

Reflective Journal – Weeks 1 & 2

The aim of our Final Production module is to rehearse and perform a production of the Ken Ludwig and Ira Gershwin musical "Crazy for You" over the course of a five-week period. The first two weeks of the production were dedicated to the first act of the show: combing through the script, blocking, learning music and dances, and perhaps most importantly, research and development.

Our director James Williams encouraged us to do a deep-dive on the world of the play, researching the context of London and Wales in the 1930s as well as the accents that we would need to take on to credibly represent our characters: RP, Welsh or even Hungarian. For appropriate dancing, we were especially asked to look into the airy and free-flowing tap style of Fred Astaire.

Through auditions, I had landed the role of Perkins, a matter-of-factly and businesslike assistant to the protagonist's wealthy and wheelchair-bound mother, Ms. Child. For character research, James advised me to look into the 1962 psychological thriller "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane" and the television series "Jeeves and Wooster" – the former to find inspiration for the relationship between my character and her employer Ms. Childs, the latter for the ways and the accent of the affluent Englishpeople of the time. I found both these references very helpful. As someone brought up in social-democratic Finland, I most likely lack nuance in my understanding of the British class system and its historical elite. Watching Jeeves and Wooster not only gave me an access point to the required heightened RP accent, but also shed light on how utterly detached from the everyday life of the masses the wealthy could be. This gave me a deeper understanding of the kind of environment my character works in and what kind of people she has to cater to. The hostile sibling rivalry of "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane" helped me to build on that: the psychological thriller chronicles an aging has-been child-star tormenting her paraplegic, formerly successful Hollywood actress sister, and James wanted this melodramatic and thriller-esque style to define the relationship between my character and her boss. Without watching the film, I don't think I would have been able to unlock the style James was looking for.

Another helpful exercise we did for getting to know our characters in more depth was hot-seating. In hot-seating, you will sit on a chair in front of the other cast members, who get to ask you questions about your character. Unsworth (2012, p.103) explains that in order to answer, you have to be "truly familiar with the play". Even if you don't know explicit answers

to all the questions, you can make informed decisions based on your knowledge of the character. "You can be very creative here as long as you can support your answers with something that you have discovered in the text", Unsworth (ibid.) states. When I went in for hot-seating as Perkins, most of the questions about my background were intuitively easy to answer, but having to ponder on how my business-minded character views the world of the arts gave me food for thought. We concluded that maybe she secretly dreams of a career in showbiz too, and that affects how she reacts to the musical's events quite a lot.

To physicalize our character findings, we explored a tool called "states of tension". Drawing from previous work by Jacques LeCoq and Keith Johnstone, John Wright (2006) has come up with eight states of physical tension, that graduate "from the minimum level of tension in the body, to the maximum level of tension [and] have no meaning in themselves; meaning is conveyed by the context." (Wright, 2006, p. 159). Our director James Williams further developed this work, concluding in a refined list of 11 states of tension (from least tense to most tense): exhaustion, teenager, Californian, distraction, neutral, Virgin Mary, ice cream, evil Mary, ticking bomb, fast bomb and rigor mortis. As the names suggest, the states of tension draw inspiration from real-life examples to help find the desired level of tension. For my stiff-upper lip character, I found the mid-level states the most useful. Especially the heightened stillness of the "Virgin Mary" (positive emotion) and Evil Mary (negative emotion) felt like something my character would carry around. This exercise helped me immensely in finding the physicality for my character.

All in all, I felt like these first two weeks gave me a deep understanding of the story we are trying to tell and what my part in it is. It is a solid foundation that is easy to build on when trying to learn harmonies or perfect difficult tap steps. I feel like I understand the aim and the shape of the piece very well, and now it is time to start honing in on the technical details of what needs to be done.

Bibliography

Unsworth, T. (2012) *Becoming an Actor*. London: Nick Hern Books

Wright, J. (2006) *Why Is That So Funny?: A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*. London: Nick Hern Books.