

National  
Theatre  
Learning

# A Taste of Honey

by Shelagh Delaney



Background pack

## *A Taste of Honey* Background pack

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**Jane Ball**  
Programme Manager, NT Learning  
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The official rehearsal and production photographs used in this background pack were taken by Marc Brenner.

Additional photographs by Ola Ince.

Cover photo (Lesley Sharp and Kate O'Flynn) by Phil Fisk

**Further production details:**  
[nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://nationaltheatre.org.uk)



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# The National Theatre production of *A Taste of Honey*



This production opened in the National's Lyttelton Theatre on **18 February 2014**

## *Characters*

Helen **Lesley Sharp**  
Josephine (Jo), *her daughter* **Kate O'Flynn**  
Peter, *her friend* **Dean Lennox Kelly**  
Jimmie **Eric Kofi Abrefa**  
Geoffrey **Harry Hepple**

## *Understudies*

**Kate Adler** (Josephine)  
**Greg Baxter** (Geoffrey)  
**Miles Mitchell** (Jimmie)  
**Mark Rose** (Peter)  
**Sarah Thom** (Helen)

Director **Bijan Sheibani**  
Designer **Hildegard Bechtler**  
Lighting Designer **Paul Anderson**  
Music **Paul Englishby**  
Movement Director **Aline David**  
Sound Designer **Ian Dickinson**  
Company Voice Work **Kate Godfrey**  
Dialect Coach **Richard Ryder**  
Staff Director **Ola Ince**

Fight Director **Bret Yount**  
Production Photographer **Marc Brenner**

# Scene synopsis

## Setting: Salford, 1958-9

HELEN and her daughter JOSEPHINE (Jo) arrive at their new lodgings, wet, cold and exhausted on a bitter winter's evening. The flat is unkempt, poorly furnished and freezing, which greatly disappoints Jo. Helen complains about being unwell and that Jo is not pandering to her every need: 'Children owe their parents these little attentions.'

Helen asks Jo to help her find a glass – but finds one in her own handbag – and pours herself a drink. Exploring the flat, Jo realises she will continue to share a bed with her mother. Helen tells her, 'Of course, you know I can't bear to be parted from you'. She offers Jo some whisky to help warm her up, but Jo doesn't like the smell. Jo offers to make coffee and locates the kitchen, where there is an ancient gas stove which bangs as it is lit. Jo wants to know who else lives in their building. Helen thinks there are some young people – perhaps a potential boyfriend for Jo. Jo says she used to have a crush on one of Helen's 'fancy men'.

Jo can smell the nearby river and the slaughterhouse. She unpacks some bulbs she has brought from the park and puts them under the sofa to grow. Helen worries that they now live too far from Jo's school, but Jo intends to leave school at Christmas so isn't too concerned. She wants to earn money so she can leave Helen. The notion of Jo starting work reminds Helen of her first job in a pub. She sings 'I'd give the song birds to the wild wood...' Helen says she doesn't want to interfere in Jo's life: 'it takes me all of my time to look after myself.' Jo doesn't want to marry young as Helen did.

Jo goes to make the coffee and Helen unpacks her daughter's art work. She is impressed by her talent and offers to pay for formal training. Jo tells Helen: 'I've had enough of school. Too many different schools and too many different places.' Jo wants to bathe before she goes to bed, but has no idea where – her mother directs her to the communal bathroom.

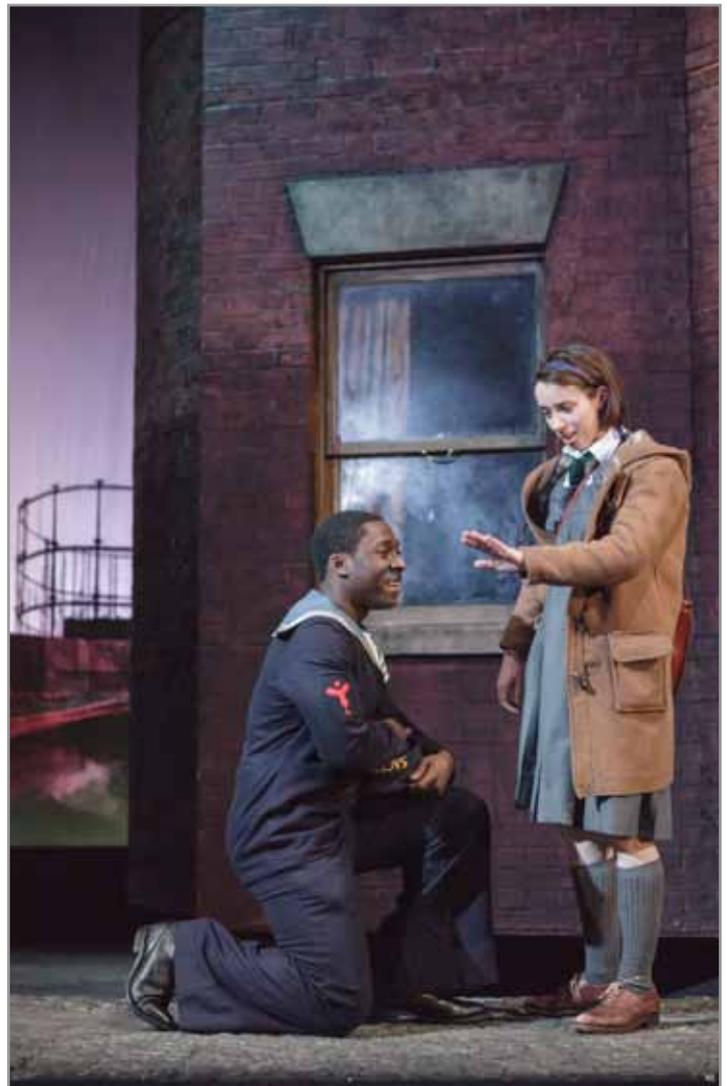
PETER, one of Helen's 'fancy men', arrives; he has come to reclaim Helen, having searched all over Salford for her, and is surprised to find that she has a teenage daughter. Jo is annoyed by his presence and realises he is the reason they have moved again ('So that's what she was running away from'). Peter is disgusted by the location of Helen's new home 'Tenements, cemetery, slaughterhouse... Nobody could live in a place like this'. Jo points out that 50,000 people already do. Helen plays hard to get with Peter: 'The only consolation I can find in your immediate presence is your ultimate absence'. Her game results in a marriage proposal, which she tests

until she is sure it is genuine. Jo thinks he is already married and manages to get Helen to persuade Peter to leave.

The women get ready for bed, leaving their new apartment half unpacked and Peter's proposal hanging in the air.

A week later, Jo is walked home from school by her boyfriend JIMMIE, a sailor. They shyly exchange words on the street. He kisses her, and she tells him she doesn't mind if someone sees them. Jimmie proposes marriage and Jo accepts. He places an engagement ring on her finger and asks what her mother's response to their impending marriage will be. She is sure that Helen is not racist. They decide they should get married when Jimmie is next on leave, in six months' time.

Jo says the engagement ring is too big and asks Jimmie to find some string so she can fasten it around her neck. Looking for the string they find odd bits and bobs in Jimmie's pocket, including a small



# Scene synopsis

toy car. Jo asks if she can keep this toy. Eventually they use Jo's hair ribbon instead of string.

Jimmie talks playfully about wedding plans ('I'm trapped in a barbaric cult... Matrimony') and Jo asks if his ancestors came from Africa – 'No. Cardiff. Disappointed?' Jimmie is about to go out drinking with some of his shipmates, but they arrange to meet the following morning; Jo will even bunk off school so they can spend the whole day together. Before she goes, Jo tells Jimmie she loves him, 'Because you're daft.'

Helen questions her daughter over her late return from school. Jo tells her mother that she was with a sailor who used to be a male nurse. Helen is interested: she wants to know if he can get her some free samples. Helen tries to help Jo find a film to watch at the cinema the following night but isn't impressed by the choices '*Desire Under the...* oh! What a funny place to have desire!' She comes across an advert featuring a lady with a large chest and speculates whether she could transform Jo in the same way: 'I'd put you in films.'

Jo asks her mother what day she was born on, but Helen doesn't remember. She doesn't like to be reminded of Jo's father or her ex-husband, who divorced her following the affair that conceived Jo. Helen tells Jo she is going to marry Peter. Jo is not pleased. She thinks her mother is 'centuries older than him', but Helen says there is only a ten-year age gap.

Peter arrives bearing gifts for Jo (chocolates) and Helen (flowers). Jo mocks Peter's choice of bride and

goes out of her way to make him feel uncomfortable while Helen gets changed. Peter shows Jo pictures of their fancy new house. Jo wants to see all of the photographs in Peter's wallet and finds pictures of women which she threatens to show to Helen. This fails so she asks about his eye patch: he lost his eye when he was a private in the army. Jo asks if he fancies her, but he doesn't 'go in for sweet young things.' He offers her a cigarette, which she accepts. Helen sings off-stage.

Helen returns, looking glamorous. She makes Jo put out the cigarette and tells her to clear up the books scattered around the room, which include: '*Selected Nursery Rhymes, Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales, Pinocchio.* Well, you certainly go in for the more advanced types of literature.' Helen and Peter leave to go to dinner and suggest that they could have an early honeymoon, which would leave Jo alone.

Jimmie arrives moments later. He sees Jo has been crying and makes her a concoction of warm milk and medication to make her feel better. Jo doesn't like milk so refuses to drink it. They talk about Helen. Jo wonders if Jimmie finds her mother attractive and if he thinks she bears any resemblance to her. He says that Helen is attractive and that Jo is nothing like her. Jo is hurt. Jimmie suggests Jo wear her engagement ring while her mother is out. She asks where he got it from, and he admits it only came from Woolworths. Jo invites Jimmie to spend Christmas with her, although she is convinced that once he goes away on service he will never come back. They spend the night together.

Time passes. Jo is unwell and appears to have caught Helen's illness. Helen gets ready for her wedding with Jo's help. She catches a glimpse of Jo's engagement ring and is enraged. Helen discourages Jo from making a commitment like marriage at such a young age, and warns her about following in her footsteps: 'Why don't you learn from my mistakes? It takes half your life to learn from your own.'

Jo once more asks about her father. Helen describes her first sexual encounter as being short and unforgettable; she says that Jo's father was retarded, which throws Jo. She worries about her own mental health. Helen brushes aside the questions of concern and makes the final touches to her wedding outfit. She asks Jo for a kiss, which Jo avoids, and goes off to marry Peter. Jo stays at home.

INTERVAL



Helen (Lesley Sharp) and Josephine (Kate O'Flynn)  
Production photo: Marc Brenner

# Scene synopsis

It's months later. A pregnant Jo returns home from the funfair with her friend GEOFFREY. She invites him, but tells him not to turn on the light 'I light this romantic half-light, it just goes with this Manchester maisonette!' Jo now lives alone, and has two jobs to be able to pay for it. Geoffrey says he has nowhere to stay – his landlady threw him out. Jo asks if he was caught with a woman or a man. She promises to let him stay with her if he reveals his sexual orientation. Geoffrey is angered by this and tries to leave but Jo convinces him to stay. He finds her sketchbook and says the drawings are like Jo: 'there's no design, rhythm or purpose.'

She tells him about her fling with Jimmie and her pregnancy. Geoffrey works out that she's due to give birth around September. He asks whether she has enough money for a baby. Things are already tight, and Jo is planning to give up her jobs as she is embarrassed by people staring at her. Geoffrey thinks she should tell Helen, if only to get extra financial support. To cheer themselves up they start reciting childhood rhymes:

'As I was going up Pippin Hill,  
Pippin Hill was dirty.'

Jo sings 'Nature Boy'.

Geoffrey wants to know more about Jimmie. Jo says: 'He wasn't a bit like you. He could sing and dance and he was as black as coal.' She exaggerates his ancestry and calls him 'Prince Ossini'. Geoffrey tells her he will stay to help tidy up and cook. They go to bed – Jo in her room, Geoffrey on the sofa. Jo shouts to Geoffrey that he is 'just like a big sister.'

A month later. Jo and Geoffrey are sweltering hot in the apartment, and Jo complains about the smell of the area: 'That river, it's the colour of lead. Look at that washing, it's dirty, and look at those filthy children.' Geoffrey is making clothes for the baby. The baby kicks, which makes Jo squeal with delight. She investigates what Geoffrey is making and wonders how he found out the baby's measurements. She says she hates babies. Geoffrey reveals he has asked the woman who lives downstairs to give make a wicker basket for the baby. Annoyed at the thought people might be nosing into her business, Jo says she should throw herself in the river.

Geoffrey gives Jo a book to read on child development. She asks if Geoffrey would like to be the father of her child, 'After all, you don't show much sign of coming fatherhood, do you?' She asks Geoffrey why he stays, and he says he is looking after her. He kisses her and asks her to marry him. Jo rejects the proposal, explaining she is no longer interested in love. She suggests Geoffrey moves out but he says he'd 'sooner be dead than away from you.' Jo goes for a lie down.

Helen arrives – Geoffrey has told her of Jo's pregnancy and invited her to visit. She rouses Jo, who is shocked to see her. Realising Geoffrey is the one who broke the news to Helen, Jo tells him off: 'I'm not having anyone running my life for me.' Helen is not the good influence Geoffrey was hoping for, 'If she won't take care of herself that's her lookout.'

Helen scolds Jo for her pregnancy, but is concerned



Geoffrey (Harry Hepple), Josephine (Kate O'Flynn), Peter (Dean Lennox Kelly) and Helen (Lesley Sharp)  
Production photo: Marc Brenner

# Scene synopsis

that she may not be eating enough or attending the clinic. She tells Jo she would be better off working than living off Geoffrey. Jo says her mother should go 'back to your fancy man or your husband, or whatever you like to call him.' Angry, Helen has a go at Jo for falling pregnant – 'You know what they're calling you round here? A silly little whore.' Jo pointedly mentions Helen's neglectful parenting and threatens to jump out of the window. Geoffrey begs them to stop shouting, but Helen tells him they 'enjoy it.'

Helen wants to give Jo money. She asks if she has been collecting her maternity benefit, but Jo isn't entitled to it. Helen says she's been worried about her and offers to send Jo some money every week.

Peter arrives, drunk. He has been waiting outside for Helen. He takes delight in needling Jo about her pregnancy – 'Who's got a bun in the oven? Who's got a cake in the stove?' – and in insulting Geoffrey, 'Who's the lily?' He wants to know if Helen is going to go to the pub with him, but she says they aren't open yet. Noticing the money Helen has tried to give Jo, Peter accuses Helen of 'giving away' his money and takes it back. Geoffrey directs Peter to the bathroom, leaving Helen and Jo alone.

Helen invites Jo to live with her but Peter returns and tells them 'I'm not having that bloody slut at our place.' Peter and Helen leave.

Jo is now nine months pregnant. Geoffrey is cleaning the flat while Jo reads a book about pregnancy. Jo asks Geoffrey where he got the book from – he says it cost 'fourpence off a book barrow.' She asks if he is impressed by her dressmaking skills – she has made herself a house-coat, but he thinks it looks like 'a badly tailored shroud.' As well as cleaning, Geoffrey has been baking a cake.

Geoffrey finds Jo's dead plant bulbs under the sofa. Jo becomes morbid and wants to hold Geoffrey's hand, but this reminds her how Helen would never hold her hand. Geoffrey warns Jo that she may end up like her mother. Jo asks him why he always wears black shirts, she thinks it makes him look 'like a spiv.' She tells him about Helen's affair with her father, and her belief that her father 'lived in a twilight land... The land of the daft.' Geoffrey thinks Helen has made it up – 'Can you see Helen going out with a real loony?'

Geoffrey gives Jo a present of a life-sized doll. The doll is white, which upsets Jo as she is made to remember that her baby will be mixed race and will suffer the consequence. She admits she made up the name Prince Ossani

and the father of her baby is really called Jimmie. Jo and Geoffrey reflect on their relationship thus far and decide that they're good for each other. Jo says she might call the baby Number One, 'It'll always be number one to itself.'

Helen arrives loaded with bags and ready to play mother. She is appalled that Jo wants to give birth in the flat rather than at hospital, and warns her 'the first one can be a bit tricky.' Helen tells her daughter she is there to look after her, and offers to sleep on the sofa. Jo tells her the sofa is Geoffrey's bed, but he says he doesn't mind moving out.

Helen tells Geoffrey to leave while she has a chat with Jo. She shows Jo all the gifts she has brought for the baby and asks if Jo has attempted to contact Jimmie. But Jo says she can look after the baby on her own. Helen finally admits that Peter has left her. She tells Jo to go to bed while she tidies up the flat.

Geoffrey returns with some shopping. Helen scorns his choice of groceries ('Spaghetti! I don't know how people can eat it') and tells him to throw out the wicker basket Jo was planning on using as a cradle. As he leaves, Geoffrey warns Helen against frightening Jo over childbirth. He wishes Jo luck on his way out.

Jo wakes up and asks Helen if there is a lot of pain during childbirth. Helen says it's more hard work than painful. Jo wonders where Geoffrey is but is interrupted by her first contraction. Helen helps her through the pain and reminisces about her childhood. As Helen makes tea for them Jo reveals that her baby will be mixed race. Helen is shocked and decides she has to go out for a drink before she can deal with the situation. Jo asks what she will do? 'Put it on the stage and call it Blackbird,' says Helen, and leaves. Left alone, Jo recites 'As I was going up Pippin Hill...'



# Rehearsal diary – week one

Staff director Ola Ince documented the six-week rehearsal period; these extracts from her diary reveal how the production emerged

## What are we working with?

Before rehearsals officially begin, the company spend a week together in the Jerwood Space, getting to grips with the play.

On Monday morning we gather around Hildegard Bechtler's beautiful model box and have our first glimpse of the world we are creating. Usually model boxes are shown as part of a 'meet and greet', where everybody involved in the production forms a circle and introduces themselves and their role; however on Monday this isn't the case as formal rehearsals haven't yet started. Only the cast and some of the creatives are present.

Once everyone has inspected the set and asked questions we are ready to hear the play aloud for the very first time. Sat around a table the cast quickly get into the swing of things and it becomes apparent that we are going to be in for a treat. The reading is vibrant, engaging and funny. The company share thoughts, discuss ideas and watch a documentary about Shelagh Delaney – *Shelagh Delaney's Salford* (director Ken Russell, BBC 4) – which gives everyone a clear idea of the playwright's intentions.



The majority of the week is spent dissecting the play. The company are encouraged to generate as many questions and ideas as they can: How big is Salford? Are all of the characters from Manchester? When does Jo start calling her mum Helen instead of mum? How much is the rent? What are the attitudes

towards race in 1950s Manchester? Where are the black community based in the north of England? Does Peter hit Helen? What is it like to be a gay man in 1959?

It is also an opportunity to look at staging the play. Delaney's script is littered with stage directions, and characters constantly refer to props. For example, Helen says, 'Pass me a glass Jo' or Jo asks, 'Is that the bedroom?' These references give us clues as to where the characters physically have to travel to and from throughout the play. On day two the actors are asked to work out some of these journeys. Some are more complicated than others and it's not easy to navigate around the set with props and a script in your hand. The actors also find that they have what feel like a million tasks to complete within a very short time period, which they find both exciting and challenging.

Occasionally we steer away from the script and improvise some of the unknown moments in the play: Jimmie and Jo's first meeting; Helen's first viewing of the flat. Improvisations are useful because they help the actors build a vivid back story, making their characters as fully formed and real as possible.

Towards the end of the week we are visited by Paul Englishby, composer, and Richard Ryder, dialect coach. Paul treats us to some suave '50s hits and explains how we may choose to engage with them in our production. We listen to the music of Alice Faye, Shirley Bassey, Eddie Cantor, Bobby Darin, Frank Sinatra, Chris Barber, Nat King Cole, Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan and Big Mama Thornton. It is decided that the music should be glamorous, inspirational, and contrast with the reality of Helen and Jo's deprivation.

Richard talks us through accurately depicting the Mancunian period accent and the language in Delaney's script. He describes the vocabulary as being very direct, with 'no fat' or excess.



# Rehearsal diary – week two

## What are the possibilities?

Two weeks have passed since the actors spent the week together at the Jerwood Space and they are raring to start rehearsals again. That introductory week made it possible for the company to learn their lines and confidently start to navigate their way around the set and play.

We arrive on Monday morning to find our new rehearsal room, Rehearsal Room Two at the National Theatre, equipped with props and a temporary set. Rehearsal Room Two is exactly the same size as the Lyttelton stage, which allows us to work as though we are in the theatre.

After a brief 'meet and greet', read-through and Equity union meeting, the cast familiarise themselves with the play. They experience the different rooms that Hildegard's set has to offer, and this helps to highlight any potential challenges in moving through the play.



The whole week is spent experimenting with scenes. The aim is to try out as many different versions of a scene as possible. The actors are imaginative and offer up new ideas.

While we generate different versions of the scene, we also try to get a deeper understanding of the era in which the play is set. We draw upon our own research, but also welcome professors of psychology and sociology to share their findings. Professors Chamion Caballero and Rosalind Edwards, the authors of *Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now* visit us on Thursday. They speak about single mothers with mixed-race children, which directly relates to Jo's experience.

Their findings help to root the play within a real social and historical context. They share stories, articles and statistics, which completely change how we view Jo's choices, social pressures and community. This means that we don't make assumptions and helps to dispel myths about race, immigration and integration. Learning more about parenting techniques and practised norms in the 1950s, such as the 'Truby King method', enables us to explore whether or not Helen is a bad parent.

Hearing how broadsheets at the time described interracial relationships and mixed-race children ('the browning of Britain') allows us to gauge the stakes in scenes between Jo and Jimmie. It additionally helps us to understand Helen's reaction to having a mixed-race grandchild. Information on the NHS, national insurance, family allowance and national assistance clarifies our questions about maternity and support for young single mothers in the '50s.

Consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist Professor Robin Anderson watches a selection of scenes on Friday, and psychoanalyses the characters. It is encouraging to find that a lot of his observations match our own. Anderson describes Jo as someone who is resilient and precarious. He says that Jo's behaviour is typical of some of the patients he deals with. He believes Helen's parenting style has resulted in Jo being subject to a series of manic relationships, which collapse. He also thinks that Jo may need help, but isn't necessarily the type of girl who wants help.

By the end of the week the company have a very clear idea of what the play requires from them emotionally, physically and vocally.

### Who was Truby King?

Dr Frederic Truby King developed a method of child-rearing that was very popular in the '50s. His approach discouraged parents from too much contact with their babies and emphasised the importance of creating a routine for feeding, even to the extent of ignoring a baby's crying at all other times.

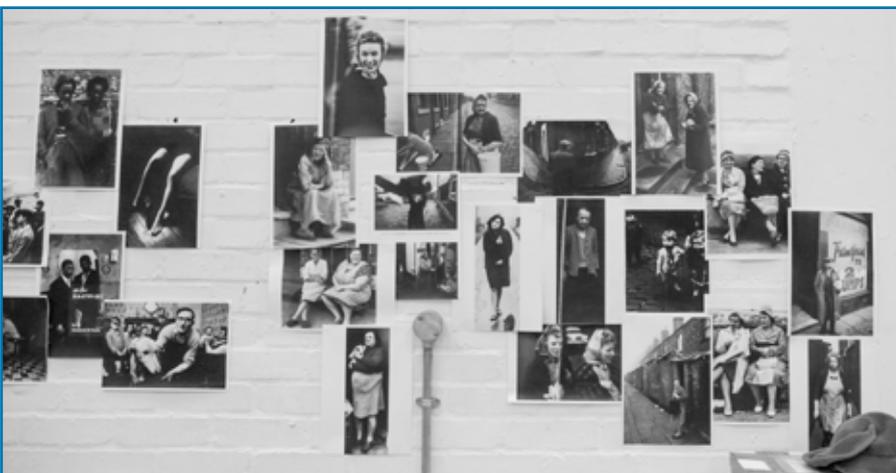
### Activity:

Take a look at the following web link and discuss the various methods of bringing up children in relation to the character Helen:

[bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22397457](http://bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22397457)



# Rehearsal diary – week three



The many different interpretations of the scenes that we have found are becoming less useful, so we start to narrow down our options. Our aim is to make sure that the staging helps an audience to understand what is happening between the characters on stage. We try to simplify some of the complicated movements so the actors can concentrate on each other rather than be distracted by a task or prop.

By the end of the week we have managed to run Act One. *A Taste of Honey* is a bigger play than we had anticipated: it is a play about life and death and requires a depth of feeling. We can afford to further some of the ideas we have already found and ground some of the emotions, rooting them in truth.

## Starting to set things in stone

At the start of the week we have another visitor: Charlotte Delaney, Shelagh Delaney's daughter. Charlotte is our closest link to the playwright – and is bombarded with questions. We learn about Charlotte's experiences growing up with a prolific playwright, how she relates to Jo and Helen's unconventional relationship and why she has allowed us to stage the play at the National Theatre.

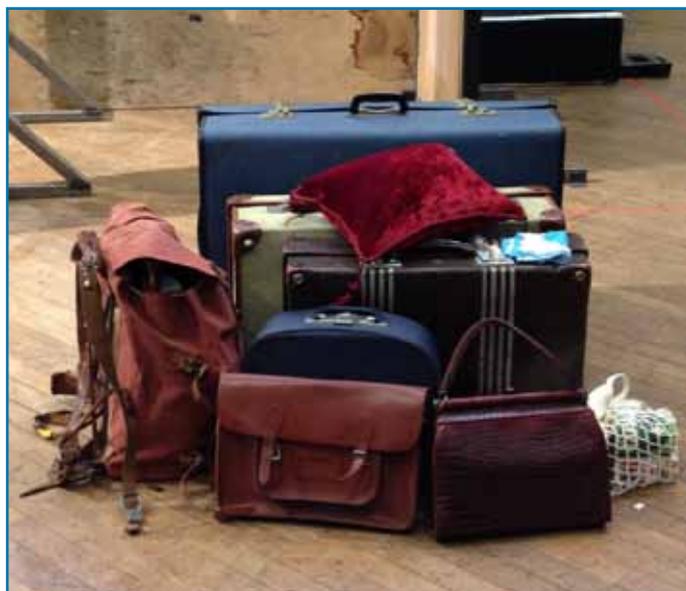
Charlotte tells us that Jo and Helen are 'awesome women. They're doing what they like. They're not tragedies. They don't need men; they can do it by themselves.' She describes the play as being about 'women that want to be liberated.' We take her thoughts forward with us, they inspire and embolden us.

Every day this week we revisit a scene and try to find the appropriate tone and staging for it. So far we have created work that is spontaneous, free and funny. Our production isn't weighed down by the misery of the character's social situations but instead celebrates their robust spirits. We are all falling in love with the play and can't help but laugh and enjoy the ridiculous and uncensored conversations in the text.

The further we go in the process the more discoveries we make about the characters' relationships and journeys. Bijan [Sheibani, director] talks about the different relationship that Jo has with each character, and how she shows different sides to her personality, depending on who she is with.



Charlotte Delaney has written a blog post for the National Theatre. To read more visit: [national-theatre.tumblr.com](https://national-theatre.tumblr.com)



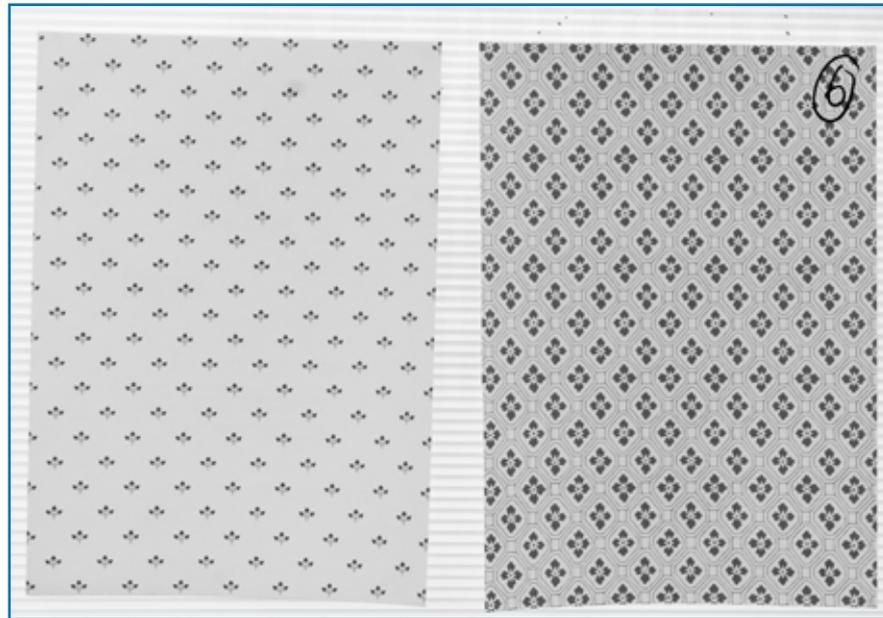
# Rehearsal diary – week four

## Digging deeper

Being a company of five can be both liberating and terrifying: it means you are able to have generous portions of the director's time, but it also means that you have a greater responsibility to get it right. It is vital the company feel secure within the play and feel that their work is clear, considered and correct.

Sometimes working quickly and efficiently can be overwhelming and you need a moment to stop, reflect and evaluate – and so that's what we do. We are in a brilliant position to revise all of our work and make sure that it is in the right territory. To do this we investigate each moment and work out exactly what is happening in every exchange.

To begin with we look at Helen and Jo's first scene and question what each character wants from the other. Early in the rehearsal process Bijan made the company aware of the different sections that exist in the play – he calls these sections units. Within each unit an event takes place. We work on each event in isolation and the actors discuss what they want from each other and what the outcome of that desire is. Occasionally working out a character's objective is



difficult and time-consuming. It can involve a lot of trial and error.

This process ensures that the actors are able to have a shared understanding and reference point – whenever they feel the scene isn't working they have a foundation to go back to. It means they can play with something concrete and that their choices will support each other's.

Once we have gone through the entire play with a fine-tooth comb we are ready to attempt our first full run. Running a play for the first time is a crucial experience as it highlights sections of the play which need developing, you get a better understanding of the characters' trajectory and the actors understand what the demands of the play are.

We run the entire play twice and the actors are shocked by how quickly they have to think to keep up with the characters' thoughts. It's a play that needs its actors to be as intelligent as the play is witty.



Left: stage management sort through rehearsal props. Photo: Ola Ince  
Right: samples of wallpaper for the set. Photo: Marc Brenner

# Rehearsal diary – week five

## Putting it all together

Five weeks in and the majority of the play has been rehearsed, apart from some transitions and the fight sequences. The actors are excited to see what's in store for them: sensual Jazz music, riveting dance moves and slapstick.

Aline David, movement director, guides the actors through the transitions. Each transition needs to convey the passing of time, involves the clearance of props and most contain a quick costume change. The transitions must also further the story and feel organic, so there's a lot to achieve in a short amount of time. Luckily Aline is a mastermind and the actors are ready and willing to dance their way to perfection. Aline gives them a structure and, in the nature of Jazz, they improvise their moves.

Some of the transitions are very technical as they involve actors appearing and disappearing through doors, or the set revolving. The harder transitions are devised with the designer, director, movement director, composer and stage management to make sure that every aspect is covered.

Bret Yount, fight director, works on the fights between Jo and Helen; he choreographs fights that feel spontaneous and dangerous. Bret doesn't just concentrate on the actors' physicalities but he also works on the build-up to the fights, helping the actors to create the right atmosphere and tension so their eruptions feel real. Bret says the actors are being too polite and waiting on each other's cues, which is not what happens during an argument, but he is also surprised by the nature of the fights, especially when



he sees Helen chasing and threatening her 16-year-old pregnant daughter.

When we are not working on transitions or fights we run the play to an invited audience of National Theatre staff. It is helpful to gauge an audience's response and for the actors to get used to playing to different people.



Left: Kate O'Flynn (Josephine); right: Lesley Sharp (Helen) in rehearsals  
Photos: Marc Brenner

# Rehearsal diary – week six

## Moving house

Three days are spent preparing for the move from the rehearsal room to the stage. For the actors this is a chance to adjust their voices to the new space and to try out some of the staging that they were unable to rehearse in Rehearsal Room Two.

The technical rehearsals begin on Thursday afternoon and last for a total of three days. These days are designed to allow all of the technical elements of the play to combine. In order for this to happen everyone must work to a very strict schedule which is enforced by the Deputy Stage Manager (DSM). The DSM cues the show (lights, sounds etc) and is responsible for making sure all of the elements in the play happen at the correct time.

On Thursday we try six versions of the opening until we are satisfied we have picked the best option. It is inevitable that some of these choices will change when we are faced with an audience, as a lot of our work will be assessed according to their reactions.

During the technical week the actors have a dress rehearsal, which means that they are in full make-up and costume. This is the first time that the creative team will see their entire vision come to life. During the technical rehearsals various changes made to improve the quality of the work, most of which are visual and enhance the play's aesthetic. For example: the living room of the flat is further distressed to make it even more undesirable; the scenic artists add finishing touches to the red brick which represents the exterior of Salford; and the lighting now echoes



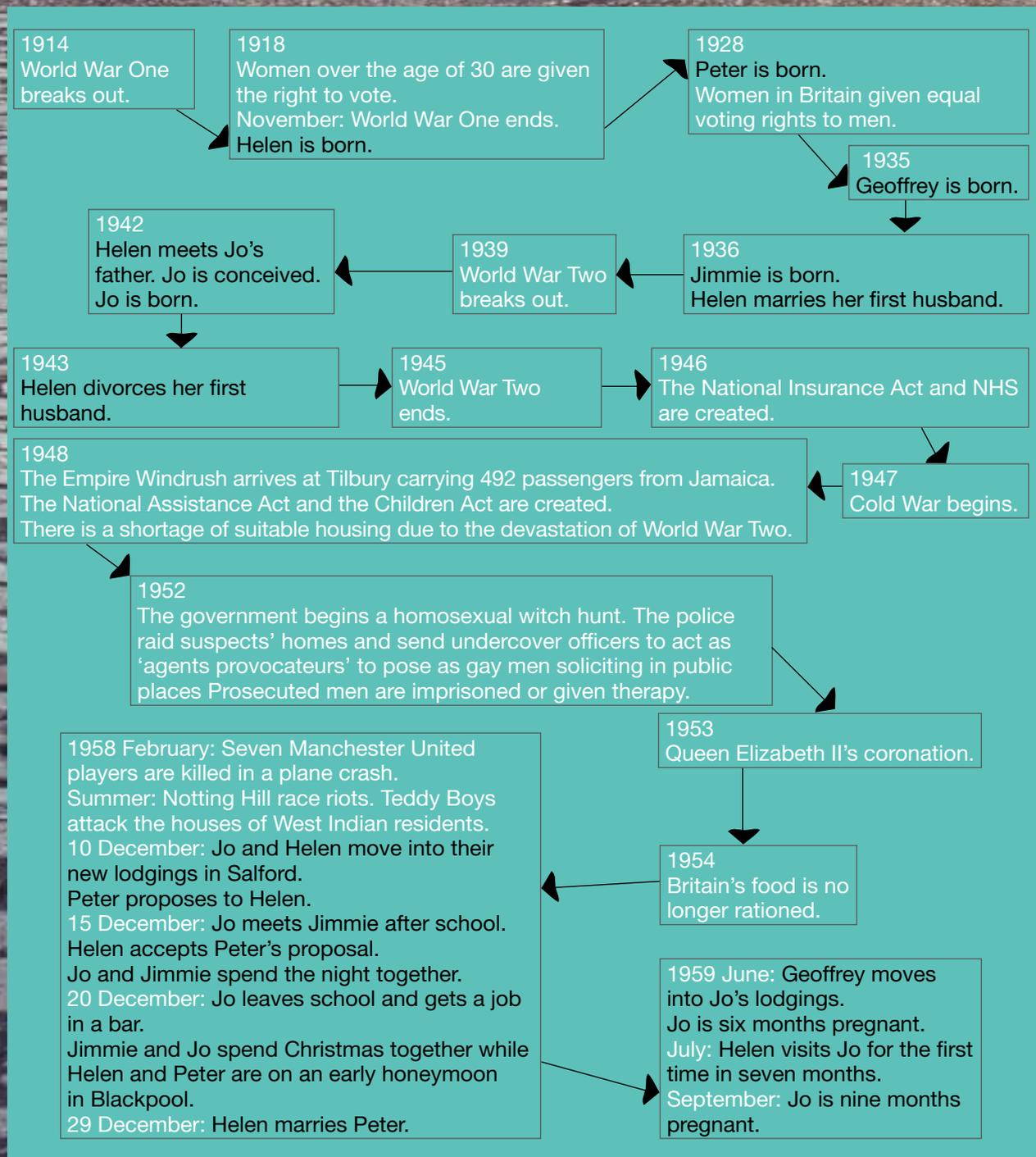
the atmosphere of a scene rather than the time of day or season. Bijan encourages the actors to gradually let their work grow in this new space, being careful not to lose all of the texture they found in rehearsals.

Ola Ince, Staff Director

| Taste of Honey Production Schedule |             | Lyttelton Theatre v3  |   |
|------------------------------------|-------------|---|---|
| <b>Deck Door Activity</b>          |             |   |   |
| Tues 04/02/2014                    | 09:00-14:00 | Two Wagons (9am & 11am)   |   |
| <b>Fit Up/Tech</b>                 |             |   |   |
| Tues 04/02/2014                    | 08:00-13:00 | Fit Up Commences  | Prop Dressing on House in Side Stage<br>Carps Lay Show Floor on Pallet  |
|                                    | 09:00       | SEAR to Join  | Lay out and connect up CYC Track  |
|                                    | 10:00       | Stages Teams to Join  | Rig CYC Track and CYC. Gauze, Full Black<br>LX Overheads (Ladder Truss)<br>Build Low Level Curved Wall on Pallet  |
|                                    | 13:00-14:00 | Lunch   |   |
|                                    | 14:00-18:00 | Fit up  | Pallet In / Elevator Down / SR & SL Flattage Up<br>Prop Dressing on House to continue<br>Test Revolve House at end of session<br>Lay floor on Forestage |
|                                    | 18:00-19:00 | Dinner  |   |
|                                    | 19:00-23:00 | Fit up  | Remaining Flattage Up / Prop Dressing on House<br>Cut US Trap in and fit up substage access   |
| <b>Weds 05/02/2014</b>             |             |   |   |
|                                    | 07:00-10:00 | Paint Call (TBC)  |   |
|                                    | 08:00-13:00 | Finish Fit Up (Stages to join at 10am)                                | Drain Pipes / Forestage facia<br>This is not a dry tech of changes. Just looking at positions prior to focus.   |
|                                    | 13:00-14:00 | Set Positions for House Revolve with Bijan & Hildegard                |   |
|                                    | 13:30-14:30 | Stages Lunch (Split Lunch to accommodate setting of house positions)  |   |
|                                    | 13:30-14:00 | Pre Tech Meeting  | NTF Noisy Works (13:00-14:00)   |
|                                    | 14:00-18:00 | LX Focus  |   |
|                                    | 18:00-19:00 | Sound Quiet Time  |   |
|                                    | 18:00-19:00 | LX and Stages Dinner  |   |
|                                    | 19:00-23:00 | LX Focus  |   |
|                                    | 19:00-23:00 | Stages Clear R/R2 and Tech work as required                           |   |
|                                    | 23:00-01:00 | Sound Quiet Time  |   |
| <b>Thurs 06/02/2014</b>            |             |   |   |
|                                    | 08:30-10:00 | Workshops on stage  |   |
|                                    | 10:00-13:00 | Sound Quiet Time & LX Plotting  |   |
|                                    | 13:00-14:00 | Lunch   |   |
|                                    | 14:00-18:00 | Dry Tech (Actors to join from 16:00 to work through opening sequence) |   |
|                                    | 18:00-19:00 | Stages Dinner   |   |
|                                    | 18:00-19:00 | LX / Sound Plotting   |   |
|                                    | 19:00-19:30 | Stages Notes  |   |
|                                    | 19:30-22:30 | <b>Technical Session One</b>  |   |
|                                    | 22:30-23:00 | Tech work as required/notes   |   |

Left: Part of the production schedule sent out by the Production Manager, Martin Barron  
Right: Staff Director Ola Ince in rehearsal. Photo: Marc Brenner

# A Taste of Honey timeline



A version of this timeline, with information about Shelagh Delaney, appears in the *A Taste of Honey* programme.

# Character profiles

## JOSEPHINE (JO)

Jo is a 15-year-old free-spirited girl. She has grown up under the 'supervision' of her single mother Helen, who has encouraged her to be feisty, impulsive and outspoken. Their relationship is complex and sometimes difficult but they love each other deeply.

Jo has spent most of her childhood flitting between different neighbourhoods, which has disrupted her education. In spite of this Jo is very intelligent and is full of potential both academically and artistically. There are several moments within the play where Jo demonstrates her perceptiveness, wit and artistic tendencies.

Jo is keen to be self-reliant and exercises independence whenever she can. This is partly down to her contemporary views but also because she does not like to rely on people in case they let her down as they have done in the past.



Throughout the course of the play Jo is looking for love: she seeks motherly love from Helen; finds love momentarily in Jimmie, but he leaves her; she finds a sexless love in Geoffrey, but that too is temporary.

## HELEN

Helen is Jo's 40-year-old mother. She is attractive, witty and intelligent, and lives each day as it comes.

Helen has an unconventional relationship with her daughter. Jo calls her by her first name and complains about her irresponsible behaviour. Helen constantly reminds Jo that she has never claimed to be a good mother, but is determined to provide Jo with all that she needs, though she doesn't always succeed. Helen doesn't give Jo the attention and stability she needs: she is constantly re-housing Jo and leaving her alone for long periods of time. Helen loves Jo and wants the best for her even if she doesn't always know how to make that happen.

Helen depends heavily on alcohol and men to survive. Alcohol helps her cope with her day-to-day trials and men provide for her financially. Helen uses her sexuality and beauty to survive, but struggles to do this as her biological clock ticks away.

Helen had an affair with an Irishman while married to her first husband, which resulted in Jo's birth. Helen's husband divorced her, leaving her to bring up Jo alone.

Towards the end of the play Helen tells Jo that she, too, experienced neglect as a child.



## Character profiles (continued)



### JIMMIE

Jimmie is Jo's boyfriend. He is 22-years-old and a sailor. Jimmie and Jo enjoy each other's company and quickly form a relationship that is tender and refreshing, in spite of society's racial prejudice. Jimmie proposes to Jo and is accepted without hesitation. Jo is in awe of Jimmie's beauty, good humour and honesty. Jimmie wants to take care of Jo and ensure that she is happy: when she is ill he attempts to nurse her better,

when she's down he tries to lift her spirits. The couple spend a few days together before Jimmie leaves to complete his national service. Jimmie promises to return to Jo after six months but doesn't stay true to his word; he leaves her and their baby.

### PETER

Peter becomes Helen's husband, although he begins the play as one of her male friends. Peter is ten years younger than Helen and a wealthy car salesman who can afford to live lavishly. He owns a car, smokes Cuban cigars, buys Helen and Jo gifts, takes



Helen out to dinner and for long weekends away and is able to buy a large house. Peter has very clear ideas about class and social hierarchy, which in the latter half of the play reveal him to be an aggressive and ill-mannered man. Peter at his best is confident, fun and smooth; at his worst is an intimidating drunk.

### GEOFFREY

Geoffrey is a young art student. He is Jo's only friend and the only person that supports her throughout her pregnancy. Gentle, kind, patient and tolerant, he is able to rise above discrimination.

When Jo experiences mood swings Geoffrey is able to control and calm her. He is a positive presence in Jo's life, providing structure and stability. In return, Jo gives him a purpose. Geoffrey struggles with confidence and isn't always able to assert his beliefs and concerns, so is easily overlooked by others.



# Lone motherhood

To be a single mother in 1950s Britain was considered to be a disgrace.

Single mothers were automatically second-class citizens and were often ostracised from their family and community.

They were seen as denoting the state of the nation, generating 'broken homes' and 'problem families'. Many women became single mothers due to divorce, rape, unmarried and unprotected sex:

"I didn't know the facts of life, you see... I thought that a kiss was what you called having babies."

(*Lone Motherhood in England, 1945-1990: Economy, Agency and Identity*. p 86)

Single mothers with mixed-race children were seen as abnormal, undesirable and inevitably doomed. It was assumed that relationships between white women and black men were deviant and socially dangerous. These women were 'morally loose or feckless women, who wilfully transgressed important social racialized boundaries.' (*Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now*. p 9)

Abortion was illegal and back-street abortions came with a high risk of physical injury and even death.

Single mothers were supervised by Moral Welfare Officers and encouraged to give birth in Mother and Baby Homes, which were often Church-funded organisations. The homes were usually run by strict nuns whose mission it was to rehabilitate women back into society via repentance and hard work. Many women likened the homes to workhouses. The idea was to give birth, allow the baby to be adopted and then return to normal life as a new woman. The Mother and Baby Homes would receive donations from adoptive parents, thus funding the Church.

The minority of women who didn't give their children up for adoption were faced with abuse from their communities, especially if they were the mother of mixed-race children.

"As soon as I came here, the people next door saw I'd got coloured children and they put a fence up, after that they were alright and some other neighbour came on and said that at first when they saw the coloured children, they thought they'd get some right dirty people in this house..."

If you've got coloured children, they'll class you as if you were a prostitute. In shops sometimes, when you go in and you'll see the salesgirls all dolled up, well, they look at you as if you were going to pinch summat, and I don't like them to do that because I've been as good as them, and then on the bus sometimes, you get these old women looking at you from head to foot, but they stop looking when I start looking back at them, and then one woman was walking past me on the bus, and I heard her say 'Disgusting'." Mrs Jagger (*Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now*. p 9)

Support for single mothers included:

- National Insurance
  - Mothers with more than one child were eligible for Family Allowance
  - Women employed for longer than 70 days were eligible for Maternity Benefits
  - Council housing provided single mothers with secure and equipped housing, if they could acquire it: "It was a luxurious home really. It was a four bedroom council house with a study and central heating."
- Judy Sleet (*Lone Motherhood in England, 1945-1990: Economy, Agency and Identity*. p 131)



## Lone motherhood (continued)

Single mothers, pregnant out of wedlock, were unlikely to receive council housing: they were deemed undeserving, as the pregnancy was considered a choice, unlike being widowed. Furthermore, housing a single mother with one child would result in 'under-occupation', which was a waste of resources.

- National Assistance

The 1948 National Assistance Act granted unmarried women the same rights as widows to ensure that they could bring up their children. But the stigma was so great that many women were too ashamed to claim and the women who did found the financial support was so minute that it was almost impossible to make the money stretch. Most women relied on help from their family to survive.

The Affiliation Order and the Bastard Law were part of the National Assistance Act, both were put in place to force fathers to take financial responsibility for their illegitimate children. The pursuit of fathers for maintenance payments was often ineffective.

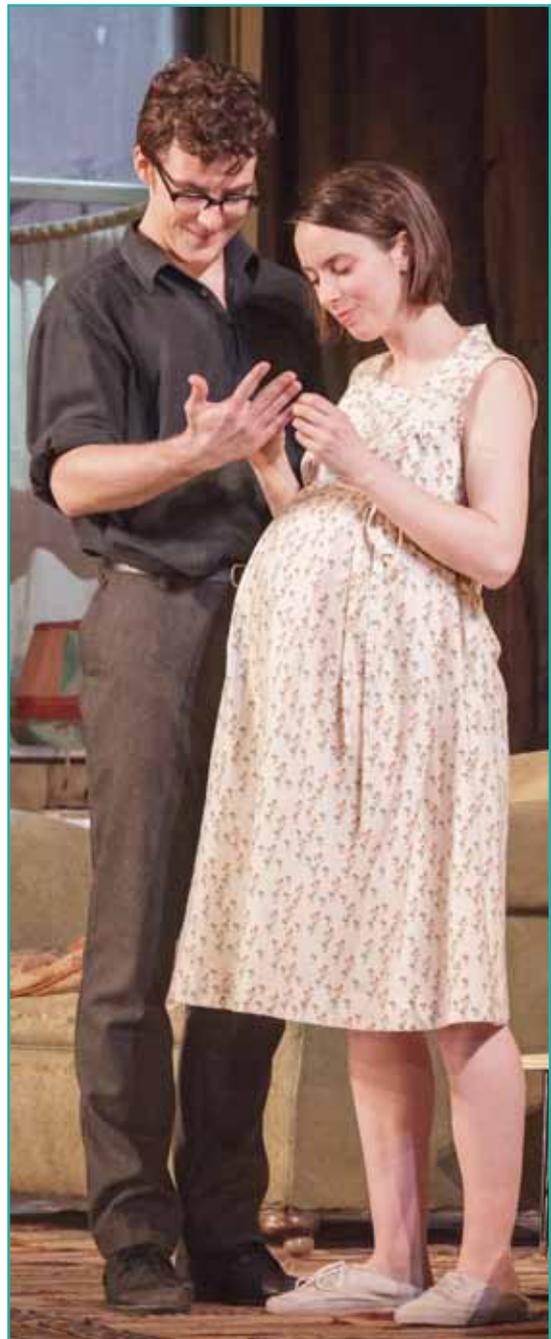
Officials at the National Assistance Board often discriminated against single mothers with mixed-race children, as the officers who assessed people's needs had considerable discretionary powers and harsh decisions were said to be common.

**Sources used:**

*Lone Motherhood in England, 1945-1990: Economy, Agency and Identity* by April Galloway.

*Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now* by Chamion Caballero and Rosalind Edwards.

Article by Ola Ince



# Childhood games

David Boardman grew up in the Longsight area of Manchester. On his website, [manchesterhistory.net](http://manchesterhistory.net), he recalls some of his childhood games from the 1950s and '60s.

## Whips and tops

'Whip and tops were not year-round toys. It seemed as though all of a sudden they were in the shops and everybody had them. Then people would get sick of them and lose them before next year. This really was a game of skill that some kids mastered and others were just hopeless at. The tops were stout little wooden cones with a metal stud at the base on which they would spin if you did it right. The whip was a stick with a heavy cord attached. You wrapped the cord around the top and then steadying the top with one finger you pulled the whip quickly unwrapping the cord and sending the top dancing across the flags. Some people could hold the whip and top in one hand and launch them in mid-air. To add to the effect we would go to Bill's, the corner shop, and buy a box of coloured chalks and make a design on the top of the top so that when it spun the colours would appear to mix...

One of the skills to acquire after you can keep it spinning is the art of lifting the top and depositing it in a different (planned) location on each whip action. At just the moment when the top is fully wrapped on each swing, it is lifted – spin added – and thrown to a new spot. A skilled person can actually “walk to school or the store propelling their top along with them.”

## Kick-the-Can

'I always thought this was Kitcan because that was how we said it. Now I don't think it was in the rules that you had to play kick-the-can in the evening but I don't remember ever playing it any other time. First of all I remember it going on until dusk and beyond and I also remember getting dragged in to go to bed with it still going on and having to lie on my bed in the front bedroom listening to all my friends still out there having fun. Now the other thing is I never remember having a can to kick, we used a football. Basically it was a form of hide and seek. A ball was placed in the middle of the street and someone was “it”. Everyone else had a count to 100 or whatever was decided to go hide usually down the back entries squished in by the backyard gates... Then the person who was “it” sought out the others. Unlike Tick, you didn't need to touch them just point them out and run back to the ball and touch it with your foot thereby capturing the kid in question. When caught, the kid had to return to the location of the ball while the person who was “it” tracked down the rest. Where this got interesting though was that while the person who was “it” went off down the street... to find someone else, a kid who was still free could come out of his/her hiding place and run towards the ball. If they got to the ball first they would kick it away as far as they could. The “it” person had to go get the ball and all the prisoners were free again. As you can imagine it was almost impossible to get to the end of this game and often the person who was “it” got fed up and walked off before we got to the end...'



Props table during rehearsals  
Photo: Ola Ince

“... when I was young we used to play all day long at this time of year; in the summer we had singing games and in the spring we played with tops and hoops, and then in the autumn there was the Fifth of November, then we used to have bonfires in the street, and gingerbread and all that.”

Helen, *A Taste of Honey*

## Pavement Art

'Having chalk to colour your top often spawned other uses for the chalk and this included hopscotch but it also included drawing on the flags. Kids played school drawing lessons on the pavement for other kids to follow but it was usually primitive art work that spread across the “fronts” of houses. Now of course this wasn't always popular with the woman whose “front” it was and this activity often spurred them on to swill down the flags outside their house destroying the latest art exhibition.'

# Childhood games (continued)

## Alleys and bottle tops

'Players had alley bags to carry around their treasures and some had so many they hauled around big biscuit tins. Alleys came in many forms. There were the highly coloured singles and then there were ones that were significantly larger and had values of 2, 3 or 4 times a single. There were rough ones made out of what looked like frosted glass that we called "bottle washers". What I didn't realize at the time was that that was exactly what they were. They were used for scouring out bottles. "Bottle Washers" were looked down on and given a lower value than shop bought alleys. The real fancy alleys were known as bobbydazzlers.

There were a number of variations on the theme of alleys. The basic game was played by digging a hole and aiming the alleys at the hole. You could do this on a croft but it was pretty hard to get the area around the hole smooth enough. Often flags had holes in them and you could dig down in the dirt beneath to make the hole bigger. Once everyone in the game had thrown all of their alleys at the hole, the person with the most success went first. So the one with the most in, or the closest to the hole, went first. To play you used a bent finger to push the alleys towards the hole. Your turn continued as long as you kept putting alleys in. As soon as you failed to sink an alley the turn passed on to the next player. If on a particular turn you were unlikely to sink the alley it was common for players to push the alley away from the hole to make the task more difficult for the next player. The person who sank the last alley won all of them...

There were other alley games though. One was played on small grids on the flags... They had a series of narrow, parallel slits big enough to support an alley. In this case the players threw their alleys with a view to getting them on the middle slit. Then the play involved advancing the alleys across the slits until they were all on the middle one.

There were also games that involved a drawn circle, often best played on soft ground. Here you either had to get all of the alleys in the circle or you got to keep all the alleys you knocked out of the circle.

For some reason that I don't know, we also, from time to time, played the same games with bottle tops. Maybe we couldn't afford alleys. I had a huge collection of bottle tops of all colours because for a while my Mam cleaned a pub.'

### Activity:

How do childhood games in the 1950s and '60s differ to games played today?

## Other games

'In Longsight there were no trees for us to climb but we did have lamp posts and it was something of a measure of manhood or womanhood if you could climb them. The old ones that started out as gas lamps were pretty easy because they had such convenient ridges for your feet and a handy set of horizontal arms to reach for with your hands. The newer metal lamps were useless because the only thing you could do was shinny up them like a tree. There was a sort of sloping ledge to start your feet on, but then it was just several feet of tapered metal tubing and most people lost grip and strength and slid back down.

The old lamps were also great for making swings on. Someone climbed up and tied one end of a heavy rope to the cross arms and then, holding the other end of the rope, you would run as fast as you could around the lamp. As the rope wrapped around the pole it shortened and you could lift your feet off the ground and spin around the pole. If you could find a tire you could tie it on the end and then you had a seat. Some people used a pillow or even a pullover to add a little comfort.'

## Hopscotch

'... Whilst this was a unisex activity it was the girls who ruled because it was the girls who knew the rules. If there was any constant in street play it was that most games had rules and hardly ever was there agreement on what those rules were and there was never full compliance on the application of the rules. So girls always had the upper hand. First of all they were better at the skills like hopping with enough control to advance the tin can to the next numbers. They had smaller feet and rarely touched the lines and they knew the rules and since they were never written down it was hard to prove that they just changed them to suit the situation. Hopscotch was one of those games that could go on for hours. Now I think about it there were at least two kinds of hopscotch. The regular one where you threw a small flat tin, like the ones throat lozenges came in, or a stone, to a number, hopped on the numbers skipping over the number in question, going on to the end turning around and coming back picking up the can on the way back. There was another variation though where the hopper moved the can to another number with the hopping foot. The layout of the numbered blocks was another variation because there was the layout with the half-moon top and another that was completely rectangular.'

# Interview with director, Bijan Sheibani

## Why did you decide to direct *A Taste of Honey*?

The first thing that I guess is worth saying is that I was looking at what other plays had been programmed and there wasn't anything working class, by a woman or Northern; it felt like there was quite a gap in the schedule.

## Do you think that happens a lot? If so, why?

It probably does. Maybe there's a view that some plays are really only suited to small places, so you might think that *A Taste of Honey* is a piece that isn't big enough for the Lyttelton. The National did Simon Stephens' *Port* last year – the play was originally performed at the Royal Exchange Manchester – and some of the unfair criticism was that it wasn't in the right space, that the Lyttelton was just too big. What I loved about *Port* was the emotional scale its characters brought, which is so suited to the Lyttelton. I don't think you need to do a play set in the Houses of Parliament to justify being on a big stage. I like that those characters are on a massive space and are playing to 800 people. I don't see enough of those stories.

## What is the play about?

I think a lot of the play is about taking care of each other and how difficult that can be; simply trying to take care of someone when you yourself feel like you're not getting taken care of properly. How much love can you give if you don't feel like you're receiving enough yourself?

## How does it feel to direct a play about women at a time when feminism feels once more to be on the agenda?

I didn't really have any of that in mind. Apart from the programming thing, in terms of what was missing in the schedule and therefore what I could propose to Nick [Hytner, Director of the NT], it is a play that I think is really honest and really true to what the North West is like. I'm not specifically interested in the '50s as opposed to any other decade but working on *A Taste of Honey* has made me think quite a lot about where my mum's family are from and where I'm from. And also what they must have gone through as women in the '50s. My mum has got two sisters and three brothers from the same economic background as Helen and Jo. They moved around a lot and were brought up in that post-war era when allegedly the North West was dying – which was what was in the press quite a lot – so, yeah, I have that personal connection and interest. I also really love the wit of the characters, just how bright Helen and Jo are. All of the characters are very witty and resilient.



As I have been working on this I've been reading Owen Jones' book *Chavs*, a view of the working classes and particularly since the early '70s and '80s with the coal mines closing and the trade unions collapsing and the villainisation of working classes – and even now with the recent Tube strike. The idea that people shouldn't dare to protest like that and actually have an impact if you are from that class is really wrong. I think there's something about the way that the character Peter says 'you're a lot of bloody outsiders, no class at all', when he is now living this life in a dazzling white house, and Geoffrey's comment that it's not 'the people in this district that are rotten' that is so relevant to now.

There is so much fear around young people, working-class people. Estates scare the middle classes; they think, 'oh there must be some awful things going on in there' when the fact is a huge proportion of the population live on an estate and they're nice people. I think it's really relevant. In recent years the Labour party have stopped representing the working classes – Blair certainly didn't, he was more interested in the middle classes. The middle classes are a much smaller percentage of the population. I wouldn't be surprised if this play really attracts a wide audience because of this. It's not a million miles away from *Coronation Street*, but it's better than that. I think it's unusual for stories nowadays to be relevant to such a wide number of people.

# Interview with Bijan Sheibani (continued)

## What do you want an audience to take away with them?

I would hope that people don't think it's a play about a terrible mother and judge Helen too harshly. Of course she should be criticised, she's not a great mum, but I want people to come away with mixed feelings about Helen and Jo, because they are very three-dimensional characters. There can be a simplification in the media now about a sort of moral code people should live by. Working-class parents are often criticised for not bringing up their children properly – if only the parents' behaviour changed then kids would be all right. This doesn't allow for the real stories to get out: the economic circumstances, lack of jobs or destruction of communities. Instead it's all about bad parenting or drug and alcohol problems and it's just a way for the government not to take responsibility. I think those women are so resilient considering the pressures they are under. They're heroes. Helen is hilarious, people love her; when you watch her you just think she's amazing, even though you don't approve of some of the things she does, you sympathise with her. They're strong even though they are economically deprived.

## What has been the most challenging thing about directing *A Taste of Honey*?

It hasn't actually been that challenging when I compare it with other projects I've done. No, it's been such a pleasure. It's a good piece of writing. It's like when I directed *The House of Bernarda Alba* [at the Almeida in 2012] – the more you put in the more you get back. If something is written truthfully then the more you pick away at it, the more you'll find, because someone is writing from their core and that is intrinsically interesting.

## What does your production offer that the original (Joan Littlewood's 1958 production) didn't?

I don't know because I didn't see the original. I'm just going to have to guess from the design pictures. I suppose that this is a bit more naturalistic with the room. As soon as we got into the theatre it didn't feel like there is a fourth wall. I think we've probably got more money and we've got a bigger stage, so we've had to fill it. Our play isn't a contemporary play and it would have been then, so maybe as an audience member you'll have the experience of going 'oh this is how we have changed; this is how we haven't changed' whereas you wouldn't have had that experience watching it in 1958. The shock factor of Jo being with a black sailor and living with a gay

man isn't there any more in the way that it would have been, but it is in the way that you go 'oh my God that was only 55 years ago.' Maybe you'd be shocked at how recently this was shunned and frowned upon.

## How did you work with designer Hildegard Bechtler?

We looked at a lot of images and photographs of the period. The restlessness that Shelagh Delaney talked about in the Ken Russell documentary really stuck with me. We talked quite a lot about the feelings of restlessness, temporariness, communities and people on the move – that's where the idea of the floating house came from. It's not on the ground, and I suppose the rotation of it adds to the sense that they are on the move. We just really wanted it to feel located in Salford in the '50s, hence the street. We also had a conversation about the different perspectives you could take on the world. There is a very close up one – studying someone's face – then as you move the camera back you've got a person, then the room that the person is in, the house of the room and then the town – and then more natural things like the sky. We've tried to create lots of different scales, which I think is useful because the characters talk about things like the dark. There are moments in the play when you go somewhere much bigger than outside of the flat – a landscape that's not really rooted in 1959 – like Africa or Cardiff. We tried to capture that so it's not a small place set in a little room. It should feel quite big. We've got sky, air and water. It is sort of global, the play. It's set in a port so there's a sense of movement in that aspect as well.

Interview by Ola Ince

# Interview with Lesley Sharp (Helen) and Kate O’Flynn (Josephine)

**Why did you say yes to your roles?**

**KATE:** I said yes to this role [Josephine] because it’s an amazing part for a young actress, it’s on an amazing stage at the National – the Lyttelton – it’s a brilliant play and brilliant writing. Anyone would be an absolute fool not to do it.

**LESLEY:** I said that I wanted to play Helen because I love the play, first of all. I thought that the whole structure was really seaworthy and had stood the test of time. I just thought that it was an amazing role for an older woman, and great roles for women are few and far between. I thought that potentially it was a fantastic opportunity.

You mention that name – *A Taste of Honey* – and everybody knows it or knows of it, they’ve seen the film or they’ve seen a version of the play or they know the story – and there’s a reason for that. The original play, and then the film, made a huge impact. The resonance still carries on down to today, and when I read the play there were things that I thought were very relevant to 2014. At the centre of the play there’s a truthful, ambivalent relationship between a mother and her daughter. Helen is trying to do her best to survive, and survive on behalf of her daughter, but it causes tensions and upset between the two of them. Ultimately it’s a loving relationship, but as is often the case with relationships between children and their parents – particularly with children in their teens – they are not easy. What Shelagh Delaney has written is very painful and accurate.

Another thing that I love about what she has written is that there is something very vibrant, alive and muscular about the dynamic between these two women. They happen to be from the North and also happen to be working class, and it’s unusual to see that depicted so wittily and so intelligently .

**Have you seen this play before? What did you think?**

**KATE:** I saw it at the Royal Exchange in Manchester in 2008 – I was rehearsing a show there at the time. I did enjoy it. They had a DJ on stage with Morrissey featured a lot, that sort of twist. But it was only reading it when this came up that I really remembered how brilliant it was, how fresh the writing seems and how unique a voice Shelagh Delaney had. I don’t know anyone that’s written like her; although Lesley and I were talking about Andrea Dunbar and the early episodes of *Corrie* [*Coronation Street*] and things like that, a lot of stuff has come after it, but nothing with quite the same voice as Delaney.

**What do you hope an audience take away from this production of *A Taste of Honey*?**

**KATE:** I never like to think about what I want an audience to take away with them, as long as they enjoyed the production. People are very attached to this play. Having performed mostly new writing I’ve forgotten what it’s like to do a play that people really know and have very strong feelings about so I hope that we do it justice. I think we’ve stayed true to what’s written, there’s nothing plonked on top of it, which I think can happen, everything is organic, the movement all seems to make sense.

**What have been the greatest challenges during rehearsals?**

**KATE:** The biggest challenge has been the language. The characters are very intelligent – just getting the wit, the intelligence and quickness of thought and changes of emotion, getting all of that together has been a challenge. I think getting the relationship right between Helen and Jo has also been a challenge. It’s quite complicated. With the other characters you can sort of see it on the page, but there are lots of different relationships between Helen and Jo, so just getting the tone of the first scene right is difficult: understanding how they banter and bat off each other and what makes them tick and affects them at different points.



Lesley Sharp (Helen) and Kate O’Flynn (Josephine) in rehearsal  
Photo: Marc Brenner

# Interview with Lesley Sharp and Kate O’Flynn (continued)

**LESLEY:** One of the things about the play, and one of the things about the role, is that Shelagh Delaney was 19 when she wrote it and she wrote it in two weeks. There’s a speed and delicacy of thought, a lightness of touch, which runs through the play like quicksilver and it means that actually you have to be on your metal. The characters think as they’re speaking, there’s no baggage, no space for air. So you have to be *really* tuned in. You have to know the dialogue inside out and be able to hurl it around. That takes a bit of doing and I think that’s the biggest challenge, actually. Everything else that’s laid down for the character is brilliantly clear, and if you obey Delaney’s rules you’re fine, you don’t go wrong.



**What’s your favourite scene or moment in the play?**

**KATE:** There are loads of good moments in the play. I really enjoy watching the other characters. I like seeing what happens between Helen and Peter when he comes in drunk. I love the scene changes as well. There is so much I couldn’t pick one moment.

**LESLEY:** During rehearsal, you often land on certain points of the play and think ‘oh this is going to be one of my favourite bits’ or sometimes you get to a section and think ‘oh I’ll never get this bit right’ or ‘I hate that corner’, but, surprisingly, through a course of a run you can do a complete volte-face – the bit that you found difficult you start to love because you’ve mastered it and likewise the bit that you loved falls out of favour or becomes something sort of normal. I think it varies: there have been moments when I’ve really enjoyed bits from Act One more than Act Two. At the moment I suppose what I’m really enjoying is the scene where I’m on stage with all three of the characters Helen meets: Geoff, Peter and Jo. It’s where Peter comes in drunk and interrupts a moment Helen is trying to have with Jo and he sort of annihilates her and embarrasses her in front of her

daughter. I’m really enjoying it because one of the dark hearts in the play is revealed, which is to do with the ebbing away of youth and beauty in a woman to make way for the youth and beauty of the generation that is coming up. It’s sort of laid bare in that scene and it’s an awful moment for Helen where she’s basically told that she’s old, loveless and ugly. But it’s fantastic because it doesn’t squash her, ultimately, it doesn’t knock her down. Also I just love being on stage with those other actors because they’re all amazing. It’s very exciting because the Rubik’s Cube of combinations of what we’re all doing change every time so the scene feels very alive.

Interview by Ola Ince

# Additional resources

## From the National Theatre:

The PROGRAMME for *A Taste of Honey* is on sale for £3 from the Bookshop, and from ushers, bars and buffets at performance times:

In 'The Start of the Possible', **Jeannette Winterson** gives her unique perspective on Shelagh Delaney's life and her influence today; **Dominic Sandbrook** describes attitudes at the time the play was written; brilliant photographs and artwork evoke that time; and a **Timeline** gives facts about the background and Delaney's work. With who's who in the company and **Marc Brenner's** photographs of them in rehearsal, the programme is an indispensable companion to the play.

Also on sale:

The text of *A Taste of Honey*, published by Methuen Drama at £9.99, as well as other work by Shelagh Delaney, plus background reading – all part of a wide range of theatre-related books, recordings and gifts.

Order from [shop.nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://shop.nationaltheatre.org.uk)  
T +44 (0)20 7452 3456  
E [bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk](mailto:bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk)

**Prices correct at the time of publication, winter 2014.**

## Other resources

### Books:

*The North* by John Bulmer

*Northerners* by Sefton Samuels

*Street Photographers* by Shirley Baker

*Street Spaces: Urban Photography* by Shirley Baker

### Novels:

*A Kind of Loving* by Stan Barstow

*The L-Shaped Room* by Lynne Reid Banks

*Chavs* by Owen Jones

*Sweetly Sings the Donkey* by Shelagh Delaney

### Essays:

*Lone Mothers of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Children: Then and Now* by Chamion Caballero and Rosalind Edwards

*Lone Motherhood in England, 1945-1990: Economy, Agency and Identity* by April Gallwey

### Plays:

*Road* by Jim Cartwright

*Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne

*Rita, Bob and Sue Too!* by Andrea Dunbar

## Films:

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* directed by Karel Reisz

*This is England* directed by Shane Meadows

*Fish Tank* directed by Andrea Arnold

*Wasp* directed by Ken Loach

*Cathy Come Home* directed by Ken Loach

*The Full Monty* directed by Peter Cattaneo

*Vera Drake* directed by Mike Leigh

*The Arbor* directed by Clio Barnard

## Documentaries:

*A Very British Sex Scandal* directed by Patrick Reams

*Shelagh Delaney's Salford* directed by Ken Russell