

STRANGER THINGS:
THE FIRST SHADOW



Louis McCartney
(Henry Creel)
and Patrick Vaill
(Dr Brenner)

THE HAWKINS HORROR SHOW

STRANGER THINGS

IS COMING TO LONDON'S WEST
END – AND ITS STORY WILL
BE “INTEGRAL” TO THE
SHOW. SFX GOES
BEHIND THE SCENES
TO FIND OUT MORE...

WORDS:
JACK SHEPHERD



Oscar Lloyd (James
Hopper Jr), Isabella
Pappas (Joyce Maldonado)
and Christopher Buckley
(Bob Newby).

WHEN THE DUFFER BROTHERS, the creators of *Stranger Things*, asked scribe Kate Trefry to write a stage play based on their Netflix series, her reaction was a natural one: “What the hell are you talking about?” After all, the world of Eleven, the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer was developed for television, and recreating the horrors of Hawkins on stage seemed an impossible task.

Yet here we are two years after that meeting, and Trefry’s talking to *SFX* between rehearsals for *Stranger Things: The First Shadow*, a prequel heading to London’s Phoenix Theatre.

“Everything about it is extremely different,” says Trefry, also an executive producer on the series, comparing her experience writing the stage play – based on a story by herself, the Duffers, and acclaimed playwright Jack Thorne – to the show.

“I wrote my original draft with little regard for the stage because I just know how to write the show, so I wrote the show. We’ve been working backwards to figure out how to bring it to the stage, but that’s why they tapped me to do it; because it’s more important that it feels like the show than anything else. It’s canon and it really is part of the show.”

The idea for doing a play originated with co-directors Justin Martin and Stephen Daldry, the Oscar-nominated filmmaker behind *Billy Elliot*. The duo had previously worked with Netflix on royal drama *The Crown*, and after the →

PORTRAITS BY CHARLIE GRAY/NETFLIX

STRANGER THINGS: THE FIRST SHADOW

streamer showed interest in entering the theatrical space, they searched for an idea that could work on stage.

“The thing about *Stranger Things* is that the world is inherently theatrical,” Martin tells *SFX* during a lunch break amid intense rehearsals. “There are great characters, but it’s also got a really great heart.” The difficulty Martin foresaw was translating the show’s horror elements to the stage, but it was a challenge he was eager to take on. “There’s a feeling of safety sitting in seats in the theatre,” he says. “I felt really excited to see what’s possible.”

The creative team knew they had to keep the tone of the series intact, including a few healthy jump scares, and needed a writer who knew the Upside Down inside out. “Kate is a phenomenal writer who, having not done theatre before, created this amazing script, which really pushed us and challenged us to be better directors,” Martin says.

CREEL LIVES

He calls the first drafts “brilliantly impossible” to put on stage; for instance, the TV series often cuts from one set of characters to another, then back again, which is a tricky effect to achieve in theatre. However, rather than asking Trefry to rewrite the story, the directors instead tried to bring her ideas to life without too many compromises. “She really has written two episodes that form a holistic story, an act one and two,” Martin adds.

Speaking of story, not much is known about what’s going to happen once the curtain rises. *The First Shadow* takes place in the ’50s and features teenage versions of Joyce Maldonado (played by Winona Ryder in the TV show), Jim Hopper (David Harbour) and Bob Newby (Sean Astin) in Hawkins. Their lives are seemingly disrupted when Henry Creel (who will one day become the evil entity Vecna) and his family move into town.

“This is first and foremost a story about Henry, a love story about Henry and this girl he meets,” Trefry says. “But while it’s about Henry, we spend a lot of time with our other



characters, weaving in and out of his orbit. Sometimes unwittingly, sometimes knowingly.”

Creel was introduced in the fourth season and *The First Shadow* picks up on story threads left dangling from those episodes. In fact, Trefry was a writer for both the fourth and the upcoming fifth (and final) seasons, giving her, as she puts it, a “master view” of the series.

This enabled her to craft a new, standalone prequel story that adds new context to both seasons. “It’s in conversation with the seasons prior and the season to come,” she says. “It really informs everything that you have seen and will see.”

Martin calls the play “integral to what season five is going to be,” adding that *The First Shadow* was conceived around the release of the second season in 2017, and since then, the seeds of the play’s story have been planted in the show.

“There are referential sequences and imagery and callbacks and flashbacks to the events of the play in [season] five that will make sense to you if you don’t see the play,” Trefry says, “but you’ll have a deeper understanding of them if you do.”

The First Shadow depicts a “traumatic event” that reverberates through these characters for the rest of their lives. The meeting of Henry and the villainous Doctor Brenner plays a

significant part. “No one will ever guess how it leads to this crazy place,” she says. “But Henry is an agent of violence and chaos who gets dropped like a little grenade into this small town and affects everybody around him.”

While some of Creel’s origin story has been told, Trefry emphasises that the version of events seen on screen may not be reliable; we were, she notes, told what happened to the Creel family by Henry himself. “The play is a different perspective,” she says. “We’re reaching back into Henry’s past to understand why he is the way he is.”

Creel’s not the only character we come to understand a little better in *The First Shadow*. The play presents Hopper, Joyce and Bob in a new light, and writing them as teenagers was an interesting challenge.

“They are different to who you know from the series,” Martin explains, “but only inasmuch as they become those people. They go on a journey through their lives and the play sets them off on those journeys that they will wrestle with to become who they are. It’s been fun finding where certain things come from.”

The adolescent Hopper has “hypermasculine daddy issues”, while his relationship with Bob is somewhat similar to the relationship between Steve and Dustin. Joyce, meanwhile, was tricky to write. “She’s

BRAD TORCHIA



Kate Trefry
with the
Duffer
brothers.

PORTRAITS BY CHARLIE GRAY/NETFLIX



Ella Karuna Williams
(Patty Newby) and Louis
McCartney (Henry Creel).

defined by her children and this manic, obsessive streak of mystery-solving,” Trefry says of the adult Joyce. “We had to ask what she was like before having her boys, so I had fun rooting her out. To me, she always seems a little out there, really determined, and quick to believe. She’s always fighting for what she believes in and what she loves, but she’s also a loose cannon.”

“You fall in love with those characters in a way that you never fell in love with them before,” Martin says. “The thing about what the Duffers have written with the world and those characters and their interrelationships, they are so rich. Being able to play with them and find out more about them has been a joy.”

There are also a few new characters in the play, and although both Martin and Trefry are reluctant to go into too much detail for fear of spoilers, they both point to Patty Newby – Bob’s sister – as a highlight. “She’s just getting more interesting every day as we continue rehearsals,” says Trefry. “She’s a very dynamic, very unusual female character who’s really complex. She has an edge that you don’t necessarily expect.”

MONSTER MASH

Of course, this wouldn’t be *Stranger Things* without a sense of time and place. Whereas the TV show is steeped in ’80s nostalgia, the play takes place at the tale end of the ’50s, and you can expect music from the period, while Martin also implies that some of the characters, presumably Hopper’s father, are still dealing with the fallout of the Second World War.

However, despite the setting, the aesthetic of *Stranger Things* remains in place. Trefry describes their approach to keeping the story feeling like *Stranger Things*, incorporating familiar Spielbergian elements such as focusing on a gang of teenage outsiders, and using nostalgia as a tool rather than a means to an end. “We keep the tonal landscape of the show,” she says. “It’s unbelievable.”

When it comes to the staging itself, the designers, as of speaking to *SFX*, are working hard on making Hawkins and its hidden laboratories a reality. “They originally said it’s like 10 shows wrapped into one,” Martin says gleefully. He adds that the most apt theatrical comparison, scale-wise, is the ongoing *Harry*



Co-director
Justin Martin
(left)...



...co-director
Stephen
Daldry.

MANUEL HARLAN

Potter stage play *The Cursed Child*, with the illusions department being brought over from that show to *The First Shadow*. “It’s really been an opportunity for us to push what they can do even further, and they’ve really gone for it,” Martin says. “There are some things I’ve never seen on stage. It’s like *Harry Potter* on crack cocaine.”

To be a true *Stranger Things* story there also needs to be monsters, and whatever mysterious creatures the creatives are cooking up, they promise these beasts will be terrifyingly real. “What we don’t do is abstract,” Martin says. “It’s frightening and exciting and exhilarating and surprising. It’s funny – in the rehearsal room, without any lights, it suddenly works and you’re feeling a bit frightened. We’ve got an astonishing team working on it.”

While the technical side is an important aspect of the play, the focus for everyone involved remains the story. “At the end of the day, if the story at the centre doesn’t work, then you’ve got nothing,” Martin says. “It’s balancing the emotional nature of the story with a very technically complicated show, so the technicalities never overwhelm the human story.”

To fulfil that promise, the casting has to be impeccable, and Martin tasked his casting director with the challenge of “finding the next Ben Whishaw or Andrew Garfield”. “They went out and they did it,” he says. “There are proper rock stars in the cast. In 10 years time, these kids will be winning awards.”

It sounds like *The First Shadow* could end up being another West End break-out. After all, stranger things have happened... ●

Stranger Things: The First Shadow previews from 17 November at the Phoenix Theatre, London.



Michael Jibson (Victor Creel),
Louis McCartney (Henry Creel)
and Lauren Ward (Virginia Creel).