

Charlie Peace: His Amazing Life And Astounding Legend.

Friday 6th September 2013 – Notes from days two to five of rehearsals

*“In Nottingham Town, not a soul would look up
Not a soul would look up, not a soul would look down
Not a soul would look up, not a soul would look down
To show you the way to fair Nottingham Town”*

We’ve now finished the first week of rehearsals at the Belgrade Theatre, our co-production venue, and will decamp this weekend to the Playhouse Theatre in fair Nottingham Town. The actors will move into new digs for the next seven weeks whilst we continue rehearsals, open the show and the production has its initial run from the 4th October.

I was given pause for thought at the end of rehearsals today when Charles De Bromhead, who plays many roles and the violin, commented that we still have so much to do. Yes, indeed he was right, but I thought back upon how much we had already achieved in the week that had passed.

Post my last blog, the next day we gathered around a large table in the rehearsal space and began to work through the text from the top. Giles told me this would take two days, as we would read each scene, including all Michael’s stage directions, and get a real sense of the scenes and characters within them. Out of this would come many questions, not only about the characters but also regarding terminology, history of the period that the play is set in, (Victorian England) and the logistics of the set. What’s a ‘*Billy Bludger*,’ a ‘*recidivist*,’ or ‘*a down right gonif!*’ ‘*If these characters are on stage and Alex, Mia, Philip and Charles will be playing music, who is free to fly the scene cloth in?*’ We would refer back to Barney’s drawings and Michael Eaton would bat back and forth emails explaining regional colloquialisms and the provenance. It also became very clear how useful our DSM Kat’s iPad would prove. Giles was very technologically adept at scouring the World Wide Web and the extensive photo albums of Kat’s cats on her iPad were quite safe.

Peter Duncan, who plays Charlie Peace, is no stranger to physically demanding performances and was already eager to find ways to scale the set. Working through the scenes, we re-examined the model box set, pictures and the mark-up on the floor. Straight away he was looking at the physical aspects of the character. Charlie was a portico thief (portico from the Italian, is a porch leading to the entrance of a building) who would climb up ropes and ladders, over and through windows. Peter proved he could deliver a physically demanding performance, as he was in a successful tour of the musical *Barnum* in which he performed many a circus feat including tight rope walking. I remember seeing Peter play Henry Machin in the Tony Hatch & Jackie Trent musical *The Card* at the Watermill Theatre, Newbury and The Open Air Theatre, Regents Park for which he received an Olivier Nomination. He gave it enough passion and energy to power a small city and was wonderful. I could already see he intended to give his performance of Charlie Peace that same level of energy and commitment.

Giles also talked extensively about Nottingham’s Goose Fair, where Michael’s play is set. Goose Fair was originally set up in the market square in the centre of town before it

moved to its current location in the Forest Park north of the city. It was a trading fair that also had rides, travelling theatre and freak shows. The travelling theatre troupes, which are portrayed within our play, led a hard life. Walter Hagger who used to run such a troupe back in the 1800s, had grown up in his father's theatre troupe. Indeed Walter's son William would go on to make a remarkable film in 1905 about the exploits of Charlie Peace. Like his father's portable theatre troupe, William kept things very much in the literal and metaphorical family. Within the film about Peace eight out of the nine cast members were from the Hagger family with additional parts played by members of William Hagger's company.

Our company watched both this film and *The Case of Charlie Peace* directed by Norman Lee in 1947. Both films dealing with the same source material of Charlie Peace's life approached it from very different perspectives. Norman Lee's 1947 film was almost a post war social moralistic propaganda film, whereas William Hagger's 1905 picture was raw and direct story telling; seeing both was very useful and interesting in every respect.

The travelling theatre troupes of the period would visit towns for three or four months at a time performing fresh plays every night. Within their repertoire they would have had over 100 plays, many of which were morality plays but also included Shakespeare's plays. Many of the actors would have stock roles they would play and they were lucky if they had three rehearsals before a public performance. Within our 'play within a play' one of the aspects that Giles points out that we will explore, is where our stories, that of the troupes version of events and that of Charlie's version, coincide and separate. The life of a travelling troupe was not a glamorous life. It consisted of early mornings, late nights, and a great deal of travelling and hard work. The troupe would not only be performing the plays but also have to pull down the shutter boards, planks and canvas of the portable theatre and set up again in the next town. Upon arrival they would also have to search for digs and a bed for the night as there was no opportunity or facilities to book in advance.

The 'freak shows' which were also part of the fairs would claim to have the 'smallest', the 'tallest', the 'largest' or the 'oldest' living person that the world has ever seen. It was fantastical. For instance, in the later 1800s there was Mlle Electra, "The Only Electric Lady — A Lady Born Full of Electricity" who gave audience members an electrical shock via her handshake. Turns out she was actually plugged into a supply of electricity. Famously David Merrick, otherwise known as the Elephant Man, was a key figure upon the 'freak show' circuit in the late 1800s.

A key element for the theatre and freak shows was the 'front man' who would work up a crowd and entice the public to part with their cash for a glimpse of wonderment; The Showman. And in charge of our theatre troupe we have our very own master of ceremonies, Norman Pace who presents,

'For your education, edification but always for your entertainment, a scene of gruesome grotesquerie, yet of illuminating instruction!' – The Showman from Charlie Peace by Michael Eaton.

The Showman was an essential part of the relationship between the theatre and freak show and the audiences. This is also the case within our play where the relationship

between Charlie, the Showman and the audience will be key as we explore over the coming weeks.

During these rehearsal days we discovered a great deal about the play, Nottingham and the Victorian era. A trip has been organised for the company to visit the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham during the week, and en route we will look around the region of Narrow Marsh. Broad Marsh and Narrow Marsh developed on the south side of Nottingham in a low-lying area by the River Leen. The area expanded into one of the most highly populated parts of the city by the nineteenth century, notorious for its network of overcrowded yards and alleys and this was where Charlie lived during his time in Nottingham. It was considered a filthy, overcrowded and poverty stricken breeding ground for disease and crime.

When you are working on a play, if a location is mentioned, you should always try to visit it. It gives you a real sense of following in the character’s footsteps. You can take pictures, and gain a sense of the environment that they would have experienced. This will help you create pictures within your mind when you work upon those scenes.

As the week progressed it marked the return of Jonathan Girling, our composer and Musical Director and Choreographer, Dan O’Neill. Jonathan continued to work with the actors in groups and individually. He starts by taking the actors through a vocal warm up. Like using any muscle, you must never burst into song without gently warming up your vocal chords or you could do permanent damage. I’d always been taught when breathing in, to first draw your breath through the nose but Jonathan contested this. First asking the actors to yawn and inhale breathe, he points out that this opens up the throat and the vocal passage. By breathing in first through the nose, you are liable to draw mucus down into the throat, therefore congesting it. A well taught rule as been quickly reversed. He then draws attention to the actors breathing and use of the diaphragm. We tend to think of the diaphragm working at the front, but Jonathan points out that it is equally important to work the muscles in the lower back as well. Breathing and its use is a vital part of the actor’s tool kit and everything Jonathan imparts, even for the experienced actor within the company, is good sound useful advice.

On the Thursday morning, the penultimate day of our first week, Dan O’Neill began to work with the actors. Similarly to the needs to warm up vocally before singing, it is also vital to physically warm up before doing movement. Firstly Dan took the actors through a series of exercises to connect their mind, breathing and body. His aim was to get a sense of ‘whose in the room,’ begin to build an awareness of each other and to think about the movement and physicality of the characters; how they move and their inner metabolic rhythm. Dan remarked that ‘so much of learning is done through our eyes.’ With this in mind, Dan did a wonderful exercise where he asked the actors to walk around the room. He then pulled half the group aside and asked each to watch a specific ‘walker.’ Unbeknownst to the ‘walker’, they were to note the characteristics and then imitate them. The purpose of the exercise was to make you observe and inhabit another body, which in turn makes you think about your own. The walk is a good hook into finding your character. We then discussed what we noticed and swapped around for the other half of the group. After this, Dan paired the company up and asked each couple to come up with two dance moves each for a routine. They then all taught each other their moves and created a dance routine. Dan pointed out that if he had taught the group the

whole routine himself, it would have taken a length of time, however, if the group creates it they will not only pick it up quicker but more importantly they have created something together as a company.

On the final day of week one Giles began to start ‘blocking.’ ‘Blocking’ is where you stand the play up on its feet, working out the moves where characters enter, exit and interact with each other. Giles was keen to emphasize that no ‘blocking’ was set in stone and would be subject to change, but he felt it was important for us all at the end of week one as we go into the weekend, to feel that the foundations of the play have begun to be laid. Because of the extensive discussions throughout the week, it was already interesting to see that the play and performances had already begun to take on a clear structure with the actors inhabiting the roles.

It had been a great first week. I had been asked to do some research over the weekend looking at Victorian Prisons. I had a lot to think about as I headed home to do my washing and spend a few nights in my own bed before repacking and heading back up to Nottingham.

Neil.

Neil Bull
Assistant Director: Charlie Peace
Nottingham Playhouse
6th September 2013