

DOSSIER PÉDAGOGIQUE

CRÉATION 23 • 24

# Cock

MIKE BARTLETT • ANNE SIMON



## Cock

Mike Bartlett • Anne Simon

CREATION

Tuesday 14, Wednesday 15, Friday 17, Tuesday 21, Wednesday 22, Thursday 23  
& Friday 24 May 2024 • 8pm

Théâtre des Capucins

•

Running time **1h40 (no intermission)**

•

**Introduction to the play by Janine Goedert**

30 minutes before every performance (EN).

•

**Q&A after the performance on the 21st May**

•

**F David Calvitto**

John **Philipp Alfons Heitmann**

W **Elisabet Johannesdottir**

M **Tom Leick-Burns**

•

Director **Anne Simon**

Assistant Director **Maximilien Ludovicy**

Set & costume design **Anouk Schiltz**

Lighting design **Fränz Meyers**

•

Wardrobe **Louise Antezak Corseret**

Make-up **Joël Seiller**

•

Production **Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg**

Licensed by arrangement with **LARK MANAGEMENT GROUP LIMITED**

•

**Anne Simon is associate artist at the Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg.**

# About the play

*Cock* is structured as a traditional three-act play where the third act serves to attempt to resolve or move towards a resolution of the complications and problems that are introduced in the first and second. However, the piece does not entirely follow the conventions of the well-made play despite its use of many of the structural hallmarks of the genre – such as much of the action occurring before the play has begun, the way in which John’s sexual meanderings are revealed, and the plot twist in the third act when M.’s father arrives to add a further layer of complication to events as they move towards a close. Each of the three acts has a specific function in the play while they all operate in a similar way of introducing events which take an unexpected turn – in the first, that John is seeing another woman, in the second, that he is leaving W., and in the third, with the arrival of F. at the dinner party.

The first act opens with John and his partner M. in an argument about cooking, which quickly turns into an argument about their relationship, their differences, and ultimately whether or not they should stay together. In a series of jumps forward, we then witness variations on this theme where John ultimately reveals that he has been seeing a woman – a relationship from which he is trying to extricate himself. Act Two takes a temporal shift backwards to the moment when John first meets W. Again, the act jumps forward in time from here allowing us to witness the development of their relationship into something more sexual and then later on towards John’s attempts to end it. Ultimately, the act arrives at a similar point in time to the end of first act as John and W. discuss M.’s dinner invitation alongside W.’s doubts that she should even stay in a relationship with John at all. The third act brings John, W. and M. together for the dinner party and with the aforementioned surprise intervention of M.’s father (F.), the play reaches a climax where John’s indecisiveness about what to do, what he is, and who he chooses to be with, comes to the fore.

**Mark O’Thomas**

# Starting point

Bartlett began writing *Cock* in 2008. At the time he was working with the Royal Court Theatre's International Department at the Centro Cultural Helénico in Mexico City, where he ran workshops for new playwrights. The popularity that cock-fights enjoyed with locals took him by surprise and became a source of inspiration.

He decided to have the audience sit around the performance space as if they were about to watch a cockfight. Also, the dialogue in the play is shaped like a fight or duel – with 2 characters repeatedly picking at each other.

# Production history

In 2009 *Cock* was first presented in London by the English Stage Company. It premiered at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre Upstairs with Ben Whishaw, Katherine Parkinson, Andrew Scott and Paul Jesson. Both critics and audiences loved the play. The production won the Laurence Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in an Affiliate Theatre in 2010. Since then, there have been multilingual productions all over the world.

In 2011 *Cock* was adapted for radio by Bartlett himself. The original cast were recorded for a production aired on BBC Radio 3 in November 2011.

In 2022 there was a West End revival of the play directed by Marianne Elliott. Interestingly enough, the language was tweaked in a few places from the original 2009 version so as to eliminate any trace of queer shaming or possible misunderstandings around what is and isn't 'normal'.

# The stage

In the production of *Cock* you are going to see, director Anne Simon and Anouk Schiltz take the idea of the bare stage a step further and conceived a stage on a stage. Anne Simon often works with abstract stages in which everything can be claimed in the moment and she likes to use the actual theatre space for the characters to relate to specifically, either as what it is (a theatre stage) or claiming it to be something else. Here are her reflections on the beauty of abstraction.

Bartlett specifically asks for no stage design, no props, no mime and thus breaks with the conventions of theatre and gives us the gift of radical abstraction: taking away the convention of the conventions (props, mime, naturalism, to be or not to be – binary, again?) forces us to focus on the mechanism of social conventions and to work with the reality of the theatre space: all negotiations and situations happen radically on and over a bare stage that is placed on a bare stage that whacks in and out of balance. Its rules and conventions are claimed and fixed in the moment and redefined in the next. Everything thus becomes focussed on brutal human debates and arrangements, because we really are only allowed to negotiate a space that is physically there (in which not much becomes everything). A blank is a blank with no known conventions, the rules of that bare stage need to be negotiated and renegotiated constantly, which magnifies whatever is at the heart of the debate, heightens the stakes, the insecurity, the crudity, the relatability. The bareness is the most beautiful gift to any theatre maker: it challenges us to find the most specific physical, emotional and spatial translations for a situation.

*Cock* is a minimalist production. Staging instructions indicate that there should be 'no scenery, no props, no furniture and no mime'.

Scenes take place in specific places – a bedroom, a kitchen, a café, an outdoor space... – but the stage remains empty throughout, which allows things to move very quickly. It also gives an unusual quality to the experience of watching events unfold.

This is how Shawn MacDonald, who played the character M in a Vancouver production years ago, experienced the empty stage: 'It is really fascinating to be in a play where you can't rely on furniture, props or stuff as a place to hide or busy yourself with a task. It is quite naked out there, and it means you really have to focus on what your character is fighting for, and that is really challenging as an actor.' (from a review by Mark Robins in Vancouver Presents, October 20, 2015)

The script stipulates that the focus must be 'entirely on the drama of the scene'. Once the play starts, there are no stage directions, which gives a lot of freedom to both the director and the 4 actors.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the set has been likened to a modern version of an old-fashioned anatomical theatre in which people's emotions are laid out and examined. Others have likened it to a boxing ring in which John's boyfriend and girlfriend fight to be the winner – with John as their prize or trophy.

# Synopsis

John takes a break from M, his partner of 7 years, and then meets W, a woman, on his way to work. They start a relationship, but somehow John cannot simply leave his previous relationship behind.

Each of the three parts of the play introduces events which take an unexpected turn. Things change in the first part when John reveals that he is seeing W, in the second one when he is leaving W and in the third when M's father arrives at the party.

## PART 1

The play opens with an argument about cooking between John and M. This quickly turns into an argument about their relationship and, ultimately, about whether they should stay together.

John tells M that he wants to take a break because they quarrel frequently and are too different. He moves out. Yet, some time later, he returns and wants to move back in. He reveals that he has had sex twice with W, whom he feels in love with despite having identified as gay all his life and never having felt attracted to women before. M feels betrayed by John's infidelity. He fights back by being sarcastic and by making very offensive and humiliating comments. His pain is obvious.

In a series of jumps forward we then witness variations on this theme. When John reveals that he wants to get out of the relationship with W, M suggests the three of them should meet.

## PART 2

The play goes back in time, to the moment when John first meets W on their daily commute. He tells her that he broke up with M two weeks earlier. He is surprised to feel physically attracted to her and decides to have sex with a woman for the first time. They both enjoy the experience. Soon, however, John avoids meeting W and tries to convince M to take him back.

So Part 2 arrives at a similar point in time to the end of Part 1: John and W discuss M's dinner invitation alongside W's doubts that she should stay in a relationship with John at all.

## PART 3

It is the longest by far.

John brings W home to meet M.

The evening turns into a showdown dinner at which open hostility rules. The scene is made up of a round of mutual cross-examination. Tension and savagery grow as we watch M and W fighting over John and over whom he will pick.

M, who describes the dinner party as 'the ultimate bitch fight', warns W that though her relationship with John appears to work now, she will soon discover the latter's indecisiveness and his laziness. He also reveals that he has told his father, F, all about John's infidelity and that F will be coming for dinner that very night.

When the latter arrives, he says that John should stop being selfish and that he should make up his mind there and then. John's indecisiveness about what to do and who he chooses to be is in the spotlight more than ever. We watch him lash out. He tells M that he loves him, but that W is a more fitting partner emotionally. What's more, he questions whether everyone is right that he is gay and cannot truly love W. At that point W reminds John that they were planning to get married and have children. When John refuses to do anything, W admits defeat and leaves M with a de facto win. John does not stop her; he seemingly finds going back to his old life easier. Meanwhile, M keeps on fighting his corner; he tells John that they can have children, too, and any life they want.

John fails to respond. He ends up literally paralysed and cannot even agree to turn off the lights in the garden and bring the cushions in. He remains outside.

# Language

Most of *Cock* is made up of naturalistic dialogue, of simple sentences and broken phrases. The play is both fast-paced and witty. Often, Bartlett's comic timing and his playful use of language make you laugh out loud, but there is a darker side, too, since the language becomes savagely unpleasant and wounding whenever one of the characters uses it as a weapon to fight back.

Silence is a crucial element as well. We see that John is often lost for words. He becomes inarticulate whenever he cannot decide where to go next.



# Structure and time

Bartlett experiments with form.

Much of the action happens before the play begins. And then, while we are watching the characters on stage, there is a lot of jumping backwards and forwards in time. Revelations – such as that of John's affair with W – are made before we watch their affair unfold on stage.

This playful use of time creates an openness in terms of structuring. It echoes the fluid use of space which the absence of props brings about. Still, in some ways *Cock* remains a traditional 3-act play in which the 3<sup>rd</sup> part sets out to resolve the central conflict introduced in the first two.

In the play-text Bartlett uses a simple horizontal line on the page to differentiate the different scenes or segments within an act or part. There is no numbering system. In many productions a short sharp tone – like the sound of a bell after boxing rounds – has been used to indicate that a new scene begins.

# Characters

Only John is given a name. Initials are used for the other three characters, with the letters W and M also functioning as markers of gender. By using initials only, Bartlett eliminates the baggage or associations that may come with a name. (cf. as a contrast, think of the use of names and their associations in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls!*)

There is deep irony here since John, the only one to be given a name, lacks any definite identity. His confusion and hesitation throw everyone else into a spin.

## JOHN

Is he lost or narcissistic? Or both?

John has been with M, his somewhat older boyfriend, for 7 years. They met when John was 21 or 22. Now their relationship has reached crisis point. John thinks that he and M are too different to stay together. Yet he remains indecisive throughout the play as he is torn between M and W, who has introduced him to heterosexual sex.

To his partner M he seems to be a slightly irritating but reassuring presence most of the time. For the divorced classroom assistant W he becomes the loving partner she hopes to have a future with. Crucially, he also makes her feel less lonely. After they meet on their daily commute and have sex, John starts questioning his sexuality. He has always identified as gay, but now we see him try to decide which way he should go – back to his male partner or forward with a wife and family.

Soon after he breaks up with M, a very confused John is back, telling his boyfriend that he still loves him. He asks for forgiveness and seems to prefer the safety of their relationship to any new kind of challenge. He then describes how he drifted into being gay: at university he enjoyed being told how brave he was to come out of the closet, yet, looking back, he has no idea who or what he is. He remains very nervous and needy.

Also, we are given little social detail about him. While we are told what M and W's jobs are, how John makes a living remains a mystery. All we know is that he commutes to work.

You could argue that his role is, above all, functional since his actions and inaction provoke others, while he remains largely unaffected by the events he triggers. The other characters seem much more goal-oriented and determined – they know what they want from life and from others. Both M and W are fighters. Both are manipulative characters who see John as an object of desire and want commitment from him.

Somehow, John sits outside of all this, unable to make up his mind. He is open about his apparent absence of character traits or personality, describing himself as a man devoid of individuality. While he complains that M won't allow him to grow up, he doesn't mind when W describes him as a pencil drawing that hasn't been coloured in yet. She finds this attractive and intriguing. The implication seems to be that John is pliable and easy to control.

## M

He is a stockbroker and a good cook. He is also John's long-term outraged partner.

In the opening scenes the two men show how different they are, suggesting that opposites attract – at least for a while.

M goes through many changes: sometimes he's hateful and venomous, at other times he is loving and vulnerable. Sometimes he oppresses, at other moments he seems to be the victim of the piece. He can be patronising and condescending, but also charming and funny.

Here is Shawn MacDonald's comment about the character he played: 'You also have my character who is politicised, lived through the AIDS crisis and has a different perspective on sexuality, and

what it means to identify as a gay man.' (Vancouver Presents, October 20, 2015)

M is very good with words and loves using an avalanche of synonyms rather than a single word only. Sometimes it is as if he were showing off and loved the sound of his own voice a bit too much! There is also his bitchiness ('Why am I being so nasty to you.'). We soon understand that his numerous savagely unpleasant comments act as his weapons of self-defence. It is him hitting back and fighting for the status quo. Though he feels offended and hurt by John's infidelity, he wants to keep their relationship going. Will he be able to forgive and forget? Will he be able to trust John again?

## W

She is a 28-year-old classroom assistant who married at 23 and went through a divorce 2 years later. W dreads the loneliness she has experienced as a single woman and becomes the female lover that fights for her happily ever after.

She feels very protective, almost motherly, towards John. We see her encourage his search of what he really wants, yet we soon discover her controlling side. When John tells her that he feels his relationship with M has infantilised him, she concludes that 'it's over now' and easily wins him over to her point of view. A shared sense of victimhood seems to bring them together.

John feels that he has finally found himself. But such happy thoughts evaporate with the abrupt opening of the next scene. 'You have to stop following me.' First, W ignores John's demand, then she tells him how angry she is before she begins to bargain, trying to persuade him that returning to M would be a mistake.

In Part 3 W really comes into her own once she is let into the ring with M and then with F. At first, she seems quite relaxed. She is confident that she is winning this fight, but then, when things become less straightforward, she fights back with unfor-

giving fierceness, signalling to her opponents that her emotions will not be played with. Set against M's shared history with John, W has a freshness and an emotional intelligence that John finds liberating. Her ability to say exactly what she thinks and to ask direct questions allows him to make decisions. It is as if making up his mind had suddenly become easy!

## F

There is yet another plot twist in Part 3 with the arrival of the father as a surprise guest. His presence adds a further layer of complication to events.

F represents an older generation that was taught to follow rules and fit in. Having a gay son, he admits, has not been easy. But over time the initial shock has led to acceptance, and now he is fiercely protective of M. Once he realises that the gloves are off between M and W, he joins the fight.

When W attacks him directly and accuses him of leering at her, he refuses to sit back. There is no gentlemanly reserve or fair play in sight. The fighting between W and F is hard and fast. W says that she had been hoping for civility, but then pulls out her claws. It gets really nasty.

# The title

The provocative one-word title takes its name partly from the slang term for the male sex organ, but it is also meant to conjure images of a cockfight. Bartlett had the play performed on a small stage with the audience in-the-round, looking down on the action. During the confrontation in the final scene the 4 characters in the ring are taking pecks at each other. It is open season on questioning anyone's sexuality and sexual motives.

Characters 'cock things up' (an expression used in the play), they cock around, they cock metaphorical guns, they do cock up arrangements and make a right cock-up of things. They also throw in cocky comments... The expressions fit each of the four characters. Besides, as Bartlett himself put it: 'In Britain if someone is really irritating you like that, you think 'Oh, he's a complete cock. He's not a dick, he's not an asshole, he's a cock. I often think a title works in dialogue with a play.'

Ultimately, the playful title echoes the show itself since the play itself can mean many different things as well. It is certainly not just about sexuality.

## CONTROVERSY OVER THE TITLE AND THE THEMES

When the play opened in New York in 2012, the American press did not want to provoke controversy and called it *The Cockfight Play*.

Meanwhile, in 2017 the way Bartlett raises questions around sexual identity and homosexuality led to a production being banned in Cyprus.

On the London underground Transport for London (TfL) had the title removed from the posters advertising the play's 2022 revival. They decided that passengers might find the word *Cock* distasteful or obscene.

A TfL spokesperson explained: 'All advertising running on across the TfL estate needs to comply with both our own advertising policy and the

Advertising Standards Authority's codes and rulings. Following advice from the Committee of Advertising Practice, the campaign was amended to ensure it was compliant.'

At the time, Chris Harper, the producer of that West End production, condemned the decision as outdated: 'We were absolutely astounded that we could not use the word *Cock* on the underground – it is 2022! The word is perfectly acceptable and has many meanings. Mike Bartlett's hilarious play, which is currently playing at the Ambassadors Theatre where the title is proudly displayed on the theatre, is a beautifully written piece which was inspired by a cockfight.'

# Type of play

*Cock* has been described as a battle of the sexes in which the gloves are off.

Bartlett re-examines stereotypes and labels as well as identity politics, yet the play does not turn into an intellectual essay on modern-day sexuality. It is a sharp black comedy as well as a 21<sup>st</sup>-century take on the traditional English comedy of manners. There are echoes of Oscar Wilde as we see understatement and irony rule. The issues are serious, but *Cock* is full of laughter thanks to the many savagely funny confrontations. Pain and humour go hand in hand.

What's more, Bartlett looks for new ways of representation: There are erotic scenes in which the actors neither touch nor remove any clothes. Carefully choreographed ideas and emotions suggest tensions between characters. Both desire and self-deceit are under the microscope.

And even though our language around LGBTQ+ issues has become much more complex and nuanced over the last 15 years, the script never feels dated. This is theatre that gives no easy answers. It invites the audience to think, explore and discuss.

# Themes

John, who is torn between two lovers, ends up at odds with his old boyfriend, with his new girlfriend and with himself.

The play questions all sorts of things:

## LOVE AND LONGING

Bartlett asks questions of who we are and who we want to be. He asks the audience and his characters to step back and have a hard look at the nature of love.

He does start from a traditional love triangle, but rather than give us a standard narrative of a supposedly straight man coming out as gay, there's a supposedly gay guy with a boyfriend falling for a woman he meets by accident. *Cock* takes a playful look at this one man's sexuality and emotional confusion. John is unable to choose: Should he stay with M or start all over again with W? To complicate matters further, the very notion that sexuality is a choice is being addressed and questioned by F, M's father, when he confronts John.

Is John straight? Is he gay? Is he bisexual?  
And, most importantly, should it matter at all?

## BISEXUALITY

At one point M's father asks John whether or not he is bisexual, something John rejects since he has never been attracted to women before. He is, above all, confused and refuses to fit into any of the categories on offer.

His relationships appear to be formed IN the moment with THIS person at THIS time. To make a choice between them or to choose both at the same time would mean identifying with a label, which is something he fundamentally resists. His reluctance to conform to the expectations of others provokes their frustration, passion and outrage.

## LABELS or PIGEONHOLING

Society seems obsessed with definitions and categories. It clearly favours clarity over sexual fluidity. Since others judge you by who you date, being gay or straight are important identity markers.


The play is not so much about John choosing his sexual preference but about the choice he is forced to make by labelling his sexuality in a way that people around him and society at large find acceptable. He is conflicted over being forced to make a decision not only about who to love but what to call himself.

Is this obsessive demand for classification, in fact, some kind of control mechanism?

Jonathan Bailey, who was 'John' in the 2022 West End revival, commented: 'It's a wild play. Every conversation I've had socially about sexuality is in this play. ... (There is) the sense that no one could help this guy. To me that is part of growing up and working out who you are. Looking into the abyss is something everyone is scared of, and probably has come close to at various points. ... Labels are helpful politically, for rights, to reinforce political movements. On a human level there seems to be a need to feel safe so you can label others, identify them and put a distance between them or draw yourself towards them. Identity is everything – aren't we pack animals? But there is a need to be categorised in society, which ties into a capitalist structure.' (interview by Susannah Butter in *The Sunday Times*, March 13, 2022)

## SEXUAL FLUIDITY AND YOUNGER GENERATIONS

In addition to exploring identity, *Cock* explores the fluidity of sexuality that ignores gay, straight or bisexual labels. In a 2013 interview with *New York Metro* Bartlett said: 'I had noticed there were a lot of people I knew who would say they were gay or say they were straight, but had experiences that were the opposite of that.'



There is a generation gap at work here as labels and categories seem to mean less and less to millennial and younger generations who are moving towards a different understanding of what makes a good relationship. It is certainly not just about who you sleep with.

So younger audiences might very well recognise themselves in John. The other characters represent some of society's more traditional views, which then creates some of the play's tensions.

## METROSEXUALITY

London is an important backdrop to a number of Bartlett's plays; it is also the setting here.

There are references to John and W going to work on the underground, to the high prices of housing and to couples spending weekends at one of the out-of-town IKEA stores. You get a sense of what leading a metropolitan life involves and what being a metrosexual means.

Mark Simpson coined the term 'metrosexuality' in a 1994 article for *The Independent*. He used it to refer to a new form of masculinity that was media-savvy, narcissistic and at ease with traits traditionally seen as feminine or female. The term soon became associated with a photograph of David Beckham in a figure-hugging sarong in 1998 alongside his then fiancée Victoria Adams.

The term has also been used in a political context to distinguish between different types of male politicians: the seriousness and the stern stiffness of Gordon Brown was set against a 21<sup>st</sup>-century metrosexual David Cameron, who exhibited emotional intelligence perhaps and also a good deal of sleekness. He appeared to be at ease with himself when he was PM.

Besides, the term 'metrosexual' ran parallel to the concepts of 'the new lad' and 'the new dad', which referred to men who were not afraid of being involved with household tasks and with raising children.

# Literary echoes

## ORLANDO

'Around 1910 human character (itself) changed.'

These words by Virginia Woolf remind us of her novel *Orlando*, the mock biography in which a character begins male but then wakes up one day female. Orlando crosses borders of gender, nation and times. He/She shakes up any expectations we might have with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Clearly, Woolf was looking for new answers. She believed in gender fluidity and felt alienated from existing traditions. A radical reinvention of gender norms is what she was pleading for.

Though less radical, Bartlett's play also questions norms and expectations. There might be fewer and different social pressures now, but whether gay or straight, people still seem to demand clear definitions and self-identification.

## 'LOOK BACK IN ANGER'

One particular episode, namely Bartlett's use of 'teddy bears waiting for a train' recalls the love triangles in *Look Back in Anger*, a play by John Osborne which also explores sexuality and the nature of masculinity. The second scene in *Cock* begins with John's return and his ironic, kitsch peace-offering of 'teddy-bears on a train'. M, who at times seems to understand John better than he does himself, recognises that the gift has a hidden meaning and soon manages to get John to reveal the truth.

Meanwhile, in *Look Back in Anger* Osborne has Jimmy and Alison identify with the teddy bear and the squirrel they keep. We watch them ritualise their struggles by playing with these fluffy toys.

There are other parallels.

Thus, the surprise appearance of F at the dinner party in Part 3 recalls the arrival of Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, in *Look Back in Anger*.

The latter helps his daughter move things out of the flat and escape Jimmy once and for all. Like Colonel Redfern, F projects an old school commonsense view of the world onto events.

What's more, if M can be likened to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Alison, W corresponds to a contemporary Helena Charles – a fighter who is out to forge a new life for herself, whatever the risks might be.

The big difference between John and Jimmy, however, is that Jimmy blames society for all the injustices and wrongs he suffers. He comes across as determined but also as full of hatred. He is exceptionally articulate and aggressive, whereas John is often lost for words and constantly seems to need guidance.



# Interview with Anne Simon, the director

by Janine Goedert

**What I find particularly striking about *Cock* is its topicality. The play does not feel like 2009, the year it was first produced, since Bartlett writes about all these concepts around gender.**

Yes, what he writes about is pansexuality though he does not refer to it as such in the original text. I do not know whether he chose not to use that label or whether the word was not around yet. Besides, the whole idea about pansexuality is that it is non-labelling. Anything else within that terminology – whether it is ‘bi’ or whatever new words we come up with – always puts a label on people. The drawers become smaller and smaller, more specific and more diverse, but they are all labels, they are all drawers.

**He certainly insists on the fact that everybody thinks in categories. Everything has to be structured, everything has to be under control somehow. It is also interesting that he brings in the father, he brings in another generation who grew up with totally different concepts and expectations.**

No doubt, it is an effort to say: ‘OK. What is happening now?’ when you see your values being questioned radically by the next generation. If we imagine the father as a left-liberal Guardian reader, he has probably always been very supportive of gay rights. Yet, once he was concerned directly, it became more problematic. He ended up having to do all this work to accept his son’s homosexuality. It was certainly not what he had expected.

**Ironically, the longish speech F has about what acceptance entailed suggests that he is still struggling to come to terms with it.**

Yes, you feel that these are not his own thoughts. We figured out that it is acquired knowledge. It’s almost appropriated knowledge, and that’s what makes it very funny today. As to the labelling, on the one hand, the characters want to be free and liberal, but then, on the other, they want to label everything. It’s almost as if the play were asking: Is that the human condition? Is it something within us? Is it the way humans


function or is it an age-old convention that we now think of as nature although it actually results from nurture? The question of genetics comes into it as well in a very odd and funny way. This discussion is central to the play. Ultimately, Bartlett seems to suggest that that we need those conventions to structure our lives around.

**I guess we want a certain predictability. Otherwise, we will have to reassess our lives all the time. There is something reassuring about being in this relationship for both John and M. Then John starts drifting. He doesn’t know who or what he is, while everyone else seems to be so sure of themselves, though, of course, they’re not. M says at one point: ‘Why am I being so nasty to you?’ Well, because of your own insecurities, you might want to tell him.**

All the characters are so relatable. You can take things from all of them and recognise yourself – not necessarily in the best possible way. Here theatre does what it actually should be doing. It puts this mirror out but without being judgmental. The experience is going to be different for every spectator, depending on which bits of each character they are going to relate to. It is partly cringeworthy. You might very well end up feeling: ‘Oh no! Why does this resonate so much?’ You think about the characters one way. Then another element comes in. The balance shifts and they’re trying to put it all back into balance.

**It is very much a classic triangle but, on the other hand, because Bartlett puts it out there on an empty stage, the language itself and the situation is what there is. There is nothing else, which gives the play a more abstract quality.**

It is the way I like to work anyway. From an Anglo-Saxon perspective it might seem abstract, very new, very kind of *Regietheater*, but for me coming from that very world it is something else. That’s why I am not sure I would call it abstract. It is like using a magnifying glass. The nude stage magnifies



the negotiations; the characters can almost step out, not physically perhaps, just do a mental stepping outside at certain moments or between lines. They can step out and look at the situation from the outside and then step back into the ring again. The staging creates an element of objectivity in this way.

# Questionnaire

How important is London as a setting?

Why does Bartlett give detailed instructions with regard to the staging?

What draws M and W to John?

Comment on the different types of vulnerability suggested by Bartlett.

What is the role of F, the surprise guest?

Who wins the fight in the end?

How crucial are silences in *Cock*?

What does the play suggest about human relationships? Do you think that we have moved on since 2009?

Do you empathise with John or do you feel that he should he simply get on with his life?

Who is the winner at the end of the play?  
What is going to happen next?

Is *Cock* a comedy of manners?

Do you like this play?



# Extract

## From PART 3

**W, F, John and M are meeting for dinner. M is the host.**

W Look I think we should all be pleasant, I think that's better for everyone.

F But this isn't *pleasant* at all, is it?

W Even so, I do hate rudeness?

F Really?

W Whatever the situation, call me old-fashioned but I do prefer courtesy. Consideration. It's how we get things done in a civilised way. Do n't you think?

F Where did he find you?

W Oh well. Rudeness it is.

F John?

W He didn't *find* me, Jesus Christ, I thought you were supposed to be from the days people had respect or something.

He didn't find me anywhere, we just always used to see each other around then eventually we got talking. Then we had sex and we discovered all the time that there was something there.

That we were falling in love.

Is that a fair summing up John?

John Yes. Yes. That's right.

W And before you complain, no, he wasn't in a relationship at the time.

F That's what he told you?

W They had broken up, the relationship was over.

F Well it isn't over now.

John

F John why don't you speak up for yourself?

# Further reading

## **\*ON THEATRE**

EDGAR David, *How Plays Work*, Nick Hern Books, 2009

SIERZ Aleks, *Rewriting the Nation*, Methuen Drama, 2011

BILLINGTON Michael, *Affair of the Heart*, Methuen Drama, 2022

## **\*ON SOCIETY**

ILLOUZ Eva, *Why Love Hurts*, Polity Press, 2012

ILLOUZ Eva, *The End of Love*, Oxford University Press, 2019

# Biographies

## Mike Bartlett

Mike Bartlett, who is one of the most prolific playwrights in British theatre today, was born in Oxford on October 7, 1980. He read English and Theatre Studies at the University of Leeds.

Bartlett started out writing plays about domestic issues for smaller stages. And though he then progressed on to working on much bigger themes and on bigger stages, he has never abandoned the small-scale.

He is also a screenwriter for film and television and won his first two awards for a radio-play broadcast.

### HIS MOST IMPORTANT PLAYS TO DATE

In 2007 Bartlett was Writer in Residence at the Royal Court Theatre in London, which is where *My Child* premiered, a play in which a divorced father kidnaps his child – with unexpected consequences.

*Cock*, which was to mark his critical breakthrough, premiered at the Royal Court in 2009.

In 2010 *Earthquakes in London* was directed by Rupert Goold at the National Theatre. This epic play travels through the decades, from 1968 to 2525 and back again. Climate change and corruption, as well as fathers and children, are key themes.

In 2011 *13* also premiered at the National Theatre. It is a play about Londoners trapped in the midst of economic gloom, while the prime minister is planning a preventative war.

In 2012 his adaptation of *Medea* opened at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, before touring the UK.

In 2013 Bartlett won Best New Play at the National Theatre Awards for *Bull*, which premiered at the Crucible Studio Theatre, Sheffield. This play uncovers the parallels between office politics and playground bullying as three employees fight to keep their jobs. Corporate culture and the fear of

unemployment are at the heart of it. The play is set up like a bullfight with the audience in ringside seats.

In 2015 *Bull* opened at the Young Vic, London. It won an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in an Affiliate Theatre that same year.

In 2014 *King Charles III*, a future history drama in blank verse, premiered at the Almeida Theatre and transferred to the West End later. It won the Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of 2014.

Critics welcomed it as a state-of-the-nation political thriller that raises questions about democracy and about the future of the monarchy, while drawing on the structure and style of Shakespeare's history plays.

A BBC TV film of *King Charles III*, which was broadcast in May 2017, generated controversy.

In 2017 *Albion* also premiered at the Almeida. It is another state-of-the-nation drama that some have referred to as *Downton Abbey* meets *The Cherry Orchard*. The play is about family and friends as well as about shattered dreams and a deeply divided people: In the ruins of a country-house garden a woman is searching for hope in post-Brexit Britain...

*Snowflake*, a Christmas show for adults, opened at the Old Fire Station, Oxford, in 2018 and was revived at Kiln Theatre, London, in 2019. This play is about inter-generational conflict as well as about contrasts of class and race.

In 2022 *The 47<sup>th</sup>*, a satire in blank verse, was showing at The Old Vic. It presented an imagined future with Donald Trump running and winning against Kamala Harris in the presidential elections of November 2024. Right-wing populism and Trump's assaults on democracy are under the microscope.

The same year *Scandaltown*, a modern-day Restoration comedy, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith. Here Bartlett revisits 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-cen-

tury Restoration drama and adopts some of its key features: there are comic asides, there are characters in disguise, there are also showdowns and plenty of topical jokes about the partying of Tory politicians and Twitter activism. As Bartlett instructed, 'everything should be joyful and fun'.

### FILM AND TELEVISION

Bartlett's psychological thriller TV series *Doctor Foster* debuted on BBC1 in 2015. It became one of the most watched TV drama series of the year and won 2 awards at the 2016 National Television Awards.

A second *Doctor Foster* series began showing in September 2017.

In 2016 Bartlett was hired to write an episode of the 10<sup>th</sup> series of *Doctor Who*, which aired in May 2017.

### Anne Simon (she/her)

#### DIRECTOR

Anne Simon is a director who has been a regular at the Théâtres de la Ville for the past ten years. She has directed many of their in-house and English-language productions. Interested in immersive theatre, mixing disciplines and questioning the relationship between stage and audience, she challenges the audience radically in suspending their disbelief and always works with multiple narrative layers of possible worlds and coexisting readings. The type of shows the Luxembourg-based director puts on ranges from contemporary text-based plays to devised, experimental site-specific performances. In the Théâtres de la Ville season 24/25, she will continue to negotiate issues of expectations and conformity: In the immersive and devised piece *Lone Wolf* (developed from workshops with young people from Luxembourg and New York), she examines group dynamics and mechanisms of exclusion in a playful and absurdly clownesque way. The exploration of (non-)conformity and identity continues in a radical adaptation of *Frühlingserwachen* that draws on intensive research

with young people and their relationship to (sexual) identity, performance, freedom and regulation/control in a digital society.

### Maximilien Ludovicy (he/him)

#### ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Being half Swedish, half Luxembourgish, Maximilien Ludovicy's studies took him to Stockholm, where after receiving a degree in acting, he enrolled in a two-year program at the Stockholm Filmschool, centered around writing and directing. He regularly kept close ties with Luxembourg, and following a brief stint in Berlin, working at Theater an der Parkaue, found his way back in 2022. He has since been involved in numerous local productions, preparing for his transition into directing. *Cock* marks Maximilien's second collaboration with Anne Simon.

### Anouk Schiltz (she/her)

#### SET & COSTUME DESIGN

Anouk studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and obtained her scenography diploma in 2005. Since then, she has worked as a set and costume designer for productions in Luxembourg and abroad with different directors. Projects a.o.: *Endspill* dir. Charles Muller (Théâtre d'Esch / Sibiu), *Bric à Brac* dir. Marie-Lune (Festival d'Avignon Off), *Hedda Gabler* dir. Gerhard Weber (Theater Trier), *Don Quixote* dir. Anne Simon (Théâtre National Du Luxembourg / Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen), *La vérité m'appartient* by Nathalie Ronvaux dir. Charles Muller (Théâtre des Capucins), *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller dir. Douglas Rintoul Queen's Theater Hornchurch, *Rumpelstilzchen* dir. Myriam Muller (Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg) *La Dispute* dir. Sophie Langevin (Théâtre National Du Luxembourg). Since 2010 she has also been working regularly on the design of various exhibitions like *Gëlle Fra*, *Cocteau*, *l'œuvre graphique* (Cercle Municipal), *Lëtzebuerg an den Eischte Weltkrich*, *Lëtzebuerg an den zweeten Weltkrich*, *Pour Elise* (Villa Vauban) and *Best of Posters* at



Les deux Musées de la Ville de Luxembourg. In summer 2019 she designed the costumes for the opera *The Sleeping Thousand* by composer Adam Maor, directed by Yonatan Levy, commissioned by the Aix-en-Provence Festival and Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg, world premiere at the Théâtre du Jeu de Paume. In March 2019 she designed the set design for the play *Ivanov* by Anton Chekhov dir. Myriam Muller and in 2021 she created the scenography for the play *The Hothouse* dir. Anne Simon at Les Théâtre de Ville de Luxembourg. In September 2021 Anouk Schiltz received the award *Theaterpräis Hannert der Bün*. Since then, she has continued her work as a set designer for the theater, recently for the production *Kasimir & Karoline* at the Landes-theater Niederösterreich in co-production with Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg.

### David Calvitto (he/him)

F

David Calvitto was born in the United States and lived in New York City for most of his life before moving to London in 2012. Since then he's appeared in many plays throughout the United Kingdom, including the West End production and national tour of Reginald Rose's *12 Angry Men*. Other theatre credits: *These Shining Lives*, *Nine Circles* (both at Park Theatre, London), *Americana Absurdum* (Menier Chocolate Factory, London), *The Christians* (Gate Theatre, London), *The Shawshank Redemption* (Gaiety Theatre, Dublin), *Casino Royale* (Secret Cinema, Shanghai), *Enterprise* (Soho Theatre, New York). He's performed John Clancy's one-person play, *The Event*, in America, Australia, the Bahamas, Germany, Holland, the UK and New Zealand, as well as at Luxembourg's own Fundamental Monodrama Festival in 2023. Since 2000, he's performed in 20 plays at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. David also has directed plays that have been produced in Edinburgh, New York, London and Adelaide, Australia, including *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *True West*, *American Buffalo*, *Macbeth*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Film credits: *The King's Man*, *Young Woman and the Sea*, *The*

*Flash*. Awards: *The Stage* Best Actor Award, 2002 Edinburgh Fringe Festival; Best Performer, 2010 Adelaide Fringe Festival. More at davidcalvitto.com

### Philipp Alfons Heitmann (he/him)

JOHN

Philipp Alfons Heitmann, raised in Germany and South Africa. He studied acting at Leipzig College of Music and Theatre and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles. He has enjoyed a successful career working in theatre and music theatre projects, both freelance and with ensembles of German regional theatres and toured in Switzerland and Austria. He also is founding member of the English language „smash'n'grab'theatre“ and the immersive theatre group „dla dla“. His stage credits include the title roles in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, Jason in *Medea*, Möbius in Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* and Beckmann in Wolfgang Borcherts *The Man Outside*. Besides this, he has worked as a voice and voice over actor for German public radio and television. Following *Mendy*, *das Musical* (2021) and *The Writer* (2023), *Cock* is his third production at the Théâtre des Capucins.

### Elisabet Johannesdottir (she/her)

w

Elisabet Johannesdottir is an Icelandic actress and writer, born and raised in Luxembourg. She went to film school in New York and Los Angeles where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting and a MFA in Screenwriting. She made her film debut in *Hysteria* in 2011. She has since appeared in TV shows like *Bad Banks* (ZDF) and films such as *Little Duke* by Andy Bausch, *Mariounette* (Samsa), *Sawah* and *Stargazer* (Deal). Elisabet made her stage debut at Théâtre des Capucins in Douglas Rintoul's production of *Closer* in 2011, she then portrayed Rosalind in his contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which toured the UK in 2013. She portrayed Dottie in Anne Simon's production of *Killer Joe*

by Tracy Letts at Théâtre des Capucins. They have since collaborated again on *Mr. Paradise* by Tennessee Williams and *Stupid Fucking Bird* by Aaron Posner as well as *Dealing with Clair* by Martin Crimp. Elisabet performed in *Illusions* by Ivan Viripaev at Théâtre du Centaure, Anna Elisabeth Frick's adaptation of Hesse's *Steppenwolf* at Theater Trier and *Rumpelstilzchen* directed by Myriam Muller at the Grand Théâtre. Lastly Elisabet portrayed Clara in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* at Theater Freiburg.

### Tom Leick-Burns (he/him)

M

Born in Luxembourg, Tom Leick-Burns trained as an actor at the Drama Centre London. On his return to Luxembourg, he worked extensively in both theatre and film. His stage credits include *Kasimir und Karoline* (1999), *Maria Stuart* (2002), *Edward II* (2002), *Reigen / Blue Room* (2005), *Angels in America* (2009), *The complete works of William Shakespeare [gekierzt]* (2006), *Design for Living* (2008) and *Hedda Gabler* (2020). His film credits include *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), *House of Boys* (2009) and *Hannah Arendt* (2023). He completed a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) at the Sacred Heart University in 2012. He was appointed artistic director and general manager of the Théâtres de la Ville in 2015. He lives with his husband David, his twin daughters Billie and Tippi and their dog Coco in Beggen.

# Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg

The Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg, namely the Grand Théâtre and the Théâtre des Capucins, present an eclectic programme of dance, opera and theatre each season, showcasing a multiplicity of aesthetics, voices and stories, and motivated by the desire to meet the expectations and demands of a dynamic cultural scene and a cosmopolitan audience. At the crossroads of cultures and languages, the Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg aim to be a place of encounter and discovery open to all, a place dedicated to the performing arts and a place of artistic innovation. Long-standing partnerships with international companies and artists, a presence in European networks and a model of collaborative co-productions enable them to support national and international creation and create opportunities for local creators beyond Luxembourg's borders. In this way, they strive to honour their mission as a creative house located at the very heart of Europe and to contribute to the development of the cultural scene in Luxembourg.

TalentLAB, a project laboratory and multidisciplinary festival, was created in 2016 out of a desire to support artists at various points in their careers, stimulate dialogue between artists, audiences and institutions, and encourage interdisciplinarity and new forms. Organised every year at the end of the season over a ten-day period and conceived as an interdisciplinary festival, it offers selected project leaders and their participants an interlude of creative freedom in a secure space, but also and above all a framework for research, transmission and exchange. With the launch of the Capucins Libre end-of-creation residency in 2018 and participation in the Bourse Project Chorégraphique: Expédition project, the Théâtres de la Ville are stepping in at yet another stage of creation, helping artists and collectives to carry out their projects by offering them the time, space and support they need to make them a reality.

On a European scale, the Théâtres de la Ville have joined various networks over the years, such as the European Theatre Convention (ETC) for theatre, enoa (European Network of Opera Academies) and Opera Europa for opera, and TOUR DE DANSE, an international network for the promotion of contemporary dance in Belgium, Luxembourg, France, the Netherlands and Germany. On the same scale, an additional link in the work and support for artists is being launched in 2022 with the Future Laboratory, a research residency project run by twelve European institutions in the field of performing arts, under the coordination of the Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg.

## Contact

### Manon Meier

Tel. +352 / 4796 4054

mameier@vdl.lu

•

### Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg

1, Rond-Point Schuman

L-2525 Luxembourg

[www.lestheatres.lu](http://www.lestheatres.lu)

