

STUDY GUIDE

KARL SYDOW
PRESENTS

STING

STARRING IN

**THE
LAST
SHIP**

THE MUSICAL



The National Theatre
Washington D.C.



The National Theatre Washington D.C.

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Written and Curated by Jared Strange, Dramaturg
Designed by Carolyn Donarski

1321 Pennsylvania Avenue NW Washington, DC 20004

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INTRODUCING THE LAST SHIP

One of the things that makes *The Last Ship* special is that it introduces American audiences to two things they might not know much about. First up, Sting: musical theatre composer and performer. Plenty of Americans know Sting as the world-renowned solo artist and founding member of The Police, but they might have raised an eyebrow or two when they saw his poster gracing theatres across the country. The truth is Sting's *The Last Ship*, based on the travails of the town he grew up in, has been around in various iterations since 2014, with Sting himself playing the pivotal role of Jackie White for a good part of that. Fans of Sting will be pleased to see that his unique artistry, characterized by an eclectic mix of styles and an irrepressible need to experiment, has translated to the stage quite well.

More significant, including for Sting himself, is the story of Wallsend, his hometown and one-time site of the Swan Hunter shipyard. Once charged with building some of the premier ships in Britain, the Swan Hunter, like many industrial sites during the 1970s and 80s, suffered under a poor economy and eventually became a battleground for political forces with very

different ideas about ownership and success. *The Last Ship* is unequivocal in its support of the working men and women who stood by their union and resisted the efforts of private enterprises to shut the shipyard down, but it is also unflinching in its portrayal of the hard life shipbuilders lead. There are no easy answers in the story told here, whether in the fight over the Swan Hunter or the personal tale of big dreams and great disappointments that runs through this northern town. There is, however, a great deal of pluck, hard work, and dignity to go around. This show's creator has a deep and abiding love for the community that raised him, and it shines brightly throughout this production.

In this packet, you'll get a breakdown of the musical, a look at Sting's long and illustrious career, and a brief tour through the show's signature number. You'll also learn a little bit about the politics at play and the developmental process the musical has gone through. All of this will serve you well as you take on the research and writing challenges at the end of the packet. Who knows? You may be sending out a ship of your own someday!



Jackie Morrison (Peggy White) and Sting (Jackie White) in *The Last Ship* Photo: Matthew Murphy



The Last Ship Photo: Matthew Murphy

SUMMARY

ACT 1

Scene 1: Curtain rises to reveal Ellen, our “storyteller.” She is joined by the company, who sing “We’ve Got Nowt Else,” an ode to the humble town of Wallsend and the shipyard that sits at its heart. Ellen introduces Gideon, a young man who wants something more than the shipbuilder’s life. Young Gideon is joined by Young Meg, who dances with him as they sing “Island of Souls” and dream of leaving for good. In the midst of their dance, an explosion wounds Gideon’s father. Afraid of what might befall him if he stays, Young Gideon joins the navy, promising to return to Meg soon.

Scene 2: Gideon returns sixteen years later. He and the Ferryman sing “And Yet,” acknowledging the difficulty of life on the Tyne and the hope that there’s better out there. Gideon himself hopes that Meg is still willing to take him in.

Scene 3: Meg, meanwhile, is at the bar she operates alongside Mrs. Dees. They are joined by Jackie White, the shipyard foreman, who is convening a meeting with several of the working men in town, the shipyard owner Mr. Newlands, and the Baroness Tynedale from the Department of Trade and Industry. With all the parties together, Jackie announces the bad news: the ship Utopia, currently sitting unfinished in the yard,

does not have a buyer. Newlands, the owner of the yard, says the only thing they can do now is scrap the ship and sell it for parts, which will keep some—but not all—of the workforce employed at a reduced rate. Despite protests from the working men, the Baroness will not step in with a government bailout. Jackie counters with the song “Shipyard,” in which he valorizes the work of the shipbuilders and explains what the yard means to them. He is joined by his loving wife, Peggy; Billy, the proletarian revolutionary; Adrian, the poetic intellectual; and Davey, the regular fella who likes a drink. With the meeting at an impasse, the men decide to strike. Gideon arrives soon after and is greeted by Adrian and Davey. Meg interrupts their reunion and angrily confronts the man who jilted her. She sings “If You Ever See Me Talking to a Sailor,” a warning for all women to steer clear of sailors. As Gideon pleads with Meg to speak with him, Ellen steps in and demands to know what is going on. Meg drops the bomb: Ellen is Gideon’s daughter. Despite Gideon’s efforts to reconcile, Meg throws him and the rest of the men out.

Scene 4: Billy gathers the men at the shipyard to prepare the strike. They are intercepted by Newlands, who threatens to hire 500 other men to come and break the ship down. Throughout, the workers sing “Underground River,” a song about the hard life of shipbuilding and the freedom that comes when the work is done.



Sting (Jackie White) and the Company of *The Last Ship*.

Photo: Matthew Murphy

Scene 5: Gideon returns to his home. There, his dead father, Joe, appears in memory and speaks to Young Gideon, who is preparing to join the navy. They sing “Dead Man’s Boots,” in which Young Gideon rejects his father’s old boots as a symbol of the shipbuilder’s life. Ellen arrives in the midst of this recollection, curious about her father but also suspicious that he was just using his mother all along. Gideon corrects this by singing “The Night the Pugilist Learned How to Dance,” recounting how he, a young fighter, impressed the woman he loved by learning how to cut

a rug. As father and daughter connect, Ellen reveals that she wants to leave town and play music with her band. She imparts that Meg does not have a fella—and laughs off the idea that love isn't on Gideon's mind.

Scene 6: Meg stands at the coastguard's house, where Young Meg and Young Gideon stood at the beginning of the play. She sings "August Winds," wondering why she is always drawn to watch the boats return home.

Scene 7: At the church, Peggy tends to Jackie, who is suffering from mesothelioma and coughing up blood. They begin the first part of "The Last Ship," a song wrapped in biblical allusions that speaks of faith in the mighty ships they build. Meanwhile, the men and Mrs. Dees gather at the picket line, Gideon and Meg wonder what is next, and Ellen marvels at the beauty of her people. Together, they join in "The Last Ship," placing all their hopes into the great steel beast.

ACT 2

Scene 1: Mrs. Dees and three other women greet the audience with a rendition of "Mrs. Dees's Rant," a playful number about the men they have to settle for in their town.

Scene 2: Meg and Ellen argue about Ellen's future and the fact that Meg kept Gideon a secret from her daughter. Meg recounts the shame she endured as a pregnant teenager and warns Ellen that being an adult means facing the consequences of one's actions. Ellen to sing "All This Time," which makes her all the more determined to escape this town.

Scene 3: Jackie's condition deteriorates. He and Peggy sing "So to Speak," reaffirming their love for each other. Billy arrives with bad news: Newlands has taken the yard out from under them by changing the company, meaning in addition to not having jobs, they'll also not have severance pay. Jackie convinces Billy to talk to the men about accepting the offer.

Scene 4: Gideon tells Meg he needs to be in another port soon but wants to work things out when he returns. He sings "What You Say, Meg?" to try and convince her to give him a chance, but Meg isn't having it.

Scene 5: As the men meet up at the gates of the yard, Jackie tells Gideon that his father was always proud of him, even if they didn't get along. As Billy approaches the men about accepting the offer, Jackie has a change of heart and sings the next part of "The Last Ship" as a call to complete the Utopia on their own terms. As the men set to work, Davey protests by singing "Out of Your Tiny Minds (Hadaway)," urging



Frances McNamee (Meg Dawson) and Oliver Savile (Gideon Fletcher) in *The Last Ship*. Photo: Matthew Murphy

them to accept the reality that the yard is doomed. The men work on without him but are interrupted by the arrival of Newlands. In the midst of the hubbub, Jackie is struck with a fit of coughing and must be led away. Ellen, meanwhile, is sneaking off when she is intercepted by Gideon, who convinces her to stay, at least until she can say a proper goodbye. He then offers to build proper barricades around the yards in service of the working men.

Scene 6: As Jackie dies, he and Peggy sing "Underground River" by way of saying goodbye. Adrian discovers them and pledges to take care of Jackie's services himself. With Jackie dead, Adrian and Peggy return to the fight.

Scene 7: Meg arrives at the yard and thanks Gideon for stopping Ellen from running off. Together they sing "When We Danced," reminiscing about their time together.

Scene 8: The women of the town join up with the men and sing "Women at the Gate," speaking out against a disappointing government and reaffirming their commitment to fighting alongside the workers. They eventually drive Newlands off and bring out Jackie's coffin to commemorate the launching of the Utopia. They sing "Show Some Respect" as an ode to Jackie and a commitment to work together. As they ready the ship for launch, Meg gives Ellen her blessing to go to London. She also tells Gideon that they will give it a go once he's back and they share a kiss. Gideon takes his place on the ship as its captain. Ellen, meanwhile, addresses the audience one last time and reflects on similar movements against corporate overlords happening all over the world. Together the company sings "The Last Ship Finale" and cheers on the completion of the last ship.

STING: FROM WALLSEND TO STARDOM AND BACK

By his own admission, Sting had no intention of becoming an actor. He was born Gordon Sumner in Wallsend, England in 1951 and took to music quickly. By sixteen, he was playing in a jazz band with his schoolmates and laying down musical roots that would nourish him through his career. Thanks to his penchant for wearing black and yellow sweaters that, according to the other boys, made him look like a wasp, he also earned himself a nickname: Sting. The artist now known as Sting finished college, worked an assortment of odd jobs—ditch digger, bus conductor, office worker, even teacher—before realizing he had a calling. After leaving his home in the North of England, Sting moved to London to play with the jazz outfit Last Exit. It was while in London that he met Stewart Copeland, with whom he would form one of the premier rock groups of the late 1970s and early 1980s: The Police. For most of its life, The Police was a trio featuring Sting, Copeland, and Andy Summers (who replaced original member Henri Padovani). Together, The Police released a string of hits, including “Roxanne,” “Don’t Stand So Close to Me,” “Message in a Bottle,” and, of course, “Every Breath You Take,” often cited as the most played song on the radio, *ever*.



Sting performs a **iHeartRadio LIVE**, January 2020

Photo: iHeartRadio

Despite already being a bona fide superstar with The Police, Sting decided to follow his restless spirit and left the band in 1984. He embarked on a solo career that incorporated the eclectic mix of styles—jazz,

reggae, pop, punk rock, even country—that would become his signature. Sting’s remarkably varied career found its high points in hits like “Brand New Day,” an Oscar nomination for the track “My Funny Friend and Me” from the animated film *The Emperor’s New Groove*, and collaborations with such renowned artists as Mary J. Blige, the Black-Eyed Peas, and even Shaggy, with whom he won the 2019 Grammy Award for best Reggae Album. He even had time to put together a reunion tour with The Police in 2007–08.

In the midst of all his projects, Sting found time in 2013 to record the concept album *The Last Ship*. This proved to be the basis for the musical of the same name, which made its Broadway debut in 2014. While not autobiographical per se, the musical sticks close to the story of the ship-building community he was born into and the dreams that eventually took him elsewhere. Sting himself stepped into the role of Jackie White for the final stretch of its run in January of 2015 and has kept the role in the retooled version now touring the country. It should be noted that the once-reluctant actor had already appeared in several films at that point and had even made his Broadway debut as far back as 1989 in Bertolt Brecht’s and Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera*. Whatever the project, Sting always brings a unique perspective and willingness to work and revise the material. This is part of what makes his music great, and it’s what helps keep pieces like *The Last Ship* afloat.

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Andy Summers, Sting, and Stewart Copeland of The Police, 1983. Photo: Terry O’Neill

ANATOMY OF A SONG: “THE LAST SHIP – PART ONE”

The importance of the actual “Last Ship” is accentuated by the musical’s three-part title tune. In this section, we’ll take a dive into the lyrics from the first part of “The Last Ship.” Observe the beautiful imagery and biblical allusions it uses to describe the struggle facing the shipbuilders and take note, because you’ll be asked to do some writing of your own!

JACKIE

It’s all there in the Gospels,
the Magdalene girl
comes to pay her respects,
but her mind is awirl
when she finds the tomb empty.
The stone had been rolled.

Not only is it “all there in the Gospels,” Mary Magdalene’s visit to Jesus’ tomb is one of the few stories that is actually in *all* of the Gospels. Each one—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—mentions several women visiting the tomb and discovering it empty; only Mary Magdalene is explicitly named in all of them. This is significant because it affirms the value of women in Jesus’ ministry and the way Jesus valued those whom society did not (fun fact: Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute, as some teachings claim, but was from a town of poor repute). Note that the women of *The Last Ship* are important allies to shipbuilders, not to mention hardworking community members in their own right.

PEGGY

Not a sign of a corpse in the dark and the cold.
When she reaches the door,
sees an unholy sight.
There’s this solitary figure
in a halo of light.

The reference to a halo obviously refers to the divinity of Jesus (according to Christian theology), and while it does set the man in this song apart, it also sets up how important it is to work alongside one’s community. This alludes to the journey of Gideon, who wanted something bigger and better for his life outside of Wallsend, but later returns to aid the working men he left behind as they prepare their last ship. No matter how “special” he is, he has a place he belongs to and a people who need him.

JACKIE

He just carries on floating
past Calvary Hill,
in an almighty hurry.

PEGGY

Aye, but she might catch him still.
“Tell me, where are ye going, Lord,
and why in such haste?”

JACKIE

“Don’t hinder me, woman,
I’ve no time to waste!
For they’re launching a boat
on the morrow at noon,
and I have to be there before daybreak.
I canna be missing,
the lads’ll expect me.
Why else would
the good Lord Himself resurrect me?”

In the Book of John, Jesus visits Peter while he is out on a fishing expedition. Peter was a career fisherman before joining Jesus’ ministry and would go on to witness many of Jesus’ miracles, a number of which were performed on or near the water. Jesus became notorious for flouting the rules of the establishment and constantly consorted with the poor, the working men, even the beggars and prostitutes. This is echoed in the way *The Last Ship* celebrates the lives of ordinary people who might not be celebrities and might not be valued by big corporations, but who have rich, dignified, and vital lives of their own.

BOTH

For nothing’ll stop us,
we have to prevail through the teeth
of this tempest in the mouth of a gale...

JACKIE

May the angels protect us
if all else should fail
when the last ship sails.

This lyric speaks to the enormous spectacle and noise of a ship being sent out to sea. It seems almost apocalyptic, and in this case, it might be. Mentioning “the end of the world” alludes to how important shipbuilding is to the community: for these people, the end of the shipyard will feel like the end of the world. So much of the community is dependent on the jobs it provides, not just because men get paid to work there, but because their families and friends make their own lives off it, too.

ALL

Oh, the roar of the chains
and the cracking of timbers,
the noise at the end of the world
in your ears as a mountain of steel
makes its way to the sea
and the last ship sails.

ELLEN

Aye, I said we we’re a storied people, I didn’t say
we were much for the happy ever afters.
Look at us. Look at us. Are we not beautiful.

Throughout the play, Ellen speaks to us as a storyteller, presumably a storyteller who has already lived through the events of the musical. This puts her in a position to see the beauty in her hometown and the people who live there. This is important because she spends much of her time in the play wanting to leave, much like her father before her—and much like her father before her, she learns to love Wallsend for what it is.

DAVEY

It’s a strange kind of beauty,
it’s cold and austere.
And whatever it was that you’ve done to be here,
it’s the sum of your hopes,
your despairs, and your fears
when the last ship sails.

ALL

Oh, the roar of the chains
and the cracking of timbers,
the noise at the end of the world in your ears
as a mountain of steel makes its way to the sea
and the last ship sails.



Oliver Savile (Gideon Fletcher) and Sting (Jackie White) in *The Last Ship*. Photo: Matthew Murphy

ALL

And whatever you’d promised,
Whatever you’ve done,
and whatever the station
in life you’ve become,
in the name of the Father,
in the name of the Son,
and no matter the weave of this life
that you’ve spun on the earth
or in heaven
or under the sun
when the last ship sails.
When the last
ship
sails...

This is a reference both to a prayer (God the Father, God the Son) and to the way shipbuilding as a profession passes from father to son in Wallsend. The fact that shipbuilding stays in the family is a point of pride for many, but it is also a source of pressure for Gideon, the musical’s main character. It’s that pressure and the desire for something else that drive him to leave town at the beginning of the play.

THE POLITICS OF *THE LAST SHIP*



The super-tanker Tyne Pride under construction, 1975.

Photo: Peter Loud



Launch of the HMS Norfolk, 1967.

Photo: *The Newcastle Chronicle*

At the heart of *The Last Ship* is a shipyard inspired by the Swan Hunter, which once sat on England's Tyne river. Despite being at the heart of controversy for decades, the Swan Hunter produced a number of top-quality ships until its final closure in 1988, including the massive Tyne Pride seen above. As "The History of Shipbuilding and Protest" sheet demonstrates, Britain saw many struggles between union workers and management over shipyards and mining companies throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. So what exactly is at stake politically?

At the heart of the matter is the issue of ownership, not just in terms of who calls the shots but who gets to call a workplace home. After the economic downturn of the 1920s and 30s, many shipyards were nationalized, or brought under government administration and funded primarily by tax dollars. This put unions—organizations composed of working people that advocate on behalf of their membership and negotiate wages, working conditions, and benefits with management—in a very strong position. Union power rankled with the conservative governments of the 1970s and 80s, who typically favored privatized industries operating under very low government restrictions. The idea here is that privatized industries, in which a small collection of companies compete with one another to provide the best services, operate best in a free market that rewards innovation, low-cost

production, and high profits, which in turn benefit the working people. The problem for union workers is that low government restrictions can mean low-quality work environments, reduced benefits due to cost-cutting efforts, and the risk of being priced out of a job entirely.

By the time *The Last Ship* begins, it is the mid-1980s and the privatization of industries across Britain has already begun. The Swan Hunter is under private ownership and will soon be sold off. The final insult to the union workers is the announcement that the last remaining ship will be scrapped—and that if they do not undertake the work themselves, the owner will bring in temporary workers, sometimes known as "scabs," to do it on the cheap. Many union disputes around the Western world devolved into similar circumstances, though some proved to be more successful for working people. You will have a chance to look into some of those incidents later in the packet. At stake for each group was the right to have a say in the terms of their employment, and every case required collective action on the part of the workers to ensure their voices were heard. This is the strength of unions: the ability to advocate collectively and negotiate with managers who enjoy greater individual power. Unions cover lots of industries and workers, including the actors you will see onstage when you take in *The Last Ship*.

STRIKE! A RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The shipyards in Wallsend are far from the only sites where working people have taken a stand to protect their livelihood. Here are the names of three major strikes that have taken place here in the United States. Do some research and fill in the details below.



Photo: Associated Press

U.S. POSTAL STRIKE OF 1970

LOCATION: _____

APPROXIMATE DATES: _____

UNION/GROUP INVOLVED: _____

KEY ISSUES RAISED: _____

MAJOR OUTCOMES: _____



Photo: Bristol Herald Courier

PITTSTON COAL STRIKE

LOCATION: _____

APPROXIMATE DATES: _____

UNION/GROUP INVOLVED: _____

KEY ISSUES RAISED: _____

MAJOR OUTCOMES: _____



Photo: Tyler Evert/AP

WEST VIRGINIA TEACHERS' STRIKE

LOCATION: _____

APPROXIMATE DATES: _____

UNION/GROUP INVOLVED: _____

KEY ISSUES RAISED: _____

MAJOR OUTCOMES: _____

PERSONAL LYRIC CHALLENGE

As read in our *Anatomy of a Song* segment on “The Last Ship—Part One,” Sting has created a piece of music that comes from the heart, deals with something enormous in his life, and employs metaphors to illustrate its importance. Using the outline below, craft a piece of writing—song, monologue, prose, whatever you like!—that incorporates these three things together.

What is something that motivates, frustrates, or delights you? In *The Last Ship*, Gideon was motivated to leave home for greener pastures because he was frustrated with his small town, but when he returns, he finds new motivation in helping the shipbuilders and is delighted to discover he has a daughter.

What is something that looms large in your life? For *The Last Ship*, it’s obvious: the ships themselves. Not only are they literally big, they mean a lot to the communities that put them together.

Draw on a source of metaphors to enhance the meaning of your piece. In the song “The Last Ship,” the ship itself can serve as a metaphor for community and hope, but there are also biblical references that give the song new meaning. Can you incorporate a similar set of metaphors—biblical, mythical, political, literary, even pop cultural—to do the same?

Now, use the space below to write!

FURTHER READING

“Sting Talks Bringing Deeply Personal Musical ‘The Last Ship’ to L.A.”

By Gary Graff, for *Billboard*, 1 March 2019

Sting will be sailing *The Last Ship*, currently docked in Toronto, into Los Angeles early next year.

His Tony Award-nominated musical inspired by the shipyard culture of Sting’s native Newcastle, England, will run Jan. 14–Feb. 16 at the Ahmanson Theatre, with Sting playing shipyard foreman and elder statesman Jackie White—as he’s doing now at the Princess of Wales Theatre in Toronto and did during the end of its Broadway run during January of 2015.

“I’d like to think this play could live without me,” Sting, who will be in Toronto with the production through March 24, tells *Billboard*. “I don’t want to be tied to the mast for the rest of my life, but I will take it to the next stage to see what happens. I’m more than happy to take it to (Los Angeles) and then see where it goes. I agreed to do it because I realized the real politics of being a name and how effective that is. But I do think it could survive without me, you know, with good actors.” *The Last Ship* premiered in Chicago during the

summer of 2014 before moving to Broadway that September, closing after a little more than four months. It was subsequently staged in Salt Lake City during the fall of 2016, in Finland during the fall of 2017 and in the U.K. and Ireland during 2018. “I think it’s a real story,” Sting says. “It’s about real issues. It’s not a fairy tale or Disney property, you know? It’s something that’s relevant. I think people find a resonance in it. That’s unusual in a musical. It’s also telling the story of the community I came from. There’s probably more of me in it than I intended, but that’s OK. I’m enjoying the hell out of it.”

The Last Ship’s U.K. tour and the Toronto production have also unveiled a new book by current director Lorne Campbell, which has streamlined the narrative and removed some characters that some felt took attention away from the socio-political crux of the story. “I think it was maybe too ambitious at first, but we learned our mistakes in the full glare of publicity,

and I don’t regret that,” Sting explains. “For me it’s never finished. I’m constantly tinkering with it and looking at ways it can be modified. The Broadway world tends to be locked but in my world, music, I don’t go there and try and reproduce something I wrote or recorded 40 years ago exactly the way it was. There’s no other way if you’re me. But I’m pretty determined, and I don’t give in easily because I can see the value of it.”

The musical’s stop in Toronto underscored *The Last Ship*’s relevance with a cast visit to Oshawa, Ont., on Feb. 14 to perform for General Motor workers facing a threatened plant closure—ironically in an arena named for the auto manufacturer. “What we did



Sting waits for the start of rehearsals during “The Last Ship” photocall at Northern Stage on March 16, 2018 in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England.

was just a gesture of support and solidarity,” Sting says. “Those people were clearly anxious; They were happy to see us but you could definitely see there was an anxiety there—understandably—and the cast were very galvanized and inspired by the reality of what they were portraying on stage. It was very moving for all of us. I don’t know how much or how effective it could be to change things, but the fact is they’re moving the plant so they can pay workers in Mexico \$2 an hour and save money, even though they make vast amounts of money and Canada bailed them out. Where’s the loyalty? That’s exactly what *(The Last Ship)* is about.”

Whilst ensconced in Toronto, Sting is also doing some recording and planning his upcoming My Songs tour, which will play five shows in Europe starting June 23. During his stay he also won his 17th Grammy Award, best reggae album for his *44/876* release with Shaggy, with whom he performed during the previous year’s Grammy ceremony. He wasn’t surprised with the win, either. “You know, it’s a good album in any category, in my opinion,” Sting says. “I thought once we were nominated we would win. Does that sound arrogant? It’s honest, not arrogant. And we were so happy for Shaggy because he hasn’t had one in a long time, and he deserves it. We’ve really formed a genuine friendship, and there’s a genuine rapport. People were infected by that, even if they had been skeptical at first about this odd combination. We’ll do it again, I’m sure.”

“Sting’s *Last Ship* Explores His Shipyard Youth”

From NPR’s *Weekend Edition Sunday*, 26 October 2014

This interview took place before The Last Ship’s initial Broadway run starting at the end of 2014. It includes then-director Joe Mantello, a veteran of the Broadway stage and two-time Tony Award-winner. Lorne Campbell, Artistic Director of Northern Stage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (the area where the musical takes place), took over directing duties for this revised run. At this point, Sting had not yet stepped into the role of Jackie White.

This interview has been included in part because it describes the creative process Sting and Mantello undertook to bring the initial version of The Last Ship together. It is important to note that some details have changed since the musical has gone under further development. New developments are not unusual—in fact, they are a critical part of what makes theatre so intriguing and vital.

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST: Long before he was Sting, he was Gordon Sumner, a kid from northern England where the shipyard loomed large over his life and everyone else’s.

STING: I was born in the shadow of that shipyard, literally. You look at the pictures of my street and then this huge—looked like an opera set behind—gigantic ships. There’s something very theatrical about it.

MARTIN: So a few years ago when Sting went looking for a new kind of inspiration, he found it in his hometown. Wallsend, England is at the center of a new musical called “The Last Ship,” directed by Joe Mantello. Sting wrote the music and the lyrics. And the story of the main character, Gideon Fletcher, echoes parts of Sting’s own biography. I spoke recently with Joe Mantello and Sting, and we started our conversation about those parallels.



Sting (Jackie White) and Jackie Morrison (Peggy White) in *The Last Ship*. Photo by Walter McBride.

STING: His father is a shipbuilder. His grandfather was a shipbuilder, just as mine were. And he decides that that is not what he wants to do. He wants to explore the world. And the simplest way to do it, because he can't become a rock star, is to join the Navy. And he goes away and doesn't return for 15 years. And when he gets back to attend his father's funeral, he has to deal with a lot of ghosts. And he also has responsibilities to live up to. He has to become a part of that community. He has a job to do to save the community. And he becomes their leader.

MARTIN: As you say, the story takes place in the town where you grew up. And you come from a family of shipbuilders. Is that where the parallels stop?

STING: I see bits of me. But it's not important that, you know, people shouldn't be drawing parallels between me. You know, otherwise we'd be making "Jersey Boys" set in Wallsend. You know, it's a different thing altogether.

MARTIN: Is it different? I imagine it is, writing for the Broadway stage. How did you have to learn to write songs in a new way?

STING: It's different from writing a pop song. You have to advance narrative within the song. And even if the song is good, if it's not doing that job then it cannot survive. Every song fights for his life—every character, every line, every verse, every couplet.

MARTIN: There's a rousing number in the musical—a song called "Shipyard." Let me ask you about it, but let's take a listen to a recording of the song from your recent album first.

STING: You know, it was the first thing I actually wrote once I'd got the green light to go ahead with this. I wrote a list of names down of people I knew in my town who worked in the shipyards. They would tell you who they were, what they did, their hopes, their fears for the future. But it didn't—wasn't guaranteed to get in the play until we had a narrative reason for those men to be saying these things. And so we brought in this character, Newlands, who was going to buy the yard and change it into a scrap yard. And this would be the men's *cri de coeur* that, you know, their chance to say, you know, this is who we are. And this is what we want.

MARTIN: Joe, talk to me a little bit about how this process has been for you. I mean, did you have any apprehensions about working on this project because this is a—obviously this is a big star? It's a guy with a lot staked on this project. He's emotionally invested in it because it is at least, in part, based on his own family's experience.

JOE MANTELLO: From our very first meeting, I got a sense of Sting's curiosity and his willingness and openness to the process. And I was saying the other night that one of the best bits of advice that I've ever been given in terms of working on a musical is be careful who you sleep with because that's what the baby is going to look like. And it's really, really true that you have to make sure that you are in sync with your collaborators. And I feel that every step of the way, all of us have been making the same musical which isn't quite as easy as it sounds. And every one of us has been willing to go back to the drawing board if something wasn't working, which is not really true of most musicals in my experience.

MARTIN: Can you give me an example of something that you had to work through?

MANTELLO: Just the other day, in fact, we cut a little bit of a scene that we'd all been in love with for a very, very long time but that ultimately wasn't serving the story.

MARTIN: Can you tell me which one?

MANTELLO: It's a scene where Gideon goes to visit his father's grave. And there was a beautiful scene, and he had a real emotional breakthrough, break down, Gideon, and then he sang the song. And what we came to realize was then the song became redundant. And so we had to strip away this gorgeous bit of writing to let the song do the work.

MARTIN: I read that you, Sting, are around a lot behind the scenes, onstage, behind the curtains during the performances making changes. Is that true?

STING: I've been to just about every rehearsal, every preview, every discussion. I'm fascinated by the process. I'm really intrigued by how an incremental change, a tiny change in one line, can have a profound effect on the whole play.

MANTELLLO: And you love puzzles, you said to me. You love puzzles. And at a certain point, the math of a musical becomes fascinating because, like Sting was just saying, if you cut, if you edit one line, a moment here, the overall shape, the dynamic of a scene can change.

MARTIN: Sting, what did you learn beyond the technical stuff?

STING: Well, the learning was technical, but also there was a catharsis in doing this stuff and other people relating to it so it makes you feel less isolated in the world. And I think that's the business of art, really, to expose things that you consider utterly personal, and find that you share a great deal with the public at large.

MARTIN: The musical is called "The Last Ship." It opens tonight on Broadway. It's directed by Joel Mantello. Joe, Sting, thank you so much for talking with us.

MANTELLLO: Thank you.

STING: Thank you.

Listen to the full interview here:

<https://www.npr.org/2014/10/26/359065354/stings-last-ship-explores-his-shipyard-youth>



Sting performs at the curtain call for the opening night of *The Last Ship* on Broadway, October 26, 2014.

Photo: Walter McBride



The National Theatre
Washington D.C.

1321 Pennsylvania Avenue NW Washington, DC 20004
thenationaldc.com