

Reflective Practice – LTCL Performing Unit 2

Candidates for Performing LTCL Diplomas in Speech and Drama, Musical Theatre and Performance Arts are required to submit a 4,000-word essay on the topic of performing - “reflecting insights gained through four different examples of first-hand performance experience”.

At this stage of their studies, we would expect candidates to have undertaken a wide range of performances in a variety of contexts. These could include: different roles and types of role in plays, musicals, cabarets –and maybe films, videos and on radio; professional and amateur work; commercials and promotional films; poetry, prose and musical recitals and readings; competitions and festivals; devised and scripted work; plays and shows for adults, young people and children in theatres, in schools, in a variety of non-theatre venues and in the open air.

The minute a performer is cast in a role, he or she is presented with a potentially infinite number of choices on how to research, prepare and rehearse for the performance. An actor cast as Hamlet could realistically spend the rest of his life reading everything that has been written about the play and never even start rehearsing.

One of the purposes of this Unit is to encourage candidates to reflect upon their performance experiences and identify the particular and specific learning points which their various experiences have provided. These learning points will only be truly valid if they can then be applied to some (though not necessarily all) performances that are undertaken in the future. As the performer becomes more experienced, individual pieces of knowledge will inter-relate and synthesise with others, and gradually the performer will begin to develop a process which will enable him or her to prepare and rehearse with a greater sense of focus and purpose –and save a lot of time and unnecessary effort in the process.

Documenting this in an essay presents a number of significant challenges to the performer.

While every performance experience should teach us something new, it is impossible to know what that “something” will be at the start of rehearsals. You therefore need to approach each new task without preconceptions and with an open mind and record your experiences with candour and honesty.

Rehearsals and performances can be emotional experiences and are notoriously difficult to describe accurately and analyse in retrospect. It is therefore strongly advisable to keep a journal or notebook, make careful notes, annotate scripts, scores and texts and document events and developments so that you have objective and detailed information to draw upon.

Over the course of each rehearsal period you should begin to use the syllabus terminology to “gather, sift, synthesise and organise material independently and to critically evaluate its significance”.

Take particular note of the requirement to be analytical rather than purely descriptive. Most performers love to talk about their work but all too often this is highly subjective or merely anecdotal. Many actors’ autobiographies are too. There is also a mystique to the process of performing that is propagated by this kind of reminiscence. (“I don’t know how it happened but in that moment everything clicked”, “Joe Bloggs brings a magic into the rehearsal room that is impossible to define”, “it was only when I fell in love with my third husband that I truly knew how to play the role of Juliet”). While it is entertaining and occasionally illuminating to read this kind of stuff, you need to apply a much more rigorous approach to your own written work to achieve the levels of clarity and understanding required to succeed at Licentiate level.

Content and style of the essay

The essay is only 4,000 words so do not waste valuable words on background information unless it is strictly relevant. It is inadvisable to write something like: “I was cast as Hamlet, the leading role in the tragedy by William Shakespeare who was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1568. Little is known of Shakespeare’s childhood but as a young man he married Anne Hathaway and shortly afterwards moved to London etc”.

However, in another case it might be appropriate to inform the reader that: “The play we were performing – The Memorandum by Vaclav Havel – had been banned by the previous Czech government for twenty years and this was to be its first public performance in Prague since the Revolution of 1989.” The unique context of the production may well be central to the insights gained.

When describing your acting process, be specific. Avoid writing something like, “We improvised a lot around the scene and that helped me understand my character”. What specifically did you improvise? Where did these improvisation ideas come from? Were they based on the work of a particular practitioner? Has that practitioner written about this technique and if so what specifically does he or she say about it? What was useful and what wasn’t? Why was this? (Remember one of the objectives of the task is to “critically evaluate”.)

Also avoid generalised comments about practitioners such as:

"We used Stanislavskian techniques to develop our characters". What techniques? How did you use them? Why did the director feel that these techniques were appropriate to this choice of material? Stanislavski's theories are now one hundred years old. What is the current critical thinking about his writing?

"This was a Brechtian production" Why? In what way "Brechtian"? How did this affect your performing style? How did this relate to issues such as set and costume design, make-up and lighting?

Avoid generalised statements like "I felt that once I had worked out how the character would walk, everything else would follow"; "We quickly learned to work as a team", "It was hard work but the end result was worth it", "This extended my understanding of the acting profession."

Not all performances are successful. Do not be afraid to reflect on a performance which you felt was unsatisfactory or disappointing in some way. You are more likely to learn from this experience than a glorious triumph which has everyone falling over themselves congratulating you and telling you how wonderful you are.

Above all **be specific**.

For example: imagine you are an actress preparing to play the role of Nancy in Oliver!

You are a responsible, careful actor and spend several days reading the original novel by Dickens as background research. You might feel that this was "invaluable" in developing your performance. But in writing this essay you would need to "evaluate its significance". What specific moments in the novel did you draw on? Why? And how might your performance have been different if you hadn't read it?

In conclusion, you should show how you might apply what you have learned to future performances. ("If I were now to find myself performing a similar role/ another role by the same playwright/ performing again in front of young children, rather than doing X as I did before I would now do Y to achieve Z".) That is a better conclusion than "Every role teaches us something new and different and I look forward to appearing in many more productions."

Note that Distinction-level work typically shows "evidence of conceptual grasp, critical grasp and independent thinking...the text reflects wide and analytical reading...there is a strong relation between theory and practice".

Work that is below pass standard however, is typically "descriptive as opposed to analytical...may be poorly structured and/or poorly referenced...the linking of theory and practice show insufficient evidence of in-depth understanding."