UP DOWN BIG MAN



A Myrtle Theatre Company and Wiltshire Creative Production

in association with
The Wardrobe Ensemble

with in kind support from
Bristol Old Vic

LOTTERY FUNDED
Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

20 - 24 October 2026

BRISTOL OLD VIC

Our Up Down Journey

"I'm afraid I've got some very bad news for you. Your son has Down syndrome. When he grows up, he'll probably just sit in a chair."

It was 1984 and that's what Nathan Bessell's parents were told the day after he was born. But that Doctor hadn't bargained on Nathan's mother Sue, fighting tooth and nail to get the best for Nathan, despite his profound learning disability.

It was a lucky day for me when Sue brought Nathan to the Youth Theatre I was running nearly 25 years ago. It has been an utter privilege and joy to work alongside Nathan, witness his growth as a performer and, *Up Down Boy* and *Up Down Man*, have been highlights of my career. When Sue sadly died two years ago, I knew I had to take on the mantle of making sure Nathan had the theatrical opportunities he deserved. He and I talked. "Another play" he said. "Like the others". And so the idea of *Up Down BIG Man* was born.

Wiltshire Creative, the co-producers of the two previous plays in the trilogy *Up Down Boy* and *Up Down Man* didn't hesitate to come on board. Gareth Machin and I agreed that this time Nathan should be completely at the heart of creating the play – and it felt a devising process would best serve this ambition. Working with Helena Seneca, Tom Brennan and Tom England of the brilliant Wardrobe Ensemble and the other talented creatives involved has proved a perfect collaboration. Society has moved on since 1989 and with it expectations for people like Nathan. But those with learning disabilities are still woefully underrepresented in professional theatre. Nathan is living proof that given the right circumstances remarkable work can be made in this way. He has improvised, choreographed and collaborated on the making. Sue would have been immensely proud. And that Doctor would have been amazed!



The long list of those to thank for this production is testament to just how many people Nathan has inspired and want to support him. Special mention must go to his wonderful large family who have been so open to helping us with research.

To spend even an hour in the company of Nathan is utterly joyful – and we sincerely hope you enjoy the show. Thank you so much for coming.

Heather Williams

Artistic Director
Myrtle Theatre Company

UP DOWN BIG MAN

Devised and written by

Nathan Bessell, Tom Brennan,
Tom England, Heather Williams
and Helena Seneca in consultation with
the Bessell family and Keynsham and District MENCAP.

Creative Team

Director
Helena Seneca
Set, Lighting & Media Designer
Michael Straun
Associate Set Designer & Costume Designer
Ruby Brown
Composer & Sound Designer
Alex Heane
Artist Support & Evaluation
David Straun
Assistant Director
Molly Byrne
Dramaturgy Consultant
Catherine Johnson
Access Consultant
Lisa Parker
Dance Consultant
Michelle Gaskell

Cast

Nathan Bessell
Tom Brennan
Tom England
Rieko Kijima
Heather Williams



Production Team

Production Manager
John Titcombe
Stage Manager on the Book
Hannah Clare
Company Stage Manager
Jenny Hunter
Costume Supervision
Sarah Freeman & Emily Barratt
Set Built By
Daniel Gent, Jake Partridge &
Chris Wiezbicki
Deputy Technical Manager
Michael Scott
Technician
Josh Key
Rehearsal & Production Photography
Craig Fuller
Trailer by
Camilla Adams
Poster Design
Ben Robins

For Myrtle Theatre

Artistic Director
Heather Williams
Producer
Morag Massey

LOTTERY FUNDED
Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



Nathan Bessell

Nathan created the role of Matty for Up Down Boy, Up Down Man and Up Down BIG Man performing at theatres including Salisbury Playhouse, Tobacco Factory Theatres, The Royal National Theatre, Hull Truck, The Egg Bath Theatre Royal, Cheltenham Everyman and on tour and at Capital E Festival New Zealand.

Other work for Myrtle Theatre Company includes: The Three Little Pigs (tour to nursery schools & early years centres); The Beggars Opera, Romeo & Juliet (QEH Theatre); Through the Wire, Jollity Farm (Tobacco Factory Theatre); City of One (Tobacco Factory Theatre, Westminster and on tour to conferences); Ori Eni (Healthy Schools conference); Hello Craig (regional tour); Hot Air (Tobacco Factory Theatres). Other: The Ice Palace (Bristol Old Vic / National Theatre Connections Festival).



Tom Brennan

Tom Brennan is a director, playwright, filmmaker and founding member of The Wardrobe Ensemble. He is a creative associate of The North Wall Arts Centre and was The Geoffrey Garton Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford.

His credits as writer and/or director for theatre include Overtone (North Wall Theatre, Edinburgh Festival Fringe); Party Season (UK Tour); Rapunzel (Tobacco Factory Theatres); Princess Smartypants (Watermill Theatre, UK Tour); The Unicorn (Arcola); Robin Hood: The Legend of The Forgotten Forest (Bristol Old Vic); The Sugar House (Finborough); The Great Gatsby (UK Tour, Wardrobe Theatre); The Last of The Pelican Daughters (Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Royal and Derngate); Drac and Jill (Wardrobe Theatre); South Western (Tobacco Factory Theatre); Education, Education, Education (West End, UK Tour); The Rocky Shock (Wardrobe Theatre, UK tour); Eloise and The Curse of The Golden Whisk (UK Tour); 1972: The Future of Sex (UK Tour); RIOT (UK Tour).

He was an Associate Director on Albion (dir. Rupert Goold); The Twilight Zone (dir. Richard Jones, Almeida); The Windsors Endgame (dir. Michael Fentiman, Westend) and The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe (Westend).

His debut feature film as director, Worry Time, recently premiered at Berlin Critics Week. His short film, A Woman Walks into a Bank was part of the official selection for several international film festivals. He also directed the music video for Dodie's In The Middle.



Tom England

Tom England is an actor, theatre maker, and proud member of The Wardrobe Ensemble.

As part of The Wardrobe Ensemble, Tom has devised and performed in The Last of the Pelican Daughters (Royal & Derngate, Edinburgh Festival Fringe), Education, Education, Education (Trafalgar Studios, UK Tour), South Western (Tobacco Factory Bristol, Taunton Brewhouse), 1972: The Future of Sex (Edinburgh Festival Fringe, UK Tour), Mog The Forgetful Cat (Old Vic, Royal & Derngate, Wardrobe Ensemble co-production), Princess Smartypants (Wayward Productions), Robin Hood: Legend of the Forgotten Forest (Bristol Old Vic), WINNERS (Theatre on the Downs), and many more. Outside of the company, Tom has performed in a number of productions across the UK and has several upcoming projects in which he will be performing.

In recent years, Tom has also starred in several independent feature films, including COSMOS (Elliander Productions) and Repeat (Body in the Box Productions), and is set to feature in an upcoming feature film, entitled The Nightstone Contacts, slated for release in 2026 (Elliander Productions/Silver Wing Film Studios).

Outside of devising and performing, Tom teaches as part of the BA Acting and Devised Theatre course at the Bristol School of Acting, a course founded and led by The Wardrobe Ensemble, and has directed a devised production, and led courses in ensemble practice and devising, at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Cast



Rieko Kijima

Rieko trained in Performing Arts at Subaru Theatre School Tokyo. For ten years she studied Japanese Traditional Dance, stage combat and Iaido (Japanese swordsmanship) at Chiba Studio and for seven years in Kyudo (Japanese Archery) at Fukuoka and Fukushima. She has worked as a freelance artist, director and workshop leader for various theatre companies for children and young people throughout Japan, including Kazenoko Tohoku, Kyushu, Chubu and Hokkaido Theatre Companies. She also directed the large-scale community production The Radiance of Life for the 100-year celebration Festival in Oketo.

Following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 she delivered drama workshops in schools within Fukushima Prefecture over a five year period for the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

In the UK as a performer she was in King Lear at Bristol Old Vic and Hot Air at Tobacco Factory Theatres. She was Japanese movement consultant on Up Down Boy and delivered numerous workshops in movement for Bristol Old Vic and Myrtle Theatre Company.



Heather Williams

Since 2004 Heather has been artistically responsible for all productions and participation activities for Myrtle Theatre, a company she co-founded. She works as an actor, director, facilitator, trainer, consultant and mentor.

From 1991-2004 and various productions since, she worked for Bristol Old Vic as a performer and director. She also co-founded and was director of Bristol Old Vic Young Company and Outreach, Participation and Engagement work.

Her early acting career included films written and directed by the Oscar winning Anthony Minghella - A Little Like Drowning, Truly Madly Deeply and Whale Music and the stage premiere of his play Two Planks and A Passion.

She was a presenter of the iconic BBC programmes Play Away and Play School, in addition to making numerous other appearances on TV and Radio and performing in Theatres throughout the country. Heather has delivered consultancies for Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, Salisbury Playhouse and Tobacco Factory Theatres, restructuring and writing policies for their Participation Departments. Recent work as a performer has been with Ad Infinitum, Travelling Light, Tobacco Factory Theatres, The Wardrobe Ensemble, Wiltshire Creative and Bristol Old Vic.

www.myrtletheatreco.com













In Rehearsals

Rehearsal Photography by Craig Fuller




ALWAYS BE YOURSELF
UNLESS YOU CAN BE A
FOX
THEN ALWAYS BE A FOX











Helena Seneca

Director

Helena is an award-winning theatre and film director and founding member of The Wardrobe Ensemble, a theatre company dedicated to making devised, ensemble-based theatre. She has directed critically acclaimed work at venues such as The National Theatre and the Trafalgar Studios in the West End. Over the past 15 years, she has made theatre for audiences of all ages, with a particular focus on devised performance and new writing.

Helena's theatre directing credits include, The Master and Margarita (BSA), Party Season (Royal and Derngate), Mog's Christmas (Royal and Derngate), Notting Hell (The Wardrobe Theatre), Cracking (National Tour), If You Fall (Ad Infinitum), Mog the Forgetful Cat (Royal and Derngate, The Old Vic), Robin Hood: Legend of the Forgotten Forest (Bristol Old Vic), Education, Education, Education (Royal and Derngate, Trafalgar Studios), The Star Seekers (National Theatre) and Pippi Longstocking - The Swashbuckling Musical Adventure (Royal and Derngate).

She has also worked as dramaturg, associate and assistant director on various productions, including Olivier Award-winning Hey Duggee, The Live Theatre Show (Royal Festival Hall), and Witness for the Prosecution (London County Hall).



Michael Straun

Set, Lighting & Media Designer

Michael has been Myrtle Theatre Company's lighting designer from 2005, lighting the majority of our shows including Up Down Boy and Up Down Man. Meanwhile he has been building an international reputation in the live events .

Concert: Hayley Williams tour (co-designer), Zayn (associate lighting designer), Beyoncé Cowboy Carter tour (associate lighting designer/ director), Håkan Hellström Gothenburg 2025 (lighting director), The 1975 Glastonbury 2025 (lighting director), Beyoncé Renaissance tour and film (lighting director), Kehlani, Drake OVO festival 2022, The 1975 (lightingdirector), Shania Twain (lighting director), Björk, The xx, Jamie xx, Koreless, James Arthur, Skepta, Tinie Tempah, FKA twigs, Todd Terje, The Avalanches, Crystal Fighters, Skindred, Glasvegas, Alexis Jordan, The Blackout, Kids in Glass Houses, Morning Parade, Hadouken!, The Answer, Jethro Tull, Ian Anderson.

Broadcast: Amazon music live 2024 (designer associate), Eurovision song contest 2024 (associate lighting designer for green wall designs), VCT Tour 2022/2023 (Riot games)

Awards: 2 time knight of illumination award winner

www.michaelstraun.com



Ruby Brown

Associate Set Designer & Costume Designer

Ruby Brown is a performance designer based in Bristol and Cardiff.

Graduating from RWCMD BA Design for Performance in 2021, she enjoys working as a maker and collaborator within an ensemble.

Some of her recent work includes Moulin Scrooge (The Wardrobe Theatre) The Detective Dog (Tiny & Tall Productions) American Candy (Mango Ensemble)

Portfolio at rubybrown.co.uk

Creatives



Alex Heane

Composer & Sound Designer

Alex is a Bristol-based composer, musical director, and sound designer working across theatre and live performance. A multi-instrumentalist across guitars, keyboards, strings and trumpet, his work draws on a broad musical range – from orchestral composition to electronic sound design.

Romeo and Juliet was his debut as composer and MD at Salisbury Playhouse. Alongside the score, Alex led the community cast workshops for the production, working with the community performers to develop the choral and vocal elements in the show.

Previous composition credits include: The Little Prince (Theatre Royal Bath); The Odyssey (The Egg Theatre); Where Did the Snow Go? (Scarlet Oak Theatre); For the Love of Stuff (Earthbound Theatre).

Work as Musician and MD includes: Kneebone Cadillac (Wildworks Theatre); The Little Mermaid (Bristol Old Vic); Oliver Twist (Tobacco Factory Theatres); Wise Children (Emma Rice/Wise Children Theatre Company); Jane Eyre (National Theatre).



Morag Massey

Producer

Formerly Executive Director at Bristol's Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory, Morag has produced and toured numerous productions. Her career includes roles as researcher for BBC Radio 4, Marketing Manager for Circomedia, Executive Producer for Opera Up Close, Producer for Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and Interim Artistic Director/Producer for Tobacco Factory Theatres.

Morag has secured funding through trusts, grants, sponsorship and membership schemes. She was a trustee of Travelling Light Theatre Company and Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and a founding trustee for Smart Works Bristol. Alongside her freelance theatre work, she is a wellbeing coach for WorkWell West at Bristol City Council and recently achieved an ILM Level 5 Certificate in Effective Coaching and Mentoring at UWE.



Hannah Clare

Stage Manager on the Book

Hannah is a Bristol based Stage Manager, specialising in site specific outdoor theatre, international touring, devised work and accessible theatre. She also dabbles in costume and wig work!

Her credits include: Nowhere (Fuel), Last Rites (Ad Infinitum), Rapunzel (Tobacco Factory Theatres), Future Cargo (Requardt and Rosenberg), Henry V (Insane Root).

She also works closely with the Bristol School of Acting on various productions.



David Straun

Artist Support & Evaluation

David works as an actor, director, facilitator, mentor, singer and teacher. In his earlier acting career he performed with seminal theatre companies such as 7:84 and Joint Stock, in continuing TV dramas Juliet Bravo and Grange Hill, and films including Brazil and Those Glory, Glory Days.

For thirteen years David was Director of QEH Theatre, Bristol – described by The Guardian as "a gem of a theatre with a programme to die for". As an associate of Myrtle Theatre he has directed The House Of Letitia Smith, co-directed City of One, and performed in City of One and Jollity Farm. He has also helped devise and deliver many community and education projects.

David has taught in Higher and Secondary education and vocational drama training. Most recently, he has helped develop and deliver the Hope Creative music project for young people experiencing the care system, and access and inclusivity training opportunities for Bristol Beacon.

David sings with Heartwood Chorus and the Gasmen Collective.



Molly Byrne

Assistant Director

Molly is a director and writer, and co-lead of Doubletake Theatre.

Previous credits as director include: The Switchboard Project (The Hope Theatre), Convenience (The Bridge House Theatre), Varnish (UK tour). Previous credits as assistant director include: The Haunting of Hill House (Salisbury Playhouse), Mother Courage (Rose Bruford), Ivy Day (The Hope Theatre).



THANK YOU

In loving memory of Sue Bessell

We wish to thank from the bottom of our hearts:

All of the Bessell family for their help and support in this production,
All at Keynsham and District MENCAP for acting as consultants,
Joanna and Paul Pearson for their generous financial donation,
MARTIN/HARMAN and MA LIGHTING INTERNATIONAL for the loan of the Lighting Equipment,
All of our generous supporters of our Crowdfunding Campaign,
Bristol Old Vic (in particular Lucy Hunt and Lisa Gregan),
Joe Childs, Jackie Passmore, The Parker Family, Jane Prowse and Ian Sutherland,
Henry Osadzinski for website design,
Brendan Murray for the generous use of the quote from *Up Down Man*,
and last but not least Hilary Davis for the original idea of basing *Up Down Boy* on Nathan's life story and her on going advice and support.

Martin by HARMAN | MA LIGHTING | sweet PROJECTS



LOTTERY FUNDED
Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

