



Mermain Education Pack





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Polly Teale - Writer and Director

Can you remember first hearing the Little Mermaid story?

As a child I was bewitched by the tale of 'The Little Mermaid'. I had it on a record and would play it and sit and sob on the settee, much to the bewilderment of my brothers. It wasn't until years later that I found myself wondering what it was about this dark coming of age story, about a mermaid who had her tongue cut out, that spoke to me so powerfully.

At the centre of the story is the experience of puberty and the self-consciousness that comes with it, a sort of loss of self.

The mermaids live beneath the ocean in a state of unselfconscious freedom until they come of age and swim up to the surface to see the world above. Leaving behind the amniotic fluid of the ocean the mermaid is suddenly confronted by herself as a separate entity in a vast universe. From this moment there is no going back to safety. She has glimpsed the world in all it's beauty and brutality and in that same instance fallen in love with a mortal Prince. She can no longer remember what it is to feel complete within herself. For the first time in her life she experiences desire and with it comes loneliness. She must live beneath the ocean, invisible to the world of men, or else sacrifice her tongue, her voice in order to walk and try to gain the Prince's love. She is warned that every step she takes she will feel like she is walking on knives.

It seems that even my ten year old self understood that there was something in this impossible choice that I could recognise. As a girl I sensed that, to leave behind childhood was to risk losing the freedom to exist on your own terms, to sacrifice your voice in order to try to please others, to gain their approval and love. The mermaid's silence, her reliance on her physical beauty to win the Prince, expressed an uncomfortable reality. Whatever I might be inside, it was what I looked like that determined my value.

Do you think that's particularly true today with so much advertising and imagery everywhere we look?

In an age of mass media, of Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, we are constantly looking at our own reflections and at idealised images of others. We spend vast amounts of money on beauty products. Dieting is an obsession and use of plastic surgery has quadrupled in ten years. Fifty thousand women had invasive procedures in Britain last year. Removing all body hair has become the norm. It feels like this is a story with increasing relevance. It's not surprising that we are seeing an epidemic of self harm amongst teenage girls. As women obsess about calories and totter around in six inch heels to make themselves appear thinner, the Mermaid's story speaks of the extreme lengths women will go to alter themselves to win approval and of the crippling self consciousness that can characterise modern life.

That's not to say that we shouldn't enjoy styling and decorating ourselves. That is an innate human instinct that we see in all humans, even in tribes in remote places who have no access to mirrors. It can be a source of pleasure and creativity if it is not based in a sense of lack, of inadequacy.





Do the mermaids know what they look like?

No they don't. It's strange to think that it is only relatively recently that ordinary people have had access to mirrors. I often wonder how it would alter our sense of self if we had no idea how we appeared to others. I decided that in the world beneath the ocean there were no mirrors, that the mermaids would not know what they looked like. They would be unselfconsciously curious, like very young children or animals, living inside their bodies looking out at the world, not watching themselves with a critical gaze. It is not until they witness the world above that they understand themselves to be separate beings who are visible to others. With this understanding comes self-consciousness and the knowledge of our essential aloneness, of death, of anxiety, of need and desire. In my version of the story the mermaids are immortal. Beneath the ocean there is no time.

Would you say that in the play we are looking at our human world through the eyes of the mermaids?

Yes. I wanted to see our world through their eyes in all it's strangeness. To see the arbitrary hierarchies that exist, how simply by accident of birth some lives are given great importance whilst others are completely expendable. I wanted to see the bizarre nature of Royalty and it's archaic sexism whereby Princes are sent to war whilst Princesses are dressed up in expensive clothes to receive bouquets of flowers and wave at crowds of admirers. Few of us have ever heard Kate Middleton speak. I wanted to see the through the eyes of the mermaids our obsession with a certain artificial, narrow idea of beauty, to see the power of the media to distort and shape our sense of self.

Tell us about the decision to involve teenage girls in the production.

Our production will involve a chorus of young women recruited in each city on tour who will create the sound of the mermaid's singing. They will also take part in a nationwide project that accompanies the show that looks at the effect of the media on girls' sense of self and empowers them to challenge myths about femininity. Onstage the mermaid chorus will bear witness as a girl faces the challenge of becoming a young woman in a complex world.

The play begins very much in our contemporary world. There is a sense of the recession, of a family struggling to cope. Was it important to you to enter the story through a modern teenager?

Yes, I wanted to avoid it feeling like a twee middle class story about a girl who reads fairy tales. At the beginning of the play we see how a teenager is ostracised because she is still, at thirteen, playing imaginary games. She lives by the sea and loves to swim and is fascinated by mermaids, imagining that they exist and can speak to her. I wanted to explore the pressure on young women to grow up quickly and abandon play, becoming preoccupied by appearance, judging one another and seeing one another as competitors. Her father has been made redundant and so she can't afford the branded products her class mates are wearing. Whilst her friends are all at a party having a makeover, she sits alone staring at the screen seeking escape. When instead a nasty video message appears from her class mates she turns to the story of 'The Little Mermaid' for answers. Diving down into the world of the story we watch as her real life starts to entwine with that of the mermaids.







The Adaptation

How Does Hans Christian Anderson's Fairytale 'The Little Mermaid' Compare To Mermaid And How Do Our Choices Impact On The Meaning Of The Story?

Mermaid is a contemporary adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale, 'The Little Mermaid'. Our version is set in the modern day and is framed by the story of Blue, a young teenage girl who lives in a remote seaside town and loves mermaids. At the start of play we are introduced to Blue who is struggling with insecurities and being teased and alienated by her friends. She starts to bring to life the story inside her bedroom, reinventing Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale. She plunges into the mermaid world as an escape from her present, and her version is shaped and influenced by her thoughts and feelings. It is as if the story is coming through Blue and all the characters we see are extensions of her and her reality.

In the original fairytale the mermaid world has a Sea King. However in our version the world below is a feminine world that has only female mermaids. In Blue's reality, her father is jobless and not around a great deal. It makes sense therefore that her version of the fairytale that she creates is absent of males.

In Hans Christian Anderson's story the human world is idealised. When each of the mermaids come of age and put their heads above the water, they see beautiful sights, such as 'pretty children' or 'beautiful sunsets'. Our version presents the realities of a modern day world and everything is given contemporary relevance. What the mermaids see is often stark and brutal and the sights are informed by Blue's view of the world. For example, they see men at war or immigrants crammed in and dying on a boat. Later when the Little Mermaid is dressed by the Queen's ladies in waiting, she goes through a transformation that highlights the bizarre lengths women go to to achieve the 'perfect' appearance. Through Blue's retelling we see our own world with new eyes.

In our production of *Mermaid* the characters are three dimensional and more developed than that of the original fairy story. We meet emotionally and psychologically complex characters that respond to events realistically. For example, the Prince is suffering from post traumatic stress after going to war. His questions are probing and thoughtful about the world we live in.

In our version Blue's reality and the story become intertwined at the moment when Blue steps into her story, becoming the girl from the original who finds the Prince after he nearly drowns and is saved by the Little Mermaid. At the end of the play the realities collide when Blue meets the Little Mermaid and the Prince. The end of *Mermaid* is most significantly different from Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale, because we wanted to avoid the idea of a traditional romantic love story or a morality tale that teaches children to be good that is the end of the original. In *Mermaid* when the Little Mermaid and the Prince meet Blue we abandon the Hans Christian Anderson narrative. We wanted to keep the story from becoming a story about female competition or jealousy and instead wanted to tell a story about learning to love yourself. Therefore in our version, at the end, Blue and the Little Mermaid are reunited and Blue is able to release the Little Mermaid back into the ocean.





The World Beneath the Ocean

What does the world beneath the ocean represent?

"She remembered how it felt to have a tail, to be light and weightless and free, to know nothing of the suffering of the world."

The world beneath the ocean represents a place of abandonment and unselfconscious freedom. It is a pure and uncomplicated environment that is fluid and unrestricted. In the world below there is no suffering. It is without any of the elements that make life challenging and painful in the world above. There is no time, death, media or war.

Metaphorically the ocean represents the safety of early childhood. The water is like the amniotic fluid of a mother's womb, that nourishes and protects. The mermaids are the equivalent of very young children, free of self consciousness, with no thought for what they look like. They are able to exist on their own terms, without the need to please others. The sea is a feminine world, sensual and physical.

In the first part of the play, as each of the mermaids come of age they swim to the surface to see to the world above for the first time. In the production this moment is represented by each mermaid dipping their head in water and then flicking it back, as if they have just broken the sea surface. The act of crossing the border from the world below to the world above is symbolic of the many changes that take place as we grow from childhood into a young adult.







How did we explore the underwater world in rehearsal?

The rehearsal process began with exploring a set of principles that established a movement vocabulary for the actors to create the impression of an underwater world. From the start of rehearsals movements exercises encouraged the actors to move organically and be led by their 'body intelligence', meaning the actors move by listening to their body's instincts, learning to move without self consciousness.

Weightlessness:

One of the key principles to capturing the illusion of being in water is creating an sense of weightlessness. As if buoyant in water, we found the body and all movement needed a slight resistance to give the impression of pushing against a current. One of the most effective principles we found was the idea that the body is never still, because in water the body would be constantly stirred by currents, even if only very slightly. Even an object that has floated to the bottom of the ocean is gently buffeted in the currents. We discovered that it was when the body was still that it suddenly had weight and grounded the image, shattering the illusion of being underwater.

An effective way to capture an idea of weightlessness was exploring physically being anemones on the seabed gently knocked by the currents. In pairs the actors would play with sending and receiving currents to each other, using different parts of their bodies to send currents with different energies. We also played with sending currents with different emotions, for example longing, love, or jealousy, to explore how this affected the movement.

The Changing Seas - Colour Work:

In rehearsals we discussed how volatile the sea is and the many different personalities it can have. In *Mermaid* the sea has moments of dead calm, and then suddenly the mermaids singing will create a storm. To explore these different sea states we used colour to open up different vocabularies of movement. Our movement director, Liz Ranken explained how visualising colour shifts vibrations in the body and effects the energy of movement. To begin, the actors visualised a colour, for example white. They imagined the whole space, the floor, walls, as completely filled with white. The actors then moved instinctively whilst visualising the colour. We could see that the colour influenced their physicality, how they moved and even their breathing. During rehearsals we discovered that red was very effective at giving the movement an intense and dynamic energy. The actors would collide and rebound from eachother, which created a sense of danger and conflict. It was extremely evocative for creating an impression of crashing waves in a stormy sea. In one of our rehearsals we on an impulse added a large piece of plastic sheeting to the movement that we happened to find in the rehearsal room. With the actors still moving whilst visualising red, the plastic sheeting suddenly took on the illusion of white foam breaking on the sea surface in a storm. This idea was found early on in rehearsals and ended up remaining in the final production and is used during the Prince drowning sequence.



Nottingham Playhouse

Cause and Effect and Answering:

Another key principle we discovered for creating the impression of physically moving in water was the idea of cause and effect. In water the slightest movement creates a current that impacts and effects something else. There is a sense in water that everything is connected. Thinking about how a current stirs a piece of seaweed, or a shoal of fish moves as one, the actors were encouraged to be very alert to each other. We established a movement principle of always 'answering' each others movement physically by listening with our bodies for what vibrated inside as an instinctive body response to another movement. From the outside suddenly it looked as if the actors were all connected by the same water. The answering technique gave a physical logic to the group's movement, visually we understood their bodies as all moving in the same element.







How have we represented the mermaids in the show?

The mermaids live free and in the moment. They have no understanding of pain, death or time. They are alert, intuitive and highly responsive creatures. They have no sense of a critical gaze. Creating our mermaids we wanted them to have the curiosity of an animal and the unselfconsciousness of a young child.

The Mermaid Physicality:

In rehearsals a useful discovery for creating the mermaid physicality was that the mermaids do not smile. We realised smiling is a very human expression. By taking away the ability to smile the actors became physically very awake, using their whole bodies to express emotion. The mermaid 'tail', simply created through loosely keeping knees and ankles together, became very responsive to impulse and thought, in the same way a cat might show through their tail how they're feeling. As the actors spoke they became physically intuitive, their bodies responding to the text. For example, Little Mermaid's movements changed according to what she was saying. If she described swimming with a whale, it was reflected as a big event physically in her body. Removing the smile also meant our representation of the mermaids was very distant from the Disney stereotype.

We approached the mermaid physicality as having an animal, sensorial response to changes in the water. In rehearsals the actors were encouraged to experience the physical pleasure of movement organically and without thinking, learning how to move instinctively, led by their body, rather than their head. Warm ups were designed to open up the actors to moving freely and organically.

To further develop an underwater language we explored how different objects moved in water. We imagined that objects from our world had fallen to the bottom of the ocean. The actors were asked to 'answer' an object's shape and texture with their bodies. Then they were asked to imagine the mermaids had discovered the object in the water. They were to react to it as if they had never seen anything like it before. This exercise helped the actors to find a highly intuitive and alert physical state that was very useful at informing the mermaid physicality. Sometimes the object was dangerous and something to be feared, other times it was a source of play and curiosity. Exercises such as these allowed the actors to explore the physical quality of the mermaids and their inquisitive and adventurous natures.

Mermaid Connection:

In the underwater world we liked the idea that the mermaids do not understand themselves as individuals, but move and respond as a group. Extending the answering work above, the actors played with moving as a 'shoal' of mermaids to investigate how they could move with a group connection. This work encouraged the actors to be consistently aware of the spatial relationships around them. It developed their skill of listening with the body and having a hyper awareness for how any one movement affected everyone in the space.



Voice of the Mermaids:

To resonate with the idea that the mermaids are very body instinctive we wanted the mermaids' voices to be broad, open and supported in the body. As the mermaids are from Blue's imagination we decided the mermaids should reflect her regional accent. This immediately gave the mermaids a much richer and fuller voice that challenged any kind of cute mermaid stereotype or sentimental fairytale. To develop the sounds of the mermaids the actors were asked to lie on their backs with closed eyes and imagine the sounds at the bottom of the ocean. The actors played vocally with different pitches and intensities, calling and responding to each other, creating different sounds and enjoying a sense of harmony. The actors were asked to improvise with their voices, for example calling a mermaid lost thousands of miles away or calling to the men above the water through a storm.





The World Above the Ocean

What are the elements of the world above?

The world above is full 'pain and suffering' according to Grandmer. With a father out of work and her friendship group excluding her, Blue is feeling rejected and isolated at the beginning of the play. Blue's reinvention of 'The Little Mermaid' portrays a human world that reflects her own troubled reality and the world she sees around her. In *Mermaid* the world above is a difficult place to be. We experience a world at war, dominated by media and obsessed with self image. Up above there is death and time and hierarchy. Humans are vain and insecure, they experience pain and loneliness. The land above depicts a world where people have need. There is homelessness, starvation and unemployment. Humans bully, judge and compete. By choosing to focus on these elements it gave the themes of the fairytale a stark, contemporary relevance. Seeing the world above through the eyes of the mermaid allows us to see our world with new eyes. It speaks to society's preoccupation with image and the hugely influential role the media has at creating a very narrow idea of beauty. We also see how young men are expected to be strong and stifle any vulnerability or uncertainty.

How does the world above the ocean contrast physically to the world below?

To create the world above we approached the physical language as a total contrast to the fluid movement established in the underwater world. We began by working with tension in the body. Distinct to the organic movement of the mermaids, the human physicality was created by making the movement very direct, sharp and jagged. The humans are built upon a tightly held spine, to create a sense of tautness, a stillness and poise in opposition to the mermaids. We also found that wearing structured, tight clothing, with hard shoes and heels was useful to explore a physical vocabulary for the world above. In contrast to the pleasure of body that the mermaids have, the human physicality is body anxious and angular. In rehearsal the actors adopted a nervous ritual for the human characters to always be adjusting their clothing. This was very effective for reflecting a sense of the human self consciousness. We improvised around the idea of competition, of being watched and and seeking external approval. It was very interesting how this transformed how the actors moved. For the Royals in particular, we explored how status was carried in the body and how a sense of power and knowledge of worth or leadership influenced movement. In the end we discovered that less movement gave the impression of a higher status, which was extremely useful for establishing the status of the King and Queen.









The Opening Scene

In rehearsals we spent time anchoring the work specifically in where and how we enter the story. The actors ran a series of improvisations exploring a backstory for Blue and her parents before the play begins. For example, we improvised Blue's father returning home late one night after losing his job. This revealed useful information about how each of characters feel about the news and then we talked about how things had changed for the family over the months of his unemployment. Backstory improvisations are a good way in to exploring the dynamics and tensions of relationships which in turn inform scenes and give greater depth to specific lines. For example it gave the moment when Blue refers to her Father as 'loser' a new dimension and richness.

MOTHER	You going to see Jade at the weekend?
BLUE	Don't think so.
MOTHER	Or Ella?
BLUE	No.
MOTHER	Haven't seen her in ages.Why don't you invite them over? Have a sleepover. You can have a fire on the beach. Sausages.
BLUE	No thanks.
MOTHER	I'll get that ice cream you like.
BLUE	I said no thanks.
MOTHER	Camp out in the back like you used to.
BLUE	Are you deaf?
BEAT	
MOTHER	There was no need for that.
BLUE	Or just stupid.
MOTHER	That's enough.

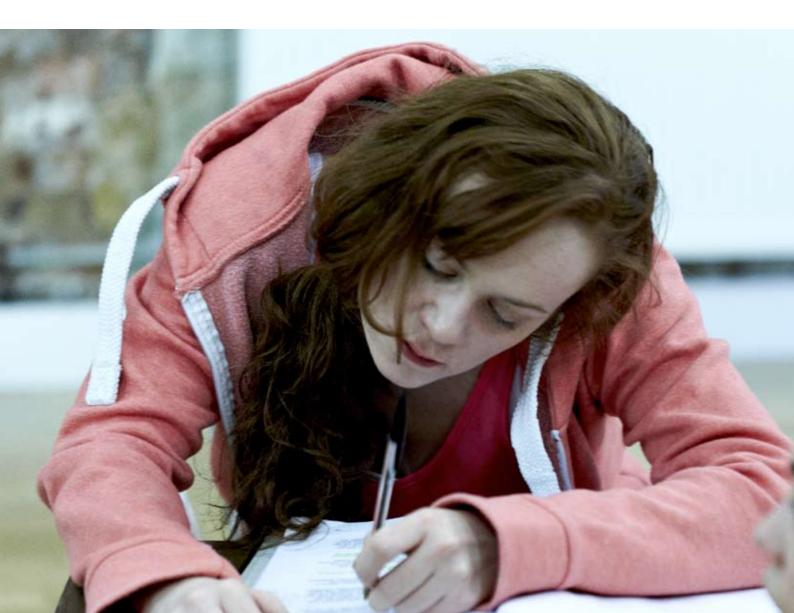




After reading through a scene with the actors, the director, Polly, asks lots of questions about the scene, such as; what do the characters want, what might prevent them from achieving their wants, and what has happened just before?

Here are some questions you may wish to explore:

What do Blue and Mother each want in this scene?
What is preventing Blue and Mother achieving what they want?
How might Blue feel about bringing friends home now her father has lost his job?
What do you imagine Katie Baxter's birthday party to be like?
How has Blue heard about the party?
Why is Katie Baxter picking on Blue? From the information you have in the scene can you imagine the story of how the tension developed between them?
What does Mother think of Katie Baxter?
What is the motivation behind Ella and Jade phoning Blue from Katie's party?







How does Blue's reality drive her to escape into the fairytale?

The stage directions at the start of Mermaid describe Blue and her family as living in 'a run down seaside town in a remote part of England. Thirteen year old Blue and her family have an alternative, new age/grunge look to them. Blue's bedroom is decorated with a collage of pictures of mermaids and mythical sea creatures.'

During this opening scene we learn that Blue has not been invited to Katie Baxter's party. Her friends Ella and Jade have not spoken to her for weeks and are at the party without her. We learn that Blue is being bullied at school because her mum bought her a pair of trainers from the charity shop that it turns out used to belong to Katie Baxter. There is also an indication that her parents are struggling after the father losing his job, which contrasts with Katie's seemingly wealthy and abundant lifestyle. When the girls call Blue from the party, Katie humiliates Blue in front of everybody, teasing her about her love of mermaids; 'Or is her mummy putting her to bed? Is she reading her a bed time story? Tucking her up with a mermaid song.' Blue is left feeling unsophisticated, humiliated and like a child. In an attempt to block out her demons she puts on her head phones, dancing in an act of defiance to Miley Cyrus' 'Wrecking Ball'. Blue's vivid imagination brings to life in her bedroom her worst fantasies as to what is happening at the party. There is no escape from her insecurities but to plunge herself into the world of the story. She tears herself away, landing on her school exercise book. She starts to write; 'Far, far from land, where the waters are as black as the darkest night, where no anchor can reach the bottom, live the mermaids. It is so deep you would have to pile a thousand shipwrecks on top of one another before one of them stuck out above the surface.' Blue's need to escape her present is reflected in the language, revealing her state of mind and desire to be 'far far' from her reality. From feeling trapped by her reality Blue brings the Little Mermaid to life as an alter ego free to do the things she desires.

How does the fairytale relate to challenges Blue faces in real life?

Mermaid is Blue's re-imagining of the Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale. As already mentioned, Blue conjures the world of the mermaids in an attempt to escape her insecurities and feelings of alienation. The world below represents a place Blue longs for, free of suffering, far beneath, safe and separate from the human world and its troubles above. The mermaids are physically free in contrast to her body anxieties. In mirror image to the Little Mermaid, who wonders about the world above; '*Things that make you wonder*, wonder about their lives, their lives up above...'; Blue longs to live in the ocean below. Just like the Little Mermaid who wishes herself human, she wishes herself mermaid.

During *Mermaid* we watch Blue go through puberty as she grows from thirteen to seventeen. In echo, each of the mermaids come of age and swim to the sea surface to see the world above for the first time. We understand Blue growing up through the Little Mermaid's rights of passage journey. Like Blue, the Little Mermaid is curious and imaginative. Both have a strong desire to go beyond permitted boundaries and are physically adventurous.

In rehearsal we were always conscious of how Blue's reality connected to the story. In rehearsals Natalie Gavin, who plays Blue, experimented with joining in on lines she felt resonated in particular with her character, for example, when Little Mermaid says; 'But I am the youngest. There is forever before I come of age. How can I bear to wait for so long?' Blue and the Little Mermaid are similar in their frustrations that everyone else is growing up faster, leaving them behind.





How Blue feels about the world is reflected in how she constructs the story and her state of mind leaks into the story as she writes. Storms echo Blue's out of control feelings. The characters she conjures are similar to the people in her life. The Sea Witch reflects Katie Baxter, a monster that takes something precious away from her. Seeing the Sea Witch poke and peer at the Little Mermaid reminds us of the image of Blue being picked apart by the girls in the opening scene. In the same way Blue's mum wants to keep her protected, Grandmer wants to keep the Little Mermaid safe in the world below; 'Remember, there is nowhere up on earth as beautiful as the bottom of the ocean.' Blue's response to her mother's need to protect resonates in the choice of language for when the King speaks to the Queen about the Prince; '...you do him no favours by keeping him locked away, swaddled up in the Palace.' Other moments reflect Blue's feelings about her father, such as the image of the immigrants aboard the boat; 'No food, no work'. A lot of Blue's thinking can be seen through the Prince, the 'jabbering voices clamouring for attention'. Through the Prince she explores questions and ideas that are running around her head; '... as if this life of privilege did not render one utterly ill equipped to know, to understand anything at all'. She questions the inequality in the world and the way that some lives are of greater value than others.

What are the conflicts living in Blue?

Blue is very conflicted. In rehearsals we identified some specific conflicts which were useful for accessing her character. Below are some of the conflicts we discovered:

Blue wants to be independent, but wants her mum to make everything better.

Blue is trying to grow up, but also she does not want to.

Blue wants her mum to leave her alone, but also wants a hug from her mum.

Blue wants to prove Katie Baxter's image of her as a "mummy's girl" wrong, but secretly still needs her mum. Blue wants to belong with Katie Baxter and the girls at the party, but she also doesn't because she wants to be

herself.

Blue is attracted and intrigued by Katie Baxter, but also hates and is angry at her. Blue wants to be herself, but is bullied for being herself.

Tasks:

What other conflict can you identify for Blue? What are the conflicts living in the Mother?







The Mermaid Chorus

An important aspect of *Mermaid* is the involvement of a local chorus of teenage girls who help create the magical world of the mermaids beneath the ocean.

Prior to the production arriving in each location, our Associate Director, Laura Farnworth and Associate Producer, Hannah Groombridge, engaged a group of local teenage girls in a day long workshop to prepare them for taking part in the show. During the workshop the young people worked physically and vocally to create their own underwater world and gained an insight into how Shared Experience create the theatricality of their productions. The workshop also looked at the themes of self image, identity and puberty that resonate in *Mermaid*. Participants were encouraged to unpick and challenge society's image of the so called 'perfect woman' with the intention of empowering them to feel free to make their own choices about self image. When we were researching the workshop we ran a series of test workshops with a group of girls at the Albany Theatre in London. Below we have included a few of their thoughts about being involved:

"The sessions were very useful because, it shows girls how unreal the 'perfect' women is. Which in total promotes self-confidence, independence and self-love."

"I liked the sessions a lot because I never really looked into the media's perceptions of women, and how it actually affects us. Also meeting other girls who felt the same as I did about certain topics was wonderful."

"I feel as though it is important to talk about these issues so girls can have a wider understanding as to why people do have confidence issues."

"I think it is useful because it allows young girls to come to the realisation that models are not truly confident, and skinny isn't always beautiful. It helps girls to be more confident and it gives them more open minds."

"Those issues are very important to talk about because most girls deal with the same issues and it's important to let "the demons out" and have a good heart to heart with other females."

"What I liked about the sessions was that I got to discuss with girls around my age a topic that affected all of us."

"I really enjoyed the group conversations... they help you feel less alone in front of the media and more confident about your own body and imperfections. I think they are important topics to be talking about as because of the media they are huge parts of our lives and are topics that generally aren't mentioned that much."









The Sea Witch

We decided that the Sea Witch had once tried and failed to win the love of a man. The Sea Witch is the physical manifestation of female envy and the embodiment of women who are forever altering their appearance in pursuit for the acceptance of others. She represents the extreme lengths women go to in order to live up to the narrow margin of the media's perception of the so called 'Perfect Woman'.

Inspiration for the Sea Witch came from watching documentaries and seeing the bizarre, alien like creatures living in the depths of the ocean that are so extraordinary they go beyond what we can possibly imagine. This led to the idea of constructing the Sea Witch out of several actors, which created a volatile, grotesque and inhuman creature. The Sea Witch was able to morph rapidly, transforming between a silky, seductive quality to something suddenly jagged and ugly.

The Sea Witch represents the human tendency to want to inflict pain on others when in pain. We decided that it would be physically painful for her to move, which underneath her movement gave a violence. We wanted to feel in the way that she moved an anger at the Little Mermaid's beauty, that she wants to damage, scratch, and hurt the Little Mermaid. Being near the Little Mermaid is both tantalising and excruciating for her. The Little Mermaid reminds her of everything she has lost and covets. The Sea Witch cannot see well and so she has to get very close to the Little Mermaid, which visually creates a sense of the Sea Witch's additive curiosity of her. When we were looking at how the Sea Witch moved it was helpful to think of the quality of a magnet that both attracts and repels. Another useful starting point was exploring jealousy physically, which helped to inform a very particular movement quality for the Sea Witch. Her rage and jealousy is something that sometimes bubbles up and takes over her, and at other times is something she suppresses and covers.

In rehearsal we discussed what the Sea Witch wants in her scene with the Little Mermaid. On a simple level she wants the Little Mermaid's voice and on a deeper level she wants to possess the pure beauty of the mermaid state. She wants to defile the Little Mermaid, because she herself has been defiled. She wants to destroy the Little Mermaid's beauty, because she has lost hers. It is all too late for the Sea Witch, so all she has left is to destroy the Little Mermaid. She wants to corrupt and pollute the Little Mermaid with her poisonous view of the world. During the scene the Little Mermaid asks the Sea Witch 'What happened to you?' and in rehearsals we asked ourselves this. A useful thought was the idea that many years ago, like the Little Mermaid, the Sea Witch had made a deal to live in the world above as a human for the love of a man, but that she was rejected. Up on earth she tried to improve and change her appearance in order to be accepted and as a result has ended up mutilating herself.

Creating the Sea Witch was a very collaborative process involving discussions between the Director, Designer and actors. It felt important that the creation of her remained playful and truthful to the storytelling nature of the production. It felt important that her physicality should in some way focus on the legs, show a lot of flesh and reflect the ghastly changes she has tried to make to herself. The actors experimented with lots of ways of changing their image, elastic bands, wigs, tights and shoes. The final result we see on stage is the collaborative culmination of those explorations and discussions.





Creating the Royals

To access the crisp, direct and angular physicality of the royals we explored their status and relationships in a series of military based improvisations when the Prince was a young boy. For example, we played a scene where the King teaches his son how to shoot, with the Queen looking on. Another fruitful improvisation began with the King and Queen getting ready for an important engagement. The six year old Prince came in with a dying bird he had found, which he wants his mother to look after. The Queen cannot bear the bird to be in the room and fears being touched and soiled. From this improvisation the actors were able to explore the deep conflicts between the Prince and Queen. This desire to be nurtured and her fear of this need and vulnerability was very useful for understanding their relationship in the play. It was very revealing how they did or did not cope with emotion. It became apparent that the Queen finds open displays of emotion uncomfortable and does not have the resources to deal with her son's emotional behaviour. After running these improvisations we quickly moved back to the script and ran all of the scenes with the royals, one after another without stopping. It was immediately visible that the improvisations were informing the scenes, which had a new charged energy running underneath them. The dysfunctional relationships that had been exposed in improvisation infused the scenes with a new tension.







PRINCE	Butterflies you see, they only live for a few days, or sometimes weeks if they are not devoured by some other creature, but those few days, they are an eternity, having no knowledge of past or future, no knowledge even of its own astonishing beauty, it lives unaware of our gaze, unaware of anything but its own pulsing life, in an eternal present, an ecstasy of now and now and now, so that even as they are about to be eaten alive the moment before their extinction is beautiful. THE QUEEN IS WRINGING HER HANDS.
QUEEN	l have no idea what you're talking about.
PRINCE	We live in fear.
-	
QUEEN	Fear?
PRINCE	Of all the creatures on earth man kind is the only one to realise that it is himself that he sees in the mirror. It is our curse, is it not, mother. The desire to impress, to show only what is admirable, what is enviable in ourselves. Hide that of which we are ashamed.
QUEEN	(STRUGGLING) I know, I realise that you are unhappy, but there's nothing,I can't.
PRINCE	This life that we lead, the pomp, the ceremony, does it never strike you as absurd?
QUEEN	I shall tell the press office that a date will be decided before the / weekend.
PRINCE	The war, it was a relief in a way, to be in the middle of a battle, to forget everything else, to know that if you didn't kill them then they would kill you. To have something real to be afraid of.

The image of a butterfly in the Prince's language relates to the mermaids. In production, to heighten the resonance of the butterfly imagery, the mermaids swim beneath the Prince during the dialogue. He describes the butterfly as like a mermaid, having no concept of time; 'those few days, they are an eternity, having no knowledge of past or future, and they live, in an eternal present'. Like Blue, this is an existence the Prince longs for, to escape the 'ceaseless chatter' inside his head.

The Prince talks of the butterfly having 'no knowledge even of its own astonishing beauty, it lives unaware of our gaze'. Similarly the mermaids have no sense of vanity and are free of self consciousness. This is in stark contrast to the Prince's world, where he lives under the judgement of others and the gaze of the media. 'Of all the creatures on earth man kind is the only one to realise that it is himself that he sees in the mirror.'

'The desire to impress, to show only what is admirable, what is enviable in ourselves. Hide that of which we are ashamed' has echoes of the Sea Witch, and earlier with Blue, when she is teased and feels ashamed because of her love of mermaids. Later the Little Mermaid hides who she is in order to become human. Learning to accept and love who you truly are is one of the key messages of *Mermaid* and something that we see here the Prince is battling with.







What Does the End of the Play Mean?

'... the dream was so real that when I woke up i thought of nothing else'

Rather than a romantic love story of a traditional fairytale, *Mermaid* tells us how important it is to love yourself and accept who you are. It is about becoming connected to the part of you that is most authentic and beautiful. By the end of the play Blue is seventeen years old. The stage directions describes her as a *'beautiful young woman with a grace and style of her own'*. In the final moments of the play it becomes clear that Little Mermaid is an extension of Blue - it is as if Blue finally meets her inner self. In the production this moment is illustrated through the actors mirroring each other.

At the beginning of the play Blue is teased by Katie Baxter about her love of mermaids; 'Made up a spell to grow a fish tail didn't you Blue.' Her powerful imagination feels like something to be ashamed of. By the end the play, however, Blue has learnt to embrace her imagination, find her independence and accept her individuality.

Through watching Little Mermaid and the Prince grow we understand Blue as maturing into a young woman. The pressures of being part of the royal family and the media attention surrounding them has suffocated the Little Mermaid. On her way to say goodbye to the Prince before he returns to war, Little Mermaid sees the ocean and hears Blue singing the mermaid song. They call to her and in a symbolic act of liberation she tears off the royal clothes that have been choking her. It is as if she is slivering out of her princess skin and the moment evokes the Prince drowning sequence from earlier in the play. The Little Mermaid has grown. She has realised she was wrong to sacrifice part of herself for the acceptance of others - she would rather die than be silent at the Prince's side. Through this act of empowerment we understand Blue has also grown. The Prince then also meets Blue. For the Prince he has finally found what he was searching for, the answer to who sang the song, and for Blue she is no longer invisible, he has seen and acknowledged her. With this completion Blue is finally able to accept and love herself as she really is. Blue no longer needs to live through the character of a mermaid who has lost her voice. She can release the Little Mermaid back into the sea, transcending the curse, where she can return to being the adventurous mermaid from the start.

At the very end Blue steps out into the water and swims with the mermaids, symbolic of an awakening and finding a physical sensuality in the body. Blue is comfortable in her own skin, in stark contrast to the awkward and body conscious dancing at the start. Blue moves freely and with confidence. Finally it is Blue that breaks the surface of the water and it is as if the mermaids dance around her, celebrating her.



Nottingham Playhouse

Lesson Plan (45 mins)

Resources:

Facility to play music/sound Objects for underwater exploration Flipchart, large paper, and A4 paper and coloured pens Print outs of magazine/models images (4 or 5) Uplifting music track

Underwater World (25 mins)

Aims: To practice exercises from the rehearsal room used to create the underwater world in Mermaid. To experiment with different qualities of movement, pace and rhythm and improvise scenes related to the play.

Exploring how objects move under water:

Facilitator places objects around the room (ordinary objects such as keys, plastic bags, plastic bottles are good.) Students select an object and animate their object, exploring how it might move under water. The students should keep their body relaxed, so that the movement of the object starts to inform their whole physicality. The facilitator can then make gestures to send 'currents' that move the objects, as if they are caught in a wave or tide. Explore different types of current, gentle and stormy etc. The facilitator can then bring the group together so they become aware of each other's presence and can explore how their objects make contact with another. To bring the exercise to a close, ask the students to imagine their object is making its way down to the seabed, so that they bring their objects to the floor.

In rehearsals the mermaids explored their objects as if they had never seen them before. Try this as a group with a plastic bag. The mermaids are fascinated but also unsure whether the plastic bag is dangerous. They gradually become more and more adventurous as they find games and ways of playing with the object. Throughout the exercise, be responsive to the currents that come from another's movement.

Explore weightlessness:

The objective of this exercise is to explore a principle of weightlessness in the body to create the illusion of being underwater. Students lie on their backs on the floor, with their legs and arms completely relaxed. Ask the group to imagine they are a anemone or a piece of seaweed that is floating on the sea bed, hundreds of miles below the ocean surface. The facilitator should send currents that impact on the 'seaweed' making it move according to the intensity and precise nature of the current. The water gently stirs them. Encourage the students to always be moving - even in the calmest waters there is a gentle current that knocks and buffets. Notice how if the body is still, it breaks the illusion of being underwater and suddenly looks like it is on ground. Remind the students to visualise being fluid in their bodies as if an anemone or seaweed, so they are physically relaxed.





Sending and Receiving Currents:

Ask the students to go into pairs and stand facing each other a few feet apart. Label each other A and B. A is underwater and B is going to send a current to A. Ask A to find a sense weightlessness in the body, as if their body is supported by water. Ask B to send a current with their arms towards A. B 'receives' the current, by physically expressing with their body the current's impact. Encourage the students to be physically clear in the sending and receiving of currents. Once they have grasped this, the exercise can be developed by asking B to send currents of different strengths, e.g. how much can they make their partner move? How small a current can they make that still impacts on their partner? Also try sending currents with different parts of the body. The students can also then explore sending the currents with different emotions, for example, longing, jealousy, anger. Ask the partners to then swop over and repeat.

Drowned Body and Mermaid:

In partners ask one person to lie on the floor and imagine they are a drowned body that has fallen to the bottom of the ocean. Remind them that their body should never be still and the currents gently stir their body. Their partners are then going to play a mermaid that has just discovered the body. To become a mermaid, ask the students to focus on being very curious, like an animal. They have never seen a human body before, and they are fascinated by what they have found. Ask the students playing mermaids to keep their knees and ankles together so they start to find a physicality for the mermaid. The drowned body can respond to the currents created by the mermaids as she moves.

The World Above - Media pressure, female identity & self-image (20 mins)

Aims: To look at the themes of self-image and identity that resonate in *Mermaid* and draw attention to the pressures that challenge young women. Students are encouraged to unpick and challenge society's image of the so called 'perfect woman' to empower them to make their own choices about self-image.

Stick Woman Exercise:

Facilitator uses large paper/flip chart to draw a stick woman. The facilitator asks the group to describe what the media's presentation of the so called 'perfect woman' looks like. Starting with the head, moving through the body to the feet, one student is invited to draw the characteristics on the stick woman and the facilitator makes notations. Once the group has made all their suggestions, the facilitator raises how amazingly detailed and specific we are about what the 'perfect woman' looks like. We are bombarded every day with 1000 images in the media and its fascinating how well we know what she looks like. Highlight to the group how unachievable these different characteristics would be for one body. To close, raise the question what effect the image of the perfect woman has on us.





Advertising images:

The facilitator shows several advertising images to the group. As a whole group look at 4 or 5 images of women in adverts. Facilitator poses questions: What would it take for us to achieve this look? Introduce the power of of consumerism and marketing by asking; who is benefiting from making us feel like we need to achieve this look? Then split into groups of 4 or 5 and give each group a large piece of paper and pens. Each group is given a few minutes to discuss and write down the answers to 'What effect does this have on us? What insecurities in us does this stimulate?' Afterwards, each group feed back to the whole group.

A Letter to Me:

This exercise works particularly well if you can play some gentle, but uplifting music in the background. The aim of the exercise is to empower the group and end the lesson feeling positive.

Ask everyone to take a piece of paper and pen and find a place in the room on their own. Ask each to write a letter to themselves that will make them feel better and stronger the next time they feel bad or insecure about themselves. Give the group 5 minutes to write, it can be as long or short as they want, but they should keep the letter anonymous. When they have finished, ask them to fold up their letter and 'post' it in the middle of the room, in a pile on the floor. Once everyone has finished ask the group to sit in a circle. Going round the room, one by one, each person chooses a letter and reads out loud. They should not read their own. Encourage the group to be a supportive audience for each letter.







Exercises to take from the Rehearsal Room to The Classroom

Emotion in the Body

Begin by standing in a line against one wall. Choose an emotion. In rehearsals we worked with jealousy. Allow the emotion to be felt throughout the body. Breathe the emotion throughout the body, so that it reaches your extremities, fingers and toes. Allow the emotion to pull and shape your body. You are expressing physically the internal sensation of jealousy, allowing it to erupt and take over the entire body as if you are becoming a jealous monster, the feelings distorting and contorting the body. As you do so, start to find a sound to go with the physicality. Once the emotion is established throughout the body, start to move towards the wall on the opposite side of the room. As you travel from one side of the room to the other, the emotion grows and becomes more intense. The workshop leader claps their hands and when this happens everybody conceals the emotion so that it would not visible to an onlooker. Imagine you have entered a room where you need to say hello to people, and you need to cover the emotion so that no one can notice it. However, the emotion does not become any less, it is still alive inside you. It may leak out in parts of the body. Try exploring these 'leaks' in the hands, neck, tongue, shoulders, at different levels of intensity between one and ten whilst trying to cover up the feeling.

Development: Play a scene from the play *Mermaid* in groups. First, identify the characters' objectives in the scene. Hold on to the emotion in the body. When the workshop leader claps their hands, the full physical expression of the emotion is released, and when they clap their hands again, the emotion is concealed.

Chair Exercise - Objectives and Obstacles

In rehearsals we defined an objective as something the character wants, and an obstacle as something that is getting in the way of what the character wants. In order to explore objectives and obstacles more fully the following exercise is very good at illustrating the principle of objectives and obstacles and encourages performers to be completely committed to playing an objective and obstacle.

Select two people from the group, label them A and B. Both sit facing eachother on a chair a few feet apart. A is given the objective 'To punish B'; B is given the objective 'To ask forgiveness from A.'

With their objective A and B should really try to change the other person. Working with their objective, 'to punish B', A moves their chair anywhere in the room. When they are finished, they sit in the chair. As soon as A sits in their chair, B immediately responds, by moving anywhere in the room with their chair, playing the objective, 'To ask forgiveness from A'. When they are finished they sit, and A immediately responds again by moving their chair, and so on. It should become a physical conversation between A and B.

There is no talking. The objective is only expressed through how and where each move their chair in the space. It is also important that each respond immediately after the other person has sat back in their chair in order that the responses are kept instinctive.





Once a physical conversation of the two objectives has been established the workshop leader pauses the game. Ask whether the group felt they were playing their objectives as strongly as possible. Discuss the different tactics that were used to try and achieve the objective. Talk about how inventive we are in our use of tactics if we really want something.

To A's objective, 'To punish B', add the obstacle that they have a fear of losing B if they go too far. To B's objective, 'To ask forgiveness from A', add the obstacle that they believe A is overreacting in their punishment.

Now begin the game again. First of all, repeat as previously, just playing the objectives only. Once they have been established, the workshop leader then adds in the obstacles. Discuss in your group following the exercise how the physical conversation changes once an obstacle is then added.

Storytelling

'If you lose a word in a sentence, it is like a dropped stitch and it all comes unraveled.' Polly Teale, Mermaid rehearsals

In *Mermaid* it is essential that the text is kept active in order that the story is told and the language is vivid. In rehearsals we used the following exercises to explore storytelling and how to activate each word.

1) Sit in a circle and choose a piece of text. Go round the circle and ask each to say the text in a whisper. Notice how in a whisper words are shaped in the mouth and how consonants become very important in order to make the words clear. Now repeat in a normal voice and encourage the same articulation as was found in the whisper.

2) The world above is an alien land to the mermaids, so when they describe the human world, they are very considered in their language. We found a useful exercise to access this quality was to sit in a circle, and go round the room, asking each person to describe an everyday object, e.g. a CD, a television, a phone etc, without saying the name of the object. We then had to try and guess what they were describing. Notice how resourceful we become in our descriptions when we can't say what it is. Also notice how active we are in our language - how thoughtful and particular we are at selecting the right words to describe our object. We also tried describing wind, clouds, sun, waves, a tree, a building, to a mermaid who has always lived beneath the ocean. In rehearsals we then went back to the text, for example, to the scenes where the mermaids describe seeing the world above for the first time, and applied this same idea of selecting words. When we did we could hear that the language had became very alive and vivid, and as the listeners, we were really able to imagine what the mermaids were saying.





Shared Experience and Expressionism

In our everyday lives we hide much of what we think and feel, for fear we would be considered foolish or even mad. I believe we have a longing to see expressed in the theatre that which we conceal in life; to share our 'madness' and understand that we are not alone.

Central to Shared Experience's approach is the desire to go beyond naturalism and to see into the characters' private worlds. There will be moments on stage when we literally enact whatever a character is secretly feeling or imagining. In more realistic scenes the social facade is a thin layer beneath which bubbles a river of suppressed emotion. During rehearsals we encourage actors to explore the subtext of the scene by allowing the bubbling emotional energy to erupt and manifest physically. In a scene where someone is secretly feeling very angry, when we allow the inner to erupt onto the surface they may viciously attack the other person; if the other character is feeling afraid they might crawl under the table. Having allowed the inner to erupt, the actor must return to the scene and struggle to conceal it. Although we may see two people drinking tea, we sense that underneath the social ritual it is as if murder is taking place.

This emphasis on subjective experience runs through all areas of the production. For example, the setting of the play will be more expressive of what a place feels like than what it realistically looks like. In *Jane Eyre* everything on stage was charred and looked as if it had been destroyed by fire to express the loneliness of Jane's psychic landscape. In *Mermaid* the cloudy mirrors expressed both the self consciousness of a world obsessed with appearance, as well as the infinite wateriness of the amniotic world beneath the ocean. In *The House of Bernarda Alba* the house felt like a prison. We decided to make the door colossally large and encrusted it with locks and bolts. It is this emphasis on the 'inner' or the subjective experience which characterises expressionism and it is at the heart of Shared Experience's approach.

Polly Teale, Artistic Director

Sources of Inspiration for Tom Piper's Design of *Mermaid*









Designer: Tom Piper

How did you begin to generate your design ideas for Mermaid?

The lucky thing for me was that there were some research and development workshops that I was able to go to before having any design ideas. Polly had the beginnings of the script and they spent a week working and I went to a couple sessions. That's been really useful because when you read the script there are these seamless transitions from one world to another, there are episodic events which you think, how are we going to realise this in the design? But seeing it in workshop you of course realise the power of the actors to be great storytellers and to transform objects and themselves through physicality.

I begin with the beginning point in the story, Blue in her bedroom. I have been inspired by books like 'Where the Wild Things Are' and the transformative power of our imaginations. That we can think we are in a bedroom and then go underwater and be with the mermaids. As the story progresses it merges into real world political events that are happening, I think that is the really interesting take of Polly's version of the story.

I normally try to create spaces that are very simple, but evocative and can serve the storytelling. In this I started looking at all the movement, that actually with the mermaid work, they are almost always down on the floor. So I thought we should raise them up so the audience are getting to see them on their eye line. So that came up very simply with the idea of a raised up platform, which could be the bedroom and then transform. That also helps be a surface that in our minds eye can be dry land and the area around it can be the sea or vice versa. It has a versatility to it. I trained in Peter Brook's company and what Peter in his work does is create areas of focus in a bigger space. Often just by putting down a carpet, in the same way a street entertainer will sometimes mark out an area and people gather round. Therefore the platform is like a floating carpet in the space, that provides a bit of tension in a bigger space.

What is the next stage in your process?

The great thing about theatre is that it is collaborative. I did various model versions, and had meetings with Polly and we discussed the model and how it might work. I quite quickly got to an idea that there could be a mirrored surface. On one level it is quite an obvious thing for a way of representing water, sea and sky. But also there are themes about identity and self image, and there are scenes set in royal palaces, which have a kind of Palace of Versailles nature. The initial version of the mirror was rough and it looked very scratched, it had a violence to it, I didn't want the story to get too pretty pretty. Then we tried a version without defining the edge of the mirror but it became too languid. So through experimenting I've got to a stage of more like an abstraction of the spray of waves that we have created in the antiquing of the mirror. Then we began thinking about particular moments that might happen.





Tom Piper's Design Images







So beginning in the bedroom, during the storm the wardrobe could take off and float in the space, but never leave it so you always get the sense that there is a dreamlike quality to the storytelling. Lots of items we use come out of the wardrobe, or from the floor, or objects found around the space. So we are never trying to fully evoke a location. For the royal palace it might be just two grand chairs for example.

What is it like to design a space that is both underwater and the human world above?

In the way it is written there are seamless transitions with people shedding a layer of clothing. I have worked a lot with Liz Ranken before, who is our Movement Director, and she often explores the idea of taking layers off or putting layers on, and looking at how that affects the physicality.

How do you negotiate between the ideas you bring at the start a process and responding to ideas that come from the development of the piece?

It is your role as a designer that you have an idea of the overall feel of the piece and the world that you are trying to create. Within that there are a lot of very creative voices that come up with ideas. Some of those ideas are embedded in the moment of a rehearsal and focussed on the detail of something. I have to be able to step out of that and be aware of the overall picture. The Sea Witch for example, I know plenty of designers that would come up with beautiful costume elements. By looking at what the actors are doing in rehearsal, and picking up from the script the suggestion that she has had cosmetic surgery in pursuit of beauty, we hold up a mirror to society. We have created a grotesque reflection upon the way people use surgery to change their bodies in an attempt to make themselves desirable. By using a collection of things that suggest surgery and body altering lingerie we create a kind of collage with the actors.

The women need to be in a basic outfit that allows them to slide around, and then also be something that you can put a coat over, add a pair of heels and feel like you are one of Kate Middleton's followers. It might be that we we are quite emblematic, such as a coat from a wardrobe for a king. Its about being open to new ideas whilst also challenging if that is the right new idea. The big challenge is not so much creating the space, but the journey of the costumes and finding an image of the mermaids that will work. I want them to feel natural, they are a force of natural nature and everything else that human beings do to themselves is fighting against drawings of what that might be that would involve very complex being natural. But then you ask, what is natural and what do they wear that is sensual without being overtly sexual? The mermaids have an innocence. I think all the time we should be trying to find solutions for the storytelling that are theatrical and imaginative and not about illusion and special effects. We are making the audience do the imaginative work.





Composer & Sound Designer: Jon Nicholls

What were your starting points for developing ideas for Mermaid?

I think with any fairy story, the challenge is how to make it emotionally truthful, genuinely powerful, and avoid twee-ness. Hans Christian Andersen's original story of 'The Little Mermaid' is actually horrific in many of its details, for example, the idea that the Little Mermaid will feel as if she's walking on sword-blades once she's lost her tail. I spent a lot of time looking for ways in which this sense of visceral feeling could be expressed in the sound and music.

The company started work on the show almost a year ago, when we worked for a week with some actors and singers experimenting with some of the central ideas/techniques in the piece, and quite a few of those things have made it into the final show. One of these was the discovery of a style of singing that felt very natural and rawly expressive. Another was the way in which an immersive and continuous soundscape can help the action move seamlessly between the water and 'the world above'. During the week I had a lot of different sounds set up on a sampler keyboard, and literally improvised live with the actors as they worked. I then took a lot of those ideas and re-shaped them in a more considered way for the eventual production.

How has it been working with a live Chorus and how has that impacted on your design?

The chorus are a key part of the concept for the show. They hugely reinforce the sound of the mermaids' singing, and create a wonderful depth and perspective to the sound. We spent a lot of time thinking about how the mermaids' singing might work, it needed to feel very expressive and very free. During the original research week last year, I worked with the actors using a style of singing called 'heterophony', which I've always been fascinated with. It's a very ancient musical technique of which you can find examples all over the world from Javanese gamelan to Gaelic psalm-singing, through to the work of composers like Benjamin Britten. It basically involves someone singing (or playing) a musical phrase, and then the rest of the ensemble copying that phrase and repeating it. However, rather than an exact copy, you're free to play or sing your own version of the original phrase, it might be a bit faster or slower, or be just a few notes of the original, or be ornamented in some way. The overall effect of a lot of people doing this simultaneously is an extraordinary blurred wave-like kind of sound, where you end up with multiple overlapping echoes of the original. Try it for yourself! I'd always thought that this watery blurred sound might be perfect for the mermaids' singing, and it worked fantastically well; any of the mermaids could improvise a phrase, and the other could then respond in their own way for as long as they wanted. I also thought it would be a perfect technique for the chorus, who are a different group at each venue and who have to respond to the mermaids' singing. There's a set of four very simple melodic phrases that I composed, which they can learn during the course of their preparatory workshop, which are a kind of seed for the onstage singing, but beyond that they're very free, and the beauty of heterophony is that it really does sound completely different every night.



Nottingham Playhouse

What is the biggest challenge of this piece?

As well as the composer, I'm also the show's sound designer, which means I'm responsible for the technical production of the sound onstage and in the auditorium. I think the biggest challenges have been to do with that aspect of the show. It's an epic story with storms, oceans, ships, palaces and monsters, and needs to be very loud at times to really get across the terrifying power, not just of characters like the Sea Witch, but also the sheer power of the natural environment of the sea. However, you also need to hear the actors and I also wanted to have all sorts of echo effects on the mermaids' voices. The usual way to do this would be to give all the actors radio microphones to wear. However, the show is intensely physical, they spend a lot of time rolling around, and also putting their heads into water, so head-worn microphones and radio transmitter packs weren't really an option. So instead I have a lot of microphones hidden all over the stage, which are constantly turned on and off throughout the show to pick up particular lines. I think during the Sea Witch sequence there are around 50 microphone cues within the space of about 5 minutes' of stage time!

How have you used sound to denote the underwater world versus the human world above?

I knew right from the start that I wanted the underwater world to feel and sound very immersive, and did very extensive research into how things sound underwater, ranging from watching all of the BBC's 'Blue Planet' series to listening to online audio feeds from the US Navy's hydrophone network, as well as recordings of whales and other undersea creatures. The show uses a cinema-style surround sound system, with speakers at the rear as well as at the front of the auditorium, which means that the audience feel the sound is enveloping them completely. The underwater sounds are underlaid by a very deep constant bed of quiet rumblings and bubblings, which contains all sorts of everyday sounds treated to sound very distant and almost unrecognisable, as if the ocean is full of objects from 'above' that have all drifted down to the bottom of the sea yet are still making sounds. One of my favourite moments is when the Little Mermaid produces a watch which is still ticking; as she handles it, the ticking slows and transforms from a 'real' sound into a huge low muffled pulse echoing through the water. When we break through the surface, the underwater sounds cut abruptly and turn into much more natural-sounding waves, gulls etc.





Actor: Sarah Twomey (Little Mermaid)

What attracted you to the play Mermaid?

I knew the story, I'd seen the Disney film and from when I was younger, I knew the Hans Christian Anderson story, but I hadn't actually ever thought about the implications of the story. So when I read Polly's reinvestigation of the story I thought that is so interesting. And I thought how on earth would you stage that! An entire world underwater, a world of weightlessness. So I thought that would be a really interesting thing to investigate.

What is the biggest challenge of playing Little Mermaid?

So far definitely the biggest challenge as an actor has been the fact that all Little Mermaid's thoughts, insecurities, and convictions are described in the narration and that is because she is an extension of Blue, but as an actor, those are the things I would conceal and then let them seep through. A lot of things being described are internal. My job is to physicalise them in the space and its hard because I feel them, but I want them to be small inside me and so to have your emotions laid bare for you in front of the audience is really quite a unique challenge as an actor, but a good challenge.

How are you overcoming the challenge?

What I am doing is thinking about storytelling. I think, I am a storyteller and I am actor on this stage telling a story. So its a balance of being inside the character and then when things are not naturalistic, then you are part of a company of people telling a story. Sometimes the Little Mermaid, as with all the other characters, might suddenly become a wave, and then in that instance, rather than worry about my psychological motivation, I think that I am part of an ancient tradition of storytellers.

How have you approached the underwater world versus the world above?

The way that we have captured the underwater world is through physicality. We started with an amazing exercise that Liz Ranken, our movement director, taught us where we found a series of movement which were organic. The work is very much floor based. The underwater world is largely depicted by the fact that we only really raise up to our knees. We found that the second we tried to evoke a watery world on our feet, it planted us immediately in the world above. So we stay on our thighs, hands, hips, knees for the underwater world, and then when we go to the world above, we start to stand. That change in level is the clearest differentiation between the two worlds. In the underwater world we haven't been literal about the tails. We found in the organic flow of movement, that our legs were coming together naturally to make a tail, but there is no strict rule. I quite like that we haven't tied our ankles together and been literal about it. It is always just about an essence. We also have some rules of thumb; for example, our movements become guicker in shallower water, and when we are in the depths of the ocean, our movements are very slow, that denotes the pressure and darkness of down below. Little details like that are very effective.





I love doing the second part of the play. It's great because the Little Mermaid's legs are alien to her when she first gets them. It would be like us waking up with a tail! So she has to figure out how to use them. Pressures are put upon the Little Mermaid almost as soon as she surfaces. She gets put very quickly into high heels, which are actually very difficult to walk in, so I get to really sense the difficulty of walking and the difficulty that she would feel just in her bare feet.

This is your first show since coming from drama school. What has that been like?

I was thrilled to get this job with such a great company. It's really amazing because I do feel with this piece in particular that all my training has come into play, after leaving school six months ago I get a chance to put it all into practice all at once. That is amazing that I had all those lessons, and now I'm having to really put into practice in the industry, I feel like I am giving all those muscles a really good flex.

