

**Kate Molleson:** Hello and welcome to the Edinburgh International Festival 2025. I'm Kate Molleson and this is the Warm Up, an Insider's guide to the performance that you're about to experience.

This time we look at Make It Happen from the award-winning playwright and screenwriter, James Graham. Brian Cox returns to the Scottish stage after more than 10 years to tell the story of the 2008 financial crash and how Scotland was at the centre of it.

James Graham is here to tell you all about it, but before that, here is our festival director, Nicola Benedetti.

**Nicola Benedetti:** Brian Cox returns to the Scottish stage for the first time in a decade as something of the ghost of fiscal past in the figure of Adam Smith. And I love the idea of this enlightenment leader who is so embedded in the fabric of this nation and its identity, and he will be interacting with the contemporary figure, Fred Goodwin.

As a festival that tries to grapple with large ideas and also tries to showcase the best of human achievement, it's important and poignant for me personally to have the voice of Adam Smith reimaged. So much of his legacy that infiltrates and has influenced the world does not prioritize his Gift of Moral Duty when applied to fiscal discipline.

If through this play and the surrounding dialogue, debate and conversations that will no doubt be inspired by its content, we can influence the re-examination of Adam Smith and what he left us, I'll feel that our festival is doing its job.

**James Graham:** Hi, I'm James Graham. I'm a playwright and a screenwriter, and I have written Make It Happen for this year's Edinburgh International Festival.

So Make It Happen is a play essentially about the 2008 financial crisis and in particular the role that Scottish banking played in that, and in particular still the Royal Bank of Scotland, which was at the time pretty much the largest bank by balance sheet in the entire world based in Edinburgh. The long shadow of that financial crisis and everything that followed immediately, obviously austerity, but also politically and culturally. The divisions that have happened ever since then, whether it's Brexit, the culture wars, anything that I think you can draw a long line basically back to that rift, that economic event.

But in its own terms, the story itself and its characters are pretty Shakespearean and pretty remarkable. In terms of characters that the play features it's a big ensemble piece. We do contain as our protagonist - or antagonist, discuss - Fred Goodwin, who was the CEO of the Royal Bank of Scotland, and he became famously "Fred the shred." He became sort of the face of the scandal. He's being played by an extraordinary Scottish actor, Sandy Grierson.

And then we have a historic character in the play called Adam Smith, who some people may know as the father of free markets, the father of modern capitalism, and he's being played by the legendary Brian Cox. And even though those two characters exist 300 years apart, that's part of the magic realism that happens in the play. The ghost of Adam Smith returns to modern day Edinburgh to retread the streets where he invented this formula, this idea, this philosophy of free markets at the very time when that philosophy is crumbling and capitalism is under threat.

And what's delicious about this story is there is something fundamentally, unapologetically Scottish about it. Scotland runs through the financial crisis to, its very, very core, not just the fact that RBS was the largest bank in the world and it was a Scottish bank, *the* Scottish bank. We also, at the time, there were the strangeness in this moment of having a Scottish Prime Minister in the form of Gordon Brown; having a Scottish chancellor in the form of Alistair Darling; but also even the very idea of free market capitalism was a Scottish idea born in the streets of Edinburgh, 300 years prior in the form of Adam Smith, the godfather of capitalism. So something inherently Scottish about this story at that time in that place, that in those weeks, even, the world's attention turned to Edinburgh.

I think one of the incredible sides to this particular story, the complete collapse of Scottish Banking and the global financial system nearly, is that it was entirely driven by humans. It was entirely avoidable. Somewhere in that story is a beautiful idea, had it not been so painful and cost people so much. A beautiful reflection on the strengths and the weaknesses of human beings and our wants and our needs and our jealousies and our search for something.

And that's sort of been my job throughout all of this. And I actually think it's the audience's job when they watch the play is to try and understand the motivation and the rationale and the reasoning by some of these hugely powerful people - the "masters of the world" they called themselves - and why they did what they did and what their blind spots were and what they were searching for.

Is it just greed? That's what we were told on the front page of the tabloids. And were these just people who, when you give them the freedom to do whatever they wanted to do, they became the worst versions of themselves and didn't think about their consequences? Or was it much more complicated? And actually I think the play hopefully tries to explore everyone's complicity in it.

But certainly if Edinburgh itself as a community, is almost a character in the play, it's, you know, it's one of the world's smallest capital cities. It's a very, very small city, very intimate. Everyone knows each other. What happens when an entire city looks the other way? When something is clearly too good to be true? The money's rolling in, the investment, the jobs.

**Kate Molleson:** The theme of this year's Edinburgh International Festival is the Truth We Seek. What does seeking truth mean to you?

**James Graham:** I would say this, wouldn't I? I would defend my craft, but I, in many, many ways, in a space where often news and social media and everything else, is no longer necessarily as reputable or as trusted as it used to be, there is something still about the quality of going into a theatre and the lights going down and watching a play over two hours. And if that play takes that responsibility seriously and just seeks simply to ask questions and to raise curiosities, and to inspire a thirst for awareness about a particular world, then I think that is a responsible thing for art to do.

Something just happens when you are in a theatre because of its superpower, which is both proximity to the real creators who are living, breathing, flesh on stage, and also being a physical community in a space, which, how many examples can you think of at the moment when you actually get to gather as a community and be side by side?

And given that most of the frames through which we see the world these days and that try to access so-called truth are so corrupting, or as machines encourage bad faith conversations or a lack of empathy for different people's perspectives and points of views. There's something about the quality of going to a play that demands when you turn your phone off and you have to sit there and you have to be in a space with other people. Empathy returns and nuance returns. It demands of you that you walk in the footsteps and the actions of people who you may sometimes disagree with or may not have had. Even though of course by definition it is all artifice, it is all crafted and created. There is a quality of truth and reality to theatre that you just don't get on any other mediums. Even dare I say, when you're streaming a TV drama because of the barrier between you and the work, and because you're double screening and you're still on

Twitter while you're watching it, and you're messaging people on WhatsApp and you're not really accessing it, you're not giving it the full quality that it deserves.

There's obviously a particular kind of mischievous delight at telling a story so, so *about* the city of Edinburgh. And that includes both its history and its ideas and its famous sons and daughters. But also it's something just about the earth in which it stands, like the tectonic plates that formed the volcano that the city sits in. There's sort of a theme, a rumbling, sonic idea in the play. The forces of history and the forces of nature that bring us all towards a certain path at a certain time. It feels like Edinburgh is gonna be throbbing underneath this production, which we have these extraordinary designers and creators building in this huge space.

It's gonna be operatic and huge. And I'm excited by that. But yeah, the fact that we're at the very heart, we've returned to Mordor from whence it came to bring the ring back and look at it. And that's really delightful. And I love, I just love that city.

**Kate Molleson:** James Graham there. Make It Happen is on at the Festival Theatre from Wednesday, the 30th of July till Saturday the 9th of August. There are lots of dates for this one, so go to [eif.co.uk](http://eif.co.uk) for more details. Supported by Sir Ewan and Lady Brown, and through the Scottish Government's Festivals Expo Fund.