Amazing Grace

written by Mal Pope

directed by Angharad Rees

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The following documents my reflective journey during a work placement with Wales Academy of Voice & Dramatic Arts, WAVDA. On the production of Amazing Grace, written by Mal Pope, directed by Angharad Rees and staged at the Sherman Studio Theatre in Cardiff.

The placement was undertaken as part of my final module, with the aim of immersing myself in a professional creative environment and testing the skills, instincts, and adaptability I have developed through my training away from peers.

Thanks SJ, this opportunity (shift in environment) has allowed me to step into ambiguity with confidence and commitment.

Being encouraged to take part in this placement and stepping into something beyond that educational setting, but still within the safety net of an educational production. Tuned out to be one of the most important experiences of my creative development throughout the degree. It has pushed me out of my comfort zone, placed me amongst professionals who are very easy to work and collaborate with, it has allowed me to see myself and my practice through a whole different lens.

I was responsible for the design, creation, and sourcing for the set, costumes, and props, as well as attending rehearsals and collaborating closely with the director, choreographer, production manager, and the rest of the company. Throughout the process, I was and still am required to demonstrate a high level of initiative, effective communication (I have learnt to not be solely independent and ask the questions when I need help). Managing my time effectively was crucial (albeit sometimes questionable, but it depends on trough which lens (department's) one looks through), as I navigated the balance between creative and practical demands. This experience has tested both my creative abilities and my capacity for personal responsibility, forcing me to work autonomously while remaining fully engaged in the collaborative process. (except from the start, in the research and incubation period which I did struggle with).

My assigned role was centred predominantly on costume (never done it before) but also set design and props – core visual elements that contribute directly to storytelling. Drawing from the rich Welsh history, particularly the struggles of miners and themes of social justice – demands a sensitive, grounded creative approach. For me, this wasn't a case of simply designing "what looked good". The aesthetic decisions needed to serve the story and reflect the socio-political and cultural context of the time. I found myself not just thinking visually, but ethnically – how do you represent struggle without romanticising it? how can design choices convey the depth and complexity of lived experience, particularly rooted in specific cultural or personal histories.

When I began my placement with WAVDA on the production of Amazing Grace, I knew it would challenge me creatively. What I didn't anticipate was just how deeply it would affect me – not just as a developing creative practitioner, but as a person navigate uncertainty, identity, and growth.

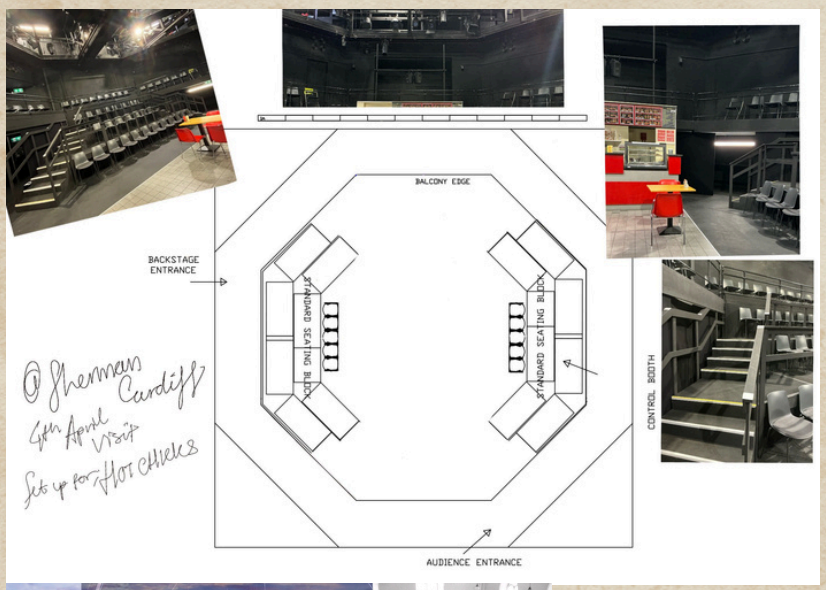
I entered the process excited but admittedly underprepared for the intensity of the demands ahead: the scale of the production with 41 cast, the speed at which decisions needed to be made, the complexities of collaboration, and the emotional weight of working on a production grounded in such rich historical context with a shit budget to work with – With the days being extremely long but the weeks going so fast!!

Reflecting on those challenges, what I've learned, and how I'm still learning as a creative, but most importantly, as a human being - Decision-making process is often slow, with moments of confusion about direction and priorities as everyone is also just figuring it out. I needed to experience this. Being a student in a different environment and discovering that the adults in the same situation are just as bad to work with sometimes.

At the same time, it raised deeper questions about my identity and relationships in the workplace. It became clear that while professionalism requires a level of independence, it also demands sensitivity to dynamics of respect, communication, and collaboration. Finding that line – between asserting myself and understanding the rhythms and personalities of those I was working with – wasn't always straightforward.

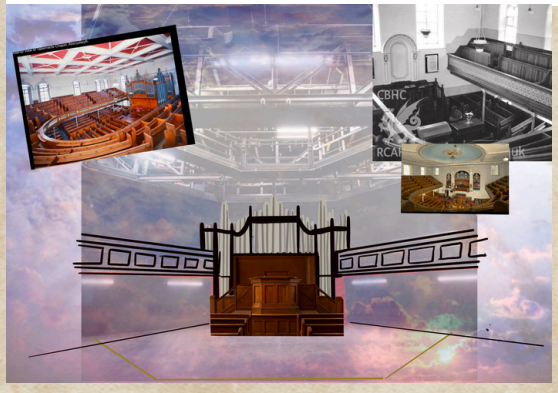
But it wasn't just about navigating external ambiguity: it was also a battle with my own internal expectations. On paper, I knew what was required of me as a professional – to be self-directed, reliable, and confident in my decisions. In practice, though, I was still grappling with that transition. I was no longer in an environment where I could rely on others or being guided more or less in what to do; I had to advocate for myself and take initiative, even when I wasn't sure I had the answers.

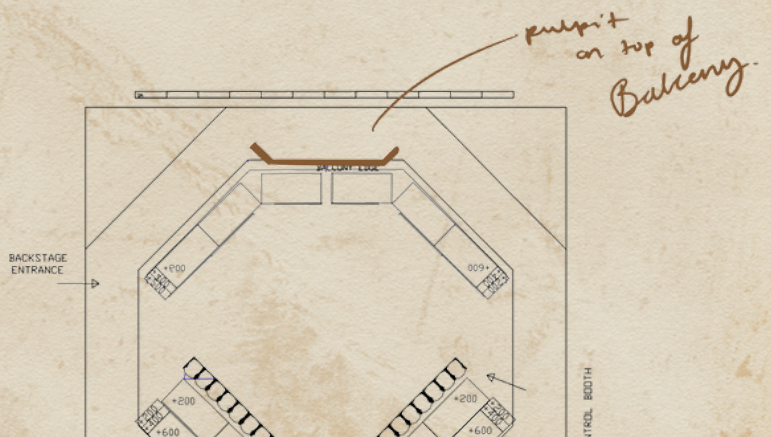
Building trust takes time, and effective communication isn't just about being clear: it's about being attuned. In that sense, the process wasn't just about learning how to work; it was about learning how to work with others. One of the most powerful aspects of this placement was how deeply it made me reflect on my creative process and identity. I came to realise that my perfectionism often masked fear – The fear of starting, fear of getting it wrong, fear of being "found out" as someone who doesn't know what they are doing. (Which to be fair, I don't half the time.) The deadlines don't wait for perfection. The deadlines are real, and the show will go on and I've had to learn to let go of the need to have all the answers and it being as period accurate as possible, and instead trusting the process, my instincts, and the support of my teammates in that I'm doing ok, and everything will work out.



Site visit to the Sherman Theatre, where I got to see the set for Hot chicks. It felt quite intimidating at first - it all suddenly became very real, and I realised the scale of what I was getting into. While we were there, we started discussing how to fill the space and navigate the script, especially considering we had 41 cast members. It raised immediate questions like:

How are we going to get them all up and down from the balcony efficiently, and how do we make the best use of the space?

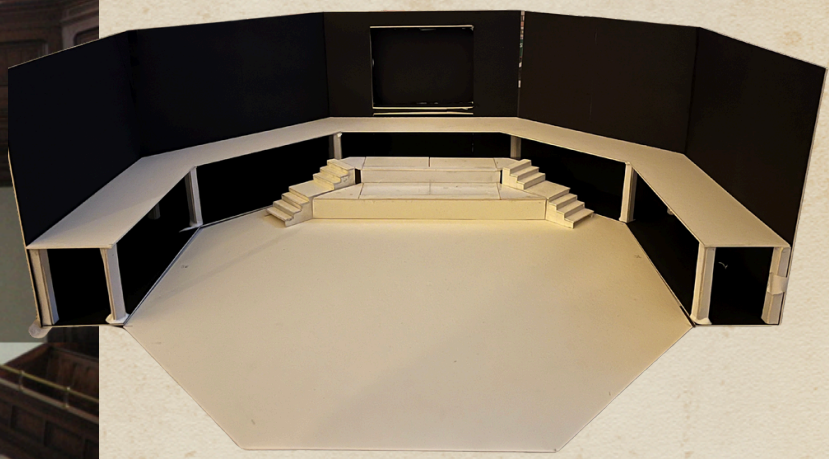




Discussion about using one of the audience seating decks for a funcitional route became the answer and the headache to the situation.

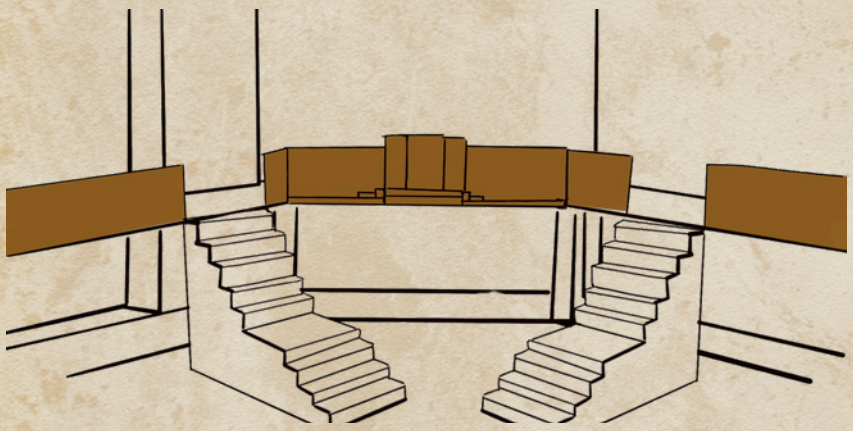


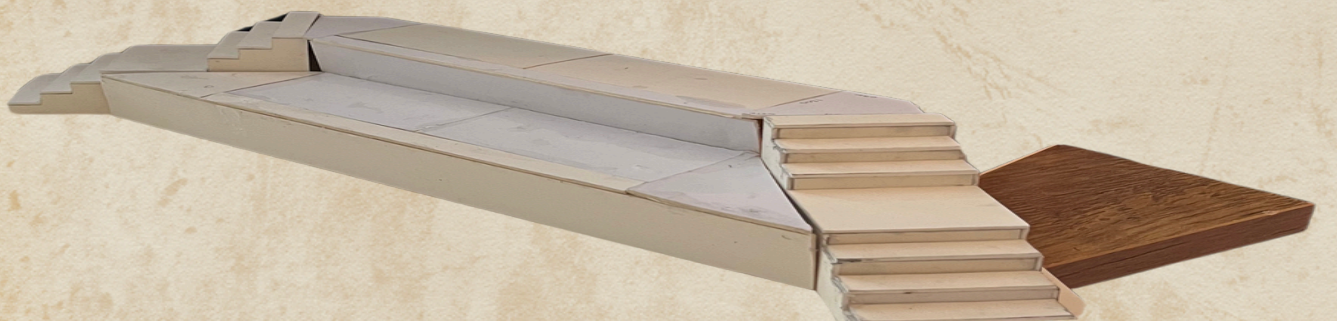






I built a model box to help problem-solve and get a sense of scale within the actual space. I also did several drawings, experimenting with layout ideas—like whether we could remove the side railings instead of having everything come from centre stage—but ultimately that wasn't structurally possible. Only the CS railing could be adjusted. I also thought about adding a lower-level platform, but that area was needed for choreography, so we had to scrap that idea.





It was almost impossible to fully grasp the scale of what was happening all at once: 41 performers, costumes, props, logistics, blocking, choreography, music—it was an overwhelming web of moving parts. In hindsight, I can admit that I didn't invest enough into the early research and preparation phase. In theatre, deadlines are real and absolutely non-negotiable. The weeks disappear fast, and there's a whole other process that runs alongside the creative vision—particularly when it comes to the set.

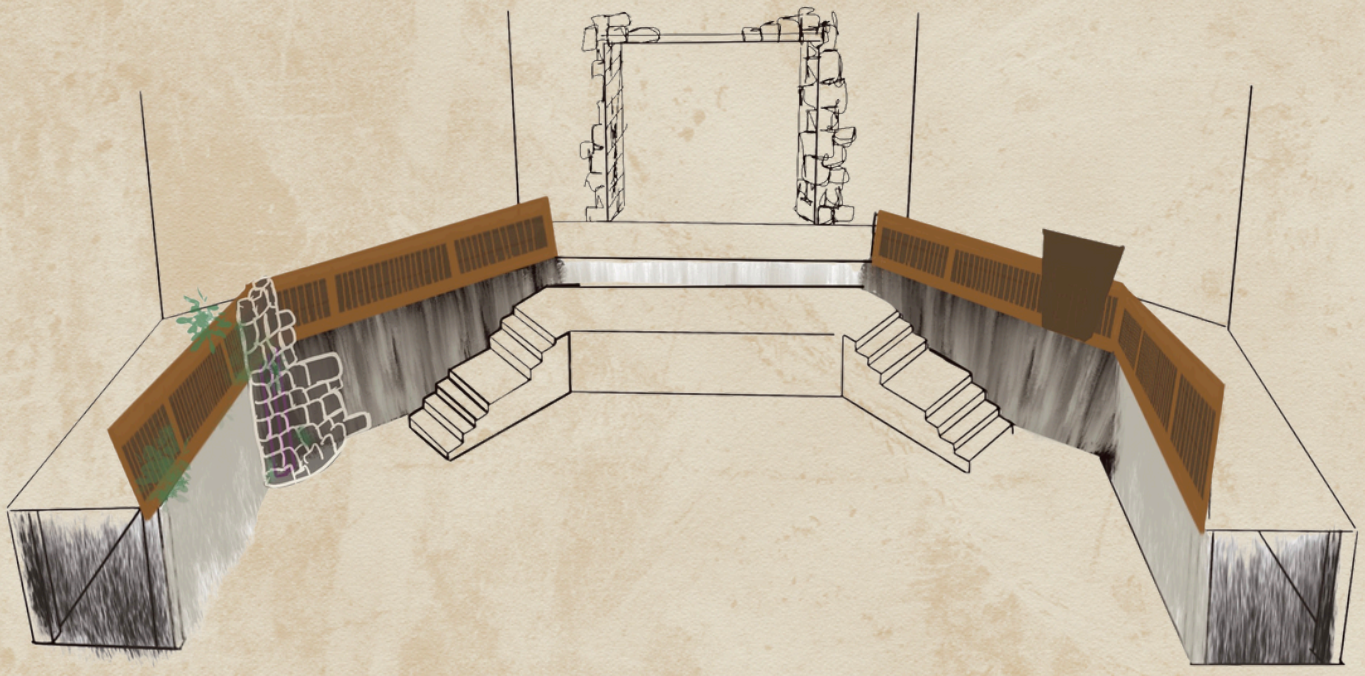
I knew it would be a challenge. I even anticipated struggling. But I wasn't prepared for just how intense the pressure would be. Delivering under these conditions has been relentless. At times I found myself wondering, How is this all going to come together? The truth is, I had no idea. Everyone around me seemed so relaxed—it was unnerving, almost surreal.

This experience forced me to confront how my identity is shaped by decision-making. I've realised that clarity often only comes after I begin. The fear of starting is real—but waiting for the perfect moment or for someone else to make the first move doesn't work in this kind of environment. Knowing what I know now, I wish I'd realised sooner: before I ask for decisions to be made, I need to make the decision to start. Once something exists, it can be shaped. But nothing can grow from hesitation.

There have been moments that pushed me hard. I spent days organising and setting up a space to manage resources and workflow, only to be thrown out of the room without warning. Everything I'd put together was dismantled, moved, or damaged. It was frustrating —infuriating, even. But it became a crash course in adaptability. I couldn't change what happened, but I could choose how I responded. That taught me resilience.

One of the most profound lessons from this placement has been the importance of knowing what's in my control and letting go of what isn't. The shift in environment helped me reach a point where I don't take everything personally. That's not indifference—it's emotional maturity. The stress is still there, but I've learned to work with it instead of letting it consume me. I sleep better at night now, and for me, that's real progress.

Ultimately, this placement has taught me far more than technical skills. It's shown me how to lead through uncertainty, how to stay grounded in chaos, and how to trust that collaboration —while often messy—is always worth the effort. I've learned to respect the creative disorder and take pride in being able to function and contribute meaningfully within it.



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