

Dear England

There's no denying that a play about the English national football team would typically place very low on my watch list. Cruel fate meant that a father who could play or watch any sport under the sun, gave birth to a son who *tried* every sport under the sun, and yet, nothing stuck. Least of all, football.

Growing up, our family outings had to be scheduled around important football matches, because there was absolutely no way that my dad would miss a game. I've seen him lose his voice from screaming so loud when Arsenal scored the winning goal, or punch (and break) the coffee table when a referee took away a goal from them. But I just couldn't get it. All these dramatics, simply because of men in uniform chasing after a ball like dogs for 90 minutes. When I gave football practice a try, I realised quite quickly that I wasn't about to; a) run up and down a pitch for not much reward, and b) take a high-speed, quite-firm football to the face or hand just to stop it from going in the goal. It's safe to say I didn't last very long on the field.

So, why am I about to watch *Dear England* by James Graham? Well, maybe it's because I finally want to understand what all the fuss is about. But actually, I want to understand my dad more. He's watched every single theatre show I've been in, and I've played some *weird* roles – a radiant rainbow, a charismatic candlestick, a conscientious crustacean. Whether or not he's understood anything or actually enjoyed the story, he's always been there to support me and show that he cares about my passions. And yet, I've never once tried to make the effort to sit and watch a game with him or take an interest in the sports that he loves. Maybe now that I've moved far away from home, I'm looking for any chance to feel close to him.

Walking through the theatre foyer, it's like I've entered a sports bar by mistake. So many middle-aged men, in the tightest blue skinny jeans, pints in their hands, wearing a colourful variety of English team football jerseys. I cringe a little when I spot the ushers selling

Dear England football scarves in a similar style to the ones that fans wear to the matches. Nobody is lost to the fact that we're in a theatre and not a stadium. I wonder if there are people here who might have stepped into a theatre for the first time, in the same way that I've never even dared enter a sports bar or stadium. As I'm taking my seat between an Arsenal kit and a Liverpool jersey, it's settling in that I'm amongst a different kind of audience tonight. A couple of minutes pass, and the stage lights switch off, saving me from any embarrassing small talk where I'd have to act like I know football.

I've never heard of Gareth Southgate before Gwilyn Lee takes to the stage to bring him to life, so I can't really say anything about how accurate the performance is to the real sportsman. And if I don't know Gareth, I have even less of a clue about who Pippa Grange is. How was I to know that these two people were about to radically change how the English national football team operates? Once Gareth is selected as the new team manager, he's introduced to the senior coaching staff – Mike Webster (team analyst), Steve Holland (assistant coach) and Physio Phil. His first suggestion is to bring on a psychologist to help the players mentally, which Mike scoffs at. But we then jump to Pippa's introduction with her first line.

PIPPA

So here's a question for everyone in the room tonight. When was the last time you were scared? [...]

Don't get me wrong, some fear is necessary, of course. But it can force us to make poor decisions. [...] For me, the real tragedy of fear – if we don't use our power to harness it – is not what it *does* to us. It's what it takes. It robs us of potential joy. [...]

So much of the modern world now is actually geared around helping us avoid decision-making. That's why there's this feeling right now – isn't there? Of 'paralysis', everywhere?

As ‘leaders’, then... how do you cultivate an environment that isn’t stale? That isn’t full of fear. By helping your team confront their fears. And that starts... by confronting your own.

In the context of the play, Pippa’s probably speaking at a conference or corporate event that Gareth has attended with the intention of recruiting her for the team. But in real life, the actress Liz White has just commanded the Olivier Theatre stage alone, speaking directly to an audience of 1,150 people, drawing us all into Pippa’s words of wisdom. She’s spoken directly into my soul, catching me off guard.

Once she’s on board, the senior coaching team sets up shop in the biometrics centre, as we watch archive footage from one of the English team’s “most painful misses”; Jamie Carragher at the 2006 World Cup. Team analyst Mike mentions the great England penalty curse, and the whole audience shifts uneasily in their seats. I wasn’t even aware that such a curse existed. The play is about to start losing me here, because this moment holds absolutely no significance in my memory bank, but Pippa’s words bring my attention back to fear.

PIPPA

Our players [...] I’m guessing they more often than not turn away from the goalkeeper, when they’re stepping back for their run-up, instead of facing them?

[...] I mean, it’s literally what Gareth was describing. ‘Avoidance’. Not looking at the thing that scares them. Guys, the problem is fear... They’re afraid... [...]

Around what a penalty represents. For any of us. Making a decision and getting it wrong. Losing people’s respect, getting shamed because of it-

What a penalty represents, for any of us. Even if we've never kicked a single ball in our entire lives, when are the times when we've taken a shot and missed? Or not taken a shot at all because of the fear of missing? The time when fear holds us back from taking risks, or we become paralysed and procrastinate decisions out of fear of making a mistake, or doing something wrong, or failing altogether. We move away from the recording and jump back into physical training, where Pippa turns to Harry Kane (at least this name sounds familiar) and poses a question.

PIPPA

Now, even if Harry misses, what's the worst that could happen?

You look like an idiot and a failure, and everyone will see that you're a fraud who doesn't deserve to be there. Are these thoughts in the players' heads or mine...? Something odd is happening here, something I wasn't expecting when I walked into the theatre. Anxious thoughts about my own fears are bubbling up inside my brain, while I'm meant to just be watching a play about football. I wonder what's going on in the minds of my fellow neighbourly sports fans sitting next to me. Was seeing all this being reenacted live serving as a kind of therapy for them? As a coping method to deal with everything they had endured while supporting this team through its turbulent track record. And just in time for the Russia World Cup in 2018.

PANAMA MANAGER

The Panama team, we are not worried about England. We hear these stories of what they're up to – modern techniques. Happy clappy, touchy feely. [...] They have lost their will to win.

I don't know this character, or man, but instantly, I hate him. Which leads to a massive grin on my face when the score of England 6–1 Panama flashes on the screen behind him. However, England still ends up in penalties against Colombia, and I too can feel the tension rising. Was all that training and newfound psychology work worth it? Harry Kane scores, Juan Cuadrado scores, Marcus Rashford scores, Luis Muriel scores, Jordan Henderson misses – shit, not again – but then Mateus Uribe hits the crossbar, and just ever so slightly there's still a chance. Kieran Trippier scores, Carlos Bacca shoots but Jordan Pickford saves it, and then... Eric Dier scores! What a glorious moment to end Act 1 on, as the lid bursts open with the highest feeling that it's coming home. Only for that brief moment of celebration to come crashing down again at the start of Act 2, with Croatia 2–1 England. So, this is the rollercoaster ride that I've been missing out on.

After a short interval, we're back in the trenches. Nobody can decide whether the team lost their anger and went soft, or if some of the fear crept back in again. Whatever the case, there's work to be done, and not much time for it. Because COVID-19 brings the European Championship home to Wembley – with the FA chairman Greg Clarke being pretty blunt about the familiar ring and added expectation for the English Lions.

GREG CLARKE

Not just to 'do well', but – well. To win. Here. [...] Nice is nice, but winning is winning. Victory over Europe! Unleashing your inner Churchill!

No pressure. And this 'new direction' of going back to tough love again puts Pippa and Gareth at odds.