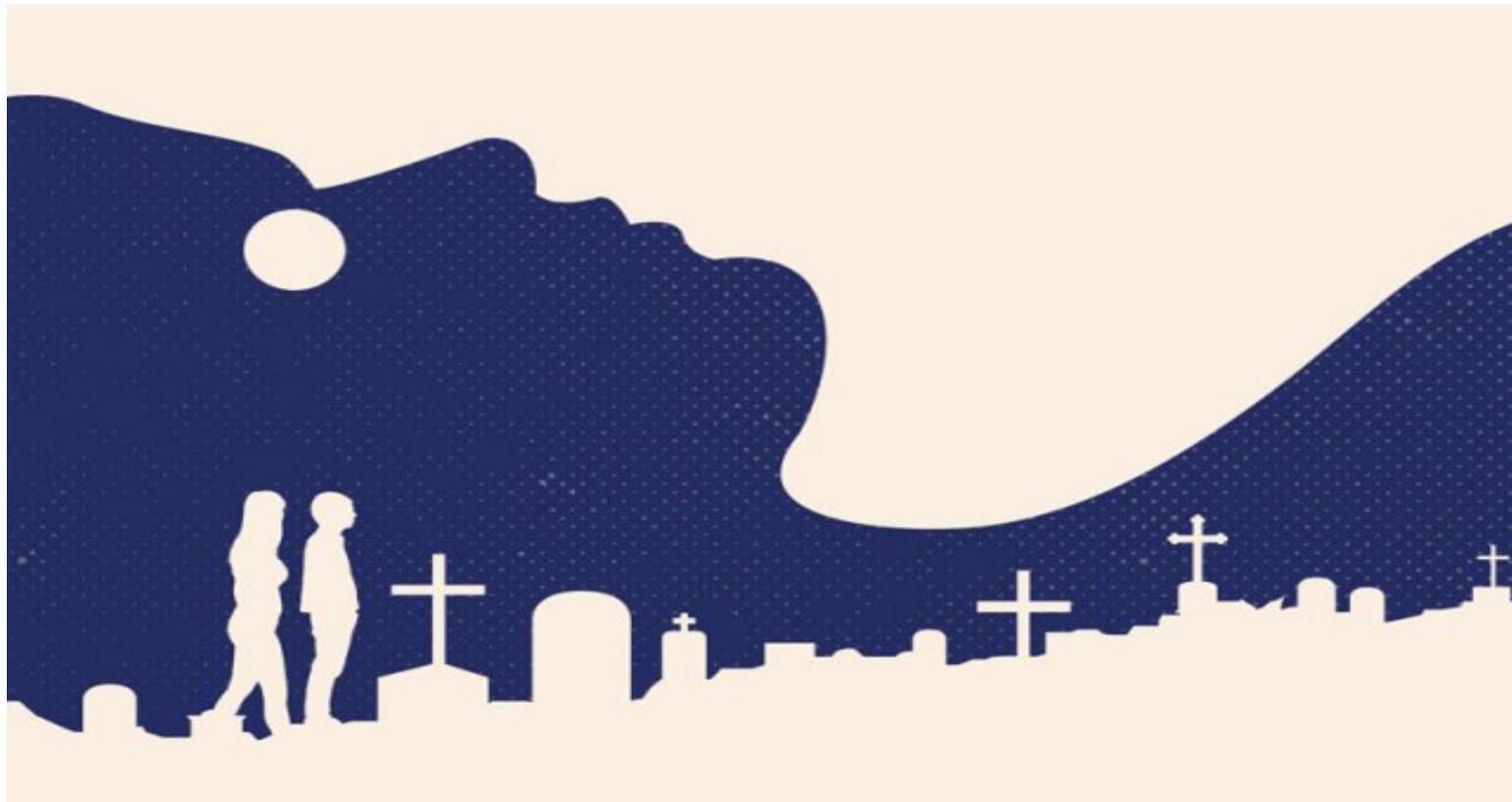


EDUCATION PACK

ESTRON

On tour throughout Wales 19 April – 19 May

Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru
in cooperation with the National Eisteddfod of Wales and Carmarthenshire Theatres



A SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

Alun is a young playwright who is trying to write a new play. But a recent shocking event in his life – losing his mother – has turned his world upside-down; overcome by loneliness, he stays at home.

We see him being comforted by his sister, Han, who is a regular visitor and also appears on the screen. And who is Leia, the visitor from another world, who also offers him comfort?

The final part of the play is striking – we see that Alun is ready once again to venture through the door and face the outside world.



WHAT DID THE ADJUDICATORS SAY ABOUT THE PLAY?

‘Estron’ by Hefin Robinson was the prize-winning play in the Drama Medal Competition at the Monmouthshire and District National Eisteddfod, 2016. The adjudicators were Aled Jones Williams, Catrin Jones Hughes and Ffion Haf. This is what they had to say about the work:

“In many ways, what Thomas Jerome Newton presents in his work ‘Estron’ is a play about a play. The play literally comes into being before our very eyes, and the stage is the site where it is created. It feels very much like a fantasy. We are unnerved. The boundaries are demolished between the stage and the set, between an actor and a character, between the script on stage and the script that is being written in front of us on the computer. Skype is used in the same way as Beckett uses the tape in *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

“There is a daring freshness here, the work of an experimental, confident writer who is not afraid to break the ‘rules’. The writer is partly serious, partly tongue in cheek, playful, beautiful, but full of imagination throughout. Here is someone who knows how to use the theatric space and also how to deconstructuralize it. We can see that the play, when staged, has exciting potential.”

THE AUTHOR: Hefin Robinson

Hefin Robison was brought up in Carmarthen and educated at Ysgol y Dderwen and Ysgol Bro Myrddin before going on to study Drama at Aberystwyth University. After graduating, he worked as an actor in several theatre-in-education projects, and then moved to Stratford-upon-Avon to work with the Royal Shakespeare Company; there, he gained valuable experience watching the masters at work in a world-famous creative institution.

Later, he spent some time in London and undertook further studies in LAMDA on the works of Shakespeare. Since returning to Wales he has worked for several companies, including the National Trust and BBC Worldwide. He now lives in Cardiff and works at the Wales Millennium Centre, whilst also continuing with his writing and theatre work.

As a dramatist, Hefin has written for theatre companies such as Dirty Protest and The Other Room, and he won the Drama Medal for 'Estron' at the Monmouthshire and District National Eisteddfod 2016; he was also nominated in the category 'Best Dramatist in the Welsh Language' in the Wales Theatre Awards 2018.



A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Strangely enough, grief or the grieving process were not the driving force for this play – before all that came the tin of *Quality Street* and the idea of a young person feeling lost and lonely in the world. I was keen to portray the loneliness that is an intrinsic part of our lives today, and the effect it has on our mental health.

From there on, I started asking questions: What is in the tin? Why is Alun talking to the contents? Why turn to an object for comfort? To me, it is exciting that the theatre can provide a world where anything is possible; as a result I knew that the tin would contain something that included an element of fantasy, and that the object was there to comfort Alun and to place his emotions in a wider context.

When writing for the theatre, I enjoy portraying the lives and voices of young people today, and although 'Estron' is a play on a serious subject, I hope that the energy and the humour of that generation is clearly apparent in it. Nothing in the theatre bores me more than a play that is profound and dark without any element of light – mostly because real life is not like that. Even during our most painful experiences, love and hope and bad jokes still exist, and it was important for me that these were part of the play.

I was also keen to avoid putting a sentimental gloss on the experience of grief. To those who are going through the process, grieving is not a clean, respectable experience – it is messy, inconsistent and irrational; I hope that the play – by means of the short scenes, the sudden change from joy to pathos and from the vigorous to the tranquil, the concurrent element, and the presence of the earthquake – will help to reflect what is happening in Alun's mind.

The idea of Alun writing a play came from that one wish to show his thoughts. It is important to me that a play justifies its place on the stage – what makes this a piece of theatre, rather than a film or a television programme? Watching the main character sharing that raw experience of creating something out of nothing offered a truly theatrical opportunity of seeing Alun's world growing, evolving and deteriorating before our eyes. It meant that Alun could speak directly with us, and develop a relationship with the audience as he shared his pain, worries and fears. This also enabled me to toy with the idea of a play within a play and to question the line between fantasy and reality.

In the end, 'Estron' is a piece of theatre about life, not about death. It is a play about a person who comes to terms with grief, and learns to cope with it in his own unique way. By means of the pain and loneliness, Alun learns how to see the universe in a whole new way.



A REVIEW OF THE PLAY

Estron was performed for the first time at the Drama Hut during the Anglesey National Eisteddfod, 2017. This is Lowri Haf Cooke's review of that performance:

Enjoying myself at the eisteddfod is a strange feeling, as my mother died during eisteddfod week in 2014. At times on the field, when people ask me 'how are you?', I sometimes wait a little while before replying 'very well, thank you'. Whilst looking through a new book about grief in Y Lolfa's stand, I managed to avoid buying it, as I did last year with the prize-winning novel *Ymbelydredd* by Guto Dafydd, as I had no appetite for sharing his journey, having co-travelled my parents' battles with cancer.

I know that this sounds odd, as I usually gain great comfort from reading about other people's experiences – but it must be on my own terms and in my own time. And if that sounds callous, and rather control-freak-ish, well tough; the truth is that grief is unexpected and selfish, and completely unreasonable at times.

And, to be completely honest, the idea of going to see a play that discusses loss or cancer is enough to turn my stomach. My main worry, I believe, is experiencing a story full of safe clichés, drowning in sentiment disguised as sincerity. Thank goodness, therefore, that I went to the Drama Hut to see the play 'Estron' by Hefin Robinson – the winner of the 2016 Drama Medal – without knowing anything about it before hand.

Is is a funny and hopeful play that is brutally honest about an absurd and completely unreal experience that none of us are ever ready to face. I was very tearful, but with a wide grin on my face, when I shot to my feet at the end.

The play follows Alun (Gareth Elis), a young Welsh playwright, who regularly Skypes his sister Han (Ceri Elen). At the beginning of the play he is suffering from a touch of writer's block; his computer screen freezes in



front of us, whilst he is describing a particular occasion at which he is expected to wear a suit and tie. Shortly, he grabs hold of an old tin of *Quality Street*, that holds a big secret . . .

The bare set of white blocks and a yellow door turn into multi-use props (not unlike Inverigo Theatre's treatment of *Y Tŵr*) but, on the whole, they form a haven for a writer who is feeling low. It appears also, by Alun's over-dependence on routine and order, that there is something serious amiss.

He is certainly a worry for his older sister, Han, who calls in with *croissants* and to shoot tequila shots, but she is also to be seen on the screen from the other side of the world. It becomes evident that this is a concurrent play that works on several levels, as we follow the responses of Alun and his sister to the biggest earthquake of all.

I daren't share more details of this ingenious play; you *must* discover them for yourselves. I will simply say that it is fresh and witty, and causes a veritable explosion of memories in the viewer's mind. The directing, by Janet Aethwy, is playful and nimble, reflecting the ambitious script that shoots to the far end of the universe before returning to encircle the world and walk on your own street.

There is no end to the movement on the stage – until the fateful second. The performances of both actors radiate on stage, and earn sympathy throughout. But the script – the script! – that makes fun of itself, that makes the viewer lose oneself, open-mouthed in pure admiration.

It is evident that the young playwright has plunged to the depths of his own distressing experiences. But that does not mean that the play is all doom and gloom; to the contrary – through the black humour, it offers a great tonic. The visual touches bring to mind some current films, e.g. *Pulp Fiction*, *Wall-E* and *Adaptation*, and there is an echo of early plays by Dafydd James and Alun Saunders in the confidence and the contemporary Welsh audacity of the powerful words. IKEA's Swedish meatballs are highly praised, as is their Nornäs coffee table that grows in significance. Indeed, I could carry on listing the small details that tickle the imagination and touch the heart, but I wouldn't want to spoil the emotional treasure hunt for you . . .

One of the best devices in the play is the philosophical character that plays a type of 'crutch'; Leia (Elin Llwyd) is an unexpected creation, full of good advice, and she succeeds in giving a context to a maelstrom of emotions – from the never-ending guilt of enjoying yourself, and the bizarre change in your taste in television programmes, to the experience of feeling like an alien in your own life.



Perhaps the greatest comfort that I had in watching this play is that none of these feelings will make any sense at all until I reach the end of my own journey. Also, naturally, at the saddest of times, it is good to be reminded that I am not alone.

QUESTIONS FOR THE DIRECTOR: Janet Aethwy

1. What was the challenge for you when directing this play?

As we only had a little over two weeks for rehearsals, the main challenge was tackling the technical aspect and to convey it in a slick and professional manner. Recording the Skype was more difficult than we had envisaged, because the timing and the performance were key elements of the flow of the text and the action – and we had to ensure that it blended in with the performances on stage without being a constraint. Recording the voice of Leia, the alien, again was a task that we had to be satisfied with during rehearsals – there was no opportunity to change it as Gareth and Ceri’s performances evolved in the period leading up to the full performance at the Eisteddfod. The film that is shown at the end of the play was prepared before the start of the rehearsals – so this again was quite risky. But as the work of a director entails long hours of advance preparation, I had examined the play in depth before starting rehearsals with the actors, and so my own vision of the film was quite robust.

2. How much discussion was there between you as the director and Hefin as the writer?

There was quite a bit of discussion between Hefin and myself. We started off with an informal meeting and chat, as we didn’t know each other at all. After that the e-mails bounced back and forth for a long time as we discussed the play in detail, grappling with the script and working as a team to strengthen Hefin’s work. We didn’t always agree – Hefin is very good at expressing a strong opinion – and I respected that. Some elements were technically impossible to re-create in the Drama Hut, e.g. in the original play there was a scene where two lighted spheres danced gracefully in the air. Hefin accepted that some things were impossible. As we are having a second chance to stage Estron, both of us have taken advantage of the opportunity and have been in regular e-mail contact to cut and weed out some parts. Less is more, giving the play a chance to breathe.

3. How many modifications have been made to the play during the rehearsal period?



There have been a few changes made during the rehearsal period – but mainly we have been making cuts as Hefin and I have already been working on it. We will have an opportunity of re-shooting the Skype and the Film, and this will be to the actors' advantage.

4. The writer describes the play as a “theatric reflection on our lives as human beings on this planet”. How would you describe it?

The journey of a young person who is dealing with a devastating loss that leads him to interesting and unexpected places, combined with a large dose of humour and pathos.

5. How would you describe the set, and what is the significance of the blocks on the stage? What influenced you when considering the set?

The idea of using blocks came to me after I had directed much simpler shows, and realising that a block is a flexible form that allows the audience to use their imagination. A block can be a table, a toilet, a cupboard, a kitchen, a waiting room in a hospital. As Estron is also a play within a play, creating a set is part of the action, therefore having a number of blocks to build – and to demolish – made sense. IKEA is also mentioned in the play, and neat, angled blocks were also suitable in that particular context. But, to be honest, it was difficult to know whether or not the idea of using the blocks throughout the play would work, and when I first saw the set things were not quite how I had imagined them. Some of the blocks were too big and very heavy. But it's strange how mistakes can sometimes turn out well; we used the size and weight to describe the pain of Alun's depression, both physically and visually, as he struggled to move forward in his life. This reaches a turning-point when his world literally falls heavily around him, and he breaks down. Another unintentional step was turning the grey into the colours of the rainbow as he rebuilt his world. All our rehearsals were conducted on the set, and this was certainly to our advantage.

6. In her review of the performance at the Eisteddfod, Lowri Cooke describes the directing as being “playful and nimble”. Would you agree with that description?

I'm glad that she felt that the directing was playful and nimble, as this is a reflection of youth; the play is full of hope and energy, and is the work of a young, exciting writer.

7. What do you hope the audiences will be taking with them having seen this production?

I hope that they leave feeling excited, and that their five senses have been affected. I hope too that people will still be thinking and pondering about the play after seeing and experiencing it.

QUESTIONS FOR THE ACTOR GARETH ELIS (who plays Alun)

When you read the play for the first time, what was your response to it?

I had loads of questions! The play was not in chronological order and, in that respect, it was confusing. I wasn't sure whether some scenes were 'real', or had been created by Alun himself (and which was which!) nor to what extent Leia actually existed. It was, therefore, clear that I had to find some answers before speaking any of the lines – and I was looking forward to that. I felt excited about finding out the meaning of the whole play and creating a complete presentation that would make sense to an audience.

How challenging for you was acting the part of Alun?

Playing the part of Alun wasn't easy. I'm grateful that I personally have not yet suffered the loss of a family member, and so the grieving process, and one's mental state after losing someone who is so close, are unfamiliar to me. That was the biggest challenge – seeing the world through his eyes, finding emotions that I had not previously experienced, and discovering the reasons why Alun is doing what we see on the stage. Once I had understood why his writing was helpful to him, why he had turned to Leia, why it was difficult for him to be open with Han – I could then believe in Alun and understand how his reaction to all this was completely natural for him.

How did you go about developing the part of Alun?

The first step was to find someone who had been through the grieving process, and to talk to them to try and understand all the emotions, the emptiness, the loneliness and the longing one feels after losing someone so close. Evidently, the subject is a very sensitive one, and because of that I had to ask someone who would trust me, and who could be open and honest with me. I spent about an hour and a half on Skype with Hefin Robinson (the writer), discussing in detail how he had coped with his loss, to whom he had turned, how other people/friends had reacted, how one copes with going back to work, etc . . . any information that would put me in a better position to try to do justice to Alun's grieving journey. Hefin was more than willing to discuss with me and to look back at the period in an open and objective way – and that was a great help to me.

What is your interpretation of the drama's final scene?

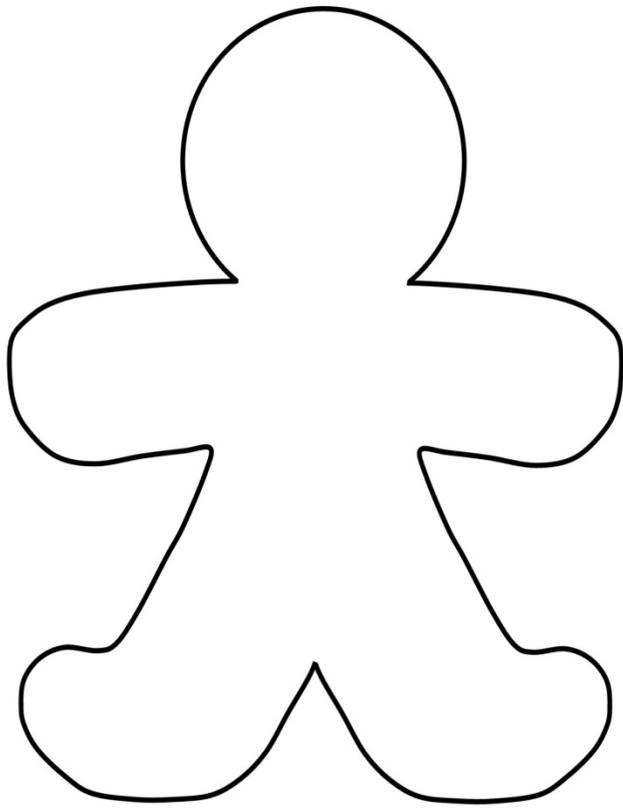
I don't want to say too much about this, or influence the audience in any way after they have seen the play, so I'm afraid that you won't get a definite answer from me! What is important, I think, is the fact that Alun has arrived at a place where he is ready to venture out through the door, to leave the



room and face the world once again after a process of asking questions and thinking about things. There is an opportunity to interpret how he arrives at that point, and Leia and Han's role in the process – but that is where the audience must decide what is their own truth in respect of what they have just seen before them.

ANALYSING A PERFORMANCE

One question that can be expected on the **GCSE Drama written paper** is the one asking you to explain how you would convey a particular character in the play to the audience, referring to the character's motivation and his/her means of interacting, voice and movements.



The exercise below will help you to prepare for that question

Choose one of the actors - either Alun or Han - and create a portrayal of him/her within the diagram on the left.

What kind of character is he/she? How would you describe him/her? What are his/her main characteristics?

How was the rapport between him/her and the other character/s?

What about the actor's vocal quality when in character? Did he/she succeed in conveying emotion/feeling? How?

Did the movements/facial expressions succeed in conveying the character successfully? Explain how.

Did the actor's performance appeal to you? Was the character appealing and did he/she hold the audience's attention? Explain how.

PREPARING FOR THE GCE DRAMA WRITTEN PAPER

If you are a pupil studying Drama for GCE/AS, you will be aware of the fact that you are studying the text from the point of view of:

The Actor

The Designer

The Director

You will also be expected to discuss the influence of other live theatre productions from the point of view of the above, and explain how that has affected your theatric decisions.

Having seen the production 'Estron', please answer the following questions:

Analyse and evaluate in what way any live productions you have seen as part of the course have influenced your ideas for performing the part of the character.

As a Performer, discuss how to play the part of ALUN in a performance of the whole play. In your answer, you should refer to the following:

- key sections of the play
- movements and interaction
- vocal skills.

As a Performer, explain how you would perform the part of HAN in the play. In your answer, you should refer to the following:

- the character's motivation and interaction
- the interaction between the characters
- the character's voice.



As a Designer, discuss how you would stage the whole play. In your answer, you should refer to the following:

- key sections of the play
- the type of stage
- set and props
- sound and lighting.

You should remember that you do not have to stage the play in the same style as Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru's production.

EXERCISE

The 'Red Chair' is a device used to examine a character more deeply by creating events in the past, and events that are outside the confines of the text. The person in the 'Red Chair' must answer the questions based on his/her knowledge of the play.

Choose one of the characters to be in the 'Red Chair'.

This character will be interrogated by other members of the class.