EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE

Background Pack
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**Welcome to the National Theatre’s background pack for Evening at the Talk House.**

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

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.

Jane Ball  
Programme Manager, NT Learning  
March 2016
The National Theatre production of
Evening at the Talk House

a new play by Wallace Shawn

Characters, in order of speaking:

Robert
Dick
Bill
Ted
Annette
Nellie
Tom
Jane

Josh Hamilton
Wallace Shawn
Joseph Mydell
Stuart Milligan
Naomi Wirthner
Anna Calder
Simon Shepherd
Sinéad Matthews

Ian Rickson
Quay Brothers
Soutra Gilmour
Neil Austin
Stephen Warbeck
Maxine Doyle
Ian Dickinson
Jeanette Nelson
Diyan Zora

Production Manager
Casting
Stage Manager
Deputy Stage Manager
Assistant Stage Manager
Assistant Production Manager
Project Draughting
Costume Supervisor
Wigs, Hair & Make-up
Supervisor
Prop Supervisor
Prop Buyer
Lighting Supervisor
Lighting Programmer
Production Sound Engineer
Sound & Video Supervisor
Sound Operator
Stage Supervisor
Rigging Supervisors

Construction Supervisor
Scenic Art Supervisor
Production Photographer

Tariq Rifaat
Wendy Spon
David Marsland
Olivia Bardsley
Maisy Wyer
Emma Morris
Lydia Crimp
Kim Kasim
Rebecca Johnston
Claire Auvache
Paul Knott
Kate Greaves
Kyle MacPherson
Alex Caplen
Matthew Ferrie
Dave Malaley
Riche Tarr
and Kieran Gonzalez
Barrie Nield
Ian Cooper
Catherine Ashmore

Josh Hamilton is appearing with the support of UK Equity, incorporating the Variety Artistes’ Federation, pursuant to an exchange programme between American Equity and UK Equity.

The World Premiere of Evening at the Talk House took place in the Dorfman Theatre on 24 November 2015.
Cover Photograph by John Bentham.
Poster designed by National Theatre Graphic Design Studio.
The play is set in a ‘Talk House’ in an unspecified era and country. This evening, there is a gathering to mark the ten-year anniversary of the play, Midnight in a Clearing with Moon and Stars. Recent political developments in the unnamed country include the government operating a ‘Programme of Murdering’ in which people who are, or may soon become, enemies of the state are executed by other civilians.

Characters, in order of speaking:

**Robert** – The writer of Midnight, now a writer for TV

**Dick** – Once a famous actor who auditioned for Midnight, he has fallen on hard times and is currently staying at the Talk House

**Bill** – The producer of Midnight, now a talent agent

**Ted** – The composer for Midnight, now writes music for adverts

**Annette** – The wardrobe supervisor for Midnight, now does tailoring and repairs for private clients

**Nellie** – The matron of the Talk House

**Tom** – The star of Midnight, now a famous TV actor

**Jane** – Once an aspiring actress, now back working in the Talk House with Nellie

Robert delivers a monologue in which he explains that it was Ted who suggested a reunion to mark the tenth anniversary of the opening night of Midnight in a Clearing with Moon and Stars. The Talk House was chosen as the venue because the cast and crew used to go there after performances ten years previously. Robert considers Midnight his best play, but due to a drastic decline in theatre-going, he now writes for television instead. He describes theatre as ‘utterly and irredicibly about a small group of humans sitting and staring at another small group of humans – an animal process – an animal process that completely lacked art.’

As the evening’s guests arrive at the Talk House to be greeted by Nellie and Jane, Robert gives a brief explanation of each person’s role on Midnight and how they are doing now. Suddenly, a blanket on the bench at the back of the room begins to move and Dick emerges from underneath it. Robert is shocked to see this once famous actor he never thought he would see again. Dick has clearly fallen on hard times since the height of his success as a TV actor, judging by his down-at-heel appearance and injuries to his face.

Dick downplays his wounds, saying ‘I was beaten, rather recently, by some friends, but you see, I actually enjoyed it very much, in the end.’ He elaborates, saying that he was about to cross a line, so his friends got together and gave him an ‘informal’ beating to stop him. Dick reminisces about the old days and says he knows that Robert didn’t think him a good actor, which Robert denies. But Dick insists that Robert had an issue with hatred towards people and that Robert did not give him a part in Midnight because he hated him. As Dick continues speaking, he starts to choke, convulse and speak incoherently. Robert rushes to get him some water as the rest of the party join them.

They greet Dick, some concerned that he may be having a seizure, others believing he is just drunk, and look to Nellie to explain what is going on. She says that this is the result of being beaten up rather frequently and that she has given Dick a room upstairs until he recovers. Reassured, the guests ask Nellie to join them in their celebratory drinks, but Nellie says she only drinks her ‘Emerald Surprise’ when she is hosting. She shares her memories from the old days of the Talk House when it was a much livelier place with a younger, well-dressed crowd who sang songs until two in the morning. She is sorry not to see them any more, apart from Tom, who she sees on-screen in his television show. He is bored of his successful show now, but Nellie encourages him to keep making it.

Talk turns to their play Midnight, which Nellie praises, despite the critical reviews it received at the time. When she asks why there is no more theatre any more, they give many different reasons: ‘it sort
of got very quiet,’ ‘the plays got too sad,’ ‘change is inevitable.’

While the snacks are being served, Tom asks Nellie what she thinks about the frequency of the elections in recent times. She replies that ‘every three months is almost irritating. And I mean, Ackerley almost always wins anyway, you know, almost always, and he’s had the job for much too long.’ Bill chips in, ‘You know, I like Ackerley, and I like Rodman – I’ve voted for Rodman more than once –’ Tom has met Ackerley before and was impressed with how quickly and skilfully he analysed a book that Tom lent him. Tom describes Rodman as ‘Ambitious... there’s something rather agreeable about his sort of almost hedonistic enjoyment of the game.’ Jane and Nellie leave once the snacks have all been served.

Bill takes up the thread of the discussion of Ackerley and Rodman, ‘Well of course, they’re both well-meaning people, and they’re bright and hard-working... I just can’t stand that “Programme of Murdering.”’ This leads to a discussion of the vote-winning success of the programme, especially in rural areas. Bill doesn’t think it’s right to take enormous numbers of lives just to win rural votes, but Annette says it isn’t ‘enormous numbers.’ In fact, government policies in other areas such as drug regulation costs many more lives in comparison. She compares the programme to ‘something one does behind one’s own back, so to speak, like something slightly unpleasant one does with one’s ass once a day or so without paying it really a lot of attention.’ Tom understands this but worries about whether they can be sure to murder the right people. Annette assures him they are very good at ‘targeting’ the correct people, but Bill is not convinced: ‘What makes you think you know anything about it?’ Annette: ‘Well – I’ve done it, darling.’ Tom, Robert and Bill express some surprise. But Annette says she needed the money and that she is not ashamed of it, reasoning that half the people they know have done it too. Bill is shocked at this, and disagrees, but Annette holds fast to her argument. Ted supports her and says he’s done it too: ‘It’s a very simple, mechanical process, and that’s all. Don’t you know that children are being trained to do it in school?’ He explains the process: ‘We’re targeting people who pose a threat to us. We’re applying a list of criteria to people.’ Bill remains appalled by the system that Annette and Ted have taken part in, and tries to highlight the difficulty of knowing whether someone is truly a threat or not. Annette reveals she targeted shepherds in Malaysia who were being trained in the use of explosives. Dick now gets involved in the argument, saying ‘Damn – but what would happen if these dangerous, malevolent sheep-herders figured out how to use the same techniques against us that we’re using against them?’ Annette ignores Dick and reminds everyone of a frightening incident five years previously where some kind of gas, possibly mustard gas, was ‘floating across the river.’ She believes that everyone is less afraid of ‘those people’ now that the Programme of Murdering is in place. Bill announces that their conversation reminds him of a guy from Leonard Malville’s old show. It’s a slightly unflattering comparison but in the end they all laugh and the conversation moves on.

Dick shares the story of Daphne Albright, who died at a restaurant the previous week. ‘They say she kept getting up to use the bathroom, and then at a certain point, she came back from the bathroom, and she started making these weird noises, these weird sounds like “Erk erk erk.”’ Bill thinks it sounds like exactly what happened to Nestor Crawley too. Dick says it’s a technique that has been around for years, and involves dropping tiny little grey pellets into a person’s drink. Ted thinks it’s an ‘awful way to go’ but Bill reckons ‘it could be worse.’ Dick admonishes him to think more carefully before saying something like that, ‘I can’t help but believe that if you casually make light of some particular form of human suffering – a disease, say, or some type of calamity, or, you know, as in this case, a manner of dying – then quite possibly that form of suffering will take offence at it somehow and will somehow return to make you regret your remark.’ Annette thinks this is a horrible thing to say when they are all trying to have a pleasant evening, but Dick defends himself, saying that Daphne and Nestor were trying to have pleasant evenings too, ‘They just happened to be people whose behaviour became somewhat...’ and he mimics animal-like behaviour... “grr – grr – grr” for which they were rewarded with evenings that were not pleasant.’

When Dick leaves to help Nellie in the kitchen, Tom complains that Dick has become a poisonous snake, and Annette asks Jane why they let him stay at the Talk House. She says that they do their best, which Annette thinks is not good enough. The group invite Jane to sit down with them and fill them in on her life since they last saw her years before. She begins by mentioning a small part she had on the television show Mouse Chatter. This leads to a discussion of the show, with Robert finally saying ‘naturally they hired the worst writers, the worst directors – it’s really a miracle it lasted as long as it did.’ There’s an awkward silence until Tom prompts Jane to tell them...
what happened after *Mouse Chatter* ended. She tells them she did a few other shows and plays before going abroad to work as a murderer for the ‘Special Areas Project’. She worked in Nigeria and Indonesia, and she ‘stuck people with – you know – pins, I guess – I mean, I shouldn’t laugh, because it was actually awful – but I scratched people, basically.’ Occasionally she had to kill people ‘more directly’ when people who would not put up a fight, such as the elderly, would curl up in a ball and she would ‘stick’ them. Eventually she returned home and started to work for Nellie at the Talk House again.

Tom muses on the fact that Nigeria is one of the worst territories for their television show – almost nobody watches it there. Robert counters that Luxembourg is even worse for them. Jane remarks that the most successful show in Luxembourg is *The Ocean of Blood*, which surprises everyone. The group goes on to gossip about mutual acquaintances.

Nellie and Dick come into the room carrying a cake with *Midnight in a Clearing with Moon and Stars* written on it, much to everyone’s delight. Nellie thinks someone should read from the play to mark the occasion. Robert and Tom refuse to read, so Dick steps in to read the ‘bowl of raspberries’ speech. It is a speech given by the victor in a battle before a triumphal feast, detailing how he intends to sit at home with just a bowl full of raspberries in order to prepare for another battle the following day. It ends, ‘My dear companions – may you long continue to protect each other and take delight in each other, while I head out down my separate path.’ His listeners applaud, and Tom says ‘Damn – I never did the speech that well. Never.’ Nellie leads the party to have coffee in the library, leaving Robert and Jane alone together.

Jane is worried about Dick, and about ‘how much longer he’ll be allowed live. I mean, everyone’s incredibly tolerant of him because everyone really loved that show – it was such a great show – but at a certain point people do lose patience.’ That was what happened to José who was killed in the street. The fact everybody loved José’s show only helped him up to a certain point. Robert agrees that Dick’s show was too long ago to help him, and he thinks Dick was never a good actor anyway. He also questions the point of Nellie giving Dick permission to stay at the Talk House. He doesn’t think this is a good idea – if Dick is not at his flat and has not let anyone know where he is, then it might look like Nellie is hiding him at the Talk House. Robert says it would be a good idea to leave a message at Dick’s flat saying where he is, and Jane doesn’t disagree. She begins to get anxious about the fact Dick is staying at the Talk House with Tom and Robert in the building at the same time. ‘You’re an important person now, you’re a public person. And Tom, my God. I must have been completely out of my mind. No one should see either of you here in the same building as someone like Dick.’

Despite Robert’s protests that she is a talented actress, she doesn’t believe she is funny enough to get any roles and she is ‘past all that now.’ She admits she does remember their sexual history. But all she wants now is to be dead. ‘To be absolutely frank, what I dream about is the possibility of just walking out of the Talk House late one night, walking down the street, and without my even noticing it, having someone shoot me in the back of the neck… Don’t tell me yes or no, but if you happen to have the ability to make that happen, I’d be very grateful.’

The rest of the party return from the library in high spirits and mostly drunk. Nellie encourages them all...
to come back more often, and Ted says ‘nothing could be nicer.’ Nellie excuses herself, saying ‘God, I can’t stop using the bathroom this evening.’ Jane builds on Nellie’s invitation, saying that some of the people from Tom and Robert’s show would have a great time at the Talk House, Timmy Barette for instance. An increasingly drunk Robert laughs at this suggestion, embarrassing Jane.

When Nellie returns from the bathroom, she says, ‘Now, I was trying to think of that hilarious sound that Daphne Albright made.’ Nellie does an impression of it, laughing and making the sound repeatedly as she wanders out of the room again. Jane calls after her, ‘I think we’ve got the idea, Nellie,’ but she keeps making the same sound. Bill tells Jane he thinks she should go and see if something is wrong with Nellie, Annette goes instead and the sounds stop. Meanwhile the talk returns to Timmy Barette.

When Annette returns, everyone looks at her in horror as the realisation sinks in: those animal noises stopping mean that Nellie has been murdered. There is silence as the lights flicker off. Nellie is dead, and one of the people in the room must have poisoned her.
Our first morning is all about getting to know each other. The director, Ian Rickson, leads us through a series of games and exercises that put our bodies at ease and focus our minds. Each of the games has some connection with the play. For example, we get into pairs and talk about reunions we have been to, clubs we have been part of, and toasts we have given. Not only is it a great way to learn about each other, it also allows us to start engaging with the circumstances of the play in a relaxed way. Everyone's experiences and responses have become a treasure trove of material that will enrich the performances.

We have a cast of eight actors, some from America, some from the UK. The range of voices in the room has led to some fascinating conversations around the table. We’ve been working through the text at a steady pace, asking lots of questions along the way. We are trying to tease out the objectives that are driving the characters at any given moment. To do this, we need to consider many different things, including the details of a character’s history, or their backstory. Ian encourages plenty of spontaneous improvisations around the table, which have helped us build a shared memory of how relationships were formed before the play began. We’ve also been using visual aids, whether it be a picture of a London member’s club or a famous person as a reference point for someone mentioned in the play. All of these details will add colour to the performances, and create clearer pictures for the audience.

We have also been exploring the wider world of our play. Adam Curtis, the documentary film-maker, visited us during the week, which was an exciting chance to talk about some of the big ideas in the play. Adam’s film *The Power of Nightmares* felt particularly relevant: a crucial element of the play is fear of ‘the other,’ an issue that has huge contemporary resonance. We also had a visit from Susie Orbach, a leading psychotherapist. She helped us navigate some of the group dynamics that dominate the play. If we perceive our gathering as the reuniting of a tribe, who are the power players and how do they exert that power? How does envy dictate how we interact? Some of our actors had some impromptu therapy in character, which was extraordinary to watch. We had only been in rehearsal for four days, but the actors are already revealing a rich understanding of their character’s needs.

It feels as though we’ve already uncovered a wealth of detail, and there’s plenty more to excavate. The point is not to find answers, but rather clues and reference points that can unlock the play, both for ourselves and for the audience. One of the actors mentioned on Friday that it has felt like a process of osmosis, details gently filtering into his subconscious throughout the week. In the next few weeks, that detail will become a tapestry of shared understanding that we will all call on when we start bringing the play to its feet.
Our second week of rehearsals has felt like a huge leap forward. When we started rehearsing, we were breaking the play down into smaller chunks via a microscopic lens so the main event of this week was our first read-through. A 90-minute play with no act or scene changes, it is extraordinary to hear *Evening at the Talk House* from beginning to end, because so much of last week’s detailed work has already settled into the actors’ minds and bodies. The read-through is a chance for us all to get a sense of the wider journey of this play.

We do a second read-through that same day, but this time Ian has swapped all the parts. Not only is everyone reading a different part, but every ten pages or so, the parts switch again. It is an incredibly useful exercise. First, it is a chance for the actors to hear the play as a whole without the responsibility of performing their own part. Second, every actor brings their own instincts and responses to each scene, revealing to us just how many options we have. Third, it is an extraordinary chance to play and have fun; our play has eight characters, and hilarity ensues when the parts change and everyone is trying to work out who is who.

In some ways it can be difficult to make the transition from table work to rehearsing on your feet. It’s important to keep the rehearsals open and playful, so the actors can experiment and take risks. Ian’s process very much allows for that. Since there was so much improvisation in the first week, the actors already have a series of shared memories and backstories that create a sense of familiarity in the space. Our setting is a Talk House, and we already know what this place meant to each character previously and what it means to them now. This is brilliant ammunition for the actors when they rehearse in situ. There is plenty left to explore, but our starting point is already rich in detail.

Our movement director, Maxine Doyle, started by leading a series of exercises designed to ensure the actors are attuned to the different ways they can use their bodies on stage. We spent a morning working through the seven states of tension, an approach developed by Jacques Lecoq. State One is the lowest level of physical tension, Seven the highest. The actors worked through each state in turn, reading lines or engaging in basic physical activities and feeling how the varying levels of tension affected what they were doing. The beauty of this approach is that it makes you aware of the huge range of possible physical states; on a day-to-day basis, our bodies can go from relaxed to tense in a heartbeat, and the actors on stage must have the capacity to embody that same emotional journey in their physicality. It has become another language we can use in the room when talking about scenes.

We have also been discovering the physical landscape of our play. We already have a detailed creative framework, courtesy of The Quay Brothers, who designed our set. But there are spaces that we need to use our imaginations to fill; what is to the left of our room, and to the right? What is behind that door, and just upstairs, out on the street, in the city itself? This special awareness is key to the actors’ movements on stage. In very basic terms, it adds story to every entrance and exit, but in wider terms, it helps us create a more complete world on stage. There’s a great sense of creative freedom in the room, which makes for really exciting rehearsals. It feels as though anything can happen when we are watching a scene unfold. I get the sense that we will be discovering new details right up until our final show, which is testament to the richness of the text, but also the openness of the process.
Our third week of rehearsals has flown by. We are now working through the play on our feet, trying different things and establishing some basic blocking. Everyone is keen to keep playing, but a basic framework is developing which everyone can use as a starting point. At any given moment, a scene can be played in a variety of ways. Ian very much wants the actors to maintain a sense of freedom on stage. When something works really well, it can be tempting to confirm it as the final way the scene will be played. However, we are only halfway through our rehearsals, and there is so much more to find.

We are still using improvisations regularly, to flesh out the circumstances of the play. At this point, we have so much shared knowledge that the improvisations can go on longer. There are many characters mentioned in the play whom we never see, and it’s crucial that everyone has a clear vision of who that person is. We improvise situations with those characters, creating backstories about relationships and events before the play begun. It’s comparable to an iceberg, in the sense that what you see on stage is the very tip, but there’s a huge mass beneath the surface. The rehearsal process has been defined by seeking out the information that will give the show greater depth.

We are in a rehearsal space that has been fully marked out by the stage management team. What that means is that we can rehearse in a space of the exact size and shape of the set we will eventually perform in. That spatial framework is incredibly useful. With eight actors on stage for most of the play, we need to think about how we can use the space to its full potential. It’s essential that the actors are constantly being driven by their objectives, and this applies just as much to their movement as it does to the way they say the lines. We play lots of games in rehearsals that help with spatial awareness. The team have grown very fond of a particular version of volleyball that is especially good fun. However, it is also a really useful exercise for making the actors aware of each other’s movements and how to work as a physical team on stage.

We made extraordinary progress throughout the week, so it felt like a well deserved treat to pay a visit to some private members’ clubs in Soho on Friday to research our setting. We spent the morning walking through Soho, stopping off along the way at various clubs and speaking with the staff. Most of the ones we visited are run by women, who generously shared stories and anecdotes from their daily lives. Old bohemian clubs in that area are famous for being a home away from home, a retreat from the hustle and bustle of city life. It’s a truly unique environment, one that we will be better able to recreate on stage after having experienced the real thing.
Rehearsal call

DAYTIME AT VARIOUS TALK HOUSES

FULL COMPANY to meet at:

10.15am    THE UNION CLUB, 50 Greek Street, London W1D 4EQ    (020 7734 4113)
11.30am    BLACKS CLUB, 67 Dean St, London W1D 4QH    (020 7287 3381)

IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER
MAISON BERTAUX, 28 Greek Street, London W1D 5DQ    (020 7437 6007)
and
ACADEMY CLUB, 46 Lexington Street, London W1F 0LP    (020 7437 5708)

LUNCH    2 BRYDGES PLACE, Charing Cross, London WC2N 4HP    (020 7240 7659)
12.30/1.00pm

Afternoon    Rehearsal Room 3
Miss Calder-Marshall
Miss Matthews
Miss Wirthner
Mr Hamilton
Mr Milligan
Mr Mydell
Mr Shawn
Mr Shepherd

6.00pm    CALL ENDS

EVENING AT ANOTHER TALK HOUSE

COMPANY TREAT:

7.00pm    GUARDIAN LIVE EVENT:
Yanis Varoufakis and Paul Mason in conversation
Central Hall Westminster, London SW1H 9NH

8.30pm    EVENT FINISHES

Thank you

David Marsland
Stage Manager
We have a six-week rehearsal period for Evening at the Talk House. Rehearsal periods can vary depending on the project, but the average is four weeks. As we enter our fourth week of rehearsals, it is thrilling to know that we still have time to keep playing. It has given us a sense of freedom that is very evident when we try a scene. The actors are continually trying new things.

The process of getting ‘off book’ on a text differs from actor to actor; some arrive at rehearsals with many of their lines learned, others prefer to use the rehearsal process as a kind of gateway to memorising the words. Everyone appreciates how important it is to be precise; in practical terms, making an error on a line can throw an actor off for the rest of a speech, but more importantly, precision on the lines is the basis of finding the right intention. Ian often helps the actors with line slips by referencing the objective of the line. We also have a fantastic stage manager on the book who is always ready if an actor needs prompting. The more the actors are off book, the easier it is for them to experiment with their characters’ journeys. The play is so rich in subtle nuances that we could rehearse for much longer without running out of ideas.

This week marked our first ‘run-through.’ Rather than doing it in the rehearsal room, we all gathered in one of the actor’s living rooms. Our Talk House is run by Nellie, played by Anna Calder-Marshall, and Jane, played by Sinéad Matthews. We have spent a lot of time thinking about what makes this Talk House special. It needs to feel like a home away from home; a place where you are welcomed with open arms; where you can be nourished and replenished. This isn’t an easy thing to achieve. You need to consider everything, from the food you serve to the way you light the room, and everything in between. Ian suggested Anna and Sinéad prepare a party for the cast (as their characters do in the play) so that we could all experience the delights of a real-life Talk House. As we gathered in the living room, it was clear every detail had been considered. Tiny candles had been placed in hidden corners, creating a cosy warmth that set you at ease immediately. An incredible array of snacks had been laid out, combining all sorts of delicious and varied ingredients. A record was playing at just the right volume, a kind of steady hum beneath the buzz of chatter. As our drinks were poured and our plates were filled, we all began to feel what the Talk House could be.

A run wasn’t necessarily planned; at any point, the actors could have stopped, or asked to go over something again. Instead, they worked through the entire play at a steady pace. Wallace Shawn’s play The Fever was first performed in living rooms, and I saw that evening how evocative that intimacy could be. The actors moved wherever the feeling took them, sometimes huddled closely together, sometimes seeking distance across the room. Whole scenes took on new life, aided by the food, flickering candles and faces half hidden in low-level lighting.

That experience really sanctified the uniqueness of the Talk House as we imagine it. Entering the final fortnight of rehearsals, we will do many more runs, but each will be richer because of our real-life evening at the Talk House.
We started our fifth week of rehearsals by gathering in the Dorfman Theatre. We had visited the theatre already, but now we had time to play in the room that will soon become our home. It was exciting to see the actors on stage. We all know that we are preparing something that will be performed, but stepping into the space inevitably crystallised that fact in our minds.

Throughout rehearsals, we have been exploring the inner lives of the characters and excavating their deepest needs. We need that detail to translate to our audience, so stepping into the theatre was an opportunity to look outwards. Our voice coach, Jeannette Nelson, was there to help the actors find the right level of voice resonance. Jeannette led the cast through a full voice warm-up. They then ran lines on stage and around the theatre, exploring what level felt right at various moments. For example, if a character is sharing something private on stage, their volume might reduce, but they can still maintain a resonance in their voice that will mean the furthest seats still hear what is being said. We ran the play on Wednesday, with the creative team as our audience. This was the actors’ opportunity to piece everything together in the theatre; to experience their characters’ overall journey and get a sense of their own parts in relation to the whole. It was also an opportunity for us to see where we are, and just how far we have come. Having a small audience was really exciting, because it helped us experience the play through fresh eyes. Jokes that we had forgotten landed afresh, and the tension was more palpable than ever when a scene reached its climax.

Brilliantly, the actors used the run as a chance to keep playing. When we rehearse a scene, it is never the case that we say ‘this is how the scene will be.’ There might be some basic boundaries, because of some element of blocking that needs to be respected, but in essence, the actors are still free to keep exploring choices in any given moment. We did another run on Friday, and once again, the actors explored new things. Ian had given the actors a ‘point of concentration,’ which is usually a certain detail that the cast can use to colour their performance. Points of concentration can be very simple, like an awareness of time or space, or a particular fact in the play that affects everyone. It shouldn’t dramatically change anything; rather, as we saw in that second run, it can add texture to certain scenes, or give an actor more drive at a particular moment.

One of the actors mentioned that he felt like he would be discovering new things until the final show. As we enter our final week of rehearsals, it is apparent that we will be playing and exploring to the very last day.
Our sixth week of rehearsals commenced with a run of the play. As we gathered on Monday morning, we all wanted the opportunity to work through from start to finish, to get a sense of where we were and what still needed work. A run after a weekend off gave the play a fresh and renewed energy; time away from rehearsals had allowed different ideas to settle, and it was the perfect way to begin our final week.

When the play’s eight characters gather in the Talk House, we watch their evening unfold in real time, with no scene changes. This structure means that some characters are never off stage. It’s useful therefore to rehearse long sections of the play in one go, which is what we have been doing. This allows us to explore as much of the journey as possible, whilst still fine-tuning where needed.

For those characters that do exit the space, we have explored their offstage story in as much detail as possible. We use improvisations to do this, setting up the exact course of events that happen off stage in various rooms in the Talk House. Not only does this give the actors a sense of their whole journey throughout the evening, it also gives specificity to the objectives they bring on stage with each entrance.

Finding the wider world of the play has been a continuous process of discovery. The text is full of clues about the political, social and economic world the Talk House is set in, and we have been excavating that information right up until our final week. We have run improvisations about the political leaders, played status games exploring who has financial power and who doesn’t, and even drawn maps referencing every physical space mentioned in the play, whether that be a restaurant, a river or a character’s house. All this information makes for brilliantly detailed improvisations because the actors have so much to draw on. It also makes our offstage world as clear as our on-stage one.

Towards the end of the week, we did a run-through with an invited audience. This was the first time we had a large number of people watching, most of whom knew nothing about the play. This wasn’t a performance as such; everyone in attendance knew they were watching a rehearsal. However, the fact of having an audience was incredibly exciting. It was a rare and exhilarating opportunity to discover how a roomful of strangers might respond to the play before previews have even begun. A team of students got front row seats, and were the most brilliantly attentive audience a cast could ask for. The responses were palpable; we felt when the audience were moved to silence, when they were tickled or shocked or unnerved.

At the end of the week we arrived at the Dorfman to begin our technical time. Tech is the moment when all the production and creative elements of a show are pieced together. This was our first chance to see the set in place, and everyone in costume. No detail has been overlooked, from tiny hairpieces worn by the actresses to magnificent wall art adorning our Talk House. We work through the play on stage, plotting in all the light and sound cues that will colour and shape the show, seeing for the first time the sum of all the parts on stage.
Rehearsal call

Rehearsal Call
Tuesday 17th November 2015
Dorfman Theatre

1.00pm    Warm-up
          With Jeannette

1.15pm    Hair & Make-up calls start

1.25pm    Half Hour Call

2.00pm    DRESS REHEARSAL 2
          NB: Production
          Photographs will be taken
          this afternoon

          followed by
          Notes and Work on Stage

5.30pm    DINNER

6.55pm    Warm-up
          With Jeannette

7.15pm    Hair & Make-up calls start

7.25pm    Half Hour Call

8.00pm    PREVIEW 1

Thank you

David Marsland
Stage Manager