

LIVE AT KING'S CROSS STATION  
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E. NESBIT'S

# THE RAILWAY CHILDREN

WRITTEN BY MIKE KENNY DIRECTED BY DAMIAN CRUDEN



## **E.NESBIT'S THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**

**Written by Mike Kenny**

**Directed by Damian Cruden**

### **EDUCATION PACK**

**By Dominic Francis**

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## CREATIVE LEARNING WORKSHOPS

### ATG West End Creative Learning Workshops available to support your visit to *The Railway Children*

Each workshop lasts 90 minutes, led by a professional theatre practitioner. Workshops can be tailored to suit learners of all ages, and to weave in your classroom topics or curriculum themes, so please don't hesitate to speak to the Creative Learning team to discuss the needs of your group.

Each workshop will be framed by an interactive introduction to railway safety, drawing attention to how to behave at a station or near a railway line, and including a practical introduction to some of the semaphore signals used in the production.

#### ***The Railway Children: Exploring urban and rural settings***

This drama-based workshop will take inspiration from the contrasting settings of the city and the country within the story of *The Railway Children*. Using extracts from the novel and the stage production, participants will work with a professional theatre director to compare the two environments through role play, drama games and devised work, and especially to explore the experience of Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis as they move to a country village from their life in London.

#### ***The Railway Children: A family portrait***

The theme of the family is paramount to *The Railway Children*, and this workshop will use drama techniques and character studies to explore the significance of family in the story and also for the participants themselves. Taking Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis' sibling relationships as a starting point, a professional theatre practitioner will lead the group to create their own short performances as a response to scenes from the production.

#### ***The Railway Children: Doing the right thing***

This drama workshop will explore morality and justice and the treatment of these themes in *The Railway Children*. Using practical exercises, the group will dissect the children's motives for their actions in the story, including helping the runner and stopping the train. Also including work on the false imprisonment of their father, this workshop will encourage participants to investigate moral principles, honesty and innocence – approaching the themes in a practical manner in order to bring a new perspective to *The Railway Children* and everyday behaviour.

#### ***The Railway Children: Designing a steam train***

Taking inspiration from the impressive steam train featured in the production, this interactive workshop will encourage participants to use logic and their imaginations to design a railway train. Including aspects of engineering, design and role play, this physical workshop will challenge participants to create an imaginary vehicle and explore how the Industrial Revolution led to such innovative engineering and the British railway network.

#### ***The Railway Children: From the page to the stage***

This workshop, led by a professional director, will explore the range of adaptations of this classic story, developing participants' understanding of different media for storytelling. Working on extracts from E. Nesbitt's novel and considering the story's legacy in film, the workshop will consider how this is translated to the stage (and the site specific challenges of this piece in this venue), using drama techniques and practical activities to investigate this transition.

#### **Cost and how to book**

The average cost of our workshops is £8.00 per person, but prices vary subject to group size and availability and are subject to VAT.

We will be able to confirm exact costs when you contact us to book. Workshops are held at the Kings Cross venue, within a West End theatre, rehearsal space or within your school/ a community space near you.

To book one of the above workshops or to create your very own bespoke workshop please contact Ellen Bott, West End Creative Learning Manager on [ellenbott@theambassadors.com](mailto:ellenbott@theambassadors.com)

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, adapted for the stage by Mike Kenny and directed by Damian Cruden, was first produced by York Theatre Royal at the National Railway Museum in York, where it enjoyed two critically acclaimed sell-out seasons in 2008 and 2009. The production then opened at Waterloo Station, in the former Eurostar terminal, in 2010 where it won the 2011 Olivier Award for Best Entertainment before opening in Toronto, Canada.

This production – produced by Runaway Entertainment, Bos Productions and Sue Scott Davison in association with the National Railway Museum – opened at the purpose-built King's Cross Theatre in December 2014.

### Synopsis

- At the beginning of the play, Phyllis, Peter and their older sister Roberta – known affectionately as Bobbie – recall a summer many years before, when they were aged eight, ten and twelve respectively. That was the summer they became 'The Railway Children'. It all started on the evening of Peter's tenth birthday...
- Two official looking men call at the family's home in London and take Father, who works for the government, away. Mother and the children are left all alone.
- Desperate to protect Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis from the truth behind Father's sudden departure, and struggling without his income, Mother dismisses all the servants and informs the children they are moving to Oakworth in Yorkshire.
- The family's new home is a cottage called Three Chimneys where Mother tries to support them by writing stories. Nearby is a railway line where Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis wave at passing trains. From one, an old gentleman waves back.
- At the local train station, the children meet porter Albert Perks. In a misguided moment, Peter, keen to help his hard-working mother, steals coal from a heap but is caught by the porter. Learning of the family's struggles, Perks forgives Peter and befriends the three children.
- When Mother falls ill with influenza, Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis ask the 'Old Gentleman' from the train for help. A hamper of food and medicine is delivered to the cottage shortly after and the children thank the man, but Mother is angry that they appealed to charity, thereby revealing the family's plight.
- One day at the station a man collapses from exhaustion. He doesn't understand English and appears extremely agitated. The children ask Mother, who speaks foreign languages, to talk to him and she learns that the man is a Russian named Mr Schepansky. He's searching for his wife and child, having fled persecution in his homeland for writing a book that sympathised with the Russian people under the repressive Tsarist regime. Mother takes him home and gives him Father's clothes, leaving Bobbie to wonder whether Father is in fact dead.
- Having befriended Mr Schepansky, Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis go to the railway line to pick cherries for him. There they witness a landslide that covers the track, endangering an oncoming train. Acting quickly, the children wave the girls' red flannel petticoats to warn the driver of the danger ahead and a disaster is averted. The Railway District Superintendent commends all three for their bravery and the Old Gentleman presents each of the children with a gold pocket watch. Bobbie takes this opportunity to ask him for his help in finding Mr Schepansky's family.
- While waiting for news, Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis decide to throw a surprise birthday party for Perks, asking people in the village to donate presents. At first the porter is angry, regarding the gifts as charity, but once Bobbie expresses the sentiments behind them, Perks realises they were given out of admiration and respect.
- The Old Gentleman visits Three Chimneys to inform the children that he has found Mr Schepansky's wife and child. The Russian is overjoyed, embracing each of them in turn, before departing for London to be reunited with his family.
- Looking through a pile of old newspapers from the station's waiting room, Bobbie discovers an article about Father. It reveals that he has been imprisoned for allegedly selling state secrets. Distraught, she confronts Mother who insists on Father's innocence, explaining that they must wait patiently for the truth to be revealed. Once again, Bobbie turns to the Old Gentleman for help. Can the elderly benefactor come to the children's aid a third time and secure Father's release?

## MAIN CHARACTERS

(In order of speaking)

### Roberta (Bobbie)

*'Roberta was the eldest. Of course, Mothers never have favourites, but if their Mother had had a favourite, it might have been Roberta.'*

12 years old. An extremely thoughtful and caring girl, she's eager to help others and always stands up for what she believes is right. Bobbie often places other people's needs above her own, including Mother's. She makes sure Peter and Phyllis don't remind her of Father's absence, protecting them in turn about the truth behind his disappearance.

### Peter

*'Next came Peter, who wished to be an Engineer when he grew up.'*

10 years old. A playful boy, sometimes mischievous, he enjoys playing tricks on people but doesn't always think of the full consequences of his actions. Despite disagreeing with his sisters about most things, often bickering with them, Peter is ultimately a sensitive boy who is very protective of his family. In Father's absence, he is the only male in the household and takes this responsibility very seriously.

### Phyllis

*'And the youngest was Phyllis, who meant extremely well.'*

8 years old. A trusting girl who looks up to Bobbie and Peter, sometimes copying their behaviour and attempting to act older than she really is. She finds it difficult being the youngest, having to fit in with her brother and sister, and gets frustrated when she feels she isn't being heard, often having to repeat herself several times. This means Phyllis sometimes speaks before she thinks, confusing even herself, but she's a very loving girl.

### Mother

*'Mother did not spend all her time in paying dull calls to dull ladies, and sitting dully at home waiting for dull ladies to pay calls to her...'*

Instead, she prefers to play with her children, helping with their studies, reading to them and writing stories and poems to commemorate their birthdays and special occasions. In Father's absence, Mother has to take responsibility for running the household and providing an income, which she does through writing. Despite many hardships and personal sacrifices, Mother adapts herself and the children to a poverty she has not previously known without complaint or bitterness. She is the true heroine of the story.

### Father

*'Father was most wonderfully clever with his fingers. He could mend all sorts of things...'*

A man of authority who works for the government, he encourages his children to follow the careers of their choice, regardless of gender, proving himself a progressive thinker. Father is very much a family man, dependable and loving, which is why his sudden departure is so devastating for Mother and the children. Despite being missing for much of the story, his absence and the family's feelings of loss are central to the piece.

### Perks

*'A friendly sort with no nonsense about him.'*

Known as Mr Perks – Albert to a select few – he's the porter at Oakworth Station and is the first person the family meet upon their arrival in Yorkshire. Devoted to his wife and children, Perks is a proud man who won't accept any acts of charity, preferring to provide for himself and his family. He befriends Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis and Mother, becoming very fond of them, and helps the family whenever he can.

## Old Gentleman

*'The children, especially the girls, liked to think that perhaps the old gentleman knew Father, and would meet him "in business".'*

An enigmatic figure – we never learn his name or what he does in the play – he is clearly an important man with considerable influence in official circles. Not only is the Old Gentleman responsible for Mother's recovery from illness, he also manages to reunite the Schepansky family. Truly a Good Samaritan, with a kind and generous nature, he uses his power to help others... But can the Old Gentleman help Bobbie and her family get what they most want?

## Mr Schepansky

*'A man with long hair and wild eyes... whose hand and lips trembled.'*

He has recently escaped captivity in his homeland, where he was imprisoned by the oppressive Tsarist regime for writing a book condemning their mistreatment of the Russian people. Separated from his wife and child, Mr Schepansky has come to England in desperate search of his family, collapsing from exhaustion and anguish on arrival at Oakworth Station. Mother recognises him, having read his book, and with characteristic compassion takes him home to nurse him back to health.

## ACTIVITY

Who are the other characters in *The Railway Children*? Make a cast list, including the actors' names, and write a brief description of each character like the ones above.

## Creative Team

Writer	Mike Kenny
Director	Damian Cruden
Designer	Joanna Scotcher
Lighting Designer	Richard G. Jones
Composer & Musical Director	Christopher Madin
Sound Designer	Craig Vear
Associate Director	Adrian Sarple
Production Managers	Crosbie Marlow Associates
Casting	Scott Davison Productions

## ACTIVITY

Who are the other members of the Creative Team? Do some research and find out who does what behind the scenes – e.g. Company Stage Manager, Chief Electrician, Wardrobe Manager, etc. You can either look in the programme when you come to the theatre, or visit the official website for the production (see **Further Reading and Resources**).

## E. NESBIT

Born in Surrey, England in 1858, Edith Nesbit would grow up to become a celebrated children's author – *The Railway Children* being perhaps her most famous book. Its publication in 1906 helped establish a literary tradition that originated with Lewis Carroll and J.M. Barrie and continues to this day with writers such as Jacqueline Wilson and J.K. Rowling.

Despite the idyllic setting of many of her stories, Edith's early life was an unsettled one. Her father died when she was just three-years-old, leaving her mother and siblings all alone. Due to an older sister's illness from tuberculosis, the family spent several years moving between countries and climates in an attempt to improve her health. As a result, Edith spent much of her childhood at boarding school or staying with relatives. She was a teenager when the family eventually returned to England, settling in Kent.

It was here, in the environs of Halstead Hall, that tomboy Edith enjoyed going on expeditions with her older brothers. Together they would explore the surrounding countryside, including a nearby railway line. As a result, Halstead has often been credited with inspiring *The Railway Children*.

At the age of seventeen, Edith and her family moved to London and two years later she married Hubert Bland, a bank clerk with a keen interest in politics. (She was already pregnant with his child.) Theirs was a turbulent and unconventional marriage. Both Edith and Hubert openly had affairs – Edith raising as her own two children that were the result of one of Hubert's liaisons. In total, they had two boys and two girls together.

The couple were politically active and Edith was a founder member of the Fabian Society, a socialist movement that laid the foundations for the modern Labour Party. When Hubert's business ventures failed she started to write to support the family, producing essays, poems and short stories. Edith was a fast worker and soon progressed to full-length novels. However, it was only when an editor asked her to write a piece on her childhood that she truly found her voice, re-inventing herself as a children's author at the age of forty-one.

*The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, published in 1899, established her reputation and other equally successful books followed, including *Five Children and It* (1902) and *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904). *The Railway Children* was serialised in *The London Magazine* in 1905 before being published as a book the following year. It has never been out of print since. By her death in 1924, Edith had published over forty books for children and co-written many more with other authors.

## THE RAILWAY CHILDREN

Widely regarded as E. Nesbit's most autobiographical book, *The Railway Children* introduced an innovative style of writing for children, setting new standards for the genre thereafter.

Previously children's authors, like Carroll and Barrie, wrote largely fanciful tales and although Edith's stories contained elements of fantasy she always portrayed her young characters in recognisable situations with believable problems – disobeying adults, getting into fights and generally enjoying the fun Edith had experienced as a child. She specifically addressed her target audience and never talked down to them.

*The Railway Children* perfectly demonstrates this union of tone and subject-matter, parallels often being drawn between the book and Edith's own life. The sudden removal of a family's financial security was something she'd had direct experience of, and the mismanagement of money was a constant issue in her husband Hubert's household. Even at the height of her success, Edith still struggled financially.

Like Mother in the story, Edith also knew the plight of being a single parent, her own father having died when she was just an infant, leaving her mother all alone. Later, Edith would have sole responsibility for her own children during long periods when her husband was absent. This was before the Welfare State and benefits system – if a mother failed to provide for her children, they simply starved.

Both Mother and Bobbie in *The Railway Children* share characteristics with Edith, leading some to suggest they're projections of their creator. It's easy to imagine Bobbie growing up to reject the constraints placed on Edwardian women, as a young Edith did – cutting her hair and refusing to wear corsets.

In both her writing and outlook, E. Nesbit remains very much our contemporary.

## THE RAILWAY CHILDREN ON TV AND FILM

*The Railway Children* has proved equally as popular with TV and film viewers - to date the book has been adapted six times for both the small and big screen. Four of these were television dramas made by the BBC, including a seven-part series produced in 1968. It starred Jenny Agutter as Bobbie, who reprised the role two years later in the most famous screen version of all.

Following the success of the BBC's dramatisation, Lionel Jeffries adapted and directed the book for the cinema in 1970. This critically-acclaimed film is generally regarded as 'one of the best children's films ever made' (*Sunday Times*) and was a box-office hit, since becoming a firm favourite in holiday TV schedules.

The film has been many people's introduction to E. Nesbit's timeless tale, including the director of the current stage adaptation, Damian Cruden. 'My earliest memory is the film,' he recalls. 'The opening scene is very strong.'

For others, the book remains the original and best. 'I know it's almost sacrilege, but I never really got the film,' says writer Mike Kenny, who adapted the book for the stage. 'I found it a bit romantic and backward looking. When Damian suggested it to me, I read the book and found a different experience entirely. I think the book is closer in spirit to our own age. It's about people struggling to make do in difficult circumstances.'

**'As Mike says, what's interesting about the book is it's easier to make it relevant to yourself in your time than it is in the film,' adds Damian. 'Though the film is very faithful to the book, the book has more edge – it's slightly harder in subject matter. The film is beautiful, but it emphasises the pastoral, whereas the book is slightly less forgiving.'**

Actress Jenny Agutter's association with *The Railway Children* didn't end in 1970. Thirty years later she starred in a new ITV adaptation of the book, this time playing Mother.

## ACTIVITY

The following could be an individual written activity or the basis for a group discussion. Having seen the production of *The Railway Children* at the King's Cross Theatre, watch the original film on DVD. What are the key differences in terms of plot, casting, set and costume design? Why do you think different artistic choices were made for the stage version? What are the challenges for a Creative Team in adapting a well-known film for the stage?

## BEHIND THE SCENES

### An interview with Writer, Mike Kenny

#### **Had you always been attracted to theatre? Can you pinpoint a time in your life when you decided to become a playwright?**

As a child reading was my favourite occupation by a mile. I'm a big fan of public libraries. Because I grew up on a council estate in a small town on the Welsh border I don't remember seeing theatre, except for one trip to a panto when visiting my auntie who lived in Liverpool. So working in theatre was not even on my horizons.

By a long and circuitous route I ended up working as an actor in the Theatre-in-Education Company at Leeds Playhouse. Because we devised all our own work, I learned a lot about writing by trying to make theatre magic in cold school halls.

I drifted into writing plays when my eldest son was young, because it enabled me to stay at home. It never felt like a decision. I'd had about five plays performed and I was still telling the world I was an actor.

#### **How do you approach adaptation of novels?**

It does depend on the book. I like to find a way of honouring the storyteller's voice. When you read *The Railway Children*, for example, you can almost hear Edith Nesbit telling it to you. She's very present in the story and she acknowledges you too, 'If you're the sort of person who...' and so forth. Some writers want to be invisible. I just worked on a new version of *The Wind in the Willows* and you sense that Kenneth Graham was a much quieter, retiring person. I try to recognise that too.

A book is not a play, though. Reading is a very intimate, solitary experience. You can pick up a book to read on a train or a bus, put it down, read a bit when waiting for the kettle to boil and finish it on a beach on the other side of the world. A play requires a lot of us to get together in the same place and watch in real time. It's very social. To do that effectively you sometimes have to ignore totally what you feel the writer's wishes might be in order to make it work.

#### **And how did you approach *The Railway Children* in particular?**

*The Railway Children*, the novel, is quite episodic. This is a challenge for a playwright. A play needs to follow a single line through quite obsessively. The other challenge is that it is the story of a family where something dreadful happens and the mother declares that no one must talk about it. Given that talking is one of the things you need in a play, it can become a bit of a problem.

In the end this 'problem' became the subject of my play – 'What is the effect of not communicating on the children of the family?' To do this, some episodes in the novel had to go. There is a section that I particularly love about a family who live on a barge, but it didn't serve the central theme so it went.

The only liberty I took with the book was to make it a memory play. The children are looking back on the events from adulthood. This means they can speculate over things which happened that they didn't understand at the time.

#### **What do you feel that a theatre presentation of *The Railway Children* can bring to the story that can't be achieved in the film? And perhaps vice versa?**

Obviously they are the same story, but I think they feel very different. It's partly the time in which we tell them. The film was made in the sixties – it was a very hopeful and optimistic time. This feeling runs through the film and is delightful. The sun always shines and we love it.

We are now telling this story in more difficult times, maybe closer to the time in which the book was written. Political corruption, poverty, refugees, lone parents are things modern children know more about. I think it now seems less of a lost idyll and surprisingly modern.

## **An interview with Director, Damian Cruden**

### **What first drew you to E. Nesbit's story? Do you remember the first time you read the book and saw the film?**

My earliest memory is the film, the opening scene is very strong. I think it must have been quite disturbing, the father disappearing at Christmas. I think I was about eight or nine years old. I only came to the book about thirteen years ago when researching possible work to produce at York Theatre Royal to support my application for Artistic Director, which I got.

### **What attracts you to the story? What relevance do you think it has today?**

So many things work for me, the overwhelming one being the power of innocence. The children ask questions of the world because they have no preconceived notions of how things are. This forces the adults to challenge their own prejudices and preconceptions and as a result things change for the better.

The story is overwhelmingly positive and draws on the emotional memory of our childhood, tapping into something that is fundamental to the very nature of what it is to be human and to love with others. We recognise a state that most of us have experienced where everything is possible, even that which we are told is not.

Nesbit lost her father at a young age and in *The Railway Children* she loses him again, but this time brings him back through her characters' determination. In her narrative she achieves the impossible. This is potent and deeply affecting. It is timeless, we will always have something to learn from such a universal story.

### **How did you go about producing it?**

The first movement came from Dan Bates, our then Executive Director, whom I talked to about the idea. He got in touch with the National Railway Museum and we went from there.

I approached Mike Kenny for various reasons. He's recognised as one of our foremost writers, I had just worked on a fantastic piece of his called *Caitlin*, about Dylan Thomas' wife, and he lives in York. I knew the production had to be fluid and that he was a writer who created work that was theatrical and uncluttered. If the piece was to work it would have to be seamless, something the book mitigates against as it is episodic in form.

### **How did you collaborate with Mike on this project?**

We met, chatted about what we felt the book meant, agreed that it had a political aspect that we wanted to draw forth and that it had to work with a big green locomotive. Mike went off and wrote the play, which we read with a company at the theatre and is broadly the script we presented. It worked. I knew it would as soon as I got it and it was a joy to direct.

### **Can you describe the creative process undertaken with Set Designer, Jo Scotcher, and Composer, Chris Madin?**

With Jo much of the process was about the development of a traverse space. We knew that the track would be in the middle and that we'd perform off trucks. Jo developed the idea of the performance being in a station, which I was keen on as I wanted the audience to feel as if they were going on a journey.

Chris and Richard (G. Jones), the Lighting Designer, know me very well and I trust them. I knew they'd understand the text. They attended rehearsals to observe how the staging and performances were developing and worked from that in creating the musical score and the lighting design.

Craig (Vear), the Sound Designer, did likewise and we had a day out on North Yorkshire Moors Steam Railway to record the real thing as source material for the sound of our trains.

### **Can you sum up the qualities of this production that helps explain its extraordinary success?**

I think it connects with something common to many. It was created with the dedication and love of a whole theatre company – from actors to crew, creatives, front-of-house staff, administrators, catering, production, stage door, marketing – everyone. It is due to their faith in such a crazy idea that this production has captured the hearts and imaginations of so many.

## **An interview with Designer, Joanna Scotcher**

### **What drew you to the theatre and where did you train?**

I have always been fascinated by spaces, atmosphere, and it is possible to shape and change our understanding of these experiences.

My childhood was spent being rather distracted from the task at hand as I was much more content looking out of windows, creating stories to fit those places and people who crossed my path. As I got older, my passion for creating and making outgrew my sketchbook and pencil and I was drawn to physical art. I studied sculpture at art school in Brighton. It was after a year of work when my sculptures were becoming larger and larger in scale that I was sent out of the workshop and built in the spaces between the school buildings.

I realised instead of creating art works that would statically sit in someone else's space, I was desperately trying to create the actual spaces on a scale that people could come into and perform within. It was quite a cathartic moment for me. I then trained in Theatre Design before going on to gain a place with the Royal Shakespeare Company in their Graduate Design Apprenticeship Programme, and it was here that I really began to learn my 'craft'.

Of course the training never stops, as each design you work on comes with unique sets of challenges to overcome and you constantly learn from each piece of work you experience.

### **In your view what makes a successful Theatre Designer?**

From the first rough ideas scribbled in my sketchbook to the first night of the show, it's an amazing and complex process. It is this process that is vital to the success of a show. As well as the artistry and style a designer is obviously responsible for, there must be a true understanding of the stories and the characters you are portraying in the narrative of the piece. It is the job of the designer to really understand how this narrative evolves and to create the canvas for the director and actors to work within, to realise the 'world' of the story.

To realise this world, it is vital to utilise the skills, creativity and ideas of everyone you work alongside. From the craftsmanship of the carpenters building the scenery, the knowledge of the costume department, the skills of the painters... The list is huge.

The most successful designers, in my eyes, hone the skills of the Creative Team and with them unify the vision of the director so the final creation is a cohesive and unified production. It is a cliché, but a production is only as strong as the team that brings it to life.

### **How did you approach the design for this production?**

The director, Damian, and I began with discussions about what the vision was for the show. It quickly became apparent that we wanted to focus on the portrayal of journeys – the journey of the characters, the story, the train, the audience – and amplify this notion within the set. So 'constant movement' became the keystone theme and the journey that each person takes, both throughout the show and, of course, in life. We wanted to weave these two ideas together in the show and so the set had to reflect this.

It harnesses the motion and bustle of the railway platform, the moving trucks keep the action flowing as we would see trains and passengers constantly flowing through a busy station, with fragments of people's lives and stories emerging from suitcases, freight cases and packages.

### **How did you collaborate with the Director and Lighting Designer?**

The set had to support Damian's vision to portray this idea of journeys and movement, and everything about a rail station is transient in its nature. We made a conscious decision to not over-clutter the scenes and minimise the props – so, for example, you will notice luggage and suitcases doubling up for tables and chairs. We want the audience to use their imagination on this journey, as the story itself is told through the memories of the children and their love affair with the life of the station.

Richard does a fantastic job with the lighting and it is so vital to the atmosphere of the vision we wanted to create. For example, from an early stage we spoke about how we could use the creative space under the platform to produce the effect of a train carriage flashing past in the dark. Lights and sound play such an influential part in both capturing and reliving our memories. Naturally a railway station is heaving with light and sound and constant movement, so we knew it was important for us to come together and utilise this for maximum effect.

## **An interview with Production Manager, Simon Marlow**

### **Which came first, the train or the theatre?**

We began with a large hole in the ground, filled it with four hundred trucks of gravel, levelled it and put down railway tracks. Then we brought in the train overnight on three lorries. Once the train was in place we built the train shed tent, then the auditorium tent and finally the foyer tent.

### **What demands did the production make of the Creative Team and the venue?**

Having to build a theatre from scratch was the biggest challenge, and it being a tent made it more difficult. There are very strict limitations on how much weight you can hang off a tent – lighting, sound and scenery. It was also freezing cold until we had finished building the tent and installed heating, which is a serious challenge for all the technicians involved.

### **How did you go about the planning to make this production a reality?**

There was a large team involved in the planning stages, which started four months before we opened. This involved local planning authority, health and safety, tent builders, producers and theatre production management.

### **What's the biggest challenge this piece presents to you as Production Manager?**

Starting from a hole in the ground in a very cold and wet November!

### **How does it compare to previous productions you've worked on?**

#### **Was it the most difficult?**

All productions are difficult – this was just the coldest, but one of the most fun to do. We have a great team on this show.

## ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

### Practical and written exercises based on an extract from *The Railway Children*

Mike Kenny's stage adaptation of *The Railway Children* differs from E. Nesbit's novel in several ways. The book is episodic in its form, comprising a series of different stories that are largely independent from one another. This presents a challenge for a writer, explains Mike, as a play, ideally, 'needs to follow a single line'.

In his re-working, the story is shortened and consequently some of the events that take place in the novel are missing from the adaptation. Instead, it explores the experience of growing up and taking on adult responsibilities through the central metaphor of going on a journey.

This, explains director Damian Cruden, is the focus of the production: 'The portrayal of journeys – the journey of the characters, the story, the train, the audience.' The use of moving trucks on the train track helps emphasise this while allowing the action to take place along the whole length of the platform, ensuring a good vantage point for all audience members.

The adaptation itself is structured in the form of a 'memory play' as the children, now adults, recall the events of the past. Not only does this enable a commentary between the characters and audience, allowing the latter to identify with and share in the characters' experiences, it also provides comic effect as we witness the same behaviours from childhood recur amongst the adult Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis.

The edited extract on page 15 is taken from Mike Kenny's adaptation of *The Railway Children*. The scene takes place on the morning after Mother and the children's arrival in Yorkshire. They have just finished unpacking at their new home, Three Chimneys cottage, and Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis wonder what they'll do next while Mother rests. Looking back, the adult Peter suggests that was the moment they became 'The Railway Children'.

1. Working as a group read through the extract and explore the staging of this scene.
2. For the purpose of the exercise use the stage directions referring to blocking as a guide only. It's more important that you find your own creative solutions to the staging, which will be determined by the space you're working in. (See Mike Kenny's note below.)
3. As directors reading the scene consider what atmosphere you want to create.
4. How would you direct the actors playing Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis in order to establish their relationships?
5. You should also take into account the other elements of production. For example, what should the lighting be like? Is any specific sound required?

## THE RAILWAY CHILDREN

### Edited Extract

- BOBBY** It wasn't until quite late in the afternoon that Mother said
- MOTHER** There! That'll do for today... I'm going to have a lie down... What will you all do?
- PETER** That was it! That was it! That was when!
- BOBBY** We all looked at each other.
- PHYLLIS** We all thought the same thought.
- PETER** At the same time.
- BOBBY** It was like the bits of information in the Child's Guide to Knowledge.
- PHYLLIS** A question.
- PETER** And an answer.
- BOBBY** The question was 'Where shall we go?'  
And the answer
- ALL** To the Railway!

**(IT WOULD BE NICE TO HAVE A BURST OF ENERGY, RUNNING MAYBE, A RUSH THAT IS EXPRESSED IN THE SOUND OF A HUGE TRAIN PASSING. ENORMOUS, OVERWHELMING EXHILARATING, CAN'T HEAR YOURSELF THINK. THE CLIMAX COMES WHEN THEY WAVE.)**

- BOBBY** A train's coming. A train's coming. It's like a great dragon tearing by. It's going to London
- PHYLLIS** London's where father is. Let's ask it to take our love to him.
- PETER** Dragons don't carry love.
- PHYLLIS** They do. They do.
- PETER** They'd be above it.
- PHYLLIS** Let's wave. If it's a magic Dragon it will take our love anyway.
- PETER** It won't.
- PHYLLIS** Wave.
- BOBBY** Here it comes.
- PHYLLIS** ....Now!

### (THEY WAVE.)

PHYLLIS      Oh yes.And somebody waved back.

PETER        They didn't.

BOBBY        .....They did. I saw a hand.

PHYLLIS        .....And a newspaper.

PETER        .....Let's go to the station.

### (THEY BEGIN TO WALK TO THE STATION)

In his introduction to the published script, Mike Kenny reflects on his early career as an actor and how it influenced his later writing, in particular the need to keep things simple: 'I soon realised that the most powerful prop we had was the imagination of the audience, and the most effective tool the skill of the actors.You can make people see things that aren't there.'

For this reason, he explains, you don't need lots of props to stage his version of *The Railway Children*: 'Here's a helpful hint from the first production. Apart from the train, everything in the production – tables, beds, landslides even – was created from the kinds of things you would find on a station platform: cases, trunks, trolleys and suchlike. These are all you need to tell the story of the journey of this family. It's actually the journey they take that is most interesting, not the luggage that accompanies them.' Remember this when you come to stage the scene.

Once you've seen the production of *The Railway Children* at the King's Cross Theatre consider how their staging of this scene compares with your own.

### QUESTIONS ON THE PRODUCTION AND FURTHER PRACTICAL WORK

You may wish to work individually on answering the questions below, or they may form the basis for a group discussion following your visit to the King's Cross Theatre to see the production of *The Railway Children*.

### MAKE NOTES

During your visit observe every element of the production in the minutest detail. Make notes in the interval and directly after the show but not during the performance. You need to experience the show fully as an audience member. Making notes during the performance is distracting for both the actors on stage and those people sitting around you.

## QUESTIONS

Consider the following, asking yourself why a Creative Team makes certain choices and how these impact upon an audience's interpretation of a show.

1. What do you see and hear on the stage and in the auditorium while you are waiting for the performance to begin?
2. What is your first impression of the set?
  - What shapes, levels, textures and colours are being used?
3. How does the design establish the world of the piece, in terms of its location and atmosphere?
4. How do the actors use the set? How does it hide or reveal them?
5. What shapes, colours and textures are used in the costumes?
  - What do they tell us about the characters, in terms of their personalities and background?
  - Compare the costumes of different characters. What stories do they tell?
6. How does the lighting show where we are?
  - Describe two contrasting locations. What colours and shades of colour are being used to create time of day, location or mood? What levels of brightness are being used and why?
  - Think about angles of light. Who is well lit and who is in shadow?
  - When do the lights change? What does this signify?
  - What atmosphere and emotions are suggested by the lighting?
7. What transformations take place within the main characters through the journey of the show? How do the actors embody these changes?
8. How do the company create individual characters for each passenger at the station?
  - Describe the characterisation of one passenger, to whose performance you were particularly drawn.

## IMPROVISE NEW SCENES

Once you've seen the production you could improvise new scenes exploring the background to the play, taking the material within this Education Pack as a starting point. What discoveries do you make? How do such improvisations inform your ideas about the story and characters?

## FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

### Books

E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children* – Adapted for the stage by Mike Kenny (Nick Hern Books, 2010)  
*The Railway Children* by E. Nesbit (Vintage, 2012 – Originally published 1906)

### DVDs

*The Railway Children* – Adapted and directed by Lionel Jeffries (EMI Film Productions, 1970)  
*The Railway Children* – Adapted by Simon Nye, directed by Catherine Morshead (Carlton Television, 2000)  
*The Railway Children* – Adapted by Denis Constanduros, directed by Julia Smith (BBC, 1968)

### Website

<http://railwaychildrenlondon.com/home>

The official website of the current production at the King's Cross Theatre. Find out more fascinating facts about the show, cast and Creative Team, plus see photos and videos of the production.

### Network Rail – safety resources

<http://rail-life-talk.tumblr.com/>

Part of the new Network Rail safety initiative, the Rail Life website was created by young people for young people. Aimed at 12 to 17-year-olds, it contains videos, advice and lots of rail safety information.

The Network rail Safety pages offer lesson plans and presentations for parents and Primary and Secondary schools

<http://www.networkrail.co.uk/safety-education/>