

STAND BY *online*



**The Room at the
Top of the House
Resource Pack**

Introduction

Welcome to our Stand By Online Resource Pack for 'The Room at the Top of the House'. In this pack you will find an insight into our devising process, interactive activities and links to national mental health support, along with a full recording of the show. The pack can be completed at home or in the classroom and is flexible to whatever workspace you have. We recommend that you work through the pack page by page, exploring each activity and having a look into what it is like to develop a devised piece of theatre.

A lot of the activities within the pack are based around creative exercises we used whilst devising 'The Room at the Top of the House', so the first thing you should do is watch the show. This will help you to understand how the activities can develop and influence live theatre.

We are also holding Q&A sessions with the cast where you will be able to submit any questions you might have about the process, so maybe keep a note of anything you might like to ask. You will find more information about how to submit these questions in the pack.

The Company

Stand By Theatre Company was formed in 2015 in Lincoln. Our three core company members had worked together throughout their degree at the University of Lincoln and wanted to utilise their individual skills to form the company.

Our team work collectively to devise theatre that draws from personal experiences and portrays the emotional journey behind each story. Our first response is always visual, whether it is through physical movement, projection, lighting and shadows or playing with props and set, we find that this way of working can transform the most personal accounts into a shared understanding.

Currently we are looking at new and innovative ways of creating theatre whilst devising 'Crossed' (work-in-progress), our new project about identity.

The Show

'The Room at the Top of the House' began development in 2016 at Lincoln Performing Arts Centre as a part of their 'Newvolutions Festival'. The piece was then commissioned by the venue and the University of Lincoln, resulting in a premiere and month-long run at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2017. The show then toured to various Arts Centres, Libraries and Festivals across the UK in 2018 and 2019.

'The Room at the Top of the House' is an honest and uplifting show about fear and the impact our decisions have on those we care about, told through mesmerising movement, poetic text and visual inventiveness.

We recommend watching the show before you complete the rest of this pack to get an insight into how the devising exercises influenced this piece of theatre.

[Click here to Watch the Full Show Recording!](#)



Our Creative Process

The show itself was a response to real stories that inspired our creative material. From the very beginning, we wanted to create something that was honest, that would open opportunities for discussion and debate and that allowed all our audiences to connect with the characters and emotions that layered each section of the show. Every single person has the ability to feel isolated, scared and vulnerable; and during our lifetime, we will all be able to relate to one of the characters within this show, one way or another. For this reason, we made the conscious decision to steer away from commonly used mental health language and labelling within the context of the piece. This gave audiences the opportunity to focus on the story being told and to allow for individuals to project their own thoughts and experiences onto the characters.

In order to ensure our script was accurate, we worked closely with a psychology consultant, Roderick Orner, throughout the devising process. Roderick visited rehearsals giving advice on our 'Support Group' sections, analysed the truthfulness within our scriptwriting and gave opinions on Josh's overall emotional story arc. In addition, we worked similarly with local counsellors and therapists; this way of collaborating was invaluable to us.

Overall, we had an incredibly open system to our rehearsals. Our cast were encouraged to take charge of their characters and these were explored in detail through character therapy sessions. In essence, this was an extension on the traditional 'hot-seating' technique; our cast were asked a series of questions, facilitated by myself and our psychology consultant, in order to develop layers to each individual that was portrayed within the piece. Our performers formed answers based on their own experiences with mental health, as well as thinking of the previous character development exercises to ensure the content was well suited to their part.

Our rehearsals were also open to members of the local community, based in the locations we were creating and rehearsing. Individuals were invited into our sessions to share their thoughts, opinions and experiences with mental health, adding another layer of truthfulness to the performance.

Finally, I would like to comment on how fun and light-hearted our process could be at times. Although we were tackling a difficult and sensitive subject, at the heart of the show was human nature and the importance of connection. For us, the best way to explore this was through play, through setting rules and breaking them, through improvisation and reflecting on treasured memories. Not one story is completely sad, nor is it completely happy. Even in our toughest times we can be reminded of the good in the world and this hopefulness is something we wanted our audiences to feel when leaving the performance space.

Michael Woodhall
Artistic Director

Inspiration

In addition to the stories that inspired the show, there was a range of sources that made up our research material throughout the process. Please see below for a list of various books, music and other work that motivated our creativity.

Andy in the Attic - John Linney

This book includes journal entries from Andy, who is suffering with agoraphobia, describing a year in his life in great detail. This book was extremely useful in helping us create the space in which Josh was inhabiting. It allowed us to think about the things that Josh might be able to see, hear and smell and how being in this space made him feel.

After hearing about the attic in great detail, it led us to think about what would be inside Josh's attic and why. From this, we gathered as many items as we could find that represented Josh as well as things that had been left in the attic and forgotten about. We questioned what Josh's relationship was to all of these items and then we set-up the rehearsal room to look like an attic space with lots of items hidden in draws, bags, boxes etc. Our cast were then unleashed into the space, we put on some music that we thought could fit into the show and they were left to play in this attic-themed play park for an hour. This improvised play-based performance piece was really intriguing and quite special, and this was the moment that we knew we were on to something powerful.

From A to X - John Berger

This novel revolves around letters written between a husband and wife; the husband has been imprisoned and the wife writes to him, describing daily events in the town. There were many things we took from this book, including the hopefulness between the characters. We also found it interesting how one character had a very isolated feeling, whereas the other was able to roam free. This is a dynamic we were trying to create between Josh and his sister, Sam.

Ultimately, this piece of literature inspired our decision to explore how Sam might communicate with her brother whilst he continues to feel trapped and helpless. And next, came the beginnings of our postcard idea. To add another layer of realness to the piece and to help the cast connect with these lighter moments, we decided to use our own memories to build an array of postcard stories, written to Josh throughout the timeline of the show.

A Note from our Movement Director

Around the World in 80 Days - Jules Verne

This piece of literature was one of our first pieces of inspiration when developing Josh's personality. The book sparked ideas of Josh's obsession with travel and the outside world, as well as having an interest in classic literature. The latter never made it into the final version of the show, however it did play a huge part in the character's growth throughout the devising process. At one point, the show was going to be structured around the '80 days', having Josh explain how many times he could have travelled around the world, allowing audiences to see how much time had passed.

Music

Due to the physicality of the piece and the fact that we were trying to make the invisible, visible, we always knew that music would be a key part of our storytelling. The music you hear in the show, is made-up of a variety of tracks spanning from the similar genres, mixed together to make our unique soundtrack. [Please see our YouTube playlist to explore the artists that inspired our creativity.](#) You may even wish to use these tracks during the devising activities, later in this pack.

Other Companies & Work

We are always inspired by other artists and theatre companies; here's a short list of some of the work that inspired us when making this show. We would highly recommend checking them out.

- Theatre:Re – *The Nature of Forgetting*
- Theatre Ad Infinitum – *Translunar Paradise*
- Gecko Theatre – *Institute*
- Zest Theatre – *Thrive*
- The Paper Birds – *Mobile*
- Duncan Macmillan – *Every Brilliant Thing*

Mindfulness Books & Psychological Research

We also took the time to read about the human brain and ways to successfully maintain good wellbeing. Here are some of the books we read which you may be interested in exploring.

- *Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World* – Mark William and Danny Penman
- *Reasons to Stay Alive* - Matt Haig
- *Mindsight: The new science of Personal Transformation* – Daniel J Siegel



“Our journey with physical theatre, just helped to highlight things without dictating to the audience”.

“We were able to look at the feelings and emotions that were occurring at that time, and use those feelings as a catalyst for movement”.

“We wanted to feel the emotion first, before making the content. So, there was a lot of playing around; a lot of building relationships and organically moving with one another”.

Martyn Bignell

Movement Director

Actors as Collaborators

A devising, collaborative collective facilitates the equal distribution of creative workload and effort between company members. This ensemble-based work thereby interrupts the established theatrical hierarchy and transforms it into a shared process with a devolved power base. This method of devising, allows performers to become more active and creative, producing an atmosphere where actors are able to communicate in a free and open manner. The use of ensemble work and the crucial ethos of collaboration in our Stand By team, arguably produce a healthier work environment and a higher quality piece, as the united Producer, Director, Movement Director and the cast learn and develop alongside one another.

Let's take a look at some of the cast's journey, working as a collective.

What drew you to this project?

Georgina: As I had studied Drama in the Community, I was naturally drawn to the project's ambition to support and educate audiences in such an important topic. In addition, I had first-hand experience of supporting someone through mental health issues and I felt like it was something I could collaboratively contribute to.

Felicity: I initially saw the show at Edinburgh Fringe and dragged all my family and friends that were visiting to see it repeatedly. I was transfixed. The respect and admiration I had for the show and the way it carefully and beautifully explored mental health is what I fell in love with.

Daniel: I remember watching an early draft of the show and experiencing this unshakeable pang of empathy toward the daily struggles of the protagonist. The amalgamation of music, movement and text created a piece that was both powerful, yet humble and, I knew that, if the opportunity were to ever present itself, I'd jump at the chance to get involved with the project.

Martyn: I had previously devised a solo performance based on dementia and wanted to continue exploring and highlighting mental health issues. I was drawn to the project by Michael's (Director) playful approach to devising combined with extensive research with mental health professionals and talking with people living with mental illnesses. The piece's aim wasn't to send a message, but to start a conversation.

What was the devising/rehearsal process like?

Martyn: We started with a rough outline of characters and the narrative. Once we had the transcripts of interviews and gathered our research, we all looked at how this new information we'd learnt about would impact our story and characters. We then experimented with different ways to convey particular ideas and feelings through movement, which included ensemble work and solo work. This was inspired by some automatic writing tasks which helped us delve into our characters psyche and also allowed us to open up about our own emotions and experiences. The automatic writing is actually where I discovered that the father struggled to communicate with Josh, which led to us devising the duet between them. There were lots of games and risks were taken in a safe environment where mistakes were celebrated. Each failure brought us closer to a good result.

Daniel: It's definitely daunting to step up to a role that has already been proficiently portrayed but, Michael, our Director, excels at creating a rehearsal environment wherein the freedom of experimentation is key. Once I unshackled myself from the fears of expectation, this allowed us to play with new ideas and interpret pivotal moments differently and, serendipitously, I believe, forged a strong, cast dynamic that really thrived. The show explores themes of isolation, self-worth, family and consequential ripples. Once I established the keynotes of the script, Josh, my character, became much more human and, from there, permitted me to both root and grow him beyond the world told within the script.

How did you contribute to your character's development?

Felicity: I think the importance of teamwork elevated the trust within the group and ultimately made it easier for me to communicate openly; I was able to develop the character of Julie in my own way, building on the previously made template. Despite not being a mother, I still connected to Julie on a personal and emotional level and was able to draw parallels between my life and hers, allowing me to create an authentic representation. The more I understood her, the more I could grow the character and unpick slight personal nuances in my portrayal.

Georgina: There was a real sense of togetherness in the rehearsal room, as we all shared our own personal experiences and utilised some of them for the show. I contributed to my character's development by writing a lot of text from my own personal experiences and merging these with the character I was playing. At the time of devising the show, just before our Edinburgh Fringe run, my mother passed away. Some of the words in Sam's speech at the very end of the show related to my mother and her illness, and how it made me feel. Every time I said those lines during our run in Edinburgh, I couldn't help but think about her.



What's your favourite thing about touring this show?

Unsurprisingly, the cast all had similar answers for this question: The audience and our post-show discussions. When tackling sensitive themes within a play, we believe the company has an obligation to deliver some aspect of aftercare. We were able to adhere to this through our cherished post-show chats.

Here are some thoughts from the cast about our time and experience with them:

Martyn: My favourite thing would be the varied responses that we've had in the many different places we've toured.

Daniel: Post-show discussions create a bridge between performers and audiences and allows a moment to reflect on what has been presented and, ultimately, engage with one another on a more personal level.

Felicity: We've been told our show offers hope. When audience members are telling you that they truly connected to you as a mother, or they were able to understand more of what their family member was going through... it's that openness and rawness of the post-show discussions that I honestly feel so grateful to be a part of.

Daniel: The show invites our audiences on an emotional journey and, as we portray something raw and vulnerable, audiences feel comfortable in imparting the same kindness. I am always in absolute awe of the kind words that people have said about our show and the stories they are willing to openly share in front of each other.

Georgina: Stamford will always be the one show I will remember for a long time! The audience spent a long time with us in the post-show discussions, sharing their stories of pain and happiness. There were a lot of tears shed by the cast that night and by the end of it all we were out in the stalls hugging the audience members, like we had known them for years!

Felicity: We were lucky to have some mental health charities present in the discussions too, which were so vital in making important connections.

Martyn: We always wanted to have a show that could be interpreted in multiple ways and discussed by audience members. I'm always excited when someone has a new approach or saw a moment in a completely unique way.

Devising Exercises

Here are a selection of devising exercises that we use in our rehearsal process. Work your way through these exercises one by one to learn inventive ways of generating fresh and new ideas.

We have also made a YouTube playlist full of music that can be used during the exercises if needed.

[Click here for the YouTube Playlist](#)

Incomplete Sentences

A writing exercise to help with quick-thinking script-writing skills. We used this exercise when developing dialogue for Josh's internal thoughts, giving it a more poetic feeling. This is a fun task you can either do by yourself at home or in small groups.

Stand By Tip

Why not try mixing your sentences with a friend to see what stories you can come up with!



Postcards

Inspired by our 'Postcard' section of the show, we wanted to allow for you to reflect on some of your favourite memories. Using positive memories and images can generate positive emotions and help to maintain good mental health.

You may wish to print out our template in order to draw a picture of your favourite place or memory. Use the second part of the template to write about your memory. Try to focus on details such as things you remember seeing and hearing, what you could smell, who you were with and the general story. If you do not have access to a printer, you could make your own postcard from paper/card you have at home.

Stand By Tip

Why not keep your postcard in a safe place and when you're having a bad day, take time to re-read your memory and be hopeful about more positive days that will occur again.

You may even wish to share your memory with friends and family members and encourage them to take part too. If you notice they are having a hard time, remind them of these happy memories, allowing you to connect together at a time when you may feel isolated.

Follow the Leader

A physical theatre exercise to help develop your ability to generate movement naturally and with confidence. This exercise is suitable for all abilities; you don't need to be a dancer to take part!

We used this technique when developing ensemble movement sequences for the show. The majority of these were to highlight the importance of communication during the hopeful sections of the piece.



[Click here to download the postcard template](#)



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Get Involved Q&A Sessions

Creative Mindfulness & Imagination

Once you have written your postcard, why not try using some of the imagery in your location to ignite your imagination by taking time to transport your mind back to this destination. Using your imagination daily can improve your creativity whilst allowing you to focus your thoughts and relax the mind; the following video gives you a small snippet of this technique.

If you find this exercise to be a positive release, why not try looking up some Mindfulness Meditation resources online - there's plenty of content on YouTube.



Photographs

A devising activity, using some of your favourite memories to generate short sequences. We used this technique when exploring Josh's family memories, reflecting on more positive times.



Stand By Tip

Why not share your memories with your friends and family!

As part of this project, we will be pre-recording some Q&A sessions throughout June 2020 and this video content will then be available online shortly after.

If you have a question you would like to ask our cast or creative team, please submit them [via this google form](#). Alternatively, you can tweet us via @StandByTC



Click here to ask the cast & creatives a question

Tell us what you thought...

We would love to know what you thought of this resource pack and the show so if you have a few minutes, we would be really grateful if you could fill out our survey.

Click here to fill out the survey

The Team

Director Michael Woodhall
Producer Katherine Copley
Marketing & Design Alice Dale
Movement Director Martyn Bignell
Psychology Consultant Roderick Orner

Devised By

Martyn Bignell
Alice Dale
Stephanie Newell
Simon Panayi
Georgina Weller
Michael Woodhall

Cast (Edinburgh Fringe Festival & Live Recording)

Josh Simon Panayi
Julie Stephanie Newell
Sam Georgina Weller
Ben Martyn Bignell

Cast (UK Tour 2019/20)

Josh Daniel Morgan
Julie Felicity Donnelly
Sam Georgina Weller
Ben Martyn Bignell

Mental Health Support & Guidance

Thank you for taking part in this project. We hope you have enjoyed gaining an insight into our creative process, learning ways to develop your own material and methods to creatively take care of your mental health and well-being.

We're keen for our work to give audiences an understanding into how to support someone in a similar situation and encourage wider conversation surrounding mental health.

Seeking help is often the first step towards getting and staying well, but it can be hard to know where to start or where to turn to. Here are a few suggestions...

- Contact your local GP. For many of us, our local GP practice is the first place we go when we're unwell. Your doctor is there to help you with your mental health as well as your physical health.
- Speak to someone you are close to and maintain positive relationships with those around you. It is important to not allow yourself / others to feel isolated.
- Trained therapists and counsellors provide a range of different therapies through the NHS, for which your doctor could refer you. In some cases, you might be able to contact them directly.
- Find a local support group / café session. For some, speaking to individuals going through a similar experience can be extremely helpful. This is also encouraged for carers and family members.
- Some workplaces offer free access to support services such as talking therapies. This is called an Employee Assistance Programme.
- Contact a local or national mental health charity. There are many charities which offer various support services. We highly recommend MIND charity.