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BLINK

by Phil Porter

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-11625-4
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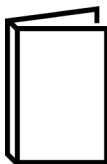
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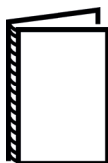


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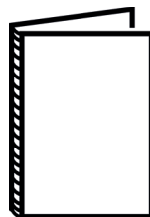
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Phil Porter's original plays include *Vice Versa* and *The Christmas Truce* for the RSC and *God of Chaos* and *The Man with the Hammer* for Plymouth Theatre Royal. *Blink*, originally written for Soho Theatre, has been performed extensively around the world. *The Cracks in My Skin* won a Bruntwood Award and was produced at Manchester Royal Exchange. *Stealing Sweets & Punching People* was produced at Theatre503 and Off-Broadway. His version of Moliere's *The Miser*, co-adapted with Sean Foley, was produced in the West End and nominated for an Olivier Award. Other adaptations include Middleton's *A Mad World*, *My Masters* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for the RSC, Janos Hay's *The Stonewatcher* for the National Theatre and *Pinocchio* for the Royal Opera House. Plays for young audiences include *The Empress & The Nightingale* for Haddangse Theatre in Seoul and *The Flying Machine* for the Unicorn Theatre. *Smashed Eggs* was produced by Pentabus Theatre and won the Arts Council Children's Award.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since its first appearance in 2012 I have seen several productions of *Blink*, amateur and professional, here in the UK and further afield. I am always intrigued to see a new interpretation of the play. In particular, I am interested to see how different audiences respond to the particular version of London that is the setting of the story. *Blink* was commissioned by the Soho Theatre and therefore written with a London audience in mind; a familiarity with the geography of London might be useful in imagining the various romantic encounters, chases, cricket matches and hospital visits that the characters describe. And yet, the play seems to have just as much resonance for non-London audiences. Perhaps this is because they encounter the London of the play much as the characters do, as a place that is exhilarating and intoxicating but can also be somewhat disorientating and never quite feels like home.

The original production of the play, as directed by Joe Murphy and designed by Hannah Clark, was fabulously theatrical and distinctive. The set was composed of three main elements: a bright green carpet that suggested grass; a panoramic autumnal picture like the one at Sophie's dentist across the back of the stage; two utilitarian grey desks existing improbably in this otherwise colourful outdoor world. Jonah and Sophie sat behind the desks for the early part of the play and used microphones when playing other characters in the story. In the years since I have seen some productions that have seemed very influenced, to their detriment, by the imagery of that original production. They have replicated the details of what we made, without necessarily appreciating how or why we arrived at those decisions, and as such they have lacked the kind of coherence of thought that is the mark of a great production. I would therefore encourage directors and designers to be bold and inventive in their conception of the physical world of the play. The original production looked nothing like what I had originally imagined but worked wonderfully; there are many ways of bringing this play to life, all equally valid.

That said, I do have two recommendations for a successful production. Firstly, I suggest that you fully engage with the event of the play, by which I mean you ask yourself why these characters are telling this story out loud and to whom they are speaking. Once you have answers to these questions you have

what you need to tell the story in a nuanced and theatrical way. Secondly, I would advise you not to get too carried away with the inherent sweetness of the story. Of course, there is something eccentric and charming about the naivety of the characters, but an audience can only take so much sugar before it becomes sickly. Be funny, be delightful, be quirky if you must, but always be ready to offset the sweet flavour with notes of acidity and bitterness. The emotional power of the play is contingent on the audience believing that the characters bear real emotional scars.

Blink is a celebration of stories: tall stories, love stories, shaggy dog stories and survival stories. If you put this play on stage and prioritise story above all else you won't go far wrong.

Phil Porter, 2018

Blink had its world premiere on 2 August 2012 at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, with original cast:

CAST

JONAH

Harry McEntire

SOPHIE

Rosie Wyatt

CREATIVE AND PRODUCTION TEAM

Phil Porter

Writer

Joe Murphy

Director

Hannah Clark

Designer

Jack Knowles

Lighting Designer

Isobel Waller-Bridge

Music and Sound

Nicholas Benjamin

Production Manager

Sarah Stott

Stage Manager

Josh Roche

Assistant Director

CHARACTERS

JONAH (20) is socially awkward after a strict upbringing on a religious commune in the north of England. He is trusting, kind and without malice, approaching the world with endearing naivety. But he also has a tendency towards obsessive behaviour in his relationships and everyday life.

SOPHIE (23) was brought up by her father on The Isle Of Man. Following his death, and since losing her job, she has become depressed, rarely venturing out of her flat. On first impression she might appear quite serious and guarded but she has a dry sense of humour and a romantic streak.

JONAH This is a true story, and it's a love story. This is our love story. And the first thing I want to tell you is this: Love is not a cast-iron set of symptoms. Love is whatever you feel it to be. Love is neither dirty nor clean. That's the first thing and this is the second: If you ever get invited to dissect a rabbit's eyeball while at the same time taking apart an old-fashioned single lens reflex camera, accept the invitation. And very soon you'll see how the two things are basically the same. The cornea, that's the front part, that's basically the focus. The iris is the aperture, controlling the light that comes in. The lens is the lens. And the retina, at the back of the eye, that's the film, receiving the image. And if you're like me you'll find that similarity interesting, which brings me on to my third point which is that London is a very interesting place. And you can trust me on this because I'm not from round here.

SOPHIE Okay, so when I'm twelve my gums begin to itch and keep me awake at night. So I tell the dentist and she says my teeth are overcrowded, and she'll take two out to make room. And she gives me a choice between a local, so a needle, and a general, meaning gas. And I'm scared of needles so I choose the gas, which they don't do any more, but basically they hold this mask down over your face and you have to breathe in this stuff. And it's got a kind of rubber taste, like an old rubber ball or something. And as you breathe you can hear this buzz getting louder, like a chainsaw getting closer, so I fix my eyes on this nurse and watch as she merges into this giant picture of autumn that covers one wall. Then when I wake up I'm okay for a second. Until this horrible, groggy feeling hits me. And as we leave I throw up this pool of frothy blood on the doorstep. And we get to the car and I'm sick in the car, and we get home and I'm sick in the porch, and I'm sick about five times more, and it's Pancake

Day but I'm too sick for pancakes, so basically it's just a really bad experience. But at least the itching goes away, until two years later when it comes back, and the dentist says she'll take two more out. And again I get the choice, and again I go for gas, only this time I ask my dad if, when we get home, I can have my bed in the garden. I want to lie outside and clean my lungs in the air. And I know it's mad what I'm asking. It's not a real request, more just an idea. But when we get back my bed's there on the lawn. And this is The Isle of Man in April, so the weather's not warm. But there it is, with an extra blanket, and Winston, my bear, on the pillow. And there's even a bedside table, with fizzy water and a working lamp, and I'm telling you this so you understand the kind of man he was, my dad. He made me feel seen.

JONAH (*holds up a small, mud-encrusted pair of wellies*) Welly boots.

SOPHIE He was a tax lawyer.

JONAH Hand-me-downs from a cousin originally.

SOPHIE My mother lives in Malaga. She left when I was two.

JONAH Wouldn't fit me now. Says on the sole 'Size 3'. And my name on the inside in felt tip: Jonah Jenkins. And if you're wondering why they look worn out that's because they are, and that's because I grew up on a farm. Or self-sufficient religious commune to be specific. We are The Paythorne Presbyterians. Mr Jenkins is my father and he's very much the man in charge. And every morning from six o'clock he reads to us from the Bible till his throat gets sore. If we snooze or fidget, an old man called Mr Fricker whacks across our knuckles with a long wood spoon. Technology's frowned upon, so there's no TV, no toaster, no microwave. Just an old green telephone for emergencies. Food is soup or stew, except on Sundays when we have roasted chicken followed by custard, and every spare minute we work the farm. So, age five I'm milking cows. Age seven catching rabbits for stew. Then age fifteen my mother Mrs Jenkins

dies of pancreatic cancer. Now, it's her that's dealt with the outside world to now, and that's worked well because the outside world likes my mother. Because she's warm, unlike Mrs Dimmock The Unfriendly Whorebag who takes over in her absence. And before long we're getting our windows smashed in at night. And our outbuildings set on fire. 'Jesus Fucks Arses' and 'Jesus Sucks Cock' sprayed on the wall of the barn in graffiti. It's decided we need a nightwatchman, a post for which I volunteer. And from that day forward, each night, from midnight till six, I keep watch. No stopping for tea. No falling asleep or playing with my privates. Just me and Mr Fricker's single reflex camera, every night for five years, me peering through the zoom, and I'm telling you this so you come to see how keeping watch, it becomes a kind of habit for me.

SOPHIE So, The Isle Of Man isn't exactly the centre of the universe. It's a place known mostly for cats with no tails and motorbikes. And jobwise it's kind of limited beyond the financial sector. So when I finish college, Dad retires and buys a house in East London, in Leytonstone, which is where he grew up, and that's where we live. It's actually two separate flats, with me on the first floor and him underneath, with separate front doors and a shared garden. I find a job with a software company called Bunch. We design and sell collaboration and content management solutions for clients in the business market. So, that might be file-sharing apps, project management apps, video-conferencing tools, that kind of thing. I'm one of four client managers and I look after three main accounts: Southern Trains, Haribo Sweets and an Asian snack manufacturer called Balaji. And while I'm at work, Dad goes out and does stuff. London kind of stuff like matinees of plays, or free talks at the Royal Society. And then in the evening we cook in one of our kitchens and we talk. And everything's pretty much perfect until his face turns yellow overnight. And the whites of his eyes go yellow too, and he's diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

JONAH Pancreatic cancer's the first of several coincidences.

SOPHIE He'd smoked for most of his life and that's what caused it.

JONAH My mother didn't smoke but she did have Type Two Diabetes, which is also a known risk factor.

SOPHIE But at first it doesn't feel real somehow. Because he doesn't seem that sick to begin with. But then he starts to age quite rapidly. And he starts getting back pain, and pain when he eats. And he gets this fever at night which gives him nightmares and makes him sleepwalk. And one night he hurts his toe on the leg of the bed, so I offer to move in downstairs with him but he doesn't want that. He doesn't want the illness to be my life, but of course it's my life. We reach a compromise and buy this thing. (*She holds up a video baby monitor*) It's a WiFi baby monitor with a video screen, so if I'm worried I can check on him. In the end he's been lying there days, not really speaking. This is in the hospice now. And I'm just sitting by the bed, watching his chest go up and down. And then, late one morning, it stops. So I think, 'Okay, so that's it then'. But then out of nowhere he's up on his feet. And he's pulling on his catheter, shouting and swearing. And a nurse is suddenly there saying, 'Don't worry, Sophie, it's not him, he's gone'. And she pushes him back down on the bed, quite hard, and now he really is gone. This happens quite a lot apparently. It's like a final bit of the person needs somehow spitting out.

JONAH/SOPHIE CATTERMOLÉ Can I get you something to drink?

SOPHIE (*caught between worlds, as if waking up, in a cloud of grief*) Sorry, what?

JONAH/SOPHIE CATTERMOLÉ Coffee, water, tea? Something herbal?

SOPHIE No, thank you.

JONAH/SOPHIE CATTERMOLÉ You are Sophie Kissack? I'm another Sophie, Sophie Cattermole.

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