

China Plate and Staatstheater Mainz present

A FAMILY BUSINESS

Written by Chris Thorpe

Developed with Rachel Chavkin & Lekan Lawal

Directed by Claire O'Reilly



© Rebecca Lupton & Ivan Pieri Gonzalez

SUPPORTED BY WARWICK ARTS CENTRE AND USING PUBLIC FUNDING BY THE NATIONAL LOTTERY THROUGH ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



ABOUT THE SHOW

A show about how not to blow up the planet.

We don't really talk about nuclear weapons much.

Even though they accompany us everywhere.

Invisible guests in cafés, on the shelves of supermarkets, in line at the cash machine.

Guests that could destroy all of that and more in a second.

A Family Business explores this hidden threat and looks at the people who do talk about them. How do ordinary people communicate about extraordinarily important issues? And what if those ordinary people were us?

For a further explanation about the show, Chris did an interview with Louis Reitmann for Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, available [on Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists website here](#).

Chris was also interviewed by Staatstheater Mainz's Chief Dramaturg Jörg Vorhaben, which is available to read on our [News & More page here](#).

BACKGROUND

A Family Business reunites Chris Thorpe with Tony award-winning collaborator Rachel Chavkin, who he worked with on the award-winning and critically acclaimed shows *Status* and *Confirmation*. This is the final show in a trilogy of plays examining the intersection between our individual humanity and our politics.

Like *Confirmation* & *Status*, *A Family Business* is built around the idea of the real-world effects on individual and social decision-making of the cognitive biases and stories we carry unconsciously within us. *Confirmation* investigated this at the level of the individual, *Status* at the level of the national – *A Family Business* expands to look at what happens when those constructed stories of nationality have to communicate with each other at a global level and at the diplomats tasked with doing that.

Confirmation and *Status* both won Fringe First Awards at the Edinburgh Festival (2014 & 2018) and were both selected for the British Council Edinburgh Showcase (2015 & 2019). Between them Chris has completed 6 UK tours, 4 Edinburgh Festivals, 4 London runs and international tour dates including: Berlin, Mannheim, Mainz, New York, Vienna, Athens, Porto, Brisbane, Bucharest, Beirut, Nuremberg and Luxemburg.

TOUR BOOKING

A Family Business premiered at Staatsatheater Mainz in December 2022 where it was warmly received by audiences and has just played at Warwick Arts Centre in March 2023, including a fascinating post-show discussion in which Chris was joined by **Véronique Christory** – Senior Arms Adviser for the International Committee of the Red Cross, Delegation to the United Nations and **Dr Patricia Lewis** – Research Director for Conflict, Science and Transformation and Director of the International Security Programme at Chatham House, and Zainab Rauf Trambo from the UN's #Youth4Disarmament programme.

The show will be available for touring in the UK and internationally from January 2024. For international tour bookings we would require a fee as well as accommodation, travel and per diems for our team. Please contact Susan at China Plate, susan@chinaplatetheatre.com for more information.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Please contact Susan for full technical specification. The show is intended for a studio venue capacity of 100-250 (approx.). The show has a cast of 4, including Chris and audio-visual content displayed on the back wall. Part of the show is performed in German with translation on a sur-title screen.

EXPLANATION FROM THE WRITER

A friend of mine, Alex Kelly of Third Angel, has a favourite saying – everything is done by ordinary people. It's not a famous quote, although it feels like it should be – it's just something a mate of his dad's said, once. It's a powerful idea. The smallest moment of individual tenderness, the cruellest bureaucratic indifference. The mass mobilisations that protect the vulnerable or destroy a people. The chain of discoveries, refinements and events that lead to the end of the world, whether through slow heating or sudden nuclear fire. It's all done by ordinary people.

In 2018 I met a woman in a bar. She'd come to see *Status*, the show I'd just opened. I was having a drink with my director, Rachel Chavkin, after the show, and the woman came over with her husband, and we started talking. We chatted about *Status* for a while, and that was fine, but I get uncomfortable talking about a show too much, so I asked her what she did. She said she negotiated nuclear disarmament treaties. So here we are.

Most people don't think of nuclear weapons often. That fact seems insane when you write it down, but it's true. There's a general perception, even among people of my generation who grew up with the threat of nuclear annihilation, that they aren't really an issue any more. And if you're younger – if the Cold War is as historically remote to you as, say, the Korean War is to me – you probably think of them even less. And if we do think of them at all as a global threat, they're usually a faint shadow in the background, almost entirely obscured by the Climate Monster that's towering above everything. Even back in 2018, with threats of fire and fury emanating from the White House, or even as I write this in February 2022 with whatever has happened in Ukraine, between me writing this and you reading it, still about to happen, they feel like a secondary problem. They don't feel as urgent as increasing environmental instability on the global scale – and on a local scale, they feel very far away from the more pressing issues of social and racial justice, political corruption or economic inequality. The big global threat, and daily emergencies that need to be urgently and locally addressed at the street or city or national level rightly take up a lot of our mental bandwidth.

So when someone tells you they negotiate nuclear arms reduction treaties for a job, at first it doesn't really land. It's almost like they've told you they restore antique clocks or research 19th Century naval battles – the kind of work that feels necessary, but background. A conversation that needs to be kept ticking over, until we get to it when we've dealt with the more pressing emails in the inbox.

When you meet someone who actually negotiates these treaties, that feeling lasts about five minutes – basically until they remind you of the existence of the weapons, the scale of the

threat, and the consequences of failure. That's the moment when you remember the phrase 'everything is done by ordinary people', and you start to really hope it isn't true.

At the end of that five minutes I remember asking her for reassurance. I remember looking her in the eye and saying – please, please tell me that when you walk into those rooms and have those conversations, everybody actually knows what they're doing.

The answer to that wasn't reassuring – but then again it wasn't *not* reassuring. Of course we know what we're talking about, she said, of course we know the subject matter inside out because it's our job and our responsibility to know it. And everyone, on all sides of the issue, seems to have clear idea of what they want to achieve. But do we, as individual human beings, know what we're doing? Of course we don't. Who does? And what better argument is there for trying to reduce the amount of civilisation-ending weapons that exist in the world to zero?

We kept in touch, anyway. We've become friends. Which considering she was in the final stages of making, and then getting enough states to ratify, the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that entered international law in early 2021, was far more effort for her than it was for me, and I appreciate it. I also appreciate the access she managed to secure to other people in her world – diplomats, activists, academics and more – that allowed me to have the conversations that informed a lot of the material in the show. All those ordinary people, just trying to do their job, the same as everyone else.

There's a whole story to be told about that treaty, its history and the negotiation process. And the real world story of that treaty coming into being, its existence as a moral marker in international law, and the obstacles it faced to get there, form the backdrop for *A Family Business*. There's a show that tries to make us all into the activists we should be, focused on the fact that nuclear weapons should be dismantled once and for all – especially as the instability caused by the climate crisis makes it all but inevitable that at some point, if they still exist, they will be used. But *A Family Business* isn't quite that show.

What we're trying to do, as ordinary people, alongside all the other ordinary people in the room, is have a conversation about the fact that there's no such thing as local problems that need to be solved locally, and global problems that are solved on a different level. All these problems are networked. And if it's difficult to think about the ones that feel 'global' – even if they threaten everything immediately around us – that's probably a sign that we need to change that immediate environment so the maximum number of us free up the greatest capacity to care.

It doesn't matter which end of that network of problems you start with. Everything is local, and we're all ordinary people.

ABOUT CREATIVE TEAM

CHRIS THORPE | WRITER

Chris is an award-winning writer & performer from Manchester – work includes *THERE HAS POSSIBLY BEEN AN INCIDENT* & *THE MYSTERIES* for the Royal Exchange, Manchester, *VICTORY CONDITION* and *THE MILK OF HUMAN KINDNESS* for the Royal Court, *CHORUS* for the Gate Theatre and *HANNAH, BEOWULF* & one of *AESOP'S FABLES* for the Unicorn Theatre. Regular collaborators include Lucy Ellinson (*TORYCORE*), Portugal's mala voadora (*OVERDRAMA/HOUSE-GARDEN/DEAD END/YOUR BEST GUES*) & Hannah Jane Walker (*THE OH FUCK MOMENT/I WISH I WAS LONELY*). His shows *CONFIRMATION* and *STATUS*, made with director Rachel Chavkin and China Plate, have toured and been produced worldwide. He was a founder member of Unlimited Theatre and an Associate of Live Art/Theatre company Third Angel. Work in development includes *A FAMILY BUSINESS* with China Plate, *ALWAYS MAYBE THE LAST TIME* for the Royal Court and a new BBC TV series.



He wrote the award-winning *THE SHAPE OF THE PAIN*, developed with director Rachel Bagshaw, recently adapted for the BBC as part of their Culture In Quarantine series. His short film for the Royal Court & the Financial Times about the climate crisis, *WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY?* was released in September 2019. Awards include Fringe Firsts for *STATIC*, *NEUTRINO*, *THE OH FUCK MOMENT*, *THE SHAPE OF THE PAIN*, *CONFIRMATION* and *STATUS* the Premio Franco Enriquez 2018; & selection for Berlin Theatertreffen's Stuckemarkt for *THERE HAS POSSIBLY BEEN AN INCIDENT*.

RACHEL CHAVKIN | DRAMATURG

Rachel is a New York based director/dramaturg/writer, and the founding Artistic Director of the TEAM. Rachel received the 2019 Tony Award, Drama Desk Award, and Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Director of a Musical for *Hadestown*. She is a director, writer, and dramaturg, as well as the founding Artistic Director of Brooklyn-based ensemble the TEAM (theteamplays.org) whose work has been seen all over London and the U.K. including the National Theatre, the Royal Court, and multiple collaborations with the National Theatre of Scotland.

In addition to her awards for *Hadestown*, Chavkin is a recipient of a Tony Award nomination for Best Direction of a Musical, three Obie Awards, a Drama Desk Award, multiple Lortel Award nominations, two Doris Duke Impact Award nominations, and the 2017 Smithsonian Award for Ingenuity along with Dave Malloy. Her first film, *Remind Me*, was an official selection of the Venice and Beverly Hills Film Festivals. Upcoming: feature film *Shrew's Nest* (Paramount). Proud NYTW Usual Suspect and Member SDC.

CLAIRE O'REILLY | DIRECTOR

Claire is currently a Resident Director of the Abbey Theatre (National Theatre of Ireland) and the showrunner in the development of a new drama for young people commissioned by RTÉ (Ireland's National Broadcaster). In 2015 she co-founded the devising and new writing company MALAPROP Theatre. They are Dublin bred but we've toured to Edinburgh, London, Manchester, Paris, Beijing, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Darwin.

Her recent associate credits include Dr Semmelweis by Mark Rylance, dir. by Tom Morris, and The Meaning of Zong by Giles Terera, dir. Tom Morris, both at the Bristol Old Vic in 2022. Her assisting credits include Uncle Vanya (Harold Pinter, West End 2020), Translations (National Theatre 2019) both directed by Ian Rickson.

She has a Masters in Drama Directing from the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School (2019) and graduated from Film and Theatre at Trinity College Dublin in 2015.

CHINA PLATE | PRODUCER

China Plate is an independent theatre studio that works with artists, venues, festivals and funders to develop, make and present engaging, entertaining and accessible new work. Their productions have won multiple industry awards including 5 Fringe First Awards and 3 The Stage Edinburgh Awards and been nominated for an Olivier Award and multiple Offies. Using performance to engage and inspire, they take shows into theatres, village halls, schools, on to the streets and to festivals in the UK and internationally. In 2019, they created, toured and programmed work for over 33,000 people across 134 venues (nationally and internationally), with a diverse programme of shows and events. In 2020 we produced 129 digital events/workshops reaching 31,788 audience members.

REVIEWS FOR STATUS



Credit: The Other Richard



- ★★★★ Guardian
- ★★★★ Time Out
- ★★★★ The Scotsman
- ★★★★ The Stage

FRINGE FIRST AWARD WINNER, Edinburgh Festival Fringe – 2018

"...a dense and provocative barrage of reflections on a world in flux and our place within it." The Guardian

“As ever with Chris Thorpe, the words are eloquent, the music essential and powerful, and the performance full of a brilliant, prowling precision...” *Scotsman*

“...a searching, meticulously crafted, beautifully written piece, full of fragile conclusions about nationhood and privilege.” *The Stage*

“*Status* is a sophisticated, hugely confident show, meticulously crafted in Thorpe’s bracing monologue and directed with assurance and remarkable insight by Rachel Chavkin...”
ArtsDesk

“...a scintillating, rigorous critique of something we often take for granted” *Fest Mag*

"Thorpe’s metaphysical road trip is grittily real, uncomfortably surreal, densely poetic"
Edinburgh Reporter

REVIEWS FOR CONFIRMATION



★★★★ *Guardian*
 ★★★★★ *Independent*
 ★★★★★ *The Scotsman*
 ★★★★★ *The Times*

FRINGE FIRST AWARD WINNER, Edinburgh Festival Fringe – 2014

“...an 80 minute-show that makes the brain both hurt and buzz...Confirmation is a show that lets nobody off the hook: not us, and definitely not Thorpe”, *The Guardian*

“Rachel Chavkin’s fast-moving, kinetic production offers us an absolutely compelling performance from a man who is fast becoming one of the most powerful performers in the UK”. *The Scotsman*

“Thorpe and director Rachel Chavkin energetically take a liberal Fringe audience to the edge of the abyss of belief and hang them over the side in a conversation for our times.” *The Independent*

“...Thorpe is out to climb outside of his own head, to experience an opinion he loathes as if it were truly his own.” *The Times*

“Chris Thorpe stares into the abyss so you don't have to.” *Time Out*

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