



Presents

THE CHORAL

A film by Nicholas Hytner

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SYNOPSIS

1916. As war rages on the Western Front, the Choral Society in Ramsden, Yorkshire has lost most of its men to the army. The Choral's ambitious committee, determined to press ahead, decides to recruit local young males to swell their ranks. They must also engage a new chorus master, and despite their suspicions that he has something to hide, their best bet seems to be Dr. Henry Guthrie (Ralph Fiennes) – driven, uncompromising, and recently returned from a career in Germany. As conscription papers start to arrive, the whole community discovers that the best response to the chaos that is laying waste to their lives is to make music together.

Directed by BAFTA, Olivier and Tony Award winner NICHOLAS HYTNER (*The Crucible*) and written by BAFTA, Olivier and Tony Award winner ALAN BENNETT, *The Choral* marks their fourth writer-director collaboration following the acclaimed films *The Madness of King George*, *The History Boys*, and *The Lady in The Van*.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Set in the fictional town of Ramsden, Yorkshire, *THE CHORAL* takes place in 1916, a little shy of two years after the outbreak of the First World War and just a few months before the Battle of the Somme. The initial surge of enthusiasm for the War has faded, and the community has become accustomed to loss.

As the film opens, young telegram boy Lofty (Oliver Briscoe) is delivering the worst kind of news to the town's many families desperate for their boys' safe return. He and his best friend Ellis (Taylor Uttley) are 17 years old – too young to volunteer, but close enough to their next birthdays to wonder about what the future might hold for them.

"For the first year and a half of the First World War, the British army was a volunteer army, and an enormous amount of moral pressure was put on young men to join up," says director Nicholas Hytner. "But in early 1916, all able-bodied young men over the age of 18 were conscripted by Act of Parliament. By the time of the Battle of the Somme, the losses had become so unbearable that the country really started to feel it; the suffering became universal."

Adds Hytner: "The film is about the entire community, but three of the recruits to the choir," – including Mitch, played by Shaun Thomas – "are then inevitably conscripted into the army."

Even before the Somme, the mood in the Spring of 1916, when *THE CHORAL* takes place, was beginning to shift. "The jingoism and patriotism started to wear off," says writer Alan Bennett. "People began to question the nature of the war, and as conscription came in, it probably made many of the young men a little sceptical of the war."

It was a feeling Bennett was familiar with. Born in 1934, he came of age after the end of the Second World War, but during a time of National Service in Great Britain.

“The months leading up to conscription were dreadful,” he recalls. “In the end, in fact, I had a marvellous time in the Army. I was on a course learning Russian, and it was just like being at university. But I dreaded it before I went in, and I didn’t have the moral courage to be a conscientious objector.”

He understood, therefore, that it was a crucial moment for young men, heightened by the fear of going to war. And so it is that the boys, and several girls of their age group, sign up for the Choral Society for the sense of hope it offers. “Alan has built into this script that sense of the finite,” notes Ralph Fiennes, who plays Dr. Henry Guthrie in the film. “Every time these young men went off to fight, their community, their parents, their friends and lovers were faced with the very real question of: would they return?”

He adds: “There’s a heightened sense of the value of something, and the value of each other. And so, the value of being able to sing in the choir and what it means to make music.”

Despite the false, modern perception that classical music is an elitist pursuit, in fact it is as accessible and resonant today as it was at the time, in which it happened to be a much more common feature of the lives of ordinary people.

And there is no greater chronicler of the lives of ordinary people than Alan Bennett, says Hytner. “We made a film together about the court of King George III, and there have been a lot of great British films about the upper reaches of the British aristocracy,” he qualifies. “But THE CHORAL is about the kind of communities that most of us live in. This is what real people were like in 1916. The one privileged character, Duxbury, in the end rolls up his sleeves and gets on with being a part of the Choral Society like everyone else.”

At the heart of Ramsden’s community, Alderman Duxbury, played by Roger Allam, is the owner of the local mill that employs a large swathe of the town’s population and the chairman of the Choral Society. As we come to learn, he has lost his only son to the war, and his wife is struggling to cope with the grief. For Duxbury, then,

diving headfirst into an ambitious concert – even as the Choral’s numbers are depleted by the war effort – is his way of processing his loss. “It’s difficult to say he’s against the war,” says Allam, “but he certainly doesn’t approve of it in the same way he might have done at its start.”

For Duxbury, and indeed each of the singers and musicians in the Choral, stretching themselves to produce a concert far beyond their means becomes essential. “It doesn’t take them away from the horrors of what is going on,” says Hytner. “But it gives them a purpose as they learn and rehearse. And more than that, it becomes a way of understanding what’s happening to them; of making sense of the horror.”

Even their choice, to stage Elgar’s *THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS*, is resonant. “It’s based on a long poem by Cardinal Newman, about the death of a devout old man and the journey of his soul to Paradise,” notes Hytner, “but it means something totally different to a community whose young men are dying. To me, that’s the hallmark of a classic: its meaning changes over time.”

“It’s a film about community, change, and people’s fear of the unknown,” notes producer Damian Jones. “I think these themes are all very resonant today with what’s going on in the world. It’s a story about a town in flux, full of regret and loss, but also hope and naivety.”

For Simon Russell Beale, who has a barnstorming one-scene cameo in the film as Edward Elgar himself, that sense of *carpe diem* is particularly prescient. “These people want to sing, and they need to sing this great music,” he says. “These boys were dying before they’ve had their first taste of champagne, before they’ve had sex. I find that unbearably moving.”

For Nicholas Hytner: “It’s a film that plays to almost everything that’s close to my heart,” he says. “It’s about the power of art, and in this case music, not only to transform people’s lives, but to help them understand what’s happening to them.”

He recalls the feeling when Bennett first approached him with the idea. "I've spent my entire life working, sometimes in film, but mostly in live performing arts, in theatre, in opera, in classical music, absolutely attached to the idea that through performance and the experience of live performing arts, people make meaning of their lives. And suddenly, here it was, this embryonic screenplay on my desk that was about precisely that: the transformative power of music, and the way it can help you make sense of your life."

THE BIRTH OF THE CHORAL

Alan Bennett had spent many years noodling around with an idea for a story set within a choral society. "I prepare folders of different things as I'm thinking of them," he says. "At one stage I had one on the Huddersfield Choral Society, which went through all sorts of dramatic upsets, and I started to write that and then decided against it. This one, *THE CHORAL*, surfaced during lockdown."

It may be no coincidence that *THE CHORAL* emerged out of the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. It was, after all, a time of great uncertainty unlike anything experienced in peacetime.

When Bennett approached Hytner, with whom he has collaborated many times over a period of decades, with the idea for *THE CHORAL* in March 2020, just as the pandemic was shuttering brick-and-mortar businesses, Hytner was facing the start of one of the greatest challenges of his career. As the artistic director of the London Theatre Company, which had first opened the doors of the Bridge Theatre in 2017, he was being forced to reckon with real uncertainty about when – or even if – his theatre might be able to welcome audiences again.

“We were in terrible trouble,” he says now. “In fact, I had to spend most of 2020 and 2021 trying to keep the theatre from going under.”

Bennett had conceived of *THE CHORAL* as a play. “But I knew immediately it wasn’t a play,” Hytner says. “It was structured like a film, the choir itself was such a major protagonist, and the film deals with the passage of time and the increasing confidence of the choir through montage, in the way films can. The town, too, required such a physical presence, so it always felt like a film.”

As it happened, Bennett had another voice telling him the same thing: the composer George Fenton, who has long been a friend and collaborator, and who would go on to adapt and orchestrate the film’s classical soundtrack. “The credit really goes to him,” Bennett says. “I sketched it out and showed it to George, who I had worked with and who I know very well, I suppose because it had so much music in it. He was very enthusiastic throughout.”

Fenton’s enthusiasm came from a quality he says Bennett was able to capture about what it means to take part in making music. “The script has a wonderful way of identifying what it *is* about music,” he explains. “It’s about something so elevated that you can look up to it, and you can also try for it. It has no ceiling; excellence is infinite. That quality is spoken about in the film, and therefore its message is kind of intoxicating.”

Over the next few years, Bennett and Hytner worked closely to hone the screenplay. According to producer Kevin Loader, who has collaborated intensely with both men over many years, the partnership between Bennett and Hytner is a perfect symbiosis, with each helping to shape and heighten the other’s work.

For Hytner, theirs is a shorthand forged in longevity as much as anything else. “My relationship with Alan goes back to 1990, and since the first time we worked together, I’ve directed all his plays and all his movies. I know how he works, and he knows how I work.”

Writing the film was not without its struggle, Bennett admits, noting times when cracking the story felt out of reach. "I hadn't focussed on Guthrie, the chorusmaster. Nick said at one point that we must make him *definitely* direct the chorus. He must be seen to be teaching them; it must be hard graft. I think that encouraged me, because really before that I was all over the place."

For *Loader*, there is added resonance in the similarities he finds with *A DAY OUT*, which was the first televised film of Bennett's. "It was a story about a Halifax cycling club during the First World War," recalls the producer. "It was a charming film by Stephen Frears, in which Alan appears, and the cycling club go to Fountains Abbey for a picnic and a chat."

Loader notes that not much happens in the film, "But the shadow of the War hangs over them. The possibility that some of them will end up on the Front. So, when I first read *THE CHORAL*, it felt like a great circularity to *A DAY OUT*, and I felt Alan was revisiting this moment in history and finding new things to say about it."

Bennett himself recognised the connection. "Shooting *A DAY OUT* was a very happy experience. Everything was difficult; the weather was terrible – it was May, but there was snow – and the script was written for a balmy summer's day. We were never anywhere near that at any point. But I can see that *THE CHORAL* was slightly unfinished business, because at the end of *A DAY OUT* you see the survivors of the cycling club at the War Memorial after the War. I never felt that really worked, and I suppose regarding it as unfinished business made me do this film."

Hytner was excited by the tone Bennett was able to find within the community of Ramsden. It called to his mind the great British films of the 1940s and '50s, which shared a similar spirit; Ealing comedies like *PASSPORT TO PIMLICO* and *WHISKEY GALORE!* "The films I thought about all came from within ordinary British communities. They weren't films about exceptional individuals." They were particularly British, like *THE CHORAL* is, Hytner notes, "But there's a tradition, too, of small-town American movies, and of Italian and French films set in self-contained communities, that I love."

Bennett's writing is marked, Hytner believes, by a great sense of empathy. "There are no villains in THE CHORAL. He's sympathetic to everybody in the film, and he's still as able to get under the skin of an 18-year-old girl as he is a 65-year-old mill owner. His writing has warmth and wit without a sniff of sentimentality. It is, in the best sense, tragicomic."

Adds Jones: "He understands how real people speak, and how they are. It's so layered and yet so simple in its language and it takes you to a whole other place. With so little effort his writing can be so profound. He loves his jokes, and they come thick and fast, but they're tempered by this very touching drama. It's always bittersweet, and while it can be broad, it can also be subtle and sarcastic. It can be interpreted in so many ways, too."

Representing the younger cast members in THE CHORAL, Amara Okereke, who plays Mary, reflects on Bennett's ability to write for young people. "He understands young people so well," she says. "These characters, even though the story is set in World War I, you recognise them, you know them. Especially if you're from the North, you know these people."

Offering insight into his own writing process, Bennett himself suggests that dialogue is key to understanding characters. "If you can catch the way somebody speaks, you can catch their inner being," he says, adding, with modesty, "I always think I get a lot of credit for stuff which is really only incidentally me."

For Fiennes, Bennett is an icon, "but he's not grand at all; he's the most loveable and approachable person. His standing, particularly in theatre, film, and spoken comedy is huge."

But the actor was as excited about the partnership between Bennett and Hytner when he signed up. "My sense of Alan Bennett in the theatre was really through the plays he's done with Nick," Fiennes notes. "It's THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE and THE HISTORY BOYS. When Nick asked me to do this, and it was a script by

Alan Bennett, that was full of all the things that make Alan Bennett great... well, I was thrilled to be asked."

He adds: "I've been hearing Alan's tone of voice all my life. And while I've worked with Nick in the theatre, this is the first time I've worked with him on a film. The combination of Nick with Alan's material creates the most wonderful sort of familial atmosphere on set."

"Nick has a very clear idea of how a scene should work," says Roger Allam, "but he's also adaptable because he's used to working in the theatre. It makes for a very relaxed, lovely way of working, and I think he's very at home making films."

"He really brings people together," explains Robert Emms, who plays Robert Horner in *THE CHORAL*. "He's great with the younger actors, instilling confidence in them, and he's a fantastic resource on character and story as well. We spoke about Robert's life before the Choral, so I could understand where he'd come from and how he ended up there. Nick was great in helping me create a huge backstory, which informs everything."

Behind this partnership between Hytner and Bennett, producers Kevin Loader and Damian Jones have their own long associations with the pair, having produced the feature film adaptations of *THE HISTORY BOYS* and *THE LADY IN THE VAN*. Says Loader: "I feel like the interloper, facilitator of it all, really. Nick and Alan's relationship is extraordinary, and it's a collaboration that is joyous to watch from where I'm sitting."

Jones agrees. "Alan is a genius writer, as we all know, and because of the pedigree of both Alan and Nick, we've established this ensemble cast that has so much shared history together. It's an opportunity not just to hop back to old times, but also to do a film that I think people are going to love but also don't really get to see anymore."

THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS

Matching Alan Bennett's specificity in tone is his choice of music for the Choral Society to bring to life. Born of Bennett's own love of music, shared with his key collaborators, *THE CHORAL* revels in the power of song, and the stories great composers have told. At the heart of the film is the choir's rendition of *THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS*, an oratorio by the composer Sir Edward Elgar that some still consider to be his masterpiece.

"It may not be a popular classic, but it's among the finest music Elgar wrote," explains Fenton. "It's also incredibly profound, and I think for some people hearing it in an enormous concert scenario, it has massive forces. It has choruses and semi-choruses that can number up to 200 people. A full orchestra, triple wind, full brass, full horns, two harps. It's a big work."

Based on John Henry Newman's poem, the story charts a soul's journey through death. It was first performed at the Birmingham Town Hall in 1900, but a poor performance marked its reception, and the Roman Catholic theology in Newman's poem prevented much performance of the work in Anglican cathedrals.

For Alan Bennett, though, it is a work that has marked his life. "They only need to play a few bars of it, and I'm gone," he says, swept up in the emotion of the piece. His father, a butcher, had been a keen amateur violinist, and as a boy in Leeds - around 1953 he guesses - he would gather with his friends on a Saturday night and make trips to the Town Hall for their weekly concerts. "We'd sit behind the orchestra, and to see them get lost in musicmaking was something enviable. So, we were always rather miffed when there was anything choral on, because the chorus sat behind the orchestra."

As such, he notes, *THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS* didn't make the greatest first impression on him either. "I remember hearing *THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS* and not liking it much; not being taken much with the story, such as it is," he says. "But

it stuck with me, and when I heard it the second time, I was more taken with the music, and I've known it ever since."

It is an unorthodox selection for the Choral Society in Ramsden, which is gearing up for a much more conventional production of THE ST. MATTHEW PASSION by Johann Sebastian Bach as the film opens. Still, with anti-German sentiment in the air, a British composer seems like a smarter choice than a German one, even if the suggestion comes from Ralph Fiennes' Dr. Guthrie, with his own long association with Germany.

"His past in Germany has given him a sort of stigma," notes Fiennes of his character. "Is he loyal to the Germans? But he's just an artist, and a musician, and he has had an inspirational time in Germany. In fact, he conducted THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS in Germany."

It's also an ambitious project for a local choral society at the best of times, but with their numbers depleted, staging a large orchestral production seems impossible... at least until Dr. Guthrie starts making some tweaks to the source. "It's a bit like doing a Harrison Birtwistle opera instead of THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO," laughs Loader. "It's incredibly audacious of Guthrie to suggest this, and it must have been an incredible learning experience for those amateur musicians of Ramsden when they had to fulfil his ambition. They only have a string trio from the local hotel's tearoom and the Salvation Army band of five; adaptations must occur quickly."

Behind the scenes, music arranger George Fenton had to put in the work to ensure that he could make THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS work with such a limited group of performers. "It's incredibly intense trying to represent such a massive work with so few musicians," he says. "But I really loved it, and it gave me great insight into his work. Elgar is a big part of my life anyway, but I've learnt so much from this."

Modern sensibilities might balk at the notion of a choral performance uniting a community, but in fact there is a long tradition of chorus work in the north of

England, notes Hytner. "They take their musicianship very seriously and they relish the difficulty of what they do."

Adds Fenton: "I think it's part of the industrial landscape, really, and in some ways the film explains some of this... it's the feeling of joining something. It's truly democratic, everyone must work together in a group, and therefore the social pecking order – which would have been quite prominent at this time – was put on hold."

In 1916, too, "the high arts were for everybody," Hytner adds. "The choral societies of Yorkshire and Lancashire were extraordinarily expert in the performance of what we now think of as remote and highbrow in this country."

Bennett agrees. "They made themselves so sought-after. I only know from Leeds, where the Festival Chorus applies, but it's made socially desirable to be a member, and the chorusmaster of the Leeds Festival Chorus, Herbert Bardgett, was a real celebrity in Leeds."

"In the United Kingdom, music education has been eroded in the state sector by a lethal combination of government policy and neglect," says Hytner. "As a result, classical music is now regularly badged as elitist. It isn't. What has made it so remote for so many people is that they're not introduced to it when they have a right to be introduced to it: at school."

He hopes THE CHORAL, and the passion that performing this ambitious musical work clearly inspires in the ensemble, will reignite an interest in classical music. "If this film can suggest that as a permanent possibility, it will have done its job," says the director. "It would be my dearest wish that the film could introduce more people to the joys of making music together; and to the joys of making *difficult* music together. It's for everybody; it's theirs."

Perhaps not everybody, says Bennett. "I suppose I can sing, but I can't *sing* properly," he laughs, at the suggestion he might once have joined a choral society himself.

If his screenwriter may have declined to exercise his pipes, Hytner knew he expected it from the cast. "It was important that everybody in the film was able to sing their part in *THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS*," he says. "It was really important they were able to rise to the challenges of learning and singing some very demanding music. Even when they are re-voiced – as is the case with Mary, Clyde and Duxbury – they had to be able to sing their parts on set so that their physicality was indistinguishable from the real thing."

And so, they did, with perhaps the greatest cinematic cheat in the film being the notion that Roger Allam – who plays a rather uninspiring tenor in Alderman Duxbury – struggles to find his notes. "There are two members of the original *LES MISERABLES* cast in the film," says Hytner. "Roger Allam and Alun Armstrong were both in the very first production of the musical." He chuckles: "They didn't have a problem learning the music. Roger, however, is a good baritone, and Duxbury is a bad tenor, so his singing voice had to be replaced."

The younger cast members, each of them with differing experience of musical performance, committed to put in the work. "They all put an enormous amount of effort into learning what it was they had to sing," says Hytner. "Amara Okereke and Jacob Dudman are fine enough musicians to be able to master the principal roles of the Angel and Gerontius, and to work closely with the two brilliant young classical singers whose voices you hear. Tia Jordan Radix-Callixte and Hugo Brady have distinguished careers in classical music ahead of them."

For *Loader*, integrating the music into *THE CHORAL* naturally was amongst the biggest challenges the production faced. "It had to feel real, because we realised probably a little later than we should have done that we, too, were taking on something that was very ambitious. To put a choral society on film and to make them feel part of this community."

The production cast some 45 amateur singers from the local area around Saltaire in West Yorkshire, where the film was primarily shot, to play supporting artists in the chorus. “They had to be there for two-thirds of the shooting days,” notes Loader, “because even when they weren’t singing, they were often backgrounding to provide the sense that they lived in the town.”

As with Allam, they, too, had to meter their abilities to the rocky progression of the Choral in its earliest days. “They had to feel like they were rubbish one minute and getting better the next,” Loader continues. “A lot of the choral singers struggled with being rubbish when in reality they’ve had decades of training.”

Fenton has written original scores for Hytner’s films including *THE LADY IN THE VAN* and *THE HISTORY BOYS*, but the task here was different, he notes, with the film’s reliance on classical pieces. “In this case I’ve arranged the music,” Fenton says, “and for *THE CHORAL* I’ve loved arranging Ivor Novello tunes, Gilbert & Sullivan, and then, of course, Elgar’s work for *THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS*.”

He continues: “The great advantage of working with someone like Nick, apart from him being super bright, is that he’s super musical. He never stops thinking, and that means that whenever we start a new journey, very often I feel like I’m lagging, because he’s already got thoughts about everything. But when we’re planning and working on something like this, we have a shared taste. He’s so sure about what he wants that if he says yes to something, that’s it, and if he says no, that’s it. We can then build a platform to go forward and discuss.”

Fenton knew early on that the scale of the production’s use of music would present unique challenges. “If there are normally around 40 music starts in a film, here we had 53 music starts happening *on camera*,” he explains. “In every case you must decide whether they’re going to film it live or prerecord on set or before shooting. We had to work very hard to figure it all out.”

In the end, it was decided that the production would need “specific people doing specific jobs,” Fenton says. Working tirelessly to ensure the principals and the

supporting artists hit the right notes were no fewer than three directors of music, working under Fenton's guidance.

The composer Natalie Murray Beale served as Music Director and coached Ralph Fiennes to convincingly lead the chorus as a conductor. Tom Brady, a rep coach at the Royal Academy of Music, was the Music Director on behalf of the cast, while Joseph Judge, chorusmaster of the Leeds Philharmonic Chorus, led the choral music direction.

"What has been great is that the three of them are completely joined together," says Fenton. "They're on set together, they work closely together, and then I feed them things. The main thing is that the music department is working all the time, every day of the shoot, and I have never known a film like this. It's unbelievable to me, and I've been doing this for years."

Ralph Fiennes worked closely with conductor Murray Beale to learn the art of conducting an orchestra. "She had coached Cate Blanchett for *TÁR*," he says. "To my eye, Cate was brilliant as *Tár*, although I think I'm different conductor to that."

He had, he notes, an "ignorant person's awe of conductors. But having to go through some of the stretches of music, the skill of keeping time and expression, and keeping a group of people on the move with the music, the higher points, the diminuendos... Working with Nat exposed me to the enormity of what it is to be a conductor, to lead musicians and singers through complex pieces of music in time, and to acknowledge all the conductor's indications of how the music shifts and changes."

"Ralph may not be a musician, but he has a deep curiosity about all things art and music," says Murray Beale. "It was a great starting point for us to begin our conversations, and to look at his character in detail: where he came from, and what his influences were working in Germany as a British musician."

Beale says that teaching Fiennes how to conduct was as unique an experience as she's had with any student. "Every individual is different, so there's no particular

method to apply,” she explains. “It all has to come from them, and from a person’s body. It was important that his gestures be as natural as possible.”

Fiennes, she says, took to her tutelage immediately. “He has a real understanding of what it means to be this type of artist, which isn’t that far removed from being an actor,” says Murray Beale. “In many ways, the process lines up; what the feeling is and how you prepare before you go on stage.”

Tom Brady found a cast at many different stages of their own musical journeys. “Some had never sung before,” he notes. “And it’s quite a task when you’ve never sung before to be able to achieve the alto part of an Elgar oratorio. It’s not quite so straightforward.”

He took individual sessions with each cast member to assess their voices and the work they each needed, and it was important to instil a sense of confidence in the less experienced members of the ensemble.

His tutelage crescendos in the Choral Society’s big concert scene, during which the whole ensemble was charged with delivering a performance fit for an audience. “It is the moment the entire film is leading up to,” he explains. “It was the biggest logistical challenge for us to overcome, because there’s an orchestra, there are soloists, and then Ralph is conducting this huge choir.”

Having assembled so many of the members of the fictional Choral from choral societies local to the areas in which the film shot, Joseph Judge faced a different challenge: how to help experienced singers and inexperienced actors find a way of faking that they couldn’t sing so well.

“There were a few specific boxes that needed to be filled,” says Judge of the process of casting them. “All of the singers are wonderful, but they’re all from different backgrounds. Ages mattered with regard to the story, and we needed certain people in the choir to play other minor roles in scenes in the film.”

For cast member Oliver Briscoe, there were no greater days on set than the ones that involved singing, even if they asked the most of the young actor. "To go into a room full of people that you've never met before and just smash out Elgar, that's definitely something," he says. "Straight away, it bonds you to your castmates, and there's a sense it has made everyone a family."

LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY

Critical to the success of *THE CHORAL*, according to Nicholas Hytner, was that the fictional town of Ramsden, Yorkshire feel alive and lived-in, like a true community facing the challenge of the Great War as one. Bennett's script had expertly chronicled the many interpersonal relationships within the Choral Society and the beating heart of the town, and casting the film meant choosing the right actors to bring that to life.

Fortunately, he says, that was the easy part. "I like community pieces, and ensemble pieces most of all," he says. "The older actors in the cast were already a community – they all knew each other extremely well and many of them had worked together before. And then the younger members of the cast immediately bonded. So, there was an effortless sense of ensemble."

It is a peculiarity of acting that experienced, award-winning actors will often share the stage with relative newcomers, and it is true in *THE CHORAL*, with some members of the principal cast never having acted professionally before. "So many of the actors had done many, many films together, and others were in their first job," notes Loader. "Yet all of the cast seemed to feel they were getting individual attention from Nick and were also being given an incredible sense of confidence in them to explore their work in a free way."

For Fiennes, scenes in which much of the ensemble gathered were the highlights of the shoot. "The ingredients are so special," he says. "We shot a scene where my character explains to the choir – to these mostly young faces, next to a couple of oldies – *THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS* and what the story is. There was a

wonderful energy from the young faces listening in. That scene had such a sense of community, and there are many more like it. The warmth in the group was so great.

If many members of the established cast had worked together before, Hytner himself had also worked with most of them, either on stage or on film. With one of the most expansive Rolodexes in the British film industry, Hytner was able to take his pick of British acting royalty.

He has a storied history, too, of casting young actors destined for stardom, not least with Bennett's *THE HISTORY BOYS*, which collected a generation of stars in the making including Dominic Cooper, Russell Tovey, and James Corden. For *THE CHORAL*, Hytner worked in concert with casting director Robert Sterne to find the young men and women of the community for whom the prospect of war is all too real.

"Robert spent time in Yorkshire, meeting young actors," recalls Hytner. "I'd never seen most of the faces he brought me, but we found the ones who would play the parts the best."

"Here we were building something from scratch," notes Loader, contrasting the process with both *THE LADY IN THE VAN* and *THE HISTORY BOYS*, in which much of the casting had carried over from their respective stage productions. "I don't think we had a single casting meeting on those films because we didn't have to; Nick cast them out of his address book over a weekend."

Jones notes that the casting stuck to young actors looking for careers in the industry. "It wasn't exactly street casting, but the net was wide, encompassing Yorkshire, London, and elsewhere," he says. "We were looking for not just excellent actors, but singers too, or at least actors who could hold a note convincingly enough that they might find roles in a choir."

According to Fiennes, the fresher faces in the cast provided a dose of enthusiasm to complete the ensemble. "They've had a lovely journey to go through, as their characters do in the story," he says.

The success of Hytner and Sterne's casting process, says Bennett, was captured for him in a screening of a rough cut of the film; his first time seeing it assembled. "When the film ended, nobody spoke at the end, because we were all so choked up," he remembers, likening it to his experience with one of the most accomplished British actors of the 20th Century. "I'd only seen that once before, when Thora Hird did her monologue where she was an older lady looking back on her sweetheart on the eve of going off to France [in WAITING FOR THE TELEGRAM]. Like John Gielgud, she could cry at will, and in the last scene she's just weeping, and somehow talking through weeping. At the end, there was a long silence, and it was because the cameramen were crying."

Oliver Briscoe's Lofty and Taylor Uttley's Ellis are the first two characters to appear in the story. For Briscoe, THE CHORAL is his first professional credit. "You'd never know it," says Loader. "You'd think he's been acting since he was two. He brings a wonderful, cheerful innocence to the character, with a kind of curiosity and open-hearted, open-eyed willingness to explore the world."

Lofty is, in the words of Briscoe himself, "a lovely lad. He's the telegram boy, taking round the awful news that a loved one has passed away in the War. He's feeling the effects of the War every day, if not twice a day. Going back to the post office to grab more telegrams to deliver. It's a big weight on his shoulders."

For Briscoe, sharing the screen with such luminaries of the British industry, delivering Alan Bennett's dialogue alongside Lofty's telegrams, has been an unbelievable first experience in film. "It's just an honour to be a part of something like this and to bring Alan Bennett's words to life," he says.

Agrees Taylor Uttley, who plays Ellis: "You're sat across from Alan Bennett, Simon Russell Beale, Ralph Fiennes, Roger Allam... all these people I grew up watching,

and some of them were in things that made me want to become an actor," he marvels. "I got a little bit teary."

"It was a surreal experience," adds Briscoombe.

But the music, along with acting professionally for the first time, weren't the only learning curves Briscoombe faced on *THE CHORAL*. "I had to relearn how to ride a bike," he laughs. "I'm ashamed to say it, but it's been about eight years since I've ridden, so it took some practice."

Uttley is best known for a series regular role on the British radio soap opera *THE ARCHERS*. "Taylor's a real character in life as well as the film," says Loader. "Ellis is a political agitator and a cheeky chappie, a bit of a cynic. He's the disruptor at the back of the class. Taylor pulled it off brilliantly."

Ellis is "part-time revolutionary and full-time obsessed with girls," laughs Uttley of his role. "He spends half the film chasing girls all over the place, and the other half undercutting all of the authority figures whenever he can."

Completing the central trio of boys faced with the possibility of a call up to war is arguably the most experienced member of its young cast, Shaun Thomas, who has been acting since he was a child, and is best known for a stunning breakthrough turn in Clio Barnard's *THE SELFISH GIANT*. He plays Mitch in *THE CHORAL*. "He's a Bradford native, and as with the rest of the younger cast, he hasn't picked up any tricks yet," explains Hytner. "He's immensely touching, as well as funny and truthful."

Like Lofty and Ellis, Mitch is motivated to join the Choral Society for love. "He works in the local mill, and in the Choral he finds a love interest in Mary," explains Thomas. "He's the kind of guy who rolls with it, and he's got a couple of friends who have served in the Army, so he probably has a bit more of an understanding about what's about to happen to them than the other lads."

Thomas particularly enjoyed his working experience with Hytner. “He has such a sense of humour, and yet he’s so focussed and so certain – he knows exactly what he wants,” the actor says. “He clearly had a vision and made it clear what he wants, which has made me really comfortable as an actor.”

“With his prior experience, Shaun became kind of the House Father to this group of young actors, which was sort of sweet,” recalls Loader. “He’s barely out of university age himself, but he became a really supportive presence to the rest of the younger cast. And he’s a very clever actor.”

Arguably one of the most musically accomplished of the young cast, Amara Okereke won the Best Actress in a Musical prize from the Stage Debut Awards in 2018 for her role as Cosette in *LES MISERABLES* at the Queen’s Theatre. She has since starred in *SPRING AWAKENING* at the Almeida, and as Eliza Doolittle in the 2022 production of *MY FAIR LADY* at the London Coliseum.

“I’d seen Amara on stage,” says Hytner. “I didn’t know her, but watching her on stage, she seemed to me to have all the strength, weight, and conviction the role of Mary required.”

Mary, Okereke explains, is a Salvation Army volunteer who wears her uniform with pride – so much so that when she first steps into the Choral’s rehearsal room to audition, Alderman Duxbury assumes she’s there to solicit donations. “She’s a bit of a misfit in the community,” Okereke says. “She gets along with everyone, but she also has her own values that she stands by, which maybe aren’t the same as everyone else’s. She’s very connected with her faith and her morals.”

Okereke was particularly familiar with Bennett’s work on stage and screen and leapt at the chance to be a part of *THE CHORAL*. “I grew up on his work,” she says. “He was one of the earliest theatre influences for me as a child, and my mum in particular was a huge fan. Having this come through and getting to be a part of it – knowing that I’d be performing his words – was a real moment for me personally.”

Says Bennett, simply, of watching Okereke perform: "She swept me away."

In the role of Bella, THE CHORAL cast Emily Fairn, perhaps best known for her work on television in THE RESPONDER. "She has a great intensity and emotional range," says Loader. "But she's also very funny. That's a brilliantly animated combination."

"Bella is a young girl in Ramsden who was dating a boy called Clyde, but he went away to War, and she hasn't heard from him in about a year," explains Fairn of her character. "The letters stopped, and yet she hasn't had a dreaded telegram, so she's in a little bit of limbo. She's in the Choral Society because she was a member with Clyde when he was in the town, so I think for her it's something fun to do."

Hytner wasn't familiar with Fairn before Sterne brought the young actress to his attention. "But she seemed to be a great contrast to Amara, and to have a kind of natural humour and an earthiness that went very well with the part of Bella as written."

Fairn credits Bennett's writing with making her task easier than it might otherwise have been. "A big part of being in an Alan Bennett movie is that I'm a working-class Northerner, and there's still not a lot of stories about working-class people from the North of England. He writes so authentically about Northern people, and the big thing you feel in the script is the humanity."

Rounding out the younger cast is Jacob Dudman as Clyde, who reappears in the middle of the film to Bella's great shock. Dudman's work includes THE LAST KINGDOM: SEVEN KINGS MUST DIE and FATE: THE WINX SAGA. "He's a remarkable figure," says Hytner. "A writer and director as well as an actor, and a Yorkshire native. He's extremely musical, but he also has a natural ease and an access to the suffering that Clyde's character has faced. It jumped out even in the very first tape of his, and it jumped out when I met him. I was very struck by his charisma as well; he has a real presence."

Clyde, says Dudman, is suffering from the effects of the War. "He's lost an arm, and he has PTSD, as so many people did coming back from the Front," the actor explains. "He has a moment in the film where he begs the Choral to see what it's really like; to understand fundamentally the unimaginable horror of the War. Ultimately, they can't understand, and he recognises that the younger members will find out for themselves, and that it's not worth scaring them; that they should enjoy this time before going to the War."

Dudman relished the opportunity to play Clyde, and in particular this moment of his. "When you get a scene like that, you obviously go and do your research and try to really visualise it for yourself, but the work is made so much easier by the words. It's such a beautifully written speech."

He adds: "One of the privileges of this job has been getting a deeper understanding of what War was like for people and trying to represent a generation who are often called the Forgotten Generation; the lost generation of people who gave their lives to the First World War."

Hytner is humble about his ability to cast future stars in the making, pointing only to his prolific body of work as though it is somewhat of an inevitability for talented young actors to find work with the director. "I was artistic director of the National for 12 years," he says. "That's an awful lot of people who, through no particular talent of my own, did their first jobs. It was because I had this enormous playbox, and I always worked with good casting directors."

He concedes: "If I can give them all a little bit of a push along the road, I'm delighted."

The more experienced thespians of the piece are lead, of course, by Ralph Fiennes as Dr. Henry Guthrie. Hytner had worked with Fiennes on a number of theatrical productions. "I know how well he plays driven characters, and characters with a core of great conviction," he says. "I also know how well he plays characters who

carry around with them a secret wound. Both things played into the wonderful performance that he gives in THE CHORAL.”

“There’s a sweetness and humour to Ralph that is really extraordinary,” says Loader. “There’s a stillness on the surface, but underneath you know there’s incredible turbulence, and you can sense that contradiction almost all the time.”

Fiennes, for his part, embraced the musical education he received to play the role. “All I can say is, for my piano playing, I’m in the business of illusion,” he laughs. “But regarding the conducting, I couldn’t resort to conducting behind the shape of a grand piano, and that was the part that was daunting for me when I read the script. I thought, ‘It’s a wonderful role, but I’ve got to know how to conduct.’”

“Ralph is a film star, so he brings a charisma and a sense of glamour, I suppose,” says Roger Allam. “Although he is, himself, modest and charming, and quite shy. I’ve known him for years, though I don’t think we’ve ever worked together before. But he also brings a filmmaker’s eye, because he has directed wonderful films, and he brings an intensity and focus. I’ve been watching him quite a lot and trying to learn from him.”

Of course, Allam is no slouch himself, with an extensive body of work particularly in the theatre. “He plays the mill owner, Alderman Duxbury,” says Hytner. “He’s the chair of the Choral Society, the most powerful man in town, but a man whose love for music and whose ear for it supersedes his attachment to his own status. He has also lost his son to the War, and his marriage has suffered because of the bereavement. It’s a part that is complex and, in the end, very touching, and it’s a humane piece of writing backed by an incredibly humane performance from Roger.”

Adds Loader: “He was originally written to be a much more pompous, jingoistic character, but he’s really the emotional heart of the story. Roger’s performance is extraordinary, because Duxbury is living this rather mournful, sterile experience at home, but out in the world he’s trying his best to carry on. Roger brings an emotional depth and complexity to that.”

Allam says he signed onto the project the day he received the script. "I love Alan Bennett's work, and I love Nick's work," he says simply. "I'd worked with Nick before, and it seemed to me a wonderfully rich, funny, moving and complex tale of the War and people's response to where they are."

"Roger is one of those actors who slips perfectly into the Alan Bennett multiverse, which is both emotionally profound and also full of amusement and irony. Roger's brilliant at that, but I think people will be surprised to find him doing something with such dignity and depth."

Allam was no stranger to music, most notably having played the role of Javert in the original London production of the musical *LES MISERABLES* in 1985. Alongside Allam in that production was Alun Armstrong, who played the innkeeper Thénardier, and who plays Ramsden's town undertaker, Herbert Trickett, in *THE CHORAL*.

Trickett forms something of a double act in the film with Joe Fytton, played by Mark Addy. "They're good friends and a rather unlikely pairing," laughs Loader. "Mark's the town's photographer, and Alun is the undertaker, so they both have these key roles in the community. And, of course, Fytton's business is booming because he's having to take all these photographs of young men before they go off to the Front, while Trickett is grumbling because they aren't fetching the dead home, and his undertaking business is in the pan."

Armstrong had performed Bennett's work in the past and even acted with him. "I'm a long-term fan," he says. "In this script in particular, there's a real balancing act going on between extreme tragedy, very touching individual stories within the ensemble, and also this wry humour of awkwardness; of people being incomplete in some ways and wanting something more."

He laughs that he had some experience to play the town's undertaker. "I did work as a grave digger when I was very young, in Twickenham Cemetery," he notes, wryly. "It may have informed my walk."

According to Addy, Joe Fytton is a “stalwart member” of the Choral Society. Says the actor of his part: “He lands himself in it and speaks before he thinks sometimes. But his job as a photographer is particularly important in 1916, because quite often that photograph of a young man in uniform heading off to the Somme is all that a family has left to remember them by.”

That THE CHORAL captures such poignancy so deftly was of particular attraction to Addy. “There’s a sequence where I’m photographing the younger lads who are about to go off,” he explains. “It’s kind of hard to talk about, really, because he knows what they’re going to face, and he knows these are important images. That was a key moment for me in terms of who Joe is, and what he feels about the war and humanity.”

For Robert Emms’ character, Robert Horner, there are different conflicts bubbling beneath the surface. A confidant of Dr. Guthrie’s, Robert Horner is a conscientious objector who also struggles with a society that will not recognise his right to love whom he chooses. “Guthrie is Robert’s mentor and teacher,” Emms explains. “There’s a real tenderness between these two characters, and Robert, in the end, falls in love with him.”

Emms shares his character’s passion for music. “There’s something really special about music, and about doing a film with music,” he says. “Robert is very much anti-war, and he questions why they’re doing this piece about an old man dying. But he suggests they can really use this moment – and the performance of this music – to tell the world how they feel about the war.”

Rounding out the ensemble, with a powerful one-scene appearance as Sir Edward Elgar, Simon Russell Beale injects a fresh dose of energy to catalyse THE CHORAL’s final act.

More than a century later, his take on Elgar as a lascivious, easily angered and egomaniacal composer might come as something of a shock to audiences exclusively familiar with the legacy of his beautiful music. “But by 1916 he was out of fashion,”

says Hytner. "The critics stopped liking him, and he was pissed off about that. He never quite got over the fact that he had 10 years at the top and then had to struggle to get himself taken seriously again."

He notes: "The scene in *THE CHORAL* is fictional – there's no record of him ever having received an honorary degree from Manchester University – but it's exactly the kind of thing he was up to, and as he got older, he was more and more inappropriate around young women, which the film also touches on."

"What I loved about Alan's script is you expect Elgar to come in and say, 'You're doing a marvellous job,' and instead what he says is, 'This is dreadful, and I don't want you to perform it,'" says Beale. It was the measure of the man Beale found in the many books he read about Elgar to prepare the role, even though his appearance is confined to a single scene.

"It's a huge scene and Simon delivers it incredibly well," says Hytner. "I've worked with him many, many times and it seemed superbly up his street to be able to pull him out like a rabbit from a hat, 20 minutes before the film ends, for a scene that he absolutely dominates."

For his part, Alan Bennett thinks Elgar is not entirely without the right to say what he says to Dr. Guthrie and the Choral. "At stake is the whole production, and they know they've done wrong," he notes. "They're not supposed to mess with somebody's work to that extent. I don't think it's unreasonable for him to react the way he does. And he was a handful."

Bennett, too, thinks Beale captures the spirit of the man with gusto. "He's not frightened of going over the top, and it's a gift for an actor when you've got something to sink your teeth into. Being so self-concerned all the time is real comedy stuff."

Eagle-eyed viewers might spot a cameo within the cameo, behind the wheel of Elgar's almost palatial Rolls-Royce: driving the car is composer and music arranger

George Fenton. “He loves his old cars,” notes producer Damian Jones. “So, when he was offered the chance to drive this immaculate Rolls, he leapt at it, but that was real pressure.”

“He was thrilled to be driving this classic car,” laughs Beale.

CRAFTING RAMSDEN

Beyond establishing a sense of community for Ramsden in the casting of *THE CHORAL*, realising a living, breathing town required the work and commitment of a team of experienced heads of department.

One of Hytner’s first hires was cinematographer Mike Eley, marking a first collaboration between the pair. In fact, Eley’s history with Ralph Fiennes goes further back, with the Director of Photography having worked with Fiennes as an actor in films such as *THE DIG*, and as a director on *THE WHITE CROW*.

“Mike is a wonderful cinematographer,” says Fiennes, “and his partnership with Nick was really great. The way the film is shot, you feel the size, scale, and breadth that Mike is creating.”

“It was through the Ralph connection that I wanted to work with Mike Eley,” notes Hytner. “He’d done a beautiful job on the movies he had shot previously, and it was very much my intention that the film not feel like some kind of parody of the ‘grim up North’ stereotype, nor that it would feel like a traditional British period drama. I wanted Ramsden to feel like a real community full of people with real jobs involved in making real music together at this particular point in history.”

“Mike brings a sense of naturalism,” concurs Loader. “He was a documentary cameraman for years and he comes from a place of looking at the real world and trying to capture it. Watching him and Nick, they rehearse scenes with the actors, discussing the coverage with them, and it seemed like a close collaboration done with extreme calm.”

For Eley, quite simply, “everything comes from the script,” in terms of his approach to shooting the film. “There were first thoughts reading through it that have survived; you find you have a vision for it. Things change on the journey to shooting the film, but it’s not that far removed from the original thought. It all felt instinctive and intuitive based on the story we were telling.”

One aspect, he reveals, that did evolve as the piece came together was the approach to lighting the final concert. “We always thought that the concert should take on a different feel to the rest of the film,” he explains. “It almost becomes its own theatrical setting, even though the Choral aren’t embellishing their performance with any visible theatrical lighting.”

Building Ramsden from the ground up also required the full skill of production designer Peter Francis, known for his work on films such as *THE FATHER* and *THE CHILDREN ACT*. It would have been beyond the means of the film’s budget to construct an entire town, but Peter’s judicious mix of real-world locations and set builds created a geography for Ramsden that belies its fictional status.

“He conjured an entire Edwardian mill town out of, primarily, Saltaire in Yorkshire,” notes Hytner, “and through his amazing eye, and the ability to transform a location and build a set out of nothing.”

In his first meeting with Hytner, Francis got the sense that he and the director were on the same page. “It’s a human story with a dry sense of humour,” he says. “One of my first responses to the script was: how can we give it a look that feels authentic, while also something slightly different from the usual period drama? It had to have a boldness to it, and a character of its own, and Nick felt the same, from the very beginning.”

“Any period movie nowadays is a challenge,” explains Jones. “We had to make it feel authentic, and that’s always difficult both creatively and financially. Peter really pulled it off without it looking like anything that had come before.”

Saltaire is one of the few unspoiled towns in the North of England whose architecture and geography provides a match for the early 20th Century. A World Heritage site near Bradford in Yorkshire, Saltaire was built by mill owner Sir Titus Salt in the mid 1800s. A popular tourist spot, and now a picturesque commuter town for the cities of Leeds and Bradford, it provided a perfect basis for Ramsden.

“It was important to give the film scale,” says Francis, “and that meant strong architecture, because we hadn’t got a huge budget. The locations we chose had to be very bold and fit the story. We chose Saltaire because it is basically the map of the place we were trying to portray; a town designed from the ground up by a proud mill owner who looks after his workers and gives them peaceful houses, and a lovely place to live.”

One of the few set builds of the production, the Choral Society’s rehearsal room became the beating heart of the film. “We wanted an open space divided by a cast iron column with a Jubilee Hall kind of architecture, and that was tough to find in a location. There wasn’t really any one particular building we tried to emulate, but what I tried to do was take elements from Saltaire and elements from other architecture and put them into the set for the rehearsal room.”

“I never thought we’d build anything,” says Loader, “but it turned out to be impossible to find a rehearsal room. They’ve all been modernised, or turned into carpet warehouses, or neglected. We did the analysis of how many hours of the filming was going to take place in that rehearsal room and it suddenly made economic sense to let Peter build it – though he was always keen to do so.”

Loader sums up Francis’s contribution: “It’s more than an eye, and a desire for authenticity. The best production designers read scripts properly and really think about how the story interacts with the world you’re trying to create. They’ll do a lot of research, but not just historical research. Cultural research is important to capture what things would have looked like, or the class of the people being portrayed. You don’t just design for the period, but for the characters and the story as well.”

Francis brought Eley as well as Hytner on his scouting trips. "You don't always take your cinematographer on the scouting," explains Loader. "But luckily Mike was free, and I know he likes to be there. A lot of the early days of the production were spent in a minivan, driving around to possible locations."

The production decided early on to stick to a muted, earthy colour palette for the film; a decision that informed the work of every department. "Together we decided this was the best approach," notes Francis. "There is a fashion to go for quite bright colours, but that didn't fit the story we were telling, or the atmosphere we wanted to create."

To lead this same charge in the costume department, Hytner and the production sought the talents of three-time Academy Award winner Jenny Beavan. "To get a hold of Jenny to do a film like this, with very little money, felt like a bit of a coup," enthuses Hytner. "Jenny Beavan's control of the colour palette came from costumes that were mostly hired; there was very little made specially for the film. I don't know how she did it."

He adds: "I told her early on that there would be no money for anything; that she'd have to hire in the costumes and call in every favour she was owed around town. And bless her, she did, and she loved doing it."

For Beavan – an artist led more by passion than profit – the script that landed on her desk was enough to make the challenge worthwhile. "I loved it," she enthuses. "It was everything that I think makes great films. The characters were incredibly clear, and the intertwining relationships were both very funny and incredibly sad. And it was full of stories that I could relate to."

Turning to the internet – a boon, she says, for researching period productions, which she did not have available to her in her early career – Beavan found footage of workers of the period exiting the mill in Saltaire, where the production was shooting. "You could see exactly what they wore, and it was a mixture of things we

would never have thought of,” she says. “Workers in straw-boater hats, with scarves over their heads, or just in their caps from their day at the mill.”

Beavan has a long history with John Bright, who runs the leading costume rental house Cosprop, and who had mentored Beavan in her early career designing for Merchant Ivory productions. So, she knew just who to turn to in order to find the pieces required for THE CHORAL.

“I have to call out the wonderful company Cosprop, who are the backbone of British period films,” says Fiennes of the pieces Beavan sourced from the storied costumer. “John Bright has this rich resource of all kinds of garments, and the best costume designers know to go there. Jenny’s choices didn’t feel like period costumes, they felt like clothes. It was an important distinction, because people wear clothes but only watch costumes. The clothes Jenny offered seemed to be absolutely right for the character, and they were simple too. There was nothing fussy about them.”

Agrees Allam: “She’s done massive budget pictures and things that are much more modestly budgeted, because she loves what she does. It’s wonderful to be around someone with that level of experience and that enthusiasm, and who has a great skill and eye for clothes.”

For Beavan, taking part in THE CHORAL was also an incredibly personal experience. “The story of Bella and Clyde was very similar to what happened to my mother in the Second World War, when she thought her fiancé had died,” Beavan says. “She was having an affair – legitimately – with my father.”

Hair & Make-Up Designer Erika Ökvist is perhaps best known for her work on Chris Van Dusen’s hyper-stylised period hit BRIDGERTON, but her task on THE CHORAL required a much more subtle approach. “She brought a naturalised style that wasn’t deliberate,” says Hytner. “It was never meant to draw the eye, which makes it the opposite extreme to something like BRIDGERTON. The fact she can do both extremes is a testament to how good she is.”

Ökvist responded immediately to Alan Bennett's screenplay. "It's rare you get a script like this where it reads so well that you can immediately see everything visually in front of you," she says, reflecting the thoughts of Eley and her fellow HODs. "It's very cleverly written where you could see the visuals immediately, and that was what really caught me."

Its specificity of vision also made for a challenge, though, because Ökvist felt the urgency of living up to the words on the page. "The stories and characters are so beautiful, and so believable," she says. "We had to make sure that we believed the characters visually, too."

She chose to base each character on period photographs she unearthed during her research process. "So then," she says, "we know that every look is applicable for this time period, and for someone of whatever particular age or social stature."

Working with such a large ensemble, and with characters of vastly differing ages and social statuses, this meant keeping an eye on how all their individual looks would gel together. "It was like creating a visual symphony," she enthuses. "The faces, the hair and the make-up needed to work together in this world that we were creating, in concert with costume, set design, camera and lighting."

It helped, she notes, to have someone at the helm with as clear a vision as Nicholas Hytner. "You can come to him with the smallest little idea and have a giggle with him about it."

Still, she recalls an amusing moment in their first meeting: "I showed him pictures of the prosthetics that I was thinking of doing on the wounded soldiers, and he almost squealed and ran away because he didn't like the goriness of it," she chuckles. "But we started talking about what kind of story those wounds would tell, and after a while he came back to me and said, 'You know, Erika, I might get into this.' I won him over." ❖

ABOUT THE CAST

RALPH FIENNES

Dr. Henry Guthrie

Ralph Fiennes made his feature film debut as Heathcliff in *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* in 1992. He has recently been nominated for an Academy Award, Golden Globe, SAG Award and a BAFTA for his lead role in *CONCLAVE* directed by Edward Berger. Other film credits include *THE RETURN*, *THE WONDERFUL STORY OF HENRY SUGAR*, *THE MENU*, *THE FORGIVEN*, *THE KING'S MAN*, *THE DIG*, *THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL*, *A BIGGER SPLASH*, *SCHINDLER'S LIST*, *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*, *THE CONSTANT GARDENER*, *THE END OF THE AFFAIR*, *THE READER*, *QUIZ SHOW*, *OSCAR AND LUCINDA*, *ONEGIN*, *SPIDER*, *SUNSHINE*, *STRANGE DAYS* and *THE HURT LOCKER*. He played Lord Voldemort in the *HARRY POTTER* series and the role of 'M' in *SKYFALL*, *SPECTRE* and *NO TIME TO DIE*.

Forthcoming films include *THE CHORAL* and *28 YEARS LATER*.

Fiennes made his feature film directorial debut in 2011 with *CORIOLANUS* in which he also starred in the title role. In 2013 he directed and starred in *THE INVISIBLE WOMAN*. His film *THE WHITE CROW* about Rudolf Nureyev was released in 2018.

He has worked extensively in the theatre with The Royal Shakespeare Company, The Old Vic, The National Theatre, The Almeida and on Broadway where Fiennes received the Tony Award for Best Actor for *HAMLET* and a further nomination for his role in *THE FAITH HEALER*. In 2016 Fiennes received the Evening Standard Best Actor Award for *THE MASTER BUILDER*.

His most recent work includes *MACBETH* opposite Indira Varma, David Hare's *BEAT THE DEVIL*, *STRAIGHT LINE CRAZY* and his own production of *THE FOUR QUARTETS* which was later filmed for the BBC.

In 2025 he presents a season of work at Bath Theatre Royal including new plays by David Hare and Rebecca Lenkiewicz as well as directing Shakespeare's AS YOU LIKE IT.

ROGER ALLAM

Alderman Bernard Duxbury

Roger Allam has been one of Britain's most acclaimed theatre, film, radio and television actors across a career of some five decades on screen and stage. He has won three Olivier Awards for his work on stage in productions of PRIVATES ON PARADE, HENRY IV parts 1 & 2, and MONEY, and is a six-time Olivier nominee. He originated the role of Javert in the West End musical production of LES MISERABLES in 1985 and played Valjean in the BBC's 2001 radio adaptation of the same Victor Hugo classic. Also on radio, Allam starred in popular sitcom CABIN PRESSURE, and he currently co-stars alongside Joanna Lumley in BBC Radio 4's CONVERSATIONS FROM A LONG MARRIAGE.

On television, Allam memorably played the fictional Member of Parliament Peter Mannion in Armando Iannucci's uproarious satire THE THICK OF IT between 2007 and 2012. Also in 2012, Allam starred as General Campion opposite Benedict Cumberbatch and Rebecca Hall in HBO's PARADE'S END, from a screenplay by Tom Stoppard. He played Adrian Stone in the second season of STARZ series THE MISSING in 2016 and has more recently starred and executive produced MURDER IN PROVENCE in 2022. Alongside Shaun Evans, Allam has starred in nine seasons of Russell Lewis's ENDEAVOUR.

On film, Allam has collaborated with directors including Stephen Frears, Michael Winterbottom, the Wachowski siblings, and Phyllida Lloyd, to name a few. In Frears' THE QUEEN, in 2006, he played private secretary Robin Janvrin opposite Helen Mirren, and in Lloyd's THE IRON LADY, he starred opposite Meryl Streep's Margaret Thatcher, playing political advisor Gordon Reece. Allam reteamed with Frears for TAMARA DREWE in 2010, for which he received the Evening Standard Peter Sellers Comedy Award, and in 2012 starred in Ken Loach's THE ANGELS'

SHARE. He played Dr. Barrie in Bill Condon's 2015 film MR. HOLMES alongside Ian McKellen, and as Robert Maxwell in Jon S. Baird's TETRIS in 2023.

He marked his first collaboration on film with director Nicholas Hytner in THE LADY IN THE VAN in 2015, and he reteams with Hytner and screenwriter Alan Bennett for THE CHORAL a decade later.

MARK ADDY

Joe Fytton

On London's West End, Mark Addy's credits include COLLABORATORS, for which he was nominated for an Olivier for Best Supporting Actor; LONDON ASSURANCE; FRAM; WILD OATS; THE TRACKERS OF OXYRHYNCHUS; MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING and THE SHAUGHRAUN/BARTHOLOMEW FAIR/GHETTO at the National Theatre; and DONKEYS' YEARS at the Comedy Theatre. Regional credits include THE HYPOCRITE at the Hull Truck Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company; THE NAP at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield; MAIL ORDER BRIDE at the West Yorkshire Playhouse; PASSION KILLERS, APRIL IN PARIS, THE OFFICE PARTY, UP 'N' UNDER, BOUNCERS and UP 'N' UNDER II at the Hull Truck Theatre; ONE OVER THE EIGHT at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough; MOLL FLANDERS at the York Theatre Royal; and THREE SISTERS at the Royal Exchange Manchester.

Film roles include THE FULL MONTY; THE FLINTSTONES IN VIVA ROCK VEGAS; JACK FROST alongside Michael Keaton; DOWN TO EARTH; and THE ORDER and A KNIGHT'S TALE with Heath Ledger. Credits also include Gurinder Chadha's IT'S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE; BARNEY'S VERSION with Paul Giamatti and Dustin Hoffman; Ridley Scott's ROBIN HOOD; THE MORE YOU IGNORE ME; DOWNTON ABBEY; and most recently Stephen Frears' THE LOST KING alongside Sally Hawkins. Mark will next be seen in Nicholas Hytner's THE CHORAL opposite Ralph Fiennes and Simon Russell Beale.

Addy began his career on television, appearing in award-winning comedies such as THE THIN BLUE LINE. Other credits include U.S. hit series STILL STANDING and Anand Tucker's critically acclaimed RED RIDING: 1983. Addy has appeared in HBO's GAME OF THRONES alongside Sean Bean; TROLLIED for Sky1; the BBC's ATLANTIS and NEW BLOOD; ITV's JERICHO; and the BBC's YOUNG HYACINTH. Mark can also be seen in ITV's WHITE HOUSE FARM directed by Paul Whittington, which dropped on Netflix to massive success; Amazon series THE RIG; James Graham's SHERWOOD; and the Disney series THE FULL MONTY which followed the original 1997 cast.

Addy will next be seen in HBO's DUNE: PROPHECY alongside Emily Watson and Olivia Williams.

ALUN ARMSTRONG

Herbert Trickett

Alun Armstrong is an award-winning British actor, well known for appearances in Mel Gibson's BRAVEHEART, Tim Burton's SLEEPY HOLLOW, Clint Eastwood's WHITE HUNTER BLACK HEART and THE MUMMY RETURNS for Universal Pictures. His additional recent film credits include GOLDEN YEARS, FUNNY COW, POSSUM, CORDELIA, KRULL, OLIVER TWIST, VAN HELSING, STRICTLY SINATRA and ERAGON. His film THIS IS PERSONAL received a BAFTA nomination for Best Drama Serial. He has just wrapped on a role in Alan Bennett's next feature, THE CHORAL.

On television Alun is well known for his role Jim in BREEDERS. In addition, he has appeared in miniseries such as PRIME SUSPECT 1973 and DARK ANGEL and most recently in James Graham's SHERWOOD. Armstrong led the cast of hugely successful BBC drama NEW TRICKS as well as GARROW'S LAW, also for the BBC. Other credits include BLEAK HOUSE, based on the Charles Dickens novel of the same name. Further television credits include YEAR OF THE RABBIT, DOWNTON ABBEY, PENNY DREADFUL, MARRIED... WITH CHILDREN, and FRONTIER alongside Jason Momoa.

Armstrong has been nominated for the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actor six times for his theatre work. In 1994, he won the award as the title character in SWEENEY TODD at the National Theatre. His appearances in the National Theatre also include the role of Willie Loman in DEATH OF A SALESMAN and The Captain in THE FATHER.

Armstrong spent over nine years with the Royal Shakespeare Company and has performed at the Old Vic, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Barbican, the Royal Albert Hall and on Broadway in countless productions including in LES MISÉRABLES (Armstrong originated the role of Thénardier in the original 1985 cast) THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF NICHOLAS NICKELBY, TROILUS & CRESSIDA, THE WINTER'S TALE, THE TEMPEST, THE CRUCIBLE and TAMING OF THE SHREW, among many others.

ROBERT EMMS

Robert Horner

Robert Emms graduated from the LAMDA in 2007; just two years later he had attracted the attention of director Steven Spielberg in the lead role of the National Theatre's production of WAR HORSE. Spielberg subsequently cast Emms in his feature film adaptation of the play, released in 2011.

It marked the start of a career for Emms that has included collaborations with directors such as Clio Barnard, Roland Emmerich, Rufus Norris and Daniel Kokotajlo. He worked with Barnard on her debut THE ARBOR, and most recently in James Graham's SHERWOOD.

Emms has recently completed filming BLOOD ON SNOW directed by Cary Fukunaga, and **he** also stars in the upcoming Saoirse Ronan indie BAD APPLES. He played Rick in Rufus Norris' debut film BROKEN and Steven in Daniel Kokotajlo's debut film APOSTASY. Other selected big-screen work includes Daniel Kokotajlo's STARVE ACRE, KICK ASS 2, MIRROR MIRROR, and as American tennis star Vitas Gerulaitis in BORG/MCENROE.

On television, Emms is known for his portrayal of Leonid Toptunov in Craig Mazin's HBO limited series CHERNOBYL. He also starred in HAPPY VALLEY, FOUR LIVES, KAOS, and two seasons of the critically acclaimed STAR WARS series ANDOR.

As well as WAR HORSE, Emms has taken to the London stage for Matthew Dunster's 2023 production of Harold Pinters' THE HOMECOMING at the Young Vic. He also played the chess grandmaster Bobby Fischer in a 2019 production of RAVENS: SPASSKY VS. FISCHER at the Hampstead Theatre.

LYNDSEY MARSHAL

Mrs. Bishop

Lyndsey Marshal can currently be seen in INSOMNIA; a 6-part TV series for Paramount +. She can also be seen in the feature films RESTLESS and UP THE CATALOGUE. Further screen work includes the four-part series INSIDE MAN for the BBC directed by Paul McGuigan.

Her most recent stage performances include playing Ebba in FORCE MAJEURE (Donmar Warehouse) and playing the role of Gina Ekdal in THE WILD DUCK (Almeida Theatre). She can also be seen in the NT Live award-winning production OTHELLO directed by Nicholas Hytner, with whom she reteams for THE CHORAL.

Other credits include Agatha in AGATHA AND THE CURSE OF ISHTAR, Ellie in THE LEAGUE ON GENTLEMEN, Cleopatra in ROME, and Lady Sarah Hill in GARROW'S LAW amongst many others.

She was nominated for a Best Actress Olivier for her role as Catherine in THE BOSTON MARRIAGE.

RON COOK

Reverend Woodhead

Ron Cook's stage credits include Grenfell: System Failure and Grenfell: Value Engineering at the Tabernacle; Girl from the North Country at the Old Vic; The Children on Broadway; Our Country's Good, The Recruiting Officer, and Cloud Nine at the Royal Court; Europe, Faith Healer, Trelawny of the Wells, Richard II, King Lear, Juno & the Paycock, and Glengarry Glen Ross at the Donmar Warehouse; Pinter at the Pinter at the Harold Pinter Theatre; The Homecoming, Henry V, and Hamlet on Broadway; The Ruling Class, Twelfth Night, and Art in the West End; The Seafarer, Howard Katz, Black, and Snow at the National Theatre.

His screen credits include Doc Martin, Inside Number 9, Life After Life, Andor, Des, The Salisbury Poisonings, The Witcher, Death in Paradise, Chernobyl, Les Misérables, City and the City, Mr Selfridge, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Little Dorrit, Silent Witness, Diary of Anne Frank, Doctor Who, Funland, The Lost Prince and The Singing Detective.

His feature film credits include The Critic, Sew Torn, Empire of Light, The King's Man, 18% Grey, Hot Fuzz, The Merchant of Venice, Thunderbirds, 24 Hour Party People, Charlotte Gray, Chocolat, Topsy Turvy, Secrets & Lies, and The Cook the Thief and His Wife and Her Lover.

AMARA OKEREKE

Mary Lockwood

Amara Okereke is a rising star of the British stage and screen. Her stage credits include the acclaimed 2021 Almeida Theatre production of SPRING AWAKENING, in which Amara played the central role of Wendla; Polly in THE BOYFRIEND at the Menier Chocolate Factory; Laurie in OKLAHOMA! at Chichester Festival Theatre; and Amara won The Stage Debut Award for her performance as Cosette in LES MISÉRABLES.

Amara was lauded for her recent performance as Eliza Doolittle in Bartlett Sher's Tony Award-winning revival of MY FAIR LADY at the London Coliseum opposite Vanessa Redgrave.

Amara made her motion picture debut for Constantin Films in the upcoming IN THE LOST LANDS as one of the supporting leads opposite Dave Bautista and Milla Jovovich. She has recently wrapped a key supporting role in THE CHORAL for Sony Pictures Classics. She stars opposite Ralph Fiennes in the film directed by BAFTA, Tony, and Olivier Award winner Nicholas Hytner from an original screenplay from prolific British writer Alan Bennett.

On the small screen Amara will lead the cast of THE MORNING AFTER, an 8-part limited series for Amazon coming out later in 2024. Previous television work also includes ANDOR for Disney+ and RED ROSE for the BBC/Netflix.

EMILY FAIRN

Bella Holmes

Emily Fairn is a Screen International 'Star of Tomorrow' for 2023 and a graduate of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

She booked her first leading role right out of drama school, playing troubled heroin addict Casey, opposite Martin Freeman in both series of THE RESPONDER (BAFTA TV nominated, 2023) for BBC One.

Fairn is currently playing one of the leads in the HOUSE OF GUINNESS series for Netflix, written by Steven Knight (PEAKY BLINDERS) and directed by Tom Shankland. She can soon be seen in, SATURDAY NIGHT, about the inception of SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE, which Jason Reitman (JUNO) has written and directed; JOY from writer Jack Thorne, featuring alongside Bill Nighy, Thomasin Mackenzie and James Norton for Netflix; and THE CHORAL, written by Alan Bennett and directed by Nicholas Hytner, starring opposite Ralph Fiennes and Simon Russell Beale.

Fairn recently appeared in Sky Atlantic and STARZ' smash hit, MARY AND GEORGE opposite Nick Galitzine & Julianne Moore, and the recent BAFTA TV nominated BLACK MIRROR - DEMON 79, alongside Paapa Essiedu and Anjana Vasan for Netflix.

Other notable credits include BFI/BBC feature film CHUCK CHUCK BABY; RAIN DOGS for HBO/BBC starring Daisy May-Cooper, and COBRA for Sky One.

She made her West End stage debut playing Alma in the world premiere of BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN @SohoPlace, starring opposite Lucas Hedges and Mike Faist. Her stellar performance received plaudits and The Stage's Debut Performer Award nomination.

SHAUN THOMAS

Mitch

Shaun Thomas is an award-winning actor, who starred in Molly Manning Walker's critically acclaimed coming of age drama, HOW TO HAVE SEX. He won Best Supporting Actor at the 2023 BIFAs alongside Paul Mescal, and the film won Un Certain Regard in Cannes 2023 as well as multiple other nominations and wins.

He will next be seen as a series regular in the brand-new GAME OF THRONES prequel series, A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS for HBO. Thomas most recently starred in ITV THRILLER THE LONG SHADOW directed by Lewis Arnold, which received brilliant reviews.

Thomas was discovered by Amy Hubbard and cast in a leading role in Clio Barnard's BAFTA nominated film THE SELFISH GIANT (2013). They went on to work together again in 2021 in ALI AND AVA, in which he starred opposite Claire Rushbrook and Adeel Akhtar.

His other film work includes Tim Burton's MISS PEREGRINE'S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN (2016) and THE BROTHERS GRIMSBY (2016). Shaun

starred in three seasons of BBC comedy LADHOOD (2019-2022) and the BBC drama FOUR LIVES (2022) opposite Stephen Merchant.

JACOB DUDMAN

Clyde

Jacob Dudman made his on-screen debut in the leading role of the hit teen drama THE A LIST, which premiered on the BBC before being acquired by Netflix in early 2020. That same year, he joined the cast of Netflix's MEDICI as Giulio De Medici in the show's third season.

He recently wrapped filming on THE CHORAL, a new feature penned by Alan Bennett and directed by Nicholas Hytner, starring alongside Ralph Fiennes, Roger Allam, and Simon Russell Beale. He also stars in the feature-length finale of Netflix's acclaimed historical drama THE LAST KINGDOM.

Another standout performance came in Red Productions and Netflix's THE STRANGER, based on the novel by Harlan Coben, where Jacob played Thomas Price, the son of Richard Armitage's character. He went on to star as Sam in FATE: THE WINX SAGA, a role he reprised across both seasons of the hit Netflix series.

In addition to his on-screen work, Jacob has built an impressive portfolio in voice acting. He is well known for his collaboration with Big Finish Productions, where he portrayed the titular role in multiple DOCTOR WHO audio dramas. His voice work also includes projects for Audible, BBC Audio, and Penguin and most recently, he lent his voice to HBO's acclaimed animated series PRIMAL and UNICORN: WARRIORS ETERNAL.

OLIVER BRISCOMBE

Lofly

Winner of Harrogate Festival of Speech and Drama 2023, Oliver Briscoombe marks his professional debut with THE CHORAL, directed by Nicholas Hytner from a screenplay by Alan Bennett.

A graduate of the prestigious Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, Taylor Uttley makes his feature film debut in *THE CHORAL*, from director Nicholas Hytner and screenwriter Alan Bennett. His student work includes roles as Romeo in *ROMEO & JULIET*, as Alun in *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*, and as Laertes in *HAMLET*.

Since 2022 he has played the series regular role of Brad Horrobin in BBC Radio 4's popular soap opera *THE ARCHERS*, and on television, he appeared in 2023's *BEYOND PARADISE* and *THREE LITTLE BIRDS*. He will soon be seen in Anthony Maras feature film *PRESSURE*, about the 72 hours leading up to D-Day, as Private Lincoln Webb. His co-stars include Brendan Fraser, Kerry Condon, Andrew Scott and Damian Lewis.

Simon Russell Beale was educated at St. Pauls Cathedral Choir School and Clifton College in Bristol. After graduating with a first in English at Cambridge University he began training as an opera singer before he turned to acting. He started his theatrical career at The Royal Court and went on to the Royal Shakespeare Company for eight years. Since then, he has spent 20 years at The National Theatre.

Beale has not only performed all over the world, but he has also appeared in award-winning TV and film. Beale has presented many BBC programmes about classical music. In 2019 he was appointed a Knighthood in the Queen's Birthday Honours for his services to the Arts.

Theatre credits include *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* and *JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN* at the Bridge Theatre; *THE LEHMAN TRILOGY* at the Piccadilly Theatre and The Armory, New York; *THE TEMPEST*, *KING LEAR*, *GHOSTS*, *RICHARD III*, *THE SEAGULL*, *EDWARD II*, *TROILUS & CRESSIDA*, *THE MAN OF MODE*, and *RESTORATION* at the RSC; *THE LEHMAN TRILOGY*, *KING LEAR*, *TIMON OF*

ATHENS, COLLABORATORS, LONDON ASSURANCE, A SLIGHT ACHE, MAJOR BARBARA, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, THE ALCHEMIST, LIFE OF GALILEO, JUMPERS, HUMBLE BOY, HAMLET, BATTLE ROYAL, CANDIDE, SUMMERFOLK, MONEY, OTHELLO, ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD, and VOLPONE at the National Theatre, MR FOOTE'S OTHER LEG in Hampstead/Haymarket; TEMPLE, THE PHILANTHROPIST, UNCLE VANYA, and TWELFTH NIGHT at the Donmar Warehouse; THE HOTHOUSE at Trafalgar Studios; PRIVATES ON PARADE at the Noel Coward Theatre; BLUEBIRD at the Atlantic Theatre, New York; THE CHERRY ORCHARD, THE WINTER'S TALE (BAM, World Tour, Old Vic); MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT at the Palace Theatre, London and Schubert Theatre, New York; JULIUS CAESAR (Barbican, International Tour); RICHARD II and MACBETH at the Almeida Theatre; JUMPERS at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, New York; JUMPERS at the Piccadilly Theatre; and HUMBLE BOY at the Gielgud Theatre.

Television includes HOUSE OF THE DRAGON, DOUGLAS IS CANCELLED, MARY & GEORGE, VANITY FAIR, CHARLIE BROOKER'S WEEKLY WIPE, PENNY DREADFUL, UNDER THE COVERS, MONTEVERDI, LEGACY, PERKINSON, HENRY IV PARTS 1 & 2, GOD'S COUNTRY, SYMPHONY, SPOOKS, SACRED CHRISTMAS MUSIC, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, DUNKIRK, GREAT HISTORIANS, GIBBON, and A DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF TIME.

Film includes FIREBRAND, RADIOACTIVE, THE OUTFIT, BENEDICTION, MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS, OPERATION FINALE, THE DEATH OF STALIN (for which he won the 2017 British Independent Film Award for Best Supporting Actor), MUSEO, MY COUSIN RACHEL, TARZAN, SAVANNAH, INTO THE WOODS, THE DEEP BLUE SEA, MY WEEK WITH MARILYN, and HAMLET. ❖

ABOUT THE CREW

NICHOLAS HYTNER

Director & Producer

THE CHORAL is the fourth of Nicholas Hytner's film collaborations with Alan Bennett, after THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE (1994), THE HISTORY BOYS (2006) and THE LADY IN THE VAN (2015). His other films include THE CRUCIBLE (1996) and THE OBJECT OF MY AFFECTION (1998).

He was the director of the National Theatre in London from 2003-2015, where he directed Shakespeare (HENRY V, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, HAMLET, TIMON OF ATHENS, OTHELLO); plays from the classical repertoire (THE ALCHEMIST, PHÈDRE, LONDON ASSURANCE); and a wide range of new plays, including THE HISTORY BOYS, THE HABIT OF ART, and ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS. He produced a repertoire of 20 productions a year and introduced NT Live cinema broadcasts around the world.

He is now the artistic director of London Theatre Company, which opened its first space – the Bridge Theatre – in 2017. His productions at the Bridge include YOUNG MARX, JULIUS CAESAR, A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, BACH AND SONS, JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN, GUYS AND DOLLS, and RICHARD II. Its second space – Lightroom – opened in 2023 with David Hockney's installation BIGGER & CLOSER (NOT SMALLER & FURTHER AWAY).

He has directed opera for the Royal Opera (London), English National Opera (London), Opéra de Paris, Théâtre du Châtelet (Paris), and Bayerische Staatsoper (Munich).

He has won three Olivier awards, three Tony awards and a BAFTA.

His book BALANCING ACTS was published by Jonathan Cape in 2016.

Alan Bennett first appeared on stage in 1960 with Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Jonathan Miller in the revue BEYOND THE FRINGE.

His stage plays include FORTY YEARS ON, HABEAS CORPUS, THE OLD COUNTRY, GETTING ON, ENJOY, KAFKA'S DICK, AN ENGLISHMAN ABROAD and A QUESTION OF ATTRIBUTION, an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS, THE LADY IN THE VAN and several of the monologues from the TALKING HEADS collection: A CHIP IN THE SUGAR, A LADY OF LETTERS, A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE (which he also directed and appeared in, winning the Laurence Olivier Award for Outstanding Entertainment and Most Outstanding Performance in a Musical or Entertainment), BED AMONG THE LENTILS and SOLDIERING ON (which he also directed).

THE HISTORY BOYS opened at the National Theatre in 2004, toured nationally and internationally and played for two seasons in the West End and on Broadway (awards for Best Play include the Laurence Olivier Award, Tony Award, Critics Circle Award and South Bank Show Award for Theatre). THE HABIT OF ART opened at the National Theatre in 2009, PEOPLE in 2012 and his most recent play ALLELUJAH! premiered at The Bridge Theatre in 2018.

His work for television includes A DAY OUT, SUNSET ACROSS THE BAY, A VISIT FROM MISS PROTHERO, ME, I'M AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, DORIS AND DOREEN, THE OLD CROWD, AFTERNOON OFF, ONE FINE DAY, ALL DAY ON THE SANDS, INTENSIVE CARE (in which he played the leading role), OUR WINNIE, MARKS, ROLLING HOME, SAY SOMETHING HAPPENED, A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE, AN ENGLISHMAN ABROAD, THE INSURANCE MAN, 102 BOULEVARD HAUSSMAN and two collections of TALKING HEADS monologues, the second of which won the South Bank Show Award for Best Drama. Two new TALKING HEADS monologues, THE SHRINE and AN ORDINARY WOMAN, were recorded for the BBC, along with 10 of the original episodes and transmitted during the spring 2020 lockdown.

Films include *A PRIVATE FUNCTION*, *PRICK UP YOUR EARS*, *THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE* (nominated for two Oscars), *THE HISTORY BOYS*, *THE LADY IN THE VAN* and *ALLELUJAH*.

WRITING HOME, his collection of prose writing, was published by Faber in 1994 followed by *UNTOLD STORIES* in 2005. Alan's third collection of prose, *KEEPING ON KEEPING ON*, containing his peerless diaries from 2005 to 2015, was published in October 2016. His other books include *THE UNCOMMON READER*, *THE CLOTHES THEY STOOD UP IN*, *FATHER FATHER BURNING BRIGHT*, *THE LADY IN THE VAN*, *THE LAYING ON OF HANDS* and *SMUT*. For many years he has been a regular contributor to the *London Review of Books*.

KEVIN LOADER

Producer

Kevin Loader is one of Britain's most established film and television producers. *THE CHORAL* is his fourth collaboration with Alan Bennett and Nicholas Hytner after *THE HISTORY BOYS*, *THE LADY IN THE VAN*, and BBC TV's remakes of Bennett's monologues, *TALKING HEADS*.

Loader also regularly works with Armando Iannucci. Their most recent collaboration was *AVENUE 5*, a television comedy set on a cruise liner in space which starred Hugh Laurie, Josh Gad, Rebecca Front and Nikki Amukah-Bird. Previous collaborations with Iannucci include his feature films *IN THE LOOP*, *THE DEATH OF STALIN* and *THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD*. The pair are about to start their next film, *GROWTH*.

Until his untimely death in 2022, Loader had a long-standing partnership with director Roger Michell dating back to their BBC adaptation of Hanif Kureishi's *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA*. Loader and Michell's Free Range Films produced most of Michell's British films over the past 20 years, including *LE WEEK-END*, starring Jim Broadbent and Lindsay Duncan; *VENUS*, for which Peter O'Toole received his final Oscar nomination; *THE MOTHER*, starring Daniel Craig and Anne Reid; the film of

Ian McEwan's *ENDURING LOVE*; and *HYDE PARK ON HUDSON*, starring a Golden Globe-nominated Bill Murray as FDR. Their last theatrical film together was Michell's documentary about the late Queen, *ELIZABETH: A PORTRAIT IN PART(S)*. The pair also made the ITV Drama *THE LOST HONOUR OF CHRISTOPHER JEFFRIES*, which won both Bafta and RTS Awards for Best Drama Serial in 2015.

Loader's early career was at the BBC, starting in news and current affairs before making arts programmes for strands such as *ARENA* and *OMNIBUS*. He then set up and acted as Managing Editor of *THE LATE SHOW*. He moved to BBC Drama in 1990. His productions there over six years included the award-winning mini-series *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA* and *CLARISSA*. He was executive producer on a range of BBC dramas, including the award-winning series *HOLDING ON*, *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL*, *OUR FRIENDS IN THE NORTH* and *THE CROW ROAD*.

He left the BBC in 1996 to run a film company for Sony Pictures and Canal+, *The Bridge*. His first feature film as producer was *CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN*, starring Nicolas Cage, Penelope Cruz and John Hurt. Subsequent producing credits include Sam Taylor-Johnson's *NOWHERE BOY*, Andrea Arnold's *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*, Julian Jarrold's film version of *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*, and *ALPHA PAPA: THE ALAN PARTRIDGE MOVIE*. More recently Loader was producer on *THE UNLIKELY PILGRIMAGE OF HAROLD FRY* and *THE SUMMER BOOK*, starring Glenn Close. He is working once again with Hanif Kureishi as part of the team bringing Kureishi's recent book, *SHATTERED* to the big screen.

DAMIAN JONES

Producer

Damian Jones is one of Britain's most prolific independent film producers. In a career that spans over 50 feature films, he has collaborated with prestige directing talent and cast to create critical and commercial films including the Oscar-winning *THE IRON LADY* (Phyllida Lloyd), *LADY IN THE VAN* (Nicholas Hytner), *BELLE*

(Amma Asante), WELCOME TO SARAJEVO (Michael Winterbottom), MILLIONS (Danny Boyle), GOODBYE CHRISTOPHER ROBIN (Simon Curtis), SEX & DRUGS & ROCK & ROLL (Matt Whitecross), THE HISTORY BOYS (Nicholas Hytner), DAD'S ARMY (Oliver Parker), KIDULTHOOD & ADULTHOOD, and ABSOLUTELY FABULOUS: THE MOVIE (Mandie Fletcher). Other film credits include M.J.Delaney's POWDER ROOM, Gregg Araki's SPLENDOR, Regan Hall's FAST GIRLS, and Vondie Curtis-Hall's GRIDLOCK'D.

Most recent productions and releases include Michael Winterbottom's GREED, Argyris Papadimitropoulos's MONDAY, Romola Garai's AMULET, Rapman's BLUE STORY, Catherine Tate's THIS NAN'S LIFE, Rupert Majendie's BRIAN & CHARLES, and Raine Allen Miller's RYE LANE.

Other films include Richard Eyre's ALLEJULAH and Curtis Vowell's SEIZE THEM, and he was an executive producer on I USED TO BE FAMOUS and GREATEST DAYS. He has just wrapped Nicholas Hytner and Alan Bennett's THE CHORAL, which he produces with Kevin Loader for Sony Classics and BBC Film. He is currently in production on Raine Allen Miller's THE ROOTS MANOEUVRE with Plan B and OrionAmazon.

MIKE ELEY

Director of Photography

From a career that began with several high-profile documentaries traversing the globe, Mike Eley followed a rather unconventional path to narrative feature films by serving as the cameraman and operator of documentary-style segments on films such as NOTTING HILL and LOVE, ACTUALLY. But it was director Ken Loach – an esteemed documentarian – who helped launch Eley's career in narrative filmmaking with an opportunity to work on **his** feature THE NAVIGATORS. Eley's talent for combining documentary finesse and narrative storytelling was perhaps best exemplified in the riveting docudrama, TOUCHING THE VOID, which earned a British Independent Film Award (BIFA) for Best Technical Achievement.

In the narrative arena, Eley has collaborated multiple times with director Susanna White, most notably on **the** BBC's JANE EYRE, for which he received both an Emmy nomination and the RTS Award for Best Cinematography. Director Michael Sucasz's GREY GARDENS for HBO earned Eley his second Emmy nomination. He later re-teamed with White for both the feature film NANNY MCPHEE RETURNS and the HBO production of PARADE'S END, which garnered Eley his third Emmy nomination. He was later **honoured** with a Best Cinematography Award from the Dinard Film Festival for Clio Barnard's acclaimed feature, THE SELFISH GIANT.

15 years after his brief stint as the documentary cameraman on NOTTING HILL, Eley was reunited with director Roger Michell, only now as Director of Photography of THE LOST HONOR OF CHRISTOPHER JEFFRIES, which earned both BAFTA and RTS Awards for Best Cinematography. The two enjoyed further collaborations on MY COUSIN RACHEL, BLACKBIRD, and the director's final narrative film, THE DUKE.

Other credits include James D'Arcy's MADE IN ITALY, starring Liam Neeson; OFF THE RAILS, starring the late Kelly Preston and Judi Dench; and THE WHITE CROW, directed by Ralph Fiennes.

Recent works include Simon Stone's THE DIG, starring Ralph Fiennes, Carey Mulligan and Lily James; the Netflix feature THE BEAUTIFUL GAME, for director Thea Sharrock; and the Sony Pictures Classic feature, THE CHORAL, for director Nicholas Hytner, starring Ralph Fiennes and Simon Russell Beale.

A resident of the United Kingdom, Eley previously served as President of the British Society of Cinematographers (BSC).

PETER FRANCIS

Production Designer

Peter Francis was nominated for an Academy Award and a BAFTA for his work and collaboration with Florian Zeller and Anthony Hopkins on THE FATHER.

Prior to this he has worked with great directors like Richard Eyre (THE CHILDREN ACT with Emma Thompson and Stanley Tucci, and KING LEAR, his first collaboration with Anthony Hopkins) and John Madden (THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL, THE DEBT, and numerous commercials).

Peter has worked on several successful shorts, including the BAFTA-winning ROOM 8, directed by James W Griffiths; and the Oscar-winning THE PHONE CALL starring Sally Hawkins and Jim Broadbent, directed by Mat Kirkby and written by James Lucas. He is also no stranger to blockbuster features, which include there James Bond films: GOLDENEYE, THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH, and CASINO ROYALE. Other large budget features including HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE, and HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS; Guillermo del Toro's HELLBOY and HELLBOY II: THE GOLDEN ARMY; and TITANIC from director James Cameron.

Francis is a passionate advocate for hand drawing. Film is an artform, and he believes the human touch a very important element when it comes to production design; shaping spaces to help tell stories and create environments that actors can inhabit as their own.

He is also a passionate collector of curios, art, and furniture, and has a particular love of the Arts and Crafts movement, which exemplifies his passion for all things handmade. Peter lives between London and The Lake District; the best of both worlds.

T A R I Q A N W A R

Editor

Having spent 18 years at the BBC, Tariq Anwar learnt his craft by cutting a huge array of programmes, including music and arts, Documentary features, light entertainment, drama series and serials, and News. He worked on extremely tight schedules, and the lessons he learnt in terms of storytelling, structure and how to make fast decisions were invaluable to his later work. Tariq has since cut a diverse

selection of feature films television dramas and documentaries and has won and been nominated for multiple awards. He won the European Editor Film award for his work on THE KING'S SPEECH, for which he also received nominations for the Academy Award, BAFTA and ACE awards in 2011. Most recently, Tariq was nominated for Best Film Editing for the 2021 Satellite Awards for his work on ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI.

Other recent feature film work includes THE SUPREMES AT EARL'S ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT, SAUDADE: A LOVE LETTER TO PORTUGAL, the WITH/IN Anthology, FARMING, HUMAN CAPITAL, WORTH, IRONBARK, THE LADY IN THE VAN, CURVE, LIBERTADOR, GREAT EXPECTATIONS, LAW ABIDING CITIZEN, THE OTHER MAN, REVOLUTIONARY ROAD, THE GOOD SHEPHERD, STAGE BEAUTY AND SYLVIA, as well as AMERICAN BEAUTY, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award, an ACE award and won BAFTA and GBFE award for Best Editor. Further BAFTA wins include the television dramas OPPENHEIMER and CAUGHT ON A TRAIN, and nominations include THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE, SUMMER'S LEASE, FORTUNE'S WAR, THE MONOCLED MUTINEER and TENDER IS THE NIGHT. He received a Sophia Lifetime Achievement Award in Portugal and had a book, MOVERS AND SHAKERS, THE MONSTER MAKERS - an irreverent take on the film industry from an editor's perspective - published.

JENNY BEAVAN

Costume Designer

Jenny Beavan was brought up in London in a musical family; her father was a cellist, and her mother played the viola.

She studied Theatre Design at the Central School of Art and Design under Ralph Koltai, a leading set designer of his day. She did not initially associate her future career in cinema or broadly based fashion... she had fallen in love with theatre and plays after seeing TWELFTH NIGHT with her grandfather, a Shakespeare enthusiast, when she was 10 years old.

Beavan started her career designing for opera, ballet and theatre in the UK and Europe, but in 1977 she reconnected with an old childhood friend, Nick Young, who had commissioned a TV film for THE SOUTH BANK SHOW from Merchant Ivory Productions – HULLABALOO OVER BONNIE AND GEORGIE’S PICTURES – to be directed by James Ivory. Nick needed someone to put together a wardrobe of clothes for Dame Peggy Ashcroft, she wanted a companion, and Jenny went with her to India to help in any way she could. This marked the beginning of her fruitful collaboration with the legendary director.

She continued to design costumes for Merchant Ivory films in collaboration with John Bright of Cosprop, her friend and mentor. Together they designed A ROOM WITH A VIEW, THE BOSTONIANS, MAURICE, and REMAINS OF THE DAY, amongst many other films, gaining nominations and an Academy Award for A ROOM WITH A VIEW.

Beavan has worked with many distinguished directors on films both huge and small in many parts of the world. These were daily historical stories set in the past, so she was amazed when director George Miller asked her to design his costumes for the post-apocalyptic MAD MAX: FURY ROAD.

After the success of FURY ROAD, and a second Academy Award, Beavan found the world opened up and she was offered a great variety of work. Films include THE BLACK DAHLIA, for Brian DePalma; A CURE FOR WELLNESS with Gore Verbinski; SHERLOCK HOLMES and SHERLOCK HOLMES: A GAME OF SHADOWS with Guy Ritchie; LIFE with Daniel Espinosa; THE NUTCRACKER AND THE FOUR REALMS for Lasse Hallström; CHRISTOPHER ROBIN and WHITE BIRD for Marc Forster; and THE KING’S SPEECH with Tom Hooper.

CRUELLA followed in 2019 – an enormous undertaking set in the 1970s following a fashion designer who ends up as Cruella de Vil. The Emmas Stone and Thompson required approximately 60 costumes between them and prep time was 10 weeks. CRUELLA also had fashion shows, punk concerts, elaborate balls, and stunts. CRUELLA did win another Academy Award.

Beavan is not afraid to experiment with various film genres and refuses to be pigeonholed. Costume design is storytelling; it should reflect each script's narrative and not be a mark of the designer.

In a career spanning more than 40 years, Jenny has worked in theatre, TV, commercials, and feature films. She has been nominated for BAFTAs, Emmys and Oscars, winning several. During the EnergaCAMERIMAGE in Toruń, Poland in November 2023, she received the Golden Frog Special Award for Costume Designer with Unique Visual Sensitivity.

Recent design work includes the British Airways safety video, and THE CHORAL. In February 2025 she was given the CDGA Career Achievement Award.

ERIKA ÖKVIST

Hair & Makeup Designer

Erika Ökvist is an award-winning Hair, Make-up, and Prosthetic Designer with a career of over 21 years. She has been nominated for and received many awards, such as a Primetime Emmy, Hollywood Make-Up and Hair Artist Guild Award, RTS, and BAFTA Craft Awards.

One of her earliest notable designs was PARADE'S END for Mammoth Screen and HBO, from which she received her first nomination for Best Make-up/Hairstyling in a non-series at the 2013 Online Film & Television Association Television Awards. In 2017, Erika won an RTS Craft Award for Best Make-up Design in Drama and a BAFTA Craft for Best Make-Up & Hair Design in 2018 for her work in TABOO starring Tom Hardy and Oona Chaplin.

After TABOO, she went on to work on many exciting series such as BLACK EARTH RISING with director Hugo Blick, and Netflix's CURSED starring Katherine Langford. In 2022, she designed BRIDGERTON Season 2. Her sterling work on the series won her an Emmy for Outstanding Period and/or Character Hairstyling and International Film & TV Hairdresser of the Year by International Hairdressing

Awards. She returned in 2023 to design the third season and claimed another win from the Make-up and Hair Styling Awards for Best Period and/or Character Hair Styling and a BAFTA nomination for Make-up and Hair Design.

Her other notable TV credits include ROOK for Lionsgate and Starz with director Kari Skogland, Peter Kosminsky's mini-series THE STATE, Pete Travis' THE GO-BETWEEN with Vanessa Redgrave and Jim Broadbent, TYRANT for Fox Network, 24: LIVE ANOTHER DAY also for Fox and MR. SELFRIDGE for ITV.

Her feature credits include AMAZON ADVENTURE starring Calum Finlay with director Mike Slee for SK Films, CAPTAIN WEBB with Justin Hardy, IN SECRET with director Charlie Stratton and starring Elisabeth Olsen and Oscar Isaac and DEMENTAMANIA with director Kit Ryan.

Ökvist most recent credits are Riz Ahmed's Amazon comedy series QUARTER LIFE and Nicholas Hytner's THE CHORAL.

GEORGE FENTON

Music Directed and Arranged By

George Fenton has composed scores for over 200 films, documentaries, TV series, theme tunes, and many theatre productions. His work has been recognised with numerous awards: 5 Oscar nominations, multiple Ivor Novello, BAFTA, Golden Globe, Emmy and BMI awards, a Classical Brit, The Nina Rota Award at Venice, and a World Soundtrack Lifetime Achievement Award.

Fenton has written extensively for the work of Alan Bennett, including TALKING HEADS, TELLING TALES, seasons of plays on television, as well as film scores for THE HISTORY BOYS, THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE, THE LADY IN THE VAN and THE CHORAL, all of which were directed by Nicholas Hytner.

Other film scores include GANDHI, CRY FREEDOM, DANGEROUS LIASONS, THE FISHER KING, THE CRUCIBLE, GROUNDHOG DAY, SHADOWLANDS, YOU'VE GOT MAIL, SWEET HOME ALABAMA, HITCH, THE WIND THAT

SHAKES THE BARLEY, I, DANIEL BLAKE, and recently COLD PURSUIT, THE SECRET: DARE TO DREAM, THE UNITED WAY, THE DUKE, ELIZABETH: A PORTRAIT IN PARTS, ALLELUJAH, UNIT 234, and THE OLD OAK.

His scores for the BBC Natural History series BLUE PLANET, PLANET EARTH, FROZEN PLANET, and recently WILD ISLES are performed in concert halls worldwide. ❖