

'Amazing Grace' Reflective Essay

Mal Pope's, 'Amazing Grace', is a 2006 musical which re-tells the story of the Welsh Christianity revival, led in 1904 by a 26 year old Miner, Evan Roberts who claims to receive personal messages from God in his dreams to save the lives of 100,000 Welsh citizens, ultimately fuelling a worldwide thirst for religion and hope. **"The Welsh Revival, though comparatively small in its initial effects, proved to be one of the most effective of all revivals in history."** (BCW, 2012). Following a real story, the events of the plot unveil Evan's emotional and mental struggles with his encounters with God, as he deals with a plethora of harsh critics stating he is a fraud, and an intense emotional journey within his own family and love life. The show has rich tones of Welsh language and culture, incorporating numerous Welsh hymns to portray this narrative. Directed by Angharad Lee, musically directed by Kieran Bailey and choreographed by Tori Johns, this show brought with it many unsuspecting adventures and fond memories. Since working with Angharad previously on projects such as Hotel Panama and our Agency showcase in Wales Millennium Centre, I had grown used to her directorial style and fast working pace, which accommodated my learning style as an actor, as I too like to learn my material efficiently so that more time can be used to refine and add detail to my performance.

I played the role of Mona, one of four members of the 'Singers of Dawn', who were inspired by a real group of girls who followed Evan throughout his journey and sang for him whenever they felt compelled to by the spirit of God. **"When travelling round the country to speak, Robert's was accompanied by the Singers of Dawn, a band of young women followers. It wasn't long before there arose suggestions of both misconduct and manipulation."** (Pope.M, 2006). This role demanded sensitivity and emotional maturity as my storyline was centred around the exploitation and suspected cohesion of Evan's followers, who were all young girls. The singers of Dawn were primarily motivated through music, therefore precision within the music was vital in this role. I worked closely alongside fellow singers of Dawn, Catrin Aur Evans as Annie, Evangelia Dimitriou as Lavinia, and Lucy-Jo Evan's as Priscilla, meaning that we all got to know each others vocal dynamic very well to feed into our intuition and guide a more connected performance. Learning harmonies was something I had already become well acquainted with through my time at WAVDA, however, the musicality required for Amazing Grace was extraordinary and complex. Whilst in music rehearsals, I struggled with blending my voice with others and found it difficult to stick to ever changing harmony lines in ensemble work. As I classify as a

Soprano voice type, I am normally used to singing the melody line of a song, therefore having to learn many harmonies proved to be a unique experience for me. **‘Voice blending in a chorus refers to the seamless intergration of various vocal parts to create a rich, balanced sound.’ (Wizard Marketing, 2025).** I found that because I was overly conscious of finding my harmony line that I was singing louder than other people in my voice type, however these harmonies implemented themselves through hours of rehearsal and became muscle memory by the end of the show. Kieran often encouraged us to walk around the space and mix up our seating arrangement when learning harmonies in order to not rely on each other for harmonies and find them independently instead. This proved to be very impactful as it forefronted when any hesitation could be heard and prompted me to be more proactive whilst learning my harmonies.

In order to accurately portray life in Wales in the early twentieth century, it is vital to comprehend the financial, social and living conditions of the time. South Wales’ Valleys, where the revival began, were renowned for being the poorest areas of the country, in terms of the general working class family, due to the exploitation of coal miners by the colliery owners. The rigorous hours and life threatening working conditions for miners resulted in many fatalities and more strikes were in place for demand of better conditions. This growing resentment towards colliery’s led to dissatisfaction amongst the miner’s families. **“Toward the end of the 19th century, the industry was characterised by rapid and uncontrolled growth. Matters of health and safety were of little importance in the race for increased productivity an profit, and this race had profound consequences.” (Mirrill.T et al, 2017).** These were terrifying conditions for Welsh families, as they were not receiving adequate pay that reflected their long working hours, meaning that families often went hungry and without necessities such as heating or warm clothing. Despite the gruelling living and working conditions, the revival filled Welsh citizens all around the country with hope and optimism. **‘Belief in a higher power or a greater purpose can foster hope and optimism, even in the face of adversity. This hope can provide motivation needed to persevere through difficult times.’ (Lien.L, 2024).** Religion and hope are deeply intertwined, therefore the revival refuelled lots of faith amongst the population. This new found faith and hope had a tremendous impact on the livelihoods and attitudes of Welsh folk, as it restored their motivation to keep pushing through difficult times and encouraging them to look out for each other. “Hope is optimism combined with the belief that one has the agency to make things better” (Lien.L,2024).

The biggest challenge I encountered as an actor in ‘Amazing Grace’ was harnessing the feeling of religious indulgence whilst being an atheist myself. As somebody who had very little experience with Christianity and faith in my personal life, I was worried that my own beliefs would halter my ability to act as though I was being overcome by the spirit of Jesus Christ and experience holistic Christianity. In order to get over this mental barrier,

Angharad suggested to whoever was not religious in the cast, to reimagine another element of their life which provided them with hope and a sense of optimism for the future. For this, I imagined my sister's pregnancy and how I want her future child to be brought into a world filled with love and optimism. During my research throughout the rehearsal process, I looked into the 'magic if', popularised by Konstantin Stanislavski, in order to let my imagination run wild with possibilities of who is watching over/guiding me. **'Stanislavski describes the magic if as being able to imagine a character's given circumstances enough to understand what that character might do in any situation.'** (Sparrow.P, 2019). In the first chapel scene at Moriah chapel in Loughour, 'Chapel Amen', was the most challenging for myself and as a cast in general. The scene and song rely on a grand build up of religious joy and hope, as multiple people confess to God their sins and want his help. In order to achieve this, I had to utilise my imagination and picture myself in the presence of my own family and friends and imagine it was them going through these difficult situations which the characters confess. This made me empathise more and feel the weight of their burden being taken off their shoulders and in return, helped me give a convincing performance and allowed me to raise the stakes in the scene by placing my own loved ones into the scene.

A unique element to this reduction for me was having the opportunity to help direct two penultimate scenes of the show, one being the mining disaster at the end of act one, and the other being Evan Robert's public breakdown in Liverpool. I worked collaboratively with fellow cast members to stage these scenes and block the actors. Due to us having a considerably large cast of 42 members, this proved to be a hurdle we had to overcome. An initial obstacle was balancing out the dynamic of the ensemble in order to gain authority over them and direct them, while still taking into consideration that we are all equals as students in a learning environment. I found that the most effective way to achieve this was by addressing them informally, yet giving clear and detailed instructions, this way we were all able to find a sweet spot between being castmates and having a hierarchy. **"In a room that values collaboration everyone is less nervous and more confident because there is a feeling of being 'in this together'"** (Fenstermaker.L, 2020). Throughout the rehearsal process, we had lots of independent learning time and pupil led rehearsals due to the velocity of the show. These sessions proved to work very successfully, however initially it took trial and error to get to this stage. We found that the first year students were lacking motivation at times, which led us to step up and become mentors for them in many ways. We decided to create multiple kahoot quiz games, such as 'finish the lyric' and 'finish the cue line' in order to make an interactive and enjoyable way to familiarise themselves with the show, this proved to work effectively and kept an uplifted and competitive atmosphere in the space. **"By creating a positive learning environment, setting clear goals, using diverse teaching methods..and incorporating gamification..can inspire students to stay engaged and motivated."** (CER)

Another intriguing element to this production for me, was the incorporation of the Welsh language, through song and dialogue. As a Welsh citizen who only had basic knowledge and understanding of the language as rehearsals started, this daunted me slightly as I was anxious about not pronouncing words correctly or using incorrect grammar. The first song we learnt with our musical director, Kieran Bailey, was the Welsh hymn, 'O Iesu Mawr'. As the hymn was performed entirely in Welsh, this meant I had to adapt quickly and pick up the grammar and pronunciations to not stand apart from my fluent Welsh castmates on the BA Perfformio and BA Theatr Geddorrol course. Firstly, I asked some of the BA Perfformio students to help me spell out the words phonetically in order to break down sentence structures and words which looked unfamiliar to me. This subsequently allowed me to pick up the language easily. **"Segmenting is the ability to break up spoken words into their separate sounds."** (PhonicsHero, 2021). I repeated the lyrics phonetically continuously until the pronunciation came second nature to me. As our storytelling in rehearsals developed, I paid more attention to the English translations to the lyrics and what stories they tell the audience, harnessing the powerful and intentional song choices to evoke an emotional response from the audience. During the mining disaster at the end of act one, we sang the Welsh hymn, 'Pen Calfaria', the lyrics translate to tell a harrowing tale of loss and devastation after disaster; mirroring the events of the plot. To unlock these emotions through the singing, I approached the lyrics like a monologue in order to find beats in it. I also tried to the best of my ability, to communicate to fluent Welsh speakers in the cast, in their native language, in order to understand the sentence patterns and common habits when speaking Welsh in conversation. **"Total immersion is key to mastering a foreign language quickly. The more you immerse yourself in the foreign language- such as reading..or speaking to people- the more rapid your progress will be."** (Burden. R, 2015). My favourite part of the rehearsal process was learning these beautiful Welsh hymns and fully submerging myself in the language and learning the tales behind the music.

In conclusion, my time spent in Amazing Grace will be one that I look upon with appreciation and gratitude for those who helped to make the show a success. Through highs and lows, I was continuously made to feel supported and inspired to grow. From learning an entire new language to discovering how to direct a scene, the show and its creative team and cast have allowed me to develop as not only a performer, but as a person.

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