



**‘Warm and engaging,  
and shot through with  
humour’**

Sunday Times

**An English Touring Theatre and  
Sheffield Theatres co-production**

**Based on the number one bestseller by Matt Haig**

# Reasons to Stay Alive

imagined for the stage and directed by Jonathan Watkins  
text written by April De Angelis

## PRODUCTION RESPONSE PACK

This resource has been developed for Drama and Literacy explorations in response to Sheffield Theatres and English Touring Theatre’s production **Reasons to Stay Alive**, imagined for the stage and directed by **Jonathan Watkins**, text written by **April de Angelis**.

Ideal for KS 3-5 students of Drama, Theatre Studies and English Literature, this resource explores the sensitive subject matter of mental health.

# INDEX

Each exercise has a highlighted objective to help you develop your creative response.

Discuss

Explore

Devise

Reflect

## SYNOPSIS

Matt, interacting with his younger self, recounts his experiences of depression and anxiety, drawing on the wisdom of famous depressives and reflecting on the moments where he found his reasons to stay alive. The play draws on his time in Ibiza, when he was 24, living ‘in a very nice villa, on the quiet east coast of the island’.

*‘The villa was right next to a cliff. In the midst of depression I walked out to the edge of the cliff and looked at the sea, and at the rugged limestone coastline, dotted with deserted beaches. It was the most beautiful view I had ever known, but I didn’t care. I was too busy trying to summon the courage needed to throw myself over the edge. I didn’t. Instead, I walked back inside and threw up from the stress of it’.*

## STATISTICS ON DEPRESSION\*

In 2014, **19.7% of people in the UK aged 16 and over showed symptoms of anxiety or depression** - a 1.5% increase from 2013. This percentage was higher among females (22.5%) than males (16.8%).

An estimated 1 in 6 people experienced a 'common mental disorder' like depression or anxiety in the past week.

In 2013, depression was the **second leading cause of years lived with a disability worldwide**, behind lower back pain. In 26 countries, depression was the primary driver of disability.

Younger people, people living in deprived areas, and people with disabilities are all less likely than average to recover from their condition after psychological therapy.

\*Sourced from the Mental Health Foundation

## CONTINUED

What follows, and what the play depicts in often animated scenes and humorous dialogue, is three more years of Matt battling with his depression. Panic, despair, a daily battle to walk to the corner shop without collapsing to the ground.

*'But I survived. I am days away from being 38. Back then, I almost knew I wasn't going to make it to 30. Death or total madness seemed more realistic.'*

*But I'm here. Surrounded by people I love. And I am doing a job I never thought I'd be doing. And I spend my days writing stories that are really guide books, the way all books are guide books.*

*I am so glad I didn't kill myself, but I continue to wonder if there is anything to say to people at those darkest times...'*



INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JONATHAN WATKINS



# SET AND LIGHTING

The set alludes to many things, with the lighting and physical response from the cast suggesting its properties and purpose.

Its pieces appear sometimes fragile, other times brittle and hard to break through or climb. It could be the form of a brain or the surface on the moon, depending on perceptions. Light plays a huge role in creating moods and definition, indicating what's happening in Matt's mind as oppose to what others see. Here is an audio interview with **Jonathan Watkins** with some design images from the storyboard on the following two slides.

# PHYSICAL THEATRE

The sensations associated with depression and anxiety can't easily be described, with language unable to capture the level and depth of overwhelming experiences. By enacting how it feels it provides a visual representation which is more accessible. Director, **Jonathan Watkins**, describes this show as 'a play with movement', using physicality to draw out connections and relationships as well as evoke the sensations of experiencing anxiety and depression.



# THE DESIGN PROCESS



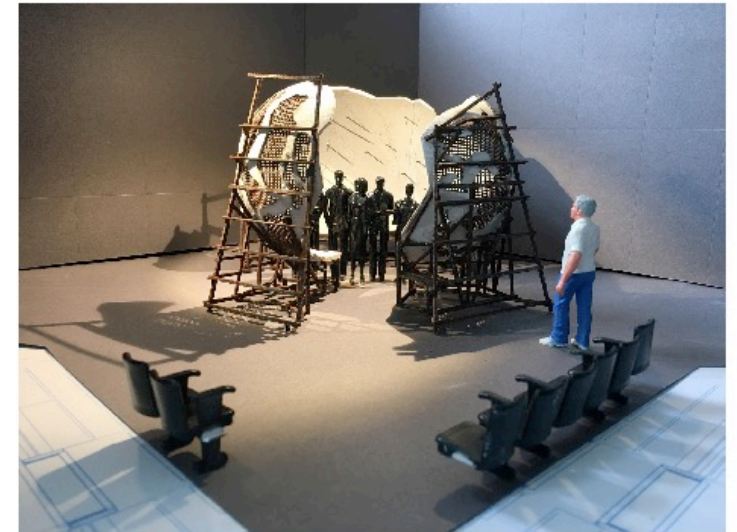
These images depict the work in progress models exploring different shapes and textures



From this exploration with the designer and director, a storyboard is developed.



Older Matt



Ibiza

Reasons to Stay Alive / 15th July 2019 / Dir. Jonathan Watkins / Des. Simon Daw



# STORYBOARD IMAGES



## LABAN EFFORTS TABLE

<b>Punch</b>	Direct	Fast	Heavy
<b>Slash</b>	Indirect	Fast	Heavy
<b>Dab</b>	Direct	Fast	Light
<b>Flick</b>	Indirect	Fast	Light
<b>Press</b>	Direct	Slow	Heavy
<b>Wring</b>	Indirect	Slow	Heavy
<b>Glide</b>	Direct	Slow	Light
<b>Float</b>	Indirect	Slow	Light

## REFLECTION

What can Laban achieve when depicting emotional states and the parallel between our thoughts and the environment?

## ACTIVITY 1:

### LABAN

Laban's Eight Efforts explore character in the body and is used as a method to extend an actor's ability to play characters physically. Devised by **Rudolf Laban**, who was a movement theorist, choreographer and a dancer, the method categorises human movement into efforts or actions, which are made up of the varying combination of three components.

They help an actor both physically and emotionally identify and play characters who are different from themselves, understanding internal impulse and in developing an expressive body that can make clean, precise choices. It also helps the actor create and maintain a strong physical instrument that will serve them throughout their training and future professional work.

Now, using Laban efforts explore embodying the character:

- **Depression**
- **Super happy and stable**
- **Depressions' inner demon**

Put them in scenes together, take them on a road trip or to Burger King or to the moon!

**Explore**  
**Devise**



Within the show, breaking up dialogue and narrative, there are 'interjections' on the subject of depression, including common perceptions, personal insights and advice for both the person living with depression and those around them.

## THE INTERJECTIONS

Discuss

- Select a line from **Interjection 1**.
- Explore some of the different 'efforts' using this line.
- How does 'punching' a line differ in delivery from 'gliding' a line?
- In pairs, create a dialogue using the lines from **Interjection 1** and what you imagine would be Matt's response to each line.
- Now annotate the dialogue by choosing a Laban effort for each line spoken.
- Rehearse and edit where you feel it helpful.
- Watch some of the performances back and ask pupils to justify the actions they have chosen for their performance.



## REFLECTION

In this interjection, do we get a portrayal of a character for 'depression'? If so, what kind of character? What's the characters motivation for saying these things?

## INTERJECTION 1 : THINGS DEPRESSION SAYS TO YOU

*'Hey.. Sad sack. Yes, you!'*

*'Why are you trying to get out of bed? Why are you trying to apply for a job? Who do you think you are? Mark Zuckerberg?'*

*'Stay in bed.'*

*'You're going to go mad like Van Gogh. You might cut off your ear.'*

*'Why are you crying? Because you need to put the washing on?'*

*'Hey remember your dog Murdoch? He's dead. Like your grandparents. Everyone you have every met will be dead this time next century.'*

*'Yep everyone you know is just a collection of slowly deteriorating cells.'*

*'Look at those people (POINTS TO AUDIENCE) Why can't you be like them?'*

*'There's a cushion. Let's stay here and look at it and contemplate the infinite sadness of cushions.'*

*'I've just seen tomorrow and it's even worse.'*

## ACTIVITY 2: REASONS TO STAY ALIVE

Discuss  
Devise

Matt Haig asked people on Twitter who had experiences of depression to tweet their reasons to keep going. He also gave his own pointers in his book on 'How to live', detailing actions, activities and thoughts he finds helpful. Reading was one of those activities for him, and he listed some authors he liked.

*Art has the power to “render sorrow beautiful, make loneliness a shared experience, and transform despair into hope.”*  
- Brene Brown

Pick a piece of art - a painting, book, song, play, poem; anything - and explore it, being aware of the feelings it conjures up.

- a) Use this piece of art, with its powers to evoke feelings, as a starting point for a narrative. Ask yourself the following questions:
- **Who made this art and why?**
  - **What if it had never been made?**
  - **What about it conjured up feelings and emotions.**
  - **What if this art was personified, made real, broken up into atoms and flooded a room?**
  - **What could seeing or feeling this art do for someone most in need of it?**
- b) Devise your response using elements from the discussion which have the most dramatic potential, ensuring that you embed your chosen piece of art into the piece.

## ACTIVITY 3: YOU AND YOU

Devise

What if you could go back in time and talk to your younger self? What if you could advise, instruct or reassure to help yourself find a happier path to the present.

Write a monologue to explore how that interaction would go and what it would look like. It's very important to create an 'authentic voice' within this type of writing. It must feel for the audience like an honest representation of you, just a little older with more experience and time to reflect.

Tip: Always write a monologue as if it's a duologue where the other person is reacting but not necessarily vocally. This will keep your monologue from being a lengthy rant.



## REFLECTION

As an exercise when exploring a scene, what does thought tracking achieve?

## ACTIVITY 4: THOUGHT TRACKING

Explore  
Devise

Depression and anxiety is often accompanied by the fear of what others are thinking or observing about you; paranoia.

Create a scene with 2-3 characters, one of whom is battling with depression and anxiety. The scene should depict something fairly ordinary taking place, such as the characters planning the menu for dinner or talking about how their days have been. This should help to illustrate how challenging it is to 'act normal' when you're inner demons are tormenting you. On chairs, using 2-3 other actors, create the characters' 'floating brains' which express their inner-thoughts at each given moment. Remember, this should be an entertaining, privileged insight for the audience, if not a bit dark and weird!

## REFLECTION

How do the different soundtracks effect the audience watching the scene.

## SOUNDSCAPES

You can extend this exploration by creating non-diegetic soundscapes and playing them over the same scene. Try adding voices, repetitive percussion, fragments of music played in a loop.

## ACTIVITY 5: SOUND

Discuss  
Explore  
Devise

Music has the power to impact mood and energy, it can speed your life up or make it appear as though time itself has stopped.

Pick three songs or pieces of music that are very contrasting in mood and energy. These are your three non-diegetic soundtracks (music heard by the audience but not experienced by the characters).

Create a scene in which a boss has brought in an employee to discuss their work and how they could improve. Remember to consider the employees feelings and what might be going on inside their head.

Repeat the scene three times in front of an audience alternating the three soundtracks, trying not to alter the dialogue or staging.

## REFLECTION

What happens when you physically explore something symbolic?

## ACTIVITY 6: HOW DOES IT FEEL?

Devise

In the show we see younger Matt, in the midst of his depression, making colossal efforts to simply get to the shop and buy a paper. In terms of energy and achievement, it is physicalised symbolically as landing and walking on the moon. Create a physically symbolic scene of how certain aspects of depression make you feel when:

- Going to the park and having a chat with friends
- Going to a gig or concert
- Taking an exam or writing an essay

Play with the tempo, think about language and the relevance of certain phrases of words, focus on movement within the interaction between characters.