



Insights into Judy Boone by Gina Isaac UK Tour 2015

Audiences will make up their own minds about a character; you make decisions as actors about your character which are often instinctive but I always try to find what I like about the character I'm playing.

I feel that Judy is presented in a very sympathetic light, I wasn't sure about that when I started rehearsals because essentially it's still quite taboo for a mother to leave her child but the more that you learn about Judy through her letters and Christopher's memories of her, it establishes her from the off as a very caring woman who obviously loves Christopher very much.

From a dramatic perspective, the first time we see Judy is in one of Christopher's memories and it is a happy memory and so straight away that places her as a very positive figure in Christopher's life.

"I remember...we were on holiday in Cornwall. We were on a beach in a place called Polperro."

When she leaves Christopher she realises it will be so painful for him and so difficult for him to understand and so that's why the letters are so important; she's trying to make him understand that it was for the good of him. It's awful. Sometimes I can hardly bear to even go on and do the letters because you just think about how awful he must have felt.

Through the letters that Judy writes we learn more about her decision to leave and this is really key in recognising that she's a good person and a good mother; she was just trying the very best she could in a difficult situation and she always berated herself more over her short-comings as a mother than anyone else did.

In the very early stages before Christopher was diagnosed we felt that Ed and Judy had very little support and so didn't have the tools to deal with Christopher; those early years would have been key in building her relationship with her son and that would have been a real struggle for her.

There are many times when Judy feels that there isn't a unique bond between her and Christopher but actually we see that they do have a deep connection. In rehearsals we spoke about the hand-touching moment and we think that it was Judy who initiated this – she's a very emotional person with a great need for physical contact and so that would have been a massive break-through for the whole family; to find that calming influence through physical contact. I don't think it happened in the moment of that memory at Polperro beach but is established before then.

There are other moments too; when Christopher arrives in London he hasn't seen his mum for two years but straight away he's calm. He allows his mum to undress him, there's an intimacy and Judy needs to hang onto that, those moments are few and far between and that's part of the challenge for Judy. I can see how she might forget it, how she might feel she's getting nothing back, but you can sometimes feel that as a mum anyway!

"And I remember looking at the two of you and seeing you together and thinking how you were really different with him. Much calmer."

She always felt that she was the problem; that must have been incredibly painful for a mother to admit; that you're not providing what you feel your child needs. So I think that it was an incredibly selfless act to leave. It was always her intention to come back; to give him the time and space and to also sort herself out.

There's a line when Ed says Judy has gone to hospital and Christopher responds:

"Is it a psychiatric hospital?"

This is perhaps an indication of Judy's mental state and we discussed that she has probably had some mental health issues in the past. But through the letters we see an increase in her clarity; we see her piecing herself back together again.

The letters become like therapy for Judy - they're also quite like love letters. She sees Christopher as being this brilliant amazing individual; she has great respect for him, she never patronises him and she recognises his huge intelligence. She's always honest and candid and doesn't try to soften things, she knows what Christopher can process and she hopes that over time he will understand and know that she didn't leave him.

We hear in one letter about Christopher's tantrum in the store when the mixers get knocked off the shelf; that would have been a huge thing for Judy at the time. This wouldn't have been a toddler on the floor, Christopher would have been a 12/13 year old boy and she would have felt very keenly what others were thinking.

What we see as the play goes on is that it no longer matters so much; when she's on Hampstead Heath, and the woman asks:

"Is he OK?"

It could have been an issue in the past but



she can deal with it better. She can let Christopher play it out, just breathe deeply and then get on with it. Actually society will always judge everybody and so it's about coming to a point within yourself where that doesn't matter and Judy gets to that point and that's a break-through for her.

That moment when she hears that Ed has told him that she's dead; it's actually too big to process which is why the scream appears – the stage direction is:

“Judy starts to howl”

And in that split second, the pain that she feels is huge but it's more about the pain that she recognises Christopher would have felt: It's the most horrendous act of betrayal from Ed – on Christopher.

In this, her moment of need, she desperately needs to connect with Christopher and so she asks for the simplest of things, to hold his hand, but she knows it's impossible and of course he says quite simply:

“I don't like people holding my hand.”

And she has to accept that and it's crucifying but even though she has learnt to accept – it doesn't make it any easier.

It's important to remember that Christopher is a teenager – forget everything else; nobody has empathy for their parents at that age, nobody wants their parents to touch them, when Judy screams, he says:

“Why are you doing that?”

That's what any teenage boy might say to his mum.

Roger isn't willing or able to deal with Christopher in their life – it's almost instantaneous when she decides to return to Swindon. She knows the utmost importance is to get Christopher to a safe place. The line:

“We're going back to Swindon because if we stay in London any longer...someone is going to get hurt. And I don't necessarily mean you.”

I think this line is ambiguous because if you want to go with Judy as the she-lion with a fiery temper– in rehearsals we talked about the possibility of it being me hurting Roger - then that's one interpretation, but I believe that she is speaking about Roger and his volatility. The only thing with taking that decision is that we don't want this to become the major reason for her leaving – we don't

want that to cloud the issue. It changes to be honest from show to show and that's great.

When she goes back to Swindon the effect of this decision is that her sole focus can be on Christopher, it allows her to resolve her differences with Ed and for them both to focus on their son. That Christopher can do his A Level – that's a massive thing; there's been a phone conversation between Judy and the school before Christopher shows up that day and I'm not sure if that's clear when you watch the play but, for me, it's another indication that her decisions have great impact.

We decided that Siobhan had probably come into their life only in the last few years and there would have been a crossover between when Siobhan arrived and Judy left. Ed and Judy would have gained a great deal of relief from Christopher finding support from Siobhan – she would have given him and them a new set of tools for how to be and behave.

“If you say you don't want to do it no one is going to be angry with you. And it won't be wrong or illegal or stupid. It will just be what you want and that will be fine.”

When she sees Christopher and Siobhan together before the maths exam, Judy sees how calm and focussed they both are. This scene is really key for Judy even though she doesn't say anything; if your character suddenly doesn't have any lines then there's usually a reason for that and it's because you're listening and observing.

I think there's a lot of moments in the play where silence is important; Judy is quite a vocal character and so suddenly in that moment she doesn't say anything – there's a clue there. Judy only has a few lines after that but I try to deliver them in a way that shows that she has learnt from Siobhan and that she recognises Siobhan as a positive influence in Christopher's life. I like to think that in terms of the play, Judy and Siobhan are able to have an ongoing dialogue.

*Interview conducted by Melanie Whitehead
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