

National Treasure, C4

15 September, 2016 | By Jack Thorne



Three weeks' rehearsal is a luxury in TV - but on a series dealing with historical allegations, it was essential in helping the cast build their characters' shared past, says writer Jack Thorne

Production company The Forge

Commissioner Piers Wenger

Length 4 x 60 minutes

TX 9pm, Tuesdays from 20 September, Channel 4

Executive producers George Ormond; George Faber; Jack Thorne; Marc Munden; Hugo Heppell; Norman Merry

Writer Jack Thorne

Director Marc Munden

Digital grading/sound Lipsync Post

Television is not a medium that prioritises rehearsals.

There's a belief in them, most of the time, but making time in the schedule for them? You're consistently told it would be too expensive, not possible, or TX dates wouldn't allow for it. But on National Treasure, they were invaluable.

I've spent most of my working life swapping between television and theatre, where rehearsals generally start around a table, the actors ask questions about the script and the characters, and adjustments are made.

In television, by contrast, there's rarely much time. When there is, any rehearsing is generally done on set, and priority is given to questions of blocking. Actors are talked to, but it often feels like they are left to build the characters themselves, with very little help.

Now, don't get me wrong, this can work very well. Britain has great actors with great instincts, who consistently produce great results. If you point a camera at them and shout "go", they'll probably do something brilliant.

But the reason I'm not a novelist is because I love collaboration. I love being pushed through the script process to refine what I've written and uncover things I didn't quite understand.

My scripts go through a minimum of six drafts over a period of at least six months and during that process, they get better and better.

From my experience, actors also love rehearsals. They enjoy having their choices tested, playing with ideas, discussing what came before and what will come after.

But they aren't often given the time to have these discussions and to make these discoveries. In theatre, they're given weeks; in TV, they're frequently given no time at all.

Building history



National Treasure is a show about historical sex crimes. It's the story of alleged events that took place 30 years ago. To tell it, we have to tell the story of a 40-year comic partnership, a 40-year marriage and a 30-something dysfunctional parent-child relationship. It's a piece that requires layers of biography.

But history isn't told in words. It's told in the way people look at each other, the way they touch each other, and the way they move through each other's space.

Thankfully, we had the most incredible cast who are capable of all that and more. But all of them talked to me, and subsequently to others, about how crucial building that history in the rehearsal room was in making the choices they then made on camera.

As Robbie Coltrane has said: "The rehearsals Marc [Munden] had us do made so much difference. Because – I've done this, and I'm sure Julie [Walters] has too – you walk into a room and someone says: 'Right, you've been married for 25 years. And – action!' And the best actor in the world couldn't do that."

So we had a couple of weeks to work out what their past relationship was like, what their marriage was like. Did she take a back seat to his career? What did she do before she married him?

Marc is a magnificent director and it quickly became clear why: he's meticulous. Every single decision he makes is thought through and talked through. He takes notes on everything and builds everything up from that.

He uses notebooks with the script on one side and a blank page on the other. He makes very few notes, but by the time of filming, that blank side will be full.

Marc's process starts with rehearsals. On *National Treasure*, we had three weeks' rehearsal time – because he insisted on it – and in those weeks, he spent time on every single scene. Every cast member – from the largest part to the smallest – came in and spent time with Marc, working on their character and their dialogue, and helping me refine the script.

Creating brilliant moments



Nothing was rushed. A four-line scene could provoke two hours of discussion as bricks were laid to build these characters.

As Marc puts it, any mistake can be made in the rehearsal room. When you're filming, you've got an LX [electrics] department getting fidgety, but in a little room in Leeds, anything is possible – and that allows for creativity and acting brilliance.

The things that were done in that room bore ridiculously brilliant fruit during filming.

We're constantly told that America does drama "better". I don't think there's a single British screenwriter who hasn't been told drunkenly at a party: "Yeah, I don't really watch much British TV, I prefer the good stuff, the American stuff, you know?"

But the other constant truth is that American TV loves British actors, because it recognises the quality of British acting talent. To make the best British television possible, we need to make the best use of our greatest assets – our actors – and that requires rethinking processes slightly.

Rehearsals are not a luxury – a thing people would love to do if they only had the time – they're a necessity.

And I do not intend to do another show without them being an integral part of the schedule.

CAPTURING EVERY COUGH AND SPLUTTER

NIGEL ALBERMANICHE



I was lucky enough to read one of the first drafts of National Treasure. Jack Thorne wrote an opening paragraph about how the episode felt, visually and sonically. This gave me great insight into the world he was creating.

Additionally, fantastic detail and direction from Marc Munden helped us really understand what would be seen, heard and ultimately felt by the audience. Every week counting down towards the shoot, Marc would get more excited about the amazing contributions that the actors brought to the table, and about what we would be able to work with sound-wise.

As we approached the shoot days, we wanted to ensure that Robbie Coltrane's character, Paul, would be heard in every imaginable way – his breaths, his coughs and the sounds he would make to communicate his struggles and pain.

We mic'd Robbie in every scene and recorded hours and hours of his breaths on set.

We used Sanken COS11s with a tiny clip and an RM11 to create an airy bubble area in which nothing was touching the mic. With the costume department's help, we got this as close as possible to his 'breathing area' to ensure a rustle-free zone in which no breaths hit the mic directly, but all of them were captured perfectly.

The Sanken COS11s are small and easily hidden and work well with Lectrosonics SMDBs.

Sometimes we would stitch the mics into costumes if we needed a smaller space in which to hide them, with the costume team creating a loop around the COS11.



We used the uniqueness of Paul's sounds as the emotional foundation to communicate his stress, and the journey that his character goes on.

We explored the character of Paul's wife Marie (Julie Walters) and her controlled and brilliant pauses, as well as other emotional moments, to show the amazing strength of her love for her husband. Her sighs and breaths indicate new discoveries and help the audience understand what she is thinking at specific moments.

We were determined to keep the world of the show textured with fascinating detail. Each episode has been sound-mixed differently to follow the different aspects of the story. We recorded many different tracks on set – birds, planes, the sounds trees make, cars passing by, even people's movements – to provide the post sound team with the soundscape that Marc and Jack had in their heads.

I can't thank the actors enough for allowing us to support them in bringing their tremendous performances to our ears. They added so much texture, discovery and emotional involvement that I hope the audience will enjoy.

I also can't thank Jack enough for his superb script, and Marc for allowing me to explore what we could achieve sonically, and for pushing me to keep trying to capture more and more exciting sounds as we discovered them.

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