

Jess Peet has written of her experience of the Fell Prize

In May 2016 I took part in my first AESS competition, the Toni Fell prize for Musical Theatre. I heard about the competition through the Royal Academy of Music, where I was studying MA Musical Theatre. The competition asks for a short programme that combines a song and speech, and states that these can come from different sources. I thought it would be a really interesting challenge to combine a monologue and complementary musical piece to make something original. I chose an extract from *Bash* by Neil LaBute in which the protagonist talks about listening to Billie Holiday. I wanted to find a musical theatre piece that had been performed at some point by Holiday, blurring the lines between what my character might be listening to on the radio and what emotions she might really be expressing.

At RAM we have the chance to study History of Musical Theatre with the incredible George Hall, and he had introduced us to the huge repertoire written by Rodgers and Hart. I knew that many of their earlier numbers had been sung by jazz and popular singers, and I managed to find a piece that had been performed by Billie Holiday. The song, *You Took Advantage of Me*, from their 1928 musical *Present Arms*, fit the overall theme of my monologue, albeit with a heavy dose of irony.

The competition is run at Sylvia Young Theatre School, and it was really easy to take part. Although there were many entrants and the competition runs for several hours in total, if you have plans during the day you can just turn up for your time slot, which you find out well in advance. AESS also provided a wonderful pianist to accompany entrants. In general, the association makes taking part a really simple and enjoyable experience!

I was the last to perform on the day, and had been excited to share my piece with the judges and fellow entrants from RAM. The 2016 adjudicators were Pip Minnithorpe and Marcus Savage. Listening to the adjudication, I was delighted to hear that nearly every entrant from RAM was given a special mention and constructive comments; more than anything, I was really proud to be part of the team.

I entered the competition because I enjoyed the challenge of giving a new perspective to two pieces by combining them. I didn't even think about the possibility of winning! The judges were really supportive though and their comments (which they gave during the adjudication and also sent out by email) gave me a real confidence boost. Pip and Marcus particularly approved of my rather strange combination of dramatic material. I would encourage anyone thinking of taking part in next year's competition to be as bold as possible in creating a programme!

Many thanks to Pip Minnithorpe and Marcus Savage and everyone at AESS for the chance to take part this year!