

## Celebrating a Legacy: the Kevin Elyot Award

This exhibition has been made possible through the generous support of Kevin Elyot's family, who have also endowed the Kevin Elyot Award: a writer's residency in the Theatre Collection.

The annual Kevin Elyot Award supports a promising writer by enabling them to be resident in the Theatre Collection and begin the process of creating a new work inspired by Kevin's archive, which may be a dramatic, creative or academic piece of writing.

### 2017 Award

We are pleased to announce the 2017 Kevin Elyot Award winner is Jon Berry.

### 2018: Looking ahead

If you would like to apply for next year's award, applications open on 1 February 2018 and close on 16 April 2018.

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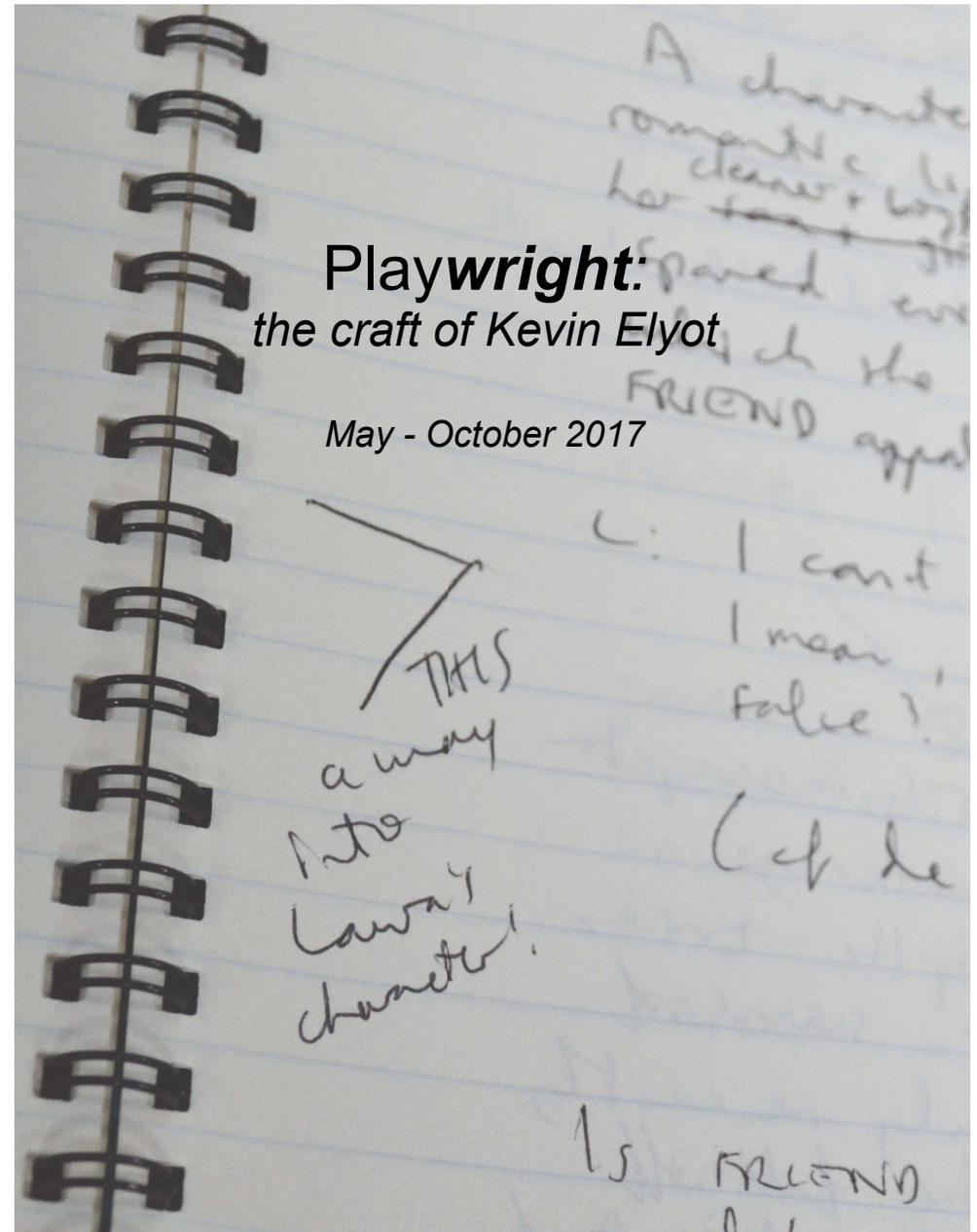
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## Playwright: Kevin Elyot (1951-2014)

Kevin Elyot is best known in theatre for writing award winning plays such as *Coming Clean* and *My Night with Reg*. Beautifully crafted works that deal with love and loss with style and humour. Although primarily a playwright, Kevin Elyot was also a screenwriter and, in his younger years, an actor.



Image used with the permission of Phil Fisk

Elyot's interest in theatre and performance as an actor began at an early age at King Edward's School, Birmingham. It was developed, here, at the University of Bristol through studying Drama, where colleagues remember him as being effortlessly funny. Professionally, his acting career included time with the pioneering group Gay Sweatshop.

It was Gay Sweatshop's association with the Bush that allowed Elyot to begin his professional writing career with *Coming Clean* (1982). But it was *My Night with Reg* (1994) that allowed him to leave acting behind. This was first presented at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, it transferred to the Criterion and led to successful international productions elsewhere. Its subject of death within the gay community reverberated strongly, even without the word AIDS ever being mentioned.

Elyot's subsequent career writing for the theatre involved working with companies such as the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company and continuing his relationship with the Royal Court. In the 1990s and early 2000s he was feted internationally as one of the fresh new British writers alongside fellow Bristol alumni, Mark Ravenhill. Works included sole authored original works and adaptations.

revisits themes, scenarios, specific ideas, again and again. He approaches and re-approaches vital questions about love, loss and mortality, casting new light each time. I realised I was learning more about why Kevin wrote, and why I write.

I also began to feel closer to him as a person. I never met Kevin, and through the archive I constructed my own, very subjective version of him, filtered through his plays and the passion behind the stories he chose to tell. At the same time I was keenly aware that this could not compare to knowing him, the man beyond his work, and this served to heighten the reality of his loss, to feel his absence more deeply.

I found a note that he'd made to himself in one of the notebooks. It says "Forget fashion, what's expected... write what's true, what's true to you, ignore everybody, write a tragedy, reach for the truth of life, aim high, write a masterpiece, amaze and surprise them."

I decided to write a different play. I began to construct a story about a lost friend, who is conjured up through fragments – objects, documents, music and memory. This has been a much more challenging task than my original idea, and also much more gratifying. Kevin followed his instincts and wrote what mattered to him, and though I hope I learned much from his skills with form, structure and style, I learned more from understanding why he wrote.

Ian McHugh, May 2017

## Love and loss in the Kevin Elyot Archive

*Inaugural Kevin Elyot Award winner, Ian McHugh, reflects on his residency.*

It has been a privilege to spend time with the Kevin Elyot Archive, to have access to his writing mind and see, up close, how he constructed his immaculately elegant plays. On my first visit to the Theatre Collection I was astounded to discover just how extensive the archive is – beyond the wealth of material relating to Kevin's plays and television adaptations, there's so much more material which demonstrates the breadth of his career.



I had been a fan of Kevin and his work since seeing *My Night With Reg* as a teenager. He was a master of writing long, symphonic scenes, in which everything occurs at just the right moment – a kiss, a witty anecdote, a flash of sexual tension or pathos, or an outrageous joke. And he layered these scenes into heartfelt stories with bracingly devastating effect. I struggle to think of any writer who manages this feat as well as Kevin.

My proposal for the Kevin Elyot Award was to write a new play grounded in the themes and structures of *Forty Winks*, my favourite of his plays. I hoped to learn from his craftsmanship, and create something which emulated his consummate style and dexterity. However, in the three weeks I spent with the archive in the summer of 2016, I began to have a very personal response to his notebooks, photographs and letters.

I fell in love with his plays a second time; I got to know his characters more intimately, got closer to the heart of his work than ever before. I began to understand how and why he

As a screenwriter Elyot is most well known for his adaptations. He worked with material as diverse as Wilkie Collins, Agatha Christie, Barbara Vine and Christopher Isherwood. He is considered by many Christie fans as creating some of the most successful adaptations of her work. He produced remarkably faithful adaptations that reimagined time and structure to fit the television format, whilst reflecting the gay experience by rewriting some of the characters as homosexual.

### **Playwright: the craft of Kevin Elyot**

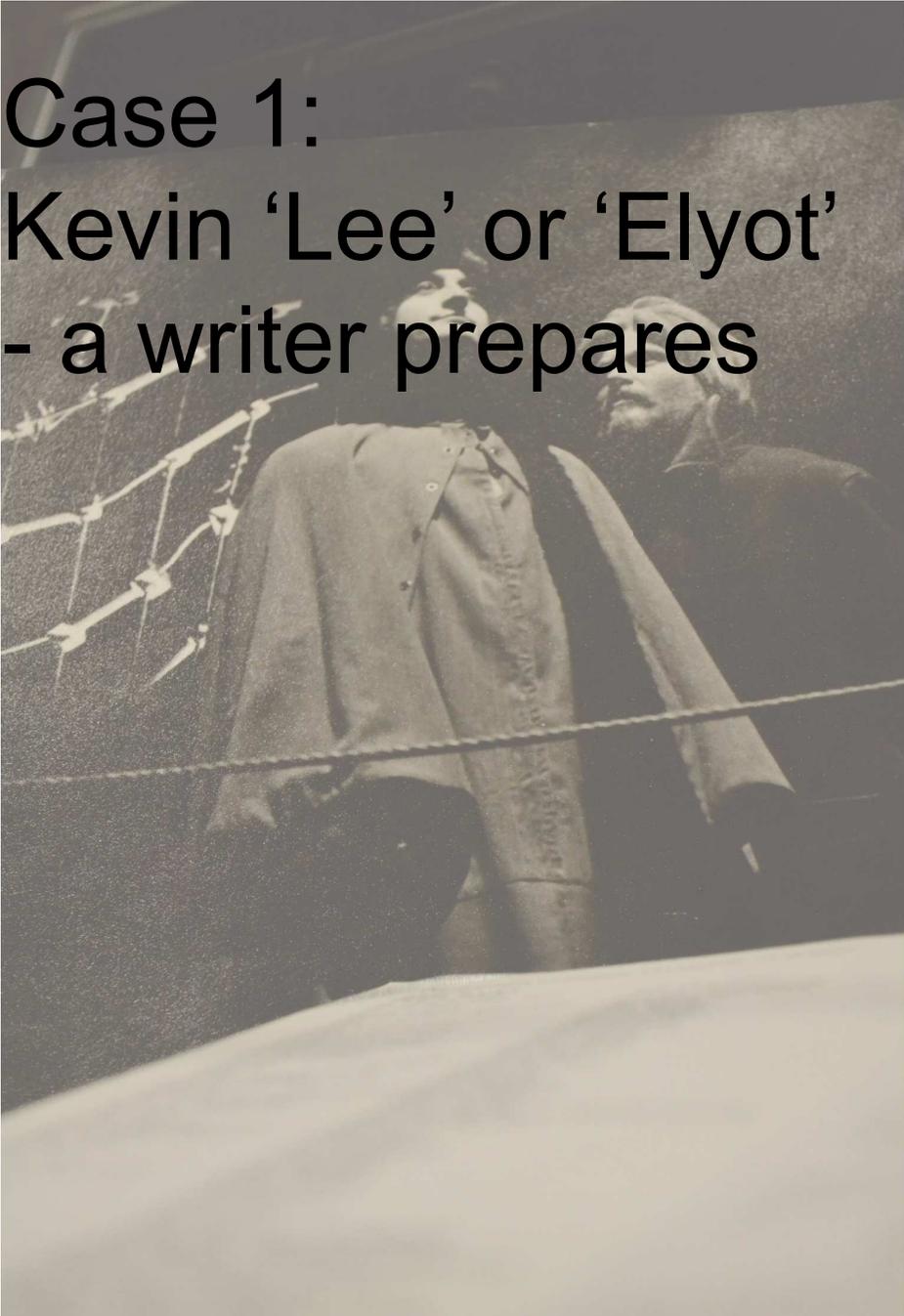
This exhibition provides a snapshot of Kevin Elyot's work and career. It combines materials used for inspiration, notebooks and work-in-progress scripts that explore his process, with publicity materials displaying the realisation from page to production. Kevin Elyot's first career was as an actor but his real passion was for writing. His success spanned theatre and later television, where alongside his sole authored work he crafted successful adaptations.

### **The Kevin Elyot Archive**

The Kevin Elyot Archive was donated to the Theatre Collection in 2016 by his family and contains material relating to his early acting career at school, university and afterwards. It also charts his development as a writer, containing material relating to all his works for stage, screen and radio. Throughout the archive his process is shown with the number of drafts and reworkings of scripts. It also includes a large number of incomplete or never produced works.

This exhibition has been made possible by the generosity of Kevin Elyot's family.

# Case 1: Kevin 'Lee' or 'Elyot' - a writer prepares



## Screen & Case 3: Elyot on writing & Elyot today

### Screen: Elyot on writing

Displayed are some of Kevin Elyot's own words on the writing process.

### Case 3: Elyot today

Kevin Elyot's legacy is as a playwright whose beautifully crafted plays still speaks to audiences today. In the Summer of 2017 his first and last complete plays are produced for London audiences.

#### 20. Script, *Coming Clean*, 1982

This play at the Bush in 1982 was the Kevin Elyot's first play produced. It caused a stir for the gay sex scenes represented on stage and secured him the prestigious agent, Peggy Ramsay. He was later represented by the Agency.

From 25 July to 26 August 2017 the King's Head Theatre are presenting *Coming Clean* to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK.

#### 21. Script, *Twilight Song*, 2013

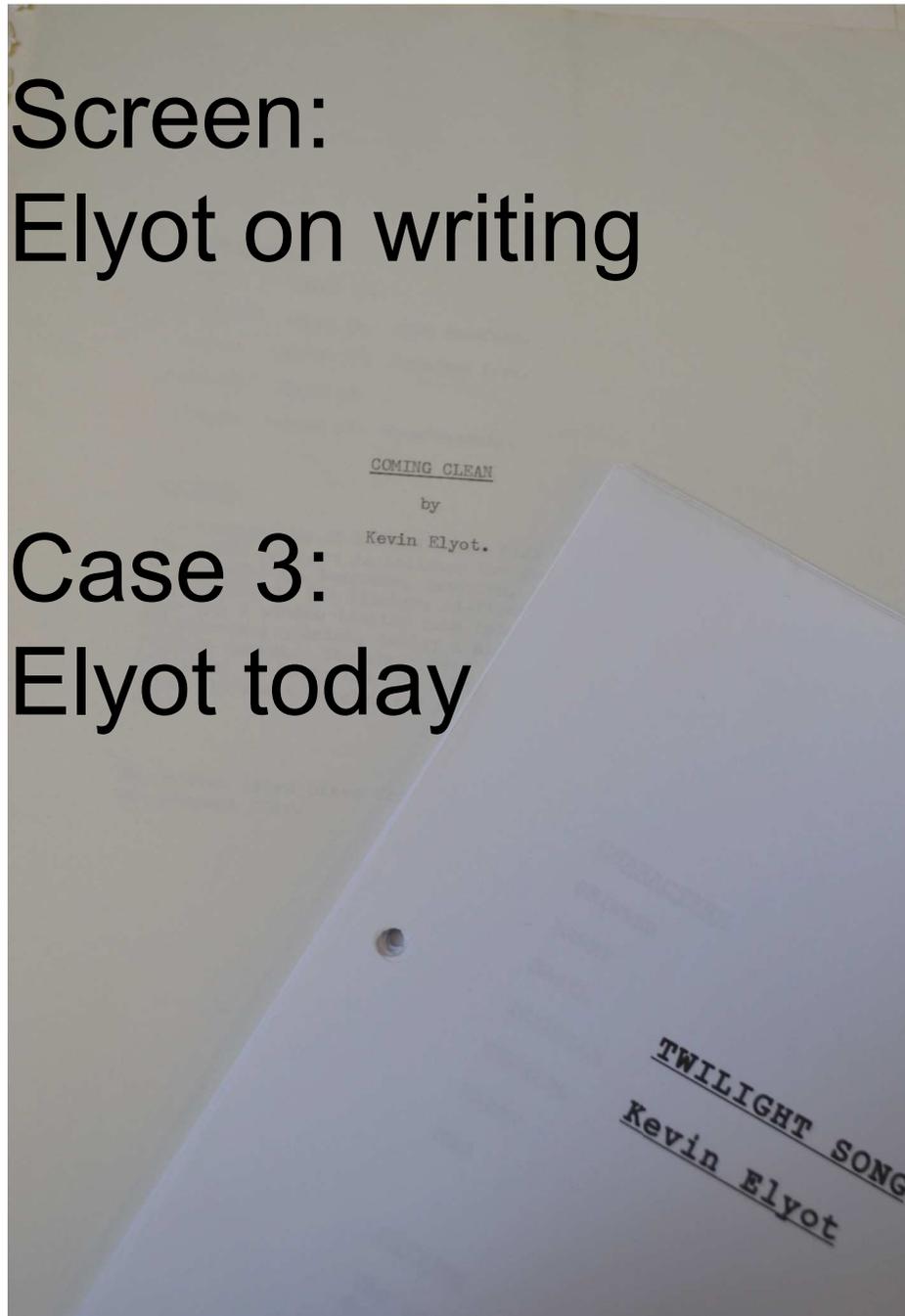
This was the last of Kevin Elyot's scripts to be written and produced during his lifetime. It was performed as a rehearsed reading at National Theatre Studio on 23 January 2013.

This year, *Twilight Song* receives its world premier as a full production at The Park Theatre from 12 July to 12 August.

Kevin Elyot's contemporary relevance is demonstrated through continued stagings of his work. His work also inspires new writing through The Kevin Elyot Award that supports a writer in residence at the Theatre Collection.

# Screen: Elyot on writing

## Case 3: Elyot today



### Case 1: Kevin 'Lee' or 'Elyot' - a writer prepares

Kevin Elyot acted from a young age, and this case displays publicity materials from his days studying at the University of Bristol and his early professional career. As a professional actor he changed his surname from Lee to Elyot, inspired by a character he once played in *Private Lives* by Noel Coward.

#### Above

- 1. Poster, *The Cherry Orchard*, Winston Theatre, 1972**  
This poster features Kevin Elyot as director and shows, that as early as his University days, he was interested in working in a variety of roles within the theatre that went beyond acting.
- 2. Poster, *Stone*, ICA, 1976**  
As part of Gay Sweatshop, Kevin Elyot performed in a number of productions including *Stone* by Edward Bond, one of three plays advertised on this poster. His involvement in the organisation demonstrates that, at this time, he identified as a gay actor.

Throughout his writing career he resisted being pigeon-holed as a gay playwright, and it is more accurate to say he ensured the gay experience (amongst others) was reflected on the stage.

#### Case 1

- 3. Production photograph & programmes, University of Bristol**  
The production photograph features Kevin Lee (left) as 'The Strange Passenger' in *Peer Gynt* (1972) by Henrik Ibsen. The open programme is from the same production and shows Kevin also playing 'Begriffenfeld'.

The closed programme is from another production featuring Kevin Lee at the University of Bristol, *The Balcony* (1971) by Jean Genet. In this production he played 'The Second Photographer' and 'Third Revolutionary'.

#### 4. Programme, *Bristol or Bust*, early 1970s

Kevin Lee featured in various numbers within this revue. His involvement in this revue demonstrates his interest in performance as a wider form that includes comedy and music.

The plays he subsequently wrote always incorporate contemporary and classical music as integral to creating an atmosphere, and his writing frequently include humour when exploring serious themes.

#### 5. Production photograph and programme, *Upside Down - at the Bottom of the World* by David Allen, Warehouse Theatre, Croydon, 1987

As a professional Kevin Lee changed his name to Elyot. He took the key role of DH Lawrence in this production.

#### 6. Programme, *Screamers*

This programme includes Kevin Elyot's biography as an actor and by the time of this production in the late 1980s, it also included his writing credits. It is clear from this programme that he was developing a career as a playwright.

#### 7. Invitation, The 1987 London Fringe Awards

Although by 1987 Elyot may have been beginning to see himself more as a writer, he was receiving accolades for his acting. This includes a London Fringe Award nomination for Best Actor.

programme from New Zealand to the left and is echoed in the Sydney (1998) poster to the right. The image of men celebrating appears in the London newspaper clipping advertising the British production and also in publicity from Melbourne (1997) and San Francisco (1998).

#### Right of Case 2:

#### 15. Poster, *Mouth to Mouth The Albery, London, 2001*

This poster was publicity used once the play transferred from The Royal Court to The Albery.

#### Bottom Shelf: *adaptation*

#### 16. Publicity advertising BBC 'Performance' season, 1997

This season included Elyot's adaptation of his own play, *My Night with Reg*, for television.

#### 17. Annotated novel, *Five Little Pigs, Granada, 2003*

Elyot began his process of adapting novels by annotating books and making notes. This right-hand page shows Elyot making some decisions about structure: switching Meredith and Philip's interviews.

#### 18. Handwritten script, *Five Little Pigs, Granada, 2003*

The first edit of each script was usually handwritten before Elyot began working with typed scripts. These pages comprise the first few moments of Philip Blake's interview.

#### 19. Press pack, *Five Little Pigs, Granada, 2003*

This press pack was produced following filming. It shows David Suchet as Poirot, Toby Stephens as Philip Blake, Julie Cox as Elsa Greer and a still from the television production.

## 12. London press & publicity, *Mouth to Mouth*, The Royal Court & The Albery, 2001

This section uses press and publicity from the two venues where *Mouth to Mouth* was staged. The play opened at the Royal Court before transferring to The Albery. External images of both venues give a sense of place, whilst The Albery exterior also quoted some review extracts with the aim of enticing audiences to buy tickets.

This mixture of newspaper reviews with imagery from the play and The Albery programme give a sense of how key elements of the play were presented such as the opening scenes (also outlined in 9, the notebooks on the shelf above) where Lindsay Duncan appears in dark glasses across from Michael Maloney, wearing an eye-patch.

## 13. International script & publicity

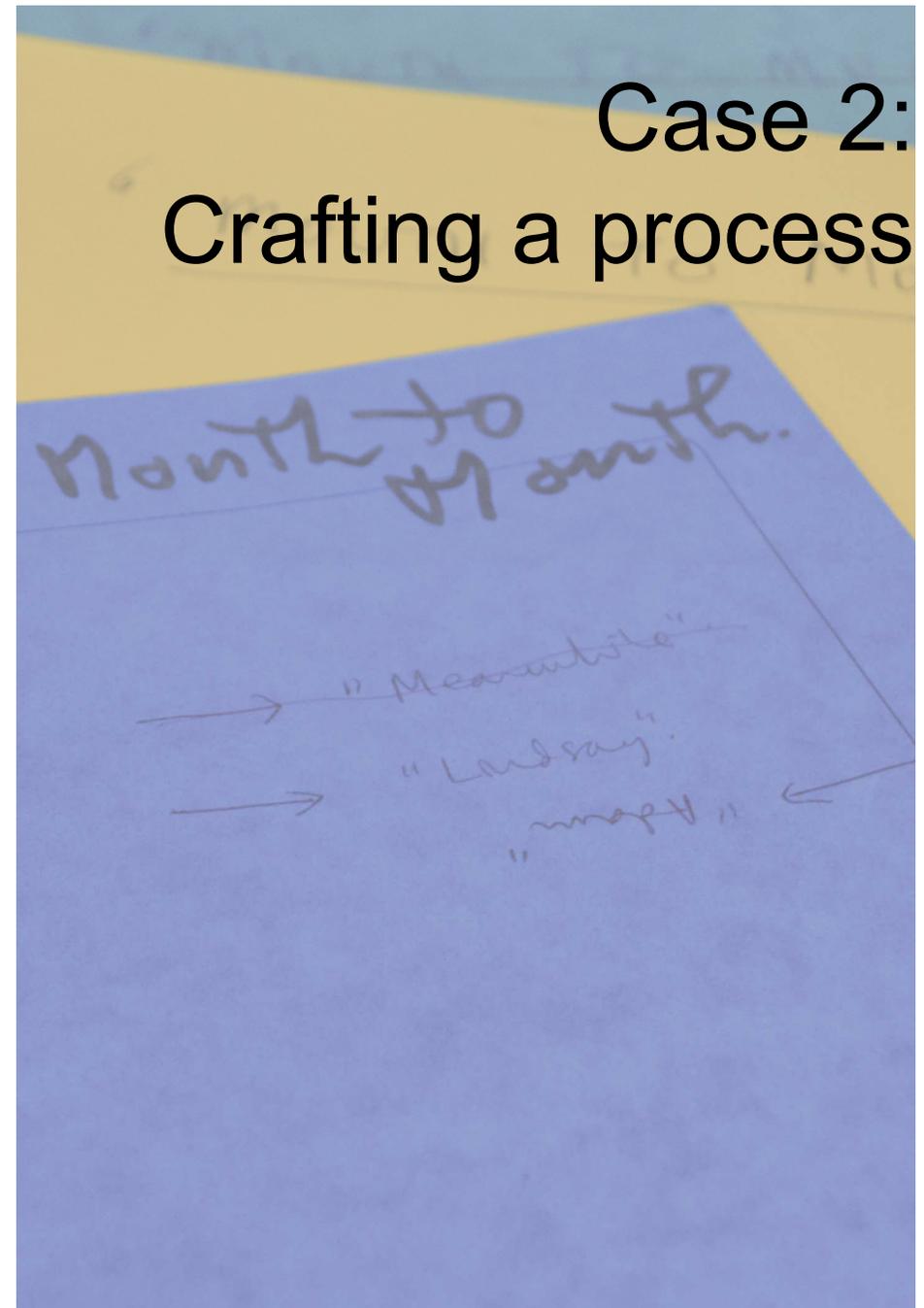
*Mouth to Mouth* was produced internationally. These materials, a Japanese script and flyer (2002), and a programme from New York (2008), demonstrate the international relevance of his playwrighting.

## 14. International publicity, *My Night with Reg*

This play is Kevin Elyot's most famous play and is the one that allowed him to become a full time playwright. Affectionately referred to as *Reg*, this play was produced internationally in as varied contexts as Japan (1996) and New Zealand (1996).

What is striking about the publicity material Elyot kept, is the similar imagery that repeats across the majority of international publicity. The central image of a man's naked back is from the London production but appears on the red

# Case 2: Crafting a process



## Case 2: Crafting a process

Focusing predominantly on *Mouth to Mouth* (2001) this case highlights Kevin Elyot's process when working on sole authored stage productions and television adaptations. What is particularly interesting about this production is its two-fold inspiration: it was in some way related to the death of Princess Diana and was also a play written for his lifelong friend, Lindsay Duncan. This case also displays some materials related to Elyot's seminal production, *My Night with Reg* and items related to his adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Five Little Pigs* for television. The diversity of the material Elyot adapted, primarily for television, speaks to the sensitivity of adaptations that ranged from Christie to Isherwood.

**Top Shelf:** *Mouth to Mouth* - from inspiration to final text

### 8. Inspiration

Items include newspaper clippings, *Of Mouths and Men* from the Guardian, *The Last Word on Death* (probably also from The Guardian), an image of Princess Diana kissing Prince Charles on their wedding day and a postcard featuring Valdes Leal's *In the Blink of an Eye* (1671).

What emerges from this material and resurfaces within the completed play is the concept of kissing as an act of betrayal, and grief as a life-changing event that has the ability to shake someone to their core.

### 9. Notebooks

These include notes on structure, form and character details. Throughout these books, the character later named 'Laura' is written as 'Linds' or 'Lindsay', indicating the impact writing for Lindsay Duncan had on the developing script. The crossing outs and annotations in different colours display Elyot's process of revisiting notebooks to further ideas.

The small section of the A4 notebook demonstrates how structure acted as a means of articulating elements of form, such as how time works within the play.

The small A5 notebook outlines how the idea of Laura's 'speech impediment' or 'stutter' developed, in separate places on both pages. It also describes a key image that opened the first and last scene of the play (and that is depicted in 12 on the shelf below.)

### 10. Work-in-progress scripts

Taking Laura's stutter from the first typewritten script to its final development, these three pages annotated by Elyot demonstrate how this scene developed across three revisions. It highlights the importance of rhythm in his work as he includes and deletes beats. (Scripts dated 02 April, 30 September and 22 November 2000).

**Middle Shelf:** from national to international production

### 11. Backstage photograph, first night cards & a telegram, *Mouth to Mouth, The Royal Court & The Albery, 2001*

Alongside different versions of scripts and publicity materials are backstage photographs and first night cards.

The image of Lindsay Duncan selected is one of a number of backstage photographs that indicate Kevin Elyot's ongoing involvement with the play in production.

The cards selected, from the many Kevin received, are mainly from the cast, including Lindsay Duncan.