

National  
Theatre



# THE GREAT WAVE

a new play by Francis Turnly

Rehearsal Diaries

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## Welcome to the National Theatre's background pack for *The Great Wave*

These rehearsal diaries, written by the staff director of *The Great Wave*, introduce the process of rehearsing and staging this new play.

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**Jane Ball**  
National Theatre Collection Manager

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The rehearsal and production photographs in this background pack were taken by Mark Douet

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# The National Theatre's Production

## Cast in order of appearance

Etsuko	<b>Rosalind Chao</b>
Hanako	<b>Kirsty Rider</b>
Reiko	<b>Kae Alexander</b>
Tetsuo	<b>Leo Wan</b>
Takeshi	<b>David Yip</b>
Official	<b>Kwong Loke</b>
Jung Sun	<b>Tuyen Do</b>
Kum-Chol	<b>Vincent Lai</b>
Jiro	<b>David Yip</b>
Hana	<b>Frances Mayli McCann</b>
Soldier One	<b>Chike Chan</b>
Soldier Two	<b>Tuyen Do</b>

Director	<b>Indhu Rubasingham</b>
Designer	<b>Tom Piper</b>
Video Designer	<b>Luke Halls</b>
Lighting Designer	<b>Oliver Fenwick</b>
Music	<b>David Shrubsole</b>
Sound Designer	<b>Alexander Caplen</b>
Movement Director	<b>Polly Bennett</b>
Fight Director	<b>Kev McCurdy</b>
Company Voice Work	<b>Charmian Hoare</b>
Staff Director	<b>Jennifer Bakst</b>
Production Photographer	<b>Mark Douet</b>

## Opening

This production opened at the Dorfman, National Theatre,  
on 19 March 2018

## Setting

Japan and Korea, 1979–2003

*The Great Wave* is a co-production with Kiln Theatre

# Rehearsal diaries

Rehearsals for *The Great Wave* began on Monday 29 January 2018, but the process of staging this new play began much earlier. Staff director Jennifer Bakst's rehearsal diaries reveal how the process unfolded.



## Pre-production

The work that leads up to the production of a play begins long before the first day in the rehearsal room.

Playwright Francis Turnly spent a year at Kiln Theatre as the Resident Playwright developing *The Great Wave* as part of the Channel 4 Playwrights' Scheme. I was lucky enough to read the very first draft in 2016, and every draft from then until the first week of rehearsals. It's been an exciting journey to see the play tighten and develop over the course of two years.

*The Great Wave* is a hugely ambitious, creatively imagined epic, spanning almost 25 years and taking place in two different countries with a host of different characters. Luckily, the National Theatre Studio supports the development new work by organising a number of workshops and readings to move the redrafting process forward until the play is rehearsal-ready. That is especially important with a play as broad-ranging and aspiring as this. When the piece was first commissioned as a co-production between the National Theatre and Kiln Theatre, Francis Turnly and director Indhu Rubasingham worked closely together to develop the play from its early drafts, along with the help of Emily McLaughlin (National Theatre's Head of New Work) and Ben Power (National Theatre's Deputy Artistic Director) to really crystallise the emotional through-lines of the story. This process of workshoping, noting and redrafting the play took another year.



When Francis had a narrative that everyone was happy with, we had an additional week of workshops before Christmas that was less about script and more about production. As our set includes a revolve, we had some invaluable workshoping time in the National Theatre's rehearsal room one, to get a sense of how we can use the revolve to move between the 33 scenes of the play. We got a much better idea of the world of the play and how we can drive the story through production. This workshop was also the first opportunity we had to have almost the full cast together – everyone bar one. The cast got to know each other and we all joked and bonded as we had a play with the piece and its realisation through production.

By the end of the week, we all felt ready for rehearsals in January.

# Rehearsal diary: week one

As *The Great Wave* is a co-production between Kiln Theatre and the National Theatre, we spend the first two weeks of rehearsals at Kiln before heading over to the National Theatre. The meet and greet (where the company come together with theatre staff for the first time) is a calmer event than usual, due to the workshop in December. Each face feels familiar and there is real excitement from everyone.

During the morning session, Tom Piper (the designer) talks us through the design of the show, and shows us the model box, a 1:25 scale model of the set. Then, for the first time, the whole cast read the play aloud. The production team working on the show as well as the theatre staff are invited to listen. Everyone comes away from the read-through elated and ready to get cracking; it's a thrilling and moving experience.

In the afternoon, we have a visit from one of our consultants on Japan, Ai Kawabe. She helps us with the pronunciation of Japanese names, places and sentences in the play, and provides some useful insights into Japanese culture and etiquette – simple things like bowing to say hello, apologise or show respect. She answers our questions, ranging from ones about class and status to teenage romance and being a single mum in Japan in the '70s. After Ai leaves, we spend some time discussing the play

and suggesting things we want to look at during the rehearsal process.

When we come back the next day, it is time to put the tables away and get the play up on its feet. We only have Francis in the room for the first and the last week of rehearsals, so if there are any script questions, we want to knock them on the head this week.

With a new play, you can't really know what works and what doesn't until it's up on its feet, so we go through the whole play in the room with the cast in the course of our first week. After seeing each scene and discussing them with the cast, Francis and Indhu confer to make small adjustments to the script and discuss more extensive rewrites for a couple of scenes. It's also useful for the actors to have a rough shape of the whole play, so that they can get a feel for the arc of their storylines.

We also have a visit from one of our consultants on Korea, Dash You, who helps the actors who have scenes in Korean with pronunciation and gives a bit of insight into the physicality of North Korean military etiquette.



# Rehearsal diary: week two

After the necessary script work of week one of rehearsals, it is exciting to be able to dig into the detailed work of staging the scenes in week two.

We begin the week by adding a huge timeline to the rehearsal room wall. The action of the play takes place across a number of years, and the characters age significantly as the play progresses. For each scene the timeline helps to outline the year/time, the country/location, the age of the characters, and how long it has been since key events in the play. This timeline joins the already huge but constantly growing collection of reference pictures from Japan and North Korea. It is helpful to have a strong sense of the world we're moving in.

Throughout the week, we go through the play scene by scene at a much slower pace than the previous week, taking our time to delve into the detail of each interaction. At its heart, this play is about a family tragedy, but there is a second major theme that is threaded throughout the story: the individual versus the state. Characters often find themselves caught up in political games, and they are forced to navigate dangerous power dynamics. In North Korea, Hanako is powerless and yet resourceful in working towards her escape – or at least her survival. In Japan, Etsuko and Reiko face an uphill struggle to convince their government to enter into diplomatic relations with North Korea to return Japanese citizens, but they find new ways to confront an unresponsive government and force them to listen and act.



Theatrically, these dynamics are full of meaty drama. Low-status characters must be creative in challenging high-status characters, using intelligent and emotional methods in high-stakes situations. Yet ultimately, despite the politics of the story, that core of the play – family, love and loss – remains relatable.

In an effort to better understand the reality of life in North Korea, we meet Jihyun, a North Korean refugee who agreed to come in and talk to us about her experiences. Jihyun works with the organisation Connect: North Korea, whose mission it is to raise awareness around human rights abuses in North Korea by organising events that aren't focused around the politics or the military capacity of North Korea, but focus instead on the people living there and the experience of everyday life. Jihyun very generously tells us of her life growing up in North Korea, from the simpler memories of her childhood home by the sea to the more difficult stories about what North Korea was like during the great famine of the 1990s and her escape. Her story is powerful and inspiring, and we are reminded of the importance of telling our story with integrity and respect.

We also have a session with movement director Polly Bennett, who introduces the cast to a few movement ideas. It's just a brief session to get them physically and mentally warmed up for more extensive work in the future.

This is our final week of rehearsing at Kiln Theatre before we head over to the National Theatre for the rest of rehearsals. After we clean out the rehearsal room, we have Friday evening drinks with Kiln staff and the *The Great Wave* cast and stage management team so everyone can touch in with each other before they see each other again next time – on press night.

# Rehearsal diary: week three



Rehearsals are now in rehearsal room two at the National Theatre. On our first day, we are warmly welcomed with a meet and greet: there is mingling, coffee, biscuits, and we get to know the wider team at the National Theatre. Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre, welcomes us with a speech, Indhu says a few words, and then it's back to the business of rehearsing.

The ingenious scenic construction teams at the National Theatre have finished building the revolve that we will be using for the set, and have brought it into the rehearsal room so we can work with it. Being able to use the revolve gives us a real sense of what it's going to be like moving on the set and in the world of *The Great Wave*. Tom Piper has designed a clever system of sliding screens that divide the revolve into a series of different, changeable spaces. It's beautiful, efficient and effective: the two different worlds of Japan and North Korea intersect and interweave, only ever a screen's width away from each other. So close, and yet always separated. It's great for the cast to get used to the space they're going to be moving in for the show, and the stage management team are learning the cues to manipulate the revolve.

We also realise that the revolve enables a whole other dimension to the play: the production shouldn't only tell the story of the written scenes, but also colour in

some of the blanks that the script leaves. The script jumps time and countries frequently, leaving gaps for our imagination to fill in. But the production can help suggest these untold aspects of the play, giving us a real sense of each character's journey through time. Thanks to the design we can use scene transitions like split screens, seeing what is happening in North Korea and Japan simultaneously.

Small gestures can carry huge meaning: seeing Etsuko make a sky-lantern to commemorate another anniversary of her daughter's disappearance means another heartbreaking year has passed for her. Seeing Reiko continue to make and distribute missing person's posters of her sister means she hasn't given up hope, even after all these years. Different audience members will see different aspects of these little backstories depending on where they sit, making each viewing experience unique.

The main storyline, however, is of course the shared through-line for everyone. We start plotting through these little backstories and sketching in ideas for the scene transitions. The fact that the cast have all put a lot of thought and imagination into their characters, using the script as their springboard, feeds in immensely to this process. They bring so much life to these sequences.

Mainly, though, we continue our rigorous detailed work of going through each scene in depth. The play is emotionally exhausting, and everyone is working hard. Indhu reminds us all that the reason we are being so meticulous now in working out each story beat in the scene and being emotionally specific is so that the actors are freed up to play and be in the moment when it comes down to the show. She talks about being 'restrictive to be free'. When it comes down the performances, the actors will already have put in all the hard work and the detail, and they can bank that and focus on the moment and be free to listen and respond to each other.

As it's week three of five, it's coming down to crunch time. We start rehearsing on Saturdays to make sure we are getting on top of this play. At the end of the week, we are encouraged as we look back on all we have done: we have managed to do a stagger-through of the first half and the second half (separately), where we put everything together for the first time. The story is really starting to come through, and there are some emotionally powerful moments between the actors. It is the first time we've actually done either half in full, so it is very rough around the edges – but it's a great opportunity to see the through-line of the play, and see what needs work.

# Rehearsal diary: week four

It's been a while since we have had some Japanese and North Korean cultural consultation, as we have been so focused on the storytelling of the play. We welcome Dash back into the room to run through the North Korean scenes and drill some of our North Korean characters in military physicality – how to hold yourself, how to salute, how to march. It gives the characters a real edge, they feel intimidating on stage and have palpable status. Reinforcing the imbalance of power in North Korea strongly informs the scene dynamics: the other, non-military characters who are at the mercy of the state are so evidently powerless, it makes it an even more impressive human struggle to see them negotiate these interactions under intense pressure.

Some of the actors playing North Korean characters go to an event organised by the charity organisation Connect: North Korea, where they cook, eat and chat with North Korean refugees and get to know about them and their lives. It is helpful to look at North Korea from both sides: the military class in charge, and the everyday people trying to do the best for themselves and their families. We have made connections with some extraordinary people on this journey of trying to understand what life in North Korea is like. It's a huge part of the joy of working on plays: you get to delve into other worlds, meet people, share in their stories and in their lives. People are incredibly generous in sharing and supporting the storytelling.



We also have two new Japanese consultants to watch a few of our scenes set in Japan and provide an outside perspective on the work. Kumiko and Akiko are both brilliant theatre-makers; they join us in rehearsals to see whether we are making any missteps in terms of Japanese cultural etiquette of the time, and advise on the details of how movement and physicality can carry a different meaning in a different culture and different time. Small but detailed changes in physicality can adjust the stakes and the status in a scene. Does the police inspector in this little coastal town know the Tanaka family? How comfortable is he with them – can he touch them at all? Or is he a stranger? More formal? Does he bow stiffly when saying hello, or is it a more relaxed nod? How does that warm familiarity versus cold formality make the family feel in the face of their loss? After trying a few things, David Yip (playing Inspector Takeshi) and Indhu opt for a cold formality, leaving the family more isolated and raising the stakes of the dramatic context.

There's another, more light-hearted example of this: in an environment where teenage romance is not as overtly physical as it is in London in 2018 – this is rural Japan in 1979 – how does Tetsuo overcome this barrier to make his intentions clear? There are some hilarious results – Leo Wan (playing Tetsuo) is having to be very artful. Akiko and Kumiko are immensely supportive in helping us explore the subtle details in all these interactions. It's also just nice to have people in the room watching. Extra eyes are

# Rehearsal diary: week four continued

always appreciated, especially when we notice that those eyes don't stay dry during some of the more emotional scenes. We are clearly having some impact with the story. It's a relief!

We also have several visits from our fight director, Kev McCurdy. Kev goes through the moments of physical violence in the play, treating each of them like a scene on its own. He discusses the stakes, the power dynamics, the chemistry of each interaction – in short, the drama. While stage combat is a craft and a skill that requires technique and know-how to do safely, at its heart it is about storytelling. How does the violence play out? What are the dramatic dynamics? Where does it sit in the rhythm of the piece? It is a real pleasure to watch Kev and the cast realise these moments practically.

As tech, dress rehearsals and previews loom closer and closer, we are doing more split rehearsal calls. I am in one room with some of the cast going over scenes we have already rehearsed, cementing the work we have done and layering in a bit more detail.



Indhu is in the main rehearsal room with most of the cast doing the heavy lifting of rehearsing the scenes in depth. Working this way, we can ensure that the important new work being done in the main rehearsal room has an opportunity to sink in and become part of the actors' muscle memory through repetition. We also continue looking at transitions: there are 33 scenes in this play, and as Indhu happily points out, nobody wants to go to blackout between each scene. That snaps the audience (and the cast for that matter) out of the world and out of the story, sapping the energy and drive out of the play and eating up time. 'Transitions are part of the storytelling', Indhu reminds us: everyone must stay alive and alert as they move through the world and between scenes.

On Saturday, we run the whole play for the first time. Polly [Bennett, movement director] warms up the cast, making sure everyone is connected, supportive of each other and ready to play. We're all nervous about putting it together on its feet for the first time. It feels like the first time we are going to get a real idea of what we are dealing with here. But our hard work pays off: we find ourselves swept up by the power of the story and the emotion of it.

Running this piece is a real marathon for the cast, as the play is exhausting mentally, physically and emotionally. But seeing this, they are clearly up for the challenge. It's also clear that we need to run it more and more to be able to refine it, deepen it, and 'take out the air'. 'Air' refers to the spaces and pauses in the rhythm of a scene. While sometimes air is appropriate, earned, and heavy with meaning, it can also diffuse the energy and drive of a scene and interrupt flow. It could also sometimes be a symptom of 'commenting' – signalling reactions and emotions before or after the line, rather than conveying meaning on the line. It might also be a symptom of not listening and as a consequence, not picking up cues. The process of running and rehearsing means that air is taken out of the story, and people are acting on the line, thinking as they speak, reacting in a live and immediate way. It's exciting to see this happen. The cast are really switched on to each other and supporting each other.

It feels like we have packed a month's worth of work into a week. We are looking forward to next week,

# Rehearsal diary: week five

This final week in the rehearsal room is all about runs. Because of the epic sweep of this play, it is harder for the actors to understand their whole journey through the piece by rehearsing scenes in isolation. Only when they experience the story as a whole can all the growth and evolution of a character truly make sense in every detail, every beat. It's important for the cast to get a sense of the rhythm of the whole piece, too. We soon realise that maintaining the pace of the play is like a constant game of keepie uppie, where everyone must stay focused to juggle and keep the energy balance on track. It can feel relentless sometimes as there are so few moments in the play to relax. Everyone has to stay front-footed, all the time, or the rhythm dips and undermines the thriller-esque element to the story. 'The audience can never be ahead of us,' says Indhu, 'they must always be just a few steps behind. We have to race to keep ahead of them and say, come on, catch up!'

The more runs there are, the more we see the prophecy from week three about being 'restrictive to be free' come true: having done the rigorous, restricting and detailed work of weeks two through four, the actors are now freer and more confident to play during the runs. They are listening, responsive, and alive to each other. As a consequence, there are fresh new discoveries and the play feels like it has new life. After each run and each new discovery, we spend some time rehearsing notes from the run, working in some of those new discoveries so they become part of the muscle memory for the actors. Then, when we run it again, we see if that works, and what other new discoveries there might be.

It is also extremely important for the production team to see each run. For Indhu, it is an opportunity to see how the piece fits together. 'It's like a piece of music,' she points out, and so for her a big priority is about keeping an eye on the rhythm of the production,

making sure that it doesn't drop where we need it to drive, and giving it air to breath where it needs a moment.

If I had to say what kind of music this was, I'd say it was a fugue – two contrapuntal melodies intersecting and interlinking, oscillating between tension and resolution. North Korea and Japan have very different energies as settings, and very different stories. The play is about the tension between the two, and how, finally, at the end, they meet. This contrapuntal energy is reflected in the actual music for the show: David Shrubsole (composer) and Alex Caplen (sound) have created beautiful music and sound that subtly use North Korean and Japanese voices (two gorgeous singers recorded in the National Theatre's sound studio) to intersect and compete, underlining the essential tension between the two worlds that is threaded through the play.

For the main production team, runs provide a chance to get a sense of the whole piece and discuss, as a team, how elements like lighting, projection, sound, music, set and costume might work together. Pieces of music and costume start being fed into the rehearsal room. Projection continue building video content for the show. Everyone wants to be ready for next week: the technical rehearsals. It is also important for stage management to get ready for tech next week: they are sorting out everyone's 'tracks' through the show – their practical journeys of what props come on and off, when and where and how, where there are quick costume changes the actors might need help with, how to efficiently, quickly and subtly sort the scene changes and where to plot cues for the revolve – basically, all the important business of making the show work on a practical level.

Because this is the last week of rehearsals, Francis has returned to the room to watch some runs and contribute his thoughts. He makes some minor edits to the script and feeds his thoughts in through Indhu. It's great to have him back. Because of the nature of the piece, Francis uses a lot of 'echoes' in the script, moments that recur or mirror other moments, little thematic call-backs. Hand-in-hand with the script, we have also decided to have physical and visual 'echoes' strewn throughout the piece: subtle, repeated gestures or pictures on stage. The audience may not even be consciously aware of these mirror moments, but they will evoke a feeling and keep the emotional memory active. This is particularly important in a play that lasts about two hours and spans over 20 years.

We finish on Saturday with a really strong run. We are nervous and excited about next week. Whatever may happen in the rehearsal room, everything changes once you get into the theatre and – crucially – put the play in front of an audience.



# Rehearsal diary: tech week

'Fit up' is when the set gets moved and/or built into the theatre, the lights are hung on the rig, the speakers are placed where they need to go – all the important business of bringing the world of the play into reality begins now. The crew have taken the revolve from our rehearsal room and moved it into the theatre as it is the actual revolve we will be using for the show. Everything is being fitted into the space and adjustments are being made on-the-go as the production team's design work slowly become a reality.

Meanwhile, we are in our (now somewhat bare) rehearsal room, working on some last-minute notes and making sure everyone is ready for tech. We introduce the cast to their dressers and talk through all the costume changes as well as practise some of the quicker ones. Kev comes back to the rehearsal room to check on the fights and make a few final adjustments.

Wednesday arrives, and with it the much-anticipated technical rehearsals on stage. Technical rehearsals are run by the stage manager, who is in charge of coordinating all departments and making sure we make smooth, efficient progress as we programme and set every technical cue of the show. The director and all the designers – set, costume, lighting, sound, music, projection – sit near each other in the auditorium, surrounded by screens and lighting/sound desks. This is so they can discuss and coordinate with each other and make sure every design and technical aspect of the show works hand in hand with all other departments, creating a cohesive feeling for the production.

The actors slowly walk through the staging with their lines so Oliver [Fenwick; lighting designer] can see them in the space and adjust his lighting states. Alex and David try out some underscoring, background atmosphere, or other incidental sound/music cues. Luke [Halls; video director] creates the textured surroundings for the world of the play, using projection. But the real moment for them to shine in this show is during the scene transitions, as well as some of the particularly heightened theatrical sequences in this play. Indhu, Tom, Oliver, Luke, Alex and David discuss what they envision for these theatrical sequences and transitions, and then the design team coordinate with their programmers and technicians to get everything looking and sounding as discussed. We run each of the transitions several times, every time discussing, revising, refining and adjusting.

Meanwhile the deputy stage manager, Fran [O'Donnell], is responsible for putting all these technical cues in 'the book' (a heavily annotated version of the script that logs each sound, music, light, projection or revolve cue) so that she can 'call' the show (make sure each tech cue is triggered

to time every performance). As this is live theatre and can be quite fluid and changeable, it takes a particular sensitivity, sharpness, and understanding of the play to do this night after night.

There are over 30 scene transitions in *The Great Wave*, a revolve, and some big theatrical sequences (like the storm), so there is a lot to get through. While going through each cue, the director and design team need to ensure that the theatrical language they are using is consistent, effective and purposeful. Do North Korea and Japan have different atmospheres, different theatrical languages? Do we want to use underscoring in the scenes, or do we strip that away and focus on the actors? Where do we need the scene transitions to be pacy and quick and drive the play forward, and where do we need them to be a bit more slow and complex and give us a real sense of passing time? How abstract or real do we go with the storm sequence? Is the great wave that swallows Hanako a purely abstract, theatrical interpretation of a wave, or should there be a visceral, real level that has a gut impact on the audience? There is a lot to consider, discuss and discover.

Polly and I watch the scenes from every angle in the auditorium, checking sightlines from different seats. We make adjustments, tidging the staging for transitions so that everything seen on stage looks intentional and beautiful. For Polly, it's a great opportunity to see how her movement work sits in the space and make some adjustments, as well as generate some new work inspired by the opportunities that being in the theatre provides.

After three intense days of technical rehearsals, we reach Saturday: the day of our dress rehearsal and first preview. The dress rehearsal is our first chance to actually run the whole play uninterrupted in the venue with all tech. After the dress, we have some very swift notes for the actors, which mostly boil down to: have fun, listen to each other, and keep the momentum of the play going.

Before we have had time to turn around, it's our first preview. This is the next step in the life of a play: where we put it in front of an audience. The audience are the final piece of the puzzle. We wait in anticipation to see how they react. How will our piece read? The lights go down and it's time: the cast do brilliantly, and after the first few vocal reactions from the audience – people laughing at funny moments, gasping at tense moments, and audibly saying 'aww' during some romantic scenes, we are hugely relieved. The audience understand and are emotionally engaged. It's a huge load off our minds.

That said, there's still a huge amount of work to do: the tech that has been programmed is a rough sketch that needs to be refined over the week of previews, and there are plenty of notes for the actors as well.