

# **X Education Pack**



## **CONTENTS**

- 1. About The Production**
- 2. About the Writer**
- 3. Introduction to X**
- 4. About the Design**
- 5. Interview with the Assistant Director**
- 6. Rehearsal Diaries**
- 7. Timeline of events**
- 8. In Rehearsal – Practical Activities**
- 9. About Young Court**

These resources are intended to give teachers and students a detailed insight into the creative process behind developing and staging *X*. 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.

# I. About The Production

X was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Sloane Square on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

## Cast

<b>Mattie</b>	Ria Zmitrowicz
<b>Clark</b>	James Harkness
<b>Gilda</b>	Jessica Raine
<b>Ray</b>	Darrell D'Silva
<b>Cole</b>	Rudi Dharmalingam
<b>Young Mattie</b>	Amber Fernée
<b>Young Mattie</b>	Grace Doherty

## Creative Team

<b>Writer</b>	Alistair McDowall
<b>Director</b>	Vicky Featherstone
<b>Designer</b>	Merle Hensel
<b>Associate Designer</b>	Moi Tran
<b>Lighting Designer</b>	Lee Curran
<b>Composer &amp; Sound Designer</b>	Nick Powell
<b>Video Designer</b>	Tal Rosner
<b>Fight Director</b>	Bret Yount
<b>Production Manager</b>	Matt Noddings
<b>Assistant Director</b>	Roy Alexander Weise
<b>Chaperone</b>	Tanya Shields
<b>Costume Supervisor</b>	Lucy Walshaw
<b>Stage Manager</b>	Sunita Hinduja
<b>Deputy Stage Manager</b>	Nicola Barry
<b>Assistant Stage Manager</b>	Heather Cryan
<b>SM Placement</b>	Jodell Hill

## 2. About the Writer

### Alistair McDowall: the pioneering young playwright on setting a play on Pluto and sympathising with his critics

The future of British theatre is here – and damned if he’s going to be Earth-bound

Holly Williams | Sunday 20 March 2016



Playwright Alistair McDowell *Justin Sutcliffe*

Last year, there was one word on every in-the-know theatregoer’s lips: Pomona. Alistair McDowall’s dystopian drama, which imagined the horrors lurking beneath an abandoned strip of land in the centre of Manchester, was treacle-black and wickedly funny, with a twisting, non-linear chronology that was correspondingly nightmarish.

Pomona was feverishly championed by bloggers, critics and theatre-makers alike, with McDowall, still only 28, practically hailed as the future of British theatre – something that seems increasingly likely, given his latest play, *X*, is on at the Royal Court. In the main space. Starring Jessica Raine. Directed by the theatre’s head, Vicky Featherstone.

“Yeah! I am as surprised as you,” says McDowall, with smiling self-deprecation. For the record, I’m not all that surprised: this is just the sort of ambitious play the Court ought to be championing.

*X* is set on Pluto, where a mission loses contact with Earth; all they can do is wait to be rescued. Time can stretch in strange ways on a planet where the natural rhythms of day and night are so different to Earth’s. As they face the fact that they’re all stuck in one room with their work colleagues indefinitely, things get... intense. “It’s really about people being trapped: what does that amount of time in that enclosed space do to you?” asks McDowall.

“What do you do with your life, once you’ve realised, ‘I’ve only got this amount of time, I’ve got *X*’ – and you have to spend it in a box with people you’ve work with every day and you

don't like that much and it's a ballache?" He pauses, then adds: "I'm making it sound very grim. There are jokes in the play! As there should always be.

X might be set on Pluto, but McDowall insists it's not really science fiction. "Although this play has the most obvious genre trappings of anything I've done – it's space; there's a space suit in it – I don't think I could comfortably class it as science fiction: it's a relationship drama that just happens to be set in space."

It's not the first time his work has been dubbed sci-fi, however: both *Pomona* and *Brilliant Adventures* – a play that featured a time machine – were given the tag, though McDowall claims those plays are really a detective story and a Western respectively. "I think there are people who are going to want X to be *Alien*, but really it's about 'Who am I?'"

Still, he acknowledges a hint of sheepishness at handing in a script set on Pluto to the Royal Court. "When I was doing it, [I thought] this is ridiculous! One half of me was going, it's theatre, you can do whatever you want. But then the more practical part of my head was like, well, you didn't tell 'em you were doing a play about Pluto..."

As a teenager growing up in the rural village of Great Broughton near Middlesbrough, McDowall dreamt of being a filmmaker, but he couldn't afford a camera, so started writing drama instead.

He'd accidentally stumbled on his perfect medium; today, he's interested only in writing plays that absolutely have to be plays, that fully exploit theatre's unique potential as a live, collective experience.

"I'm always looking for more ways I can cook the liveness at a higher temperature," he begins. "That's the whole point of doing a play, right? We're all there at the same time. I want to have a moment when the temperature in a room changes significantly."

X will, he promises, be "quite aggressively theatrical," and the script is rich with mind-bending, knotty experiments with form. "I'm not interested in making complete logical sense at every moment.

"My favourite filmmaker of recent years is Shane Carruth; he made *Primer* and *Upstream Color*, which have no interest in whether you're 'following' them – what's interesting is that they're telling stories through different means, through an unconscious heartbeat. That's my deal, really: trying to find new ways of wrestling with basic story mechanics. To do that in a room full of people is really exciting."

No spoilers here, but I predict that this refusal to tie up X's narrative "in a nice bow" will likely divide audiences.

Still, McDowall is used to that: *Pomona*'s explicit language and violence prompted walk-outs – reported gleefully – when the show debuted at the Orange Tree in genteel Richmond at the end of 2014, where it was credited with overhauling the reputation of the theatre as part of Paul Miller's new reign as artistic director.

Given the experimental nature of his writing – and his vehement arguments about the need for it to be uncompromisingly theatrical – I expect McDowall to be an opinionated, visionary young gun when I ask about the state of British theatre.

Not so. Not only does he politely demur from giving big sweeping answers to such questions, but he's even remarkably sympathetic to people who actively dislike his work. "People were a bit mean about the Orange Tree, because their clientele is older.

"But people probably walked out because they were bored, not necessarily because they were like, 'What a disgrace!'" he laughs, before pointing out that there were also walk-outs at the National Theatre and the Royal Exchange in Manchester, where McDowall lives with his wife.

"I completely sympathise. I feel bad if someone feels like they've given up an evening of their life, got a babysitter... and they hated it. At the Exchange, they had an event with friends of the theatre and it was basically a room full of very nice old ladies. Some of them had very clearly really hated Pomona, but because I was so friendly, no one said that to my face. I'm always very polite – I was brought up well!"

He certainly was: McDowall is very considerate, the sort of young man your grandmother would love if he should happen to sit next to her in the stalls.

Although she might be a bit freaked out if it was one of his plays – especially given that the dark, unsettling atmosphere he creates on stage actually comes from his own personality.

"I have various issues with anxiety," he explains, "and usually there's a character who is a bit jittery and nervous and talking like I am now" – although most of his answers are beautifully fluent, McDowall can get stammeringly nervy.

"But what's weird in Pomona and X is that that anxiety has wormed into the form of the play: the whole play feels anxious."

Don't hold your breath for a light-hearted romcom from his pen, then. So what can we expect next? He's not sure, "but I don't think I'm going to do another space play for a while".

Does he worry that the genre thing might stick, that he might become... "Mr Sci-fi? I guess I do a little bit. That's not what the next play is going to be! But I don't really mind – it's nice when anyone thinks anything of you, right?"

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/alistair-mcdowall-the-future-of-british-theatre-on-setting-a-play-on-pluto-and-sympathising-with-his-a6939136.html>

### 3. Introduction to X

Gilda, Mattie, Clark, Ray and Cole are astronauts stationed on Pluto. They have come to the end of their term and are waiting to be picked up and taken home. However, they haven't had any communication from their Earth base for 3 weeks. Everyone has different coping mechanisms whilst waiting for help to arrive. Gilda, the station scientist, studies the planet and listens to silence to relax. Ray, the Captain, practises bird calls to remember how birds sounded before they all disappeared. Cole, another scientist, tries to solve maths problems. Mattie carries on as usual and Clark does what he wants.

As time passes the situation becomes harder to deal with. One night Gilda thinks she hears someone walking around the storage space above her. Mattie reassures her that it's just the oxygen and water systems. Gilda is struggling as she has recently become Captain, as Ray killed himself. Mattie and Gilda eventually bond, and Mattie tells Gilda a story about Ray. Before his suicide Ray had become unstable and struggled deeply with being stuck on the space station. Late one night, Ray thought he had seen a little girl looking at him through the window. She disappeared and Ray tried to find her, but she had seemingly vanished. Ray told Mattie what he saw, he was distressed because instead of a mouth the girl had a scar in the shape of an X. This distresses Gilda, as she thought she had thought someone moving around.

Later, Cole and Clark are in the kitchen. Cole is working on an equation, while Clark is bouncing a ball around, bored. Clark bothers Cole into telling him what he's doing. Cole is working on an algorithm for time. The clock has stopped working, every so often it glitches and goes back in time. The clock is centralised, so everyone's watches and computers are linked to it. This means no one knows how long they've been on the space station.

Gradually the situation becomes worse. Eventually the clock stops working altogether. Memories become jumbled and no one is sure of anything anymore. The crew struggles to piece together recent events and start to forget who they are....



Jessica Raine as Gilda © Manuel Harlan

## 4. About the Design

Moi Tran, the Associate Designer, spoke about the inspiration for the design of X.

### **How did it feel to be asked to design something as abstract as a space station on Pluto?**

It is always exciting to be presented with the challenge to create an exciting abstract world. The interesting thing with X is that it is a world that combines elements of familiar domestic mundanity against a very supernatural dimension, they live at opposite end of the spectrum and so heighten the audience experience of both extremes.

### **What were the initial ideas for the design?**

There is a strong sense of the isolation and the vastness and echo of space that comes from the writing, not only as a description of the world the play is anchored in, but also of the mental and cognitive space that characters inhabit psychologically. We were very keen to create a set that would evoke these initial feelings.

A box suspended in space and surrounded by nothingness, there is something very unsettling about this image and we wanted to convey this in the design.

### **What challenges were faced when designing/ realising the set?**

The set, although seemingly simple was a complicated construction to build as it was mathematically worked out. It was raked in two directions and so the perspective of every element needed to be in keeping with this equation.

The raking in two directions helped to create the affected movement and blocking on stage, it looked normal but it was not.



The Model Box for X

**Can you talk us through the design?**

The design allows for visual surprises to happen which is very important, it is a space that conveys loneliness in familiarity, but also familiarity in loneliness.

It is a space station in many respects, there are of course recognisable elements, but over the course of the play it transforms so many times that the space becomes more of a reflective mirror for so many questions we are faced with in this modern world.

**Can you talk me through your process of designing a set?**

There is always a lot of research and discussion in the process, this dialogue never stops throughout and it helps to carve out the essence of the play and the how this is expressed through the design choices.

The process of exploring shapes and spaces in the model box through the white card stage is also very helpful to obtain an understanding of how what is imagined can reveal itself physically.

**What's your favourite feature of the set?**

We love the infinity and ambiguity of the window that draws our focus at the back of the set into the dark beyond.....

**Design Activity for X**

Design X for a site specific production. Imagine you have to turn a 10m x 10m disused warehouse space into a space station. This is a large scale set to help reflect the scale of the play. Your budget is £200. How would you create the set?

Think about:

- How would you use lighting and sound?
- How would you create a feeling of loneliness and isolation?
- Which part of the story is the most important? For instance, is it the vastness of space? The feeling of loneliness? The loss of the world we know? How would you reflect this in the set?



## **5. Interview with the Assistant Director, Roy Alexander Weise**

### **What were your thoughts when you first read the play?**

My first thoughts were what on the earth have I just read?! I didn't really know what it was about. But I knew that it had a strong sense of isolation and being lost and being disconnected and what that feels like and the idea of depression and what it is to lose your mind. And what circumstances might make somebody feel as if they are in that place of isolation and depression. And where they feel like they're losing their grip on what is real and what isn't. And I also just thought it was really cool to have a play set on Pluto. Because why not? Because a lot of writers feel bound to reality, or a reality that we know. And Ali has definitely created a world very loosed based around what we understand Pluto to be, but actually not factual and it doesn't have to be. Because the story isn't actually about Pluto. It's just about being away from all of civilisation and what that does to the individual.

### **So it's not about being in space, it's about being as far away as we can imagine.**

It's the furthest planet, it's one that for a long time we've said there can't really be life on Pluto. And that's kind of changing as time goes by. It's like the last resort. Being sent to Pluto is the worst, probably the least exciting trip that you could be sent on as an astronaut, because there isn't really much happening there. And then to be sent out there for a really long time and to be told that there is no connection (but everything is working fine and that potentially everything that you've left behind has disappeared), kind of leaves you thinking about the state of the planet as we know it and the way in which we affect the planet and the way in which we have affected the planet. And this culture we have of, we go one place, we see it as it is, we explore it, we use all the resources, we enjoy life there for a while and then when that's not good enough for us anymore, we explore life somewhere else. So all of this research to find life forces on other planets. There are lots of conspiracy theories about that potentially being a way for people to escape when the Earth has had enough of the way that we treat it.

### **So in that sense do you think it's an environmental play?**

I don't think it is an environmental play, but I definitely do think it has undertones about the environment. Effectively it's about care and about how we care for each other and how we look after each other and how we look after the planet. It's about what we give, as well, as much as what we take. Even though there are lots of references to that and to the ways that technology has overtaken our lives. It's more about the fact that in the future those are the going to be biggest things that affect us. That there'll be a lack of resources. There will be life forms that don't exist. In the same way that we've grown up knowing the Dodo is extinct, but once upon a time the Dodo was a living creature. And the idea for them of the Dodo being extinct is like what on Earth? And so, now for us setting a play in the future where things are completely different, where technology has become our most reliable and most used means of communication, what happens when that stops doing what it's meant to do? Or what if the people on the other end stop doing that, what happens to us then? So it is about that and the ways in which we connect, it is also about nature and the fact that things like technology stop us from looking at the other things that come for free, being a human being.

### **With that in mind, we've been talking about dystopian plays being a modern phenomenon. And that this play feels like a play for a modern audience. How has that translated into the performance of the play and in rehearsals?**

It's that a play that from here on will be timeless. It's got all the elements that we understand and that generations after us will understand. The use of technology, the ways in which the planet is being jeopardised, what loneliness is, what depression is, it's got all of those things. Because of that it is relevant for a modern audience but it also has that element of timelessness. We keep making jokes in rehearsals that one day there will be a student production [of X] when Gilda's pregnant somebody will actually pump up their belly. Which is not something we're doing. And we're not doing old lady acting and people will take joy in taking these elements of the play and really exploding them. Because they really resonate with us and because there are themes in this that I feel from here on will be eternally connected to. It is definitely a play that young audiences can connect to. It's a play that older audiences can connect to as well because there is a lot of reminiscing. The character Ray talks about

what life was like back on Earth and definitely sounds like a lot of people we would know who are a generation or two above us who will tell us about what life was like before. And who feel like we are wasting all of the things that we've been given. There are characters the varying audience members will be able to find connections with.

In terms of the performance, we did spend a bit of time talking about what might it look like physically. But we just ultimately decided that it's about human beings and human beings now function in the same way that they did before and kind of always will do. And obviously there are little things that change, like the way that we move and the way that we speak and the way that we feel ultimately will always come from the same palate. There were decisions to keep it all naturalistic until the moments where the text requires it to be something other. And I guess that's so that we can invest in it and believe that's it a time that is now or in the future, that we recognise those people regardless of where in time they actually are.

**Are there any technological effects that let us know we're in the future, or does the play rely on the text to show this?**

It's really interesting, we had lots of conversations in production meetings and design meetings about what futurism looks like. In the 60's and 70's there was an idea of what futurism was and that's kind of stayed decade after decade. Our understanding of what is futuristic comes from Alien and films before that. Where they had to imagine it because technology wasn't as widely used as it is now. So we had to think about what the future for our generation looks like. And I think if we really are thinking about it, and not trying to be wildly imaginative, with the things that we have statistically, looking at the way that inventions for instance, the speed of inventions being made and growth in terms of technology, it probably won't look that different to how it looks now. So other than the space station there isn't really much else to say you're in the future. Although the trainers look really cool! The trainers do look like they're made of some kind of fabric that would be made in the future.



Ria Zmitrowicz as Mattie © Manuel Harlen

**That's interesting though, because our phones for instance, look completely different to the phones we had ten years ago. It's changed so quickly.**

Absolutely. That's more aesthetic and I guess in a way we're always a little bit behind what's actually being invented. For instance, going from modern typewriters to actual laptops is a massive jump. Because the actual system behind what drives a laptop and what makes it work and the technology behind that and the technology behind a typewriter is very analogue still. Even though it's made to look like it has LCD screens etc. but the technology behind that material is completely different. We've learnt how to make things more compact, we've learnt how to make things look a bit slicker, we've learnt how to use different textiles in that technology a little bit differently, but the actual system is the same.

**That resonates with what you were saying about the characters. These characters are really removed from what we know but they're still relevant to an audience.**

Yeah, they're still the same. Human beings and the history of mankind and the psychology of human beings isn't something that changes and we still experience loneliness. There will never be something that will prevent us from feeling less alone than we might do now. And I think there's something really interesting about that, that's explored in the play as well.

**Present audiences can also see themselves in Ray. For instance, if you were to tell an 18 year old that there was a time when mobile phones weren't even in colour they couldn't believe it because they couldn't comprehend it. There's something about how quickly things change for each generation.**

In terms of something like that, yes it is massive in terms of those shifts. And to think that there's a generation of person on that space station that won't have known what a tree looks like. Or what a bird looked and sounded like. And this idea that he has to keep doing it and playing the bird whistles to keep reminding himself of what is real and what exists. And the idea that food is completely changing as well. I know so many people that don't know how to cook rice. But that's ok you can still cook rice easily. I bought some Jollof rice that I put in the microwave, in a packet the other day. And actually it didn't taste bad. But actually I was really worried about the fact that I was eating Jollof rice from a packet.



Darrell D'Silva as Ray © Manuel Harlan

**But at the same time there are some people who only eat food in that way.**

Exactly. Down to talking about how food is presented in the production. It was like “well it can't be fruit can it? Because there aren't any trees and there's no fruit is there? So what is food, how is food made, what chemicals do they use to make food?” And actually it's really interesting because there are certain people who don't know what fruits and vegetables taste like. And that's because of lifestyle differences.

**For stuff like that, has Ali given you much context in rehearsals?**

He just says 'yes' and 'no' and 'that wouldn't be possible'. He's very vocal in but in a great way because Vicky's belief is that if it's not Chekov then why should we sit there and try and figure out what it is when you've got the resource right there to tell you exactly what it is. And so he's very vocal and she invites that from him to let us know where did this come from, where did this idea come from, is this something that's factual or something that's imagined? And he is really great and generous at signposting us to his inspirations and what he wants to achieve from certain things. For instance, there's no paper, but then we're like oh great so in this scene there'll be some books on the table and then we're like oh crap there's no paper. So what is it then? And then that task is left for us to discover what it would be. If it wasn't tablets and laptops what would they actually use if they wanted to do what we would do with books and paper? Because I think the desire to do that will always be there. Because you don't want to have to open something and look for something every time. You want to stick stuff up or flick something [and have it be there]. So that desire to always write will always be there. So what is the material? And then we start thinking ok well is it metal? If it's metal what kind of ink would you use to write onto metal? How permanent or flexible is that? Or would it be plastic? What plastic would it be? Is it a special kind of whiteboard or blackboard? Do people still use chalk for instance? Because a lot of these people are geologists and mathematicians and that kind of thing. Would they still use things like that?

There's a lot about progress as well. On one side you have technology which has advanced so quickly. But then on the human side it feels a lot slower. You can imagine that in 200 years or so, there is a woman who, because she is in a predominantly male environment, feels she has to shrink herself.

Absolutely. It's really interesting because that's something that we absolutely get. But is not something that in the rehearsal room we'd be desperate to talk about.

Because I think it's all there, it's all laid out in the play. And usually when you have those discussions in the play, if it's not just acknowledging something, you have those discussions to discover what something is. But because it's all so clearly laid out, we have moments where we go 'Gosh!' So is that a real thing that we will go 'damn!' in twenty years, we'll still deal with depression with pills, we'll still have a woman who struggles to have a voice in that environment, we'll still have men who directly or indirectly, intentionally or not intentionally, have not as much respect for a woman, who is their counterpart, as they should. And those thoughts are really scary, but we don't talk about them so much because the text is so dense and there's so many other things to talk about. But also we only spent the first week talking about the play, and then it's been acting and physical and stuff like that. But it is really scary to think that in the future people and relationships may not have changed as much as we have wanted them to.



Jessica Raine as Gilda © Manuel Harlan

### **How have you explored how the time shifts in the play?**

The simplest thing that we did, quite early on, was we tried to create a timeline. It was quite a tricky task, because there are lots of events that happen and lots of things that need to happen throughout the duration of the play. And then there's a period in the play where it's impossible to chart how long it has been. But we tried to create markers in terms of the actor's imaginations that allow them to think about what it might feel like, or how long it might feel like. And it might feel like it's the morning or it might feel like it's late at night. And because of the clock and because it sputters out, it all just has to be imagined after that, because there's no way at all of knowing how long it's actually been. After we did the timeline we did a very simple, staggered run, of the first half at least, where we did it in order. And it was really depressing, watching that whole decline. But actually there was something really fascinating about seeing it jumbled and out of order. And that experience of it being jumbled takes the audience on the same journey that the characters go on too. But that was literally the only thing that we did, and very simply and very easy. And also talking about the immediate circumstances of what it might feel like to be there, away from Earth for this long, not having contact for this amount of time. For people like Ray who has nothing to go back to, it's not a massive concern. But Cole who has a kid, but he's put himself in a place where he's really testing himself and isn't thinking about that. For Gilda, again she's not got no-one to go back to, but the idea of being stuck there for so long is something that is not right. And the idea that the whole planet has kind of disappeared freaks her out, likewise with Clark. It just came down to the immediate circumstances, and talking about what the experience has been like thus far for each person. Because some of them can hack it for much longer than others can.

### **Reading it you do get that sense of dread. Do you think the audience will get that and what techniques have you done for the audience to feel that kind of tension?**

I think the audience will get it. And I think the reason why they will get it, is because the actors are investing so much in playing the truth of those moments. For instance, in Act 2 when Cole has cancer



and they're like 'Oh my gosh we have to tell him for the first time'. And they're like 'You've got cancer.' And then a few lines later they're like 'What's wrong with your leg?' And it's that really sharp and immediate belief and the imaginative leaps that they make as actors. And it's hard because there are some actors that are so method that would really struggle because it's out of chronology and it's really hard to latch onto a reality because it isn't real. But because they have had to take on those imaginative leaps, it will sustain the story as it goes along.



James Harkness (Clark) and Jessica Raine (Gilda) © Manuel Harlan

### **Can you tell us about the design?**

It's a space station and they are usually pretty cool. There's some detail that's been taken out but other details has really been brought to the forefront. Like the gadgets and stuff, so the idea of communication and this technology buzzing is always there. There's a massive window, where supposedly we see the girl, but we can't actually ever see through the window. And I think that's important because it means that no matter what happens with light the audience can never imagine that they've actually seen someone behind there, until the real moment when the girl does come into the space station. It's on a slight rake, so it's slightly tilted so there is a feeling of it being slightly off centre. And then also there will be moments where leaves are be placed in the space. So it won't ever drop and feel like autumn, it shouldn't feel like trees are alive. It's a metaphor for what was and they will just be placed in amongst scenes in the second act as a reminder of what was and what could possibly be if we continue the way that we are.

### **What do the company want the audience to leave with?**

I don't think this is a play that has or is trying to hark on a particular message. I think it talks about various things. But I think it's the kind of play where you don't have to know what it's about to know what it feels like. And I think what it feels like is miles more important. There's so much mystery in it so that people don't feel like they know exactly what they're watching. So that people take from this really epic story what they want to. In terms of discussing isolation, discussing grief, discussing technology, discussing the Earth and the planet. It's just one of those plays where it feels like it talks about everything and our entire existence as human beings. And the necessity to be with one another and to connect with one another in the way which we connect with our environment. So for people to have those discussions in the bar afterwards.

## 6. Rehearsal Diaries

During the rehearsals of X, members of the Royal Court Youth Board were invited to observe rehearsals. One of the members, Lil, wrote about her experience.

### Written by Lil Worden, age 18

I went into rehearsals for Alistair McDowall's new play 'X' directed by Vicky Featherstone to be performed at the Royal Court, on the Wednesday of their second week of rehearsals. I had never observed a rehearsal before. I was used to being an actor in that environment: reading lines, asking questions, having a laugh, playing with whatever piece we were working on. So this was a first time experience that I was excited to be having. I had never been to the Jerwood Space, which felt like a blank canvas- light, airy and simple. Walking into the room I saw what I believe was a mood board, stretching across the wall of the space, filled with images, reminders, inspiration and mind maps. I could've spent a good hour looking at everything on that wall. Diagrams of space toilets were particularly interesting.

I felt very safe and welcome in the space, as I can imagine every member of the cast and crew do. There was no judgement; no point was a silly or unnecessary point. There was a lot of conversation before a run of the first act began. It felt like everything mattered- when a question or idea was put in to the space, there was a sense of everybody really focusing on what was being asked. Before the run, the actors were advised to keep discovering and keep playing and were encouraged to explore new ways of doing and saying things and find new tones and layers in the piece.

In 'X', time is twisted. We aren't always clear what the order of events are or how long the crew have been away. A useful exercise that was done in the rehearsal was making a precise physical timeline of the play. This was a long and thoughtful process that was aimed at giving the actors and the rest of the team a better grasp on what each moment means in relation to what has happened in the play and what is going to happen. I liked the idea that Vicky put forward, that was they might never know or understand the piece fully by the end of the process, but they can simply tell the story well and serve the writing moment by moment.

After the rehearsal, I left with a headache- a good headache though. My mind had been really worked and stretched, and that was just from observing the rehearsal! I was reminded of how much detailed work goes into productions. It was an inspiring and challenging way to start the day, and I'm very grateful to have been able to have been in the room!



## 7. Timeline of Events

This is a chronological timeline of the events in X. The timeline was created by the Assistant Director to help the creative team discover how much time has passed. Having an understanding of the chronology of events, allows the actors to discover how the different moments relate to each other.

Look at the timeline with your class. As a group discuss the reasons why the writer chose to use a non-linear chronology (i.e. why is the play not in time order). Do you think it is effective? Why? How would the play change if the events were in order? As an audience member which version of the play would you prefer to see?

---

# X Timeline.

## YEAR 1

### MONTH 1

- Gilda's mum dies. Cause of death was Alzheimer's or Dementia.
- 2 days after the death Gilda and the team leave for Pluto

### MONTH 6

- They arrive in Pluto and set up the space station

### MONTH 6-12

- Lost radio contact with Earth prior to this but they were pre-warned. (Satellite maintenance)
- Life as ordinary on Pluto

## YEAR 2

### MONTH 9

**Scene 3:** Ray and Clark talk about birds and play Guess Who. Ray asks Clark if he has seen anything out of the window

AWAY FROM EARTH: 24 months

ON PLUTO: 18 months

## YEAR 2, MONTH 9 - YEAR 3, MONTH 1

- They have lost radio contact for 3 weeks without planning or warning
- Ray has seen lights, shadows and movement outside the window again

## YEAR 2/3

### MONTH 1

**Scene 1:** Gilda and Ray acknowledge that there is a problem with communications.

AWAY FROM EARTH: 24 months and 3 weeks

ON PLUTO: 18 months and 3 weeks

### YEAR 3, MONTH 1 - 2

- Ray has seen a girl outside the window
- Ray's behaviour has been more erratic of late.

## YEAR 3

### MONTH 2

**Scene 6:** Gilda has found Ray after he has cut himself in the arm with a knife.

*AWAY FROM EARTH: 25 months and 3 weeks*

*ON PLUTO: 19 months and 3 weeks*

### MONTH 3

**Scene 7:** Ray has torn his photographs. He sees a bird and a girl inside the space station. He stabs himself repeatedly in the neck, wipes an X on the window with his blood. He dies.

*AWAY FROM EARTH: 26 months and 1 week*

*ON PLUTO: 20 months and 1 week*

### YEAR 3, MONTH 3 - 4

- One month since Ray's death
- They've had a funeral/service for him.
- X has been left on window
- Gilda has become Captain
- Gilda has been berating Clark about comms of late
- Clark has noticed that messages have been received on Earth but there are no responses
- Cole has noticed that the clock has been glitching

### MONTH 4

**Scene 2:** Mattie and Clark talk about trees. Gilda confronts Clark about the X not being cleaned. Clark tells Gilda about the lack of responses even though messages are received.

#### SAME EVENING

**Scene 4:** Clark has cleaned the window. Gilda confronts Mattie about Ray's name. She tells her about her "silence" and meditating. Mattie tells Gilda Ray's story about the girl at the window.

*AWAY FROM EARTH: 2 years, 3 months and 1 week*

*ON PLUTO: 1 year, 9 months and 1 week*

### YEAR 3, MONTH 5 - YEAR 4, MONTH 4

- A year has passed since Scene 4
- The clock has been glitching more regularly with large jumps in time.
- Nobody has noticed apart from Cole. He's been studying it secretly.
- Cole has taken Ray's watch from his body (in the freezer) at some point.



## YEAR 4

### MONTH 4

**Scene 5:** Cole tells Clark about the clock glitching.

AWAY FROM EARTH: 3 years, 1 month

ON PLUTO: 2 years, 7 months

## YEAR 4-5 (INTERVAL)

- Clark has immediately told Gilda about Cole and the time glitching
- Gilda has confronted Cole about this. It may have been violent.
- They've spent a long time trying to work out what's happening with clock
- Eventually the clock sputters out completely.
- They all become isolated
- This happens over a year

## YEAR 5

### MONTH 4

**Act 2, Scene 1:** Gilda hallucinates a girl arriving at the space station to rescue them.

SAME DAY

**Scene 1, 1a:** Clark, Cole and Gilda argue for an hour about the girl who has supposedly come to rescue them. They go to look for her.

AWAY FROM EARTH: 4 years, 1 month

ON PLUTO: 3 years, 7 months

## YEAR 5, MONTH 4 - YEAR 6 MONTH 3

- Cole's leg plays up.
- They scan it and diagnose him with cancer.
- He forgets several times.

## YEAR 6

### MONTH 4

**Scene 1, 1b:** One year has passed. No spaceship has been found. Clark and Gilda remind Cole that he has cancer. He keeps forgetting.

AWAY FROM EARTH: 5 years and 1 month

ON PLUTO: 4 years and 7 months

## YEAR 6-7

- Gilda and Clark nurse Cole until he dies.
- They put him in the freezer.

## YEAR 7

### MONTH 4

**Scene [ ]c:** Cole has died. His battle with cancer lasted a year. The remaining two try to piece together their story. They start to lose their memory.

AWAY FROM EARTH: 6 years and 1 month

ON PLUTO: 5 years and 7 months

## YEAR 11

### MONTH 4

AWAY FROM EARTH: 10 years and 1 month

ON PLUTO: 9 years and 7 months

**Scene [ ]d:** Clark and Gilda have forgotten everything. They begin to rebuild themselves and they fall in love. Gilda falls pregnant. Clark dies shortly after.

## YEAR 11-12

### MONTH 1

**I - IX (PREGNANCY):** Gilda is pregnant alone on the space ship for 9 months.

### MONTH 10

- Mattie is born.

AWAY FROM EARTH: 10 years and 10 months

ON PLUTO: 10 years and 4 months

## YEAR 16 - YEAR 32

### MONTH 10

**X:** Young Mattie plays hide and seek with Gilda. Gilda ages. Mattie puts Gilda to bed for the last time and watches Gilda tell Young Mattie the story of her grandmother (the last tree). Gilda dies. Mattie is left alone.

### By the end...

AWAY FROM EARTH: 32 years and 10 months

ON PLUTO: 32 years and 4 months

## 8. In Rehearsal – Practical Activities

### Warm Up

#### 2 Truths, 1 Lie

Put the class into small groups. In each group, students must decide nominate a member of the group to tell a lie. The others will tell the truth. Each group will share their truths and lies with the rest of the class. The other groups must then decide which person is lying and why. Do this for every group, and ask who was the most effective liar and why.

#### Clown Clapping

Ask a volunteer to leave the room. As a group decide on an action that this person should do when they re-enter. The group has to give the person clues to what the action is, but they can only do this by clapping. For instance, if the volunteer had to touch their nose and raised their arm, the group would clap a lot. But if they put their hand on the floor they would clap lightly. Keep clapping until the volunteer does the action required. Do this game a few times to establish a sense of unity within the group.

### Rehearsal technique

#### The 7 Levels of Tension

This is an exercise developed by French actor Jacques LeCoq. This exercise helps an actor explore the emotions they experience in a scene. Using the states listed below explore the scene provided with your students.

1. **Catatonic** – In this state there is no movement, the body is completely relaxed. Any movement is extremely difficult. Lie on the floor and try to move. Explore the difficulty of trying to move in this state.
2. **Laid back** – This is also known as the Californian. Any movement you make is incredibly relaxed and laid-back. Imagine you are sunbathing. Explore how you move. How much purpose does your movement have?
3. **Neutral** – This is a state of awareness. You are aware of your movements but are not tense. Walk around the room without purpose. Try and walk around without making decisions. How natural does this feel?
4. **Curious** – This is a state of indecision. Walk around the room and explore your surroundings. Touch things, change direction and stop suddenly. Imagine you are late to meet a friend, but only by two minutes. How does this affect your movement?
5. **Suspense** – This is a state of crisis. Imagine you've heard a rumour there is a bomb in the building. How does this affect your movement? How does this affect your decisions? Notice any changes in your body from other states of tension.
6. **Passionate** – This is a state of disorder. It has been confirmed that there is a bomb in the building. How does this affect your movement? How does this affect your decisions? Notice any changes in your body from other states of tension.
7. **Tragic** – This is a state of chaos. The bomb is about to go off. How does this affect your movement? Can you move at all? If not, how do you convey your emotions? How does this affect your decisions? Notice any changes in your body from other states of tension.

Rehearse the scene below with your students. Run through it once. Then do it again using the levels of tension. Look at the text and find moments when the levels of tension change. Make a note of these and use them to help the scene progress. Remember that levels of tension can be internal as well as external. There may be some instances where someone can experience two levels of tension at the same time.

For instance, in the scene below Gilda could be experiencing an internal level of 6 (Passionate). However, she doesn't want Ray to think she is weak so externally she would show a lower level, perhaps a 4 or 5. For the actor playing Gilda, get them to think about how this conflict of tension affects their actions. What do they do to convince themselves and Ray that they are not at a 6? How does this affect their physical movements? For the actor playing Ray, think about what level of tension they are experiencing. Does his level of tension change? If so, when? How does this affect his actions? Think about his physical movements? Particularly in relation to Gilda.

*It's late.*

**Gilda** stands, **Ray** sits and eats.

*Silence.*

**Gilda** ...it's not so long.

**Ray** It's long.

*Pause.*

**Ray** It's a long time.

*Pause.*

**Gilda** There was that time- Before, We lost them-

**Ray** That's /not-

**Gilda** We had nothing from them then-

**Ray** They warned us before, we knew that was going to happen, it was *scheduled*.

They were repairing a satellite.

**Gilda** Maybe they're doing that now.

**Ray** It's completely different.

**Gilda** It might just be-

**Ray** Two days with prior warning is completely different to three weeks radio silence.

...

If someone farts out here they want to know about it.

They want a ten page report on who farted, when they farted, *why* they farted.

You're Miss Paperwork for fuck's sake.

That's half the reason they keep us locked to their hours, so they can breathe down our necks easier.

And I've been out here a thousand times and haven't /once-

**Gilda** Not this far.

**Ray** It doesn't matter-

**Gilda** No one's been out this far-

**Ray** Three weeks, no contact, that is a long time. Wherever you are.

...

That is a problem.

...

It's not something to debate.

*Pause.*

**Gilda** goes to the cupboard and retrieves a box of cereal. She eats a handful.

*Pause.*

**Gilda** So then we go through all the systems-

**Ray** He says they're fine.

**Gilda** So then one of the satellites-

**Ray** He says they're fine.

**Gilda** If it was fine we'd be talking to them, something is not fine-

**Ray** He says everything tech-wise is.

**Gilda** There's *something* wrong-

**Ray** Of course there's something wrong but it's outside his range of influence.

**Gilda** His range of influence?

**Ray** Calm down. It's late.

**Gilda** You're telling me to panic-

**Ray** I'm telling you how it is.

You're a grown woman, calm down.

*Beat.*

**Gilda** I don't like how you talk to me.

**Ray** Well.

*He takes some pills from a bottle in his pocket.*

**Gilda** What are those.

**Ray** Pills.

**Gilda** What pills?

**Ray** My pills, it's none of your business what pills, why would I tell you what /pills I take?

**Gilda** I'm sorry-

...

Sorry.

*Pause.*

**Gilda** So what do we do.

*Pause.*

**Gilda** What can we do?

**Ray** Nothing.

**Gilda** Noth

**Ray** There's nothing to do. We wait.

**Gilda** We can't just-

**Ray** We're here, they're there.

**Gilda** I get that-

**Ray** The phone lines are fucked.

**Gilda** Yes-

**Ray** We can't reach them, they can't reach us.

**Gilda** No-

**Ray** They're supposed to have picked us up by now-

**Gilda** We don't-

**Ray** And we've no means of going anywhere ourselves-

**Gilda** I know-

**Ray** So then what are you asking me for?

What do you think I know that you don't?

You're the genius here, why don't you tell *me* what to do?

*Beat.*

*She blinks.*

**Ray** Oh Jesus Christ.

**Gilda** What.

**Ray** I can't even have a normal conversation-  
You're supposed to be my second in command.

**Gilda** I'm *fine*-

**Ray** I can't talk to you if you're going to start blubbing every /time-

**Gilda** I'm not "blubbing".

**Ray** Well it looks like you're doing something.

**Gilda** I'm not.

...

But if I was,

Which I'm not,

But if I was it would be a perfectly appropriate response to the situation.

*Pause.*

**Ray** They will come and get us.

Maybe they're late, maybe something's wrong, but they'll come.

...

And not because of us, but because you don't send billions worth of gear to Pluto then forget about it.

...

We've done eighteen months. A few more won't kill us.

*Pause.*

**Gilda** I wasn't crying.



Darrell D'Silva as Ray and Jessica Raine as Gilda © Manuel Harlan

## **9. About Young Court**

Young Court is the Royal Court's inclusive programme of activities by, for and with young people up to age 21. Through our participation projects, young people have the chance to learn from the foremost artists and facilitators in current theatre practice, encouraging them to investigate the craft of making theatre. Young people can experience unique learning exchanges, across all departments, opening up the world of the rehearsal room as well as backstage, offering a fascinating insight into the professional process of staging Royal Court productions. Young Court aims to encourage young people to discover their power to influence and change theatre, giving them a platform to experiment, question and innovate, placing young people at our centre and fostering a live dialogue in which their views and ideas are valued and can inform our work.

Young Court offers a wide-ranging programme of activities including:

**Youth Board**

**Young Script Panel**

**Primetime**

**ReAct**

**Art on Stage**

**Insight workshops around productions**

**INSET workshops for teachers**

**Post-show talks**

**Royal Court in a Day Study Day**

**Performing Arts Business Study Day**

**Bespoke workshops**

A full description of all Young Court events can be found on the Young Court page of the Royal Court web-site, [www.royalcourttheatre.com](http://www.royalcourttheatre.com) if you would like more information, please e-mail Lynne Gagliano, Head of Young Court, at: [lynnegagliano@royalcourttheatre.com](mailto:lynnegagliano@royalcourttheatre.com) or phone 020 7565 5174.

**The X resource pack was compiled and written by Romana Fello, Deputy Head of Young Court and Maia Clarke, Young Court Assistant with the kind assistance of Roy Alexander Weise and the creative team of X.**