Breaking the Silence
By Stephen Poliakoff

Education Resource Pack

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Synopsis

Caught up in the maelstrom of post-revolutionary Russia, the Pesiakoff family lose their palatial Moscow home and are re-accommodated in a dilapidated imperial train, complete with their maid. Assigned the position of telephone inspector, Nikolai, unflappable and immaculate in his elegant English suit, soon neglects his duties for a private ambition: to be the first man in the world to record sound on film.

Inspired by stories of Mr. Poliakoff's grandfather, "Breaking the Silence" takes place entirely in a railroad car to which the Pesiakoffs, a White Russian family, were consigned by the new government in 1920.

Cast

Verkoff: Owen Aaronovitch
Nikolai: Philip Bretherton
Eugenia: Diana Kent
Polya: Celia Meiras
Sasha: Ilan Goodman
Guard One: Jonathan Wright
Guard Two: Jim Findley

Production Team

Director: Esther Richardson
Designer: Jamie Vartan
Lighting Designer: James Farncombe
Sound Designer: Stuart Briner
Movement director: Vic Sivalingam

Themes/Issues

- Family
- Class
- Work
- Ambition
- Political change
- Confinement versus freedom
- Science - sound on film
Designer Jamie Vartan talks about his work…

The design, lighting and sound are vital for this play, to create excitement for the audience. Otherwise it would be hard to hold a play for three hours with a wordy script set in one location. The train turns between scenes to add variety and allow the audience to see it from different points of view, as we do the characters. In some ways the train is like a time capsule, a tardis moving through time.

When the train turns, especially at the end of the play, it should have a feeling as if it is floating into space, as the family venture across the border into the unknown. It will be the first time that the audience will see the back of the carriage with the extent of the bullet-hole damage.

One of the interesting things about the train is that you never see who is driving it, there is a ghost driver. And the design shows the carriage alone, not connected to a locomotive.

We have focused on period detail with the props and researched in depth the film, camera and projections of the time. There is a detailed prop camera but when Sasha smashes up his father’s equipment the lens will be made of sugar glass and he smashes up a crate of junk.

One of the sounds that we are creating is that of a film projector, which will blend into the sound of the train. The windows of the carriage also reflect the film theme, with the edges likened to a strip of film.

Background

The character of Nikolai, feature in Breaking the Silence, did not become the first to develop silent film. The development did not happen until a few years later.

The Silent Era of Film

Inventors and producers had tried from the very beginnings of moving pictures to marry the image with synchronous sound, but no practical method was
devised until the late 1920s. Thus, for the first 30 years of their history, movies were more or less silent, although accompanied by live musicians and sometimes sound effects, and with dialogue and narration presented in intertitles.

**Political change: The sound era**

Experimentation with sound film technology, both for recording and playback, was virtually constant throughout the silent era, but the twin problems of accurate synchronization and sufficient amplification had been difficult to overcome. In 1926, Hollywood studio Warner Bros. introduced the “Vitaphone” system, producing short films of live entertainment acts and public figures and adding recorded sound effects and orchestral scores to some of its major features. During late 1927, Warners released *The Jazz Singer*, which was mostly silent but contained the first synchronized dialogue (and singing) in a feature film. It was a great success, as were follow-ups like Warners’ The Lights of New York (1928), the first all-synchronized-sound feature. The early sound-on-disc processes such as Vitaphone were soon superseded by sound-on-film methods like Fox Movietone, DeForest Phonofilm, and RCA Photophone. The trend convinced the largely reluctant industrialists that “talking pictures”, or “talkies”, were the future.

The change was remarkably swift. By the end of 1929, Hollywood was almost all-talkie, with several competing sound systems (soon to be standardized). Total changeover was slightly slower in the rest of the world, principally for economic reasons.


**Russian revolution**

*The first act of Breaking the Silence takes place in 1920 and the second act in 1924.*

The Third Russian Revolution (also called the Russian Revolution of 1918, or the July Revolution 1918) is a term describing a series of rebellions and uprisings against both the Bolsheviks and the White movement. The uprisings started on 6 July 1918 and were most prominent for the remainder of that month, but continued up to 30 December 1922.

Defeated at the Congress, the Left socialist revolutionaries pursued their aim of sabotaging the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and dragging Soviet Russia back into war with Germany by using their positions within the Cheka to assassinate the German Ambassador in Moscow, Count Wilhelm von Mirbach, on July 6, 1918.3 The Leadership of the Left SRs incorrectly believed this assassination would lead to a widespread popular uprising in support of their aims. They claimed to be leading a revolution against the peace with Germany and not necessarily against the Bolsheviks and Soviet power.
The main rebel force was a detachment commanded by D. I. Popov, a Left S.R. and member of the Cheka. About 1,800 revolutionaries took part in the insurrection, bombarding the Kremlin with artillery and seizing the telephone exchange and telegraph office. During the two days that they remained in control there, they sent out several manifestos, bulletins and telegrams in the name of the Left S.R. Central Committee declaring that the Left S.R.s had taken over power and that their action had been welcomed by the whole people. The Fifth Congress of Soviets instructed the government to suppress the insurrection at once, and the group of Left S.R.s at the Congress was arrested.

Left S.R.s and some anarchists also started insurrections in Petrograd, Vologda, Arzamas, Murom, Yaroslavl, Velikiy Ustyug, Rybinsk and other cities. A telegram from the Left S. R. Central Committee stating that the Left S.R.s had seized power in Moscow, was sent to M. A. Muravyov, a Left S.R. and Commander of the Eastern Front. On the pretext of attacking the Germans, he seized Simbirsk (later Ulyanovsk) and march his forces on Moscow in support of the left socialist revolutionaries.

On Aug 30, 1918 Lenin survived an attempted assassination leaving a bullet in his neck -- a wound which has been speculated may have led to his stroke that prevented him from removing Stalin at a key historical moment five years later.

Aleksandra Kollontai… increasingly became an internal critic of the Communist Party and joined with her friend, Alexander Shlyapnikov, to form a left-wing faction of the party that became known as the Workers' Opposition. However, Lenin managed to dissolve the Workers' Opposition, after which Kollontai was more or less totally politically sidelined.

Boris Savinkov

The SR terrorist Boris Savinkov claimed to have been financed by France to organize these revolution, though he did not claim responsibility for the assassination of Mirbach. 1

The end result of the revolution was the suppression of the Left SRs, the last major independent party other than the Bolsheviks. While Lenin had wanted a multi party government and recognized the continued existence of parties based on the petty bourgeois class, the military necessity of suppressing revolution pushed the government into the direction of a one party state. Many SRs who did not participate were integrated into the Bolshevik Party afterward. In 1921, there was another SR led revolution called the Kronstadt Rebellion. The Left SRs collapsed as a party by 1922 and existed as small cells through 1925.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/third_Russian_revolution

The Role of Women

Between the 1889 and 1930 Russia was transformed by industrialisation, revolution, world war, cival war and communism. The Russian female worker is
typically seen as beast of burden, expected only to labour and bear children, totally subordinate in a patriarchal system which survived the fall of tsarism and helped to shape the communist state. And mirroring the assumed passivity of the female peasantry are the ascetic self sacrificing upper-class female professionals who dedicated their lives to serving the people

**From Women and work in Russia 1880-1930**
Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar

**Interview with Stephen Poliakoff**

**Born** December 1 1952; married Sandy Welsh in 1983, have son and daughter

**Education** Westminster school and King's College, Cambridge

**Plays** Include City Sugar, Strawberry Fields, Shout Across the River, Breaking the Silence, Playing With Trains, Sienna Red, Sweet Panic, Hampstead, Blinded by the Sun, Talk of the City, Remember This

**Films** Include Hidden City, Close My Eyes, Food of Love

**TV dramas** Include Caught on a Train, She's Been Away, Shooting the Past, Perfect Strangers, The Lost Prince

**In his words:**

"I proposed - bloody-mindedly I suppose - to compel audiences to slow down ... Long scenes can be very compulsive."

"Obviously, winning the Emmy for The Lost Prince has opened up possibilities internationally. I do get offers from America, to go to Hollywood, but I've always resisted them. I'm much more like Mike Leigh or Ken Loach; I just want to do my own thing, and eventually you get to a sort of tipping point where the work does go international. In the end, it's not about money, it's about having complete artistic control."

"I've always wanted to write about work, because we think about work most of the time and yet there is virtually nothing written about it," Poliakoff says. "Also, work relationships can be more intense than marriages, and I'm always intrigued when I hear someone say of somebody else that 'she used to be my secretary and now she's really powerful'. David Cameron is a brilliant example. He was quite a lowly person at Carlton Television not long ago, and now he could be prime minister."

"I take a long time to write things, and then it's sort of finished. And because the work is quite complex, I'd be lost if I started changing things."
Interview with Esther Richardson- Director

Why have you chosen to direct this play?

Firstly I love historical dramas and I also love plays that follow the journey of a group of people. Right now I’m enjoying the fantastic ensemble of actors, who I’m working with, who are exploring that journey with me. It was also important for me to challenge myself to work on an existing, established play, as in the past I have mainly directed new work. Although interestingly my approach to directing this play is similar; I want to respect the voice of the playwright and not just take the text and impose all my own style upon it. I want to stay true to what Poliokoff would have wanted.

What do you think will be the most exciting and challenging part of the play to direct? Why?

The piece is set in just one location, a train, so to sustaining audience interest for 3 hours of drama is challenging. A focus of mine was to show how that environment changes over the years. Yet the train is also the source of excitement, when it moves. The other challenge is the relationship between the four family members. We are doing some detailed thinking around this in rehearsals. The family’s reactions to each other are important to get right. It’s also important to stay faithful to the period in which it is set. My final challenge is the props! I have never done a show with so many before.

How do you see the relevance of the play to today’s society, especially within the city of Nottingham?

The story is a human one of a family exiled in their own country. This rings true in many contexts happening in the world today. Overnight things can change when a new regime takes over. Political decisions can impact on your life. People will also be able to relate to the family relationships in the play; managing a dominant family member, a child being the adult-like figure and the changes in status in relationships.

Have you got any messages you would like the audience to go home with?

For them to think about what they would do if they were placed in the situation that the family are in the play. For them to get a sense that this period in history is more than just dates and facts, it is about a human story. It might encourage some audience members to go away and research the period further.
Rehearsal photos

Ilan Goodman as Sasha

Diana Kent and Celia Meiras

Diana Kent and Ilan Goodman

Diana Kent and Celia Meiras

Diana Kent as Eugenia
Pre- and post-show activities

Interpreting character

Explore performing the extract below in contrasting ways.

a) The guards as serious, controlling menacing
b) The guards as bumbling comedy characters
c) Beginning as A and moving into B

From Act 1, scene 2

_The door crashes open and two pale faced GUARDS in military uniform burst into the carriage._

GUARD1: Right! All right - could you stand up please. Come on stand up.

GUARD 2: *(fast)* State your destination - arrival date, departure date, and nature of your business.

GUARD 1: We need to see your travel permit and your identification card, where are they?

GUARD 2: We’re going to look at your luggage as well, so lay it out along here…

NIKOLAI: My dear comrades, none of that need concern us.

GUARD 1: What do you mean that doesn’t concern us - everything that comes down this line concerns us.

GUARD 2: Where are you going for a start?

NIKOLAI: *(Simply)* I have no idea.

GUARD 1: Do you know where you are now?

NIKOLAI: I have even less idea of that - a remote settlement where it seems people have the sense not to live. I assume you didn’t choose to be here. Gentlemen, through some appalling error - for which I have yet to find the culprit - I am your new Telephone Examiner.
GUARD 1: You mean you…you work for the Northern Railway?

NIKOLAI: For the moment, yes. Why else do you think I would be here? (*He points to Sasha*) That over there is my son who is accompanying me on this mission. We are not going to waste our time in not believing each other, I would hardly invent such a story - there is no obvious advantage for me in having to wander up and down the line…unless I officially had to.

GUARD 1: No, we believe you.

GUARD 2: If you say that's who you are - we believe you

GUARD 1: Forgive us comrade, we have been here so long, and we haven’t seen anyone for several months, not since the men working on the line left.

GUARD 2: All we see is the occasional freight train, we wait by the line praying for lights to appear, howling for a train! And when one comes all we get are people staring down from the locomotive as they rumble past…

GUARD 1: But comrades we don’t have much news here about telephones to give you - the poles haven’t even arrived yet.

NIKOLAI: I expected as much.

GUARD 2: Where are you from comrade - which depot are you from?

NIKOLAI: I’m afraid I have never been inside a depot. We are from Moscow, though we have been in the country for

GUARD 2: (*Cutting him off*) Moscow! You’re from Moscow.

**Interpreting mimed sequence/ monologue**

- Explore ways to perform the sequence below where Sasha smashes up his father’s equipment. You could try some of the following ideas;

  a) With guilt in places, pausing to reflect
  b) With absolute anger
  c) With sadness
  d) With childlike quality
Sasha: He won’t stop his ‘work’ don’t you see! *(Turning back into the carriage)*
How can I do anything?..

*He breaks off, staring at the box in the middle of the carriage. He lifts off the top prised open by VERKOFF, and lets it drop onto the floor*

I think whatever these are…

*He dips his hands in and lifts up a glass lens wrapped in straw.*

Whatever they happen to be - they will have to go

*He drops the lens back onto the others in the box, making a clanking noise.*

Can I do it? It has to be good enough to stop him.

*He picks up a hammer and a long knife from among the equipment lying in his father’s corner; he moves back to the box; he lifts one of the lenses again and runs the top of the knife down it, scratching its surface. Then he knocks the lens with a clean, sharp hit from the hammer. It splits in two.*

Must destroy it so he can’t start up again - no chance of him trying to start again. It mustn’t mean we have to stay even longer. *(Loud)* Has to go!

*A ferocious burst of destruction as he pummels the contents of the box.*

**Status between the characters**

Discuss the relationship between Sasha and his parents. How much does he compensate for their immaturity?

Discuss the role of Polya as servant, how important is she to the others? Where does she stand in the hierarchy?

Explore the status between the characters

- Create a mock railway carriage with some different levels (could simply be made from chairs)
- Place the characters; Nikolai, Eugenia, Polya and Sasha within this space using the levels, eye contact, proximity etc to indicate their status to one another. Does this change from Act 1 to Act 2? If so create a different image for each.