

National
Theatre



RUTHERFORD AND SON

by Githa Sowerby

Rehearsal Diaries



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Welcome to the National Theatre's rehearsal diaries for *Rutherford and Son*

These rehearsal diaries, written by the staff director of *Rutherford and Son*, introduce the unique process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play. At the end of these rehearsal diaries, you'll find a glossary of some of the common theatre terms which come up as part of a rehearsal process.

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**.

Sarah Eastaff
Programme Manager, NT Learning
May 2019

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Author
Hannah Joss

Editor
Sarah Corke

Design
NT Graphic Design Studio

NT Learning
National Theatre
South Bank
London SE1 9PX
T 020 7452 3388
F 020 7452 3380
E learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk

The rehearsal and production photographs in this pack were taken by Johan Persson; additional photographs by National Theatre Publishing

Cover image (Roger Allam)
by David Stewart

Further production details:
nationaltheatre.org.uk

The National's production

The Company

Cast, in alphabetical order

John Rutherford

Roger Allam

Martin

Joe Armstrong

Richard

Harry Hepple

Ann

Barbara Marten

Janet

Justine Mitchell

Mrs Henderson

Sally Rogers

John Jnr

Sam Troughton

Mary

Anjana Vasan

Understudies

John Rutherford

Nick Harris

Martin

Chris Anderson

Richard/John Jnr

Joe Evans

Ann/Mrs Henderson

Jules Melvin

Janet

Sue Appleby

Mary

Nicola May-Taylor

Singers

Sarah Dacey

Roshi Nasehi

Osnat Schmool

Elizabeth Swain (Swing Singer)

Sue Appleby

Nicola May-Taylor

Jules Melvin

Director

Polly Findlay

Set and Costume Designer

Lizzie Clachan

Lighting Designer

Charles Balfour

Movement Director

Polly Bennett

Sound Designer

Paul Arditti

Music and Music Direction

Kerry Andrew

Sarah Dacey

Company Voice Work

Simon Money

Dialect Coach

Danièle Lydon

Staff Director

Hannah Joss

Production Photographer

Johan Persson

This production had its press night on
28 May 2019, in the National's Lyttelton Theatre.

Rehearsal diary: week one

Staff Director Hannah Joss' diary tracks the six-week rehearsal period for *Rutherford and Son*, beginning 1 April 2019

Written in 1912, Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* follows the Rutherfords – a glassworks-owning family in the fictional town of Grantley – as they emotionally fall apart. The patriarch, John Rutherford, rails against his children and their modern values whilst fighting to keep the now failing glassworks open.

A play which is as psychologically complex and historically specific as *Rutherford and Son* requires a highly detailed approach to ensure everyone in the company has the same depth of understanding. To foster this, we spend the first week of our rehearsal process doing some 'table work', concentrating on back stories and a timeline of the events leading up to the play.

We focus on segmenting Act One into units, using a set of rules introduced by the director, Polly Findlay. She explains that a change of unit can only occur when the action changes every character on stage – this can also be thought of as a 'change in the weather', helping to indicate the size of shift that is taking place. Where each unit falls is up for discussion and is often led by the actors who are in the scene. The process of working out the units is pleasingly open, and Polly encourages the whole company to express their opinions.

As we move through the uniting, I note down any significant questions that arise. Queries emerge on anything from back stories – when did Martin and Janet first express their feelings for one another and when did John and Mary marry? – to historical questions about the running of a factory or business economics of the time.

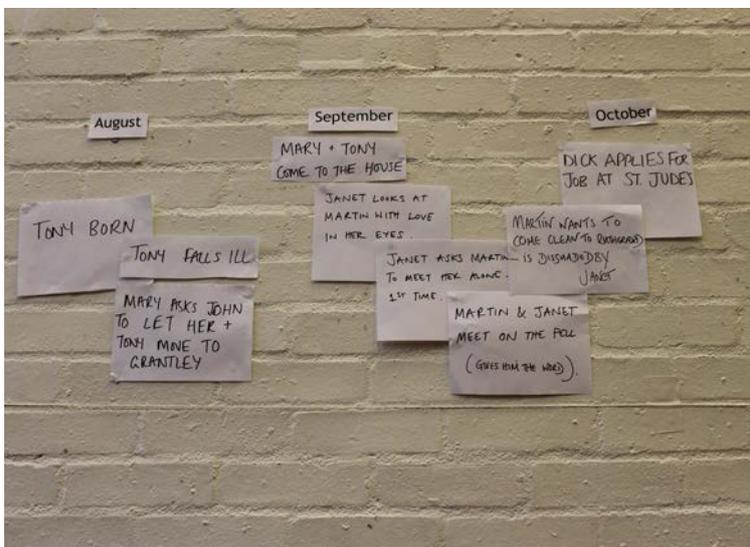
We also collate a timeline of all events leading up to the beginning of the play. We want these events to be as specific as possible, to cultivate a deeper, shared



understanding of what has led the Rutherford family to their current situation. There are still events that are in a state of flux and may only be resolved as we work through the play.

On Thursday and Friday we are joined by two experts, Dr Joe Lane and Charles Hadjamach. Dr Joe Lane, a business and economics historian from the London School of Economics, speaks to us about the Rutherford factory – how it would have financially run, the mechanics of Rutherford's bank loan and the broader business and economic context of the time period. Joe is so passionate about his subject – his particular area of expertise being the pottery industry in the 18th and 19th centuries – and he is an incredibly helpful presence in the room, answering any questions the company throw at him and promising to research any he doesn't have an answer to.

Charles Hadjamach is a leading authority in glass and author of the book *20th Century British Glass*. He helps us to fill in gaps in our knowledge about the Rutherford's factory and what went on inside it. Using Githa Sowerby's own family's glassworks – Sowerbys – as a useful touchstone, Charles takes the company through the complex and skilled process of making glass in the late 1800s.



Rehearsal diary: week two

This week we continue rehearsals with the rigour and detail of table work before moving on to beginning to stage the play on our rehearsal set.

Lizzie Clachan's set design for the production perfectly captures the house of a Victorian industrialist family who are currently living in reduced circumstances. To cut costs, the Rutherford family are living out of one room. Period furniture clutters the space – a large heavy dining table is centre stage and numerous chairs (large and small) are scattered around. Various other bits of furniture have been pushed towards the fire while files sit next to bread boards as the worlds of the factory and the home collide. Most imposing is Rutherford's huge mahogany desk, which looms stage right. In rehearsals we look at the family awkwardly and uncomfortably moving around it, giving a sense that it is not sitting in its original home.

We spend some time this week investigating the surrounding area of the house in Grantley – where is the factory? Can the family see it from the house? Where is the moor and how much of it do they overlook? These types of analytical and creative activities build upon the uniting and back story work we did in week one of rehearsals.

And so, to managing the mechanics of the storytelling when it contains, and at times relies on, belongings. The furniture doesn't just let the audience into the world of the play but specifically communicates the idiosyncrasies, rules and traditions of the Rutherford family. Questions arise around processes within the

house. Whose responsibility is it to put Rutherford's letters on his desk in the evening? What journey do the letters take through the house before they arrive in Rutherford's hand? And what happens to them once they've been opened and read?

Our work this week uncovers some of the Rutherford family's existing psychological damage. Rutherford is a dictator-like patriarch whose objective, tragically, is to financially and socially provide for his children. In his mind he's created a family that demands respect but in reality, he's caused damage to them. By piling his whole self into the cultivation of the Glassworks, Rutherford sets out to provide safety, security and a life for his children – his version of love. However, his aggressive steamrolling of the family to uphold the rules that he believes their lives depend upon, alienates his children. In turn, his children are seemingly unable to love one another.

At the beginning of act one the family are awaiting the arrival of Rutherford as though they are expecting a lion and are unsure of whether it'll be tame or not. The transactions between each character – Ann, Janet, Dick, John, Mary – are taut with tension about the mood their father will be in, particularly as Rutherford is returning from an important meeting with the bank. Using the rehearsal set this week, we are beginning to understand how the shape of the room, the furniture within it, and who does what in the 20 minutes leading up to Rutherford's arrival home – who is in charge of dinner? Where should Rutherford's slippers be? – can drive the staging of the first act.



Rehearsal diary: week three

At the beginning of the week, Barbara Marten, who plays Ann Rutherford, says that she doesn't yet psychologically comprehend totally buying into the patriarchal structure of her character's world. Throughout the week we return to this provocation. We liken it to dedicating your life to strict religious practice – denying yourself in favour of a 'greater' force. Barbara is keen to note that her character, Ann, does not blindly accept the patriarchal power that rules her life, and she still has opinions on the right, or correct, or done thing to do.

The patriarchal structure within *Rutherford and Son* shows itself in two ways – the wider society in which Githa Sowerby was living and writing, and the focused example of the Rutherford family itself. Rutherford runs his family with a clear set of rules that are entirely dictated by gender. John is the eldest son so will take over the factory, Dick should also look to enter the family business – a duty he has flouted before the beginning of the play – and Janet is told that she can 'sit as a lady with your hands afore ye' and wait for a man to marry her. Aunt Ann, never married and acting as mother in lieu of the deceased Mrs Rutherford, runs the household.

Over the course of the week, movement director Polly Bennett focuses on the opening minutes of the production, which sees the women of the house – Ann, Mary and Janet – preparing for the men – Rutherford, Dick and John – to come home for dinner. In approaching this work, Polly talks about the endurance and stoicism of the women of this period and how these attributes don't necessarily naturally sit in our contemporary physical make up. We consider questions like: what does it feel like to sit in the same chair looking at the same painting for years on end? What has happened in this room today? What activities need to take place throughout the day to ensure a smooth-running dinner time at 6pm? What would Rutherford do if he comes home to find the sitting room a mess?

We soon hit on the realisation that there is nothing for the women to do. In his pursuit of a 'better' life and social elevation, Rutherford has created a particular kind of life for the women of the house. They are to think of themselves as ladies, and upper-class women of the time were expected to shirk work in favour of learning skills that would enhance their chances of finding a good husband – they would learn French, play musical instruments, read literature and attend plays and concerts. Janet has been given the gift of idleness but has not been allowed to undertake any kind of



activity, rendering her existence a purposeless one. She has started to help with the servants' duties, which is particularly pertinent at the beginning of the play as we find the Rutherfords in reduced circumstances and without the usual number of servants they are used to.

Another big realisation that emerges from this work with Polly Bennett is that, for the women of the house, every thought, activity and desire has to be passed through the gaze of Rutherford.

Rehearsal diary: week four

From the very beginning of rehearsals, Polly Findlay has talked about the 'scene under the scene'. This means looking at the thoughts that a character withholds whilst playing out the actual action of a scene. The characters' background desires and vulnerabilities can be at odds with the action and each actor needs to be aware of them.

In act two, Dick asks Rutherford's permission to take up a curacy position at a nearby church – St Jude's of Southport. Dick arrives at Rutherford's desk with a well thought-out, and respectful plan citing his reasons for wanting to leave Grantley and the family business. He delivers his speech with a measured tone and works hard to answer his father's seeming indifference. As we revisit this scene, Polly (Findlay) and Harry Hepple (the actor playing Dick) discuss the psychological undercurrent for the character, how Dick's knowledge that his father has little respect for his chosen path is a source of great vulnerability and how he must fake some strength to make it through the conversation about St Jude's. It is this 'fake it 'till you make it' activity that will tell the story of the 'scene under scene' to the audience. In seeing a man fight against his own weaknesses, an audience will recognise this all-too-human struggle.

Polly describes the balance between playing the action and playing the psychological undercurrent as 'resisting the condition' – for example, if you play a character who is drunk, you work hard to act sober. This is something I've seen in Sam Troughton's (John Jnr) process. In early rehearsals Sam played every thought that his character goes through, so that he physically and mentally experiences it. Then, as scenes are revisited, he tucks those thoughts and experiences below the surface – the thoughts are still there, but they are covered up by the action of a scene. For example, in John's conversation with Mary in act one, John counters her accusations with bravado and argument, whilst secretly knowing that what she says holds some truth and that he has let her down. John's guilt drives his responses.

Initially Sam played parts of this scene with great emotional abandon, allowing his words to rain down on Mary. Now, as we move towards the penultimate week of rehearsals, his words have become more measured, yet they remain highly charged with the knowledge of what John is thinking and feeling. Addressing the background thoughts of the characters early on in the process helps the actors to then move those thoughts to below the action of the scene, where the psychological detail remains without thoughts being obviously signalled.



All of this work is undertaken in the pursuit of understanding the psychological truth for each character. 'Resisting the condition' is just another way of asking you to look at how we respond to things in real life. A character will navigate a scene based on their psychological map of the play and it is imperative, in a rehearsal process, to consistently check in with a character's underlying emotional journey in the 'scene underneath the scene.'

Rehearsal diary: week five

The company continue their examination of truth and naturalism in Githa Sowerby's play. To move away from the feeling that we are staging a polite Victorian drama, we have turned to improvisation. Polly Findlay describes a particular 'theatre language' – physical and vocal – that, as theatre artists, we are all expertly versed in. There are ways to move and deliver lines that are recognisable to us and to audiences, and while these forms of presentation are communicative, they also have a sense of performance that we would like to move away from.

The exercise we have been returning to each day begins with Polly asking the actors to improvise the words of a particular scene within the architecture of Githa's writing. For example, John's line in act one, 'Cheery old soul Aunt Ann. No one's ever five minutes late but she kills and buries them' could become something like, 'God, Aunt Ann is delightful as always, she's always getting at everyone for nothing'. The actors are encouraged, as much as possible, to translate the lines of the play into words that they themselves would use. The actors are then asked to improvise the scene again but this time they are allowed to bring Githa's lines back into the conversation, if they feel like her words are the best way to express the thoughts of the character. At this stage, we have found that the actors oscillate between their own words and Githa's. Finally, the actors return entirely to Githa's words but maintain the quality of the off-text, improvised version of the scene.

The improvised, off-text version of a scene is always particularly thrilling. The actors are not only fighting to find their own words to express what Githa wants the character to say but they also need to listen to the other characters – it's a different experience to learning the written lines, and therefore anticipating other characters' reactions.



One of the benefits of this work is how it forces an actor, in the process of rephrasing their lines, to unpack what the character is thinking, to open out that thought and to expose the nuts of bolts of it before putting it all back together. A helpful image I've returned to this week is that of an accordion opened as wide as possible; each fold is uncovered to be investigated and understood before it is closed back up and the line is delivered. This exercise therefore helps the actors to work out any unclear character thoughts.

This way of working is also highly effective in rooting actors to each event in the scene and encourages their character to really 'play for the win'. Polly often talks about the 'street view' version of the scene and she urges the actors to think of their character in terms of what is happening in that moment, rather than knowing what is coming later on. When John first comes down stairs and he and Mary begin speaking to one another in act one, neither of them know that the conversation is going to morph into full-scale conflict. Each exchange therefore needs to be delivered with the attempt to win the disagreement – only then can the interaction truthfully escalate.

Rehearsal diary: week six

During a full run of the play at the end of last week's rehearsals, we made a big discovery: the production needs to clarify, specify and highlight the power that Rutherford holds over his family and his work force. The Rutherfords run on a currency of bullying, alliances and belittlement, a currency that has been set by its patriarch – and we need to show how this works.

In unpicking ways to tackle our discovery, one company member describes an experience they had with a school bully many years ago. The bully in question would pick on them on the school mini bus, psychologically pulling apart this person on a near daily basis. The specific moment that the company member lived in fear of was the split second in which the bully would turn around in their seat and lock eyes with them; our company member knew exactly what was about the unfold.

This story provides a useful, practical tool for the company to approach the ways in which Rutherford operates with his family, particularly in act one. We start using what we call 'the beam' – that moment where Rutherford locks eyes with a member of his family and makes the decision to single them out, much like the school bully.

It is worth noting that it has been a challenge to rearrange the language we use around this type of work in terms of what Roger Allam (Rutherford) is playing because, as is the case with most people who bully others, Rutherford does not consider himself a bully. Rutherford merely sees himself as the man of the house, interacting with his family in a variety of ways. The knowledge of this difference in how Rutherford sees himself, and the way others see him is another specific example of how the rehearsal process has been forensic in its pursuit of detailed and textured naturalism; each character must have a layered and truthful set of intentions.

Justine Mitchell, who plays Janet, helpfully notes that when presenting a king on stage 'you don't play the king, everyone plays him for you' – and this has been an approach we have returned to time and again throughout week six of rehearsals. It is particularly useful in revisiting act one prior to Rutherford's arrival when we find the women of the house waiting with mounting tension, for him to arrive. Their trepidation manifests in a number of ways, particularly in their exchanges with one another. Ann digs at Janet for either working too much or not working hard enough, Mary attempts to befriend Ann but is met with a rebuttal of her 'London ways', and Janet is staging a number of mini-revolutions seemingly manufactured to upset order and in turn, her aunt, Ann.



All the while, these interactions are influenced by the emotional response Rutherford elicits within these women.

To help pinpoint the exact nature of the bullying exchanges between the women, Polly asks Barbara Marten (Aunt Ann), Justine Mitchell (Janet) and Anjana Vasan (Mary) to take a piece of paper and a pen, play the scene, and to give themselves a tick on their piece of paper whenever they feel that their character has won something – it could be an argument, or the chance to undermine another character. This exercise helps to specify the tactics their characters use and highlights to the company just how much each character attempts to stage a victory over another.

As we move into the Lyttelton Theatre to begin technical rehearsals, we hope that this week's focused work will make the bullying culture of the Rutherford household tangible and clear for the audience.

Theatre glossary

Meet and greet

Usually held on the first day of rehearsals, the meet and greet is a chance for the company and production team to meet everyone who is involved in the production as well as staff from marketing, learning, fundraising, etc. The director – and sometimes the writer – may take this opportunity to explain a bit about their vision for the production.

Round the table / table work

Some directors like to start rehearsals by reading through the script, and getting an understanding of the play, characters and setting without adding movement or blocking.

Blocking

Working out where actors should stand or move on stage, and at what point.

Put on its feet

The point in rehearsals where the company start to add in blocking and try out movement for scenes. Some directors like to put a play 'on its feet' from the very start, and work out the intention of the play and the characters at the same time as the movement.

A run

Rehearsing each scene of the play in chronological order, without interruption. Runs help directors and actors to see which parts of the production may need more attention or reworking. The first run-through of a play is often referred to as a 'stagger-through', as there are usually delays and mistakes.

Off book

Once an actor has learnt their part, they no longer need to use their script in rehearsals and are described as being 'off book'.

The book

This is another name for the script. A stage manager who is 'on the book' will be in the wings of the stage, ready to help any actor who may have forgotten a line – they are also known as the 'prompt'.

Act

The separation of a play into different sections, which in turn are sometimes sub-divided into scenes.

The space

The area in which the work is taking place. This term can refer to both the rehearsal room and the theatre stage.

Staff director

The National Theatre uses staff directors rather than assistant directors. Staff directors have a variety of jobs, depending on the production and the director they are working with. They can help with background research

for rehearsals, lead improvisations and act as a liaison on behalf of the director. Once a production has had its press night, the director steps away from the production and the staff director takes over. The staff director rehearses the company at 'bring back calls' and also rehearses the understudies.

Bring back call

The National Theatre operates a 'rep' system, meaning that a production will not be playing every day and a company may have a break every other week or so. A bring back call is a short rehearsal on the day when the company return from having a break. The staff director normally holds a line run with the company, and rehearses in more detail complicated scenes, movement sequences or fights.

Rehearsal call

The stage manager will work out a day-by-day rehearsal schedule for a production, in consultation with the director. The rehearsal call sets out the scenes that are being worked on that day, and the actors or production team who are needed, and when.

Ensemble

A company of actors or performers where the emphasis is on collaborative group work.

Company

The cast, production team and other staff associated with the show.

Understudy

An actor who learns the role of another member of the company so that they can perform that part in the event of injury, illness or scheduled absence.

Actioning / intentions

A way of approaching a text, which some actors and directors like to use. Each line is assigned a transitive verb, which may help the actor to explore ways of delivering that line and uncover the meaning behind what their character is saying or trying to achieve.

Stanislavskian

Relating to Constantin Stanislavski, a Russian theatre practitioner usually associated with method acting.

Beckettian

Relating to playwright Samuel Beckett, whose work is associated with minimalism.

Alexander technique

A system designed to promote healthy movement and posture. Named after its creator Frederick Matthias Alexander.

Theatre glossary (continued)

Upstage

The area at the back of the stage furthest from the audience.

Downstage

The area at the front of the stage closest to the audience.

Improvisation

Action taken by an actor(s) that is unprepared or unrehearsed. During the rehearsal process this is often led by suggestions from the director for the purposes of exploration and discovery. During performance improvisation is often used by actors to cover a mistake or accident on stage.

Beat

In the script a playwright may use the term 'beat' to denote a pause or a shift in pace or intention in the play. In rehearsal, the term is often used to describe a particular moment or event on stage. It can also be used to describe a unit of time.

Line run

The company say their lines without adding movements. Line runs help actors to feel confident that they know their words before going on stage. Sometimes line runs are done at speed, which can really test how well actors know their roles.

Model box

A scale model of the set, used by the director and designer to work out how each scene could look. For the acting company, model boxes help them to visualise where they will be standing on stage and the world their character is living in. Carpenters, production managers, scenic artists and prop-makers will also study the model box, to get an idea of textures and finish on the set, as well as the overall look. Model boxes can also help to flag any issues with elements of staging before they are made.

Fit up

The set is assembled on the stage.

Get in

The set, props and costumes are brought to the stage, ready for technical rehearsals.

Technical run

Running through the play setting all technical cues, including lighting, sound, set changes and automation. This is an opportunity to practice scene changes, characters' entrances and exits, costume changes, and for actors to get used to being on the set.



Dress run / dress rehearsal

A dress rehearsal is a chance to pull together all elements of a production, including sound, lighting and costume, and work through the play as though it is a performance.

Previews

Before a production has its press night, it normally has a couple of preview performances. Productions can still change right up to press night, and it is during previews that the company and director get to see how audiences respond to the production, and they may rework sections accordingly.

Press night

The night the critics see the production before reviewing it.