Behind the Beautiful Forevers

a new play by David Hare
based on the book by Katherine Boo

Background pack
Welcome to the National Theatre’s background pack for *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*.

This background pack introduces the process of bringing the National Theatre production to life, from auditions through to press night.

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Jane Ball
Programme Manager, NT Learning
November 2014
The National Theatre production of
Behind the Beautiful Forevers

a new play by David Hare
based on the book by Katherine Boo

Sunil Sharma
Deepak Rai, aka Kalu
Manju Waghekar, Asha’s daughter
Asha Waghekar
Abdul Husain
Raja Kamble
Mahadeo Waghekar, Asha’s husband
Rahul Waghekar
Zehrunisa Husain, Abdul’s mother
Kehkashan Husain, Zehrunisa’s daughter
Karam Husain, Zehrunisa’s husband
Airport Director
Sub-Inspector Shankar Yeram, aka Fishlips
Fatima Shaikh
Mirchi Husain, Abdul’s brother
Meena Chinnu
Cynthia Ali, a neighbour
Officer Kulkarni
Noori Shaikh, Fatima’s daughter

Poornima Paikrao,
Special Executive Officer
Abdul Shaikh, Fatima’s husband
Guard at Dongri
The Master
Taufeeq
Laxmi Chinnu, Meena’s mother
Judge PM Chauhan
Prosecutor
Defender
Clerk of the Court
Judge CK Dhiran

HIRAN ABYESEKERA
ASSAD ZAMAN
ANJANA VASAN
STEPHANIE STREET
SHANE ZAZA
RANJIT KRISHNAMMA
SARTAJ GAREWAL
GAVI SINGH Chera
MEERA SYAL
ANJLI MOHINDRA
VINCENT EBRAHIM
SARTAJ GAREWAL
CHOOK SIBTAIIN
MUZZ KHAN
THUSITHA JAYASUNDERA
RONAK PATANI
ANNEIKA ROSE
MANJEET MANN
MARIAM HQUE
TIA-LANA CHINAPYEL/
NIKITA MEHTA/
TIA PALAMATHANAN/
PEHR RAMRAKHYANI

NATHALIE ARMIN
RANJIT KRISHNAMMA
ESH ALLADI
PAL ARON
MUZZ KHAN
BHARTI PATEL
THUSITHA JAYASUNDERA
CHOOK SIBTAIIN
ESH ALLADI
MARIAM HQUE
PAL ARON

Director
Designer
Lighting Designer
Sound Designer
Video Designer
Fight Director
Company Voice Work
Dialect Coach
Staff Director

RUFUS NORRIS
KATRINA LINDSAY
PAULE CONSTANCE
PAUL ARDITTI
JACK HENRY JAMES
KATE WATERS
JEANNETTE NELSON,
DANIELE LYDON
ZABARJAD SALAM
EMILY LIM

Understudies
Esh Alladi (Mahadeo Waghekar/Airport Director/
Abdul Shaikh/Kalu/Ashad Dhiran),
Gavi Singh Chera (Clerk of the Court),
Sartaj Garewal (Raja Kamble/Karam Husain/The Master),
Mariam Haque (Meena Chinnu/Kehkashan Husain/Manju Waghekar),
Muzz Khan (Kulkarni/Fishlips/Defender/Prosecutor),
Manjeet Mann (Asha Waghekar/Laxmi Chinnu),
Ronak Patani (Sunil Sharma/Abdul Husain/Nagare),
Bharti Patel (Poornima Paikrao/Cynthia Ali/Judge Chauhan/Fatima Shaikh/Zehrunisa Husain),
Assad Zaman (Rahul Waghekar/Mirchi Husain/Taufeeq/Guard)

The National Theatre would like to thank the following for their support of this production:
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National Angels Limited

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Edgerton Foundation New Plays Award

This production opened in the National’s Olivier Theatre on 18 November 2014
Act One Scenes 1 – 12
Abdul is sorting rubbish on the maidan while Sunil picks rubbish. Kalu enters on his motorbike and tries to persuade Sunil to come thieving with him. Sunil refuses. Meanwhile, Manju is waiting at the tap to collect water, reading *Mrs Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf. Sunil takes his rubbish to Abdul who weighs it and pays him less than he was hoping. Manju returns home where her mother, Asha, the ‘go-to woman’ of Annawadi, is receiving her daily string of clients in need of her help. Mr Kamble, a family friend, is first in the queue. He asks Asha for a loan to help him pay for a new valve for his sick heart. Asha refuses, rejecting his offer of a 5,000 rupee ‘token of thanks’ and telling him to go and pray at the temple instead. Manju tries to change her mother’s mind but is sharply reprimanded for interfering with her work. Mahadeo, Asha’s husband, and Rahul, Asha’s son, return home demanding supper.

Back in the maidan, Kalu tries again, unsuccessfully, to convince Sunil to come on his thieving mission. That night Kalu goes alone to steal the scrap metal and is attacked and brutally murdered by two drug dealers who accuse him of informing on them to the police.

The next day Zehrunisa Husain is working alongside her son, Abdul, in the maidan, paying the pickers who have brought rubbish to their scales for weighing. She reflects on the community’s resentment of their success as a Muslim family, and on her husband’s dream of moving out of Annawadi to Vasai, a Muslim area in the countryside where they have bought a small plot of land. She reveals that she doesn’t want to leave because it would mean her being forced ‘back behind the burqa’. Kehkashan, her daughter, prepares supper alongside them whilst ranting about her husband whom she has just left, having discovered ‘intimate photos’ of another woman on his mobile phone. Karam, Zehrunisa’s sick husband, returns home and informs the family about the anti-Muslim riots that are happening in the city. Sunil arrives to tell Abdul the news about Kalu’s death.

Officer Fishlips and his sidekick, Nagare, clear up Kalu’s body, falsely registering his death on the form as ‘suspected tuberculosis’.

Act One Scenes 13 – 21
Back in the maidan, the Husain family, intent on doing some ‘home improvement’, empty out their belongings from their house in order that they can build themselves a new kitchen shelf. Their neighbour, Fatima Shaikh (known as ‘One Leg’) comes out of her house to complain, insisting that they have to ask her permission before starting work because ‘it’s a shared wall’. She and Zehrunisa exchange insults. Abdul warns his mother that it is a mistake to carry out the building work, reminding her that everyone already resents their wealth and warning that they should keep their heads low and not make themselves more of a target. Zehrunisa disagrees with him, saying that they will be treated like ‘shitty Muslims’ regardless of what they do, so they might as well show that they can ‘live better than others’. The building continues.

That night, Manju and Meena conduct one of their regular secret meetings in the toilets. Manju teaches Meena about Congreve’s drama, *The Way of the World*, and its key themes of ‘love, social position and money’. Meena reveals she is unhappy and feels trapped in her life. Manju tries to persuade her to stop thinking negatively and to focus instead on her learning, which she believes will help her to ‘escape’.

The Airport Director explains that the key challenge of building a modern airport in Mumbai is the lack of space.

The next day Fatima comes outside to complain to the Husains that they have made a hole in her wall whilst building the shelf. Abdul tries to placate her but her frustration erupts into a public row with Zehrunisa, who reminds her that their family paid for the wall to be built in the first place.
Eventually Fatima leaves, supported by Cynthia, telling Zehrunisa she is ‘going to regret it’. Karam returns home from buying new floor tiles for the house. He says he has been told by a group of boys that Fatima is in a rickshaw on her way to the police station to file a formal complaint, accusing Zehrunisa of assault. Zehrunisa hurries to the police station to defend herself.

In the police station, Officer Kulkarni tells both women to stop wasting her time with their simple ‘domestic’. She sends Fatima home but instructs Zehrunisa to stay. Asha arrives and tells Zehrunisa that she can ‘get the whole thing wrapped up in an hour’ for a mere 1,000 rupees. Zehrunisa does not accept the offer. Asha leaves. Officer Kulkarni returns, hinting that, for a fee, she will turn a blind eye if Zehrunisa chooses to ‘finish off’ Fatima once and for all. Zehrunisa does not accept this offer either.

Back in Annawadi, Fatima dances flamboyantly to her music, riling Kehkashan and Karam, who are extremely worried about Zehrunisa. Infuriated by her inappropriate behaviour they abuse her verbally and threaten to physically attack her. The argument dissipates without conclusion as Fatima returns inside her house, shouting fierce threats to the Husains as she leaves. Moments later, Noori, Fatima’s 8-year-old daughter, runs screaming from her home claiming that her mother has poured kerosene on herself and set herself on fire. The maidan erupts, Fatima’s door is bashed down and she emerges, flaming. Cynthia, Meena, Manju and Asha put the flames out with water and Asha pays for a rickshaw to transport her to the hospital. Kehkashan and Karam realise that it is Fatima’s plan to blame them for the attack, as a way of exacting her revenge for the wall incident. They force Abdul to flee so that he will not be caught and so that their business, of which he is the centre, will not be jeopardised. The police arrive that evening and arrest Karam.

Later that night, Abdul is hiding in the storeroom next to his house. Sunil comes in to check he is alright. Abdul tells him that he has decided to turn himself into the police station and profess their innocence, believing that if he does so they will spare his father. Sunil tries to dissuade him, but fails.

**Act One Scenes 22 – 30**
While recovering in Cooper Hospital Fatima is visited by Poornima Pakrao, a special executive officer of the government. She explains that Fatima’s original statement, which claims that the Husains poured kerosene over her and set fire to her, is untenable because Noori, Fatima’s daughter, has said she saw Fatima doing this to herself. Poornima alters the statement so that it says the three Husains attacked Fatima and that she, unable to retaliate, was incited to suicide as a result. Abdul Shaikh, Fatima’s husband, worries for her health.

Meanwhile, Abdul is beaten by Officer Fishlips in the police station, having turned himself in.

Poornima Paikrao, fresh from her visit to Fatima’s bedside, visits Zehrunisa in Annawadi, offering to represent her as a professional negotiator, for a fee. Zehrunisa refuses the offer. Karam is thrown into the same holding cell as Abdul. Zehrunisa comes to the station to find out what they have been charged with but Officer Fishlips demands too high a bribe. She promises to return with the money, begging him not to hurt them in the interim. Before she returns, a call comes through and they are told that they are being charged with murder.

After four days in hospital, Fatima dies. Having decided that it ‘doesn’t look good’ to report the truth – that she arrived with 35% burns and subsequently died – the doctors change the figures so that it reports she arrived with 95% burns instead. Her body is brought back to Annawadi and prepared for Muslim burial by Kehkashan and Zehrunisa, overseen by the rest of the community. An officer arrives to escort Kehkashan to jail. The monsoon begins.

**Act Two Scenes 1 – 8**
Zehrunisa laments her decisions and regrets the fact that she did not accept the first bribe she was offered to settle the dispute. She meets with Officer Fishlips who agrees, for a fee, to acquire a false birth certificate for Abdul claiming he is 16 so that he will not be sent to jail but to the far less severe youth detention centre. Zehrunisa reveals she has never known Abdul’s proper age.

In Dongri Youth Detention Centre Abdul has a life-changing experience meeting The Master, a teacher who delivers the moral lesson that ‘being good is the right way to live’. Inspired by his words, Abdul tries to ask for his help in getting him out. The Master tries to ask for his help in getting him out. The Master tries to ask for his help in getting him out. The Master tries to ask for his help in getting him out. The Master tries to ask for his help in getting him out. The Master tries to ask for his help in getting him out.

Back in Annawadi, Rahul and Manju are lovingly preparing a 40th birthday party for Asha. Just as they are about to eat, Asha receives a series of phonecalls. Her tone of voice reveals that this is no ordinary client but a person of power who she is sleeping with. The family beg her not to go but
she refuses to listen to them, defending herself as she leaves by saying that she is the only one who keeps the family together and that she has the right to do it ‘her own way’. Distraught, Mahadeo tells Rahul and Manju that they are never to speak of the incident again.

Zehrunisa visits Kehkashan in prison. They update one another, Kehkashan revealing that there has been no news from the authorities on the date of their trial, and Zehrunisa revealing that she is now spending all of her time visiting relatives and begging for money which she can use as bribes to try and bring the trial date forward.

In Annawadi, Meena and Manju hold another secret meeting in the toilets. Meena reveals that she has been thinking a lot since Fatima’s death about how she would end her own life. She feels ‘beaten’ and does not want to carry on her struggle. Manju tries to stop her from talking this way.

**Act Two Scenes 9 – 17**

Sunil tells us that Wall Street has crashed and the price of rubbish has fallen. Taufeeq, an older thief, appears and convinces him to come and steal German silver with him that night.

Six weeks after his arrival Abdul is released from Dongri on the condition he reports back every week. Returning home he is greeted warmly by Zehrunisa and Mirchi but is dismayed to find out the full extent of their recent hardship: the storeroom has been sold off and their business has collapsed. He tells Zehrunisa he is prepared to get straight back to work but, in keeping with his new ethos, inspired by the Master, announces that they will only deal in non-stolen rubbish from now on. Zehrunisa despairs at this choice but agrees.

The community celebrate the festival of Navratri with dancing and music in the maidan. Manju notices Meena is unwell and discovers she has attempted to kill herself by consuming an entire tube of rat poison. She tries desperately to find help but Meena insists she does not want any help, she wants to die. Laxmi, Meena’s mother, ignores Manju’s pleas, believing that Meena is just ‘pretending’ because she is angry with them.

Sunil comes to welcome Abdul home and tries to buy him a meal of chicken chilli and rice. Abdul learns of Sunil’s recent thieving and disapproves. He tries to explain his new ethos to Sunil - that humans are ‘all made from the same stuff’ but that we have it in our power to ‘make ourselves different’. Just as water can either be ‘dirty water…nothing else’ or it can be ‘ice’, so we can try to be ‘better than what [we’re] made of’. Abdul doesn’t think Sunil understands him. Sunil is upset, thinking that Abdul no longer wants to be his friend.

Sunil is attacked by two security guards on his way back down from the roof.

**Act Two Scenes 18 – 26**

The first court hearing of Karam and Kehkashan’s trial begins in a fast-track court, overseen by Judge Chauhan. Cynthia and Abdul Shaikh are called to the witness stand. After a brief hearing, the judge calls lunch and says the case will be resumed in eight weeks. Karam’s health is in significant decline.

Asha speaks to Zehrunisa outside the courtroom, offering to help her sell her house, for a fee. Zehrunisa refuses the offer once again.

Taufeeq and Sunil go thieving. On their way back, Sunil climbs up to the roof of the building and looks out over Mumbai. He dances.

Manju is teaching her daily class at home. Asha bursts in, overjoyed, announcing that she has secured a deal with Bhimrao Gaiwakd from the Maharashtra Education Department, whereby she and Manju will front a scam education programme running 24 kindergartens and thus earn themselves a large sum of money. Manju disagrees on principle but Rahul is easily persuaded by the temptation of a new computer. Laxmi, Meena’s mother, suddenly arrives, revealing that Meena has died in the hospital. She blames Manju, and her attempts to ‘educate’ Meena, for her death. Asha defends Manju’s actions.

Sunil is attacked by two security guards on his way back down from the roof.
Poornima Paikrao returns to Annawadi to tell Zehrunisa that the judge in Karam and Kehkashan’s trial is being changed. She claims that, for two hundred thousand rupees, she can get the trial abandoned. Zehrunisa crumbles at this figure. Abdul stands up to Poornima in front of everyone, exposing and humiliating her and announcing that his family will not be exploited by her any longer. He knows she cannot possibly get the trial abandoned because it is a criminal trial and it is not in her power to have any such impact.

The second hearing of the Husains’ trial takes place in court overseen by the new judge, Judge Dhiran. He dismisses the case instantly, declaring that they are obviously innocent and that the case should never have been brought to trial. The Husains are overjoyed, Abdul Shaikh is distraught. Taking pity on his helplessness, the Husains offer to walk back to Annawadi together with him and Noori.

Dawn, the next day. Sunil is out picking rubbish on a road overlooking the Mithi river. Abdul comes by with a motorised cycle loaded with rubbish. They catch up, Abdul telling Sunil that he is now in the business of moving rubbish, since their sorting business never managed to recover after he returned from Dongri. Sunil tells Abdul he has stopped thieving since he was attacked by the security guards. Abdul confides in Sunil about how difficult it is to live by his ethos, to try and be ‘better’, to try and be ‘ice’, because of how the world is. Sunil points out his new picking hotspot – a precarious ledge below the bridge. They part ways, and Sunil jumps from the bridge.
The first day of rehearsals feels a lot like the first day of school. Rehearsal Room 2, our home for the next seven weeks, fills with new faces and nervous excitement as the company and production team assemble together with around 70 members of staff at the National. After brief introductions and a welcome from our director, Rufus Norris, during which he acknowledges the rare privilege of working with Sir David Hare and the National’s first-ever fully British-Asian cast, we sit down for the first read through of the script. It is a very special moment to hear the characters spring to life for the first time.

After lunch Katrina Lindsay, our designer, presents the model box. This is the first time the company are shown the set within which they will perform the show. As she lays out a seemingly endless display of delicate handmade pieces the world of the Annawadi slum emerges in miniature form, complete with sari-clad figurines, garish motorway signs, toilet cubicles and piles of rubbish. The detail and scale of the design is staggering and leaves everyone incredibly excited (especially Assad, who discovers he gets to ride a motorbike on-stage!).

The ramshackle, over-crowded homes of the slum will be juxtaposed with the high-speed, five-star cityscape of modern Mumbai, separated by a wall which dissolves at the end of Act One as the two worlds collide. The setting will feel naturalistic whilst remaining playfully theatrical and, inspired by the industrious resourcefulness and graft of the Annawadians, the space will be worked and controlled on-stage by the company at all times – an effect which will require extremely precise staging and choreography.

We watch a series of short films and slides showing footage of Annawadi as recorded by Katherine Boo, the author of the book on which the play is based, during her four years spent living in Mumbai. The cast are deeply moved to ‘meet’ their real life counterparts on screen and to experience the environment, sounds and senses of Annawadi for themselves. Referring to their own recent research trip, David and Rufus talk about the play, emphasising first and foremost their wish to honour Katherine’s complex and un-patronising portrayal of the slum-dwellers. We return to this thought often throughout the week, noting how the psychological complexity of the characters in hers and David’s hands becomes an equalising force in the play: despite the extreme discrepancies in lifestyle, opportunity and material wealth, the inner lives of the rich and the poor are shown to mirror one another. The play will interrogate the severe injustices of a globalised economy by focusing not on the insurmountable adversities and problems faced by the slum-dwellers but on the ingenious, entrepreneurial ways in which they choose to fight them.

For the final hour of our first day we ‘get up on our feet’, which is how the rest of the week pans out. In light of the practical complexities of the design and staging we begin by creating a rough physical map of each scene and transition. We ‘bash’ our way through Act One and the start of Act Two, exploring different images and dynamics within the space. With 55 scenes (or ‘sections’, as David prefers to refer to them) and multiple location changes, the play requires a very specific rhythm and fluidity. We start to establish a physical language that will enable this, testing out different ‘rules’ of suspension, pace and movement quality. As discoveries are made our stage managers and production managers remain in constant conversation, finalising the details of how each section of the set needs to be built.

Come Friday evening we have covered over half of the play, eaten Meera’s delicious homemade cardamom biscuits, listened to a lot of Bollywood music and started to feel like a company.
Our second week of rehearsals begins as our first week ended, getting the remainder of the scenes in Act Two up on their feet so that, by Wednesday lunchtime, we have a full draft of the entire piece. Just before we break for lunch, Rufus announces that the company are going to perform the whole play in 20 minutes – which they somehow manage to do! They charge through the text, ‘topping and tailing’ each scene (ie, only reading out the first and last line) and marking through each transition. Punctuated by wild cries of ‘REVOLVE!’, ‘COURT SCENE!’, ‘RUBBISH! GO!’ from Rufus and Anna, our Deputy Stage Manager, plus a lot of laughing, it is messy and chaotic but ultimately incredibly useful in providing everyone with a sense of the overall shape and journey of the piece.

For the second half of the week we return to the top of the show and begin working through scenes in detail. Rufus encourages the company to experiment freely with their characters, motivations and relationships, allowing things to emerge in an instinctive, organic way. We remain on the constant lookout for ‘promise’ which, more often than not, we discover in the most unlikely and accidental of places – Rufus’ bag of nuts becomes a way of unlocking Asha’s opening scene, whilst Hiran’s ability to turn any object, from a plastic bag to a broken chair, into a toy, becomes an important expression of Sunil’s playful, carefree spirit. Through discussion and play, we start to better understand the layers of meaning within David’s text and the complex power struggles at work within Annawadi.

We also begin to explore the actors’ power relationship with their audience. David’s script breaks the ‘fourth wall’ via several direct-address monologues which require the characters to speak straight to the audience. We decide that this must happen on the characters’ own terms – it must be clear that they choose when to let the audience into their lives, and that they remain in control when they do so. In this way, reflecting Katherine’s distinctive journalistic style, they will not be presented as passive victims of poverty to be pitied and observed, but humanised individuals with active agency, to be engaged and reckoned with. The actors find different ways of communicating this dynamic. Stephanie Street (below), as Asha, remains seated as she speaks to the audience, treating them like any other client who has come to beg a favour. Thusitha Jayasundera, as Fatima, flirts, teases and dances provocatively before choosing to open the conversation. And Hiran, as Sunil, goes about his daily business of picking rubbish, smiling and acknowledging the audience, but not speaking until he is ready. Those of us in the room instantly feel the effect of this tenacious, unapologetic approach.

We have three key visitors to our rehearsal room this week. The first is Jeannette Nelson, Head of Voice, who leads a daily vocal warm-up with the company. The Olivier stage presents a very specific set of challenges as a performance space and the actors’ voices will require constant attention throughout our rehearsal period in order to ready them for the run. The second is Budgie Salam, our dialect coach, who works with the actors individually to create authentic character accents. Since the characters in the play have migrated to Mumbai from many different corners of India we need to find correct regional accents for each family group, whilst incorporating the subtle distinctions between the older and younger generations and people from different classes. On top of this we will need to find a unity of voice for the characters living together in Annawadi. Our third and final visitor is the extraordinary Katherine Boo. We spend a very humbling two hours on Friday afternoon listening to her reflect on her experience and working through our big list of burning questions covering everything from Zehrunisa’s insults to Mahadeo’s choice of drink. We ask after everyone in Annawadi, with whom she remains in close contact, and are at turns excited and saddened to hear of their news. The more we get to know the characters in our play, the more our sense of responsibility to them grows.

Specific research topics this week include:
- Dongri Observation Home, Mumbai
- Fast-track courts and the protocol of Indian courtrooms
- The Indian National Anthem
- Navratri festival – customs (including the traditional Garba dance and its music), and origins
- Suicide rates in the slums
Rehearsal diary: week three

We are almost half way through our rehearsal period and the signs are beginning to show. What was an almost clear rehearsal room on day one has now filled with the debris and clutter of Annawadi. With so many individual pieces of set to take into consideration it becomes very important at this point for both the stage management team and the company to start getting used to which bits of set they are responsible for moving where. Even more importantly, Rufus needs to see how the larger ‘transition’ moments, where we move from one location to the next, could work. A lot of the set pieces are still to be constructed in the workshops, so Sara and Bryony, our assistant stage managers, devise a clever scheme of stand-ins. A fleet of clothes rails and hat stands are labelled with pictures of motorway signs, cows and sections of traffic, which are wheeled around the space in place of the real things. We spend a large portion of Friday’s rehearsal using these to work on the procession at the end of Act 1, when Fatima’s body is carried out through the streets of Mumbai. Choreographing an ensemble of 22 actors with over twice that number of set pieces is no small task and requires an awful lot of brain power from everyone in the room.

Our selection of props has also swelled. It has become clear that in order to create a true sense of Annawadi we need the slum-dwellers on stage to be permanently engaged in activity. And, in the style of a ‘work play’, this engagement needs to be actual as opposed to pretend. By having everyone performing the tasks live – whether stringing marigolds, drying chillis, cooking pakora or sewing quilts (details extracted directly from Katherine’s experience) – we hope to conjure an authentic impression of the atmosphere, smells, sounds and texture of the slum. Not to mention a constant sense of movement. We develop an idea introduced in week one where the slum-dwellers in each scene remain ‘alive’ and busy, but only at what we call ‘50 percent’, ie, no sharp or big movements and with half their usual energy and pace. Such high-level ensemble acting requires a lot of skill and a lot of rehearsal: each actor must be working on their designated task, yet remain aware of where the focus of the scene currently lies. They must ensure they don’t accidentally steal the focus by being too animated (or too interesting!).

This soft, physical underscoring and the sense it brings of a stage filled with life feels central to the tone of the whole play. We want to share Annawadi with our audiences in the same way Katherine shares it with her readers – direct, honest, un-patronising and un-edited. We don’t want to smother their stories or to distance our audiences from their lives. The space should feel alive and present, as opposed to feeling like a static still-life, set apart from its observers. We are presenting a community on-stage that lives and breathes in front of and alongside the audience, sharing the same air and smelling the same spices.

Beyond the rehearsal room, the company spend a lot of time in costume fittings this week. Each actor has a detailed chat with Sabine, the Costume Supervisor and Renata, the Wigs Supervisor, overseen by Katrina, our designer. Costume plays a crucial role in the actors’ process of transformation so it is essential that they have the chance to share decisions and discoveries that they have made in rehearsals. Some of these are to do with character – Steph, for example, has decided that business-minded Asha is governed by her phone so requests a sari into which she can tuck a mobile somewhere close to her chest. Some are to do with practicalities – Shane and Hiran, playing Abdul and Sunil, must be able to climb up the scales in their costumes; Assad, playing Kalu, must be able to take his shirt off quickly when the dealers order him to strip.

The huge number of characters in the play means that almost every actor is playing multiple roles, which results in lots of quick costume changes to plan, sometimes down to the second. We tackle the biggest costume challenge of all at the end of Friday when the production team hold a meeting to discuss how we will create an effect involving Fatima setting herself on fire. We are given a demonstration by pyrotechnic specialists and discuss the best way to move forwards.
# A rehearsal call in week three

**Rehearsal Call**  
**Monday 6th October 2014**  
**Rehearsal Room 2**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Cast Members</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td>Physical Warm-up <em>led by Assad</em></td>
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<td>10.20am</td>
<td>Vocal Warm-up <em>with Jeannette</em></td>
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<td>10.45am</td>
<td>Scene 1:21 <em>Storeroom</em></td>
<td>Mr Abeysekera, Mr Zaza</td>
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<td>11.45am</td>
<td>Scene 1:8 <em>Death of Kalu</em></td>
<td>Mr Aron, Mr Khan, Mr Zaman</td>
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<td>12.30pm</td>
<td>Scene 1:12 <em>Police</em></td>
<td>Miss Haque, Mr Abeysekera, Mr Alladi, Mr Aron, Mr Chera, Mr Khan, Mr Patani, Mr Sibtain</td>
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<td>1.30pm</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
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| 2.30pm  | Scenes 1:23, 26 & 27  
**Beating**  
**Charge Sheet**  
**It’s Murder** | Miss Syal, Mr Ebrahim, Mr Khan, Mr Sibtain, Mr Zaza |
| 3.30pm  | Scene 1:24 *Offers*                      | Miss Armin, Miss Mann, Miss Mohindra, Miss Syal |
| 4.30pm  | Scene 1:28 & 29  
**Washing the Body**  
**Doctors** | Miss Mohindra, Miss Patel, Miss Rose, Miss Street, Miss Syal, Miss Vasan, Mr Alladi, Mr Krishnamma, Mr Patani |
| 6.00pm  | CALL ENDS                                  |                                            |

*All Company are welcome to attend the morning Warm-up Calls*

*Understudy Company  
You are welcome to attend rehearsals as you wish*

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**Wigs, Hair & Make-up**  
**(Level 5)**  
*with Renata*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Cast Members</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.30pm</td>
<td>Miss Mohindra</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.00pm</td>
<td>Miss Patel</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.30pm</td>
<td>Miss Vasan</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.00pm</td>
<td>Mr Alladi</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.30pm</td>
<td>TO FINISH</td>
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*Release Miss Armin at 5.30pm*

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Thank you  
David Marsland  
Stage Manager
Rehearsal diary: week four

As we work our way through the scenes in Act 2 we explore the principal characters’ trajectories and the key changes they undergo between the start and close of the play. The script compresses several months’ worth of action into two hours, zooming in and out of multiple different lives, meaning that in most cases the actors only have a few scenes to convey the full psychological journey of their characters. At the start of the week we focus on Abdul’s moral makeover, inspired by his experience of meeting the mysterious Master. His decision, on returning to Annawadi, to only deal in rubbish that is not stolen, and his mother’s strong reaction against this reveals the difference in their respective journeys. Whilst Abdul has found in himself something to hope for and to live by, Zehrunisa’s tenacious attitude to business and her faith in the potential of building a better future for her family has been crushed by her recent experiences. With Karam and Kehkashan in jail, wrongly accused of inciting Fatima’s self-immolation, she has sunk from her position as Queen of the Slum, feared and respected by the local pickers, and has been forced to sell off their storeroom and become a desperate supplicant, begging her relatives for money to help get them out of jail. She does not feel the system affords them the luxury of moral choice – if they don’t deal in stolen goods, they stand no chance of making money. And without money, they will never have a better life. But Abdul sees it differently: for him, the possibility of ‘living well’ is now more connected to the idea of ‘doing the right thing’ than it is to the idea of monetary wealth. As is typical of Katherine and David’s complex portrayal, both viewpoints are given equal weight. As an audience we are not encouraged to side with either, only to acknowledge how impossible judgement becomes in an arena of such extreme injustice and inequality, and to appreciate the intelligent, creative, myriad ways in which the different characters choose to deal with its effects.

Another pivotal journey within the play is that of Meena, whose death forms a focal point of Act 2. In the scene where she and Manju talk about suicide we explore their contrasting attitudes towards hardship: where Meena insists on speaking the truth, acknowledging that ‘she is beaten’ and then accepting this with suicide, Manju’s tendency is to keep things ‘bottled up inside’, choosing not to talk about the problems of her life and believing passionately in the power of education and aspiration to lift her out of Annawadi and towards a better life. Meena’s decision to end her life is ultimately made with absolute clarity and without self-pity. We play with the staging of this moment, placing her death within the context of a large, joyful dance at the Navratri celebrations. It feels like an apt reflection of her spirit to have her literally dancing towards her death, defiant and active until the very end. We then rehearse the scene where Manju hears the news of her death from Laxmi, Meena’s mother. In her distress she accuses Manju of being responsible, claiming that if Manju had not filled Meena’s head with ideas of education and the ‘false hope’ of bettering herself then she would not have been driven to such a state of despair about her own life. Asha, by contrast, defends Manju’s attempts to ‘broaden Meena’s mind’. As with Abdul and Zehrunisa, we are shown both sides of the argument. To ensure that this comes across in the playing of the scene, Bharti Patel, playing Laxmi, has to find a delicate balance in making Laxmi’s distress evident without her seeming to be ‘out of her mind’. Pitching these extreme moments of trauma is a key challenge for the actors. We experiment with the rhythm of the scene – discovering, for example, that it is far more interesting for Laxmi’s physical attack on Manju to come in its middle, rather than its end – and with the pace of the dialogue, enjoying the effect of Laxmi attacking her opening lines with vicious speed whilst Asha maintains a slow, controlled energy.

As in previous weeks, this detailed, text-based work on individual scenes with a smaller number of actors is interspersed with larger ensemble rehearsals with the full company. We spend a lively afternoon on Thursday staging the first courtroom scene, using as many people as possible to create an effective sense of the bustle, sweat, noise and overcrowding which Katherine describes. And we create a rough draft of the moment where Abdul leaves Dongri Youth Detention Centre for the first time, emerging back into the world of Mumbai after his life-changing experience. After considering with the company the different public scenarios and images Abdul might encounter on his journey Rufus choreographs a brief, wordless sequence where images Abdul might encounter on his journey Rufus choreographs a brief, wordless sequence where images created by the ensemble appear suddenly, almost dream-like, around him – women doing their laundry in the renowned Dobi Ghat area, men playing a big game of cricket, a child flying a kite. This is one of many moments within the play where a character from Annawadi is taken out of their own environment and set against the broader context of the city. It is so important that their stories are interpreted in this way – viewed in relation to, and not isolation of, the wealth, privilege and opportunity of modern Mumbai.
Research topics during rehearsals include:

- Mumbai’s police force, and how people qualify into it
- Muslim body washing rituals, and prayers for the sick and the dead
- The Indian national anthem
- Om Shanti Om
- The Shiv Sena party
- Muslim/Hindu riots
- Laundry techniques in the slums
- The waste-picking industry (see page 19)
- Indian wedding party traditions
- Cooper Hospital, Mumbai
- Female prisons, Mumbai

Films/TV:
- Salaam Bombay
- Om Shanti Om
- Lunchbox
- Wasteland
- Hotel India
- Strictly Navratri

Books:
- Of Poverty And Plastic by Kaveri Gill
- Maximum City by Suketu Mehta
- A Free Man by Aman Sethi
- A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry
- The Age of Kali by William Dalrymple
Rehearsal diary: week five

It’s Monday of the fifth week and everyone is starting to wonder where all the time has gone. It’s hard to believe we’ve now been rehearsing for a month and that we will be on stage, running our technical rehearsal in just under two weeks’ time. We are aiming for our first runthrough on Thursday afternoon, so spend the first half of the week revisiting scenes in more detail and tightening up the staging of more complicated moments.

There is an influx of exciting new people into the room over the week. The three young girls who will rotate playing the role of Noori, Fatima’s daughter, come for their first rehearsal with the full company on Tuesday afternoon. It is remarkable how much the dynamic of a scene changes when you place a child in the middle of it. Children are a fundamental part of Annawadi, and the simple, fresh energy which Tia, Nikita and Tia-Lana bring to the room feels like the missing piece of the puzzle.

On Wednesday afternoon we’re paid our first visit by the Fight Director, Kate Waters (or ‘Kombat Kate’ as she is more regularly – and appropriately! – known). Starting with Laxmi, Asha and Manju’s brief scrap during the scene where Laxmi accuses Manju of causing Meena’s death, and finishing with the guards’ attack on Sunil and the drug dealers’ murder of Kalu, Kate works out how to safely and effectively achieve the impression of each violent interaction. Unsurprisingly it requires a lot of precision and practice to create the desired effects – especially in the case of Kalu’s death, which involves his eye being gouged. First, Kate watches the scene a few times in order to understand its shape and structure, then starts to develop the actors’ movements. Her approach is collaborative and her choreography extends organically from the actors’ instinctive, natural movements. Building it up step by step she creates a safe, accurate fight sequence which feels well integrated into the action and pace of the scene. This first session results in an initial draft of each sequence which we will develop and refine in the final weeks.

Paule Constable, the Lighting Designer, and Paul Arditti, the Sound Designer, are now permanent presences in the room as well. Between now and the technical rehearsals they will make key decisions with Rufus about how each moment of the play will look, feel and sound. The production depends on the synchronicity of all of these elements and it is thrilling to see the different layers of artistry begin to come together.

The run-through on Thursday marks a significant moment in our process. The company do an amazing job of rising to the challenge, and we manage to make our way from start to finish with very few bumps along the way. There is still a huge amount of work to do but everyone feels really pleased and energised. Running the whole piece gives the actors and creative team a chance to experience its overall rhythm. David and Rufus have a crucial meeting afterwards to decide which parts of the text may need editing to reduce the running time. Making cuts is always difficult but together they manage to find moments where the action can be stream-lined. In a couple of cases this means ‘splicing out an organ’, as David puts it, and losing a whole scene, but mostly it is about trimming the odd line to tighten dialogue.

Fuelled by Steph’s delicious homemade banana cake the week wraps up on Friday afternoon with stunt practice for the boys: Hiran and Shane are hooked into harnesses and have a go at clambering up the newly constructed weighing scales in preparation for the scene where Abdul and Sunil are hiding in the Husains’ storeroom, and Assad is finally given the keys to Kalu’s motorbike. All of these technical moments will require a lot of attention between now and the performances – each tricky manoeuvre must become second nature for the actors – but we leave for the weekend confident that the final effects will be very much worth the extra effort.
We have now reached week six, our final full week in the rehearsal room. A key priority at the start of the week is to work through the cuts which David has made to the text following last Thursday’s run through. Working on a new play of this epic scale means that the writing is in constant motion.

David and Rufus need to whittle the script down to a suitable running time whilst ensuring that each character’s story is properly developed and clearly told. The new versions of the scenes are rehearsed and David watches closely to check that the flow and meaning of each has not been compromised. It is careful, rigorous work – the addition or loss of just one word or phrase can sometimes completely alter the meaning of a scene.

Kombat Kate returns on Wednesday afternoon to do a second draft of all the fight sequences. There is plenty of technical training and activity occurring outside of the rehearsal room too – voice work continues with Jeannette every day, as does motorbike practice with Assad and Vincent in the car park, scales-climbing practice with Shane and Hiran, and tuk tuk driving practice with Pal. Because of the high number of characters in the play there are still lots of costume fittings to be scheduled in as well. Some actors have worked with key costume and prop elements from very early on: Natalie has been inseparable from Poornima’s satchel, Shane – Abdul’s bandages, Steph – Asha’s glasses, Vincent – Karam’s clothing, and most people have swapped their trainers for flip flops and their tracksuit bottoms for saris. This allows the actors to sink into the gestural, physical language of their characters more easily.

The week peaks on Friday with a second full run-through in front of a wider audience of people involved with the show, from the marketing team to the lighting and sound operators. Each time we run sections together in this way the company are able to further familiarise themselves with their complicated show ‘tracks’, ie, their practical journeys throughout the piece. The more they can rehearse these logistical details now – which prop they must collect when and from where, which entrance they need to enter or exit from, which costume they need to change into and how quickly – the more they will be able to focus on the finer details of their performances later. It takes a lot of brainpower to keep up with everything happening in the room but the company do an amazing job of getting through smoothly from start to finish. And the cuts, whilst painful, have done their job – the pace feels much sharper and everyone is relieved to hear that the overall running time has been reduced by almost half an hour.

The week ends on Saturday with a cueing meeting. This is a crucial part of the production process before we start our technical rehearsals in the theatre. Anna (Deputy Stage Manager), Paule (Lighting Designer), Paul (Sound Designer), David (Stage Manager) and Rufus sit down together and work through the script, deciding where the technical cues will come within the action – when, for example, the lighting state will change, the Annawadi roof piece will be flown in, or the blast of music during Fatima’s entrance will cut. Having these sorts of conversations before the technical rehearsals begin saves precious working time on stage and quickens the process for everyone.
Rehearsal diary: week seven

The first half of our final week of rehearsals is spent redressing a tonal imbalance that David and Rufus noted in the play following Friday's run-through. They are keen to 'soften' the feeling of the first half, in particular with relation to the Husains' story. As they explain to the company on Monday morning, it is vital for the play's narrative arc that things in Annawadi are going relatively well at the start of our story – work is plentiful, the ship is on course. It is only following two major events – firstly Fatima's burning and secondly the global recession – that things get considerably worse. In order to achieve this tonal shift we re-work the first Husain family scene, painting a much happier image of their family dynamic. This creates a more interesting, textured portrayal of the characters' emotional lives and strengthens the narrative by giving the characters more to lose when the dispute with Fatima climaxes. Similarly, we then re-explore the relationship between Fatima and Zehrunisa. Instead of allowing their antagonism to erupt instantly in their first scene together we decide to focus this moment on their closeness as neighbours and Fatima's complex dependency on Zehrunisa as a fellow Muslim.

The end of Wednesday signals the end of our time in Rehearsal Room 2. The company are given the keys to their dressing rooms, the stage management team ship our incalculable number of props off to the theatre in cages, and I pull up the 'mark-up' of our set with an odd sense of ceremony. As Rufus notes, the heart of a play lives first in the writer's head, then in rehearsal, and finally in the dressing rooms. Everyone feels the significance of this moment in our process and, as has become typical of our company, we mark it with freshly baked scones from Anjli Mohindra (playing Kehkashan Husain) and a huge mountain of cake from Bryony Peach, the Assistant Stage Manager – the ‘Bombay Bake Off’ rolls on!

Our technical rehearsal begins with a vengeance on Thursday. We have just eight sessions in which to work through the entire play. This is very tight given the ambition and scale of Rufus’ production. The Olivier auditorium becomes a mass of computer screens, tables and scripts as the full production team – sound, lighting, set, stage management, video projection, automation, hair and make-up, costume – move in. For the first time Katrina’s extraordinary design is realised on stage in front of us. The first sighting leaves everyone very overwhelmed – it really is more beautiful and more enormous than any of us could have imagined and, when accompanied by Paul’s lighting and Paul’s sound design, creates a truly authentic vision of Annawadi. As the company fill the stage in their multi-coloured saris, long plaited wigs and muddied flip flops, the image is complete. We work through the script, combining all the technical elements of the production and re-staging scenes where necessary in order to ensure that the space and the set are used to their best effect. It is intense, careful and exhausting work but the effects are extremely exciting. Everyone’s commitment is proved on Thursday evening when the entire team is required to shovel the ‘inconceivably large’ amount of rubbish which Rufus requested on and off the stage multiple times in an attempt to uncover the most effective clearing technique. It is a ridiculous, wonderful act of mass teamwork and we can’t help but think Sunil and Abdul would be very proud of us!

We wrap up at 10.30pm on Saturday ready for a much-needed day off ahead of Monday’s dress rehearsal and first preview. Whilst the act of making a piece of theatre can feel very private in rehearsal, the process is never complete until it lives and breathes in front of its audience. It will be a surreal and a special moment sharing these stories, which we have lived and learned so closely over the past seven weeks, with other people for the very first time.
Technical Rehearsals

Rehearsal Call
Monday 10th November 2014
Olivier Theatre

10.00am  Please be in your Dressing Rooms, so that the Sound Team can find you to fit Radio Mics. Please remember to wear the Mic Belts when you are getting in to costume, hair and make-up.  FULL COMPANY with CHILDREN

10.30am  Technical Rehearsal
Company ready in costume to continue from 2.23 (Bulldozer in Annawadi) to the end.

Then work ‘Washing the Body’ to end of Part One.  FULL COMPANY with CHILDREN

12.30pm  LUNCH

1.30pm  In to costume, hair and make-up  FULL COMPANY with CHILDREN

2.00pm  DRESS REHEARSAL
The Production Photographer will be taking photographs  FULL COMPANY with CHILDREN

5.00pm  DINNER and stage re-set

6.30pm  Warm-up
(in RR4 if stage not available)

6.55pm  The Half  FULL COMPANY with CHILDREN

7.30pm  PREVIEW 1

Production Manager's technical schedule
Monday 10 November

8am  workshops
9am  rig rubble drop boxes
10am  dry run of Drum trade sequence
10.30am  finish tech of Part 2
11.30am  set up end of Part 1
11.45pm  tech last sequence of Part 1
12.30pm  lunch
2pm  Dress Rehearsal
5pm  break
7.30pm  Preview 1

The technical process for a show of large scale begins with Pre-Production days. These happen before the actual stage fit-up to allow the stage departments to prepare and unload scenic elements into the theatre, ready to go on stage. Next comes Fit-Up. Led by the Production Manager, the aim of the Fit-Up is to build the set, test any moving scenery and ensure the stage is ready for the actors. After Fit-Up follow technical rehearsals. The two main objectives are to allow the company to familiarise themselves with the set, and to rehearse any complicated scene changes with the technical team. This is also when the director and creative team make decisions about speeds and cueing of scenery, lighting and sound. As this schedule demonstrates, the schedule can be very demanding. On the last day of technical rehearsal, 10 November, there was also a dress rehearsal and the first public preview performance! The preview period for an Olivier theatre production has around eight performances, leading up to press night.
The facts shown here are drawn from Katherine Boo’s book and are true for 2008, which is when the play is set.

Annawadi is a slum set back 200 yards from Sahar Airport Road. It is bordered to the east by a large sewage lake.

It was first established in 1991 by a group of construction workers who came from Tamil Nadu to repair one of the airport runways. The job complete, they decided to settle on the nearby brushland, working hard to transform it from wet bog into a liveable, solid, plot, in anticipation of further work opportunities.

The name ‘Annawadi’ translates as ‘the land of annas’, which is a respectable Tamil term for ‘older brothers’.

The land belongs to the Airports Authority of India. Plans to modernise the airport involved plans to raze Annawadi and its neighbouring slums. But this has so far not materialised.

The majority of Annawadians are not considered poor by official Indian benchmarks.

The slum is surrounded by five luxury hotels including the Hyatt, the Hotel Leela and the Inter Continental.

The residents of Annawadi come from all over India and are a diverse mix of different castes, ethnicities and religions.

There are 3,000 residents living in a total of 335 huts across approximately a half acre of land.

The huts are arranged in different slum lanes and around a central ‘maidan’ (or ‘square’). There are three main sections:

1) Tamil Sai Nagar – the oldest and cleanest area of the slum, positioned by the public toilets
2) Gautam Nagar – the poorer area of the slum, home to its Maharashtran Dalit community
3) The road at the entrance to the slum, without huts, where many of the scavengers sleep

Six out of the 3,000 residents have permanent jobs. The rest are part of the informal work sector.

35 out of the 3,000 residents are Muslim.

Annawadi is part of Ward 76, run by Corporator Subhash Sawant, a member of the Shiv Sena party.
In *Behind The Beautiful Forevers* Katherine Boo shines a rare light on India’s informal rubbish collecting industry. Here we explore some of the characters’ jobs and how they fit into the wider picture.

Sunil is a PICKER. He makes his living collecting rubbish which he then sells to Abdul, who is a SORTER. Abdul’s family run a successful business buying rubbish off the pickers, ‘sorting’ it out into different types of material, and then selling it on to recycling companies.

On average, Mumbai currently produces around 8,000 tonnes of rubbish every day. As in many developing countries, the government struggles to deal with the management of this huge quantity of waste. The services provided by the likes of Sunil and Abdul are therefore of considerable environmental and social significance.

Approximately 60 to 80% of India’s plastic waste is collected, separated and recycled by the pickers and sorters of the informal waste industry, giving the country one of the most impressive plastic recycling rates in the world.

The ‘pickers’, also known as ‘scavengers’ or ‘chugnewallahs’, collect waste from a combination of dustbins, rubbish dumps and the streets. Sunil and Abdul live in the Annawadi slum next to Mumbai International Airport. The airport is a lucrative picking ground often overrun with scavengers, particularly the area where the cargo is loaded onto the aeroplanes. The average distance covered on foot each day by a picker is 5 km. Their average wage is 15 to 20 rupees per day, which equates to roughly 15 to 20p. The waste they deal with is known as *kooda-kacchra*, meaning it is ‘wet’ and often contaminated by decomposing food and faeces. As Sunil tells us at the start of the play, everything, from a discarded ketchup packet to a broken umbrella handle, can be of value to a picker.

Picking is a job fraught with risk – whether judging the drop between a wall and a dumpster, dodging the weaponwielding guards, or trying to run away from the other pickers intent on stealing his wares, Sunil has to constantly stay alert. And competition is fierce: the number of pickers is on the increase, given the scarcity of permanent jobs in the city.

Furthermore, as Karam, Abdul’s father, bemoans in the play, their livelihood is under threat from the government’s big ‘Clean Up’ campaign, supported by high-profile Bollywood celebrities and public figures. The success of this campaign would be financially disastrous for the thousands of families like theirs dependent on the informal waste industry.

A selection of plastic bottles used in rehearsal – in order to collect the huge number needed for the play our production team placed collection bins around the building asking everyone to donate their leftover bottles. Each bottle was sterilised for health and safety reasons, and then made to look dirty after!

Abdul uses a large set of scales, seen below in rehearsal, to weigh the rubbish brought to him each day by the pickers. The scales used in our production have been specially made.
Asha, Sunil and Abdul all talk about how ‘Government money is the best kind’.

- What do they mean?
- How does the play demonstrate the effects of corruption on the slum dweller communities?

Katherine Boo’s journalistic style presents the Annawadians not as passive victims of poverty but as active investigators into the wrongs of their society. How does this manifest in the play?

How does the play present Annawadi’s broad cultural diversity and the tensions this can cause, particularly in relation to the Hindu-Muslim divide and the caste system?

The play explores the complex layers of corruption endemic within the community.

- How many different examples of corruption can you identify?
- And how many different attitudes towards it?
- Who do you agree with most?

The play centres around two women, Zehrunisa and Asha, who exercise very different types of power. What are the differences in their approach?

The four key characters – Asha, Zehrunisa, Abdul and Sunil – undergo profound personal journeys between the start and end of the play. How and why do they change?

Manju believes in the power of education to lift her out of poverty. Meena does not. Who do you agree with, and why?

Was Zehrunisa right to refuse the first bribe? How have the production’s creative team managed to summon an authentic impression of Annawadi on stage?

What are the barriers to the Annawadians’ aspirations and successes?

How are the Annawadians’ lives affected by globalisation?

Who suffers the biggest injustice within the play?

The play is full of ethical provocations: do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- It’s not just that rich people don’t know what they’ve got. They don’t even know what they throw away. (Sunil, Act 1 scene 1)
- There’s a market in people just like there’s a market in rubbish. And Muslims in rubbish come bottom of the pile. (Zehrunisa, 1.10)
- In this life, you make your own luck. (Asha, 1.20)
- If you don’t think it’s wrong, then it isn’t. (Asha, 2.15)
- If you learn, you’ll have power. (Manju, 1.15)
- People say I’m a whore. How can I be a whore? Whores don’t choose. I choose. I’m in control! (Fatima, 1.13)
- I’m saying we’re all made from the same stuff. But we can make ourselves different. Like, for instance, water. It can be dirty water. Just water. Nothing else. Or it can be ice. Everything’s made of the same. But it can be better than what it’s made of. (Abdul, 2.13)
Interview: Meera Syal, playing Zehrunisa

How did you prepare and research for the role of Zehrunisa?
I think research is really important, particularly for a project like this which is based on real people and a real place. The first obvious thing was to read the book. I wrote down everything that was said about the character or that the character says about herself, under different titles like ‘marriage’, ‘motherhood’, ‘money’, all the things that make up a character. I’ve watched a lot of stuff about Mumbai – there are quite a few documentaries out there about the Mumbai slums. You get a feel for what it feels like living there – how people move, speak, what their daily activities are – and you can place where the character’s world is. The third layer is your points of emotional contact with the character. First and foremost Zehrunisa is a tiger mother – and I’m a mother. The way she fights for her children against every single odd is something that you really connect with as a mother. It’s about working from those connections and finding ways of feeding them into the scene. It’s a mixture of research and instinct – you inevitably say, ‘How would I feel if I was in this situation?’ You find your points of empathy.

How do you approach each scene in order to find those points of empathy and that sense of truthfulness?
Well, I’m not sure I’ve got there yet – we’re only in week four of rehearsal! The lines are down and the moves are done but there’s a lot of fine detail and layers to put in yet. It’s quite interesting watching documentaries about people who are in the middle of a struggle – real struggle, not the kinds of struggles we have – epic struggles about life and death and survival. What’s extraordinary is that they tell their stories without self-pity or sentimentality. I think people that are struggling and have struggled don’t dress it up, they don’t need to. The events that have happened to them are so big – it’s like when you see someone who has suffered a major trauma speaking about it on the news. They don’t go, ‘Oh my God!’: they say, ‘And then this happened – I saw my family swept away’. Some things are too big. Obviously it’s a play and we have to reach the audience right at the back of the stalls, but we also have to bring that clarity to it.

The characters are not only real people, they are real people who the writer and director have met. Has that affected your preparation and presented specific challenges for you as an actress?
I think you feel more of a sense of responsibility when you know that these are real people’s lives that you are trying to honour. It’s fantastic that we have the author of the book, who spent three years with these people, in rehearsal with us so she can answer any questions we have about a character. David Hare’s script teases out the dramatic spine of three years’ worth of events, which is a huge job. You definitely feel you want to honour what they’ve been through and not make it sentimental. I just remind myself that my job is to tell the stories as truthfully as possible, without sentimentality and without dressing it up – to let people into the lives of a bunch of extraordinary human beings and to bring that connection to a bigger audience and say, well this could be the poor anywhere.

Have there been any big challenges so far?
I do feel like the actor in search of the character at the moment. It’s a funny process this, sometimes you do a scene and think, ‘That was totally her!’. Then you do it the next time and it’s not there anymore – and that’s just about running through it and rooting it. The challenge with this particular role is to keep the through line very clear, because Zehrunisa starts off as queen of the slum and ends up destitute – it’s quite a fall from grace. There are a few scenes where things happen which would crack a lesser person and it’s about trying to chart that so the decline is gradual and believable. You can’t go to number ten crisis level on scene three, otherwise you’ve got nowhere else to go. It’s about finding the rhythm of it by running the scenes.
What does it feel like when you properly find your character? Has there been a moment in rehearsal where you have ‘synced’ with her? There has. There’s a scene where she’s so quiet – I really felt it there.

The scene where she visits Kehkashan in prison?
Yes. My own connection with her, being a mother and having my own grown-up daughter, really hit me. It’s a bit of a myth that you forget who you are and become your character, because you never quite forget who you are on stage – it’s a mixture of a lot of different things and, in the end, most actors are playing aspects of themselves. What you are doing is bringing truths from your history and emotion to mesh with the character, so it’s about finding those points of contact – and the points of contact with the other people on stage with you. You cannot act in a vacuum. You create a character, but the full characterisation comes when you are all on stage together, especially when playing family members.

Have there been any particular highlights for you in rehearsals so far?
I quite enjoyed getting my mouth around some seriously dirty insults, which I would never be allowed to say in real life, but because it’s in the play I can – there’s something really glorious about being given permission to swear!

How did you come to be an actor?
I didn’t go to drama school: I did English and drama at Manchester University. In the last year I created a one-woman monologue comedy show which I took to the Edinburgh Fringe with the National Student Drama Festival – I was chosen to go to the Fringe. I wasn’t going to go into acting, I didn’t think women like me did act – I had no role models or examples to follow. Naturally you think, ‘I won’t get any work, I mean, who’s going to cast me?’

Do you mean that in terms of where you lived and your ethnicity?
Ethnicity principally. You didn’t really see any Asian women out there, there were very few in a very small world – and it was a very stereotypical world – and certainly not in comedy, which is what I was doing a lot of. It was a four-year course at Manchester and I had an MA place lined up at Leeds doing drama and psychotherapy. The year after that I had a PGCE booked at Goldsmith’s – so I really had it all mapped out: I was going to work with children with learning difficulties through drama. And then, when I took this one-woman show to Edinburgh, a director from the Royal Court called Pal Hayman saw the show and offered me a job starting literally a couple of weeks after I graduated. I think I hesitated for all of half a second before I said all right! My parents thought that as I’d done my degree, I’d have that to fall back on if it didn’t work out. I think I would have kicked myself if I hadn’t given it a go. My Sliding Doors moment, really.

Is this the first time you’ve worked at the National?
It’s my third time – in 20-odd years it’s not a massive amount, so I’m happy to be back. The first time was Peer Gynt with Declan Donnellan, the second time was Rafta, Rafta with Nick [Hytner] and now I’m here with Rufus.

What made you say yes to this role?
A combination of things. I’d read Katherine’s book before I knew it was going to be a play and thought it was an amazing piece of work. When I heard it was going to become a play with David Hare scripting it and Rufus Norris directing I knew I wanted to be in it. I had no idea what I would be playing but thought I would do anything in this because it’s the kind of theatre I like. It’s relevant and big, and asks the big questions. I hope people come out feeling a little changed from it.
Can you tell me how you prepared to play your character, Sunil, before rehearsals started?

I don’t really know how to answer that. A lot of it was there already – I went to a government school back home in Sri Lanka, and it was close to something you would call an estate or a slum, almost; a lot of kids from there came to the school so I had a very diverse set of friends when I was young. I knew characters like Sunil and I was probably a bit like that when I was a kid: dirty! I had no inhibitions or concerns with keeping myself healthy. Also reading the book helped to get into it – the book is an amazing read.

You are the only cast member to have visited Annawadi, the real slum where the play is set – did that form a crucial part of your research?

It did. I went in February and I met Kehkashan and Mirchi. Mirchi took me around and showed me where Sunil’s father had rented a hut. Sunil hated to sleep there because the rats would nibble at his feet. It was an extraordinary experience. Everything makes sense when you are there. I didn’t meet Sunil which is a blessing and a curse. Sometimes I wish I had seen him. I would love to have learned some mannerisms, but I can see those in the video. What is different, playing a real character, is the responsibility to convey the character as truthfully as possible. What’s written in the script is somebody’s real life, real thoughts, real experiences – and you can’t take that for granted. It’s not sympathising with them, it’s understanding and being truthful.

He’s twelve and you are 28 – how has this impacted on your preparation?

I don’t think about it at all. I leave that to Rufus – if he cast me, he probably thinks that it works! It is a massive gap but I just think about the fun Sunil is having. It is easy in a way, because a 12-year-old would see things much more clearly than an adult would. We have so many filters as we grow up, but if he likes something he likes it. If he decides to do something he does it, without fear or being scared he’d break something or fall.

Do you have a set warm-up routine or way to prepare on a daily basis?

I come into rehearsals around 9.30am. I do a bit of warm-up before the official voice warm-up. It depends on what mood I am in, sometimes I have my headphones on, sometimes not. I do a lot of stuff I learnt at drama school – I had a voice teacher called Robert Price, who was fantastic – and I’m into calisthenics, which is body-weight exercises, rather than going to the gym, so I do that too. When you feel limber and warm it gives you a physical confidence. Sunil is described as this person who can climb and jump and not be inhibited – I want to be as close as I can to that.

You grew up in Sri Lanka, how have you come to find yourself here at the National Theatre in London?

It all starts in 2007. I used to do Sri Lankan theatre when I was back home, with a company called the Lanka Children’s and Youth Theatre Foundation. They used to do a lot of children’s plays – I’ve been a mouse, a monkey, a baby bear. Then in 2007 I heard that there was an audition happening (in English) at the British Council, led by someone from RADA. I went to the audition, got selected and ended up playing Romeo in a tri-lingual version of Romeo and Juliet – in English, Tamil and Sinhala. Afterwards I was asked if I would like to go to drama school. I didn’t really have a clear idea of what drama school was, but what I heard was ‘Would you like to go to England?’ Yes! I’d never been out of the country in my life, I was 23.

I was in awe of everything, from entering the airport, getting on a plane, flying, landing – and suddenly you’re in the midst of it. People here say Britain is a tiny island – it isn’t, it’s huge! We got on a train which was clean – it was brilliant – and went to Bristol. I got selected to go to drama school there, but I had three more auditions. It was very sweet: the person who walked me to the door told me they were supposed to wish me
Interview: Hiran Abeysekera, playing Sunil

luck for the other auditions but that ‘I would be very happy if you’d choose us’. I came back to London and auditioned for LAMDA, Guildhall and RADA – RADA was the last one. I got into LAMDA and Guildhall, which offered me a scholarship, and RADA, which offered me an even bigger scholarship. Then there was the issue of funding, how was I going to go to drama school? For the first term Sri Lankans back home helped me with half of the first year’s tuition fees but after that it was taken care of by sponsors and RADA funding.

You’ve been working professionally for…? I graduated in 2011, so three years.

And is this your first time working at the National? It is. It’s great. It’s crazy good.

Why is it so crazy good? It is something every actor dreams of – and it’s one of those landmark things. Everybody wants to work at the National. When you are here, it suddenly becomes the norm. The building, the staff – it is the dream, it is absolutely wonderful. Every day I buzz myself in with my key card and I go ‘Oh my god, I’m at the National!’

Have you had any particular rehearsal highlights so far? Yes. I get to play a woman at one point!

There is a lot of extreme trauma in the play, and with your character in particular, how have you managed to access and understand that? Has that been a particular challenge? When it comes to trauma a lot of it is already there. Everybody has something to take from. Sri Lanka went through a 25-year war and I was born in 1985, while the war was going on. I grew up hearing things about what was happening, even though I wasn’t in the war zone. Again, when it comes to hunger, I understand it. I wasn’t a street kid but my childhood wasn’t luxurious. If you look deep enough you’ve got it all there already; and when you don’t you do research.
Interview: Esh Alladi, playing Guard at Dongri / Defender

The role you are playing is based on a real person – has that altered your process? Yeah. I’ve never done that before. You don’t want to trivialise or broad-stroke anything in that life; you don’t want to paint by numbers or assume anything about them. Katherine and Rufus talked about the importance of us portraying them as complex people and about not diminishing everything that they are. As an actor it’s also about bringing theatricality and creativity to it using the information you have.

You play a lot of different characters – what are the challenges of taking on several roles? I used the book a lot and thought about each character being a whole person: how they move, how they interact, how they talk, what they do. I’m playing the brothel keeper in the slum scenes. He isn’t a named or scripted ‘part’ so you don’t really know who he is just from watching it but, as an actor, you make it real and attack it with the same rigour as if you were playing the lead: I’ve got my own little back-stories going on. They help me make that real. I’m also playing the prison guard. All we know about him from the book is that he is ‘pock-marked’; it doesn’t say anything else so we’ve had to fill in the gaps. It’s fun using those key Stanislavski questions to build the characters – Where am I from? Where was I born? What’s my objective?

There are so many different elements in this production: a complex set design, hundreds of costumes, wigs and props. How have those extra elements affected your preparation? It’s so helpful to have props in the room. How you move something or use an object can really inform how you stand and talk on stage. The way you move around can say a lot about a character – if you can twiddle your baton dextrously, you’re going to come across differently to someone who is just waving it around haphazardly without really knowing what they are doing. Costumes are also great. I love knowing what you are going to wear, especially shoes: if you know you are going to be in flip-flops or barefoot it helps you to literally walk in someone else’s shoes.

What have been your highlights of the rehearsal process so far? There are so many. It’s so relaxed and there’s a lot of laughter in the room. I don’t know if there is one particular day that has stood out yet – it still feels quite early in the whole process. I’m enjoying the dancing and being in the background of all the slum scenes. And I love my scene as the Guard in the Dongri detention centre: the boys make me laugh so much. It’s going to be so hard in performance not to corpse!

What’s your technique for not corpsing? I do multiplication tables in my head. I switch between the sevens and the nines and I start at weird numbers – 13 times nine is… and I have to figure it out. That’s a way of getting back into role when I know I’m slipping towards laughter.!

Can you share something of your journey up to this point in your career? I understand that you have multiple identities outside of this room…? I went through an unorthodox way of getting into acting. I’ve always wanted to be an actor and did a lot of stuff when I was a kid – a lot of dance: ballet, jazz, tap, modern. I then got into singing through theatre school, and did musicals – and then got into acting. I wanted to be Gene Kelly when I was a kid and obsessively watched *Singin’ in the Rain*. When I was 18 – or even younger than that, there weren’t very many Indian people in theatre. Meera and the *Goodness Gracious Me* team were the first Indian people I’d seen on TV who made any impact on me. I really had never seen any brown faces on TV before and didn’t know what would I do if I were to go into this business. At that time I quite liked musicals and had never seen an Indian face in a musical either – I still don’t think I have – so it didn’t feel like it was necessarily an option. Security is also an issue with acting work – you are always waiting for the next job: you can be really successful and still be waiting months for your next job. That’s something to be addressed. It’s not a lifestyle for everybody.
I come from a family of doctors so I went into medicine. Just before starting medicine I did a summer drama school for four weeks. It was like being in a drama school environment – it was called the Midsummer in Oxford, part of the British American Drama Academy. There were lots of American and British students coming together with teachers from schools all round the world – Juilliard, RADA, LAMDA, UCLA – and amazing people like Derek Jacobi doing workshops. It completely spoiled me because then I went into medicine and it was nowhere near as fun! But again, the problem of thinking I wasn’t going to get work in acting felt so paramount. I did loads of am-dram and student productions at university, finished medicine and worked full time as a doctor. But the itch never went away. I kept thinking, What if? I didn’t want to live with any regrets so I applied to drama school – just one – and thought I wouldn’t get in because I hadn’t acted for a few years by that point. I got in. I was supposed to go to Australia for a year to travel but none of that happened. I went to drama school for two years and it changed my life. I still practise medicine because you’ve got to get bread on the table, but since then I’ve been really lucky. This is my fourth project with the National.

**Empathy and compassion are important words for an actor.**
Yes, really important, especially for listening. To be able to look out for somebody else when acting is a very important thing otherwise you get totally internal – by looking out you make everything active and more available. You become more responsive in the moment.

**What made you say yes to this project?**
I loved the book. I’d read it when the National first announced they were doing the play, before they workshopped it in 2013. I thought it was a great, unsentimental view of life in the slum. It wasn’t dreary, either – ‘sex, drugs and corruption’. It was all that plus hope, joy and laughter. Because it was written so much like a story it was very engaging and read like a novel. It’s a very important project as well – something that other people don’t know about. I think people assume when they’ve seen *Slumdog Millionaire* that they have an idea about what life in a slum is like, and they also think it’s all dreary and awful. This will hopefully give people a deeper understanding of what it is to be living in poverty.

**Do you think the landscape is changing for British-Asian actors?**
I think the landscape has significantly changed since I was a child, but I don’t think it’s enough of a change. There is still a big opportunity to get Asian actors in a range of things and reflect the actual population we have in this country, especially in this city. I think things are probably moving in the right direction, but not fast enough. We need more writers and producers willing to put Asians into roles which aren’t specifically Asian, and for people to be more bold with their casting.

**Are there any similarities between being a doctor and an actor?!**
Being a doctor you have to act a lot. You see horrific injuries and accidents and you have to stay unflappable and cool. You have to stay in role. Even on your worst days you have to make sure you have compassion, energy and constant empathy for people, and remove any judgement you may naturally have.
You were part of the final research and development workshop week at the National Theatre Studio earlier this year. Can you tell us about what that involved?

For Rufus it was to develop a stage language so we could get an idea of how to join these 55 scenes together, and for David it was just to hear bits that he’d rewritten since the last workshop. It was basically in a similar shape as it is now, in terms of story arcs, but it has changed substantially from the first few workshops where the text is concerned. We got to try out some of Rufus’ transition ideas to work out how to make it look like a well-slicked machine.

What do you look for when you go through the script before rehearsals start?

I always try to work out who my character is, what it is they are trying to say, and what their challenges are. Everyone has a problem or objective, a reason for being in that room or that place. I tried to work out what my character, Kehkashan, is trying to do and how she is trying to do it. And also what her relationship is with other people in the room, because I think you are shaped by your friends and your family. I try to work out who I am playing from facts in the script. Straight away I really liked Kehkashan. From the minute we meet her we see she wears her heart on her sleeve and has an interesting relationship with her mother. They are like sisters, but at the same time not. And my relationship with my own mother is really similar – our relationship is like two friends or two older women. It was so enticing to finally be able to play that on stage with a character.

How did you crystallise what Kehkashan’s problem is and what she’s trying to do?

Often it’s not so evident and you really have to dig deep, but it is quite clear from Kehkashan’s first entrance that she is in an emotional battle with her Mum and with herself. She is in love with somebody who she was set up with via an arranged marriage. She has learned to love that person and thought that was all you really needed for a successful relationship. But, unlike with her parents, that wasn’t enough. This was incredibly evident from the first read – I then had to work out what the conflict was. She guilt-trips and berates her mum a lot. Is that because she believes her mum is the root cause of her problem? Or is it more of a conflict with herself and trying to get her own head round it?

What else have you learned about your character since coming into rehearsal?

My gut instinct was to play Kehkashan as very hard-edged – someone who wasn’t going to take any rubbish from anybody, and who was going to really nail her mum with the responsibility for what was happening. But, since reading the book, seeing some documentary footage of Kehkashan and working out who she is through reading her scenes, I’ve discovered she is the ‘glue’ holding her family together. She is the mediator who tries to stop people fighting. I’ve realised that she has a lot more heart than I was playing her with before, and she is a lot less feisty. I think characters always change. If you try to fix the way you play them too early, you are in danger of playing them in a two-dimensional way. You need to keep evolving and adding bits – that’s how you reach a rounded person.

What does your research look like?

I love researching, especially if it’s a time period or a country that’s fascinating. I’ve been to India five times but I don’t know nearly as much as I know about my home city (Nottingham) – it’s so huge. I read a lot, if I can’t get footage of the time. I try to watch as many documentaries as I can, to help me be specific about where I am placing things and people. I did loads of that and spoke to my Mum a lot.
Interview: Anjli Mohindra, playing Kehkashan Husain, Zehrunisa’s daughter

Is your family from India?
She’s from Delhi, and my family are from Punjab. My family are Hindu, but my character Kehkashan is Muslim. Despite the religious differences, many of the cultural values and external stimuli that shape Kehkashan are similar — how she helps keep the house, for example, and what is expected of her, like going to live with her new husband once married, are the same. Katherine Boo’s book is so brilliant at sharing character thoughts – what Kehkashan was thinking in the court room, for example, or that she found her plastic shoes really uncomfortable. You can try to discover these things yourself, but when they are there in the book, and so specific, you are so lucky.

Can you tell us a little about your journey to the National? How did you first get into acting?
I have always wanted to act because I loved playing as a child. Board games were interesting for me, but not as much as letting my imagination go wild and playing doctors and nurses and seeing where that took us! When I was 11, I joined an acting group in Nottingham called the Television Workshop which trains a lot of actors for the screen. There were two auditions, 20 kids got in each year, and once you were accepted, you got to go there twice a week. I was there until I was 18. I thought I wanted to go to university so I worked hard at my A-Levels and was all ready to study something called Economics – but I couldn’t even tell you what economics means! I was trying to shoehorn my way into a career that would sustain me and let me do acting on the side, I suppose. Then I got a part in a Doctor Who spin-off series for three years, which showed my parents that acting could be possible as a career choice. And it gave me a real taste for acting because I was doing it all day, every day. And that was it, there was no going back. That led me to get little parts in things like Doctors and Casualty. But I love doing theatre: starting at the beginning and finishing at the end every night. I’ve always wanted to work here. I’ve worked at a few regional theatres, but this is my first time in London and at the National.