

A reflective essay on the Theatre Laboratory Module

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I began the year, through the medium of Welsh, studying Gecko Theatre under the guise of Angharad. It was absolutely fascinating, and I got to learn a completely new style of physical theatre with techniques such as: murmuring, stream of consciousness, styles of breathing ext. - which I explore and apply with whilst engaged in other projects. After transferring to the BA MT course I developed a series of completely new skills underneath the tutoring of David George Harrington.

For our first theatre lab assessment we looked at Kander & Ebb and the Golden age era. We worked on ensemble songs such as Coffee Break from How To Succeed, Anything Goes from Anything Goes, Kiss of the Spider Woman and more. I knew joining the class late, that I had to make a good impression and I knew my strengths as a singer were my technique training with Kiefer providing me with a strong low range and a developing high range. Despite this, one of my main weaknesses as a singer was harmonising, and joining the class late forced me to pick up a toolkit of skills faster and more efficiently. Due to this I did some research and found the following, *'Some singers, like those involved with barbershop quartets, think of harmony as practically mathematical in nature.'* (Harmony Helper, 2017) I found that once I had read this, I myself realised that I viewed music mathematically and this allowed me to actually find tools and aids to help learn faster and quicker. For all songs, I was on the Baritone harmony line and found that most of the harmonies were top tenor parts forcing me to strengthen my high belt, and developing my mixed and head voice. Finally, I was told due to my commitment and hard-work that I was going to be given a duet which I did with Chesca, which was a blend of 'I don't care much' and 'Maybe this time' from Cabaret, this forced me to have to harmonise independently and strengthen my rhythmic and timing abilities due to my song being in 4/4 and Chesca's being in 3/4.

Reflecting on the show, I believe that as an ensemble it was a very welcome challenge to us all that was executed fairly well. The combination of dancing whilst singing and acting was extremely challenging but very rewarding. Due to nerves and excitement, there were technical mistakes as a collective (i.e. cut-offs, lack of confident starts to harmonies) but we blended well as a group, and most of all, had fun! Individually, I believe I performed well, I feel that I demonstrated a wide range of skills and styles in my performance: from the realistic blocking of

‘I don’t care much’, setting my given circumstances (being in a prison, clinging on to hope, missing my lover), mapping the space (where in the cell I can walk, where is everything located) and my character’s journey through the song. I tried to push myself into real questions: why is my character singing right now? To himself? What was so serious that has lead him to burst into song? Which was answered by Hagen’s description: *‘the words that arise audibly though involuntarily from a human being who is in crisis’*, *‘verbalising when alone is a need to gain control over one’s circumstances’*. (Hagen, 1991). Then the contrast to the camp, dramatic style of ‘Dressing them up’, and enjoying making explosive and dramatic choices to match the feel of the song. One of my biggest weaknesses was the balance of singing whilst dancing, I found that sometimes I had to drop out of harmonies in the ensemble pieces in order to catch my breath, and I learnt afterwards that: *‘If you’re holding tension, oxygen has basically stopped ‘Your singing voice is going to be very stuck or, at absolute best, thinner than you want it to sound.’* (Dance Magazine, 2018). Another weakness I discovered was my ability to blend. I was so used to being a strong soloist that I didn’t realise the importance of blending sound. Whilst watching back rehearsal videos I heard my voice distinctly above the others. In order to avoid this it’s suggested that one *‘can practice blending by singing with different singers or recordings, and trying to match their tone and volume.’* (Linkedin).

In the second term, we started a new Theatre Lab assessment which was ‘Disney’ and ‘Pop/Rock’. I wasn’t particularly thrilled as neither style of MT has ever interested me but decided that it was probably even better as I would widen my knowledge of the styles and it’s repertoire and learn. As stated by Carrane, *‘The things that actually have lasting meaning in our lives are not easy and they aren’t convenient... happiness doesn’t come from our level of ease, it comes from living a life of meaning. True joy does not come to us in the form of comfort, it comes to us when we risk connecting ourselves to the world.’* (Green Shirt Studio, 2015). How do I know I really don’t like it if I don’t know the genres and haven’t tried them? After my hard work in the previous term I decided to ask for a solo and was given Ursula’s ‘Poor Unfortunate Souls’ from The Little Mermaid, a part of the Disney Villain Medley, which was very exciting. We learnt ensemble numbers from films/shows such as Hunchback of Notre Dame, Newsies, and We Will Rock You. During the rehearsal process I focused on trying to blend with the other voices, which was harder due to the loss of members in the term. The repertoire was exciting to rehearse as we were forced to explore and apply a wider range of vocal qualities: contemporary American Broadway (Seize the day), choral singing (God Help the Outcasts), character singing (Disney Villain Medley), and legit (Disney Princess Medley). Personally, I feel that I managed to show a range of ability within each style of singing whilst still acting through song and dancing. *‘between the successful singers ... and those who were ... hindered in having a career. One of the big differences was the amount of flexibility the singers possessed.’* (The BriceLand Studio, 2016). Furthermore, one of the main pushes in the last term was having to strengthen my upper vocal range, but this term pushed it further whilst in ‘Only the good die young’ from We Will Rock You, I had to sing the female alto line, flipping from thin folds to falsetto, whilst keeping dynamics and volume. In the rehearsal sessions, it was usually only Matt and myself present and

that forced me to strengthen my ability to harmonise even more. During this time, I feel that my greatest weakness was my inability to organise, and thus didn't prioritise Lab above other modules meaning that I was far less confident in harmonies than I should have been, which affected the speed of which we were taught.

In reflection, it's my opinion that the show overall was successful. As an ensemble we sounded much more blended and stronger and those left in the course put so much effort into the final piece. Despite this, I do feel that we as a class could have applied notes stronger: for example, we were told repeatedly about cut offs and specific dynamics for parts of songs and due to the choreography and acting, we repeatedly forgot those notes. As an individual, I believe that I demonstrated a massive range of abilities and feel that I have grown as a performer massively since the last term. Even when I was in the background without a character I still created narrative, a goal and a direction. The main weakness I felt individually was that I could have done more preparation work on the characters I did play, Ursula and one of the princes were all comedic, exaggerated characters which often feels like no preparation is needed and merely comedic technique – however, whilst watching back videos I saw 'Jona being funny as Ursula' rather than 'Ursula attempting to steal the voice of Ariel'. In the future, as recommended by Chekhov, I could 'find an imaginary body for your character', what are their qualities? How do they walk? What colour/shape/movement are they? Additionally, the obvious: their given circumstances, objectives, obstacles ext. Whilst I'm very proud with my performances, I do believe that I've fallen into the trap that comedic characters do not need any expansion, as say, Hedda Gabler's character would.

In conclusion, throughout this module I've developed an extensive set of skills which will be invaluable to my career (quickly learning harmonies, singing whilst dancing, acting through song) whilst also discovering my weaknesses that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Following into the next academic year, I aim to focus on these weaknesses and attempt to correct them.

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