



Pilot Theatre presents

**A SONG**

**FOR**

**ELLA GREY**

**RESOURCE PACK A**

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# A SONG FOR ELLA GREY

By David Almond

Adapted for the stage by Zoe Cooper

Directed by Esther Richardson

Pilot Theatre in association with Northern Stage and York Theatre Royal

*"A darkly romantic tale that sings of the madness of youth, the ache of love, and the near-impossibility of grasping death"*

This new production, from the company that brought you *Noughts & Crosses*, is a magical retelling of the Orpheus myth, full of music, sound and storytelling.

Claire and her best friend, Ella Grey, are ordinary kids from ordinary families in an ordinary world. They and their friends fall in and out of love, play music and dance, stare at the stars, yearn for excitement, and have parties on the beautiful beaches of Northumberland. One day a stranger, a musician called Orpheus, appears on the beach, and entrances them all but particularly Ella. Where has Orpheus come from and what path will Ella follow? A tale of modern teenagers and ancient forces, a tale told since the dawn of time and told again today.

*"After our success with our recent adaptations of young adult fiction for mid-scale, it is an honour to be working with David Almond and Zoe Cooper on a new version of David's masterpiece, A Song for Ella Grey. After the huge upheaval and change of the last few years there isn't a more apposite moment for Pilot to present this mighty story of teenage love and loss, set in the extraordinary landscapes of Northern England. As always this work will introduce audiences to thrilling new talent and open rich conversations and reflections about what it means to come of age in 2023."* Esther Richardson, Artistic Director

Age suitability 13+

# TOUR DATES

**Northern Stage, Newcastle**

1 – 15 February 2024

**York Theatre Royal**

20 – 24 February 2024

**Theatre Peckham**

27 February – 2 March 2024

**Hull Truck Theatre**

5 – 9 March 2024

**Liverpool Playhouse**

13 - 16 March 2024

**Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford**

19 – 23 March 2024

# ABOUT THIS PACK

Resource pack by Anna Cantrell  
Edited by Oliver O'Shea  
Designed by Sam Johnson

This resource pack accompanies the touring theatre production of *A Song for Ella Grey* and is aimed at educators who are exploring the novel by David Almond within KS3 English, as well as PSHE and Classics. This resource is also designed to support reading-groups, literacy programmes and library services.

Resource Packs – Parts B and C will be published in Spring 2024, and will support Drama and Performing Arts students to explore the stage adaptation and theatre production. These resources will include interviews with the cast and creative team, as well as filmed scene extracts to watch again.

We are not responsible for the content of external links, and we strongly recommend checking the suitability of external content before sharing with your students.

This resource contains plot spoilers.

If you have any questions or feedback about this resource pack, please contact: [education@pilot-theatre.com](mailto:education@pilot-theatre.com)

Supported by Arts Council England and the Keith Howard Foundation.



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# SYNOPSIS

## This synopsis contains plot spoilers

*"Maybe it's all been just coincidence, tale-telling, rumour, madness, the madness of being young, the madness of knowing love for the first time, the madness of being alive in this miraculous place." (p.275)*

A magical and mysterious story of love, self-discovery and grief, *A Song For Ella Grey* is a modern retelling of the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Claire and Ella have been inseparable since they were five years old, and they have a strong bond with their friends. They delight in their youth, revelling on the banks of the Tyne and the beaches of Northumberland, drinking, dancing, and singing.

However, Ella's adoptive parents disapprove of her dreaming, and forbid her to go with her friends on a camping trip to Bamburgh beach. Whilst there, the others encounter the beautiful and mysterious Orpheus, who mesmerises them with his music, and guides them towards a deeper level of self-awareness. But it is Ella, stuck at home and hearing his song only through her phone, who falls the deepest. When she and Orpheus eventually meet, they are immediately captivated by each other, and embark on an all-consuming relationship.

Tragedy strikes during the couple's wedding on Bamburgh beach when Ella receives a fatal snake bite. Refusing to accept defeat, Orpheus embarks on a journey through the gates of Death to bring back what was taken from them. He uses the power of his beautiful and hypnotic song to persuade Death to give Ella back, on the condition that Orpheus does not look behind him as she follows him out of the afterlife. Unfortunately, just as they reach the light, Orpheus is overcome by passion and looks back at his love, sending her back to the darkness forever.

Over the next few months, stories spread of Orpheus' whereabouts. It appears that his grief has forced him to isolate himself further, as he wanders without direction. He also seems to surround himself only by men, spawning the rumour that he's "gone gay." (p.250) But it's Bianca, a girl from school, who is the last to see Orpheus alive. Driven by her own love for him, she goes in search of Orpheus. She finds him, moments before jealous, devilish women rise from the sea and the earth, and tear him to pieces. The novel ends as Claire readies herself for university and the rest of her life, now that she has "cast the story out" into the world. (p.3)

# CHARACTERS

## CLAIRE

*"I need to cast the story out and live my life." (p.3)*

Claire is the narrator of the story. She tells the tale in order to release her feelings of grief so that she may carry on with her life. Claire is artistic and intelligent. She loves to sing and dance with her friends, and she writes poetry. She and Ella have been best friends since they were five years old, and are still incredibly close, often having sleepovers together. She loves Ella deeply and finds it difficult to come to terms with her relationship with Orpheus.

## ELLA

*"She'd been such a clever girl but was rapidly turning into a silly dreamer." (p.25)*

*"Oh, she looked so beautiful. She looked so changed, suddenly more than the dreamy Tyneside girl." (p.102)*

At the beginning of the novel, Ella is a dreamer. She is clever and works hard, but her grades have been dropping. However, once she meets Orpheus, she has a stronger sense of self-awareness and is able to communicate profound philosophical ideas during her Literature lessons at school.

As a baby, Ella was found in a basket on the hospital steps by the Greys, who adopted her. As such, she feels a sense of duty to her parents because without them she feels she would be *"absolutely nothing."* (p.28)

## ORPHEUS

*"I'm the one that tames the beasts, that brings the birds down from the sky, that makes the water flow uphill. I'm the one that sang my way through darkness down to Death to bring her back again." (p.195)*

Orpheus is a mysterious and beautiful traveller who Claire and her friends encounter on Bamburgh beach. His singing and the music he makes with his lyre is so beautiful that nature is drawn to him: snakes slither up to hear him play, and Ella believes that even the river *"was changing its course to flow towards him."* (p.100)

He is a shy person, who can feel uncomfortable in the company of other people, but he has a deep connection with Ella, and they fall immediately in love. Orpheus is driven *"mad"* with grief when Ella is killed on their wedding day and journeys into the afterlife in order to bring her back. (p. 177)

At the end of the novel, he is violently torn apart by some devilish, jealous women who cannot bear that he has overlooked them.

## BIANCA

*"'It was love,' she said. 'Even if I didn't understand it myself till now. You don't go searching for somebody out of hate.'" (p.259)*

Bianca is a student in Claire and Ella's Literature lessons. She comes across as vulgar and flirtatious, exclaiming that Orpheus is *"sex on a bliddy stick!"* (p.10). However, near the end of the novel, she comes to Claire's house and shows a softer side to her personality. She weeps as she confides in Claire that she loved Orpheus and explains how she saw him murdered.

# SAM

"Sam came with me into my tent that night. Even then I thought of her."  
(p.42)

"'It's hopeless, isn't it?' he said.  
'You care nowt for me, do you?' he said." (p.249)

Sam is a strong, kind, and gentle young man. He and Claire first start a relationship during the Easter trip to Bamburgh beach, where they swim in the sea together and Sam sings made-up songs about how much he likes her. But it is clear that Claire does not find the relationship satisfying; even Claire's mum seems to realise that they are not a perfect couple. Near the end of the novel, as Sam drives Claire around looking for Orpheus, he breaks down; he is starting to realise that Claire does not love him.

# THE GREYS

"It was more than love. We gave her everything." (p.168)

The Greys are Ella's adoptive parents. They found her as a baby on the steps of a hospital and rescued her. As such, Ella feels it is her duty to live up to their expectations. They are presented as dreary and drab, living in a grey house and dressed in grey. They disapprove of Claire and the friendship group, believing that they are leading Ella astray and not allowing her to concentrate on her schoolwork.

# NOTES:

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# YOUTH AND SELF-DISCOVERY

*"But mebbe that's just how it is when you're young. You've got all these weird forces in you, but you feel unsatisfied, empty, unfinished."* (p.77)

*"I tried to tell her more, but the words I had were not enough and the sounds came out as useless gasps and murmurs. I just held her close, closer."* (p.133)

*"Where's the surprise in that? He was always bliddy gay."* (p.250)

Claire, Ella and their friends are at a huge transition in their lives. At 17 years old, they're just on the cusp of adulthood and are discovering who they will become. They enjoy their youth and *"scoffed at...[k]ids wanting to be old before they were young"*(p.16). Claire's mother is despairing that the young are asked to write essays about love when *"They should be doing love."* (p.79)

Ella seems to flourish and grow once she meets Orpheus, realising that she is still *"unfinished"* and is *"unsatisfied"* with her life as it is (p.77). Claire reflects that since meeting Orpheus, Ella looks *"so changed, suddenly more than the dreamy Tyneside girl."* (p.102). Indeed, Orpheus and his mesmerising music seem to guide everyone he meets to a more profound awareness of themselves. James, for example, after encountering Orpheus, starts wearing eyeliner and mascara, and by the end of the novel is in a relationship with a man called Paul.

Claire too is discovering her own sexual identity. She is devoted to the beautiful Ella and struggles to understand where this fits with her unsatisfying sexual relationship with her boyfriend, Sam. Almond never presents sexual identity as something that is fixed, but rather something that changes and develops as the characters learn more about themselves and find themselves in new situations. Orpheus, who had such a passionate and spiritual connection with Ella, appears also to have a sexual preference for men.

- Why do you think your teen years are such an important period of your life?
- What have you learnt about yourself in recent years?
- Why do you think Claire's mum thinks young people shouldn't be writing essays about love?
- What do you think Claire feels for Sam? Why do you think she's in a relationship with him?

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# PLACE AND BELONGING

*"Below us the water caught the lights of the stars, of the city's glow in the sky, of the lights in the windows of The Cluny. It glittered and swirled."*  
(p.89)

*"We left Tyneside behind, we crossed the ancient healed coalfield, we saw the sea shining. At Amble, bright boats danced their way to Coquet Island. Beyond here, the road followed the coast, and the beautiful places started, the places of dunes and castles and long white beaches."*  
(p.131)

*"We are members of a little family in a little home. Beyond us is Tyneside, the beaches and coalfields of Northumberland, the world, the galaxy, the universe, everything that there has ever been and will ever be."* (p.274)

Some authors keep geographical details to a minimum and do not mention place names. However, the North East of England setting of *A Song For Ella Grey* is absolutely integral to the novel. Almond, who grew-up in the region and lives there, creates images of the local areas with incredible attention to detail, from around Ouseburn with the Cluny and Seven Stories, to the seaside towns and villages with their fish and chip shops and lobster pots. He even accurately names local bus routes! Claire and her friends feel proud to live in the North East, full of spaces where they can express themselves freely and places where they feel like they belong.

- Are there places that you feel encapsulate you and your identity, where you feel like you truly belong?
- Why might Almond have chosen a beach as the setting for the majority of his novel? How does it link to the atmosphere and ideas presented in the book?
- How has Almond used language to make his descriptions of these places sound so magical?
- Where is Claire going at the end of the novel? How do you think she will feel, so far away from home?

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# THE ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE MYTH

Myths and legends are traditional stories passed down through generations. They often blend reality with imagination and were used to help explain natural and social events.

Myths are stories about gods, heroes, and supernatural beings, such as the Greek god Zeus and the hero Hercules. On the other hand, legends are stories about real or historical figures who perform extraordinary feats, such as King Arthur and Robin Hood.

For thousands of years, before most people were able to read and write, oral storytelling was the way that these myths and legends were communicated. Each time the story was told, it would alter as people added extra details and embellished others. That is why there are often different versions of the same stories.

*A Song For Ella Grey* is based on the Greek myth Orpheus and Eurydice, which is most famously told in a version written by the Roman poet Ovid. The story features in his work *Metamorphoses*, an epic narrative poem written in Latin, comprising over 250 myths in 15 books!

*"The curse of this Voyage is my wife,  
Whose foot a viper stinging, did abridge her youthful life."  
Metamorphoses, translated by Arthur Golding (1567)*

As well as through epic poems, the tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice has been retold many times through theatre, and depicted in other art forms, such as opera and ballet.

In ancient Greek theatre, masks were used to help audience members at the back of the *theatron* (the ancient Greek word for a theatre auditorium) to see. Furthermore, just as Claire uses a mask to become Orpheus and tell his story as he enters the underworld, in ancient Greece, masks allowed the same actor to play multiple parts.

*"I'll make a mask.  
I'll disappear.  
I'll put on a mask, and let Orpheus breathe through me, speak through me."* (p.190)

It is also believed that masks were used as part of religious ceremonies in ancient Greece. Although no masks survive from the period, they have been depicted in paintings from that time.

- What myths and legends do you know? Does your version differ from the version told by others in your class?
- What do you imagine Claire's mask of Orpheus would look like? Can you design a mask for a theatre production of the book?

# HOW TO SET-UP A READING GROUP

Whether you are a teacher, school librarian or youth worker, establishing a reading-group has many benefits for young people, most notably in developing their literacy, creativity, self-expression and academic attainment.

This resource is designed to support group-leaders in exploring the novel of *A Song for Ella Grey*, whether in the classroom or in extra-curricular settings.

We have outlined a suggested schedule which could culminate in a trip to see our stage adaptation of *A Song for Ella Grey* in Spring 2024 at your local theatre. Between each session, we have suggested which sections of the novel to read, and there are creative activities you might like to lead with your group. The questions in the Themes and Topics section of this resource could be used as discussion points.

The schedule is designed to be manageable with short sections to read each week, but you could consider a shorter schedule for more able and eager readers.

Other things to consider:

- a consistent weekly meeting time and place helps give a regular rhythm to the group
- factor in term timetables, other events, and religious holidays when planning your schedule
- consider how the group will access the novel – do you need to purchase or borrow copies?
- each session could be between 45 minutes to 1hr 30 minutes, depending on how detailed the discussion is which takes place, and how many activities you explore. A shorter session would suit a lunchtime group
- how will you promote the reading group? Are the creative activities and the theatre trip more appealing to less confident readers?
- if working in a school, collaborate with your colleagues in other departments (Classics, Drama, Music, PSHE – the novel and theatre production have many cross-curricular links)

- ensure that you follow best practice in terms of safeguarding, considering the themes and topics of the novel, and in planning your theatre visit
- in the first meeting, you could introduce the characters and read the first few pages together as a group, as well as exploring the origin of the myth
- give clear instructions on which sections to read ahead of the next session
- ensure that anyone who decides to read ahead does not reveal plot spoilers to those who are adhering to the reading schedule!
- in the final session, after the theatre trip, you could reflect on how the playwright adapted the novel, and the how the production was realised onstage.

## **Session One**

read pp.1-42 before the second session

## **Session Two**

read pp.43-80 before the third session

## **Session Three**

read pp.81-124 before the fourth session

## **Session Four**

read pp.125-165 before the fifth session

## **Session Five**

read pp.166-182 before the sixth session

## **Session Six**

read pp.183-237 before the seventh session

## **Session Seven**

read pp.238-276 before the eighth session

## **Session Eight**

Theatre Trip to *A Song for Ella Grey* before the ninth session

## **Session Nine**

Reflection on the theatre production

# CREATIVE EXERCISES

- Draw the figure of Orpheus. Who is Orpheus? What does Orpheus wear? Who does Orpheus remind you of?

- Create your own group playlist inspired by *A Song for Ella Grey*. What music do you find captivating?

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- What places and landscapes inspire you? Collect some reference images and share with the group.

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- Research artists, composers and writers who have adapted the Orpheus myth, and share their work with the rest of group. How is their interpretation different to David Almond's?

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- Design the scenography of the underworld for a stage production of *A Song for Ella Grey*. What shapes would you use? What materials or textures? What is the atmosphere? How would this scene be lit?

- Design the mask which Claire creates to enter the underworld. Could you be inspired by the style of other masks?



# SUPPORT LINKS

Information correct as of 2 November 2023

## BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

National Bereavement Service Helpline: 0800 0246 161  
[www.thenbs.org/](http://www.thenbs.org/)

Cruse National Helpline: 0808 808 1677  
[www.cruse.org.uk/](http://www.cruse.org.uk/)

Compassionate Friends Helpline: 0345 123 2304  
[www.tcf.org.uk/](http://www.tcf.org.uk/)

Child Bereavement UK Helpline: 0800 02 888 40  
[www.childbereavementuk.org/](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/)

Winston's Wish Helpline: 08088 020 021  
[www.winstonswish.org/](http://www.winstonswish.org/)

Child Death Helpline: 0800 282 986  
[www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk/](http://www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk/)

Hope Again: Child Bereavement Network  
[www.hopeagain.org.uk/](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk/)

At a Loss  
[www.ataloss.org/](http://www.ataloss.org/)

Good Grief Trust  
[www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/](http://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/)

Sue Ryder  
[www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/online-bereavement-support](http://www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/online-bereavement-support)

# LGBTQ+ INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Stonewall  
[www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)

Switchboard LGBT+ Helpline: 0800 0119 100  
[www.switchboard.lgbt/](http://www.switchboard.lgbt/)

LGBT Foundation: 0345 3 30 30 30  
[www.lgbt.foundation/](http://www.lgbt.foundation/)

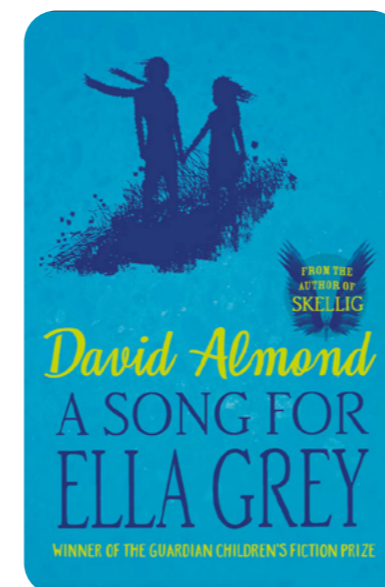
Pink Therapy  
[www.pinktherapy.com/](http://www.pinktherapy.com/)

Mermaids Helpline: 0808 801 0400  
[www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/](http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/)

Gendered Intelligence  
[www.genderedintelligence.co.uk/](http://www.genderedintelligence.co.uk/)

## REFERENCES

Almond, David. 2014. *A Song For Ella Grey*. London: Hodder Children's Books. Paperback edition published in 2015.  
Golding, Arthur. *Metamorphoses*.



# FURTHER RESOURCES

## UPCOMING RESOURCE PACKS

### **Resource Pack – Part B: available from January 2024**

This resource will introduce students to Pilot Theatre's adaptation and production of *A Song for Ella Grey*, and key members of the creative team, including insights into rehearsals.

### **Resource Pack – Part C: available from March 2024**

Ideal for students preparing for the Live Theatre component of their GCSE / A-level Drama exams, this resource will include filmed scene extracts from the live performance, allowing students to watch key scenes again, with accompanying analysis.

## FREE CPD SESSION

### **Monday 11 March 2024 (online)**

In this interactive CPD session aimed at secondary Drama teachers, Pilot will advise how to use our education resources to enrich classroom learning, and how best to support students in writing about *A Song for Ella Grey* for the Live Theatre component of their GCSE and A-level exams.

The online session will look at key extracts from the production, and moments of acting and design in detail. In addition, the CPD will give practical teaching strategies for studying the performance of *A Song for Ella Grey*.

[Reserve your place on the session](#)

# WORKSHOPS AVAILABLE

A practical creative session exploring the play, production, characters, and themes delivered by a Pilot artist. The workshop can be tailored to using *A Song for Ella Grey* as a creative stimulus for theatre devising, exploring issues related to the play, or to focus on aspects of the production, such as music.

All workshops are bespoke and tailored to the needs of your students, and can be scheduled pre- or post-performance at your school, college or university. To arrange a workshop, please email us directly: [education@pilot-theatre.com](mailto:education@pilot-theatre.com)

For state schools: 2 sessions or a full day: £325 + VAT  
1 session (up to 2 hours): £250 + VAT

For private schools: 2 sessions or a full day: £475 + VAT  
1 session (up to 2 hours): £400 + VAT

## MAILING LIST

If you would like to join Pilot Theatre's mailing list to hear about our future projects, [please sign-up here](#).

## FEEDBACK

If you have any feedback about this resource, please do share it with us! We would love to hear your thoughts: [education@pilot-theatre.com](mailto:education@pilot-theatre.com)



The cast of *A Song for Ella Grey*. Photo by Esther Richardson

# TOUR DATES

**Northern Stage, Newcastle**

1 – 15 February 2024

**York Theatre Royal**

20 – 24 February 2024

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