

Charlie Peace: His Amazing Life And Astounding Legend.

Monday 9th & Tuesday 10th September 2013 – Notes from days six and seven of rehearsals

‘Gloomee Moo-d, Gloomee Moo-d!’

Monday:

Today the company arrived in ‘fair Nottingham Town.’ Kat, our Deputy Stage Manager, had arranged to meet us at the Stage Door of the theatre and from there she would take us to the rehearsal room; a stone’s throw away in College Street. Although we had already had a week’s rehearsal in Coventry, today we would meet the full Nottingham Playhouse contingent. We would also have access to the set, costume and props and marketing departments.

This morning we would do a read through for many of the Playhouse staff including Chief Executive, Stephanie Sirr and the playwright Michael Eaton. We all gathered in the rehearsal room with the addition of Erik Petersen from the Nottingham Post and his photographer. The Post will be running a regular feature on the production of *Charlie Peace* during the rehearsals and run, so keep a watchful eye out.

Giles gave a brief introduction, but as time was valuable he was keen to crack on with the reading so with a ‘*Ladies and Gentlemen, Charlie Peace,*’ we were off. As the actors took us through each scene the photographer maneuvered around the room capturing moments. We reached the end of Act One, had a brief respite for a sip of water or a cup of tea then on with Act Two. I was sitting next to Michael Eaton who, as the reading progressed made a few notes that he would share with the company at the end. It went well and you could sense the level of character development that had taken place since the first read through in Coventry exactly one week ago. On completion, the room was a hive of conversation and activity. Stephanie and Giles exchanged a confident glance as Michael spoke with a few of the cast. Press and PR Manager, Jo McLeish introduced various cast members to Erik who would be interviewing them at intervals over the coming weeks. In addition to Peter Duncan and Norman Pace we have a talented ensemble cast including local actors Nicholas Goode and Bridie Higson that will be familiar to Nottingham Playhouse audiences.

Post lunch, we then got to have our first glimpse of the set. Jasper and his team have been constructing it for the past four weeks. It sits at the rear of the stage in the main house. Having previously only seen the model box and the design pictures, for the first time the company could get a real sense of the size and scale of the set they would be working on. As always with the sets at Nottingham Playhouse the build quality is exceptional and we were all suitably impressed by the work that construction and paint shop have done. Peter Duncan was of course straight away asking Jasper to guide him around the set and the different levels. This is an incredibly vital time for the actors and creative team to see up close what they will be working with. It is an opportunity to look at the space where the scenes will be played, upstage, on the forestage or on the upper level. We can look at the doors for entrances and exits and where the pillars are. We can also begin to develop an awareness of sight lines in relation to the actor and the audience. All these aspects have a direct impact upon the staging of the production.

Tuesday:

You may remember, when we were at the Belgrade I mentioned, ‘you wait for one production, then two come along...’ Well, this week in Nottingham...it’s three! This morning we all gather on the upper level at the Playhouse, as not only were the *Charlie Peace* company rehearsing here, but Headlong are about to begin technical and dress rehearsals for their co-production of George Orwell’s *1984* and Nottingham Playhouse’s Young Company are in rehearsals for a production of Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*. The Young Company’s shows are always excellent and it’s very exciting to have Headlong at the venue. Having seen their production of Lucy Kirkwood’s (Brilliant!) *Chimerica* recently, I can’t wait to see *1984*.

I look around the room at the vast range of actors, directors, designers etc. to the next generation of younger creative, all having been brought together with a passion and energy for making exciting theatre. Taking a moment to soak it up, it really drives home to me what an incredible job both Giles and Stephanie do here in Nottingham. Nottingham Playhouse really is a theatre at the heart of its community, and I feel very proud to be a current part of it.

After all three companies have introduced themselves, had a cup of tea, we all catch up with friends and colleagues from previous shows and paths that have crossed, and then disperse to continue our work.

Back in the rehearsal room, Jonathan Girling spends the morning working with the company on the music. Starting with a vocal warm up he reiterates the importance of breath support and use of the diaphragm, opening up the throat, breathing through the mouth. He points out, as you sing higher you tend to think higher visually. However, to stop yourself going flat on the note, as the notes go higher, if you visualize going down this will keep you in pitch. We also have a new arrival in the room today; the harmonium. Mia Soteriou who plays Charlie’s wife Hannah, will be playing it during the show. A harmonium, or pump organ, is like a piano but pedals pump air through the instrument creating a very specific sound. These instruments were very popular during the 19th Century in small churches and private homes and Charlie Peace was known to have had one. This gives you some idea of the attention to detail throughout the production.

It is clear that over the weekend Jonathan has been burning the midnight oil working on the arrangements and fine-tuning the compositions. As I work closely with Jonathan on this production I have become very aware of his expertise and the challenges of the composer’s process. Similarly to the playwright, with new writing and musical compositions it would seem vital to have an element of flexibility during the rehearsal process. Initially the composer may have to adapt his music to suit the singing voices of the actors that are cast and then the arrangements to suit the instruments available to him. As rehearsals evolve, scenes may be lengthened or shortened, sections have to be extended or cut. An actor playing an instrument may be needed within a scene where they were previously available and this will immediately impact on the arrangement. It is not until you hear the voices and instruments together that you get a real sense of the sound of the show. Creating a diverse piece of theatre such as *Charlie Peace* Giles, Jonathan and our choreographer Dan have a balancing act on their hands; acting, singing, musicianship and physicality. If they get that balance wrong during this

rehearsal process you could be in danger of overwhelming the actors, unbalancing the production and not giving enough attention to specific elements and detail. And this is where it is essential to have a strong collaborative team with open lines of communication. I have seen that very clearly throughout this process. At the end of his session, Jonathan gathers his sheet music together, pleased with the company and how things are taking shape and we break for lunch.

The action of Michael’s play covers Sheffield, Nottingham and London and in it Charlie is not only a master of disguise, but is also well adept at accents. With an attention to detail Giles has called in Kathy Wheat, a dialect coach who will spend this afternoon, the first of two sessions, working with the actors.

On our return from lunch the cast began by looking at the Sheffield accent. Kathy talked about the placing of the voice (back of the throat and tight), the use of the tongue and the pitch. ‘Gloomee Moo-d, Gloomee Moo-d.’ They all repeat, ‘Gloomee Moo-d, Gloomee Moo-d.’ She spoke of the clear ‘L’ and the dark ‘L.’ In the Sheffield accent the clear ‘L’ is made at the front of the mouth, dark ‘L’ at the back of the mouth with the tongue raised. The ‘T’ sound, ‘country’ becomes ‘Cun-ree’, swap ‘there all’ for ‘dare all’, ‘Mother’ to ‘Moder.’ After an extensive workshop we move onto the Nottingham accent. Kathy points out that this accent is on a minor note, and slightly off the note in pitch. She gives us some examples and when it is pointed out, even to the Nottingham born and bred in the room, it is an interesting revelation. You suddenly hear it. ‘February’ shortens to ‘Feb-bre’, ‘library’ to ‘Lie-bre.’ Kathy continues to look at the form and shapes of the mouth and its impact on the accent and how to reproduce it. She asks the actors to select particular lines from the script and we all listen as they experiment and Kathy guides. With her trained ear even when all the cast are trying lines at the same time she still manages to pick out slight anomalies that need correcting. Next up is London and specifically south London. There is a debate of what a south London accent is and how it is commonly confused as cockney or what we call Ray Winston Cock-a-nee!

It is suddenly 6 o’clock and time to finish. We all need to get home, do our homework and be up early as we all have an appointment in court first thing in the morning!!

Neil.

Neil Bull
Assistant Director: Charlie Peace
Nottingham Playhouse
10th September 2013