Top Class Theatre Studies

Discussion Forum Transcript

Tuesday 21 April 2020
With Chief Assessor Richard Sallis
And performers Christina Keen, Laura Pryor, Tallulah Thornton-Lawrence and Thomas Vulcan

**RICHARD SALLIS [RS]**

Welcome to Top Class Theatre Studies 2020, and this discussion with a few 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 lands in 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. Our four performers todays 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 so now, I’ll ask the performers joining me today to introduce themselves.

**CHRISTINA KEEN [CK]**

Hello, my name is Christina Keen. I’m from Beaconhills College, and I did the Mrs Lovett monologue from *Sweeney Todd*.

**THOMAS VULCAN [TV]**

Hi, I’m Thomas Vulcan. I’m from Haileybury College, and I did Loren / Barnacle, from *The Encounter*.

**LAURA PRYOR [LP]**

Hi, I’m Laura Pryor, I’m from Ruyton Girls’ School, and I did the *Hoods* monologue.

**TALLULAH THORNTON-LAWRENCE [TTL]**

Hello, my name is Tallulah. I’m from North Fitzroy High School, and I did the monologue Mrs Lovett from *Sweeney Todd*.

**[RS]**

Thanks very much everyone for contributing to today’s discussion. Tallulah and Christina, I’d like to start with you, same question to both of you. As you know, every year there are 10 to 12 monologues set for this exam and you’ve got a choice. Obviously for this particular exam last year you both chose the musical *Sweeney Todd*. Christina, what was it that attracted you to a musical when you had the other choices as well?

**[CK]**

For me, musical theatre has always been a really big part of my life. Singing is something that I absolutely love to do. I love manipulating my voice through song. That was a really really big contributing factor to me choosing that particular monologue.

**[RS]**

What about you Tallulah?

**[TTL]**

Similar to Christina I’ve done musical theatre my whole life in and outside of school. Even before going in, I knew I was going to consider that. I definitely did go through the other monologues, and my key thing in picking it was that I had a vision for it, more than I had for the others.

**[RS]**

Great, and Tallulah it might sound like a silly question but would you recommend somebody choose the musical option if they haven’t had a lot of experience in musicals in the past?

**[TTL]**

I think it would definitely be possible. I’d say if you haven’t done a lot of singing, musical theatre, it’s maybe something you could get coaching for. But if you have a real affinity with that character and you have an idea, I wouldn’t be put off by that. But it’s certainly something to think about, whether it would hold you back.

**[CK]**

I really agree with Tallulah. I definitely wouldn’t be put off if you feel that that is the character that you most attach with. If you feel connection to that character then yes, you should go with that character. But it is definitely a very hard thing to go in if you haven’t had any vocal training especially. I know for a few people that I know they didn’t have very much vocal training, or they were very self-conscious about their vocals when they were going into it, and it was a real obstacle for them to try and get the monologue out through song.

**[RS]**

Thanks Christina. And something for us all to remember is that if you do choose the musical option, you have a choice. You can sing it all the way through; you can sing part of it and speak part of it; or at the other end of the spectrum you could actually technically say all of the lines rather than sing them. But I think it would be true to say that the majority of people who choose the musical option either sing it all the way through, or do a combination of speaking and singing.

Tom, a very different play for you. *The Encounter* with Loren and Barnacle. A true story based on a novel, set in the jungle, and also a play that was intentionally written to include a lot of sound and sound effects. Was that partly one of the reasons that attracted you to the play?

**[TV]**

Yes, it was one of the big factors because I’m very involved in the technical side of theatre, that’s where my main passions lie. That was the main thing, I went, ‘oh, that’s theatrical’. But I did go through all the other ones, at one point I was thinking of doing the *Sweeney Todd* (I don’t sing). I got a lot of advice to do the tech one and I eventually decided to do that because not only did it play to my strengths, but also I got really interested in the themes and messages of the play. It’s all about consciousness; our relationship with nature; fiction versus reality; the world as we see it – it’s quite intellectually challenging.

**[RS]**

Thanks Tom. And Laura, something again very different. A contemporary Australian play, set in contemporary times, quite an edgy play, quite a non-naturalistic play as well. What was it that attracted you to it?

**[LP]**

I’ve always loved Australian theatre, and I think we should always be looking for ways to celebrate it more. Specifically, I am an avid lover of Australian gothic theatre and its principal idea of being scared of the unknown. Specifically in this monologue I was really drawn to the challenge of portraying these vulnerable and scared characters, because it’s something that I haven’t really done before. That’s what drew me to it initially.

**[RS]**

Great thanks very much. A different question now for everyone. Obviously when you were working on your monologue in class, you’re not only working on the monologue; you’re also working on the scene the monologue is part of and the greater play as well. Was there any particular exercise or activity that you did in class on the wider world of the play that informed your development of the monologue?

**[CK]**

Personally, reading the play or watching it is…it seems silly and it seems like something you would obviously do but some people don’t. That is a very very important thing to do. If you’re not familiar with the rest of the play or the musical in my sense, it’s really difficult to know how to play the character. I think definitely reading the play. I also personally love hot-seating, because that is always something where I feel I can become the character – answering questions and improvising scenes with people as that character, it makes me feel a lot more confident that I can portray who I’m trying to portray.

**[RS]**

Thanks Christina. And Tom, what about you when you were working on *The Encounter*?

**[TV]**

I agree with Christina 100 per cent – read the whole play, watch it if you can. From reading the scenes, what comes right before and right after the bit you’re examined on, the bit you perform, that could greatly change your characterisation. My Loren, he had just seen a tribe member killed and eaten by insects over a number of days, and then burned alive. That was what happened right before I then start. So that really informs what happens. And then on the other side of the spectrum for design, right after the last line, the stage direction is ‘suddenly there’s smoke and fire’. So that gave me the idea at the very end, I’ve got a water bottle that’s red and I drop it, and the idea was that if I was to continue that would be the fire, and I’d react to that. So it really gave me a lot of ideas for how to fit my performance into the world of the play.

**[RS]**

Thanks Tom. And Tom raises a really important point there. As we know with this task you have a choice, which is that irrespective of which character you choose you can interpret that character using acting and direction, or design – two design areas. But if you choose the acting and direction option, there are still design elements of course that you bring to your acting performance. It would be very rare that a student would present for the exam as an actor without wearing a costume for example, and then there are choices beyond that of set items, makeup, sound effects, lighting effects, set items as well. One of the things that we need to think about is also how it will look and what stage elements we will bring to performance.

Laura what about yourself in terms of how you worked on the play *Hoods*?

**[LP]**

I think as you guys have said reading the play is extremely important. When I first read just the monologue I had a completely different idea of what it meant to when I actually read the play. Going further, I think really doing in-depth research into the context. I did acting and directing, but I obviously had a set. One of my main things was consumerism, so I wanted to display brands that were popular in the ‘90s in Australia. I did a lot of in-depth research into which brands people were buying, and which were the most popular in that time.

**[RS]**

Thank you. And we’ll come shortly to other research that you may have done to develop your monologue. But Tallulah what about you, what are some of the things that you did or you did in class that helped you to develop your monologue?

**[TTL]**

I’ll stick with everyone else and say reading the whole play and reading the scene; and I watched a zillion interpretations of my scene in full, to see how they fitted in with the play. But something our teacher made us do was a bunch of questionnaires on the character, which I found really helpful to flesh out my role with other characters, even if that’s not the one in my scene, but in the world. That was really helpful to me, and then I could work that in with symbolism into my choices.

**[RS]**

We’ll move on again now to a related aspect to working on your monologue, which a number of you have touched on. To use the term that’s used in the study, we engage in dramaturgical research. What dramaturgical research do you think most helped you to develop your character?

**[CK]**

I think definitely a lot into the historical context. For *Sweeney Todd*, it’s set in the 1800s. So that time period, and also the fact it’s set in London, which is just this dreary old town especially back in the 1800s when there were just diseases and so many things going around, and the entire city was just miserable. That really helped to inform my acting, but so much more in my direction as well. Simply the fact that I had a very long skirt, but I hiked it up to above the ankles because that is not something that people would have done back in the 1800s, it would have been down below the ankle. But I did that to show just what kind of a character Mrs Lovett is. Things like the wool of the skirt and the material of the skirt and the fact that I was wearing a petticoat and boots and stockings underneath as well – it was all these things to show the time period, to show what the surroundings were, the fact that it was so cold. Definitely historical, all of the context is a very very important thing that helped to inform a lot of my decisions.

**[RS]**

Thanks Christina. I think that that last point you make about context is really important because some plays – and I think certainly a musical would fit into this category – some plays its harder than others to actually change the context to a different time or to a different place. Other plays to lend themselves to that. Segueing into Tom, I think it would be true to say that it would be very hard to choose your play into a different location – perhaps a different time but certainly not a different location. Tom, in terms of research, what really informed your monologue?

**[TV]**

I was very lucky – because this play is devised for one actor, on the theatre company’s website they had published their notes from every single rehearsal whilst they were creating the play. So I spent a lovely evening reading through all of that, and that gave real insight into all their inspiration for the play. So I was able to then go and research the different philosophical theories they were thinking about, the different people they were referencing and who they talked to. That I think is quite a unique experience to have for this sort of thing.

Beyond that, I did a lot of reading into the origins of the actual story, because it’s based on a real story as you said and there’s a book written about it called *Amazon Beaming*. So I read what I could find of that book online, and all of that historical context really informed most of what I did.

**[RS]**

Can I ask you an associated question Tom – from what you’ve just described, the materials that you did access, where they hard to find online or was it not too difficult to find information about the play?

**[TV]**

The theatre company Complicité is all about experimental theatre, so they were bound to have a lot of stuff on the website. But past that it was quite difficult to find specific resources. A lot of what I was reading was related things that I could find a link to the play.

**[RS]**

A take home message from what Tom has just said is that this is a lengthy process, the research process, and you’re not necessarily going to find exactly what you want the first time you go to Google. Like any research process, it can be quite an involved process and it’s expected of you that you will work on this process – it’s certainly not something that you will just access over a few evenings. Laura, what was the research that best helped you?

**[LP]**

With my character it was quite tricky, because the Hoods are this unknown anonymous character, but I was lucky because I got to transform into some of the different characters that are mentioned in the monologue. For example, I did quite a lot of research about real people who are living in places of extreme poverty, and that really helped me develop the character of the mum who is obviously living in poverty which leads to her having to leave her kids behind in the car.

Researching physical movements as well, for a mysterious kind of character, that really helped me develop my character of the Hoods.

**[RS]**

That’s actually a really good point you make there Laura. The research that we do isn’t necessarily only into the content, context and themes of the play, it’s also into the style of the play. Certain plays particularly require us to do our homework, learning as much we can about that particular style. One other point about style: again like the context of the play, you’re more than at liberty to change the style of the play. The test would be: would changing the style that would work for the monologue work for the whole play as well? The same for changing the context – the context might work for the monologue but would it work for the whole play? That’s the test you have to apply if you’re going to change the context or the style of your monologue.

Tallulah, what research best helped you develop Mrs Lovett?

**[TTL]**

One thing that I found really interesting was research into the role of women and the role of the lower class of London in the 1800s. That really affected how Mrs Lovett as a woman and a poor woman views everyone around her, and that really feeds into her goals and her ambitions. Further than that, research into the themes was really important for me. Connecting back to how it fitted into the whole play, that was a really good way for me to take the messages that the whole play was trying to send and show them in my scene in ways that otherwise I might not have gone to the effort to do.

**[RS]**

Thank you. You also remind me of something there too – it’s very common to research the intentions of the playwright and the themes that the playwright has decided to convey via the play. If you can gain insight into what was going through the playwright’s mind as they were writing the play, that can be invaluable.

We’re going to finish with a double-barrelled question. I think it would be true to say, because it’s very common for everyone, that you may all have experienced a few roadblocks along the way as you were developing your monologue. If you could identify one or two of those, and also how did you overcome them, because obviously you did. And also if you could conclude with a little bit of advice for anyone who is doing this task this year that we haven’t covered already.

**[CK]**

There were so many roadblocks! The entire process, for me at least, was just a never-ending line of roadblocks. It meant that getting to the end and finally finishing and performing the monologue made it that much more rewarding. The biggest one for me was right at the very start. I had a vision for the monologue, and the rape of Barker’s wife is a very very difficult subject to broach, especially in high school I found. Being in Year 12 and trying to perform something like that in front of my teacher and all of these people I would never really talk about those sorts of things with, it was very very hard. Especially because in the actual show, that whole scene is performed by an ensemble; Mrs Lovett is simply telling the story as it’s being played out around her. It was really difficult to try and figure out how to portray that and how to show that. For me, I went through about ten different ways of showing it, and I finally settled on the phallic references with my rolling pin; and also the music box that’s underneath the table behind the curtain. With that I had Barker’s wife as this tiny white figure, surrounded by all of these black large figures as she span around. That for me, it was very symbolic for me. Honestly that was one of my later decisions; I didn’t come up with that until closer to the end of the process, and it’s one of the most important things in my monologue.

Advice in that aspect would be: let things happen, it’s okay. I remember in my drama solo two years ago, I changed something the day before I went into my exam – and it still worked, everything still happened. So it may come very late in the process, but every little bit counts. It’s hard, but it’s so much fun, and it feels so great at the very end of it, and you can finally say, ‘I did this, I got through this’, and you become a much stronger person throughout.

**[RS]**

I can see a few nodding heads there! Thanks Christina. Tom, what about yourself?

**[TV]**

On things happening late in the process, my main roadblock was…if you look at my monologue you’ll notice that I’ve got two speakers downstage either corner, and two microphones centre stage, and they all plug into this little box next to my laptop, plus I need power. I had a hell of a lot of cords. It wasn’t until two weeks beforehand where I finally said, alright, let’s work out how we’re going to set this up in two minutes. I spent hours coiling them specific ways, working out what I was taping to what, and it took forever but I finally got it down and it was slick and I knew exactly where I was going. That was the main problem I faced; there were tonnes throughout but everyone finds their own way of overcoming them.

Advice would be…don’t be put off if you want to do something that’s crazy, because it might pay off like it did for me. But then again, you still have to be realistic. I did end up paring down my design to what it was and it’s quite a lot as it is. Have confidence in yourself, if you back yourself you’ll be able to do it, but don’t go overboard completely and try and put on a theatrical performance from a theatre.

**[RS]**

Great advice Tom. For those of you watching, a reminder as Tom said that you’ve got two minutes to set up all your materials, so a.) you really do need to think of the logistics of that, and b.) you do need to work that into your rehearsal, because you don’t want to be suddenly realising you’ve got some technical problems on the day that you could have solved back in the classroom.

Laura, what about yourself?

**[LP]**

Mine was more of a mental roadblock. As people have said, it’s an extremely difficult process, it’s definitely not all easy, you’re going to come across challenges. I was maybe halfway through the process and I completely lost all motivation to continue – I wanted to give up, I wanted to not do it anymore. In hindsight that probably wasted a lot of time. The way I got over that was to ask for help – even from people who haven’t done the process before or are not really familiar with it, it’s really good to get an outside point of view.

The biggest advice is to allow yourself to be vulnerable. Especially because this is our own creation, we tend to get quite sensitive and defensive about it. The biggest thing is to completely let go of that, and allow yourself to be vulnerable, to ask for help and receive feedback – because it’s extremely valuable.

**[RS]**

That’s excellent advice. It is a very vulnerable process that you can suffer through at times, and your mind will play mental tricks with you in terms of, ‘oh, this isn’t all that good, I’m sure I could do better, I don’t think I can do any better.’ It is a process, and you need to work through it. It’s really important as you mention that that happens to a lot of it – you just have to break through that barrier keep going, it is an endurance test to some degree! Tallulah, what about yourself?

**[TTL]**

Similar to Christina, the issue of Lucy’s sexual assault was something from the outset when you look at the monologue it’s like, ‘how am I going to do that?’ Especially because in the live musical it’s done by an ensemble. My initial idea that made me want to pursue the monologue, because I thought this is something that’s interesting to me and inspiring, was to use puppetry to create that moment. As the weeks went by and I started researching puppetry and what it would take, I increasingly began to think, I don’t know if I could really pull this off. The amount of time and work that it would have taken to master that skill. I increasingly was thinking ‘I don’t think I can do this.’ And then I went to a workshop run by Malthouse Theatre, and I ran into five other girls who were also going to do puppetry for Mrs Lovett. So I thought, oh, this idea isn’t as creative as I thought it was, and I’m not really inspired by it anymore. So I put that aside, and I was matched with a monologue that didn’t have something that really inspired me. And I almost went back to the drawing board and looked at other monologues, because I was bored by it. But once I got over that moment and I started brainstorming again, and I ended up using the tea towel to do it more symbolically, it was much more enjoyable to me. Scrapping all the work that I would have done wouldn’t have been a good idea definitely, even if in that moment I was like, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore’. So I think sticking with it, and knowing in your heart what will make you the most satisfied. Maybe for someone else, switching after a few weeks of work would have been the best decision if you think, the other monologue I’m into, I have a really clear image for it and I have a plan, that can be good. Thinking logically through the process and knowing clearly what you’re going to do is really key.

**[RS]**

Thanks Tallulah. I might just ask everyone one other quick question at the end – the extent to which working with your classmate on your monologue, did that help you in your development of your monologue, and if so in what ways?

**[CK]**

It was definitely a very important part of the process. As much as you want to work alone and you don’t feel confident enough to show it to other people, you just need to do it from the very beginning, because it’s so beneficial to hear other people’s opinions on what you’re doing and seeing what works and what doesn’t works.

**[TV]**

We did almost weekly performances of even 10 seconds that we’d worked on. We had a pretty small class so it was quite an intimate performance space. That was quite daunting performing to your friends and peers. But by performing little sections or the whole thing that many times throughout the whole process, by the time it got to the exam I was that competent because I’d had all the feedback at every step. It was as detailed as, ‘I don’t like when you turn your head at this point, why don’t you just do it to the right.’ All of that builds up and it makes it so much better than it would be if you were just working isolated.

**[LP]**

I completely agree with what everyone has said. Especially when you’re performing it to people who are doing something else, just getting a completely fresh opinion. On the other side, I found it extremely valuable helping other people – watching their monologues and giving them advice – because I found myself thinking of ideas for my own monologue while I was trying to help them.

**[TTL]**

Definitely agree with everyone else that working with everyone is super useful. In theatre it’s pretty rare that you’re doing a show by yourself, it’s almost always something you do in a team. So not isolating yourself…I think if I’d done it all closed off from the class it wouldn’t have been an enjoyable process. Examiners can see whether you enjoy what you’re doing, and that’s really important in that way. I also agree with Laura that giving feedback to other people was really useful to me.

**[RS]**

Thanks Tallulah. And thanks to Christina, Tom, Laura and Tallulah for your insights today, I think they’re very valuable indeed. Of course, this year is a very different year for us all. Even delivering the performances and the discussion this way is something new. But if you’re listening to this right now and you’re going to be taking this exam later in the year, we hope that the advice that you’ve heard today will be useful to you. Thank you very much.