

Recipe for Success

Choosing your songs and honing your act for a particular booking can be a tough process. **Jennifer Reischel**, who recently performed in *Cabaret Confidential* at Pizza on the Park, shares her preparations for the musical theatre showcase

I have always felt that the moments before going on stage to commence a performance are not unlike taking part in an extreme sporting event. The combination of heightened energy, excitement and fear causes you to forget such trivialities as the bare shoulders of your cocktail dress or the heaviness of a fur coat under the heat of the spotlight.

I am perched on a stool at the back of famed London cabaret venue Pizza on the Park, the seconds ticking in my head echoing the clanking of cutlery and glasses of dining audience members hastening to finish their culinary creations before the entertainment of the night begins.

Suddenly the compere bounces on the stage, ready to warm up the room with some banter and songs. And then it's time for me to hit the microphone and begin my one-woman slot as part of the musical theatre showcase known as *Cabaret Confidential*.

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Later that day, a medley idea of parts I would like to play pops into my head and thanks to Facebook, I was reminded by my composer friend Nick Hutson of the *Too Tall Blues*. Having had many earfuls of my grumbling over height issues clashing with casting directors' specifications, Nick did what composers do best and turned my woes and insecurities into a lamenting comedy piece of musical theatre.

Song choices came and went, and I discovered that the key is to combine my knowledge and influence of the musical theatre golden era and cabaret greats with my own desires and needs as a musical artist and person. And so I continued arranging, with the assistance of my multi-talented singing teacher, musical director and general musical accomplice Heather Weir – "Can you help me melt a G major chord into an E flat major diminished minor?" – tweaking, observing, trying out and, most of all, figuring out what doesn't work.

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When I first got the email in November confirming my appearance, it immediately seemed a tempting venture and three months for preparation seemed aptly.

Challenges soon became apparent though. How do you write an act when you possess only rudimentary scene writing and music theory skills?

Where on earth do you start putting together half an hour's worth of material to keep an audience suitably satisfied and on their toes with continual elements of surprise?

My subconscious then battled this process out regularly in my dreams, causing me to wake up in the middle of the night, agonizing over song choices and act structure.

After literally surrounding myself with every piece of sheet music in my possession for an entire weekend, keeping Judy Garland – the Concert Years running on repeat on my DVD player and spending far too much time “researching” unique material on YouTube, it became clear that I was going round in circles.

So I stripped myself of my tuneless distractions, shoved all papers under my bed and forced myself to concentrate on my most valuable asset in the process – namely, myself.

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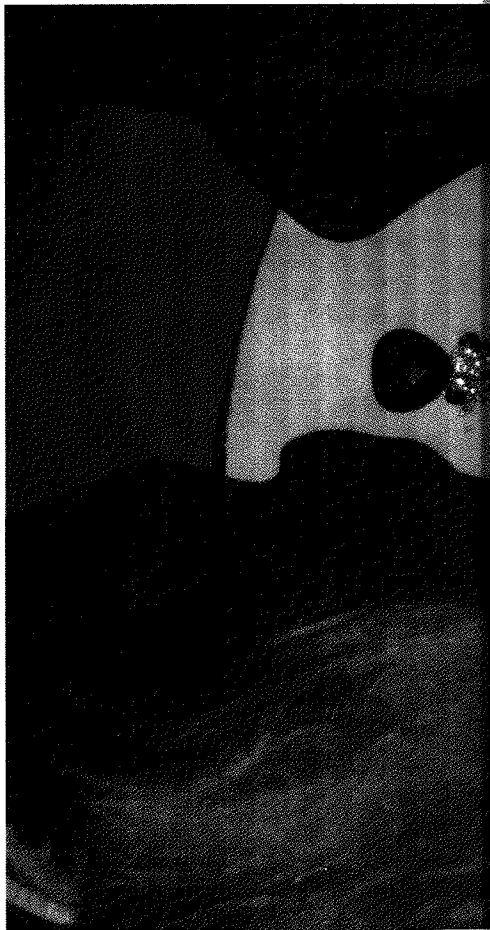
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As the act slowly came together in my head as well as on paper and in my body, I was equally occupied juggling marketing and self-promotion on various networking sites with outfit shopping at every vintage store in London.

Sadly, the Too Tall Blues was as ever, right on the button and in order not to commit any faux pas wardrobe malfunctions on the night, I ended up having to invest in a rather formal piece of American upmarket evening wear. Ironically, the garment is overly lengthy, even for a six-foot Amazon such as yours truly. Still, as ever, it was a great excuse to invest in a new pair of stage heels and, of course, a new matching lipstick was more than necessary.

Ever the multi-tasker, I also became best friends with the scanning machine, converting endless pieces of sheet music to PDFs and sending them on to my accompanist. Equally, the elevators at my day job played their part as handy resonating warm-up chambers and ever-forgiving, silent spectators to my cabaret trials and tribulations.

The time came to put all that planning into practice, culminating in rehearsals at a garage housing the



Jennifer Reischel in her stage wear just before her performance at Pizza on the Park

apple of my eye – a Yamaha upright. Simply far too expedient a possession really for any average actor's digs, it lives in storage, comfortably surrounded by a washing machine, tumble dryer and heating pipes.

The hour flew by and the more we covered, the more unveiled itself as needing to be perfected. The importance of these intense, one on one sessions became even more apparent as we were very aware that it was not possible to complete any full run-throughs at the venue itself and that we would have to rely on a short technical session on the day, an hour before the show, to sort out any last-minute issues.

The pianist vamps up the introduction as I squeeze through tight-knit tables and past vividly coloured shirts to make it on to the podium. A microphone stand is located to my left, a baby grand piano on my right as I look out on to a sea of eagerly anticipating faces in front of me. Sondheim's seemingly apt lyrics from *Follies* – “No, don't look at me, not just yet...”

– pop into my head, but I take a deep breath and as intended, start my opening medley from *Gypsy*.

The rest is all a blur and I lose all sense of time throwing myself into moment after moment. Somehow gliding off the stage at the end of it all just before the interval, I am proudly informed that I completed my performance in 29 minutes, just four minutes over my official allotment. Lips dry and head spinning, I down a jug of water before settling in my seat to enjoy the rest of the showcase and some of West End's prominent leading ladies – this time from the opposite perspective.

A few days later, I receive an email confirming total number of ticket sales and my own personal earnings for the evening – \$68 exactly. So, in the words of Glenda Jackson: “You've got to sing like you don't need the money.”

Jennifer Reischel is the author of So You Want to Tread the Boards. See www.performingarts-auditionguide.com