

THE P WORD

BY WALEED AKHTAR



TEACHER'S RESOURCE PACK

INTRODUCTION

Hello!

We hope that this Teacher's Resource Pack will help you and your pupils to prepare for your visit to the theatre and afterwards, to explore what you have experienced in watching *Poison*, by Lot Vekemans, at Gothenburg English Studio Theatre.

Some of the exercises are suggested for use prior to the performance whereas others are intended for after having watched the play.

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact us.

Kind regards,

The GEST team

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ABOUT THE PLAY

The P Word by Waleed Akhtar

A Bollywood rom-com, a nail-biting thriller, and a heartwarming comedy – all in one!

“I’m not in your Britain. I’m in another Britain.”

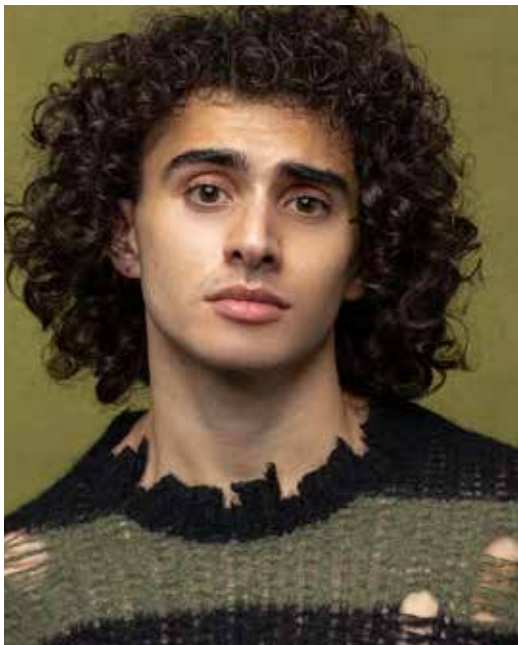
Zafar flees homophobic persecution in Pakistan to seek asylum in Britain. Billy, a gay British-Pakistani man from London, is weighed down by the complexities of being a brown gay man. In Soho, at 2 a.m., parallel worlds collide – and Zafar’s and Billy’s lives are about to change forever, all set to the beat of your favourite Bollywood soundtrack.

Most Promising New Playwright, OffWestEnd Awards - 2023

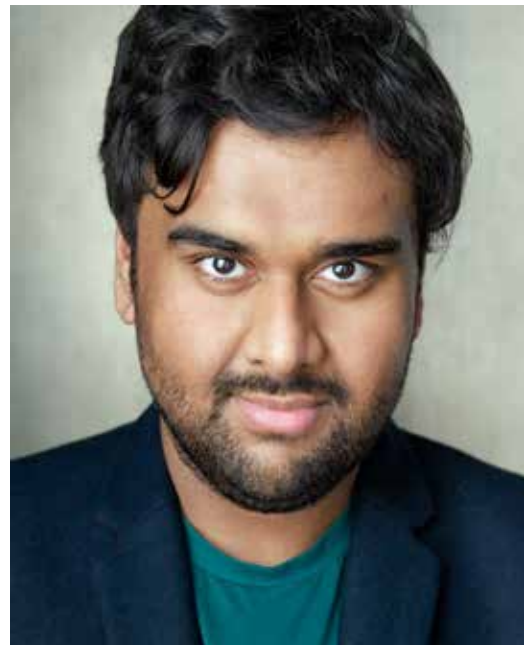
Outstanding Achievement in Affiliate Theatre, Olivier Awards - 2023

‘Tremendous, gorgeous, devastating... The P Word is heart-meltingly lovely, full of faith in the transformative power of love and friendship’ Time Out

‘A tremendous two-man rom-com’ The Times



Harry Singh, ‘Billy’



Raj Kherra, ‘Zafar’

ABOUT GEST

GEST - Gothenburg English Studio Theatre - is an award-winning theatre located in Gothenburg and is the only professional English language theatre in western Sweden.

GEST was founded in 2005 by Kristina Brändén Whitaker and Gary Whitaker to provide quality, contemporary and award-winning theatre in the English language.

GEST works with professional actors and directors from Britain and Sweden and aims to produce theatre of the highest standard, which is accessible to everyone. As well as performing in Sweden in our Gothenburg theatre, GEST also performs internationally and is always keen to collaborate with theatres abroad. We also collaborate closely with schools, colleges and universities, offering specially reduced student prices, workshops and after-show discussions with the actors.

THE TEAM

Playwright: Waleed Akhtar

Director: Gary Whitaker

Assistant Director: Maxima Rodriguez

'Billy': Harry Singh

'Zafar': Raj Khera

Set and Light design: Max Mitle

Sound Design: Yosef Madar



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GOING TO THE THEATRE

You as an audience play a big and important part in the theatre performance.

It would be great if you had an opportunity to go through this chapter prior to your visit to GEST. We hope it will help your pupils get the most out of the play and gain a deeper understanding of how the theatre world works.

Below are some examples of discussion topics, observation exercises and useful vocabulary used in theatres.

1. Discussion topics

What are the differences between live theatre and film?

Things to bear in mind: two dimensional vs. three dimensional; larger/smaller than life on the screen vs. life-size; recorded vs. live, etc.

Discuss the nature of film as mass-produced, versus the one-time only nature of live performances. Which do the students feel is more valuable? Why?

What is the role of the audience in a live performance?

In what ways can you as an audience member affect the play and the actors' performances? How might a non-attentive audience affect the actors on stage, and how could an attentive audience affect them?

How would reactions such as laughter affect the experience for actors and audience alike, and how might noise such as phone calls, text messaging etc. affect them?

If you (the students) were going to put on a play on a small stage, how would you like the audience to be?

Discuss in groups and write a list of etiquette rules for the audience. Compare the rules with the other groups.

In theatre we often talk about the relationship between the actors and the audience, and between the audience members themselves. Even though the actors have rehearsed the play for several weeks before the premiere, no performance is ever exactly the same. The audience plays a big part in this too, as big groups of people often unconsciously create different kinds of atmospheres. The actors on stage can pick up on the atmosphere in the room, which affects their performance, which in turn affects the audience and the atmosphere in the room.

GOING TO THE THEATRE

2. Observation exercise

Observation exercise that you can use when attending a play.

When you get into the theatre, look around. What do you see?

Observe the lighting around the room and on the ceiling. Look at the set. Does it look realistic or is it more abstract? Try to guess how the set will be used during the show.

Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance: the lights, set, props, costumes and stage direction. All the people involved in the "behind the scenes" elements of the theatre are working backstage as the play unfolds before the students' eyes. Ask them to be aware of this as they watch the show. Observe the lighting and sound cues. How do they affect the experience and the story?

To "understand" theatre

Often we think that there is only ONE, correct interpretation of a play's meaning, when really there are very few questions in life to which there is only one unambiguous answer. A play is the result of many people's thoughts and interpretations. The director, an actor or set designer may not all agree on what the play is really about, and your thoughts as an audience member are as important as anyone else's!

Quite often it can be more fruitful to ask yourself what the play made you feel or think, rather than focusing on what the play was about or what the playwright really meant.

Remember that in the arts, there are no wrong answers!

ABOUT THE ASYLUM PROCESS IN SWEDEN

1. Applying for Asylum

A person who comes to Sweden and needs protection applies for asylum at the Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket).

They get a temporary ID card (LMA card), which allows them to stay in Sweden while their case is being processed.

2. Interview and Registration

The person is registered, and basic information is collected.

They have an interview where they explain why they need protection.

3. Investigation and Decision

The Migration Agency carefully examines the case and decides if the person qualifies for asylum.

If approved, they get a residence permit and can stay in Sweden.

If rejected, they can appeal the decision in court.

4. Appealing (if rejected)

If the asylum request is denied, the person has the right to appeal to a Migration Court.

If the court also rejects the appeal, they will be asked to leave Sweden.

5. Staying in Sweden (if approved)

A person who gets asylum can stay, work, and study in Sweden.

After a few years, they may apply for permanent residency and later, Swedish citizenship.

6. Leaving Sweden (if rejected again)

If all appeals are rejected, the person will need to return to their home country.

Many people choose to leave voluntarily and can get support from Swedish authorities for their journey.

If someone cannot or does not want to leave, the police may become involved to arrange the return. This is called forced return or deportation.

GLOSSARY

Appeal A legal request for a case to be reconsidered after a rejection.

Asylum seeker A person who flees their country and asks for protection in another.

Banging British slang for something really good or impressive.

Barrister A type of lawyer in the UK who represents people in court.

Bredrin Derived from Jamaican Patois, meaning “brother” or “close friend”.

Credibility The quality of being believable; crucial in asylum cases.

Destitute Extremely poor and lacking basic necessities.

Forced removal Being taken out of a country against one’s will.

Graft Slang for flirting or making an effort to win someone over.

Home Office The UK government department responsible for immigration and asylum decisions.

Innit Short for “isn’t it?”, commonly used in London slang.

Jacked Muscular and well-built.

Kameez A type of tunic

Leng London slang for someone who is very attractive (an upgrade from “peng”).

LGBT+ Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender/transsexual, where the + makes it an inclusive term for all those whose sexuality isn’t heterosexual or whose gender identity isn’t based on a traditional gender binary.

Parathas A type of flat bread

Peng Slang for something or someone attractive or high-quality.

Persecution Hostility and mistreatment, often due to religion, ethnicity, or sexuality.

Phulkari A type of traditional Pakistani embroidery

Pissed In British slang, it means “drunk”.

Stigma Negative social attitudes towards a group of people, such as asylum seekers or LGBTQ+ individuals

EXERCISES

1. Memory round - discussion exercise

Since it might have been a couple of days since you saw the performance and you might have different experiences and memories of the play it, is a great idea to start with an exercise like a memory round.

Divide into smaller groups and describe to each other what happened in the play. Start from when you entered the theatre. This is not a review exercise, so try to avoid valuing what you saw, just describe it. Use sentences like: 'When I entered the theatre I saw...' 'The actor told us about...' Or answer questions such as:

- When and how did the play start?
- How was the stage set out?
- How would you describe the actors and the characters?
- What relationships did the characters have to one another?
- What were the turning points in the story?
- How did the play end?

Using these sentences and questions, describe to each other what you saw.

2. The P Words – Discussion exercise

In the play, two slurs (derogatory terms), both starting with “P” (making them both “P words”), are mainly used by the character Billy—both to refer to himself and others. The other character, Zafar, reacts to this and challenges Billy.

Why do you think Billy uses these slurs? Why does Zafar react?

Discuss the use of slurs and whether people within certain groups can reclaim words that were originally used to oppress or insult them. Who should—or shouldn't—use such words, and why?

EXERCISES

3. A letter home – writing exercise

In the play, Zafar tries to call his mother;

'It's me, Zafar... Your son'.

Silence

'I don't have a son by that name and I don't know a Zafar. Don't ever call here again'.

Why do you think the mother responded this way? How do you think Zafar felt?

First, write a letter as Zafar to his mother. What would he want to say to her? To the rest of his family?

Next, try to imagine what the mother would reply. What would be her letter to Zafar?

4. Another way – acting exercise

In the play it sounds like Billy has a large family, he calls them “the whole tribe”, but it's been over a year since the last time he saw them. That time, his mum tells him about a cousin that had a baby and says “I always pray you'll have a proper family and kids”. Billy continues:

“I know what she means by proper. I resist the urge to say ‘I will when I find the right guy.’ I just leave early.

I'm tolerated, that should be enough, right?”

Is it enough to be tolerated, but not accepted for who you are and who you love, by your family?

In a group of around four, where someone plays Billy, someone plays the mum and one or two others play other people in the family, explore what would happen if Billy, or someone else (!) spoke up for Billy.

EXERCISES

5. Theatre review – Writing exercise

Write a review for The P Word! Below you'll find some guidelines how to write a theatre review, and on the next page you'll find a real review of the original production of The P Word in London for extra inspiration.

1. Introduction: tell your reader what you saw, where and when. Describe in detail what kind of play this was (drama, comedy, Shakespeare history play, farce – be as specific as possible).

Tell your reader what your general response to the production was. Did you find it an enjoyable experience? Why exactly? Did it give you food for thought? About what and why? What did you learn about modern theatre practices?

2. The direction: the director is the person who is responsible for what you see on stage. What meanings in this play were emphasised? How did the design, staging, and character and acting style choices draw attention to these? Were these choices successful in creating the impact on the audience you thought the director and creative team intended?

Did the theatre itself and the stage suit the production? Why or why not? Was there an interesting and varied use of stage space? Was the focus generally where it should be?

3. The acting: discuss the acting. Was it of a particular kind? Stylised in some way, very physical, very melodramatic, realistic or breaking the 'fourth wall' (these are only a few of the possibilities).

What can you say about the kind of acting in this production compared with the kind of work you've seen in other productions? Was the style of acting appropriate to the kind of play and style of production? Why or why not? What part of the performance did you particularly enjoy? Be as specific as you can in saying why.

4. The design: how did the design contribute to the production's meanings?

Describe the set, light, sound and costume. What kind of a statement did each of these make?

5. Conclusion: what did you particularly like about the production? How did it illuminate your understanding of life?

REVIEW

|Review|

The P Word review - an irresistible romance and so much more

★★★★☆

Bush theatre, London

Waleed Akhtar's bewitching love story between a gym bunny and an asylum seeker raises urgent issues



Arifa Akbar

Fri 16 Sep 2022 13.12 CEST

The P Word is a love story with shades of When Harry Met Sally: it has the same awkward will-they won't-they friendship, cuteness and big dose of schmaltz.

But Waleed Akhtar's duologue is ingeniously so much more: a consciousness-raising play about homophobic persecution, racism within the gay community and Britain's hostile asylum system. These issues do not feel fully enough explored in the play's short duration (80 minutes) but neither are they welded on or shouted out - at least until the very final moment.

Bilal, played by Akhtar, is a British Pakistani who has been bullied at school for being brown, big and gay. He has since transformed himself into a Grindr-addicted gym body, changing his name to Billy and defensively chasing hookups with only white men.

Zafar, played with tenderness by Esh Alladi, is a Pakistani claiming asylum in the UK; his gay lover was murdered and he is marked for the same fate if he returns to his village near Lahore.

Directed by Anthony Simpson-Pike, they are oblivious of each other for the first part of the play, speaking from their own sides of Max Johns' circular dais stage, but there is an emotional gear-shift when they meet. Akhtar's script gains energy, momentum and intensity from hereon in. British Pakistani identity is touched on as well as faith and homophobia, with a lovely exchange about the serenity that Islamic prayer brings for both men.

The play could afford to go further into character. It hurtles on, led by unlikely friendship, while Bilal's emotional transformation comes too quickly. But the story has an irresistible quality that makes us believe in it and we are swept along.

We get the Bollywood ending that the play knowingly drives towards but which it undercuts in the same breath to make a point about asylum. This over-emphatic moment is not needed - we get the message through the story itself. But if this is a slightly scrappy drama, it bewitches with hope, romance and heart.