

March 5, 2013

Dear Professor,

You have always been open and honest with me, and I feel I need to do the same.

Last month, I initiated a conversation with M about her acting class. I was told that the class was almost entirely female and so I asked her if any of the ladies needed a tenor for roles. She replied that it was a great idea and that she would consider it. As the conversation ended, she confessed that she was frustrated with B and that she might solicit my help. She mentioned his tardiness and other less than desirable attitudes in acting class and during the Sondheim review. She asked me if I could step in to do his role in the spring opera if needed. She also asked if I would do a G & S scene with B, or be a tenor (replacing B) for Bk and D if she couldn't figure something out. I said I would consider it. However, my intention for initiating the conversation with M was to offer myself for one of the Duke's duets with the female Coloratura's in the class. I purposefully made this clear to M as the intention for my volunteering.

Roughly a week later, I sang with the Verdi Opera Theatre in a concert involving B. This was the first time that I have gotten to spend time with B in a setting where I observed firsthand some of the reason why so many people find him hard to work with. For example, he would assert himself and give me "vocal advice," including tips for how to make my high notes better and he would correct my diction for certain songs (like O Paradis). At other times, he rendered "acting advice." His tips and advice were not correct, neither were they given with my best interest at heart. At one point, B asked to speak with me privately. In that conversation, he told me that he respected me for my ability and leadership, admitting his inability to be responsible and respectful during rehearsals, etc.

Friday afternoon (3/1/13) as I was leaving for the Detroit airport, SM texted me that my 'acting class scene' was in our office. I was confused and asked him if he meant JO because I never agreed to take a role nor was I asked to do so. I expected a role with one of the ladies. S then explained, "Professor F said JR." Therefore, I called you even before I picked up the music. You confirmed that it was assigned to B and myself, and that it would expand my horizons as an actor. Confused as to why I was not asked first, I drove to school and picked up the music, thinking it was just a small thing that I could perform without complaining or having to make an issue. When I realized that this was a significant role with deeper implications, I called you back and we had a discussion. This situation may cause B to misunderstand and become more difficult, thinking he is being harassed due to his sexual orientation. That is simply not the case here.

I have put much thought into the matter we spoke of on the phone. I will firstly explain my position regarding the role of playing a homosexual as compared to a murderer, etc. (However, that is actually not the issue that bothers me the most.) I

appreciate that you told me that you put me into this situation as a way to prepare me for the future while I am still in a nurturing and caring environment. I initially reacted because this is a situation that I have never encountered and all sorts of thoughts went through my mind, ranging from fear, to embarrassment, to confusion, to what have you. I had not taken the time to deeply consider, reflect, and come up with strategies to explain my position to others in matters such as this. I usually depend on simply being a role model without having to say much nor wanting to make any issues. After listening to your considerations for assigning such a piece to me, I have given it a great deal of thought and I believe I was able to look at the broader scope of the situation.

I want to start by saying that the reservation and lack of enthusiasm regarding acceptance of this role, and many other types of roles, are based on my own personal convictions. I am not attacking what other people believe, the way they think, and what they choose to do here, and neither would I force my convictions on them or venture to say anything negative towards or about those who differ from me or disagree with me.

You told me that I needed to take a step back and find out what I am truly feeling about all of the choices I make as an actor. I fully agree and am now processing through my convictions as well as my fears, comforts and discomforts, to find what will allow me to optimally progress in the most positive way possible.

You spoke to me about the fact that I have already portrayed many “evil” or “sinful” actions on stage, and that this does not define who I am off stage. You placed homosexuality in that list as one of the many “sins,” treating it the same as those other sins. As an opera character I have played roles in which I murdered, cheated, lied, slandered, committed suicide, adulterated, stolen, cursed God, etc.. This is something I have thought about many times before. The reason I could justify playing those particular roles came from the realization that I was portraying something evil, and wanted it to be taken as evil. If I were to play the fornicating, scandalous Duke I expected to be viewed as an evil man. If I were to portray a scene from the bible that included sin, I’d hope to portray the sin as what it is: sin. However, this does not hold true in my eyes in terms of homosexuality. I view it as a sin, but many people view it in a positive light. Again, I stress that I am speaking and acting on my personal convictions that I do not force on others. What another person does is their own business.

Because you did not ask me if I would do such a role, now I am presented with a dilemma that demands a choice and an action. The problem is that others already know that I have been assigned to the role. I would have liked to avoid the whole matter and handle it discretely. So, I will explain my position and hope that you and others can still respect me for it as I respect you for yours. My position is this: I can accept roles that portray murder, because people see murder as “bad.” No one who watches the Duke in Rigoletto thinks, “Wow what a great guy. He’s a real keeper.” However, if I were to accept the homosexuality role you have assigned me, I would

have to portray homosexuality as “good” (especially in this love song). Now, you are asking me to go against my own conscience and this with a person (B) who professes to be a homosexual. B may now think he is being harassed because he is gay. I would not feel comfortable playing this role with anyone. To portray murder, cheating, immorality, atheism or lying in a negative light does not offend my conscience because I believe those things are negative. However, to play the role of a homosexual does offend my conscience and sends mixed messages to many of my colleagues. As I said, I would much prefer to handle such matters discretely.

The real dilemma is how this role affects other people. I truly wish you had asked me before you involved other people because now I feel I may offend people whom I care deeply about and respect (including yourself), yet disagree with them in this matter. I avoid arguing personal convictions because they are personal and therefore, I believe that we should not force them on others. I have colleagues, family, friends and professors who may be upset with me if improper messages are conveyed. For instance, I disagree with homosexuality personally, but I care about the homosexual. I work with many now and have no issues. For the record, I would also be uncomfortable being absurdly vulgar or sensual (including shameless nudity) on stage if it was meant to be taken as a positive thing. I would also be uncomfortable disavowing God on stage if it was meant to be taken as a positive thing. I have always sought to avoid treading the line between hurting people and doing something against what I feel is right. My goal is to lead by example and to love others, not to judge them nor make unnecessary issues based on differences.

You made another point about my future in relation to making money. Although I am concerned about supporting myself and a family now and in the future, I have been raised to rely on God to provide, and he always has. It is my goal that money and success will never be a reason that I make sacrifices of this sort.

With that said, I am still not sure what to do. I feel that if I do not go through with this scene, you, and now M (and anyone who M will then talk to about this) will look poorly upon me, with the possible thoughts that I am not a good actor and that I will not succeed.

I respect you, your teaching, and your person so much, and have always listened eagerly to your guidance. I hope that my admiration and holding you in such high regard has been apparent these past five years. However, I find myself at a crossroad of either losing your respect for me, or losing respect for myself. I wish you had asked me before you involved other people.

I have not come to a peaceful conclusion yet, but am still trying to sift through my feelings. My main concern which I have stated throughout this letter, outside the content of the scene itself, is that no one asked me before the assignment was made. I have worked with you for five years and you have never put me in such a position without a discussion and mutual consent. I have been careful to listen earnestly, to absorb what you have said, and to endure all that I feel I can. However, now I feel

that my back is up against the wall, and that I must defend myself in a situation in which people assumed I volunteered, but did not for deeper personal reasons.

I do have a suggestion. If M wants me to “help” B, why not assign a different (non-sexual) song for B and I to sing together?

JR