

Performance studies - The Language of Performing Arts .

When I initially decided to embark on the Performing Studies course I knew that it would involve studying the three different disciplines, Dance, Drama and Music. However I presumed that they would be taught separately. Although we began by learning about each area individually they were soon combined in order for us to create our own mini project. The aim of the mini project was to demonstrate our new found knowledge and ability in relation to Performance Studies.

In drama our theme revolved around 'The Fall of the House of Usher' by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). We also studied Stanislavski's system as he was our chosen practitioner for drama. Stanislavski invented "method acting" if an actor uses Stanislavski system they would tune into a past emotion experience to represent a naturalist effect on stage. We began by reading the story, we then brain stormed ideas, picked and allocated characters. My character was a normal young girl of about 17 who was staying in a house with her friends, but was scared of being alone. I chose to be this character because I thought I could relate to her and was able to express her emotions, as I was of a similar age and same gender. I attempted to remember particular emotions I had felt when first going away without my family. I then used these feels and emotions and incorporated them into our piece. We started an improvisation, rehearsed over it and then selected the bits that worked and rejected the pieces that didn't. We chose to perform our piece in silence, we didn't want to use dialogue but rather focus on our body language, our proxemics, our relationship to other characters on stage and expression. Relationship is a key word we also use in dance; it means how each character acts with the others on stage, is they work alone or together and how they do this e.g. unison. We believed that the silence would give our piece more individuality, create tension, and un-nerve the audience as this was a concept they would not be particularly familiar with. An example of an expression we used was shocked. This was shown through a startled expression characterised by wide eyes and an open mouth. We rehearsed over this but then we decided that performing our piece in complete silence didn't work as well as we had hoped, as it didn't get the eerie story line across to the audience. We decided to use some lines from our stimulus. The lines were taken directly from the text, an example we used was "come you shall sit and listen I will read." We liked this idea and decided to develop it further. We also used sound effects in our piece such as scraping and knocking; these effects were unsettling and helped to create tension. We came up with a tableau for our piece where we all got into a freeze to show our expressions in the piece. Tableau is used by Boal where he uses the human body as a tool of representing feelings, ideas, and relationships. Once we had a basic structure for our performance we started to work on characterisation and physicality, we thought about the gestures we would use and how this would help us build a realistic character. Gesture is another word we use in dance. This means a movement with no weight behind it. These gestures included contraction of the body and defence actions which indicated that my character was scared and trying to defend her self from danger. Expression was vital in our piece particularly sections when my character had to show she was afraid. My character was

scared because she didn't like being alone in the house with only two people of the same age and no one else to protect them.

Our performance was quite frightening; it came across like this because of the tension and atmosphere created. We intended to create unease throughout the piece and I felt this was achieved

In dance our theme was 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Our chosen practitioner for dance was Christopher Bruce and we began our first lesson by watching 'Swan Song,' which was one of his works. We looked at the five key words, motif - a movement that is repeated and developed throughout the dance, space - size of space, levels and directions, action - travelling, turns, jumps and body shapes, dynamics - weight, time and flow. Dynamics is a word we have used in music. However in music it means the volume of the music. How loud or quiet a piece of music is. Relationship - the relationship between the characters if they do it in unison or canon, group work or alone. Unison and Canon can also be used in music. It means whether we sing together or overlapping one after another. We then analysed Bruce's work in relation to these key terms, which were in direct reference to Laban's table of movement. In our group we had to make a short dance based on parts one and two of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. We first thought of some ideas then thought of the relationship there would be between us. We decided the mariner would be centre stage dominating the space and other characters, and that the sailors and albatross would be placed around him. We then observed that the relationship between the mariner and the sailors broke down during piece due to the mariner killing the albatross. Our piece began on the ship and as a group we began to move like waves in the sea. The albatross then arrived; we used extended arms to represent wings and elevation to convey flight. The albatross then gets killed and to end we carried the dead bird over to the mariner and placed it as a burden, ending in stillness. We wanted our performance to keep relating back to the poem, so we took each part and made movements for it. As mentioned above we began by representing the sea using movements that were dynamic and unpredictable. We also used flowing movements and turned on a low level from one side of the stage to the other. Two group members would move across upstage, while another two would travel across in an opposite direction downstage to show the changing in the waves. As the storm arrived our slow movements intensified. We used a stronger dynamic to show a build up in the waves. For the clearing of the storm we used our hands, which covered our eyes. I thought this gesture represented the fog through which the sailors could not see, however when albatross arrives the fog clears. We liked this movement and decided to use this as our Motif, developing and repeating it throughout the dance. Our dance ended with a lifting action to represent the dead albatross. All the sailors held the albatross in their arms and walked over in unison to the mariner who was still centre stage and placed the albatross on his back, this was a burden on the mariner. Within our dance we also used drama because we thought about characterisation and dramatised it. We took on roles and had to think about emotion, so we didn't all look dead and dull, we then had individual characters.

In music we learned and performed 'and all stations to' by John Paynter. He used a pulse, using words split

the beat into interesting rhythms which is contrapuntal. This then added an ostinato which added dynamics to the piece. The piece began as a canon creating a texture. We then looked at 'China Coffee Cup' by Peter Greenham our other practitioner. We read through 'China Coffee Cup' then in smaller groups we had to improvise our own piece of music, this then took us on to a piece by Mark Anthony Turnage, we listened to his opera about breakfast called 'Greek'. He used texture within his piece by layering his phrases and words. The way in which he used a melody was by changing his spoken words to singing them; this set a pitch which then created a harmony, where all the different pitches were being sung at the same time. We based our theme on all of the above techniques. We started thinking about these pieces and the words we could use to make our own mini project which was the scene of morning breakfast. We all started with the phrase 'Good Morning' in canon as we sat down one after another around a breakfast table. We thought about timbre and came up with different tonal qualities some people said their words in a happy and cheerful manner whereas others used a sad quality; this made each good morning sound different. We carried on saying good morning after we had brought in movement here where we sat down in canon, this linked music and dance. We built up the 'good mornings' to a crescendo and stopped. My character was a young child we all had our own lines; 'Can I watch cartoons, look I've finished.' At first we were just saying the words with a rhythm but then we changed the melody. We then sang the words and put a lot more expression in them this sounded a lot better. We tried out saying our lines in many different ways until we were happy. In the end everyone overlapped their words this gave it a thick texture because our individual lines were overlapping. One by one people faded out and left the circle until there were just two people left, whilst doing this we also faded it down to silence. We did this piece so that we could work on rhythm and try using different beats, irregular and regular.

All the skills and knowledge that I had learnt from studying the three separate art forms I now brought together for my final integrated performance. The stimulus that we were given was a picture of a clock face which had a man's arm protruding from behind it. The man appeared to have a firm grip of the hour hand which was pointing towards the time 1:55. In our group we brainstormed, then continued to write down the thoughts and feelings we received from the picture. Some of the ideas we produced were power, strength and the concept of holding back time. We then came up with a storyline and characters, our basic storyline involved a young girl being hit by a truck. Everybody around at the time of the incident believed it was their fault. It was all about trying to hold back time, and "if only" it didn't happen. My character was a young child, I thought in depth about how my character would move, speak and act. This related back to the methods and theories of our drama practitioner Stanislavski who encouraged his actors to relive past emotional experiences and then incorporate them into their performances.

We decided upon beginning the piece in a more abstract way, we also felt that music would work well integrated in the opening section, however we wished to later move into a more naturalistic section, as we believed that this would help convey the core message of our performance to the audience. We began our performance with a solo voice chanting tick, we gradually built up the texture and our rhythm maintained a

regular and steady beat. We also incorporated movement which involved everybody stepping into a line. The people entering from the right were chanting tick continuously while the people entering from the left were saying 'ticka tocka' to a fast beat, this created a thicker more dense texture. We continued to integrate both music and movement, starting from the front in canon we began to say ding-dong, while our hands developed a clock shape travelling backwards. I believe that this combination looked and sounded effective, with the gradual build up in sound of the clock and the use of harmony and various pitches. We rehearsed what we already had and then progressed to change the words to Cuckoo and stepped out the line to form a V shape which related back to the stimulus as it represented the hands of the clock indicating the time 1:55. We integrated movement all of the three art forms into our next section. In twos; we each had a movement, some people were stepping back and forth, whilst others walked round in a circular motion. My movement involved stretching my arms straight out to form an L shape while rotating it at different angles. We also used sounds that were different from each other, such as, Ding Dong and Tick Tock. All our sounds were made to represent the noises of a clock. One of our group members stood at the back saying words over the top of the sounds. She was used to represent the clock that was stuck at 1:55; she used repetition by continuously stating the words "cant move stuck!" We introduced varied dynamics at this point; each member moved and spoke at a fast speed, then leisurely brought them both down to a slower, gentler pace, till we eventually stopped. We evaluated what we did and came to the conclusion that everything in the scene worked well, so we kept rehearsing this to refine our performance.

We decided, as a group, to add some naturalistic drama. Thinking about Stanislavski's system we worked on characterization. This scene began with lots of alarm bells ringing and everyone in the group rising up as their own individual characters. Our characters here included a young girl aged eleven, a man who was driving the lorry involved in the incident, the victim's best friend, a police woman and a big issue seller. We chose these characters because we wanted some people who were close to the victim and others that were not. This enabled us to show how certain occurrences can bring different people together. We decided that we should all have our own motif to represent our characters. As I was a young girl my motif involved buying sweets, this is what I was doing at the time of the accident. The actions I used in my motif were fast stepping and skipping like a child, then standing still and slowly reaching into my bag of sweets, picking out one and putting it into my mouth, after doing this I would bring my hand down into a freeze. Characters such as the Lorry driver used sharp, sudden, braking movements to represent the moving vehicle, while the big issue seller waved her arm and crouched to convey her emotions and also her status among society. We also used the space at this point to convey to the audience the idea of individuality and the idea that, before the accident, some of the characters were not linked; and led completely separate lives. We repeated our own motifs to a piece of music that discussed the different days of the week. The music related to our performance, as any character could have been at the scene, any day of the week. The next section of our performance was when the young girl (Julie) got knocked down by the lorry as she was going about her everyday business. This related back to the stimulus because it involved holding back time and 'if only' she hadn't crossed the road, she wouldn't have been killed. We continued to rehearse and

perfect this scene till we were happy with it and then moved on to the next.

After our motif we all froze, this created tension as there was complete stillness on stage; no one was moving but the music carried on playing. We all then walked to the beat of the music in unison into two lines, from here we performed a choreographed dance, this dance was made to represent the crash. We came up with many ideas for the dance and selected the bits that worked best. The dance began with a slow gesture using our hands, we wanted it to begin slowly so that when the girl was knocked over the movements become bigger and faster. This would contrast with the opening of the dance, therefore creating a climax. The way we were stood in the space was very important for the story of the dance. We stood in two lines and the back dancers represented the vehicle knocking over the girl.

Our next scene was set in a courtroom, we decided, in this case, to use naturalistic Drama. Tension played an important role in this scene. We paced slowly with our heads down; this was to show the audience the guilt and sadness we had regarding the accident. We used a lot of freeze frames; we froze every time someone gave their speech on what had happened to them, and what they had seen at the time. I think that we used the space and proxemics well within our piece, as we covered the whole area of the stage, and didn't just use the front or back. We also used different levels; some people were close to the ground, whereas others were high. If our characters felt they were, in some way to blame for the accident we were on a low level and if we didn't have a close relationship to the girl or didn't feel as much guilt we were on a high level. While we where frozen on our different levels, the girl who had been knocked down walked around at a slow pace, going up to each of us individually and through physicality, the gestures and expression she tried to communicate with us, and reassure us that it wasn't our fault, even though we couldn't actually see her.

Throughout this scene there was a piece of music played, the timbre was sad, soft and quiet. We chose this piece of music as we felt it related to the mood of the scene and created a sombre backdrop as the victim gave her final speech. One technique which I believed was very effective occurred during the girl's speech. The officer began to read out the girl's speech, she then walked upstage and continued the speech and their voices overlapped. We wanted the girl to explain how she had been involved in the accident and how all the other group members in fact were not to blame. To finish of our performance we had everyone gathering around the girl, who lay on the floor. We all did something that related to ours characters, e.g. I held a small red rose which I then lay on the young girl, this shown my affection towards the character. This showed the relationship we now each had with the victim.

I thought, in the end my performance went well. I enjoyed doing it and was happy with what we had produced. At first I thought that the whole performance wasn't going to come together, and that the three arts forms didn't very link well, but after we had put in additional parts the elements seemed to over lap and link more, such as the combination of movement and sound in the opening scene and the integration of music which related to the actions of our specific characters. Our strength, I found was working together to

produce the final performance, we all put in ideas and as a group we came up with the finished product. If we had more time I think our performance would have been better, I think we needed to work more on the music element and if we had practiced more on the first section I think it would have been, as a whole better, and this was our weakness. I believed that if we would have used our voices more to create music in the piece it would have flowed more, added more interest and created a darker mood. I also believe that overall it would have been a better integrated performance. I think I focused well throughout the piece and I now have a better and clearer understanding of what it takes to put together a performance. I believe that it is a lot easier when someone tells you a basic story and you continue from there, but when you have to do all the work yourself, it is a lot harder. I find that you have to spend a lot of time working and perfecting the performance and concentrating in order to get it exactly how you want it. I spoke to some of the audience prior to the performance and quizzed them on their views and opinions. Most people said it was really effective and it worked well. People seemed to like the fact that we used a dance to represent the crash. Some of the audience said that the music we used worked and went with the performance; they said that it was moving towards the end when everyone was giving their story of what they had seen. Overall I am happy with what the audience said and how they thought it worked well.