

Learning in the Digital Era

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Student Number: 2203950
Course Name: BA Musical Theatre
Module Name: Learning in the Digital Era
Module Number: ADPA4001
Due Date: 30|01|2023

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TASK 1 - REFLECTIVE ESSAY

During the course, I've had the opportunity to attend three masterclasses, with Luke McCall, Mary Hammond and most recently, Kerry Ellis. Ellis' Masterclass was the most beneficial to me. It was an honour to be able to attend a masterclass run by someone so renowned for her career in the musical theatre industry. She made her West End debut at the age of 21 in the ensemble of Lerner and Loewe's "My Fair Lady," and is best known as the original Elphaba in Stephen Schwartz's "Wicked." She led several exercises and guided some team-building techniques. She gave helpful critiques- for the most part- to those who performed. The part I especially learned the most from was the question and answer section at the end.

We began the workshop with some simple exercises. For the first exercise, Kerry Ellis asked us to walk around the room at a steady pace. This allowed me to focus on my surroundings, being sure not to hit anyone as I pass them. We sped up the pace, which proved more difficult not to maintain without colliding with others, I made sure to keep an eye on where others were going, as well as myself. Which was an effective way to stay aware. We began to run, this was almost impossible, as I couldn't change direction quick enough not to collide. Though, I felt I was mostly successful in keeping the collisions to a minimum.

After this, at a steady pace of walking, Ellis shouted different circumstances- the first, being young. This allowed me to be free, I tried not to be self-conscious while doing this, as it's usually outside of my comfort zone, especially in a room with people whom I don't attend lessons with. The next was to be old, this was quite foreign to me as someone who rarely possesses any characters outside of my playing age, I had difficulty in having any kind of originality, and found that I was imitating what others were doing around me. The next circumstance was greeting each other in a friendly manner, I quite enjoyed being able to greet others in the room where I would not have otherwise, building my confidence. We then greeted each other falsely being friendly with the others, as if we didn't like them. I felt my differentiation between this one and the previous one was obvious and I was able to possess a passive-aggressive character. We then had a circumstance at the complete other end of the spectrum, where we would greet someone that we like a little too much. I felt the shift between the two was quite difficult to navigate, although I felt like I had several ideas of how to portray this circumstance. I greeted some people as if I was in love with them and was too awkward to show, I would also greet others as if I idolised them, like a celebrity, where I would get overly excited to have seen them.

Kerry Ellis then led a few team-building exercises allowing us to work together. The first was the well-known drama game 'Zip Zap Boing'. Where we would send a "clap" or "impulse" to each other in turn, saying the word "zip" each time. Other moves such as "zap" sent the clap in different directions. The game would get very fast pace and as a result, caught people out, sending them out of the game. I felt very challenged, as it kept me on my toes, I felt like I was successful with my contribution to challenge other members of the group during this. The next

exercise was 'Splat', where the player standing in the middle of the circle, randomly pointed to someone and shouted "SPLAT!" the player pointed, ducked; then the two players on either side of the "ducker" had to "splat" each other by pointing to the other and saying "SPLAT!". This exercise proved difficult at times, as the group was so large, it was unclear who the splatter was pointing to.

Kerry Ellis then moved on to the acting through song segment of the workshop, where several students performed a song, and she would give them advice on how to improve. I felt she moved quite quickly through the list of students performing, as a result, Ellis' critiques were very vague and weren't in much detail. However, I felt like some of the points she was making were helpful, not only to the performers but also to the rest of the people in the room watching.

Towards the end of the workshop, Kerry Ellis opened the floor for anyone who had any questions, the first question was "How did you maintain your vocal health while playing Elphaba?". She talked about how she was a "reckless singer", she didn't understand that singing at such a range would fatigue her voice. She said that she had to learn how to maintain her voice on the job, and when she went back to play Elphaba six years later, she'd had time to work on her vocal health and was more comfortable singing such notes. The next question was, "Was the industry as you expected?" She said that she didn't expect to see how quickly it changes. She went on to talk about casting, this was the part I felt most helpful for my future in the industry. She said not to take No's personally when auditioning, to have confidence in your talent and separate your personality from your art. This gave me confidence that the industry panellists don't judge people based on their personality, just that the art that your showing doesn't fit what they're looking for at that moment.

She discussed getting back on the stage as Reno Sweeney in 'Anything goes' which is the most recent role she has played on the West End, alongside Denis Lawson as Moonface Martin. She said how she was nervous to tap dance again, but she enjoys challenging herself. This is a trait that I relate to, this gave me more confidence to push myself after seeing evidence that it pays off. She also said to try and get something from panellists when auditioning and to learn from each experience to improve next time, which is refreshing to hear that even industry professionals are still learning.

As a whole, I felt as if I learned a lot from the lesson and was able to apply myself to different scenarios and circumstances which I likely would not have otherwise.

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Task 2 (Live Performance Review)
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TASK 2 - LIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEW

On Thursday, the 15th of December, I attended a professional production of *Les Misérables* at the Welsh Millennium Centre, Cardiff. A much-loved show by avid theatregoers, based on a novel of the same name- *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. "The great Romantic of nineteenth-century letters." (Florian Rodari-1998)

As this was my first time seeing *Les Misérables*, I didn't know what to expect from the production itself. People have told me that this is one of the best shows they have seen to date, so I was expecting amazing things. I found, during my prior research, that *Les Misérables* originally opened in the west end in 1985 and has been there since. Making it the longest-running musical in the West End to this day. Its book, music and lyrics are by Alain Boubil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, who have worked together on several other well-known musicals such as 'Miss Saigon'. The play follows the story of Jean Valjean, a prisoner, who was convicted for the small crime of stealing a loaf of bread. He goes on the run, followed around by Javert. He takes care of Cosette, the daughter of Fantine, who died, they escape to Paris, away from Javert. Until he finds himself in another battle with Javert at the Barricade. Love, death and poverty are the main themes of the musical, where love brings a connection between the rich and poor that eventually leads them to their deaths. The director of the particular show I saw was the resident director, Jo Parsons.

The venue, which I have attended before, is a magnificent space and a true reflection of Wales' love of theatre. The steel exterior and huge bilingual lettering reading "In These Stones Horizons Sing - Creu Gwir Fel Gwydr O Ffwrnais Awen." putting itself on the capital city's skyline and brings tourists from far and wide. The interior is just as magnificent, especially in the Howard Gordon Theatre, which is the second largest stage in Europe. "No West End theatre boasts what we have here. There's nowhere in London that comes close to this facility." (Andrew Lloyd Webber). There was a problem with our reservation; the staff was extremely helpful in resolving it and even upgraded our seats from the balcony to the raised stalls, where the view was spectacular, seeing everything on stage, despite the fact that there was a walkway crossing my eye line, where people would walk and occasionally block the view. We arrived on time, so there were no lines, but on previous visits, the building was always very orderly and had enough staff to manage the number of people attending the venue.

The set was spectacular- originally designed by John Napier and redesigned by Matt Kinley. It progressively improved as the show went on, revealing more and more of the design work behind it. One part of the musical where the set impressed me the most, was during the death of Javert, where he falls to his death from a bridge. They used concrete railings and lampposts to signify the bridge, the railings that Javert stood on. As he fell off the railings, his harness caught him, suspending him mid-air, where the set was pulled upward, giving the impression that Javert was moving downwards. Even though I haven't seen the show before, the set seems to stay true to its original designer, John Napier, the absence of the revolving stage seems clear, as the cast just walks around in a circle

instead of being moved by the floor. I feel the redesign of the set was unnecessary, I felt I was distracted at these moments when the cast walk in a circle. Perhaps re-blocking these scenes would have improved the performance.

The sound, designed by Mick Potter, was moderately quiet throughout most of the show, but not to the point where I could not hear the dialogue and lyrics. During ensemble numbers, the lack of sound was not at all apparent, but I feel this could have been balanced if the sound team did sound checks throughout the entirety of the theatre to know where to amplify the sound.

The costume designers, Anreane Neofitou and Christine Rowland, were incredible in showing a clear separation between the rich and poor. Although I feel that if the main characters were to wear specific colours, this would improve the audience's ability to follow the narrative even better.

The acting in the show was effortlessly spectacular, especially on the Ensemble's part, having to switch between different kinds of people, rich, poor, prostitutes, prisoners, etc. Lauren Drew, who played Fantine, was amazing at capturing our hearts with such little time on stage. She performed the song 'I Dreamed a Dream' impeccably. Using speech quality at the beginning of the song to show how she is trembling from emotion, and also used sob quality, emphasising her upset. She had a clear separation between her circles of attention, which is a technique originated by Stanislavski. Although I could hear her Welsh accent slip through some of the lines, which could have been corrected with an accent coach. Saying this, I don't see a need for specific accents to be used, as the musical is set in France and none of the cast portray a French accent.

The singing was also strong for the most part, although, Nic Greenshields fell flat on a few of his bigger notes, especially during 'Stars', arguably one of the most notable male solos in musical theatre. The ensemble seemed to favour acting over singing during 'At the End of the Day', which didn't cause them to be off-pitch but added an extra layer of naturalism. The harmonies during the song were excellent and nobody was off pitch even at the soprano's highest notes nearing the end of the song.

There wasn't a lot of dancing in the show, mostly just improvised by the individual, but this proved effective, especially during the Thenardier's song 'Master of the House'.

Overall, the Musical was impressive to watch but didn't live up to the expectations I had prior. I feel this had nothing to do with the casting but the story and production itself, I feel it may have passed its time and could do with a revival, new songs, and new story developments. I didn't feel I learned much from the show, but I suppose I would recommend the show, but will be sure to say the downsides, such as the price of tickets and dated narrative.

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