

The background image is a photograph of the interior of the Bristol Old Vic theatre. It shows a grand, ornate auditorium with multiple tiers of green seats. The ceiling is highly decorated with gold-colored patterns and large, intricate chandeliers. The walls are also ornate, with red and white sections. The overall atmosphere is one of historical grandeur.

# Bristol Old Vic

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## Education Pack: Jane Eyre

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# Introduction

## by Toby Hulse

In the marketing for *Jane Eyre* the production is advertised as being 'directed by Sally Cookson, devised by the company'. Although the idea of devising a show is very familiar to Theatre Studies students, indeed it is the principle way in which drama is taught at secondary school, it is far less usual in professional theatre, particularly as a process for creating a production for a large performance space such as Bristol Old Vic's Main House. The aim of this resource is to give some insight into the devising process - not to provide a list of exercises for you to try in the classroom, but to give an insight into the opinions of professional theatre makers who choose to work in this way.

Sally Cookson has devised many works from literary sources, with many of the people who are working on *Jane Eyre*. Those of you who saw *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Island* or *Cinderella*, to name just a few of her productions that have been made in Bristol, will recognise many faces and names in the creative team, and amongst the cast. The obvious difference with *Jane Eyre* is that this is a piece of theatre for adults, rather than family audiences. The decision to stage it in two parts has also allowed Sally and her team the space to explore fully the novel's complexities, giving a grand, epic scope to the production. Interestingly however, what is perhaps most clear from the contributions that follow is that the approaches and working methods used to create the piece are essentially the same.

### **Each key member of the creative team was asked the same three questions:**

- What is your role on the production, and for what decisions are you responsible?
- This is a devised piece of theatre - how does this way of making a show impact on your creative practice?
- From your creative perspective, what should we look out for when we watch the show?

### **Whilst reading what each artist has written it might be worth thinking about and debating some of the following:**

- Every member of the creative team is keen to stress that this is a collaborative artistic enterprise. Traditionally professional theatremaking is highly departmentalised, with each key creative taking responsibility for a clearly defined area. How do these two approaches sit together?
- What are the possible strengths and weaknesses of a devising approach to theatre?
- Who 'owns' this piece of theatre? What would happen if it were revived with some different cast members? Could another theatre company put it on? Does it exist as a play in the same way that, say, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller does?





NO SMOKING



# The **Director**

## SALLY COOKSON

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The director's role is to tell the story of the play as clearly, imaginatively and theatrically as possible. The way I work during rehearsals is through devising, which means that we don't start with a concrete script. The script emerges during the process, through improvisation, discussion and lots of playing and experimenting. Everyone working on the production has an input into the piece that you see on stage, and my job is to be a facilitator of creativity - making sure that we have the right creative team and cast in place; deciding which aspects of the story we are going to emphasise; galvanising ideas; and ensuring that we make a world that fits together. Although there are many people working on the show and contributing their ideas, the production has to feel cohesive - the set design, music, performance style, costumes all have to complement each other - and it is my job to ensure that this happens.

The starting point for this production was Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. There are several play adaptations out there already, but I was keen to make a new version and discover with the company what gives the book its enduring power, what has kept it on the best sellers list for the last one hundred and seventy years.

At the beginning of the process, before we went into rehearsals, Mike Akers and I spent time going through the novel together and discussing the elements of the story that we wanted to highlight. *Jane Eyre* has become known as a passionate love story, which indeed it is, but that is only part of it. In many of the film versions, the relationship between Jane and Rochester takes up the bulk of a two hour screenplay. However, Mike and I both agreed that we thought of the book as a coming of age story, a life story as opposed to just a love story. The voice of Jane Eyre speaks of passion, lower caste

aspiration and female rage - it is a story of a young girl's longing for fulfilment, and fulfilment on her own terms - a concept very much at odds with the dictates and confines of the Victorian society of her day. It was the first novel to give voice to the rising frustration and sense of injustice felt by women trapped in a patriarchal environment. For me, what makes the novel so great is the weight placed on identity. The intensity of the novel's search for identity is something we all have experience of. Jane's spirit and strong will, her peculiar and brilliant mind, strive for personal freedom to be who she is - and she lashes out against any constraint that prevents her from being herself.

I was keen to explore these themes, and get to the heart of the story and characters in a theatrical, non-literal way - I knew that this wasn't going to be a period costume drama. Authentic set and costume can suffocate a piece, killing the essence and magic of the story, so that it becomes a dinosaur of a piece. I wanted *Jane Eyre* to resonate with a modern audience, so we are making bold creative choices to ensure that our version of *Jane Eyre* is as 'Wild, Wonderful and Thrilling' as it can be. It is always daunting when you're working on a story which everyone knows so well, because you want to surprise and maybe challenge expectations, without losing any of the things which make us love the story in the first place.

The seven strong cast will all be multi-roling, apart from Madeleine who plays Jane. There will be a strong sense of ensemble on stage, so that the whole company are part of the story all the way through. There is a main part but no main actor - they are all as important as each other. As always, music is integral to this production, and the band will be at the centre of the action - I've deliberately placed them right in the middle of the set. Benji Bower fans won't be disappointed. Live music is intricately woven into the story, including traditional ballad singing as well as Minimalism, Jazz and Choral singing, to create a stunning non-traditional score.

I find it thrilling to excavate a text with a company of creative theatre makers, because the possibilities of what you discover are extraordinary, and *Jane Eyre* is no exception. Sometimes the best way to interpret a scene is with text, sometimes through movement and music, and at other times hearing a song underscoring textless action is what is needed. All the time, Mike watches and transcribes and shapes the play into a cohesive whole.

We discovered early on that finding the right voice and language for the characters was important. If we just lifted the dialogue from the book to the stage, it felt at times stuffy, and the characters became quite wooden. Our solution was to allow the actors to simplify the archaic language and add their own improvised text: the characters

came to life. At other times, we discovered that Brontë's language served us well, and nothing could compare with her beautiful choice of words. It has been trial and error and involves a lot of grappling and wrestling with the text.

We spend hours improvising the episodes we want to show. The whole process is collaborative and demands a great deal of trust and faith. It can be an utterly terrifying prospect to start without a script, and as opening night looms ever closer the knot in the stomach tightens! But if we don't ask the questions and explore all the possibilities we will never know what we may have missed.

I have been devising shows for so long now, I can't remember what it's like to work on a scripted play from Day One - I'd quite like to have a go, although I'd probably find it quite difficult!

# The Dramaturg

## MIKE AKERS



I have so many different responsibilities on this production, everything from scribing actors improvising in the rehearsal room, to adapting sections from the book before rehearsals start, to structuring and crafting the piece as a whole as it emerges. I am using all the same skills that I use as a writer of original work, but with someone else's story as a starting point, and an extraordinary number of different artists' imaginations and ideas as my stimulus. The finished script will be the result of a true collaborative process rather than a traditional adaptation. It is a conversation between many people that I have captured and crafted.

From the start Sally and I knew we wanted to present a faithful version of *Jane Eyre*, a version that told all of Jane's story rather than simply the romance with Rochester that dominates most other film, TV and stage adaptations. It is a story about an outsider who survives; about the classic struggle between the powerful draw of an interesting life and the need to play it safe; about an inspirational, powerful female voice. It has a magic and a passion and a wildness about it, referencing the world of fairy tales and soaked in the miserable Gothic dampness of the English landscape.

However, novels are very different from stage plays, and *Jane Eyre* is no exception. The novel is already brilliantly structured, but as a story told over three volumes. We wanted our story to work over two parts, and four acts. As we have tried to restructure the story to fit our purpose, we have discovered quite how brilliantly structured it is - too many changes and the whole thing begins to unravel in our fingers. We have, however, had to invent here and there. Novels develop ideas and plots incrementally, bit by bit, over time. Theatre works around set moments of dramatic tension and revelation. Something that takes Rochester a number of weeks to discover about himself can be beautifully suggested in a novel, but simply won't work on stage.

To create these moments of tension and struggle has required some new plot elements, and those who know the novel well will be able to see what we are doing and why.

Novels are also very good at exploring the internal life of characters - what they think and feel - plays show much better what characters do as a result of their internal life. In order to keep this internal life, we use an ensemble to dramatise Jane's thoughts and emotional development. It is worth pointing out that these are not narrators or story tellers, rather a way of the audience sharing Jane's inner life. Because of this the ensemble don't take on this additional role until Jane is of an age in the story where internal conflict and self-knowledge is psychologically true - although they are fully involved in the action prior to this in other ways.

And we have learned from the novel too. A danger of devised work is that it continues to sound like the work of many authors (as it is) and lacks the coherence of a single writer. Although the creation of the piece has been achieved through actors improvising, our essential bedrock has always been the dialogue in the book. It is Charlotte Brontë who has given cohesion to the finished play, and that is exactly as it should be.

# The **Set Designer**

## MICHAEL VALE



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The set designer is responsible for any of the decisions which need to be made regarding the aesthetic and practical nature of the design. My role is to collaborate with all the other crafts and skills involved in the production to develop and then realise the design which the director and myself have agreed upon.

Although this piece is devised by the company, and many decisions relating to the production are made in the rehearsal room, the design deadlines have to be set for a time before rehearsals begin, to allow for set to be built. So, when you are designing for this kind of production, you are more often than not trying to produce, with the director, a kind of 'playground' which you are reasonably certain the show can be performed on, but without a definite knowledge of how that will happen in detail or from scene to scene. The nature of this 'playground' usually derives from a sensual or intuitive approach to the 'feel' of the production, based very much on colour, texture and the dynamics of the staging. The key creative decision in creating this 'playground' was to begin with a dominating structure on which the story could be told, rather than a simple, bare space.

Design wise it would be interesting to look out for how the dynamics of a scene are supported by the use of several different levels at the same time and how they come together to create a 'whole' picture.

# The **Costume Designer**

## KATIE SYKES



I am the costume designer which means that I need to decide what all the actors/characters are going to wear in the show. I am responsible for conveying my ideas not only to the creative team but to the costume makers as well.

In a devised process the costume designer needs to be in rehearsals perhaps more than you would on a non-devised show - there are more opportunities to suggest costume ideas which might be help to make a visual image more exciting. Inevitably though, devising means that costume ideas can happen at the very last minute, which can be a bit stressful!

The most important creative decisions for me were around how to convey a sense of the Victorian period without the costumes becoming dull, heavy and like something from a museum. The actors need to be able to move freely, as the show is very physical, and I felt that the costumes should reflect the eclectic nature of the music. I am playing around with referencing a number of different periods, and with establishing a costume convention which picks a single costume detail e.g. large frilly sleeves and exaggerates it for a particular character. The restrictions of budget are interesting too. In a traditional period piece the costume budget would be a major element of the show's expenditure. I still need to keep a constant eye on the economics of the design, and that will steer my decisions, but this is not always in a bad way. As there is a freedom around period I can be more inventive in solving costume challenges, and it is this inventiveness which is ultimately more fun for the audience.

It is worth looking out for some of the solutions I have come up with to allow actors to play a number of characters in quick succession. Also look out for the way costume creates a strong identity for the ensemble which can be overtly theatrical at times, yet discreet at others.



# The Musical Director

## BENJI BOWER



The musical director's job is to write, compose and produce the soundtrack for the show; to rehearse any music that the cast and musicians need to play in the show, and to help further the story and support the cast through music.

I have always worked through devising and I have made a lot of shows with Sally, so I am very used to this way of working. It can still be pretty hair raising at times. I write a lot of stuff and play ideas to her, so I can try and create the world that I'm thinking of. Some music is written before we work on a particular scene, and represents the ideas I am bringing to that part of the story. Some music is improvised live as the actors are working. And there are times where what I have written doesn't work, and I have to come up with something there and then... By now Sally knows where I'm coming from, and how to understand what I'm talking about when I talk about music.

Unlike *Peter Pan* and *Treasure Island* this is the first piece of Sally's that is dark almost throughout. Key words for the music might be: darkness, deep, emotional, beautiful singing, lovely twinkles. There isn't much space for the music to lift the deep emotion which is created. That's where the idea to use sourced tracks came from, to lift the mood. Instead of using lots of classical music, like you might find in a TV period drama, we're tried to create a set of music influenced by acoustic and folk music and we've managed to create something different. It's been all about trying to finding the world of *Jane Eyre*. We're taking influence from old English folk tunes and then mixing that with more classical influences from that time such as Edward Elgar, always being careful not to use too much of that. It all gets a bit stuffy if you use it too much. We have worked with Phil King, who is well known on the Bristol folk scene. He's got a great voice and he's an excellent addition to the folky elements of the music.

Another way we've tried to take the music out of the 'period drama' style is by using a lot of sound design. I really love Brian Eno and ambient artists like Steve Reich, Philip Glass and Cinematic Orchestra so I've created music from these influences using drones and surround sound. A lot of *Jane Eyre* is quite dark and there's a ghostly, eerie theme going throughout it I wanted to try and create this in sound design.

And, of course, we're throwing a few curve balls and using popular music in some scenes. We've created a version of *Mad About the Boy* by Noel Coward and a cut down version of *Crazy* by Gnarls Barkley which I created with the jazz singer Alice Russell. As a tribute to Bernard Herman, who's another great influence of mine and who composed the original score for the film *Jane Eyre*, we're stealing a bit of his music! But where we are using popular music it's in a way that is completely relevant to the characters or to the story.

As a musician it's all about marrying the music to the piece. It's a great feeling when an idea I've written a year ago suddenly comes together and it all works. The most important thing for me is to be constantly on the same page as Sally and Mike and the cast, to be part of that one ensemble, telling the story. Ultimately when we get into the theatre that's when it really comes alive. We're going to be live, centre stage with a grand piano and all our instruments. We'll be in amongst the acting. When everything starts coming together it gives you an excitement to get out there and perform it. You can see the story and see how the music fits into the show. There are areas of the music that are left with an element of freedom that the musicians and the cast can feel in the moment. It's difficult to feel and understand this completely in the rehearsal room but when you're in performance mode and you're on stage you can really make it work. I really love this way of working, I love writing and I love it when it works.

# The **Movement Director**

## DAN CANHAM



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My role as movement director is to help shape some of the sections in the show that rely on movement as the primary element. This ranges from helping advise the actors on simple physicality, to helping create the ensemble sections, to choreographing 'set-pieces' that have movement at the forefront, usually in close relationship with the music.

Generally speaking, I will come to rehearsals with a seed of an idea for how to approach specific sections or tasks we'll be working on that day. Sometimes this will be useful, and sometimes it'll go out of the window as soon as we start working. It's a collaborative process and Sally is very good at facilitating discussion and creating an open atmosphere in which everyone is able to chip in. I'm familiar with this way of creating a performance from other shows I've worked on in the past, although of course the level of collaboration in the room differs with each director.

For me, it's really important that the movement serves a purpose and enhances the story telling in the show. It's sometimes a tricky area to work in, because in a show like this I neither want to be too descriptive with movement (doing something that words could do better) nor too abstract (losing the half the audience in a moment of left-field expressionistic dance). So a lot of the choices I've made are to do with doing things simply - often with the ensemble amplifying the atmosphere.







NO SMOKING



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