

The Culture Project



Welcome to the 9th Edition of The Culture Project

In this edition, we reflect on [Pride](#) and mark Black History Month, **Standing Firm in Power and Pride**. We also explore culture in the workplace through our thoughtful learning & development sessions, celebrating how inclusivity shapes our community.

Highlights include conversations with [Liam Mower](#) and [Andrew Monaghan](#), offering insight into portraying LGBTQ+ roles in [The Midnight Bell](#) and the resonance of these stories set in 1930s London. We also honour the pioneering legacy of [Elisabeth Welch](#), a celebrated Black artist of the 1930s, whose artistry and presence not only broke barriers but also inspired generations of Black performers in theatre and music. Her influence is beautifully echoed in Michela Meazza's miming of Elisabeth Welch's song, The Nearness of You, in the production.

This issue reaffirms our commitment to visibility, representation and the celebration of diverse voices.

[New Adventures, EDI&A Team](#)

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2025

STANDING FIRM IN POWER AND PRIDE

The theme for Black History Month UK 2025 is “Standing Firm in Power and Pride,” a powerful tribute to the resilience, strength, and unwavering commitment to progress that defines the Black community across the globe. This year, the theme highlights the profound contributions made by Black people - leaders, activists, and pioneers who have shaped history, while also looking towards a future of continued empowerment, unity, and growth.

Power represents influence, leadership, and capacity to affect positive change. It acknowledges the visionaries who have led political, civil rights, and social

movements, as well as those who have broken barriers in business, education, and the arts. Their legacies remind us that true power is not about titles but about the collective strength, courage, and unity used to forge a more equitable future for all.

[Please follow this link if you would like to know more.](#)

This year, New Adventures shines a light on Elisabeth Welch, whose recording of *The Nearness of You* is featured in The Midnight Bell. Please continue to the next page to discover her fascinating story. Enjoy!

Elisabeth Welch : Elegance, Defiance & Standing Firm in Power and Pride.

This Black History Month, we celebrate the remarkable legacy of Elisabeth Welch, a pioneering Black artist whose voice features in the soundtrack of our production *The Midnight Bell*. Through her story, we explore what it meant to navigate the stage as a Black performer in the 1930s, and how her artistry helped shape culture in ways that still resonate today.

In the glittering world of 1930s cabaret and revue, one voice stood out above the rest: Elisabeth Welch. Born in New York but finding her greatest success on the stages of London, Welch became one of the first black women to break through as a celebrated performer in Britain. Her career was not only dazzling, but it was also quietly revolutionary.

Welch's rise to fame was a story of both displacement and discovery. At a time when America's stages often limited or outright excluded black performers, Britain offered her

something closer to freedom. It wasn't, however, a world without barriers. Racial prejudice followed her across the Atlantic, but it was a world where her artistry could not be denied. London embraced her as a star, and she gave the city something unforgettable in return.

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Her talent was extraordinary. A crystal-clear soprano and an innate ability to command an audience, she became a fixture of London's musical life. Welch introduced songs that have since become standards, Cole Porter's provocative *Love for Sale* and Harold Arlen's aching *Stormy Weather*. These weren't just tunes of the era; they became cultural touchstones, and her voice carried them into history.

But Welch's influence went far deeper than music. In the 1930s, audiences were accustomed to seeing Black performers through narrow, stereotyped roles. Welch dismantled those expectations with every performance. She brought glamour, intelligence, and sophistication to the stage, showing audiences an image of black womanhood they had rarely been allowed to see. Her very presence in those spaces was a kind of resistance, resistance through elegance, poise, and excellence. What made Elisabeth Welch radical was not a raised fist but a lifted chin. She didn't shout her defiance; she embodied it. By commanding space in mainstream British theatre, she forced audiences to rethink their

assumptions. She proved that artistry knows no boundaries, and in doing so, she shifted the cultural conversation.

Her legacy continues to resonate. For performers of colour who came after her, Welch's success made new possibilities imaginable. She proved that talent could not only survive the limitations of prejudice but actively reshape the society around it. Elisabeth Welch was more than a singer. She was a cultural force, a woman whose artistry challenged boundaries and whose voice became the soundtrack of a generation.



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From Silence to Spotlight: Celebrating Queer Characters in The Midnight Bell.



As we reflect on Pride 25, we turn our focus to another hidden history: what it meant to live as a queer person in 1930s London. The city pulsed with glamour and grit, smoky jazz clubs, neon-lit pubs, and dance halls alive with possibility. Yet for gay men and women, life was lived between the cracks of legality and respectability. Same sex desire was criminalised, forcing love into coded glances, secret letters, and hidden bars tucked away in the city's underbelly.

These spaces became lifelines, fragile sanctuaries where identity could breathe, even under the constant threat of exposure. It is within this charged atmosphere that *The Midnight Bell* unfolds, capturing the risks, yearnings, and resilience of queer lives in the shadows.

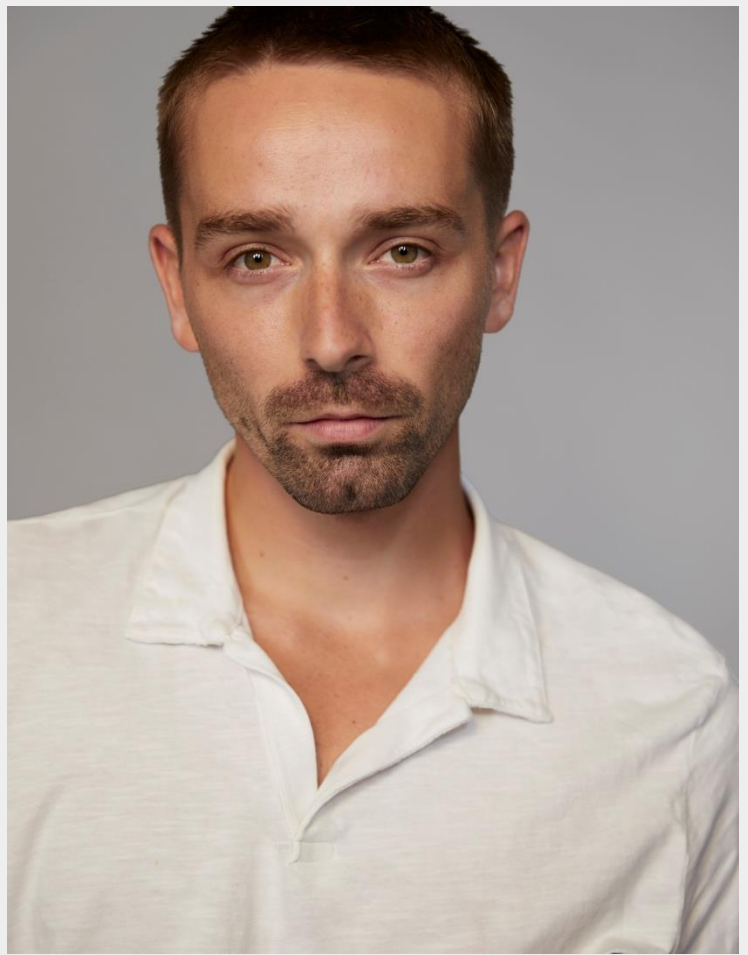
To bring these stories to the stage, we spoke with **Andrew Monaghan** and **Liam Mower**, who created roles that honour those hidden histories. Their reflections offer us a window into the process of embodying characters who lived in secrecy, yet whose experiences still resonate with audiences today.

Follow this [link](#) if you like to know more about what it was like being gay in the 1930's.

Excitingly, for the first time, we're introducing audio versions of these interviews, perfect if you'd like to listen to the extended conversations in full.

Listen to [Liam's audio here](#) and [Andrew's audio here](#).

Liam Mower on Bringing Albert to Life: Playing a gay character in The Midnight Bell



Can you describe your character in *The Midnight Bell* and their journey within the story?

I play the role of Albert, who on paper is described as the “West End chorus boy.” He’s a confident and artistic character, but beneath that, he struggles with loneliness and a deep desire for human and romantic connection. Albert simply wants to be seen for who he truly is. You’ll often find him at the Midnight Bell pub with his best friend Netta, who shares his passions for theatre, arts, and jewellery. Every night they’re together at the same table, creating their own little world.

The *Midnight Bell* is set in 1930s Soho, a time when homosexuality was taboo and even criminalised. How did you prepare to step into the emotional and social reality of a gay character from that era?

The amazing thing with Albert and Frank is that their story wasn’t in Patrick Hamilton’s original plays. So, we had the opportunity to create their arc from scratch. Research is a huge part of Matthew Bourne’s process. We looked deeply into the history of that time, particularly the lives of homosexual people in the 1930s. These people absolutely existed, and we wanted to capture the true essence of their lives, lives that were resilient, but often secretive, difficult and sad. To think someone was criminalised simply for being who they were is unthinkable. Sadly, in some parts of the world, that is still the case. For us, it was vital to represent Albert and Frank truthfully.

How do you think the experience of being gay in the 1930s differs from today, and how did that influence your performance choices?

Because homosexuality was criminalised, people often lived their lives in secrecy. They developed their own subtle ways of communication, signs or gestures that only those “in the know” would recognise. There’s a moment in the show when Frank pulls out a hanky from his pocket. It’s a coded signal to Albert that he wants something more, a conversation or something romantic. That was inspired by the kinds of discreet signals people used at the time. Of course, today it’s very different. We have open spaces, gay bars, and communities where people can meet like-minded others. Back then, everything was underground, hidden in the shadows of Soho. That secrecy shaped how we approached the piece.

How do audiences today respond to the characters and themes, especially younger viewers who may not know the history?

That’s the magic of theatre it educates while it entertains. Every night we see beautiful reactions from audiences, many of whom didn’t expect the story to unfold as it does. Some people aren’t prepared to see two men kiss on stage, and we really kiss, not just a peck. But it’s important that people see this because it reflects real life. These stories and relationships have always existed.

If young men see images of two men holding hands on stage, it can help to normalise those moments and challenge toxic

masculinity. Representation is improving in what we consume and watch, but there’s still more work to be done.

What do you hope viewers take away from your performance in *The Midnight Bell*, particularly in terms of visibility, identity, and empathy?

I hope audiences feel inspired and that they escape reality for a short while, that’s the power of art and theatre.

But I also want people to understand that these stories aren’t just fiction. The plays may be fictional, but the inspiration comes from real people who lived those lives. We’ve always existed, and it’s important that audiences know that when they watch *The Midnight Bell*.



Andy Monaghan shares his experience playing Frank, a gay policeman, in the *Midnight Bell*.



Can you describe your character in *The Midnight Bell* and their journey within the story?

I play Frank, who arrives at the pub as an outsider with no real ties to anyone, but he's immediately drawn to Albert. From the start, you see he's wrestling with his sexuality, for him, their encounters are more about physical release, whereas for Albert it's emotional. That tension really drives their relationship.

When we created the show, Matt asked us, "Why does your character drink?" For me, it became about whether Frank uses alcohol to suppress his feelings or to let them out, and I like playing between those two states depending on the night.

Act One builds to a duet where it feels like Frank and Albert could either fight or kiss, which gives the first half this big, dramatic climax. Then in Act Two, you see Frank relax a little as Albert introduces him to more of the gay world of the 1930s. But everything shifts when it's revealed Frank is a policeman, which devastates Albert and raises the stakes of their relationship.

The Midnight Bell is set in 1930s Soho, a time when homosexuality was taboo and even criminalised. How did you prepare to step into the emotional and social reality of a gay character from that era?

We managed to uncover a couple of documentaries, and what stood out was how, at the time, gay men were often categorised into three “types”: the effeminate “queen,” like Albert, the working-class man who might sleep with both men and women, and the more “respectable” middle-class gay. For Frank, it felt most natural to place him in that working-class space, someone for whom sex was more about release than identity. Because we’re a physical art form, visual references were also helpful. One that influenced me was from Russell T Davies’ series *Cucumber* in 2015. There’s a storyline about a man presenting as straight but struggling with his sexuality, he’s flirty, aggressive, suppressing a lot. Even though it’s the wrong era, that physicality really resonated and gave me something tangible to work with.

How do you think the experience of being gay in the 1930s differs from today, and how did that influence your performance choices?

My own experience of being gay is very different from Frank’s, I came out young, had amazing support from family and friends, and felt comfortable in myself early on. So, the challenge was stepping into a version of a gay man I hadn’t lived, while grounding it in the secrecy and stigma of the 1930s. Everything had to feel hidden, but still clear enough for the audience to

read, especially in busy scenes with multiple storylines.

What I enjoyed was the chance to really create a character. There are elements of me in Frank, of course, but his experience is far removed from mine, which made it feel like a genuine creation. Working opposite different partners, we built contrasting characters with very different life experiences, and that tension is what gives the relationship its richness.



Learning and Development - Refresher

As part of our ongoing Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Access (EDI&A) commitment, you'll have previously taken part in some of our Learning and Development sessions. We know these sessions cover a lot of ground, from practical guidance to thought-provoking discussions, and it can be a lot to take in.

To help keep things fresh in your mind, we've put together a short refresher highlighting some of the key takeaways from those sessions.

Listen to summaries of each session [here](#) or read below.

Trans Allyship – Global Butterflies

- Everyone is on a journey to allyship, and it is important to remember that you don't need to be an expert to be a trans ally. Be open to learning, trying, apologising with grace and making friends on your journey.
- As allies to the trans community, it is important to be showing up in any way you can. You can contact your MP by email ([here is a template letter](#)), donate to trans charities (for example [Trans Solidarity Alliance](#), [Mermaids](#) and many others), check in with friends and colleagues or encourage others to be better allies to the trans community.

Unconscious Bias – Creative Access

- Unconscious bias has huge impacts on workplace culture and affects how we interact with those around us. Microaggressions, a manifestation of unconscious bias can be verbal, behavioural or environmental and generally convey hostile, derogatory or negative attitudes towards stigmatised or culturally marginalised groups.
- Intervening when you recognise microaggressions can be transformative for workplace cultures. It is very important to focus on the behaviour displayed, not the person and to tailor your approach appropriately.
- It is important to manage our own micro-behaviour and continue to identify and challenge our own unconscious bias. Microaffirmations can be a productive and affirming way to build a working culture that is pleasant, inclusive and welcoming for all.

Access Riders – Alexandrina Hemsley

- Access Riders are “a formal document sometimes attached to a contract outlining the accommodations needed to work”. Writing down your access requirements is the first step in communicating them.
- Alexandrina shared that “*access (is) an ecology of needs within an organisation and everyone’s needs matter*”.
- New Adventures has piloted an Access Rider template for The Red Shoes production. It has been created with reference to Alexandrina’s own template. Her workshop is available to watch again for a limited time [here](#). Passcode: K^m8ieL6

Disability Equality – Michèle Taylor - Ramps on the Moon

- Inaccurate, two-dimensional representations of disability in media and culture are still a powerful engine of ableism. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said: “*That is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.*”
- The social model of disability is a much more useful and powerful tool for us to understand ableism across society and the barriers it creates. It states that people are disabled by aspects of the environment they are in, for example the distance of parking from a venue or the lack of audio description, rather than an individual’s medicalised disability as the issue.

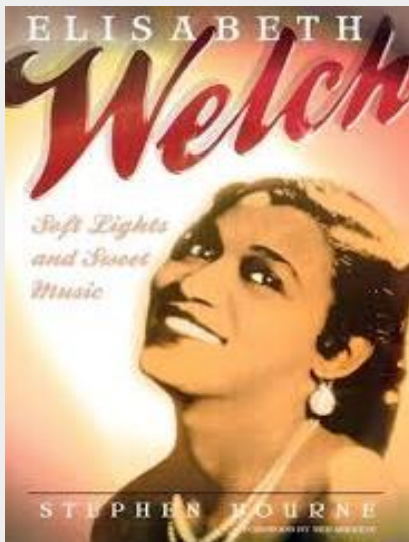
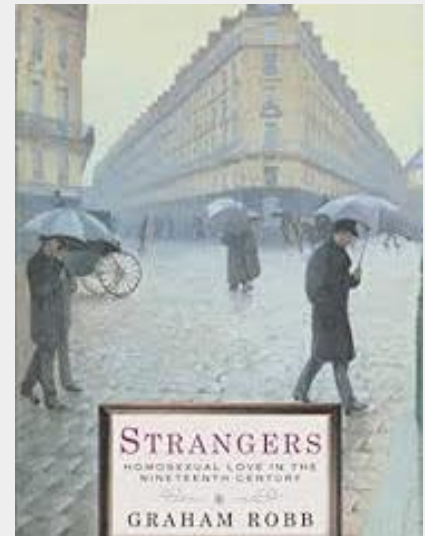
Neurodiversity Awareness – Access All Areas

- Neurodiversity refers to the concept that all brains think and process information differently. It is also used as an umbrella term used to capture autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, dyspraxia, dyslexia, Tourette’s syndrome for example.
- One way in which we can tackle unconscious bias about neurodiversity is to adapt our language and communication.
- By using accessible communication, e.g. keeping instructions simple and specific, and allowing time for processing and responding.
- Use language that is empowering when talking about neurodiversity or a neurodivergent person, to ensure that we are avoiding negative stereotypes or reinforcement.

Book recommendations

Strangers – Graham Robb

"Strangers homosexual love in the nineteenth century" is found in the title of Graham Robb's 2003 non-fiction book, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the 19th Century*. The book reframes the Victorian era not as a time of unyielding persecution for same-sex love, but as a period of surprising tolerance, complex subcultures, and coded communication



Soft Lights and Sweet Music – Stephen Bourne

African American singer and actress, Elisabeth Welch, highlighting her contributions to stage, screen, and radio. The book explores Welch's ability to interpret popular songs, her influence as a cabaret star in London's café society, her work entertaining troops during WWII, and her iconic performances in films like Derek Jarman's [The Tempest](#).

Dance, Disability and Law – Sarah Whatley

This collection is the first book to focus on the intersection of dance, disability, and the law. Bringing together a range of writers from different disciplines, it considers the question of how we value, validate, and speak about diversity in performance practice, with a specific focus on the experience of differently-abled dance artists within the changing world of the arts in the United Kingdom.

