

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will be discussing the work that I have done in the first module of performance studies.

The aim of this module was to develop technical skills in dance, drama and music and using the performance process of improvising, rehearsing and performing and then applying these skills to four performance pieces. We carried out several skills workshops to help develop confidence in all 3 thematic areas to a more even consistency as some members of our group had never done dance, music and some hadn't taken expressive arts GCSE.

In this module I developed skills in all three areas, some completely new skills (for example in dance) and those skills, which I already knew but developed them to a higher standard of performance. I also learnt the processes of constructing a performance piece in performance studies and skills that are applicable in all three thematic areas. I will elaborate on how I have developed these skills during this module in this essay.

THE DRAMA PIECE

The stimulus we were given for our drama piece was a painting by Paula Rego called "The Family" which contained a lot of ideas for interpretation, especially work on proxemics, which we had previously studied in our skills workshops. "The Family" shows an ambiguous relationship between men, women and children and the variation in the 'traditional' status of a father, mother and daughter figures. It is important to bear in mind during stages of improvisation that character and plot development are not always the most essential part of a drama piece. More advanced performance skills should be taken into account, such as tension, proxemics and physicality and the subtext created as a result of the effective use of these techniques, which our drama piece evolved around. We decided that the most direct way of communication was to produce a distinct sexual subtext between two characters, and in our case this was the father and the daughter.

Initial brainstorms we had were focused on light, physicality and gesture in the picture and we didn't want it to be 'story - led' as we felt this would be too simplistic and wouldn't allow us to explore our skills and techniques as performers. In the early stages of improvisation, we decided that tension was vital in our scene, so this had to be created by silences and gestures instead of dialogue, a skill we had refined further in our skills workshops. When we began improvisation, we initially found it slightly awkward to develop a sexual subtext, without performing as though we were two embarrassed girls. However, we overcame this by making sure we explored the situation and the characters and focused that particular scene of the drama piece towards the communication and body language of the father and the daughter, and therefore ensuring we got the right reaction of the audience towards this, which gave us confidence in our abilities to sustain the interest of the audience.

After we had completed the first scene, we found it hard to integrate the mother's feelings as her status or lack of in the previous scene, needed to be explained for the mother to be sympathised and associated with by the

audience. This was so the end scene would show a better character interaction of the trio and a feeling of ensemble. We felt it would also work well if there was a status shift between the characters in the end scene so we decided that by taking on the mask of the mother would reveal her feelings to the audience and not show her to be completely naïve and helpless in this situation.

During rehearsal, we found we were able to get our timing synchronised, which was just what our piece needed to give it pace and direction and to involve and interest the audience continuously. We made the gestures and physicality of the characters very prominent to make sure body language was acknowledged by the audience to show them all the undercurrents within the scene. We also decided that it was necessary to have a scene to show the daughters position within the family because although she seemed very mature and capable within the situation we wanted to show the naivety of this girl and the fact despite appearances she was not in control at all. This also justified the status change in the final scene between mother and daughter, and shows the motivation of all three characters for their actions through the scenes. The fact the scene wasn't ended, as a 'story-led' scene would be allows the audience to have freedom to come to their own conclusion.

This particular piece, I found, gave us the least trouble. It was an enjoyable piece to construct, during all stages of development of this piece, as we knew we were effectively using the techniques by the reaction of our audience. However, I did feel that perhaps we could've focused on a different part of the stimulus, as although I feel we communicated with the audience, I don't feel we used all the techniques to create a more rounded piece. By creating a sexual subtext as a focus, it slightly limited the techniques you can use as to achieve a high standard of performance, without in this instance making the aspects of storyline sordid and therefore directing away from the subtext and physicality between the three characters. I think despite this, we were very successful in our approach to this drama piece and it was most likely our best piece.

THE MUSIC PIECE

The stimulus we chose for our music piece was a musical structure as we decided we wanted to make sure we weren't limited to what we could do in this piece and so we could quite easily change or adapt our piece. We also decided initially on a chord sequence with this as we felt it would be easy to integrate other musical parts into this. We had done a lot of work in music on scales/chords and myself and another in my group had further knowledge of this as we both play the piano. However, during the stages of improvisation, we found it hard to begin a music piece that inspired us and the harmonic sequences we were devising weren't effective. We were trying to devise a composition using the basic principles of 20th century music practitioners, so styles evolving around simple ballads, featuring a repeated chord sequence, which polyphony (either voice or piano) can be easily integrated. We had various composition ideas, aiming to use a combination of polyphony or an ostinato melody and broken chords over the top of the chord sequence we

were given. Despite our structured and planned approach to this piece, we found this restricted our creativity somewhat and it didn't depict the feel we wanted and we found we weren't the only group. We experimented after choosing melody and harmony from one of the music starting points (a chord sequence) with percussion from another starting point entitled 'The Rite Of Spring'. This piece was slightly revolutionary as although it had the basic feature of an 8-bar rhythm, it defied the expected by placing the accent of the bar on different beats of the bar. However, the formation of our piece was somewhat lacking as there was only 3 people in our group. Another group were having the same problem as us. We decided it would be in both our interests if we joined groups and as a result we would enhance the texture and timbre of the overall piece. We combined the initial ideas from both our pieces and then adjusted it and developed these ideas further.

As we merged our groups quite late in the stages of the time assigned for the music piece, we didn't actually have much time to rehearse but we felt that would be to our advantage to give our piece a constantly evolving feel. However, we did make sure that our piece did have definite aspects of structure and certain variations to the rhythm to tell the group that we were moving into the next form within the structure. Our end musical structure was ABCBD, and within each section we varied the contrast of instruments and layered the rhythm, to involve the audience. In this piece, we communicated very well as a group, which was essential to the proper functioning of the piece. We divided the group into teams, pairing similar percussive instruments together so that as a group we sounded syncopated and not messy. This also allowed us to be more confident as a group and as individuals as in the group we merged with, there were people that had not done music for 2 years.

Once we had established our structure, it was essential that we rehearsed it enough to be able to capably and confidently perform our piece, which is very important to a rhythm piece as everyone becomes dependent on some aspect of the piece or person playing. It didn't take long to master the basic structure and we all were desperate to perform well because we realised that because playing percussion is such a physical thing, that when it's performed well, you get a huge 'buzz' out of playing.

When we performed our piece, we unfortunately had lost some of the initial energy we had accumulated playing in rehearsal. It may have been the different performance area as the dynamics in our rehearsal and performance area were very different but the timbre and texture that we originally had was lacking and the piece, to me seemed rather limp. I also found that there was a change of tempo from the outset and we lost energy from that also. The part building we specifically used to impact on the audience didn't seem as distinct, neither the canon nor unison we used. I also felt that our question and answer at the end didn't seem very effective and I think it may have been because of the small performance area as drums can be quite deafening in a small space, so the audience may have been more uncomfortable with the noise in such a restricted area. Despite this, we enjoyed playing our percussive instruments so much, and devising the piece collectively that myself and others are planning to form a percussive group with other students.

THE DANCE PIECE

The stimulus for our dance piece was a picture by Salvador Dali called "Sleep". It's a fairly abstract painting with a head shape held up by two prongs at the top and behind of it, and the face appears to be in some kind of conflict; we felt this was possibly insomnia or a nightmare/dream.

We decided during our initial brainstorm that the 'face' from the Dali picture should be our opening motif (a motif based on the Preston -Dunlop {1963} definition), which we decided should be repeated throughout the dance to allow the audience to recognise the various sections of the dance. Based on this, we decided next on that the music we would dance to would have to be fairly dynamic and abstract, with a clear beat which wasn't too fast to allow us to vary in our pace of movement throughout the dance. We liked the ideas associated around sleep such as strength and weakness, travel, contact and calm.

The improvisation stage in this particular piece was more simplistic I felt, as we would play the music, from our opening motif, and evolve from there. Therefore, we could remain in the style we wanted the dance to be performed continuously. As none of us in my dance group had ever done dance before, we were very systematic about the 3 main stages of performance studies development and were attentive when improvising to use the skills we had recently developed in the dance workshops that focused on action and dynamics. This allowed us to be more confident in our abilities so we could therefore produce a high quality dance piece.

We had watched a video in our dance workshops of a modern dance company performing a piece, who used repeating motifs with a clear variation in dynamics between the different sections which gave us a lot of insight into how we could develop our dance piece. The contact used in this particular dance piece was controlled in the first section and then more forceful in the second section. We felt that with only 3 of us in the group, we could easily make this effective. We wanted to manipulate each other's weight, using direction and gestures to allow our piece to flow and maintain the interest of the audience. With the audience in mind, we created a 'story'; within our dance varying the combination of who should be paired together with the person left on their own, usually the dominant one, with powerful gestures used over the other submissive reptilian gestures (i.e. along the floor altering the use of levels).

The line between improvisation and rehearsal was most blurred in dance as it was always in a stage of rehearsal and improvisation simultaneously as if we didn't like something we would experiment other ideas we had until we found something that integrated better with the theme of our dance. We aimed to convey to the audience, many of our ideas about dreams, through gestures in our dance, such as a dominant individual in aspects of the dance making strong, sudden movements, showing you have little control over independent thought when you are sleeping (we all do Psychology AS level which has already explored aspects of sleep). During rehearsals, we extended the dance slightly, changing the group sizes and relationships, making a focal point of different aspects of the dance. Although this may imply that our dance would end up under rehearsed, it allowed the group to be

continually evaluating our work, in all 4 pieces objectively and considering the feeling and overall mood we wanted to convey to the audience all time

I felt our performance was successful to a certain extent, because like our music piece, I felt performances during rehearsal were slightly better than our actual performance. I think it may have been that because we had never done dance before in our group, we found an audience intimidating and perhaps didn't communicate as well as we had done previously. However, I felt we did accomplish the most in this piece as we were less confident in dance and after the skills workshop and devising our dance, collectively they made us feel capable and confident in our abilities. I enjoyed performing this piece a lot because the controlled section at the beginning of the dance built up tension and suspense, and then the fluid change of dynamics, allowed us to exert a lot more power into our movements. The actions and gestures used were stronger. We actually managed to integrate characterisation into our piece so we could give each other roles, to show conflict in the dance to relate back to our initial ideas about the Dali painting. It then also allowed us to show a contrast in movements between the two group sizes and characters.

THE COMBINED PIECE

Our stimulus for the combined piece was another painting called 'The Temptation of St. Anthony'. It's an old style painting with a religious theme with 'evil' or abnormal thing occurring in this picture. Our group decided during initial brainstorms that a religious aspect would be a good way to approach this piece as then we could have a good base for music as because of choirs we belong to, we had knowledge of Gregorian and plain chants. We began to discuss how we could integrate all 3 art forms effectively and we decided that an abstract piece would be a good contrast to the other pieces we had previously performed. We began talking about religion and how we could develop this further and the mention of church sanctuaries abusing children came up. We thought this would be quite a good relation to the picture as first impressions, the picture seems pleasant but when you get closer, you realise the disturbance in it. We thought a church is supposed to be a haven from evil, but in certain instances it isn't so a statement summarising this would be an effective way to convey the sordidness of the situation without actually having to say what was happening. This was quite a Brechtian approach, as Brecht would use a recurring statement in his plays as an explanation of guideline to what was going to happen (e.g. Caucasian Chalk Circle – 'Terrible is the temptation to do good'). We thought this statement was appropriate for our piece, 'A place of purity and goodness where evil permeates'.

During improvisation, we all agreed that a tableau representing the purity of the church should be our opening scene. Then the statement would be said and we would move the tableau into an 'evil' pose. We then began our improvisation from there. This was very hard to develop I found as this required us to collectively use all our skills that we had learnt and combine them to create a successful piece. Therefore, we made it an aim that drama wouldn't dominate so we made this piece fairly movement based, to also convey the calmness and the idea of the untouchables amongst religion to the audience. We decided that by developing harsh and distinct facial expressions

and gestures, we could easily denote our characters or just portray a gestus that we each represented.

We were quite lucky that we didn't have to make forced links between the art forms because we weren't using a traditional structure of a performance studies piece as we weren't having a dialogue scene, so it made it easier to introduce dance and music at appropriate times. We thought that we could begin with a religious chant with a simplistic form, repeating Latin words in a 3-part harmony with intervals of 4ths and 5ths, aiming to create tension. This would accompany a movement to represent sanctuary and the sanctity of the church. We felt in this piece we had to be fairly pragmatic when improvising, as we didn't want to forget the basic principles we needed to include from each thematic area (not merely for the sake of it but because our collective skills in all 3 areas would create an effective combined piece.)

The combined piece was most definitely the hardest piece to devise in my opinion, as there was a lot to consider continuously. I felt that because of this, we slightly restricted our creativity and the motivation behind the majority of scenes was perhaps unclear. I think that our music in this piece was very successful. We devised a plain chant using modern methods, applying melody and harmony, in which we also varied the texture. By using a simple chord sequence and a drone on the piano, the audience knew that this was based in the church. I think that our dance was successful to an extent but I feel that if we had more time, I would've liked to develop it further. I did like the fact we performed our dance to a structured rhythm sequence to show the evolving of the evil dominating the pure and good. But as I said before, there seemed to be no real motivation behind our piece. I did feel that although we had no dialogue, it was unnecessary to do so and I think that the studying of Boal and Pinter really helped with this. I think that, as a group we realised that plot and character development weren't important at that stage. By not having any characters but just acting the gestus of our role, we portrayed the mannerisms, which as a result created tension because of the content of the scene. I do feel that because we didn't have characters such, the other skills we had refined were lacking. This is the one piece that I actually would like to do again as I don't feel we devised and performed this to the best of our abilities. I think I would've liked to keep the music and dance pieces but adjusted the drama to include the kind of energy we had had in the drama piece where the piece was 'loaded' with subtext. This I feel was not dramatic and didn't convey the ideas to the audience that we wanted to. I don't believe this piece was as successful as it could have been.