

Charlie Peace: His Amazing Life And Astounding Legend.

Monday 2nd September 2013 – Day One of rehearsals

“Do not avert your gaze!” The Showman from *Charlie Peace* by Michael Eaton

Today, after all the meetings and preparation, from various parts of the country the director, writer, musical composer, movement director, cast and members of the creative, technical and marketing team from Nottingham Playhouse (and me) all converged upon The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry. We are all gathered for the first day of rehearsal for *Charlie Peace* and the traditional meet and greet. And like buses, you wait for one production to come along, and then two come at once. As *Charlie Peace* begins rehearsals our co-producer and host for our first week of rehearsals, the Belgrade, also begin rehearsals for their own in-house production of *One Night in November*.

Both companies gathered on the upper level of the Belgrade as Hamish Glen, the Artistic Director, welcomes us to his theatre. After introducing his team and company of actors, it then falls to Giles Croft, Director of *Charlie Peace* and Artistic Director of Nottingham Playhouse, to reciprocate. Giles thanks our host and speaks of the importance of this two-year collaboration between the two venues to present new writing.

In 2014 the Belgrade will be the lead producer of a new play, *Propaganda Swing*, but this year Nottingham leads with *Charlie Peace*. The genesis of *Charlie* began two years ago with initial talks about finding a melodrama based on the crimes within ‘Shottingham,’ the name given to Nottingham due to its reputation for crime. Both Giles and Nottingham writer Michael Eaton explored various ideas and texts including Dion Boucicault’s *London by Night*. It was at this point Michael expressed his real interest in the Sensation Drama and the legend that is Charlie Peace. After investigation it was found of the many places that Charlie Peace visited, both as a resident and as a criminal, he had settled in Nottingham for a period of his life. Giles and Michael had evidently found the character at the heart of their show and a story to be told. With Giles’ explanation of this clear passion for the project that had brought us all together, we then introduced our roles and ourselves to our co-collaborators. Swiftly followed by mingling, grabbing a complimentary pastry and a cup of tea before the two companies then made their ways to their individual rehearsal spaces within the venue to begin their work.

First days are always a nerve-racking affair, even for the well-seasoned performer or creative artist. For many of the company they will have moved into their ‘digs’ that morning or arrived with suitcase in tow. (One member of our company had arrived in Coventry only to find he had been double booked by a guesthouse into the same room as a fellow cast member. It is at times like these that everyone comes together, ‘we’ll find you a bed, and you won’t be homeless.’ Luckily, another member of the cast knew of a spare room at his digs so all was well.)

Meeting as a company for the first time, these are the people we will be working with for the next three months, creating and learning, playing, laughing, hand in glove as we all explore Michael Eaton’s powerful play and learn Jonathan Girling’s compositions. I remember, on the first day of rehearsals of another production I worked upon, the Director came over to me early on and asked if I was having the, ‘where are you from?’

conversation yet. These initial introductions are a vital part of the rehearsal process. Before you immerse yourself in the play, through these conversations you begin to discover a common ground outside the world of the play. Very quickly you find your six degrees of separation, and though it is an alarmingly oversubscribed industry without enough jobs to go around, it is also alarmingly small. It is these small references that bond you together as a company before the play becomes your unifying reference point.

We will be spending our first week in the B2 Studio, which is where the show will be performed when it transfers here on 26th October after the run in Nottingham. Before we even reach the room there is talk of the play happening all around. Giles and Michael are once again in deep conversation; as the show opens with a Tableau Vivant (a living picture) are the characters within the play aware they are in a play within the play? Is it Charlie or the spirit of Charlie that we see? If we argue there was an intended play the troupe were to perform, who would have played Charlie from the travelling troupe? Michael responds that the scenes of the intended play would probably have been the same but Charlie Peace’s spirit is articulating the themes and context of the story Charlie feels needs to be told. The Showman, played by Norman Pace, has lost control over the story and how that story is being told. There is a real sense of the battle for control between Norman Pace’s Showman and Charlie Peace played by Peter Duncan. Michael Eaton explains how previous texts telling the story of Charlie have been one-dimensional and even early films provide only a frisson of Charlie on one note. His intention is that his play is the latest perpetuation of this long-standing myth. As I have worked upon the piece with Giles and his team over the proceeding months I feel Michael has written a play about ‘the man,’ bringing together the legend, the myth and a window to the man behind it. The character of Charlie Peace has fascinated Michael since he was a child when his grandma use to sing the following verse (of unknown provenance):

*He used to be Napoleon
In the waxworks show
All the people they admired him so
But now he’s had bad luck,
They’ve melted down his grease
They’ve put him in
The Chamber of Horrors
And called him Charlie Peace.*

Michael has researched extensively to find the origins but to no avail. Have you every heard it and did your parents or grandparents recite it to you? Do get in touch if you have any information.

Back in B2, we all gather around a large table. As Giles explains the shape and structure of the week, cast members are taken aside one by one to have their costume measurements taken. “There is a lot within this play,’ Giles explains, ‘many elements, things to try out, explore and that is what this week is all about.” He draws our attention to a pile of reference books upon the table including, ‘Victorian Sensation,’ ‘How to be a Victorian,’ and ‘Crime and Criminals of Victorian England.’ Michael is a walking reference library on the subject and over the course of the following weeks he will bring in his mountain of research material to support our work.

Giles then hands over to Jasper Gilbert, Nottingham Playhouses Production Manager who, in the absence of the designer Barney George who could not be present today, shows us the model box of the set. This is a detailed scaled down representation of the set upon the stage of the venue, in this case where we first open, Nottingham Playhouse. Jasper explains that another of the aspects of this co-production that was of key interest and excitement was the diversity of the two playing spaces, the Belgrade’s B2 Studio and Nottingham Playhouse’s main proscenium stage. Not only is the play a play within a play but also the show’s design is a fully functioning hemp house theatre, within a fully functioning theatre. The design has multi levels with ladders leading to an upper level at 3 ½ meters; the ability to fly scenery with a full counter weight flying system and will also have front and back projection. This means that images can be multi layered to create exciting pictures and actors will be able to be within a scene without being projected upon. Charlie Peace is a physical piece of theatre, and the set has been designed to be climbed up and over, through and around.

Next up is our composer and musical director Jonathan Girling who speaks about the music he has written to accompany Michael’s play. He talks of his approach, how his music supports and works within the play and how the actor musicians and their instruments will be integrated into the piece. Jonathan has written the most wonderful, haunting and evocative melodies, and it is this mix of traditional songs and new arrangements played by our ensemble that adds another exciting level to the piece. Over the weeks I’ll sneak a recording for you to listen too!

Then we reach the moment of the first read-through. It is another nervous moment, not least of all for our writer. I asked Michael how he is feeling and if he is nervous. ‘I’ve heard it many times with the voices within my own head,’ he says, ‘but this will be the first time I’ve heard it spoken out loud by the company of actors.’ As the next two hours unfold it is clear that Michael has nothing to fear. The characters fly off the page as the story of Charlie takes flight. The text is rich and the cast embraces it fully. Before we know it, we have reached the moment Giles reads out, ‘...and curtain. The end.’ The room spontaneously applauds. The marketing teams from each venue say their farewells as our Deputy Stage Manager Kathryn Wilson (Kat) and Jane Eliot-Webb, the Playhouse’s Company Manager clear the tables to begin putting the mark-up down. The stage management team marks out a representation of the set on the floor with different coloured tapes to show where walls, doors, windows etc are. This then acts as a guide for the actors to rehearse upon. As this happens Jonathan moves to one side of the stage and begins to take the actors through some of the songs whilst Giles, Michael, Dan O’Neill (our movement Director) and I move to the opposite side to view a copy of the 1905 film, ‘The life of Charles Peace.’ The room is full with music, activity and an audible creative buzz.

More questions follow, ‘to what degree do we make the production naturalistic or stylised?’ Giles and Dan discuss ideas for the physicality of the play. Dan expressed the importance of exploring the earthiness of the characters.

Lots to think about, questions to explore and answers to be found. And this is just day one. It is 6pm and Kat calls the end of the first day. As the actors disperse, Kat, Jane and her team complete the mark-up. Someone then notices that row A of the seats will

impede into the stage area. ‘We’ll need to speak to someone about that.’ Giles sets off to speak to the box office as we all head for our digs to eat, think through the day and sleep. We start work at 9.30am tomorrow. Watch this space and I’ll let you know what we discover!

Neil.

Neil Bull
Assistant Director: Charlie Peace
Nottingham Playhouse
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