

National
Theatre



ROALD DAHL'S

WITCHES

THE

PRE-SHOW
ACTIVITY PACK



Introduction

This pre-show education pack for KS2 and KS3 students is designed as a pick-and-mix of activities for you to use with your classes prior to seeing the National Theatre/Roald Dahl Story Company's production of *The Witches*.

Part one offers a selection of exercises designed to introduce children to theatre and specifically musical theatre, and the kinds of jobs and careers available. In part two, the exercises focus on introducing students to the story of *The Witches*, the key characters and the world of the book and play. You can either work your way through the pack or choose a particular area to focus on. All of the exercises will help prepare your students for seeing the production.



After watching the production, why not download our *The Witches* Activity Pack (available from 7 November) and get creative, stepping into the shoes of the production team to make your own musical.

If you have any questions, then please contact letsplay@nationaltheatre.org.uk

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SYNOPSIS



Luke is a very brave and imaginative ten (and a half!) year-old-boy who lives with his mum and dad. When his parents die in a car crash, his unconventional, eccentric grandma, Sofie, whom he has never met, arrives from Norway to take care of him. She tells Luke she is a witch hunter and has dedicated her life to stopping witches. She says witches may look like ordinary women but want to squelch, squiggle and fry children. Luke doesn't believe her until he meets a witch for himself.

Grandma has a heart attack, and despite her resistance, the doctor orders her to go to Bournemouth to recover. Luke and Grandma stay at the very grand Hotel Magnificent, run by Mr Stringer, a rather short-tempered, unfriendly and impatient man. There, Luke meets Bruno Jenkins, a rich and greedy boy with a sweet tooth.

Luke is exploring the hotel's ballroom when the annual meeting of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children arrive. To Luke's horror, the RSPCC turn out to be the witches of England, led by the formidable and evil Grand High Witch. The Grand High Witch details her new plan to make all the children of England disappear. They will lace sweets and chocolate with Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse Maker, a potion that will turn children into mice. She demonstrates by offering some chocolate to Bruno, who turns into a mouse. When Luke

calls out to warn Bruno, he too is caught and transformed into a mouse.

Luke and Bruno, now mice, find Grandma and plot to overthrow the Grand High Witch. They plan to steal a vial of Formula 86 from her hotel room and pour it into the soup made especially for the RSPCC's dinner. They steal the potion and Grandma narrowly escapes the Grand High Witch. Luke is scared after the encounter.

Uncertain he is ready to take on the witches alone, Luke is inspired by an unlikely collection of hotel ornaments... children who were transformed by the witches in years gone by! He sneaks into the kitchen, darting around the kitchen staff, but he's seen and his tail is chopped off by the chef. Luke finally pours the potion into the soup pot, and when dinner is served, all the witches are turned into mice. Bruno is reunited with his parents, who are initially alarmed to have a mouse for a son. Luke – who is also still a mouse – and Grandma set off on an adventure to find and stop the witches all over the rest of the world.



1 What is Theatre?

In this first exercise, you can simply facilitate a discussion with your students.

Who has been to the theatre before?
What did you see?

Avoid prompting the students too much and just see what they come up with. Starting with this exercise will help you to gauge the level of understanding of theatre in your class.

You might like to show images of different kinds of theatre and ask the students to decide which is most like theatre as they understand it.

Does everybody agree?

To help with this you may want to Google some of the examples below to find images of different types of theatre spaces. Also listed are several examples of different styles of theatre that you can use as part of your discussion.



Types of Performance Space	Styles of Performance
Proscenium arch / end on	Comedy
Thrust	Tragedy
In the round	Pantomime
Traverse	Musical theatre
Black box	Physical theatre
Promenade	Immersive theatre
Site-specific theatre	Digital theatre

2 Word Rush

What words come to mind when we think of 'theatre'?

Prepare a large sheet of paper or use the interactive white board. Ask the students to call out any words that relate to theatre.

As they do so, add the words to the paper or board to create a collective collage of vocabulary.

If possible, keep the paper or board displayed for the whole lesson and refer to it where appropriate.

3 Definition of Theatre

Invite the students to use the words in the 'word rush' activity to make a sentence that defines theatre for them.

Rufus Norris, the Director of the National Theatre, thinks:

'Theatre is an amazing way to tell stories. Theatre brings people together to experience a story.'


Do you agree?

4 What is Musical Theatre?

Has anyone seen a musical before? What are the differences that you notice between the performance of a play and a piece of musical theatre?

Using the vocabulary from the 'word rush' exercise, ask the students to come up with a definition of musical theatre specifically. The following definition may be of use.

Which do you prefer: theatre or musical theatre? Why?



Musical theatre is a form of performance which combines music, songs, dialogue, acting and dance to communicate a story. Insights into the characters and what they are feeling are also communicated through music and song.



5 Encouraging your Students

Do you really want your students to love theatre? Here are some ideas:

- Visit your local theatre or the National Theatre for a **backstage tour**
- Take the class to see a **production**
- Book a visit from a **touring theatre company**
- Take the class to see another school performing a **school play** or assembly
- Purchase the book **All About Theatre** for your classroom to introduce students to all the roles in theatre
- Read stories set in or around theatre
For example: **Millhouse** by Natale Ghent
The Dream Theatre by Sarah Ball
Summerlost by Ally Condie
The Devil and His Boy by Anthony Horowitz
- Watch National Theatre productions for FREE in your classroom now, by registering for the **National Theatre Collection** (available free to all UK state schools)
- Browse the **National Theatre Let's Play** programme for primary schools or the **National Theatre secondary schools programme** on the National Theatre website
- Sign up to the National Theatre's **schools newsletter** to be the first to find out about more opportunities for your students at the National Theatre



6 Jobs in Theatre

The National Theatre has over 800 permanent staff and each year employs over 1,200 freelance artists. There are over 42 different departments at the National Theatre all contributing to the running of the building, what you see on our stages and our activity across the UK.

Nearly everything you see on stage at the National Theatre is made in our building on the South Bank, making it the largest factory in central London. Whatever your favourite subject is at school and whatever your talent is, there is a job that you can do at the National Theatre. It is a vibrant, creative and exciting place to work.

Alongside being an actor or performer on the stage, what other careers or job roles are involved in putting a production together? In small groups, give your

students large pieces of paper to record as many job titles as they can think of. Remind students to think about their own drama or performance experiences in school, as well as any wider knowledge they may have.

You might like to show [this online backstage tour](#) of the National Theatre to give them some ideas. The diagram on the following page can also be used to guide them, if necessary. We will be exploring some of these theatre jobs in more detail in the next section.

If you were to work in theatre, what job would you choose? Ask them to think about their own particular talents, skills and interests. Ask the class to share these in small groups.

Jobs in Theatre

If you don't know what some of these jobs involve then why not look them up on the internet to find out.

Directors

Theatre Director
Musical Director
Movement Director
Fight Director

Special Effects

Armoury Specialist
Pyrotechnic Specialist
Illusions Specialist

Marketing & Press

Performers

Actors
Musicians
Puppeteers

Playwright

Sound & Video

Composer
Sound Designer
Sound Technician
Sound Operator

Front of House

Box Office
House Manager
Ushers
Security

Set

Set Designer
Digital Drawing Team
Construction Team
Scenic Artists

Costume

Costume Designer
Costume Makers
Costume Supervisor
Dressers

Casting

Casting Director

Wigs, Hair & Make Up

Wig Makers
Make Up Artists
Hair Stylists

Props

Prop Supervisor
Prop Buyer
Prop Maker

Lighting

Lighting Designer
Lighting Technician
Lighting Operator

Production

Production Manager
Stage Manager
Producer

7 Production Taskmaster

You are the Production Manager on *The Witches* at the National Theatre. It is your job to coordinate and communicate with all the different departments and staff to make sure the production reflects the director's vision for the play. Can you decide who would need to be involved in each of the following tasks? Note: Some tasks may involve a few different roles.

The director wants to make sure that school groups have the opportunity to see the production and is worried by the level of advance ticket sales. Who can try to boost these?

A key actor has had to leave the production whilst it is in rehearsal due to unforeseen circumstances. Who can search for a suitable replacement?

We need to decide what a bottle of Formula 86 should look like. Who might need to be involved in this decision? Who is then responsible for making this?

A signature piece of music needs to be created for the Grand High Witch. How can this be developed?

There are some magical illusions in the production. Who might be involved in helping to create these?

The tables which have been ordered for the scene in the restaurant of the Hotel Magnificent are the wrong colour. Who do we need to contact to help fix this?

Part of the play is set in a very grand hotel, the Hotel Magnificent. Who needs to be involved in helping to achieve the right look?

A character turns into a mouse half-way through the play. Who can ensure this is communicated effectively to the audience?

There is a car crash in the first half of the production. Who might need to be involved in the conversation about how this is presented on stage?



1 Getting to Know the Story

Before starting rehearsals, the Director, who is in charge of the whole team, must do a lot of research and preparation.

They need to know the story of the play very well, so that they can make sure every aspect of the production tells the story really clearly to an audience.

The story of *The Witches* musical has been adapted from a book, also called

The Witches, written by Roald Dahl.

Of course, the best way to get to know the story of *The Witches* is to read the book as a class. This was certainly the starting point for both the Writer and the Director of this production.

In order to find out more about the role of the Director in a production, why not watch our short film [What is a Director?](#)



Story Whoosh

Seat or stand the students in a circle. Explain that you are going to tell the story of *The Witches* together. Explain that you will narrate a story and each time you mention a character, the person you signal to should come to the centre of the circle and pretend to be that character, acting out whatever the character in the story does as you describe it.

You may want to practise this with a simple short example first, eg 'In a wood lived three bears, a mummy bear, a daddy bear and a baby bear and they loved eating porridge.'

Narrate the story of *The Witches*, incorporating all key characters, places and plot points. You can use the synopsis of *The Witches* on [page 3](#) for this exercise.

Each time a new character enters the story, signal to a student to go into the centre of the circle and become that character. It works best if you nominate students one by one around the circle.

You can clear the circle and reset the action at any point by calling 'Whoosh!' The students should then rejoin the circle and are no longer the characters that were assigned to them. Story Whoosh continues until the whole story has been told. You could ask the students to tell the story back to you, recapping the main characters and plot points to embed the learning.



2

Getting to Know the Characters

Before and during rehearsals, actors work hard to understand the characters they're playing. In order to find out more about the role of the actor in a production, why not watch our short film [What is an Actor?](#)

Ask the class to identify the main characters in *The Witches*.

- The Grand High Witch – the most evil of all the witches determined to rid the world of children

- Luke – a curious, brave and imaginative 10-year-old boy
- Gran – an unconventional, eccentric and cigar smoking old lady
- Bruno – a greedy boy from a privileged background
- Mr Stringer – a rather unfriendly man who runs the Hotel Magnificent

Which famous actors would you cast in these roles?



Character Diagrams

Divide the class into small groups. Provide each group with a large piece of paper and allocate each group one of the main characters from *The Witches*.

Ask one member of the group to lie down on the piece of paper and the others should draw round them so that you have a large outline of their body.

Ask them to note their character's motivations, thoughts, feelings and character traits on the inside of the outline.

Ask them to note any physical characteristics they observe or infer from the story on the outside. They can also add what other characters in the story might think of them.

Encourage them to consider how the character might walk, talk and laugh.

- What kind of habits might they have?
- What would be a common expression or turn of phrase for the character?
- What kind of impression might they make on others when they enter a room?

You could also give them the opportunity to think about how the character might dress. You could provide magazines, catalogues, fabric and other art materials. Give them the time to source and cut out examples of clothing and styles that they would associate with their character and attach these to the paper. They might also consider what colours they most associate with their character and add patches of colour using colouring pencils.

Allow time for each group to collate their notes, finalise their character diagram and prepare a presentation to summarise their character to the rest of the class.





Hot Seating

Place a chair in the centre of the room and seat the class in front of the chair. Give the instruction that as soon as anyone sits on the chair that they are no longer a school student, but they are going to move, act and think as if they were a particular character.

Choose a character that you are going to explore. Ask one of the students, sit in the chair, remembering that as soon as they are seated, they become that character. Encourage them to think about how this character might sit on the chair differently.

The rest of the class can then ask the character any questions. These can be questions that help to flesh out the life

of the character like, 'What's your favourite thing to eat?' or questions that relate directly to the story like, 'How did you feel when X happened to you?'. The child in the seat must answer all questions in role, totally inhabiting that character.

You may want to give the rest of the class a chance to think of any questions that they would like to ask the characters in advance. You may want to demonstrate inhabiting a character so the students can ask you questions first.

This exercise can lead straight into a written exercise, such as writing a diary entry for their character at a key moment in the story.

2 Getting to Know the World of the Story

The world of the play is communicated to the audience largely through the stage design and costumes of the production. This is created in the main by the Designer. It is common for a Designer to be responsible for both the stage and costume design of a production, but they can also be two different Designers.

To find out more about the role of the designer on a production, why not watch our short film [What is a Designer?](#)

What are the different locations in the story?

- Luke's house and Luke's bedroom
- Hotel Magnificent reception
- The hotel's ballroom
- Room 454 – the hotel room of the Grand High Witch
- The hotel's sun terrace
- The hotel's kitchen



Masking Tape Maps


Ask the students to get into small groups of five or six people and give two rolls of masking tape to each group. The cheapest masking tape is best for this as it is easy to tear and less sticky, so will be easy to remove afterwards. If you prefer, they can stick the masking tape to a large piece of paper instead of sticking it directly to the floor.

Allocate each group one of the locations in the story and ask them to create a floor plan/map of their location in masking tape. They should imagine it as a bird's-eye view. They should include as much detail as possible that they know from the story and add in more detail from their imaginations. This can include furniture and objects that might be found in the space. Where necessary, they should add in labels to indicate different features on the map.

Go round each group in turn and ask them to explain their maps to the rest

of the group and the reasons for the choices they have made.

You could take this further and ask each group to create a mood board, showing the different colours, shapes and textures they might include for this location if they were the designer for the production. You can use this activity as a starting point for a writing exercise from the point of view of the character(s) who might be found in these locations, perhaps describing their surroundings.



Do you have any budding writers or musicians in your class? Why not also check out the following short films:

[What is a Composer?](#)

[What is a Playwright?](#)

After Seeing the Production

The activities featured here are just the first step in your *The Witches* learning journey. After watching the production, why not download our *The Witches* Activity Pack (available from 7 November) and get creative, stepping into the shoes of the production team to make your own musical.

The Witches book is also a splendidly spooky way to bring some adventure into your classroom throughout the curriculum. With free downloadable lesson plans from the Roald Dahl Story Company, use the original story of the Grand High Witch to explore Maths, English, PSHE, Computing, Art and Design.

- **Create your own Witch awareness videos**
- **Collage the fearsome face of the Grand High Witch**
- **Explore maths challenges with the Formula 86 recipe**

Visit roalddahl.com/teach to download.

