

Amazing Grace- Reflective Journal

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My final production at WAVDA was *Amazing Grace*, a musical by Mal Pope, directed by Angharad Lee. The story follows the events of the 1904–1905 Welsh Revival and focuses on Evan Roberts, a young coal miner who becomes a key figure in one of Wales' most significant religious movements. I played the role of Mary, Evan's sister, a character deeply involved in his journey, both spiritually and emotionally. This role demanded not only performance skills, but also extensive research, empathy, and a willingness to immerse myself in a world that initially felt unfamiliar and, at times, alien.

To prepare for the role of Mary, I began historical research. Understanding the Welsh Revival was essential, as it shaped the emotional and social atmosphere of the play. The Revival led to the conversion of an estimated 100,000 people in just a few months (**Bebbington, 1989**). I read about Evan Roberts' life, his visions, and the personal strain the movement placed on him. His spiritual experiences were intense and, in many ways, isolating. As a sister watching this unfold, Mary would likely have experienced a complex mix of pride, fear, and concern. I also researched the role of women in Welsh nonconformist religious life. Although rarely in leadership roles, women were central to the functioning of chapels and revival meetings (**Jones, 2004**). Mary's role would have been one of both support and emotional labour, providing a grounding presence for Evan during his more unstable periods.

To further understand the emotional reality of religious conversion, I watched contemporary testimonies and interviews with people who had experienced evangelical faith. One particularly helpful resource was the BBC documentary *The Welsh Revival* (**BBC Cymru, 2004**), which featured descendants of revival participants. While I do not share their beliefs, their sincerity helped me find a point of empathy. As Stanislavski emphasises, truth in performance comes not from imitation but from emotional identification (**Stanislavski, 1936**). I didn't need to be religious; I needed to understand what faith *meant* to Mary.

Performing a religious character posed unexpected challenges. The language of the play, scripture, prophecy, and spiritual awakening felt unnatural at first. I struggled with how to deliver these lines without slipping into stereotypes or melodramas. At times, it felt performative in a way that clashed with my instincts as an actor striving for naturalism.

This conflict forced me to reconsider my approach. As I rehearsed under Angharad Lee's direction, we explored how belief systems shape behavior, posture, and voice. I was encouraged us to focus on subtext, on what was unspoken. For Mary, silence is often said more than words. She was a woman of faith, but also one of duty, often watching her brother from the sidelines, both proud and anxious. I began to appreciate how stillness could communicate in a variety of reflective ways. As someone without a religious background, I had to overcome a sense of disconnection. Yet I found resonance in the emotional truths behind faith: a longing for purpose, a desire to belong, and the comfort of certainty in an uncertain world. This role pushed me into emotional and intellectual discomfort. There were moments in rehearsal when I questioned whether I could genuinely portray a believer. But this discomfort became a gateway to growth. I began to recognise that performing something alien doesn't mean it must remain foreign. Through rehearsal, discussion, and research, I found a version of Mary that felt honest, both in her faith and in her fears.

Reflecting on the experience, I see how much it taught me about character embodiment. Mary was not simply a supporting character, she was a mirror to Evan's transformation. She grounded him, worried for him, and, in many ways, suffered in silence. I used Brechtian techniques of observation (**Brecht, 1964**), asking myself: What would I do if someone I loved became a religious leader overnight? How would I feel if my brother's health declined in front of me, all in the name of spiritual awakening?

The answers didn't come quickly, but they came. And they helped me create a layered performance that respected the historical and emotional weight of the piece. One of the turning points in my preparation came when I realised that I didn't need to "believe" in Christianity to portray a character of deep faith. What mattered was finding something that I could believe in, something emotionally resonant enough to act as a bridge into Mary's world. After reflecting on this, I began to explore the concept of psychic mediums. By imagining how I might feel if someone I cared about claimed to receive messages from beyond, like a medium might, I was able to connect more honestly with Mary's emotional landscape. That internal shift gave my performance a greater sense of truth. I was no longer "acting religious"; I was reacting to a spiritual force with the emotional logic I personally understood. Psychic mediums gave me a point of access, a way to feel, rather than fake, the weight of belief.

Another side of Mary's protective nature came out in her relationship with Annie Davies, one of Evan's closest friends, during the revival. With Evan in the middle, Mary and Annie both cared deeply for him, but showed their support in different ways. This created a quiet emotional tension between the two women, which I tried to show in my performance. In

our rehearsal process, Angharad Lee encouraged us to explore the tension and affection between Mary and Annie. One of the most dramatic moments in *Amazing Grace* is the song “Safe Hands”, a duet between Mary and Annie Davies. In this scene, Evan has suffered a mental breakdown, and Mary comes to see him. But Annie stops her and won’t let her in. She says Evan is resting and that he’s “in safe hands.” The song becomes a strong argument between the two women, both fighting for control over what’s best for Evan. This moment was very intense to perform. I saw Mary angry, scared, and completely shut out. She’s spent so long protecting Evan, and now Annie is stopping her from doing that. I played Mary as someone who feels helpless but won’t back down. I used sharp, direct body language, standing firm, raising my voice, and showing through my expression that Mary wasn’t going to be pushed aside. Mary also sees Annie as a threat. She’s not just another friend; she’s someone very close to Evan who might be pulling him away from his true purpose. Evan believed he was chosen by God to lead a revival, and Mary supported that. But Annie, while caring, seems to be distracting him from that mission.

Mary worries that Annie’s comfort might be holding Evan back from what he’s meant to do. In the song, we sang back and forth, almost interrupting each other. That showed tension between us. It felt like a tug of war, not just over Evan’s care, but over his future. I didn’t play Mary as cruel, but as desperate, a sister who believes her brother’s calling is too important to lose. Another song which captures this theme is “Jealousy”. In rehearsals, I portrayed Mary as deeply protective of Evan, like a caring mother and son, not in a toxic way, but driven by her fierce support for his dreams. She becomes jealous of Annie Davies; worried Annie could come between them. The lyric, “He is so innocent and yet he’s found it easy to forget, that you are standing in my place,” captures this jealous love, sacrifice mixed with fear of being replaced. Later, the words, “How did I get here, filled with anguish in my tears, when he needs me to be near,” deepened my performance even more. In that moment, Mary’s heart breaks with confusion and pain as she wonders how she ended up so distressed, knowing Evan still needs her. My portrayal focused on that raw tension, Mary’s devotion battling with jealousy and anguish, desperately holding on in case Annie’s closeness disrupts their bond. It was challenging to establish Mary’s relationship with Evan before fully diving into the emotional core of her character. At the very start of rehearsals, we devoted significant time *outside* of actual scenes to build a genuine bond. We practiced trust-building improvisations and shared quiet moments, just like a mother and son getting to know each other. Subtle physical gestures, like a reassuring hand on the shoulder or stepping protectively between Evan and others, became the small but significant moments that felt real. I also created a rich emotional backstory for Mary, imagining what shaped her fierce devotion and her instinct to protect him. This foundation was essential: once the emotional groundwork was laid, the intense scenes, especially the “Mining disaster”.

At the end of Act I, after the horrifying mining disaster, the scene is very intense. As miners lay dead and survivors wept and the anticipation if Evan and Mary's father will come out of the mine alive., Will Hay's character confronts Evan: "Where's your God now, Roberts?" Seeing Evan, Mary refuses to let Evan's faith collapse. In one of the musical's most powerful moments, she steadies him with unwavering conviction, singing: "You have come too far to turn and simply walk away; see the people standing here, they need your words. Will you help them? Will you guide them? If you leave, the sheep will scatter, and they will be lost." This furthermore establishes their bond earlier in rehearsals and makes this moment resonate deeply. As Mary, I stood beside Evan not just as his anchor, but as his moral compass. In embodying fierce protection, through tone, gestures and passion. I conveyed a woman who refuses to let tragedy steal the fragile hope of revival. Their relationship, already rich with devotion and mutual trust, finds its clearest expression here, Mary speaking softly yet decisively into Evan's crisis, reminding him and the audience, that true leadership in grief demands courage, and that she would stand by him.

Performing the mining disaster scene was the hardest thing I've ever done on stage. The physical effort, overwhelming grief, pushed me to my absolute limit. I'd never experienced anything so intense. The scene demanded real emotion, stamina, and deep empathy. But standing with Evan, holding his hand and delivering Mary's words, felt like a powerful achievement of connection and bravery. As time went on, I really settled into the raw emotion of the scene. In rehearsals, we worked on connecting deeply with the characters' feelings. I used techniques like recalling personal memories to bring out genuine emotions and practiced physical movements to express those emotions. This helped me stay present and true to Mary's experience. The more we rehearsed, the more natural it felt to convey her pain, fear, and hope. By the time we performed the scene, I was able to fully embody Mary's emotions, making the moment even more powerful for both me and the audience.

Performing Mary in *Amazing Grace* was one of the most demanding and rewarding experiences of my training at WAVDA. It required sensitivity, discipline, and above all, openness to history and of course to faith. I feel as though I left it with a deeper appreciation of belief as a driving force in human life. It was also fulfilling to bring to life a story rooted in Welsh history and identity. It was so rewarding to perform. *Amazing Grace* is more than a musical, t's a celebration of Wales, its language, its culture, and the powerful legacy of the 1904 Revival. As an actor, my job is not to judge the characters, but to understand them. And through understanding Mary, I learned more about myself, my strengths, and my capacity for empathy. I hope that in bringing her to life, I honoured both

the character and the historical women like her, who stood in the background of great movements, holding everything together.

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