

Breaking the Mould: Reinventing Theatrical Syntax in Classic Plays - IATL Project Report

Revisiting my initial proposal for the IATL Student as Producer fund, it strikes me that as this project unfolded it became both far simpler and far more complex than I ever thought it might. My own descriptions of my ambitions for the project seem to me, in hindsight, bloated and academic: the point of the ten weeks work wasn't *really* to 'reinvent theatrical syntax', but to 'do something exciting'. As an aim, this is somehow both simpler and yet more difficult: there are no intellectual pretensions to hide behind when your ambition is to keep an audience gripped for two hours; no fancy words or footnotes; only bodies in space, a props table, and a director frantically doubling as a lighting technician.

It's true that our route to 'doing something exciting' was by attempting to take a rigorous and often academic approach to the stagecraft of a play immured in a stiflingly traditional performance history. Our first week of rehearsals was spent in a library, and the objectives we set ourselves for the show were as much intellectual as they were practical. But the most important thing to acknowledge in reflecting on this project - and indeed the thing that I am most proud of about it - is that the outcome was, emphatically, a piece of theatre. Theatre as research, perhaps, but theatre first and foremost: owned by the actors on stage, relying almost entirely on the presence and engagement of a live audience, and fuelled by something far more elemental, primal and unknowable than any kind of intellectual investigation that can be plotted on a graph.

The play was Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. I was forced into making a choice regarding which play to stage under the auspices of the project sooner than I expected to; I had hoped to run a series of open workshops on a variety of texts before auditioning the performance proper. The scheduling conflicts created by the proliferation of student theatre at Warwick meant that the only way to ensure I found an ensemble was to cast alongside the slew of other projects auditioning early in Term 1. Unfortunate as it was to have to omit the workshop stage of the project, *Hedda* was a play I had suspected I might land on since the summer. The play was written by the "father of theatrical realism" and yet full of rich symbolic power, first staged in the late nineteenth-century but full of blisteringly contemporary ideas. It also fulfilled the unofficial criteria of yielding a surfeit of almost laughably similar production images when searched for in Google Images: a sure sign that there was a long and notable performance history to riff off, and position our production in relation to.

Having decided the play, I held auditions over the weekend of October 4th/5th, when I met with over thirty performers from across all years, and from a variety of disciplines. Though I was looking for acting talent, and suitability for the roles in *Hedda*, these auditions were also an exciting first opportunity to discuss the project and the play with people who had been interested enough in my outline to audition. The conversations I had over this weekend were enough to convince me that not

only had I made the right choice of play, but that the project as a whole was a necessary one: there was a real sense of a shared feeling that theatre needs to work harder, go further and experiment more to re-engage audiences who have become accustomed to “the way things are done”. After an energising weekend and some painful decisions I had my collaborators: Rosie Gray (English and Creative Writing), Angus Imrie (English and Theatre), Antonia Salib (Politics), George Attwell-Gerhards (History), Harri McKenzie-Donovan (Theatre and Performance), Stuart Nunn (English and Theatre) and Rosie Hiscock (English Literature).

The first week of rehearsals went some way to simulating the workshop structure I had envisioned the early part of the project taking: rather than looking at the text of *Hedda*, we developed a working method as an ensemble by investigating plays of other stylistically iconic writers: Wilde, Chekhov, Miller. After completing independent research, we spoke about the burden of performance traditions, about the definition of *necessity* in performance, about the pros and cons of anachronism in contemporary productions of classic plays. Many among the ensemble were able to talk about productions by directors such as Rupert Goold and Ivo van Hove; practitioners whose work directly informed my IATL application. These early rehearsals gave us a strong theoretical grounding, but, in hindsight, also lent us a false sense of security. Talking is not doing. It was a security which would be punctured fast, and crucially.

First rehearsal on the text. Harri and Rosie Hiscock in the first scene of the play, as Aunt Julle and Berthe. We read through the scene, talk about it in vague terms, and then I ask them to have a go at running it through. “I actually don’t know what we’re supposed to be doing.” My stomach turned: Harri was absolutely right. We knew we *didn’t* want the items of furniture referenced in the script to actually be on stage, *didn’t* want representative lighting, *didn’t* want an acting style that simply reinforced the stereotypes perpetuated about these characters for the last 120 years. We hadn’t actually begun to think in any tangible, actionable way, about what we *did* want. Here then, in rehearsals proper, was when it first became clear to us that our greatest downfall would be to forget that we were not writing an essay, but putting on a show.

Steadily, we were able to work out what we wanted, firstly by translating the emotional landscape of the play and its characters into blocking. We moved through each of the play’s four acts slowly, charting relationships in terms of physical proximity, ways of moving around the space, techniques of taking spatial ownership and ‘marking territory’. Crucial to this process was what happened when we reached the end of an act: we knew we wanted the transitions to be metaphorical rather than realistic, and this gave us ample opportunity to experiment.

As the company began to become accustomed to playing with metaphor, and with approaching key

moments of the play iconoclastically, we began to develop some of the images and ideas which would eventually run through the production. It was whilst working on transitions that we began to develop what would eventually be the show's eclectic soundtrack: Nina Simone, Eartha Kitt, Elbow, Fleetwood Mac, Queen and Solomon King all found their way into the production. It is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the ensemble that decisions like these were made; decisions which challenged archetypal performance practice and yet - we felt - made complete sense.

Perhaps the most significant metaphor we reached for in the production, was also the most costly. In order that our *Hedda* be, emphatically, a play about now as much as about the late nineteenth-century, we decided that the costuming would be contemporary, but that Hedda would - over the course of the play - become immured in an exquisitely period dress. We hired a petticoat, bustle, corset and dress from the RSC, and Rosie was dressed in each item by other characters, on stage: the suggestion being that the same forces which restricted women's liberties in 1890 remain insidious today. I mention the dress in particular because it feels to me the aspect of the production that best sums up the aims of the project: to create a show rooted both in the time of a play's writing, and in the present; to make points that work both intellectually and theatrically.

Given that IATL as a department is suffused with the spirit of collaboration, it feels fitting to end this report with words by somebody other than me. As IATL also courage the dissemination of work, this ending is also fitting, taken as it is from a review of our production of *Hedda*, written by a second-year Theatre and Performance Studies student on his blog. The full piece discusses many aspects of the production and raises many interesting points, both of success, and of opportunity for development - something we may get the chance to do as the show was entered for the National Student Drama Festival 2015 - but this opening acknowledges and credits the ambition that lay behind both mine and the ensemble's approach to this show, and was received with excitement (and some degree of relief) by all of us:

"I like theatre which doesn't just throw away the rule book, but tears it up into tiny pieces, pieces it back together into an entirely new order and then waves it in the air for a bit while singing. Or something. I especially like it when all this kind of thing is happening to a classic which has become stuck in the period trappings so often suffocating the very idea of classics. While this doesn't seem as prevalent with work from Shakespeare's era anymore (with texts being mucked about with often for the sake of accessibility), there is still the whiff of the usual trappings and languid pacing surrounding playwrights such as Chekhov and Ibsen. Their plays still speak to huge important contemporary societal issues and, most importantly, hit on aspects of human nature which will always be universal. What is the point of presenting dusty museum pieces when they can be bold, engaging and strike a visceral note in the audience as any modern play can?"

Which is why I was very excited about seeing this Hedda Gabler. This production from director Ed Franklin at the University of Warwick - in association with IATL (Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning) - recognised the urgent relevancy of the plays exploration of gender, as well as its resonating themes of missed opportunity and unfulfillment, and presented them in a visceral, daring, and consistently exciting way.”