

Genie Drama to Carriage Works Theatre

Tony's Journey

Tony's journey from the drama class at Genie in the Gutter to the stage in Leeds:

Here I am on a Sunday morning putting pen to paper having been asked to write about my amazing, exhilarating, emotional and fulfilling journey from the old drama room at Genie to acting in the lead part in a professional production at the 400 seat Carriage Works Theatre in the heart of Leeds.

The play called 'Bittersweet Sunshine' was written by playwright Ben Tagoe who has previously written for BBC's Casualty series. 'Bittersweet Sunshine' was the opening play on the opening night which heralded the start of the week long Emerge Festival in Leeds, showcasing new and emerging writers, performers and directors from across Britain.

I successfully auditioned for the part in early March 2010 and then came twelve weeks of intense rehearsals at the Wortley studio just outside of Leeds. The work involved researching and building the character, evaluating the subtext and memorizing 250 lines of dialogue as well as monologues and three major script changes to cope with as well. Well, I loved every minute of it. The other cast members, all of whom were attending high calibre drama schools, were a lot younger than myself and a joy to work with. Natalie Jones, who played my niece Hayley, had spent two years in Barcelona in Clown and Miming theatre.

Our cut off point for learning lines was the end of April and from then on it was a hectic schedule of run through and working on individual scenes. Some of the scenes were quite difficult and I was like a sponge and brimming with enthusiasm, ready to absorb everything from our amazing director who was a great help.

There was one particularly special moment when Natalie and I were together rehearsing a scene at Wortley that came at a pivotal and emotional part in the play. No matter how hard I tried I just could not reach the high emotional energy level that scene required for its intensity and with only three weeks to go before opening, I was becoming desperate. I nipped off to the toilet and said quick prayer for help and then came back out and began the whole scene again, only this time the whole studio went quiet and the other cast who were upstairs reading lines stopped what they were doing and stood on the balcony to watch. I just remember hearing the applause and cheers. To hear that from other actors was euphoric.

By mid-June the set was ready, and we moved into a small theatre near the carriage works for the final rehearsals and speed runs before the opening night of Monday June 21.

We moved to the Carriage works itself on the Monday morning of the play and completed final touches and had our photographs taken and time was ticking by.

The door was to open to the public at 7.30pm with 200 tickets already pre-booked, our nerves were at breaking point but confidence in all of us was high.

After the lights went up the rest was a complete blur and I only remember the applause at the end which I always wanted to experience, ever since seeing Ellen Roach and Tony Bennet at The Actors Studio in 2008.

Should you not be a believer in miracles, one year prior to this I lay in my daughter's backyard all night long freezing, battered and beaten by alcohol and unaware I was even there. I had lost the will to carry on, I had been down so many times, shunned by society, homeless and without much hope after a three-week relapse, destroying everybody who ever loved and cared for me along the way.

Such is the nature of this illness of alcoholism, and incidentally one of the first things that I did when coming out of relapse was write Cal Edwards up and ask to go back to drama. I didn't have Carolyn's number.

The reason I relate all of this is because in the front row of the audience on the second night was that same daughter of mine now sitting with my Fiancé Caina and other members of the family. She cried from start to finish, and that said more about my recovery than any amount of lights or loaves could ever do. She cried because her father was alive and out of the dark and in the light. She cried the tears of the child that had just for that night, just for the moment could realise hope and joy. There is a belief and faith that anything is possible and to quote some of my friends 'no matter how far the scale we have gone...'

Charles Dickens wrote that 'creativity is born out of psychological injury' and how right he was, especially concerning alcoholics and addicts in recovery.

So what a thing it is and also how humbling that immensely talented busy people like Sean McKee, Karen Brown – not to mention a certain Jimmy McGovern (who is a writing hero of mine) took time to come along to Genie in the Gutter and give help and support in a haven of untapped creative potential that should be encouraged, nurtured and development in people that were once shunned by society. In the age of 'here today, gone tomorrow', self-obsessed celebrityism (don't know whether said word exists) Sean, Karen and co. stand head and shoulders above the rest.

Many thanks to Simon who in his benevolence and in every class made the mistake of asking the clients how they were, and true to form, alcoholics and addicts whether in recovery or not were quite willing to indulge him with every woe (poor Simon).

One of Simon's phrases was 'enough talking just get out there and let's see what we've got, and in a sense, I have adopted it as working philosophy for myself in most things. Failure is not an option, neither is it an issue because just for today I do not drink. So, I am a success in every sense of the word. Throughout my journey I have discovered that acting is a combination of concentration, imagination, and radiation and all these qualities can be learned and developed. From what I have seen over this last year, theatre is crying out for real people writing and acting about real issues and I hope to be a part of the revolution if it ever comes about.