

Cordelia's story, *Brideshead Revisited*

This was a two part project set by Illona Linthwaite at Drama Studio London during my training. Our first storytelling exercise was telling fairytales (I did 'The Treacherous Island', from Sweden), but this added a new twist – using an existing story and developing it from a new direction and perspective.

Task 1: Tell the story of a novel/part of a novel from the point of view of a single character, making up sections to fill gaps if necessary. (15 minutes)

I chose to do Cordelia Marchmain from 'Brideshead Revisited' by Evelyn Waugh. To me, she was one of the book's most memorable characters and yet her story arch is entirely separate from the main narrative told through snatches of other characters dialogue before she re-emerged at the end, utterly changed and almost terrifyingly honest. I was really proud of the story I put together and the way I told it – beginning at the end and telling it through Cordelia's memory starting with her last happy summer of childhood and coming full cycle. As an actor it was a great learning curve – Cordelia is tragic in the book because you see her through Charles Ryder's pitying eyes. She has no pity or sympathy for herself, so the challenge was to turn the audience into Charles and let the sense of tragedy come from them. I was not allowed to milk it, or I would have been unfaithful to the character. It had to be fairly full on, unreserved and honest, delivered with a lot of eye contact. It also had to be funny to capture the joyous childhood. I also tried to retain as much as Evelyn Waugh's style and words as I could.

Opening lines:

'Do you pity me? Do you look at me and think: there sits Cordelia Flyte, who was once such an engaging, charming child, grown into a plain and pious spinster; all that burning love spent on serum-injections and delousing powder?

Don't pity me. I don't pity myself. I had a most privileged childhood, running through the marble statues, round the fountain, up the grand staircases of Brideshead Castle...'

Later example:

'...Rex took catechism classes to convert to marry Julia. What a chump! He swallowed everything I told him, even the sacred monkeys in the Vatican. But then it turned out he was divorced. Marriage, you see, is eternal... Julia married him anyway, as a Protestant. It was a small, squalid affair in the Savoy Chapel. No bridesmaids.'

Task 2: Tell the same story in 3-5 minutes to a piece of music using only movement and no speech.

This was generally viewed as a much scarier task. It was quite exposing, but thinking back, far more memorable than the initial stories – I watched a lot of performances, but the stories I remember were accompanied by a good movement piece. They could be incredibly moving and actors seemed to embody their characters more, I personally felt that I was much more part of the story – seeing characters and space around me.

Whilst I think it would be difficult to do this second half of the project alone from the first and make it understandable, it would be great to experiment with combining music and movement with vocal storytelling in future work.

I used the beginning of *The Lark Ascending* by R. Vaughn Williams.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR2JIDnT2I8>

Some character research

Cordelia as described by Charles Ryder at the end (the Cordelia I was telling it as):

‘rather shabby, moving in the manner of one who has no interest in pleasing’

‘brisk and matter of fact’

‘so accustomed to gross suffering as to lose the fine shades of pleasure’

‘hard living had roughened her’

and yet :

‘I saw Cordelia’s fond eyes on all of us, I began to realise that she, too, had a beauty of her own.’

‘there was no past tense in Cordelia’s verb ‘to love.’