

THE BRIEF AND FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL



Curriculum Links

Drama, Music, English

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The Weta Digital Season of

The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil

2020 TEACHERS RESOURCE

**New Zealand
Festival** OF THE ARTS

CAST AND CREATIVES

nationaltheatre.org.uk (United Kingdom)

A 'work in progress' showing of a new musical based on the novella by **George Saunders** (United States)

Book by **Tim Price** (United Kingdom)

Music and lyrics by **Bret McKenzie** (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Directed by **Lyndsey Turner** (United Kingdom)

Vance Andrew Patterson

President Jeffrey Kingsford Brown

Wanda Moana Ete

Jimmy Tom Knowles

Freeda Vanessa Stacey

Cal Nigel Collins

Andy Zechariah Julius Donnelly

Melvyn Jeremy Randerson

Phil Daniel Rigby

Carol Naana Agyei-Ampadu

Leon Devon Neiman

Gertrude Caitlin Drake

Co-designer **Camilla Clarke** camillaclarke.co.uk

Co-designer **Chloe Lamford** chloelamford.com

Musical Director **Tarek Merchant** tarekmerchant.co.uk

The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil is under commission to the National Theatre of Great Britain and is presented in association with the National Theatre of Great Britain.

ABOUT THE SHOW

Welcome to Inner Horner, a country so small it's inhabitants sleep standing up. When Inner Horner suddenly shrinks, forcing its citizens over the border into Outer Horner territory, a stand-off between the two nations begins. In a climate of fear and mistrust Phil, an embittered nobody, begins his rise to power. Though brief, his reign soon becomes very frightening indeed.

A new musical version of George Saunders' cult story is being developed behind closed doors for the National Theatre in London. Now, for the first time, its creators Bret McKenzie, Tim Price and Lyndsey Turner offer up a work in progress showing of their first draft to a live audience.

With script in hand, actors, musicians, singers and technicians will test out their new material, rewriting each day in response to the audience, turning the Festival into a living breathing development lab for Saunders' brilliant timely satire on our fatal addiction to power.

"It's quite hard to describe the story of the Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil but one of the elements that I love about it is the main character Phil is kind of a loser dude who becomes the president. Which seems pretty relevant at the moment. One of his character traits is that his brain is bolted on and sometimes the bolt falls off and his brain falls off. And that seems to happen when he is doing his political speeches...It's a crazy story." Bret McKenzie

GENRE

Musical theatre is different to dramatic theatre in that it combines songs, spoken dialogue and often uses dance to tell a story. A musical is also different to a play with music, in that it gives as much importance to the songs and music as other elements of the production.

Read more on the BBC revision guide ... [bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2hr7ty/revision/1](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2hr7ty/revision/1)

PRODUCTION AND TECHNIQUES

THE CONCEPT

A work-in-progress showing is a play or musical staged in a modest form and does not include many of the production elements that come later e.g. staging, full costume and props. This is a rare opportunity for the audience to be engaged not just as passive viewers but as creative partners. These early responses incorporate fresh points of view into the development of the play. The audience is engaged critically and creatively; and asked to reflect on what they felt worked, what didn't and what's missing. This initial phase is only one part of the development process, there is a separate rehearsal process for the premiere at the National Theatre in London.

ADAPTATIONS

Writer of the book (script) Tim Price worked with author George Saunders to adapt *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* from a novella to a musical production. When writing an adaptation for stage you need to consider lots of secondary characters and many different locations, these can be difficult to translate onto stage.

Read the excerpt from *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* which is linked on the next page. What has Tim Price changed or and what has been kept the same?

THEMES IN THE TEXT

Satire: *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* is a political satire. Satire uses wit, irony and sarcasm to reveal bad behavior in humanity. The purpose is to ridicule the wrongdoing but it can also be used to change and reform the world around us.

'My people,' he shouted in the stentorian voice. 'I shall speak now of us! Who are we? We are an articulate people, yet a people of few words. We feel deeply yet refrain from embarrassing displays of emotion. Though firm, we are never too firm. Though we love fun, we never have fun in a silly way that makes us appear ridiculous, unless that is our intent.' – From *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* by George Saunders

Nationalism and Power: A central theme of the text is nationalism and power and its ability to corrupt. It is about what big countries do to little countries, about power and powerlessness, border security and responsibility. Telling this story to the extreme – a country who can only fit one citizen at a time within its borders – brings our attention to current political issues that are happening around us.

SET, COSTUME AND PROPS

In a development process props and set are pared down and minimal. It's often not until the dress rehearsal before the opening of the performance that all the production elements are working together to create the final performance.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND READINGS

READ

Read an excerpt from George Saunders novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*: reignofphil.com/excerpt.html

Explore *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* from all angles at reignofphil.com

Learn about work-in-progress performances – or ‘scratch theatre’ – on the Guardian: theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/sep/15/work-in-progress-theatre-scratch

Read about director Lyndsey Turner and her body of work on the Guardian here: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/sep/18/lyndsey-turner-hamlet-theatre-director-shuns-limelight>

INTERVIEWS

“I’m not really sure what to call it. It started out as a kids’ book, but then suddenly became about genocide. So much for the marketing tie-ins!” Read an interview with George Saunders: maudnewton.com/blog/roy-kesey-interviews-george-saunders/

"I didn't want to put Kermit through AutoTune – even though it was tempting."
Bret McKenzie on writing music for *The Muppets*: theguardian.com/culture/shortcuts/2012/jan/22/muppets-flight-of-the-conchords-bret-mckenzie

WATCH

Watch Bret talk about his role as Guest Curator of New Zealand Festival of the Arts youtu.be/5pXhr-5-HPs

Explore Bret McKenzie’s past work in the musical form.
Flight of the Conchords: youtube.com/user/FOTC0123
Muppet or Man: youtu.be/cRTjksM3YAs
Bret McKenzie and Kermit the Frog sing: *Life’s a Happy Song*: youtube.com/watch?v=aDnTo2S2BrA

GO FURTHER

What happens during a rehearsal? Read through the rehearsal diaries of past National Theatre performances: nationaltheatre.org.uk/learning/schools/secondary-and-fe/resources

Try this musical: [Mr Gum and the Dancing Bear – the Musical!](http://MrGumandtheDancingBear-theMusical!)
Or this adaptation from a book: [Small Island](http://SmallIsland)

‘Search for the New Zealand Musical’ with Luke Di Somma: pantograph-punch.com/post/sing-out-dave-search-for-the-new-zealand-musical

“Dark, concerned, confused and funny, all at the same time ... Like so much of Saunders' brilliant, crazy writing it's relevant, but not too relevant” **THE TIMES** on Saunders’ novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*

PROVOCATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

PRE-FESTIVAL

What does a rehearsal look like? Have you been to one? What happened?

Discuss the concept of a work-in-progress showing. Why do you think it is important for a company to get feedback on their content? What are you expecting from the staged reading?

What do you think the challenges of adapting a book into a musical or play are?

Read the summary of *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*. What do you think the themes of the play will be?

AT THE FESTIVAL

What sense of energy do I feel in the space? What do I notice about the physical space before the performance has even begun?

What captures my attention during the performance? The actors? The staging? The music? Why?

What questions do I have about the production? What is the meaning?

AFTER THE FESTIVAL

What was the show about? What was the story? Was it easy to follow?

How did you feel watching the work in progress? Did you relate to the story?

What elements of the story made for a good musical? Why do you think they chose this form over another, e.g. play, opera or dance?

In musical theatre, songs are born from moments with emotional resonance. How did the music and lyrics create emotion in the performance?

How was watching a work-in-progress staging different to watching a finalised performance? How was it similar?

How did the actors use the drama techniques (voice, body, movement and space) to create their characters? Did the characters evolve or stay the same? How did their movements change?

Did you get a sense of what the set, props and costume might be in the full production? How was this indicated to the audience?

Did you see any people on stage that were not the cast? Who were they? What is their job?

What feedback would you have for the writer and director? What did you enjoy about the showing? What would you suggest for the full production?

Need something more? Contact your SchoolFest team with any questions about the performance.

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