

A foreword

by Matthew Warchus

This is probably my favourite Dennis Kelly moment, in a strong field of many.

We were in previews for the very first production of *Matilda the Musical* in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2010. The show was generally going very well but there was nevertheless a sense that the first chunk of Act 2 might be a bit too brutal for a family show. A lot of bad stuff is piling up in that phase of the story; Trunchbull is on the warpath, Bruce has gone to Chokey, Mr Wormwood, in a rage, threatens to cut off his daughter's lifeline to books, and the beloved Acrobat and Escapologist, in Matilda's imaginary tale, are forced to attempt 'the most dangerous feat ever in the world, ever'.

In a genuinely shocking turn of events Matilda tells an aghast Mrs Phelps (the librarian) that high in the roof of the Big Top the pregnant(!) Acrobat loses her grip and plummets to the ground. 'She did live long enough to have the child', Matilda says, 'But the effort was too great ... And then she died'.

Having heard audible sobs from some audience members in early previews, I chatted with Dennis and asked if he might think about a way to dial back the darkness somehow. 'Yeah, I'll have a look tonight', he said, surprisingly unfazed.

I spent half the next morning puzzling away in my head how the issue might be resolved without massive upheaval to the story. It seemed like an almost impossible task. After lunch Dennis arrived with an air of inscrutability. 'I had a look at it', he said. I opened the script and scanned the problem area for trims and softened vocabulary. But everything seemed identical. I flicked through the pages. No changes at all. Fair enough, I thought. And then I saw it – a quintessential Dennis Kelly masterstroke. No cuts, no toning-down, no punches pulled, but instead, immediately following 'And then she died', there were five brand new words: 'And then things got worse'.

That night when Matilda spoke that new line there was a huge laugh from the audience and somehow everything was fine.

I vividly remember sitting there in the middle of that laugh and realising that of course you don't have to soften the intensity or blunt the edges. You don't have to steer around difficult stuff. You just have to help the audience cope. It was a revelation. So clever. So big-hearted. So Dennis Kelly.

Matthew Warchus, July 2023

