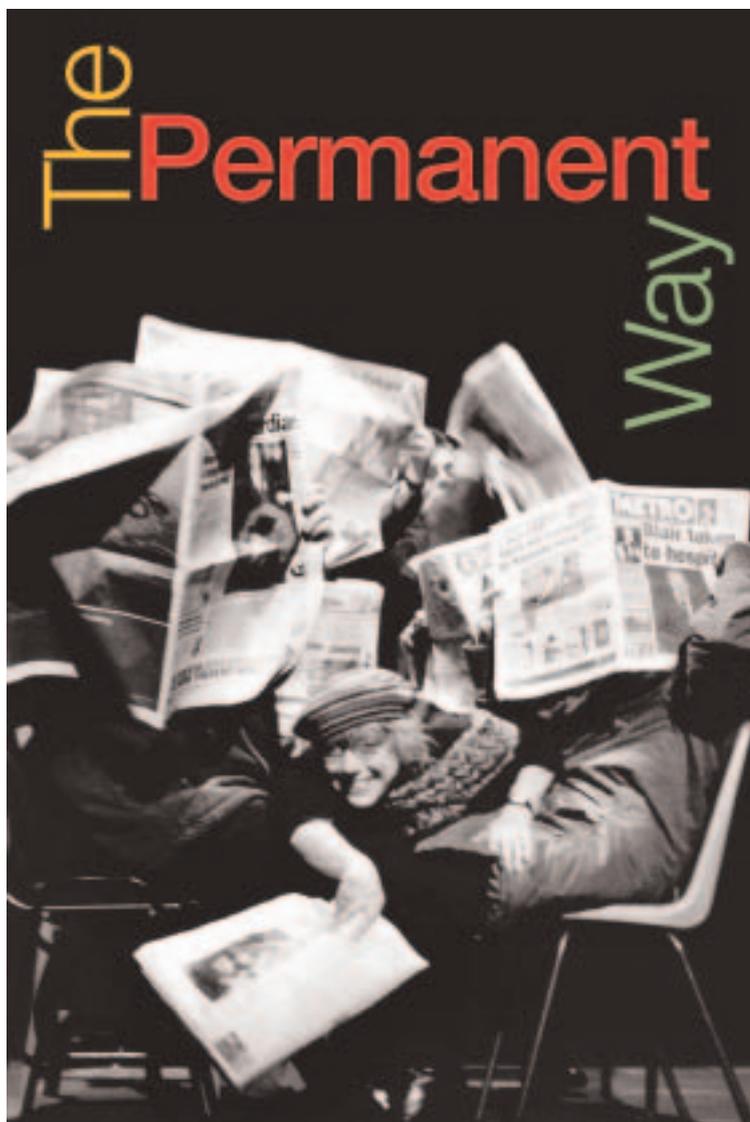


## The Permanent Way Workpack

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### **The Permanent Way** by David Hare

A co-production between  
Out of Joint and the  
National Theatre

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

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# The play

## How the play came about

During a meeting in November 2002 between the director of Out of Joint theatre company, Max Stafford-Clark, and the playwright, David Hare, it became clear that both theatre practitioners were keen to work together again. It was, after all, some time since their last collaboration on *Fanshen* for Joint Stock in 1976. They agreed that if a mutually intriguing subject could be found, then the two men would be eager to explore it. That night, Max sent David a copy of Ian Jack's short book, *The Crash that Stopped Britain*, which examines the Hatfield rail disaster in October 2000. The next morning the Playwright rang the Director: this was it – they had found something promising!

In February 2003, Max and David – along with Assistant Director, Matt Wilde – assembled a troupe of nine actors, some of whom he had worked with before (myself included) and some of whom were new faces. Their task was to discover if there was sufficient material for a play. Two weeks of practical research followed. In groups of two or three – sometimes with Max, sometimes with David, sometimes with tape recorders, usually without – the actors set off to interview a host of people who had been involved with or had encountered the railways since their privatisation in 1991. The interviewees included union leaders and heads of train operating companies, as well as survivors and bereaved from the four major

Lloyd Hutchinson  
& Bella Merlin  
photo John Haynes



train crashes that had occurred since 1997.

During one rush-hour, we stood on Waterloo Station and asked obliging commuters what they thought of the train services. Maxine Peake and Matthew Dunster even donned red uniforms and spent the day serving in the buffet car and clipping tickets on a train up the West Coast Mainline. On our return from the interviews and encounters, we fed the information back *in character* to Max, David and the other actors. In other words, if three people had interviewed the Chief Executive of Virgin Trains, then those three – regardless of age or gender – would adopt that person's appropriate physical stance and vocal tone and answer questions asked by the rest of the group. In this way, David was presented with the actors' 'filter' or interpretation, so that vocal, physical and psychological details became as important in his construction of the play as the factual information itself. By the end of the fortnight's research, David had written a piece of drama, using the material collated to date which was performed to an invited audience, including Nicholas Hytner (Director of the National Theatre) and Graham Cowley (Producer of Out of Joint). Shortly after, programming began.

## Synopsis of *The Permanent Way*

In many ways, *The Permanent Way* follows the structure of a mini classical tragedy. Structurally, there are five 'Acts', within which characters claim centre-stage for a while and then pass the narrative baton on to another character or group. It opens with a Prologue set on a commuter train travelling into London: nine characters present various attitudes and opinions about Britain today, public transport and social apathy. Beginning fairly naturalistically on a station platform and ending in an absurdist flurry of tearing newspapers and commuter madness, the Prologue then segues into 'Act One'.

'Act One' consists of four scenes. First of all, we meet three of the men-in-suits who decided how the railways should be privatised and then floated in the City. These characters are a High Powered Treasury Thinker, a Senior Civil Servant and an Investment Banker. Thereafter,

# The play

centre-stage is taken by two men responsible for the post-privatisation running of a particular Train Operating Company: they are A Senior Railway Executive (previously with Intercity) and a Very Experienced Rail Engineer (now a consultant). They then pass the theatrical buck to the 'man at the top', A Leading Entrepreneur, who in turn gives us an insight into the difficulties of transmuting the running of the railways from British Rail to Network Rail. The fourth and final scene of 'Act One' takes us onto track-level itself, where we meet a gang of labourers working on the permanent way.

The bulk of the play, comprising acts 'Two' to 'Five', follows the four major train crashes which have occurred since privatisation. The Southall disaster in September 1997 is presented to us in 'Act Two' through the eyes of a British Transport Policeman and a Bereaved Mother and Father, who lost their 29-year-old son in the crash. The narrative thread is then transferred to a Campaigning Solicitor as the focus shifts to the Ladbroke Grove crash in October 1999 ('Act Three'). Here, the details of the crash unfold through the stories of two

survivors (A Young Man In Denim and A Survivors' Group Founder) and a Second Bereaved Mother (whose 24-year-old son was killed). This section also includes a brief dramatisation of Lord Cullen's Public Inquiry into the crash. In 'Act Four', we are taken through the Hatfield crash of 17 October 2000 and the narrative baton is passed from the Campaigning Solicitor to a Scottish Literary Editor (based on Ian Jack, whose book *The Crash that Stopped Britain* first inspired Max and David). This time, we are shown the impact of the crash on four figures who were at the periphery of the actual disaster, but who were heavily involved in the emotional aftermath and structural events. They are the Vicar of Hatfield, the Operating Executive of GNER (whose train was involved), the Technical Director of Jarvis (who maintained the track) and the Managing Director of Railtrack. Having given us a range of technical, managerial and moral perspectives, David Hare then plunges us deep into the emotional heart of the final crash in 'Act Five'. This section focuses on the Potters Bar disaster on 10 May 2002, through the story of a woman who was both a survivor and bereaved (A Bereaved Widow) and the man who rescued her (A Squadron Leader).

The play ends with an Epilogue, in which many of the characters return with final statements, illuminating where they are at now (2003–4) in their personal lives or professional careers.

Lloyd Hutchinson  
& Kika Markham  
photo John Haynes



# Interviews

## THE REHEARSAL PROCESS:

An interview with director,  
Max Stafford-Clark

***In the last few years you've directed Robin Soan's A State Affair as well as David Hare's The Permanent Way. Is there anything different about working with a writer on a verbatim text (see Glossary of Terms) as opposed to a more conventional, fictional play?***

The embarkation point is that both actors and writers are going to surrender themselves to the words that they find. Part of the writing skill is in the editing of the material. Most of the interviews in *The Permanent Way* and *A State Affair* were an hour's duration, possibly longer – actors sometimes spent the whole day in the company of some of the subjects. And when they come back and improvise, the improvisation is itself condensed [to about twenty-five minutes]. What the writer then uses of that improvisation is condensed yet further. So the character [of the Second Bereaved Mother] that you play for example, you met twice and David met twice and probably those interviews added up to three hours of material, but the actual stage time is maybe six or seven minutes. So there's a condensation process that takes place.

The other thing is that you have to surrender yourself to the material in terms of the story. So, in *The Permanent Way*, you start with the idea that privatisation has not been good for the railways and you end up with a lot of detail about quite *why* it isn't. You also discover a story about the conflict between the bereaved and the survivors, which we hadn't anticipated. And you talk with a man who was vilified in the media (the Head of Railtrack who had cartoons portraying him as a murderer), but you're also able – which you didn't anticipate – to see him as a fairly sympathetic, genial businessman, 'parachuted' (in his own words) into a situation which he was powerless to control. And *his* misery, as well as the misery of the passengers who suffered, was very palpable.

***So do you look for a particular kind of writer when you want to work on something that's steeped in a real situation, since – as you say – the writer has to surrender him or herself to the material as well?***

You want a writer who's got a political engagement, obviously, as David Hare has and as Robin Soans had too. I think that's essential. I think one of the great things about British theatre writing is that it does have a political dimension and a political curiosity and it does play a part – as much as journalism does, and certainly more than novels do – in the debate about how we're going to live our lives and examine social institutions. Obviously *The Permanent Way* examines the railways, and by doing so it provides a metaphor for the way we're governed and the way we react to that. *Serious Money* was a play about the city and Wall Street and financial mechanisms, as well as being revelatory of the more general kind of behaviour characteristic of the late 1980s.

***You have a particular approach to rehearsal, involving 'actioning' each line (see Glossary of Terms) by labelling it with a transitive verb as you detail in your book, Letters to George. How did you feel about adopting this process for working on direct address monologues to the audience?***

It was particularly helpful because it stops actors playing *past emotion* and makes them play *present intentions*. For example, take the scene between the Bereaved Mother and Father where they're talking to the audience and describing seeing their son's body in the mortuary, discovering that the impact of the crash had sheared his nose, and how the mortician has combed his hair into a fringe though he'd never had a fringe in his life. Now that information was in fact told to us as a joke; they were laughing as they said it. But if you just read that in a script, you would say that the feeling the person had was, say, horror, and the intention they had was perhaps 'to shock' the listener. But actually that wasn't the case. So 'actioning' teaches us all observation. Of course you *are* acting, although not with

# Interviews

another actor: your intention is towards the audience. But then that's no different from Shakespeare's asides or Restoration plays, where quite a sizeable portion of the play involves talking directly to the audience.

***I find the joy of it is that, if you haven't played your action like an arrow, you can feel yourself miss the audience. When you absolutely play it, you get their response: they laugh, they groan, they tut, they've even hissed.***

I think the danger if you don't action the script is that the play could get emotionally indulgent, soppy, because actors would instinctively feel that what they had to do was *relive* the feeling. And actually, there are small moments – the Cullen Inquiry, the meeting between the bereaved parents and John Prescott – that are re-enacted and do, as it were, flash back to Time Past. But the vast majority of *The Permanent Way* is Time Present, talking about events which took place in the past. And if you talk about a train crash that you were in four

years ago, it's possible for the story to be quite detached and the speaker's objectives to become quite different: for example, to 'entertain' the listener. So the Squadron Leader's story of the crash at Potters Bar is quite jokey and underplayed.

***How important was it for you that the actors resembled the real-life people they were playing?***

I think you've got to make an effort and I think that effort is something the audience responds to. But for example, *you* play someone who's some fifteen years older than you, Matthew Dunster plays someone who's probably twenty-four or twenty-five years older than him. So you're not in the Rory Bremner world of impersonation, but you are certainly trying to encourage the actors to capture the *spirit* of the person. And working through impersonation is not wrong. Indeed, the first thing the actors do when feeding back the interviewed information is to endeavour to impersonate.

***Obviously the space in which a play is set impacts hugely on rehearsal choices: where did the idea for *The Permanent Way* set come from – you or Bill Dudley?***

It was mostly Bill – the idea of the wires stretching out over the audience was his. I kind of knew that a crash would be appropriate, even though David hadn't written one in the script. At the beginning of rehearsals, we were trying to make the crash happen at the very end of the play. But when you look at the writing, you see that's a mistake. Although David knew a crash was important, he has ended the play far more equivocally with the Bereaved Widow's 'hysterical friendship' line. So we embedded the crash in the body of the play. The original idea I discussed with Bill was that all the cast would be present all the time as in a station waiting room, but that was an idea we departed from in rehearsal.



Kika Markham  
photo John Haynes

# Interviews

## **Why?**

The original idea was to create a tribunal, with people listening to each other's testimony, but the production didn't head in that direction. And also the costume changes that are necessary if you're going to play two parts either have to happen visibly in front of everybody – which I've done before: *Our Country's Good* was staged like that – or in the dressing room or wings. And it seemed intrusive to bring that kind of Brechtian device into the production.

## **Though it happens on occasion, doesn't it? Does it worry you that there's a mixture of devices?**

It doesn't bother me a bit. I quite like it. I think in that sense, there is a celebration of theatricality, that you occasionally see an actor transform from one character to another in front of you. Also, Bill wanted gantries and that left us with rather an exposed space. And you think, 'Well, a lot of this play might be people just sitting



Kika Markham  
photo John Haynes

down and talking to the audience, so how do we achieve that? What kind of seats are there?' And you get into a discussion of the minutiae of the set quite quickly. Should the seats all be the kind that you find on a railway platform? Should they be seats from a train carriage, which would suit the Prologue? Or should they just be ordinary chairs that people would find in their own kitchens or living rooms – which is where a lot of the original interviews took place?

## **How did that choice come about?**

The hybrid chairs were my decision. We 'auditioned' various chairs and we even went with a plastic one from the rehearsal room we were working in. Then there's the 'poor theatre' idea, with the armchair having wheels on it so that it can then become the van out of which the railway workers emerge.

## **So as a director are you quite open to what might happen in the rehearsal room? Or to some extent do you like to have decisions made before you start?**

I think when you're a young director you're inclined to be a bit rigid, to have ideas that you've got to prove work. I think that it's fine to have ideas before you go into rehearsal, but you've then got to test them out and see whether they work, and think on your feet. So for example, 'Actually, having different chairs does work'. Re-enacting the [Cullen Inquiry] tribunal was something we fought shy of at first, but then we tried it out on the rehearsal room floor and thought, 'Yes, that could work'. Sometimes the actors are playing without any costume changes: for example, Kika Markham doesn't make any costume changes at all for the tribunal. Now on the page, when you consider it before hand, you think, 'Well, how can that work, because we've established a convention, she comes on in a different costume to be the Bereaved Widow at the end, so how can she now – without any costume change – be an attendee at the tribunal? Isn't that going to be confusing for the audience?' And then you try it in rehearsal, and you think, 'No, it's not confusing, it's perfectly followable.'

# Interviews

I think I have learned to be less literal and more fluid.

***'Metaphorical realism' is a term I've recently encountered. And I think there's a lot in The Permanent Way which reflects metaphorical realism. (See Glossary of Terms.)***

That's the first time I've heard that term, but it sounds good to me and I shall be using it from now on.

***Did you expect The Permanent Way to impact so profoundly on the public?***

No. And you always have to preserve a state of innocence when you're involved in something. I had no idea that *The Permanent Way* would strike such a chord. I knew that we were doing good work, I thought that the play would be well received, and I thought it was about a public issue and I was fascinated by that. But no, I didn't assume or know that it would not just be the hit it's been, but that it would strike such a chord with people. Did you know?

***I had an inkling in the penultimate week of rehearsal. I remember saying to a friend on the day we were about to open in York, 'I don't know if I'm right, but I feel we've got a massive hit on our hands'. It felt like there was a bubbling in the air.***

What's also strange is that the public know before you do. Because the advance bookings were greater than for many Out of Joint shows. Now that could be David Hare's presence as the star, or it could be the subject, or it could be the fusion of David Hare and the public subject.

***And it could be the fusion of you and David Hare...***

Please...!

***You talk in your book, Letters to George, about building an ensemble and clearly The Permanent Way is an ensemble piece. What qualities do you look for in actors?***

You want to empathise with them. You want them to have seen your work and liked it. That becomes increasingly important. I'm more drawn towards plays that need an ensemble. And *The Permanent Way*, if you recall, was in a very real sense created by the actors: they assembled the material, they brought the research to David. So you're creating an ensemble, and the ensemble is creating the ensemble play: I suppose that's the way of looking at it.

# Interviews

**THE CREATIVE TEAM:**  
**The Lighting Designer, Johanna Town**

***What were the particular challenges of lighting a multi-location – and often non-specific location – play?***

It was quite tricky, because it's a big set. It's a five-by-eight metre square of nothing and I really wanted to make sure that the actors weren't too exposed on the set by opening it out too much. Yet Max also wanted to make sure that he used the space as much as possible by having people walk in and out and make long journeys from the back of the stage down to centre-stage. So I decided that the only way to do that would be to use colour (something that I use an awful lot as a designer anyway) to say, 'Right, this is the mood of this section, now it's getting a bit sadder' or 'This is a bit more funny'. So I tried to use colour washes to change each one of those main sections of the play, and from that to close down and open out the space depending on how each section worked.

***How many lighting states are there in total?***

We cut an awful lot to try and simplify it a bit, but there are probably about seventy lighting cues.

***What sort of colour are you using for The Permanent Way?***

On this show, my palette came from the steel-work of the set, so it's all very rustic, dirty blues, dirty lavenders, all those sort of material type colours. Industrial lighting green, which looks like the light in factories, is actually what we use for the Scottish Literary Editor. That creates a sort of blend between him being in the middle of a field and in an industrial area. So all the colours are quite industrial and specifically chosen to go in that metal-like environment.

***So in many respects, you're significantly influencing the audience's emotional journey on a very subtle level, aren't you?***

Yes, absolutely.

***At what stage did you come into rehearsals to understand how the emotional atmosphere was developing on stage?***

I prefer to be in rehearsals as much as possible and try to get there from Day One and then come in at least once a week after that. In the last couple of weeks, I try and make that two or three times a week. That said, I took all my imagery and decided what the show was going to be about through my discussions with Max before rehearsals even started. That's what made me know emotionally how Max was going to treat the show.

***So you were in on it well before we were?***

Yeah, yeah! The set designer, the lighting designer, the director all meet probably one to two months before rehearsals start. Often the director hasn't even finished casting by the time we're making decisions about the show.

***I guess with new plays – which you work on a lot – the play might not even be finished.***

That's also the case: you have to go from the passion of what you're hearing the writer and the director talking about. And it can change. Take the scene between the Investment Banker, the High-Powered Treasury Thinker and the Senior Civil Servant [The Three Wise Men]. I saw that as a very insular lighting state, so I did it in dark blue with spots of light to try and make each of the three of you stand out – which was how it was described to me that the scene might be done. But after the first few performances when we opened in York, I realised it was too dark and too moody, and the whole space collapsed inwards and we were still only at the beginning of the play. And that was a disaster. So now the actors are in an orangey-yellow state, which actually creates a much happier, jollier feeling, so it's much more as if you're all in a sunny day in your offices now. The lighting's saying, 'We've had this comic moment of the Prologue and we're going to get serious, but we're actually keeping the

# Interviews

whole thing upbeat at the moment and from here on in it will actually start to get darker’.

***Obviously you create atmospheres and images that the actors can’t always be aware of. How do you work with actors in production week, do you have much interaction?***

You try. I’m very conscious that an actor should do whatever they naturally want to do, so I sometimes feel very guilty about saying, ‘Look, you’ve got to stand here’ or ‘You’ve got to stand there’. But on *The Permanent Way*, it was such a bitty piece with people taking different positions all over the stage space, that by picking actors out by means of light, I was able to make them stronger. I did have to say to the actors, ‘We can put the light wherever you emotionally want to be, but once you’ve fixed it, you’re going to have to stand there every time’. And that’s something that’s quite hard to get across sometimes. Especially when you’re in a technical rehearsal and everyone’s trying to rush through stuff and help each other out and the actor says, ‘Yeah, sure, I’ll stand here’ and for the next four weeks they’re thinking, ‘I really hate standing here – I wish I was further upstage so I could relate to that actor better’. So it’s really good that actors try and get a rapport between everybody involved in a tech.

***How open do you find actors are to responding to the dialogue which needs to happen between the lighting designer and what’s happening on the stage? This goes back to the idea that often we don’t know what picture you’re painting.***

I think far more actors are more interested in set and design than they used to be and they appreciate that we are taking you somewhere you’re also trying to go to. There used to be a time when directors were very protective of the actors. Lighting designers sat at the back of the auditorium, the directors were in charge and wouldn’t dream of bringing an actor off stage to look at a lighting state. But that’s changed. And I think it’s quite nice that actors come out into the auditorium when they’re not on during a

tech and look at what’s happening on stage, then they can feed back to the other actors. That way you can see what we’re all working towards.

***You were saying that the dialogue between director, actor and lighting designer has improved. Is that due to developments in technology?***

I think it’s an appreciation that all the design elements – set design, lighting design, music – can all help to shape a show emotionally. We are all part of that process.

***Hearing what you just said about ‘The Three Wise Men’ scene having an orange wash, it’s very useful for the actors to know how the lighting is shaping the whole atmosphere of the piece, particularly with The Permanent Way which has such an emotional musicality to it.***

You didn’t notice the difference between when you were acting in dark blue and when you were acting in orange?

***I wasn’t as aware of it as you’ve just said, I have to say... But what’s interesting is that I knew there was a big thing about my costume for the Investment Banker having to change when we got to the National: it couldn’t be too dark. So my concern was ‘Oh, why is it suddenly such an issue?’ But now I understand that the whole picture was being brightened up. How about the pools of light: is there a different quality, for example, between the very square pool of light that the Bereaved Mother and Bereaved Father sit in and the one that I sit in later as the Second Bereaved Mother, which is again a very specific square shape?***

Most certainly. I decided to go for squares on all the chairs just to give people platforms. It heightens the areas. If you just cast a pool of light onto the black floor, then it all gets a bit wishy-washy, so it was a matter of giving a structure and having a theme. So all the Survivors and Bereaved are in squares. I think it

# Interviews

comes from the Squadron Leader and the Bereaved Widow in the train near the end of the play: their square of light is supposed to look like a carriage as well as just a square. I then took that idea back through the play to the other crash victims. The Bereaved Mother's area is warm and cheerful because she's a very positive person. Even though she's gone through a lot and it's very sad what she's saying, she's driving in a different way from, say, you are as the Second Bereaved Mother. To some extent, your character seems to be still very much aggrieved at what's happened, whereas the first Bereaved Mother wants results, so the colour of the square is much warmer, much sunnier. Besides, I didn't want it to get too depressing too early on. I've actually put mauve on the Second Bereaved Mother, and the Young Man in Denim and the Survivor's Group Founder are in a pale sky-blue. He's in the pub, having a chat, so I wanted to give that area more of a daylight feel. I am restricted by the colours that are provided by the National as well. A list of colours are given to you and you

Nigel Cooke  
photo John Haynes



then have to decide what you're going to do with them.

## ***So how many colours have you got?***

Fifteen.

## ***That's not many at all.***

No. When we transfer to the Lyttelton, there are a different fifteen colours from the ones we have in the Cottesloe. So we might make some different decisions there: you might look down from the stage at me during the tech and go, 'Where's my orange gone?' and I'll say, 'Well, we don't have orange now, so we'll go on to this colour instead!'

## ***What are the challenges for you of lighting a production which tours to a number of different venues, and indeed transfers from the Cottesloe to the Lyttelton?***

The great thing about going to the Lyttelton when we do is that it's empty and *The Permanent Way* is on every night rather than being in rep with another play. So I have no restrictions and I can put my equipment wherever I like. But I also have to find ways of lighting the actors in small squares of light in singular pools, which is what we do in the Cottesloe. At the moment I can put one lantern on your face and you're lit in the Cottesloe; I can't do that in the Lyttelton. I've got to find a way of really pumping enough light on, so that for the front row you're not overlit and the back row can still actually see you speaking. In *The Permanent Way*, seeing you speaking is the most important thing – so balancing that is going to be hardest. I'll have to see it in front of an audience, because you don't realise until you sit there with an audience that some scenes – which you think are lit – are actually underlit. And you feel the audience just go to sleep or getting bored. You can feel the whole space de-energising.

# Interviews

***So we can blame you for those nights when the audience don't seem interested!***

Yes! That's what was happening with 'The Three Wise Men' scene early on in York. We were unintentionally lowering the audience's concentration because it was all getting too dark on stage. Once we brightened it up, they kept with you much more throughout that scene. And that's going to be a big challenge in the Lyttelton – keeping the audience, but not overlighting.

***This show has done so many different venues: from schools to Birmingham Rep to the Cottesloe to the Lyttelton. To what extent do you have to take all that into consideration at the very beginning, or when you get to each venue are you able to juggle?***

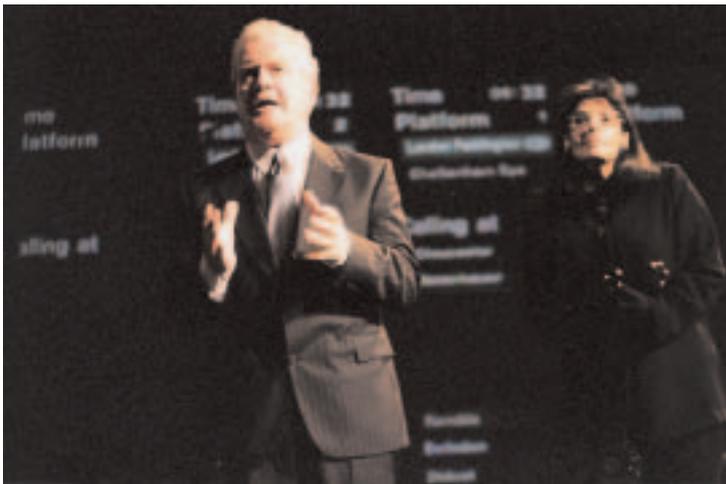
I think one of my approaches with Out of Joint is that the show should be presented in a neat package at each venue, and I think that means I don't always take the risks that I should. But it does mean that everybody gets the same quality of production, regardless of which venue you go to. And I think that's important as I'm there to support the play and the audience's enjoyment, and not really for the sake of my own art. I know how much technical time they have to rig the equipment at each venue and I know most of the theatres they play. So I design

my rig hoping it will fit into most venues. But I quite enjoy that as part of the challenge – knowing that we can reproduce the show. I am very conscious that it's about Max and David's work getting around the country and being seen, and I think I have a responsibility to make sure that happens.

***You say you don't take risks, but from what I've watched on the monitor backstage during the show, and from what audience members have said, your work has a massive emotional pay-off in this piece. I mean, you are taking the audience on a specific emotional journey, aren't you?***

Well, I hope so. That's what I always strive to do in every show. It has to come from the heart.

Ian Redford & Souad Faress  
photo John Haynes



# Interviews

## INTERVIEW WITH FLAMINIA CINQUE: Bereaved Mother

**Unlike myself – who had actually undertaken the very first interview with the person upon whom my part of *Second Bereaved Mother* is based – Flaminia hadn't been involved in the original fortnight of research. So in this interview, I was keen to find out how that might have affected the way she approached her role of *Bereaved Mother*.**

***I understand that you never met the real-life person on whom your character is based before the production opened. How did that affect the choices you made in creating your character?***

From the first moment that I read the script, the way the character was written had an instinctive rhythm to it and that's what stuck out for me the most. It flowed beautifully, it was very natural and I could hear the speed at which this person spoke – because of the way it was written and punctuated, and how she interrupted herself or repeated herself. So I really don't feel that I consciously did any work. I feel as though it was instantly there: I just read what I saw. In fact, I would probably say it was perfect writing.

Sam Graham &  
Flaminia Cinque  
photo John Haynes



***You did actually talk to her on the phone, didn't you, but you didn't know what she looked like?***

I didn't know what she looked like at first, but maybe four or five days into rehearsals, I saw a video of her so I instantly had a visual picture of her. And it made no difference in a way, because I felt that her essence wasn't related to her physical self, if you see what I mean. I'm physically very different from her: she's a taller lady than me and bigger and obviously older, so I couldn't focus on her physical appearance. If I was trying to look like her, I'd have failed immediately. So I decided to focus on the energy with which she expresses herself. When I spoke to her on the phone, we talked for two and a half hours – which to some people would be an extensive phone call, but to me was a breeze! And I felt very comfortable with her. She was instantly warm and open – which is how she'd been described to me [by my colleagues who had met her in the research period] and which was clear from the writing. I found her very centred and very forward-moving. She was able to honour the enormity of her grief at losing her son and refer back to it with comfort. It's rare to find someone who can comfortably talk about grief. And as my colleagues had said to me, she does put you at your ease when you're with her. She doesn't make you feel uncomfortable about all the awful things she has experienced. She was able to laugh and make jokes all the time and it wasn't a cover-up: she would've been like that with her son anyway – their sense of humour has carried on, even though the physical presence of her son wasn't there any more. I found that very exciting and very interesting, because it gave it a lot of levels which are not necessarily obvious in the text.

***Max Stafford-Clark has a specific way of rehearsing involving the 'actioning' of a text. Had you worked this way before?***

I'd dipped my toe into this rehearsal technique about ten years ago when I was working on a piece and I was completely unaware of the process. I'd never heard of it and it confused

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me and the director in question hadn't told me he was going to work in that way – he hadn't labelled it. It wasn't clear to me what he was attempting to do. Whereas working with Max, I understood instantly. To be honest, in the interview Max did tell me that he worked in this way, which I thought was a wonderful thing. It's very rare that a director explains how they work to someone: they either assume you know, and someone like Max could've assumed I knew because of his status. But in retrospect I thought it was a very good thing that he said, 'I work like this: would you be prepared to do that?' And I said, 'Absolutely.' I was open to anything when I went into the interview. So for the first couple of weeks when we did 'actioning' and we were sitting round the table, I found it extremely fulfilling. It helped me to break the text down, to work on a text in a focused and studied way.

## **What other preparation tools did you use for building your character?**

It's difficult for me to explain what else I did. My blanket label, I suppose, would be 'instinctive actress', and I think what happens is that I subconsciously accumulate a lot of information. I'm not one of those people who will go, 'Ooh, I met this amazing woman on the bus, and I must remember that one day'. I don't consciously do that. When I need it, I know that something will come out: I'll remember something I've experienced myself or somebody I've met along the way or something I've disliked or something that would be appropriate. I don't go reaching for it, it comes to me: it's like a microwave process, it starts from the inside out. So for Maureen [Bereaved Mother] in particular I didn't need to start thinking about the people I've lost in my life: I couldn't possibly imagine what Maureen is experiencing or experienced at that time other than the shock of it. But in order for words to sound real, to sound like my own, they have to be *physically* real, I have to inhabit the words *physically*. There are some people I've watched who don't fit in their skin very well and when they're talking they're uncomfortable. Maureen is not that sort of woman *at all*, and therefore

the job was easy for me. It helped me once I'd seen her on the video obviously and then heard her voice on the phone, because the ease, the way she speaks, there's a natural flow of energy. She's open and flowing and that was very close to what I'm used to. I trust in the idea that what I *know*, will happen. Let me work on what I *don't* know, which is learning the lines and this new 'actioning' process, and the rest will fit in.

## **Obviously it's a very emotional part. Is that exhausting?**

No! Not *doing* it. The first two weeks of rehearsals I cried every single time we were reading it. And because we were all listening to each other and I was hearing everyone else's story as well, I found the whole piece destroyed me really. But it wasn't, 'Oh my God, I'm reliving this life of hers'; it was just the sort of closeness to the story and the fact that we were hearing it over and over. For instance, when you hear a tragic piece of news on the television, it's shocking and for a moment you think, 'God, those poor people!' But it's immediately followed by another piece of news – which may also be a tragic or funny piece or boring or something you're not interested in – but it's immediately followed by something else. So you're not left immersed in that moment to experience it deeply, something else comes in very quickly. Often in our own daily conversations, if someone gets upset about something, pretty quickly someone else will say, 'Come on, don't be upset, you'll get over it, you're doing alright', and they'll instantly stop your process. I don't like that, I need the process to run its course. Because I believe that if you let it run its course, it might take ten minutes instead of two, but then that ten minutes is finished and it's not underlying everything else and you can get on with other things. And I needed that process – I didn't know I was going to be like this. But when we were working on the script 'round the table', the rehearsals were very focused, and you're not thinking of anything practical or technical, you're only thinking about the words and what you're saying. So of course you highlight those

# Interviews

words and their meaning becomes intensified. You're involved, you're right in the middle of whichever emotion drives your character to say those lines. So I felt very moved. But I remember thinking, 'This had better stop soon, because I can't go on for five weeks of rehearsals like this'. Because apart from the fact that I would annoy everyone I'm working with, it would be detrimental to the rehearsal process and I wouldn't actually be able to do any work after that. Again, it's trusting that this'll have its life: I'll cry the amount I'm supposed to cry and then, once I'm cried-out, I'll get on with it. And that's exactly what happened. So now, in performance, I'm extremely removed from the events of the play. I don't think about them until I'm on stage and when I come off stage I don't think about the events any more.

I did get moved once and it was a disaster. Luckily it was on my last line and my voice broke up and it clearly came through, and it was a reminder that it shouldn't happen. An old guru teacher of mine at Bristol Old Vic used to say, 'I don't give a damn what you feel. You must make *me* feel – I've paid the money.'

## ***The real-life Bereaved Mother came to the first preview: how did it affect your performance?***

I was nervous for *her* in a way, as I could imagine that there might be a whole load of emotions running through her, coming to see this play, coming to the National where she used to come with her son – he used to bring her here quite often. Of course I couldn't really imagine all the things she'd be going through, but I felt a responsibility to her. On a practical level, it affected my performance in that I was scared she might feel that I was making her sound common and I didn't want her to think that. Although she even makes a joke herself within the script about being from Essex and she's got a great sense of humour about it, just for a nano-second I was a bit worried, thinking, 'She's spoken to me on the phone and is she going to think that I've dumbed this down to sound like her?' Although I wasn't doing an impersonation of her, I'd had to get an energy –

which was there from the way she spoke and how she's fuelled – and obviously the accent helps: without the Essex accent it doesn't read in the same way.

## ***How did your meeting with her go after the performance?***

My meeting was excellent because she was everything I expected – and more. I recognised her from the video and she was extremely warm and welcoming, she gave me a great big hug and I gave her a hug too. I felt like I knew her, she was everything I'd imagined when I read the script the first time. Because I would say that Maureen is a woman who absolutely knows herself: her voice, her physical expression and her vocal expression are completely in synch. And that's why she's such a joy to play because she's a rooted woman and therefore she can afford to be genuine and expansive and supportive – because if she's angry about something she will bloody well tell you! And that's so freeing, because she's a real rounded person – and it's wonderful to see.

## ***And did she enjoy the play?***

She was really complimentary about the performance and very supportive of the piece itself. She thinks that David Hare has done an amazing thing to bring the different view-points into one space. She was very complimentary about the way I had portrayed her, she said things like, 'You're so pretty, I'm going to have to have a head transplant...!' And she didn't say anything about the accent, so that was great! She was very kind about all my colleagues as well – how brilliant everyone was. And that's another mark of the kind of woman she is – she didn't forget anyone in it. She didn't just focus on 'I wonder who's playing me'. She could enjoy the whole process of the play and actually see its worth in the world at the moment. Not only for the bereaved and the survivors but for the future of the rail industry – wherever it will end up.

## For discussion

1. In the first week of rehearsals, playwright David Hare described *The Permanent Way* as being a play about rail privatisation. In the second week, he suggested it was about the disillusionment of 'Blairite' Britain. In the third week, he refined his description as being 'a play about honour and dishonour'. How does *The Permanent Way* explore these three views and which are the key characters who illustrate each theme?
2. The play highlights some areas of disagreement between the survivors of the train crashes and those who lost partners and relatives. What issues are raised by those apparent disagreements? Are they justified? To what extent do you feel those disagreements might be the displacement of other anxieties or concerns?
3. Do you think you need to know anything about rail privatisation and the four train crashes before seeing the play?
5. On paper, *The Permanent Way* is an unlikely 'good night out': an hour-and-fifty minutes without an interval, all monologues to the audience, about rail privatisation! How and why has it captured the public's imagination and attention so forcibly?
6. The characters in the cast list are not given names, but appear as High-Powered Treasury Official, Young Man in Denim, Technical Director of a Maintenance Company, etc. How does this dramatic device alter or affect our relationship with the characters?
6. '*The Permanent Way* is a perfect marriage between Brechtian story-telling and Stanislavskian characterisation.' To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?
7. What other contemporary social themes might serve as possible subjects for a piece of verbatim theatre?

Bella Merlin & Kika Markham  
photo John Haynes



# Practical exercises

1. Divide the group into pairs, each individual within the pair is labelled A or B. Person A tells Person B of five events in their life (eg earliest memory, worst row with parent, best holiday, tale behind any scar, first love affair). Person B from one pairing then recounts to Person A of another pairing the stories they have just heard *in the character* of the Person A who first told the story. Note speech patterns, hand gestures, facial details, eye contact, speed and rhythm of story telling, etc.
2. Invite someone from your school or college, eg a secretary, a cleaner, a caretaker, a member of the kitchen staff, to talk to your class. Interview them about their job and what they have to do, how they feel about working in the school, how they get on with their boss, have they ever worked anywhere else, etc. Following the interview, four people take on the role of the interviewee while the rest of the class ask them questions. The four people remain in character throughout the class' questioning, inventing answers where necessary. Afterwards, discuss how the interviewee might form a character in a play. Draw out themes and ideas of what might constitute an interesting drama based on the interviewee's contribution, and compile a list of other people who might then be interviewed if you were to construct a piece of verbatim drama.
3. Taking any of the 'Acts' from *The Permanent Way*, examine the way in which voices are juxtaposed, ideas are passed like racing batons and different rhythms of speech as set against each other. Then take one particular speech and analyse the punctuation.
  - Note where a question mark invites an answer or where it is rhetorical.
  - Note where an exclamation mark forces the listener to sympathise or approve or protest.
  - Note where a colon invites the audience to listen attentively to what follows.
  - Note where a comma draws the listener in or indicates a phrase to be 'thrown away'.
4. Taking an article from the day's newspaper, discuss in small groups what the dramatic issues might be, which characters you might include, what opinions you might want to juxtapose against each other, what actions you might include, where you might set a short scene. Then have a go at improvising it. Make sure you have a strong central event and that you don't get too stuck in 'talking'.
5. *The Permanent Way* is essentially character-driven with little on-stage dialogue. Therefore, observation is vitally important, as *observation* inevitably stimulates *imagination*. Choose a person who is familiar to the whole group – a head teacher, a celebrity, a local figure. Divide the group into two halves: the first half collectively imitate the way the subject walks, talks and gestures. The second half comment on what they have seen: what was accurate, what was exaggerated, what was omitted. Now swap over. Then in pairs, take any one of the characters from *The Permanent Way*. Look at their speeches, imagine how they might move and walk, and how these might be affected if the character were to be played by a man instead of a woman, or vice versa. Try improvising round the text, as if one of you were interviewing the other. Is the interview taking place in their office? Their garden? The local pub? The kitchen? A train station? Now change the location. How does that affect the way you talk and walk?

The playscript of *The Permanent Way* published by Faber and Faber is available from the National's Bookshop. Tel 020 7452 3456  
Email [bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk](mailto:bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk)  
[www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/bookshop](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/bookshop)

# Written work & research

1. Read one of David Hare's 'state of the nation' trilogy, *Murmuring Judges*, *Racing Demon* or *The Absence of War*. Compare his fictionalising of the research material in the trilogy with the verbatim presentation of *The Permanent Way*.
2. There are a number of issues of citizenship in *The Permanent Way*, including justice, responsibility, materialism, fear, guilt, notions of criminality, the individual versus the state, capitalism. Can you think of any other aspects of citizenship that the play provokes? Taking **one** of these themes and **two** characters from the play, compare and contrast how the theme is explored through each voice.
3. The Epilogue presents an array of opinions which in effect encapsulate the play. Taking **one** line from each character in each 'scene' throughout the play, chart out the story presented in *The Permanent Way*.
4. The character of the Bereaved Mother states that she was awarded £7,500 for the loss of her son, the Young Man in Denim is compensated £18,000 which also covers the loss of his bag and his ruined trainers. The Second Bereaved Mother describes how 'each child, they say, has a different value, maybe ten thousand pounds, maybe twenty'. The Survivor's Group Founder has settled for a sum that is alleged to be a seven-figure amount. Taking the role of **either** one of the bereaved **or** one of the survivors, write an imaginary letter to the Head of Railtrack outlining your feelings concerning compensation and the Value of Life.
5. Political theatre often provokes the audience into changing their perspective on society, and in Brechtian terms, even changing society itself. What do you consider the 'super-objective' of *The Permanent Way* to be? In other words, what does the playwright want the audience to leave the theatre thinking/feeling/doing? How effective is theatre as a means of affecting social change? You might want to consider Brecht's *Brecht on Theatre* or Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.
6. Director Max Stafford-Clark has pioneered new theatre writing, often with a political slant. Taking Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and F\*\*\*ing*, David Hare's *Fanshen* or Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, examine the social issues brought to the theatre and the dramatic devices employed. How do these texts compare with other plays first directed by Max Stafford-Clark, such as Stephen Jeffreys' *The Libertine*, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* or April De Angelis' *A Laughing Matter*?

Kika Markham  
photo John Haynes



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## Newspaper Articles

*The Permanent Way* has provoked many articles in the arts, reviews and news sections of many of the national newspapers. The following provide some interesting angles on the subject matter and its presentation through verbatim drama:

- The Guardian, Saturday 2 February 2002: 'Why fabricate?: Our hunger for stories is limitless but, argues David Hare, the best art is conceived in response to the real world.' ([www.guardian.co.uk/saturday\\_review/story/0,3605,643339,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,3605,643339,00.html))
- The Guardian, Saturday 1 November 2003: 'Leading us up the wrong track: For his new play, David Hare researched the privatisation of the railways and could find no one in support of it – not even Margaret Thatcher. So why, he asks, does our current government pursue policies that are so obviously both out of step with the desires of the electorate and contrary to expert advice?' ([www.guardian.co.uk/arts/politicaltheatre/story/0,13298,1082035,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/politicaltheatre/story/0,13298,1082035,00.html))
- The Observer, Sunday 9 November 2003: 'Whose line is it anyway?' by Neil Ascherson: 'Disaffected rail employees and disaster survivors have collaborated with David Hare on his explosive new play. Will this mark a golden age for political drama?' ([www.guardian.co.uk/arts/politicaltheatre/story/0,13298,1082019,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/politicaltheatre/story/0,13298,1082019,00.html))

Matthew Dunster  
& Souad Faress  
photo John Haynes



- The Independent, Friday 14 November: 'Staging a revolution: Sir David Hare has returned to what he does best: theatrical government-baiting. Paul Taylor hails a renaissance in political drama.'
- The Guardian, Saturday 31 January, 2004: 'Just the ticket: Ian Jack welcomes David Hare's new play, *The Permanent Way*, and the light it sheds on public issues.' ([books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1134478,00.html](http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1134478,00.html))
- The Times, Wednesday 11 February 2004: 'Knight of the long knives leaves blood on the tracks' by Ben Webster, 'Sir David Hare's play attacking rail privatisation has been criticised by industry figures as manipulative and distorted.' ([www.timesonline.co.uk/newspaper/0,,172-996903,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/newspaper/0,,172-996903,00.html))
- The Times, Wednesday 11 February, 2004: 'Playwright who loves to provoke' by Benedict Nightingale, 'But latest work is less open-minded.' ([www.timesonline.co.uk/newspaper/0,,172-996896,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/newspaper/0,,172-996896,00.html))
- The Observer, Sunday 25 February 2004: 'Tracking Truth' by David Aaronovitch, 'Theatre can question where journalists often can't. But it must be a measured inquisition.'

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[www.networkrail.co.uk](http://www.networkrail.co.uk)  
[www.jarvisplc.com](http://www.jarvisplc.com)

A transcript of David Hare's interview with Richard Boon at the National Theatre can be found at [www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/platforms](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/platforms)

The National Theatre's programme to *The Permanent Way* includes an original article by Ian Jack, 'A British Gift'.

Bella Merlin, Lloyd Hutchinson & Flamina Cinque  
photo John Haynes



# Glossary of terms

## Actioning a text

This rehearsal process involves finding a transitive verb (I threaten, I enlighten, I prepare, I reassure, etc) which sums up the intention behind a line of text. It must always be something that you are actively *doing* to the other character/s on stage – or, in the case of *The Permanent Way*, to the audience. Here's a speech from the Second Bereaved Mother with the actions determined by the director and the actor in rehearsal:

(**entertains**) Next day we sent Cullen the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word 'accident'. (**impresses**) We all did. (**teaches**) Because Ladbroke Grove wasn't an accident. (**focuses**) In the signal box, they admitted, there's an override button you can push and straight away you close down the whole Paddington throat. (**alerts**) But of course they don't. They never touch it. (**provokes**) My guess is they don't want to delay the Heathrow Express. (**sours**) My view, they only seem to have two rules on the railway – never delay the Heathrow Express, it's the Golden Cash cow, (**entertains**) and the second is: don't kill tourists.

Actions are not set in stone and will inevitably adjust throughout rehearsals and during the course of a production's lifetime. However, they are a useful means of maintaining the inherent structure of a production, particularly during a long tour or run.

## Metaphorical realism

This term may be applied to plays where the location is non-specific: although the details of each moment may seem realistic (coffee cups, biscuit tins, newspapers, etc), the fluidity of the changing stage space allows each 'mini' location to take on a theatrical resonance beyond its own reality. For example, the Scottish Literary Editor is able to move between other characters' individual spaces without breaking the 'reality', say, of the Vicar of Hatfield's sitting room or the train carriage in which the Squadron Leader and the Bereaved Widow are sitting. At the same time, the collected images (linked by the Scottish

Literary Editor like beads on a chain) create a montage of perspectives which then takes on bigger meaning in the audience's eye.

## Verbatim Theatre

Essentially, verbatim theatre involves the use of actual words spoken by real people to create a piece of drama. This information is usually collected through interviews which are either heavily notated by the interviewers or recorded and thereafter transcribed. However, the process of condensation and editing (discussed above in the Interview with Max Stafford-Clark and on the National Theatre's Platforms website in David Hare's conversation with Richard Boon) reminds us that what we are seeing is a *theatricalisation* of real life: the craft that is involved in the writing process turns the random nature of real life into the structured art of theatre.