

Emma
by Kate Hamill,
based on the novel by Jane Austen

Audio Description Programme Notes
for the matinee performance in the Abbey Theatre
Saturday 18th January 2025, at 2pm

Welcome to the audio description introduction to **Emma**, by Kate Hamill. The play is directed by Claire O'Reilly. Set Design is by Molly O'Cathain, with Costume Design by Catherine Fay, and Lighting Design by Sinéad McKenna. The Composer and Sound Designer is Jenny O'Malley. Hair and Make-up is by Leonard Daly. The Movement Director is Philip Connaughton, and the Intimacy Coordinator is Sue Mythen.

The performance runs for approximately two hours and forty-five minutes, including one twenty-minute interval.

This production contains strobe lighting, haze, and loud music. It is recommended for audiences aged twelve and upwards.

ABOUT THE PLAY

"A mind must have occupation, or it will come to mischief".

This winter, a spectacular reimagining of Jane Austen's **Emma** has made its European premiere on the Abbey Stage. Centring on its charming, clever and flirtatious title character, **Emma** follows the privileged lives and relationships of the smart set, and those who wish to join them. Skewering social norms of the late eighteenth century, it examines love, desire, class, and the effort it takes to sustain a life of luxury.

Ripping the bodice of tradition, **Emma** is thrilling audiences with a contemporary soundtrack, and a period-but-playful retelling of this classic comedy of manners.

ABOUT THE SET

The overall design for this production has been inspired by a simple china plate pattern. Milky, glossy white plates, with patterns, or figures painted across their surfaces in soft blues. This is echoed in the costumes, the set, the massive painted backdrops and swagging curtains, and even on the china plates on a dresser in one of our scenes. This nod to delicate porcelain brings us back to the Georgian era when Austen's novel was first published, though there are many nods to the modern day throughout – one layered upon the other.

When the audience arrives first in the theatre, loud music is playing and most of the stage is hidden from us behind a giant curtain hanging the full width of the stage at the front. It is an almost see-through milky white curtain with hand-drawn images in vibrant blue, with a thick white screen hanging behind it to help the painted images stand out more.

There are couples placed here and there across the undulating fabric. Some depict two women in delicate embraces, sitting side by side, hands clasped together, noses almost touching. Elsewhere, men and women stood together in tender hugs. Or someone gently leaning across another's shoulders to offer a chaste kiss. In between these loving vignettes, tendrils of wildflowers are painted as though growing through and around each scene. This is the kissing curtain, and is often drawn together at the front to create a private space for our title character.

Right at the front of the stage, jutting out into the first row of seats over on our far right is a large circular bed, with a duvet and pillows covered in a floral blue and white china pattern material, with some blue velvet throw cushions in the mix. This bed belongs to Emma.

When the curtain and screen are lifted, the full stage is revealed to us. On the stage, in the centre, is a large white disk, like a giant china plate with roses painted in blue in the centre, and a leaf border all around the edge. It is over 4 metres across. Curving around the back of this disk is a metal staircase, painted a vibrant blue. Its highest point is at the back just left of centre, and the stairs curve down to the left and right to reach the floor. In the first scene, there is an ornate floral arch at the top of these stairs, lit by warm white fairy lights.

Behind the curving staircase, on the left, is a large swagged net curtain in blue, reaching from the rafters way above the stage, almost to the floor. While at the back on the right is a flat screen which has again been painted in milky white and blue china pattern colours, depicting a life-size image of a garden, with ornamental trees, shrubbery, and flowerbeds.

Throughout the performance, we move to outdoor locations and the homes of some of the characters. In the Woodhouse home, which Emma shares with her father, a wall is lowered in, with floral blue and white wallpaper, and blue wooden panelling. An arched, glazed, double doorway in the centre. There is a sofa, with a portrait of a beautiful lady hanging above it on the wall. Mr. Woodhouse has an ornate gilt chair that he sits on, next to a trolley with food. Elsewhere in this room is a stool, and a tall vase filled with pink and peach-coloured flowers. A chandelier twinkles overhead.

Emma's bedroom is shown by bringing the kissing curtain back in, along with a French blue dressing table and matching chair, and another small trolley with some refreshments on it. Another tall vase of flowers stands near the round bed which is always present over on our right.

At the Westons' garden party, we return to the main circular space, with the addition of a large wooden swing hanging from the rafters, and a small, potted orange tree in the centre.

When visiting in the modest home of the Bates', everything is covered in crochet and knitting. Mrs. Bates herself, sitting in her wheelchair, is wearing a crocheted blanket over her knees, and a crocheted hat and a shawl. Every knitted surface is made from blue and white wool, including a knitted lampshade on the standard lamp, and a knitted cover for the small harpsichord. There is even a crocheted wall panel hanging underneath the curving stairwell, like woolly wallpaper. All of the knitted items for this scene were made for the show by members of the Abbey Theatre's very own crafting circle who get together for crafting purposes all year round. This is the first time their work has been featured in a stage design.

We return then to the Westons' in the kitchen, where a large table is covered by a blue and white gingham cloth as Mrs. Weston ices a cake. There is a wooden dresser behind, which is crammed with china, from cups and saucers to large serving platters.

An afternoon's strawberry picking on Mr. Knightley's lands takes place in the curve of the stairwell, with the stairs taking the role of the hillside. Two giant baskets are stood to the left and right, waiting to be filled with strawberries, which are in fact, giant helium balloon strawberries the size of your head. There is a white wrought iron patio table and two chairs set to our left.

A riotous ball later in the evening, hosted by Mr Knightley, is also held in the centre of the main space, with the backdrop and swagged curtain whipped away so that bright, coloured lights can flash in time with the pulsing music. An even larger chandelier sparkles overhead.

ABOUT THE CAST AND COSTUMES

Emma is played by **Toni O'Rourke**. A woman in her twenties, she has lightly tanned skin, light brown hair in a feathered cut to the jawline, bright blue eyes and a winning smile. She is slim, and filled with energy and confidence. Emma wears an outfit for most of the performance that she adorns here and there. A bralette in satin material, white with a blue floral pattern, with matching wide leg trousers. Underneath, she wears a snug full brief knickers in the same material, over a pair of hot pink tights. To attend parties, she pulls on a frothy, tulle dress in pinks or lilacs over this base costume. To sleep, she gets down to the bralette, briefs and tights, and pulls on a baggy white t-shirt with a china pattern print on the front. When out in the countryside, she wears an orange gingham dress with lacy trim around the neck, and a Fanta-orange frothy net underskirt.

Her father, **Mr Woodhouse**, is played by **Damian Kearney**. With pale complexion and thick, curly, red hair which is greying, Mr Woodhouse wears a navy velvet fez on his head, and is almost always dressed for staying indoors, wrapped up in his china pattern dressing gown with navy velvet collar and cuffs, over cream chinos and navy slippers. The same actor also plays **Mr Weston**, now married to Emma's former governess. Mr Weston is sharply dressed in a powder blue jacket, crisp white shirt, chinos and tan suede ankle boots.

Mrs Weston, formerly Miss Anne Taylor, is played by **Liz FitzGibbon**. A woman in her thirties, she has sallow skin, long, brown highlighted hair, large, expressive eyes, and a friendly, and sometimes knowing smile.

She first appears in a simple ivory bias-cut wedding dress, and later wears a variety of loose silk, ruffled tops over cream palazzo trousers and cream court shoes.

The same actor also plays **Mrs Bates**, an old woman in a wheelchair, a former teacher, who is almost completely hidden under the swathes of knitted layers she has piled over herself, with only her glasses peeping out from among the stitches!

Mr Knightley, a wealthy neighbour of the Woodhouses, is played by **Patrick Martins**. A man in his late twenties, he is tall and muscular, dark skinned with closely cropped black hair. He moves with confidence, mostly, and seems to behave a little older than his years. He first appears in a powder blue short jacket, white shirt and blue silk tie, cream chinos and brown leather brogues. He is also content to dress down, wearing a chunky mustard knitted cardigan around the house, or a cream, sleeveless cricket jumper for going strawberry picking, with a giant strawberry embroidered on the tummy.

Harriet is played by **Hannah Mamalis**. A young woman, just nineteen, she has long, curling black hair which she wears hanging down, or just with a few locks pinned back at the temple. She has pale skin and big brown eyes, and is immediately taken under Emma's wing. At the Westons' wedding she wears a blue and white dress like most of the other guests, but later, her own sense of style comes through. Harriet loves dresses with a high empire line waist, in bright floral patterns with big, flouncy skirts. She arrives at the Woodhouse home wearing a peach and pink dress with three-tiered skirt, flouncy white cotton shirt sleeves and a bow at the front that matches the bows in her hair. Her outfits become steadily most flouncy and colourful with the passage of time, reflecting her rising confidence.

Miss Bates is played by **Clare Barrett**. Daughter to Mrs. Bates, and a teacher, she mostly appears wearing a tweed pinafore dress in various shades of blue, with short sleeves, and a white cotton embroidered blouse underneath. She is a little older, perhaps in her forties, short, and curvy. Her blonde hair is shoulder length and pinned back at the temples. She wears flat blue loafers and white tights. When she goes to formal events, she embellishes her outfit with a hair ribbon, or a bow on the front of her dress, which colour matches to what the other guests are wearing.

This actor also appears as a member of **Stage Crew**, wearing black shirt, trousers and boots, and with a mic'ed headset on for communicating with Stage Management.

Jane Fairfax, played by **Ciara Berkeley**, is a relative of the Bates', and a young woman also in her twenties, like Emma. She is tall and thin, with long dark brown hair with a neat and short fringe, and pale complexion. When we first encounter her, Jane wears a simple brown cotton summer dress with a neat, belted waist, and a lemon-yellow netting underskirt.

Mrs Elton, played by the same actor, is married to Mr Elton and they often style their outfits to match. She first appears wearing a lime green silk jumpsuit with pink embroidery, with exaggeratedly high shoulders, and wide, harem-pant style trouser legs, and a pink turban on her head. Her subsequent outfits are of similar shape, also matching with her husband. The Eltons are passionate, and often break out in garish dances together.

The same actor plays one other role, **Robert Martin**, a tenant farmer on Mr Knightley's estate. A young man, in his early twenties, Mr. Martin has his long brown hair tucked up under a tweed flat cap, and wears a dark blue check jacket with rustic, brown buttons, and navy woollen trousers, and chunky ankle boots.

Mr Elton, at first an eligible bachelor and vicar, but later married to Mrs Elton, is played by **Domhnall Herdman**. With a mop of thick brown hair, and a trim moustache, Mr Elton dresses very dashingly. He first arrives to the Woodhouse home in a navy jacket, shirt and large floppy silk bow, and cream trousers with brown lace-up shoes. Later, he wears a lime green silk jacket, with delicate pink embroidery to match his wife's outfit.

The same actor also plays **Mr Churchill**, the somewhat estranged son of Mr. Weston. His hair is bleach-blonde and gelled into a spiky style, with a light brown moustache. He dresses flamboyantly in floral shirts, and brightly coloured ties, teamed with cream chinos and brown shoes.

That concludes the audio description introduction for **Emma**. It was prepared by me, **Bríd Ní Ghruagáin**, who will also provide audio description for this performance. A Touch Tour will also be held before the performance, meeting in the foyer at 12pm. The Abbey Theatre team will be in touch if there are any changes to be made to this start time.

Audio description at the Abbey Theatre is supported by Arts & Disability Ireland, and The Arts Council. For updates about audio described and captioned performances, text **ACCESSARTS** to **51444** or head to **www.adiarts.ie** for more information.

Thank you. Go raibh maith agaibh.

