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VIRGINIA PREMIERE

THE RIVER

by Jez Butterworth

DIRECTED BY ROBERT CHAPEL • JAN 20-FEB 11 • LIVEARTS.ORG



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STUDY GUIDE

THE RIVER

Written by Jez Butterworth

January 20 - February 11, 2023 in the Founders Theater

Directed by Robert Chapel

The play runs for approximately 85 minutes with no intermission.

“Butterworth's play undeniably gains from intimacy. At 80 minutes, it is strange, eerie, tense and, on a single viewing, slightly unfathomable.” – *The Guardian*

“The three-character drama is emotionally exposed and intensely inconclusive—a poetic, lusty puzzle that rivets one moment, exasperates another, and is destined to keep theatergoers arguing about its meaning all the way home.” – *Newsday*

“This cryptic tale of a man and a woman ... magnifies the seemingly ordinary to mythic proportions, while honorably refusing to stoop to easy explanations ... You're likely to leave it feeling hungry, and not just because it aims to mystify.” – *New York Times*

Study Guide compiled for Live Arts by Education Director Ti Ames



Rehearsal photo by Will Kerner featuring (foreground, L-R): Christina Ball and Steve Tharp; background features Sound Designer John Holdren.

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Plot Summary

On a moonless night in August when the sea trout are ready to run, the Man brings his new girlfriend to the remote family cabin where he has come to fish since he was a boy. However, she is not remotely interested in the sport and would rather stay in with her book. When she finally agrees, the next time we see the Man he is reporting his girlfriend as missing, lost in the darkness. But it soon becomes clear that she may not be the only woman he has brought here—or indeed the last. While the women may come and go, the trout will never leave him.

Setting

The cabin on the cliffs, above the river.

Play Content Warning

- Graphic language
- Allusions to sexual situations

Characters

THE MAN

THE WOMAN

THE OTHER WOMAN



Rehearsal Photo by Will Kerner featuring Christina Ball.

About the Playwright

Jez Butterworth is a playwright and screenwriter, actor, and film director. His stage plays include *Mojo* (1995; West End 2013); *The Night Heron* (2002) and *Winterling* (2006), both of which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre; *Parlour Song* (2008), which opened in New York in 2008; the multi-award-winning comedy, *Jerusalem* (2009; Broadway 2011), which starred Mark Rylance and was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play; *The River* (2012); and *The Ferryman* (2017; Broadway, 2019 Tony Award Winner for Best Play).

Among other awards, Butterworth has received two Olivier Awards, three Evening Standard Awards, four Writers' Guild Awards, and three Critics Circle Awards. He wrote and directed the film adaptation of *Mojo* (1998) starring Ian Hart and Harold Pinter. Screenwriting credits include *Night of the Golden Brain* and *Christmas* (both written with his brother Tom Butterworth); *Birthday Girl* (2001), which starred Nicole Kidman; *The Last Legion* (2007); *Fair Game*, starring Sean Penn and Naomi Watts; *Get On Up* (2014); *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014); *Black Mass* (2015); and the James Bond film *Spectre* (2015). Most recently, he is the playwright and screenwriter of *Mammals*—a six-part series starring James Corden and Sally Hawkins.



Performance History

First produced by the Royal Court, London, in 2012, *THE RIVER* received its North American premiere at the Circle in the Square Theatre in New York in 2014, starring Hugh Jackman, Cush Jumbo, and Laura Donnelly.

About the Director



Robert Chapel has directed more than 140 productions throughout his career, including: Russian premiere of *Sweeney Todd* in Moscow; *She Stoops to Conquer* in Australia; Genet's *The Balcony* (Drama-Logue Award for Directing) in Los Angeles; *Shubert Alley* for official opening of Shubert Archive in New York; Bernstein's *Mass* in Ann Arbor and Charlottesville; 55 productions for Heritage Theatre (producing artistic director); 24 productions for UVA Drama Department (professor and chair, 26 years); 12 productions for University of Michigan Department of Theatre including *Playing for Time* for official opening of the Arthur Miller Theatre; *Le Tragedie de Carmen* for Charlottesville Opera; and four productions for Live Arts. Awards and achievements

include: Lifetime Achievement Award, Virginia Theatre Association; Raven Faculty Award, UVA; and Fulbright Grant and U.S. State Department Grant for trips to produce theater in Russia. He has directed at University of Alabama, NYU, Indiana University, Cal Arts, and San Diego State University.

“The Fish Takes It All”: An Interview with Props Associate Mimi Halpern

The interview below was conducted on Wednesday, January 4, 2023. Ti Ames chats with Mimi Halpern, props associate for THE RIVER, entrusted with all things fish-related for the production. Interview edited by Ti Ames.

Ti: Please describe the process of how a real fish is introduced in the play.

Mimi: Although in the original production, this big old fish is thrown down on the table, and The Man has to gut it and debone it and fillet it, our fish are going to be previously gutted and deboned. So (the character is) going to have to “fillet” the fish—he's going to have a sharp knife in his hand, and that's going to be a big deal. But it's not quite the dramatic thing that was worrying me. The audience has to be prepared for something like (gutting) the fish.

Ti: Well, now I'm curious, because I know that the first part of this conversation was, let's use a prop fish, right? So we had ordered all of these fake fish and were trying to figure out how to maybe dye them or paint them to—

Mimi: —look realistic?

Ti: Exactly. Can you talk a little bit about that decision? The choice to make it a real fish?

Mimi: Well, again, that is something that really is in the hands of the director, right? But I do believe Bob felt that for the visceral reaction of the audience, you needed to have a real fish because it might look too comical to have a fake fish, because people would be able to tell. We wanted to get that mood, as it's a bit of a disturbing play where you're never quite sure what is going on. Are these just memories? Where did these women go? Who are these women? Are they really like a fish that got away? Or did he do something to them? Did he gut them, you know? So I think we needed real fish to get that level of questioning and perturbation in the audience. The real fish is sort of symbolic of that.

Ti: I'm excited, but also a little squeamish.

Mimi: I understand. I know you were very concerned about the fish smell, and so am I. But here's what we're doing. We're hoping that gutting the fish will help with the smell a lot on the stage. Also, the fish will be scrubbed beforehand. Everything will be put into plastic and sealed and thrown away immediately afterwards.



Rehearsal photo by Will Kerner featuring Caitlin Reinhard and Steve Tharp.

Ti: Earlier, you started talking about the process of the fish, right? So let's start from the top. Let's say we're getting ready for the show to start. What is the process of taking care of the fish? What needs to be done?

Mimi: I'll give you an example. We have the two fish here that the actors will use during rehearsal. They are frozen. They have to be taken out in the morning or the night before the show to thaw, right? We also have to have cooked fish ready because the fish is going to be "cooked" on stage. So the frozen fish has to be taken backstage where it will probably be sitting on ice or something. I don't want to give it all away, but you know The Woman actually brings the fish onstage and slaps it on the table. The actor then puts the fish down on some newspaper and a cutting board and fillets the fish that will go onto a tray. Then he puts that in the oven on the stage. At that point, a wonderful little stage manager comes backstage, takes the raw fish out of the oven, puts the cooked fish in (which is really the fish from the night before) and "cooks" it. At the appropriate time, the actor on stage takes out the tray from the oven with the cooked fish. There it is. It's all done. And they actually eat some of it on stage.

Ti: Oh, wow. That's pretty involved.



Photo by Ti Ames, featuring a prop fish crafted by Technical Director Jeremy Pape and Associate Technical Director Annie Temmink.

Mimi: It is pretty involved. And because the actors have to cook it and eat it, it has to be a real fish. It would look a little funny to put a fake fish into the oven and then have nothing come out. Or, you're not gonna sit there with a big fish in front of you and pretend you're gonna eat it, right?

Ti: The whole idea of using "real props" has always been very fascinating to me, because as human beings, it's very easy for us to say, "Oh, this is a play, therefore, it must be 'x, y and z.' We can use our own imagination." Right?

Mimi: Right.

Ti: But how do you think the visceral quality of this show, and the fact that it needs to be a real fish, is going to impact the audience?

Mimi: Well, that's what I'm worried about. I think some people will get it, that, "Oh, this is the mood." A mood of enormous loss or death, you know. There will be a mood that much of the audience will attribute to that real fish. And some of the audience will be totally turned off.

Ti: Understandable, either way.

Mimi: Yeah, I'm going to be very interested to see. You were just saying there's something a little bit mystical, if you will, about this show. So do you really need to have real props is a question? Do you really need to have the real thing there when it's maybe all in his memory? We don't know. Maybe it's all sort of mystical in his memory or not even realistic. Maybe it's just his own imagination. We don't know. So in a way, because the play is written as such that we don't really know what's real and what's not real, you have to bring certain things down to the real level. You almost have to bring them down to the most basic, and the fish is kind of that tangible, real, "was-living-a-little-while-ago-and-now-it's-dead-on-the-table" thing. Yeah, it really kind of slices through, if you will, that mystical, magical sense. Whether that brings the audience into a more, "Oh, maybe this was real" place, I don't know. But maybe that's the concept.

Ti: I mean, it makes sense to me, especially the smell of a fish. The sound of it, the look of it.

Mimi: Exactly. You'll see the fish slide out of their hand, you know, and plop on the table. So yes, it will kind of bring the audience to, "Oh, something's real here."

Ti: And that's part of that sensory experience of theater, right? It's not just the catharsis and the emotions, but it's the reality.

Mimi: Yeah, I didn't even think of it that way. But yes, very much. Wow... Because smells especially bring back memories. They take you to different places in your head. They can remove you. So we're going to try really hard to mask the smell. We're gonna use vanilla scented plastic bags, and we'll have a lot of lemon scented wipes to make sure that people aren't totally turned off by the smell.

Ti: That's real. I mean, it is necessary for the reaction that Bob might be looking for.

Mimi: Right? There's a wide range of how people might react, and you can't prepare. We'll try as best we can to prepare for the whole whole range of experiences. No telling.

Ti: Is there anything else about the fish that you would think would be useful for our study guide?

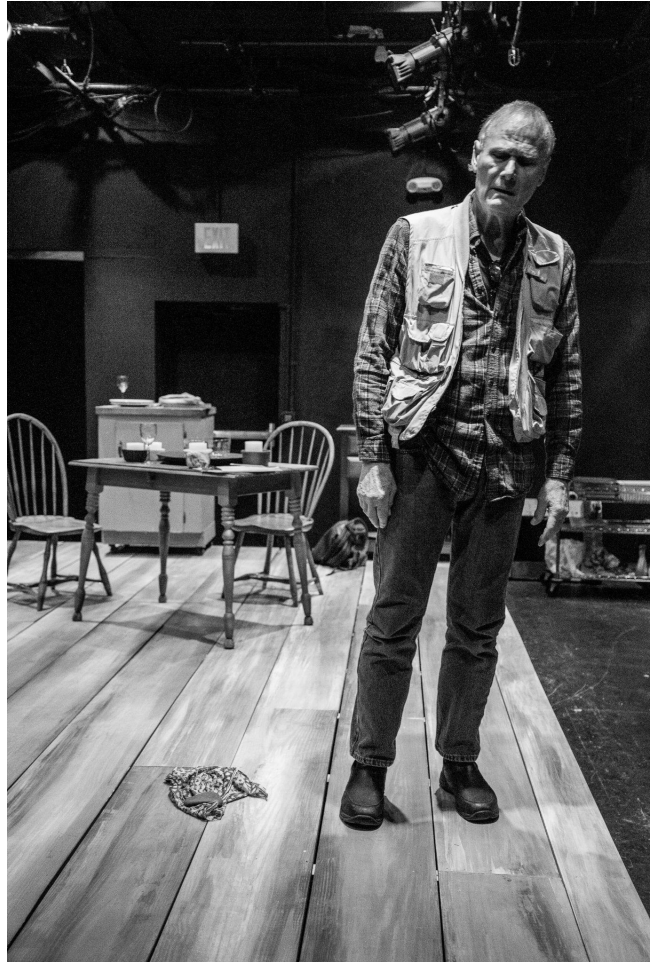
Mimi: Well, I think it's great to prepare people for the fact that it is going to be a real fish on the stage, and that they may have a sensory experience as a result—either the smell of it, or even a reaction to the fact that it's being cut into or sliced up on the stage. I also think it's important to know that the fish is a symbol throughout the show—I mean, fishing and fish capturing, being caught, losing and loss are a major part of the plot, if you will.

Ti: I like that. And maybe in that way, using the real fish will actually bring that benefit, right? It'll really make a lot more sense.

Mimi: Yes, that's what I think too.

Ti: Thank you so much, Mimi!

Mimi: Thank you, Ti!



Rehearsal photo by Will Kerner featuring Steve Tharp.

An Ode to (Fake) Fish...

In September of 2022, the Live Arts staff began brainstorming how to incorporate the use of fish in THE RIVER. Many productions of the show have been performed with real fish, while others opted for the use of rubber, plastic, or even silicone fish as a prop. For two months, the Live Arts staff collected a variety of fake fish to potentially be used onstage during THE RIVER. When RIVER Director Robert Chapel decided to use real fish, the fake fish that had accumulated in the Live Arts office were suddenly a moot point.



Photo by Ti Ames featuring the fake fish of THE RIVER (in no particular order): Big Bubba (also known as Alfred, also known as Kool-Aid Man II), Lil Bubba and Bubba Jr., Flip, Finn, Flathead, Spot, Gilly, and Zebulon (Zeb for short), and Holy Mackerel (affectionately known as Mac).

In Live Arts fashion, the fish have become a part of the Live Arts family. Each fish has been given a name and certain personality traits. Some have even been “adopted” by particular staff members. Above is a picture of these beloved (and somewhat odd) props that we have come to love and appreciate. We hope that their presence brings you as much joy as they have to us. Thank you, (fake) fish!



Rehearsal photo by Will Kerner featuring (L-R): Scenic Designer Tom Bloom, Sound Designer John Holdren, Steve Tharp, Caitlin Reinhard, Volunteer Coordinator Kathleel Mueller, Costume Designer Tricia Emlet, and Props Associate Mimi Halpern.

Talkback Information

The audience talkback for Live Arts' **THE RIVER** is scheduled for 9pm on Thursday, **February 2, 2023**, in **Founders Theater (123 E. Water St., 3rd floor)** with members of the cast and crew, facilitated by Education Director Ti Ames. You do not need to purchase a ticket to the show on February 2 to attend the talkback. This program is provided free of charge to the Charlottesville community. Please email Education Director Ti Ames at ti@livearts.org with questions about the event.

Works Cited

[The River \(Play\) Plot & Characters | StageAgent](#)



Promo photo by Will Kerner featuring (L-R): Caitlin Reinhard, Steve Tharp, and Christina Ball