

THE CLASSIC THRILLER LIVE ON STAGE

EMMA RICE'S
WISE CHILDREN



ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

NORTH BY NORTHWEST

ADAPTED & DIRECTED BY EMMA RICE

Based on the Turner Entertainment Co. Film North by Northwest
Produced by special arrangement with Warner Bros. Theatre Ventures and Kay & McLean Productions

EDUCATION PACK

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Welcome

Welcome to the education pack for *North by Northwest*.

Based on Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 thriller, *North by Northwest* is adapted and directed by Emma Rice and brought to life by her theatre company, Wise Children.

We've crammed this pack full of information so you can discover more about the production and the people who make it happen.

Enjoy!

Wise Children x



Synopsis

"The Hitchcock picture to end all Hitchcock pictures"

Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* was released by MGM studios in 1959 and went straight to number one at the US box office. The cold war thriller had an original screenplay written by Ernest Lehman, a theatrical score created by Bernard Herrmann and starred leads from the golden age of Hollywood; Carey Grant, Eva Marie Saint and James Mason. Consistently ranked among the best films of all time, *North by Northwest* has enjoyed an enduring popularity that Ernest Lehman referred to as 'timeless'.

Bought to the stage by Emma Rice's *Wise Children*, this theatrical adaptation of Hitchcock's film brings the biggest moments from the silver screen to life on a set of enormous revolving doors, with a cast of just six performers.

ACT ONE

"Do I have your attention? Good. Let's begin."

The **Professor**, the story's narrator, introduces us to the world of the play; it's 1959, the cold war has the world on tenterhooks and, in New York, advertising executive **Roger Thornhill** is leaving work through a revolving door.

Worrying that he hasn't had a chance to call his mother, Roger heads to a cocktail bar where he meets a client. As a hotel bell boy calls loudly for a '**George Kaplan**', Roger waves him over to ask about sending a telegram to his mother. Lurking villains, **Anna** and her husband, **Valerian**, assume that Roger is George Kaplan and kidnap him.

Roger is taken to the Townsend Estate where he is met by **Mrs Townsend**. He is locked in a room with the sinister **Phillip Vandamm** who does not introduce himself, but repeatedly calls Roger 'Mr Kaplan'. Whilst Roger attempts to share his true identity, Vandamm runs through Kaplan's recent movements, trying to catch Roger out. Finally tiring of the interrogation, Vandamm and his cronies force Roger to drink a bottle of whiskey and bundle him into the driver's seat of a car. Roger manages to drive off alone and sets out along a perilous cliff-top road.

Synopsis continued...

The police notice Roger's dangerous driving and chase him, causing him to crash. He is taken to Glen Cove Police Station where he uses his one phone call to ring his mother and then falls into an alcohol induced daze. He wakes in court and tells the judge and his mother, **Clara Thornhill**, what happened to him the previous night.

The police officer takes them back to the Townsend Estate to investigate, but there Mrs Townsend reacts to Roger like he's an old friend, calling him Roger and scolding him for trying to drive home the previous night. Roger demands to see the man he met last night, who he assumes is her husband, and Mrs Townsend directs them to the United Nations.

The police officer refuses to investigate the matter further, but Roger decides he needs to understand what happened to him. He remembers that Vandamm told him Kaplan was staying in room 796 at the Plaza Hotel and convinces his mother to help him break into the room. There, Roger realises that no one at the hotel has ever seen Kaplan. Valerian and Anna track Roger down at the hotel and he escapes in a taxi to the United Nations.

“The United Nations. A sanctuary of peace and security created from the ashes of World War II. A beacon of hope for us all designed to spare future generations from the scourge of conflict.”

At the United Nations, Roger asks for Mr Townsend and is puzzled when a stranger appears. Anna and Valerian arrive and watch as Mr Townsend informs Roger that his wife is dead and his estate has been vacant. Panicked, Anna convinces Valerian to kill Mr Townsend. As she creates a diversion, Valerian stabs Mr Townsend in the back and the gentlemen falls into a bewildered Roger's arms. Roger pulls out the dagger and is left next to a dead body holding the murder weapon.

As Roger flees, the Professor and his agents reveal to the audience that George Kaplan is a non-existent decoy. The Professor also expresses his delight that Roger has drawn attention away from their 'Number one' undercover agent and states helping Roger now would risk global security.

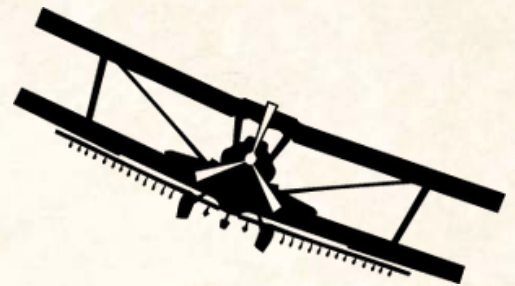
Synopsis continued...

Roger calls the Plaza Hotel, who tells him that Kaplan has gone to Chicago. Avoiding the police, Roger makes his way through Grand Central Station and onto the sleeper train bound for Chicago. On the train he meets **Eve Kendall** who helps him to avoid capture by the police. Roger and Eve feel an immediate connection and, as the train speeds towards Chicago, they flirt over dinner.

Eve reveals she knows that Roger is wanted for murder, but when the state police board the train, she hides him in her room. Once Roger is safe, the pair share an intimate night; not only kissing, but talking about who they lost in the war and other secrets. But, unbeknownst to Roger, Eve sends a note to Vandamm, who is also on the train asking: "What shall I do with him in the morning?"

--- Interval ---

ACT TWO



“Let me remind you of where we are. Geographically we are at Chicago Railway Station ... And narratively we are in the pea soup.”

The Professor and his agents welcome the audience back and reintroduce Roger, who has made it off the train with the assistance of Eve. Eve offers to call Kaplan for a grateful Roger, but instead she calls Vandamm and relays Vandamm's instructions to him. Reluctant to part ways with Eve, but believing he is going to meet Kaplan, Roger catches a bus out into the countryside.

Alone and in the middle of nowhere, Roger waits by a cornfield. A crop-dusting plane appears and, to Roger's surprise, heads straight for him and opens fire. Roger escapes through the fields and attempts to stop an approaching gas tanker for help. The tanker stops just before it hits Roger and the plane crashes into it causing an explosion.

Two farmers passing in a pickup truck stop to help and, miraculously uninjured, Roger rolls out from underneath the tanker and steals their truck. Remembering that Kaplan will be at the Ambassador East hotel, Roger heads back into Chicago. At the hotel reception, he finds out Kaplan apparently checked out before Eve called and realises that Eve is with the villains.

Synopsis continued...

Roger spots Eve at the hotel and follows her up to her room. During a tense conversation, Roger tries to figure Eve out and she tries to convince him to run. Eve receives a phone call and writes more instructions on a memo pad, then hides that note. When she believes Roger is showering, Eve slips away. Roger rubs over the indentation left on the memo pad to find out where Eve has gone: 1212 North MICHIGAN, an auction house.

At the auction house, Roger sees Eve with Vandamm, Valerian and Anna. He confronts Eve and Vandamm, and learns Vandamm's name when the villain bids for and wins Lincoln's briefcase. As Vandamm and Eve leave with the briefcase, Valerian and Anna attack Roger. The ensuing fight ends when Roger is led out of the room by the auctioneer, who turns out to be the Professor in disguise.

The Professor explains that Vandamm is being investigated by the government and they know that he plans to leave the country from Mt Rushmore the following night. The Professor also reveals to an astonished Roger that there's no such person as George Kaplan and that Eve is in fact an undercover agent and his 'Number one'.

“Forgive me for referring to our Number One as a man, Mr. Thornhill. It was about all I could do to help keep her safe while she's in such terrible danger...”



Synopsis continued...

To help Eve, Roger agrees to be Kaplan for one more day and heads to the top of Mt Rushmore with the Professor. In a pre-arranged deception, Roger meets Vandamm and Eve, and to protect her cover, Eve shoots Roger in the chest. After Vandamm leaves, the Professor rouses Roger, revealing that Eve's gun was loaded with blanks. Eve returns and apologises to Roger telling him her true identity. Roger also learns that Eve will be leaving with Vandamm that night.

“War is hell, Mr Thornhill, as well you know... even when it's a cold one.”

The Professor knocks Roger out and takes him to a safe house, but as soon as he wakes up Roger goes after Eve. At Vandamm's house, Roger spies on Vandamm, seeing him first with Eve, then alone with Valerian who shows his boss that Eve's gun had been loaded with blanks. Vandamm is devastated and announces he will dispose of Eve on the plane. Roger also learns that Lincoln's briefcase is filled with microfilm that could spark world war three.

Roger gets a message to Eve and meets her in her room. He tells her about the contents of the briefcase and warns her that her cover is blown. Despite this, Eve chooses to stay with the briefcase and heads out with Vandamm. Roger fights off Anna to follow Eve and finds her by the plane, they grab the briefcase and run off towards Mt Rushmore.

As the narrator, the Professor pulls Vandamm, then Valerian and Anna, out of the action of the play to find out what in their war-torn past led them to this moment. The action resumes and Eve and Roger climb down Lincoln's face, pursued by the villains. As they tussle, Valerian falls to his death. Roger and Eve end up dangling at Vandamm's mercy, but, overcome with grief, Anna shoots him. The Professor puts down his scotch, and stops his musing on the war, to step back into the world of the play and pull Roger and Eve to safety.

As Eve reaches solid ground the scene shifts to an election rally. Roger cheers her on and Eve thanks the crowd for electing her as the first woman senator of New York. She lays out her plans for a peaceful future.

“I promise we will never return to the division, cruelty and hatred that we have all endured. Never again.”

Credits

CREATIVE TEAM

Adapter and Director

Emma Rice

Set & Costume Designer

Rob Howell

Composer & Sound Designer

Simon Baker

Lighting Designer

Malcolm Rippeth

Movement Director, Choreographer & Intimacy Coordinator

Etta Murfitt

Creative Consultant

Mark Kaufman

Fight Director

Kev McCurdy

Assistant Director

Evangeline Dickson

ORIGINAL CAST (MARCH 2025)

Roger Thornhill

Ewan Wardrop

Phillip Vandamm

Karl Queensborough

Eve Kendall

Patrycja Kujawska

Valerian

Simon Oskarsson

Anna

Mirabelle Gremaud

The Professor

Katy Owen



Credits continued...

PRODUCTION TEAM

Production Manager

Sam Paterson

Costume Supervisor

Lucy Gaiger

Props Supervisor

Lisa Buckley

Lighting Programmer

Victoria Brennan

Production Sound

Charlie Simpson

Production Lighting

Laurence Russell & Jeffrey Hinde

Production photographer

Steve Tanner

BACKSTAGE

Company Manager on the Book

Kate Foster

Stage Manager

Helen Lainsbury

Assistant Stage Manager

Zoë Mackinnon

Head of Sound

Harriet Hollinshead-Lee

Head of Wardrobe

Anna Souter

WISE CHILDREN

Artistic Director

Emma Rice

Executive Director

Poppy Keeling

Creative Director

Simon Baker

Head of Production

Jay Jones

**Associate Director and
Head of Training**

Laura Keefe

Head of Organisation

Steph Curtis

Finance Manager

Ben Parker

Associate Producer

Rhys Bugler

**Participation and
Production Assistant**

Riddell Erridge

Fundraiser

Helena Price

**Digital and Technical
Assistant**

Merlyn Salter-Ling

**Communications and
Marketing Assistant**

Amelia Madan

Education pack compiled by

Helen Comerford

Spotlight on Rehearsals

North by Northwest rehearsed for five weeks in Wise Children's space in Frome, The Lucky Chance. Before the team headed to York Theatre Royal for **technical rehearsals** (see p16), we grabbed a few of the cast, creatives and production team to interview. As scene work and fight calls continued in the rehearsal room, we found a quiet space to chat about their roles on *North by Northwest*.



As you read the interviews consider:

- *How the actors approach multi-roling (playing multiple characters)*
- *How research inspired decisions*
- *The different methods the actors use to prepare for their roles*
- *The importance of backstory to storytellers*
- *The different stages of creating a show*
- *How technical effects are woven in to tell the story*
- *The small choices that make a big impact on a show*

Cast Interview: Simon Oskarsson

Who do you play in *North by Northwest*?

I play Valerian and a bunch of other characters.

What research did you do for your parts?

Well, first of all, I watched the original film to get a sense of the story and the style of that. Then I also researched the time that it's set in to see what's going on then. The adaptation is different to the film, so I also took a lot of time to read Emma's script so I could get all the facts that I needed.

I do something called 'mining the text'. I try to find everything that my character says about themselves, everything other characters say about them, everything they say about other characters and any facts that are in the stage direction. I list that and that helps me to get a sense of them.

What acting and characterisation decisions did that lead you to for Valerian?

First of all, the accent. In this version, Valerian is Ukrainian, so I did a lot of research into sounding Ukrainian. I listened to voice clips and also decided where he would be from in Ukraine.

Valerian is a violent person who's been through a lot in his life, so I tried to find weight to his movement. I thought about how he would carry himself and what kind of movement quality he would have, and I found it to be quite slow and weighty. Valerian takes his time, except for when he explodes into action.

I also dropped my voice as much as I could for Valerian, so he is quite low and the other



characters I play are more high-pitched.

And how do you want the audience to see your character?

When he's first presented I want to give them the feeling that he's just the baddy, but the more you get to know him, the more empathy you get for him. I hope by the end the audience are a little bit on his side or that they can understand where he comes from and why he has ended up like this.

Do you have a favourite moment in the show?

The opening is very good especially in the way that we introduce everything to the audience, but the sequence of getting to Mount Rushmore through to the end is probably my favourite. I like it because of the staging and how much physical work there is there. It's a very exciting time for Valerian because his storyline gets tied up there in quite a dramatic way. It's a really fun part to play.

Cast Interview: Mirabelle Gremaud



Who do you play in *North by Northwest*?

I play Anna and others.

What research did you do for Anna?

I looked at a lot of spy movies like James Bond, which I love. Anna is not in a positive state for this whole play, so I also watched a lot of Tarantino to see the depth of characters that are in a very dark place for the whole time. I decided I wanted to find a presence and an attitude grounded in stillness. I looked into actors that work with stillness and the director Robert Wilson (an opera director who uses stillness as a force). Researching stillness was important because it's the opposite of what I do - I'm always moving around.

What other acting or characterisation decisions did that research lead you to?

I trusted less movement and less stylised movement, and instead let the emotion lead the tiniest thing that happens in my body.

For example, if I'm worried in a moment, I don't want to show that in a stressed way (like I'd react). Instead, I have to think what is the minimalist thing I could do? It might just be to look. It might be just turning my head and trusting that one gesture in itself is going to tell the story.

How do you want the audience to see Anna?

I think I want them to believe her when she says she can kill someone. I've never played anyone who killed anyone before, so it's a great challenge and it's something I'm very much looking forward to. I want them to believe me onstage when I say I've killed before and I can do it again.

Do you have a favourite moment of the show?

So far, I think one of my favourite scenes is one scene that I'm not in! It's when Roger Thornhill is at the court, claiming his innocence. It's a very silly, short, fast-paced ensemble scene and I really enjoy it.



Cast Interview: Karl Queensborough

Who do you play in *North by Northwest*?

The main character I play is someone called Phillip Vandamm.

What research did you do to prepare for playing Vandamm?

Well, I saw him as a kind of 007 villain, so, I watched a few of the Bond films and researched other villains that speak with an English accent. For reference points, I love looking at films and images to match them up with my character. I looked at Malfoy's dad from the Harry Potter series as well because he's got that upper RP, snooty villainy. Lucius Malfoy doesn't have to do much to prove his status, but he's got that high status, solid kind of quality – it's very old school.

What acting and characterisation decisions did your research lead to?

When I'm playing a character, I'll pick a centre they would lead with, for example, Phillip Vandamm is all in the chest because he's confident and up front. I also play Roger Thornhill's mum and she has a handbag which she holds in a certain position, so I lead with the hands. I choose the character's posture and set their tempo; considering the way they would speak and the way they would move.

The animals study work I did at drama school is also useful. I associate an animal with the characters and consider how that animal would move and, if they could talk, how they would sound. This takes it to the extreme, but you can bring it down as well. For Vandamm, I used a jaguar and Clara, Roger's mum, is a peacock or a flamingo.



Associating the characters with certain materials helps as well. When Phillip Vandamm speaks, I imagine a chocolate factory with the chocolate dripping into a tray. It's got a silky kind of quality.

I love visual representations for character work.

How do you want the audience to see your characters?

I want them to see my characters as real people, but obviously with this kind of play everything is heightened. On the surface, Vandamm is a villain; he's in the wrong, he's working for the Russians during the Cold War so he's obviously the bad guy. But, from Vandamm's perspective, he's doing the right thing and there's a bit of a reveal towards the end which explains why he is the way he is and what's brought him to this point.

Emma's written a fantastic climax to Vandamm's story and added in backstory which you don't get to see in the film. That's what's great about how

Cast Interview: Karl Queensborough

Continued...

she's adapted this. We get to see her insights. The play does its best to solve unanswered questions from the film, especially with Katy playing the Professor and narrating the show. The film can be an overwhelming overload of information, but with our show you get all the details.

Do you have a favourite moment?

Oh man ... Without spoiling too much, there's a section at the end where we're in Vandamm's house. A few things have been revealed and there's a great sequence with the revolving doors which stop to see what's occurring in the different rooms. In the rehearsal room you can imagine what the sequence will look like, but on stage, with lights, sound, all the manoeuvres and the props, I think that it is going to look very impressive.



Stage Manager Interview:

Helen Lainsbury

What are your main responsibilities during rehearsals?

I'm generally in rehearsals day to day keeping a track of all of the props, set moves and anything that we will need to do technically. For example, there are fly cues or Kabuki drops (which is when things fall out of the sky) and I'm keeping track of when all those things need to happen. This is so that when we get into the theatre, I can run the technical rehearsal.

Are you also in charge of Health and safety in the rehearsal room?

To an extent, yes, I suppose you could say stage management are the responsible adults in the room. We will keep an eye on things and if things look like they're unsafe, we will ask people to stop. The ultimate responsibility for health and safety lies with production management. They will write a risk assessment based on things that we say we've seen in the rehearsal room and things that we know are going to be on the stage. That document will be solidified once we've teched.

You've mentioned 'teching', could you briefly describe what a technical rehearsal is?

A technical rehearsal is the transfer of a show from the rehearsal room onto the stage.

"A technical rehearsal is the transfer of a show from the rehearsal room onto the stage."

In the rehearsal room there are lots of things that are being represented with stand-ins, like the Kabuki drops that I mentioned earlier, we can't do that effect in a rehearsal room because this ceiling is not that of a theatre.

Once we move into the theatre, we need to implement all the technical effects. We'll also be adding in costume changes because we don't have all the costumes in the room, so there's an extra layer there.

The technical rehearsal is a chance for lighting to make sure the lights are pointing in the right direction and achieving the desired effects. Sound will have already made their sound effects, but they need to level it on the sound system. We've got one or two speakers in the rehearsal room and we'll have many, many more in various places in the theatre.

Basically, it gets a bit more complicated and adds an extra level for every department.

Stage Manager Interview: Helen Lainsbury

Continued...

Who else is on your stage management team?

I'm the stage manager and I have an assistant stage manager called Zoë. She is in charge of props with me and will be on the opposite side of stage to me during the show, so we make sure there's a stage management representative in both wings.

Traditionally you'd also have a deputy stage manager who calls the show. For us, Kate is on book and she also happens to be the company manager of Wise Children (responsible for the welfare of the cast and crew).

During the show, Kate will be on a headset speaking to every department. She will tell lights and sound when to go (cue them). If stage management have any time sensitive cues, like we need to set a prop on a certain beat of the music, Kate will cue us for that as well.

"I will make sure that every prop, every piece of scenery and every person that's involved in the show is in the right place at the right time"

What are your main responsibilities when the show opens?

I will be backstage for the show and I will be the liaison between front of house and backstage. Once front of house says they're ready for us to start, I will get all the actors to stand by ready to go on. Once I'm happy that everything is ready, I will start the show.

During the show, I will make sure that every prop, every piece of scenery and every person that's involved is in the right place at the right time. I might also have stage cues during the show, so if there's a busy set change or costume quick changes, I might help with those.

At the end of the show, Kate and I will sit and write a report on anything that happened that night. This goes to all of the creative and production people (like the director and the designer) who were there for rehearsals and tech, and then sent us on our way to look after the ship

Do you have a favourite moment of the show?

I think it's going to be when the Kabukis go because it's a really technical bit. I probably shouldn't do any spoilers, but there are lots of special effects that come in the last ten pages that I'm excited about. It's the big finale of the show with planes taking off, things falling out the sky, and a big structure that's built out of all the props that you've already seen. All the complicated bits are going to come right at the end!

Sound Designer and Composer Interview:

Simon Baker

What are your main responsibilities on *North by Northwest*?

The main responsibilities of the sound designer are twofold; technical and creative. You're in charge of what the audience hears, whether that's actors' voices (because we put radio mikes on them), music or sound effects. You're in charge of how the show's sound is delivered technically to the auditorium. Communications backstage also play a big part in a sound designer's life; making sure stage management and the crew can hear each other.

Creatively, you're responsible for the sonic world of the play, so again what the audience hears, but using whatever you can from the sound toolbox to tell that story.

What research did you do for the show?

We watched the film a lot and realised quite quickly that the film is strangely naturalistic. Hitchcock's clever and a genius of the visual edit, but sound technology at the time wasn't particularly advanced, so the film is not constructed the way a spy thriller would be these days. Hitchcock was very reliant on music and his composer, Bernard Herrmann, who used those big string sounds that people remember (like the scene with the knife in the shower in *Psycho*). For our show, we couldn't go back to the film score, so we started from scratch to give it a different feel.



What was your approach to creating the soundscapes and effects of the show?

It's an Emma show, so there are usually two threads running through the sound worlds. There are the naturalistic elements you'd expect to hear, like birdsong, wind, rain or other sounds which create environments. We usually fatten them up with other sounds to hide the reality, and we often do what we call accenting. For example, when a suitcase gets put down, you might try and fatten that sound up by putting in a big low bass drum as it hits the floor.

There are lots of fights in the show and a small dagger doesn't really make any noise, but in our show, it might make a huge noise. You're always looking for those moments which are about storytelling; they're telling the audience this bit's important or this bit's got more weight than the actual physical action might have in real life.

Sound Designer and Composer Interview: Simon Baker

Continued...

How did the time period of *North by Northwest* influence your sound design?

Quite often Emma shows live in a slightly curious time frame, which is kind of around the late 70s. We can blur that because there might be a mobile phone, a laptop or some more modern technology, but largely her work is set in the 70s. *North by Northwest* is very much set in 1959 and we haven't really deviated from that. Everything you hear, has to be right for that time.

For example, there's a big sequence in the film where a crop-dusting plane attacks Roger Thornhill in a cornfield. Those plane sounds had to be from the right planes. Finding things like that takes quite a lot of research and then, of course, you find the right thing and you go well it's not a very interesting sound, is it? So, then you have to sort of deconstruct it and work out what would make it more interesting. But every car, every bell, every telephone ring in the show is all around about the right period.

“You're always looking for those moments which are about storytelling; they're telling the audience this bit's important...”

How did your research influence the music of the show?

The entire score is pre-recorded on this show because, when we started, the idea was to use lots of found music from the period. We've done this for the big set pieces, but there's lots of incidental music, chase music, scene setups or walk arounds which found music doesn't really work for, so we had to find our own language.

We were looking at the graphic work for the film and the designer, Saul Bass, to inform the poster for the show and saw Bass did lots of the opening sequences for Hitchcock (*Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*). Bass' style was much more jazz infused than the film's score, so we've gone with that jazz base. I watched a lot of films like, *Ocean's 11* and other caper or heist films to see what they'd done and how they used instrumentation. But, I wanted to bring it back to 1959 and the music of that time, especially as Miles Davis' famous album came out that year.

Do you have a favourite moment in the show?

There are loads of great little moments in the show and it's the small accent things that I really enjoy. There's a tiny moment, which will go by in a split second, when the two villains stop Roger Thornhill coming out the Plaza Hotel. They tap him on the shoulder and there's a little sound queue in there which I think really typifies the world and the style of the show.

Adapter and Director Interview: Emma Rice



"I imagined what every one of those characters had done in the war and added a gentle backstory to this wise-cracking comedy."

this film was a hope that, post the second world war, nations would work together. At this moment, that message feels more vital than ever.

Research and adapting...

How did you go about researching *North by Northwest*?

The film is really complicated, so I watched it a few times. My process is to create a big list – I ask 'What are my favourite bits?' and 'What are the bits that I don't understand?' You're obviously going to use the best bits, so you can put these aside for now: they're obviously going to end up in the show. It's the bits that you don't understand that you need to dig into.

One key moment that stood out to me was when the characters visit the United Nations. This happens quite early on, but it felt really important, although I wasn't quite sure why. So, I did a lot of research into the United Nations and that inspired not only how I adapted the show but also how I cast the show. I really wanted an international company because I felt that at the heart of

What elements were you excited to add to your adaptation?

I wanted to add some anti-war feeling to the piece. With anything that was made in 1959 every member of the cast, every member of the crew and every audience member would have had something experience of the recent world war. Of course, in 1959, everybody's desperately trying to forget it and nobody's been able to process it, so it is barely ever mentioned – but it is absolutely present throughout.

Looking at the story from 2025, I imagined what every one of those characters had done in the war and added a gentle backstory to this wise-cracking comedy. I wanted to say that, beneath the jokes, people were pretty traumatised. In 1959, the United Nations was saying 'let this never happen again'. But, as we know, we've been riddled with wars ever since and we have the threat of another one now.

Adapter and Director Interview: Emma Rice

Continued...

Rehearsing...

What did you do on the first day of rehearsals and why?

On the first day of rehearsals, we played a lot of ball, we did a lot of dancing and we played around with newspapers - I think we made some funny hats at one point! This is because I like to create a room in which everybody feels welcome, nobody feels scared and everybody is equal.

The aim is the take away that anxiety that you always have, which is 'Am I good enough?' or 'Am I going to succeed?'. I take all of that out of the room. Nobody's trying to be a great actor and nobody's reading any lines - I never do a read through for that reason. I just make sure that everybody's sweaty, everybody's silly. I make sure that I'm as bad at ball as everybody else and that I laugh at myself. I teach the room that nobody can do anything wrong.

Dancing is another great way to start. You have to really concentrate physically, which takes you out of your head, but it is also really impressive, so people feeling like they're achieving something. When you see the show, you'll see what I mean: the choreography is amazing.

By starting like this, you're putting in place a solid foundation for what the show's going to be, but you're also taking away any sense of anxiety. And, given that I did end the day making paper hats, everybody has a real sense that this is going to be fun. This is

not to be sniffed at: if people think they're going to have fun, you get really good work out of them.

How did working with the performers help shape the show?

There are only six performers and they're all amazing. Apart from Simon Oskarsson, I've worked with all of them before, although Simon is such a kindred spirit that it already feels like I've worked with him forever. They are so inventive, so physical, so playful, so talented. I've got some really, really energetic actors who have brought a striking physical dynamism to the room and pushed the choreography (I mean, Karl and Simon ... I can't stop them!), but they are all from really different performance backgrounds so they've also helped me create the form. They've brought their own heritage, and their own stories and have helped me add that into the show. They've done nothing but enrich the process.

Do you have any tips for working together as an ensemble?

With this ensemble, we make sure that we're really sharing the load. The actors often run the physical warm-ups and decide what games they're going to play. I keep sharing responsibility and that is when leadership, which is my position, becomes really enjoyable. Yes, I'm guiding the room but the room can guide me as well.

Adapter and Director Interview: Emma Rice

Continued...

Into the theatre...

Is there a moment that you're particularly excited to create when you get into the theatre?

Yes! I am so excited to create the very sexy love scene on the train. Hitchcock was famous for his intimate scenes (he loved his blonde ladies) and in that scene on the train the camera is so close to the two actors, it's like they're dancing together. They're whispering into each other's necks and it's really sensuous. Of course, you can't do that in theatre because you've got people sat in the back of the stalls.

Our set is made up of revolving doors, so, for our stage version, I've put the two actors inside a door that never stops moving, which kind of mimics the way the camera moves in the film. I've got Katie Owen's character, the Professor, with film equipment; he's carrying a boom mic and listening on headphones, which again references the film.

My sound designer will make sure that the actors can speak really quietly but still be audible. Because the doors are revolving, my lighting designer will be able to get that sense of momentum, as if lights are coming through a train window. My choreographer has done a really gorgeous dance routine, creating a constant flowing movement with the doors, and the actors' performances are just breathtaking.

I'm excited about it because I'm using all of the text from the film as well as quite a lot of the 'action lines' (stage directions in

screenplay format). We've layered them together to create a swirl of dialogue, action lines, lighting, sound, comedy, real profound acting and choreography, and it's going to be awesome.

"Make decisions, keep on your feet and don't get in your head."

What advice do you have for theatre makers?

Trust your instincts and start making decisions. Do not worry about making a bad decision because you can change them, and I bet you your first instincts are good. The more decisions you make, and the faster you work, the more you will understand what it is you're doing - every other decision will get easier and faster.

If you start thinking, 'maybe this isn't good', 'maybe this is uncool', 'maybe there's a better idea' - you'll never do anything. Don't be afraid to be silly and don't be afraid to be obvious because you can always make another decision. You can always say, 'how can I make this less silly, or sillier, or how can I make this more unique?'

That's my big note - make decisions, keep on your feet and don't get in your head.



Helpful Resources

The Wise Children podcast with Emma Rice

<https://www.wisechildrendigital.com/wise-childrens-detention>

The NXNW Spotify playlist

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/54yFsxCdTXVDgcYP_OA51E2

Wise Children's Tea and Biscuits

(for more on Wise Children rehearsals):

<https://www.wisechildrendigital.com/tea-and-biscuits>

Wise Children's Instagram

(for rehearsal snaps and trailers)

https://www.instagram.com/wise_children

Kneehigh's Archive

(for Emma's past shows)

<https://thisiskneehigh.co.uk/>

