

Earthquakes in London Rehearsal Diary

By Tom Attenborough

Week 1

When the cast and company of *Earthquakes in London* gathered for our first day of rehearsals, many people already knew each other: because of the size and scale of the show, preparation work had begun in the months previously, and several cast members had also had preliminary conversations with Caroline, our Director, about their characters. As well as this, most of the production team worked together on the original production of the play at the National Theatre. So there was a reassuring atmosphere of familiarity as we came together to start rehearsals.

The first thing that struck me was the size of the rehearsal room - it is the biggest I have ever been in. This is so that we can fit in the revolve that we will be using as part of the actual set, to give us a chance to rehearse on it. It is a real privilege and very exciting to be able to blend scenes together and integrate the revolve itself in the rehearsal room, to get used to how it works and how it can be used in the show. The room was also packed with the numerous props and pieces of furniture used in the show, as well of course as the large number of people in the cast and crew!

Rehearsals began with a 'meet and greet', where everyone introduced themselves and described what their role was, giving everybody an opportunity to meet and identify each other. After this Caroline and Lucy, our Set Designer, showed the company the model box. This is a scale model of the set, and gives everybody an opportunity to see what the exact set will look like in performance, as well as to ask any questions they may have about how the show might be staged. Given both the complexity of the show and the intricacy of Lucy's design, there were many questions and much excitement! After everyone had had a look at the model box, we had a full read-through of the play. This is the first time we get to hear all the characters in the actors' voices and to hear the words we have been studying for so long read aloud, so it's a really interesting and exciting experience. Mike Bartlett, the Writer, also listened to the read-through and made small adjustments to the script that occurred to him in hearing it aloud, as well as answering any questions the actors had. The cast also spent some time getting to know each other, playing a game in which they got into pairs and had three minutes in which to remember as many details about their partner as they could before having to relay these details back to the group! We wound up the day by exploring the revolve a little bit, getting used to how it works and how it will affect the actors during their scenes.

Immediately on the second day of rehearsals we began to work through the play scene by scene chronologically from the beginning. It was a really liberating experience to be able to get the show up on its feet and start trying things out and playing around so early in rehearsals. The rehearsal process for this show is a fascinating balance between freedom within the scenes and really tight staging and choreography, as scenes blend and crash into each other with such regularity. This gives the actors the chance to try things out within a concrete framework of how we get into and out of the scenes. With each scene, we begin by sitting down and reading it through, before talking about what is happening and answering any lingering questions. Then we spend the rest of the rehearsal call working through the scene, trying things out and adding specific details. It is a real challenge for the actors to find the specificity of their characters so early in rehearsals, especially as most of them are already off book (having learned their lines), but they seem to be taking to it with great flair!

Intermixed with scene rehearsals is work on the musical and dance numbers within the show. We have singing rehearsals in which the actors learn the parts to the songs they have to sing, and Scott, our Choreographer, comes in for certain calls to stage dance numbers such as Jasmine's burlesque performance and the 'I am not a Robot' routine. The actors shift between dialogue, singing and dance rehearsals with unbelievable ease! However this may in some part have been due to the several cakes and biscuits baked and brought in by

various members of the company that have contributed a great deal towards keeping morale high!

By the end of week one we have blocked through the whole of the first act (the play has five acts). This gives us the opportunity to put it all together and see how the first half hour of the play fits together. After we have run Act One, which goes amazingly smoothly and looks fantastic, we work back over the scenes in specific detail to round off the week.

Week 2

In Week 2 of rehearsals we continue working through the play chronologically scene by scene. At times we go back and re-visit previous scenes containing the same characters as it helps the actors to have a sense of the direct chronological paths of their individual characters. Week 2 also sees more detailed music and choreography work, as Scott begins staging a full cast dance routine! We are also integrating more props and furniture as we go along, adding more and more elements to the show as the actors become comfortable with their lines and the staging.

During this time the actors also go off one by one to have their costume fittings. This gives the costume department the chance to see whether the costumes they have planned fit the actors and look right for the characters.

We also use this week to start making use of our second rehearsal space. Because the play contains over eighty scenes it is extremely useful to have access to a second space to go back over scenes we have previously rehearsed. Thus while Caroline rehearses scenes from acts two and three in the main rehearsal room, I am able to take other actors away and look in more detail at scenes we rehearsed last week. Often it is really important for actors to be able to rehearse a scene several times simply because the repetition helps them feel more comfortable and free in their performances, and having an alternate space allows us to do this vital work, as well as continuing to add detail and specificity. It also gives us the space to run lines, have conversations and give notes while still allowing Caroline to give her full attention to the work taking place in the main rehearsal room.

By the end of week 2 we have finished staging act 2 and have run acts 1 and 2 together, and are half way through staging the third act of the play. At the half-way stage of rehearsals, it is reassuring that we have got through about half of the play! There is still a lot of work to do but the show looks in great shape and there is a fantastic energy still in the room that makes the production great fun to work on.

Week 3

During week three we continued to work through scene by scene, putting the final touches to the first half of the play. Whilst we were blocking these scenes we also looked in close detail at a lot of the scenes from acts one and two in our second space, again putting specific details into the performances and exploring any issues or questions that had arisen since we last rehearsed the scenes. Having blocked the whole of act three, we worked back through it in detail and ran the act, as it is quite a detailed and complex act involving a lot of overlapping and choreographed scenes. Although it seems an age since we rehearsed the beginning of the play, when we look back over it in our second space it still feels both fresh and detailed, which is very reassuring! We also had regular music and dance rehearsals to ensure we stayed on top of those moments, as well as putting the final moments of choreography on our full company dance number, which we affectionately refer to as 'Robot'. It is a tune we have begun to whistle in our sleep!

By the end of the week we had staged the first four acts of the play, working sometimes into the evening and also on Saturday to ensure we kept to our schedule. Act four in particular required very specific blocking and use of all the possibilities of our set design,

producing really exciting results. On the Saturday we went back over act four in detail, looking at all the links between scenes and putting the details into the final complex final moments of the act. It was testament to the work ethic of our company and the atmosphere of fun and enjoyment Caroline instils that the entire company arrived on Saturday enthusiastic, energetic and excited about rehearsing. It was in return very reassuring to see how much detail the actors have retained from each of our rehearsals, and how they are able to put such care and specificity into their performances while still staying on top of all the technical things they need to do such as entering at exactly the right moment, contending with the revolve and moving seamlessly round a crowded stage. With act five being the shortest act and the simplest to stage, we are very much looking forward to putting it together early next week before taking the plunge of looking at the whole show! It is a really exciting time as we see the show begin to take its full shape.

Week 4

Our final week of rehearsals began with us blocking our way through act 5. Act 5 is very different in feel and shape to the rest of the play, and Caroline's ideas for staging the act really reflected this. The entire set for the show changes at this point, and we bring both our revolves into full play simultaneously, creating a really exciting effect. We worked all day on Monday and into the evening on Tuesday to put a shape onto the act, making sure the actors were happy both with the way the act should be played and with their geography around the stage. By Tuesday evening we were able to work through the fifth act as a whole, at which point we realised we had finished staging the entire show! The next day we worked back over acts one and two as it had been quite a while since we had looked at them, refreshing ourselves as to the detail we had worked on, combining this with more work with Scott on the movement and choreography sections of the first half of the show. This put us in a position to run the show from start to finish on Thursday morning, which was an extremely exciting experience. It was nerve-wracking for the entire team to see how all our work would hold up, but we were very pleased to see that the shape of the whole show worked as a cohesive whole and that the actors had retained an incredible amount of detail in their performances, which was all extremely encouraging. We spent the rest of the afternoon giving notes and looking back over certain scenes in detail.

On Saturday morning we had our third and final run of the show, in front of members of the creative team as well as several of the Headlong staff. It was brilliant to see how readily and accurately the actors had absorbed our notes from the day before and how quickly the show was improving and taking shape. We felt that we had reached a point where we were ready to move out of the rehearsal room and into the theatre, which is an ideal position to be in at the start of our tech week. The other person to watch our final run was Mike Bartlett, who was able to see how the play was working as a whole and who was able to suggest certain cuts or tweaks to the script; again, this is a big task for the actors at this late stage in rehearsals but once again one they were completely willing to take on in order to make the show as exciting as possible.

At lunchtime on Saturday we all said goodbye for the weekend before heading down to Plymouth to begin our technical rehearsal on Monday. Soon we will marry lighting, sound, projections, set and costumes to the work we've done in the rehearsal room in order to get the show ready for performance!