



# A TASTE OF HONEY

BY SHELAGH DELANEY

## EXCHANGE EDUCATION: Resource Extra

**A TASTE OF HONEY** is in production at the Royal Exchange Theatre from 12 November – 6 December 2008. The production marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shelagh Delaney’s funny, vibrant and unforgettable play. When her mother abandons her in favour of her latest fancy man, Jo looks for love herself, and soon finds that life is awfully difficult to get right.

### First day of rehearsals

On the first day of rehearsals for **A TASTE OF HONEY** the actors, creative team and Theatre staff gather together for the first time. This is an opportunity for Theatre staff to welcome the actors to the building, and also for Director Jo Combes, and Designer Ben Stones to share some of the ideas behind the production. Jo reads the company a quotation from the bible, “Then Saul said to Jonathan, Tell me what thou hast done. And Jonathan told him, and said, I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in mine hand, and lo, I must die (Samuel 14:43)”. This connects to the play’s title. It is about having a little taste of happiness, finding a moment of sweetness in an otherwise bitter existence. With this in mind, Jo feels it’s important that, despite the play’s potentially depressing themes, the production is not downbeat or miserable – for her, this is a play about celebrating those small moments of happiness, putting your life on stage and enjoying it.



## Joan Littlewood and Shelagh Delaney: Two Extraordinary women in theatre

This 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary production is, Jo Combes tells us, “also a celebration of two extraordinary women in theatre”. The first of these is Shelagh Delaney, who wrote the play, aged just eighteen. After leaving school Delaney held a variety of jobs: shop assistant, clerk in a milk depot, usherette, but her ambition was always to write. When she was seventeen, she began *A TASTE OF HONEY* as a novel. However, after seeing a production of a Terence Rattigan play which she deemed bland and trivial, she was convinced that she could do better. She felt that the real working class experience was missing from the Theatre, complaining in a 1959 interview that, “North Country people are shown as gormless, whereas in actual fact they are very alive and cynical”. So, she took a fortnight off work to adapt her novel into a play.

**WHY NOT:** Discuss how *A TASTE OF HONEY* would be different if it had remained as a novel, rather than becoming a play?

**WHY NOT:** Find four or five other plays which were first performed in the 1950s? Compare the first scene of these to the first scene of *A TASTE OF HONEY*.

The second of Jo Combes’ “extraordinary women” is Joan Littlewood, who directed the first ever production of *A TASTE OF HONEY*. Joan Littlewood developed the Theatre Workshop, a company of actors and theatre makers committed to devising and commissioning plays which explored working class experience. At the first day of rehearsals, Jo tells the acting company how Littlewood and the rest of her company would sleep over in the theatre during rehearsals. Jo also describes how in order to keep the performances fresh, Littlewood might on any given night swap around the actors’ parts, so that without any warning Jo would find herself playing Helen and vice versa. Although Jo assures the acting company she does not plan to resort to quite such drastic measures, she tells them that she is keen to recreate, and pay testament to, this sense of playfulness and celebration.

Actor Murray Melvin joined Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop in 1957 and played Geoffrey in the first production of *A TASTE OF HONEY*. Murray recently appeared at the Royal Exchange Theatre, and during his time here he spoke to us about the enormity of Littlewood’s influence over modern

theatre: “When I go to the theatre these days I see Joan’s influence all the time. She was the first to bring the real working class voice into the theatre. Until then when you heard a working class voice on stage or on film they were always as a figure of fun, the comedy maid going ‘lawks ma’am’. Joan brought the real working class experience onto the stage. Today that is considered the norm but the influence was Joan.”

Murray continues: “Her theatrical influences came from Europe, starting in Russia with Stanislavski. At Theatre Workshop, his teachings were our bible. Eisenstein was another teacher. All Joan’s productions were very filmic – for example, the cross cutting of scenes. She loved to have two, three or four scenes going on at once. “We can cope with two or three conversations at a party”, she’d say, “so why not on the stage?”. “Never under-estimate the ability of your audience” was her credo. She also loved commedia dell’arte, Piscator with his docu-drama, Brecht, the Agit Prop street theatre... All this was a part of our daily lives in the company. At the start England did not understand her, hence her struggle to create her theatre. It was all strange, and I daresay ‘Foreign’.”



“Today” says Murray, “I see a bare stage with a shaft of light in which a piece of scenery and some props suddenly appear, and a wry smile comes to me. She did it all this years before and now they are catching up with her. So the influences are there all the time.”

The influence of *A TASTE OF HONEY* on Murray was clearly enormous: “As the young boy, Geoffrey, I played a gay person not as a figure of fun (which was the norm for gay characters in 1957) but as a character with dignity – Joan’s working credo. Although so much time has passed, and much has changed, the significance of that portrayal is ongoing. I still get letters from young people, telling me how seeing the film has helped them with their own sexuality. And then there was the Mother with the boyfriend, an unmarried girl pregnant by a black boy. Wow, dear old Joan got it all out there – she was breaking ground in the early fifties!”

*(A full transcript of this interview with Murray Melvin is available to download from the ‘Features’ page of the Royal Exchange Education website, titled ‘Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop’)*

**WHY NOT:** Think about how the world has changed in the fifty years since the play was written? Imagine one of the characters has travelled in time. Write a monologue from their perspective, discussing how they feel about modern day Salford. What might shock or disgust them? What would they be pleased or proud about?

**WHY NOT:** Research the European theatre-makers who Murray Melvin describes as influencing Joan Littlewood? For each theatre-maker create a collage to represent key aspects of their ideas.

**WHY NOT:** Work with a group to think about the plays you have seen recently, and to research current theatre listings? Who are the main characters in each of these plays? Use this to discuss whether there are any groups who are missing or unfairly represented in modern theatre.

### Ideas for further Exploration...

#### **WATCH:**

OH, WHAT A LOVELY WAR created by Joan Littlewood for the Theatre Workshop – this musical, and later film, comments on the story of the First World War using popular songs of the time. Murray Melvin feels that, “Joan, with that one production created a whole new world for theatre.”

#### **LISTEN:**

MORRISSEY: LOUDER THAN BOMBS – Shelagh Delaney’s works have formed the inspiration for several songs written by the British singer/songwriter Morrissey, and she featured on the sleeves of the *Louder Than Bombs* album and *Girlfriend in a Coma* single by his band, The Smiths. Listening to this album, and looking at his lyrics, can you see why Shelagh Delaney appealed to Morrissey?

#### **READ:**

VARIATIONS ON A THEME by Terrence Rattigan – this is the play that Shelagh Delaney supposedly wanted to better with *A TASTE OF HONEY*. In what ways is it different from her play?

SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING, by Alan Sillitoe – this novel, first published in 1958, also explores the lives of working class British characters.

SMALL ISLAND by Andrea Levy – this novel explores the relationships between a British and a Jamaican couple, who’s lives converge during the second world war. The novel is largely set in 1948, and offers an insight into the racial prejudices in the world of *A TASTE OF HONEY*.

## The Importance of Place: Notes on the Design

A TASTE OF HONEY is set in a comfortless flat in Salford in the 1950s. The action takes place in the room Jo shares with her Mother, Helen, and also in the street outside. The play's author Shelagh Delaney was from Salford and Director Jo Combes feels that getting the world of the play right is incredibly important.

Designer Ben Stones has tried to create a room which is as minimal as possible. Everything in the flat is make-shift – for example, the suitcases that the women carry on when they arrive are transformed in to shelving. Later in the play, Jo's friend Geoffrey helps her re-invent the room. Jo Combes explains how, “decorating the flat is their way of expressing themselves as artists”. It was therefore important to begin the play with the flat as bare as possible, demonstrating the importance of Geoffrey's arrival in Jo's life.

The bare, naturalistic room will be set against a heightened style of performance (with actors coming out of character and directly addressing the audience) and also against stylised scene changes. As the Royal Exchange Theatre is in the round, there are several ways of achieving scene changes and they often involve more than just moving traditional scenery on and off. At the Royal Exchange, scenery is often moved mechanically using motors, winches, hydraulics or pneumatics, and the most common form of mechanical movement of scenery is ‘flying’. Before the start of any Royal Exchange production, look up, and see if you can spy any props hanging close to the ceiling – chances are that you'll see them later on in the show. In this production, the street lights and the windows fly in and out to mark when the action moves from inside to outside. By moving the scenery in this way, the Creative Team are trying to achieve a magical, dream-like state. The actors will also take an active role in the scene changes – dancing on and off between scenes, and bringing additional props with them.

down sofas – as if they have been abandoned in the street. The other half of these seats will become doorstops – suggesting that down this street there are many other homes, just like this one, all with families struggling to live out their lives inside. The idea behind this is to bring the audience on to the stage – making them part of this world.

**WHY NOT:** Create a mini-museum, capturing the atmosphere of the place where you grew up? Decorate a shoe box with photos, fabrics, and found objects which remind you of home. Try and make your museum multi-sensory – are there any particular smells that remind you of home? Could you capture them, for example using pot-pourri, dried flowers or herbs?



The Salford setting hasn't just affected the design of the production – on the first day of rehearsals Director Jo tells the actors that she feels it is important that they develop “a Salford swagger” – this isn't a play about doing down where you come from, it is about being proud of it, putting your life on stage and celebrating it. To help achieve this, the production will use the strong musical heritage of Salford and Manchester with a live DJ on stage playing a mix of music from the 1950s to the present day. Music will be used to reflect the themes of the play and the live performance element will also add to the sense of celebration in the production.

**WHY NOT:** Make a soundtrack of songs which remind you of the place where you grew up? You might use bands or artists who come from your home town, or who refer to place in their lyrics – or you might choose songs which just remind you of a particular time in your life.

**WHY NOT:** Think about how much significance a piece of furniture has when it is placed in a bare space? Collect as many images of different sofas as you can. Compare the images. Pick five or six, and for each image decide who would own a sofa like it? What can furniture tell you about the life and personality of the person who owns it?

The front row of theatre seats (known as banquettes) will be removed, and transformed. Half of these seats will be replaced with old, broken