National Theatre

# Our Generation

a new play by Alecky Blythe

## Rehearsal Diaries

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## Welcome to the National Theatre's rehearsal diaries for *Our Generation*

These rehearsal diaries, written by Stephen Bailey, staff director on *Our Generation*, introduce the unique process of rehearsing and staging this play. At the end of these rehearsal diaries, you'll find a glossary of some of the common theatre terms which come up as part of a rehearsal process.

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**Jane Ball**
**Education Manager (National Theatre Collection),**
**National Theatre Learning**
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The rehearsal and production photographs in this pack were taken by Johan Persson

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**Further production details:**
**nationaltheatre.org.uk**

# The National Theatre's production

## The Company

Cast, in alphabetical order

*Teenagers*
Zac
**Dee Ahluwalia**

Lucas
**Joe Bollland**

Robyn
**Anna Burnett**

Ayesha
**Anushka Chakravarti**

Ali
**Gavi Singh Chera**

Ierum
**Rachelle Diedericks**

Luan
**Hélder Fernandes**

Mia
**Sarita Gabony**

Callum
**Cornor Gormally**

Annabella
**Alex Jarrett**

Taylor
**Callum Mardy**

Emily
**Poppy Shepherd**

*Adults*
Alberta
**Debbie Chazen**

Agron
**Hasan Dixon**

Luljeta
**Stephanie Street**

Director
**Daniel Evans**

Set Designer
**Vicki Mortimer**

Costume Designer
**Kinnetia Isidore**

Lighting Designer
**Zoe Spurr**

Movement Director
**Carrie-Anne Ingrouille**

Music Composition, Production and Direction
**D.J. Walde**

Sound Designer
**Paul Arditti**

Video Designer
**Akhila Krishnan**

Dramaturg
**Sebastian Born**

Creative Producer
**Pádraig Cusack**

Casting
**Charlotte Sutton CDG**

Dialect Coaches
**Charmian Hoare and Shereen Ibrahim**

Company Voice Work
**Jeannette Nelson**

Staff Director
**Stephen Bailey**

Collectors
**Alecky Blythe, Izzy Dougill, Leah Gaffey, Dan Murphy, Ruth Tebby and Olivia Wilkes**

This production had its press night on
1 March 2022, in the National's Dorfman Theatre.

Production Photographer
**Johan Persson**

# Rehearsal diary: week one

## Staff Director Stephen Bailey's diary tracks the eight-week rehearsal period for *Our Generation*, beginning 6 December 2021

The first day of rehearsals feels like it has been a long time coming. Alecky Blythe began collecting verbatim testimony for the project which would eventually become *Our Generation* in 2015. Over five years, she and her fellow collectors followed 12 young people from across Britain – from London, Cambridgeshire, Birmingham, Glasgow, North Wales and Belfast – through their teenage years and the accompanying changes in their lives. Alongside that, there have been multiple workshops where the material has been tested to see if it could become a show.

I first joined the project in February of 2020, as assistant to director Daniel Evans, but multiple cast and production team members were already attached, even at that stage. The length of the creation process is something that could only be done by the National Theatre. That the production's premiere has been further delayed by Covid-19 and lockdowns is only part of a long, meticulous development process.

Some of our 15 cast members and many creative and technical team members are engaging with the project for the first time. Others have been here much longer – indeed, Sarita Gabony has managed to apply to Mountview, train for three years and graduate during her involvement with the project.

I spend most of my week in a sound studio with Gurjit Dhinsa [verbatim audio support] working on the pseudonymisation process. Though the cast will be learning every line, explanation and utterance (observing intonation, volume, pace, etc.), we will be working with Alecky's standard headphone method in rehearsal (the actors listen to the audio as they are saying the lines) and then the actors will learn the text from their audio. Therefore, especially given the young age of our subjects, we need to redact and replace every piece of potentially identifying data.

Each actor comes into the studio, listens to the audio and says a replacement name or location in mimicry of the original, which Gurjit then seamlessly slots into the original audio. Where this gets really tricky is when overlaps happen with more than one person speaking when the name is said. Then we need to get every actor that is speaking at that moment into the booth to recreate the entire moment. We've done over 160 of these in this past week – this means we have completed part one (of three). Gurjit is taking a well-deserved holiday next week, so I'll get to be in the rehearsal room more, but we will be venturing back into the sound studio the week after to try and polish this off before the end of the year.

In the rehearsal room, Daniel works through part one, scene one, which covers the initial time with our subjects (roughly up to 2016). He merges classical acting techniques with the fact that we are working from real recordings and can draw background material from the real people due to our long connection with them.

Working with Alecky's recorded delivery technique, the actors listen to the audio and repeat it back. Daniel then steers the discussion to consider the participants' intentions in each scene: what does each character want? What are they trying to achieve? In every case, he is keen to stress the circumstances of the recording – someone else is there listening and saving the audio – and how that affects how people behave. Constantly, they are performing in their own way. Alongside this, he has the cast doing Stanislavskian character exercises – extracting facts and questions (what they know and do not know about their character) from their entire audio. We are creating hybrids: derived from the words that real people have said but always in a public context and also distilled from five years of audio down to approximately 25 minutes for each character. With access to extensive detail of the interviewees' histories, we can make judgements about why they might express certain opinions or make choices, but we are also bringing our own interpretations of who these teenagers are from the choices in the recordings we use and the work we do in the room.

Alongside this character work, we begin working on some ensemble moments where we bring the 12 young people together – though they've barely ever met in real life. We bleed actual moments from the recorded testimony into platforms to give the young people a

Alecky Blythe
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week one (continued)

**Our Generation**
**Friday 10th call**
**Gorvy Rehearsal Room .**

NB There will be a camera in Rehearsals for a while at the end of the morning.
The costume hair and make up will be in Rehearsal Room 5

9:00 Creatives meeting RR2
09:30-09:40 - Interview filming: Collector – Izzy Dougill (Duffield Studio)
09:45-09:55 – Interview filming: Collector – Dan Murphy (Duffield Studio)
10:00-10:10 – Interview filming: Collector – Ruth Tebby (Duffield Studio)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **10:00** | **Visitor Tanya Byron. The 12 The Teenage Brain** | |
| 11:00 | Gavi and Anushka costume for trailer in RR5 | |
| **11:20** | **Filming in rehearsal Room 2** | |
| 11:30 | Anna Costume for trailer in RR5 | |
| **1:00** | **Hasan Lunch** | |
| **1:15** | **Debbie and Sarita Lunch** | |
| **1:20** | **Lunch** | **Alecky and Daniel interview** |
| 2:00 | Hasan Costume in RR5 | |
| 2:15 | Debbie and Sarita costume in RR5 | |
| **2:30** | **Learning time** | **Daniel Board meeting** |
| **2:30** | **Rachelle Dialect work with Shereen London in 007** | |
| **2:55** | Steph and Rachelle Costume in RR5 | |
| **3:00** | **Dee Dialect work with Shereen Glasgow in 007** | |
| 3:30 | Poppy Costume In RR5 | |
| 3:50 | Helder Costume In RR5 | |
| **3;30** | **Audio work** | **Full Company** |
| **3:30** | **Anushka Dialect work Birmingham/Pakistani in 007** | |
| **4:00** | **Gavi. Dialect work Birmingham/Pakistani in 007** | |
| **4:10** | Joe Costume in RR5 | |
| **4:30** | Alex costume in RR5 | |
| 4:55 | Callum Costume in RR5 | |
| 5:15 | Dee Costume in RR5 | |
| 6:00 | Wrap and Call ends | |

chance to express their views about the tumultuous last five years. An example would be the part song which closes out part one, scene one. Lucas is a member of an *a cappella* group at his school and we have recording of his group practising their version of 'Some Nights' by fun. Over the refrain of 'What do I stand for', the actors change from Lucas' classmates into their own characters, offering their views on Brexit, Trump and other political matters. D.J. Walde [music composition, production and direction] has picked out the harmonies that exist in the recording and then creates and teaches our own version – keeping that authenticity alongside performance polish. Another group moment comes when Annabella performs in her hip-hop troupe. Carrie-Anne [Ingrouille, movement director] choreographs an impressive routine which will be a highlight of the opening 30 minutes.

A real highlight of the week is a visit from teenage psychologist, Professor Tanya Byron. She gives us a crash course in the development of the teenage brain. Of particular note, we find out that the front part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, is last to develop fully in the maturing brain. It isn't fully developed until we are in our mid-20s. The prefrontal cortex is the decision-making part of the brain, responsible for our ability to plan and think about the consequences of actions, solve problems and control impulses. Because the prefrontal cortex is still developing, teenagers might rely on a part of the brain called the amygdala to make decisions and solve problems more than adults do. The amygdala is associated with emotions, impulses, aggression and instinctive behaviour. We begin to think about how this information explains the sudden, abrupt and drastic changes we saw in our interviewees over the ten years and why they are so open to growth.

Professor Byron explains various reasons why traumas and problem behaviours develop. Hyper-pressurising parents, abuse, isolation, immigrant trauma, bullying or poverty can all drastically affect how young people's brains develop. It is fascinating to see how several of the archetypes she sketches could be applied to our subjects' development, how they might adjust to a change in circumstances or what they might find particularly challenging.

Professor Byron also highlights the uptick in teenagers presenting with severe mental health issues, how they increasingly seem to occur in teenagers irrespective of background and privilege, and the need to differentiate from 'normal' anxiety, which can be awful enough, and something much more severe, which can be a danger to their health. With several of our subjects experiencing therapy or taking medications, her words provide much needed context to help us handle the telling of their stories with compassion and truth.

After that emotional morning, I am called on to help film our trailer. The wonderful National Theatre team have mocked up school sets around the building and we whizz around to film 12 vignettes in a few hours. These will be chained together in a TikTok-inspired montage that should be released towards the end of next week. For the first time, the actors speak the words without direct headphone support, though I listen on headphones to ensure perfect accuracy. The actors are, generally speaking, slightly faster than the original material – not speeding up words but cutting down on the pauses and dead space created by the editing. As the show looks to be substantial in length, this is much appreciated news!

Above: Rehearsal call for *Our Generation*, sent by stage manager, Jane Suffling
Right: Sarita Gabony and Joe Balland
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week two

We begin week two down two actors and a member of the crew. In the face of rising closures across London's theatres, we push on determined to get through as much of the play as we can. By the end of the week, we have covered all the audio for the first part (the longest) which covers the majority of our cast up to their GCSEs in 2017/18. We also stage the entirety of the first scene, which is half the first part, and are able to run it on Friday afternoon.

A large amount of our time is focused on working out the performance rules and helping the actors navigate the performance space. We're working on a thrust stage in the Dorfman, which places audience on three sides of the stage. Given that so much of the text has been generated by the subjects speaking directly to the interviewer, there is a lot of direct address and we work on sharing that text around the auditorium and finding moments for audience interaction. Our Friday run generally has the stage held only by the speaking actor but we are unsure if that is the correct choice. We need to deal with how the pace drops across the multitude of short scenes.

We also discover a problem around how it is sometimes unclear as to who is playing who, and who is the interview subject. We benefit from having people in rehearsal who are less familiar with the stories and narratives and are quickly able to point out where clarity is currently lacking and where we can tighten. It's exciting to be this far along after two weeks, but this is a play with six scenes, so we have a way to go. A lot of our choices are building on the workshop showings we did over the last two years as a framework, moving characters through the space and leaving the detail to be worked out as they feel comfortable with the material. It is, as Daniel has frequently said, 'a rough sketch'.

Alongside this, we work into part two's audio with the intention of being able to push through part one, scene two and into part two during staging next week. Here we are beginning to have conversations around how the teenagers change over time and how we need to map five-year journeys for each over the course of the play. The evolution of their voice is a good starting point, and we continue to use the collectors (the people who carried out the original interviews) for additional background information.

We are facing major dilemma around music. Multiple times throughout the play, the teenagers cite lyrics, sing snatches or interact with music playing. Some, those out of copyright, have flown through in terms of clearance. Others are more challenging. With the desire to eventually make the production accessible to a wider audience via National Theatre at Home and the National Theatre Collection, the expense rapidly increases and we are moving away from using contemporary music for our movement sequences in favour of our own, similar compositions. More challenging is interacting with certain estates. We want to end our first half with our part song – a mash up between fun.'s 'Some Nights' and Hanson's 'MMMBop' – and need clearance from both. I have spent a lot of time writing context and scene summaries to explain how we came to the decision to use these tracks. We keep our fingers crossed.

More worrying is music in an early class scene, where the class is hijacked by some practical jokers shouting out part of a song after a Spanish teacher attempts to teach them a concept. Apparently the original artist's representatives refuse all requests. And without that refrain the scene doesn't work.

And finally, it's worth noting our conversations around access in performance. We are fortunate to have the advice of the National Theatre's new Head of Access, David Bellwood, around this. We had very lofty access goals and an immediate discovery has been how long the lead-times are for access and how some of our ambitions may not be realised. There was a desire to caption all performances, but there isn't the technical capacity to support this whilst providing captioned performances in the other auditoriums at the National Theatre. There is also concern over the amount of fragmentary, overlapping text in the show and how that might be challenging to parse (find each sentence's component parts) if presented in its entirety. In consultation with our video designer, Akhila [Krishnan], we are now considering captioning for clarity and understanding – picking out key lines, words and themes to shape the meaning of the play around the text said on stage.

Rachelle Diedricks
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week three

On Sunday last week, we received the unfortunate news that we need to move rehearsals to online. With record number of Covid cases in London, and the National Theatre making the decision to cancel all their performances for the remainder of the year, the building itself is also going to close.

We are fortunate to be given one day in the building on Monday to do some extra work on staging part one, scene one, before working remotely for the remainder of the year. This gives Daniel and Carrie-Anne a chance to respond to our findings from last Friday's run.

The key shift we make is to embrace a more ensemble form of storytelling. To combat the confusion, pacing issues and isolation we found in Friday's run, the 12 younger performers now remain on stage throughout, fluidly slipping in and out of scenes as the text demands. We would also like to use captioning to pinpoint the subjects of scenes to improve the clarity. The three senior actors may come and go as they represent a plethora of characters that rotate around the lives of the 12 subjects.

Daniel also decides to pull action downstage onto the thrust and to leave characters sitting in the front half of the stage when inactive – sightlines depending. Along with a handful of light cuts, we find the Monday afternoon run to be more fluid and coherent; transitions are shorter and having all young people on stage makes tracking their journeys easier.

Additional goals will be to expand and detail the group sequences – extend the hip-hop dance, add a second verse to the national anthem, etc. The opening is also worked on physically, with a greater degree of choral work using flocking techniques, where the speaker is the leader and the rest pick up and mirror a mannerism in support of them. There is a lot still to do, but it proves an incredibly productive Monday, in the face of losing the possibility of in-person work for the better part of a fortnight.

However, we are fortunate that we can continue to work online. Our sound engineer, Dylan DeBuitlear [verbatim audio support], sets up a feed of the audio on cleanfeed.net which the cast can connect to. We can then use Alecky's headphone technique without worrying too much about delay.

While rehearsing online means we can really only work on text, we aim to get through all the material by the new year and focus on character work and familiarity. In the two and a half days before Christmas, we are able to finish part one, scene two and part two, scene three and move on to part two, scene four.

Though the pandemic is wreaking havoc on our production process, I am grateful that this is happening in 2021. What we have been able to achieve through Zoom rehearsals, live streaming to isolating company members, recording and sharing files would not have been feasible five or even three years ago and gives us the flexibility to cope with adversity.

Daniel is keen to be back in the rehearsal room at the National Theatre in the first week of January so we can block and stage the scenes – and once we have gone through all the material on audio, that lack of in-person access will begin to seriously impact our timeline.

Left: Alex Jarrett
Right: Vicki Mortimer and Daniel Evans
Rehearsal photographs: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week four

A short working week following a break for Christmas, during which we mostly continue with online work.

In summary, we power through (almost) all the audio for a first pass, continuing with our actioning and character work. We work online with cleanfeed, though progress is not as swift as it had been in person due to lag, technical issues, etc. We estimate we have lost two to three days of effective working time due to the decision to move online. However, we have at least managed to continue with necessary work.

A key discussion arises when we reach the point in the narrative where Covid begins. Exactly how art can speak to or reflect back the experience of the last two years, or the loss of life (having just passed 150,000 UK deaths at time of writing) is a challenge. The advantage *Our Generation* has is that it touches on Covid not by choice but by circumstance. We did not begin relationships with our subjects during the pandemic, but instead were able to see how their lives were disrupted or shifted from what they thought they knew to our 'new normal'. In that sense, we hope we will give an honest and reflective account of the lived experience of the first lockdown (as our text ends in September 2020). However, through discussion, we also become aware of how the wider experience will be implied by the presentation – though no deaths occur in the narrative, the company's experience is of losing family members.

## Rehearsal Call

**Friday 31st December.**
**ON ZOOM**
All calls subject to change

| | Location |
|---|---|
| 10:00 | **Full Company say hello** |
| 10:05 | **Audio work finishing Scene 5**<br>**Starting with Debbies scenes,**<br>**Then working though chronologically from Heavy Metal** |
| 12:00-<br>12:15 | **Tea break. approx** |
| 13:30 – 14:30 | **Lunch** |
| 14:30 | **Continue to work through** |
| 4:00-<br>4:15 | **Tea Break. approx** |
| End of day<br>6:00 | **If time… Social Media without audio.**<br>**Call to End** |

Top: Rehearsal call send by deputy stage manager, Andrew Reed
Bottom: Members of the company
Rehearsal photographs: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week five

Back in the rehearsal room, our focus is on speed. We finish the audio by the end of Tuesday and then part one, scene two and the majority of part two, scene three by Friday. This is just a sketch of the piece – rough shapes, transitions, how we get people on and off stage.

We have some slightly more developed sections, such as parents' evening, exams and the part song – these are generally the ensemble moments where stories overlap and blend, or where we use the entire cast. With movement director Carrie-Anne, Daniel explores staging other ensemble sections where Alecky has cut together short thoughts from across the 12 subjects on various matters, such as social media, fear or relationships. We particularly explore how movement might interface here, whether we stage it to imply actual conversations between the 12 (as all were recorded individually) and how much to separate them from the conventions we are using for staging the actual scenes.

Some of these discussions are left unresolved, as are our perceptions on rules as a whole running throughout the piece. Generally, a director would want to create a sense of consistency in staging decisions to forge a coherent language of significance and symbolism. However, given how driven by the text (and within that volume, pace and diction) this production is, Daniel is holding off on making final decisions until we have a basic shape for the entire play. Indeed, given how the piece traverses four hours, three acts, 200+ scenes and five years of interviews, rules may need to shift or change, while the text and characters remain as the constant. This openness is particularly pushed by our dramaturg, Bash [Sebastian Born], and means we can stay receptive to possibility, only limited by time.

Time is always a worry, despite Daniel's herculean efforts in staging over one third of the play in approximately three days. To make up the time lost by going online, we will be working Saturdays from now on and doing individual monologue sessions in evenings. The first preview is now cancelled, to ensure we have sufficient tech time due to the complexity of the show. We also encourage the cast to learn their text for when we come back to sections to speed up that development.

On that note, we try the opening (with additional refining of movement) without headphones and it makes a difference in connection, a sense of ensemble and clarity for audience members. Actors are pulled out of their heads and into physical space. Giving up the headphones is a newer feature of Alecky's work, but one can see the dividends it pays here, though it requires a much more detailed learning job from the actors than a conventional script.

I have been collating the timelines created by the cast. What this has thrown up for me is how Alecky's play structure blurs away from exact adherence to the

continuity of the subjects in the name of theme and narrative. I can put timelines together chronologically, but this does not match up with where characters are in the play. In part, this is because subjects were interviewed for different periods of time – Ierum was only interviewed for three years, while others were interviewed across five years.

We have an internal sense of timeline which is roughly accurate for each character (though Alecky is happy to sometimes switch order of conversations to draw out thematic resonance), but the narrative chronology seen on stage suggests all subjects journey through the world at the same time. This also informs some discussions around using surtitles for structure. Though we are keen to use them to convey nominal and locational information, Daniel doesn't want to bind us to distinct timelines because of the likelihood of confusing the audience needlessly. Instead, we consider using chronological markers that are not bound to a date but a period – exams, parents' evening, first day of school – drawing out the parallels between the characters and emphasising a consistent and solid meta-structure which we can then play loosely within with the scenes.

Carrie-Anne Ingrouille
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week six

Over the course of this week, Daniel stages the entire show. Though there will be plenty of retooling and adjusting, we now have a base shape for all scenes from which to work. This has also clarified a lot of his thinking around the theatrical rules of the piece. In particular, we are now heavily committed to keeping the 12 young people on stage throughout, but then pulling them out at the beginning of the pandemic – reducing a populated stage to an isolated one. The effect of this will hopefully be amplified as we are increasingly looking at scenes and actions overlapping and actors moving to respond to stories relayed by other participants in the first two parts. Therefore, as the play experiences a 'twist in the plot', to quote an interviewee, so do our staging methods shift to encapsulate the shifting experiences of the 12.

This effect will also be enhanced by decisions we make this week regarding projection and video. Though there are some moments where video will come into play earlier, the largest use of video is in part three, opening the pandemic section with a series of filmed scenes, then returning to that medium when we come back to our ensemble moments. Filming will to take up all of Friday next week and Monday the week after, and will comprise a mixture of stylistic and realistic treatments evoking everything from TikToks to Zoom calls. Again, the idea is to emphasise the shift in living conditions that began in March 2020 but also evoke the increased use of videos and screens experienced during this period as all interviews took place remotely.

Time has been a recurrent thought in terms of scheduling. With such a complex show and losing in-person time from remote rehearsals in December, Daniel asks for two alterations to our scheduling. Firstly, we are now running two weekly evening sessions to focus on individual actors, leaving the days more free for ensemble work, where can D.J. finalise the 'part song' while composing additional musical moments and Carrie-Anne can develop several complex routines which punctuate the show. Secondly, we have extended the preview period in order to ensure due diligence is done to the storytelling whilst achieving the show's ambitious technical goals.

The individual sessions result in the most detailed work on characters. The cast have been amazing in coming off the audio whilst retaining huge accuracy to not just the words spoken but also the intonation, stutters, other mouths sounds and even the pace of delivery. Listening along on with the track has become a key part of my job and the resemblance is uncanny.

Daniel mostly focuses on channelling the physical choices being made into those that will best suit the production. This includes trimming back physical gesture and lessening the tension carried in the body while focusing on support, grounding and placing. By emphasising this simplicity – in Daniel's own words a 'relaxed alertness' – the truth of the characters sings through, with the ease of the performances giving striking power to their stories. Alongside this, we start to pull the group scenes from audio and can focus more on smaller details – listening and how stories are told between characters in the space – to create larger experiences on stage rather than just showcasing a series of individuals.

A final note for this week should go to some choices which have been come to with regarding disabled representation. The character Taylor is a wheelchair user, as is the subject he is based on. A prolonged casting process, which reached out to over 100 organisations due to lack of disabled representation in our industry, resulted in the casting of Callum Mardy – performing on a major stage for the first time in his career, where he's doing excellent work.

Daniel and the National Theatre both understood that the lived experience of using a chair was needed for the character and to give a truthful account of movement. I should note, Callum's reasons for using a wheelchair are different to those of Taylor – there is still acting and imagination used, but it comes from a basis of an understanding which could not be achieved by a non-wheelchair user.

However, it has proved more difficult to realise George, Taylor's father. George is also a wheelchair user, but the only 'adult' male actor we have is Hasan Dixon, who is not a wheelchair user or disabled in any way.

Daniel decides the best way to proceed is to engage with wheelchair users in the artistic community and be led by them. I feel it is useful to record some of the general feedback for consideration should any similar issues ever arise in the future:

- Across the board, there was an appreciation that the production has prioritised authenticity in its main

D.J. Walde
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week six (continued)

disabled role and not compromised in truthful reflection and uplifting disabled talent.

- There was also an understanding of the limits of the production. Budget-wise, we can only afford one 'adult' male actor. This makes an argument that he must be a wheelchair user less obvious. Firstly, that would be mandating casting based on one of over a dozen roles Hasan plays – and several of them are more prominent than George and are not based on real-life wheelchair users. In addition, the three senior actors frequently play against age, ethnicity (though this manifests through only non-white actors playing white characters) and other factors. There has been an attempt to manage representation across the cast, realising that, particularly the older actors, cannot match every character they play in background. In an ideal world, a larger budget might have allowed a second wheelchair-using actor. But the key point is that Hasan's portrayal of a disabled character is in a theatrical language that is used across the production, within a diverse cast often playing against type – and not just for disabled characters.

- Furthermore, Callum plays non-disabled roles at other points in the play, thus balancing this theatrical language rather than erasing disabled actors from the project.

- There was an understanding that, where attention is being paid to disability across the production and genuinely extensive lengths have been taken to ensure good disabled representation, a non-disabled actor playing a disabled character was permissible due to the circumstances of this production and the efforts made.

- There was a universal pushback on any suggestion of erasing George's disability – including having him sit in a chair as opposed to a wheelchair. Feedback stressed the necessity of representing disability if the production truly aspired to encapsulate Britain. Indeed, George and Taylor are unfortunately outliers in depictions of disability on stage. They are happy, self- confident, in active sexual relationships, raising families and succeeding in their careers – all roles often withheld from the tragic stereotype portrayals of disability in drama.

- But the realisation of George as a character is also important. In a less stylistic, minimalistic production, having Hasan play George would be far more problematic. We will not suggest Hasan is disabled or acts as a disabled person. Instead he represents the truth that George, Taylor's father, is disabled. The wheelchair is brought into scenes, Hasan sits in it and he leaves it at the end of a scene. He is not embodying disability. The truthful representation is done by Callum. Hasan's chair is part of the set and production – not an acting device to achieve any method-acting quality. It is respected but considered an integral piece of staging rather than a character in itself.

This may be quite a long explanation, but in a discussion which is very much still happening across the industry, clear principles have come from the disabled community:

– genuinely try to represent us; sometimes this may not be entirely possible and that is understood;
– if you wish to have non-disabled actors play disability there must be significant disabled presence elsewhere;
– the actor is not embodying or realising disability
– that is something that should be left to the disabled actor – but no-one is saying no non-disabled person can never play any injury, disability or access need if the choice is made with dignity, integrity and, crucially, real disabled input.

As a disabled person and someone who works with disabled creatives regularly, I've been really heartened by the attitudes in this process, and the courage of the team to learn and be led.

In short, Hasan plays George and will be in a wheelchair. Our work, with some external consultation, is now to make that execution clean and honourable.

Stephen Bailey
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week seven

Monday sees our call get more complex as we balance costume calls, dialect calls, main sessions and individual sessions across the cast. In particular, Carrie-Anne is now working individually with cast members, particularly those who play many roles, in order to show the physicality with as precise difference as is achieved in voice through the recordings.

Beyond this, we continue to revisit scenes, now moving into part two and scenes three and four. Here, we see the reflection of the individual work coming to the fore and increased detailing to improve clarity. This process is matched with continued script amendments – all removals and cuts. Given the four-hour running time, we can't afford to have deadweight in the script, even if it might be interesting or compelling material. Reiterations in scenes have been stripped down. A charming interaction with a young Welsh girl before meeting Mia has been removed – while it is funny, it complicates our ability to work out, as an audience, who is important and whose story we are following.

This also results in the removal of a wonderful scene with a Kosovan family, where they discuss the pressures placed on immigrants to succeed, the pride the sons feel in their parents and systemic inequality. There is, understandably, some cast resistance to the loss of this compelling moment. However, regrettably, Luan (our subject) says little in the scene as it is focuses on his brother. Moreover, the issues raised are reflected elsewhere and through other characters. The brother may say it with great conviction and precision, but when exam results are opened and the private school students each achieve more A/A* grades than over half the other subjects combined, the point about systemic advantages is still made.

On Tuesday, unfortunately, we have news of a positive Covid case in the company. Thankfully, there appears to have been no further spread among the cast and, under new rules, the cast member can be back in the room from next Tuesday, though they cannot be in close contact until the end of the week. We press on without them, passing through part two and moving into a recap of part three.

Tracking cast positioning across our hundreds of scenes remains a key part of my job and that of stage management. With the persistence of Covid, we discuss what contingency planning can be enacted in the event that a cast member needs to isolate during the run. We cannot be provided with understudies, but our writer and director are both experienced actors, and the hope is that with a complete show 'bible' (a breakdown of movements, blocking etc) for each of the 15 parts, it should be possible for them to navigate the show should the worst come to the worst.

A piece of bright news is the confirmation that the vast majority of our music clearances have come through. We have increasingly used D.J.'s compositions for longer moments and non-diegetic sound (music used within the context of the story) but the dance music for the 'Born to Perform' section and both songs for the part song have been given the go-ahead, which secures several of our larger ensemble moments.

On Friday, we have our first of two days of filming. The day involves the TikToks and a series of clips for our NHS clap ensemble. We will be filming more footage on Monday, but today's work of recreating three TikToks is much more time consuming than that will be, particularly in the recording of Carrie-Anne's new dance sequence which the cast have been practising in any free moment. The actual end capture proves surprisingly painless, and we are able to wrap 30 minutes early. Let us hope that continues next week.

Saturday rehearsal is 'just' a run of part one. This should have been a significant event as our intention was to present to an audience of invited young people to gauge their feedback and let that influence the show. However, with a cast member out due to Covid, it is felt the presentation would be sincerely lacking and given how much of our focus/attention is being given to the clarity of the storytelling, having someone reading in a character would make the exercise redundant. That said, we finish at 1.30pm having solidified all transitions in the most stage-business heavy part of the show and with a very tight, off-audio run. Part one feels at the point where repetition is what is most needed – all elements work well, we need to give the cast the time, experience and confidence to link their tracks together. It is fortunate that we have additional time in the room. It is unfortunate that we need to press on with parts two and three – though we will find time to spend a session on transitions next week.

Callum Mardy
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week eight

Besides a further filming session on Monday, most of this week is focused on refining parts one and two. Part two undergoes major rewrites. For the most part, this means reordering, some cuts and combining scenes. Credit to the cast for dealing with shifting running orders and blocking. Key priorities include minimising repetition, ensuring a balance of tone and content that keeps the audience engaged and streamlining the play wherever possible. We make a key dramaturgical discovery that combining a character's sections together, so we meet them fewer times but for longer each time, is better than trying to juggle all 12 characters' narratives simultaneously. This is particularly useful in the context of Mia's domestic abuse plot, which is now focused much more in the final third of part two, scene three rather than spread across the entire scene.

This frequent rejigging also makes clear the necessity of sometimes just going through scenes to track everything in the cast's minds. This proves more time-consuming than anticipated. Daniel sets out to cover part one on Friday morning and it ends up taking more than the whole day. However, this is time well-spent, both to refine the choreography in the staging but also to ensure the actors feel comfortable and able to flip between parts while retaining an active energy while on stage. It is also going to make technical rehearsals less focused on stage 'business' as we track mobile phone plots, hijab plots and where costumes can and should be changed.

Costumes are a point of discussion as, in this penultimate week, we start to have production team members feeding more into the work we do. Paul Arditti (sound designer) works out where atmosphere is useful for setting the scene (though we are keen not to overdo this) and he also picks out key sounds from the recordings, which we can carry through into the production. With D.J., he pitches where underscoring is useful to carry sections or emphasise thematic links.

Akhila Krishnan (video designer) is planning a large animated element which will shift from light sketches projected on the back wall in part one, to more realistic drawings by part three as the characters become more developed and realised. This trend is contrasted by Kinnetia Isadore's costumes which begin packed full of colour but become washed out in part three as the characters experience the draining effects of the pandemic.

We also consider where we should pare back and not over-emphasise things (putting a hat on a hat, to quote Daniel) and costume is a key focus here. The three senior actors multi-role the most intensely and we do not want costume changes to detract or to create slowness at any point. Sometimes, some vagueness is going to be preferable to a full change of costume when Steph [Stephanie Street], Debbie [Chazen] or Hasan switch on a sixpence to a different character.

This minimalism is also planned for Zoe Spurr's lighting.

This will likely have a shift in lighting state for every one of our 200+ scenes, but they will be gradual shifts and focus on emphasis and gentle transition rather than snaps. We will deploy more vigorous lighting in the ensemble moments which break our commitment to naturalism and focus on using those bursts of colour and sound as palate cleansers.

Part of our decision to potentially strip back costume comes from the Saturday presentation. The entirety of part one is played to an invited audience of teenagers from Chichester, the Orange Tree, Theatre Royal Stratford East and Theatre Peckham. It is followed by a feedback session which will inform our thinking going forward. Thankfully – and we can only hope this was not politeness, but watching them we feel we held their focus for the 95 minutes – feedback was very positive.

Daniel begins by asking them about themes they recognised and the focus moves around fear, anxiety, exam pressure, parental pressure, lack of identity and the challenges of trying to find one, and balancing school and social pressures. A key takeaway is that different stories and characters will pop at different moments and be engaging to different audience members. It is heartening to hear different specific lines being cited by different audience members as moments of where they empathise or identify with characters, suggesting we are doing a solid job of trying to encapsulate the experiences of a generation.

Stephanie Street
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Rehearsal diary: week eight (continued)

*Our Generation* is clearly a watch that requires investment from the audience. There is definitely an enthusiasm for the ensemble moments, where the style of watching changes, and of moments that link the piece together – particular praise is given to the opening lines that then recur through each character's narrative.

By and large, despite having to substitute our video captions for a flipchart and lacking most of our costuming, the multi-roling proves manageable. Accents, vocalisation and physicality are all cited as clear, which means we don't have to do that job with tech and slow down the running of the show. Some moments of confusion are noted and we will adjust blocking and the script as needed. It is remarkable how small some of those moments are: Hasan still wearing a teacher's whistle while being Agron, or Zac sitting at a table with the same tablecloth as Drin, Luan's brother, (both played by Dee) – both stand out where a detail told a much larger story.

Time and its passage are also on our minds. We can't caption with years as the characters' timelines are so jumbled and some characters were followed for longer than others. At the same time, we need to make it clear that we start in approximately 2016 and end in about 2020. Music, though mostly original compositions by D.J., is identified as already working strongly by the test group, so are small contemporary details – Trump, Kim Kardashian being robbed, etc. It underlines that we need to ping out those lines to allow the audience to do that connecting work.

The same goes for ages of the characters. There is resistance to putting ages for each character's introduction caption because that might tie us into chronicling the progression, which has the aforementioned problems. However, many of Alecky's selections leave an age, or a birthday, or a reference – such as the first year of GCSEs – which allows the audience to track how old characters are at certain points. Again, we will encourage the cast to stress those bits of detail and test if it is sufficient in previews.

For the cast, it also leads to several discoveries. In particular, that reactions cannot be taken for granted and they have to be prepared for not getting the reaction they might expect from a line. Instead, they need to imagine the interview collector is there and encouraging them to continue talking, and play that reality.

We note that masks are challenging here as they obscure so much of the face and make building those relationships difficult unless imagination is brought to bear. It also highlights the challenges of stamina and focus as we don't present even half the complete piece to the test group. We plan to do three runs next week before entering tech to continue working on this. However, we finish the week in an elated mood, proud of what we are achieving.

Anushka Chakravarti
Rehearsal photograph: Johan Persson

# Theatre glossary

**Meet and greet**
Usually held on the first day of rehearsals, the meet and greet is a chance for the company and production team to meet everyone who is involved in the production as well as staff from marketing, learning, fundraising, etc. The director – and sometimes the writer – may take this opportunity to explain a bit about their vision for the production.

**Round the table / table work**
Some directors like to start rehearsals by reading through the script, and getting an understanding of the play, characters and setting without adding movement or blocking.

**Blocking**
Working out where actors should stand or move on stage, and at what point.

**Put on its feet**
The point in rehearsals where the company start to add in blocking and try out movement for scenes. Some directors like to put a play 'on its feet' from the very start, and work out the intention of the play and the characters at the same time as the movement.

**A run**
Rehearsing each scene of the play in chronological order, without interruption. Runs help directors and actors to see which parts of the production may need more attention or reworking. The first run-through of a play is often referred to as a 'stagger-through', as there are usually delays and mistakes.

**Off book**
Once an actor has learnt their part, they no longer need to use their script in rehearsals and are described as being 'off book'.

**The book**
This is another name for the script. A stage manager who is 'on the book' will be in the wings of the stage, ready to help any actor who may have forgotten a line – they are also known as the 'prompt'.

**Act**
The separation of a play into different sections, which in turn are sometimes sub-divided into scenes.

**The space**
The area in which the work is taking place. This term can refer to both the rehearsal room and the theatre's stage.

**Staff director**
The National Theatre uses staff directors rather than assistant directors. Staff directors have a variety of jobs, depending on the production and the director they are working with. They can help with background research for rehearsals, lead improvisations and act as a liaison on behalf of the director. Once a production has had its press night, the director steps away from the production and the staff director takes over. The staff director rehearses the company at 'bring back calls' and also rehearses the understudies.

**Bring back call**
The National Theatre operates a 'rep' system, meaning that a production will not be playing every day and a company may have a break every other week or so. A bring back call is a short rehearsal on the day when the company return from having a break. The staff director normally holds a line run with the company, and rehearses in more detail complicated scenes, movement sequences or fights.

**Rehearsal call**
The stage manager will work out a day-by-day rehearsal schedule for a production, in consultation with the director. The rehearsal call sets out the scenes that are being worked on that day, and the actors or production team who are needed, and when.

**Ensemble**
A company of actors or performers where the emphasis is on collaborative group work.

**Company**
The cast, production team and other staff associated with the show.

**Understudy**
An actor who learns the role of another member of the company so that they can perform that part in the event of injury, illness or scheduled absence.

**Actioning / intentions**
A way of approaching a text, which some actors and directors like to use. Each line is assigned a transitive verb, which may help the actor to explore ways of delivering that line and uncover the meaning behind what their character is saying or trying to achieve.

**Stanislavskian**
Relating to Constantin Stanislavski, a Russian theatre practitioner usually associated with method acting.

**Beckettian**
Relating to playwright Samuel Beckett, whose work is associated with minimalism.

**Alexander technique**
A system designed to promote healthy movement and posture. Named after its creator Frederick Matthias Alexander.

# **Theatre glossary** (continued)

**Upstage**
The area at the back of the stage furthest from the audience.

**Downstage**
The area at the front of the stage closest to the audience.

**Improvisation**
Action taken by an actor(s) that is unprepared or unrehearsed. During the rehearsal process this is often led by suggestions from the director for the purposes of exploration and discovery. During performance improvisation is often used by actors to cover a mistake or accident on stage. Sometimes a script is written in a way which allows actors space to improvise the occasional line or two – normally in reponse to the audience's reaction to an event.

**Beat**
In the script a playwright may use the term 'beat' to denote a pause or a shift in pace or intention in the play. In rehearsal, the term is often used to describe a particular moment or event on stage. It can also be used to describe a unit of time.

**Line run**
The company say their lines without adding movements. Line runs help actors to feel confident that they know their words before going on stage. Sometimes line runs are done at speed, which can really test how well actors know their roles.

**Model box**
A scale model of the set, used by the director and designer to work out how each scene could look. For the acting company, model boxes help them to visualise where they will be standing on stage and the world their character is living in. Carpenters, production managers, scenic artists and prop-makers will also study the model box, to get an idea of textures and finish on the set, as well as the overall look. Model boxes can also help to flag any issues with elements of staging before they are made.

**Fit up**
The set is assembled on the stage.

**Get in**
The set, props and costumes are brought to the stage, ready for technical rehearsals.

**Technical run**
Running through the play setting all technical cues, including lighting, sound, set changes and automation. This is an opportunity to practice scene changes, characters' entrances and exits, costume changes, and for actors to get used to being on the set.

**Dress run / dress rehearsal**
A dress rehearsal is a chance to pull together all elements of a production, including sound, lighting and costume, and work through the play as though it is a performance.

**Previews**
Before a production has its press night, it normally has a couple of preview performances. Productions can still change right up to press night, and it is during previews that the company and director get to see how audiences respond to the production, and they may rework sections accordingly.

**Press night**
The night the critics see the production before reviewing it.

The company in *Our Generation*
Production photograph: Johan Persson