Acting Edition

TWENTY THOUSAND STREETS UNDER THE SKY

by Patrick Hamilton
adapted by Simon Reade

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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The World Premiere production of this adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky* was produced by Ashley Cook for Troupe Productions Ltd., by special arrangement with Alan Brodie Representation and Berlin Associates. The production opened at Southwark Playhouse Borough on Thursday, 10 September 2026. The cast was as follows:

BOB . . . . . Jordan Scowen
JENNY MAPLE (JANE TAYLOR) . . . . . Yanexi Enriquez
GEORGE PERRY . . . . . Alex Bhat
ELLA DAWSON . . . . . Rosalind Lailey
ERNEST ECCLES . . . . . Michael Maloney
PRUNELLA/LANDLADY/WAITRESS . . . . . Lucy Gray
Understudy Jenny Maple (Jane Taylor), Ella Dawson and Prunella/Landlady/Waitress . . . . . Emily Beck

Other roles played by members of the company.

Creative and Production Team

Author . . . . . Patrick Hamilton
Adapter . . . . . Simon Reade
Director . . . . . Matthew Iliffe
Set and Costume Designer . . . . . Ellie Wintour
Lighting Designer . . . . . Alex Musgrave
Sound Designer and Composer . . . . . Elizabeth Purnell
Movement Director . . . . . Sam Spencer-Lane
Intimacy Director . . . . . Jess Tucker Boyd
Costume Supervisor . . . . . Alice Stokoe
Stage Manager . . . . . Lois Sime
Assistant Stage Manager . . . . . Elysia Beaumont
Assistant Stage Manager . . . . . Emily Beck
Assistant Director . . . . . Amber Charlie Conroy
Production Manager . . . . . Lewis Champney
Producer . . . . . Ashley Cook

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CHARACTERS

The play can be performed by as few as six actors as follows:

BOB – 25. Throughout the story he can look anything between 20 and 30. Young in spirit. Old in bitter experience. A merchant seaman in his time. Harbours a secret dream of becoming a Great Writer. Cockney-voiced, of deceased parents: Irish mother and American 'cop' father. Clean-shaven. Besotted by Jenny.

ELLA DAWSON – 27/28. Bright, neat, industrious, trim, practical, virtuous. Often startled though largely incapable of startling. Dark hair, shingled 'in the fashion.' Unrequitedly in love with Bob.

JENNY MAPLE – 21. Apparently naïve, ingenuous face, pretty. A 'girl' of the West End streets, i.e. a sex worker, a prostitute. In love with no one. (In a flashback to her earlier life: Jane Taylor, age 18.)

ERNEST ECCLES – 52. A well-to-do clerk. Grey hair, short close-cropped moustache. Significantly shorter than Ella, with whom he is obsessed.

GEORGE PERRY – 38. A raffish gentleman, thick moustache, corpulent and dissipated, yet handsome. An alcoholic, of sorts. (In a flashback to his earlier life: age 35.)

Female "doubles"

PRUNELLA – Older than Jenny. Her friend, of sorts. Also a woman of the streets. Dark, flashy, frank, outspoken.

LANDLADY – Jenny's gatekeeper.

WAITRESS – At the Lyons Corner House. Sometimes bright, sometimes surly.

SETTING & TIME

London, autumn and Christmas 1929.

(In the flashback, 1926.)

DRAMATIST'S NOTES

Patrick Hamilton (1904–1962) wrote his semi-autobiographical trilogy as a dark celebration of the seedy, smoky, smoggy, smutty London lived by him in the late 1920s. It is centred around three protagonists, all as young as the century. Their private isolation, loneliness, and (self-) delusions are played out in the public houses, the pubs of London, "these haunts of destruction." Almost a century on, their collective story still resonates in the epic emotional landscape precisely because it is intimate and profoundly sad. Three modest souls lost in a *danse macabre* in the maze of London – from the Euston Road to Soho, the West End to Hammersmith – those twenty thousand streets of London themselves bringing multifaceted character to the story.

We meet pliable barman BOB, the cockneyfied son of an American cop and an Irish mother. He squanders his life and his £80 life savings in the "wild torments of his obsession" with JENNY, "a girl of the West End streets." Jenny is lured by "the insidious promptings of alcohol" – and her earlier encounter with raffish GEORGE PERRY – into the dissolute world of sex work/prostitution. And the lonely barmaid ELLA who is perfunctorily seduced by the totally incompatible ERNEST ECCLES, twice her age, while she remains hopelessly, unrequitedly in love with Bob. The tone of all their stories is tragicomic, dramatising the suffering and despair of their ordinariness. They are tempted to aspire, but their hopes are dashed in the gutter, with little more than "the dignity of their sorrows" left intact. Hamilton was what his biographer, Nigel Jones, in *Through A Glass Darkly* (Black Spring Press, 2008), calls a "chronicler of the lost and lonely, the restless and the rootless."

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This stage adaptation focuses on these five characters (Bob, Jenny, her dealings with Perry both then and now, Ella, and Eccles) with a bare minimum of supporting roles played economically by just one additional actor: Jenny's larger-than-life friend PRUNELLA (both now and then), the sometimes surly Lyons Corner House WAITRESS, and Jenny's infuriatingly patient LANDLADY.

For better or worse, Hamilton was acutely attuned to what he called "the atmosphere and life and ethics of these places" – the streets, the public houses – and, more ironically, "my own particular brand of fun: Drunkenness!": "talking drunk, confidential drunk, laughing drunk, beautifully drunk, leering drunk, secretive drunk, dignified drunk, admittedly drunk, fighting drunk, and even rolling drunk. And blind drunk. Only one stage off dead drunk." His fragment of an unpublished autobiography was titled "Memoirs of a Heavy Drinking Man."

The chamber adaptation bears witness to the humanity of Hamilton's vision – "the small fish in the weird teeming aquarium of the metropolis" – and seeks to capture all the conflicting emotions of his world, of the "sensation of pity and horror, of shock and weird fascination…swallowed up for ever in the great world of London." (To some extent, *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky* has self-conscious and ironic echoes of Jules Verne's 1869–1871 science fiction adventure story *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.)

Published first as Bob's story (*The Midnight Bell*, 1929), then with Jenny's backstory (the salaciously titled *The Siege of Pleasure*, 1932) and finally Ella's simultaneous story to Bob's (*The Plains of Cement*, 1934, originally titled "Time, Gentlemen, Please"), *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky – A London Trilogy* was compiled and published in one volume in 1935, championed by J. B. Priestley.

Bob dreams of being a writer (an English Tolstoy no less) and the dramatisation works Hamilton's distinctive third-person narrative voice into Bob's aspirant writer's voice (more despairing Dostoyevskian, perhaps, than picaresque Dickensian.) Similarly, Ella's story is told in part through her "introspections" and the dramatisation seeks to capture some of that tone and ambience. From our perspective of Bob's experience, Jenny appears at first to be carelessly cruel, until we learn to appreciate her backstory in *The Siege of Pleasure* – a flashback to the first night she was led astray by men (one man, Perry, in this adaptation) and alcohol. The adaptation weaves her story throughout. Jenny is based on sex worker Lily Connolly with whom Hamilton (a Bob-like ingénue, if a more successful writer) was obsessed.

The dialogue is laced with the subtext of Chekhovian, aching desire beneath deceptive banalities and cheeriness. It has sustained wry, dry humour, an irony of tone which echoes E. M. Forster, even Jane Austen at times. (Mr. Eccles' letters are similar in knowing tone-deafness to *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Collins'.) Yet there are also bursts of dire menace and anxious threat as the discourse spirals downwards into the Dante-esque, hellish circles of the "wicked old town." Because of all this, it often sounds like T. S. Eliot at his most demotic in the *Sweeney* verses, and even proto-Pinter: "I'll show you how to live, I'll show you how to live! I'll show you life with a capital L. I'm a past master of the art." Part of the pleasure of bringing the whole story to the stage now is to repay the debt dramatists of the past one hundred years – and English literature at large – all owe to this great unsung anti-hero of a writer, Patrick Hamilton, for a trilogy that takes us beyond the relative melodramas of his popular plays *Gaslight* and *Rope* (both successfully filmed, the latter by Alfred Hitchcock) and his better-known novel *Hangover Square*. In *Twenty Thousand Streets*, this young writer – himself as old as the century – pens heart-wrenching portraits of female vulnerability, of male emasculation and how it fuels impotent rage.

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Hamilton is often self-consciously theatrical: Bob "snapped up empty glasses to return to the bar with the verve and rapidity of a performer"; "he merely objectivised himself as an abused and terrible character and surrendered to the explicit demands of drama." The production can focus its characters within detailed set-piece design, allowing them to shine against the backdrop of a gaslit shimmer and murk, their voices piping up in the maelstrom of an expressive London soundscape. All of which is painted evocatively by Hamilton.

Whether all these journeys criss-crossing the twenty thousand streets lead to an epiphany or redemption for the protagonists is moot. Jenny appears to be a lost soul. Eccles brings humiliation upon his puffed-up self. Perry is none the wiser. Yet at the (anti-)climax of Bob and Ella's stories, Hamilton offers a kind of hope: Bob doesn't end his own life in despair but literally steps back from the precipice, bucks fate, and chooses to return to the ocean as a wanderlust merchant seaman; Ella has passively abandoned all hope of ever attaining Bob, but she actively chooses to reject Eccles. And, as the curtain is about to fall, the fates conspire to bring Bob and Ella together one last time in a chance encounter at the heart of the twenty thousand streets. Where they finally – *finally* – kiss. Then say goodbye for ever.

The staging

The stage can be as bare and uncluttered as aesthetic and budget demand. But what's necessary to the clarity of storytelling should be seen in scrupulous specificity and detail: a saloon bar, bar stools, circular tables and chairs, cast-iron single beds, washstands, a telephone booth, a park bench, a lamp post, etc. The stage floor and/or backdrop might bear the ghost of an image of the first publication (1936) of London's iconic *AtoZ* of the streets around Soho, Fitzrovia, and the West End: Warren Street, Great Portland Street, Euston Road, Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Street, Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, Saint Martin-in-the-Fields. Most scenes should run straight into the next; scene numbers and headings are there for rehearsal convenience more than anything.

The sound

Exterior and interior. Dawn sparrows. The bustle of the saloon bar and the chatter of the Lyons Corner House. The thronging city streets. The gear-grinding traffic. Footsteps on pavements, the roar of a passing omnibus, all swallowed up in the great whirl of London.

The lighting

Late autumn fog, smog, unforgiving streetlight – strafed through Venetian blinds, diffused by dirty smutty windowpanes. Crisp snow and grim slush.

The language

As far as possible the dialogue retains Hamilton's punctuation, his… elipses, his idiosyncratic Capitalisation for (ironic) Emphasis and (Self-) Importance, his *italicisation*, and his punctilious use of cockney accent (droppin' a "g" e.g.). Hamilton had an acute ear for the word on the street, and was also a playwright, so his rhythms and rhetoric inform his speakable dialogue.

The timeline

The narrative of the novels is set when it was first written: the autumn of 1928. We know this because the clientele of the Midnight Bell refer to King George V's septicaemia that he gravely suffered in November that year. This dramatisation, however, chooses to set the narrative a year later, when the first of the trilogy was first published and the moment of the Wall Street Crash. It also means that Jenny's origin story, set three years earlier, can take place at the time of the General Strike. Hamilton was brought up by snobbish, aspirant parents, and he came to detest the ill effects of capitalism, to despise the bourgeoisie and their contempt for the proletariat. He despaired at the unchecked rise of fascism and was a Marxist, sympathetic to the Communist cause. He is also slippery in his own timeline: Ella is 27 in *The Midnight Bell*; but by the time the story was retold from her own perspective (first published five years later) she was 28.

SR September 2026

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For Ashley

BOB. They don't have "heroines" nowadays, Jenny.

JENNY. Yes they do. An' they have heroes, too.

BOB. No, they don't, Jenny. "Heroes" and "Heroines" are out of date.

JENNY. 'Course they have heroines. You gotta 'ave a girl what goes through it all, haven't you?

BOB. Yes, but you don't make them "heroines" any longer.

JENNY. Don't be silly, Bob. 'Course you do.

BOB. But you *don't*, Jenny.

JENNY. All right, then. You don't. You know more about it than me.

BOB. You might have protagonists…

JENNY. Well, *that's* a good thing…

Scene 18.

PART ONE

Prologue: Dual Streets

(Night. Big Ben chimes. The river laps.)

(In the sparkling, post-Christmas shadows, **BOB**, *25, in suit and muffler, walks dazed towards Westminster bridge – on the precipice; looks down; considers jumping in and ending it all.)*

(A sudden intake of breath –)

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(The tip-tap of steps along London's pavements. The distant trundle of a lone omnibus. The screech of a cat. Some faded sparkly Christmas lights give the scene a seedy glamour.)

*(***JENNY** *– pretty, 21 – steps into the light of a street lamp. A midnight bell tolls.)*

(A man in the shadows – **GEORGE PERRY**, *38, in overcoat, silk muffler, soft hat – lights his cigarette, illuminating his face, his moustache.)*

JENNY. *(Smiling.)* Good evening, dearie. Do you want me?

*(***PERRY** *takes the cigarette out of his mouth and grins.)*

PERRY. *(Well-spoken.)* Pardon?

JENNY. I think you want me – don't you? Late Christmas present.

PERRY. Christmas? Seems days ago now.

JENNY. You've been hanging about here ever such a long while.

(Pause. He looks up and down the deserted street.)

PERRY. Depends how much you want.

JENNY. Well, that depends on you, doesn't it, dear? Would you like to spend the whole night with me?

PERRY. That depends on what it would come to.

JENNY. If I spend the whole night, I'd want a fiver – to make it worth my while. But if it was just for a little while it would come cheaper, wouldn't it?

*(***PERRY** *thinks for a moment, then adopts a business-like tone.)*

PERRY. What about the whole night for four quid?

*(***JENNY** *doesn't think this an unreasonable negotiation, but protests.)*

JENNY. Haven't you got a fiver?

PERRY. No. I can only spare four pounds. Afraid it's that or nothing.

(She pretends to hesitate.)

JENNY. I'm very hard up.

PERRY. Not my problem.

JENNY. It is if you want me.

PERRY. I want you, all right.

JENNY. So you'll have to pay for your wants.

PERRY. Why are you so hard up, then?

JENNY. Why should I tell you?

PERRY. Curious, that's all.

JENNY. All right: a young man called Bob – he's a barman in The Midnight Bell, just off the Euston Road – he gave me twenty pounds –

PERRY. Twenty pounds? Why?

JENNY. Various reasons, dear. Wanted me to go to Brighton with him.

PERRY. Sounds extravagant – and a bit mad.

JENNY. He's crazily in love with me!

PERRY. Did you go?

JENNY. No.

PERRY. Oh.

JENNY. Never showed up at Victoria, did I?

PERRY. Why not?

JENNY. Got drunk and spent all the money instead.

PERRY. All of it?

JENNY. I know. I'm a wrong'un. But I'm afraid of what he might do.

PERRY. Why, is he a monster?

JENNY. Bob? No! He's not a monster. But he'll be wondering where I've got to. And if he finds me, he's bound to make a scene.

PERRY. So why don't you run away?

JENNY. Need the money, don't I.

PERRY. Suppose you do.

JENNY. I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I?

PERRY. Have you? Well, I hope we'll see a lot more of each other!

(Cheap double entendre*, not worthy of him or the situation.)*

Sorry.

JENNY. 'S'all right.

PERRY. You're not a bad little lady, really, are you?

JENNY. I'm not.

PERRY. How did you get this way?

JENNY. I took the Wrong Turning, dear.

PERRY. Did you?

JENNY. I did. With someone not a million miles away from where I'm standing right now, s'matter of fact.

(We should get an inkling that **PERRY** *was the man responsible, even if he is still oblivious.)*

PERRY. Is that a fact?

JENNY. Yes, dear. Got in with the Wrong Crowd, an' I Took to Drink.

PERRY. You did?

JENNY. That's right. All through a glass of whisky.

PERRY. Nothing wrong with a glass of whisky – in moderation. How about we have a whisky, before – you know?

JENNY. No, dear. How about we go to an 'otel?

PERRY. What, now?

JENNY. No time like the present.

(The whoosh of a bus, and they're gone.)

Scene One: Dual Bedrooms

*(Whoosh. October. **Three months earlier.** A darkening Monday afternoon beyond the shabby curtains drawn across the grimy windowpanes.)*

(A lorry thunders past on the Euston Road, rattling the windowpanes.)

*(**BOB** empties a jug of freezing water into a basin on the washstand and plunges his head in, holds his breath for longer than is comfortable for all of us…then rears, gasping. He rubs his hair madly with a grubby towel, looks in the mirror.)*

BOB. Here we go again.

(A distant bell tolls. He checks the time, peers round the curtain out the window.)

*(In the adjacent room, **ELLA** lights the incandescent gas light: similar wrought-iron bed, washstand, jug-and-basin. She cleanses herself, humming to herself. He listens.)*

*(She stops. Hears **BOB** shuffle. They talk to each other through the thin wall.)*

ELLA. Bo-ob!

BOB. Ullo, Ella!

ELLA. What's the time, Bob?

BOB. Five to!

(Silence.)

(They both prepare themselves efficiently, like actors behind the scenes, before their big entrance.)

(He crouches to brush his hair in the mirror.)

(She puts on a sensible, plain dress over her demure slip.)

(When she's ready, she knocks at Bob's door.)

BOB. Come in!

*(***ELLA** *enters.)*

ELLA. Well, 'Bob.'

BOB. *(Not looking up from mirror.)* Well, 'Ella'.

ELLA. Brushing his precious 'hair'.

(He doesn't respond.)

What *you* been doing all afternoon?

BOB. Me? ...Stayed in.

ELLA. Sleeping – I bet.

BOB. Oh, well...

ELLA. And I should think so too, after all them drinks.

BOB. What drinks?

ELLA. If this was my pub, I'd've barred you. Drunk on duty!

BOB. I wasn't drunk.

ELLA. Well, you wasn't far off. And at lunchtime, too. I thought you said you was giving up drink, Bob?

BOB. Can't help it, if they give 'em to me.

ELLA. Oh yes. The Penalties of Popularity, I suppose.

(He buffs his shoes with a rag.)

What d'you want for Christmas, Bob?

BOB. What you thinking about Christmas for, Ella? It's months off.

ELLA. Only ten weeks. It'll be upon us in no time.

BOB. You don't want to be squandering your tips on the likes of me, Ella.

ELLA. Don't I?

BOB. No.

ELLA. Suppose not.

*(**ELLA** riffles through a pile of his magazines and books.)*

You're a great reader, ain't you, Bob?

(She picks up a fat, green volume.)

The Decline an' Fall of the Roman Empire. Do you wade through all this, Bob?

BOB. That's only Volume One. There are seven in all.

ELLA. *(Scanning the pages.)* My word! What did he want to write all that for, Bob?

BOB. *(Rubbing his shoes.)* I couldn't tell you, Ella. I'm getting 'em one by one.

ELLA. Well, I'll Decline and Fall downstairs. So long, Bob.

BOB. So long, Ella.

(She goes out, footsteps receding down the hollow wooden stairs.)

*(**BOB** checks himself one last time in the mirror, turns off the gas, pops on his white bartender's short coat, fixes his white apron, and follows **ELLA** into...)*

Scene Two: The Midnight Bell

(Saloon bar. Thirty foot or so long. Mirror behind, all bottley glitter, row upon row. Large, round clock fixed high above – currently a minute to five o'clock. Leather bar stools and seats at small, round, copper-topped bar tables. Large ashtrays branded with a well-known whisky. A well-provided coal fire.)

*(***BOB** *switches on the electric lights. Goes to the door and slides back the upper bolt, lower bolt.)*

(The dim roar of London outside. The distant thunder of trams.)

*(***BOB** *goes to the front of the bar and joins* **ELLA**, *who is busy behind. He reads the* Evening News, *rattling the pages.)*

BOB. *(Not looking up from his newspaper.)* Quiet tonight.

ELLA. Business is slack.

(She polishes some glasses.)

What's in the news?

BOB. …Nothing much… London Stock Exchange has got the jitters after the Wall Street Crash…

ELLA. And?

BOB. That's about it…

ELLA. Oh… How does that affect the man on the street?

BOB. Or the woman on the street?

ELLA. Yes. More women than men voted in the General Election. For the First Time Ever.

BOB. Must be why Ramsay Macdonald won.

ELLA. What? Labour?

(Firm footsteps ring on the pavement outside – the door swings briskly open with its habitual creak. Enter a short, respectable, middle-aged clerk: **MR ECCLES***, 52. Sporting an old battered black hat.)*

ECCLES. Good evening.

ELLA. Good evening.

BOB. *(Still barely looking up from his newspaper.)* 'Evening.

*(***MR ECCLES** *approaches the bar, fishes coins from his pocket.)*

ECCLES. I'll have a half of Burton, please.

ELLA. *(Automatic response.)* Half of Burton?

(She pulls the half pint, clink of coins, smash of till.)

*(***MR ECCLES** *takes his first sip.)*

ECCLES. Is that the *Star* you've got there?

BOB. *(Still not looking up.)* No. *Evening News*.

ECCLES. Oh.

(He takes another sip.)

I thought perhaps you might have seen my own little contribution?

BOB. What – have you written something for the *Star*, Mr....?

ECCLES. I do turn out little things from time to time.

(He removes an already well-thumbed copy of the Star *from his inside pocket.)*

BOB. Let's have a look.

(He hands it over.)

ECCLES. Only a letter. I think you'll find it on page five. It's on the topic of women's hair:

BOB. *(Reading.)* "I concur most heartily with W.M.B.L., that a woman's hair is her crowning glory. In these days of close-shaven tresses, the would-be modern young miss – frequenter of night clubs and quaffer of cocktails – can be said to be nothing less than letting the side down. Personally, I like it long… Ernest B. Eccles – Bedford Park Mansions, West 4."

Very good, isn't it, Ella?

*(***ELLA** *takes a casual look.)*

ELLA. Very good.

ECCLES. *(Looking at Ella's shingled hair.)* I fear you don't hold my views yourself.

ELLA. I bet you'd like a lot of Lady Godivas knocking about, wouldn't you?

ECCLES. That would depend on the Lady Godiva. Now if you, for instance –

ELLA. Not me. Too cold.

ECCLES. But your hair would keep you warm. Why don't you grow it, like a sensible girl? It would increase your charms a thousandfold.

ELLA. Oh, yes. I'm sure.

ECCLES. Not that any increase is required.

ELLA. Well, we all have to keep up with the fashion, don't we? Though judging by your hat, you're above fashion yourself.

(Ouch.)

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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