



# Pride & Prejudice<sup>\*</sup>

by Isobel McArthur    after Jane Austen    (\*sort of)

Education Resource Pack 2021



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# Worksheets

A series of worksheets with ideas for classroom work are available to download at [prideandprejudicesortof.com/education](http://prideandprejudicesortof.com/education)



# An introduction to Pride & Prejudice\* (\*sort of)

The “sort of” in the title refers to the way the story is told, rather than any changing of the tale itself. A significant amount of the show’s pleasure is drawn from the virtuosity and quick-change skills of the performers.

*“A lady’s imagination is very rapid;  
it jumps from admiration to love,  
from love to matrimony in a moment.”*  
Jane Austen

With Austen’s most famous novel (20 million copies sold worldwide) as source material, there are certain elements of parody – five servants retell the story, Elizabeth ticks off stiff Mr Darcy with Carly Simon’s *You’re So Vain* – but overall, the show is a surprisingly faithful rendering. Five actresses portray the young female servants who retell one of literature’s most famous stories, and these same five actresses play every other character, as well as singing and playing instruments.

This female-driven production filters a classic work through a 21st-century lens. It burrows into ever-weaving themes: sexism, class; the ache of irrelevance; why relationships are worth it, however agonising they get.

# Interview: Isobel McArthur

From its first run at Glasgow's Tron theatre in 2018, and its 2019 UK tour, writer and co-director of *Pride and Prejudice\* (\*sort of)* Isobel McArthur's adaptation of **Jane Austen's** iconic novel is retold by five young female servants with Georgian petticoats: all wearing marigolds and Doc Martens. Now, it comes storming into the West End - but without forgetting its roots.

"This is a piece that has come from Glasgow, and we are interested in bringing more and more people into the theatre where they may otherwise perceive an exclusivity," the theatre-maker says, speaking on Zoom. "Whether that's intellectual, social etiquette or class exclusivity. Our show does not set out to be a history lesson; it is a show for modern audiences."

To that end, McArthur's irreverent piece reshapes **Jane Austen**. She deploys karaoke as an entry point for audiences to involve, entertain and immerse them in the world of the characters. "It's fascinating to have a conversation about how you can make old things seem new," she says. "I have tried to make sure that the characters can be viewed and enjoyed for how funny or brilliant or life-affirming they really are. *Pride and Prejudice\* (\*sort of)* is a reimagining of the story.

Unlike most adaptations, no prior knowledge of the **Jane Austen** universe is required. "You don't need to know a thing about the classic book, and frankly you don't even need to like it," she continues. "But if you do know the book inside out then you will find it has been reimagined with the care and respect that it deserves. Equally, if you are petrified about the story being remade in this manner, please be assured I love the source material just as much as you do. We are hugely indebted to Austen and if it's good then it is so because of her."

Questions of status and class are a major preoccupation of **Jane Austen's** characters and storytelling - how then does this all-female *Pride and Prejudice\* (\*sort of)* tackle that? "Firstly, we bring the show closer to home: five female actors arrive on stage and some of them speak like me (with accents including Mancunian, Scottish and



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Northern Irish). Every voice that we hear is of interest because of the multi-role factor. When we talk about class and regional accents, we start to distinguish accent and vocal quality - as an industry and culture, we're still light years behind."

Mixing Austen's classic novel with pop anthems including "You're So Vain" and "Holding Out For A Hero" plays a crucial part in the storytelling. (Naturally, the former is addressed to the brooding Mr Darcy.) "I needed a musical language and karaoke felt like a natural device because I think it is universal. Essentially, at the heart of this show is Glasgow entertainment and that is very much music hall. Karaoke is for everybody, and it is about the fact that anybody is allowed to get up and have a go."



Still, politics can't help permeating this female-driven production. Indeed, a recent survey conducted by playwright Jennifer Tuckett, in partnership with the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, Equity, Stage Directors UK and the December Group, revealed more than 60% of women across all roles in UK theatre are considering leaving the industry, with 85% worried gender inequality will worsen post-pandemic.

Certainly, Austen's tales of the female condition have arguably been reduced, by over-adaptation and faulty emphasis, to ribbons and dreams of rich men and their lovely houses - to advertisements for being a traditional wife in the Regency style. McArthur set out to uncover some harsh truths in the iconic novel. "Look, relationships haven't really changed over the past 200 years. Class struggles haven't, gender struggles haven't changed and that is what is very amusing, as well as relatable," she says. "I think it's living in that specific space: it's relevant because every single character in the novel is recognisable as somebody that we all know."

This London production honours and transcends the source material and feels as richly rewarding a theatrical experience as any original play. Certainly, in McArthur's adaptation, there is a sense of a dialogue between the 19th and 21st centuries. Within the show, the cast are lightning fast, natural and quicksilver in the storytelling.

"What we must remember is that **Jane Austen** is far cleverer than me or anyone else working on this show; she was a genius. *Pride and Prejudice*\* (*\*sort of*) has sumptuous costumes, glorious backdrops, and a timeless plot. It is a play with songs but it's front-footed and audience-facing - and it is no less *Pride and Prejudice* for being any of those things," says McArthur.

As we emerge from the Coronavirus pandemic, audience habits may have changed but the most expensive seats are still getting more expensive - according to supply and demand. The show's producer **David Pugh** is proud that there are no premium seats during the London run: preview prices range from £9.50 to £25, for example.

McArthur herself is not a fan of premium prices. "How on earth can you expect to get people in when your prices are prohibitive?" she asks. "If a student can get the best view in the house for £25, then I'm thrilled.

"The very spirit of *Pride and Prejudice*\* (*\*sort of*) is about saying: here we are, players in service to you, the audience, and we owe you a fantastic evening. Not an evening that makes you feel like you need to study essays or authors before you come. But an evening that you will come away from uplifted and enlightened - and one that brings the audience together in that uniquely communal way that only live theatre can.



# Director: Simon Harvey Q&A

## 1. Theatre is back! How do you feel about the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*\* (\*sort of)

As I live and work in Cornwall in a variety of scales and settings, theatre has been back for quite a while for me – apart from the first lockdown, when everything stopped I have continued to work and opened about a half a dozen shows – I think I might even have a solid claim to having the first show back in the UK after the first lockdown – a one man version of *Great Expectations*, which opened at the open air Minack Theatre in Cornwall (on the night that restrictions lifted in July 2020). However, most of the shows I have worked on have been outdoors or one or two handers so it's great to be working on a bigger show like *Pride and Prejudice*\* (\*sort of) in a West End theatre – with a full company and creative team. It was fun to be back in a rehearsal room and it's even better to now be back in the theatre working on the stage. Now we just need an audience to really complete the experience.

## 2. Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* over 200 years ago. Is she a heroine of yours?

I'm ashamed to say that I'd never read any Austen previous to working on this show. Not for any particular reason, I just never encountered her during A Levels etc and I seem to have managed to miss all of the TV and film adaptations. Of course, I'm aware of the famous scene with Colin Firth emerging from a lake as Mr Darcy but apart from that, I knew little about this novel or any of Jane Austen's body of work. However, as part of my research into this show, I read the novel, so that I had a good understanding of Isobel's adaptation and of course very much enjoyed both the intricate plotting and the wit and flair in the writing. I definitely would not be adverse to reading some of her other work.



## 3. Do you think it's more difficult to direct adaptations of classic texts?

I think it can be a blessing and a curse – a blessing because with a classic you are starting with material that has touched people and continues to do so. By their very nature a 'classic' novel is generally a really good story which has captured people's imaginations and hearts. And that is often what we are after as theatre makers and story tellers. It can be a curse as sometimes people have very clear ideas and opinions about classic texts and how they should be performed. Luckily with this adaptation, Isobel and the team had subverted expectations with this show whilst remaining absolutely true to the spirit of the original.

## 4. Isobel McArthur wrote and co directs the show. Has it been a collaborative process?

It has been a very collaborative process as Isobel and I are co-directing. She is coming at the show with a wealth of knowledge as it was her original concept and script and she has been there since the beginning, whereas I am coming to it fresh. Early on we had a conversation about what we wanted to do with it to improve it – in some cases this meant rewrites, edits and tweaks to the script and sometimes reconceiving sequences through design and performance and sometimes restaging. The set in particular has undergone a radical re-conceptualisation and that means we've had to rethink the staging of the entire show.



**5. Can you explain, in a short sentence, what a theatre director on a show like this does? To make it absolutely clear.**

The director (or directors) works with the actors and creative team to find the language, style and staging to take it from a script (or concept) into a show / performance. This show was at a slightly more advanced stage when we started this process – but the job is essentially the same, but building on certain decisions which have laid the foundations.

**6. What makes Austen's style, her legacy, her body of work and her politics so distinctive?**

I think the freshness of her writing style and the wit and technical construction of her prose is what has allowed her work to live on and continue to inspire fresh adaptations (like our version). She was also a woman, writing with considerable flair about the female experience in a time that was almost entirely male dominated. She put well rounded female characters at the forefront of her stories which was radical at the time she wrote them and something which is unbelievably only starting to become more common relatively recently.

**7. You have a long history with the legendary theatre company *Kneehigh* - how would you describe your approach in a rehearsal room?**

Yes, I worked with Kneehigh on and off for around seventeen years and it was a great opportunity to learn about making, touring and crucially for this job, remounting shows. There were

several occasions when I was tasked with either overseeing the remount and rework of older shows – sometimes with the original cast and sometimes with entirely new casts. I always think that when the starting point is a show that is successful enough that the producers are confident that people will want to see it again, you are in a fantastic position. Often when you are making a show you are dealing in unknowns, you don't know whether stuff will work for an audience. With a remount you know that much of the show *has* worked – then your task is about taking something good and making it even better. I'd say my style is collaborative – I am not dictatorial about ideas and I certainly don't claim to know how everything should be staged or acted in advance but I get a feel for it as it develops – so often, I like to put a broad shape on a scene in terms of staging, enough that when the actors get to it next time they can start to work from that framework, then I enjoy the process of refinement. It's like painting a picture you start with the broad brush strokes then you fill in the colour, then you continue to add the final flourishes in the form of detail. The great thing about a theatre show is that you can still be finding those details one hundred shows into a run.

**8. Is there anything that you'd like to add?**

I'd like to elaborate on the point I made above – when I started directing, I used to put a lot of pressure on myself to know all of the answers about everything related to a show and or script. If I didn't, I'd feel like it was down to my own lack of preparation. I now often say "I don't know...but I will" and I always do eventually. I wished I heard that advice when I was starting out!





# The Music

Isobel McArthur has reshaped *Pride and Prejudice* in a way that Austen could not. Her most inspired idea is to use karaoke as a tool to involve as well as entertain the audience; seeing this show is like a speedread.

Whimsical though it may seem, this sort of sideways exploration on display here is invited by a show that filters history through the consciousness of the #MeToo era, making merry with the glamorous superficialities of Regency society – while sneaking Carly Simon and Bonnie Tyler into its storytelling and doing away with many of its inhibitions.

*Every Day I Write The Book*

*Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*

*You're So Vain*

*Everybody Knows That I Love You*

*At last*

*If You Leave Me Now*

*Holding Out For A Hero*

*Lady In Red*

*I Think I Love You*

*Dedicated To The One I Love*

*Something Changed*

*Young Hearts Run Free*



# Comedy Staging Jos Houben Interview



“Comedy is speed,” says Jos Houben, wryly, “In good drama, things need to move forward. My role is about helping to set up a rhythm sequence between performers and then stopping it, halting it or realising a double take, or even syncopating it. In this show, the way that they present it is directly to the audience and that has a certain urgency to it, like a Commedia dell’arte play.”

We are talking between *Pride and Prejudice\** (\*sort of) rehearsals about his role directing the physical comedy on the audacious retelling of Jane Austen’s most iconic love story. He continues: “Therefore, if you lack urgency – which is the key characteristic of this type of physical comedy – the comedy element feels out of place. It is inherent in the style; the higher you go with the tempo the more a body is engaged, the more we suddenly realise the farce of the behaviour, the comedy of the handling of an object or the humour of a simple misunderstanding.”

The Belgian-born, Lecoq-trained actor is responsible for the comedy staging on this production. He is a towering figure representing the highest form of physical theatre and clowning today. Houben is internationally acclaimed as a leader in the field of Comedy and Physical Theatre.

“I had seen *Pride and Prejudice\** (\*sort of) before, and I admired it very much,” he says. “I was honoured when producer David Pugh asked me to collaborate on this production. The advantage I have here, of course, is that the outline is there. I don’t have to invent it; it’s in their body because they have the muscle memory and the physical history of telling this story, in their own unique way.”

He remains fascinated by the craft of comedy staging, which has led to a fruitful life in academic teaching (“I learn as much as I teach,”) but while he is self-aware he is totally determined to remain curious and enthusiastic about his craft. What, I ask, is the secret of good comedy? “Firstly, you have to love it; you need to like it. Of course, the secret is to watch a lot. Because I think that is what is underestimated: imitation.”

How did he approach the comedy staging? “For me, the advantage here is that they have rewritten it. *Pride and Prejudice* is not a play; they have pulled a play out of it with their sense of humour and with their Glaswegian spirit,” he says.





# Design Moodboard with Ana Ines Jabares - Pita

A Costume Designer is the person responsible for designing the costumes for a production, making sure they match the period, style and Director's vision for the piece, as well as being practical for the Performer.



Fashion photographer Tim Walker has been a big inspiration for us. He is a fantastic storyteller through very bold images.

This picture reminded us of the windows at the Tron Theatre in the original production, and a staircase felt like the perfect playground for Georgian times.



We love mess and cakes. Who doesn't? You need to come to see the show and find where the cakes are!



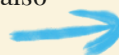
Each scene of the show happens in a different home. One fun way we found to differentiate homes is through the food, drinks and nibbles they offer in each of them.



This image inspired the costumes for the 5 sisters. All the characters are colour coded, so all the character and costumes changes are easier to follow track. Mary looks quite pissed off in this picture! (She wears a pink dress that looks like the pelmet of the Criterion Theatre).



We loved the colours and atmosphere of this one. But we also love the horse!





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