

TRANSITIONS: From the Big City to the Suburbs Goodbye Broadway, Hello Charleston

An Interview with Master Teacher Stephanie Samaras

For more than 25 years, Stephanie Samaras has been one of New York City's top voice teachers. Her students and former students have appeared on Broadway, Off-Broadway, national tours, regional theaters, cabarets, television, and recordings. Stephanie's first teaching video, "Classical Training Applied to the Pop Voice," has received worldwide distribution, and she regularly presents master classes and recitals across the country at universities and vocal conferences. She was selected as a Master Teacher for the prestigious NATS Intern Program in Fall 2006. In 2015, Stephanie traded a successful voice studio in Manhattan's historic Upper West Side for a private voice studio over her garage in the suburbs of Charleston, South Carolina. Stephanie and her husband, opera singer Ryan Allen, relocated to South Carolina to help care for Allen's mother and to be near family.



of theater people. He knew that I taught voice at IU and he started recommending me to his clients. I also had some comedians take lessons as well.

Little by little my students started getting jobs in national touring Broadway shows. Others would ask my students who they studied with. When they got back to New York several of them called for lessons. That got the ball rolling for me. They started getting cast in Broadway shows. It was totally unexpected.

Inter Nos: When did you join NATS?

SS: I joined NATS in 1987 after I was asked to be a presenter at the very first International Congress of Voice Teachers in Strasbourg France. That lecture-

demonstration (Classical Training Applied to Pop Singing) was so successful that other NATS chapters in America asked me to come and lecture and do master classes. In 2006, I was honored to be a Master Teacher for the NATS Intern Program.

Inter Nos: What are the best things about making this major transition?

Stephanie Samaras: There is definitely a quality of life here that you don't get out east. I guess the main thing is that my husband is able to share in taking care of his 93 year old mother. Up until we got here, his brother handled everything, and it was very stressful for him. Now the two of them work it out.

Inter Nos: You've had quite a successful career as a singer and as a teacher to professional NYC music theater performers. Did you always plan to be a teacher?

SS: As a masters student in vocal performance at Indiana University, I had a Graduate Teaching Assistantship. I LOVED it! When it was time for me to leave, I was asked to stay on, but I wanted to give my performing career a chance first before I launched into my "Plan B."

One of my first regular jobs in Manhattan was working as a singing waitress at a comedy club called The Comic Strip. I always got a lot of compliments on my voice, and the accompanist there coached a lot

Inter Nos: You must have a lot of great stories. What are some of your favorite teaching moments?

SS: Well, through a friend's connection, I was able to rent a living room during certain hours at the Ansonia Apartments. In those days the tenants rented their apartments during the day for people to teach in them. I was there for 13 years until the building started going co-op. If you weren't on the lease you had to go. Ah, those were the days! One of my regular students was Patrick Swayze's wife, Lisa Niemi. She was in *Will Rogers Follies* at the time. Patrick also came several times for lessons. He was a sweetheart, very serious about singing, I might add. Well, one time a young student and her mother were visiting from out of town. He was there finishing a lesson when they came in. The look and dropped jaws on their faces was priceless.

My very favorite story is when another one of my students who

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was also in the *Follies* came in one day and announced she wanted to audition for the role of Will's Favorite on the first national tour. This gal had not much of a voice when she first started lessons, but she was an extremely hard worker, a great dancer, and drop dead gorgeous (didn't hurt). I said "Well alright, let's work on her song." She had heard it so many times, she had it DOWN. After she sang it for me, I looked at her and said, "You're going to get this part. I just know it." After her lesson, she had arranged a coaching with the conductor of the show. He was thrilled when he heard her. Knowing what she sounded like when she first auditioned for the show, he asked, "Who is your teacher? You sound amazing. Wait til Tommy Tune hears you. He won't believe it." So they got Tommy in to hear her, and the same thing happened. "Who is your teacher?..... Wait til Cy Coleman hears you." She was on the callback list. At the auditions Cy Coleman saw her name and said, "What is this, some kind of joke"? They both said, just do us a favor and listen to her. They could not wait to see the look on his face, which was one of awe! He hired her on the spot, and from then on Tommy Tune called me "The Miracle Worker." The bad part was that he would always send me people who couldn't sing! There are so many more stories, but those are two of my favorites.

Inter Nos: This last year was a big change for you and your husband. Tell us about your relocation and what you are doing now.

SS: A big change is putting it mildly. We knew what we were getting into when decided to leave NY/NJ. My husband and I have been coming to Charleston, SC for about 20 years during the holidays. Ryan was born in Columbia, SC, and his mother and brother live here. My husband is an operatic bass and still sounds great. He almost immediately started looking into church jobs and he lucked out. One of the few paying churches had just lost their bass and he got the job right away. Charleston is funny. It's supposed to be a very cultural town, but there really aren't that many opportunities for classical singers to sing—especially opera. The theater community is a little better, but mostly amateur. No one wants to pay their performers!



It's weird. I sort of lucked out in that one of my students who took lessons from me in NY, has a theater company in Charleston. They do musical cabaret-revue type shows, all excellent, I might add! I am the vocal director/advisor. I do what I can to help the singers.

Inter Nos: Where do you teach? Are you continuing lessons with any of your NYC pro singers, either by Skype or by making trips to the city to teach?

SS: I have a really nifty office in a room above our garage where I teach privately. I don't expect it to be like NYC, there is only one New York. I am used to working with dancers, who are not always the best singers. So, I know the talent is not going to be the same. I still have several of my New York students who do FaceTime lessons with me. I like it better than Skype. It's still never as good as in person, though.

Inter Nos: What advice do you have for other teachers who are transitioning from a big city studio to a smaller market?

SS: Network, network. Definitely, get connected to the local NATS chapter. Introduce yourself, but don't be pushy. That's not my style! When you meet people, just say you're new in town and you want to find out what's going on. Go see local productions. Find out what the going rate is for the top voice teachers in the area and don't expect NYC rates!

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Inter Nos: What have been some of the challenges of your transition?

SS: The biggest challenges have been to meet other colleagues. I have volunteered to adjudicate for some local NATS events here, but really never got to talk with anyone. You know how crazy those events are! I don't want to step on anyone's toes, either. I don't want the local teachers to think I am some big shot from New York, and I know it all. I really would love to do a Master Class here. I have been to some college and local productions, and know I could have been of some great help to them. They just did a local production of "Chorus Line." The auditions were posted in Facebook. I have taught people in over 30 productions of that show. (Broadway, National Tours, International, and regional theater). I offered help to anyone interested in getting ready for the auditions. Not one person called me. Go figure.

Inter Nos: Isn't it just a matter of time?

SS: I have only been here a year, and I don't advertise. I don't have a lot of students, but I am slowly working my way up the food chain. It's a bit surreal. I joke that someday it feels like Magda's aria, "To This We've Come." But there is a lot to like about my new life.

Inter Nos: What do you like about Charleston?

SS: Everyone is so nice here. Things are much less expensive than in New York. We live five miles from downtown Charleston, and just five miles from the beach. Best of all, NO SNOW!

Stephanie Samaras had a private voice studio in NYC 1978 to 2015, before relocating to Charleston, SC. She was on the music theater voice faculty of Montclair State University, City University of New York, NYU Tisch School of the Arts and CAP21 Conservatory, and Keane University, NJ.