

National Theatre Collection

Chewing Gum Dreams – Learning Guide

About This Guide	1
Background Information	2
Teaching Information	3
Production Notes	
Contextual Information	4
Key Design Elements	4
Performance Style	6
Key Moments	7
Plot Synopsis with Timecodes.....	8
Find Out More	13



About

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of *Chewing Gum Dreams*, directed by Nadia Fall, and written and performed by Michaela Coel. *Chewing Gum Dreams* opened in March 2014 at the National's temporary theatre, The Shed.

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

Background Information

Recording Date – 17th March, 2014

Location – The Shed, National Theatre

Age Recommendation – 14+ (adult themes, sexual & drug references)

Cast

Tracey Gordon **Michaela Coel**

Creative Team

Director **Nadia Fall**

Writer **Michaela Coel**

Lighting **Jamie Spirito**

Sound **Mike Walker**

Teaching Information

This production is particularly suitable for:

- Anyone with an interest in **contemporary theatre**.
- Anyone with an interest in the **monologue form**.
- Anyone with an interest in the **work of Michaela Coel**.

In particular you might like to explore:

- The themes of the play, including Coel's exploration of the education system, race, sex and friendship.
- The way in which Coel evokes the various different characters.

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

- Michaela Coel's one-woman play was written in 2010. It was performed by Coel in 2014.
- The play was the basis of the TV series *Chewing Gum* on Channel 4.
- The play contains strong language, sexual and drug references and references to domestic violence.
- The play was performed in The Shed at the National Theatre. This temporary theatre was a small, intimate performance space that was created at the National Theatre while extensive refurbishment was done on the Dorfman Theatre between 2013 and 2016. The productions that were performed in the space were often ground-breaking, challenging and unexpected.

Key Design Elements: Set

- The stage is kept bare throughout the performance, except for one padded office chair with wooden arms.
- As well as sitting on it, she stands behind it as if it is the chemist's counter. The floor is a neutral grey colour.
- The staging is a thrust configuration which creates a sense of intimacy between the audience and the character. The minimal nature of the set means that our sole focus is on Tracey and the stories that she is telling.

Production Notes

Key Design Elements: Costume

- **Tracey's** costume consists of a black pleated school skirt, black school blazer, grey spotty socks and white plimsolls. She has a black Nike rucksack on her back.
- She changes to denim shorts and a black scoop neck t-shirt. She has a white vest top underneath that.
- After she has undressed for Connor, she puts her school shirt and skirt back on, which reminds us that she is still only 14 years old. It makes her seem much more vulnerable than she realises. The issues that Tracey is dealing with are very adult, and so the juxtaposition can feel uncomfortable for the audience.



Key Design Elements: Lighting

The lighting plot for this production helps to create setting for the different incidents that Tracey is recounting. This includes:

- Disco lighting – pink, green and yellow pulsing lights, particularly focused downstage.
- A yellow wash is used for much of the performance.

Production Notes

- A pale wide spotlight when Tracey describes Miss Mott and the classroom conveys a sense of the disturbing atmosphere as the class are chanting and the teacher is trying to gain control of the class.
- A cold hue, in wide spotlight, when Tracey talks about Candice being in hospital makes Tracey appear small, vulnerable and pale. It emphasises the difference between the beginning of the play where Tracey seems confident and in control, and the end where she is frightened and struggling.

Key Design Elements: Sound

Recorded sound effects and music are used throughout the production. As well as providing information about setting, it also helps create mood and atmosphere on such a minimalist set, and in a one-actor performance.

Recorded sounds and music include:

- A bus bell and engine
- Birdsong
- The sound of the chemist door chime
- The sound of waves – (when Connor takes Tracey to Margate)
- Song – *A little Bit of Luck* by DJ Luck and MC Neat
- Song – *Rendezvous* by Craig David (which plays as Tracey gets undressed for Connor)
- Song – *The Heartless Theme aka The Superglue Riddim* by Heartless Crew

Performance Style

- The character of Tracey is 14 years old. There are moments in the performance where her body language is confident and she moves with purpose around the stage. She sits on the chair as normal, but also sits on its back, with her feet on the seat, again suggesting confidence and control.
- Later in the play, as the subject matter becomes more serious and upsetting, Tracey's body language becomes less decisive and confident.
- On her way to Connor's house, she runs around the edge of the stage a number of times, to suggest the journey to the house.

Production Notes

Key Moments

You might like to consider these moments in particular when you are studying the production.

- A sudden moment of vulnerability in the nightclub describing what happens to Candice: 0:15:55 – 0:17:34 (**Content warning: strong language**).
- Tracey asks the chemist for the morning after pill. Like many of the conversations that Tracey recounts, she speaks the other character's lines too. The comedy and pathos comes from her naivete that combines with her dismissive attitude of the pharmacist (**Content warning: strong language and sexual references**): 0:23:21 – 0:25:21.
- Tracey talks about Connor and "the cracks in the floor": 0:25:21 – 0:27:34.
- Tracey talks about Candice, who has fallen pregnant: 0:27:35 – 0:30:35. Note how Tracey then runs around the space several times to suggest running to Connor's house. She stands behind the chair that now signifies Connor's front door.
- Tracey is in a lesson discussing Candice (**Content warning: use of the 'N' word, sex and drug references**). Note the way she impersonates the teacher's voice, and how she also creates the rising sense of tension in the classroom as the students chant: 0:34:05 – 0:37:36.
- Tracey visits Connor's house and is rejected by Connor's mother. She stands behind the chair again. Note the way she changes her voice and body language to create the character of Connor's mother. Although the mother's voice sounds kind, the sense of loss is palpable for Tracey, and her own body language gets increasingly desperate (**Content warning: strong language**): 0:40:03 – 0:45:47.

Plot Synopsis

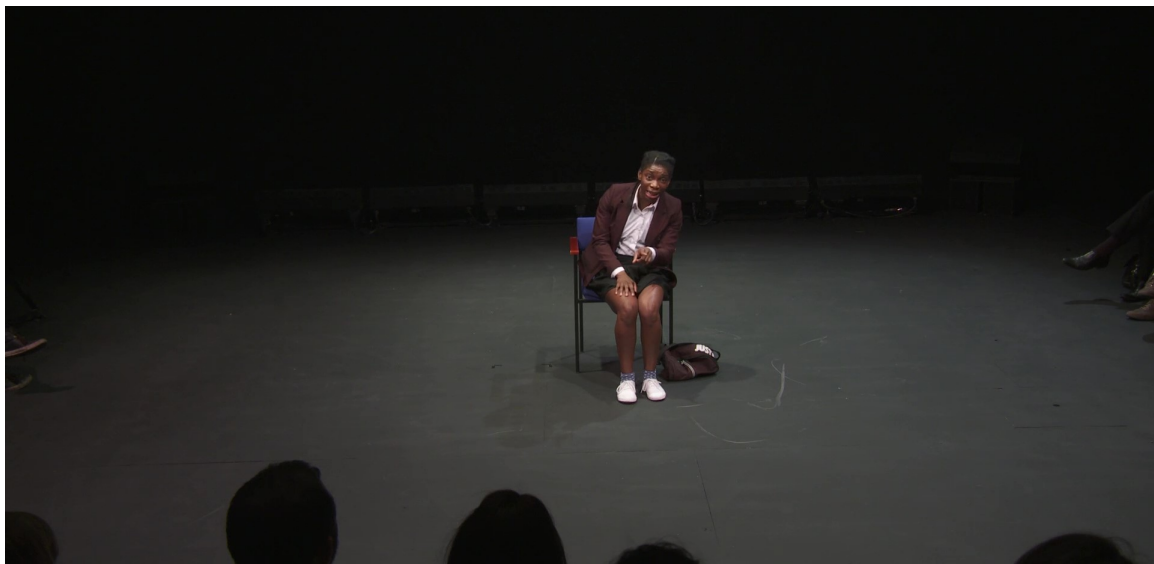
Scene 1

Tracey Gordon, aged 14, is on the bus. She thinks Indian bus drivers are the best as they don't care whether your bus pass is legit or not. 'Connor Jones' blue eyes are eyeballing my pop socks,' she notices.

Tracey describes and slags off her schoolmates as they get on: Seraphina Forbes, who doesn't say good morning ('she's just a bit odd; she wears a red dressing-gown to school and tells people it's a coat'), and Candice who looks like a crow. Fat Lesha, she says, is laughing the loudest. Lesha is famous for her ability to lick her own vagina: 'You have to pay to watch her though – she's the business type.' Tracey describes how, in year 8, they made Lesha eat one of the sausage bagels she sells, filled with dog shit. When she got food poisoning, 'Fat Lesha took the rap for all of us; she got suspended for two weeks.' Tracey's insults finally force Seraphina to turn round and stare at her. Connor Jones is playing Ghetto Kyote on his portable speakers – 'for a white boy... he's got really good music'. It's obvious that Seraphina is crying, but 'life goes on innit?'

Scene 2 (03:38)

Candice Ellis ('the buffest girl I've ever seen in the whole'a Hackney') is Tracey's friend since primary school. They exchange insults, but 'I think we might be closer than any other two people on the planet. I only know what love is 'cos of her'. Candice's boyfriend Aaron Davis is ten years older than they are, and mixed race, like Candice. But Tracey thinks his mix is bad. When they were younger, he put his hand up her skirt, she sees a demon in him.



Plot Synopsis

Scene 3 (07:27)

Although Tracey really tries to listen in class, she often doesn't understand. Candice asks her if she said Regan's dad was gay. She didn't, she just asked. She describes Fat Lesha's walk. Lesha has a pencil test to see if the girls' tits are big enough, and if they aren't, slaps them round the head. Lesha asks Tracey if she knows Emma is pregnant by Bola Akinsola, who only has one testicle? 'She ain't gonna finish school you know? Miss Mott said she's gonna die on benefits in a council flat like a chump.'

(10:45) Lesha tells Tracey that Connor Jones gave her 8 out of 10 for personality. Tracey thinks the teacher, Miss Mott, although her husband is black, is racist: she colour codes the class, with Asian kids at the front, white next, and 'Black ones, obviously, at the back.' Tracey is sent out for laughing, the teacher telling her she will never do anything in her life and her skirt is too short. Everyone except Candice laughs as she leaves. 'No one has ever embarrassed me so low from anywhere.'

Scene 4 (13:05)

Tracey considers herself quite buff: 'From the front it looks a bit bland but the minute you check me from the sides, it's like "powpow" – a past and a future like Beyonce.' She muses on the size of her eyes and lips: 'Fat Lesha always says that fat lip girls give the best blow jobs – but I don't do dem nasty tings der man.'

(14:50) DJ Luck and MC neat – 'A Little Bit of Luck' plays, and Tracey talks about dancing girl-on-girl with Candice because 'guys like it'. But Aaron interrupts them, tells Candice to go to her mum's and knocks her about. After Tracey helps her to her feet and cleans her face, Candice apologises to Aaron, 'And she looks happy, ugly, in pain, drunk, but genuinely happy'. And now Candice is dancing with Aaron, not with Tracey.

Scene 5 (17:35)

Waiting for the last bus, Tracey snatches Seraphina Forbes' bus pass and boards the bus behind Connor Jones, leaving Seraphina behind, crying. Tracey walks up the stairs in front of Connor, 'So he can see my bum swinging', and goes to sit at the back, 'away from the hood rats'. He sits beside her and puts his hand on her thigh. She doesn't get off at her stop, but goes to his room with him. Craig David's 'Rendezvous' plays as they undress. Tracey has only seen one dick

Plot Synopsis

before (when Aaron showed her his in the lift – ‘I just get the stairs now’). She suddenly realises her period has started, ‘So... maybe we can put our boxers back on. Sorry.’



Scene 6 (22:00)

Tracey had always assumed white people were bad kissers – ‘it’s just that most of them have really small lips and they can’t embrace the challenge of lips like mine... But Connor was great!’ It occurs to Tracey that she could get pregnant. She texts Candice for help, but no reply, which is odd. There’s only one option left: ‘I ring the DIY vagina licker for advice’, and learns that she can get the morning after pill by giving someone else’s name and address. She gives the Asian chemist Seraphina’s name. He wants to know when she had intercourse and she has to explain that they didn’t: ‘I wanked him.... This ain’t The Bill or something, why are you interrogating me?’ The chemist gives her the pill and some condoms, though she doesn’t know why: ‘I ain’t got a dick.’

(25:25) Tracey describes how Connor talks to her. He can’t believe she’s never seen a horse, or been to the beach: ‘We lay on his bed and spoke aloud the stuff you keep in private diaries and letters.’ Connor wants to be better than his dad, is

Plot Synopsis

ambitious and wants to go to university. 'He says there's cracks in the floor 'n I should aim higher before I find myself stuck in dem.... I tell him them cracks were made for me, they were made for my mum, and her mum and relaxin into them is what we do best. I ain't smart enough to be someone. I'm just smart enough to know I'm no one.' She leaves before he wakes and doesn't expect anything from the relationship.

Scene 7 (27:35)

Tracey wants to tell Candice about Connor, but Candice is pregnant and says that she and Aaron plan to get married and move to the country. 'You're 14 Candice. You can't get married.' She tries to tell her that Aaron is not a good person, but Candice thinks she's jealous and won't listen. Tracey rings Connor and asks him 'Can you take care of me and stuff, or something please?'

Scene 8 (30:33)

Tracey and Connor once kissed for eight minutes, timed by two Craig David songs. He has taken her to the seaside for the first time in her life – 'He blindfolded me and took me all the way to a beach... It goes so far, it joins with the sky. I feel like crying, but not from sadness.' Tracey has been taking more advice on sex, and supplies, from Fat Lesha since the 'jumped-up prick at the pharmacy' won't supply the pill.

Scene 9 (33:14)

Lesha has heard about Candice's pregnancy, and tells Tracey about Aaron's family history: 'You know he found his sister hung from a ceiling when he was like 8 and now his mum is propa mad, nothing behind the eyes.' Lesha says Candice is on crack, and Miss Mott says 'If she is on crack and she is pregnant, good riddance. Now pay attention and STOP THE CHAT!' Tracey objects to her talking about Candice like that, and the teacher tells her to get outside. Tracey says 'No, YOU get outside Miss' and the class starts to chant 'Get out' at the teacher. Lesha carries Tracey on her shoulders as she tells Miss Mott exactly what she thinks: 'It's my fault I'm failing Miss, I shoulda gone Cardinal Pole, apparently the teachers there are actually qualified, emotionally and intellectually.' Miss Mott runs out and Tracey is proud of expressing herself.

Plot Synopsis

Scene 10 (37:30)

On the 67 bus, Tracey finally allows Seraphina to sit beside her. Seraphina asks about members of the family: 'And Uncle Ted. Has he come back yet? Has your dad come back yet Tracey?' She says she will be praying, and Tracey sees beauty and warmth in the face of her cousin, 'and my heart clogs up with guilt'. Seraphina reveals to her that Candice has been taken to hospital, 'bleeding from her belly, from down there.'

Scene 11 (40:01)

Tracey rushes to Connor's house but is confronted by his mother: 'I'm sure that you're a lovely girl... but before it goes too far it's best we put a stop to it now, isn't it?' Tracey spots Connor standing in the hallway, and tries to get him to come with her, but the door is closed in her face.

Scene 12 (40:41)

She goes to Hommerton hospital where Candice is. 'I tilt my head to the side tryna find life at a normal angle and everything falls out of it.' Candice asks if Aaron will be gone long; the police have taken him away. Tracey waits and watches with her: 'She is my home, she's home for me, she is where I live, and she's beautiful. And I'm gonna take care of my home.'

DJ Luck & MC Neat, 'A Little Bit of Luck', mixes with the sound of a baby crying.

The End

Find out more

Watch

Playwright Winsome Pinnock and National Theatre Associate and Dramaturg Ola Animashawun discuss plays from the Black Plays Archive. In this episode they discuss *Chewing Gum Dreams* alongside *Barber Shop Chronicles* (which can also be found on the **NT Collection**).

Explore

Visit the National Theatre's Black Plays Archive online. The BPA is an online catalogue of the first professional production of every African, Caribbean and Black British play produced in the UK.

Find out more here: <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk>

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

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

Find out more

Suggestions for Further Activity/Research

Read this review from *The Guardian*. After you have read the review, write your own review, paying particular attention to the demands of a one-actor performance (not just on the performer, but the needs for set, costume, lighting and sound to make a 45 minute performance compelling and unpredictable).

Find out more about Michaela Coel, who has performed on TV and film, as well as in *Home* and *Medea* for the NT (both of which are also available on the **NT Collection**). **This article is a good place to start.**

Discussion: Coel's play represents a character from a particular borough in London. She reflects on the concerns and experiences of her and her peers. If you had to write a play about the place and people where you live, what would you include? What are the key concerns of people your age?

Debate: "*Chewing Gum Dreams* would be more successful if it had a full cast of actors to play the different roles". Dividing your group into two, one team should argue for this statement, and the other one against.

We hope that you have enjoyed watching and studying ***Chewing Gum Dreams***. 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?**

This guide to support your viewing of the production was compiled by Teacher and Arts Education Consultant Susie Ferguson.

If you have any comments or feedback on our resources please contact us:
ntcollection@nationaltheatre.org.uk