

“HOW DEEP IS THE OCEAN?”: A HISTORICAL, ANALYTICAL
AND CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE WORLD
OF IRVING BERLIN

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Theatre
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 8, 2017

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ABSTRACT

This paper details my experience with this creative project. The scope of this project is research on Irving Berlin that will then inform an interpretive process that was originally going to culminate in a public performance. Throughout my research and using one of the chosen songs in an audition setting, I realized that this research is not meant for performance per se. Further explanation will be made in this paper.

My project focuses mainly on the two hallmarks of creating professional performance: the historical and analytical research. The historical research informs my own analytical research, the creative process, and finally the performance of these songs in an audition setting. A detailed explanation of my process and the results it yielded will be included, as well as an analysis of what I have learned.

I will document my interest in Irving Berlin and why I chose this composer. I will then give detailed insight on my process, followed by explaining the process further through the song “How Deep is the Ocean?” I will then analyze my performance of the material, both in the videos I recorded of myself and the audition where I used a song, and, finally, what I have learned.

Please note that there are videos submitted with this paper that can be accessed through the repository that will aid in further understanding this project.

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INSPIRATION

When contemplating exactly what I wanted to do as my thesis, I came to the realization that there are limitless options within the creative field. I could write a play, assistant director or choreograph, perform in some capacity, or just do a classic thesis paper. However, in my junior year I crafted a research paper for my Musical Theatre History class on Irving Berlin that had me thinking about how simplistically beautiful Berlin's lyrics are and how many of his songs still live on today. I wanted to focus on a composer that would allow me creative freedom within his songs, while remaining significant today and where I would not be singing dated songs.

Still today, Berlin's music is wildly popular. Jerome Kern's famous quote that "Irving Berlin has no place in American music -- he is American music" accurately sums it up (Freedland 12). Berlin wrote classics such as "God Bless America," "White Christmas," "There's No Business Like Show Business," and countless more. He was fiercely popular on Broadway and in Hollywood, as well as on the billboards. Many songs Berlin wrote in the 30s and 40s had recording revivals in the 50s by jazz crooners like Sinatra and Fitzgerald. Just this past season, Berlin's *Holiday Inn* was produced on Broadway so his music is most certainly significant today within the musical world.

THE PROCESS

Initially, I had no idea how many steps this process would entail. After beginning the first step, I determined there should be a four-step process. The process evolved, as follows: Step one: Examination of the work of Irving Berlin for the solo voice; Step Two: Selecting five individual songs that would challenge me as a performer, as well as be advantageous for my future career; Step Three: Intensive historical research; and Step Four: Use several rubrics, acting approaches, and performance techniques to polish the five songs to performance level.

I first examined the work of Irving Berlin for the solo voice. The precise number of songs written by Berlin is unknown, but it is estimated Berlin wrote somewhere between 1,250 to 1,500 songs (Collins). I compiled a list of all of his known works and proceeded to listen to them through various media outlets such as YouTube, iTunes, Spotify, and online music databases. Then, I narrowed the list to 29 songs and made a YouTube playlist. The playlist can be listened to here:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMGWznqgMGff2_CYbHKT6Foewdq4Q7gD

I then categorized these 29 songs by the year they were written, the tempo (that is, whether they are an up-tempo, ballad, or walking tempo), and subject matter (which usually came down to comedy, love, tragedy, or song of the times). After I categorized the songs, I continued to narrow down the list by researching whether the sheet music to each song could be acquired, as some were more obscure.

The second step was to narrow down the list of songs to only five that I would use for my project. The songs I chose were “How Deep is the Ocean?,” “I’m Beginning to Miss You,” “Let Me Sing And I’m Happy,” “You’d Be Surprised,” and “Falling Out Of Love Can Be Fun.” I focused on these five songs for various reasons. “You’d Be Surprised” and “Falling Out Of Love

“Can Be Fun” both are up-tempo songs that fit my “type”. A “type” is similar to a stock character you would see back in *comedia del arte* or even old Hollywood films. It is an archetype character that you can boil down to three adjectives. Mine are sexy, funny, and sassy. Both of these songs have a funny, sexual undertone, a type of song that Berlin was especially masterful at producing. I decided on “Let Me Sing And I’m Happy” based on a performance of that song I found by Bernadette Peters, an award winning Broadway performer, and felt its simplistic lyrics could be interpreted in many ways that could make for a fun and creative outlet. “I’m Beginning to Miss You” and “How Deep Is The Ocean?” are the two ballads I choose. Generally, ballads are more difficult to perform because of their slower tempos and elongated phrases, and they have always been a challenge for me. I wanted to choose two that had simple melodies and lyrics that would compel me to have to produce lots of creative work behind the songs and that would keep me engaged mentally and physically.

The third step was to do intense historical research on each individual song. I answered these questions for each song: (1) How was each song was written?; (2) When it was written?; and (3) For whom was it written? I then looked at significant/ historically important performances. Next, I analyzed the performance styles of said performances and allowed that to influence my own acting and performance choices.

The fourth step was to take the five songs that I had decided on, and use various rubrics, acting approaches, and performance techniques to polish the five songs to performance level. I used a combination of methods for each song, as within the rubrics it was also necessary to use various acting approaches. I used a rubric from our sophomore year Musical Theatre Lab class for some songs. I used David Craig’s acting methodology of the story within the song for some

of my songs, as well. I also utilized the acting methodology of Stanislavski, Stella Adler, Uta Hagen, and Meisner.

I will now outline the above process by using one of my chosen songs, “How Deep is the Ocean?” However, it is to be noted that I performed this process for each of my chosen five songs.

“HOW DEEP IS THE OCEAN?”

“How Deep Is The Ocean?” was written in 1932. In 1932, when the rest of the country was sunk in the depths of the Great Depression, Irving Berlin embarked on the second half of his career. Unwilling to accept Berlin’s professional demise, Max Winslow, a friend and employee, retrieved a song Berlin had filed and presented it to Rudy Vallee. “Say It Isn’t So” became a number one hit and one of only a few Berlin songs to be introduced on the radio (“How Deep Is the Ocean?”). The song endures to this day as a jazz standard. A reenergized Berlin then borrowed four lines of the chorus of his “To My Mammy” (1920), including the querying phrase, “How Deep Is the Ocean?” and created a new song whose lyrics are a succession of questions, “How deep is the ocean?; How high is the sky?, etc. The second line, “I’ll tell you no lie” is the only line that does not ask a question. Philip Furia, in *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A Story of America’s Great Lyricists*, depicts the lyrics as “Another slang formula—the Yiddish oenchant for answering a question with another questions...”

The song was not written specifically for anyone or anything, but Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra, with vocalist Jack Fulton, were the first to make the pop charts with their recording of “How Deep Is the Ocean?” It was one of the first songs Berlin had released on the radio rather than the stage or screen. The song also appeared in the background of the film *The Life of Jimmy Dolan*. It has been added to the stage adaptation of the movie musical *White Christmas* but was done post-mortem.

As far as significant performances, over 81 recording artists have recorded this song in the 85 years since the song has been released (“Songwriters Hall of Fame Inducted”). Most of these artists did not do live performances of this song, so I listened to the various artists interpretations

of the song and would try to experience their emotions through their voices. What I found particularly interesting was that the first recording of the song by Paul Whiteman and Jack Fulton is more upbeat and cheery sounding than the successive performances. When the song made a revival with recording artists in the 50s, the song had two types of interpretations. There was the jazzy version with a toe-tapping beat, such as Billie Holiday's recording. Then there was the crooner classic where the tempo was slowed down, making the meaning of the song different for me and much more dramatic, such as heard in Sinatra's version. I ultimately decided to go with the slower tempo, as it afforded me the opportunity to explore the meaning of the song within my interpretation.

Within my interpretation, I used an acting methodology developed by David Craig that we learned freshman year in our Musical Theatre Performance Lab. This technique is used to develop subtext and movement within a song. The idea behind this technique is that it compels you as an actor to be thinking before speaking (singing) and allows you to create an underneath life to the song that shines through. It works best with songs with simplistic lyrics and allows the actor to deepen the meaning of the song.

Further, it creates an inner dialogue that influences the outer lyrics. I also choose this technique because, although I am a senior, it still challenges me, as it is not an easy process. First I created a monologue that coincides with the lyrics but does not have to directly pertain to what the lyrics imply. For the monologue I created, I drew inspiration from my personal life; hence, I also incorporated some Uta Hagen and Stanislaski acting techniques. I was trying to have as much emotional connection as possible to this song.

Once I had created the monologue, I worked on stripping away the monologue from being something I was uttering out loud to becoming something going on only in my head, in my thought process. The physical movements of the monologue stay alive. Next, I layered the lyrics of the song on top, as in my head I am thinking of the dialogue of my monologue. The result is that the inner life influences the outer life.

Once I had completed all of the above steps, I simply just had to rehearse. I used videos of myself as a form of critiquing myself. I discovered I could not be objective on whether the acting technique I was using was correct for the song while actually performing the song. So, by videoing myself and watching the videos, I was able to truly see the effect of the above steps on my performance. Obviously, in the true moment of performance nothing always goes to plan, but by doing the steps above, I am able to be better prepared and have a deeper understanding of each song.

In the repository are two videos of myself performing. The first one titled “Without the Story Within the Song Technique” is of me performing without any acting technique at all. To the untrained eye, it isn’t horrible. However what I noticed is that my breathing isn’t strong, my phrasing is broken, and my body is totally unengaged. I let my mind wander during that performance and it completely shows.

There is another video titled “With the Story Within the Song Technique” and in that video I noticed significant changes. It’s very clear how much more engaged I am in the second performance. Not just mentally from an acting standpoint, but also vocally. By having the underneath text, it forces my entire body to be engaged and present in the moment which is exactly what one wants in an audition setting.

PERFORMANCE

Originally, the scope of this project was to culminate in a public performance. However, throughout the process I concluded that a public performance would not adequately result in my true purpose of this project, which is for me to have songs at the ready for future auditions. I reached the realization that a public performance would not afford me the opportunity to perform these songs, and truly test them, in the right setting. A performance would have me thinking about things that would not come into play when auditioning. I would have to hire an accompanist and rehearse the songs with them, taking away the unknown of going into an audition room and not knowing what you could get. The whole concept inevitably would end up being concocted. Even if I opted for a “mock audition,” I would still wind up acting in some sense because it would not be a true audition setting.

Therefore, I decided to take one of these songs into the real world and test it out. I used “You’d Be Surprised” in an audition. Although it was at an audition for a show that I could not actually be cast in, as I had already signed a performance contract for a show that would conflict, and that eliminated some of the pressure, I still got to test out how the song would translate in an audition setting. I also got to test out how prepared I was, if the historical, analytical, and creative work I did on the song actually helped me, and if that work “sticks in my body” when I am nervous at an audition.

Overall, I realized that this work was essential in the preparation of this song. I have never felt so at ease at an audition. Granted, the pressure of actually having to get the job was eliminated, but I do not think that was part and parcel of the process. The previous work I had done on the song allowed for there to be a confidence with the song because I knew exactly what

to expect, and if I felt like doing something new, I simply allowed the work I had already done to influence the choices I made. I emailed the theatre after the audition to let them know that I could not do the production, so I could be taken out of consideration before they made any decisions. I will never know if I would have been cast or not, but I feel most confident that, if I had not been cast, it would have been because of an outside factor and not because of the performance I had done in the room.

CONCLUSION: TO THE “REAL WORLD” I GO

I have learned a great deal throughout this project. I am now quite the little encyclopedia as regards facts about Irving Berlin and his solo voice repertoire, so I imagine that as a future fun party trick! I have gained plenty of historical research on these five songs and can refer back to that at any time the need arises. I have added five new songs to my audition binder that I know I can readily access at any time and feel absolutely confident to sing at an audition. I have re-learned the importance of proper preparation. Through testing out a song at an audition, I have learned that, if I want to feel my best as a performer where a vast part of my career will consist of auditioning for jobs, I need to do this work. I plan on morphing the work I have done with this project and incorporating it into a new routine that I will utilize with every new song I prepare for auditions.

This project not only has prepped me to have an arsenal of songs at my ready when I am in NYC auditioning away, but it has also revived in me the idea that you must do your work to truly be engaged and truthful within a song. I am beyond excited at what this project has given me. I now have observable research that will continue beyond this project and allows me to develop these songs throughout my career.

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