

**LIVE WITH A REAL STEAM TRAIN.**  
• AT THE ROUNDHOUSE THEATRE •

**E. NESBIT'S**  
**THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**



Written by **MIKE KENNY**      Directed by **DAMIAN CRUDEN**

**EDUCATION PACK**

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# Introduction ABOUT US

## **About The Touring Consortium Theatre Company**

The Touring Consortium Theatre Company is a highly respected and established production company which aims to produce high quality theatrical performances accessible to all. It was formed in the belief that curriculum based drama with an integrated education programme was essential to inspire and develop the generations of the future.

Since its foundation in 1996, the company has produced 19 productions across the UK and in 2010 it produced York Theatre Royal's production of **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** at London's Waterloo Station. Now a year later, the company are producing it for a second time at Toronto's Roundhouse Park, marking the company's first step into international territory.

For more information visit:

[www.touringconsortium.com](http://www.touringconsortium.com)

[www.facebook.com/touringconsortium](http://www.facebook.com/touringconsortium)

## **About Marquis Entertainment**

In 1996 Robert Richardson began his career with a new Canadian company, Marquis Entertainment Inc. and in 1999 became President. Marquis Entertainment has developed into a leader in the international theatre industry, with a focus on producing, managing and representing theatrical productions for both national and international markets such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, South Africa, France, Finland, Germany and Hong Kong.

For more information visit:

[www.marquisent.ca](http://www.marquisent.ca)

### **Writers**

Anne McArthur & Nicholas Rice

### **Editor**

Nicholas Rice

### **Contributors**

Jo Flook, Neale Birch, Damian Cruden, Jo Scotcher, Mike Kenny, Chris Madin, Richard Jones.

### **Stock Resources**

Old Victorian Wallpapers  
[www.myruso.deviantart.com/](http://www.myruso.deviantart.com/)

### **Victorian Brushes**

[www.spiritsighs-stock.deviantart.com/](http://www.spiritsighs-stock.deviantart.com/)

### **Design**

Nicholas Rice

# Introduction USING THIS PACK

This pack has been devised primarily for the use of high-school teachers and their students. It may also be used by younger students to help their understanding of the story. This pack has been specifically written for the 2011 production of **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** in Toronto, and includes useful information and commentary from those involved in the production process.

There are four main sections which explore everything from vital background reading and the context of the time in which the story was set and written, to an analysis of the themes and narrative.

Links and resources are provided to accompany the pack and aim to encourage students to interact and engage with the text both in, and beyond the classroom. There are also a number of exercises that have been created in support of each section and that focus on different skill-sets.

**Remember to keep an eye out for them using the following symbol:**



**Discussion**



**Drama**



**Writing**

We thoroughly hope you enjoy our production of **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** live at the Roundhouse, and find this pack to be an effective source of learning. We regularly review our Education Packs and welcome feedback and suggestions via our email at [info@touringconsortium.com](mailto:info@touringconsortium.com).

# Background SYNOPSIS

At twelve, Roberta (Bobbie), is the eldest of the three children in her family; her brother, Peter, is ten and her sister, Phyllis is eight. Together they live a happy and middle-class suburban life in Victorian London with their Mother and Father and a house full of servants. On the evening of Peter's birthday, two men call by the house and inform Father (who works for the Government) that he is under arrest. The family idyll is left shattered as Father is led away, leaving Mother and the children all alone.



Without Father's income, Mother is forced to dismiss the servants and find more modest housing. Worried that the children will learn the truth about Father's arrest, she takes the family away from London, to rural Yorkshire.

They move into a cottage called Three Chimneys where Mother struggles to support the family by writing stories. The children, meanwhile, begin exploring their new home and discover a nearby railway track. They wave at a passing steam train and an old gentleman waves back. The children go to the station and befriend the porter, Albert Perks.

As the children adapt to their poorer lifestyle, Peter decides to steal coal from a heap at the railway station, but is caught by Mr. Perks. And then, when Mother falls ill with influenza, the children appeal to the 'Old Gentleman' on the steam train for help to buy the supplies that she needs. A hamper is delivered to the cottage and the children thank the 'Old Gentleman' for his help. When Mother recovers, she is furious that they accepted charity and that their business has been made public.

At the station, a rugged and agitated man collapses on the platform, pleading in French for help. The children call on their Mother to speak to him. She discovers the man is a Russian named Mr. Schepansky. In search of his family, he is lost, having escaped cruel treatment from the Tsarist regime, which held him captive for writing a book that sympathised with the Russian people. Mother takes him to stay in their home and dresses him in Father's clothes.

The children become friends with Mr. Schepansky and visit the railway in search for cherries to give to him. A landslide occurs suddenly and covers the railway track. Realising that the 11:29 train is minutes away, the children wave the girls' red flannel petticoats to warn the driver of the danger ahead. The train stops and the children receive a presentation from the Railway District Superintendent. The 'Old Gentleman' presents the children with pocket watches and Bobbie asks him for help to find Mr. Schepansky's family.

The children decide to throw a birthday surprise for Mr. Perks and ask people in the village for presents. Perks reacts angrily and sees the presents as an act of charity. Bobbie reads the labels on the presents and Perks realises that they have been given out of admiration and respect.

The 'Old Gentleman' arrives with the news that he has found Mr. Schepansky's wife and child. Schepansky is so overjoyed that he kisses the 'Old Gentleman' on the lips, before departing for London to be reunited with his own family.

Mr. Perks stops by and gives Bobbie a pile of old newspapers and magazines from the station waiting room. In one of them she reads the truth of her Father's whereabouts. He has been found guilty of selling state secrets and has been sentenced to five years' penal servitude. A distraught Bobbie confronts Mother, who insists Father's innocence and tells Bobbie they must be patient. The next day, Bobbie gives a letter to the 'Old Gentleman' protesting Father's innocence and asking for help.

The local grammar school boys' paper-chase takes place and the children cheer the boys on from each end of the railway tunnel. As the boys exit the tunnel, the children notice that one boy is missing and decide to go into the tunnel to find him. Inside, they find Jim who has broken his leg. Jim is taken back to Three Chimneys and Mother writes to his grandfather. To their surprise, Jim's grandfather is revealed to be their own 'Old Gentleman'. Jim stays with the family and his grandfather arranges for domestic help for Mother.

Realising that they have not visited the railway in a while, the children go to wave to the 9:15. The entire train waves back as if in celebration. Bobbie goes to the station where she is greeted by an excited Perks. As the passengers begin to emerge from the train, a tall figure appears through the clouds of steam and it is none other than Father. Bobbie cries 'Daddy, my Daddy!' before running into his arms. The family is reunited and the story comes to a close as Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis declare that was 'the summer when we were—**THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**'.



### Discussion

1. How relevant do you think the story of **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** is today?
2. What do you think happen to the family Father returns?
3. In pairs, compare and contrast the lives of the Railway Children before and after they move to Yorkshire. What are the main differences?

# Background CHARACTERS

## **Father**

is the central figure of the story although, ironically, he is absent for most of it. He is a family man who encourages the children to follow the career paths of their choice, regardless of gender. He works for the Government and provides a wealthy upbringing for the children, until he is taken away under accusations of sharing state secrets. At the end of the story, Father returns and is reunited with his family. Although we do not have much opportunity to get to know him in depth, his absence, and the family's feelings of loss, is central to the narrative.

## **Mother**

is the unsung heroine of the tale. When her cosy world is abruptly shattered, the question is whether she is up to the challenge which confronts her. She is; she instantly takes practical steps to save her family by moving to a more affordable home and taking up writing in an effort to earn enough to maintain it. Money is tight but, without complaint or bitterness, she adapts family life to levels of poverty she has not previously known.

## **Roberta (Bobbie)**

is the eldest child and is intelligent, thoughtful and tomboyish (she wants to be a railway fireman). She always has her Mother's welfare at heart, and hushes Peter and Phyllis from reminding Mother of Father's absence. Bobbie also protects them from the truth of Father's whereabouts. Much like Mother, Bobbie has a fearless attitude and a caring nature that makes her a staunch fighter in helping people and standing-up for what is right.

## **Peter**

is the only boy and his aspiration is to be an engineer. He is sensitive, having started crying when his toy train breaks. Peter disagrees with Phyllis that they were 'different' from other families, strongly believing that his family were 'ordinary'. But as the story unfolds, the family is forced into living with little money and the children experience the reality and hardships of what 'ordinary' life was like for most families at this time. Peter naturally tries to assume the male role left void by Father's absence, but is always overshadowed by the actions of his sister, Bobbie.



## Phyllis

is the youngest child, and claims that being the youngest is confusing because she has to fit herself in between the others. She looks up to Bobbie and Peter, often copying their behaviour and attempting to act older than she really is. Phyllis is easily irritated when she feels like she isn't being heard and she has to repeat herself before she is heard. She enjoys attention and will often speak before thinking, even confessing that she doesn't know what she means half the time.

## Mr. Perks

is the station porter at Oakworth Station and is the first person the family meets when they arrive in Yorkshire. Perks is a proud family man who becomes genuinely fond of the children and shares in their delight when their Father eventually returns. It is likely that Perks is an ex-military man, as many were employed in the early railway. He catches Peter stealing coal and firmly tells him the wrongness of his actions, before later forgiving him.

## Mr. Schepansky

is a Russian dissident, who was held captive in the Siberian mines, where he had endured cruel treatment from the Tsarist regime for the 'crime' of writing a book sympathetic to the struggling Russian people. He arrives at Oakworth Station filthy and malnourished. He is lost and in search of his wife and child, who had previously escaped to London. Mother treats him with great compassion and understands the cruelties he has suffered in his native Russia. The 'Old Gentleman' finds Schepansky's family and he departs for London.

## The 'Old Gentleman'

is a 'man of mystery', it is never explained who he is or what he does; even his name never becomes apparent. He certainly plays a pivotal role in proceedings as an all-round 'Good Samaritan', and seems to wield some influence in official circles in London. It is directly thanks to him that Mother recovers quickly from her illness, that the Schepansky family is reunited, and that Father is ultimately released to return home.



### Writing

1. Why do you think the Old Gentleman's name is never given?
2. Do you think **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** were an ordinary family?
3. Hope is an important theme in **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**. Which character do you think is most hopeful about the future?

# Background EDITH NESBIT



Edith Nesbit (1858 – 1924)

Edith Nesbit was born on August 15th 1858 in Surrey, England. Her father was an agricultural chemist who died in 1862, before her fourth birthday, plunging the family into disarray. The family moved around constantly for some years before eventually settling for three years at Halstead Hall in Kent. It was here that Edith and her brothers explored the surrounding countryside and gardens, investigated mysterious passages, and regularly played at the local railway line. Because of this, Halstead is often said to have inspired **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** (1906).

When Edith was seventeen, the family moved again, this time to London. Two years later, she became pregnant and married the child's father, Hubert Bland, in 1877. Their marriage was an unconventional and open one. Edith had affairs and Bland maintained an affair which produced two children, both of whom Nesbit raised as her own.

Later, when Bland's business faltered, Edith became responsible for maintaining the home and family. Edith began a journalistic career and became a prolific writer on socialism during the 1880s. In 1884 Nesbit and Bland were among the founders of the Fabian Society (a precursor to the British Labour Party).

Edith began writing novels in 1885 and some years later started writing children's novels, earning her fame and success as a children's author. By her death in 1924, she had published forty-four books for children, both novels and collections of stories.

## The Railway Children

Edith invented a style of writing 'for children' which was new and unique, and which would set the standard for the genre ever after. Edith addressed her target audience and never patronised them.

Before Edith came along, very few writers addressed children in such a way. Those that did concentrated on fantasy like Lewis Carroll's 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' (1865) and comforting adventure stories such as Anna Sewell's **BLACK BEAUTY** (1877). No matter how far-fetched her plots, Edith presented the children in her stories with real and recognisable troubles and situations. In her later work, she also casually introduced socialist politics, often writing about the problems faced by the poor.

**THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** encapsulates all of this, but it is also something else: of all her published fiction, it is the most autobiographical. Parallels are commonly drawn between the story and Edith's own life. The first of these is the sudden removal of a family's security blanket, and the effects of the resulting poverty. Money, or the mismanagement of it, was always an issue in the Bland household. Even at the height of her success, Edith never seemed to have enough.

Just like Mother in **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**, Edith knew only too well the plight of the single mother, having lost her own father at an early age, and later looking after her own children during periods without her husband. There was no welfare state then, no benefits system, so if the mother failed to provide for her children, they would simply starve.

The Mother in **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** and young Bobbie, share characteristics with Edith, and it has been suggested that both of them are projections of her. Bobbie shares similar 'unfeminine' ambitions as Edith did, and can easily be seen as developing into the young Edith, who rejected the constraints placed on Victorian women, cutting her hair and refusing to wear corsets. Mother has been given Edith's renowned generosity and compassion, she does not hesitate to take in any waif or stray who needs help.

And then there is Father, and the sense of his absence which runs through the story. The railway is a powerful symbol of this, since the children fantasise that the passing London-bound trains are conveying their feelings to him. The death of Edith's own father just before fourth birthday marked her childhood, and when she wrote about her early years in 'My School-Days' (1896-97), her unhappiness is all too evident.

Edith wrote the novel very much on her own experiences and the story approaches issues that are just as relevant today as they were then. **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** remains a children's classic and has not been out of print since 1905.

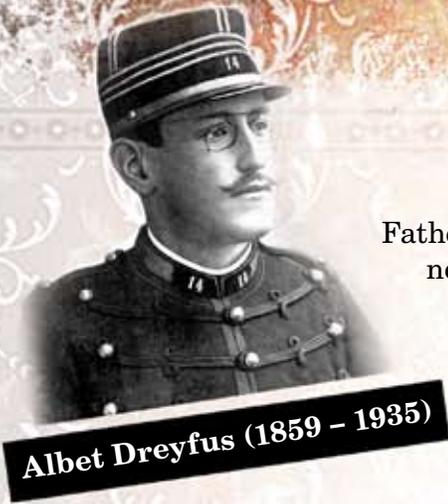


### Writing

1. How do you think the children will be when they grow up?
2. Why do you think Edith wrote about issues that were similar to her own experiences?
3. Do you believe children's stories should address contemporary issues?

Context

# THE DREYFUS AFFAIR



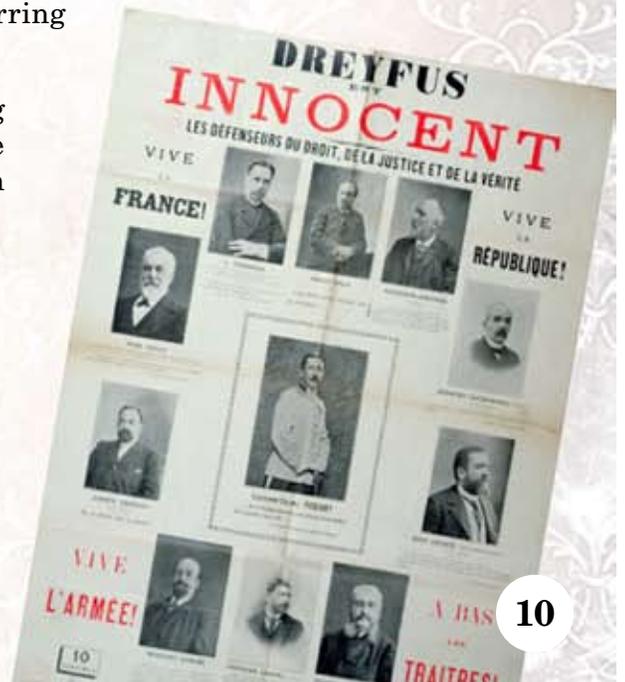
Father's fate is often said to have been influenced by the notorious French scandal known as 'the Dreyfus Affair'. In September 1894, a cleaning woman at the German Embassy in Paris found a note in a wastebasket which suggested that a Frenchman was willing to sell military secrets to the Germans. Suspicion fell on a young Jewish artillery officer in the French army called Captain Alfred Dreyfus.

Two months later, after a secret court martial, and despite his protestation of innocence, Dreyfus was convicted of treason. The 'evidence' against him was non-existent, or clearly forged, and was presented by witnesses who were openly anti-Semitic. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, in solitary confinement, on the infamous prison at Devil's Island in French Guiana.

Dreyfus was manacled in a cold iron cage in the hold of a ship and, after a journey of fifteen days in the darkness, with no idea of his destination, emerging into the fierce heat of a tropical land. Many prisoners perished on the journey, and were thrown to the sharks, and many more died once they arrived, of disease, starvation, madness and despair. Dreyfus himself contracted chronic cholera, and malaria, as well as suffering constant horrific nightmares.

Doubts about Dreyfus' guilt began to surface the moment he was sentenced, but intensified when it became clear that the spying he had been accused of was still occurring after his imprisonment.

Dreyfus began to attract some powerful allies, among them writers Anatole France and, particularly, Emile Zola. In 1898, Zola wrote an open letter to the French President in a magazine article. His accusation was that the court martial was an army—and establishment—cover up. On the strength of it, Zola was charged with libel. Despite an impassioned defence in court, he was found guilty and given a year's imprisonment, as well as a hefty fine. When his appeal failed, he fled the country and carried on campaigning for Dreyfus from England.



In 1899, the campaign finally persuaded the authorities to reopen the case and bring Dreyfus, now aged 39, back to France to face trial again. But, to everyone's shock, he was found guilty and was sentenced to another ten years imprisonment. French President Loubet realised that the verdict would only further public anger, and so, issued Dreyfus with a free pardon only ten days later.

In 1906, the year of the publication of **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**, Dreyfus was totally exonerated and reinstated in the French army. The 'Dreyfus Affair' is commonly suggested as being Nesbit's inspiration for the circumstances in which Father is arrested. Like Dreyfus, Father is accused of working against his Government and sharing confidential information. Both Dreyfus and Father are taken away from their families, leaving their wives and children to fend for themselves. For the Dreyfus family, they would have to do this for over five years.

In **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**, the sudden absence of Father is not only confusing for the children in the story, but also for the audience, who are restricted in being able to know and identify with him. It is only when Bobbie learns the truth of Father's sentence in the newspaper, that the audience do so too. This is significant because like Dreyfus and his defenders, Father's innocence is largely dependent on the belief of the audience.

Just as Dreyfus' innocence had been protested, Father's is too. Bobbie pleads with Mother to tell someone and explain that Father is not a spy, to which Mother replies 'No one listens. No one. I've tried everything. Everyone. So we must just be brave, and patient'. Mother's determination, like Dreyfus' wife, is not out of choice, but very much reflective of the strength and hope that was needed in order to survive.



## Peter Kropotkin

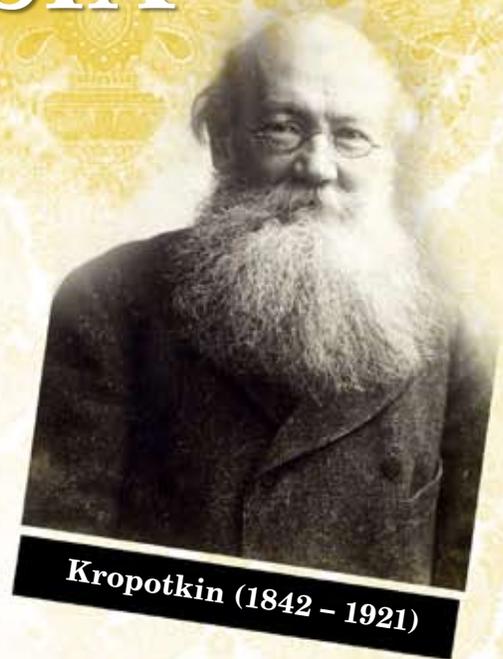
Nesbit's political themes are further embedded in **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** with the appearance of Mr. Schepansky, who can be likened to Peter Kropotkin (known in Russia as Prince Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin). Kropotkin lived in Tsarist Russia, a period in which over 80% of the population were peasants, and freedom of expression against the Tsar's regime was not permitted. The regime behaved with appalling brutality towards any and all who supported the growing revolutionary movement in a country which was still feudal.

Kropotkin was born in 1842 into a wealthy, aristocratic family. By the age of twelve, young Peter had already begun to sympathize with the plight of the peasantry on his father's many estates, and he publicly renounced his royal title.

As an adult, his political activism intensified. He identified with the liberal-revolutionary movement, and eventually anarchism. His relentless promotion of revolutionary propaganda led to his arrest and imprisonment in 1873. Three years later, Peter not only succeeded in escaping from prison, he also defected from Russia and began his international travels, spreading his political message and publishing pamphlets in support of it, as he went. He helped to kick-start the socialist movement in Paris, and spent three years writing for the revolutionary newspaper 'Le Révolté' in Switzerland, until the Swiss government expelled him in 1881. Two years later, he was imprisoned by the French on political grounds. Upon his release in 1886, he settled in Britain and became a regular at the Fabian Society meetings that Edith Nesbit also attended.

Nesbit and Kropotkin were good friends, sharing many of the same political beliefs, and in **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**, she highlights the issues faced in Russia, by her inclusion of the character Mr. Schepansky. The parallels between Kropotkin's life and Schepansky's are immediately obvious, with both having to flee their country for simply expressing themselves and writing against the Tsar regime.

Nesbit can also be seen to defend Kropotkin through Mother's interaction with Schepansky. Mother cares for Schepansky and explains his struggles to the children, who cannot understand why he had been sent to prison if he was a good man. She tells them 'He wrote a beautiful book. About poor people. And how to help them. I've read it. There's nothing in it but goodness and kindness. And they sent him to prison for it. He was in a horrible dungeon, all alone, for three years'.





**Sergius Stepniak (1851 - 1895)**

## **Sergius Stepniak**

The inspiration for Schepansky can be seen further in 'Sergius Stepniak', with whom Edith Nesbit was also a good friend. Stepniak was born in 1851 in what is now Ukraine. Like Kropotkin, he attended a quasi-military school and went on to join the army, although he didn't remain in it for long, re-signing his commission at the age of twenty. And, like Kropotkin, his revolutionary fervour was aroused at an early age. However, Stepniak initially believe that violent actions were the most effective means of forcing the autocrats into reform.

He joined the rising against the Turks in Bosnia in 1876 and used the experience to write a manual on how to conduct guerrilla warfare. The following year he fought in another rebellion, this time in Italy. Back in

Russia, he opted for more direct tactics when he assassinated General N.V. Mezentsev, the chief of police in St. Petersburg. Although he managed to escape arrest, he was forced to flee the country and, like Kropotkin, became a wandering citizen of wherever in the world would have him.

He lectured and wrote copiously on his political beliefs, from which is it clear that his views on the effectiveness of violence mellowed over time. His early advocacy of guerrilla warfare being replaced with approval of argument and peaceful agitation as instruments of change. Eventually he settled in London, where had been celebrated in socialist circles since the publication of his book **UNDERGROUND RUSSIA** (1882). He established the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, as well as the 'Russia Free Press', and was a habitué of the Fabian Society. Nesbit and her husband Bland identified with Stepniak and he was well respected by the Socialists in England.

While there are many similarities between Stepniak, Kropotkin and Nesbit's Schepansky, there are a number of differences too. Unlike Stepniak, Kropotkin and Schepansky did not advocate the use of violence to try and provoke change, instead, expressing their beliefs through writing. Stepniak was without a family, and experienced an untimely death two days before Christmas in 1895, when he was hit and killed by a train at a level crossing on his local railway line. The effect that this had on Nesbit is unknown, but it is likely that it influenced her writing of **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** several years later. For Stepniak, the railway marked the end of his life, but for Schepansky, the railway represents the start of his own freedom, and the journey home to his family. Schepansky's story can be seen as a positive representation of 'fighting' for what is right, and being able to overcome the struggles faced, with the support of the community.

## Context

# INDUSTRIALIZATION

Edith Nesbit lived in Victorian Britain, a period which was marked by the growth of the British Railway, and more importantly, industrialization. Industrialization is the social and economical process that is developed by the progression of technology, workers and industries, in the production of goods.

Britain experienced rapid industrialization, gaining dominance of world trade, as well as the highest levels of income in the world. Britain's large industrial output was advanced by the development and progression of steam technology. Up until the mid 18th Century, steam engines had been largely restricted to use in coal mining. However, engines became more effective and powerful with the advances made by James Watt, whose engines were four times as powerful as those previous. Steam engines now started to be used in industries such as textiles, speeding up the production process.

The mining process had also become much quicker, and with a booming demand for coal among the industries, it needed to be. Transporting coal was initially slow and difficult, with a reliance on boats and networks of canals. It was not until the early 19th Century that steam locomotives began to be use, and in 1825, George Stephenson's 'Locomotion' was utilized as an effective method in the transportation of coal and raw materials. Steam locomotives became so effective that the railways grew with the level of industrialization, and by 1851, 6,800 miles of track had been laid in Britain. In less than two decades, railway way mileage had grown by 81% and the traffic carried rose by 180%.

The significance that Nesbit gives to both the railway and issues of poverty is a realistic indication of the period in which she was living. As a socialist, Nesbit sympathized with the struggles of the workers in factories, earned a very small proportion of profit. The expansion of industrialization made the contrast between rich and poor increasingly more visible, and to some extent, **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** identifies with this. The family begins as a wealthy one with servants, and becomes a poor one that depends on the support of others.

The development of the railway was an exciting and remarkable time, allowing people and communities to become much more mobile and dispersed. In **THE RAILWAY**

**CHILDREN**, it is used as a source of freedom. It is by way of the steam train that Mother retreats with the children to Yorkshire so that they are able to survive, and it is also the railway that

the children use to escape into a world of adventure. It is Schepansky's route back to his family, and similarly, it is how Father is reunited with his daughter on the platform edge.

Stephenson's 'Locomotive'



# Understanding THE NARRATIVE

The play is based on the Mike Kenny adaptation of the novel by Edith Nesbit and so there are a few differences. The novel is episodic in its form, presenting a series of different stories that are largely independent from one another.

Writer Mike Kenny explains that this is a ‘challenge for a playwright’ as a play ‘needs to follow a single line’. In this adaptation, the story is shortened and so some of the settings and events that take place in the novel are missing from the play. Instead, the play focuses more intently on the central themes of loss and the experience of journey.

Director Damian Cruden explains that the production focuses on the ‘portrayal of journeys—the journey of the characters, the story, the train, the audience’. The use of moving trucks along the railway lines emphasizes this, and also allows the action to occur at any point across the lengths of the platforms. This does not only ensure that everybody gets a good view of the show, but it also supports the narrative in a constant progression. And, for the first time since the show was originally produced in York, England, the Toronto production includes a station clock in its set design, and this is used to further represent the characters’ journey.

The story is structured in the form of a ‘memory play’, which positions the children as recalling the events that took place in the past. This is a useful technique because it allows a commentary between the characters and the audience, so that they are able to identify with, and, share in their experiences. It is also used as an opportunity for comic effect, because although older, they are in possession of the same behaviours and qualities that are visible throughout the story. For example, in the story opening, a grown-up Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis, argue about the point at which they became ‘Railway Children’.



## Drama

1. In groups, devise a short scene using either a flashback or narration to tell a story to the rest of your class.

You may want to consider using some of the themes that **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** uses.

**POVERTY, HOPE, COURAGE**

# Inside the Production INTERVIEWS

## **Damian Cruden, The Director**

**What first drew you to E. Nesbit's story?  
Do you remember the first time you read  
the book and saw the film?**

My earliest memory is the film, the opening scene is very strong. I think it must have been quite disturbing, the father disappearing at Christmas. I think I was about eight or nine years old. I only came to the book about thirteen years ago when researching possible work to produce at York Theatre Royal to support my application for Artistic Director, which I got.

**What attracts you to the story?  
What relevance do you think it has for today?**

So many things work for me, the overwhelming one being the power of innocence, the children ask questions of the world because they have no preconceived notions of how things are. This forces the adults to challenge their own prejudices and preconceptions and as a result things change for the better.

The story is overwhelmingly positive and draws on the emotional memory of our childhood, tapping into something that is fundamental to the very nature of what it is to be human and to love with others. We recognise a state that most of us have experienced where everything is possible, even that which we are told is not.

Nesbit lost her father at a young age and in **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**, she loses him again, but this time brings him back through her characters determination. In her narrative she achieves the impossible. This is potent and deeply affecting. It is timeless, we will always have something to learn from such a universal story.

**How did you go about first producing it?**

The first movement came from Dan Bates, our then Executive Director, whom I talked to about the idea. He got in touch with the NRM and we went from there. I approached Mike Kenny for various reasons, he's recognised as one of our foremost writers, I had just worked on a fantastic piece of his called Caitlin about Dylan Thomas' wife, and he lives in York.

I knew the production had to be fluid and that he was a writer who created work that was theatrical and uncluttered. If the piece was to work it would have to be seamless, something the book mitigates against, as it is episodic in form.



**Damian Cruden (Director)**

### **How did you collaborate with Mike on this project?**

We met, chatted about what we felt the book meant, agreed that it had a political aspect that we wanted to draw forth and that it had to work with a big green locomotive. Mike went off and wrote the play, which we read with a company at the theatre, and is broadly the script we presented. It worked. I knew it would as soon as I got it, and it was a joy to direct it.

### **Can you describe the creative process undertaken with the Set Designer (Jo Scotcher) and the Composer (Chris Madin)?**

With Jo much of the process about the development of a traverse space, we knew that the track would be in the middle and that we'd perform off trucks. Jo developed the idea of the performance being in a station, which I was keen on, as I wanted the audience to feel as if they were going on a journey.

Chris and Richard, the Lighting Designer, know me very well and I trust them. I knew they'd understand the text. They attended rehearsals to observe how the tagging and performances were developing, and worked from that in creating the musical score and the lighting design. Craig, the Sound Designer, did likewise, and we had a day out on North Yorkshire Moors steam railway to record the real thing as source material for the sound of our trains.

### **Can you sum up the qualities of this production which create its extraordinary success?**

I think it connects with something common to the many. It was created with the dedication and love of a whole theatre company, from actors to crew, creatives, front of house staff, administrators, catering, production, stage door, marketing—everyone. It is due to their faith in such a crazy idea that this production has captured the hearts and imaginations of so many.

#### **Discussion**

1. Think about the different roles people have within a theatre. In groups talk about what you think these different people do and why their jobs are important:

**DIRECTOR, SET  
DESIGNER, COMPOSER**



**Mike Kenny (Writer)**

## **Mike Kenny, The Writer**

**Had you always been attracted to theatre?  
Can you pinpoint a time in your life when  
you decided to be a playwright?**

As a child, reading was my favourite occupation by a mile. I'm a big fan of public libraries. Because I grew up on a council estate in a small town on the Welsh border I don't remember seeing theatre, except for one trip to a panto when visiting my Auntie who lived in Liverpool. So, working

in theatre was not even on my horizons. By a long and circuitous route, I ended up working as an actor in the Theatre in Education Company at Leeds Playhouse. Because we devised all our own work I learned a lot about writing by trying to make theatre magic in cold school halls.

I drifted into writing plays when my eldest son was young, because it enabled me to stay at home. It never felt like a decision. I'd had about five plays performed and I was still telling the world I was an actor.

**Theatre is a collaborative art form—how does that work for you as a writer which is by nature, perhaps, a solitary occupation?**

It is an oddly split job. You need to be two completely different people. I do tell people who express a wish to be a playwright that they have to be fascinated by conversation, at every level. A play is people talking, and the way you get there is through engaging in endless conversations with all the many people involved in making it. Anyone who knows me will tell you I'm pretty gregarious. However there is a time in the process when everyone has to shut up and you have to sink into yourself and produced the play.

I am quite happy with my own company. When I'm writing I wouldn't communicate with anyone for weeks if it weren't for my family coming home at the end of a day. Looking back, I think my circumstances growing up were perfect for creating a playwright. I was a quiet only child in a huge extended family, who all liked talking.

**How do you approach adaptation of novels?**

It does depend on the book. I like to find a way of honouring the storyteller's voice. When you read **THE RAILWAY CHILDREN** for example, you can almost hear Edith Nesbit telling it to you. She's very present in the story and she acknowledges you too, 'If you're the sort of person who...' and so forth. Some writers want to be invisible. I just worked on a new version of **THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS** and you sense that Kenneth Graham was a much quieter, retiring person. I try to recognize that too.



A book is not a play though. Reading is a very intimate, solitary experience. You can pick up a book to read on a train or a bus, put it down, read a bit when waiting for the kettle to boil, and finish it on a beach on the other side of the world. A play requires a lot of us to get together in the same place and watch in real time. It's very social. To do that effectively you sometimes have to ignore totally what you feel the writer's wishes might be in order to make it work.

**And, in particular—how did you approach THE RAILWAY CHILDREN?**

**THE RAILWAY CHILDREN**, the novel, is quite episodic. This is a challenge for a playwright. A play needs to follow a single line through, quite obsessively. The other challenge is that it is the story of a family where something dreadful happens and the mother declares that no one must talk about it. Given that talking is one of the things you need in a play it can become a bit of a problem.

In the end this 'problem' became the subject of my play. 'What is the effect of not communicating on the children of the family?' To do this some episodes in the novel had to go. There is a section that I particularly love about a family who live on a barge, but it didn't serve the central theme, so it went. The only liberty I took with the book was to make it a memory play. The children are looking back on the events from adulthood. This means they can speculate over things which happened that they didn't understand at the time.

**What do you feel that a theatre presentation of THE RAILWAY CHILDREN can bring to the story that can't be achieved in the film? And, perhaps, vice versa?**

Obviously they are the same story, but I think they feel very different. It's partly the time in which we tell them. The film was made in the '60s; it was a very hopeful and optimistic time. This feeling runs through the film and is delightful. The sun always shines and we love it. We are now telling this story in more difficult times, maybe closer to the time in which the book was written. Political corruption, poverty, refugees, lone parents are things modern children know more about. I think it now seems less of a lost idyll and surprisingly modern.

## Jo Scotcher, Set Designer

### What drew you to the profession and where did you train?

I have always been fascinated by spaces, atmosphere and it is possible to shape and change our understanding of these experiences. My childhood was spent being rather distracted from the task at hand as I was much more content looking out windows, creating stories to fit those places and people who crossed my path. As I got older, my passion for creating and making outgrew my sketchbook and pencil and I was drawn to physical art. I studied Sculpture at art school in Brighton. It was after a year of work when my sculptures were becoming larger and larger in scale that I was sent out of the workshop and built in the spaces between the school buildings.

I realized instead of creating artworks that would statically sit in someone else's space, I was desperately trying to create the actual spaces on a scale that people could come into and perform within—it was quite a cathartic moment for me! I then trained in Theatre Design before going on to gain a place with the Royal Shakespeare Company in their graduate design apprenticeship program and it was here that I really began to learn my 'craft'. Of course, the training never stops as each design you work on comes with unique sets of challenges to overcome and you constantly learn from each piece of work you experience.

### In your view, what makes a successful theatre designer?

From the first rough ideas scribbled in my sketchbook to the first night of the show, it's an amazing and complex process. It is this process that is vital to the success of a show. As well as the artistry and style a designer is obviously responsible for, there must be a true understanding of the stories and the characters you are portraying in the narrative of the piece. It is the job of the designer to really understand how this narrative evolves and to create the canvas for the director and actors to work within, to realise the 'world' of the story. To realise this world, it is vital to utilize the skills, creativity and ideas of everyone you work alongside.





From the craftsmanship of the carpenters building the scenery, the knowledge of the costume department, the skills of the painters... the list is huge.

The most successful designers, in my eyes, hone the skills of the creative team and, with them, unify the vision of the director so the final creation is a cohesive and unified production. It is cliché but a production is only as strong as the team that brings it to life.

**How did you approach the design for this production?**

Damian Cruden (Director), and I began with confident discussions on what the vision was for the show. It became quickly apparent that we wanted to focus on the portrayal of journeys—the journey of the characters, the story, the train, the audience—and amplify this notion within the set. So ‘constant movement’ became the keystone theme and the journey that each person takes both throughout the show and, of course, in life; we wanted to weave these two ideas together in the show and so the set had to reflect this. It harnesses the motion and bustle of the railway platform, the moving trucks keep the action flowing as we would see trains and passengers constantly flowing through a busy action, with fragments of people’s lives and stories emerging from suitcases, freight cases and packages.

**How did you collaborate with the Director and Lighting Designer?**

The set had to support Damian’s vision to portray this idea of journeys and movement, and everything about a rail station is transient in its nature. We made a conscious decision to not over-clutter the scenes and minimize the props so you will notice luggage and suitcases doubling up for tables and chairs for example. We want the audience to use their imagination on this journey, as the story itself is told through the memories of the children and their love affair with the life of the station.

Richard does a fantastic job with the lighting and it is so vital to the atmosphere of vision we wanted to create. For example, from an early stage we spoke about how we could use the creative space under the platform to produce the effect of a train carriage flashing past in the dark. Lights and sounds play such an influential part in both capturing and reliving our memories; naturally a railway station is heaving with light and sounds and constant movement so we knew it was important for us to come together and utilize this for maximum effect.

## **Richard G. Jones, Lighting Designer**

### **How did you come to be a theatre Lighting Designer?**

I became interested in theatre from the age of fourteen when I started at my local Youth Theatre. I worked at the theatre as a casual working on shows, crewing and follow spotting whenever possible. When I left school I studied electrical engineering but knew that theatre was where I wanted to work. I managed to get the local theatre to employ me on a government scheme that meant I did two years on the job training working in various departments. Eventually, I started work in the electrics department and that is when I realised that lighting was the area I wanted to work in. I was given the job as Studio Theatre Technician for a year where I started lighting all the shows.

### **How do you approach lighting this production?**

#### **How did you collaborate with the Director and Designer?**

The first thing you will notice when you watch this show is the hugely long performance space – nearly 40 metres. When I saw the model the first time I talked to Damian, the director, about how we would need to break each platform section down into separate areas to help the audience focus during scenes. There is a wonderful atmospheric musical score, very filmic and we wanted scenes to flow from one to the other, so we looked at the lighting being very fluid taking the audience from one area to the next as seamlessly as possible.

There were obviously conversations with Damian and Jo about the look and style, some of which were taken due to the nature of a site specific show and budget. We came up with very specific areas for specials and being able to focus down to actors so we used the platform lights as markers from the first day of rehearsal. This gave us seven areas on each platform and as Damian knew about this in advance of rehearsals he worked these into the blocking of the show. By staging key moments under these on the journey, it meant that we were able to isolate and shift the audience focus and not just have a full up general cover.

#### **What are the particular challenges of lighting a show in a site-specific situation?**

All site-specific jobs vary a lot, but always have the issues of where you are and how much power you have or how much weight you can hang from the structure or not. I have worked in Cathedrals and disused factories, each venue throws up lots of different challenges.





## **Chris Madin, Composer and Musical Director**

### **What drew you to the profession of composing for theatre?**

I began writing music when I was very young. I grew up in a house with lots of instruments kicking around and very noise tolerant parents. Both my Mum and Grandad played in the pit band for lots of local amateur dramatic societies, so I got to see lots of dress rehearsals for shows like **OKLAHOMA, THE MIKADO** and **IOLANTHE!** I'm afraid to say that it put me off musicals for life! I'm still not a fan! But I loved the atmosphere of the theatre.

I studied the cello and played in orchestras etc. before discovering rock and roll and forming various gigging bands. Lots of my friends then joined the newly formed Crucible Youth Theatre in Sheffield and they always seemed to need music for their productions. I sort of fell into it by default but knew instantly that I liked it.

Good music is like good drama, it relies on tension and release to keep the audience involved and I was able to recognise that somehow... it came quite naturally.

### **What was your approach to composing music for this production?**

After initial meetings with the creative team and discussion with the director I arrived on day one of rehearsals with my writing studio and began work at the same time as the cast began theirs. I knew that the sound palette I wanted to work with was very English and orchestral and period. The piece has such big emotional themes in it (as well as great big train!) and the physical space is so large that I knew a big sound was needed. I knew that the director was keen for a very realistic sound design to match the size of the engine and so I worked to musically express the feelings awoken in the children on seeing the train.

The music happened very easily for this piece with each scene in rehearsal suggesting very clearly which direction the music should take.

### **How did you collaborate with the director and other members of the creative team on this production?**

I've worked with the director and lighting designer on many shows prior to this and we have a kind of theatrical shorthand. This means ideas can be tried out very quickly without massive negotiation which is very creative. The sound designer and I collaborated once we were in the actual space and began to see where our individual contributions overlapped or dovetailed. Certain sound design elements emerge out of the music and certain pieces of music emerge from the sound design. It again was a playful process and a lot of fun.

# Links and Resources

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### Books

**Kenny, Mike (2010) 'E. Nesbit The Railway Children Stage Adaptation'. Nick Hern Books.**

**Lurie, Alison (1988) Writers for Children, Charles Scribner's Sons.**

**Nesbit, Edith (1906) 'The Railway Children'. Penguin Classics.**



### Links

**Gardner, Lyn (2005) Golden Age: Edith Nesbit**

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/mar/26/theatre.booksforchildrenandteenagers>

**Gopnik, Adam (2009) Alfred Dreyfus: The Trial of the Century**

[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2009/09/28/090928crbo\\_books\\_gopnik](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2009/09/28/090928crbo_books_gopnik)

**Penguin Reader, Teacher Support Programme**

<http://www.penguinreaders.com/pdf/downloads/pr/teachers-notes/9781405869645.pdf>

**Railway Children Toronto**

<http://www.facebook.com/Railway.Children.Toronto>

**The Edith Nesbit Society**

<http://www.edithnesbit.co.uk/>

### Video

**Lionel Jeffries (1970) The Railway Children (DVD)**

E.NESBIT'S  
**THE RAILWAY  
CHILDREN**

[WWW.RAILWAYCHILDREN.CA](http://WWW.RAILWAYCHILDREN.CA)