

**EDUCATION & RESOURCES PACK**

# **LIFE OF PI**



**MEET THE TEAM**

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This pack includes interviews with members of the creative team. Students and teachers can use these interviews to prepare for, and respond to, their visit to the production.  
(Please note reference is made to key scenes in the plot.)

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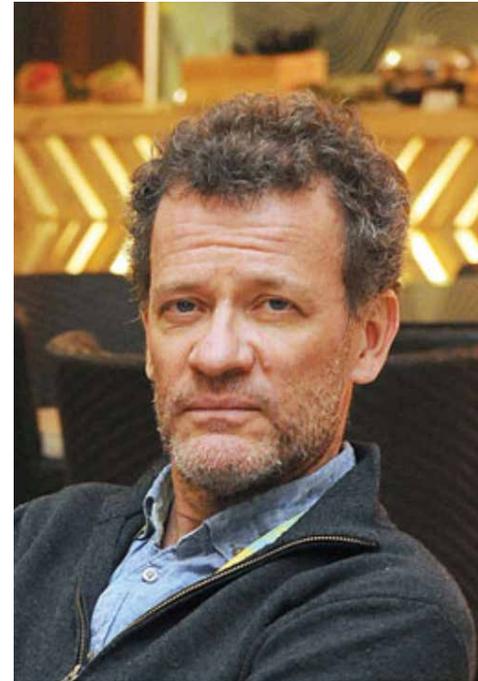
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# YANN MARTEL AUTHOR

Yann spoke to us from his home in Canada and explained his process of writing the novel.



## Q Can you start by telling us about the novel?

*Life of Pi* is a literary novel which means that it follows fewer rules than genre-based fiction. With romances, murder mysteries, thrillers etc, there are rules and conventions. However, with literary fiction the lack of rules means that it's more personal, but it can make the work harder to read. Literary novels plumb the depths of life. I'd say that *Life of Pi* has elements of adventure and is also highly philosophical. It has religious elements, and it's set in an exotic settings. The novel is an exploration of particular questions, and each of my novels has explored one particular question I was interested in. Here it's religious faith.

## Q What was the writing process for Life of Pi?

In my 30s I travelled through India, and for the first time was puzzled by religion: in an age of science and technology and the triumph of these, I was intrigued that something as obscure as religion would endure. I realised that art and religion operate in similar ways. Stories are important in both literature and religious belief.

The novel took 4 ½ years to write in total and the first 2½ were taken up with research. That ranged from looking at animal behaviour, biology, reading castaway stories, and finding information about survival at sea. I explored a whole range of subjects. I wrote copious notes, jotted down quotations, and also travelled extensively in India. I did on the ground research, studying Indian English and really getting India under my skin. I also spent a lot of time in the library at McGill University whilst I was living in Montreal doing more theoretical research.

There are three broad strands of research – zoology, religion and survival at sea - and I realised it was way too much to fit all of it into the novel. In the actual chapters, I would only use a fraction of that research but I gained a huge amount of knowledge and could definitely impersonate a zookeeper in my mind!

The process generated about 700 pages of notes on a Word document, which also consisted of ideas for scenes, dialogue, observations and ideas. Once I had all of that information, printed on paper, I then used scissors to cut up all the research and put it in different envelopes, depending on where they belong in the novel. The first envelope was called 'Author's Note', the second envelope was the first chapter when Pi is in Canada. What was in the envelopes was the backbone of each chapter and then I'd flesh out that chapter.

The novel has a feel of gritty realism, so I needed a really thorough knowledge of the topics.

You have to do your research. Then you reach a point where you can close your eyes and imagine yourself in the skin of the character.

#### **Q What are the themes of the novel?**

*Life of Pi* explores the idea that life is an interpretation. It's not just about facts, but how you interpret those facts. You can have one set of facts that can generate two entirely different stories.

This is key in *Life of Pi*. At the heart of *Life of Pi* is this notion that a ship sinks and after 227 days a boy arrives on the coast of Mexico in a life boat. These facts are incontrovertible, but what happens in between is not. One is a story with animals, one is a story without.

In the theatrical adaptation, both stories are told equally and the audience is free to choose between those two stories. Do you want to live a life that cleaves most to reason and facts, or one that takes greater leaps of the imagination? It's the latter version where art and religion become important notions.

When I wrote the book, I didn't concern myself with what the book might mean to people. I had a notion of two stories based on the same set of facts and the same number of characters.

When it was unexpectedly successful, I was often asked about the meaning of Richard Parker. Initially I drew a blank! Then all these perceptive readers were giving me answers which I then started feeding to my next group of readers! Broadly speaking there are two stories told in parallel and the characters are paired off. The zebra is the Taiwanese sailor, the orangutan is paired off with Pi's mother, the hyena is the French cook, and then the pair we have left is Richard Parker and Pi. They symbolically echo each other. Both share a dogged desire to live, and keep living, and both do what needs doing to achieve that.

**Q What interpretations have people offered about the meaning of the novel?**

Some interpretations would say that the tiger is a figment of Pi's imagination and symbolises his determination to survive. In this version, he can't accept what he did – that he killed the cook who killed his mother. He survived, but at what cost? Perhaps it is all a big lie he told himself to make an ugly truth acceptable. Some people say the tiger could be God - at one point Pi says he couldn't have survived without the tiger; it gave him a reason to live. Many people would say that about the Divine – it's something that keeps Pi alive. The Old Testament talks of the fear of God, so Pi is both in love with and frightened of Richard Parker. One person even said the relationship between Richard Parker and Pi is a metaphor for marriage! The most obvious interpretation is that it's a parallel – Richard Parker is a parallel creature to Pi.

**Q The description of Richard Parker is detailed. Was it difficult to write?**

I don't remember it being difficult to write. There were other sections that were much more difficult. Words are not good at descriptions, particularly if things are unfamiliar. My Chinese translator didn't know what a sea anchor is – I spent a lot of time trying to explain. Most people know tigers, they can visualise one and you just fill in the outline.

What's interesting about writing is that the things you'd expect to be difficult, aren't, but the utterly mundane is very difficult. I remember in the Author's Note at the very end when he thanks various people including the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Japanese Embassy was really hard. I remember really struggling even though it's completely unimportant whilst the crucial stuff seemed to come quite easily. The tiger description is vaguely theatrical. Tiger stripes are like our fingerprints, they're totally unique – no two faces are identical, very much like Chinese theatrical make up.

A good example of the difference between writing in a novel and creating that story for the stage is the sinking of the Tsimtsum. To me, that was a way of Pi getting to the lifeboat with the tiger. So I simply wrote, "The ship sank" and described a "monstrous metallic burp" but then it quickly moves on to how that feels for Pi, and his emotional reaction.

For a film maker this moment is a God send! It's quite a beautiful scene in the film and those three words become an entire scene that's forcefully told. However Pi's dialogue to Richard Parker just vanishes. What is strong in one medium is not in another. All the mental rumination about religion is lost in the film and sometimes in the play because of the visual component of both of those two forms. They are inherently visual media.

**Q What are the challenges of adapting a novel for stage or screen?**

Writing a book involves writing and rewriting, and then your editor tells you to rewrite even more! Books take a long time to write but they tend to be a successful form of storytelling. The challenge for the adaption of any novel is that you necessarily lose something moving from one to another. Each medium has its own strengths and weaknesses and you write for that specific medium.

Adaptation is difficult. You gain a lot though – the immediacy of the actors, for example. You gain the fact that the audience has already agreed to suspend their disbelief (whereas cinema needs lots of special effects to achieve the same effect). People who've read the book will recognise novel in the play or movie. They'll fill in any holes that might be in the adaptation. Adaptation just tells a story in a different way. Some people are natural readers, who enjoy the quiet of reading, and when you read a book you're sort of creating a little movie in your mind. That's very empowering, you are the director, the designer etc. Others prefer visual and aural storytelling, and the play or cinema provides the social experience too. I don't need to be possessive!

**Q How were you involved in creating the adaptation?**

I assisted at one week of workshopping, but I stepped back very quickly because I immediately recognised this was not my language. I can understand the language of prose and novel writing, but the language of theatre is a different instrument.

Adaptation within the rehearsal room is very collaborative, whereas I'm used to writing in the quiet of my mind. What works on the page doesn't necessarily work on the stage, and vice versa. Therefore you have to let go, and trust the artists who are adapting the story because they know what they're doing and it's their artistic risk.

I had a lunchtime conversation with Lolita Chakrabarti (playwright) – we discussed the novel in detail and I told her what the novel is about for me. Of course, everyone has their own interpretation and Lolita has done a great job. She periodically showed me drafts, but I would only guide with small things such as 'this doesn't sound like something Pi would say' but nothing much more than that.

I remember giving the odd little perspective. For example, there were discussions about the other people who would arrive when Pi reaches Mexico. But those people can't see the tiger – the only person who can witness Richard Parker is Pi.

If someone is adapting one's work, we must trust the risk taking of the adapters – the more freedom they have, the better the adaptation will be.

*Life of Pi* is a tricky story to adapt because the mistake most people make is that they have to get to the boy in the lifeboat in the Pacific as quickly as possible. In fact, not much happens once he's on the boat – it's a domestic drama and there's a guy and his big cat, he periodically feeds his big cat, and he loses weight. The real tension comes at the end in the hospital in Mexico when you realise there are two stories being told.

**Q What advice can you give to anyone who's adapting a novel into a play?**

Well, what I'd say is when adapting a novel or a story, you need to look where its heart lies. What is the actual moving force?

That's the same with any book – you need to ask what it's really about. Some people get caught up in what's loudest and flashiest which isn't necessarily where the story is at. Go deeper and see what's really driving the story.

# LOLITA CHAKRABARTI PLAYWRIGHT

Lolita explained the process of adapting *Life of Pi* for the stage.



**Q When did you first read the novel and how did you get involved with the production?**

I read the book in 2002 when it first came out and I loved it. Of course, I had no idea that I would eventually be asked to adapt it! Before I was commissioned for this project, I had adapted a film into a radio play but I hadn't really adapted much before!

**Q It must have been a daunting process! What was your starting point?**

My first port of call is always the personal connection to material. I didn't understand *Life of Pi* but that was what was so mysterious: I loved the way that Yann kept us in that space that even at the end you're wondering what happened. I didn't feel cheated by the book at all, even with this ambiguity.

When I started the adaptation process I took a highlighter and I highlighted all the bits I thought were interesting within the story. This included the dialogue and the dramatic moments for example. It's a very personal relationship between you and the piece and so it can seem a little random and chaotic at that stage.

By chance I found an online pdf of the book so I cut and pasted all the different sections under headlines: God, family, zoo, loss, Richard Parker and so on. The basic story is obvious. In the book there's a whole section involving a journalist, but that didn't interest me at all. I particularly loved the Japanese shipping people and I knew Mr Okamoto and his junior served the same dramatic purpose. I wanted to put more women in the play so I took the essence of the Japanese shipping merchants and used their essence, and teamed Mr Okamoto with Lulu Chen.

I like to be left alone with the first draft, I don't want anyone to interfere! Your relationship with the material is so delicate at the beginning that any other voices or input will get in the way!

**Q Is this a linear process, or does it take place over different periods of time?**

An important part of writing is when you leave it alone, you let it filter like sand and it starts to settle. It starts to land in places you wouldn't expect.

There was an eight month period between the commission and writing the play. I did do some research, but it wasn't a research heavy script. I looked at animal behaviour, zoos and the political situation in India at the time the story is set as I didn't previously understand it, but that was about it.

Religion is a very difficult thing to write about: I spent a lot of time looking at it and thinking about it. Interestingly I was in a production of Hamlet and I started writing *Life of Pi* during that time. I was surrounded by amazing language and two intriguing protagonists in Hamlet and Pi. Pi isn't depressed at all, but he is trying to survive. That was an interesting opposition to consider.

**Q Is there one way of interpreting the story?**

I spoke to Yann when I was commissioned to adapt his novel. I met him in London and my first question to him was "*what really happened?*" He said, "*if you lose the story of the people that's fine, the real story is the animals.*" There is no single answer to what it's about! We all come out thinking what we think...I have my version of what I think, but I haven't put it into the play. In Yann's mind there is no definitive answer of what it's about.

**Q What are the key challenges of adapting Life of Pi?**

One of the main ones is how we stay honourable and give answers in the play, but still allow the mystical element of religion and of life to live within it, when the audience leaves the theatre. As an individual, I definitely have my view, but it is very individual.

**You're an actor as well as a playwright. How does this inform your approach?**

For a new piece of work, I'm there from the first moment in rehearsals. I rewrote hugely during the rehearsal process for *Life of Pi*.

I'm really conscious of the actors when I'm writing and I really listen to them in rehearsal. If their instinct is saying that there's something not feeling right then we need to tackle it. The thought between the lines is the most important thing. You need to know what the thought is from one line to the next. If the thought isn't right, you have to shift the line.

A script is never a perfectly formed thing when it arrives in the rehearsal room – there are edits and changes. The actors were incredible in adapting to them, even though some of them were happening late in the rehearsal process as we approached previews. That's the stressful part because until you get it in front of the audience, you don't know what it is! It's a fear that's part of the excitement though – if each individual person is sure of what they're doing, when it gets put together it becomes something new and exciting.

I did some rewrites after Sheffield, but then we were delayed because of the pandemic. That later version was used in rehearsals for London, but I did do a few more small rewrites. The staging was different so the language needed to fit the staging, such as the length of entrances and exits and how much dialogue could be delivered, for example.

#### **Q What are the other considerations when adapting a novel for stage or screen?**

Theatrical interpretation is a very different form to a book. A book is a very personal relationship between you and what you're writing. Yann says, "*Pi sits at a table*", and whoever is reading will fill in the detail about a table. In film, everyone asks a LOT of questions about what it looks like, it's meaning – it needs to have a purpose. In theatre, the table doesn't even need to be there! The way in which we use our imagination is different.

There are some books that I wouldn't know where to start on. With those I do adapt, I have a flavour of character of what they want, what they need and where they're going. It can be relationship to environment, animals, and people: that is the key. If the relationships in the book are rich, that's what grabs me.

This show tells the story in a new way, and brings out things in a new way that you won't necessarily have seen in the book. In the book, the chronology is all over the place and you don't really question it. Your mind leaps, but in the theatre that's quite difficult to do so it becomes a different language.

#### **Q Were there any particularly difficult scenes to write?**

You have to be playful in rehearsal. When I first wrote a draft of when the Tsimtsum sank, it was all going on. The scene was far too busy! There were basically various mini scenes going on at the same time. The actors did what I had written, they used tissue boxes, coat hangers, a costume rail, etc. to bring it alive, and there were some bits that were magical. Finn orchestrated some movement, too. Although there was a lot about the scene that didn't work, we found the intention – that's key. We took elements of it, I rewrote it until we get the sinking of the ship that you see in the show.

The scene at the zoo at the beginning was also a big challenge. I wrote and wrote, and it took a long time to get right. None of us could tell why. It's near the opening of the play – it's where the magic and wonder start and the different elements start to combine. It's the high point before we go to sea. All of the important characters were being introduced, but then Pi

is shortly going to lose them so it was difficult to achieve in a short amount of stage time! The arrival on the island is also an important moment and we had to make some quite significant changes to our original plans. Pi is hallucinating because he's so hungry and traumatised. My original ideas didn't work and so it's become a monologue now. Pi explains it and the audience has to imagine it for themselves. Perhaps that makes it even more effective: sometimes less can be more!

**Q Can you tell us about the theme of religion in the play?**

I loved the religion in the book, because it made me chuckle. In these times it's quite dangerous to laugh at religion but the book is a gentle, affectionate look at what religion does and what it means to people.

I grew up in a Hindu environment. It made complete sense to me as a child that the stories I was told demonstrated good behaviour and explored different elements of ourselves.

**Q Do you have a favourite character in the play?**

What I really like is the way in which we've made women more prominent in the play. I've taken characters from the novel who are men, or who are in the background, and made them more prominent female characters. I love the representations of lots of different kinds of people in the play. I can't pick a favourite character though!

**Q What do you want the audience to think and feel when they're watching the play?**

You follow your own feeling when writing. I have to make sense of my feelings as I follow the story. If I am wanting to create fear, then I explore the fear and ask how the character carries on, how do they carry on? I'm following the emotions in the story. Nobody's response is irrelevant: it's very personal. You're sitting in a room with people, but it's about your response.

I want us all to feel loss when Pi loses his family. Everyone has felt that in some form. By the age of seven we have experienced the full range of human emotions, and as we age they simply become more complex. Anyone seeing the show will have felt those feelings before. That's why stories that are universal and are so relevant to all of us.

# MAX WEBSTER DIRECTOR



## Q Can you tell us about transferring the show to London?

The show was first performed at the Sheffield Crucible, which is an incredibly exciting space. We used the thrust configuration, with all of the audience looking down onto the stage. This made the use of the floor a really key part of the production and provided some incredibly exciting opportunities. Bringing it to the West End, we've reconfigured it to an end on staging, but the seats in the auditorium have been lifted so that this audience still get that same experience. We've also built the stage out into the auditorium, too.

The end on configuration has presented a few challenges, so we have made some changes to the blocking in London, as you would expect. I think the most technically challenging part of the play is the tiger training scene when all of the performance and design elements all work together to create that sense of peril and drama. It includes sound effects, trap doors, puppets, lighting, video projection, revolve cues – everything is working full blast!

## Q What are the staging challenges of Life of Pi?

*Life of Pi* is a challenging novel to adapt because of the interpolation of the scenes at sea, with the more conversational scenes in the hospital. We have to ensure that we don't lose momentum and tension in those scenes – that we sustain the audience's engagement and interest.

Yann's novel is an image which is expanded – a boy and a tiger in a boat! The first third is about the family, the epilogue is the second story with the two investigators who talk to Pi, and then the middle is an extended journalistic and scientific description about how Pi survives. It doesn't have the same arc as a theatrical piece, so the challenge is to give the time at sea that vital shape.

My role as a director includes ensuring that the fundamental information and story is clear:

- Where we are – whether that’s a zoo, a hospital room, the market, the sea etc. There are a lot of different locations in the story.
- The circumstances of the scene – why we’re there, what’s happened before the weather, and temperature, the atmosphere and so on.
- The physical and verbal language – what the characters are doing, and what they are saying, which run parallel to each other.

#### **Q What was your approach to rehearsing the show?**

The first time we made the show, we’d done a lot of Research and Development (R&D) and workshopping. On our first day we did a read through, which I usually do at the beginning of the rehearsal period. Read throughs are good to do both as an ice-breaker, but also a way into discussion, talking about the play and what it means, and the key themes that we think are important. We also did a movement session. We did an introduction to puppetry and talked about the practicalities of working together. We had some principles about how we’d be with each other – including equality, diversity and inclusion.

Working with Finn there was a lot of practical and technical direction as well as the artistic process of telling the story. Each time the puppet does something, it has to be physically ‘written’: not physically written down, but it needs working out and creating with precision. Everything is collaborative.

#### **Q How did your own training inform your work on this production?**

Part of my training was at the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris. That training was great in its focused thinking about what one does with one’s body. For *Life of Pi* that focus is about what you would do on a beach in Mexico, in contrast to how you would use your body in a zoo. Whilst you are being assisted with the projections in the show, the story is held in the bodies of the actors and everything around them is supporting that.

#### **Q What do you want the audience to experience as they watch *Life of Pi*?**

Theatre is something that happens between the actors and the audience in a triangulation with the play we’re performing. When I’m directing, I constantly consider the relationship with the audience and I don’t think it’s a one way interaction: it’s a shared act of imagination. I’ve been struck by the different thoughts people have had when they come away from the show and I really like the way they resonate with the story. Some people are very interested in the theology of the play, whilst others see it as an epic story of survival. Art is not didactic. The play means different things to different people.

Yann gets asked a lot about which of the stories is ‘real’, but Yann has said that he wanted to write a very democratic novel – that people have a choice. We want the play to be an emotionally effective story – but again there are various different emotions that you might feel when watching it.

# SIMON FRIEND PRODUCER



## Q What was the initial process of bringing *Life of Pi* to the stage?

I bought the rights for *Life of Pi* in 2016. Lolita Chakrabarti had a strong vision for the play, and I was already aware of Max Webster's work, particularly *The Lorax* for the Old Vic, which was another puppet-based show. I brought a group of people together and we workshopped the puppetry and set design, and then our job was to find a venue for the show.

Once a producer has put a team of creative people together and found a venue, they need to let the creative team enter the creative process and my job was then to look at marketing and sustaining strong audience attendance.

The show began its life at The Crucible in Sheffield: it's a cavernous space in which you can create a whole world. In Sheffield, the design used a thrust configuration, so the performers were close to the audience.

A producer has to do a large number of things: as well as commissioning new work, we also need to have a strong understanding of intellectual property law, and be able to create a team of people to create a project.

## Q What skills do you need to be a theatre producer?

As a producer, you need to develop an extremely thick skin! You will get rejected a lot! However, that is not a bad thing. If you're making enough suggestions and offering ideas, it means you are purposeful and working hard! The moments where our shows create magic are what makes it worthwhile.

**Q What was your journey to becoming a producer?**

At school I was heavily involved in productions. As well as the productions created by our teachers, I also put on other productions and gained experience in producing, directing and performing. After the 2004 Tsunami I mounted a charity fundraising concert and enjoyed that experience of bringing people together.

I studied English at University College London (UCL), but was also involved with the drama societies. Whilst I was in my third year, I got an internship with a West End producer which gave me a great foundation, and then did a Stage One producer training scheme. I spent four years at Theatre Royal, Bath, where I worked as a producer, including on Things We Do For Love, and eventually formed my own production company.

I adore reading, and I even used to read the publishing industry's magazine, The Bookseller to find out what books were up and coming, and therefore potential theatre works! I very much enjoy the literary element and then working with the creative team to take it from page to stage.