

The Ensemble Project

The Idea

This project was born from many discussions (usually over a glass or two of wine) between friends about the kind of theatre we'd like to be involved in, and the kind of theatre we'd like to create. Having been a part of various productions at Warwick where we took on individual roles (costume designer, producer, director etc.) we wanted to work on a project where every voice would carry equal weight and everyone would be able to contribute to and create all aspects of the show. We decided that the way to achieve this feeling of collaboration and community would be to focus on the dynamic of what would be an emerging company, rather than the final performance. We chose a text that we felt gave us scope for varied interpretations and paths of approach – Harold Pinter's 'The Lover'. We decided that in order to further distance the focus of the project from the final performances of the piece, we would use three different casts and perform the play over three nights, allowing for change, discussion and flexibility. This would (hopefully) mean that our rehearsal period was not concerned with one particular take on the text, nor would each actor be able to settle into their role as their own personal 'job' for the show – they were sharing it with two other actors and a whole creative team.



The Auditions

The first step was to bring in six actors who wanted to work in the same way that we wanted to work, and who had the same goals and ideas about the project. We were anxious not to create an 'us and them' feeling to the auditions, since this would inevitably bleed into the project, and absolute equality and collective ownership over the project were crucial to our ideas. So we ran the first round of auditions as very informal and relaxed workshops, where we tried to make everyone as comfortable as possible. Discussion was a large part of the evening, and we encouraged everyone to respond to what they were seeing from other people as well as their own groups. We were overwhelmed with the turnout, and possibly the hardest part of the whole process was whittling down a recall list.

Eventually though we recalled fifteen actors for six parts, and focussed in further on the material we had been workshopping in the first round of auditions. The talent was staggering, but the most gratifying part of the process was the final discussion, where we were able to sit back and just let the responses and reactions and ideas flow and be explored by the group. We offered places in the project to the six actors we felt had the most passion and willingness to contribute to the ideas being explored – every single one of them was both encouraging of other people's ideas but also eager to input their own, and that was exactly what we were hoping to find.



The Early Rehearsals

We had always wanted to steer clear of the actual script of the play until at least halfway through the project, so our early meetings were dedicated to creating a strong group dynamic and exploring some of the themes of the play without explicit reference to the text. One of the strongest tools we found for this was ‘freewriting’ – an exercise in which one person would read out a list of unconnected words at 30 second intervals, and the rest of the group would clear their mind and simply write in response to those words. We found it an incredible way of observing the different ways our minds work and approach ideas and how sensory each person was in their thought process. It was also a very personal process, and meant that we got to know each other very

well very quickly!

We also looked at other Pinter plays in order to get a feel for his style, again without tying ourselves to the text of *The Lover* - we read through scenes from *The Birthday Party*, *Betrayal* and *The Homecoming*, discussing and exploring where we felt there were through-lines in Pinter’s works, and hopefully building a solid understanding of his writing. We tied reading these scenes into physical exercises as well as intellectual ones to further break down any barriers in the company, and by the time we came to

As we moved on to looking at the text, we used the freewriting to begin to angle ourselves towards readings and interpretations of the play. Rather than a random string of words we began to use words, phrases and eventually scenes from the play, which allowed us to explore its ideas without adopting specific roles.

“Clothed in nothing. Bare. Cold and damp. The wind whistles through my hair. Through my bones and I walk. Ashamed of my body like Adam, rolling, playing as he once did in the garden. This time however I am bare and naked in front of her. Exposed completely. Half a man. I’m not your lover I tell her, I’m just not anymore. I’m sorry but I cannot do this anymore. The silence is like a sharp razor, balanced, poised, slicing through conversation, ripping at its tendons, the muscles of words, the skin of language destroyed and peeled back as I stand. Stand. Stand at the edge of the bed. Her wonderful body curled neatly on the edge of the bed. The soft white sheets cold. The burgundy red walls. The smells of incense.”

- Joe Boylan, actor (freewriting exercise).

“I very much enjoyed working with The Ensemble Project, however the idea that the group was more about the process rather than the final performance was one which took a while to get used to – I am so used to focusing on the end project that the idea looking at the text itself was not necessary until a couple of weeks before show time was one which caused me no end of fascination and unbridled joy. In-fact, it has enlightened me to now look beyond the script and develop the ideas of the play before looking at the words at all – although our final performance was touch and go at times (at one point I'd been drying



the same glass for at least 7 minutes) I felt that the way we had come to finding our characters was something quite unique and special; and in-fact I would have liked to have continued the project for longer and pushed the show date further forward in order to have more time to play and explore. Yes, there did come a point where it became necessary to actually look at the script and learn those lines and things like that, but the process of finding the soul of the play rather than the shallow skin-deep production was something truly interesting and I look forward to working in this way again.”



- Lucy Ogilvie, actor.

The Later Rehearsals

We did, as Lucy says, eventually have to turn to looking at the script, but using the freewriting as a way into this allowed us to still maintain the idea that we were a company separate from the play, particularly as the final pairings of actors had not been decided upon yet. We began to read through scenes as a group, with non-actors on the team reading as well as the people who would be doing the final performances.

“My most valuable lesson from the process was a different way to approach text. In many productions people enter the rehearsal room with preconceived notions of the text and of character. The set-up of our project meant this was impossible. Removing these preformed ideas meant we were forced to respond to the text and let this guide our decisions. Performance led our rehearsals and we developed a system of having actors stand and perform a random scene without a read through, we gave them some pieces of furniture to play around with, but apart from that they just had to act. Afterwards, we discussed. This doesn’t sound like anything revolutionary, it sounds like I’ve described exactly how a rehearsal is supposed to be run, however when a production is structured in a hierarchy of roles this is lost. In an environment of equals everyone feels open to comment and discussion is possible. We would focus on how everyone reacted to the scene, the thoughts that arose from that particular performance rather than a former reading of the play. Any line that seemed jarring could then be discussed; nothing was forced to be natural if it was not natural. Then we would try the scene again and see what changed.

This flexibility in ideas leads to a kind of truth behind the performance because actors are guided by their instincts. Nothing was imposed on the performer; no ideas were fed nor orders given. They simply performed the line as it was written on a page and after they had said it decided what it meant. This is one way we developed three very different performances of the same play. Actors focused on themselves within the role rather than trying to morph themselves into a role.”

- Lucyna Raczka, team member.

We came to finally deciding on the pairings of the actors by a silent vote – we all individually wrote on a piece of paper who we believed should be paired together, and miraculously it was a unanimous decision. We like to think this was something to do with the process we had gone through in exploring the text and the actors developing their own complimentary interpretations of the play together, and the casting certainly felt more solid and natural than it has in any other show I’ve worked with. I think building the dynamic that we had focussed on developing over the early rehearsals was crucial in giving us three such strong onstage (and offstage) relationships.

Designing publicity and set was done in much the same way. Katie lead the design of the publicity, but did so by sitting down and discussing with everyone what they would like and what they thought would be effective, and as a group we decided on a final rough template. Katie then went away and worked her magic, and came back with several different designs, which we sat down and narrowed to a final poster/flyer together.

The set was slightly more left up to the individual pairs, but since a large part of the later rehearsals (after the pairs had been decided upon) was observing and feeding back on the individual performances and productions being created by each pair, everyone was able to advise and help with set design and what seemed to work for each specific reading of the text. Despite our initial idea (at planning stages for the project) of each pair using the same unified set, it actually became incredibly important due to the staggering differences in the interpretations of the text for each couple to create and take ownership of their own space.



The Performances

“What struck me about the process was, despite the collaborative nature of the project, the variety of realisation apparent in the three final performances. This is, of course, testament to the kaleidoscopic quality of Pinter’s text; tragicomic in temperament, it allowed the group to exploit these two disparate elements, tragedy and comedy, at our own discretion, leading to very different interpretations from the individual pairs, as reflected by the final pieces and feedback garnered in the after show discussions. This worked to give life to a piece which, in light of Pinter’s style, is often seen to be a rigid artefact in the canon, unsusceptible to any form of adaptation (though we didn’t ‘adapt’ the text in a conventional sense, the three performances were so varied it seemed that, despite the words and setting remaining unaltered, the pieces had undergone a process of change).

*Further, it is my strong conviction that this would not have been possible without the aid of working in such a democratic way; although each member of the group did not necessarily contribute to the same degree (inevitable time commitments being accountable), everyone gave something invaluable. Objective criticism and opinion gave each pair the degree of exploration necessary to form such multifarious productions, coupled with creative input from the visual artists, set designers and lighting aids in the project, making apparent, as soon as the finished sets of each pair was regarded, that each performance of *The Lover* was of a very distinct style.”*

- Josh Goulding, actor.

The Aftershow Discussions

This was perhaps the most rewarding part of the project. Since the focus had been so much on the process rather than the final performances, these discussions allowed us to share that in however small a way with the

audiences who had (very kindly) taken an interest in what we were doing. The questions we were asked were interesting and insightful, and certainly made us think about what we'd been doing, what we'd wanted to do and what we'd achieved seriously. It was, for me, incredibly rewarding just to see the whole company listening and answering questions with the kind of pater and report that only comes from an instinctive and intuitive team. We were asked among other things about how successful our 'collaborative' ethic had been, how we'd ended up with three such different and varied shows, how we'd overcome the initial 'team versus cast' divide, and how we'd be continuing in the future (which we hadn't discussed at that point).



The Next Step

"At first, the five of us who began planning the project had many discussions outlining ambitious plans for discovering a better way to approach theatre than what we had previously experienced. What I hadn't realised was that so many other students were keen to do the same. The success of the project has largely come from the volume of people who auditioned, enabling us to invite the best of a very talented (and interesting) group of students to work with us. The audition process which involved testing people's willingness to voice opinions, try new things and test each other's ideas revealed very quickly that many more than just the initial Ensemble group were willing to engage in a collaborative, experimental project. The post-show discussions equally displayed that ensemble and company theatre has a great future in Warwick drama. Unfortunately, due to the sheer volume of events that have been going on this term our open rehearsal did not go to plan. We wanted to open up our workshops for other students (not just English or Theatre students) to join us and

help shed light on the themes and issues we were tackling in Pinter's 'The Lover'. It has become clear that any of the people who auditioned for the project (and many more) would be invaluable to have in a rehearsal room playing with the same ideas and exercises that we were. However, nobody was able to attend the rehearsal we allotted to open the doors for. It was disappointing but I don't doubt that when the project continues, having had the performances, more people will get involved.

I feel very proud to have been part of a project which has been continually talked about from beginning to end. The post-show discussions (and post-post-show chats) have suggested that several students interested in theatre will be taking ideas from what we touched upon during our rehearsal process. For example, the free-writing exercises became a strong foundation for much of our discussion and exploration of the play (and each other's minds!). But further than that, other students have picked up on its possibilities and intend to use it in their own rehearsals next term. I hope that it has also shown the student actors and production teams that they should take ownership over every performance as a whole; that an actor should have directorial input as well as being able to make choices about costume or publicity; that a director does not need to have a concrete concept ready for actors to fit into but that an actor is valuable as a person with experience; that rehearsals are

a fabulous resource for publicity ideas! The process has been very rewarding for me and from what I can glean from others, it's been rewarding for them too. There are, of course, gaps and limitations but this only re-affirms that we have more ambitious plans to test."

- Katie Caddick, team member

Since finishing the project with IATL, we've been meeting sporadically and discussing our next step as a group. We're hoping to continue to build on the work we have done, and potentially create a new production where all members of the company would be performing together. We want to draw on key ideas from the first stage of the Ensemble Project – workshopping ideas and themes rather than jumping straight into the script, casting the show democratically after a couple of weeks of exploring the play, and creating all aspects of the production collaboratively and equally. Fingers crossed it'll work. Watch this space...

The Ensemble Project presents
Harold Pinter's
THE LOVER



+post-show discussion

Wed 7th - Fri 9th
December 7.30pm

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Studio

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