
Life Lessons Learned Along the Way: Lessons from the Stage

We continue our series of personal, impactful stories that have shaped how we practice law.

By Thomas W. Werner

My first time on stage, I was a mess. What else could be expected of a 12 year old who had just joined the seventh grade choir two months prior? My father didn't care about my youth and inexperience, though. He cringed from the audience whenever I (very visibly placed in the middle of the front of the three rows of singers on stage) idly shuffled my feet, pushed up the sleeves of my tuxedo shirt, violently mussed my own hair, and darted my head around, my eyes fascinated by everything on the ceiling of the middle school auditorium. He (a long time veteran of the stage himself in community theater and as the song leader of St. Paul's Catholic Church) taught me my very first lesson in professional appearance. And that lesson, drilled into my head by Dad's post-performance critique was this: "Don't be a ' _____ ' on stage."

This was the first of many lessons I learned throughout my six years of middle and high school choir, four summers of community theater musicals (with Dad), and several holiday church choirs (also with Dad). In addition to professional appearance, I learned that audiences easily detect fear. I learned to mask the jangling of my nerves upon walking on stage until the jangling itself subsided.

I learned teamwork. I learned that no one single person can ever be a choir. No one voice is ever more or less important than any other. For aural perfection, all voices must be one voice, none surging ahead of or lagging behind the whole.

I learned to follow the directions spelled out in symbols and abbreviations throughout sheet music. I learned the importance of precise rhythm, of cadence, of tempo. I learned to distinguish staccato from marcato, legato from tenuto. I learned the precision of whole, half, quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes.

I learned to emote. I learned how to swell with every crescendo, increasing volume to convey frenzied emotion, and shrink with every decrescendo, drawing the audience in with the power of silence.

I learned the value of practice, practice, PRACTICE, every day in class singing the same song again and again until perfect, and then singing it even more to ensure that perfection is sustained. And then, outside of class, humming the same tunes while standing in left field of my Little League games until each song seeped inexorably deep into my memory.

On one memorable evening, I even learned not to wear pants so tight that they would rip at the seam when I bent down to tie my shoe in the waning moments before marching into the lights of the stage.

I can never repay my choir teacher, Mrs. Kerwin, for the full value of the lessons choir taught me, for they are invaluable, but she has now provided me the opportunity to pass forward the value of those lessons to others. Mrs. Kerwin recommended me for a position to which I was recently elected: a three year term on the Board of Directors for Michigan Youth Arts, an organization that provides opportunities to youths across the state to participate in choral, instrumental, visual, film, dance and written arts. In this position, I hope to empower youths to experience even a fraction of the wisdom that those arts have given me. I can't wait to get started.

Outside of karaoke, I have not sung on stage in many years now. My performances, whether to a judge or jury in a courtroom or an opposing counsel or mediator during settlement negotiations, don't typically involve singing. And yet, the lessons I learned from the stage persist: Be professional in appearance. Be precise. Practice. Emote. *Don't be a – well, you know.*

