National Theatre

Visual Story



by David Lan

Dorfman Theatre

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Production photography by Manuel Harlan

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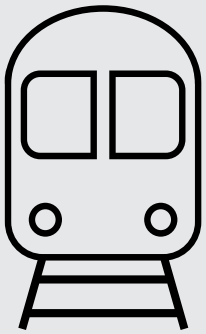
About the National Theatre

How to get here



The National Theatre is a large concrete building on the South Bank in London.

It has three theatre spaces called the **Olivier**, **Lyttelton** and **Dorfman**.



The nearest **train** and **underground** stations are:

- Waterloo
- London Blackfriars
- Embankment



The National Theatre has an **underground car park**. There is **free parking available for Blue Badge holders**.



More information about getting here is **on our website:**

nationaltheatre.org.uk/your-visit/getting-here/

About the National Theatre

Dorfman Theatre



This production will be performed in the **Dorfman Theatre**. The Dorfman Theatre has **its own entrance**, separate to the National Theatre main building.

The entrance looks like this.

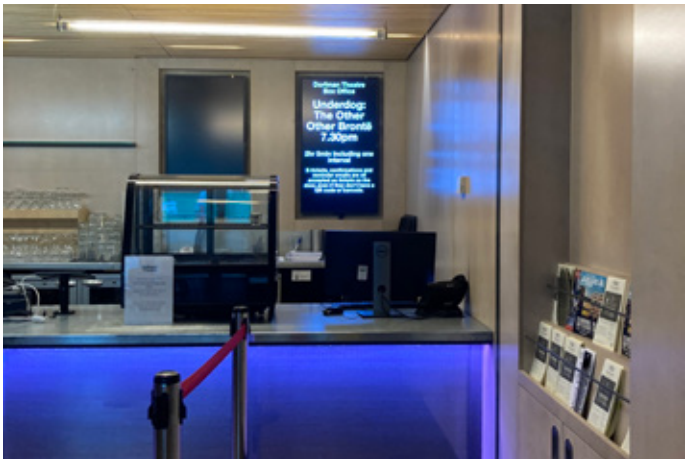


When you arrive through the main entrance, the **security team** will **check your bag**. You might need to queue for a short time.

The security team will not touch you.



There is a **ground floor foyer** and an **upper foyer**. The ground floor can be **busy and loud** before and after the show, and during the interval.



If you need help with your ticket, you can speak to the **box office team**. Their desk is at the back of the **ground floor foyer**.



The **access desk** is located in the **Dorfman foyer corridor**.

There are hearing enhancement headsets, ear defenders, fidget toys, and large print cast lists available here.

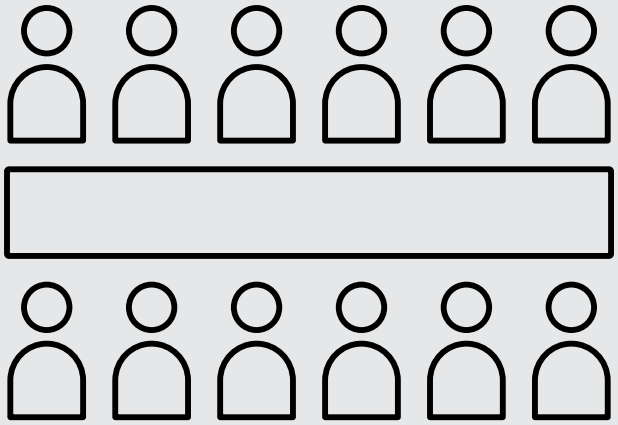
There are **accessible toilets** in the ground floor foyer. To find the toilets, turn **left** when facing the bar.



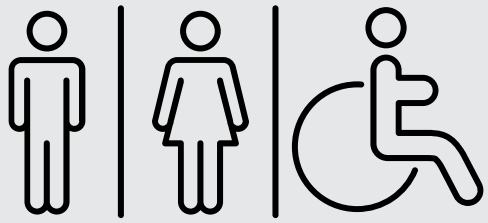
There are lots of staff available if you have questions or if you would like directions to your seat. **National Theatre staff** wear **black t-shirts** with **white writing**.



The Dorfman Theatre has three levels of audience seating: the **pit** (lower level), the **circle** (middle level), and the **gallery** (highest level).



In this production, the stage is a traverse, which means the audience in the **pit** will sit **either side** of a central stage.



Bathrooms in the areas near the Dorfman Theatre will have **hand towels instead of hand dryers**.

The Production
The Land of the Living

The Land of the Living is a **play** written by **David Lan**.

Dates
The Land of the Living will be performed in the Dorfman Theatre until **Saturday 1 November**.

Length
The Land of the Living is **2 hours and 45 minutes** long.

This includes one **20-minute** interval.

Warning!
The following pages have **spoilers** about the content of the play, the characters and the set.

The Production
Content Guidance


Gunshots


Weapons on stage



Screaming/ shouting



Strong and offensive language


References to child abuse and violence


Racist language


Antisemitic language


Disordered eating


Moments of total blackout


Smoke and haze


Themes of grief


Depictions and threats of violence


Loud noises and loud music


Sexual references


Depictions of displacement

What Happens in the Play?

The set

The Land of the Living starts with a conversation taking place in **London in 1990**. The characters talk about events which happened in **Southern Germany in 1945**.

The set is **traverse**: a long stage runs through the middle of the lowest level of the theatre, with **audience sitting on either side**.

One end of the stage has a **bookshelf**, a **large door** and a **piano**. The other end has a **small kitchen**, **sliding doors** and a **raised section full of trees**.

Many scenes have **actors walking or running through the audience**.

The actors use **suitcases**, **benches and chairs** to represent different spaces like trains, houses and offices.

These are images of the **model box** (a scaled down design of the set)





What Happens in the Play?

The characters



Ruth
A UN worker.
60s, 20s in scenes from the past



Thomas
50s, 10 in scenes from the past

The role of young Thomas is played by a young actor. 4 different actors play Thomas at different performances.



Dora and Theresa
UN workers and translator



George
A US soldier



Bill
A US soldier and photographer

Other characters

An ensemble of actors play lots of different roles, such as:

- **Ruth's mum**
- **American soldiers**
- **Soviet soldiers**
- **United Nations relief workers**
- **Adult Thomas' siblings**

What Happens in the Play?
Synopsis

Context

The Land of the Living moves between **1990** and **1945**.

In 1990, **Ruth** is in her 60s, living in **London**. In 1945, she worked for the **United Nations Relief and Rehabilition Administration (UNRRA) in Germany**.

In 1990, **Thomas** is in his 50s. He is a successful piano player. He was a child living in Germany during the war.

Throughout the play, Ruth and Thomas talk about what happened **immediately after the war in 1945**. Their conversations and memories are played out on stage.

When Ruth talks about the past, she becomes her younger self (20) in the scenes.

Adult Thomas often stays on stage, watching the younger (10 years old) version of himself.

Plot

In **1990**, Thomas visits Ruth at her new flat in **London**. He wants her to talk about the past.

Ruth tells Thomas about how she ended up in **Passau, Germany in 1945** as an UNRRA worker alongside the American military.

In 1945, Dora and Theresa (Ruth's assistants) and Ruth are setting up a camp for displaced people.

They find Anna. Speaking in Polish, Anna says that her children were taken away from her three years ago.



Ruth goes to a dinner party with George, an American lieutenant, at the castle belonging to the local countess.

Ruth realises that the castle would be perfect for housing all of the displaced children she is looking after. The children move in.

In another room in the castle, George finds boxes of metal instruments.

The American soldiers bring in a captured German doctor, who explains that he used the instruments to tell which children were ‘pure blood’.



In 1990, Ruth explains to Thomas that many countries were trying to find the children who had been taken from their families and brought into Germany. She explains that the UNRRN offered every child a choice: stay there, or go back to their home country.

In 1945, young Thomas is playing football at his home in Germany. He speaks Bavarian German with his mother and father. His mother asks him to read to her.

In 1990, Thomas sits at the piano as Ruth continues to narrate the story.

In 1945, a displaced woman tries to explain to Ruth and Theresa that many children in the area are not from there, and have been separated from their real parents.

Ruth and her team search through villages to find the children. She finds young Thomas and his adoptive parents.

Thomas' mother makes him wear glasses to hide the fact that he is a 'perfect child'.

Ruth and George ask the town's mayor for records about adoptions in the area.

American soldiers take young Thomas away from his adoptive mother.



Ruth visits her own mother in Alsace. Her mother thinks the children should be returned to their adoptive parents, not their home countries.



Thomas' adoptive father comes looking for him. He fires a rifle.

American soldiers threaten to shoot him, but Ruth stops them. Thomas takes the bullets out of the gun.



In 1990, Thomas tells Ruth about how he started remembering his childhood during a concert he was performing in.

They argue, and Thomas asks Ruth why *she* didn't keep him when he was younger.

In 1945, Bill (a US soldier) takes photos of the children to help their real families find them.

Theresa tries to find out what language young Thomas really speaks. Ruth and Dora try to help him remember his early childhood.

George and the soldiers take young Thomas to play baseball. When they return, they tell Ruth that young Thomas speaks Polish. He remembers the name of his dog.



More villagers start sharing information with Ruth and her team.

One woman gives Ruth a toddler to take home to her real parents. Ruth and the team go to the Central Tracing Bureau to figure out who the toddler is and which country she came from.

Young Thomas smashes plates because he is hungry and upset. A translator realises that his accent is from south-eastern Poland.



Russian soldiers have heard about the children being taken back to Poland and try to stop the train from leaving.

Ruth takes young Thomas to her mother's house to hide him there.

Ruth's mother teaches Thomas to play the piano.

Ruth, Dora and UN team take the children on the train to Poland. The children are welcomed back by the mayor of the village.

In 1990, older Thomas tells Ruth that a man had approached him after a recent concert.

The man is Thomas' real brother, Pawel, from Poland. Thomas reunites with Pawel, and his sisters Ewa and Malgorzata – all musicians too



Thomas finally finds out that his real name is Janusz. He wishes Ruth had taken him on the train too, so that he could have found his real family earlier.

In 1945, when Ruth returns from Poland, the American soldiers have sent the rest of the children to live with American families.

Ruth offers young Thomas a choice: he can stay with her, or he can go back to his adopted mother. Older Thomas does not remember making this choice.

Young Thomas chooses to go back to his German family. Older Ruth cries as she remembers.

What Happens in the Play?
Sonic story

This graphic tells the sonic story of *The Land of the Living*. It highlights any particularly loud or quiet moments, or any moments when there are sudden changes to the sound.

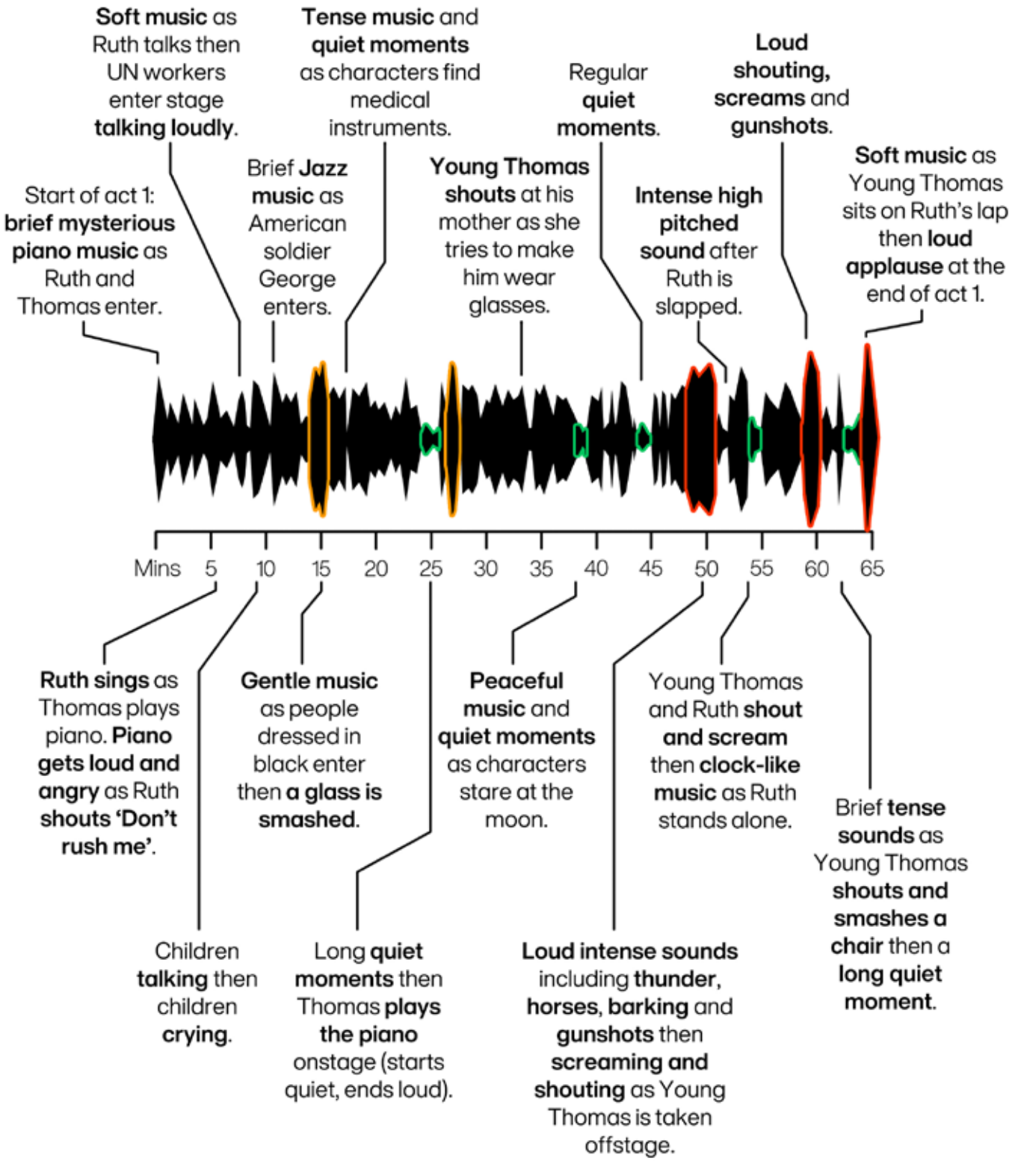
Sound summary

- The Land of the Living is a play
- Scenes often have background music
- Music and sound effects play from lots of different areas of the stage and auditorium
- In some scenes, characters loudly play the piano
- There are many muffled and distant gunshots
- There are some loud gunshots seen on stage
- Characters often shout, scream, and talk over each other
- Characters often speak in different languages



The Land of the Living
Sonic Story – Act 1

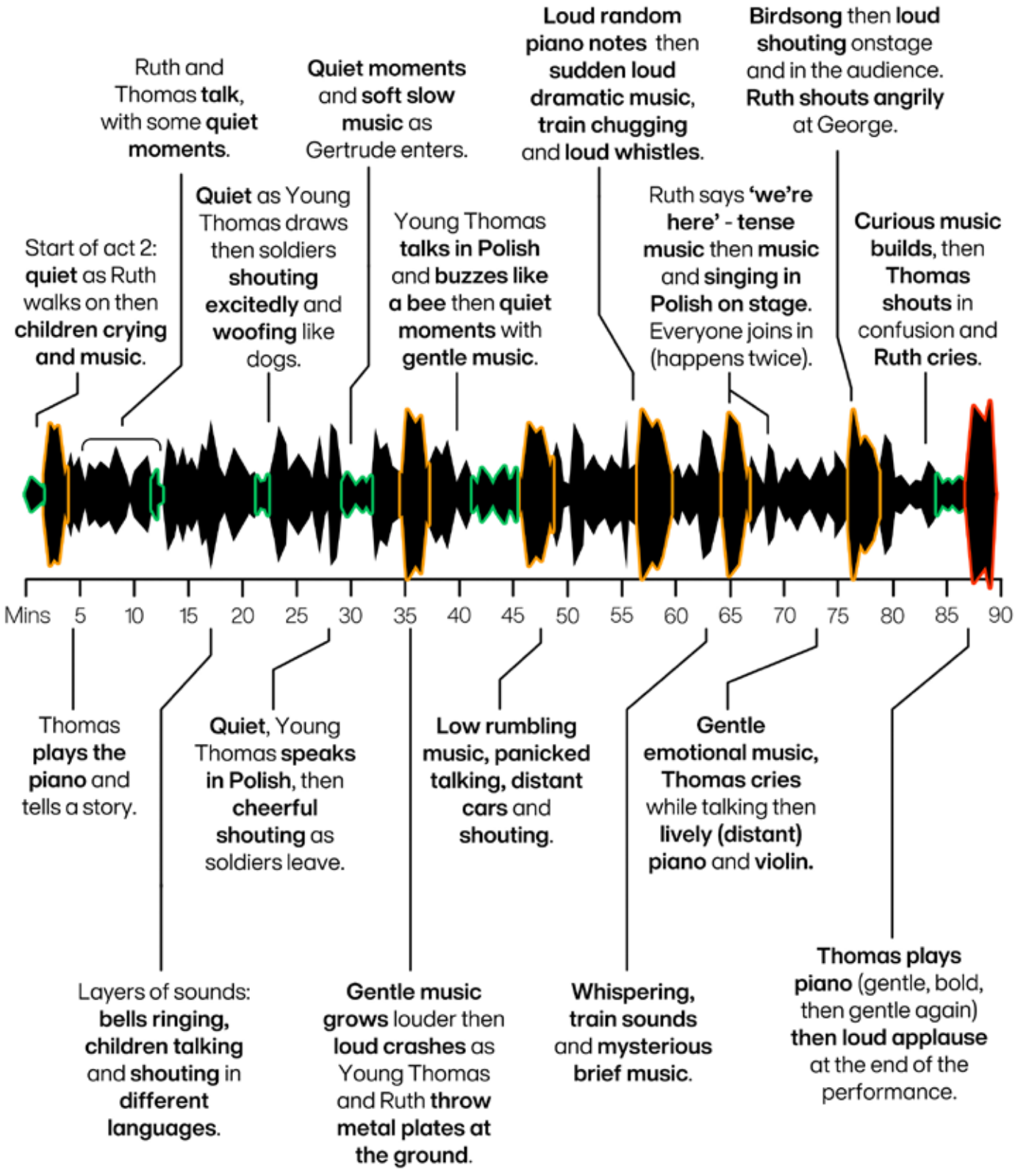
- Very loud
- Loud
- Quiet



Sonic story designed by Touretteshero CIC, 2025

The Land of the Living
Sonic Story – Act 2

- Very loud
- Loud
- Quiet



Relaxed Performance
Access information

There is a relaxed performance of ***The Land of the Living*** on **Monday 20 October** at **7.30pm**.

This performance will take place in a **relaxed environment**. This means:

- Some of the lighting and sound effects have been adjusted to be less sudden or intense
- The auditorium lights will remain on during the show at a low level
- You are welcome to leave and re-enter the auditorium if you need to
- You are welcome to move around or make noise
- We have ear defenders and fidget toys available to use. Just ask a member of staff who will direct you to the access desk

Relaxed Performance
Upcoming performances

Bacchae
Indhu Rubasingham begins her tenure as Director of the National Theatre by bringing Nima Taleghani's new version of Euripides' tragedy to the stage. This relaxed performance will also be **captioned**.

Monday 27 October at **7.30pm**

Hamlet
Something's rotten in Denmark. A bold, darkly funny take on Shakespeare's tragedy, directed by Robert Hastie.

Thursday 6 November at **7.15pm**

End
This touching and funny play which completes David Eldridge's trilogy exploring love and relationships. Directed by Rachel O'Riordan.

Thursday 18 December at **7.30pm**

More information about our future relaxed performances can be found on our website:

nationaltheatre.org.uk/whats-on/?accessibility=relaxed-performance