Supporting notes:

Practitioner: Steven Berkoff

Steven Berkoff was brought up in a working class environment, in a time when social class divide was highly significant. This was a big aspect of Berkoff’s aims in his plays; to portray the harsh social divides of the world, and present plays from a working class perspective. An example of this in ‘’Metamorphosis’’, where the pressures of society and indeed from his family turn the main character, Greggor Samsa, into a dung beetle. Another one of Berkoff’s aims is to shock and stun the audience. He wants to make the audience feel mentally and visually uncomfortable with what they are watching. An example of this is in ‘’East’’, in which the character of Mike has a particular speech about women’s genitalia. During his speech, Mike actually mimes climbing inside a female genitalia, which would be very shocking for the audience to watch. Berkoff also is a big believer in total theatre, which is where the actor and ensemble use no props and little set, but simply sound and physical theatre to create the environment of the play. I saw this achieved successfully in ‘’Metamorphosis’’, where the actor’s simply used sound and ensemble work to completely achieve the environment of a classical music concert. This, whilst shocking the audience with the material, all stunned them with the skill and physicality in the ensemble.

Key features of their practice:

Exaggerated facial expression and movement:

This is shown in ‘’Decadence’’, where they are describing all the food they have eaten at the restaurant, by pulling large, bloated facial expressions, indicating their greed, and also using their body to describe the food, and how they felt about it, for example when describing the salmon, he mimed holding it very delicately, to show that it was a luxurious food.

Hyperbolic mime:

This is shown in ‘’East’’, during the cinema scene, when the characters react to the film that they are watching, such as bouncing up and down as if watching a horse in a western.

Foul Language:

This is shown particularly well in most of Berkoff’s plays, yet a strong example is in ‘’East’’, during Mike’s ‘’c\*\*t speech.’’

Directly addressing the audience:

This is shown in ‘’Metamorphasis’’, where Gregor is visibly reaching out to the audience and asking for help, as he changes from a man into a dung beetle.

Physicalisation of objects:

This is shown in ‘’The Trial’’, where the ensemble become drawers, when K’s flat is being raided by Slimm and Wellnit. Adding sound to the mime helped to create the illusion, e.g. making a whooshing sound when the drawers were opened.

Rhythm in voice/body:

Also shown in ‘’Greek’’, where the Sphynx performs her ‘’I hate men’’ speech in rhythm, and moves her body accordingly.

Justification of choice of play;

‘’Greek’’ was one of Berkoff’s later plays, as it was first performed in 1980. This meant that Berkoff was fully understanding towards his aims, and how to achieve them. Exaggerated facial expressions and body language can be shown in the ensembles reactions to events, such as the fight scene between Eddie and the café manager. It also show’s Berkoff’s focus on working class, as a working class family is at the centre of the play. The use of no props or setting adheres to Berkoff’s desire for total theatre, for example an entire pub scene and environment is created by the ensemble. A further example is in the café, when the ensemble repeat food dishes, such as ‘’beans on toast’’, to create an environment through their bodies and voices. The complete physicalisation of the material in the speeches, as well as the constant involvement of the audience allows them to be shocked and feel uncomfortable, i.e. many of the character’s speeches are addressed directly to the audience, which is another one of Berkoff’s aims.

Greek performance history:

11 February 1980, Half Moon Theatre London

24th August to 3rd September 2005, University Theatre, Arts Centre, Christchurch

26th November to 30th November 2013- Baron’s Court Theatre, London

Bibliography

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek\_(play)

http://iainfisher.com/berkoff/berkoff-play-east.html

http://iainfisher.com/berkoff/steven-berkoff.html

Steven Berkoff Plays 1: By Steven Berkoff

Plays I have seen:

Greek

The Trial

Metamorphosis

Decadence

East

Section B: Dramatic Intentions, interpretation of extract and Berkoff’s effect.

Through the key features in Berkoff’s practise, one of our main intentions as a group we decided, was to shock and make the audience feel as uncomfortable as possible. In our extract we achieved this in a number of ways, such as in the café, when the two waitresses are speaking about their previous conquests. We did this by playing with the rhythm of the text, all the while maintaining eye contact with the audience. We also added gestures to certain lines of the scene, such as when waitress one was talking about the largest genitalia she’d ever encountered, she measured the size of it with her hands, and when talking about the ejaculation that followed, she made an explosion gesture, by spreading her fingers out wide and quickly moving her hands towards the audience, physically showing the explosion. This will both shock the audience, but also physically create the scene, adding to the shock intended by the nature of the text.

We also wanted our performance to show the poor conditions in Britain in the 1980’s. One way we achieved this was by highlighting the political damage occurring for the working class in London at that time. We made the overpowering, feminist character of the sphinx a mirror to Margaret Thatcher, and made the entire monologue of the speech completely dominate over Eddie, and the ensemble in general, to symbolise how Thatcher had completely commanded London in the eighties. It was clear from Berkoff referring to her in the text as ‘’Maggot Scratcher’’ that he saw her as a nasty character, so I portrayed her as this archetype by completely mistreating the ensemble, who were portraying Thatcher’s cabinet. I used hyperbolic mime to completely abuse them, and turn them into quivering wrecks, terrified of Thatcher. An example of this was during my speech, I moved around, physically abusing the ensemble as I went past them, eg hanging them by their tie, or pulling their genitalia. This showed just how nasty Thatcher was, and also how dominant she was over her cabinet.

Another intention we wanted to portray was the different representations of women in Greek, and how badly all of them were treated. We achieved this by showing each of the women characters in a different light, for example Mum was played in a very mollycoddling light, whereas the sister was a very moody character, and the sphinx a very domineering character. However, we made sure that all of the women characters were treated badly by other characters in the play, e.g. Mum was often verbally abused by Dad, to show how they were treated badly. We showed this physically by having a mime of her ‘saggy tits and slack arsed lump.’ We also felt that it was important to show the audience that throughout the play, most of the characters have very loose morals, a typical attribute of Berkoff’s characters. We incorporated this in several scenes, i.e. when Eddie kills the café manager. We staged a vicious mime to symbolise the fight, yet made sure that the ensemble had little reaction towards the fight, to show that no one was really that affected by it. Also, during the scene where Eddie first travels to London, and is talking about Scottish football hooligans, the ensemble were very vulgar with their gestures, such as slow-motion spitting at the audience, and using their hands to create swearing gestures. Also in the fight scene that is between the hooligans, the moves were very deliberate and violent, insinuating the loose morals and sinful nature of the hooligans, that they were so happy to fight.

We also felt that it was important to incorporate Berkoff’s aim of ‘Total Theatre.’ We achieved this in the café scene, where Eddie first meets the waitress, we wanted to create the environment physically, so we took the scripted choral section of ‘soggy chips, greasy eggs, beans on toast’, and brought it out physically by adding over exaggerated mime such as serving up the eggs with a grimace and extending to grab the toast, and saying the lines in a type of round, each ensemble member saying a different line.

Section 3: Assessment of the interpretive/rehearsal process and of the potential effectiveness of the piece.

Experience of Rehearsals:

I developed my character of ‘’Sphinx’’ by giving her aspects to show off my parody of her as Margaret Thatcher, whilst keeping in with the Berkovian style. An example of this was the movement. I made every movement when I was Sphinx very upright and tense, to show off Thatcher’s rigid political status. Working on the movements helped me develop my character as it helped to not only present her in the exaggerated and Berkoff style, but also develop a large contrast from my other character in the play. I moved to a high level and got the ensemble around me to slump, this created high status for the character. I watched videos that included Thatcher and found that she had quite a low voice, and tended to speak slowly. With this knowledge, I began to copy her voice, yet however I exaggerated certain aspects (such as the pace of her words), in order to make her seem more patronising and aggressive. We also added choral sounds of people and groups who have felt mistreated by Thatcher made it clearer to the audience that the character was a parody of Thatcher, by aggressively chanting ‘Thatcher, Thatcher milk snatcher’ it became clear to the audience who I was representing. Also, added with my movement and characterization of Thatcher, for example a slow, calm, posh voice truly emphasised the damage that Berkoff felt caused for Britain in the eighties. This also showed the contrast between the Sphinx and Eddie, who typically had a very fast paced, working class London twang.

Through constructive criticism we became aware of ensemble synchronicity and spacing in the scene where Eddie moves to London. Having initially portrayed comic Irish drunks, we realised this took away from the seriousness of Eddie’s words as he was talking about IRA bombs, so instead move as if being blasted by a bomb (in slow motion), to give it a more sombre tone. To effectively move in slow motion, we found we had to tense all our muscles to maintain physical control and effectively give the sense of panic. We also added claps to keep in time with the scene, but soon realised that a synchronised clap made a very convincing explosion sound. This was effective for the audience as it would have truly emphasised an explosion, and the damage caused, whilst also highlighting just how terrible Irish terror acts were in the eighties.

We decided that for Greek, one of Berkoff’s main intentions was to show the damage that occurred in working class Britain in the eighties. As well as the IRA scene, we wanted to develop a speech Dad makes in the play, to both involve the ensemble more and to show the audience how his people in working class jobs had their health ruined for low wages. When the Dad speaks about his retirement, the ensemble added gestures and movements to make his damage visible to the audience, rather than just words, so they were telling the story physically. For example, we added movements to the injuries he received such as ‘’shot nerves’’ and ‘’asbestos in my lungs’’. Also, Dad listing these off in a matter of fact way contrasted with the shocking visual impact of our exaggerated movements showing damage. We also decided another important intention for Berkoff was shocking the audience. One scene which we rehearsed to successfully achieve this was the café scene, where Eddie fights the café manager. We choreographed the fight scene towards the audience, so that all of the movements seemed to be aimed at them, shocking them. We also included the ensemble in the back, reacting to the different movements. During the rehearsal process, we played around with timings, to decided when the chorus reactions would be most effective. We decided that having big, exaggerated reactions every 5 words was the best way to get the most out of the audience, shocking them aswell.

Consideration of Health and Safety:

We always made sure that we performed vocal and physical warm ups at the start of every rehearsal, so we did not pull or strain any muscles. When moving any rostra, we always lifted with our knees, and never allowed one person to lift something on their own. We also made sure that any towered rostra was connected properly and safely to the other piece, to avoid it falling and colliding with another actor. We were also aware of our surroundings when rehearsing on the stage, so that no one would fall off and injure themselves.