

REFLECTIVE ESSAY ON FINAL PRODUCTION – AMAZING GRACE

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The following essay is my reflection on playing Evan Robert's in Mal Pope's, 'Amazing Grace'. The musical was that of a documentary type play '*characterized by a central or exclusive reliance on actual rather than imaginary events*' (Canton, 2007), meaning there

was a greater emphasis in the script of the truth of Evan Robert's history that an ordinary interpretational biographic play/musical.

Research for Evan Roberts was difficult. It was a daunting challenge doing a biographical/documentary musical of a man who changed hundreds of thousands of lives. The websites which provided information were all Christian-funded sites, meaning that they were presumably biased and didn't give an objective description of Evan.

I felt a large amount of pressure, especially as a gay man, to play a character who was tied in with a culture and part of history I felt do distant from. However, Mal Pope coming in to speak to us about his personal experience and research of Evan helped immensely.

It was a fun challenge to make reasonable conjectures about the story of Evan. From a gathering of biased information, the script, Pope's additions, educational resources; in conversation with the director, I came to my own conclusions about Evan. For example, was he queer? Why couldn't he speak in Liverpool? Ext.

I believe that I did a sufficient amount of research in order to understand Evan, however clashed with some aspects of the script. Thus, causing me to over-analyse, and over-think. Attempting to make choices about a real human's life, of which you have no certainty are true, is a challenge.

Therefore, I had to remind myself: I have completed the research, I know my lines and my superobjective, thus, now within the scenes I must '*trust the preparation is there*', reminding myself that the '*magic happens when you allow yourself to respond naturally instead of forcing an outcome.*' (Smith, 2025). This role is my interpretation of Evan, what I believe to be true, not a wholly factual reimagination; as stated by Adler, '*acting is human behavior assembled in novel and interesting ways*' even traditional characters such as Hamlet can have new and different interpretations (Adler, 2000). Through allowing my imagination to reinvent who Evan was to me, 'adaptations' to different given circumstances I faced emerged and I found '*psychological justifications*' to any note given easier (Merlin, 2009), as this wasn't a matter of the metaphysical idea of 'Would Evan Roberts do that?' but rather, would my understanding of him do so?

In the future, it's important to allow myself to experiment without judgment. Throughout my time at WAVDA, I seem to still have difficulty trusting that I have everything I need. I

must give myself permission to fail, to *'focus on truth, not perfection'* and to just trust my instincts. (Blake, 2025).

At first, I was apprehensive to play the part, the script was highly religious and felt alien to me. The writing was set a century ago, the language foreign and the type of worship and prayer completely new.

I felt as if in every Church scene I was mocking religion as I simply couldn't embody it realistically. However, Angharad's advice of 'Find something you can replace 'God' with' helped.

As explained by Professor of Theatre Andrew Gallant, with a character such as this the actor either plays a caricature of the role or avoids fully becoming the character, causing a flat performance. His advice is to find the inner-wish of the character and make that positive. (Gallant, 2016). By locating Evan's wish of wanting to make everyone happy, I gave myself something familiar and tangible, which also allowed the pain Evan feels when the people turn against him more personal. It was also important to put my personal beliefs regarding religion aside for the role: and find a neutrality in my deciphering of Evan. As stated by Stanislavsky: *'Preconceptions mostly arise from other people's prejudices which they foist on you'* and can damage the relationship between the actor and his character (Stanislavski, 2009). Therefore, despite a class-wide hesitation to the piece, I had to try and understand *Evan's* love for God rather than change *my* belief on God.

I believe later in the process that I succeeded at finding a real sense of joy. Following this somewhat 'superobjective' of wanting to make everyone happy, in the highly religious scenes, they no longer felt uncomfortable, but rather I could find real rejoice in witnessing those around me celebrating. When discussing God, I no longer felt self-conscious but instead experienced true excitement seeing the happiness grow on my fellow actor's faces. However, I feel that I could have made more of an effort to explore, individually, how actually speaking to God feels, how it affects me and where I see Him, to experience a more grounded feeling when performing scenes of direct address to God. It's vital to

'accept the reality while you are living the character's life... empathy and imagination are all that is required'. (Vera & Deer, 2015), which could have been exploited more.

To summarise, I thoroughly enjoyed this challenging task and would be interested in the future to see how more complicated roles, so different from myself, would impact and educate me.

The part of the process that concerned me most was the vocal aspect. Evan's character was a tenor with large chunks of singing back-to-back, and having already been experiencing fatigue from previous projects, I was worried for what was ahead.

I felt as if I often had to over-sing in an attempt to hit the high notes, resulting in me often losing the narrative and my consonants dissipating; the storytelling purpose of the song simply becoming noise. The element of being in 'control' in musical theatre was subsequently highlighted; the vitalness of being in control of your performance taking priority, then the emotion following.

However, the discovery, from Kiefer and Angharad's advice, was that there is a tendency to over-perform, likely due to a neurosis to prove myself, that had trickled into my acting as well. Furthermore, due to the restrictions of the script, I realised that my usual process of Event, Objective & Payoff wouldn't suffice. As stated by Angharad, the musical was extremely episodic with a lack of subtext; I felt as if my acting had no journey or truth and this emphasised the over-performing tendency.

The solution to this was treating each scene as its own, and living presently within the scene, as Hagen explains, we listen with our eyes not just our ears (Hagen, 2008). For example, during the Mining Disaster, I found myself prescribing myself to the voice of the inner-critic of 'This scene is sad thus I must cry', which inevitably led to a mental block and a demonstration of emotion rather than a real sensation. To resolve this, I had to trust my innate ability to act, trust the writer, my process and more so the audience who wish to *'follow the story and discover the truth'* themselves (Schiffman, 2022). I learnt that the audience want to analyse and follow for themselves, not be forced to understand. Additionally, I discovered the importance of vulnerability and authenticity. I had to trust

what I had learnt over the past 2 years, my skills, and my process. I had to be '*present, open, connect*' and allow myself to feel and let that show rather than forcing a reaction (Hollis, 2023).

As I became more imbedded within the play, I found myself in what Mike Alfreds labels '*States of Pure Feeling*', where we are absorbed in a moment by pure emotion, almost paralysed, beyond '*objectives or actions*' and where nothing else can intrude. (Alfreds, 2007). Subsequently, every performance I cried as Benjamin was carried out. Through listening, being present, and allowing the event to impact me, I produced real emotion: of which I have never been able to do consistently previously, which thereafter didn't impair on my vocal ability. Another aid in this was Tempo-Rhythms, when I allowed myself to be engulfed by the Tempo-Rhythm of the scene '*due to its influence over an actor's emotions and inner sensations*' (Merlin, 2009), I found myself truly feeling. For example, the rhythm of the Mining Disaster hit deep within my core a sense of distress and urgency, whereas, in 'As a Woman' ignoring the tempo-rhythm of Annie's pleading, helped aid me in reaching a level of uncomfortable-detachedness that led fluidly into Evan's nervous breakdown. Building on this, understanding that musicals are '*heightened dramatic scales*', leading to a need to burst out in song, I realised the importance of dramatic moments to feel like life or death (Vera & Deer, 2015). Comprehending that Benjamin is the boy I looked after in the mines, I built their relationship, raised the stakes, so that with every performance the devastation grew to new heights and impacted Evan's later tragic fall.

In regards to vocal stamina, in order to maintain vocal durability, I focused on warmups and warm downs, hydration, and vitamin supplements. (Manna, 2022). Rather than doing group warmups, I went off independently and did personalised warmups that would allow me consistent vocal quality throughout the day, which aided in a longer period of vocal sustainability.

In conclusion, despite sickness on the final day, I felt that I succeeded for the first time to stay in control, whilst still experiencing a truthful emotional state, but prioritising vocal technique above all else. Also discovering, in the moments of quiet, that I was flooded by the feelings that I had managed to subdue to perform safely and securely.

Moving forward, I need to reassure myself that I have nothing to prove and that I am good enough; realising that an emotional story can be told simply by just singing the song (due to the past research and experimentation now being embedded within me), and allow the toolkit I've built to do the talking, rather than 'forcing' any emotion.

As a queer man I've always wanted to, but struggled, to play straight characters. I've consistently found signs and indications that I as an actor am not straight so wanted to achieve a realistic physicalisation of a straight man.

I felt that as the process developed, I became more in touch with Evan, exploring ways of walking, or exploring physically how Evan would tell '*a story nonverbally*'. (Woltmann, 2024). Angharad's advice of relaxing into the scene, helped ground the character, and new nuances occurred due to the relaxation I experienced; i.e. hands in pockets, ruffling of hair, positions whilst sitting.

From feedback from the audience, I believe I successfully demonstrated a new physicality within my acting and embodied Evan Robert's to the best of my ability. I allowed myself to stop worrying about whether it was 'straight' enough, and rather just lived in my personal truth of who Evan was to me. Through '*bodily awareness*' and '*character analysis*', I lived within the essence of Evan rather than simply his body, '*bridging the gap*' between myself and my character (SPS, 2025), allowing for a truthful physical representation rather than an attempt to simply show a different side of myself. Following the advice of Chekhov, I began to use my imagination to view the character, and whilst learning lines at home, reflecting on blocking: seeing what was successful, what wasn't, the director's notes, and then allowing it to flourish within my imagination, looking at improvement and then experimenting with new ideas in the rehearsal-space. (Chekhov, 2023).

Following this process, it made the exploration of Evan's fall far more interesting; now feeling confident in the way I held myself as the character, I could explore his fall from grace, with ease. I found the exploration of fatigue, panic attacks and hallucinations fascinating however doing so for 4 performances in a row was draining. To avoid too

much emotional exhaustion, it was important to build a supportive environment backstage, allowing those open communications to create a safe space for them and I because '*when we feel safe, we can explore intense emotions without fear*'. This meant I built a large margin of '*emotional stamina*' and felt safe doing the performance: staying in control, simply going through my blocking rather than delving into a deep psychological state (Martins, 2025).

In reflection, I believe that I physicalised Evan Roberts through my *personal* interpretation of him, being able to explore and experiment safely and freely. In future projects, I feel confident with my capability as a performer to embody a character of any sexuality without a cruel inner critic alongside a clearer concept of the process I should follow.

To conclude, I am very pleased with my final performance of Evan Roberts. I believe I have learnt plenty more about myself as an actor and as a person and feel more certain going forward regarding my personal actor-process, how to deal with a character foreign to me, and how to stay in control during performances (despite nerves or neuroses).

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