One Man,
Two Guvnors
by Richard Bean
based on The Servant of Two Masters by Carlo Goldoni,
with songs by Grant Olding

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Further production details
www.onemantwoguvnors.com

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The Royal National Theatre Board

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The National’s production

The production of *One Man, Two Guvnors* opened in the National’s Lyttelton Theatre on 24 May 2011, transferring to the Adelphi from 8 November 2011; and to the Theatre Royal Haymarket with a new cast from 2 March 2012. The production toured the UK in autumn 2011 and will tour again in autumn 2012. The original cast opened a Broadway production in May 2012.

### Original Cast (National Theatre and Adelphi)

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UK tour cast to be confirmed

**The Craze**

- **GRANT OLDING** (vocals, guitar, keys, harmonica)
- **PHILIP JAMES** (lead guitar, banjo, backing vocals)
- **RICHARD COUGHLAN** (double bass, electric bass, backing vocals)
- **BENJAMIN BROOKER** (percussion, drum kit, backing vocals)

*The Craze debut album is available from the NT Bookshop nationaltheatre.org.uk/bookshop*
Carlo Goldoni

Carlo Goldoni was born in 1707 into a middle-class family in Venice. As a child, he was fascinated by theatre, playing with puppets and writing his first play at the age of twelve. His father attempted to distract him from a dishonourable career in the theatre by sending him away to study at various schools, but each time Goldoni either ran away or got expelled. During one of these incidents, he joined a company of touring actors and travelled back to Venice, the adventures he experienced on this journey solidified his love of theatrical life. Eventually, in 1731, he graduated from law school and started practising in Padua. The lure of the theatre was too strong however, and the following year he was back in Venice, writing. Goldini’s path to stardom was not smooth; his first play, a tragedy called \textit{Amalasunta} [1733], was a flop. He threw the manuscript in the fire, and wrote a tragicomedy, \textit{Belisario} [1734], the success of which launched his career.

Over the next ten years, Goldoni took up a succession of resident dramatist roles at various large theatres and opera houses, writing opera librettos and tragic works, before discovering comedy was his ideal form. His first major comedy, \textit{L’uomo di mondo} (\textit{The Man of the World}), premiered in 1738 and he followed it with a succession of hits, including, in 1746, \textit{Il Servitore di Due Padroni} (\textit{The Servant of Two Masters}). The play was written for a famous harlequin called Antonio Sacchi, (whose stage name, Truffaldino, is the servant’s name in the play) and was based on an existing plot. In 1748, Goldoni joined Girolamo Medebac’s company, who were resident at the Sant’Angelo theatre in Venice. Medebac was a famous theatrical manager who had assembled a cast of eminent actors, and Goldoni wrote a series of plays, experimenting with form and honing his skills. It was whilst he was installed with this company that Goldoni achieved his now infamous challenge of writing sixteen comedies in two seasons; a play a week. Goldoni’s relationship with Medebac deteriorated over rows about royalties, and in 1753 he defected to the Vendramin family at the rival Teatro San Luca, where he stayed until 1762.

These years were dogged by a rivalry with fellow playwright, Carlo Gozzi [1720-1806], which played out publicly in the press and divided Venetian theatre audiences. Gozzi felt Goldoni was destroying the traditions of Commedia dell’arte and making the form banal; Goldoni, in turn, believed Gozzi’s work to be too fantastical and therefore artificial. By 1762, Goldoni was tired of the dispute and accepted an invitation to direct Italian plays at the French court of Louis XV [1710-1774]. After his contract ended, he stayed at court to teach Italian to the royal family, and was subsequently granted a pension for life. Unfortunately, the French Revolution [1789-1799], interrupted these payments and Goldoni lived out the rest of his life in poverty. He died in 1793, having never returned to Venice.

Goldoni lived a colourful life, he was often involved in disputes over money and women, and many of his experiences ended up in his plays. His memoirs, published in 1787, are full of amusing anecdotes, although many have questioned the accuracy of some of these adventures, suspecting he preferred a good story over the truth. He wrote 200 plays, including 150 comedies, redefining Italian theatre.
Commedia dell'arte

Commedia dell'arte is shortened from ‘commedia dell’arte all’improviso’, meaning ‘comedy through the art/craft of improvisation’, but also translates as ‘comedy of the guild’; Europe’s first professional theatre. Previously, theatre had been provided by amateur academics, writing and performing their own plays (known as ‘commedia erudite’; ‘learned comedy’). Commedia originated in Italy in the mid-16th century with companies consisting of ten or so touring players, often playing improvised outdoor venues. The more prestigious companies had patrons amongst the nobility and the rest relied on carnival organisers hiring their services, or audiences tipping them. The actors specialised in playing particular stock characters and wore masks depicting these personalities. Unlike British theatre, where Shakespeare’s heroines were being played by young male actors, commedia used actresses; attempts by the church to ban actresses for their corruptive influences never succeeded.

There were no written scripts in commedia; companies improvised their shows along predetermined plot scenarios, knowing the rough structure of the narrative. Each actor knew where their character’s story began and concluded, and therefore the various plot-points they needed to hit in order to complete their character’s journey. They memorised speeches, songs, poems and sections of dialogue so they could recall them on stage as necessary. Commedia also had roots in the art of touring jongleurs, wandering entertainers, who performed a mix of acrobatics, songs and audience interaction (not dissimilar from the likes of contemporary street performers in Covent Garden). From jongleurs, commedia inherited lazzi, comic verbal or physical set pieces, which they studied and honed, incorporating them into the action when applicable.

Goldoni’s earliest writings for the theatre consisted of sections of dialogue for the players to improvise with, but he soon recognised that in order to become a playwright like the European writers he admired such as Molière [1622-1673], then he needed total control over the whole play. He began writing full scripts and banned masks which he felt were an unnecessary barrier between performer and audience, his changes met with resistance from the actors who resented handing control of their art over to a new party. Commedia as a form was 200 years old however, and becoming stale; Goldoni determined to explore real Italian life onstage, and the audiences responded. His plays often had a satirical edge, commenting on contemporary issues and relationships, and he fairly portrayed people from different classes, condemning the immoral whether they were poor or rich.
One Man, Two Guvnors – a background

One Man, Two Guvnors is an adaptation of The Servant of Two Masters. Richard Bean, the playwright, has altered the names of characters, relocated the geographical setting, and changed various plotting points, but the play is still recognisably based upon Goldoni’s original. Bean and the director, Nicholas Hytner, set out to find a contemporary equivalent for Goldoni’s play. This involved two objectives: firstly, to locate an updated equivalent of 1740s Florence, which became 1960s Brighton [see Richard Bean’s interview on page 15]; and secondly, to find a British style of theatre comparable to commedia through which to tell the story. The production incorporates elements of variety, music hall, pantomime, stand-up comedy, and end-of-the-pier shows; all of which, in varying degrees, owe something to the genre of commedia.

1963, Brighton
Not only did relocating the play to 1963 in Brighton allow the show’s creators to explore the popular entertainment which would have been on offer in a British seaside town, it also fulfilled a dramatic function. The Servant of Two Masters was located in Florence, with the lovers fleeing from Turin; Richard Bean was able to designate that his lovers fled from London to Brighton. This allowed him to involve the characters in the criminal underworld of the East End (the Kray twins were at the height of their fame in the 1960s) and therefore explain why the characters carry weapons (in 1740s, Italy, most men would carry swords) which is essential to the plot.

Improvisation
Commedia has its origins in improvisation and this has been retained in One Man Two Guvnors when the central character, Francis, interacts with the audience. By getting audience members on to stage to help him move the trunk, or asking them for suggestions on where he should take Dolly on their first date, the production is combining traditional commedia with twentieth century comedy. In the tradition of stand-up comedians, the actor playing Francis has several stock responses written by Richard Bean and himself which cover most eventualities, but often he improvises in the moment and this allows

Francis (Owain Arthur) and Stanley (Ben Mansfield)
Photo: Johan Persson (March 2012)
One Man, Two Guvnors – a background (continued)

the play to feel fresh like commedia
would have done.

Music, Song and Dance
Traditional commedia would include song
and dance. The innamorati (lovers) would
frequently sing duets, they memorised
popular contemporary songs, and some
characters would play instruments,
such as the guitar. Many performers had
honed the popular form of madrigali,
a specific genre of song with close
chromatics and difficult harmonies. One
Man, Two Guvnors makes similar use of
music by having a band in the auditorium
that play as the audience enter before
the production and during the interval.
They take the form of a 1960s band,
similar to the Beatles, and take to the
stage between scenes. At various
points, the actors themselves come on
stage during these numbers and play a
speciality act such as the car horns, the
xylophone, or ukulele. This deliberately
evokes the era of variety and music hall
which was popular in the early half of the
twentieth century, particularly in seaside
towns such as Brighton where One Man,
Two Guvnors is located.

Themes
Richard Bean, after Goldoni, has retained
the themes which were popular with
commedia audiences in the 18th century.
Plot lines included jealousy, old age,
love and adultery, popular themes that
still drive most television soap operas.
These themselves originated in ancient
Greek theatre and were passed on via the
Romans and Renaissance to the present
day. Scattered amongst the plotlines of
commedia plays were old gags and punch
lines, as well as contemporary jokes and
satire. Richard Bean has incorporated a
combination of jokes, some of which are
reminiscent of the gags of end-of-the-pier
stand-ups and some which are politically
motivated. (As the play is set in the 1960s,
he also plays with historification - jokes
built around the dramatic irony of the
audience being more knowledgeable
than the characters – for example, Dolly’s
prediction in Act Two that one day there
will be a liberal woman prime minister.)
Lazzi – comic set pieces

Derived from the Italian ‘lazzo’, meaning ‘joke’, lazzi is a comic set piece which has been handed down through generations of commedia improvisations. Traditionally, the Harlequin character (Francis in Two Guvnors) would have over 100 lazzi at his disposal. All the characters would recognise the lazzi so as soon as the Harlequin decided to perform one, they would immediately recognise the role they had to play in the improvisation. The examples of traditional lazzi listed here wouldn’t look out of place in a Charlie Chaplin film, an episode of Fawlty Towers, or a pantomime.

Examples of Traditional Lazzi

Running-around-the-balcony Lazzo
Arlecchino, pursed, or to prove his identity as Arlecchino, leaps from the stage to the first spectator box and runs around the railing or the three sets of balconies.

Lazzo of Unspilled Wine
Startled, Arlecchino, holding a full glass of wine, executes a complete backward somersault without spilling the wine.

Slapping Lazzo
A Zanni, with either his hands bound or holding plates of food, slaps another character in the face with his foot.

Innocent Bystander Lazzo
Arlecchino and Pedrolino meet each other face-to-face and are armed to the teeth. They heap abuse on each other, relying on others to hold them back physically. Finally, when the Captain seeks to separate them, they strike out at each other with the Captain receiving most of the blows.

Source: http://sites.google.com/site/italiancommedia/lazzi

 Alfie (Martin Barrass)
Photo: Johan Persson (March 2012)
Lazzi (continued)

Goldoni incorporated several lazzi in *The Servant of Two Masters* including the scene where Truffaldino uses bread to seal his master's letter which he has wrongly opened. It is believed this was a lazzi that the well-known actor, Antonio Sacchi, who originated the role, was famous for performing. In *One Man Two Guvnors*, this lazzi has been altered to a set piece about Francis accidently eating a letter.

**Literal translation from Italian of Goldoni’s *The Servant of Two Masters***

**Truffaldino**: I am pleased we’re not going. I wanna see how this all pans out. I wanna test my abilities, serving these two masters. This letter, which is going to my other master, I don’t wanna deliver it open like this. I’ll try to fold it shut again. *(He tries different ways of folding it, badly).* Now I have to seal it. If only I knew how! I saw my Nan seal them with a bit of chewed-up bread. I’m gonna try it. *(He pulls out a tiny piece of bread from his pocket).* I feel bad using up this dear piece of bread; oh well, must be done *(he chews on a little piece of the bread to soften it but swallows it involuntarily).* Oh bloody hell! it’s gone down. Now I have to take another bite *(he does the same and swallows it).* There is no way, this is just against nature. I’ll try again *(he chews, as before. His impulse is to swallow it but he stops, with great effort, and manages to pull it out of his mouth).* Oh, here we go. I’ll seal the letter *(he seals it with the bread).* I think it’s come out pretty well. I’m just amazing!

**Other lazzi in *One Man, Two Guvnors*** includes the trunk-carrying; Francis’ fight with himself; the waiter opening the wine with a corkscrew; and various food and drink related activities in the dinner scene (Act One, Scene Four).

**The comparative scene in Richard Bean’s *One Man, Two Guvnors***

*(Enter Francis. Francis starts going through the letters of which there are four in all, two letters, and two authorisations.)*

**Francis**: Authorisation letter. Let’s put that in this pocket. Rachel Crabbe. Let’s put that in this pocket for now. I’m good at this. I could work for the Post Office. That’d be three jobs. Authorisation. That goes in the authorisations pocket. Stanley Stubbers. *(Puts it in his mouth. Chews a little. Mumbling)* Don’t really need these authorisation letters any more do I? *(He puts the authorisations in the same pocket as the Rachel letter.)* So this pocket is now for Stanley Stubbers’ letters. Good. What are these then? I’m getting confused now. Two authorisation letters. If there’s two letters they definitely need their own pocket. What’s this? Stanley Stubbers. That’s the one that tasted quite good.

*(Puts it in his mouth. Chews a little more.)*

Mm.

*(He takes a proper bite.)*


*(Really eats the letter.)*
Richard Bean has changed the names of Goldoni’s characters, but he has predominantly retained the function of the character from the original source material. Commedia dell’arte characters were usually stock characters, often known by the same name (or at the most, a handful of names), because they always fulfilled the same purpose in the drama and exhibited the same characteristics.

Goldoni himself had adapted the traditional commedia characters for his own dramatic purposes (for example, Florindo – called Stanley Stubbers in One Man, Two Guvnors – is actually an amalgamation of two commedia characters: Il Capitano and Innamorati). Richard has striven to find a 1960s equivalent of Goldoni’s original personalities.

### Character conversions

**A Servant of Two Masters / Commedia**

**Truffaldino / Harlequin or Zanni**
Tricky servant

**Pantalone / Pantaloon**
Old, rich man, motivated by money

**Brighella**
An upbeat, enterprising servant

**Florindo / Il Capitano**
Blaggart, slightly cowardly

**Smeraldina / Columbina**
Intelligent servant

**Dr Lombardi / Il Dottore (Doctor)**
Old academic

**One Man, Two Guvnors**

**Francis Henshall**
A chancer, juggling two masters

**Charlie Clench**
Gangster, tight with money

**Lloyd Boateng**
Black ex-con, now runs a pub

**Stanley Stubbers**
Public school nitwit

**Dolly**
Feminist bookkeeper

**Harry Dangle**
Latin-speaking solicitor to the Clenches

The remaining three characters are all examples of commedia Innamorati (lovers) whose main objective is to overcome obstacles to their love. They had many different character names.

**Beatrice / various names**
Dresses as dead twin brother, Roscoe

**Silvio / various names**
A wannabe actor

**Clarice / various names**
Pretty and stupid
Rehearsal overview

Associate Director Adam Penford writes about the rehearsal process of the original production, which began at the National in April 2011.

Day One
Rehearsals traditionally begin with a ‘meet and greet’ session. Representatives from all departments at the theatre stand in a circle and introduce themselves to the new cast and creative team one-by-one. At the NT, this can take quite a while as there are so many departments - from marketing to armoury to digital media – the circle only just fits into the cavernous Rehearsal Room Two. After introductions, Nicholas Hytner explains his vision for the production; why he decided to direct the play, a brief history of commedia dell’arte, the period and location he’s setting the play in. Then everyone crowds around the model box [a scale model of the set], and the designer, Mark Thompson, and Nick talk through the design scene by scene. The design is very handsome and as the flats [flat pieces of scenery] are manually slid and flown in and out, swiftly transforming locations, the excitement in the room grows. After lunch, only the cast and creative team remain for the first read-through of the play around a table. Some actors instinctively really perform at read-throughs, whilst others give a softer and less-acted reading; either way, there is lots of laughter, a promising sign for a comedy!

Weeks One and Two
Nick approaches each scene of the play in the same way. Firstly, the actors read through a scene aloud around a table, and then everyone discusses its content. As this is a new play, Nick is very keen to ensure that the plot is clear and logical. Writer, Richard Bean, is in rehearsals all the time during these early weeks and small rewrites occur constantly. After reading the scene, the actors try putting it on its feet. Nick is very hands-on and constantly jumps up to make suggestions of how actors could speak a particular line, or when and where they should move. There is a mark-up of the stage stuck to the floor, with lines designating where the flats and front cloth will be, to allow the actors to get used to the space. We also have rehearsal doors, furniture and props; the stage management team are on hand to grab anything we might need. Nick works through each scene in this way during the first two weeks, running the whole scene through once or twice when we get to the end. Whilst Nick is staging the scenes, the associate director, Cal McCrystal, a comedy specialist, is concentrating on rehearsing the comic set pieces. This includes working closely with James Corden [the actor playing Francis in the original production] on devising material for the trunk lazzi and staging the very physical and demanding dinner scene, which provides the climax of act one.

Whilst these rehearsals are taking place in the main rehearsal room, the production machinery of the NT is grinding into motion. Actors are being grabbed when they’re not being used to attend rehearsal calls in singing, dance, spoken voice, comic set pieces and stage fighting. Some of the actors, particularly James Corden, are required by the marketing and press departments to film segments for video trailers and give press interviews, either on the phone or in person. Mark
Rehearsal overview (continued)

Thompson also begins the process of designing costumes, starting with ‘costume chats’ with each member of the cast to discuss their ideas of how the character should look. Mark and the Costume Supervisor, Poppy, have photographs and newspaper cuttings of people in the 1960s as a starting point.

Weeks Four and Five
Once Nick has worked through each scene in the play in detail, he starts back on scene one again, adding another layer of detail to the performances and the staging. Sometimes decisions made in later scenes have a knock-on effect to the logic of earlier scenes and changes are made. Richard Bean starts delivering larger rewrites and we all abandon our original scripts, which are now full of crossed-out lines and hand-written additions, in favour of an updated version. A timeline appears along the back wall of the rehearsal room listing the events – both onstage and off – that happen during the twelve hours that is the play is set in. Nick also encourages all the actors to think about key things that occur in their characters’ lives before the timeframe of the play starts [their ‘back-story’]; how old they are, where they were born, how long have they known the other characters in the play and how did they meet. We spend an afternoon in rehearsal ‘hot-seating’ where Nick interviews the actors in character about how they feel about the other characters in the play and the events that occur. This leads to improvisations of the key events; such as the moment Alan asked Charlie for his daughter Pauline’s hand in marriage; and Francis and Rachel’s car journey to Brighton. With a cast of comedy actors, the improvisations are very funny.

Week Six
During our last week of rehearsals, the four-piece band joins the cast in the rehearsal room so we can hone the scene changes and practise the songs. All this is designed to make the transition into the technical rehearsal in the theatre as smooth as possible. The rehearsal props, furniture and bits of costume are gradually replaced by the real things [they’re called ‘actuals’]. Most importantly, real food for the dinner scene is tested. We have two full run-throughs of the show which audiences are invited to attend and Rehearsal Room Two is full to the seams with 100 A-Level students.

James Corden and Oliver Chris in rehearsal for the original production
Photo: Johan Persson (April 2011)
Rehearsal overview (continued)

squeezed in. We use their reaction to gauge when a scene is too long, when the plot isn’t clear and when the action isn’t funny enough. New sets of rewrites and cuts are introduced after each run.

Technical Rehearsal
The ‘tech’ proves to be a relatively smooth process, especially when considering the complexity of the show’s design; a live band, sliding flats, flying flats, trapdoors, automation (which transports the microphones from substage to stage level). Over three days, we work through the whole play; often running complicated sequences (such as scene changes) several times. Paul Arditti, the sound designer, has a complicated job as he has to mix the band and singers for each musical number in order to get an attractive aural balance, as well as providing direct sound effects.

There are some complications such as the automation system, which makes a loud whirling noise which distracts from the dialogue when the mics are moved at the end and beginnings of scenes. It is decided in previews to only cue the automation after the dialogue has finished, and Grant Olding, the composer, has to extend the music to allow the mics time to travel before the singer is due to begin. Another major issue is the two doors, located on either side of the stage. These are used in most scenes and the action requires a lot of them. (Farces, or plays with farcical elements, are notorious for their reliance on doors). In different scenes they have to open in a different directions (denoting external locations where doors open inwards, and internal rooms where doors open outwards), they are frequently slammed and crashed against by actors, must stay firmly shut once closed, but not be so heavy that the cast has trouble operating them. At several times during the tech the doors don’t go according to plan. Eventually, the decision is made to give the actors a tech session off (3 hours) in order to allow the production team to fit new lighter, but sturdier, doors, with more reliable catches. At the end of the tech, there are two dress rehearsals which go very well; although the decision is taken to change some sections of action and the cast have to implement changes in front of an audience during the first preview.

Previews
The first preview goes very smoothly and the audience response borders on hysterical. Rehearsals continue during the daytime throughout previews: scene changes are sharpened, alternative punch lines are tested and discarded, blocking is changed and cuts are made. The overall purpose, as it has been throughout the process, is to make the story as clear and funny as possible.
In early November, the production transferred to the Adelphi Theatre in the West End with the original cast. It was decided that the length of the show was a bit too long for a commercial audience and Richard Bean made 10-minutes worth of cuts to the text. The cast only had one day to put these cuts into action during the technical rehearsal. This proved difficult as they had been saying the original version of the text for 6 months, and to re-learn sections was confusing. They had 14 previews to consolidate the new slim-lined version and by press night they had honed the new version and the production opened to great reviews. Over the course of the run however, due to the parts of the play that involve improvisation and audience participation, the running time of the play gradually crept up to its original length as the cast had more and more fun adlibbing.

The Adelphi Theatre is a big venue, which usually accommodates large-scale musicals rather than plays. The auditorium seats 1500 people and the cast and production team had to adapt week-to-week. The King's Theatre in Edinburgh presented a particular challenge as the stage was raked [set on a gradient, with the floor sloping down to the front of the stage]. This meant that all the furniture and some props had to be anti-raked to counteract the angle of the stage, or they could topple over. After deliberation, a decision was made not to anti-rake the serving trolley used in the Dinner scene as it's wheeled at high speed and there was a concern that anti-raking it might slow down the action in the scene. However, during the first night James Corden's performance adrenalin kicked in and as he ran at high speed across the stage, and jumped up and down, the trolley slowly started to drift down towards the edge of the stage. James spotted it just before it fell off on top of the front row of the audience, and spent five minutes trying to make it stay in one place. In the end, he continued the scene, holding on to the trolley throughout, to the delight of the audience.

The Adelphi Theatre is a big venue, which usually accommodates large-scale musicals rather than plays. The auditorium seats 1500 people and the cast had to increase the size of their performance and the vocal energy they used in order to reach the audience at the very back. There were 8 shows a week scheduled and occasionally this took its toll on the actors' voices, which became tired and required treatment from a voice specialist. By the end of the run in February, the cast had performed to approximately 200,000 people at the Adelphi. They subsequently had a well-deserved holiday before taking the play to New York.
In production: transferring to the Haymarket

Lisa Blair, Resident Director of the production at the Theatre Royal Haymarket writing in May 2012:
Due to the fantastic success of the run at the Adelphi theatre, a new cast was selected to continue the production in the West End. This not only meant a new cast but also a new venue. The show would be running at the Theatre Royal Haymarket with a capacity of 900. In late January 2012, the new cast assembled for rehearsals at the National Theatre. It was a huge task for all involved (including the creative team) because they would be recreating the original production but ensuring they still brought their individuality.

The four-week rehearsal period was interesting because much of the blocking [the process of planning where, when, and how actors will move about the stage during a performance], had been worked out and already set during the previous rehearsal period. However, the new cast still explored this for themselves under the direction of Nicholas Hytner and Associate Director Adam Penford. This meant that the cast had ownership on this new version of the play whilst also making sure they went through the actor’s process, which is so vital to rehearsals.

This new production saw little change in way of text. A few lines were tweaked with actors’ input but Richard Bean made the majority of changes. One of the biggest text changes revolved around the character, Francis. Prior to Owain Arthur taking the role, Francis was a character from London. In this new production, Owain was playing Francis as a Welshman. This meant that region specific lines had to be changed to accommodate this.

During previews, changes were implemented; fights were redirected, lines were cut, microphone levels were adjusted to ensure all singers were heard clearly in the auditorium and blocking was refined. Press night took place on 13 March 2012, and the show received fantastic reviews. Many of the reviews mentioned how the new cast had made the show their own whilst staying faithful to the text and essence of the original production. This was wonderful news for all those involved. The show is currently running at the Theatre Royal Haymarket until January 2013.

Francis (Owain Arthur) and Stanley (Ben Mansfield)
Photo: Johan Persson (March 2012)
Interview with Richard Bean, playwright

Richard Bean was born in Hull and worked as an occupational psychologist and stand-up comedian before becoming a playwright. His many plays include Honeymoon Suite, Harvest, The Heretic, Toast, The Big Fellah and an adaptation of Molière's The Hypochondriac. England People Very Nice premiered at the NT in 2009. He talks to Adam Penford about the play during the last week of rehearsals in April 2011.

How does writing an adaptation compare to writing an original play? Most writers like to do an adaptation once a year as you know what happens next. The pain of doing original work is it’s up to you to decide where the plot goes. With an adaptation, you just have to make the plot work in the context you’ve decided on, so in One Man, Two Guvnors it’s set in 1963, Brighton. Then all I have to worry about is making it funny. It’s a great pleasure to do adaptations; I’m not saying it’s easier, but it’s more pleasurable because someone’s already written the ending. Deciding how to end a play is a writer’s torture.

A Servant of Two Masters has a complex structure and is very much of its period. What are the problems in adapting and updating a work of this genre? The main problem to solve is that the plot revolves around arranged marriage and that doesn’t exist in contemporary society, except within certain cultures. But we wanted to set the play in the 1960s so it would have been a very different play if I’d explored immigrant marriages in that decade. The solution we came up with was a marriage of convenience because one of the parties was gay and wanted to hide that fact by marrying a woman. That was my first big breakthrough. The second problem was the sword fighting that features in the original. I remembered Baz Luhrmann’s film, Romeo + Juliet [1996], where he got around his updating of Shakespeare’s play by branding the automatic guns the characters used as being made by a manufacturer called ‘Sword’ so he didn’t have to change the text’s references to swords. This made me think that in the 1960s East End gangsters would have carried around flick knives and that introduced the gangster concept to the adaptation.
Richard Bean interview (continued)

You've relocated the play from 18th century Venice to 1960s Brighton. How did that come about?
I remember having many early discussions with Nick [Hytner, the production’s director] about where to set it. Because food is such a main motivating factor for the central character, my original idea was to set it just after WWII because food was still being rationed. I thought the kind of period music and clothes we could incorporate would be very stylish. But Nick wasn’t very keen on that as he thought the colours [both literally in the set and costumes, and stylistically in terms of the mood of the music] would be too muted; browns and greys and military colours. Nick was set on having more primary colours in the mix so we settled on 1963.

You've retained many elements of Commedia dell'arte. Was this important to you?
I certainly wanted to keep most of the stock characters from the genre. Nick and I sat around a lot and talked about how those characters fitted into British comedy, music hall, Variety, even Monty Python; you can imagine John Cleese playing a pretentious middle-class gent spouting Latin [like the character of Harry Dangle in One Man, Two Guvnors]. We wanted to put a bit of a 1963 spin on the stock characters. So, for example, the birth of feminism gave us the character of Dolly. The physical stuff was quite a challenge and also it’s not fashionable in contemporary theatre to have asides to the audience. The physical gags and business we’re doing is a risk. I’m quite sure some of the more pretentious broadsheet critics will find it a bit too close to pantomime. But Nick and I wanted to make an accessible, popular comedy that would find a new audience for the NT. The first draft had quite a lot of swearing in it because that’s how East End gangsters speak, but Nick felt very strongly that we should take all the swearing out so that family audiences could watch the show. There’s only one use of the ‘F-word’ in the play now, right at the end.

You've been sitting in on rehearsals quite a lot. How do you find handing over the play to a director and actors?
I would normally only be in the room for the first week of rehearsals, but with this there’s been a lot more work, partly because of how all the physical business that’s being created affects the script. Nick has wanted me around much more than I usually am which I’m very happy to do, but usually I’m only too happy to get out of the way and let the director and actors get on with it. Nick and I have worked on three plays together now and my involvement really depends on the project. With England People Very Nice, our first collaboration, I was in the rehearsal room all the time because we wrote it as we rehearsed. We did a lot of rewriting on that and we’ve found a way of working together on rewrites whilst I’m in the room and he’s directing. I don’t consider any of my plays to be finished until the Friday of the first week of performances. I know the play will get better once it’s in front of audiences and it’s that performance draft I send to the publishers, not the first rehearsal draft.
Grant Olding trained as an actor at Central School of Speech and Drama. He has written several musicals including *Simply Cinderella*, *Robin Hood*, *Tracy Beaker Gets Real*, *Spittin’ Distance* and *Three Sides*. He has also written music for plays including *England People Very Nice*, *The Alchemist*, *The Man of Mode* and *Southwark Fair*, all at the NT. He spoke to Adam Penford during rehearsals in April 2011.

**What were your initial discussions with the director about the role music would play in *One Man Two Guvnors*?**

The first conversations I had with Nick were about time, place and style. He told me it was set in 1963, Brighton, and mentioned Ealing Comedies [a series of films produced at Ealing Studios between 1947-1957], *Carry On* films [low-budget comedies, 1958-1978] and early Beatles music. Later, he abandoned the above in place of skiffle music. Later still, it was Variety acts. Finally, we decided we would make our own rules up and create a hybrid of all the styles we wanted to incorporate. Nick began sending me YouTube clips of crazy Variety acts; people playing car horns and xylophones. We decided there would be music in between scenes, but we didn’t know if that would just be incidental music, or actual songs, or if there would be underscoring during the actual scenes. Before rehearsals began, we did a workshop and decided the band would be on stage and that would be the skiffle band that the character of Francis mentions in the play.

**What was your process for writing the music once you knew what the director required?**

Once I knew the type of instruments I needed to incorporate then the line-up of the band formed in my head. We did some workshops and I got the band playing all kinds of crazy stuff that hasn’t actually ended up in the show; bones, paper bag, musical saws. This inspired me to write the first song, ‘My Old Man’s a Gannet’, which was about food, a major theme in the play. Nick liked the idea that all the songs should incorporate various ideas from the play, without actually being about events which occur on stage. He told me to write a series of songs based on that concept and we would decide at a later point where those songs might fit in within the structure of the play. I had written about six songs before we started rehearsals and it was only then that we started talking about where in the show they might fit and who would sing them.
Grant Olding interview (continued)

Was the decision to have four members in the band a budgetary choice or because that’s how many musicians would be in a 1960s group? Originally, the NT had budgeted for three players, but I argued for four because it seemed impossible to do beat combo [three guitars, plus drums] music without four members. All those 1960s bands – the Beatles, the Kinks, plus skiffle bands – had four musicians. These discussions were before we’d decided if the music would consist of songs or instrumental music, and if we’d settled on instrumental we definitely would have needed a fourth member to play the melody. I don’t think I’d want to do it with more than four though, it’s the perfect number. Also, there was a point in rehearsals when we were discussing having a cast of actor-musicians, who would play the characters and then play instruments on stage during the musical interludes. We’ve kept an element of that in the production.

How easy is it to find musicians who are willing to be seen on stage rather than hidden in an orchestra pit? It’s not very easy. I knew I needed young people, who were happy to get up on stage and would actually care about the show. Plus, Nick wanted us to feel like a real band, because of that I had these four players in my mind from the beginning. All of us have been in pop or rock bands before and I’ve worked with all four of them before, and they’ve worked with each other before as musicians on various musicals and are great mates. We had four band rehearsals before they joined the actors in rehearsal. If we didn’t know each other it would have been a nightmare as everyone would have been jostling for position. Within the first hour we were laughing and joking and messing around. This is a different show for me because I haven’t written out specific parts for each instrument. Instead, we all come up with ideas and try them out and work out what’s best.

They are very versatile musicians. One plays the double bass and the electric bass. The guitarist has learnt the musical saw and the ukulele, although we don’t use them in the show now. The drummer learnt the washboard, paper bag, bones and spoons. The tricky bit is to keep it realistically 1963. How people perform now on stage is very different from then. 1960s performers stand in a certain way and bob their heads. It comes from a dance band tradition. Even the instruments that rock groups played in the 1960s came from dance bands. The performance style is more polite. It’s very different from the rock that’s played now. Any time our drummer throws in a fill or plays a bass drum pattern that doesn’t feel like it comes from the early sixties, it takes the audience out of it. And that’s been a real challenge. The bass drum is just keeping it really simple, keeping it to the 2 and 4 counts, not pushing beats and syncopating. The bass player’s problem is not to funk it up, because he is usually a really funky bass player. The guitarist has had to do lots of research into country music. For me as a composer, the big challenge was writing three chord songs, something really simple, real pop songs. No middle eight, just verse and chorus, two sections. Two or three chords at the most.
Grant Olding interview (continued)

Which do you write first: lyrics or music?
I always write the lyrics first because I come from a musical theatre background. In a musical the music is always driven by a character, and therefore by lyrics. Saying that, most times when I’m writing a lyric I do actually hear the rhythm of the song in my head, so I have a vague idea of how the melody might go and then I’ll refine that. Sometimes, when I get on to writing the melody it takes over and I have to go back and rewrite the lyrics from scratch again. Many of the skiffle songs in the show are story songs, they have a plot progression. I often work out the story of the song first, where in the plot I have to get to in each verse and chorus, before I start writing.

How does writing music for plays differ from writing songs for musicals?
The main difference is that in musical theatre you tend to be in control of the whole show; in plays, you’re trying to serve everyone else. In a musical, the emotional journeys and themes, and therefore the structure of the show, are driven by the composer; so you’re dictating where the underscore goes, how you’re going to get into a song etc. In a play, the director gives you a list of what music they need; for example, scene change music or underscoring. If a scene change takes longer than expected, then they will ask you to write an extra twenty seconds of music. In One Man, Two Guvnors, there’s only one piece of scene change music which tells you something about the emotion of the characters [the blues music before the pier scene in Act Two which depicts Stanley and Roscoe’s depression]. The test is that you could take the visual picture away and still tell, by the music, the way the characters are feeling. That’s more like musical theatre.

You’ve worked with Nick a lot. Can you say something about the collaboration?
We’ve worked together on five plays, and we have a common language; he doesn’t have to take ages explaining an idea to me. I like to be in rehearsals a lot so I can feel like I understand the production and Nick encourages that. I like to get to know the actors and what they’re doing with their character; the actors’ physicality tends to influence the music you’re writing for that character. Nick is brilliant at guessing exactly where the music should start, how long it needs to be to cover the scene change, and what the mood should be. Not many directors have that level of instinct.