

# FORTY YEARS OF MUSICAL THEATRE EXCELLENCE

*a retrospective by Rick Pender*

By the 1960s, the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music had a nearly century-old reputation for traditional musical arts, including instrumental performance, voice, orchestra and chorus. Theater was the province of the College of Arts & Sciences. CCM voice faculty member Helen Laird believed other forms of singing should be included in a conservatory. She lobbied CCM Dean Jack Watson to establish a program in musical theater, and he recruited Jack Rouse from the University of Wisconsin to shape a division that encompassed broadcasting, opera and musical theater.

Rouse recalls, "Helen was the first faculty member who didn't think it was a cardinal sin to sing in chest voice and belt." At UC a young Cincinnati singer, Pamela Myers, had starred in musical theater productions staged by theater professor Paul Rutledge in Arts & Sciences. "I had excellent voice training with Helen Laird," Myers recalls, "who believed that singing is a holistic experience." When Myers graduated as CCM's first musical theater major in 1969, that was a new perspective.

Myers quickly put CCM on the map when she was cast in the original Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim's groundbreaking *Company* as Marta, a young Midwestern girl who epitomized the hordes of adventurers flocking to the city. Her rendition of "Another Hundred People," a number Sondheim wrote specifically for Myers, earned a 1971 Tony Award nomination and established Myers as the first of many CCM grads who established the gold standard in professional musical theater.

Back in Cincinnati, Rouse was building a true conservatory program. "I believed there was a place for professional training for professional theater." He simultaneously established a live-show program at the new Kings Island amusement park that provided summer experience for CCM students. During his five years at CCM, Rouse assembled a faculty with first-rate theatrical credentials: conductors Bruce Fisher from the University of Michigan and Oscar Kosarin with Broadway experience. Three Yale-trained professionals rounded out the team: designer Paul Shortt, technical director Steve Waxler and producer Suellen Childs.

"Our first show was *Sweet Charity* in Wilson Auditorium in 1969," Rouse remembers, recalling the decrepit 1930s facility. "No one was sure we were worthy of Corbett Auditorium." By 1970, that attitude changed, exemplified by *West Side Story* with future opera stars Barbara Daniels and Kathy Battle, in addition to conductor Erich Kunzel, who went on to found the Cincinnati Pops in 1977.

Myers remembers performing in *Funny Girl* at CCM, perhaps its first production beyond Broadway, thanks to UC alum Martin Tahse, who was involved in the original show. That connection represents another hallmark of CCM: Alumni who open doors and provide opportunities for subsequent students.

When Rouse departed CCM for a career in theme park design, his successor was suggested by Word Baker, artistic director at the Cincinnati Playhouse. Worth Gardner was a talented young director who had assisted Baker with several shows. Gardner remembers being impressed with the city and its "level of professionalism, musicianship and artistry." Between 1973 and 1985 he established those qualities as the foundation of CCM's musical theater program.

"At the forefront of the menu," Gardner says, "was an effort to attract students who exhibited a compelling clarity of vision, discipline and consistency in the mastery of craft. Our growing reputation gave us access to a wonderful talent pool, not only from the Midwest but from other sections of the country. Every entering class bore a unique personality, voice and potential. As a training conservatory we were trying to expose them to classic musical theater repertoire as well as engaging their creative voices in making new works." Citing productions of *Sweeney Todd* (1984), *Sister Aimee* (1975), *Gypsy* (1983), *Carnival* (1974) and *The Canterbury Tales* (1986), Gardner says, "We were producing way beyond our reach with extraordinary results!"

Gardner and his fellow teachers "were young and inexhaustible in our desire to expand the boundaries of what musical theater could be. Combining our collective desire for building excellent young artists, we also strove to nurture individual voices."

Jim Walton (1977) remembers the emphasis on creativity. "Worth encouraged me to write, to direct and choreograph, to take whatever different challenges arose." Following graduation, Walton originated the role of Franklin Shepard in Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981). His career continues with the upcoming Broadway revival of *Bye, Bye Birdie*.

Tony Award winner Faith Prince (1979) says she was naïve about what was required for a career in musical theater. "I was sort of raw, like dough, waiting to be kneaded. CCM gave me everything. When you left, you knew what you were shooting for." With tons of Tony recognition — a win for best actress in the 1992 revival of *Guys and Dolls* and nominations for *Bells Are Ringing* (2001) and *A Catered Affair* (2008) in which her daughter was played by another CCM grad, Leslie Kritzer (1999) — Prince clearly absorbed what was necessary.

She was challenged to find her depth when Gardner and others told her, "OK, we get that you're funny. What else can you do? Show us something else." That combination of comedy and pathos pretty much made my career," she says gratefully. "It was an incredible time of my life," Prince adds. "I remember saying, 'Oh, God, please don't let me leave.' I wanted to push out and find my life. The rigors of CCM made that possible. My knees still shake when I come into that building."

Another Tony winner Michele Pawk (1985) was attracted to CCM because "the program functioned more on the level of a graduate program. I feel very blessed to have been pushed and nurtured while I was there." Gardner taught her a fundamental lesson: "He was a huge believer in ensemble theatre. No matter how big your part, everybody onstage was involved. I take that with me to every production." Pawk is proud to be a CCM grad. A director was raving about two recent CCM alumni he had worked with, not knowing she went there, too. "Their work ethic, preparation, enthusiasm and positive energy, not to mention their talents, were all attributes about which he gushed. Although I had nothing to do with their training, I still felt like a proud parent."

When Kevin McCollum (1984) came to CCM, he had planned a career in film and thought studying theater would give him an edge. But he had leadership skills, too. "I was president of the CCM Tribunal," he remembers. "One year I put together a P.D.Q. Bach festival to raise money for scholarships. I was good at getting people to do what I asked them — I was playing the role of a producer back then, and I guess I've fallen into that." While he succeeded as an actor after graduation, McCollum's true success has been as a producer of award-winning Broadway

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shows including *Rent* (1996), *Avenue Q* (2004), *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006) and *In the Heights* (2008).

According to McCollum, CCM attracts students who have their own inner voice. "Life is not doing what people are telling you to do. It's listening to yourself and figuring out how to contribute your own story." He adds, "You have to do it because it burns inside you. You will never get enough approval. If I was afraid of risk, I couldn't function as a producer. You have to have an internal light that guides you. Worth told us if you're doing this for your parents, you'd better stop now. That's not going to sustain you for a career. He was a taskmaster, but he was also passionate about 'Aren't we lucky to be doing this?'"

Stephen Flaherty (1982) came to CCM wanting to compose musical theater. "I had heard that CCM had this amazing musical theater performance program, one of the very few in the country at the time, so even though I entered as a dual major in piano and composition, I knew I was a musical theater person at heart." In 1980, a collection of his songs, *The Carnival of Life: Without Intermission* was performed at Patricia Corbett Theater, directed by Gardner. "That production sort of 'outed me' as a musical theater writer to the composition faculty." Today he's the acclaimed composer of *Once on This Island*, the Tony Award-winning *Ragtime*, *Seussical* and more. Asked if CCM led him to his present career, Flaherty offers one word – "Absolutely."

Worth Gardner says, "When I came to CCM and Cincinnati, there was an emerging sense of identity. Style and artistry thrive there with ease and great resonance." He cites another crucial factor: "There is no great art without great patronage. The overwhelming generosity of the Corbett Foundation meant we had a laboratory to redefine an artistic landscape."

Gardner laid a foundation of creativity for the program before leaving to become artistic director at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. CCM's reputation was solidified and extended by his successor, Aubrey Berg, who first visited UC in 1987 as a guest director for a Hot Summer Night's production of *Nine*. He joined the faculty shortly and subsequently became the Patricia A. Corbett Distinguished Chair of Musical Theater in 1992, shaping the program into one of the nation's best with a reputation for discipline, innovation, professionalism and an indomitable will to succeed.

"I believe in the 'triple-threat' approach to musical theatre training," says Berg, "preparing young performers to sing and dance and act with equal accomplishment." Every student's individuality is highly valued, Berg explains. "Each is unique, and we seek to liberate the special qualities within every one of them. We do not favor a cookie-cutter approach to training."

Berg is known as a stern taskmaster who advances a piece of simple wisdom: "Give up the need for praise. Praise easily given renders itself meaningless. We instill in our students a strong sense of self-evaluation. They know when they have done good work and when it's time to spend an extra hour or two in the practice room."

During Gardner's era, incoming classes of about a dozen first-year students were the norm. Under Berg that number has grown to 20-25, now recruited from across the United States. Approximately 800 students are auditioned annually for each new class.

"While there are 50,000 out-of-work actors in New York City alone," Berg observes, "many of our graduates are performing on Broadway, Off-Broadway, in national touring productions and in every related field of the entertainment industry. A conservatory training program is an organic entity, growing with changes in the profession and by no means set in stone. We try to keep our training current, reflecting trends and fulfilling needs as they arise."

Many students from Berg's tenure have made successful careers. Aaron Lazar (1999), set to play a major role in this fall's Broadway revival of Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*, once asked Berg if "The Impossible Dream" could be cut from *Man of La Mancha*. "He was concerned the audience might find it dull," Berg chuckles. "But he stopped the show with it each night."

More recently, former student Karen Olivo accepted a 2009 Tony Award for her performance as Anita in the Broadway revival of *West Side Story*. Sharon Wheatley (1989) was in the original cast of *Avenue Q*, and Ashley Brown (2004) opened the Broadway production of *Mary Poppins* (now touring to Chicago and Los Angeles), in the original Broadway production, and Christy Altomare (2008) is Wendla in the touring production *Spring Awakening*. Berg says, "I always think, 'I knew you when,' and it still brings a great deal of satisfaction."

Working as a child performer in Chicago, Sam Samuelson (1989) met adult actors who had graduated from CCM. "I felt as though I had one choice – go to CCM or into another field of study!" After graduating, he performed in *Blood Brothers* on Broadway, toured in *Ragtime* and worked in several Off-Broadway productions. Now he's a talent agent in Chicago with a second office in New York City.

"I've built a music theater department and have talent in principal roles on Broadway and in tours. We represent Tony Award winners. I also own a theatre in a northern suburb of Chicago. My CCM training taught me to be resourceful and self-reliant, to be as prepared as possible, and how to work with other people. Big dreams can only be attained with a team!" (One team Samuelson particularly remembers was the 1989 cast

of *Hair*, in which he played Claude. "I can't believe they are doing it again. I mean, it's only been 20 years!")

Liz Pearce (2000) recently made her Broadway debut in the Tony Award-winning *Billy Elliott: The Musical*. "I simply would not be here without the training, support and encouragement I received from my teachers at CCM. The most important lesson I learned was perseverance. It's not enough just to want to perform. You have to constantly work at your craft." Careers like Pearce's are often launched by showcases that CCM seniors perform for producers and casting agents in New York City. "The showcase provides an extremely valuable introduction into New York's theater scene and is one of the most fantastic opportunities that CCM gave me," Pearce asserts. "I was signed by my agent who I am still with today, and I booked my first professional job. A school that provides that kind of steppingstone is the place to be!"

Some CCM grads find success in related careers. Erin Ortman (2000) grew up in Montana, but after seeing some Broadway shows, she knew, "This is what I want to be doing." She noticed CCM grads in many casts and decided it was the school for her. When she got in, she learned a saying from other students: "If you can make it through this program, New York will feel easy." However, by Ortman's third year, she knew she didn't want to be an actress. "I was drawn to teaching, directing and producing." Berg recognized her strengths. "He was a huge champion for me, allowing me to direct two classmates in a full-length musical and to direct the freshman showcase." Today Ortman is a faculty member with New York University's highly respected CAP 21 program. "I am teaching, directing and producing! Just like I figured I would be."

Berg inherited an excellent faculty, and he cites colleagues – scenic designers Shortt and Tom Umfrid, lighting designer Jim Gage, costumers Dean Mogle and Rebecca Senske and the make-up artist Kelly Yurko – along with his current team of choreographer Diane Lala and music director Roger Grodsky as essential to the education CCM offers.

With four decades of accomplishment, CCM has indeed established the model for musical theater training. Today other schools have copied what CCM created, but none does a better job offering a competitive conservatory environment that prepares triple-threat performers for careers in musical theater. Rouse, Gardner, Berg and the CCM faculty have molded talented students into working professionals who know how to perform and how to build careers and support themselves. With 40 years of alumni as a significant network of support for graduates, it's a certainty that CCM's illustrious program will continue to set the standard.

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