

MAKING THE PLAY

STAGING THE PLAY: Interview with Director Esther Baker

Why this play and why now?

EB: I encountered the play when I facilitated a workshop on it with Davey Anderson, the writer, at the National Theatre. And I thought then that it's so right for Synergy's work. It's a great piece with so much in it for young people. It feels really contemporary and it's really complex even though it's only 24 pages long. It really addresses violent crime and why it happens. And I think we've got a real problem with young people and violence. It's very interesting working on it with Synergy because we have a cast and crew of professionals and ex-prisoners, who it really resonates with, both as people who have experienced violence but also having become violent themselves because of unresolved issues.

Did you at any point think about casting an ex-prisoner in the lead role?

EB: The lead has a lot to carry; it's a story-telling performance; a tricky play and you have to be careful not to over-emote it. So I felt that it would be great to have a professional carrying the protagonist role. I also wanted to have ex-prisoners who bring an authenticity in the cast and also as assistant director and assistant stage managers. It's not just about what they bring to the play. Their contribution is invaluable in terms of being able to communicate the ideas in the play to young people, via the post-show discussions and workshops.

As part of the process, do you spend time working on the relationship between professionals and non-professionals?

EB: Everyone is treated as a company of professionals. Obviously there is an element of people learning on the job but everyone has an equal voice in the room. The process requires both openness and confidentiality, as people have shared some intense life experiences in the rehearsal room. It's a team effort, very much an ensemble piece. The presence of the non-professionals is an invaluable resource in the room. We don't have to go out and do lots of research about violence and violence in the home. Everyone in the room has something to say about this play that is quite near to them.

What are some of the challenges of staging this play?

EB: How to put the past and the present on stage? What is in the past and what is in the present? Who takes which lines, as they are not allocated. Those choices affect the meaning of the play. Is James telling the story or is he hearing the story? Who is he talking to? Who is the audience? Is it his key worker? Is it young people he wants to prevent doing the same as him? There are many options like that. In terms of staging, you have to go with the economy of the text. It has to be physicalized but it's about finding a way that is subtle but effective. Also, how do you change between roles in a fluid way. We're using video projection so we have to look at how we integrate that. We'll have a lot of technical rehearsals, working on that. We're going for abstract

images, rather than literal images which is in keeping with the use of suggestion in the text and in our playing style.. And we have chosen a set to go with that as well. Simplicity.

Do you feel a responsibility to communicate a particular message to young people via this play?

EB: I think the play is very responsible. It doesn't focus on crime. It focuses on circumstances around it. We as a company have a responsibility in choosing what we do and don't talk about in the post-show discussions because people in the cast and crew have seen a lot of things and it's not always appropriate to highlight those things. We also have a responsibility to the ex prisoners because we're talking about their life stories and it's up to them what they share and don't share.

What would a successful experience of this play be for the audience?

EB: That it engages them and allows them to connect with it emotionally. That it opens up questions for them rather than tells them the answers and that there is an interesting dialogue between the cast and crew and young people. And that it is of high artistic quality – the art is at the centre of it, not the message. It's not about preaching a message, it's about communicating with them through art.

What about the young people watching who have not experienced violence, who live a life protected from the things James is exposed to?

EB: Empathy. A lot of our work is about challenging the public generally about people who commit crimes. A lot of 15-year old's who commit these crimes are demonised, whereas there are a lot of complex reasons why people do them. I think if we can help people understand that, we can help change their attitude to why and who the people are who commit crime. And they are part of our society.

How much time did you spend with the writer?

EB: We spent a day workshopping and an evening talking about it which was invaluable. I think if the writer of the play you are directing is alive, then it's always worth contacting them because it just gets you beneath the surface of the play. Plays reveal themselves when you're rehearsing them either as strong, complex pieces of work, or the holes begin to show. But this play is fabulously written.