


## Pied Piper and Class in the City

By Katie Beswick

In the original folk story, which is believed to be based on a true event, Hamelin's children are lured away by a charismatic piper when the mayor refuses him payment for ridding the town of its rats. The 'Pied Piper' story has been told in many versions, from Grimm's fairy-tale to the famous Robert Browning poem, in which he described a vermin-infested Hamelin, where rats, 'fought the dogs and killed the cats/And bit the babies in the cradles/And ate the cheeses out of the vats/And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles . . .'. In this BAC Beatbox Academy show, we visit a newly imagined 2023 version of Hamelin, where the main industry is a rat-infested pie factory in which the town's children work for a ruthless mayor. With few breaks and no appreciation for their graft, the children are forbidden from making noise or entertaining themselves during their shifts.


Fed up with being exploited, and desperate for entertainment, the children form a secret band called the rebel clefs whose activity is reported online by factory worker and blogger Sally Snorekin – who also makes vlogs about the town's growing rat problem. The mayor sets his young daughter, Robyn, to oversee the factory children and keep them in their place – but she is soon seduced by the rebel clefs' energy and the possibility of fulfilling her own dreams of making music by joining them. When the mayor offers one hundred guilders to whoever can rid the town of its rats, the Piper arrives, sparking a chain of events that leads to Robyn viewing the factory children as people rather than simply workers, with the mayor exposed as the town's real rat.

The workplace setting for this play might seem a strange change from existing versions of the tale, but by placing the story in a factory, Murray and the Academy make a wider point about class inequality in our current society. The term 'labour relations' refers to the unequal power relationship between workers and those who employ them. The theorist Karl Marx argued that groups who have access to the 'means of production' (that is the buildings, tools and resources to produce goods and services) have the most power, and can exert control over those who are reliant on the work provided by these means in order to live. This inequality in power is the bedrock of class inequality, which lays the foundations for all inequality in our society. In Hamelin, we see an imbalance of power between the mayor and the factory workers, between the mayor and his daughter, and a struggle



for power between the mayor and the Pied Piper. The workers, meanwhile, tussle to find a sense of solidarity between themselves. In one way or another, these struggles can be understood as class struggles, with the worker-children representing society's working class, who the town of Hamelin come to understand they cannot function without.

The story of Hamelin therefore becomes, in this production, a wider comment on the class struggles of our society, and particularly of life in London, where the play was developed and first performed. In London, economic inequality is rife, with extreme wealth sitting alongside abject poverty. According to data collected by the London Mayor's office, the richest ten per cent of Londoners earn more than ten times the income of the lowest-earning households in the city. The UK government estimate that over 600,000 of London's children (that's about thirty-three per cent) are living in poverty, which means they exist in households that cannot afford to consistently provide the staples of life, such as food and shelter, or access necessities that make life easier, such as transport and childcare.



In this context, Pied Piper reminds us not just that society should be more equal, but that music and creativity can help us to access such equality. It is by seeing one another in all our humanity, and acting in empathy and solidarity, that we can begin to make cities fairer and life more joyful for everyone. That's a very humanist sentiment in these difficult times, emphasising the power not only of art, but of our relationships with each other, and the emotional ties that bond us.

