A LITTLE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

Education Pack
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This Education Pack was written and designed by Beth Flintoff, with contributions from Beth Knott and Paul Stacey.

Rehearsal photographs by Ian Legge.
Introduction

This pack has been designed to complement your visit to see *A Little History of the World* at The Watermill Theatre or on tour.

The pack is aimed primarily at those studying Drama or English, with articles of interest for anyone with a curiosity about the play. While there are some images, the pack has been deliberately kept simple from a graphic point of view so that most pages can easily be photocopied for use in the classroom.

Where you see this arrow there is a link that you can click on to view other material online.

Your feedback is most welcome, please email (beth@watermill.org.uk) or call me on 01635 570927.

I hope you find the pack useful.

Beth Flintoff
Outreach Director

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Synopsis

‘All stories begin with ‘Once upon a time’. And that’s what this story is about: what happened once upon a time. Our own history begins with ‘Once upon a time.’
Ernst, A Little History of the World

Bright young academic Ernst Gombrich is tasked with producing a translation of an existing history text. However, believing he can write something much better himself, he sets to work writing a new book: an entire history of the world for a non-specialist audience to be completed in just six weeks. Determined Ernst researches all day and writes all night; his publisher, Otto collects the completed chapters from him at the end of each week. However, it quickly becomes clear that Ernst’s handwriting is completely illegible which leads him to read his work aloud to Otto and to his friend Ilse Heller. Engrossed and intrigued, they adopt a variety of guises to help Ernst tell the fascinating and intricate details of the greatest story of all, the story of the history of the world. Together the trio learn about the greatest inventors of all time, the conception of language and time by the Egyptians, the political, artistic and sporting contributions of the Greeks, the conquering Romans, the age of Chivalry and the Renaissance. They travel through the age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution all the way to their present day, coming to a halt against the stormy backdrop of Hitler’s rule on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War. But, in an ever changing world, History never really ends.

Richard Ede (Otto)
Ernst Gombrich

‘There is no such thing as art. There are only artists.’
Ernst Gombrich, The Story of Art, 1950

Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich was born in Vienna in 1909 and died in London on November 3, 2001, aged 92. He was born into a sophisticated family in Vienna which was originally Jewish but converted at the turn of the twentieth century. Throughout his life, he was anti-sectarian and unreligious, but in the early days of the spread of Nazism in Austria he insisted on describing himself as an Austrian Jew. As a result he was forced to flee Austria to London in 1939.

During World War II, he worked for the BBC World Service and broke the news of Hitler’s death to Churchill. A Little History of the World was his first book, written primarily for children during the year of his marriage to the pianist Ilse Heller, in 1936. A Little History of the World was originally published in German entitled Eine kurze Weltgeschichte für junge Leser. Although the Nazis banned it for being too pacifistic, the book achieved immediate success and it is now available in twenty-five languages around the world. At the time of his death in 2001, Gombrich was working on the English translation of A Little History of The World. Caroline Mustill completed the translation and it was published in English in 2005.

The war hindered the progress of his career but after 1945 he began to write prolifically. His best known work, The Story of Art (1950), is considered a seminal introduction to the visual arts and sold over a million copies. In 1956 he gave a series of lectures in Washington, which were put together as one book: Art and Illusion, described in The Independent as ‘one of the most innovative books ever written by an art historian’.

His family was highly musical: his mother was a pianist whose teacher was only two generations away from pupils of Beethoven. His wife, Ilse, was also a pianist, a pupil of Rudolf Serkin, giving up her concert career when she married, though continuing to teach; they had one son, Richard, who has been professor of Sanskrit at Oxford since 1976.

‘He was often melancholy,’ said his granddaughter Leonie in an interview for The Guardian, ‘but he always insisted that blessings had to be counted. That’s why he took refuge in art and music. When my grandparents played a record, we all sat in silence, as if we were at an actual concert. You could only cough between movements.’

http://gombrich.co.uk/

http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/oct/02/historybooks.features1
Meet the Director

Paul Stacey is the Director of A Little History of the World and also the Artistic Director of Reading Rep, an Associate Company of The Watermill.

‘The earliest series of books I remember reading as I was growing up was the Ladybird Series: Adventures from History. They were passed on to me by my father and I read voraciously. From Alexander the Great to Julius Caesar, Napoleon to Nelson, I was fascinated by the history of mankind and its frailties. While I didn’t become a historian, I have never lost this childhood fascination.

I didn’t come across A Little History of the World until I was 25 and had already embarked on a career in theatre. I remember wishing I had come across the book a decade earlier. I read it anyway. While pitched at a young audience, it’s so beautifully and humanely written that it can be enjoyed by children and adults alike.

Nostalgically, it whisked me back to the Adventures of History series. I wanted to use the book as an opportunity to combine my two great passions, history and theatre. I immediately set about acquiring the rights to adapt Ernst Gombrich’s great work for the stage and for this I am enormously grateful to the Gombrich Estate.

First published in Austria in 1936, A Little History of the World was written in just six weeks by a struggling academic. Gombrich was first asked to write a translation of an existing work but (fortunately for us) felt confident he could write a better version himself - he just had to convince the publishing house that he could manage it in six weeks. He studied during the day and wrote at night.

While writing the book Gombrich was introduced by his mother to Ilse Heller, to whom she was teaching piano. Ernst read the book aloud to her every Sunday. It was during this period that the two fell in love: they were later to marry. Given the warmth, humanity and pathos which flows through the book, it is hard to imagine that A Little History of the World is not infused by Ernst’s new found love for Ilse. So much so that the book was originally banned by Hitler for being too pacifistic.

The original edition of the book was written shortly before the second World War broke out, but by the time it was translated into English in 2005 Ernst had been let down by the two largest wars in a single century. Today we live in a smaller, more fragile and increasingly violent world. Now, more than ever, we need to look back at our history of the world and reassess our place in it.

If I can infuse this production with the same love of the humanitarian spirit which permeates every page of A Little History of the World, then I hope I have done justice to Ernst Gombrich’s remarkable story.’
You can watch an interview with Paul here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSxKGM5lvhE

For more information about Reading Rep you can view their website here:

http://www.readingrep.com

Paul Stacey - Biography

For Reading Rep Paul has directed The Dumb Waiter, A Christmas Carol, Miss Julie, Waiting for Godot, ’Twas the Night Before Christmas and Proof. Before founding Reading Rep, Paul was Literary Manager of the Old Red Lion Theatre in London. Prior to returning to the UK, Paul worked as a Director and Dramaturg for the Moscow Art Theatre, Punchdrunk Theatre Company and New Repertory Theatre. His directing debut – Sexual Perversity in Chicago – made him one of the youngest people ever to direct at the American Repertory Theatre. He has taught theatre history, acting and dramaturgy at Harvard University. He is a Dramaturgy graduate of the American Repertory Theatre/Moscow Art Theatre Institute at Harvard University. He read English at the University of Nottingham and is a Teach First Ambassador.
Meet the Playwright

Toby Hulse is a playwright, director and creative practitioner. His work as a writer includes *War Game* and *The Last Days of Mankind* (Bristol Old Vic), *A Christmas Carol* (Lakeside, Nottingham). *Pinocchio* (The Berry, Hedge End), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Southwark Playhouse), *Arabian Nights, The Wind in the Willows, Treasure Island* and *Gulliver’s Travels* (The Watermill Theatre), *Abraham and Isaac* (Durham Mysteries 2010), *The Nutcracker* (St George’s, Bristol) and the *No Loud Bangs* plays for very young children, that sold out Bristol Old Vic Studio over four consecutive Christmases.

Toby is currently writing *To Dream Again*, a new play for Polka for next year’s Shakespeare anniversary, inspired by *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He also teaches Improvisation and Clown at Bristol Old Vic Theatre School.

What advice would you have for any aspiring writers who would like to adapt a famous novel?

‘Books and plays work in very different ways and as a writer you have to be true to the medium in which you are working. Remember that acting is about action – we want to see our characters do things not talk about them. Books largely happen in the past tense, and the story has already ‘happened’ by the time the writer is recording it. Plays happen moment to moment in the present tense, and, if we once suspect the characters know what is happening next, we no longer believe in what we are watching. Finally, keep asking yourself the question – ‘what is theatrical about this moment?’ If it wouldn’t work well on stage, no matter how important the moment is in the book, lose it. If at any point you suspect the audience would be better off reading the book then stop.’

How do you like to write?

‘I work best in the morning and am pretty hopeless after about 3pm. I have always worked well to deadlines and restrictions – the less time, the more constrained the task, the better I write. I spend a lot of time thinking about things before I do them. Much, much more than seems sensible. And then, right at the last moment, I work in a frenzy. I use a laptop (because I detest the amount of space that a larger computer takes up – a PC workstation is my definition of bad furniture), but also scribble a lot in pencil in notebooks. Post-It notes proved useful for a bit, until I realised I was leaving marks on the walls...’
Inside the Rehearsal Room

When working on a brand new script, it’s sometimes a good idea to have an extra week working on the text, before starting the ‘official’ rehearsal period. This is usually called a ‘Development Week’ and it’s a chance for the director to work with some actors (not necessarily the same actors that will be in the final performance) and the playwright to explore how the play might work. The Development Week is usually a few months before rehearsals actually start, to allow breathing space for any script re-writes.

Such a process was used for A Little History of the World because it is a brand new adaptation of a successful work of non-fiction. The creative team worked with three actors for a week in March, before rehearsals officially started at the end of May.

Beth Knott, Assistant Director, was with them, and she kept a record of how it went.

Development Week

‘I write to you from the rehearsal room of A Little History of the World’s week-long development workshop.

The creative team, made up of Paul Stacey (Artistic Director of Reading Rep) Lee Lyford (movement director) and Toby Hulse (playwright) are all working together with the cast to give the play its first breath of life.

'Little History’ has many opportunities for action sequences beyond the script so a development week has been a fantastic opportunity to solidify the play to ensure a smooth rehearsal process once it commences. It has been great to have Toby with us for the development week to share with us his vision for each chapter and teach us everything about the History the play depicts (seriously, he knows everything!). Lee Lyford was another valuable asset to the team, working closely with the cast to choreograph the trickier sequences, helping everyone get a sense of how the play would take shape.

The cast is made up of three actors who are extremely talented with characterisation and accents, needless to say there has been a lot of laughter involved in the process! There has

Top: Research pictures on the rehearsal room wall.

Bottom: (left to right) Alasdair Buchan (Ernst), Richard Ede (Otto), Jess Mabel Jones (Ilse)
hardly been a moment where ideas haven't been flowing and because of this chapters of the play have been growing stronger and stronger.

It has been a great week for all involved and there is definitely a buzz of excitement in the air for the beginning of rehearsals! Even at such an early stage I can already tell you it won't be one to miss!

Rehearsals
A few weeks, later, rehearsals began in earnest, and again Beth was with them: ‘The first week of rehearsals for 'A Little History of the World' is complete and huge progress has been made! The production team have been incredibly efficient with almost all of the props ready in the room at the beginning of the week and the finished set being in the rehearsal space ready for the second.

The play is divided up into sequences and a fair amount of these are heavily movement-based so our movement director Lee Lyford has been working closely with the cast and director Paul Stacey to create a shared vision of how each of the sequences will look and whether or not sound or props will be used. Next week we will be going over these sequences in detail which in turn will make the walk-throughs smoother. Over time we can pick up the pace and turn it into a run-through!

One of my favourite elements of the show is how many different ways the central desk to Ernst Gombrich's study is used; it is moved all over the stage, climbed on and turned over to become an Olympic podium, an operation table and many other things. When you come to see the show also keep an eye out for the chairs that fold over to become ladders that have kept the cast and creative team amused for the longest time! All props necessary in the storytelling are found within the study using ingenious object-manipulation by the cast, which works so smoothly that sometimes you might not even notice!

With one week down and only three weeks to go I have a funny feeling this month will fly by in a blur of storytelling and history lessons, and before we know it opening day will be upon us!'  

Beth Knott  
Assistant Director
Meet the Cast

Alasdair Buchan | Ernst Gombrich
Alasdair trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. Most recently, he played Mr McQueen in Urinetown the Musical (Apollo Theatre, West End). Other theatre includes Richard III and The Pride directed by Jamie Lloyd (Trafalgar Studios); Two Gentlemen of Verona (Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory); Macbeth (The Lord Chamberlain’s Men); The Importance of Being Earnest (Redgrave Theatre, Bristol); Newsrevue (Canal Café Theatre); Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me (Courtyard Theatre) and The Lost World at the Bristol Old Vic directed by Toby Hulse. Film and Television includes: Albie Houndsmoor-Jones in Casualty and Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone. @alasdair_buchan

Richard Ede | Otto
Theatre credits include: The Reduced Shakespeare Company’s The Bible - Abridged; George Bailey in It’s A Wonderful Life (Farnham Maltings); Richard Hannay in 39 Steps (UK Tour); Jack Gurney in The Ruling Class (English Theatre Frankfurt); Benedick in Much Ado; Petruchio in Taming of The Shrew; Cassio in Othello; Tybalt in Romeo and Juliet; Bottom in Midsummer Night’s Dream; Horatio in Hamlet and Fagin in Oliver Twist (all World Tours for TNT/ADG); Sir Roland in The Wife Of Bath (Rude Mechanicals); Lovewell in Clandestine Marriage (Dr Johnson’s House); Beast in Beauty and The Beast (Colchester Mercury); Hook in Peter Pan (Dubai/Thailand Arena Tour); Baron De Coubertain in Horrible Histories ("Olympic Flame" UK Roadshow for BBC); Bagheera in Jungle Book (Oman); Stanley/The Mask in The Mask (UK Tour) and Sandy in Ben Elton’s Gasping (Cragrats Theatre).
TV work includes Modern Manners (BBC), a promotional film for a Korean Video Game, various commercials and voice-over work for Cartoon Network. @richardede1
Jess Mabel-Jones | Ilse
Jess is a theatre maker, performer and puppeteer and over the years has worked in street theatre, burlesque and cabaret. She is an Open Space practitioner, relaxed performance advocate and associate artist at Battersea Arts Centre. Jess is co-creator of the Tourettes myth-busting show *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, which won a Total Theatre award in 2014. Jess is thrilled to be back working with The Watermill following her appearance in Hardboiled last year.
@jessmabeljones
Credits

A Little History of the World
By Toby Hulse
based on the work by E.H. Gombrich
as translated into English by Caroline Mustill

Alasdair Buchan Ernst Gombrich
Richard Ede Otto
Jess Mabel-Jones Ilse

Director Paul Stacey
Designer Victoria Spearing
Movement Director Lee Lyford
Lighting Designer Simeon Miller
Sound Designer Max Pappenheim
Assistant Director Beth Knott

Production Manager Lawrence T. Doyle
Company Stage Manager Ami-Jayne Steele-Childe
Assistant Production Manager Nelly Chauvet
Theatre Technician Josh Robinson
Deputy Stage Manager Bobbi McGlade
Assistant Stage Manager Ana Becker
Wardrobe Amanda Dooley and Eloise Short
Tour Marketing Rosie English
Production Photography Philip Tull
Rehearsal Photography by Ian Legge