

Drama and theatre studies

[Literature](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of our performance requirements is a pre-1900 piece. Whilst discussing the idea of performing an extract in a style which could not be considered modern, the obvious choice which occurred to us was to perform a play by Shakespeare. His plays are among the most widely celebrated of all playwrights, and the diversity within them allowed us plenty of scope. I suggested that one of his history plays would be effective in portraying a method of acting, and of characterisation, which would require us to think outside of conventional modern plots. Conveying historical facts in an entertaining way appealed to me.

Having read Henry IV recently, I thought it a humorous and varied text, however was aware of the lack of female roles. Upon consideration, myself and Ruth agreed that it would challenge, and almost parody, conventions of Shakespearean theatre to have two females perform male roles, since in Elizabethan theatre it was compulsory for female roles to be played by men. The scenes we chose displayed typically male characteristics such as speaking crudely of women, drinking ale and boasting of our actions, which we decided would allow scope for humour as we exaggerated male stereotypes.

I performed extracts of the play "Whale Music" several years ago, and remembered it having strong female characters. It is also an evidently naturalistic and modern play, in contrast to Henry IV. Bearing in mind our chosen theme of "take away the mask and the truth is revealed", we searched the play for scenes in which emotions are disguised. We found the first scene effective as Caroline refuses to fully open up to Kate about why

she is uncomfortable at the thought of them being alone together in the back of the van.

The second scene we chose fits the "taking away of the mask" perfectly, as Caroline's monologue pours out every emotion, thought and secret she has kept to herself for so long and finally finds the moment to tell Kate everything she needs to hear. I requested to play the character of Kate because her sexuality and attraction to Caroline would create powerful moments of dramatic tension, and having to express sexual attraction towards another character was a challenge we had not attempted in any performances our group had undertaken before.

When first pondering a plot for our devised piece, the first decision we made was to base our scene in a surreal, abstract setting. We also knew we wanted our characters to be confused as to their whereabouts, and decided that in the end one should have a moment of realisation, while the other remains trapped and lost. Through this, we reached the idea of Purgatory, and decided that the most effective characterisation would be two entirely contrasting people.

The idea of the Salem witch came from a combination of reading Miller's "The Crucible", and our decision that the 17th century dialect used in Shakespeare would lead to a distinct lack of communication with a modern-day character. Research Henry IV- This had the potential to be the most difficult piece to understand the historical context of. However, having studied Shakespeare at school, including a history play, and having even

watched 'Richard II' performed by the RSC, I had considerable knowledge of the style.

While discussing how Shakespearean actors would have exaggerated female characters to play for laughs, I decided to make the character of Hal slightly effeminate so as to parody tradition. I also watched a BBC dramatisation of Henry IV to further my understanding of character status and relationships. I learned that although Hal is a prince, and heir to the throne, he is more content with a life of crime, drinking, robbing, pillaging, and generally acting in controversial ways. The core element of my research involved language translation, which I used an internet study guide for.

This helped me to understand more clearly the words I was saying and what they meant, despite their Elizabethan style. Whale Music- Anthony Minghella's first theatrical success was written, and presumably set in, 1981. Therefore the drama is modern in comparison to Shakespeare, though we did discuss possibilities of attitudes having changed since the 1980s. We considered that the key plot of the drama, Caroline's pregnancy while not knowing the father and having to move away from disapproving parents and shame, would have been more controversial a few decades ago.

To acknowledge this, we made Caroline a fairly reserved character. The title of the play comes from the CD of whale music which Caroline is given and told will help her to relax during pregnancy. I researched the background of the relationship between Caroline and Kate, and learned that Caroline is an ex-student of Kate's, and Kate also once doubled up as her landlord. Knowing

that they had lived together, yet so much is still unsaid between them, strongly enforced the " mask" idea in our theme.

My research therefore led me to believe that Caroline wants the metaphorical mask removed at last, but Kate is happier for it to remain. I also searched for performances on Google, and although regrettably there were none taking place which I could attend, seeing images and reading reviews helped me as I was encouraged to see that all of the performances were presented in a modern, naturalistic style which supported the ideas we had. Our devised piece overlapped two eras, the 17th century and the present day.

As I have worked in historical interpretation of the 17th century in Llancaiach Fawr Living History Museum, I am able to convert modern phrasings into historical terms. However, we decided not to make the dialect too blatantly obvious or complex as this would draw attention away from the problem faced by the two characters. To symbolise the idea of " take away the mask and the truth is revealed", we wanted a lack of communication through the characters' fear of one another, confusion of their whereabouts, and refusal to listen to one another, as well as their difference in morality being symbolised by their inability to relate.

Therefore, a literal lack of communication through incomprehensible language would overshadow the underlying message. The title of our piece is a Latin phrase meaning " purifying fire" which I think is very fitting, and somewhat ironic. The character Elizabeth who I play was burned at the stake

for witchcraft, yet it is her realisation and acceptance of this fate which "purifies" her, so to speak, and allows her to be at peace.

The word "purify" can also be related to our theme of "take away the mask and the truth is revealed", as the removal of a mask, be it physical or metaphorical, can be likened to a cleansing and revealing process. I researched the history of witch-burning in Salem, although I already had some knowledge of it through reading Miller's "The Crucible", and from personal interest in history. I learned of the fear and suspicion surrounding symbols, such as the "Evil Eye", and so incorporated this into the script by telling how my (Elizabeth's) mother had found her drawing symbols and condemned her.

Development Process. While rehearsing our first scene from Henry IV, we tried various approaches including both characters being incredibly hung-over, or Hal being a more authoritative princely character. However, Hal's speech is too good-humoured for him to be regal (such as his quip about a buff jerkin) so I instead began to portray him in a positive, teasing, playful manner. To contrast the lazy, sluggish nature of Falstaff, I made the physicality of Hal more bouncy and restless, which at times even went so far as to make him appear rather camp!

Yet this worked effectively with our motivation to exaggerate the characters and mock male stereotypes, so I continued to lift the pitch of my voice and over-dramatise my gestures. My walk also became more prancing, and I began to use physical gestures such as tossing my hair and crossing my legs to again exaggerate the feminine portrayal of Prince Hal. Although my acting

partner Ruth and I learned our lines and connected with our characters separately, I feel it was our strong interaction outside of lesson time which truly helped our development process.

Rehearsing in a different environment, namely at home, allowed us to share ideas in a relaxed environment, and also meant that our extra rehearsal time would benefit us greatly. We advised each other on meanings of lines and how we saw one another's characters, and the mixture of opinions created more fully-formed characters after combining ideas from both of us. While rehearsing the second scene, we discovered the humour of Falstaff's gradual elaboration of his false tale.

However, as Hal is merely humouring Falstaff by pretending at first to believe his heroic tale, we thought it best that Falstaff be fully drunk and Hal be only slightly tipsy, so as to create a tavern atmosphere and the type of scene in which two men would boast of their deeds, without resorting to overly drunken performance which we felt would distract from the underlying secrecy of Hal and naivety of Falstaff. We did attempt to act the scene whilst acting completely drunk, shouting in one another's faces and mixing up words, but I believe that it left the scene degraded to nothing more than senseless gibberish.

However, we agreed that the ignorance of personal space added to the sense of intoxication, and so continued to speak closely into one another's faces, but lowered the volume from the previous bellowing, and kept slurring to a minimum for practicality of articulation and the audience's understanding. We decided to stage our scene in a proscenium arch style. As

our rehearsal progressed, I found it most effective to speak while facing directly out towards the audience wherever possible, to mimic the overdramatic and flamboyant tendencies of Shakespearean theatre.

When we first started rehearsing 'Whale Music', our lack of movement meant that our performance felt very wooden. Therefore a key part of our development was to apply as much emotion to our lines as we could, without exaggerating. We rehearsed the first scene with Caroline sat down, but changed this to her standing up as I thought that Kate's (my) awkward body language would be more defined, as Kate approaches Caroline and kisses her. We decided early on to keep set and props to a minimum as we did not want to detract from the core emotions of the scene.

Also, as our theme is "take away the mask and the truth will be revealed", I thought it more poignant not to "mask" our performance with unnecessary props and complex set, preferring the "truth" of the drama to come from our acting performance. When lighting the second scene, in which Kate is lying in bed, we thought of using dim general cover to represent lamp light. However, as rehearsal progressed we decided to experiment with the idea of using an actual lamp, plugged in to the side of the stage.

I think that this idea was effective in not only making the scene more natural, but also reflecting the theme as the effect of the lamp illuminated our faces and created unnatural shadows on them, reminiscent of a mask. I downloaded some audio clips of whale music, and upon hearing the eerie, haunting moans, decided it should be used somewhere in our piece as a tribute to the title, and an exaggerated expression of emotional angst and

torment felt by both Kate and Caroline at the emotional peak of our performance.

The main development I felt in getting to grips with the character of Kate was that I gradually learned to tone down her sexual attraction to Caroline. At first I performed the scenes while constantly making physical contact with Ruth (Caroline) and edging nearer. However over time and with practice, I began to question whether she would be so forthcoming, especially considering that her lover, D, is staying in the same house as herself and Caroline.

Also bearing our chosen theme in mind, I decided that it was best for Kate's longing to be more disguised, until she chooses to voice her love. In our devised piece, a lot of the development involved physicality. After attempting to speak without making eye contact, and walking in a strange, drifting way in an attempt to convey the setting of Purgatory, we decided that it looked disorganised and felt as though we were trying too hard to make the scene surreal.

Therefore we re-rehearsed the scene speaking directly to one another which allowed greater character interaction, and the fact that the characters were able to see one another and converse, yet not have the faintest understanding of one another, fitted the "mask" theme ideally. Our setting for Purgatorius Ignis was an empty stage to express the infinite bleakness of Purgatory. We used a purple-tinged general cover lighting, after agreeing that red would suggest Hell-fire, and blue would appear either serene and heavenly, or a symbol of cold, and so neither would suit our purpose.

Therefore we chose the colour in between the two to symbolise Purgatory being between Heaven and Hell. Performance. While performing Whale Music, I felt that the atmosphere created by the dim lighting was particularly effective. The sound effect we added of seagulls really changed the setting and conveyed more clearly the sense of being outdoors at night. I was concerned about how long I should wait after lights up before entering, but I feel that the time I waited was just right for allowing Ruth to have a moment of solidarity, without leaving her feeling awkward.

Our performance went well, with no mistakes in lines, and a consistent flow of action. I felt that the attempted kiss went better in the actual performance than it had in rehearsals, when we were prone to either laughing or it looking as though Ruth was too prepared for it, when it was supposed to be unexpected. In the second scene, the lighting worked well and allowed the "mask" effect which I described in the "development" section. Also, as Ruth allowed me plenty of time between her entering and beginning to exit, my process of waking up was not rushed.

Again, our lines were remembered accurately which was pleasing. During Ruth's monologue, I had foreseen the possibility of my looking wooden, but I believe that I stayed in character well and so my silence, broken only by occasional small laughs or gestures, was effective in allowing Ruth her moment of outburst without leaving me still and silent in the background. My only concern is that the whale music playing behind Ruth's monologue may have been a little too loud, which would have risked sounding strange and its intention unclear.

However, having not been able to view our performance afterwards, I am unsure whether the volume of the music was suitable or not. The performance of our devised piece, Purgatorius Ignis, was more successful than I imagined. I was pleased with the lighting effects we had chosen, however I would like to have had a smoke machine to add a more sinister atmosphere, as well as this having the potential to relate to the theme through the smoke acting as a " mask" which we as actors would be concealed behind.

Unfortunately a smoke machine was not available for use in our performance. I was able to watch footage of our performance, and one criticism I do have of myself is that my accent fluctuates a lot, sometimes sounding neutral, sometimes Welsh and sometimes more upper-class. However, having said this, at the beginning of rehearsals we agreed that accent was unimportant to our scene. When a person speaks naturally, their dialect often fluctuates a little, so I do not think that my variations in vocal deliverance had any great effect on the overall performance.

On a more positive note, I felt that my monologue was delivered with suitable emotion and pauses, although I think it is possible that Ruth remaining on stage instead of leaving may have looked more effective, I did not wish for it to appear as though I was commanding attention all to myself and am worried that this is how my monologue in a spotlight came across to the audience! We performed Henry IV as our final piece.

I felt that our costume looked superb, it made those watching laugh but I see this as a positive reaction- our intention was to parody men in drag, and I

think that our costumes, in particular my ridiculous bowl-cut wig, added humour to our characters. The bawdy music at the beginning of the scenes was highly effective and made our performance very upbeat. Unfortunately, there was a moment during our performance at which I forgot my lines, however I think that I covered this well by remaining completely in character and using one of the props, a cup, to mime taking a drink while I worked out how to get back into the flow.

Ruth helped by also staying in character and prompting me, and I was later informed that the memory lapse had gone unnoticed by the audience, so I am confident that we performed well. Evaluation. In the early stages of our planning, I was concerned that development got off to a slow start due to our indecision on which theme to choose. However, I feel that we chose the correct theme as it is a thought-provoking statement which led to fascinating discussions about possible symbolism and its relevance in our own lives.

It also allowed us to explore in depth the concepts of subtext and hidden emotions in characters, as the people we portrayed often say one thing and mean another, or are living lives of secrecy and denial. Being able to portray a character with more happening under the surface than they convey directly to an audience was a challenge, but it led to detailed exploration of body language and vocal tones. In conclusion, I feel that all of our intentions in our characterisation and expression were fulfilled to a high standard.

Having read the day before the exam that Anthony Minghella, the writer of "Whale Music", had passed away, we hoped that our performance would do his writing justice! I believe that our chosen theme, "take away the mask

and the truth is revealed" was evident in all of our chosen pieces, and I believe that we conveyed this theme effectively, particularly in our devised piece. While I have a few small criticisms of our performance, overall I am very pleased with the outcome of our performance, and believe that our dedication and teamwork over the past few months has truly paid off. Show preview only