

Welcome to this audio introduction for Guildford Shakespeare Company's production of *Pride & Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. The play has been adapted by **Abigail Pickard Price**, with **Sarah Gobran and Matt Pinches**, and it is directed by **Abigail Pickard Price**. This introduction will provide a description of the set and costumes for *Pride and Prejudice* along with a summary of the plot and main characters.

Pride & Prejudice was published in 1813. It has consistently remained near the top of any ranking of the best and most beloved English language books ever since, and has been the subject of many film and theatre adaptations. It is set in Austen's own lifetime - the Regency period of English history - and reflects (and gently mocks) the manners and habits of English life at that time.

Central to the tale is the **Bennet** family - 5 daughters of marriageable age and their parents - dwelling at **Longbourn**, a modest country home in Hertfordshire, near the village of **Meryton**. **Mr and Mrs Bennet** are proud of their two eldest daughters; **Jane**, the beauty of the family; and **Lizzie**, witty and intelligent - though rather despairing of their younger three - **Mary**, a would-be intellectual; **Kitty**, easily influenced and a little foolish; and **Lydia**, a racy young woman of just 16.

The Longbourn estate can unfortunately only be inherited by a male relative. In the absence of sons, Mr Bennet's heir is the somewhat ridiculous **Mr Collins**, a clergyman currently living and working under the patronage of **Lady Catherine de Burgh**. Lady Catherine is an imposing dowager, and her nephew **Mr Darcy** is no less daunting. Mr Darcy has a close friend in **Mr Charles Bingley**, who, along with his sister **Caroline**, has just moved into **Netherfield House**, an impressive residence only a few miles away from Longbourn. The arrival of Bingley, Darcy and Miss Bingley is certain to enliven the neighbourhood. A battalion of soldiers is also stationed at nearby Meryton, introducing the sisters to the charming **Mr Wickham**, who is discovered to be an old acquaintance of Mr Darcy...

The story is told with a simple and versatile set. A square of wooden floor defines the performance space. A black back wall about 5 metres wide is edged with old gold skirting and crossed at waist height by a dado rail painted the same gold tone. The main entrance to the space is an open archway at the centre of the wall, the curve of the arch also outlined in gold. Four tall, arched mirrors are mounted on the wall, narrow and elegant, suggesting mullioned Georgian windows. The glass of the mirrors is faded and foxed, so the reflections in them are softly blurred.

At the back left stands a large antique wardrobe, side on to us. It's dark wood with mirrored double doors and an ornate pelmet. Costumes and small personal items are stored within and actors can fetch them as needed. On the end of the wardrobe nearest us there are a few coat hooks at head height. A few garments hang here, along with a small oil painting of a country house in an ornate wooden frame.

At the back right is a wooden coat rail, also end on to us, with a row of coat hooks at the top, and a cluster of small baskets beneath. More costume items are hanging here, and on the end is another framed oil painting of a different residence. Closer to us stands a wooden table and chairs. The oak table has slender, elegantly turned legs, and the chairs are a matching set with balloon backs and seats upholstered in richly coloured satin - though each chair is a different colour - one teal green, one mustard yellow, and one crimson. Table and chairs can be redistributed as needed to represent different locations: when the table is placed to the right and 2 chairs set comfortably around it, we are at Longbourn, the Bennet family home. Placing the table in the centre and arraying the chairs more

formally to either side takes us to the drawing room at Netherfield, Mr Bingley's abode. When the table is turned end on to us and covered with a lace cloth we know that we have arrived at Rosings, the stately residence of Lady Catherine de Burgh. At the same location, the lace cloth is folded back to lie in a long strip draped over the far end, a single chair is placed at the head - and the table becomes a piano! The table will even transform into a horse-drawn carriage: a character perches atop the table, legs hanging, and jiggles and sways as though clattering over cobbles.

The oil paintings also help us to identify the location of a scene. Some of them are double sided and can be speedily flipped over or replaced with an entirely different painting. As the story takes us to new locations, the paintings change. They might give us a view of the place we're visiting, from a cosy country Parsonage in Kent to a palatial stately home in Cheshire; or they might represent the kind of art found at that location - from regal portraits to pub signs.

The many characters of the story are presented to us by just 3 actors - 1 male and 2 female.

Each actor wears a base costume in keeping with the Regency setting of the story. When they take on a new character, they add an item of dress to signify the change - often a jacket or a hat, but occasionally nothing more than a ribbon or hair rosette.

Our first actor is **Sarah**, a vivacious woman in her 40s, with golden skin, a wide, expressive mouth and enormous blue eyes. Sarah presents a wide range of characters from petulant matron to doe-eyed beauty.

She wears a base costume of a plain white gown, the waist high under the bust in the fashion of the era, the skirts hanging straight to the floor in a column. The short, puffed sleeves, the scooped neckline and the hem of the skirt are trimmed with a line of dark red velvet ribbon. Her curly blonde hair is swept up at the back, and gathered into a loose bun. A few tendrils hang loose beside her face.

Sarah's primary role is MRS BENNET, the long suffering and endlessly complaining matriarch of the Bennet family. To identify her in this role, Sarah adds a large white mop cap to her outfit, extravagantly trimmed with ruffles and lace, and a paisley shawl. Mrs Bennet is loud and energetic, constantly plying her fan and pulling faces which make her emotions very plain.

Sarah will also play JANE, the eldest Bennet daughter, adding an overdress of sprigged muslin to her base outfit. Jane is gentle and modest and keeps her eyes demurely lowered.

Later, Sarah will present:

Charlotte Lucas, a rather frumpy young lady in large spectacles and a white crochet shawl;

Miss Bingley, a haughty woman with a strong sense of her own importance, wrapped in an elaborate silk overdress of bronze and blue, with a blue feather in her hair;

and Aunt Gardiner, Mrs Bennet's sister-in-law, much gentler than her relative, dressed in a short, fawn cape and an orange bonnet trimmed with green velvet, and carrying aloft a stove pipe hat representing her spouse.

Our second actor is **Luke**, an imposing man of about 30. Luke is 6ft 3, broad shouldered and square jawed. He presents the majority of the male characters - and one or two ladies as well.

His primary character is MR DARCY. He's dressed in slim cream breeches tucked into black knee length boots, with a white linen shirt and softly pleated cravat, topped by an ivory satin waistcoat and brown tailcoat. His dark brown hair waves thickly back from his pale forehead, forming a gentle quiff over one eye. Long dark sideburns frame his face, and his blue eyes are deep set under low, straight brows, making his gaze intense. Darcy retains a formal, mannered posture, and rarely smiles.

Luke also presents MR BENNET by slipping a drab beige housecoat over his smart outfit, and popping on a pair of spectacles, which he peers over the top of, tucking in his chin. An older man, with a more relaxed bearing, Mr Bennet is rarely seen without a book in his hand.

MR COLLINS, heir to the Longbourn family home, is an insipid fellow in a black vicar's frock and wide brimmed black hat, with spectacles and a prim demeanour. Mr Collins is somewhat accident prone and frequently stumbles or bumps into others.

MR WICKHAM, eye-catching in his dashing scarlet soldier's uniform, has a roguish grin and decided twinkle in his eye.

And finally, Luke will become LADY CATHERINE DE BURGH, Mr Darcy's aunt, slipping on a blue-grey gown of an older style, trimmed and ruffled at hem and wrist, with a square cut neckline, a rigidly corseted bodice, and sweeping full skirts; Lady Catherine has a stately bearing, looking down her very long nose at everyone around her.

Last, but by no means least, our third actor is **April**. She is diminutive and lively, in her 20s, with light brown curls gathered up at the crown, tendrils falling loose around her heart-shaped face. She has a clear, ivory complexion, flashing blue eyes, and a pert, cupid's bow mouth. She's dressed in a white muslin gown with a pattern of tiny blue flowers all over, a high waist and little cap sleeves, and she represents our heroine, ELIZABETH BENNET, known as Lizzie. Lizzie is also our narrator and often speaks directly to us.

In addition to Lizzie, April plays one more significant role, that of MR BINGLEY, the catalyst for the entire story - he puts the cat among the pigeons by moving to the neighbourhood and being ready and willing to accept any invitation he is offered. To become BINGLEY, April slips a black gentleman's tailcoat over her frock and adjusts her posture to effect a masculine stance - shoulders square, and one arm tucked up behind the waist. Though he has beautiful manners, Bingley is much more relaxed than his friend Darcy, he's eager and friendly, and keen to make the acquaintance of his new neighbours.

The younger Bennet sisters, Mary, Kitty and Lydia, are played by **all** of the actors in turn - whoever is available will take up the role by the simple expedient of popping a ribbon in their hair, and a matching sash around their waist - navy blue ribbons for Mary, purple for Kitty and scarlet for Lydia.

The sisters are first presented to us during a dance - two of the trio of actors form a steeple with their arms - the third passes beneath, and speaks to us as they emerge, introducing themselves as one of the

sisters. Having spoken they weave around to the back of the group and change places with one of the others, repeating the process until all 5 sisters have been identified and the dance continues.

Dancing plays a significant role throughout, and many balls and assemblies are enacted. The dancing is measured and elegant - dancers face each other and step in unison, moving forward and back, or giving a little sideways skip. Sometimes they make contact palm to palm, while circling one another. Couples converse as the dance steps bring them close and pause when the flow carries them apart.

Sometimes the actors change role in mid-step! During one ball, Mr Bingley is dancing with Jane; the actor playing Bingley slips out of their jacket and moves aside, transforming into Lizzie, sitting demurely under the eye of Mr Darcy. Meanwhile, Jane dances on, holding Bingley's coat as though her partner were still present opposite her.

Invisible partners return again at a later ball, when three of the Bennet sisters dance side by side, their partners represented only by hats which the dancers hold aloft opposite themselves.

Whenever the actors change from one character to another, it happens without interrupting the flow of the narrative. Sometimes an actor will rush out as one character and re-enter seconds later as a different person. More often it happens in full view of the audience.

At the beginning of the performance, for example, we meet Mr Darcy. Wearing a dark brown overcoat on top of his tailcoat and breeches, he stands before us and gazes out, a smile tweaking the corners of his mouth. He lifts his top hat and whirls round, coat tails swinging.

Lizzie stands beside him and speaks the opening words of the play: as she does so, Mr Darcy puts down his hat, whips off his overcoat, swings into a loose fitting house coat and a pair of spectacles to become Mr Bennet, all in the milliseconds before the next words are spoken.

In some scenes, an actor will play 2 separate characters, slipping in and out of a jacket, or twitching a hat on and off as they speak. At one dinner party, the three actors present 2 characters each! They hold a tablecloth by the corners, keeping it taut and horizontal between them, creating a mobile table. As the conversation becomes more animated, the actors switch characters rapidly, shifting their position from one side of the table to another, and flinging garments off and back on again as they change persona.

In another scene, a housekeeper, played by LUKE in apron and mop cap, conducts a tour of the grandest house of them all; Pemberley. At one point, the housekeeper holds up an empty picture frame, declaring it to be a portrait of Mr Darcy - then whips off her cap and poses behind the frame, instantly becoming the portrait of Darcy himself! Stepping out from behind the frame, she is the housekeeper once more and moves on to the next portrait, where the comedy continues...

And at the very end of the play, the three actors perform a country dance where they present all the characters one after the other, whipping through the costume changes in seconds!

It's a high energy performance from all three actors, whirling us through this hilarious, inventive adaptation of Jane Austen's beloved romantic comedy.

Cast and Company Credits

Sarah Gobran plays Mrs Bennet and others

Luke Barton plays Mr Bennet and others

... and April Hughes plays Lizzie Bennet and others

Design is by Neil Irish and Annett Black

Lighting design by Mark Dymock

Sound design by Matt Eaton

... and movement design by Amy Lawrence.

The Company Stage and Production Manager is Hannah Walker.

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