

TABLE | ROOM | STAGE

Fresh Eyes Responses

The Understudy, Scene Work
August 23, 2015

BONNIE LEE KELING

- Scene work: Several scenes, apparently previously rehearsed, gone over with the director suggesting variations in speech inflection, speed, body language, stage movement, facial expression & so forth. Found myself getting tense with the repetitions & corrections, realizing that proof of professionalism was being played out before my eyes. There is very little room for expressing frustration or impatience: this is the process & as director Michael said, this beginning work is "tender." Perhaps that explains my discomfort, feeling almost a voyeur, watching private vulnerable acts, not yet 'ready for prime time.'
- Environment: Entered the theatre lobby as another theater company & its first audience were exiting; walking back to rehearsal room noting another theatre company is also rehearsing, in an adjoining area. So much activity, electric energy this building is holding.
- Timing: The importance of timing is accentuated. Needing to pay attention to words & actions, so they make sense to the audience & honor the playwright's writing & stage directions, while allowing here & now creativity. What a delicate dance. Silence or stillness can speak volumes, too.
- "Is That Funny?" One monologue tackles the question & reinforces the often mysterious chemistry involved when a joke flops or brings laughter. (Jerry Seinfeld still does unannounced standup to test how he's doing.) *The Understudy* is intended to be a comedy.... However, I found it excruciating to watch a joke done repeatedly.
- Yelling: there seems to be a lot of yelling! Can anger, frustration, aggression, tension be 'shown' in other ways & how does that get decided as the production develops...?
- Terminology: Within the play there are terms used that may not be understood outside the theatre community. (How is a 'standby' different from an 'understudy' for example.) Similarly, when the actors, crew & director talk --'color', 'nuance', 'prop wallet', 'beat shifts', 'tonal shifts'.....
- To Be Continued....it was a more emotional experience this time, perhaps because the Fresh Eyes experiment is just that. Looking forward to more observing of this production's crafting, refining & then the actual performances.

TRISH GARNER

It is more difficult to comment on the process here. The dynamic is just that – dynamic. The play that is going to be this play is beginning to take shape. If I have one critical comment to make, it would be that more attention could be given to the pauses, the transitions, the shifts in voice tone. To be sure, the actors are finding their way, and I can only imagine how difficult this must be when they are still learning their lines. How to maintain a

flow – or perhaps more germane, how to effect a transition, in the midst of starting and stopping in order to remember lines. Not at all easy.

I also feel that the pauses or transitions are particularly important in this play, which clearly weaves a Shakespearean and intricate web of multiple layers among the “real” character and his or her history / emotions, that character as an actor on stage, an actor as a professional – needing to earn an income, actors vs actors VS actors and actors, being an understudy. Then we add the present actors playing these parts in this current production, this director’s vision, the part of the stage, the part of the audience, etc. etc. One might even say that this interplay [pun intended] is Kafka-esque! But that’s exactly why the pauses are so critical. Not to slow things down and lose the dynamism. But, in a sense, they allow the audience some time to see thru one prism, only to be set in another direction – just as the play moves in another direction.

There is an interesting degree of intimacy in this aspect of the play-making process. Being open to give of oneself, and at times to be wrong about choices. The director and the actors are so clearly professionals, and I admire their work.

I also notice an interesting difference between the way Michael communicated among the actors. An intriguing physicality, a sense of pulling taffy with Harry, a more direct approach with Jake and a very quiet, more intimate tone with Roxanne. He clearly appreciates the actors’ dilemmas, but doesn’t hit them over the head with it. Joins in, but also makes clear he is the director. Seems masterful to me.

I wondered how old Gavin and Jared perceived that Harry and Jake were. What the age disparity was. And Roxanne?

The tape recorder – its electric wire was distracting. And when Harry bangs the water glass on the table, it is a metal table and it rings. I’m not sure that is the table that is going to be used on stage, but the ring seemed needlessly loud.

Query – when Roxanne looks at Laura, is there one location above the audience that she will be looking to?

I really enjoyed Harry’s change in vocal tone when he started reading his understudy part. Emphasized that this guy really is a good actor (even to the more subtle point of emphasizing that it’s what we as an audience expect of a good actor).

I thought at one point that the chairs around the stage deck would be distracting, but I did not find it so during this rehearsal. I really liked the way Harry stretched his arms over the backs of the chairs when he was talking with Jake. But kind of leaned over and looked at his hands at one point when he was talking with Roxanne (or rather, when she was talking to him).

In the scene where Roxanne says “no, no..... you moron,” I thought Michael’s direction to Roxanne, and her response to his direction, to add variety to the verbal and physical pacing, emotional intensity, etc. was good. Not just pissed off, but building for it. Or building to it and pulling back, then building again.

I can’t remember which actor speaks of the “Crown Prince,” but I would BE the Crown Prince, take a pause and almost to the degree of parody, be regal.

I’m hungry for more Fresh Eyes!!

ALAN SCOTT HOLLEY

Almost two weeks after its very first rehearsal, *The Understudy* has made great strides toward becoming a production that is ready to hit the stage on opening night. With just over two weeks until first preview, however, the time for tables filled with snacks and friendly chitchat has long passed. Upon entering the rehearsal room, I immediately noticed how the vibe among the cast and crew had shifted since the read-through, and rightfully so. It's time to get to work, the clock is ticking, and every second is precious.

The actors jumped right into scene work, which is an arduous process of running the same lines, the same blocking, and the same set changes, over and over again, making different decisions and receiving different notes every time. Surprisingly, the actors seemed a bit uneasy when they realized that they would be performing for someone beside the director and crew for the first time: us. I was just about ready to hightail it out of there, as I in no way wanted to impede their ability to work. Luckily, director Michael Mendelson stepped in and prefaced the night by telling us about how the actors are currently operating within, as he called it, a "tender part of the process." Still working to get off book, the actors are wrestling with the difference between memorizing the material and really *knowing* the material, all the while trying to explore every word, every action, and learn what it means for their character. As much as I love acting myself, sometimes I wonder if there's enough coffee in the world to keep me going in a professional production.

This is the part of any rehearsal where trouble and pressure seem to just keep piling up, and it all comes as a natural part of the territory. Actors are repeatedly forgetting lines and stumbling over their words, the director is trying to be helpful without being a dictator, and the crew is struggling to keep up with props and set changes while also realizing that certain things are just *not* going to work like they thought they would. Needless to say, frustration builds. On the surface, the inherent difficulties of working scenes may seem to fight against the spirit of the comedy that is being produced, but in reality, it's a necessary evil. All it takes is one great moment of clarity—an actor finally finding how a line should be delivered, or the director finally landing on how the scene should play out—to rejuvenate the room and remind everyone why there are working long into the night.

I continue to be impressed by director Michael Mendelson. He gives every single note to his actors with care, intention, and a kind of loving guidance that I haven't seen anywhere else. For most notes, he will announce his thoughts loud enough for the whole room to hear, but there are some that he feels are personal and important enough to a certain character that he will pull the actor aside and discuss with them one-on-one. When a joke succeeds, he laughs harder than anyone else, despite the fact that he has heard it countless times already, and you can frequently find him bouncing from one foot to the other with a huge smile on his face. To be honest, I'm just jealous I'm not working for him myself!

Everyone is tired, but it is in no way all for naught. So much progress is being made, and I can't wait to see how everyone's hard work is going to pay off!

KATRIN KASPER

- *What was the most **surprising** thing you saw or heard today?*
How uncomfortable it already feels to be a witness of the triangular relationship
- *What did you notice about the **way people work**?*
Very willing to try out new stuff.
From the first reading to now, the group has become a team.
I appreciate the way new ideas are introduced.

- *How did the **director** (Michael Mendelson) interact with actors or stage management? Or **actors** with each other?*
He's very encouraging and creates a safe rehearsal atmosphere.
He quickly responds to what the actors do and gives precise directions in an understandable way.
Sometimes he gives private/tête-à-tête notes to the actors, which I think is nice if it's about something that only one character needs to know.
Actors work professionally with each other, don't waste time and really connect with one another.
- *Based on what you saw today, what do you think may be the **trickiest** part of the show to pull off?*
Probably technical stuff/cues in the performance
To keep up the fight energy and pacing for the comedy aspect of the play
- *What did you think about the **design of the show**? How do you think the design will contribute to the **audience's experience**?*
It was good to see the rehearsal space to get a better impression of what the stage will actually look like later. I like that it's a rather small space – it adds physically to the tension that's already there due to the relationship situation of the characters.
For the audience it will be nice to have this intimate setting, where actors can walk around seats and be close to audience.
- *Was there anything that someone said that was particularly interesting?*
Obviously it's been decided to let Harry speak directly to the audience in his monologues.
It surprises me every time how detailed and planned blocking is when it still looks natural and also how written text becomes alive.

Questions that came into mind:

- I didn't think that the instructions from the director would be so detailed - is that partly because it's comedy?
- I wonder what the process/character preparation of the three actors is. I'm aware that that is a very personal and intimate question that should probably not be answered in public (or not answered at all) – but if they were willing to talk a little about that, that would be great!