

A York Theatre Royal, ETT and An Tobar and Mull Theatre Production



The Last Picture  
by Catherine Dyson  
Directed by John R. Wilkinson

**EXTRA  
RESOURCES**

# ABOUT THE PLAY

A support dog. A teacher. A very difficult conversation.

When an inappropriate symbol is found on school property, a teacher chooses empathy over anger - and turns a moment of hate into a chance to talk.

*The Last Picture* is a one-person play perfect for young audiences (Year 9+), supporting classroom discussion around history, hate, and moral responsibility.

With the quiet presence of Sam, an emotional support dog, the play provides a safe, non-judgmental space for critical thinking, compassion, and open dialogue.

**Themes:** Empathy, Moral Responsibility, Complicity, Historical Awareness, Difficult Conversations

**Style:** One-Person Show, Poor Theatre, Live Storytelling, Contemporary Drama

**Influences:** Chris Thorpe, Tim Crouch, Documentary Theatre, Solo Show, New Writing, Conversation-led Performance, Minimalist Theatre

**Topics:** WWII History, The Holocaust, Hate Symbols, Contemporary Hate, Education, Citizenship, Youth Dialogue, Support Animals

**Age guidance:** 14+

**Content guidance:** This play includes references to the Holocaust and antisemitism. It has descriptions of discrimination, violence, torture and death

This resource pack contains interviews with Writer Catherine Dyson and Director John R. Wilkinson, followed by practical drama-based exercises to support reflection, empathy, and discussion before or after attending the performance.

Activities are suitable for classroom or workshop settings.

Show artwork by RachelO Studio.

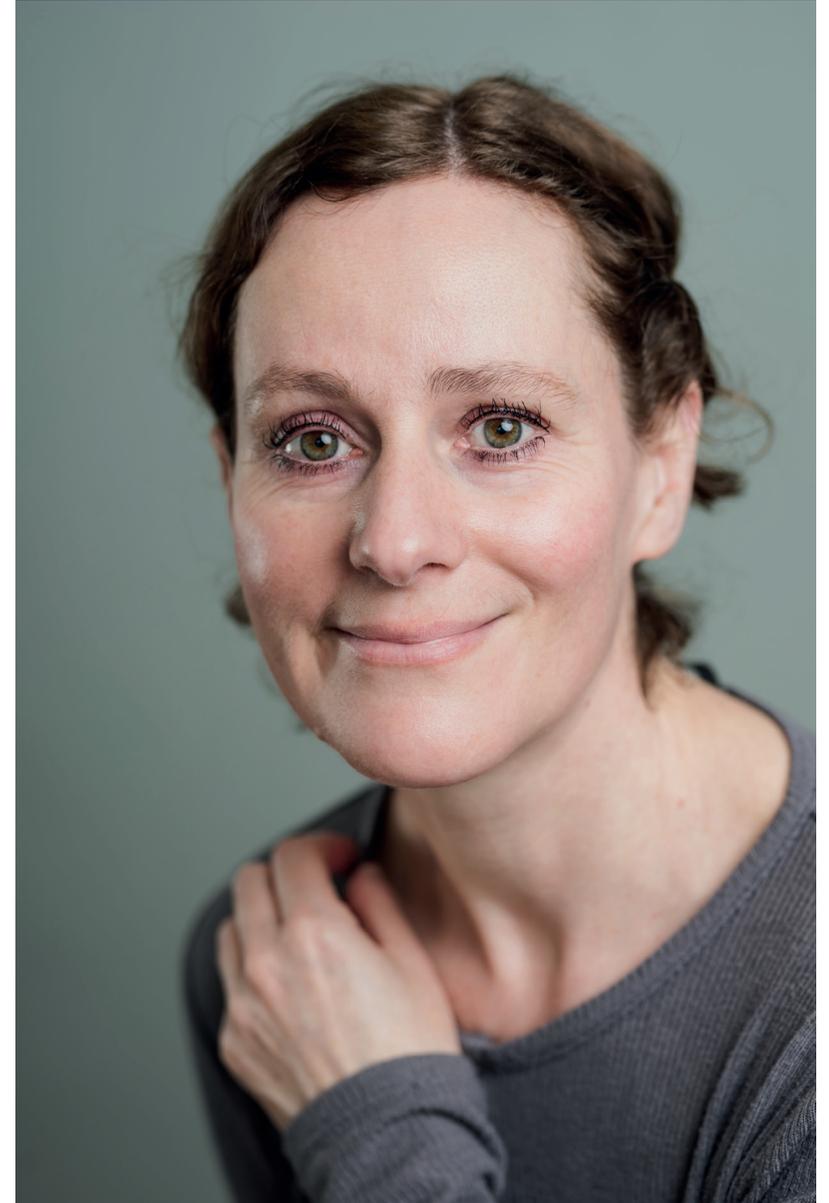
# INTERVIEW WITH WRITER CATHERINE DYSON

## **How would you describe *The Last Picture*?**

*The Last Picture* is told from the point of view of an emotional support dog who is accompanying a group of children on a school trip. The dog takes them around an exhibition of photographs which focuses on events in Europe in 1939. It's primarily about empathy, the power of our imagination and the communal experience of being together in the theatre to explore those things.

## **Where did your inspiration for the play come from?**

The idea behind the play came from a number of different places. Whilst this play is not about me or my family, I do have a personal connection to that period of history. My grandad was a Polish Jew, from a part of Poland which is now in Ukraine. He left in 1939 and ended up in Australia and later came to the UK. Most of his family and his fiancée were left behind and sadly didn't survive. It's something I had grown up knowing about from a young age even though my grandad never talked about it at all. As I got older, I felt there was a piece of my history that I was missing and it became something I wanted to find out more about and to write about. The Holocaust has been explored a lot in all forms of art and has been done brilliantly, but I was really interested in finding a new way of writing about this period of our shared history.



The idea for the dog came very early on in the writing process. It was an experiment really into how the character of the dog could help us to explore a dark and difficult story and still feel safe. I wanted to write in such a way that the audience wouldn't feel judged or accused - and the neutrality of the dog felt like an unexpected and interesting way to do that.

The play also focuses a lot on the photograph exhibits and I wanted to find a way of 'looking' at things when we can't physically see them - to help us to really appreciate what is going on more clearly.

### **Can you tell us about the process from first draft through to the play being made for stage?**

It's the first thing I've written in a while that wasn't in response to a specific commission or working with a venue or company. It was just something I really wanted to write for myself which was quite freeing in a way.

I then entered it for the Royal Shakespeare Company's 37 Plays competition and it got picked up by them which was brilliant. I feel so fortunate that it then ended up in John R. Wilkinson's hands - he really understood it straight away and I couldn't have hoped for a better Director to work with for this piece. It's been so exciting to see John build the creative team and to see everyone working on bringing it to life on the stage.

### **How did you approach writing from the perspective of Sam?**

It was an early idea to tell it from the point of the view of the dog and I found that it opened up possibilities. A dog doesn't carry the burden of emotion, or the morality and guilt, that a human character might (as we see in the play through the character of the teacher.) Sam is in a way always neutral. This enabled me to describe quite graphic and terrible images in a way that asks the audience to come with us in imagining those things whilst also feeling held. The dog's neutrality offers us a different way of accessing the story which is without judgement or emotional manipulation.

I was also very interested in this sense of fragility that many of us have, particularly in this post-pandemic world when things can feel turbulent and scary. The emotional support dog is a tool that can be used to help people deal with these difficult feelings and it feels like it's very of our time to explore that.

### **What is your favourite part of the playwriting process?**

Writing for me is a way of understanding the world and honestly, it's also really fun! It's amazing to have licence to follow your imagination in this way as part of your job. It's hard to say my favourite part, but I do really love when I'm just starting to write something new and I haven't quite worked out exactly what it will be. The potential there, and the anticipation of what could be, is always really exciting.

Then, seeing your work turned into reality on stage is a very precious experience. Seeing the team come together and that everyone is joining you on this collaborative process of telling a story.

Putting your writing in front of the audience is also very special and particularly for *The Last Picture*, the audience is at the very heart of the play and it's all about what they bring to it.

### **What can audiences expect from the show?**

A powerful story, that will be told in a very compelling way by one actor. I think audiences can expect to be immersed in a story and to come out feeling like they've been on a communal journey of the imagination. More than anything I would want people to leave the show feeling a sense of hope. That it will reaffirm their sense in the power of humanity's goodness and the potential we all have for empathy and imagination.

### **Finally, if you could describe the themes of the play in three words, what would they be?**

Empathy. Courage. Humanity

# INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JOHN R. WILKINSON

## **Tell us more about *The Last Picture* and what audiences can expect?**

It's a one person show told from the point of view of an emotional support dog called Sam, as he takes a school group on a trip to a photography exhibit. The photos depict a specific period of history in Europe, and the show really asks the audience to use their imagination as we explore these images together.

The clever thing is you never see any of the pictures physically represented on stage.

There is something joyous about the power of storytelling and in particular the mechanisms we can use in theatre to tell those stories, which differs from other art forms. For me, theatre sits between literature and film and there is something so exciting about how much you can create in the imagination of the audience even with just one or two objects on the stage.

I think theatre has a responsibility to create those opportunities for audiences to get an imaginative work out and this show absolutely provides that.



### **What did you think when you first read Catherine Dyson's script?**

I first read the script as part of the RSC's 37 Plays Project, and it immediately struck me as a show we had to make at York Theatre Royal. Catherine's voice is new and different, and I loved the blend of restraint and emotional depth in her writing. It's intimate and thought-provoking and tells an important story that feels so relevant.

I was fascinated by how Catherine uses the device of the dog to shield the audience from the heavy subject matter depicted in the photos. It's a really clever way of exploring an intricate topic.

### **How do you go about taking a script like this and turning it into a show?**

So much of what is in the script is about how the photographs are conjured in the imagination. A period of Research and Development was important to give us a sense of how we can do that most effectively on stage.

As a Director one of the first jobs, particularly on a new script, is to really get to grips with what the writer has in their head and download and digest all of that to come up with the blueprint for the show. When Catherine and I began to talk about staging the show we were instinctively aligned in how we wanted to approach this. From that starting point it's then been brilliant to begin having conversations about design, sound, lighting, etc with our fabulous creative team and really getting to grips with how we stage the show.

The choice of performer is of course incredibly important too – for Sam, what the part calls for above all else is warmth and the ability to get the audience visualising the story as it's being told.

### **What is your favourite part about directing a show like this?**

One of my favourite parts is assembling the team and finding people who would suit the project and work well together. I have been so lucky with the creative team we have on board, who are all exceptional and I know we will make something special. I can't wait to see it come to life on the stage and to get into rehearsals in January.

It's also so exciting to work on a brand-new play and to partner with ETT and An Tobar and Mull Theatre as co-producers and see the show go out on tour.

**What would you like the audiences to go away from the production feeling/thinking about?**

The show is supremely subjective - it's much more about what the audience want to take from it and for each person that will be quite personal. The world is a scary place, and I hope that the play really emphasises the power of empathy and how important it is to have these conversations. I think above all else I'd hope that audiences will go away feeling that they've had a communal experience that is unlike anything else they've seen before - and a chance to really exercise the power of their imaginations!

**If you could describe the production in three words, what would they be?**

Necessary. Enthralling. Powerful.

# INSIDE THE REHEARSAL ROOM

Actor Robin Simpson in the rehearsal room with Director John R. Wilkinson. Photos by James Drury Photography.





# EXERCISE 1: DESCRIBING A PLACE (USING IMAGINATION)

*The Last Picture* is all about the images we create in our mind.

**Aim:** To develop listening skills, imagination, and trust through guided visualisation.

1. Ask participants to work in pairs and label themselves A and B.
2. Participant A thinks of a place they know very well. This could be somewhere connected to a strong memory, or a place they have a photograph of.
3. Participant B closes their eyes and listens carefully.
4. A describes the place in as much detail as possible: sights, sounds, textures, and atmosphere.
5. After the description, B opens their eyes and guides A around the room, as if giving A a tour of their own memory of the place.
6. Encourage physicality where appropriate. For example, if the place is a playground, the pair might include crawling through an imaginary tunnel or climbing imaginary steps.

## **Reflection:**

- How did it feel to trust someone else with your memory?
- What details were most vivid?

# EXERCISE 2: PHOTOGRAPHS AND LIVES

**Aim:** To explore how context changes our emotional response to images.

1. Show the group a collection of photographs depicting everyday life after World War II. Images should be ordinary: people at home, engaging in hobbies, spending time with family or friends.
2. Ask the group:
  - What do we learn about these people from the images?
  - What kind of lives do they appear to have?
  - How do the images make you feel?
3. Now introduce new context: explain that these images are of people who later died during the war.
4. Discuss:
  - What changes when we know this information?
  - How do our feelings towards the images shift?
5. Create two word carpets (large sheets or areas on the floor/wall):
  - One for feelings before the new context
  - One for feelings after the new context

## **Reflection:**

- Why does knowledge change our emotional response?
- What does this tell us about memory and history?

# EXERCISE 3: THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE MUSEUM

**Aim:** To explore narrative, space, and direct address.

1. Choose a short section of text from the playtext.
2. Ask one participant to play the role of Sam.
3. Use the entire classroom or an outdoor space as the 'museum'.
4. Sam reads the text aloud while the rest of the group follows, as if on a guided tour.
5. Highlight moments of direct address in the play (for example, lines such as: "You are bored.").
6. Encourage Sam to experiment with directly interacting with the audience:
  - Making eye contact
  - Changing tone
  - Responding to the group's reactions

## **Reflection:**

- How does direct address make the audience feel?
- Does it change the power dynamic between performer and audience?

# EXERCISE 4: PUTTING YOURSELF IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

**Aim:** To explore storytelling through objects and encourage empathy.

1. Ask everyone in the room to place one shoe somewhere in the space.
2. Explain that the room has now become a museum of shoes.
3. Choose one person to play the role of the curator.
4. The curator moves around the space and describes each shoe as if it were an exhibition piece:
  - Who might have worn it?
  - What kind of life did they live?
  - What journey might the shoe have been on?
5. This is an improvisation exercise, there are no right or wrong answers.

Link this back to museums and memorials:

- Many museums contain everyday objects left behind.
- These objects hold stories and represent real lives.

## **Reflection:**

- How can ordinary objects carry extraordinary meaning?
- What responsibilities do museums have when telling these stories?

**Notes for teachers or practioners:**

- Allow time for discussion and emotional processing.
- Be mindful of the sensitivity of the subject matter.
- Remind participants that they can step out of an activity if they feel uncomfortable.