**Introductory Notes for An Improbable Musical**

Welcome to this introduction to *An Improbable Musical*, created by Improbable and directed by Lee Simpson.

The audio-described performance at Hackney Empire takes place on Saturday 22 October at 7:30 pm with a touch tour beforehand, time TBC.

The performance lasts for approximately 80 to 90 minutes with no interval. The live audio description will be given by Ess Grange for Improbable.

The following introduction includes information about *An Improbable Musical*, and descriptions of the set and performers. This show introduction is also available as an MP3 audio recording from [www.improbable.co.uk/current-projects/an-improbable-musical](http://www.improbable.co.uk/current-projects/an-improbable-musical), and [vocaleyes.co.uk/whats-on](https://vocaleyes.co.uk/whats-on/).

For access information for the theatre please visit <https://hackneyempire.co.uk/your-visit/access/>

Please note that this show is completely improvised for every performance. It is possible that difficult subject matter might arise without prior content warnings. Some handheld torches might be used. There will be haze and may be flashing lights and some lights pointing into the audience.

*An Improbable Musical* is a completely improvised show. Improbable are maestros of improvised theatre, and for three decades have created make-it-up-as-you-go-along shows that have captivated audiences across the world from off-Broadway to the National Theatre. *An Improbable Musical* might be hilarious or heart-breaking, anarchic or eerily atmospheric. The show aims to spin theatrical magic out of thin air and describes itself as essential viewing for anyone who likes their theatre as live as it gets.

*An Improbable Musical* takes place in the Hackney Empire. This theatre was built in 1901 and was designed by Frank Matcham, famous for his 'chocolate box' style. This auditorium is no exception: it is an ornate red-and-gold affair with every wall and gallery covered in swirling baroque ornamentation. The red velvet seats flip up when not in use.

The stage at the Hackney Empire is 10 metres wide by 10 metres deep, behind a beautifully decorated proscenium arch. The arch has pink and gold minarets on either side and a large painted tableau above it, framed in gold.

For this production the stage space is quite bare. It stretches back to the original brick wall of the building. Around the sides and rear are tables holding all sorts of materials, props and puppets that might be grabbed by the performers and used as stories unfold. There are also clothes rails holding a real mix of items, from Tudor doublets to faux fur coats to everyday tracksuits or frocks.

Some of the materials used during scenes include a large very thin plastic sheet that billows and floats in the air like waves.

A long, wide sheet of special paper fabric that can act as a shadow puppet screen.

Tissue paper, brown paper and foil sheets that can crumple, rustle and float, making clouds or landscapes or magical creatures.

There are puppets with mysterious staring faces and cloth bodies that float and dance. There is also a giant bald head, big enough for a performer to get right inside of, and a pair of big hands, each about a metre long, on tall poles. These might be used with the head to create a giant, or they might appear disembodied and looming over characters.

The stage is dominated by a tall tower in the centre of the space. Built on a hexagonal base, it is about 3 metres wide and 5 metres high. The tower is made of bare wood and metal, and has a mix of steps, staircases, ladders and levels. There is a bottom-level hidey hole with trapdoor, a mid-level platform with a ladder running straight up the middle to a top level, and through a doorway is a winding staircase running up round the outside of a wooden wall. The top level is open with light metal handrails and a metal grille floor. The wooden wall runs right up to the top, where there is a little hatch window in it, allowing performers to look through and down to us below. The tower is on a revolve, and can be turned by the performers during the show to give different faces and arrangements of stairs, wall and open space. Sometimes they revolve it mid-scene when people are performing on it, giving a sense of a journey or a scene change.

Instrumentalists are positioned to the left of the space. Their instruments include keyboard, drum kit, vibraphone, cello and an array of global woodwind instruments.

Either side of the space are some stools and chairs that the performers sometimes sit on whilst waiting to join a scene.

Many characters will emerge during the performances, but we don’t yet know what they will be. They are conjured and performed by:

**Neill Ashdown**: a white British man, quite tall and of medium build. He has dark hair that is slightly greying, and green eyes in a broad face. He is playful with a sometimes sardonic vibe, throwing the audience the odd look from time to time. Niall moves as gracefully as his 57-year old body will allow and wears check shirts, dark jeans, and trainers.

**Ruth Bratt** is a white woman with cropped blonde hair. She has twinkling brown eyes and often a mischievous, impish energy. Ruth is slightly below average height and of middling build, and in her early forties. She wears a petrol blue jumpsuit, or houndstooth harem pants, loose top, and black and white dance trainers.

**Clarke Joseph-Edwards** is a black man with close cropped dark brown hair and brown eyes. He wears tracksuit bottoms with a casual dark shirt over a t-shirt. Clarke has a cheeky smile and upbeat energy.

**Josie Lawrence** is a tall white woman in her fifties, with a mid-brown bob and fringe, and hazel eyes. She has a broad smile and moves easily between serious gravitas and big, bright energy. She is usually dressed in black with flashes of blue or deep rose.

**Aya Nakamura** is a Japanese woman. She is very petite and of slim build. She is forty. Her long hair is red and often tied up in a top-knot. Aya’s style is casual loose clothing in darker colours, and blue boots. She moves with a fluid and dynamic physicality as she operates puppets and materials.

**Lee Simpson**is a tall, slender white man in his fifties. He has thick brown hair short at back and sides, and a little longer on top. He has grey eyes in a long face, and often a somewhat melancholy air - though when he brightens into upbeat energy, his smile is beaming and he moves with a quick lightness.

The musicians are:

**Chris Ash**, who is mostly sat at the piano. He is a slender white man with a light scattering of white stubble. His brown hair has streaks of white in it. As the musical director, Chris is frequently staring at the cast and other musicians with curiosity, intent, and sometimes joy.

**Juliet Colyer** is a petite white person with shoulder length light brown hair and blue eyes. She plays cello and electric cello. Juliet's cello is on a harness, so she might get up and wander into scenes whilst playing it.

**Joley Cragg** is a white woman with long light brown hair and brown eyes. She is always dressed in black. Joley plays percussion and vibraphone. She sits behind a drum kit, with a range of instruments including tabla and shakers.

**Max Gitting** is a white male with short sandy hair and glasses. He plays global woodwind instruments including bamboo flutes, shepherds flute, and panpipes.

An Improbable Musical is directed by Lee Simpson

Associate Director is Angela Clerkin

The designer is E.M. Parry

Lighting design is by Colin Grenfell

The sound designers are Oscar Thompson and Will Thompson

Movement Direction is by Pauline Mayers

Audio Description is by Ess Grange for Improbable