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A woman in a black lace dress and veil stands in the center of a dark, candlelit room. The room is filled with fog and lit by several lit candles on a table to the left. To the right, there is a chair with a white veil draped over it. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and terrifying.

**THE
WOMAN
IN BLACK**

BY SUSAN HILL & STEPHEN MALLATRATT

EDUCATION PACK



EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE PACK FOR THE WOMAN IN BLACK

SUPPORTING MATERIALS FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Educational Resource Pack for The Woman in Black, adapted by Stephen Mallatratt from Susan Hill's 1983 novel.

This pack is designed to help students and teachers engage more deeply with the play, both before and after watching it. It includes key information about the plot, characters, themes, and production, as well as discussion questions and activities to stimulate critical thinking.

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1. PLOT

The *Woman in Black* is a gripping and atmospheric tale of loss, revenge, and the supernatural, blending traditional ghost story elements with a psychological depth that leaves a lasting impact on its audience.

The story centres around Arthur Kipps, a young and somewhat inexperienced solicitor, who is tasked with travelling to a remote and isolated village to attend the funeral of Mrs. Alice Drablow, a reclusive client of his firm. Kipps is also responsible for organising her affairs and retrieving any important legal documents from her eerie, abandoned estate—Eel Marsh House.

The journey to Eel Marsh House is Kipps's first encounter with the village's strange and unsettling atmosphere. Cut off from the mainland by a causeway that is only accessible at low tide, the house itself is surrounded by treacherous marshlands and a thick, ever-present fog. The villagers, although generally welcoming, are secretive and evasive, particularly when the conversation turns toward Eel Marsh House or its former inhabitants. Kipps soon senses that something is being deliberately withheld from him.

Upon entering Eel Marsh House, Kipps begins to uncover sinister secrets about the house's tragic past. He becomes aware of a ghostly presence—the mysterious *Woman in Black*—whose appearances seem to be tied to inexplicable and terrifying events.

The villagers' fearful reactions to her reveal that the *Woman in Black* has become a figure of local legend, known to bring tragedy to all who see her. It soon becomes apparent that the ghost is linked to a terrible family tragedy involving the death of a child, and Kipps finds himself increasingly entangled in the supernatural occurrences that seem to plague the house and the surrounding village.



As Kipps delves deeper into the mystery, the tension escalates, leading to a series of haunting encounters that shake his rationality and unravel his understanding of reality. What begins as a professional duty quickly turns into a personal nightmare, as Kipps learns the devastating truth about the Woman in Black's vengeful spirit. Her presence is not only linked to the past but continues to influence the present, with tragic and far-reaching consequences.

Many years after the events at Eel Marsh House, an older Arthur Kipps, still haunted by the trauma of his experiences, seeks to exorcise his psychological demons. He hires a young actor to help him dramatise and retell the story, hoping that by reliving the terrifying events of his past, he can finally lay his memories to rest. In doing so, the audience is taken on a journey through Kipps's traumatic memories, watching as the actor portrays the younger Kipps, while the older Kipps watches on, guiding the retelling.

As the narrative shifts between past and present, the play builds an atmosphere of dread, gradually peeling back the layers of the ghostly mystery that surrounds Eel Marsh House and its ghostly inhabitant.

The Woman in Black herself is a silent, malevolent force throughout the play, her presence marked by fear, tragedy, and death, ensuring that Kipps—and the audience—will never forget her terrifying hold over the town and its people.

Through its sparse use of props, minimal set design, and reliance on lighting and sound, the play succeeds in making the audience feel a part of the chilling and supernatural world it creates. It's not just a ghost story—it's an exploration of the devastating impact of grief, unresolved trauma, and revenge.



2. KEY THEMES

- **Fear of the Unknown:** The central tension of the play comes from the audience's fear of the unknown, created through the unseen presence of the Woman in Black. The play taps into psychological horror, making the audience question what is real and what is imagined.
- **Isolation:** The desolate setting of Eel Marsh House, separated from the mainland by a tidal causeway, amplifies the sense of isolation felt by Kipps. This physical isolation mirrors the emotional isolation experienced by characters haunted by the past.
- **Grief and Revenge:** The Woman in Black, Jennet Humfrye, is driven by the unbearable grief of losing her child. Her vengeful spirit reflects the dangers of unresolved grief, as her presence continues to cause harm long after her death.
- **The Power of Memory:** Kipps's recounting of his past highlights the impact of trauma. His attempt to relive and process the events underscores the lasting effects of memory and its role in shaping personal identity and fear.



3. CHARACTERS

ARTHUR KIPPS

Arthur Kipps is the protagonist of *The Woman in Black*. As a young solicitor, he is practical, rational, and duty-bound. Initially, he approaches his task at Eel Marsh House with confidence, dismissing the villagers' superstitions about the house and the Woman in Black. However, as the story unfolds, Kipps becomes increasingly consumed by fear and doubt. His rational worldview begins to break down as he encounters the supernatural, which profoundly affects his mental state.

Later in life, the older Kipps is haunted by the traumatic memories of his time at Eel Marsh House. He is scarred emotionally by the events he experienced and seeks solace by retelling his story. The "play within a play" structure allows the audience to see both the confident, younger Kipps and the older, more fragile man still trying to come to terms with his past.

Key Traits: Rational, determined, traumatized, haunted by the past.

THE ACTOR

The Actor is a key figure in the "play within a play" structure. He is hired by the older Arthur Kipps to help dramatize and retell the events of Kipps's past.

Initially, the Actor is professional, confident, and skilled at his craft. He approaches the retelling as a challenge, seeking to bring Kipps's story to life through performance. As the play progresses, the Actor becomes emotionally invested in Kipps's story, experiencing fear and tension as the haunting tale unfolds. His transformation from a detached performer to a character deeply immersed in the ghostly events mirrors the audience's journey, as they too become drawn into the terrifying narrative. The Actor serves as both an interpreter of the story and a participant in the chilling events.

Key Traits: Confident, skilled, adaptable, empathetic.



THE WOMAN IN BLACK (JENNET HUMFRYE)

The Woman in Black, also known as Jennet Humfrye, is the play's central antagonist and a spectral figure of fear and vengeance. Jennet's backstory is one of heartbreak and tragedy.

She gave birth to an illegitimate child who was taken from her and raised by her sister. Though Jennet longed to be with her child, she was forbidden from doing so. Tragically, the child died in a fatal accident near Eel Marsh House, which Jennet witnessed from afar. Overcome with grief and anger, she died not long after, but her spirit never found peace.

In death, Jennet becomes the Woman in Black, a vengeful ghost who haunts Eel Marsh House and the surrounding village. Whenever she is seen, it is said that a child dies, making her presence a harbinger of doom. The Woman in Black embodies unresolved grief and revenge, taking out her fury on the living by ensuring that no one escapes her curse.

Key Traits: Vengeful, grief-stricken, tragic, malevolent.

MR SAMUEL DAILY

Mr. Samuel Daily is a local landowner who befriends Arthur Kipps during his stay in the village. Unlike the superstitious villagers, Daily is more rational and pragmatic, though he is still cautious when it comes to the supernatural occurrences surrounding Eel Marsh House. Daily tries to warn Kipps about the dangers of the Woman in Black, but his efforts are ultimately futile.

Daily's wealth and status in the village allow him to take a more detached view of the events. He does not suffer the same fears as the villagers, but he is not ignorant of the risks Kipps faces. His character adds an element of wisdom and support for Kipps, offering practical help and a more measured perspective on the situation.

Key Traits: Rational, supportive, cautious, protective.

MR JEROME

Mr. Jerome is the local solicitor who originally handled Mrs. Drablow's affairs before Kipps arrived. Like the other villagers, Jerome is deeply disturbed by the Woman in Black and is reluctant to speak about her. He is visibly shaken when Kipps mentions the ghost, and his nervous demeanour reveals how terrified he is of the supernatural events surrounding Eel Marsh House.

Jerome's character highlights the fear and paranoia that grips the village. His reluctance to assist Kipps fully and his evasiveness regarding the Woman in Black reflect the community's collective trauma and helplessness in the face of the ghost's curse.

Key Traits: Nervous, evasive, fearful, superstitious.



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4. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

The *Woman in Black* by Susan Hill, and its stage adaptation by Stephen Mallatratt, is deeply rooted in the traditions of gothic literature, a genre that emerged in the 18th century and continued to evolve throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Gothic fiction is known for its dark, eerie settings, supernatural elements, and themes of madness, death, and isolation—all of which are central to *The Woman in Black*.

Gothic Literature

Gothic literature became popular during the late 1700s, with works such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* setting the foundation for the genre. The gothic tradition often features haunted houses, desolate landscapes, and tragic, tormented characters. These elements evoke an atmosphere of fear and suspense, exploring the boundaries between the known and the unknown, the natural and the supernatural.

The Woman in Black fits squarely into this gothic tradition, with its remote setting at Eel Marsh House, an isolated, decaying mansion surrounded by treacherous marshlands. The house itself serves as a classic gothic symbol, representing both physical and emotional isolation. Similarly, the ever-present fog and eerie silence of the marshlands create a foreboding atmosphere, further isolating the characters from the safety of the mainland.

Victorian Ghost Stories

The play also draws heavily on the Victorian tradition of ghost stories, which flourished in the 19th century. These stories were often published in magazines and read aloud as a form of entertainment, especially during the long, dark winter nights. Authors like Charles Dickens and Henry James made ghost stories a popular part of literary culture, using them not only to frighten but also to explore psychological and social issues.



In *The Woman in Black*, the ghost story is not just a source of fear but a vehicle for exploring grief, loss, and revenge. Jennet Humfrye's transformation into the vengeful Woman in Black reflects the Victorian fascination with the afterlife and unresolved emotional trauma. Like many Victorian ghost stories, the play suggests that the past can never be fully escaped — it continues to haunt the present.

Themes of Social Class and Isolation

Set in an early 20th-century context, the story also reflects certain anxieties of the time, particularly surrounding class and societal expectations. The character of Arthur Kipps, a middle-class professional, is sent to deal with the affairs of the upper-class Drablow family, highlighting the divisions between social classes. Mrs. Drablow and Jennet Humfrye's family secrets are carefully hidden behind the walls of Eel Marsh House, a symbol of the old aristocracy, with their personal tragedies impacting the wider community.

Eel Marsh House's isolation from the village can be seen as a metaphor for the emotional isolation of its inhabitants. Jennet Humfrye, shunned by society due to her status as an unwed mother, is forced to live apart from her son, leading to the unbearable grief that drives her to become the vengeful Woman in Black. This theme of isolation is central to gothic literature, where characters are often physically and emotionally cut off from the rest of society, leading to madness, despair, or tragedy.

The Supernatural and Psychological Horror

Unlike more traditional ghost stories where supernatural elements are explicitly evil or good, *The Woman in Black* blends the supernatural with psychological horror. Much of the terror stems from Arthur Kipps's inner turmoil, as his rational worldview is shattered by the inexplicable events he experiences. This blend of the psychological and supernatural links the play to gothic texts like Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, where the line between reality and imagination is blurred, leaving both the protagonist and the audience unsure of what is truly happening.

The play also taps into the psychological horror of confronting unresolved trauma. The older Kipps is plagued by his memories of Eel Marsh House, and the act of retelling his story is a desperate attempt to make sense of his experiences. This psychological depth adds a layer of complexity to the story, making it not just a tale of ghosts, but of human suffering and the long-lasting impact of grief.

Theatrical Context

Stephen Mallatratt's stage adaptation, which premiered in 1987, is notable for its innovative use of the "play within a play" structure. This framing device draws attention to the power of storytelling itself, allowing the audience to experience the past through Kipps's memories while engaging with the present-day retelling. This technique also adds a meta-theatrical layer, blurring the boundaries between actor and character, performance and reality.

What makes the stage version particularly unique is its minimalist approach to staging. With only two actors and a few props, the play relies heavily on sound, lighting, and the audience's imagination to create its eerie atmosphere. This echoes the tradition of Victorian theatre, where budget limitations often led to creative, atmospheric solutions that focused on psychological tension rather than elaborate special effects. The sparse staging of *The Woman in Black* heightens the suspense, as the audience is left to imagine the horrors lurking just out of sight.

Modern Ghost Stories and Enduring Appeal

Since its publication and subsequent adaptation, *The Woman in Black* has earned its place among modern ghost stories. Its themes of isolation, grief, and revenge resonate with contemporary audiences, who continue to be drawn to its haunting atmosphere and emotional depth. The story's universal themes of loss and the fear of the unknown allow it to transcend its gothic roots and remain relevant to new generations.

The enduring appeal of *The Woman in Black* can also be seen in its success on stage and screen. It became one of the longest-running plays in West End history, captivating audiences with its ability to evoke fear through suggestion, atmosphere, and the power of the imagination. This minimalist, psychologically charged approach reflects a broader trend in modern horror, where subtlety and emotional complexity often replace overt gore and violence, creating a more lasting impact on audiences.



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5. EXPLORING THE PRODUCTION

The *Woman in Black* is not just a haunting story; it is a masterclass in how minimalist theatrical production can create a deeply immersive and terrifying experience. The play, adapted by Stephen Mallatratt, relies heavily on atmosphere, technical effects, and the audience's imagination to evoke fear.

MINIMALIST STAGING

One of the most striking features of *The Woman in Black* is its minimalist approach to staging. With only two actors, a handful of props, and a bare stage, the play strips away the excess, forcing the audience to focus on the psychological tension and atmosphere. Unlike more elaborate productions, where extensive sets and effects are used to create spectacle, *The Woman in Black* relies on simplicity, which leaves much of the horror to the audience's imagination.

The stage typically includes basic props such as a chair, a coat rack, and a desk. These minimal elements are cleverly manipulated to serve multiple purposes throughout the play. For instance, a simple chest can act as a carriage or a bed, allowing the production to seamlessly transition between locations. The audience is invited to use their imagination to visualize Eel Marsh House, the fog-covered causeway, and the menacing marshes, making the fear more personal and psychological.

This minimalist staging mirrors the isolation felt by Arthur Kipps, heightening the sense of loneliness and vulnerability as he navigates the eerie surroundings of Eel Marsh House. The starkness of the stage also draws attention to the story's characters and themes, rather than distracting the audience with elaborate set pieces.

THE POWER OF SOUND

Sound plays a crucial role in building tension and fear in the production. Because the stage is so sparsely decorated, the soundscape fills in the gaps, creating a sense of place and heightening suspense. The play uses sound effects such as the creaking of floorboards, the clatter of horse hooves on



the marsh, the distant cries of a child, and the eerie silence that descends at key moments. These sounds are often sudden and jarring, designed to unnerve the audience and keep them on edge.

The use of sound to create an atmosphere of dread is particularly effective in scenes where Kipps explores Eel Marsh House. The silence between sounds can be just as terrifying as the sounds themselves, as it builds anticipation for the next unnerving moment. The audience is left in a constant state of suspense, waiting for the next sound to signal something ominous.

One particularly effective sound element is the cry of the Woman in Black's lost child. This haunting sound is used sparingly but with great impact, often signaling that something terrible is about to happen. By using sound to evoke the presence of the supernatural, the play keeps the audience guessing about what is real and what is imagined.

The West End Worldwide production features an original soundtrack composed by Director John Payton, seamlessly weaving a delicate theme throughout the play. It includes a haunting music box aria and a dramatic, cinematic score, enhancing the emotional depth and atmosphere of the performance

STRATEGIC LIGHTING

Lighting is another essential tool in creating the ghostly, unsettling world of *The Woman in Black*. The production makes use of shadow and darkness to hide or reveal elements of the set and characters, playing with the audience's perception. For much of the play, the stage is dimly lit, with areas of darkness creating the sense that something could be lurking just out of sight.

Strategic use of lighting helps to create moments of shock and surprise. For example, the sudden appearance of the Woman in Black may be signaled by a spotlight that isolates her figure, casting her in an eerie glow. The contrast between light and shadow is key to creating a sense of mystery and danger, suggesting that the audience, like Kipps, can never be sure what might appear next.

In addition to traditional stage lighting, the use of lanterns and candles further enhances the gothic atmosphere.



THE PLAY WITHIN A PLAY STRUCTURE

A defining feature of Mallatratt's adaptation is the use of the "play within a play" structure. This meta-theatrical device serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it allows the story to be told from two perspectives: the older, traumatized Arthur Kipps, and the younger Kipps experiencing the events for the first time. This dual narrative adds complexity, as the audience watches Kipps relive his traumatic past while grappling with his current emotional state.

Secondly, the "play within a play" structure creates a sense of distance and unreality, which heightens the psychological tension. The audience is constantly reminded that what they are watching is a reenactment, yet the events feel all too real, blurring the line between performance and reality. This blurring adds to the overall theme of memory and trauma, as Kipps's attempt to retell his story serves as both an exorcism of his fears and a reminder that some horrors cannot be escaped.

This structure also allows for fluidity in the storytelling. Scenes can shift quickly from one location to another, and the transitions between past and present are seamless. The actors' ability to switch between roles enhances the play's theatricality, engaging the audience with the mechanics of performance while also drawing them into the story's supernatural elements.

AUDIENCE IMAGINATION

One of the most powerful elements of this play is how it engages the audience's imagination. By keeping certain elements of the story hidden—whether through lighting, sound, or sparse use of props—the play leaves much of the horror to be imagined by the viewer. This approach makes the experience highly personal, as each audience member brings their own fears and interpretations to what they cannot see. A technique, known as "suggestive horror," is a hallmark of gothic fiction, where the unseen is often more terrifying than the visible. In addition, the lack of elaborate special effects means that the production relies on psychological horror rather than physical horror. The audience is drawn into Arthur Kipps's internal terror, experiencing his fear and uncertainty as he grapples with the reality of the haunting. This engagement with the audience's imagination makes the production deeply immersive, ensuring that the fear lingers long after the final curtain.



5. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Themes of Isolation:

- How does the physical isolation of Eel Marsh House reflect Arthur Kipps's emotional journey? In what ways does the setting contribute to the sense of fear and tension?

Fear of the Unknown:

- The play uses suggestion and atmosphere to create suspense. How does the fear of what isn't seen compare to the fear of what is directly shown on stage? Why do you think this technique is so effective in *The Woman in Black*?

Psychological vs. Supernatural Horror:

- Do you think the play is more focused on psychological horror or supernatural elements? How does Arthur Kipps's mental state play a role in the overall sense of terror?

The Role of Grief:

- Grief is a central theme in *The Woman in Black*. How do you think Jennet Humfrye's unresolved grief turns into vengeful rage? How might this reflect real-life reactions to loss?

Character Evolution:

- How does Arthur Kipps change from the beginning of the story to the end? What lessons does he learn, and do you believe he fully comes to terms with his experience by the time he hires the actor to retell his story?

Other

- How does the minimalist staging of *The Woman in Black* affect the way the audience experiences fear and suspense?
- How do sound and lighting contribute to the creation of atmosphere in the play? Can you think of moments where these elements were especially powerful?

6. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Soundscape Creation

Objective: Create an atmospheric soundscape to evoke the eerie setting of *The Woman in Black*.

Instructions: In groups, students can use instruments, everyday objects, or recorded sounds (like creaking doors, wind, footsteps) to create a soundscape that mirrors the haunting mood of the play. They can time it with key scenes from the play to enhance the suspense. Afterward, they can discuss how sound impacts the atmosphere in theatre.

Dramatic Monologue

Objective: Develop empathy and understanding of characters' emotional states.

Instructions: Have students write and perform a dramatic monologue from the perspective of a character in the play, such as Arthur Kipps or the *Woman in Black* herself. The monologue could explore their deepest fears, motivations, or what they feel during a key moment in the story.

Character Hot Seating

Objective: Deepen understanding of character motivations.

Instructions: Select a student to play a character from *The Woman in Black* and sit them in the "hot seat." The rest of the class will ask them questions about their actions, feelings, and experiences, and the student in the hot seat will respond in character. This will help students explore the psychology and motivations behind the characters' decisions.

Newspaper Report

Objective: Practice narrative perspective and report writing.

Instructions: Students can write a newspaper article reporting on the strange events at Eel Marsh House, as though they were a journalist from the village. They should include interviews with townspeople, describe sightings of the *Woman in Black*, and use a sensational tone to reflect Victorian ghost stories.



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Freeze Frame Tableau

Objective: Encourage visual storytelling and explore key moments of tension.

Instructions: Divide students into small groups, and ask them to select a key moment from the play. They should create a "freeze frame" tableau to capture that moment visually, focusing on body language and facial expressions. Other students can then analyze the tableau, explaining what emotions or story elements they see.



Gothic Storyboard

Objective: Visualize the gothic elements and scenes in the play.

Instructions: Students can create a storyboard for key scenes in *The Woman in Black*, focusing on how the gothic setting, lighting, and atmosphere build suspense. Each frame should depict the scene, noting which elements create tension and how they would stage it in a production.



Letter Writing

Objective: Explore character relationships and develop writing skills.

Instructions: Students can write a letter as Arthur Kipps, either before or after his visit to Eel Marsh House. In the letter, they should describe his fears, thoughts about the townspeople, and his feelings about the supernatural events. Alternatively, they can write as Jennet Humfrye (*The Woman in Black*) before her death, revealing her anguish and desire for revenge.



Set Design Models

Objective: Explore visual and practical elements of theatre design.

Instructions: Students can create miniature models of the set for *The Woman in Black*, using materials such as cardboard, fabric, and paper. They should think about how to create the eerie atmosphere with limited props, lighting, and the layout of the stage.





CONCLUSION

The *Woman in Black* offers a unique opportunity for students to explore the intersection of literature, theatre, and the human experience. Through its chilling narrative, the play delves deep into universal themes of grief, trauma, revenge, and the supernatural, all while maintaining the suspense and psychological tension that are hallmarks of gothic storytelling.

As students engage with the characters, the haunting atmosphere, and the minimalist production, they are invited to question what it means to be truly haunted—not only by ghosts, but by memories and unresolved emotions. The play's use of sound, lighting, and suggestion encourages a more active role from the audience, requiring them to fill in the gaps with their imagination and, in doing so, making the fear deeply personal.

The educational activities, discussion points, and contextual explorations within this pack aim to inspire critical thinking and creativity, encouraging students to consider how storytelling—whether through literature or theatre—can evoke powerful emotional responses. From understanding the historical context of gothic literature to reflecting on the psychological depth of the characters, students are given the tools to not only appreciate *The Woman in Black* but also to explore the larger questions it raises about fear, isolation, and the power of memory.

We hope that this experience has sparked meaningful discussions and offered fresh perspectives on the themes and techniques that make *The Woman in Black* such an enduring and compelling work. As students continue to explore the world of theatre and literature, they will carry forward the lessons of this play—about the fine line between reality and imagination, and the enduring power of storytelling to provoke, unsettle, and inspire.

SCHOOLS PERFORMANCES AND Q&A'S

THE WOMAN IN BLACK is respected internationally as one of the most effective plays ever to be written. Over 7 million people worldwide have seen Susan Hill's chilling ghost story on stage where it continues to delight and terrify audiences of all generations.

Do your students have burning questions about the storyline, character development, or the magic behind the scenes?

West End Worldwide and thrilled to extend an exclusive invitation to all school groups for a complimentary Q&A sessions, lasting 20 minutes, right after the performance.

Dive deeper into the world of theatre as we cover various aspects of our production and enhance your understanding of the narrative and the dramatic techniques that bring this stage play to life.

This Q&A is your golden opportunity to satisfy your students curiosity and gain invaluable insights. Don't miss this chance to connect with the creative minds behind "The Woman in Black" and unlock the secrets of its theatrical brilliance.

This show is a perfect study piece for a wide range of subjects, including Drama, Art & Design, Dance, Media Studies, English, Music, ICT, RE, PSHE, and spans from KS3 to KS5. It also aligns with specialised units in BTEC Performing Arts courses and the Creative and Media Diploma.

Our previous productions of this show in the Middle East:

Madinat Theatre 2017, Dubai (Timeout Award Winner)

Madinat Theatre 2015, Dubai

Madinat Theatre 2012, Dubai (Timeout Award Winner)

Al Jaleli Theatre 2012, Abu Dhabi

First Group Theatre 2009, Dubai

We welcome you to the 2024 production.

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Have a query about the production or want further material on the show?

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