

ALL THE ORDINARY ANGELS – Rehearsal Diary with Writer Nick Leather

WEEK ONE

The first week of rehearsals has been very surreal! As a writer you spend ages (I have spent 18 months) creating all these characters, and then on the first day of rehearsals at the 'meet and greet' session they literally walk into the room! I think the show has been really well cast - as soon as I saw them I thought 'that is a proper family' – the mother looked like the mother, the brothers looked like brothers – it was a very strange feeling.

Most of the first day was spent doing a complete read through of the play, which went well. On the second day we spent time talking about the world of the play and the time period when it's set, and then we got it up on its feet. That was the point when it really came alive for me, as it's never been on its feet before now – it's left me feeling fairly confident!

I love the design for the production. It feels like Es (the Designer) has really understood the play and the ideas behind it. Some designers often have ideas before they even start work on the play and can be quite literal in their interpretation of the text. Es' design is quite abstract, but it really feels like she has got into the play and designed the world of the play.

As a writer I have found it quite hard to find my role within the rehearsal process. It's hard – you wonder whether if you don't say anything they'll wonder why you're there, but then if you say too much will they wish you'd shut up and let them get on with it! It's been a big learning week for me as I've not done anything like this before, and trying and find an in-between can be difficult. I've sat in on quite a few rehearsals for other productions, but when you're the writer you have a different level of emotional investment in the play as opposed to when you're just an observer and it can be harder to be objective.

This first week has been very hands on, and I've been in rehearsals almost all the time. I've tried to be around to answer any questions the actors and the director have, and to give my opinion when there are queries. However, it can be hard as a writer to get back into your own play. I wrote this play a while ago now, and although I know everything about the characters and I can remember all the dramatic drives which I used, there are some lines which I just don't even remember writing! Once they get into it, the actors and the director will probably know the play line by line better than I do, and in a way it is probably better to leave them to it so they can do their jobs properly. By the time a play is written down and typed up I don't feel that the writer owns the play anymore than anyone else involved in the production – their job has been done, and you then need to leave it to the actors to go and find the characters for themselves and work out how to get from A to B.

I think the first week is a tiring one for everyone, you come such a long way with the piece and with each other as a group – I have had very few weeks which have had such ups and downs as this last week has! I've been around a lot but I think that as the process continues I'll be there less and less, although I'll still be on hand to answer any questions.

WEEK TWO

Week two has been spent putting the piece on its' feet, with the actors and the director starting to look at things in much more detail. The way that the play is written means there are quite a lot of things to do as well as to say, and so it makes sense to get the piece on its' feet reasonably early as some of the lines the actors say don't really make sense unless coupled

with what they are supposed to be doing at the same time. I have been less involved in rehearsals this week, and have stepped back a bit so that the company can find their own way through the piece. By the end of this week the company have gone through the entire play, worked on individual scenes and now know where they are, with the intention of doing the first run at some point in the third week.

The highlight of the week for me was a (long!) walk around Manchester on Monday with the whole company. We visited a number of places where scenes from ALL THE ORDINARY ANGELS are set, and spent time talking about the feel of the place and imagining what it would have looked like in the early 90s. We went to Ancoats and saw houses which are very similar to the house where Rocco and Lino would have grown up. Then we walked to Tib Lock and round the back of the Hacienda, and then onto the roman remains in Castlefield, which is where another scene is set. The whole day was a real experience for the whole company, but particularly for the actors as it gave them a chance to walk off the stage and into the real world of the play. An exercise like this helps to remind you that although it's a made-up story it's set in a real world. For the actors to be able to stand exactly where their characters are supposed to be and get 'into the scene' gives you a real sense of the tone of everything

A walk like this is interesting, as a stage production is not actually about re-creating the exact settings of the play, it's about capturing the abstract – the sounds, the light, the feel of the place, and how the characters are compelled to behave in that place. You could do ALL THE ORDINARY ANGELS as a screen play - film it in the exact locations where each scene is set, and cover all the same storylines, but the end result would be very different. As a writer, you write in a very different way depending on the medium of performance (radio / stage / screen etc.). When writing for the stage you are writing for three dimensions, and the audience should feel like they are actually there (e.g. when there is a scene in a church, the audience should actually feel like they're in a church, they are not sat in a theatre). Writing for the screen is very different - when you go to the cinema, you are very much sat in the cinema watching a film.