

Embedding Dyslexic Practices



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DEVELOPING YOUR CREATIVE PRACTICE

REFLECTION DOCUMENT

Written by Matthew Jewson, BA,MA | Dyslexic Theatre Director | 2024

Acknowledgements and Thanks

“Thank you to the creatives that were interviewed back in January 2024 for your honesty and generous thoughts on your creative pathways as a fellow dyslexic. I thank my team, who were part of the entire exploration in the rehearsal rooms. We created something magical for 6 days and this is only the beginning of a longer and fulfilling neurospicy journey. I hope this piece of reflective writing can be used as an indication that the theatre industry and those decision makers in it’s system can see that neurodivergent creativity is an asset to all theatrical spaces and to adapt creative settings that can allow dyslexics to thrive.” –

Matthew Jewson

Abstract

Embedding Dyslexic Practices in a rehearsal can only be established through extended explorations, reflections, and processes. The DYCP project sought to originally find a toolkit for actors to explore and for directors to scaffold their cast through a more creatively accessible lens for dyslexics. The goal was set, and through reflections and research phases, it was apparent that to fully “embed” what is essentially a new creative way of approaching a rehearsal room in theatre, I needed to understand my own identity as well as the creative approaches available to me. Therefore, with 6 days to explore and ‘embed’ simply wasn’t enough time to design a new toolkit and fully functioning practice. This has come to be my largest realisation that this project has indeed become the catalyst for a much longer process that will become my body of work.

Through the simulated rehearsals, we have reflected each other’s needs, shared experiences, and challenges, and identified what the industry needs from our ‘neurospicy’ gifts. This has developed my practice in a way I never expected, but it has been a gift as it has now created a pathway for further exploration and projects to come. I have established great creative partnerships, reflections, and a plan to ultimately curate a new practice for dyslexic actors working in theatre that feels wholly authentic and accessible to them.

About Matthew Jewson

I have been working as a professional theatre maker since I acquired my MA at East 15 Acting School in 2012. This subsequently was the same year that my Dyslexia was discovered. I worked as a professional actor in my early years, touring with Chapterhouse Theatre Company, Watford Palace Theatre, and TIE with Rainbow Theatre. From 2015 to 2020, I was Creative Director for the educational theatre company TWAS Theatre Ltd. The company toured curriculum/issue-based writing and led workshops to young people. In 2019, I worked as Engagement Producer at Mercury Theatre, Colchester, and currently

work as a freelance director/practitioner. I have been freelance directing theatre since 2021 and lecturing in higher education at the University Centre Colchester and Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Project Overview

The premise of the project is to explore the current practices that are in place for me as a theatre director and to reflect on the needs of dyslexic actors and how to address any challenges that might arise during the process of creating a piece of theatre.

The days were originally broken into sections that were scheduled; however, due to the nature of the reflections, the plan needed to be adaptable to allow time to reflect.

However, the following rehearsal techniques were explored and reflected upon in the space;

- Auditioning
- Line Learning
- Table Reading
- Sight Reading
- Approaching Shakespeare

At the beginning of the process, I took the opportunity to collect information about the general creative experiences and science behind dyslexia. I spent 6 research days across a couple of months to digest and inhabit the workings of the dyslexic brain, I came across a multitude of inspiring books that have been referenced and the bottom of this reflection document.

After the initial research phase I interviewed 11 creatives that spanned from actors, playwrights, directors and artistic directors. These interviews were set up to listen to the varied experiences that these creatives have had or currently having as a dyslexic within the industry. These meetings also pathed the way of how I was intending to approach the simulated rehearsals. I was able to identify the needs of the dyslexic creative and what I could interrogate within the work. Within this document at the end of each day is a useful quote from one of interviews taken place.

With the rehearsals I had 4 actors present for each of the 6 days, a scribe was present for each day to document our reflection. Lastly, I was supported by neurodiverse specialist Deborah Groves, who offers coaching and support for working artists with neurodiversity. She's worked with the Globe Theatre, Arcola, RSC and National Theatre to name a few. With a wealth of experience under her belt she's also about to embark on releasing her new book 'The Dyslexic Actor' that will become a vital tool for dyslexic actors navigating the industry.

Introduction

First, this experience has been revolutionary and now has become a critical part of my identity as a dyslexic director, actor, and educator.

This project re-affirmed the importance of what it means to me to be a dyslexic creative person and how I have worn it as a badge of honor in the later years of my practice.

Through my experiences as an actor on jobs, I regularly met creative walls connected to my dyslexia. This ranges from feeling burnt out from line learning rapidly, processing information, and experiencing overwhelm in rehearsals. During these times, I thought it was normal, but now with 10 years of experience, they were avoidable circumstances and instances that were not in place while I was on the job.

Now working as a theatre director my practice has been formed by making sure that the young actor in me would not experience these stresses again. Therefore, I have dedicated my practice on focusing through a lens of accessibility for dyslexic actors and a process of approaching storytelling that also works for my neurodiverse needs.

When first approaching a production, I work with visualizations and pictorial approaches that can help me build the world of the play in the first instance. This would start by creating a Pinterest board to inspire my vision of project. The pictures would also be a through line in rehearsal in terms of character development. Kinesthetic approaches are key within my practices particularly when analysis character embodiment which involves archetypes, colours, use of elements and senses. In text analysis, I adopt the process of Uniting, Actioning and Objectives but take it into a more colourful view (more on this below.)

The following has been simplified to give a succinct view of how each day was implemented. I started with the aims set out for each day, followed by reflections and exercises. By allowing time to process and reflect at the beginning of the next day, key points of what was learned from the day.

“You know, Dyslexics really need to be seen more”

– Kate Briggs, Actor

Day One

Summary of the day:

From the offset, it was important for me to establish an understanding for the group to hear what my current practices are as a theatre director and what I am to gain from this experience. We took the time to each talk about our own dyslexic journeys to understand our current coping strategies and the challenges we faced. Deborah spent the day talking

to us about identity, intersectionality, and what makes you, YOU. We started by discussing actor-centric preparation for a role and 'mining' a text.

Understanding our own challenges

At the top of the day, we took the opportunity to explain all our neurodiverse journeys; immediately, it became a revelation in the room that many of us mentioned our own dyslexia within an educational setting. Therefore, this was a reflection on the challenges faced in school from primary school to drama school training. Naturally, dyslexia will show its challenges within learning settings because dyslexia fundamentally is a 'learning difference.' But what struck a chord for me was listening to events or circumstances where our learning differences were not supported, harnessed, or even at times ignored. These moments can leave lasting effects on our future choices in learning and life in general.

Moving back to my original goal is that my aim is to prevent any actor from feeling vulnerable in a space where they are learning and processing information.

When we reflected about our own theatrical hardships in rehearsal rooms, another unified experience was working with a director who could not positively respond and change their practices to suit the needs of the dyslexic actor. There were also instances when some (including myself in the past as an actor) felt that they couldn't vocalise their dyslexia to a creative team out of fear of putting the actor at a disadvantage during the rehearsal process. Feeling embarrassment and even shame against having a "diagnosed learning disability" is a natural and normal response to seeing that you might give off a negative air about yourself and disrupting others. In this space, our neurodiverse specialist mentions :

"There is a medical model of neurodivergence and a social model: however we live in social model. After school, it's fine. Challenges lie in the formalised learning. However, diagnosis is not the right word; instead, identity is used. Your identity is not a disadvantage. Upon acceptance of this, I will be able to go into a rehearsal room and show that identity, rather than that limitation." – Deborah Groves

What was also reflected amongst us was that we all had examination experiences in schools where we were excluded from classes and given extra time on tests. As much as this scene is a strategy to harness neurodiverse learners, all we see is the social exclusion that has occurred. If anything, it alienates neurodivergents more and, in turn, magnifies negativity.

However, we were gifted a room with an actor who had a positive learning experience as a dyslexics. This actor mentioned the following:

"I was brought up being told I was a 'genius' – I was supported by family and encouraged to learn about historical figures who were dyslexic like Einstein, Turing, da Vinci."

Family responses to understanding learning differences can vary but being raised in a positive household can change the whole perspective of how we learn. They finished by saying “I’ve *always thought of it as a superpower.*”

From sharing our personal dyslexic journey, the following listed were also discussed:

- Delayed involvement in activities of enjoyment (such as theatre) because felt held back to do so.
- Family links: How do relatives deal with dyslexia?
- Collective coping strategies
- Dyslexia is very varied and isolating at times.
- Losing the fear of dyslexia through theatre and meeting like-minded people.
- How actors and directors work differently
- Difficulties beyond performance prep and rehearsal
- Awareness of neurodiversity in the room.
- Table readings: Understanding what it brings, but fear it brings
- Traditional methods/approaches for looking at new text but also different/kinaesthetic methods

These reflections identify unified and unique challenges, experiences, and wants from a creative process.

What is your approach to creating a character?

The neurodiverse specialist suggested an activity for identifying our actor’s processes before entering the rehearsal room. The reason behind this was to determine what contrast and coalitions the actors might have in the process. One of my curiosities around this exercise was to see what kind of visual, kinaesthetic and sense immersion are their practices to inhabit a role. So you has 14 weeks to prepare for Day 1 in the rehearsal rooms...what do you do?

- Highlighting text
- Uniting and Titling
- Music Playlist
- Mood boarding
- Line learning
- Researching the world of play
- Character listing

These are clear and appropriate practices for actors to use in preparation for a role. What my curiosity within my practice is how can we use these techniques in a way that allows the dyslexic mind to flourish. Practices that are visual like mood boarding and highlighting texts, are effective uses of visualising line retention and imagining characters through images like from a Pinterest board. A novel way of building the rhythm of a

character is listening to music that you think your character might like. This might be a time period in which the play is set or a series of emotional tracks that your character might resonate with. Our specialist mentions:

“Being dyslexic means we can pick up aural rhythms in sounds and decipher them quickly”

I personally like to immerse myself in music when visualising a text from a director’s perspective; for me, it paints the heartbeat of the play.

These are techniques that many dyslexic actors are unaware that other neurodivergents have similar practices. What I find brilliant about a neurodiverse approach is that naturally dyslexic individuals think outside the box, so naturally, we will find approaches that work uniquely for ourselves, but when finding practices that are shared, it’s like sharing a piece of that superpower that we each behold. Not all practices will work for everyone, but that’s the beauty of taking what we need and leaving those that do not work free of the fear of having ‘bad’ practices. I feel creating a space so we can galvanize these techniques into a cohesive friendly practices for neurodiverse actors is necessary.

The following is a transcript taken from day one of the exploration:

TF : If I am in a rehearsal space, how do I go out of my way to tell director ‘these are my needs?’

MJ : It is difficult to pinpoint what access needs we might have—is that just articulation? Is there a language proficiency? Is it a neurodiverse block?

NS: Walking into an established space is intimidating because we feel the weight of those who have been through it before us, but it is important to be able to convey our needs to the right people. We should be comfortable saying this: “We as neurodiverse people will be better when we’ve got it...”

DG: It will be helpful when speaking to a director to offer solutions, not just stating the block that we are experiencing.

NS: What comes from knowing our identities and what we must succeed. It is positive as soon as we leave school. Back to drama schools: It is frustrating when they do not teach processes, especially on the commercial basis that they operate.

I remember, in my first professional acting job, I was two weeks into rehearsal and found my cast were miles ahead in line learning. One day, I took my director to the side and had to apologise for learning lines as promptly, I failed to tell him that I was dyslexic but wanted to keep it hidden out of fear of exposing my ‘disadvantage’ The was completely fine but mentioned “It would’ve been good to know this from the offset!” In my reflections on this experience, this is because I didn’t feel like I could have said anything? Would any accessible assurance be made if I did say something? What if I had not got the job because of being dyslexic?

“The language that we all need to learn to create access for ourselves. Knowing what it is we need to ask for, so a director can understand what to provide. We are all under pressure because everyone in the rehearsal room is under pressure. You should know yourself and know who to speak with to best convey these theatrical terms that have been used to make people feel excluded.”

-Deborah Groves, Neurodiverse Specialist & Access Worker

Day Two

Summary of The Day

This day was an opportunity for us to isolate the challenges that we face when in rehearsals and explore further how actioning and uniting is for us in terms of processing time and needs. Is there a use for us, and can the language be adapted for it to be an accessible take? In the afternoon session, we took the time to list down the challenges and fears we might have and reflected on these in the space. We also examined roles and responsibilities within the rehearsal room. I took the opportunity to share some of my current approaches to a rehearsal with my expectations for the actors in my creative space.

Actioning

Actioning is a standard use of actor to director practice that can assist the actor in providing transitive verbs to activate text and is also used as a measure of understanding text for both actors and directors. But does it work in its original form, first discovered by Stanislavski? It's a practice that's universally used by directors and practitioners and is embedded in all drama school training. This was reflected by one actor:

“Actioning wasn't helpful for me as it gave too many things to think about at once – and in turn engaged the logical part of my brain rather than emotive/responsive part.”

You can understand that when you're working with a dyslexic actor with a director when prompted in a rehearsal to think of a verb from the spot or even using the Book of Actions by Marina Calderone, it can stifle your creative flow as you then use the more intellectual parts of our brain to search for language that resonates with a line. I don't know about you, but when I am prompted to answer something quickly or search for a word that represents what I mean, I feel flustered and overwhelmed.

But I still believe actioning has its place in a rehearsal room but just done in a more dyslexic friendly route...

Here is an extract of what was reflected in the room regarding actioning:

NS: What are you trying to achieve in the direction when using Actioning?

KC: It might help to be questioned as to what I am trying to achieve in my delivery, so there is a basis for understanding the changing direction.

DG: So, is it objective versus action? Multiple actions can lead to the achievement of objective. 'Every single punch is intended to end the fight.' The difference is that every action attempts to achieve an objective. Therefore, when each action fails, it has to change to try to achieve the objective in a different way.

NS: Therefore, the director's toolbox must include all these options and create a different approach to reach the objective.

MJ: What do you think the character wants from this scene? Is the foundational objective. All these techniques like actioning are there to serve the objective. Therefore, does it help strip away the techniques and focus on the objective alone?

NS: For neurodivergence, simplicity spawns a complexity of responses. Keep it simple and be playful, then build. After an initial undirected exploration of a scene, perhaps additional layers of direction and suggestions are introduced slowly. For us as actors, appreciate that these words might be thrown at us, but for us as neurodiverse people, keep them simple and know how to translate these words into helpful things.

MJ: The Key thing is about not overwhelming the actor

NS: The traditional language is what can be potentially triggering

KC: I would appreciate it if the director remained focused on the objective, but on how we can use a different approach to achieve it.

What this reflection meant for me is that there is an opportunity to develop theatrical techniques that are fundamentally more simplistic for a dyslexic actor to feel enabled and supported to reach their acting objective. This exciting part is that we do not know what this approach is.

Part of this fantastic piece of reflection is that it indicates the cognitive holes that we are experiencing in the rehearsal room. However, we are not here to say that actioning is a bad neurodivergent technique; that is not the case at all. It absolutely has its place and uses; however, if we are going on the mind set of creating a new language that is accessible for us to reach our full potential, then we are just providing another tool for the director and actor.

Following from this discussion, it was mentioned how isolation from not knowing a word in an action when prompted can feel, in turn creating a vulnerable space for us.

NS: Some attitudes in rehearsals for those trying to be accessible can at times inadvertently have a patronizing approach to ensure that people feel safe. But the point is that the industry is not working for many people to achieve their potential, particularly for neurodiversity.

DG: It's difficult to be creative when feeling wrong and vulnerable. Like I don't want to expose my intellect when prompted to find a bunch of verbs in a speech.

NS: People forget the importance of playing for exploration and development. Being given too much direction can result in the loss of the direction itself.

What are the challenges that dyslexic actors are facing?

Within the afternoon session, we conducted a shared exploration of what we find challenging as a dyslexic actor when approaching a play. This is from the day of the job offer until the final performance. We wanted to explore further whether some challenges are unique or shared as a collective. Again, for me personally I had not ever creatively worked in a room full of all dyslexic actors, so I was interested to see what could be discovered.

We went through the list and raised our hands if we had experienced a challenge; below is the list with the tally of hands next to it;

Challenges listed:

- Learning chunks of texts scheduled for a particular time (4/6)
- Spelling (3/6)
- Research but not really understanding the play (4/6)
- Afraid to ask for script in advance, especially for bigger role (4/6)
- Being able to say you are overwhelmed (5/6)
- Being asked a question that requires an immediate response from a director (6/6)
- Line-learning (5/6)
- Feeling like you are not serving your vision or doing your job well (5/6)
- Dance calls (4/6)
- Sight-reading (6/6)
- Director notes before asking for clarity (6/6)
- Inundated with new information on day 1 of rehearsals (6/6)
- Taking longer to process information (6/6)
- Taking longer to learn (6/6)
- Physical choreography (5/6)
- Overwhelmed by too much information (6/6)
- Exhaustion (6/6)
- Processing visual information (1/6)
- Short-term memory (6/6)
- Confidence affected by dyslexic language (5/6)

- Remembering notes in a short time (6/6)
- Emotionally exhausted when in performance mode (6/6)
- Being 'switched on' (6/6)
- Rehearsals that are static/not kinesthetic (6/6)
- Rehearsal process under- and over-whelming (text analysis) at the same time (5/6)

Within the 26 listed challenges, only one listed challenge (1/6) raised their hands the remaining 25 challenges either half or more hands were raised on each challenge.

This creates a clear indication that dyslexic learners can experience the same challenges in a rehearsal room but are never able to articulate these challenges out of fear of feeling embarrassed. The intention of using this is not to highlight the issue and to have a solution for all challenges but to use a reference point into how we can facilitate a space for us to meet the challenge and work collaboratively to solve them in real time during rehearsals.

It is also important to mention that neurotypical individuals can also experience these challenges and that they are not exclusive to neurodiversity.

The following is a transcript from day two on our challenges:

DG: Misunderstandings can always occur in rehearsal. That's not the problem. The trap that can happen is the actors getting angry at themselves for not getting it right/understanding, rather than expecting misunderstandings to happen and the good stuff to emerge.

MJ: Are we neurodiverse people hypersensitive to our own failures and inadequacies and have heightened responses to them?

ND: An individual with ADHD may experience up- or down-tempo swings, ups, and downs: emotional deregulation. Strengths of being dyslexics: empathetic, highly intuitive, and sensitive, which means more sensitive to discomfort. Compounding this is that for much of our lives, we have been told we are getting things wrong.

DG: Failure too early in life will make us hypersensitive to failure. I grew up as the youngest of seven siblings, which means I grew up being used to failing or struggling more than older siblings, and I have grown up used to it and comfortable with it.

KC: In childhood, very sensitive to getting things wrong, but as an adult, very happy to make mistakes. Possibly a product of parents asking: 'so what have you learnt from that?'

DG: As intuitive neurodiverse people can often think that we can see through the director's notes the negatives. That they are lying about enjoying, for example, a self-tape

NS: Being intuitive, we are used to assuming what people are thinking, which we have to take care of because we can assume they think we are failing.

DG: Some actors take every note as a failure, but as a director, I should help them make the shift to seeing every note as a development.

NS: There is not enough praise in the arts, specifically in the theatre and rehearsal room.

“I think it’s so useful to be able to collaborate with people who have differences in your type, even if it manifests differently in them because different things manifest differently in us all, but there’s just that understanding collectively, and we are trying to build something accessible. Neurodivergent rehearsals just make people keener to accommodate people’s differing needs.”

– Marcy Amrick, Playwright

Day 3

Summary Of The Day

This day, we took the time to reflect on auditioning from an in-person perspective, mainly by briefly discussing self-taping. I was curious here to listen to our actor’s experiences in auditioning and what neurodiverse challenges they encountered. What I strive to embed in any auditions that are in my control is to create a space for dyslexic actors to never feel exposed or vulnerable, as these are naturally stress-inducing experiences that can have a profound effect on neurodiverse people. We also spoke about a technique that derives from Uniting/boxing text that has been reimaged as “Chunking,” I created this term in my directing practice and wanted to audit the uses/challenges of the technique. Later in the day to week one, we took the opportunity to positively reflect on our strengths as dyslexic creatives.

Auditioning From a Dyslexic Perspective

During my research phase of the project, I became aware that my own current practice in auditioning and leading the audition rooms as a director, although in every job, the auditions will be specified to the work. For example, the space for new writing will be completely different from a commercial musical theatre production.

I have found my own challenges with this regarding the various creative rooms I have been in as a director and haven’t been able to fully embed my ideal way of best practice for auditioning at times, but when reflecting with the group, I took the time to share what I would like to embed in my auditions if I was given complete creative control.

Below is a list of things I would like to create for a neurospicy friendly audition:

It is also worth noting that the below are equally useful accesses for neurotypical actors.

- ***Script sent and available to actors at least 1 week before the audition***

We learned from Deborah Groves that Equity Union now provides a rule that actors are to receive sides/scripts for auditions at least 2 ½ days before the audition. In my practice at least a week ahead will allow the actor to process the wording, phrasing, and cognition to build an interpretation of the material. It is vital to allow processing time.

- ***Promote workshop audition calls when possible (though it's not always possible)***

I have found that creating a space in which all auditions can collaborate and create with also showcasing themselves establishes an environment that relaxes the actor and promotes joy and positive experiences. It is not always the easiest to be set up but usually works for R&D auditions, devising, or new workspaces.

- ***No more than 4 creatives on panel to avoid overwhelm and anxiety***

If I can control who is in the room, what I'd like to do is make sure that no more than 4/5 creatives on a panel is present; otherwise, it becomes stuffy in a room and intimidating. I would like to promote a welcoming and engaging environment. The other tactic would be that I would walk to the waiting area to greet them in, there's nothing worse than walking into a space that feels like an X-factor audition.

- ***If a panel table is set out so that the director is sat on the side or in front of desk.***

Not only is done for myself for practical purposes, it allows me to get us to interact face-to-face more easily, but it always rids away with a physical block to the actor. When behind the table and taking notes, we can lose the connection to the actor and isolate them. So I always try to be in an accessible space to be able to see them, encouraging them, and engaging them more importantly.

- ***Allow time to work with the actor and have conversations unrelated to the work.***

We want the actor to be relaxed first. With this, I'd create an opportunity to talk about themselves outside creativity, like what their newly binge obsession on Netflix is and what it is about. It provides a level of relaxation and safety to the environment. Ideally, this is before they see their material.

- ***A break-out/resting area for actors or waiting room with tea/coffee available***

Again dependent on whether space allows it but creating offers for tea/coffee being available are nice openers to destress and centre your actor. Break out spaces away from

noise as a relaxation offer is always welcomed but is tricky to establish if the space is not available.

- **Promote restarts in an audition** (*it's ok to start again and no it won't ruin your chances*)

This is something I've found particularly with drama school graduates. Fear of asking "Can I start that again?" if any omissions occur during their audition. This ineffective fear of "You have one shot at this" is unhelpful and unproductive. I want my actors to feel like they can start again and even promote prompts/scripts to them to use in the audition. It is not a memory exercise... We're human and we can get things wrong. It is also important to state to the actor that should this happen, it will not affect what we think of your potential.

Chunking Your Text

A device that I have used in my practice is the term "Chunking" – I took the opportunity to share this device with the actors in a form of visual breaking up of the text. This derives from Stanislavski's uniting and is more famously used by directors like Mike Alfreds. This is a form of breaking the text into 'events' or 'moments' for the actors. As an actor, I always found uniting a useful task, but it was quite granular and, at times, an arduous task. However, for a neurodiverse mind, I feel it has merit. The proposed method fragments the text in a manner that is digestible for processing needs. Taking this idea into account, I developed a broader version of uniting.

Therefore, instead of marking out different events, we widen the scope of narrative shifts. These chunks are distinguished a little more by how the writing is structured to drive the narrative. Therefore, typically, we will find 5-8 chunks in a written play that show plot or narrative changes. What I would do next is to assign a colour and title to these chunks to create a visual representation of the movement.

This has been a technique that has been a personal approach for a few years and have never had the opportunity to explore this approach with a room exclusively of dyslexic actors, so I was keen to see what feedback I could obtain and how it can be utilised.

We explored this technique with the play 'Random' by Debbie Tucker Green. The following lists the selected comments:

NS: Whether you want to call this text analysis, or whether you want to call it something else, is very helpful. Also helpful for line-learning: i.e. section of statements and question sections. It is also about the process of visually noticing.

CO: Is it possible to do this though at the beginning of the process, when the actor might not have read the script or had a chance to process and analyse?

KC: Perhaps as a thought, chunking something that you as director do for the whole play but do not share with your performers initially, but something you can return to if you notice that something is not working within a scene.

Receiving this feedback was vital to my process in this technique. What was agreed in the room was that 'chunking' isn't a form of text analysis but is used as a precursor to the more granular actor-centric work like uniting, actioning, and beats.

It was also reflected that is this a technique for directors, actors, or even both? Right now, it's difficult to make that decision, but its original discovery was when I was acting. What I would like to do to properly establishes its effectiveness is to embed this practice whilst working on a production.

What I would like to do is to establish chunking at the beginning of a rehearsal process as a foundational approach and see if it works as a good processing technique for further text analysis during rehearsals.

"Don't be ashamed of it. Don't let it block you. Speak your truth within it and just state it." -
Jesse Jones, Artistic Director Royal & Derngate Theatre

Day 4

Summary of the Day

This day was an opportunity for us to explore Shakespeare and a few techniques in the language through a dyslexic friendly lens. It was also an opportunity to further explore the curiosity of the block that many dyslexics have with Shakespeare's work.

Shakespeare vs. Dyslexia

This topic has been quite divisive among the neurodiverse community. The initial session on Shakespeare discussing how the natural challenges from a language perspective.

My connection to Shakespeare began when I was playing Romeo & Juliet in my college production. The moment I understood that the language was meant to be acted out rather than read in a classroom was creatively unlocking, but the most profound effect Shakespeare gave was that all of my cast had to experience a level of investigation into the language. For the first time, I was in a room where everyone found the language challenging. It linked to my Dyslexia in a way that I never expected. I felt less exposed and fearful of getting it 'wrong' because we were all collectively in that same boat.

I also found the IAMBICs, verse, and prose to be vital tools for understanding the language. It was like even if you do not know what the word is, you can still get a sense of the emotion or weight by playing with the extension of the vowel in “Oh” to truly understand Juliet’s speech to Romeo. The imagery became a clear connector to my dyslexic identity.

On the other hand, many dyslexic creatives aren’t so keen on Shakespeare, so let’s pull a couple of quotes from a selection of creatives I’ve interviewed in my research phase:

“I have no desire to direct Shakespeare at all in the slightest; it is because of the interrogation of the text and the different language. I think it would just make me feel insecure in the room around it, and if I am challenged. How that that will come out because it comes out when I’m challenged”

“I do feel like the industry, still is and always has been pushing creatives, artists, actors, directors to find the love for Shakespeare and yeah it’s not for everyone.”

“I think it sort of feels like there is some kind of mathematical code to it that I just don't that I haven't cracked. But it feels like language shouldn't be something that is mathematical like that.”

My practice as a director and educator is not to sway opinions or to convince anyone to enjoy Shakespeare. It is important to respect the tastes of the range of views and opinions neurodiverse creatives hold on Shakespeare. The one reflection I do have from listening to many thoughts on the Bard is that negative experiences derive within a learning capacity, whether at school or in drama schools. But my job is not to interrogate that, but instead, I’d direct you to Petronilla Whitfield’s book – *‘Teaching Strategies for Neurodiversity and Dyslexia in Actor Training’ Sensing Shakespeare*. Within my reading list, this book allowed me to discover a fantastic case study on how she approached Shakespeare through a neurodiverse lens.

Sonnet Exploration

We took the opportunity to explore a Shakespearean sonnet consisting of 14 lines of poetry. I within my practice find approaching a sonnet quite a useful tool because it can unlock imagery in Shakespeare’s language.

1) Finding pictures

One technique upon first reading through the sonnet, I asked the actors to read it to themselves a second time, and this time highlight any words that spark an image or picture in one’s head. It can be as many or as little as possible.

I like this technique. I believe it allows the actor to see his/her own interpretation of the sonnet. We know sonnets are not locked with narrative or character, so it allows a level of devising and creative making for them to understand how it feels to them.

2) Identify the verbs

In the third reading of the sonnet, I asked the actors to underline and perform words and verbs that were within the text.

This may provide an opportunity for the actor to find action in the sonnet.

3) Storyboarding your sonnet

Lastly, by creating a level of layering, I gave the actors the opportunity on a separate piece of paper to use the highlighted pictures or verbs underlined to draw a series of images. They can be as literal or abstract as they require. It is completely up to the actor. It could be a shade, shape, stickman, or something more artistically minded.

Watching Shakespeare

When sharing our own reflections on Shakespeare, the topic arose as to how we digest his work: We spoke about watching versions of Shakespeare, whether through NT live production recordings, movies, or listening to audiobooks. It is important to encourage that this is a perfectly fine approach to learning the language, particularly for any trained actor, that you feel like you are cheating or cheapening your approach. I would encourage our dyslexic actors to watch a version of the production you are putting on and use it as a tool to understand the language and narrative. It is perfectly valid and extremely useful.

“Dyslexics want to be able to retreat, and I think I like that. It is a clear word to use. When in processing mode, we can retreat, work out what they mean, try and understand it, try and work out where the goal posts are, and then start to become a little bit playful”

- Ed Harris, Playwright

Day 5

Summary of the Day

Line learning can be a significant topic of conversation for the dyslexic community. Within my own experience, I have been able to explore a range of techniques that work for me personally, but again, this was an opportunity to delve into the coping strategies that we all might have and curiosity. In the afternoon session, we took the opportunity for

me to explore with the actors my 'active' table read, which is a more kinesthetic version of an initial table read.

"People often say to me 'I cannot learn lines quickly', and I say to them 'that is correct'."

- *Isobel Pilkington, Actor*

Line Learning Strategies

At the beginning of the session, we took the opportunity to go round and list our current line learning strategies. Below are our actor's reflections:

Actor 1 -Line Learning

- Use of repetition techniques
- Ask friends for help
- Learning preceding lines

Actor 2 - Line Learning

- Read it out loud a lot
- Focus on the chain learning first section and continually adding
- Linking visual images to cues
- Do it before bed.
- Audio Recording
- Having pen/paper in bed so that you wake up and check bits

Actor 3 -Line Learning

- Before bed
- Drawing lines around trigger lines to identify the thoughts leading to the lines
- Give each line a different colour that means something to me and communicates the sense of the line
- Getting it in my body

Actor 4 - Line Learning

- Use to write the internal monologue above the line: thoughts in my head that sit above the text.
- Learning the words like learning the lyrics to a song and mouth movement without meaning

The above techniques are completely valid and useful line learning techniques. From my perspective as a director, I'm interested to see if there is anything a director can do to

assist or support the visual learning of lines. Being completely aware that is an actor's duty can also be a significant stressor within a rehearsal room. Below is a transcript conversation about line learning processes and challenges:

DG: *I've made the mistake of learning the lines so thoroughly ahead of the process. I've unconsciously made lots of decisions before the process, but still not helpful for the director to request no learning before exploration.*

MJ: *I encourage people to learn lines as best they can, with the ability to play. Have worked with many people who have very solid ideas, and it is hard to get them out of them.*

DG: *No actor should come to the room without putting his/her work in the way that works best for them.*

MJ: *Have you experienced line-learning blocks (hitting a barrier, or a section that is just not working for you)*

KC: *Shifting the focus to audio and physical content*

NS: *Rhythm*

CO: *I think of it like sewing, and if it's not going in, it's because there's a link missing—or a dropped stitch—and identifying what is often brings new meaning to it.*

DG: *Often I find if I am not remembering a bit, it is because I do not know why a character is saying something*

CO: *Absolutely. Finding new rhythms and beats to find ways in. Used for stuttering when young and can slip back in. Overcoming the need for training through breathing*

DG: *What do you do when you dry? My voice teacher compared stubbing your toe to a freeze in response to the moment. Breathing was also involved. Deep breath: a reset that helps overcome block*

KC: *Improvising is always an option. Furthermore, based on bouncing back and forth as reactors will take you back to where you should be.*

Active Table and Sight Reading

Exploring the text 'The Last of The Haussmann's' by Stephan Beresford, I facilitated an 'active' table read to facilitate a more relaxed reading of the scenes. I have always found table reading to be a tricky experience, particularly if it is a script given to me on the first day of rehearsal. Even with little preparation, the anxiety- and stress-inducing experience always overshadowed my choices with lines. It has never been an enjoyable experience for me.

So a couple of years ago, I started exploring table reads where I would encourage actors to either stand or even walk around when delivering lines. It is not used as a physicality to character but as an aim to relax the actor and the fidget willfully around the space. I have always found that this freed the actor in some capacity, and it can also become more playful.

Here are some reflections on the exercise by the actors:

CO: *Moving on every line is a useful tool to moving beyond sight-reading blocks*

KC: *Often wondered why they use sight-reading in the audition process.*

CO: *improves, but does not stop things moving about the page.*

When exploring this exercise, one actor bravely powered through the struggle of sight-reading, I noticed when it was their line that they would slow down and stop. I asked them to focus on the action of walking instead of stressing on spoken flow while reading, and once this happened, the flow of their talking briefly improved. However, it wouldn't stop the word fizz on the page; it did relax the focus into something more physical and in turn relaxed the actor. Within this exercise I have a small hypothesis on where our dyslexic brain needs to focus when sight reading text.

Focusing on Brain Hemisphere Function, the language, time and logical parts of our brain sit within the left hemisphere whilst our creativity, holistic thinking and intuition reside in our right hemisphere. All neurodiverse and neurotypical have a more dominant hemisphere and it is suggested that dyslexics like to lean to the right hemisphere more than others. With that knowledge my theory is that when we're engaging in a left hemisphere task like sight-reading when we're exploring language and having to think logically, we should allow our right hemisphere to aid the action more, allowing the creative kinesthetic approach to harness the left side of our brain instead of fighting against it.

This is a new practice of mine in rehearsals and something I've been keen to explore further in creative spaces. First impressions are important, and the last thing we want is to make our actors anxious about reading on their first day of rehearsal.

"If you need clarification always raise your hand. If you don't understand what something means. If something is confusing to you, just raise your hand and ask because by not asking you're just hurting yourself, you are hurting the room by not asking that question and when you think about it that way, it makes it feel less."

- **Allison Heinz, Director & Writer**

Day 6

Summary of the Day

Day 6 was set out to explore what could be next in the frame after the DYCP project. We spent the day discussing potential projects that could continue this work. This was organically collaborative to pitching ideas with the aim of creating a new practice for dyslexic creatives.

My Final Thoughts and Next Steps

In the space I took the opportunity to share the following reflection:

MJ: These six days have created a kaleidoscope of ideas we have explored, but it's all through the lens of simplicity, which is where I begin. This has given me the space to hear neurodivergent responses and feedback on the needs and requirements of my processes and practice. About developing practice that is inclusive to all. Reaffirmed the need and the importance for good practice. Being in control of time is the most important thing to allow the processing of new ideas in the rehearsal room, and to allow room for everyone's strengths.

My DYCP project sought out to originally find a toolkit for actors to explore and for directors to scaffold their cast through a more creatively accessible lens for dyslexics. The goal was set, and through reflections and research phases, it was apparent that to fully “embed” (what is essentially a new creative way of approaching a rehearsal room in theatre), I needed to understand my own identity and the creative approaches available to me. I also wanted to be led in the room to explore their needs and how best I could help them. This organic approach allowed each day for us to reflect with guidance of our neurodiverse specialist, Deborah Groves which was completely invaluable.

Early on in my research, I understood that this project was not about seeking answers but rather about finding what could become my best practice. With the guidance and tutelage of Deborah and actors present, I was able to identify the areas in which I would like to embed my creative practice that are tailored to be ‘dyslexic friendly.’

Through the simulated rehearsals, I have been given the space and security to take creative risks, reflect on creative needs, and collaborate with fellow dyslexics who bravely shared their experiences and challenges. I could explore the exercises I learned during my research phase, and in turn, this developed my practice in a way I never expected.

I have established great creative partnerships, reflections, and a plan to ultimately curate a new practice for dyslexic actors working in theatre that feels wholly authentic and accessible.

From research to rehearsals, I have learned that it is important to acknowledge that although the techniques are not definitive for all dyslexics, they are an option, as all dyslexics will experience challenges based on their own neurodiverse identity.

Next Steps

So what's next? – It's important to me that what was achieved in this exploration was a call to action on that we dyslexic people in the theatre industry need to continue to develop our way of working but instead of finding coping strategies while unlearning our didactic education system. Why not collaborate and create a creative space for us all to do this together.

I want this DYCP project to become the foundation of a larger R&D project that explores embedding a new creative language that dyslexics can understand and use from a lens of simplifying and scaffolding the artist. I want to see us innovate and create new explorations, rehearsal techniques, and cast studies into creative work that is entirely made by dyslexic and neurodiverse creatives. This will be achieved by setting up a new neurodiverse residency theatre company.

This phase has been reflective. Now, time to apply.

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