WELCOME TO THE WIFE OF WILLESDEN

This production invites us to come out of the cold and gather in the warmth of a British pub. Here, among the neighborhood regulars, we find a powerful reminder that sharing stories—and laughing together—are essential to our well-being.

The Wife of Willesden marks the playwriting debut of celebrated author Zadie Smith. Since Geoffrey Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales in the 14th century, the character Alyson, the Wife of Bath, has shocked generations of readers with her no-holds-barred accounting of female power and pleasure. Now, Smith has brought Alyson to new life in North West London as Alvita, who takes the stage to share the ways that her five husbands have, one after the other, all left her wanting more. Bawdy, vivacious, and irrepressible, Alvita teaches us—by trampling them—that plenty of taboos still surround the discussion of older women’s desires today.

Alvita’s tremendous energy, and her hilarious attack on centuries of prudishness, feel like such a vital gift for the present: the theater is filled with laughter. Recently, I was excited to read about the work of Natalie Dattilo, an instructor of psychology at Harvard Medical School who studies the ways that laughter can lower anxiety, reduce pain, and bring communities closer together. “In order to feel good,” Dattilo says, “we have to practice feeling good.” As director, I feel inspired by the idea that the theater, as a space to laugh together, might be a place where we can rehearse collective well-being. (In this context, I think it’s worth noting that Chaucer wrote his Tales—which are just as lewd and lively as Alvita—in the aftermath of the plague.)

This production comes to Cambridge from London’s acclaimed Kiln Theatre, located in the borough of Brent (which also includes Willesden). We are thrilled to celebrate the A.R.T. debut of this entire company, including director Indhu Rubasingham, who is Kiln’s Artistic Director. To learn more about these artists and this work, don’t miss the wealth of articles in the current issue of the A.R.T. Guide, including reflections on the Canterbury Tales by scholars at Harvard and Oxford, as well as a glossary of local London terminology from Zadie Smith.

Thank you for coming in from the cold and laughing with us.

Diane Paulus
Terrie and Bradley Bloom Artistic Director
A.R.T. in association with BAM

presents

THE WIFE OF WILLESDEN

A Kiln Theatre Production

Creative Team
Adapted by Zadie Smith
Adapted from Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath”
Directed by Indhu Rubasingham
Designer Robert Jones
Lighting Designer Guy Hoare
Composers & Sound Designers Ben and Max Ringham
Associate Director Hannah Hauer-King
Associate Set Designer Ben Davies
Associate Costume Designer Kinnetia Isidore
Casting Director Julia Horan CDG
Movement Director Imogen Knight
Fight Director Kev McCurdy
Voice & Dialect Coach Hazel Holder
Wigs, Hair & Make-Up Campbell Young Associates
Kiln-Mackintosh Resident Assistant Director Jessica Mensah

First performance at the Loeb Drama Center on February 25, 2023.

Production support of The Wife of Willesden is provided by The Linda Hammett Ory & Andrew Ory Charitable Trust.

Additional Production Support is provided by Brenda and Kevin Jarrell.

This production is supported, in part, by The Robert Brustein Endowment Fund for New Works.

Media Support of Life of Pi is provided by WBUR.

Take Five ticket subsidies are supported by a lead gift and further supported by individual contributions.


Runtime: One hour and 35 minutes.

This production includes strobe lighting, flashing lights, haze, slurs against women, and symbolic representations of sexual and physical violence.
Company
(in alphabetical order)
for full company bios, please see the digital program (QR Codes available in theater lobby)

Winston/Mandela/Black Jesus: Marcus Adolphy
Understudy for Alvita, The Wife of Willesden and Aunty P/Old Wife: Sophie Cartman
Pastor/Eldridge: George Eggay
Ian/Socrates/Bartosz: Andrew Frame
Darren/Young Maroon: Troy Glasgow
Polly/Sophie: Claudia Grant
Asma/Kelly: Nikita Johal
Ryan/Colin: Scott Miller
Author/Zaire/Queen Nanny: Jessica Murrain
Alvita, The Wife of Willesden: Clare Perkins
Aunty P/Old Wife: Ellen Thomas

Understudies never substitute for listed players unless a specific announcement for the appearance is made at the time of the performance.

Additional Production Staff for The Wife of Willesden
Kiln Theatre Producer: Mirain Jones
Kiln Theatre Production Manager: Nicki Brown
Kiln Theatre Assistant General Manager: Robyn Bennett
Company Stage Manager: Alex Constantin, EJ Saunders
Deputy Stage Manager: Anna Townlet
Assistant Stage Manager: Michael Medina*
Head of Wardrobe: Keshini Ranasinghe
Production Sound Support: Dylan de Buitlear
Company Management Assistant: Shannon Kelley
COVID Safety Manager: Meg Hamblen

(*) Member of Actors’ Equity Association

Access Staff
Director of ASL: Kristin Johnson
ASL Interpreters: Julia Barnes, Sho Grant
Audio Description Consultant: Amber Pearcy
Audio Describers: Maria Hendricks, Mel Watkins
Open Captioning: c2 Captioning
Occupational Therapy Consultant: Mary Beth Kadlec
NICE(r) Relaxed Performance Consultants: Spectrum Theatre Ensemble

Special Thanks
Daniel Donoghue, Anna Wilson, All Kiln Theatre Staff

Additional Lighting Equipment provided by Christie Lites
Program Notes

In the Rehearsal Room

by Zadie Smith

When I first began this attempt at Chaucerian translation, I thought I was writing a monologue. But almost immediately this proved impossible. At various moments in the original, Alyson speaks to the Pardoner, the Summoner, and the Friar, and once I'd let three extra people on to the stage, I couldn't think of a good reason why there shouldn't be more. For as well as talking to quite a few people, the Wife of Bath talks about many more. She is a voracious narrator: mimicking people, quoting them, animating them, bringing them to life and killing them off within a paragraph. So why not let St. Paul appear in the flesh, and all Alyson’s husbands and friends, and Christ himself! When typing on a laptop in a study facing a wall, the possibilities can appear endless. In the rehearsal room, things turned out to be a little more complicated.

Scenes it had amused me to write back-to-back—like a wedding following hard on a funeral, or a story of one marriage bookended by two others—became, for the director and our ten actors, a complicated choreography of music, emotion, quick changes, voice transformations, and, well, choreography. I have playwright friends who tell me nothing delights them more than forcing ten strangers to repeat words they have written. I have to say that was not my first reaction. It was more like: All these lovely people are here at 10:30 in the morning—and it’s my fault. Very soon, though, this sense of mortification passed, and something like vocational awe replaced it. I felt a great humility before the startling openness of actors, their playfulness and generosity and unselfconscious freedom—so different from writers! Their visual and physical imaginations. The creativity they seem to hold in their gestures, in their very beings. Rhyming word games are one thing; embodiment is quite another. And it’s been my delight to watch our directors, Indhu Rubasingham and Hannah Hauer-King, create a vivid theatrical reality out of my static sentences.

I suppose writers like me, who work a lot with dialogue, are always to some degree actor manqués, secretly convinced they could, if asked, “do all the voices” themselves. But the moment our extraordinary flesh-and-blood Alvita opened her mouth in the rehearsal room! Then that demented fantasy fell away. Not in my wildest dreams could I have heard, in my head, all the emotion, humor, intelligence and drama I’ve been privileged to see happen in front of me, every day, in the rehearsal room…

The layers of experience and sensation available in the theater should be the envy of all novelists. My first glimpse of the ingenious set demonstrated the difference. In one glance I could take in, entire, what it would have taken me three pages to describe. Not to mention sound effects, music, dancing, costumes! In the end, the rhyming verse becomes mere scaffolding, over which is laid all the three-dimensional richness of sound and movement, light and shade, the human voice, the human body. And yet: I also felt the miracle of text, in the rehearsal room. That 600-year-old jokes can still land is a humbling fact indeed.

Of course, Chaucer could not have imagined the manner in which we have re-embodied his lines (although the man who gave, to his Wife of Bath, the line “Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit / I took no kep, so that he liked me” may not be as far from as our contemporary sensibilities as we
sometimes imagine.) I felt the presence, in the rehearsal room, of Chaucer’s humor and bawdiness, his philosophical depth and intellectual perversity. All transformed by the process of passing through these various flesh-and-blood actors, with their human voices and human gestures, with which they are able to perform the miracle of turning text into experience, words into action, ideas into something like “life.”

Zadie Smith is the author of the novels White Teeth, The Autograph Man, On Beauty, NW, and Swing Time; as well as a novella, The Embassy of Cambodia; three collections of essays, Changing My Mind, Feel Free, and Intimations; and a short story collection, Grand Union.

Originally published by Kiln Theatre

For more articles about The Wife of Willesden, see the A.R.T.’s digital Guide.
Program Notes

The Wife of Willesden: A Glossary

by Zadie Smith

Note on the text: In North West London—as in any corner of any big city—we have some vocabulary that is peculiar to the neighbourhood, and may need translation. Also: places, objects, and ideas. Please find below fifty explanations and translations that we hope will illuminate some of the “North Wheezian” peculiarities you will find in your entertainment this evening.

1. **The Kilburn High Road**: An ancient and ungentrifiable street that runs through North West London. Mainly chicken shops.
2. **The Colin Campbell**: An old pub on the Kilburn High Road
3. **The Big Issue**: A magazine created and sold by the unhoused.
4. **Flexing**: Showing off, especially with clothes or money.
5. **From mi eye deh a mi knee**: From back when my eyes were at my knees. Therefore: since I was a small child. From Jamaican Patois.
6. **Brassic**: To be very low on funds; broke
7. **Slagging off/Slating**: Talking shit about somebody
8. **Kipping**: Sleeping
9. **To take the huff**: To get offended
10. **Proper screwing**: To be really annoyed
11. **'low it**: Not to judge something too harshly; to “allow it.”
12. **Eediat**: From Jamaican Patois.
13. **To rinse**: To use up all of something
14. **Chatting breeze**: Talking a load of nonsense
15. **Grinding**: To dance very close to another person in a sexual manner
16. **Baileys**: An alcoholic Irish Cream drink
17. **Jamming**: Hanging around with a friend
18. **Camden Palais**: A beloved North London nightclub, now under new management and renamed.
19. **Cuss**: To run someone down, verbally.
20. **Mandem**: Your crew, your boys.
21. **Galdem**: Your crew, your girls.
22. **To eff with**: To mess with somebody
23. **Chief**: A dated North West London phrase from the 90s, now obsolete, meaning complete and utter idiot.
24. **Pum pum**: A vagina
25. **Mi deh yah**: Everything is good, I’m here, I’m ok. A transplanted idiom from Jamaican Patois.
26. **Braffing**: From Jamaican Patois.
27. **Pickney**: From Jamaican Patois.
29. **Raving**: Going out to nightclubs and dancing all night. Also can be done in a field.
31. **Fit**: Good-looking
32. **Traipsing**: Wandering around North West London, usually in search of late-night transport.
33. **Brent**: London is divided into thirty-two Boroughs. Brent is ours.
34. **To chirps**: To chat someone up; to flirt
35. **Arse over tit**: To fall over dramatically
36. **Teef**: A thief
37. **Banging on and on**: Talking about something in a relentless manner
38. **Bailiff**: The guy who comes to repossess your furniture when you can’t pay a debt.
39. **Pisshead**: A drunk
40. **Duppy**: A malevolent spirit or ghost. From Jamaican Patois.
41. **River Mumma and Ol’Higue**: Fearsome female figures from Jamaican folklore
42. **Muss-muss**: Really ugly and dishevelled. From Jamaican Patois.
43. **Crep**: Sneakers
44. **Butters**: Old North Wheezian term, now obsolete, meaning: unattractive.
45. **Buss up**: Blow up, explode. From Jamaican Patois.
46. **Arks**: Ask
47. **Oh my days!**: You can’t be serious! Wow!
48. **Bwoy**: Young man. From Jamaican Patois.
49. **Wastemen**: The sort of men who waste your time, energy, money; a generally useless man.
50. **Cut up about it**: Very upset about something
51. **The Ends**: Another term for your neighbourhood, wherever your neighbourhood may be. Every borough in London believes they invented this phrase, but there is no doubt in our minds that its true origins are to be found right here, in North West London.

*Zadie Smith is the author of the novels White Teeth, The Autograph Man, On Beauty, NW, and Swing Time; as well as a novella, The Embassy of Cambodia; three collections of essays, Changing My Mind, Feel Free, and Intimations; and a short story collection, Grand Union.*
About Kiln Theatre

“Kiln Theatre has revitalised the cultural life of Brent and brings world class theatre at an affordable price to people from all walks of life.”
—Zadie Smith

Kiln Theatre sits in the heart of Kilburn in Brent, a unique and culturally diverse area of London where over 140 languages are spoken. We are a welcoming and proudly local venue, with an internationally acclaimed programme of world and UK premieres. Our work presents the world through a variety of lenses, amplifying unheard / ignored voices into the mainstream, exploring and examining the threads of human connection that cross race, culture and identity.

“This place was a special cocoon. Now she has grown and blossomed into a beautiful butterfly.”
—Sharon D Clarke

We believe that theatre is for all and want everyone to feel welcome and entitled to call the Kiln their own. We are committed to nurturing the talent of young people and our local communities, to provide a platform for their voices to be heard.

“I wanted to say thank you for creating the most diverse theatre I have been to. In terms of race, culture, class, age, everything – not only in the selection of shows and actors, but in the audience.”
—Audience member, 2021

www.KilnTheatre.com
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Artistic Director: Indhu Rubasingham
Executive Director: Daisy Heath
Associate Director: Amit Sharma
Producer: Mirain Jones
Head of Creative Engagement: Romana Flello (Maternity Cover)
Head of Creative Engagement: Jenny Batt (Maternity Leave)
Finance Director: Sophie Norvill
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About the A.R.T.

The American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University is a leading force in the American theater, producing groundbreaking work that is driven by risk-taking and passionate inquiry. A.R.T. was founded in 1980 by Robert Brustein, who served as Artistic Director until 2002, when he was succeeded by Robert Woodruff. Diane Paulus began her tenure as Terrie and Bradley Bloom Artistic Director in 2008 and co-leads the theater in partnership with Executive Director Kelvin Dinkins, Jr., who began his tenure in June 2022.

Throughout its history, A.R.T. has been honored with many distinguished awards including the Tony Award for Best New Play for *All the Way* (2014); consecutive Tony Awards for Best Revival of a Musical for *Pippin* (2013) and *The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess* (2012), both of which Paulus directed, and eighteen other Tony Awards since 2012; a Pulitzer Prize; a Jujamcyn Prize for outstanding contribution to the development of creative talent; the Regional Theater Tony Award; and more than 100 Elliot Norton and IRNE Awards. Additional Broadway productions include *1776; SIX; Jagged Little Pill; Waitress; Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812*; and *Finding Neverland*. Since their premieres in Cambridge, A.R.T. productions have also gone on to reach audiences Off-Broadway, on US National Tour, and at partner theaters across the country, as well as in London’s West End, Tokyo, and Sydney. Under Paulus’s leadership, A.R.T.’s club theater, OBERON, was recognized annually as a top performance venue in the Boston area, and attracted national attention for its innovative programming and business models.

As the professional theater on the campus of Harvard University, A.R.T. is committed to playing a central role in the cognitive life of the University, catalyzing discourse, interdisciplinary collaboration, and creative exchange among a wide range of academic departments, institutions, students, and faculty members. A.R.T. plays a central role in Harvard’s undergraduate Theater, Dance & Media concentration, teaching courses in directing, dramatic literature, acting, voice, design, and dramaturgy. A.R.T. staff also mentors students in the Harvard Radcliffe Dramatic Club at the Loeb Drama Center. A.R.T. is also engaged in a number of multi-year initiatives with partners at Harvard that explore some of the most pressing issues of our day, including collaborations with the Harvard University Center for the Environment (to commission and develop a series of new works that address climate change and the environment), the Healthy Buildings Program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (to develop a *Roadmap for Recovery and Resilience for Theater*), and the Initiative for Racial Equity at Harvard Business School (to pilot the Program in Arts and Culture Organization Management).

Dedicated to making great theater accessible, A.R.T. actively engages community members and local students annually in project-based partnerships, workshops, conversations with artists, and other enrichment activities both at the theater and across the Greater Boston area.

The Loeb Drama Center where the A.R.T. performs is located on the traditional and ancestral land of the Massachusetts, the original inhabitants of what is now known as Boston and Cambridge. We pay respect to the people of the *Massachusetts Tribe*, past and present, and honor the land itself which remains sacred to the Massachusetts People.