

# IN CONVERSATION

## WITH THE CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM



*Joe Penhall's work is concerned with universal issues; mental illness, human isolation, work and family structures observed through the minutiae of everyday life. His plays challenge notions of 'the norm' by extending the boundaries of the performance text into the realms of hyper-naturalism, experimenting with heightened dialogue and thwarting perceived notions of gender. This play presents a balanced yet contradictory representation of schizophrenia; an illness which, unlike a broken leg, is difficult to securely diagnose. Indeed, the piece explores the many ways in which all mental health diagnoses boil down to semantics: questions of language where one word placed wrongly can make all the difference. So, in a play about the ability of language to change people's lives, the audience are asked to question their perceptions and are made to examine, forensically, the intellectual pathways through which we treat mental health and the damage that so often occurs in the name of liberal fundamentalism.*



*During the first week of rehearsals, Joe and the company sat down for a discussion on what the play's themes mean to them today:*

**Joe Penhall:** I wrote *Blue/Orange* to present an extraordinary argument that couldn't be held in conversation.

**Giles Terera:** The beautiful thing about theatre is that we can explore these themes over a couple of hours rather than in the short form that debates are so often conducted today.

**James Dacre:** In an age in which too often we tell stories from just one perspective, or make arguments from just one side of a debate, one of the things I think that is so remarkable about all of Joe's work is the way that he provides balance and perspective: two sides of a debate. He really celebrates the raw ability of theatre to create a forum in which ideas are dissected and discussed, not reduced to 60 characters in a tweet, but really explored with all of the nuance that the complex themes he tackles demand.

**Ralph Davis:** The way in which *Blue/Orange* captures three men's warring ideologies over issues of power, race, identity politics and privilege is so contemporary. Fundamentally, it's about three men desperately trying to get what they want. That speaks so powerfully at a time when everything's so polarised, divided and divisive as it is at the moment. It can feel a lot of the time like there's a war, even inside your own head, because what you see on the news, read on social media or experience in the workplace can be so full of contradictions. It can be really difficult to figure out who you are and what you believe in.



**Joe:** The play's central themes are Identity, Power and Language. I was fascinated by the question of who has the right to say who you are and what you are? Who holds the power in a situation and to what extent are those with the best education - the best grasp of language - always able to talk their way out of trouble, to win arguments and ensure that they come out on top.

**James:** After eighteen months in which it's been impossible to welcome audiences to live theatre, *Blue/Orange* makes a powerful case for how different points of view can be captured onstage, asking audiences to join in with those arguments and to relish being a part of the debate. It's a play that asks so many timely questions: *What does it mean to be British in the 21st century? What are our shared values? What do we care about as a nation, but also, what stands us apart?*

**Giles:** I think Joe captures not only the complex workings of how we think and feel about these things, but manages to do it in a really truthfully funny way. I know a lot of people who in the last two years have been desperate to have these kinds of conversations. And it's actually really tricky sometimes. I think this play, and hopefully our production, provides a space where we can have that kind of discourse.

**Francesca Murray-Fuentes:** With this production we're not simply giving an old play a facelift. We're rediscovering the heart of this story, and placing it very securely into a world that we understand. So it may be set 20 years ago, but I believe it will resonate deeply with a 2021 audience. It has a really strong undercurrent of how we treat the most vulnerable in our society when they are placed in our care.



**Michael Balogun:** We're beginning to realise that far more people suffer from mental health issues than we previously thought. And that a higher than normal percentage of Black people suffer with mental health issues. This play tries to understand why that is and explores how prejudice, racism and powerlessness affect people's mental health.

**Francesca:** The 'wear and tear' of racism, in its many forms, places huge pressure on people's mental wellbeing. For some young Black men the residual and intergenerational effects of slavery and historical trauma are still keenly felt, and you add that to ongoing experiences of trauma and injustice, daily micro-aggressions...

**Michael:** If you're a Black man in Britain you're 17 times more likely to be diagnosed with a serious mental health condition than if you're White.

**Giles:** One of the themes in the play is about the treatment of mental health with regards to race. How a person is responded to and treated given their ethnic background; or not, whether that's a factor and whether that should be a factor.

**Francesca:** Debate had been raging since the publication in 1982 of 'Aliens and Alienists' as to whether misdiagnosis was the reason behind why psychiatric admissions in the UK Black population were four or five times what was expected.

**James:** The popular understanding was that White, middle class British psychiatrists were simply misdiagnosing

schizophrenia in people whose culture they did not understand. Early in the millennium, independent research assessments were carried out and purported to find misdiagnosis no more common in Black than White patients. The National Schizophrenia Fellowship reported that it did "not accept that any individual ethnic group has more inherent susceptibility to severe mental illness than any other groups". Can we take this to be true? Even if it is, the questions still remain: "Why are admissions so high?" and "What can we do about it?"

**The Mental Health Foundation Report of 30 September 2021 reported that:**

- In the year to March 2020, Black people were more than 4 times as likely as White people to be detained under the Mental Health Act – 321.7 detentions per 100,000 people, compared with 73.4 per 100,000 people
- Black men are more likely to have experienced a psychotic disorder in the last year than White men
- Refugees and asylum seekers are more likely to experience mental health problems than the general population, including higher rates of depression, anxiety and PTSD.



**Joe:** I wrote *Blue/Orange* in my twenties after working as a cadet journalist, when there were several reported cases of people who were incarcerated in mental hospitals for saying things like, 'Idi Amin's secret police are following me around Peckham', and being diagnosed as being delusional as a result. And what I discovered at the time and is widely acknowledged today is that there really were people being followed around Peckham by Idi Amin's or Gaddafi's or Mugabe's secret police. Today I think that we're much more open to the complexity of other people's life stories. When the play first premiered the medical



establishment was far more dominated by educated, privileged, White professionals. And those from outside of this background were too often considered outsiders. Now, people are a lot more aware of the complexities of the human experience and less judgemental of different human experiences but whilst we've made some progress in this respect, there's far more still to be made.

Another story that influenced the play came about through a friend of mine in America who was schizophrenic. He fortunately recovered and used his experience of recuperation to begin supporting others who were recovering from bipolar and schizophrenic disorders. I joined him as a volunteer for a number of weeks and came across an African American man from Missouri who had a pervasive, enduring delusion that he was White and female. I was so moved by the complexity of this plight and the impossibility of explaining it to people. So I wrote this play, in part, as an attempt to understand why this might be and to explore quite how complex the human condition can be.

**Ralph:** I think Giles playing Robert - a role previously always played by Caucasian actors - is really important to that sense of complexity. It deepens the conversation about what the play is about. And makes its discussions about race very rich and complex and interesting.

**Michael:** It also recognises how schizophrenia is misunderstood and heavily stigmatised in society. Through following Christopher's journey audiences will

hopefully understand that better. I hope audiences will leave the theatre discussing whose journey they aligned with the most: whose story they related to most.

**Joe:** Yes, I hope the play and its characters speak to people very directly. We're trying to make the play more representational of what the NHS is like now and how the world has changed over the past twenty years. We're attempting to do something very fresh that, hopefully, feels just as relevant to audiences today as it did when I first wrote it.

*"Being young, Black and British in 2021 it's hard to not live in a state of constant rage. The rage you feel deeply has many layers, roots and consequences. The rage is both personal and political. The rage is simultaneously communal and collective. The rage is rooted in the historical and the present. The rage that surrounds you paints, shapes and colours the lens you navigate the world through. It's hard not to feel fearful, bleak and defeated. There are enraging injustices all around you. Here's a short summary: In the history classroom Black stories of resistance, joy and contribution are lost, minimised and erased as a one dimensional perspective on Black life and history is presented as empire, colonialism and slavery is presented as the sum total of Black existence. It's witnessing year after year the wasted potential of young people in your community as a result of an underfunded and ill-designed education system, whether it be the disproportionate school exclusion of young Black children or the existence of the school to prison pipeline. On a wider scale, it's seeing and being hyper aware of the violent, traumatic and ever-present impact of institutional racism. From cases of police brutality captured on social media, to the deportations of the Windrush generation, to the Grenfell Tower fire - we see the violent impact of a world working against the communities we are from, have grown up in and deeply love. What I'm talking about is inextricably linked to the mental health of young Black people."*

**Athian Akec, activist, writer and speaker,  
Black Minds Matter UK**