



# Mutiny and murder for Christmas

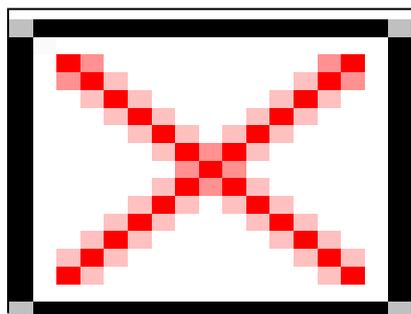
Article Author:

[Geraldine Brennan](#) [1]

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Byline:

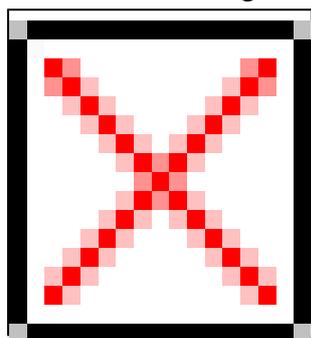
## Treasure Island at the National Theatre



Home of hugely successful stage adaptations of children's books, including **War Horse**, **Emil and the Detectives** and **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**, the **National Theatre** is putting on **Treasure Island** this Christmas. **Geraldine Brennan** talks to playwright **Bryony Lavery** about the challenges and pleasures of bringing Robert Louis Stevenson's classic to the stage.

Bryony Lavery told a gathering of young playwrights earlier this year how she likes to set herself rules for each new project (more than 40 stage plays over almost four decades, plus more than 10 works for radio). She finds that to start writing with constraints of time, space or number of actors boosts creativity.

The rule or challenge that has emerged in adapting **Treasure Island** for the National Theatre is, she says, 'really



more of a pleasure?'. Lavery and director Polly Findlay are determined to pack Robert Louis Stevenson's classic adventure tale of murder and mutiny with great moments through physical storytelling and, above all, as much comedy as possible.

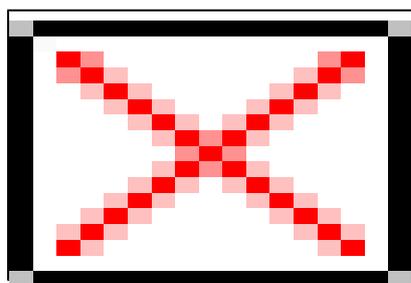
She has the vast Olivier stage, a cast of 22 and a set like one of Stephen Biesty's **Incredible Cross-Sections** to play with and, with the opening night two and a half weeks away at the time of our meeting, is constantly seeing new ways to make the text work harder.

'On stage you need an incident every five seconds. We are constantly looking for ways to add sight gags and visual story. I'm rewriting all the time.'

So her latest draft, taking shape in rehearsal that morning, is at least the fiftieth since she was commissioned in April, rewriting through three development workshops until July.

In the process Stevenson's tale has expanded in all directions. While Jim Hawkins, Long John Silver, Blind Pew and

Black Dog are firmly lodged in our imagination, the Hispaniola and the high seas are teeming with more shadowy characters that also need to live large on stage.



There are maybe six very strong characters in the book, others that have room for development and some who you don't learn a lot about but they need to be there. You can't have actors playing nothing, or just 'a pirate' so we have created some very memorable and characterful pirates and inept wannabe sailors. They all have to print as a character very quickly so they all need something strong about them. Without giving too many surprises away, one is Kind Killigrew who does appear in the book, but I have given him big hands and made him very good at strangling.

Recognising that classic ripping yarns for boys are also for girls, and that 'It would have been dreadful to offer a Christmas show for everyone and include only one female character who is the mother of the hero', this **Treasure Island** has had a gender rethink.

Lavery's Jim Hawkins is a girl, Squire Trelawney recruits female deckhands and the Hispaniola is scuppered by female pirates including Joan the Goat, based on the real-life 18th-century pirate Anne the Goat. The pirate band includes the eminent clown, Angela da Castro.

Comedy aside, Lavery has also retained the darkness of Stevenson's tale of murder and mutiny. The opening chapters in which evil comes to the door of the Admiral Benbow Inn and Jim and his mother appeal for help in vain are among the most chilling in classic children's literature and she wants to keep this sense of dread. Having adapted **More Light**, a play set in a tomb and featuring castration and cannibalism, for the National's **Connections** season to be performed by young people, Lavery is sure of her boundaries.

The intended audience is 10-plus, the age when she discovered the story. 'It's the age when your world becomes bigger. Often it's when you first discover that not all adults are good and you recognise what fear is.

'**Treasure Island** definitely frightened me as a kid. I can remember being very frightened of the Black Spot and not knowing why, and Black Dog, Blind Pew and Billy Bones arriving and really staying with me. When I was asked to adapt the book, all those fears arose.

'We did a workshop with 10-year-olds in a primary school to find out what made them laugh and what would scare them. One teacher said they liked safe danger: they wanted to know who the goodies and baddies were and have a sense that it's all going to work out in the end. The mixture of scary and funny that we have aimed for offers that reassurance.'

Her taste for adventure fiction ('I also loved **The Children of the New Forest**, became skilled at making bows and arrows and wanted to live in the woods' fuelled the sense of play that is always part of her process). 'There will always be room for play at some point.'

Also, she credits her mother's taste for reading narrative poetry aloud ('I loved **The Highwayman** by Alfred Noyes') with developing her sense of the power of language and story. And so her first encounter with Stevenson was in **A Child's Garden of Verses** and her mother's reading of **The Land of Counterpane**. Her delighted command of artistic possibilities is like that of Stevenson's 'giant great and still/That sits upon the pillow-hill' with his toys spread out before him. Later, the public library saw her through the complete works of Thomas Hardy in her teens. 'But I'm glad I saved Dickens until I was older. I got a lot more out of it.'

After a hard week of play at the **National Theatre** she was preparing for a weekend of more playtime at rehearsals for her second Christmas adaptation: **Chichester Festival Theatre's** youth production of **The Hundred and One Dalmatians**. 101 dogs, played by children, tell the story. If there are rules, prepare to see them broken.

**Geraldine Brennan** is a journalist specialising in children's books and education, regularly reviews for the **Observer** and has judged several literary awards.

[Treasure Island](#) [3] opens on December 3

[The Hundred and One Dalmatians](#) [4] opens on December 20

**Treasure Island**, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oxford Children's Books, 978-0192737458, £4.99 pbk

**Treasure Island**, Bryony Lavery (adapter) Robert Louis Stevenson play script, Faber and Faber, 978-0571324361, £9.99 pbk

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