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Voice Maintenance of Singers on a Broadway National Tour

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN BROADWAY SUSPENDED PERFORMANCES on March 12, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the actors of the “Great White Way” were not the only professional music theater performers affected by this decision.¹ Over thirty Broadway National Tours stopped circling the country and suspended their performances as well. Prior to the shutdown, Broadway National Tours employed hundreds of performers. With an optimistic look to the future of live performance, national tours already have next tour stops planned in 2021 for many music theater productions.² Singers and their voice teachers need to be prepared once again to meet the extensive singing demands of performing in a Broadway National Tour. National tours maintain the eight-show performance schedule of their Broadway counterparts. However, the tour location typically changes every week, and sometimes even more frequently for Non-Equity tours, requiring performers to travel during their time off. This can lead to additional stress and fatigue to performers. Therefore, the intent of this study is to understand more fully the effects of frequent travel and demanding schedules on vocal function and how professional singers maintain their voices on a Broadway National Tour.

Four lead performers of the same tour were chosen due to the extensive singing demands of their roles coupled with a typical performance schedule of eight shows a week. Surveys were administered to the singers after the last performance in the following four tour locations: Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, and St. Louis. The survey consisted of five questions about the perceived effect of the tour location, transportation, housing, theater space, and schedule on the singers’ vocal function. In addition, semi-structured interviews were also conducted at the end of their tour. To create a portrait of each participant, the interviews covered the topics of vocal maintenance, vocal practice, overall health, and challenges of touring. The survey and interview questions are found in an appendix to this article. Data collection was ended earlier than expected due to Covid-19, however initial results provide interesting preliminary data.

INTERVIEWS

Amanda

Amanda is a thirty-one-year-old female, with an MFA in Acting from a top program in the Northwest. Several years prior to her employment in this

national tour, she had a vocal hemorrhage, which was treated by a top otolaryngologist in New York City. This was her first national tour and she felt confident in her voice. Her role required her to sing at the extent of her vocal range, sustain a high belt production to an E₅, and scream for all eight weekly performances. Her main strategy for vocal maintenance is steaming. She steams every night for forty-five minutes before bed, and again when she wakes up. Sleep is also imperative for her vocal health and a benefit of touring, since she had more time to rest. Her vocal practice occurred in her dressing room, but she really credits vocal maintenance (hydration and rest) as her main strategy.

Amanda said the weather was a big challenge because the tour locations happened to be in cities that were unseasonably cold and wet, leaving her in a difficult climate for over three months. She also found establishing a sense of home to be difficult, and remedied this by setting up her nightstand in each hotel in an identical fashion. Being away from loved ones and her community was also challenging, and she expressed relief that the tour was over, saying, “it is not for everyone.”

Jack

Jack was a thirty year old male, with a BFA in Music Theater. This was his first national tour and his role required him to sing at the extent of his singing range, as well as speak in an accent dissimilar from his natural vocal production. His main strategy for vocal maintenance is hydration. His first question in every new theater is, “Where is the water? How do I get access to hot and cold water?” He warms up in his dressing room, but this routine varies based on the weather and the theater. He avoids eating a large meal before each show and also credits sleep as the best way to maintain overall health, as well as a clean diet, and exercising as much as possible. He travels with an exercise bike so that he can get aerobic activity regardless of the weather.

Jack said “the challenge is inconsistency of place and where you’ll be living and working.” The location of his dressing room was different in each theater, with one example being six floors above the stage. In this city, he had to leave his dressing room earlier to make his entrances on time and not to arrive out of breath. He noted that one week is not enough time in a place to establish a routine, and it is hard to find the motivation to use his free time for enriching activities.

George

George was a thirty-nine year old male, with a BFA in Music Theater. This was his second national tour, and his role required forceful speaking as well as beautifully floated Mode 2 “falsetto” vocal production. His role had an hour and a half break within the show, so he had to keep his voice warmed up backstage during this long break. Unlike the rest of the participants who travelled by air, he drove to each city with his wife and toddler. His main strategies for vocal maintenance are hydration and reducing his vocal load by speaking gingerly with his family members throughout the day. If he is not successful with this plan, he can feel tired during the show, alerting him that he had talked too much during the day. He warms up in his dressing room with vocal exercises that he has adapted based on the needs of the role. He avoids eating a large meal before shows because “it feels like there is a huge weight in the place where I need to breathe. I can’t support myself the way I need to sing.” George also stressed his vegan diet and daily exercise for maintaining overall health. He reported that traveling by car, instead of by air, was a vocal maintenance strategy due to the lack of humidity in air travel. He noted that this was of utmost importance when the COVID-19 pandemic started and expressed relief to not having flown with his family.

George felt that adjusting to the weather was the biggest challenge, due to walking to the theater in extreme conditions and the adverse vocal effects of heat and air conditioning within the theaters. He discussed adjusting to the different theaters, in terms of their acoustics and backstage spaces perhaps due to his specific needs based on the long break in his role. He also mentioned wanting to stay up after a show and socializing, but knowing that he cannot do that every night and still maintain his vocal and physical health.

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

From these interviews, several commonalities emerged. The participants mainly credit hydration, enough sleep, reducing vocal load of talking, and the scheduling of meals as strategies for vocal maintenance. They utilize their dressing room to warm-up directly prior to performances, and this warm-up routine adapts based on their perceived vocal health and needs. However, the

participants stressed vocal maintenance as opposed to warm-ups as their most important strategy for professional vocal function.

For overall health, the participants all reported that daily exercise, a healthy diet, and sleep were imperative for their vocal functions. Adjusting to the weather, being in different living spaces, and a range of theater spaces were the most challenging aspects for touring. In short, establishing a routine was very difficult. This lack of routine may also affect the stress and emotional challenges of touring that the participants expressed such as isolation and family demands, coupled with performing challenging vocal roles every day. Amanda stated, "It's hard. You're away from people you love and the things that you love and if you are at an age where you envision settling down, that's a hard thing to do."

One observation of note is that the singers were not in consistent contact with a voice teacher and did not report using voice lessons, dialogue with a voice teacher, or specific teacher guided vocal exercises as a vocal maintenance strategy. This finding presents an opportunity for voice teachers, and touring productions themselves, to be more active in providing vocal support for singers who perform in challenging and changing environments. Being aware of these issues and having strategies for the success of the singers could ultimately help mitigate vocal injuries and other stress-related incidences. Vocal injury is often the most common reason for Broadway performers to call out of a performance and use a sick day³.

Additionally, when the participants were asked if their strategies to maintain vocal and overall health on tour were different from their behavior when they are in a nontouring show, they all responded no. George stated, "This behavior is fundamentally ingrained in me so that I can do any work at any time."

SURVEYS

To add to the overall understanding of the singers' specific vocal function on tour, a survey was administered consisting of five questions about the effect of the tour location, housing, theater space, transportation, and schedule. Similar to the results of the interviews, the weather of the tour locations had the biggest effect on the singers, when specifically compared to the other location categories of allergies, humidity, and altitude.

For housing, the categories of air-conditioning, food options, bed/pillow, noise, and proximity to the theater, all affected the participants. They were active in selecting their housing in each city, aiming for spaces with kitchenettes and within walking distance to the theater. For the theater space, the categories of air quality, dressing room location, and hall acoustics, all affected vocal ability. The acoustics of the theater space could help or hinder vocal production. One participant stated, "not great acoustics. We can't hear ourselves very well, resulting in pushing sometimes." On the other hand, the acoustics of a different theater "were excellent for such a large house and really allowed me to not work as hard to hear or be heard." Again, we see the variability to be challenging to the singers.

Two remaining categories of the survey, travel and tour schedule, were not prominently discussed by the participants in the interviews. But from the survey data, the length of time in each city was perceived to have the greatest influence apart from the weather of a city. The first two stops of the tour each lasted for one week and the participants reported being tired from the quick turnaround coupled with a lack of sense of familiarity in the city, whereas the next two stops lasted for two weeks that provided a better sense of routine.

CONCLUSION

Some takeaways from this initial research are that the participants are very focused on maintaining vocal and overall health by using hydration, sleep, diet, and exercise daily. Emotional health seems to be the biggest challenge with the variability of stops, theaters, and other aspects of the tour in addition to the lack of routine. Interestingly, one performer traveled with his family as support, but he had an additional stress of vocal load (children love to talk!). Many of these behaviors are fundamental to the participants' persistence as professional music theater performers, but they are heightened during a tour given the variability in the different environments. Additionally, it appears that performing in a national tour can present unique emotional challenges for maintaining personal relationships, and creating a sense of community and support for the performers.

Perhaps most interesting for the voice community, the singers in this study were not relying on personal

voice teachers or vocal lessons provided by the touring company to help with their vocal practice and maintenance. This absence suggests an educative need and opportunity for voice teachers and the music theater community to offer and advocate for more vocal support for performers on a Broadway National Tour. In other words, vocal maintenance on a tour, in addition to the strategies discussed by the singers of this study, can also consist of vocal warm-ups, cool-downs, and other exercises specific to each singer's voice to maximize efficiency. Given the challenges in controlling the many variables in a national tour, providing additional vocal options could be helpful, especially as voices mature and evolve. Additionally, adding strategies for fatigue or illness in voices could greatly cut down on compensatory behaviors, often unhelpful in a singers' vocal journey. One might also suggest a peer support group to counteract the loneliness and isolation. With the vocal demands of these shows, performers may be hesitant to participate in additional vocal conversations, but perhaps one positive attribute to the current state of Covid-19 is improved online community options.

This research has presented a baseline of information about vocal maintenance of singers on a national tour to benefit voice teachers, professional singers, and aspiring singers currently pursuing a music theater career. Due to COVID-19, the national tour associated with this research closed in March 2020. When this research continues, having data from additional tour locations with varied climates, a larger population of participants, and a specific interview protocol investigating the vocal demand of participants' roles will present additional best practices for vocal maintenance in a demanding music theater performance environment.

NOTES

1. Julia Jacobs, "Broadway, Symbol of New York Resilience, Shuts Down Amid Virus Threat," *The New York Times*; www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/theater/coronavirus-broadway-shutdown.html (accessed October 2, 2020).
2. "All Touring Shows," *Playbill*, 2 Oct. 2020; www.playbill.com/productions?venue-type=touring.
3. Natalie Bradshaw, Amy L. Cooper, "Medical Privacy and the Professional Singer: Injury Stigma, Disclosure, and Professional Ramification on Broadway," *Journal of Singing* 74, 5 (May/June 2018): 513–520.

APPENDIX A

Survey Questions

1. How has the physical location of this tour city affected your vocal ability/function?
 - a. Allergies
 - b. Weather
 - c. Humidity
 - d. Altitude
 - e. All of the Above
 - f. Not Applicable
 - g. Other
2. How has the transportation to this tour city affected your vocal ability/function?
 - a. Air travel
 - b. Bus
 - c. Car
 - d. Not applicable
 - e. Other
3. How has the housing provided in this tour city affected your vocal ability/function?
 - a. Food options
 - b. Bed/Pillow
 - c. Air conditioning/Heat
 - d. Proximity to Theater
 - e. Noise
 - f. All of the Above
 - g. Not Applicable
 - h. Other
4. How has the theater in this tour city affected your vocal ability/function?
 - a. Air Quality
 - b. Dressing Room
 - c. Acoustics
 - d. Facilities
 - e. All of the Above
 - f. Not Applicable
 - g. Other
5. How has your schedule in this tour city affected your vocal ability/function?
 - a. Show schedule
 - b. Personal commitments
 - c. Rehearsal/Put-in schedule
 - d. Length of time in city
 - e. Advertising/Media commitments
 - f. All of the above
 - g. Not Applicable
 - h. Other

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Background

1. How many National Tours have you performed on, including this one?
2. Tell me about your own singing. How and when did you get started?

3. Talk to me about your vocal training. Did you study voice in school?

Vocal Maintenance

1. How do you maintain your voice on tour? What strategies do you use consistently?
2. Talk me through your practice schedule. How much time would you say you spend practicing your voice throughout the week?
3. How do you maintain your overall health on tour?

Tour Life

1. What are some of the best parts about performing in a National Tour?
2. What are some of the challenges about performing on a National Tour?
3. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about performing on a National Tour?

Mezzo soprano, **Christianne Roll**, received her BFA in Musical Theatre from New York University, where she was a Tisch Scholar and was selected as one of the top performers of her graduating class. Her doctorate is from Columbia University, where she focused her studies and research on musical theatre vocal pedagogy.

As a member of the Actors' Equity Association, Christianne has performed at the Goodspeed Opera House, the Lucille Lortel Theatre, the York Theatre, and internationally as the principal singer for Norwegian Cruise Lines. She has soloed at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, The White House, and has sung the national anthem for the Philadelphia Eagles. Christianne competed in the BBC international vocal competition, "Voice of Musical Theatre," in Cardiff, Wales, and was a finalist of that competition.

As an educator, Dr. Roll is an associate professor and head of the Musical Theatre BFA Program at Florida Southern College. In 2017, she won the college's Miller Distinguished Faculty Award for excellence in teaching. Previously, she served as the head of the music theater program at Emory

& Henry College. A recognized expert on the female musical theatre voice, Dr. Roll is a frequent presenter at conferences such as The Voice Foundation Symposium, the Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance, the National Association of Teachers of Singing, the Southeastern Theatre Conference, the Virginia Theatre Association, and the Florida Theatre Conference. She has served as the music director for Norwegian Cruise Lines, teaching hundreds of performers from around the world.

Jeanne Goffi-Fynn is a Senior Lecturer and Director of the Doctoral Cohort Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her areas of interest include the Performance of Singers across the Lifespan, Applied Studio Teaching, Voice Development and Pedagogy across styles including CCM and Ensemble Singing. She is also a Singing Voice Specialist, after completing internships in vocology, specifically in the retraining of singers with muscular tension dysphonia (MTD). Prior to joining Teachers College, she served at New York University, the New School Actors Studio, William Paterson University, and the American Musical and Dramatic Academy.

Jeanne has presented workshops, master classes, and pedagogic presentations for numerous organizations, including the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), New York Singing Teachers Association (NYSTA), College Music Society (CMS), International Congress of Voice Teachers (ICVT), The Voice Foundation, the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), and International Society for Music Education (ISME). She is a member of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) and serves with Opera America on their Singers Training Forum, Board of Overseers, and Strategic Committee. She is currently President of NATS-NYC and Chair of the National NATS Mentoring Initiatives. She has developed Singers' Workshops at TC, aiding both the education of graduate students and the development of young singers between ages eleven and seventeen.

Jeanne's career included opera, legit music theater, choral gigs, and solo recitals often with newly commissioned works. During the summer, she can be found at the International Lyric Academy based in Vicenza, Italy. Her websites include <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/jcg21/>, JeanneGoffiFynn.com, and SingersWorkshops.org.