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The Olivier-Winning Cast of Operation Mincemeat Sets Their Sights on New York



David Cumming, Zoë Roberts, Jak Malone, Claire-Marie Hall, and Natasha Hodgson of Operation Mincemeat, which begins previews at Broadway's John Golden Theatre on February 15. Photo: Emilio Madrid

By Juan A. Ramírez

The winds of chance have always been on the side of Operation Mincemeat.

No, not the team behind the soon-to-open Broadway musical, though we'll get to them in a second. The actual operation was a World War II deception in which British intelligence sourced a random corpse, dressed him up as a major, stuffed his pockets with false documents outlining plans to invade Greece, and let him wash up on the Spanish coast for the Germans to find while the Allied forces breezed into Sicily. Somehow, this farce of a plan worked.

That was 1943. Then, in 2019, a similar miracle happened when SpitLip, a troupe of four Brits with the goal of making “big, dumb musicals,” debuted a comedy based on that improbable story at a tiny theater in London, with three of its members plus two outside actors swapping through dozens of roles. It was a hit, cracking the stiff upper lip of British history into a wide-open smile, and kept scaling up into larger theaters, eventually landing in the West End in 2023, where it has since been extended 12 times.

Now those winds have blown the cast of Operation Mincemeat to the shores of New York City—seemingly straight from the Olivier Awards after-party where they celebrated their two wins, including best new musical. Once they towel off, they'll begin performances on Saturday at [Broadway's Golden Theater](#), ahead of an opening night next month. Were the corpse to wake up today, he would not be as shocked at this outcome as the Mincemeat team.

“When we found the idea for the show, we were all genuinely quite upset,” says David Cumming, a SpitLip member in the cast. “We were like, Does anyone need any more art about World War fucking Two?” But the troupe—a ragtag team including castmates Natasha Hodgson and Zoë Roberts, plus the writer-musician Felix Hagan—carried on. They saw an opportunity to poke fun at that time in British history, which Hodgson says is “the one war we all got taught and in a Remember how Britain was so wonderful? way.” Where others saw a military victory, these four spied a comedy about a group of people stealing bodies and tossing them at sea.

The story also ticked all their boxes and rather reflected their own: a comedy about a core gang pulling off an audacious stunt. A very limited budget meant there could be no elaborate costumes or scene changes, resulting in a hat-on-hat-off style that established silliness as the production's guiding principle. But as they learned more about key characters in the plot, like a secretary named Hester Leggatt who time had entirely forgotten, they realized Operation Mincemeat could also be an opportunity to redeem the "smaller" parts that history's victorious authors are wont to exclude.

That role would eventually go to Jak Malone, a huge admirer of the team's previous work who'd made his way onto their radar by making fan art. (At Malone's audition, Hodgson says, the group initially groaned about "the fan-art guy" coming in.) On the first day of rehearsal, however, he reduced the production's lighting designer to tears singing the show's heart-stopping ballad "Dear Bill."

Following Malone's casting, the team embraced a system of meritocratic gender-bending. "Most people in the story are men because that's what history tells us and that's who's been allowed to tell these roles," says Cumming. "We were genuinely sick of seeing shows with just men onstage and don't think it's acceptable these days. You can quite easily cast women and make them play men, it's really not hard."

"If it were hard, we wouldn't have done it," quips Roberts.



Hodgson, Felix Hagan, Roberts, Cumming, Hall, and Malone at the Olivier Awards last year Photo: Getty Images

Malone won the show's other Olivier for his performance, and its fervent fan base took it upon itself to investigate the little-known Leggatt's legacy, digging into the National Archives and discovering someone had misspelled her last name for years—adding to the already near-impenetrable secrecy created by her job in national security. Her family was contacted, and once the shock of discovering their relative's true achievements subsided, they attended the show. Many related families have been in touch with the production, with some quietly hanging around to meet them after a performance, others asking for comps for their 19-person clan.

The musical has left quite its mark on England, bringing together disparate audiences with its off-kilter queerness and comedy as well as through its thematic material. "It's the musical your dad knows about," Hodgson says, noting older men typically come in expecting a wartime epic and leave more than pleasantly surprised. But the actor Claire-Marie Hall, who's rounded out the cast since its first London transfer, says that Broadway represents a different challenge, with people flying in from around the world to see things on "the world's stage."



The cast in New York. Photo: Emilio Madrid

Stateside, they won't have to contend with audiences knowing as much about this history, though the cast maintains it was never common knowledge in the UK either. They're not changing any lines, even if Malone jokes they'll have to speak them more slowly for American audiences. But the SpitLip team hopes they'll be received as warmly as they were during an early workshop of the project at the **Rhinebeck Writers Retreat** upstate in 2019—their last time in New York—where Roberts says they charmed their hosts with their Britishness and high energy.

The show's roots may be very British, but Cumming says its ultimate focus is universal: "The final person to remember is the body itself. The show kind of forgets about it, and you never hear his name until its final moment. It brings it all back to how easy it was for us, as a country, to use a body that no one cared about because he was homeless and died on the street to prop up our system. It's very easy to forget the small people, and the show is deeply reverential to that while still poking fun at history and the establishment." Adds Hodgson, "You can get away with a lot, as long as you're funny."

[Operation Mincemeat](#) opens on Broadway on March 20.