



Audio Description Notes for *Emma*

WELCOME

Welcome to the Guthrie Theater's production of *Emma*, written by Kate Hamill, based on the novel by Jane Austen and directed by Meredith McDonough.

My name is Elana Centor, and I will be your audio describer for this performance, which is approximately 2 hours, 10 minutes and includes one 20-minute intermission.

This is the world premiere of Kate Hamill's adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Originally commissioned in 2019, it was in rehearsals in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered theaters worldwide. Two years later, *Emma* is now front and center on the Wurtele Thrust Stage.

Emma is based on Austen's classic novel about Emma Woodhouse — a clever, highly educated young woman with lots of time on her hands. With nothing to do with the education she has, Emma spends her time meddling in the love lives of her neighbors and friends.

The story takes place in two acts and is set in Highbury, a rural town in England. The period is the early 1800s, similar to the popular Netflix series "Bridgerton."

In this adaptation, Hamill and McDonough took cues from 1940s screwball comedies, which typically include fast-paced and overlapping repartee, farcical situations, spoofing of love and battles between the sexes. Most importantly, the central female character dominates the relationship with the central male character, which is certainly true of Emma Woodhouse and her favorite verbal sparring partner, Mr. George Knightley.

STAGING

The staging for *Emma* is minimalistic. When you enter the theater, you see a two-story, gray stone structure that appears to be the back terrace of an English manor. It is almost as long as the back of the stage, and there is approximately 4 feet on both sides of the structure where actors enter and exit the stage. An L-shaped staircase on the left side runs from the stage floor to the top of the structure and leads to a terrace with a low railing.

On the wall of the structure at 12 o'clock, there are large, imposing, double-radius arched doors in solid wood. To the right of these doors is a matching archway, but instead of a door, it is filled in with bricks. Throughout the play, this area opens to move various set pieces onstage.

Behind the structure is a painted cloud backdrop and a miniature version of an English countryside with a lush, green landscape and whimsical buildings nestled in the hills.



STAGING (continued)

The stage floor consists of checkered, black-and-white square tiles that give the appearance of a giant chessboard or checkerboard.

The most dominant feature on the set is a massive, tilted frame that hugs the back of the stage, starting parallel to the front of the stone structure. The sides of the frame are approximately 6 feet wide and look similar in appearance to the stone structure. There is decorative art along the sides and square appliques around the frame, including one that contains a cursive E for Emma. The top of the frame tilts approximately 45 degrees to create a fanciful environment.

KEY PROPS

There are no props onstage until the play begins.

Draperies: Whenever a scene takes place inside Emma's home, an imposing set of elegant, swag draperies is lowered to just above the top of the terrace. It takes up the entire length of the structure, and the sides hover along the sides of the building. They are a rich burgundy.

Chaise lounge: The chaise lounge has a light fabric and is wheeled in with two side tables and a serving cart, which sit on a round, white rug. On the opposite side of the stage, a simple, padded, armless bench is long enough to allow the actors to lay on the length of the bench with their legs bent and feet touching the floor. In one scene, an exasperated Emma does just that.

Paintings and animatronic cats: During scenes set at the Bates Cottage, nine paintings are lowered in front of the stone structure. The bottoms of the paintings sit just above the archway doors. The paintings are very large, approximately 10 feet tall, and cover the length of the back of the stage. They are portraits painted in a realistic style, but instead of featuring people, the portraits feature cats wearing crowns, gowns, formal attire and period clothing of the upper class. In addition to the portraits, stuffed animatronic cats sit on the chairs and chaise lounge. At various points, Miss Bates invites Emma to sit on a chair or the chaise lounge, both of which are occupied by the prop cats. While the portraits are the dominant feature of the Bates Cottage, there is also a piano and chairs. The chaise lounge and tables featured in Emma's house are repurposed for the Bates Cottage by placing a dingy brown cover over the chaise lounge and matching tablecloths over the tables.

Strawberry carts: In a scene where the cast attends Mr. George Knightley's annual strawberry picking party, the cast enters the stage pulling supersized strawberry carts filled with giant prop strawberries.

Cloud and message backdrops: During the wedding scene and other outdoor scenes, a second backdrop is lowered to the set, featuring clouds or fun messages to the audience.



KEY PROPS (continued)

Artist easel and painted backdrop: In one of the scenes, Emma is painting a portrait of her friend Harriet. Emma sits on the left side of the stage in front of an easel and a small canvas. Harriet is laying on the chaise lounge on the right side of the stage. She is wearing a beach hat that resembles a cowboy hat. The backdrop with the painted scene is positioned behind her.

CAST, CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES

Emma features a 10-person cast, with some actors playing double roles or appearing as Servants and Mrs. Bates.

Emma Woodhouse is played by **Amelia Pedlow**, who returns to the Guthrie after performing in *Frankenstein – Playing With Fire*. Emma wears a variety of gowns in different hues of pink. In one scene, cast members come onstage and help convert Emma's day dress into a party gown by adding a satin bodice with a giant, hot-pink bow tied in the back. The bow extends diagonally from just above the floor to the shoulder.

Harriet Smith is played by **Samantha Steinmetz**, who is making her Guthrie debut. Harriet performs a great deal of physical comedy in this play. Whenever her voice is overemoting, her body matches with exaggerated physicality. In one scene, she moves like a scared chicken with her hands on her hips, flapping her arms as she undulates her chest. Harriet wears a variety of gowns in different hues of yellow. Her day dresses are simpler than Emma's.

Mr. George Knightley is played by **Carman Lacivita**, who is making his Guthrie debut and has performed on Broadway and received multiple acting awards. Throughout most of the play, he wears Regency-era clothing typical of his wealthy station. In the final wedding scene, he wears a John Travolta-inspired white outfit to match Emma's white wedding dress.

Mr. Elton is played by **Louis Sallan**, who is making his Guthrie debut and has performed for the stage, film and television. All of Mr. Elton's outfits have a comical flair. As the town rector, he is dressed in the requisite black with a matching black priest's hat with a rounded top and overly wide brim. The comical part of the outfit is the shirt, which has puffy sleeves and an oversized bow. The effect is more cartoonish than pious.

Mrs. Anne Weston is played by **Brenda Withers**, who is making her Guthrie debut and has performed at a variety of theaters around the country. Mrs. Weston is Emma's former governess and trusted companion. She often serves as the "adult in the room," and her clothing is subdued and modest. There is a visual gag throughout the play as she quickly becomes "with child" after getting married in the opening scene. As the play progresses, the size of her pregnant belly expands.



CAST, CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES (continued)

Miss Bates is played by **Sun Mee Chomet**, who has performed in multiple shows at the Guthrie, including *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *After a Hundred Years*. Miss Bates, like Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton, is a highly comical character. She wears large, dark-rimmed glasses and is always dressed in modest clothing.

Robert Martin/Frank Churchill is a dual role played by one actor. Robert Martin, the original love interest of Harriet Smith, is a gardener who wears modest, nondescript clothing. When Frank Churchill appears for the first time, he is wearing a leather jacket and gray pants, which gives him the appearance of the “bad boy” character often seen in 1960s beach films.

Mr. Weston/Mr. Woodhouse is a dual role played by **David Kelly**, who returns to the Guthrie after playing the cat in *Harvey*. Mr. Weston wears clothing appropriate to a man of wealth in 19th-century England. Mr. Woodhouse mostly wears a dark, floor-length bathrobe and a snug, wool winter cap.

Mrs. Elton is played by **Anna Leverett**, who is making her Guthrie debut. Mrs. Elton doesn't have many lines, but she makes her presence known by her fingernails-on-a-chalkboard hyena laugh that dominates the space whenever she is in it. She wears modest clothing.

Jane Fairfax is played by **Christine Weber**, who has performed in multiple plays at the Guthrie including *A Christmas Carol* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Jane is the adored niece of Miss Bates and wears a variety of feminine, flowing day dresses.

The comical role of **Mrs. Bates**, the aged, infirmed mother of Miss Bates, is played by various members of the cast. She is confined to a wheelchair and does not have any lines in the play, but she communicates using cat-like gestures and sounds. Mrs. Bates is hard of hearing, so Miss Bates bellows and repeats phrases when she talks to her. Mrs. Bates is covered in blankets and wears a mop cap, a round, soft, gathered bonnet with a decorative frill. Her head is always bowed so the audience doesn't see her face.

SCREWBALL COMEDY

What the actors say and do, especially their physical antics, often causes the audience to erupt in laughter. Some key comedic moments include:

- When Mr. Elton serenades Emma and he enters the stage with a Tom Jones-inspired stance, holding a wireless microphone and singing like he's in a Las Vegas lounge.
- When Emma explains that Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill are in love, and the two lovers stand behind her on the terrace, acting out the story as she shares the details.



SCREWBALL COMEDY (continued)

- A running gag where Mr. Woodhouse tries to get anyone (and everyone) to eat gruel. He often carries a big bowl of gruel and invades people's personal space when he puts it in their faces.
- Dance scenes where the actors perform traditional dances of the 1800s, like minuets and waltzes, to modern pop music.
- When cast members serve as backup dancers and perform moves that are more Motown than Regency England.