

Production 1: Richard O'Brien's Rocky Horror Show

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Reflective Essay

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Stepping into Richard O'Brien's Rocky Horror Show was unlike any performance experience I've had. From the start, rehearsals were about embodying the wild energy of the show, not just learning lines and choreography. "Richard O'Brien, born Richard Timothy Smith in 1942, is the creator of The Rocky Horror Show, a musical that has been in continuous production since its debut in 1973. The Rocky Horror Picture Show was not an immediate commercial success but, thanks to late-night screenings and audience participation shows, it became a cult classic" BBC (2006). I learned that the show was written as a tribute to sci-fi and horror B-movies, blending camp, rock music, and gender-fluid themes. Its interactive cult following and message of self-expression have made it an enduring piece of theatre history. As stated, "Richard O'Brien's Rocky Horror Show - without question the most lurid show in rock theatre history – is a mind-blowing and sensual experience, a divine party, an infernal joke in life's Garden of Eden. It created its own world from the start, impossible to categorise. The internationally acclaimed production takes the show back to its roots: the fascination and shrill charm of the B-movie, of burlesque and glam rock" ATG (2025). The process was highly rewarding, pushing me to apply the skills I'd developed while challenging me to grow. Navigating its bold themes, intricate staging, and high-energy demands broadened my insights as an aspiring performer, reflecting on the highs, challenges, and madness of bringing the show to life.

Richard Tunley directed our production, which was exciting for the cast as we had never worked with an external director before and Richard is renowned for his work. We quickly learned about his versatility as a director, as he was simultaneously directing a children's production of Charlie and The Chocolate Factory in Switzerland. Richard's directing style was a blend of structured precision and creative fluidity. He employed lateral thinking techniques and flocking exercises, to encourage organic movement and ensemble cohesion. Flocking exercises are integral to ensemble work, as they cultivate non-verbal communication and synchronisation among performers. The Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators describes flocking as "a type of movement improvisation in which students mirror or shadow each other's movement in groups, often utilising a diamond formation to foster synchronisation and collective awareness." Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators (2025). Richard's deep understanding of Rocky Horror Show's B-movie inspirations influenced his blocking and character direction, ensuring every moment felt purposeful. He was meticulous with notes, refining small details to enhance performance. One challenge he gave me was to adjust the tempo of my monologue for better audience engagement. After receiving this direction, I researched pacing, and Kevin Lerner states, "Skillful use of pacing and pausing can create suspense and build anticipation among your listeners. Pauses before revealing an important fact can heighten emotional impact" Lerner.K (2023). This research expanded my understanding of pace, which I later refined and was praised for.

Initially, I found Richard's detailed directing approach intense, as it required a high level of adaptability. However, as rehearsals progressed, I gained a deeper appreciation for his ability to extract nuance from performances. His commitment to clarity in blocking and stage presence helped strengthen my performance, and I felt confident in his vision. Other cast members seemed to find his approach equally demanding yet rewarding. This experience reinforced the importance of adaptability in acting, as "adaptability allows actors to navigate the shifting sands of roles, bringing authenticity to each character portrayal. It's the difference between merely reciting lines and embodying a persona, captivating audiences with the depth and nuance of each performance" VADA (2025)

Richard's ability to offer fresh perspectives significantly enhanced my performance. His structured approach to blocking ensured every moment had intention, which was beneficial for storytelling. However, at times, his rigidity made it challenging to explore alternative interpretations freely. My personal contribution was my willingness to adapt to his detailed feedback, which led to noticeable improvements in my character portrayal. As noted by

David Genik, taking notes allows actors to "reinforce your memory and recall important aspects of your performance." Genik.D (2023). By reviewing these notes, I was able to refresh my understanding and ensure consistent and authentic portrayals.

The success of Richard's direction stemmed from his strong conceptual understanding of the show. 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). Richard exemplified these qualities by articulating a clear vision that resonated with the entire team. The challenges came from quickly adapting to detailed blocking changes. Understanding stage composition and audience engagement was crucial to executing Richard's vision. His meticulous attention to detail helped us immerse ourselves in the world of the show, making every moment feel intentional. Richard's ability to focus the audience's attention ensured each beat had a clear storytelling purpose. As Ingham notes, "a director's role is not only to guide the performers but to shape the audience's experience through careful control of visual and spatial elements" Ingham.R (2017). Richard's direction demonstrated this by using staging, movement, and lighting cues to reinforce dramatic intent. Furthermore, he embraced the concept of "killing your darlings," a term often used in creative fields to describe the ability to let go of ideas that, while initially promising, no longer serve the greater vision of the piece. As Bayne explains, "great directors and writers understand that objectivity is key—being willing to discard even beloved elements if they no longer serve the story." Bayne.M (2020). Richard's lack of ego in this process was inspiring; he continually reassessed his own work, ensuring that every directorial decision benefited the cast and enhanced the production's overall impact.

This experience highlighted the importance of balancing directorial precision with personal creative input. While a structured approach provides clarity, flexibility in exploring character nuances is also valuable. Richard not only enhanced the overall quality of the production but also inspired personal growth in each actor. His commitment to refining every aspect of the show ensured that the performance consistently met the high standards he set. Ultimately, working under Richard's direction strengthened my adaptability as an actor, sharpened my focus on storytelling, and deepened my understanding of how a director's vision can transform a production into a cohesive and compelling experience.

In future projects, I will refine my ability to implement directorial notes by taking more concise rehearsal notes and recording blocking changes to review later. Additionally, I will develop my ability to analyse directorial choices in real-time to enhance adaptability.

During the rehearsal process, alongside Richard's direction, we also worked with him as a choreographer as well as Tori Johns. Both creatives brought distinct stylistic approaches. Tori's choreography was highly expressive, emphasising the theatrical nature of the show, while Richard's approach was more symbolic and precise, incorporating movement to reflect deeper themes. While both choreographers had unique stylistic approaches, their styles complemented each other seamlessly, enhancing the overall cohesion of the show. Richard and Tori collaborated closely to uphold Richard's vision while also incorporating their own creative flair into each number. The fusion of both choreographers' input enriched the production which is supported by research highlighted in 'Dance in Musical Theatre: A History of the Body in Movement', "Integrating diverse choreographic styles within a theatrical production enhances the narrative by offering multiple perspectives and enriching the audience's experience." Sablo.L (2020). Learning from two contrasting styles was an enriching experience, though it also presented challenges in adapting to their differing expectations.

A significant challenge was maintaining character integrity throughout intricate choreography, particularly when layering movement with singing and acting. This was demonstrated during my tap solo as Columbia, where I had to retain complex footwork while

keeping the character's high-energy, manic persona alive. To combat this, I figured that deepening a physical connection to my character would aid me in overcoming this hurdle. Stanislavski states "the body must be trained to be responsive to the mind, capable of conveying the subtlest shades of character and emotion." Stanislavski.K (1949). This research deepened my understanding that the foundational aspects of my character must be consistently embodied physically. By integrating these elements with muscle memory, I could ensure that characterisation remained intact throughout movement, ultimately allowing dance and performance to merge seamlessly.

At the start of the process, I was excited but also apprehensive about mastering the choreography, particularly the stamina required to execute demanding sequences while singing. Eric Franklin emphasises the importance of breathing exercises, stating that "efficient breathing patterns are fundamental for dancers to maintain stamina and execute movements with ease." Franklin.E (2019). Initially, I found Tori's expressive style easier to connect with, whereas Richard's symbolic approach required more interpretation and precision. Over time, I developed an appreciation for both styles and their contributions to the show's overall aesthetic. While some moments of frustration arose, particularly when struggling with muscle memory and synchronisation, I felt a strong sense of accomplishment as my technique and endurance improved.

The dual choreographic approach ultimately worked well. The rehearsal structure allowed for repeated refinement, and peer support within the cast helped solidify sequences. Nemr's research helped me understand the vital role of repetition in a rehearsal process and in my own individual practice. As Nemr (2023) states, "There is a correlation between repetition and formation that is worthy to explore. Repetition is key in a creative practice. There is a necessity of discipline, regular practices, and repetition in some form or another. There are at least two areas in which repetition serves a significant purpose – process and content. The repetition of process serves to establish a way of doing things with relative disregard for the thing that one is doing." Nemr.A (2023). This insight reinforced the importance of disciplined, consistent rehearsal, allowing me to refine both technical execution and characterisation. By integrating repetitive practice into my individual rehearsal time, I was able to solidify movement sequences and develop muscle memory, enhancing my performance quality.

However, the physical demands of the choreography, particularly in sustaining Columbia's energy, were initially underestimated. Additionally, the challenge of executing my tap solo with precision under performance conditions proved demanding. My personal contribution was rigorous practice and taking detailed notes to aid muscle memory, which, as author Noel Kingsley explains, develops through repetition: "Repetition of any activity brings familiarity and with it habitual muscle patterns to perform the task. This also includes the simple act of walking or sitting. We use hundreds of muscles in the process and as children we practice, we become able to walk, run and jump or write a letter. Muscle memory allows us to perform tasks without the same conscious thought that was required the first time we did it." Kingsley.N (2017). The choreographers' detailed feedback further helped refine performance quality.

One key reason the choreography process was successful was the structured rehearsal schedule, which allowed for gradual layering of elements. Research into stamina training suggests that early conditioning significantly improves performance endurance; had this been incorporated earlier, the physical aspects may have been easier to manage. As Koutedakis and Jamurtas state, "Improving physical fitness through targeted stamina training can enhance a dancer's endurance, allowing them to perform with greater efficiency and reduced fatigue." Koutedakis.Y & Jamurtas.A.Z (2004). The challenge of singing and dancing simultaneously could also be linked to the need for better breath control and vocal endurance training.

This process reinforced the importance of stamina training, muscle memory techniques, and adaptability to different choreographic styles. In future productions, I will implement a structured conditioning plan alongside learning choreography to build stamina from the outset. Additionally, I will break down intricate sequences into smaller sections for more efficient retention and focus on breath control techniques to ease the demands of simultaneous singing and dancing.

In conclusion, working on *The Rocky Horror Show* was a transformative experience, offering invaluable insights into blending acting, singing, and dancing. Richard Tunley's precise direction and Tori Johns' expressive choreography created a cohesive production that balanced wild energy with thematic depth. The process taught me the importance of adaptability, muscle memory, stamina training, and clear communication between the creative team and performers. I learned how structured and fluid creative approaches contribute to a successful production, and the value of feedback in refining performance. This experience deepened my appreciation for collaboration and will inform my future work in theatre.

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