

# THE BRIEF AND FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL



## Curriculum Links

Drama, Music, English

## Contents

Cast and Creatives

About the Show

Production and  
Techniques

Further Resources

Provocations and  
Activities

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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](http://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](http://camillaclarke.co.uk)

Co-designer **Chloe Lamford** [chloelamford.com](http://chloelamford.com)

Musical Director **Tarek Merchant** [tarekmerchant.co.uk](http://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](http://reignofphil.com/excerpt.html)

Explore *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* from all angles at [reignofphil.com](http://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](http://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/](http://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](http://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](http://youtu.be/5pXhr-5-HPs)

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

[schoolfest@festival.co.nz](mailto:schoolfest@festival.co.nz) | (04) 473 0149

# The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil

## Three Phil Scenes

A schools resource for The Weta Digital Season of *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* at The New Zealand Festival 10-14 March 2020.

Find the full Teacher Resource at [festival.nz/events/schoolfest/teacher-resources/](https://festival.nz/events/schoolfest/teacher-resources/)

Director Lyndsey Turner has sent through three versions of the same scene from *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, based on the novella by George Saunders, script written by Tim Price, music and lyrics by Bret McKenzie.

Read through the three scenes and then think about these questions...

What are the main themes the creators are trying to convey?

Which scene do you think most effectively communicates the main theme?

How are the scenes different?

How are the scenes the same?

Why do you think the writer has made these changes?

### Phil's Long Night of the Soul

#### Version 1

*Alone, Phil enters the Southern Part of town. It is dark and grimy and dangerous. Phil's brain sparks as it doesn't sit well on his rack.*

**Phil:** Those stupid Inner Hornerites! GOD I HATE THEM! Just when I had everything going for me! And now! Those inert slugs have ruined everything! Nobody wants to follow me now! How can I do anything if no-one will do as I say! IT'S YOUR FAULT!

*Benny in school uniform appears...*

**Benny:** How's it my fault?

**Phil:** You're in my head! All the time. Telling me I'm a loser. Telling everyone in school I'm a loser.

**Benny:** But you are.

**Phil:** Every day on the way to school, I prayed to God you'd be ill. Or killed. Or embarrassed by someone else. Just so I'd have a break from your constant bullying!

**Benny:** I don't even remember you in school, you must have been such a loser.

**Phil:** My brain fell off in the swimming pool and I had a seizure and nearly died and you invented a dance that made fun of me. Everybody did it. The Phil! You made me famous for being weak. This is all your fault!

**Benny:** Oh it's all my fault is it? You know the best thing about being part of your imagination now? Being a voice in your head? I know your head now...And I know how humiliating The Phil dance was for. And I know how ashamed you were seeing the whole school yard doing it every morning when you came into school...But now... I know the truth. The pathetic truth is Phil is part of you liked the attention. Part of you liked being special. The only kid in school who had a dance made up about him. That's how pathetic you are...You got an ego boost from humiliation...

**Phil:** It's your fault!

*Carol, in sexy, nightdress appears.*

**Carol:** What have I done?

**Phil:** YOU KNOW I LOVE YOU! So why when you look at me, you look like you're about to laugh. Like I'm some joke. I see you looking at Cal whenever I talk. Like I'm some in-joke that only a husband and wife get.

**Carol:** I look at Cal because he's my husband.

**Phil:** Why do you need to look at him when I'm talking? I'm talking you should be looking at me! You should be admiring me! I'm doing this for you! You should be looking and admiring and regretting, regretting you married him and turned down me. What have I got to do to get your attention?

**Benny:** The Phil?

**Phil:** Shut up. Why him and not me?

**Carol:** There's not one thing.

**Phil:** Name one thing he's got that I haven't. Go on. You can't. I've got everything he's got. I've got res- I've got a job! I've got status. The President knows who I am. You should be- What has he got that I haven't?

**Carol:** Friends. He's got friends.

**Phil:** I...I have...I have got friends.

**Carol:** Who?

**Phil:** Melvin, Larry, Freeda. Leon.

**Benny:** They don't like you.

**Carol:** They don't like you.

**Phil:** They do.

**Carol:** Where are they now? You're all alone Phil. Only your demons keep you company now. Who wants to marry that? You want to know why I look at Cal when you're talking? We feel sorry for you. We both know bullying us is the highlight of your day and we feel sorry for you.

**Phil:** But I'm in charge. I'm a force to be reckoned with. What I say goes. I've got a medal.

**Carol:** We look at each other, because we can't bear to look at you, because we pity you so much.

**Phil:** Even when I'm being commanding?

**Carol:** You're never commanding Phil. You're never ever commanding.

**Phil's Dad:** Tough day son?

**Phil:** Tell me you died.

**Phil's Dad:** I can't tell you that.

**Phil:** How can a father walk out on his wife and son, and never get in touch again? How can he do that?

**Phil's Dad:** You know how.

**Phil:** I was six.

**Phil's Dad:** I'm not going to spell it out for you.



**Phil:** You died. You died. That's the only explanation why you didn't get in touch.

*Beat.*

**Phil's Dad:** If that's what you want to tell yourself.

**Phil:** It's the only explanation.

**Phil's Dad:** Is it though? Really? Really?

**Phil:** I can't think of any other reason.

**Phil's Dad:** You can't? Or you won't.

**Phil:** I'm not doing this.

*Phil tries to leave.*

**Phil's Dad:** Why wouldn't I get in touch with you? Knowing who you are and what kind of kid you were. Why wouldn't your father bother to get in touch with you?

*Silence.*

**Phil:** Because I'm not worth it.

*Pause.*

**Phil's Dad:** Exactly. You're not worth it. You're not worth me wasting my time on. And if your own father won't waste time on you, who will?

*Phil's Dad, Benny and Carol leave.*

## Version 2

*Phil is walking trying to get his brain to fix back on properly. He fumbles and drops it and out of frustration he kicks it. It rolls across the stage and is picked up by...*

**Dad:** That's no way to treat your brain.

**Phil:** AND BEHOLD THE PRODIGAL FATHER RETURNS.

*Dad fits Phil's brain back on.*

**Phil:** What do you want?

**Dad:** See my boy.

**Phil:** Now I'm famous.

*Dad shrugs.*

**Phil:** The media are idiots ok. They totally exaggerate everything. Made me look like a total loser when I'm not!

**Dad:** You getting picked on son?

**Phil:** Yeah. Yeah but it's not fair because I'm the only one, keeping the country safe.

**Dad:** Breaks my heart to see you like this. Besmirched.

**Phil:** It's not fair.

**Dad:** It's not fair.

**Phil:** What am I meant to do?

**Dad:** Getting bullied is a rite of passage. Happens to everyone. You just have to learn how to deal with it.

**Phil:** How *do* I deal with it? My brain keeps falling off, everyone keeps laughing at me.

**Dad:** The best way to deal with bullies is to ignore them.

**Phil:** Just ignore them.

**Dad:** Yes. Ignore them. Stand tall. Walk away with your head held high

*Beat.*

And then beat the shit into someone smaller than you.

**Phil:** What?

**Dad:** Beat the shit into someone smaller than you. You have to pass it on otherwise you're the schmuck carrying all the aggro. This is how power works. If someone takes it from you. You take it from someone else. Otherwise, what kind of guy are you?

*Dad steps backwards through the dry ice.*

### Version 3

*Phil sits down and tries to clean his brain.*

**Phil** 'Weak freak' you'd be in a public meltdown if your brain fell off. 'Hot mess of embarrassment Phil'. Yeah well, I am. What do you want me to say? I'm grossed out just as much as you. I hate me as well. Why can't *anyone, ever*, see that? Why can't anyone ever SEE WHAT I FEEL?

**Ghost Dad** I see it.

*Phil looks around.*

**Phil** Dad?

**Ghost Dad** Yes son.

**Phil** But, you're dead.

**Ghost Dad** I'm here to show you the way to go.

*Phil looks around.*

**Ghost Dad** Metaph/orically.

**Phil** I knew that. I knew that.

*Beat.*

Why now? Why not the time I nearly drowned in the swimming pool, or when Carol broke my heart or when no-one remembered/ my birthday.

**Ghost Dad** Because you weren't ready then.

**Phil** Ready for what?

**Ghost Dad** My Dad gave me some advice but I was too proud to listen to and I paid the price dearly. Don't make the same mistake as me.

**Phil** This is all your fault! You're the one who gave me this stupid fucking brain, that falls off all the time. I can't, do anything right! It never works! I'm weak! And embarrassing. Everyone thinks I'm a freak. And it's your fault! Why did you make me like this?

**Ghost Dad** Son this world is tough. And I knew I wouldn't be there to help you through it. So that wobbly brain of yours has helped make you the man you are today.

**Phil** By constantly humiliating me in public?

**Ghost Dad** That wobbly brain is your super-power. You just don't realise it yet.

**Phil** THIS BRAIN HAS DONE NOTHING FOR ME! NOTHING! I'm a nobody who's brain falls off, and shouts his secrets to anyone. I'm a failure and I'm weak. And it's all thanks to you.

**Ghost Dad** You are going to rule this land. You'll see your wobbly brain is the thing that makes you special.

**Phil** You are the worst ghost ever! I'm glad Inner Horner killed you.

### **SONG: SOMETIMES A MAN GOTTA FUCK ANOTHER MAN UP (Ghost Dad)**

MY SON, LET ME TELL WHAT MY DADDY TOLD ME LONG AGO  
HE SAID IF YOU WANNA GET AHEAD  
THERE'S ONLY ONE THING YOU NEED TO KNOW  
TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD THOSE WHO WIN AND THOSE WHO  
LOSE  
IF YOU DON'T MIND A LITTLE BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS,  
MY SON YOU GET TO CHOOSE

FOR EVERY MAN STANDING ON HIS FEET  
THERE'S ANOTHER MAN LYING IN THE MUCK  
UNLESS YOU WANNA BE ONE OF THOSE SUCKERS ON THE GROUND,  
(PASS YOUR TIME EATING DIRT)  
SOMETIMES YOU GOTTA FUCK ANOTHER MAN UP

MY SON THIS IS ONE LESSON THEY WON'T TEACH YOU IN THE SCHOOL  
SO LISTEN UP, PAY ATTENTION, THIS IS LIFE'S ONE AND ONLY REAL RULE  
THEY'LL TELL YA THERE ARE DIFFERENT WAYS TO GET BY,  
DIFFERENT WAYS TO SURVIVE,  
THEIR WAYS LEAVE YOU ROTTING IN A GRAVE,  
YOUR DADDY'S WAY KEEP YOU ALIVE  
THEIR WAYS MAKE YOU ANOTHER MAN'S SLAVE,  
BUT MY WAY LETS YOU LOVE YOUR LIFE

FOR EVERY PERSON WITH A POCKET FULL OF GOLD  
THERE'S A THOUSAND IN THE MINES OUTTA LUCK  
YOU WANT TO BE MAN WITH THE MONEY IN HIS HAND / YOU WANNA BE THE  
GUY WITH THE FUTURE IN HIS EYE  
SOMETIMES YOU GOTTA FUCK ANOTHER MAN UP

KNOCK THEM DOWN, TAKE THEIR MONEY  
GOD FORGIVES THEM THAT WIN  
KICK THEM ROUND, MAKE THEM BLOODY  
VICTORY WILL WASH AWAY THE SIN

MY SON, WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE,  
I THOUGHT THE WORLD WAS A BEAUTIFUL PLACE  
THEN ONE DAY, LIFE PICKED UP SOME DIRT, AND LIFE THREW IT IN MY FACE<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
COULD HAVE TURNED AROUND, RUN AWAY AND TRIED TO HIDE  
BUT I STOOD MY GROUND, I KICKED MY LIFE IN THE BALLS,  
AND I KEPT ON KICKING TILL IT DIED

FOR EVERY MAN DRINKING LIKE A KING  
THERE'S A MILLION MORE WITH NOTHING IN THEIR CUP  
UNLESS YOU WANNA BE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL/HEAP  
SOMETIMES YOU GOTTA FUCK ANOTHER MAN UP

KNOCK THEM DOWN, TAKE THEIR MONEY  
GOD FORGIVES THEM THAT WIN  
KICK THEM ROUND, MAKE THEM BLOODY  
VICTORY WILL WASH AWAY THE SIN

*At the end of the song, Phil puts his brain on and Ghost Dad disappears.*