

Final Production: Amazing Grace
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Reflective Essay
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After hearing that for our final production of our degree, we would be participating in Mal Pope's 'Amazing Grace' combining with the BA Perfformio group and the 1st years, I was filled with an array of emotions, ranging from anticipation to excitement. "Mal Pope's hit musical, *Amazing Grace*, which tells the intriguing story of Evan Roberts and his leadership of the 1904 Welsh Religious Revival." Sherman (2025). Taking on a musical of such scale with not much information about it online was daunting however, it was a challenge that I wanted to put my all into, especially as my last performance. "The show presents a harrowing story about faith, sacrifice and hope, through the eyes of W.T. Stead, leading *Sunday Times* journalist and peace campaigner, with a rich musical backdrop by Mal Pope and well-known Welsh hymns. Based in Loughor, *Amazing Grace* follows the experiences of Evan Roberts receiving a profound spiritual call, and his harrowing journey from rejection to glory, as his message inspires over half a million people around the world. The production is a celebration of Welsh history and the energy of the next generation of performers." UWTSD (2025). The process was extremely rewarding, pushing me to apply the skills I'd developed throughout the course while challenging me to grow and expand my mindset. My knowledge and insights continually broadened while navigating the show's religious themes, interesting character relationships and intense storyline.

Angharad Lee directed our production, which was exciting for the cast as we had worked with her previously and she had also been a key lecturer throughout our training. Having that familiarity brought comfort, especially when working within such an intense and intricate narrative. We were also aware of Angharad's professional success and had recently watched her direction of *The Wild Tennant* at the WMC with Bella Merlin, which left us in awe. Furthermore, "Angharad is an award-winning director and producer who works across disciplines and with a keen interest in the development of the musical theatre sector in Wales" Lee.A (2025). She is recognised for productions such as 'The Last 5 Years' and 'Gair ar Gnowd'. Angharad's directing style focuses heavily on objectives, a technique rooted in Stanislavsky's practice. This approach gives actors clear motivations for every line, movement and song, helping us connect emotionally and push the narrative forward. As Deer explains, "Every act, scene and song, right down to the smallest action, has its own objective... This is called an objective hierarchy." Deer.J (2008). One key challenge the cast faced was the religious context of the musical. Many of us do not identify as religious, which made it initially difficult to engage with the material. However, Angharad encouraged us to find personal belief systems we could connect with such as karma, manifestation, or spiritual energy. This method helped us root our performances in authenticity. As Uta Hagen supports, "When faced with a role, you may have to find substitutions for moods, objectives, feelings, settings, history, locations, relationships, periods, etc., in order to feel what the character feels. Your substitutions are complete only when they have become synonymous with this actor, this play's events, these objects you are using in your stage life and produce a significant action." Hagen.U (1973).

Angharad's directing style was thoughtful and detailed. She paid close attention to character development and narrative precision, but also encouraged openness to interpretation. This was evident in her decision to adapt the character of Dan, Evan Roberts' brother, into Elizabeth, Evan's sister, allowing me to step into the role with authenticity. As noted in *The Cross-Gender Casting of Great Shakespearean Characters*, "cross-gender casting can dig deeply into the very nature of gender and identity. We live in a world where gender is a spectrum and not something rigidly prescribed." Financial Times (2014). This elaborates how thoughtful gender-swapping can uncover fresh layers in character relationships. Angharad worked closely with me to develop a new backstory for Elizabeth, ensuring the character felt fully realised within the existing world of the play. However, one potential drawback of changing the storyline was that Elizabeth no longer fit into scenes involving the miners, which had originally included Dan. This meant I missed out on those group dynamics and the opportunity to explore the working-class male experience of the time. That said, the change allowed for a more emotionally layered relationship between Elizabeth and Evan.

Their sibling bond brought out a youthful, more playful side to both characters, which arguably deepened the audience's connection to Evan's personal life and humanised his journey even further.

Angharad's freeness in direction was beneficial because it allowed us the freedom to develop our own ideas and interpretations, fostering creativity and personal connection to the material. However, I sometimes found this challenging as I struggled to fully trust my instincts without reassurance. Since Angharad only intervened when something was incorrect, I often second-guessed myself. Later, I learned it was okay to ask her directly for guidance, which helped me develop my acting choices. A recurring piece of feedback from her was that I tend to swallow my words in text and need to improve my diction. As noted, "clear diction is essential to effective communication in performance, as it ensures that the audience can fully engage with the spoken word" Crystal.D (2003). Using my natural Welsh accent helped me pronounce words more naturally without the difficulty of adopting an unfamiliar accent. According to Knowles, "actors who employ their native accents often find it easier to maintain clarity and authenticity in their vocal delivery" Knowles.M (2010). However, because the accent was so close to my own, I occasionally became vocally lazy, losing the precise diction we had worked hard to develop. Research showed me that muscle memory and repetition are key to consistent speech quality. "Through consistent practice and repetition, learners can consolidate the neuromotor patterns associated with the articulatory movements required for speech. Over time, this leads to improved fluency and accuracy in speech production as, due to automation, the required motor sequences require less conscious effort to execute." Boettger.H (2024). By linking gestures to words and stage directions, I engaged my whole body, improving both physicality and speech clarity.

The success of Angharad's direction lay in her open, collaborative style. Rather than enforcing a strict vision, she encouraged us to explore and make creative decisions ourselves. As Katie Mitchell outlines, a director must possess "the ability to structure and analyse the text, to create a visual and spatial interpretation, and to lead and inspire the company." Mitchell.K (2009). Throughout the process, Angharad always endeavoured to implement these factors into her work, always paying close attention to detail in spacing and blocking, particularly involving movements which involved using the stairs and the balcony. When working in the rehearsal space, she encouraged us to mime walking upstairs which was effective when we got to use them in the Sherman. She also paid close attention to everyone in the space, whether they were a lead in a scene or an ensemble member and she ensured everyone was fully immersed in each scene. Her leadership showed that trust and collaboration can be just as powerful as control.

For future projects, I plan to improve how I respond to direction by keeping clearer, more focused rehearsal notes and recording blocking changes so I can revisit them outside of rehearsal. I also aim to sharpen my ability to observe and interpret her guidance in the moment, which will help me adapt more confidently and contribute more effectively to the creative process.

Tori Johns, our choreographer, brought a wealth of experience and expertise to our work. Royal Ballet-trained and with professional credits in iconic productions such as *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*, Tori expertly blends classical technique with theatrical storytelling. As Susan Banes explains, "The art of choreography lies not only in the mastery of movement vocabulary but in the choreographer's ability to shape and communicate complex emotional narratives through the body, transforming abstract technique into compelling stories." Bates.S (1988). Having worked with Tori before on *Rocky Horror*, it was comforting to collaborate with her again on *Amazing Grace*, where her supportive presence fostered a creative and trusting atmosphere. The contrast between the more intimate, character-driven choreography in *Rocky Horror* and the large-scale ensemble work in *Amazing Grace* showcased her versatility. "A skilled choreographer must adapt their vision to suit the size

and style of the company, crafting moments that resonate regardless of the number of performers” Dance Magazine (2021). Watching her manage a larger cast with such clarity and energy was truly inspiring. Her work reinforced the idea that “observing experienced choreographers provides invaluable inspiration and practical insight for emerging artists” Kassing.G & Jay.D.M (2003), and I aspire to develop the same confidence and artistry in my future choreography.

As I was playing Elizabeth, there was only one major dance number I participated in, titled “It’s Happening Here.” This was a high-intensity piece featuring complex, repeating dance sequences paired with intricate lyrics. While I was excited to take part, I also felt apprehensive about mastering the choreography, particularly the stamina required to perform demanding movements while singing. Eric Franklin emphasises the importance of breathing techniques for performers, stating that “efficient breathing patterns are fundamental for dancers to maintain stamina and execute movements with ease.” Franklin.E (2019). Although I wasn’t involved in other major dance scenes, the stamina training and muscle memory I developed through this number benefited my overall stage performance. My dance background helped me internalise blocking and stage directions much like a dance routine, making them easier to recall under pressure. As Hanna and Haugen highlight, “the integration of movement and muscle memory enhances an actor’s ability to deliver consistent performances and supports vocal and physical expression.” Hanna.J.L & Haugen.J (2017). Tori Johns’ choreography and her methodical, clear approach played a crucial role in helping me build this connection between movement and acting, allowing me to engage fully with both the physical and emotional demands of the role.

A challenge I faced was during the partner combinations in “It’s Happening Here,” working with first-year Ethan Watkins, who I had only briefly met before. Our initial struggle was building a comfortable, trusting connection. Mutual trust is essential in partner work, especially with physical contact and lifts involved. As Backstage states, “partnering work requires vulnerability and trust, two things that don’t come automatically but must be built through communication and repetition.” Backstage (2020). I also initially found the lift section difficult, as I am usually a base but was now a flyer, which felt physically and mentally unfamiliar. To overcome this, we held a lift call before every run to build consistency and connection. We bonded over our shared enjoyment of the number and supported each other in learning and teaching choreography. This friendship also helped bridge the social gap between BA1 and BA2 students. Another challenge came from my costume, the skirt would get caught mid-jump during the lift. Instead of changing costumes, we discreetly hoisted the skirt up during the routine beforehand, avoiding disruptions. This demonstrated how “collaborative creativity in rehearsal environments fosters both interpersonal trust and adaptive thinking” Smith.M (2016). Finding this solution strengthened our partnership and dynamic

Additionally, I was incredibly grateful to be given the role of Dance Captain for Amazing Grace. It was a responsibility I didn’t take lightly, and I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to shadow our choreographer, Tori, throughout the rehearsal process. Assisting in cleaning routines not only strengthened my eye for detail but also gave me a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of each number, allowing me to understand the show as a whole. This insight enriched my own performance and helped me support others with consistency and clarity. Being Dance Captain also taught me the importance of leadership, organisation, and calm communication under pressure. These are skills I will carry forward into future productions. According to Get into Theatre, “a dance captain is responsible for overseeing and maintaining the artistic standards of all choreography and musical staging within a production” Get into Theatre (2024), which resonated deeply with me in this role. It was especially rewarding to feel the trust and respect of the entire cast, which made the role even more fulfilling. Knowing that my peers valued my input and direction truly enhanced my confidence and sense of contribution to the production.

To conclude, working on Amazing Grace was a truly enriching experience. Collaborating with Angharad and Tori allowed me to grow in confidence, leadership, and versatility as a performer. I developed a deeper understanding of character work and ensemble connection, while gaining valuable insight into directing and rehearsal processes. From acting challenges to dance captain responsibilities, I felt supported and inspired throughout. This production not only strengthened my technical skills but also reaffirmed my passion for theatre. It was incredibly special to perform Amazing Grace as my final show, and I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity to finish this chapter surrounded by such an inspiring team and cast.

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