Top Class Theatre Studies

Discussion Forum Transcript

Friday 17 April 2020
With Chief Assessor Richard Sallis
And performers Matilda Komene, Sarah Bowers, Sophie Bolton and Tom Liszukiewicz

**RICHARD SALLIS [RS]**

Hi everyone, and welcome to Top Class Theatre Studies 2020, and this discussion with a few of our performers. 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 respect 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 performers for the following discussion.

And we’ve got four Theatre Studies students from last year that we’re going to be talking with today, and so I’ll ask each of the performers to join me by introducing themselves.

**TOM LISZUKIEWICZ [TL]**

Hello everybody, I’m Tom Liszukiewicz, I went to St Kevin’s College last year and I did the monologue of Sweeney Todd, acting.

**SARAH BOWERS [SarahB]**

Hi everyone, I’m Sarah Bowers, I went to Firbank Grammar last year, and I did the monologue of Mrs Lovett, acting.

**MATILDA KOMENE [MK]**

Hi everybody, I’m Matilda Komene. I go to Fitzroy High School and I did the monologue from *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

**SOPHIE BOLTON [SophieB]**

Hi everybody, I’m Sophie Bolton and I went to Firbank Grammar last year. I did the monologue *Hoods*, Design.

**[RS]**

Tom, Sarah, Matilda, Sophie, thank you very much for joining us today. I’m going to start with a question for Tom and Sarah. Both of you chose to do the musical which last year was Sweeney Todd, and you both chose to perform that – and obviously there’s a choice whether to perform and direct, or whether to design. So Tom, starting with you, could you tell us why you chose to perform Sweeney Todd, and why you chose to perform rather than design for that musical.

**[TL]**

At the start when we did monologues each year, I’d always research into all the plays and I’d rule out the characters or theatre styles which I thought I maybe wasn’t as confident with. For example, Greek theatre I’m not as drawn towards, but realism and musical theatre I am, because of natural experience having done them before. I narrowed it down to Trigorin from *The Sea-Gull* and Sweeney Todd, and I basically made a list of all my ideas and then weighed the pros and cons and just decided from there that Sweeney Todd was the one I felt more inspired with, most comfortable with, and the most excited with – and I think that’s really important, because you want to enjoy your monologue. And then acting – from the start I always wanted to do acting rather than design, because I always leaned towards acting with the analysis we did in Theatre Studies, so that’s how I came to the decision.

**[RS]**

And Sarah?

**[SarahB]**

In my mind I always wanted to do the musical theatre monologue and when I saw it was *Sweeney Todd* I was like, ‘I’m set on this’. But then I decided maybe I should have a look at the other plays, so I had a bit of a look but I kept on being drawn back to Mrs Lovett. And I decided acting because I really wanted to dive into the nuances of her, I think she’s a really interesting character, and I felt like if I did design I’d miss out exploring this whole world of things I could learn from doing the acting.

**[RS]**

Great. Moving on to Matilda, you chose a very different play, a contemporary Australian play, set in the modern day with flashbacks to the past, and the monologue requires you to change characters at one point. What specifically drew you to this monologue?

**[MK]**

I also did a lot of research into some of the other plays. I was very drawn also the musical, but for me I really have enjoyed from doing unit 1 and 2, performing German expressionism and theatre of cruelty theatre styles, and I knew I could really interpret the play using a lot of those elements. So that is one thing that really drew me towards doing this performance. I also really like portraying a very dominant character and doing something…it was very much something I was quite strong with. But yes, very much the theatre styles.

**[RS]**

Thanks Matilda. And Sophie you chose the design option last year. And the data’s in, about 20% of students chose the design option last year. And you chose a different play again, another contemporary Australian play, this time set in relatively contemporary times, called *Hoods*. And there are a lot of design possibilities in *Hoods*, and you chose costume and set. Can you tell us why you chose *Hoods*, and why you chose design?

**[SophieB]**

A couple of things drew me to the *Hoods* monologue. I quite liked how it was very neutral and there was a lot a room for interpretation, because it more focuses on the hood character and it’s very neutral, there’s no it’s a boy it’s a girl, it’s a lot of room for interpretation. I also really liked how it’s more storytelling than you had to become a specific character, it’s more storytelling about different characters. Originally I had actually chosen to do acting, I started researching on that and started doing the first minute in the way I’d do that in an interpretation. And then I realised…personally I’m not a very confident actor, so I got really like, ‘oooh, I don’t know’. So I started looking into design, and I realised I could play more to my strengths and use my writing skills and create a really good script for myself, and then competently present that, and then the little acting bits that you include didn’t seem so scary, so I thought that was a much better option for me.

**[RS]**

Great. And you make a really good point there Sophie, that for designers you do need to – whether you improvise it over and over or whether you write a script – but you do have to deliver lines to deliver, but they’re lines that you create for yourself, plus quoting a few times from the script itself.

I’d like now to cast your mind back to when you were doing classes last year. One of the requirements of the task is that in class you study the play more broadly, including the scene that the monologue comes from. Tom, starting from you, if you could talk to us about either that process you went through of working on the greater script; or was there a particular activity you did in class that you thought really helped you to develop your monologue.

**[TL]**

One of the biggest things for me was reading and analysing the whole thing. The thing I noticed with Sweeney Todd was that his monologue was at the very start of the show and at that point he hadn’t committed any crimes yet, he hadn’t done any wrong, and I think that’s a very important distinction to make. You see Sweeney Todd as a character that’s very angry and he kills people, that’s what he’s known for, but I wanted to get empathy from the audience with all that because he’s had so much that’s happened to him with the Judge that’s done everything to his wife, and basically taken his life away from him. So that’s something I realised through the whole research I really focused on, and then I could allow variation in character arc. I also knew where he was going – so in that six minutes we had I tried to show that whole character arc, to show where he’s going in the whole play.

**[RS]**

Thanks Tom. And Sarah, how about you? What was something that happened in class that you took part in that really helped you with the development of your monologue.

**[SarahB]**

In my class we had three other Mrs Lovett’s, and we’d sit down and discuss our ideas, they were often conflicting, and it was really interesting to see the different interpretations and just bounce ideas off each other and get input. We’d just do improvisational tasks together, of Mrs Lovett in the space. It was really cool to see how different ours all were, yet we were doing exactly the same script from exactly the same world. And just watching the play, different interpretations, Patty LuPone, all these different people gave me little things I could take into my own Mrs Lovett that was really helpful.

**[RS]**

Great. And how about you Matilda?

**[MK]**

Very similar to Tom and Sarah. I made sure I read the script lots of times to really understand he shift in the character and to see whereabouts that shift occurred, and I really wanted to showcase that in my monologue exam. Similar with Sarah, I had two other students who were also doing the same play, one was design and one acting, and we did a lot of collaborative work together and gave each other feedback on our different ideas, which were also quite contrasting, so that was really interesting to see. We also did a lot of exercises in class, I remember one specifically where you become an animal that is similar to your character, and you have to see how they would stand, how would they walk, and how would they present themselves, and that was very helpful to see what everyone else was doing, and kind of give you an idea of how your character might act and perform.

**[RS]**

Thanks Matilda, I think the question everybody’s going to want to know is which animal was Appleyard for you?

**[MK]**

I portrayed Appleyard as a peacock.

**[RS]**

Very appropriate! Thank you. And Sophie, what about you, in terms of what really helped you work on the design of your monologue.

**[SophieB]**

I think it was really important for *Hoods* to read the entire script, because all of the different parts of the monologue were actually from different parts of the play, as it swapped between from the hoods’ perspective as well as Jesse and Kyle. So I thought it was really important for me to read the whole script and when doing that I could see the themes and the important part of the storytelling – this was what the monologue was symbolising, and the flowing imagery. I definitely thought that reading the script was very important.

And it was really helpful for me performing in front of the class and practicing it a lot of times because – I’m not gonna lie – it took me almost until a couple of weeks before the exam to get the actual script perfect, very detailed and exactly what I wanted to say. As I was the only doing design until quite close to the end, doing it in front of the class as well as my teacher was really important because it helped me develop how my ideas were being expressed and if it was clear to the audience. They were able to tell me if my design actually reflected the themes that I was discussing in my script, so that was really helpful.

**[RS]**

I think you make a really good point there too Sophie, whether we call this a performance or an explanation, an interpretation, you do actually have to present this, so just as the performers need to perform in front of an audience you need to present in front of an audience doing design, really good point.

Tom back to you, you touched on this in your previous answer to an extent. With this task we have to do dramaturgical research. Can you share with us one piece of research that really nailed it for you and really helped you to develop your character.

**[TL]**

Other than just reading the whole play I’d say probably historical context of London at that time, because you can really see the world that the character was in and how that world affected him personally. For example, the themes in *Sweeney Todd*, capitalism and the industrial revolution is a big part. In the monologue at the start he sings about the world being this terrible place that’s gritty and dirty, and I feel like if you’ve got this sense you can feel…it’s hard to explain, but you can feel where the character is in this place. And that informed also my set design, I just had crates and dirty rags and harsh fabrics, I tried to really convey that harsh world and how that affected him personally.

**[RS]**

Thanks. And I think as you say there, the context of the play is a really important thing to research, and I can see how that would have helped with that play. How about yourself, Sarah?

**[SarahB]**

Exactly the same thing. I really loved looking into the sociocultural context of the world of the play, and I felt I had a whole new appreciation for character once I could understand how she lived within her world. Definitely helped with my design choices, with my set, I lit a table on fire pretty much and it was all broken. It was so much fun to immerse myself into her world, and I felt it was a lot more truthful and believable for the audience.

**[RS]**

Fantastic. And Matilda, very different play for you contextually. What was it about the research that really helped you to develop the character.

**[MK]**

I did a lot of research into the original book, the movie, and the tv show that recently came out. I drew a lot of inspiration from the three different Appleyard’s portrayed. I was very lucky, I got to travel to Hanging Rock and experience the atmosphere there, and it’s really amazing how the wind really weaves between the rocks, so I utilised that in my soundscape. The sound really created an idea of how I wanted to portray the character, in this eerie, and…I interpreted it as these demons releasing, specifically in the second half of the script.

**[RS]**

You’ve touched on something I’d never thought of, of course it’s in Victoria, you actually get the opportunity to go to Victoria. Shame that Sarah and Tom didn’t get a chance to go to London. But if it’s in Victoria, great bit of research! Sophie, what about yourself? What really helped you in that regard.

**[SophieB]**

For me what really helped was researching into the intention of the playwright. I really researched why Angela Betzian actually wrote the play and what she intended to communicate and what message she tried to portray. In this sense it was portraying political information to younger audiences, so this was really important to include that in my set, in a way that’d be able to communicate these themes of domestic violence and poverty and neglect to younger audiences, so I had to do it more in a playful way. This research really informed me in doing that.

**[RS]**

Something that you’ve all touched on to a degree which I think is really important is that when the monologues are set they’re set in different styles. Musical theatre is more an obvious style. But you’re absolutely right Sophie, *Hoods* was written for young people, so that’s the kind of research that also is important – into the playwright’s intentions and the style in which they’ve written the play in the first place.

We’re going to finish up with a double-barrelled question. First of all, I would hazard a guess this may apply to everyone, if you came across a roadblock or two along the way, what was that roadblock and how did you work around or through that. And if you could also at the same time share with the listeners one bit of advice for students working on the task this year that we haven’t already covered. Tom, could I start with you?

**[TL]**

I had a lot of roadblocks. Originally the staging for my monologue was completely different, I went with a more symbolic and stylistic staging where there wasn’t as much of a sense of place and time but it was very symbolic, because with *Sweeney Todd* you can be very symbolic. But then it just wasn’t working, I didn’t know why it wasn’t working. Luckily, I had teachers and fellow students who could help me so much and give different perspective which I think is important. Because Sweeney Todd in the monologue he talks to two different people, Mrs Lovett and Anthony, so I ended up switching my whole staging around so there was more a sense of time and place and I felt that worked so much better. If you get on the workshopping early and you get your lines down pat it really allows that time to be able to have those roadblocks, because you don’t want to be having them right before the exam and be like, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing.’ That’s something I think is good to know.

And then, something we haven’t touched on, for the interpretation statement it’s good to not put everything in. The assessors are Theatre Studies teachers and they’ve seen so much, you have to assume they can realise simple things. For example, in my monologue I had a scene change, and I felt I didn’t have to outline that because it was obvious that I was changing from two scenes. You don’t want to rush it and put everything in, instead you want to focus on the more important things, such as when I alluded to Shakespeare and I wanted to make that clear, or about the red chair and what that symbolises. You want to hone in on the important stuff, and make it short and sweet so it’s not rushed and it’s a good last impression on the monologue.

**[RS]**

Great advice, thanks so much Tom. Sarah how about yourself?

**[SarahB]**

I found a roadblock right at the start. I got so excited about Sondheim’s music and I got really lost in it, trying to learn it, because it’s really intricate. Then I realised I wasn’t acting, I was just singing the song, and it wasn’t a monologue any more. So I stripped back all the song and relearned it as a monologue, and then slowly added some music in. I think if you’re doing music theatre don’t get lost in the song, I know they’re awesome and you get really excited about it, and all music theatre nerds love Sondheim, but just remember it’s a monologue exam and you don’t want to get stuck singing the song.

I also started overperforming it, and I wasn’t staying true to the style. Music theatre, while it’s very over the top, this show, my interpretation was a lot more nuanced and internalised, and not high-kicks and turns and everything.

Also, with the interpretation statement, start a lot earlier than you think you need to. With my teacher, we had an ongoing conversation, and I had 13 drafts because I always overwrite everything, and cutting it back was so helpful. If I started when some of my other classmates started I would have had a mess of an interpretation statement, because I always overwrite. Learn it as a monologue in itself – it’s really important that you give a good last impression after your monologue, it’s the last thing they remember before you leave the room. Take it as seriously as you take the monologue.

**[RS]**

Great advice Sarah. Matilda, what about yourself?

**[MK]**

For the second section of my monologue, I was really invested, I had all these great ideas, and a really big aim of mine was to utilise the space and levels. But particularly with the first part I struggled with the very disjointed structure of writing the script has, and I really portrayed the character as a very constructed way of living, so I didn’t really know how to manipulate the space as much as I would have liked. So I did a lot of work with my teacher, one on one, and with my peers, and I came up with this idea of a circle of wattle representing the land coming onto her restrictive way of the life, and the Australian bush being so free. From there it evolved, and I created this idea of time and time passing and how the land is slowly coming over her and taking over her, and the demons come out. A piece of advice is definitely to work with your teacher one on one to get rid of these roadblocks.

And for the statement of intention, definitely make sure, again with what Sarah said, starting really early, and making sure you’re using the correct terminology, such as elements of theatre composition, and correct theatre terms like lighting and set design.

**[RS]**

Thanks Matilda, yeah that’s very important. Sophie, finishing up with you.

**[SophieB]**

Definitely the biggest challenge for me was fitting it in the eight minutes. When I first wrote it, it was pages long, and I’d go to perform and it was 13 minutes long, and I was like, oh, okay, that’s a bit of an issue. Having to cut it back is very difficult. Two things that worked for me was going through it and making sure there was absolutely no repetition, anything that was any bit similar cut it or make it into one sentence so all the information is provided in that one sentence instead of little bits throughout. Also, going through the study design and the requirements and the criteria, we had ten things we had to follow, so making sure each of those ten things was covered, and if there was any waffling or anything just get rid of it because you don’t need it. It’s really important to focus on those criteria and make sure you go through everything.

And then my next challenge was doing the interpretative statement, because you’ve just sort of done the exact same thing and explained your ideas and why you wanted to make these choices and what it’s going to do for the audience. At the start I was like, ‘what am I going to write in the interpretive statement.’ Then I realised to make the first bit shorter, the thing I touched on in my interpretative statement was the theatrical styles that are present in *Hoods* and the ways I interpreted those. So although I touched on them in my actual design speech, in my interpretive statement I really went into detail with that, and really explored how I used them and what I did with these styles to incorporate it into my design and how this affected the audience. I think it’s really important for people doing design to pick one or two specific things for the interpretive statement and really go into depth with that, so you can allow space in the actual speech to go into other things which may have more to do with the set and how that could be incorporated with the acting.

Also one last thing for designers: I think it’s really really important to deliver it as confidently as you can. I’m a very nervous performer so I struggled with that and the first time I had to do it in front of an audience, I fully freaked out, and I was sitting by myself and I was like, gotta breathe and I was really stressing. And then I realised, if you go up there, and you just pretend you’re the most confident person in the world, it comes across exactly as you want it to, so that’s my piece of advice.

**[RS]**

Great piece of advice, thank you so much Sophie. And thanks you Sophie, and Matilda, Sarah and Tom for your golden nuggets of wisdom that you’ve shared with us today, and of the course the performances that people would have seen before this discussion. For those of you doing this task this year – and we have to acknowledge that it’s in the context of an unusual year for us all – but I think listening back to the advice you’ve been given today will be equally as useful this year. So from all of us here, thank you very much for listening.