

West 11

by Paul Bradshaw

West 11 is the story of a divided area. Focusing on the extremes of the two classes and how they have managed to coexist just a stones throw away from each other for over 200 years. Whilst their postcodes are the same their lifestyles couldn't be more different. In the play we meet two characters that represent the voices of these classes and they reveal to us that this divide has been ingrained within the very streets.

M (male) is a older Middle Class resident. *50's/60's*

W (female) is a younger Working class resident. *30's/40's*

The stage is bare apart from two identical chairs.

Throughout the piece the characters will speak directly to the audience until the very end when the two classes meet briefly.

M: Welcome to Kensington. 5 Square miles of London just west of the centre.

W: It's the richest borough in the country. It has the richest residents, the richest homes, there's even a palace.

M: But there is another side to Kensington too. A side that until recently no one really talked about.

W: This side.

Beat

M: I love West 11.

W: I love West 11.

M: It's clean, it's tidy. It's home.

W: It's friends, it's community. It's home.

M: When we moved in it wasn't exactly paradise, but over the years the area has really changed.

W: I was born and raised on the Lancaster Estate.

M: Don't get me wrong, there are still some dodgy parts.

W: Never lived anywhere else. This is where I grew up and this is where my heart is and this is where I always wanna be.

M: But our side is just, well...lovely.

W: There's such a distinct divide. Us and them. Inequality is nothing new though. North Kensington has been divided for nearly 200 years.

M: The old wall that separated the Victorian slums from our side still stands, well some of it does.

W: It's in the very fabric of our streets.

M: It's fascinating, the history. I love it.

W: As well as the Victorian take on the Berlin Wall there is an invisible boundary. On that side, those that can afford everything and on this, those that can't.

M: I've seen photos of what the slums were like, just horrid really. Pigs, humans, chickens, all under one roof. It looked filthy. Like something from a third world country, in London. Just crazy.

W: They can't even imagine what it's like on our side.

M: I can't even imagine how it must've been to live in those conditions.

W: It just makes you wonder. The rich over there and the poor here...

M: Just terrible.

W: It hasn't really changed. The stigma is still there. Instead of pig shit we're now up to our elbows in debt, red ants, black ants, cockroaches, the lot!

M: Obviously it's nowhere near as extreme as then.

W: The difference is just as extreme. It's almost surrealistic. Y'know people have got clubs and swimming pools underneath their houses.

M: Houses around here can fetch upwards of 4 or 5 million pounds, it's mad!

W: Meanwhile on our side I know families struggling to eat, having to use food banks! It's fucked up.

M: What was once the Dickensian shit hole of London has now got the golden postcode; West 11. They're like, 'that will sell' and they do! I wish I'd invested in other property when I was younger really.

W: We're sitting on a pot of gold, West 11 is worth so much money to them, y'know I just think, they don't, well, they don't really want social housing

in this area! They know they can make shitloads of money so they want to get rid of us.

M: Some of the blocks are just such an eye sore. They just loom over us. I don't know why they don't spruce them up or something. Some flowers or a lick of paint or something, wouldn't take much to fix.

W: If something is broken, a window smashed or something, you have to go down to the council all guns blazing for anything to be done. 3, 4, 5, 6 times for something to be done. It shouldn't be like that.

M: I guess the council doesn't bother spending because they know it'd be a state again in a few weeks.

W: They get everything they want and we're like second class citizens. There's no money put into anything, to even just a community or social building. We've been, just...left.

M: It's a shame really.

W: It's a shame really.

M: They're so lucky to live in West 11.

W: They're so lucky to live in West 11.

Beat

W: What the rich don't understand is that all those big white fronted houses in Notting Hill used to be ours. For decades, they were social housing.

M: I suppose it's quite strange to think of this house being occupied in the way it was before we got our hands on it.

W: In the 50's there'd be families of 8 living in 2 rooms that were riddled with vermin and lice.

M: Dozens of people, full to the rafters.

W: We were on the very top floor so for Gran to go to the toilet she'd have to go down two flights of stairs, across the landing, past the cooker that was shared with all the other families and through someone else's room just for a piss.

M: All the stairs are a bit much for me sometimes.

W: I couldn't do it! I don't know how they did it?! The strongness of that generation, they had to do it.

M: Got to keep the legs moving though! Keep the strength!

W: And that's why they've passed on a, y'know, a strength, a hope, down the genes. We've learnt to be survivors and no matter how much they tear us down we will always get up and fight.

M: God I'd hate to sound like I'm a moaner. Now, my life is pretty easy.

W: No one's family had it easy. They'd squeeze people so hard, they make it so hard for us at the bottom that all we can really focus on is keeping a roof over our head.

M: I've got a wonderful roof over my head.

W: And that's the be all and end all innit, just keep our roof over our head. And keep our children out of trouble.

M: The kids are all doing well.

W: The people around here work hard.

M: I wished they'd work a little harder.

W: Really hard.

M: They've never had to work very hard, growing up with parents that are successful can do that I suppose.

W: Always working.

M: I guess they *are* a bit lazy.

W: No time to relax. Working three jobs, always busy.

M: London can be a bit overwhelming for them, nowhere to relax, too busy.

W: I don't remember the last time I went on holiday, can't afford it. Not even a weekend in the country

- M: We always used to take them to the countryside when they were little. To give them a taste of my childhood.
- W: It'd probably be too quiet in the countryside anyway, I'd get nervous, like I was gonna get murdered and no-one would hear me scream or something.
- M: I do miss the greenery, the fresh air and the smell.
- W: I'd miss the busy London sounds.
- M: Growing up in the Surrey countryside was idyllic.
- W: Growing up in the 70's in Notting Hill was just perfect.
- M: So different to the hustle and bustle of busy London.
- W: I wouldn't change it one bit.
- M: Wouldn't change my childhood for the world, it was...picturesque.
- W: Everyone was friendly, you all played out on the street, your front doors was open, y'know, nobody had keys and you didn't lock up and that!
- M: Weekends by the seaside with the family.
- W: There'd be about 6 families per house. We were all so close. A proper community.
- M: The good old days.
- W: The good old days? Ha, well in those days in was the good old days but when you look back at it, it's wasn't alright, it wasn't! All the houses were still overcrowded, two rooms per family and one shared bathroom.
- M: There was just so much space to roam and explore in the country.
- W: Growing up and living in that you didn't know any different, y'know, you made the most of what you had. But looking back, they were dumps! Real dumps. *(laughing)* As much as I loved it, they were rank, they were rank!
- M: When we found the house is was rank! It needed a lot of work. But we saw it's potential so we put in an offer of the equivalent of £300,000 for

the whole building and it was accepted very quickly.

W: They're unrecognisable now.

M: When I told Mum I was moving to Notting Hill she thought I was mad. She'd lived in London in the 50's and Notting Hill had such a bad reputation that she thought we'd end up dead.

W: I'd die to have a nosie around inside one of them.

M: But we were young and thought we knew better. It's definitely paid off now, West 11 is the golden postcode. Mum's don't always know best after all.

W: I wonder what Mum would've made of it all?

M: We basically had to start from scratch. Rip out all the insides and start over.

W: Every one of the houses were being gutted and converted back into single houses.

M: It was pretty run down, the basement level was very damp. It was dark, damp and the mushrooms loved it.

W: Our flats that we'd grown up in were soon gonna be occupied by rich banker men and politicians, while we were in council blocks just a stones throw away.

M: I think we fitted the profile of a lot of the people that moved in at the time. We were not rich in the same way as people moving in now are rich and we were young and we were bringing up our family.

W: Don't get me wrong. When we first moved into the new flats on the Lancaster Estate they were like a palace, perfect to bring up a family. Didn't need anything doing to them.

M: We gradually started doing up the house and restoring it into the single house it's architect had imagined.

W: We'd waited years for better housing and it was great, at first. But the sheen of the Magnolia walls didn't last very long to be honest.

M: It was a huge challenge, it took a fair few years and lots of hard work

but it was so worth it.

W: Within the first year things started breaking and going wrong.

M: So worth it, especially financially.

W: There's no money, that's the problem. The council don't want to spend any money on the likes of us. We're not worth the investment.

M: Such an investment! We've not had it valued for a while but it wasn't short off a million at the end of the 90's.

W: The 90's then changed the whole area. Everyone wanted to be in Notting Hill. The stars started moving in and it became more, like, the 'place to be'.

M: I loved the 90's, it really transformed the area.

W: Don't get me wrong, it was fun! All the art galleries on the Portobello Road...

M: The Portobello Road

W: And you'd just go and be like "oh, ha, yah, yah, yah" and "look at that one" and hobnob just to get the free wine, let's be honest!

M: At every exhibition there were canapés and wine.

W: It wasn't like I was arty or, y'know, like, you just went and everyone went, it was 'the thing'.

M: There was so much to do, right on your doorstep. Galleries, delis, and so many great bars.

W: All the pubs started to change and everyone used to go and drink, y'know, erm, Sol! Do you remember Sol? With a piece of lime.

M: I think I drank my body weight in Sol most weekends.

W: It all just changed, the 90's changed the whole area. It was good fun, I'm not saying we didn't have fun.

M: We had so much fun.

W: But that's when it became, erm, more noticeable that, there was an, um, inequality? Because all of a sudden you were seeing people that were right next to you that had more than you.

M: There were still some dodgy people around. Friends had their watches nicked, y'know, car windows smashed and our neighbours were bloody burgled.

W: I'm sure they used to flash it in your face to make you jealous or something.

M: But as long as you kept your wits about you and didn't walk down any dark alleyways at night you were always safe.

W: You could just see it all changing. You'd go out and y'know, our shops became *delis*.

M: Everything you needed on your doorstep.

W: Our pubs became *bars*. It slowly was like, wait, hold on a minute! And then BAM - a pub became a fucking Waitrose!

M: That little Waitrose is so handy.

W: You realise that everything is becoming for...not for us anymore, for the people that have moved in. For them.

M: Outsiders might say the area became 'gentrified'.

W: Gentrification.

M: But I think gentrification is not always a bad word. Sometimes it's great for an area to get a boost.

W: It ruined things around here.

M: It's done wonders for around here.

W: We've even got a fucking film! 'Notting Hill' pfft.

M: Well, um, my wife always said I was like Hugh Grant in my prime.

W: Only seen it once, it's absolute bollocks if you ask me.

M: She must really love me to tell me those lies.

W: They've missed out all the best bits of West 11.

M: You still get the odd tourist asking to see Hugh Grant's door.

W: The best people.

M: I don't even know where it is.

W: The real West 11.

Pause

W: It's a joke.

M: Funny really.

Beat

W: Nowadays I get people walking passed me and look at me like I'm lost, but I'm like 'alright love? No, it's alright. You can walk down my road'. Sometimes I feel like I shouldn't walk down this road, y'know people probably walk passed me and look at me and they're like 'she's not wearing Prada'. Probably everyone that lives here, would never had thought I used to live here, let's be honest. Because they probably don't know that it was social housing back in the day.

She looks up at a house.

W: This is my home, it's the first address I remember learning. You payed for a room, there was four of us in the bedroom, my grandma, grandad, my mum and me. And yeah, wow, look at it now. It looks like it's just one house. Wow. I've walked past this and dreamt about buying this for years, and I will, one day I will, one day. *(she notices a man in the window).*

W: *(to him)* Oh sorry, I was just, looking. I'm from here, as a child. I'm sorry.

Man exits house and the actors interact for the first time.

W: So sorry, sir. I used to, erm, we used to, er, my grandmother, grandfather, mother and myself used live here. We used to rent one room.

M: Oh, yes...

W: *(pointing up at the house)* So this was the kitchen and that window was our room. Sorry. I was just, just, looking at it. I always say that when I win the lottery I'd love to buy back / my erm, my house

M: Well, you can't buy it because I love it.

W: Oh, well that's good, I'm glad you love it. That's alright then. As long as you love it.

M: We've had several people who have lived here in the past.

W: Yeah, yeah...

M: Oh, well I've been here, for well, an awfully long time.

W: Yeah. Well, I'm still in the area, it's such a lovely area.

M: Lovely area.

W: Well, that's good, I'm so glad you love it.

M: Well, you're welcome anytime...

W: Thank you very much, thank you.

M: Well, good afternoon.

W: Afternoon.

M exits

W: I feel like, I'm trespassing. But, he was very lovely, a lovely man.
(pause) It is two worlds. Always has been. These people wouldn't come over to our side. It's sad that they're missing out on such lovely people. They don't want to join our community. They've moved into our community but no one wants to join it. It's really, er, it's really sad.

Lights fade to black