



NT Education Workpack

Blue/Orange

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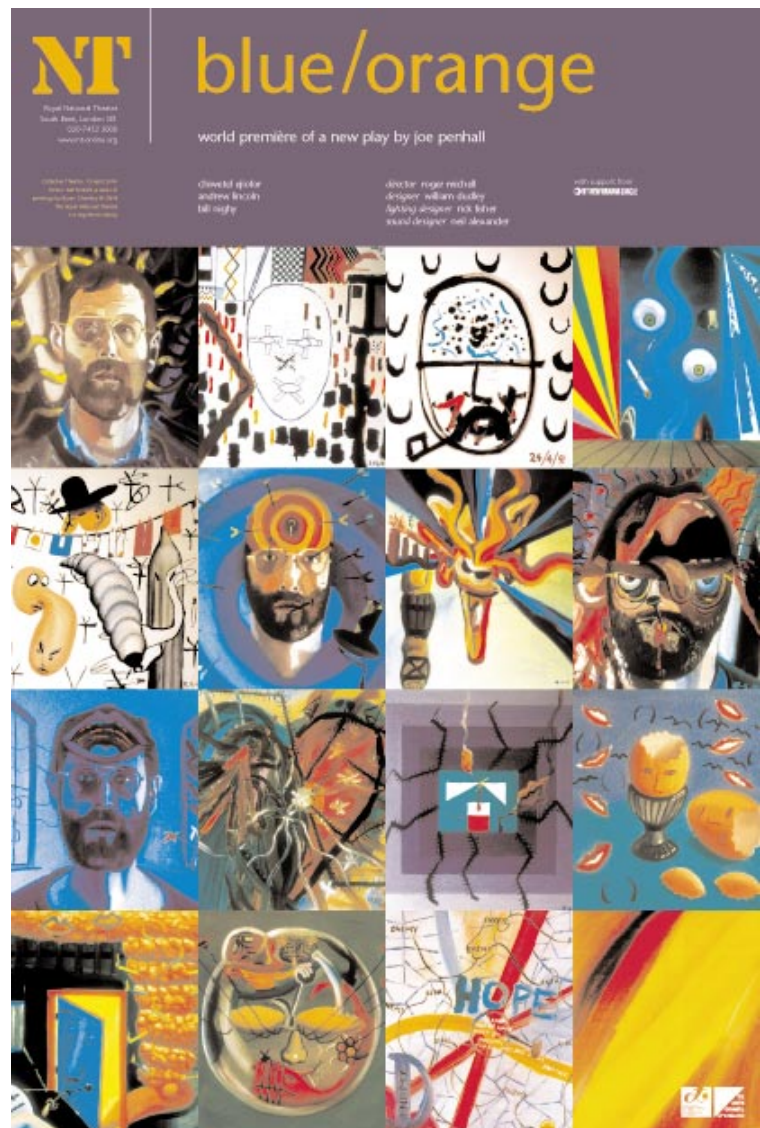
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Blue/Orange
by Joe Penhall

This production premiered at
the National's Cottesloe
Theatre on 13 April 2000

See www.nt-online.org for
further production details

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The play

Introduction

Blue/Orange is the first play by Joe Penhall to be produced at the National Theatre. His previous plays include *Some Voices* (1994) and *Pale Horse* (1995) at the Royal Court Theatre, *Love and Understanding* (1997) at the Bush Theatre and *The Bullet* (1998) at the Donmar Warehouse.

Joe Penhall's work is concerned with universal issues; mental illness, human isolation, family structures observed through the minutiae of every day life. His work challenges notions of 'the norm' by extending the boundaries of the performance text into the realms of hyper-naturalism, experimenting with heightened dialogue and thwarting perceived notions of masculinity.

Joe Penhall explains that *Blue/Orange* was written in order "to present an extraordinary argument that couldn't be held in conversation". He also asserts that the post-colonial discourse so clearly configured within the play functions as a metaphor for disenfranchisement: "when colonial Vikings arrive, they cause damage. Colonialism engenders poverty, be it economic, social, psychological or cultural". This play lays out the arguments that surround issues of race, class, mental illness and patriarchy within a visceral and dynamic, yet often comic, text. The cast present the physical landscape of colonisation.

Chiwetel Ejiofor
photo Ivan Kyncl



The two white men annexe, subdue, modify and eventually dismiss the young black man while struggling for primacy. The audience are asked to question their perceptions and are made to examine, forensically, the intellectual pathways of the liberal and the damage that so often occurs in the name of liberal fundamentalism.

The Play: Synopsis

The Characters

Christopher 24, Black. Working class. Sectioned by the police following an 'incident' in Shepherd's Bush Market.

Bruce late 20s. An idealistic, middle class, white, liberal psychiatrist in his first year of training.

Robert 50s, white, upper middle class, careerist consultant who feels he has 'Professor' potential.

The Action

The action takes place over 24 hours in a modern London NHS psychiatric hospital.

The Plot

Christopher, a young black man from a council estate in White City, is at the end of a 28-day 'section' order and junior psychiatrist, Bruce, is conducting his assessment prior to discharge. Bruce is not convinced that Christopher's diagnosis (Borderline Personality Disorder) is correct and feels that he may be suffering from schizophrenia. He wants to section him again for further observation and calls in his mentor and Consultant, Robert, for a second opinion. Robert confirms BPD and instructs Bruce to discharge Christopher. They haven't enough beds and Christopher deserves his "freedom".

Christopher enters the room, desperate to leave although he does not want to return to

White City where he is frequently arrested and has no friends or family. Bruce prompts Christopher to display his delusory tendencies in front of Robert, and Christopher duly observes that the oranges he sees are blue. He also confides that he is the son of Idi Amin, exiled former dictator of Uganda.

While Bruce believes it would be wrong to release Christopher, Robert argues it is their responsibility to do so, suggesting that his blue orange observation is influenced by a surrealist poem by Paul Eluard, 'La terre est bleue comme une orange' (The Earth is blue like an orange), and that there are logical grounds for believing his father is Idi Amin.

Bruce's analysis, suggests Robert, is "Ethnocentric", based upon white, Western cultural criteria alien to those of an African. Their disagreement becomes increasingly heated, and Christopher's diagnosis appears secondary to the psychiatrists' personal, ideological struggle.

When Robert interviews Christopher, he says that he does not want to go home after all. Robert persuades him that he can be cured with medication and that he only *thinks* he is seeing things so that he can stay in the hospital. His suggestion that Christopher has been sectioned as the result of Bruce's racial prejudice escalates and, clearly with Robert's encouragement, Christopher files a complaint.

Bruce reads the report and recognises Robert's rhetoric. The conflict between the two psychiatrists gets out of hand as Bruce accuses Robert of using Christopher as a guinea pig.

Bruce and Christopher are left alone. Bruce tries to explain the seriousness of the complaint made against him and loses his temper. Just as Bruce's tirade reaches its climax, Robert returns. Robert encourages Christopher to "be brave" and leave, with the promise of an outpatient's appointment. Just as Bruce is about to lose his job he turns the tables on Robert: 'I'd like to lodge a Complaint with the Authority.'

Andrew Lincoln
Bill Nighy
photo Ivan Kyncl



The play

Interview with Roger Michell

Why this play?

Because it presents a balanced yet contradictory representation of schizophrenia. The writing often feels extemporised although it is deeply technical and highly crafted.

What is the play about?

It is a play about three 'deranged' people. It gives us three different visions of the characteristics of 'derangement'. The play is beautifully balanced, capturing the ambivalent nature of psychiatry, which is an area where, unlike with a broken leg, it is difficult to make a secure diagnosis. Diagnosis often boils down to semantics, to a question of language, where one word placed wrongly can make all the difference.

You use jazz as the music that frames the performance text, why?

Because the play is jazz. It has the same construction, a basic beat with the melody flying over it. The piece of music that we use is a piece of Dave Brubeck from the 50s, and it actually has three voices in it. There is a 'fugue' feel to it, with voices rising and falling, arriving for their solo and then falling back into the basic rhythm.

How did you prepare for the production?

I read the text and kept on reading it. I think that the structure of the text is fundamental. In rehearsal we spent a lot of time studying the form; every beat, every pause, every comma. The grammatical structure can tell you a lot.

How did you work with the actors?

We spent a lot of time reading and discussing the text. Everyone's ideas, not just mine. I think it works best if an actor is off the book before they start to act. I don't see much point in walking around trying to read from the text. It is a useful tool however, as the actors learn the lines very quickly. We also worked on making the physical characteristics of anti-psychotic

drugs performable – we wanted to avoid stereotypical representations of 'madness' and not be reliant on slavish realism.

Do you use improvisation in rehearsal?

I use it, but only in a structured and targeted way. For example, I asked the cast to prepare for the meeting that occurs between act 2 and act 3. We used the whole company, myself included, and we were the panel that Christopher comes and sits in front of. Bill Nighy (Robert) was able to use the evidence gathered from act 3 to articulate the nature of the exchange. It gave us a real sense of Christopher's perspective, a vulnerable, young black man in front of this symbol of institutionalism – the Panel.

How does the relationship between the playwright and the director function?

It should be cordial, warm and friendly – and this was. You must have mutual respect. You visit places that you would not normally visit with your colleagues and there is an intimacy between the playwright and director. Joe is a playwright who listens and he understands that we are here to serve the text and not the playwright. We have cut somewhere between 20 and 30 minutes of text during rehearsal and Joe has been entirely supportive of, and completely involved in, the process. I believe that when you go into rehearsal you have the play 'on leasehold', you don't own it but you must try and 'please' the play.

Did you work with Bill Dudley (designer)?

We worked in depth on the idea of institutions. We visited a 19th-century lecture theatre at Guy's Hospital and were struck by the intensity of focus that was created by the 'tiering' of the seats- hence our 'boxing ring' .

For discussion

1

SET

How does the set convey the notions of 'institution'?

The stage was configured to resemble a boxing ring, what implications does this have for the audience's reading of the performance text? Does this compare or contrast with Brecht's notion of the boxing ring as democratic space?

2

LIGHTING

Was the lighting naturalistic or heightened? Why do you think the lighting designer chose to use neon?

3

MUSIC

What is the role/function of music in a production?

What was its function in this production?

4

IDEOLOGY

How does this play deal with notions of post-colonialism?

Why are young black men more likely to be diagnosed with and institutionalised because of mental illness? You might discuss this in light of the recent McPherson report and its highlighting of institutionalised racism.

Practical exercises

1

Prepare an extended improvisation of the management hearing. Use evidence gathered from act three and act two. Experiment with notions of institutionalism in your staging. How can varying configurations of seating imply status/differing hierarchical discourses?

2

Choose one speech from each of the characters and read them aloud. Find a way to mark each incident of punctuation. You could use a stamp of your foot, a clap or finger click. Consider how recognising the punctuation changes your understanding or performance of the text.

3

Work in threes. Each of you should be a different character from the play. Extend the exercise above to include each of you moving between one of four chairs on each moment of punctuation. Can you choreograph this to a piece of contemporary Jazz?

Written work & research

1

What are the physical effects of the different medications available to patients with mental illness? (Haloperidol, Olanzapine, Seroquel for example.) You could find this information on the internet.

How do you make these physical characteristics into a performance text without recourse to 'mad' acting?

2

Collect articles from the press on illness for a period of one week. How many refer to physical illness and how many to mental illness?

Is there a difference between the images/language used for the different articles?

What conclusions can you draw from this?

Other related materials

Plays that deal with issues and notions of mental illness and institutions:

Equus by Peter Schaffer

The Physicists by Freidrich Durrenmatt

Marat/Sade by Peter Weiss

Play dealing with notions of Post-colonialism:

Cloud Nine by Caryl Churchill

Bill Nighy
photo Ivan Kyncl

