

Reflective journal – weeks 3 & 4

During week three of our production of “A New Brain”, we started staging the scenes. This part of a production is at the same time very exciting as we get to finally start putting things on their feet, but also quite draining as it involves a lot of uncertainty and waiting around. In general, I’m not very quick at picking up routines and transitions, but, maybe due to my current personal life situation, during these two weeks I found it even more difficult to get things to stick. If I didn’t write something down, the section would escape my brain instantly, so as we progressed I tried to improve my note-taking and squeeze in a bit of practice in moments where it was possible.

Come week four, we had managed to stage all of our scenes and had done a rough stagger run of the entire show. To add more depth to the outline of the show, we did a session researching and analysing the scenes by looking into their “symbolic plane”. Our interpretation of the show is that most of the songs are “manifestations” of the protagonist’s anxieties and personal issues: his relationship with himself, his mother, religion, career, financial security and so on. As Stanislavsky scholar Bella Merlin (2014, p. 170) puts it: “Your ‘external actions’ can’t just be activities, they are the physical manifestation of your desires and aspirations.”

Guided by our director Luke, we combed through every scene and assigned them meaning from the pool of these manifestations. We agreed that most of my bigger “solo” scenes (“911 Emergency”, “Trouble in his Brain”, “Craniotomy”) do not really operate on this symbolic plane but rather serve a very practical dramatic function, explaining what is going on medically. Hence this “manifestation” work was, for me, more beneficial in trying to find appropriate energy and expressiveness for the bigger ensemble numbers (“Time and Music”, “And they’re Off”, “Eating Myself Alive”, “Heart and Music” and “I Feel so much Spring”).

I found the manifestation research especially beneficial for the songs “Time and Music”/“I Feel so much Spring” and “And They’re Off”. The aforementioned, which is the closing number of the show, is a manifestation of Gordon’s relationship *with himself*. Throughout the story, Gordon has tried to escape his anxieties and issues – essentially, himself – but has had to come to terms with who he is through his near-death-experience. In this final number, we as ensemble members are empowering him to embrace who he is, feeling proud of the transformation he has gone through. Finding my objective towards Gordon – to encourage him – translated into a more emotionally truthful, warmer connection with the song.

"And They're Off" manifests Gordon's relationship with his father and the tragedy of his family being broken up by the father's gambling problem. In this number, we as ensemble members represent this memory, acting as the audience at a horse race. The production team asked us to portray anticipation and then disappointment over losing the race. On the other hand, they wanted the singing to be very energized, but the non-sung parts distant and almost robotic. The discussion about Gordon's father helped me to understand the connection between the required physicality and the story, as I could imagine the emotional scale of frenzy to hollowness a gambling addict would feel. Trying to implement this made my connection to the song a lot stronger and performing it more exciting.

In addition to working on our scenes, we had dialect coach Rhian Cronshaw come in to teach us the basics of the "standard American" accent. She explained to us the history behind this accent that was created for the broadcasting industry and Hollywood with the aim of being as general as possible, not giving away your geographical origin. "Stress, intonation, and rhythm work together to create the voice patterns of the English dialect that is standard in North America" (Lujan, 2006, p. xii) and the accent is heavily rhotic, meaning that r's are pronounced (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014). As a non-native English-speaker I found this hour of information very useful and interesting, and it motivated me to do even further research on accents. My character in the show is a non-native English-speaker like myself, so I discussed with our director Luke what to do with this new toolkit of accent work. We decided that it would probably not be the best use of my time to try and hone my American accent, as I am anyway playing a character whose English isn't perfect. All in all, the accent work was very useful but for this show, it is best to mostly focus my time somewhere else.

References

Lujan, B. (2006) *The American Accent Guide. A comprehensive course on the sound system of American English*. Salt Lake City: Lingual Arts.

Merlin, B. (2014) *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Sharpe, E. and Rowles, J. H. (2014) *How To Do Accents*. 2nd edn. Bloomsbury Publishing. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/1812268/how-to-do-accents-pdf> (Accessed: 20 May 2022).