

The Dictionary of Lost Words is an adaptation by Verity Laughton of the novel by Pip Williams.

Note that this *What To Expect* contains spoilers.

The production runs for approximately 2 hours 40 minutes including interval, at the most. The aim is to run at 2 hours 30.

It is set in the city of Oxford, England in the time period from 1880 to 1989.

The novel and the script cover Esme's lifetime in a world of major events, notably the suffragist campaign for the emancipation and voting rights of women in England, World War 1, the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary, gender roles, feminism and power.

Early in the play we are with Esme and her father, Harry, as they sort 'slips' in the scriptorium. Esme is 4 years old and Harry is helping her spell words. She identifies there are 'girl slips as well as boy slips' in an early reference to the creation of language for a male world. As Harry throws a slip without a definition into the fire Esme puts her hand in to retrieve it, leaving her with permanent damage.

There is a great deal of feeling and emotion in the play. Verity uses humour through a great deal of the passages that contain coarse language, and loving and beautiful emotion through the relationships and unlikely friendships that Esme forms.

Coarse Language:

There is a passage of repeated use of the word cunt. The scene lasts approximately 2 minutes. Mabel uses this word with ownership. It reveals her power with the word, a deliberate attempt to remove the male venom from the word. It is utilised in a very humorous vain, whilst trying to shock but also trying to educate Esme. Esme sees this as her opportunity to reclaim language traditionally used against women, to provide women with the language that is theirs.

Mabel says something and Esme requests that she repeat it.

"I said silly bloody cunt, what did you think I said? And I said it loud enough for her to hear me too!"

Lizzie requests that Mabel lower her voice "Lower your voice. They'll have you out of here for that language, you know that. Esme, come on!"

Lizzie says to Esme "Esme, if you ever use those words out loud, I'll box your ears!"

Mabel responds to Esme's persistent requests for defining the word with "It's yer quim".

As part of her discovery process and identifying usage Esme asks Mabel “put cunt in a sentence for me, would you please?”

When pushed further Mabel responds with “Sad to say but you really is dim, lass. You got a cunt. I got a cunt. Lizzies’s got a cunt, but old Fred over there, married to cunt-face, he ain’t got a cunt, got it? Tho’ he’s a cunt all the same, believe you me!”

Mabel further uses the word in several sentences, a limerick even, to provide Esme with her definition, for one of her ‘slips’ to include in her collection.

She discusses the word “Quim, It’s just proof of her shame. That yer are enjoyin it!”

This scene is used to highlight the difference in language between genders, and between classes. Mabel has had no other way in which to hold herself, to distinguish herself, she has no education, no position and no money. It is her use of language, of ownership of her situation that sets her apart and draws Esme to her. She aims to make her flinch, but Esme does not. Despite her status as working class, Mabel still has a strength about her that speaks to Esme, a sense of knowing she is of a status and class that is dismissed and Esme understands this too.

It is also at this market that Esme meets Tilda Taylor. Who also has a strength about her, although she is of a more genteel status, albeit an actor. She refers to herself as a ‘dollymop’ and when Esme is encouraged to write it down she explains to Tilda that she writes the words that “need rescuing. The dirty ones, however, do seem to be Mabel’s speciality.”

An example is “‘Dollymop’: a woman who is paid for sexual favours on an occasional basis. ‘A coin for the dollymop will keep your lap warm’. Tilda Taylor 1906”

It is at a production of *The Dolls House* that Esme meets Bill Taylor, Tilda’s younger brother. After the performance they meet in the local for a drink, where they discuss Esme’s collecting of words, and how the editors of the dictionary find the coarse language “too vulgar to include in the Dictionary”.

Esme is verbally abused as she protests and marches for women “Ya nasty stupid bitch! Back to the fucking kitchen ya’ fancy piece of shit!”

Sexual references:

Mabel, the market seller, is not someone that Lizzie (Esme’s maid) would have her talk to, she is not of the same class. Her language is coarse and crude, with inuendo “Eh well, nought else to do with my hands now no one wants ‘em round their shaft”.

She has a particular kind of language foreign to Esme, vulgar and coarse.

Tilda is a woman very much in control of her own desires, and unafraid to discuss it.

“Tilda will find her way into the bed of one of those two - I’d take bets on Claudio because he’s more fun, but Benedick is better-looking so .. who knows?”

“Bill, how can you know that?”

“It’s her habit. I know Tilda. And I know her habits. She denies them all season - fucking is bad for the play, she believes. So - end of season, a great final performance and then she let’s them have her. Or more to the point, then she lets herself have whichever one of them most takes her fancy on the night.”

Esme speaks to Bill “Tilda told me that women experience... enjoy... desire... as much as men do”

Sexual content:

There is a scene between Esme and Bill, there is no action but we understand what they are about to do.

Bill says “Either way, Tilda won’t come home tonight. I know that” and then “Will you walk through the door with me this night of an old clock moon, Esme Nicoll?”.

Adult themes:

Pregnancy. After her experience with Bill Esme finds herself pregnant.

She discusses the feeling of it with Lizzie “Lizzie, I was curious. I wanted to know the feeling. My body - does this seem shameful? I suppose it does! My body wanted him. His. Body. So I thought why not? But. I don’t love him. Not like Da loved mama or even .. Dr Murray loves Ada. ..

I like Bill, very much. But I don’t want to marry him. And I won’t. If I ever marry - and I won’t now, that’s clear, who’d take me? - But if I was to marry a man. I’d need more..than feeling ‘dizzy’. I’d need to love his mind.”

Esme visits Mabel at the market. Mabel gives Esme the details of a woman in ‘the Trade’, where she plans to get rid of the baby. However upon visiting she is told the baby has decided to stay.

During the birth Esme discovers that the woman who will adopt her baby has lost two of her own babies.

Emotional moments:

As the play takes us through a large period of time, we do experience the deaths of a number of characters. These include Harry, Esme’s father, Dr Murray, Gareth and eventually Esme.

These are emotional moments which may require tissues!

Please Note:

The character of Mabel is the origin of most of the colourful language. To accept the language we have to understand Mabel's status in the play, and the representation of the working class underprivileged that have no voice. The creation of the dictionary is driven by men, by words that are deemed appropriate by men. It does not take into consideration the words of the likes of Mabel, whose lives are lived in vastly different spheres. Thus her language is vastly different to those in power.

In highlighting this difference both Pip Williams, the author of the novel, and Verity Laughton, the playwright, have remained true to the voice of those that Esme is trying to honour.

So while it takes us a moment to acclimatise, we realise that actually this language is incredibly important to the narrative of the play. It drives Esme, and those with her, to ensure women are heard.

Finally - It is also carries a great deal of humour, there is no perjorative use of the word, there is ownership and much mirth around it.

The play is a beautiful affirmation of friendships, love, strength and family, across status and outside of the expected.