

# Nicholas Muni

## Seminar Series for Opera

### **Description**

Building a successful career in opera is a multi-faceted and long-term pursuit. Beyond the principal requirement of a healthy and secure vocal technique, an opera singer must be a good actor, learn how to audition effectively and know how to handle the logistics of a career. Those are the foci of this seminar series: acting, auditioning and professional development.

Good acting is a combination of clear analysis, emotional/physical expressivity and practical stagecraft techniques. This series addresses all three of these aspects, achieving concrete results quickly and effectively within the normally limited time constraints of a seminar format.

Each of the following classes is a free-standing event, so that students who are not able to attend the entire series can benefit from the topics covered in each one. The four Core Acting Seminars and The Complete Audition Seminar consist of an interactive "chat" of approximately 15-20 minutes to explain the concepts and techniques that will be covered in that class, followed by working sessions with 4 singers of approximately 20 minutes each, leaving about 20 minutes for Q & A.

For developing stage directors and designers, if applicable to your student body, the principal focus of this class is how to develop a powerful and coherent production concept. Unlike directing in Europe, young American directors often create their first productions on rented scenery and costumes, which bypasses the concept development phase.

This proposal is structured in a "menu" format enabling you to choose from among numerous options, depending on what you feel would be most valuable for your students. They are designed to be two hours in length, but could be longer if desired. And there is always the possibility of custom-crafting and combining classes, depending on the needs of the students.

For the Stage Directing/Design seminar, I would recommend 3 hours depending on how many directing students are involved.

**Seminars marked with an "\*" also work well in a virtual learning environment and are now being offered.**

### **Seminar Descriptions**

#### **\*Core Acting I**

This class presents the "physics of theater". In the same way that the law of gravity goes largely unnoticed but dictates many aspects of our physical reality, there are "invisible forces" that are an inherent part of theater-making. These forces operate under the radar but are extremely powerful. To understand them is to leverage their power and become a more effective artist. 4 singers will present material in working sessions.

### **\*Core Acting II**

This class focuses on fundamental analysis and acting techniques that will quickly put a singer onto a powerful acting track. It offers tools that are extremely *practical* that can immediately be applied to any work at hand, including song literature. 4 singers will present material in working sessions.

### **Core Acting III**

This class will explore the relationship between body awareness and story-telling, as well as how a tension-free body promotes free and expressive singing. In the form of group exercises, we will explore the concepts and then apply them to material presented by individual singers. 4 singers will present material in working sessions.

### **Core Acting IV**

This class on stagecraft will take a deep dive into the critical but widely misunderstood technique of “cheating out”. It will instruct the singers on how to allow the audience to fully witness aural and facial expression without destroying belief in the character/situation. In addition to volunteers for demonstrating the techniques, 4 singers will present material in working sessions.

### **\*The Complete Audition**

This class offers a **comprehensive** view of the audition process as well as practical techniques to improve the audition presentation. 4 singers will present “mock” auditions.

### **\*Professional Development**

This class examines the “nuts and bolts” of a professional career. It is a lecture format with a continuous Q & A current. Printed handouts will be provided.

### **\*Stage Directing/Design Seminar *Konzeptregie***

This class focuses on the process of crafting a production concept. Textual/musical analysis and decoding, dramaturgy, imagery research, creating the world: choosing time period and location, single environment productions, lighting and projected imagery.

In addition to these seminar classes, I could offer private coachings for as many students as time and space will permit.

*Below are detailed descriptions of each seminar for those who would like more in-depth information.*

## **\*Core Acting I** (detailed description)

Among the topics covered:

### **The Brass Ring**

*The raison d'être of art-making is to compel the audience to feel through complete submersion in the story being told.*

### **The Fundamental Sequence**

*There is a psycho-emotional sequence that occurs within each audience member during any performance: Believe >>> Infer >>> Invest >>> Feel. This is the sequence an audience member follows on the road to being moved by a performance. The artist's responsibility is step one in this sequence: believe.*

### **The Unspoken "Contract" of Theater-Making between Artists & Audience**

1) Artifice: The audience understands and accepts that everything they witness is artifice. The main job of the actor is to make the audience forget this fact.

2) Voyeur: Each audience member wants to be a voyeur of the event onstage. The actor agrees that they must enable the audience to see and hear all critical information and (in some theatrical styles) simultaneously support the audiences' belief that the actors are unaware of their presence.

3) Improvised: The audience accepts that the event has been carefully rehearsed. But the actors agree to compel the audience to believe it is all happening for the first time.

4) Choice: For the audience, everything that is witnessed is assumed to be an artistic choice. Whether or not the producers or actors have made choices on every detail is irrelevant: everything will be **perceived** as a choice.

5) It's all one thing: The audience perceives everything as one massive gesture. The producers and actors agree to keep the seams between the various components invisible.

6) No one will get physically hurt: Without certainty of physical safety for the actors, the audience can't transcend into a feeling state.

### **You are always the Character...but the Character is never You**

*If you have any anxiety about adequately "becoming" the character, you can relax. The moment the curtain goes up, the audience fully accepts that you are "Pamina" because you are the only "Pamina" we have. You can feel confident in that. The work is then about sustaining their belief that you are "Pamina".*

*But no matter what "Pamina" does, she is never you. Understanding this concept will free you to fully step into the character's shoes, no matter what the character is like or what they may say or do in the story.*

### **Separate what the artist knows from what the character knows**

*Reminding ourselves of this obvious fact is critical to powerful theater-making.*

We must never allow what we know as artists to inadvertently carry over into the depiction of the character. What the artist knows must remain invisible to the audience.

### **Invisible Reality and Unseen Scenes**

Imagine an iceberg. The huge portion of it beneath the water supports the much smaller portion we see above. Regardless of the size of the iceberg, the proportion of visible to invisible remains the same: 1/9 visible to 8/9 invisible. The actor's work lies, in large part, in the unseen portion. The richer and more specific the unseen portion, the more powerful the visible portion will be.

### **The Law of One**

The ritual we call "theater" does not tolerate redundancy or anything that is unnecessary.

### **There are no absolute right or wrong answers in theater-making**

"There are no right or wrong answers" has become a cliché of entitlement. But in theater (and art) it is absolutely true. While there are some "facts" that belong in the realm of "right" and "wrong", the answers to most creative questions ("What if?", "What is the character's motivation?", etc.) don't fit into that realm. The answers to these types of questions are not right or wrong in any absolute sense. However, there is a standard to be met: are they, theatrically speaking, more effective or less? More tension-producing or less tension-producing? More inspiring or less inspiring? Only in this sense are answers "right" or "wrong".

### **Real versus Believable & You are not Alone**

What the actor feels during a performance is not necessarily what the audience "gets". What makes an audience feel emotion is a combination of what the artists are doing and other invisible forces such as context, expectation, audience inference and investment. Powerful acting is easier than you think if you understand these invisible "assistants".

### **The Alternative drama: a lesson from Quantum Physics**

In some theorems within the science of Quantum Physics, it is implied that in any given moment, an infinite number of realities may simultaneously exist. Which of those realities ends up being experienced by each of us is determined by which path we turn our attention towards.

The author gives us the text, the sequence of events, the story. And that road map must be followed if the actors wish to present the intentions of the author to an audience. However, the characters do not know the text or sequence of events **in advance**. They have no idea they are involved in a story. To them, the events are simply part of their lives—their reality. While the character may have expectations of what is coming next, they are not certain. And the uncertainty itself creates tension and excitement. By embracing this notion, and by exploring actions/possibilities that are alternatives to the given plot and text, the illusion of spontaneity can be fully achieved.

In addition to working sessions with four singers to illustrate these concepts, there will be some improvisatory work with volunteer members from among the attendees.

## **\*Core Acting II** (detailed description)

### **The First Fundamental Secret of Great Acting:**

#### **Answer the Five Magic Questions**

*What does your character want (the objective)? What is the best way to achieve the goal (alternatives)? What is preventing him/her from obtaining it (the obstacle)? What must he/she do to overcome that obstacle (the action)? What are the rewards/risks if he or she does/doesn't succeed (the stakes)?*

*Learning how to answer these questions is more vital than one might think and I teach a specific technique to discover answers that are potent and can be played by the singing actor with specificity and point.*

### **The Second Fundamental Secret of Great Acting:**

#### **Separate what the artist knows from what the character knows**

*Imagine acting as a computer. What is visible on the screen is what the audience sees. But what creates the images on the screen are millions of calculations and transactions, dozens of active programs and other procedures that remain invisible to the viewer. What the artist knows must remain invisible to the audience, so that they only experience the character.*

### **The Third Fundamental Secret of Great Acting:**

#### **Transform your obstacle (true action)**

*Your obstacle can be another person (Scarpia), it can be an aspect of your own character ("the reckless part of me"), it can be an abstract force (God, Fate, Luck, Love, Time, etc.) or it can be something physical, like a locked door. You must overcome this obstacle by transforming it, in order to achieve your goal. **True action is the attempt to cause change.** Success or failure in this pursuit is irrelevant, it is the attempt to cause change that creates dramatic tension. For examples: transforming a resistant father into an open-minded father in order to marry the person you love or transforming your own hesitation into boldness in order to propose marriage to the person you love.*

Associated topics:

Translation: *Literal, syntactical, paraphrase. Knowing the material at this level of detail provides fertile ground for confidence and enables you to fully engage your creative imagination.*

The Magic of Paraphrasing: *Putting the material into the singer's own words brings immediacy, emotional connection and depth to whatever is being sung. Through a systematic approach, the discoveries made by putting the material into the singer's own words are transferred: first to speaking the given text and finally to singing the given text and music.*

The Illusion of Spontaneity: *When the audience is tricked into believing that everything they are witnessing is occurring for the first time, they can transcend into a feeling state. It's as simple (and as challenging) as that.*

Privacy in Public; Fourth wall or “audience as voyeurs”: *In this continuing age of “naturalism” on the opera stage, it is essential to have a solid grasp of this concept and an understanding of what drives the need for it. I teach simple techniques of how to sustain the illusion of privacy in public.*

Subtext and Unique interpretations: *What the very finest directors look for are interpretations that are “interesting”. What does that mean and how do we create such interpretations? We will explore techniques on how to lower inhibition, enabling the singer to gain access to their own subconscious richness—and then how to translate that emotional richness into a concrete acting reality. A vital technique to succeeding in the modern world of opera acting is creating subtext. What is subtext exactly? How does one generate it, become conversant in it and express it clearly?*

## **Core Acting III** (detailed description)

### **Body Language**

*Understanding the basic, universal visual signals of body language and what they communicate is vital for making powerful acting choices. However, the additional aspect we focus on is how to integrate these body language signals with the singer's posture to promote healthy singing.*

### **Body Neutral**

*Communication starts with a clear, blank slate.*

*Nothingness. Emptiness. Neutrality.*

*It is a state where anything is possible because we start with nothingness.*

### **The Flop**

*The “Flop” is a helpful technique to check whether or not the singer-actor's vocal technique is free of inappropriate muscle or muscle group engagement. It is especially useful for detecting subtle, even invisible-to-the-eye inappropriate muscular tension in shoulders, arms, hands and legs.*

### **Focus: Inner, Near, Far, Infinite**

*The eyes tell stories. Exactly how are eyes expressive? Not the face (eyebrows, the forehead, the muscle groups around the eyes), but the eyes themselves? One way in which eyes tell stories is where they appear to be focused in a particular way.*

### **“Thinking Eyes”, “Singer stare” and Balconies**

*The main value of simulating “thinking eyes” is that it immediately and clearly creates the illusion that the words your character is saying or the decisions your character is considering are all happening for the first time. It creates a spontaneous look/feel. This spontaneous look/feel instantly makes the audience believe in the character and situation, aided by the audience's willing suspension of disbelief that is one of the prime tenants of theater.*

### **Focus change sequence: thought—eyes/head—body**

*In the acting style called naturalism, there is a certain change-of-focus sequence that is read by an audience as “natural”, and therefore believable.*

### **Breathing and heart rate as acting partners**

*I've always been astounded at how clearly breathing reads from the back of the theater. Breathing seems like such an intimate action, yet its message carries great distances.*

## **Core Acting IV** (detailed description)

Through volunteer participation, we will demonstrate the following techniques and then apply those techniques to the presented material.

### **Accidentally on purpose: cheating out**

*The phrase “cheat out” seems to encourage bad acting choices. A more accurate phrase (though far too lengthy) might be “accidentally-on-purpose allow the audience to eavesdrop or witness the full impact of your facial and vocal expression”. How does the artist accomplish while at the same time compelling the audience to believe they are voyeurs observing a “slice of life”?*

### **Character Connection and Audience Access**

*This is the ultimate goal of all acting, whether in film or stage work, but different techniques are needed because of the differences between the various media—and it is vital to recognize those differences, and understand how they function, in order to capitalize on them.*

### **Playing scenes in Profile**

*This is one of the most common mistakes for a singer-actor (even for theater actors). I encounter it constantly when directing opera, even with seasoned professionals, and it has prompted me to develop techniques for how the singing actor can avoid this trap.*

### **GPS (Global Positioning Status) and Diagonals**

*GPS refers to where you are located within a space, the “latitude and longitude” coordinates of where your body is at any given point. GPS Positioning in the space tells stories. Even if you were to eradicate all facial and body language expression, your position would tell a story: positioned in the center of the space tells a story, positioned far upstage tells a different story, positioned far to stage right tells yet another story.*

### **POV (Point Of View), a.k.a. Body Angle and Shape**

*POV refers to the shape your body is making at any given moment, regardless of the GPS positioning. Standing, sitting, crouching are attributes. Body angles: facing straight downstage, facing towards stage right, facing upstage are attributes. Body language: slumped, weight on one foot, looking up—these are all attributes that can be put at the service of depicting character and story-telling.*

### **Monitoring and Communicating over the shoulder**

*This is an excellent technique to solve issues arising from profile singing. From the DS position, turned slightly away from the US character, the DS character intensely monitors the US character over his/her shoulder, listening carefully to his/her words, trying to interpret the silent reactions, trying to sense his/her “vibes”, waiting for a response, etc.*

### **“Side eyes”**

*Another extremely useful tool is the use of “side eyes” which allows connection to another character while allowing the audience full access to aural and facial expression.*



**Talking "through" the back of your partner's head**

*This is a useful technique for the US character in a diagonal relationship because it enables the actor to avoid getting into a profile singing position.*

**"Wrapping" the end of a line**

*This technique can be used in the diagonal relationship by either the US actor or the DS actor, helping to maintain connection while allowing the audience to receive critical information.*

**Developing us of the 60° Slice of Pie**

*In a proscenium theater configuration, this refers to the optimal angle range you must be singing in for the audience to hear and see your face most fully. If "0 degrees" is facing directly toward the audience, then angling about 30° to either side is the maximum amount a singer-actor's face should be angled away from 0°.*

**Throw away lines to keep it honest**

*It is important to identify a small number of lines that you can "throw away" either profile or upstage. The reason this is important is that it helps further convince the audience that you, as a character, are not aware of the existence of an audience in a particular, fixed direction. It helps solidify the illusion that your character exists in a 360° world; it completes the "fourth wall".*

**Turning Away versus Turning Towards**

*There is an immense, and completely perceivable, difference between a character turning away from someone/something and turning toward someone/something. A powerful technique when your character is in the DS position of a diagonal relationship.*

## **\*The Complete Audition** (detailed description)

We will start with an overview (accompanied by a printed handout) of the following concepts and then four singers will perform mock auditions (one of which should be a monologue), and be given feedback and suggested refinements for their presentation.

- Understanding the psychology: Helping the artist understand the bigger picture of casting creates a healthy perspective--and more success in auditioning.
- Understanding "Fach": Vocal Range, Tessitura, Color, Texture, Amplitude, Articulation types, Temperament types, Physical Types. How to decide whether a role is right for you.
- Dossier building: Information empowers the singer. An organized approach to information-gathering on the company for whom the singer is auditioning.
- Cover letter, Resume and Head shot: The power and effect of this "paper audition" is often underestimated. Simple, specific points on how to create the most effective cover letter and resume.
- Repertoire List: Simple techniques of how to put together a rep list which puts your best foot forward.
- Appearance: Basic concepts which empower the singer to make choices that will enhance their visual impact.
- Impressions: Entrance, Announcement(s) and Exit.
- Presentation: Where should I focus my eyes? How much should I gesture? How much can I move around? Should I pantomime the use of props?
- Interpretation, Basics: Finding the true action in the piece—how to determine the actions verbs; creating a journey (beginning, middle, end) for the piece, so that something is actually happening—and is therefore riveting.
- Interpretation, Advanced: How to create off-center or "interesting" interpretations. How to develop subtext. How to develop inner monologue.
- Follow-up: What appropriate and productive steps to take after the audition.

### **The Cyber Resume: Websites**

Having a resume online, available for viewing 24/7, is both a great idea and very easy to do. Tips on creating a powerful website.

### **The Paper audition: Resume**

Instruction on how to create the most effective resume possible.

### **The Image Audition: Head Shot**

You might think the only purpose of the head shot is providing accurate identification. But the other purpose, equally if not more important, is to help the viewer make the leap to imagine you onstage.

### **The Screening audition: CDs and DVDs**

Increasingly, training programs and competitions are requiring a CD or DVD as part of the application. Tips on putting your best foot forward.

### **The Cyber Audition: YouTube and Social media**

The internet is here to stay and evolving all the time. "Going viral" can be a friend or a foe.

**Audition Preparation: Choice of arias**

*The rule of thumb for choosing what to present at an audition is to sing what you do best. First impressions are the most lasting.*

**Extraordinarily long arias**

*If any of your selections are very long pieces, you might consider preparing and offering a cut version as a possibility and offering it as an alternative choice.*

**Over-exposed arias**

*Be sensitive about programming arias that are extremely common and can unintentionally start things off with a negative feeling.*

**Arias that show very little**

*There are some arias that are lovely, but do not expose the voice enough for a useful evaluation.*

**Audition Preparation: Monologues**

*Requests for a short monologue are increasingly common. How to identify a good choice.*

**Overall audition folder preparation: the do's and don'ts**

*Nothing is more distracting and irritating than when an accompanist opens your folder and sees a complete mess.*

**Audition Preparation: Hallway behavior and Finding what works for you**

*You are nervous and focused on how your voice is functioning, remembering your text and music. Still, it is important to establish a habit of behaving politely and in a friendly manner while waiting to go into your audition.*

**Audition Preparation: When and how to cancel**

*After you've gone to a lot of trouble and expense to obtain the audition, it is very difficult to be in a condition that forces you to cancel. It can be a very difficult judgment call.*

**The Presentation**

*FAQs: How much "acting" and movement is appropriate? What gestures are appropriate? Should I use props? What about "prop arias" like "Dies Bildniss" or The jewel song? Where should I look/focus?*

## **\*Professional Development** (detailed description)

Among the topics included in this seminar:

### **Vocation or Avocation?**

*How to do an honest assessment of whether or not a professional singing career is really the right path for you. Discarding the destructive attitude that singing as an amateur pursuit devalues you.*

### **Opera or a cure for cancer?**

*A healthy question to ask from time to time is: does opera help the state of my community, the world at large and if so, how?*

### **Working with management**

#### **Types of managers**

*All managers are not the same. There are three basic types of managers: a **business manager**, an **impresario manager** and a **publicist manager***

#### **Your relationship with your manager**

*Think of any manager as a potential business partner.*

#### **Timing for management**

*How do you know when you are "ready" for management?*

#### **Life before Management**

*Prior to the time when you begin working with a manager, how do you "manage" yourself?*

#### **Getting your own auditions**

*It is definitely true that a number of companies only audition singers who already have a manager. How to enhance your chances for getting auditions.*

#### **Negotiating your own contracts**

*Inevitably, you will get some offers, even without a manager. When this happens, you will face the situation of negotiating a compensation package for yourself. Simple techniques and tips for success.*

#### **Long Range planning**

*Your career is your business. Like any successful business it needs a well thought-out plan. And so does your personal life. How to craft a long range plan that will get you where you want to go.*

#### **Budgeting**

*How a simple, honest budget can reduce the stress of the unknown and provide the security of an on-going reality check.*

## **\*Stage Directing and Design Seminar: Konzeptregie**

(detailed description)

### **Script Analysis**

- > Identifying the “catalytic action”, the event/decision that propels the story into being.
- > Identifying the “climactic action”, the event/decision that determines how the opera will end.
- > Identifying the central character of the piece and/or of your production
- > Creating the “critical path”, identifying those actions/decisions without which the opera would cease to continue.
- > Developing the “this is a story about...” statement or the “mission statement” of the production.
- > Character analysis. How to strip away bias and assumptions to get to the truth of each character.
- > Identifying themes and recurring imagery in the script.
- > “De-coding” music and text created in a remote period and culture.
- > How to avoid clichés and generic interpretations.
- > Thinking outside the box: achieving “freshness” while avoiding gimmicks and shock effect.
- > Updating: value and pitfalls.
- > Musical research to spark the imagination.
- > Imagery research to fuel the conceptual direction.
- > Working backwards from the given ending to create interest and intensity.

### **Space and Architecture**

- > The three “natural” parameters: space, time and resources.
- > The “unnatural” parameters: aesthetics, taste and caution.
- > Scenic locations: stripping the script down to absolute essentials.
- > Guiding the eye to affect the heart. Story-telling through architectural shape.
- > Acoustical considerations as part of the conceptual and design approach.