Welcome to the National Theatre’s background pack for *A Taste of Honey*

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National’s repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you’ve enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or 020 7452 3388.

Jenna Omeltschenko
Touring Partnerships Manager
September 2019

This background pack is published by and copyright The Royal National Theatre Board Reg. No. 1247285 Registered Charity No. 224223 Views expressed in this background pack are not necessarily those of the National Theatre

**Author**

Rehearsal diaries are by Lucy Wray with original content from the 2014 background pack by Ola Ince

**NT Learning**

National Theatre
South Bank
London SE1 9PX
T 020 7452 3382
F 020 7452 3380
E learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk

The rehearsal and production photographs in this background pack were taken by Marc Brenner

Cover image by Stuart Chorley

Further production details: nationaltheatre.org.uk
The National Theatre production of *A Taste Of Honey*

This production opened on Friday 20 September 2019 at The Lowry, Salford

**Characters**
- Helen **Jodie Prenger**
- Josephine, her daughter **Gemma Dobson**
- Peter, her friend **Tom Varey**
- Jimmie **DuRone Stokes**
- Geoffrey **Stuart Thompson**

**Understudies**
- Peter and Geoffrey **Liam Bessell**
- Josephine **Katy Clayton**
- Helen **Claire Eden**
- Jimmie (Tour) **Marcel White**
- Jimmie (West End) **Nathan Queeley-Dennis**

**Director** Bijan Sheibani
**Set and Costume Designer** Hildegard Bechtler
**Lighting Designer** Paul Anderson
**Music** Benjamin Kwasi Burrell
**Movement Director** Aline David
**Sound Designer** Ian Dickinson for Autograph
**Voice and Dialect** Joel Trill
**Resident Director** Lucy Wray

**Production Photographer** Marc Brenner

Bijan Sheibani originally directed a version of *A Taste of Honey* for the National Theatre in 2014, which was adapted into a touring production that opened at The Lowry in September 2019 before going on a UK tour and transferring to the Trafalgar Studios in December 2019.
Synopsis

Setting: Salford, 1958-9

Helen and her daughter Josephine (Jo) arrive at their new lodgings, wet, cold and exhausted on a bitter winter’s evening. The flat is unkempt, poorly furnished and freezing, which greatly disappoints Jo. Helen complains about being unwell and that Jo is not pandering to her every need: ‘Children owe their parents these little attentions.’

Helen asks Jo to help her find a glass – but finds one in her own handbag – and pours herself a drink. Exploring the flat, Jo realises she will continue to share a bed with her mother. Helen tells her, ‘Of course, you know I can’t bear to be parted from you’. She offers Jo some whisky to help warm her up; Jo doesn’t like the smell so Helen volunteers to ‘put it in a safe place’. Jo comments that her mother is ‘knocking it back worse than ever’. She goes to make coffee to warm them up and locates the kitchen, where there is an ancient gas stove which bangs as it is lit. Jo wants to know who else lives in their building. Helen thinks there are some young people – perhaps a potential boyfriend for Jo. Jo says she used to have a crush on one of Helen’s ‘fancy men’.

Jo can smell the nearby river and the slaughterhouse. She unpacks some bulbs she has brought from the park and finds a ‘cool, dark place’ for them to grow. Helen worries that they now live too far from Jo’s school, but Jo intends to leave school at Christmas so isn’t too concerned. She wants to earn money so she can leave Helen. Helen is reminded of her first job in a pub and sings a song that ‘used to bring the house down’. Helen says she doesn’t want to interfere in Jo’s life: ‘it takes me all of my time to look after myself.’ Jo doesn’t want to marry young as Helen did.

Jo goes to make the coffee and Helen unpacks her daughter’s artwork. She is impressed by her talent and offers to pay for formal training. Jo tells Helen: ‘I’ve had enough of school. Too many different schools and too many different places.’ Jo wants to wash before she goes to bed but has no idea where – her mother directs her to the communal bathroom.

Peter, one of Helen’s ‘fancy men’, arrives; he has come to reclaim Helen, having searched all over Salford for her, and is surprised to find that she has a teenage daughter. Jo is annoyed by his presence and realises he is the reason they have moved again, ‘So that’s what she was running away from’. Peter is disgusted by the location of Helen’s new home, ‘Tenements, cemetery, slaughterhouse... Nobody could live in a place like this’. Jo points out that 50,000 people already do. Helen plays hard to get with Peter: ‘The only consolation I can find in your immediate presence is your ultimate absence’. Her game results in a marriage proposal, which she says she ‘might accept’. Jo thinks he is already married and manages to get Helen to persuade Peter to leave.

The women get ready for bed, leaving their stuff half unpacked and Peter’s proposal hanging in the air.

A week later, Jo is walked home from school by her boyfriend Jimmie, a sailor. They shyly exchange words on the street. He kisses her, and she tells him she doesn’t care if anyone sees them. Jimmie proposes marriage and Jo accepts. He places an engagement ring on her finger and asks what her mother’s response to their impending marriage will be. Jo thinks she’ll probably laugh but reassures him that ‘whatever else she might be she isn’t prejudiced against colour’. They decide they should get married when Jimmie is next on leave, in six months’ time.

Jo says the engagement ring is too big and asks Jimmie to find some string so she can tie it around her neck. Looking for the string they find odd bits and bobs in Jimmie’s pocket, including a toy car, which Jo likes and wants to keep. They use Jo’s hair ribbon instead of string.

Jimmie talks playfully about wedding plans (‘I’m trapped in a barbaric cult... Matrimony’) and because Jimmie is spending the evening out drinking for one of his shipmates’ birthdays, they arrange to meet the following morning. Jo won’t bother going to school so they can spend the whole day together. Before she goes, Jo tells Jimmie she loves him, ‘Because you’re daft.’
Helen questions her daughter over her late return from school. Jo tells her mother that she was with a sailor who used to be a male nurse. Helen is interested: she wants to know if he can get her some free samples. Helen tries to help Jo find a film to watch at the cinema the following night but isn’t impressed by the choices ‘Desire Under the... oh! What a funny place to have desire!’ She comes across an advert featuring a voluptuous lady and speculates whether she could transform Jo in the same way: ‘I’d put you in films.’

Jo asks her mother what day she was born on. Helen doesn’t remember and doesn’t want to talk about Jo’s father or her ex-husband, who divorced her following the affair that conceived Jo. Helen tells Jo she is going to marry Peter. Jo is not pleased. She attacks her mother’s age and the age gap between her and Peter ‘you’re centuries older than him’, but Helen says there is only ten years.

Peter arrives bearing gifts for Jo (chocolates) and Helen (flowers). Jo mocks Peter’s choice of bride and goes out of her way to make him feel uncomfortable while Helen gets changed. Peter shows Jo pictures of their fancy new house. Jo wants to see all of the photographs in Peter’s wallet and finds pictures of women which she threatens to show to Helen. This fails so she asks about his eye patch; he lost his eye when he was a private in the army. Jo asks if he fancies her, but he doesn’t ‘go in for sweet young things.’ He offers her a cigarette, which she accepts. Helen sings off-stage.

Helen returns, looking glamorous. She makes Jo put out the cigarette and tells her to clear up her books. Jo reminds her mother she’s leaving school this week. Helen and Peter leave to go to dinner and suggest that they could have an early honeymoon, leaving Jo on her own in the flat for maybe a week or so, over Christmas.

Jimmie arrives moments later. He sees Jo has been crying and makes her a concoction of warm milk and medication to make her feel better. Jo enjoys being looked after but doesn’t like milk so refuses to drink it. They talk about Helen. Jo wonders if Jimmie finds her mother attractive and if he thinks she bears any resemblance to her. He teases her that Helen is attractive and that they are not all similar. Jimmie suggests Jo wear her engagement ring while her mother is out. She asks where he got it from and he admits it came from Woolworths. Jo invites Jimmie to stay with her for Christmas and he agrees, although she is convinced that once he goes away on service he will never come back. They spend the night together.

Time passes. Jo is unwell and appears to have caught Helen’s illness. Helen is excited getting ready for her wedding until she catches a glimpse of Jo’s engagement ring and is enraged. Helen discourages Jo from making a commitment like marriage at such a young age, and warns her about following in her footsteps: ‘Why don’t you learn from my mistakes? It takes half your life to learn from your own.’

Jo once more asks about her father. Helen describes her first sexual encounter as being short and unforgettable; she says that Jo’s father was ‘retarded’ which causes Jo to worry about her own mental health. Helen brushes aside the questions of concern and makes the final touches to her wedding outfit. She asks Jo for a kiss, which Jo avoids, and goes off to marry Peter. Jo is left alone.

INTERVAL
Synopsis (continued)

A couple of months later, a pregnant Jo returns home from the funfair with her friend Geoffrey. She invites him in but won’t let him turn on the light: ‘I like this romantic half-light, it just goes with this Manchester maisonette!’ Jo now lives alone, and has two jobs to pay her rent. She realises that Geoffrey has nowhere to stay because his landlady has thrown him out. Jo asks if he was caught with a woman or a man. She promises to let him stay with her if he reveals his sexual orientation.

Geoffrey is angered by this and tries to leave but Jo convinces him to stay. He finds her sketchbook and says the drawings are like Jo: ‘there’s no design, rhythm or purpose’. He doesn’t like them and thinks she should get proper training.

She tells him about her fling with Jimmie and her pregnancy, which he had guessed. Geoffrey works out that she’s due to give birth around September. He asks whether she has enough money for a baby. Things are already tight and Jo is planning to give up her jobs as she is embarrassed by people staring at her. Geoffrey thinks she should tell Helen, if only to get extra financial support. They have fun reciting childhood rhymes to each other. Jo particularly likes Geof’s ‘Pippin Hill’ poem and is charmed by the care that Geof shows her. Jo goes to bed singing ‘Nature Boy’. Geof, who is sleeping on the couch, wants to know more about Jimmie. Jo says she’s sick of love. Geoffrey tells her he will stay to help tidy up and cook. After they’ve said goodnight Jo shouts to Geoffrey that he is ‘just like a big sister’ to her.

A few months later Jo and Geoffrey are still living together in the flat. It’s summer; sweltering hot and Jo complains about the smell of the area: ‘That river, it’s the colour of lead. Look at that washing, it’s dirty, and look at those filthy children.’ Geoffrey is making clothes for the baby. The baby kicks Jo for the first time. She investigates what Geoffrey is making and wonders how he found out the baby’s measurements. She says she hates babies. Geoffrey reveals that the woman who lives downstairs is going to make a wicker basket for the baby. Annoyed at the thought of people nosing in her business Jo says she feels like throwing herself in the river.

Geoffrey gives Jo a book to read on babies and motherhood. She asks Geoffrey if he would like to be the father of her child. She asks him why he stays, and he says somebody’s got to look after her. He kisses her and asks her to marry him. Jo rejects him, ‘stop breathing all over me you sound like a horse! I’m not marrying anybody.’ She suggests Geoffrey moves out but he says he’d ‘sooner be dead’ than away from her. Jo is confused and goes to lie down.

Helen arrives – Geoffrey has told her of Jo’s pregnancy and asked her to help him get Jo out of the house. She rouses Jo, who is shocked to see her. Realising Geoffrey is the one who broke the news to Helen, Jo tells him off: ‘I’m not having anyone running my life for me.’ Helen is not the good influence Geoffrey was hoping for. ‘And what do you think I can do about it? In any case, bearing a child doesn’t place one under an obligation to it.’
Mother and daughter quickly begin to fight. Helen scolds Jo for her pregnancy, but is concerned that she may not be eating enough or attending the clinic. She tells Jo she would be better off working than living off Geoffrey. Jo says her mother should go ‘back to your fancy man or your husband, or whatever you like to call him.’ Helen is angry with Jo for falling pregnant – ‘You know what they’re calling you round here? A silly little whore.’ Jo pointedly mentions Helen’s neglectful parenting and threatens to jump out of the window. Geoffrey begs them to stop shouting, but Helen tells him they ‘enjoy it.’

Helen wants to give Jo money. She asks if she has been collecting her maternity benefit, but Jo isn’t entitled to it. Helen says she’s been worried about her and offers to send Jo some money every week.

Peter arrives, drunk and unpredictable. He has been waiting outside for Helen. He takes delight in needling Jo about her pregnancy – ‘Who’s got a bun in the oven? Who’s got a cake in the stove?’ - and in insulting Geoffrey, ‘Who’s the lily?’ He wants to know if Helen is coming to the pub with him, but she says they aren’t open yet. Noticing the money Helen has tried to give Jo, Peter accuses Helen of ‘giving away’ his money and takes it back. Geoffrey directs Peter to the bathroom, leaving Helen and Jo alone.

Helen wants Jo to live with her but Jo doesn’t want to and when Peter returns he tells them ‘I’m not having that bloody slut at our place.’ Peter and Helen leave.

Jo is now nine months pregnant. Geoffrey is cleaning the flat while Jo reads a book about pregnancy. Jo asks Geoffrey where he got the book from – he says it cost ‘fourpence off a book barrow.’ She asks if he is impressed by her dressmaking skills – she has made herself a house-coat, but he thinks it looks like ‘a badly tailored shroud.’ As well as cleaning, Geoffrey has been baking a cake.

Geoffrey finds Jo’s plant bulbs, which have died. Jo becomes morbid and wants to hold Geoffrey’s hand, but this reminds her how Helen would never hold her hand. Geoffrey warns Jo that she may end up like her mother. Geof carries on cleaning the flat and Jo asks him why he always wears black shirts, she thinks it makes him ‘like a spiv.’ She tells him what Helen said about her father but Geoffrey thinks Helen made it up – ‘Can you see Helen going out with a real loony?’

Jo wishes her mother was there, even though she knows they’d quarrel if she was. Geoffrey gives Jo a present of a life-sized doll so she can ‘practice a few holds’. The doll is white, which upsets Jo. She panics that she doesn’t want to give birth, that she doesn’t want to be a woman. Geof offers to go and find Jimmie but she doesn’t want any man. Jimmie was ‘only a dream’ she had, someone tender who looked after her while her mother left her alone ‘in some sordid digs’ over Christmas, as she did every year. Jo and Geof reflect on their ‘not marrying love’ relationship. Geof has decided to be the person who will love Jo while she looks for someone to love. She tells him he’d make a funny father and Geof walks away into the kitchen. They set the table for tea and when Geof asks what she might call the baby, Jo says Number One because ‘It’ll always be number one to itself.’

Helen arrives loaded with bags to move back in and look after Jo. She is appalled that Jo wants to give birth in the flat rather than at hospital and warns her ‘the first one can be a bit tricky.’ Helen is planning to sleep on the sofa and when Jo tells her the sofa is Geoffrey’s bed; he says he doesn’t mind moving out, which upsets Jo.

Helen wants to get rid of Geoffrey as quickly as possible and he leaves to go to the shop. Jo is angry that Helen has insulted Geof, which Helen denies. Helen shows Jo all the gifts she has brought for the baby and asks if Jo has contacted Jimmie. Jo says she can look after the baby on her own: ‘this is my flat now Helen’.

Helen finally admits that Peter has left her. She tells Jo to go to bed while she tidies up. Geoffrey returns with some shopping. Helen scorns his choice of groceries (‘Spaghetti! I don’t know how people can eat it’) and orders him to throw out the wicker basket Jo was planning on using as a cradle. As he leaves, Geoffrey asks Helen not to frighten Jo over childbirth. He wishes Jo luck on his way out.

Jo wakes up and asks Helen if there is a lot of pain during childbirth. Helen says it’s more hard work than painful. Jo wonders where Geoffrey is but is interrupted by her first contraction. Helen helps her through the pain and reminisces about her childhood. As Helen makes tea for them Jo reveals that her baby will be mixed race. Helen is shocked and decides she has to go out for a drink before she can deal with the situation. Left alone again, Jo recites ‘Pippin Hill’ for herself and the baby inside her.
A Taste of Honey was written by Shelagh Delaney in 1958 when she was 19. She sent it to Joan Littlewood in London who produced it that year at Theatre Royal Stratford East and in the West End in 1959. The play is set in Salford, where Shelagh is from, and tells the story of 17-year-old Jo, who lives a precarious life with her mother Helen. The play begins with Helen and Jo arriving at a cheap, damp bedsit.

At 10am on Monday we have a meet and greet with all the team. Director Bijan Sheibani speaks about how pleased he is to be invited back with this show – and how when he and designer Hildegard [Bechtler] revisited the play, they felt the themes spoke very differently than they did five years ago, leading to a radical reconsideration of the concept and design of the 2014 production. With the new cast on board, we’re all really excited for this incarnation of the show. Hildegard talks us through the model box: the general feeling was that the previous set didn’t feel gritty enough. For the new version, everything is a bit rougher, run down, abandoned.

The set for the Lyttelton, where Bijan’s previous production of A Taste of Honey was staged, was a realistic house with complex scenery, painted perspective, a revolve to show exterior and interior scenes, and costumes in quite a glamorous 1950s style. In this production the play is still set in 1958 but the period style will not be nostalgic of a bygone era but one that feels contemporary and relevant. It’s a slightly abstracted space, representing interior and exterior with two ‘pillars’ that rotate, a mirror ball, metal floor and rusty girders visible in the roof. Helen and Jo are unprotected – it’s not homely or safe, there are people coming and going, with understudies and musicians visible at times, representing the ‘community’ – people in doorways, rough sleeping, ‘under the arches’ where Geof will be if he can’t stay with Jo. There is a BP screen across the back, which can go to black/colour/transparent and the footprint easily expands and contracts for touring. The sense is of something much more chaotic, fluid, and flexible. Pre-show the space will be quite clear, with the musicians jamming and Jodie singing in a way that feels improvised. In the rehearsal room we have mark ups for Richmond Theatre (the smallest space) and The Lowry (one of the biggest).

Props supervisor Chris Lake has brought all the props from the 2014 production into the rehearsal room so we’ve set up a sort of ‘playground’ for the actors to start building the world.

We sit down to a read through, which runs at 45 mins each half and the ease the actors have with the script means that after lunch instead of spending the afternoon working round a table we are immediately up on our feet with Movement Director Aline David, putting together the world of the play and experimenting with the scene changes for act one. The SM team have put up Hildegard’s reference images in the rehearsal room so the company can get a sense of the style we are looking to create. Amy Winehouse is a useful reference for the production in that stylistically she feels at home in both the 1950s and now.

On Tuesday we’re into blocking act one with Gemma [Dobson, playing Jo] and Jodie [Prenger, playing Helen] and then on Wednesday morning Gemma and Durone [Stokes, playing Jimmie] start work on Jimmie and Jo’s first scene while Jodie works with the musicians in the separate space we have for this week. Just before lunch we all go in to listen to what they’ve made and it’s sounding brilliant. Composer
Ben [Kwasi Burrell] has put together a version of ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ for Jodie to sing in the pre-show, which evolves from the musicians picking up their instruments like found objects, organically layering into fully accompanied song. For the moment in act one where Helen performs a number she used to sing in the pub (‘I’d bring the house down with this one’) we’re using ‘Ain’t We Got Fun’, which again involves the musicians gradually joining to create an evocative reminiscing moment.

Jodie’s extensive musical knowledge solves a mystery for us in the script, when the sight of an aspidistra plant causes Helen to exclaim that it puts her in mind of her first job ‘in a tatty little pub down Whit Lane’. Jodie knows the Gracie Fields song ‘The Biggest Aspidistra in the World’ which was a hit in the 40s and through that link we discover that the aspidistra was a popular house plant in Victorian times, later becoming mocked in the music halls as synonymous with the middle classes, a 1950s in-joke that would have been enjoyed by a contemporary audience but had maybe lost meaning for us today. We experiment with Jodie reciting the comic first verse of ‘The Biggest Aspidistra’, which works well to elucidate the link, and to bring the pianist in to bridge the gap to the next song.

On Thursday we work with Jodie and Gemma on the end of act one and have the first of our weekly production meetings. Hildegard and Laura [Hunt, costume supervisor] have brought costume ideas in and meet with the cast individually for fittings. There is very little time when Gemma isn’t on stage but while she is away from the rehearsal room, having her costume fitted, we work on the relationship between Peter and Helen, and the first scene they have together. In the afternoon we progress onto act two.

Towards the end of the interval the musicians will be playing (without Jodie singing) probably with the understudies setting up the space in the same way they do at the opening, and with Gemma and Stuart [Thompson] as Jo and Geoff having fun at the fair. There’s a good bit of circus-inspired music in the Peggy Lee song ‘Is That All There Is?’ which will be a reference for the music.

On Friday morning we continue working with Gemma and Stuart on act two and there is a music call with Durone. Ben has composed a great version of ‘My Love is like a Red, Red Rose’ that Jimmie will sing before his first entrance act one scene two. Friday afternoon sees Jodie joining Gemma and Stuart to work on Helen’s entrance into act two scene two. There is a chase/fight sequence here between Helen and Jo which we mark but will look at again with Aline.

To end a fun and productive first week I spend Saturday working with the understudies. We manage to run through the blocking for all the scenes we’ve looked at this week and it’s great to see them inhabit the space and start to get to grips with all the props and set. Next week we’re hoping to block the rest of act two by end of Tuesday so we can go back and start adding more detail and complexity. We have some marketing interviews on Tuesday to film and the musicians will be in the room with us for the first time.
We begin the second week picking up where we left off, with blocking from Peter’s entrance in act two, scene one. Peter is ‘drunk’ and ‘unpleasant’: we’re beginning to witness the descent of Helen and Peter’s relationship, Peter’s alcoholism, and homophobia towards Geof. Continuing into act two, scene two, Jo is nine-months pregnant and we’re exploring the relationship between Jo and Geof a bit more – what does Geof want to happen between them? Will Jo ever give him what he’s looking for? It seems like they have been ‘playing house’ together but that there is a time limit on their set-up. Helen’s entrance after Peter has run off with someone else shows she’s immediately planning on moving in and chucking Geof out – but perhaps Geof is ready to leave? Jo is stuck in the middle of Geof and Helen; having just started to feel powerful and a bit more stable with Geof, she is now thrown back into chaos and she is terrified of giving birth.

On Tuesday and Thursday Ben and the band join our rehearsals. It’s very cool to have the instruments in the room for the first time – a real piano and drum kit replace the flight cases and stools we have been using to mark their positions. We are starting to see how the characters will interact with the musicians and we work on transitions between scenes, refining music and movement together.

We’ve been experimenting with the atmosphere and context of the pre-show world and honing moment the final pre-show song leads into the first scene. There’s a balance between having something present and lively, with the actors and musicians on stage while the audience are coming in and avoiding it becoming a performance moment in itself that the audience pays full attention to. We think that the moment Jodie starts singing the audience will want to watch, which should give the cue that the play is starting so we are may just have one song in the pre-show, ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’. Ben has put together a slightly more up-tempo version of the song which is working really well – smoky and sexy but also energised. There is also a song at Jimmie’s entrance and exit for his first scene with Jo so we decide which parts of his song begin and end the scene. Durone and Jodie both have beautiful voices and the songs stick in everyone’s heads – at any quiet moment you can hear someone humming or singing ‘My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose’ or ‘Ain’t We Got Fun’. We look briefly at the interval into act two scene change, but we will come back to that again next week.

During the prep for the show I went to the British Library and read the original manuscripts for A Taste of Honey. The manuscripts are fascinating because they clearly show the evolution of the play from Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Royal Stratford East into the West End. You can read online the copy of the script from the Joan Littlewood archive and in the Manuscripts Reading Room of the British Library they have the copies submitted to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office (which used to look after censorship in theatre) for approval in 1958 and 1959 (the producing team are pleased to note that this tour marks 60 years since the West End production). We have printed copies of both these versions, which arrive in the rehearsal room this week, and the actors are really excited to refer to them. If we get the chance, they’d love to read the 1958 version aloud together. There are blue pencil marks and crosses from the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, the scope of which shocks us a bit. Things like the word ‘effeminate’ to describe Geof are crossed out (linked to the fact that it was illegal to represent homosexuality on stage) and the phrase ‘bit of crumpet’ is questioned (too lewd?) but the racist language used to describe Jimmie and the baby are unchallenged. With a few cuts and edits, the play was granted a licence. Aside from the censorship, the manuscripts also offer interesting clues as to the evolution of the structure of the play. The ending was clearly tough to decide on as there are several different versions, including one where Geof speaks the final monologue denouncing racism – unfortunately by employing the language he calls offensive. The decision to end the play with Jo and the baby feels like the right one to us as A Taste of Honey is her story.
We have a group vocal session this week with the brilliant Joel Trill who takes the company through some exercises to strengthen their voices and make sure they avoid vocal strain and injury over the course of the tour. Joel will also be conducting individual sessions with the actors. We have a conversation with Durone about Jimmie’s accent and whether we want to stick with Durone’s natural south-east London accent or go with something a bit closer to that of 1950s east London. Joel is going to send Bijan some examples of both styles of accents and we’ll see how comfortable they feel with the text and the production. Given that we don’t want the production to feel like a period piece it may be that Durone uses his own accent.

On Wednesday Aline works her movement magic with Durone and Gemma on the second Jo and Jimmie scene, which is a bit more physical and intimate. At the end of the scene they have sex for the first time so it’s fun to plot in the tension and anticipation between them, and to give the actors a chance to become more comfortable working physically together. In the afternoon we carry on with the ending, where Helen gets rid of Geof (possibly for good – we’re split in the rehearsal room as to whether Geof and Jo will see each other again after this moment) and staying with Jo while she has her first contraction. The revelation from Jo that her baby will be black sends Helen into a spin and she leaves the flat, desperate to get a drink. Jo is understandably panicked as to whether she will come back given that she’s going into labour but we want to make it clear that Helen does intend to return. Helen’s line ‘I ask you, what would you do?’ can be played as a direct question to the audience, as it was in the 2014 production but we try it to Jo, which adds something interesting.

By Thursday afternoon we reach the end of the play with preliminary blocking and circle back to the start. All the work we’ve done means that we now know the characters better and through Friday and Saturday we’re able to start re-examining and fine-tuning the scenes, adding detail in layers so we will have something with depth and complexity built up over time. Actor Kayla Meikle, who recently worked with Bijan on Dance Nation sits in on the rehearsal for an hour and it’s great to have the reaction of someone who is completely new to the production in the room – she laughs a lot and I realise I have become accustomed to how funny Gemma and Jodie are. It’s exciting to think about how an audience might react.

A swing is fitted in the rehearsal room on Friday, which is officially declared the most fun thing in a rehearsal room ever. This week’s gone very fast but we’re definitely stepping up a gear and the play is progressing.
Bank Holiday Monday is a day off for us this week so we hit the ground running on Tuesday working with Durone and Gemma on the swing for the first time, which opens up some fun options for blocking. One of the things that prompts Jimmie’s proposal is the fact that Jo’s the first girl he’s met ‘who really didn’t care’ at a time when interracial couples faced prejudice and censure. On Tuesday morning we also look at act two scene one, Jo and Geof’s first scene together. Geof has walked Jo home from the fairground, which Jo shrewdly guesses is because he’s been kicked out of his lodging and has nowhere else to go, ‘didn’t fancy sleeping under the arches did you?’, she asks. Jo tries to bribe him to stay with her, urging him to tell her ‘what’ he does and ‘why’ but he would rather leave than indulge in ‘sensational confessions’. Shelagh Delaney believed that people had the right to privacy in their relationships and Jo’s fascination with ‘people like’ Geof is condemned, so that he is allowed to exist without being tormented and othered.

In the afternoon we work on the final scene of act one when Helen is getting ready to marry Peter who ‘spends his money like water’. Helen has bought new clothes including a fur which she loves – her enthusiasm is brilliantly undercut with Jo’s sour response: ‘I bet somebody’s missing their cat’. This is the scene Helen discovers that Jo is engaged and there is a fight over the ring on a ribbon around Jo’s neck. Stage management have looked into how to safely pull the ribbon off Gemma’s neck, including referring back to the experiments that were done for the 2014 production and we decide to try a quick-release knot that DSM Tan [Tanith MacKenzie] expertly ties.

The musicians are with us on Wednesday afternoon so we look at the music Ben has written for the end of the interval into the opening of act two. We see Jo and Geof buy a balloon at the fairground and win a teddy bear in a throwing game. The musicians are able to riff off what we are doing helping us to build a snappy, upbeat reset that will welcome the audience back into the show.

On Thursday we have a rehearsal room event in the afternoon, organised by the press and marketing team, where we will show a section of the pre-show and the first ten minutes of the play to local press from tour venues. Bijan and Hildegard introduce some of the concept and design ideas and, after the showing, the journalists have the opportunity to ask the cast questions. When asked if she is basing the character of Helen on anyone specific, Jodie tells us about her nan who lived in Manchester in the 1950s, who she kept in mind when preparing for the role. The cast are all really looking forward to visiting all the venues on tour, particularly bringing it back to Salford, where an annual Shelagh Delaney day is celebrated on 25 November – Delaney’s birthday. It’s great to watch the opening of the play again; we learn a lot from running this small section and discover some things about the way that the musicians and characters interact during scenes.

After the event, we’re back to working with Gemma and Stuart on what we call the ‘hot sewing scene’, the second section of act two scene one. Geof has been living with Jo for a couple of months, and he is busy making clothes for the baby while Jo is prowling about in the heat and experiences the baby kicking for the first time. We see a brief moment of awe before she pushes away the sentiment with ‘shows it’s alive anyway’. Geof tries to kiss Jo in this scene and we work with movement director Aline on the physical effort it takes for him to attempt to force a change in his sexual orientation. Geof asks Jo to marry him but she turns him down – she rightly says ‘it’s not marrying love’ between them but it leaves Geof ashamed and regretful. He’s changed something between them and Jo wonders if it might be better if he left. This scene gets even tougher for Jo when her mother, Helen, returns followed by Peter who is drunk and abusive. We’ve already plotted the ‘chase’ sequence between mother and daughter which we spend time revising and refining.

Something I love about this play is the way that Shelagh Delaney challenges gender stereotypes. Jo and Geof struggle with the limitations imposed on them by gender – neither feels fulfilled by or comfortable with what is expected of them and in act two scene two we see very clearly Jo’s rejection of oncoming motherhood. ‘I don’t want to be a woman!’ she shouts at Geof, who loves babies and would love to be the father of her baby. They both deviate from the feminine and masculine ideals of the era, which they both celebrate and suffer for.
In A Taste of Honey, Shelagh Delaney shows there is no one way to be a woman or a man, something that speaks directly to the conversations still being had around gender, equality and the freedom not to be defined by our biology. Helen is clearly not fulfilled by motherhood or marriage and she encourages Jo not to get trapped when she is young – ‘Marriage can be hell for a kid’. This leads us to consider all the women that married and became mothers before there was much choice, and the impact that has across the generations. Shelagh never married and was a single mother, which in many ways helped her maintain her independence: she was not financially dependent on a man and did not have to dedicate her time and energy to looking after a husband. At a time when women’s education, opportunities and desires were often secondary to men’s she found a way of asserting her own individuality and living her life without compromising her own goals and dreams. Jo repeatedly expresses ambivalence about Jimmie coming back and believes staunchly that she will be OK on her own, ‘I’m everything to myself’.

We go back to look at the Jimmy and Jo section of act one, scene two where Jo is left alone in the flat after Helen has gone to spend Christmas with Peter. Jimmie gently explores Jo’s circumstances, asking about her mother and the ‘Pirate King’ (Peter) and caring for Jo in a tender way that she doesn’t get from Helen. Jo wants to be loved and doesn’t care if Jimmie comes back or not, despite his insistence that he will, she just wants him to stay over Christmas, ‘It’s enough’.

On Saturday we stagger through the entire show for the first time, piecing together the scenes and scene changes that we have worked on separately, identifying where the gaps are and making a note of the parts we want to explore further or change. It feels really good to get everything up and in the right order – there is still a lot of work to do but we’re all really positive going into our final week of rehearsals in London.
Rehearsal diaries - week four

Full of new ideas from last week’s sharing, we start this week by looking at the opening of the play again. We experiment with Jodie singing ‘The Biggest Aspidistra in the World’ and ‘Ain’t We Got Fun’ a capella, so that the moment seems more like a memory inside her head than being performed out to the audience with the band. Currently it’s one of the only times where the band is present during a scene and it feels odd to break the visual language we’ve set up. We consider leaving out the aspidistra part of the song and going straight into ‘Ain’t We Got Fun’, which feels more focused.

There are some other isolated moments that need developing physically, including part of the swing scene between Jo and Jimmie, some of the flirting between Peter and Helen, and the fight between Helen and Jo over the ring. It’s difficult to make the ribbon ‘break’ from around Jo’s neck in a way that is both safe for the actor and truthful for the audience. The tie we are using comes undone too easily so the timing cannot be guaranteed while the actors move freely in the rest of the scene. In the 2014 production the actors ended up cheating it by slipping it over Jo’s head and this is something we will try as it is easily and safely controlled by the actors but can be done in a way that looks like a real struggle between them.

More temporary pieces of set have been constructed in the rehearsal room including the curtain that covers the top stage-right corner where the bedroom is, and the washing line. We all immediately start playing with ideas that the physical presence of these things prompt. Their presence is also useful to start working with the real distances between objects and furniture and we start refining the timing of the ensemble work on scene changes, which are becoming ever more tightly choreographed. We’ve agreed most of the props now so the actors are getting used to working with the real things on stage. The quicker they can get used to working with the actual props, the more natural the action of incorporating them will be. Their familiarity makes it easier for the actors to focus on what they’re doing rather than thinking about what they’re holding or moving.

We are also starting to think about where the ensemble will be during the scenes. Do we place chairs for them at the sides of the stage? When do we want them to be visible? When should they be hidden? We speak to Lighting Designer Paul [Anderson] about how they could be lit at the periphery – due to the openness of the set design, the lighting was always going to play a big role in atmosphere and delineating spaces. From trying out various things over the last few weeks, we’ve decided that it’s better when the ensemble are not individual characters but share a mood or attitude. Their character neutrality helps them feel ambiguous and intriguing in a way that invites the audience to view and interpret them in lots of different ways. At times they appear threatening; at times they play with the atmosphere of the scene or music, at other times they go against it.
Work on the first scene with Jodie and Gemma continues with the dynamic between Helen and Jo being interrupted by Peter’s entrance. With the band in the afternoon Aline and Ben run scene changes. They focus on the change from the pre-show to scene one, which sets up the entire show.

On Wednesday we continue choreographing scene changes with Aline. There is a lot of prop and furniture moving to coordinate logistically and we’re continuously refining the look, feel and timing, making sure we’re telling a clear story with the characters involved. We find a nice moment of lift for Durone jumping up onto a stool during the second part of his song – he’s said goodnight to Jo and is feeling young and excited and in love. Ben teaches the ensemble backing vocals, which adds fullness to the sound.

Listening to the song ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ which Jodie is singing for the pre-show into act one we feel that some of the lyrics aren’t quite right – there are some outdated ideas about pleasing your man, linking obligations of sex with the commitment a woman can expect from a man. We start playing around with how we can nudge the lyrics into a tone we’re more interested in sharing and, on Bijan’s instructions to ‘make it a bit more Amy Winehouse’, I have a go at rewriting. Safe to say if I could write songs like Amy Winehouse I’d be doing that for a living, but I focus on keeping the protagonist’s experience front and centre, what our expectations are for ‘good’ men and giving harder edges to some of the softer language. We arrive at something we’re happy with, and when I present it to Jodie she makes a final tweak to one line that’s even better.

On Wednesday evening I run a call with Gemma and Durone to look at the Jo and Jimmie scenes, giving us an opportunity to go into more depth on their characters and circumstances. On Thursday we run the entire show for the first time, with an audience in the rehearsal room including Rufus Norris [Director of the National Theatre] and NTP [National Theatre Productions] staff. Everyone is nervous but the adrenaline helps and it’s really useful for us to see where we’re at. We have so many ideas afterwards and seeing the run with musicians shows us that there are more places for music and songs than we anticipated. We start experimenting with underscoring the scenes – something we workshopped over the summer with Jodie, Gemma and Ben but hadn’t yet revisited in rehearsal.

We decide to add more than is needed at first, so that we can identify where to strip stuff back rather than gradually adding music. We go through the script and identify moments where the musicians can support and work with the tension and tone of the scenes. Everything is being worked out in relation to Jo and her emotions – for example, we’re starting to find an insistent percussive sound that charts Jo’s fears about Peter and what will happen if her mother leaves her again. The musicians and actors work really fast over the next couple of days to learn new accompaniments and songs, and we introduce more points where the ensemble sing.

We have another idea for the opening of act two: Geof is introduced in a parallel way to Helen and Jo at the top of the play. Like Helen and Jo, he is someone who is living precariously – he has been kicked out of his lodging – and he is always on the move. We give Stuart a song to sing, echoing Jodie at the opening of act one, while the ensemble load him up with his belongings. Again, we make subtle adjustments to the attitude of the ensemble – some of them make eye contact with him or help him, others don’t.

We revise and develop some of the storytelling we’re doing within scene changes and we decided to bring back Jimmie in act two. Jo often refers to Jimmie as ‘a dream’ and although she isn’t necessarily longing for him to return she is thinking about him – it is therefore appropriate that he ‘haunts’ her a little throughout her pregnancy.

These big scene changes that require a lot of people and a lot of moving of furniture or props need to be sorted out in the rehearsal room because we don’t want to hold up other departments during technical rehearsals in the theatre.

Over the next couple of weeks, during ‘tech’ and previews, we’ll be working on scenes every day and the actors will get a more complete sense of the play when they start to run it more often. We’re really proud of all the hard work everyone has done so far and we are looking forward to getting up to Salford, where the first leg of the tour begins.
We get into The Lowry in Salford this week to begin technical rehearsals for the show. With the set now in place – including the pillars that we haven’t yet worked with and the actual swing – we need to adapt some of the blocking, for example when Geof backs Jo into the stage left pillar to kiss her. We learn how to move the piano and drums on their trucks, tweaking the choreography for the specifics of the space. We’ll do this every Tuesday when we arrive at each venue on tour because the dimensions of the stage and position of exits vary slightly, and some of the stages are raked so we’ll need to factor in putting brakes on the furniture and pillars.

For pre-show as the audience enter, the musicians are grouped centre-stage with Jodie sitting on a bar stool at the piano. We prolong the time they spend in this configuration to establish their presence, delaying the point in the opening song when they move. We want them to have their own space on stage, lighting them properly so it doesn’t feel like we’re hiding them or pretending they’re invisible. In the band’s second positions, where they are for the rest of the show, we realise that the drums work best turned upstage so that we see them clearly but don’t get a distracting glint off them from the lights. The double bass player has their own clear space upstage centre, in between the wardrobe and mirror with a bar stool to sit on when not playing. Our draughtsman Tim has checked sightlines so we know the angle that works best for the piano downstage right. The ‘piano’ is a keyboard inside a piano shell, which we don’t want to disguise so we cover the back in a translucent black fabric that won’t block sound and through which you can see the keyboard player’s hands and legs.

We make lots of discoveries with lighting and underscore during the week. Ben is continuously writing things for the musicians and we’re refining the underscore as we try it out. Where the underscore plays with the mood and emotions of the characters, Ian [Dickinson, sound designer] has also added the sound design to enhance the sense of place – the tugboat, the children playing on the croft, the sound of gulls at the docks. In our more abstract staging the lighting works better when it marries with the real world rather than the emotional world of the play, so the primary light sources are clearly identifiable things: the lamp, the overhead bulb, the large window stage left, street light outdoors. We experiment with going quite dark in places, then push it the opposite way lighting the whole stage in a stark way, and tweak both ideas to land on something we’re really happy with.

There’s a balance between creating the atmosphere we want over the course of the show and making visible the mechanics of what the ensemble and set are doing. Defining the mood of the ensemble for scene changes helps communicate to Paul [Anderson, lighting designer] where to take the lighting in these moments. There’s a film noir tone to the opening with people walking through the rainy streets – later on people are clocking off work, journeying home or going out for the evening. Friends help Geof spring clean the flat and prepare for the arrival of the new baby, in the same way that the ensemble helped Helen prepare for her wedding in Act 1. We add a lot of colour and a mirror ball to the fairground, a bright injection of fun for Jo and Geof (and for the audience after the interval) which sets it apart from the more neutral, realistic palette of the scenes in the flat and outdoors.
The Wardrobe department work hard over the week adjusting costumes as we make final decisions about what everyone will wear, and helping the actors to become familiar with their quick changes. Gemma especially has very short gaps when she needs to change costume and we figure out how to make these easier, for example taking off her tie and cardigan in the scene when she comes home from school and using just two sizes of pregnancy bump rather than three. Because we’ve been using the props in rehearsal the actors are comfortable using them. The ‘business’ on stage becomes second nature so they can concentrate on bedding in the scenes and finding even more complexity and nuance.

The final ingredient comes with the audience, who laugh in lots of places we weren’t expecting and feed the actors with their energy. We push the pace up a gear and over the course of previews the show loses a total of 15 minutes from the running time just from shortening pauses, refining the rhythm of scenes and scene changes, and from the actors picking up cues quicker. The faster pace suits the text – these characters are witty, think quickly, respond immediately and say what they’re thinking – and the jokes land even better. It’s been a full-on and intense couple of weeks but seeing everything come together is incredibly satisfying for the whole team and we continue to tweak things right up until press night.

We run the first of our workshops with school groups who see the show – here in Manchester students know the play well and they are really engaged with offering suggestions on how they could approach staging the play themselves and analysing the choices that we’ve made for this production. The company is looking forward to taking the show around the country over the next couple of months but it’s really special to be opening this play in Shelagh’s home town (one night we even get a laugh of recognition when ‘Whit Lane’ is mentioned!) and seeing how it clearly still resonates with audiences.
A Taste of Honey timeline

1914 World War One breaks out.

1918 Women over the age of 30 are given the right to vote. November: World War One ends. Helen is born.

1928 Peter is born. Women in Britain given equal voting rights to men.

1932 Helen meets Jo's father. Jo is conceived. Jo is born.

1935 Geoffrey is born.

1936 Jimmie is born. Helen marries her first husband.

1938 Helen meets Jo's father. Jo is conceived. Jo is born.

1939 World War Two breaks out.

1942 Helen divorces her first husband.

1945 World War Two ends

1946 The National Insurance Act and NHS are created.

1948 The Empire Windrush arrives at Tilbury carrying 492 passengers from Jamaica. The National Assistance Act and the Children Act are created. There is a shortage of suitable housing due to the devastation of World War Two.

1952 The government begins a homosexual witch hunt. The police raid suspects' homes and send undercover officers to act as 'agents provocateurs' to pose as gay men soliciting in public places. Prosecuted men are imprisoned or given therapy.

1953 Queen Elizabeth II's coronation.

1954 Britain's food is no longer rationed.

1958 February: Seven Manchester United players are killed in a plane crash.

1959 June: Geoffrey moves into Jo's lodgings. Jo is six months pregnant.

Summer: Notting Hill race riots. Teddy Boys attack the houses of West Indian residents.

10 December: Jo and Helen move into their new lodgings in Salford. Peter proposes to Helen.

1959 July: Helen visits Jo for the first time in seven months.

15 December: Jo meets Jimmie after school. Helen accepts Peter's proposal. Jo and Jimmie spend the night together.

20 December: Jo leaves school and gets a job in a bar. Jimmie and Jo spend Christmas together while Helen and Peter are on an early honeymoon in Blackpool.

29 December: Helen marries Peter.
Character Profiles

JOSEPHINE (JO)
Jo is a 15-year-old free-spirited girl. She has grown up under the ‘supervision’ of her single mother Helen, who has encouraged her to be feisty, impulsive and outspoken. Their relationship is complex and sometimes difficult but they love each other deeply.

Jo has spent most of her childhood flitting between different neighbourhoods, which has disrupted her education. In spite of this Jo is very intelligent and is full of potential both academically and artistically. There are several moments within the play where Jo demonstrates her perceptiveness, wit and artistic tendencies.

Jo is keen to be self reliant and exercises independence whenever she can. This is partly down to her contemporary views but also because she does not like to rely on people in case they let her down as they have done in the past.

Throughout the course of the play Jo is looking for love: she seeks motherly love from Helen; finds love momentarily in Jimmie, but he leaves her; she finds a sexless love in Geoffrey, but that too is temporary.

HELEN
Helen is Jo’s 40-year-old mother. She is attractive, witty and intelligent, and lives each day as it comes.

Helen has an unconventional relationship with her daughter. Jo calls her by her first name and complains about her irresponsible behaviour. Helen constantly reminds Jo that she has never claimed to be a good mother, but is determined to provide Jo with all that she needs, though she doesn’t always succeed. Helen doesn’t give Jo the attention and stability she needs: she is constantly rehousing Jo and leaving her alone for long periods of time. Helen loves Jo and wants the best for her even if she doesn’t always know how to make that happen.

Helen depends heavily on alcohol and men to survive. Alcohol helps her cope with her day-to-day trials and men provide for her financially. Helen uses her sexuality and beauty to survive, but struggles to do this as her biological clock ticks away.

Helen had an affair with an Irishman while married to her first husband, which resulted in Jo’s birth. Helen’s husband divorced her, leaving her to bring up Jo alone.

Towards the end of the play Helen tells Jo that she, too, experienced neglect as a child.
Character Profiles

JIMMIE
Jimmie is Jo’s boyfriend. He is 22-years-old and a sailor. Jimmie and Jo enjoy each other’s company and quickly form a relationship that is tender and refreshing, in spite of society’s racial prejudice. Jimmie proposes to Jo and is accepted without hesitation. Jo is in awe of Jimmie’s beauty, good humour and honesty. Jimmie wants to take care of Jo and ensure that she is happy: when she is ill he attempts to nurse her better; when she’s down he tries to lift her spirits. The couple spend a few days together before Jimmie leaves to complete his national service. Jimmie promises to return to Jo after six months but doesn’t stay true to his word; he leaves her and their baby.

GEOFFREY
Geoffrey is a young art student. He is Jo’s only friend and the only person that supports her throughout her pregnancy. Gentle, kind, patient and tolerant, he is able to rise above discrimination. When Jo experiences mood swings Geoffrey is able to control and calm her. He is a positive presence in Jo’s life, providing structure and stability. In return, Jo gives him a purpose. Geoffrey struggles with confidence and isn’t always able to assert his beliefs and concerns, so is easily overlooked by others.

PETER
Peter becomes Helen’s husband, although he begins the play as one of her male friends. Peter is ten years younger than Helen and a wealthy car salesman who can afford to live lavishly. He owns a car, smokes Cuban cigars, buys Helen and Jo gifts, takes Helen out to dinner and for long weekends away and is able to buy a large house. Peter has very clear ideas about class and social hierarchy, which in the latter half of the play reveal him to be an aggressive and ill-mannered man. Peter at his best is confident, fun and smooth; at his worst is an intimidating drunk.

Durone Stokes (Jimmie) Tom Varey (Peter) and Stuart Thompson (Geoffrey)
Production photos Marc Brenner
Lone Motherhood

To be a single mother in 1950s Britain was considered to be a disgrace. Single mothers were automatically second-class citizens and were often ostracised from their family and community. They were seen as denoting the state of the nation, generating ‘broken homes’ and ‘problem families’. Many women became single mothers due to divorce, rape, unmarried and unprotected sex:

“...I didn’t know the facts of life, you see... I thought that a kiss was what you called having babies.”
(Lone Motherhood in England, 1945-1990: Economy, Agency and Identity. p 86)

Single mothers with mixed-race children were seen as abnormal, undesirable and inevitably doomed. It was assumed that relationships between white women and black men were deviant and socially dangerous. These women were ‘morally loose or feckless women, who wilfully transgressed important social racialized boundaries.’ (Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now. p 9)

Abortion was illegal and back-street abortions came with a high risk of physical injury and even death.

Single mothers were supervised by Moral Welfare Officers and encouraged to give birth in Mother and Baby Homes, which were often Church-funded organisations. The homes were usually run by strict nuns whose mission it was to rehabilitate women back into society via repentance and hard work. Many women likened the homes to workhouses. The idea was to give birth, allow the baby to be adopted and then return to normal life as a new woman. The Mother and Baby Homes would receive donations from adoptive parents, thus funding the Church.

The minority of women who didn’t give their children up for adoption were faced with abuse from their communities, especially if they were the mother of mixed-race children.

“As soon as I came here, the people next door saw I’d got coloured children and they put a fence up, after that they were alright and some other neighbour came on and said that at first when they saw the coloured children, they thought they’d get some right dirty people in this house...

If you’ve got coloured children, they’ll class you as if you were a prostitute. In shops sometimes, when you go in and you’ll see the salesgirls all dolled up, well, they look at you as if you were going to pinch summat, and I don’t like them to do that because I’ve been as good as them, and then on the bus sometimes, you get these old women looking at you from head to foot, but they stop looking when I start looking back at them, and then one woman was walking past me on the bus, and I heard her say ‘Disgusting’.” Mrs Jagger (Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now. p 9)

Support for single mothers included:
• National Insurance
• Mothers with more than one child were eligible for Family Allowance
• Women employed for longer than 70 days were eligible for Maternity Benefits
• Council housing provided single mothers with secure and equipped housing, if they could acquire it:

“...It was a luxurious home really. It was a four bedroom council house with a study and central heating.”
Judy Sleet (Lone Motherhood in England, 1945-1990: Economy, Agency and Identity. p 131)
Single mothers, pregnant out of wedlock, were unlikely to receive council housing: they were deemed undeserving, as the pregnancy was considered a choice, unlike being widowed. Furthermore, housing a single mother with one child would result in ‘underoccupation’, which was a waste of resources.

• National Assistance
The 1948 National Assistance Act granted unmarried women the same rights as widows to ensure that they could bring up their children. But the stigma was so great that many women were too ashamed to claim and the women who did found the financial support was so minute that it was almost impossible to make the money stretch. Most women relied on help from their family to survive.

The Affiliation Order and the Bastard Law were part of the National Assistance Act, both were put in place to force fathers to take financial responsibility for their illegitimate children. The pursuit of fathers for maintenance payments was often ineffective.

Officials at the National Assistance Board often discriminated against single mothers with mixed-race children, as the officers who assessed people’s needs had considerable discretionary powers and harsh decisions were said to be common.

Sources used:

Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now by Chamion Caballero and Rosalind Edwards.

Article by Ola Ince
### Pre-Performance Lesson Plan

Ideally for a double lesson or pick activities

Aims and objectives:
- To introduce and explore the opening of the play.
- To encourage students to think about performance styles and production elements by exploring clues in the text.
- To imagine and predict possibilities for performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Starter</th>
<th>5 mins</th>
<th>‘A Taste of Honey’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>List as many different words associated with this title as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Share.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What might this play be about?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First impressions</th>
<th>10 mins</th>
<th>Look at the range of images from the cover of the original playtext, posters of film adaptations and past productions of A Taste of Honey. What are your first impressions?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What further clues do you get about:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• When the play is set?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who are the characters?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What genre is the play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who is the audience?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage directions</th>
<th>10 mins</th>
<th>Read the opening stage directions of the play:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ACT ONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Scene 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The stage represents a comfortless flat in Manchester and the street outside. Jazz music. Enter HELEN, a semi-whore, and her daughter, JO. They are loaded with baggage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If you were a director, designer or actor, what information has the playwright provided in this opening stage direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consider the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Setting of the play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Characters – who are they? What is their relationship to each other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What is their status?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Genre of the play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who is the audience for this play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The status of the characters?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The nature of the characters?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### First impressions of the text
20 mins

Read the first page of the play:

**HELEN:** Well! This is the place.

**JO:** And I don’t like it.

**HELEN:** When I find somewhere for us to live I have to consider something far more important than your feelings … the rent. It’s all I can afford.

**JO:** You can afford something better than this old ruin.

**HELEN:** When you start earning you can start moaning.

**JO:** Can’t be soon enough for me. I’m cold and my shoes let water … what a place … and we’re supposed to be living off her immoral earnings.

**HELEN:** I’m careful. Anyway, what’s wrong with this place? Everything in it’s falling apart, it’s true, and we’ve no heating – but there’s a lovely view of the gasworks, we share a bathroom with the community and this wallpaper’s contemporary. What more do you want? Anyway it’ll do for us. Pass me a glass, Jo.

**JO:** Where are they?

**HELEN:** I don’t know.

**JO:** You packed ‘em. She’d lose her head if it was loose.

**HELEN:** Here they are. I put ‘em in my bag for safety. Pass me that bottle – it’s in the carrier.

**JO:** Why should I run round after you? [Takes whisky bottle from bag.]

**HELEN:** Children owe their parents these little attentions.

**JO:** I don’t owe you a thing.

**HELEN:** Except respect, and I don’t seem to get any of that.

What do you notice about this mother-daughter relationship?
Create a list of Facts you have found from the opening of the play.

### Characters
20 mins

Divide the class into two groups and create character profiles of Jo and Helen using Role on the Wall.

On the inside of the human figure outline, write adjectives which describe the characteristics of the character.

On the outside, record the Given Circumstances of each character (Who? Where? When? Why? How?)

Share Jo and Helen’s profiles.

What style of performance does this scene lend itself to? Is it naturalistic or stylised? Which theatre practitioner’s practice would you use to explore this character and the scene?

### Relationship between performers and audience
10 mins

What is the relationship of the performers to the audience? Do they know they are there?

Find at least three examples of when the actors could be speaking directly to the audience.

Share.
## Developing ideas practically

30 mins

As a director, would you choose for Jo and Helen to directly address the audience? Or would you have them speaking to themselves and maintaining the fourth wall?

In groups of three (two people play Jo and Helen and one person is the director), experiment with two different performance styles for the opening text.

1 – Play the scene with the characters not acknowledging the audience.
2 – Play the scene using direct address.

What are the differences between the two scenes? Choose whether you would like the performers to directly address the audience or not and prepare your scene to share with the group.

Share examples and feedback on the effect of these choices.

You may prefer to do this as a Forum Theatre exercise with the whole group as the director, looking at the effects of the choice to acknowledge the audience or not.

What are the effects of the choices we have made? How does this affect the style of performance? What impact does this have on the audience?

## Preview

10 mins

Look at the image from the current National Theatre production of A Taste of Honey that you are about to see.

What creative choices have been made with regards to:
- Set?
- Costume?
- Props?
- Music?
- The characters?
- How the characters interact with each other?
- How the performers interact with the audience?

## Predictions

5 mins

From your knowledge of the play so far, what predictions can you make about the way the National Theatre’s production will present the opening text. On a post-it note, record your response and stick it somewhere in the classroom or in your work book.

‘I predict that the opening scene will...’
Post-Performance Lesson Plan

Ideally for a double lesson or pick activities

Aims and objectives:

• To reflect upon and evaluate the production elements used in the play.
• To reflect upon and evaluate the performance styles used in the play.
• To articulate opinions on the success of the production elements and performance styles used in the play.

Starter
10 mins
Jot down five words to describe your first impressions of walking into the theatre.
Return to your prediction from the last session. How does your response to the play in performance compare to your expectations?
Create a Spectrum Line across the space ranging from 'The production was exactly what I expected' to 'The production totally surprised me.'
Elicit responses from the students about why they had this reaction.

Production elements carousel
45 mins
Divide the class into six groups. Each group is given a large piece of paper with one of the following production elements on:
Set
Costume
Music and sound
Props
Lighting and visuals
Movement
Each group has five minutes to respond to the following provocations before moving on to the next production element. The students need to respond and build upon the notes made by the previous group:
1. Describe the use of this production element.
2. Describe one choice made by the designer for that production element.
3. Why do you think this choice was made?
4. What was the effect of this choice on the audience?
5. Explain why it was or wasn’t successful in achieving an effect.

For example - Set
1. The set used was very fluid and flexible.
2. The set designer chose to build environments around the performers.
3. I think they made this creative decision to show how life changes so quickly for these characters.
4. The effect of this on the audience was that we could see the world being built in front of us, exposing the ‘making’ of this world, allowing us to remember the performative element of the play.
5. I think this was successful because it released the play from being a naturalistic ‘kitchen sink’ drama allowing the audience to go inside the world of the play whilst knowing it is not real.
### Production elements carousel (cont.)

Each group feeds back on the findings of the whole class on each production element.

As a class, discuss:

How did production elements work together to create the world of the play?

### Opening scene

**ACT ONE**

**Scene 1.**

The stage represents a comfortless flat in Manchester and the street outside. Jazz music. Enter HELEN, a semi-whore, and her daughter, JO. They are loaded with baggage.

- **HELEN:** Well! This is the place.
- **JO:** And I don’t like it.
- **HELEN:** When I find somewhere for us to live I have to consider something far more important than your feelings … the rent. It’s all I can afford.
- **JO:** You can afford something better than this old ruin.
- **HELEN:** When you start earning you can start moaning.
- **JO:** Can’t be soon enough for me. I’m cold and my shoes let water … what a place … and we’re supposed to be living off her immoral earnings.
- **HELEN:** I’m careful. Anyway, what’s wrong with this place? Everything in its falling apart, it’s true, and we’ve no heating – but there’s a lovely view of the gasworks, we share a bathroom with the community and this wallpaper’s contemporary. What more do you want? Anyway it’ll do for us. Pass me a glass, Jo.
- **JO:** Where are they?
- **HELEN:** I don’t know.
- **JO:** You packed ‘em. She’d lose her head if it was loose.
- **HELEN:** Here they are. I put ‘em in my bag for safety. Pass me that bottle – it’s in the carrier.
- **JO:** Why should I run round after you? [Takes whisky bottle from bag.]
- **HELEN:** Children owe their parents these little attentions.
- **JO:** I don’t owe you a thing.
- **HELEN:** Except respect, and I don’t seem to get any of that.

How did the opening of the production compare to your predictions? Did anything surprise you?

What was the effect of opening the show with a song?

### Characters

**10 mins**

How did we first meet Jo and Helen in the production?

Look at the Role on the Wall that you created prior to seeing the performance. Is there anything you would add/change?

### Performance choices

**15 mins**

Make a list of all the choices and decisions made by the actors and the director about the way this scene was played.

Did anything surprise you about the way the mother-daughter relationship was portrayed?
| Relationship between the performers and the audience | How did the performers engage with the audience? Did they use direct address? Did the production use the fourth wall? How did this make you feel? What other ways did the production acknowledge the audience? Choose one moment in the production which highlights the relationship between performers and the audience and explain the effect of the choices made: In the moment when __________ the actor playing ______ chose to ______________. This choice had the effect of ______________. I think the director’s decision to do this was ______________. |
| Plenary | Write a 140-character Twitter review of the play and share with the rest of the class. |
In ‘The Start of the Possible’, Jeannette Winterson gives her unique perspective on Shelagh Delaney’s life and her influence today; Dominic Sandbrook describes attitudes at the time the play was written; brilliant photographs and artwork evoke that time; and a Timeline gives facts about the background and Delaney’s work. With who’s who in the company and Marc Brenner’s photographs of them in rehearsal, the programme is an indispensable companion to the play.

Also on sale: The text of A Taste of Honey, published by Methuen Drama, as well as other work by Shelagh Delaney, plus background reading – all part of a wide range of theatre-related books, recordings and gifts. Order from shop.nationaltheatre.org.uk T +44 (0)20 7452 3456 E bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk

OTHER RESOURCES

BOOKS
- Tastes of Honey by Selina Todd
- The North by John Bulmer
- Northerners by Sefton Samuels
- Street Photographers by Shirley Baker
- Street Spaces: Urban Photography by Shirley Baker
- Chavs by Owen Jones

NOVELS:
- A Kind of Loving by Stan Barstow
- The L-Shaped Room by Lynne Reid Banks
- Sweetly Sings the Donkey by Shelagh Delaney

ESSAYS
- Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now by Chamion Caballero and Rosalind Edwards
- Lone Motherhood in England, 1945-1990: Economy, Agency and Identity by April Gallwey

PLAYS
- Road by Jim Cartwright
- Look Back in Anger by John Osborne
- Rita, Bob and Sue Too! by Andrea Dunbar

FILMS
- Saturday Night and Sunday Morning directed by Karel Reisz
- This is England directed by Shane Meadows
- Fish Tank directed by Andrea Arnold
- Wasp directed by Ken Loach
- Cathy Come Home directed by Ken Loach
- The Full Monty directed by Peter Cattaneo
- Vera Drake directed by Mike Leigh
- The Arbor directed by Clio Barnard

DOCUMENTARIES
- A Very British Sex Scandal directed by Patrick Reams
- Shelagh Delaney’s Salford directed by Ken Russell