SMALL ISLAND
adapted by Helen Edmundson
based on the novel by Andrea Levy
Rehearsal Diaries
Welcome to the National Theatre’s rehearsal diaries for Small Island

These rehearsal diaries, written by the staff director of Small Island, 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.

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Sarah Eastaff
Programme Manager, NT Learning
May 2019
The National’s production

The Company

Mrs Ryder
Amy Forrest
Hortense
Leah Harvey
Miss Jewel
Sandra James-Young
Little Hortense
Keira Chansa, Aiko Foueillis-Mosé,
Nova Foueillis-Mosé
Mr Philip / GI / Kenneth
Trevor Laird
Miss Ma
Jacqueline Boatswain
Little Michael
Shaquahn Crowe, Raphael Higgins-Humes,
Quincy Miller-Cole
Michael
CJ Beckford
Policeman / GI
Natey Jones
Woman in Hurricane
Chereen Buckley
Bernard
Andrew Rothney
Queenie
Aisling Loftus
Aunt Dorothy / Woman with Baby
Beatie Edney
Mrs Buxton / Miss Todd / Woman in Cinema
Stephanie Jacob
Mr Buxton / Ginger / Sergeant Thwaites / Railway Worker
Adam Ewan
Young Man in Sweet Shop / Kip / GI / Railway Worker
Cavan Clarke
Arthur
David Fielder
Franny
Phoebe Frances Brown, Rebecca Lee
Gilbert
Gershwyn Eustache Jnr
Recruiting Officer One / Soames / Railway Worker / Military Policeman
Paul Bentall
Elwood
Johann Myers
Recruiting Officer Two / GI / Foreman
John Hastings
Usherette
CJ Johnson
GI
Daniel Norford
Celia
Shiloh Coke

Director
Rufus Norris
Set and Costume Designer
Katrina Lindsay
Projection Designer
Jon Driscoll
Lighting Designer
Paul Anderson
Composer and Rehearsal Music Director
Benjamin Kwasi Burrell
Sound Designer
Ian Dickinson
Movement Director
Coral Messam
Fight Director
Kate Waters
Music Supervisor
Marc Tritschler
Music Consultant
Gary Crosby
Company Voice Work
Jeannette Nelson
Dialect Coach
Hazel Holder
Associate Set and Costume Designer
Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey
Associate Projection Designer
Gino Ricardo Green
Staff Director
Anna Himali Howard
Associate Music Director
Shiloh Coke

On Film
Alyn Hawke and Gemma Sutton

Music recorded by Jazz Jamaica Allstars
Additional music recorded by London String Group

Supernumeraries
Jamie Ankrah, Aimee Louise Bevan, Thea Day,
Victoria Denard, Alma En, Alvin Ikenwe,
Luther King Osei, Alice Langrish, Roberta Livingston,
Fatima Niemogha, Anselm Onyenani, Mary Tillet,
Joseph Vaiana, Tricia Wey, Christopher Williams,
Joylon Young

This production had its press night on 1 May 2019, in the National’s Olivier Theatre.
In 2004, Andrea Levy’s fourth novel, Small Island, was published. It received great critical acclaim and won several major awards, and it has since been adapted into a BBC television series. Moreover, Small Island has had a huge cultural influence by telling of the shared history of Jamaica and Britain through the eyes of Hortense, Gilbert, Queenie and Bernard.

On 18 February 2019 we come together for the first day of rehearsals full of excitement to stage this sweeping, lyrical story for the first time, but also full of sadness: Andrea Levy died last week, on 15 February. It is an emotional day, both sombre and joyful. Rufus Norris, the Director, welcomes everyone and we begin with a minute of silence to remember Andrea. A picture of her smiling face is pinned to the wall of our rehearsal room, next to a picture of her mother, on whom the character of Hortense is based.

We warm up and start to get to know each other with some movement and dancing led by Coral Messam, our Movement Director. Our first read-through of Helen Edmundson’s adaptation of Small Island is extraordinary. There are laughter and tears, and the story feels incredibly meaningful to us in this moment. We have Andrea’s legacy in mind, and the history of a generation who are once again facing hostility and deportation from the UK.

When we take a look at the intricate model of Katrina Lindsay’s epic set design, Katrina and Rufus describe Small Island as a story about agency and movement. Hortense, Gilbert and Queenie arrive in London – as many of us in the rehearsal room have – as economic migrants in search of a better life, and we watch as their dreams clash with the historical moment in which they find themselves. Rufus and Katrina talk about how the production is about ‘bringing history to life and life to history’ – and this is an idea we return to throughout the week. It’s as if we are taking a black-and-white photograph and going on to tell the story of the person in it, in all their complicated humanity. Later, we watch Imagine, a documentary about Andrea and her life, which was aired alongside the BBC adaptation of her novel, The Long Song, over Christmas. In the documentary, Andrea emphasises the importance of remembering the entwined history of Britain and the Caribbean in order to understand modern Britain.

For the rest of the week our mornings are filled with dancing and moving, but also singing. Benjamin Kwasi Burrell, our Composer, teaches the cast some Jamaican folk songs and English hymns which will be woven into the production. In the afternoons, we work on the first three scenes which are told from three perspectives – those of Hortense, Gilbert and Queenie. We investigate the characters and their relationships and ask Helen (Playwright) lots of questions. It’s especially interesting to see how movement and staging can give our narrators a really playful way of bringing their stories to life. We also use the physical languages which Coral is creating to ‘sketch’ some of the bigger ensemble scenes, with people moving across the space like waves, putting individual characters in relief against a crowd.

On Friday Jon Driscoll, our Projection Designer, joins the rehearsals and we experiment with different ways of using archive footage, shadow play and image projection on a big cinema screen, reminding us of the interplay between idealism and reality. Before she meets Bernard, Queenie imagines a love like the ones she sees on the silver screen. The cinema screen allows us to dig deeper into the romance of Hollywood and the rose-tinted spectacles through which we tend to look back on history. We find some especially poignant moments in which the actors play with their shadows, as though they are alternative selves, or ghosts.

We end the week with a visit to the Black Cultural Archive in Brixton, where we listen to a talk about the history of the BCA and find out about the Windrush era. We are shown an array of interesting artefacts, reading materials and oral histories. The BCA has a timeline of black British history dating back to Roman Britain, emphasising the BCA’s aim to disrupt and complicate the Windrush narrative. Lots of our questions are about the coverage of colonisation in education and the school curriculum, a response to Gilbert’s question in Small Island: “How come England did not know me?”
We begin rehearsals this week with lots of playing and experimenting, including trying out different ways of creating a hurricane in the first scene, and ways that the narrator can be at the centre of everything that happens on stage. Our Movement Director, Coral, works with the whole company to keep developing the physicality of the ensemble, and we play with how they can reflect the emotional centre of the story from three different perspectives: those of Hortense, Gilbert and Queenie.

There are huge geographical transitions to think about in the first half of the show, as we shift back and forth between Jamaica and England. We play with these continental shifts, exploring how it feels for the person who is taking us there, from Gilbert’s homesick relief in Kingston turning to a yearning to escape, to Queenie’s astonishment at the glamour and romance of London. Rufus and Coral continue to experiment with ensemble movement, music and dance to show us these perspectives, and we’re able to create beautifully evocative atmospheres by incorporating some of the songs that Ben has been teaching to the cast into the scenes.

It’s really exciting this week to have some time on the Olivier stage. For many of us, it’s the first time we have had the chance to look out to the audience from the other side of that auditorium, and we spend a session transposing some of our work in the rehearsal room onto the stage, to see how it fits. Everyone walks around, getting used to the different perspectives around the auditorium and seeing how it feels to watch and listen from different seats. We talk about how unique the Olivier is, and how Andrea’s story and Helen’s adaptation are a perfect fit for such a large theatre – an epic yet personal story. Later in the week, I sit in on a voice session in the Olivier led by voice coach Jeannette Nelson, who helps the actors warm up their voices and get to know the auditorium. Jeannette gives them some fascinating tips and tricks to help their voices reach everyone in the theatre, and we listen carefully to the acoustics around the stage and the auditorium.

Towards the end of the week, we do some filming with the actors, creating poignant video portraits of some of the characters on our huge screen, and creating some abstract imagery to bring a more psychological approach to our use of projection. On Friday, we try putting the imagery together with some of the scenes. We then test out a pivotal moment of the show, when Gilbert boards the Empire Windrush bound for London in 1948. Katrina Lindsay has designed a huge sail to billow out across the stage and, using some of the shadow work we discovered last week, we create a crowd boarding the ship as Gilbert and Hortense say their goodbyes. It’s emotional on a personal and historical scale, and the power of bringing to life these famous images is felt by everyone watching.
Week three of *Small Island* rehearsals brings us a real treat: our first rehearsal with our company of child actors. Little Michael and Little Hortense are played by a rotating cast of six brilliant young actors who arrive in rehearsals for the first time halfway through the week. We start rehearsals with them by playing a game which Coral has been playing with us throughout the process – Grandma’s Footsteps. The storytelling in *Small Island* means that there is a lot of freezing and unfreezing of the action, as well as the ensemble working together to support the narrator, so it’s a perfect game for us to practice those principles as well as allowing us to have a dance. At the start of the week Coral adds new rules to make the game even harder, such as passing a jacket around the group without being seen, or doing ballet to heavy metal music whilst creeping up on Grandma. All of this is great training for each actor’s focus when we rehearse ensemble scenes. Nevertheless, the young actors prove far more skilled at Grandma’s Footsteps than the adults, as well as much stricter on the rules, and they suitably trounce us all.

We then play with some different ways of showing the relationship between Hortense and Little Hortense, including how they might interact with one another on stage – with Hortense watching as Little Hortense plays out her own childhood memories, and who might speak which of Hortense’s lines. We also have a brilliant time looking at the scene in which Little Hortense and Little Michael climb trees and look at birds’ nests, trying out different ways of using Katrina’s set to give a sense of the landscape around the house, and the jeopardy when Little Michael falls out of the tree. It is interesting to see how simply placing Hortense and Little Hortense together creates a really poignant image and allows us access into Hortense’s memory – especially into her close relationship with her grandmother, Miss Jewel, and her fear of Mr Phillips. The young actors are so adept at allowing the audience into those relationships, and using their physicality to tell the story of Michael and Hortense. We’re all very excited to have them back next week.

Later in the week we have our second session with Fight Director Kate Waters, in which the company work on the big fight in the cinema in scene three. Last week, Kate had worked with the actors on some combat principles and moves which allow them to always be in control of the staged violence, using the placement of their body weight and some visual trickery. This week they put these principles into practice and create a fight scene which feels dangerous and chaotic, with order and safety underpinning it, all whilst making sure that the audience is following the story within the fight using composition to draw the eye to the focal points on the stage.

Putting together the fight scene in the cinema means that we have now put the whole of scene three on its feet. At the very end of the week we have our first run-through of a chunk of the play, seeing how the different sections fit together and where the gaps might be. It’s exciting to see how the transitions in time and place fit together, and how the actors are starting to be able to reach into a toolbox of storytelling styles and physical languages to take the audience along with them in this fast-moving narrative.
Rehearsal diary: week four

Week four of *Small Island* sees us getting stuck in to act two. It’s a much more intimate, closed world, in which our narrators turn inwards and we focus on the entwined domestic lives of Gilbert, Hortense, Queenie and Bernard. We split off into two rehearsal rooms for most of the week. In one rehearsal room, Coral and Ben continue to work on the ensemble singing and movement and in the other, Rufus works with the actors to excavate and sketch out the whole of the second half of the show. Watching the rehearsals, it’s clear that the epic storytelling of the first half sets us up for a real emotional pay-off in the second half, as the hopes and dreams of these characters are brought into conflict with reality.

My research into the experience of post-war Britain, both for those living in England and those migrating from the Caribbean, has led to me reading pamphlets which were distributed by the British Council, the BBC and other organisations to advise readers about migration. Two particularly interesting pamphlets are ‘Going to Britain?’, which is a guide for Caribbean people, written by those who had already experienced moving to Britain, and ‘Your Neighbour from the West Indies’, which attempts to dispel assumptions and encourage a welcoming attitude towards people migrating to Britain from the Caribbean. ‘Going to Britain?’ contains useful advice about finding a job, navigating the NHS and finding housing. It encourages politeness and humour in the face of prejudice, in order to ‘keep the door open for those who will come after you’. This reflects something we have been talking about in rehearsals, as we observe the many instances in which Gilbert swallows an insult or holds himself back, thinking not only of his own reputation but that of all the others who will come after him. The consequences of playing music too loud, being late for work or even defending himself against racism are far-reaching, and his every move is scrutinised. ‘Your Neighbour from the West Indies’ is optimistic about the entrenched racism within everyday language; ‘Many have absorbed the oft-preached doctrine of the superiority of the white races which has crept into our vocabulary in verbal symbols… No doubt there will come a change in our symbols in the future.’ The pamphlets are a reminder both of how much has changed, and how much work society still has to do.

At the end of the week we have another session in the Olivier, and make our way through most of act two, trying out the principles of the set, which is a stripped-back view of the inside of Queenie’s house, 21 Nevern Street, with a staircase running up the middle. We also test the revolve, which will take us between Queenie’s part of the house and the room that Gilbert and Hortense share at the top of the house. It’s the first time we’ve used the revolve in the Olivier, and it gives a really clear sense of how the domestic drama of act two will feel, as well as how we can take the action outside of 21 Nevern Street when we need to.
This week, I accompany our Composer, Ben, to a recording studio in Hackney to listen to him rehearsing his compositions with some musicians from Jazz Jamaica. He’s preparing them for a longer recording session, in which there won’t be as much time to go over the music. We record parts of the rehearsal to experiment with in the rehearsal room. There are mento and rhumba numbers as well as Ben’s thematic compositions which will run through the show as musical motifs, played by a string quartet as well as the brass and rhythm musicians from Jazz Jamaica. It’s really important to talk with the musicians about what’s happening on stage during a given piece of music, in order to help them get the right sound for the recording – knowing the emotional context makes an audible difference. We also record lots of solo lines from the compositions, to build in at moments where the sound might need to be more sparse. Ben has some exciting ways of blending sound effects with music – like recording a cello drone as a possible sound effect for a plane flying overhead – for which these solo lines of rhythm or melody will be useful.

Meanwhile in the rehearsal room, the week begins with a day of intensely focusing on the movement sequence in scene two, which takes Queenie from Lincolnshire to London. Having initially found a shape that works for the scene, Coral and Rufus choreograph the detailed ‘makeover’ sequence in which Queenie is at the centre of a dazzling trip to Oxford Street, surrounded by dancing mirrors, cinema seats rolling past, and Londoners passing her by. It requires real technicality to achieve the smooth and effortless effect of Queenie being swept off her feet and becoming part of a romantic cinematic fantasy, and we work to counts of eight, putting each step in place. There’s a sense of triumph when we manage to run the sequence all the way through, which is a great start to the week.

These are the moments which we return to throughout the week to add more layers of music and movement. By the end of the week, we have a much more detailed picture of the scene four transition to Kingston (Jamaica), too. Having had a few sessions with Coral working on learning some historically accurate dance steps, the actors now have a palette to draw from, so that the scene feels sociable and spontaneous. It’s a similar way of working to scene two – layering in lots of technical detail under the surface so that when it’s staged it feels natural and all that work becomes invisible.
Two words on the rehearsal call send a ripple of excitement through the cast’s WhatsApp group this week: baby puppetry. There are two ‘babies’ in the show – newborn baby Michael, who emerges in the birth scene, and is then swapped out for a slightly older baby Michael who is ‘less of a fright’.

The first ‘baby’ is a rigid little doll with an umbilical cord attached, whilst the second is larger and heavier, with a full head of hair, limbs that flop around and a soft beanbag body. When the actors are holding the second ‘baby’, it’s possible to make it appear real – the actors’ focus on it encourages the audience to believe in it, but the actors can also manipulate the doll with tiny movements which give the impression that it’s breathing and wriggling like a real baby. We call in a puppetry consultant, Laura Cubitt, to help us. Laura shows the actors how to pick up the baby and put it down whilst maintaining belief in its weight, and even little tricks to make its arms look like they’re moving of their own accord. It requires real concentration from the actors, especially from Leah, who, as Hortense, needs to look tense and uncomfortable holding a baby, but also keep it ‘breathing’ and ‘moving’ in her arms. The minute the actors forgot to animate the baby, it becomes oddly noticeable on stage in its stillness. But when it works, its believability catches me off-guard – even though I know it’s only a doll. Everyone starts to fall a little bit in love with this particular prop.

At the end of the week is a big day – in the morning we spend some time in the Olivier, working principally on how to pitch direct address in the auditorium and connect with the audience, and in the afternoon we go back to the rehearsal room for the first run-through of act one.

The first three scenes of act one are the most technically complicated in the show; they are split into around 50 sub-scenes and involve a fast-paced style of storytelling which keeps the actors and all the technical elements constantly moving. This means it’s really important to get ahead of the timing of it, and see where there are gaps, at this stage. This is first time the actors have brought these scenes together and it’s great to see the moments where the story and style are really clear. Exciting new moments emerge as the actors continue to play with one another, and practical problems like ‘how does that bucket get off stage?’ become visible. It runs at a longer time than we were expecting, but we can now go back over it looking for pauses, events and parts of the text which might be slowing down the pace, before we run the play in full next week.
Rehearsal diary: week seven

This is our last full week in the rehearsal room before we go into technical rehearsals. On Wednesday we welcome a very special guest into the rehearsal room – Alford Gardner, who, like Gilbert in the novel, left Jamaica to serve with the RAF in the Second World War and was briefly posted to the USA before serving in Britain. Alford returned to Jamaica after the war before boarding the Empire Windrush and moving to Britain in 1948 – he has lived in Leeds ever since. Our Associate Designer, Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey, had already been in contact with Alford and invites him and his son Howard in to talk to the cast and watch rehearsals for the afternoon.

Over lunch, Alford and the cast talk about the play, and Alford’s own experiences. He tells us about signing up for the RAF after taking their exams, leaving Jamaica and then serving in the RAF. He was posted to the British countryside but used to hitchhike to London on his days off. Alford has memorable anecdotes about a pub landlord in Blackburn who hid him in the kitchen to protect him from white American GIs and of his first time eating British military rations. His account of travelling on the Windrush and finding friendship and family in Leeds is full of joy and – much to his son, Howard’s, embarrassment – partying and girls.

After lunch we show Alford around the rehearsal room. Alford points out a picture on the wall from our research and says, ‘That’s me!’ It turns out we have a picture of 18-year-old Alford, in his RAF uniform on our rehearsal room wall. It is a beautiful moment and goes back to our first week of rehearsals where we sought to bring history to life, and life to history.

On Saturday, we have our first full run-through of the show. Lots of the supernumerary cast come to watch, as well as the production and technical teams, all taking copious notes. We are able to experience something of the scale of the show, and of the huge journey the story takes. Something I especially appreciate during the run is seeing how the relationships which are set up in the first three scenes really pay off when you meet those characters again later, even if it’s just for a moment. When we’ve been watching all the scenes separately it’s been harder to tell how the delicate motif of memory will play out over the two hours, so it’s brilliant to experience the story in full and make those connections along the way. It is also momentous for the actors, knowing how it feels to do the show all the way through, and more importantly knowing that they can do it. It feels like we’re in a really exciting place ahead of technical rehearsals next week.
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.
**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.

**Press night**
The night the critics see the production before reviewing it.

**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.