Study Guide for

The Family Reunion

By T.S. Eliot

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 1</th>
<th>Cast and Creative Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 2</td>
<td><strong>THE FAMILY REUNION: background to the play</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE FAMILY REUNION in relation to T. S. Eliot’s life and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family tree of characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Synopsis of Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The ‘worlds’ of the play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indivisible time: past, present and future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perspectives from the rehearsal room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accentuating the indivisible nature of time in performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Christian doctrine of redemption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A poetic drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3</td>
<td><strong>THE FAMILY REUNION in rehearsal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timeline of events referred to in THE FAMILY REUNION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploring character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Chorus in rehearsal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 4</td>
<td><strong>Bibliography and footnotes</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cast and Creative Team

**Cast** (in order of speaking)

Amy
Gemma Jones

Agatha
Penelope Wilton

Ivy
Una Stubbs

Violet
Anna Carteret

The Honourable Charles Piper
William Gaunt

Mary
Hattie Morahan

Harry
Samuel West

Colonel, The Honourable Gerald Piper
Paul Shelley

Denman
Ann Marcuson

Downing
Kevin McMonagle

Dr Warburton
Christopher Benjamin

Winchell
Phil Cole

**Eumenides**
Charlie Coopersmith, Ben Galvin, Elliot Horne, Thomas Huttlestone, Joss Littler, Harry Scott
Creative Team

**Director: Jeremy Herrin**

**Associate Director at the Royal Court.**


Film: includes *The Inventor*, *Linked*, *Dead Terry*, *Warmth*, *Cold Calling*.

Radio: includes *The Vertical Hour*.

**Designer: Bunny Christie**

For the Donmar: *After Miss Julie*.


Opera: includes *Brief Encounter* (Houston Grand Opera).

Film: includes *Swansong*, *Twelfth Night*.
Lighting Designer: Rick Fisher


Theatre: includes Billy Elliot (Victoria Palace, Sydney, Broadway), Landscape with Weapon, Honour, Mother Clap’s Molly House, Lady in the Dark – 1998 Olivier Award, Chips with Everything – 1998 Olivier Award (NT), Jerry Springer – The Opera (NT & Cambridge), Blue/Orange (NT & Duchess), Far Away (Royal Court & New York), A Number (Royal Court), Via Dolorosa (Royal Court & New York), Disney’s The Hunchback of Notre Dame (Berlin), An Inspector Calls – 1994 Tony Award (New York).

Opera: includes Betrothal in a Monastery (Glyndebourne & Valencia), Billy Budd, Radamisto, La bohème, Peter Grimes, (Santa Fe), The Fiery Angel, Turandot (Bolshoi), A Midsummer Night’s Dream (La Fenice), Wozzek (ROH), Gloriana, La bohème (Opera North), The Little Prince (Houston, New York & San Francisco), Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake (London, Los Angeles, Broadway & world tour), Cinderella (London, Los Angeles).

Rick is Chairman of the Association of Lighting Designers.

Composer and Sound Designer: Nick Powell

For the Donmar: Timeless (Traverse & UK tour).

Theatre: includes Urtain (National Theatre of Spain/Animalario), Relocated, The Vertical Hour, The Ugly One (Royal Court), Bonheur (Comédie Française), God in Ruins (RSC & Soho), Futurology: A Global Review (Tramway, Glasgow), Marat-Sade (National Theatre of Spain/Animalario), Realism (National Theatre of Scotland), The Wolves in the Wall (National Theatre of Scotland & Improbable), The Wonderful World of Dissocia (Edinburgh Festival & National Theatre of Scotland), The Stars Are Out Tonight (Lyric Hammersmith), San Diego (Vancouver), Hamelin (Animalario), Pyrenees, Mercury Fur, The Drowned World, Splendour, Riddance (Paines Plough), 800M (Tramway, Glasgow), One, Two... (Traverse & UK tour), Playhouse Creatures, Mr Heracles (WYP), Lifegame (Brisbane Festival & NT), Pornographia Barata (Spanish tour), Lament (Scottish tour & Toronto), Tiny Dynamite (Frantic Assembly), Casanova (Tron).

Nick has written numerous scores for film and TV, and is one half of the band OSKAR whose LP2 will be released in the new year.
THE FAMILY REUNION in relation to T. S. Eliot’s life and work

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. He received his undergraduate university education at Harvard. He completed postgraduate studies at Harvard in philosophy, as well as at the Sorbonne and Merton College, Oxford.

He settled in England in 1915, working as a school teacher and then as a bank clerk to supplement his income as a poet. In 1925 he became literary editor for the publishing house Faber & Faber, later becoming a director of the company.

Eliot is described as one of the most daring innovators of twentieth-century poetry. This innovation also extends to his plays which are all written in verse. His work reflects his belief that poetry should aim to represent the complexities of modern civilization in language, and that in turn requires the use of complex poetry.¹

In 1927 Eliot became a British citizen and member of the Church of England. His own journey as a Christian is charted in his poetry, particularly The Waste Land (1922) and Four Quartets (1943), with both pieces pursuing a quest for regeneration and a better world. This religious philosophy is also evident in two of his most famous plays, Murder in the Cathedral (1935)² and The Family Reunion (1939).

One of the key themes in Eliot’s work is the importance of tradition as a living force; of the past, present and future in constant interaction. This theme is at the heart of the creative choices made by the cast and creative team in the Donmar’s production of THE FAMILY REUNION.

Did you know that . . .

THE FAMILY REUNION was published in 1939, the same year as T. S. Eliot’s classical book of verse for children, OLD POSSUM’S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS (the book on which Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical CATS is based).
The family tree of characters

Seven years I kept him,
For the sake of the future, a disconnected ghost,
In his own house. What of the humiliation,
Of the chilly pretences in the silent bedroom,
Forcing sons upon an unwilling father?
Dare you think what that does to one? Try to think of it.
I would have sons, if I could not have a husband:
Then I let him go.

*Amy, Dowager Lady Monchensey, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part II, Scene 2*

A curse comes into being
As a child is formed.

*Agatha, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part II, Scene 2*
**Characters associated with the family**

DOWNING  
Harry’s servant and chauffeur

DENMAN  
Servant to Amy at Wishwood

DR. WARBURTON  
Doctor to Amy and her family

SERGEANT WINCHELL  
Has been policing the area surrounding Wishwood since 1918, when he was a young constable

**Characters pursuing Harry**

THE EUMENIDES  
Ghosts from Harry’s childhood

DAISY  
Harry’s deceased wife
Synopsis of Part I

Eliot divides THE FAMILY REUNION into two parts, with each part made up of three scenes. In this introductory section, a précis of Part I is given to offer an insight into the events which lie at the heart of the play.

Part I
Scene 1

The scene takes place on Amy’s birthday, an afternoon in late March. The family have assembled at Wishwood, Amy’s house in the Cumbria, for a family reunion: Harry, Amy’s eldest son, is returning to his childhood home after an eight year absence. We learn that Harry has been travelling abroad since his marriage to Daisy, a marriage of which the family did not approve.

Daisy died a year ago, after she was swept off the deck of the ship they were travelling on in the middle of a storm. When Harry arrives, his behaviour is erratic and disturbed. He relates the story of Daisy’s death, claiming that he pushed erratic her over the side of the ship. His family all refute his claims. Harry’s Uncle Charles, the brother of his deceased father, tells him that he must not ‘indulge such fancies’; Amy tells him that when he sees Wishwood by day in the morning, ‘all will be the same again’.

When Harry leaves the room, the chorus of aunts and uncles – Ivy, Violet, Charles and Gerald – concerned, call on Amy to summon Doctor Warburton to see Harry. As Amy leaves the room to make the phone call herself, Charles has the idea of questioning Downing, Harry’s servant, to discreetly find out what is wrong with Harry. Downing reveals that he believes Harry to be ‘rather psychic’.

The scene closes with Amy re-entering the room and expressing her frustration that Harry’s younger brothers, Arthur and John, have not arrived in good time to dress for dinner.
Scene 2

Agatha, Amy’s youngest sister, and Mary, Harry’s cousin, discuss the impending family dinner. Mary solicits Agatha’s advice: she wants to know how she can get away from Wishwood. Agatha advises her that now is not the time to leave.

As Agatha exits, Harry enters the stage and meets Mary for the first time in seven years, and for the first time since she graduated from Oxford University. Mary says she must go and change for dinner, but Harry asks her to stay as he wants to ask her a question: was she ever happy as a child at Wishwood? She says that she wasn’t, because she was only the cousin, kept at Wishwood ‘because there was nothing else to do with me’. They reminisce about how everything seemed to be ‘imposed’ on them as children at Wishwood. They recall their one childhood pleasure, the hollow tree in ‘the wilderness’ and the secret times that they had there. The ghosts that haunt Harry, the Eumenides, appear before him. As Harry addresses the ghosts, Mary tries to calm him, telling him that there is no one else in the room. Harry reprimands Mary for her lack of perception.
Scene 3

Ivy, Violet, Gerald and Charles burst energetically into the scene, now dressed for dinner. Mary makes a hurried exit, saying she must go and change. Amy enters with Dr Warburton, inquiring as to whether her two younger sons, Arthur and John, have arrived yet. She re-introduces Harry to Warburton, their family doctor over the years. The conversation takes a rather unexpected turn as Warburton talks about his first patient, who was a murderer and suffered from incurable cancer. This leads Harry into a disturbing speech about the differences between murder and cancer, after which Warburton accompanies Amy into dinner. The chorus of aunts and uncles express their growing fears for the future and leave the stage. Agatha closes the scene with a monologue in which she implicitly refers to a family curse which needs to be broken:

The eye is on this house
The eye covers it.
There are three together
May the three be separated
May the knot that was tied
Become unknotted
May the crossed bones
In the filled-up well
Be at last straightened
May the weasel and the otter
Be about their proper business
The eye of the day time
And the eye of the night time
Be diverted from this house
Till the knot is unknotted
The cross is uncrossed
And the crooked is made straight.

Observation point

- How many times is Agatha’s refrain, referring to the family curse, repeated during the play?
  Till the knot is unknotted
  The cross is uncrossed
  And the crooked is made straight.

- What is Eliot’s intention in repeating this phrase?

- When you see Part II of the production, how, and by whom, is the nature of the curse revealed?
  What dramatic impact does this have on the remainder of the production?

- What creative choices have been made throughout the production to accentuate the nature of the curse?
The ‘worlds’ of the play.

Amy inhabits a world of duty that revolves around the continuity of life at Wishwood, through the succession of Harry, as 11th Lord of Monchensesy, to become custodian of the property and head of the family. The second world embodied in the play is the spiritual world, accentuated by Harry’s Aunt Agatha. Agatha comes across as the guardian of the threshold to this world – a world she has seen. Harry’s dilemma in the play is that he inhabits neither world: he refuses to submit to the authority of Amy and her world, to which Ivy, Violet, Gerald and Charles have succumbed, and he doesn’t yet belong to the world to which Agatha is gatekeeper.

Harry’s affinity with Agatha’s more creative and spiritual way of seeing the world is established in the opening scene of the play. She responds to Harry’s tormented tales by telling him that ‘There is more to understand’ and that he should ‘hold fast to that/as the way to freedom.’ He is receptive to her advice:

I think I see what you mean,
Dimly – as you once explained the sobbing in the chimney
The evil in the dark closet, which they said was not there,
Which they explained away, but you explained them
Or at least, made me cease to be afraid of them.
Harry is haunted by messengers from the spiritual world calling him towards it. In the Donmar’s production of THE FAMILY REUNION these messengers are young boys – the ghosts of Harry’s childhood – who appear before him at key moments in the play. (T. S. Eliot refers to these ghosts in his stage directions as the Eumenides, a reference to the furies of ancient Greek myth who pursued Orestes). When Harry senses the presence of the ghosts, he talks about:

That apprehension deeper than all sense,
Deeper than the sense of smell, but like a smell
In that it is indescribable, a sweet and bitter smell
From another world. I know it, I know it!
More potent than ever before, a vapour dissolving
All other worlds, and me into it.

*Harry, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part I, Scene 2.*

The cast and creative team had conversations about these two separate worlds, finding it particularly interesting when looking at the similarities between them, as Abbey Wright, assistant director on the production, explains:

*There was a breakthrough moment when we were talking about seeing Amy’s life as a choice to suppress her spirituality and creativity. Jeremy Herrin, the director, was quite taken with the idea that she had loved her husband but had never been able to express that love. So she has a germ of intellectual creativity, of spirituality, but this has not been cultivated or been given free reign in the way that Agatha’s has. Although there is a clash, they are not worlds apart, they are not occupying different spheres.*

*Abbey Wright, Assistant Director, THE FAMILY REUNION*

The production also gives the impression that the older generation, apart from Agatha, inhabit a very different world from that of Harry and Mary. There are times during the performance when it feels as if they are threatening, imposing their world on the younger generation, particularly the united force of the chorus of uncles and aunts. Mary shares this thought with Harry at their first meeting:

…when I was a child I took everything for granted,
Including the stupidity of older people-
They lived in another world, which did not touch me.
Just now, I find them difficult to bear.

*Mary, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part I, Scene 2.*
Indivisible time: past, present and future

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

The opening lines of ‘Four Quartets’, T.S. Eliot

Perspectives from the rehearsal room

I think the idea of the past, present and future being indivisible and informing/determining each other is at the heart of Eliot’s work

Abbey Wright, assistant director, THE FAMILY REUNION

Abbey Wright stresses the company’s discovery of the importance of tradition as a living force within the play, of the past, present and future in constant interaction; this is what they spent the five week rehearsal process talking about and unravelling.
They had the idea that this theme could be considered as an abstract philosophy about the nature of time, the universe and the environment, with time being circular. In a more practical sense they considered that the theme speaks of our own psychology and the human tendency to set traps for ourselves, repeatable patterns of behaviour which have been sewn by past events and which determine our future.

The play not only deals with the question of Harry’s inheritance of Wishwood – the country house and family estate – but also with his family’s psychological legacy. Harry speaks of the crippling moral code he inherited from his upbringing:

When we were children, before we went to school,
The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;
Misconduct was simply being unkind to mother;
What was wrong was whatever made her suffer;
And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous –
Though never very happy, I remember. That was why
We all felt like failures, before we had begun.
When we came back, for the school holidays,
They were not holidays, but simply a time
In which we were supposed to make up to mother
For all the weeks during which she had not seen us
Except at half term, and seeing us then
Only seemed to make her more unhappy, and made us
Feel more guilty, and so we misbehaved
Next day at school, in order to be punished,
For punishment made us feel less guilty. Mother
Never punished us, but made us feel guilty.

*Harry, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part II, Scene 1*

The cast and creative team came to see that Eliot’s recurrent theme in the play was that the future is long since decided by the past. However, they also decided that THE FAMILY REUNION is a redemptive play which seems to pose the possibility of remaking the self and redirecting one’s future through honest confrontation with the past and exorcism of its demons – both within yourself and the world without you.

**Accentuating the indivisible nature of time in performance**

The Donmar’s production of THE FAMILY REUNION experiments with the notion of time. The production is true to its 1930’s setting, but various modern elements of time have been introduced. For example, the production opens with a prelude: a modern metal bucket is placed on the floor, with the sound of drips falling rhythmically into it; there are dust sheets over the chairs, and the ticking of the clock; Amy enters and surveys the room. The prelude has been inspired by all the references to time in the play, for example ‘the loop in time’, and ‘this decayed house’. By starting the production in this way, in a modern period, the creative team is aiming at conveying the sense that Wishwood has decayed over the years.
What is important, however, is that the production remains very much set in the class period of the 1930s. Subsequently, there is a definite hierarchy of status established in the production. This is particularly evident in the prelude, where the characters enter the space and place chairs down, almost as if they were isolated chess board pieces. The staging is determined by the status of the various characters at the opening of Scene 1.

**Observation point**

- When you see the Donmar’s production of THE FAMILY REUNION, what does this prelude to the opening scene communicate to you about the themes in the play, and the hierarchy of the characters?
- How does lighting, sound and setting accentuate the theme of the indivisible nature of time throughout the production?

In Amy, Eliot presents his audience with a character whose life is ruled by tradition, yet resists the notion of the past or the future: the present is an ever constant state. This is exemplified by the way we see her life ruled by the clock. In the opening scene of the play she complains that, now she is old, the clocks cannot be trusted; she fears that time will come to an end. She herself is compared to a machine like a clock by Dr Warburton, who says of her ‘the whole machine is very weak/And running down. Her heart’s very feeble’. Her final words in the last scene of the play are ‘The clock has stopped in the dark.’
To Amy, the past and the future do not exist as forces that impact on the present: tradition is ever present and unchangeable. She thus expects Harry to have an unquestioning acceptance of his succession. However, Harry enters the play with a diametrically opposed attitude to life and a fiercely different energy. Harry’s rhythm of life is not determined by the cold precision of measured time, but an organic ‘burning wheel’ of desire and memory. Amy would have him deny his past and start again ‘as if nothing has happened’, where as Agatha, from her own experience, knows that within this hellish state of despair exists the potential for redemption; suffering is a means to this end.

During Harry’s eight year absence Amy has kept life at Wishwood constant, waiting for his return. ‘Nothing has changed’ she tells Agatha in the opening scene, ‘Everything is kept as it was when he left.’ Amy is resolute in her belief that her son will return to the same Wishwood that he departed from eight years earlier.

‘For the sake of the future’, Amy tells her family that they must forget Harry’s marriage to Daisy, whose death she describes as ‘nothing but a blessed relief.’ She demands of the family that:

…There can be no grief
And no regret and no remorse.
I would have prevented it if I could. For the sake of the future:
Harry is to take command at Wishwood
And I hope we can contrive his future happiness.
Do not discuss his absence. Please behave only
As if nothing had happened in the last eight years.
Agatha’s views are diametrically opposed to those of Amy. For her:
...everything is irrevocable,
Because the past is irremediable,
Because the future can only be built
Upon the real past.

*Agatha, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part I, Scene 1*

She believes that her nephew will find another Harry at Wishwood, ‘the man who returns will have to meet/The boy who left’ because:
When the loop of time comes –and it does not come for everybody-
The hidden is revealed, and the spectres show themselves.

*Agatha, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part I, Scene 1*

As previously mentioned, in the Donmar’s production of THE FAMILY REUNION this is re-enforced by the ‘spectres’ appearing in the guise of Harry’s younger self.

**The Christian doctrine of redemption**

During the early stages of rehearsal, the cast were grappling with a basic understanding of the theology, and in particular the Christian doctrine of redemption, which underlies the play. The director, Jeremy Herrin, invited a theologian to talk to the cast to help them with these philosophies. The theologian’s talk focused on the interplay between the Christian doctrine of redemption and the structure of Greek drama which Eliot chose to employ in THE FAMILY REUNION.7 Abbey Wright, assistant director on the production, summarises the content of the talk as follows:

*Both views (Greek and Christian) accept the loss, brokenness, suffering and sin which inhabit our existence, but they pose different means as to how this can be faced. In the Greek model of life, the best you can do is endure it with dignity, but in Christianity these horrors can be redeemed and overcome and the process of transformation can take place. We have talked a lot about the essential mystery at the heart of this process of transformation and at the heart of the play. It seems to be through facing the ghosts of the past that redemption/self-transformation can happen. It is fascinating how these ancient religious concepts often seem to embody concepts from modern psychology: such as the Freudian idea of having to exorcise certain events from your childhood which have had a damagingly formative effect.*

*Abbey Wright, Assistant Director, THE FAMILY REUNION*
A poetic drama

T. S. Eliot’s plays are often categorized as ‘poetic drama’, alluding to the verse form in which they are written. Eliot explains the importance of this dramatic style of writing as follows:

What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike their own, an unreal world in which poetry can be spoken. What I should hope might be achieved, by a generation of dramatists having the benefit of our experience, is that the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry, that it is saying to itself: “I could talk in poetry too!” Then we should not be transported into an artificial world; on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary, daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured.”

Poetry and Drama, T. S. Eliot*
Eliot’s poetry in THE FAMILY REUNION is rich in imagery. This is particularly evident in the language he gives Harry, the main function of which is to reflect Harry’s inner emotional turmoil. Harry externalizes his feelings by talking of stench and contamination, of ‘tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone.’ In the opening scene of the play he attempts to explain his inner being to the family:

You do not know
The noxious smell untraceable in the drains,
Inaccessible to the plumbers, that has its hour of the night; you do not know
The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom
At three o’clock in the morning. I am not speaking
Of my own experience, but trying to give you
Comparisons in a more familiar medium. I am the old house
With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning,
In which all past is present, all degradation
Is unredeemable. As for what happens –
Of the past you can only see what is past,
Not what is always present. That is what matters.

This contrasts with Agatha’s style of language, which illustrates that within Harry’s hellish state of despair exists the potential for a state of transcendence, achieved through suffering.

The chorus worked in depth on the verse in their choric odes (see Section 3, ‘The chorus in rehearsal’). However, the cast and creative team did not explicitly focus on the verse during the rehearsal process, apart from where they felt it supported a creative choice, for example, by looking at a half line which implies a pause because a character is thinking.

There was one instance where they did experiment with the verse. They worked with Christopher Benjamin (Dr Warburton) on delivering the verse in a more prosaic, rigid way, and some exciting discoveries were made:

That was when Jeremy and I both noticed that actually, when you observe the poetry more closely, bizarrely, it sounds more naturalistic. Because it is so skilfully written, the more you hit the poetry and the form of the writing, the more the everydayness of it sings out – and that was Eliot’s objective – because he felt that in his previous play, ‘Murder in the Cathedral’, his language was too poetic and heightened, and he wanted to create a form that sounded more ordinary.

Abbey Wright, Assistant Director, THE FAMILY REUNION
THE FAMILY REUNION in rehearsal

As the play’s title suggests, the family is the focus of T. S. Eliot’s play. This is why the cast mined the text for clues to help them locate the backstory for their characters in relation to family events. Each time they discovered a useful date or event which had taken place prior to the play’s setting of 1939, they recorded it on pieces of paper pinned up around the rehearsal room walls, with each piece of paper representing a single year. This information has been collated here into a timeline of events.

Timeline of events referred to in THE FAMILY REUNION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Arthur George Piper, 9th Lord of Monchensey born (Harry’s Grandfather, Gerald and Charles’ Father)</td>
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<td>1874</td>
<td>Amy is born</td>
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<td>1876</td>
<td>Ivy is born</td>
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<td>1879</td>
<td>Violet is born</td>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>The Honourable Gerald is born</td>
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<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Agatha is born</td>
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<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>Charles is born. Arthur George Piper, 9th Lord of Monchensey dies in December</td>
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<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Gerald is sent to the North-West Frontier</td>
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<td>1889</td>
<td>Dr Warburton goes into country practice</td>
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<td>1900</td>
<td>Amy and Henry are married</td>
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<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>March 21st – Amy’s 29th birthday; Harry is conceived. Summer. Agatha and Henry have an affair</td>
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<td>1904</td>
<td>Henry (Harry) Edmund George Piper born, Wishwood, Cumbria</td>
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<td>1906</td>
<td>John Piper born</td>
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<td>1910</td>
<td>Henry and Amy’s marriage over. Harry’s father leaves for Rome – only Agatha knows where he is going. Denham is born.</td>
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<td>1912</td>
<td>Henry dies. Harry becomes 11th Lord of Monchensey. Mary’s mother dies of flu. Mary starts to spend more time at Wishwood.</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td>Gerald is engaged in a holding on the North West frontier. He is a Brigadier. August – Mary’s father Cecil goes to France. Mary (5 years old) comes to stay at Wishwood more permanently.</td>
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<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Harry comes back from school with measles, aged 13. Treated by Warburton</td>
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<td>1917</td>
<td>September – Harry starts secondary school.</td>
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<td>October – The trees in the ‘wilderness’ are felled and the summer house built in their place.</td>
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<td>1918</td>
<td>Winchell arrives on this patch as Constable.</td>
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<td>November – the First World War ends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>September – Mary starts secondary school, aged 11 years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Harry goes to university – Merton College, Oxford.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Old Denham is killed in a terrible accident.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Summer – Mary finishes school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October – Mary goes to Oxford, St. Hilda’s College.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Downing arrives at Wishwood as the new butler, contracted by Harry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Winchell promoted to sergeant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Mary completes her masters and, despite Agatha’s advice, returns to Wishwood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arthur drives at speed through the village, almost knocking Winchell of his bike. Winchell speaks to Downing about the incident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>April 25th – Daisy Piper lost at sea, mid-Atlantic, New York to London crossing, 11.15 pm. (Did she fall, or was she pushed?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exploring character

Harry
One of the priorities during the rehearsal process was to pin down Harry’s mental state:

*He needs to be in an extremely anguished mental state in order for the words he is speaking to feel connected and not just to feel like poetry.*

Sam West (Harry)

The cast talked about depression, which is clearly referred to in Harry’s speech to Agatha where he describes the two kinds of hell – the feeling of despair which gives a knowledge of eternity, and the sense of numbness which comes to cover the first feeling. The cast were astonished at how psychologically astute the writing is amongst these swaths of poetry:

At the beginning, eight years ago,
I felt, at first, that sense of separation,
Of isolation unredeemable, irrevocable –
It’s eternal, or gives a knowledge of eternity,
Because it feels eternal while it lasts. That is one hell.
Then the numbness came to cover it – that is another –
That was the second hell of not being there,
The degradation of being parted from my self,
From the self which persisted only as an eye, seeing.

*Harry, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part I, Scene 2*

As Abbey Wright comments:

*Harry’s journey throughout the play is an incredibly complex voyage of self-discovery and we tried not to reduce it or to impose too much explanation onto it; we wanted to be open to the language and let it live as Harry says, ‘on several planes at once’. On one level he is having a late adolescent-style rebellion against a domineering mother and striking out on his own to find himself – as thousands of young people do every day – on another level, he is undergoing a religious/spiritual conversion.*

Abbey Wright, assistant director, THE FAMILY REUNION
In the opening scene of Part II, Harry seeks to find out more about his father’s departure from Wishwood. One memory he recalls, is the day his father died:

But now I remember
A summer day of unusual heat,
The day I lost my butterfly net;
I remember the silence, and the hushed excitement
And the low conversation of triumphant aunts.
It is the conversations not overheard,
Not intended to be heard, with the sidewise looks,
That bring death into the heart of a child.
That was the day he died.

*Harry, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part II, Scene 1*
Harry and Mary

Abbey Wright talks about how interesting it has been to explore the interplay between the physical and spiritual in Harry and Mary’s relationship. Eliot himself had a horror of his own sexual desire and viewed his relationship with his wife, Emily Hale, as a kind of perfect, unconsummable relationship:

 *It has been fascinating to invent the backstory for Mary and Harry – their escapades in the night with the hollow tree etc. We felt that Mary was quite in awe of Harry when she was younger and continues to be now and that she is a very bright young woman but has always battled with her self-esteem, probably due to feeling like a poor relation, an outsider, within her own family unit... It is wonderful to watch Mary’s development throughout the play and I think that by the end you feel a great sense of hope for Mary, that she has gained a sense of empowerment and her future will be better.*

Abbey Wright, Assistant director, THE FAMILY REUNION

Mary has a spiritual insight on the same level as Agatha, as can be seen when she talks to Harry at their first reconciliation:

> I am not a wise person,
> And in the ordinary sense I don’t know you very well,
> Although I remember you better than you think,
> And what is the real you. I haven’t much experience,
> But I see something now which doesn’t come from tutors
> Or from books, or from thinking, or from observation:
> Something which I did not know I knew.
> Even if, as you say, Wishwood is a cheat,
> Your family a delusion – then it’s all a delusion
> Everything you feel – I don’t mean what you think,
> But what you feel. You attach yourself to loathing
> As others do to loving: an infatuation
> That’s wrong, a good that’s misdirected. You deceive yourself
> Like the man convinced that he is paralysed
> Or like the man who believes that he is blind
> While he still sees the sunlight. I know that this is true.

*Mary, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part I, Scene 2.*

Harry is inspired by Mary’s insight:

> You bring me news
> Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,
> Sunlight and singing; when I felt sure
> That every corridor only led to another,
> Or to a blank wall; that I kept moving
> Only so as not to stay still. Singing and light.

*Harry, THE FAMILY REUNION, Part I, Scene 2.*
Agatha

Penelope Wilton (Agatha) was keen that her character did not ‘sit mysteriously in the corner looking like she knew all the answers.’ She has her own journey to go on and is just as much a part of this family as the other sisters and her own exorcism/transformation is occasioned by her return to Wishwood as much as the others:

*We have worked to inject human emotions into her speeches so that she never appears like a mystic cipher – which, when you’re talking about the ‘weasel’ and the ‘otter’ and so on, does take a bit of thinking about. The language does give you such a sensual access into the heart of the character though and the primal nature of her fears and desires.*

*Abbey Wright, Assistant director, THE FAMILY REUNION*

Amy and Agatha

There was one particularly useful session during the rehearsal period where Gemma Jones (Amy) and Penelope Wilton (Agatha) explored Amy and Agatha’s relationship. The difference between the two women is apparent, but they also discovered their affinity and similarities. This resulted in the actresses exploring the idea that Amy has a frustrated, possibly creative, inner life, which she has deliberately shut off. She was in love with her husband and was deeply hurt by his affair with Agatha. She sees Agatha as a potent, threatening force and has a sensory awareness/wariness of her all the time which pulses through the scenes.
During an early stage in rehearsals the director, Jeremy Herrin, got the cast to play ‘wink murder’ in character. When he made Amy (Gemma Jones) the detective and Agatha (Penelope Wilton) the murderer there was a very interesting dynamic of the slightly dangerous, intrusive presence of Amy, and that sense of her waiting and biding her time to strike. Agatha is sensitive to that, and Amy is watching this too. Then, with all the aunts and uncles furtively watching the status play as well, it became a fascinating exercise which informed the relationship between Amy and Agatha.
The Chorus in rehearsal

The chorus is made up Amy’s sisters Ivy and Violet, and her late husband’s brothers, Charles and Gerald. At the beginning of the rehearsal process, the actors playing these roles – Una Stubbs (Ivy), Anna Carteret (Violet), William Gaunt (Charles) and Paul Shelley (Gerald) – worked on the play’s five choric odes separately from the rest of the company with voice coach Penny Dyer.

The first choric ode.

The first choric ode takes place in Part I, Scene 1. Amy has just warned the family that, when Harry returns, they must not mention anything about his marriage to Daisy, or anything about how he has spent the past eight years while he has been absent from Wishwood. The chorus deliver the ode through direct address to the audience, expressing their inner most thoughts and feelings.
**Practical Exercise**

T.S. Eliot said there should be three stresses in every line of the choric odes. Penny Dyer and the chorus really worked on this, and on maintaining the caesura* in the middle of each line.

*Cæsura = a pause in a line of poetry, especially to allow its sense to be made clear or to follow the rhythms of natural speech, often near the middle of the line.

- Working in groups of 4, read through this choric ode once. What are the inner most thoughts and feelings of Ivy, Violet, Charles and Gerald that are expressed?
- Decide where you think the stresses or beats should be in each line, and try and identify where the caesura lies in each line.
- Reassemble as a group and experiment with reading aloud different versions of the ode. What are the similarities/differences in the choices that each group has made?

**IVY, VIOLET, GERALD and CHARLES**

Why do we feel embarrassed, impatient, fretful, ill at ease, 
Assembled like amateur actors who have not been assigned their parts?
Like amateur actors in a dream when the curtain rises, to find themselves dressed for a different play, or having rehearsed the wrong parts,
Waiting for the rustling in the stalls, the titter in the dress circle, the laughter and catcalls in the gallery?

**CHARLES**

I might have been in St James’s street, in a comfortable chair rather nearer the fire.

**IVY**

I might have been visiting Cousin Lily at Sidmouth, if I had not had to come to this party.

**GERALD**

I might have been staying with Compton-Smith, down at his place in Dorset.

**VIOLET**

I should have been helping Lady Bumpus, at the Vicar’s American Tea.

**CHORUS**

Yet we are here at Amy’s command, to play an unread part in some monstrous farce, ridiculous in some nightmare pantomime.
The second choric ode.

When the chorus break out into their second choric ode, they have witnessed Harry's disturbed state of mind on his return to Wishwood, and listened to his confession of murder.

The opening stanza, spoken in unison, sets the scene for the ode: why should they be brought together and drawn into the shame of this murder? When rehearsing this ode for the first time, Paul Shelley (Gerald) commented that he didn’t feel that the brothers and sisters always came to Amy’s birthday party, and that it was ‘a three line whip this year’.

The single lines that follow show the growing mistrust amongst the brothers and sisters, brought about by the unsettling events surrounding Harry’s return:

They are all in different places emotionally. The lines come from fear. When you bring any group of people together they all have different thoughts, but this (ode) brings you all to the same place.

Penny Dyer, dialect coach, THE FAMILY REUNION

Anna Cartaret (Violet) says that the talk about murder in the family has ‘unsettled’ them; Una Stubbs (Ivy) believes the family is now ‘tainted’.

When working on the final stanza, the actors found that miming some of the ‘bigger’ words helped them to secure the lines in their memory. Penny Dyer agreed with them, advising them to make the gestures as simple as possible, ensuring that they were executed on the word. She felt that this technique would also offer clarity to the audience.
Practical Exercise

- Working in groups of 4, read through the final stanza, from 'We all of us make the pretension'. Discuss what the stanza means to you.
- Read though the stanza again, and this time underline the keys words that you think would benefit from being acted out.
- Now experiment with staging this. Note: Penny Dyer advised her actors that the actions could be ‘metaphorical’; they don’t have to be literal.
- Present your work to the rest of the group.

CHORUS
Why should we stand here like guilty conspirators, waiting for some revelation
When the hidden shall be exposed, and the newsboy shall shout in the street?
When the private shall be made public, the common photographer
Flashlight for the picture papers: why do we huddle together
In a horrid amity of misfortune? Why should we be implicated, brought in and brought together?

IVY
I do not trust Charles with his confident vulgarity, acquired from worldly associates.

GERALD
Ivy is only concerned for herself, and her credit among her shabby genteel acquaintance.

VIOLET
Gerald is certain to make some blunder, he is useless out of the army.

CHARLES
Violet is afraid that her status as Amy’s sister will be diminished.

CHORUS
We all of us make the pretension
To be the uncommon exception
To the universal bondage.
We like to appear in the newspapers
So long as we are in the right column.
We know about the railway accident
We know about the sudden thrombosis
And the slowly hardening artery.
We like to be thought well of by others
So that we may think well of ourselves.
And any explanation will satisfy:
We only ask to be reassured
About the noises in the cellar
And the window that should not have been open.
Why do we all behave as if the door might suddenly open, the curtains be drawn,
The cellar make some dreadful disclosure, the roof disappear,
And we should cease to be sure of what is real or unreal?
Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be.
The third choric ode.

Amy, Harry and Dr Warburton have left the room to go into dinner and the chorus express their mounting inner fears.

In rehearsal, voice coach Penny Dyer suggested that there should be a single voice to denote the past, and the actors should speak as a chorus when talking about the future, commenting that:

*When you have one voice, it is the vulnerable voice of the past. The past voice is of fear; the future is more visceral.*

**Practical Exercise**

- Woking in groups of four, read through the ode together, identifying which sections denote the past and which the future. What do you notice about the ode, for example, how does it begin and end?
- Come into a tight circle, so that your voices are closer together and read through the lines again. What does this feel like?
- Still in your groups of four, take the following extract and work on it as a round:
  
  *Have torn*
  The roof from the house, or perhaps it was never there.
  And the bird sits on the broken chimney. I am afraid.
- Observe the advice that Penny Dyer gave the chorus when working on a round:
  
  *Be in the same rhythm for a round – don’t slow down for it.*
  *Keep going in a round – don’t wait for each other.*

**IVY, VIOLET, GERALD and CHARLES**

I am afraid of all that has happened, and of all that is to come;  
Of the things to come that sit at the door, as if they had been there always. 
And the past is about to happen, and the future was long since settled. 
And the wings of the future darken the past, the beak and claws have desecrated History. Shamed 
The first cry in the bedroom, the noise in the nursery, mutilated 
The family album, rendered ludicrous 
The tenants’ dinner, the family picnic on the moors. Have torn 
The roof from the house, or perhaps it was never there. 
And the bird sits on the broken chimney. I am afraid.

**IVY**

This is a most undignified terror, and I must struggle against it.

**GERALD**

I am used to tangible danger, but only to what I can understand.

**VIOLET**

It is the obtuseness of Gerald and Charles and that doctor, that gets on my nerves.

**CHARLES**

If the matter were left in my hands, I think I could manage the situation. 
(Exeunt)
The fourth choric ode.

Observation point
The chorus deliver this ode after the interval, during Part II of the play. When you see the production, consider what prompts the chorus to break out into direct address to the audience at this stage in the action.
Practical Exercise

• In groups of four, read through the whole choric ode and get a sense of its meaning.

• During rehearsals, Penny Dyer brought the actors’ attention to the 9 images Eliot uses from line 6 onwards, ‘The treble voices on the lawn’ to ‘The season of stifled sorrow.’ In the images, the author takes us from spring through to winter. Read through these lines and discuss what the images are and that they mean in the context of the play.

• As a group, experiment with counting up to 9 in unison. Repeat the exercise, but this time, count to 9 and imagine you are walking down steps, with your voices moving down an octave with each number. Repeat this exercise with the text, the voice taking a step down in range with each line. What impact does this have on the delivery of the lines?

As a chorus, you are coming down nine metaphorical steps and into real feelings of vitriol and resentment. In terms of character, it is your conscious and your unconscious self that you are speaking from.

Penny Dyer, dialect coach, THE FAMILY REUNION

• After having worked on this section, experiment with delivering the complete ode. Compare and contrast the mood of the verse at the beginning and end of the piece.

IVY, VIOLET, GERALD and CHARLES

In an old house there is always listening, and more is heard than is spoken.
And what is spoken remains in the room, waiting for the future to hear it.
And whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard on the future.
The agony in the curtained bedroom, whether of birth or of dying,
Gathers into itself all the voices of the past, and projects them into the future.
The treble voices on the lawn
The mowing of hay in summer
The dogs and the old pony
The stumble and the wail of little pain
The chopping of wood in autumn
And the singing in the kitchen
And the steps at night in the corridor
The moment of sudden loathing
And the season of stifled sorrow
The whisper, the transparent deception
The keeping up of appearances
The making the best of a bad job
All twined and tangled together, all are recorded.
There is no avoiding these things
And we know nothing of exorcism
And whether in Argos or England
There are certain inflexible laws
Unalterable, in the nature of music.
There is nothing at all to be done about it,
There is nothing to do about anything,
And now it is nearly time for the news
We must listen to the weather report
And the international catastrophes.
(Exeunt CHORUS)
Observation point

When you see the Donmar’s production of THE FAMILY REUNION, consider the following points:

• In what way does the lighting and sound design support the presentation of the choric odes?
• The final choric ode, which is not printed here, is spoken within the last ten minutes of the production’s final scene. Consider the following:
  • To what extent is this ode prompted by the events taking place offstage?
  • What is the chorus’s concluding message for the audience?

Afterword

In his programme note for THE FAMILY REUNION, Sean O’Brien says that in the play ‘laughter and horror come so hard on each other’s heels as to be almost inseparable’. Try and identify key moments during the Donmar’s production of the play when this happens. How significant is the role of the chorus during these moments?
Footnotes

(Endnotes)

1-2 Readings of this poetry and Murder in the Cathedral forms part of the Donmar’s T.S. Eliot Festival, 20th November 2008 to 17th January 2009.

3 Elements of THE FAMILY REUNION can be seen to be influenced by The Oresteia, the trilogy written by the ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus. The Oresteia is a useful reference in terms of the function of the furies in the play: their role was to hound Orestes out of the house of Atreus, and pursue him until justice was done. The parallel in THE FAMILY REUNION is the Eumenides hounding of Harry out of Wishwood. What is different in the Donmar’s production of the play, is that the Eumenides are images of Harry as a young boy, as opposed to the female furies Eliot had envisaged. Also, THE FAMILY REUNION has the realisation that Harry is going to follow these ghosts, as opposed to being forever pursued by them as Orestes is by the furies.

4 Interview with Abbey Wright, 15th November 2008, Jerwood Space.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 See footnote 3 which refers to the influence of The Oresteia in Eliot’s play. The intense relationship between mother and son in each play is also interesting – Amy/Harry and Clytemnestra/Orestes. At the opening of both plays, each mother is anticipating her son’s homecoming. Harry means ‘home ruler’ and the sense that the stones of the house in The Oresteia, are awaiting the son’s return is analogous to the fabric of Wishwood awaiting Harry’s return.

8 Poetry and Drama, T. S. Eliot, Faber & Faber, 1951.

9 Interview with Abbey Wright, ibid.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Interview by the author with Abbey Wright, assistant director for THE FAMILY REUNION, Jerwood Space, 15th November 2008.

Attendance at rehearsals, 28th October, 7th and 15th November 2008.


Secondary sources


Eliot, T. S. – Poetry and Drama, Faber & Faber, 1951.

Further reading


With thanks to Jeremy Herrin, Penny Dyer, Abbey Wright and the cast of THE FAMILY REUNION.
Noël Coward was born in Teddington, Middlesex on 16 December 1899. He was born just in time to see the last Christmas of the old century, and it’s due to his festive arrival that he was christened ‘Noël’.

Despite his flamboyance in later life and his apparent ease amongst the top tier of society, Noël Coward actually had humble beginnings. He was brought up in suburban south London, the son of a failed piano salesman, Arthur Coward. His younger brother was a very ill child and died very young, and as a consequence Violet, his mother, was utterly devoted to the young Noël.

Depending on which source is consulted, Coward began his professional acting career between the ages of 9 and 12. It is clear however that he enjoyed performing from a very young age. Community concerts, school prize giving events and even for house guests (he would apparently fly into wild tantrums if he wasn’t asked to perform in front of guests!). By the time he appeared in Peter Pan (1913) at the age of 12, Noël had established a modest reputation as a child actor. One reviewer described him as “bursting with remarkable talent”. However, in later life Noël described himself as “one of the worst boy actors ever inflicted on the paying public”.

Noël spent his late teens performing in touring theatre and in occasional West End roles. He had been writing and co-writing scripts since the age of 19, but it wasn’t until 1920 that he found some success. His play I Leave it to You opened in the West End and even though it was a brief run the play, and Noël’s lead role performance in it, were given encouraging reviews. Unfortunately, his age meant that producers were unwilling to take a risk with him. He also made a visit to America where he hoped to sell some of his early scripts to Broadway producers. This was an unsuccessful trip. Tired, and low on money Noël returned to England, thankfully to see his luck change. A producer of a small theatre in Hampstead was very interested in producing one of Noël’s two new plays, Hay Fever and The Vortex, but he couldn’t decide which one. According to Noël, Norman Macdermott, the producer, favoured Hay Fever. However, in Noël’s own words “…as there was no good part for me in that, I managed to steer him over to The Vortex”.

It wasn’t until after World War Two that Noël Coward’s work began to be unfashionable. He became seen as a playwright disconnected from the new post-war, serious world, a theatrical world that demanded more ‘realism’. His plays were viewed as silly and light-hearted affairs. Coward took the opportunity to buy a house in Jamaica and indulge in his love for painting, as well as reinventing himself as a popular Las Vegas Cabaret star, but he certainly didn’t retire. He still continued to pen plays, books, poems, songs and musicals, as well as appearing in the occasional film.

The 1960’s saw a renewed interest in Coward and his work. No one enjoyed this peak more than Noël himself. He was suddenly in demand once more, on both sides of the Atlantic. This is a trend that remains today. Constant revivals of Noël Coward’s work allow us to re-examine the beauty and wit of one of the century’s greatest writers. The writer John Osborne memorably once said “the 20th Century would be incomplete without Noël Coward: he was simply a genius, and anyone who cannot see that should kindly leave the stage.”

Noël Coward died on 26 March 1973 at his home in Jamaica.

For further information, visit www.noelcoward.com.
The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate not-for-profit 251-seat theatre located in the heart of London’s West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Since 1992, under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London’s most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 26 Olivier Awards, 12 Critics’ Circle Awards, 10 Evening Standard Awards and 10 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

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