



**THE OLIVIER AWARD-WINNING
BEST NEW MUSICAL**

STANDING AT THE SKY'S EDGE

Music and Lyrics by **RICHARD HAWLEY** Book by **CHRIS BUSH** Directed by **ROBERT HASTIE**

LEARNING RESOURCE PACK

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Welcome to this resource for *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. Here you'll find a range of information, interviews and activities to enable you to enjoy and explore the production even further. Whilst the classroom/studio-based activities are intended for Key Stage 4 and 5 students for A Level and BTEC exams, we're delighted to share this resource with all of our visitors to Park Hill.

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This education resource was written by Susie Ferguson – a Drama and English teacher and Creative Learning Facilitator. Commissioned by National Theatre Productions, in association with Go Live Theatre Projects.

SECTION 1 THE PRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION



Standing at the Sky's Edge tells the story of the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield, and through it, the story of post-war Britain.

We follow three distinct timelines throughout the show.

TIMELINE A: From 1960 to 1989 we follow HARRY and ROSE, a local, white, working-class couple for whom Park Hill offers an exciting new future. In the ensuing decades, we see them struggle through the deindustrialisation of the North (more specifically, the collapse of the steel industry), mass unemployment and the physical degradation of the estate itself.

TIMELINE B: From 1989 to 2004 we follow JOY and her cousins GRACE and GEORGE, Liberian immigrants fleeing civil war. They encounter Park Hill at its lowest ebb, where the estate feels full of drugs and violence, but it offers them a sanctuary of sorts. Joy falls in love with JIMMY, the now teenage son of Harry and Rose, and they start their own life together.

TIMELINE C: From 2015 to 2020 we follow POPPY, a southern, middle-class interloper who has moved to Sheffield following a bad break-up. The Park Hill she encounters is now hugely desirable, expensive, aspirational architect-designed living, and she struggles with the idea of being a gentrifier. Her sense of belonging is also shaken by her ex-girlfriend NIKKI's attempts to win her back and bring her home to London.

These three stories are woven together to build up a kaleidoscopic portrait of life on an ever-changing estate.

This is, broadly speaking, a show about home, and what that word means - whether it's shelter, sanctuary, just a roof over your head or something more profound than that. It's a show that argues anyone can make a home anywhere, and that having a home is a fundamental right.

Standing at the Sky's Edge begins as a story about a physical building, but ends as something much bigger, about the nature of home itself, which can only ever be defined by the people within it.



Laura Pitt-Pulford, Elizabeth Ayodele and Rachael Wooding in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg



THE NARRATIVE



There are three timelines in *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. It is not presented chronologically. You'll sometimes see characters from the different periods occupying the same space and there are several moments where we see adult or older versions of characters shown in a later time period.

Timeline A: 1960/1979/1985/1989

Rose Local. Slightly unwilling housewife. Begins mid 20s.

Harry Rose's husband. Steel worker, mid/late 20s at the beginning.

James Rose and Harry's son. Aged 8.

Trev A former colleague of Harry.

Cathy Trev's fiancée



Timeline B: 1989/1992/2002/2004

Joy A young Liberian refugee. She is aged 14 at the beginning of the story.

Grace Joy's cousin.

George Joy's cousin, younger brother of Grace.

Jimmy The now teenage son of Rose and Harry. (His relationship with Rose and Harry becomes apparent during the narrative)

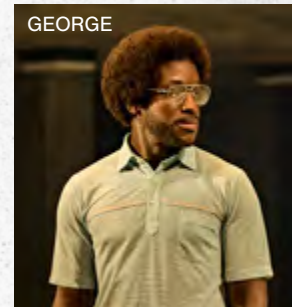
Constance Joy's daughter. (10-12)

Housing Officer

Gary

Kevin Local teenagers

Teen



Timeline C: 2015/2017/2019/2020

Poppy Southern. She has bought a flat in the redeveloped Park Hill. In her 30s.

Nikki Poppy's ex-partner. In her 20s or 30s.

Charles Poppy's father, in his 50s or 60s.

Vivienne Poppy's mother, a similar age to Charles.

Marcus Poppy's work colleague.

Connie Adult Constance from timeline B, in her mid 20s in the latter part of the timeline. She is the narrator, and the estate agent who introduces Poppy to the renovated Park Hill flat

Max Marcus's boyfriend.

Seb

Alice

Karen Party guests

Justine

Jenny



The 2024 West End company of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Act One

The play opens with two workmen adjusting the neon sign that says, 'I love you, will u marry me?'. During the song *As The Dawn Breaks*, we see three different tenants arriving at a flat in Park Hill – a housing estate in Sheffield which overlooks the city. Each character is from a different year – the years are displayed above the stage. Connie, the estate agent, addresses the audience.

The action focusses then on Harry and Rose in 1960, newlyweds who are beginning married life at Park Hill, followed by Joy, Grace and George who are shown around their new flat by a housing officer in 1989. The housing officer is patronising and thinks they cannot understand English. He warns them to keep the front door locked at all times due to the dangers of the area. Time shifts again, this time to 2015 when Poppy – a southern, middle-class woman moves - into the flat. Connie lets her in. The flat is part of the new Urban Splash redevelopment of Park Hill.

Poppy's parents, Vivienne and George, visit her in her new flat. They are slightly bemused by Poppy's wish to move to Yorkshire. Charles is dismissive of Park Hill's status as a listed building and Vivienne expresses concern that much of the estate remains boarded up.

Joy and George discuss the need to call Park Hill home now. They are refugees from civil war in Liberia and Joy is concerned for her parents, who have been left behind. *Naked In Pitsmoor* is sung during this scene. Meanwhile, in 1960, Rose tells Harry that her friend is recruiting for jobs at Coles (Cole Brothers, a former department store in Sheffield) but Harry is not keen for her to take a job there. He is proud to be "the youngest foreman this city has ever seen", and he hints that her role as a mother will happen soon. Rose sings *I'm Looking For Someone To Find Me*. Other characters and members of the ensemble join and sing with her.

In 1989, Joy is on a walkway, walking towards her flat and trying to find her keys. Gary and Kevin cut her off and harass her. Jimmy sees them off, checking that Joy is all right once they have left. He introduces himself. Later we see Joy being quizzed by Grace who has seen her talking to Jimmy, she doesn't want Joy to make "that sort of friend".



Jonathon Bentley in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

In 2015 we see Poppy welcoming Marcus to her new flat. Their conversation hints at Park Hill's troubled reputation before it was redeveloped. We briefly see Harry and Rose in conversation after Harry returns from a shift at the steel works, before we shift back to 1989 where Grace is still concerned by Joy's friendship with Jimmy, and news of continued violence comes from Liberia. Joy describes the flat as "like a prison". In 1960, Rose and Harry discuss their friend's newly-announced pregnancy. Rose and Harry have not yet been able to have their own baby.

At this point a bottle of Henderson's Relish is passed in between the different households who are all eating at the table, within their specific time periods.

In 1989, George watches Joy and sings *Tonight The Streets Are Ours*. We see the different characters settling into their routines, and they join in singing the song.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

AT THE SKY'S
EDGE

Act Two

Act Two begins with the indication of three new time periods – all of which are years of general elections. 1960 becomes 1979, 1989 shifts to 1992, and 2015 moves to 2017. After the jubilation of the previous song, it is a shock to the system and the transition deliberately distorts the sense of optimism.

Connie addresses the audience, hinting at the “rot” setting in. Poppy and Marcus discuss the election, and the vandalised “I love u” sign. Connie addresses the audience again and the time shifts to 1992. Joy is now 17 and Grace is worried for her safety after another young person was assaulted the previous week. Joy is reluctant to reveal the name of the friend who she’s walking with.

Time shifts again and it is 1979. Rose and Harry now have a son, James, after ten years of trying to have children. Connie’s monologue suggests that times are hard, and people are struggling financially. Rose asks Harry to ask family members for any hand-me-down boots for James. Harry is too proud to do so, insisting he’ll provide for his son. It is election night, and Harry is agitated. He thinks the phone in the flat has been tapped because of his involvement with the workers’ union.

As James leaves the stage, Jimmy (now 21) enters and meets up with Joy. It is 1992. He will be walking with her. Jimmy talks of Neil Kinnock and the Labour Party’s potential to lead the country out of recession. He tells Joy that he has been offered a job on an oil rig, which means that he will be away for months at a time. The steel industry in Sheffield is in decline. They arrange to meet that night when Grace is out. Joy promises him that “after tonight, everything will change”.

It is now 2017. Nikki sings *Open Up Your Door*. She is shown around a flat at Park Hill by Connie. She has posed as a potential tenant in order to track down Poppy, her ex-partner, who appears as she walks towards her flat. Poppy insists that Nikki leaves, reminding her that their wedding was cancelled because Nikki was unfaithful with Poppy’s boss.

In 1979, Harry is outside the flat. He is drunk, and sings *My Little Treasures*. He enters the flat, and finds Rose and James waiting for him. It looks like Thatcher’s Conservative government have won the election, despite Rose’s optimism. Harry grabs Rose forcefully, insisting that “I still matter. This city still needs me.”

In 2017, Nikki has been helping Poppy distribute election leaflets. Back in the flat, they discuss their relationship, and an offer of a job in Poppy’s previous firm in London. She insists that Nikki leaves.

In 1992, Joy sings *Coles Corner*. She has previously argued with Grace about the strict rules that prevent her from having a social life. George leaves the flat and Jimmy quickly arrives.

As we hear the music for *There’s a Storm Comin’*, Connie’s monologue suggests that times are challenging for all three families. Within this section, Joy tells Jimmy that she is expecting their baby (1992), Poppy talks about moving away from Sheffield (2017) and Harry returns home having lost his job at the steel works (1979). During the song sequence, extracts from Margaret Thatcher’s victory speech can be heard.

Interval



Joel Harper-Jackson and the 2024 West End company of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*.
© Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

PLOT SYNOPSIS

AT THE SKY'S
EDGE

Act Three

Time has shifted once again. For Harry and Rose it is now 1985, for Joy and Jimmy it is 2002, and we see Poppy in 2019. The act opens with *Standing at the Sky's Edge* which is sung by the whole company.

Harry is embarrassed that Rose has asked his friend Trev if there are any jobs at Safeway, the supermarket. His pride has been damaged by his lack of employment. Nigel tells Harry that he will be going back to the mines following the unsuccessful miners' strikes which have lasted a year. Harry becomes emotional and criticises Rose when she comes home from work, embarrassed she has been asking for help finding him a job. Trev sings *Our Darkness*. We see the miners going back to work.

In 2019, Poppy talks to her mother about working freelance after being made redundant. Vivienne is dismissive of Sheffield and is keen for Poppy to move back south, which Poppy had mentioned briefly. We shift to 2002, when Joy and Grace enter with ten-year-old Constance. Grace no longer lives in Park Hill, and Constance mentions that Nana Rose doesn't like visiting either. Jimmy is now working as a security guard, keen to move away from Park Hill, whilst Joy is studying to be a nurse: it is clearly a strain not being able to spend much time together, and life on the estate is declining, with many residents choosing to leave.

It is New Year's Eve. Jimmy and the company sing *Midnight Train* and we segue to 1985. Rose is leaving Harry, who is slumped in a chair. She and Jimmy are going to live with her mother. Harry sings *For Your Lover Give Some Time*. In 2002, Jimmy phones Joy, hoping to be home in time to see in the New Year with her. They express their love for each other, even though times are very hard. In 2019, Poppy is hosting a New Year's Eve party which is gatecrashed by Nikki, who recognises Connie as the person who showed her around the flat on her previous visit. Nikki criticises the people who redeveloped, and moved into, Park Hill. Connie reveals that she lived in the very flat in which Poppy is now living, but is very clear that she is happy to no longer be living there.



Jonathon Bentley, Rachael Louise Miller and Joel Harper-Jackson in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

In 2002, Joy enters the kitchen in her dressing gown, waiting for Jimmy to come home from work. In 1985, Harry also enters and slumps in his chair. There is a brief reprise of *There's A Storm Coming*, sung by Joy, as we see snippets of 2019 and 1985. In 2002, a teenager emerges from the shadows as Jimmy walks home. As Poppy's guests countdown to midnight, Rose realises that Harry is not breathing, and Jimmy is stabbed by the teenager.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Act Four

Time has shifted again. 1985 moves to 1986, 2002 becomes 2003, and 2019 becomes 2020. Rose sings *After The Rain* as time moves on once again.

In 1989, Rose and Jimmy are leaving Park Hill and looking forward to a fresh start. In 2004, Grace and George are helping Joy move out, reassuring Constance that they will return to Park Hill at some point. Sheffield is now a City of Sanctuary and so new families will be arriving from Liberia. In 2020, Poppy enters, followed shortly afterwards by Nikki, who has stayed the night on Poppy's sofa. They have an emotional conversation about how their relationship ended. Nikki leaves.

As a memory, Connie appears, and we see the moment she hands over the keys to Poppy's new flat. Suddenly Poppy has a change of heart and runs after Nikki. We see Joy, George and Constance saying goodbye to the flat, and Jimmy and Rose do the same in 1989. The company sing *Don't Get Hung Up In Your Soul*. Poppy and Nikki get back together.

In 2004, Joy steps out of the flat to lock the door, hearing the voice of the housing officer from her very first day in the flat. As she steps out into the hallway, she sees 1989 Jimmy there, and they converse. Their conversation is similar to their first meeting, years before and as it comes to a close, the 'I love you' sign flickers on.

Connie's final monologue talks of love and hope and the company sing a reprise of *As the Dawn Breaks*.

The End



Standing at the Sky's Edge in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

AN INTERVIEW WITH...

AT THE
STANDING
SKY'S
EDGE

We caught up with writer Chris Bush and producer Rupert Lord to discuss how the germ of an idea became an award-winning musical.

How did the idea for *Standing at the Sky's Edge* begin?

Rupert: I was listening to a Radio 4 documentary on the BBC, and it was about the graffiti - the 'Claire Middleton, I love you, will u marry me?' graffiti. It's now largely forgotten that it did say 'Claire Middleton'.

I was intrigued by this, because it had become already at that point fairly iconic, because it was so readily visible in Sheffield. And I was slightly aware of it. I can't quite remember why, but I was already aware of Park Hill. I already knew Richard Hawley because I'd worked in the music industry for quite a long time. So anyway, I heard this half hour documentary and it was presented like a tragic opera. I mean, it was like the libretto for a classical Puccini opera: it was so theatrical, and really sad, with quite a lot of mystery in it. It was just one of those light bulb things. And I thought there was definitely a show in the idea of Park Hill.

It was such an interesting idea. The documentary maker wasn't just touching on the story of Claire and the person we now know is called Jason, who wrote the graffiti. It was also about social care, or the lack thereof. It was about housing, it was about community, it was about all sorts of stuff that I've always been really interested in.

Chris: Yes. The brief was basically: it's Richard Hawley's music, and it's about Park Hill. We didn't explicitly set out to write a state-of-the-nation play. With our approach, you come to it in a slightly more round-about way. We were writing about a very specific geographical, socio-political set of circumstances, but within that, you could capture something. Of course, the great freedom of a setting like Park Hill, is that it is iconic. It's not just one thing. It's been there for 60+ years; it's got nearly 1,000 flats. So, you could tell any story you wanted, or any collection of stories you wanted, plausibly within those walls. I also think one of the really important things to me, was making sure that if we were telling a drama that was about the North, we didn't perpetuate a misconception that everyone in the North is white, and straight, and working class. You can get one very particular lens of Northern-ness that I knew wasn't true. I knew that I wasn't going to write that version.

I'm also a big believer in form and content going hand-in-hand. When you figure out the story that you're telling, that will help you figure out *how* you're telling that story.

Was there a particular challenge in telling the story of Park Hill?

Chris: I really wanted to avoid telling a story of inevitable managed decline, which I think quite often happens when you're looking at post-war Britain, particularly post-industrial Northern Britain, which can tend to be 'things were great for a while, then the wheels came off, everything's terrible, are we picking ourselves up again? We're not really sure'. That didn't feel like a story that I was interested in telling.

Rupert: What's great about Richard's music, and the way that Chris' book addresses the pre-existing lyrical content, is that Richard is an incredibly politically motivated individual, but you never hear him being didactic, or in any way preachy. He and Chris have collectively come up with something in the show that doesn't instruct anyone to reach a conclusion. I think that that is a large part of what's brilliant about what Chris has done. It is an incredibly political piece, but it isn't preachy.

This is a jukebox musical. How did you choose which Richard Hawley songs to use in the production?

Chris: On a basic level, the level of emotional engagement and payoff you can get from four bars of music compared to 4,000 words of text is amazing. There is an emotional shorthand that can transport you and put you in a place in time and make you feel things in a way that sort of theatre does really brilliantly.

I think there's something different about when you're working with pre-existing songs, rather than composing original songs. You have to think of it in a different way. As a writer, the approach becomes more curatorial in a way, rather than starting to tell a story through theme and song and creating everything from scratch. I had Richard's back catalogue, that I could dip into, listen to, put them into categories and so on. I could ask what they feel like they're telling me. For example, what year does this evoke? What mood is this? Songs like *These Streets Are Ours* and *Looking For Someone To Find Me* - those sort of upbeat numbers became really important structural pieces.

It's a different process, more like putting together pieces of a puzzle than sitting down with a composer and collaboratively asking how are we going to tell a story? I think the most successful way to approach the jukebox idea is when you encounter these songs - found artefacts, if you like - and you figure out how they can sit in your story and help you tell the story. It's a mistake to think that they will work functionally in the same way as a song written for the express purpose of a piece of musical theatre.

Rupert: 'Jukebox musical' as a term is quite often used pejoratively. Although this is a catalogue of original songs, the way in which Chris and Rob (Robert Hastie, the show's Director) have deployed them in the show, they lend a kind of a tone and a colour and a background and a theme, without being too 'reverse-engineered' to make sense with the script.

Chris: Because we have those three timelines, we discovered really early on that music was such a key way to be able to speak between those places. These are three different sets of people who have very, very different circumstances, but with a shared emotion in this moment. Or, for example, we have someone singing in 2015, which is speaking, somehow, to the emotional state of the moment that is happening in 1985. That idea of being able use music in this way felt like an incredibly useful way to break down all those barriers that only theatre can do.

I knew that any music had to exist in the world of Park Hill. There were about five or six numbers that felt like 'stone cold classics' that we had to include, for example *Coles Corner*, *Open Up Your Door* and *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, that felt like lynchpins.

I feel like there were some songs that were always going to be there, then there were moments of knowing the three timelines, and the characters. I needed a song about falling in love here. I needed a song about a heartache here. Once you settle on what you like the best for that emotional moment, you can then see if there is specific imagery within that song that I can then retrofit to sort of speak to the characters .

I think my favourite moment of the whole show is the *Our Darkness* sequence. It's not a particularly well-known Richard song - it was an album track rather than a single. I remember listening to that number and thinking it could be specifically about miners returning to work after the strike, it could contain the idea of the breakdown of Harry and Rose's relationship, etc.



Joel Harper-Jackson and Rachael Wooding in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End.
© Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

You know, it's a combination of Lynne's (Lynne Page, Choreographer) brilliant movement, Richard's brilliant song, and Tom's (Tom Deering, Orchestrator, Arranger and Originating Music Supervisor) gorgeous arrangement.

It's not a very sort of writer-heavy sequence - it's mostly stage directions at this point - but it's one of the bits that I'm most proud of because I was in that curator role looking what this number can do. There's also the idea of *Our Darkness* coming to represent so much of the North's complicated relationship with its industrial heritage and asking what else is left if you take this away.



WELCOME TO PARK HILL

A HISTORY OF THE PARK HILL ESTATE

Park Hill was built between 1957 and 1961. It was officially opened in June 1961.

Following the 1951 census, it was discovered that 81,000 households in Sheffield did not have a bath. There were 26,600 applicants on council housing lists, which meant a wait of up to 6 years for housing. Park Hill was an estate built in order to improve living conditions, clearing slums of back-to-back housing where infant mortality and high death rates blighted the lives of many.

996 flats were built, housing almost 3,000 residents, many of whom had moved from the housing that had previously existed near the site. The old street names were re-used, and neighbours from the back-to-back housing were placed near to each other, to continue the sense of community.

The utopian idea of 'Streets in the Sky' was inspired by Le Corbusier's Brutalist architecture, with 'streets' being wide enough for milk floats, for children to play together and for neighbours to meet. The community also had shops, playgrounds and amenities.

Like many housing schemes in the country that had initially appeared utopian, Park Hill began to decline in the 1980s. Increasing numbers of flats stood empty, with the council unable to find tenants. Rising unemployment, vandalism and anti-social behaviour meant that Park Hill became associated with decline, poverty and crime. There was no longer a sense of community. Although many similar estates were cleared and demolished, Park Hill was awarded Grade II listed status in 1997.



The Park Hill Estate, 1969. Photo's by Mick Jones

WELCOME TO PARK HILL

AT THE SKY'S
EDGE

*“She’s an old lady who’s come on hard times,
she’s getting her face washed and putting
a new frock on - she’ll be there again.”*

Grenville Squires, former Park Hill caretaker
talking about the estate’s regeneration

In 2001 the now-iconic ‘I love you, will u marry me’ graffiti appeared on the bridge. It was removed during maintenance work in 2021, but this was reinstated in 2022 and is now illuminated in neon lighting. The graffiti can be seen some distance away from the estate.

The neon has been added by Urban Splash – the innovative property developer who bought Park Hill for a nominal sum of money and began the regeneration of the estate. The design for the regeneration was nominated for the Stirling Prize in 2013.

Park Hill has also been used for various TV shows and music videos – you may recognise it as Yasmin Khan’s home in series 11 and 12 of Doctor Who, for example.

Arctic Monkeys, Pulp and Yungblud (all artists from South Yorkshire) have all referenced Park Hill in their music or music videos.

Now, in 2024, Park Hill has welcomed a variety of new residents. Some are people with long family ties to the area. Others are new residents in the city and from other countries. The third phase of the regeneration includes student accommodation, reflecting the vibrant lives of the city’s two universities.

Rupert Lord’s inspiration for *Standing at the Sky’s Edge* began with this radio documentary:

[The I Love You Bridge. You can find it here.](#)

Content warning: suicide, drug use, cancer

In this documentary you’ll hear *When The Sun Goes Down* by the Arctic Monkeys. They filmed the video for this song on Park Hill estate in 2006.



Standing at the Sky’s Edge at the National Theatre 2023. Photo by Helen Murray,
Original graffiti c. Jason Lowe 2001

SECTION 2 STAGING



AN INTERVIEW WITH...

AT THE SKY'S
EDGE

Robert Hastie, Director of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, explains some of the key challenges in directing the production

Park Hill is a well-known landmark in Sheffield. Can you tell us a little more about it?

One of the ways in for us was actually to start learning about the very first generation of people who moved in to Park Hill and what it meant for them to have gone from quite poor quality housing, in the two-up-two-down streets that lined Park Hill until just after the Second World War. Those people were then rehoused in the new 'streets in the sky', this social housing utopia that Park Hill was set up as.

It's really hard to depict on stage and of course we got it for free in Sheffield because everybody knows Park Hill. When you're there, it really does feel like you're in a street in the sky. It's not a tower block though. That's really key. It is several storeys high but it's a big sprawling estate.

We did a lot of talking to people, and found people who had lived and grown up there. In fact, the husband of one of our finance team had grown up there. His father had been an early cine camera user, an early home movie aficionado, and kindly lent us some his videos. They were very short, but they gave a really clear idea of what it was like to live in Park Hill in the 60s, when it was a time full of hope. All this went into the show, capturing the feeling of hope and excitement of having hot and cold running water, of having loos inside: having all of those amenities that were that were new to a lot of those families in their home.

If you walk up to Park Hill there are little bits of pathway where you can feel what it replaced. There are little areas of cobbled path and bit of brick work on either side. You can get a bit of a sense of what the slums were like there before.

Standing at the Sky's Edge was originally performed at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre. One of the things that was so compelling about doing the show was that you look out of the windows of our theatre and across the valley and the Park Hill building is facing us. The Crucible itself was built 10 years after Park Hill, but it's also a big concrete, Brutalist building that caused controversy in the city. Therefore, in Sheffield, the production felt very direct, it felt very personal.



Robert Hastie and company members in rehearsals, 2022. Photo by Johan Persson

How will you bring that sense of familiarity to audiences seeing the production in London?

I think one of the things we were unsure of when we first took *Standing at the Sky's Edge* to London was how we would be able to create that sense of place without literally being able to point to it. That's where the design comes in. Ben Stones (Set and Costume Designer) wove the concrete and the design of the materials and the architecture of Park Hill and put it on The Crucible stage. He blended it together with the building's own architecture. When it came to doing it in the Olivier (the largest of the three theatres at the National Theatre), we got all of that for free again.

We're so excited to be going to the Gillian Lynne Theatre. That's because of all the theatres in the West End, that's the theatre that is also a Brutalist concrete building.

Ben is from Sheffield, which also helped! He helps us in our mission, and makes the audience feel like they become part of that community. That starts as soon as you come into the theatre, and you feel your environment start to mesh with the onstage environment perfectly.

AN INTERVIEW WITH...

AT THE SKY'S EDGE

How did you work with your first cast to explore the characters that Chris Bush wrote so beautifully? What's your rehearsal process?

Chris was around the whole time. The first time we staged the production, the characters were still being sort of moulded in rehearsal, around the work that the actors were doing.

As we learned how the characters related to each other, we learned how they operated within their environment as well. Chris was really present working with the actors to shape those characters. I like to work very collaboratively. I used to be an actor, and as an actor I really enjoyed those processes where I felt like I had a creative voice.

In a production like Standing at the Sky's Edge, the sense of a collective is really integral to the work itself.

We had various discussions about whether we would show several different flats on stage, but settled on having one flat and telling the stories of all the people who lived in that one flat. We wanted to get a sense that we could have chosen any flat and examined the lives of the people who lived there. It just so happened to be this one. That meant creating a piece around those central stories. We focus on a sense of real kind of richness and variety and diversity which lends itself well to the kind of ensemble work that I enjoy. I think stages like The Crucible and the Olivier and Gillian Lynne really lend themselves to that collective creation.

With such a collaboration, how do you go about making the important decisions?

The thing about a musical is there's lots to do: It's a big machine: there's music to learn, there's choreography to do, there are the scenes to get on their feet. You don't have time to spare so you have to crack on. There's a pragmatic sort of craft to it. We didn't spend long on the early research but it was really crucial for us to make sure that everybody understood the world that they were in.

Rehearsing in Sheffield was incredibly important: our rehearsal room literally looks out over Park Hill, so the actors were very much immersed. For the move to the Gillian Lynne, this will be the first time we've done it without starting rehearsals in Sheffield, so we're doing a lot of thinking about how we introduce our cast to that world. I think we're probably going to have some sort of field trip, to just go and be in that environment!

The research was important, but it was also important not to separate that research from the practicality of getting up and doing it. We had a brilliant Associate Director (Elin Schofield) who kept feeding in images and references and putting them on the wall as reference points.



Robert Hastie and Elin Schofield in rehearsals ©CameronSlaterPhotography

Can you tell us more about the relationship between character and environment?

We encouraged the actors, as we're learning music, as we're putting the scenes on their feet for the first time, to continue thinking about what that environment would mean for their character. For the three different generations that we see and all the other characters around that they all have their own relationship to the world. This includes how they feel about being there, how they feel about their neighbours, their aspirations and where we are in time. The clarity of the timeline is really important to us because it moves between different time frames.

Did you use any specific rehearsal improvisations to achieve this?

The only improvising we did off-text was about relating to the room. We did exercises where we got actors to move and unpack into the space. It was about allowing them to do what we all do when we move into a new living place, which is to put the space on like clothes and adapt it to us, moulding into our own personal personalities and preferences.

How does the design help you tell the story?

The set doesn't change between different time periods. It's exactly the same layout, it's exactly the same furniture. We flip between the early days when everything was new, and then the days when everything was deteriorating and was becoming dilapidated, and even dangerous. Then there's the turnaround when it was redeveloped. Again, the only tools we had to indicate where we were in the timeline, were design based. We also use a lot of signifiers in costume as well as set.

Is there a scene or a moment that you think is the most challenging to direct and perform?

YES! It's what we call the Henderson's scene. It's the scene where the three timelines are all in the same space at the same time. We've watched them all individually and then for the first time everybody sits down for dinner. They all sit at the same table but they don't acknowledge each other at all.

How did you rehearse such a complex scene?

We first rehearsed each scene (timeline) separately. Each one has its own arc and through-line. In the modern scene, Poppy is making a new friend, and revealing some of the reasons why she's ended up coming to the city. In the middle timeline they are struggling to familiarise with their new environment. They're receiving reports from Liberia. They all have family they're worried about. Then in the earliest timeline Chris captures really brilliantly the kind of Yorkshire working class 1960s ability to talk about everything and nothing. There's so much going on in between the gaps and what's not being said.

For Harry and Rose, you hear in the silences between their lines, the pain of this couple who have not thus far been able to have children. We suspect there's been a pregnancy that hasn't gone to term and there's a lot of pain and anxiety kind of underneath.

All of those scenes are very rich in their own right and have a lot for the actors to get their teeth into. Once we had set each one, we then had to rehearse it like a dance routine.

It had to be choreographed incredibly precisely. For example, "I put my fork down here, and you put your fork down there". We had rules that we set ourselves to give the illusion that the characters were walking through each other. It couldn't at any point look like an actor was deviating from what would be a natural movement or journey to avoid another actor from another timeline.

Everything had to be minutely plotted. It took days, and days, and days. It was very complicated and remains so. It's also probably the most satisfying thing to have got right. There's no right or wrong when we're working on a play, but this was an instance where I got the feeling we'd got it right, that everything's in place.

Having started from the acting perspective, and then getting into the technical aspects, what was beautiful to watch developing was how that then released the actors back into being able to invest in their characters and their relationships again. This includes having a relationship with the characters they don't meet.

Can you tell us more about that idea?

We all started talking about going home at the end of the day, and thinking about those ghost layers in our own homes. It made us all think about the echoes of all the other people who might have lived, and hoped and dreamed and in some cases were born or died in the spaces that we now occupy. That's the sort of thing you can only arrive at by approaching something from the technical end and from the emotional aspects.

This isn't a traditional musical, so how does movement feature in the production?

As a director, some of the first productions I did were revivals of classic musicals. I remember realising that they're the most collaborative forms of making theatre. You really have to trust in the craft and expertise of your colleagues, your musical director, your choreographer. Traditionally, a director would be running to different rooms, and a choreographer would take your ensemble away and bring back a totally choreographed number and then you discuss how that works in relation to the whole. Usually a huge amount of the craft of it happens within a prescribed rehearsal for that purpose.

This didn't and couldn't happen in this kind of a show because of the way the music works. We were working a lot more symbiotically and discovering the function of the music within it. We had instincts, but we really didn't know how it was going to work.

In some musical numbers we discovered moments where we wanted to go into something that feels recognisably choreographic and dance-like, the characters seem to want to dance in this moment. We had the joy of filling a sort of real space of concrete, both literally and figuratively, with dance.

But then we also have things that are much more abstract and have a much more expressionist relationship to the music and emotion that the characters are experiencing. An example is a song like *Coles Corner*, where our character Joy is looking out over the city and longing for her life to start. She's really longing to have the freedom to go out into the world and experience what she thinks other people are experiencing. She's looking out at the city and seeing all the lights at night and all the places. She's imagining the dancers and the couples, the affairs and the relationships and the friendships. That became a real kaleidoscope of different dance styles, different relationships to movement, we had couples moving in a very modern way, we had couples dancing in a way that you might imagine a sort of dance hall in the 1960s, and so on.

Then there's something that becomes even more abstract still. In *For Your Lover Give Some Time*, Harry is contemplating the disintegration of his marriage. Two figures emerge from the shadows, and play out a series of very simple gestures.



Joel Harper-Jackson, David McKechnie and Nicola Sloane in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

Sometimes you're not even aware that it does have choreography to it, because it's a very simple exchange that takes place over a kitchen table, that then moves to a kitchen counter, that then moves into the living space. It's a series of repeated gestures that may be Harry's memory of his own relationship, maybe his memory of his parents' relationship, maybe someone else who has lived in this house, but captures the essence of a relationship going on.

The brilliant thing about working with Lynne Page is that she's equally comfortable and excited working across that whole spectrum of movement styles and she really relishes working with the physicalities needed to present 'real' people. It needed to feel like we were seeing a real community on stage and so therefore we're working with a range of physical

experiences and abilities. Lynne really loves working with the actors on what it is that their body does and building the movements from that.

***Standing at the Sky's Edge* is a jukebox musical, but not as we know it! What are the challenges as a director, working on this style of musical?**

Watching *Girl From the North Country* and seeing the form of a musical being pushed and challenged in that way really unlocked how we needed to use Richard's music in *Standing at the Sky's Edge*.

There's usually a rule with musicals that the music and songs do the work when you've run out of scripted words. When you reach a certain emotional pitch, you have to go into song. Music furthers the narrative, moves us forward and offers character development.

Girl From the North Country inspired us to throw out all of the 'rules' and decide that actually, the songs can absolutely be diegetic and tell the story, but they can also tell us something about atmosphere, or character, or locate us in time. They can act ironically or be counter to the situation that the characters are in at any given moment.

Characters don't necessarily have to sing their own songs, either. Other voices can express what is going on for another character. There were some obvious places to use some of the songs. For example, the opening number begins with the lyric "as the dawn breaks", so it was really clear it had to come at the beginning.

There's a number called *Don't Get Hung Up In Your Soul* which has the line "where you gonna go now they've closed the old home down", that felt like it belonged towards the end of the show in a reflective mode. Often we had to listen to the full craft and poetry of the music, not just the lyrics. The lyrics sometimes don't help to locate where the song should go and how it should be sung because Richard's songs were not originally written for a musical theatre narrative.

His songs are ethereal so trying to kind of wedge them into scenes, and expecting them to do the work of dialogue was very rarely effective.

Richard writes really beautifully and poetically, personally and emotively about himself, his town and other people's relationship to their place and their lives.

Tom Deering, Orchestrator, Arranger and Originating Music Supervisor, answers our questions about the music of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*

What are the challenges of scoring songs that weren't originally written for a theatrical performance?

Richard has an unusual (as far as the contemporary rock 'n' roll world goes) baritone voice. His voice is rich, haunting, and mellifluous at times, other times coarse and powerful. At all times it's intensely personal. There is so much of the song wrapped up in the way they're performed by Richard, so the composition cannot be fully documented in a transcription of the melody and harmony alone. In order to preserve this, we spent time studying his performance style - never with a view to emulation or simulation, but to understand how the poetry of the words and music become symbiotic in his voice. By listening to his music and abstracting his musical choices we could translate this into actors' voices.

Chris Bush cleverly placed the songs at key dramatic moments of the story. This meant that it was the context of how and where the songs appeared, as well as who was singing them, that did so much of the heavy lifting of the transposition from record into the theatre, rather than just the content of the song/transformation itself.

Can you talk us through the arrangement of the title track, *Standing at the Sky's Edge*? How does the scoring help the narrative in this number?

The track begins with the sound of an industrial hammer which mutates into the bass drum (this was an excellent idea from our choreographer Lynne Page). We then hear the haunting 'call to arms' of the guitar solo, followed by the acoustic guitar picking open 5ths. The actor, Sharlene Hector, sings the first verse with very little else happening underneath.

The first chorus is the whole company in unison, after which the kit adds a backbeat on beats 2 and 4.

The second verse, sung by Lauryn Redding, is supported by the strings. On the line "now all she hears is the rain on the roof...", we added a voice two octaves lower. This creates an eerie effect which leads us into the second chorus. This time with a simple harmony at the fifth.

During the dialogue section that follows, you'll hear the bass taking the melody. Once the dialogue is complete, we come out into a short tag of a chorus, with an extended "a-way" section, employing use of the 'portamento' technique, which is where the singers slide between their notes. This is designed to be unnerving and threatening. The diminuendo (getting quieter) lulls us into a false sense of security, as it's leading us down a path to a massive drum hit and a guitar solo.

Following the guitar solo, we hear Samuel Jordan sing the third and final verse, with the band dropping out except for the bass drum. Like the diminuendo earlier, this creates space/contrast for the full chorus to explore, now in a fuller harmony, however still only using roots and 5ths. This double chorus is the high point of the whole song, which eventually disintegrates into more portamento "a-way" to round us off.

At what point in the production process do you start working on orchestration? What is the process?

It was different for all the songs. In some instances, for example *As the Dawn Breaks*, I had arranged the song before rehearsals, and had a pretty good idea of what the orchestration would be. I sat for many hours considering the poetry that courses through this song, and how strings might amplify the ephemeral nature of a sunrise. Other songs, such as *My Little Treasures*, very little arranging was done before working with the actor in the original cast. I made it up as they were singing through the song the first few times. After this the orchestration just sort of emerged through the character. This happened during rehearsals in about the third week.

Is it daunting working on such iconic songs?

It isn't daunting as such - although it is a huge privilege to work on such beautiful material.

How do you work with a sound designer on a show like *Standing at the Sky's Edge*?

This is an excellent question! The relationship between sound and music departments is crucial. In fact, on *Sky's Edge* we didn't really consider them different departments. During pre-production, Bobby Aitken (Sound Designer) and I spent a lot of time sharing references, discussing music and music production style and, importantly, what the relationship of the band to the vocals might be. Bobby's job is not simply "amplification". Together we acted more in the capacity of music producers. This would involve discussions regarding drum kit tuning, guitar and bass frequencies, relationship of dialogue style to singing style. During the technical period our main session is the stage and orchestra call. This is a day when we run the show, led by music and sound, stopping to ensure that what is happening at the mixing console is in sympathy with what the actors and band are doing, and vice versa.

Do the different time periods have an impact on how numbers are scored? What other influences do you have to take into consideration?

The songs, for me at least, sit outside of space and time, in an imaginary 'music world'. There is not an endeavour to realise the music in a psychologically real manner. As a consequence, no consideration was given as to when the songs take place during the orchestration process. The most important part of any arrangement and orchestration is the melody. Everything else - rhythm section, strings, cast harmonies etc - should be there to express a depth of the melody or to focus the melody.

Can you tell us a little about the style of some of the songs?

Open Up Your Door was inspired by Richard's original version, and symphonic jazz of the twentieth century. I was keen that we had a 'new sound' for when Nikki arrives on stage: this is a character we haven't met before and so wanted to present them with a unique musical sound.



Lauryn Redding in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

I wanted *For Your Lover Give Some Time* to feel like a series of memories within memories being unlocked. The song starts off with a minor 2nd between the strings - perhaps there's something painful about this first memory? As it unfolds, we hear little cogs of memories becoming unlocked: listen out for the cello and double bass exchanging pizzicato, and the guitar ostinato that happens throughout. The string interjections are meant to evoke wistful recollections of things gone by, perhaps held in a haze, perhaps they aren't true?

AN INTERVIEW WITH...

AT THE SKY'S
EDGE

Sound Design in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* - Interview with Sound Designer, Bobby Aitken

What are the challenges for sound design in this specific production?

Generally, my work as a Sound Designer in the theatre falls neatly into two distinct categories. The first is to help the storytelling by making content. This can range from a simple thunderclap from an upstage loudspeaker to a fully immersive soundscape. The second category is to do with the manipulation of sound from the band and cast. I would say that the greater part of my work on *Sky's Edge* has more to do with this second category. Unusually, the songs in the piece were not written specifically for the piece but were chosen by the author from the composer Richard Hawley's back catalogue. The musical pieces range from delicate lullaby-like songs to powerful anthems.

What equipment is involved in producing the sound for the show?

Like most musical theatre productions, the cast wear miniature head-worn mics, connected to a body-worn transmitter. These miniature mics do a great job in capturing the performers voice for most of the show, but fail to capture the power and intimacy required for the bigger songs. We use handheld radio mics for those, so in total we require 45 radio mics for the show.

Specifically, the mics are by Shure. The loudspeaker system is based around Meyer Sound Leopard loudspeakers. The mixer is a Digico Quantum T, the effects units are mostly by TC electronics. We use QLab as the playback system. As you can see, there's a lot of equipment involved!

Where does sound play a particularly important role in the storytelling in this production?

There is a lovely moment near the top of the first act where we are introduced to the concept of the fluid timelines in the show. As we come out of the scene where we are introduced to Poppy, a 21st century character, we find Joy - a character from the 1980s. Joy is homesick and pulls a keepsake from her bag. It's a tiny music box which plays a simple tune. The tune is then taken up by the band to become a song sung by Poppy in the same space but a different time.



The 2024 West End company of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

The first act closes with a troubling, chaotic musical piece ('*There's A Storm A-Comin'*') which highlights problems on the estate in the late 70s. Prior to the song, tension is built by the playback of unsettling sounds - police sirens, barking dogs etc. These sounds are not obvious to the audience, but they do change the mood in the house. During the song, iconic speeches by prominent politicians of the time are heard.

In this production, and in fact most pieces of musical theatre, the job of moving the narrative along is performed by the script and the music.

AN INTERVIEW WITH...

What are the challenges/opportunities of using sound to show the passing of time?

The unique way in which a single apartment is inhabited by characters from different moments over a sixty-year timeframe is complex. A classic example might be the look of the cooker. You will see that the kitchen bears the aesthetic of an architect's model. The appliances are grey and generic - they betray no specific time. In our world of sound, things are a bit easier to manage. For example, we use the sound of rail travel to suggest time passing. The Park Hill estate, where our story is set, overlooks Sheffield Train Station, so the sound of trains is helpful. We use era-specific train sounds.

Another noteworthy detail is the use of the date boards. The visual aesthetic is designed to be generic, i.e., not era specific. We required a sound to attract the audience's attention when they were changing, so we have chosen to use the sound from classic mid-century 'flip-over' railway notice boards which, incidentally, are called Solari Boards.

What advice do you have for aspiring sound designers?

In my experience, our theatre industry is second to none in terms of support and encouragement from established professionals. I have never met a Sound Designer who is not happy to spend time with aspiring professionals or to pass on techniques and methods. As a younger designer you are not expected to know everything. Take time to ask questions. You will get things wrong. Simply ask if you don't have an answer to a problem. Get to the theatre 10 minutes early for your call, be nice, attentive, and enjoy. Join The Association of Sound Designers. It's a fantastic asset.

Do you have a piece of advice that you think is particularly important?

The perception of sound is SO subjective - be mindful who you solicit opinion from!

FOCUS ON SET & COSTUME DESIGN

AT THE SKY'S EDGE

Interview with Ben Stones, Set & Costume Designer

Can you talk us through the process of designing *Standing at the Sky's Edge*?

The process of research started early. I gathered lots of information based on the architecture of Park Hill and its history, and Brutalism in general. It was also important to explore the history of the clothing and the fashions in the area.

Every designer's process is different, but I have a structure that I work to each time. I'm not someone who draws the costumes immediately – I create the world the characters live in first, then I draw the costumes, make collages, or pull research to suggest styles to the costume supervisor, who is responsible for finding and organising the making of any costumes.

When we started to work on the set design, the production had a clear concept in terms of its structure and how the different timelines would inhabit the space, but not in terms of how the space itself would work. There were times when we thought it needed the three timelines to be visually contained in their own world on stage and not mingling with each other. We played around with it, but it wasn't working, so I started looking at it all taking place in one flat.

The size of the Sheffield Crucible stage also informed the staging, as three fully furnished apartments simply wouldn't fit on stage and there would be problems with sightlines. Then the idea formed that the characters were like ghosts passing through time, wandering around in the same space together, which is quite a filmic visual language.

What were the challenges in designing *Standing at the Sky's Edge*?

The challenges for the designer are always specific to the individual show and what it needs. For *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, the key is to be able to show three clearly defined timelines, and to help the audience understand where those boundaries are between each storyline.

While it's important to get a sense of place and space, the show doesn't need a backdrop of the Sheffield hills or a sign saying 'Sheffield'. I think the issues around social housing in the piece are universal and are happening everywhere across the UK and beyond.

But the DNA of the set design has to be Park Hill, because it's a very specific kind of Brutalism. There are many kinds of brutalist architecture – Park Hill is

based on the Corbusier style from France, and any slight deviation to this means you could reference Brutalism from another famous building that's not specific to Sheffield.

Did you spend much time at Park Hill itself? Do you find site visits are helpful to the process?

I did spend a lot of time at Park Hill. Whenever I was in Sheffield, I would go up and just wander around to try and get a sense of it and the people. Of course, I can only get a sense of the people of the modern timeline, but it was helpful just wandering around and seeing the different periods of Park Hill's history.

During our original work on the production, Park Hill hadn't been completely regenerated. You could walk through an area where they were still building and refurbishing the next phase of it, but you'd keep going up the hill and reach something that had fallen into disarray in the 1980s. You could see how the whole area had changed over time.

Once you'd completed your research, what were the next steps?

Once I'd read the script and done all my research, I started to play with ideas of shape and structure in the model box. Then, eventually, we put a white card model together (a cheaper version of the final model). That is then costed, which tells us what we can and can't afford.



White card model of the set design for *Standing at the Sky's Edge* at the Gillian Lynne Theatre. Photo by Johan Persson.

FOCUS ON SET & COSTUME DESIGN



This is taken into account in the redesign, and we then go into a longer process of creating a final model, where the set design is rendered at full 1:25 scale. The model is painted and textured so that all the artists who build and decorate the set know what they are creating.



Render of the set design for *Standing at the Sky's Edge* at the Gillian Lynne Theatre.
Image credit Ben Stones.

How does the set design work across the different time periods?

The flat is one single apartment that has tenants, sort of as ghosts, passing through time.

The décor and furniture has to exist in all timelines and not feel out of place. The kitchen area is quite modernist and it's similar to Park Hill now. All the furniture, sofas, armchairs, side tables and stools come from a mid-century style – when this style was in fashion in the 60s the families at Park Hill would have had them. In the 80s this style would have fallen out of fashion and into disrepair and been given to charity shops or thrown away. Nowadays, mid-century furniture has become fetishised by the middle classes or design-conscious people. That's why I think Poppy would have it, but it would have been refurbished – it would very rarely be original. It was my little thread through time that all three families would have owned the same furniture.



2024 West End company of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

How did you use the costume design to help communicate the different time periods and key information about the characters to the audience?

For Joy, the use of fabrics, shape and colour in her costumes tell a very complicated story. Hers was a very comfortable family that came to the UK to escape war in Liberia. Her story in the show begins when she is very young. I wanted her to appear in a 'Sunday best' dress – they're possibly a religious family. Their move to the UK is very sudden, so there wouldn't be much thought in it. They've dressed practically, but she's a young girl so they've made her feel happy and comfortable. The fabrics for this costume are a floral pattern – the references are around a late 70s/early 80s kind of look. The shape of it is very much fashioned on schoolgirl attire worn at churches.



Elizabeth Ayodele in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

When we next see Joy, those natural fabrics have turned into mass-produced fabrics because she's been in the UK for about three years. The clothes are more late 80s style, with polyester fabrics, and the colour is starting to pop a bit more than when she was a young girl. When we meet her as a mother, it's now closer to present day and clothing is even more mass-produced, such as uniforms for working in the NHS.

FOCUS ON SET & COSTUME DESIGN

Poppy's costume has little nods to the colours of Park Hill – the oranges, the yellows, and the reds. This is helpful visually because there is not much colour at all on the set. Poppy's timeline is reflective of the Park Hill she inhabits – at the point where phase one of the Urban Splash redevelopment has more colour than previous incarnations of the estate.

For Harry, we use fabrics which are made of natural fibres for the early scenes set in the 1960s. Harry and Rose's timeline has a big time jump from their first scenes to 1979. We go from natural fabrics and wools to denims, and I use the colours and palette of the time – browns and oranges – to help the audience understand the shifts between each timeline.



Joel Harper-Jackson in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End.
© Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

Rose also goes from natural fibres in the 60s to polyester in the 70s. In the 80s her colours get more muted. Here is where I start telling an emotional story through the clothing. Rose's costume gets a little more monotone because, as a character, she has to go through so much; she loses her husband and later her son, so her character loses her colour and optimism.

How do your costume designs demonstrate the socio-economic status of the characters without relying on stereotype and trope?

Part of my thought process involves asking myself with each character 'where would this person get their clothes?' You have to think about the characters' income and class status.

In her first scenes, Rose wears an outfit which is evocative of late-50s style – even though these scenes take place in the 1960s. With Harry and Rose being young newlyweds when we first meet them, they wouldn't be well off. We also know they're from a working-class background.

Their clothes would be a bit more homemade and probably outdated for the period – their clothing wouldn't be what you would see in Vogue or a history book about the 1960s. Realistically, clothes last us a long time and we don't keep up with fashion trends as quickly as a magazine might suggest, particularly people without disposable income.

Designing Poppy's costumes was also about conveying a sort of economic status. She's a young professional and she'd wear key pieces that aren't designer brands, but are from quality high street stores.



Laura Pitt-Pulford and Nicola Sloane in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End.
© Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

Did the costumes need to be custom made or were you able to source them?

A lot of Joy, Harry and Rose's early costumes were made by the team at Sheffield Crucible because you can't buy those items any more, whereas the 80s clothing, although scarce, you can get in charity shops or costume hire stores. The clothes that Poppy wears, you can buy pretty much anywhere.

What is the process of working with a Wigs, Hair and Make-Up designer to ensure a cohesive design?

Working with a wigs, hair and make-up designer – and specifically with Cynthia [De La Rosa] – is always really exciting because she comes in with tonnes of research. She has an incredible understanding of colours and textures from global majority communities, and of the story to be told with those textures. That's one of the key successes of *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in terms of the set, costume and make-up design: the people feel very real. A particular success is Joy's character. You really get the sense of how this girl has arrived in Sheffield, acclimatised to the local area and changed in style over a long period.

FOCUS ON CHOREOGRAPHY

AT THE
STANDING
SKY'S
EDGE

Interview with Lynne Page, Choreographer

What does the role of a choreographer entail?

I think choreographers are very multifaceted in their approach of how they make a show. In my view, a good choreographer will have a very good dialogue with the director, the designer, the lighting designer and also the sound designer, because in a way the overall concepts for the numbers sort of include all of those things – they include props and the set. It's always just a great idea to have an open collaborative conversation with everybody on the creative team.

Even though it can be thought that choreographers just do pure dance steps, of course, what they actually do is far more wide reaching. Ultimately a creative team is a team, and so you become part of that team. You are predominantly in the movement and dance space, but you definitely dip into all of the other areas.



Robert Perkins, Elin Schofield, Thomas Herron and Lynne Page in rehearsals for the *West End*. © Johan Persson.

How do you go about preparing for a production like *Standing at the Sky's Edge* which is not a traditional musical?

Ultimately, by sitting with the director and talking about the concept – what's the tone of the show, how are we going to present the material? In the case of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, the songs served as pieces of emotion that sometimes didn't push the narrative forward, and that's what sometimes made it quite different.

In preparation, I would have a think about what each song means and why each song is there. Then what I tend to do is just put the music on, and I just imagine things; images and ideas came into my head. While I was doing this process, I spoke to a video and record the ideas that were coming to me.

Then I kept talking to our director Robert Hastie and we kept going, 'what about this? What about that?', and kept pushing the ideas forward. We continued to meet, we questioned each other, whether we're happy with an idea that we are going to work towards for a particular scene or a particular song – obviously, with my job, more about where the music is concerned. Sometimes we went to see other musicals, only because it put us in the frame of mind of the kind of tone of show that we were working towards.

My favourite event of preparation with Rob was that we had a model box of the set, and so we got some Lego pieces, and we had a day where we played around with Lego pieces to see what it looked like when the set was inhabited with people or things. That was a little bit out of the norm, but it was a fun day!

How would you describe the style of the choreography in the show?

It's more pedestrian and ordinary - it's something that people would do naturally. There is some dance, but I would definitely say it's heightened naturalistic gestures, and it just all builds from that point.

I am contemporary dance trained, and because of the lyricism of the music, I felt that a more fluid style suited this show – not in every set piece, but I suppose I leaned more towards contemporary dance rather than musical theatre dance for this show.

Do you go into the rehearsal room with fully formed ideas, or do you work with a more facilitative/workshop approach?

It's a mixture for *Sky's Edge*. I definitely always go into the rehearsal room with an idea, always with a concept for the numbers. But because the nature of this show is the more ordinary, gestural, sometimes domestic movement that then becomes the choreography, I definitely wanted to base it on the actors – I wanted a lot of the movement to come from the actor. Even though I was really clear on what the idea was, I would then set the actor a task and see how they would respond to that task.

It was a combination of a little bit of prep and a little bit of workshoping in the room.

FOCUS ON CHOREOGRAPHY

AT THE SKY'S
EDGE

Has there been a lot of change in the movement through the different iterations of the show?

The main baseline and concepts for the set musical pieces has stayed the same, but it's been dependent on the cast, as it will change because each actor needs to be able to own what they're doing on stage.

Obviously each actor brings a completely different quality. Our new Harry, for example, has some sort of natural movement in his body. So I'm still presently discovering what is in there, and how far I can push Harry to move, even though he's not really a character that would traditionally dance. I can get quite expressionistic with him, just because of the nature of what the actor has in his body. That has been really interesting to work with.

Can you identify three moments in the show and talk through how the movement and choreography contribute to the dramatic moment in the scene?

Coles Corner is a song about Joy imagining that she could be out in the city and she could be dancing. The choreography comes from what she's imagining in her own mind, and what I've done is populate the set as if she's looking out over the city. There are different couples or different people dancing in different nightclubs or bars or tea dances, so the whole city is alive.



Elizabeth Ayodele and the 2024 West End company of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

For something like *There's A Storm A-Comin'*, everybody has got their own story, but it's about the pressure of oppression and rage, and what happens if each human being just gets pushed to their edge and they need to let out their anger and their frustration. What was historic at that time in the 80s in Park Hill was that people used to throw furniture out of the windows. This song is about expending frustrated energy.



The 2024 West End company of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

For Your Lover Give Some Time is a moment in the show where I was interested in representing couples that had got to the point where they couldn't communicate anymore. There's a couple – they're not really a ghost couple, but you're not really sure who they are – and they represent sort of where Harry and Rose have got to, where they can't meet in the middle and the communication has broken down and it's heartbreaking.

For the title track, *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, the choreography is very arresting, and perhaps not what people would expect from a musical. Can you talk through your inspiration and ideas for that piece, and its intended impact?

The choreography for *Standing at the Sky's Edge* I think it's very intended but quite minimal. I wanted to make the most of a show that opens Act Two with lots and lots of microphones. In that respect, it becomes quite rock and roll and gig-like. Therefore, I just wanted to keep the choreography quite modern and much more in the world of a gig, rather than a musical.

I've worked with quite a few recording artists in the past, and I sort of integrated the work I've done in the music industry into this show. For this song it was really just about mic technique, but pushing the boundaries of mic technique.



The 2024 West End company of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

FOCUS ON CHOREOGRAPHY

AT THE
STANDING
SKY'S
EDGE

What was the most challenging moment of the piece to work on and why? How did you get around the challenge it posed?

I think the most challenging piece to work on was *Tonight The Streets Are Ours*, mainly because it comes in quite quickly after another quite uplifting number. You've got *I'm Looking For Someone To Find Me*, which is quite jolly and celebratory, and then the next number following it is almost the same thing, as it is hopeful and it's celebrating the estate. It was quite a tough one to work out how to not do something that was just gratuitous dancing.

It was only when I watched the Henderson's Relish scene that I thought, actually, the repetition of forwards and backwards in time, could be an interesting basis on to which to build the number. It did take a while before I actually came up with the idea of how to make the number work.

What I ended up doing was filming the scene, and then just watching the video backwards and forwards and working out that actually, if I put music over that, it becomes quite interesting.

Is there anything that you do in rehearsals in terms of exercises or tasks that might translate well for students responding to the themes in the piece?

Going back to *Coles Corner*, I felt it was important that if an audience cast their eye over this part of the show, they would almost be able to know which nightclub they were in, and maybe what type of music they were dancing to. I picked lots of different kinds of music and I played those – it was Jorja Smith, and then we had some house music, and some hip hop, and then some tea dance music – and I would get them all dancing to that piece of music. then I would switch the music off and put *Coles Corner* on, but get them still dancing in the way they danced to Jorja Smith, for instance.



The 2024 West End cast in rehearsals for *Standing at the Sky's Edge*.
© Johan Persson

That's sometimes quite a good way of creating interesting movement – that you're dancing to one piece of music in your head, but actually there's another piece of music over the top.

Is there anything else about the movement and choreography in the piece that you think is interesting or useful for students to know?

I think sometimes it's just a great gift to be able to work at scale. A lot of the time you don't often get the opportunity to make a really, really big show. With *Sky's Edge*, it's gotten bigger and bigger and bigger.

I really enjoy almost having a big toolkit to work with, and it's just really nice to be able to relish that opportunity. With choreography you need bodies, and the more bodies you get, the more interesting you can make things. Of course, pas de deux and solos are interesting as well, but you can deliver a lot with a lot of people. So it can be a great gift to get a lot of people on stage, and it can be super fun as well.

What advice do you have for aspiring choreographers and movement directors?

I would say you just have to keep making as much work as possible, putting your work out there anywhere you can. And then just keep writing to and badgering people like me, that have any facilities to open some doors.

In my position, if I can open a door to somebody I will – I'll just keep needing to be reminded because people get busy. Keep writing those letters, ask to go for a cup of tea, see if you can assist people or observe in the room, see if you can do work experience – just keep trying to get in the room.

SPOTLIGHT ON WIGS, HAIR AND MAKE-UP

AT THE
STANDING
SKY'S
EDGE

Spotlight on Wigs, Hair and Make-Up with Cynthia De La Rosa

Unlike many musicals, which might feature very stylised, fantastical and abstract wigs, hair and make up, *Standing at the Sky's Edge* uses a more naturalistic approach to convey narrative and, importantly, the passing of time.

Cynthia De La Rosa is the Wigs, Hair and Make-Up (WHAM) Designer on the production. At the beginning of the process, Cynthia reads the script three consecutive times. She says:

“The first time I read it as a voyeur – I’m just watching. Then I look at the implications of what’s on the page. For example, scene changes might mean quick changes which are going to influence the decisions that I make. Then there’s other information to consider. Is the character crying? Have they been running? Is it raining outside?”

As well as the script, there are other sources of information, too. Cynthia continues:

“Research plays an important part in the design process. Photographs from the 1960s, including specific photos of Park Hill estate were important. Photographs from subsequent decades of people in Sheffield and the surrounding areas also informed creative decisions. It’s important not to just rely on photographs of the London-based fashions of the time. Trends take a while to move from London and cities to the more rural areas. They can take five or even ten years to travel beyond the city. I looked at photos from Sheffield, the Pennines, Liverpool and Manchester, and newspapers from each year of the story. All of that research is a rich resource to draw from.

Designers do, of course, use Google and other online resources. However, that comes with a warning! It’s not always reliable or a thorough representation of what you’re looking for. Archives, libraries and books are important resources that you shouldn’t ignore.”

Wigs, hair and make-up are important signifiers. Cynthia explains:

“For *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, WHAM helps with the storytelling. For example, Rose is a character whose socio-economic status means that her hair might not be up to date with trends. Her hair is a late-50s style, rather than a 60s style, even though the first scene



Photo by Helen Murray

is set in the 1960s. Rose doesn’t have a job for very long, and that will affect how much money she can spend on her hair, for example. For the children in the piece, we consider their background too. Who cuts their hair? Is it a barber or does their mum do it to save money? These might seem like minute considerations, but they are important.

In the original staging, Poppy cuts her hair short (we don’t see that moment on stage, but her hair visibly changes over the course of the narrative) - it’s a psychological and physical change for her, and as a designer I’ll consider what motivates those shifts. A lot of that information will be written into the script. In the West End version, Poppy’s hair will go from short to long - we see the passage of time with her starting in shorter styles and then we are using the actors own longer hair.

There are 75 wigs in this production. We use wigs to demonstrate character too – often considering factors that I’ve already mentioned. We also consider the needs of Black and Asian hair – it’s important to think widely about different hair types and styles. George, for example, begins the narrative with an afro style, which later becomes a high top, and then later becomes a more cropped 1990s style. Joy’s hair shows texture change, from her beginning as a young immigrant child and young person who can’t afford hair relaxers, and then her gradual assimilation into European styles. In her job as a nurse, we can see the utility and practicality of wearing wigs for black women. On this production, all of the hair needed to

SPOTLIGHT ON WIGS, HAIR AND MAKE UP

AT THE
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look like real hair - not glamorous, not stylised, but practical and everyday hairstyles worn by people living their everyday lives. You'll see that the design reflects the period in which each scene is set, but not in an ostentatious, intrusive way.

Music and popular culture influences the way people wear their hair but, again, these are characters who don't necessarily have the means to recreate high fashion looks. It was important to Rob (Robert Hastie, Director) and Ben (Ben Stones, Set Designer) that the look was simple and believable."

Whilst make-up can reflect the period, and the character's personality, there are other important elements too. Cynthia provides an important example:

"Harry's change requires make-up too, and this is another area where research is important. I looked into what happens when someone is suffering from kidney failure – one of the outcomes of alcoholism. His skin would become clammy and grey, for example. Connecting hair, wig and make-up design is important for an integrated approach. We watch Harry's character change enormously: his make-up becomes broken down as he relies more on alcohol, and we see him enter the flat cold and wet in one scene. He has a big transformation and a huge dramatic arc.

It's important not to consider each individual in isolation.

"Not only do we consider the individual actor and character, we also have to think about the way in which hair and make-up work within an overall picture. We don't necessarily want one particular person to pull focus away from an important moment, for example. We therefore need to be aware of what each scene looks like, and which characters are on stage."

Wigs play an important role in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* for both practical and narrative purposes. Cynthia tells us about the process of designing and fitting wigs:

"Wigs can be immensely helpful, too, because we might be working with actors who have prior commitments. Perhaps they can't cut their hair because they're filming a piece which requires their natural hair to look a certain way.

The process moves from the design to the fittings and making of required wigs. If I'm lucky, I can meet the actors before rehearsals so that I don't have to pull them out of rehearsals to do fittings. We take photos



Photo by Helen Murray

from the very beginning of the process, which helps the Head of Department who is not necessarily there from the beginning. It also helps with the longevity of the show, and any subsequent revivals that might take place. We create a 'bible' with all of the details of everything in the show, and then once the show has 'locked' that means no further changes are made. This is often at the end of previews, during which we might have been continuing to tweak certain things. Understudy wigs tend to be fitted during the technical rehearsals, but since COVID we have tried to do it before then; the demands of COVID meant that things have changed and we need people to be ready for anything.

Opening night tends to be the last day for a designer to be there, but on some productions we might watch the show once a month or so, in order to check the standard and continuity is maintained, watch understudies playing the roles etc."



SPOTLIGHT ON WIGS, HAIR AND MAKE UP

If you're wondering how to train for a role in wigs, hair and make up, Cynthia offers this advice:

"Training opportunities include the **Christine Blundell Make Up Academy** and the Deleamar Academy. Peter Swords King also runs a course – you can follow him on Instagram (@peterswordsking).

Practical ability and skills are vital. Whilst there are no theatre-gearred programmes for hair and make-up specifically, the skills you'll learn on courses are, of course, transferable. At the beginning of your career you shouldn't assume you'll become a designer, so make sure you develop the skills to become technically proficient as a hair and make-up artist. This is a job that's hugely physical: you need to cut hair, apply or guide the application of make-up, prep and fit wigs, and so on. It's a wide variety of skills so get as much experience and practice as you can.

Don't be afraid to knock on doors and speak to people when you're starting out. I handed out my CV to various theatres but realised that no one was getting in touch, so I went to stage door at the English National Opera and asked to speak to the Head of Department. I ended up working there for nine years! Word of mouth is important, so every job that you do is potentially an entry point to your next job. I've worked with Ben Stones before – on The Twilight Zone at the Almeida Theatre, and that's a great example of how one show can lead to another!"

You can find Cynthia on Instagram:
[@cynthiahairandmakeup](#)

Cynthia also co-founded Levelling UP which is a not-for-profit organisation tackling textured hair discrimination in the performing arts. You can find them on Instagram: [@levellingup_uk](#)



Photo by Helen Murray

Mark Henderson, Lighting Designer, talks us through the process of lighting *Standing at the Sky's Edge*

The geography of the set design, and how it sits within the theatre space, is paramount when designing a show. The architecture of both the scenic design and the theatre influences where you are able to rig and access equipment. This particular set has multiple levels, so it's important to build in the ability to light all of those levels, and isolate areas within those levels.

I listened to Richard Hawley's music a lot whilst I was designing the lighting for the production. It helps gain a sense of the tone and style of the specific songs. I did a few site visits to Park Hill too, to get a sense of the area and the skyline.

There are a lot of moving lights in the show – mainly LED, and both spot (with the ability to shutter and use patterned gobos) and wash (a soft edge). There are some older 'Par' lamps that are fitted with 'Aero' – aircraft landing light bulbs – which give a very narrow beam and have a very specific colour quality. These are mainly used at the beginning of Act Two to achieve a specific stylistic look. We also use a lot of haze to

enable us to see the light beams and therefore create more atmosphere.

As well as being able to isolate locations and use theatrical language to dramatise songs, we also wanted to make it look partially like a concert. The opening of '*Standing at the Sky's Edge*' at the start of Act Two is an example of this. The lighting is used to enhance the mood and atmosphere. The company are primarily static, but the music is strong and needs a strong look to echo what we are hearing. There are underlying pulses in the music, and equally so in the lighting.

Lighting a drama is very different to lighting a concert. In a drama, there are many elements to consider, such as setting the scene in terms of location, time of day, etc. The actors generally have to be lit to enable their faces to be seen, and there are times when areas need to be isolated. The action and choreography have to be followed. Light and shade is important. In concert lighting, the effects and requirements tend to be different – generally the wish is to echo the music and create effects that emphasise and support the character of the music. We've tried to achieve both styles within this production.



LIGHTING DESIGN



At the end of Act One, there's a gradual build of tension through the song *'There's A Storm A-Comin'*. The company gradually become more frantic and disturbed as the song progresses, and the lighting hopefully echoes that with more movement and effects building as the music and action build. There are moments within the song when certain actions are highlighted to try and move the eye to where the important moments are within the mayhem.

'Coles Corner' is another example of the lighting setting the atmosphere. We have an isolated singer on a balcony and then the rest of the company, mainly in silhouette and shadows, in couples, with slow movement choreography in the space downstage. We break the scene briefly to dramatise a short dialogue sequence, but then return to the subdued atmosphere to complete the song.



SECTION 3
**CLASSROOM AND
STUDIO ACTIVITIES**



IN THE DRAMA STUDIO

Devising From a Stimulus: Your home, and your home town

Stage One: Oral History

Talk to friends and family who have lived in your local area for a long time. Ask them to tell you about their perception of the area. You might find it helpful to record the conversation (ask permission first) or make some notes to use later. You could have an informal conversation or ask them the following questions:

- How has the area changed over the years, and why?
- How long has your family been associated with the local area? If they have relocated to the area, where did they come from and why? What was it like moving to this location?
- What are the positive and negative aspects of living in this area? What has caused those things?

You might also find audio or video footage of your local area online.

Stage Two: Visual History

Make a collage (physical or digital) of images of your local area. You could take your own photographs of key locations or find them online. How you present them is up to you, but you could create a map-style collage, or group the images in different categories - for example, interior and exterior, places for older or young people, etc.

Stage Three: Creating Characters

Using the research from stages one and two, consider the different characters you might like to include in a narrative. You might base them on real people or, as in the case of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, you could create fictional and/or composite characters. Consider the need for a diverse range of characters – age, gender, socio-economic status, different relationships etc.

Stage Four: Creating a Timeline

Your devised piece is likely to be fairly limited in terms of time, so you will need to be realistic with how much time you can cover. However, as in the case of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, a straightforward chronological timeline might not be the most effective way of presenting your narrative. If you are conveying social change, for example, how will you demonstrate cause and effect? How can flashbacks or flashforwards (analepsis and prolepsis) be used without confusing your audience?

IN THE DRAMA STUDIO

Introducing your setting in a devised piece

At the beginning of the production, adult Connie delivers this monologue:

<i>Three mornings, decades apart</i>	<i>To root themselves</i>
<i>Same old sun</i>	<i>Become an eighth hill</i>
<i>That makes optimists of the lovesick</i>	<i>In this manmade monolith</i>
<i>Restarts the hearts of old romantics</i>	<i>To matter to someone</i>
<i>And roly-polys irrepressibly down the hillside</i>	<i>To make something of their days</i>
<i>Hitting the concrete</i>	<i>As the dawn breaks</i>
<i>With the full force of a first kiss.</i>	<i>And breaths are held</i>
	<i>Because this moment won't come again.</i>
<i>Three households, decades apart</i>	<i>Savour the stillness,</i>
	<i>then –</i>
<i>Sharing one roof, one sun, one hope</i>	

Consider how you might introduce the setting of your own devised piece. Note the use of the following techniques which might inspire your own ideas

- Alliteration
- Repetition/anaphora
- Phrase(s) which relate to lyrics in music that you are using to underscore the monologue

Soundtrack and Setting

In *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, all of the music is from Richard Hawley's own back catalogue. Many of the songs have specific reference to Sheffield landmarks (for example, *Coles Corner*, which references a famous corner where a department store stood in the city).

Although your local area might not be associated with a particular musician or style of music, consider how time, mood and atmosphere can be conveyed by music, much of which does not need lyrics. For example, the Vitamin Quartet play a number of string versions of popular music, and you can find a huge number of instrumental versions of songs online and via streaming services. Adele's *Hometown Glory* is another example of a popular song, with relevance to the theme, but which has an excellent instrumental version. Plan B's *III Manors* is also worth exploring in terms of lyrics (strong language – discretion advised) and music score.

Alternatively, you could choose a particular artist or group whose music you wish to combine to create a jukebox musical. The challenge is to avoid restricting your creative ideas simply because you *like* a song. Instead, it must serve the narrative and help your audience think or feel in certain ways.

Once you have considered all of the steps above, work on each scene which helps you convey the narrative and characters that you have created.

Good luck!

IN THE DRAMA STUDIO

Scripted work

Chris Bush's script provides a lot of opportunities to explore your performance skills in both monologue and duologues. Consider the key aspects of:

- Facial expression:** Eye contact and direction/use of the mouth and jaw/use of the head and neck/tension in facial muscles
- Physicality & body language:** Use of space and levels/gestures and mannerisms/proximity to other characters/interaction with set/how physicality is affected by costume
- Vocal skills:** Pitch/pace/pause/projection/accent/volume/hesitation/tone/diction

In this extract, Harry talks to his friend Nigel after discovering that Rose has been looking for work on his behalf:

HARRY *You know that was it – the overwhelming emotion when we first moved in here – gratitude. Not joy, or excitement, or... or trepidation. Just gratitude. Relief. Back before the lifts broke and the ceilings leaked and the rats got in the walls. Way back when. Cos we'd come from slums, near enough, and this were paradise, and we were so grateful that we never stopped, never saw the con, never thought to question why we were in the slum to begin with – why some other bastard had to be the one to lift us up. Cos it blinds you, that gratitude, teaches us to be humble, to doff our cap and thank our lucky stars for whatever crumbs we can catch. (beat. To NIGEL) And you go back Tuesday?*



Joel Harper-Jackson in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in the West End. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

IN THE DRAMA STUDIO

In this extract, Nikki has spent the night at Poppy's flat after turning up unexpectedly:

Forward to 2020. POPPY enters, straightens a few things up, pours coffee. NIKKI enters shortly after, just out of the shower. POPPY hands her coffee.

- NIKKI** *Thanks. I just grabbed a t-shirt from... Think it used to be mine, actually.*
- POPPY** *Keep it.*
- NIKKI** *Do you still sleep in my t-shirts?*
- POPPY** *Don't. I'm not... Letting you sleep on my sofa doesn't change anything. You can drink your coffee and then get on a train, okay?*
- NIKKI** *Okay. (beat) Only... I don't think there are any trains today.*
- POPPY** *Not my problem.*
- NIKKI** *So... What do adults do on New Year's Day? We could – I know – we could go for a walk in the hills – I hear they have hills here –*
- POPPY** *Don't do this.*
- NIKKI** *Or a pub somewhere. Big old stone pub with proper beer and a real fire, and... and board games. New Year's Day Scrabble tournament –*
- POPPY** *What planet are you on?*
- NIKKI** *I'll let you cheat.*
- POPPY** *Don't.*
- NIKKI** *I'll let you win.*
- POPPY** *I'm not... And I don't cheat! I never cheat!*
- NIKKI** *Uh–*
- POPPY** *I win because I'm better at Scrabble than you, that's it.*
- NIKKI** *Better prove it then.*
- POPPY** *You can't just... (she stops herself) What do you want, Nikki?*
- NIKKI** *I want to talk. (beat) Cos we never did – not really. You just packed up and left, more or less overnight, so –*
- POPPY** *I had good reason.*
- NIKKI** *Maybe I did too. (beat) No, not a good reason, there can't be a... But it was hard. It was hard when you couldn't love me like I loved you.*
- POPPY** *I loved you.*
- NIKKI** *I know. But it was different, wasn't it? I love you in technicolour. I love you in five dimensions. I love you in this glorious, messy, destructive... It isn't polite, how I feel about you. It isn't civilised. But that doesn't make it lesser. It was never difficult to love you, but it is difficult to be in love with someone who finds your love embarrassing. And you did. I know you did.*
- POPPY** *That isn't true.*
- NIKKI** *It is. And I get it. Who would want a lifetime of me? Sure, it's fun for a while, but til death do us part? It's a lot. So you started shutting down, shutting me out even more than normal. I was overspilling with all this love and it was too much, because I'm too much, and –*

IN THE DRAMA STUDIO

AT THE
STANDING
SKY'S
EDGE

- POPPY** Stop it.
- NIKKI** I'm just trying to explain.
- POPPY** You cheated because you loved me too much?
- NIKKI** No.
- POPPY** You really will just say anything, won't you?
- NIKKI** I'm sorry. I am. Just tell me what else do you need.
- POPPY** You really think it's that simple, don't you? Not this – I don't need this. I needed kindness – to be treated with kindness – and patience, and space, and... delicacy. I needed time – and you knew that. Not grand gestures. Not declarations. The gesture isn't for me, it's for you. I never asked for this.
- NIKKI** I love you. Not a day goes by when I'm not in love with you.
- POPPY** I know. But so what, Nikki? I'm not...I can't...I can forgive you – I have forgiven you, but I can't deal with all this...It exhausts me. I don't want fireworks. I'm not going to chase after you in the rain. And I know you think this is so romantic, this fucking wrecking ball approach to adult relationships, but it doesn't work for me. You can't keep doing this. You need to go.
- NIKKI** Okay. Okay, I've said what I came here to say, so... And I was wrong about this place – wrong about it being wrong for you. It's nice, and I'm glad you feel settled here. But you are here by yourself, aren't you?
- POPPY** That isn't any of your business.
- NIKKI** Don't leave it too long. Not because of what I did. I couldn't bear that. Find someone who deserves you. Because until you let someone else in, it's just another box to keep out the rain. (beat) Look after yourself, Pops.

Accent work

The Sheffield accent is not always as easy as it sounds! During rehearsals, actors with dialect coaches Michaela Kennen and Shereen Ibrahim to ensure that the accents you will hear are as authentic as possible. If you are interested in accent and dialect, as either a Drama or English student, you'll find this article online an interesting read: www.steelcityspiel.home.blog

Photography and Documentary

Read this article from The Guardian. Not only does it show images of Hyde Park flats (which were eventually demolished), it also tracks Park Hill's decline.

Ensuring that you follow the guidelines of your teachers and guardians, document a small part of your local area. Ensure that you ask permission of anyone whom you wish to photograph.

Graffiti

'I love you will u marry me?' is the iconic graffiti that was sprayed on a walkway on Park Hill. It can be seen from the area below Park Hill, near the train station. It was sprayed by Jason Lowe, for his then girlfriend, Claire Middleton. Although *Standing at the Sky's Edge* does not seek to tell Claire and Jason's story, the inclusion of the graffiti in the set design places that action in a very specific location.

Discussion topics:

Can we consider this graffiti as art?

If you argued no, does it change if you consider the use of the slogan on T-shirts (as worn by Alex Turner from the Arctic Monkeys), and its recreation by architect Jeremy Till at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2006?

Listen to the BBC documentary mentioned on page 12. What are the ethical issues of using publicly displayed graffiti in subsequent artistic works?



Standing at the Sky's Edge at the National Theatre 2023. Photo by Helen Murray, Original graffiti c. Jason Lowe 2001.



Architecture

"It's Brutalism, it isn't meant to be warm!" Charles

Park Hill is a Brutalist style building. Brutalism uses concrete and steel. The style is associated with the 1950s and 1960s - as post-war redevelopment took place, the use of Brutalism's block structures became popular. Park Hill's design is controversial - some people consider it worthy of its status as a Grade II Listed Building, whereas others see it as an eyesore that is visible from most parts of the city of Sheffield.

Standing at the Sky's Edge was first staged at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, before transferring to the National Theatre, and then to the Gillian Lynne Theatre in the West End. Coincidentally, all three buildings are examples of Brutalism.

Read more about Brutalism [here](#).

Take a look at these example of Brutalism from across the world [here](#)

Read about the other buildings that were nominated for the [Stirling Prize in 2013](#)

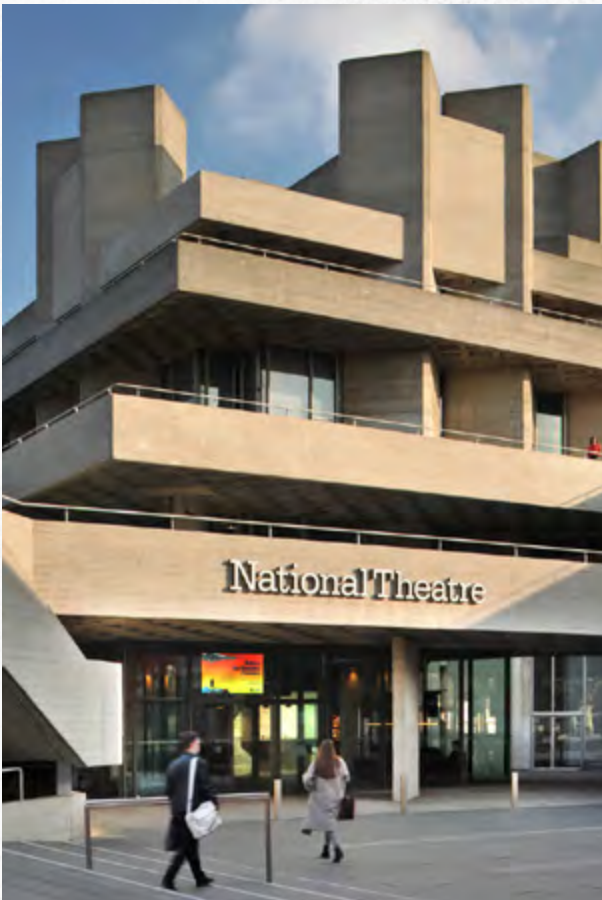


Photo by Philip Vile



View of Park Hill from Sheffield Railway Station, 1969. Photo by Mick Jones



The Park Hill Estate, 1969. Photo by Mick Jones



IN THE CLASSROOM

History & Politics

“Blake – I know him. Jerusalem, right? Dark satanic mills – visions of a Socialist Utopia once the workers have risen up and grasped the means of production.” Jimmy

William Blake wrote the poem in 1804, and it's a poem that's critical of industrialisation. It expresses sympathy for the labourers who work for a monarchy, for little or no benefit. The class system and the ruling of a country is implicitly criticised here. It is full of religious references and you'll find more analysis here: <https://poemanalysis.com/william-blake/jerusalem/>

Consider the similarities and differences between English life in 1804, and the 1980s in which this line is spoken in the play. What is Chris Bush suggesting here?

Thatcher's victory – 1979

Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979 and was a controversial Prime Minister even after her leadership ended in November 1990.

Read this biographical information about Thatcher.

You can also look at this timeline.

One of these sources is written by the UK Government, the other is on a news site. What do you notice about the tone in which the sources are written? How are her perceived strengths and weaknesses conveyed in the two sources?

Watch this video of media coverage of Thatcher's victory - why do you think this journalist's comments could be seen as controversial and potentially provocative?

The steel and coal strikes

In order to fully understand Rose and Harry's storyline, it's vital that you understand the wider issues that were occurring within Sheffield, and further afield, at the time. Yorkshire is a heavily industrialised location, with steel works and coalmines providing a considerable amount of employment in the 20th century. In the last three decades of the century, however, pay, conditions and the threat of privatisation threatened relationships between unions and the government.

The below resources will help with your research:

Read this piece on the steel workers' strikes in the 1980s.

Look at this timeline which explains the issues surrounding the steel industry.

Take a look at these images: How might you define the mood and atmosphere in Sheffield at the time? How well do you think the scenes in *Standing at the Sky's Edge* convey the tensions and concerns?

IN THE CLASSROOM

PSHE

Discuss the following quotations from the production. We have provided prompts for each one, but you can take the discussion in any direction that you feel is appropriate.

“And here’s what it comes down to – Do you belong, or only passing through?”

Connie

- How long do you need to live somewhere before it feels like ‘home’?
- Can you only consider one place ‘home’?
- What does it mean to belong somewhere?

“I don’t think home is a place, really. I think it’s the people you find, and the people you take with you.”

George

- To what extent do you agree with this statement?

“A series of boxes that stop the rain coming in”

Connie

- What does Connie mean by this? Is the rain only literal, or is there a more metaphorical interpretation of this line?

“We’re a city of sanctuary – that means somewhere safe.”

Constance

- What is sanctuary? Are there any buildings that particularly represent sanctuary? How are Joy’s family let down by this promise of sanctuary?
- What stops Park Hill becoming a true sanctuary? What can society do to remedy these problems?

Information about key themes and facts in *Standing at the Sky’s Edge*:

- Sheffield, City of Sanctuary: <https://sheffield.cityofsanctuary.org>
- MOBIE – a charity working to inspire young people consider the way in which we live and how we wish to live in the future <https://www.mobie.org.uk>

The ethics of refurbishment and gentrification

Park Hill was built as social housing to support those who were living in slum conditions. Over the years, it became run down and if it had not been given Grade II listed status, may have been demolished. Without private investment, Park Hill might still be run down and uninhabited.

Read the below extract from Act Three:

- CONNIE** *(addressing NIKKI) I was born here, Dad was too, and his parents were some of the first in. Mum, she left everything to come here, and yeah, it saved her.*
- NIKKI** *Right. Right then - exactly. This is what I'm saying. (to POPPY) It's not for you. You've taken this woman's home*
- CONNIE** *Has she heck?*
- NIKKI** *You've colonised -*
- CONNIE** *Er, no - she bought it. Fair play to her.*
- NIKKI** *But your family -*
- CONNIE** *Moved on. We moved on - that's what healthy people do. You should see where I am now. I've got a garden. 've got a dog. I've got sash windows. This place - sod it, I'm off duty - this place anything special. Polish some concrete and get it on Doctor Who and you lot think it's Nirvana. No. A home is a series of boxes that stops the rain coming in - if you're lucky. Everything else is what you put in it.*
- NIKKI** *But -*
- CONNIE** *And no-one cared about this place until the posh pricks came along, but now they do. Now people don't shoot up in the lifts or get stabbed in the hallways and that is progress*
- I'll take that as a win.

Discussion topics

- Why do you think the refurbishment of Park Hill has been controversial for some people?
- What research have you found about access to social housing?
- Why do you think Connie mentions Dr Who? (Park Hill features in an episode of the BBC drama). What is she suggesting here about the value and perception of Park Hill, locally and nationally?
- From a sociology point of view, why is social housing so important?

IN THE CLASSROOM

Further reading and listening:

“Done my research – watched the documentary, got the picture book” Poppy

Park Hill: Who Lives Here Now?

Watch this short video from the BBC which mixes footage of Park Hill from the 1960s and present day.

Stirling Prize

Watch this BBC coverage of the Stirling Prize finalists. A representative of Urban Splash talks about the regeneration work and the ideas behind the redesign.

Park Hill Reimagined

Watch this video from Sheffield Museums for a more in-depth exploration of Park Hill, including more footage of the regenerated parts of the estate.

Reel History of Britain

Watch this short film which shows a previous resident revisiting original footage from 1966. There are also images of the slums which were cleared in order to build Park Hill.

One to One with Suzy Wrack

Listen to this episode of One to One, where Suzy Wrack talks to Joanne Marsden, who was born on the estate.

‘A woman’s paradise’?

Read this blog from the Women’s History Network which talks about gender roles, housing and everyday life at Park Hill.

LIVE PRODUCTION CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to help organise and improve your notes about the production. As you gain confidence, make sure you update the traffic light tracker from red, to amber, to green!

	Red	Amber	Green
The Production Concept			
I can explain the dramatic intentions of the production team in a maximum of three sentences.			
I can identify three key moments in the production that I can evaluate with these dramatic intentions in mind.			
I can articulate what the production made me think and feel at key moments in the performance.			

	Red	Amber	Green
Performing			
I can describe and evaluate the performance of Connie's monologues throughout the production, and explain how they convey the themes of the show.			
I can explain how performers used their vocal skills, particularly accent, pitch and pace, to convey their characters.			
I can describe at least two moments where movement and choreography were particularly effective during the performance, and evaluate how it contributed to the narrative and emotional intentions of the production.			

	Red	Amber	Green
Costume Design			
I can describe the costumes of at least two characters from each timeline of the production.			
I can explain how each set of costumes helps to convey setting and characterisation within those timelines.			
I can evaluate how the costume designs convey character for each of the timelines.			
I can discuss the decisions made about hair and make-up and how they are integrated into the overall costume design for at least three characters and in at least two different parts of the production.			



LIVE PRODUCTION CHECKLIST

	Red	Amber	Green
Set Design			
I can describe the set, using appropriate technical terminology.			
I can explain how the set design conveys the setting of Park Hill, using photographs of the real estate, and the production's set design.			
I can explain how the different levels of the set provided opportunities for blocking and choreography.			

	Red	Amber	Green
Lighting Design			
I can identify three key moments where lighting was used to create mood and atmosphere, and explain how this was achieved.			
I can use technical terminology to describe how three lighting effects were achieved.			
I can explain and evaluate how lighting was used to create setting for three moments in the production.			
I can describe and evaluate how the inclusion of the neon 'I love you, will u marry me?' contributes to the production's setting and intentions.			

	Red	Amber	Green
Sound Design			
I can describe how music was used in at least two key moments, using the original soundtrack of the production that is available on Spotify to help me.			
I can explain and evaluate how live and/or recorded soundtracks were used to create mood and atmosphere.			
I can explain and evaluate how three songs were performed by soloists and/or the company to maintain narrative and/or communicate emotion.			
I can analyse the way in which the choice of music and orchestration helped convey the narrative and themes of the production.			
I can explain and evaluate how the use of standing mics and other unconventional uses of sound design met the intentions and style of the production.			



STANDING AT THE SKY'S EDGE

Music and Lyrics by
RICHARD HAWLEY

Book by
CHRIS BUSH

Directed by
ROBERT HASTIE



National
Theatre

SHEFFIELD
THEATRES

VARIOUS
productions