

BACKSTAGE

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SPOTLIGHT ON
SINGING AND MUSIC



Hitting the Heights

Four singers in vocally demanding roles on keeping their voices in top shape

BY DAVID SHEWARD
dsheward@backstage.com

Ethel Merman used to say that going into a show was like taking the veil: To keep her voice in shape, there could be no drinking, smoking, or excessive partying. But are such restrictive vows really necessary? Four performers currently facing musical mountains explain how they prepare for the climb every night and reveal the tools they use to maintain those top notes.

NANCY OPEL

In Off-Broadway's *The Toxic Avenger*, the musical version of the cult horror film, not only does Nancy Opel play three roles—the sinister mayor of a polluted New Jersey city, the crabby mother of the title mutant hero, and a caustic nun—but in a showstopping number called “Bitch/Liar/Slut/Whore” she plays two of them at the same time. On top of that, the show features a hard-driving rock score by Bon Jovi keyboardist David Bryan.

Back Stage: How do you sing two different roles in one song?

Nancy Opel: In musical theater, usually you switch keys if it's two women singing together—to delineate between the two characters, to make them feel or sound different. David Bryan didn't want to do that, because he said that was musical theater and not rock. So I said, “What do you suggest I do?” He said, “Just do it up the octave.” I said, “Okay, but I'm not quite sure how that's going to sound.” That's really how it happened. I literally sing this one song with myself, and because he didn't want any key changes, I sing in one octave and then I flip up to another one for the other character. Is it hard? You bet it is. But luckily, because it's rock, I can kind of grind it out at the top; I can get away with it.

Back Stage: Do you have to care for your voice differently than for other shows?

Opel: It's hard work. It's probably the most demanding show I've ever done. Physically it's challenging in terms of blocking, movement, etc. It's also extremely challenging just because there's only five of us in the cast and there's no time to duck out and be lost in the crowd. My general vocal care situation is all about getting enough sleep. For me, if I start to lose sleep, the first place it hits me is my voice. If I don't get enough sleep, I have to warm up twice as much as I would generally. By the way, I warm up thoroughly before every show. Also, I don't drink anything alcoholic during a show. An occasional something, but literally I mean a once-in-a-blue-moon thing, because all alcohol dehydrates you, and that's death for a show like this.

Back Stage: What does your warm-up involve?

Opel: I do a completely legit warm-up, as if I were going to sing Rodgers and Hammerstein. I would also say the two things that are really important to me in performing are enough breath and breath control. Interestingly, I learned a lot about breath control and support in my acting school at Juilliard more than with a vocal coach. I learned a lot about diction. I think those are the two key elements to singing in a healthy way: breath and diction. If you don't have adequate breath support, all the strain goes straight to the cords, the neck, the throat, and you get a lot of tension there. Once you get tension there, it's more likely you'll get vocal issues. One of the best ways to kick a score out into the audience is to have excellent diction too. You look like a better actor and you can use slightly less power if you've really got your diction going for you.

CAROL ROSEGG



Nancy Opel in
The Toxic Avenger