

A WHISTLE IN THE DARK: Rehearsal Diary with Julia Wade, Stage Manager

REHEARSAL WEEK 2 (10th February 2006)

What we have done so far

Up to this point, everything we've been doing has been very organisational. With every show you compile a props list, which then goes out to every department, so we know exactly what has to happen when and where, and who needs to sort it out. Everyone works off the same blueprint.

In the first week it's quite good to not let the actors be daunted by having too many people in rehearsals, but I've been in this second week. My role in rehearsal is to check that everyone's OK and that the props and furniture are as we want and set out how they all should be. We need to know what the actors do and what doors are needed, so we can make a door plot. I create a running list of what stage management need to do and where we need to be and a setting list of where we need to put all the props.

I've been checking that Jacob's happy and that he knows everything I know and vice versa. So I, with him, then arrange the dialect, fight and music coaches, liase with the director on when's good for him and when's good for the other person and try and fit it in.

It's important not to panic, because if I'm panicking, what's anyone else going to do? So it's important to always be in control and communicate with everybody, to make sure everyone knows what's going on and that it's a happy ship! One of my primary concerns is that the actors are alright.

What we're doing now

At the moment, we've worked through the play and we're just getting to the end of the last act, so it's a really good place to be in because it gives us two weeks to work on it. We're waiting for companies to either send us the stuff or get back to us on certain pieces of information. The play is set in 1961, and because we're so close to the audience, it's got to look right. There's quite a lot of food eaten, cigarettes smoked, newspapers to be read. A lot of research has been done on these things, which is always interesting. For example, the characters are quite poor, so even though cork-tipped cigarettes were in, they wouldn't have smoked them because they'd have been too expensive.

With newspapers, we're getting the front and back page of a copy of the Daily Mirror from 1961 and we can get it copied. This is another reason why it's so helpful to go into rehearsals, because you have to put yourself in that place and imagine what the characters might read.

A lot of the actors are from Ireland and, thoughtfully, Jacob has said that he'd rather work evenings instead of working Saturdays so they can go home for the weekends. So at the moment I'm doing 9.30am until 6.30pm days, with a couple of nights finishing at 9 to make up for Saturday. So it's really quite good.

What I hope to do next

Next week we start rehearsing in the module, so that is another change, especially because a lot of the actors in this play have never worked here before. It's difficult for them to visualise where exactly they enter and how close the audience are, so it will all become more apparent.

I will be collecting props and making sure that everything that needs to come to us is well on its way. I've got lists drawn up for London already because we've got a whole new set to take with us. We're taking all the set furniture and the props except the sugar glass bottles for the Tricycle that are being dropped off in London. If they were all delivered here they might break when they get transferred down, because the set gets thrown on the van.

The sugar glass bottles are used in a fight sequence where one is smashed over someone's head. I'm slightly concerned that they might pick up the wrong bottle or they might break the sugar glass bottle too soon! Part of my job is making sure the actors go through these sequences enough times in rehearsal.

It's an on-going process as well; more props and food can still come out of rehearsals, so we're still having to locate things. You get used to there being something in a play that causes concern, like a prop you've been promised and someone lets you down, for example. It's important to ride it out. I'm feeling good about where we are though; I'm pleased we've gone through it all.

REHEARSAL WEEK 4 (22nd February 2006)

What we have done so far

As of last Thursday, we started rehearsing in the module and I've been going into rehearsals more to get a feel of where the actors come on and where everything is. We realised that stacked suitcases with a radio on top wasn't going to work in terms of sightlines. Also, quite a few coats get hung up, so we're going to need a coat stand.

Certain things have been confirmed. We didn't know what food we were having until quite recently. We're having Spam sandwiches, sausage and beans, and jam sandwiches with fruit... but not altogether at the same time. We know that the beer bottles are Guinness and they have been donated to us so we're waiting for those to arrive. The bottle hasn't really changed since the '60s but the labels have so we'll be replacing them.

We've had the first fight session, which gave the actors the bones of what they'll be doing. Fight sequences in the round are more difficult because you can't really disguise anything, so practice is vital. Paddy (playing Michael) might need to have a bit of padding, because he gets kicked to the floor. The other actor's not really hurting him but I'm worried about the repetitiveness of him falling to the floor. I will liaise with wardrobe about exactly what he needs. We try and pre-empt a lot of things like injury.

What we're doing now

New props are coming out all the time. We've got a cup that has to smash on the floor, so from that we realised that Betty will need a dustpan and brush to clean it up. I'm now an expert on kilns and how ceramics are fired in the oven! The cup is still in a plaster form, which is why it breaks easily and is soft enough to use safely on stage.

We need more bottles of beer, extra cigarettes and a cigar. That sort of thing comes from character development. Two of the actors who have to smoke on stage don't smoke in real life, so we've had to get ultra, ultra low tar cigarettes. Most of the actors have got their costumes already. A couple of characters get changed on stage, so for timings it's good to have these costumes in rehearsals.

We haven't run the play yet. The first run's tomorrow, so there's all the anticipation for that. I just want to get it right and know that I have done everything I can in preparation for technical

rehearsals and opening the show. I'm pretty sure that everything's there from the list, but until I see a run, I'm always a bit nervous. From that we can build on it and do the rest of the lists for the technical rehearsals. We don't want to be running round maniacally next week, teching and previewing *and* trying to get new stuff.

Today I'm doing a 12-hour day, with an hour for lunch, so the working hours have increased. We're rehearsing in the module so inevitably we're here earlier and later than everybody else to set up. I am feeling quite tired today. I think I'm having a midweek lull! Not too bad though, considering.

What I hope to do next

I really enjoy tech weeks. It's great putting it all together and getting the sound and lighting. Being in charge of the tech rehearsals, I have to make sure that everything is where it should be, that the actors have had their hair and costume calls and are all on standby. It's down to me to make sure the scene-changes happen, when we stop and start and where in the script we go from. It keeps you busy, definitely!

When we open here, we've got a week and then we start re-rehearsing for London during the days, except on matinees. We need to work out a schedule of working hours for re-rehearsing because the actors can't go over 43 hours a week. We'll have all the walls and doors and the fireplace set up in the rehearsal room in Swan Street for us, so it will be a case of re-blocking for the proscenium arch space at the Tricycle theatre. It'll be a bit tough at first but it'll be fine.

During performances I don't really get nervous, but my adrenaline goes. I do get nervous though on press night but mainly for actors and the production as a whole – everyone wants it to do well.