



MISS LITTLEWOOD



REHEARSAL JOURNAL

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Introduction

When people hear the name Joan Littlewood, oftentimes it is not one easily recognised by the general public, and as questioned by Sam Kenyon, ‘how come we know about so many unremarkable men and so few remarkable women’¹. However when you mention work such as ‘Oh What A Lovely War’ or ‘A Taste of Honey’, the titles are familiar and well known in comparison. At the root of our production of ‘Miss Littlewood’ was the aim as a company to highlight the tumultuous life behind such groundbreaking theatrical work, and to showcase the female ‘charismatic theatrical revolutionary’ who made such significant political statements ring true with so many audiences of the 20th century. Our aim was not to mimic or to impersonate, but to draw audiences into the narrative that supported Joan’s life alongside her work. The show was a great challenge to undertake due to its heavy material, and demand on a cast of only 8 in size yet with 40 characters, however I believe we achieved this to a very high standard and that we successfully told a poignant and impressive story to three different audiences through June 22nd-June 23rd. With our MAMT company, we were joined by our director Angharad Lee, our Musical Director Kieran Bailey and our stage manager Garrin Clarke.

This research journal will be displaying how I tackled such a momentous show, evaluating why I made certain choices and examining my own personal practice as an actor and what I learnt within the process. We also had an amazing opportunity to speak to the writer of the musical, Sam Kenyon, which was an invaluable experience and one that provided us with further ideas about the show and the writing process that added so much depth to our individual performances. Though I did not know who Joan Littlewood was at the beginning of the process, as Gill Sutherland so poignantly writes; ‘this is a serious homage but the cracking songs and humour render a life story jauntily told’² and I think it is important to celebrate such a phenomenal working woman and the things she achieved during her life.

¹ Kenyon, Sam. Miss Littlewood.

² Sutherland, Gill. REVIEW: Miss Littlewood at the RSC.

Our production was staged in The Gate, and had a square stage that featured a band pit directly in the centre, allowing for interaction and a sense of community to the show as a whole. Our seating was tiered pews but also had cabaret seats and tables on the floor, allowing the audience to embrace the relaxed, workshop feel to the show from the moment they stepped into the theatre. This is very important when it comes to such a political piece. As Carnelli writes; ‘whenever artists invite (real or virtual) participants to interact with them and with the topic of the artwork, to express their opinion about an issue or to remix the content; audiences are called to reflect on their individual meanings, tastes and values, raising the question of who belongs in the field and who makes the art’³. Our director, Angharad Lee, made it clear to us early on in our rehearsals that our version of this show would aim to include the audience as much as possible. The opening scene of Miss Littlewood involves audience participation too, which as Carnelli addressed, engaged the audience in a personal and cooperative manner that allowed for them to reflect later on in the show when we addressed the heavy political themes that fed through Joan’s life and her work. It was important for us to include the audience in this way in order to make the story easy to follow. All the female members of our cast play Joan at certain points in her life, and alongside this we all multi-rolled numerous times throughout. Without a friendly and likeable narrator for the audience to introduce each scene, it could be quite confusing for an audience member to follow.

³ Carnelli et al. Breaking the Fourth Wall.

Character Research

A crucial part of this show is the truth that lies beneath each character and interaction. As we are representing non-fictional characters, we had to look in depth into who they were and their beliefs, in order to bring context to our performances. Alongside this however, we wanted to take a caricature approach to these depictions, to stray away from trying to mimic a person and more towards entertainment value for the audience. In this section, I will be breaking down what I learned about each of the primary characters I was depicting, and evaluating how this aided in my overall performance.

Joan Littlewood

As I mentioned in the introduction, all of the female members of our cast played Joan at various points in her life, labelled Joan's 1-6. There are many reasons for this, but as stated by reviewer Gill Sutherland, in the original production of Miss Littlewood



Figure 1; Joan Littlewood outside the Theatre Royal Stratford East.
Theatre Roval Stratford East Archive.

at the Swan Theatre; 'The seven Joans are old and young, skinny and plump, white and black. Each signals their 'Joanness' by taking it in turns to wear a peaked black cap, a trademark of the director in the real world. They do not impersonate her but take on facets of her at the various stages of her life. The device is a nod and a cheeky wink to Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man, which gives the story a profound universality, a feminist tilt, and handily boosts the chorus for the big numbers'⁴⁴ We used our

⁴⁴ Sutherland, Gill.

own individuality as ways to access the part of Joan within us, like stated by Sutherland, that allowed for a cohesive yet multi-faceted narrative.

My Joan was Joan 4, aged around 36 to 40, and followed the section of her life in which she faced refusals from the Arts Council that led to her suicide attempt, and then the opening of her new home, the Theatre Royal in Stratford East, and all the chaos that ensued. When learning about Joan Littlewood, her political views were greatly spoken about. The RSC write; ‘Littlewood began producing a series of hard- hitting documentaries for the BBC, driven by socialist politics, and in 1941, she was banned from the BBC for her alleged extreme communist views and for fear of broadcasting her dangerous ideas to the nation.’⁵ LAMDA writes; ‘Joan believed that “The great theatres of all times have been popular theatres which reflected the dreams and struggles of the people” and so she employed acting styles from Commedia Dell’arte, which uses stock characters, and Slapstick to engage audiences and undermine theatrical tradition’⁶. This tradition of Joan’s is what heavily influenced our portrayal of her and those she was close to within her life. We too decided to take a stock character approach to our script, using themes of clowning and slapstick to both engage and disengage our audience as she would’ve simultaneously chosen to do. Her political views and ideologies filtered through into her work, as her theatre focused on pushing political boundaries, wanting to ‘demolish the barriers we erect between “popular” and “art” theatre’⁷. Through this research, I understood to play Joan as a sharp minded, strict and uncompromising director. She held on very tightly to those who joined her company and suffered with loss greatly, starting from her early childhood when her mother and father neglected her.

⁵ RSC.

⁶ LAMDA Tutor. Joan Littlewood.

⁷ Billington, Michael. Joan Littlewood: Oh What A Legacy.

Howard Goorney

Another famous character I depicted in this show is Howard Goorney, a Manchester born Jewish actor. Howard was described by a Prague critic as being full of ‘full of gaiety, wit, movement and untiring happiness’⁸. From this description, I used these traits to form stock character traits for Howard, including; repetitively smiling, laughter and scoffing between lines and shrugging my shoulders in acceptance. Howard auditioned for Joan’s Theatre Union after seeing a production of Lope de Vega's Fuente Ovejuna. He was cast by Joan age 17 and as



Figure 2; Howard Goorney

a young communist himself, but was however assigned to an armoured regiment during WWII. ‘In 1945 Howard received a letter from Littlewood. It instructed him to get demobbed - and get back. Some fervent praying to a single candle did the trick. Classified an "A2 psychopathic personality of the artistic type", he was given an honourable discharge.⁹ He then became a founding member of Joan’s Theatre Workshop alongside other characters that appear in the show.

Cedric Price

Cedric Price was an architect that Joan met in the late 50’s and early 60’s, when playing him I made sure I was cool, calm and collected whilst maintaining a level of romanticism in my speech. The scene I had with Joan was sensual and his character was playful. He was a ‘pillar of the British Architectural Theory of the second



Figure 3; Cedric Price. Architectura Viva.

half of the 20th Century’¹⁰. In 1961, Littlewood and the architect Cedric Price dreamt up the ‘Fun Palace’, a radical space in the East End where local people could come together to enjoy and celebrate

⁸ Rankin, Peter. 2007. Howard Goorney Obituary.

⁹ Rankin, Peter. 2007. Howard Goorney Obituary.

¹⁰ Cedric Price. Architectura Viva. .

the arts, but their dreams were left devastated after issues with land and funding. ‘Littlewood and Price's vision is now an ongoing campaign for locally-led culture at the heart of community and an annual weekend of action, championing Littlewood's words "I really do believe in the genius in every person."'’¹¹

Jean Newlove

A character I felt fell greatly into the trope of caricature was my depiction of choreographer Jean Newlove. ‘Jean Newlove was Rudolf Laban’s first assistant when he came to England. She subsequently became movement teacher to Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop and has trained several generations of performers’¹². For her character, I prioritised breathwork and slow talking, things that are stereotypically associated with Laban and the trope of movement teachers at drama school. Though funny, she still became one of the most renowned dance teachers of the 20th century, and was part of Joan’s theatre company for many years.



Figure 4; Jean Newlove.

¹¹ The RSC. Who was Joan Littlewood?

¹² Jean Newlove Biography.

Historical Research

Alongside the character research we had to undergo, there were many political references within the script that we contextually did not understand and had to do further research into. An example included; ‘The Black Shirts’ who were a paramilitary group in Italy, and the main militant arm of the National Fascist party¹³. Jean Newlove in this show appears wearing one of these shirts in reference to Mussolini, and it was imperative that we understood the context of our lines to fully convey the intended meaning. A primary focus of my historical research was into the Socialist party through the early 1940’s. In 1945, the labour party won the British General election. At the time, the Government made efforts to improve the lives of the working class, which aligned with Joan Littlewood’s aims within the theatre and her goal to create accessible theatre that represented the voices of real people.

In the final scene of the show, we perform a short section taken from arguably Littlewood’s most famous work ‘Oh What A Lovely War’. In this context, we had to truly understand the political landscape at the time as it has been stated that ‘this work changed the landscape of British Theatre and had a major impact on perceptions of the First World War¹⁴.

¹³ Study.com

¹⁴ British Library.

Brecht

A dramatic practitioner that we followed in our show was Bertolt Brecht. We used many of his techniques to assist in our telling of this story, and a lot of the text content of this show had a very Brechtian tone to it already. Firstly, the use of a narrator in our story was constantly a reminder for the audience that they were watching a musical, effectively taking them out of the scene and then placing them back in. Brecht wanted his audiences to know they were not watching realism, and this tied in with our use of stereotypical caricature and tropes to emphasise characteristic traits. This was further heightened by our costume changes being on stage, with all of our props and set changes visible to the audience too. The intertextuality of the script handed itself nicely to our alienation, as the audience were constantly made aware of us becoming different characters. This is most widely known *Verfremdungseffekt*; the key aim of this was to discourage the audience from empathising with events on stage and instead incite them to real-life action¹⁵. We ensured this was the case from the beginning of our production, as we interacted with the audience as they took their seats, immediately making a point of reminding them that they were watching a play and nothing supposed to be considered realistic. This distancing technique followed through to our staging, as we all remained in a considerable distance from one another when on stage, to depersonalise ourselves from the action taking place.

Dickson even writes that; ‘The 1956 visit of Brecht’s Theatre Group, Berliner Ensemble, to London radicalised British theatre, developing their earlier influence on groups and practitioners such as Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop’¹⁶. The Brechtian influence that inspired Joan carried through into our depiction of her life. Brecht and Joan had similar ideologies when it came to theatre, Dickson writes; ‘Bertolt Brecht believed that theatre had a duty not only to reflect society, but to change it.’. This is echoed strongly in Joan’s work and attitude to the arts, as she was keen to push the political boundaries of theatre to change societal attitudes. Similar to Joan, ‘There is, too, often an urgent topicality to Brecht’s dramas, which frequently touches on political problems of his own times’. It is

¹⁵ Dickson, Andrew. British Library. Bertolt Brecht and epic theatre: V is for *Verfremdungseffekt*.

¹⁶ Dickson, Andrew.

this topicality that runs as an undercurrent throughout Miss Littlewood, in a way that the character of Joan Littlewood herself tries to use it as a distraction away from her own personal life. Murray Melvin stated that Joan hated sentimentality, so focusing on the emotional parts of her life throughout the show would've been strongly disliked. We showcased this in certain scenes of sentimentality being interrupted; for example, in the scene where Jimmie Miller leaves Joan, they engage in a hug. Instead of allowing the moment to linger, Joan 4 signalled to our Musical Director Kieran to immediately play an Irish Jig to 'ruin' the moment. This was both in line with Joan's own personal directing style while furthermore adhering to a Brechtian style of jarring and reality dismantling theatre.

Scene Work & Musical Numbers

Our approach to scene work was chronological, and as we were all multi-rolling the entire company was needed for the majority of rehearsals. The most challenging scene that I will be evaluating in this chapter is scene Twenty, the opening of Act 2. Immediately into this scene is our biggest dance number 'Stratford East'. I was playing Joan, following her suicide attempt at the end of Act 1. As this singular scene spanned the length of 20 pages and encompassed at least 10 years of Joan's life, it was important for me to break down the scene into sections to understand Joan's emotional journey and how this part of her life effectively aged her and the impact it had on her attitude. Sam Kenyon told us himself that this scene was 'added to the very final draft' as it was requested by many of the artistic directors he spoke to, to add a 'reward' into the opening of Act 2. Sam said that it was necessary to reward the audience with an uplifting 'crowd pleasing' song like Stratford East, to thank them for connecting with us as actors in the first act¹⁷. To do this, I used the Stanislavskian method of breaking the scene into Units and Objectives seen in 'An Actor Prepares'¹⁸, each time there was a shift in a scene, there might be a new objective¹⁹. The first couple of sections were celebratory, as Joan had found her new home. However, as people started to leave her company, the Unit titles changed to 'grief' (Jimmie Miller leaving), 'acceptance' (Her lover Gerry having an affair) and 'Mania' (realising her work was starting to become menial and stagnant). Breaking the scene down like this helped me to consciously find different parts of Joan's emotional temperament. In total, there were 16 shifts within this single scene, including 4 different songs. Though we took a Brechtian approach to our show, these methods used by Stanislavski to understand objectives and super objectives were incredibly helpful to find the throughline of this scene and make it therefore easier for the audience to follow.

It was not only the scene work that proved challenging in the second act, as the musical ensemble numbers in this act needed a strong and diligent approach to learning. One of our ensemble songs,

¹⁷ Kenyon, Sam. Interview.

¹⁸ Stanislavski, Constantin. 'An Actor Prepares'.

¹⁹ Careers in Film. Stanislavski.

‘Change’, involved 6 out of 7 Joan’s all singing different sections of songs from throughout the show. As every single one of us was singing a different song in unison, it was imperative for us to have constant rehearsal and practice, and required extreme concentration throughout the learning process. Many of the songs written by Sam Kenyon for this piece of work were complex and tricky to follow, however it was satisfying when we finally succeeded in singing as a group, as the result was moving. Even though we were not singing the same thing, our cohesiveness as a cast was proven through our hard work and effort spent working on perfecting our individual harmony lines and song sections.

Final thoughts

Evaluating the rehearsal process and performance of Miss Littlewood, I feel as though I was successful in portraying such a complex and detailed story while undertaking the responsibility of transforming into many different characters. Though I had the support of my fellow cast mates, it was quite a challenge. As I mentioned, scene twenty was an incredible difficult scene emotionally, and needed my complete focus and concentration to effectively show the spectrum of Joan's emotional range during this period of her life. The most important thing for me when performing this scene was letting myself completely fall into the character, because if I feel restrained I find my performance isn't truthful and I feel as though I'm being a character rather than just living as the character. Over the course of this year it has been my biggest goal to allow myself to be fully free when performing on stage and I believe this show allowed me to fully grasp this concept and achieve a personal acting goal of mine. The most crucial thing to understand when it came to performing this script was the sheer amount of historical context and knowledge we needed to understand. Without our research we wouldn't have been able to feel the stakes of what these people were going through at the time, and it helped massively with the direct and aggressive energy in the heavily political moments during the show. With this energy, our Brechtian influence was of crucial importance to enhance these political messages in the way Joan intended.

Overall, I believe our thorough research is what helped us to succeed so well in this production. We harnessed the energy of the young communists of the early 20th century through Brechtian influence, and we used that energy to politically engage with an audience while telling the life story of such a renowned and successful female director.

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FIGURES



Figure 1; Theatre Royal Stratford East Archive.



Figure 2; Shutterstock 1969. Howard Goorney.



Figure 3; Cedric Price. 2004. Arquitectura Viva.



Figure 4; Jean Newlove. Simple Pleasures Wordpress.