

National Theatre Collection

Jane Eyre – Rehearsal Insights

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About

This pack supports the National Theatre's production of *Jane Eyre*, directed by Sally Cookson, which was originally staged at the Bristol Old Vic and opened on the 24th September 2015 at the National's Lyttelton Theatre in London.

These insights were prepared during rehearsals by staff director Ellen Havard. They introduce the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play.

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsal Diary

As this production was initially conceived, devised and presented at the Bristol Old Vic, this rehearsal diary focuses on a few key areas of bringing the production to the Lyttelton stage at the National Theatre.

The Principles of the Devising Process and Creating a Company

Role: Director

As a director, it is your responsibility to guide your company through the weeks of rehearsal, technical rehearsals and previews. Directors all work in different ways and some directors will work differently depending on the project. Sally Cookson, director of *Jane Eyre*, is a director who works almost exclusively as a director of devised work. Devised Theatre is a form which is becoming increasingly popular and increasingly diverse in its definition.

Some devised productions start with an initial theme, other productions might start with a simple story or event which inspires the theatre makers to make a piece of theatre and other productions might start from a story within a different medium, for example a novel. In this case, it is the latter which has brought a stage version of Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, to life. Regardless of the initial stimulus for a piece of devised work, almost without exception, devised work does not start with a script. Instead, the theatre makers involved develop a piece through a process of improvisation, research exploration and development. This is the way that Sally Cookson's *Jane Eyre* was made originally.

The original, two part production was devised from scratch with the company (all of whom have returned to show at the National Theatre). When they started that process, they didn't have script, so they worked on the novel and through a devising process, developed the piece and ended with a script.

Rehearsal Diary

On the first day of any rehearsal process, you experience a mixture of emotions; excitement, anticipation, nervousness and often a strong sense of the unknown. Everyone will be feeling one if not all of these emotions, including the director! The first day of *Jane Eyre* is no different; despite the show having been put on before, there is a lot of work to be done to adapt the production from two shows into one.



After our meet and greet (a short session where lots of people from the rest of the building come down to meet the new company and welcome them to the building) Sally spoke to the company about the challenges ahead as we begin our rehearsals; knowing that we need to shorten the original and interrogate the impact on structure when putting it into one evening and to rework it for a new space. Inevitably this means that there will be times when the team have to be very strict with themselves and part with material that they spent a long time and effort generating when they were in Bristol.

This time around, we have a script to start with, which is unusual for Sally. This script acts as a documentation of the previous production as well as beginning edited by Sally and Mike Akers (dramaturg) to put it

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into a one night event. As we had a script, we did a read through on Monday afternoon, so that Sally, Mike and the rest of the company could hear the edit out loud. Benji Bower (composer) added in some music from the original production and the company sang some of the original songs, so that we could time it and get a sense of how long it might be, but also to hear how the structure worked and to be aware of the emotional journeys of the characters and the impact that might have on an audience.

As a result of this read through, there were discussions with the whole company about the structure. Through discussions after hearing the read-through of the work Sally and Mike had done between the original production in Bristol and now, it became very clear that simply putting the two previous parts together and having just one interval wasn't going to work for the remounted production. As a result, the following few days were spent interrogating the current structure. Sally began to discuss the possibility of having two intervals, meaning the story would be told in three acts. We did various exercises and had discussions about the impact of this on the production and on what the focus of rehearsals would need to be to achieve this.



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Throughout this week, the actors and other creatives have given a lot of input into the discussions about changes to the previous production. This is much more common in a devising process than it is in a more traditional process when a script exists (slightly different if one is working on a piece of new writing, which sits between devising and existing scripted productions). On day one, Sally reminded the company that we would need to be prepared to come up with ideas and have them fall on their face and not to be too precious about ideas and input. This means that a company have to be comfortable with each other and everyone needs to work towards creating an environment which celebrates contribution, failure and imagination.

The process of creating a strong sense of teamwork and company is intrinsic to creating a strong piece of theatre. The way that Sally makes work and tells stories is through ensemble storytelling; the whole company show and tell the story, meaning that every member of the company is as important as the other. This production of *Jane Eyre* is no exception to that; every member of the company is onstage almost throughout and they all have a very active role in the storytelling – even more reason to need to be a strong team. A simple beginning to developing an ensemble can be through company warm ups. Every day this week we did a warm up; something physical, often a game and collective singing. The games that Sally played this week were not competitive, but were focused on working together. This helps to bond the company and starts the day with fun, sharing laughter and encouraging playfulness – all very important when you are devising.

In the rehearsal room we have covered the walls in research; images, articles, all connected with elements of the book as well as Brontë's life and information on the social and historical context of the novel. As well as this, we have a storyboard which came from the Bristol rehearsal room. Each flipchart page has a drawing which represents a scene in the play. One day this week, we took this down and laid it on the floor so that we could look at how the production would be split into three acts.

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Below is an example of one of the games the company played during the first week of rehearsals, which you could try with your own group.

Patterns

Stand in a circle. The leader throws a ball to another person, across the circle. That person throws it to another and that person throws it to another and so on. When you have received and caught the ball, cross your hands across your chest to indicate you have had the ball. The last person throws the ball back to the leader. No, repeat this pattern, throwing the ball to the same person as you threw it to. (You don't need to use your hands across your chest this time). Repeat this pattern a few times.

When the leader is happy that the pattern is being remembered, they should hold the ball for the next set of instructions:

From the leader, go round the circle clockwise and each person says a number (in chronological order). The leader is 1 and the numbers should go all the way round until the person next to the leader says their number. They should then repeat their number and anti-clockwise, the numbers should be counted down. Repeat this a few times.

Now, the leader should reintroduce the ball, sticking to the previous throwing pattern. When the leader is happy that the pattern is going well, they say '1' and the person next to them says 2 etc. This means you have to think about throwing and catching as well as listening for your turn to say the number. When the leader is happy with how this is going, they should tell people to move around the space, continuing to maintain the throwing and counting pattern. When you want to finish the game, the leader should ask everyone to remake the circle, whilst the patterns continue.

This game encourages everyone to be supportive to each other, it helps with spatial awareness and thinking about lots of things at once! It was a great game to start the day with when we played it as it really wakes you up!

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Rehearsal Diary Focus: Adaptation

Role: Dramaturg

What is a dramaturg?

Much like the term ‘devising’, ‘dramaturgy’ is quite hard to define, particularly the practical application of dramaturgy – theoretical definitions don’t always capture the profound impact of dramaturgy when making theatre. Perhaps, instead, it is slightly easier to define dramaturgy by considering the role of a dramaturg. Even then, it’s quite tricky to define as the role of a dramaturg will change dramatically depending on the specific endeavour and process on specific projects. To me, a dramaturg is someone who focuses on how well the story comes across to the audience; not necessarily how it is told, acted or directed, but rather how the story itself is structured and how the audience receives the story. I like to think of the role of a dramaturg as a ‘Defender of Story’. Some dramaturgs are also writers, but not always. It is a role which is constantly in evolution and is best not to be restrained by definition, as the role of a dramaturg is to serve the story in whatever way that particular story and theatre making process requires.



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Adapting *Jane Eyre* (or ‘How on earth are you going to do it!?’)

This version of *Jane Eyre* is an adaptation; a novel turned into a piece of theatre. It is a beloved story which has been seen on stage and on screen before, in number of different adaptations. Adaptations are very popular – to see well known classics embodied on a stage is very exciting. Audiences are often interested to see how writers and directors can translate a piece of written fiction into a piece of theatre.

Directors make theatre for a number of different reasons. Sally is passionate about stories and about bringing books to life. She has made a lot of theatre for children and young people, including many adaptations.

After reading the novel several time throughout her life, Sally came to putting the book onto the stage. When beginning to plan how she would do this, she read the book again and again and began to decide what elements of the book she wanted to draw out and focus on when putting it on stage.

Sally has spoken in rehearsals about the fact that the book is referred to as a love-story. She acknowledges that whilst the love story within the book is certainly an important factor, it is the life-story that Sally is more interested in. Many of the choices in what to focus on in the process of adaptation have been made as a result in Sally’s desire to tell this life-story. For example, it could be quite easy to skirt over the early parts of Jane’s life and fast forward to her arrival at Thornfield Hall and relationship with Mr Rochester. Sally has spoken about feeling it very important to chart the abuse of Jane’s human rights in her early life, as Sally feels it is implicit to understanding the choices Jane makes throughout her life. Also, the impact of the novel on feminist literature is important and the character of Jane is famous for exploring her place in the world as a Victorian woman and questioning the role of women in the world. As a result of this all of the choice Jane makes throughout this stage production have been focused on making choices for herself and exerting her independent will (a trait of Jane’s that is so valued by

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readers of the book). For example; we have worked very hard on ensuring that the moment Jane turns down St John River's proposal is not as a result of Jane hearing the voice of Rochester; rather Jane hearing the voice of Rochester after she has said no to St John; to show that Jane makes choices that are independent of anyone else's (particularly male) intervention.

Throughout the rehearsals, I have heard many members of the company referring to this adaptation as 'our version'. For me this is very useful to remember; that this production of *Jane Eyre* is a response to Brontë's book rather than any attempt to replicate the book on stage; books and plays work very differently and any good adaptation will aim to focus on making a version which acknowledges its form and tells the story through that form. If you know the book well, you will be aware of the bits we will have left out; none of which have been a comment on Brontë's impeccable storytelling, more as an acknowledgement that to serve a story well, when adapting from a novel into a production, some things have to be left behind, as to try to jam them into a time restricted production would not make for a fulfilling piece of theatre.

Storybeats and Structure

As I have mentioned, *Jane Eyre* is a devised production and when the company made the show in Bristol originally, there was no script on day one of rehearsals. Instead, there was a wealth of research, Brontë's book and the beginnings of a structure, which Sally and dramaturg Mike Akers began developing before rehearsals. This structure charted the whole of the book and was broken down into story beats – by this, I mean a series of events within the story. These provided a beginning framework to start to tell the story.

Voice

Jane Eyre was written with a character speaking directly to the reader, as a first person narrator. Sally and Mike chose not to have Jane speaking to the audience in the first person, but Jane is present in every

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scene, so the audience see everything at the same time as she see it. Sally developed a convention that means at some moments, we are party to Jane's inner conversation, when the ensemble take on the role of Jane's inner voice. This was a very helpful device which meant the audience hear Jane's voice without Jane speaking to the audience. It is also a way for Brontë's wonderful relationship with reader and Jane to be represented.

Dialogue

When reworking the production, we have often returned to previously devised scenes, to revisit and improve existing script from the Bristol version. A lot of the dialogue in the production is based on dialogue in the book but worked on very carefully by Sally, the actors and Mike to ensure the words work for the stage and feel natural to be spoken out loud. Read a passage from the novel alongside watching a scene from the production and you will see how closely it is based on the book but also how there have been subtle edits to make it work for the stage.

Interview with Sally Cookson

Interview with Sally Cookson, Director

Let's talk about before you start rehearsals. And particularly thinking about *Jane Eyre*. What have you been thinking about before you get your actors in a room?

Well, the first thing I think about is *why* I want to do a particular project. I think I always attempt to answer that question before I do anything else; to really know whether it's really the right thing to do or not. So I ask myself, why do I want to do this? And with *Jane Eyre*, lots and lots and lots of reasons. Obviously it's one of those titles that's taken on legendary status. It's a very popular title. People throughout the world know it. Regardless of whether they've read the book or not, they know something about the title. I'm really attracted to popular titles because I like making theatre for an audience that want to see a show because they know something about it. And I like to make work for a wide, diverse audience. And so that's one of the main reasons. The other reason is I wanted to make this story into theatre because it's one of those books that's been with me for a long time. When I eventually read it, when I was at drama school, it had a huge impact on me and I was really drawn, initially, as a woman in my twenties, to the kind of feminist manifesto that is a big part of the book. And I think it says something different to everybody who reads it. That's what's so brilliant about the book. Like any good story, it's multi-faceted and multi-layered. And it resonates now as much as it did in Victorian times and I think it's because of the central character who strives to find fulfilment. I think that's what we're all doing, we're all struggling to do that. So it's a very human story and I think now, coming to it as a middle-aged woman, I see it from a different angle which is from an angle really of individual human rights. I see it as a story of a character who understands that in order to thrive, she needs nourishment, and not just physical nourishment but emotional and intellectual. And that's why I think it's an important story to still be told. And that's what I want to make very resonant with this production.

Interview with Sally Cookson



So that's the first thing that you do. So when you're considering how you might start approaching that story...

I rely on my instincts. So the first thing I'll do, and if it's a novel, I'll read it once just for pleasure. I'll just make a mental note of the things that ping out in the story to me, the things that I think could be theatrical. The things that I think would make a good piece of theatre. And then I'll read it again and I'll make notes about the things that ping out. So, themes or ideas that I think are going to work very well in theatre and those are the things that kind of tickle in my stomach and I want to itch those tickles and it's that that I kind of latch onto in a very instinctive way. And there were lots of things in *Jane Eyre* that really fascinated me. The challenges really, of the story. How on earth are you going to put this on stage? One of the things with Jane that I had no idea how we were going to do it but I was really interested in how we were going to approach it as an ensemble and in the devising process was... When you read the book, you get very close to the title character. She is your friend, in the way it's narrated – first person narration. It feels as though she is talking directly to you and you feel very close to her. You have access to her mind and

Interview with Sally Cookson

what she's thinking. And that's a really important part of the book and I wanted to avoid having the actress playing Jane narrating – or telling the audience what they are thinking – what she is thinking – but I didn't know how we were going to achieve that. I just knew it was one of the challenges I wanted to investigate in the rehearsal room.

What do you do on a first day with your cast to start to frame that? It depends on what the project is. With *Jane Eyre*, I was working with very experienced actors but they hadn't worked together before so the first thing I wanted to do was to make them feel comfortable. I always see my job on the first day as first of all making everyone feel very relaxed. Although you know first days are never relaxed! They're always hideous. I like to get them over and done with as quickly as possible. But I will always try and set up this idea of 'ensemble'. And that means working physically in the space together. And I will always do specific exercises, some games, I think games are really useful but I use very simple exercises that I've used for many, many years which I've sort of developed really from various things I've been shown by other people. But I think what I do is just make people be together in a space, use their bodies which triggers their imaginations. As soon as you start getting physical in the space, you stop actually thinking intellectually and you respond instinctively. And that's what I'm really interested in doing. I want people to not feel anxious or nervous. By getting them physically moving in the space, that really helps with that. So we'll do a lot of mucking about, throwing a ball, running, doing exercises where you have to do two things at the same time so counting while catching and throwing, keeping a ball in the air, all that kind of stuff, very kind of basic exercises, lots of coordination exercises, quite a lot of sort of movement-y stuff, we'll do. And try and get actors to laugh, you know. That's always a good thing if you can make them laugh and smile. Then they feel that they can relax and trust the environment, to really open up because that's what you're demanding when you're devising. People are going to be exposing themselves in all sorts of different ways. They're going to feel very vulnerable, they're going to be offering up ideas that get rejected. They're going to be asked to... not just think about how to interpret the character that they're playing or characters

Interview with Sally Cookson

that they're playing, but really take responsibility for how, as a company of actors, we are going to tell this story and that demands a lot from an actor.

And just to elaborate on that slightly, what do you see the role of an actor as in a devising process?

Again, you're asking them to do a lot of things. They've got to be wonderful actors and they've got to be able to interpret their characters brilliantly which is the conventional bit. They've also got to create the dialogue. I find that a very important part of the devising process. They have to find the character's voice and the character's words. Now, there's a lot of help with that because I always work with a writer in the room, but I find the best work comes from the text coming from the actor. I will always try and recruit actors who enjoy doing that, who enjoy improvising, trying to find their voice, trying to find the words that their character speaks. So they're essentially having to be writers as well. And some actors thrive on that and some actors absolutely loathe it and don't enjoy the process at all. So I make sure when I'm auditioning I will always test that in an actor to see whether they're able to do it naturally. And it doesn't mean that when you set up an improvisation an actor's got to be totally brilliant all the way through that improvisation – that's not it at all. But they've got to understand that that is how the character is built. And that through those improvisations, by kind of distilling what they do, we'll discover the essence of the character.

And with your production of *Jane Eyre*, the actors play lots of different parts, except for a couple of actors who have one part, but they are still a part of the ensemble as well. How do you choose that? Do the actors choose that themselves or do you choose that before you start rehearsals?

I usually make those decisions before we go into rehearsal. I think that's one of the things that... That's just a really important time-saver. There is so much to work out in the rehearsal room that if we've got to work out that too, then it just takes an awfully long time. And I have quite a good instinct on casting. I enjoy that side of it very much so I will always cast it before we go in. Having said that, I have occasionally, during a devising

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process, cast it and then halfway through realised that actually one of the other actors would be better placed playing one of the parts. And that's happened, and in fact that happened on *Jane Eyre* and because of the trust there was in the room, because there was a very egalitarian feeling, when that happened, the actor who I asked not to play that part any more was incredibly gracious and understood and agreed that it was right for another actor to play that part. And that was extraordinary because you can imagine how difficult that would be to take a part. Usually I cast everything very precisely before I go into a rehearsal room.

And why did you choose to multi-role for *Jane Eyre*?

I like seeing that in work. It's one of the things I really enjoy. When I go to the theatre, I love seeing an actor playing more than one part. I was inspired by Theatre Complicite in the eighties - that's the first time I saw them do that, and I loved it. I thought it was so clever seeing an actor switch from one character to another and almost be unrecognisable. I think there's a real pleasure for the actor. I think that's an important part of it and creates a very, very tight ensemble.

