

ACTORS' INSIGHTS ON "BRASSED OFF"

CAST

Gwyn Vaughan Jones

John Cording

Lynn Hunter

Brendan Charleson

Sara Harris-Davies

Daniel Llewelyn-Williams

Maria Pride

Ioan Hefin

Branwen Gwyn

Ciaran Joyce

Dai

Dafydd

Vera

Brian

Rita

Barry

Mandy

Haydn

Gloria

Scott

Have you ever been involved in a mobile tour of this kind before? Do you anticipate any difficulties?

Gwyn

I did perform in "To Kill A Mockingbird" which was a Clwyd Theatr Cymru mobile tour, but this one will be different as it's not a set text so we won't have the same number of students as on "Mockingbird". This time the audience will be more community-based. We also have local brass bands each week, so I'm sure they will bring their own supporters.

John

I've not been on a mobile tour like this before, but I have worked in the Royal Exchange in Manchester, which is a permanent theatre within a building, so that's probably very similar. I do think that having 10 actors and 20 band members around the stage might cause a few problems, but I'm sure they will be worked out during the rehearsals.

Lynn

I've not been involved in a mobile tour before, but I have done ten years of community touring for another company. The interesting part of this project for me for me is that we will have much better resources than in community touring, when the company turns up at a venue only to find that there isn't a blackout, or the seating isn't raked which restricts audience viewing. I'm fascinated by the mobile tour because we take absolutely everything, and I'm looking forward to seeing the audience's reaction. This is how touring should be, creating that complete theatre experience and so keeping the artistic quality of the piece.

What do you think the reaction will be from the local communities?

Brendan

I think the audiences will enjoy a play that explores and celebrates their recent history, but I think their reactions would not be so positive if we hadn't corrected the inaccuracies in the original script. "Brassed Off" is a fairy story set in a factual historical context that the audiences will know back to front, but as long as there aren't any irritants in the evening they'll enjoy it thoroughly. The brass band is part of their culture and people always love to hear language spoken in their own idioms, as long again as it's done with a reasonable amount of accuracy.

Sara

We are definitely targeting communities that have first-hand experiences of the closure of the mines. I'm hopeful that they won't link it too much to the film and that they will see it as something that happened across the whole country, in particular in areas that depended on one industry. I'm sure the audiences will find something they can relate to.

Lynn

All of the venues have a history of coal mining, and their communities are still suffering from the pit closures. I was working in Maerdy during the time of the strike, and on the day the miners stopped work the colliery brass band played them out and they marched through the town. They were so proud, and yet everyone felt a huge sense of grief. This was not unusual and is something that people do not forget, so when we arrive with "Brassed Off" I think the reaction will be one of interest in the telling of their own story.

Do you make any conscious choices about your character before you start or do they just develop in the rehearsals?

Daniel

When you go for an audition you have to have made some sort of decisions about the character, after that, if I've been successful, I start to think about my character in more detail. Some directors allow actors to make bold choices, others don't, and it really depends on how they like to work.

Maria

I didn't make any choices about Mandy before I arrived for rehearsals; the decisions have been made in the rehearsal room. But as I was brought up in a mining community, I know the people in the play so well it's easy to become my character.

Lynn

I'm also from the area where this piece is set, so I know any number of "Veras". They've lived all around me for years and years. But in general, I do tend to do some preparation. I always read the script through once to write down everything my character says about her; then I read it again and write down everything other characters say about her. This gives me a sort of shape as to who she is, what she

thinks of herself and why people react to her in a particular way; and what the writer thinks she might be. But I don't like to do too much preparation, as it doesn't give you enough room to react to what is happening in rehearsals. Vera is probably a composite of two or three people I know, and I do feel that I know her well enough to walk around Mold and react to situations as Vera.

Ioan

I think Terry has been very clever in his casting, but if that's the case it's worrying for me because I must be a clown with a tendency for suicide. I haven't done any physical preparation, but when I pick up a script and look at the text, almost without realising it, the physical stuff comes through. So I suppose preparation starts as soon as you pick up the script.

John

This differs from play to play, but I do sort of make conscious decisions, but the director in rehearsals usually crushes them. When you're sent a script for an audition you can't help but make decisions about your character. Sometimes, if I've been offered the part I'll do a bit of background research to my character. For this particular piece I went to a brass band in Newport and watched the conductor, which was interesting and frightening at the same time. I don't read music so I'm listening to all the different tunes the bands will be playing as many times as I can. Some of the pieces are not too difficult but "Orange Juice" could be! As the conductor I have to know when to bring the band in, and when to finish it, but I'm sure the bands are experienced enough not to follow me if I'm going wrong. Another important aspect of my character is his selfishness and uncaring attitude, until the very last moment when he does appreciate his community.

Branwen

This is my first experience of acting, so I didn't make many choices about Gloria, although I did watch the film a few months ago to remind myself of the story. It was obvious that she only feels like she belongs to the community when she's playing in the band, so that gave me something to work with. On a more practical side, I started to practise the trumpet again, which I've really enjoyed.

Do you build a complete life for your character?

Brendan

As "Brassed Off" is adapted from a film script the dialogue is quite lean and so doesn't give you much to go on. But it's not too important for me as I've lived in a mining village in the Rhonda Valley for 14 years and from there I can find easily find some truthful representation of my character.

Ciaran

When I read a script I look at the way my character reacts in different situations and I try to decide what has happened in his past to result in those reactions. I also think about his likes and dislikes. As I'm playing someone much younger than myself in "Brassed Off", I've been trying to remember my childhood and how my experiences affected me and my family.

Daniel

I think it's essential because we are all the result of our past experiences. I think the more you can colour a character, and the more detail you give it, the richer it becomes. If don't do that work then the character has voids, and this is most apparent when you aren't doing anything on stage, an audience will soon notice if a character has little depth.

Ioan

For this piece we did some research into the areas affected by the strike and the demise of the coal industry putting the piece into a historical context, which helps us as actors build up our characters. I can remember being very angry at the opening of The Big Pit Museum, it seemed like an instant reaction – as soon as a coal mine closed, a museum opened. Yet within five years I was glad it was there, as it keeps the memory of the industry alive. In West Wales there's been more of a "greening over" of the pit sites than in the valleys. Now there are golf courses, country parks and no evidence at all of the pits. I also remember the outrage when concrete was poured into the mines to seal them up, this cost lots of money. All these details help to build a character and find the truth in the piece.

How do you think your character would have coped with the miners strike in 1984?

Maria

Mandy is a fantastic example of the women I remember from my childhood, they just kept on going through those difficult times, though I'm sure they complained quite a bit! The most important thing is that the kids were always fed. What I remember of the valleys women of that era is "it's your lot just get on with it;" they certainly had a sense of selflessness.

Lynn

Vera is interesting as she is supportive, but not political. She wouldn't have been on the picket line; she'd have been out shopping. Vera wants to make everything all right for everyone, making tea and dishing out the biscuits. She's the sort that can cope with everything.

Ioan

Haydn is political; we know that he was arrested during the strike. He's very strong willed and strong-minded in that sense, but he's also a victim of circumstances. He almost has a tragic outcome, but he's come out of it with a lot of credit and ready for a really big life change.

Gwyn

The strike was a time of high tension and as most of the characters are normal South Walians, they would have fought for their community, but the men who went back to work would have split that community.

Sara

I believe that Rita would have been very active on the picket line, also she would have been organising food packages for the miners' families. In fact anything to help her own community, like joining the march down to London.

Brendan

Brian used to have passion and a lot of fight, so in 1984 he would have been very involved, although Haydn does accuse him of not always being on the picket line. Brian seems to be good at living in the present, he doesn't think too far ahead. He enjoys a good time, always looking for cracks. But when we see inside his head in the soliloquy there's a sense of an untapped potential. His imagination and desire to go to Africa and be with elephants comes from nowhere. I think by 1989, he's resigned to the destruction of the industry and planning what he'll do with the compensation money.

Ciaran

Scott would have been 5, so wouldn't have known too much about the strike. But he would remember the arguments at home about money.

Branwen

Gloria wouldn't have been living in South Wales at the time of the strike, although she would have seen it on the news and taken an interest and empathised with miners, but it wouldn't have affected her directly.

Daniel

My character would have been 20, and so working in the mines as a junior, apprenticed to an older miner in the crew. He would have gone on strike and having to make such an important stand at such a young age would have had a big effect on him. As would watching Haydn, who was like a big brother, being imprisoned.