THIS HOUSE

Saturday 5th May @ 2.30

Good evening and welcome to the Theatre Royal Plymouth for this combined National and Chichester Festival Theatre's production of the politically thrilling epic, This House. The play written by James Graham, presented by Jonathan Church productions and Headlong and directed by Jeremy Herrin.

I am Veryan and will be describing the first act with my colleague, Penny describing Act two. The play runs for two hours forty-five minutes with one twenty-minute interval.

This House was originally written in response to the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. The play takes us back to the Labour governments of 1974-79, which – first in a hung parliament then with the slenderest, fluctuating majority – faced a daily struggle for survival.  Graham's stroke of genius is to set the piece in the engine rooms of Westminster: aka the offices of the Labour whips and their Tory counterparts as they wheel and deal to secure the votes of the “odds and sods”, the Liberals, Northern Irish, and Scottish Nationals.  Graham's play is richly alive to the grotesque and comic absurdity of a voting situation so tight that sick and dying backbenchers in wheelchairs and oxygen masks have to be hauled in and dragged through the lobbies for divisions; and the time-honoured convention of “pairing” absentee members is shattered when backstairs relations between the rival parties break down.

The author, Graham is still only in his early 30s and yet can already boast a string of astute and impressive pieces – from Eden's Empire, an early work about the Suez crisis, to the television play Coalitionwhich focused, with great empathy and even-handedness, on the events that took place during those five frantic days in May 2010.  One of Graham's great virtues is that he can be very funny, without ever stooping to easy cynicism, and in this play, he manages to pack it all in - the fake disappearance of Labour's John Stonehouse, the repercussions of Michael Heseltine seizing the mace that symbolises parliamentary order and the disruptive effect of the 1975 referendum on membership of the European Union.

**Sets, Scenery and Characters**

The play takes place in the Palace of Westminster, the main locations being the

Government Whips office and the Opposition Whips Office, located either side of the Member's lobby, all of which are set within the imposing high ceilinged Commons Chamber. This encompasses the entire stage and is represented by a ten-foot high curving oak panelled wall at the back of the stage. Above the wall there is a railed gallery accessed by an iron spiral staircase centre right. There is a wide opening in the centre of the panelling, most of the time it is filled by the Speakers majestic and throne-like, chair with its wide green seat, but at others it becomes a variety of different places: first a cleaners cupboard filled with mops, brooms, clothes and a bucket; then it represents the crypt with a dimly lit altar complete with cross and flickering candles, then again, when elderly members are unfortunate enough to succumb, it becomes a portal through which they pass into the next world, when it appears like a dark tunnel with a glowing light in the distance suffused by a billowing mist. Either side of this opening are two doorways with yet another on the far right. On the left of the opening, recessed into the panelling, is a members' bar, which when not in use is covered by shutters. On ether side of the chamber are three tiers of green leather benches, where members of the audience sit as if in the Commons. Situated in front of the benches are the Whips Offices - these are represented by rows of utilitarian mahogany desks with swivel desk chairs. There are file boxes and telephones on most surfaces and at times a blackboard is brought into the Government office on the left. On this has two chalked columns, headed - Majority. The left hand column is titled Lab 318 with the tory column on the right with the total 278. Under Tory are the other parties, Lib, Scots, Irish Welsh and others.

In the middle of the green-carpeted floor are a small table with a tape recorder beneath; a record player, and a stack of 78 records. Two chairs are placed either side. Six overhead lights illuminated the Chamber.

When the action moves to Westminster Hall, stained glass windows appear on the wall behind the gallery with illuminated carved angles set at intervals around the walls. And yet other locations include a small anteroom behind the famous Big Ben clock face - this looms high above the gallery, and then briefly in Act two, there is a scene in the dark cellars where the Guy Fawkes plot took place.

Situated on the right side of the gallery are three musicians, a drummer and two guitarists. The play the music of Stephen Warbeck and are occasionally joined by Members of the house for a sing along.

The play begins with the lights coming up on the three musicians on the right of the raised gallery -Labour whip, **Michael Cocks** is also there standing with his back to us as he faces the huge clock face of Big Ben. Thus starts a long prologue with the speaker, dressed in a flowing black gown and shoulder-length grey wig, announcing the names of the members as they process, in a rather disorderly manner, into the Member's lobby. The action then moves seamlessly to the Government Whips Office where we meet **Jack Weatherill,** the Conservative Deputy Whip - he's a tall good-looking man in his early fifties with a thick shock of jaw-length auburn hair sharply dressed in a dark three piece suit, shirt, tie, a silk handkerchief in his breast pocket and polished black shoes. We also meet the Conservative Chief Whip **Humphrey Atkins**, a tall and distinguished looking older man with grey balding hair and glasses. He also wears an impeccable three-piece suit, with shirt and old school tie. The men are clearing out their desks, putting everything into black file boxes.

Next we encounter Labour Chief Whip, Cockney geezer, **Bob Mellish**. He is in the Opposition Whips Office, on the left, where and he too has begun packing up his desk, although when we first see him he is more engaged in eating sausage and chips from their newspaper wrappings. Mellish is a Londoner in his 50s with thick unruly hair who wears a brown tweed suit with shirt, red tie and brown shoes.

Here we also meet the Deputy labour Whip, **Walter Harrison**, a Yorkshire man in his 50s - he wears a grey suit and has iron -grey hair.

The action then moves to the Members' Lobby and onto the clock tower where the clockmaker and Cocks are in discussion.

The prologue ends and scene one begins - it is afternoon in the Government Whips Office where the Labour Members are assembled, most of them wearing large red rosettes on their lapels. During this scene we meet the remaining two Labour Whips, a middle aged Yorkshire man called **Joe Harper,** who initially appears in full state opening of parliament regalia and the only female Whip - **Ann Taylor.** Taylor, from Lancashire, is a woman in her late twenties with an attractive face framed by a shoulder length bob of dark brown hair. She is elegantly dressed a bright blue suit with a pencil skirt, multi coloured blouse and high heeled shoes. She is stylish and wears flattering make up. She only really wears the jacket during the second act.

The Labour Members tend to be more casual in their dress than the Conservatives with open tweed jackets and coloured shirts, but they nearly always sport a red tie.

When the action moves to the Opposition Whips office we meet the last of the principle characters, **Fred Sylvester,** the youngest of the Conservative Whips. Sylvester is a good-looking, fair-haired Londoner in his thirties' and of slight build compared to Atkins and Weatherill, but equally stylish in his immaculate dark three-piece suit.

Later on we meet the rather dour **Audrey Wise,** an intransigent member of the awkward squad who insists upon putting Socialist principles before Labour party discipline and votes against proposed spending cuts. She strides in wearing a sensible if somewhat dowdy calf length dress with her frizzy shoulder-length hair hanging un-styled around her make-up-free face.

For all their rivalry, there's an almost chivalrous bond and a humorously grudging respect between the Labour deputy whip, Walter Harrison and his opposite number, Jack Weatherill,

The speaker appears in the background of many scenes, sometimes sprawled in his chair or observing proceedings from half way up the spiral staircase from where he announces each of the members as they arrive - he wears a black gown and shoulder length grey wig. The clerk also wears a gown and short clerical wig.

There will be no programme notes before Act two as the story and action continues from where it left off at the end of Act one. I should however warn you that there will be a loud noise during the second half as a helicopter arrives.

The scenes changes are rapid and overlapping, which will make it difficult to describe without talking over dialogue, but we will do our best to keep you informed.

**The principle characters' and cast**

**Labour Whips:**

Bob Mellish - Martin Marquez

Walter Harrison - James Gaddas

Michael Cocks - Tony Turner

Joe Harper - David Hounslow

Ann Taylor -Natalie Grady

**Tory Whips**

Humphrey Atkins - William Chubb

Jack Weatherill - Matthew Pidgeon

Fred Silvester - Giles Cooper

The rest of the large cast who play a colourful host of MPs and Whips includes;

**Stephen Critchlow** (playing MP's for Bromsgrove/Abingdon/Liverpool Edge Hill/Paisley/Fermanagh)

**Ian Houghton** (playing MP's for Armagh, Ambulance Man, Ensemble)

**Marcus Hutton** (Ensemble)

**Harry Kershaw** (playing MP's for Paddington South/Chelmsford/South Ayrshire/Henley/Marioneth /Coventry North West/Rushcliffe/Perry Barr)

**Louise Ludgate** (playing MP's for Rochester & Chatham/Welwyn & Hatfield/Coventry South West/Ilford North/Lady Batley)

**Geoffrey Lumb** (playing MP's for Clockmaker/Peebles/Redditch/Stirlingshire West/Clerk)

**Nicholas Lumley** (playing MP's for Oxshott/Belfast West/St Helens)

**Miles Richardson** (Speaker Act I/Mansfield/Sergeant at Arms Act II/West Lothian & Ensemble)

**Orlando Wells** (Walsall North/Plymouth Sutton/Serjeant at Arms Act I/Speaker Act II/Caernarfon/Clerk & Ensemble)

**Charlotte Worthing** (Ensemble)

**The Musicians** are Tom Green, Johnny Wells, Nadine Lee

Directed by Jeremy Herrin with Jonathan O’Boyle, the production is designed by Rae Smith with lighting design by Paule Constable and Ben Pickersgill on tour, music by Stephen Warbeck, choreography by Scott Ambler and sound by Ian Dickinson.