

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA - Rehearsal Diary with Everal Walsh

Everal A. Walsh has previously appeared at the Royal Exchange Theatre in BASIL & BEATTIE (The Studio). Everal trained in Leeds and on a scholarship at the Academy Drama School in London. In the past six years, he has worked with the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Contact Theatre, Theatre de Complicite, and has recently completed a national tour of his one-man show LIVING PRETTY. His Television credits include EMMERDALE, CORONATION STREET, PRIME SUSPECT and MAX AND PADDY'S ROAD TO NOWHERE.

WEEK ONE (17 – 21 January 2005)

What I did

At the beginning of the week we met with the rest of the cast and the company for the first time. We read through the whole play together and discussed the text, looking at the politics and social climate of the time, and the characters themselves. We then split the play down into smaller sections, working with specific actors for particular scenes. We read the scenes again and discussed what we read, comparing our different understandings of the text. As Shakespeare's language is old-fashioned we had to make sure that we agreed on what was being said, and how this affected the story as a whole and also each individual character. We then read through the individual scenes for a second time, trying to take some of these discussions on board and give a bit more life to the text. Towards the end of the week we then moved onto the floor and did some basic blocking, moving from scene to scene and building our understanding slightly so that we now have a loose framework of how the play should look physically, as well as just the words themselves.

How I have developed my character(s)

I feel as though I have gained so much more from this first week of rehearsals than I had from just reading the script itself. I'm not an academic who sits and studies – instead I gather information and tools from communicating with the people who I'm working with and around. By looking at the layering of the play and discussing the history and language of the play, the text has become more alive to me. I've managed to find the passion rather than just the words, and have discovered that the words are coming *from* the passion. From these discussions my understanding of the text and my characters has grown considerably since I received the script a few months ago, even at this early point in rehearsals.

What I hope to do next week

I hope to have all of my words locked down and in my head by the end of the second week of rehearsals. I want to be able to almost 'let them go' so they become automatic and natural. This will let me get to the emotion and find more truth in the characters that I'm playing, so that I can make it as real as possible to someone who's looking in and watching. As a performer, I am driven by emotions and by the conflicts of emotions, and it's all about trying to find all these nuances - which is much easier once you've learnt the words and movements your character has to make.

WEEK TWO (24 – 28 January 2005)

What I did

In week one of rehearsals we had primarily just been reading and looking at the basic text. However, in week two the process has moved on quite significantly and we have been able to work in much more depth. We have been concentrating on working the scenes closer and closer together – so that instead of stopping regularly, we would roll a scene and then continue on into the next scene in order to form a whole picture.

We have also focused on the physical element of the production this week. There are two major battle scenes which my characters are in (although one is not actually a battle scene, we are just rowing a boat to battle), and we have spent a lot of time on the physicality of these scenes. The actors actually 'make' the boat on stage, and then we have to create the effect that we're out at sea and we are trying to reach a certain point as fast as we can. I have found this work quite painful, as I am not a very physical actor - I actually expect to be quite fit by the end of this run!

We have also spent time in the Module this week, which has been great as working on the stage at such an early point in rehearsals is often not possible. This has meant that my physical work has been made a lot easier, as I have been able to judge the distances which my characters have to move, and visualise performing on the stage.

How I developed my character(s)

Eros: We haven't looked that deeply at Eros yet, as he's primarily active in the latter part of the play.

Soothsayer: This second week of rehearsals has developed my thoughts and ideas on the Soothsayer. I believe that he is a very powerful person, although this is not so much a physical power but a spiritual power, which gives him the ability to see into the future and foretell what's going to happen. I have found parts of the character quite difficult from an acting perspective - you are always told in acting that 'less is more', and this is even more so in the case of the Soothsayer's calmness where you almost have to stop acting and 'let it flow'.

What I hope to do next week

I hope to be totally off the book by the end of week three. I also hope to have spent more time developing the character of Eros. I want to have a deeper understanding of his relationship with and love towards Antony – although I feel I'm gradually beginning to understand this, I want to discover why he goes to such lengths to stay by Antony's side. Why does Eros have such devout love for Antony that he actually takes his own life rather than kill Antony when Antony asks him to?

WEEK THREE / FOUR (31 January – 11 February 2005)

What I did

Weeks three and four of rehearsals have been very much a consolidation period, designed to give the company a fuller picture of the production. As we knew before each rehearsal which section we were going to be covering, I was able to work on that section the night before (trying to get the lines more firmly planted in my mind), so that I was off the book in rehearsals. In each rehearsal, we would take a section and work on it to tighten it up, and then run it and add on the next section. Then we would stop, work on the section that we had just run into, and then run it again and into the next section, and so on. Finally, we would come right back to the beginning and run the whole lot together. This rehearsal process has been particularly useful in identifying the timings between each section – for example, my character might be off on one page and then back on again in the next scene, but until you run sections together you don't get a full feeling for exactly where you're supposed to be.

We have also spent a lot of time over the past couple of weeks on the fight scenes. The fighting in ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA is vicious – it's all about severing people's bodies otherwise they'll do it to you. Although we are not actually physically fighting anyone on stage, the closeness of the physical combat has a significant impact, and I have actually begun to understand at some level why soldiers form such close-knit groups. I wouldn't like to go into a proper combat situation, but simply from playing these types of atrocities I can see where a certain exhilaration comes from – the fear, which turns into this animal instinct.

How I developed my character(s)

Eros: By week three we had moved on from the first part of the play, so by this point the Soothsayer has disappeared and Eros has appeared. At times I have been confused about how strong Eros is as a person, but having spent time working on his character over the past two weeks I now think he is a very strong person. This is particularly clear in his belief in Antony, who he views as an almost god-like entity, and for whom he is prepared to give his life. In playing the Soothsayer and Eros, I have to shake off Eros the person and not be afraid to let the characters breathe for themselves. The words and the psychological emotions and moves are basically there now, but for myself personally I now need to almost let these things go, and find my characters' own history. In a large production like ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA, the main characters have such a huge journey that I am basically there to help colour their situation. The audience are not necessarily concerned about my personal story – they just want to know why I appear at particular points in the action. But for me, as an actor, I need to understand my back story. I think that I will get to a certain level before we open, but I am not sure that I will properly know my characters until we have run the show a number of times.

What I hope to do next week

During the next two weeks, before the show opens, I want to become fully comfortable with running the whole play. I don't necessarily think that I will find everything, but I want to get to the point where I no longer have to think about anything – it should no longer be about walking out onto the stage, but more about walking out into that time and that moment.