



**HOW TO SUCCEED  
IN SHOW BUSINESS  
BY  
REALLY, REALLY  
TRYING!**

**GUIDANCE and INSIGHTS  
for**

**ASPIRING SINGERS, ACTORS and DANCERS**

**AN APPRENTICESHIP OF THE MIND**

**With**

**Dr. John McDonnell Tierney, PhD**

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***“This book is all that I need.  
How to succeed.”***

from How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying

## TOPICS

[To be read in no particular order.]

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**THIS IS NOT YOUR TYPICAL  
“HOW TO SUCCEED” BOOK**

This book is different!

It is not your typical How to Succeed Book.

Most “How to Succeed” books tell you that you can and will succeed if only you believe in yourself and never give up pursuing your dreams, you know the song!

*This is my quest, to follow that star,  
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far.”*  
from *The Man of LaMancha* by Mitch Leigh

This, of course, is the anthem of all us dreamers: *The Impossible Dream*.  
Have you ever given thought to the *title* of our anthem?

Look up the definition of “impossible.”

## THE POSSIBLE DREAM

This book is about “The Possible Dream” and it challenges you to honestly evaluate whether “success in show business; or, “success in musical theater” is, in fact, really, really “possible” for the person you are, the brain that you have, and the body you live in. If it isn’t, then no matter how much you “really, really try,” chances are not good for your success.

Again, this book is different. Most How To books in the theater have been written by well-known and even not-so-well practitioners in the theater, producers and directors. This book is written by a psychologist/musician and a teacher who has “practiced” the musical theater arts for more than sixty years.

And, finally, this book is different in that it will neither encourage nor discourage you to “follow that star,” it will simply provide some insight into what it takes to make the journey. If this is at all disconcerting to you, we will refer you to an alternative title: *How To Succeed In Musical Theater Without Really Trying by Chris Will*. Otherwise, we invite you to join Dr. John McDonnell Tierney, aka “Dr.T.” as he shares guidance and insights that may “really, really” help you determine if your dreams are really, really possible...or maybe not.

We set you off on your journey of personal discovery with some sage advice given to generations of aspiring singers, dancers, and actors.

***“Don’t give up your day job!”***

**TEACHERS, STUDENTS,  
MENTORS and PROTÉGÉS**

*“Willkommen! Bienvenue! Welcome!  
Happy to see you, bleibe, reste, stay!  
Meine Damen und Herren, Mes Dames et Messieurs,  
Ladies and gentlemen, Guten abend! Bon soir!  
Good evening! I am your host!”*  
from Cabaret by Joe Masteroff

Greetings and Welcome! Thank you for picking up this little book. Perhaps you were intrigued by the title: How To Succeed In Show Business By Really, Really Trying? If succeeding in Show Business is what you want to do, then I might be able to help you.

Hello, my name is John McDonnell Tierney. I am a teacher, a retired Professor of Music Education and Educational Psychology, my students called me “Dr. T.” I hold advanced degrees in both fields and, more importantly, I have over fifty years professional experience **teaching** literally thousands of **students** and **mentoring** dozens of **protégés**.

The Mentor/Protégé relationship is very different from the traditional Teacher/Student relationship. The latter, especially in Higher Education, is fleeting at best. As a **Teacher** (aka. Professor), I would see students twice a week for 1:15 minutes or thrice for 45:00 minutes for one semester and then they were gone. Oh sure, there were a few who kept in touch, for a while, and then they too were gone.

As a **Mentor**, however, I often sat with kids in the Student Union Cafeteria just sort of chatting over a “cuppa joe.” And, sometimes those chats evolved into true mentorships as students evolved into protégés. And that, for many, was a really important relationship at that moment in their lives. In fact, many of my protégés have gone on to succeed in show business and in life as well.

Actually, I was an apprentice to a Master myself. His name was Larry Weed and he was a Professor of Lower Brass at UMASS and the most amazing trombone player I had ever heard. I became his defacto apprentice when I entered the Master of Music Performance Program in 1967. Larry would send me to substitute for him when he could not make a symphony rehearsal or studio recording session. I always strived to be worthy of his trust and agonized when I felt I had let him down. I recall playing a wrong note in a Mahler Symphony, a G instead of a Gb, with the Springfield (Mass) Symphony Orchestra while subbing for Larry. I replayed that note in my head for a long time, forgetting the thousands of notes I had played correctly. That was before I learned to let such agonies go; they are cautionary tales only. So, I offer myself as a Mentor (cognitive or otherwise) to you, having personally benefitted from having been a protégé myself. For what it’s worth: I went on to a long career as a professional trombone player, paralleling my career as an educator. So, I know how good the Mentor-Protégé relationship was for me and I know how good it can be for you.

So, why not meet me in the Student Union? Pull up a chair and let’s chat. We will see where that takes us. Let’s begin with a little history.

## A LITTLE HISTORY

*“Anything you can do, I can do better  
I can do anything better than you  
Anything you can be I can be greater  
Sooner or later, I'm greater than you  
Any note you can reach, I can go higher  
I can sing anything higher than you.”*

from Annie Get Your Gun by Dorothy and Herbert Fields

For most of human history, if you wanted to learn how to do something (a task), you did so by watching other, more experienced people, and approximating their behaviors. Many times these tasks were a matter of life and death: making fire, finding shelter, hunting and gathering.

By mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, as tasks (tanning leather, forging tools, weaving cloth) became more complex, a more formalized approach to learning emerged: apprenticeships. The first apprenticeship system of training was introduced in 1563 and it specified that Masters should have no more than three apprentices and apprenticeships should last seven years (which, incidentally, is the time it took me to complete a PhD.) Apprentices would begin by doing the most menial tasks –emptying the Tanner’s rancid curing vats, stoking the Blacksmith’s fire, sweeping the floor in the Weaver’s Shop - perhaps to emerge seven years later ready and able to establish their own shops, to become Masters themselves, and to take on a new generation of apprentices to carry on the legacy of their Masters and their Master’s Masters.

Fast forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when the way people learned to how do most complex tasks was in schools: reading, writing, computing, singing, dancing - from pre-schools to graduate schools, to training schools, to schools that do not call themselves schools – academies, institutes, conservatories and the like.

Towards the end of the Century, some “backward-looking” educators revisited the apprenticeship model imagining a kind of “Apprenticeship of the Mind” and, although they substituted “mentor” for “master” and “protégé” for “apprentice,” the relationship among and between stakeholders was the same. These Cognitive Apprenticeship Models focused on learning-through-guided-experience and on cognitive skills and processes instead of the physically concrete craft that characterize traditional apprenticeships. The model is aimed primarily at helping protégés learn the problem-solving processes that experts (Mentors) use **to handle complex tasks**. And that, dear Protégé is what this particular “Apprenticeship of the Mind” is all about.

Succeeding in show business is a **complex task** made of complex sub-tasks that themselves are made up of complex sub-sub tasks; kind of like idea of "Turtles All The Way Down," the myth held by some cultures of a “World Turtle” that supports the Earth on its back.

## TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN

There is an old story about a young protégé challenging his Master when told of the Turtles that support the Earth. “*If the earth rests on the back of a turtle, what does the turtle rest on?*” he inquires. To which the Master replies, “*Another Turtle.*” Not satisfied, the protégé persists, “*But, on what does that second turtle rest?*” To which the Master replies, “*Another turtle, and then another, and another...it’s turtles all the way down!*” Similarly, in our art, its **tasks all the way down**. So then, the purpose of this book is to highlight some of those tasks and to describe how experts accomplish them.

## EXPERTS AND EXPERTISE

Experts are generally described as folks who have had 5,000 to 10,000 hours of authentic practice in a field or a domain. Even at the low end, 5K, that’s an awful lot of time taking many years to achieve. The actual and demonstrateable “expertise” of experts are usually limited to one or a few domains of practice. For example, after more than half-a-century of professional practice in music and musical theater, I have logged in my required 5,000 hours and counting. So, technically at least, I am an expert and it is my task to draw on that expertise to create an apprenticeship in which you can, in fact, begin and/or continue logging in your hours. The good news is that experts had to start somewhere; you can start wherever you are and learn how to do some of the things that experts do. And to do that, it is extremely helpful to also know how experts think, plan, organize, and manage their practice.

## AN APPRENTICESHIP OF THE MIND

In this “Apprenticeship of the Mind” you will have the opportunity to learn the problem-solving processes that this expert (that’d be me!) uses to handle the complex tasks associated with professional practice in the performing arts, specifically my professional practices as I carry on the business of a composer, a playwright, and a theatrical producer with an Off-Broadway track record, and especially the language (the words) I use to talk and think about my work.

### WORDS

*“Talk in everlasting words  
and dedicate them all to me.  
And I will give you all my life;  
I’m here if you should call to me.*  
from “Words” by The Bee Gees

The first thing you need to know, if you are to be my protégé, is what I mean by the words I use. I will, of course, use the English language.

In our Mentor-Protégé relationship, we’ll need not only the English language generally; we will also need context-specific language. So, let’s consider the words in the title of this book not “generally,” but very specifically in the context of *you* “really, really trying” to succeed in show business.

So let us now consider the meaning of the words in the title of this book.

***How to...Succeed...In Show Business...by Really, Really Trying***

**“How to...”** From the moment of birth to the moment of death, we are always learning how to do things; *how to* find our mother’s breast; *how to* go gently into that long good night. In psychology we call that procedural knowledge. In show business there is a whole lot of stuff we need to know how to do. If your goal to succeed as a performer in our business, well then you need to know *how to* sing, act, dance and do a lot of other stuff at professional levels.

**“...succeed...”** When we were casting for the 2019 Off-Broadway premiere of *Humanity’s Child*, we had more than 200 applicants, auditioned 45 and selected 12. When we interviewed the 45, we asked them about their goals. To a person, goals were things like, *“I want to be in, or often star in, a Broadway Musical.”* Or, *“I want to live out my dreams.”* Or, *“I want touch the hearts of other people.”* Nobody said, *“I want to make a good living, for a long time, doing what I like to do.”* Broadway Musicals open and close, many very quickly. The dreams of youth give way to reality and “other people” go away taking their hearts with them. And you? You are left with memories. Hey, memories are great and I have a ton of them. But, memories do not pay the mortgage. In show business there will be a whole lot of memories to be made and, with the “good luck” previously wished upon you, successes to be achieved; and we’ll be getting to that soon. For now, let us agree that if your goal is to be in a Broadway Show, then “success” is getting cast in a Broadway show.

However, if your goal is to “...to make a good living, for a long time, doing what you like to do,” then “success” is getting cast in a Broadway show. And then, getting cast in another after that one closes, and another; and another, always thinking about the next show and the next success, understanding that, like the turtles, success rests on the back of other successes. If one turtle slips, the earth may tumble.

So it is “...*in show business.*” You know what I mean by “show.” You’ve been in “shows,” right? You have “shown” your skills and talents to other people, right? And, you probably have an inkling as to the meaning of “business,” having sold tickets to many shows that you’ve been in. Still, in the interest of clarity, we will define “show business” to mean singing, dancing, and acting, i.e., practices and occupations that comprise the Musical Theater Arts. And that is a big part of what you may learn in this apprenticeship of the mind....*by “really, really trying”*

The word “trying” appears in the title of this book because I was “trying” to be clever with my play on words referencing “How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying” the 1961 musical by Frank Loesser. For now, let us agree that “trying” means “making a genuine effort over time to accomplish a goal.” The first “really” means: in actual fact, as opposed to what is said or imagined to be true or possible. And the second “really” is tacked on to say, “*Hey, I’m serious. You really, really need to make a consistent and genuine effort.*” No one can do that for you. But if you agree, to really, really try to succeed, then I can offer some guidance and insights as to how to do that. Now, pay attention...ideas, concepts, stories, definitions, histories...will fly by very quickly. Don’t get left behind!

## NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS

*“There's no business like show business like no business I know.  
Everything about it is appealing, everything that traffic will allow.*

*Nowhere can you get that happy feeling*

*When you are stealing that extra bow.”*

No Business Like Show Business from Annie Get Your Gun

Like the lyrics of so many songs, these from *Annie Get Your Gun* are appealing but, regretfully, not true. I can think of several businesses that are “like” show business; the Hotel Business for example. They have actors who wear costumes and recite scripts; their sets have been designed as has their lighting; they rely on marketing to attract an audience...the similarities go on.

And how about that second line, “*Everything about it is appealing?*” Waiting for hours in line at an audition only to be told the role has been filled; going to rehearsals after working all-day in the coffee-shop; sharing a small flat in Brooklyn with three roomies while waiting for your big break? Appealing?

And finally, “*...nowhere can you get that happy feeling.*” Well, true if “that happy feeling” is so narrowly defined as to be only possible in show business, but in the real world, there are many “elsewheres” where “happy feelings” may be gotten. So, why do I even quote from a song so full of inaccuracies? Because, embedded therein, is a very important accuracy and it is this: *show business is a business!*

## SHOW BUSINESS IS A BUSINESS!

*“What’s he mean, Mamma?”*

Magnolia Hawkes in Showboat

In 1972, I played in Showboat, the 1927 musical by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II and, later in my career, directed the show in a community theater. The female lead, Magnolia Hawks, was a very naive young woman who, when being seduced by a handsome young suitor, Gaylord Ravenol, simply does not understand that she’s being seduced. She asks her Mother, *“What’s he mean, Momma?”* What he meant was “I’m hoping to...” well, you know. I cite Magnolia Hawks here because I have encountered so many “Magnolia Hawks” throughout my long career: naive young women (and men) who, like Magnolia, were seduced without even knowing they were being seduced. I’m not talking about romantic seductions here; I’m talking about *emotional* seductions. Show business seduces us by making us *feel good* in the beginning of our relationship. Remember all those cheering fans and audiences at our fourth-grade dance recital, or our middle school performance of Frozen (Junior). We never got a bad review, did we? And show business is not very forthcoming; it never even mentions the business part until way later. And, to my current knowledge, college and professional development programs make a difference between learning to be a performer and being a business manager, for example. So, I’m saying to all you Magnolias out there, “Open your eyes, see the world (or at least the business you are entering) as it is and *prepare for it*. That’s what this book is all about: helping you prepare and position yourself to *succeed in show business by really, really trying!*

## PERSPIRATION and INSPIRATION

***“Success is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration.”***

Thomas Edison

Edison’s point should be well-taken. Like so many, many things in life, success comes from work. I’m not even going to say “hard” work, because much of our profession, you know- singin’ and dancin’- comes quite easily to us, but “efficacious” work that accomplishes what we set out to do; that’s “the work” I’m talking about.

It’s kind of funny, or maybe ironic, that in the beginning we all had other people “perspiring” on our behalf; parents and teachers. And, those of us who have survived, we probably also had other people “perspiring” on our behalf; agents and managers. However, in the meantime, after parents and teachers have stepped back, but before agents and managers have stepped up, *you* need to be perspiring on *your* behalf. You need to be your own press secretary, booking agent, marketing director, social media manager, recording engineer, videographer...the list goes on.

So, where do you learn how to do all that stuff? Well, you can enroll at the New York Academy of the Performing Arts for about \$36,000.00 per year, or Boston’s Berklee College of Music for just over \$45,000.00. Or, you can learn those and many other things by observing expert practitioners and, over time, participating in authentic practice where you do not learn to do things in case you might need to do them in the future; you learn things because you need to do them right now.

## GOALS and INTENTIONS

If you are going to take a bus-trip cross-country, you will probably have some goals and intentions in mind. For example, if your goal is to see as many great works of art as possible; your intentions are to visit a specific list of museums. Similarly, if you are going to take a trip on my bus, you should have clear goals and intentions in mind. Said differently, if you want to “succeed;” you need to start with a definition of success.

*If you do not define success,  
you will never know if or when you have achieved it.*

It is quite natural to think in terms of success in the theater as associated with applause, the adoration of fans, Tony Awards, and so forth. While I do wish you the best at achieving such things, that’s not what this apprenticeship is all about. This apprenticeship is about *you* establishing a long-term career in the entertainment industry. It is about *you* making a living, paying *your* mortgage, and sending *your* kids to college someday. And, it’s about your understanding the fundamentals of our profession— who we are, what we want, and more.

So then, if you are ready...

*“Let’s go on with the show.”*

from “No Business Like Show Business” by Rogers and Hammerstein

## WHAT WE ALL WANT

***“Let me entertain you, let me make you smile.  
Let me do a few tricks, some old and then some new tricks...  
...and if you're real good I'll make you feel good.”***

from “Gypsy” by Sondheim and Laurents

If you want to understand the cry of all musical theater performers, look no further than the musical theater literature. Read the Stephen Sondheim lyric again. What do we all want? We want to “entertain” you! Let’s think about what that means.

Definitions of “to entertain” include *“providing someone with amusement or enjoyment.”* Providing joy as in enjoyment is exactly what I want to do, but amusement? Not so much. “Amuse” suggests that one’s attention is *lightly engaged*, *“I was amused by the kitten’s antics.”* I am not interested in amusing audiences, where their attention is *lightly engaged*. I want to enthrall, captivate, charm, mesmerize, and engross audiences where their attention is *heavily engaged*.

Okay; what else do we want? Well, if Stephen Sondheim and Gypsy Rose Lee are to be believed, we want our audiences to be happy. We want them to “smile” and “feel good.” Really? Well, yeah, we do...sometimes. But other times, we want them to cry. Many years ago I attended a performance of a musical in which a man, an actor, made me cry.

## CONSISTENCY and NOVELTY

There is one final line from the Sondheim lyric that bears our attention. It reveals something very fundamental about what it is to be human and how the human brain works.

*“Let me do a few tricks,  
some old and then some new tricks.”*

The human brain desires two seemingly opposite things at the same time: **consistency** (old tricks) and **novelty** (new tricks). And, in fact, we need both. Without consistency, life would be impossible. Without novelty, life would be boring. And so it is with our art form. Virtually all musicals share consistencies; they all have songs embedded in stories; they all are performed in a theater; they all use lighting, sound efx, costuming, make-up...the list goes on. And, when we go to a show, even a world premiere, we expect that most if not all these “old tricks” to be there. At the same time, we expect not just “songs embedded in stories,” but *new* songs embedded in *new* stories, or at least new versions of old stories as in musicals based on other forms (e.g. My Fair Lady was based on Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw.)

## THE MAN WHO MADE ME CRY

Something all performers hope for is that their performances might be remembered; whether it is in the kindergarten play or the Broadway Hit, performers want to be remembered after the show. I still remember being in the audience for the 1972 revival of *Lost in the Stars*, a musical by Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill based on the novel *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. The musical premiered on Broadway in 1949 and I saw the '72 revival with Brock Peters in the lead role as Stephen Kumalo, a preacher whose son had been convicted of murder. The final scene focuses on Stephen hearing the church bells counting down to the hour and the moment of his son's execution. Peters, a consummate actor, *was*, for those of us silent and mesmerized witnesses, the universal father, feeling the grief reserved only for those of us who have lost a child. Bells chimed the countdown and, as the last and final bell rang out, the son died, the father collapsed in grief, and I in my seat, quietly cried. I certainly did not feel "good" at that time. I felt something much deeper. As a new father myself, I felt I had gained an insight into something, at the time, I could not even imagine...the death of one's own child. Even when the child had grown to adulthood; the grief is the same. (*Trust me.*)

And this is the lesson all aspiring performers need to learn: *people do not remember consistencies, they remember novelty*. Even if you perform a song that has been done hundreds and hundreds of times, you need to somehow make it different...make it novel.

**WHO WE ARE**  
**and**  
**WHO WE ARE NOT**

*“Whether I’m right or whether I’m wrong.  
Whether I find a place in this world or never belong.  
Daring to try, to do it or die, I’ve gotta be me.”*  
from “I’ve Gotta Be Me” by Walter Marks

**IDENTITY**

One of the most important processes in human development is identity; who we are. The search for identity usually begins in early adolescence and, for some, never ceases. Other folks manage to develop a mature sense of identity overtime. My identity, forged in fire, includes: husband, father, grandfather, activist, trombonist, writer, mentor, and...*musician*. I am, in my essential being, musician...it is my nature.

And so, I will begin this discussion of identity, aka. “Who we are and who we are not,” with a brief discussion of human nature and the nurturing thereof.

This will be important, because...

*If we do not know who we are;  
we cannot imagine who we can be.*

## NATURE vs NURTURE

*“Why did I choose you?  
What could you offer me?  
A love to last a life time through.*

*And when I lost my heart so many years ago,  
I lost it lovingly and willingly to you.  
If I had to choose again I would still choose you.”*

From “Why Did I Choose You?” by Martian and Leonard

I recall once having been asked in an interview why it was that I choose music as a profession. I replied, “I didn’t. Music chose me.”

While not literally true – “Music” is not a person that chooses anything – metaphorically considered, “The Muse,” very early on, found a welcoming home in my brain. Said differently, my particular brain, for reasons that remain a mystery, was particularly well-suited to musical thought...it was my nature. I did not choose to be musical; I was born that way. And, happily, I was one of many folks “born that way;” natural-born musicians.

Let’s think about what “natural” means. The word is derived, of course, from “nature” and is often spoken of in relation to the word “nurture.” **Nature** is what we think of as *internal mental processes*, “pre-wiring” influenced by genes and other biological factors. **Nurture** is the influence of *external* factors after conception, life experiences and learning on an individual basis.

As far back as 1690, philosopher John Locke argued that you were born with a metaphoric “tabula rasa.” In **Locke's** philosophy, *tabula rasa* was the assumption that at birth the human mind is a "blank slate" where behaviors are formed solely by one's sensory experiences which are the result of the way we are raised or, better said, how we are *nurtured* by the fullness of the context. It is a fascinating discussion, and I encourage you to learn more on your own, but the bottom line is this: it takes both: Nature and Nurture.

### **THE BRAIN YOU LIVE IN**

I know a lot of “smart” people; chances are you know a few too. And, if you are over the age of 13, you also know that smart people can do “really, really” dumb things. So, how is that? If you are “smart;” how can you be “dumb?” If you are “intelligent;” how can you be “stupid?” It had been assumed, for a long time, that intelligence was a very general thing possessed by all “normal” human beings; like we were all issued the same computer at birth, although some with a faster processor, bigger RAM, and larger hard drive. So, any intelligent (smart) person could potentially succeed in any field of human endeavor providing they grew up (were nurtured) “in that field.” Anybody could become a brilliant musician; they just had to hang out with brilliant musicians. Fast forward to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1983 and a psychologist named Howard Gardner challenges the idea of a single IQ, where human beings have one central "computer" where intelligence is housed. Gardner argued that there are really *multiple* types of *intelligence*, each representing different ways of processing information.

This became known as *Multiple Intelligence Theory* in which Gardner articulated eight separate “intelligences” related to eight types of human experience. On the list, you may be glad to hear, is Musical Intelligence which, along with Verbal-Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Visual-Spatial, Naturalistic, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Intelligences, the theory says, are possessed in varying strength and proportions by individuals. Gardner later added to the list and some psychologists (include yours truly) have suggested that there may be as many “intelligences” as there are human brains to house them.

Almost all “the intelligences” on Gardner’s initial list are, in my view, pretty much necessary to succeed in the “American Musical Theater.” Obviously **musical intelligence** is crucial. After all, “Musical” is our middle name. But that’s not enough. If you are going to understand the meaning of words and the power of language, you will need a strong **verbal-linguistic intelligence**. You will also need robust **visual-spatial** and **bodily-kinesthetic intelligences** if you are to move about on stage or execute complicated choreography.

And, if you are going to be part of a production involving more than yourself, you will need **interpersonal intelligence**, the ability to recognize and understand other people's moods, desires, motivations, and intentions; as well as **intrapersonal intelligence**, the ability to recognize and assess those same characteristics within yourself. And, if you should ever rise to full on-going employment in the “business;” you will need a keen **logical-mathematical intelligence** to, well... “take care of business.” That, of course, leaves only one left: **naturalistic intelligence**.

*All the sounds of the earth are like music,  
The breeze is so busy it don't miss a tree,  
Oh what a beautiful morning, Oh what a beautiful day,  
I've got a wonderful feeling everything's going my way.*  
from "Oh What A Beautiful Morning" by Rogers and Hammerstein

Although *naturalistic intelligence* is usually regarded as the ability to perceiving phenomena in the natural world, I also see an importance for the artistic mind; that naturalistic intelligence includes not just *perceiving* but also *appreciating* naturalistic events. It's one thing to say, "*It is morning!*" And another thing to say, "*Oh, what a beautiful morning!*" I would argue that Oscar Hammerstein could never have written this song without possessing a deep appreciation for the natural phenomenon.

That's not the whole **nature** story. It more than about the brain that lives in your body, it also about the body than your brain lives in.

## THE BODY THAT YOUR BRAIN LIVES IN

Let's assume that after deep personal reflection and "soul-searching," you have determined that, yes indeed, you're a pretty smart person; you posses all eight intelligences and more. Even so, the "brain that *you* live in" is encouraged or discouraged by "the body *your brain* lives in." For example, the body my brain lives in is seventy-five years old, five-foot-seven inches "tall" and weighing in at 165lbs (yeah, that's it...165!).

When I was in High School, I tried out for the football team. I could not run very fast so they told me I was a guard, a right guard. Guess what? I learned the hard way that I was a wrong guard, and, if truth be told, not really a football player. But, let's suppose for a moment that I had always "dreamed" of being a starting right guard in the New England Patriots. I went to the New York School of the Foot Ball Arts instead of a traditional high school, and after that I attended Boston's Berkeley College of Football. I could have learned and could accomplish flawlessly all the necessary moves of an NFL lineman. I could have even been a kinesthetically and spatial genius. Even if all that were true, I, at 5'7"/165lbs., still could not succeed in the National Football League as a lineman. At this writing, the smallest lineman in the NFL is 5'11"/ 250 lb. Elvis Dumervil of the Baltimore Ravens.

The body "my brain lives in" let me know a long time ago that, as much as I would have like to be a triple-threat in musical theater, a singer, actor, and a dancer, I would never be another Fred Astaire; I have the proverbial "two-left-feet." This is not to say if someone is not-so-smart musically, kinesthetically or naturalistically, cannot be brilliant all the other ways. They can succeed in Show Business as producers, directors, agents, managers, and so forth applying all the other intelligences identified by Howard Gardner all those years ago. As for me, if I could only sit with The Muse and look into her eyes so she would know that I speak my truth, I would say her,

***"If I had to choose again, I would still choose you."***

From Why Did I Choose You? by Martian and Leonard

## THE BIG FAT LIE

When I kid, back in the Stone Age, they told us we could be anything we wanted to be, anything at all: president or performer; it was just a matter of dreaming and never giving up on your dreams. *It was a big fat lie!* No one can be anything. What you can be depends, once again, on the brain and body you have. As an “aspiring singer/actor/dancer,” you now have the crucial responsibility to yourself to realistically and honestly identify who and what you really are. The lesson here is this:

***Know who you really are;  
find a way to be what you can be.***

Some folks never learn this lesson and some live out their elder years in despair never having achieved their truly impossible dreams.

Bummer.

## CHOPS

“Chops” is a term jazz musicians use to compliment other musicians. “*That cat has got great chops!*” (Translation: *That musician is a really, really good player!*) In the professional world, it does not matter at all if you are a great marketer, or a great social-media guru; if you haven’t got chops, you have nothing to market or post on your Facebook page. *You are your product.* If your product is not competitive; you will not succeed.

## SINGERS vs MUSICANS

When I was in production for my earlier musical, *Humanity’s Child 2019*, I put out a press release about “The Singers and Musicians” in the show. One of my singers took exception. “Singers *are* Musicians,” she wailed, clearly offended. Ummm...sometimes, but not always. Now, here’s something that you do not want to hear: most folks, maybe even you, come to the business of Musical Theater as singers not musicians. So, what’s the difference?

Singing, most broadly defined, is the act of making musical sounds with the voice, often by sustaining tones at discernible pitches, and that, in fact, is what singers do. By the grace of Mother Nature, most human beings can sing at some level. My grandsons sing in pre-school, my neighbor sings in the Senior Center Chorus; both are singers, neither are musicians.

So then, what exactly are “musicians?”

**Musicians are literate;** they can read music. Can you imagine an actor who cannot read a script; he/she would have a really tough time succeeding in theater, musical or otherwise. Yet, in my experience, almost all singers I've auditioned, or even hired, "play by ear." They need to hear someone else sing the song, then they can do it. As mentioned elsewhere in this book, I worked as a professional trombone player for most of my adult life. I never said to a Band Leader or Orchestra Conductor, "Sure I can play the first trombone part; I just need to hear another trombone player play it first!" I would have had a career lasting about five minutes.

**Musicians are fast;** so fast in fact that frequently there is no time between when musicians see a musical score and perform it for the first time. This is called sight reading and it was a skill I often needed to use. When I was 21 years old, I was hired to play for the NBC Production of Peter Pan starring Kathy Rigby. We had one "talk-through" rehearsal the morning that the show opened. That was the first time we saw the charts. Two hours later we were sight-reading a very high-level and demanding show and we did it well. Why? Because we were not just players; we were musicians.

**Musicians are accurate;** they play it right the first time nearly all the time, making few mistakes, and not repeating those few.

**Musicians are adaptable.** The Principle Trombone in Symphony Hall on Sunday Night might also be the same cat in the Jazz Club on Monday Night. Many singers and players will intentionally and often proudly limit themselves and thereby limit the potential for success. They may say, “*I’m a classical singer; I don’t sing Jazz,*” or vice-versa. If you manage to get to the top of your profession, you can say that. In the meantime, learn to adapt what you do to the job you are asked to do. This does not mean give up your standards; it means no matter what kind of music you are hired to sing, do it at your very best performance level.

**Musicians are knowledgeable;** they are intimately familiar with the great players, musical traditions, and theoretical foundations of their art.

It is beyond the scope of this book to teach you the basics of musicianship. The good news is that such things can be learned many places; schools, private teachers, YouTube Videos and so forth. But no one can learn for you. It’s not too late to improve your musical skills, to become a musician. Fair warning, becoming a musician is a constant and never-ending process, we are always “becoming” the musician we aspire to be while honoring the musician we are.

What will you become? A *singer*? Or, a literate, fast, accurate, adaptable, knowledgeable *musician* who sings. The more you aspire to be the latter; the better your chance for success.

## **THE THREE P's**

### **PERFORMANCE, PERCEPTION and PERSISTENCE**

We have talked about the importance of “chops:” building chops, having chops, and maintaining chops. Let us now look at chops more closely using a mnemonic (a mental strategy) to help us remember this really, really important idea if you really, really want to succeed.

The “Three P’s” are my own invention and a strategy for organizing your thinking about who and what you need to be to succeed in Show Biz.

**Performance** is the sum total of all the characteristics that define contemporary professional practice. It is the set of expectations implied every time a pro is engaged. It is the standard of excellence to which professionals aspire, understanding that “standards” are always rising.

**Perception** is how you are seen by others and the full range of things you can do to shape that perception. It is a comprehensive set of developmental strategies that clearly and positively define who and what you are.

**Persistence** is how you carry on a daily-basis. It is the set of behaviors and practices that allow you to meet “rising standards,” and to enhance complementary definitions of who and what you are.

## PERFORMANCE

If you hire a professional in any service field, you not only expect them to “perform” at a certain level, you assume that “performance” will meet professional standards. Any competent plumber can fix your toilet; any competent singer can croon your tune. That similarity breaks down, however, when you understand that the ubiquitous seat-of-honor in question functions or it doesn't. Once fixed, there is no continual improvement or expectation of improvement. Even the infamous golden throne of a previous President functions no better than my humble ceramic privy.

Because we are all human beings and not bathroom fixtures, we can enter the profession as singers, dancers and actors with a basic set of skills and competencies and then improve through authentic practice and continual professional development.

Over the years and throughout literally hundreds of auditions, I have developed a general set of criteria by which I have judged and hired (or not hired) performers. As it turns out, my criterion closely parallels current professional practice, easily confirmed by a Google search. I offer here a kind of summary or amalgamation of the techniques I've developed for evaluating applicants.

## EVALUATING YOUR PERFORMANCE

Video record yourself doing a kind of “mock audition.” You have five minutes to impress the audition committee singing and dancing and acting your chosen material, understanding that you may well be stopped at any moment if your performance is not up to speed. When you are done, watch your video and, as honestly as you possible can, ask yourself these questions about your performance:

- ✓ Is my performance musically, lyrically and rhythmically interesting?
- ✓ Is my interpretation true to the style of the arrangement?
- ✓ Does my singing convey appropriate emotion?
- ✓ Do I consistently sing with accurate intonation: melodies, harmonies?
- ✓ Do I demonstrate control of vibrato vs straight tones appropriate to the musical style and context?
- ✓ Does my vocal color and tone fit the musical style, freely produced, and resonant?
- ✓ Is my breathing well-supported and breaths artistically placed?
- ✓ Are my dynamics musically interesting, appropriate and well executed?
- ✓ Is my diction clear and understandable and stylistically appropriate?
- ✓ Is my performance visually interesting and cohesiveness?
- ✓ Do I make eye contact with audiences?
- ✓ Do I demonstrate emotional credibility; believable or forced?
- ✓ Do I appear comfortable and energized on stage?
- ✓ Do my movement and/or dancing suit the song and enhance the music?
- ✓ Do my movements and/or dancing stand out from the crowd, creative energy is evident?
- ✓ Was my performance well thought out and rehearsed; one that people would pay to see?

So, how did you do on a scale of one to ten. Perfect Ten or room for improvement? That’s a rhetorical question. There’s always room for improvement in performance and perception.

## PERCEPTION

Psychological research long ago revealed that there is often a wide gap between how we think we are perceived by others and how we are actually perceived. And, to complicate matters further, perception of us by other folks may be based on vastly-different criteria, so the very same performance may be judged as good or bad depending on the values of the judge. That said, there are embedded in the theatrical traditions and current professional practice certain values that we can pretty much count on across the board. While most experienced theater folk can list many criteria, two that are particularly important to me are *attractiveness* and *dependability*. If you really, really want to succeed in Show Biz, you must be seen (perceived) by the movers and shakers of the business to be attractive and dependable

## THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

*“You are so beautiful to me.”*

from *You Are So Beautiful* by Joe Cocker

“Attractive” does not mean “beautiful,” for beauty is in the eye of... well you know. You need not be “beautiful” (whatever you think that means) but, you must, in some way, be attractive. You need to *attract* the eye of the beholder and you need to do it very, very quickly. It is almost unfair how quickly a director or producer will reject an applicant, often for outrageous reasons. *“Didn’t like the look on her/his face!”*

When we were casting for the New York shows, we articulated our criteria: females based in New York City, age range 18-32; strong vocals; professional experience and/or advanced training; good professional references, etc. Even with the highly-constraining geographical limitations, our research returned over sixty pages of potential choices giving little more than a name and photograph. So, it was love at first sight or it was not. I skipped over hundreds of aspiring singers and actors simply because I was not attracted to their photo. In some pictures, people looked angry, or scary, or totally taken with themselves. In other photos they looked like they used an old high school yearbook picture, the image did not jive with the age. Unless you are a character-actor, and want to limit yourself to angry, scary, attitude-broadcasting roles, your best bet is to post a recent photo, professional-shot but not over-edited, with you sporting a very nice, simple but attractive smile. A smile can make the difference between being further considered and being overlooked.

If you are lucky enough to have attracted the eye of a director and earned further consideration, you still need to reel them in. The first thing I do is look for a recent music video. If they don't have one, I look for someone who does. If they do have a music video, I listen for 30 seconds. If I'm not impressed, I move on.

So, here are some do's and don'ts you may want to consider.

### **DO'S and DON'TS**

- ✓ **Do not** use a video with a 30 second music intro. I do not have time to listen to your band. Start singing immediately.
- ✓ **Do not** over-produce your video. With sufficient editing and pitch-correction software, even bad singers can be made to sound good. I need to know that you are good without editing and correcting.
- ✓ **Do not** under-produce your video. Believe it or not, I actually received an audition video recorded acapella by a young woman in the front driver's seat of her car with the motor running!
- ✓ **Do** use a recent video. I want to know how you look and sound now, not five years ago.
- ✓ **Do** keep it brief, highlight only your best work and with as much variety as possible. Six 30 thirty-second clips are much more effective than one three minute clip.
- ✓ **Do** feature clips that are similar to the job you are trying to get. If you are auditioning for *Mary Poppins*, do not feature a Hip-Hop video; if you are auditioning for *In The Heights*, do feature a hip-hop video. Connect what you do with what you will be expected to do.
- ✓ **Do not** include other performers in your video; there is enough competition out there without you bringing it to my attention. (I recall seeing one video where I did not like the applicant, but loved her duet partner.)

I'm guessing any other producer/director would have many other do's and don'ts, and I encourage you to seek them out. In the meantime, I hope these exemplars may be helpful

Now let's talk about **dependability**. It does not matter at all how wonderful your audition is or what a really great performer you are; if you cannot be depended upon to show up on time, well-prepared, and ready to rehearse as if it were opening night, you will likely never win another audition and you may even be replaced sooner than later.

*A cautionary tale:* When we selected the original cast for the Off-Broadway shows, it included a male character (The Storyteller) and we had selected a very talented young fellow named Harry to play the role. On the night before the first New York rehearsal, I received an email from Harry informing me that he could not make my rehearsal because he was in another show and the director had called an extra rehearsal for his cast. He felt that was okay because my show was not opening for another six months and his show was opening next week. I replied by wishing him "break-a-leg" and informing him that his services would no longer be required. He was furious, insulted, just could not believe I'd dump him for this reason. Well I did, and I would again. If Harry, at his audition told me he was in another show, and there might be the possibility, for just a short while, that he'd need to be elsewhere, then he would have been able to add an Off-Broadway show to his resume. But he did not and he cannot.

## PERSISTENCE

***“You need to know when to hold ‘em.***

***Know when to fold ‘em.”***

from *The Gambler* by Kenny Rogers

Most of us have been told, “*Never give up on your dreams. You can be anything you want to be.*” A nice, warm and fuzzy idea, but as legions of former aspiring singers, actors, and dancers have learned, if you do not fold ‘em when your body and brain tell you to; if you *never give up on your dreams,*” you may end up really, really disappointed.

I will give you what may seem to be contradictory advice, “Hold ‘em” just as long as you possibly can. (*Here it comes...wait for it...the “BUT!”*) BUT...know when to fold ‘em; know when to move on to something better suited to who and what you really, really are.

***You do not have to entirely “give up” on your dreams,  
just redefine them a tad.***

## EXIT MUSIC

***“I’m singing in the rain, just singing in the rain.***

***What a glorious feeling’, I’m happy again.***

***I’m singin’ and dancin’ in the rain!***

from “Singin’ in the Rain” by Arthur Freed

Climbing the metaphorical “ladder of success” in show business has been compared to climbing Mt. Everest. It is unnecessary to explain why that climbing that iconic peak is a hugely difficult proposition and not for the faint of heart. That said, there are, in fact, many who have ascended to the summit of the actual mountain and of their personal “Mt. Everest” as well. They achieved their possible dreams; they have made a living and a life in show biz ***“...singin’ and dancin’ in the rain!”***

Hey, maybe you can too!

Then again, maybe not.

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Here’s an interesting bit of trivia: Some 5,000 people have reached the summit of Mount Everest since Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first made it to the top in 1953. About 306 people, who did not know when to quit, died trying. Our advice:

***Keeping climbing...but, don’t die trying.***

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John McDonnell Tierney, aka “Jack,” holds advanced degrees in Music (UMASS) and Educational Psychology (UCONN) and has held fulltime college faculty position in both fields.

From 1996 until his retirement as a Professor of Psychology in 2012, Dr. Tierney focused his teaching practice and scholarly research on Adolescent Development.

Prior to 1996, Jack was a fulltime Professor of Music specializing in Musical Theater.

Over the course of his career, Jack produced and/or directed more than fifty musical productions with high school, college, community and professional companies as well as commercial clients.

He also composed several major musicals including “Dreamsinger” (2000), Peacemaker (2016), Humanity’s Child Off-Broadway (2019), and the 2021 version of Humanity’s Child, subtitled “More than a Musical,” currently in production.

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