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Production 1-ADPB6001

‘The Rocky Horror Show’ Reflective Essay

Over a 5 week intensive period, I worked alongside director, Richard Tunley, Musical director, Chloe Clayton and Choreographer, Tori Johns to bring ‘The Rocky Horror Show’ to life.

Richard O’Brien’s ‘The Rocky Horror Show’, first staged in 1973, is a cultural phenomenon that blends eccentric writing, camp humour, sexual innuendos and a celebration of non-conformities. Drawing inspiration from 1950s and 60’s B-Movies, science fiction and horror genres, the show parodies and pays homage to the shockling aesthetics while exploring themes of sexuality and gender. Its outlandish characters, exaggerated performances and absurd narrative creates an immersive world where societal norms are forgotten, offering a rebellious space for the audience.

Beyond its artistic significance, Rocky Horror has been a vital force for the LGBTQ community. With its message of sexual liberation, gender fluidity and acceptance, the musical and film resonated with marginalized individuals, giving them a platform of self expression. The film’s interactive midnight screenings and devoted fan base crafted an environment where you are free to express yourself without judgement. It became an important aspect of LGBTQ culture, celebrating diversity, individuality while challenging conventional expectations of gender and sex. The Rocky Horror Show remains a timeless symbol of personal freedom and an enduring influence in the fight of acceptance and equality. ‘Theatre is the art form which is most capable of addressing contemporary reality’ (Brecht, B and Willet, J . 1964)

I was cast in the role of ‘Magenta’, an alien in disguise as a maid at Frank N Furter’s mansion and loyal servant to him. I worked heavily alongside Lucy Jo who played my sibling, ‘Riff Raff’ as we formed an evil alliance at the end of the show. Lucy and I worked closely in developing a believable to layered sibling relationship through our characters. We worked with Angharad Lee on how to convince the audience that we are not the same as Janet, Brad or Dr Scott, and show how intimate their relationship is alluded to be. We found that the most impactful way of doing this was through unsettling, knowing glances at each other. Through using Stanislavski’s grasp we were able to understand their dynamic better and form a deeper emotional bond. “True connection is achieved when both actors are in a continuous state of ‘interplay’; feeding off each other’s energy and impulses” (Merlin.B, 2014). Through growing comfortable with Riff Raff and Magenta’s relationship, we were able to experiment with our impulses and interactions with each other. For example, there was a part of the show where Magenta is infatuated with Rocky and calls him, ‘A triumph of the will’ to which Riff Raff then slapped her out of playful jealousy as Magenta is normally infatuated by Riff Raff.

As an actor, I believed it would be challenging to play Magenta and to accurately portray her transformation throughout the show, I knew there had to be a definitive turning point for her and Riff Raff to decide to turn on their master, Frank, and return to their home planet. To begin with, I discovered that Magenta was a playful, mischievous character, often messing with Brad and Janet's minds, however as Frank grows more infatuated by power and proving himself to Dr Scott, Magenta grows more restless and tired of 'earthlings' becoming Frank's main priority and interfering with their experiments. Coincidentally, my relationship with both Riff Raff and Frank had to be explored in depth. Jona, Lucy-Jo and myself worked together to decipher a timeline for the aliens, this explained why they were so scared of Dr Scott and what she represented for them. Riff Raff and Magenta calling back to 'Transexual' makes more sense seeing as they've been on Earth for so long. I found that through developing a clear backstory for Magenta, that I was able to communicate not only her emotions, but convey her relationships between others more accurately. "A character's past is not just a list of events. It is a collection of emotional truths, and those truths are what we must understand and convey" (Alfreds, M, 2007)

During our first week of rehearsal, Tunley reiterated how in our interpretation of the text, he wanted it to be heavily ensemble driven, blurring the lines between 'main characters' and the ensemble. To achieve this, we experimented with 'Flocking' in our early rehearsals. 'Flocking' is defined as 'A type of movement improvisation in which students mirror or shadow each other's movement in groups. Often uses a diamond formation. Students follow the movements of a leader and share leadership throughout the group' (*CODE.com*) Through keeping the leader of the flock ever changing, it enabled us to see everyone as equals. We carried this flocking notion in many of the full company dance numbers, such as 'Sweet Transvestite' and 'Over At The Frankenstein Place'.

We also got introduced to lateral thinking during rehearsal games with Richard which encouraged us to think outside of the binary and expand our creativity. Through using lateral thinking in my approach to Magenta, I found myself becoming more free with my creative choices. For example, in my first scene where Brad and Janet enter the castle, instead of following a conventional path of cold detachment or ominous threat, I experimented with more subtle reactions which made it more menacing, such as small giggles and side glances at them. This redirection of tone, to a playful curiosity, helped me bring a fresh perspective to the scene and character. This pushed expectations of the story in a way which compliments the show's subversive nature. Cognitive thinking enabled us as an ensemble to overcome practical challenges, such as spacing or prop malfunctions in a professional and appropriate manner. On our opening night, a prop of gore consisting of a dislocated, bloody hand fell out of a bag while it was being passed over to me in a scene. Instead of breaking the 4th wall and letting the audience in on the mistake, I decided to make it a part of the scene, using it to heighten the tension of the incident as I waved the hand of a deceased one in the grieving person's face to annoy them in a teasing way. I believe this stayed true to my character and it was due to the introduction of lateral thinking that I was able to trust my instincts and not panic mid show. 'The true art of

improvisation is not in avoiding mistakes, but turning them into opportunities that keep the performance fresh and engaging' (Johnstone, K. 2019)

Richard often referred to 'connecting the dots' as an actor and how our actions are always motivated and crucial to the emotional development of a character. "Motivation gives birth to action. The driving force of any scene lies in the motivation that drives the character to pursue his goals." (Stanislavski, K. 1963). I found it difficult through playing such an eccentric character so far from my own personality to find the authenticity of her actions when we first started rehearsals. I leaned more towards the physicality and sensualness of the character in order to feel connected to her, and through using this method of embodying Magenta, that my reactions then came naturally to me, although I discovered that I cannot rely on the physicalization fully. "You must understand that you, as the actor, are the body and the movement that the character requires. Physicality is as important as the internal life." (Hagen, U. 1973)

One of the core challenges of Rocky Horror for the majority of us was the stamina and energy required to perform such an intense show, both vocally and choreography wise. With the back to back numbers of 'The Time Warp' into Frank's entrance in 'Sweet Transvestite', I initially found it gruelling to muster up my performance quality and deliver the best vocals possible while being worn out from dancing. I took it upon myself to start incorporating cardio movement to my singing. I did this through singing while running on a treadmill in my house, singing all of my harmonies and/or leading lines while running at a steady pace to build up my stamina as an actor. During rehearsals, we incorporated this further into our physical warmup as a company, we achieved this through belting while doing star jumps and burpees etc. "A singer's vocal technique and physical stamina are inextricably linked ; without good physical conditioning, even the best vocal technique will fail to reach its full potential' (McCoy, S. 1994).

An interesting element of this production was the fact we were working alongside the BA Commercial Dance level 6 students, whom we had only worked with briefly in the past. Richard worked especially hard in the first few days getting us to trust each other as a cast and grow comfortable working so intimately with each other. "An actor must be able to unite the different elements of his performance with the other members of the ensemble to create a harmonious whole" (Merlin, B, 2014). We instantly found that we all provided different strengths to the show, for example the dancers were able to pick up movement and physicality quickly, meanwhile some musical theatre students found it easier to pick up reactions to text and singing while dancing. We each worked vigorously to bring us all up to the same standard at all three disciplines, as the show is demanding in all three aspects of musical theatre. I found that through working with a group of people I was unfamiliar with, I was able to better my own performance as I was learning from their way of working and etiquette when it came to picking up choreography and physicalising my character. It was a fantastic and beneficial bonding experience for all of us as we grew closer and came to love elements of the production which initially frightened us. I saw tremendous growth in myself as a dancer through this production as we drilled choreography and it was broken down by the dancers and Tori in a thorough way.

The score of the show is influenced by multiple genres of music, predominantly rock and roll fused with 70s pop music. Despite the songs being mainly character driven, meaning we were able to be more experimental with the music, some songs had to be treated as traditional musical theatre ensemble numbers, in which Chloe supported us by drilling complex harmonies and cut offs with us. The most intricate numbers of the show being Frank's final emotional ballad, 'I'm Going Home' which was led by ensemble harmonies towards the end. During our performance of 'I'm Going Home', we were all focused on Frank who is in the central stage area, meaning we were unable to face Chloe for our harmony cut off at the end of the song. Whilst learning the song in music calls, it was easier for us to be guided as we could turn to her for a visual cue. Initially, we found it difficult to remain in sync with the piano without having visual cues. However, we adapted efficiently through focusing on our physicality, by learning to 'body' the music and follow off from each other's energy in the space. We aligned the movement of our voices, as this song required no dance moves or movement, and honed in on our breathing to create a unified, seamless blend of voices. 'Blending in the choir is an art that involves careful attention to tuning, tone production, and breath control' (McKinny, J.C, 2005) . Through using this approach, we moved as one voice rather than a collection of different singers, ultimately making it a more cohesive and beautiful vocal blend which enhanced the emotional impact of the performance.

To conclude, my growth as a performer during the Rocky Horror Show has been extraordinary. Through playing the role of Magenta, I have been pushed outside of my previous physical and emotional boundaries as an actress, encouraging me to embrace being a larger than life persona. From an ensemble perspective, the show's demanding stamina and intimacy with the cast challenged all of us as a cohort and brought us closer together as a cast, making us more comfortable and supportive of each other. Richard, Chloe, Tori and Angharad's guidance ensured that high standards never slipped and motivated us to constantly bring new energy and life to our performances. Overall, it has been the most eye opening and rewarding show I have worked on as a performer which I believe will have a long lasting impression on my approach to rehearsing a show going forward in my career.

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