Welcome to the National Theatre’s rehearsal diaries for Julie

These rehearsal diaries, written by the staff director of Julie, explore the process of rehearsing and staging the play.

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National’s repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you’ve enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or 020 7452 3388.

Jane Ball
Programme Manager, NT Learning
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Further production details:
nationaltheatre.org.uk
The National’s Production

Cast
in order of speaking
Jean Eric Kofi Abrefa
Kristina Thalissa Teixeira
Julie Vanessa Kirby

Partygoers
Temitope Ajose-Cutting
El Anthony
Thomasin Gülgeç
Francesca Knight
Dak Mashava
Michela Meazza
Ana Beatriz Meireles
Ashley Morgan-Davies
Rebecca Omogbehin
Yuyu Rau
Petra Söör

Supernumeraries
Subika Anwar-Khan
Steven Bush
Holly Rose Hawgood
Tom Kelsey
Olivia Leat
Tucker McDougall
Josefine Reich
Elliott Rogers
Sophie Spreadbury

Director Carrie Cracknell
Designer Tom Scutt
Lighting Designer Guy Hoare
Movement Director Ann Yee
Music Stuart Earl
Sound Designer Christopher Shutt
Fight Director Owain Gwynn
Illusions Chris Fisher
Video Designer Mogzi Bromley-Morgans
Company Voice Work Jeanette Nelson
Staff Director Jo Tyabji
Associate Movement Director Michela Meazza
Rehearsal diary: week one

Rehearsals for *Julie* began on 16 April, 2018. Staff director Jo Tyabji’s rehearsal diaries reveal how the process unfolded.

Rehearsals for Julie begin with a week of work around the table with Eric Kofi Abrefa (Jean) and Vanessa Kirby (Julie), understanding the world and beginning to build backstories.

A gift and a challenge of working on plays set ‘here and now’ is that the world is so familiar. So much is universally understood – we don’t need to get a specialist in 21st-century etiquette to come into the rehearsal room to talk to us about how people greet each other. But what is taken for granted shouldn’t go unexplored. We work through the events of the story and articulate the intentions as a way of exposing the innards of the play, and creating a strong framework of shared understanding within the cast. We ask ourselves what one character is doing to another and why, opening conversations that immediately go to the heart of the play, exploring the dynamics of race, class, gender and place that propel the action.

Alongside the work we are doing on the world of the play and intentions within the script, director Carrie Cracknell asks the actors to start a timeline. They begin with 2018, and work backwards to the year of their character’s birth, writing their character’s age with each year. As these backstories become clearer through the work on the script, we make choices about when important events happened. For example, when did Jean arrive in the UK? How much of that time has Julie been around? When did Julie’s mother die? What happened just before Jean started working for Julie’s father?

There are some big decisions to be made, which have been deliberately left open in this version of the play, such as where Jean is from. The question is posed on Monday, and Eric has an answer by the end of the week. He decided that Eric is from Ghana, and his mother is from Côte d’Ivoire. With each detail, the complexity of the world becomes more apparent.
On Monday, we are joined by Thalissa Teixeira (who is playing Kristina), and do the work of consolidating her backstory and timelines with Eric and Vanessa so that the relationships between these three members of the household become clear.

The rest of the ensemble join us on Tuesday, and at last we realise the scope of what we will be able to create together. We are excited by the close, detailed storytelling of the scripted work supported and amplified by the movement work around it. We begin dovetailing text work with ensemble work, so that Eric, Vanessa and Thalissa are switching between the very brain-tiring work of thinking into their characters, imagining the psychological life and creating the impetus for their words and actions, and joining in company-wide warm ups that lead into physical improvisations.

Evolving out of the physical warm up, these exercises begin as freeform movement, and then develop into broadly structured improvisations. The entire action of Julie is contained within the night and following early morning of a party. Starting with unconnected movement the ensemble’s physical exploration becomes coloured with atmosphere, and little bubbles of intention emerge – to dance, to connect, to disconnect, to recover, to dance again. At its core, this rehearsal process is about creating the environment for performers to make their best offers, and Carrie stresses there is no wrong idea. From those offers and ideas, choices are made. Some actions are carried forward and evolved, and others discarded or pared back.

The line between choreographic and naturalistic movement is bent and twisted – someone might simply be sitting up because before they were lying down, yet that movement might instantly shift into a more heightened, expressive place, and back again.

As the improvised world of the party develops we start to place the opening story beats of the play within it. So now there’s a bartender, and Julie focuses her attention on him; and now there’s Kristina and Jean in the kitchen, working; now there’s a phone-call; now there’s a conversation about shame; now Julie’s asking Jean to come up and dance and Kristina’s shrugging, and waiting until they’ve gone before she walks away. Story emerges so fast, albeit in the wrong order and over a much less condensed period of time than it eventually will, but this allows a freedom in the early exploration of character and relationship. This freedom among the cast helps to soften the edges of what is often a profound shift away from exploration around the table. Our understudy cast are part of the ensemble, and it’s great to see them beginning to form the relationships that will be invaluable to them, and to the company. By Thursday we’re doing scene work that is far closer to the script. We are still improvising the beats, but with a closer eye to causality: this happens; and so, this happens.

We break from that work to create a first draft of a movement section that will support a specific part of the naturalistic action. This immediately raises the question – does this movement amplify what is already happening, or does it counterpoint it? Currently, it does both; cutting across as well as accompanying a complex set of actions and reactions. We’ve made more than we’ll use, of course, but it’s a first look at how the abstract is embedded in this ultimately naturalistic world. As a result of the repeated improvisations and freedom to explore, by Friday we have set the first draft of the opening scene. We have created an outline of a centrepiece of movement, and we’ve explored the broad structure of the party through music and physical research. There’s a sense of acceleration, the company have learnt the language of the work they’re making and are starting to speak it fluently.
Balancing the crafts of devising without text and directing written text has been my fascination since I was 16. One way of combining them is to develop strong relationships with writers, and developing projects from well before they enter a rehearsal room. However, our process in the rehearsal of *Julie* is embodying another approach: by combining multiple modes of narrative expression, we’re (tenderly, violently, bravely, haltingly) peeling a story off the page and into the world, and at the same time making story beats in the room from the ground up.

We’ve continued to work between large-scale, wide-ranging improvisations and detailed scene work, moving through beat by beat and getting more on top of the lines as we go. With the arrival of our movement director Ann Yee there is a palpable shift in pace and focus. Ann watches scene work for a day, to develop an understanding of what Carrie is building and to become attuned to the demands of the story unfolding downstage. By the end of the day Ann is talking rapidly and urgently about the long invisible lines between characters offered by the extreme horizontals of Tom Scutt’s design, and the repeated forms that occur downstage and upstage. Fundamentally, the ensemble must assist rather than break those lines if the upstage party is going exist onstage alongside the downstage scenes. There’s a great deal to be done to shape the physical work we’ve been improvising so that it gives focus to and assists those lines of tension. It must amplify the downstage story, with the upstage story breaking through in ways that are useful; adding not subtracting, magnifying rather than undermining,

The morning of purely physical work allows Ann to create the environment from which to offer Carrie more moments of – frankly – pure creative genius than can possibly fit in one show. Luckily, that’s why we film it: to be able to go back and identify what will create the building blocks for what the show really needs. These building blocks create a new movement language, offering textures and even whole beats that couldn’t have been accessed by designing them from the outside.

Another objective of the week is to create the psychological and experiential foundations for the relationship between the expressive world of the party upstage and the naturalistic world of the action unfolding in the kitchen downstage. To put it another way, Vanessa needs to meet the ensemble without the pressure of an impending scene one, and Julie needs to know who the people at the party are and what her relationship to them is (which means they need to know that too!). We give each member of the ensemble a first sketch of two different characters, sometimes paired with another character, and they begin to build relationships. This task immediately changes and deepens the work they’re able to do in relation to *Julie*, leading to a second day of improvisations that offer the right combination of textures and beats for the opening of the show. By Saturday, Carrie and Ann are ready to storyboard from what they’ve seen, laying out those moments of devised material in relation to the complex and gnarly forward action painstakingly provided through the page by playwright Polly Stenham. All week, line run by line run, scene rehearsal by scene rehearsal, the actors are feeling their way into this action.

even when this happens through contrast.

The endgame having been stated, the physical work determinedly goes back to a much earlier state. I know this imperative well: if you don’t set up the right creative relationships in the room, because you’re anxious to get to the end point of the work too fast, you’ll be in danger of straining or breaking something and may not get there at all.
On Friday we reach the end of the play. This is, of course, not the same as finishing the play! We work through from the central event of the show (spoiler, it’s Jean and Julie having sex) to Kristina’s entrance, finding our way towards blocking from stage shapes found in improvisation. We then work from Kristina’s entrance to the end of the play, walking through Julie’s death and Kristina’s re-entrance, and making discoveries from that sketch. Tom Scutt has given us an incredible totemic item in the long table that is the centrepiece of the kitchen. Vanessa’s first suggestion is a version which results in Julie dying on the table. The symbolism is seductive, sacrificial and epic. But it also swings into the arena of suicide as something achingly glorious, portraying Julie’s suicide as a solo tragedy rather than a social one, with repercussions beyond herself. This shows an aesthetically beautiful death, instead of the messy and unbearably sad reality. We talk instead about Julie dying off the table, curled up in a position that could lead Kristina to think she is asleep or passed out, only going back to check she’s ok from an instinct that she’s more still than she should be, or as a final act of selfless care before leaving.

We then work with the dancers into the opening sequence of party one, work which continues on Saturday morning with movement and architecture-led investigations that then became character-based explorations. From there, the opening sequencing of party one is sculpted so that each person at the party has movement led by character and intention. This then allows the dancers to become freer in using their contemporary technique, lifting moments out of pedestrian or quotidian movement into a heightened, stylised physical expression. The non-dancer ensemble is fully embedded within this, making great physical and character choices.

The action of the play within the text (as opposed to the story of the party built through the physical work) is so swift, taut and complex that discoveries made on Wednesday can feel impossible to repeat on Thursday. The active relationship between Jean and Julie is so knife edge that the actors feel they’re never far away from it being unsustainable – he’d leave if she said that, she’d leave if he did that. But the truth of the play is they don’t, and holding to that, trusting that their mutual fascination and attraction is enough to override, or more accurately to allow them to enjoy what they’re doing to each other. This duality is the challenge of the rehearsal process day by day.
Week five is a period of intensely hard work. Brain connected to the heart, connected to the gut type work. The work is divided into two types. Firstly, working through the understanding the actors must have for the tough psychology of the characters in the play, so that those actors can be fully in control of it, recognise it, and hold themselves safely separate to it. Secondly, working through movement with the acting scenes in place, and asserting the right physical language to make the work as a whole soar. Both types of work use the brain, both types of work produce something approaching euphoria when they start to bear fruit, and both types of work are deeply engaged with the spinal cord of storytelling.

Here’s some of that euphoric fruit: Ann Yee takes the dancers away for a few hours and comes back with some energetically raw opening choreography, which created such an intense kinaesthetic empathy in all of us watching that we grinned like loons, punched the air and danced in our seats. That original choreography was in unison, which is unlikely to be in the final cut since the show needs something that reads as party rather than choreography, so I feel quietly privileged to have been present to be able to experience that front footed, all in, same facing stadium tour version.

A quick aside before I continue my list of cherries – on the first day we met, a hundred thousand years ago (otherwise known as Week three), Ann referred to choreographing by stealth. I asked her how she did that, and she took a breath to begin explaining, before changing her mind and saying, ‘You’ll see.’ This week I have seen. It can be summed up like this – making it possible for the brilliant humans you’re working with to make their best offers of movement, then get them to repeat what they’ve made until you arrive at a movement phrase that’s come completely from them. She does it so fast you’ll think she magicked it. Another fruit: when Carrie Cracknell painstakingly facilitated a conversation about where Jean is from. This allowed the underbelly of what the story is saying about how race operates in these relationships to surface, unlocking a really tiny but very key rewrite (we’re talking three words). No dancing, but the euphoria was just as real.

Finally: Thalissa and I spent an hour on the terrace in the sun talking through Kristina’s emotional journey beat by beat in the very last moments of the play. There is a specifically hard task for Thalissa: she has to leave the stage carrying a lot of psychological weight, and then be on her own (because everyone else is on stage) for a prolonged period of time. Safety first: we devised a ritual she can do when she comes off stage that will allow her to put it down and return to herself, and then pick it back up again when she needs it. Mental and emotional health is part of being able to do your job to the highest degrees of excellence. The elation when we found the right tasks for her ritual was like a silent flash of recognition, busting the myth of torture being necessary to being a ‘true artist’.
Theatre Glossary

Meet and greet
Usually held on the first day of rehearsals, the meet and greet is a chance for the company and production team to meet everyone who is involved in the production as well as staff from marketing, learning, fundraising, etc. The director – and sometimes the writer – may take this opportunity to explain a bit about their vision for the production.

Round the table / table work
Some directors like to start rehearsals by reading through the script, and getting an understanding of the play, characters and setting without adding movement or blocking.

Blocking
Working out where actors should stand or move on stage, and at what point.

Put on its feet
The point in rehearsals where the company start to add in blocking and try out movement for scenes. Some directors like to put a play ‘on its feet’ from the very start, and work out the intention of the play and the characters at the same time as the movement.

A run
Rehearsing each scene of the play in chronological order. Runs help directors and actors to see which parts of the production may need more attention or reworking. The first run-through of a play is often referred to as a ‘stagger-through’, as there are usually delays and mistakes.

Off book
Once an actor has learnt their part, they no longer need to use their script in rehearsals and are described as being off book.

The book
This is another name for the script. A stage manager who is ‘on the book’ will be in the wings of the stage, ready to help any actor who may have forgotten a line – they are also known as the ‘prompt’.

Act
The separation of a play into different sections, which in turn are sometimes sub-divided into scenes.

The Space
The area in which the work is taking place. This term can refer to both the rehearsal room and the theatre stage.

Staff director
The National Theatre uses staff directors rather than assistant directors. Staff directors have a variety of jobs, depending on the production and the director they are working with. They can help with background research for rehearsals, lead improvisations, and act as a liaison on behalf of the director. Once a production has had its press night, the director steps away from the production and the staff director takes over. The staff director rehearses the company at ‘bring back calls’ and also rehearses the understudies.

Bring back call
The National Theatre operates a ‘rep’ system, meaning that a production will not be playing every day and a company may have a break every other week or so. A bring back call is a short rehearsal on the day when the company return from having a break. The staff director normally holds a line run with the company, and rehearses in more detail complicated scenes, movement sequences or fights.

Rehearsal call
The stage manager will work out a day-by-day rehearsal schedule for a production. The rehearsal call sets out the scenes that are being worked on that day, and the actors or production team who are needed, and when.

Ensemble
A company of actors or performers where the emphasis is on collaborative group work.

Company
The cast, creatives and other staff associated with the show.

Understudy
An actor who learns the role of another member of the company so that they can perform that part in the event of injury, illness or indisposition.

Actioning / Intentions
A way of approaching a text, which some actors and directors like to use. Each line is assigned a transitive verb, which may help the actor to explore ways of delivering that line and uncover the meaning behind what their character is saying.

Stanislavskian
Relating to Constantin Stanislavski, a Russian theatre practitioner usually associated with method acting.

Beckettian
Relating to playwright Samuel Beckett, whose work is associated with minimalism.

Alexander technique
A system designed to promote healthy movement and posture. Named after its creator Frederick Matthias Alexander.

Upstage
The area at the back of the stage furthest from the audience.

Downstage
The area at the front of the stage closest to the audience.
Improvisation
Action taken by the actors that is unprepared or unrehearsed. During the rehearsal process this is often led by suggestions from the director for the purposes of exploration and discovery. During performance improvisation is often used by actors to cover a mistake or accident on stage.

Beat
In the text of a play, a playwright may use the term ‘beat’ to denote a pause or a shift in pace or intention in the play. In rehearsal, the term is often used to describe a particular moment or event on stage. It can also be used to describe a unit of time.

Line run
The company say their lines without adding in movements. Line runs help actors to feel confident that they know their words before going on stage. Sometimes line runs are done at speed, which can really test how well actors know their parts.

Model box
A scale model of the set, used by the director and designer to work out how each scene could look. For the acting company, model boxes help an actor to visualise where they will be standing on stage and the world their character is living in. Carpenters, production managers, scenic artists and prop-makers will also study the model box, to get an idea of textures and finish on the set, as well as the overall look. Model boxes can also help to flag any issues with elements of staging before they are made.

Fit up
The set is assembled on the stage.

Get in
The set, props and costumes are brought to the stage, ready for technical rehearsals.

Technical run
Running through the play setting all technical cues, including lighting, sound, set changes and automation. It is an opportunity to practice scene changes, characters’ entrances and exits, costume changes, and for actors to get used to being on the set.

Dress run/Dress rehearsal
A dress rehearsal is a chance to pull together all elements of a production, including sound, lighting, costume and work through the play as though it is a performance.

Previews
Before a production has its press night, it normally has a couple of preview performances. Productions can still change right up to press night, and it is during previews that the company and director get to see how audiences respond to the production, and they may rework sections accordingly.

Press night
The night the critics see the production before reviewing it.