



The Low Road **By Bruce Norris**

BACKGROUND PACK



CONTENTS

- 1. About The Production**
- 2. About The Writer**
- 3. Introduction to The Low Road**
- 4. About The Design**
- 5. Researching the World of the Play**
- 6. Interview with the Director**
- 7. Assistant Director's Rehearsal Diary**
- 8. Practical Exercises**
- 9. About Royal Court Education**

These resources are intended to give teachers and students a detailed insight into the creative process behind developing and staging *The Low Road*. Through interviews, production notes and rehearsal techniques, they demonstrate how the writer, director and cast worked in collaboration to create the show. We aim to provide useful information and opportunities to help students discover the unique world of the play for themselves.

1. ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

The Royal Court Theatre Presents

THE LOW ROAD by Bruce Norris

THE LOW ROAD was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Sloane Square, on Friday 22 March 2013.

Cast in alphabetical order

Redcoat/Hessian/Questioner/Faraday/Musician

Questioner/Musician

Sergeant Manley/Attendant/Musician

Mrs Trumpett/Belinda/Margarita Low

Peg/Sister Elizabeth/Musician

Jim Trumpett

Company

Farmer/Nathaniel Pugh/Ed

Hessian/Pandit

Old One-Eyed Tizzy/Ntombi/Mary Cleere

John Blanke

Prostitute/Constance Pugh/Questioner

The Duke of Buccleuch/Hessian/Questioner/Officer

Young Jim Trumpett

Captain Shirley/Poor Tim/Dick Trumpett

Adam Smith

Slave Merchant/Brother Amos/Hessian/Ivan/Lagarde

Prostitute/Sister Comfort/Delilah Low

Greasy-Haired Man/Martin/Isaac Low

Company

Jared Ashe

Jack Benjamin

Kit Benjamin

Elizabeth Berrington

Helen Cripps

Johnny Flynn

Charlyne Francis

Ian Gelder

Raj Ghatak

Natasha Gordon

Kobna Holdbrook-Smith

Ellie Kendrick

Edward Killingback

Frederick Neilson/Will

Thompson

Simon Paisley Day

Bill Paterson

Harry Peacock

Leigh Quinn

John Ramm

Joseph Rowe

All other parts played by members of the company.

Director

Designer

Lighting Designer

Sound Designer

Composer

Casting Director

Associate Designer

Assistant Director

Dominic Cooke

Tom Pye

Jean Kalman

Carolyn Downing

Gary Yershon

Amy Ball

Ben Gerlis

Simon Dormandy

Production Manager	Tariq Rifaat
Stage Manager	Nafeesah Butt
Deputy Stage Manager	Sarah Hellicar
Assistant Stage Managers	Katie Hutcheson & Sophie Rubenstein
Stage Management Work Placements	Elena Rouse-Eyre & Amy Slater
Costume Supervisors	Iona Kendrick & Jackie Orton
Hair & Make-up Supervisor	Carole Hancock for HUM Studio
Assistant Hair & Make-up Supervisor	Laura Solari
Wigs supplied by	HUM Studio
Dialect Coach	Penny Dyer
Movement Directors	Imogen Knight & Sue Lefton
Fight Director	Bret Yount
Set Built by	Miraculous Engineering
Scenic Work by	Kerry Jarrett
Additional Scenic Elements by	Bay Productions & The Rocking Horse Workshop
Armourer	Mark Shelley

2. ABOUT THE WRITER

Bruce Norris Biography

For the Royal Court: The Pain & the Itch, Clybourne Park and The Low Road.

Other theatre includes: Domesticated (Lincoln Center); A Parallelogram (Steppenwolf Theater, Chicago/Mark Taper Forum); Clybourne Park, The Pain & the Itch (Playwrights Horizon Steppenwolf; The Unmentionables, We All went Down to Amsterdam, Purple Heart, The Infidel (Steppenwolf).

Awards include: Tony Award for Best Play, Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play, Evening Standard Theatre Award for Best New Play, Pulitzer Prize for Drama (Clybourne Park); Steinberg Playwrights Award, Whiting Prize, Joseph Jefferson Award (Chicago).

The Telegraph, 7 March 2013

Bruce Norris: 'I think we are doomed'

Uncompromising American playwright Bruce Norris has the super-rich in his sights as his latest work prepares to open at London's Royal Court, says Jasper Rees.



By Jasper Rees

They're changing the guard at the Royal Court Theatre. For his final act after six years in charge, Dominic Cooke has returned to the American playwright whose work he introduced to these shores upon becoming artistic director. A new play by Bruce Norris can mean only one thing. Theatre-goers should start quaking in their Louboutins as he prepares to give them another bloody nose.

Norris's speciality is pointing a finger at his well-heeled, self-satisfied audience. "I like to disrupt is what I like to do," he says as his new play rehearses in the next room. "I just like to disrupt situations. I don't like when people seem to think they know the answers or their mind is made up about something." Thus *The Pain* and *the Itch* scratched raucously beneath the veneer of smug East Coast liberalism to reveal ugly, unpeaceable instincts, although that was an exercise in throat-clearing compared to *Clybourne Park*, which shone an interrogative arc light into racial attitudes among both black and white.

It won the Olivier and Tony Awards for best new play, and then in 2011 the Pulitzer Prize.

For Cooke's swansong — and Norris's first Court commission — the playwright has chosen to alight on the era's defining theme: money. This time he is going for broke. The Low Road diverges from his claustrophobia-inducing single-set domestic dramas with 20 scenes, 60 characters, a historical sweep and transatlantic reach. Why the step change?

"I must have had some kind of aneurism," Norris muses. "I thought, Dominic's leaving so he can destroy the budget and it won't matter. The one good thing about having a play be successful like Clybourne Park is that you know that whatever you do next will be judged inferior to your previous work. That way I could say, 'Well then I can do anything I want.'"

Don't, however, expect an Enron-style broadside against recent events on Wall Street and in the City. "You can't write an interesting play about what happened in the past five years, because it's so mundane. Ultimately, you have to write about human beings rather than about how computers work. I guess I'm writing about why people think the way they do, feel the way they do, about money and status. And why it is important that you want your child to grow up and not just succeed, but exceed others. That kind of structural need to ensure the status of future generations is almost a species problem and one that really can't be addressed until we evolve."

Not that Norris has any faith in mankind's ability to evolve. His theory is that we've never really left the cave — "Of course not. We've decorated the cave" — and that the amoral law of the free market "is the law that we obeyed when we had hair all over the majority of our bodies and hunted and gathered". And in plays that sucker audiences as laughs make way for gasps, Norris has taken it upon himself to point this out.

"I would say it's not about a mission to unmask the privileged bourgeois hypocrites," he says of his oeuvre, "and it's not a campaign to bring down the American way of life. I guess, if I were to be really pretentious about it, it's a campaign to bring down the species. I think as a species we have some big problems that are insurmountable. I think we are kind of doomed, and our responsibility is to just be perpetually vigilant to our worst tendencies."

Norris looks like one of those springy bantamweights who lands jabs and cuts rather than haymakers. His sharp, alert features are framed by a geekier brand of spectacles, and his mordant drawl suggests perpetual bafflement. Born in 1960, he grew up in Houston, the middle in a brood of three. Was he an attention-seeking second child? "Um, I was a pain in the ass is what I'd say." He went into acting, he claims, with the specific plan of gaining attention. A small part in *The Sixth Sense* was his most visible screen role.

In 1992 he wrote a play called *The Actor Retires*. "I found that the form of exhibitionism required by being an actor was not nearly as satisfying". His plays began to be performed in earnest in the early 2000s. *Purple Heart* (2002) is currently enjoying its UK premiere at the Gate Theatre in Notting Hill. Though set during Vietnam, it gives voice to his dismay at the US invasion of Afghanistan, "a despairing moment because whatever last atom of optimism I had about my own generation was kind of crushed at that moment".

Playwriting mostly in the not-for-profit sector — the Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago has put on seven of his plays — has not made him wealthy, he insists. He rents in Chelsea, New York, and should he so wish, he has enough to down tools for a couple of years. Not that he has. Later this year a new play for the Lincoln

Center called Domesticated will feature a philandering US politician. Meanwhile, *The Low Road* emanates partly from his visceral shock at quite how much money other people have stashed away.

"I've had throughout my whole life a complete disregard for anything like the financial section of a paper because why would you read about the new fluorescent bulb that GE has developed this year? Who gives a shit? This is incredibly arrogant and a pretentious, snotty-nosed artist thing to say, but those are the people who quite rationally and sensibly have houses. They have houses out in the country. I've misapplied my life to the pursuit of something that gives me incredible pleasure but Jesus Christ, I don't have any of those things. I feel like a fool."

And even the pleasure of lecturing a captive audience for two hours has its drawbacks. "What I like is sitting there while the play is going on because no one takes the megaphone away from you. Then I have to put my clothes back on.

"As soon as the lights come up, you hear the actual things that people think. If I felt that what I was hearing was actual critical analysis of something I'd written, I'd listen attentively. But generally I try to walk out of the theatre when the conversation unfolds because the mundane nature of it is sometimes too much to take. It's too great a distance from your optimistic expectation of the conversation that you would provoke. I mean generally it's like, 'Huh, I didn't like that as much as the play we saw last night, so where are we going for dinner?'"

3. Introduction to *The Low Road*



The Low Road - Synopsis

The Low Road is a satire about contemporary American politics, set back in the late eighteenth century, when America was fighting for independence from British rule. It is narrated by Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher and father of modern economics who argued that everyone benefits when individuals pursue their own self-interest because an "invisible hand" leads them to benefit society as a whole, whether they mean to do so or not. This idea

underpins rightwing politics in the USA today, and it inspires young Jim Trumpett, the hero of our story, as he goes in search of his fortune through war-torn America in 1776.

The story begins in 1759 when, as a baby, Jim is abandoned at the door of a tavern in Massachusetts with a letter explaining that his father is "G. Washington of Virginia" and that whoever raises the child will receive a rich reward when he reaches 17. So Dolly Trumpett, proprietor of the tavern, takes the boy in. Her tavern doubles as a brothel popular with British soldiers, and when one of them tells Mrs Trumpett of a wealthy Virginian gentleman called George Washington – the man who, in history, was to become first President of the United States – she is convinced that her fortune is made, as well as that of her young charge, and she decides to raise the boy as her own.

As a boy, Jim comes across the most famous paragraph from Adam Smith's masterpiece, *The Wealth of Nations*, when Smith passes briefly through Mrs Trumpett's tavern (the real Adam Smith never crossed the Atlantic – but this isn't history!) Smith's image of the "invisible hand" turning self-interest to the benefit of all, inspires young Jim with an almost religious belief in the virtue of selfishness and justifies him in his growing heartlessness and greed.

On his seventeenth birthday, following the discovery that his father may not be who he thinks he is, Jim commits a crime that forces him to leave his adoptive home and venture forth in pursuit of his fortune. Intending to go to Virginia and make the now-famous George Washington accept him as his son and heir, and armed with a fat purse of money secretly accumulated while fiddling the finances of the brothel, Jim equips himself with the things a gentleman needs: luxurious foodstuffs, fine clothing, and a negro slave. But no longer has he set off with his new treasures, than he and his slave, John Blanke, are robbed at gunpoint by a masked highwayman and left penniless by the roadside.

Rescued by an eccentric local religious community, Jim and John are generously clothed and fed. However, Jim's abrasive and passionately held views, and his discovery of the true identity of the highwayman that robbed him, provoke a violent quarrel that leads to Jim's hasty departure from the community, with more than his own goods in his luggage, and another dark crime to his name. As he flees the community, Jim is arrested for refusing to pay road tax by a platoon of German soldiers in the service of the British crown. When he foolishly protests that he is the son of George Washington of Virginia - the name of the man who by now is leading the American Revolutionary forces - they prepare to shoot him as an enemy of the British crown.

After the interval, and following an interlude in which we discover what Jim Trumpett's descendants are up to in our own day, we return to 1776, where Jim, after a sudden reprieve and a stroke of good fortune, lands a job as private secretary to Isaac Low, a rich New York financier, where his skills as an ingenious and unscrupulous investor bring him to the threshold of wealth and social status, the goals he has pursued since childhood. But, as we know only too well from recent economic disasters that our story deliberately foreshadows, the higher you build a financial house of cards, the greater may be the fall.

While Jim's gift for money-management makes him useful to Low and his family, his slave's tragic history has won their hearts. John Blanke was kidnapped in West Africa and enslaved as a child but rescued by the Earl of Rivington, a liberal British peer, who made John his heir. But John was cheated of his inheritance, separated from his childhood sweetheart, another African slave named Mary Cleere, and forced to work on brutal sugar plantations until he was purchased by

Jim Trumpett. The Lows feel deep sympathy for John's story and encourage him to turn it into a play for the edification of their high-society New York friends. A grand banquet is planned at which John's play is to be performed and, to his astonishment, he finds that one of the wealthy guests is accompanied by a beautiful African companion – his long lost love, Mary Cleere. Everything seems set fair for a happy ending for all. But fate has not finished with John, or with Jim...

4. THE DESIGN



In his interview in Section 6, the director Dominic Cooke mentions that he and designer Tom Pye were keen to create a Poor Theatre aesthetic for the production in order to best serve the episodic structure and storytelling style of *The Low Road*. Poor Theatre was a concept conceived and promoted by theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski. He believed that by eliminating traditional theatrical devices, a more pure, essential sort of theatre could be created. In his book *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) Grotowski explains:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costumes and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects.

While these conventions were not eliminated in our production, the designer did strip down the design elements to the bare essentials, suggesting a place or time of day with simple set choices such as a pub sign or a rough cardboard moon. Tom Pye also cleverly devised a system of plain wooden panels that could be moved easily via an overhead track to swiftly change the locations of the scenes. The result is a fascinating non-naturalistic set which has the sort of rough-hewn

look that matches the play's knock-about style while also highlighting its interrogation of the morality around money.



DESIGN ACTIVITY

Imagine you have been asked to design *The Low Road* for a touring production that will be playing in school halls throughout the UK. In order to cut down on the cost of transporting the set, you have been restricted to using only one large table and two wooden benches. After noting down every location in play, jot down your ideas for how you would create each different place with just these 3 items.

5. Researching the World of the Play

The Low Road presents the audience with two worlds, 18th Century Colonial America and the present day. Bruce Norris begins the play in the 21st Century. He uses the fascinating dramatic device of a real historical figure, Adam Smith, introducing the 18th Century story to the contemporary audience. Jim Trumpett's story acts a parable to highlight the parallels with our current political and economic situations. This meant that, in terms of research, the cast and creative team needed to delve into both the past and present in order to bring to life each time period as well as understanding how past economic thinking has influenced our present world.

Before rehearsals began, the Assistant Director, Simon Dormandy, assembled a sort of encyclopedia of terms and ideas that are important to the play. He called this the Wikibook, using Wikipedia as a starting point for researching each topic. This was brought into rehearsals, along with other books on American history and economic theory to provide a library for the company to read and refer to throughout the rehearsal period.

Here is an excerpt of from Simon's Wikibook research that was available to introduce the key figure of Adam Smith:

Adam Smith

	
Born	5 June 1723 OS Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland
Died	17 July 1790 (aged 67) Edinburgh, Scotland
Nationality	Scottish
Region	Western philosophy
School	Classical economics
Main interests	Political philosophy, ethics, economics
Notable ideas	Classical economics, modern free market, division of labour, the "invisible hand"
Influenced by	[show]
Influenced	[show]
Signature	

Adam Smith (5 June 1723 OS – 17 July 1790) was a Scottish moral philosopher and a pioneer of political economy. One of the key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment,[1] Adam Smith is best known for two classic works: The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), and An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776). The latter, usually abbreviated as The Wealth of Nations, is considered his magnum opus and the first modern work of economics. Smith is cited as the "father of modern economics" and is still among the most influential thinkers in the field of economics today.[2] In 2009, Smith was named among the "Greatest Scots" of all time, in a vote run by Scottish television channel STV.[3]

Smith studied social philosophy at the University of Glasgow and at Balliol College in the University of Oxford, where he was one of the first students to benefit from scholarships set up by his fellow Glaswegian John Snell. After graduating, he delivered a successful series of public lectures at the University of Edinburgh, leading him to collaborate with David Hume during the Scottish Enlightenment. Smith obtained a professorship at Glasgow teaching moral philosophy, and during this time he wrote and published The Theory of Moral Sentiments. In his later life, he took a tutoring position that allowed him to travel throughout Europe, where he met other intellectual leaders of his day. Smith then returned home and spent the next ten years writing The Wealth of Nations, publishing it in 1776. He died in 1790 at the age of 67.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Below are the major areas the cast researched. They are divided into topics from the 18th Century and 21st Century. With a partner, see how much you can discover about one topic from each time period. Begin with Wikipedia and then, using the Further Reading and External Links sections at the end of the entry, move on to researching the topics in more depth. How could your research help to influence the way you might design or direct the play?

18th Century America:

- American Revolution
- Atlantic Slave Trade
- Boston Tea Party
- George Washington
- The Invisible Hand
- Shakers
- Province of Massachusetts Bay

21st Century America:

- Tea Party Political Movement
- Davos/World Economic Forum
- Neo-Conservative Movement
- Free Market
- Milton Friedman

6. Interview with The Low Road's Director, Dominic Cooke



The Low Road is epic in its scope but what do you feel is its main focus?

There are two key ideas that connect. One is the engagement with debate around taxation and the morality and rights and wrongs around taxation which is a very big issue in the States. But with that is the morality of people protecting their wealth. As the play says at the very end, most serious wealth has been stolen;

most inherited wealth was originally gained by literally someone plundering it, like in each aristocratic family, someone along the line in the family background stole some land and that's become their land and that is then passed off to many subsequent generations. So the kind of wealth that backs up big merchant banks, for instance, has at some point been robbed from someone. Other means of creating wealth have been through slavery, exploitation of people and people not being paid properly for their work. Basically what Bruce Norris is saying is that the people who are arguing against taxation and re-distribution of wealth through the taxation system, are actually the people whose wealth has been stolen anyway. And that's the core idea of the play.

So the main character, Jim Trumpett, when he steals from the brothel at the start of the play, he begins this whole cycle?

Absolutely and his belief, his justification, for that is that he's making more money for the brothel, which is true. It's similar to the way bankers are being paid these ridiculous bonuses. They are normally making more money for their companies, but they're being disproportionately rewarded. Jim Trumpett believes that he's entitled to that money, even though it's plain theft, because he's bringing in a bit more for Mrs Trumpett, and she's getting a small share - she gets a nice new dress.

Why do you think Bruce wanted to use Adam Smith as the play's narrator?

I think he was interested in trying to explode various myths around the creation of wealth. That's attacked very much in the scene with the religious community when Jim keeps misquoting things that he thinks are from the Bible but they're not. The connection, especially in the United States between religion and wealth on the right is such a strong relationship that often religion is used to justify power being held in a very small number of people's hands and Bruce wanted to attack that. And one of the patron saints of the American neo-conservative movement is Adam Smith, who actually when you read him is much more liberal than you would think. But the Adam Smith we've got on stage is the neo-con version. He's not the actual Adam Smith. Yes, he did believe in this idea of the Invisible Hand, that in a way there's natural law regarding the distribution of wealth and we shouldn't intervene too much, but actually he was much more aware of the responsibilities of people with wealth to look after and take care of people who didn't have it. He just basically didn't believe in the process of state intervention.

Is that the reason he begins in the 21st Century, because this Adam Smith is this neo-con version?

Yes, the audience discovers he's aware of the 21st Century. For instance, he knows the low road route that Jim follows down the East Coast has become Interstate 95, so he knows what's happened since the 18th Century. And this is because he's our current version of Adam Smith, coming into the theatre to start the play.

What drew you to these particular ideas that Bruce is exploring in The Low Road?

I think Bruce is a materialist writer. By that, I don't mean he's materialistic. But I think he has a materialist view of the world which is basically that ownership and wealth define most human relationships and I think that's there in all his plays. I think he's relentlessly unsentimental about the past. He writes really well about

the past. For instance, the way he wrote the maid character in Clybourne Park was refreshing to me. He was unsentimental in that he showed that, despite the character's strong personality, how few options she had. And how she made those options work for her. It's a pre-civil rights consciousness that he's writing about. I think what's often happening now in American narrative, their general contemporary take on the past, is that there's a passion for putting present day values on the past when they didn't actually exist like that. We tend to make people more heroic than they actually would have been. So there's something about the way Bruce writes about the past that I find really refreshing. The Low Road is playful and it is anachronistic. It's a parable, it's not literal, it's Adam Smith's version of the story but it is very much imbedded in the reality of the kind of choices people have. So, for example, Mrs Trumpett is a woman who's been left on her own because her husband died and she's a woman who wants a better standard of living. Well, what is actually available to women at that time? Because there was no role for woman in business in the 18th century. Well, running a brothel was probably about the best she could do. There's something about the honesty of that that I really really like. The other thing about the play is just its fantastic ambition. Studio theatre has created one, or maybe two, generations of playwrights who often feel most comfortable writing intimate plays. So whenever you come across a play with a big scope like The Low Road it's always very refreshing.

Once you'd read the play, how did you come to find the style for the production?

I tend not to worry too much about style because I think if you're true to the play it kind of emerges. If you're doing a historical drama, one of the things people worry about is verisimilitude and accuracy in terms of detail of behaviour. And although we've been kind of careful about the visuals and trying to keep people very much within that period, I've also said to the actors, remember this is one person's version, it's Adam Smith's story and it's taking place in a theatre, it's not literal. So, they can feel free to enjoy the anachronisms. For example, the 'Rise of the Tide' phrase is a phrase made popular by JFK and of course in The Low Road it's put into the mouth of someone in the 18th century. Bruce has been playful about that and so I've encouraged the actors to be playful. We made a decision with the designer early on to use a Poor Theatre aesthetic for the set (although it turned out to be a very expensive production because of all the costumes!). To me there would be something contradictory about us trying to raise consciousness about the morality around money and making it a glossy production. In fact, I often find productions of Brecht don't work for me because they look too expensive. This play is clearly based on the Brechtian aesthetic with the titles and the characterisation. I mean Mrs Trumpett is straight out of Brecht. She's a kind of Mother Courage figure. And the most successful productions of Brecht that I've seen are ones which use a Poor Theatre aesthetic and therefore aren't spending lots of money on the production which seems to me contradictory to the play. So, for The Low Road, it just felt right to do the production in this way. There were certain visual things that Tom Pye, the designer, and I decided early and we involved Bruce in those discussions and decisions. They dictated some of the style, but I mean you're also trying to get to some kind of emotional truth even though there's a kind of knockabout, slightly cartoonish style. The stakes are very real for the characters. So, we also needed to find a way to stay true to the emotional stakes in each scene.

Jim Trumpett isn't necessarily a sympathetic character. In fact, at times, what he says is fairly repulsive and yet the audience is intrigued to follow his journey. What has Bruce done to capture and sustain our fascination with him?

Most people who go to the theatre are fairly liberal-minded and would probably be opposed to his ideas and arguments. But I think Bruce is very intentionally trying to make us identify with someone we would not necessarily identify with. I think there are two reasons for that. One is to dramatise and understand the psychology of the free market or the Tea Party mentality, that extreme neo-con position. I think Bruce would probably argue that Liberals benefit from people like Jim Trumpett because actually most liberals are people who have a certain amount of wealth, they're not the super wealthy, but they usually own their own home, they're comfortable and they would not want that to be taken away from them. The Marxist view of liberals, and Marx can be viewed as the ultimate materialist philosopher, is always that liberals just want to keep the status quo and all they want to do is give a few crumbs away to the poor, so in a way preventing any sort of revolutionary change to keep things comfortable for themselves. I think one of the things Bruce is so brilliant at is interrogating the dualities and double standards of liberals. And seeing them as a very conservative force in society. He's needling the consciousness of the audience that comes to the theatre.

Given that the Low Road is really a play about the 21st Century, why is it set in the 18th Century?

If you give the audience the opportunity to decode the parallels between a present day situation and a made-up situation, it empowers them and makes them more active. I do think Bruce is also talking about where things have come from. If you look at the realities of wealth, how it actually functions, we are still in a shocking situation where very, very few people own most things and that truth is constantly being hidden from us by all sorts of illusions. I think in a way Bruce is going 'Look, this is the reality!'. And that's why the contemporary bit of the play is so brilliant. Originally I wasn't sure about the position of the contemporary bit. Initially I said to Bruce I think you should cut it because it feels like you're sign posting something that's already in the play. The audience should be able to decode and work out for themselves the parallels between past and present and by putting that in you're sort of banging them on the head, but actually what's so invaluable about that section is that you see how one of Jim Trumpett's descendants is that kind of Merrill Lynch/Lehmann Brothers person and is the absolute embodiment of the neo-con position. We've seen that Jim actually just stole a whole load of money which his descendant, this man, has inherited and that's how he's come to be in that position. Whilst for many, many people, the vast majority of people, we are in a fairer, more equal world than we were say a hundred years ago in that there are a lot more people with many more rights than there used to be (which is a good thing), the fact remains that the basic ownership of property and land hasn't really changed.

The character of Constance says society is based on violence and gold. Is that a distilled expression of the idea of the play?

I think in a way yes, but Bruce would always want distance himself from any fixed position. He has never in our discussions identified himself with a position but for me the play is a Marxist play. And I think his position is ultimately a Marxist position, because it's a radical materialist standpoint. It's basically saying the morality of inherited wealth and the ownership of wealth being held in a very few hands is questionable. And Constance is a kind of proto-Marxist character, albeit in an 18th century setting, because she says all profit is theft. This is the old Marxist position: profit is created by workers doing things and by withholding their true wages you make profit; it's an unfair exchange. And that's an old school, hardline Marxist position. I would not say Bruce is arguing for the models

of Marxist government or state socialism but I think the position is philosophically very close to Marx.

So, which is the way forward for us to follow - the philosophical road of the religious community in the play or Jim Trumpett's way?

Bruce doesn't posit a way forward and of course there's an ending in which a very nihilistic future is envisaged. But, you know what, I think there's always something contradictory about that in the act of creating a piece of art which is ultimately hopeful. And I think that whilst Bruce is incredibly despairing, I think underneath it, he's also offering a lot of questions that have possible hopeful outcomes. Why the hell are we doing this? Why the hell are we allowing this to happen? Is it the case that our selfish drives outweigh our collective drives? Because it does feel that way at the moment with what we're doing to the environment. There is so much evidence that we need to change radically, but that sort of change demands an abandonment of our very comfortable lifestyles which we're loathe to give up.



7. Assistant Director's Rehearsal Diary

Day One: Pointers

Dominic welcomes everyone and, before we get down to work, he points out a core idea of the play: that all significant property has been stolen at some point, or else acquired by violence.

He suggests we look as sharply at the motives of those in the play who claim to have the interests of others at heart - the liberals in the play such as Nathaniel Pugh, for instance, or Isaac Low - as we do at the more obviously ruthless characters. These characters should not be taken at their own estimation.

He gives us some things to keep in mind about Bruce Norris:

- He's a "closet Marxist": his characters' material conditions define their attitudes, attitudes they will vigorously defend and justify.
- His characters tend to be strategic and "performative": they have clear aims in mind and are rarely what they seem to be; how they see themselves need not be how we see them.
- His characters love to win the argument.
- He is a virtuoso of overlapping dialogue: don't be polite but drive your line into and over the line of your fellow actor.

Dominic compares rehearsing to painting a big canvas: you start by blocking in the broad shapes, creating a solid foundation on which further detail and variation can be placed, and letting it dry before coming back and adding in the next layer. We will begin by gathering a mass of information from many sources, and then discard what we don't need. The first week will be all about questions, big and small, obscure and blatantly obvious. There will be an amnesty on ignorance: there is no such thing as a stupid question.

Week 1: Exploring the Play

After a session playing games to get to know each other, start to build the ensemble and create a mood of physicality and fun, we move on to the activity that will occupy us for a week: breaking the script up into sections and giving each section a name that defines who is doing what to whom in the most dynamic and precise way we can achieve, uncovering the driving action without which the scene would not take place, and asking all the questions we need to ask in order to understand who these people are, what their experiences have been, what drives them, and all the details and conditions of their lives: their relationships, ambitions, backstories, experiences. If questions aren't answered in the room, using the information we have from the play itself, our own imaginations and our existing background research, they are recorded and will be returned to later. A long list of things we need to know quickly forms.

The table is soon covered with books about the period; the walls slowly fill up with maps and photos, copies of engravings, objects and paintings from the time, as we systematically build the fullest possible sense of the play's world.

A series of expert speakers comes in to talk about aspects of the play's context: the philosophy of Adam Smith, the social history of Massachusetts in the 1770s, slavery in the USA in the eighteenth century, the ideas that define and excite the conservative right in the USA today.

Actors are asked to "cast" any character that is referred to but that doesn't appear on stage (eg the wife of a character who is mentioned but whom we never meet) and bring in a photo or painting of him or her.

When naming sections, we try to make choices that raise the stakes of the scene and tell the most dynamic story, the ones that makes a scene play best. We also look for the most active, transitive action for the core of each section as we try to identify which of the many stories one might be telling is the most important, the most urgent, the most dynamic, surprising and true. Dominic explains, "I think it shows when a production hasn't done this part of the process – people shout more."

It is also important to remember that, in the end, and despite the care with which we are developing a world from the past, we are actually telling a story about the present day, through the lens of the past.



Weeks 2-4: Creating Characters for the Crowd Scenes

The play has a series of crowd scenes, with characters who are never named and about whom we discover little. It is vital that each of these characters has as full a life as we have time to give him or her, so the crowds are never generalised or clichéd. The rehearsal of every crowd scene is preceded by exercises to build and define a specific and individual character for each actor, with his or her own name, backstory, desires and preoccupations, physicality, tempo, psychology and habits.

We watch newsreel and movie clips that throw light on the situations and personalities we are trying to bring to the stage.

Dominic, in common with a number of directors today, uses playing cards to randomize the imaginary circumstances of characters, such as how long they have done a particular job, how much money they have, how far they are in debt, how extrovert they are or how much they want sex.

Week 2-4: Putting the Sections on Stage

When we start to put our sections on stage, the first thing we do is define as precisely as possible what each character's objective is for that section, and what their obstacles are. There is usually just one objective, but there may be many obstacles: what they want and what stands in their way. Getting these right, discovering the choices that draw the most accurate, specific and powerful action from the actors, takes lots of care and determined probing of the text, the character, their immediate situation and backstory.

Entrances and exits are defined in advance, and then moves are improvised by the actors, then tidied up and sharpened by the Dominic, by tying them to details of motivation and need, while also keeping an eye on the stage picture.

This is slow, painstaking work: it takes three weeks to put the whole play on stage. All the time, we are looking for ways to raise the stakes of a scene, to find the best objectives and get them absolutely clear in our minds and bodies, choose backstories that help the scene play best, and refine our sense of the urgent circumstances that provoke the scene and its conflicts. We also discuss the

political and economic underpinnings of the scenes, trying to get a clear sense of how the characters' material circumstances influence their attitudes and value systems and motivate how they act. Status is a continual reference point, as is finding out who has power, what everyone has to lose, or to gain, from the outcomes available in a scene.

As long as they are absolutely precise, simpler objectives tend to be more potent for the actor, pulling you harder and further through the play

Actors are usually very respectful of each other on stage, wanting to position themselves or deal with shared props in ways that help their fellows: this often needs to be worked against since it can dilute the conflict in a scene, make it pleasant instead of dynamic.

In emotional scenes, feeling can swamp meaning, and striving to generate emotion can take the place of striving to achieve what your character wants: don't let it. Keep the emotion behind the intention; keep the intention foremost. Play the scene and not the character; get your point across; change the other character's mind and action: win the argument.

One should never forget that a silent character is still very present: choosing not to speak can be a strong, active decision.

Bruce's plays are extremely rare in that they are written for four, five and six voices competing in a scene, when so many modern and contemporary playwrights write for two or at most three characters at once. When playing these polyvocal scenes, it is vital to be clear about the strategy your character is employing, and to be precise about status and status conflicts.

Weeks 2-4: The Production Starts to Gather

From day one, the actor-musicians have been playing live in and between scenes, filling the air with beautiful eighteenth-century airs and hymns. Specialists come in to fine-tune the movement, the many accents of the show and the fights.

While detailed work on scenes proceeds, the rehearsal room gradually fills up with the stuff of the show, much of which will go straight on stage when we move into the theatre: a giant toy horse, beehives, signs that give the scenes titles, pistols, muskets, swords, a baby doll with a speaker inside it, a potty, chains and metal shackles, blood in a Tupperware box, balaclavas, riot shields and mic stands, pirate hats, a banquet for nine twinkling on a long damask tablecloth, a scold's bridle.

The stage is filling up with lines, curves, L-shapes and exes in multi-coloured tape; round the walls, long tables are covered with props, all taped off from each other and named; one end of the room is packed with rehearsal costumes: corsets, tricorne hats, hooped underskirts, overcoats.

The many, complex scene changes are set up and practised with as much care as the scenes themselves, since the style requires them to be done by the actors, and the goal is to keep the epic energy of the story moving as swiftly and smoothly as possible from scene to scene.



Week 4-5: Practice, Detail, Sharpness

With the scenes and scene-changes set, we return to the start of the play and rework it, section by section, adding further detail, sharpness and drive. With a writer as accurate and astute as Bruce, the actors must be sure to speak exactly what is written, taking special care about the points where the overlaps begin: what triggers the overlapping dialogue is carefully chosen, and it is vital that the trigger phrases are clearly heard.

In real life, moments of intense crisis are usually accompanied by extreme lucidity of language. A person in an intense situation generally uses lots of energy to keep a lid on their feelings so they can get their point across. On stage, actors often divert their energy to creating the emotion rather than treating the emotion as a useful obstacle over which to drive the point they wish to make. It is natural for actors to want to generate intense emotion but, in a play like this, it is vital that the characters get their points across

The key moments in a film or TV drama take place on the actor's face in close-up; on stage, drama happens in the space between the actors, so actors need to avoid going in on themselves, losing the scene in internal emotion or individual character-acting in isolation from their fellows. We work hard at trying to keep all the drama transitive, so actors are always focused on their partners and trying to change their minds.

As we dig deeper into the detail, it becomes more and more important for the actors to listen and open themselves to the surprising impact of another's fresh and unexpected thoughts on their own. Similarly, when speaking, they should take care to go thought-to-thought, avoiding prepared responses and generalised reactions: to try to live in the moment

There's an urge to tell the audience who your character is and what they should think about him or her, which it is all too easy to give in to, when the most interesting scenes to watch involve a process of discovery, where you find out more and more about the characters as the scene progresses, and no-one is commenting on their characters but standing with them, whatever views they have and no matter how foolish or repellent they seem to be, and letting the audience be the judge.

This is often most sharply defined when a character is defeated or balked in achieving an objective. The tendency is for the actor to show the audience the character's sense of defeat and loss and comment on it in order to draw their sympathies and shape their reactions. It is usually better to adjust, and keep driving for that lost objective, using a different tactic but aiming for the same thing, and leave the audience to make their own judgements. That way, the audience see the defeat just as clearly but the drama never drops, and the audience remain on the edges of their seats.

Week 5: Running the Play

After our first run, Dominic invites the actors to think more about the rhetorical shape of the text, the strategic way that the characters are making their points; to mark the moment when a key word or thought is first uttered, and then how other characters, or the same one, re-use and redefine that word to get their way.

He says how he was struck by the fact that this is a play about ideas more than emotions; he is sometimes hearing what the actors are feeling but not necessarily what they are saying, what they want.

The run went well but it got a bit overheated. Dominic reminds the actors to trust the text, each other and the story; they are very well supported: it's a fine cast and a great play.

8. On Your Feet – Practical Exercises

Assistant Director Simon Dormandy describes two exercises used in rehearsals for The Low Road. The first is a fun warm up for the actors and creative team to get to know each other and to start to work as a team. The second activity is an exercise the director created for the actors to develop characters in one of the crowd scenes. Both are easy to try out for yourselves in any rehearsal process.

Warm-Up Game:

We played name games with balls - saying the name of someone across the circle as you throw the ball. This was complicated by the addition of a second, third and finally a fourth ball: attention, communication and joyful anticipation came to the fore. Then we built routines of ball-throwing, mixed with walking across the circle and swapping places, all with names so a complicated and intensely memory-testing network of names, catches and moves was built up. It was huge fun and we all knew each others names within about 20 minutes.

Characters in a Crowd Exercise:

Crowd characters were built with the actors on their feet. For instance, when building the characters of a group of merchants who sell Jim Trumpett a series of luxury goods in town, Dominic began by asking the actors find a private space and go with a prop to somewhere in their shop or workplace and begin an activity involving the object they were selling.

The director then asked the actors to:

- Decide where their centre of movement was and let the movement spring from there.
- Pat the place on their body which was the centre.
- Identify and define a tempo and to stick to it.
- Think how their character might complete the sentence "Life is..." and then to find a gesture and a noise to express that feeling.
- Find reasons to cross the room, with goals to achieve (find something in a store or put something away) in order to practice and extend these physical aspects.

Then each character would go through an extended free improvisation with Jim in which they sold him their wares, using words and movement as they wished. Finally, the fast-moving sequence with which they each, in quick succession, hand him an item was practised, but using the end of the improvisation they had just done, so nothing was generalised or skimped: each exchange had a history and a specificity to it, and each character's relationship to Jim, to their product and to each other was unique and strongly marked.



8. EDUCATION AT THE ROYAL COURT

The Royal Court is a centre for excellence and innovation in theatre-making, and the Education Department aims to stimulate and inspire students of all ages, encouraging learning and participation in every aspect of the theatre's work, from the process of writing plays to pioneering rehearsal room techniques.

We offer a wide-ranging programme of work designed to open up and de-mystify the craft of making theatre. Royal Court Education activities include:

Workshops for productions
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Performing Arts Business Study Day

A full description of all education events can be found on the education page of the Royal Court web-site, www.royalcourttheatre.com. If you would like more information, please e-mail Lynne Gagliano, Education Associate, at lynnegagliano@royalcourttheatre.com or phone 020 7565 5174.

The *Low Road Education* Background Pack compiled and written by Lynne Gagliano, Royal Court Education Associate and Simon Dormandy, Assistant Director for *The Low Road*. Cover Image by feastcreative ©2013. Rehearsal photos and Production photos by Johan Persson© 2013.

