



ORPHEUS DESCENDING

By Tennessee Williams

A VIEW FROM THE INSIDE

Ed Lewis is one of two new Directors in training, joining us from Birkbeck College for a year. Ed's first job here was to assist Sarah Frankcom on our forthcoming production ORPHEUS DESCENDING. Here is Ed's view from the rehearsal room.

"My first encounter with Tennessee Williams was studying *A Street Car Named Desire* for my A-levels. The first thing that struck me was that I would never look as good as Marlon Brando did in the film...But, after I'd recovered from that initial shock and ditched my modeling career, I was then struck by his use of symbolism and the atmosphere Williams creates in his writing. This is taken to a whole new level in *Orpheus Descending*; the curtain of a changing room becomes not just a curtain but a representation of fertility and desire, a dying man is the embodiment of Death itself and a young man is representative of a wild animal and the mythical character of Orpheus at the same time. This all sounds very confusing and quite daunting to tackle but, if there's anything I've learnt from the rehearsal process so far it's that with a strong knowledge of the play, its context, and breaking it down into 'manageable chunks', all these problems suddenly become a lot more manageable.

The Greek myth of Orpheus is about a young man who is so talented a singer and player that with his talent he convinces Hades, God of the Underworld, to allow his wife Euripides out of the hell. However, Hades makes one rule, that his wife must walk behind him and only when both of them are back from the underworld can he look back at her. As with most Greek myths, it doesn't end well; just as Euripides is about to step into the world of the living Orpheus cannot take it anymore and looks back, losing his wife forever. In *Orpheus Descending* Valentine Xavier, a talented guitar player and singer, comes into

Two River County and tries to take the Italian born Lady Torrance away from the her oppressive dying husband Jabe. Lady was bought for marriage after her father, a bootlegger, was burned to death for selling alcohol to black people by a group just like the Ku Klux Klan. As you may be able to see, these characters are all linked to the Orpheus myth: Val is Orpheus, Lady is Euripides and Jabe is Hades. Being an actor in a piece full



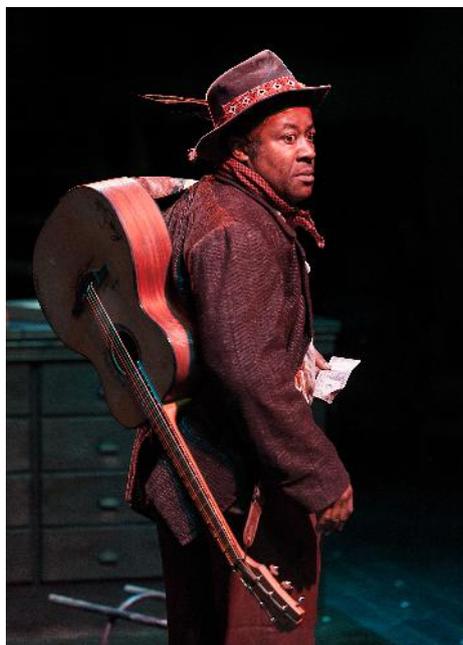
Imogen Stubbs as Lady Torrance and Luke Norris as Val Xavier (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

to the brim with such symbolism can be quite daunting. But the director, Sarah Frankcom, addressed these problems in the first week of rehearsal. We went through the play scene-by-scene and interrogated what was going on in each scene. She would ask the cast questions like "Why do you not say anything in this scene?" or "Why has your character not left the town yet?" Questions like this give the whole cast a chance to interrogate the text fully and begin to get an in-depth understanding of the play, it's characters and it's subtext. This also means that things that first appear complex in the play, like the myth of Orpheus, simply play themselves out naturally when the actors get on their feet. The actor already knows what the character wants and therefore why they behave in the way they do. For example, there is a key moment in the play when Val looks back at Lady whilst playing his guitar, a direct link to the Orpheus myth. If the actor playing Val, Luke Norris, didn't have a realistic reason to turn round it wouldn't look real or honest to us in the audience. However, because Sarah and Luke had interrogated the text together, that moment looked genuine and all the more gripping because of it.

Another problem that has faced us is how to change aspects of the play that fitted perfectly back in 1950's America but jar with us today. The character of Uncle Pleasant or Conjure Man is quite controversial for today's audiences; he is the only black man in the play

WHY NOT? Read the Orpheus myth and then create a mood-board symbolizing your response to it. Cut out and collage images which remind you of the story. What kind of figures do you picture when you imagine Orpheus, Euripides and Hades? What colours and textures re-create the atmosphere of the myth for you?

and he is a sort of Wildman crossed with a witch doctor. Williams wrote in the script that Uncle Pleasant has a toothless mumble and is dressed in rags. In our society seeing the only black man in a play portrayed in this way seems like blatant racism, however, Williams was writing in a society completely different to the one we live in today. When Orpheus Descending was written black people were discriminated against right across America, especially in the South, with regular lynchings, beatings and even burnings of black people taking place. So even having a black man on stage was quite risky at the time, especially as Uncle Pleasant is the only character left on stage at the end of the play, meaning that the audience ends up applauding a black man (whether they realise it or not). Many even say that Williams would have made Valentine's character black if he could have. Understandably, for this production, Sarah has modernised the part. From his first entrance up to the end of the play, the actor who is playing Uncle Pleasant, Trevor Georges, will be situated on the top level of the Theatre



Olwen May as Eva Temple, Trevor Michael Georges as Uncle Pleasant/Conjure Man and Claire Brown as Dolly Hamma (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

watching the action and playing music for certain scenes. It should seem almost as though he is controlling the action of the play itself. Trevor has been watching rehearsals and working with Sarah and the acting company to find the appropriate music to lift and underscore certain scenes.

Another technique that has been used in rehearsal is uniting. This is where you take a scene and you break it down into units of thought or action; whenever a character changes their thought process or does something different from what they have been doing before you make a mark in the script and that is counted as one unit. This means the actors can see how the action of the play develops in bite-sized chunks as well as seeing how their characters thoughts move and flow through the action of a scene. This has proven invaluable for the extended scenes between Lady and Val, as the changes in dynamics can be very subtle in these scenes. By uniting you can ensure that the subtleties are clear to the actors and consequently, to the audience.

WHY NOT? Working in pairs or a small group, sit down to read out loud a section of dialogue. Whenever you notice that a character has had a new thought, or is doing something different, stand up. Mark in your script each time a performer stands. Your script has now been broken up into units. Give each unit a title to reflect what is happening in it.

As well as uniting a scene many directors choose to action a play. Actioning is where you work out what a character wants to do in each unit of action and put a transitive verb to it. Confused? So was I the first time I came across actioning. Basically a transitive verb means something that you can do to someone else, the list is endless; I belittle you, I seduce, you, I educate you etc. The way most directors will approach actioning is by sitting down with the actors and talking through each unit to decide on an action. However, this process can take a long time and it only works for some actors. Sarah's approach has been to use actioning when the actors are on their feet. If they are struggling with finding what the character is trying to do in a scene, Sarah

will give them an action to try an unlock them. This means that we have not spent too long round a table and the actors that find actioning useful have been able to use it in their rehearsal process.

WHY NOT? On separate post-it notes, list as many transitive verbs as you can. Remember, this describes something that you can do to someone else e.g. I tease you, I praise you, I inspire you. Choose a piece of dialogue to read out loud. For each line, choose the transitive verb which most suits it. How does this process bring the dialogue to life?

It's been a great learning experience working on Orpheus Descending so far and working with Sarah and such a skilled group of actors has been a privilege. I am looking forward to the last few weeks of rehearsals where everything steps up a notch. It's all about to change as we start rehearsing in the theatre itself this week and really get to grips with the in-the-round space that makes the Royal Exchange so unique.

ORPHEUS DESCENDING runs at the Royal Exchange Theatre from 24 October - 24 November 2012.

Box Office: 0161 833 9833
royalexchange.co.uk/orpheus

Introducing ORPHEUS DESCENDING
Wednesday 7 November, 10am – 12pm
Pre-Show Workshop for schools, community groups and individuals who have booked to see the show.

£8 / £6 (all concessions & group leaders);
Book on 0161 833 9833

2 x 2 Between The Lines (18yrs - adult)
Wednesdays 14 & 21 November, 11am – 1pm
A pair of discussion, playreading and talk-based sessions to accompany ORPHEUS DESCENDING.

£12 for 2 sessions; Book on 0161 833 9833