

National Theatre Collection



Ballet Shoes

Learning Guide

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About This Guide

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of **Ballet Shoes**, directed by **Katy Rudd**, which opened on **26 November 2024** at the **National Theatre**.

Our packs are designed to support viewing the recording on the **National Theatre Collection**. This pack provides a plot synopsis with timestamps to allow you to jump to specific sections of the play, and detailed content warnings to assess suitability for your classroom.

Here you'll find all the information you need to enable you to study the production and write about it in detail. You'll also find pointers for further research.

Background Information

Recording Date – 8 February 2025

Location – Olivier Theatre, National Theatre

Recommended Age – 7+

Cast

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Ensemble..... | Stacy Abalogun |
| Ensemble..... | Eryck Brahmania |
| Ensemble..... | Cordelia Braithwaite |
| Off Stage Swing..... | Luke Cinque-White |
| Ensemble..... | Michelle Cornelius |
| Winifred, Ensemble..... | Sonya Cullingford |
| Petrova Fossil..... | Yanexi Enriquez |
| Nana..... | Jenny Galloway |
| Ensemble..... | Courtney George |
| The Prince, Ensemble..... | George Hann |
| Theo Dane..... | Nadine Higgin |
| Ensemble..... | Philip Labey |
| On Stage Swing..... | Katie Lee |
| Doctor Jakes..... | Helena Lymbery |
| Ensemble..... | Sharol Mackenzie |

| | |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Sylvia..... | Pearl Mackie |
| Pianist Ensemble..... | Nuwan Hugh Perera |
| Katerina Federovky, Ensemble..... | Xolisweh Ana Richards |
| Jai Saran..... | Sid Sagar |
| Pauline Fossil..... | Grace Saif |
| Great Uncle Matthew (GUM), Madame Fidolia..... | Justin Salinger |
| Posy Fossil..... | Daisy Sequerra |
| Ensemble..... | Katie Singh |
| Off Stage Swing..... | Sam Stones |



Creative Team

| | |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Writer..... | Noel Streatfeild |
| Playwright..... | Kendall Feaver |
| Director..... | Katy Rudd |
| Set Designer..... | Frankie Bradshaw |
| Costumer Designer..... | Samuel Wyer |
| Choreographer..... | Ellen Kane |
| Composer..... | Asaf Zohar |
| Dance Arrangements and Orchestration..... | Gavin Sutherland |
| Lighting Designer..... | Paule Constable |
| Sound Designer..... | Ian Dickinson for Autograph |
| Video Designer..... | Ash J Woodward |
| Illusions..... | Chris Fisher |
| Casting Director..... | Bryony Jarvis-Taylor CDG |
| Dialect Coach..... | Penny Dyer |
| Voice Coach..... | Cathleen McCarron |

Content Warning Details

Including Timestamps

Discrimination

Homophobia

- Jakes tells Pauline that she was outed as a lesbian by her lover's nephew and lost her job (0:43:30)

Sexism / Misogyny

- Nana and Posy seem displeased about the idea of living with a lady Doctor (0:16:37)

Death and Trauma

Death / Dying

- Sylvia's parents have died and she has been left in the care of GUM (0:04:18)
- Petrova tells Theo Dane that Pauline's parents drowned (0:17:40)
- Petrova tells Theo Dane that her parents succumbed to a terrible illness (0:17:59)
- Nana tells the girls that they cannot afford to fix the house unless they declare GUM legally dead (1:09:10)
- Madame Fidiola dies (1:43:29)

Adoption

- We learn that Sylvia and each of the three Fossil children were adopted by GUM over the course of 6 years (Act One, Scene Two)

Others

Loud and Sudden Noises

- GUM is on board a ship which is caught in a thunderstorm (0:06:39)
- A thunderstorm with lightning crashes (1:29:44)

Plot Synopsis with Timestamps

Prologue (0:00:00)

The show starts with the cast teaching the audience ballet arm positions.

Act One, Scene One - A Stage, 1919 (0:01:16)

An elderly lady arrives and plays the piano. Great Uncle Matthew (GUM) lectures about fossils at centre stage.

Scene Two (0:03:53)

The Fossil-Filled Home of GUM

Sylvia Rose Brown, a young girl, meets her last living relative, GUM, through Alice Gutheridge (Nana). He is hesitant to let her stay. Sylvia finds GUM's lectures boring and shows Nana a drawing of a Tyrannosaurus, suggesting they should have feathers as their closest relatives are chickens.

A Letter, 1920

The scene shifts to a ship heading to New York. GUM writes to Sylvia, saying her feather theory has caused a stir in the academic community. His ship hits an iceberg, but he survives on a lifeboat and rescues a baby from the ocean.

Home

GUM gives the baby to Sylvia and Nana who name her Pauline. Nana insists they clean the upstairs for the nursery.

A Letter, 1922

GUM writes to Sylvia from a glacial ravine, where he was injured and lost two fingers and half a leg. He notes the nurses are struggling in the children's ward.

Home

GUM brings home another baby. Nana is displeased but names the baby Petrova, insisting that GUM doesn't bring home any more.

Home / A Letter, 1924

In 1924, GUM writes to Sylvia that he sent a child home via district messenger, much to the dismay of Nana. The mother gave the child a pair of ballet shoes and named her Posy. GUM mentions being caught in a landslide but he hopes to return soon.

Scene Three - Present Day, The Local Schoolyard (0:13:14)

Little girls are playing on the playground when a fight breaks out between Pauline and a sixth-former. The headmaster arrives and calls Pauline, Petrova and Posy in their office.

Scene Four - Home - The Kitchen (0:14:16)

Sylvia is upset to learn they have all been expelled. She asks what happened, and Pauline explains that ‘One of the older girls asked Petrova, why, if we were sisters, we all look so different. So Petrova told them our entire history’. The other girls didn’t believe them, thinking Sylvia was their mother. Pauline chose the surname ‘Fossil’ when she was five. With no other school to attend, Nana suggests Pauline work since she is now 14, but Sylvia disagrees saying they are bringing in lodger. The family have not heard from GUM in 6 years.

The lodgers are due to arrive and the girls start moving fossils to make space. One lodger is a ‘lady doctor’ (Doctor Jakes) and another is a dance teacher (Theo Dane), which excites Posy.

Scene Five - Theo Dane’s New Bedroom (0:17:12)

Petrova sits on Theo Dane’s bed, explaining how the three girls came to live with Sylvia as their guardian.

Posy enters excitedly, showing her ballet shoes. Theo compliments them, but her sisters dismiss her. Theo counters by listing her achievements and puts on a record to teach the girls the Charleston. Doctor Jakes arrives.

She is annoyed from standing in the rain. Sylvia introduces herself, Nana, and the children, which irritates Jakes since she wasn't expecting to share the house with so many people. Nana shows Jakes to her room, and the girls help move her things. As they leave, Theo gives Sylvia a brochure for The Children’s Academy of Dancing and Stage Training. While Sylvia is disinterested, Nana suggests it could be a good option if all three children attend.

Scene Six - The Children’s Academy of Dancing and Stage Training (0:25:47)

Dancers perform as Theo teaches a class while the three girls watch. Madame Fidolia enters, looking aloof and mysterious, and speaks to each child. Theo hands Sylvia a list of supplies they will need for the classes.

Scene Seven - Training Sequence, Various Places (0:29:53)

Theo leads the class through various sequences while the girls struggle to keep up. Meanwhile, Sylvia is making them clothes to save money. The children attend math and science classes, followed by more dancing, showcasing their growing skills. Theo wishes to speak to Winifred (a star pupil at the Academy) and Pauline, while Fidolia asks to speak to Posy in her office. Petrova walks home alone.

Scene Eight - Outside the House (0:32:48)

Petrova quizzes Jai Saran about his car and gets into the driver's seat. Sylvia scolds her and questions Jai's intentions. He explains he saw the 'Rooms to let' sign and wishes to see the place. Petrova gets excited about the chance to live with someone who fixes cars. Jai asks Petrova to watch the car while he views the room.

Scene Nine - Inside the House, An Unoccupied Bedroom (0:34:44)

Sylvia shows Jai around the house, and he compliments the skeletons and her artwork, calling them 'extraordinary'. He takes the room.

Scene Ten - Transition, The Academy (0:37:05)

Madame Fidolia hosts a private lesson with Posy.

Scene Eleven (0:37:20)

The House, A Hallway with a mirror

Pauline reads a monologue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Doctor Jakes, who reveals she is a Doctor of Literature. Pauline shares that she has an audition for a West End pantomime, and Doctor Jakes invites her into her room for help.

Bedroom of Doctor Jakes

They discuss the play, and Doctor Jakes quizzes Pauline on what she likes about it. When Pauline asks her 'Who is the woman in all of the photographs?' Jakes quickly rebuffs her. We learn that Doctor Jakes is a lesbian. Pauline tells Jakes how GUM found her and that she doesn't know her parents or original name. Jakes helps Pauline appreciate the beauty of choosing her own name. She then shares her backstory, explaining how her lover died, the house went to the nephew, and when she refused to leave, he outed her as a lesbian and she lost her job.

Scene Twelve - The Children's Academy (0:44:03)

Posy is in a solo class with Madame Fidolia but is frustrated with the repetitive exercises. Madame Fidolia shows her a photograph of Katerina Federovsky, one of the best ballet dancers in the world. Katerina was tormented by other dancers and replaced by Juliette Manoff in a lead role. Enraged yet captivated by Juliette's skill, Katerina asked how she could become as great as her, and Juliette responded, 'by going over her exercises'. Madame Fidolia accidentally reveals she is Katerina.

Scene Thirteen - A Stage (0:48:03)

Mr French leads the auditions. Winifred sings a song from *Alice in Wonderland*. Next, Pauline recites a monologue from *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman. She then performs the required song. Winifred is distraught at her new competition.

Scene Fourteen - A Garage or Street Outside the House (0:51:24)

Petrova and Jai work on fixing the car, and discuss women pioneers in aviation. Petrova shares her worries that her life choices are already made for her but confides in Jai that she knows she wants to be a driver.

Scene Fifteen - A Theatre Dressing Room (0:55:10)

Pauline practices lines in the dressing room while Winifred is unhappy as Pauline's understudy, leading to a small fight that Mr French breaks up.

Scene Sixteen - Hallway (0:57:23)

Pauline locks herself in the bathroom while the rest of the house try to get in.

Scene Seventeen - Bathroom (0:58:00)

Sylvia enters the bathroom to console Pauline, who is upset after Mr French assigned the part to Winifred, making Pauline the understudy. Sylvia supports her, admiring that Pauline has finally found something that she truly enjoys, and encourages her to be the best understudy she can be for the next six weeks.

Scene Eighteen - Opening night, *Alice in Wonderland* Production (1:01:33)

The production of *Alice in Wonderland* begins. During a tense moment, Winifred forgets a line, and Pauline rescues her by giving it. Winifred runs off stage to thank her, and the performance continues.

Scene Nineteen (1:04:15)

Kitchen

The whole household is celebrating Christmas Eve, with the lodgers congratulating the Fossil children on their successes. They spot a present under the tree covered in stamps, which they realise is from GUM.

A Letter, 1927

GUM writes that he has sent presents to each girl and mentions that Sylvia has been credited for her scientific discovery in the photograph within the parcel.

Kitchen

Nana sends the children off to bed. On the photograph, we see that a dinosaur has been discovered with feathers, confirming Sylvia's hypothesis years before.

Scene Twenty - The Nursery (1:08:00)

Meanwhile, upstairs, Nana reveals the parcel was sent seven years ago. She explains they can't afford to fix the house unless they declare GUM legally dead, which makes the children worry about their future. Nana leaves.

Petrova suggests they should participate in as many productions as possible, using the money to keep the family together. The children vow to create a future for themselves and help their family.



Act Two, Scene One (1:13:09)

The three girls open Act Two performing snippets from several shows while Sylvia and Nana try to fix the house. The house is still 'For Sale'.

Scene Two - The Academy (1:16:22)

Posy has a private lesson with Madame Fidiola and asks to wear her mother's ballet shoes. Fidiola assures Posy she will take care of the shoes and reminds her about her audition in six months' time. Posy hasn't told her family about the audition due to money concerns.

Scene Three - An Onstage Rehearsal (1:18:30)

During a rehearsal for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Petrova struggles with her lines while hiding a car brochure in her costume. Mr French suggests replacing her just as Doctor Jakes arrives. She tells Mr French she will help Petrova prepare for her role in three days. They all leave to return to the car.

Scene Four - Just Outside Croydon Aerodrome (1:23:15)

Petrova and Jai watch the planes overhead. Jai helps her with her character and in return, asks for her assistance with dance moves to impress someone he wants to ask on a date.

Scene Five - Flying Rehearsal (1:26:19)

After the impromptu dance lesson, Petrova and the other children return to rehearsals. Some actors are terrified when hoisted onto suspension cables, but Petrova volunteers. Mr. French reluctantly agrees, and she is raised up, delivering her lines expertly.

Scene Six - Home (1:29:42)

After a heavy thunderstorm, lightning creates a hole in the ceiling. Theo suggests contacting set builders to fix the roof. They leave the children to discuss the family's financial situation when the phone rings. Pauline answers.

Scene Seven - A film Studio (1:32:20)

Pauline is dressed as Princess Henrietta, a 1650s English Princess. Pauline and her acting partner Arthur start the scene, but are stopped by Director Mr Sholsky, who is unsure of Pauline's delivery. Pauline struggles because she doesn't know 'which part of the story this scene is in'. Mr Sholsky helps her understand her character's motives and they restart the scene, with Pauline succeeding.

Scene Eight - The Academy (1:36:21)

Posy dances alone in the studio, trying to perfect her routine for the examiners when Madame Fidiola arrives. Posy is reluctant to leave and be taught by someone else. As she goes to get changed into her audition attire, we learn about Fidiola's escape during the Russian Revolution. She packed a suitcase and escaped by boat to England. With her health deteriorating, she became a teacher, fully leaving her past behind, transforming into Madame Fidiola. When Posy re-enters, she finds Madame Fidiola in her chair, unresponsive.

Scene Nine - Home (1:43:42)

Pauline has the opportunity to go to California, but Sylvia and Doctor Jakes reject the idea, as Jakes wants her to go to RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art). Pauline admits she wants to ease their financial worries and reveals that she, Petrova and Posy (with Nana's help) have been using their earnings from shows to support the family. Sylvia is deeply upset that everyone has lied to her. Posy arrives with Theo, explaining that Madame Fidiola died, and she missed her audition. Utterly distraught, she runs off to her bedroom.

Scene Ten - The Nursery (1:48:03)

In her room, Posy tries to escape through the window. Petrova and Pauline stop her, and are followed by Theo, who brings a parcel for Posy from Madame Fidiola. Inside, she finds her mother's ballet shoes in a display case. Theo reminds Posy that 'dance is something to enjoy' and she suggests they see Juliette Manoff's company perform. Posy is thrilled to find that Juliette is in the city and insists that Theo takes the three girls to ask Juliette to teach her in Paris. Theo agrees.

Scene Eleven - Hallway (1:52:23)

This time, Sylvia has locked herself in the bathroom when Nana walks in. Sylvia is upset, worrying she is raising the children poorly but Nana reassures her. When Jai enters, Nana steps out, leaving Jai and Sylvia alone. Jai asks her to dinner and some dancing, and she accepts. On their way out, they run into Doctor Jakes, who informs them the children are gone. Sylvia learns that Jai taught Petrova to drive and that she borrowed the car to get to the audition.

Scene Twelve - A London Road (1:57:30)

The three girls and Theo are driving to Juliette Manoff.

Scene Thirteen - Back at Home (1:59:00)

Sylvia orders a taxi for immediate arrival and leaves. Nana sneaks to the phone and asks the taxi company to delay for fifteen minutes, while Doctor Jakes observes. They both head off as well.

Scene Fourteen - On A West End Stage (2:00:20)

A professional ballet dancer moves across the stage. Posy enters, and Juliette Manoff asks why she's there. Posy reveals her ballet teacher was Katerina Fedorovsky, surprising Juliette, who thought Katerina had died years ago. Theo, Pauline and Petrova are escorted into the rehearsal space and Juliette demands them all to be removed as Posy starts to dance, piquing Juliette's interest.

Sylvia, Jai, Jakes and Nana enter, encouraging Juliette to take Posy to Paris for study. Pauline offers to pay for Posy's tuition with her filming earnings, and Sylvia agrees to let her go.

Scene Fifteen - Transition, The Fossil Home (2:05:15)

The 'For Sale' sign is replaced by a 'Sold' sign as the house is gradually emptied.

Scene Sixteen - The Back Garden (2:05:47)

The entire household creates a time capsule in the back garden filled with precious belongings. GUM reappears, and the children are thrilled. Sylvia slaps him but then hugs him tightly.

The children explain everything that has happened, including their moves to different countries: Pauline with Jakes to California; Posy and Nana to Paris; Petrova moving in with Sylvia and Jai, who just got married that morning. Sylvia tells GUM that she wants to be an illustrator.

Theo proudly states she is now the new Head of a children's stage academy, and Petrova tells GUM that she wants to become a pilot, much to his approval. He suggests they live together, saying 'And if my family is going to be scattered around the globe, it would certainly help if one of the children trained as a pilot.' Petrova accepts the offer, and Jai gives his car to them on loan.

Jai and Sylvia leave for their 2-week honeymoon, while everyone else heads to the station for their trains.

The three Fossil sisters repeat their vow to one another.

Petrova and GUM get into the car for an exciting journey to Croydon along the A23.

The End



Find Out More

We hope that you have enjoyed watching and studying *Ballet Shoes*. Don't forget that there are many more fantastic productions to explore as part of the National Theatre 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?](#)

Watch

In The Rehearsal Room

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AQjRdtQD9w>

Audience Reactions

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6mTx_4g1Zs

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/teacherresources/>

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>

Our Funders

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Thank you