National Theatre

Background Pack

John
By Annie Baker
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Welcome to the National Theatre’s background pack for John

This background pack, written by Rosy Banham, the staff director of John, introduces the process of rehearsing and staging the play.

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  
February 2018
The National’s Production

Opening

Dorman Theatre,
24 January 2018

Length

about 3 hours 10 minutes including two intervals
NB This time is approximate. Please check with front-of-house staff for accurate timing

Setting

The week after Thanksgiving. A bed and breakfast in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Company

Mertis .................................................... Marylouise Burke
Jenny ..................................................... Anneika Rose
Elias ..................................................... Tom Mothersdale
Genevieve ................................. June Watson

Understudy Mertis/Genevieve .......... Heather Rome

Director ................................. James Macdonald
Designer ................................. Chloe Lamford
Lighting Designer ......................... Peter Mumford
Sound Designer .......................... Christopher Shutt
Dialect Coach ............................... Charmian Hoare
Staff Director ............................... Rosy Banham
Production Photographer .............. Stephen Cummiskey

Marylouise Burke is appearing with the support of UK Equity, incorporating the Variety Artists’ Federation, pursuant to an exchange programme between American Equity and UK Equity.

World premiere produced by
Signature Theatre, New York City
James Houghton, Founding Artistic Director
Erika Mallin, Executive Director

The American New Work Programme is supported by
The Harold & Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust, Lawton W Fitt & James I McLaren Foundation and Kathleen J Yoh
This week, we sit across from each other around a table, strewn with scripts and cups of tea, and we ask questions. Lots of questions.

There are the big questions that the play raises about human nature:

- What makes a person lie?
- How do you know if a relationship is ‘right’?
- Do all of us feel ‘watched over’ in some way?

We seek clues in Annie’s text, and look to our own lives and experiences for insights, reaching for responses and trying on some answers for size. More and more questions accumulate, and with them come myriad possible answers:

- We lie because we’re afraid of the judgment of others.
- We lie because the truth is sometimes too painful.
- We lie because it’s far easier to get through the day that way.

Of course, there are simpler questions with more clear-cut answers – questions about the play’s context, for example, or an event, item, or philosophy that a character references in passing:

- What happened at the Battle of Gettysburg?
- What does HCG stand for?
- What on earth is neo-platonism?

These questions require research, and we turn to history books and online searches. At times, instead of tapping these questions into our phones, we choose instead to tap into writer Annie Baker’s brain – full of information, factoids and insights which she shares with us across the table. Our findings and her answers begin to weave something of a contextual carpet, upon which our characters will eventually stand:

The Battle of Gettysburg was a turning point in the American Civil War, fought across three days in 1863 between Confederate and Union forces, and resulted in over 50,000 casualties. Set in modern day Gettysburg, the play invites its audience to witness an arguably small conflict – the breakdown of a single relationship – play out on the site of a much, much larger one from history.

There are, of course, sartorial questions:

- Will they be wearing gloves when they come in?
- Will I be wigged?

Practical questions:

- Do Americans have a different kind of light switch?

And philosophical questions:

- Do objects have lives of their own?

But this week was never about knowing all the answers, ‘getting it right’ or drawing exhaustive or definitive conclusions. We have another five weeks to feel our way into this gorgeous, delicate, elusive play, which poses so many rich and varied questions. This week, then, our task was to simply articulate those questions, and to sit comfortably in not yet knowing all the answers, to discuss the work across a table and develop a shared trust that in the weeks to come we might discover some of the answers together.
Week two is all about objects and space. We move away from our tables and onto the mark-up – the rehearsal room rendering of the Dorfman stage – which is sketched out in tape, tabs, flats and rostra (theatre-speak for curtains, temporary walls, and raised platforms respectively). The play is set in Mertis’ Bed & Breakfast in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and Chloe Lamford’s intricate set design incorporates several doors, a landing, central staircase, living room, dining area, bay windows and an entire, unseen bedroom above the stage, from which the audience can occasionally hear snatches of muffled dialogue. This design has been realised as fully as possible by the technical team in our rehearsal room, and on Monday morning we begin to navigate and orientate ourselves in the set. We wander around the mark-up as Chloe explains various subtle features of the set – beyond the front door, for example, is an off-stage porch, and next to an armchair is a large window, through which Peter Mumford, the show’s lighting designer, will cast a suggestion of the dying afternoon sun, or a cool morning light.

Throughout this orientation, stage management helpfully highlight the discrepancies between our mark-up and the set as it will exist in the theatre: our rehearsal room staircase is 14 steps short of the real one, stopping somewhat abruptly to accommodate a ceiling much lower than the theatre’s, while our rehearsal sofa is a stand-in – the ‘actual’ one hasn’t yet been bought by the props department. The actors move about the space; Marylouise, who plays Mertis, acquaints herself with the place that her character calls home, while Tom (Elias) and Anneika (Jenny) experience the set as complete newcomers, much as their characters do at the start of the play. Meanwhile June (Genevieve) is aware that she is experiencing the set in a different way from her character – she observes a world which Genevieve, who is blind, cannot see.

As the week goes on, the space becomes filled with trinkets. Regular deliveries from the lighting and props departments arrive in the rehearsal room, and it feels as if every time we come back from a tea break a new oddity has appeared: an orchestra of china angels, a model village, a light-up snow globe, a flock of porcelain birds, several stuffed gnomes, a milk pitcher in the shape of a dog’s head, seven side lamps, mismatched candles, and an ‘American Girl’ doll called Samantha in a miniature rocking chair. According to the script, Mertis’ living room is chock full of these ‘tchotchkes’ (an Americanism, originally from Yiddish, meaning ‘a small item that is decorative, rather than functional’) – trinkets, essentially, or knick-knacks.

Each character has a distinct relationship with Mertis’ many tchotchkes: to Elias, they simply constitute...
‘miniature shit’ (although he can’t help but feel a little unsettled by the portrait above the grandfather clock); to Jenny, they are both compelling and terrifying (she experiences a nervous compulsion to grind her teeth when looking at them); to Mertis, they represent ‘her matter’, which she ‘takes very good care of’; and to Genevieve, blind, they are invisible, accessible only through verbal description and her sense of touch (she does concede, however, that in the past she has felt a “deep but disturbing connection with the soul of every object”). We consider the possible lives of these inanimate objects – do they inherently contain life, or do we simply project life onto them? Are they just decorative items, or do they have mystical or spiritual properties that we don’t understand?

As the week goes on, we sketch through almost the entire play on our feet, and the actors begin to interact physically with each other, the host of on-stage objects, and the space itself. There are, of course, very practical questions regarding the tchotchkes:

At what point do I pick up the angel? And where do I put it down?

But there are also character-based questions:

When did Jenny last see her own ‘American Girl’ Doll, Samantha?

The blocking is loose at this stage; our director, James, encourages the actors to try different physical journeys through each scene, and we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each version. We hit on certain moments that ‘click’ immediately, and leave others to be worked out later, ready to revise next time we run the scene.

Through these rehearsals, it soon becomes clear that some objects or items of furniture don’t quite fulfil the right function for the actors – a sofa is not deep enough to accommodate two people lying side by side, a china figure is too small to cradle like a baby in the way that the stage directions demand, and a kettle boils too loudly and quickly (we discover that American kettles boil slowly and silently – a fact which has a significant bearing on how an intimate scene between Jenny and Mertis plays out!) These discoveries are reported back to the props department during the midweek production meeting. The props department, in turn, share images of yet more trinkets which they have sourced and which they would like to buy. Annie and James approve some of them, and its back to the drawing board for others. A small fan heater written into the stage directions provokes a particularly long discussion: the lighting department need to know if it should glow, our props team want to know if it should move, and stage management stress that it should be light enough for Anneika to carry with ease. We look at various images pulled from online searches, and Annie has the final word on this one: ‘The more creature-like, the better’.
By now, every scene has a physical life, and this week we return to the top of the show to work through the play for a second time, filling in some of the gaps and answering unresolved questions from our first-draft staging. We make decisions about the events that have occurred off-stage between scenes, and these, in turn, go some way towards clarifying the on-stage dynamics between the characters. We decide that the argument between Jenny and Elias that the audience overhear at the end of Act 1 Scene 1 is a fairly commonplace disagreement, from which couple will recover relatively quickly. This then informs the nature of their exchange in Act 1 Scene 2, which takes place in the middle of the night, some four hours later. It is a slow, sleepy scene, and we decide the couple won't go into it bearing a grudge or with any residual resentment from the altercation earlier that day. However, the row which concludes Act 2, in which Jenny reveals one of Elias' secrets to Mertis, is a serious one, with repercussions that ripple through the following scenes. Tom (Elias) and Anneika (Jenny) fabricate a journey for their characters after this scene's end, which involves still more shouting and apportioning of blame in the upstairs bedroom. We work on filling in the story beats that the audience don't see, in the hope that these will lend a certain authenticity to the ones that they do see.

On Wednesday, movement consultant Leon Baugh comes into the rehearsal room to work with us on the small section of the play which requires movement in a more considered and structured sense – a moment in Act 3 when, according to Annie's stage directions, ‘Jenny is stiff as a statue. Elias picks her up and carries her, like a mannequin, down to the couch’. In this moment, Annie suggests, we should perhaps wonder if Jenny has temporarily left the human realm and joined the ranks of the frozen dolls all around her. Leon works methodically with Tom and Anneika, inviting them to consider all the different ways in which this moment might be staged. Between them, Leon and Tom pick Anneika up in just about every way possible – slung over the shoulder, lifted from the waist as a dead weight, and, eventually, carried by the hips, with the top half of her body folded forwards, almost like a sack of potatoes. Leon is working to two briefs – the creative direction dictated by Annie's stage directions, and the more practical considerations, which necessitate that everyone involved in the lift feels comfortable and safe. The eventual outcome fulfills both briefs, and will be revisited with Leon in the weeks to come, ensuring that the sequence is firmly in the actors’ muscle memories by first preview.

On Thursday, photographer Stephen Cummiskey spends the afternoon in the rehearsal room, observing the rehearsal and capturing the company at work. He takes photographs at strange angles, with dolls and snow globes looming large in the foreground, and I am interested to learn that part of his brief is to read the script and to photograph our rehearsals in such a way that aims to reflect the ‘feeling’ of the play. His role, is, then, more creative and less functional than I might have imagined, and I am impressed by his sensitivity to the dynamic of the room and to the project as a whole.

The Christmas tree in our rehearsal room is decorated as the week goes on – it's a part of the set but also feels like a timely and festive reminder of the forthcoming Christmas break. A leisurely Friday involves a long company lunch at the National’s restaurant, at which our Secret Santa gifts are distributed by the incredibly well-organised stage management team, and we all leave for Christmas with some tchotchkes of our own.
Rehearsal diary: week four

Week four is a short week of rehearsals between Christmas and New Year, and gives us the chance to revisit each scene of the play after a well-deserved, four-day break. The actors are more confident with their lines, the scenes feel more robust, and we begin to map out some of the key transitions between the scenes.

In the opening stage directions, Annie writes:

Mertis opens and closes an old-school red velvet curtain between every act.

During every scene transition Mertis sets the hands of the grandfather clock to the time of the following scene and changes the music on the jukebox. If she isn’t the last person on stage, she stealthily creeps on-stage between scenes to move time forward.

And so Mertis is stage managing this event. She pulls the strings and choreographs the evening; choosing when to open and close the curtains on the action and selecting which sections of the story she wishes to reveal to the audience. We agree that Mertis seems to know something the younger pair don’t. Elias and Jenny play out their scenes unaware of the stage they stand on, oblivious to the audience that watches them, unconscious of their roles as characters in a play – unlike Mertis, it seems. These curious stage directions open up a whole host of corresponding questions:

If Mertis is in some way in charge of this event, then why has she chosen to share this story with us?

What is it about Elias’ and Jenny’s stay at the B&B which warrants retelling to a wider audience?

These are questions that we leave open to interpretation and further discussion in the coming weeks. In the meantime, we begin to stage these strangely compelling transitions, and to discover some of the principles which guide them – an exercise which poses yet more questions:

Does the music change come before the clock change?

Can the other characters see Mertis’ actions?

On Thursday morning, we venture down to the scenic studio together to look at the show’s set, which has been built, assembled and painted on site, in the National’s network of backstage workshops. We are working with real props and furniture in the rehearsal room, but the architecture of Mertis’ B&B (the walls, the central staircase, the windows, and doors) has so far only been suggested by stand-in flats and platforms – our imaginations have had to fill in the gaps and embellish the space. But down in the scenic studio, we encounter this specific, complete architecture for the first time. The actors try out moments of blocking that occur on the staircase, acquainting themselves with the distances they will need to cover as they deliver particular lines, the space they have to perform certain maneuvers, and the boundaries of their on-stage world.

At the end of the week, talk in the rehearsal room turns to ‘leakage’. Over the previous weeks, we have unpacked and examined the emotional underpinnings of each scene and discussed the shifting subtext that each character carries with them through the play. Our director, James, is now keen that the actors bury this newly discovered knowledge and emotions deep within their characters. James tells the actors that this is a play, in part, about secrets, and as such, these people conceal a lot from each other. If they are raging, if they are hurting, if they are jubilant, even; it is all, more often than not, happening internally. This is particularly applicable to the first scene of the play, during which Elias and Jenny meet Mertis for the first time. It may be that the pair have had a long and difficult journey from Columbus in Ohio to Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, it may be that they have argued en route, it may be that they are tired and irritable, but at this point in the play, they are on their best behaviour, and reveal very little of their inner states or selves. They do not ‘leak’ any emotion just yet. There’s plenty of time for ‘leakage’ as the play goes on, but for now, it’s all about covering up – and from an acting perspective, this means doing less. We hope this will prompt the audience to look and listen more carefully, encouraging them to play the emotional detective as we watch our characters in the act of giving very little away.
Over the last few weeks, we've been working on a micro scale, unpacking the psychological dynamics and implications of small exchanges, silences and short pauses. This week, as we start to run longer sections of the play together and begin to make discoveries on a macro level. We are able to trace the characters' wider journeys through the play, and to draw comparisons between them in order to better understand some of the ideas contained within the piece as a whole. As an example, I'll focus specifically on some of the findings we made through running Act 2.

In Act 2, Scene 1, Jenny is introduced to Genevieve by Mertis, and the three women pass a dreamlike evening connecting with each other and sharing stories. After a run of the act as a whole, we consider why Genevieve has been summoned at this moment in the play, and how she might come to impact the following act. Sat beside Jenny, who worries constantly about what other people think of her, Genevieve seems to offer an alternative model for modern womanhood and a different way of moving through the world. Unlike Jenny, Genevieve has managed to avoid the prescriptive patriarchal standards of her time, resisting the urge to please and appease. She no longer cares about the judgements of other people and navigates life according to her own genuine desires – she now sits at the centre of her universe, ‘facing out’. This is an approach which Jenny can emulate and learn from as the play goes on, and indeed she does. Through discussions like these in the rehearsal room, we come to a clearer understanding of the shape of the play, identifying its turning points and the moments where the journeys of its characters intersect and feed into one another.

The atmospheric demands of each scene also become clearer in the context of runs. For example, the aforementioned scene in Act 2 takes place late into the evening, over a bottle of wine. Jenny is a bit tipsy in the company of Mertis and Genevieve, who are old and close friends. The pauses and silences written into the script are numerous. After a run, Annie reflects that the scene needs to find a delicious kind of ease throughout, which gives way to entirely comfortable silences between these women. James suggests that they may have been sitting round the table together for perhaps an hour or more before the audience joins them. The atmosphere is therefore relaxed and the women feel comfortable and connected. Meaningful reflections in the scene are borne out of easy and supportive silences. The actors are, then, encouraged to take their time; to dare to be still and silent, and in doing so, to find the truth of this unique meeting. Within this same scene, there is a moment when Genevieve stops to draw attention to a noise she hears: ‘a rustling, a whispering, or possibly the beating of wings’. Neither Jenny nor Mertis hear the sound, and after a run of the act, June (playing Genevieve) wonders what exactly it is that her character detects at this point. Annie suggests that if June really stops to listen, she will indeed hear a sort of rustling in the form of small noises coming from the audience in front of her. It’s a lovely observation, which supports the idea that Genevieve and Mertis carry with them through the play an awareness of the theatrical event that the younger characters don’t have. This expanded awareness might be derived from their advanced years, and brings with it the suggestion that they may well have something to teach or impart to the visiting young couple. Indeed, as we run together whole sections of the play, it seems increasingly clear that Mertis and Genevieve are in some way – some often uncanny, ineffable way – involved in shaping the events that play out between Elias and Jenny over the course of the weekend in Mertis’ B&B. And so the play gives knowledge, insight and power to older women, and in doing so makes visible – and celebrates – a section of society that has become largely invisible.
Rehearsal diary: week six

It's our last week in the rehearsal room, and props and pieces of furniture are disappearing on tea breaks to be rehomed on Chloe's set in the theatre. We run the play multiple times on our dwindling mark-up, with small new audiences in attendance each time. The first rehearsal room run is intimate; we are joined only by core members of the production team (lighting designer Peter Mumford, sound designer Chris Shutt, set designer Chloe Lamford), all of whom scribble down notes as we go, planning ahead for the upcoming technical rehearsals. The second run is attended by Rufus (Director of the National Theatre) and Ben (Deputy Artistic Director), who programmed the play, but have yet to see what we've worked up in rehearsals and how the piece has taken shape. For the third run, our audience is a team of dressers who will be helping the actors with their costume changes backstage throughout the run, and for whom this is therefore the only chance to watch the play in its entirety. For the actors, it's good to have new faces out front, and fresh responses that validate their work over the previous weeks. June (playing Genevieve) is surprised (and delighted) to find that her first line ('That was around the time I went crazy!') evokes a laugh each time – something she hadn't anticipated, but which Annie knowingly affirms, having witnessed the production's reception in New York last year. The cast continue to find new details that range from technical ('try turning the kettle on before the line'), to physical ('experiment with slowing the character's pace down a little, and finding a more measured and contained way of moving through the space') and psychological ('take on something of the role of therapist in this scene, guiding and aiding the other character with real delicacy and care').

Between runs, we drill sections of the play which are particularly tough for the cast because they feature tightly overlapping lines and multiple cut offs. These sequences often occur at moments of conflict or tension in the play (for example, when Elias confronts Jenny about the nature of her affair), and they offer up something of a verbal obstacle course – the cast need to know the lines incredibly well in order to navigate them with dexterity and ease. Emily, our DSM, is tasked with noting down even the smallest deviations from the text as writ, and delivering these deviations to the actors between runs, so as to dislodge any mistakes that are threatening to become habitual.

In the evenings, I am working with Heather Rome, who has joined the company as an understudy for both Mertis and Genevieve. Her task is a large and somewhat daunting one – she essentially needs to learn about half of the play in order to cover both characters – but she embraces the challenge with zeal and determination, aiming to get about ten pages under her belt each day. Her job isn't for the faint-hearted; she will need to be prepared to step on in front of an audience for either role at potentially very short notice. Our initial work is, then, simply to work on words and moves together, replicating the blocking that has been created in rehearsals to date.

On the last day of the week, we make the move from the rehearsal room into the theatre. At the start of the day, stage management lead a short orientation session. They walk us around the set, and take us on the backstage journeys that the actors will be making during the show. They make us aware of health and safety issues – loose cabling, for example, that hasn't yet been run under the stage, and could therefore pose a trip hazard – and they introduce us to features of the set that we haven't been able to experience in full in the rehearsal room. For example, there is a pair of red velvet curtains which sit across the line of the prosценium arch, and which Mertis opens and closes on the action. These are, in fact, operated by the backstage crew, while Marylouise simulates pulling or pushing them. In the theatre, we are able to trial this for the first time, determining the pace at which all parties must operate in order to give the false impression that Mertis is single-handedly tugging these large curtains across the space. When they are drawn, and the interior of Mertis' B&B is revealed, there are more miniature items than we could have possibly imagined, nestled into every nook and cranny of the room. Everywhere you look, a doll looks back at you, or if not a doll, then a Lincoln model, or a Father Christmas toy, or an angel atop a Christmas tree. The model village we had in the rehearsal room lights up now that we're in the theatre, and it's somehow quaint, tacky and completely magical all at the same time. The toy train set now runs a victory lap around the base of the Christmas tree thanks to the work of the on-stage technical team, and the pianola plays itself – the keys rising and sinking as if a ghost were sat at the stool in front of it. There is Pepsi and carbonated water in the fridge, ‘Reese’s Pieces’ inside drawers (‘Dangerous’,
Mertis reflects solemnly), and even real-life flyers for tourist attractions in Gettysburg laid out in the porch area (just underneath a twee sign that reads ‘GETTYSBURG IS MY HAPPY PLACE’). I hope all this gives some idea of how astonishingly detailed the set is, how absorbing it is both to be on and look at from the auditorium, and what a sense of delight and excitement the whole company felt on that first morning of our intensive technical rehearsals, or ‘tech’.

Of all the details, perhaps the most pleasing is a copy of the New York Times, laid out at breakfast by Mertis for her guests in Act 1. It is the real copy of the New York Times that was published on the morning that the play takes place, and it just so happened that the paper’s front page coverage that day was a long feature – and accompanying image – on the production of Follies at the National Theatre. It's an unintentionally meta detail that surely only the most beady-eyed audience members will notice, but in a play that is in part about the strange and mysterious, it is a lovely coincidence which we take a moment in tech to appreciate.

As well as props on set, each actor carries ‘personal props’ throughout the production. There are a mind-boggling number of iPhones in the actors’ pockets, for logistical reasons too long-winded to go into here, but the sound department is responsible for operating them remotely, making suspect text messages appear at crucial moments in the production. The actors are remarkably relaxed in entering this next phase of the process, navigating the phones, the new clothes (costume jumpers and jackets are auditioned on set, with new ones appearing in each tech session), and the theatre lights for the first time. The lights themselves are transformative – two large windows afford Peter Mumford the opportunity to tell stories about time of day through different shades and saturation, while an extraordinary number of small, practical lamps litter the on-stage set.

Sitting in the auditorium, it feels intimate – snug, even – like we’ve all been invited to spend an evening chez Mertis; a woman who will consistently delight and surprise us as the evening unfolds. As day one of tech – and week six of rehearsals – comes to a close late into Saturday night, it feels right that there are only a few days left before we share this world with its first audience. It’s almost ready for that final ingredient.
Play synopsis

ACT 1

Scene 1
A pair of red velvet curtains which hang across the front of the stage are drawn by an elderly woman in slippers, revealing a kitsch and cluttered B&B in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The woman is Mertis, the B&B’s eccentric proprietor. After a short while, the doorbell rings; Elias and Jenny, a cosmopolitan couple in their 20s from New York, have arrived for their three-day stay – en route home from Jenny’s parents’ place in Ohio, where they have spent Thanksgiving weekend. They enter a world that is very far from their own; there are cheerful knick-knacks in every corner of the room, dolls on every shelf, and ornate lamps on every surface. Mertis gives them a short tour, introducing them to the breakfast area, affectionately known as ‘Paris’ because ‘you can go there for tea or hot cocoa any time of the day or night – just like a Paris café’, and eventually taking them upstairs to their room. They had originally booked the Jackson room, but Mertis somewhat falteringly concedes that there is a leak in the Jackson’s ceiling, and that Elias and Jenny will be sleeping in the Chamberlain instead. As the couple gets settled in their room upstairs out of the audience’s sight, Mertis slowly and methodically switches the lamps off downstairs, and, in the final moments of the scene, she overhears a muffled argument coming from the Chamberlain room…

Scene 2
It is 2.04am and Jenny is cold. She carries a small space heater from the Chamberlain room downstairs with her and curls up on the sofa with a blanket, hoping to warm up. Some moments later, Elias sleepily descends. Jenny explains that she is too cold to sleep, and points out a doll on a shelf by the landing. It’s the very same one she owned as a child – a doll called Samantha, who scared her, and who now lives in her mum’s basement in Ohio. Elias heads back up to bed, and Jenny goes to follow him, stopping to look at the piano by the staircase, which, as she goes to touch it, begins playing entirely of its own accord. Jenny is horrified, and Elias is drawn back down to the landing. The pair watch in silence as the keys rise and fall, as if a ghost were sat at the stool. The spectacle ends and Jenny tempts Elias onto the sofa with the promise of a neck rub. A well-meaning conversation about the B&B turns into a small argument, but the pair reconcile when Elias gives in to Jenny’s request for a scary story. He improvises a spooky tale about a couple in a motel, which Jenny delights in, but his imagination fails him at a crucial moment. He stops midway, takes himself back upstairs, and leaves Jenny alone and cold on the couch.

Scene 3
It’s 8.17am the next morning, and Jenny and Elias are eating breakfast in ‘Paris’. More tensions in the relationship surface as Jenny becomes frustrated with Elias’ loud eating – ‘it’s just kind of a gross sound’, she concedes. The row is interrupted at intervals by the coming and going of Mertis with various breakfast items: eggs (which Elias is convinced are fake) and homemade duff (a dark brown cake, which neither Elias nor Jenny touch). Mertis enquires about the couple’s plans for the day: they will be doing an auto-tour of the town, which was the site for the biggest battle in the American Civil War. Their small talk is interrupted by phone call from Mertis’ friend Genevieve, and Mertis leaves the stage, reciting Latin into the receiver. Jenny exits shortly afterwards, leaving Elias alone with Jenny’s phone on the breakfast table. It dings, and Elias makes a move to pick it up, only to be interrupted by Mertis, and then Jenny, who explains that she has got her period, and may not be able to follow through on their plans for the day. Elias convinces her to reconsider, returns her phone to her (without looking at the message she received), and in the final moments of the scene, he is joined again by Mertis. She tells him about the diet she is on (the HCG, which involves daily injections of a pregnancy hormone), and she persuades him to try some of the ‘special potion’ which comes with it. Hesitantly, he sips it, and is left feeling somewhat unnerved as Mertis wishes him well for the day, taking her potion with her.

Scene 4
It is 4.48pm and Mertis is alone in the B&B, watching the sunset. A car pulls up outside, and Jenny enters through the front door. Her period pains have intensified, and she has left Elias to finish the auto-tour without her. The pair end up downstairs together, Jenny clutching her stomach to ease her cramps, and Mertis writing ‘special potion’ which comes with it. Hesitantly, he sips it, and is left feeling somewhat unnerved as Mertis wishes him well for the day, taking her potion with her.
ACT 2

Scene 1
Mertis pulls back the curtains on Jenny and Genevieve, sat around a table in ‘Paris’, drinking wine. It is 8.52pm. Genevieve is blind, and recalling a phase in her life prior to her blindness, when she was diagnosed as clinically insane. She describes the relationship which caused her madness: an abusive one with a man called John, who managed her thoughts long after she left him. She has now recovered from her madness, but acknowledges that occasionally she still feels John’s presence watching her. Mertis, listening to this, enquires of Jenny: ‘Do you ever feel watched?’ Jenny reveals that she has always felt watched and judged by objects, and by dolls and stuffed animals in particular. Talk turns to the house, the items in it, and Genevieve’s suspicion that it is haunted. Genevieve calls their attention to a noise – ‘a rustling, a whispering, or possibly the beating of wings’ – which neither Mertis nor Jenny can hear. After Genevieve leaves, the Christmas tree lights flicker inexplicably, and Jenny wonders if she is being punished by Samantha – the doll on the landing, from her childhood – for having spoken about her to the older women. Elias returns from the ghost tour, and in an ill-conceived attempt to recreate the intimacy of the earlier part of the evening with Genevieve and Mertis, Jenny tells Mertis a personal story from Elias’ childhood. Elias is furious, and storms upstairs, leaving Jenny crying on the couch to Mertis. Eventually, Jenny reluctantly heads up to the Chamberlain room to face Elias, and Mertis is left, yet again, overhearing the sound of shouting from upstairs.

Scene 2
It is 12.04am. Again, Jenny is cold. She comes downstairs to ask Mertis to turn the heating up, but there is no reply from Mertis’ quarters. Elias joins her downstairs, and before long, they are arguing again, but this time it is about something deeper and infinitely more important than their previous quarrels. Elias confronts Jenny about a recent affair she has had, and Jenny falteringly gives him some of the details. Elias screams at Jenny – it is loud, ugly, and shocking – and, moments later, he tries to initiate sex to make it better. But the physical passion is fleeting, and soon Elias is slumped over Jenny, unable to continue – he says this is because of his depression. Jenny is once again left alone downstairs, looking up at Samantha on her shelf on the landing, who has watched and judged by objects, and by dolls and stuffed animals in particular. Talk turns to the house, the items in it, and Genevieve’s suspicion that it is haunted. Genevieve calls their attention to a noise – ‘a rustling, a whispering, or possibly the beating of wings’ – which neither Mertis nor Jenny can hear. After Genevieve leaves, the Christmas tree lights flicker inexplicably, and Jenny wonders if she is being punished by Samantha – the doll on the landing, from her childhood – for having spoken about her to the older women. Elias returns from the ghost tour, and in an ill-conceived attempt to recreate the intimacy of the earlier part of the evening with Genevieve and Mertis, Jenny tells Mertis a personal story from Elias’ childhood. Elias is furious, and storms upstairs, leaving Jenny crying on the couch to Mertis. Eventually, Jenny reluctantly heads up to the Chamberlain room to face Elias, and Mertis is left, yet again, overhearing the sound of shouting from upstairs.

Genevieve
A few minutes into the second interval, Genevieve steps out in front of the drawn curtains and implores the audience members who haven’t yet left the auditorium for the bar or the toilets to stay for five minutes longer. She goes on to tell the story of her madness in seven stages, and the subsequent story of her blindness, which allowed her to stand in the centre of her own life, and to let go of worrying about other people’s judgments. During her madness, it was as if her mind had been colonised: in her blindness, it was liberated. ‘You can all think whatever you like about me’, she tells the audience, before taking herself back behind the curtain.

ACT 3

Scene 1
It’s the morning after Jenny and Elias’ row about Jenny’s affair. Elias is downstairs, waiting for breakfast. Jenny is still upstairs. Mertis appears, somewhat Somewhat nervous; she is running late. While Mertis serves up breakfast, it transpires that Jenny slept in the Jackson room last night. Concerned, Mertis heads upstairs to check on her, and while she is gone, the audience hears the distant sound of beating wings. Back downstairs, Mertis reassures Elias that everything is fine, and coaxes out of Elias information about his and Jenny’s relationship. It comes to light that Elias is unsure about whether to stay in the relationship or leave it. Eventually, Mertis comes round to her favourite topic: that of the ‘watcher’. She enquires whether Elias ever sensed a greater, unseen presence watching over him as a child. The conversation unnerves Elias, who did – and still does – sense such a presence, and when Genevieve arrives for her weekly reading, it is something of a relief to him to park the topic at hand. In the final moments of the scene, he grills Mertis on the temperamental nature of the house, asking whether or not it is haunted. Mertis gives a charming yet elusive response, and Elias is left none the wiser.

Scene 2
Mertis reads to Genevieve from HP Lovecraft’s The Call of Cthulhu, an extract about the stars and the cycles of eternity. The day passes as she reads, until the pair are plunged in total darkness. Mertis puts the book away, and lights all the candles in the room, in anticipation of the young couple’s return. She listens out for Elias and Jenny’s car pulling up outside and then leaves the stage.

Scene 3
Elias and Jenny arrive back from still more tourist activities in Gettysburg. Jenny is cold and stiff. Elias likens her to a statue, and proceeds to tell a new scary story on the sofa, in the candlelight, about a statue in a town square. It is detailed and compelling, and Jenny is hooked – until her phone begins to ding in her pocket once more. The story is cut off midway, and Elias demands to see the text messages. Jenny refuses, saying the messages are from her sister, and that he is being invasive. Eventually, Elias uses Samantha to get his way, threatening to set her on fire unless Jenny hands over her phone. Jenny screams, throws her phone at Elias, and grabs Samantha. She announces that the relationship is over and she never wants to see Elias again, before disappearing upstairs. Mertis enters; she has heard screaming. Genevieve is revealed in the corner of the candlelit room – she has been there all along, since her reading with Mertis, and has listened to the whole ugly scene play out between Elias and Jenny. Elias, Mertis and Genevieve sit around a table in Paris while Jenny packs upstairs. Genevieve steps out in front of the drawn curtains and implores the audience members who haven’t yet left the auditorium for the bar or the toilets to stay for five minutes longer. She goes on to tell the story of her madness in seven stages, and the subsequent story of her blindness, which allowed her to stand in the centre of her own life, and to let go of worrying about other people’s judgments. During her madness, it was as if her mind had been colonised: in her blindness, it was liberated. ‘You can all think whatever you like about me’, she tells the audience, before taking herself back behind the curtain.
How did you first come across this play?

I discovered Annie’s work a few years ago. I fell in love with a play called *Circle Mirror Transformation*, which we took to the Royal Court. I got to know Annie during the rehearsals for that show, and in the process of working on it, I read her other plays, too. I think, as a lot of people do, that she’s an absolutely major writer of her generation in America – her work is unique in terms of what it does anywhere, in fact. She sent me *John*, and, strangely, I’d already seen it in New York. When I read it, it confirmed what I’d suspected when I saw it in the theatre: that it’s a brilliant, cunning, complex and playful piece of work.

How did you and Chloe Lamford develop the design together?

We read the play carefully, combing over Annie’s instructions. We obsessively googled bed and breakfasts in Gettysburg, and Annie sent us some pictures of B&Bs that she’d stayed in when she was writing the play. We made lists of every image that needed to be in focus on stage. And then, over a period of weeks, we juggled those images around in the model box, trying to make everything fit. It’s complicated because when you’re staging something in an end-on configuration in the Dorfman, the sight lines aren’t perfect for those people sitting in the slips. So you have to try to wedge all the key images into the middle of the space. And there are so many key images in this play – because it’s a piece of theatre about imagery, and all the extraordinary objects that are in the room – so fitting everything in becomes a sort of crossword puzzle. And then we needed to design a room that could span tonally from extreme kitsch to haunted house throughout the course of the play, so that was another challenge.

What are the challenges in directing this play?

I think the key thing is simply to do justice to the different images and atmospheres in different scenes. As a director, I can become quite obsessive about detail, and so this is a good play for me because it’s full of detail to obsess over.

Were there key ideas you wanted to bring out in the production?

It has been important to explore the space and weight one gives to objects – the simple and magical power of miniature things. And to play with the house having a sense of independent life.

What have been the most enjoyable or fulfilling moments of this process for you?

It’s all been very enjoyable. There’s nothing nicer than staging a small cast play with a brilliant bunch of actors. You have the space to get to know one another really well, to push the play this way and that, to see what works, and to develop these complex and multi-faceted characters. And of course your most complete joy comes near the end of the process, seeing the whole thing come together. When all the things you’ve worked on individually begin to gel and find a kind of shape and a rhythm together in front of an audience. That’s always the alchemical bit of the process: when all the things you’ve created in isolation react with an audience, giving way to something very live, and hopefully magical, too.

We’re in previews now. How have you been influenced by having an audience for the work?

An audience always teaches you a lot about the right speed at which to tell the story. It teaches you whether you’re going faster or slower than the story demands. And you have to adapt according to what you sense in them. That’s very much our process in previews at the moment. It’s been delightful to hear how vocally engaged the audience have been – laughing when they are amused – and by contrast, how still they have become in moments of tension and silence. Annie is someone who loves to play with silence, which is a thing I like a lot, too. That’s something of a bond for us. Her work is very much about time and mutability, and that is something you adjust in the presence of an audience; sensing how long you can stretch time out in front of them.
Where did this play come from?

This play came from so many places: an interest in Civil War tourism, an interest in undermining the tradition of the disintegrating-relationship-play, an interest in women’s troubled relationships with their childhood dolls and toys, an interest in how the demonic is connected with the divine, an interest in self-objectification and mid-life perspective shifts, and also an interest in writing a character who seems like a stock type at first (the friendly, batty proprietor of a B&B) who then turns out to be a highly intelligent sophisticated witch of sorts.

What was the process of writing this play like?

I researched this play for two to three years before I wrote it. That part was really fun. Writing it was hard. I wrote it in fragments at first. I wrote fragments of fights between this young couple, and then fragments of interactions between each member of the couple and the proprietor of the B&B. When Genevieve appeared at the beginning of Act 2 that was a bit of a revelation – I had no idea she was going to enter the play.

Mertis is preoccupied with the idea of a ‘watcher’. What made you want to explore this?

As you can probably guess, I also was preoccupied with this idea while I was writing the play. I was thinking about people – particular women I knew, but some men too – constantly watching themselves from outside themselves, and then exploring who it was they were picturing watching them – was it some kind of undefined spiritual energy? A wrathful Old Testament God? Or just other people?

John was staged in New York in 2015. How has it felt to come back to it? And how do British and American rehearsal rooms differ?

It’s been really nice to come back to it. I like it better than my other plays. Our rehearsal period in NYC was also quite rushed – we only had three weeks – and it was wonderful here to just sit around talking about the play with these incredible actors and James Macdonald, who is so brilliant. Let’s see... how do rehearsal rooms differ... well, you guys only take breaks every few hours! I couldn’t believe it. And then the breaks are very leisurely communal chatty tea breaks. James is such a particular director that I certainly can’t generalise about British rehearsal rooms based on his methods. But he creates such a lovely, supportive, yet rigorous environment.

What have you learnt from this play’s audiences?

It’s been interesting to see how a lot of the American references just sort of glide by without the audience recognising them. Also I’ve noticed that people who hate the play here are much more polite. In NYC people literally moan and writhe and scream at the actors from the fifth row when they don’t like something. And often with my plays during early previews in NYC a third of the audience walks out.
The setting of the play was partly inspired by a range of B&Bs which Annie has stayed in, and by one B&B in particular. This one, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, had a dining area known as Paris which found its way into Mertis’ home in the text.

These photographs of the real-life B&B were also a source of inspiration for designer Chloe Lamford, when she was working on the set.
Set designer Chloe Lamford has covered every corner of the set with trinkets and tchotchkes belonging to Mertis. Below are some of the items you might miss from the auditorium, including Mertis’ breakfast alcove, her jukebox, and real-life leaflets advertising tourist attractions in Gettysburg, which were picked up by actor Tom Mothersdale on his pre-rehearsal research trip.
Props

Over the course of the play, there are two breakfast scenes and a lot of snacking. Tom Mothersdale (Elias) eats a bowl of cereal, scrambled eggs on toast, a plate of blueberry pancakes, and some Vienna Fingers – so the equivalent of his dinner (and then some!) – on stage. These pictures are taken by our assistant stage manager, Cheryl Firth, who prepares the food for the show backstage every night.