

Welcome to this introduction to **PLANTATION A...**, an experimental sonic theatre work based on Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel *Jealousy*, composed by Edward Jessen and presented by Phaedra Ensemble.

Plantation A... will be performed at the Arnolfini Art Centre in Bristol on the 16th November 2024. The performance will begin at 7.30pm. The show lasts for 70 minutes and there is no interval.

The following introduction includes information about Plantation A..., descriptions of the setting, characters and costumes, and information on how sound is used to convey description and movement, followed by access and contact details for the venue.

Please note this production contains themes of a sexual nature, although these themes are not presented visually. Plantation A... is suitable for audiences aged 16 and above.

Jessen describes this work as “a theatrical puzzle of time and place, one saturated in geometry, and conducted in sound.” His aim was to build an opera not based on watching, but on aurally describing the drama.

In the 1950s, French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet innovated a manner of storytelling focused purely on a drama’s inanimate aspects and on its incidental components. His stories spell out the habits and patterns of people: what they hold, where they sit and how they touch. The plot hides within what we are not told, but is merely inferred through the obsessive detail.

Robbe-Grillet’s breakthrough novel, *Jealousy*, written in 1957, repeatedly visits an assortment of compact scenes, each within the same day and a half window, on adjacent plantations in an undisclosed location. We bounce within this time frame, forwards and back.

From this place, whose surface we explore in aurally-discernible routes and patterns, comes a theatrical puzzle. The sum of these descriptions leads the story’s narrator, a man brought to a

standstill by jealousy, to suspect an infidelity between his wife and their neighbour. What's missing in description is the character whose very name contains an ellipsis, three dots. His wife. We know her only as A...

Beneath these stylistic elements, lies a simple story. A woman, A... and her male neighbour Franck, get delayed by undescribed car trouble on a trip into town. They spend the night at a hotel. Upon their return, her husband is offered nothing in the way of an explanation. For him, it is a presumed seduction, a shared night in a shabby hotel. As jealousy takes hold, we foray into imagination, both his and hers.

The location of Plantation A... is vague, possibly a French colonial spot in a hot climate, in an era that we may or may not recognise as the past. The time, within the day and a half that contains our action, is always now. As such, the set is minimal. Details are delivered in narration or left to our imagination.

At the Arnolfini - we enter the auditorium on the left of the floor level stage area which leads to raked seating in front. Designed as a theatre, the walls are dark and draped in black felt.

The square playing area is backed by a tall metal stand from which three large 65 inch TV screens are displayed in portrait orientation side by side. These screens reference the idea of windows and blinds, a key image from the original novel.

Four musicians, two violinists, a cellist and a keyboard player, are seated unseen behind these screens. They leave their instruments and venture into the action when required.

A simple rectangular white table is positioned end on directly in front of the screens on the right. Chairs, plates, cutlery and glasses are brought out to create a dinner, and then cleared away.

On the left, a beige canvas single camp bed with collapsible metal legs sits at the front of the performance space. Bed linen,

sheets and pillow cases are brought out when A... and Franck are at the hotel.

The part of **A...** is sung by Polish soprano Anna Pych. In her late 20s, she is of medium height and build, with a soft pale round face and curly brown shoulder length hair. She wears a black mid length dress with long sleeves. A... moves gracefully, enigmatically, never too fast, never quite letting the observer know what is happening in her mind. A... wears a metronome as she moves through the action, so her location is identifiable as she has a fast pulsation. A... sings in English, although we may not always understand the language she uses as words and sounds dissolve into decayed, repeated, staccato forms.

Other characters are the undescribed **husband**, whose paranoia and jealousy we absorb through the narration. **Franck**, a neighbour who routinely visits from his adjacent plantation, and is suspected of infidelity with A.... Franck appears for drinks on the veranda where he repeatedly reclines in a designated comfortable chair. Franck also wears a metronome, so can be tracked by his slower pulsation, which

fades out as he departs a scene. Franck's wife, **Christiane**, only exists within conversational references. And finally, there is **a boy**, a mechanised character, who obeys A...’s orders. He brings the lamp, he serves and clears the table, he asks questions but does not wait to hear answers.

These other characters are interchangeably represented on stage by the musicians of the Phaedra Ensemble, and also by dance artist Iris Athanasiadi. The movements of these characters are more perfunctory and mechanical, so as to highlight the central figure of A....

**Darius Thompson** plays the violin, and is more often representing the character of Franck. Darius is an Anglo-Iranian British Londoner in his mid 40s. He is tall, of slight build, with light brown skin and short slightly thinning dark brown hair. He has a long pensive face with sharp features, and dark stubble.

**Paloma Deike** also plays the violin. A white woman in her early 40s, she is of average height and slim build, with mid length

straight brown hair, deep set brown eyes and an oval face with neat features.

**Sergio Serra** plays the cello. In his early 30s, London based Spanish cellist Sergio is tall with an athletic build, olive skin and curly dark mid length brown hair. His oval face holds bright dark eyes and a wide grin framed by a short beard.

**Eliza McCarthy** plays piano and keyboards. A London based American musician in her late 30s, Eliza is of average height with an athletic build, light skin and straight, jaw length dark hair with grey streaks. She has an oval face with high cheekbones and bright blue eyes.

The musicians are wearing all black clothes so as to blend into the background.

Dance artist, **Iris Athanasiadi**, doubles for and mimics A...’s character on stage. She also transforms the set by moving objects when required. This white European performer in her early 30s is slim and short, with light olive skin and long dark

brown wavy hair. Her oval face bears romanesque features, with a wide smile and pale eyes. She wears a similar long sleeved black dress to that worn by A.... Her movements are similarly slow, graceful and enigmatic.

Audio description is naturally integrated into this performance due to the literary structure of the original novel, where details and description of moments are repeatedly delivered to us by the narrator, without any direct statement of what is happening. There is no mention of infidelity, for example. We are presented with a sequence of small events, seemingly low in consequence, all in support of the idea that A... and her neighbour Franck are enjoying an affair directly in front of the undescribed husband.

Our narrator delivers description and detail with the same intensity of focus found within the original novel. The same images are repeated. The car journey, the dinner, A... brushing her hair, A... clutching at a napkin horrified as Franck swats a poisonous centipede. When dinner is served, there are characteristic descriptions of the arrangement of chairs,



positioning of cutlery and consistency of sauces. These scenes are described again and again, but with an almost perpetual slight alteration. We flow from scene to scene. As one image fades, another springs up only to be subsumed by the next.

We assume the narrator is the husband, but this is not stated. As such, the narrator is presented as a collection of male characters who might fill that vacant spot. Borrowing from the sonic world of 1950s hyper-sincere advertising, voices come from the forgery world of post war era product placement. They extol the virtues of luxury foods and bath products, holidays and diversions in a wide and booming American accent. This artificially intelligent inauthentic narration provides an infinite but subtle variation. Images and descriptions may change the length of a dress or the colour of hair.

Practical sounds are used within the performance to convey parts of the action. We can hear ice rattling in glasses when cocktails are served at dinner. We can track the movement of these glasses as they travel, to be repeatedly served and cleared by the boy at a succession of speeds. A swishing and

brushing of the floor lets us know when the boy is mopping. Flaps of sheets and pillow cases can be heard when A... and Franck are in the hotel room.

Through repetition, we learn that objects have sustained tones associated with them. When we assemble them, these objects form a musical chord, for example, the soft tones of bed, mattress, pillow and sheet. A sonic language of people and things. These connected sounds and tones are left to focus our sense of the drama, in the absence of any real visual cues.

Throughout the performance black and white images are played out on the TV screens behind the performers. These images are of elements described in the narration but do not appear at the same time. They appear before and after, in countless variations, sometimes blurred, sometimes in vignette. These unsynchronised appearances promote the notion that all things are happening now.

The video content includes: a woman, dressed in black, methodically brushing her hair; a kerosene lamp on a veranda's

dining table, as varied waiters appear and change the table setting; a spinning clock-face with all the clock numbers substituted with the word “now”; canvas chairs by a small drinks table, with a constantly changing background; handwritten text of narrated statements, appearing and receding; wooden blinds slowly lowering; tire tracks in soil; a pencil drawing, showing the layout of the plantation house; and circling aerial views of the plantation’s banana trees from varying heights.

The imagery looks unnatural and slightly ‘affected’ or ‘false’, as though seen through distorted dreams.

Lighting is used to isolate and foreground central elements within the action, echoing the intention of the video content. Much of it is tightly focused on the central characters. Rotations occur around the dinner table. There are sharp cuts accentuated by subsequent slow rises and fades, focusing on the images repeatedly described by the narrator.

The sound, lighting, action and video content all swirl together, bouncing around within time and place, to plunge us into the intensity of the narrator's jealousy.

The access information for the **Arnolfini Art Centre** can be found at [arnolfini.org.uk/plan-your-visit/accessibility](https://arnolfini.org.uk/plan-your-visit/accessibility) . Or by contacting the Centre by phone on 0117 917 2300 or by email at [enquiries@arnolfini.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@arnolfini.org.uk) .

Concession tickets are available for this performance at £8. Please let the centre know if you have any particular seating requirements.

The venue address is 16 Narrow Quay, Bristol, BS1 4QA.

The entrance to the Centre is step free and opens directly onto the cobbled street alongside the harbour. This entrance can be found on the navigation app what.3.words at [///cycle.valid.terms](https://www.what3words.com/#!/en/arnolfini-art-centre) . Please contact the Centre on 0117 917 2300 with any further enquiries.

The Creative team for Plantation A... is

Composer, Edward Jessen and Projection Designer, Jamie Hamilton.

Set Design is by Victoria Jessen-Pike, with Lighting Design by Zeynep Kepekli.

Audio Description and Access Consultant is Holly Thomas.

And the Producer is Emily Granozio.

This introduction was written by Charlotte Whitten.