

Reflective Journal – Weeks 3 & 4

Weeks three and four of our production of Crazy For You were spent first working on the musical's second act, adding in new dance numbers and finally doing full runs in the actual theatre space.

A central theme during weeks 3 and 4 for me, personally, was wellbeing. Having previously been through a pregnancy, I thought I knew what to expect when doing a show at six months pregnant, but I was badly mistaken. The physicality of the show combined with summer heat and prolonged morning sickness meant that I had to come face to face with my limitations both physically and mentally. I have never learned to rely on talent but have instead always prided myself over being a conscientious and hard worker, and it was a shock to realize my capacity in this area was severely diminished. As my body sent clear signals telling me to do less and rest more, I had to balance between my physical wellbeing and the standards I set myself as a performer, and this took an emotional toll. I felt guilty for not having the same stamina for dance numbers I normally would, and frustrated when I was hugging the toilet while others practiced. I knew, however, that putting myself down would make things only worse, so I tried to focus on nurturing my resilience.

Psychologist Emma Seppala (2016) maintains that, according to research, resilience, our ability to bounce back from moments of adversity, is enhanced by self-compassion, gratefulness and a calm mind and diminished by perfectionism. Hence, I intentionally focused on the positive and tried to pick my battles: I felt happy that having a fairly small ensemble role leaves me time to recover between songs, and allows me some free time in the rehearsal room so I can practice and catch up if I've missed something because of my physical state. In the ensemble numbers I decided to focus on the quality of dance performance even if that meant my singing would suffer – with my pregnant aerobic fitness it is probably not possible to have a golden standard on both, and that will have to suffice.

Another thing to be grateful for was the fact that even though my pregnancy affected dance and singing, it didn't have the same power over my acting. Not having a principal role means that the script does not give much information about my character Perkins and even less about my ensemble role as an anonymous follies girl. This gave me room to be playful with my track and to come up with my characters' objectives quite freely. According to Merlin (2007, p. 56), "Stanislavsky advocates [...] guiding your 'concentration' towards what your character really wants in a scene, towards his or her driving desire or what Stanislavsky calls

an objective”, and I tried to keep clear objectives as my guideposts. Our director James emphasised that we can only be truthful when we know our objectives – and it is only after we’ve identified them that we can start “amplifying” our acting and adding style and physicality. Amplifying without objectives results in performative over-acting, and that is something I wanted to avoid.

Something that helped me explore my physical stage presence and gave me clues on objectives was a status exercise James workshoped with us. The status work is thoroughly explained in Keith Johnstone’s book “*Impro*” (1987), but in a nutshell, status is a social tool that establishes hierarchy and is communicated through body language and behaviour: “a person who plays high status is saying ‘Don’t come near me, I bite.’ Someone who plays low status is saying ‘Don’t bite me, I’m not worth the trouble.’” (Johnstone, 1987, p. 34). We all have a preferred status that we naturally navigate towards, but as actors it is our job to take on and present statuses other than just our own. Personally, my preferred status is quite low, but if needed, I can also assert authority. My character Perkins, on the other hand, has quite a high status, but has to fight for it when it comes to her boss, Mrs. Child. To workshop this, James had me and Cody, who plays Mrs. Child, to improvise a scene where we are teenage sisters fighting for status. It was very exciting to see how our physicality was affected by this, and it also gave me ideas on why my character acts the way she does. A very useful exercise altogether!

Bibliography

Johnstone, K. (1987) *Impro. Improvisation and the Theatre*. London: Routledge.

Merlin, B. (2007) *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Seppala, E (2017) *The Happiness Track. How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success*. London: Harper One.