

**National
Theatre**

Under Milk Wood

Learning Guide

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About

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of **Under Milk Wood** directed by **Lyndsey Turner**, which opened on **16 June 2021** at the **National Theatre**.

Our packs are designed to support viewing the recording on the **National Theatre Collection**. This pack provides links to the UK school curriculum and other productions in the Collection. It also has a plot synopsis with timecodes to allow you to jump to specific sections of the play.

Here you'll find all the information you need to enable you to study the production and write about it in detail. This includes notes about all the key elements from performance style to design. You'll also find pointers for further research.

Background Information

Recording Date – 1 July, 2021

Location – Olivier Theatre, National Theatre

Age Recommendation – 12+

Cast:

Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard / Gossamer Beynon / Mrs Dai Bread 2...Susan Brown

Mr Waldo / Organ Morgan / Dai Bread / Butcher Beynon.....Ifan Huw Dafydd

Mr Pritchard / Mr Pugh.....Alan David

Mrs Willy Nilly / Mary Ann Sailors / Mrs Dai Bread 1 / Bessie

Bighead.....Gillian Elisa

Mr Edwards / Mr Ogmores / Lord Cutglass.....Michael Elwyn

Rosie Probert / Mrs Cherry Owen.....Kezrena James

Richard Jenkins.....Karl Johnson

Evans the Death / Utah Watkins / Sinbad.....Andrew Macbean

Nogood Boyo / Willy Nilly / Jack Black.....Lee Mengo

Miss Price / Lily Smalls / Mrs Organ Morgan.....Gaynor Morgan Rees

Captain Cat / PreacherAnthony O'Donnell

Mrs Utah Watkins / Polly Garter / Mrs Beynon.....Siân Phillips

Owain JenkinsMichael Sheen

Mae Rose Cottage / Mrs Pugh.....Cleo Sylvestre

Creative Team:

Director Lyndsey Turner

Designer Merle Hensel

Lighting Designer Tim Lutkin

Sound Designer and Additional Compositions.....Donato Wharton

Songs Composed by.....Edward Rhys-Harry

Movement.....Imogen Knight

Teaching Information

This production is particularly suitable for:

- English Literature students who are studying the work of Dylan Thomas.
- Drama students who are studying the work of director Lyndsey Turner.

In particular you might like to explore:

- A contemporary audience's response to the piece, thinking about it in the context of having been performed just as the country recovered from the Coronavirus pandemic.
- The fact that the play was originally commissioned as a radio play by the BBC and was only later adapted for the stage.
- This production alongside some of Lyndsey Turner's other work, including *Top Girls* and *The Crucible* (both of which can also be found on the NT Collection).



Production Notes

The following notes have been compiled to help guide you through the significant design and performance aspects as you watch the production, or to remind you of them after you have watched it. You may also want to make your own notes and form your own opinions on the effectiveness of these aspects as you explore the production.

Contextual Information:

- The original radio play of *Under Milk Wood* was broadcast in 1954.
- This production was the opening production at the Olivier Theatre when audiences returned to the National Theatre building after the COVID-19 pandemic closures. You will notice that the staging is very carefully blocked to ensure that social distancing could still happen. Michael Sheen and Karl Johnson are two actors who were in a 'cohort' which would mean they could make physical contact but everyone else is much more distanced.
- Siân Owen has added a new context for the play, in which the son arrives at a care home to see his father who is suffering from a form of dementia. Rufus Norris wanted the plays that were re-opening the National Theatre after lockdown to reflect community, and therefore the care home setting was particularly appropriate – particularly after the experiences for those in caring roles during the pandemic.

Production Notes

Key design Elements: Set

- The Olivier Theatre was reconfigured for *Under Milk Wood* and became a theatre in-the-round configuration. The stage was left intentionally bare of static items of set, instead stand-alone pieces such as chairs, low tables, a TV on a stand, and various trolleys were used instead to create a wide range of locations. These could be moved with ease, and this helped with the rapid transitions between the different settings of the narrative.
- You will notice that many of the items of set are placed far apart. This is because *Under Milk Wood* was the first production in the Olivier after the COVID 19 pandemic closed theatres for a prolonged period. Part of the design's aesthetic meant that actors could safely interact whilst maintaining a safe social distance.
- In the opening moments of the production, a dream-like state is suggested by the white sheeting billowing above the furniture of the care home. We are briefly introduced to Richard's mind.
- Set dressing includes cans of paint and decorating materials, a tea trolley containing crockery and biscuits, a TV and unit, armchairs, and high-backed chairs such as you would see in a care home. We also see walking frames for some characters.
- Look out for set detail which denotes a modern setting (21st century) vs the 1950s setting in which the original text is located. Consider colour, scale and texture, in particular.

Production Notes

Key design Elements: Costume

- Richard (Dad) wears blue and white striped pyjamas, and dark slippers. He is later in a black 3-piece suit, with a white shirt and a dark tie.
- Kelly wears a green anorak, with a light green carer's uniform.
- Serena wears a white dress, with a brown $\frac{3}{4}$ length Puffa-style coat, with white shoes and a white handbag.
- Luke wears pale green scrubs, a pale brown hoodie, and a grey beanie, with white Croc-style footwear, often worn in care homes and hospital settings.
- Mrs Drew wears a pale blouse, with a checked skirt and a brown cardigan.
- Mr Duffy wears brown trousers with a brown woolen waistcoat, and pale shirt.
- Mr Davies wears a white knitted gilet, with a brown long sleeved polo shirt and brown trousers, with a white eye patch covering one eye.
- Mr Evans' costume includes light beige trousers and a pale beige cardigan, and he has glasses on a chain.
- Owain wears a white shirt, dark grey trousers, a grey linen shirt and brown shoes. He discards his jacket for much of the performance but puts it back on towards the end.
- Mrs Beyon wears a red dress with a cardigan and cream apron.
- Pugh wears a brown suit jacket, white shirt, a dull yellow bow tie and brown trousers.
- Dai wears a russet knitted and buttoned-up waistcoat with brown trousers, and a white shirt.
- Lord Cut-Glass wears a very Victorian-style costume of black frockcoat and top hat, with a narrow striped knitted scarf. He has a pocket watch in his breast pocket and another on a waist coat.
- Nogood Boyo wears a brown jumper, brown trousers, and an orange-hued beanie hat.

- Make-up is kept largely natural.
- Some female characters wear brightly-coloured lipstick, but the transitions between characters mean that extreme make-up is not necessary.

The ensemble wears a variety of different costumes throughout the production. The list above gives an indication of the style and period being depicted but is not an exhaustive list.



Production Notes

Key design Elements: Lighting

- As you watch the production, be sure to note how the stage is sometimes completely flooded with light, and at other times very tight spotlights make the performance space seem much smaller and more intimate.
- Follow spots help illuminate 1st Voice/Owain and allow the audience to imagine different locations which are signified by smaller items of set, like a trolley or small dining table.
- Lighting fades between one state and another – as the production relies on rapid yet smooth transitions, there are no full blackouts between scenes.
- Note the way lighting is used to focus our attention on the relationship between Richard and his son towards the end of the performance, particularly as we have returned to the care home setting by this point.



Production Notes

Key design Elements: Sound

- In the opening moments of the production, we hear distorted and muffled voices, suggesting the voices that Richard hears around him in the care home.
- There is some underscoring, with piano music and string music audible at some points in the performance.
- At various points we hear the recorded sound effects of dogs barking, bird calls and birdsong. We also hear the boiling of a kettle in a kitchen.
- Around 01.01.08 we hear J S Bach's *Sleepers Awake* being played on the organ.



Production Notes

Performance Style

- The creation of different settings often uses ingenious design choices. This includes layered tablecloths that can be quickly removed to reveal another one underneath, and folding/rotating parts of a table to quickly move set dressing items such as teapots, crockery etc. The actors initiate these changes themselves within the transitions between scenes or sections, often doing it so quickly that the audience would barely notice.
- This production relies on a very strong ensemble style. Delivery is swift, as are the transitions between scenes. The pace of the production encourages the audience to fully suspend their disbelief and become completely immersed in the world that is being created through vivid verbal imagery, and the imagery created by costume, set, lighting and sound design.



Production Notes

Key Moments

- Owain asking to see his father takes place from 00.08.20 onwards, and the scene runs until 00.17.21.
- The original text of *Under Milk Wood* then starts at 00.17.37, when the lighting becomes a warm red wash, and the lighting becomes more intense on Owain. This section of text concludes at 00.23.01. From this section onwards, take note of how the ensemble interacts to create all the different characters mentioned in the text.
- As you watch the various sections in the production, take note of where Owain is as he observes the action and helps narrate it.
- Watch from 00.29.07 to observe the way in which '1st Voice' (Michael Sheen/Owain) narrates. Reverend Eli Jenkins begins speaking at 00.40.52.
- Another section of dialogue begins at 00.49.04, and in this section, you can see the way in which locations seem to change according to which tablecloth and set dressing is on the table. Watch until 00.53.52 to see the various ways the transitions between different locations are made.
- Look at set design again from 00.54.23 to 00.57.20 to see the way in which objects like the laundry basket become a sailing ship, for example.
- From 01.01.01, 1st voice returns to narrate the sounds and sights of the morning. The shop counter is created during this section, which ends at 01.10.03.
- Adults playing children begins at 01.15.03, and we are transported to the inside of a pub shortly after 01.17.43, and the section ends at 01.29.35.
- The action re-enters the care home location at 01.41.43. Watch carefully until the end of the performance to watch how the relationship between Owain and Richard is brought to its emotional conclusion. 1st voice (Owain) becomes emotional at 01.45.12 as the rest of the company form tableaux across the stage.

Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

00:00:05 Care Home

A Welsh care home lounge, covered in dust sheets. Richard Jenkins enters, he hears voices from all over. Serena and Kelly, two care home nurses find Richard, confused and alone. Painters have been in, and Luke, who has been working on the night shift, has fallen asleep on shift. He is picking up as many shifts as he can, and the care home is short-staffed.

The various residents of the care home enter the lounge to begin their day. Owain arrives to see his father, Richard. He is impatient and agitated, having driven all night, and has arrived before visiting hours, so begins to kick up a fuss, startling the other residents. Owain is a writer.

The staff bring in Richard to see his son. He looks at Owain and around the room, confused. He says nothing. Owain tries to make pleasantries with his father, and reveals he is having a difficult time, and that his own son is no longer talking to him. Richard says nothing. In his agitation, Owain says frustratedly he will get straight to the point, and there is something he needs to talk to him about. Richard is scared, and starts to panic, talking about not having a penny, referring to himself as Dickie.

Owain realises that his father doesn't recognise him, and has dementia. The nursing staff talk about how they are helping him, going through old photographs in a photo album, as his old memories are coming to the surface. Owain takes the album and tries to show it to Richard, to evoke some memories. Nothing. However, it does serve some painful memories for Owain, of how Richard treated him like one of his students in public, and how he dragged him out of a pub as a teenager, in front of his mother. Owain grows more and more desperate for Richard to talk to him, to look at him, admitting that last night he almost did something "really stupid."

00:17:30 Llareggub

Owain tries a new method to reach his father, and he tells him a story. He sets a beautiful, poetical scene of the seaside town, Llareggub. The other residents and staff of the care-home become the characters of the story. Richard is listening and watching.

00:22:30 Nighttime

The citizens of Llareggub are asleep. The narrator (First Voice/Second Voice/Owain) speaks of how we are witnessing the townspeople's dreams. Captain Cat, the blind sea captain, is tormented in his dreams by his drowned shipmates, who long to live again and enjoy the pleasures of the world. Mog Edwards and Myfanwy Price dream of each other; Jack Black the cobbler dreams of chasing away the girls in his nightmares; the undertaker dreams of stealing currants from his mother's baking; Mr. Waldo dreams of his childhood and his failed marriages; Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard dreams of her two deceased husbands. The other characters dream of their innermost secret desires.

“Time passes. Listen. Time passes. An owl flies home past Bethesda, to a chapel in an oak. And the dawn inches up.”

00:39:40 Morning begins.

Our guide introduces the town, discussing the facts of Llareggub. The Reverend Eli Jenkins delivers a morning sermon on his love for the village. Lily Smalls wakes and bemoans her pitiful existence. Mr. and Mrs. Pugh observe their neighbours, as Mr Pugh fantasises the many ways of killing his wife; the characters introduce themselves as they go about their morning.

Mrs. Cherry Owen reminds her husband of his drunken antics the previous evening. Butcher Beynon teases his wife during breakfast. Blind Captain Cat listens as Willy Nilly the postman goes about his morning rounds, delivering to Mrs. Ignorance-Pritchard, Mrs. Pugh, Mog Edwards and Mr. Waldo. Captain Cat can recognise each person in the

town from their walk alone and has learned the intimate details of their lives. Organ-Morgan plays at his organ.

At Mrs. Organ-Morgan's general shop, women gossip about the townspeople. Willy Nilly and his wife steam open a love letter from Mog Edwards to Myfanwy Price; he expresses fear that he may be in the poor house if his business does not improve.

01:08:35 Mid-Day

Captain Cat listens to the children playing and singing in the schoolyard. Mrs. Dai Bread Two swindles Mrs. Dai Bread One with a bogus fortune in her crystal ball. Reverend Eli Jenkins stops to listen to Polly Garter, as she scrubs floors and sings of her past lovers.

In the schoolyard, Gwennie urges the boys to “kiss her where she says or give her a penny”. They tease and bully little Dickie, who doesn’t have a penny to give her, and whose mother says he mustn’t misbehave.

Gossamer Beynon and Sinbad Sailors privately desire each other.

01:19:45 Dinner Time

During dinner, Mr. Pugh imagines poisoning Mrs. Pugh. Mrs. Organ-Morgan shares the day's gossip with her husband, but his only interest is the organ. We get a glimpse of Lord Cut-Glass's insanity in his "kitchen full of time". Captain Cat dreams of his lost lover, Rosie Probert, but weeps as he remembers that she will not be with him again. Reverend Jenkins works on the White Book of Llareggub, which is a history of the entire town and its citizens. On the farm, Utah Watkins struggles with his cattle, aided by Bessie Bighead. As Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard falls asleep, her husband's return to her, plotting how to kill her. She intercepts them, sternly, and they go about their tasks. Mae Rose Cottage swears that she will sin until she explodes. The town prepares for the evening, to sleep or otherwise.

01:36:50 Night

As night begins, Reverend Jenkins is missing. Jack Black heads to meet his Satan in the woods. Cherry Owen heads to the Sailor's Arms, where Sailor Sinbad still longs for Gossamer Beynon. Mr. Waldo and the townspeople sing drunkenly at the Sailors Arms, rowdiness ensues. The Reverend Enters. Here we see a mirroring of a teenage Owain being caught by his schoolmaster father at the pub.

Beat.

01:41:40 Care Home

We are back in the care home. Nurse Serena brings Richard a chair to sit on, mirroring the scene from earlier. It is leaving time, and Owain is ushered out. Before he leaves, Richard sings Reverend Jenkin's sermon of Milk Wood, blessing the end of the day. He embraces his son. The residents of the care home finish the story of Llareggub: Captain Cat sees his drowned shipmates, and Rosie, as he begins to sleep. Mog and Myfanwy write to each other before sleeping. Mr. Waldo meets Polly Garter in Milk Wood.

Owain reassures his father and closes the story. As the citizens of Llareggub return to their dreams again, as Richard too falls to sleep.

Lights dim and fade to black.

Suggestions for Further Activity

- Read this review from *The Guardian*:
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jun/24/under-milk-wood-review-michael-sheen-dylan-thomas-national-theatre> . Write your own review, using this one as a model.
- In the review, Arifa Akbar says, “While this is a charming production that bewitches, it begs the question of why a drama that is so consciously retreating into the past is revived now, and how it speaks to our pandemic landscape.” Discuss with your class why you think it is important or relevant (or not) that the NT staged this production in 2021. Do you think it needed the additional material in which the text is placed within the context of a care home? Justify your opinion.
- Watch an extract from the 1971 Richard Burton and Peter O’Toole film.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ba8UC6Ducxc> Which version do you prefer? What opportunities does live performance have that the film doesn’t, and vice versa?
- Listen to the original BBC radio recording from 1954
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0h7b47h>
- Watch this recording of In Conversation with Michael Sheen, Siân Phillips, Kezrena James & Kate Mosse as they discuss the NT production:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U3L2D_LVXQ . Then go back and watch the first 20 minutes of the production. What additional understanding do you have because of hearing them speak?
- Lyndsey Turner and Merle Hensel also worked together on *Top Girls* which is available to watch on the NT Collection. Watch this production and note the similarities and differences in the approach between the two production designs. You could also look at Merle’s *Top Girls* photographs on her website here:
<https://merle-hensel.squarespace.com/work#/top-girls/>

Find out More

Watch

In Conversation Michael Sheen, Siân Phillips, Kezrena James & Kate Mosse

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U3L2D_LVXQ

Learning Hub

You can find more resources for schools and teachers on the National Theatre's Learning Hub. Search by key stage, subject, theatrical style or practitioner and discover an ever-growing library of short films, learning guides and digital exhibitions.

Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learn-explore/schools/teacher-resources/>

National Theatre Archive

More materials relating to the production including the costume bible, poster, prompt scripts, programme, stage management reports and more are held at the National Theatre Archive, which is free to visit.

Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/archive>

We hope that you have enjoyed watching and studying **Under Milk Wood**. Don't forget that there are many more fantastic productions to explore as part of the NT Collection. We hope that watching this recorded production has made you feel inspired to see and make live theatre. [Why not find out what's happening at your local theatre and how you can get involved?](#)

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Thank you