

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: Rehearsal Diary with Fran O'Donnell

Fran is Assistant Stage Manager (ASM) for the Royal Exchange Theatre's production of GREAT EXPECTATIONS. After studying English and Drama at Aberystwyth University, Fran worked as a production manager for two years. Fran has previously worked as an ASM at Clwyd Theatr Cymru, Harrogate Theatre and at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

Week One: 26 – 30 January

I spent two days last week getting the rehearsal room at the Theatre ready for the first day of rehearsal. I spent this time finding props and getting hold of items of rehearsal furniture. Along with the other members in the stage management team (Stage Manager and Deputy Stage Manager*) I helped to mark out the rehearsal floor with tape. This is a very important pre-rehearsal job, by using tape to mark out where items of furniture and the set will go on the rehearsal room floor, it helps the director and the actors to work out and practice their moves before moving into the Theatre during the final weeks of rehearsal.

On Monday one of my jobs was to check that all the actors had turned up for the first day of rehearsal! At our first meeting we all introduced ourselves, which can be quite a daunting prospect and the Director, Jacob Murray introduced the set model to everyone working on the show. The Designer, Johanna Bryant, has designed the set and costumes for the production has made a model of the set which is 1/25th the size of what the set and furniture will actually be in the theatre. Jacob used the set model to tell us his ideas for staging the play and what he is hoping to achieve in the production. After welcoming the actors the stage management team gave them a pack containing some information about the Theatre and checked all their details, including the addresses of where they are staying and contact telephone numbers. (*Some actors do not live in Manchester and when they are rehearsing at the Royal Exchange Theatre stay in temporary accommodation known as 'digs'*).

Whilst the actors have been rehearsing, I've spent the rest of this week *propping*, which means making and finding the props that will be used in the show. This week the props I'm trying to find range from pork pies to an anvil that will be used in Joe's forge! I'm very lucky at the Royal Exchange Theatre because there are people to help me with this including Kim who buys the props and Alan who runs the workshop where the set, props and all items of furniture are made. I've been talking to a lot of bakers and butchers this week trying to get them to donate food and have spoken to one blacksmith who will be donating an anvil for the production.

In addition to finding props I was called into rehearsals this week to teach the actors a card name called *Beggar My Neighbour* which they will be playing in the show.

- *The Stage Manager is in charge of the stage management team and looks after all the logistics for the production, The Deputy Stage Manager, sometimes described as being 'On The Book' is the directors eyes in the rehearsal and writes down all the actors moves in the prompt copy of the script.*

Week Two: 2 – 6 February 2004

I began the week by being taught how to make stew for the show! I experimented making different types of stew using a range of ingredients and vegetables. It's important to find the right way of making the stew so that it doesn't take up too much of my time and is also going to be something that the actors will eat!

Along with the show's Designer I collected the anvil. The blacksmith has also lent us a lot of other tools, which will be used in the production. A major supermarket chain confirmed this week that they will be donating food and coffee for the production and a kind gentlemen from the *English Playing Card Society* sent me pictures of original Nineteenth Century playing cards, which I will use to make a set of cards for the production.

I've spent a lot of time this week making the paper props that will be used in the show such as copies of letters, bills and receipts. In the play both Pip and Herbert Pocket search for copies of bills and invoices and in the scene in which they do this; they will be using the paper props that I have made. There are also a lot of paper props required for Jagger's office such as legal documents and post and I've also started to make these this week.

A lot of my time this week has been taken up marking out the rehearsal vinyl floor covering which will be placed over the floor in the theatre which is being used for the current show (*The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*). The actors and director will use the vinyl floor to rehearse on during the daytime. It will be removed in the afternoon when rehearsals have finished to make way for the evening performance of *Little Voice*.

On Thursday I attended a production meeting, where representatives from all the stage and production departments such as lighting, sound, wardrobe and workshop met to discuss all the technical requirements for the show.

Next week I'm hoping to be able to spend a lot of time in rehearsals so I can really get to know the show. When the show is on I will be busy during the performances making sure that all the props are set in the right place for the actors to pick up before they go on stage.

I found out this week that I will also be appearing on stage in costume during the performance to take part in scene changes. The scene changes in *Great Expectations* are very important, they help the story move from place to place.

Weeks Three, Four and Five: 9 February – 1 March

I spent the last two weeks of rehearsals making sure that all the people who had promised to lend us props for the production were still able to do so. This meant that I had to chase up suppliers and all the people who are kindly donating props for the run of the show. On a few occasions I also had to go to a fruit market at 8 o'clock in the morning to collect the fruit and vegetables that will be used in the production.

At the end of the rehearsal period I watched several run throughs of the play. It was important for me to do this to understand how the play will work in the Theatre space. By watching the play I could tell if there were likely to be any problems with the props and if any of them needed changing or adapting. Watching the play all the way through also gave me an opportunity to work out the best way of setting the props out for the actors. The Royal Exchange Theatre is very unique, as all the props are set in storage cupboards in the public hall area. The cupboards are near the eight doors, which are used by both the audience and the actors to enter the Theatre. The props have to be set in the cupboards and then locked away after each performance to prevent them from being stolen.

After the last performance of *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, the set for the show was cleared and the new one for *Great Expectations* put up in its place. I spent all day on Sunday making sure that all the props were in the right place for the beginning of the technical rehearsal. On Monday morning we started teching the show, we worked through all the lighting and sound cues and rehearsed the scene changes. I'm quite heavily involved in the scene changes moving, furniture and props. The technical rehearsal lasted for two full days. On the Wednesday afternoon we dress rehearsed the play before performing it in the evening for the first time to the public. We then spent the next few days rehearsing parts of the play during the daytime and then performing it in the evenings.

We officially opened the play on Press Night, when the play was performed in front of people from local and national newspapers. Everybody was a bit nervous backstage but it was a great performance and I really enjoyed myself.