ALMEIDA THEATRE

# Access Information Pack



# Desire Under the Elms

by Eugene O'Neill

Directed by Ebenezer Bamgboye

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# The Production

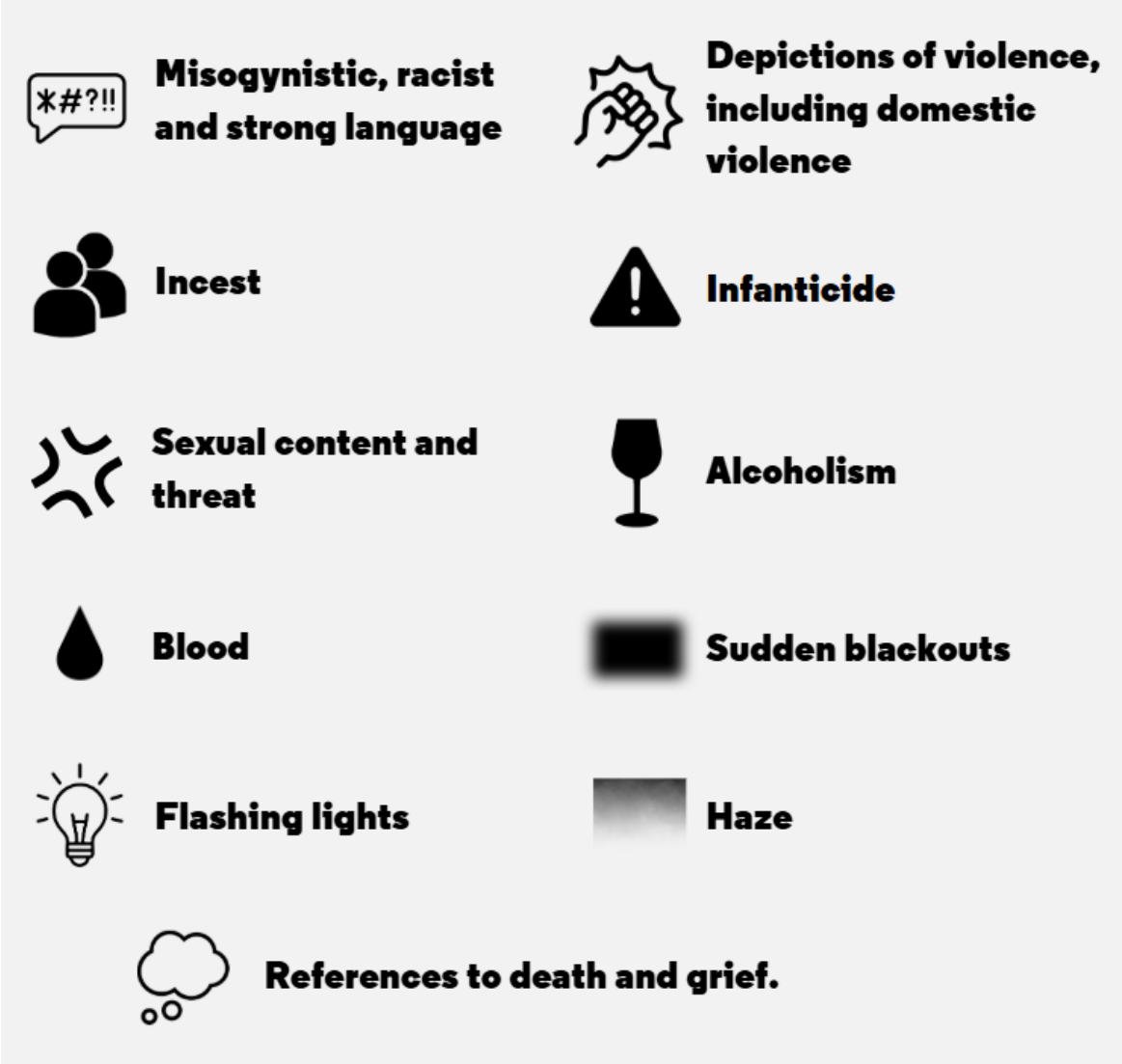
Please note the following information contains full plot spoilers.

## Overview

**Eugene O'Neill**'s 1924 play *Desire Under the Elms*, tells the story of a family fighting over who will inherit their farm. Their struggle for ownership becomes tangled up with love, lust and betrayal leading to tragic consequences.

## Content Guidance

*Desire Under the Elms* contains:



# Performance Conditions:

## Relaxed Environment Performances

The duty manager will make an onstage announcement before the performance begins to explain what a Relaxed Environment Performance is. They will explain:

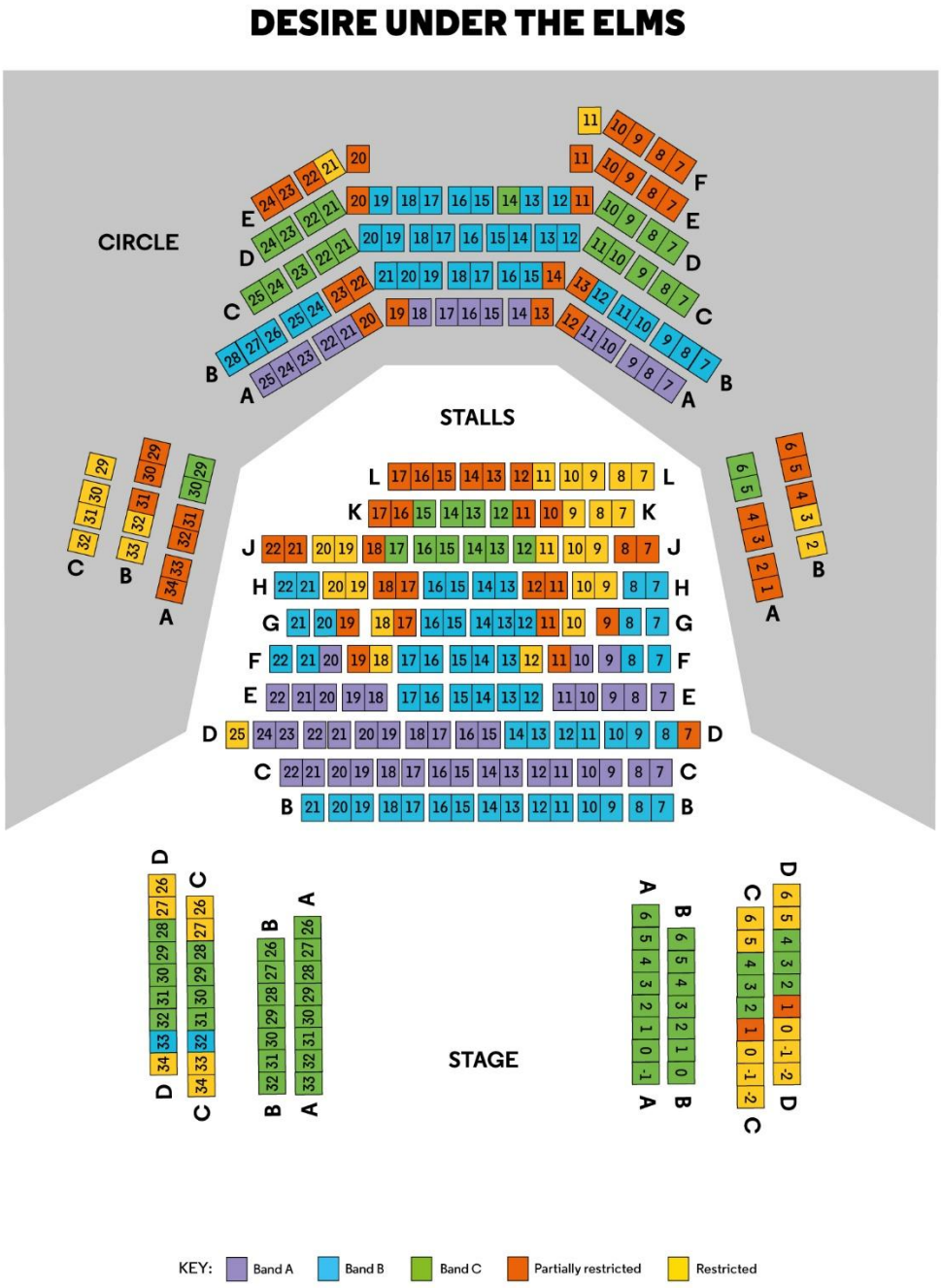
- Audience members are free to make noise, move about or come and go to take breaks and access the facilities as needed.
- If you need to step out of the auditorium for a break, there is also a TV monitor in the foyer to watch the performance from, so you don't miss any of the action.

# Running time and interval

The running time is 2 hours and 35 minutes, including a 20-minute interval. The first part lasts 1 hour and 15 minutes, followed by the interval, with the second part lasting 1 hour.

# Seating

In this production, the stage comes out into the auditorium in a thrust formation. There are seats in front of and either side of the stage (side stalls). There is a raised walkway that goes all the way around the stage and the side stalls. The seats in the stalls are arranged in rows, with aisles either side. Further seating is available in the Circle level above. There is no step free access to the side stalls and the Circle.



# What Happens in the Play?

## Brief Synopsis

*Desire Under the Elms* begins on a farm in the United States of America – this production has changed the location and time from 1850s New England to rural Louisiana in 1900.

Eben and his half-brothers, Peter and Simeon, live a hard life of work on the farm. Their father, Ephraim, left the farm three months earlier and could return at any point. Although all brothers want their father's prosperous farm, Eben claims it is rightfully his by inheritance from his mother.

When Ephraim returns with a new and much younger wife, Abbie, Simeon and Peter sell their share of the farm to Eben and leave. Over a couple of months, Abbie promises to give Ephraim a son in return for the farm. At the same time, she and Eben begin a dangerous flirtation, which culminates in a supernatural moment where the ghost of Eben's mother appears to encourage their relationship.

A year later, Abbie and Eben have had a child but pass the baby off as Ephraim's. When Eben discovers that Abbie conceived the child to get the farm, he breaks off the relationship. Abbie, desperate to prove her love, kills the baby. In the final scene, Abbie and Eben reconcile but Abbie decides to face the consequences of her sin.

## Content and Themes

**Themes:** ownership & inheritance; racism; desire & sexuality; family & trauma; labour; mothers & gender roles; the supernatural.

**Content information:**

- Sexual contact and violence between characters is shown in realistic and symbolic ways
- Parental and domestic abuse is discussed and depicted
- Blood on stage
- The supernatural and ghosts
- References to death from overworking
- Partying, alcohol consumption
- Harassment, shouting, aggression and volatile behaviour
- Intimidation and threat
- A slap to the face
- Joke referencing homelessness
- Reference to slavery
- False accusation of sexual violence
- Discussion of death of a child; infanticide
- References to sex work
- Sexist comments and insults

**Potential triggers:** Verbal abuse and insults; physical aggression, including slapping, pushing, grabbing; kissing, sexual touch and intimacy; loud and sudden shouting; sudden and blinding lighting/sound effects. Use of stage blood and haze. The most intense sequences are in Act 2 Scene 6 and from Act 3 Scene 4 to the end of the play.

## Sensory and Staging Overview

If you are affected by any of these elements, you are welcome to take breaks at any time.

**Sound:** There is a combination of live music and pre-recorded sound played throughout. The live music is performed by a trumpeter, guitarist and vocalist. The musicians play two full songs live – one at the top of the show and one at the end of the first half – which include pre-recorded backing. They also play smaller snippets of songs throughout the show. All songs are covers or adaptations of popular songs. The musicians will also play short bursts of sound – often a single note or refrain – during scenes, to express the characters' emotions. The musicians move around the stage so sounds may come from different directions. One short live acoustic piece is also performed by the character Simeon.

During moments of choreographed movement – particularly moments expressing violence, intimacy, attraction and the supernatural – the sound design is often loud and aggressive. There is an original soundscape that plays throughout.

In one scene, the voices of two of the characters echo across different speakers.

**Lighting:**

- During key moments, the large square portal or screen that hangs at the back of the stage flashes
- There are sudden shifts into darker states and several sustained periods of low lighting

- There are also sudden changes in colour, where blue, orange or green lights will become more intense
- Two objects on stage – a bucket and a stone box. Both have light coming out of them
- There are sudden shifts in lights to show a change in scene or to accentuate movement sequences
- Audience members in the side stalls will have side lights shine towards their faces

**Staging:** There is a large platform in the middle of the stage, with audience seating close to the sides of the platform. Actors walk and run around a raised walkway that goes all the way around the stage and the side stalls. People sitting in the side seats are more visible than those in the main seating blocks and often exposed to stage lighting. There is a metal bucket hanging high above the centre of the platform throughout the show which is lowered and used in a movement sequence at the end.

Haze is used throughout the performance.

**Movement:** moments of violence are depicted either in slow-motion, realistic fighting, or symbolic stage images. There is one particularly harrowing physical image of a male character overpowering another and twisting his arm. Moments of attraction or intimacy are depicted through touch, including characters clawing at each other or mounting each other. All movement is accompanied by a sudden strong shift in lighting.





# Characters




**Spirits** - Three figures who roam the stage, played by actor-musicians (a trumpeter, singer and guitarist)

**Peter** - the second brother, who dreams of leaving the farm and travelling to the Appalachian mountains

**Simeon** - the eldest brother and a talented musician

**Eben** - the youngest brother, who believes the farm is rightfully his. Blames Ephraim for the death of his mother

**Ephraim** - the patriarch, who has worked on this farm for almost 50 years

**Abbie** - a woman from a town nearby who marries Ephraim

# Scene by Scene Synopsis

## ACT 1

### Prologue

The three Spirits perform a version of "House of the Rising Sun". Eben enters doing a stylised movement in the middle of the stage to represent his work on the farm.

### Scene 1

Content Warnings: Vulgar, sexist language.

Peter and Simeon return from a day of work on the farm. Peter describes how beautiful a local woman called Lila Johnson is, who Simeon pays no attention to. When Simeon has a surge of back pain and says he doesn't know how much longer he can do their strenuous work, Peter offers the idea of moving to the Appalachian mountains to play music. Simeon, who has heard this plan before, thinks it's a bad idea to leave behind the farm after years of working it with the hope of owning it one day, and believes the mountains will leave them worse off. Peter wants to dream big and be free. Their brother Eben, who has been eavesdropping, interrupts the conversation, establishing the tense relationship between the brothers. Eben has cooked their dinner and they go inside.

### Scene 2

Content Warnings: physical aggression, sexism. References to overwork, slavery, haunting and ghosts, sex work.

A short movement exchange in which the three brothers wrestle. A short musical moment where Simeon performs some lines of the song, “Feathery”.

After dinner, Simeon encourages Eben to stay and talk. Simeon shares how overworked they are. We learn that Eben doesn’t believe Ephraim is his father and that he believes the whole farm is his by rights, which antagonises his brothers. The brothers exchange blame for the death of Eben’s mother, who had cared for them when they were young and was overworked under Ephraim. They share that they can still feel her ghostly presence on the farm. We learn Ephraim left the farm in response to a call from God, but they do not know where he went. Eben goes to leave to visit the local sex worker, Minnie, and Peter reveals that their father Ephraim also previously slept with Minnie. Eben lunges at Peter in frustration and exits.

## Scene 3

**Content Warnings:** sexual language and implied sexual violence.

Eben speaks about Minnie and his affection for her, despite learning she slept with Ephraim.

In a movement sequence, Eben dances with one of the Spirits who embodies Minnie. The sequence ends with Eben physically jolting his body in agony and the music swells intensely.

## Scene 4

**Content Warnings:** References to domestic violence.

Eben returns the next morning to share the news that Ephraim has married again. Peter and Simeon weigh up the option of leaving the farm. Eben tells them he has written out a contract offering them 300 dollars each if they sign over their share of the farm to him. Peter and Simeon deliberate and decide to take the money once they see their father's new bride in person. The brothers reminisce about the kindness of Eben's mother and how she bore the brunt of Ephraim's wrath. When they see the new bride in the distance, the brothers decide to take Eben's money and sign the farm over to him.

## Scene 5

**Content Warnings:** References to sexual violence. Physical threat and intimidation. Mockery and insult. Shouting.

The brothers take one final look at the farm and hide in the shadows. Ephraim and his new wife, Abbie, enter but cannot see Peter and Simeon, who start to mock and threaten them, (their voices ring out over speakers in the auditorium). The brothers leave and Ephraim rushes to check the state of his farm.

## Scene 6

**Content Warning:** References to death of a baby, poverty. Sexist insult. Physical threat and intimidation.

Abbie sees Eben cleaning in the kitchen. Eben is startled but then ignores her as she tries to introduce herself. When he does speak, he dismisses her. She notices that they both wear necklaces to commemorate important people - he for his mother, she for her daughter. She then opens up about her life and the

death of her daughter. Eben insults Abbie, leading to a verbal sparring match in which Abbie boasts that she owns the farm.

The scene builds to a movement sequence where the two characters rush at each other and their bodies swirl, representing the growing sexual chemistry between them. Abbie tries to end on a conciliatory note before she exits.

### Scene 7

**Content Warning:** Shouting, aggression and shoving.

Eben goes outside to find Ephraim. Ephraim challenges Eben for not working and Eben counters him aggressively. Ephraim threatens Eben and then pushes him.

## ACT 2

### Prologue

**Content Warning:** Physical jerking and shouting.

A movement sequence represents the passing of two months. Eben moves around the walkway, shaking and pounding his body. When he reaches the platform, the music changes. He and Abbie pass each other in an expressive movement.

## Scene 1

Content Warning: Insult and mockery (including a joke about homelessness), sexually explicit language, references to sexual contact and predation.

Abbie catches Eben on the way to town and confronts him about staring at her while she was naked and pressing his erection against her. Eben chooses to sit with her and they spar playfully. Abbie gives a speech identifying Eben's repressed feelings for her and encourages him to embrace them. Eben explodes at Abbie with sexual passion, represented in a movement sequence. Eben runs away, likely to see the sex worker Minnie, which infuriates Abbie.

## Scene 2

Content Warning: False accusation of sexual violence, sexism.

Ephraim enters dancing and singing. He shares with Abbie his feelings about growing old and his increasing softness towards Eben. Abbie does not want him to leave the farm to Eben and accuses Eben of trying to make love to her. Ephraim threatens to kill Eben, so Abbie retracts the allegation. Abbie proposes they have a son so that Ephraim leaves the farm to her, and he agrees.

## Scene 3

Content Warning: References to sex.

Some hours later, Eben returns to the farm. To Abbie's amusement, he never reached Minnie because she had another customer. As they stargaze, Abbie

and Eben warm to each other and Abbie calls him beautiful. At the sound of Ephraim approaching, Eben runs away.

## Scene 4

Content Warning: sudden verbal aggression and shouting; references to death and farm labour; loneliness; sexualisation.

Ephraim enters, eager to head to the bedroom, but Abbie declines. Ephraim tells the story of the farm: the dilapidated state he found it in, his temptation to go West and find richer soil, and his previous wives. When Abbie shows she is bored by his speech, Ephraim explodes at her, but then leaves full of regret at his rage towards her.

## Scene 5

Content Warning: sexual references.

A tearful Abbie enters the kitchen. Eben goes to comfort her. A stylised movement represents the two kissing. When they part, Eben denies their chemistry again. Abbie challenges him, culminating in a slow sensual walk towards him, where she says “Tell me to stop” but he cannot. At the last moment, he breaks away and Abbie chases him and a huge row breaks out. The row is interrupted by a light that goes on in the parlour room. Once they determine that Ephraim is not in there, Abbie runs in.

## Scene 6

**Content Warning:** the supernatural, references to abuse, sexual content.

Abbie and Eben enter the parlour, where they sense a ghostly presence. Eben identifies the presence as his mother. The presence is warm to Abbie. The room starts to shake, and the two characters are flung at each other. Abbie realises that the powerful ghost wants them to touch. Eben gives in to his desire on the basis that his mother wants revenge on Ephraim, and in a stylised sequence Eben and Abbie make love in the parlour room.

# INTERVAL

# ACT 3

## Prologue

A movement sequence depicting Abbie and Eben above a cot-sized stone box, running their hands over a beam of light, watched by the Spirits. A movement sequence follows depicting an intense party.

## Scene 1

**Content Warning:** sexual references.

Abbie and Eben have had a child that they have passed off as Ephraim's. It is the day of the baby's christening, and they have just had sex in a room above the party. They trade stories of risky sexual encounters where they were almost

caught by Ephraim. Eben tells Abbie he loves her, and she warns him not to toy with her feelings. She then goes down to the party.

## Scene 2

**Content warning:** alcohol consumption and excess; predatory behaviour and sexual harassment; sudden shouting.

The partygoers are drunk and tease Abbie, who they suspect has been sleeping with Eben. Men crowd around her, jostling and prodding her. Ephraim enters and downs a potent alcoholic brew. Abbie leaves to return to the baby.

## Scene 3

**Content warning:** slapping; sexist insult.

Abbie returns to Eben, visibly upset by the party. Eben becomes enraged by the men's behaviour towards Abbie and threatens to teach them a lesson. Abbie panics and slaps him across the face Eben to stop him. Eben says they must tell Ephraim about their relationship and the baby and leave for California. He fears Ephraim will overwork their son, just like his own mother was overworked. Abbie begs him not to, so she can enjoy this rare moment of happiness in her life.

## Scene 4

**Content warning:** physical and verbal abuse.

Ephraim finds Eben outside. Eben restates his right to the farm. Ephraim counters that his son will be the heir, but Eben insinuates that women from Denson, where Abbie is from, have children with ambiguous paternity. The row escalates around Ephraim's treatment of Eben's mother. Ephraim reveals that Eben's family owned the land but that he built the farm, and that he married Eben's mother because she was pregnant with Eben out of wedlock. Eben, enraged, lunges at Ephraim, but Ephraim beats him mercilessly. Ephraim tells Eben he knows that he tried to make love to Abbie and that she proposed they have a son so she can have the farm (Act 2, Scene 2). Ephraim violently twists Eben's arm, and Abbie interrupts them.

### Scene 5

**Content warning:** insult; sexist insult.

After Ephraim leaves, Eben rejects Abbie. He disavows the son, ends their relationship and decides to leave the farm. Abbie grows desperate to prove her love.

### Scene 6

**Content warning:** infanticide, screaming, stage blood.

In a stylised moment, Abbie kills the child, with the help of the Spirits.

### Scene 7

**Content warning:** aggression and violence, discussion of infanticide.

The next morning, Eben is packing up to leave, ignoring Abbie. Abbie tells Eben what she has done. At first, Eben thinks she has killed Ephraim but then learns it is the baby. Devastated, he goes to the sheriff to report her.

## Scene 8

**Content warning:** aggression, discussion of infanticide.

Ephraim arrives. Abbie tells him what happened and reveals the son was Eben's all along. Ephraim, bewildered and devastated, goes back to work.

A short movement sequence depicts Eben's internal struggle.

## Scene 9

Eben returns to Abbie. He has realised that his mother's spirit was misguiding him and that his love for Abbie was real. He apologises and wants to escape with Abbie. Abbie decides to stay, to confront the consequences of her actions. In a symbolic final moment, Abbie cleans the blood from her hands.

# About the Almeida Theatre

## How to get here

The Almeida Theatre is on Almeida Street in Islington. The postcode is N1 1TA. It is a large, white concrete building and it is situated halfway up the road.

The outside of the theatre looks like this:



Journey to the theatre

The nearest underground stations are **Angel** on the Northern line or **Highbury & Islington** on the Victoria line, and London Overground.







You can find more information on our website here:

**almeida.co.uk/your-visit/getting-here/**

## Highbury & Islington Station to Almeida Theatre

This is what **Highbury & Islington** station looks like outside.




Follow the path out of the station to the right onto Upper Street.

The theatre is about 1 kilometre down the road on Almeida Street.

On your journey down from Highbury, you will pass these **landmarks:**

This is Union Chapel.

It is near bus stop G.



If you don't want to walk, you can get buses 4, 19, 30 or 43 and get off at St Mary's church - bus stop N – for the theatre.

This is where Upper Street crosses Islington Park Street and Canonbury Lane.



This is Islington Town Hall.



This is what Almeida Street looks like as you arrive at the theatre.



## Angel Station to Almeida Theatre

This is what **Angel** station looks like outside.




From Angel station, turn right onto Upper Street and cross the busy road at the pedestrian crossing.

Continue along Upper Street for about 1 kilometre.

The theatre is on the left on Almeida Street.

On your journey down from Angel, you will pass these **landmarks:**

This is the main bus stop across the road from Angel station – bus stop Y.



If you don’t want to walk you can get buses 4, 19, 30 or 43 and get off at bus stop P, opposite St Mary’s church.

This is Islington Green.



This is St. Mary’s Church.



This is what Almeida Street looks like as you arrive at the theatre.



## Information about the theatre

You can watch a video tour of the building on our website here: https://almeida.co.uk/your-visit/access/

Inside the main entrance of the theatre, there is a foyer where people can wait. This is what the foyer looks like.



It can get quite busy here before the start of the play.



When you arrive, the front of house team will greet you.

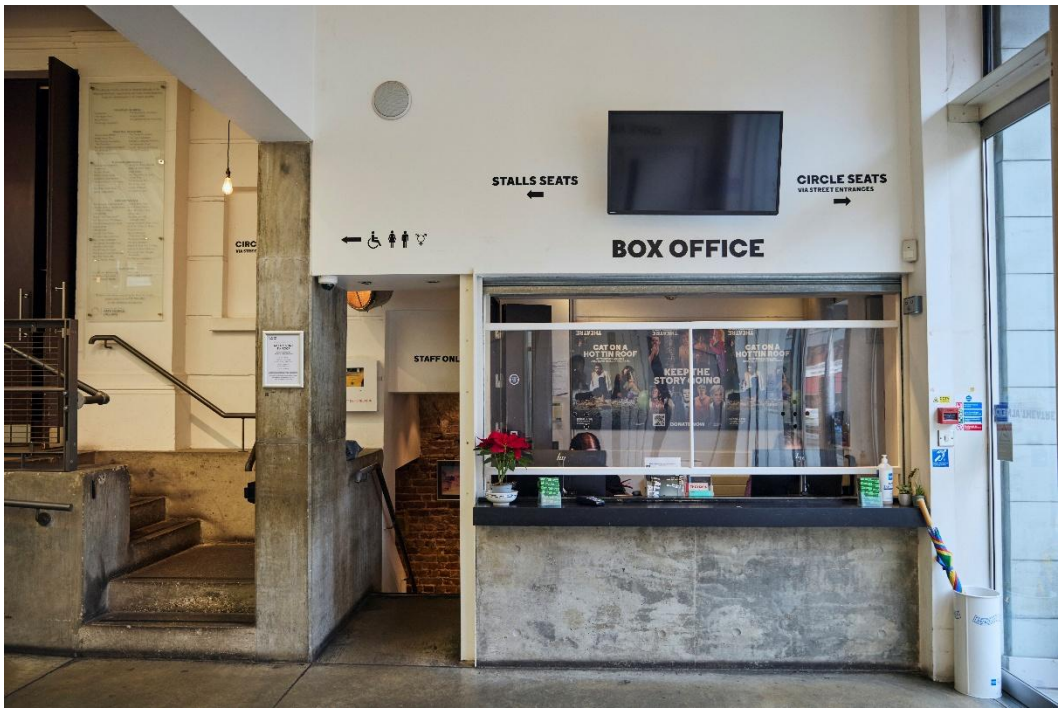


There are lots of staff available in the building if you have questions or if you would like directions to your seats. They are very happy to help you.

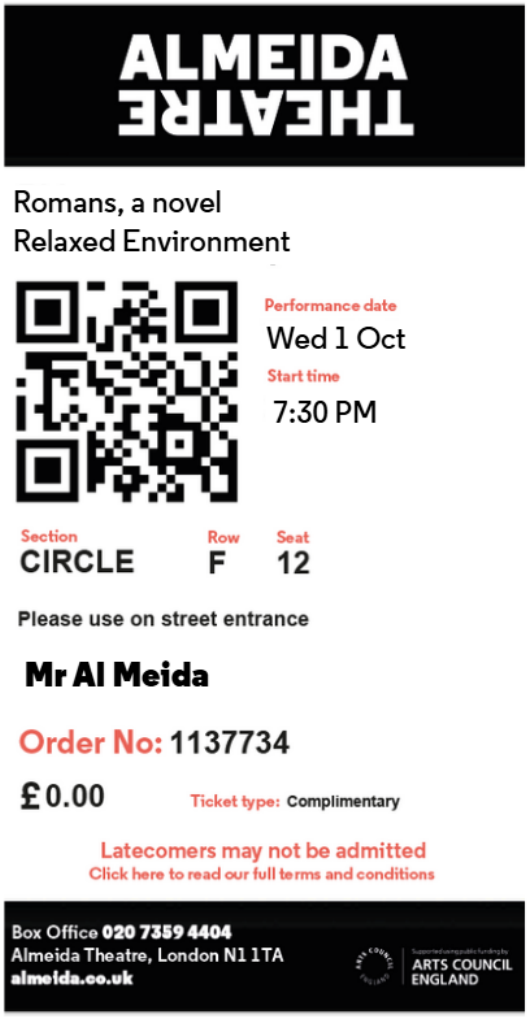
Almeida Theatre staff wear black t-shirts with white writing.



If you need help with your ticket, you can speak to the box office team. It can be quite noisy at the box office, and you may have to wait in a queue. Their desk looks like this.



If you have a digital ticket, you can find it in your email inbox, and it will look like this.



The Front of House assistants will scan your ticket as you enter the auditorium.



The entrance to the stalls is via the ramp to the right of the foyer.



The entrance to the circle is on the outside of the building located to the right of the main entrance.




There is step-free access to the foyer and stalls. There is one accessible toilet at the back of the foyer.

This is the café and bar, where you can buy hot and cold drinks and food.



? If you have any questions or feel worried about your visit, please do contact us at access@almeida.co.uk or call our box office on 020 7359 4404.

## Opening Hours

You can find our Box Office opening hours on our website here:

https://almeida.co.uk/your-visit/booking-information/

The Almeida Café & Bar opens two hours before every performance and remains open until 11 pm, with the kitchen closing 30 minutes before the show starts.

The auditorium opens 30 minutes before the performance begins – you are welcome to take your seats from then.