

Keynote

WEBINAR SERIES



Q&A WITH BROADWAY STAR RAQUEL SUAREZ-GROEN

Nathan Mains: Thank you so much for the inspiring presentation, especially during these times. I think, if you're ok with it, we have a couple of questions, maybe a couple minutes to answer some questions.

Raquel Suarez-Groen: That would be great!

Nathan Mains: We've had a bunch of different topics come in. How can schools and educators help students build confidence to pursue their goals and dreams?

Raquel Suarez-Groen: I think support is always the number one challenge. I think when I was in school, there was so much competition that was going on and so a lot of it was, like we had said before, how many likes did you get, what did you get cast in, etc, etc. I think just having the support and how do the students know that it doesn't necessary mean whatever happens in school is going to make you successful or not successful in the real world. Again, I didn't get cast in anything when I was in school, and my career turned out fine. Having the support really builds the confidence when you're in school and maybe giving them different opportunities in different ways. Having them lead different groups would give the confidence too. With us even, what we do, a lot of confidence for me also became a physical reaction, so when I would get nervous, my heart beat would go fast, my leg would start to shake, so something that I had to start incorporating into my life was meditation and breathing techniques. That for me calmed my mind down, but it also allowed for my body to calm down. I know there are schools now too, especially with very young children, where they do introduce times of meditation where it's just learning how to shut your brain down, just stop the negative messages from coming in. That's really powerful. In our class we do these nose breathing techniques where we do alternate nostril breathing where they can really slow their heart rate down so that they can make wise decisions rather than an immediate, emotional decision based on what their feelings are in that moment. I think having that aspect to it would be really beautiful.

Nathan Mains: Along those same lines, somebody posted the question about tenacity and what you've taken away from your career about being tenacious and how that could translate over for educators as, again, they work with students and try to instill in them that same sense of tenacity. What can you tell us?

Raquel Suarez-Groen: I mean the most beautiful thing is if you just stick to it, it's going to work out. You know, I had so many noes along the way. It was "no, no, no," and I had people who were so much more successful than me, who were better singers than me, better actors than me, but I always took my noes as a way to grow. So I got a no, "alright, I'm going to work harder on my voice, I'm going to work harder on my acting skills, I'm going to work better at my nerves and calming them down so that when I get into a room I don't." So, I think the noes don't always have to be negative because it may also just have to do with timing. Maybe, sometimes for me, I think I wouldn't have been ready to do Broadway until a couple years ago. So, actually, the noes were a huge blessing. So, I think every rejection gets you closer to where you need to be.



Rejection can also be a protection. As long as you can keep your mind to always keep going and to learn from the rejection rather than taking it personally as a “I’ll never do this.” You just have to go through it, and we all go through it. We all get rejected, we all get noes, we all get negative feedback sometimes, but if you’re able to process it in a positive way to allow yourself to move forward, I think that’s key. I always say to everybody, if you just stick to it, eventually it’s going to work out.

Nathan Mains: We’ve had a bunch of questions; I’m going to try to blend them all together for you. I think you struck a chord with people on the eight shows per week video and also just your comments about 450 shows a year. So, the questions have sort of been around the passion and how you realistically keep your passion up with that kind of crazy schedule of performances. How you give an exciting performance night after night after night and make it seem like it’s the most exciting thing that you’ve ever done that one night, knowing that you’re doing eight of them every week. Can you talk a little bit about what goes into being about to hit the stage and really give off that energy over and over again?

Raquel Suarez-Groen: Yeah, so when I’m on Broadway, my life really is the show so I live a very - it’s kind interesting because I feel like Broadway life has kind of prepared me for this quarantine life because I’m used to being very alone, generally not talking during the day, having a very specific diet, exercising, so that keeps me mentally in shape. But when I get to the show, there’s so much energy that goes on, like even though you do it eight times a week, we don’t always – like you know Nathan, you’ve seen the show before – we don’t always have the same singers on stage, sometimes we have a new Phantom or a new Giry or a new Christine, and so sometimes you get on that stage, it will be someone you’ve never performed with in your life. It will be somebody new who came into the show, so that itself brings the energy there.

Also, when you get out there and the audience is sitting there and they’re watching you and they’re clapping. You feel that too. I always remember that it is somebody’s first time seeing the show. This may be somebody’s first time seeing a Broadway show. Some people are traveling from other countries to come and see that one performance. So, I really put that on myself to think somebody just spent whatever \$200 to come and see you from Italy or from Iowa or from, you know, wherever, Pennsylvania, you know, people have driven or flown for hours to come and see you. Ultimately too, I’m in a show where we really have a tradition to keep. It’s the longest running show on Broadway. It’s such a beautiful show to be a part of. Once that orchestra starts it’s hard not to get excited. Of course there’s going to be days where you’re tired or things like that, but there’s always a way to switch your mind.

Also, sometimes I just think, “Okay, like what’s the story that Carlotta wants to tell today?” You have to give yourself little stories and little challenges on the stage. Today I’m going to try this, whether it’s vocally or in acting ways. It’s always just like what we’re doing now. Always stay creative, because if I did the same thing every day then it would get very, for everybody, get a little boring. I always try to switch things up for myself and my colleagues, so that it’s never the same thing every single night.

Nathan Mains: We’ve had a question about vision boarding. You touched on that in your presentation. Kind of springing this on you, but how could that possibly be applied to what schools do in terms of reopening? As schools are talking about how to reopen in the fall, hopefully, could they apply kind of the same principles of vision boarding to their processing? Could you touch on that a little bit?

Raquel Suarez-Groen: Absolutely. Vision boarding, it’s a law of attraction, so the energy you put out there, you attract. It’s about creating a vision for yourself of what you want to see. So, if it’s for a school to put the time frame on there from when you want to open, how do you want it to open, what things or what events do you want to create around that, what people do you want to see around that. Even the feelings that around that of like calm or joy or excitement. You can put all of those things on a vision board. Our minds don’t actually



know the difference between whether something has happened or whether something is happening or will happen, so if we imagine something to be true and we live in that world of where we're going to go, our minds believe it's already happened. That's the beauty of it. When I got Phantom, I believed it was already mine. Having a vision, I think, is always important. It's so incredibly important, especially for a school, where you are responsible for so many kids, so creating a vision board of when you want to open; what you want that to look like; the people that you want to bring in to get that started; the way it's going to look in every way, shape or form. That's a really amazing way to also mentally keep yourself more positive and to look forward to something, but also to create that reality for yourself.

Nathan Mains: We've had a question come in regarding the workshops that you referenced. I'll give you a moment here if you want to explain to folks how they can learn more about them - what age groups you work with, can adults join the workshops - that sort of thing.

Raquel Suarez-Groen: Right now, the class, it's in five modules. It's going on right now. We're creating these modules. All information can be found www.empowervoicesnow.org. Dana, do you want to take this one?

Dana Guerrero: Well, it started out as a course for singers. So, we were blending the psychological aspect and using the skills to calm singers. Then, some people were joining who were like really high-end performers, children, middle-aged adults. We had, one time, age 13 to 68. Somehow, in this call over the series of modules, there was the most supportive, beautiful, level playing field environment that we said, "Let's open it up to more than just singers" because we had some folks that just like sang in church, and they just they never performed. Well, now we have kids that that just want to do things on YouTube and want to do like public presentations and so we're still trying to keep the - it's all about the confidence building along with however you want to present yourself. So, we went from building the confident singer to building the confident mind. I think it'll just kind of morph into that.

If you do go on the website, that is how you can access it. I think the interesting thing is because I'm a therapist, I am used to working with different age groups. It can sometimes be interesting, you have a 13-year-old and you have a 30-year-old, and we want to keep everything like positive and appropriate, and it becomes more like a family of people who are learning how to build their confidence. I have like really, Raquel, the expertise of you, who you are actually performing, teaching people how to calm down when you lose the words, how can you calm down that quivering lip, how can you come down when you're going off pitch and you know it and bring yourself back on and this audition really matters. That goes to even applying to college, kids having tremendous anxiety of like "I applied to 11 schools and how do I do this." Okay, let's build some skills in here of confidence, let's visualize what you want and then let's present it to the group. So, it's been quite amazing. The website is the way that you access the classes and they're affordable. They really are.

Nathan Mains: We were asked about strategies to calm performance nerves and what you use. I think primarily, Raquel, but applying those really for coping with the anxieties related to the current pandemic. Have you been able to apply what you've used throughout your Broadway career and just take it directly to some anxiety around the pandemic, and what can you suggest to people?

Raquel Suarez-Groen: One hundred percent, yes. As I talked about before, actually, this time has - let me start a point one. The one thing that I always use are alternate nostril breathing techniques, which I use for my performance. So anytime that I sing before the cadenza, I'm actually doing breathing techniques to slow down my heart rate before I sing. The beautiful part was when I met Dana, and we were doing the classes, that she also introduced that. Dana is also a meditation teacher and a yoga instructor. When I started working with her, I was like, "oh my goodness, like my worlds opening up. These are the things that I also do in my performance." and she uses those techniques with her own clients. Keeping your mind still is something that we all need in



our lives. For me, for singing, it can be, “Oh no, there’s 1,600 people looking at you. Oh no, you got a little bit of phlegm on your cords. Oh no, it’s too early.” There’s so many things that go through, but in our everyday lives, it can be, “Okay, now I have to teach online. I’ve never done this before.” The anxiety of having to use a computer. We can calm ourselves down with these breathing techniques in every profession. Meditation, too, has been really beautiful to calm the mind. Dana, can you just talk about some other techniques that we use in the class? It’s a huge part of what we do in the class, it’s all about having tangible things that you can take. So that wherever you are, whether you’re performing, presenting or sitting at home and you’re having those nervous reactions, how to calm your body down.

Dana Guerrero: Right, so we do focusing skills like object naming. Let’s say you’re in a very intense situation and you’re losing it. Someone is speaking to you and trying to give you instruction, and you can just look around the room and name objects. This is the floor. This is the table. This is the chair. This is the window. You’re doing it and people don’t even know you’re doing it.

Another thing, I call it fingertip prayer, but it’s just something that even sometimes medical students who are taking exams, and I use it with them when they’re taking their MCATs (Medical College Admission Test). So, you just connect your thumb to your point your finger and you take a breath and you maybe create an intention - may my mind to be relaxed - and you inhale and you exhale. May I access my highest level of performance - you inhale and you exhale. You’re doing these things. No one’s even knowing that you’re doing it, but it brings you out of your mind. It brings you into your body. It also creates cognitive change from anxiety from right brain to left brain, left brain to right brain.

We are also teaching folks how to discriminate between if your decision making is with your wise mind or your emotional mind. We’re not judging either of them because decisions are made through both sides, decisions are made through emotional thinking and also through wisdom. We need to know how are we making this decision.

So, for example, my 21-year-old wants to return back to her school in her off-campus housing. “I want to do it. I want to do it. Everyone’s doing it, look at it on Instagram. Everyone’s parents, dah, dah, dah.” Emotionally, she’s processing it through emotional mind. What does wise mind say about timing? What does wise mind say about exposure? “I know, but I want to do it.” So, she’s clearly in emotional mind. It’s understandable. How can we use both sides of the mind to make a positive decision about reintegration? So that’s kind of like, these are the tools that we use.

Raquel Suarez-Groen: What is making a big difference for me too is, like I said before, not to sound like a broken record, but it is to stay creative. Whether it’s doing things online with people that are different than my normal schedule or to sing a song or to dance or to take an online class that I would never take. To get your mind away from just what’s happening in reality and kind of stepping away from that and being creative and allowing your mind to be that free child that it wants to be rather than, you know, I’ve stopped watching the news because it doesn’t bring me joy. So, doing things that also give you just a different mindset to have your mind focus on something else, rather than just the pandemic that’s going on.

Keep an eye out for the full recording this webinar episode on myPSBA.org.

