Top Class Theatre Studies

Discussion Forum Transcript

Tuesday 21 April 2020
With Chief Assessor Richard Sallis
And performers Harrison Dart, Jack Smith, Jack Thomson and Talana Kitchen

**RICHARD SALLIS [RS]**

Welcome to Top Class Theatre Studies 2020, and this discussion with four of our performers from last year. I’m Richard Sallis, and I’m the Chief Assessor for the Theatre Studies monologue exam. I’ll be moderating today’s discussion.

As we begin our discussion we acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land across which we’re currently meeting, the peoples of the Kulin nations. We pay respects their Elders past, present and emerging.

Each year, Top Class concerts present some of the best work from VCE performing arts students, for the benefit of current students, teachers and the general public. In 2020, due to the disruptions of COVID-19, Top Class Drama and Theatre Studies were unfortunately unable to proceed as live concerts at Arts Centre Melbourne. And so, we’ve endeavoured to pull together an online version of these concerts. Performers have contributed self-taped videos of their monologues, and in addition we’re hosting a series of conversations with performers about the process they went through to develop their work. We recommend that you watch the performances first, and then join us for the following discussion.

And now, I will ask the performers joining me today to introduce themselves.

**TALANA KITCHEN [TK]**

Hi, I’m Talana Kitchen, I went to Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School, and I did Theatre Studies at the same school. My monologue was Nina from *The Sea-Gull*.

**HARRISON DART [HD]**

I’m Harrison Dart, I’m a current student at Mentone Grammar School. I did Theatre Studies as a Year 11 student doing 3 / 4. I performed the monologue of Sweeney Todd, from *Sweeney Todd* the musical.

**JACK THOMSON [JT]**

Hi, I’m Jack Thomson, I go to Wheeler’s Hill Secondary College. I did Theatre Studies in Year 11 as a 3 / 4 subject, and I chose to do the monologue of *Hoods*.

**JACK SMITH [JS]**

I’m Jack Smith, I currently attend Girton Grammar School and I also did Theatre Studies as an early 3 / 4 in Year 11. I did the monologue King George, *The Madness of George III*, as King George III.

**[RS]**

Great. Thank you so much everyone. We’ll get started with our discussion now. I’d like to start with Harrison. A question that does come up each year, because seems to be that each year there is a musical option on the monologue paper. So, why the musical; and what advice would you give to anyone considering choosing one of the musical characters when they’re making their choice?

**[HD]**

For me, the reason I was drawn to the musical theatre piece was I enjoy the musical aspect of storytelling. I feel like the music and the use of song words or heightened use of language can really help with the storytelling aspect and getting across the emotions of a character. It’s one thing to say a line or deliver it a particular way, but being able to put everything into the singing aspect in terms of expression for me really helped to deliver a lot of what the Sweeney character was about. I’ve been singing for the last four or so years, so for me a lot of the character work that I’ve done has involved singing. For any students going into Theatre Studies looking at the musical solo, consider your strengths. If musical theatre works for you as a performer then it’s definitely something to consider; but if you don’t see yourself as someone who enjoys singing as much…you can still look definitely at doing the musical theatre monologue because I actually did, half of my monologue I actually spoke the song, as opposed to singing it. That’s definitely an option as well. But if musical theatre is a strength of yours then definitely look into doing that.

**[RS]**

Thanks Harrison. Now we’re going to talk to Jack about *Hoods*. Jack, *Hoods* is a very different play from the musical theatre piece. It’s contemporary, it’s non-naturalistic. What were the factors that attracted you to choose this character?

**[JT]**

I initially read through all of the scripts first and I wrote down ones that I liked and then I did some research on them. I picked *Hoods* from that because when I read it, I read all of the rhymes, because they were all poetic and all rhymed with each other, that made me think of rap, and I was like, ‘oh, that’s something I like doing.’ I tried to put both of them together, so I made the first third and the last third of my piece go as spoken rap, or slam poetry.

**[RS]**

Fantastic Jack. And like Harrison said, that’s also playing to your strengths, which I think is a really good way of going. Talana, a different type of play again. This time a classic Russian naturalistic play, set in the 19th Century. What was it about this play and the character of Nina that attracted you to this monologue?

**[TL]**

My process for choosing it was I picked my top three monologues and I acted and spoke some lines to my teacher, as a sort of audition, just to get a feel for them. I was really drawn to Nina, just because she was this young innocent girl who had a dream, I really felt like I could do something that was really different with her, that would convey Chekhov’s message but in a completely different way. I was so fascinated with the world of 19th Century Russia, I thought it was so interesting.

**[RS]**

Thanks Talana. I think it’s true to say that your interpretation perhaps isn’t the classic, almost stereotyped naturalistic interpretation. I think that’s important for people to know, because you are in this exam permitted to change the style of the original piece if you wish to do so and if it still works. You also included some video in your piece. Were there copyright issues that you had to deal with to include that video?

**[TL]**

Yes, there were a lot of copyright issues. I never imagined myself getting to a place to have to share the monologue publically, and in hindsight I wish that I had followed the copyright, or even considered copyright. I had a backing video that had images rolling constantly throughout the whole monologue, and all of them were copyright infringement, so to publically share it for Top Class I had to redesign the whole video and locate completely copyright free images. I would suggest that if anyone was to use a backing video to consider copyright and maybe in their original backing slides to just locate copyright-free things. It’s a really important thing to recognise.

**[RS]**

Great, thank you very much Talana, that’s very sound advice. For anyone listening out there, you just never know, like our four performers today, you may be in Top Class next year, and if that’s the case copyright becomes an issue, so please keep that in mind as you’re working on it this year.

Jack Smith, we haven’t heard from you yet. Again, a very different play, a contemporary play by Alan Bennett but about a real historical figure, King George III. What attracted you to this play?

**[JS]**

I think the initial decision to go with this play was the playwright himself, Alan Bennett. I’ve seen a couple of his films and read a couple of his plays, and I very much enjoy his style, that dark comedy but also fast paced talking to loads of people at once. The great thing about this monologue being that it’s a person slowly losing control of a room while he’s trying to talk to all of these people. Comedy is a type of acting which I usually go for anyway, so I felt like this monologue was probably the best decision to go for, and then throughout the process I found a lot more of that darker aspect of the character, while also playing up the comedy. It was really nice to play both those up. And that’s why I decided to pick this monologue over the others.

**[RS]**

Thanks Jack. I think what’s important from the four people that we’ve heard from is that you’re all performers and you all enjoy performing. The thing we must remember though is that there is that other option which is that you could choose design. There’s not a separate set of characters for design, you have the one set of characters, but you have the choice to apply acting and direction or to design areas for them.

Let’s move on. Talana, I’d like to know what you did in class – for the benefit of people listening, if you haven’t started working on this task yet, what you do is that you don’t just work on the monologue, you also need to work on the scene that the monologue is in and the greater world of the play as well. You’ll be doing a whole lot of exercises and activities in class. Talana, was there a particular activity or something you did outside of just working on your monologue that really helped you develop your monologue?

**[TL]**

When I decided which monologue I was doing I read the play at least three times, it probably would have been like five times before I decided to fully hone in on the actual monologue. So in this way I got a sense of Nina, of her character throughout the whole play, her dynamics with all the other characters and her relationships, and where she ends up. In the monologue, I could have a good sense of what she was actually doing at that present time, what she had done, what she will do, and how she’d interact with all the people that she does in the monologue. I think definitely reading the script is soemthing that was very very vital.

From that, specifically reading the scene and understanding every single thing going on in the scene, not just Nina but all the other characters I think was really important as well.

From that, a specific activity that we did in class that I thought was really really effective was we got big pieces of butcher’s paper and we wrote down every single word of our monologue and we just breathed in every single word, any idea that came to us that included the script and the wider understanding of the play we had, we jotted down every single thing. So that we knew the character, and we knew what he or she would do in the context of where she was right now. I thought it was so rewarding to be able to breathe in every single word and know exactly what your character would do because you’d have an understanding of what she was like in the play. I thought that was really good.

**[RS]**

Terrific, thanks Talana. There’s absolutely no getting away from it, if you want to do well with this task one of the things you have to do is just to read that play over and over because you’ve really got to know the play inside out. Harrison, what worked for you in terms of developing your character?

**[HD]**

Fortunately for me I was already a big fan of *Sweeney Todd* as a show before the monologues came out, I already had a lot of pre-existing knowledge about the show. Once I found out that Todd was one of the characters, as soon as I saw that I was already drawn to the character. After having a look at the other characters as well I found that Todd as a character, not just as a ‘dream role’, I realised that the actual personality of Todd was something that I could work towards. How I did it was in my folio I had a diagram of Todd as a character, I had all of his personality traits, everything that happened to him before the show, everyone that happened to him during the show, and obviously at the end of the show he dies, so nothing happens to him after the show. For me, I laid out everything that happens to him, how it affects him as a person, how his personality develops, how he transitions from Benjamin Barker to Sweeney Todd, what makes him transition between those characters. Then I made an image board with a bunch of different interpretations of Sweeney Todd. I specifically looked at Johnny Depp’s rendition of the character, and Michael Ball’s rendition of the character, and sort of drew inspiration from them. During class-time, I’d go and I’d sit in the corner and I’d work in my folio or on my laptop, and I’d watch videos and I’d take notes about different ways that the character had been explored before, and different interpretations of that character. I looked at what theatre styles would work in the Sweeney monologue. For me, musical theatre was obviously a big one, but I also looked at things like theatre of cruelty as well, because I really wanted to explore the different ways that I could manipulate this character. So a lot of what I looked at was developing his personality, and then his gesture and movement and voice and stuff like that, looking at different interpretations.

**[RS]**

Great, thanks Harrison. And Jack, when you were working on your character from *Hoods*, was there something that happened in class, an activity you did, that really helped you to develop that monologue.

**[JT]**

Much like Talana said I read through the script a couple of times and I worked out where the parts where that the monologue was in – because the monologue itself was three separate parts. An activity we did in class was we worked out the emotional states, line by line, you go through and say this is the main emotional state, and then how high each of the lines are. You try and work out where your emotions should be placed within each of your lines.

Another thing that really helped was we went to see another play which had hip hop theatre in it, which because I’m a hip hop dancer I decided to put aspects of hip hop theatre which I saw from another show into my own monologue, which was really really helpful, which helped form the basis of my monologue.

**[RS]**

Great, thank you Jack. And Jack Smith, King George III, same question to you.

**[JS]**

A big thing with King George specifically in this monologue is the injuries, the treatment that he’s had prior in the play leading up to this moment in the play. He’s got bandages around – I won’t go too graphic! – he’s got bandages around his legs and he’s got weeping sores, and it’s just a whole lot of disgusting things. A big part of that was physically getting up in the scene and walking, we did a lot of ‘walk around as your character’, which seems like a really standard, basic thing to do in a class. But especially in my monologue, getting that walk exactly right…because he never addresses his legs, or he doesn’t address them that much in the monologue itself, but it’s still a very prominent part of his character. Once I worked out how he walked and how he limped along while still trying to keep his regal status by standing up straight, but he physically can’t support himself. That kind of activity of just simply walking around and getting into the mind of the character worked really well in class, and that really helped with the interpretation of the monologue.

**[RS]**

Thanks Jack. I think to a degree you’ve all touched on this next question, but there may be something more specific that you want to mention at this stage. One of the aspects of working on this task is to conduct dramaturgical research. Was there a particular part of that research that really informed your monologue, and if you hadn’t have done it your monologue wouldn’t have been as good as it was? Again Talana can we start with you.

**[TK]**

I think dramaturgy was one of the biggest things I focused on in my monologue, as I did recontextualise it from 19th Century Russia to 21st Century Russia. I started by…one of the first things that I did approaching my monologue was conducting dramaturgical research on Chekhov himself, his childhood, his goals and aspirations, his relationship with his family, and then other plays he’s written, the context of Russia and what Russia was like during the time that the play was released. Getting that understanding, I was able to understand what sort of character Nina would have been in that period of time. This dramaturgy allowed me to see that Nina would have been a rebel in 19th Century Russia, she would have been this flirtatious, family-defying, rebelling young teenage girl. So this dramaturgy to understand what Nina would have been in 19th Century Russia, I was able to convey her as a rebel teenage girl in 21st Century Russia. So I then explored trends in Russia in 21st Century, and how to convey Nina, music rebellious young teenage girls would have listened to in 21st Century Russia. So that was my dramaturgy, specifically for my character. Also, something that I wanted to emphasise predominantly was the political climate and climate change and youth activism in Russia. So I spent, some classes and some weeks I wouldn’t even look at my monologue, I would just solely focus on researching global warming, and how Putin is reacting to it, and what the climate is in activism. Then Greta Thunberg became really relevant so I researched her for ages and how she was impacting people of Russia as well. I found it so so interesting. Through this dramaturgy, through music, and everything I found, I really developed my monologue in terms of making sure it was really relevant and really factually accurate. Dramaturgy was really really helpful in developing my ideas. I think one piece of advice I would give really strongly is just research research research because you get so many ideas from just spending time researching the playwright, researching the context, it’s so important and that’s what was most helpful to me in developing my monologue.

**[RS]**

Thanks Talana. I think it’s worth us remembering that earlier we spoke about the fact that you can actually change the style of the original piece, but you can also change the setting or the time period. Talana’s did all of that and it’s a good example of how you can recontextualise the original monologue. Harrison, you touched on before some of the research you were doing into previous productions, et cetera, was there something else you wanted to talk about?

**[HD]**

A lot of what I was researching at was the themes of the monologue itself. Looking at obsession and revenge, looking a lot at the symbols behind that. I was also looking at other characters that relate to that. I touched on in my research looking at characters like The Phantom of the Opera, because a lot of what he’s focusing around is obsession as well. I was looking at aspects of other characters from other written works or other performances that followed that same ideal. I looked a lot at Stephen Sondheim who wrote the musical version of *Sweeney Todd*, and a lot of what he believed in as a writer, what his intention for the play was. There’s a few videos on YouTube of Sondheim working with performers and explaining the idea behind each piece. A lot of what Sondheim wanted to do was, he was very good at connecting lyrics to music, every word that he had written down was there for a reason. Through looking at Sondheim’s intention of what he wanted for the play specifically, for me that was very important because then I was able to paint a picture with the words that he’d given me.

**[RS]**

Thanks Harrison. Yeah, watching YouTube clips and everything that’s absolutely considered to be dramaturgical research. And Jack I noticed that you mentioned before going to see another production that included rap in it – again, that’s dramaturgical research. Was there anything else that you did, Jack, that’s worth mentioning?

**[JT]**

One piece of research that was massive in *Hoods* was the game simulation idea. There’s multiple points within the script where it says “Stop. Rewind. Insert special feature.” To try and keep that and pay homage to that, my crates are really grungy feel, and they can be placed in different orientations so they’re kind of different levels to get through. My final moment ends with me running up and jumping off them, which is really reminiscent of winning a Super Mario level. I liked that idea because it also payed attention to, in the full playscript, how the kids can’t actually win the game in *Hoods*.

**[RS]**

Great, and that game playing was certainly a major part of your interpretation. I think it’s worth mentioning for anybody watching that that was really one of the key characteristics you brought to it, along with the rap. And Jack Smith, for you, with King George III, obviously there’s historical research – was that the main type of research you did or did you do other types of research as well?

**[JS]**

I did a lot of political research and historical research of that time. It comes at a really crucial moment in both King George’s life but also just the general state of the world. The play takes place mere months after America’s just won the war of independence, and that takes a toll on King George’s mind, because he’s lost part of his Empire but he’s lost a part of himself by losing those colonies. He’s also got the constant…because the Prince Regent in the play, but also in real life, who’d later be King George IV, there’s a constant waiting for King George III to die so that he’ll be the next King. The joke being that King George III keeps living. It’s that political and regal backstabbing between the two of them but also those within his government – because his government was seen to be really weak at the time – it’s that constant looking around making sure that I still have control of what’s going on, I don’t think you’re going to overthrow me. That aspect of dramaturgical research really helped in my monologue, because there’s a lot of talking to different people and working out what they’re there to do. For example, in the monologue and in the scene, the new doctor who’s going to treat King George, Dr Willis, he’s going to restrain him to a chair and really get into his mental psyche, and George has never met him before. It’s a really good insight, with that historical context of how everybody’s going against him, how he’s almost interrogating Dr Willis into being what he’s about. I was really fascinated by that concept – that there’s all these people in the room who say, yeah, we all follow you, we’re all loyal to you, but then when Dr Willis brings out the chair and the King’s shown to lose all his control only about two of his servants stay behind to say we still stand with you, while everyone else abandons him. That’s what I really liked when I came to the research, and that really informed my monologue.

**[RS]**

Thanks Jack. And as all of our performers have said, you do need to read the play back to front many times, but also dramaturgical research means going beyond what’s in the play and actually looking for other interpretations, the reason why the playwright wrote the play in the first place, and other details that will place it in that particular time and particular place.

We’re going to finish up now with a double-barrelled question for you. I’d hazard a guess that at some point each one of you came across a bit of a roadblock when you were working on your piece. I’d like you to give us an example of a roadblock you came up against and how you solved it; and then if you could also tell us any advice that you haven’t already given today that you think it’s worth giving to people who’ll be working on this task this year. Again, can we start with you Talana.

**[TK]**

I think every day was a completely new roadblock, so many things went wrong. I think in the ends that’s probably how you do build and improve your monologue so much. One roadblock that I encountered that probably had the biggest impact was at the very start, that I chose my monologue because of the transition from Nina being Nina to the play in the play, within *The Sea-Gull*, I loved that thought. I knew that Chekhov, through my dramaturgy, had originally intended it to be a comedy, so I said, ‘great’, I’m going to do absurdist theatre, really expressionist, and transform into this completely abstract creature and just be really funny…I realised it was just a disaster, and I had been working for weeks on this theatre style. It had just come to a point and I hit a roadblock where I was like, this is not the message I want to convey. But I had just had my mind set on making it a comedy. I realised I had hit this roadblock, but there was no point in panicking, I’d spent a lot of time on this idea that I needed to completely throw out the window. So instead, I re-evaluated, I made a mindmap, I thought, why is this not working? Why am I hating what I’m doing? Then I brainstormed ideas of how I could make it better. I knew I wanted to convey global warming in Russia and climate change and youth activism, but what theatrical style could make it happen? How could I do that best and convey Chekhov’s messages. That roadblock was such a big one because I’d spent so much time, but it was honestly the best thing that could have happened to me, because it made me re-evaluate everything, understand exactly how I wanted to portray it.

Some advice I would give is to journal everything. The roadblocks, don’t get discouraged when you hit them, because they’re going to be your biggest helper. They’ll show you what you’ve been doing wrong and why you’ve been doing it wrong…not wrong! Nothing’s wrong, it’s always good to explore and experiment different things. Advice I would give is to journal, jot down everything, mind-map, and don’t get discouraged when you hit something that’s going to stop you or make you feel a bit sad about things because it’s all about just exploring different avenues and going down different paths. It’s going to turn out just fine and you’re going to hit some roadblocks but they’re going to be your biggest helper in the end. Journal everything, mind-map, brainstorm different ideas, and you’ll create a piece you never thought you would at the start, but it will be so interesting. It’s really cool to see where you’ve been through your journal. That’s what I found really helpful.

**[RS]**

Thanks Talana. And you raise a really good point there, that there are aspects of our monologue that sometimes are our favourite bits, but sometimes as we gradually work through towards performance we have to be brave enough to say, even though that’s my favourite bit, it’s actually not working as part of the whole thing, so I’m actually going to have to ditch it. That journaling that you talk about – you can work your way through the reasoning of why it’s not working, I think that’s a great technique. Harrison, how about yourself?

**[HD]**

One of my favourite sayings is ‘make the plan, execute the plan, expect the plan to go off the rails, ditch the plan.’ What happened for me, because I think very big – a lot of my ideas are very big and often impossible to do. One of my first ideas was having a massive backdrop that would cover the entire stage, but then I realised we only had 5 by 5 metres to work in, so I had to scale it right back. Even after a couple more weeks of development I still had to keep scaling back. For me I think that was actually a good thing, because even though I kept running into roadblocks with logistics for me ideas, at the very least I still had things to take away from it. So instead of my set being 10 metres wide, I was able to bring it back to being one and a half metres wide. And then I thought, okay instead of having a four-sided set, then I’ll just have a two-sided set. So I just kept scaling back and back. I think by the end, when I got to performance, or in the last couple of weeks of development, I think I really had something that I had kept bringing back and kept refining and kept working on until I was able to incorporate my ideas in the best and the most logistic way. For my set, dreaming too big was the roadblock that I had, but I think it worked out because bringing it back and refining it I was able to keep all of my best ideas (or at least what I thought were my best ideas!), to having it be something reasonable and something I could actually perform with properly.

**[RS]**

And Harrison have you got any general advice for anybody working on this task this year?

**[HD]**

Don’t be afraid to dream big. If you have some idea that you know is impossible, still write it down, because you might be able to work that in somewhere else. Any ideas that you have, write everything down. Even if you can’t actually do what you’re dreaming – flying up in the fly tower or something like that in the harness – you can still incorporate that somehow, you can still draw elements from that and emulate that in a way. For me, I wasn’t able to walk offstage and come back onstage with a different set, so I just changed the set on the stage, so I had the idea of moving from one setting to another without having a massive scene transition, all I had was a set and a sheet that I ripped off to uncover the other side of the set. Even going from a massive transition to a smaller one that still retained that idea of completely changing time of place, helped me a lot. So dream big, and then bring it back and refine until you have the main ideas in the best way.

**[RS]**

Thanks Harrison. And Jack, when you were working on *Hoods*, I would imagine there was a few roadblocks along the way?

**[JT]**

Initially it’s really hard because all of the different parts, you have to try and fit them all together to make sure that they all flow nicely. One really big roadblock I had was that I’d finally blocked everything, I’d made my entire seven-and-a-half-minute soundscape full of different backing tracks and sound effects and everything. I was doing it, and I found myself relying really heavily on the movements and music of the piece, because I’m a physical actor, because I dance, et cetera. I found the way I was delivering my lines had become really monotone and boring. I had to fix that, I had to start from the very start and relearn all the emotion back into my lines, and I even cut out a song that was in the middle section initially, because I wanted to make sure I couldn’t rely on the music to bring the emotion, and I had to focus and use my acting skills instead of just dancing around to the music.

One thing to take away from this is, we know that you want to try and get everything done as soon as possible, you want to be done and be able to rehearse it, and keep going over and over it so that you know it. But it’s always good to just relax, don’t overstress everything, because that’s when it starts to get really bad, when you’re just forcing yourself to make all this work that you can’t make in that short amount of time, because good things take time.

**[RS]**

That’s a great piece of advice, thanks Jack. And Jack Smith, a roadblock for you as you were working on King George III?

**[JS]**

I found that the biggest roadblock I had was also transitions and moving between the two scenes. The first half of the monologue ends with him saying that he will not be restrained to a chair, that’s near Act I of the play, and then Act II begins with him in the chair. There’s a gap in the middle where I can’t just say, in the middle of the monologue, ‘so this is the interval, I’m going to go sit in the chair.’ I had to come up with a way of transitioning between those two. The way that I found that was to incorporate the scene of him being forcibly restrained by his servants into the chair. That of course became a problem because I’m the only one in the scene, and I have to get myself into the chair as if six other people are dragging me in. Since there were a small amount of people in our class, we could really take the time to physically be the other people in the scenes. We spent maybe three quarters of the period on each person’s scene, really diving into them. The aspect that we worked on with mine was getting the other people in my class to physically hold on to my arms, drag me back an then forcible put me into a chair while I struggled, so I can work out, this is how my arm has to move, this person’s got this joint, that kind of thing. Having a class that was really dedicated to helping each other out really helped overcome that transition, so that we could all work on each other’s monologues to really help get a better understanding and a better flow.

The advice that I have leading on from that is to really use your fellow classmates or the people around or your teachers. Really see what they see in the monologue. Once you’ve got a good flow of your monologue and you want to perform it in front of a class, let them give you feedback – this is what worked, this is what didn’t work, and this is what I think you could possibly improve. You don’t have to take all of it on, because of course they’re focusing on their monologues and you’ve gone really deep into yours. So they might say, oh you should do this thing, but you go, no my character would certainly not do that, or he can’t do that, or something. Really heed the feedback that you get in class, and have one on one sessions with your teachers or with your classmates, because they’re really useful in understanding your character and the monologue itself.

**[RS]**

Great, thank you so much Jack.

And in closing, thank you to Talana, Harrison, Jack and Jack for sharing those great thoughts with us today, that’s really useful. It’s a strange year this year as we all know, we’re working in a context that none of us could have predicted, but I think to have a resource like this this year is really going to be of great help to people who are working at the moment at home and will gradually be working on this task leading up to the end of the year. So again, thank you very much everyone, and if you’re doing the task this year, wishing you all the best with it.