

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR: Rehearsal Diary with Assistant Director Rania Jumaily

Week One

The first week of any rehearsal process is always fascinating and this first week was no exception. The most immediately unusual and exciting thing about this show was the cast, which was very big (thirteen actors and six supernumeraries which I will explain later) and predominantly female. In fact, out of a cast of nineteen, only one of the actors was male! It was amazing, in this day and age, that the sight of all these women on the first day was something of a shock! And it immediately made me realise how unusual this project was in that we were doing a period text which had a predominantly female cast, female lead roles and that dealt with the experience of being a woman. This made the project very special and unique from the outset. The read-through on the first day went very well and it was great to see this play that we had all read numerous times on our own, come to life and jump off the page. It was a difficult read through in some ways because the play deals with very difficult and emotional subjects, and without having done any work on it, it was hard for the actors to go for it and give the text what it needs. However, we all felt that the potential for the piece was great and just hearing it read by the actors for the first time was a special experience.

The play was written in 1934 and was then revised in the 50s. The changes that Hellman made for the 50s production were small but significant, the most important change being that in the later version, we learn that Mary Tilford's father killed himself which is very important information for that character. In our production, the decision was made to use the 1950s text but set the play in 1934, when it was originally written and performed.

The actors did not do any acting, in the traditional sense of the word, in the first week of rehearsals. Yet the week was invaluable and I think laid the groundwork brilliantly for the weeks to come. We spent the week working through the play from beginning to end, asking questions and creating back stories and lives for all the characters. This is a very specific way of working and is defined by its attention to detail. Each scene was read by the actors and then we discussed it by asking what sometimes seemed like endless questions about the scene and the characters within it. Alongside this work came the creation of back stories for the characters, which involves creating a life for the character outside the play. An example of this would be the suicide of Mary's father. The actors were asked by the director to make decisions about this event; when it happened, who found his body, what happened immediately after his death, where was Mary at this time, and even what room in the house it happened in. All the questions that were asked made the actors make specific decisions about their characters, and by the end of the first week the benefits of this detailed approach were already paying off: the world of this play felt like it was starting to come to life.

Week Two

In the second week, the play started to live in a different way: the actors were finally on their feet! Although I think delaying actually getting up from the table can be scary for some actors, it was great to know that they were all starting from a very solid place because of the work we had done in the previous week. We went back to the beginning of the piece and worked through each scene in the space. The rehearsal room is marked out by the stage management team, with coloured tape, to represent the shape of the set. However, the design for the show was going to involve a raised floor in two pieces, like a tiered cake, and obviously there was no way to re-create this in the rehearsal room: we would just have to wait and see what effect this would have in the tech! There were still lots of questions to be answered and our progress was slow but steady.

It is amazing how you discover even the most obvious things about the play when it is put on its feet. For example; when working on the first act of the play, it seemed crazy that we only see the world of the school and all the school girls for the first ten pages of the play. We knew therefore that the opening of the play would need to be incredibly strong and vivid so that the audience would be aware of the word that was being destroyed by a lie. I did a lot of work with the seven school girls in this week: we did improvisations about the school, and asked lots more questions about their characters! We wanted each character to be as real and three dimensional as possible, and the girls were set lots of different exercises to do in order to flesh out their characters. Examples of these went from writing in their exercise books about what they did in the holidays, to all being set the task of reading *Mademoiselle du Maupin* – a book that is mentioned in the play, and underlining all the bits that they found the most exciting! We also had a lot of discussion about the dynamic of the class and school in terms of the hierarchy of the girls; who was friends with whom etc etc.

An exciting addition to the second week was the arrival of Lea Anderson, the choreographer. Lea started work with the school girls this week, as the plan was to have the girls change the scenes in between acts and transport us from the school to Mrs Tilford's, and back to the school again. In the first couple of sessions, Lea concentrated on original physical education exercises from the 1930s which were hilarious, and also worked on getting the girls to think physically rather than intellectually. Lea also did a lot of work on strengthening the backs and upper bodies of the girls, in preparation for lots of chair carrying! At the end of the second week everyone felt very positive about where we were; there was a huge amount to do particularly in terms of putting the piece together as a whole, but the work on individual scenes and characters was really encouraging and we all felt a step closer to creating the world of *The Children's Hour*.

Week Three

Everything seemed to crank up a massive gear during the third week. We were now working through the play for the third time, cementing the blocking and generally taking away anything unnecessary or not essential to the telling of the story. In the rehearsal room, the work was concentrated on stripping down and going back to basics: but outside the rehearsal room the opposite was true! In the third week, Jan Hayden Rowles, the dialect coach, was in doing individual and group sessions on the American accent with the whole company, which they were all finding very helpful. Costume and wig fittings were in full swing and we survived the trauma of several of the girls having all their hair chopped off into 1930s bobs, to save on wigs! Even with the haircuts, we had a very 'wiggy' show on our hands, and all the girls also took part in what was fondly termed a 'hem party' at which they all lined up and the length of their school uniform skirts were chosen by Liz Ascroft, the Designer.

The end of the second week heralded the arrival of our six supernumeraries, who were going to play the rest of the schoolgirls taking our class from a paltry seven to a believable thirteen. All six girls are acting students at either Manchester Metropolitan University or Salford College. They went through group auditions with the Director and Casting Director, and are not paid a salary (but do receive expenses) but can be in the whole play, just without any lines. It was strange at first to have a new influx of girls in the group, particularly for the girls who had been rehearsing for two weeks together already, but we worked hard on integrating the two groups and creating a believable class. I did some work with the new girls on their own at first, filling them in about the process so far and what their role would be. In this third week, we did some more improvisations with the whole class which were really helpful in terms of getting the new girls familiar with the old girls and their characters, and we also 'hot seated' all the girls together. Hot-seating is a simple way of developing character: each actor sits in the middle of the room and is questioned about everything and anything, and has to answer in character. This was particularly helpful for the supernumeraries who had to create believable characters without anything to say or any real help from the text.

All the girls worked with Lea this week on a variety of different physical exercise and the shape of the scene changes started to become clearer. The first session we had with all the girls was based on getting them to work together and as a group, and just to get to know each other a little and start to feel comfortable working as a collective. We played playground games and physical games we remembered from our childhoods, like trying to get someone to levitate by chanting! Towards the end of the week, we began work on getting a shape for the first scene change. The girls themselves were responsible for creating all of the raw material that has become the scene change. Lea asked them to get into groups of three or four and create a mini performance using chairs, representing what might happen if a hurricane hit the classroom. The results of this were fantastic: both incredibly creative and beautiful, and Lea then took ideas from all the different pieces and incorporated into the first scene change; the moment when we see the girls after the lights have been turned out and the moment that represents the title of the play.

Week Four

The fourth and final week of rehearsals was terrifying, exhausting and exhilarating. All the disparate elements that had been working independently of each other had to come together in this week and the time pressures of opening in a week started to hit home. We were very lucky to have had two weeks rehearsal in the theatre space itself so the actors, the majority of whom had not worked at the Exchange before, were beginning to feel much more comfortable in this space in the fourth week. The supernumeraries were integrated into the opening scene of the play, and the scene changes were fully realised. Much of the rehearsal of the movement sequences had taken place in the rehearsal room so we immediately had a lot of work to do when we transferred them to the theatre where the space is so different. The main task of the week was putting the play together as a whole. This involved very basic decisions such as exits and entrances for the characters, which is immediately more complex at the Exchange as you have a choice of seven potential exits and entrances rather than two! A major change for the actors this week was the addition of the school girls into the smaller scenes of the play. The idea was that the girls should be watching all the scenes that take place after Mary runs away from school; they are witnesses to the terrible events that occur. This was difficult for the older actors at first as they had been used to playing these two or three hander scenes on their own and suddenly they had an in-built audience a week before we opened! But the effect of having the girls present on the edges of the stage was very successful and something everyone was happy with. The week ended with our first run through of the whole piece on Thursday afternoon. This is always a scary but very exciting time: as it is the first chance you have to see if the piece works as a whole and also to see where the holes are that need work. It was fantastic to see the play together for the first time, although there was still a lot of work to do, and we had two more runs on the Friday and Saturday mornings.

The end of the four week process is a strange time as in one way, something has come to an end as the exploration of the play with the Director has finished, but in another way the production is just beginning, as tech week approaches and all the other outstanding elements are still to come. It is also the point at which the show is handed over to the actors themselves; to keep exploring and discovering, whilst at the same time, cementing their knowledge of the piece and their characters and become more comfortable and easy with their actions on stage.

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR was a truly great rehearsal process, thanks to the Director and the fantastic ensemble company; we laughed a lot and cried a bit but all felt that a world had been created on stage that the audience will believe in, and within which this tragic and moving story can be told.