

Introduction

We were working together in the West End production of the mega-musical *Wicked*, Mark as Fiyero, and Louise at the time as Galinda (though she went on to play Elphaba too). Whenever we weren't dancing through life or defying gravity, we would chat about our similar backgrounds and interests: how we both had a passion for performing from a very young age; how we worked hard at our hobbies through our teenage years; our experiences training at the same college, although not at the same time; what it was like starting to audition for – and get – roles and moving through a succession of professional productions; and our shared opinions and experiences – the good and the bad – that come along with any career in the entertainment industry.

We are both asked for advice from aspiring performers, sometimes at stage door after a performance, from letters sent to theatres or via our agents, and increasingly on social media. There is such demand for information about how to break in to the entertainment industry from young people who, exactly like us when we were younger, want to make it their career. So we decided that we could combine our experiences and knowledge in writing a handbook about how today's commercial-theatre industry works, and to offer some words of advice to anyone who'd like to make it their livelihood too.

In order to make the book as helpful as possible, and to answer the questions that people really want and need the answers to, we decided to invite you to tell us what you wanted to know. We encouraged anyone, of any age, anywhere in the world, to post questions via a special website that we set up. To the many, many hundreds of you who did, THANK YOU! Your questions were interesting, thought-provoking, intelligent and revealing; and we've answered as many as we thought we could cover in one book. We really appreciate everything you asked, and we genuinely couldn't have written this book without you (if we've answered your question, then your name's in the back of the book). Even if you're not planning on a career on stage yourself, but have an active interest in theatre, we hope that the book draws back the curtain and shines a spotlight onto the realities of life as a performer.

The book is divided into four chapters that cover, broadly, training for a career in theatre; auditioning for roles; getting jobs and performing; and then managing and maintaining a lifelong career. Most of the questions we've answered together, but if one of us has a specific experience or an anecdote that's relevant, we've included that too, indicated by a little 'headshot'. We've also written about our most memorable moments in the business which are dotted between the chapters on shaded grey pages.

Of course, everything that follows comes from our own experiences, performing in some of the biggest West End musicals of the last decade – so it's naturally focused on musical theatre, and mainly on opportunities in the UK. We've also made a conscious decision only to cover working on stage, rather than what it's like being a performer on screen. Other performers will have had different experiences and may have different advice. But what's here is an

honest reflection of our ideas and opinions, that come from spending thousands of hours in classes, workshops, audition rooms, rehearsal spaces and, of course, on stage.

In some ways, we are writing this book for earlier incarnations of ourselves. It contains all the secrets of this crazy, wonderful, exhausting, exciting, bewildering but brilliant profession, that we wished we'd known when we were starting out. If you're in that position now, dreaming of a career on the stage, we hope that this book reveals the secrets you need to know.

We hope you enjoy reading it.

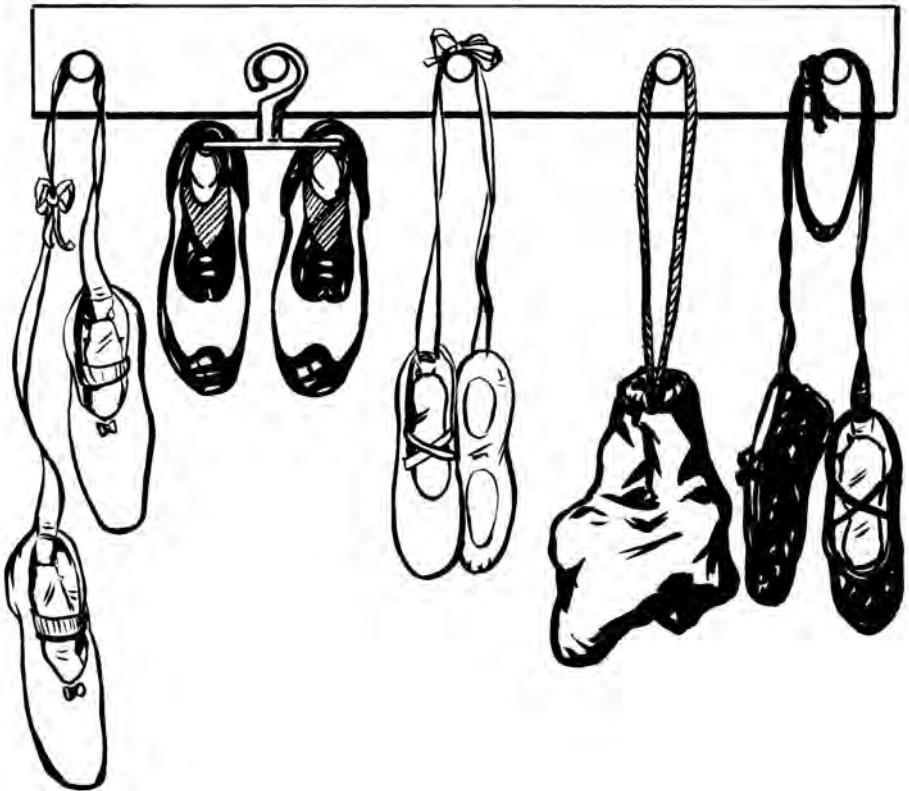
Louise and Mark x



Part One

SECRETS OF LEARNING YOUR CRAFT

Training and Developing



How can I improve my vocal range?

Vocal ranges are being challenged more and more, with new musicals often requiring singers to belt consistently at the top notes of their register, then down in the basement of their voices, and then back up top again for a couple of hours every show. It is not only important to have a good range, but also to have a strong voice with the stamina to withstand the vocal responsibilities that come with performing eight shows a week.

The best way to strengthen your voice and increase your range is to find a singing teacher you trust; ideally, one who is very experienced and has a good reputation in the industry. Most good singing teachers can be expensive, especially if you are out of work. Having a weekly lesson for anything from £40–140 can obviously take its toll on your bank balance, but investing in one lesson a month could really make a difference.

An average lesson will be one hour and it's surprising how much you can fit in to that time. All singing teachers will allow you to record the lesson on a Dictaphone or your iPhone, which then means you can repeat the lesson, every day or several times a week, by yourself at home. Making alterations to your vocal range or stamina is not something that can change overnight. It can take weeks, months or, more often than not, years to notice a comfortable difference. So you'll need a lot of practice.



When I toured with *The Book of Mormon*, I had weekly voice lessons for forty-five minutes on Skype with Liz Caplan of Liz Caplan Vocal Studios LLC, who is probably the most sought-after and well-respected voice teacher in New York – if not in America. We only ever did vocal exercises every week. In fact, she hadn't heard me sing a single song until she saw me in the show eleven months after we started our sessions together! I would record those weekly lessons, and label them with what we worked on specifically. For my daily show warm-up I developed a catalogue of voice lessons from which I could select to help me get ready to perform, depending on what I felt needed to happen vocally that day – for instance, if I needed to lower my larynx, clear my nasal cavities or release the tension in my neck. I have worked professionally using my voice successfully for about ten years, but I couldn't have survived *Mormon* without the help of Liz. In my opinion, having a great voice teacher to help you is invaluable.

I have been incredibly fortunate in my career to have played a variety of different roles, all of which required varied vocal styles, ranges and techniques. I have my training to thank for being able to adapt my voice accordingly. If you only sing in one style, you are limiting yourself as to the roles you can play, so it's important to push your vocal boundaries and to develop new techniques regularly.



Even in the one show, Galinda and Elphaba in *Wicked* require completely different singing styles.

During my training at Laine, I had singing lessons every day, in which I worked on musical-theatre and contemporary technique, but I also chose to take opera/classical classes after college hours. At times I was reluctant, it didn't feel like 'my thing', but it taught me so much about finding my soprano voice. On many occasions since, having some classical technique has helped me to protect my voice from overworking my belt and putting too much pressure on my vocal cords.

My most challenging role to date, vocally, was Elphaba. To be able to push the range of my voice to its limits eight times a week was intense to say the least. The day I was offered the role, I got straight on the phone to Mark Meylan, a vocal coach based in London, who has years of experience working with vocalists all over the world. I wanted to make sure I found how to place these huge songs in my voice without putting strain on it and potentially damaging or exhausting it. His vocal exercises helped me to focus and place each sound so it was safe to sing, yet still sounded exciting. I also wanted to keep my tone and not force my voice to sound like another person. I still have his exercises on my iPhone and I practise them religiously to keep my vocal stamina up. Every vocal coach is different and you may have to try a few to find the one you feel most comfortable with.



Anyone who knows me knows that one of my ultimate goals has been to perform my own show at the Royal Albert Hall in London. So when I was asked to be one of Michael Ball's guests on his UK tour which would play – guess where?!

– the Royal Albert Hall, I couldn't believe my luck! It was so thrilling and something I will remember for ever.

Michael said to me that night: 'Take a picture in your mind.' Which is exactly what I did. When I walked out onto the stage and the music started, I took a moment to look out and take in the room. Over five thousand people were out there watching us that night, literally surrounding the stage. The wonderful dome shape of the roof in the Royal Albert Hall is spectacular, and for such a vast auditorium it feels strangely intimate when you're on stage. I've had the pleasure of performing there since – and each time is as special as the last.

My audition process for *Ghost: The Musical* in the West End was very quick. I met the associate creative team on a Friday morning, then they asked me return later that day to meet the director Matthew Warchus and producer Colin Ingram. I was sent a song to learn over the weekend (which happened to be the weekend of my debut album launch party, so I didn't have much study time!), and then on the Monday morning I was reading opposite two potential leading ladies for my final audition.



Later, my agent called me and said, 'They were extremely happy with what you did in the auditions, and they are very interested in you. But unfortunately they don't know if the role is even available at this stage because they are trying to piece together the casting puzzle between the London and New York productions, and a lot depends on visa issues, the legalities and so on... So for now, let's try to forget about it and then if something comes of it we'll discuss that if it happens – but well done!'

When you're waiting to hear if you've got a job, the suspense can drive you insane, so I genuinely convinced myself there was no job available, and just happily continued with my life, enjoying my final couple of months in *Wicked*.

Three weeks later, when I'd forgotten about *Ghost* altogether, my agent called me, and before I could even say hello, he began:

'Where are you?'

'I'm on the Tube to Fulham,' I replied, 'to visit my friend Amy on her lunch break from rehearsals.'

'Can you come meet me in half an hour?'

'Well, no, like I said, I'm meeting Amy. I could come and see you afterwards.'

'No, I'm watching a client in the *Legally Blonde* matinee. Can I see you after that?'

'Erm... yeah, I suppose. Is everything okay?'

'Yes, I just want to talk to you about something in person instead of over the phone.'

'Okay, can I know what it's about?'

'No. I'll meet you in Victoria for a coffee before your warm-up.'

Click!

So there I am, sitting on the Tube to Fulham thinking what the hell could it be, and after chatting to Amy over lunch we decided it was either that he was getting rid of me as a client *or* that I was going to get a job offer for *Ghost*. It was a very long five-hour wait to meet him, and I even had a forty-minute shower in my dressing room to kill time. He eventually met me in a café at 6 p.m., by which point I'd had to buy a herbal remedy to calm my nerves. I'd even bought his coffee before he arrived in order not to waste any more time. Finally, he turned up, sat down and began:

'So, *Legally Blonde* was in great shape.'

'Aaaaaagh! Are you seriously going to talk about *Legally Blonde* after keeping me waiting all afternoon?!'

He laughed.

'Okay okay. Well, as an agent there are certain conversations that cannot be had over the phone and one of the perks of my job is being able to have moments like this with my clients. I am so happy to tell you that this morning we had a phone call offering you the role of Sam Wheat in *Ghost: The Musical*. You start rehearsals in two weeks and you open on 13 January. Congratulations!'

The rest of the conversation cannot be printed because it involves far too much swearing. But I wept tears of joy and burned my hand by throwing green tea all over the table,

so exhilarated I felt. I had worked so hard to win the role, and it's not that often in this industry that you truly get what you want. I still hate my agent for keeping me waiting all afternoon, but I wouldn't have had him tell me in any other way. It was very special.

