

DOMMAR®

Study Guide for

POLAR BEARS

by mark haddon



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Cast and Creative Team

Cast (in order of appearance)



Paul Hilton

Sandy, Kay's older brother. A self-made businessman, he is forthright and aggressive. His dismissal of his sister's illness and initial hostility towards John masks his attempts to protect both Kay and their mother.



Richard Coyle

John, Kay's husband. A lecturer in philosophy, he regards himself as rather staid, but also a stable and positive influence on Kay. He struggles with his wife's violent mood swings, a result of her illness.



Jodhi May

Kay, John's wife, an aspiring author of children's picture books. She has been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, a medical condition which results in extreme polarities in mood, from mania to depression.



Celia Imrie

Margaret, Sandy and Kay's mother. A retired teacher and frustrated painter. She lives alone in a large house in a remote part of the countryside. She is a widower and still grieves after the loss of her husband. She fears she'll soon lose Kay too.



David Leon

Jesus, an enigmatic figure who appears to Kay in times of crisis. He could be a person from her past, such as an ex-boyfriend, but his true identity remains a mystery.



Alice Sykes

Skye Bennett/Girl, An ambiguous figure – she may represent Kay as a young girl.

Creative Team

Jamie Lloyd, Director

Jamie is an Associate Director of the Donmar Warehouse. Recent work includes, for the Donmar: *Piaf* (also Vaudeville, Teatro Liceo, Buenos Aires, and Nuevo Teatro Alcala, Madrid – in Argentina, ADEET Award for Best Production and Clarin Award for Best Musical Production) and the forthcoming *Passion*, plus staged readings of *A House Not Meant to Stand* and *The Cocktail Party*; other theatre includes: *The Little Dog Laughed* (Garrick), *Three Days of Rain* (Apollo), *The Pride* (Royal Court – Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement), *Eric's* (Liverpool Everyman), *The Lover and The Collection* (Comedy) and *The Caretaker* (Sheffield Crucible and Tricycle).



Soutra Gilmour, Designer

Recent work includes, for the Donmar: *Piaf* (Vaudeville/Buenos Aires); other theatre includes: *The Little Dog Laughed* (Garrick), *Three Days of Rain* (Apollo), *The Pride* (Royal Court), *The Tragedy of Thomas Hobbes* (RSC at Wilton's Music Hall), *The Lover* and *The Collection* (Comedy), *Our Friends in the North*, *Ruby Moon*, *Son of Man* (Northern Stage), *Last Easter* (Birmingham Rep), *Angels in America* (Lyric Hammersmith), *Bad Jazz*, *Brief History of Helen of Troy* (ATC), *The Birthday Party* (Sheffield Crucible), *The Caretaker* (Sheffield Crucible, Tricycle), *Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5* (Traverse/Kosovo), *Lovers and War* (Stockholm), *Hair*, *Witness* (Gate), *Baby Doll*, *Thérèse Raquin* (Citizens, Glasgow), *Ghost City* (New York), *When the World Was Green* (Young Vic), *Modern Dance for Beginners* (Soho), *Through the Leaves* (Duchess & Southwark Playhouse) and *Shadow of a Boy* (NT); opera includes: *Into the Little Hill*, *Down by the Greenwood Side* (Royal Opera House), *Anna Bolena*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan Tutte*, *Mary Stuart* (English Touring Opera), *The Shops* (Bregenz Festival), *The Birds*, *Trouble in Tahiti* (The Opera Group), *El Cimmamon* (Queen Elizabeth Hall), *Saul*, *Hansel and Gretel* (Opera North), *A Better Place* (English National Opera) and *Girl of Sand* (Almeida).

Jon Clark, Lighting Designer

Recent work includes: *The Cat in the Hat*, *Pains of Youth*, *Our Class*, *Women of Troy* (NT), *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Merchant of Venice* (RSC), *The Little Dog Laughed* (Garrick), *Three Days of Rain* (Apollo), *The Lover* and *The Collection*, *Dickens Unplugged* (Comedy), *Pinter's People* (Haymarket), *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, *The Pride*, *Gone Too Far!* (Royal Court), *Been So Long*, *Street Scene*, *The Jewish Wife*, *How Much Is Your Iron?* (Young Vic), *The Birthday Party*, *Spyski!*, *Water* (Lyric Hammersmith), *The Soldier's Tale* (Old Vic), *Eric's* (Liverpool Everyman), *On the Rocks* (Hampstead), *How to Tell the Monsters from the Misfits* (Birmingham Rep), *Ghosts* (Arcola & ATC), *Night Time* (Traverse, Edinburgh), *Gone to Earth* (Shared Experience), *Underworld* (Frantic Assembly); opera includes: *Into the Little Hill*, *Down by the Greenwood Side* (The Opera Group, ROH2), *The Love for Three Oranges* (Scottish Opera & RSAMD), *Jenufa* (revival for ENO, Washington Opera), *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, *L'Elisir d'Amore*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Così fan Tutte* (Grange Park Opera), *Tarantula in Petrol Blue* (Aldeburgh); dance includes: *Cathy Marston's Libera Me*, *Karole Armitage's Between the Clock and the Bed* (Bern Ballett), *Tenderhook*, *Sorry for the Missiles* (Scottish Dance Theatre), *Anton & Erin – Cheek to Cheek* (London Coliseum) and *Mountains Are Mountains* (Tanzquartier, Vienna).

Ben and Max Ringham, Composers and Sound Designers

Recent work includes, for the Donmar: *Phaedra*, *Piaf* (also Vaudeville/Buenos Aires); other theatre includes: *The Little Dog Laughed* (Garrick), *Three Days of Rain* (Apollo), *Little Voice* (Vaudeville), *An Enemy of the People* (Sheffield Crucible), *Really Old Like Forty Five* (NT), *The Pride*, *The Author* (Royal Court), *Branded*, *All About My Mother* (Old Vic), *Contains Violence* (Lyric Hammersmith), *The Lover* and *The Collection* (Comedy), *The Caretaker* (Sheffield Crucible), *Amato Saltone*, *What If...?*, *Tropicana*, *Dance Bear Dance*, *The Ballad of Bobby Francois* (Shunt), *The Pigeon* (BAC), *Henry IV Parts I & II* (NT). Ben and Max were nominated for a Best Sound Design Olivier Award for *Piaf* and as part of the creative team accepted a Best Overall Achievement in an Affiliate Theatre Olivier Award for *The Pride*. Ben and Max are associate artists with the Shunt collective and two-thirds of the band Superthriller.

An introduction to Mark Haddon and his work

Biography

'I try not to talk too much about my writing anymore. Where it comes from, what it means, what I was trying to say...' comments author-illustrator Mark Haddon, reflecting on the many interviews he has given since the publication of his bestselling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* in 2003. 'The really interesting questions about writing don't have snappy answers. Most of them don't have answers at all.'¹

Born on 26 September 1962 in Northampton and educated at Merton College, Oxford, where he read English, Mark had been writing and illustrating children's books for nearly twenty years before *Curious Incident* brought him widespread acclaim. The novel won numerous accolades and awards, including the Whitbread Book of the Year, and has since been translated into over twenty languages. A film of the book is currently in development.

Originally wanting to be a palaeo-anthropologist – 'excavating Australopithecus bones in Northern Kenya'² – Mark doesn't remember reading much fiction as a child, although he recalls *Stig of the Dump* and cites James Joyce and Virginia Woolf as his favourite authors. ('I re-read them both regularly and they remind me why I write.'³) Perhaps then his chosen career is a little unexpected?



'I think that writing is more like being gay or being a priest, rather than being a car mechanic or a dentist,' he reflects. '(It's) less a case of embarking on a career, more like coming out (or admitting your vocation) – the discovery that this is where you've been heading all along. It was certainly like that for me.'⁴ Mark added to this thought in a later interview: 'I don't remember deciding to become a writer... You finally admit that this is who you are, you come out and hope that no one runs away.'⁵

Writing for Mark was, in part, a reaction against the conventions of a more routine existence: 'I was, and still am, completely incapable of holding down a "normal" job (i.e. turning up at 9am, wearing smart clothes, being told what to do)... I was working as an illustrator for magazines and newspapers when I first started writing seriously. That kind of illustration pays well per hour but has to be done in very short bursts and therefore involves a lot of waiting near the phone, during which time I got a lot of scribbling done.'⁶

He started by writing what he now calls '(dreadful) poetry', some of which was published, encouraging the would-be poet 'to carry on writing the (dreadful) stuff for an embarrassingly long time (it has taken me twenty years to learn how to write non-dreadful poetry)'.⁷ It was five years after leaving university that Mark first turned his attention to children's fiction. 'I started writing books for children because I could illustrate them myself and because, in my innocence, I thought they'd be easier.' He soon learnt differently – 'writing for children is bloody difficult' – and describes his early experience as 'a stern apprenticeship':

'Young readers have to be entertained. No child reads fiction because they think it's going to make them a better person... Bore children and they stop reading. There's no room for self-indulgence or showing off or setting the scene over the first 30 pages.'⁸

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time was an attempt by Mark to write specifically for an adult audience, so he was surprised when his publisher suggested marketing it to children as well. The difference between writing for children and adults is a topic Mark is frequently asked to discuss. Mark's response is that, 'There is no real difference... books for children are as complex as their adult counterparts and they should therefore be accorded the same respect.'⁹ This frustration was the result of repeated attempts by Mark to break down the barriers between the two. 'For many years I had been trying to write for adults and to get my writing for adults published... making that transition, from writing for children to writing for adults, is like crossing Death Valley in a Bacofoil jumpsuit. People's prejudices about children's writing being what it is, I sometimes think it would be easier for a plumber to break into adult fiction than for a children's writer to do the same.'¹⁰

Although POLAR BEARS is Mark's theatrical debut, he has written extensively for TV and radio, winning a BAFTA in 1999 for his children's drama *Microsoap*. When he isn't working on a novel, Mark teaches creative writing and his advice to aspiring authors reveals much of his own craft: 'Many years ago a reader of one of my children's books wrote and asked whether I did much crossing out. I wrote back and said that I did more crossing out than I did writing. And I still happen to think that crossing out is the secret of nearly all good writing'; 'Whenever I teach creative writing, which I do occasionally, I always tell students that (reading the text out loud) is the perfect way of finding out whether a piece of writing works.'¹¹

The tough but pragmatic aesthetic Mark preaches is one by which he abides: 'I have thrown away five completed novels and that's a gruesome enough figure. But not necessarily a waste of effort.' He summarises the qualities required by a would-be writer: 'Vast self-confidence combined with bracing self-criticism is the perfect combination.'¹²

Meanwhile, he himself chooses a quality employed to great effect by past masters of the stage: silence. Preferring instead to let the work speak for itself.

'It's not so bad if you write about stuff. Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. New England. Witch-trials. The fall of Enron. Then you can talk about stuff. But, despite all my efforts, I can't do stuff. I do families and relationships and the eccentricities of the human mind. So the temptation is to start telling anecdotes. About your own life and your own mind. About the lives and minds of those around you. But these things are raw material, the steam in the tank. They drive the wheels, and every time you sound a little peep on that whistle, the pressure in the tank goes down. So I'm not going to say anything about POLAR BEARS.'¹³



POLAR BEARS

Leaving Room for the Illustrations

Mark Haddon's bestselling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* is written from the perspective of a young boy with Asperger's Syndrome, a condition on the autism spectrum. As a young man, Mark worked with children with varying disabilities, including autism. That the novel's narrator had a condition (probably Asperger's) was more by accident than design. Mark began with an image of a dead dog and a voice describing it in a very factual, deadpan way. He then asked himself who the voice belonged to. His subsequent book, *A Spot of Bother*, focuses on a man who's convinced he's dying of cancer. Medical conditions and their treatment appear to be a recurring theme within Mark's work.

POLAR BEARS, similarly, has at its centre a character with a specific illness. The play suggests Kay has a condition known as bi-polar disorder, previously known as manic depression. It is a condition that affects a person's moods, which can swing from one extreme to another. People with bi-polar will have periods (or 'episodes') of both depression and mania. It is clearly a subject which fascinates Mark: 'The human brain is like a car; you only really begin to understand it when it goes wrong.'¹⁴



The play explores the impact Kay's illness has on the other characters' lives; from her mother Margaret, who takes up a position of expert on her daughter's illness, giving her a sense of purpose, to John, Kay's husband, who struggles to cope with his wife's violent mood swings. Issues of mental health and depression recur elsewhere in the play when we learn that Margaret's husband, Kay and Sandy's father, committed suicide, his note explaining, 'My mind is not wholly clear at the moment.' (p.34)¹⁵

Despite the subject matter, the play has a bleak humour. In fact its strong elements of black comedy are a direct result of the effects of Kay's illness on others. Mark sets the tone by ringing the changes: 'Humour and high-seriousness... Perfect bedfellows, I think. Though I usually phrase it in terms of comedy and darkness. Comedy without darkness rapidly becomes trivial. And darkness without comedy rapidly becomes unbearable. The comedy and the darkness also allow you to create sentiment without it becoming too sentimental.'¹⁶

The play's structure, with its distinctly un-chronological narrative order, adds to the overall sense of dislocation, as events unfold out of sequence; the audience witnessing the cause after the effect. It begins with John telling Sandy that he has killed Kay, then travelling to an unidentified time, perhaps the past, perhaps the present in which Kay is alive and in Oslo, before returning full circle to the confrontation that we surmise led to the tragic act (which is the starting point of the story). Like the characters, we struggle at times to tell the difference between fact and fiction, dream and reality. Is Jesus the same young man (Olly) who claims to have been at university with Kay?

The stage directions are minimal and give no real indication of where a scene might be set; the director and actors have to rely upon the clues within the text. This suggests that the overall design will need to be open to interpretation, the set non-representational. Similarly, the staging will have to allow for a fluid transition between scenes, as we move from train stations to hospitals, from the past to the present. Recalling his early work in picture books, Mark comments that part of his job as a writer is, 'To leave room for the illustrations.' The cast and creative team have five weeks of rehearsals in which to fill in the gaps.

Inside the rehearsal room

Late February 2010 and the start of rehearsals for the Donmar Warehouse's next production, Mark Haddon's new play POLAR BEARS. As is tradition at the Donmar, rehearsals begin with a 'Meet and Greet' where everyone involved (cast, crew, office staff) gather in the rehearsal room to introduce themselves to one another.

Michael Grandage, the Donmar's Artistic Director, talks with enthusiasm about Mark's play and joins with everyone in wishing him, the creative team and the actors the best of luck for the next five weeks of rehearsals. He explains that while colleagues will occasionally visit rehearsals, offering support and advice where needed, they want to give the cast and creative team the space they need to explore the play in private.

Michael then hands over to director Jamie Lloyd, one of the Donmar's Associate Directors, who talks a little about the background to the play, which has been in development for a while. Jamie is unequivocal in his praise: 'It is quite simply one of the best new plays I've ever read.' His evident excitement at finally getting into the rehearsal room with the play and 'an amazing cast' is infectious and soon everyone is equally enthusiastic to make a start.



Designer Soutra Gilmour unveils the model box, revealing a sparse yet evocative design. The stage is stripped back, leaving it exposed and bare. Lighting will play a key part in creating mood and atmosphere. There is something clinical about it, reminiscent of medical establishments and other institutions. There will be little in the way of furniture and props, if any, leaving the actors to suggest the various locations through their physicality. It will require bravery on their part as they're thrown back on their innermost resources to establish the world of the play.

The cast and creative team are then left alone to begin work in earnest, in the privacy of a closed rehearsal room. The Donmar's Resident Assistant Director, Titas Halder, writes a regular report on their progress, which is e-mailed to the rest of the team each week.

From: Titas Halder
Sent: 28 February 2010
To: All at Donmar Office
Subject: Polar Bears Rehearsals Update - Week 1

Dear All,

The end of our first week of rehearsals and the feeling is one filled with promise. The cast are lovely and have settled in well as a working unit.

For the first couple of days we spent our time sitting around the table reading through the scenes one-by-one and working out information about the characters and their histories and other text-related questions. Jamie has given me an early voice in the room, bringing in the research that I have been working on in order to answer the actors' questions about the myriad places and historical figures that Mark has included.

It was great to have Mark in the room for the first few days. We rapidly realised that his brilliant play is more complex than we'd previously thought, and so it was useful for everyone to be able to pick his brains about timelines and where he saw a particular scene happening. He's also been a very sensitive presence; contributing when he needs to and holding back when the actors need space. How unique also to say that our very large paper timeline is illustrated by Mark Haddon!

We started to stage some scenes on Friday, working chronologically through the play. Since the scenes are short and the nature of the staging is stripped back the scheduling is not too complex for the time being. Everyone feels like we have a good amount of time to approach this, but since there are often complex thoughts and psychologies for the characters in each scene, Jamie is carefully pacing the stages of work for the cast so that scenes build naturally and breakthroughs can be made later on in the process.

The cast are all positive and happy and stage management are doing a great job of making sure that everything that Jamie or anyone else needs is there. I think everyone is looking forward to coming back in on Monday.

All best,

Titas

I return to rehearsals several days after the 'Meet and Greet', in early March, for day two of the second week. The walls are now adorned with photos and text: images of the Norwegian landscape (Svalbard is specifically mentioned in the play) and polar bears in the wild; artwork depicting Greek myths and legends; explanations of the sub-types of bipolar and its medication. There is also a timeline running the length of one wall, detailing all the major events depicted or referred to in the play; starting with the marriage of Margaret and her husband (the unseen Donald) on 19th April 1972 and ending with Scene One, in the present, 'John tells Sandy that he killed Kay'.

This morning Jodhi May, who plays Kay, is rehearsing alone with Jamie. Also in the room are Titas and Deputy Stage Manager, Nicole Walker. It's a very intimate rehearsal, spent discussing Kay's character in a quiet and considered way. People are relaxed and open with one another as they share personal experiences, which inform certain aspects of the story and characters.

Many issues are raised and questions asked as the play's key themes are explored: Has Kay really met Jesus? Is she mad? What is madness? Jamie refers to Scientology, its attempts to rationalise the seemingly irrational. (He asks wryly, 'Has Tom Cruise got it right?') There is some discussion about madness facilitating a gift; examples given include the artist Vincent Van Gogh and the author Virginia Woolf. Is madness the price of creativity?

The connection between trauma and bi-polar disorder is also explored. Central to understanding Kay's character is the extent to which her father's suicide, and in particular the attendant feelings of guilt, has contributed to her current psychological state. Jamie reflects that a person like Kay with no clear pathway, either in terms of a career or, more fundamentally, personally, can easily fragment. Jodhi agrees. 'She's really rejecting life and people at this point. It's a very solitary journey.'

Discussion then moves onto Kay's relationship with her brother, Sandy, and in turn with her husband, John. Jodhi suggests that Sandy's 'tough love' is strangely comforting to Kay, offering a perverse sense of security. John's inability to model this behaviour leaves her feeling even more alone. The sense that John is out of his depth makes Kay feel unsafe. For John, the experience of living with Kay and her condition leaves him ultimately 'wrecked', and as a consequence unable to love again.

After a short tea break Celia Imrie and Paul Hilton, who play Margaret and Sandy respectively, join rehearsals. Today they are looking at Scene Seven, in which Sandy visits his mother to persuade her she can no longer continue to live alone in the dilapidated family home, the upkeep for which is paid for by Sandy. Celia and Paul begin by reading through the scene quietly with Jamie laughing as they discover the humour in their exchange. Again the mood in the rehearsal room is relaxed yet focused, the director and actors sit round the table discussing the scene in detail before placing it within the context of the play.

'Where are we on the timeline?' asks Jamie, referring to the length of paper on the wall behind him. He encourages the actors to fill in the gaps left by the author. 'What's brought Sandy here?' Paul suggests Sandy makes a weekly visit to see his mother. 'Does he go out of his way to do that?' Jamie asks. Paul thinks he does and as a result resents it. He describes Sandy as a workaholic – 'Always has to have his hand on the tiller' – a man plagued by 'inner demons'. Both Paul and Celia agree that there's an enormous gulf between mother and son.



They explore the setting of the scene: Margaret's house, Sandy and Kay's childhood home. They imagine a large property in the country, some rooms no longer in use. It's much in need of repair, with buckets in the living room to catch the rainwater from the leaking roof. Buckets which, suggests Celia, aren't new. 'It's too much palaver to get builders in,' she says, justifying her character's actions (or lack of).

She identifies a different tone to Sandy's assertion that Margaret has to leave, quoting his line, 'Things have changed' (p.27). 'I don't like the sound of that,' comments Celia, suggesting Margaret has been 'dreading' this conversation with Sandy for a long time. In truth, she says, Margaret's 'utterly miserable' in the cold, wet house. 'But she doesn't want to go. The change is too huge.' Despite the gulf between them, Margaret is desolate when Sandy leaves.

Jamie is keen to explore the back story to the play further. 'Do we know what Donald (Margaret's dead husband) did for a living?' he asks. Celia and Paul are undecided. Reading Kay's story for clues, they wonder whether he might have been a 'military man'. A soldier would have been at home less, reasons Celia, impacting on the relationship between Margaret and her husband. Jamie is intrigued by Donald's reference to God in his suicide note. 'Were the children raised as Christians?' Celia considers this before replying, 'Not in a major way.'

Donald's suicide is discussed at length. Celia suggests Margaret is 'appalled' that Sandy, then a child, discovered his father's body hanging in the hallway. 'That would have been just awful.' She and Paul explore the idea that, upon finding the body, Sandy was dispatched to look after Kay while Margaret dealt with Donald. They agree that they have never properly talked about his death. Is blame attached to Sandy? That somehow he was complicit in Donald's suicide? Jamie makes notes during the above, pleased by the depth of analysis. 'Excellent!' he comments.

They turn their attention briefly to Margaret's relationship with her daughter. Is Sandy's assertion that Margaret doesn't want Kay to be well true? Is she a convenient excuse for Margaret not pursuing a career as an artist? 'Does Margaret still continue to paint or has she just stopped?' asks Jamie. 'I think she has some half-finished paintings,' suggests Celia. She and Paul then set about putting the scene on its feet.

From: Titas Halder
Sent: 08 March 2010
To: All at Donmar Office
Subject: Polar Bears Rehearsals Update - Week 2

Dear All,

It's been a really strong second week of rehearsals. Having worked around the table last week to decipher characters' backgrounds and a timeline of events, we got to work putting the scenes on their feet in chronological order. We worked through about four scenes a day, which allowed us to approach each scene in detail whilst working out a rough shape for staging. We managed to work through the entire play by the end of the week, which has made everyone feel a lot more confident about understanding the events of the play and the arcs of their characters' journeys.

The cast are continuing to bond with each other and the room is feeling more bright and jovial. This positive attitude will become more important no doubt as the heavier matter of the play starts to be felt!

On Thursday Jamie and Richard [Coyle, playing John] took a trip to Cambridge to visit a philosophy professor, which was a very useful day. Richard came back full of enthusiasm for the philosophical theories surrounding knowledge and the other areas that John is immersed in. Seeing the depths to which philosophers engage in certain arguments certainly made some things click into place for his approach to the character.

Other aspects of the production were also discussed this past week. Jamie listened to some sound/music from the Ringers [Ben and Max Ringer, Composers and Sound Designers], which was incredibly atmospheric, and Soutra came in to chat with the cast about costume. As well as being practically very useful, it was also an opportunity for the actors to talk with freedom about how they perceived their characters, which was useful for everyone else to hear and no doubt solidified some ideas that were previously half-thoughts.

It was a very positive thing to have made it through the whole play. Lots of little breakthroughs were made by the actors and it feels like we have a good amount of time to continue work in even greater detail.

Jamie is continuing to pace rehearsals so that new information can be digested and metabolised thoroughly, and so that fundamentals for staging in the Donmar - such as getting diagonals right - will become second-nature to the actors. We look forward to working through the play again in chronological order before tackling it in the tricky show order.

Titas

From: Titas Halder
Sent: 15 March 2010
To: All at Donmar Office
Subject: Polar Bears Rehearsals Update - Week 3

Dear All,

Week 3 has been one of simplification and consolidation. More elements of the play are starting to spark into life. Over the week we made a start on working in show order, but mostly worked through the play in chronological order to consolidate the events and chronology of the play for the cast.

Whilst working each scene, Jamie introduced the idea of the scene changes before and after in order to keep the cast thinking about show order. Putting the play on its feet also gave Jamie the opportunity to work on the worlds-upon-worlds concept for the staging and scene changes, which meant trying some exciting options with various characters present or leaving whilst other scenes were starting or continuing. The concept of the stage-detritus gradually building up started to take shape, with the latter scenes taking place upon strewn paper, clothes and the smashed mug.

The Ringhams played Jamie more sound and Jon Clark [Lighting Designer] also came in to watch rehearsals, which further informed the staging. With a greater understanding of which areas might be lit from beneath the floor, and some idea of how little pockets of the stage could be lit whilst others are in shadow, we could be bolder with imagining the pacing and visual pictures that will be most effective. Stage management have been brilliant this week in building a rehearsal noose and a paper drop. The noose, in particular, has added quite a presence to the scenes in which it is used.

All of the actors have been doing great work this week. There are moments in which they are already drawing upon gut-wrenching emotional depth. It seems that the stripped back staging, with as few props as possible, is freeing them to work off each other and trust in the direct relationship between actor and audience.

We were also joined by Skye [Bennett] and Alice [Sykes] this week (both playing the Girl). Mark delivered a revised version of the scene which accorded to the actors' ages and makes the story more direct. That gave us an opportunity to see and hear the last piece of the play that had thus far been unstaged. Both girls were fab, responding well to Jamie's direction, who worked with them in order to match their vocal qualities to Jodhi's. A really positive week and we look forward to tackling show order this coming week, starting to run sections together.

All best,

Titas

I next visit rehearsals a fortnight later, near the beginning of week four. There have been some changes within the rehearsal room itself, with the addition of several scenic elements: discarded artwork and items of clothing are now strewn across the floor and a noose has been rigged from the ceiling. Jamie and stage manager Greg Shimmin discuss its position; Greg acts as a conduit between the production and rehearsal process. I notice that the team have been joined by the composers – two brothers – Max and Ben Ringham, who sit at a computer preparing to add sound to the rehearsals.



During a tea break Jamie talks quietly to a member of the cast on the far side of the room, giving him notes, while Titas gives another actor some information and Nicole talks to each in turn about the dropped lines from a previous scene. During these quiet moments everyone occupies themselves with work, whether it's the actors running lines quietly or stage management preparing the space for the next scene.

Rehearsals continue with Scene Fifteen, in which John encounters one of Kay's ex-boyfriends, Olly, at her hospital bedside. Jodhi is now joined by Richard Coyle, who plays John, and David Leon, who plays Olly. They begin with the transition into this scene from the previous one, marking the moment with sound. The scene is run a couple of times, Jamie declaring it better afterwards. He encourages the actors to give themselves the space they need to really engage and communicate with one another. 'When the characters' thoughts feel rushed, they're usually more complex and that's when you need to take your time.' Jodhi reflects on Kay's first line to John – 'You're here' (p.58) – and wonders whether she wakes with 'a pain head or a grudgy head'. Jamie asks Titas to clarify the effects of Kay's medication. Is her head spinning? He doesn't want to suggest she's on valium.

They then move onto Scene Sixteen, possibly the most elusive of the entire play. It consists of a single stage direction, two lines in length, which reads: 'Darkness. Kay burns her illustrations. Arctic wind. A bear in the distance, perhaps.' (p.60) As I leave, Jamie is focusing on the logistics of the scene, the actual burning of the pictures, with stage management.

From: Titus Halder
Sent: 22 March 2010
To: All at Donmar Office
Subject: Polar Bears Rehearsals Update - Week 4

Dear All,

Last week was terrific. The rehearsal room remains a very warm and cheerful place when not working and incredibly focused when we are.

Towards the end of the week we had a couple of full company calls, so the room has been busy. Soutra and Fizz [Jones, Costume Supervisor] have been in for costume fittings and costumes are now being worked into scenes, which has added a sense of the play's reality. Sound is now fully incorporated into scene changes, which gives us a real sense of the atmosphere of the play.

On Monday we were visited by a clinical psychologist who answered some of our questions on bipolar disorder. She was very helpful and it was heartening to know that our research and thoughts were in the right place.

On Wednesday Mark rejoined us, which signified that we were now ready to start on the advanced stages of rehearsing the play. It has been a gradual shift but we are leaving individual scenes behind and starting to work on running chunks together in show order.

On Thursday we ran our first scenes together and there was a real lift-off moment the first time we ran Kay's story into the 'noose scene'. On Friday we managed to run a substantial chunk of the play together. Running the scenes like this has allowed us to feel the momentum and atmosphere of the play a lot more clearly, and allowed the cast to be freer in building their emotional journeys. Discoveries are still being made by the actors and scenes are becoming more and more polished. The non-chronological order now really makes sense to us and we can't wait to have a real attack on running the show order.

We look forward to seeing some of you in the rehearsal room later this week for runs, hearing your thoughts and can't wait to get the play into the theatre!

All best,

Titus

I return to rehearsals at the end of week five. It's Saturday morning and since Thursday the cast have been performing the play to small, invited audiences of Donmar staff. It's important that the actors have an opportunity to run through the piece under semi-performance conditions, with as many elements of the production (props, sound) in place as possible.

The atmosphere in the rehearsal room feels relatively relaxed. The actors warm up, bending and stretching like athletes before a run, while stage management ensure everything's in place for the performance. I sit next to author Mark Haddon, who has returned to rehearsals this past week for final preparations before the production's move into the theatre. He explains that there have been a number of revisions to the script, including the re-ordering of some scenes. We talk a little about the previous runs, how an audience can affect the performance and, ultimately, the meaning of a play. If they don't engage with the humour in the early scenes, says Mark, the emphasis shifts and the overall tone becomes very bleak.

Having had that experience earlier in the week, the cast are careful to guard against it, and the performance they give today is full of subtle shades of light and dark. There is much laughter throughout as the audience respond to the black comedy inherent in the play's frequently absurd, and at times truly awful, events; as in the opening scene when John tells Sandy, matter-of-factly, that Kay is dead. Some moments are particularly harrowing and the close proximity of actors to audience in the rehearsal room lends the play a greater intensity, making it a particularly emotional experience to watch.

Afterwards Mark and Jamie sit huddled in the corner swapping notes, discussing possible cuts and/or additions to the script. Overall, the cast and creative team seem pleased. They can depart for the weekend knowing that the hard work of the past five weeks of rehearsals is finally coming to fruition.

From: Titus Halder
Sent: 29 March 2010
To: All at Donmar Office
Subject: Polar Bears Rehearsals Update - Week 5

Dear All,

Last week was one of run-throughs and working notes as we approach moving into the theatre. The mood amongst the cast is positive. They have the play quite securely in their bones and are working brilliantly to incorporate the augmentations that Jamie and Mark have made to the script throughout the week.

It was great to see some friendly faces at the end of the week for runs. Your feedback on the show is essential and it is so valuable for the cast to get a sense of performance in front of an audience and for the creative team to see an audience reacting to the performance. Thursday was the first run in front of anyone and the cast were naturally a bit nervous. It was great for them to have a real attack at the play, and it signified a real gear change for us all. We could clearly see which aspects of the production were hitting their mark and which might need some more work.

Over the last couple of days the team has been working to heighten the moments that need to flourish and make sure that the overall tone is just right. Mark has made some great alterations and cuts, and the Ringhams have done some great work to provide new material, such as underscoring Kay's fairytale, which has made that moment very special and magical. Saturday's run was a brilliant culmination of the week's work, with the play running at a tight show-time, and performances which trod the line between the light and the dark in the play.

We're all really looking forward to getting into the theatre.

Titus

The next time I see the cast and creative team is at the Donmar for the first preview. These early performances are a vital opportunity for everyone involved to experience the production under full performance conditions before a paying audience. Their presence, and the effect it has on the production, is the final part of the process. It's only by sitting in an audience that you get a true sense of the production, in terms of its pace and overall tone.

The set achieves the exact effect that Soutra had described at the 'Meet and Greet' several weeks ago. Its elemental quality adding greatly to the sense of isolation experienced by all of the characters at different points in the play. The actors are still adapting to being in the space and working with the technical aspects of the staging, including the synchronised lights and sound which mark the transition between scenes. Each give detailed, nuanced performances and watching the play again I'm struck by the pain and anguish that each of the characters experience. This is leavened by the inherent humour within the piece, with which the audience readily engage.

The cast and creative team will reflect on this experience, making further alterations to the performance – slight shifts in tone and emphasis – in preparation for Press Night the following week and then the rest of the run. They have journeyed through five weeks of rehearsal to successfully arrive at this point; now the next stage of their travel begins.



An interview with Assistant Director, Titas Halder

As Assistant Director, what were you asked to do in preparation for rehearsals?

As an assistant director your role is to be two things at the same time. One is a super facilitator; so if anyone in the room – stage management, director, actors – needs anything you can do it or have it there in front of them before they've even asked for it. This can be from the most mundane thing, such as moving a chair, to having a schematic plan of the Donmar lights. And the other thing is to always have an artistic view on a scene or on what an actor's doing at any one time, and to store that up and give it when and if needed, at the right time.

You mention 'the right time', what is the etiquette for an Assistant Director giving their view in the rehearsal room?

I think it's always tricky for an assistant director. What it comes down to is having a very good understanding of what is going on in the room at any one time. Some assistant directors might have an anxiety to get their point across, so that everyone in the room knows they've got a valid view and can give a note, but if you think about it the other way round, the director needs to have the space to think everything through. So if you come in at the wrong time, you're going to be stifling what they're doing. Actually it's about responding to what the director needs at any given moment. It's so delicate when you're a director working through a scene with an actor. You might be working towards something in a very intricate way, giving the actor notes, little guides and hints, and then leaving them the space to work it out. The last thing you need is another voice to come in from left-field, even if it's working towards the same goal, only to knock things off-kilter.

Tell me a little about the 'encyclopaedia' you've compiled for rehearsals.

Jamie uses his assistants incredibly well and what he said to me was, 'Go through the play and any word which anyone might have a question about, write something down'. And that's absolutely right, because if someone doesn't know who Adam and the Ants are that's not their fault and you have to give them an answer. The last thing you want to do is make someone feel stupid because they don't know what something in the play means. It can be anything, from something incredibly complicated like, 'What's a benzodiazepine? A group of medicines which...' blah-blah-blah, to, 'A poplar tree looks like this'. So it's also about gathering lots of images.

One of the best things about being an assistant is that you end up reading about the most incredible things. You have to have a really broad, open mind and a desire to learn about things, and it's scary and impossible because you can't become an expert on Aristotle or the Logical Positivists in a week, but you have to do as much research as you can so that if a question comes up you can give the actor enough information to make them feel they understand what's happening in a scene.

Obviously the encyclopaedia is an incredibly large document and I'd be a liar if I said I knew everything in it! The point is it's about having that information at hand; so you've read a scene the night before and you know that halfway through it an actor is going to come across a particular word. In the first two weeks it didn't

matter, because there were a whole host of other things they needed to think about first, but now they do need to know what this particular thing is. And so before the scene's begun, you've got the page in the encyclopaedia ready.

The other thing is it's all well and good having a million pictures and an encyclopaedia entry on Svalbard, but actually if you just plonk that on the wall it becomes like wallpaper: you'd never look at it, so you have to gauge when's a good time to display it. For example, when you've just done a scene and something comes up you can present the images, because it means people go, 'Oh, OK. That's what that place looks like.' It's not about flooding the room with information, it's about giving the information when it's most needed. So one day we've got a few pictures of the Arctic Circle and when we did a scene in which Kay specifically mentions waters and seals and polar bears, that's when we put up the pictures of all those things. That way it feels like you've covered the territory and it's started to come alive a bit more.



Can you give me a sense of what Jamie's rehearsal room is like.

I think with every good director the process is slightly different for each play. Week one was certainly not about jumping up and attacking the scenes. A lot of it was spent sitting around the table discussing the play, because there is so much to unpack. The timeline is not straight forward so we wanted to find our way slowly through the play so we could all know where things happened and why. Some scenes are very short and are presented out of order, we needed to spend quite a long time making sure we knew what the actual order was. If you're an actor playing those scenes, you go into one and then every single cell in your body has to change in order to get into the next, because you're not going from 4pm to 5pm on Tuesday evening, you're going from Oslo in February of one year to a hospital bed in Manchester six months ago. So we've worked through those situations and circumstances, those emotional journeys, around the table so that when we get to running those scenes together the actors can get from one place to another.

So week one was really a lot of work around the table and Mark was present, working with us and being on hand if we needed to ask anything. That was really useful for us and he was a great presence, in terms of being sensitive to the actors and their needs. It's a real skill and some writers who don't often work with actors don't necessarily have it; knowing when to say something and when not to.

In week two we started to get up and stage things, getting a rough shape. The Donmar stage has a particular configuration, it's not end on, in that it has three sides and there's a second tier in the auditorium, so you always have to have an idea of what is the right shape for the scene. It's about building that in, weaving it into the emotional journey of the scenes, without Jamie going, 'Go over there... stand here', and he's incredibly good at not doing that.

Week three, last week, was a real turning point in rehearsals where we'd got through a lot of the foundation blocks: 'This is where you enter from... This is where you are in the journey of the play,' etc. Now we're thinking about show order, building in scene changes. And other elements are starting to come in, like the sound. The lighting designer is sitting in on as many rehearsals as possible. Props are also present, because there's an element to the staging of detritus, of the evening building up. Clothes and papers get strewn across the stage and things get smashed, and you need those things for the actors to get used to and for us all to begin to understand the feeling of this production. And tomorrow Mark rejoins us.

When was Mark last in?

Mark was with us until the end of the first week, then he left us to it, but he's been in contact with Jamie via phone and e-mail in case anything's needed changing script wise. Because they've been working on the play for so long together, there's that absolute trust between them. So Mark's going to rejoin us and we're going to run things together. That will be the take-off stage.

Each new play presents its own unique challenges, but what are some of the particular qualities of POLAR BEARS?

I've worked predominantly in new writing venues and when a brilliant new play comes along you don't necessarily ask what is brilliant about it, in a sense you just know. If you know you're working with writing of real quality, you'll never fully understand it until you start to unpack it. So things like the depth of research we



needed to do began to become apparent from being in a room with the play. So there are those things which are time-consuming, where you have to go away overnight and find an NHS document and gather lots of information, but the brilliant, unique thing about this play is that there is an inherent, natural theatricality to it.

It sounds a bit strange to say we're working on a new play that's theatrical, but actually a lot of new writing sits in a place somewhere between TV and theatre. This play, however, is absolutely not: 'Here's a woman who has a condition, let's go on a journey over three years of her life and see how terrible it is...' Mark has written a play in which the form of the piece gives you an insight into what this condition is actually like. And that's in the play, it's not on top of it. It's not just in the dialogue, it's there in terms of the structure. Our job is to make that blossom, to serve those things that the writer has done.

There are some things in the play which could only be realised in a theatre. I'm thinking of the stage direction: 'Darkness. Kay burns her illustrations. Arctic wind. A bear in the distance, perhaps.'

Absolutely. Mark has been brilliant in that there are hardly any stage directions in the play. He's also written for TV, and in TV scripts it's seventy per cent directions and thirty per cent dialogue. But what he's done here is given us just dialogue and absolutely trusted in Jamie and the rest of the team to realise the play. There's barely a stage direction in it because he understands that's what the cast and creative team do in the rehearsal room. He understands that if he writes 'the characters sit around the table' that may not actually be the best way of staging the scene, and therefore of serving what's written.

I think that as long as there's trust between the writer and director, in terms of what the writer wants to achieve with regard to mood and feeling and the director trying to faithfully serve those things and work towards the same goal, then, in theory, what you do in the rehearsal room is the sum of that work.

We're trying to make the staging as simple as possible, so there are barely any props. It's brilliant because it means you have this fundamental relationship between the actor and the audience, and between actor and actor. We're going through the play dispensing with cups and plates and anything we don't need. On the other hand there are specific requirements, such as a decomposing body, a fire on stage and papers and a noose that drop in from the ceiling. That's where the Donmar team, stage management and production, are so brilliant. You say, 'We need a noose', and when you come in the next day it's there, and it works and it's safe. And because we've had it for three weeks, when we get into the technical rehearsals it won't be a problem. And it's also about looking at the play as a whole and saying, these moments – i.e. burning the papers – are so important and will be such a striking image that we need to get them right.

Jamie's policy is very much that nothing should be a surprise to the cast, so everything we could possibly need is in the rehearsal room as early as possible. The only thing that should be new is the sensation of being in the theatre, under the lights.



POLAR BEARS in performance

Practical exercises based on an extract from the beginning of the play

The following extract is taken from Scene One. Sandy is visiting his brother-in-law John, having received a troubling telephone call. They haven't seen one another for a while and John seems agitated, his appearance dishevelled, as though he hasn't slept for several days. From the start Sandy (and the audience) suspects something is not right, and his worst imaginings are very soon confirmed.

Working as a group read through the extract and explore the dynamics of the scene. As a director what atmosphere do you want to create? Think carefully about tone and emphasis, recalling Mark Haddon's comment about achieving the necessary balance between comedy and darkness. Consider also the staging of the scene. How would you direct the two actors playing John and Sandy in order to establish their relationship? You will need to think about their positioning on stage, in particular their relationship to one another.

Think about the following: How will you ensure the scene, the first of the play, achieves maximum impact upon the audience? How does that affect your approach to pacing? You should also take into account the other elements of production. For example, what should the lighting be like? Is any specific sound required?



Once you have seen the Donmar's production of POLAR BEARS consider how their staging of this scene compares with your own.

POLAR BEARS by Mark Haddon

An extract from Scene One (pp.2-7)

Sandy and John enter.

Sandy Sorry. I'm going on about myself.

John No. It's good to listen to a human voice. It's been a while. Helps calm me down.

Sandy John?

John Thanks. Thanks for coming.

Sandy John, what's the matter?

John I don't really know where to start.

Sandy Is this the disciplinary stuff at college?

John What? Oh, no, it's nothing to do with that.

Sandy So, what is it then?

John I'm so sorry about this.

Sandy Just tell me, OK.

John I shouldn't have called you.

Sandy I'm family. You're meant to call me.

John I suspect you're not going to think of me as family after this. In fact, technically, I'm not sure I count as family any longer.

Sandy Are you having an affair?

John No. I'm not having an affair. I've never had an affair. Never thought about having an affair. Which is pretty amazing, don't you think? In the circumstances.

Sandy Is Kay having an affair?

John No, Kay's not having an affair. Or rather, she wasn't. I'm pretty sure she wasn't. It's hard to be certain about that kind of thing.

Sandy Has something happened in Oslo?

John Kay's not in Oslo.

Sandy No?

John Have you got a cigarette?

Sandy Sure.
Gives John a cigarette.

John Thanks.

Sandy So where is she?

John She's in the cellar.

Sandy What's she doing in the cellar?

John She's dead.

Sandy You said she was in the cellar.

John She's dead. And she's in the cellar.

Sandy What are you talking about?

John Ironically, she didn't kill herself. If that's what you're thinking.

Sandy Whoa, John. Don't fuck around like this.

John You see, actually, I killed her.
Pause.



Sandy You're serious.

John We had a fight. Like we do, periodically. I pushed her and she fell. There was such a small amount of blood. You expect there to be a lot of blood, don't you. From seeing people being killed on the television.

Sandy Oh, Christ.
He starts to exit.

John Please, Sandy. Don't.
Pause.

John She's a bit of a mess. You go stiff after a bit and I had to kind of fold her to get her down the stairs. I think I might have broken something. She doesn't smell too good, either.
Pause.

Sandy What the fuck have you done?

John I'm really sorry.

Sandy You killed my sister.

John I keep thinking that if I concentrate hard enough I can make time go backwards. Like Superman flying round the earth really fast so the San Andreas Fault opens up again and he can pull Lois Lane's car out of the ground. Except I'm not Superman. And I can't make time go backwards.

Sandy Shut up.
He takes his mobile out.

John Don't, Sandy. Please.
Sandy can't get through.

Sandy Fuck.

John Sorry. The reception's rubbish. Kay's mobile never worked in the house.

Sandy Why didn't you call an ambulance?
Pause.

Sandy Answer the fucking question.

John I'm sorry. I thought... Well... She was dead.

Sandy Why didn't you call an ambulance?

John I did a first aid course at college. Only a couple of months ago, funnily enough. I gave her chest massage. And mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Sandy I asked you why you didn't...?

John Her heart had stopped. Three minutes without oxygen and the brain starts to die. We're a long way from the nearest hospital, Sandy.

Sandy What if there was an ambulance nearby? She was lying on the floor, dying. What if one was just passing? If there was a million to one chance. . .

John To tell the truth I didn't want someone to come and take her away.

Sandy So you put her in the cellar?

John You see, then I would have been on my own. And I didn't want to be on my own.

Sandy This can't be true.

John Those were exactly the words I kept saying to myself.

Sandy I'm going to ring the police.

John This was a few days ago, incidentally. Which accounts for my dishevelled state. And the smell down there.

Sandy How many days ago?

John Four, maybe five. I've lost track of time, rather. I rang Sian at the faculty office and told them there was a family crisis I guess this counts as a family crisis. That's why I put her in the bag. It's what the hall carpet was delivered in. I was going to throw it away but Kay said we should hang onto it in case it ever came in handy. You know what Kay was like about recycling. Please. Don't ring the police.



Sandy You're asking me to pretend this didn't happen?

John We can sort it out. If we just stay calm and think it through really carefully.

Sandy We can't 'sort it out'. This is not something you 'sort out'.

John Also... it wasn't really an accident.

Sandy No, John. No.

John I just got very angry. You know what Kay's like.

Sandy What did you do?

John I wanted to hurt her. And just for a second... I wanted it to be over. Don't we all imagine that kind of thing sometimes?

Sandy No, we don't all imagine that kind of thing sometimes.

John You don't live with Kay.

Sandy I'm ringing the police.

He exits.

John Maybe she said she was going to Oslo but she didn't go. I mean, obviously, she didn't go. But maybe she went somewhere else. Maybe she committed suicide. I mean, that's not exactly out of the question, is it.

Sandy enters.

Sandy Where's the phone?

John I was thinking. Maybe you could help me bury her. On Oakshott Hill.

Sandy Tell me where the fucking phone is or I swear I'll...

John Fallen trunks and mushrooms and this dappled light. And bluebells. Like this great wave of blue just swept in.

Sandy Where's the phone?

John It's in the kitchen.

Sandy exits.

John Kay always said she wanted to be buried there. I mean, not in the immediate future. I think she was planning something a little further off. Except, of course, you can't be buried there. Because it's a country park. You can have your ashes scattered there. You can have your ashes scattered anywhere. I think. But you could be buried there unofficially.

Sandy enters.

Sandy Because she does wander, Sandy. You know that.

Sandy You cut the cord.

John With the kitchen scissors.

Pause.

Sandy It was a lot tougher than I expected.

Sandy John...?

Pause.

Sandy John I really need you to help me, Sandy.

Sandy I'm leaving.

John You can't leave, Sandy.

Sandy And how are you going to stop me?

Questions on the production and further practical work

You may wish to work individually on completing these questions.

- When you go to see the Donmar's production of POLAR BEARS consider the following:
- What transformations take place within the main characters through the journey of the play? How do the actors embody these changes?
- How does the design establish the world of the play, in terms of its location and atmosphere?
- How does the production utilise lighting and sound to realise the above scene?



Ideas for further study

Bibliography

'Mark Haddon', Donmar Magazine, Issue 21 (2009)

The Observer (11/04/04)

The Guardian (02/02/04)

Mark Haddon interviewed on the *Today* programme, Radio 4

Endnotes

(Endnotes)

1 'Mark Haddon', Donmar Magazine, Issue 21 (2009), p.10

2 The Observer (11/04/04)

3 The Guardian (02/02/04)

4 Ibid.

5 The Observer (11/04/04)

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13 'Mark Haddon', Donmar Magazine, Issue 21 (2009), p.11

14 Mark Haddon interviewed on the *Today* programme, Radio 4

15 All page references refer to the rehearsal draft of POLAR BEARS by Mark Haddon (2010)

16 The Guardian (02/02/04)

About the Donmar Warehouse

The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate not for profit 251 seat theatre located in the heart of London's West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Since 1992, under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London's most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 35 Olivier Awards, 23 Critics' Circle Awards, 19 Evening Standard Awards and 11 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

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