

Romeo & Juliet: Rehearsal Diary

Week 1

On a Monday morning in early January, still in the shadow of Christmas and New Year, the company gathered for the first time. Apart from a few individual conversations and some preliminary work with Robert, our director, it was the first time most people had met each other, so over tea and cake everyone tentatively introduced themselves. There wasn't much time to soak in the ambience as introductions were sped along by a speed dating game, in which the company were split into pairs to gather as much information about each other as possible to be fed back to the group. With the ice broken, and safe in the knowledge of who was a big fan of cryptic crosswords, and whose hero is Ryan Gosling, the company was encouraged to talk about their responses to Shakespeare. It was interesting to see how strong many of their likes and dislikes were, influenced in turn by some of their best and worst experiences in the theatre. It was soon clear that everyone was singing from the same hymn sheet and that we all felt a responsibility to work hard to make the production exciting and innovative.

Robert is allergic to tables and dislikes a traditional read-through, so the company were soon up on their feet and working with text to get everyone comfortable with the language and verse of Shakespeare. There was a large range of experience, from those with many Shakespeare productions under their belt to those who had never spoken verse before. Everyone became a beginner again, united in a crash course on a little known speech from *Richard II*. Over-acting it to free up the text, beating the pentameter into the floor, and bullying each other to find the flow of the argument. As well as ensuring everyone got used to working in verse, the exercises were especially good for encouraging good verse-speaking habits, enabling a better understanding of the language. After a quick break for lunch, the afternoon session saw the cast discuss their response to the play, with particular attention to the cut we are working from - a creative and very unique version of the original. However, mystery remained as Robert kept his cards close to his chest with regards to specific details, collecting the thoughts and ideas of all present on the various themes that pervade the play. Finally, the company was introduced to the ancient sport of 'nine-square', a ball game which got the competitive juices flowing and started a tradition with which each subsequent rehearsal would begin.

The rest of the week saw the actors working on the text. Having split the entire play down into bite-size chunks the cast was called in groups to work on certain scenes, explore and talk through relationships, and get the play on its feet. This was in no way prescriptive and the actors were encouraged to explore different variations and choices, to try things out and introduce ideas, and to play around with the text. Objects of all shapes and sizes: wheelie-chairs, footballs, cutlery, sofa cushions and a tea trolley, were pulled out of cupboards and off shelves and handed over to the cast. Scenes and soliloquies were occasionally hammered out to the strains of Goldfrapp or Marvin Gaye. The aim was to encourage freedom to explore the text and to ensure that all the actors had a strong understanding of the meaning, arguments and ideas therein. The results ranged from the perverse to the brilliant, and gave the company a solid foundation and understanding of the text from which to work before building up to staging.

By this time, the production office was in full swing and the stage management team were on hand to ensure the whole show was running in a smooth and organised fashion. Kala, our deputy stage manager, had her hands full noting down any changes, additions or requests made in the rehearsal room - to send to the production team and keep them updated - as well as cataloguing props, costume and other items we might need. By mid-week the cast were all very comfortable with each other and enjoying the opportunity to explore their characters and scenes in great detail, and with even greater freedom. The world of the play and the relationships within began to solidify as the actors became more confident in their discoveries - developments greatly helped by the fact that by now many of the actors had learnt all their lines and were able to rehearse off-book.

On Friday evening, the Headlong team, along with the producers from Nottingham Playhouse and The Nuffield, Southampton descended on the rehearsal room for a meet and greet. All were intrigued to learn about the process so far, and the company were eager to share their stories of the week and the progress that had been made. The highlight of the evening was the presentation (by Helen, our Designer) of the model box, a scale mock-up of the set. This allowed the company to see the space in which they would be performing, and ask any questions about it. After a week of working on the play without any concept of spacing or blocking - focusing only on the text - there was a thrill of excitement from the actors when they saw what they would have to play with. By the next morning, a plan of the set had been taped out on the floor of the rehearsal room so that they would be able to stage scenes with the correct blocking, safe in the knowledge of where all the doors and walls would be when it was eventually constructed. The realisation that the elements of the show, which had been worked on separately for months, were beginning to come together - particularly in the presence of all the people who had worked so hard to make it happen - provided a truly exciting end to the first week.