



# The White Bike

by Tamara von Werthern

## Education Pack





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# About the play

Millions of people cycle to work every day. And every week, some of them don't make it home. One Tuesday morning, Isabelle packs her lunch box into her pannier, kisses her young daughter goodbye, and sets off on her bike through Hackney. What happens along the way is at once shocking, inconceivable and terrifyingly ordinary. Based on a true story, *The White Bike* is an affecting play about what happens when our world is turned upside down.

★★★★ *'This is the most human and probably most convincing ghost story to be seen on stage for a long time... will stick in the mind long after leaving the venue'* - The Upcoming

Originally performed at The Space, London in 2017 with 5 actors playing over 14 roles, the play explores how safe we are on the roads, loss, family, grief and what happens to us when we die. It was directed by Lily McLeish, and the creative team included artists from Complicite and Frantic Assembly, placing emphasis on the soundscape, lighting and physicality of the piece to create a fluid, immersive piece of

theatre that took the audience on a journey with them. The design by Lucy Sierra placed the actors between two circles, a large round arc at the front of the stage and a smaller circle at the back, evocative of a tunnel. Lighting included bike lights, lighting strips attached to bike parts and movable light sources. The physical work included choreographed cycling, lifts and falling, creating an unstable, constantly moving, slightly unsettling effect.

Most recently *The White Bike* has been taken on by a large ensemble of young people from Bodens Performing Arts in Barnet where it continued to demonstrate its relevance and impact on both the audience and young people. Theatre can create change, it can highlight the importance of the things going on around us and give a face to the news stories we far too often read about.

Each production has taken on a different form. For the original production at The Space, director Lily McLeish and playwright Tamara von Werthern knew that they wanted to translate the experience of cycling onto the stage. So instead of simply seeing a woman on a bicycle they focussed on creating a physical movement piece with bike parts. They found a stage language that allowed fluid movement between the journey on the bicycle and the memories.

There are various ways in which Isabelle's journey can be shown on stage. You could use video recordings of the route. There could be a map projected at the back, maybe with a moving dot. A bike could be suspended in the air. Or fixed to the floor so that it remains stationary when pedalled. The play could even be staged outside of a theatre, site specifically, on an actual journey with an actual bike...The number of actors in the cast is also flexible. It can be performed with a cast of three, in a simple setting, a full cast of fourteen, or a larger ensemble cast. You could cast Isabelle with two actors, one to play her 'physical' self and one to speak her thoughts aloud. There are many different staging options and we welcome you to try them.

*'I really enjoyed directing The White Bike for its first outing at The Arcola Theatre and am delighted that it is now being performed by drama students and young people. It's a play with a powerful message.'* - Caroline Leslie, Head of Acting, Lamda



# Why young people?

Young people are most concerned with making change happen. School strikes are putting pressure on politicians, young people take to the streets, and use their voices to be heard. They are active in saving their future. Theatre can play a huge part in giving young people a voice, and the power to affect their audience and provoke change in this way. *The White Bike* is a play about one young woman who is killed riding her bike to work. It's a clarion call for safer streets. Its message goes further than that though – helping to create an environment in which cycling is safe and easy is also creating a world that is sustainable. Reducing motor traffic will inevitably lead to a greener, better future.

*The White Bike* is written in a way that lends it to be told in many different ways. But, being set in the real world, along an existing cycle route with flashbacks to memories, there are always people surrounding the central action, which means the more bodies in space, the more effective the performance. Twenty young people performed the play at Bodens, the detail of the characterisation of the witnesses of the crash, the joy of the nightclub scene and the realism of queues of traffic snaking behind the cyclist was impressive. There is a lot of fun to be had in exploring the humanity in the details of this poignant piece.

The play lends itself to debate on many different issues, ranging from law, geography, climate change, positive lifestyle choices, citizenship and politics.



*"The play allowed us to explore character, relationship and subtext within our young company, sifting through the text for the well sign-posted clues, leaving spaces to enable the creative input of our own company. Importantly for us, 'The White Bike' also gifted us wonderful opportunities for physical exploration of the text and major moments within the piece, offering a more holistic process for our young people as they brought the production to life."* - Adam Boden, Boden Performing Arts.

*"We couldn't have had better material to work with when it came to creating a rich physical world - a world of cycling, of dreams, of a whole life. It threw huge physical challenges at me as an actress, and demanded a rare and invigorating degree of physical, intellectual and emotional engagement. It's a true ensemble piece and handled well I think will always make for great and lasting cast relationships. I hope hundreds of women get to work on the role of Isabelle; she's such a gift and it's a wonderful and important story."* - Josephine Starte, Isabelle in the professional premiere at The Space.





# Playwright Q & A



**The Space production - September 2017**

## **What first led you to writing *The White Bike*?**

I have cycled to work for 15 years now, I started purely to save money and then fell in love with my cycle commute and the city I live in in a new way. It is a cheap, environmentally sound way of really experiencing lived life around you, as well as packing in exercise and fresh air on a daily basis. I feel that first of all, this play is a love letter to cycling, and tries to communicate the freedom and happiness that come with it. Cycling in London is however, not without its challenges, and I have experienced many near misses on my bike. When I came back from maternity leave, and was already feeling more vulnerable in traffic after having been off the bike for a while, I cycled past Notting Hill Gate, where flowers were piled up by a lamp post and the smiling face of Eilidh Cairns looked out at me from a poster. I read

the note and learnt that she was killed by a lorry driver who had fled the scene a few days previously and that her family were looking for witnesses. I also read that she was almost exactly my age, had worked in a similar job to mine and cycled to work. Just like me. In the days that followed as I cycled through London, I could not get her story out of my head, and I began to think about writing something about it. This was partly because I felt it was something I was scared about and I wanted to face the question 'what if this happened to me?' and partly because I felt the need to spread the message about cycling safety – I wanted to tell a story in a way in which it would affect people and lead them to engage with the human story and feel for themselves the need for change.

## **What were the challenges of writing a script inspired by true events?**

I just felt a huge responsibility towards Eilidh's family and friends. I didn't want them to feel I was in any way sensationalising the experience or expose them. I also decided early on that I would use personal details of my own life and create the main character as a blend of what I knew of Eilidh and myself. So the story is inspired by the events surrounding Eilidh's death and a lot of the information comes directly from sources around this, but it is still a work of fiction. Both Eilidh's sister and her mother came to see the original production and told me that they were happy with how the story was told, and I am really glad for their support, both in creating the work, and in supporting the finished piece.

I interviewed other people whose loved ones had been killed while cycling, and a lot of the details around the grief (including the exploding light bulb, when one of them asked for a sign if they were still there, and the crumpled jeans next to the bed) made it into the play.



I think personally the biggest challenge I had to overcome was to find the courage to approach Kate Cairns and to ask if she would meet and speak to me about her sister's death. I found that really hard, but I am so glad I did it.

**How did you go about writing a play that gives freedom for a theatre company to play and experiment with casting and what were the challenges of that approach?**

It's really interesting actually that this happened, and I have been thinking about why there is so much freedom within the script. I just tried to tell the story as best I could, and to be honest, with as few characters possible, so the very first outing it had at the Arcola, as part of a festival, used only three actors, but when I started to collaborate with director Lily McLeish on the professional premiere, we realised that the minimum number we needed would be five. With five actors, it is a real ensemble piece, with everyone in the cast on stage all the time, and everyone apart from Isabelle and Henry, doubling all the time. But seeing it with twenty in the cast, I really enjoyed the possibilities this offered with the physicality – the details in the crowd scenes, the amazing physical work with lifting and falling around the more abstract scenes.

I think at the heart of the play has been the bike journey, all the way along. And that is of course a huge technical challenge, but also an opportunity, as you need to create the world around that journey. And that can be done in a very minimal way or a big way.

Even the character of Isabelle lends itself to be split into the outer and inner Isabelle, and played by two actors, so I guess that there really is quite a lot of freedom in interpreting the world of the play and its characters.

I think it is a universal story, so it's only fitting that every company can make it their own.

**Are there any tips or advice you would give to an actor approaching the play for the first time?**

If you are cast as Isabelle, do have a look at the five stages of grief, as they are reflected in the script, and knowing them can provide useful background information. Otherwise, let the script speak for itself.

**A note from the director, Lily McLeish:** *"When I first read *The White Bike*, the first question that popped into my head was "How on earth are we going to stage someone cycling through London?" and the sheer complexity of this staging challenge felt extremely exciting. *The White Bike* offers a huge amount of freedom and room for imagination to bring it to life and that is what is so pleasurable about directing it. In our production, we created an abstract, dreamlike journey on a deconstructed bicycle. So instead of having a fully functioning bicycle on stage, we had bike parts, which floated in and out, manipulated by the actors. However, the play offers a lot of different approaches to solve the staging challenge and there are numerous ways to stage it. I would encourage any actor or director approaching the play for the first time to let their imagination go wild and allow themselves to come up with many ideas before choosing the one that feels right for them. The writer has given lots of clues about the characters and the journey and specified time and place, which is very helpful, and yet the creation of the world and how to solve the stage directions is entirely free and can be explored as an ensemble and director."*



# Research Tasks

## Local cycle routes

Isabelle's story is set out in a very specific area of London with key locations that help to tell the story of her life. Her cycle route is key to understanding the events of the day she dies. The young people you are working with may wish to set the play in their local area.

**Curriculum Links:** Drama, PSHE & Citizenship, Geography

**Time:** 1-2 hours (longer for physically walking / cycling the route)

**Resources:** Maps of local area, access to the internet, access to walking the local area.

**Activity:** As a class, students should identify the locations that Isabelle visits and/or talks about throughout the play (a hospital, a dance club, a town hall, etc). In smaller groups, students can then work on each of the key locations and identify a local place that will represent these locations, plotting it out on a map. This can be done through internet and map research or through going out in the local area.



*"I loved getting immersed in the world of cycling. Exploring London on a bike, cycling some of the route from the script to fully understand (and record) what the visuals would be for the piece. Getting real world footage from my bike and manipulating it to take the audience to an otherworldly surreal place between life and death was an exciting challenge." - Ellie Thompson, video designer*

Through understanding the locations in the play cast members will be able to picture the route and give credibility to Isabelle's story.

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## Exploring Physicality

Physical theatre is a creative genre of theatrical performance that encompasses storytelling primarily through physical movement. *The White Bike* offers many opportunities for physicality to tell its story. As previously mentioned there are many ways of staging the play and consideration needs to be given to Isabelle's journey on her bike and how that can be visually expressed on stage.

**Curriculum Links:** Drama

**Time:** 30 mins

**Resources:** This could work as a homework task. Students can use whichever research method they favour.



**Activity:** Students should each be given a different physical style of theatre, practitioner or theatre company that uses physical theatre to create mood and atmosphere and help tell their story. Suggestions for research: Commedia Dell'arte, Mime & Slapstick, Jaques Lecoq, Steven Berkoff, Frantic Assembly, DV8, Complicite, Kneehigh.

They should provide a fact sheet answering the following questions:

- What is physical theatre? What does it mean in terms of the style/practitioner/theatre company you're researching?
- What performance have they used physical theatre in? How effective was it?
- What is a well-known physical theatre technique associated with this style/practitioner/theatre company?

*"I loved the excitement and challenge in the rehearsal room; throwing around ideas and our bodies, in order to create a world in which we could bring cycling and the world of East London alive on the stage." - Helen Millar, Actor*

**Extension:** Students could then prepare a short 5-10 min lesson on their style/practitioner/theatre company to teach the rest of the cast.

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## Hot Seating

As the play is based on real life events, it is important for the young people to understand the characters on a deeper level. Whilst the play isn't strictly naturalistic the characters still need to be represented as real as possible for the audience to care about them.

**Curriculum links:** Drama, PSHE & Citizenship

**Time:** 20 mins

**Resources:** None

**Activity:** As a class, or in small groups, students should hot-seat the main characters within the play (Isabelle, Henry, Debbie, Paul, The police officers - perhaps Lily when she is older). Students should be encouraged to ask questions that help their cast members to understand the characters better: how they feel? Why they did or didn't do a certain thing? Etc. Students could prepare hot seating questions prior to putting the character on the hot-seat. The character in the hot-seat will always answer in role.

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## Wider research

The playwright spent a lot of time researching the frequency of the type of accident seen in the play; on average around seventeen people a year are killed on London's roads alone\*(Average between 1986-2010; source: cyclingintelligence.com).

**Curriculum links:** PSHE & Citizenship, Geography, Maths (statistics).

**Time:** 30mins

**Resources:** Research method of choice. (Surveys, questionnaires, case studies, observations, news articles, interviews etc.)

**Activity:** Students should research safety on the roads in their area, considering how they or their family members get around and what safety measures are already in place.





# Using the text

## Applying Physicality

**Curriculum links:** Drama

**Time:** 1 hour

**Resources:** Script extracts

**Activity:** Split the cast into 4 groups. Each group should be given an extract of the text, these are the stage directions written by the playwright to show the journey Isabelle is on (see below). Each group should then come up with a movement sequence to represent the extract they have been given.

At this stage try to encourage students not to use any props at all. You could refer back to the research session on physical theatre - what ideas could they pinch from other styles, practitioners, theatre companies? When the young people show their work back to the others it should be clear the moment of the story they are telling. The extracts should be shown back in sequence.

Extract 1: *ISABELLE cycles on, up a little hill, along a busy road with heavy traffic. She turns right, the road is flat now, and quieter. She gets faster, gets into rhythm of cycling, breathes.*

Extract 2: *A lorry overtakes her and turns left. She narrowly avoids being crushed under its wheels. The sickening sound of brakes screaming and the lorry grinding to a halt. DEBBIE has seen everything and puts both hands in front of her mouth.*

Extract 3: *She indicates to turn right and moves over into the middle of the road. This is a tricky turning, as you can't properly see around the bend of the road, and as she turns, she is distracted by seeing SALLY asleep on the pavement. A car whooshes past and she wobbles and nearly comes off the bike.*

Extract 4: *A lorry comes hurtling towards her, smashes into ISABELLE and knocks her to the ground. The brakes scream and the lorry grinds to a halt. DEBBIE raises both hands to her mouth.*



**Bodens Performing Arts Rehearsal Images**





## Letters to Isabelle

**Curriculum Links:** Drama, English

**Time:** 30 mins

**Resources:** Paper & Pens

**Activity:** Student should each choose a character to write a letter from, to Isabelle. This may be from her daughter, the lorry driver, her husband, the witness, get them to be imaginative with who they choose so there is variation within the room or if they are already cast it could be from their character specifically. Students should then try freewriting - this should be a quiet space in the room where they write continuously for 5 mins, whatever thoughts come into their head from their character and what they would say to Isabelle, the idea is that the pen doesn't leave the page. They can then spend some time editing and refining the words they have written to develop a monologue performance of their letter to Isabelle. These could be performed after the actual performance to an audience.

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### Flashbacks

There are a number of moments in the play where we are taken back in time to key moments in Isabelle's life, this should seem different to her actual physical journey she is taking that fateful day. These could be presented through a change in sound and lighting but also through the use of the ensemble and the atmosphere created on stage.

**Curriculum Links:** Drama

**Time:** 30 mins

**Resources:** The script

**The Space production - September 2017**

**Activity:** Students should look at the various flashback moments throughout the play (the first time she meets Henry, her wedding day or the day she gave birth for example) and work together to find a way to move from the reality of her cycling along a London street to the moments of her past. Students should be encouraged to use the ensemble to support this and at this stage avoid sound and light to suggest a change in time and location.

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## Creating Debate

**Curriculum Links:** PSHE & Citizenship, Law & Politics

**Time:** 20 mins

**Resources:** Prepared statements (some examples below)

**Activity:** Ask the students to stand in the middle of the room, in neutral territory. One side of the room will be the strongly agree area, and the other strongly disagree. The students should imagine a line down the middle of the room and they can position themselves anywhere along it. Deliver statements to the students for their consideration:



- Cyclists should face criminal charges if they aren't wearing a helmet.
- Cyclists should have to take out insurance / undergo tests like drivers do.
- Cyclists should be able to jump red lights when there are no pedestrians.
- Cyclists should pay road tax too.
- It should be easier to remove a drivers license.
- Cycle lanes create congestion.
- Motor traffic should be reduced by half by 2030.
- There should be tougher sentencing for motorists who kill vulnerable road users.
- The congestion charge helps to create cleaner air.

Students should be encouraged to offer a reason they have chosen to stand in their position on the agreement line and agree, build or challenge each other's points.

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## Staging a Trial

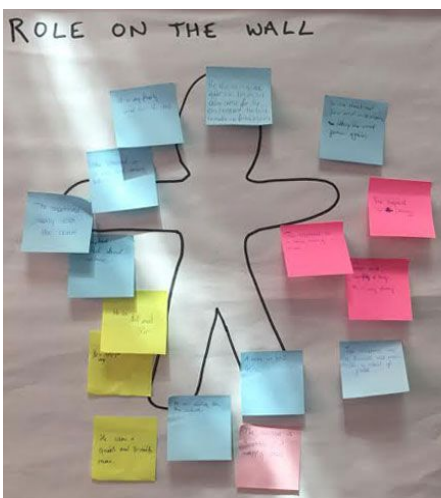
The play explores the human side of Isabelle's accident and asks the audience to care about the characters and what they go through after her accident. However, there is a wider context to the story; one that challenges the rules of the road, asks if our safety is being looked after enough and considers the consequences the drivers of vehicles face in such circumstances.

**Curriculum Links:** Drama, English, Law and Politics.

**Time:** 1 hour prep time, the improvised court case can run for however long is beneficial.

**Resources:** The script, access to rules and regulations / case studies of similar cases.

**Activity:** Students should re-read pages 33-37 that explore the facts of the accident from the witness and the driver. Students should note down key facts that they may need for a court case improvisation. Prepare the classroom / rehearsal room into a courtroom space, using actors to play some of the key roles needed. Divide the remaining students into 2 halves; one group will defend the driver and one prosecute. Ask the students to prepare their arguments in their groups and be ready to answer questions from the opposition. Students should think carefully about how they present their arguments - what kind of language could they use to make their case stronger? What body language or tone of voice might be useful in order to sound convincing and engage others to your cause?



## Role on the Wall

**Curriculum Links:** Drama, English

**Time:** 30 mins

**Resources:** Paper & Pens. Sticky notes.

**Activity:** Students should draw a gingerbread man type figure in the centre of their page. It needs to have space in the middle of the body to write detail and around the outside. You can write directly onto the sheet or use sticky notes and place them on. After choosing a character to focus on; **Outside** the figure, students should write the given or factual qualities about them (eg. what they look like, how old they are, where they are from,

what kind of family, how people see them) and **inside** the figure write personal qualities (eg. their thoughts, feelings, opinions, emotions, fears, etc.)



# Theatre for Change

*The White Bike* has a clear message and deals with an important issue. Audience feedback has shown that real change has been achieved, ranging from people realising what a cyclist advance box is for, noticing ghost bikes by the side of the road, and being emotionally impacted by the story told. Many people have said that seeing the play has changed the way they think about cyclists when driving. Theatre can do that, it can provoke a response, open our eyes, engage an audience and reach new people; it can make a change.

What is important to *your* young people?

Whilst this education pack has provided you with some activities around the play itself, each can easily be adapted to create new work. Starting with the activity below, encourage your students to create their own work around something they care about, something they want to change. They will have covered a range of styles, practitioners and theatre companies as well as explored believable characters and situations at this stage so they should be able to pull from all these.

**Curriculum Links:** PSHE & Citizenship, Drama, Politics, History, RS, Geography

**Time:** Initial activity 10 mins

**Resources:** Paper and Pens

**Activity:** Ask the students to write down on a piece of paper something that they would like to change about the world around them and place it in a pile in the middle of the room. These can remain anonymous. You could then read each aloud and students can discuss and then vote on a starting point for creating a piece of theatre. Most great theatre starts with a message; something we want to say to the world, so what is it they want to say?

**Starting with still images** - Once the young people have chosen something to focus on (this could be as a whole group or in smaller groups of 4 or 5) they should start by creating 3 still images to summarise what it is they want to change about the world.

**Bring the images to life** - Once these images are clearly communicating something to an audience they can begin to build upon them; bring the images to life and create short improvisations with one or two lines that develop the scenes. At this point, students can bring in relevant props, things that are linked with the issue that is being explored (in the case of *The White Bike* this would be cycling gear, such as lights, bells, handlebars)

**Off you go** - From here there are several ways students can continue devising and creating new theatre; as long as they have decided what it is they want to say (and who they want to say it to) it is time to explore in a practical way the ideas within the group; bring in research, develop characters, explore styles and genres and make a change.



# Working with the playwright

The White Bike is set along an existing route in East London. There are a number of locations along this route where major events within the play take place. These include a hospital, a dance club, a town hall, etc. For the amateur premiere of the play by ImpAct Theatre in Bournemouth, the playwright offered a complete relocation of the play to set it along an existing local route in Bournemouth. The route had to be planned by the director involved in the production who sent photos of the locations to the writer, who then rewrote and localised the relevant passages.

The playwright is happy to make this service available for a fee of £150.

There is also a workshop available on the physical aspects of staging the original production, led by playwright Tamara von Werthern and original cast member Helen Stern. The hourly rate for this workshop is £30 per person for up to 30 students in the session. The full workshop can be delivered in a three-hour time slot.



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