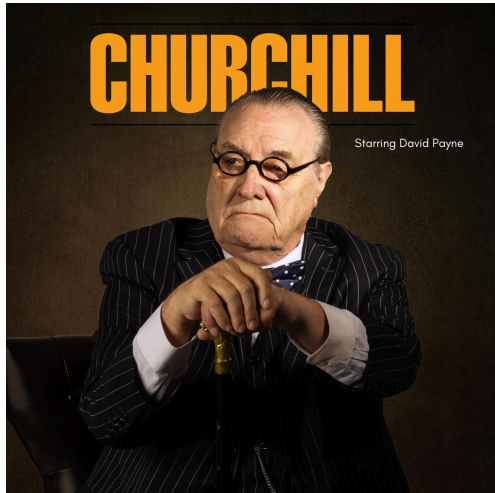


# Becoming Churchill: An Exclusive Q&A with David Payne

By Elizabeth Montgomery



David Payne never imagined a life in the spotlight. Growing up in South London, his passions lay in numbers, planning, and order, the qualities that led him to pursue a career as a structural engineer.

Yet, life had a different stage in mind for him.

Since a fateful audition, Payne has become the world's foremost performer of C.S. Lewis, bringing the beloved author to life in over 1,000 productions across the U.S., the UK, and Canada. His signature show, *An Evening with C.S. Lewis*, has captivated nearly 750,000 audience members around the globe.

While he never built a career in engineering, David has masterfully "engineered" an enduring connection between audiences and some of history's most endearing figures. Now, he takes on another iconic role, portraying Winston Churchill in *Churchill* at The Phoenix Theatre Company, offering audiences yet another unforgettable experience.

Payne joined Michelle Chin, The Phoenix Theatre Company's Resident Dramaturge, for a candid conversation delving into the challenges and triumphs of Payne's journey of stepping into Winston Churchill's shoes.

**Q: You have a fascinating history of how you got to what you do now, could you tell us the story?**

A: I was a structural engineer for years before transitioning into youth work at a church, which led to organizing music events. That eventually brought me to Nashville, Tennessee, to set up an office for a British company. Toward the end of my two-year stay, I saw a notice for auditions for *Shadowlands*, a play about C.S. Lewis and his American wife. The ad specified 'British accent required,' so I thought, 'Why not?' Though I'd never been on stage, the director encouraged me to audition. I went in hoping for a small part and landed the lead role of C.S. Lewis.

**Q: Working on that production, do you remember the moment that you were like, 'okay, I think I want to do this now.'?**

A: When I played C.S. Lewis in *Shadowlands*, I realized how much I enjoyed acting. Though I didn't think I could act, others encouraged me to audition for more roles. My real passion, however, was exploring C.S. Lewis further. After reading his book *A Grief Observed*, about coping with his wife's death, I decided to memorize it—96 pages in all. A colleague in Nashville, knowing about this, asked what I planned to do with it. He hosted a gathering at his house, where I performed excerpts. That experience inspired me to expand it into *An Evening with C.S. Lewis*, incorporating parts of *A Grief Observed*.

**Q: So, we've heard about how you did your first CS Lewis one man show, how did you think about doing a one man show about Winston Churchill?**

A: Well, I grew up with Churchill. Churchill was very instrumental, because I lived in England for most of my years, Churchill was, was always a figure. And then in my teens, he was a figure. And then in my early 20s, he was a figure. So Churchill was, in many ways, just part of my life. The idea of writing a play featuring Churchill, and I was now old enough to play him, was just intriguing, and so I wrote it in 2020, and we launched it in Florida, in a couple of theaters, and it sold out.

**Q: When writing Churchill, what guided your research process? While many people know Winston Churchill as the leader of the UK during the pivotal five years of World War II, the show covers so much more than that. How did you figure out what was going to be in the show?**

A: In the play, Churchill reflects on his life, telling an American audience, "Most would expect me to focus on my leadership during World War II, but that only lasted five years. It was the 65 years leading up to it that shaped me." My goal was to uncover the man behind the leader—his failures, like the Battle of Gallipoli, his experiences in the trenches of World War I, and his relationships, including his bond with Queen Elizabeth and the profound support of his wife, whom he credits with helping him survive the war.

**Q: As the writer, director, and actor in the show, do you find that that is isolating working on all of it, or is it sort of freeing, because you can adjust, and no one's there to puppet you or anything like that?**

A: I always say the best director I've ever had is the audience, because the audience tells you what they like and what they don't like, and frankly, normally, the audience always gets it right. So I've been going through something, and I would be making a comment and and the audience laughs. And I thought, 'oh, I didn't think that was funny,' but the audience laughed. They loved it. And so I made sure that stayed in the play.

**Q: What do you want people to takeaway after seeing Churchill?**

A: The same thing I want them to say after seeing an evening with CS Lewis, or Christmas with CS Lewis, and that's I really felt I was with the man. When I get that, I'm very, very grateful. When people say 'I thought I was with Churchill,' or 'I thought I was with CS Lewis,' then you won the battle because they got go away thinking they've had a good time.

**Q: Is there one reason why people should come see the show?**

A: One guy told me 'my wife dragged me along to this. I did not want to come,' but he said, 'You made me laugh and you made me cry,' and I just want them to go away thinking they've had a great time, they feel they may have met the man, and they feel that they got great value for money.

Churchill runs at The Phoenix Theatre Company February 2 – April 13, 2025.