CHICAGO PREMIERE

RUTHERFORD AND SON

by GITHA SOWERBY

directed by MECHELLE MOE
Dear Friends,

Welcome to the long overdue Chicago debut of Githa Sowerby’s *Rutherford and Son.*

Written and originally produced to great acclaim, this play still has received only a handful of productions. More recently, a biography of Githa has been published, and revivals of the play in the United Kingdom have become quite common, including two major productions in London and Sheffield within the last year. Yet, here in North America, the play still has received only a handful of productions.

**TimeLine** is proud to try to undo that injustice, to give abundant evidence that she is destined to take rank with the world’s best latter-day writers and thinkers.

— *Journalist Phil Farmum in Nash’s Magazine, 1912*

Githa Sowerby was born October 6, 1876 to the family of a prosperous glassworks in Gateshead in the north of England. During her life, her family’s finances would veer from wealth to precarity and back. It is clear that many of the characters and concerns in her play are drawn from her family. Her great-grandfather and grandfather were formidable men and ruthless capitalists, and her grandfather John Sowerby grew the Sowerby’s Ellison Glassworks into a glassmaking powerhouse in England and Europe.

Githa’s father, John George Sowerby, was ousted from the glass company and started a new career as a painter, bringing his family into increasingly shabbier homes. Githa used the opportunity to take a flat in London with her sister Millicent, and they began earning a living writing children’s books. Githa wrote the text and Millicent illustrated the books.

London provided a relief to Githa, who was able to interact with new friends and escape the limited circle of acquaintances and family in Gateshead and the peripatetic life of her father. She sought to rectify what she felt were deficiencies in her education, since her father did not think his daughters should be formally educated. She began attending plays and lectures, including some at the Fabian Society, a socialist organization. Githa embraced socialism, abandoning the ruthless materialism in which she had been raised and joining the Fabian Society in 1905.

Best,

FROM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR PJ POWERS

A MESSAGE

A MESSAGE

PLAYWRIGHT

PLAYWRIGHT

THE TIMELINE: ENGLAND AND THE SOWERBYS

1771 The first factory cotton mill opens in Britain. It is owned by Richard Arkwright in Cromford, Derbyshire.

1775 – 1783 The American War for Independence—also known as the Revolutionary War—is fought.

1788 The Protection of Stocking Frames, etc. Act is passed, designed to protect against the deliberate disruption of textile factory machines.

July 14, 1789 The French Revolution begins with the storming of the Bastille.

1792 Mary Wollstonecraft writes *A Vindication of the Rights of Women.*

1799 – 1800 Trade unions are outlawed in England. The English government will slowly and nearly completely lift the ban through successive acts in 1825, 1871, and 1906.

March 21, 1807 Britain abolishes the slave trade.

1811 – 1812 Textile workers in Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire sabotage and in some cases destroy industrial machinery under the banner of their fictional leader “Ned Ludd,” protesting two years of high unemployment. The British army is called to quell the protests.

1812 The Frame Breaking Act of 1812 is passed, making industrial sabotage—“machine-breaking”—punishable by death.

March 1815 The Corn Laws are passed in Parliament, increasing the price of food in England. These laws will not be repealed until 1846.

September 27, 1825 The world’s first steam locomotive passenger service begins. This will usher in the rise of railways as an economic force and a fixture of British life.
In 1911, she went into rehearsal at The Royal Court Theatre for her first play, *Rutherford and Son*, which debuted in February 1912. It was an instant sensation—running for 133 performances in London and 63 performances in New York—and Githa was compared to Henrik Ibsen, Maxim Gorky, John Galsworthy, and Miguel Piñero. She also was frequently called a man in many reviews, since her name was listed as K.G. Sowerby in programs. Although Githa enjoyed the success of *Rutherford and Son*, she did not want to appear in public, make speeches, or seek media attention. Despite that discomfort, when she was discovered to be a woman, she was subjected to countless members of the press seeking interviews about this “new woman playwright.”

The playwright and journalist Keble Howard made her out to be a dimwitted debutante and marveled at the autobiographical origins of the play offer more insight into what the English saw as a fundamental difference between “public” and “private” space. Public space was the domain of men, while private space was the domain of women. One cultural exemplar of this dichotomy was the figure of the “Angel of the House,” taken from a narrative poem written by Coventry Patmore in 1854. Patmore’s “Angel” was a woman who was a paragon of purity, domestic obedience, and complete devotion.

Concurrent to the publication of Patmore’s poem was the formation of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, organized in the 1850s by the women of the Langham Place Group. Attitudes shifted, in large part due to the campaigning of women suffragists like these.

A number of landmark laws were passed (and others repealed) in the second half of the 19th century that changed the landscape of women’s legal rights and protections. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made divorce a civil rather than religious act, created a court to oversee divorces, and made them more affordable for middle-class women. The Three Contagious Diseases Acts are passed, effectively criminalizing the presence of unchaperoned women in public spaces. All three will be repealed in 1866.

Roger Allam and Anjana Vasan in the National Theatre's 2019 production of *Rutherford and Son*. (Johan Persson)
Glass is as much a state of matter as it is a specific material. Because of its unique molecular structure, it is categorized as a rigid liquid. On an atomic level, it more closely resembles a liquid than a solid, with an amorphous rather than crystalline arrangement. While glass does occur naturally, humans have been making glass for a variety of purposes since antiquity. Earliest examples of human-made glass date back approximately 5,000 years, though glass does not begin to resemble our modern equivalent until much later, through advancements in composition and shaping techniques.

Examples of Sowerby glass, obtained via eBay by the Rutherford and Son production team.

Glass is composed primarily of silica, which is the main component in quartz sand. Other ingredients—such as sodium carbonate, calcium oxide and lead oxide—are added to change the melting temperature, color, durability, and clarity of the glass. At the time of Rutherford and Son, these ingredients were heated and kept in ceramic pots—in a molten state thanks to a furnace—until glassmakers were ready to use it. Glassmakers would extract the molten glass using various methods, and shape the glass by blowing, pouring, stamping, or otherwise manipulating it. This process had been industrialized in the 19th century, and chemical and mechanical advancements resulted in the widespread availability of glass for a variety of social classes.

Glassmaking requires a high amount of skill and strength, as well as ready and affordable access to necessary materials like coal, potash, silica, etc. Here are a few terms that you will hear Githa Sowerby’s characters use during the play:

**Colliery** A coal mine and its associated structures, equipment, and workforce.

**Lear** An oven open at both ends, used for heating ceramic pot-arches in preparation for placement in a furnace. Ceramic will break if subjected to thermal shock and must be preheated in order to withstand the heat of a glassmaking furnace.

**Lear man** Personnel in charge of a Lear oven.

**Metal** Here, another word for glass, or specific glass recipe.

**Muffle furnace** Here, a smaller table-top furnace used for small-batch glassmaking.

**Pot-arch, Pot** A ceramic container used to hold and maintain glass in a molten state.

**Potash** Potassium carbonate, at the time derived from certain plant ashes.

**Pot-loft** An area for the storage of pots and pot-arches.

**Pot-setting** The process of preparing the pots.

**White metal** The specific kind of clear glass for which John Rutherford, Jr. has discovered the recipe.

The Sowerby family’s glassworks are primarily known for having produced pressed glass—a more affordable alternative to cut glass—which involved the placement of molten glass into a metal mold. The glass was then pressed to fill and take the shape of the mold. Sowerby’s was known for producing ornamental glass, as well as luxury glass for daily use.

About the Sowerby Product

**Married Women’s Property Act of 1882** allowed women to own and control property after marriage. And the Contagious Diseases Act, which had essentially criminalized women’s presence in public places, was repealed in 1886. This repeal also raised the legal age of consent for women from 12 to 16 years of age.

**Access to education for women also improved** in the late 19th and early 20th century. The University of London opened to women in 1878. Oxford and Cambridge, however, did not offer women degrees on an equal basis until after the First World War. Full suffrage for women in England would not be granted until 1928, and class played a significant role in the amount of access that women had to the rights fought for and won in the 19th century. Despite the letter of the law, the spirit of it was not always felt.

The working class was often perceived as more prone to succumbing to “base desires,” and therefore in need of supervision, control, and “civilizing.” This perception extended to people of color in England, and in England’s colonial slave empire. Combined with a fundamental disregard for women’s capacity for logic, mature emotion, and intellectual rigor, this created fertile ground to foment socio-political change.

“It is men, only men, from the first to the last that we have to do with! To please a man I did wrong at first, then I was flung about from man to man. Men police lay hands on us. By men we are examined, handled, doctored.”

— A prostitute’s account, recorded by Victorian feminist and social reformer Josephine Butler

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January 1876 John George Sowerby, Githa’s father, registers the trademark of Sowerby’s Ellison Glassworks.

October 6, 1876 Githa Sowerby is born in Gateshead, England.

1878 The University of London is opened to women. Oxford and Cambridge will not open to women for another 40 years.

1879 John Sowerby dies. He is succeeded by John George.

August 2, 1880 School attendance is made mandatory from ages 5 to 10.

1882 The Married Women’s Property Act is passed, allowing women to control property they bring into a marriage.

December 1884 Based on previous Reform Acts of 1867 and 1868, the Third Reform Act creates a uniform franchise qualification. Roughly two-thirds of adult males in England and Wales, three-fifths in Scotland and half in Ireland are granted the right to vote in parliamentary elections. This stops short of creating a true democracy for men, as many adults who are servants, members of the armed forces, and children living in their parents’ houses remain disenfranchised.

1909 In the West Stanley Pit disaster, explosions from two illegal lamps kill 160 men in a coal mine, 59 of them under age 20.

1910 – 1914 During the Great Unrest, union membership increases dramatically in England, and tensions between workers and owners rise. The British government intervenes in several strikes, even going so far as to deploy the armed forces.

1911 – 1912 Britain loses a combined 41 million working days to the various strikes across the country.

February 1912 Githa Sowerby’s play Rutherford and Son premieres at The Royal Court Theatre, London.
While the industrial revolution drastically shifted England’s economy during the 19th century and facilitated the growth of a middle class, the quality of life for working class English people did not significantly improve until the end of the century. A combination of new and more dangerous working conditions, high food prices, an increase in demand for unskilled low-wage labor, and periodic economic contractions contributed to slow improvement.

People of all genders, as well as children as young as 4 years old, have been recorded working in factories, coal mines, and other industries during this time. It was not until 1872 that the legal age of coal mining boys was raised to 12, and there is evidence that younger children continued to be illegally employed. Schooling beyond the age of 10 was not universally compulsory at this time, and education was not often accessible for the working class.

Between 1840 and 1890, the median life expectancy for middle-class Britons was lower than 50 years of age. Working-class Britons’ life expectancy was half that. The turn of the 20th century would see the emergence of germ theory, and shifting attitudes about hygiene and cleanliness signaled the beginning of a dramatic rise in life expectancy and falling rates of infant mortality through to the 21st century.

Workers often had little to no redress for poor working conditions and low wages. Trade unions in England had been outlawed in 1799, partially in response to the French Revolution. Parliament incrementally lifted the ban on trade unions throughout the 19th century. Under the ban, however, one of the few ways that workers could exert pressure on mill and factory owners was through mechanical sabotage (machine-breaking). The Luddite movement is the most famous example. Between 1811 and 1812 the English government sent the British army to suppress Luddite activity in Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire. Those apprehended were given a mass trial and levied severe punishments upon any conviction, including execution and penal transportation. The Frame Breaking Act of 1812 would go on to make industrial sabotage a capital crime.

Though a century apart, these events would become part of the groundwork for the Great Unrest, a period between 1910 and 1914 that saw a dramatic rise in union membership, military intervention in worker strikes, and rising tensions between workers and owners. Between 1911 and 1912, 41 million working days were lost to strikes.

To provide a better understanding of the economic realities in *Rutherford and Son*, here are some comparisons of money amounts, adjusted for inflation to today and converted to U.S. dollars:

- £1 = $113 ($145)
- £10 = $1,133 ($1,453)
- £100 = $11,327 ($14,532)
- £1,000 = $113,275 ($145,336)

The standard working-class weekly household budget in 1904, as reported in 1922, was 22 shillings 6 pence. Before 1971, a British pound (£) was worth 20 shillings. Each shilling was worth 12 pence.

John Davies, 12 years old, at work at the Rhondda Valley coal mine, 1909.

**THE INTERVIEW**

During rehearsals for *Rutherford and Son*, director Mechelle Moe (MM) and cast members Jeannie Affelder (JA), Christina Gorman (CG), and Rochelle Therrien (RT) chatted about the play and their responses to it.

(MM) Githa Sowerby—our playwright—has been kind of erased from theatrical history. *Rutherford and Son* debuted in 1912 in England during the time of the Great Unrest. And it was quite a hit at the time, produced by the Royal Court Theatre as part of its New Play Series. It was only scheduled to run for four shows and ended up running for 133 performances with an extension in New York City. Something I learned that was very fascinating to me is that the play itself was advertised by Sowerby’s initials, K.G. Sowerby—and that actually wasn’t her choice.

(AL) Ohhhhh ...!

(CG) I read it and was completely sucked into the world of the play, and it wasn’t until I got to the last scene that I thought “Who was this playwright?” I know there were a bunch of awesome male playwrights who championed women’s rights but still I thought “Whoa, whoa, this is really interesting, who could have ... OH it’s a woman!” It just made sense to me. I was pleasantly surprised and thought it was kind of revolutionary that she was writing at this time period.

(MM) Yes. It’s a huge criticism of capitalism and industry at the time, really examining gender roles, the strikes, and everything that was happening with all these industries and unions rising up. And at a time when it wasn’t fashionable to be educated. Even Githa herself didn’t receive an education. She was pretty much self-taught when she moved to London. But everything else on stage at the time was from a male perspective and often female writers were really pushed out and discriminated against and not lifted up.

(JA) Good playwrights have to get inside every character in the play and work through every character’s point of contention. Scandalous—how could a woman possibly write about the themes of this play!—the intimate knowledge she had in order to write the scope and depth of this piece.
of view, and I think Githa is a really good playwright. She represents Rutherford and his desire to keep the business going, his loyalty to his ancestors, his desire to have his business continue with his children. She also writes sympathetically about the members of the family who don’t care about the business, who want to throw it to the river. She writes the perspective of the people in the house looking into the town and the people in the town looking into the house, and she makes everybody a hero in their own life. Everybody stands on their own two feet, and I think that’s admirable.

(GG) Githa’s story is really interesting and her family story is fascinating. You can see how she draws from so much of her own life and her own family history. It’s so rich with drama and heartbreak and, from what I’ve read of the biography Finding Githa by Patricia Riley, not a lot of joy. But it is a wonderful look into the idea of taking charge of one’s own life. That was not done a lot back then, yet we see it with the characters in the play and in Githa’s life.

(MM) This is a very compelling family drama and as with anything well-written, there’s a lot of love, a lot of humor, and we’ve found opportunities to embrace those and lift those up. Which is one of the reasons TimeLine chose this play. There are so many issues that pop off the page. You can go to this play regardless of your background and find something you’re intrigued by, because there’s a little something for everyone.

This is only a portion of these artists’ conversation. Check out the complete version online at timelinetheatre.com/blog.

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