damage. Salazar had to go on strict vocal rest for a month, received surgery, and jumped back into the production days ahead of its official Broadway opening. Although most vocal injuries are dealt with in a timely manner, leaving one unresolved can cause even more vocal degradation.

⁵ Tilting refers to the movement of the cricothyroid or in some cases the thyroarytenoid muscle, that results in the increase of pitch (or highness of a note).



An example of the movements conducted by the cricoarytenoid and cricothyroid muscles. From Sataloff, R.T., Chowdhury, F., Portnoy, J., Hawkshaw, M.J., Joglekar S. *Surgical Techniques in Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery: Laryngeal Surgery*. New Delhi, India: Jaypee Brothers Medical Publishers; 2013 without permission.

Other accounts of Broadway professionals with vastly different experiences come from a blog called *Vocal Health on Broadway & Beyond: Singing Actors, Part 1*. Darius de Haas, when asked if he had ever been cast in something that was not vocally right for his voice and if so, what he did talked about his experience in *Rent* (of course its *Rent*) but ultimately contended that “I’ve worked with a voice teacher who is classically based, and it has really saved me. Even when I was singing things that got me off my axis, I had enough in my training with him to get me back on. I’ve never suffered major vocal stress or damage because I always knew where my good strong spot was.” This marks a critical awareness: how to manage the vocal demands for a particularly grueling role. Darius de Haas turns his answer to his classical training, whereas George Salazar didn’t start seeing a voice teacher until after his surgery.

What all these different testimonials reveal is the importance of a strong foundation in good vocal training- on average the lifespan of an opera career tends to be over sixty years, while the lifespan of a Broadway performer is usually less than thirty years- and that’s for the successful ones. I argue that this is due to all opera singers’ foundation, training that creates a

safe practice that is for more sustainable than the contemporary ‘belt’ training most musical theatre singers learn today.

In a study done in the ‘Journal of Voice’ in 2017, entitled *Vocal Characteristics and Laryngoscopic Findings in Future Musical Theatre Performers*, a group of thirty-one first year musical theatre students were invited to take part in a study that would determine their vocal quality- both objectively and subjectively through acoustic analysis, dysphonia severity index, video laryngostroboscopy, voice handicap indexes, questionnaires, and more methods. The study concluded that even though there was an overall good vocal quality in most of the students, almost half had some type of lesion; three students had nodules⁶, eight had erythema⁷, two had edema⁸, and one had a vocal polyp⁹. The study highlighted the alarming observation, “in 45% of the students, video laryngostroboscopy evaluation of the vocal folds showed an organic lesion. More male than female students showed an organic lesion (86% versus 33%). The majority of these lesions are inflammatory (26%)” (D’haesleer, Claeys, Meerschman, Bettens, Degeest, Dijckmans, Smet, Luyten, and Lierde). Clearly, vocal capacities were not optimal, seeing as almost half the students had some sort of organic lesion on their vocal folds- which not only impedes phonation, but impedes the longevity of a career on the stage. The questionnaires filled out by students about their vocal symptoms found the most frequent were fatigue- at 80% of all students, dryness of the throat- at 80%, and lastly, vocal tract discomfort- at 73.3%. Here we have an in-depth and in-the-throat look at students training to enter the professional industry, students who also were born into the contemporary musical theatre canon. Their education is informed by the repertoire of “now”. Most musical theatre training programs have added

⁶ A growth of an abnormal tissue on the vocal folds.

⁷ A reddening of the vocal folds caused by a dilation of blood capillaries.

⁸ Excess fluid in the vocal folds.

⁹ A growth that protrudes from a mucus membrane around the vocal folds.

pop/rock vocal classes, a prime example of how much contemporary musical theatre is expecting of performers. For instance, Elon University- ranked one of the top ten Musical Theatre B.F.A. education programs in the country, added a pop/rock vocal class after their alumni, Barret Wilbur Weed (a prime example of contemporary musical theatre cannon vocal damage) was cast in *Heathers: The Musical*, where she played Veronica. The study suggests that the discrepancies between overall good vocal health and inflammatory lesions does not add up. How can a group of individuals with overall good vocal health have so many problems with their vocal folds? I argue the missing link in this data is the contemporary musical theatre cannon. The contemporary musical theatre cannon is written to aggressively challenge vocal ranges and sometimes no matter how good the training, singers are asked to stretch their limits far beyond their natural capacities. This demand in turn deteriorates the very instruments it relies on, leaving us with a baffling paradox of vocal demand versus vocal health.

Now that we have taken a microscopic look at the instrument, a broad look at careers on Broadway as well as testimonials, it's time to look at some popular examples of the contemporary musical theatre cannon and its effects on the voice. The most notable and perhaps most joked about example is Idina Menzel, a widely popular Broadway veteran whose work has spanned stage and screen, for over three decades. She was heard most recently in Disney's Frozen franchise as Queen Elsa. Idina's first show was Jonathon Larson's *Rent*. Her voice at the time had a much smoother and softer quality than the tonal quality we associate her with now. Idina maintains brightness¹⁰ but offers poor tone and suffers from a rising larynx- an after effect of pushing,¹¹ that can be heard not only in the voice but seen in the neck as well. Although

¹⁰ a quality of sound that can be compared to forwardness- meaning the primary resonating cavity would be the frontal sinus, or above the eyebrows.

¹¹ Pushing: a strain in the vocal folds.

Menzel doesn't push all the time, she pushes at the top of her range in hopes of singing high, vocally demanding notes. Instead of raising her soft palate, something Menzel should be doing, she makes up for the lack of space by pushing more sound through her vocal cords to try and raise the pitch. Although this method works to create sound on pitch, the cost of this risk outweighs the performance it yields. Menzel's next notable role was in 2003, when she played Elphaba, the wicked witch of the west in Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked*, for which she won a Tony. In this show Elphaba sings up to an F5. Idina Menzel successfully sustained the note for almost all of her performances during her run as Elphaba in *Wicked*. In the Original Broadway Cast Recording featuring Idina Menzel, in the song *Defying Gravity*, Menzel does a great job breathing (which is harder than it sounds) but most of her notes are almost thrown out of her mouth. Instead of opening her soft pallet to create more space she continues to push the sound out and forward, like her vocal habits in *Rent*. During the last sixteen bars of the song, where she sings 'bring me down', Idina is very tight, her larynx sounds high, her glottal attacks are prominent and between the second to last word and last word of the song she does not breathe- a technique of contemporary belt training. Menzel then played Elsa in *Frozen*, where her voice continued to push through notes she could not otherwise sustain. The next notable role Menzel performed was Elizabeth in Tom Kitt's *If/Then*, a show written specifically for Idina. The role written is far less high than her previous roles, with Menzel's tessitura sitting below her passaggio for at least half of the show- a smart move on the part of Tom Kitt. With music that sits so low in Menzel's range one can clearly hear the fatigue, damage, and shredding of her vocal folds in a voice that is more natural to her speaking voice. Her folds no longer sound like they are oscillating comfortably but rather it sounds like there is some sort of contusion interrupting pure sound. Although Idina Menzel may never lose her fame, one could argue that

with the evidence presented, she *is* losing her voice, and after ten more years of theatre and continued vocal habits, she will likely have nothing left.

Another example of the effects of the contemporary musical theatre cannon on the voice comes in the form of a show, *Dear Evan Hansen*. With eight shows a week most Evan Hansens miss one to two performances. The role is incredibly vocally demanding because Evan is a seventeen-year-old- boy. Which means, to the producers at least, that none of the music Evan sings can be turned or put into another register. Evan also sings multiple B4's a night and even if one of the B4's is a miss that infliction of pain/damage/or soreness on the voice can take away up to if not more than the top ten percent of one's range. With the top of one's range gone, it begs the question whether to push through a show or have an understudy or standby replace the performer.

Vocal damage is much more common than we think. Even contemporary popular artists have had their fair share of vocal troubles: Adele, Sam Smith, Julie Andrews, and so many more. Although vocal damage can be remedied by vocal rest, care, and if needed, surgery, it alters the state of the voice. Singing should never hurt, in fact, when optimal sound is created the sound should be so forward and have so much space it basically exists beyond the mouth and it should not be felt at all. Contemporary musical theatre has a lot of singers in their throat, which leads to a high laryngeal position and constricted muscles in the throat.

In conclusion, since the conception of Jonathon Larson's *Rent* in 1996, musical theatre has not been the same. Tessituras exist beyond the passaggios and the performers are expected to leave the note open and belt their faces off. Although a strong foundation in good vocal technique has helped many singers maintain a healthy and long career, the demands of contemporary musical theatre ultimately cause more harm than good. In a profession where

performers are used as pawns for money, everyone is replaceable, especially when a voice goes out.

Annotated Bibliography

-, Caitlin Huston, et al. "Speaking out about Vocal Injuries on Broadway." *Broadway News*, Broadway News, 19 Sept. 2019, broadwaynews.com/2019/09/19/speaking-out-about-vocal-injuries-on-broadway/. In this article published by Broadway News, by Caitlin Huston, Caitlin argues that vocal injuries on Broadway are much more common than normally spoken of. She does so by sitting down with Broadway professionals and asking them about their vocal injuries they suffered during shows by breaking down the stigma behind vocal injuries; lastly, by meeting with Dr. Paul Kwak, a laryngologist who sees Broadway performers on the regular. Huston's purpose is to break the stigma behind vocal injuries on Broadway, because many performers have had to have vocal surgery. Huston criticizes the industry for being so cruel to performers whose voices have been damaged while working on shows. This work is significant because it holds the industry accountable and opens up a conversation about vocal health and damage, something most performers try to keep secret, so they can continue to book professional gigs.

D'haeseleer, Evelien, et al. "Vocal Characteristics and Laryngoscopic Findings in Future Musical Theater Performers." *Journal of Voice*, vol. 31, no. 4, July 2017, pp. 462–469., doi:<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0892199716304167?via%3Dihub>. In this scholarly article published in the *Journal of Voice*, a group of vocal experts completed an observational study on thirty-one first-year musical theatre students to determine the quality of their voices. They did this study by first taking an objective approach with acoustic analysis, aerodynamic measurements, and Dysphoria Severity index. Then by taking a subjective approach with video laryngostroboscopy and questionnaires. The purpose of this observational study was look at specific voice

qualities in musical theatre students. What resulted was despite good overarching vocal habits, there was a large presence of lesions and subglotal tension.

Freeman, Warren, et al. "Deciphering Vocal Demands for Today's Broadway Leading Ladies."

Journal of Singing, vol. 71, no. 4, Mar. 2015. *Gale Academic OneFile*,

doi:[https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=purchase&id=GALE%7CA405989977&v=](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=purchase&id=GALE%7CA405989977&v=2.1&it=r)

2.1&it=r. In this scholarly article published in the *Journal of Singing*, an in depth look at

vocal demands for today's Broadway leading ladies found that belting has become the

preferred audition requirement for most casting calls. The article provides evidence by

taking an in depth look at contemporary audition calls and their accompanying audition

slides. Then by breaking down the tessitura of the song and determining how long the

singer spends on each note. The articles purpose is to determine how long singers have to

sing outside of the traditionally defined passaggio. This article is important because of the

clear 'tessigraphs' created.

Semer, Neil, et al. "To Belt or Not to Belt: Does Musical Theatre Damage Your Voice?" *CS*

Music, 1 May 2019, [www.csmusic.net/content/articles/to-belt-or-not-to-belt-does-](http://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/to-belt-or-not-to-belt-does-musical-theatre-damage-your-voice/)

[musical-theatre-damage-your-voice/](http://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/to-belt-or-not-to-belt-does-musical-theatre-damage-your-voice/). In this article by Neil Semer, published in *CS*

Music, Neil asks the question of belting or not? And whether it really does damage the

vocal folds. He does so by looking at contrasting schools of thought in vocal technique

training and compares the contemporary belting technique to classical technique. Semer's

purpose is cautioning opera singers of belting and/or auditioning for roles in Musical

Theatre that will cause harm to the vocal folds. Semer criticizes contemporary belt

training, suggesting that all it leads to is unnecessary tension and an obstacle for true

sound. This work is significant because it calls into question the validity of what most musical theatre performers have learned regarding making sound for Broadway.

Sisco, David. "Vocal Health on Broadway & Beyond: Singing Actors, Part I." *Blog*, 16 Oct. 2017, contemporarymusicaltheatre.wordpress.com/2015/01/23/vocal-health-on-broadway-beyond-singing-actors-part-i/. In this article by David Sisco posted on Contemporary Musical Theatre.com, David has an honest conversation with Broadway industry professionals to engage in problem solving possibilities to aid in the vocal pandemic of vocal damage sweeping contemporary Broadway. He does this by questioning Broadway veterans about their voices and their vocal habits. Sisco's purpose is to facilitate this dialogue in hopes of sharing knowledge to further the care of voices on stage. This work is significant because it encompasses such a wide array of stage performers with very different backgrounds.

The Last Fifty Rehearsals

I can safely say that after almost an entire year of tirelessly working on a musical, I am still not sick of Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years*— a testament to how brilliant the music is and how rich the characters' lives truly are. The experience of putting up *The Last Five Years* is one I will never forget. Every day I was able to explore new actions and relationships and I watched and listened as these new actions informed my voice. In the end I was able to become Jamie Wellerstein and give myself over to the narrative I wanted so badly to tell. I am so proud of the work I have done, the work my fellow cast member did, and I am ecstatic we were able to put on a musical at Purchase College.

Exactly one year ago to the day I'm writing this paper, Westin, the director, Juliana, my co-star, Paola the stage manager, Matt, our pianist at the time, and I, all logged onto zoom and sung through the show. At the time the stakes were different; we were a year away from putting up the musical and we had been in lockdown for about three months at that point, so the choices we made were not clear, nor were they thought through. However, I am happy to say the first sing through was nothing like the show we put up. When I put down the material after the zoom call, I did not pick it back up until I stepped foot on campus on January 30th, 2021.

I had just taken the entire semester off from school for financial reasons and once I realized I only need a few more credits to graduate, I jumped at the opportunity to take a leave of absence. During that time, I did nothing with my voice whatsoever. In fact, the only time I thought about the show was when I received a phone call from our director, Westin, one December morning; he was freaking out because our pianist at the time had just quit. Since I had been working so closely with Purchase Musical Theatre Club, I was not worried because I knew so many other collaborative pianists. Ironically, the person I immediately thought to replace our

previous pianist was recommended by the old pianist and I assured Westin that we would be just fine with this new pianist. With our first major distress resolved, I stopped thinking about the show for another month while I studied for my law school admissions test.

When the time to finally start school came in January, I moved back on to campus and hit the ground running. I immediately met with my beloved vocal coach, Jacob Rivera, a trained opera singer and Purchase College alumni who has helped my voice achieve new heights throughout my education at Purchase. We began working through the show quite vigorously, starting with each number in order. From the get-go I was worried my voice would not be able to sustain the entirety of the show and to combat that I made my vocal rehabilitation my number one priority. I drank so much tea.

I am an out of state student, a way out of state student, from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, to be exact. When I came to school in January, I was leaving seventy-degree humidity for the bitter cold tens and twenties of New York. It was terrible. The weather seriously took its toll on my voice. My nose and vocal folds were incredibly dry, and I was so congested some days it was hard to breath. I had to steam three times a day for an entire month just to get enough moisture in my throat and vocal folds to ease some of the discomfort caused by the dryness.

After two weeks of quarantining (thank you out of state) we began the in-person rehearsal process. I remember our first rehearsal like it was yesterday. We all came into the rehearsal space excited and humbled to begin working on this new piece, a musical, at Purchase College. We jumped right into the work without any preface or speech from our director. In hindsight I should have seen this as a clue, from the very first day there was a major lack of communication. I asked our director three times the week before if we were going to sing through the show or read through the show on our first rehearsal. I argued that we needed to do some table work first and

my voice was still not in peak condition and I was worried about the repercussions of singing when I was not ready. Our director said we wouldn't sing through the show. However, he had a very different expectation on the first rehearsal and demanded we sing. I sang through the show, not incredibly warm, but made it through, nonetheless.

I learned a lot in that first rehearsal; how fun this show would be for example, or how challenging the vocal demands would be, and most importantly how different Jamie's life is from my own. After the first rehearsal ended, I knew where I stood with the material and how much more work needed to be done. Throughout this entire process I found 'checking in' to be the most rewarding and enriching experience I discovered. I would 'check in' every now and then by recording my songs- whether on video or voice memo-and go home and listen back to the track I had just recorded. I would sit with my sheet music and follow along as I compared what I did to what was written. I would go through the music and mark where things were wrong with tempo, in the melody, or in my voice. If you had asked me five years ago to record myself singing and listen to it, I would have thrown such an outlandish tantrum you would have forgotten what you wanted me to do. Even two months ago, I would have met this task with disdain. These days however, I would gladly jump at the chance to sing a song, record it, and listen back to it. And that is exactly what I did for three months.

While learning to sing, one of the foundational points made is to never listen to yourself. By that I mean, don't sing and actively listen to yourself—we do not hear ourselves the same as others hear us. The audience hears our sound out of our bodies while we, the singer or performer, hears the sound through their bodies, through bones, through cavities, through fat, etc. Listening to myself was a habit I have had to overcome during this production. All of this to say, vocally, I

have improved tenfold. I am singing things I never could have imagined all because of the work I put into this show.

We trekked forward with our first rehearsal under our belts and an expectation to really make this show soar, to prove that we can do anything. Throughout the rehearsal process we dedicated specific days to me, specific days to Juliana (who played my characters wife, Cathy), and specific days to work on duets together. We were also lucky enough to have some one-on-one time with Harry, our pianist.

From the very beginning of the process, I had trouble with our director, as did every other member on our team. I would argue it was the biggest challenge of the production, to work with a director who doesn't know how to direct. Throughout the entire rehearsal process, I was told to act on emotions, my notes were, "be angry," or "you should be sad here." As an actor that's not helpful information. One does not act on emotion, for generality is the enemy of art. Not only did I feel misguided and poorly directed but, I felt like my director did not care about me or the show. There was not a single rehearsal where he was not on his phone for at least half of the time. Some days I would receive notes, as text messages, in the middle of a run. Not to mention some days in rehearsals the director and stage manager would get into fights that stopped the entire rehearsal for ten minutes at a time.

Once I realized I was going to do my own thing the entire show and not rely on a director to pretend to tell me what to do, I steadfastly got to work. I brought my vocal care back to my number one priority- sometimes choosing not to speak in my other classes. I found solace in vocal rest. By vocal rest I mean full silence, no talking. I think I was on vocal rest for a combined twenty days or so. In my silent moments I discovered a lot about my character, my voice, and the desire/impulse to speak. The vocal rest was intended to help my vocal folds

recover after the tedious work I would put them through during rehearsals, and it worked, well. Come March, my voicer felt great, there was no dryness or hoarseness.

Moving into the next few weeks of rehearsal we started Jamie's 'blocking' (I use this term loosely because the direction was subpar) at the beginning of his timeline, with 'Shiksa Goddess'. The song immediately presented issues I would need to overcome vocally in order to have a successful show. Jamie's first sixteen bars sit low in my voice and I had to find a way to sustain low pitches without giving in to my habitual back of throat singing. In fact, I discovered I had to do the exact opposite- the lower the note, the brighter and more forward it must be. As a singer my habits are, well, my habits, and one of them is titling my sound to the back of my throat. Now keep in mind one needs forward placement in all singing. Sure, some people may be able to get away with keeping their sound in their throat and still sound good, but I cannot. I have worked tirelessly trying to find good forward placement. There even came a point where I pretended to be a unicorn for a week or so, because the placement of a unicorn's horn is right where my vocal placement should be—above the eyebrows. What I found with my forward placement is that I had to consciously monitor it. My unicorn placement discovery had to be thought about every day, every rehearsal, I would argue even more than any other tool I discovered whilst rehearsing the show.

Learning the vocal track of Jamie was the most rewarding part of this production. I thought it would be the most challenging, but it surprisingly wasn't. The biggest challenge I faced on this show was Jamie's acting track. Jamie's track towards the first half of the show is upbeat, fast paced, and exhilarating, which is very similar to my own life now. Young Jamie and I share a lot in common, the world is our oyster, and our lives are progressing rapidly. However, it was these adjectives (upbeat, fast paced) that I had to use, explore, and endow my space with,

while subsequently removing any trace of them from my voice. My body had to read something completely different than what my voice was presenting, to maintain good vocal health and to sustain the show for an entire run.

I discovered an amazing vocal philosophy from Jacob Rivera that changed my life and the way I approached this show. It's this idea of putting things on a scale of one to ten, ten being screaming, one being a whisper. This realization came during one of my lessons when Jacob warned me that if I kept singing at the level I was currently singing at (a six) I would not make it through the show because my voice would be too exhausted to continue. It was not until I found myself at a two point five that I discovered a sustainable sound. I learned that any singer should be able to sing any single note either as loud or as quiet as possible. My whole life I have been a pusher, a nasty habit I no longer claim. Throughout this process I learned the difference between pushing my sound out of my throat versus letting my sound ride on my stream of breath. With this new philosophy in tow, my relationship to the show changed yet again. I did not have to do as much work as I thought I needed to do to sound good and that, in turn, left me with more space to explore physically and mentally.

The second half of the show came to me much later in the rehearsal process. The two final songs Jamie sings towards the end of his relationship with Cathy, "Nobody Needs to Know" and "If I Didn't Believe in you" were not even touched until March of the rehearsal process. I knew the songs the least and I knew even less about how Jamie was feeling. I knew this would be the case going into rehearsals, and I spent some silent days contemplating how I would be tackling the juicy material.

The journey to get "If I Didn't Believe in You" on its feet was a very mental one. I spent a lot of time looking at the words for what they were, keeping them at face value, hoping I would

understand what exactly was going through Jamie's head during his heated relationship struggle with Cathy. Ultimately, this is where the problems resided. The connection from one thought to another seemed intentionless to me and I blamed Jason Robert Brown for bad writing. Jamie has a complete one eighty moment towards the end of the song when he goes off, "No one can give you courage, no one can thicken your skin. I will not fail so you can be comfortable, Cathy. I will not lose because you can't win." After practically begging on his knees in desperation for Cathy to talk to him and express her feelings Jamie's demeanor quickly shifts and he stabs Cathy with metaphorically sharp words. It was this moment- this one eighty- I struggled to satisfy.

Throughout our show Juliana, Westin, and I had conversations about what part of the story we found the most resonant or powerful. The question I kept asking was at what point in a relationship do the things one says end the relationship? Or in other words, what happens when you cross the line? What comments are marriage ending? I think I found this question early on because of that switch in "If I Didn't Believe In You," I mentioned previously. I would argue this was why I had a hard time justifying my actions. I didn't understand the one eighty. However, within the one eighty was the crossing of the marriage ending line and the gravitas of it needed to be played. It was not until I discovered the gravitas of situation, that I was able to explore the one eighty more.

"Nobody Needs to Know" was another song that I was trepidatious to explore. Sure, I have cheated on many people, but at that point it was so long ago, and after spending a year in quarantine with about zero human connections, I did not know the first place to start in Jamie's cheating lament. I settled on trying the Chekov technique, an acting technique based on inner images and gestures, in hopes that the atmosphere I would create would give me a foundational step into further understanding the song. I was right. I endowed the atmosphere with a hot, wet,

and dense fog. And I began to move through it while singing. The first experience with it really grounded me, there was this desire to get out of the fog, but I was too deep in it to get out, I had to cope with being stuck in the thick of it. This, in turn, informed Jamie's desire to remove himself from the situation he had just put himself in, but nonetheless was stuck in. We both wanted to get out, but realized the answer was to relax, and think it through. Once I realized "Nobody Needs to Know" was nothing but realizations, I had a much more palatable time digesting the text and informing my actions.

As we moved forward in the rehearsal process more issues arose within our production team. Our director did not create a happy, conducive rehearsal space and did not have a direction for the show. He refused to separate his work and personal relationships and it was unprofessional and extremely disheartening because the atmosphere that was yielded from his directionless tantrums made every team member dislike him. As one of the seniors on the project I felt like the nasty atmosphere created was my fault because this was my show. Ultimately, there came a point where I refused to let my director ruin all the work we had created, and I called everyone into a team meeting for an open dialogue.

This meeting came at the end of March, two months into the process and one month out from the show. The entire company sat in a circle and we all aired our grievances. A lot of the tension arose from the relationship between the Stage Manager and Director due to a discrepancy in how we wanted to run the show. Seeing as our project was helmed by two B.A.L.A. Music Theatre Studies Majors, Juliana and I, we wanted to run our show as professionally as we could. Our experiences in equity houses taught us all that we needed to know, and we wanted our production to run the way we were accustomed to in the industry. There was also an ongoing disdain towards our project from most of the Purchase Theatre Conservatory faculty. With all

that said, we did not want to run our show like Theatre and Performance majors. We wanted Broadway.

We also received major setbacks from the school and faculty members. We fought tooth and nail to even get a spot in a theatre and the spot we received was days before finals. Our project was deemed not as important as the Theatre and Performance majors, as they had priority. However, it was the tenacity of myself, Juliana, and Westin that really shined. I had learned previously that if you want to do something at Purchase, you just have to do it and advocate for yourself. And that's what we did. I am happy to say we received no handouts, or even any help whatsoever, except from Peter Sprague.

Acting and singing aside, the three seniors on the project, Juliana, Westin, and myself, all took on the role of scenic designer. However, that ultimately ended up being helmed by just me and they sat on the sidelines and watched. We had at least six design meetings and the whole time it was just one big argument over what everyone wanted and what the director did not comprehend. The only thing we could ever settle on was that we needed to build an apartment, meaning we needed a couch, a coffee table, a bed, and a desk. Our original design concept included a brick wall with cracks, hinting at a reoccurring motif heard throughout the show in Jamie's line, "you never saw how far the crack had opened," but we took another route when we entered the theatre and were met with the constraints of Humanities' theatre.

Something I have learned and will take with me wherever I go is that the next idea is more than always the better idea. My ideas have been rejected and although it hurts at first, once I reevaluate and rethink the situation the next option, design, or choice, I come up with is always better.

When tech week finally rolled around, I felt like I had done my work. The music was sitting beautifully in my voice and my intentions and actions seemed clear to me. I was able to dedicate my time to my second job, scenic designer. We put up curtains and framed Humanities theatre like a real theatre, with wings, a runner, and a boarder. Ultimately, what ended up happening was the bare minimum, at this point our director had given up, telling me multiple times “I’m so done with this show. I hate it.” Once we began working with lights, I had to be onstage for the duration of rehearsal and the lighting choices were solely up to our lighting designer and Westin. Westin did not like anything our lighting designer offered, and we settled yet again with the bare minimum.

I gained a respect for the technical aspect of the theatre I had not had before. I helped our lighting designer hang and program the lights as well as record cues for the show. I lived with our sound technician and she and I talked about the sound system in Humanities for a solid week. I also grew even closer with the stage management team. And although tech week was hellish, the knowledge I gained was priceless.

Fifty rehearsals later, we made it to opening night after having Wednesday dark. Opening night was magical. The opportunity to be on stage again was enriching. During opening night however, I was in my head the entire show, trying to make sure not only my sound was on it, but that my actions were clear. I would say I developed a quadruple consciousness and with such an obtuse awareness I had a hard time believing in Jamie and his story. I made it my goal to perform just as Jamie on Friday night’s show—I promised myself to work outside of my head and to stop focusing on sounding perfect or looking good. I had already done the work and now it was time to play, time to forget all the work I had done and just exist as Jamie. I am happy to say on

Friday I became Jamie Wellerstein. I stopped thinking about anything else other than what I was saying. I stayed present and had the time of my life on that stage.

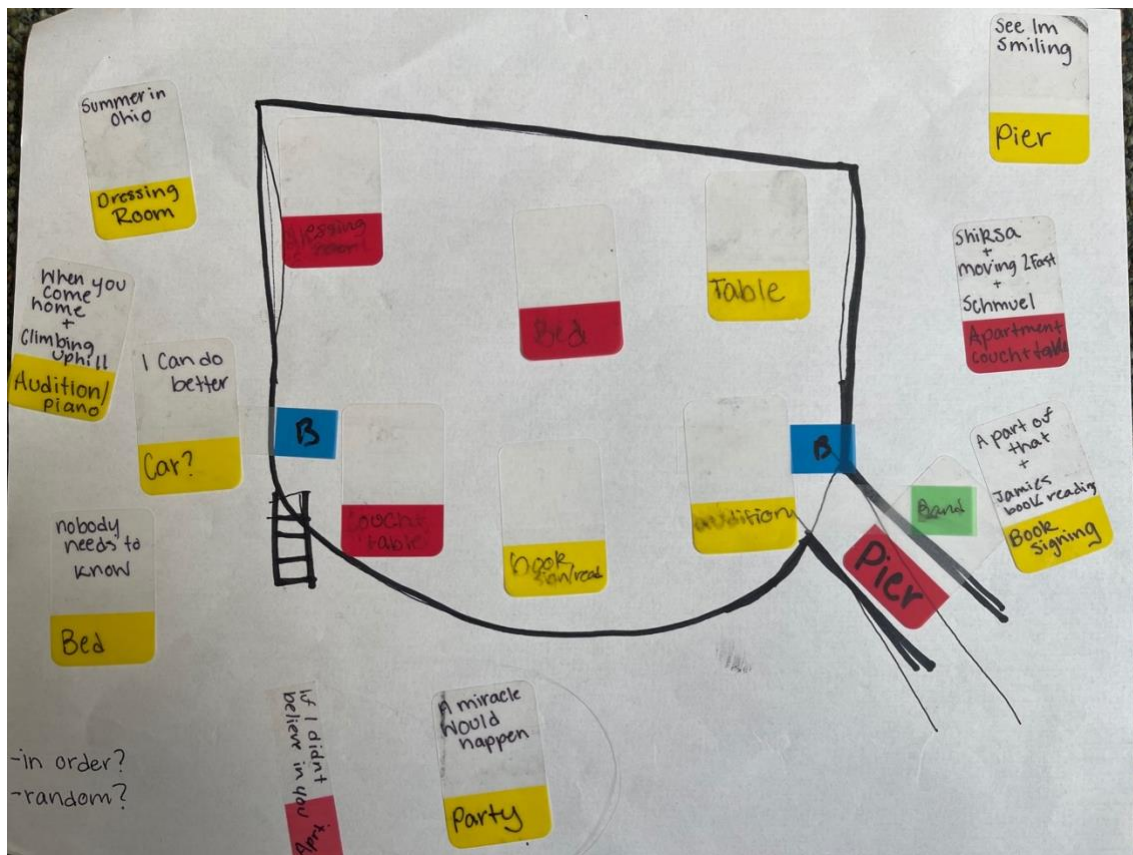
An obstacle I faced multiple times throughout this production was masks. We ordered a special kind of mask for the show, a singer's mask, that protruded about five inches from our mouths, and they served us great. The problem I ran into was with my diction. Some may say I have a natural inclination to spit while I speak, and I couldn't agree more. As I noted previously, the first half of Jamie's track is very fast paced, and that meant a lot of words. After each number I had to replace my mask because I had made the inside so wet it would stick to my entire face. There was one number, "The Schmuell Song" that honestly terrified me every time I did it. The song is about nine minutes long and for all nine minutes its Jamie (me) singing. The inside of my mask would be soaked. Towards the end of the song, when I ran out of breath and was in serious need of air and every time I would inhale the mask would enter my mouth and stick to my tongue or teeth. This was a major obstacle I had to overcome; how to breath when you cannot get any breath. There were some days I thought I was going to pass out on stage because I could not get enough breath from inside the mask.

All in all, mounting *The last Five Years* was a tumultuous journey that changed my life. Although there was trouble in paradise, I am ecstatic about my performance and the growth I have achieved. I wanted people to think of me as a musical theatre major, and since opening night, friends, and other members of the Purchase community deemed me just that. I had my cathartic goodbye for now to theatre and even found myself in tears after closing night.

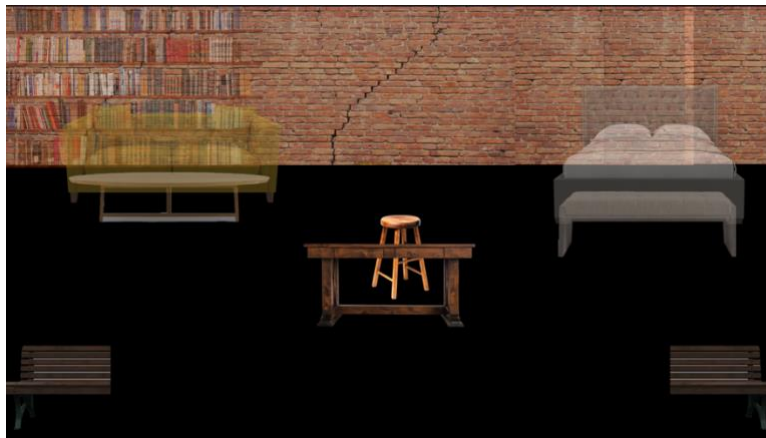
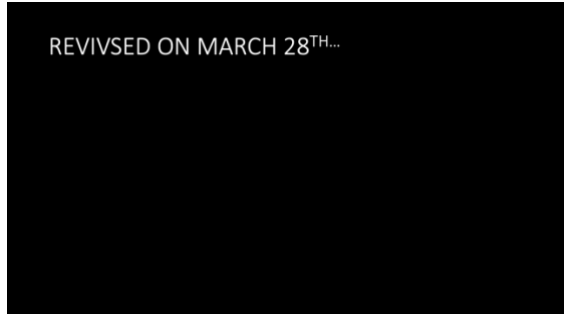
Designer's Portfolio

Set Rendering:

Our set began with a relative idea of what was required to further the story. That included a couch, a coffee table, a bookshelf, a writer's desk, a bed, a trunk, a dressing room mirror, and a lot of set dressing. When we first looked at it on paper, we used place holders to account for where set pieces would be located on stage. The idea was to build a series of living images or tableaux, that could grow throughout the show, with Cathy and Jamie's relationship. The two stories meet in the middle during "The Next Ten Minutes", and we wanted to see all the worlds they had created together during the song, to help further the idea of living images/memories.



After our first production meeting I began to render the set digitally in hopes of getting a better perspective on the narrative we were telling with our design.



Scene 1: Still Hurting

Lights up on Cathy at the table discovering the letter? Lights up on table, Cathy enters light w/ letter? Maybe there's a line that hits too hard? I hear the iconic JRB waltz in this song- so I wonder how we can play with that, whether in lights or? Ride the sun away... maybe there's a burst from bright light to warm light? How does Cathy feel? It should feel like Cathy sinks into something new? Speed the time? Foundations cracked? Maybe the crack should be lit at the

beginning of the show? And then fade for Shiksa comes.



Scene 2: Shiksa Goddess

Lights up on Jamie entering his apartment after his and Cathy's first date.

This apartment needs to look different than their shared apartment. Maybe he packs things off stage?



Scene 3: See I'm Smiling

Lights up on Cathy at the end of a pier by a river in Ohio. Maybe the audience is in light blue because their the river?

Is there a sky behind her?
How can we isolate her?



Scene 4: Moving Too Fast

Lights up on Jamie sitting on couch.

During the song Jamie moves the couch? Packs up his belongings? When Jamie enters and reenters, he brings the rug with him?



Scene 5: A Part of That

Lights up on Cathy at Jamie's book signing party. A table can come out of the wings? Only half out? The party is happening off stage left but we only see her. She's a part of that? or not? She's isolated from it? Clearly if she has an awareness of being apart of that "arnt I?" She's outside of it looking in. isolation.



Scene 6: The Schmuel Song

Lights up on Jamie.
He plugs in the Christmas Tree.
Maybe w/ an extension cord?



Scene 7: A Summer in Ohio

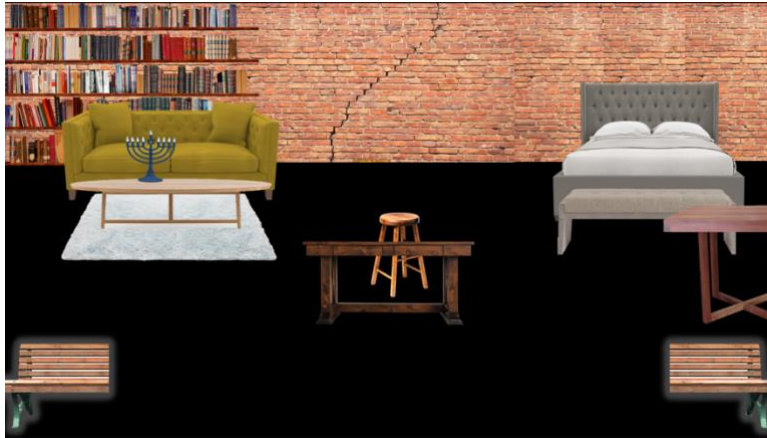
Lights up on Kathy in her dressing room. It's the same table but with a rectangular piece now attached?

This is an iconic BROADWAY number. This is the musical theatre moment we all dreamed of when we decided to do a musical.



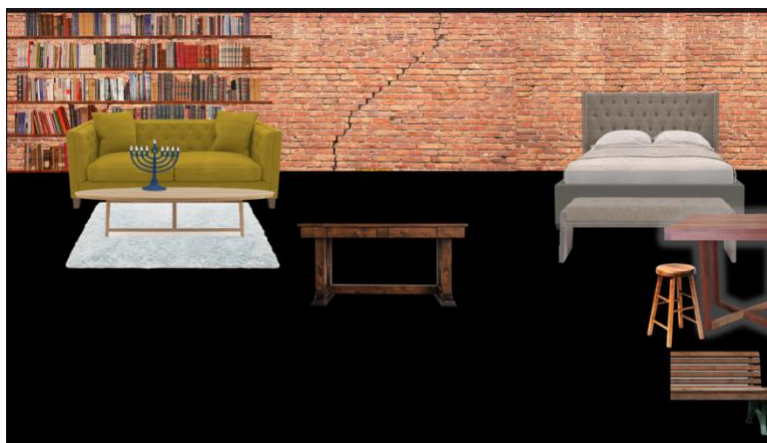
**Scene 8: The Next Ten Minutes
Part 1**

Just the two down benches are lit at first.



**Scene 8: The Next Ten Minutes
Part 2**

“Till the world explodes”?
We see the two worlds finally
come together in one story.
Revealing all the memories they
have shared w each other over the
past three years.
We need this to be THE
CONNECTION in the show.



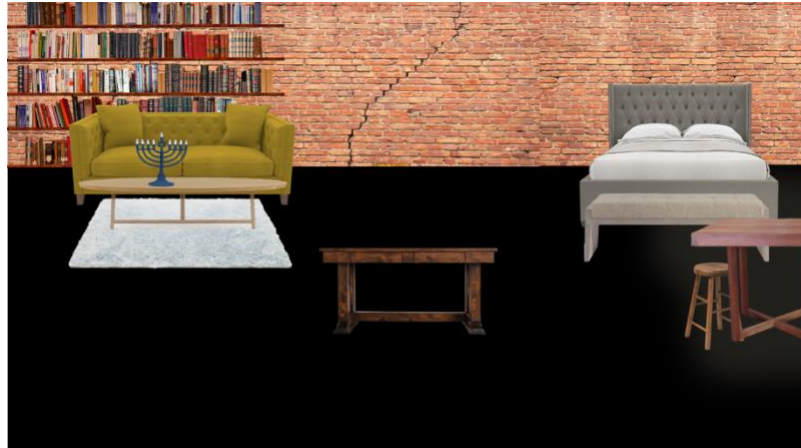
**Scene 9: A Miracle Would
Happen**

Lights up on Jamie.
Jamie is at the bar? A Party?
Literally anywhere but home with
Cathy.
Jamie removes his bench at end of
Miracle Would Happen.
Is everything in the back still lit? If
everything is more lit then what
does that mean for blocking?
Should we use more space?



Scene 10: Climbing Uphill

Lights up on Cathy at an audition.
Cathy can use the stairs to go onto
the stage for her audition? Or use
them to put her stuff down on?
She goes back and forth in and out
of her thoughts, can we show this
w light?



Scene 10.5: Jamie's Book Reading

Maybe all we need is stool?



Scene 11: If I didn't Believe in You

In front of the bed, maybe more center?



Scene 12: I Can Do Better Than That

The Coffee Table is the car? They are on the way to Cathy's parents house.



Scene 13: Nobody Needs to Know

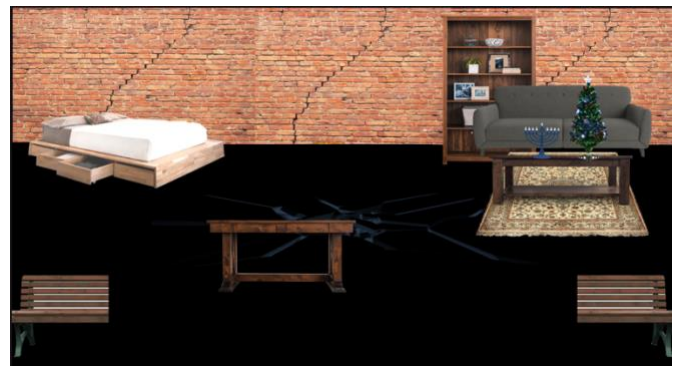
In the bed- its morning. Jamie has just cheated on Cathy. Set dressing? Other girls clothes? Sunshine coming through window? Lamp?



Scene 14: Goodbye Until Tomorrow/I Could Never Rescue You

Lights down on everything? We are at the beginning and the end of their stories.

Other/Earlier Design Concepts:



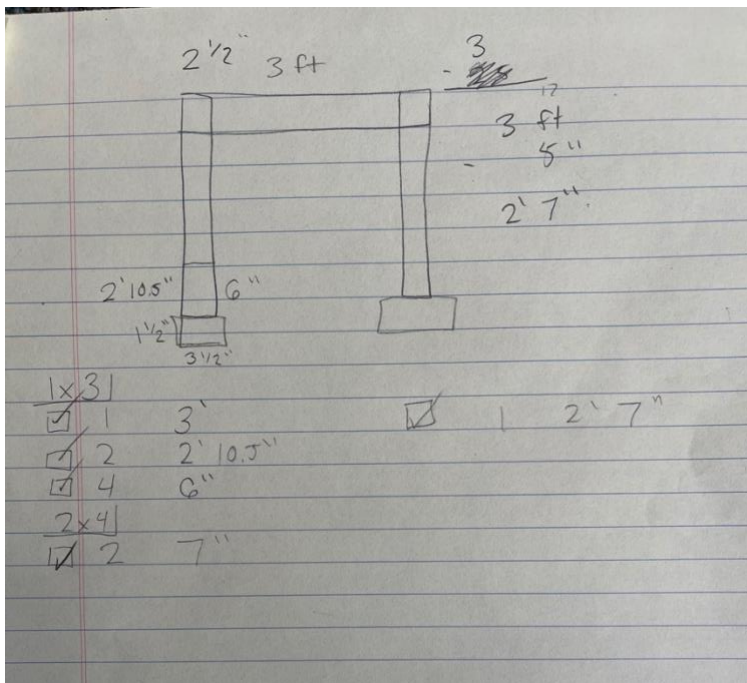
The Actual Set:

Once we moved into Humanities we got to work swiftly. Our set included a couch, a coffee table, a bookshelf, a writer's desk, a bed, a trunk, and a lot of set dressing.





We only had to build one thing for the set and that was Cathy's dressing room mirror.



Pictures From The Show

Moving Too Fast



The Schmuel Song





The Next Ten Minutes

Nobody Needs To Know



Show Poster



Starring Juliana Giannasca and George Tsambis

Directed by Westin Hicks

MAY 6TH, 7TH 7:30PM



HUMANITIES THEATER

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK - PURCHASE COLLEGE