

ON THE SHORE OF THE WIDE WORLD – Rehearsal Diary with Roger Morlidge

Roger Morlidge is currently rehearsing the role of John Robinson in *ON THE SHORE OF THE WIDE WORLD*. Roger previously appeared at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Sarah Frankcombe's production of *KES*. He has performed at the Birmingham Rep, Royal National Theatre, RSC and at the Sheffield Crucible. Roger's television credits include *EASTENDERS*, *HOLBY CITY*, *MOLL FLANDERS* and in *SHERLOCK HOLMES 'A CASE OF EVIL'* as Dr. Watson. On film he has appeared in the *ENGLISH PATIENT* and *SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE*.

WEEK ONE (14 – 18 March 2005)

What I did

On Monday afternoon the cast met to read through the play. These are always frightening experiences as you're meeting the cast and the director for the first time. I was lucky on this occasion, as I'd previously worked with the director Sarah Frankcom and two of the other actors in the cast last year on *KES*. The daunting thing on the first day is being introduced to the other members of staff in the building and then desperately trying to remember who everybody is! We spent the rest of the week working through scenes in chronological order in the play. I'm not in the play until the third Act, so I didn't get to work on my scenes until Thursday, although I was in on Tuesday morning to see how Sarah was running rehearsals. It's good to know because every director works in a different way. Sarah for example is approaching working on this play very differently to how she directed *KES*, which was much more of a physical show and because a lot of the scenes were set in a school was about building up relationships between the pupils and teachers. This play is much more to do about exploring individual characters.

How I developed my character

When I was not called for rehearsals, I spent a lot of time on the internet researching support organisations for people in a similar situation to my character, John Robinson. I didn't find any support groups, which rather surprised me and increased my sense of isolation from the other characters in the play and what they are going through. Had my character been a member of the family, there are plenty of organisations who will provide help and support. Whenever I start a new job I keep a notebook and I spent some time writing down ideas about the character. For example on the way to Tesco on Tuesday I saw the car that I thought my character would have driven. It was a P reg Blue Mondeo. I don't go looking for ideas they seem to drift in and I just write them all down. I find that it helps me build up a picture of the character that I'm playing – who they are, where they're from and what surrounds them in their daily live.

WEEK TWO (21 – 25 March 2005)

What I did and how it helped me to develop my character

There were two very important things that happened this week. On Monday all of the Company went to Stockport for the day. We were given a set of instructions and £20 in expenses. I was given several locations to visit, the first of which was the road where my character might live, the second was the site of the road accident, the third was a police station and the last one was the Central Library at the University of Manchester where John Robinson works. This kind of day is vital to the rehearsal process as you get a real sense of where the character actually lives and certainly for me in this play, to see the sight of the road accident, which catapults John Robinson into the lives of the other characters in the play, was very important. When I'm talking about the accident in the play I can now picture exactly where it happened. It will make everything feel more real when I'm on stage. It was interesting that the Police Station that I went to was the wrong one and that instead of going to Stockport, John Robinson would have been taken to Cheetham Hill Police Station.

The second important thing that happened to me this week was that I spent Thursday morning with a lecturer from the Mathematics department at the University of Manchester. He was an applied statistician, where as my character is actually a pure mathematician. It was fascinating to spend a couple of hours with a some one who works at the University and try and get inside the mind of a person who spends all their time working with figures. He very quickly made me feel very stupid! I was extremely aware that in his job he is extremely objective where as an actor in my work I'm very subjective. We're looking at the world from completely different perspectives. It was quite a difficult meeting as we both were a little bit unsure of what to ask each other. I really wanted to find out what he thought about mathematics. I was very impressed by one thing he said about some numbers being nicer than other numbers. It was a very emotional response to numbers, which I was surprised at. I came away from the meeting with a very real sense of the dedication and discipline that people like him who work in this area have for their subject. All in all a very productive week for me outside the rehearsal room. I'm looking forward to using a lot of these things to develop my character.

WEEKS THREE & FOUR (28 March – 8 April)

What I did and how it helped me develop my character

In week three, I started to work in the rehearsal room with Sarah on the scenes that I appear in. All my scenes take part in Act three with Siobhan Finneran who is playing Alice Holmes. It's been a bit of a weird week as I only appear in Act three of the play, I have felt a little bit isolated from everything else that has been going on, mainly because I've not been in the building very much and also because apart from Siobhan, I haven't been working with any of the other actors. We blocked the scenes, worked out what props we would need and then began running the scenes. I did find that when I started rehearsing the scenes having mulled them over in my head for a long time it all came out as a general blurb. John Robinson has so much emotional baggage from his involvement in the accident and from his marriage, that to begin with we acted out the scenes pretty much as if they were shouting matches. A lot of the emotional stuff I had to release so I could begin to forget about it.

In week four when Siobhan and I went back to rehearse the same scenes, it felt like we'd got all the emotional baggage out of the way and could sit back on what we were doing and be a lot more refined and subtle in what we were doing on stage. By this time we were both off the book, having learnt our lines and we were much more careful in how we said the lines. We had a very good note from the writer Simon Stephens, which was that a lot of the characters in this play are trying to achieve an effect, which is the opposite of what they are actually saying. With this in mind I felt that I was able to fully explore the subtleties in the text. When we rehearsed the scene where John and Alice meet for dinner we were able to examine in detail the sexual undercurrents in the text. On Friday we ran the entire play for the first time and it was clear that we had a good understanding of what we were trying to achieve. The run went very well, a couple of lines got missed out, some of the lines still need fine tuning, which is something that Simon is very keen that we do, so that the lines are spoken as they actually appear on the page. I've been very encouraged by the notes I've had from Sarah and I'm looking forward very much to performing the play in front of an audience.

ON THE SHORE OF THE WIDE WORLD by Simon Stephens runs at The Royal Exchange Theatre from 13 April – 14 May 2005.