Red Velvet

Background Pack

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Tricycle Creative Learning

The Tricycle’s Creative Learning programme works to develop the imaginations, aspirations and potential of children and young people in the diverse community of Brent and beyond. Collaborating with schools and young people, we use theatre, drama and film, to bring unheard young voices into the mainstream; creating work that engages the emotions and provokes debate. Whether as audiences, writers, performers or producers of new work at the theatre, young people are at the Tricycle’s heart.

About this Background Resource Pack

This document is designed to give an insight into the research and rehearsal of the Tricycle’s 2014 production of *Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabarti, directed by Indhu Rubasingham.

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The Tricycle Theatre 2014 Production of *Red Velvet*
By Lolita Chakrabarti
The Production opened at the Tricycle Theatre Kilburn, on Wednesday 29 January 2014.

**The Company**

Bernard/Terence  Simon Chandler  
Halina/Betty/Margaret  Rachel Finnegan  
Connie  Natasha Gordon  
Casimir/Henry  Nic Jackman  
Ira Aldridge  Adrian Lester  
Ellen  Charlotte Lucas  
Pierre  Eugene O’Hare  
Charles  Oliver Ryan

Director  Indhu Rubasingham  
Designer  Tom Piper  
Lighting Designer  Oliver Fenwick  
Sound Designer  Paul Arditti  
Composer  Paul Englishby  
Choreographer  Imogen Knight  
Casting  Julia Horan  
Assistant Director  Harry Mackrill

Charlotte Lucas, Oliver Ryan, Eugene O’Hara and Adrian Lester  
Photo credit: Tristram Kenton
CHARACTER BIOGRAPHIES

Ira Aldridge (1807 – 1867)
Born in New York City, Ira was educated at New York's African Free School. His father was a clerk and lay preacher who became a minister. Aldridge began acting at Brown’s Theatre for the African Grove, one of the first Black theatre companies. His first known British performance was at the Royal Coburg (now the Old Vic) in 1825, as Oronoko in The Revolt of Surinam. The playbill announced him as a ‘Man of Colour’. Soon after going to England, Aldridge married an Englishwoman, Margaret Gill, in 1824. They were married for 40 years. In 1831 Aldridge began touring Great Britain. He played to great acclaim across the provinces including Dublin, several locations in southern Ireland, Bath, and Edinburgh.
Aldridge first toured to continental Europe in 1852, with successes in Germany (where he was presented to the Duchess of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha), performances for Frederick William IV of Prussia, and in Budapest. An 1858 tour took him to Serbia and to Imperial Russia. A year after Margaret’s death, on April 20, 1865, Aldridge married his mistress, the Swedish countess and Amanda von Brandt, with whom he already had a son, Ira Daniel. They had four more children: Irene Luranah, Ira Frederick, Amanda Aldridge and Rachael Frederica (born shortly after his death). Ira died whilst on tour in Łódź, Poland.

Charles Kean (1811 – 1868)
Born in Waterford, Ireland and educated at Eton, Charles followed his father Edmund into the profession. He made his stage debut in 1827 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. He never repeated the success of Edmund and left London to tour the provinces, returning briefly to play Hamlet in 1838. Often eclipsed by Edmund in classical roles, Charles excelled in melodrama. He eventually became a leading actor-manger, running both the Haymarket and Princess’s Theatres to great acclaim.

Ellen Tree (1805 – 1880)
Born into a theatrical family, Ellen made her stage debut playing Olivia in a musical version of Twelfth Night opposite her sister Maria as Viola. Famously progressive, Ellen was one of the most renowned actresses of her generation. She successfully toured American between 1836 and 39, playing many of Shakespeare’s heroines, and earning the modern equivalent of a million pounds. Ellen met Charles Kean when they were both performing at Drury Lane in 1827; they became engaged in 1832 but didn’t marry until 1842. They often performed together and Ellen retired from the stage when Charles died in 1868.

Pierre Laporte (1799 – 1841)
Little is known of French theatre manager, Pierre. However, he was a successful manager known for a radical and progressive style. In 1841 Laporte replaced the famous baritone, Tambrini with the
newcomer, Coletti, during a run. Audiences stormed the stage in protest and the event was recorded in Tom Ingoldsby’s ballad “A Row in an Omnibus (Box)”.

**Margaret Gill** was born in Yorkshire, England, and was the first wife of Ira. They had no children. After her death Aldridge married the opera singer, Amanda Von Brandt. Margaret died in 1864.

**The play also features:**
- Halina, a Polish journalist
- Casimir, a Polish stage hand
- Terence, Ira’s personal assistant.
- Henry, a young actor in the Covent Garden Company.
- Betty, a young actress in the Covent Garden Company.
- Connie, a Jamaican servant at the Covent Garden theatre.
TIMELINE

1787 The first New York African Free School is created by the New York Manumission Society, an organisation founded to promote the abolition of slavery within New York.

The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade is founded in Britain by Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson.

1807 Ira Aldridge is born in New York, USA on 24 July

1808 The Slave Trade Act of 1807 is passed in Britain. This Act outlawed the slave trade, but not slavery itself, which was not banned in British colonies for another 25 years.

1820 Ira attends the newly established African free School number 2

1821 Ira plays at the newly opened Brown’s Theatre Mercer Street, New York, NY

1824 Ira travels to England

1825 Ira plays Oroonoko at the Royal Coburg Theatre (now the Old Vic) in London

1825 Ira marries Margaret Gill

1827 Ira tours to Sheffield, Halifax, Newcastle, Manchester, Edinburgh, Lancaster, Liverpool and Sunderland

1827 Government of Republic of Haiti honours Ira with a Commission in the Army of Haiti in the 17th regiment of the Grenadier Guards of the President of the Republic, Boyer

1829 Ira tours to the English provinces

1829 Charles Kean plays Iago to Ira’s Othello in Belfast

1832 The House of Commons passes the Reform Act, which introduces extensive changes to the voting system in England and Wales. These changes include extending the vote to the middle classes; any man with property worth £10 or more is now entitled to vote. There are huge riots and a danger of civil war.

1833 Edmund Kean collapses at Covent Garden and Ira is asked to take his place

1833 10 & 12 April Ira plays Othello at Covent Garden

1833 16 April Covent Garden closes for 5 days

1833 Ira returns to the English touring circuit

1838 Ira travels to Belfast

1838 Ira made Brother Mason of the Grand Lodge of Ireland

1839 Ira made excellent Brother of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Ireland

1848 Ira’s son, Ira Daniel, is born to a then unknown woman. He lives with Margaret.

1852 First European tour. Ira plays St Hubert, Aix-la-Chapelle, Elberfeld, Cologne, Bonn, Baden, Basle, and Leipzig

1853 King of Prussia, Frederick IV presents Ira with the Prussian Gold Medal of the First Class for Art and Science
1853  Emperor Franz Joseph presents Ira with the Medal of Ferdinand
1853  Ira becomes Honorary member of the Hungarian Dramatic Conservatoire
1854  Ira is presented with the Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold by the Emperor Of Austria
1854  Ira is a recipient of the White Cross of Switzerland ‘Pour ma merite’
1855  Ira is in London sick for several months, returning to work later that year.
1858  Bernhard, Duke of Saxe Meiningen presents Ira with the Royal Saxon House Order with medal in gold. Ira is now Chevalier Ira Aldridge, Knight of Saxony.
1858  Ira plays Lyceum Theatre, London
1858  Ira plays Russia Imperial Theatre, St Petersburg
1858  Ira becomes an Honorary Member of the Imperial Academy of Beaux Arts, St Petersburg and holder of the Imperial Jubilee de Tolstoy Medal, St Petersburg
1860  Luranah Aldridge born to Amanda, Ira’s mistress
      Abraham Lincoln is elected President of the United States of America
1862  Ira Frederick ‘Fred’ born to Amanda
1862  Moscow- Ira opens at the Maly theatre and is moved to the Bolshoi which is sold out
1863  Ira applies for British citizenship
1864  Margaret dies aged 66
1865  Amanda Aldridge born to Amanda
1865  Ira marries his mistress, Amanda von Brandt
1867  Ira meets Hans Christian Andersen at World Exhibition in Paris
1867  Ira dies in Łódź, Poland on 7th August
ENGLISH THEATRE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Red Velvet is the forgotten story of American actor, Ira Aldridge, and how he came to be the first black actor to play William Shakespeare’s Othello. It is also a play about theatre and the process of creating theatre. At the time Ira was performing in London in the early 19th Century, English theatre was deeply conservative, governed by the taste of the bourgeoisie. The impact of Ira’s performance would have been great and far reaching. It is important to recognise how radical both he and Pierre Laporte were.

- Actresses first appeared on the English stage in 1629, when a French company came to perform in London. However, English women were not allowed to appear on the stage until 1660. It is thought that the first Englishwoman on stage was Margaret Hughes, who performed the role of Desdemona for the King’s Company at the Vere Street Theatre. In 1662 a formal royal warrant was passed by King Charles II declaring that all female roles onstage should be played by women.

- The Licensing Act of 1731 governed English Theatre until it was abolished in 1968 and from its inception was understood as a restrictive measure. Noted in a speech given to the House of Lords by The Earl of Chesterfield, “It seems designed not only as a restraint on the licentiousness of the stage; but it will prove a most arbitrary restraint on the liberty of the stage”. The Act required that the permission of the Lord Chamberlain had to be granted before any performance could take place. The Licensing Act restricted the production of traditional drama to the two ‘Patent’ theatres: Drury Lane and Covent Garden. These were the only two theatres that were allowed to perform Shakespeare in original form. Shakespeare was then, as now, tremendously popular, so to get around the restrictions of the Act, other theatres often staged ‘musical’ versions of Shakespeare’s plays.

- In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the theatre was dominated by the middle classes, and theatre managers in London sought to attract this bourgeois audience with themes that would appeal to the middle class fashion and politics of the time.

- During the Industrial Revolution, the theatre began to develop new styles of stage lighting and scenery (including 3D structures with which the performers could interact, rather than painted scenery), as well as costuming. These changes influenced the acting style of the 19th Century, which was often highly romantic and melodramatic. Gesture and high emotion were heightened to reach the vast audiences of large theatres such as Covent Garden.

- Over the course of the century, the relationship between the audience and players on stage was also formalised. “The audience were being asked to accept one major social innovation: gentlemen were now banned from sitting on the stage and wandering around backstage. The play was clearly to be more important than the social activity of the audience”. (The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre by John Russell Brown).

- As theatre became more respected, more people began to think of acting as an art, rather than a craft. Actors and actresses soon attained a high level of celebrity within London. Edmund Kean was one of the most famous and acclaimed actors of his generation. He made his London debut as Shylock in The Merchant of Venice in 1814. A critic said that Kean’s performance as Othello was full of an “oriental and yet most natural gesture, which even in its naturalness had grand ideal propriety.”

- The leading actor of a theatre company, who would play the title role in any Shakespearean production, would act as the equivalent of the modern-day director. They had total control over the company’s performances.
In the Nineteenth Century, the Theatre Manager was in charge of the day-to-day running of the theatre as well as employing the leading actor and the rest of the company. He would also be in charge of the financial and business elements of producing the play.
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR’S REHEARSAL DIARY

Week One

The director of RED VELVET (and Artistic Director here at the Tricycle Theatre), Indhu Rubasingham, described returning to the play like “being in the company of an old friend”. And that is exactly how it felt being in the rehearsal room. The story of Ira Aldridge, the first black man to play Othello in London, during the abolition of slavery in 1833, premiered at the Tricycle in 2012 and is being revived here before a New York transfer. In between times, Adrian Lester – who plays Ira – actually played the title role in Othello to huge acclaim at the National Theatre.

For this re-visit to the Tricycle, we welcomed two new members of the company, Oliver Ryan and Nic Jackman. Before rehearsals started, Oliver and Nic met up with Indhu and Red Velvet writer Lolita Chakrabarti, to discuss the roles and explore the historical context of the piece. When playing the fictional character of Henry, Nic has some especially important lines regarding the abolition of slavery, which he must fully understand in order for the audience to be up to speed with the detail. Oliver plays a real life figure, Charles Kean – son of the famous actor Edmund – so Lolita discussed the known facts around Charles’ life, which give Oliver a greater freedom when creating the character.

The usual rehearsal process, especially when working on a piece of new writing, is about discovery; the company work to find how to tell the story in the most lucid and dynamic way. The great gift about working on a revival is that the cast and company understand the play and know what works. Rehearsing a play for a second time allows a deeper exploration into the detail of the text and production.

The first day of a rehearsal is usually a testing of the water: everybody meeting, hearing the play out loud and seeing the model box of the set, all for the first time. In contrast, the first Monday for the Red Velvet team involved diving in at the deep end. After the usual company meet and greet, we all gathered around to read Act I Scene II, the first scene in the play with all company members on stage. After this brief read-through we immediately got the play up on its feet.

Indhu worked with Catt Padgham, our Deputy Stage Manager (DSM) and the company – both old and new company members – establishing the blocking from the previous run of the play. She uses the
‘book’, her version of the script which is personally annotated to include all the technical aspects of the production, from sound and lighting cues to the blocking for the cast.

On Thursday, we moved forward from the basic blocking of the play. Our choreographer, Imogen Knight, joined us to recreate the scene changes. These moments consolidate the action within the scenes and allow the relationships between characters to develop beyond the words of Lolita’s play. *Red Velvet* is a play about theatre and Indhu has created a very theatrical style of telling this story. This theatricality allows the audience to move swiftly between the different times and places in which we meet Ira.

We close the week with a ‘stagger through’ of the play. This is when we piece each scene and the scene changes together, so that everyone can see and hear the play together for the first time. It allows Indhu and Lolita, as well as the actors, to be able to chart the story-telling and make sure each beat (the smallest unit of action in a play, covering a shift in the action, thought or emotion of a character) of the play is being told clearly.

### Week Two

It's only the second week of rehearsals and we are moving at a fantastic pace. As the majority of the company are rehearsing for a second time, rehearsals have become more about discovering the detail and minutiae of the text, rather than establishing the basics. As Indhu says, normally when rehearsing a new play it is all unknown, so we are privileged to be exploring deeper and developing the answers that were found during the production last year.

One of the main things to establish for our contemporary audience is how radical Ira's approach to acting is in the play. Theatre performances were still rooted in the popular style of melodrama, and choices that seem obvious now - such as looking into the eyes of the actor you are performing with - were alien concepts to both actors and audiences. Indhu was keen to explore this, and we spent time unravelling each individual response from the Covent Garden company members as they see Ira perform for the first time. It is through them that the audience will understand the challenges that Ira's choices would have posed. These small moments also help heighten the tension in the final scene between Ira and Pierre and help explain why Pierre is so frustrated.

Simon Chandler, Rachel Finnegan, Charlotte Lucas, Nic Jackman, Natasha Gordon and Eugene O’Hara

*Photo credit: Tristram Kenton*
We started running each half of the play. Usually the bigger picture of the entire play wouldn’t be seen until at least week 3 - but in this shortened ‘re-rehearsal’ process, we start to play in front of an audience next week! It is important to the language of the play that the scene changes are rehearsed in the context of the play; each look and movement says something about how the character is feeling and establishes a finer exploration of their own journey.

By Wednesday we were ready for a full run. There was a real excitement in the rehearsal room and several of the creatives attended in preparation for the technical rehearsals in the theatre. We worked with the sound in situ and Oliver Fenwick, lighting designer, scribbled away - working out how to light the new blocking that has emerged during rehearsals. During this run our dialect coach, Richard Ryder sat in to make notes: he then coached each actor in terms of how they can develop their accents. As we have a range in the show (from French to American, German and Cockney!) it is important that everyone is as accurate as they can be.

The week continued with some further rehearsal and we had a final run through of the play on Friday afternoon. The company focused in on all the work they had done over the past fortnight and it was a wonderful performance – a great way to say goodbye to the rehearsal room. The next time the play is performed in its entirety it will be in the theatre and in front of an audience.

**Week Three**

We are now in the theatre for technical rehearsals. It seems bizarre that we have already finished our journey in the rehearsal room, but the play is ready for the next part of its journey. The set has been in storage in Deptford since last year and has been rebuilt. It is wonderful to see it back in all its glory. Tech rehearsals are usually a slow and laborious process, which each member of the creative team trying out new ideas. As we know the production already works, it is a case of recreating the visual and audio world that was developed in 2012 – with a few tweaks here and there each time the blocking has changed dramatically.

By Wednesday afternoon every element is in place and we await the final piece of the jigsaw – the audience. Tonight it will be the staff of the Tricycle, who see the final dress rehearsal before the public arrive tomorrow evening. The theatre is buzzing with excitement as we join together to bring Ira back to the stage once more. Next stop, New York!
INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL FINNEGAN

*Red Velvet* is set in the Nineteenth Century. How does performing in a period piece affect the rehearsal process?

It started in rehearsal – we did a lot of table work in the first week and everyone came with bits of research that they had done. We talked a lot with Lolita about all the research she had done when writing the play and we had a big discussion working the play through in sections and dissecting the facts in each section. We then discussed if and how Lolita’s interpretation differed from the facts. You let all that information sit with you and at some point – you don’t forget about it, but you stop thinking about it as much. And once you get up on your feet, you work with the text and hope that the research has soaked in and given you a basis from which to work.

In terms of period, the main thing for me was physicality. The corsets help quite a lot with that. My natural disposition is to be quite slouchy and wear big baggy jeans and you can’t do that with corsets. You have to be more upright and everything automatically feels more formal. So the costumes definitely helped with that.

You play three parts in *Red Velvet*: Halina – the Polish journalist, Betty – the young actress, and Margaret – Ira’s first wife. What are the challenges of playing three different roles?

It really started before the rehearsal process, for the audition, because I knew I had to come in and find three distinct and individual characters quite quickly. So it was about finding specific things that I could latch on to for each of them, which would help me change quickly. When I first started looking at the character of Margaret, it was Betty’s line ”She’s a bit of a mouse” which told me about her and I really latched onto that. With Betty, the horse anecdote told me that she was a vivacious, lively and confident character. And with Halina I really felt that she was a woman in a man’s world, she has a persistence and strength about her. She is intelligent. So it’s all about mining different things from the text and then building it in rehearsal, adding layers and allowing it to become more detailed as time goes on.

When you first start running it, running the play the whole way through, it’s a bit of a marathon. Your mind is all over the place going from one character to another, but the more you do it, the easier those switches become.

How has the production developed between the first run and this revival? How do you feel your own performance has changed?

The whole production to me feels more detailed. It feels like we’ve added layers to what was already a strong production – and we’ve been able to go over things again which we wanted to
iron out. So it feels like it has grown and found a new depth. I feel especially that the women in the play have grown. Halina now is so much stronger than she was in the first run, which is something that came out of rehearsals, which we liked and thought was right for the character. As for Margaret, her relationship with Ira feels more authentic this time around. It feels quite combative in a way that a married couple would be.

Coming back to the show, there is a higher level of trust. You can be braver because you know it’s a good show to begin with and there is a freedom for us to add new elements. And for me, when we started last year I had just graduated from drama school. So I have grown myself – now I feel more comfortable in myself and stronger when changing things, bringing new ideas and exploring more.