

PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS
POST-SHOW TALK, OXFORD PLAYHOUSE
WEDNESDAY 11TH OCTOBER 2017

Emma- Lisa Dwyer Hogg

Paul and Dad- Trevor Fox

Foster- Ekow Quartey

T and Ensemble- George Somner

Laura and Ensemble- Aimee Lou Wood

Shaun and Ensemble- Michael Balogun

Chair: Thank you so much for joining us after a very powerful piece about the pitfalls of modern life. Oxford Playhouse is the second venue on your tour. As none of you were in the original production, can you talk us through the rehearsal process for this production; picking up the play, taking hold of it and making the characters your own? And perhaps talk a little bit about the research, around the play and for your characters.

Lisa: I think that we were lucky in the sense that Tommy and the director, Jeremy, were really eager for us to bring our own interpretations so it certainly wasn't a remount of the show. I don't think any of us would have really been interested in that. They've renewed the set so all of that was there for us to discover.

Trevor: There's a big difference between taking over in a show and building a new production. When you do a new production you have much more scope to bring something new to the part. Whereas in other times when one is going into a running production it's much more prescriptive because you are going in with other actors who are still working...if you go into a long running show in the West End or anywhere, I went in the Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night time...and with that people are working in a certain way and you have to fit in with them. You don't have the long rehearsal period like we had. We were able to discover the characters and a lot of the movement. Obviously we are doing a production of a show that has been very successful, so, with that, there are certain things that are kept, and the director had worked on it, so we met her and worked with what she wanted to use.

Chair: How much of the science behind addiction influenced rehearsals and how you made decisions about your characters. Did you look at real stories, with regard to the situations we encounter in the play and were you asked to do much research for yourselves?

Ekow: We were quite lucky. Two psychiatrists came to speak to us. One who had worked in rehab for years and years, and then formed her own, based on what she thought her clients needed. And then someone who worked for...I think Priory...a bigger rehab centre. So we had a wealth of knowledge. We had days where we just sat with our books open, talking about the frontal lobe (the front of the brain) addiction and the science behind it, talking to specialists. So that was our basis

and I know Matilda had a lot of conversations with some of the psychiatrists about the pronunciation of words and the experience of having a doctor in rehab and a therapist, and the difference in how they operate...the science background and psychological background. We were quite lucky with that. We shared a lot in the room, friends, family, ourselves, we just threw it out there. We even had some guys come in from one of the rehab centres and we went to open AA meetings, which helped to ground everything. It's very difficult doing a piece about something so important to so many people in the country, the battle with addiction. People don't see it as an illness. To see people go through it...and have that respect for them...I think it grounded a lot of people's performances.

Chair: That is the beauty of the writing. It draws you in to be judgemental and then tips everything on it's the head, addiction is definitely not that simple.

Audience: I read the play and I found the moment when the Mum gives her the box of pills really crushing. I thought of her as the antagonist and I hated her. However, in this production I felt I could really understand her. Do you think if the play were to carry on...does she enable the addiction?

Lisa: I don't know about the aspect of enabling but I do think she has to hear those things from her parents for a start, as hard as they are. It shows great progress in her character that she can hear it and not fly off the handle. Yes it's hard, it's really painful to hear those truths, but it shows how far she has come in her journey. It's quite a controversial choice by the mother, to have that box there, but at the end of the day she is sort of putting it right back into her hands isn't she? She's saying 'here's your choice, make your choice'. I don't know whether that's the right thing for a mother to do but she is engaging on a real level.

Audience: You refer to your character as Emma not Sarah. I was interested in that.

Lisa: We all call her Emma. The text says Emma, the character is Emma. And she always refers to herself as Emma.

Audience: Why does her Mum call her Lucy?

Lisa: She was christened Lucy. Really she was Lucy. Then she was really Sarah. Then she changed her name to Emma.

Audience: I find it fascinating to watch the other audience's reactions when we were down here. Does the choice to have an audience back there link with Emma's addiction? Is there an explanation or is it open for interpretation?

Lisa: I think it's open to interpretation. But I do think there is that element of always being watched and surrounded. As an actress she is always on stage and being observed. Nowhere is really safe. She can't hide from her addiction.

Laura: There's that judgement element as well.

George: I think it brings into perspective the whole group too. Being in an environment where everyone is there as a community.

Trevor: Also it was originally done in the Dorfman at the National. It was done in traverse. So when it went into the West End they kept a bit of that and we kept a bit of that as well. It still holds onto the original production.

Chair: Because she is an actor everything is exposed. Seeing the other audience reminds people that they cannot immerse themselves in the world. It continually reminds the audience that it isn't real. That's what I was drawing from it.

Lisa: I suppose she keeps breaking that fourth wall. She breaks it at the start, in *The Seagull*, she comes up in the blackout, she's looking at the audience, she touches the wall and she breaks that wall.

Audience: How much as actors do you recognise yourself in Emma?

George: It's the big chunk Duncan has written when you're speaking to Mark, just after the group. That spoke to me. Not glorifying what it is to be an actor and all the reality of what it takes, the ins and outs of a job.

Ekow: It's slightly crippling to have a writer literally describe you in two pages.

Audience: In the interval one of my students told me 'I don't want to be an actor anymore...I don't want to turn out like that'. I told her 'don't worry, you won't. Not everybody does'. She said 'but that means some do' **[audience laughter]** and I said 'let's move on!''.

George: I think that's the thing about the lens that you look at addiction from, having Emma as your protagonist. You have someone who is probably actually very able to be understanding of emotion. As actors you are constantly just breaking it down and trying to work out what emotions you have to go through. Just as an actor to go into something where you have to be honest with yourself and you spend so much of your time pretending to be someone else. You think you know yourself but you don't. You hear the character and you pick little things where you go 'if I do that, I'm in trouble'. Those things always ping out. Any actor wants to find something little that makes them think, that is me.

Michael: I've just come out of drama school. I see Emma and she's not working and she's depressed and self-medicating with drugs. I am not self-medicating with drugs but this is my first job and I'm working and I wonder what it's going to be like when I'm not working and how I'm going to feel and that journey. I think coming out of drama school this is a good play to start with because it gives me a nice reference point for harder times.

Laura: I have friends who say to me as long as I just keep working I'll be fine. If I don't stop working I'll be fine. I had someone say it to me on the phone the other day. It is a hit. She says that she gets the same things from acting as she does from drugs and alcohol but good parts are harder to come by. It is an addiction. There are so many parallels. Actress, addict....

Lisa: There are so many parallels. You may get turned down ten times...ten jobs...and you say 'this time it will be different'. You keep going back for more even if you keep getting knocked down. It is an addictive quality to it.

Trevor: Far cleverer people than me have thought about it, but what type of people are we that want to be actors? We are so uncomfortable with who we are that we want to spend our whole lives pretending to be other people. But that's not enough. We have to pretend to be other people in front of other people **[audience laughter]** who then tell us how brilliant we are at being other people. There's a lot going on there. I think it's true of artists, not just actors. People who want to create something else.

Host: Sadly we have to end there but you've given us lots to ponder. Thank you so much, not just for bringing the show to Oxford but for also giving us your time this evening.