

Reflective journal – tech week & performances

The final week of our production of A New Brain was reserved for tech set up, dress runs and finally, of course, our three performances. This final stretch of a production is, to me, a heightened experience, an exercise in collaboration where all the individual elements and makers of a show finally come together to create a magical new realm of imagination that can then be shared with an audience. And in this, we actors have an integral role. As director Mike Alfreds puts it (2007, p. 38):

"[N]o one brings the theatre to life – or, to be more accurate, brings life to the theatre – but actors. Before actors come on stage, everything about theatre is abstract, theoretical, potential. Actors are the ones who make theatre happen, who turn ideas into experience."

With this production, many practical things changed during tech week as we did not have our extended stage in use earlier. The week was full of trial and error ranging from prop malfunctions to confused use of space, and trying to fulfil my actor's objective of bringing theatre to life navigating these changes felt at times challenging. At the beginning of tech week I was very unsure if the show would pull together and become great. But the uncertainty goes with the territory, even spices things up, as Alfreds (2007, p. 45) describes: "Theatre can only be really vibrant when it concentrates on what it does best [...] – immediacy and freedom. Theatre is potentially subversive because it is rough and unpredictable."

I tried to hold on to this sense of immediacy and being in the moment during our run-throughs and performances. To help with this, our director Luke gave each character a new piece of given circumstance to focus on in each run. The different focuses I got to play with were: "neurology isn't actually her area of expertise", "she wants to spend more time with her family", "she has just decided to divorce her husband", "she has been offered a promotion in another hospital and "she is trying to decide whether to fire Nancy D or Rita". All of these focus points were more or less in line with the background work I had done independently on my character: I imagined her as a workaholic divorced mother who feels guilty for not spending enough time with her children.

Playing with these focus points was a lot of fun, and it benefited me in two ways. Some of the focuses brought new depth to the immediate given circumstance of my workplace, the hospital: the "not a neurology expert" focus added a required sense of urgency in the way I was operating as the doctor, whereas the "firing one of the nurses" one affected my acting in

relation to my fellow characters. These two focus points were definitely the ones I felt changing my acting the most. On the other hand, the focus points that concerned my character's personal life outside the hospital (the divorce, the promotion, the family) helped me to understand her on a deeper level. I realized creating a character is like getting to know a new friend: you have to keep asking questions, and the layers of truly understanding someone will come in time. Only asking the basic questions won't cut it – you will either end up with a shallow friendship or a stereotypical, generic character. Luke's questions helped me to avoid this, and at the end of our three performances, I felt like I knew Dr. Berensteiner a lot better I would had imagined at the start.

All in all, the learning curve throughout our three performances was steep. On our final show on Friday, I felt like the entire cast had high energy and we were able to actively listen to each other. Merlin (2014 p. 34) maintains that "the art of great acting is the art of true listening. Listening operates on two levels: you have to listen to yourself in terms of your own inner activity [...] and at the same time you have to listen to your performance partner." I really felt like I was able to do that on Friday night, especially in the first half of the show and in the song "Trouble in his Brain".

In the second half of the show I made some elementary mistakes in some of the ensemble number's harmonies, and that made me a little bit self conscious, and "self-consciousness is the roadblock to all progress in acting." (Harvard, 2013, p. 19). That resulted in some nerves and pitchiness in "Craniotomy", but I think I was able to navigate the situation alright and didn't get flustered or mortified even though I knew my singing was a bit off. Focusing on storytelling instead of perfectionism is something I am constantly trying to teach myself.

References

Alfreds, M. (2007) *Different Every Night: Freeing the Actor*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Harvard, B. (2013) *Acting Through Song: Techniques and Exercises for Musical-Theatre Actors*. London: Nick Hern Books.

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