

THE AMERICAN CLOCK AT THE OLD VIC

A man in a dark polo shirt and jeans is captured in a dynamic dance pose on a stage. He has his right arm raised and his left arm extended. The background shows a rehearsal room with other people, including a woman at a music stand and another woman standing to the right. The entire image has a strong yellow-green color cast.

TEACHING
RESOURCES

FEB—MAR 2019

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Teaching resources

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Further details of this production can be found at oldvictheatre.com



The American Clock company

SYNOPSIS

The American Clock tells the story of the Baum family — a once very wealthy family who lose their fortune during the Great Depression.

The play opens with Arthur Robertson advising Clarence (a shoeshine man) and then his therapist, Dr Rosman, to sell the stocks that they have been so carefully building into a financial portfolio. Robertson hints to Dr Rosman that when he does sell the stock, he should buy gold, rather than just retaining paper money. At this point Robertson, who is a corporation director and experienced investor, is unsure whether he will make a public announcement when he withdraws his money or whether to do it quietly in order to avoid triggering a bigger financial crisis.

Meanwhile the Baum family lives a comfortable existence. They have a chauffeur and a maid and live in a large apartment and are preparing for an evening at the theatre when we first see them. Moe has given Rose a diamond bracelet as a gift. He is heard on the telephone buying 500 more shares in General Electric and other companies, extending his wealth. Rose's widowed father has been living with her family for six months and it is now time for him to move to the home of his other daughter Fanny's smaller home, about which he is unhappy and resentful. Moe and Lee speak briefly about college for Lee, something which is a few years in the future for him. The family are so confident in their comfortable existence that they take it for granted.

'The crash begins'

Three financiers — Livermore, Durant and Clayton — discuss the suicide of Randolph Morgan who has apparently lost his fortune and is responsible for the loss of other people's investments too. Randolph's sister Diana arrives, unaware that her brother is dead. The three men do not break the news to her, instead telling her that Randolph is at the office, dealing with orders. Clayton brings bad news to Durant and Livermore about the state of their investments. Robertson arrives and Livermore asks him for a loan of five thousand dollars, which Robertson pays him in notes, hidden in his shoe. Robertson breaks the news of Randolph's death to Diana, and then tells the audience that Livermore later left the five thousand dollars in an envelope addressed to Robertson and then shot himself in a hotel bathroom. The real-life character on whom Livermore is based did indeed end his own life after repeated financial difficulties.

Moe's son Lee empties his bank account and uses the money to buy a bicycle. He cycles to a pawn shop with his mother's diamond bracelet on her request: the family are now struggling financially. Lee's friend Joe arrives, proudly holding a signed photograph of Herbert J. Hoover, the American President to whom he has written. Joe expresses an interest in dentistry as a future career.

Moe sacks Frank, their long-serving chauffeur who has been selling the tyres off the family car for his own profit, and suggests that he has been ignoring this practice for some time. The car will also be sold. Frank tells Moe that he has nothing without that job but Moe is unsympathetic, Frank having brought his dismissal on himself.

'Some significant time passage. The crash becomes the Depression'

The Baum family move house, staying with Fanny in Brooklyn. Space is tight, and there is friction between Grandpa and Rose over where their belongings can be stored. Grandpa declares that Hitler, who is now active in Germany, 'won't last six months'. Lee goes to take Rose's choker — a wedding present from Moe — to the pawn shop but finds that his precious bike has been stolen whilst he has been telling Rose about his luck in withdrawing his money before the bank was closed by the government. Rose is unable to join in Lee's enthusiasm in considering Cornell as his chosen university, knowing that the family is unlikely to be able to pay the fees.

In Iowa, farmer Henry Taylor is despondent as Judge Bradley and Frank Howard (an auctioneer) arrive to auction some of Taylor's belongings in order to reclaim a debt on his equipment and cattle. There is general unrest and the farmers disarm the deputies, a gun goes off and Brewster grabs Judge Bradley, pinning his arms by his side. Another farmer places a noose around the judge's neck, threatening to hang him if the crowds and bidders do not leave. Brewster bids on the entire farm, buying it for one dollar in order to save Henry's farm and complete the auction.

LATE SPRING 1932

Exhausted marathon dancers (see glossary) drift across the stage. It is a symbol of the endurance and exhaustion seen across America as people struggle to survive. Lee and Moe discuss different universities and their fees, which they cannot afford. An exhausted and hungry Henry Taylor arrives at the door, asking for any work and offering services for food and lodging. He collapses from hunger and as he has his first meal of the day, explains to the family about the farm uprisings in Iowa. Moe is not particularly sympathetic to Taylor, but gives him a small amount of money. Lee is upset by what he has seen but Moe and Grandpa are dismissive of how much people are suffering.

Theodore K. Quinn is introduced. He calls Arthur Robertson and asks him to visit in Quinn's new office. He is the new President of General Electric. Instead of being excited about his new appointment, Quinn admits to Robertson that he is uneasy about past financial practices. He tells the story of how he tried to outwit the sales manager of Frigidaire — a company he thought was a rival but it was actually 'owned by the same money'. He feels guilt at buying out independent businesses and sees that America might not be able to be innovative or successful anymore if corporations keep buying up small businesses. He says America has become a corporate country.

A journalist arrives, eager to ask questions of the new President of General Electric. Instead, Quinn announces his resignation and his intention to start a small advisory service for small businesses instead.

Lee approaches Rose as she reads a library book. He has found a university course which does not charge fees but it is not a course he wants to do. He gently suggests that he postpone his plans for university for a year. Meanwhile Lee's cousin Sidney is determined to write a song to make him famous: there is no point attending employment offices because there are so many other men going for the same work. Fanny asks Sidney to consider marrying Doris, who lives downstairs. Doris is currently only thirteen but making the arrangement now would mean financial stability and the chance to live rent free in their apartment which is owned by Doris's parents. The scene ends with Doris and Sidney singing together and exiting the stage hand in hand.



Jim Henson

THE ELECTION OF 1932

Theodore Roosevelt is now President of the USA. Lee now has a job, and walks with Moe as they leave their home for the day. Lee gives Moe money for his transport and lunch, son now supporting his father, and discussing the fantasy scenario of Lee going to college and becoming a successful journalist.

Rose refuses to allow the piano to be sold, and bemoans the fact that all she hears about is money. Lee eventually does graduate and the scene is now set in 1936. Joe is now a dentist and Ralph is optimistic about his work on aeroplanes, claiming that there will be a war — 'as long as there's capitalism'. Joe cannot currently afford to open a dentist's practice, hoping to do so in the next three years when he can afford a second hand drill.

Lee goes to work on a paddleboat and Joe is seen with flowers which he will sell on the subway. He talks to Isabel, a prostitute, about the way in which money corrupts all relationships.

'the main thing about the Depression is that it finally hit the white people.'

In the Deep South, Lee talks to Isaac, a black cafeteria owner and the Sheriff arrives. He asks Isaac to provide food for a dinner he is holding for his second cousin who has become state senator and in charge of the state police. The Sheriff is keen to join the state police as they are the only public service who are still being paid. He cannot afford the ten dollars that Isaac will charge but gives Isaac his radio as collateral.

Moe and Lee visit the WPA (Works Progress Administration) to apply for work and financial support. Because of the rules and restrictions on who can apply, Lee and Moe must claim that Lee cannot live with Moe due to them not getting on with each other. Other claimants tell part of their stories — cab drivers who have lost their livelihood, and citizens who cannot afford to bury their dead. Clayton — the wealthy financier from Act One is trying to claim relief but has too many belongings to be eligible. Matthew Bush rushes in and collapses. He is so in need of food that milk is taken from a baby's bottle, and another bottle of milk is bought for him using a dime given by Moe. Moe and Lee eventually convince Ryan that they cannot live together and Lee is given the appropriate paperwork.

On the subway platform, we see Joe selling flowers. Lee is staying with Edie, who is a comic strip artist and who encourages Lee to join the Communist party. He is cynical and she asks him to leave — he travels to Lake Champlin as part of the WPA writer's project and writes to his mother.

Rose and the women in the family are playing cards, struggling with the heat. They have only opened windows at the back of the house to make it appear to debt collectors that there is nobody home. They are in constant fear of being asked for the money they owe. They have taken in Stanislaus, a man who asked for accommodation and who sleeps in the cellar. Rose does not trust what he says about formerly working as a ship's steward. Rose is under incredible strain and is thinking about asking Stanislaus to leave. Before the conversation continues, Moe arrives home early and tries to comfort Rose who has seen death in the cards. Moe reports that he saw a young flower seller (with the suggestion that it was Joe) jump in front of a subway train.

The doorbell rings but nobody answers it. There is an unknown, anti-climactic feeling, 'as if we've been filming a scene and wrapped the shoot'. Robertson then tells us that the Second World War was what started to bring America out of its depression. We learn, through dialogue and a series of tableaux that the Korean and Vietnam wars have taken some of the young hopeful men of America, that Sidney is a head of security rather than a famous composer, and that Moe, Fanny and Rose are all now dead. Robertson ends the play by telling us that perhaps 'belief is what saved the United States.'

CHARACTERS

MOE BAUM

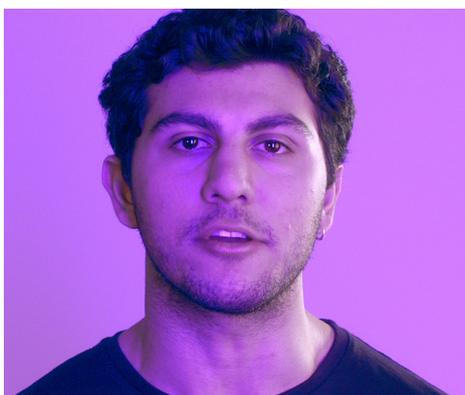
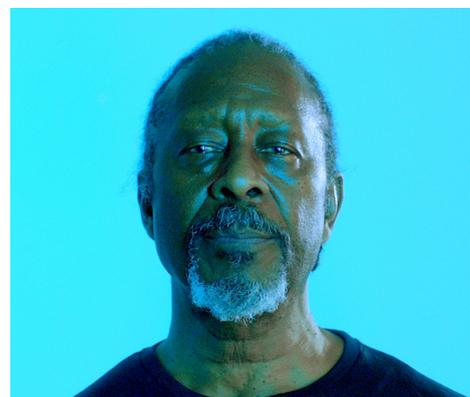
Head of the Baum family. At the start of the play his family is wealthy, he employs various staff and the Baum family live very comfortably. Towards the end of the play Baum is depending on welfare relief, and is partly supported by his son.

ROSE BAUM

Moe's wife and Lee's mother. She loves to sing and play the piano and is devastated when even the piano is taken away as the family falls into poverty.

LEE BAUM

Son of Moe and Rose. Dreams of university, where he eventually goes, but also supports himself in various ways. As a boy, he withdraws his cash from the bank before it goes bust, but the precious bike that he buys with the money is eventually stolen.



Moe, Rose, Lee — *The American Clock* company

GRANDPA

Rose's widowed father, he has been living with the Baum's for six months and resents having to move in with Fanny in her smaller home in Brooklyn.

ARTHUR A. ROBERTSON

A corporation director and investor who makes a link between the band and characters by being the play's primary narrator.

FANNY MARGOLIES

Rose's sister, who lives in a smaller house than Rose at the beginning of the play, but with whom the Baum's move in when they lose their house and wealth.

JESSE LIVERMORE, WILLIAM DURANT & ARTHUR CLAYTON

Financiers who all lose money in the Crash.

SIDNEY MARGOLIES

Fanny's son, who dreams of being a famous songwriter. Later in the play he marries Doris Gross, a much younger girl who is the landlady's daughter. It appears to be a financial arrangement brought about by the desperation of the Depression but the marriage appears to work when many others fail.

JOE

A boyhood friend to Lee, trains as a dentist but is unable to afford to begin practice. Sells flowers on the subway to make a living, and ends his own life by throwing himself in front of a train.

FRANK

Chauffeur to the Baums. Is dismissed when Moe confronts him about selling the tyres from the car for his own profit, and the need to sell the family car.

THEODORE K. QUINN

Becomes President of General Electric after working them for many years. Immediately resigns for moral reasons.

HENRY TAYLOR

A farmer who falls behind on his payment, and is subject to having some of his property solved off. Later in the play, he has lost his farm completely and is struggling to find work. He goes door to door looking for work, food and lodging and collapses from hunger whilst talking to the Baum family.

JUDGE BRADLEY

A judge who is sent to oversee an auction at Henry Taylor's farm. As part of the Iowa farmer's uprising, he is attacked and placed in a noose but released when the auction ends.

FRANK HOWARD

The auctioneer overseeing the auction at Henry Taylor's farm.



Demand for grain fell and prices dropped. 60,000 farmers lost their farms in 1924 and the mechanisation of industries such as coal mining and shipbuilding meant more unemployment.

In 1929 the Senate blocked President Hoover's plans to increase tariffs, which led to panic selling of shares. Prices fell, panic grew and the stock market crumbled.

'Like weather: had to expect bad weather, but it always got good again if you waited. And so we waited. And it didn't change.'
The American Clock



A severe five year drought in the midwest created The Dust Bowl: it ruined millions of farmers, contributing to rising unemployment levels and destitution.

'Any lack of confidence in the economic future or the basic strength of business in the United States is foolish'
President Herbert Hoover

VOTE ROOSEVELT

VOTE ROOSEVELT

Franklin D. Roosevelt won the 1932 election by a landslide, receiving the highest percentage of the popular vote of any Democratic nominee up to that time.

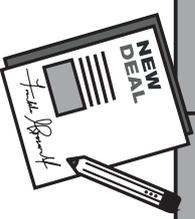
He was determined to encourage economic recovery and help victims of the Depression.



In 1933, unemployment reached an all-time high of 25%, compared to today's unemployment rate of 4%.

Over 9,000 banks had now closed too, collapsing as people withdrew their savings in panic.

'Not only our future economic soundness but the very soundness of our democratic institutions depends on the determination of our government to give employment to idle men' President Franklin D. Roosevelt



Roosevelt put in place The Social Security Act, which laid the groundwork for the modern welfare system in the United States, and The Works Progress Administration, which provided jobs and income to the unemployed. Between 1935 and 1943, the WPA employed 8.5 million people.



The US began building their armed forces and spending on manufacturing. Government spending went up significantly and unemployment fell. After over a decade of Depression, American soldiers returned home in 1945 to an economic boom.

..... **1929** **1930** **1932** **1933** **1935** **1939**

A TIMELINE OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

GLOSSARY

VAUDEVILLE

A light hearted comedy play, often with music and unrelated acts such as singers, dancers, jugglers and even animals.

JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER (1839–1937)

Oil magnate, businessman and philanthropist. Founded the Standard Oil Company, and gave an enormous amount of money to charity. Also founded three universities.

PHILIP MORRIS

One of the world's biggest producers of tobacco and cigarettes, founded by Philip Morris in 1902. Morris was British, but moved to America where the business was founded.

IBM (INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MACHINES)

Now a world famous IT company, IBM began by providing equipment to companies for record keeping. This then moved into the provision of electric typewriters and, eventually, computers and software.

CAPITALIST

Someone who invests in trade and industry, and conforms to capitalist values (where businesses are privately owned rather than controlled by the state). Capitalism tends to focus on the wealth of the individual rather than the welfare of society.

GERSHWIN

George (1898–1937) and Ira (1896–1983) Gershwin were famous composers who created some of the most popular American musicals. Ira Gershwin wrote musicals and songs. George Gershwin wrote both popular and classical music as well as operas (Porgy and Bess) Many of their songs are considered part of The Great American Songbook — the most popular and influential songs of the early 20th century.

GENERAL MOTORS

Founded by William Durant in 1908, General Motors designs, manufactures and distributes cars. It remains one of the largest and most influential corporations in America.

GENERAL ELECTRIC

Formed in 1892 through the merger of several electric companies, GE remains a significant multi-national company.

WPA (WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION)

Part of the New Deal strategy during the depression where people worked on public works projects.

MARATHON DANCERS

During the 1920s and 1930s in America, dance marathons were endurance events which involved dancing for as long as possible in order to obtain prize money. Audience members could watch as couples battled it out around the clock until the last couple standing would be victorious. Many places eventually banned the events on moral, religious or social grounds.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT (1882–1945)

32nd President of the United States of America, had a landslide victory over Republican Herbert J. Hoover. Roosevelt's New Deal programme focused on reform, relief and recovery following the devastating impact of the Great Depression. Roosevelt died whilst in office. Harry S. Truman, who had been acting as Vice President at the time of Roosevelt's death, became the 33rd President of the USA.

HERBERT J. HOOVER (1874–1964)

31st President of the USA. His presidency took place between 1929–1933, during which time the Crash and Great Depression overshadowed his time in office.

THEMES

MONEY AND THE FAILURE OF AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM

In the opening sections of the play, the audience meets a number of characters who have placed their faith in the economic system of investment, and in the idea of the American Dream. All of these hopes are dashed when the economic system fails and appears to be a great leveler — from the wealthy financiers to the frugal shoeshine man, all are potentially equally devastated when the financial crash occurs.

FAMILY

In this production, we are shown three different incarnations of the Baum family. The production's director, Rachel Chavkin, is keen to explore the universal nature of family, and what different family units might look like.

AMBITION

The ambitions of the characters range from financial wealth, to attending university, becoming a famous songwriter but are then turned into basic survival instinct as people become desperate and to lose their homes, their jobs and their identities. Rose ponders the fact that many educated men have nothing left to do but stand on the streets all day and there is very little for them to aspire to, whilst the younger generations might be going to university without any prospect of employment when they graduate.

FALLS FROM POWER AND GRACE

The cycle of boom and bust continues to this day, and with it carries the potential for failure. Chavkin is interested in this cycle and how it plays out against the continuing cycle of the clock.

HUMILIATION

A concern for reputation as well as the guilt that might accompany the responsibility for the downfall of others is something which affects a number of characters in this play. Randolph Morgan, who we never meet, ends his own life whilst Joe is also stricken by a sense of failure. Moe is initially too embarrassed to claim welfare.

MUSIC

Music plays a key role in this play. Many of the characters talk about singing, songs and music and it is interesting that many of the most upbeat songs came about at a time of great depression. In this production, period music is blended with contemporary sounds to reflect the juxtaposition of what Arthur Miller described as the 'despair and energy' of the time.



Justin Ellington; Francesca Mills



AN INTERVIEW

WITH CAST MEMBERS JYUDDAH JAYMES AND TAHEEN MODAK

We spoke to two of the actors who are playing the character of Rose and Moe's son, Lee.

You both play the role of Lee Baum at different times in the play. What are your thoughts about playing him?

There are three of us playing the role and Lee starts the play as a child and ends it as a young man. We wanted to depict this character as someone who is savvy, and who sees what is going on in the world around him. Although the faces change with the three versions of the Baum family, the story doesn't. Most importantly, we want the audience to see Lee and his family and be able to relate to elements of the scenario that they find themselves in. The casting of the family, and the three different versions, has been key to this. Families can look different but underneath the skin colour, our audiences can hopefully identify elements of their own family, or other families that they know and find that connection.

Lee is that kid who watches the world disintegrate around him and then has to adapt to it. He's a creature of circumstance and he has to take whatever action needed in order to survive.

Can you talk us through the process of creating a character like Lee, particularly as the audience need to understand that he's being played by different people?

When you create a character you start from a neutral place and then you start to think about things like the tics, the gestures and speech patterns and the accents. Little by little you're building layers and eventually you've created a whole person! As the rehearsal process goes on, we'll look closely at our different interpretations and make sure that that clarity is there for the audience.

What about the relationship between Lee and his mother, Rose?

It's a really interesting and important relationship. There's that line in the script that has really stood out to us: 'After all these years, I can't settle myself about my mother'. It's such a beautiful line that encapsulates so much about their relationship. It contains all of those moments that the audience doesn't see within the action of the play, the moments where Lee is trying to prevent Rose feeling guilty about his struggles to get to university, and to minimise her distress. Again, Miller is writing about the mother-son relationship because it's an important relationship for any boy.

It's interesting to read the play considering the fact that there are very few female influences in it, but the presence of the mother is very important. Lee's father is interesting to explore too — for Lee he's that superhero who can fix anything and supply anything but that's suddenly taken away: Rose and Lee have to help pick up the pieces.

With the three versions of Lee, we can identify him as three different stages of his life. Lee #1 is learning as he goes along, like any child does, but Lee #2 starts discovering the harsh realities of life. Lee #3 then shows a depth of understanding that has developed throughout all of these stages.

The American Clock has a lot of autobiographical moments and Arthur Miller admired his own mother immensely. She had taught Arthur's father English (his father was born in Galicia, which now forms part of Poland). The family lived very comfortably until 1929 when they lost almost everything (including a summer house and the employment of their own chauffeur) and had to move to Brooklyn.



Golda Rosheuvel, Clarke Peters

There are quite a few productions of Arthur Miller's plays coming up in London this year.

Why do you think he remains so popular?

His work is timeless. He writes about family, and the state of relationships and about what it is to be human, so it's always going to be relevant. As an actor, working with Miller's words is great because he gives us everything that we need — you look at what he's written and you can just run with it without having to ask too many questions.

In terms of *The American Clock*, Miller is dealing with a big historical event — the Crash and the Great Depression, but what makes it relevant is that he doesn't just deal with the big names or corporations. He shows us the man who has to go home to his family, who has to put food on the table rather than just looking at the wealthy stockbrokers.

Can you describe the rehearsal process for the show?

We start around the table, with a read through. It's an important part of the process because you need to understand the scene: what's happening in it and what the scene is doing — what it reveals. Once you've worked that out, and the rhythm or beats of the scene, you can get it on its feet. Rachel (Chavkin — the director of *The American Clock*) is not prescriptive — it's a collaborative process. Rachel mediates and facilitates and that's particularly helpful when you suddenly get stuck on a line or a moment. It's also a very experienced cast so even if we have lots of questions about a moment or an element of the play, we can always come up with an answer that works.

Movement is very important in this production of *The American Clock*. What can you tell us about what we can expect?

Movement plays a very significant role. Justin (Ellington — the composer for the show) has talked a lot about how even though the time of the Great Depression was a very dark and difficult time, it actually produced some of the liveliest and optimistic music. Some of the scenes include movement which encapsulates what's happening in the scene, and we've been encouraged to use our own body's natural capability and make the movement our own.

It's been interesting to learn about the dance marathons that took place during this period — a real endurance test which was entertaining, but more importantly was often people's way of trying to earn a living. Some of these events went for weeks at a time and encapsulates the endurance and desperation that everyone felt during this time. People went to extraordinary lengths to win — ice baths for the men and smelling salts for the women were used because they were only getting two hours of sleep a night during the competition! Sadly, some event organisers skipped town before awarding the prize money, so some people went to those terrible lengths and ended up not being paid after all.

Just like the way in which the energetic dancing of the time tried to cover up the difficulties of the time, *The American Clock* is described as vaudeville for exactly the same reason — an attempted lightness during a very dark time.



Taheen Modak; Jyuddah Jaymes

What are your favourite moments from the play?

That line about Rose really stands out as we've already said — it's a testament to the brilliance of Miller's writing. Another moment though, is Lee's line about 'that's when I knew there was a system'. It's his startling realisation — and a reminder to the audience — that even though we think we are in charge of all our decisions, there are other powers at play. Corporations, groups of people that we've never even met, all acting in ways that perhaps make us less independent and autonomous than we thought!

At one point in the play, Lee talks about suddenly seeing his mother with short hair. He was only accustomed to her wearing it long. Suddenly a norm that he has taken for granted has completely changed. That's the essence of *The American Clock*: what you think you know and all of your assumptions can suddenly change in a split second. That's what's happened to us in the 21st century, and throughout the past. In these current times, with various financial crises, and the current Brexit debate, we're all having to re-evaluate what we think we know.

The character of Lee is ambitious. As young actors, what advice can you give to aspiring drama students about how to achieve their acting ambitions?

Do EVERYTHING. There are a lot of youth companies (National Youth Theatre, RADA Youth Company, etc.) where you can learn so many skills before you need to start auditioning for drama school. Get as much experience as you can. It can be competitive but try not to think about it as a competition. Once you're auditioning, you've got nothing to lose — but what you'll gain is potentially a place at a drama school! If you're struggling to pay for audition fees, there are schemes that can help you (for example opendoor.org.uk) so do research what support you can get. Getting a part time job is another way of funding audition fees if you need to.

Do take your time — you might not get in first time round, or you might not be ready to go to drama school straight after you finish school. We often meet people at auditions who have perhaps had a whole other career before they trained as actors. Be prepared to ask lots of questions and to have lots of different experiences. It's an experience of growth — drama school doesn't knock you down and then build you back up as is commonly thought. Instead it's a process of exploring lots of different skills, asking lots of questions and learning your craft. Don't be afraid of it — just grab all of the opportunities and go for it!



The American Clock company

AN INTERVIEW

WITH JULIA LOCASCIO, BAYLIS ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

What can you tell us about how this particular production has been researched and developed?

Rachel has been developing this concept for about four years and it has undergone some development with the National Theatre Studio. The NT Studio is where ideas are workshopped and explored before a full production is agreed and creates an environment for directors and writers to experiment with ideas.

There was initially some talk of doing it in New York, but *The American Clock*'s production history is that it was always popular in the UK, possibly more popular than it has been in the United States and so it's great to be mounting the production in London. After the play's initial production at the Spoleto Festival, the show transferred to Broadway in 1980 and did not run for very long, closing soon after it opened. In 1986 it was much more successful at the National Theatre.

After the show closed on Broadway Arthur Miller took some time to rewrite and reconsider before it opened at the National Theatre and that's when *A Vaudeville* was added to the title. Arthur Miller intentionally increased the Brechtian elements — the sense that the play is self-aware of its performativity.

Rachel Chavkin (Director) has been working closely with Arthur Miller's estate — it's a radically changed version with the three versions of the family, but it has all

been done with the Miller Estate's blessing. This is interesting because it links with the very American sense of continually revising who we think is the hero or protagonist of any story. The injection of this on-going conversation alongside the theatricality of the DJ and contemporary music is, in our eyes, a fuller expression of the play as intended by Miller. This production goes even further into going into the vaudeville aspect, and engaging with the people with whom it's communicating — in this case, the audience in London in 2019.

There seem to be a lot of Arthur Miller plays being mounted this year, particularly in London. Do you think there's a specific reason why he remains so popular?

That's an interesting question! Miller's plays have always been popular and possibly even more so in the UK than in the US.

We're at a moment in history when we're thinking about nations, and thinking about the hypocrisy of how systems have run. In particular we could examine the wild speculation of the American market, and we're also engaged in the MAGA question — the current idea of Make America Great Again. We're asking, what is this great, nostalgic America that we should supposedly be thinking about? Miller's work is often philosophically playful and that's something we sometimes forget — it's not all kitchen sink realism!



Golda Rosheuvel, Clarke Peter; Francesca Mills, Rachel Chavkin, Julia Locascio

There's a line that Robertson has in *The American Clock* when he's speaking about the breadlines that he's seeing from his Riverside Drive apartment. He lives on a glamorous thoroughfare but he describes the view as 'Calcutta on the Hudson'. It's a vision of vast poverty. His rumination on that is that every society has a clock running on it and the question becomes 'when does time run out on society's idea of itself'? That clock is still running in America and the foreboding questions that Miller was asking are unresolved to this day. How do we look after the people who are unable to look after themselves?

Music is key to this production. How has music been incorporated into the show?

We've been working extremely closely with Musical Director Jim Henson, our composer Justin Ellington and Sound Designer Darron L. West. They've been in the rehearsal studio every day which is unusual but a great asset. Music will be very present throughout — there's a scoring that's happening underneath the scenes as well as the big numbers. For example there might be an electric beat, whines, pulses — psychological sounds — as well as the 1930s standards. With those numbers included, there's almost a musical theatre quality to the play.

We've spent a significant proportion of rehearsal time on movement — there are currently three big movement

sequences so far. One is a big Wall Street series of gestures where we create the landscape of capitalism. There's also a Busby Berkeley style dance. (Berkeley was a movie musical choreographer and is famous for shows such as *42nd Street*). This number is staged with an eye to irony — the false plastic mask of happiness of the time. Another sequence is the marathon dance — largely inspired by the film starring Jane Fonda — *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* These dance marathons were brutal and there was a strong level of spectatorship and showiness. A lot of the movement that we've included is authentic swing and we've been working with Michael Jagger who is a swing specialist, but the way it's intercut into other movement is quite contemporary.

What's your favourite moment in the play?

It changes fairly often, but recently it's been the scene between Lee and Rose, in which we get to see the son taking care of the mother. It has a lot to say about the way the generations interact — it's the moment when Lee and Rose make peace with the idea that Lee won't be able to go to college that year. You see it in the writing and the staging that there's this spotlight on the character of Rose — the proxy for Miller's own mother — Lee is stepping outside the frame to tenderly observe the journey that she's on. This scene has a lot to say about what the younger generation needs to do to help, but in the context of a scene which is domestic and intimate in its setting.



The American Clock company

CLASSROOM & STUDIO ACTIVITIES

Many of these activities are intended to be explored before visiting the production, and then revisited when evaluating or analysing what students have seen.

RESEARCH

The American Clock is loosely based on Studs Terkel's *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. Access some of his interviews by clicking on Eileen Bathe's testimonial of one person who felt humiliated by the need to receive relief.

Studs Terkel's Interviews

It can often be difficult to imagine the realities of living during the Great Depression.

Explore the following link and listen to at least one interview. Make notes as you listen, and feed back to your classmates what you found out. Once you have heard a variety of different stories, how can you summarise how people from different parts of society might have experienced the Great Depression. What were the main similarities and differences that you noticed?

Oral Histories of the Great Depression

CREATING THE FAMILY

The roles of Rose, Moe and Lee are each played by three different actors at different points in the play. The intention is that the audience is made to consider the universal experiences that the Great Depression entailed, but also the fact that not all families look the same. However, there is risk involved in different actors inhabiting the same role. By the time the third version of the Baum family is seen together, the actors playing Rose/Moe/Lee Baum #3 will already have been seen playing other roles in the production. So how do we ensure that the audience can follow the action and still engage with the characters?

In a group of nine, create three different Baum family units. One 'family' should improvise a scene where Rose, Moe and Lee are having breakfast together. Decide what mannerisms each character might have. As one of the three families shows them having breakfast, the other actors might represent staff (such as a chauffeur arriving to collect them, a maid serving or clearing up breakfast etc).

Each Rose, Lee and Moe should ensure that they have the same mannerisms — picking up cutlery, using a napkin etc. You can then experiment with showing the different families at different times of the Baum's wealth — for example when they are very comfortable, to when they are starting to feel the financial pinch, to when they are in the cramped confines of Fanny's house. What physical, vocal and facial skills can you use to communicate that you are playing the same characters at different points in their lives?

CREATING TRANSITIONS

Music is a key part of the production, both to give a sense of period but also to show the strong juxtaposition of the energy and the destruction of the period. There is an irony that some of the most difficult times in American history produced some of the most uplifting and inspiring pieces of music. The use of music can be extremely helpful when making significant transitions between location or period, using space, physical theatre, lighting and projection as ways of transporting the audience from one place to the next.

Using songs such as *We're in the Money*, *On The Sunny Side of the Street*, or *T'ain't Nobody's Bizness* (all mentioned in the script for *The American Clock*) create a transition sequence between two contrasting locations in the play. Think about how you might move furniture as well as people, and how costume change might also be incorporated into the sequence (for example when Lee finally attends university).

T'aint Nobody's Bizness
We're In The Money
On The Sunny Side of the Street

You might also experiment with using these stylistic examples of how contemporary music and original music is combined to bring a setting alive for an audience

On The Sunny Side of the Street
J Dilla, Lightworks
Soul Coughing, Bus to Beelzebub

SET DESIGN

The script describes the setting of this play as,

'An arena of the mind where we struggle with our history'

From this description it is clear that the design for this production should be non-naturalistic.

The design must be versatile enough to show different geographical locations, including New York, Iowa, Louisiana and New Orleans. It must allow enough flexibility for a live jazz band, as well as creating interior and exterior locations such as a bar, a farm, an apartment, a subway, a welfare office and a cafeteria. The nature of this particular version of *The American Clock* also requires the audience to be able to see the three different incarnations of the family as they go through the same experience AND allow us to see the transition from one version to another.

Design a set for the production. Traditionally The Old Vic stages productions using a proscenium arch, but other configurations have been used (for example in the recent production of *A Christmas Carol*). Research how the auditorium has been changed for different productions to help make your decisions.

Take a look at a view from the stage at The Old Vic in this video:

[youtube.com/watch?v=LHaeF_h7Rv0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHaeF_h7Rv0)

Is there anything that you see in this video that might inform how you might incorporate the style of the auditorium into your set design?

THE PASSAGE OF TIME

Time is obviously a key element of this play. *The American Clock* explores the relevance today of events that took place almost 90 years ago.

Create a mindmap of different ways you could incorporate the theme of time and/or clocks in a production of *The American Clock*. Consider:

- Sound design — music and sound effects
- Set design
- Costume design — including distressing costumes to make them appear older as time passes
- Lighting design — including projections

DISCUSSION: WHAT IS A HERO?

In her interview, **Julia Locascio** (Baylis Assistant Director) mentions that we might need to re-evaluate what it means to be a hero, and think about who the hero of any given story actually is.

Who do you think is the hero in this story? Are there any potential heroes who are revealed to be disappointing (or merely human after all?) What message do you think Miller is trying to communicate about the nature of being a hero?

CREATIVE WRITING TASK / DEVISING STIMULUS

Arthur Miller's *The American Clock* is semi-autobiographical and as such his 'voice' is very much apparent throughout the play. It is one person's story of they have endured and survived hardship, and how the cost of adapting to new circumstances has taken its toll.

Look at the following line from *The American Clock*, which is spoken by Lee at the end of Act One. Using it as a starting point, write or devise a monologue which could reflect how someone may feel in the 21st century as the world changes beyond recognition:

'An arena of the mind where we struggle with our history'

THE AMERICAN CLOCK

ITS JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

The American Clock is one of Miller's less well-known works and it has had a less successful legacy than works such as *The Crucible*, *Death of a Salesman* and *A View From the Bridge*. The play premiered in May 1980 in the US at the Spoleto Festival and then premiered on Broadway on November 11th 1980. Despite full houses, the show closed after only eleven previews and twelve performances — a fact Miller partly attributed to the fact that the play's producer had no money left with which to advertise the show.

The National Theatre, with whom the creative team of this production has worked closely in the early stages of preparation of the 2019 version, premiered *The American Clock* at the Cottesloe Theatre (now called the Dorfman Theatre) — the smallest of the National's three theatres — in August 1986. It became so successful, however, that the show transferred to the venue's largest theatre, the Olivier, in December that year. It was directed by Peter Wood and utilised the idea of a jazz band, included songs from the period and even incorporated a moving spotlight to match the vaudevillian style of the piece indicated in the script.

In his autobiography *Timebends*, Miller is appreciative of the British way of presenting this play. Plays at the National Theatre had (and continue to have) a limited season, and is therefore less financially uncertain than the Broadway residencies of productions. It is ironic, therefore, that the play's original failure on Broadway was due to financial concerns, and that only the financial certainty at the National Theatre could help exploit the piece's potential.

Miller describes his vision of *The American Clock* as 'an epic style, like a mural...a profusion of individual images woven around a broad social or religious theme.'¹ It was this information that Peter Wood used to inform the National Theatre production. Miller told him, 'We should feel, along with the textures of a massive social and human tragedy, a renewed awareness of the American's improvisational strength, his almost subliminal faith that things can and must be made to work out.'²

By creating this idea of a mural, Miller is suggesting that we can see the story from both up close — the story of the individuals caught up in the Crash and Depression — and from standing further back, considering and contemplating the greater implications of the falls from grace, the falls from power and the humiliation involved as the clock ticks and the cycle continues.

In this 2019 production, the family is played by three different sets of actors in order to demonstrate the on-going relevance of the family's story to different time periods and cultures. Music plays an even more significant role than originally with classic 1930s music from the American Song Book being blended with much more contemporary and experimental sounds. The audience is asked to consider how this story, which is based in the late 1920s onwards, has far reaching implications and issues that we grapple with today. How do we look after those who are most in need? How do we plan to keep our families safe in times of political and economic uncertainty? At a very uncertain time for Britain in particular, how do we protect our own assets but also take the necessary risks for growth and development?

Lee admits to Robertson that 'I didn't know there was a system. I thought that if a man was — say, like my father — hard-working and making the right goods, he got to be well-off.' *The American Clock* is a timely reminder that we should examine the systems with which we run our own lives, and countries, and ensure that no-one takes what they have for granted.

¹ In *Timebends: A Life* by Arthur Miller. Grove Press, 2013, p. 588

² *Ibid*

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