

National Theatre

Teaching Practitioners using the Archive

Archive Finding Aid

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Introduction

The National Theatre Archive provides many opportunities for in-depth exploration of the work and repertoire of prescribed practitioners. The collection holds material from all productions in the National Theatre's history, showcasing the work of directors and designers (lighting, sound, costume, set and puppetry) from 1963 up to present day. The Archive's collections also include video recordings and are an invaluable asset which can be used in conjunction with the [National Theatre Collection](#) (Drama Online) and curated [Google Arts and Culture exhibitions](#). To find out more about how you can use the Archive for teaching, see our A Teacher's Guide to the Archive resources available on the [Learning Hub](#).

How to use the online catalogue

The [Archive catalogue](#) can be accessed via the [Archive webpage](#) and is very straightforward to use. By clicking on the links on the left-hand side, you'll be able to search by production, role, or person. The results will show you what's available at the Archive, and you'll be able to use that information to tailor your specific needs and the purpose of your visit. When teaching the work of practitioners using the Archive, the different search fields can be helpful in identifying connection between different practitioners who frequently collaborate with each other.

Once you've booked your visit via the [online booking form](#) and requested the materials that you would like to see, you can prepare your students beforehand through a range of activities. To get the most out of your visit, it's important to share the purpose and desired outcomes with your students.

Below you will find examples of how to use the Archive to support work on Alecky Blythe (writer), Rae Smith (designer) and Rufus Norris (director).

The screenshot displays the National Theatre Archive website. On the left is a navigation menu with the following items: Home, About the Catalogue, Search the Catalogue, Search by Person, Search by Production, Search by Role, How to Search, Useful Links, and Contact Us. The main content area is titled "Welcome to the National Theatre Archive" and features an "Advanced Search" section. This section includes four search fields: "Any Text", "Title", "Reference Number", and "Date". Each field has a corresponding "Refine Search Criteria" link. At the bottom of the search area are "Search" and "Clear" buttons. A tooltip labeled "How to Search" is visible over the "Search" button.

Screenshot of the Archive online catalogue

Alecky Blythe

Alecky Blythe's work at the National Theatre includes *London Road* (2011, 2012 and a planned revival in 2025) and *Our Generation*, which had its premiere at the National Theatre in 2022.

Watching *London Road*

London Road was directed by Rufus Norris and written by Alecky Blythe, with music by Adam Cork. The Archive's collection on *London Road* provides a detailed and inspiring record of how the play was created. However, to understand the full context of the tasks below, your visit should begin with the recording of the production. The production is quite long, so students might find it helpful to be given a particular aspect of the production to focus on. For example:

- How does the use of song affect the way the audience receives the narrative?
- What do you notice about how the songs still capture the cadences and rhythms of speech?
- How is multi-roling achieved through the use of costume as well through acting skill? (Note: there are 11 actors in the ensemble, who play a total of 52 characters. Box RNT/SM/1/643a contains a detailed breakdown of the distribution of roles.)
- What are the most striking moments in the production?
- How are the transitions managed between different scenes and settings?
- How do the performers ensure that the audience feels like the 'interviewer'?
- How many different locations are created on stage, and how?



Production photograph from *London Road* (2011). Photographer: Helen Warner

Audience response and ethics of verbatim

Ask students to consider the following questions:

- What are the ethical considerations in telling a true story for a theatre audience? How do you think Blythe, Cork and Norris have navigated these sensitivities?
- Do we have different expectations from an audience watching a verbatim piece of theatre? Should/do we react in a different way knowing that these are the words and interactions of real people, many of whom are still alive?
- During the creation of *London Road*, the Iceni project, which works with people experiencing alcohol and drug addiction, was under threat due to funding cuts. Collections taken at the end of each performance of *London Road* raised over £23,000 for the charity, according to show reports. What does this tell us about the social role of theatre, and verbatim theatre in particular?

Then point out the show report (reports are written after every performance) which include the following statement:

‘We had a heckler during Julie’s speech last night. A woman called out “shame on you”. Miss Fleetwood carried on and towards the end of the speech the woman shouted out “you shouldn’t say that” to which Miss Fleetwood spoke directly to the heckler “but I wasn’t saying it – it was in my head”. We then started the Garden Scene with Miss Fleetwood not quite finishing her speech.’ (The character of Julie is played by Kate Fleetwood, who talks about the complexities of the character in the Platform talk mentioned later in this guide.)

The press reviews for *Our Generation* also tell a similar story: the *Daily Mail’s*

Ephraim Hardcastle reports that:

‘Hostilities broke out in the audience at the National Theatre on Wednesday night during a performance of the tedious coming-of-age drama *Our Generation*, when one of its teenage characters gloated over Boris contracting Covid early in the pandemic. His declaration, “if this doesn’t kill him, I’ll go and finish him off” triggered whoops and furious applause from a matron in the stalls. “You really think that do you?” barked a man in front of her. “You really want our Prime Minister dead?” Left-wing arts luvvies sometimes forget that Boris still has plenty of admirers. A witness reports: “It was easily the most exciting moment of a long evening’.’ (3 April 2022)

Discuss both of these reports, in relation to the prompts that you have considered. How does this extend or change their opinions?

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Guide your students to read the following articles, which provide more information about the response to *London Road* and the kind of stories that Alecky Blythe focuses on:

The *Daily Telegraph* article (15 April 2011) reports that ‘Kerry Nicol, whose 19-year-old daughter Tania, was one of the five women killed by Steve Wright, has already denounced the show as “claptrap. They just want to go ahead with the play and make money out of other people’s misery,” she said.’

Catherine Bennett in the *Observer* (17 April 2011) leads with the headline ‘We shouldn’t make entertainment out of recent tragedy’ and ends it with ‘who would make a musical of Dunblane?’

The Times (16 April 2011) suggests that ‘I do not think a theatre would be as sniggery about South London stabbings. But my main cringe was at the moments played for ironic humour. It is not comfortable to sit amid a suave South Bank audience laughing at real ordinary people’s remarks as if at an Alan Bennett fiction, especially when things that they presumably said just once are twisted into repetitive patterns....’

In contrast, the *Daily Mail* (15 April 2011) describes the production as ‘in essence, an affectionate portrait of a community and doesn’t feature either Wright or any of his victims, who were working as prostitutes in Ipswich’s red light district around London Road.’

Once you have explored these articles and students have watched *London Road*, ask students to respond to each of the comments. How does this affect the way that they might apply Blythe’s working methods?

You can also refer to the article by Susannah Clapp in the *Observer* (17 April 2011) which contains a paragraph about Blythe’s methodology and previous work.

Platform talk (RNT/PL/3/991)

Alecky Blythe describes her process in detail, and is joined on stage by Adam Cork, Rufus Norris (Associate Director of the National Theatre at the time, and director of *London Road*). Actors Kate Fleetwood and Michael Shaeffer from the production also participate. Begin the talk at 7mins 38 secs.

- From 11 mins onwards Blythe explains the context of creating the material that became *London Road*. She explains how the transcriptions of the interviews take place a lot later and that the actors are primarily using audio recordings to learn lines, rather than a written script.

The talk also includes the following information:

- Adam Cork and Alecky Blythe created some rules for the work, including ensuring that they (cast and artistic team) didn't do anything that meant the audience stopped **listening**.
- *London Road* is unusual in that the actors are not wearing earpieces – during the performance, which is the usual practice in Alecky Blythe's productions and with her company, Recorded Delivery. Usually, earpieces ensure actors do not fall into their own speech patterns but instead retain the accuracy of the voices of the people whose words they are speaking. This is particularly important when a production runs for a long time and prevents actors falling into different interpretations.
- The actors were shown photographs of the people whose words they were using but very little additional information. The voice of the character suggests a lot of the physicality of the person who speaks, which is something that can be exploited in rehearsal and performance.
- The idea of a musical about the Ipswich murders raised a conversation about what is considered good taste in portraying real life events.
- *London Road* is a very 'English' production.

Rehearsal and show reports

The show reports provide excellent information about audience responses and anything unusual that happened (such as technical issues) during each performance. The reports below are particularly interesting to draw to your students' attention. Records are also kept of discussions that take place in rehearsal. Draw your students' attention to the level of detail and accuracy that Blythe aims for, and the different decisions that take place about multi-roling and other staging choices.

- 24 February 2011: 'Mr Norris mentioned that there is a slight possibility that he might want to experiment with a low level of house lights being on during the pieces so that the direct address sections can be addressed specifically to one person (eye to eye). Different locations will be used for the different addresses. This is only an idea and certainly not confirmed.'
- 4 March: 'Please see props note 8. Ms Blythe also mentioned that both the promotions girl and radio DJ were wearing branded Town 102 radio jackets'

- 7 March: 'Mr Wisbey will now play the policeman on p.19. Miss Sloane will play a policewoman in the same scene. Both actors have played residents immediately beforehand without leaving the stage. They are currently marking the change by adding hats.'
- 9 March: 'Please can we have a sound effect of Bailey the dog barking. This will be used at least twice, currently been used in "Cellular Material". The original Bailey the dog has been described by Miss Blythe as being a "wiry, yappy dog, possibly a Westie, but not a pure breed".'
- 10 March: 'In amendment to yesterday's notes (note 9) after further investigation by Miss Blythe, Bailey the dog is in fact a Maltese'
- 14 March: This report includes a detailed description of costume use.
- 18 March: 'The sound effect of police sirens is required in act one section five to come between the BBC news reader and the Chris Eakin's text that begins "Wicked Bloody World" this is being used to help change locations from the sitting rooms and the court room and to cover moving the sofas up stage.'

The importance of research

In prompt book box RNT/SM/1/643a, there is a research list/timeline which outlines the process from 2000 when Ipswich FC building work meant prostitution shifted towards London Road, up until 2011, which is when the Icen project was struggling to attract funding after a contract was not renewed. Follow the timeline and discuss the importance of keeping detailed notes during the creation of verbatim material.

Choosing your topic and stimulus – responding to your visit

As a follow up to the work you have done in the Archive, watch [this video](#) in which Alecky Blythe and director of *Our Generation*, Daniel Evans, discuss the production. You can find more detail about the production in the Learning Guide for *Our Generation* which accompanies the recording on the National Theatre Collection. Challenge your students to use all of the information they have gleaned from the visit to the Archive, to create their own mini version of *Our Generation*, reflecting their own experience of a specific time.



Production photograph of Our Generation (2022). Photographer: Johan Persson

Rae Smith

Rae Smith has worked on a range of productions from Shakespeare to new plays at the National Theatre. Her work includes *War Horse* (2007), *Translations* (2018), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2024), *wonder.land* (2015) and *The Light Princess* (2013). *wonder.land* and *Translations* are both available to watch in advance of a visit to the Archive, via the National Theatre Collection.

Making observations and noting connections

Rae Smith has a longstanding working relationship with director Marianne Elliott and one aspect of Smith's work that you might like to explore is her collaboration with Elliott on *War Horse*, *The Light Princess* and *All's Well That Ends Well* (2009). Noticing trends within their collaborations can be particularly fruitful for groups working in Elliott's style and whose group includes a set and/or costume designer.

Another aspect of Smith's practice that you may wish to highlight is the number of designs for productions in the National Theatre's Olivier theatre. The largest of the building's three auditoriums, the Olivier offers opportunities to work at large scale and to create epic landscapes. The use of natural materials in *Translations*, for example, creates hugely atmospheric setting for the action.

Thirdly, another observation focus might be choices of colour palettes within a production, and across productions. How does Smith use colour and texture to create a sense of place, mood and atmosphere. *War Horse* and *The Light Princess* are both good examples to use for this task.

Encourage your students to sketch as they make notes so that they can practise their own drawing skills, which are required when answering design questions in an examination. When accessing costume bibles, students might like to write down information about texture and fabric, and any colour names that they see, so that they can colour their own notes when they return to school. (Please note that only HB pencil is allowed in the Archive – no pens or colours, please. There is no photography allowed in the National Theatre Archive due to copyright reasons.)



Production photograph of *War Horse* (2017). Photographer: Brinkhoff/Mögenburg

Staging physicality

Play clips from recordings of *War Horse* and *The Light Princess*. Both of these productions require high levels of physicality, whether because of the use of life-sized horse puppets, or to create the illusion of a character independently, Smith's designs have had to stage the 'impossible'. Looking at photographs and sketches from both productions, ask students to investigate how Smith has worked with directors and other directors (including video and projection designers) to stage magical moments on an often epic scale.

By using the recording of *wonder.land* that is available on the National Theatre Collection, you can prepare students to look at aspects of projection and technology within Smith's work. Use the recording as necessary, selecting short clips or watching the production in full, as appropriate.

Designing for style and genre

Another way to encourage careful observation of Smith's work is to discuss style and genre. Within Smith's repertoire of designs at the National Theatre, there is a range of adaptation of children's fiction, Shakespeare, naturalism, puppetry and comedy. Before watching any of the productions you've selected, you may wish to work with your students to create a set of expectations and criteria for what a designer might need to consider with regards to style and genre. For example, comedy might require mechanisms for slapstick comedy, naturalism will need functioning objects, fittings or fixtures, and physical theatre might require large and safe spaces for large ensemble choreography. Then, whilst watching a recording or viewing photographs, students can evaluate how well they think a particular design suits the style and genre of their chosen production.

Using reviews to inspire independent evaluation

Students sometimes find summarising design concepts very challenging. The demand for technical terminology can be intimidating and the need to be concise within description can be difficult. Therefore, students can benefit from a thorough exploration of the press material surrounding productions.

By using newspaper reviews and press and marketing material within the archive collections, students can find phrases which help them create their own responses. Asking students to find descriptions by critics that they agree with and others with which they disagree, can then lead them to writing short sentences in which they express their own opinions.

The following reviews for *Translations* might be particularly helpful:

Morning Star, 16 June 2018

'Rae Smith's setting is so convincing you almost smell the turf fires. Yet, squint a little and this could be a battlefield.'

Southwark News, 7 June 2018

'A huge, almost panoramic set conjured up a desolate, misty moor. A few bricks, some makeshift furniture and a dozen dusty books created a classroom. A few country folk, who looked in need of a good wash depicted the Irish in 1833.'

WhatsOnStage, 30 May 2018

'Rickson's ruminative revival presents a cultural battlefield. Smith turns the Olivier stage into a boggy, barren no-man's-land. In its middle sits Hugh's hedge school, where Baile Beag's locals come to learn languages. Its outline of bricks resembles a scattering of sandbags with books propping up the parapet and wooden duckboards bridging the mud. This is the frontline in a war of words.'

The reviews for *The Light Princess* might also trigger some interesting debates:

Robert Shore in the *Metro*, 13 October 2013

'Rae Smith's visually sumptuous designs combine animation and puppetry to impressive effect, even if the lake scene, with its cavorting frogs, is uncomfortably reminiscent of *The Muppet Show*.'

Susannah Clapp in the *Observer*, 13 October 2013

'Rae Smith's designs are so gaudy that you would think this rite-of-passage story was summed up in a dimple and a wink.'

The Stage, October 17 2013

'It has, however, been brought to the stage with loving commitment and attentive detail, from Rae Smith's gorgeous pop-up toy theatre sets to the inventive puppetry of Finn Caldwell.'

Using photographs to help students describe what they

see

Pair students up and ask them to label themselves A and B. Person A describes a design that is depicted in a photograph or sketch. Person B uses pencil and paper to draw **only what person A describes**. The two students should not be able to see each other's image or drawing and so should sit back-to-back if possible. Person A should try and use technical terminology, and words suggesting shape, scale, texture, colour, etc., but cannot make generalised statements such as 'it's a tree with loads of branches'. The aim of the exercise is for students to hone their descriptive skills to allow their listener (and eventually reader/examiner) to be able to imagine the image vividly, from the description alone. Once the picture and sketch has been revealed, compared and evaluated, ask the students to swap roles and use a new image to repeat the task. You could also ask them to do a series of images depicting how a set or costume change throughout the production, with the same descriptive focus.

Rufus Norris

Rufus Norris has directed the following productions at the National Theatre. **Bold** denotes availability of recordings on National Theatre Collection:

The Amen Corner (2013)
Behind the Beautiful Forevers (2014)
Death and the King's Horseman (2009)
***Everyman* (2015)**
Hex (2021)
London Road (2011)
***Macbeth* (2017)**
Market Boy (2006)
Mosquitoes (2017)
My Country; a work in progress (2017)
Nye (2024)
***Small Island* (2019)**
Table (2013)
***The Threepenny Opera* (2016)**
***wonder.land* (2015)**

Building a director profile

As preparation for your visit, consider the following prompts with your students, or ask them to do some independent research. This activity helps students make connections between the type of work a director might be particularly interested in, and whether there are any notable or repeated collaborations with other members of the creative team:

- Looking at the 15 productions listed above, find out i) the genre of the play ii) who wrote the play iii) when it was first written and/or performed iv) who worked on the artistic team with Rufus Norris.
- Whether there any specific collaborations with actors across different productions?

When you visit the Archive, look at the production programmes carefully. Read the biographies for the members of the artistic team to fill in more information to answer the prompts above. You can also use the press review files for specific productions; there are often interviews with Norris in which he describes his working methods.

Social, cultural, and historical context

Ask students to use the press material available for your selected productions to form a summary of the contexts of the productions. For example, Norris' productions include stories of national history (*Nye*, *Small Island*), classical repertoire (*Macbeth*) and musicals/productions with music (*London Road*, *wonder.land*, *The Threepenny Opera*). Create a timeline for the list of productions and a parallel timeline which

deals with the social and historical context of when each production was mounted. For example, *Small Island* was performed before and after the pandemic, and *Nye* was performed in 2024, a year after the 75th anniversary of the NHS. *Macbeth* was performed at the same time as other popular UK productions of the play.

Theatrical style

Before your visit, watch [this video](#) on *Small Island*, directed by Rufus Norris in 2019 (and revived in 2022). A key aspect of Norris's practice is the use transition and juxtaposition.

Using one or two of the recordings that are available in the Archive (and not on the National Theatre Collection, which can be watched at another time), watch the first 20–30 minutes of different productions. What do you notice about the way in which transitions are used and created? Whilst *Small Island* uses projections as part of many of the transitions, how does Norris create that same fluidity in productions which do not use video or image projection in the same way?



Production photograph of *Small Island* (2022). Photographer: Johan Persson

Creating new work or adaptations

Watch to the Platform talk with Simon Stephens (RNT/AE/1/2/520) in which the process of updating *The Threepenny Opera* is described. Consider how using Norris' attitude to updating class works can be applied to your students' own work. **Note, this Platform talk may contain strong language **.

Rehearsal notes written by the stage management team for each day of rehearsal are sometimes available for productions, giving interesting and nuanced insight into the working methods of a director and their artistic team. You could also use published rehearsal diaries from the staff director, such as those available for [Small Island](#) to gain insight into the rehearsal process and Norris' methods.

Once you have visited the Archive and engaged with a range of Norris' work, ask students to create a presentation, display or short piece of drama which demonstrates their understanding of his work.

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Thank you

This guide to Teaching Practitioners Using the National Theatre Archive
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