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Welcome to the National Theatre’s rehearsal diaries for ‘Master Harold’... and the boys

These rehearsal diaries, written by Anthony Simpson-Pike, staff director of ‘Master Harold’... and the boys, introduce the unique process of rehearsing and staging this play. At the end of these rehearsal diaries, you’ll find a glossary of some of the common theatre terms which come up as part of a rehearsal process.

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.

Sarah Eastaff and Jane Ball
Programme Managers, NT Learning
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Cover image (Hammed Animashaun and Lucian Msamati) by Sebastian Nevols

Further production details: nationaltheatre.org.uk
The National’s production
The Company

Cast, in order of appearance

Willie
Hammed Animashaun

Sam
Lusican Msamatic

Hally
Anson Boon

Understudies

Willie
Obi Opara

Sam
Mensah Bediako

Hally
Jame Lampert

Director
Roy Alexander Weise

Set and Costume Designer
Rajha Shakiry

Lighting Designer
Paule Constable

Movement Director and Choreographer
Shelley Maxwell

Sound Designer
Giles Thomas

Company Voice Work
Simon Money

Dialect Coach
Joel Trill

Staff Director
Anthony Simpson-Pike

This production had its press night on
1 October 2019, in the National’s Lyttelton Theatre.

Production Photographer
Helen Murray
We’re a small company, the play’s a three-hander, and so we’ve all quickly gained a sense of familiarity with each other. On the first day we read the play and start digging through the script for facts and questions, which leads to some useful character and research questions.

The rest of the week is mainly focused on movement with Shelley Maxwell. Since Sam and Willie will be ballroom dancing in the production, Shelley is teaching us all the fundamentals of ballroom, specifically the waltz and the quickstep ahead of our sessions with our ballroom experts (from Strictly Come Dancing!) next week. It goes without saying that Shelley is a master of her craft and teaches with such clarity that I’ve been successfully learning the steps despite barely passing my dance exam at drama school. The cast have been doing an impressive job and are progressing quickly.

Shelley has broken down the components of these dances into very simple terms so that we are doing the dance before we even realise it. Each dance session is preceded by a physical bootcamp to increase our stamina and strength. Everyone has been joining in with these and supporting each other, including our incredible stage management team.

Another highlight of this week has been splitting up into groups and making kites in order to fly them like Sam and Hally do in the play. Under Shelley’s instruction we make the kites by firmly sticking to the description given in the script of Sam making the kite for Hally: we use brown paper, wood from a tomato box, flour, water and string. Meanwhile, Fi [Fiona Bardsely, DSM] and Speedy [Andrew Speed, SM] make a kite using modern materials like glue, tape and bamboo sticks. Then we go out to the terrace to try to fly them – unfortunately, there isn’t enough wind but we’re going to try again another day! By the end of the week we are all feeling a lot more secure in the ballroom steps and we are looking forward to diving further into the text next week.

Short synopsis of the play:
‘Master Harold’… and the boys is a semi-autobiographical play about a white teenage boy, Hally (based on the writer Athol Fugard himself), in Apartheid South Africa in 1950 and two black South African men, Sam and Willie, who work for his family. It is set in St George’s Park Tea Room in Port Elizabeth.

Hally comes home from school to find Sam showing Willie a dance in preparation for a ballroom competition they have entered. Sam is Willie’s teacher and a close friend. Willie has lost his dance partner, Hilda, because he beats her. He is worried because the competition is approaching and he needs to practice with her. Sam tells him to apologise to Hilda and to stop beating her, which Willie refuses to do. Sam tells Hally his mother has gone to the hospital to bring home his alcoholic father, who has been recovering there. We find out that Hally’s father is an amputee and requires complex personal care. Hally is not happy about the prospect of his dad coming home and decides Sam must be wrong. His mother calls and confirms that his dad wants to come home, which Hally insists his mother cannot allow to happen. He is clearly shaken by the news. Sam and Willie distract Hally, giving a profound explanation of the importance and beauty of ballroom. As they reminisce about their shared history, Hally gets a phone call from his mother in which she confirms his father is at home. Hally reacts badly and he is made to speak to his father on the phone. After the phone call, Hally starts to denigrate his father to Sam and Willie. When Sam tries to calm him, Hally lashes out at him with racist language, demanding Sam calls him ‘Master Harold’, and he spits in Sam’s face. Sam tells Hally they can never go back to how they were before and he almost hits him but chooses not to after Willie intervenes. Sam extends an olive branch to Hally and tells him that has a choice: continue down this path or turn back. Hally leaves. Willie, realising how devastated Sam is, gets him to dance in the tea room asking Sam to dream as they dance together.

Rehearsal diary: week one

Staff Director Anthony Simpson-Pike’s diary tracks the six-week rehearsal period for ‘Master Harold’… and the boys, beginning 4 August 2019
Having been introduced to the basics of ballroom last week by our incredible movement director Shelley Maxwell, this week we go over what we have already learned before moving on to exploring different dance sequences. On Monday we do some more work on learning the waltz before continuing our table work with Roy [Alexander Weise, director]. We’ve been talking a lot about the relationship between Hally, Willie and Sam and their shared history as well as individual backstories.

On Tuesday, we are lucky enough to have Bill Deamer [ballroom consultant] from Strictly Come Dancing come in to work with us. He is impressed with the work we’ve already done and so we immediately dive in to learning possible choreographic sequences. We have the added benefit of hearing about some of the secrets of Strictly… but I can’t tell you them here! Bill’s partner, Kylie [Anne Cruikshanks, associate ballroom consultant], is also a fantastic dancer and gives us a lot of useful tips. We learn a new dance, the foxtrot, which is apparently the hardest dance in ballroom.

Thursday proves to be really exciting because we get to use the Lyttelton stage. It is Anson’s [Boon, playing Hally] and my first time stepping onto it. Not only that but we have the pleasure of being led in a voice session by Jeannette Nelson. It is heartening and exciting to see how fast the cast adapt to the demands of the stage, how quickly they find the muscle of the Lyttelton. Jeannette’s skill and her understanding of how to help people to imagine and implement the possibilities of their voice is extraordinary. She talks to us about the placement of the voice and how it responds to the imagination. Whereas a lot of people focus on the stomach and diaphragm area, Jeannette’s advice is to imagine your voice in your lower back. It is wonderful to see how effective and immediately useful this note is.

Touching on the historical references in the text, I spend some of this week making profiles of the ‘men of magnitude’ that are mentioned in the play, including Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Shakespeare and Darwin. I also start to do some research on alcoholism to help Anson understand what it would have been like for Hally to have an alcoholic father. As well as this, I find some documentary material and testimonials for Hammed [Animashaun, playing Willie] to understand more about Willie’s behaviour and about men who perpetrate domestic violence.

Hally doesn’t dance in the play and so, towards the end of the week, when the others are in dance calls, we spend time going through the script with Anson. We start to ‘action’ the text, which isn’t something Anson has done before and it is exciting to be able to explore it together with Roy.

Friday afternoon is given over to more digging through the text. We’ve made a lot of realisations about the characters and their relationships and it feels like we’re in a good place to go further next week.
Most of this week is spent consolidating our text and table work and going further with the ballroom steps. The cast have done incredibly well in learning the dancing so far and so this week Shelley has been teaching us more advanced choreography and putting together more sequences for us to play with. The idea is that once Hammed and Lucian have enough material at their fingertips they can start to create their own sequences as well. It’s been great watching how much they have achieved in the ballroom work. And the stage management team and I have continued to join in so we’re all learning the steps.

Having learned a huge amount from our table work, we have now started to stand the play up and consolidate the lines so that the actors are free to play. Roy’s aim is to make sure the actors really own the work; this means they need to feel comfortable enough to take risks and have freedom to make discoveries before starting to block the play. In that vein we have been avoiding firmly setting anything just yet. Instead, the actors are trying out lots of different ideas and Roy and I are making a note of what might be helpful to revisit as a provocation for the actors. The important thing is that it comes from them. We have also started to bring the dance sequences into the scenes to understand them in context.

One of the main things we’ve continued to focus on this week, is the relationship between the three characters and how pressures like status or the presence of other characters like Hally’s mum, might affect them – or not – at different points in the play. In order to encourage a real sense of camaraderie between the cast, Roy has been asking us to bring in games to play together. This is because the characters play lots of games and have a shared history of doing so. It’s part of their joint vocabulary that the cast will need to embody.

We’ve started introducing the props into the room and have begun to zero in on the characters’ relationships to the space of the tea room. Practically this means all our physical warm-ups and dance sessions are in the ‘tea room’. We’ve received the props for the café, including tables and chairs, and we have started to explore what it means to dance around them and other set items. How can the actors own the space? Which character feels most comfortable in it? And what does it mean for Hally to both offer space and take it away? These are the nuances we’ve been looking at.

On Thursday we have a meet and great which is a great opportunity to meet some of the wider team at the National. Roy talks about the importance of making sure Willie and Sam are complex and beautiful, that they’re not merely just people suffering from oppression. This too has been an important subject of conversation with the cast and in the rehearsal room. It’s essential that we understand how beautiful these men are.
This week we’ve been continuing to build the shape of the play. At the beginning of the week we focus on getting through a ‘draft’ of the play. Roy’s process is not to intervene a lot at this stage of the process so as to release the actors to make choices and to play. When he sees pictures or moments that he feels he would like to keep, he will document them by taking photos so we can come back to them. Before playing a scene, we always spend some time going through the lines first, led by Fi our DSM and myself, and then we go into it. The actors have made huge progress on this front and are nearly word perfect.

Towards the end of the week, having finished drafting, we start the process of finalising a shape. One of the key discoveries we make this week is how to use the props in the tea room to physically build some of the memories Sam, Willie and Hally talk about. It feels like the quality of play in their relationship is increasing every day. Something, which makes the end of the story even more heartbreaking. On the subject of playing, we’ve continued to play games this week, the favourite being a sword and shield game where you have to tap someone’s palm, which is hidden behind their back, to get them out.

I’ve been doing a bit of research on a number of different things this week too. We’ve all realised our age because the youngest people in the room don’t know what a floppy disc is or how to use a rotary telephone so I made a tutorial. I’ve also been looking into how Hally’s school timetable might have worked. How many classes might he have had? Which subjects? What is his favourite class? These questions and their answers will help Anson to build an emotional memory but also inform practical things such as how many books he would bring to school every day and therefore how big his bag would have to be.

This week the understudies join us in the rehearsal room. I take them through a readthrough of the script on Tuesday before they have a dance call with Shelley. They’ve taken to it with focus and enthusiasm. While the main cast have continued to work with Simon Money [voice coach] on the Lyttelton stage, the understudies have also begun to work with him. Their work has been about learning their vocal habits and working on clarity. On Wednesday, the understudies have individual dialect calls with Joel Trill [dialect coach] which is useful. Michael Henry [singing coach] has also been coming in to go through the songs in the play with the understudies.

I’ve started working through the text with the understudy cast, doing the same digging process we did with Roy with them and discussing research to bring them up to speed. We are going through the facts that appear on each page of the script and asking any questions that feel relevant to playing their characters. It’s been helpful to start building a complex picture of the information we have in the play and how that can inform their work and we’ve been making numerous essential discoveries.

In interesting prop news, we’ve been testing different bottles for Hally to smash on stage. We want to avoid smashing real glass so we’ve been looking at using sugar glass. However, sugar glass dissolves in liquid and we need the bottle to contain ‘brandy’ for over an hour. We’ve been timing how long the sugar glass can survive with liquid in it and treated one of the bottles with a plastic coating to see if that makes it last longer. So far one bottle has dissolved and the other one stuck itself to the table so we couldn’t pick it up. Needless to say, it’s still a work in progress! But all very exciting. Another great week. Next week we will continue to focus on nailing down the shape of the play.
This week we’ve been working on building trust and complicity among the actors and finishing our final ‘draft’ of the play. As we get towards the painful final moments of the play, where Hally spits in Sam’s face in the middle of a racist outburst, we are zeroing in on how to approach that with as much sensitivity as possible. A large part of that is about making sure the actors fully trust each other, they’re going to have to do this day in and day out. Roy leads a trust exercise with the cast to work on this.

In the exercise, two of the cast must first stand in front of each other and look each other in the eyes taking in everything about each other’s faces. Then they are instructed to close their eyes and put their palms against each other’s, not ever losing contact. One actor becomes A and the other B. A is given the task of opening their eyes and leading B around the room, as B keeps their eyes closed. The provocation to B was to fully let themselves be led, to trust completely in A without any hesitation. This means going backwards and sideways, weaving through furniture and going up and down stairs all with their eyes closed (Roy and I are on hand to make sure it is still safe). Roy puts on music while they do this so they can lean into the experience more without feeling self-aware. Then, the cast change their pairs around until everyone has worked with each other. Finally, all three of them work together. All the cast comment on learning more about themselves through the exercise but also on the feeling of togetherness the exercise had provoked.

As we start to solidify the architecture of the play, the understudies have been learning through observation. Meanwhile, I’ve been continuing to work with them – when the call allows – in the mornings, carrying on our text work. This week they also have a session on the Lyttelton stage with Simon Money. He focuses on resonance and articulation building on the warm-up work he was doing with them and has already done with the cast. Simon talks about the tricks of working on the Lyttelton and the infamous acoustic ‘dead spot’ in the theatre and how to get around it.

Back in the rehearsal room we also did a workshop on the geography of our tea room, clarifying where everything would be kept in the room and on the shelves with Rajha Shakiry [set and costume designer] and the cast, and getting the actors used to treating it with familiarity. What would Sam and Willie’s cleaning routines be? Where would they keep everything? And how does Hally interact with the space and the stock, especially when his mother isn’t there? Anson has particularly enjoyed rehearsing the bits where he drinks ice cream and lemonade. This idea of a regular cleaning routine is especially useful for Hammed, playing Willie, since he spends a lot of time listening to Sam and Hally and non-verbally participating. Willie is a man of few words but he’s always engaged and is an active participant in the conversation. For Hammed the provocation has been to find a track that expresses all that without relying on a textual anchor, this has been our particular focus this week. And these physical routines have been helpful discoveries.

And finally for this week, an update on the sugar glass. We’ve been thinking not only about which version of the sugar glass bottles to use but also where to smash the bottle on stage because Sam and Willie dance across the floor after so it’s a question of staying safe and being able to see the glass so they don’t step on it. This week we tested smashing the bottles, which our stage manager, Speedy [SM], volunteered himself to do. The first bottle smashed everywhere and might have taken out a few audience members if we’d been on stage, so we’ve gone with the coated one to control the explosion. The results are promising and we’re looking forward to getting into tech to properly see it in action.
This week we have been focusing on running the play to get a clearer picture of the architecture of the show and on Friday Rufus [Director of the National Theatre] came in to watch a run and give us notes. The show is in brilliant shape as we’ve moved from doing macro work to more micro, honing the detail and nuance that our brilliant cast continue to deliver. In terms of discoveries, we’re finding that the end can feel like it comes out of nowhere unless the narrative arc is configured very carefully along the way.

We’re clarifying the map of the play, which is a delicate and rigorous process. Running the play has taught us a lot about how the different parts inform each other. In that regard, there have been some significant discoveries. For example, we can’t shy away from Hally’s more negative traits and his changeable mood, even at the very top of the play. We must understand he has the potential to explode from the beginning in order to understand how he gets to the final moments. We’ve been leaning into the jabs Hally makes earlier in the play as a result. Every run we’re gaining deeper insights into the characters and their world.

On the subject of leaning into the jabs, this has been the week of finessing the fight sections of the play. On Saturday we have the pleasure of working with Brett [Yount] our fight consultant and Shelley, our movement director and choreographer, to do this. We run through the drafts of these moments we had in the play and then rework them with Brett to make sure they are safe and convincing. For the majority of the week we’ve been marking the moment of Hally spitting at Sam, as it’s an incredibly sensitive action to rehearse. But on Saturday, we finally block it. It is testament to the actors’ trust in each other, and Roy’s sensitive direction, that this goes successfully. Though it is a painful moment, by running towards it we are also running towards the truth of the play. This is an autobiographical text documenting a real event in Athol Fugard’s life. It demonstrates the complexity of a man who was born into a racist society and then became one its chief opponents. But racist impulses were absolutely part of his story – as is true for anyone who is born into an institutionally racist society – and we must be truthful about that to serve the text. In many ways I feel this is one of the core gestures of the work. Don’t assume anyone is above the toxicity of the society around them. It takes time, energy and a commitment to honesty to begin to defeat it.

Running the play often is also helping us to focus in on the minutiae. Though the actors make it look easy, the level of detail the play demands is huge and this is especially true of the physical tracks. Last week, I spoke a little about the complexity of Willie's track. The final third of the play requires Sam and Willie to lay out tables and for Sam to also set them while Hally is combusting. The emotional and physical demands of that section are intense. We have been drilling these physical routines to make sure they’re second nature and that we don’t lose any of the story beats. Going through the play as a whole is allowing us to zoom in on problem-solving moments such as these.

We have also been excited to see the final stages of the set-building process. This week we carry out another rain test on the roof of the tea room. The NT’s workshops have built an amazing sprinkler system on top of the roof on each corner to create the rain during the play. The challenge is to make the rain look as real as possible, meaning the drops need to achieve a certain size, coverage and speed going down the windowpane. It’s a technical exercise and the team have to add milk into the water, position the sprinklers specifically and put strips of neoprene across the roof to break up the stream of water so it looks more like raindrops. The result looks great.

As well as seeing the result of the set build, we have also started using costume in rehearsals. They look great but more importantly they add the final ingredient for the actors to fully embody their world. The cut of the jackets affects how they move as do their shoes. This is doubly important for the dance sections. How do the waiters’ jackets add a sense of formality to the way they hold themselves? What does it mean to waltz in their costumes? On that note, the dancing is improving hugely each week. Now that the steps are learned, Sam and Willie are telling their full story through the final dance. And it’s beautiful to see.
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, without interruption. 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’s 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, in consultation with the director. 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, production team 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 scheduled absence.

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 or trying to achieve.

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 an actor(s) 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. Sometimes a script is written in a way which allows actors space to improvise the occasional line or two – normally in response to the audience's reaction to an event.

**Beat**
In the script 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 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 roles.

**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 them 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. This 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 and 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.