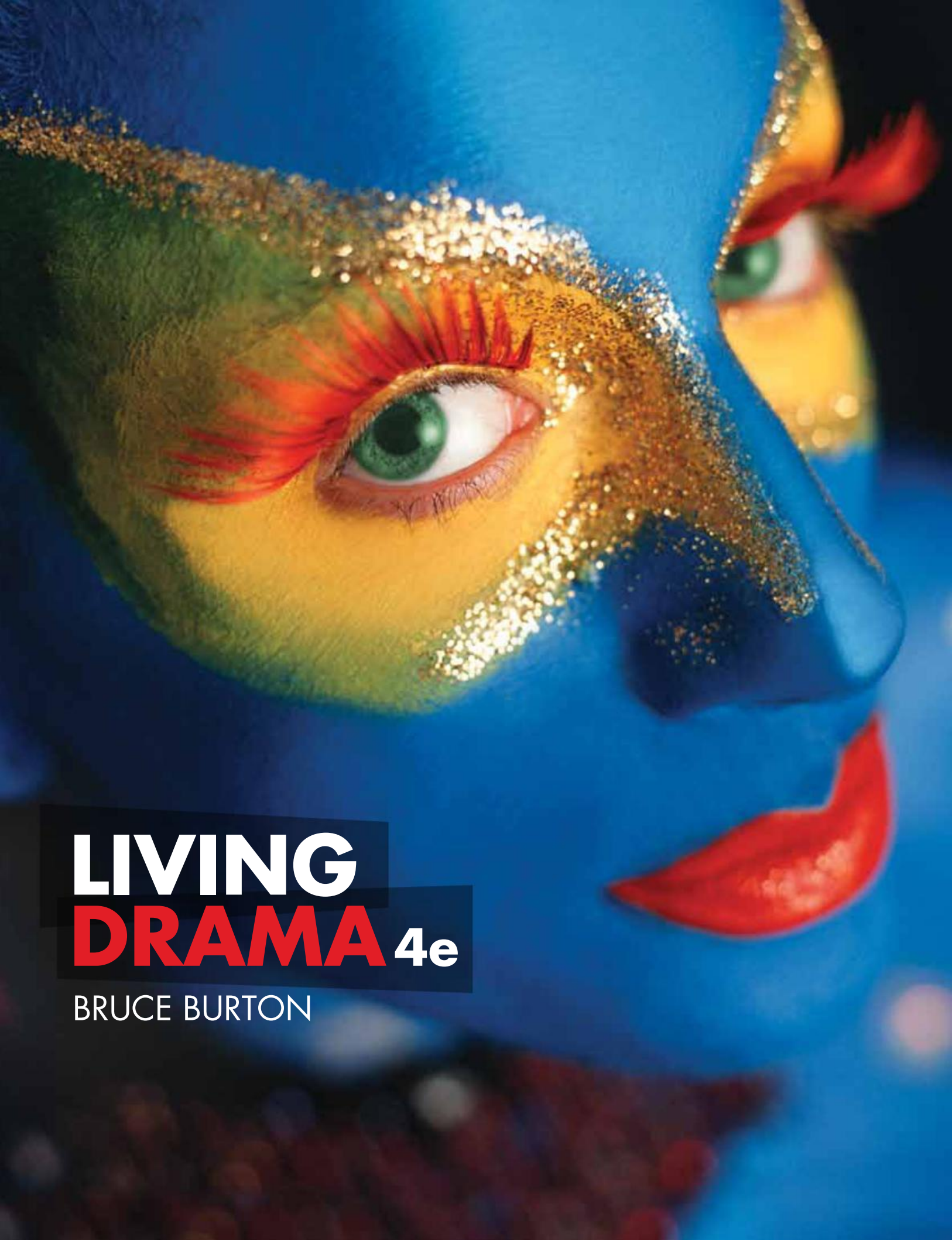

LIVING DRAMA 4e

BRUCE BURTON

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INTRODUCTION

TO THE STUDENT

Drama is an art form that is directly concerned with living, with the way we lead our lives. Through drama we explore the way human beings think, feel and communicate, learning to understand others and ourselves much more fully.

As a learning experience, drama is unique. Most of what you learn about the world you live in comes to you second-hand, from books, television, film, newspapers, the internet and what other people tell you. Drama is first-hand experience of a special kind. Simply by the use of your imagination and your skills in enactment, you can become different people in different situations, sharing a limitless range of experiences. Drama allows you to take on the role of another person in an imagined situation, so that you perceive and experience the world through different eyes.

Each time you engage in the imaginative world of drama, you enhance your own sense of self and your understanding of the nature of humanity. This happens equally with characters and situations you create yourself, and when you work with texts from the vast treasure house of the theatre.

For this process of learning to work effectively, you need to acquire all the skills of enactment that are part of the art form of theatre.

TO THE TEACHER

Living Drama has been the standard senior Drama and Theatre Studies text for the past two decades throughout Australia and New Zealand. As with many of the art forms, there has been significant change to the practice of drama and theatre during that time, both in the industry and in curricula.

Living Drama 4e (fourth edition) is written to provide a complete Drama and Theatre Studies course for senior secondary students. It is not intended to be prescriptive. Nor is it intended to be taught from cover to cover. Given the range of courses available to students and teachers, the book has been written to provide a broad yet deep approach to the core topics and ideals in drama and theatre practice. *Living Drama* provides your students with a complete foundation for their senior studies in the unique and complex world of drama.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this edition of *Living Drama* to my family with all of my love—my wife Andrea and my sons Owen and Heath.
Bruce Burton

The publishers and Bruce Burton would like to thank Wesley Enoch and David Milroy for their contributions to this book.

CURRICULUM GRID

STUDYING DRAMA AND THEATRE WITH *LIVING DRAMA 4e*

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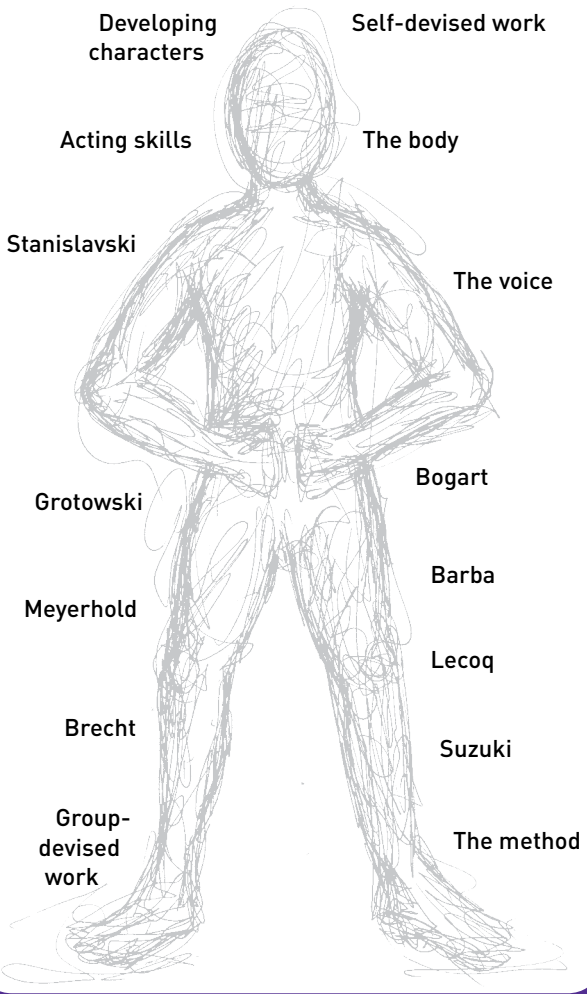

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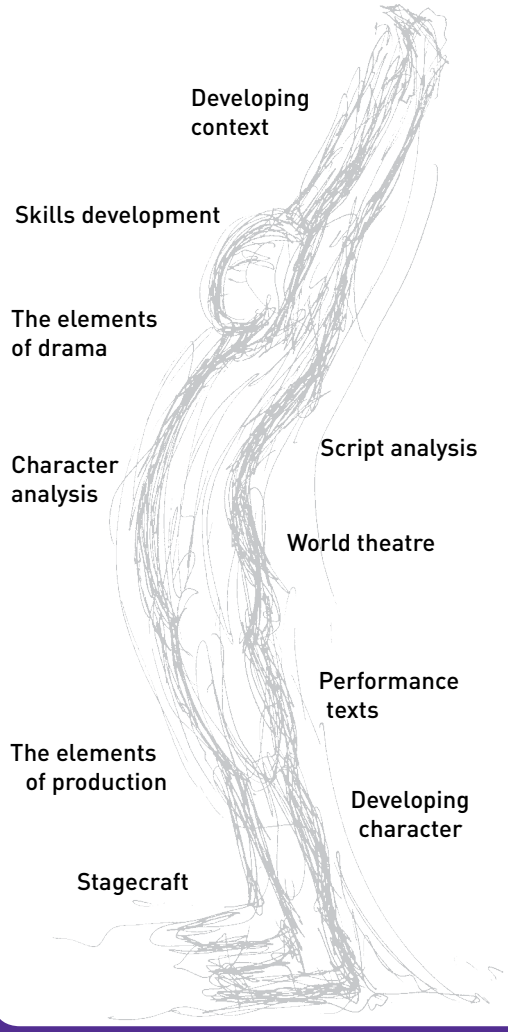

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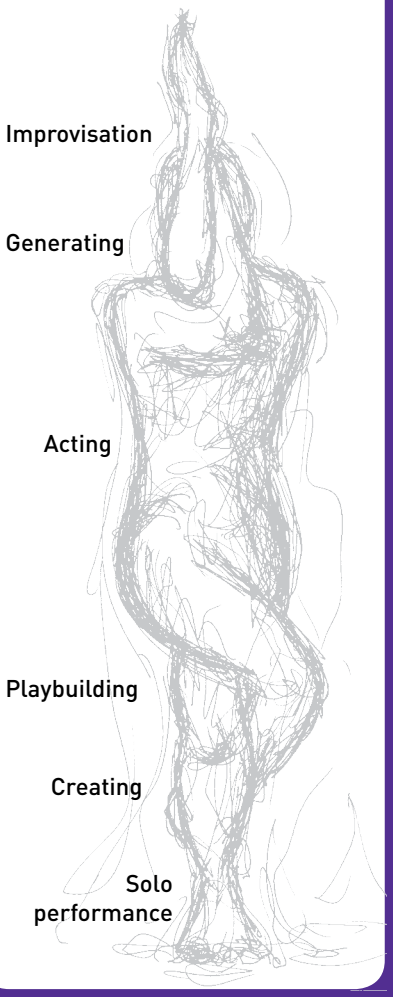

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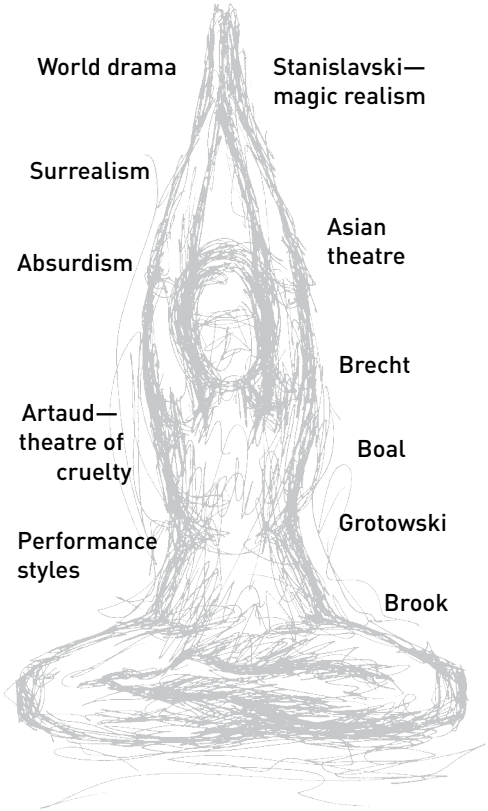

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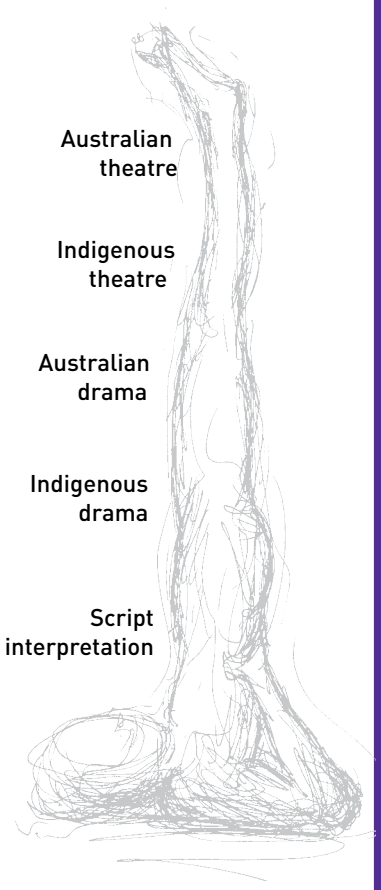

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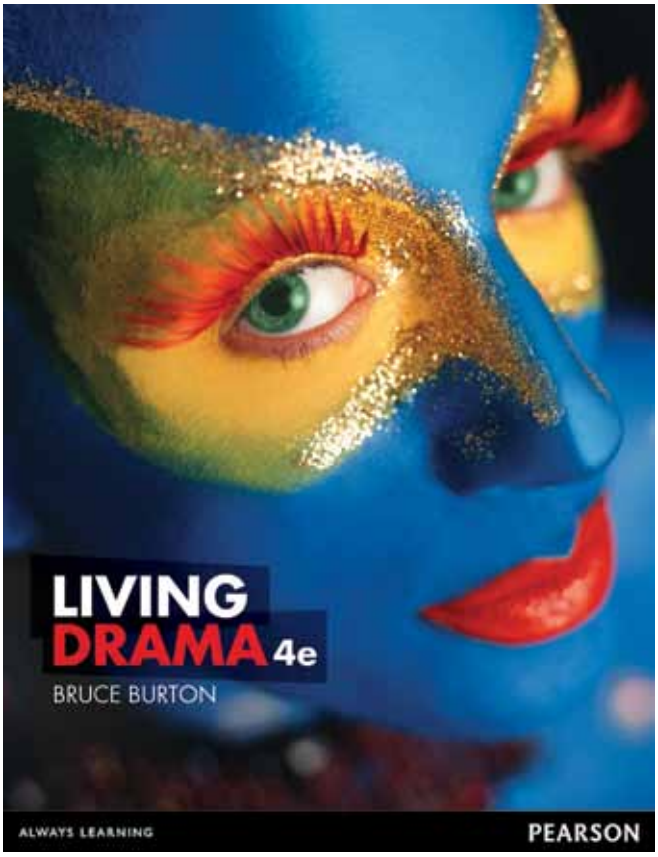
LIVING DRAMA 4e



Student Book

Times have changed since 2001 when the market-leading *Living Drama* third edition was published. The way students and teachers learn and engage with drama and theatre has been shaped by the influences of new and established theatre practitioners and theorists, including Anne Bogart, Eugenio Barba, Jacques Lecoq, Tadashi Suzuki, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner. As Australia's ties with our Asia–Pacific neighbours have deepened, we have also learnt more about and been influenced by the theatre of Asia. Australian theatre, and in particular Indigenous Australian theatre, has developed new traditions and styles as it has moved into the twenty-first century. *Living Drama 4e* (fourth edition) provides students with the opportunity to learn about these important influences and to engage with key texts from the 1940s through to the twenty-first century.

Working through *Living Drama 4e*, students will engage with the important foundation skills and knowledge they need for characterisation (section one) for drama and performance (section two), and for improvisation and playbuilding (section three). In section four they broaden their focus to look at the historic development in the West and elsewhere, and in section five they take an in-depth tour of Australian theatre and its evolution since 1788.

> "All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts..."

As You Like It, Act II Scene VII, William Shakespeare

ALWAYS LEARNING

Living Drama 4e builds on the strengths of the last three editions, maintaining the same quality and depth of material, but extending it to include:

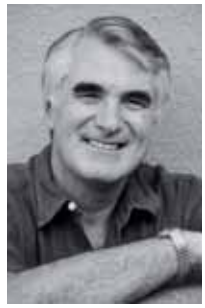
- profiles of important figures in theatre and their contributions
- additional script extracts from a broad range of sources
- workshop activities for each unit to engage students in experiential learning
- a new chapter focusing on Indigenous Australian theatre, including case studies
- margin notes, highlighting intercultural connections and other engaging facts
- a brilliant full-colour design featuring a gallery of contemporary and historic images from the theatre.

Online Support

Pearson Places provides online support for students and teachers using *Living Drama 4e*. The *Living Drama Student Lounge* contains support material for students, including weblinks and scaffolds for character development and the elements of production. The *Living Drama Teacher Lounge* contains support for teachers, including all the material available in the student lounge as well as additional workshop activities, playbuilding themes and ideas, and practice exams in both the NSW (HSC) and Victorian (VCE) formats.

Pearson Places is the gateway to digital learning material for teachers and students across Australia. Sample the range of resources and register for free at **www.pearsonplaces.com.au**.

Pearson Places



Bruce Burton

Bruce Burton is one of Australia's best-known Drama and Theatre Studies authors. He has brought to *Living Drama 4e* an extensive knowledge of drama and theatre practice from Ancient Greek theatre through to contemporary Indigenous Australian theatre, a deep understanding of the key elements of drama, and a wealth of experience in the fundamental techniques of acting and creating theatre.

Bruce has directed many theatre productions as well as devising pre-service university courses. He has won numerous awards including the Carrick Australian Award for Teaching Excellence in the Humanities and the Arts. He is currently Professor of Applied Theatre and Director of the Bachelor of Secondary Education program at Griffith University in Brisbane.

We believe in learning.
All kinds of learning for all kinds of people, delivered in a personal style.
Because wherever learning flourishes, so do people.

PEARSON

SECTION ONE

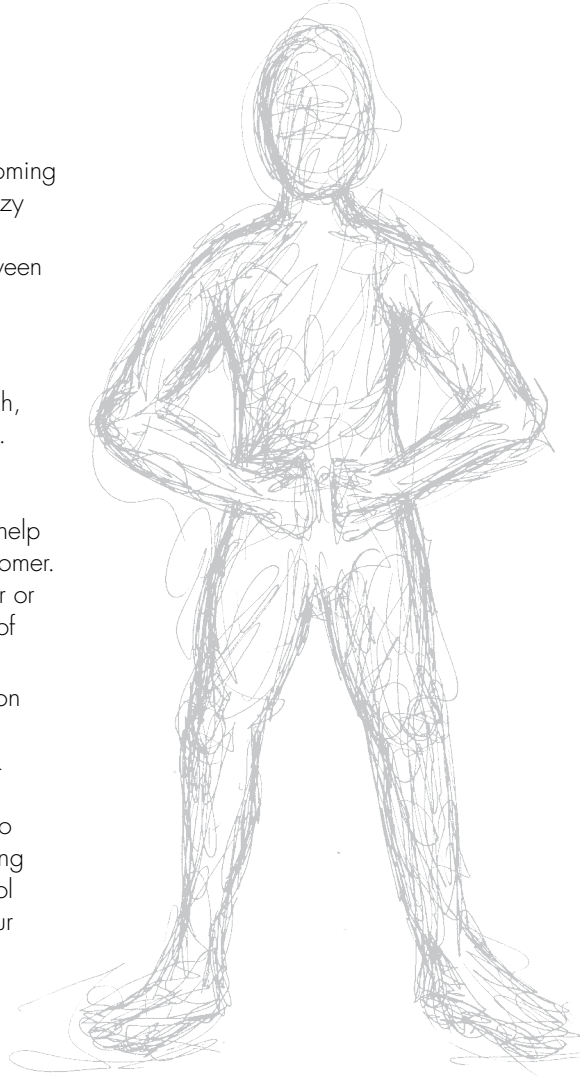
CHARACTERISATION

INTRODUCTION

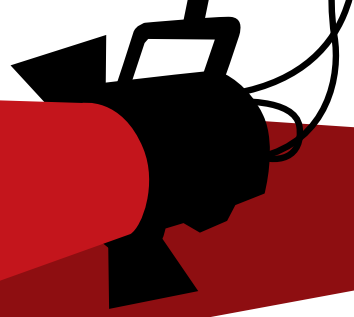
At the core of all drama is the action of a person taking on a role—becoming someone else, and then acting as if they were that character. It was Jerzy Grotowski, one of the most influential theatre directors of the twentieth century, who said that all we need for theatre is a face-to-face encounter between a living actor and a live audience. Grotowski knew that it was the actor in character who makes theatre happen; later in this section we will explore his special system for training actors.

Simply stepping into a role and pretending to be someone else is easy enough, and you will have taken different roles frequently in your earlier drama studies. Sometimes this will just have involved role-taking, where you performed a few simple actions without really becoming someone different. You will also have used role-play frequently, where you spoke and behaved in a certain way to help develop the drama—perhaps as a doctor or a police officer or an angry customer. At times you will have played with exaggerated roles such as a pop megastar or a feral street kid, experimenting with some of the tragic or comic possibilities of these caricatures.

It is much more difficult and complex to actually create a character and function as though the person were real. When you have to bring a character to life for an audience, as the best professional stage and screen actors do, the task is even harder. If your character is to be interesting and credible, and able to interact believably with other characters in the drama, then you must appear to become the person you are portraying. This requires speaking, moving, thinking and feeling as they would. At the same time, you must be completely in control of the character, consciously applying a range of expressive techniques to your performance and effectively interpreting the text for the audience.



CHAPTER ONE
BODY LANGUAGE



An actor's body should be skilled, flexible and expressive in order to represent a range of physical types and behaviours. There are a number of systems for studying and enhancing our use of physical movement to create a character.

In the complex craft of creating a character, there is a form of human physical expression which is absolutely fundamental in portraying the thoughts and especially the feelings of the person we are representing in performance. This form of non-verbal expression is called body language. In this chapter you will examine the different elements of body language and learn how to consciously use them to express the whole range of interior attitudes and emotions that belong to any character.

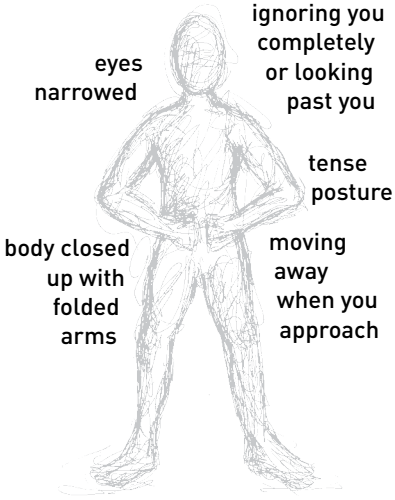
1.1 THE NATURE OF BODY LANGUAGE

We are all familiar with spoken language, and we use it every day in dozens, or even hundreds, of conversations. We also use written language to record information or inform other people. There is another language we use all the time, but we do so without really being aware of it. It is a language of movements, gestures and expressions which together are called body language.

It is our body language that is used to communicate those very important parts of ourselves: our feelings, our attitudes and our personalities. Most of our personal relationships with other people are formed, developed and sustained through body language. Of course we use words as well, but they are very often not nearly as important as our body language. When we are with people, talking to them, working with them and socialising with them, our movements and gestures and the expressions on our faces are sending a constant stream of messages, and we are receiving a flow of silent messages in return.

Experts world-wide agree that body language is a vital part of the way we convey our thoughts and our feelings to other people when communicating face to face. Between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of all human communication happens through non-verbal means including the way we sit, stand, move our bodies and hands, and the expressions on our face. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall has described this as 'the silent language'.

What is this woman communicating with her body language?



Examples of hostile body language

The problem is that we are not sufficiently aware of these messages or the information they are giving. For example, you might feel that someone you are talking to really likes you, without being able to explain how you know. In fact, the person is probably giving you a number of clear body language messages and you are responding without realising it.

You respond subconsciously to all these physical messages, clearly knowing that the person you are with really likes you, even though you do not actually analyse the messages or their meaning. You are equally aware when someone is hostile to you, even if their conversation is friendly, and you instinctively 'read' the body language messages they are sending.

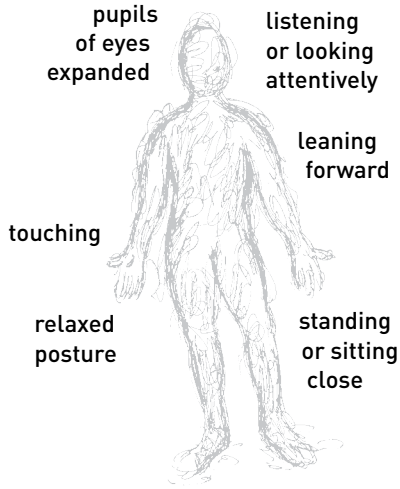
Just as we unconsciously register body language signals from other people, so we are constantly sending a stream of non-verbal messages in turn, and we are often unaware of the signals we are transmitting. This is a great pity because they are such an important part of our relationships with other people. Research has shown that people who show friendly and rewarding body language are far more popular than people whose body language is unfriendly and demanding.

Most importantly, body language can actually change the way people think and behave. In fact, a large part of our self-image is built up by the way people react to us from early childhood. Parents who treat children coldly and harshly can make those children feel inferior and unwanted. If friends react with strong disapproval to something we are saying or doing, we usually change our words or behaviour. So it is essential for us to recognise the elements of body language and understand their effects.

In terms of creating a character, body language can be as important as the spoken text we improvise or interpret. You need to consciously and skilfully use the body language that is appropriate to your character's dialogue, and also to provide your character's non-verbal responses to the dialogue spoken by others. If your character is a parent who is furiously angry with his or her children, then your gestures and facial expressions must convey your rage as much as your words, and must also show your character's reactions to the children when they are speaking.

In performance, it is your use of expressive body language that conveys your character's attitudes and emotions to the audience. Very often in a play, a character's true thoughts and feelings are not expressed in the lines; they are, in fact, often concealed by the character from the other people in the play.

Perhaps the most famous example of a character concealing his true feelings is Shakespeare's Hamlet, who pretends to be insane—or perhaps really is. When a genuinely talented actor portrays Hamlet on stage, he uses a full range of expressive body language to represent to the audience both the pretence of madness and also Hamlet's true self. This is essential because many of Hamlet's speeches are wild and bizarre, and often very ambiguous.



Examples of friendly body language messages

Jude Law as Hamlet. Can you read the body language? What can you tell about how the character is feeling? How can you tell?

Only through body language can you make an audience aware of your character's real self, and therefore help them understand the subtext of the play.

1.2 THE ELEMENTS OF BODY LANGUAGE

POSTURE

The way we stand or sit creates an impression on other people. Psychologists have identified four main postures that we interpret as meaning something:

- leaning forward in an attentive, interested way = approaching or warm
- drawing back or turning away = withdrawn or cold
- proud or conceited, with an expanded chest, straight back, erect head and raised shoulders = expanded or dominant
- depressive and downcast, with the body slumped, head bowed, shoulders drooping and chest sunken = contracted or submissive

GESTURES

The way people move their hands, feet and heads to make gestures tells us a great deal about them. From their gestures alone, we can tell whether someone is angry or happy, frightened or relaxed, speaking honestly or telling lies.

As well as using gestures to convey feelings, we also give signals with them. For example, we move our hands and feet when we are about to speak or want to emphasise something. In fact, there is a whole range of conscious gestures we all use and understand. Here are some of them:

- hands up = surrender
- head nod = agreement
- head shake = disagreement
- hand clap = approval
- fingers crossed = hoping for good luck
- pat on back = encouragement
- hand wave = greeting or farewell
- finger point = giving directions
- fist shake = threat

People's unconscious gestures often tell us what they are really thinking and contradict the words they are saying. During a conversation, our gestures can be a far more reliable guide to our true feelings than the words we are using. Some examples of unconscious gestures are:

- hand covering mouth = lying
- hands fiddling = nervous
- fists clenched = angry
- nail-biting = insecure
- hands covering face = afraid
- hands clenched together = frustrated

Expressive gestures: what does the body language tell us?

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

We show our feelings most of all in our faces, more than in words or with any other part of the body. If you feel an emotion strongly enough, it shows in your face whether you want it to or not. When you are angry or embarrassed, you flush or turn bright red, and if you are shocked or frightened, your face goes white. In times of real pain or distress, tears flood your eyes.

Eyes

Our eyes are the most active senders of messages. We use our eyes constantly and in recognisable patterns. It is the person listening who watches the other person most. When we are actually talking, our gaze tends to move around much more, and we only look at the person we are talking to from time to time, usually to make sure they are listening or to check their reactions.

When two people are talking, they look into each other's eyes for about a third of the time during the conversation.

What can you tell about this character from his eyes?

INTERCULTURAL

Smiling is the most common expression of welcome or friendship, and it is a universal way of showing meaning throughout the world. The meaning of a smile can vary between different cultures. The Japanese might smile when they are confused or angry as a way of avoiding embarrassment or conflict. In other parts of Asia, people might smile when they are embarrassed.

Research shows that people who are regarded as friendly make eye contact far more than unfriendly people. Women make eye contact more often than men. It is the way people use their eyes that we respond to, not the shape or size of the eyes themselves. Interestingly, the pupils of our eyes actually widen when we see someone we like, and experiments have shown that people find large, wide eyes more attractive, without knowing why.

Mouth

After our eyes, we use our mouths most to express our feelings. Smiling is the most common expression of welcome or friendship. Very often, the shape of our mouths reveals our emotions: up in a smile for happy, down in a curve for unhappy or depressed. We curl our lips in a sneer to show contempt, and bare and clench our teeth when we are furious with anger.

As with eyes, we associate certain personality traits with people's mouths. Thin, tight lips are believed to show a mean, unpleasant personality, while full lips and wide mouths are regarded as signs of a generous, warm-hearted person. As with eyes, we respond to the way people use their mouths rather than the shape of the mouth itself. It is interesting to consider the way women use lipstick to make their lips look wider and fuller.

What can you tell about this character from her mouth?

INTERCULTURAL

In western culture, when someone does not look you in the eye, people think they are being dishonest or 'shifty'. In Asian culture, looking someone directly in the eye is considered disrespectful.

USE OF SPACE

We each have a kind of personal space around us, an area which we feel belongs to us. How close we let people come to us physically depends entirely on how close we are emotionally to them. Only our own family and real friends are allowed to come close enough to touch us. When we are within touching distance, we can sense each other's body heat and breath, smell each other, and see the smallest pores and blemishes in each other's skin. Therefore, we restrict this kind of closeness to people we know really well, trust and love.

With friends and acquaintances we feel comfortable at a distance of about a metre. Most of our other contacts with people at school, at work and in shops are conducted at distances of one to three metres.

Another way we make use of space is by turning our bodies towards each other or away. We only stay face to face and very close to someone we love. With friends, we usually sit or stand side by side or at right angles to each other. Although we tend

to face strangers when we are with them, we always maintain our distance, keeping them outside our personal space.

Watch what happens when strangers are crowded together in a train or an elevator. Everyone tends to face in the same direction, fold their arms and close their bodies defensively, and deliberately avoid eye contact. In a lift, almost everyone stares intently at the numbers of the floors as they flash past. When we are unable to prevent our personal space being invaded, we feel very insecure and uncomfortable.

EMPATHY

There is another crucial element in non-verbal communication which is partly an outcome of body language but also transcends the physical messages we send and receive. This is the extraordinary process of empathy, which involves the ability to understand and feel the emotions being experienced by another person. Genuine empathy means being able to share someone else's feelings—the love or anger or happiness that they are experiencing.

It is this process of empathy in operation that makes live theatre unique. At its most powerful, theatre allows us to share a whole range of genuine emotions—those felt by the actors and by the audience. Perhaps more than any other single factor, it is the ability to create genuine feelings and transmit them to the audience that distinguishes great actors.

The process of empathy is a complex one. When you feel a strong emotion, there are major changes to your physical state. Your expressions, movements, posture, breathing, body temperature and heartbeat can all change remarkably. A great deal of empathy is related to those body language signs.

Not all empathy can be explained simply by physical changes. Some people are highly sensitive to others, and are aware of other people's states of mind and emotions even when there are no physical clues. There is evidence to suggest that people who are highly empathic, or very close to each other, communicate directly on an emotional level in ways we do not fully understand.

Teenagers have the potential to be extremely empathic. They are going through a stage of intense emotional development, and are deeply concerned with their own feelings and the way other people feel towards them. This is therefore the ideal time to develop your skills in empathy. The technique for understanding and controlling your own feelings, and learning to respond to others, is called emotion memory.

EMOTION MEMORY

Normally when we remember something that happened to us in the past, we remember the actual event. Sometimes we also recall the feelings we experienced at the time, and when this happens we experience the emotion all over again. For example, if you remember a really embarrassing situation, you might not only recall the embarrassment, but actually feel it again—your cheeks blush, your heartbeat increases and you feel like hiding your face.

Often our emotion memory can be triggered by a single object or sound. A particular piece of music, the taste of something, a word or a gesture—any one of these can cause us to remember and re-experience a strong emotion, even if we have almost forgotten the actual event.

It is through our emotion memory that we can learn to really empathise with someone else. If a friend loses someone close to them, you might be sympathetic, but you can only really understand what they are feeling if you experience it for yourself. One way to do this is to remember a time when something similar happened to you, such as the death of a loved pet or when a friend moved away. By reliving the sense of loss, you can begin to feel what your friend is suffering.

INTERCULTURAL

The personal space people need varies from country to country and culture to culture. In general, Italians and Greeks are much less concerned about personal space than the English. People such as the Japanese, living in very crowded conditions, have adapted to extreme physical closeness. Of all nationalities, Australians have traditionally demanded the largest amount of personal space and have been one of the most inhibited nations when it comes to touch. This has changed as Australia has become a more multicultural society.

It is important to remember that body language is not an exact science. A single sign of body language is not a reliable way of telling what someone might be thinking or feeling. We need to see a series of consistent movements, gestures and expressions all giving the same message before we can assume anything.

It was the great Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavski who, more than 100 years ago, first applied the psychological technique of emotion memory to creating a character. It remains the most powerful tool we have as actors to help us generate real empathy with other actors and with the audience.

As we learn to use emotion memory to recall and explore our own emotions, we also become more skilled at communicating our feelings to others and responding to them. When you do this, you will also discover your own talent for empathy and watch it increase with practice. Empathy is also extremely valuable in helping us to become more emotionally mature. By controlling and focusing our feelings, we can concentrate on positive emotions such as warmth, happiness and joy, and learn to filter out negative emotions like jealousy and hate.

WORKSHOP: BODY LANGUAGE

Exercise 1: Working in pairs, one of you stands up and moves away from your partner. Now decide what kind of mood you are in—are you angry, happy, tired, excited, depressed? When you have decided, sit down beside your partner, who should watch you the whole time and try to read your body language. What was your partner able to comprehend about your mood?

Exercise 2: One of you tries to persuade the other to do a particular favour, such as lending them some money or doing their homework. The one being asked to do the favour should watch their partner and observe their body language. What were you able to comprehend by observing and asking yourself questions about your partner's body language?

Exercise 3: Now the whole group tries to get one person to do something for them, something the person does not want to do. As they try to pressure that person, observe the body language they use so you can describe it later.

Exercise 4: Go back to working in pairs. This time try a situation in which you use body language that is the opposite of what you are saying. For example, if you are starting an argument, speak very aggressively but sit and smile and use body language that suggests you are being friendly. If you are speaking in a warm and relaxed way to your partner, stand over them and threaten them with your fist.

You will find this very difficult to do, because our body language is such a part of the way we communicate. Keep trying to use the opposite body language and observe the effect it has on your partner.

WORKSHOP: EMOTION MEMORY

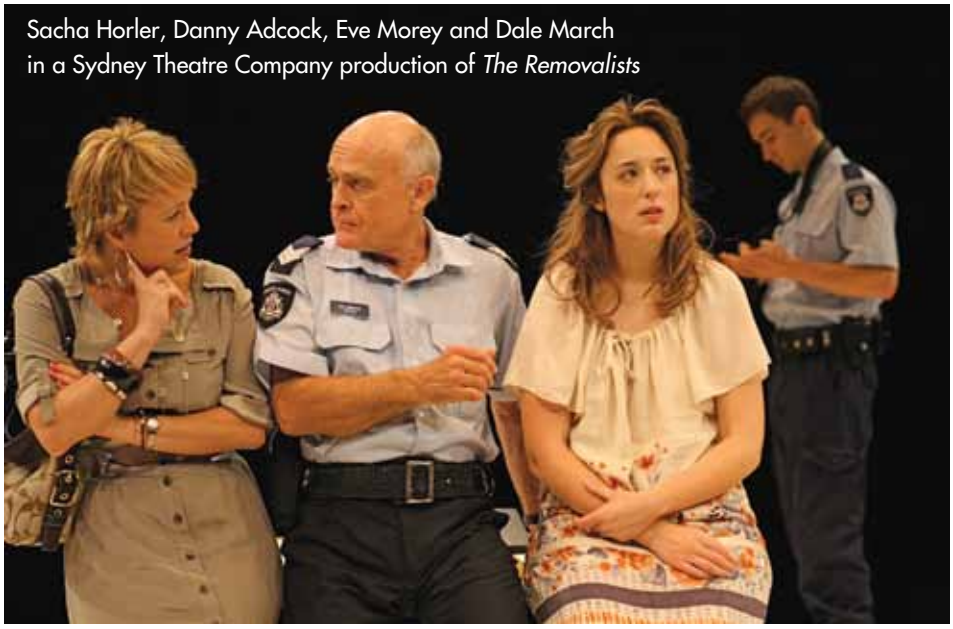
Exercise 1: Working in pairs, sit facing each other. One of you looks down and concentrates on remembering an experience that caused a very strong emotion at the time. When you can remember and feel that emotion, look up. Your partner should concentrate on you and see if he or she can apprehend (sense) the emotion you are feeling. Repeat this exercise, taking it in turns. The more you practise it, the better you will become at sensing your partner's feelings.

Exercise 2: Describe to your partner an experience that happened to you, or something that you witnessed that was exciting, frightening or upsetting. Try to project your feelings as well as describing what happened.

Exercise 3: This time, generate and realise a situation that involves strong feelings, such as a family quarrel or two friends meeting after a long time. Try to make the emotions you express to each other really genuine and respond to your partner's feelings.

The Removalists

by David Williamson



Sacha Horler, Danny Adcock, Eve Morey and Dale March in a Sydney Theatre Company production of *The Removalists*

Unquestionably one of Australia's major plays, *The Removalists* was first staged in 1970. It established David Williamson's reputation as a playwright and was the inspiration for many of the distinctively 'Ocker' plays of the 1970s.

This play is a savage portrayal of the culture that can operate inside the police force. Ross, the naive young constable who is the protagonist, is increasingly drawn into a culture of corruption and brutality, and by the end of the play he beats a man to death. The other central character, Sergeant Simmonds, represents the cynicism and inhumanity that corrupts Ross.

In the following extract, Kate and Fiona enter the police station to report that Fiona's husband has been physically abusing her. It is the non-verbal interactions between the four characters in this scene that convey the meaning of the play and the personalities of the four characters.

Exercise: As you work on this extract, make full use of posture, gestures, facial expressions and personal space as you interpret the behaviour of your character and his/her interactions with the others. The following steps can be used as a guide to working with the extract:

- Try to consciously use body language that suits your role and the situation.
- Use body language signals in response to the other characters—both their dialogue and their non-verbal communication.
- Experiment by creating the whole scene without dialogue, just using posture, levels, gestures, expressions and proxemics.
- Perform the piece for another group. After you have realised the piece, reflect on the artistic meaning you were attempting to achieve and comment on how successful you were in achieving this when communicating only through body language.
- Watch another group perform. As audience members, reflect on the meaning you interpreted from the body language–only piece.

The term 'proxemics' was first used in 1966 by Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist, to describe the distances between people as they were interacting. It is now commonly defined as the study of spatial distances between individuals in different cultures and situations.

[Simmonds stares thoughtfully at Ross and doesn't at first notice that two young women have entered the station. The elder of the two, Kate Mason, is more expensively dressed and more elegant than her younger sister, Fiona Carter; but Fiona has an easy and innocent sensuality about her that is most attractive and takes the edge from her sister's more conventional beauty. Kate tends to be tense and affected. Fiona is more relaxed and natural. The two policemen notice them. Simmonds scrutinises them. There is a pause.]

Simmonds Well. What can I do for you, ladies?

Kate *[smiling]* My sister and I have come to report an offence, Sergeant.

Simmonds *[pulling a note-pad indolently towards himself as he studies her]* Names?

Kate I'm Kate Mason and this is my sister Fiona Carter.

Simmonds *[writing this down]* All right ladies. *[Grinning lecherously]* Let's have it.

Kate We've come to report an offence.

Simmonds Against person or property, as they say?

Kate Against my sister.

Simmonds I see. What was the nature of this offence, Mrs *[checks pad]* Carter?

Fiona *[calmly, matter of fact]* I was beaten by my husband.

Simmonds *[putting down his pen and looking at Ross]* Ross. This is Mrs Mason and this is Mrs Carter. Ladies, this is Constable Ross. He's just arrived from training school. I wonder if you'd mind if Constable Ross handled your case? Not because I think it's trivial, in fact just the reverse. I want Ross to get his teeth stuck into something substantial as early as possible. I tend to think it's a great mistake to throw a lad onto routine paper-work when he comes to you willing and eager.

Kate *[smiling]* I would prefer to deal with the person in charge.

Simmonds *[mock surprise]* Are you expressing a lack of confidence in Constable Ross, Mrs Mason?

Kate *[forced smile]* Not at all, Sergeant …

Simmonds Constable Ross is a product of the finest police training in the southern hemisphere, Mrs Mason. You've been thoroughly trained, haven't you, Ross?

Ross *[hesitantly]* I've been trained.

Simmonds The boy's modest. Where did you come in your class, Ross?

Ross I did reasonably well.

Simmonds Isn't he sweet? Where did you come, Ross?

Ross Ninth.

Simmonds Out of how many?

Ross Eighty.

Simmonds *[to Kate]* Top ten per cent. *[Recalculating]* Almost. Pity you didn't come eighth, Ross. *[To Kate]* I think you'll find the Constable a very capable man.

Kate *[forced smile]* I'm sure he is but …

Simmonds I've judged Constable Ross competent to deal with your case, Mrs Mason, and in a way your objection to him is a reflection on my judgement.

Kate It's just that …

Simmonds Constable Ross has been prepared for every eventuality. Isn't that right, Ross?
[Ross looks embarrassed]
Isn't that right, Ross?

Ross Yes.

Simmonds However I can understand your doubts and I feel that you're entitled to express them. After all, we are public servants. Servants of the public. I'll take charge. *[To Ross]* I'm taking over, Ross. Two paces backwards and learn. Look and learn. *[To the women]* Right ladies, I'm all yours.

Kate We appreciate your dealing with our case personally, Sergeant. My sister's rather upset over the whole business.

Simmonds Yes. It's pretty terrifying when the family unit becomes a seat of violence.

Kate *[fumbling in her handbag]* We've got a medical report from a doctor.

Simmonds *[taking it and looking at it]* Your lawyer told you to get this, I presume?

Kate Yes, he did.

Simmonds Then to come to us? *[Fiona and Kate nod.]* I doubt if you'll get a conviction on the strength of this report, ladies.

The Removalists by David Williamson, Currency Press, Sydney, 1975.

Other plays

Aftershocks by Paul Brown and the Workers Cultural Action Committee, Currency Press, Sydney.

A Man with Five Children by Nick Enright, Currency Press, Sydney.

White with Wire Wheels by Jack Hibberd in *Four Australian Plays*, Penguin, Victoria.

Gary's House by Debra Oswald, Currency Press, Sydney.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VOICE

Just as you need to become highly skilled and knowledgeable in the use of non-verbal communication in order to create characters effectively, you also need to learn how to make full use of your voice in order to communicate a range of different characters vocally. You need to investigate how your voice works and how you can develop and enhance its quality and range.

Your voice is an important instrument that you should investigate and prepare.

2.1 SOUND

All sound is caused by vibrations and these vibrations occur when one object hits another. When you clap your hands, the air around them is disturbed and vibrates. Your ears pick up these vibrations or sound waves and your brain interprets them as a particular noise.

Usually, the harder the object being hit, the louder the noise. However, some objects vibrate more than others and this also affects the sound. The vibrations produced by glass being smashed are much stronger and sharper than those caused by plastic being crushed, even though the plastic is tougher than the glass. So sound depends on an object being struck or hit and on the kind of vibrations that object produces.

RESONANCE

Musical instruments produce regular vibrations, but they also have something else that makes their sound louder and last longer—a resonator. A resonator is something that amplifies and sustains the original sound: a good example is the body of a drum. When a stick strikes the drum skin, the sound vibrates inside the drum, making it much louder and sustaining it. The deep, vibrating sounds of a giant bass drum are very resonant; the vibrations are very strong and they last a long time. Think of a resonator as a hollow object with room inside for the air to vibrate.

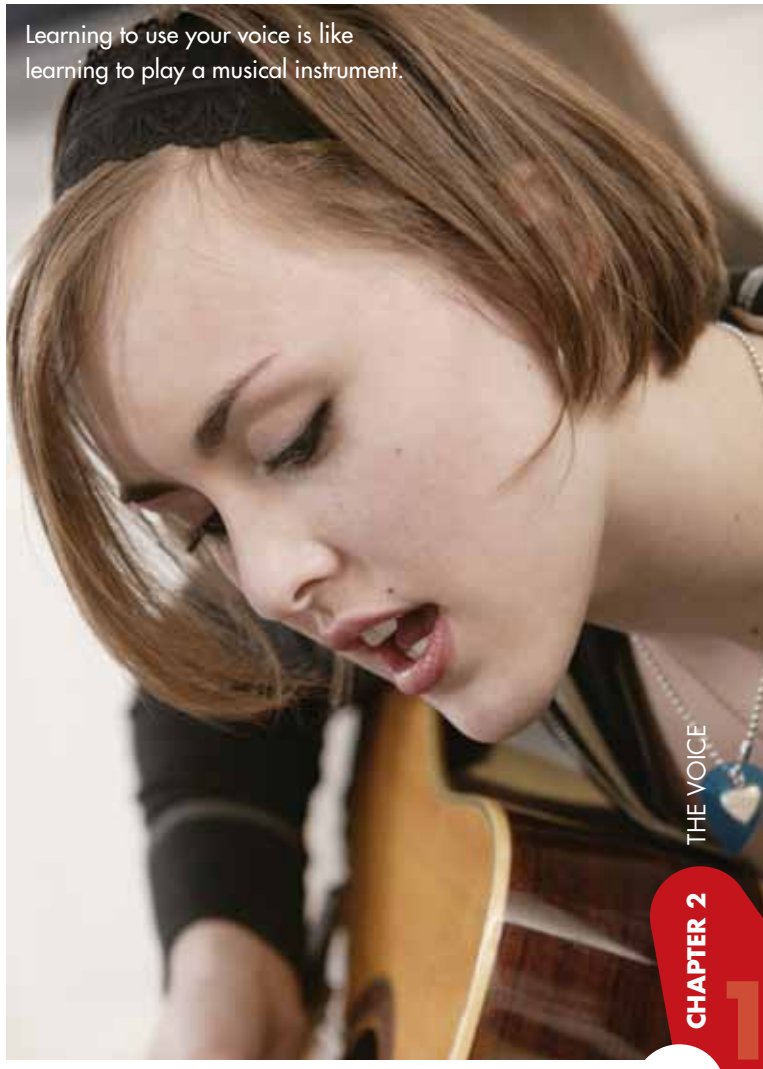
Resonators are made of materials that produce certain kinds of vibrations. A cave is a marvellous natural resonator. If you shout into it, your voice is amplified and sustained, echoing on and on.

PLAYING YOUR VOICE

The human voice is a musical instrument and works like one. When you play a guitar, you hit or strum the strings to make them vibrate and create sound waves. In the same way, the breath from your lungs hits or strums the vocal cords in your throat (or larynx) and makes them vibrate, producing sound waves.

The body of an acoustic guitar is a resonator. The sound vibrates inside and sets up sound waves that amplify the original sound of the strings being strummed. If you don't know how to play a guitar, you hit the strings awkwardly, making unpleasant, discordant sounds, and it is quite possible to break a string by strumming it carelessly. The quality of sound you get from a guitar depends on how well you can play it, on the actual movement of your fingers and hands.

The human body is also a resonator: the sound made when air hits your vocal cords vibrates in your chest, throat, mouth and nose. We all have different voices. The important thing with any musical instrument is how well it is played, and this applies to your voice as well. You can use your voice clumsily and even damage your vocal cords by treating them harshly when you speak. When you speak, the skill with which you use your lips, tongue and palate to shape words will decide how effective your voice sounds. So learning to use your voice is really like learning to play any musical instrument. Once you understand how it works, it is simply a matter of practising with it until you are really expert.



Learning to use your voice is like learning to play a musical instrument.

2.2 HOW YOUR VOICE WORKS: BREATH

The sounds you make begin with breath striking your vocal cords, like guitar strings being strummed, so let us examine where your breath comes from and how to make the best use of it.

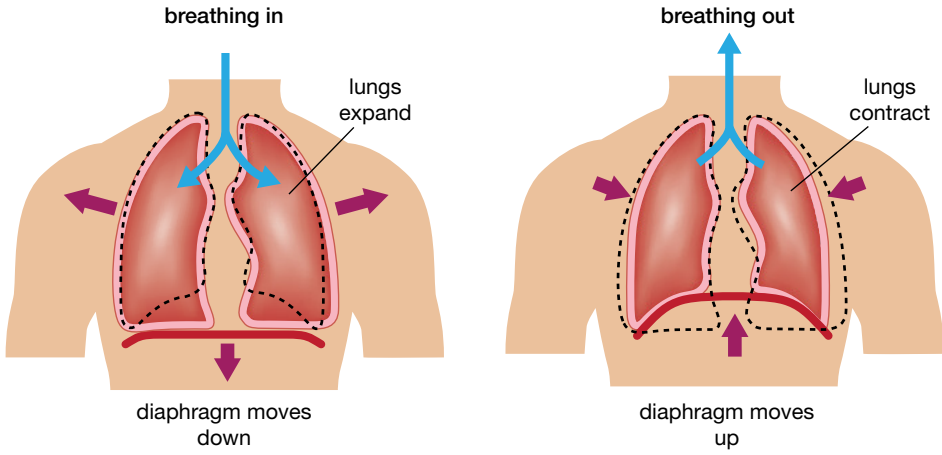
MORE AIR, LESS EFFORT

Your lungs sit inside your chest like two air bags, expanding and contracting as you breathe in and out. Their movement is controlled by the ribcage and the muscles of your chest, so this is where breath control should start.

You can check for yourself the way the ribs at the top of your chest are joined at the back to your spine and at the front to your breastbone, or sternum. Breathe in and feel the way the whole top of the ribcage has to move to let your lungs expand. This involves a lot of effort just to breathe in a small amount of air.

There is much more room available at the bottom of the ribcage, because there the ribs are only directly attached at the back, to the spine. In front, they are connected to each other and joined by muscles that can expand and contract them. The very bottom ribs are free at the front and are called floating ribs. So if you use the lower part of your chest for breathing, you can take in a lot more air with a lot less effort.

You can use your diaphragm to make even more room available for your lungs to expand downwards. The diaphragm is a curved sheet of muscle below the lungs, and it is attached to the ribs. When the ribs expand as we breathe in, the diaphragm stretches and flattens, leaving more space for the lungs to fill up at the bottom. So it is the diaphragm and the muscles between the ribs that you have to exercise to get the breath control you need to make full use of your voice.

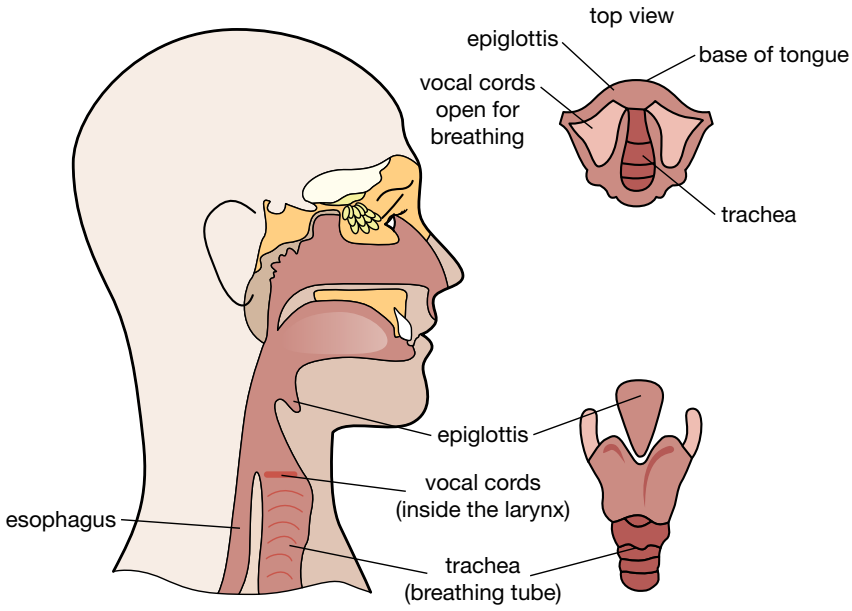


The respiratory system

VIBRATING THE VOCAL CORDS

All the sounds you make in speech begin with your breath passing between your vocal cords and making them vibrate. Unfortunately you have no direct control over your vocal cords. You cannot actually feel them working or make them move as you want. When you are breathing normally, they stay apart and the air passes easily through them. When you are about to speak, they come together automatically and the breath from your lungs touches them and makes them vibrate.

Your only way of controlling your vocal cords is to control the flow of air to them. If you force sound out without enough breath behind it, or breathe out too harshly or suddenly while you are speaking, your voice will sound strained and unpleasant, and you could even damage the vocal cords. You need to concentrate on producing a strong, steady flow of air that makes the vocal cords vibrate smoothly and efficiently.



The vocal cords

INTERCULTURAL

Circular breathing is a technique that can be valuable for actors. It is used by musicians who play wind instruments, especially Indigenous performers who play the didgeridoo. This technique allows performers to play continuously without stopping for breath. Circular breathing involves breathing in through your nose while breathing out through your mouth. With practice you can control the flow of air over the vocal chords very effectively.

WORKSHOP: MORE AIR, LESS EFFORT

Exercise 1: Lie on your back on the floor, letting all your muscles relax. Stretch and flatten your shoulders and back so they are resting completely still against the floor.

Exercise 2: Put your hands flat against the sides of your chest where the ribcage is widest and breathe out, emptying your lungs.

Exercise 3: Breathe out to a count of ten, controlling the flow of air through your mouth so that your lungs are completely empty when you reach ten. Repeat this exercise twice.

Exercise 4: Take a long, deep breath in, then breathe out to a count of fifteen, controlling the flow of air the whole time. Repeat twice, then see if you can breathe out counting up to twenty on the one breath.

Exercise 5: Breathe in deeply, filling the whole chest cavity. Put one hand on your stomach in the space between the bottom ribs, and press gently. Now breathe out just a little air and breathe it back in again. Feel the movement of your diaphragm rising and falling under your hand.

Exercise 6: Breathe out, counting aloud up to six and pressing gently on the diaphragm area as though you were pushing the numbers out from there. Now repeat this exercise a number of times, first with your hand on the diaphragm area, then without. Concentrate on making your breath flow up from the bottom of your lungs, so the sound you make when counting seems to begin in the diaphragm below your ribs.

WORKSHOP: VIBRATING THE VOCAL CORDS

Exercise 1: Stand up straight but relaxed with your back stretched and widened, the way it was when you lay on the floor at the beginning of the previous workshop.

Exercise 2: Relax your head and neck muscles by letting your head drop gently forward then back, then turn it slowly from side to side, letting it roll down and up on each turn.

Exercise 3: Lift your shoulders up towards your ears, then let them drop slowly back down. Repeat twice.

Exercise 4: Take a deep breath in, then breathe out to a count of ten. Repeat, counting up to fifteen, then twenty, as you breathe out.

Exercise 5: Put one hand on the diaphragm area between the bottom ribs and breathe in deeply. Now speak the long vowel sound *AH* (the *ar* sound in words like bark and dark). Make sure your throat and mouth are open and relaxed, and the breath for the sound rises smoothly from the diaphragm area.

Exercise 6: Take a deep breath and make the *AH* sound again, this time continuing it until you run out of breath. The sound should flow out steadily and evenly, as if you were singing a note. Repeat this exercise four times, keeping the flow of air smooth and strong, so the *AH* sound is clear and unforced.

Exercise 7: Now do the same with the vowel sound *AY* (as in day and bay). Keep the sound flowing all the time you are breathing out, making sure the energy for the sound begins in your diaphragm. Repeat four times, then try the vowel sound *I* (as in die and lie).

2.3 MAKING YOUR BODY RESONATE

As you have already seen, you have spaces in your body to make your voice resonate, just like a musical instrument. The quality of sound you make depends on whether you use these resonators properly. If you slump forward when you talk, you reduce your chest resonance. If your shoulders are tense, you cannot get much resonance in your neck space. A tight, restricted throat cuts down the supply of air to your mouth and head resonators.

So if you want to use your resonators properly, you must concentrate on using each set of muscles effectively. To do this requires good posture—standing or sitting correctly—and the ability to relax and control your muscle movements.

WORKSHOP: POETRY TO RESONATE THE BODY

For this workshop you will need a page from a book or a poem to use in practice. Poetry is extremely useful in voice work because of the rhythm and intensity of the language.

Exercise 1: Lie on the floor and do the breathing exercises you have already practised.

Exercise 2: Still lying relaxed, speak the poem you have chosen. As you say it, have one hand against your ribcage so you can feel your chest vibrate or resonate as you speak.

Exercise 3: Stand up and speak the poem, gradually increasing your projection until your voice is loud and clear but without any sign of shouting or straining.

Exercise 4: Stand in a corner with your face to the walls and speak the poem. Listen to the way the walls bounce the sound back to you. Deliberately try to increase the vibrations, but do not strain your voice or yell.

Exercise 5: Exercise your mouth and jaw by letting your jaw drop and saying *AH* five times. Each time, try to open your throat and mouth wider and relax them more. Now say the poem, concentrating on keeping the same relaxation and width in your mouth and throat.

2.4 HOW YOUR VOICE WORKS: SPEECH

The second vitally important element in using your voice effectively is the way you actually form words—your speech. Good speech does not mean changing your voice or your accent. It is simply a matter of learning to speak clearly and using the whole range of your vocal apparatus.

You have already examined the importance of your breathing in this process. Now let us look at the way we actually form words, and do some exercises that develop effective pronunciation.

THE VOWELS

Vowel sounds are the heart of every word we speak. From the five basic vowels in the English language, A, E, I, O, U, we get over twenty different sounds in combination with other letters. For example, the letter A is pronounced AW in the word law but *AH* in the word lark.

All the vowel sounds are made with your jaw relaxed and your throat open so that the sound from the vocal cords passes freely into your mouth. The different vowel sounds are then shaped in your mouth by the use of your tongue, palate and lips.

Say this vowel sequence and feel the way your lips change shape:

AH (as in dark) *AW* (as in law) *OO* (as in lose).

Here is another sequence of lip vowels. Try them:

OH (as in go) *OW* (as in house) *OI* (as in boy).

Now put one finger in your mouth so that it is touching the back of your tongue and try saying these vowels:

AH (as in dark) *ER* (as in learn) *EE* (as in leave).

Feel the way your tongue is flat for *AH* but curves for *ER* and makes an arch for the *EE* sound.

The fourth vowel sequence also involves tongue vowels. As you practise them, be aware of the way your tongue curves inside your mouth to make the sounds:

AY (as in day) *I* (as in sky) *AIR* (as in hair) *EER* (as in ear).

When you speak, it is the vowels that are most important in creating the tone of your voice, so if your vowels are blurred or breathy, that is how your voice will sound. If your vowel sounds are strained or nasal, then you will sound harsh-voiced or as if you are speaking through your nose.

To make sure our vowel sounds are clear and strong, we need to develop the muscles that make them. First, we need to exercise the jaw muscles so that we speak with an open jaw which allows a free flow of sound into the mouth; then, the muscles of our tongue and lips, to help us form our vowel sounds precisely and accurately.

Lip vowels

AH (dark)	*AW* (law)	*OO* (lose)	*OW* (cow)
MAH	*MAW*	*MOO*	*MOW*
PAH	*PAW*	*POO*	*POW*
SAH	*SAW*	*SOO*	*SOW*
BAH	*BAW*	*BOO*	*BOW*

INTERCULTURAL

South-East Asian languages contain a large number of vowels and consonants that require different pronunciations. When the languages are written, special marks are used to indicate the way the letters or words should be spoken.

Tongue vowels

AH		*EE* (leave)	
AH	*AY* (day)	*EE*	
AH	*AY*	*EE*	*I* (sky)
LAH	*LAY*	*LEE*	*LI*
TAH	*TAY*	*TEE*	*TI*
DAH	*DAY*	*DEE*	*DI*

The consonants

Consonants are formed when you use part of your mouth to completely or partly block the sound coming from your vocal cords. Consonants are important because they break up the vowel sounds into syllables. If the consonants are not clearly voiced, we lose the sense of a word. It is impossible to tell the difference between words like map, mat and mad unless the final consonant is properly sounded.

Plosives

One group of consonants are called plosives because they are formed when the sound from the vocal cords is stopped for a split second by the lips or tongue, and then allowed to explode out of the mouth. Try saying the consonant *P*, as in past, and feel the way your lips block the sound and then force it out suddenly.

Now put your hand up to your mouth so your fingers are almost touching your lips and say the following pairs of plosive consonants:

P	*B*
T	*D*
K	*G*
CH	*DJ* (the g sound in budge).

You should have felt the breath exploding from your lips for each consonant. Did you notice that there was more breath for the first column: *P*, *T*, *K* and *CH*? The sound for these consonants is made just by the breath exploding from our lips, whereas the consonants in the second column are actually sounded or 'voiced' as well.

Continuants

The second group of consonants are made when the sound from our vocal cords is only partly blocked. We can go on sounding these consonants for as long as our breath lasts and for this reason they are called continuant consonants.

The first three are *M*, *N* and *NG* (the *ing* sound at the end of words like running). These three are actually made by the sound of air escaping through the nose. Rest one finger against the side of your nose and place another just under your nostrils, then sound these three nasal consonants. You should be able to feel both the vibration in your nasal cavity and the air coming from your nostrils.

The next continuant consonant sounds are *L* and *R*, both made by the front of the tongue. The more you exercise your tongue, the more clearly you can sound these consonants.

Fricatives

The last six consonants are all made by the friction of the air passing through the mouth, so are called fricatives. They are excellent to use for practice because they demand a strong flow of breath and correct articulation in the mouth if they are to sound clear and precise.

The first two sounds, *S* and *Z*, are made with the tip of the tongue against the teeth; the sound escapes through the gap between the teeth. The next two, *F* and *V*, are made when the top teeth touch the lower lip and the sound escapes between them.

The last two sounds are very similar, the *TH* sound in thin and the *TH* sound in this. The differences are that we use extra breath for the sound in words like thin, and we voice the sound in words like this. They are both formed with the tip of the tongue between the teeth; the air is forced out around the tongue.

WORKSHOP: THE VOWELS

Exercise 1: Let your jaw drop down so that your mouth is wide open. Open and close your mouth slowly five times, making the jaw muscles work more each time. Now open your mouth wide and put two fingers, one on top of the other, into your mouth and close it until your teeth are just touching your fingers.

Exercise 2: Keep your fingers in place between your teeth. Make the *AH* sound, sustaining it for as long as you can.

Exercise 3: Remove your fingers, but keep your jaw in the same position. Take a deep breath and make the *AH* sound for as long as your breath lasts, keeping your mouth open the same width all the time.

Exercise 4: Practise the 'Lip vowels' and 'Tongue vowels' sequences on page 20, always beginning with the *AH* sound and making sure your mouth is open the width of two fingers each time you begin.

WORKSHOP: PLAYING WITH THE VOICE

Exercise 1: Begin by making the *AH* sound with your throat relaxed and your mouth open at least the width of two fingers.

Exercise 2: Say *LAH*, feeling the tip of your tongue curl up to touch the ridge behind your top teeth before uncurling to lie flat.

Exercise 3: Now practise the following exercise, making the curling movement of your tongue as precise as possible, even when you say *LALALA* very quickly.

LAH (pause)	*LAH* (pause)	*LAH* (pause)	*LAH*
LA LA	*LA LA*	*LA LA*	*LA LA*
LALALA	*LALALA*	*LALALA*	*LALALA*

WORKSHOP: PLAYING WITH THE VOICE

Exercise 4: Do the same sequence with each of the following consonants: *T, D, P, B, K, G, M, N.*

For example:

TAH	*TAH*	*TAH*	*TAH*
TATA	*TATA*	*TATA*	*TATA*
TATATA	*TATATA*	*TATATA*	*TATATA*

Make sure you say each consonant on its own first, noting how your tongue and lips move, and then when you say them in groups, try to get the same precise movements.

Exercise 5: Practise saying the following consonants in pairs:

S *Z*

F *V*

TH (thin) *TH* (this)

Concentrate on the movements of your tongue, lips and teeth, and emphasise the difference between the breathed sounds of *S, F* and *TH*(in), and the voiced sounds of *Z, V* and *TH*(is).

Exercise 6: Now combine the vowels and consonants together using all the elements of your voice to produce clear, strong sounds. Speak the vowel sequence:

AH I OW EE AY OH AW OO

Now place each of the consonants in turn in front of each sound and practise the sequences they make:

BAH BI BOW BEE BAY BOH BAW BOO

DAH DI DOW DEE DAY DOH DAW DOO

and so on for every consonant.

Using the same vowel sequence, place each consonant in turn after the vowel sound and practise them, beginning with:

AHB IB OWB EEB AYB OHB AWB OOB

2.5 USING THE INSTRUMENT

You have examined the way your voice works and practised some exercises to develop your speech. Let us finish by working on some techniques that help you to speak in more varied and interesting ways. In other words, to make full use of your voice as an instrument.

TONE

Because your body acts as a resonator for your voice, you can improve the quality or tone when you speak by using different parts of your body to resonate the sounds you are making.

This technique is extremely simple to learn. Just by focusing your concentration on the resonance in your body you become aware of it and can use it consciously whenever you wish.

PROJECTION

As well as improving your tone, you can also learn to make your voice carry further without having to shout. Again, the technique is simple. All you need to do is aim your voice where you want it to go. If you focus your attention on the person or place you want your voice to reach, and let the sound come out easily and naturally, then your vocal apparatus will automatically adjust the amount of breath and sound needed.

VARIETY

You can also make your voice more interesting and effective by introducing some variety into the way you speak. We can:

- change the pitch of your voice, using the higher and lower notes to express thoughts and feelings strongly
- use intonation, stressing or emphasising certain words that are important in what you are saying
- vary the pace at which you speak and use pauses for emphasis or to create tension
- change your volume, speaking more loudly or softly when it is appropriate.

Variety in speech should never be used artificially, just for the sake of it. The aim should always be to use the full range of your voice to express yourself more clearly and communicate more effectively.

Speech is almost never used in isolation in the theatre, any more that body language is. They are both part of the integrated use of our voices and our bodies in performance.

WORKSHOP: TONE

Exercise 1: Put one hand behind your back, resting flat against your spine about halfway up. Place the palm of your other hand against your ribcage just under your heart. Say your poem or one of the main voice exercises aloud, feeling the sounds vibrate in your chest and back. As you speak, concentrate on building up that resonance without forcing your voice.

Exercise 2: Place one hand on either side of your throat and feel the resonance there when you speak. Keep your throat relaxed, and concentrate on building up the resonance by simply increasing the flow of air from your lungs.

Exercise 3: Move your hands to your cheeks, with your fingers touching the sides of your nose. Do some voice exercises involving the nasal consonant sounds *M, N* and *NG,* building up the vibrations in your mouth and nose resonators.

Exercise 4: Now speak or read anything you like, consciously making your body resonate with sound.

WORKSHOP: PROJECTION

Exercise 1: Say the long vowel sound *AH* three times, aiming it at three different places: one close to you, one in the middle distance and one a long way off. Do not force the sound to make it louder, but concentrate on shifting your attention from one place to the next and focusing your voice to reach each place.

Exercise 2: Now do the same with some words, reading or speaking to someone next to you, then someone further away, and finally to someone quite distant. In each case, focus your attention on the person and project your voice to just reach them comfortably.

Justin Sharrock and Peta Carolan in a CQ University production of *Snapshots from Home*

Snapshots from Home

by Margery Forde

First performed in 1997, this play is a series of short, cinematic scenes that give the audience a range of vivid impressions of life in Australia during the Second World War. The play focuses on the experiences of the women who remained behind when the men went off to fight in the war.

The following extract contains the final sequences of the play, showing the soldiers returning home in 1945 after the war has finished, and then jumping forward to today with the characters reflecting back on their experiences. As you can see, the characters are identified in the script only as voices, and this is a clear indication of the emphasis on the spoken dialogue. The extract relies particularly heavily on effective vocal work to convey the texture and meaning of the text.

Exercise: Make sure you warm up your voice sufficiently before you begin speaking the lines, and consciously apply the different vocal techniques you have learned to each extract you perform. At the same time, be aware of the non-verbal elements of the performance and ensure that your body language and use of empathy reinforce and enhance your spoken performance to create meaning for the audience and for yourself.

Snapshots from Home

SLIDE: HE STILL WON'T TALK ABOUT IT

VOICE 1 (Young woman)

The Aussie prisoners of war came down Queen Street in cars. They'd come through from Malaya and Burma and those places.

VOICE 2 (Young woman)

It was terrible to see them. These pathetic bundles of humanity. So terrible. I just stood there crying. That afternoon I went home on the tram.

[On the tram. The audience don't see the POW. The people on the tram are all staring at the unseen figure.]

VOICE 2 **There was this man … he'd been a prisoner of war. He was sitting right in the middle of the tram, on his own. He looked like a very old man … but he couldn't have been. He couldn't have been very old at all. He was in a very bad way … a shocking state. Everyone on the tram spoke to him …**

[Each passenger gently speaks to the POW in turn as they leave the tram.]

VOICE 3 **Good luck matey. All over now, eh?**

VOICE 4 **She'll be right, mate. You're home now.**

VOICE 3 **You'll be alright, young fella. You keep your chin up …**

VOICE 4 Yeah … you're home now, mate. You're back home.

VOICE 2 The man started to cry. I was still sitting across from him and I wanted to put my arms around him and hold him and comfort him and tell him how sorry I was. But I couldn't. I got off the tram and walked up the hill.

[The actors walk forward and talk directly to the audience. They are now speaking as the men and women they are today … in their 70s and 80s.]

SLIDE: I HOPED TOMORROW WOULD BE BETTER …

VOICE 2 Do you remember … once the war was over we were expected to go back to the kitchen sink and populate or perish? But I'd changed.

VOICE 1 I'd been in the army for four years. I was educated, I'd learned about friendships and I knew what went on in the big bad world.

VOICE 2 My father had made every decision in our family. Mum did as she was told until the day she died. But I couldn't be like my mother … subservient to a man.

VOICE 1 I argued with my father for the first time in my life.

VOICE 4 Fifty years on … and I still feel bitter about what happened. The terrible anger has never left me and it never will.

VOICE 3 I did hate … with a youthful fervour. Not any more.

VOICE 2 My husband had been through six years of private horror before I met him. He still won't talk about it. We've had forty years of living with the consequences.

VOICE 4 When I see young Japanese I feel like walking up to them and shaking them and saying 'Do you realise your history books don't tell the truth?'

VOICE 3 Neither do ours, mate. I don't feel bitter. I don't think your average Japanese was any happier about the war than we were.

VOICE 4 You certainly hope war never happens to your children … or your grandchildren. But then you see families who can't get on together … and towns … and political parties … and races that can't get on together. Then you have wars …

VOICE 1 With so many men at the helm, there'll always be wars. That's because men don't have to go into the labour wards and push like hell to bring people into the world. Life just doesn't mean as much to them.

VOICE 3 My only grandson was on stand-by during the Gulf War. I realised then that someone who belonged to me might be caught up in something terrible … just as I was.

SONG: TOMORROW IS A LOVELY DAY
(Words & music: Irving Berlin)

VOICE 3 *It's a lovely day tomorrow …*
Tomorrow is a lovely day …

VOICE 1 **World War I was supposed to be the war to end all wars. But it wasn't. I marched in the streets to demonstrate against the war in Vietnam.**

VOICE 2 **I became a member of the peace movement … the People for Nuclear Disarmament.**

VOICE 3 *Come and feast your weary eyes*
On tomorrow's clear blue skies.

VOICE 4 **We all hoped that there'd be no more wars, but it hasn't happened and probably never will … mankind being the way it is.**

VOICE 3 *If today your heart is weary,*
and every little thing looks grey.

VOICE 2 **Back then, in my 21 year old optimism, I certainly hoped that my children would grow up in a world without wars.**

VOICE 3 *Just forget your troubles and learn to say …*

VOICE 1 **I believed tomorrow would be better. I still believe it can be.**

ALL *Tomorrow is a lovely day.*

[Lights slowly down]

FINIS

Snapshots from Home by Margery Forde, Playlab Press, Brisbane, 1997.

Other plays

The 7 Stages of Grieving by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, Playlab Press, Brisbane, 1996.

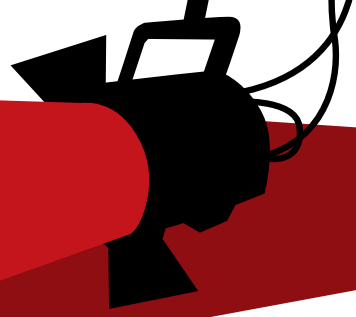
Wolf by Tobsha Learner, Currency Press, Sydney, 1992.

Waltzing the Wilarra by David Milroy, Currency Press, Sydney, 2011.

Così by Louis Nowra, Currency Press, Sydney, 1992.

Under Milk Wood by Dylan Thomas, Everyman, 1975.

CHAPTER THREE
CREATING A CHARACTER



At the heart of all drama, in the classroom, on stage, on television and on film, are the characters portrayed by the actors. Some of the most powerful drama takes place when we forget that these characters are fictional, we identify with them as human beings and become engaged with their stories in the play or film we are watching. In turn, when we are working on a performance ourselves, we want the roles we play to be as intense and believable as possible.

It is a difficult and complex art to actually create a character and function as though the person were real. When you have to bring a character to life for an audience, as the best professional stage and screen actors do, the task is even harder. If your character is to be interesting and credible, and able to interact believably with other characters in the drama, then you must appear to become the person you are portraying. This requires speaking, moving, thinking and feeling as they would. At the same time, you must be completely in control of the character, consciously applying a range of expressive techniques to your performance and effectively interpreting the text for the audience.

This chapter explores the elements required to achieve this complex task, beginning with the expressive physical and vocal techniques that are a necessary starting point. The chapter focuses on Constantin Stanislavski's system for training actors, which is still the most complete and effective structure we have for learning how to create characters. This is followed by an exploration of Jerzy Grotowski's work, which attempted to create extraordinary actors capable of achieving self-knowledge through intense training and dedication. Throughout the chapter you will be asked to apply the techniques you are learning to a range of improvised and scripted characters.

3.1 CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI'S SYSTEM

Of the major innovators who have influenced the development of drama in the last 100 years, none has been more significant than Constantin Stanislavski. As an actor, and most of all as a director, he transformed the whole nature of theatre and had a profound and lasting effect on film and television as well.

Although he died more than seventy years ago, the style of realistic theatre that Stanislavski developed and popularised is still the dominant performance style on stage and screen throughout the world. The actor training he pioneered still provides the most complete and effective way to achieve realistic characterisation.

Stanislavski did not invent realistic acting. Since the time of the Ancient Greeks, there have been actors who tried to create real, believable people on stage. Stanislavski's achievement was to develop a whole system of realistic staging and acting that worked, and which could be taught to other people.

Stanislavski once said that there were no small parts, only small actors.

Our immediate interest is in Stanislavski's system of actor training, which he developed and refined over a period of forty years. He used his own theatre, the Moscow Arts Theatre, as the location for his investigations into the craft of acting, and experimented with his own acting in order to try out new approaches to performance. The end result is a coherent set of techniques that we can apply to enhance our ability to create characters based on any script we wish to perform.

3.2 STANISLAVSKI'S TECHNIQUES

CONCENTRATION

Stanislavski demanded an incredibly high level of concentration, both physical and mental, from his actors. To achieve this, he trained them in a range of concentration and relaxation techniques.

One of the most important techniques involved circles of attention. Actors were taught to begin by concentrating all their attention on a single spot, ignoring everything else. They then widened their focus to include a single object, such as a chair. The circle of attention became wider still to include an area, and finally widened to take in the whole room. At each step, the concentration of the actors had to be total, so that they were aware of everything inside each circle of attention and oblivious to everything outside.

Imagining the room or space divided by concentric circle helps an actor to develop their concentration using circles of attention. In this case, the actor could begin by focusing on the fruit bowl before widening their concentration.

PHYSICAL SKILLS

Throughout his life, Stanislavski emphasised the importance of physical training for actors and used exercises, mime work and dance to make his actors supple, graceful and strong. Towards the end of his life, he became increasingly convinced that physical movement and control were the keys to acting, a theory that Jerzy Grotowski was later to develop much further.

Stanislavski argued that on stage, and in real life, some of the strongest human feelings are signalled by small, natural movements. Even complete stillness can be the result of a very strong emotion, as when people are frozen with fear or rigid with barely controlled anger. Every physical movement we make has a reason or cause.

VOICE

Stanislavski argued that actors were far more intensely involved in communication than people in ordinary life. They therefore had to be able to use their voices much more effectively. He insisted that his actors do regular voice exercises to improve their diction, projection, resonance and expressiveness.

For Stanislavski, the human voice was an instrument that could be used with great power and beauty to communicate. He particularly used singing as a way of developing the voice.

EMOTION MEMORY

Stanislavski demanded that his casts actually experience the emotions of the characters they were portraying. This seems an impossible demand to make. How can a young actor who has never been a mother genuinely feel the joy of a character in a play who has just given birth to a baby? How can an actor who has never deliberately hurt anyone in his life become a vicious killer in a play?

One of Stanislavski's greatest achievements was to solve this problem. It was Stanislavski who developed the use of emotion memory to train actors to remember and experience a whole range of human feelings. When we remember something important, such as a very exciting time in our lives, our hearts actually beat faster and we experience a feeling of excitement all over again.

Stanislavski's actors were encouraged to use this experience of emotion memory all the time. The young actor portraying the mother could use her emotion memory to recreate the joy she felt as a child when she was given something special, such as a new pet or a much-loved doll. The actor portraying the murderer could use the emotion memory of a time when he felt intense hatred or the urge to destroy something.

If we develop the use of our emotion memories through constant practice, we will learn to put ourselves emotionally in another person's place and experience what they are feeling. The more we use our emotion memories, the more sensitive we become, not only to our own feelings but to the emotional lives of everyone around us.

Remember, it is the skilled and intelligent use of emotion memory that makes it an important acting technique. You should always choose memories you are comfortable exploring, and the feelings you recall need to be controlled and carefully used to give your role a genuine emotional dimension.

OBSERVATION

All of Stanislavski's actors were encouraged to use their powers of observation to learn more about people and their behaviour. He instructed them to watch and listen with real concentration every minute of their waking lives, and urged them to read books, study paintings and listen to music. The more they observed, the more they would learn.

Observation of people and places is an important part of the actor's training.

HARMONY

Both during rehearsals and in performance, Stanislavski insisted that his actors must be in harmony with one another. At the Moscow Arts Theatre he created an ensemble, a group of actors who cooperated together to create superb theatre. An actor might have the main role in one play and only one line to say in the next. Working like this was part of Stanislavski's philosophy, and one of his most famous observations was that there were no small parts, only small actors.

On stage his actors worked together in character, making eye contact with each other and genuinely responding to the actions, words and emotions of the other actors. They were told to completely forget the existence of the audience and concentrate on working in complete harmony with each other.

In essence, Stanislavski taught people to cooperate together with complete commitment, sacrificing their own ambitions and desires for the good of the whole group.

ANALYSIS

One of the most important skills Stanislavski taught his actors was the ability to analyse human behaviour. As well as rehearsing a play, actors at the Moscow Arts Theatre spent many hours analysing it, discussing each character in detail. Stanislavski pointed out that every character in a play has a particular reason or motive for his or her behaviour. Each character is trying to achieve something vitally important to him or her. Stanislavski called this motive or aim the 'super-objective' and his actors were required to study their characters in depth to work out what their super-objectives were.

Once the actors had discovered this, they could understand why their characters behaved as they did. All the actions taken by the characters would make sense because they would be aimed at gaining what the character wanted. For every character, there would be a clear line of action running through the play leading to the character's super-objective.

For example, in one scene a man might be extremely generous and friendly to a woman he has just met, while in the next scene he might threaten her with violence. These actions seem contradictory, but if we know that the man's super-objective is to gain complete control over the woman and make her obey him, then both the friendliness and the violence make sense. They are part of a clear line of action aimed at dominating the other person. An actor taking the part of the man would know how to act both scenes to show that all his actions had the same motive.

Stanislavski did not limit analysis only to plays. He instructed all his actors to analyse themselves as well as the characters they created. Actors were asked to examine their own actions, knowledge and experience, to look inside themselves and discover their own motives and super-objectives. Things they had done in the past were described and analysed, and the actors were able to recognise the lines of action they had taken and to identify their own super-objectives.

Stanislavski called the 'what if' question the 'magic if' because the question took the actors out of everyday reality and into the creative world of the imagination.

CREATIVITY

At the heart of Stanislavski's system is a very simple question: 'What if?' Stanislavski called this question the 'magic if', and he made his actors use it all the time as a stimulus to creativity.

Once they had used all the other techniques we have been studying, the actors then had to ask themselves: 'What if I were this character in this situation? What would I do?' For example, the actor creating the character of Nora in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* must answer the question: 'If I were a young wife trapped in an unhappy marriage, what would I do?'

When a group of actors use the 'magic if' with real skill and total commitment to their characters, all of them become completely involved in the imaginative reality of the play. Everything the characters say and do on stage is real for the actors playing them, and therefore real for the audience watching.

The 'magic if' is not just an important theatrical technique, it is the key to all drama. By visualising an imaginary situation, and then projecting ourselves into it as different people, we can live a whole world of experiences and emotions that would never be available to us in reality.

Anyone can use the 'magic if': it only requires a simple act of imagination. However, if we have also learned all Stanislavski's techniques for creating a character, then we can use the 'magic if' to experience a range of alternative realities. We can effectively become other people, living other lives.

If he were alive today, Stanislavski would be particularly contemptuous of some modern film and television actors who believe in their screen images to the point where they lose their own personalities altogether.

PERSONALISATION

On stage, Stanislavski's actors seemed to become the characters they were acting, until the audience watching believed that the people on stage were real in every way—speaking their own words, feeling genuine emotions, taking important decisions and committing real actions.

Stanislavski insisted that this fusion of the actor with the character must never be total. Actors must always be in control of their creations, so that a part of their consciousness remained separate, observing and directing the behaviour of the character. Stanislavski claimed that actors who really believed they were the characters they played were unbalanced.

What Stanislavski required of actors was the difficult but rewarding skill of personalisation. To achieve it, actors had to use their emotions, observations and experiences to create a character and then become that person as completely as possible on stage. While they were acting, they had to seem to be the character, yet be in complete control of their performance and return to being themselves as soon as the play was over.

We can use personalisation ourselves to experience the world from different points of view. In a way, it is like stepping in and out of other people's shoes. What does it feel like to be a mother or a father? We can use Stanislavski's techniques to answer that question, creating the character of a parent with total conviction and being that character during an improvisation. At the same time we remain ourselves, in control of our creation, and can leave the character behind once the improvisation is over.

Constantin Stanislavski in the role of Don Juan, 1889

WORKSHOP: CONCENTRATION

Exercise 1: In your own room or another room you know well, work on developing different circles of attention.

Exercise 2: Place a number of articles on a table or chair—such as pens, keys, coins, a book—and concentrate on them as intensely as you can for a few seconds, observing as much as possible about them. Look away and write down a description of the articles, making it as accurate and complete as possible. Now check how effective your observations were and then repeat the exercise.

WORKSHOP: EMOTION MEMORY

Exercise 1: Lie completely still, breathing slowly and deeply. Concentrate on remembering an experience, a dream or a nightmare that involved a very strong emotion. Focus on the feeling, making it build up inside you. Finally, when it is really strong, make a single, controlled movement which expresses the emotion. You can jump to your feet or sit up or simply open your eyes. The important thing is to express what you are feeling in that one movement.

Exercise 2: Practise using your emotion memory, recalling different experiences and the emotions you felt at the time. Try to intensify your experience of the emotion as much as possible.

Exercise 3: Working with a partner, try to develop real empathy between you. Use your emotion memory to generate a strong feeling and see if your partner can sense and experience the feeling too. The more you work with someone like this, the more empathic you will become.

WORKSHOP: OBSERVATION

Exercise 1: Imagine you were playing the role of an employer who was interviewing someone for a job.

a Generate a character based on people you have observed, behaving as they would in this situation. (Remember to consider any cultural and social impacts on your character in this situation.)

b Improvise the interview with a partner, making it as real as possible.

WORKSHOP: HARMONY

Exercise 1: In small groups, take it in turns to describe an experience that made a strong impression on you. Try to concentrate all your attention on one another as you talk and listen, really sharing the experiences.

WORKSHOP: ANALYSIS

Exercise 1: Analyse your actions. Can you remember some behaviour of your own carried on over a period of time, which was done for one reason?

Exercise 2: Working in pairs or small groups, generate and then realise an improvisation in which one of the group deliberately follows a line of action towards a particular super-objective. Organise the improvisation to clearly show that everything is done with one motive in mind, so the meaning of your work is clear to the audience.

WORKSHOP: PERSONALISATION

Exercise 1: Ask yourself: 'What if I were a convict on the First Fleet sailing to Australia?' Answer the question, not in words, but by creating a character and imagining the situation aboard a convict ship. Use all of Stanislavski's techniques to commit yourself totally to the character you have created.

Exercise 2: Work with a group of students who have done the first exercise. Try to think, speak and behave as the convict character you have created, and try to totally involve yourself in the imaginative world of the ship.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

Blackrock

by Nick Enright

Blackrock: Glenys comforts her daughter, Cherie.

This play began life as a short work entitled *A Property of the Clan* and was based on the true story of the rape and murder of a girl at a beach party. The play had an immediate impact and many audiences saw it as a documentary account of the actual attack. Enright rewrote the text to create a full-length play that he called *Blackrock*, after the place where the action is set. It was first produced in Sydney in 1995 and has become a standard text for performance and study in schools.

The play focuses on the reasons why any group of boys would abuse any girl, and the consequences of that event on friends, family and the attackers themselves. In the following scene, Cherie is mourning the death of her friend when her mother, Glenys, and her aunt, Diane, enter. Diane is the mother of Jared, who was friendly with all three boys who committed the crime. The scene is a grim depiction of the anguish caused by the murder and also reveals that Diane has breast cancer.

Exercise: As you perform this scene, try to capture the reality of the characters and their relationships, and also the painful emotional context of the scene. Try to deliberately apply all of Stanislavski's techniques, as well as the skills you have acquired in both language and voice.

[Cemetery. Same evening. Cherie has the tape-deck. She plays the song, turns it off.]

Cherie They haven't even got your headstone up yet. We're putting the tree in, but. Tomorrow. None of the guys'd give anything, even the ones that wanted to. Afraid their mates would pay out on them. We got enough, but. Leanne's mum knows someone works in a nursery. It's going to be good. Right beside the netball courts. Your tree, forever and ever.

[She plays the song again.]

There you were, all over the news again last night. It's like they won't let you rest. They wouldn't name Scott and Davo, two minors, they said, just two minors, with blurry bits over their faces. They named you often enough, eh? Put your face, your name all over Australia. Now everyone's talking about what'll happen to them three. But whatever happens, they'll still be alive and you'll still be dead.

[Dianne appears, followed by Glenys.]

Glenys Do I have to chain you up like a dog? Grounded means grounded, Cherie. Get in the car.

Cherie You don't even care what's happened. You heard what those three did to her—

Glenys Stop going crook on me. It's not my fault!

Cherie Nothing's anybody's fault. She raped herself. She killed herself. That's what youse all think.

Diane I don't think that, love.

Glenys Tell you what I think …

Cherie I don't want to know.

Glenys You douse yourself in kero, then start playing with matches, you can't blame anyone else when you set yourself on fire.

Cherie Shut up!

[She tries to hit Glenys, who grabs her hand.]

Glenys Don't raise your hand to your own mother.

Cherie You're not my mother! Not if you say that about Tracy. And here, where she can hear you …

Glenys She can hear me? You think she can hear you?

[Cherie nods.]

Think she can talk to you?

DIANE Let it go, Glenys.

GLENYS I wish she could, Cherie. So she could tell you not to be the bloody idiot she was.

[Cherie dives at her. Diane restrains her.]

Cherie Take it back!

Glenys It's true. I want you alive, not dead!

[Cherie breaks and runs away.]

Diane That was a bit rough.

Glenys Shut up.

Diane Well, it was.

Glenys You're not bringing up a girl. Jared can take care of himself. Cherie's got to learn the way the world works.

Diane No, Glen. She knows more than we do. She knows this isn't natural. When the old folks cark it at work, they're ready for it mostly. This kid wasn't, she hadn't hardly begun. If she really could talk, she'd be bloody angry!

Glenys What brought that on?

Diane I'm crook. And I'm scared. They're going to take this off.

[She touches her left breast.]

Glenys Oh, Jesus …

[She puts her arms around Diane.]

Diane I don't want to die.

Glenys You won't. You won't die. You'll bury the lot of us.

Diane One thing I was always sure of was my body. Brain's not too crash-hot. But this body …

Glenys When is it?

Diane Any day. I'm waiting for a bed. My bag's packed. They gave me a booklet, it says bring pyjamas or a front-opening nightdress …

Glenys You told Jared?

Diane Not yet.

Glenys And I'm the one that gets the mothercraft lecture.

Diane I've tried, things keep getting in the way. I don't want to fall apart in front of him. If I don't beat this …

Glenys You will. Let's get that one home.

Diane Say I don't. What'll happen to him?

Glenys You've done a good job so far. The boy's nearly there.

Diane Where?

Glenys Wherever it is they go.

[They've gone.]

Blackrock by Nick Enright, Currency Press, Sydney, 1996.

3.3 JERZY GROTOWSKI'S SYSTEM

Grotowski believed that acting was a voyage of discovery for the actor and the audience.

Grotowski refused to call the techniques he developed a 'method' for learning how to act. Instead he developed a series of different techniques which he combined with his own vision of what an actor should be.

Grotowski called his approach the 'via negativa' or 'the negative road'. This meant that actors should learn not to do things like act artificially and be inhibited on stage.

Unlike Stanislavski, who spent his entire life working in the theatre and became recognised worldwide, Jerzy Grotowski was a theatre director for only a comparatively short time. He directed in an obscure theatre in Opole, Poland, between 1959 and 1976, and was not involved in mainstream theatre after that time. He died in 1999.

Yet his impact on the development of new forms of theatre has been profound, both in his style of transformational theatre and in his incredibly intense system of acting. His work has become known worldwide through books by him and about him, and most of all through his influence on some of today's greatest theatre directors including Peter Brook and Trevor Nunn.

Central to Grotowski's system of training is the idea that acting is not just a job, but a way of life. First of all, he insisted that an actor must be prepared to sacrifice years of his life to receive a proper training. Grotowski suggested that actors should begin their training at specialist drama schools at an early age, certainly no older than fourteen. After finishing school, they should spend another four years as apprentice actors before being allowed to become full members of a theatre company.

Secondly, he made his actors at the Laboratory Theatre go through rigorous physical and vocal exercises every day of their working lives. Finally, he demanded that his actors be prepared to give themselves completely to their work without embarrassment or inhibitions. He asked them to work to eliminate selfishness, egotism, nervousness, vanity and anything else that might prevent the training they were receiving from working.

Jerzy Grotowski, 1966

Grotowski made these demands because he believed, like Stanislavski, that actors must become highly skilled and worthwhile human beings in order to become good actors. However, Grotowski took this idea to an extreme conclusion. He wanted his actors to become so skilled physically and vocally that they could construct a language of sounds and movements that would communicate as powerfully as a great poet does with words. Grotowski believed that when his actors achieved this level of skill, they would create a kind of inner harmony and peace of mind that would make them healthy in both mind and body.

In essence, Grotowski believed that the true nature of acting is a search for self-knowledge. His training was designed to give actors superb vocal and physical skills, and to teach them to break free of the limitations they placed on themselves through ignorance, lack of courage and self-deception. In other words, to fulfil their true potential as human beings.

3.4 GROTOWSKI'S TECHNIQUES

Obviously, there is no way that we work through Grotowski's complete system of training. However, we can learn and make valuable use of some of the most important techniques he developed. Grotowski's techniques can teach us all how to concentrate more effectively, how to use our voices and bodies more skilfully, and, most of all, how to develop greater self-awareness and sensitivity to other people.

EVOKING SILENCE

Grotowski stated that an actor must begin by doing nothing. He called this creative passivity. He believed that if a group of actors could remain completely still for several minutes in complete silence, with no outside noises or disturbances, then they would begin to experience an internal silence as well. By making this silence happen, by evoking it, they could learn to concentrate intensely.

As well as using silence to develop concentration, Grotowski also made his actors train and work in total silence except when sounds or speech were essential parts of the activity. He insisted on this, not only to increase the level of concentration, but also to discourage actors from showing off or trying to impress or distract each other.

As you learn to apply Grotowski's techniques, deliberately try to create a sense of silence both around you and inside you, and see how it increases your level of concentration.

While Grotowski was profoundly influenced by Stanislavski's system, he also drew on the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold, another Russian theatre director, who emphasised intense physical development as part of his actor training and performance work.

PHYSICAL TRAINING

This is the basis of Grotowski's system. His actors had to learn extraordinary physical skills, not the skills of gymnasts and athletes, but a technique of movement that allowed them to control every move they made, even the smallest, in every detail.

Grotowski claimed that it is our bodies that express everything about us and which react to the world around us. Everything we think and feel is expressed through our bodies, and everything we experience is felt through our bodies. As you can see, Grotowski was intensely aware of the importance of body language well before it became a popular subject with psychologists and behavioural scientists.

In some of the plays he directed, Grotowski made his actors turn their faces into twisted, frozen masks, simply by the use of their facial muscles. At other times, actors were required to contort their bodies into strange, non-human shapes or imitate the movements of different animals.

Being able to manipulate your body is an important part of Grotowskian actor training.

He was not concerned with the importance of physical training for these reasons alone. He wanted to give his actors the creative physical skills to fully express their imaginations and their personalities.

In his later work, Grotowski emphasised physical exercises that involved some kind of contact with a stimulus. He trained his actors in exercises that involved working in a certain kind of space or using a particular object and, most of all, exercises that demanded physical contact with other people. He insisted that his actors learn to respond physically to the world around them with logic and precision in a process of 'give and take'.

VOICE

Grotowski would ask his actors to make their voices come from the tops of their heads and to feel the place resonate with the sound. Try it, then try focusing your voice from other areas, such as the back of your neck or the centre of your chest. In each case, place your fingers on the area you are focusing your voice from, and see if you can feel it resonate.

Grotowski believed that actors must have vastly better developed vocal and respiratory systems than the average person. He taught his actors to use total respiration: breathing properly using the lungs, diaphragm, ribs and head in the correct order. When they breathed in and out, his actors had to imagine a column of air filling up their bodies from the bottom of their lungs, all the way up to the tops of their heads. Try doing this using the diaphragm breathing described on page 17.

As well as controlling their breathing, the actors also had to learn to focus their voices as though they were coming from different parts of their bodies. When they did this, they also had to project their voices, aiming them at different places in the room.

Grotowski also taught his actors to make their voices more flexible. They were encouraged to develop the full registers of their voices, from very high to very deep, using them to imitate the voices of little children, adults of both sexes and old people. They also had to improve their diction so they could speak with great clarity in a number of different ways including singing, chanting and reciting poetry.

Finally, the actors were required to learn to imitate all the sounds in the world around them, including the mechanical sounds of machines and motors, the cries and calls of birds and animals, and natural sounds such as thunder or dripping water.

Grotowski truly believed that the voice is the instrument we use to communicate with other people. The more effectively we use that instrument, the better we can communicate.

CONTACT

As his training program developed, Grotowski came to insist more and more on the importance of contact, particularly contact between human beings. He believed that real harmony in human relationships, on and off the stage, only developed when people really learned to look at each other and listen to each other. As an example he gave the simple, everyday occurrence of two people saying 'good morning' to each other. We do this every day as a matter of habit, never really observing the way we say it nor the way it is returned. Yet if we learned to really look at people and really listen to them, even when they say something as simple as that, our observations would tell us a great deal about the way they were thinking and feeling. We would then be able to respond naturally and instinctively to them, not just to what they were saying but to the way they were saying it.

What Grotowski was asking for was the development of a real awareness of others, a real sensitivity to them in everyday contact. Equally, he was asking his actors to be more aware of the impact they had on other people.

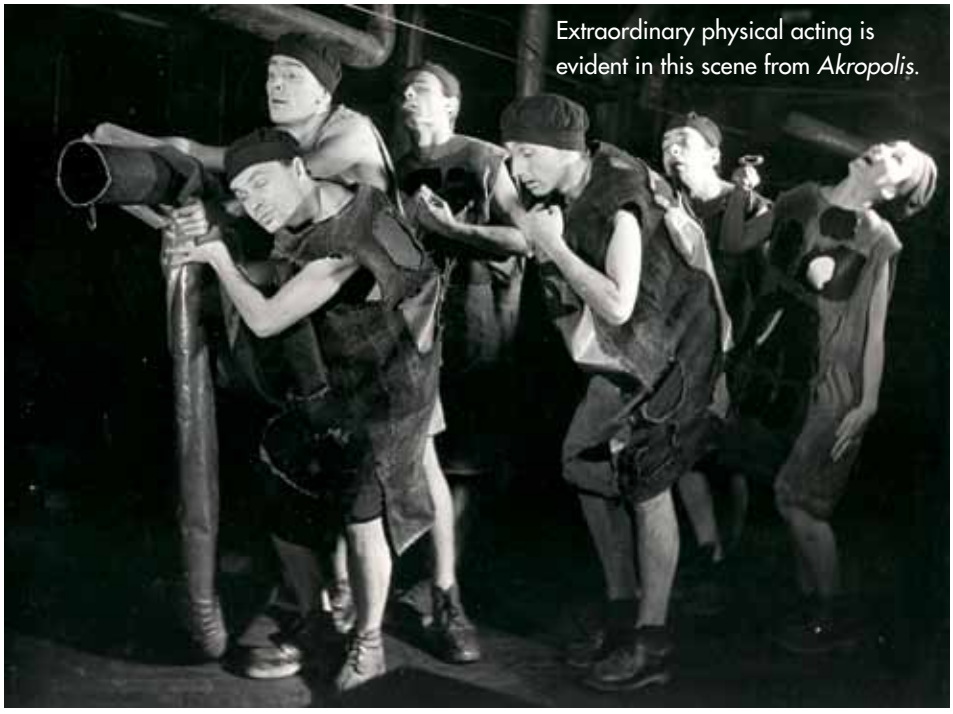
It is not easy but it is something we can all learn to do. In all our contacts with other people, we can concentrate on really looking and listening, on being completely aware of them, and then responding to what we are actually seeing and hearing.

TRANSFORMATION

In his 'poor theatre', Grotowski aimed always for the simplest possible use of staging, lighting, costumes and special effects. It was then up to his actors to use all their skills to transform empty spaces and simple objects into a range of imaginative worlds. A plain wooden floor became the ocean, while an old bathtub was first used as a bath then transformed into a church altar and finally into a marriage bed.

Simple items like a chair or a piece of cloth could be transformed a dozen times during the course of a play, representing real objects like an executioner's block, or being used as symbols, such as a piece of white cloth worn to represent purity and innocence.

To make this work, the actors were required to use their physical skills and their voices and, most of all, their powers of imagination, concentration and commitment. As an example, Grotowski pointed to the way the simple wooden cross of the crucifixion has become a symbol of enormous power and meaning because of the belief of the Christian faith.



Extraordinary physical acting is evident in this scene from *Akropolis*.

In the play *Akropolis*, the costumes for the prisoners in the concentration camp were simply old bags with holes torn in them. The insides of the bags were lined with red material which looked like torn flesh. These simple costumes created the illusion of a room filled with identical tortured bodies. They were realistic—concentration camp inmates did wear old remnants of clothing—but they also symbolised the suffering that occurred in the camps.

MEMORY

Like Stanislavski before him, Grotowski emphasised the use of emotion memory to recall an experience and recreate the feelings that went with that memory. But Grotowski went further and demanded total honesty and total commitment from his actors in their use of emotion memory. They had to be prepared to make use of all their memories of past experiences, no matter how private or painful.

This was vital to Grotowski's system for two reasons. First of all, when his actors were performing in a play, they were directed to make full use of their emotional memories to create genuine feelings for the characters they were portraying. When they did this, Grotowski believed that the audiences watching would experience those feelings for themselves and therefore come to understand a great deal more about the characters on stage, and about the human race as a whole. In other words, Grotowski asked his actors to use emotion memory to create genuine empathy between themselves and the audience.

More importantly, Grotowski believed that when people were trained to remember and re-experience past emotions, without avoiding or suppressing any of their memories, they would come closer to knowing the truth about themselves. For Grotowski, use of emotion memory was an important path to self-knowledge.

Was he right? Try it and see. Remember an experience you had which involved a strong emotion. Can you recapture that emotion? Why did you feel like that? Do you still feel the same way? What is your attitude now to the way you felt then?

TRUTH

Grotowski warned his actors to avoid what he called 'the beautiful lie', both on stage and in their everyday lives. By this he meant doing something just because it looked good or because it was what people expected them to do.

As an example, Grotowski described what happened when some actors were asked to sit down and pretend to write something. Many did it artificially, in a way that looked graceful or eye-catching. Others did it because they were told to, without any conviction at all, so that it was impossible to tell what they were meant to be writing or why.

The actors Grotowski trained were encouraged to look for the real truth in any situation or human relationship, and to behave in response to that truth. When they were asked to perform the act of writing, they first had to decide what they were writing, how they felt about it, and whether the writing would be easy for them or difficult. Only when they were sure of the truth of their feelings and actions would they do the exercise.

In other words, Grotowski demanded total commitment and belief in every activity, even the simplest exercise. When his actors had learned this, he expected them to carry that kind of belief and commitment with them at all times. They were expected to look for the real truth in their daily lives and relationships, and act completely honestly according to that truth.

Grotowski argued that actors needed to be both disciplined and spontaneous at the same time. This meant that actors should train their bodies, their minds and their emotions. Rehearsal should take place with real commitment and yet be open to the imagination and creativity at all times.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Let us finish where we began. Grotowski's system is a way of life, not just a training program. A number of observers watched Grotowski at work in the 1960s and 1970s, most notably the famous English theatre director Peter Brook. Those who described what they saw, including Brook, believed that Grotowski's system did produce people of extraordinary physical and vocal skill, totally dedicated to their art, and outstanding in their emotional maturity.

If you can use just some of Grotowski's techniques to learn part of these skills, then they will be of enormous value to you, not just as a performer but as an individual human being.

WORKSHOP: EVOKING SILENCE

Exercise 1: Lie on the floor in a relaxed position. Breathe deeply and slowly, using your diaphragm. Now imagine you are lying in the sun on the beach, completely alone, in total peace and quiet. Concentrate on feeling the sun warming your body, your face and your arms.

WORKSHOP: PHYSICAL TRAINING

Exercise 1: The cat: Lie face down, arms and legs spread. Now draw your hands and arms in towards your body. Push with your hands against the floor, lifting your body slowly up, and bring your legs up underneath you. Curve your back up into the air and then stretch forward and back as a cat does.

The cat stretch

Exercise 2: Opposing sides: Make one side of your body strong and graceful, with quick, flowing movements. Make the other side slow and clumsy. Do some simple movements like going for a walk or eating a meal, with one side of you moving smoothly and easily, and the other side stumbling and awkward.

Exercise 3: Practise making movements that begin inside your body. First, push something away, feeling the pushing movement begin inside your body, then your whole body moves, with your hands actually the last to move.

Exercise 4: Do the same sequence with taking something. The movement begins inside you, your body moves, and finally your hands reach out to take the object.

WORKSHOP: TRANSFORMATION

Exercise 1: Place an empty chair in front of you. Imagine there is someone who is important to you sitting in that chair. Use all your concentration and imagination to make the transformation happen. Now go over to the chair and behave as you would if the person were really there.

Exercise 2: Take a simple piece of cloth and use the power of your imagination to transform it into something else. Make it something that arouses strong feelings in you, such as a present from someone you love, or something that once belonged to a friend who has gone away or died. Focus all your concentration and feeling on the cloth, transforming it into the object you have imagined.

Exercise 3: Work with a group to create an improvisation that uses a few simple objects such as tables, chairs and pieces of clothing and transforms them into symbols of enormous significance. A plain table can become the coffin at a funeral, the altar in a church or an executioner's block. The possibilities are infinite, limited only by the imagination and powers of concentration of the group. The improvisation should revolve around the chosen objects.

Exercise 4: Repeat exercise 3, this time using only a piece of music as your stimulus.

WORKSHOP: TRUTH

Exercise 1: Imagine you have a friend who is living in another city. Sit down and write a letter to him or her. As you do this exercise, concentrate on making that friend real to you, so that the action of writing the letter becomes natural and true.

Exercise 2: Working with a partner, take it in turns to tell each other an important secret, one that is complete fiction. Although the secret is not true, try to make it become real as you tell it. Really communicate with your partner, bringing the secret to life by the power of your imagination and concentration. Make sure that you do not artificially act or perform in any way while you are realising your performance to make your story more believable.

The crucifixion scene from *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*

The Royal Hunt of the Sun

by Peter Shaffer

One of the most influential works of the 1960s, this epic play by English playwright Peter Shaffer tells the story of the conquest of Peru by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The play was performed throughout the world, and is notable for its powerful use of language and its imaginative staging.

The play begins with the narrator, Old Martin, talking to the audience in Brecht-like fashion about the action of the play and its message. However, this speech is more than a piece of Brechtian narration. It is also infused with references to love and worship, the two great emotions portrayed in the play, which balance the terrible greed and destruction shown in the action.

Exercise 1: When you perform this monologue you need to make Old Martin a real and credible character, and also to portray the feelings of worship and love that drove him. Begin your work on each text by warming up your voice and body and then using the technique of invoking silence to completely focus yourself on the performance.

The Royal Hunt of the Sun, Act 1, Scene 1

[A bare stage. On the back wall, which is of wood, hangs a huge metal medallion, quartered by four black crucifixes, sharpened to resemble swords.]

Scene one

[Darkness.]

[Old Martin, grizzled, in his middle fifties, appears. He wears the black costume of a Spanish hidalgo in the mid-sixteenth century.]

Old Martin **Save you all. My name is Martin. I'm a soldier of Spain and that's it. Most of my life I've spent fighting for land, treasure and the cross. I'm worth millions. Soon I'll be dead and they'll bury me out here in Peru, the land I helped ruin as a boy. This story is about ruin. Ruin and gold. More gold than any of you will ever see even if you work in a counting house. I'm going to tell you how one hundred and sixty-seven men conquered an empire of twenty-four million. And then things that no one has ever told: things to make you groan and cry out I'm lying. And perhaps I am. The air of Peru is cold and sour like in a vault, and wits turn easier here even than in Europe. But grant me this: I saw him closer than anyone, and had cause only to love him. He was my altar, my bright image of salvation. Francisco Pizarro! Time was when I'd have died for him, or for any worship.**

The Royal Hunt of the Sun by Peter Shaffer, Longman, London, 1966.

Other plays

Sisters by Stephen Sewell, Currency Press, Sydney, 1991.

Our Country's Good by Timberlake Wertenbaker, Methuen, London, 1991.

3.5 PUTTING IT TOGETHER

THE CHALLENGE

The techniques of Stanislavski and Grotowski are theatrical techniques designed to increase our self-knowledge and our understanding of other people.

Having studied them, can you use them? Let us find out by applying the techniques of Stanislavski and Grotowski in exactly the ways they did. To do this, take an outstanding, realistic play that deals in a profound way with the lives of complex human beings, and study it in detail. Your aim is to get to know the characters in the play as people, to understand who they are and why they behave in the ways they do.

Now comes the real challenge: to become a character from the play, thinking, acting and speaking as that person. However, you will act as that character not in the play itself, but in a situation that could have happened outside the play, before it began or after it was over. To do this well you will need all the skills you have learned: physical, vocal, mental and emotional.

There are a number of outstanding plays to choose from, but the one that has proved very successful for this challenge is Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, the greatest Australian play of all and one of the major plays of the twentieth century.

WORKSHOP: *SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEENTH DOLL*

Exercise: Your task is to create a complex, appropriate and skilled response to Ray Lawler's play.

Working in pairs or groups, generate and then realise a dramatic scene. It could be based on one of these situations:

- Roo and Barney meeting up in Brisbane before arriving for the seventeenth summer
- Emma and Olive immediately after the departure of Roo and Barney at the end of the seventeenth summer
- Bubba and Olive three years later—the twentieth summer
- Roo and Barney five years later—the twenty-second summer
- Nancy and Olive eight years later—the twenty-fifth summer.

This is merely a list of suggestions. You should develop any situation from the play that interests you.

Use your knowledge of the dialogue of Lawler's play and your insight into his realistic portrayal of the characters to develop your scene. You will need to take an imaginative approach, first improvising and then scripting your response. Either create a completely new scene or provide a sequel to Lawler's final scene.

In order to complete this task you will have to:

- work to create a sense of reality in your scene
- develop a short plot outline
- refer back to Lawler's plot in some way, either through incident or dialogue
- develop dialogue in keeping with the original play
- consider a suitable setting
- create a script for your performance
- make full and appropriate use of all the techniques you have learned in your study of the work of Stanislavski and Grotowski as you generate the scene.

The scene should be about eight minutes in length and no more than twelve minutes. This depends on the amount of development and the point at which you can effectively end the scene. Scripts are to be presented for consideration in assessing your work.

CHAPTER FOUR

REPRESENTING A CHARACTER

Although realism was the dominant style of theatre performance in the first half of the twentieth century, a number of other, non-realistic forms of performance emerged, including symbolic theatre, expressionism and surrealism. These new styles of theatre were concerned with showing on stage the thoughts, feelings and dreams of human beings rather than just their daily lives. New ways of acting emerged to perform plays written in these styles. The most important of these new performance styles were developed by writer–directors, including Meyerhold's' Biomechanics and Brecht's Epic Theatre.

These approaches to performance transformed twentieth century theatre. Although Meyerhold is less well-known today, his belief that movement was superior to speech and his use of Asian acting styles had a profound effect on characterisation. Brecht is still acknowledged as one of the major theatre innovators of all time, and the style of theatre and acting he pioneered is still extraordinarily influential today. In Section Four: World Theatre we will explore his plays in more detail.

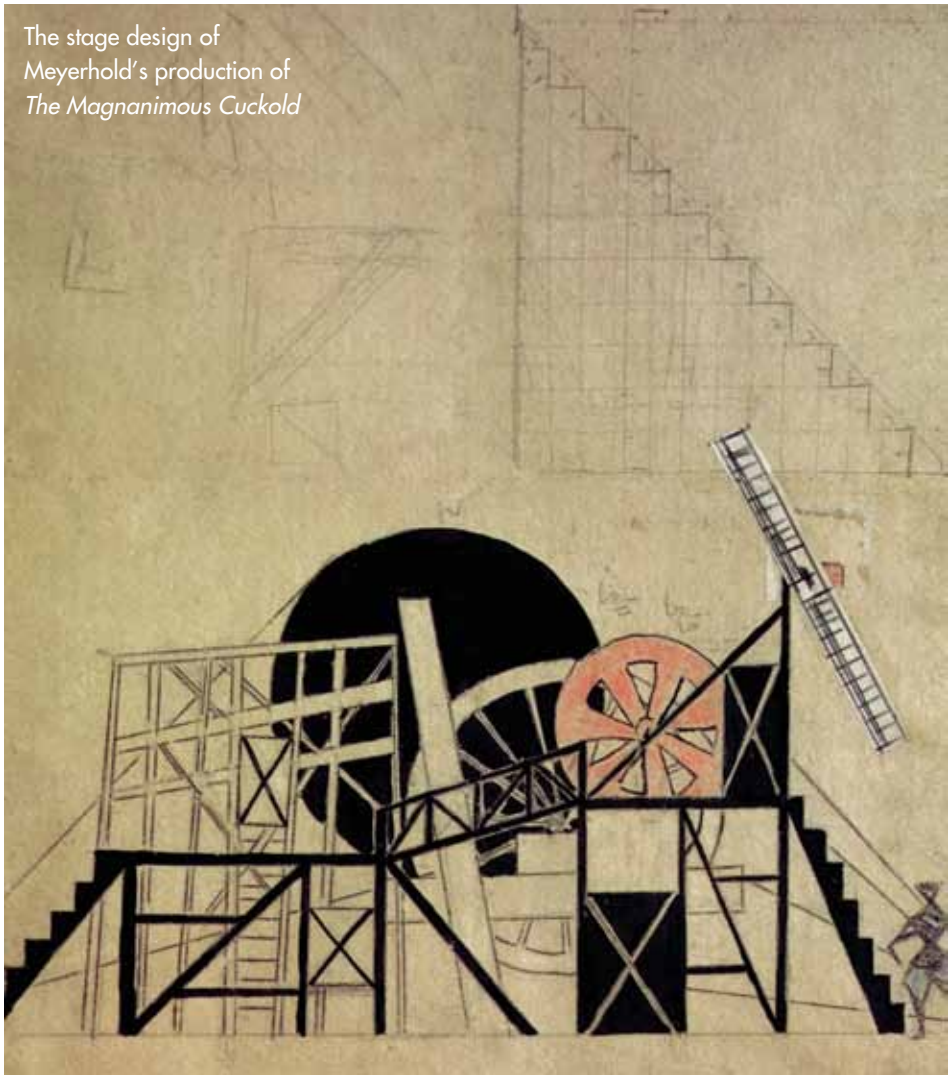
4.1 VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD

Vsevolod Meyerhold was born in 1874 in the Russian town of Penza and briefly studied law at Moscow University. While at university, Meyerhold became fascinated by theatre and was a founder member of Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre. His career as a stage director began in 1902 and lasted for 37 years. During this time he directed more than 290 productions.

When Meyerhold began directing, he was very interested in realism and was strongly influenced by Stanislavski. However, he quickly began to experiment with symbolic and surreal theatre. From 1910 onwards, at his studio in Saint Petersburg, he worked on the performance style of *commedia dell'arte* in great depth, exploring how the movement and gesture patterns used in *commedia* could help demonstrate characterisation. Meyerhold was fascinated by the use of *commedia* masks, and the way the masks created the characters. He also began to investigate the nature of Asian theatre and to include elements of Asian performance styles in his teaching, directing and staging.

In 1921, Meyerhold founded his own free workshop and school and then the experimental theatre company called the Vsevolod Meyerhold Theatre. An important part of his development of 'biomechanics' was based on new developments in the world of the twentieth century, especially in industry, and the sets of the plays he directed became increasingly mechanical and non-realistic. On stage, his actors were directed to use machine-like and robotic movements and to create surreal frozen

Commedia dell'arte (comedy of professional players) began in Italy during the sixteenth century. This form of performance had no scripts or theatres, and was completely improvised and extremely physical in nature.



The stage design of Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*

Vsevolod Meyerhold, 1906

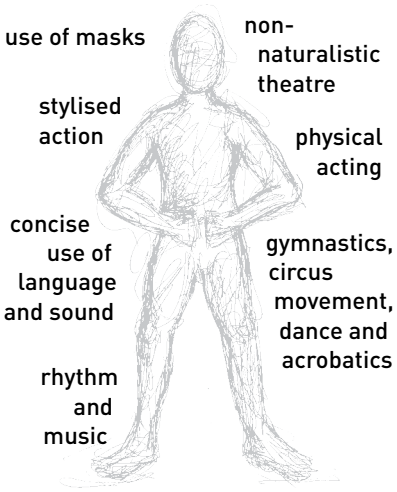
images. Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* used a set that had a moving structure with platforms and wheels. The actors were directed to move in unison in time to the movements of the mechanical set.

Meyerhold continued to work with his company for 16 years and trained most of the actors who performed with his theatre. Meyerhold was an opponent of the government of Russia (then the Soviet Union) and a number of his productions were critical of the dictatorship of Stalin, its leader. In 1938 his theatre was closed down and in 1939 he was arrested and accused of anti-government political activities. He was executed in Moscow on 2 February 1940.

BIOMECHANICS

Biomechanics was developed over the lifetime of Meyerhold's theatre experiments. It was designed as a training tool to help actors create their roles in rehearsal and then to transfer this to their performances on stage. Meyerhold believed that the performance style of realism reduced the ability of actors to fully express themselves. This is because it was based on spoken words, small actions and insignificant behaviour. As a result, he felt realistic acting denied the audience the right to use their imaginations fully. Meyerhold focused on stylised action and on the physical expressiveness of the actor's movements, and he often experimented with frozen images and dramatic tableaux.

Stanislavski invited Meyerhold to his studio workshop in 1905 to help him experiment with non-realistic approaches to theatre. Stanislavski knew that realism did not work for every play, especially the new plays that were emerging at the time.



The key principles of Meyerhold's approaches to theatre and acting

To create his acting techniques, Meyerhold concentrated on training in movement rather than speech, and developed ways for his actors to present their characters to the audience physically rather than focusing on creating a realistic character. He attempted to design a whole new way of staging theatre in which his actors were constantly aware of their movements on the stage. This required actors to train their bodies to be able to perform any action in a natural and expressive state.

Actors would work through the following sequence of physical exercises in developing a character:

- make the correct economical gesture or pose for a character
- turn it into the largest and most exaggerated form of that gesture or pose
- scale it down again
- work to develop the rhythm of the character's physical movement.

Meyerhold valued the imagination as an innate ability in actors, but he believed it needed to be released through physical acting approaches. He also trained his actors to be disciplined, to express their emotions physically and consciously and to use their creative imaginations. All performers were part of an ensemble, as Meyerhold stressed that an actor depended on the other actors as they trained, explored and performed in his theatre.

A scene from Meyerhold's production of *The Forest*, 1924

In his early work, Meyerhold used mime improvisations to help his actors develop their skills, and these were often expanded into mime performances for the public. One example involved the actors working on a fully-lit stage but acting as though they are completely in the dark—say in a haunted house or lost in the countryside at night.

Mechanical and robot-like movement was an important part of Meyerhold's biomechanics. In a number of non-realistic plays that he directed, characters lost their identity and became machine-like. Meyerhold directed the actors in these plays to act and speak like robots and sometimes to wear masks in the scenes where this happened. When the characters recovered their identity or their freedom, the roles were performed much more realistically.

The use of masks was essential to Meyerhold's approaches to acting. Meyerhold believed that the creativity of actors is shown in their movements, which are enhanced and extended by the use of masks. Meyerhold's mask training was explored through make-up, hair, hats, scarves and eye glasses as well as *commedia dell'arte* masks. Masks made it possible to explore the physical appearance and nature of a role in rehearsals and then to develop the whole character for performance. Actors were also asked to use their faces to make mask-like expressions, and these expressions changed with the different scenes in a play and changes in the character's behaviour.

WORKSHOP: BIOMECHANICS—PHYSICAL EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Mime the action of firing an arrow from a bow. Separate each action so that there are at least 15 separate actions, and pause between each step in the sequence.

Exercise 2: Working with a partner, create a number of different freeze frames of extreme action like the stab with the knife. Stylise the freezes and exaggerate them as much as possible.

Exercise 3: Imagine you are someone who is involved in an accident. Work through the sequence of events, beginning with a freeze showing the accident happening as realistically as possible. Now change to a very exaggerated freeze of the same movement, and then bring it back about half way. Start moving, showing the impact of the accident on you physically in mime.

WORKSHOP: BIOMECHANICS—MACHINE MOVEMENTS

Exercise 1: Devise a number of freeze frames of robots, exaggerating the physical shape of the robot. 'Switch on' and move and act as the robot, then freeze again in your starting position.

Exercise 2: Working in groups, create a number of different machines through movement and sound. You could do this exercise with one person entering the space at a time and adding to the machine, or in a more organic way.

WORKSHOP: BIOMECHANICS—WORKING WITH A MASK

Exercise 1: Put on the mask and inspect yourself completely from all angles. Try a number of gestures and movements suggested by the mask. Move around the space in the character suggested by the mask.

Exercise 2: Use the furniture and other objects in the room. Interact physically with other actors wearing masks.

WORKSHOP: BIOMECHANICS—IMPROVISATION

Exercise 1: Generate an improvisation of a group of people trapped in a deserted, dark house or lost in the countryside at night. Start with each character in an exaggerated frozen pose, and then create a highly stylised mime that includes the physical movements, accidents and collisions of the characters. Use freezes, slow motion and fast forward movement as well as other stylised action. Add language in the form of individual words, shouts and whispers, and also vocal sound effects.

Exercise 2: Generate the following brief improvisations using different forms of movement—as a robot, as an animal, in a nightmare:

- a meal in a restaurant
- at a nightclub
- on the beach.

Rehearse one of the improvisations and realise it as a brief performance to the class. As an audience, respond to the improvisations, deciding which ones most effectively use stylised movement to convey the meaning of the performance.

4.2 BERTOLT BRECHT

Bertolt Brecht was born in Germany in 1898. In 1917 he enrolled at Munich University as a medical student but he was conscripted into the army in 1918, right at the end of the First World War. During 1918, at the age of only twenty, he wrote his first play, *Baal*.

Brecht never completed his medical studies. From 1919 onwards he became increasingly involved in the theatre, as both a writer and a director. By 1924 he was already using some of the techniques that were later to became famous, such as actors wearing white face make-up and holding up big signs giving plot summaries before each scene in a play.

By 1927 Brecht was studying the writings of Karl Marx, and between 1927 and 1932 he became increasingly involved in political theatre in Germany. In 1933, Hitler came to power and anyone with communist sympathies was in danger. Brecht fled Germany with his family, living briefly in a number of different places before settling in Denmark. Between 1933 and 1941 he wrote some of his greatest plays, including *Life of Galileo* (1938), *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1938), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1941) and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941).

As the Second World War spread across Europe, Brecht was forced to flee once more. In 1941 he sailed with his family to America, settling in California. In 1943 he wrote one of his most famous plays, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Although the Second World War ended in 1945, Brecht went on living in America until 1947. In that year he was called before US Government's House Committee on Un-American Activities, which was investigating the spread of communism in America. Brecht and his wife left America and returned to Europe, living at first in Zurich.

In 1949 Brecht finally moved to communist East Berlin and formed the Berliner Ensemble, which became one of the world's great theatre companies. In 1956, while preparing for a visit to England with his theatre company, Brecht suffered a heart attack. He died on 14 August 1956.

Karl Marx was born in Germany in 1818. In 1847 he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx believed that since the world had become more industrialised due to the Industrial Revolution, workers were becoming more and more oppressed. He advocated that in order to have a fair and equitable society, all property and the factories, machines and tools used to produce wealth should be owned and controlled by the whole community.

EPIC THEATRE

Brecht called his plays 'epic theatre'—play that tell a story, usually historical, on a large scale, including a number of people in a series of events over a long period. Brecht used epic theatre as a way of presenting his political views. In the final analysis, his plays are propaganda, made interesting by Brecht's theatrical genius.

The Berliner Ensemble

Brecht compared his plays to scientific experiments. In them, types of human behaviour were studied to show why they happened and how that behaviour could be improved. The plays tell stories in a way designed to make the audience feel they are simply observers, watching the events happening on stage and making judgements about them. His plays move in a series of independent scenes, sometimes skipping years in time and moving from place to place. Each scene is there to make a particular point about human behaviour for the audience to consider.

In Brecht's epic theatre, the audience became like scientists, sitting back and observing events in a completely detached and logical way. All Brecht's theatrical techniques were designed to make sure this happened.

There have been claims over the past decade that Brecht's plays were written, at least in part, by the women in his life—his wife and the famous actresses who worked with him. The evidence is interesting but not conclusive, and the plays remain great pieces of theatre, regardless of their authorship.

BRECHT'S TECHNIQUES

At the heart of all Brecht's theatre is the idea of 'alienation' (a feeling of being separated from others). Brecht explained that he meant to take away from a character or an event the things that make them familiar and understandable. The aim was constantly to surprise and challenge the audience, while reminding them that the play they were watching was simply a story being told to make a profound political point.


Bertolt Brecht, 1954

Staging

Brecht used fragments of scenery and single pieces of furniture to suggest whole locations. A single cut-out of a tree would be used to represent a forest. A plain chair and a bench for the judge represented an entire courtroom. The scenery was often changed in front of the audience, sometimes by the actors themselves, and there was no front curtain in Brecht's theatre.

Costumes were sometimes complete, but often a single item of clothing or a simple prop was all the costume required. For example, an actor portraying a peasant would appear wearing a sheepskin jacket over a plain dark outfit. At the end of the scene he would remove the jacket, put on a helmet and pick up a spear in order to appear as a soldier in the next scene. Frequently, these changes of costume and character were done on stage in front of the audience, reinforcing the idea of alienation.

Lighting

In many of Brecht's plays, the stage was flooded with bright, white light for the entire time, regardless of whether the scene was a summer day or a winter evening.

Narration

Most of Brecht's plays made use of a screen, or large notices, somewhere on or above the stage. The screen or notices gave the audience information about the play, introduced the scenes and often made comments about the action happening on stage. Sometimes Brecht also used a narrator: an actor who talked directly to the audience, giving them information and hammering home the message of the play.

Songs

The use of songs was another alienation effect. By breaking the mood or action of a scene and bursting into song, the actors were reminding the audience that they were watching a play and that the play had a message. The songs were used to comment on the action, to make a particular point about one of the characters or even to briefly summarise the message of the play. Sometimes the actors actually stepped out of character and sang the songs directly to the audience.

Brecht's most famous song, written with Kurt Weill for their musical *The Threepenny Opera*, is 'Mack the Knife'. A version by American singer Bobby Darin hit number one on the charts in 1959. Jazz great Louis Armstrong also recorded a version.

INTERCULTURAL

In traditional Chinese theatre, the gesture to show that a character is crying is moving the finger up and down in front of the eyes. Brecht encouraged his actors to use this gesture instead of actually weeping tears.

Brecht believed in the idea of the intelligent actor. He wanted his actors to be interested in the world beyond the stage, to know about politics and social change, and to bring this intelligent understanding to the performance of a role.

A word of warning: the famous German actress Lotte Lenya told the story of how she asked Brecht for advice about acting in one of his plays. Instead of giving her a list of rules, Brecht simply told her to follow her instincts and go about the business of acting. It seems Brecht himself was aware that his famous theories could only be taken so far.

Movement

Brecht was interested in Asian theatre, particularly Japanese and Chinese theatre. He admired it for the skilled use of techniques, particularly physical movement, and the way this movement was used to tell a story in a stylised, unemotional way. Brecht encouraged his actors to learn the formal gestures of Chinese theatre and use them in a completely detached way, as though they were doing exercises or watching themselves in a mirror.

Voice

Brecht made enormous vocal demands on his actors. They were required to sing, chant, use mechanical and strange-sounding voices, produce disconnected and non-human sounds, and speak in a range of dialects and class accents.

Often Brecht's dialogue is powerful, simple, poetic and full of emotion, then suddenly it will be broken by strange or dissonant speech or sounds designed to produce alienation. Class distinctions and regional accents are carefully written into the language of the plays and are extensively used as part of the political and social messages of the plays.

Acting

Brecht described the actor's role as being like an eyewitness at an accident. The actor's job was to demonstrate what happened. Actors must not get carried away with their roles in a play and deceive the audience into believing they are watching a real event. Nor must actors try to become any of the characters they are portraying. The actor's job is to demonstrate the words and actions of the character. At no time should the actor or the audience identify with the character.

Brecht actually listed a series of rules his actors should follow:

- Perform with the awareness of being watched.
- Look at the floor and openly calculate their movements on stage.
- Separate voice from movement so that words and gestures are not coordinated.
- Remain uninvolved with the other actors, physically and emotionally.
- Make their own movements on stage when it suits them.
- Focus their performance, deliberately acting at specific groups in the audience.
- Speak their lines as if they were a quotation or a speech.
- Speak directly to the audience from centre stage.
- Occasionally speak stage directions aloud.
- Be critical of their characters, as though all the actions had happened in the past and they were now judging them.
- Change roles with other actors, both in rehearsal and in performance.
- Stand in front of a mirror and study their gestures.
- Use robotic, mechanical, dreamlike and other non-realistic movements and voice.
- Use opposite styles of acting, such as acting a serious death scene in an outrageous comedy style.

The truth is that Brecht's plays are a rich and complex mixture of the real and the unreal, of politics and theatre, and must be treated as such. In the same way, his techniques for communicating ideas and concerns can be extremely powerful, especially when used carefully and in combination with other techniques that balance and enhance those of Brecht.

Mother Courage and Her Children

by Bertolt Brecht

Brecht has given us the techniques, and the plays, for expressing a whole range of social and political concerns. However, they only work effectively if we can contribute something of our own. We must apply to Brecht's techniques everything we have learnt about human interaction and communication, and about drama as performance. Most of all, we must use our skills to create real, complex characters in worthwhile human situations. When we do this, we will fully realise the value of Brecht's work.

Brecht (second from left) rehearses *Mother Courage* with three of his major artistic collaborators: Erich Engel (left), Paul Dessau (the composer) and Helene Weigel, Berlin, 1948

Let us now look at one of Brecht's most famous plays, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, applying all his techniques in an effort to communicate his concerns to an audience. As you work on *Mother Courage*, you should also make full use of all the skills and techniques you have learned in earlier chapters. *Mother Courage* follows the character of Mother Courage through twelve years, across the face of Europe and back again, during the Thirty Years War of 1618–48. Mother Courage owns a wagon that she uses as a mobile canteen, supplying the armies fighting the war. She is like a vulture, living off the war, but unwilling to make any sacrifices herself.

Different scenes skip from year to year and country to country, each one showing Mother Courage trying to make a living, and losing her three children in the process. At the end of the play, her last surviving child, her daughter Kattrin, is shot. Leaving other people to bury her daughter, Mother Courage harnesses herself to the wagon saying she has to get back into business again.

Brecht's intention was clear. He wanted to show the link between war and making money. He described war as a continuation of business by other means. Most of all, on the brink of the Second World War, Brecht wanted to warn ordinary people and small countries that they would suffer terribly if another war broke out. *Mother Courage and Her Children* is Brecht's plea to the world to prevent all wars as 'no sacrifice is too great for the struggle against war'.

In the following extract, the year is 1632. Mother Courage has sent her daughter Kattrin into town to collect some goods. Kattrin cannot speak. Mother Courage mentions in this scene that a soldier injured her when she was little, and she has been dumb ever since. Her older son, Eilif, is off fighting the war, but her younger son, Swiss Cheese, is already dead, executed by a firing squad. Mother Courage is talking to the chaplain, a shifty insubstantial character who has been living off her, when Kattrin enters. Kattrin is carrying the parcel of goods she was sent to collect, but she is bleeding from a wound over her eye. Notice how Mother Courage speaks with a working-class dialect, leaving out some words and misusing others.

Exercise: Work on these scenes from the play to realise a performance that uses both Meyerhold's and Brecht's techniques. For example, at the start of the scene, when Mother Courage is worrying about Kattrin, actors might perform a highly stylised mime showing what happened to her, with the soldiers moving like robots. For some of the speeches and songs, actors could speak directly to the audience and even step out of character to do this.

Mother Courage What happened, someone assault you? On way back? She was assaulted on her way back. Bet it was that trooper was getting drunk here. I shouldn't have let you go, love. Drop that stuff. Not too bad, just a flesh wound you got. I'll bandage it and in a week it'll be all right. Worse than wild beasts, they are. *[She ties up the wound.]*

The Chaplain It's not them I blame. They never went raping back home. The fault lies with those that start wars, it brings humanity's lowest instincts to the surface.

Mother Courage Calm down. Didn't clerk come back with you? That's because you're respectable, they don't bother. Wound ain't a deep one, won't leave no mark. There you are, all bandaged up. You'll get something, love, keep calm. Something I put aside for you, wait till you see. *[She delves into a sack and brings out Yvette's red high-heeled boots.]* Made you open your eyes, eh? Something you always wanted. They're yours. Put 'em on quick, before I change me mind. Won't leave no mark, and what if it does? Ones I'm really sorry for's the ones they fancy. Drag them around till they're worn out, they do. Those they don't care for they leaves alive. I seen girls before now had pretty faces, then in no time looking fit to frighten a hyaena. Can't even go behind a bush without risking trouble, horrible life they lead. Same like with trees, straight well-shaped ones get chopped down to make beams for houses and crooked ones live happily ever after. So it's a stroke of luck for you really. Them boots'll be all right, I greased them before putting them away.

[Kattrin leaves the boots where they are and crawls into the cart.]

The Chaplain Let's hope she's not disfigured.

Mother Courage She'll have a scar. No use her waiting for peacetime now.

The Chaplain She didn't let them steal the things.

Mother Courage Maybe I shouldn't have dinned that into her so. Wish I knew what went on in that head of hers. Just once she stayed out all night, once in all those years. Afterwards she went around like before, except she worked harder. Couldn't get her to tell what had happened. Worried me quite a while, that did. *[She collects the articles brought by Kattrin, and sorts them angrily.]* That's war for you. Nice way to get a living!

[Sound of cannon fire.]

The Chaplain Now they'll be burying the commander in chief. This is a historic moment.

Mother Courage **What I call a historic moment is them bashing my daughter over the eye. She's half wrecked already, won't get no husband now, and her so crazy about kids; any road she's only dumb from war, soldier stuffed something in her mouth when she was little. As for Swiss Cheese I'll never see him again, and where Eilif is God alone knows. War be damned.**

So scene six ends with Mother Courage condemning war for the way it has destroyed her family. This scene is used by Brecht to show how women suffer in wartime.

Now look at scene seven, which follows. Some time has passed and Mother Courage has been making money. In this brief scene she is full of praise for the war. Brecht shows that Mother Courage is a hypocrite who changes her song when things go well. The words of the song also show how no one can escape the war.

Mother Courage and Her Children, Scene 7

[High road.]

[The Chaplain, Mother Courage and Kattrin are pulling the cart, which is hung with new wares. Mother Courage is wearing a necklace of silver coins.]

Mother Courage **I won't have you folk spoiling my war for me. I'm told it kills off the weak, but they're write-off in peacetime too. And war gives its people a better deal.** *[She sings:]*

'And if you feel your forces fading.
You won't be there to share the fruits.
But what is war but private trading
That deals in blood instead of boots?'

And what's the use of settling down? Them as does are first to go. *[Sings:]*

'Some people think to live by looting
The goods some others haven't got.
You think it's just a line they're shooting.
Until you hear they have been shot.

And some I saw dig six feet under
In haste to lie down and pass out.
Now they're at rest perhaps they wonder
Just what was all their haste about.'

[They pull it further.]

Mother Courage and Her Children by Bertolt Brecht, translated by John Willett, Methuen Drama, A & C Black, London, 2006.

CHAPTER 5

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CHARACTERISATION

The systems devised by Stanislavski, Grotowski, Meyerhold and Brecht in the earlier part of the twentieth century still profoundly influence the training and the work of actors throughout the world today. However, there have also been many significant developments in the theatre in the past fifty years, and an important part of these changes has been the emergence of different forms of performance that have led to new ways of acting. Some of these contemporary performance styles are completely new, while others are adaptations of existing forms of performance, including circus and dance as well as new Asian theatre styles such as Butoh and Suzuki.

In this chapter we will explore a number of these contemporary forms of characterisation through the work of some major theatre innovators: Anne Bogart, Eugenio Barba, Jacques Lecoq, Tadashi Suzuki, and the creators of method acting—Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner and Stella Adler. These directors and teachers either developed new performance styles themselves, or popularised new forms of theatre in their work that have become major acting styles in the twenty-first century. All of them were strongly influenced by the work of the great theatre directors explored in chapters 3 and 4. A number of them continue to make a major contribution to the theatre today.


Anne Bogart

5.1 ANNE BOGART

Anne Bogart is an American theatre director who developed and adapted her own form of directing performance focused on the connection between the actor's mind and body. She then combined her approach with work of the Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, who has created a form of physical performance based on traditional Japanese forms but translated into a very modern style.

Bogart was originally influenced by Grotowski's work. After she finished her studies in theatre at New York University she began teaching there, developing experimental performance work with her students. She later went to Europe to work in innovative new theatre before returning to New York in the 1980s, where she established a reputation as an extraordinary director. At this time she was strongly influenced by Viewpoints, a new system of modern dance practice and training. Bogart expanded Viewpoints into nine qualities of stage presence that formed the basis of creating and acting in new theatre work.

Bogart went to Japan in 1990 to work with Tadashi Suzuki, who had established an international reputation by creating a radical new form of Japanese theatre. Together they set up a company of actors that was dedicated to combining their two

approaches to performance and acting. This company, founded in 1992 and based in Saratoga Springs, New York, is named SITI—the Saratoga International Theatre Institute. It is an ensemble-based theatre company.

International exchanges and collaborations are at the core of SITI's practice, ensuring that performers benefit from cross-cultural influences in dance, music, art and other performance styles. The actor training that SITI offers is one of the most important parts of the company's activities, and actors from around the world, including Australia, have studied with Bogart and Suzuki. The company offers courses for actors in a combination of Viewpoints and Suzuki training, and in composition, and also develops and performs new works.

SITI Company's *Radio Macbeth*, directed by Anne Bogart and Darron L. West

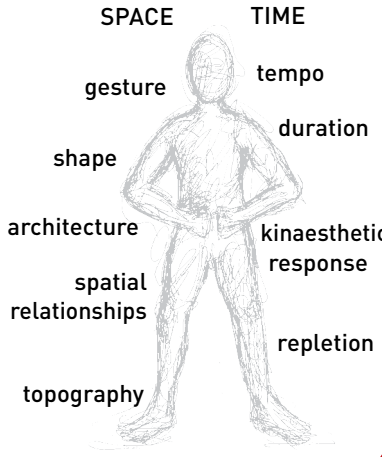
THE VIEWPOINTS TECHNIQUE

Viewpoints is a technique developed by choreographer Mary Overlie in the 1970s for examining and describing dance performance in terms of six key elements: space, story, time, emotion, movement and shape.

Overlie's Viewpoints were later refined and adapted for theatrical performance by Anne Bogart and another well-known US director, Tina Landau. In their system there are nine qualities of stage presence divided into categories, as shown opposite. Sometimes a further three vocal qualities are added: pitch, dynamic and timbre.

The purpose of Bogart's Viewpoints is to help actors to work quickly and adventurously, responding spontaneously to ideas and challenges, and using intuition rather than extensive planning to create performance work that is exciting and flexile, and focuses on strong voice and movement.

Although these qualities are taught in other practices, Bogart's also insists on actors being spontaneous and responding in movement the way they feel is right, not simply repeating a learnt pattern or movement. For example, you might begin by walking beside someone, and then suddenly, without thinking about it, turn away and stoop with your back to them. As a new impulse occurs to you, you might turn again and follow the other person. This intense awareness and response to other performers Bogart describes as 'listening with your whole body'.



The Viewpoints qualities of stage presence

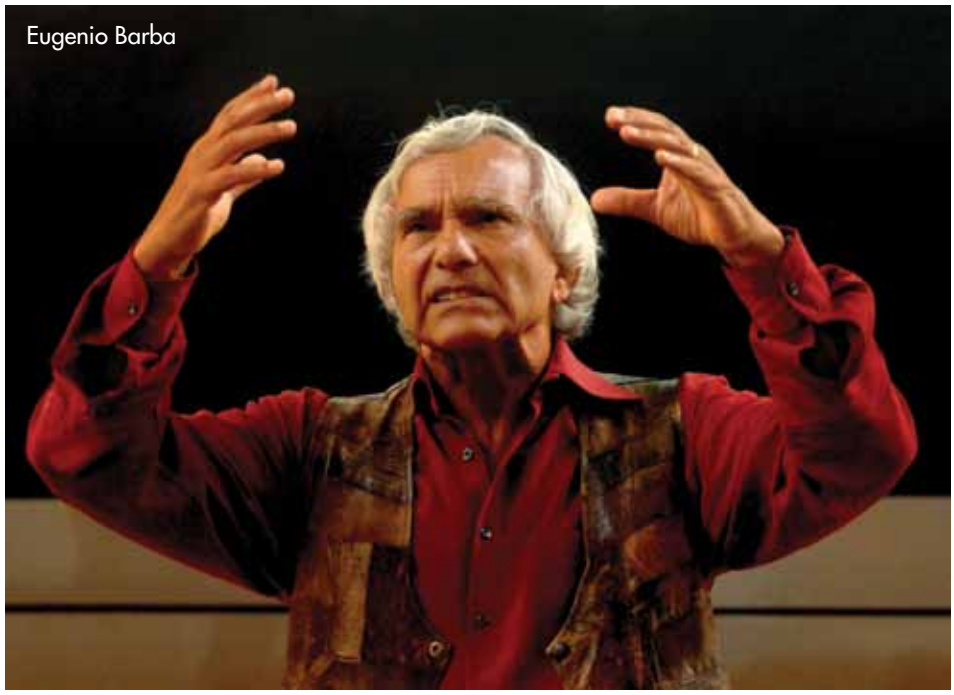
WORKSHOP: BOGART'S METHOD

Exercise 1: Working in a group, line up with a half metre space between you. Move forward in a straight line as though you are moving down a lane, and complete a number of simple actions as you move—jumping, squatting, striding, stopping and crouching. As you perform each action, be aware of the people moving around you and respond instinctively to their movements, timing or changing your actions in harmony with theirs.

Exercise 2: Working with a partner, choose a few lines of dialogue from a play and start to perform. You can speak all the lines or just part of them, repeat them or remain silent. Let the speaking of the lines decide your movement, but do not plan in advance or try to think ahead. Instead, respond to your own impulse to speak and move, and to the actions and speech of your partner.

Exercise 3: In a group, generate an improvisation about a dream, but with the following conditions: there must be 10 seconds of stillness, 5 seconds of group speaking and 20 seconds of fast, whole-group movement.

5.2 EUGENIO BARBA



Eugenio Barba

Eugenio Barba is the director of the Odin Teatret in Denmark, and he creates and directs new works as well as researching, teaching and writing about theatre as a scholar.

Barba was born in 1936 in Italy but moved to Norway in 1954 to work and study at Oslo University. He later spent three years with Jerzy Grotowski's theatre in Poland and also travelled to India where he studied traditional forms of theatre. Barba later included the techniques he learned from Grotowski and Kathakali in the actor training he developed.

In 1964 Barba formed his own theatre company, Odin Teatret (Odin Theatre), in Norway and developed his methods of actor training. Their first production, *Ornitofilene*, was performed throughout Scandinavia. In 1966 Barba moved the company to Denmark and renamed it the Nordic Theatre Laboratory/Odin Teatret. Company members come from a dozen different countries and the company has so far created eighty-one performances and performed in sixty-three countries. Barba is regarded as one of the most important theatre directors and scholars in the world.

BARBA'S APPROACH: SELF-DEFINITION

Odin Teatret in a performance of *Ode to Progress,* 1997

Like many other major theatre directors and teachers, Barba believes that the core of acting lies in the use of the body and the ability to express a character through action and through sound. He was also influenced by traditional Asian forms of theatre. He uses improvisation extensively, both in training actors and in creating and staging performances.

The use of exercises to develop physical skills is important in the training Barba uses, but they are only part of the overall development of the individual actor. The exercises are designed to teach important principles about physical acting, such as the use of balance, finding the centre of gravity of the body, controlling opposing tensions and discovering movement patterns that are completely different from daily physical activities. Barba encourages his actors to experiment with their own actions and exercises rather than just doing the same as everyone else, because he wants them to find their own abilities, boundaries and rhythms—their unique qualities as performers.

In terms of voice, Barba's actors work on developing their individual voices, rather than just practising exercises. At different times in his work he has taught his actors to use Grotowski's resonator training, and for one play they practised a range of vocal exercises ranging from simple voice work to Chinese opera to chanting and speaking in a made-up language. However, the emphasis is on the actors constructing their own vocal training overall.

WORKSHOP: BARBA'S METHOD

Exercise 1: Isolation: Sit in a chair, arms folded and feet together. Now experiment with a number of movements—using arms, legs, back and head—doing each one separately. After each movement, return to your original position. Now imagine you are a kidnap victim and are strapped in the chair, but with your arms and legs free. Repeat the moves you made, but this time as the kidnapped person.

Exercise 2: Opposing body tensions: Stand with your knees bent, your legs wide apart and your arms stretched above your head. Make an S movement through your body, pushing your hips in one direction, your body in the other direction, and your arms back the other way.

Exercise 3: Improvisation: Working as a group, imagine you are all trapped in a net. Generate an improvisation in which you work together to break out of the net. Deliberately improvise so that your body movements are different from every other member of the group. Develop a series of individual words and sounds for your role that are also different from other group members.

Exercise 4: Realise the net improvisation as a performance, focusing on expressing your own individual body movement and sound as effectively as possible while working in harmony with the rest of the group.

Odin Teatret in a performance of *Judith*

5.3 JACQUES LECOQ

Jacques Lecoq was born in 1921 in Paris. At the age of 35 he founded L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, which went on to become the most famous mime school in the world.

Lecoq's early experience as a gymnast and physical education teacher gave him an understanding of movement in space. He also learnt about mime, masks and physical theatre while working with a number of *commedia dell'arte* companies in Italy. When he returned to France he opened his own theatre school in Paris and he went on to devote most of his working life to this school.

Lecoq was interested in giving a voice to ordinary people in a country that had suffered terribly during the Second World War. His emphasis was on using the actor's body rather than relying on dialogue to create meaning.

Lecoq's school is the world centre for mime training. A large number of international actors and directors who trained with Lecoq have gone on to become major theatre practitioners in their own right, including Monika Pagneux and Philippe Gaulier, as well as members of the Complicite company in the UK, one of the world's great physical theatre companies. Lecoq died in 1999.

LECOQ'S TECHNIQUES

Complicite's production of *The Winter's Tale*

Lecoq aimed to train his actors to investigate ways of performance that suited them best. His training nurtured the creativity of the performer, instead of giving them a set of skills. As students stayed with Lecoq's school longer, he accomplished this by never telling the students how to do what was right but encouraging them to keep trying new approaches to creative expression. The idea of playfulness was central to stimulating creativity, and Lecoq insisted that actors should take risks, play with ideas and be as inventive, generous and open as possible.

He encouraged actors to use what he called replay, in which everyday experiences and situations were explored spontaneously and silently, focusing on expressing the actions of characters as imaginatively and creatively as possible. He also encouraged the transformation of objects in a manner similar to Grotowski, in which a simple object such as a stick could be used to represent a whole range of different things—a gun, an umbrella, a motor bike etc.

Lecoq aimed to have his actors express emotion through the movement of their bodies. He made extensive use of masks, including the 'neutral mask', to isolate the body as the primary means of expressing emotion. Actors would begin with the neutral mask to emphasise their movements, then progressively move to small masks.

Lecoq did not set out to create a complete system of acting and he rejected the idea that his techniques were a 'method'. However, his life's work was focused on what his books called 'the moving body' and 'theatre of movement and gesture'.

WORKSHOP: LECOQ

Exercise 1: Work in pairs, using a long stick of cane as the focus of your movement. Each of you hold one end on the stick or cane, and pull and push it between you. As you move, be sure to keep the same distance from each other. As you develop the exercise, try to work further apart, still using the stick or cane, and freeze completely a number of times during the exercise. Take it in turns to give an instruction to your partner, using the stick to emphasis the word. You might say 'come' and pull on the stick, or 'kneel' and push down on the stick.

Exercise 2: Work in groups, with all of you wearing neutral masks. Imagine your bodies are huge, and begin to move around the space, making contact with other members of the group and interacting with them.

Exercise 3: Working in groups, use lengths of cloths and your bodies to create the shape and actions of a single living creature—real or fantasy.

Exercise 4: Working on your own, make a simple body mask out of cloths or other materials to create a living creature. The body mask can cover your whole body or just part of it. Develop the body shape and movement of the creature you have created with the body mask. Now work with a partner and improvise a scene showing the interactions between your creature and your partner's creation.

5.4 TADASHI SUZUKI


Tadashi Suzuki

More than any other Asian theatre practitioner, Tadashi Suzuki has influenced the development of theatre throughout the world over the past forty years. Suzuki founded the Waseda Little Theatre of Tokyo in 1965. He was the General Artistic Director of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Centre between 1995 and 2007 and organised Japan's first international theatre festival, the Toga Festival, from 1982 to 1999. Suzuki's book *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki* remains an influential work in theatre world-wide.

Suzuki's approach blends the forms and traditions of ancient Greek theatre with Japanese Kabuki and Noh performance styles. Noh is a traditional Japanese form of musical theatre that dates back to the fourteenth century. It is highly stylised and was traditionally performed for aristocratic audiences, with performers often wearing masks. Kabuki is a Japanese dance drama form that originated in the seventeenth century. Kabuki makes use of exaggerated and noisy performances and was more accessible to commoners.

The core of his work has been the development and teaching of his rigorous training system, the Suzuki Method, whose principles have also been highly influential in modern theatre. In his actor training, Suzuki demands intense levels of commitment and skill, particularly in physical control of the body.

Many of Suzuki's productions have been of classic European plays, including Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and his most famous production, Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, which toured the world.

SUZUKI ACTOR TRAINING

Kabuki and Noh have both had an influence on the work of Tadashi Suzuki. This is a scene from Suzuki's production of *Waiting for Orestes: Electra,* 2009

Although Suzuki's approach to training and performance are influenced by Asian philosophy and Japanese forms of theatre, his collaboration with Anne Bogart in the USA has also informed his practice. Suzuki's training is focused on the actor's awareness and the positioning of the body as well as highly stylised movement. The training is intensely physical and includes elements of traditional Japanese and Greek theatre, ballet and martial arts. The training aims to increase the actor's emotional and physical power and commitment to each moment on the stage. The exercises concentrate on the lower body and the actor's footwork, sharpening breath control and concentration. Suzuki's training focuses on the actor's connection to the earth, and to the centre of the body. In particular, Suzuki has developed distinct ways of moving that include stomping, sliding and shuffling. These movements are used as exercises and as ways of moving on stage in performance.

Perhaps the most striking style of movement Suzuki introduced into theatre performance is rhythmic stomping. As a part of traditional Japanese religious ritual, stomping was meant to link the worshipper with the earth. Suzuki encourages this idea of the actor linking with the earth, but also uses stomping to increase the ability of actors to control their breathing and develop their body strength.

Sliding their feet is another technique to help performers make contact with the ground, and it is used extensively in training his actors and in performance. The sliding movement increases the flexibility and strength of actors' muscles, and because it demands serious concentration to perform effectively, sliding also builds focus. The stylised sliding movements developed by Suzuki are used to create intricate patterns of action, and this also helps actors to work together as an ensemble.

WORKSHOP: SUZUKI

Exercise 1: Stand in a neutral position, legs comfortably apart and hands by your sides. With your back straight, slowly bend your knees, lifting your arms with hands pointing down. Be aware of the downward pressure of your body towards the earth. Freeze as a statue and hold the position.

Exercise 2: Begin to move, sliding your feet across the floor as smoothly and evenly as possible. Be aware of your contact with the ground. Come to a stop and again become a statue.

Exercise 3: Begin to stomp your feet in a steady rhythm. Make the stomp strong but controlled. Move forward, steadily increasing the tempo and power of the stomping. Freeze again in mid-stomp to create an action statue.

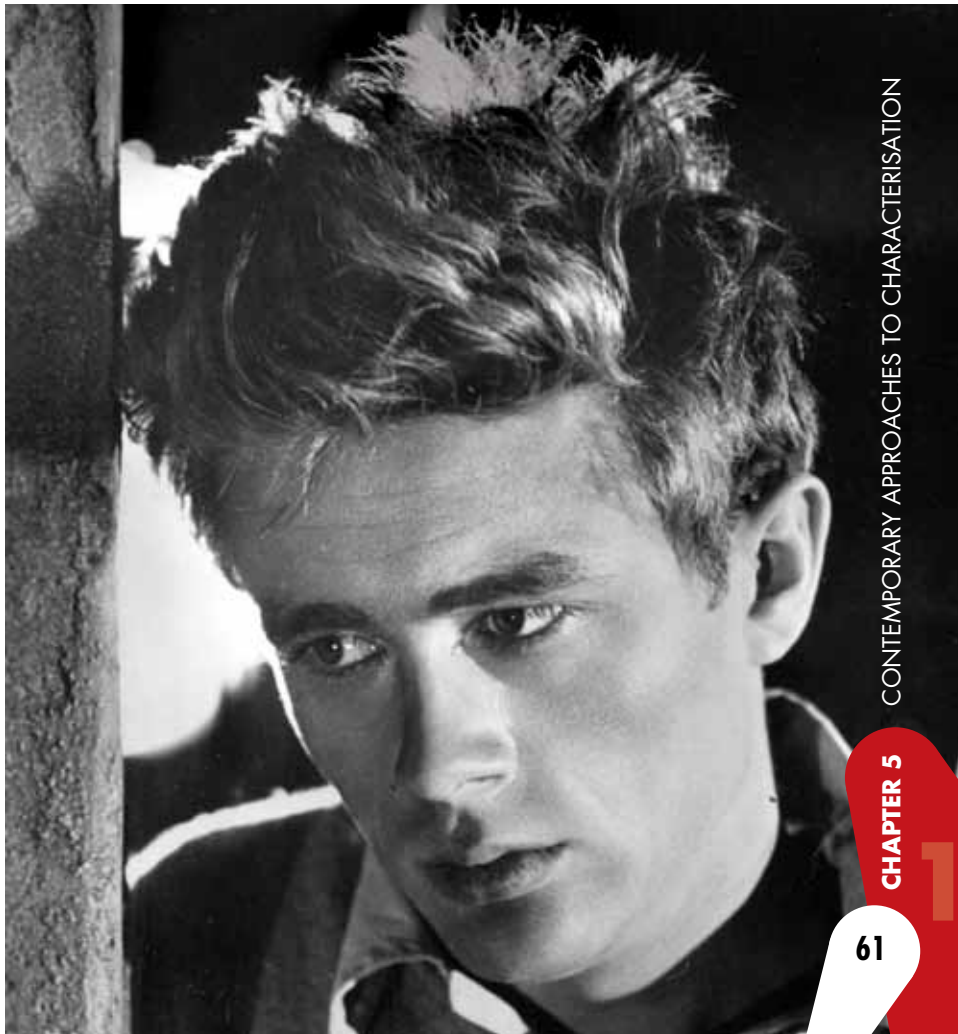
Exercise 4: Form two groups facing each other on opposite sides of the room. Play some slow, rhythmic music and begin to move slowly across the room, using the sliding technique. Try to pass smoothly between the people in the other group coming towards you. When each group reaches the other side of the room, turn and repeat the exercise.

5.5 THE METHOD

Method acting is one of the most influential—and controversial—systems of acting. The most important actors, directors and teachers who developed the Method were Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, and the influence of their work has lived on after their deaths. Despite the fact that Adler and Sanford split from Strasberg and emphasised different aspects of Method acting, the core of all their teaching focused on the emotional and psychological dimensions of acting. In this regard the Method is very different from the other contemporary acting techniques.

The Method was originally based on Stanislavski's system of actor training and adopted many of his principles, including the use of genuine emotion to portray truthful roles and situations. Method actors are also taught to decide on the 'super-objective' that motivates all the behaviour of their character, and to create a subtext in their performance. This subtext involves the unspoken thoughts and motives that lie behind the dialogue and actions of a character.

The Method is different from Stanislavski's system in a fundamental way. Method actors use their own memories, experiences and observations when developing a role; that is, they put *themselves* into the character. The result is that some Method actors give substantially the same performance over and over again in different roles, portraying characters that are all very like them. This is the opposite of Stanislavski's insistence that actors must create unique and believable characters that are authentic for each role in each play.



James Dean, shown here in the film *East of Eden* (1953), was a Method actor.

Lee Strasberg in 1956

5.6 LEE STRASBERG

Lee Strasberg was born in 1901 in what is now Ukraine, and moved to New York at seven years of age. He left school in 1918 and studied acting at the American Laboratory Theatre, which offered classes based on Stanislavski's system. Strasberg became a professional actor in 1924, and seven years later he helped to establish a new theatre company on Broadway, called the Group.

The Group Theatre was something very new in American theatre. It attempted to create exciting and outstanding new plays and performances that had strong social messages. Over a number of years, Strasberg directed for the Group and also became an expert acting teacher. In 1948 he became the director of the Actors Studio, still one of the most famous places for actor training in the world. During the 34 years until his death in 1982, Strasberg trained 24 Academy Award winning actors at the Actors Studio, including Dustin Hoffman, Marlon Brando and Paul Newman, and other well-known actors, such as James Dean and Marilyn Monroe.

Marilyn Monroe outside the Actors Studio in 1956

STRASBERG'S METHOD

The core of Strasberg's technique centres around the personality of the actor. He believed that actors should understand the psychological motivation of their characters by relating them to their own life. This included inventing a 'backlife' for each character based on the actor's own understanding of what that character was like.

A great deal of Strasberg's actor training was designed to develop the emotional awareness of his actors so that they could use feelings from their own previous experiences in the roles they portrayed. However, Strasberg again focused on the actor making emotions and experiences real to themselves on stage, rather than part of the genuine creation of a fictional character. The idea of his method was to break down the artificiality of acting by encouraging the actor to become so familiar with a character that the role ceased to be distinct from the actor's self. As a result, the personality of the performer became part of the performance.

When Strasberg asked his actors to create a 'backlife' he was asking them to give each role a history of experiences and relationships that were consistent with the script.

In the 1974 mafia film *The Godfather II*, Lee Strasberg played the role of gangster Hyman Roth.

5.7 STELLA ADLER

Stella Adler was born in New York in 1901 into an acting family: all five of her siblings became actors, and she grew up acting in plays with her parents. She was influenced by Stanislavski after seeing a production by his Moscow Art Theatre in 1923. Stella Adler joined the Group Theatre in 1931 and worked there with both Meisner and Lee Strasberg. Adler travelled widely and performed around the world, living and acting in London, Europe and South America as well as the USA. She left the Group Theatre briefly and studied with Stanislavski in Paris, and her time with him convinced her that American theatre needed to be changed.

As well as being a major theatre innovator, Adler was an outstanding actress, performing with the Group until 1937. She performed in Hollywood films for a number of years before returning to New York to act and direct. In 1949, after some years of teaching elsewhere, she started the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York, which still operates today. Among the actors who have studied there are Marlon Brando, Robert De Nero and Warren Beatty.

Meet the Fockers: Dustin Hoffman (left) trained at The Actors Studio; co-star Robert De Nero trained at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting.

ADLER'S METHOD

Like Strasberg, Adler emphasised the importance of real emotions. Unlike Strasberg, Adler believed that the emotions created on stage must be authentic to the role being portrayed, not just the actors revealing their own feelings.

This meant that Adler placed great importance on the imagination of the actor in creating characters that were true to the time, place and situation of the each play they performed. She insisted that the social, political, historical and geographical background of the characters in every play made them different from the actors playing them, so it was impossible for the actors to rely on their own 'emotion memory'. The only way to create these roles effectively was through the use of the actor's imagination. Her actors were required to research the context of a play in depth and come to understand their characters through imagining the context of their lives. She developed a number of exercises to stimulate their imaginations.

Adler also insisted on the importance of skilled physical movement to present the action of a play effectively. She stated that in a performance actions should come first and then words come out of the actions. She encouraged actors to build up an effective repertoire of actions that could be used to express the meaning of a play and the nature of a character.

Adler believed that imagination was crucial to effective acting. She encouraged actors to find the secret and unspoken messages hidden in a play and bring them to life on stage.

5.8 SANFORD MEISNER

Sanford Meisner was born in New York in 1905. After studying to become a concert pianist, he began a job in theatre, later joining Strasberg and Adler at the Group Theatre. He became disenchanted with the style of teaching at the Group Theatre and spoke to Adler about better ways to train actors. In 1935 he became head of the Drama Department at the Neighborhood Playhouse, while continuing to act and direct plays produced by the Group Theatre. He also appeared in a number of plays on Broadway.

Meisner received commendations from three US Presidents and was named 'Humanitarian of the Year 1990' by the Washington Charity Awards.

In 1958 Meisner moved into films, becoming a director with 20th Century Fox in Los Angeles, and acting in a number of films. However, his connection to the theatre remained strong, and he returned to the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York to head the Drama Department, where he remained until 1990. He also founded his own school of acting in 1985, and this school still operates in California. In 1995 he launched the Sanford Meisner Center, which combines both performance and actor training.

MEISNER'S METHOD

Meisner believed that actors had to create genuine emotion in performance, and this emotion needed to come from the truth and meaning of each play and the characters. For Meisner, the creation of a role was fluid and spontaneous, and relied on the relationships between characters and between the actor and the audience. While he believed that actors should create apparently real and believable people on stage, he also insisted that they needed to react and modify their roles in response to the performances of the others actors. Much more than Strasberg or Adler, he emphasised that it was the connection between actors on stage that was vital to the power of any play.

One important way of training actors to respond instinctively and truthfully in performance was Meisner's use of repletion. Actors are encouraged to work in pairs and begin with one actor spontaneously making a comment related to their partner. The partner immediately repeats the comment, and the first actor does the same. As the comment is repeated, it gradually changes in the way it is spoken and eventually in the use of the words. The aim of the technique is to encourage actors to respond truthfully to dialogue and a dramatic situation.

Meisner's final appearance as an actor was as a special guest on *ER*.

WORKSHOP: THE METHOD

Exercise 1: Working with a partner, make a simple comment such as 'You look happy today'. Your partner repeats the comment about themselves: 'I look happy today'. Repeat the comment a number of times, watching your partner's body language and listening to the tone of their voice. Note the changes in the way they speak the line and in the way you respond to them.

Exercise 2: In pairs, generate an improvisation about two friends having a disagreement in a workplace. Draw on your own experiences and memories as much as possible to create the role and the situation. Now realise the disagreement as a performance to one other group, and ask them to respond by identifying how closely your roles mirrored yourself and your partner, and how effective this was in making the performance believable and engaging.

Exercise 3: In groups, generate an improvisation about a group of convicts coming to Australia in 1788. Before you begin improvising, share your knowledge and understanding about the time and place of the First Fleet and the backgrounds and personalities of the convicts—you might need to do some research at this stage. Once you begin the action, respond freely and imaginatively to the situation of the improvisation and to the performances of the rest of the group.

SECTION TWO

DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE SKILLS

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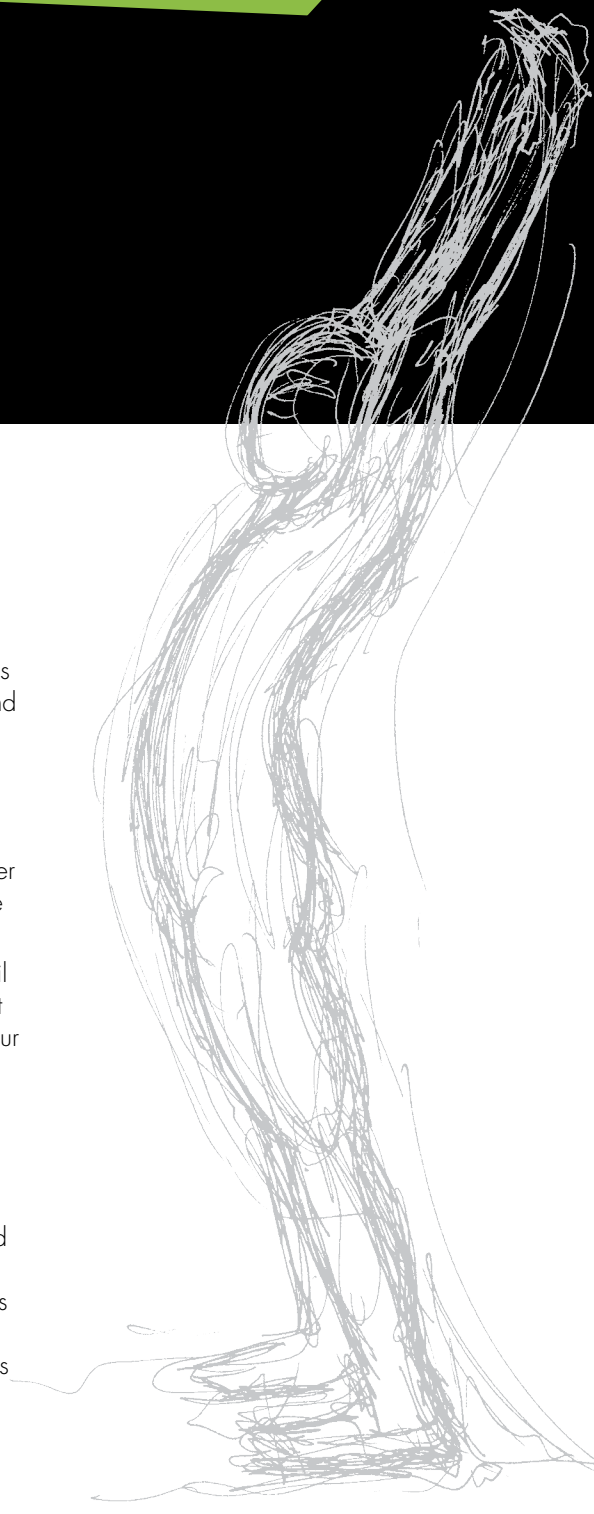


INTRODUCTION

One of drama's greatest strengths is the way it provides us with different perspectives and new knowledge about human experience. Just as creating a character enriches our understanding of how other individuals think and feel, creating performances based on a range of texts gives us profound insights into the way societies live and function.

However, before we can begin to improvise and build dramatic performances that will provide these insights, it is vital for us to acquire the knowledge and the performance skills necessary to generate worthwhile ensemble and solo performance work. Aside from character, which we explored in section one, other contexts vital to effective performance include theatrical traditions and history, the key elements of drama, stagecraft and the dramatic text.

Throughout this section, these four contexts of performance are discussed in detail and then explored through practical examples and activities that enable us to put our learning about performance into practice. Then, in section three, we apply our new understanding and skills to improvise, build and enact both ensemble and solo performances.

As you are learning and working through section two, constantly remind yourself that the creation and performance of theatre is complex. Apply everything you learn in this section to each scene and task in the workshops, continually refining and enriching the texts and the performances. Draw on the skills, knowledge and understanding that you acquired about creating a character in section one. At the same time, be as open and creative as possible in using the different contexts of performance to explore our lives. Do not be afraid to experiment with the creation of character, the traditions of the theatre, the elements of drama, the uses of stagecraft and the nature of texts. Drama is a living process that is constantly renewed each time we work creatively with it.

CHAPTER SIX

ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

INTERCULTURAL

The Arrival is based on the picture book by Shaun Tan and is a collection of stories of migration. Included is the story of Tan's father, who arrived in Australia from Malaysia in 1960. The book was adapted by the New Zealand performance group Red Leap Theatre, who performed the work as part of Sydney Festival 2010. The play makes effective use of a number of important elements of drama, in particular the tension of anticipation, with the audience wondering what will happen to the new arrivals.

Every form of dramatic activity, from a spontaneous improvisation in the classroom to a full-length play on stage, contains certain crucial elements. These elements are the building blocks of each drama and give it its own unique shape and form. When we create improvised work, we make use of these elements instinctively and when we rehearse a play, the elements are already present in the text. However, if we wish to achieve genuinely powerful and theatrical performance work, it is essential for us to understand what these elements are and how to consciously employ them in our dramas. In fact, the elements of drama form a vital part of every section of this book.

We have already explored some of the key elements of drama in section one, since characters and character interactions are absolutely fundamental in any drama. Another key dramatic element is movement, and we examined the importance of body language and non-verbal communication through movement in section one as well. The element of language is very much part of the written text, which we look at in chapter eight. This chapter concentrates on the four elements that are most significant in the context of a performance and that are the easiest to learn to manipulate and enhance through improvisation and rehearsal. These elements are tension, focus, time and place, and symbols.

Kate Parker on stage with Jared Rawiri in *The Arrival*, a play that uses and manipulates the elements of drama

6.1 TENSION

Tension is the power or force that drives all drama. Unlike the elements of character and movement that we explored in section one, tension is intangible and difficult to define; nevertheless, it is crucial to the success of any performance.

For an audience, the success of a play depends largely on how effectively tension has been deliberately created and directed during the performance. The audience's involvement in the play will be decided largely by the levels of energy and excitement they experience. Really memorable pieces of theatre occur when extraordinary levels of tension build up on stage and then flow into the audience, drawing them fully into the world of the play.

We can harness this powerful and complex form of energy in a number of ways in our dramatic work. The most effective way to learn how to do this is to explore the different uses of tension in sequence: first by creating tension at the beginning of a performance; then by directing and controlling tension throughout; and finally by resolving it through the use of climax and anti-climax at the end of the performance.

CREATING TENSION

The clearest way to describe tension is to identify it as the energy created on stage when a text is performed. Tension is also the level of excitement generated in an audience.

It is absolutely vital to create intense and appropriate levels of tension that will provide the energy and focus that the actors need, and generate excitement and anticipation in the audience, helping them to suspend their disbelief and fully enter the life of the play. Light and dark, music and sound, empty space, surprising action, stillness and movement are all effective ways of creating tension through anticipation.

Light and sound

The traditional way of creating tension in the theatre is to fade the lights to blackness, so that the stage and the audience are in the dark. This always works to generate a sense of anticipation, which is the nervous energy of wondering what will happen next. The use of darkness is also effective in building tension—we have an instinctive fear of the dark and our imaginations work vividly to fill the dark with

Creating tension—note how the lighting and the shapes of the actors create tension.

For the actors and the audience, the first minute or two of any performance is the most significant. In this brief span of time, the whole texture and atmosphere of the play is established for the actors, and the attention of the audience is caught or lost.

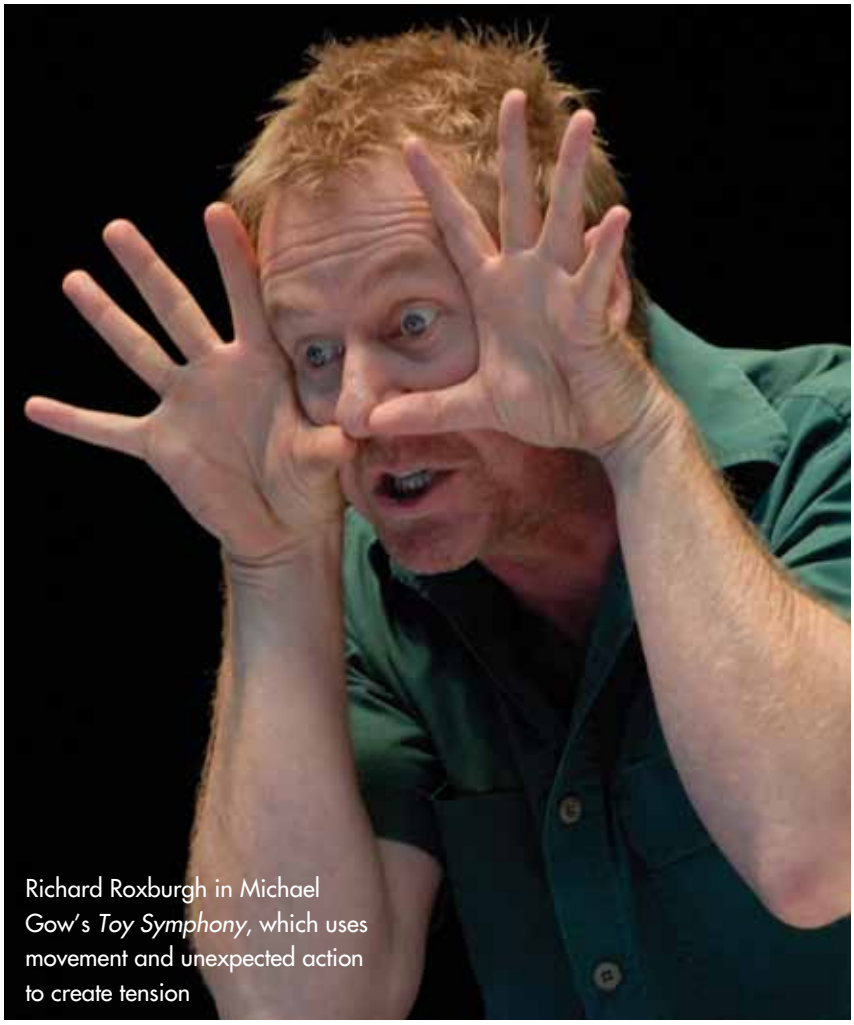
strange and frightening images. If atmospheric music and sound effects are played in the blackness, the effect is intensified. Blackouts with evocative sound effects are still used frequently for this purpose in the theatre, and are a powerful, simple way of building the tension of anticipation.

Space

Sometimes just an empty space can create tension. This is particularly so at the beginning of the performance, with single spotlights and areas of shadow intensifying the sense of anticipation. Alternatively, a contemporary technique for creating tension at the opening of a performance is to have the actors on stage, often frozen in a tableau (a dramatic image). The use of tableaux is particularly effective because we respond to the frozen image the way we would to a photograph, imagining the story behind it and anticipating the action that will follow.

Movement

A third way to create tension is through unexpected action and rapid changes in movement. If a play begins with the stage completely empty and then a group of actors suddenly streams onto the stage, exploding into action, energy and tension flow with them. If they were then to freeze into complete stillness, the tension would be intensified and would continue to build as we anticipate what might happen next. Early on in Michael Gow's, realistic play *Toy Symphony*, the figure of Alexander the Great—in full ancient Greek uniform, sword in hard—suddenly appears in a suburban lounge room. The surprise, and the tension, is extraordinary. It takes the audience a moment to realise that the figure is coming from the imagination of a character in the play. The surprising appearance of imaginary characters is used a number of times in the play to heighten the tension, sometimes dramatically and sometimes humorously.



Richard Roxburgh in Michael Gow's *Toy Symphony*, which uses movement and unexpected action to create tension

CONTROLLING TENSION

Once tension and anticipation have been established in a drama, they must be controlled, manipulated and maintained throughout the performance. Tension can be controlled through the text of the drama and the quality of the performance and stagecraft.

Tension of the text

Controlling the flow of tension in drama is reliant first of all on the dramatic story we are telling. Whether we are using a script, preparing an improvisation or spontaneously creating a drama, there are four key types of tension within a text that we need to be aware of in structuring a drama.

Ruby Moon employs the tension of mystery.

Tension of the task

This is the job, task or quest the characters in a drama must complete. It can be anything from leaving home to falling in love, committing murder or achieving redemption. There are rules to generating this type of tension.

- The task must be important, both for the characters and the audience.
- It must be difficult for the characters to achieve the task.
- There must be an effective resolution—although the characters might not complete the task, it must still be resolved in some fashion.
- The play must end in a way that is dramatically satisfying.

Tension of relationships

This is normally the heart of any drama, and the way relationships develop in a play and are resolved is crucial to the levels of energy and excitement that are generated and controlled. Very often the task facing the characters in a drama is directly related to their relationships, and even when the task is a physical, political or moral one, the relationships between the characters involved in this task are always important. For example, Macbeth's task is to kill the king and survive as king himself, but it is his relationship with Lady Macbeth that drives both his attempts to complete this task and the play itself.

Matt Cameron's contemporary Australian play *Ruby Moon* is about the mysterious disappearance of a child. The audience desperately wants to see the parents solve the mystery of the child's disappearance, while also wanting to understand the mystery of the extraordinary behaviour of the parents themselves.

Tension of surprise

The power of dramatic storytelling is its ability to confront us with the unexpected, surprising us with amazing, fantastic and hilarious experiences that can generate or release enormous amounts of energy and excitement. We can also be challenged, taken aback or shocked by a drama we are performing or watching, and made to think again about what we believe and feel. When this happens in drama, a very powerful tension is generated between our own attitudes and beliefs and the meaning of the drama.

Tension of mystery

Every drama contains some unanswered questions; there are some parts of the story or characters we do not know or do not fully understand. Effective drama uses mystery to build tension for both the actors and the audience, asking them to explain the hidden meaning, solve the problem or answer the question. The tension of mystery can be built throughout a drama, adding more and more twists and challenges, as it often is in comedies. Alternately, a major mystery can be created initially and then revealed, step-by-step, throughout the action of the work.

Tension of the performance

We can also control and direct the tension in our drama through the way we perform. Throughout any play, the levels of tension ebb and flow naturally, based on the quality of the performance and stagecraft, and the responses of the audience. It is essential to be aware of this flow and to take control of the level and nature of the energy by building, changing and focusing the tension to make the drama work.

Rhythm

Stanislavski believed that all human beings have a distinctive 'tempo-rhythm' in the way they move, speak, think and behave. He encouraged his actors to create clear and distinctive tempo-rhythms for each character they portrayed.

Tension can be controlled by consciously controlling the rhythm of the play. Every performance has its own flow of energy, just as every character in a play has a distinctive personal rhythm in speech and movement. The rhythm of a play is therefore made up of pace and tempo.

A play can have a smooth, even pace that is either fast or slow. In a slow-paced play, the action is consistently quiet and slow. In a fast-paced play, the action is rapid and energetic. Intense, realistic dramas are often slow-paced, relying on the relationships between the characters and interior emotions, rather than violent action, for dramatic effect. On the other hand, comedies written in the style of farce rely on frantic action and outrageous encounters between the characters to be funny.

However, no performance piece operates at just one pace and we call the deliberate changes of pace, which give a play its special rhythm, the 'tempo' of the work. Tempo is rather like the beat in a piece of music, which can vary from fast and loud to slow and quiet in ways that give the music rhythm and atmosphere. In the same way, the tempo of a play is the deliberate changes in pace and energy that help to make the performance a coherent and meaningful whole. A scene involving violent action is often followed by one that is quiet and sombre, revealing the consequences of the violence in the previous scene and giving the audience time to absorb the impact of the action. Even in the most frantic comedies there is a balance between scenes in terms of pace and energy.

By controlling the pace and tempo of our work, and therefore controlling the rhythm of the performance, we can direct and intensify the tension to make the play more exciting, involving or humorous. This is particularly important in our improvised work where we must create the text, and therefore the tension that drives it, ourselves. However, even the most accomplished plays, written by the greatest playwrights, need to develop a clear rhythm in performance, and this is the responsibility of the actors and the director. By controlling the rhythm of the performance, we control the tension and therefore the impact of the work.

Style

Another way to control the tension in performance is the choice of style and the use of different styles in different scenes. We can greatly intensify the tension of a piece of theatre by performing the play in a different style from the one in which it was written. For example, Brecht's plays are written in an epic style and are structured to alienate the audience from the characters. However, powerful, realistic performances can bring these characters to life, making the plays far more involving and the political messages much stronger. Brecht himself came to realise this later in his career and wrote about the extraordinary tension created on stage by the contradiction between the didactic messages of his plays and the powerful emotions generated when expert actors portrayed the experiences of the characters as though they were real.

When classic Greek plays are performed today, they are often staged and acted realistically, frequently without masks or elaborate costumes, so that the tension of the relationships between characters is more fully realised. Furthermore, the contrast between the ritual form of the text and the realistic performance style creates a tension that can be genuinely creative in impact.

It is seldom possible, or wise, to totally change the entire performance style of a play, but it is effective and appropriate to change the style of individual scenes within a play to heighten the tension. It is often worth modifying a humorous scene in a comedy to highlight the serious and real consequences of certain kinds of behaviour. This can intensify the comedy that follows, but also take the audience by surprise, heightening their interest in the play and characters and building anticipation. Equally, we can relieve the dramatic tension of a sombre play by introducing some comedy in a scene where it is appropriate, increasing the interest and excitement of the audience and also making the characters more real by showing another side to their natures.

Changing or eliminating the dialogue and using sound, lighting and other stagecraft elements can make a realistic scene surreal. The tension is increased by providing another perspective on the characters and the action, which also surprises the audience and increases their interest and anticipation.

RESOLVING TENSION

All drama ends with the resolution of the tension that has been created and controlled, but this can happen in two totally different ways. We use the word 'climax' to describe the end of a play where the action comes to a dramatic and final end, and this is one way to resolve tension. The other is 'anti-climax', where the relationships and the action are not concluded; these are left unresolved, or they simply dissolve away without any special moment of dramatic action.

Climax

In traditional comedy and tragedy, there was always a dramatic climax that released the energy and excitement of the play in a powerful and final way. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, the first theoretician of the theatre, believed that in tragic plays the climax was the moment of catharsis for the audience—the time when the emotions of pity and terror were felt so strongly that people were emotionally cleansed and made healthier. This is the release of tension at its most intense. In comedy, the excitement and joy of an audience at the climax of a play can be equally liberating, with the tension being released through laughter, rather than tears.

Anti-climax

Many plays, particularly contemporary ones, conclude with an anti-climax where nothing dramatic happens and there is a sense of life continuing after the play has finished. In these plays, the tension drains away slowly, rather than being expelled in a single burst. Where human behaviour and human relationships are concerned, an anti-climax can be more believable and more satisfying than a dramatic climax. In our own lives, we know that experiences and relationships usually continue on after something dramatic has occurred. When we see this happen to characters on stage, we accept the truth of it and make the play part of our understanding of the world.

The city of Newcastle in NSW was hit by an earthquake in 1989. A really interesting piece of verbatim theatre called *Aftershocks* was created by Paul Brown. *Aftershocks* tells the stories of the survivors of the earthquake in their own words. *Aftershocks* was also filmed for television. Knowing that the earthquake really happened, and that we are seeing and hearing the true stories of the survivors, adds greatly to building the tension in any performance of *Aftershocks*. When we discover what happened to the characters, this tension is resolved most effectively, either in a dramatic climax of death or survival or in the quiet continuation of their lives after the earthquake.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TENSION

Work in groups to prepare an improvisation about an earthquake happening in your city, like the devastating earthquakes in Haiti in 2010 or Japan in 2011. Develop the improvisation in three scenes. In the first scene, create tension using the techniques that have been outlined in this unit. In the second scene, develop tension through both the story and performance techniques. Finally, resolve the tension in the final scene in the most appropriate way for your drama.

WORKSHOP: *AFTERSHOCKS*

Read the play *Aftershocks* and choose three scenes. Analyse the way that tension is used in each of the scenes. Compare and contrast the way tension is used in *Aftershocks* with the way tension is used in the documentary drama you created. After reviewing *Aftershocks* are there any changes you would make to your own performance? Explain.

As a result of the Haiti earthquake on 12 January 2010, over one million people were made homeless.

6.2 FOCUS

In drama, the element of focus is central to all aspects of performance. As with tension, focus occurs naturally in drama. By identifying and consciously enhancing the different points of focus in operation in the theatre, we can greatly increase the power and impact of our work.

We use the word 'focus' to mean where attention is directed. The first point of focus is the text, which includes the key characters, action, dialogue and meaning of the written text. The second point of attention or focus is the performer's focus, which involves all the performance factors, including acting and stagecraft, as well as the interpretation of the text itself. The third point of focus belongs to the audience and their experience of the play.

FOCUS OF THE TEXT

Whether we are creating our own play, working on a text as an ensemble of actors or watching a performance as an audience, the key to our appreciation of the drama is our understanding of the playwright's focus. Every performance text is unique and the focus taken by the individual playwright is therefore unique, no matter how similar plays may be in subject matter or style.

The key focus of many texts is the impact on an audience—to make them laugh or cry, or feel shocked or elated—and the performance succeeds to the extent that it achieves this impact. The prime purpose of the situation comedies and melodramatic soapies that dominate our television screens is to keep the audience watching week after week. These texts focus on entertainment, and the writers specifically script the episodes to be constantly funny, surprising or full of tension. As a result, the characters, the situations and the events often change radically or develop in the most unlikely directions; realism, authenticity and credibility are not important ingredients. This is completely legitimate as the purpose of these series is entertainment, and the form of each episode is constructed to achieve this focus.

Our first concern when dealing with a performance text as creator, director, actor or audience is to identify the particular focus of the playwright. We need to work out what narrative we want to explore or what the text means, and how this should be achieved in performance. This is just as crucial for the texts we create as those we perform or view. If we decide the focus is real life and the message is tolerance and understanding for those who are different, the focus will probably require a realistic style of performance, with believable interpretation of the characters. If the focus is the world of the mind, imagination and emotions, the play is more likely to contain surreal events and characters in strange and unreal settings.

Realistic focus

In many works of performance, both on stage and in films, the focus of the text or the intent of the playwright is to depict real life. The purpose of realistic texts is to enable us to understand more about our own lives through sharing part of the lives and experiences of other human beings in the theatre. The writer, director and actors work to create the illusion that we are watching actual people going about their everyday lives. Many significant modern Australian plays, including *Sisters*, *Hotel Sorrento*, *The Club* and *Blackrock*, have as their central focus the portrayal of real and recognisable characters who reveal something important to us about being Australian and being human.

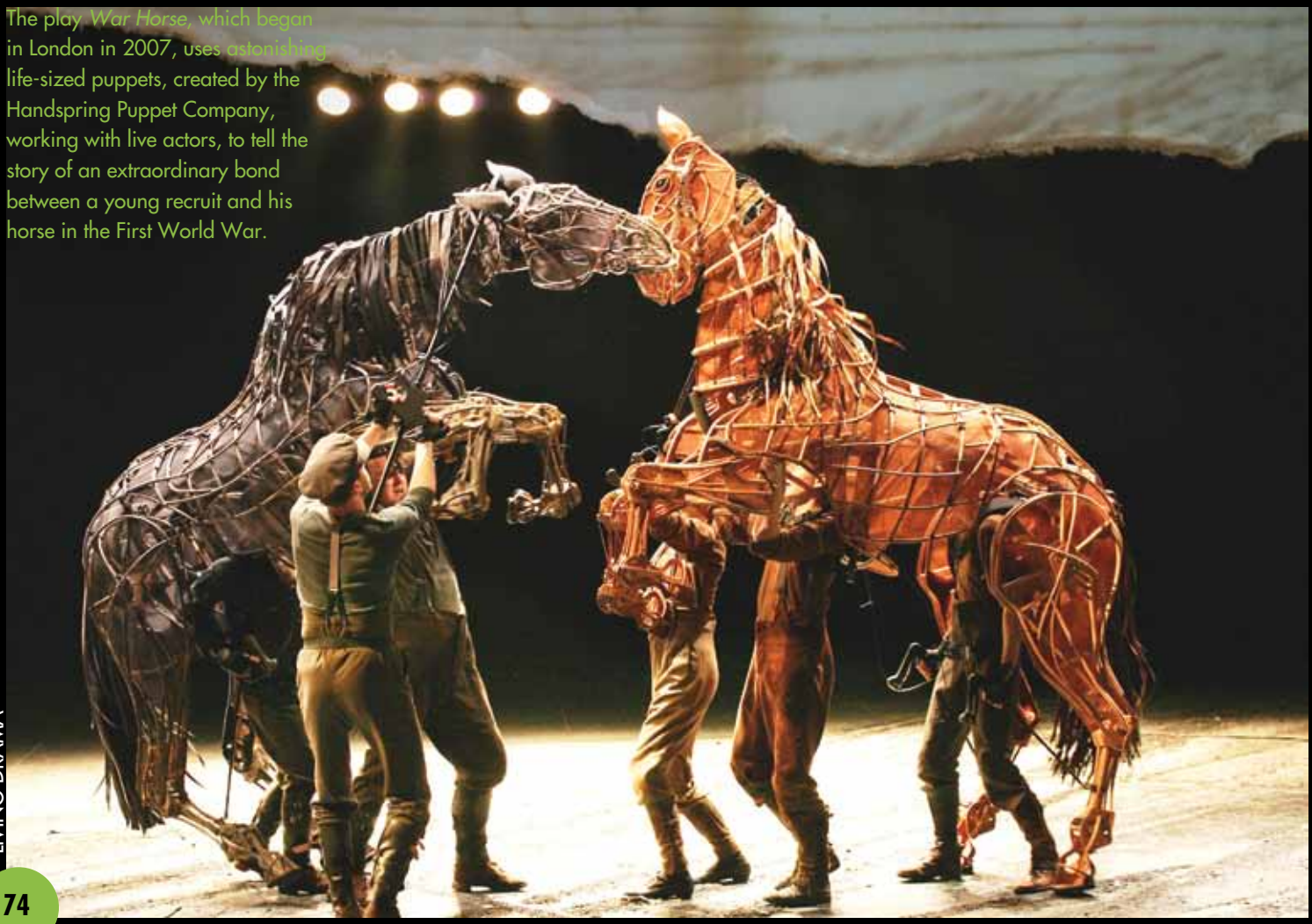
There are also a number of plays that are basically realistic but that use non-realistic and surreal sequences and devices to provide an additional focus. The outstanding Indigenous plays *The Seven Stages of Grieving* and *Box the Pony* demand

our empathy and understanding for the characters and their lives. At the same time, the playwrights of these works challenge us to see these characters through a new perspective. Both of these plays are monodramas, so all the characters in each play are performed by one actor, who tells the story of the character's life. The audience is drawn into the interior world of imagination and becomes involved in the personal stories of the central characters. The focus of these texts is not just the lives of the characters and their connections to the audience, but the inner selves of the characters and the meanings these have for each of us.

Surreal focus

Dramatic works can also have a surreal focus. There is a strand of surreal theatre that focuses on individual experience and its relevance to our own lives. These plays are concerned with the interior world of the characters—their dreams, their subconscious thoughts and their emotions. Recent Australian plays, such as *The Black Sequin Dress* and *Mr Melancholy*, have brought to life the minds of the characters, rather than their everyday lives. A number of black light theatre and puppetry companies, such as the Handspring Puppet Company in England and Compagnie Philippe Genty in France, attempt to do the same by representing on stage all the magical and weird imaginings and dreams to be found in people's minds.

There are also two central strands of surrealist theatre that have as their focus not just individual real experiences but the whole nature of humankind and the way societies operate. Both these forms are dealt with in detail in section four, but we shall briefly touch on them now in terms of their focus.



The play *War Horse*, which began in London in 2007, uses astonishing life-sized puppets, created by the Handspring Puppet Company, working with live actors, to tell the story of an extraordinary bond between a young recruit and his horse in the First World War.

Theatre of cruelty

Antonin Artaud conceived a particular form of surrealist theatre that he called 'theatre of cruelty'. This form of theatre is designed to confront audiences with the evils of the world they live in and to instil in them the desire to get rid of these evils. One major development in this form of theatre is the 'theatre of the absurd'—plays by playwrights including Beckett and Ionesco that focus on the absurdity and meaninglessness of the world we inhabit. The intention of these playwrights is to confront us with the harsh truths about human existence. The characters are seldom realistic and the situations they find themselves in are more like nightmares than everyday life. The second wave of these playwrights—Pinter, Albee and Stoppard—also place their characters in strange and absurd situations, but are much more realistic in their approach than the earliest absurdists.

Tess Hansen and Scott Farrow in the Tasmanian Theatre Unit Trust's production of *Miss Saigon*

Expressionism

The second major form of surrealistic theatre that has as its focus the social world we live in is expressionism. This form reached its peak in the ideological plays of Bertolt Brecht. These plays focus on the power structures in society, particularly the injustices and inequalities. The characters and plots are manipulated by the playwright to call the attention of the audience to this ideological focus. Brecht himself, however, came to realise that audiences needed to care about the characters in his plays if the plays were to have a real impact. The great modern musicals *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*, which have a strongly ideological focus and expressionist form, give us sympathetic and identifiable characters to relate to emotionally.

FOCUS OF THE PERFORMER

This form of focus has two components. The first is the focus of the actors on the performance itself. The second is the actor's direction of their focus as characters in the play. We must make conscious and effective use of our focus on stage, both in terms of our own character and to direct the focus of the audience. To achieve this, we need to work in harmony with the other actors and the director to achieve a cohesive and effective focus.

Direct focus

In terms of the way we direct our attention as a character, we can focus directly on an important character or object, using body language and movement to look or move straight towards the centre of focus. Our attention and emotional states can also be directed intensely but more indirectly, so that a character may be the centre of our focus, even if we are not facing or moving directly towards them.

Counter-focus

On the other hand, we sometimes deliberately create counter-focus on stage because a number of important characters or important actions are happening at once. In this case we need to carefully balance the shifts of focus to achieve the effect we want, which could be the confused swirl of a battle, the sudden explosions of movement or dialogue in a crowd conflict, or the bizarre action and interaction of a dream. We can also use counter-focus if we wish to show one character isolated or in disagreement with the others, in which case there will be two separate points of focus at different places on the stage.

Focusing the action

There are a number of specific techniques that allow us to focus the action of the drama more effectively. These include space, places of meaning, repeated patterns, props and delivery (language).

Space

Within the performance space we can use different levels to focus the action. We can shift focus by changing levels and lighting or by blacking out different levels. We can also use different focal points on stage to intensify or reduce focus, such as moving to the front and centre of stage to heighten focus or using the back corners of the stage to create areas of very low focus.

Places of meaning

By locating the action in a particular location or a place of special meaning, the focus of the drama is increased and intensified. Setting the action under the sea or in a church or temple gives a specific focus to the action.

Repeated patterns

The creation of particular patterns of movement, gesture, sound and action can create rituals that provide special focus.

Props

Objects on stage also provide a strong centre of focus, particularly when they suggest action, such as a gun, or special meaning, such as a cross or a valentine.

Delivery

Very often how lines are spoken can be just as important as the meaning of the words. A whisper, a shout, a scream or a laugh can provide strong focus on a character or the action.

FOCUS OF THE AUDIENCE

This is the third form of focus in the sequence, and essentially it is a product of the focus generated by the text and the performers. It also includes the way stagecraft elements, such as lighting, staging and costume, are used to direct the focus of the audience.

Focusing on meaning

This form of focus needs to be deliberately developed and controlled in the theatre to ensure that a performance has the maximum impact possible. There must be an interesting and valid interpretation of the text, and this must be presented so that the audience is fully involved in the play. It is essential to choose the appropriate style of realism or surrealism in interpreting the text and creating characters. In other words, the focus of the text—its meaning, its concerns and its form—should be made as clear and vivid as possible for the audience. We can place our own interpretation on the text and be highly creative as directors and actors in our staging of a play, as long as we focus our interpretation for the audience so that they understand and engage with the play.

Focusing the attention of the audience in the theatre has all the same characteristics as focus on film and television. In film and television, focus is controlled by the camera moving out for wide shots and in for close-ups or to frame a particular character or action. On stage, it is the actors who move closer and further away from the audience and direct the focus of attention.

Focusing on action

During rehearsals, it is equally crucial for the director and actors to decide how and where the focus of the audience will be directed. There will be times when this focus should be wide, taking in everything that is happening on stage and even in

Can you indentify the ways this mime is using focus?

the entire theatre. At other times, we will want the focus of the audience to narrow down to just one character or even one spot on stage. We will need to use movement, the placement of actors and objects on stage, and perhaps stage design and lighting to achieve both wide and narrow focus.

As actors, the way we direct the focus of our characters is a vital element in directing the focus of the audience. This is not just about visual focus—where the audience is looking—but also where its interests and sympathies are focused. Once we are involved in the performance of a text, all the forms of focus we employ work to capture and direct the focus of the audience.

WORKSHOP: *THE CRUCIBLE*

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* explores the hysteria that led to the Salem witch trials in America in 1692. In the play, a group of teenage girls accuse people in the town of Salem of being witches.

Exercise 1: In small groups, read *The Crucible*. Then, take the focus of the play and give it a modern time frame. Justify the time you have chosen in a short paragraph.

Exercise 1: Continue working in your group. Create a drama about the consequences of 'witch-hunting' and making false accusations against people who are different. Decide on the focus of your text, and then use all the techniques for developing focus we have explored in this chapter to present your improvisation.

6.3 TIME AND PLACE

Time and place are the physical dimensions that provide the locations for all dramas. Every event in our lives, and every action on stage, occurs at some time and in some place.

INTERCULTURAL

Bran Nue Dae, by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, allows the audience to explore issues relating to Aboriginal Australia and Aboriginality. It is set in 1969, and this time frame is very important to the meaning of the play. Although *Bran Nue Dae* is a musical comedy, it tells an important story about a young Aboriginal man trying to discover his identity at a time when Indigenous Australians were just beginning to find a voice. The play also makes us realise that some of the racist attitudes that were common among Australians at that time still exist today.

TIME

Dramas can be located in different time frames. These time frames are time past, time present and time future. There are also different ways that time can pass in a play, including real time, selective time and flexible time.

Time frames

It is essential to be aware of the time frame of a play—past, present or future. This is because when a drama happens is a usually a vital part of the context of the narrative and the action. However, it is also important to remember that dramatic action can move freely between different time frames and different types of time. In some plays, such as absurdist works, the action occurs in an indefinite or undefined moment in time.

Time past

Setting a play in a time frame from the past allows the drama to explore any moment from the whole of human history. Time past involves using our imagination to go back in time and act, or believe as an audience, that we really are in a different time. This means the audience can relive, or recreate, the past. Using a past time frame allows us to see another time through modern eyes, as well as to provide interesting perspectives on the present. Playwrights from the ancient Greeks to Shakespeare to Brecht used past time frames in their work to challenge and comment on the political and social contexts of their own time.

Time present

Contemporary dramas often deal with the relationships, experiences and feelings of people like us, and in this way help to illuminate our own lives. We frequently use our own time frame to explore and understand people, situations and issues that are important to us here and now. Setting a drama in the present also makes it possible to explore, question, challenge or affirm the world as we know it. Equally, modern plays from other cultures and countries offer the chance to experience imaginatively the lives of people we otherwise might never encounter.

Time future

It is interesting how few plays are set in a future time frame, despite the opportunity this offers to imagine and represent possible directions for our world and humankind. One reason for this may be that the future, or science fiction, is and will remain a major film genre. This is because the technical resources available to film-makers make it possible to create amazing future worlds, such as in *Avatar*. However, some recent plays have made use of future time frames, moving a few years into the future in the final scenes of a realistic play to show how particular events and trends in society might develop. An example of this is Stephen Sewell's *It Just Stopped*.

Using time

As well as being set in different time frames, dramas can also use time in different ways within a play.

Real time

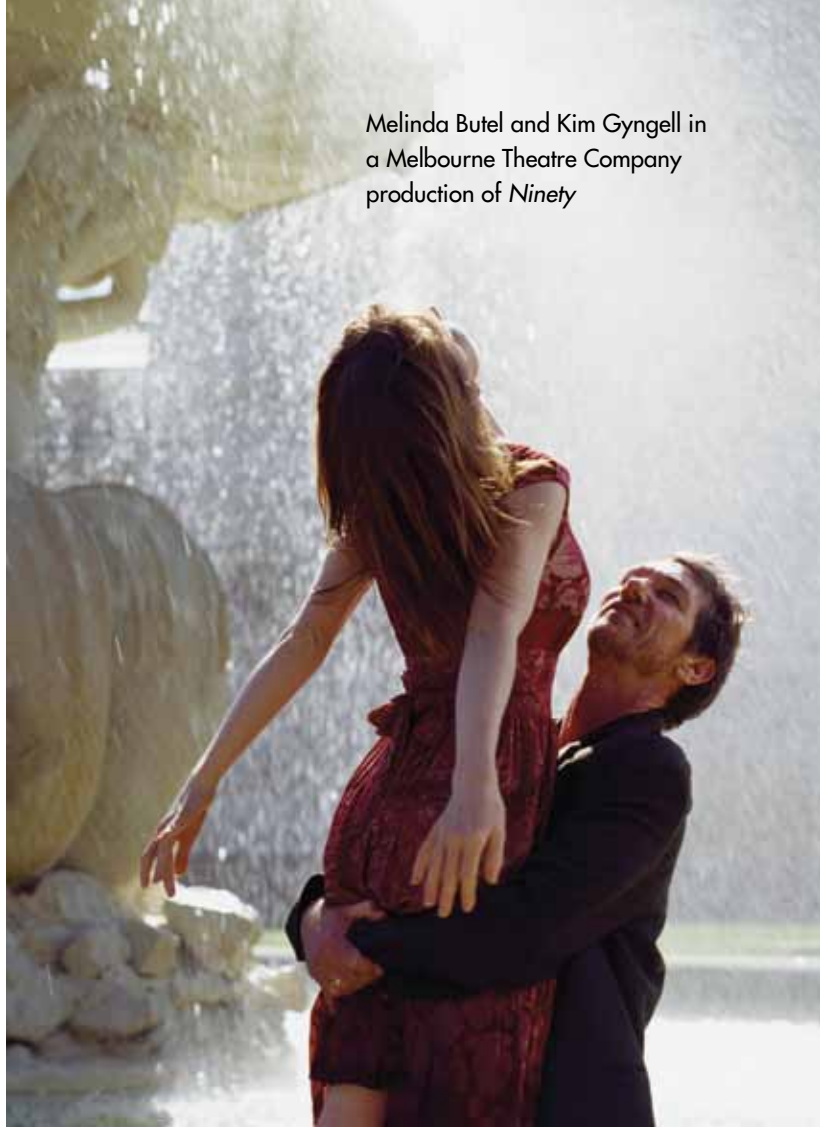
In real time, the drama takes place in the actual time of the action. A five-minute improvised argument between characters would last five minutes on stage, and one hour in the life of a character would take one hour of stage time. Time passes on stage just as it does in real life.

Selective time

This is the most widely used form of dramatic time in the theatre. Selective time means that only the most significant moments are focused on in a play. From scene to scene the action can jump ahead days, weeks or even years, so that only the most interesting and important incidents and encounters are represented on stage. In this way, selective time can be used to concentrate intensely on key experiences, and a person's entire life can be portrayed through a series of dramatic snapshots.

Flexible time

This form of dramatic time is used particularly through the medium of flashbacks, where previous incidents in a character's life are re-enacted on stage. Many contemporary plays use flexible time to move both forward and backward in the lives of the characters, building dramatic tension. Within a drama we can also pass time flexibly, by slowing it down in slow-motion action or speeding it up so that events happen very quickly.



Melinda Butel and Kim Gyngell in a Melbourne Theatre Company production of *Ninety*

The contemporary Australian play *Ninety*, by Joanna Murray-Smith, uses time in a very effective and clever way. The female character has exactly ninety minutes to convince her ex-husband to take her back, which is exactly the length of the play. When it was staged in Melbourne in 2008, the entire stage revolved very slowly, just like the big hand of a clock, marking out ninety minutes.

PLACE

The element of place identifies the physical location of all dramas. Just as there are three time frames used to describe when a play occurs, we can identify three types of place frames to describe where the action of a drama happens.

Specific place frames

Locating dramas in specific and recognisable locations provides an immediate and clear context for the action. Many dramas are located in recognisable, common places such as a character's kitchen, an office where several characters work or a restaurant where characters meet loved ones. Specific place frames are found most often in realistic plays where the lives of the characters are strongly connected to the place where the action occurs. For example, in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the action is predominantly set in George and Martha's lounge room.

In the past, where a number of specific locations were identified in a play, these were represented by the scenery on stage being changed for each location. Modern designers often place the set and props for a number of different locations in the same space, dividing the performing area so that the characters move from set to set when they change locations. Multimedia projections are being used increasingly to identify specific locations. This allows the action of the play to be continuous, with the images of different places simply projected on screens or on stage to change the location.

Cats is an example of a work with an atmospheric place frame.

General place frames

General place frames are used to identify a kind of environment, rather than a specific place. A drama about drought could be set in a dry riverbed anywhere in Australia, just as one about recent bushfires could be located in a bush setting that could be any bushfire danger zone. General place frames can also include places that we are all familiar with—verandahs, footpaths, cafes—but the actual nature and location of the place is not important because it is only a background to the action. In this case, it is usually not important to represent the location realistically, but simply to identify it through text, action or another indicator. With plays containing a number of general place frames it is possible to perform in an empty space and indicate changes of location with a staging object or multimedia projection.

Mood and atmosphere place frames

Many dramas require a particular mood or atmosphere as part of the location of the action. This can be achieved by the use of stagecraft resources and other theatre techniques. Light and sound are particularly effective for creating the world of dreams, nightmares and the surreal. They can also suggest a location, and its atmosphere, at the same time. A prison cell can be delineated by the projection of bars of light on stage and the sound effects of doors being slammed and locked. Film and computer-generated images are especially effective in establishing mood and atmosphere and suggesting surreal, fantastic locations.

WORKSHOP: WARM-UP—TIME AND PLACE

Exercise: A group forms a circle; one student moves to the centre and begins performing an action or talking in a role or both. Another member of the group steps in and begins to act in a way that changes the action and where it is occurring. Modify this so that the person beginning nominates a time and place for what they are doing. Their actions should fit in with the time and place they nominate—for example, a bushranger robbing a bank would not be appropriate for a modern time frame. When the next member of the group joins the improvisation, they should change the time and place frames. The following members of the group do the same when they enter. The teacher can also name the time and place frames for the game, changing them as each group member enters.

WORKSHOP: IMPROVISATION—TIME AND PLACE

Working in groups, create a time and place improvisation, using time and place as effectively as possible. For example, a drama about the First Fleet might be structured in three scenes.

Scene 1: Crime and punishment, showing the crime that was committed and the criminal being caught and sentenced to transportation.

Scene 2: Life onboard the convict ship for the convicts and the soldiers.

Scene 3: In modern time, where a film is being made about the First Fleet.

6.4 SYMBOLS

Drama is about making meaning. Whenever we create our own drama, work with a text or watch a play, we are exploring an aspect of the experience of being human and making sense of it. Plays can tell an exciting story, make us laugh or cry, draw us into a strange or fantastic world, or swamp us with strange, abstract images. Whatever the form of the drama, its purpose is to increase our understanding of ourselves and our world.

Drama, like other art forms, makes meaning in a special way, through the use of symbols. The meaning communicated through the unique language of the arts can be more complex and more powerful in its impact than the written or spoken word, or visual images in photographs or on television. Our ability, therefore, to create effective drama texts, to communicate fully with an audience in performance and to appreciate drama as spectators depends on our ability to use and understand symbols in the theatre.

A symbol can be anything we give a special meaning to—an object, a word, a picture or even an action. We use symbols all the time in our everyday lives, and they play an important part in our experience of the world. By its very nature, drama involves the use of symbols. Because all theatre is fiction, involving heightened action and showing life intensified, everything that happens on stage carries special meaning. Every word that is spoken has been chosen for the message it conveys; the set and every object on it is important to the play, and everything about the characters is significant.

Symbols are the way we give importance to key elements in our lives and symbols, in turn, provide one of the key elements of drama. By giving special significance to everything on stage, symbols help to give real meaning to the dramas we create and watch. Some types of symbols regularly used in drama include objects, costumes, sounds, movements and characters.

Robert Alexander and John Bell in *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome: A Shakespeare Commentary,* which uses symbols in the form of blood and books

OBJECTS

Some symbols we use have a universal meaning that everyone understands—a gold wedding ring is the symbol of marriage and, in a way, represents all the important emotional, legal and practical implications of being married. The Christian cross is not only a symbol of the crucified Christ, but also represents the whole Christian religion itself. In each case, the simple object is loaded with a meaning and significance that would require millions of words to convey. Symbols can change their meaning with time, so the skull and crossbones that used to represent pirate ships now warns us of poisons and dangerous chemicals.

In an extraordinary joint Bell Shakespeare and Queensland Theatre Company production of *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome: A Shakespeare Commentary*, by Heiner Müller, two objects were used as powerful symbols. The first was blood, which was contained in buckets around the stage. The set was splattered with blood and, as each character was killed, the murder was symbolised by the killer smearing his victim with blood. The second symbol was books; as the characters in the play became more violent and uncivilised, books were hurled to the ground, torn and used as weapons. These two symbols clearly conveyed the message of the play about the way violence and war become obsessions and relentlessly destroy civilisation.

COSTUMES

Another design element that has particular symbolic power is costume. Realistic and representational costumes tell us a great deal about the characters who wear them. Costumes can also have important wider meanings within the context of a play. In Shakespeare's works, the crowns worn by different kings symbolise the power and special status of kingship. This is why Macbeth craves the crown of Scotland: it will make him more than an ordinary mortal. It is also why Richard II finds it so difficult to give up his crown to Henry Bolingbroke.

In the theatre, masks have been used as symbolic costuming going back as far as ancient Greece. Modern theatre continues to use masks in a variety of interesting symbolic ways—from the frozen facial expressions of Grotowski's theatre to the elaborate horses' heads of *Equus*.

SOUNDS

Many symbols we use in the theatre are neither words nor pictures but sounds and actions. The beating of a heart can be used as a symbol of life, so can the sound of breathing. Music has the power to convey symbolic meaning and soft, gentle violins carry the sense of peace and romance just as clearly as loud, clashing drums and brass suggest conflict. The sound of waves breaking gently on a beach conveys a totally different message from the howling wind of a cyclone. These different sounds each generate a whole world of images and emotions in us; they communicate with us on a deep and powerful level. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* concludes with the slamming of a door as Nora walks out, leaving her husband and children behind. This single sound symbolises the finality of her departure, and the audience knows there is no hope of her returning.

MOVEMENTS

Any action in itself can have symbolic meaning. A simple gesture like shaking a fist at someone clearly conveys a message and a threat, while stretching out an open hand to someone is a universal symbol of friendship and help. Moreover, raising both hands in the air conveys a message of surrender in almost every culture.

CHARACTERS

Perhaps the most significant factor of all, in terms of symbolic meaning in drama, is the characters themselves. Because drama presents life heightened and intensified on stage, the characters created by the playwright and performed by the actors mean something, and have a purpose beyond merely representing people. Characters in the theatre have a symbolic dimension, expressing a particular idea, representing a belief or providing us with a different perspective on human experience.

This is just as true in comedy as in tragedy, and this can be seen most clearly in *commedia dell'arte*. In that form of comedy, stock characters symbolise particular aspects of human nature, such as greed, stupidity and arrogance, which we laugh at but also recognise as existing in our own personalities. Il Capitano combines boasting and vanity with complete cowardice, just as Il Dottore is always a greedy, pompous bore who thinks he knows everything. At times we have all behaved in ways similar to the characters in *commedia*, and they symbolise for us in vivid and exaggerated form the follies and weaknesses we all share.

Even in the most realistic dramas based on real people and events, characters take on symbolic significance beyond their individual selves. In many plays, the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist becomes a battle between the good and evil inherent in human nature. *A Man for All Seasons*, written by Robert Bolt and first performed on stage in 1960, is based on real historical events and people living at the time of King Henry VIII. Even so, the character of Sir Thomas More comes to symbolise all the best human traits—faith, integrity, honesty and intelligence. His opponent in the play, Cromwell, is portrayed as genuinely evil; he has no values or beliefs, beyond ambition and personal desires. The conflict between these characters symbolises on stage the struggle between good and evil, and it is left to the audience to decide how far they would be prepared to go to stand up for their own beliefs.

In a similar way, Arthur Miller's great play about the Salem witch trials, *The Crucible*, is based on historical fact, but the key protagonist in the play, John Proctor, also represents the human qualities of honesty and faith, opposed to the prejudice, selfishness and malice of many of the people of Salem.

A scene from *Yibiyung* at Belvoir Street Theatre, with Jada Alberts and Jimi Bani

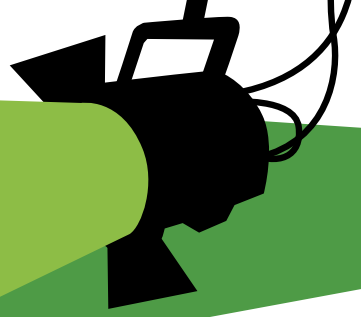
INTERCULTURAL

The recent Australian play *Yibiyung* by Dallas Winmar is about the Stolen Generations of Indigenous children. Winmar based the central character of Lily, whose real name was Yibiyung, on her grandmother. Yibiyung comes to symbolise all the children who were stolen and struggled to survive.

WORKSHOP: AUSTRALIA DAY

Exercise: Working in groups, create an improvisation about Australia Day. Use as many symbolic devices as you can, including objects, masks, sounds, movements and symbolic characters to present a narrative about Australia Day and your understanding of its meaning in our society at present.

CHAPTER SEVEN
ELEMENTS OF THEATRE



In the past, 'stagecraft' was the term used to describe all the elements of theatre that enhance the performance of a text. Today, these are often referred to as the elements of production, directing and design. They include the technical components of lighting and sound, the physical design components of staging, and costumes, props and make-up. Most importantly, they also include the direction of the play, which is both a craft and an art.

As Grotowski observed, the core of drama is the encounter between the living actor and the live audience. However, the effective use of the elements of production can make this encounter more powerful and theatrical, realising the full potential of the text and the acting. This chapter examines the different elements of theatre and demonstrates how we can apply them to our performance work. A clear understanding of stagecraft also enables us to appreciate more fully the performances we watch as audiences.

7.1 DIRECTION

The direction of a play is different from the other technical and design elements because it involves a whole range of dramatic elements and techniques. The director has become in some ways the single most important person in both the staging of a play and the making of a film. The job of the director is difficult and complex, and involves fulfilling a range of different roles.

THE DIRECTOR AS COORDINATOR

The director is the chief organiser in any production team. This means making important decisions about the organisation of all facets of the work before beginning to actually direct the play. The director must guide decision-making about all elements of the production and approve the rehearsal schedule, the design of the stage and costumes, the use of lighting and sound, and the overall use of the performance space.

Every performance piece needs clear coordination, either by an individual or through joint decision-making. Inevitably, and logically, this duty falls upon the director or directors.

THE DIRECTOR AS TEACHER

The most intense and involving function the director is asked to perform is to help the actors develop their characters. Rehearsing the play is a journey of discovery in which the actors learn more about the characters and, in the end, about themselves as people. A director who is able to inspire a company with a vision can make this voyage of discovery possible for the actors in rehearsal.

An essential part of directing the actors is the job of building and sustaining a sense of ensemble. To achieve this, the director must firstly establish a working process in which the actors are conscious of being valued and feel secure. All the actors must feel that their contribution is important and that they are able to make suggestions, experiment with ideas and take risks. The final decisions regarding the nature of each individual actor's performance must rest with the director in order to preserve the unity and quality of the play. How these decisions are made and communicated can determine the value of the experience for the actor and the general health of the ensemble.

Most of the great directors of the last 100 years, from Stanislavski onwards, were teachers as well as directors, and many of them saw their teaching about theatre as more important than directing plays.

An ensemble is a group working cooperatively and supportively together to attain a common goal.

THE DIRECTOR AS INTERPRETER

It is the director's prime responsibility to bring to life the playwright's text on stage. This means becoming deeply familiar with the script and working to interpret the playwright's vision and realise it fully. Many directors believe that they should be as faithful as possible to the script, avoiding any changes and asking themselves constantly how the playwright would want a particular scene or character directed.

Skilled directors who see themselves as interpreters of the playwright's words also make themselves familiar with other plays by the same writer and with anything that playwright has written about the theatre. They also ask their actors and designers to fully research the playwright's work and the background to the particular play in order to make the performance as faithful as possible.

THE DIRECTOR AS CREATIVE ARTIST

As well as directing the script and interpreting the action, modern directors often operate as creative artists as well. This can involve imposing a particular style on the performance of a play or film, such as turning a realistic play into a surreal one, or a serious drama into an absurd comedy. Straightforward social realist plays are often transformed by directors into political theatre by using Brechtian techniques, such as slides containing political messages that comment on the action, and having the actors talk directly to the audience.

Other directors update or change the context of plays, setting them in different periods or different cultures from the ones in which they were originally set. This is particularly common with Shakespeare's plays, a notable example being Australian director Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film version of *Romeo + Juliet*, which he set among the street gangs in modern-day Los Angeles.

Directors who see themselves as creative artists also feel free to cut, alter and even totally transform the texts of the plays they are directing. These directors might remove scenes from plays, change the order of the scenes, and introduce new text from other sources—including writing it themselves. For the past forty years, Ariane Mnouchkine in France has worked collaboratively with her company, totally transforming both classic and modern plays through the use of improvisation, music, dance, imaginative design, and Asian and African theatre forms.
The Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki has gained an international reputation for his use of Japanese performance forms in radical adaptations of classic Western theatre,

Australian writer and director Baz Luhrmann is known for his creative style.

especially Shakespeare. In section four you will examine how Grotowski worked with classic plays from his native Poland, as well as works by Shakespeare and Marlowe, transforming every text he used—sometimes changing the context and the period, at other times totally revising or even throwing out the text and keeping only the main characters and the bare bones of the plot.

Some of the most influential directors of the modern era have also created their own plays from other sources, working in collaboration with a range of creative artists including writers, musicians and choreographers. The musical *Cats* was devised by a creative team headed by English director Trevor Nunn and based on the poems of T. S. Eliot. In France, Peter Brook worked with his company of actors and writers to develop the extraordinary nine-hour stage play *The Mahabharata* using the Indian creation myth of the same name as his inspiration. In the USA, Robert Wilson creates theatre that blends drama and performance art. His 1998 piece *Monsters of Grace* was based on a thirteenth century Sufi poem and used music and three-dimensional film technology.

When we work on a play text, or create one of our own, we therefore need to be aware of the possibilities open to us as directors in actually creating the performance and not merely staging it.

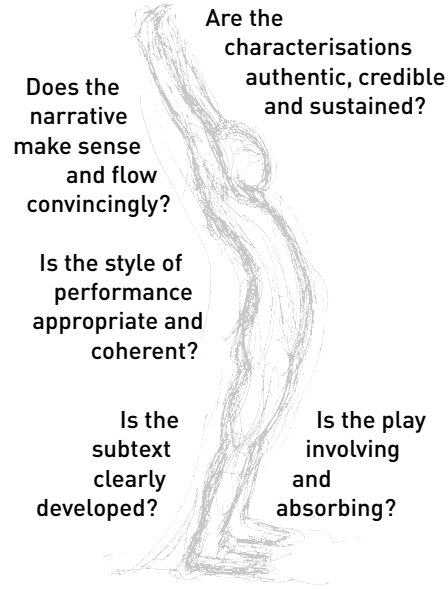
THE DIRECTOR AS AUDIENCE

Whether we operate as the interpreter of a play or the creator, there is another function we must perform as a director. This is the vital role of being an audience before the play is publicly performed. Remember that the actors cannot see themselves acting, so they have no way of knowing how effectively they are communicating with an audience.

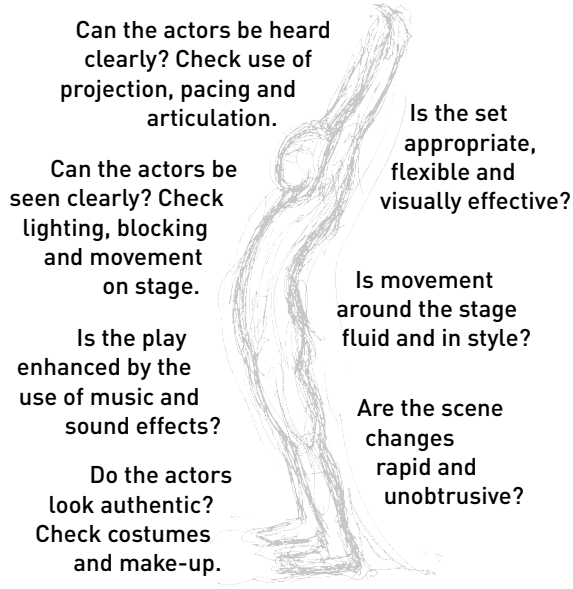
The twentieth century has often been described as the century of the director because it was during the last century that the director became the most important individual in the making of theatre.

During the rehearsal period the director must take time to step back from involvement in the work and become 'an audience of one'. This involves being the audience for run-through rehearsals of the play, treating them as though they were real public performances, and watching and listening to find out if the performance is working as a piece of theatre. The director must first check all the technical and functional aspects of stagecraft and performance, and make any necessary changes.

Because she or he is the coordinator of all aspects of the production, the director has both the power and the responsibility to structure the performance in order to make it a worthwhile experience for the audience.



Questions for the director—general



Questions for the director—technical

WORKSHOP: DIRECTING POETRY: 'THE HOLLOWMEN'

Poetry can provide a script for performance that can be as powerful as a theatre or film script. T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' is a five stanza poem which is said to be influenced by the work of Dante.

Exercise 1: In small groups, complete the following directorial tasks.

a Find a copy of the poem 'The Hollow Men'.

b Research the background of the poem, the time in which it is set and any other relevant information.

c Research any existing performances of the poem or performances that make reference to the poem.

d Create a directorial concept for a performance of 'The Hollow Men'. In creating the concept, refer to the questions in the figures on the previous page.

e Present your directorial concept to the rest of the class as if you were pitching your idea to potential producers/backers for your production.

7.2 LIGHTING

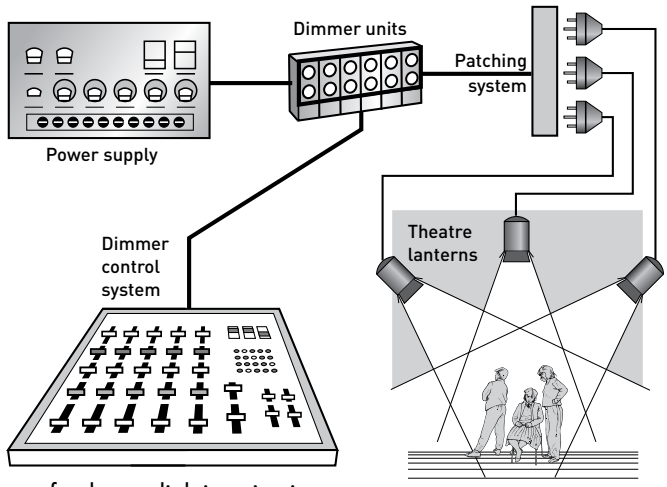
Modern lighting rigs in theatres and entertainment centres can be impressively elaborate and hi-tech, capable of dazzling visual effects. Rock concerts and large-scale musicals show what can be achieved with lighting in performance. Lighting can also be used extremely effectively, but much more simply, to enhance the performance of small-scale plays in the barest of spaces. The basic principles of performance lighting are the same no matter how much or how little equipment and technology are available.

All lighting systems operate in the same way, whether they are the ordinary lights in our home or a full lighting rig in a theatre. At home, we plug a desk lamp into a power point and switch it on. We put a bright enough globe in the lamp to make it effective and move it back and forward to focus it on the desk where we need the illumination. In the theatre, the lighting works in a similar fashion on a larger scale. We plug theatre lights, called lanterns, into power points located in lighting bars above the stage and auditorium, and hang the lanterns from bars, focusing them onto the stage Most modern lighting rigs also include laser lights and data projectors.

The wires or channels for the power points are routed through a control or patch panel, just as the wires in our home go through a fuse box, and come out as ordinary power leads with plugs on the end. In the theatre, we plug these leads into power points on a box called a dimmer rack, which allows us to control each channel separately, deciding which lanterns, lasers and projectors we turn on and how bright they are. Because theatre lighting requires so much electricity, this dimmer rack is connected to a special three-phase power supply, which is powerful enough to provide electricity for up to six lanterns for each channel on the dimmer rack, safely providing a total of 2400 watts per channel.

The switching on and off and dimming of lights is done on the lighting board. These boards have slides as well as switches, which allow the lighting technician not only to turn lanterns on and off, but to precisely increase and decrease the amount of illumination from each lantern. The boards also provide a number of special effects such as chase sequences, in which different lights can be set to flash on and off alternately. Modern lighting boards have a sophisticated computer unit that makes it possible to program hundreds of different lighting effects in sequence so that the changes occur on cue. As part of the lighting set–up there will also be at least one computer and data projector connected to the lighting board to allow the projection of images.

Despite all the technology, the basic operating principles for theatre lighting are straightforward. It is how the lighting is used that decides just how effectively it enhances the performance of a play. In designing and using lighting as a part of stagecraft, four functions are fundamental.



The components of a theatre lighting circuit

ILLUMINATION

What we see on stage is determined by the placement and levels of lights, and it is essential that any performance is competently lit so that the audience can see the characters and the action. If there are insufficient lights or they are set incorrectly, then significant areas of the stage will be dark and the actors will be obscured.

Beyond the functional need of adequate illumination, we can use lighting to direct the vision and the focus of the audience. The use of spotlights to illuminate characters, action and areas of the stage has the effect of intensifying the focus and enhancing the significance of the spotlit character or area.

At a basic level, lighting is also essential in the changing of scenes. If the action of a scene ends suddenly and dramatically, then a sudden blackout is highly effective. A quiet conclusion or an anti-climax can be signalled by a slow fade-down of the lights. It is essential not to have long blackouts between scenes, even if there is a need to change sets, because loss of illumination means loss of focus and eventually loss of involvement by the audience in the world of the play.

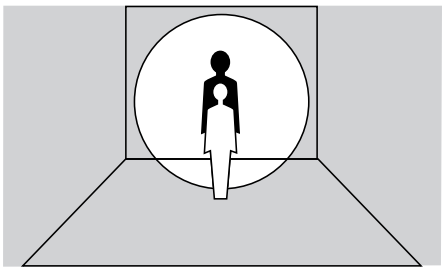
LOCATION

A gobo is a patterned template that is fitted in front of a light to cast a particular shape of light onto the stage.

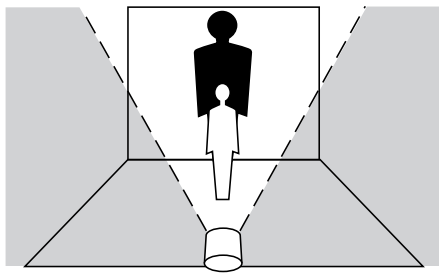
Lighting is important in signalling location in a play, both in place and in time. Bright light with the use of amber colour can suggest a beach location; soft, green, dappled light a bush setting; and dim, shadowy blue light the interior of an abandoned house. The use of different levels of light, and a range of coloured gels, patterned gobos and still or moving images can create an infinite variety of locations, enhancing sets or simply replacing them.

We also delineate time by the use of lighting: bright white light for daytime exteriors; dim, blue light for night. Changes in time are signalled by increasing or decreasing the intensity of light, and by fading from one colour to another. The entire passage of day into dusk and then darkness can be suggested by changes in the intensity and colour of light.

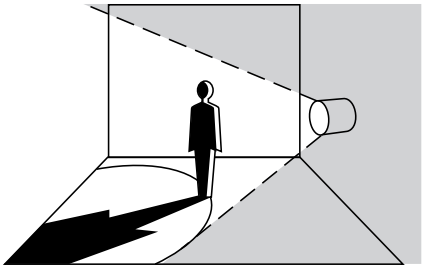
Intensity and colour can also be used to suggest surreal and emotional locations as well. For example, red light makes an effective visual background to a nightmare, and soft amber and gold can represent nostalgic memory during a monologue.



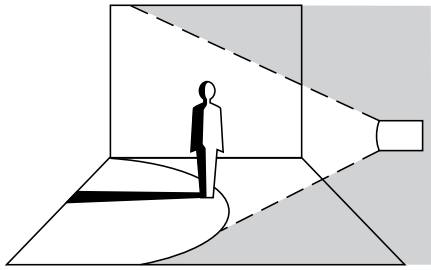
Lighting directly from the front at the same level as the subject tends to wash out the nose and is liable to hurt the actor's eyes over a long period.



Lighting from below with a single light leaves shadows around the eyes and gives the nostrils undue prominence.



A backlight from the side gives a certain amount of facial contour and a halo effect in the hair.



A single light from the side, at the same height as the subject, will light only one side of the face, leaving the other side in shadow.

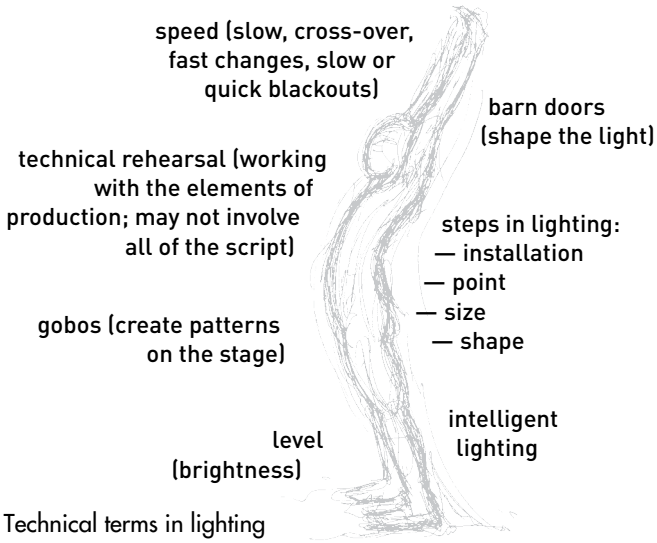
Note the way the direction of the lighting changes the mood

MOOD AND ATMOSPHERE

The mood or atmosphere of a play is both intangible and vitally important. Lighting is one effective way of enhancing the mood of a text and again, it is the placing of lights, the level of brightness and the use of colours and patterns that is important.

Simply changing the number or direction of the lights makes a significant difference in the image we see and in the mood or atmosphere of that image. If we add a particular colour to the lighting, the effect will be further increased. A gobo pattern, such as bars, would then give the image an even stronger mood.

The use of film, lasers and computer-generated images is very effective in generating atmosphere and creating surreal worlds on stage.



Technical terms in lighting

WORKSHOP: COLOUR MOODS

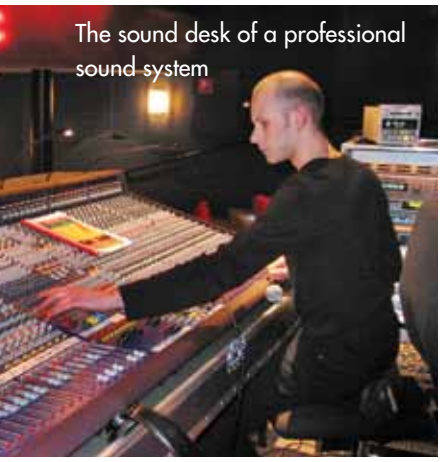
Exercise 1: One way to create moods on the stage is to use colour. Using torches and cellophane or par cans with gels, complete the following exercises to understand the way colour can create mood.

a In small groups, turn each light and torch on.

b As you experience each colour, brainstorm the mood or atmosphere that would be created on stage by the colour.

c Choose one colour and generate a short performance to match the mood. For example, if you chose a red light you might want to improvise a short fight scene.

'Par can' is the name given to the parabolic aluminised reflector lamps used in theatre lighting.



The sound desk of a professional sound system

7.3 SOUND

Just as with lighting, the use of sound in the theatre can be extremely elaborate and stunning in impact. Large-scale musicals and spectacular physical theatre, such as Cirque du Soleil, might use live orchestras, rock groups and recorded sounds in a way that is similar to the soundtracks of films. The musical *Miss Saigon* included the sound effects of a battle being fought and even featured a helicopter landing on stage!

At the other end of the spectrum, some of the great directors of the twentieth century, including Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook and Trevor Nunn, used their actors to produce all the sounds heard on stage. This 'theatre of transformation' asks the actors to use only their own skills to provide sound effects—singing, playing instruments, chanting, whispering, imitating animal and mechanical noises, drumming, clapping and using different objects to produce sounds.

No matter how complex or simple the performance, all theatre can be enhanced by the effective use of sound. While live music is played in musical theatre, most contemporary productions use a recorded soundtrack, normally assembled in order on a single tape or disk. Many directors create a continuous soundtrack that includes music, sound effects, voices, sounds so soft they are almost subliminal, and even silence. This continuous recorded sequence of sounds is known as a 'soundscape', and the skilled use of soundscapes is a feature of innovative theatre.

Most theatres have a sound system that is similar in structure to the lighting system. The sound desk has slides that allow the operator to control the sound coming from a range of sources including DVD, CD and tape players, as well as from microphones and musical instruments. All these sound sources are connected to amplifiers, so the operator can also increase and decrease the volume of sound from each source. The sound board also has controls that modify the quality of sound being broadcast, altering the balance of bass and treble, adding echo, and altering the mix of sounds being heard.

The use of recorded sound can enhance any performance. In a highly realistic play, sound effects can be used to reinforce the reality of the setting. If a scene is set in a forest, the sound of bird calls and the wind blowing helps to make the forest setting real for the audience, while in a totally naturalistic play the actors would need to provide all the sounds that would be heard in the setting.

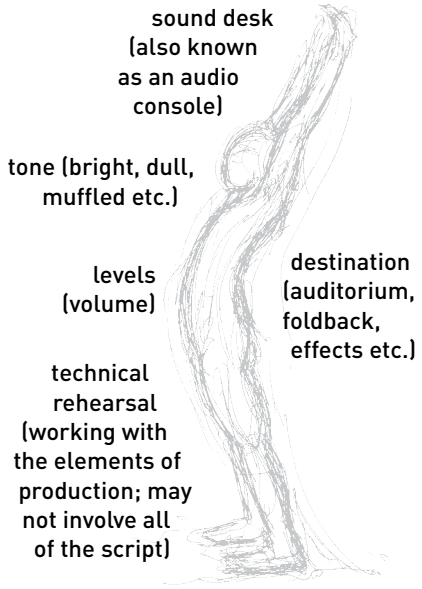
Sound is also a powerful tool for creating mood and establishing atmosphere. Because music affects the right side of the brain—the hemisphere associated with emotion and creativity—the use of music in the theatre works to stimulate and intensify the feelings of the audience. When music is played before a play begins, it creates a mood that can enhance the emotional impact of the play that follows. Similarly, music playing during a scene can increase or transform the emotional temperature of that scene.

Directors need to be careful in their use of music to generate emotion. In a realistic play, the overuse of music can destroy the audience's belief in the performance, as often happens in films when the music becomes too obtrusive and annoying. This is apparent in some sentimental Hollywood films whose soundtracks are full of sobbing violins, while action films often assault audience's ears with loud music and sound effects until they are numbed by the impact.

Used with discrimination, sound is a potent force in the theatre. Sound effects do not have to be evident to be effective; sometimes subtle, almost subliminal sound can have an enormous impact. The faint background sighing of wind or sea creates an eerie atmosphere, while the soft sound of a heartbeat can generate enormous tension in a drama, particularly when it stops.

Music and sound effects can also be effective in linking scenes, in a number of ways. Music can be used to cover the sounds of the scene change and help to maintain the focus of the audience. Music and sound effects can suggest a change of place or time and help to establish the location of the next scene. Finally, sound can provide an emotional context or a strong atmosphere for the following scene.

In dance, physical theatre, musicals and often in surreal plays, the use of sound is the way that much of the meaning of the performance is communicated, rather than through words. When you are working with non-realistic texts, you should try to use sounds and music in a range of imaginative ways that reinforce or take the place of the written text. The dance musical *Cats* relies far more on movement to music than it does on the simple poems that provide the text of the play. Thus, when you are creating your own plays you should think of sound as an important and integral part of your texts.



Technical terms in sound

Cats uses sound, costume and light to create a performance.

WORKSHOP: THE ATMOSPHERE AND MOOD OF SOUND

We all react to sound, especially music. How we react is influenced by our background, culture and experiences. Music without words can be particularly evocative and create an additional level of meaning for the audience and the performer.

Exercise 1: To experience this further, complete the following exercise.

a Select a piece of music, preferably without words.

b Spread out around the space with several sheets of paper and pencils or marker pens.

c As each piece of music plays, draw the scene or mood that you experience as the music unfolds. Start a new piece of paper for each piece of music.

d In small groups, discuss your drawings and choose one to be the foundation of a performance.

e Generate the chosen performance.

f Realise the performance for the class using the selected piece of music.

g Respond to the performances of other groups, critically analysing the way the music accentuated or detracted from the performance.

7.4 STAGING

Staging is the term used to describe the physical placement of a play in performance. Staging involves not only the shape of the stage itself, but also the design and construction of the set that occupies the stage, the setting of props on that set, and even the movement of the actors on the stage. Where the theatre or performance space is a flexible one, staging also includes the shape of the auditorium and the positioning of the stage in the performance space.

The traditional proscenium arch stage

THE STAGE

The traditional stage shape that is still most common in theatres around the world is the proscenium arch, where the stage is built at one end of the auditorium and the audience sits in rows facing the stage. However, the twentieth century saw a revolution in the design of theatre stages, with the shape becoming much more flexible. Modern performance can occur on thrust stages or revolving stages, and also in theatre-in-the-round, circus tents, open-air amphitheatres and even in the street.

When working on the staging of a play, many contemporary directors and designers look first at the location and shape of the stage they will use before they begin designing the set they will place on it. When Jerzy Grotowski travelled to England, the USA and Australia with his Polish Laboratory Theatre Company, he made sure it performed in a range of spaces, none of which were theatres. The company used halls, cellars and ordinary rooms as their theatres throughout the tours. Grotowski did this because he wanted to break down the barriers between actors and audiences, which are set up by the design of traditional proscenium arch theatres. For Grotowski, staging meant, first and foremost, creating a space in which actors and audiences were in contact with each other.

For Peter Brook, perhaps the most influential director of the twentieth century who is still directing plays, staging means finding the space that is most appropriate for the play being staged. *The Ik*, an African play his company created in the 1970s, was staged in the village squares of a number of African villages. Rather than designing a set to fit a stage, Brook searches for a space that will be the natural stage and set for his play.

When Peter Brook's great Indian creation epic *The Mahabharata* came to Australia, it was performed in a huge quarry, which provided a natural amphitheatre.

THE SET

Just as stages changed radically during the twentieth century, so did the sets that occupy the stage. Traditionally, sets were composed of painted canvas flats that were placed at the back and sides of the stage to represent the location of the play, and these flats were then augmented with furniture or other objects appropriate to the play. Interior flats were usually made to be as realistic as possible, with doors and windows that opened and closed, often with real pictures on the walls, and on stage was all the furniture you would find in a real house. If the setting was outdoor, the designer would often place real trees on stage, and sometimes actual sand or grass as well.

There are both classic and contemporary realistic plays being staged today that demand this level of authenticity in the set. However, modern directors and designers are also much more flexible in their use of sets, and now employ a range of techniques for setting a performance in a particular location. Screens are often used instead of painted flats, and lighting can be used to colour these screens, or images and films can be projected onto them. Scrims are also widely used in contemporary theatre. These are curtains made of translucent material, so that when lights or projections are shone onto them from the front they act like a screen, but when they are lit from behind the audience can see right through them.

Rather than a whole realistic set on stage, designers will frequently place just one important symbolic object that has a special meaning in the play. In Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the entire set is the wagon in which Mother Courage trundles around Europe, following the war and making a living from it. Because there is no other set, Brecht is able to move in both time and place from scene to scene without having to change the set. Signs, slides or the actors themselves simply tell the audience where and when the next scene is happening. In Peter Shaffer's play about the conquest of Peru, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, the central staging object is a giant golden sun. This represents not only the sun that the Incas worshipped, but also the gold the Spaniards were seeking. In Samuel Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*, the only set is a single tree, which represents the place where Vladimir and Estragon are doomed to wait.

A set model for the play *Cuckoo in the Nest*

Most set designers throughout the world still build elaborate set models exactly to scale when they are designing a production.

In the past, designers used to construct a scale model of their set, experimenting with different possibilities and obtaining the approval of the director (and often the actors) before building the actual set. Today, software programs allow designers to design sets on a computer. These programs are particularly useful because the designer can vary the size and shape of any of the staging at a click of the mouse, and can rotate the set to study it from every angle. Despite this, it is still a very good idea to build a model of the set once it has been designed because a model allows the designer to fully develop their ideas about the staging and set in three dimensions before building it.

Often there is no need for a set at all. A bare stage, which Peter Brook describes as the empty space, can be transformed into any place at any time by the quality of the text and the acting. Shakespeare's plays epitomise the way a playwright can make a whole world come to life on stage just through the power of words. His play *Henry V* has a famous prologue which brings to life the battles and the landscapes that are the context of the play.

The actors, in conjunction with the director, can also create the set of a play simply through the use of their bodies and simple objects. This is the core of the 'theatre of transformation' (see chapter 16). Rather than elaborate sets and props, the actors use their own bodies to create places and objects on stage. In *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* there is a scene in which the Spaniards climb the Andes mountains to reach the city of the Incas. To achieve this effect, the actors portraying the Incas lined the flight of stairs on stage, turned their backs to the audience and lifted the cloaks they were wearing into points above their heads. The cloaks were blue and green in colour with white at the top, so the effect was of a number of mountain peaks rising higher and higher. The actors portraying the Spaniards then climbed the stairs, weaving their way between the mountain peaks until they reached the top. The effect was extraordinary and complex. Not only did it seem that the Spaniards were actually climbing through the mountains but, because the Incas were creating the mountains, it was as though the Spaniards were actually conquering them, which is of course what happened. (For a much more detailed exploration of the use of transformation in staging, see chapter 16.)

The key to effective staging is the visual power of the stage and the set and their appropriateness to the individual play being performed. There are times when a traditional stage and a detailed, realistic set will be necessary. Far more often, though, it is possibly to be flexible in your use of space and imaginative in your setting in order to bring a text vividly to life.

WORKSHOP: PIPE CLEANER SETS

Henry V

by William Shakespeare

Exercise 1: Read the prologue from *Henry V* opposite and create a model for the set using pipe cleaners. Remember to think about the scene you are creating as well as the use of space by the actors, the way the designer may be able to light the set, and how the audience's sight lines may or may not be affected by the set.

Exercise 2: After generating your pipe cleaner set, present it to the class.

Henry V, Prologue

Enter Chorus

Chorus O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object: can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance;
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history;
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

Exit

Henry V by William Shakespeare.

7.5 COSTUME AND MAKE-UP

How the actor looks is of crucial significance in the creation of a character. Costume and make-up give a character credibility, both for the actors and for the audience, and are central to developing the context of the play. This is obviously true of plays set in particular historical periods, and when the age and appearance of the character is important. The musical *Cats*, for example, owes a great deal of its success to the extraordinary make-up and costuming that transforms the dancers into cats.

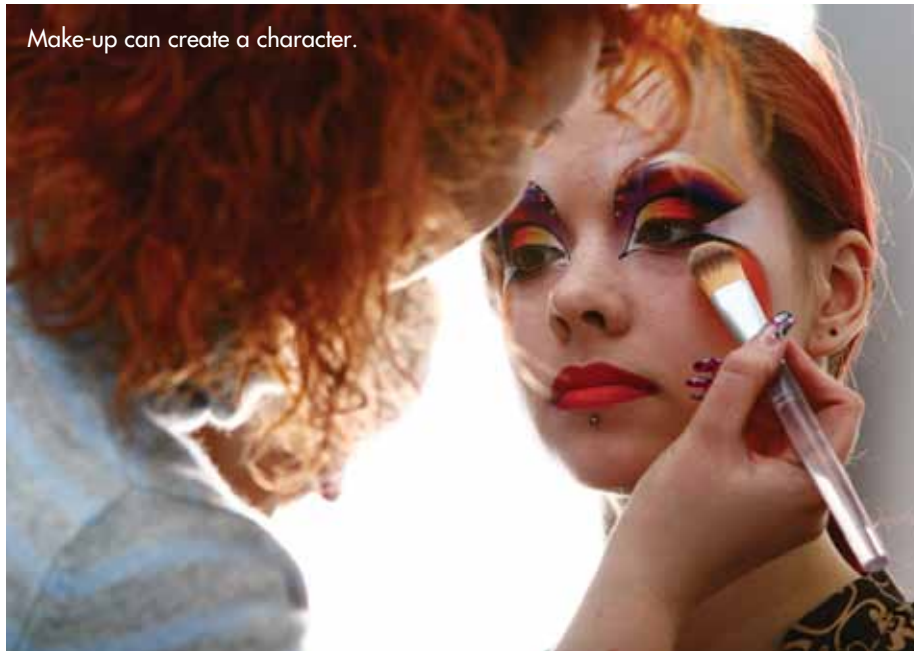
COSTUME

As with all elements of stagecraft, costumes have changed radically in the last 100 years. The elaborate clothing of melodrama gave way to the detailed and believable styles of realism and naturalism at the end of the nineteenth century. With the growing range of theatrical forms in the twentieth century, costume styles became more and more diverse. In the early part of the twenty-first century, there is no single accepted style. While realism is still the dominant style for plays, costuming ranges from the most lifelike to the totally abstract. A number of forms of theatre make extensive use of surreal costume, particularly physical theatre, black light theatre and contemporary dance drama.

Costume can also have symbolic importance both for the characters and for the text. In *Waiting for Godot* the two central characters are described as tramps in the original text, but in a number of productions they have been dressed as clowns, which changes the perceptions of the audience and therefore affects the meaning of the play. The use of the Incas' cloaks as mountains in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* gives those costumes a powerful symbolic meaning as well as transforming the actors' appearance.

Cirque du Soleil makes use of surreal costumes as part of its performances.

MAKE-UP


Make-up can create a character.

Even in a completely realistic performance in which the actors are portraying characters of their own age, it is essential to use make-up if theatre lighting is used. This is because bright or coloured lighting can totally change a person's appearance, and it is necessary to apply make-up to compensate for the impact of the lights.

Straight make-up involves using colour and shading to give the actor a natural appearance under lights on a theatre stage. Character make-up can be extremely elaborate and require professional skill to apply, but dramatic transformations, particularly in age, can also be achieved quite simply through the use of lines, shading and hair colouring.

As with all the other elements of stagecraft, it is the interpretation of the text and the style of the performance that should determine the design of costume and make-up. The needs of the actors are an even more important factor. The actors must feel that their physical appearance is in harmony with their conception of the character. It is therefore essential for them to have an important role in the design of costume and make-up so that the stagecraft elements enhance the intensity of the actor's performance and the believability of the character.

WORKSHOP: NEWSPAPER COSTUMES

Exercise 1: Creating an idea for a costume doesn't need to be a difficult process. Life-size costumes can be made using newspapers and sticky tape, with a member of the class working as the model.

a Choose one of the characters below:
- Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*
- Lady Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan*
- Jimmy Munday in *No Sugar*
- Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*.

b Generate a newspaper costume for your chosen character. You can create the costume in any style or genre as long as you can justify your choice.

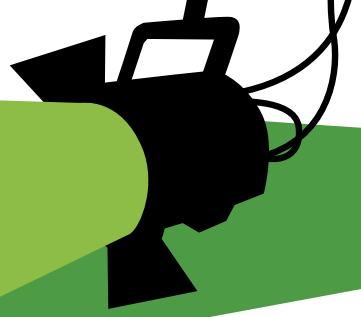
WORKSHOP: MAKE-UP DESIGN

Exercise 1: Like most designers in theatre and film, make-up designers create designs for their characters.

a You have been asked to create a make-up design for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The concept is to be presented for three characters, but should apply to the whole cast. Before you begin your design, decide on the style of the production; for example, surreal, traditional, modern or any other appropriate style. When generating the design, consider if it is face, face and hands, full body or a combination.

b Present your concept to the class.

CHAPTER EIGHT
PERFORMANCE TEXTS



The key context for any dramatic performance is the text. You can now apply everything you have learned about the elements of drama and performance to the performance of scripts.

Whenever you rehearse and perform a play, you work with a play text. Usually, the text is written as dialogue that you learn and then speak as the characters in the play. Play texts also contain stage instructions that give you a guide to at least some of the action required in the performance. When you improvise your own plays, you actually create a new text made up of both words and actions. Moving beyond play texts, any written text can provide you with the basis for improvised performance work; the whole field of literature, including novels and poems, generates rich opportunities to develop interesting performance work.

In the past, the word 'text' meant words that were written down, and this is the traditional dictionary definition. In today's post-modern world, 'text' is now used to describe anything by which meaning is communicated, so a painting or a piece of music can be considered a text, as can a piece of mime or dance. This is an important definition for us because in the modern theatre words are no longer the only form of text. Contemporary drama includes a range of performance forms that may use no words at all. These forms include physical theatre such as Butoh, circus such as Cirque du Soleil, black light theatre and puppetry such as Compagnie Philippe Genty, Aboriginal dance drama such as the Bangarra Dance Theatre, and the whole area of performance art, which blends visual art with drama. When we think of performance texts we need to be aware of the entire range of possibilities that are available.

In this chapter you will concentrate on play texts, which are, after all, still the heart of the theatre experience. In particular, you will discover how to deconstruct a play for meaning, and then reconstruct that text as a piece of performance. In section three you will explore texts from different sources, both written and visual, using them as starting points or pretexts for creating your own dramas.

8.1 DECONSTRUCTING A TEXT

French director Antonin Artaud described the theatre as a mirror or double of real life, able to reflect what our society and our lives are like, but also able to change the way we live by changing the way we see ourselves and our world. This is the double purpose of all drama, whether it happens in the classroom or the theatre, whether it is funny or serious, historical or modern. When we work with a performance text, we become more fully aware of the richness and diversity of human experience, but also more aware of the common bonds that unite us all.

Our first reading of a text, on the page or in the theatre, is therefore for dramatic meaning, to discover what the play has to say about people and the world they live in. This involves first of all working out the playwright's intention or message. This could be a clear political or social statement such as we find in the works of ideological dramatists such as Brecht. The essential meaning of the play could be religious, as in classic Greek theatre, or strongly philosophical, as in Shakespeare's tragedies. In realistic theatre, the central concern of many plays is psychological—an exploration of the causes of individual human behaviour. In surreal theatre, the emphasis of the creator is often on what lies beyond reality and our everyday lives, or what is found beneath the surface of those lives in dreams and the irrational.

Of course, each of us receives and understands the playwright's message differently, according to who we are and to our individual level of experience and understanding. Very often, our understanding of a text is strongly influenced by our beliefs, and certainly the extent to which we enjoy reading, seeing or performing a play can depend on the extent to which we are in sympathy with the dramatist's point of view. Nevertheless, in our culture we do share common assumptions and knowledge about ourselves, our society and about theatre. This shared culture helps us to construct shared meanings from any work of drama we experience, which balance our personal and subjective responses to a text.

Recent research has shown that people under the age of twenty-five very often experience the performance of a play quite differently from older people.

As well as the dramatist's stated concerns, a play text also carries a range of messages that are part of the context of the play and not necessarily intended by the dramatist at all. The time and the place in which any play is written strongly influence the nature of the play. Particular forms and styles of theatre dominated during different periods of history. The subject matter and the meaning of plays in each historical period strongly reflected the society and values of that period—and sometimes strongly challenged that society and its values.

When you perform or watch any play text, you therefore need to be aware of the hidden messages inherent in the text, and this is just as true of a play written this year as one of the classics. When you deconstruct a text, you need to look for the cultural meaning of the play as well as the playwright's meaning, and then your own personal response. The plays of Anton Chekhov tell us a great deal more than he actually intended about the lives of middle-class Russians at the end of the nineteenth century—the way they lived, their values and attitudes, and their relationships with each other. This historical context is not only interesting for its own sake, but gives the plays a strong sense of reality and vitality in performance. We believe in Chekhov's characters, we care about them, and we share their attempts to make sense of their lives.

How do you read this scene from the Australian play *Gwen in Purgatory*?

At the same time, certain behaviours that Chekhov took for granted in his plays, such as the treatment of the peasants and the inferior position of women, we now recognise as part of his time and his culture—Russian society more than 100 years ago. When you work on a play such as *The Cherry Orchard* you therefore need to bring a consciously critical approach to the cultural context of the play. This means that you need to decide whether you simply accept and portray the values and behaviours contained in the text, or challenge them in performance through your interpretation of the text.

It is important to note that the plays of our most popular Australian dramatist, David Williamson, also contain values and attitudes (particularly about Australian men and their attitudes to women) which as performers and audiences you might wish to challenge. Williamson's plays are no more 'modern' in their portrayal of relationships than Chekhov's, and are just as much a product of a particular time and place.

In essence, when you deconstruct a text you are working out three levels of meaning. The first is the playwright's meaning, which is the central concern or message of the play conveyed through the characters, dialogue and action as scripted by the dramatist. The second level of meaning is personal and involves the knowledge,

understanding and beliefs that each individual reader, actor and member of the audience brings to the play. The final level of meaning is the cultural meaning: those contexts, attitudes and values that are apparent in the play and are part of the time and place in which it was written.

8.2 RECONSTRUCTING THE TEXT

Once you have deconstructed a play text for meaning, you then need to reconstruct it as a piece of theatre with all the complex interweaving of characterisation, form, style, dramatic elements and elements of production. A play can read extremely well on the page and yet lose all its energy and interest, as well as its meaning, in performance. The text must come to life on stage to work as a piece of theatre.

As well as bringing a text to life, you must also make it meaningful. To do this you need to identify and then balance the three levels of meaning which belong to that particular text. If you feel that the playwright's meaning is overwhelmingly important, then you will concentrate on the characterisation and action to make sure the message is clear. Time and place are almost irrelevant in Samuel Beckett's plays, and the cultural context is far less important than the grim existential message—life is absurd and there is no god, no meaning and no future. Whatever your personal beliefs, this is the meaning you need to realise fully when working with any text by Beckett.

Jean Johnstone, Jean Weisz, Suzanne Schrag, Julia Willhite and Susan Forrest in a production of *Lear's Daughters*

If the playwright's message is simple and straightforward, and it is the cultural meaning of the play that is interesting, then your focus will be on the stylised performance and stagecraft elements which enhance that cultural context. Restoration comedy is most noted for its clever satire of human follies and the way the plays create the extraordinary society of Restoration England, and this is what gives the plays their vitality and meaning on stage.

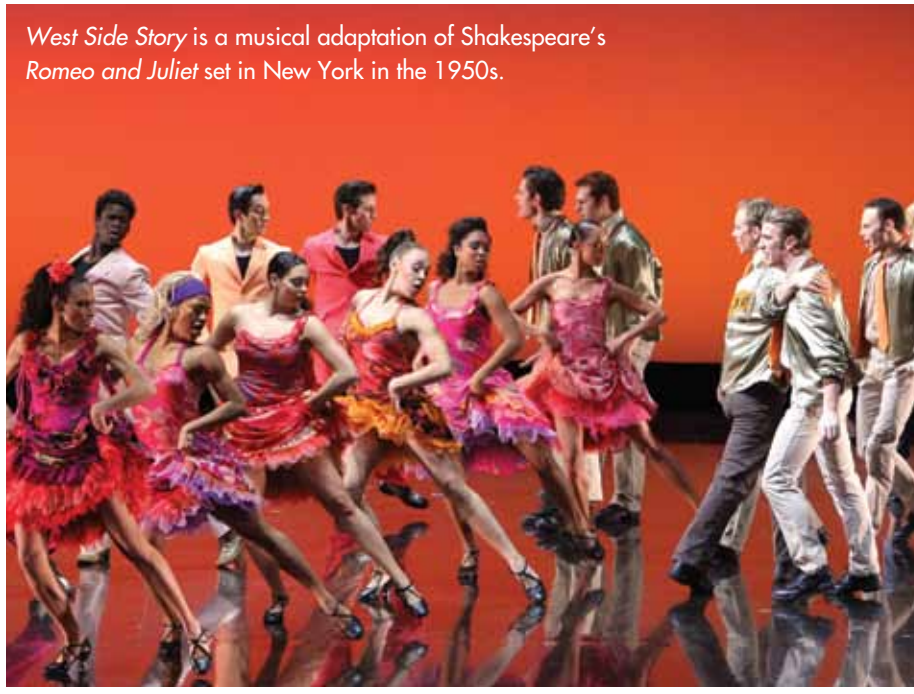
On the other hand, your personal beliefs and understanding might lead you to challenge the cultural context of a play that you might find personally unacceptable in some way. You have already seen in chapter 7 how the director can function as a creative artist, transforming the period or the context of a play and working with the

actors to reinterpret the characters and their relationships. Having deconstructed the cultural context of a play, you might therefore decide to make the unacceptable hidden messages and assumptions as apparent and obvious as the playwright's intended message. Your reconstruction of the text might change the time, place, characters, dialogue or even the sequence of the play to achieve your intention.

A word of warning: the modernising of plays for its own sake can destroy the whole texture and quality of the play. Most modernisations of Shakespeare contribute little to the plays and can often wipe out the intensely imagined world that the text contains. If you have an overriding social, political or personal agenda you wish to bring to the theatre, it is possible to do it far more creatively by devising your own play, rather than imposing it on an existing work. If you want to do a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, you can set it among the street gangs of Los Angeles today, as Baz Luhrmann did in his film. Alternatively, you can use the play as a pretext and create a new work of theatre, as was done with *West Side Story*.

The most radical reconstructions of Shakespeare's texts were done by the German writer/director Heiner Müller. The most famous of these is *Hamletmachine*, a combination of the original play and Müller's own writing.

Similarly, there have been feminist productions of *King Lear* that focus on the way Lear treats his daughters. These reinterpretations of the play present Lear as a dominating, destructive father who deserves what he suffers at the hands of Goneril and Regan. While these reconstructions of the play offer interesting interpretations, they lose most of the tragic power and impact of the original play. A more striking and memorable feminist representation of the story is *Lear's Daughters*, devised by Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group in London. The group improvised their own dialogue and situations for the three daughters and also created the character of the mother. The result is a stunning piece of theatre in its own right that carries with it the resonances of the original play. The achievement is similar in form and quality to Tom Stoppard's use of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.



West Side Story is a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* set in New York in the 1950s.

On the other hand, many extraordinary productions of significant plays have been strongly informed by the personal meanings brought to them by the actors and the director. Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* was originally a psychological study of a boy who blinded horses. The original director of the play, John Dexter, developed the surreal elements of the work. He introduced the extraordinary metal horses' heads and staged the play on a circular stage where the actors sat and watched, and then stepped into the action. The meaning of the play was deepened and made richer by involving the subconscious world of sexuality, ritual and dreams. The actor Colin Blakely, who played the psychiatrist Dysart in this production, brought to his performance an extraordinary intensity and complexity that made the character far more important than in the original text. Both the playwright and the director picked up on this reconstruction of the text, and the character of Dysart was expanded in the text and in performance. A third, cultural layer was added to the text: the problem confronting individuals in the modern, materialistic world with the loss of religious faith and the disappearance of any metaphysical understanding of the nature of humanity.

The purpose of reconstructing a text as performance is essentially to make dramatic meaning that communicates powerfully and appropriately. You can focus intensely on one meaning to the exclusion of others if you believe that this is the essence of the text. Alternatively, you can work to communicate a range of meanings—textual, cultural and personal—if this is what makes the text worthwhile as a piece of theatre.

Ruby Moon

by Matt Cameron

The central focus of this text (and the alternatives suggested) is the relationship between women and men in marriage, a subject that is found in more plays throughout the history of theatre than any other.

Ruby Moon is a contemporary Australian play that has become internationally recognised as a major work of theatre. It was first staged in 2003 and has been performed throughout Australia and in Europe a number of times during the past decade.

The play is set in the suburbs of an Australian city. Ruby Moon, a 10 year old girl, has gone missing, simply vanishing on the way to visit her grandmother. Despite a police investigation and all the efforts of the parents, Sylvie and Ray, there is no trace of her. The mother and father cannot believe she is gone and are unable to accept the reality of living without her. They continue to behave as though Ruby is still alive and keep returning to the events of Ruby's disappearance. They place a child-sized mannequin wearing Ruby's dress on their front lawn. They also visit the other residents of their street, hunting for the truth about Ruby's disappearance. Each person they interview gives hints that implicate another neighbour.

The constant searching and the questioning of the neighbours appear to be a way to numb their grief and sense of loss. Ray and Sylvie look for different things in their searches and hear and see different things from each other. When they return home, they hardly communicate. They are trapped by the horror of what has happened; their lives and their marriage are frozen.

Ruby Moon is a play about a marriage in crisis. The disappearance of Ruby has shattered Sylvie and Ray's relationship. The imaginary games that define their relationships are elaborate and complicated.

The play has an episodic structure that flows between past and present. The roles of the neighbours are all played by the actors who portray Sylvie and Ray, and these other characters are all bizarre and extreme. The play increasingly challenges us to decide whether these characters actually exist at all, or are figments of the couple's imaginations—part of the elaborate game they are playing to cope with their grief and despair.

Alternative texts

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

Look Back in Anger by John Osborne

Ruby Moon, Epilogue

Ray **I'm not the one shovelling painkillers down my throat.**

Sylvie **Only to escape your gallery of madmen** [As Carl] **'Dear lady, it's the black hole. It's ravenous.'**

Ray [As Dawn] **'God made the seas**
God made the lakes
God made me
Well, we all make mistakes'

[They laugh a little then stop, broken. Silence]

Sylvie **Was there a child, Ray? Was there ever once actually a little girl?**

RAY Don't, Sylvie. That's too far.

SYLVIE But what about the Gallows boy? We made him up.

RAY We had to.

SYLVIE Was she really taken from us, Ray?

RAY You know she was.

SYLVIE Tell me what we know, Ray. It helps when you tell me what we know.

RAY *[breaking down]* We know that once upon a time there was a little girl called Ruby Moon.

SYLVIE Past tense.

RAY We know that she set off to visit her grandma at the end of the street but she never arrived.

SYLVIE Our prized Ruby. Our gem.

RAY We can't keep doing this every night. We can't keep riding into this tunnel.

SYLVIE This is our train.

RAY We're facing the wrong way, Sylvie, We can only look back. And nothing lies ahead because all we can see is what's already passed.

SYLVIE But we can see the light. It's back where we came from.

RAY We can't keep blaming ourselves. Or even those around us.

SYLVIE Then who? Who?!

[She weeps. He pulls himself together for her.]

RAY What if … what if it was a stranger?

SYLVIE Do you know?

RAY It's so obvious …

SYLVIE Tell me.

RAY Who else could it be …?

SYLVIE Ray …?

RAY We told her to never trust a stranger …

SYLVIE Which stranger? Who? You tell me who!

[She clutches at him. He hums the 'Greensleeves' tune.]

But haven't we thought of him before?

RAY I remember now. When I bought the ice-cream I saw the signed photo of Veronica stuck up on the inside wall of the van.

[SYLVIE hums 'Greensleeves'.]

SYLVIE Da da da da, da-da da da da …

[He hums with her. She smiles.]

Yes … it must be him! We should call Detective Holloway!

RAY We will, baby. First thing in the morning.

[He offers her pills and a glass of water.]

Try and get some sleep. The sun will be up soon.

SYLVIE My head will be clearer tomorrow …

[She takes a pill. This time she swallows it.]

Ray …? Maybe it was the telephone repairman …?

RAY Yes, baby. Maybe it was.

SYLVIE Or the wizard? Do you think it was the wizard?

RAY You never know.

SYLVIE We'll get him tomorrow night.

RAY Of course we will.

SYLVIE I still don't trust others.

RAY I know.

[The telephone rings. They stare at it.]

Are you going to get that?

SYLVIE You can hear it ringing?

[He nods. They stare at the telephone. She moves to answer it. Just as her hand reaches for the receiver the phone stopes ringing.]

Do you think it was her?

[Ray opens the worn leather book at the last page.]

RAY *[reading]* 'Flaming Tree Grove was stilled like a painting
Black birds on the wire on the verge of fainting
As the horizon burned and the flames licked higher
A little angel disappeared down the corridor of fire.'

SYLVIE Don't let it end like that, Ray …

[RAY closes the book. The sound of the naïve piano refrain echoes.]

It can't end like that …

[The full moon shines blood-red with increasing intensity. The naïve piano refrain reverberates with a shy RUBY singing.]

RUBY *[singing, voice-over]* 'She's not in the room
She's not outside
Hide from the world
The curtain girl …
Behind the curtain girl.'

[The lights slowly fade to leave the parents silhouetted by the blood-red moon with the rocking horse rocking slowly back and forth and the RUBY mannequin standing sentinel. Blackout.]

THE END

Ruby Moon by Matt Cameron, Currency Press, Sydney, 2005.

Justin Smith and Jaime Mears in a Sydney Theatre Company production of *Ruby Moon*

The meaning of the text

Matt Cameron describes his play *Ruby Moon* as 'a story about a little girl who sets off to visit her grandma, just like a fairytale, but never arrives. The child randomly taken from our midst is an all-too-common tragedy which threatens us in a deeply primal way.' In performance we need therefore to create believable, complex characters for Sylvie and Ray as real parents who have lost their child. The techniques of Stanislavski and Grotowski that we investigated in section one give us the skills and understanding to do this.

In the play, Ruby is a very real presence even though she does not exist on stage. The mannequin in her clothes is visible throughout. She is spoken about constantly, but never speaks. Yet she dominates the play and the lives of the parents. In performance it is essential to create the sense of Ruby's presence on stage, directing focus towards the mannequin when talking about Ruby, and interacting with it as though it is Ruby.

Ruby Moon is also a journey into the subconscious fears and anxieties that simmer beneath our calm and prosperous lives. There is a strong sense in the play of the loss of innocence as individuals and as a society. The playwright portrays the suburban neighbourhood, once so safe and secure, as a distorted nightmare. We can use the physical theatre acting techniques from section one and the staging and technical elements from chapters 6 and 7 to create the surreal world of the street on stage.

Cultural meanings

When a child goes missing anywhere in the world and can't be found, it can become the subject of intense media and public interest. The idea that children can just disappear, be taken and never return, threatens us all, both personally and as a society. The Lindy Chamberlain case, which involved the disappearance of a baby, Azaria, at Uluru in 1980 has become part of our national consciousness.

Ruby Moon also taps into the subconscious fear of the unknown and death that is part of childhood and our memories. There is a symbolic and mythic level to the text, with references to some archetypal children's stories—*Little Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Alice in Wonderland*. The suburbs are where we live, where our homes, our families and our security are found. *Ruby Moon* challenges the assumption that the neighbourhoods we have created for ourselves are safe by reminding us how vulnerable children are and how easily they can be taken. In performance, the anxiety, the dread and the despair that Sylvie and Ray experience are essential to their emotional dimension.

Secondly, we are shown a surreal and frightening image of a suburban street in the play, inhabited by extreme and nightmarish residents. Modern parents are much more protective of children and much more anxious about their safety than in the past, and the neighbours in the play represent these fears. The performances of the characters of the neighbours need to create their frightening, nightmare presences, and the non-realistic acting techniques studied in section one, especially stylised movement, are useful here.

At the same time, the play suggests the possibility that these characters are figments of the imaginations of the parents, created as part of an elaborate ritual that both sustains them and traps them. The psychological phenomenon of married couples playing elaborate games in their relationships is a significant thread in many plays. It is important when creating the roles of the other characters in *Ruby Moon* to show their exaggerated and caricatured dimensions and to indicate in performance that they may be fantasies created by Sylvie and Ray.

Personal meanings

As individual audience members, the play communicates with us on a number of levels. For all of us, the fear of the unknown and the sense of vulnerability we experienced as children remains with us to some extent. *Ruby Moon* may remind us of the fragility of life and of happiness and security.

Ruby Moon is also a powerful exploration of grief and the way it incapacitates us as human beings. At the same time, it delves into the complex strategies people evolve to deal with unbearable grief. Although Sylvie and Ray are both deeply damaged by their loss, and have constructed their elaborate fantasies together, they often react differently and are at different stages in their grief. Sylvie feels overwhelming responsibility and guilt for Ruby's disappearance, and this is crucial to performing the role. There are indications in the play that Ray wants to move on and begin living again, and these need to be emphasised in his interactions with Sylvie, both in actual dialogue and in movement.

There are interesting ambiguities and possibilities in the characters of the neighbours. How we interpret their level of reality and their natures will condition how we perform them on stage. Are they the playwright's surreal version of the darkness that lies beneath the surface of the suburbs? Are they Sylvie's and Ray's distorted versions of the people in their street? Or are they total fantasies, created by Sylvie and Ray as part of the game they play to contain their grief? How we realise these roles on stage will depend on how we answer these questions.

SECTION THREE

IMPROVISATION AND PLAYBUILDING

3

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most complex but also rewarding task in drama is to invent a performance text yourself and then mould it into a complete piece of theatre, either as part of an ensemble or individually as a solo performance. To achieve this task successfully, you need to have the expressive ability to create interesting and credible characters (as we did in section one) and secondly, you must be able to call on a range of knowledge and skills related to the contexts of performance (which we explored in section two).

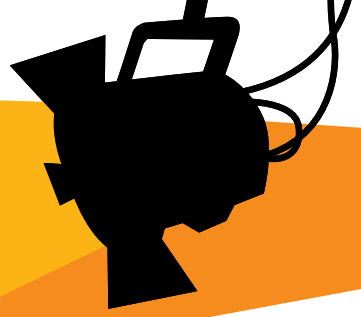
The process of improvisation requires you to experiment freely with ideas, situations and characters. It is vitally important to be willing to respond positively to the work of others, and to be creative in offering possibilities for dramatic development yourself.

Special skills are required to achieve success in improvised work. Remember that spontaneity is a key ingredient in all drama, but particularly in improvisation. It is vital that you react immediately and imaginatively when you are involved in dramatic situations and characters. Cooperation is just as essential in drama, and you must cultivate the skill of working with others to develop a worthwhile piece of drama to which everyone contributes.

Many of your improvisations will remain unperformed, either as process drama or work in progress. Others will develop into full, rehearsed performances as solo and ensemble plays. Regardless of the outcomes of your improvised work, it is the process of dramatic creation that is unique to this form of drama.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PROCESS OF IMPROVISATION



Improvisation is a completely natural activity and is simply an extension of the way children play. All children have the ability to pretend they are someone else, or to pretend they are in a completely different place, and then to behave as though what they are pretending is real.

This kind of make-believe is the beginning of improvisation. When you improvise, you imagine that you are someone else, that you are experiencing a particular situation or that you are living in an imaginary environment. True improvisation begins when you start living the life of another person, or behaving as though you really are living in a different place or in different circumstances.

While we all have the ability to improvise naturally, at senior level you also need to have at your command a range of fundamental skills and techniques that will enable your improvisations to function as worthwhile learning experiences. In this section you will work on creating complex improvisations that challenge and enrich your use of your imagination, and increase your ability to communicate with others.

Most of all, improvisation allows us to have a whole range of human experiences which would otherwise be denied us. It provides not just a single learning experience, but an infinite number of them. Each time you improvise, a new and unique experience occurs. With each improvisation, you can learn something different about yourself and other people.

When you apply the techniques of improvisation to texts, stories or materials from other periods in history and from other cultures, you are also able to share imaginatively in the lives and experiences of other people and other societies that are very different from your own.

All the great theatre innovators and teachers of acting used improvisation extensively to help their actors develop performance skills, and in many cases created new plays through improvisation.

9.1 IMPROVISATION

SPONTANEOUS IMPROVISATION

It is never easy to be spontaneous, that is, to respond immediately and positively to a new situation without hesitation or embarrassment. Most people, even professional actors, find spontaneous improvisation very difficult. They find it almost impossible to become a different person in a different situation without having time to plan or prepare.

The ability to be spontaneous, always open and ready to accept new experiences, is obviously an extraordinarily valuable skill to have as an actor. We are all born with it and as children we all have an intense desire to explore the world around us, and to react with complete naturalness to all the experiences we encounter.

As we grow up we become more self-conscious and learn to dislike doing certain things and to be afraid of attempting others. Most of all, we acquire an awareness of embarrassment, which prevents us from trying anything that might make us appear stupid, peculiar or inadequate. Because of this self-consciousness, we tend to 'block' people when they approach us, instead of responding to them. This happens all too often in our daily lives, as well as in improvisations.

Blocking

Blocking is a way of saying 'no' to people. It denies them the development of their conversation, imagination or emotions, by being negative about it.

Consider the following simple example. A friend approaches you with great enthusiasm and asks, 'How do you like my new jeans?' You reply, 'They don't fit you properly.' Whatever your motive for being so negative, the effect is to block your friend's enjoyment and to spoil his or her pleasure in sharing that enjoyment with you.

Offering and accepting

In improvisation, as in life, you learn to offer and accept, not to block. When you respond spontaneously and positively to everyone around you, you become much more intellectually and emotionally alive. You need to learn to offer your own ideas, reactions and feelings freely and openly, and to accept what other people offer with complete willingness. If you can learn this skill in spontaneous improvisation, you can use it as a life skill too.

People who are really skilled at spontaneous improvisation seem to be almost telepathic, as though they are able to read the minds of their partners. This is because they are able to respond instantly and openly to everything that happens. They have learned not to limit their imaginations and emotions.

Positive blocking

Naturally there will be times in our dramas when an improvisation is simply not working, or a context you have created that causes disagreements or conflict between people. There will equally be times in your life where you find yourself in unsatisfactory situations where you are unable to agree or work with the people around you. Instead of simply saying 'no' in our improvisations and in these situations, you should try to use 'positive blocking' to change what is happening to make it more acceptable or effective. Positive blocking involves accepting what is happening but attempting to redirect or refine the drama or the situation.

Here is an example: A group of friends are trying to decide what to do about someone who is behaving badly. This could be either a real or dramatised situation—the use of positive blocking would be the same.

JOHN	Let's go and push his face in.
KIM	No, let's just completely ignore him.
JOHN	No, we've got to do something about it.
TRISH	I agree, but maybe we should try talking to him first.
KIM	He won't listen.
TRISH	You're probably right, but let's give it a try. If it doesn't work, we could try your suggestion.
JOHN	I still say bash him.
TRISH	I understand how you feel John, but let's try sorting it out with him first. Maybe we could get Phil to come with us—he's good at talking to people.

Positive blocking such as this allows you to change a situation by introducing new possibilities, and provides people with the opportunity to modify what they are saying or doing. It is part of being positive and spontaneous, having the self-confidence to respond to other people and other performers in ways that respect their contribution while affirming your own.

INTERCULTURAL

Theatrical improvisation is used extensively in theatre for development in Africa and Asia. Theatre groups work with villagers and townspeople to improvise the problems and issues they face and try out solutions in performance.

Would you classify this as an example of blocking, offering and accepting, or positive blocking?

ROLE IMPROVISATIONS

During your lifetime you will live out a number of different roles, for example as children, brothers and sisters, parents, workers, employers, friends, neighbours and so on. Some of the roles you choose for yourself, such as when you take a particular job, form a friendship or marry. Other roles are given to you, particularly during childhood and adolescence.

There are many other 'fantasy' roles you would love to experience but might not be able to, such as film star, sporting hero, top model, millionaire, successful artist. Also, there are roles that are not available to you yet, such as parent, teacher, employer or public figure.

Improvisation allows you to explore all these lifestyles. In improvisation you take on a different identity and try to act the way you believe that person would actually behave. Taking on a different role requires a high level of commitment. It is not enough in a family improvisation just to do what a father or mother does. If you choose to take on the role of a parent, then you must endeavour to think and feel as parents really do in particular situations.

Improvisation is like taking off one mask—your own—and putting on a different one.

It is essential to avoid caricature in improvisation. It is always tempting to exaggerate certain characteristics when you are creating a role, or to imitate performances you have seen on film or television. Real human beings are far more interesting and complicated. Role improvisation demands that you use your knowledge of human behaviour, all your experiences, and your intelligence and emotions to become a different person—someone believable and complex, who behaves in a way that is consistent with the role you have created.

If you do this, you will be able to use role improvisations to seriously explore a multitude of unfamiliar experiences you will never have the opportunity to encounter in reality. When you imaginatively create an extreme role, like that of a world leader or a person condemned to death, you extend both your imaginative range and your understanding of the world.

It is equally important to show a genuine level of commitment when exploring roles that are familiar to you, such as the roles of child or parent, student or teacher. An intense level of involvement in role improvisations like these will allow you to correct mistakes that you made in the past, and prepare you for future experiences.

Psychologists regard role reversal as a very valuable way of helping people to understand the reasons others behave the way they do (developing empathy), and to become more aware of their own behaviour.

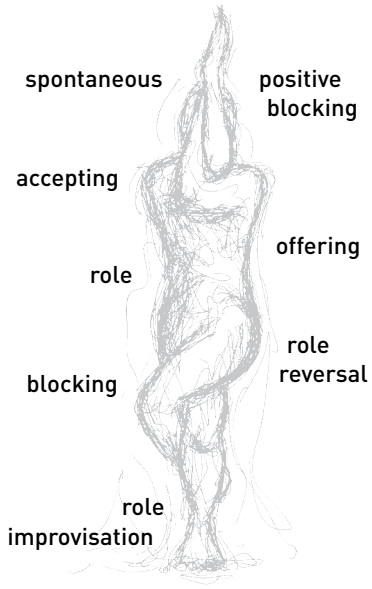
Role reversal

The technique of role improvisation is extremely valuable in heightening your sense of self, and in making you more aware of your relationships with others. One way of using it to develop sensitivity to the thoughts and feelings of people around us is role reversal, where you deliberately take on a role opposite to your normal one.

This means that in improvisations involving families you would create the role of a parent, in school situations you would become the teacher, and in work situations you would improvise the role of the employer. You should consciously and deliberately take on roles like these, which are opposite to your own, as often as possible.

As well as the other benefits of role improvisation, role reversal helps you to develop the valuable quality of empathy, which we explored in unit one. It makes you see the world from another person's point of view, and very often their point of view is the opposite of your own. You can create a valuable learning experience for yourself when you improvise the role of a parent with teenage children, or a teacher with a class of senior students, or an employer with young, part-time employees.

If you commit yourself to the role, behaving as you know that person would, then you will learn a great deal about the reasons for people's behaviour. If the improvisation really works and you are genuinely involved in your role, you will have the opportunity of seeing the world through another person's eyes.



Key terms in improvisation

WORKSHOP: SPONTANEOUS IMPROVISATION

Exercise 1: Working in pairs, begin an improvisation in which you choose the character you want to be and start to behave as that person. Your partner should accept your character and the situation, and then respond to it. For example, if you choose the role of a parent who is angry with a child, your partner should accept the role of the child and respond to your anger as a child would.

Exercise 2: In pairs, work on some spontaneous improvisations that involve positive blocking. You could choose to be asking something unreasonable or causing an argument or behaving badly. In each case your partner should reply 'Yes, but …' and try to resolve the situation.

Exercise 3: Work in a group of four or five and build up an improvisation, beginning with just one person starting to improvise, then the rest of the group joining in one by one. When you join in the improvisation, you should accept what has already happened and try to offer a character and some actions that will help the improvisation to develop.

Exercise 4: Try building a number of improvisations in this manner. Make each improvisation completely spontaneous, choosing only the order in which each of you will enter the improvisation. Plan nothing else beforehand.

WORKSHOP: ROLE IMPROVISATION

Exercise 1: Working in pairs, both of you will improvise roles you would really like to experience. Begin by sitting side by side. Imagine you are passengers on a plane. Close your eyes and take a number of deep, slow breaths. Now concentrate on creating your role, deciding your name, age, job, position or status, where you are travelling and why. Take your time, creating your role as completely as possible. When you are ready, you and your partner should begin talking to each other in character, acting as strangers who have just met on the plane.

Exercise 2: Still in pairs, improvise situations that you have both experienced which involved some conflict, such as an argument with a friend, a fight with a brother or sister, or a clash with an adult. Make the roles you create as real as possible, and in your improvisation see if you can resolve the problem by understanding how the other person felt.

Exercise 3: In pairs or small groups, explore some role reversal situations in which you take on roles such as teachers, parents, police, doctors, employers or other adults. Also experiment with situations in which behaviour is reversed such as a group of girls treating one boy the way groups of boys may behave towards a girl on her own.

9.2 ENSEMBLE PLAYBUILDING

Ensemble playbuilding is improvisation at its most complex. It involves a group working together cooperatively as a team to develop a character, an idea or a situation into a performance text and then rehearsing and staging that text as a fully realised play.

Operating as an ensemble to improvise a play is all about cooperation and teamwork. The skills of spontaneous improvisation are essential here, particularly being open to new ideas and experiences, and being able to use both acceptance and positive blocking. A true ensemble is one in which each member of the group works in harmony with all the others towards the achievement of a worthwhile performance.

There are a number of ways to use the process of improvisation to build an ensemble performance. One way is to use a group of interesting texts that all deal with a similar experience. This is a very effective way of creating an improvised play.

Another way to develop an improvised play is to build the performance step by step, beginning with a single idea and then improvising each scene, developing a text and the actual performance at the same time.

An third approach is to use a concept map structure. You begin by taking a large piece of paper and drawing a circle in the middle, big enough to write in the title and subtitle of your play. Each member of the ensemble does this individually on their own sheet of paper. The circle is left empty for the moment while you brainstorm all your ideas for a play, writing down words and phrases, or even making sketches about characters, situations, settings, action, style, costumes, music—any idea at all which comes to you.

You then look at each other's brainstorming notes and add anything you feel might fit in with the concepts on each sheet of paper. Returning to your paper, you underline or highlight the words, phrases, sketches etc. that now appeal to you as offering interesting possibilities, and you also add any new ideas you have gained. Join these underlined or highlighted words and phrases together by lines. If possible, use different coloured lines for different elements of the drama such as themes, characters, plot, styles and stagecraft.

You now try to synthesise everything on your concept map into a title and subtitle for your ensemble play. The title needs to be something brief and dramatic to catch the attention. The subtitle should provide some information about the play, perhaps briefly summing up the plot or describing the main character. Your title and subtitle are now written in the empty circle and might read something like the following: 'Mind Games: She manipulated everyone she met—until her victims struck back!'

The next stage in the concept mapping is for the ensemble to select some key ideas to begin improvising into a text. This can be done by simply choosing a concept map that everyone particularly likes, or taking ideas and possibilities from a number of maps and weaving them together into a mosaic. Similarly, there might be one title and subtitle that stands out, or the ensemble might combine a number of possibilities.

For example, one member of the ensemble might have conceived of setting the play in a space station above the Earth in the future, where the station is a transit stop for people travelling to the planets. Characters from a number of other concept maps could be woven into this setting. An idea from another concept map, such as a dream predicting the future, could also be used.

As each possibility is introduced into the central concept that has been chosen, it can be improvised to see how well it integrates into the text. In this way the play is built, not scene by scene but concept by concept, until there is a complete text that has been created cooperatively through the sharing of ideas.

Australia's Frank Theatre (also known as Ozfrank), which uses Suzuki and other Asian theatre techniques, worked as an ensemble to create a musical by interpreting eight songs by Australian musician Nick Cave through movement, and building the play around them.

Up Jumped the Devil is an ensemble play that uses the songs of Nick Cave as inspiration.

MODELS OF IMPROVISED ENSEMBLE PLAYS

The following case studies illustrate two successful examples of plays that were improvised by drama students using both scene-building and concept mapping techniques to create and develop their performances. The first model involves a full public performance and video recording. The second piece, 'The Refuge', was a process drama in which the audience were also the actors, becoming characters living in the refuge.

Improvising a reflection

A group of English girls and boys studying 'A' Level (Year 12) Drama in London decided to use their area of special interest to reflect on an experience some of them had shared. Two of the girls and one of the boys in the group had worked together as a singing trio, performing professionally at a number of rock concerts and recording an album. They decided they would like to show how the pop music business exploited them and other performers. They also wanted to demonstrate the positive side of their experience—the sheer excitement of performing and how some people in the pop industry, such as their agent, were honest, caring and worthwhile people.

The others in the drama group agreed, and the six students worked together to improvise and then script a performance, which they finally dramatised as a television video (30 minutes running time). The drama was set in a club where the singing trio were performing and showed them preparing for the performance, singing in the concert, and then backstage afterwards. The other students created the major acting roles—the agent, the club manager and another singer, the star of the concert. The rest of the class agreed to be the audience at the club.

As well as scripting the drama, the group also composed their own songs, which were used in Brechtian fashion to comment on the story. The main song was entitled 'Exploitation'. Another of Brecht's techniques was used during the concert. The singing trio suddenly froze, the music stopped, and one of the girls stepped off the stage area into the audience and began to talk to them, describing the joy of singing to an audience, and explaining how this made her willing to accept the humiliating treatment she received off-stage. This use of alienation was extremely effective.

In their written reports on their work, each member of the group included a copy of the script and described in detail the contribution he or she had made. They also explained what they had set out to achieve and, after watching the video a number of times, gave a written analysis of their degree of success in attaining their goals.

This piece of performance drama, created by the students themselves and made into a television program, was a powerful and revealing reflection of the personal experiences of the students, and a fascinating revelation of the understanding of those experiences.

The Refuge—reflecting on empathy

This was a highly effective workshop conducted by three people with a group of senior students. The aim of the workshop was to create the experience of empathy—to feel the emotions and have the experiences of another person. To achieve this, the workshop used Stanislavski's techniques for creating a character.

To begin the workshop, the group was told that they were the residents of a new refuge or hostel for homeless people that had just opened in the city. The refuge was for people of all ages who were temporarily homeless: people from interstate, teenagers leaving home, people who had left or lost their previous accommodation and others who could not afford anywhere else to live.

The drama area was divided up into various spaces: kitchen, lounge, dormitories, supervisor's office and the social worker's room. The workshop leaders described their chosen characters to the group. One was the supervisor, the head of the refuge, a stern and unsympathetic man who was determined to run the place efficiently. The second decided to be a social worker, professional and detached in her manner, but determined to help all the residents as much as possible. The third chose to be a cook, capable enough at her job, but unfriendly and lazy, regarding the residents as a nuisance.

The process began with the workshop leaders taking the group through a series of exercises to help the students create a character. They began with concentration work, lying still with their eyes closed, taking slow, deep breaths. The workshop leaders asked a series of questions which the students had to answer inside their heads, taking on their characters as they did so. What is your name? How old are you? Where have you come from? Why did you leave? Why have you come to the refuge? Are you glad or unhappy to be here? What is your attitude to the staff and the other residents? How do you intend to behave?

Each question was asked slowly and clearly, with a pause of ten seconds or more between each question. This helped the students to build their belief in their characters. After the last question, there was complete silence for a minute while the students intensified their involvement with their characters.

The workshop leader taking the role of the supervisor then ordered everyone to stand up, and went around with a clipboard taking down details of names, ages and previous addresses. The social worker wandered around talking to people, offering help and advice, while the cook nagged, bullied and complained.

The drama continued for almost an hour, with the workshop leaders in character helping to sustain both action and belief. The longer it went on, the more the students became involved with their own characters and with each other. The level of imaginative reality was complete. To end it, the supervisor ordered everyone to sit down and close their eyes. As themselves, the workshop leaders then took the students through a relaxation exercise, relaxing each muscle in their bodies in turn.

The workshop concluded with a 20 minute discussion about the experience. Students were asked to describe what they did, how they felt, and how they reacted to other people. Many interesting observations were made about the characters students had chosen, whether they were like themselves or the exact opposite. Finally, each student was asked to analyse in writing what he or she actually experienced as a different person during the workshop, and what had been learned from that experience.

WORKSHOP: SPONTANEOUS IMPROVISATION

Exercise 1: In a group, create a piece of spontaneous improvisation. You may begin with an idea, an object or a piece of music, but that is the only preparation you are allowed. Start improvising, making sure you respond immediately and positively to everything that happens in the improvisation. Try to help it build and develop, and work on establishing and developing your role in it.

IMPROVISED PLAYBUILDING

Exercise 2: In groups, generate a polished improvisation based on your spontaneous one. You can work on the original situation you created, extending and structuring it, or you can take the characters you created and place them in a different situation.

CHAPTER TEN
ENSEMBLE PLAYBUILDING

We can use existing texts of different kinds as starting points for building plays through improvisation. As you know, anything that communicates meaning can be considered a text, from plays, novels, stories and poems to television programs, films, paintings, photographs, sculptures and music—the list is extensive. These texts can bring a greater depth of experience and understanding to your work, as well as providing you with a limitless range of dramatic situations and characters.

If you have a particular interest or concern that you wish to explore in drama, you can begin by researching that interest or concern to find as many relevant texts as possible. These texts can become the starting points, or pretexts, for your work, or you can actually weave segments from different texts into your playbuilding. By drawing on the lives and experiences of different people from different times and places that are revealed in these texts, you can work in ensembles to build plays that explore particular themes and concerns.

Let us look at a group of texts from different times and places which all have as their theme the experience of being different in some way from the rest of society. Once you have explored the texts, you can use them in a variety of ways for your own ensemble playbuilding.

10.1 EMBRACING DIFFERENCE: COLOUR

We are all different from one another. Every human being is unique, and even identical twins are completely separate, very different people. This uniqueness is one of the miracles of being human. In our society, many of the differences between people are regarded as perfectly normal, such as physical differences in height and physique, and different hair and eye colours. Other differences are tolerated, but the people who have them are often teased and ridiculed, such as foreigners who speak with an accent, eccentrics who behave or dress strangely, or people who are physically or mentally disabled. Worst of all, the human race has a grim history of maltreating and persecuting other human beings, not for anything they have actually done, but simply because they are different, perhaps in skin colour, religion, nationality or sex.

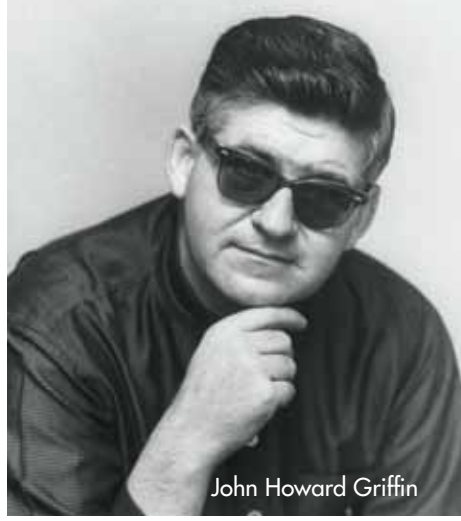
What does it feel like to be different? All of us have experienced the feeling many times in a number of small ways. In this chapter you will examine the writings of a number of people who have felt their differences very intensely and have described their experiences for us.

INVESTIGATING DISCRIMINATION

In 1959, a man consciously and deliberately set out to see what it felt like to be different. John Howard Griffin was an American journalist born in Dallas, Texas in 1920. He studied medicine in Paris and during the Second World War worked as a doctor with the French Resistance fighting against Hitler before joining the United States Army Air Force. He was badly wounded twice during the war.

A white man, Griffin decided to discover what it felt like to be black. In particular, he wanted to experience what it was like to be a black man living in the southern part of the USA in the 1950s. In states such as Georgia and Alabama, blacks were segregated from whites, forced by laws and the actions of white people to live in separate areas, attend separate schools, eat in separate cafes, and travel in the backs of buses and trains. Black people were treated as inferior simply because of the colour of their skin.

With the help of a doctor, Griffin became a black man using a combination of drugs, skin dyes and sessions under a sun lamp. Between November 1959 and August 1960 he travelled through the southern part of the USA, living as a black man. Afterwards, he described his experiences in a book, *Black Like Me*. This book went on to become a best-seller and was one of the influences leading to a series of civil rights laws passed by the American Government that finally gave black people equal legal rights by 1965.



John Howard Griffin

A film was made of *Black Like Me* in 1964. It had to be made in secrecy and filmed in a number of states of the USA because of the story and the multiracial cast and crew. The film was a failure at the box office. However, the book is still widely studied today.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

Black Like Me

by John Howard Griffin

Below is an extract from the book in which Griffin describes the treatment he received in the city of New Orleans from a number of different white people. In particular, he writes about the 'hate stare' he was given simply because his skin was black. Equally, he writes about the white people who treated him as an equal, like the woman in the Catholic bookshop. To her, he was a fellow human being, regardless of his skin colour.

Black Like Me

My money was running low so I decided to cash some traveller's cheques before leaving. The banks were closed, since it was past noon on Saturday, but I felt I would have no difficulty with traveller's cheques in any of the larger stores, especially those on Dryades [Street] where I had traded and was known as a customer.

I took the bus to Dryades and walked down it, stopping at the dime store where I'd made most of my purchases. The young white girl came forward to wait on me.

'I need to cash a traveller's cheque,' I said smiling.

'We don't cash any cheques of any kind,' she said firmly.

'But a traveller's cheque is perfectly safe,' I said.

'We just don't cash cheques,' she said and turned away.

'Look, you know me. You've waited on me. I need some money.'

'You should have gone to the bank.'

'I didn't know I needed money until after the banks closed,' I said.

I knew I was making a pest of myself but I could scarcely believe this nice young lady could be so unsympathetic, so insolent when she discovered I did not come in to buy something.

'I'll be glad to buy a few things,' I said.

She called up to the book-keeping department on an open mezzanine. 'Hey! Do we cash traveller's ch—'

'No!' the white woman shouted back.

'Thank you for your kindness,' I said and walked out.

I went into one store after the other along Dryades and Rampart Streets. In every store their smiles turned to grimaces when they saw I meant not to buy but to cash a cheque. It was not their refusal—I could understand that; it was the bad manners they displayed. I began to feel desperate and resentful. They would have cashed a traveller's cheque without hesitation for a white man. Each time they refused me, they implied clearly that I had probably come by these cheques dishonestly and they wanted nothing to do with them or me.

Finally, after I gave up hope and decided I must remain in New Orleans without funds until the banks opened on Monday, I walked towards town. Small gold lettering on the window of a store caught my attention: Catholic Book Store. Knowing the Catholic stand on racism, I wondered if this shop might cash a Negro's cheque. With some hesitation, I opened the door and entered. I was prepared to be disappointed.

'Would you cash a twenty-dollar traveller's cheque for me?' I asked the proprietress.

'Of course,' she said without hesitation, as though nothing could be more natural. She did not even study me.

I was so grateful I bought a number of paperback books—works of Maritain, Aquinas and Christopher Dawson. With these in my jacket, I hurried towards the Greyhound bus station.

In the bus lobby, I looked for signs indicating a coloured waiting-room, but saw none. I walked up to the ticket counter. When the lady ticket-seller saw me, her otherwise attractive face turned sour, violently so. This look was so unexpected and so unprovoked I was taken aback.

'What do you want?' she snapped.

Taking care to pitch my voice to politeness, I asked about the next bus to Hattiesburg.

She answered rudely and glared at me with such loathing I knew I was receiving what the Negroes call 'the hate stare'. It was my first experience with it. It is far more than the look of disapproval one occasionally gets. This was exaggeratedly hateful I would have been amused if I had not been so surprised.

I framed the words in my mind: 'Pardon me, but have I done something to offend you?' But I realised I had done nothing—my colour offended her.

'I'd like a one-way ticket to Hattiesburg, please,' I said and placed a ten-dollar bill on the counter.

'I can't change that big bill,' she said abruptly and turned away, as though the matter were closed. I remained at the window, feeling strangely abandoned but not knowing what else to do. In a while she flew back at me, her face flushed, and fairly shouted: 'I told you—I can't change that big bill.'

'Surely,' I said stiffly, 'in the entire Greyhound system there must be some means of changing a ten-dollar bill. Perhaps the manager—'

She jerked the bill furiously from my hand and stepped away from the window. In a moment she appeared to hurl my change and the ticket on the counter with such force most of it fell on the floor at my feet. I was truly dumbfounded by this deep fury that possessed her whenever she looked at me. Her performance was so venomous, I felt sorry for her. It must have shown in my expression, for her face congested to high pink. She undoubtedly considered it a supreme insolence for a Negro to dare to feel sorry for her.

I stooped to pick up my change and ticket from the floor. I wondered how she would feel if she learned that the Negro before whom she had behaved in such an unlady-like manner was habitually a white man.

With almost an hour before bus departure, I turned away and looked for a place to sit. The large, handsome room was almost empty. No other Negro was there, and I dared not take a seat unless I saw some other Negro also seated.

Once again a 'hate stare' drew my attention like a magnet. It came from a middle-aged, heavy-set, well-dressed white man. He sat a few yards away fixing his eyes on me. Nothing can describe the withering horror of this. You feel lost, sick at heart before such unmasked hatred, not so much because it threatens you as because it shows humans in such an inhuman light. You see a kind of insanity, something so obscene the very obscenity of it (rather than its threat) terrifies you. It was so new I could not take my eyes from the man's face. I felt like saying: 'What in God's name are you doing to yourself?'

A Negro porter sidled over to me. I glimpsed his white coat and turned to him. His glance met mine and communicated the sorrow, the understanding.

'Where am I supposed to go?' I asked him. He touched my arm in that mute and reassuring way of men who share a moment of crisis. 'Go outside and around the corner of the building. You'll find the room.'

The white man continued to stare, his mouth twisted with loathing as he turned his head to watch me move away.

Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin, Grafton Books, London, 1964.

Exercise 1: Working in pairs, re-enact some of the situations described in this extract. Decide on your characters and the situation first, and then improvise. Do not try to remember the exact words of the conversations, but concentrate on the emotional truth of the situation, creating the resentment and hostility of the shop assistants and/or ticket seller, and Griffin's response to them.

Exercise 2: This time, work in groups of three or four. Choose one member of your group who is physically different from the rest—in hair or eye colour, height or sex. Improvise an everyday situation in which that member of the group goes shopping, sightseeing, flat-hunting or looking for a job. The other members of the group decide how they will respond. It can be with hostility, by mocking the person who is different, or with no indication of prejudice at all.

Exercise 3: As a class, respond to the improvisations and, in particular, to the feelings and reactions of the students who were different.

10.2 EMBRACING DIFFERENCE: DISABILITY

Annie's Coming Out is an Australian film that tells a true story with close similarities to the life of Helen Keller. In the film, a social worker in an institution for disabled people discovers that a severely disabled child called Annie actually has a lively, intelligent brain. The film tells of the struggle to obtain Annie's release from the institution, and how she went on to live a rich, fulfilling life.

The story of Helen Keller is the true story of a severely disabled woman. She was born in the USA in 1880, the child of wealthy parents. Helen was born a normal child but suffered an illness as a baby that left her blind and deaf. As a result, she never learned to speak. Blind, deaf and dumb, she had suffered the loss of the three most important ways of communicating with the world around her. During her early childhood, Helen developed a number of simple signs and gestures to communicate her basic needs to her family.

In 1887 her parents hired a young woman named Annie Sullivan to look after Helen and try to teach her. Annie herself had been blind and, despite several operations on her eyes, she only had partial sight. Overcoming incredible difficulties, Annie taught the young Helen Keller to speak using sign language. Annie Sullivan was an extraordinary young woman, very different from most other women of her day. Helen proved to be even more exceptional, and went on to teach other disabled people, becoming an inspiration to blind and deaf people throughout the world.

WORKSHOP: EXPERIENCING BLINDNESS

Exercise 1: Working in pairs, take it in turns to close your eyes and experience blindness. First, guide your partner around the room, steering him or her from behind with hands on shoulders. Then take it in turns to guide each other without touching, just by giving instructions. Finally, start with your partner sitting with eyes closed in a chair. Lead him or her to the other side of the room and let go. Your partner must try to get back to the chair without any help at all. However, make sure you follow your partner and prevent any collisions or accidents.

Exercise 2: Improvise on the idea of trying to teach a simple, everyday activity to someone who is blind and deaf. See if you can use the methods Annie Sullivan used, and observe just how difficult it is to be unable to hear or see and how much it cuts you off from people around you.

Patty Duke as Helen Keller and Anne Bancroft as Annie Sullivan in the Broadway hit *The Miracle Worker*

The Miracle Worker

by William Gibson

The following scene is taken from the play *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson. Based on Helen Keller's life story, the play shows how Annie Sullivan saw through Helen's disabilities and recognised the intelligence and talent inside the child. Kate is Helen's mother and the Captain is her father.

This scene shows how difficult it was to teach Helen, and how painstaking and patient Annie had to be. Notice how the scene describes the actions of the characters in great detail. This will help you when you are working on improvisations of your own about blindness and deafness.

Exercise 1: In pairs, generate a performance based on the script.

The Miracle Worker, Act 2

[It is evening.

The only room visible in the Keller house is Annie's where by lamplight Annie in a shawl is at a desk writing a letter; at her bureau Helen in her customary unkempt state is tucking her doll in the bottom drawer as a cradle, the contents of which she has dumped out, creating as usual a fine disorder.

Annie mutters each word as she writes her letter, slowly, her eyes close to and almost touching the page, to follow with difficulty her penwork.]

Annie **'… and, nobody, here, has, attempted, to, control, her. The greatest, problem, I, have, is, how, to, discipline, her, without, breaking, her, spirit.'** *[Resolute voice]* **'But, I, shall, insist, on, reasonable, obedience, from, the start—'**

[At which point Helen, groping about on the desk, knocks over the inkwell. Annie jumps up, rescues her letter, rights the inkwell, grabs a towel to stem the spillage, and then wipes at Helen's hands; Helen as always pulls free, but not until Annie first gets three letters into her palm.]

Ink.

[Helen is enough interested in and puzzled by this spelling that she proffers her hand again; so Annie spells and impassively dunks it back in the spillage.]

Ink. It has a name.

[She wipes the hand clean, and leads Helen to her bureau, where she looks for something to engage her. She finds a sewing card, with needle and thread, and going to her knees, shows Helen's hands how to connect one row of holes.]

Down. Under. Up. And be careful of the needle—

[Helen gets it, and Annie rises.]

Fine. You keep out of the ink and perhaps I can keep out of—the soup.

[She returns to the desk, tidies it, and resumes writing her letter, bent close to the page.]

'These, blots, are, her, handiwork. I—'

[She is interrupted by a gasp: Helen has stuck her finger, and sits sucking at it, darkly. Then with vengeful resolve she seizes her doll, and is about to dash its brains out on the floor when Annie diving catches it in one hand, which she at once shakes with hopping pain but otherwise ignores, patiently.]

All right, let's try temperance.

[Taking the doll, she kneels, goes through the motion of knocking its head on the floor, spells into Helen's hand.]

Bad, girl.

[She lets Helen feel the grieved expression on her face. Helen imitates it. Next she makes Helen caress the doll and kiss the hurt spot and hold it gently in her arms, then spells into her hand:]

Good, girl.

[She lets Helen feel the smile on her face. Helen sits with a scowl, which suddenly clears; she pats the doll, kisses it, wreathes her face in a large artificial smile, and bears the doll to the washstand, where she carefully sits it. Annie watches, pleased.]

Very good girl—

[Whereupon Helen elevates the pitcher and dashes it on the floor instead. Annie leaps to her feet, and stands inarticulate; Helen calmly gropes back to sit with the sewing card and needle.

Annie manages to achieve self-control. She picks up a fragment or two of the pitcher, sees Helen is puzzling over the card, and resolutely kneels to demonstrate it again. She spells into Helen's hand.

Kate meanwhile coming around the corner with folded sheets on her arm, halts at the doorway and watches them for a moment in silence; she is moved, but level.]

Kate *[presently]* **What are you saying to her?**

[Annie glancing up is a bit embarrassed, and rises from the spelling, to find her company manners.]

Annie **Oh, I was just making conversation. Saying it was a sewing card.**

Kate **But does that—***[she imitates with her fingers]***—mean that to her?**

Annie **No. No, she won't know what spelling is till she knows what a word is.**

Kate **Yet you keep spelling to her. Why?**

Annie *[cheerily]* **I like to hear myself talk!**

Kate **The Captain says it's like spelling to the fence post.**

Annie *[a pause]* **Does he, now.**

Kate **Is it?**

Annie **No, it's how I watch you talk to Mildred.**

Kate **Mildred.**

Annie Any baby. Gibberish, grown-up gibberish, baby-talk gibberish, do they understand one word of it to start? Somehow they begin to. If they hear it, I'm letting Helen hear it.

Kate Other children are not—impaired.

Annie Oh, there's nothing impaired in that head, it works like a mousetrap!

Kate *[smiles]* But after a child hears how many words, Miss Annie, a million?

Annie I guess no mother's ever minded enough to count.

[She drops her eyes to spell into HELEN's hand, again indicating the card; HELEN spells back, and ANNIE is amused.]

Kate *[too quickly]* What did she spell?

Annie I spelt card. She spelt cake! *[She takes in KATE's quickness, and shakes her head, gently.]* No, it's only a finger-game to her, Mrs Keller. What she has to learn first is that things have names.

Kate And when will she learn?

Annie Maybe after a million and one words. *[They hold each other's gaze; KATE then speaks quietly.]*

Kate I should like to learn those letters, Miss Annie.

Annie *[pleased]* I'll teach you tomorrow morning. That makes only half a million each!

Kate *[then]* It's her bedtime.

[ANNIE reaches for the sewing card, HELEN objects, ANNIE insists, and HELEN gets rid of ANNIE's hand by jabbing it with the needle. ANNIE gasps, and moves to grip HELEN's wrists; but KATE intervenes with a proffered sweet, and HELEN drops the card, crams the sweet into her mouth, and scrambles up to search her mother's hands for more. ANNIE nurses her wound, staring after the sweet.]

I'm sorry, Miss Annie.

Annie *[indignantly]* Why does she get a reward? For stabbing me?

Kate Well—*[Then, tiredly.]* We catch our flies with honey, I'm afraid. We haven't the heart for much else, and so many times she simply cannot be compelled.

Annie *[ominous]* Yes. I'm the same way myself.

[KATE smiles, and leads HELEN off around the corner. ANNIE alone in her room picks up things and in the act of removing HELEN's doll gives way to unmannerly temptation: she throttles it. She drops it on her bed, and stands pondering. Then she turns back, sits decisively, and writes again, as the lights dim on her.]

[Grimly] 'The, more, I, think, the, more, certain, I, am, that, obedience, is, the, gateway, through, which, knowledge, enters, the, mind, of, the, child—'

The Miracle Worker by William Gibson, Pocket Publishing, New York, 2002.

10.3 EMBRACING DIFFERENCE: TEMPERAMENT

There is another kind of difference which is not physical at all, and yet it can be profound, and it relates to individuals who simply do not fit in with the people around them. The way they think and feel about the world is completely different from the thoughts and feelings of their families, their friends and the rest of society.

A different temperament like this is not a matter of personality. It means having completely different ideas and emotions from everyone else. People whose temperaments are very different are often rebellious and unhappy, and feel cut off from those around them.

WORKSHOP: TEMPERAMENT

Exercise 1: In pairs, improvise a parent–child situation in which the child has a totally different attitude to life from the parents. Try to resolve the conflict in some way.

Exercise 2: Working in groups of four or five, discuss and then improvise a family situation in which one member has a totally different temperament from the rest. Create a situation that explores this difference.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

My Brilliant Career

by Miles Franklin

Judy Davis as Sybylla in the film version of *My Brilliant Career*

The novel *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin tells the story of a girl who had the experience of being temperamentally different. Originally published in 1901, the book is a mixture of fiction and autobiography. Sybylla, the girl telling the story, was based on Miles Franklin herself, who wrote it while still a teenager. It tells of her upbringing in the Australian bush, most of it in real poverty and hardship, except for the times spent with her wealthy grandmother and aunt.

Throughout, Sybylla is regarded by almost everyone as difficult, irritating and unnatural. She feels trapped by the society she lives in and desperately longs for something more worthwhile and fulfilling than the life she is leading. In chapter six, when Sybylla is fifteen, she has a furious argument with her mother about her future. Sybylla mentions that she wants to become a musician, but her mother tells her that it is a ridiculous idea and accuses Sybylla of thinking herself too wonderful for her own good. Below is Sybylla's reply.

Miles Franklin left Australia in 1906 and lived in the USA and England, returning home in 1932. While overseas, she wrote a number of novels and was involved in feminist groups.

Exercise 1: In small groups, work through the text and use it to generate a short performance about the argument between Sybylla and her mother.

'I'm sure it's not any wish of mine that I'm born with inclinations for better things. If I could be born again, and had the designing of myself, I'd be born the lowest and coarsest-minded person imaginable, so that I could find plenty of companionship, or I'd be born an idiot, which would be better still.'

'Sybylla!' said my mother in a shocked tone. 'It is a wonder God doesn't strike you dead; I never heard—'

'I don't believe there is a God,' I said fiercely, 'and if there is, He's not the merciful being He's always depicted, or He wouldn't be always torturing me for His own amusement.'

'Sybylla, Sybylla! That I should ever have nurtured a child to grow up like this! Do you know that—'

'I only know that I hate this life. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it,' I said vehemently.

'Talk about going out to earn your own living! Why, there's not a woman living would have you in her house above a day. You are a perfect she-devil. Oh God!' And my mother began to cry. 'What have I done to be cursed with such a child? There is not another woman in the district with such a burden put upon her. What have I done? I can only trust that my prayers to God for you will soften your evil heart.'

'If your prayers are answered, it's more than ever mine were,' I retorted.

'*Your* prayers!' said my mother, with scorn. 'The horror of a child not yet sixteen being so hardened. I don't know what to make of you, you never cry or ask forgiveness. There's dear little Gertie now, she is often naughty, but when I correct her she frets and worries and shows herself to be a human being and not a fiend.' So saying my mother went out of the room.

'I've asked forgiveness once too often, to be sat upon for my pains,' I called out.

'I believe you're mad. That is the only feasible excuse I can make for your conduct,' she said as a parting shot.

'Why the deuce don't you two get to bed and not wrangle like a pair of cats in the middle of the night, disturbing a man's rest?' came in my father's voice from amid the bedclothes.

My mother is a good woman—a very good woman—and I am, I think, not quite all criminality, but we do not pull together. I am a piece of machinery which, not understanding, my mother winds up the wrong way, setting all the wheels of my composition going in creaking discord.

She wondered why I did not cry and beg forgiveness, and thereby give evidence of being human. I was too wrought up for tears. Ah, that tears might have come to relieve my overburdened heart! I took up the home-made tallow candle in its tin stick and looked at my pretty sleeping sister Gertie (she and I shared the one bed). It was as mother had said. If Gertie was scolded for any of her shortcomings, she immediately took refuge in tears, said she was sorry, obtained forgiveness, and straightaway forgot the whole matter. She came within the range of mother's understanding, I did not; she had feelings, mother thought, I had none. Did my mother understand me, she would know that I am capable of more depths of agony and more exquisite heights of joy in one day than Gertie will experience in her whole life.

Was I mad as mother had said? A fear took possession of me that I might be. I certainly was utterly different to any girl I had seen or known. What was the hot wild spirit which surged within me? Ah, that I might weep! I threw myself on my bed and moaned. Why was I not like other girls? Why was I not like Gertie? Why were not a new dress, everyday work, and an occasional picnic sufficient to fill my mind? My movements awakened Gertie.

'What is the matter, dear Sybylla? Come to bed. Mother has been scolding you. She is always scolding someone. That doesn't matter. You say you are sorry, and she won't scold any more. That's what I always do. Do get into bed. You'll be tired in the morning.'

'What does it matter if I will be. I wish I would be dead. What's the good of a hateful thing like I am being alive. No one wants or cares for me.'

'I love you, Sybylla, better than all the rest. I could not do without you,' and she put her pretty face to mine and kissed me.

What a balm to the tempest-tossed soul is a little love, though it may be fleeting and fickle! I was able to weep now, with wild hot tears, and with my sister's arms around me I fell asleep without undressing further.

My Brilliant Career by Miles Franklin, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2001.

10.4 PUTTING IT TOGETHER

As we observed at the outset, we are all different from each other, every one of us is a unique human being. The works we have looked at have given us just a few examples of the experience of being different. We have observed the behaviour of individuals and seen how their experiences of being different affected them. But the extracts in this chapter also emphasise just how much human beings share in common, despite their differences. The desire to live and explore the world, the need for care and affection, and the experience of powerful human emotions are part of our shared humanity.

In your own presentation, as you explore the experience of being different, try not to lose sight of those special elements we all share.

A POWERFUL STATEMENT

There is a work, first performed in the 1970s, which is an almost perfect fusion of all the techniques discussed. It was created by the black South African actors Winston Ntshona and John Kani and white South African writer Athol Fugard. Kani and

Sizwe Banzi Is Dead, directed by Athol Fugard at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1973 with John Kani (left) and Winston Ntshona (right)

Ntshona began by talking about their experiences as black South Africans. Then they improvised on their experiences, sometimes acting out things that had happened to them, sometimes creating imaginary people and situations that were still realistic, and sometimes entering a world of complete fantasy—a world of humour and horror that presented monstrous reflections of the reality of apartheid. As the two black men improvised, Athol Fugard began writing, structuring the real and imagined experiences of Kani and Ntshona into a play called *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*.

The play concerns a black man, Winston Ntshona, who wants to work in a white area but does not have the document he needs, the hated pass that controls the movements of black people in their own country. He finds a dead body in an alley and steals the man's clothes and his documents, including his pass. The dead man's name was Sizwe Banzi, and Winston takes on his identity in order to go on living and working in the city. However, Winston finds it unbearable having always to pretend to be someone else. He feels he is completely losing his own identity, his fundamental sense of self. At the end of the play, he throws away the clothes and tears up the pass. Sizwe Banzi is finally dead.

The play deals with a theme that concerned both Artaud and Brecht in their time: the way an unjust society can destroy the humanity of the people living in it. Most notably, *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* combines the techniques of ensemble and solo performance with great skill, subtlety and power.

In one scene, John Kani appeared as a police officer, just one of the dozens of roles he played. To create the role of the police officer, he simply wore an officer's hat and carried an official-looking clipboard. In the middle of the scene he suddenly left the stage and strode into the audience, yelling at the people sitting stunned in their seats, demanding their names and addresses. Most people meekly gave them.

Kani then demanded to see their passes, and the members of the audience had to confess they did not have any. Everyone in the audience was experiencing the same humiliation thousands of black people went through every day at that time in South Africa's history.

At another point in the play, Winston mourns for his wife and children who are thousands of miles away in one of the tribal homelands. He sings an African song, slow and mournful, and moves in a stylised, ritual dance. Although the words are incomprehensible to the audience, the song and the movement convey a sense of aching loss and longing.

A subtle use of techniques is involved in a scene in a photographer's studio where Winston goes to get a photo of himself to put on Sizwe Banzi's pass. John Kani began the scene by putting up a sign and pinning some photographs on a board. Then he walked across to the audience, held his hand out to one of them and said, 'Come with me'. He led the member of the audience to the board and showed him the photographs. They were pictures of Kani's wife and children, and he described each one with warmth and love.

This scene had an extraordinary effect on the audience. First of all, everyone identified with the person who had been chosen and listened, nervously but intently, to every word Kani said. When Kani talked to that one person, it was as though he talked to each member of the audience individually. They were all made vividly aware of this black man, not as an actor but as a human being with a family, just like themselves. Brecht-like, Kani had stepped out of character to talk to the audience. Artaud-like, he had involved the audience emotionally in his story.

The final, brilliant fusion of Artaud and Brecht occurred at the end of the play when Winston tears up the dead man's pass, takes off the dead man's clothes, turns to the audience and says, 'I am a man'. The shock of nudity and the emotional realisation of the truth of the words are pure Artaud. Yet the technique was also Brechtian. The actor had stepped out of role at the end of the play to deliver the final message to the audience.

Sizwe Banzi Is Dead has been described in detail because it is a model of what can be achieved in making a dramatic statement through ensemble playbuilding.

Embracing and exploring difference is a key theme in drama and theatre.

WORKSHOP: A PERFORMANCE ABOUT DIFFERENCE

Exercise 1: Your first challenge is to work in a group to create a dramatic presentation, ten to fifteen minutes in length, that explores the experience of being different in some way. You will need to work together for at least four weeks to create your presentation, and the following steps are essential.

a Discussion—It is vitally important that your group spends sufficient time in discussion to enable you to choose an experience that genuinely interests and involves all of you.

b Research—Investigate, in detail, the aspect of being different that you have chosen. If it is a disability of some kind, read about it but also try to speak to disabled people about their experiences. If the difference you are exploring has emotional causes, like anorexia, then make sure you discover what those emotional causes might be.

c Improvisation—It is not compulsory to script your presentation. The amount of written preparation is entirely up to you. What is essential is to experiment with the situation your group has chosen. Use improvisation to try out characters, ideas, conversations and actions. Continue improvising until you have achieved the presentation you planned.

d Characterisation—All the extracts we have studied were based on real-life experiences and conveyed a strong sense of reality. You must aim for the same sense of truth in your work, particularly in the character you create.

e Performance—Use all the techniques you have learned, both from improvisation and from the study of theatre, to make your actual performance as powerful and involving as possible. Remember that you want the rest of the class to share the experience you have explored.

Exercise 2: Submit an essay of approximately 500 words describing the perception your group was attempting to communicate. You must analyse in depth how successful you felt the group was in terms of cooperation, use of techniques, commitment to the task and individual creation of character. In conclusion, you must attempt to express what you learnt about the chosen aspect of human experience through discussion, research, improvisation and performance.

WORKSHOP: A PERFORMANCE OF IMPORTANCE

Exercise 1: Select a situation that is significant, such as the stolen generations or the consequences of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Develop a dramatic statement about this concern, using all the techniques you have learned in this unit for ensemble playbuilding. Work in groups and develop the dramatic statement around the particular concerns and skills of the group.

Here are the steps for you to follow:

a Begin with a concern of importance that is shared by everyone in your group. With Kani and Ntshona it was apartheid, something they had experienced and which affected them deeply.

b Talk about the issue, share your ideas and perceptions, search for further information, and ask other people for opinions and advice.

c Improvise. Use the drama process to explore your concern in depth by developing different characters, different situations and different techniques.

d Structure the statement. Once you know what you want to say and how you will use the drama process, apply all the techniques you have learned in drama to give your dramatic statement meaning and power.

e Aim to communicate. As you rehearse the dramatic statement, concentrate on the idea of communicating feelings and ideas to an audience.

f Generate and realise the dramatic statement.

g Find out from your audience (adults and fellow students) how successfully you communicated with them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
SOLO PERFORMANCE

In many ways, solo performance is the most challenging form of drama you can attempt. First of all, the entire performance is your individual responsibility, in contrast to the cooperative nature of ensemble theatre. Secondly, some of the key elements of drama are missing from solo performance. The vital elements of human relationships and interactions disappear when there is only one character on stage. You also lose the complex forms of focus that depend on a number of significant characters inhabiting the stage at the same time. Finally, in terms of the action, much of the mystery and surprise, which creates the tension of a play, is missing when there is only one performer. The shape and development of a solo performance is much more predictable for an audience than an ensemble play.

These limitations are part of the challenge of solo performance and can be balanced against the extraordinary relationship that can be created between the audience and the single performer on stage, and by the exciting range of approaches and styles that have evolved in solo performances in recent years. By choosing the appropriate context and style for your work, you can create solo performances of extraordinary vitality and power. Let us explore some of the possibilities that are available, and then work on a number of texts that offer a range of challenging solo performances.

11.1 FORMS OF SOLO PERFORMANCE

MONOLOGUES

Monologues are by far the most common form of solo performance, although in the strictest sense they are often not solo performances at all because they occur in plays containing a number of characters. Monologues simply involve a character or a narrator talking to someone else who is silent. This can be another character in the play, the audience, or an imagined or invisible listener.

Almost every play ever written contains monologues, and they are particularly important as models for solo performance because much of the best playwriting in the history of the theatre occurs in monologues. If you are genuinely committed to developing your skills as a solo performer, you should begin by working on monologues from outstanding plays. It is worth noting that most audition pieces are monologues, chosen for the challenge that they provide the actor. At the end of this chapter you will work on some significant and demanding monologues from contemporary plays.

SOLILOQUIES

Like monologues, soliloquies involve characters speaking alone in plays that normally contain a number of characters. In a soliloquy, the character is not talking to anyone else, but is thinking aloud and, in the process, revealing their deepest thoughts and feelings. Soliloquies are not nearly as common as monologues in plays, but can be vitally important in revealing to the audience, and to the actor playing the role, the true nature of the character. They were a major feature of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and we find in Shakespeare's plays that some of the greatest speeches ever written are in the form of soliloquies—most notably of all, perhaps, Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy. As with monologues, soliloquies provide you with the greatest possible challenge in becoming a competent solo performer who can create a single character with real depth and impact through a written text.

'To be or not to be' is one of the best-known soliloquies ever performed or written. Edward Thomas Booth spoke these lines as Hamlet c. 1860.

MONODRAMAS

These are true solo performances in the sense that there is only ever one actor on stage. However, the text of a monodrama can contain any number of characters—all performed by the same actor. A number of characters can appear on stage one after another, with the solo performer changing costumes and characters rapidly. This occurs in a number of monodramas that are biographies of real people, often entertainers.

In some monodramas there is a central protagonist and all the other characters are imaginary, existing only in the mind of the protagonist on stage, who talks to them and often takes on their roles. Other monodramas have characters that are memories recalled by the protagonist, who interacts with them and acts them out as though they were there. The challenge with a monodrama is to create a range of characters that are all different and credible, and to make the interactions between the characters believable.

Monodramas were particularly popular as a dramatic form in the 1970s. Two memorable Australian monodramas of the time were *A Stretch of the Imagination*, written by Jack Hibberd, and *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin*, by Steve J. Spears. Among the most exciting performance texts to emerge in Australia in the past decade have been the monodramas written and performed by female Aboriginal performers such as Deborah Mailman (*The 7 Stages of Grieving*) and Leah Purcell (*Box the Pony*). These monodramas are intensely modern in their action and concerns, but draw extensively on traditional Aboriginal storytelling for their form.

Modern plays often use soliloquies that are filmed or recorded on audio, or are spoken in conjunction with computer images and dramatic film sequences.

STORYTELLING

This is a form of solo performance that has a long history in cultures around the world. There has been a revival of storytelling in the theatre, most notably in African theatre and in Aboriginal performance work in Australia. The storyteller acts as both narrator and actor, telling the story to the audience and taking on roles, often two or more at the same time. Songs and dances are an integral part of storytelling, so the solo performer must be multi-talented. The recent work of Aboriginal solo performers clearly demonstrates how vital and engaging this form of storytelling can be in the theatre.

PHYSICAL SOLO PERFORMANCE

Solo performances do not have to be word- or character-based. The explosion of physical theatre in the past twenty years has spread into solo performance, with actors creating and performing dramas that rely on mime, body language, dance and other movement forms to communicate. In this form of solo performance, the actor's body becomes the text, telling stories, creating mood and atmosphere, and making meaning. From the classic mime of Marcel Marceau to the extreme physicality of Butoh, movement offers a vast range of possibilities for solo performance.

Many word-based plays also contain crucial solo movement sequences, sometimes in tandem with a monologue, but often in physical form only. This is particularly true of the absurdist playwrights, whose plays attacked the meaningless of language and its abuse as a means of communication.

PUPPETRY, BLACK LIGHT THEATRE AND MULTIMEDIA

Puppetry is another traditional form of theatre that has enjoyed a renaissance in the past few decades. Many contemporary solo performers make use of puppets, particularly shadow puppets and black light techniques, to create characters and settings on stage.

The use of film, video and computer imaging also makes it possible for the solo performer to interact with other characters, while hologram projections make it possible to generate three-dimensional images on stage. The possibilities for the use of multimedia are particularly interesting in terms of solo performance.

Australian puppeteer Tim Watts used puppets to create a surreal solo performance with strong echoes of Greek mythology for the Sydney Festival. *The Adventures of Alvin Sputnik: Deep Sea Explorer* tells the story of a man who journeys to the bottom of the sea to save his wife's soul.

Tim Watts, puppeteer, in his show *The Adventures of Alvin Sputnik: Deep Sea Explorer*

Box the Pony

by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin


Leah Purcell in *Box the Pony*

This extraordinary monodrama is one of the most powerful and exciting of recent Australian plays, and is discussed in more detail in chapter 21. It is the story of Aboriginal actor Leah Purcell, performed by herself in monologue, song and dance.

In this scene, Leah tells the story of how her friend Steff was given a pony. Leah performs all the roles in the story: first as herself telling us about Steff; then she becomes Steff as a girl; followed by becoming Steff's old Nanna; and then as Steff again, seeing the pony for the first time. She also dances as the blue crane, which is Steff's totem.

Exercise: As you work on this piece, try to capture the flavour of the language and the movement, and also distinctively create each of the three characters—Leah herself, Steff and Nanna.

Box the Pony

LEAH She was mad for them bloody horses.

[LEAH throws the second cow hide onto the ground. It represents the character of NANNA]

Steff was Bungabura. When she was little her nanna called her that, Gamilaroi for blue crane … that's a bird from up'ome'der.

[LEAH takes on the form of the blue crane]

Got these long legs … and long neck … and a soulful cry.

[LEAH dances as the blue crane]

STEFF Nanna can't do this no more. Arthritis got her real bad.

[She dances over to NANNA's hide]

LEAH Steff'd play tricks on Nanna, like move her bedpan out of reach. Pretty stupid really, because she had to clean it up.

Her nanna couldn't walk. Could hardly move, bedridden, Steff had to look after her.

[LEAH moves between being NANNA, shrivelled up with arthritis, and STEFF watching Neighbours *on TV. She moves rhythmically, stepping between their two hides to play each character. The movement is dance-like and the following words are delivered with the same rhythm]*

NANNA Water … water.

[STEFF is watching Neighbours*, humming and singing part of the theme song]*

STEFF What?

NANNA Water …

STEFF Yeah, wait there, Nanna Daisy …

NANNA Water.

STEFF Ad break soon. Hold your horses, Daisy Duck.

NANNA Water.

STEFF Nanna!

[STEFF is annoyed that NANNA has interrupted her TV, and gets up to get her a water]

Eh, Nanna … I gotta go up 'ere … see Mum up the pub there.

[NANNA, crippled with arthritis, has her head down]

NANNA Here girl, they there for you. In the backyard … Bungabura, you gonna be tall like them blue cranes. You gotta fly away girl, you run away.

LEAH Steff's nanna couldn't have known the blue cranes were there. She couldn't move …

NANNA What's your name, girl?

[STEFF has become afraid of the respect for NANNA's spiritual insight]

STEFF Um, Bungabura … I got to go, Nanna. Pension day … see Mum at the pub der.

[STEFF runs from NANNA, in fear. Moving behind the punching bag she becomes LEAH]

LEAH Another time, up at the pub, Steff sees her mum on the verandah, talking to an old man on a pony …

STEFF Old fella, white hair all swept back, solid!

[sniffs] Horse and Brylcream.

Black man dressed real deadly like John Wayne. Cowboy coat and shiny boots. Must be real important. One of them Government blackfellas.

LEAH He was her grandfather. A drover. He's retirin' soon and that horse will be glue.

[STEFF looks at the horse, moves slowly towards it, nervous. She puts one hand under its chin and strokes its head with the other]

STEFF That pony, he clocked me, eh. He looking me over *real* slow. He winking at me, eh. Mum don't see. That pony he saying something to me. I can hear him, eh. He sayin', 'Help me, save me, ask your mum!'

Box the Pony by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin, Sceptre Press, 1999.

Other plays

Endgame by Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber & Faber, London, 1986.

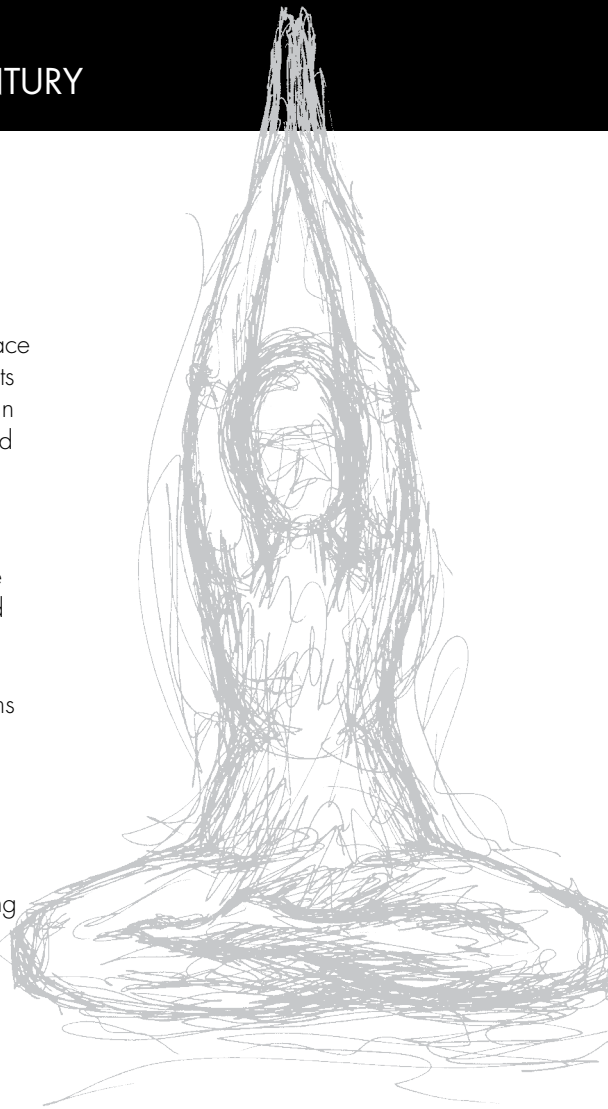
A Stretch of the Imagination by Jack Hibberd, Currency Press, Sydney, 1973.

Atlanta by Joanna Murray-Smith, Currency Press, Sydney, 1990.

SECTION FOUR

WORLD THEATRE

4



INTRODUCTION

Drama as a performing art is only a few thousand years old. We can actually put a date to the first real theatrical performance, which took place in Ancient Greece in 534 BC. The use of drama to express different facets of human experience, however, is very ancient indeed. The way every society in history has used drama tells us a great deal about the people in that society and their relationships with each other and the world around them.

Theatre is part of our heritage and our culture. The manner in which theatre developed in the past and the way it is used today provide us with invaluable skills and vital insights into the nature of the society we live in. In this section we first look at the way theatre has evolved through a series of major traditions and performance styles. We then explore in detail the overwhelming explosion of theatre activity that has occurred in the past 100 years. In the twentieth century, more plays were written and performed, more theatres built and more new forms of drama developed than in the preceding 2400 years.

Today, a text in the theatre can be a traditional play, a series of songs and dances, a number of physical actions, or even the interaction of a number of actors portraying non-human creatures and objects. Texts can involve just the spoken word, words and songs, action and sounds, or even no words at all. A modern text can be scripted, improvised or even spontaneously created during performance; a play can be a multimedia event in which lighting, sound, film, computer images and even holograms are the medium. The final chapter in this section explores the amazing diversity in today's theatre, and the possibilities for tomorrow.

CHAPTER 12

MAJOR TRADITIONS AND STYLES

12.1 THE NATURE OF THEATRE

INTERCULTURAL

We can clearly see how Ancient the theatre practice of telling different parts of the human experience is by looking at the Aboriginal corroboree, which has always been central to the Aboriginal way of life.

Stone-age men were faced with terrible natural threats to their existence from fires, floods, droughts, cold, earthquakes, storms and savage animals. These ancient cultures believed that many of these natural forces were gods. They feared and worshipped these gods, developed ceremonies and rituals that offered sacrifices to them, and begged them for help and protection.

These ancient ceremonies and rituals had many of the features of what we now call 'theatre'. For thousands of years, humans used masks and costumes to imitate their gods, and dressed in animal skins or painted their own skin to represent the animals they hunted. Among many tribes, the priests or medicine men used special effects such as fire, smoke, strong smells and music to create theatrical effects as part of their religious ceremonies.

Two kinds of dramatic ceremonies or rites developed over hundreds of thousands of years. The first kind were solemn rites, which involved praying to the gods, appealing for help or begging forgiveness. These solemn rites were the beginnings of the serious plays we call tragedies. There were also joyful rites, which were celebrations giving thanks to the gods for good fortune, such as a successful harvest. They were often spontaneous expressions of happiness and were the first stirrings of the theatrical form we call comedy. So we can say that since the beginning of humankind, drama has been used in public performances as an essential part of human experience.

The earliest written records that describe religious ceremonies using some kind of dramatic performance date back to 3000 BC. The Sumerian civilisation that developed in Mesopotamia (the area around modern-day Iraq) held festivals in spring and autumn each year, and the celebrations included different kinds of performances. The Babylonians, who borrowed much of their culture from the Sumerians, celebrated the new year with processions, recitations and pantomime performances.

Of all the early civilisations before the Greeks, it is the Egyptians who left behind the most detailed accounts of their use of drama. A number of the pyramids, some of them dating from 2400 BC, have writing on their walls that could almost be described as play scripts. One of them, named the Abydos Passion Play, was performed regularly. We know this because the official responsible for staging it between 1887 and 1849 BC left behind a detailed description. This myth was acted out by the Egyptians in order to worship their god—a public performance that was also a religious ceremony.

The Abydos Passion Play was performed by the priests, and told the story of the death of the god Osiris. He was torn to pieces and his limbs scattered. His wife Isis and his son Horus gathered the limbs together and reassembled the god.

The theatre as we know it today began 2500 years ago in Ancient Greece. Within a century, Greek theatre achieved heights that have only been reached a few times since in the history of the theatre. The great Greek tragedies have inspired writers ever since and are still performed today. Some of them are among the greatest plays ever written. The incredible achievement of Greek theatre was to give us everything that is still fundamental to theatre today. We may have developed technical resources that the Greeks never dreamed of, but the whole nature of theatre was essentially created in Greece in the fifth century BC.

12.2 GREEK THEATRE

Greek theatre grew out of the celebrations held at religious festivals. The festivals honoured the nature god, Dionysus, who was particularly associated with wine. There were three great festivals held every year and the most important was the one in Athens in April, known as the City Dionysia.

In the early festivals, an important part of the celebration was the performance of a hymn sung by a chorus of townspeople. Originally it was a hymn to honour Dionysus, but over the years the hymns developed and changed, telling the stories of other gods as well, and describing the adventures of legendary Greek heroes such as Jason and the Argonauts.

The chorus hymns were called tragedies from the Greek word *tragòidia*, literally meaning 'goat song'. The reason for this is simple: at the start of the festival a goat was sacrificed to the god and at the end of the festival a goat was given as a prize to the best chorus. These tragedies were powerful and serious stories, describing how the gods punished men for their pride or recounting the legend of a great battle, such as the destruction of Troy. However, they were still religious ceremonies rather than theatre; hymns and not plays.

It's because of Thespis that actors are often referred to as 'thespians'.

The man who has been given the credit for turning them into theatre was a chorus leader named Thespis. He took the revolutionary step of leaving the chorus and taking on the character of the god or hero in the story. In character, he talked to the chorus, creating a dialogue with them. Not surprisingly, he became the first man to win a prize at the dramatic festival of the City Dionysia in 534 BC.

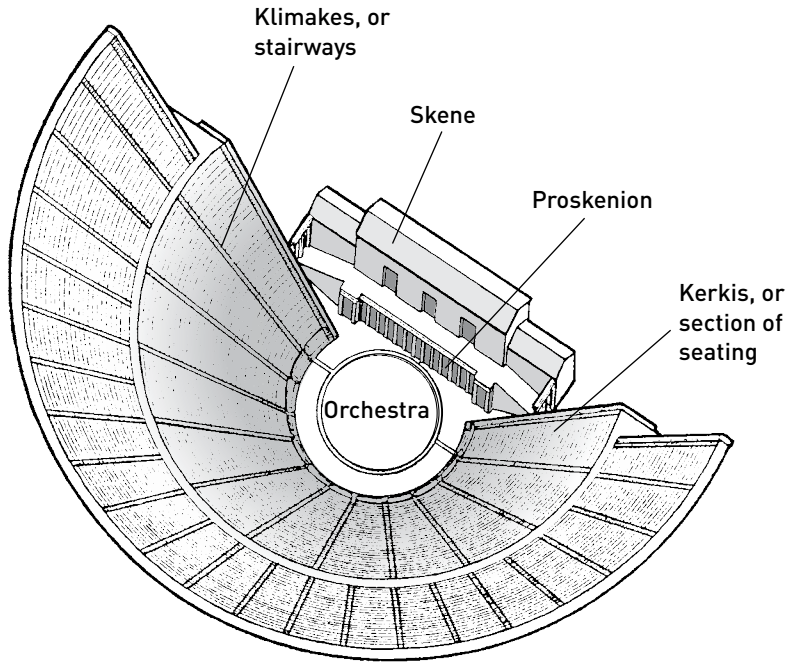
During the fifth century BC, the City Dionysia became a major event in the lives of the people of Athens, attended by every citizen, as well as by representatives from the other states of Greece. To enter the competition, a writer had to submit three tragedies or one comedy. The tragedies were performed on the first three days of the festival, and the comedies on the fourth day. Prizes were awarded to the best tragedy, the best comedy, the best production and, in later years, the best tragic actor.

THE GREEK STAGE

Before there were any theatres, the first performing areas were just large dancing areas called *orchestra* in Greek. A wooden dressing room was built at the back, called a *skene*, from which we get the word 'scene'.

The theatres built by the Greeks were open-air, cut into hillsides in a curve, and the largest could seat 20000 people. Because of their design, these amphitheatres had outstanding acoustics and an actor standing in the centre of the circular, floor-level stage could be heard from any of the seats.

The *skene* at the back of the stage had special revolving panels attached to it, with pictures painted on the panels so that they could be turned to create different scenes during the play. There were huge doors in the centre of the *skene*, with smaller ones on either side, and these were used for exits and entrances. Behind the *skene* was a crane that was used to lift up the actor playing a god and 'fly' him onto the stage. There was also a machine for making the sound of thunder, and a movable platform or cart that could be wheeled on for indoor scenes.



The design of a typical Greek stage

GREEK ACTORS

Just three male actors made up the acting cast of a Greek play, playing up to ten characters between them—male and female. The chorus numbered fifteen for a tragedy and twenty-four for a comedy.

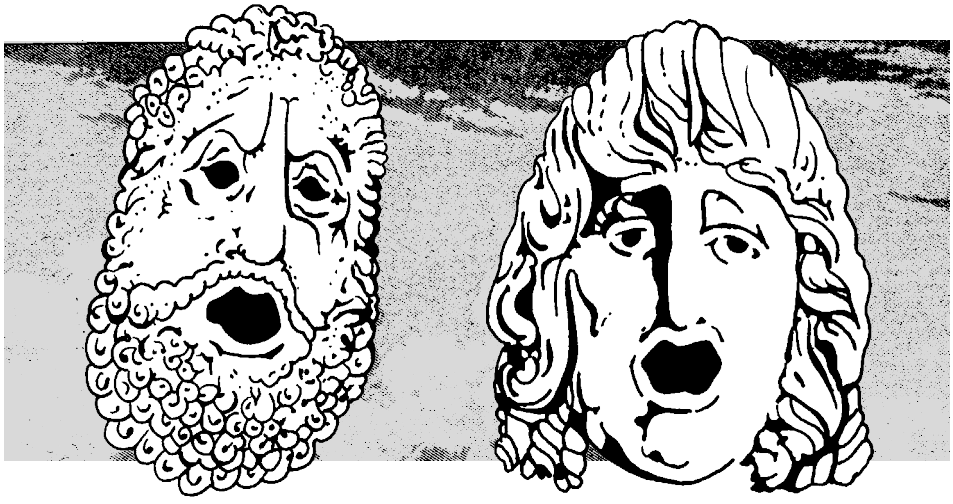
In Greece, acting was an honourable profession and it was quite common for a son to follow his father as an actor.

Everyone on stage wore masks: simple ones for the chorus and much more elaborate ones for the actors. The masks were made of wood, cork or linen, and showed the age and sex of the character as well as their dominant emotion: pride or anger for a king, rage or suffering for a daughter seeking revenge. We know that there were at least thirty different kinds of masks, some of them used for generations.

Because they wore masks, Greek actors needed superb vocal skills. They were required to speak with the voices of many different characters—men and women—and convey a whole range of emotions just through the spoken word. It has been suggested that some of the masks acted like megaphones, with the mouthpieces carefully carved to amplify the human voice.

The actors also had to be physically strong and fit. Many of the costumes for the tragedies were extremely elaborate and heavy, and some were actually hung on frames that fitted over the actors' shoulders. The costumes included a headdress, called an *onkos*, which made the actor look larger and more impressive. There were also built-up boots, called *cothurni*, to make the actor taller. These costumes were extremely heavy and restricting, so there was very little action on-stage in the tragedies. The murders, battles and triumphs took place off-stage, and were described by the chorus or an eyewitness.

In comedy, however, frantic action was part of the play. Comedy actors needed to be acrobats and be able to tumble, fall, engage in desperate chases and act out mock fights. Their costumes—soft slippers called *socci*, flesh-coloured tights and a short jacket—allowed them complete freedom of movement. Their masks were grotesque and exaggerated.



Sketches of two Greek tragedy masks, one male and one female. Note the emotions etched on the faces.

At the beginning of the first century AD, the library at Alexandria in Egypt contained scrolls of thousands of plays by Greek playwrights as part of its collection of approximately 750 000 scrolls. The destruction of the library is a mystery. Some historians think Julius Caesar burned the library in an attack on Alexandria in 48 AD. Others think it happened in 415 AD when Christian monks murdered Hypatia, a brilliant pagan female philosopher, and burned her body in the library. The Muslim invasion of Alexandria in the seventh century has also been blamed.

GREEK PLAYS

Thousands of plays were written and performed during the golden age of Greek theatre from 500 to 300 BC. Of all those plays, less than fifty have survived in their complete form. What we have left today is the work of just five men: the three great tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and two writers of comedy, Aristophanes and Menander.

Aeschylus was the first great writer of tragedies. Born around 525 BC, he was a soldier as well as a poet, and fought at the famous battle of Marathon. He died in 456 BC and of his eighty or ninety plays, only seven complete works survive.

It was Aeschylus who introduced a second actor onto the Greek stage and required his two actors to play a number of different parts. These innovations made dramatic conflict and the development of character possible for the first time. His plays were essentially religious in nature, dealing with the relationships between people and the gods. They were, and still are, great drama, written in powerful and striking language.

The playwright who followed him was Sophocles. Again, only seven of his ninety or so plays survive. Sophocles was born around 506 BC and lived to the age of ninety. As a dramatist, he was extremely successful, winning eighteen prizes for his plays during his lifetime.

Sophocles introduced a third actor into performances and increased the number of characters in his plays. He also reduced the importance of the chorus; in his work

INTERCULTURAL

Wesley Enoch wrote and directed an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* called *Black Medea*. The adaptation included Indigenous storytelling techniques to convey a commentary on the lives of Aboriginal people to the audience.

the dialogue and action of the play are more important than the voice of the chorus. Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles was more interested in human relationships than the effect of the gods on people. His plays involved carefully developed plots and complex characterisation. In his two great plays about King Oedipus, he investigates the causes of human actions and the nature of suffering through the character of Oedipus.

The last and most realistic of the tragic writers was Euripides, who was born around 484 BC and died in 406 BC. Of the ninety-two plays he wrote, eighteen survive. He introduced the idea of a prologue, a spoken introduction to a play, and relegated the chorus to a very minor role, using them mainly to fill in the breaks between scenes.

The plays Euripides wrote are complex and modern, and are often revived today. They are unusually realistic, no longer just pure tragedy but with elements of comedy and even melodrama in them. Several of the plays deal with different forms of human madness. Most interestingly, Euripides wrote about women—their relationships, their place in society and, most of all, their beliefs and passions. The plot of his play *Electra* concerns Electra's revenge on her mother for the murder of her father. The core of the drama revolves around Electra's intense emotions and her relationships with her father, mother and brother.

The great comedy writer whose work has survived is Aristophanes (448–380 BC). We have access to eleven of the forty plays he wrote, most of them named for the disguises used by the chorus in the plays, such as *The Wasps*, *The Birds*, *The Clouds* and *The Frogs*.

These comedies are an extraordinary mixture. They bristle with insults, obscenities, personal attacks on people Aristophanes knew, and clownish action. Yet they also contain brilliant, savage satire and real wit as well. Most of the comedy has dated and does not translate well, but some of the real humour of the plays still emerges on stage, even today.

The other comedy writer whose work has survived was Menander (342–292 BC). Only five of his plays have survived and they are incomplete. They are comedies of manners, dealing with family matters such as missing children or a lost fortune, and the main character is usually a cunning servant.

By the time Menander was writing, the golden age of Greek theatre was over. The next phase in the history of the theatre belonged to the Romans. Unfortunately, this was a time of decline and finally death for classical theatre.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

Agamemnon

by Aeschylus

Who's Who of the Trojan War

Achaeans (Greeks)

Atreus: father of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae

Agamemnon: commander of the Achaeans

Menelaus: brother of Agamemnon

Helen: wife of Menelaus, kidnapped by Paris

Trojans

Priam: king of Troy

Paris: son of Priam

Agamemnon, by Aeschylus, is set around the events of the Trojan War. Agamemnon goes to Troy as the leader of the Achaeans. When he returns from Troy, he is murdered by his wife's lover, Aegisthus. The play is set before Agamemnon returns, just as Troy falls. In this opening scene, the chorus provides the audience with a background to the story.

Exercise 1: Identify points where the script can be said in unison, as duets and as solo parts.

Exercise 2: Identify actions that would enhance the words spoken by the chorus; for example when saying 'Ten years have passed' you may move your arms like a ticking clock.

Exercise 3: Rehearse and realise your performance for the rest of the group.

Exercise 4: After watching the performances, discuss how playing with the 'voice' of the chorus as well as the use of movement added to or detracted from the audience's interpretation of the scene.

Agamemnon

CHORUS

Ten years have passed since the strong sons of Atreus,
Menelaus and Agamemnon—both alike
Honoured by Zeus with throned and sceptred power—
Assembled and manned a thousand Greek ships
And, with the youth of Hellas under arms,
Sailed from these shores to settle the scores with Priam.

Then loud their warlike anger cried,
As eagles cry that, wild with grief,
On some steep, lonely mountainside
Above their robbed nest wheel and sail,
Plying the airy waves, and bewail
Their wasted toil, their watchful pride.
Till some celestial deity—
Zeus, Pan or Apollo—hears on high
Their screams of wordless misery,
And pitying their unhappy state
(Since air is heaven's protectorate),
Sends a swift Fury to pursue
Marauding guilt with vengeance due.

So against Paris' guilty boast
Zeus, protector of guest and host,
Sends Atreus' sons for harsh redress
Of his and Helen's wantonness.
Now Greece and Troy pay equal debt
Of aching limbs and wounds and sweat,
While knees sink low in bloodstained dust,
And spears are scraped as they are thrust.
Things are as they are now; their end
Shall trace a fate that none can bend.
In vain shall Priam's altars burn;
Vainly his rich libations flow
To gods above and powers below.
No gift or sacrificial flame
Can hope to soothe or turn
The wrath of heaven from its relentless aim.

We were too old to take our share
With those who joined the army then.
We lean on sticks—in strength not men
But children—so they left us here.
In weakness youth and age are one;
The sap is weak in unripe bones
As in the withered. The green stalk
Grows without thorns. So, in their grey
And brittle years, old men must walk
Three-footed, weak as babes, and stray
Like dreams lost in the light of day.

12.3 ROMAN THEATRE

The Romans left us one enduring element in the development of performance drama—the magnificent theatres they built throughout Europe and North Africa, some of which still survive today. Most of what went on in those theatres does not deserve to be remembered.

The Romans copied the Greek style of amphitheatre, but they built on flat ground, not on hillsides. The outsides of their theatres were surrounded by enormous stone walls. The stone stage of the Roman theatre was raised up quite high, and had an elaborately decorated wall at the back of it, often two stories high. There was even a curtain that could be raised and lowered from a trough at the front of the stage.

The greatest of the Roman tragedians was the philosopher Seneca, who wrote his plays to be read or acted only in private performances.

Very few of the plays written in Roman times have survived and most were copies or adaptations of Greek works. The two noted writers of Roman comedy, Plautus and Terence, both took their inspiration from the works of Greek playwrights, particularly Menander. Plautus simply adapted Greek plays, giving them Roman characters and settings. Terence, a freed slave from Africa, had more originality, and his plays are genuine comedies of manners. The serious writing of tragedies was rare in Rome.

Real theatre, even the comedies of Plautus and Terence, was not what the mass of Romans wanted. By the first century AD, Roman theatres were being used not to show life on stage but to give spectators the sight of death. Roman citizens flocked to the theatres to watch gladiators killing each other, and to see Christians being fed to lions or set on fire and burned to death. Over time these spectacles became more extravagant and more violent. On one occasion the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, then under Roman rule, was sealed and flooded. Inside, a sea battle between real ships took place, with the sailors actually fighting and killing one another.

When we think about Roman theatre and entertainment, many people think of the gladiators.

For a time there were some noted actors in Rome performing in the early comedies, but as the theatre degenerated into violent spectaculars, the whole craft of acting became discredited. The popular form of theatre that survived was the mime-comedy entertainment. These mimes were crudely performed and usually obscene, telling gross stories of drunkenness, greed and adultery. They often included dances and acrobatic performances by half-naked girls. By the reign of the Emperor Nero, these crude mime performances were being used to attack Christianity, which was rapidly spreading throughout the Roman Empire. A clown would act out the birth and death of Christ, performing the most outrageous and obscene actions.

It is hardly surprising that when Christianity became the dominant religion in Rome in the fifth century AD, theatrical performances were banned. This ban was soon in force throughout the Christian world. The magnificent theatres built by the Romans had become the tombs of classical theatre.

For almost a thousand years the theatre was silent. Its memory was kept alive by wandering bands of singers, acrobats and dancers who appeared at festivals. Often they included short comedy scenes in their performances. However, these performers were officially banned by the Christian church, and they lived a risky, shiftless life. When the theatre did emerge again, it was in the most surprising of places.

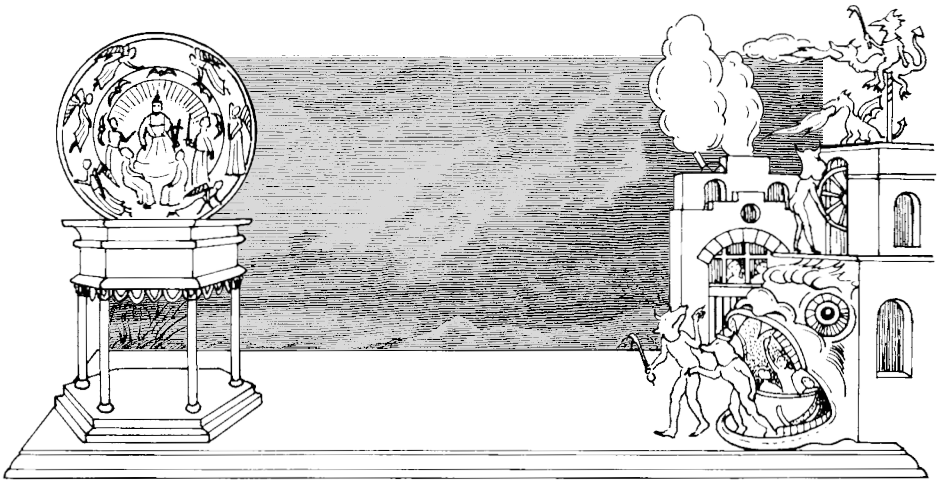
WORKSHOP: ROMAN THEATRE

Exercise: Using the internet and other resources, search for quotes, plays and other material from Seneca the philosopher. Using your research, generate and realise a two- to three-minute performance.

12.4 MEDIEVAL THEATRE

Ironically, the Christian church that banned the theatre in the fifth century was responsible for its development between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. During this period, a form of religious theatre developed inside churches throughout Europe. It began with short scenes that told of the life and death of Christ, acted out by the priest and the choirboys.

MIRACLE AND MORALITY PLAYS



A medieval stage with Heaven on one side and Hell on the other

Over the centuries, more scenes were added and other people were allowed to act in them. They were performed in front of the altar: on the right-hand side was a door or a miniature house representing Heaven, and on the left-hand side was Hell. These scenes eventually developed into full-length pageants that included Bible stories and the lives of the saints as well as the life of Christ. All the available space inside the church was used for the performance and the congregation sitting in the pews was the audience.

Just as the Greek theatre had developed from religious festivals, so a whole new theatre emerged throughout Europe growing out of these church pageants. This form of theatre took a further step when the pageants were performed outside the churches. Once they were acted in towns, the pageants were taken over by the local authorities and acted by local townspeople. The actors were members of trade guilds. These guilds were composed of men who all worked at the one job or craft, so there were blacksmiths' guilds, tailors' guilds, carpenters' guilds and so on. Each guild was responsible for staging one scene, usually a scene associated with their work. For example, the shipbuilders' guild would stage and perform the scene that told the story of Noah's Ark.

In some countries these religious plays were staged on the steps of the church; in others, the town square was used. However, in certain countries, particularly England, the scenes of the plays were mounted on carts and paraded through the town. Each cart would stop at a particular place, the actors would perform the scene, and the cart would move on. The audience remained where they were, waiting for the next cart to arrive and present the next scene.

There were two kinds of medieval plays. The first was the 'miracle play'. A number of these plays were grouped together in a cycle and together they told the whole Bible story of humankind, from Adam and Eve up to the Last Judgement. The whole cycle might be performed every four or five years, or perhaps only once in ten years,

Shakespeare used the idea of trade guilds staging plays in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the group of tradesmen including Quince the carpenter, Snug the joiner and Bottom the weaver rehearse and stage their play for the Duke of Athens.

depending on the local authorities. However, particular scenes were often performed each year at the appropriate time, such as Christ's crucifixion at Easter time.

The second kind of play was the 'morality play'. This was really an illustrated sermon about good and evil, and aimed to teach common people about the power of evil, and how to avoid it and achieve salvation.

Many medieval plays were well written, exciting and dramatic, and are some are performed even today, notably the York cycle in England and the famous Passion Play at Oberammergau in Germany.

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

Harlequin in a stylised pose

While a new theatre was emerging from the churches of Europe, a totally different kind of drama had appeared in Italy. *Commedia dell'arte* means comedy of the professional players, and it was totally an actor's theatre. Professional companies of Italian actors wandered all over Europe in the sixteenth century bringing *commedia dell'arte* to every country including England. They performed wherever they could find an audience—in the street, in pubs, in houses and in palaces.

Commedia dell'arte owed everything to the actors. Not only did they work without theatres, but they also had no scripts. The plays were all improvised around the outlines of a few simple stories. Each actor in the company always played the same character throughout his career, and he knew a number of long speeches off by heart, which he would adapt and use in different performances. The comedy actors in the company, the *zanni*, were experts in a range of long comedy routines called *burles*, and also had their own special comic tricks, known as *lazzi*.

All the actors wore masks, except the young lovers, and these masks represented the same group of characters who appeared in every play. The plots usually revolved around the attempts of the young lovers to meet or marry. The heroine's father or guardian was Pantalone, who tried to stop her escaping with her young man. His elderly friend was always the lawyer, Il Dottore, and there was always a cowardly, boastful soldier, Il Capitano.

However, the best known of all the stock characters were the comic servants. Once the play had started, it was their job to keep the action flowing. They could introduce any tricks or comedy routines into the play they wished, and develop the story in any direction, as long as they brought the action back to a point where the plot could be picked up and continued. The most famous of these comic servants was Arlecchino, whom we know as Harlequin, and the best-known female servant was Colombino, or Columbine.

There were anywhere between five and twenty-five actors in a *commedia* company, and they had to be dancers, singers, acrobats and mimes as well as actors. Moreover, they needed to be incredibly quick-witted to improvise as they did, and be able to communicate in several different languages. They were truly professional actors and, long after the companies had disappeared, their influence lived on in the plays of Shakespeare and Molière, and in 'Punch and Judy' shows.

WORKSHOP: STRING WALKS

Exercise 1: Stand in a line at one end of the space. Imagine you have a piece of string attached to your big toe. As you cross the space, allow your big toe to lead you across the space. When you reach the end of the space, imagine the piece of string has moved to your knees and as you cross the space, your body is being lead by your knees. Repeat the process using other parts of your body, for example your elbow, your stomach, your nose etc.

Exercise 2: Imagine a character based on the string walks. Walk through the space introducing yourself and talking to the other characters in the space.

12.5 ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

The second great age of theatre to follow the Greeks blossomed almost two thousand years later in England under Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled from 1558 until 1603. Just as Greek theatre was at its greatest when Greek civilisation reached its peak, so Elizabethan England in the second half of the sixteenth century was a country full of life, energy and new ideas.

From the period of the miracle and morality plays in England, groups of professional actors had developed. They were usually part of the households of rich and powerful men, and gave performances of short comedies and longer chronicle plays that told stories from English history. These plays were often acted on platforms set up in the courtyards of pubs or inns. This was where Elizabethan theatre began.

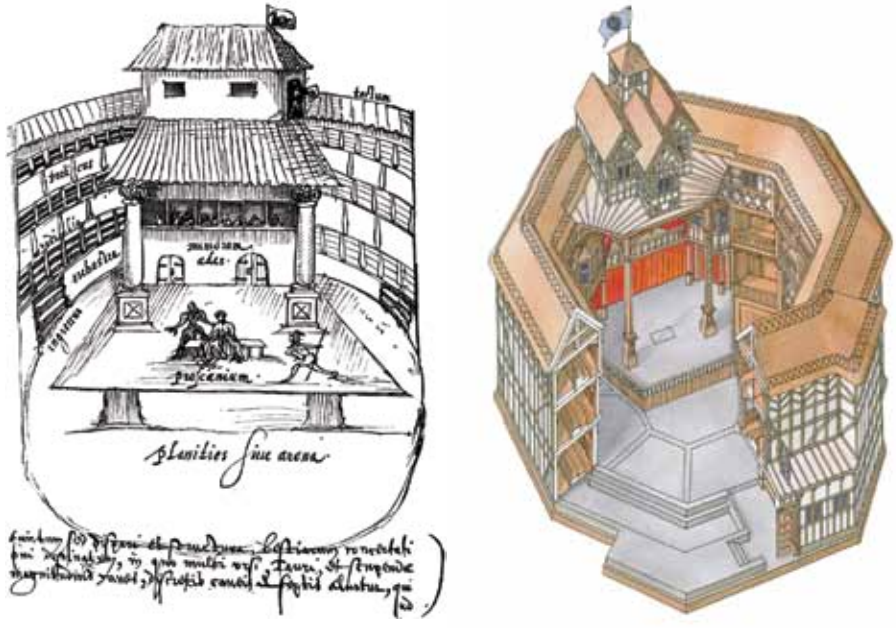
THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE

The first playhouse, simply named 'the Theatre', was built in London in 1576 by a carpenter and part-time actor named James Burbage. His son, Richard Burbage, became the first great English actor. A whole succession of playhouses followed, such as the Curtain, the Rose, the Swan, the Globe, the Fortune and the Hope. The only surviving picture that exists to show what they were like is a drawing of the Swan by a Dutchman who was visiting London.

All the Elizabethan theatres were built of wood in a hollow circle: the stage was located in the centre and the area where the spectators stood was open to the air. The stage was a raised platform that extended out so that the audience could stand on three sides of it. Built into the circular walls of the theatre were two or three galleries where the rest of the audience could sit on benches or stools.

At the back of the stage was a wall with doors or curtains leading to the backstage area. There was a gallery above used by musicians or for scenes such as the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Behind and above the stage were the dressing rooms and a tower containing machinery that was used to create stage effects, such as storms.

A faithful reconstruction of the Globe Theatre has been built on Bankside near the River Thames in London, as close as possible to the site of the original Globe Theatre in Shakespeare's time. The new Globe was completed in 1997, and stages performances of Shakespeare's plays.



Elizabethan theatres: on the left is the Swan Theatre in London and on the right is a reconstruction of the second Globe Theatre, built in London in 1614.

ELIZABETHAN ACTORS

Elizabethan theatres were run by professional managers who expected to make a profit, and the acting companies were composed of men who made their living from acting. Some companies worked for salaries paid by the managers, while others owned their own playhouses and shared the profits from their acting. All the theatre companies had noble and powerful men as their patrons. Elizabethan men who owned no land and had no master were treated as rogues and vagabonds.

Shakespeare belonged to a company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

There were no women in the theatre companies. Boys played the roles of young women such as Juliet, and the comedians in the company acted the roles of older women. Actors had to be able to sing, dance and play musical instruments as well as act, because music was an important part of Elizabethan theatre.

The costumes worn by the actors came mainly from discarded clothes given to them by their wealthy patrons. These costumes would have seemed magnificent to the ordinary people watching the plays. Of course, the costumes would all have been clothes of the period so, depending on the play, suitable extras were added—a breastplate and sword for a Roman, a turban for a Turk and so on.

The life of an actor was not easy. Theatres were prohibited from the city of London itself, and had to be built on the south bank of the river, among the brothels and bear pits. Playhouses often burned down, or were closed for long periods because of the plague or riots or freezing winters. When this happened, the actors were forced to tour, performing in the courtyards of inns or, if they were fortunate, in the houses of noblemen.

There was almost no scenery on the Elizabethan stage and the audiences were large and rowdy, eating and drinking as they watched the plays. Elizabethan plays contained dozens of scenes that flowed rapidly, often jumping years in time and hundreds of kilometres in place. The actors had only the power of language to help them, and they needed enormous physical energy and skilled voices to bring to life the great tragedies and comedies of the age. We have diagrams and letters of the time that describe how the famous actors Edward Alleyn and Richard Burbage were able to move an audience to tears, and make them totally believe in the events and characters they created on stage.

INTERCULTURAL

In 1997, Deborah Mailman played the role of Helena in an Indigenous production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Sydney Festival of the Dreaming. The festival was part of a four-year celebration of indigenous cultures from around the world in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

ELIZABETHAN PLAYS

Christopher Marlowe

In blank verse, each line is made up of a number of pairs of syllables (often five) with alternating stress. The lines do not rhyme (hence 'blank'). For example:
You stars that reign'd at my na-ti-vi-ty,

The Elizabethan period was a time of great plays which are still at the heart of the theatre today. The first outstanding English playwright was Christopher Marlowe, born in 1565, the same year as Shakespeare's birth. Marlowe began work in the theatre some years before Shakespeare and his influence was to prove vital.

Marlowe was a university graduate and a poet as well as a playwright. He was the first to write plays in the flexible, powerful blank verse that became the language of the Elizabethan theatre. His play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil, is a fascinating piece of theatre full of superb dramatic poetry, and is still performed in theatres throughout the world.

Marlowe might have even equalled Shakespeare as a writer if he had lived long enough, but his life was short, extreme and violent. A possible spy and a professed atheist, he made public statements declaring his own depravity and challenging the existence of God. Some of his brief life was spent in prison, and he died in a pub brawl at the age of twenty-nine, stabbed through the eye.

Ben Jonson

There were other playwrights of importance during the Elizabethan era, including Robert Greene and Thomas Kyd, both university men. Then there was Ben Jonson, who began his working life as an apprentice to a bricklayer. Jonson was a quarrelsome, frustrated, outspoken man, often in trouble and occasionally in prison. However, the comedies he wrote have made a lasting contribution to the theatre.

Jonson's plays such as *Volpone* and *Every Man in His Humour* are savage, clever satires on human behaviour. They ruthlessly reveal the stupidity and greed of human beings, and show how petty people can be. Yet they are genuine comedies and their portrayals of human weakness are hilarious as well as savage.

William Shakespeare

Foremost of all the Elizabethan writers was William Shakespeare, who was born in Stratford Upon Avon in 1564, married there at eighteen, went to London and worked as an actor and playwright, retired to Stratford and died there in 1616. Those are just about all the hard facts we know of his life. What he left for us are some of the greatest plays ever written.

Shakespeare wrote for a popular audience who had paid good money to be entertained. Many of the characters in his plays were actually written for particular actors in the company. During his time as a playwright, he churned out plays at a rate of about one every nine months. However, the triumph of his great plays is the way they conquer these limitations. Not only are they dramatically stunning, but they also offer profound reflections on the very nature of being human.

For example, the conflict between ambition and duty that troubles Macbeth is a universal one, and his action in killing the king is a conscious crime against humanity, the kind of crime we have learned a great deal about in the last century. Yet there is more to the play: it is also a study of guilt and madness.

Harold Perrineau as Mercutio and Leonardo DiCaprio as Romeo in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

In fact, Shakespeare's great plays defy simple description because they are as complex and fascinating as human beings themselves. Most of all, his plays are great dramas. The language may be a problem when we are unfamiliar with it, but when we see the plays performed on stage we are exhilarated by the extraordinary flow of the scenes, the complexity of the characterisation and the power of the words.

The theatre that followed after Shakespeare was inevitably less powerful. There were fine actors, but none as good as Alleyn and Burbage. There were talented playwrights, but none to equal Shakespeare or Jonson. Only one new theatre, the Hope, opened after 1600.

One outstanding writer did emerge in the early part of the seventeenth century and that was John Webster. His two great revenge tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, are dark, violent, powerful pieces of theatre. Their central characters are both women—intelligent, powerful, independent women who are capable of both great and terrible actions.

The whole of English theatre came to an abrupt end in 1642 when the English Civil Wars began. The playhouses were closed and acting was forbidden. As long as Cromwell and his Puritans were in power, the theatres stayed closed.

INTERCULTURAL

One of the defining features of Shakespeare's genius was the way he acknowledged the humanity and worth of people from different cultures at a time of deep prejudice. Othello, the Moor, is a tragic hero and an individual of extraordinary power. Yet in Elizabethan England, black Africans were mainly thought of as slaves.

Romeo and Juliet

by William Shakespeare

Today if we see a production of a Shakespearean play, it is conducted within modern theatrical conventions. In Shakespeare's day, the audience did not behave in the same way we would be expected to behave. How do you think this may have affected the actors and the way they performed?

Exercise: Below is an extract from *Romeo and Juliet.* Imagine and realise a performance of this script for a traditional Elizabethan audience, taking into account the way that audience would behave. After your performance, discuss how the change in audience behaviour affected the way you put together and performed your piece.

Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, Scene 1

[Enter Tybalt and others.]

Benvolio By my head, here come the Capulets.

Mercutio By me heel, I care not.

Tybalt Follow me close, for I will speak to them.
Gentlemen, good-den: a word with one of you.

Mercutio And but one word with one of us? Couple it with something; make it a word and a blow.

Tybalt You shall find me apt enough to that, sir, an you will give me occasion.

Mercutio Could you not take some occasion without giving?

Tybalt Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo.

Mercutio Consort! What, dost thou make us minstrels? An thou make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords: here's my fiddlestick; here's that shall make you dance. Zounds, consort!

Benvolio We talk here in the public haunt of men;
Either withdraw unto some private place,
And reason coldly of your grievances,
Or else depart; here all eyes gaze on us.

Mercutio Men's eyes were made to look, and let them gaze;
I will not budge for no man's pleasure, I.

Tybalt Well, peace be with you, sir. Here comes my man.

[Enter Romeo.]

Mercutio But I'll be hanged, sir, if he wear your livery.
Marry, go before to field, he'll be your follower;
Your worship in that sense may call him man.

Tybalt Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford
No better term than this: thou art a villain.

ROMEO Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee
Doth much excuse the appertaining rage
To such a greeting. Villain am I none;
Therefore farewell; I see thou know'st me not.

TYBALT Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries
That thou hast done me; therefore turn and draw.

ROMEO I do protest I never injur'd thee;
But love thee better than thou canst devise
Till thou shalt know the reason of my love:
And so, good Capulet—which name I tender
As dearly as mine own—be satisfied.

MERCUTIO O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!
Alla stoccata carries it away. *[Draws.]*
Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?

TYBALT What wouldst thou have with me?

MERCUTIO Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine lives; that I mean to make bold withal, and, as you shall use me hereafter, dry-beat the rest of the eight. Will you pluck your sword out of his pilcher by the ears? Make haste, lest mine be about your ears ere it be out.

TYBALT I am for you. *[Drawing.]*

ROMEO Gentle Mercurio, put thy rapier up.

MERCUTIO Come, sir, your passado.

[They fight.]

ROMEO Draw, Benvolio; beat down their weapons.
Gentlemen, for shame! Forbear this outrage!
Tybalt! Mercutio! The prince expressly hath
Forbid this bandying in Verona streets.
Hold, Tybalt! Good Mercutio!

[TYBALT under ROMEO's arm thrusts MERCUTIO in, and flies with his friends.]

MERCUTIO I am hurt.
A plague o' both your houses! I am sped.
Is he gone, and hath nothing?

BENVOLIO What, art thou hurt?

MERCUTIO Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch; marry, 'tis enough.
Where is my page? Go, villain, fetch a surgeon.

[Exit page.]

ROMEO Courage, man; the hurt cannot be much.

MERCUTIO No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world.

A plague o' both your houses! Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm.

ROMEO I thought all for the best.

MERCUTIO Help me into some house, Benvolio, or I shall faint.
A plague o' both your houses!
They have made worm's meat of me.
I have it, and soundly too—Your houses!

[Exeunt MERCUTIO and BENVOLIO!]

Romeo and Juliet, by William Shakespeare.

12.6 THE GROWTH OF EUROPEAN THEATRE

The leading Spanish playwright of the period, Lope de Vega, wrote over 1200 plays and 750 of these have actually survived. They all reflect the values of Christianity and particularly the teachings of Catholicism.

Theatre in Spain developed in parallel with Elizabethan theatre, with very similar playhouses being built in Spain in the 1570s and 1580s. However, Spain and England were officially at war, and there was very little contact between the two countries. Spanish theatre was greatly influenced by *commedia dell'arte* and, most of all, by the Catholic Church.

The great age of French theatre began in 1637 with the play *Le Cid* by Pierre Corneille. The theatres built in France were quite different from the English and Spanish ones. They were completely roofed over and were originally just large rooms with a stage at one end, lit by candles.

In these French theatres were performed the works of three great playwrights: Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, who wrote mainly tragedies, and Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, better known as Molière, one of the greatest comic playwrights of all time. The genius of these writers lay in their observation of human passions, faults and suffering. Their plays had enormous power and vitality that comes through when they are performed today, even in translation. It was the French who set up the first national theatre in the world, the Comédie Francaise, in 1680. Its aim was to encourage the development of French artistic expression, especially in the theatre.

In the century that followed, a number of rulers throughout Europe set up national theatres including Joseph II in Austria, Gustav II in Sweden and Catherine the Great in Russia.

RESTORATION THEATRE

In England there was a fresh burst of theatrical activity after Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. New indoor theatres were built and a real theatre of comedy developed. For the first time in England, women were allowed to act and a number of famous actresses emerged.

The playwrights William Wycherley, William Congreve, George Farquhar and others wrote brilliant comedies of manners. Their plays were clever and witty, but they were also savage satires on the behaviour of wealthy English socialites.

The Comedians Theatre Company's production of *The School for Scandal* at the 2009 Edinburgh Fringe Festival

There were two important playwrights who came later and also wrote comedies that developed from the Restoration style. The first was Oliver Goldsmith, whose one famous play was *She Stoops to Conquer*, first performed in 1773. The second was R.B. Sheridan, whose plays *The Rivals* (1775) and *School for Scandal* (1777) are still frequently performed.

Other than these, the time of great playwrights and great theatre was over, not only in England but throughout Europe. Middle-class sentimental plays were popular everywhere as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Their heroes were honest, middle-class merchants who behaved well at all times and were a credit to their nation and to civilisation.

If the plays were poor, the actors were not. This was the time of the first great actor-managers who ran their own theatre companies and played the leading roles. David Garrick was perhaps the most famous and introduced a much more natural style of acting to the English theatre, as well as improvements such as concealed stage lighting and superb scenery. He also ended the centuries-old custom of allowing spectators to sit on the stage during performances!

In Germany, another great actor, Friedrich Schröder, became the first German to perform Shakespeare's plays in translation. Schröder had an enormous influence on German theatre, particularly in the way he trained his company to act with more skill and naturalness.

By the year 1800, theatre was enormously popular, not only in Europe but also in the 'new' countries of America and Australia. The first playhouse had been built in America in 1716 and by 1800 New York was the centre of American theatre.

The first theatrical performance in Australia was given on 4 June 1789, just eighteen months after the First Fleet arrived. It was a production of the comedy *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar, performed by a group of convicts. From then on, there were regular theatrical performances until 1800 when the governor banned stage productions temporarily. When the first theatre opened in Australia in Sydney in 1832, it immediately began to stage the type of play that was already dominating theatre everywhere else—the melodrama.

The brilliant style of humour known as 'comedy of manners' that characterised Restoration theatre is still a major form of theatre today. The plays of Alan Ayckbourn in England, Neil Simon in the USA and David Williamson in Australia are modern comedies of manners that have been extraordinarily successful on stage.

MELODRAMA

The first melodramas were written and performed in France. Their author, Guilbert de Pixérécourt, actually admitted that he wrote plays for people who could not read. They were a mixture of violence, romance and tear-jerking sentiment, with short scenes full of action. They used spectacular settings, stage effects and music to increase their impact. The stories all involved an evil villain, an innocent and long-suffering heroine, and a brave and honest hero. After numerous wicked actions, the villain was always defeated and goodness always triumphed.

Melodrama swept through the theatre world, dominating the stages of every country for almost a century. Thousands of melodramas were churned out by writers everywhere. Although great plays, such as the works of Shakespeare, were often revived, they did not fill the theatres as melodramas did. The popularity of melodrama led to the building of new theatres worldwide. In London, for example, there were only ten theatres operating in 1807, but by 1870 there were thirty.

This was also a period of great development in the theatre buildings. Gas lighting replaced candles, beginning with the Lyceum Theatre in London in 1803. This meant that stage lighting could now be really bright and properly controlled. There were just two disadvantages: the burning gas produced an unpleasant smell and it caused a great many fires. During the period of gas illumination in theatres in Europe and America, more than 400 theatres burned down.

Because melodrama demanded spectacular scenery and stage effects, there were rapid advances in stage design during the nineteenth century. Some of the effects created on stage included forest fires, earthquakes and volcanoes. Costumes became more and more elaborate, but also much more historically accurate.

Melodrama also saw the dominance of the actor-manager, the man who owned his own theatre company and often his own theatre, directed the plays and acted the leading roles. The other actors were often relegated to being just mobile stage scenery, their lines ruthlessly cut from the play. One of these actor-managers was notorious for removing every scene from Shakespeare's plays in which his own character did not appear. Yet the greatest of these men, including Charles Kemble, Charles Kean and Henry Irving, were outstanding actors. The nineteenth century also saw the appearance of superb actresses such as Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry and the French actress Sarah Bernhardt.

Although melodrama dominated world theatre, it was not the only type of play being performed. In each country, classic plays were revived, and in different places throughout Europe there were experiments in more realistic types of staging and writing. Perhaps the most famous innovator was George II, the ruler of the duchy of Saxe-Meiningen in Germany. He took control of the state theatre company in 1866 and created a style of ensemble acting in which actors worked together with dedication and discipline unlike anything seen before. The company toured Europe between 1874 and 1890, and had a powerful influence on the next great period of theatre.

A style of theatre that has become particularly popular in Australia is gothic theatre, which owes its origins to melodrama. A number of 'Australian gothic' plays have been staged in the past ten years, most of them including supernatural events and pain and suffering. The characters in these plays are usually trapped somewhere dangerous or are alone and isolated.

WORKSHOP: *THE COLLEEN BAWN*

Written by Dion Boucicault and based on the novel *The Collegians*, *The Colleen Bawn* is a melodrama that was first performed in 1860. The play is based on the real life murder of fifteen year old Ellen Scanlan in Ireland.

Exercise: Research life in rural Ireland in the early 1800s, including marriage, fashion, economic status and circumstances, major historical events and any other relevant information. Using your research, create a series of concepts for one of the elements of production (lighting, set, costume) for a performance of *The Colleen Bawn*.

12.7

REALISM AND THE THEATRE OF IDEAS

The last half of the nineteenth century was a time of enormous change in the world, and writers began to emerge whose plays reflected these changes and their effects on society. The comic strip unreality of melodrama was washed away by a flood of superb plays that dealt with the real problems and concerns of people, and which used dialogue that sounded like everyday speech.

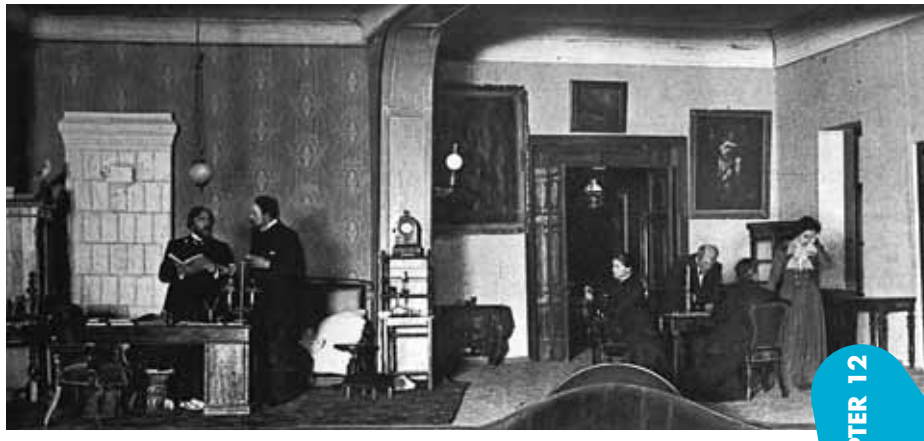
REALISTIC PLAYS

The first of the new playwrights to emerge was Henrik Ibsen from Norway. He wrote a series of plays that were brilliant, detailed portraits of life in a small town, as well as fascinating studies of individual human behaviour. Two of his most famous plays, *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, show the lives of women trapped in destructive marriages. Hedda destroys both herself and the people around her, but Nora in *A Doll's House* finds the courage and willpower to leave her husband and children. Ibsen's writing was extraordinarily modern in its concern for women.

Ibsen's plays caused a storm of protest in a number of countries before they were accepted. They were followed by the works of another Scandinavian playwright, August Strindberg of Sweden. His plays *The Father*, *Miss Julie* and *The Dance of Death* are bitter, grim and powerful studies of human beings who are in despair. *The Dance of Death*, in particular, is merciless in its picture of a disintegrating marriage in which the husband and wife hate each other.

In England, George Bernard Shaw, a great supporter of Ibsen, wrote a number of plays dealing with social problems such as slums and prostitution, using humour as his weapon. Meanwhile in Ireland, two great playwrights emerged: John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey. Their plays are authentically Irish in their characters and use of language, but are concerned with universal human problems. Synge's short play *Riders to the Sea* is the greatest one-act tragedy ever written, the grim story of the endless deaths at sea of the poor fishermen of the western isles of Ireland.

The new realism took root everywhere including Russia. There, a doctor named Anton Chekhov wrote a series of fascinating, intimate studies of middle-class families who feel the world around them changing, but are unable to cope with it. *The Cherry Orchard*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters* and *The Seagull* are superb realistic plays. They were also vital in the development of the new theatre of realism.



Two productions of Chekhov plays by the Moscow Arts Theatre: a scene from *Uncle Vanya* (above) and the final scene from *The Seagull* (below). Both productions were by Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko.

THE REALISTIC STAGE

At the time that Chekhov's first plays were produced in Russia, a young actor named Constantin Stanislavski was working to change the old, melodramatic style of acting in the Russian theatre. In 1898 Stanislavski founded the Moscow Arts Theatre with the aim of making the theatre more real and believable.

Stanislavski's work in training actors is explored in section one, and his influence on the whole development of world theatre is examined in section four. If you are planning to perform a realistic piece of theatre, take the time to read chapter 13 on the legacy of realism, because it was Stanislavski's work that has set the pattern for realistic theatre ever since.

Stanislavski insisted that everything that happened on stage must appear to be real. The fantastic, painted backdrops of the old melodramas were abandoned, and solid walls and doors appeared on stage. Real rooms were created with all the furniture and belongings people would find in their own homes. A great deal of care was taken to make sure that the characters' costumes were completely authentic, and lighting and sound effects were also as realistic as possible.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

Hedda Gabler

by Henrik Ibsen

Exercise: The introduction to Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* is extremely detailed. Read the description below and then make a sketch for a set design ensuring all items in the description are covered.

Hedda Gabler, Act 1

[A large drawing-room, well furnished, in good taste, and decorated in dark colours. In the back wall there is a wide doorway with its curtains pulled back. This opening leads into a smaller room decorated in the same style as the drawing-room. In the right wall of this outer room is a folding door that leads into the hall. In the opposite wall, left, is a glass door also with curtains pulled back. Through its panes can be seen part of a veranda outside and autumn foliage. In the middle of the stage is an oval table with a cloth on it and chairs round it. Downstage, against the right wall are a large, dark porcelain stove, a high-backed arm-chair, a padded foot-rest and two stools. Up in the right corner are a corner sofa and a little round table. Downstage, left, a little way from the wall, is a sofa. Above the glass door, a piano. On each side of the doorway at the back stands a what-not with terra-cotta and majolica ornaments. Against the back wall of the inner room can be seen a sofa, a table and a chair or two. Over this sofa hangs the portrait of a handsome, elderly man in a general's uniform. Over the table a hanging lamp with a soft, opal glass shade. All round the drawing-room are bouquets of flowers in vases and glasses; others are lying on the tables. The floors in both rooms are covered with thick carpets. Morning light: the sun shines in through the glass doors.

Miss Juliane Tesman, wearing her hat and carrying a parasol, comes in from the hall followed by Berte, carrying a bouquet wrapped in paper. Miss Tesman is a comely, sweet-tempered-looking woman of about sixty-five, well but simply dressed in grey outdoor clothes. Berte is a servant getting on in years, with a homely, rather countrified look.]

Hedda Gabler and Other Plays by Henrik Ibsen, Penguin Books, London.

12.8 NATURALISM

Although this term is often used interchangeably with realism when talking about the theatre, the Naturalistic Movement actually had a separate dramatic development with its own philosophy and characteristics.

Émile Zola, the great French novelist and playwright, first outlined the elements of naturalism in 1873. He argued that all drama should be based on scientific observations of human behaviour and should exactly reproduce real life on stage. The first naturalistic plays did this, putting on stage a 'slice of life' that attempted to exactly duplicate the behaviour of ordinary people in their daily lives. This meant that a two-hour play depicted just two hours in the lives of the characters, and the actors tried to become those characters, living rather than performing them. The audience were observers and for them it was like looking through an invisible 'fourth wall' of someone's house, watching people go about their lives.

Because naturalistic acting involved 'living' the life of the character, many of the rules of traditional acting were broken. Actors could perform with their backs to the audience, mumble or whisper lines and use violent language and actions.

During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, a number of genuinely naturalistic plays were staged, and in this period a number of major playwrights wrote plays that were strongly influenced by naturalism, including Strindberg, Chekhov and Gorky. However, naturalism in its strictest form as a 'slice of life' was not inherently interesting or dramatic enough for audiences. It was quickly absorbed into realism, which still aimed to make plays appear real, but used a range of dramatic techniques to intensify life on stage. Most importantly, realistic plays focused only on the most dramatic moments of the action, and moved flexibly through time and place. In performance, realistic plays also increasingly used non-naturalistic techniques including music, lighting and simplified or symbolic staging to heighten the drama.

12.9 20TH CENTURY THEATRE

The century from 1900 to 2000 produced the most incredible variety of styles and performances in all the history of theatre. An extraordinary range of theatrical forms emerged all over the world during this period: some were completely new while others were revivals of traditional forms given a new life and character.

Later in section four we examine these developments in detail, focusing in particular on the most significant forms to emerge in Western, Asian and African drama. In this chapter we will just touch briefly on the range of theatrical forms and styles that made European, American and Australian theatre so interesting in the twentieth century. This survey provides us with some valuable frameworks for structuring our own performances in interesting and original ways.

EXPRESSIONISM

This style of theatre began as a reaction to realism and reached its peak in Germany after the First World War. Playwrights such as Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller wrote plays in which the characters were not real people but symbols of good and evil, power and oppression, the elite and the socially disadvantaged; the dialogue they spoke expressed this lack of reality quite deliberately. The expressionist stage was bare, lit by shafts of white light against a black background. It often featured machinery, such as metal bridges that moved up and down or vast flights of stairs and platforms. The English actor, director and designer Edward Gordon Craig designed extraordinary expressionistic sets that influenced stage designers throughout the century.

A set for *Hamlet* designed by Edward Gordon Craig

Expressionism was replaced in Germany by the political theatre of Bertolt Brecht, which has become one of the major styles of contemporary theatre throughout the world. In the past thirty years, conventional political theatre has evolved into a powerful tool for social change in Africa, Asia and South America in 'theatre for development' and 'liberation theatre'.

SURREALISM

The Surrealist Movement began in the early part of the twentieth century with an attempt by painters and writers to reveal the interior world of the mind, particularly our subconscious mind and most of all our dreams. The surrealists were strongly influenced by Freud's psychoanalytical theories and his emphasis on the significance of dreams in revealing our true selves.

Some genuinely surreal plays were staged between 1900 and 1930, and these plays used strange, puzzling images and movement on stage, fragmented and incomprehensible dialogue, and had plots that were often confusing or impossible for audiences to understand. However, the most interesting surreal drama at this time was happening on film, and a number of extraordinary silent films were made that were authentically dreamlike and unreal, including *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* and *The Blood of a Poet*.

COMEDY

The traditional styles of comedy that have entertained audiences for thousands of years are still popular today, some greatly changed from their ancient beginnings, some still immediately recognisable.

One style of comedy is farce. This broad style of comedy involves exaggerated characters, absurd situations and frantic action. At its most physical it is called slapstick. It was extremely popular in ancient Greece and Rome, and reached its height as *commedia dell'arte* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Farce enjoyed a resurgence again in late nineteenth century France, before reappearing once more in the slapstick silent films of Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and Charlie Chaplin. Farce has remained a major style of comedy, not only on stage, but as the basis of many hugely successful American situation comedies on television, such as *Arrested Development, Third Rock from the Sun* and *The Nanny*.

A second style of comedy is termed 'comedy of manners'. Originating in ancient Greece in the plays of Aristophanes and Menander, this style of comedy reached its height during the Restoration in England in the seventeenth century. The plays reveal the absurdities and faults in human behaviour, frequently portraying real and believable people but ruthlessly exposing their weaknesses. One type of comedy of manners that is particularly savage in attacking the follies of famous people and recognisable stereotypes is satire.

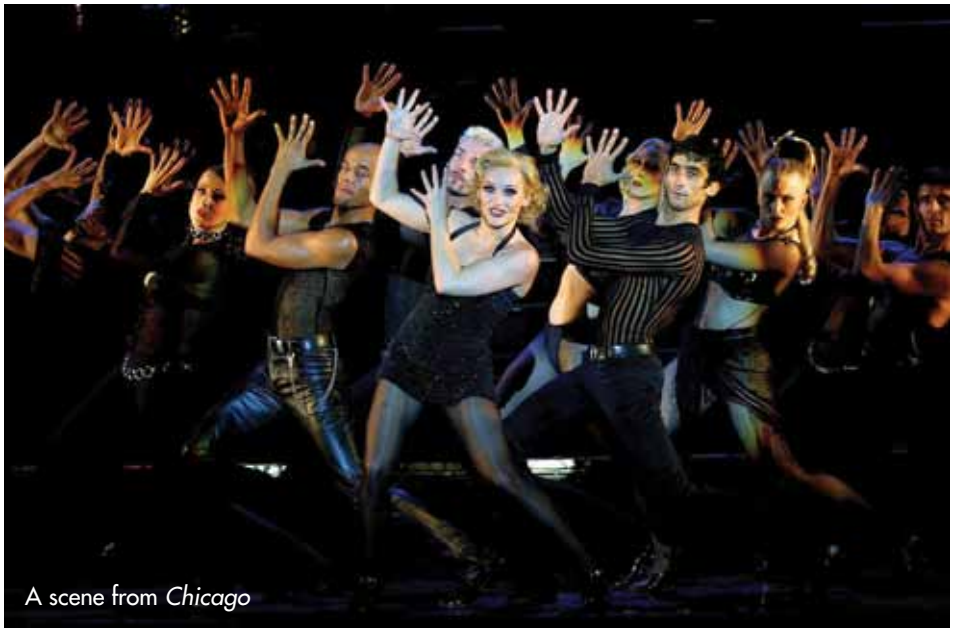
In the twentieth century, comedies of manners were among the most popular plays, particularly the works of Alan Ayckbourn in England and Neil Simon in the USA. Satire became a major style of television comedy with shows such as *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-in* in the USA, *Yes Minister* in Britain and *Fast Forward* in Australia. A number of recent television shows are very much in the style of comedy of manners, including *Kath & Kim* and *Friends*, while Australia's most popular and prolific playwright, David Williamson, continues to write mainstream comedy of manners plays such as *Don Parties On*, his 'sequel' to his 1970s hit *Don's Party*.

THE MUSICAL

The USA made a significant contribution to twentieth century theatre, in particular a body of great plays by a number of outstanding playwrights including Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. A second, unique contribution was musical comedy.

Originally a light romantic comedy play that included songs and dances, the musical has evolved into an important and diverse theatrical form in its own right. *West Side Story* in the 1950s was the first musical to tell a serious, modern story that reflected on American society.

The flowering of the musical comedy reached its zenith in the 1970s and 1980s in the USA. The sophisticated and dramatically satisfying work of Stephen Sondheim ranged from the gentle, nostalgic comedy of *A Little Night Music* to the clever fairy tale for adults *Into the Woods* to the powerful melodrama of *Sweeney Todd*. Other major musicals of the 1970s and 1980s included *A Chorus Line*, *All That Jazz* and *Chicago*, all of which were made into highly successful movies. *Chicago*, in particular, is still being revived and toured in a number of countries today. The golden age of American musicals appeared to be over by the end of the twentieth century, although *Rent*, first staged in 1996, proved to be an exception, enthralling audiences around the world with its engaging, contemporary plot and location, and its driving energy.



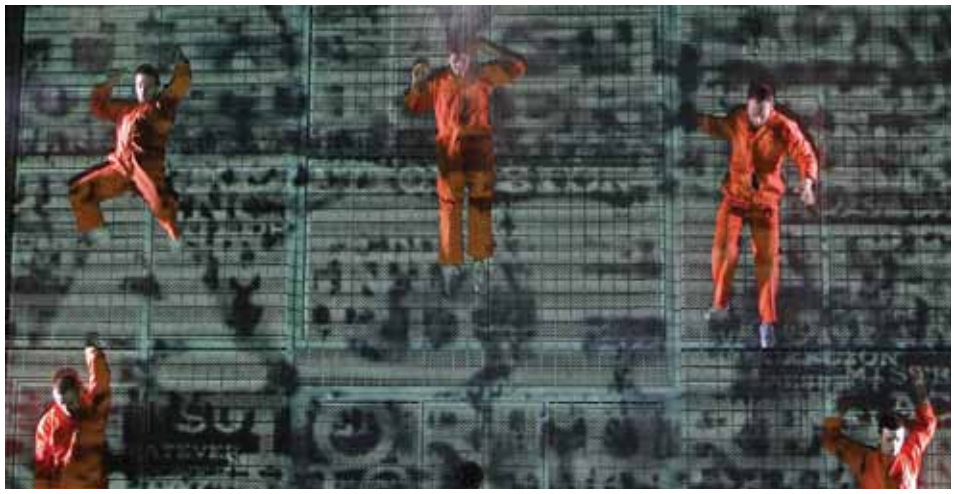
A scene from *Chicago*

PUPPETRY AND BLACK LIGHT THEATRE

One of the oldest forms of theatre—puppetry—continued to be a major theatrical form in Asia in the twentieth century in the traditional shadow puppetry of the *wayang kulit*. However, it also developed in new and exciting ways in a number of countries. Professional puppetry companies emerged in Europe, Japan, the USA and Australia, blending traditional hand and rod puppets, marionettes and large body puppets with modern black light technology. Two of the most innovative companies to emerge in the last decades of the century were the Philippe Genty company in France and Handspan in Australia. Philippe Genty uses a range of puppets in performance with live actors to create fascinating surreal stories, while Handspan has been strongly influenced by Japanese puppetry but also makes extensive use of black light technology to create extraordinary illusions on stage.

MULTIMEDIA

While there was a groundswell of interest in using modern communications technology in the theatre, the actual number of genuinely multimedia plays staged in the 1990s was small and the results disappointing. However, the continuing advances being made in the multimedia field are increasingly influencing live theatre in the twenty-first century. Most plays staged in the last ten years make use of at least some multimedia elements.



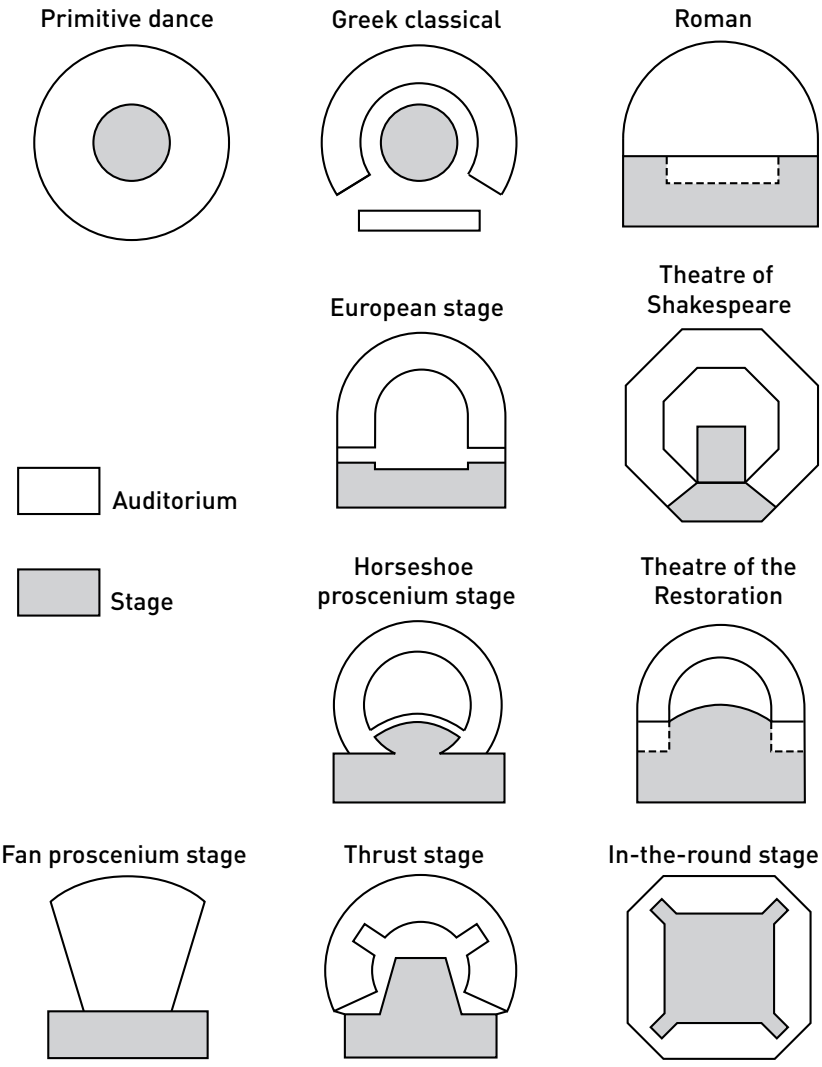
Honour Bound incorporates multimedia to help tell the story of David Hicks and his imprisonment at Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

THE DIRECTOR

The twentieth century was the age of the theatre director. Brilliant and imaginative directors have dominated the development of theatre, particularly in their interpretations of great plays from the past. The directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in England developed a style of staging Shakespeare's plays that has made the RSC the most famous theatre company in the world.

Throughout the twentieth century it was the directors who were responsible for major developments in the theatre. It was Stanislavski, the Russian director, who developed the first system for training actors. Craig revolutionised the staging of plays in England early in that century. As a playwright and a director, Brecht altered the course of twentieth century theatre, while other directors such as Peter Brook have continued to push theatre in new directions. In section one we examined the acting methods and techniques of a number of major theatre directors. In the following chapters we explore in detail the impact on theatre today of the most important directors of the past century.

THE STAGE



There are a variety of stage types available to a director, from the ancient to the modern and any space in between.

The actual design of theatres also saw tremendous changes in the twentieth century. On the one hand, there was the growth of enormous, luxurious, government-built theatres throughout the world, equipped with the most modern technology—revolving stages, computerised lighting, magnificent sound equipment. On the other hand, there was also the development of a 'poor theatre', with plays performed by small, cooperative companies wherever they could find an audience—in halls, community centres, schools and even in the street. Many of these companies were highly experimental, improvising their own plays and creating their own 'happenings'. Little theatres, often no more than a room with some seats, were important in contributing to the development of the theatre.

Between 1900 and 2000, the shape of the stage itself went through a number of changes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most theatres had a proscenium arch, the invisible 'wall' of the room through which the audience watched life happening on stage. Today we have thrust stages, which bring the action out into the audience, so that we sit on three sides of the stage or in a curve around it. Some theatres are built in-the-round, with the stage in the centre and the audience on all four sides. There have also been a number of experiments in 'total theatre'; that is, trying to involve the audience more completely or actively in the play.

Cymbeline

by William Shakespeare

Shakespeare wrote in such a way that his work can and has been performed in a variety of styles. Below is an extract from *Cymbeline*. In the extract, Guiderius and Arviragus speak over the body of a woman, who they presume is dead. They are not aware that the woman is their sister and she is not dead, only drugged.

Exercise: Generate and realise two performances using the extract below. The two performances must come from two different styles examined in this chapter; for example, you could choose to do this in the style of a Greek chorus and to use realism.

Cymbeline, Act 4, Scene 2

GUIDERIUS — Fear no more the heat o' th' sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

ARVIRAGUS — Fear no more the frown o' th' great;
Thou are past the tyrant's stroke.
Care no more to clothe and eat;
To thee the reed is as the oak.
The sceptre, learning, physic, must
All follow this and come to dust.

GUIDERIUS — Fear no more the lightning flash,

ARVIRAGUS — Nor th' all-dreaded thunder-stone;

GUIDERIUS — Fear not slander, censure rash;

ARVIRAGUS — Thou hast finished joy and moan.

BOTH — All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee and come to dust.

GUIDERIUS — No exorciser harm thee!

ARVIRAGUS — Nor no witchcraft charm thee!

GUIDERIUS — Ghost unlaid forbear thee!

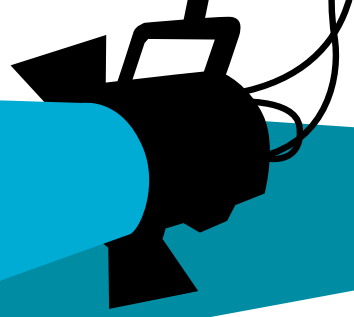
ARVIRAGUS — Nothing ill come near thee!

BOTH — Quiet consummation have,
And renowned be thy grave.

Cymbeline by William Shakespeare.

CHAPTER 13

STANISLAVSKI TO MAGICAL REALISM



Despite the amazing explosion in theatre activity in the twentieth century and the appearance of a range of new types of theatre, the dominant form of the past 100 years has undoubtedly been realism. This has been just as true in television and cinema as on stage.

The core of realistic theatre is the creation of believable characters and situations that give the illusion of real life. The audience must believe in what they are seeing and hearing, and become involved in the play, accepting the performance as a true representation of human experience. For the audience this involves suspending their disbelief. They know they are in a theatre watching a play, but the plot and the characters are believable and interesting enough for the audience to accept them as real during the action of the play.

The theatre of reality evolved considerably during the twentieth century, moving away from the emphasis on complete realism that was Stanislavski's legacy. In the USA, in particular, there was a move towards a more selective realism, with intense focus on particular characters and events—a form of heightened reality. The past three decades have also seen the emergence of magical realism, in which the plots and characters remain lifelike and believable, but supernatural and surreal elements are introduced into the texture of the play, such as nightmares coming true or angels appearing to change the course of events.

13.1 STANISLAVSKI'S LEGACY

Realism as a theatrical movement actually began in the nineteenth century with a number of attempts to move away from the exaggerated melodrama that was dominating the stages of the world. These tentative attempts to develop a more believable form of theatre were fully realised when a young Russian named Constantin Stanislavski decided to form his own theatre company.

Stanislavski's real name was Constantin Sergeyevich Alekseyev and he was born in Moscow on 17 January 1863. His father was very wealthy and gave his son a private education that included frequent visits to the opera and theatre, as well as lessons in acting, singing and dancing. By the age of fourteen, Constantin was acting in plays in a theatre built by his father on their country estate. He took his stage name of Stanislavski from an actor he met in amateur theatre in 1885.

After finishing his education, Stanislavski started a group called the Society for Art and Literature, and between 1888 and 1897 he directed and acted in a number of their play productions. During this early period of his life, Stanislavski became increasingly unhappy with the melodramatic style of acting that was in fashion

The Moscow Arts Theatre Company, 1889. Anton Chekhov is reading *The Seagull* to members of the company. Stanislavski is seated on his right.

not only in Russia but throughout the world. As a result, he arranged to meet with a successful playwright and teacher of theatre named Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko to discuss ways of reforming Russian theatre. The meeting took place in a restaurant on 22 June 1897 and as a result they established the Moscow Arts Theatre, which aimed for a new truth and realism in the theatre. The opening production on 26 October 1898 was a tremendous popular success, and it was followed in December by Stanislavski's production of a play by Anton Chekhov called *The Seagull*. The play had been a complete failure at its first production three years earlier in St Petersburg. Under Stanislavski's direction it became world famous, the beginning of a revolution in the theatre that made the Moscow Arts Theatre the most renowned and influential company in the world. In 1889, Stanislavski married Maria Perevoshchikova (stage name Lilina), who went on to become a great actor with the Moscow Arts Theatre.

The historic meeting between Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko lasted eighteen hours!

While Stanislavski was completely responsible for training the actors and directing the plays at the Moscow Arts Theatre, Nemirovich-Danchenko was the administrator and also chose most of the plays that the company performed in its early years. He also advised Stanislavski on the interpretation of the plays and the problems of staging them.

In 1906, as well as working as an actor and director, Stanislavski began to develop a system for training actors. In 1912 he set up the First Studio, an experimental theatre for improvising plays and developing acting techniques. For the rest of his life, Stanislavski continued to work on his system for training actors as part of his total involvement in the theatre.

Between August 1922 and September 1924 the Moscow Arts Theatre toured Europe and America, with Stanislavski both directing and acting. The tour made the man and his work world-renowned, and in 1924 his autobiography, *My Life in Art*, was published in London.

On 29 October 1928, Stanislavski suffered a heart attack while acting in Chekhov's play *The Three Sisters*. This forced him to give up acting, and for the rest of his life he concentrated on directing, teaching and writing books that described his techniques for training actors. The first two books, *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*, focus on the vocal, physical and emotional skills an actor must develop. The third book, *Creating a Role*, sets out in detail how to construct a character for performance on stage.

Stanislavski, who died in Moscow on 7 August 1938, was the single most influential director in the history of theatre. Since the time of the Greeks, actors have tried to create real, believable people on stage. Stanislavski's achievement was to develop a whole style of realistic staging and acting that truly worked, and which could be taught to other people. This was his enduring contribution to the theatre.

STANISLAVSKI'S SYSTEM

What Stanislavski actually did was to apply a scientific approach to acting. He constantly experimented with his own work. Every time he trained, rehearsed or went on stage, he was experimenting. The system he developed taught actors how to use skill, discipline and willpower to achieve inspiration. His aim was to train actors to be truly creative people, and the techniques he discovered through observation and experiment allow actors to achieve the kind of inspiration that comes naturally only to a real genius.

At the core of Stanislavski's system is his insistence that actors must believe everything that is happening on stage. Most of all, they must believe in what they are doing themselves, so that acting a part becomes the extraordinary experience of living the life of another person. Stanislavski called this the 'theatre of living experience', and to achieve it actors need intensive training and complete self-control.

Throughout his life, Stanislavski went on developing the techniques required to teach actors to achieve this experience. When he was directing a play, the stage often resembled a classroom. The actors were put through an enormous range of exercises, and new techniques were invented and tried. Plays were analysed in depth as the actors worked on creating their characters.

The aim of all the techniques was the same: to develop actors who had creative intelligence, complete self-discipline, perfect control over their voices, diction and physical movement, and the ability to create and experience the whole range of human emotions. Anyone who could achieve all these qualities would be not only a superb actor, but a superb human being.

Stanislavski urged his students and admirers not to blindly copy his system, but to develop their own methods as well. He insisted that he was not the only source of truth about acting and the theatre. In an interview with American director Harold Clurman in 1934, Stanislavski concluded by saying: 'After all my years of study and work in the theatre, I have come to the conclusion that I know nothing about it'. This extraordinary modesty was characteristic.

His dedication to the theatre was total. He believed that it was important to society, brightening the dark lives of poor people and teaching them important truths. To Stanislavski, actors were people who had the vitally important job of educating society, and his commitment to this job never faltered. He worked ceaselessly, rehearsing and teaching throughout the day, then arriving at the theatre in the evening hours before the performance to prepare himself.

Stanislavski demanded the same dedication from his actors, and they were sometimes banned from the theatre for days just for being a few minutes late for rehearsal. In rehearsals, he would keep saying 'I do not believe you' if an actor's performance was not real enough. The actor would be forced to repeat the scene until Stanislavski was satisfied, and sometimes this would take hours. He would accept nothing less than complete emotional truth.

He applied the same standards to himself. An actor once asked him to demonstrate a piece of acting technique, and then interrupted Stanislavski's demonstration by calling out, 'I don't believe you!'. Instead of being angry, Stanislavski simply replied, 'Really? Then I shall have to work on this at home.'

During his lifetime Stanislavski also displayed real integrity. The theatre was his life, and he remained totally true to his beliefs about it. He was always open to new ideas and techniques, but he refused to do anything that he did not believe in, even under threat.

After the communists seized power in Russia in 1917, Stanislavski continued to direct plays and work as he had always done. In the late 1920s, he was under tremendous pressure to stage plays that he regarded as worthless communist propaganda. He refused, even though it could have meant being sent to one of Stalin's work camps where millions of Russians were dying.

In the end, this integrity was rewarded, not punished. Perhaps because Stanislavski was so admired throughout the world, the communists decided that his system of training actors and directing plays was scientific, and so fitted in with communist theory after all. By the time of his death, he was as honoured in his own country as elsewhere.

13.2 SELECTIVE REALISM

As the twentieth century progressed, a number of major playwrights emerged whose writing was essentially realistic, but who were much more flexible in the way they presented real life on stage. In their plays, telling a story in sequence became far less important, while time and place became fluid. Some of these playwrights also intermingled elements of the emerging forms of surrealism and expressionism in their realistic plays. The most significant of these selective realists were the three American playwrights Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

Eugene O'Neill

Unquestionably one of the great playwrights of the twentieth century, O'Neill used a range of styles in his writing, which is probably unequalled by any other writer in the past 100 years. Writing at the rate of almost one play a year for twenty years, he created a number of masterpieces ranging from expressionism in *The Hairy Ape* through a rewriting of classic Greek theatre in *Mourning Becomes Electra* to pure naturalism in *A Long Day's Journey into Night*.

A stunning production of *Long Day's Journey into Night* was staged by the Sydney Theatre Company in 2010, starring the distinguished American actor William Hurt (right).

O'Neill varied the degree of reality he presented in his plays and also frequently employed non-realistic elements to suit the context of a particular play. While he drew on a range of theatrical influences, O'Neill also made extensive use of his own personal experiences in his writing. Despite the extraordinary range of styles in his plays, all O'Neill's work demands realistic acting in the form developed by Stanislavski, but also requires the actors to be flexible in their creation of character.

Arthur Miller

Most of Miller's work is strongly realistic in nature, and requires the creation of totally believable characters on stage. The influence of Ibsen is apparent in Miller's use of social realism. However, in the play *Death of a Salesman*, there are flashbacks and other flexible uses of the realistic form, and the set is expressionistic in style—the skeleton of a house where the actors walk through the walls. By contrast, *The Crucible* uses a formal language structure that Miller invented for his sixteenth century characters, and a scene in which a group of girls pretend to be possessed by the devil demands highly stylised movement.

Miller's plays were a powerful challenge to the political and social structures of America in the 1940s and 1950s, dealing with subjects such as businessmen profiteering from the Second World War and the persecution of people suspected of being communists by the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Miller's writing was also an attempt to write modern plays that were true tragedies in the classic sense: plays that were real and personal, but also had universal meaning.

Tennessee Williams

Perhaps the most poetic of realist writers, Williams also used a range of styles within a basically realist framework. Williams's first successful play, *The Glass Menagerie*, is a memory play using flashbacks and an expressionist set. His greatest play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, appears to be relentlessly realistic, yet it is also a powerfully symbolic play with layers of meaning emerging from its structure.

His trademark is the use of long monologues spoken by his characters, which reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings. It is the personal suffering and sense of loss of these characters that are the heart of Williams's writing. Their monologues appear realistic and true to the characters, effectively catching the rhythms of speech distinctive to the southern states of the USA. However, they are in fact brilliantly constructed and extraordinarily poetic in their impact, and require acting of the highest order.

Others

In the 1940s and 1950s, selective realism dominated the theatre and a number of outstanding works of theatre were staged. In England, John Osborne's plays combined intense realism with powerful monologues reminiscent of Tennessee Williams. The greatest Australian play of the century, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, first performed in 1955, contained the elements of naturalism, poetic monologue and symbolism characteristic of selective realism.

Selective realism remains a potent force in the theatre of reality, and the majority of plays being staged in mainstream theatres in England, Australia and the USA today are still written in this form. However, this dominance is being challenged by the latest evolution in realistic theatre.

Melbourne Theatre Company's 2008 production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

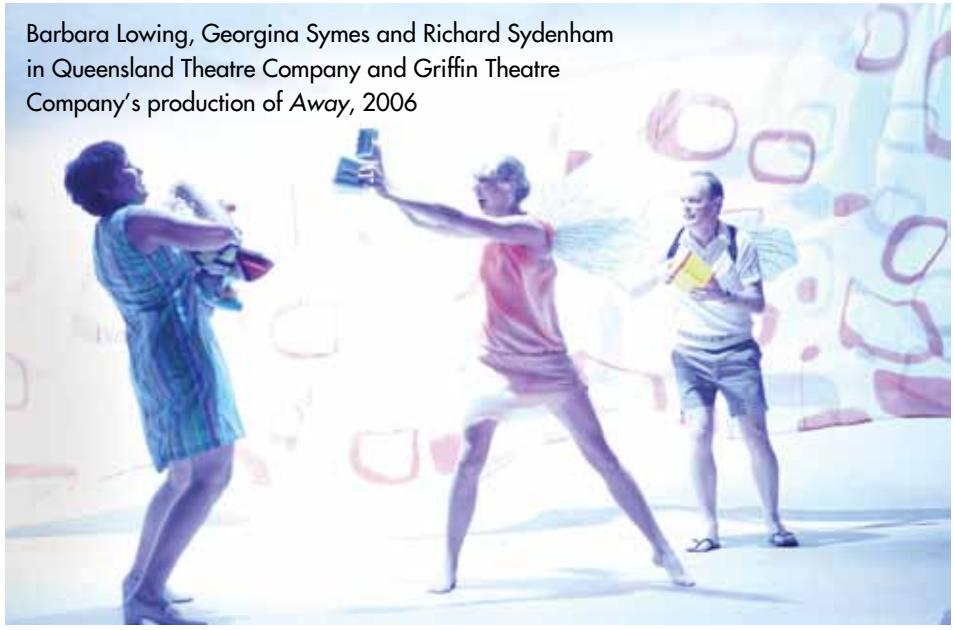
13.3 MAGICAL REALISM

In the second half of the twentieth century, theatre became increasingly complex with playwrights and directors freely mixing different forms of theatre within a single play. It is hard to put a single label to many modern performance works—the word 'eclectic' is often used to describe plays that include a blending of styles. There is one blend, however, which can be clearly identified as belonging to the theatre of reality, and that is magical realism.

One of Australia's most important recent plays, *Away*, is an example of magical realism in which the lives of three very ordinary families are affected by magical events.

Emerging in the 1960s as part of the theatre revolution that accompanied the hippie era, these plays are basically realistic but have a completely non-realistic element in them, which is used by the playwright to transcend or move outside everyday reality. Surreal dream and nightmare sequences are often used in magical realist plays, and these dreams are often more important in the play than apparently real events. The appearance of supernatural characters, such as ghosts, gods and spirits, is also common and ordinary characters often have extraordinary powers, such as the ability to read minds, to heal or to see into the future.

There has also been a proliferation of magical realist films in the past two decades, again involving ordinary people whose lives are influenced by supernatural characters and events. In the film *Truly Madly Deeply*, a woman's life is taken over by the ghost of her dead partner. Although her house is filled with ghosts, the character of the woman remains totally realistic and deeply moving in her emotional turmoil. Her partner's ghost and the other ghosts around him represent her desperate attempt to cling on to what she has lost. She makes them appear and she makes them real.



Barbara Lowing, Georgina Symes and Richard Sydenham in Queensland Theatre Company and Griffin Theatre Company's production of *Away*, 2006

In 2006, Michael Gow directed a production of his own play *Away* for the Queensland Theatre Company; it was the twentieth anniversary of the first staging of the play.

Whether on stage or in film, magical realism requires credible and intense acting. The suspension of disbelief is just as important in this style of realism as it is in totally naturalistic plays. It also demands of the actors and the audience both emotional commitment and imagination in responding to the intermingling of realism and 'magic' on stage.

The theatrical revolution sparked by Stanislavski appears to have met a deep need in human beings. Through realistic performance we are given an insight into the lives of fellow human beings that is normally not available to us. Throughout the twentieth century, realism became more and more dominant in every form of drama, and this dominance continues into the twenty-first century despite the emergence of a fascinating range of non-realistic forms.

Away

by Michael Gow

One of the finest of all Australian plays, *Away* was written in the 1980s but is actually set in the 1960s, when Australia was embroiled in the Vietnam War and was about to be changed forever as the hippie era reached our shores. The action of the play follows three families who 'go away' on holidays to the beach for Christmas in 1967.

The lives of the members of each family are changing as the holiday begins, just as Australia was changing at that time. Coral and Roy are a couple whose son has just been killed in Vietnam and Coral is unable to accept his death. Roy is the principal of the local high school where the children of the other two families have just been involved in a performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the following scene, Coral wanders on stage after the school play is over, thinking about the performance and remembering her dead son.

Exercise 1: Read the text carefully and identify just how realistic it is in style. Is it totally realistic or an example of selective or magical realism?

Exercise 2: Realise and generate the extract, making the character as real and believable as possible, but using a staging and performance style appropriate to the degree of realism in the particular text.

Away, Act 1, Scene 2

[Outside. Coral, alone.]

Coral **When that woman woke up and saw that donkey at her feet I thought my heart would break. I had to wipe away tears. To wake up and find something you want so badly. Even an animal. And then she woke up again and saw her husband and loved him. That boy! In that blue light the shadows on his face and neck were like bruises. He looked so sick yet so wonderful, so white, so cold and burning. 'What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?' I kept saying it over and over in the dark. All these children, having fun, playing and me sitting there in the dark wiping away tears. I could hardly watch them. Their legs and arms painted gold. And that boy's hair, so black. And his smile. 'What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?' Is it better for them to die like that? Looking like gods? Burning, gold, white. What's that word they always say in those plays? Alas?**

[She sighs.]

Alas.

When *Coral* and *Roy* arrive home after the school play, he tries to convince her that it is time to end the mourning and bitterness over the death of their son.

Away, Act 2, Scene 3

ROY — Please, please stop doing it to me. I didn't send him. He had to go. Would you rather not pay the price for the life we have? We could just lie down in the street, defenceless, and let whoever wanted to come and take what we have. Would that have been better for you? Would you have been happy then? Jesus, Coral, you're too selfish. We were picked out to pay. I can't help that. We've paid. I can't bring him back. So we have a duty to go on with what we have. Maybe we should even be proud? We're living in a country with one of the highest standards of living on earth and we have shown ourselves willing to defend that standard.

The following scene is also from *Away*, this time concerning one of the other families in the play. Tom, a schoolboy at Roy's school, is dying from leukaemia and knows it, but keeps the knowledge to himself. His father Harry knows his son is dying, but does not know that Tom is aware of it. In this scene, father and son are painfully careful about what they say, hiding their knowledge and trying to protect each other.

Tom and Harry need to be portrayed with complete realism and with a strong sense of the father–son relationship. At the same time, the unspoken anguish they both feel needs to be suggested but not made obvious.

Away, Act 2, Scene 1

[At home. HARRY and TOM.]

TOM — You didn't have to wait up for me.

HARRY — There's still a lot to do, you know.

TOM — I was all right.

HARRY — Last minute things.

TOM — I got home in one piece, didn't I?

HARRY — I think your mother'll need a trailer for her stuff.

TOM — I won't need much.

HARRY — You feeling all right?

TOM — I'm not tired. I feel wide awake.

HARRY — You looking forward to this trip?

TOM — Of course I am.

HARRY — We are.

TOM — We've been talking about it for months.

HARRY — It'll be a good break.

TOM — That's right. I'm thirsty.

HARRY — We need a good break. From home, work.

TOM You want a drink?

HARRY A cup of tea?

TOM I feel like something cold.

HARRY It's been a rough year.

TOM I remember, you know.

HARRY On your mother.

TOM Yes, I do know that. I remember it all.

HARRY So you can forgive us looking forward to this little trip?

TOM Have I complained? Why do you think I don't want to go?

HARRY Planning the holidays was as important to your mother as actually going away.

TOM I want to go.

HARRY Something to look forward to.

TOM Same for me.

HARRY A few weeks just with ourselves. Just with you. It'll be good.

TOM It'll be terrific. I've looked forward to it. Ever since you suggested it I've wanted to go. That day in the hospital and you brought in the tent and put it up in the ward. I couldn't wait for summer to come.

HARRY When you have your own kids you'll know what I'm talking about.

TOM Come on, Dad, you're getting tired.

HARRY When you've got your own family—

TOM Do you want a drink or not?

HARRY Put the jug on.

TOM No. I want something cold.

HARRY It's not going to be a flash holiday.

TOM I don't want to go to St Tropez.

HARRY But it will be fun. Most of the time.

TOM It'll be a laugh a minute.

HARRY And even if it does get a bit dull, a bit boring, even if you do get a bit fed up, you know a bit … pissed off …

TOM Shit, Dad, where did you pick that up?

HARRY Even if it is slow, if you could try and still have a good time, look like you're having a good time. I'm asking this for your mother. It's for her. Let her see you really enjoying yourself, having a terrific time.

TOM I won't have to try.

HARRY I'm not asking you to lie.

TOM I wouldn't. But I won't need to.

HARRY But … well, you are a bit of a Laurence Olivier. We were very proud tonight. I glanced sideways at your mother at one point and her face was glowing, it was shining. She was very happy.

TOM You'll be tired tomorrow. You'll fall asleep at the wheel. Then where will we be? Some holiday.

HARRY What about that cup of tea?

TOM I think I'll go to bed.

HARRY Don't get too tired, will you?

TOM That's why I'm going to bed.

HARRY We love you a lot.

TOM You shouldn't worry about me. Now hit the sack.

HARRY Have you got your mother a present?

TOM I got three. They get bigger and bigger.

HARRY I'll see you in the morning.

Away by Michael Gow, Currency Press, Sydney, 1991.

Queensland Theatre Company and Griffin Theatre Company's production of *Away*, 2006

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SURREALISM, ARTAUD AND ABSURDISM

The most startling, original and often dramatic movement to emerge in the theatre in the twentieth century was undoubtedly surrealism. The word 'surreal' means beyond or outside normal reality and that is exactly what surrealism in the theatre involves—experiences and characters that are strange and extraordinary. In surreal plays, everyday events and characters are distorted and fractured so that they appear completely unpredictable, weird, or sometimes even totally bizarre and incomprehensible.

14.1 SURREALISM: THEATRE OF DREAMS

At its heart, surrealism is concerned with exploring the irrational and hidden side of human experience—our dreams and nightmares, our subconscious mind and our deepest emotions. This means that surreal plays seldom have clear storylines, recognisable settings or predictable action, and the characters are neither normal nor realistic. Instead, we are taken into dream worlds where chaos and absurdity dominate, and the plays affect us as dreams do, disturbing our view of the world and challenging our understanding of reality.

The development of surrealism spanned the whole of the twentieth century and its impact on the theatre, and on cinema, has been highly significant. Whole styles of writing and performance grew out of the surrealist movement including theatre of cruelty and the absurd. The other most significant, non-realistic forms of theatre that have developed in the past century—ideological theatre and the theatre of transformation—were both profoundly influenced by the surrealist movement. It is now extremely common for most plays, even the most realistic, to contain surreal elements in their writing, direction or design. The use of dream sequences has become particularly popular in modern plays as a way of showing what a character is actually thinking and/or feeling.

There are also a number of creative and exciting theatre companies throughout the world today that are truly surreal in their performance work, including Philippe Genty's company in France, Zen Zen Zo in Australia and Robert Wilson in the USA. In addition, much of the experimentation in multimedia theatre at the moment is focused on using light, film, computer imaging and sound to create stunning surreal experiences for the audience.

One of the few genuinely surreal Australian plays is Jenny Kemp's *The Black Sequin Dress*, first staged in 1996. In the play, a woman enters a nightclub and slips and falls. The nightclub becomes a surreal underworld and she is falling into madness. The play takes us into a world of memories, desire, dreams, fantasies and myths.

A scene from Jenny Kemp's *The Black Sequin Dress*

Let us now look at the growth of surrealism from 1900 to 2000, concentrating in particular on the work of the major writers, directors and designers who created and shaped surreal theatre from its beginnings right through to its modern manifestations.

SYMBOLISM

In earlier chapters we explored symbol as a vital element in drama, and saw how playwrights have always made objects and characters in their plays stand for something really important—from the crown in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to the slamming of the door in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. This use of symbols is common to all plays, and is one of the unique features of the theatre.

However, in their plays written and performed in the early years of the twentieth century, Chekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg experimented with making symbolic objects and characters a central part of their plays, so that an important non-realistic element was introduced into the text. Just the title of Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken* suggests something beyond normal realism, and in fact the play is strongly symbolic in form. Strindberg actually wrote two plays, *A Dream Play* and *Ghost Sonata*, which were dream fantasies exploring the nature of reality and illusion. This symbolism marked the beginning of surrealist drama.

At exactly the same time that Ibsen and Strindberg were turning away from realism in their plays in the first decade of the twentieth century, two outstanding theatre designers were also experimenting with symbolic form in their designs of sets, lighting and costumes. Adolphe Appia, in Europe, actually designed for opera rather than theatre, but he wrote extensively on the whole field of stage design and his writing had a profound effect on theatre design. Appia believed that the design of sets, lighting and costumes should not be realistic but symbolic, representing the atmosphere of the play, the nature of the action and the emotions of the actors. He used ramps and platforms to create a set rather than flats and furniture, and his lighting designs concentrated on darkness and light, and powerful colours to symbolise the feeling of the play.

Working at the same time as Appia, but independently of him, the Englishman Edward Gordon Craig created a number of designs for theatres in different parts of Europe which also concentrated on light, colour and texture rather than traditional stage design. Craig used different stage levels and screens to replace flats and

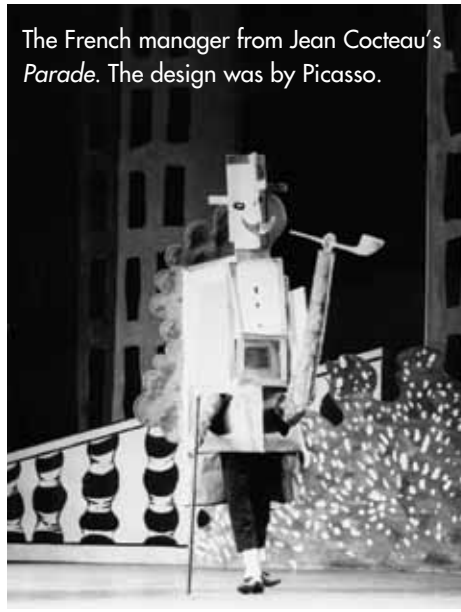
furniture, and his designs for each play were based on the atmosphere and feeling that the play generated, not the actual location or period. All Craig's designs were intended to create visual symbols that would help to convey the meaning of the play.

A number of major stage directors also began experimenting with symbolism in the period from 1900 to 1915. In Russia, Vsevolod Meyerhold conducted a series of experiments in what he called 'anti-realistic theatre', and symbolist acting and staging were a significant part of these experiments. Stanislavski himself invited Craig to Moscow to design the Moscow Art Theatre's production of *Hamlet* in 1912. The collaboration was not a happy one, with Stanislavski rejecting or changing many of Craig's symbolist designs. However, the play did run for 400 performances and influenced other directors and designers to introduce symbolist elements into their work.

EARLY SURREALISM IN FRANCE

In 1896, just as symbolism was entering the writing and directing of plays, an extraordinary piece of theatre was staged in France which had an important impact on the development of surrealism. Alfred Jarry's *Ubi Roi* was about the murder of the king of Poland, but there all connection with reality ended. The actors performed the play as if they were puppets. The performance style involved wild caricature and extreme satire unlike anything seen on stage before. The set was painted with bizarre illustrations of the inside and outside of a room, with palm trees, a snake and a skeleton hanging from a gallows all visible. A number of the characters in the play were portrayed by life-sized puppets made of cane, which were eventually thrown off the stage.

There were only two performances of *Ubi Roi* and they caused a storm of controversy. The play was not staged again in Jarry's lifetime. However, it had a profound effect on those who saw it and others who read the script. Two French artists in particular, Guillaume Apollinaire and Jean Cocteau, subsequently wrote plays that used many of the surreal elements Jarry had woven into his play. Most significant of all, when Antonin Artaud founded his theatre of cruelty in 1927, he named it the Theatre Alfred Jarry.



The French manager from Jean Cocteau's *Parade*. The design was by Picasso.

WORKSHOP: SURREALISM

Exercise 1: Working in groups, create a realistic improvisation about an accident in which someone is injured, using believable dialogue and action.

Exercise 2: Now recreate the improvisation as a nightmare, using surreal sounds and body movements. Have some members of the group take on non-human roles, such as objects that come to life or machines or strange creatures.

WORKSHOP: SURREAL ANIMALS

Playwrights have used animals to create surreal plays from the time of Aristophanes (*The Frogs*, *The Birds* and *The Wasps*) through to modern musicals such as *Cats* and *The Lion King*. These animal characters satirise human behaviour, creating moments of humour.

Exercise: In small groups, generate a performance that satirises one aspect of human behaviour through the use of animal characters. You can heighten the surrealism by incorporating a dream sequence and/or symbolism.


Antonin Artaud in 1930

14.2

ANTONIN ARTAUD: THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Antonin Artaud was born in 1896 and died, insane and in poverty, in 1948. All his attempts to create a theatre of magic, beauty and power that would change the hearts of people ended in failure. Yet since his death, Artaud's extraordinary, imaginative ideas have been a major influence in the world of theatre, and have given us completely new ways of perceiving reality and communicating with other people.

Artaud began his career as an actor in the theatre in Paris, and was also one of the most brilliant young poets of his time. However, from the early 1920s onward, his main interest was in directing. In 1927 he formed his own theatre company with the writer Roger Vitrac. Their theatre opened on 1 June 1927 with a one-act play by Artaud and a full-length play by Vitrac. Lack of success and money quickly put an end to this theatre.

From the earliest days as an actor and director, Artaud had been experimenting with new theatrical forms. In 1931 he saw a group of dancers from Bali performing at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris. Their use of movement, music, costume and sound stunned him. All his revolutionary ideas about theatre and about life crystallised into a single dramatic theory that Artaud called the 'theatre of cruelty'. He wrote a series of essays, letters and articles about it, which were published in 1938 as a book entitled *The Theatre and Its Double*.

Artaud's theories had a profound influence after his death, but in his lifetime he had very little chance to put them into practice. In 1935 he was able to raise the money for a play he wrote and directed, and in which he acted the leading role. The play was a critical and financial failure. The rest of Artaud's life was spent largely in poverty and despair, marked by long periods of mental illness. In many ways, his was a failed life, yet his legacy changed the world of theatre and left us with ways of seeing and communicating that enlarge our understanding of ourselves and others.


Jean-Paul Sartre in 1964

THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Artaud saw the world he lived in as one in desperate need of change, a world of people all mad, desperate and sick. It is important to remember that Artaud's perception of the world was not uncommon in Europe in the 1930s. His generation had lived through the First World War—'the war to end all wars'—in which some 15 million people had died. They had already experienced the Great Depression, when the economies of the world's richest nations had suddenly disintegrated in 1929, leaving tens of millions of people unemployed, homeless and hopeless. Worst of all had been the rise to power of ruthless dictators—Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Franco—who threatened to destroy human liberty and world peace.

Artaud's view of the world as being full of lies, aimlessness, meanness and hypocrisy closely echoes the philosophy of existentialism. This philosophy was based on the writings of various philosophers including the Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote plays as well as novels and philosophical works. Sartre believed that human life has no intrinsic meaning. He totally denied the existence of any God, any reason for living, any pattern to human life. We are born with nothing, and return to nothing. Sartre argued that human beings must face up to the pointlessness and absurdity of their lives, and then they will be free to take actions and make decisions that reflect the terrible reality of existence.

While Artaud shared this view of the world, he believed that it was possible to change that world through his theatre. Artaud saw a direct connection between

the theatre and life: he thought of them as mirrors, or 'doubles', each reflecting the other. If civilisation was sick, then so was the theatre that reflected it and both must change. Artaud believed that if the world of theatre could be transformed by him, then the outside world, which he found so desperate, would be altered as well by his theatre of cruelty.

Artaud said: 'The true purpose of the theatre is to create Myths, to express life in its immense universal aspect'. He believed that theatre could be used to reveal the truth about human existence.

ARTAUD'S TECHNIQUES

Visual poetry

When Artaud watched the Balinese dancers in 1931, he saw performers using movement, gestures and dance instead of words to communicate with their audience. Combined with music and different sound effects, this stylised movement, which Artaud called visual poetry, had an enormous emotional impact. It communicated feelings about the great human mysteries of creation, growth and death in ways that words could not. This does not mean Artaud wanted to eliminate words altogether, but he insisted that they should only be used when they were totally necessary and important.

The movement and gestures of Balinese dancers influenced Artaud's work.

INTERCULTURAL

Artaud's fascination with Balinese dance was part of an increasing interest in Asian theatre and culture in the early 1900s in Europe. Asian dance, art, design, architecture and food all influenced the lifestyles of many Europeans at this time.

Assaulting the senses

Artaud argued that the great mass of people had been brutalised and desensitised by the world they inhabited. There was no point in appealing to their understanding or intelligence. So he wanted the theatre of cruelty to hypnotise them as a snake-charmer hypnotises a snake, putting them into a trance in which they could be shocked into confronting themselves, their way of life and the meaning and mystery of all existence.

To do this, Artaud planned 'an assault on the senses'—using lights, music and sound in the same way as modern rock concerts do. He believed that the theatre should have all the expensive equipment that film-makers use, and should employ it just as skilfully.

Creating a dream world

Through the use of masks, ritual objects, and traditional and striking costumes, Artaud hoped to remove his audience from their everyday cares and preoccupations. He wanted no scenery in his theatre, just symbolic objects sometimes strangely distorted into nightmare shapes. Combined with the use of movement, lights and music, these things would affect the audience in the way dreams do, working directly on the emotions and the subconscious mind.

Involving the audience

In the theatre that Artaud imagined, the audience would be seated in the centre of the auditorium and the action of the play would take place all around them, and even among them. Instead of being spectators, the audience would be made to feel part of everything that happened.

The skill of the actor

Artaud insisted that actors should be highly trained and able to use their voices and bodies with great skill. Most of all, they must be totally committed to their work, so that the intensity of their emotions is felt by the audience. This is similar to the total involvement Grotowski demanded of his actors. Artaud believed that actors should be emotionally involved in their work and convinced of the truth of it.

Contemporary English playwright Edward Bond is famous for the use of extreme violence and shocking events in his plays. He attempts to confront audiences with the cruelty and injustice that can be found in the world.

Deliberate cruelty

When he used the word 'cruelty', Artaud meant it. Not physical cruelty, which draws blood, but an attack on the emotions designed to shock the audience and totally involve them in the drama. To do this, he suggested the use of violent, terrifying and shocking actions and images, designed to 'pulverise' the audience's feelings.

It is very important to note that Artaud did not intend to use shocking actions or effects purely for their own sake. He meant them to be used as all his techniques were to be used, to change the way people perceived their world.

Improvising the play

There were to be no scripts in the theatre of cruelty. Artaud planned to improvise, basing the process on important events, serious human concerns or important themes taken from existing plays. An example he gave was an improvisation based on the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. Artaud said he would use this to demonstrate the horror of the extermination of one race by another, and to make people feel how destructive religion can be when it is used for the wrong reasons.

Using the techniques

To use the techniques of theatre of cruelty properly, you must first begin by looking closely at the world you live in and decide what important elements in it you feel most strongly about, both good and bad. Once you are totally committed to the emotional truth of your perceptions, then you can make effective use of Artaud's techniques to share with other people your own heartfelt understanding of one facet of human life.

WORKSHOP: THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Exercise 1: Working in small groups, create a piece of mime, movement or dance that is designed to convey a single strong emotion, such as love, hate, fear, joy etc., just through the use of stylised movement.

Exercise 2: Using music, sounds, voice (but very few words), extreme physical movement and lights (if available), create improvisations that convey the emotion associated with a certain state of being, such as blindness, loneliness, death, triumph or power.

Exercise 3: Using neutral masks, symbolic costumes (such as white cloth for birth or purity, black cloth for death) and the other techniques already explored, create a dream or nightmare sequence with a strong emotional content. The improvisations must be as unreal and dreamlike as possible.

Exercise 4: Work in pairs. Each pair works out a short improvisation involving a strong emotion. The major aim of the improvisation is to involve an audience directly in both the action and the emotion of the improvisation, so you can use an improvisation from a previous exercise as a starting point. For example, using blindness and the emotional sense of insecurity it creates, you might both improvise being blind and going to the audience for help. Then you might blindfold the audience and make them move around, unable to see, so that they experience the sense of deprivation for themselves. Once you have created your improvisations, join with other pairs to make groups of four and take it in turns to be performers and audience.

Exercise 5: In pairs, work to create a short improvisation based on a personal experience with a strong emotional content. You must use Stanislavski's and Grotowski's techniques for achieving total commitment to the improvisation, as well as theatre of cruelty techniques. Join your pairs into groups of four, and act in turn as performers and audience.

Exercise 6: Working in groups, create an improvisation based on a subject such as child abuse, persecution or brutality, which makes use of violent, terrifying and shocking actions and images to create a strong emotional impact. Remember: the technique must be used with discrimination or it is counter-productive. The improvisations must incorporate Artaud's other techniques as well.

WORKSHOP: CRUELTY IN PERFORMANCE

Exercise 1: Working in groups of four, choose a subject for improvisation which, in Artaud's sense, reflects the violence and unrest of contemporary society; for example, terrorism, poverty, prisoners of conscience, the threat of nuclear war, child abuse. The exercise is to prepare an improvisation on a subject using theatre of cruelty techniques as variously and effectively as possible. Use as many resources as possible, such as music, masks, clothing, props and lighting.

Exercise 2: Each group improvises its theatre of cruelty, using the rest of the class as an audience. Assess the effectiveness of your group's use of techniques from their impact on the audience.

Exercise 3: As a class, discuss the success of the improvisations and their impact on the audience.

14.3 THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Artaud never achieved his creative vision of a radically different type of theatre. However, after his death, a new form of playwriting emerged which was profoundly influenced by his ideas. It was called the 'theatre of the absurd'.

In fact, a number of very different dramatists and plays were associated with this title, and there were actually two waves of absurdist writing in the decades following the Second World War. The first wave appeared in the 1940s and early 1950s, while the second wave began in the late 1950s and continued through to the early 1980s. There were significant differences in writing style, in subject matter and in types of performance between the two waves, and even between plays in each wave.

Whatever the differences, these two waves of absurdist theatre share common fundamental characteristics. First of all, absurdist theatre was essentially a genre of writing created by a number of outstanding playwrights. Secondly, the plays all express similar strong and individual views of the world as a meaningless and threatening place for human beings to live in. In performance, the plays use a range of startlingly original theatrical techniques that all work to communicate to audiences the playwrights' grim vision of life. In all the absurdist plays, the influence of early surrealism and the theatre of cruelty is clear and pervasive.

THE FIRST WAVE

Three major dramatists dominated the early development of absurdism. They were Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet. All three men were profoundly influenced by the ideas of Artaud and by the existential philosophy of Sartre. Like Sartre and Artaud, the absurdist playwrights believed that all life was meaningless and totally random. Their plays show human beings struggling to cope with their lives in a hostile world, and in many cases simply waiting to die.

One of the reasons for the absurdists' bleak view of the world was the Second World War. The deliberate extermination of millions of Jews by the Nazis, the deaths of some 60 million people in the fighting, and the use of nuclear weapons to end the war led to a widespread sense of disgust and despair which surfaced in the first wave of absurdist plays.

Samuel Beckett

Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* was voted the most important play of the twentieth century in a survey of 800 leading theatre workers conducted by Britain's National Theatre in 1998.

Samuel Beckett, the greatest of all the absurdist playwrights, is also one of the most significant playwrights of the twentieth century. His plays are a despairing portrait of inadequate and often desperate human beings struggling to survive, or facing death, in a world that is bewildering and hostile. However, Beckett's extraordinary use of language transforms his plays into moving, profound, and often even comic masterpieces. He weaves unique and powerful poetry out of an amazingly simple and spare use of words.

Eugène Ionesco

On the surface, Ionesco's plays are much funnier and less grim than Beckett's work, but there is a darker layer underneath. Simple objects, such as chairs, take on a bizarre and threatening life of their own, and everyday events and experiences slide into nightmare and surreal madness for Ionesco's characters.

Jean Genet

In Genet's plays, the characters struggle to control themselves and each other in a world that is chaotic and dangerous. Many of Genet's characters are trapped inside their own bizarre fantasies, living out their dreams and nightmares, and unable to distinguish between reality and illusion.

THE SECOND WAVE

The plays of Beckett, Ionesco and Genet had a profound impact on the development of Western theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. Part of that impact produced a second wave of playwrights whose work was essentially absurdist in form, although quite different from the first wave, and often very different from each other. The key figures in this second wave were Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard.

Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter's work is fascinating for its use of language, and of silence. In his plays, characters are trapped in despairing and meaningless lives, and often live them out in a single room. The entrance of a stranger is always a threat, and in his early plays often led to violence. All the characters use words not to communicate but as weapons of attack and defence, and as a means of avoiding the truth. Long pauses and absolute silence are common in Pinter's plays as communication breaks down completely.

Edward Albee

Like Pinter, Edward Albee writes about the fear and danger of living in a hostile world, a world where people hurt rather than help each other. Albee uses comedy like a scalpel: to dissect his characters and reveal the truth about them. His plays also have tragic overtones, unlike those of the other absurdists, because many of his characters have worthwhile or likeable elements; these, however, are destroyed by others or by the characters' inability to deal with reality. Only some of Albee's plays are absurdist in form.

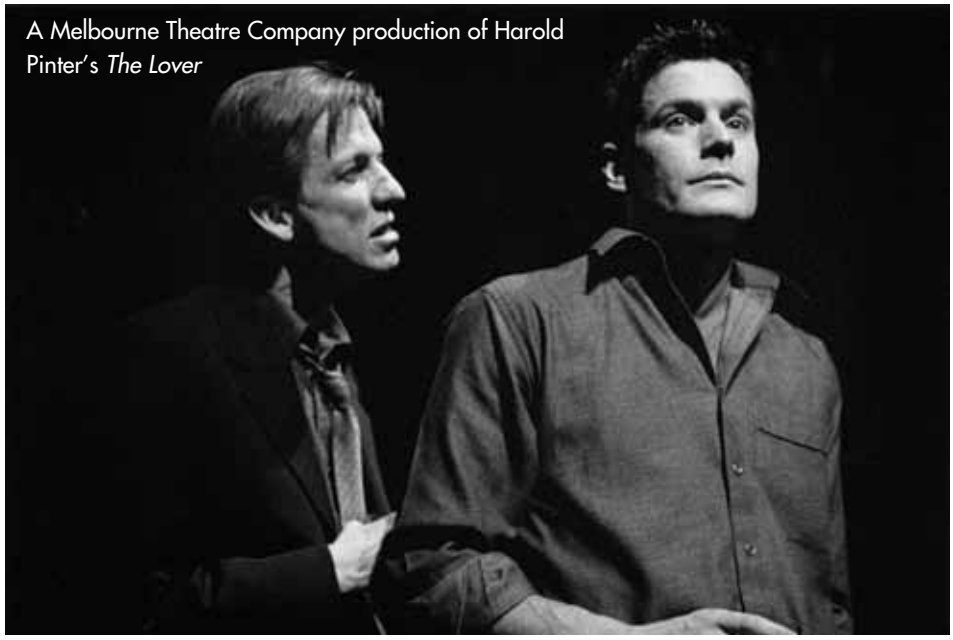
Tom Stoppard

Many of Tom Stoppard's early one act plays are hilariously funny, and his characters are often genuinely engaging and sympathetic. However, they still inhabit a world that is mystifying, threatening and often nightmarish. Like Pinter, Stoppard is deeply concerned about the importance of language and the inability of humans to use words to communicate with each other. His two outstanding, full-length absurdist plays are *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. His later plays have been much more eclectic in style.

Harold Pinter

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD TODAY

Absurdist theatre did not end with the second wave of dramatists. Rather, it became an integral part of world theatre. It is hard to identify a modern play that is exclusively absurdist, but many of the important plays of the past decade have contained strong absurdist elements, and many outstanding contemporary playwrights use absurdist ideas and techniques in their work. Sam Shepard in the USA, Caryl Churchill in England and Michael Gow in Australia are major dramatists whose work has been profoundly influenced by absurdism.



A Melbourne Theatre Company production of Harold Pinter's *The Lover*

Surrealism, from its original dreamlike form through Artaud's theatre of cruelty to absurdist drama, has been a major movement over the past century and has now become a fundamental element in modern theatre. As we move into the twenty-first century, we are seeing an increasing number of important new plays that weave powerful surreal elements into their basic form, and some of the most exciting theatre companies currently operating worldwide are essentially surreal in nature. If the last 100 years saw the birth and growth of surrealism, this century is likely to see its full flowering.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

Waiting for Godot

by Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett was born in Ireland, but lived most of his life in Paris. His play *Waiting for Godot* was first produced in 1953. Fifteen years later Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of his status as a writer, proof that the theatre of the absurd was a major force in world literature.

Waiting for Godot provoked a storm of criticism when it first appeared for a number of reasons. Practically nothing happens during the entire play, it does not tell a story in the conventional sense, and it is full of pauses and silences, strange uses of language, and peculiar people.

It begins and ends with two old tramps waiting under a tree on a country road. Their names are Vladimir and Estragon, and they are waiting for Mr Godot. Another pair of characters, with the unlikely names of Pozzo and Lucky, appear and vanish. At the end of Act I, a boy enters and tells the tramps that Godot cannot come today, but will come tomorrow.

Act II repeats exactly the same pattern. Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, attempt suicide (again) and encounter Pozzo and Lucky. The conversations are different, their suicide attempts use other methods, and the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky has changed, but in essence the situation is the same. At the end of the final act, the same boy appears with the same message as in Act I.

Almost nothing happens, yet the play is extraordinarily rich and thought-provoking. If Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for God, then the play seems to hold out some hope of salvation. Yet that hope is very uncertain. Godot never appears and, even if he did, what would he give them?

On another level, the play can be taken as a direct expression of Sartre's ideas. We see that Vladimir and Estragon cannot bear to face the truth that there is nothing to wait for, no purpose or meaning in their lives. In one of the most famous speeches in the play, Pozzo cries out '… they give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more'.

In the end, *Waiting for Godot* defies simple explanation, and this is part of its power. The play is fundamentally concerned with the mystery of human existence, with our struggle to understand our lives, and with the conflict between freedom and necessity. Below is part of the last scene of the play.

Waiting for Godot, Act 2

[Estragon draws Vladimir towards the tree. They stand motionless before it. Silence.]

Estragon **Why don't we hang ourselves?**

Vladimir **With what?**

Estragon **You haven't got a bit of rope?**

Vladimir **No.**

Estragon **Then we can't.**

[Silence.]

Vladimir **Let's go.**

Estragon **Wait, there's my belt.**

Vladimir **It's too short.**

Estragon **You could hang on to my legs.**

Vladimir **And who'd hang on to mine?**

Estragon **True.**

Vladimir **Show all the same.** *[Estragon loosens the cord that holds up his trousers which, much too big for him, fall about his ankles. They look at the cord.]* **It might do at a pinch. But is it strong enough?**

Estragon **We'll soon see. Here**

[They each take an end of the cord and pull. It breaks. They almost fall.]

Vladimir **Not worth a curse.**

[Silence.]

ESTRAGON You say we have to come back tomorrow?

VLADIMIR Yes.

ESTRAGON Then we can bring a good bit of rope.

VLADIMIR Yes.

[Silence.]

ESTRAGON Didi.

VLADIMIR Yes.

ESTRAGON I can't go on like this.

VLADIMIR That's what you think.

ESTRAGON If we parted? That might be better for us.

VLADIMIR We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. *[Pause.]* Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON And if he comes?

VLADIMIR We'll be saved.

[VLADIMIR takes off his hat (LUCKY's), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again.]

ESTRAGON Well? Shall we go?

VLADIMIR Pull on your trousers.

ESTRAGON What?

VLADIMIR Pull on your trousers.

ESTRAGON You want me to pull off my trousers?

VLADIMIR Pull ON your trousers.

ESTRAGON *[Realising his trousers are down.]* True.

[He pulls up his trousers.]

VLADIMIR Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON Yes, let's go.

[They do not move.]

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett, Faber & Faber, London.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

REFORM: EXPRESSIONISM, BRECHT AND BOAL

The second major form of non-realistic theatre to emerge in the twentieth century was the theatre of reform—theatre whose basic purpose is to change the political and social structures of our world. A number of very different styles have developed under the reform umbrella. The three most significant have been: German expressionism, which began the movement; Bertolt Brecht's particular form of theatre, which he referred to as epic; and the more recent work of the Brazilian director Augusto Boal.

15.1 EXPRESSIONISM

Just like surrealism, expressionism began as a revolt against realistic theatre in the early years of the twentieth century, and it was similarly influenced by developments in visual art. As with surrealism, expressionism also attempted to explore the experiences of dreams and the subconscious.

Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* inspired many Expressionist playwrights as well as painters.

There is another important similarity. Expressionism grew and evolved throughout the twentieth century, mainly due to the work of major innovators, and expressionist plays and expressionist ideas and techniques are now found in the theatre worldwide. However, contemporary forms of expressionism are very different from its early beginnings, and quite distinct from current styles of surreal drama.

Expressionism emerged as a theatrical form in Germany between 1890 and 1920, and it was responsible for a number of outstanding silent films including Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. It was very much a drama of protest, glorifying youth, freedom and the individual, and attacking the strict nature and grim mechanisation of German society in the early part of the twentieth century. The characters tended to have titles like 'The Mother' and 'The Worker', rather than names, and they each represented a social group rather than an individual. This strongly political nature has remained a fundamental feature of theatre of reform throughout its history.

However, the early expressionist plays also had a strongly surreal side—dreams and nightmares were important elements—and some of the first plays were almost entirely surreal in atmosphere. By 1920, however, this surreal element of expressionist theatre had largely disappeared, replaced by strong social and political themes and an emphasis on historical stories that were used to criticise current power structures and social realities.

It is worth noting that expressionist theatre did not just appear in 1900. A number of major plays written during the nineteenth century sowed the seeds of expressionism, most notably the work of Georg Büchner, who died in 1837. His extraordinary works

Danton's Death and *Woyzeck* contained many expressionist elements and were strongly political in subject. It was the staging of these plays in Germany in 1902 and 1912 that inspired German writers, directors and actors to experiment with expressionist techniques and ideas.

A number of expressionist playwrights emerged in the period from 1900 to 1920, most notably Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. Their plays made expressionism an international movement in the theatre and influenced some of the twentieth century's greatest playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill in the USA and Sean O'Casey in Ireland. However, by that time, another German playwright and director had begun working whose plays would transform expressionism into epic theatre.

Expressionism on stage: the 1920s New York production of Ernst Toller's *Man and the Masses*

15.2 BERTOLT BRECHT: EPIC THEATRE

Born in Germany in 1898, Bertolt Brecht was 16 years old when the First World War began. This war, which killed 15 million people and ruined Germany, had a profound effect on him as a person and an artist.

Brecht served briefly in the army before the war ended in November 1918 and he saw its consequences for ordinary people as Germany was defeated. After the war Brecht became involved in political activity and was attracted to the doctrine of socialism, which swept Europe after the communist Russian Revolution in 1917. However, Brecht saw the consequences of an attempted communist takeover in Bavaria when he was living there in 1919, which resulted in chaos and a crackdown by the army. These events led him to believe that revolution should be the result of intelligent

thought and scientific investigation, and this conviction applied to his involvement in theatre as well as politics.

At the same time as his political interest was awakened, Brecht became increasingly involved in theatre. He was initially attracted to naturalistic theatre through the work of Gerhart Hauptmann in Germany and Emile Zola in France, because it focused on the lives of everyday people. However, in his first play, *Baal*, which was written in 1918, Brecht experimented with the new style of expressionist theatre; his next play, *Drums in the Night*, was also expressionist in form.

In 1922 Brecht directed for the first time, but he was so arrogant as a director and so rude to the actors that he was replaced. He was later allowed to contribute to the rehearsals of *Drums in the Night* and his next play, *In the Jungle*, which opened in Munich in May 1923.

Brecht became increasingly interested in the writings of Karl Marx and was influenced by Helene Weigel, the left-wing actress who bore Brecht's first child. While politically Brecht was increasingly drawn to communism, in the theatre he continued to experiment with form, and his first major success as a playwright came in 1928 with the staging of a musical *The Threepenny Opera*. This play, based on John Gay's 1728 play *The Beggar's Opera*, is a savage satire on the middle class and contains many of the major elements of epic theatre. The play blames capitalist society for the existence of the criminal underworld that is the setting of *The Beggar's Opera*. The music, written by Kurt Weill, is a blend of jazz, folk, and modern music, and ironically it was part of the enormous emotional appeal of the play. This was the opposite of Brecht's intention, because he believed the 'epic theatre' he was creating should speak objectively to the intelligence of the audience.

INTERCULTURAL

Brecht was profoundly influenced by Asian theatre and culture. He based a number of his plays on Oriental stories and legends, and incorporated Chinese acting techniques into his productions.

EPIC THEATRE ON STAGE

We explored the acting techniques associated with epic theatre in chapter 4. On stage, Brecht's plays were nearly all historical narratives that blended large-scale stories with the striking dramatic techniques he used to train his actors. The exceptions to this were the texts he wrote in which Nazi Germany was the background, or target, of the plays. Brecht took his plots from European history, from Asian myths, and from other classic plays. All his works were fiction—history and fact were transformed to suit his purpose, which was to make the audience become scientific observers who would form intelligent opinions and make rational judgments on the behaviour of the characters and the action of the play, relate these to the social and political context of the real world, and then work to change that world.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Brecht left Germany to live with his family in Denmark until 1941. This was the period when most of his greatest plays were created.

Life of Galileo (1938)

This play is based Galileo's (1610) discovery that the Earth moves around the Sun, which was in total opposition to the teachings of the Church, that the Earth was the centre of the universe. Galileo was condemned by the Church, forced to recant, and spent the last part of his life under house arrest. In Brecht's version, science is not a wonderful way of discovering and changing the world, but an instrument used by the powerful and the rich of the world to suit themselves. Everyone in the play is corrupt or vulnerable. Galileo's daughter is reduced to being his jailer; her wealthy fiancé is in love with his wealth and his land, not her; and Galileo is not a hero but a fallible and frightened man.

Mother Courage and Her Children (1939)

This remains perhaps the greatest anti-war play ever written, and is still staged throughout the world today. See pages 52–3.

The National Theatre in the UK, one of the world's great theatre companies, staged an exceptional, modernised production of *Mother Courage* in 2009.

The Good Person of Szechwan (1943)

In this play Brecht is concerned with the question of just what makes a person good. The protagonist is actually a young prostitute, called Shen Te, who tries desperately to follow the rules for good behaviour taught by the gods, who actually appear in the play. The other citizens of Szechwan are hypocrites who pretend to be respectable and moral, but take every opportunity to abuse Shen Te and cheat each other. The only way Shen Te can protect herself is to disguise herself as a man. She pretends to be a powerful male cousin named Shui Ta. To be good person, Shen Te has to pretend to be someone she is not.

The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui (1941)

Brecht's famous attack on Hitler and the Nazi Parity, this play is a savage satire and a chilling reminder about how easy it is for tyrants to gain power. It is set in the vegetable markets of Chicago in the USA in the 1930s, at the time of the Great Depression. Arturo Ui, a local gangster, seizes control of the cauliflower trade and then attempts to take over the entire city. Ui is a completely laughable character at first, and the whole plot of taking over the cauliflower business is laughable. However, Ui is increasingly revealed as a complete psychopath, and he relentlessly murders anyone who stands in his way. In the most chilling scene in the play, he is coached by an actor to be a more effective public speaker; as the scene progresses, Ui is transformed into a terrifying imitation of Adolf Hitler giving a speech. The play ends in mass murder.

In 1941 Brecht sailed to the USA to escape the German armies sweeping across Europe. He settled in California and went on living in the USA until 1947, writing just one great play during that period.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1944)

This play was the most overtly communist of all Brecht's work and the prologue was not printed in the USA while he was living there. The prologue and the play ask the question: who should own the land and the means of production—capitalists with the money to buy farms and factories, or the farmers and workers who actually produce the food and machines.

In the prologue, two groups of peasants gather to argue who should own the valley where they live. The story of the chalk circle is then told, about a civil war centuries ago when the governor's wife was forced to flee and left her child behind. A servant called Grusha finds the child and cares for it. After much suffering and sacrifice to ensure the safety of the child, the war ends. The Governor's wife returns and demands the child back. Grusha is brought to a court presided over by Azdak, who places the child in a chalk circle and tells the two women to take him if they want him. The women struggle over the child but Grusha lets the Governor's wife win the tug of war because she is afraid the child will be hurt. Azdak then gives the child to Grusha because she has looked after it and proved she loves it more.

Brecht returned to Berlin in 1949 to stage *Mother Courage and her Children* with his wife, Helene Weigel, in the title role. This was the beginning of Brecht's own theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble, which is still one of the world's great theatre companies. Brecht devoted all his time and energy during the 1950s to the ensemble and on staging his own plays. He died in 1956.

WORKSHOP: EPIC THEATRE

Exercise 1: Working in groups, create a short improvisation about a current political or social issue, such as global warming, terrorism, child slavery in the Third World, or another issue you choose. Set the action of the piece in a different cultural setting from your own.

Exercise 2: Rehearse and perform your improvisation, applying the Brechtian performance techniques from chapter 4.

WORKSHOP: REALISING A BRECHTIAN PLAY

Exercise: Choose one of the plays mentioned in this unit and generate a short (two- to three-minute) performance. Make sure you are true to the political or social viewpoint that Brecht is putting forward as well as identifying appropriate Brechtian performance techniques (see chapter 4).

15.3 AUGOSTO BOAL: THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED


Augusto Boal in India, 2006

Brazilian Augusto Boal is one of a number of influential theatre directors who emerged from outside Europe and the USA. Boal called his form of theatre the 'theatre of the oppressed', and it is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it involves the use of theatre as a weapon of social and political reform, and marks the next major evolution of this form of theatre following Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. Secondly, Boal's techniques have become a central component in 'theatre for development', a major theatrical movement now widespread in Asia, Africa and South America, which operates very differently from traditional Western theatre. Thirdly, Boal did not work with written texts but used theatre to actively involve the audience as part of the creation and performance of plays, so his form of theatre breaks down the traditional barriers between actor and audience.

Augusto Boal was born in Brazil and began to develop theatre of the oppressed during his time as director of the Arena Theatre in Sao Paulo between 1956 and 1971. At that time, most theatre companies in Brazil modelled their work on the style of European theatre companies. However, Boal set out to create a form of theatre that was special to his country, and which dealt with local issues and the concerns of native Brazilians. To do this, he invented a new type of theatre he called 'theatre of the oppressed'.

This system involved some techniques that were radical for Brazilian theatre in the 1960s. Boal got his actors to swap roles, to wear masks on stage and to mix fact and fiction in the plays they created. In particular, Boal used an actor to be the Joker, who would operate as a kind of master of ceremonies, introducing the play, providing information and explaining what was happening to the audience. This technique of the Joker later became one of the key features of 'forum theatre'.

During the 1960s there were two military coups in Brazil, the first in 1964 and a much more repressive one in 1968. The military dictatorship that seized power in these coups clamped down on all resistance and brutally suppressed human rights in Brazil. Boal decided to use the Arena Theatre to challenge this repression and also to encourage a demand for democracy. To achieve these aims, he experimented with a range of new types of theatre and, in particular, tried to find ways to actively involve audiences in the theatre experience.

In 1971 Boal was arrested on the orders of the military dictatorship, jailed and tortured. He was released after three months, but was warned that if he continued his political activities he was a dead man. He moved to Argentina and lived and worked there until 1976. During his five years in Argentina, he continued to develop his theatre of the oppressed. He was convinced that the theatre could help to free people from the political, social and economic forces that kept them poor, repressed and unhappy. He set out to achieve this goal by developing three new forms of theatre: image theatre, invisible theatre and forum theatre.

However, the government of Argentina became more repressive during the early 1970s, and Boal found himself increasingly restricted and persecuted in his work. He devoted his time to writing about theatre of the oppressed, rather than directing, and finally left Argentina in 1976 to settle in France for ten years.

In Paris, he set up a Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed, and he also travelled widely in Europe and North America, popularising his work. As he did so, he realised that people in the developed world suffered from oppression just as much as the poor of Brazil, but their oppression was psychological, happening inside their own heads. Boal began to use theatre of the oppressed to deal with these emotional and personal oppressions.

In 1986, there was a change of government in Brazil and Boal returned to set up a Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro, as a partner to the one in Paris. He developed a theatre program for the poor children in the city with funding from the government and private business, but this funding was later withdrawn. Boal continued his work under increasingly difficult circumstances and in 1992 decided to stand for election, partly in protest at what was happening in Brazil. He won a seat as a legislator, and out of this experience came his ideas for his next experiment in the theatre of reform: 'legislative theatre', which was designed to use theatre to actually change the law.

By 1996, nineteen permanent theatre groups had been formed and thirteen new laws had been passed as a direct result of their work. Boal, however, lost his legislator's seat in the 1996 elections and was no longer able to work in the same way. Nevertheless, his work continued through direct links between the Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed and pressure groups, such as doctors and students, who are working for change through the use of theatre.

Theatre of the oppressed is now one of the most widely used forms of theatre for development. Boal continued to travel widely, not just between the two centres in Paris and Rio de Janeiro, but all around the world until his death in 2009.


Augusto Boal travelled to Australia in 1995 to run workshops and demonstrate his techniques to teachers and theatre workers.

TYPES OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Image theatre

Boal designed image theatre so that people could explore their experiences without the need for language. He believed that creating freeze-frames, mime movements and improvisations based on the oppressions in their lives allowed them to express those oppressions and understand them more deeply than by speaking about them. Furthermore, once they had shaped these images, they could try to change them, inviting others to help them, and in this way learn to deal effectively with the issues in their lives.

The essential features of image theatre are as follows:

1 The participants use drama to explore their own experiences, feelings and oppressions. They also work with each other to develop a greater understanding of and empathy for the lives of others.
2 Each performance begins with a freeze-frame created by the groups of participants.

3 The images are silent ones—no words are used.
4 The meaning of the freeze-frame is analysed by the other groups, who suggest titles and themes. In particular, the person being oppressed in the freeze-frame is identified and the nature of the oppression is discussed.
5 This freeze-frame is then worked on by members of the groups and other individuals who act as sculptors to mould and change the frozen bodies.
6 This continues until a real image is achieved. This is a freeze-frame showing a form of oppression that everyone agrees portrays the situation in its reality. An image of immigrants, for example, showed how poor people coming to Sweden from other parts of the world struggled to survive. The freeze-frame showed one man reaching out for help, another working very hard, and a young black woman lying on the ground in despair.
7 Other groups and individuals now change the freeze-frame, moving the frozen people to try to create an ideal image—showing the situation as it should be, with no oppression. In the immigrants example, this involved members of another group freezing in positions showing how they would help the immigrants.
8 The real image is then created once more, and each spectator makes a change to the real freeze-frame to try to bring it closer to the ideal.
9 The freeze-frames are brought to life, moving in slow motion to create a series of moving images showing how the oppression could be overcome.
10 Different transitions from the real image to ideal image can be tried, both as a series of freeze-frames and as slow motion and normal action.

Invisible theatre

This is a form of public theatre in which the actors perform a play they have prepared in a public place such as a shopping mall, a crowded train or a city square, but the people watching do not know it is a play. It arose partly out of the difficulty Boal encountered in actually staging plays while living in Argentina. Boal's intention in inventing invisible theatre was to provoke violent reactions from the public involved, and then try to get them to discuss their reactions. For example, a group of actors might act out a scene in a busy street in which one of them is a black woman and the others pretend to harass her. She would appeal to people passing by to help her while the other actors would encourage the passers-by to join with them and torment her. Finally the actors would reveal that it was a performance and try to get the public to reflect on their reactions.

Invisible theatre is, by its very nature, highly problematic. Boal himself admitted that his actors were actually placed in danger on a number of occasions because the public believed it was real and did not know that they were seeing theatre. Just as seriously, in a number of invisible theatre performances the actors actually encouraged the people who became involved to behave badly and even illegally. Understandably, in some cases the public involved did not calmly reflect on what had happened once they knew it was a play, but were angry and actually threatened the actors with violence.

Unlike Boal's other forms of theatre, invisible theatre is not widely used because of strong reservations about its morality and its usefulness.

In fact, Boal's use of invisible theatre appears to actually oppress the people it involves, since it keeps them ignorant of the truth and allows them to be manipulated by the actors, who hold the knowledge and the power. In a way, invisible theatre is a denial of the true essence of theatre, which is a shared journey of discovery between the actors and the audience.

Forum theatre

Unlike invisible theatre, forum theatre does work to actively empower all those involved, both actors and audience, and it has become a major form of theatre for development in the twenty-first century.

In forum theatre, a group of actors perform a play for an audience. The play involves a situation in which an individual is oppressed by a group of people who have some kind of power over the protagonist. The play is acted through once while the audience watches. It is then performed again, but this time any member of the audience can call out 'Stop!' and enter the play at any stage to replace the protagonist and try to end the oppression, or at least modify it. The actors performing the play try to continue the action exactly as it happened the first time so that the oppression continues and the play ends exactly as it did the first time.

INTERCULTURAL

Forum theatre is the most widely used form of theatre employed by non-government organisations in developing countries in their attempts to improve the health, welfare and social conditions of millions of people.

The spect-actors

There are no passive spectators in forum theatre, but rather what Boal calls 'spect-actors', the members of the audience who are invited to step into the forum play and change it. Any member of the audience can step in at any time to take on the role of the oppressed person, and it is possible for every spect-actor to have a turn.

The spect-actors also frequently contribute to the creation of the original play. Often the actors base their play on the experiences of a member of the audience who has suffered some form of oppression. The different approaches taken by members of the audience to deal with this oppression can help the person whose story was originally used. Boal called this use of a forum to explore real issues faced by members of the audience a 'rehearsal for reality'.

The Joker

Forum theatre performances are controlled by a kind of master of ceremonies that Boal names the Joker. By this he means the Joker in the pack of cards, the highest card that controls all the others and can change the game at any time. The Joker introduces the play at the start, explains anything that is unknown or confusing, instructs the actors to run the play each time, and invites the audience to intervene.

Magic

It is also the Joker's responsibility to identify when 'magic' is used and to stop it happening. Magic occurs in forum theatre when a member of the audience steps into the play and says or does something that is totally out of character, or completely contradicts what has been happening. For example, if a spect-actor took the role of a quiet, shy person who was being bullied, and then suddenly made this character extraordinarily aggressive, this would be magic. Equally, if a character was suffering terrible deprivation through being poor, it would be magic for a spect-actor to step into the role and declare that they had just won Tattslotto.

Because the word 'magic' suggests something special and exciting, many actors and teachers use an expression such as 'As if' when challenging the authenticity of an intervention in a piece of forum theatre.

Since Boal first devised forum theatre almost thirty years ago, different groups in different countries have adapted it in various ways. One major modification is to allow the spect-actors to take the role of any character in the play, not just the protagonist. This allows much more sophisticated and often more realistic solutions to be explored. Very often the person being oppressed has no power to change things, but the people around them can influence events, and those responsible can sometimes modify their behaviour.

Another modification is to use forum theatre to explore a particular problem in a structured way. This was done as part of the international Drama and Conflict Resolution (DRACON) project, and later in the Acting Against Bullying project. John O'Toole and Bruce Burton used forum theatre in schools in Sydney and Brisbane to teach students conflict and bullying management techniques. Senior drama students created forum theatre plays structured into three scenes. The first scene showed 'latent conflict'—the beginning of a conflict between people before it had become obvious. The second scene showed 'emerging conflict', where the clash between the main characters had become serious and was more apparent. The final scene ended in 'manifest conflict', where the characters were totally hostile and opposed to each other, often in full physical battle, and where the conflict was

obvious to all. The drama students then taught Year 8 and 9 students in the schools about conflict management and performed these forum theatre pieces to them. The students were invited to step into the plays, taking any character's place, to see if they could manage the conflict situation. Many of them did so very successfully.

Not only schools, but community groups, homeless people, prisoners in jail and cultural minority groups have all used forum theatre to explore and better manage their oppressions. Throughout Africa and Asia, forum theatre has become a vital part of theatre for development, which aims to empower communities in underdeveloped countries to deal with the economic, social and political problems that confront them.

Augusto Boal at a workshop in New York, 2008

Legislative theatre

Using his position as a politician and working through the Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal formed contacts with a number of different community groups, introducing these groups to image and forum theatre. The groups were encouraged to create plays that are parables—performances with a political or social point, similar to the work of Brecht. The groups then visited each other, sharing their theatre performances, and also performed at political demonstrations and festivals.

Once people had become sensitive to an issue through the use of theatre, a meeting was held—Boal referred to this as 'the chamber in the square'. At this meeting, people discussed what laws might be passed to deal with the issue raised by the theatre pieces. Finally, an amendment or a new law based on this discussion was presented to the parliament, often by Boal himself.

A successful example of legislative theatre at work was when a group of people over sixty created a play about an elderly person being wrongly treated by an inexperienced doctor. As a result, a law was passed that forced hospitals to offer specialist treatment by doctors and nurses trained in geriatrics.

WORKSHOP: IMAGE THEATRE

Exercise 1: In a group, form a large circle and have one person step into the centre and take up the position of someone experiencing the particular oppression you have chosen to explore, such as slavery, unemployment, racism, discrimination or another serious form of suffering. One by one, join the freeze-frame, silently taking up a position as someone involved in the oppression in one way or another, on either side or as an observer.

Exercise 2: Form small groups of three or four and stand in circles facing in towards each other. A topic for an image is named—a straightforward oppression such as bullying, teasing, harassment or exclusion. Each group must immediately form a frozen image of this oppression with one of the group members as the oppressed person. It must be done spontaneously and without any conversation.

Hold your freeze-frames and look around to observe the images of the same subject created by the other groups.

Exercise 3: Form an image of an oppression that you have experienced or learned about with yourself as the victim. Share and discuss these individual images, identifying the type of oppression and its impact on the victim.

Exercise 4: Use the same oppression you identified above as the subject, but this time create the image with yourself as the oppressor who caused the situation. Again discuss the images, analysing the behaviour of the oppressor.

Exercise 5: Working in groups, create a piece of image theatre following Boal's ten steps. Choose a form of oppression that your group is concerned about and which has serious consequences for the people involved. As well as working on your own image, contribute to the work of other groups as spectators and also as participants where necessary.

WORKSHOP: FORUM THEATRE

Exercise 1: Working in groups, decide on a newspaper headline about a social problem or issue, such as discrimination or street kids. Form a freeze-frame that would make a dramatic photograph to go with the headline. Create your freeze-frame for the rest of the class, speaking the headline aloud while you are frozen.

Exercise 2: Now improvise a play with action and dialogue which that shows how this problem or issue arose. Make sure you have more than one scene in your play, and that you clearly show the development of the situation; for example, a group of people continuously tormenting someone who is different until that person cannot bear it any longer, or a teenager leaving home after a fight with her parents and then refusing to return despite what happens to her on the streets.

Exercise 3: Choose one member of your group to be the Joker, and rehearse the play a number of times until you are confident in your character and the situation.

Exercise 4: Perform the play as a piece of forum theatre to an audience. The Joker explains to the audience that the play will be performed straight through the first time, and then a second time when the audience can join in to try to help the situation.

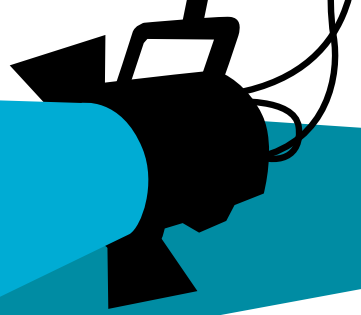
Exercise 5: The Joker needs to explain to the members of the audience that they can replace any of the actors in the play at any time on this second run-through by calling 'Stop' and taking over the character. However, they must not introduce impossible elements into the play or totally change the character—this is magic and the Joker will not allow it to happen.

Exercise 6: As you perform your forum theatre, remember that you must try to stick to the original action and the nature of the characters as much as possible, whatever changes are introduced by the spect-actors who come into the play. However, if one of the spect-actors does manage to make a real difference to the situation, you should respond in character.

Exercise 7: After the forum performance has finished, discuss what happened with the audience, identifying why particular efforts to change the situation succeeded or failed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TRANSFORMATION: GROTOWSKI AND BROOK



The three major theatrical forms of the twentieth century that we have explored so far all had their beginnings more than 100 years ago and evolved throughout the century. The fourth significant development in Western drama emerged in the second half of the century, and had its beginnings in the work of an obscure Polish stage director named Jerzy Grotowski in a small town in southern Poland.

This startling new form was extensively influenced by all the others, and in some ways involves an amalgam of realism, surrealism and ideological theatre. However, it also has a unique identity of its own and this can be seen most vividly in the work of its two most influential exponents, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. Their contribution to drama is best described as 'theatre of transformation'.

INTERCULTURAL

Grotowski stated that his work was influenced by Asian theatre forms, and also by the connection between theatre and religion that is found in Indian and Chinese theatre.

We have already seen in chapter 3 how Grotowski modified and intensified Stanislavski's system of acting with the aim of assisting people, not just actors, to discover the truth about themselves through drama. Brook's commitment to realistic acting and believable characterisation has been just as lifelong and intense, and he has directed some of the greatest performances of the twentieth century.

Yet both men were also inspired by Artaud's theatre of cruelty, and both experimented with many of Artaud's techniques for shocking and mesmerising an audience. They were also influenced by expressionism and Brecht's use of epic theatre. Like Brecht, they both worked to create new plays that had strong political and social messages, and they made extensive use of Brechtian techniques such as a narrator, actors changing roles during the play, and the use of simple objects to replace whole sets and locations.

However, the transformational theatre they created is not just an amalgam of other forms. At its heart is a highly original and challenging use of actors in ways that create not only characters but also whole imaginary worlds. Both men believed that the essence of drama is the interaction between live actors and a live audience, and that the unique power and mystery of theatre is found in that encounter on stage.

In performance, the actors are asked to transform themselves and the acting space into the world of the play, representing not just all the characters, but the entire context of the play—the locations, the sounds, the whole world of the drama. In one scene an actor might represent an important character, while in another scene she may simply be one of a group of actors making the shape of the wall of a room. Later in the play, she may use a simple wooden chair as a throne, while in the following scene she may become an executioner, using the chair as an execution block. She may also be required to create sound effects, sing and narrate lines from the play.

In short, the theatre of transformation works through the actors who transform the imagination of the audience by transforming themselves on stage.

16.1

JERZY GROTOWSKI: POOR THEATRE

Born in Poland, Grotowski began his career as an actor. In 1959 he set up the Laboratory Theatre in Opole, a town in south-east Poland. The choice of name for his company— 'laboratory'—was quite deliberate. Grotowski used his actors to study the way theatre worked, and to experiment with new techniques in acting and staging.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Laboratory Theatre made a few brief trips overseas, mainly to England and the USA, but the company also visited Australia. These visits made Grotowski and his methods world famous. However, in 1976 he moved away from directing and staging plays altogether. Instead, he worked intensely with small groups of people, helping them to develop self-awareness and self-realisation, using the transformational techniques he had pioneered. Grotowski called this work 'para-theatre', and he continued to develop its use while living in both the USA and in Italy. He died in 1999.

Despite moving away from mainstream theatre in 1976, Grotowski's contribution to drama has been enormous. As we saw in chapter 3, his system for training actors is the most demanding and intensive one ever devised. Furthermore, his concept of 'poor theatre' has revolutionised the direction and staging of twentieth century theatre.

Jerzy Grotowski, 1966

POOR THEATRE

From the start Grotowski realised that theatre could never compete with television and films in the use of technical equipment, lighting, music, costumes, make-up and special effects. He set out, therefore, to eliminate all these things from the plays he directed, creating a theatre of poverty, or poor theatre, where the only important elements involved were the actors themselves and their special relationship with the live audience.

To make this live relationship more intense, Grotowski abandoned the traditional style of theatre building with its raised stage and auditorium full of rows of seats. Instead, he staged his plays in old buildings and sometimes even in ordinary rooms, with small audiences of between 40 and 100 people. The actors and the audience shared the same space; there was no special stage or acting area.

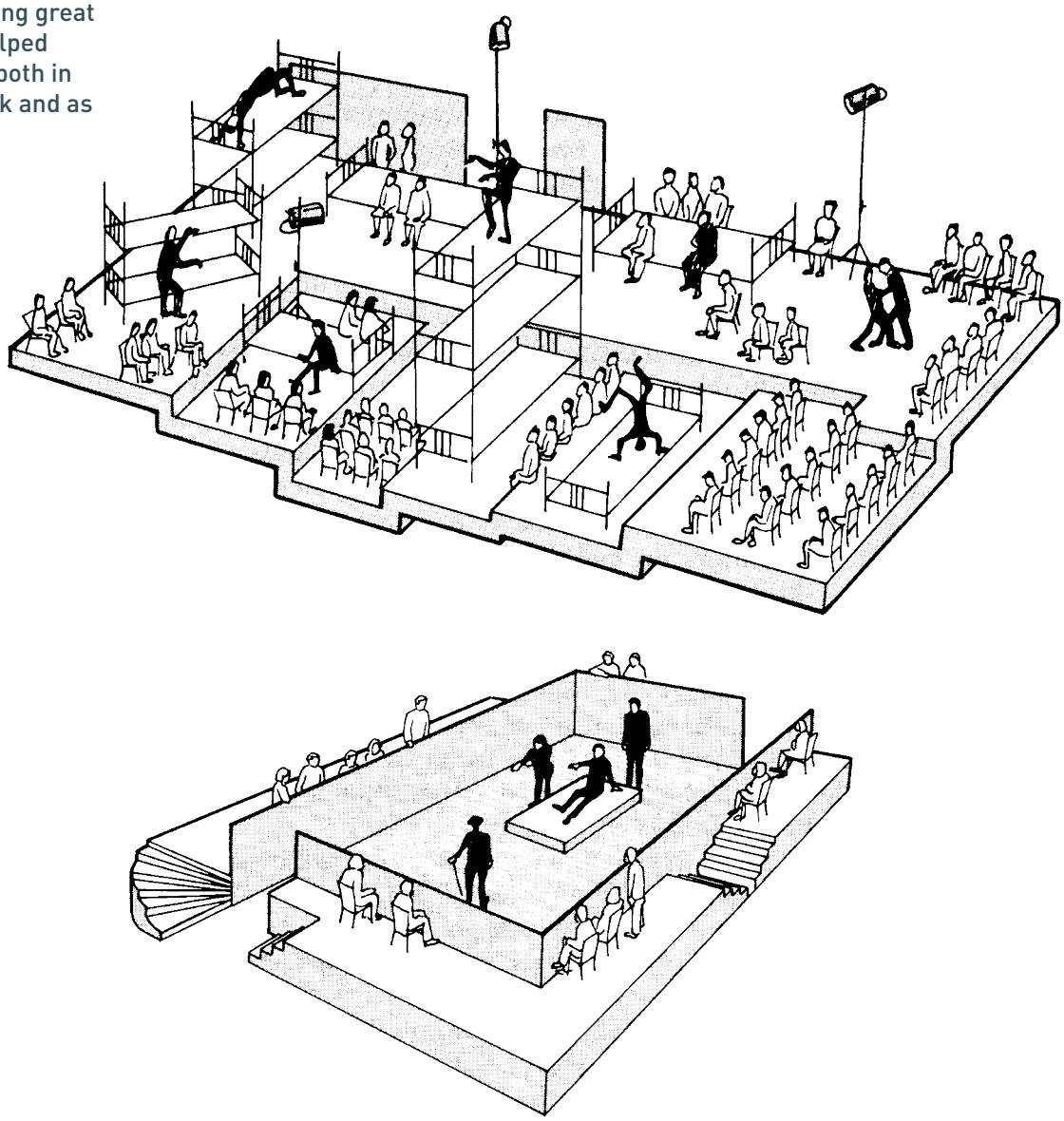
To see how this worked, let us briefly look at two plays directed by Grotowski. The first, a play entitled *Kordian*, is set in a lunatic asylum. When Grotowski directed it, he filled a large room with beds, and the actors playing the lunatics occupied the beds. All around the room a number of chairs were placed, filling up the spaces between the beds. The audience sat in these chairs and so the action of *Kordian* happened all around them.

For Christopher Marlowe's play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, Grotowski used a number of large wooden tables as the setting. At one table sat the actors playing the main characters. The other tables were shared by the audience and the other actors. The action of the play took place around the tables and sometimes on top of them.

Grotowski's aim was to do what films and television could not—bring the audience face to face with living characters and live action. He directed the action of the play so that it happened all around the audience, often so close to them that the actors were inside the spectators' personal space, close enough to touch them.

The plays Grotowski chose to direct were mainly classic works, including Greek, Shakespearian and famous Polish plays. He wanted his actors to have the experience of creating great and powerful characters who commit actions of enormous, and often terrible, importance. He believed that performing great roles in great plays helped to develop his actors, both in their professional work and as human beings.

In some of his early productions, Grotowski tried to involve the audience in the action of the play. These experiments were a failure because the audiences refused to respond to pressure from the actors to participate. Grotowski decided that audiences should not be involved actively, but should be allowed to be spectators, watching the action but taking no part in it. In all his later productions, Grotowski arranged the space he was using so that the audience would be as completely involved as possible, but only as spectators observing what was happening.



Sketches for Grotowski's productions. The actors are the dark figures.
Above: design for *Kordian*. Below: design for *The Constant Prince*.

Grotowski directed plays that dealt with important issues, particularly those he saw as the great myths that human beings all share, such as religion. In a number of his productions the central protagonist is a Christ-like figure who is tormented or crucified. In his famous production of the play *The Constant Prince*, the prince actually rises from the dead. However, Grotowski also believed that religion was in a stage of inevitable decline throughout the world, and this had helped to throw our society into a state of crisis. These beliefs were reflected in his productions, particularly in his direction of the classic Polish play *Akropolis* by Stanislaw Wyspianski.

In the original play of *Akropolis*, all the action takes place inside Cracow Cathedral, the most famous church in Poland. When Grotowski staged it, he made the setting the concentration camp at Auschwitz, where more than a million people—mostly Jews—were exterminated by the Nazis. The characters in the play became prisoners about to be sent to the gas chambers. Without changing one word of dialogue, Grotowski changed the whole meaning of the play, bringing the past face to face with the worst of the modern world.

Grotowski did this because he wanted to confront his audience with a terrible question: 'If you had been one of the people put in a concentration camp, would you have been able to keep your culture and your sanity, or even your humanity, or would you have become an empty human shell with nothing left inside?' Grotowski believed that the purpose of theatre was to confront people with the truth about themselves and ask questions like this. He argued that the audiences who came to his plays were spectators in search of the truth about themselves and their purpose in life.

As you can imagine, Grotowski's poor theatre made incredible demands upon his actors. In fact, he used the plays he directed quite deliberately to put into practice his latest research into acting techniques.

WORKSHOP: THEATRE OF TRANSFORMATION

Exercise 1: Working in pairs and using neutral masks, if possible, complete the following exercises:

- Mirror each other's movements in slow motion.
- Create a series of freeze-frames depicting situations that show both of you asleep, then unconscious and, finally, dead.
- One member of the pair performs a number of body language postures, gestures and movements, and their partner repeats the movements.
- Create a movement piece showing an intense relationship between two people in which movement reveals the emotions hidden by the neutral masks.

Exercise 2: Working in groups, create the following improvisations:

- Use a single item of clothing or a pair of boots. Each member of the group in turn puts on the clothing and moves and talks as the character suggested by the clothing. The other members of the group respond to the character that is being created.
- Improvise a group ritual that uses vocal sounds, individual words, singing, whispering, stamping and clapping to create a soundscape.
- Use a poem or a song as the pretext for an improvisation, creating a series of freeze-frames to visualise the poem or song. Now moving rapidly in a circle, each member of the group speaks just one word in turn about the poem or song. Use the words to build a performance.

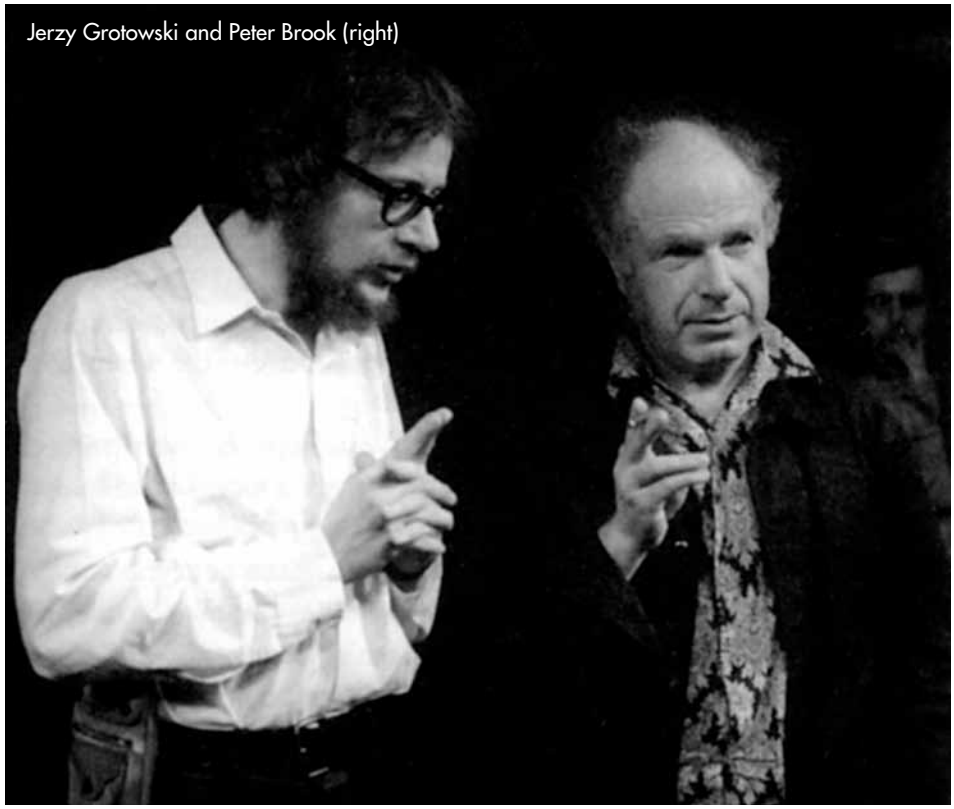
Exercise 3: Group playmaking:

- In groups, write a story about a character who takes a journey in search of something vitally important.
- One member of the group reads the story while the rest of the group create freeze-frames to illustrate key events in the story.
- The groups now dramatise the story in movement and dialogue, with the narrator introducing scenes and emphasising key moments.
- Groups rehearse and perform their quest stories using transformational theatre. Items of costume identify the characters, simple objects are transformed a number of times to provide the setting, and the actors take on all the roles and also become living scenery.

Exercise 4: Working with text:

- Using a piece of classic text such as the witches scenes from *Macbeth*, create a piece of transformational theatre that would communicate with any audience anywhere.

16.2 PETER BROOK: WORLD THEATRE


Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook (right)

The most influential of the great theatre directors of the twentieth century still working and directing today is Peter Brook. For the past thirty years, he has been involved in developing a form of theatre that intermingles texts, styles and actors from all over the world in his attempts to create a genuinely universal form of theatre. This work has produced some unique pieces of performance including *The Ik*, *The Conference of the Birds* and, most notably, *The Mahabharata*, one of the twentieth century's greatest theatrical works. However, Brook's quest for a world theatre has also generated serious criticism from major theatrical figures in Asia who see his use and transformation of classic Asian texts as appropriating their culture and distorting it for his own purposes.

Peter Brook was born in London in 1925 and his early ambition was to be a film director. In fact, he has continued to make films throughout his life, including an outstanding movie version of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and the stunning six-hour film of *The Mahabharata*. However, the stage is where he is a legend.

At the age of only 21, he directed a number of Shakespeare's plays at Stratford-upon-Avon, followed by major operas at Covent Garden. In 1951 he travelled to Berlin and met Bertolt Brecht. Although Brook held opposing political views and beliefs to Brecht and disagreed with his whole theatrical philosophy, he was spellbound by the strangeness and dazzling theatricality of Brecht's work as a director.

For the next decade, Brook lived alternately in London and Paris, directing a range of films and also travelling widely. In the early 1960s he joined the Royal Shakespeare Company to form a theatre research unit which he called The Theatre of Cruelty, in honour of Artaud. Working with a company of actors, he experimented with a range of exercises, activities and performance texts in an attempt to discover ways of re-igniting theatre with the kind of burning intensity Artaud had demanded.

During this time, Brook heard about Grotowski's work in Poland and brought Grotowski to England to work with the Theatre of Cruelty company. Brook was profoundly influenced by Grotowski, particularly his concentration on the dedication of the actor, and on the discovery of truth through theatre.

In 1964 Brook directed, and later filmed, the play *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss. This extraordinary play combines the political nature of Brecht's work with the impact of Artaud's cruelty; Brook's direction managed to interweave these two forms into a powerful piece of theatre. This was followed by a devised play called *US*, a savage attack on US involvement in the Vietnam War.

In 1970 Brook created a seminal piece of theatre in his direction of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Focusing on the theme of magic, he deliberately chose the formula of the magic of the circus and the stage magician, as opposed to Shakespeare's fairies and spells. The set for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a white box. The actors were trained to use trampolines, juggle and perform sleight of hand. At the same time as the action was physicalised in this way, intense concentration was given to speaking the language on a quiet, intense, intimate level, intensifying the atmosphere of magic and secrets. This astounding piece of theatre profoundly influenced the direction of drama throughout the Western world, both in the development of physical theatre and in the move to focus on intense intimacy in the acting and speaking of Shakespeare.

In the same year, Brook moved permanently to Paris and set up his International Centre for Theatre Research. Through intense improvisation over a period of years, Brook and his group of actors from Europe, Africa and Asia developed an extraordinary level of performance skill. They travelled widely, taking their ensemble performance to many parts of the world, performing for free in locations such as parks, village squares, church halls and even on wasteland outside towns and villages, but never in theatres.

During these travels, the company set out to learn as much as possible about the theatrical forms of the places they visited and worked to integrate these forms into the ensemble. One play the company created from their experiences in Africa was *The Ik*, which dealt with the impact of famine on a tribe called the Ik. The company studied photographs and films showing the Ik suffering from hunger and malnutrition. Using transformational theatre techniques, the actors then created a play that was performed in a number of African villages.

In 1973 Brook began work on *The Conference of the Birds* with dramatist Jean-Claude Carriere. The play they developed was based on an ancient Persian poem and the characters in it are birds in search of their lost king. The birds in the play symbolise different aspects of human behaviour, and their search is actually a journey of self-discovery.

In his direction of *The Conference of the Birds*, Brook made intensive use of transformational techniques, particularly in rehearsing the actors. They were encouraged to experiment with making bird sounds and bird movements as a way of finding their characters, and in performance their use of voice and movement was a blend of bird and human.

In the mid-1970s, Brook's company finally found a permanent home in an abandoned theatre called the Bouffes du Nord in Paris. Located behind a major railway station, the theatre had been empty for more than twenty years and was in terrible disrepair. Brook insisted on keeping the ruined appearance of the building and turned it into a flexible performance space, where the battered walls and scarred floors provided a setting for a range of fascinating theatre experiments.

The most memorable of these experiments was *The Mahabharata*, a six-hour adaptation by Brook and Carriere of one of India's classic creation myths. It tells the story of an epic war between a group of brothers and their cousins, which also involved the gods. In the myth, this battle took place at the beginning of the world and profoundly influenced the development of human history.

A key example of transformation in *The Ik* was to use a pair of boots to represent a character. When an actor or a member of the audience put on the boots, they became that character.

INTERCULTURAL

Brook has attempted to create a genuinely intercultural theatre, drawing on plays, performance styles and actors from around the world.

Bruce Myles as the Grand Inquisitor

In his version of the Mahabharata, we see Brook's clearest attempt to create a world theatre. The text is Asian, the writer French, the director English and the actors came from all five continents of the world. The performance style is a blend of Western character creation, Eastern song and movement, and African ritual dance and chanting.

In 1993 Brook staged *The Man Who*, a play as different from *The Mahabharata* as it is possible to be. This intensely personal, small-cast play was inspired by a book about mental illness by neurologist Oliver Sacks. Brook and his actors worked intensively with patients and doctors in mental hospitals, and then used transformational theatre to create the play. In his book *Threads of Time: Recollections*, published in 1998, Brook wrote: 'Theatre is not just a place, not simply a profession, it is a metaphor. It helps to make the process of life more clear'. More than any other director of the twentieth century, Brook attempts to make the experience of living clearer to people on a world scale.

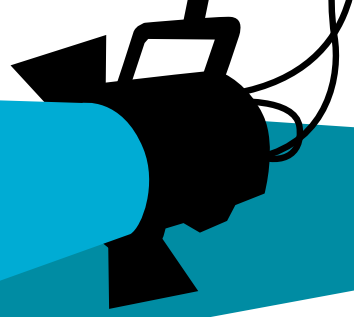
In 2011, Brook was still working with his company in the Bouffes du Nord in Paris, but had handed over the directorship of the company. In 2008 his production of *The Grand Inquisitor* toured the world. The play is set in Spain in the sixteenth century during the Inquisition. In the play, Christ returns to the world and is immediately arrested and questioned by the Grand Inquisitor who is the only character who speaks. This outstanding piece of theatre was directed by Brook and performed by Bruce Myles with the extraordinary intensity and total focus that is Brook's hallmark as a director.

WORKSHOP: WORLD THEATRE

Exercise 1: Research an Indigenous Dreaming story that could be performed as a piece of world theatre.

Exercise 2: Improvise and perform the Dreaming story using realistic acting for some of the characters but also incorporating stylised movement, singing, music and important symbols.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
THEATRE OF ASIA



When we use the word 'theatre', we tend to mean the form of European theatre that began with the Greeks 2500 years ago, developed further in Europe and spread to America and Australia more than two centuries ago. In reality, there is an infinite variety of theatre forms in our world; every culture that has ever existed has developed its own, unique performance art.

Many of these indigenous forms of drama still exist and are experiencing a revival of interest. It is increasingly common for theatre practitioners throughout the world to weave elements of indigenous dramatic forms into their work. For example, the styles of dance drama distinctive to Indigenous Australia, native America and tribal Africa have all been extensively copied and modified in a range of Western theatre performances.

In the past 100 years there has been an explosion of new theatrical activity in many of the countries of Asia. New theatre companies have emerged to adapt, radically alter and even totally transform existing forms such as Chinese opera, Noh and Kabuki theatre. Western theatre forms such as expressionism, epic theatre, surrealism and absurdist theatre have also become part of these innovations.

On a world scale, the theatre of Asia is the largest and most diverse in the world. More than half the world's population live in the continent of Asia, and thousands of different traditional theatre forms still exist among the many different nations and cultures of Asia. The most dominant and significant of these traditional forms have been *Xiqu*, which we know as Chinese opera; *wayang kulit*, the Javanese shadow puppetry of Indonesia; and the three classic forms of Japanese theatre—Noh, Bunraku and Kabuki.

Let us look at these traditional forms of theatre that are still alive in Asia today, and then examine the key developments that have shaped modern Asian theatre.

17.1 CHINESE OPERA

This form of performance has a history as distinguished as Western theatre, and like Western theatre has undergone a number of transformations in the past 2000 years. The form of *Xiqu* that is most popular in many parts of the world today is Peking (now Beijing) opera. Beijing opera was created in 1790 by a group of actors who combined spectacular acrobatics and martial arts with music and singing. While this is the most popular form of Chinese opera, there are still hundreds of variations performed today.

INTERCULTURAL

Chinese opera was very popular in Australia more than 150 years ago because so many Chinese came to Australia to work on the goldfields. Between 1858 and 1869 there were 14 Chinese opera companies touring in different parts of Australia. Their audiences included people from many different cultures and countries.

In Chinese opera, the plays are based on well-known stories from Chinese history and mythology, very like the plays of the Greek and Elizabethan periods of theatre. Unlike Western classic plays, Chinese opera texts do not divide into tragedy and comedy, but freely combine both. The texts are often very long, and it is unusual for a whole play to be staged in one performance. Instead, individual acts from a number of different plays are staged in one night, often loosely linked by a single theme, such as love and marriage or war and honour.

The emphasis in Chinese opera is not on the unfolding of the plot, because the stories are already well known to the audience. There is no attempt to create the sense of reality that is the hallmark of Western theatre. Instead, each actor announces their character when they enter, and often explains to the audience the background to the story and the problems the characters are facing. The villains in Chinese opera traditionally tell the audience their plans and confide their innermost secrets.

There is no scenery and props are symbolic rather than realistic, so a flowered carpet is used to represent a garden, and a chair can be turned on its side to represent a rock. A paddle moved backwards and forwards by a character symbolises the rowing of a boat. Stage managers actually bring props on during the action and sometimes adjust the actors' costumes in the middle of a scene.

Above all else, Chinese opera is a matter of acting skill. Dramatic focus and tension come from watching the expertise of the actors. They are skilled in a combination of singing, speech, acting and martial arts. The characters they play are character types, and actors often spend their entire career portraying just one character, very like the actors did in *commedia dell'arte*. Historically, Chinese opera companies were either all male or all female, and some single-sex companies still exist. However, since 1911 male and female actors have worked together on stage and portrayed their own sex.

Despite the highly stylised nature of Chinese opera, and the spectacular costuming and acrobatic movement, there is also a strong emphasis on emotional honesty in the acting. The intense commitment and focus of the actors, as well as their talent, achieves the transformation of simple objects and the creation of an imaginary world on a bare stage.

A Chinese opera production

17.2

WAYANG KULIT: JAVANESE SHADOW PLAY

Wayang kulit dates back to 860 AD on the island of Java, making it one of the oldest story-telling traditions in Asia. Its name comes from the Indonesian words *wayang*, meaning 'puppet', and *kulit*, meaning 'leather', which is what the puppets are made of. In *wayang kulit*, the puppets are moved behind a translucent screen lit from the back, so the audience sees the characters as silhouettes.

The puppets are carved out of buffalo leather and attached to bamboo sticks. All the puppets used in a play are usually operated by one man, the *dalang*, who is a combination of storyteller, actor and singer. One *dalang* can have up to 300 puppets. The stories are a blend of religious stories, myths and historical facts. Performances can last from dusk to dawn, and are frequently staged at festivals, weddings and other celebrations.

An Indonesian *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) performance.
Top: the *dalang* operates the puppets behind the illuminated screen.
Bottom: the audience sees the shadows cast on the screen.

17.3 TRADITIONAL THEATRE IN JAPAN

NOH

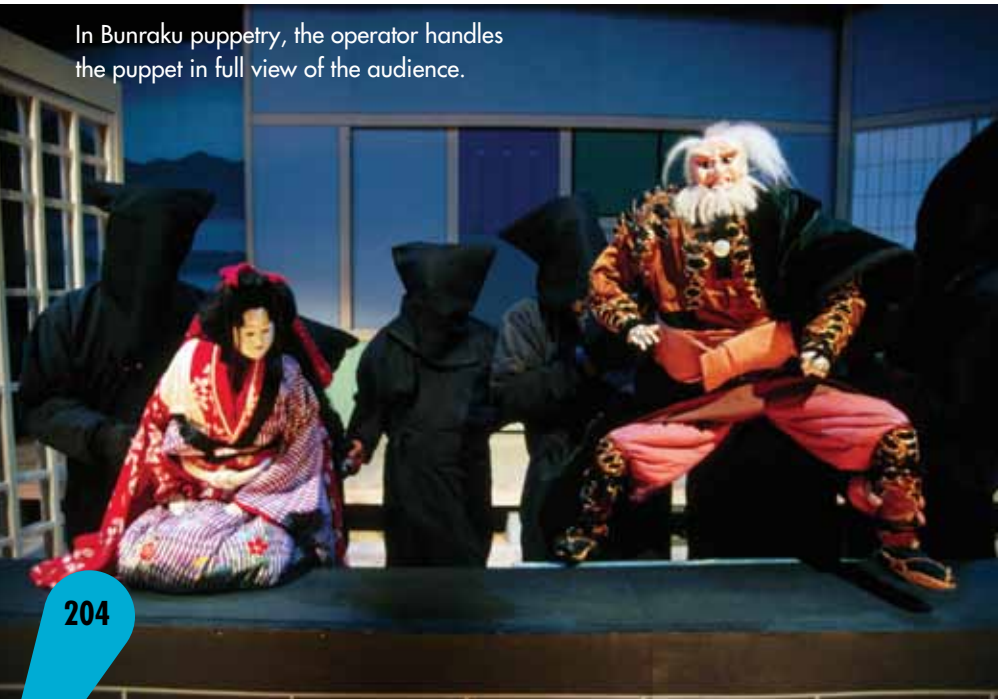
This ceremonial form of drama was perfected more than 600 years ago by a father and son team who wrote and performed most of the 240 surviving Noh plays. The form of a Noh play is always the same. There is a central character, known as 'the doer', who may be a man, but can also be a woman, god, ghost or animal. The actor portraying this role wears a mask. This protagonist, 'the doer', is challenged in some way by a second character, 'the *waki*', who is always a man.

Actors in Noh theatre are always male and train for just one of these roles; they normally portray that role throughout their acting careers. The performance form is a combination of highly stylised dancing and chanting that requires a high level of expertise.

All Noh stages are identical—about five metres wide and made of polished wood supported on huge earthenware jars so that when the actors stamp their feet the sound resonates like a drum. The only scenery is a tree painted on the rear wall, which is made of wood. There is always a four-piece orchestra at the rear of the stage and a chorus of six to ten singers, and there is continuous musical accompaniment to every performance. By Western standards, Noh performances are almost totally static and the pace of the action is incredibly slow. It has always appealed to a minority audience and in Japan today it is a highly specialised theatrical form. Nevertheless, Noh plays continue to be staged and have an impact on current theatrical developments, not only in Japan but worldwide.

BUNRAKU

The second major form of theatre to emerge in Japan after Noh was Bunraku, the Japanese form of puppet theatre that has influenced puppetry around the world. Bunraku began in the sixteenth century in Japan with companies of puppeteers acting out stories. These puppeteers accompanied wandering storytellers who went from place to place, entertaining people with chanted stories of battles and romances, just like the minstrels and troubadours of England and Europe.



In Bunraku puppetry, the operator handles the puppet in full view of the audience.

Bunraku was transformed by the work of Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725), who wrote an enormous number of plays, both historical and domestic, especially for puppet theatre. Some of his domestic plays are still staged by puppet companies in Japan today and are still extremely popular.

Bunraku puppets are basically hand puppets and the puppeteers dress all in black and operate their puppets on stage. Originally the puppets were quite small but today they are about two-thirds of life size and are beautifully made and elaborately costumed.

KABUKI

Kabuki was actually invented 400 years ago by a Japanese priestess, named Izumo Okuni, as a form of dance drama with an all-female cast. After a tour of Japan in 1603, Okuni built a theatre in Kyoto which opened the following year. In 1629 the Japanese government decided that the performances had become too erotic and banned women from performing in Kabuki; it remains an all-male theatrical form today.

Kabuki is one of the world's great traditional theatre forms and the name effectively describes the form: *ka* means 'song', *bu* means 'dance' and *ki* means 'skill'. Kabuki actors train from childhood in singing, dancing, acting and physical agility. The male actors who portray females are also trained in stylised feminine movement and gestures. Leading Kabuki actors all come from a small group of families who dominate Kabuki theatre; the fathers in these families pass on their skills to their sons. The sons initially learn the lines and the stylised movement sequences, or *kata*, exactly as their fathers and grandfathers performed them, but then add their own variations as they become more expert—with permission from their fathers.

Kabuki is first and foremost performance theatre. The scripts are often anonymous, and actors have made alterations and additions to them over the years. Many of the plays were taken from the puppet plays of Bunraku or from Noh theatre and there are three basic types. One group of plays tells stories based on historical events, another group involves domestic dramas of love and honour, while the third are dance dramas set in the supernatural world of spirits or involving animals. These dance dramas are the most popular Kabuki plays in Japan today.

The staging of Kabuki is spectacular. The theatres are large (often with over 2000 seats) and today are very similar to Western theatres, with seats in rows in the auditorium and balconies. In the past, however, the audience used to kneel on mats or straw on the floor. Kabuki stages are huge and have a revolving section, an invention that was used in Japan long before it was introduced in Europe. There is a thrust stage or runway at stage right, which rises back into the audience and above their heads; this is used for exits, entrances and dramatic scenes.

Kabuki is a very visual form of theatre—the scenery and costuming are elaborate and colourful but not realistic. Huge painted backdrops and sets are raised and lowered, or moved in and out on the revolving stage, and coloured cloth is used extensively. A black backdrop comes down for night, and blue cloth is spread on the stage to symbolise water. The costumes are based on the period in which the play is set; historical plays have particularly extravagant costumes. Often these costumes are changed on stage suddenly and dramatically in front of the audience with the help of special assistants dressed in black.

Kabuki continues to be enormously popular in Japan, and despite some experiments in modernising the form using electronic music and experimental lighting, it is traditional Kabuki that still enthrals audiences.

Although traditionally only men have been allowed to perform in Kabuki, on very special occasions such as private festivals, women can now perform.

A modern Kabuki performance in Japan

17.4 NEW DIRECTIONS IN ASIAN THEATRE

In China, rigid government control prevented the development of major new theatrical forms, and Chinese opera itself was almost destroyed by the cultural revolution of the 1960s. However, China now has a major theatre company performing a modern repertoire of plays—the Hong Kong Repertory Company, which became part of China's cultural legacy following the hand-over of Hong Kong to China in 1997. So far, the theatre has continued to operate and there has been an increased interest in the theatre in Hong Kong, and in teaching about drama in the schools.

In Japan, as we have seen, the traditional forms of theatre have continued to flourish, but there has also been an explosion of involvement in theatre, both mainstream and experimental. Mainstream American and British plays, and particularly musicals, are especially popular and more than forty a year are performed in Tokyo alone, usually translated into Japanese.

A fascinating range of experimental and avant-garde theatre is also being performed in Japan. Influential Japanese directors, such as Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninagawa, have staged a number of Western classics including *Macbeth*, *Medea* and *The Tempest* using Japanese movement and acting styles.

We explored Suzuki's form of actor training in detail in chapter five. In his direction of plays, he uses a performance style that synthesises the movement he developed in his actor training with martial arts, Kabuki and Noh. His aim is make connections between Japanese and European theatre, and he has worked extensively on adaptations of Greek myths and plays including *The Trojan Women*, *The Bacchae* and *Clytemnestra*.

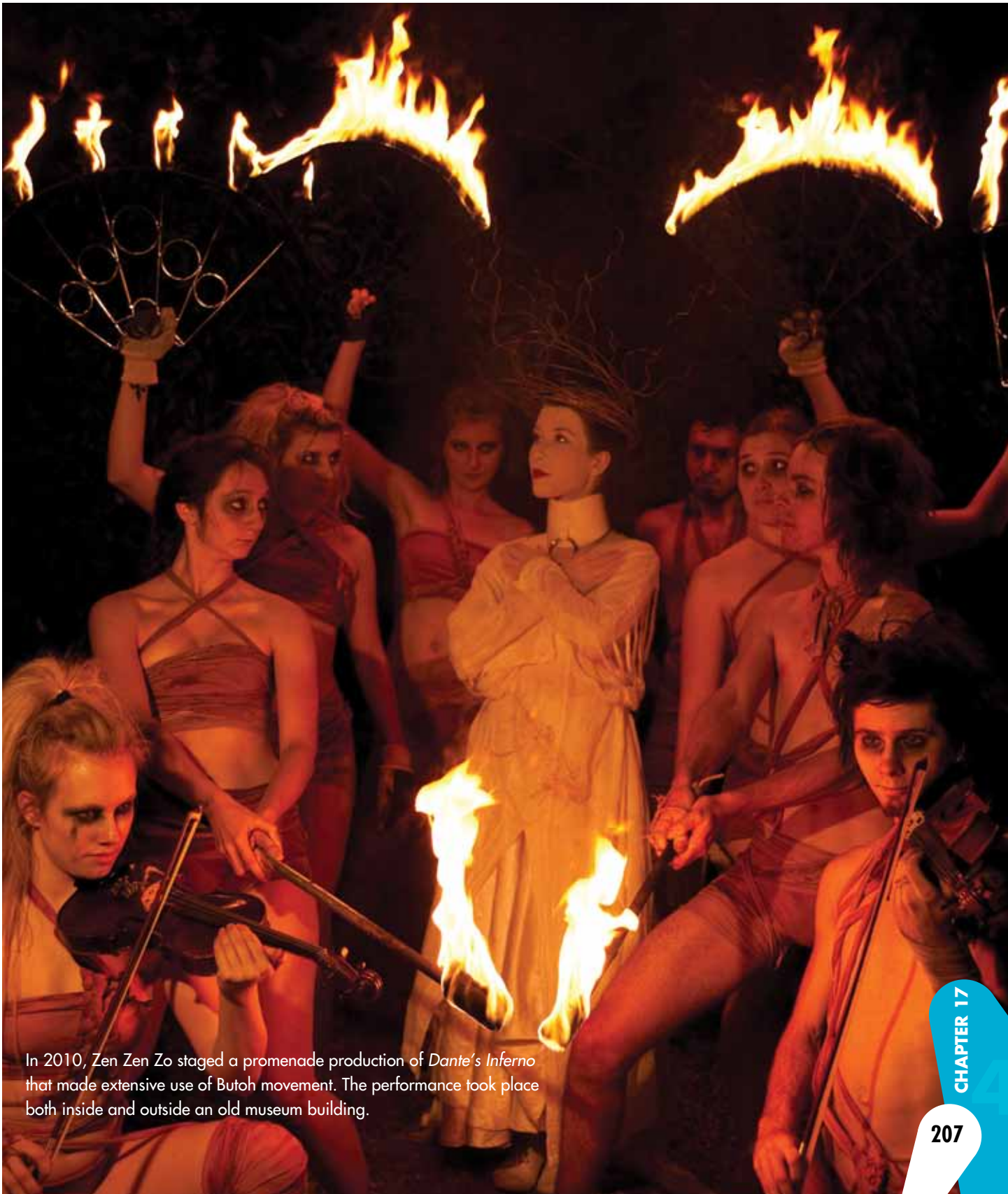
Other directors such as Kobo Abe have experimented with genuinely surreal forms of theatre, while as number of playwrights including Juro Kara and Oriza Hirata have written plays that combine the intense energy of physical theatre with strong political and social criticism. More realistic, psychological plays have become popular in the past decade. At the same time, Butoh has become influential as an exciting new form of explosive physical theatre.

Butoh in performance

BUTOH

Butoh began as a form of experimental performance art in Japan in the 1960s. This was a time of student protest on issues including the presence of US military troops in Japan, the Vietnam War and the restrictions of traditional Japanese culture. There were demonstrations in the streets and Theatre groups sprang up performing protest pieces. Butoh emerged from this period of unrest. The founder of Butoh was Tatsumi Hijikata, a young dancer who felt that Japanese dance was simply copying Western styles and forms. His aim was to develop a distinctly Japanese form that focused on the human body through unconscious improvised movement. Butoh can be translated as 'earth dance', and it has developed as a striking new form of physical theatre practised by actors and mimes as well as dancers. Butoh has strongly influenced other forms of theatre performance throughout the world.

Butoh performers wear little or no costumes, their heads are usually shaved and their bodies are painted white. The performances involve violent and distorted movement and often contain confronting images, disturbing content and angry attacks on the nature of modern society. In many ways, Butoh is form of theatre of cruelty that Artaud would have recognised and applauded. A number of contemporary Australian companies including Frank Theatre (also known as Ozfrank) and Zen Zen Zo, both based in Queensland, have been influenced by modern Asian theatre, especially the physical style of Butoh.



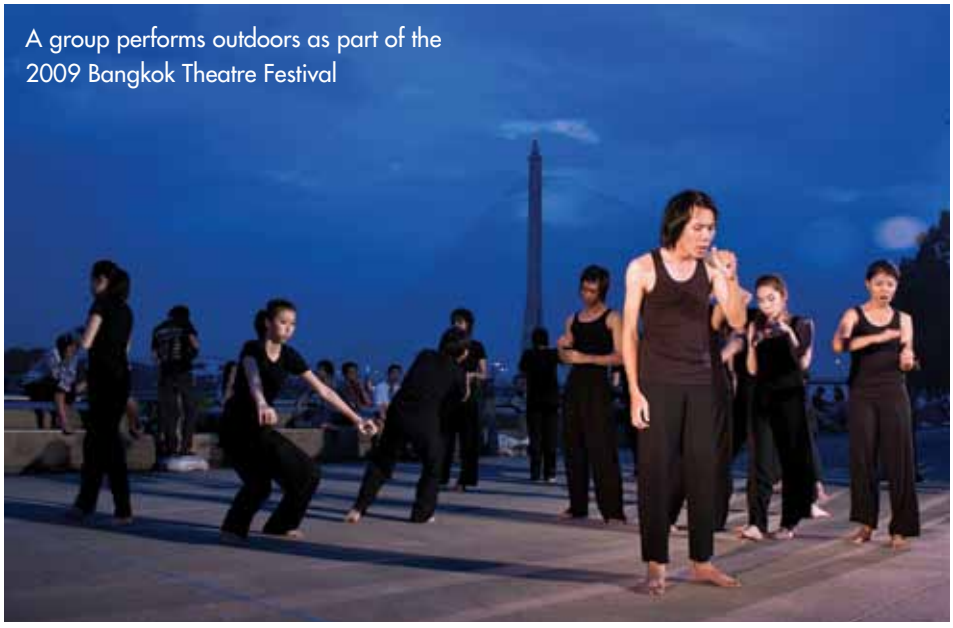
In 2010, Zen Zen Zo staged a promenade production of *Dante's Inferno* that made extensive use of Butoh movement. The performance took place both inside and outside an old museum building.

17.5 CONTEMPORARY THEATRE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

In many Asian countries, often in defiance of government restrictions, young companies are finding new voices. Many of these experiments blend traditional Asian forms of theatre with Western dramatic elements and combine the theatre practice of different Asian countries. An interesting example of this is the contemporary Thai play *Girl of the Soil*, staged by a group of Thai theatre companies as part of the 2009 Bangkok Theatre Festival. In the play, Mali, a teenage girl living on a farm in the north of Thailand, comes to Bangkok to search for her own identity in the modern world. She becomes involved in political activism, but is soon disenchanted with the city and eventually decides she wants to grow organic rice. *Girl of the Soil* was originally written by the Japanese playwright Hideki Noda more than ten years ago, and has been adapted by the Thai director Nikorn Saetang. The actors who performed the play at the festival came from five different theatre companies, and the play involves extensive use of physical theatre moment, both Western and Eastern.

This play explores many of the key issues facing Asia today—the migration to the cities, the desire of the young to be part of the modern world, political oppression and environmental sustainability. These issues are common themes in the theatre of many Asian nations.

Asian theatre in the twenty-first century is diverse, vibrant and a blend of traditional and modern theatre that is increasingly influencing performance work world-wide.



A group performs outdoors as part of the 2009 Bangkok Theatre Festival

WORKSHOP: THEATRE OF ASIA

Exercise 1: Study the photographs and text on pages 204–8. What elements do all these styles of Asian theatre have in common? What differences can you identify between them?

Exercise 2: Improvise in groups to create your own piece of Asian theatre, using as many of the elements you have identified as possible.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THEATRE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In this brief overview of contemporary theatre, we will look at the major developments across the world, and then explore the main directions that modern theatre is taking. In some areas there have been exciting and innovative changes in the ways theatre is written and staged, particularly in the use of technology and performance spaces, and in the blending of different forms of theatre from around the world. On the whole, however, the period since 2000 has seen a continuation of the main features of theatre as a performance art; the fundamental nature of theatre as a live encounter between actors and audiences that explores human experience remains unchallenged.

Despite the predictions of the past few decades, television and film have not caused the decline of theatre. In some countries, theatre is at risk due to political, economic or social conditions, but in many nations more people are attending theatre than ever before. Neither the ongoing international consequences of 9/11 nor the advent of 3D movies has affected the significance of theatre as a major art form and an important area of human experience.

18.1 MODERN THEATRE IN EUROPE

BRITAIN

In many ways, Britain remains the theatre capital of the world in terms of the quality and number of plays staged each year. The Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the National Theatre maintain a level of excellence unmatched anywhere else. The National Theatre in particular is pushing the boundaries of theatre. It staged the premiere of *War Horse*, one of the most acclaimed contemporary theatre productions in the world, and commissioned a number of adventurous new works. In 2009 National Theatre Live (NTLive!) began broadcasts of live stage productions to cinemas around Britain, and then to cinemas across the world. In 2011 the National Theatre added broadcasts of other major companies in Britain, including Complicite.

Theatre buildings and the staging of plays in Britain have been greatly assisted by billions of pounds in grants from the National Lottery. A number of new companies have emerged and established international reputations for their work, including Complicite and Almeida. In Scotland, the long-running Edinburgh Festival has become the largest theatre festival in the world.

INTERCULTURAL

Contemporary British theatre has been greatly enriched by the appearance of a range of British Asian playwrights and theatre companies over the past 30 years. Their work has made a major contribution to artistic creativity and innovation on the British stage.

There has also been a resurgence of playwriting in Britain, particularly in the genre of violent confrontational plays dealing with forbidden subjects and dysfunctional behaviour. The work of Sarah Kane was the impetus for this genre of text, with plays depicting rape, murder and cannibalism. The title of her last play *4.48 Psychosis*, staged in 2000 shortly after her suicide, refers to the time of early morning often associated with depression and suicide. A number of other significant playwrights are associated with this genre of play, including Mark Ravenhill (*The Cut*, 2006), David Harrower (*Blackbird*, 2005), Patrick Marber (*The Musicians*, 2004) and Martin Crimp (*The City*, 2008).

At the same time, a number of established British playwrights are continuing to work, including Alan Ayckbourn, Caryl Churchill and David Hare. Recently, some much younger playwrights have emerged whose plays deal with the experience of late teenage and early adult life. Polly Stenham was only 19 when she wrote *That Face*, which won a number of awards and was staged internationally.

FRANCE

Theatre in France is also alive and well. In fact, France has more than 400 theatres that are subsidised by the government and five national theatres. The Comedie Francaise remains the most celebrated and recognised theatre in France, as it has been for hundreds of years.

A very different modern theatre company in France with an international reputation is Theatre du Soleil ('the Theatre of the Sun'), directed by Ariane Mnouchkine. She works with the commitment to developing new works of theatre, sometimes using improvisation, sometimes starting from classic texts. Theatre du Soleil incorporates a range of performance styles in their work, ranging from *commedia dell'arte* to Asian theatre, using Bunraku puppetry and Vietnamese water puppets at different times. Many of Mnouchkine's productions are staged outside of traditional theatres in unusual spaces and buildings such as barns.

GERMANY

In Germany, a number of directors and playwrights are creating innovative new theatre that is both exciting and controversial. The Director Frank Castorf is known as a 'text destroyer' because he radically alters and distorts the texts of plays he stages, Interestingly, his work is particularly popular with young audiences, When he tried to direct Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 2004, the changes he made were so radical that he was refused permission to stage the play by Williams's estate.

INTERCULTURAL

Helena Waldmann's work has been deeply influenced by the time she has spent in places such as Afghanistan, Iran and Palestine. Her 2009 production *Burka Bondage* exposed the parallels between the burka, the gown that Muslim women wear to completely cover their head and body, and bondage, a Japanese technique for binding women.

Burka Bondage by Helena Waldmann

The German playwright Elfriede Jelinek won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004. She has written a large number of plays, many of them controversial because of the political or social subject matter. Her most recent play was *Die Kontrakte des Kaufmanns* (*'The Businessman's Contract'*) performed in 2009.

Young German playwrights, like the new wave of German directors, are working across national boundaries and cultures in the creation of new work. In 2009 a project was set up in which young playwrights from Germany and Israel wrote short plays on the theme of identity, which resulted in collaborative performances by Israel's HaBima company and Germany's Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus. The plays focused on the countries' identities and the connection between them.

18.2 MODERN THEATRE IN AFRICA

Africa has produced a number of major playwrights who use the theatre to achieve reform in their countries. Perhaps the most internationally recognised is Athol Fugard, whose plays attacking apartheid in his native South Africa are among the most powerful works of theatre of reform in the twentieth century. In chapter 10 we looked at one of these great plays, *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*. Since the end of apartheid in South Africa, Fugard has continued to write. In 2010 his play *The Train Driver* was first produced in Cape Town, directed by Fugard himself, before being staged in the USA to very positive reviews.

Another leading African playwright, director, scholar and teacher is Nigerian Femi Osofisan. Although he has written more than fifty plays, most have not been staged outside Nigeria. However, his play *Women of Owu*, a rewriting of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* in a modern African context, was staged in London in February 2004.

In a number of other African countries, new theatre work and new companies are emerging. However, in some countries there is still a tension between the dominant Western form of theatre introduced by the colonial powers during the twentieth century and the new works written in African languages such as Swahili and incorporating African performance styles.

Running parallel to the emergence of a genuinely African theatre has been the spread of theatre for development. While reformist playwrights have concentrated on political and social issues in plays written for theatre performance, a number of groups have worked to take theatre to the townships and villages to empower people to improve their lives. This form of theatre is often improvised, draws on the stories and lives of the audiences, and often involves the townspeople and villagers as performers. The plays deal with issues such as the role of women, the need to educate children, the importance of clean water or the spread of AIDS.

As well as using the techniques of Boal and other theatre innovators, these groups have also integrated African storytelling and dance into their work. This means that the performances that go into the townships and villages use forms that are familiar to the people—forms they can actively participate in and make use of themselves.

At the same time, actors and teachers take traditional stories and songs to young people who have never heard them. The spread of theatre for devolvement has meant that theatre communicates directly with the people and helps them to take control of aspects of their lives where they do have some power.

In 1995, Nigerian playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa was arrested and executed by the Nigerian government because his plays and political activities drew international attention to the extreme environmental pollution in Nigeria. Since that time, playwrights in a number of African countries have been jailed or exiled, and fear of persecution has prevented many theatre companies from staging controversial or political plays.

18.3 MODERN THEATRE IN AMERICA

There has been a significant growth in the number of theatre buildings and theatre companies in the USA in the first part of the twenty-first century. Many important theatre complexes, including the Lincoln Center in New York, have undergone extensive renovations, and a number of new theatres have been built in major cities and on university campuses across the country.

While Broadway in New York City is the best known theatre location in the USA, very few language-driven plays are staged there. Most of the performances on Broadway are musicals, many of them revivals.

Some of the USA's most celebrated directors have continued to stage important works in the past decade. Robert Wilson, the most famous experimental director in the USA, continues to create and direct plays that are concerned with human communication and the use of language. In 2009 he staged Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, in which a solitary character on stage listens to a tape of himself speaking. Amongst younger directors, Julie Taymor became famous for her direction of *The Lion King*, and continues to direct major musicals and operas.

A number of established playwrights have continued to produce new plays. The best known is David Mamet, who has written a number of successful film scripts as well as plays. Suzan-Lori Parks established a reputation as one of the USA's leading black playwrights in the 1990s, and she has continued to produce new work including writing one complete short play every day for a year: the resulting series, '365 Plays/365 Days', was produced by 700 theatres around the world.

A number of younger Asian-American playwrights have also emerged, some writing plays that deal with their experiences or the wider reality of contemporary America, whilst others have focused on life in Asian cities such as Manila in the Philippines.

18.4 DIRECTIONS IN MODERN WORLD THEATRE

The well-made play

Despite all the innovations and experiments of the last 100 years, despite the spread of digital technology and the emergence of physical theatre and performance art, the most popular and the most widely performed style of theatre is still the traditional stage play, performed in acts and scenes and involving characters speaking dialogue. It may be that this will continue to be the fundamental shape of live theatre, as it has been for 2500 years.

Festivals

There has an explosion in the number of theatre festivals being staged around the world each year. These festivals can range from local community celebrations to city, state and even national events. Many of these festivals provide the opportunity to see performance work from around the world that would not otherwise be available. Festivals also enable theatre artists to write, stage and perform new work that would not otherwise be funded. In Europe alone there are over 300 drama festivals each year.

The musical

Stage musicals are amongst the most popular style of theatre around the world. However, in the twenty-first century there have been some major changes in the way musicals are written, and in the musicals being performed. Over the past decade, many of the musicals staged internationally have been revivals. These large, spectacular productions tour across countries and even across continents. Some musicals have been revived again and again since the year 2000, including *Cats*, *Chicago*, *West Side Story*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Fame*.

Fame the musical

Members of the Melbourne outdoor theatre group Strange Fruit perform on top of five-metre poles at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, 2009.

The scripts of musicals have also taken a new direction. The great musicals of the 1970s and 1980s had new music composed for them and the plots were either original or based on history or literature. The most popular contemporary musicals tend to be biographies of rock musicians such as *The Buddy Holly Story* and *Jersey Boys*, and feature their music. Other recent musicals have made use of existing music in fictional plots, such as *Mama Mia* (Abba) and *Across the Universe* (the Beatles). Some popular recent musicals are stage versions of musical films such as *The Lion King* and *Billy Elliot*. Even *Wicked*, the most popular of contemporary musicals, is actually a prequel to the classic musical *The Wizard of Oz*.

Multimedia

Multimedia can involve the use of a single electronic element or can be a combination of soundscapes, virtual characters, computer animations, images and holographs, as wells as electronic sound, recorded music and laser light displays. Computer sensors and motion detectors allow actors to interact with sets, props and digital images. The internet allows actors in different countries to perform in the same play at the same time.

While there have been some spectacular productions using multimedia—*Wicked* is a good example—the multimedia elements used in contemporary plays are usually there to augment the live action. Experiments in multimedia performances with no live actors on stage are rare and have not been particularly successful. Nevertheless, the potential of multimedia to enhance and even revolutionise theatre is very much a reality.

Wicked the musical

Physical theatre

The extraordinary success of Cirque Du Soleil and Complicite is indicative of the popularity of modern physical theatre. Almost all the contemporary theatre innovators explored in chapter 5 focused on movement as the key to acting, and their influence on Western theatre has been profound. In addition, major elements of physical theatre styles from Asia are transforming the performance of even the most text-based and realistic plays. There is every likelihood that the impact of physical theatre will increasingly revolutionise live performance.

The future is both exciting and uncertain, and the crucial question remains: will theatre always be a real encounter between live actors and a live audience, or will it be something completely different in the twenty-second century?

The new theatres built for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas cost hundreds of millions of dollars and are the most elaborate in the world.

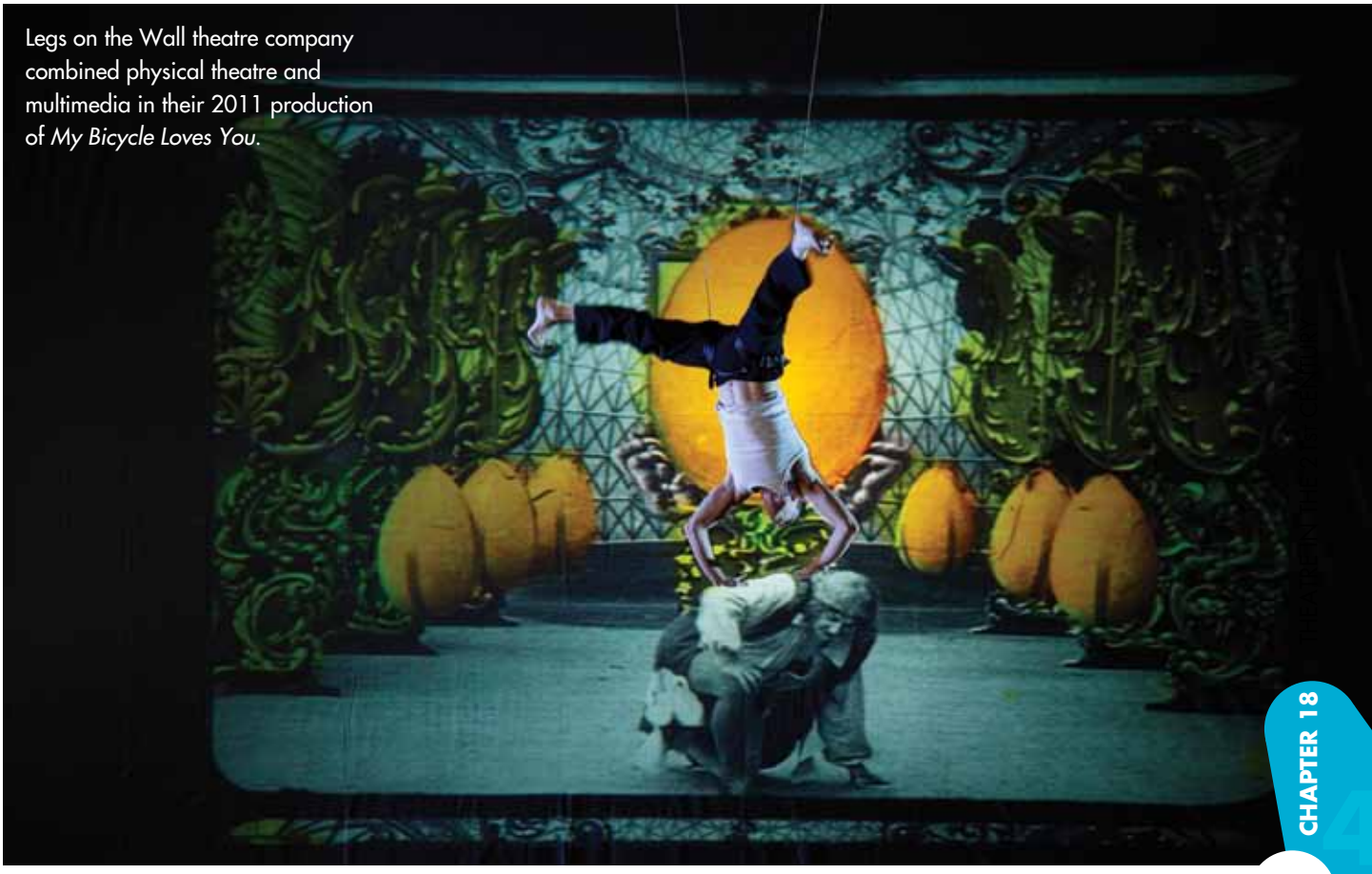
WORKSHOP: THEATRE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Exercise 1: As a whole class, decide on the plot and characters for a piece of theatre that would appeal to a young, modern audience. Structure the text of your play into a number of separate scenes.

Exercise 2: Work in groups, with each group taking responsibility for one scene of your play. Your group is responsible not only for the narrative and action, but also the performance style of the scene.

Exercise 3: Each group improvises their scene using one major twenty-first century performance style, such as realism, musical, multimedia, physical theatre, eclectic, or any other major contemporary style you choose.

Exercise 4: Perform your collage of theatre styles to an outside audience.

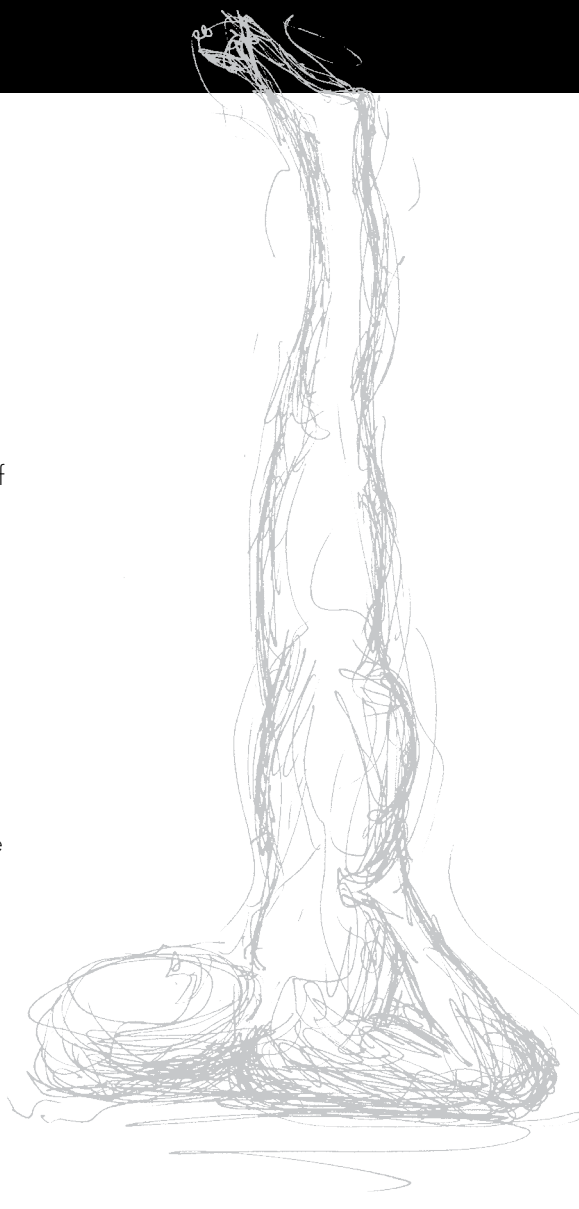


Legs on the Wall theatre company combined physical theatre and multimedia in their 2011 production of *My Bicycle Loves You*.

SECTION FIVE

AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

5



INTRODUCTION

Theatre performance in Australia is just over 200 years old. However, we have one of the oldest forms of dance drama in the world: Aboriginal corroborees have been performed here for perhaps 40 000 years. By contrast, the school subject of Drama is very new, only emerging in Australia in the 1970s.

In this section, we will concentrate on the development of theatre in Australia over the past 200 years. Our main focus will be on the appearance of a distinctive style of Australian drama in plays that reflect our society and our culture. As part of this study, we will examine the emergence of theatre companies in different states, but the emphasis will be mainly on plays and their writers.

Over the past century, many playwrights, directors and theatre companies have deliberately set out to capture and develop uniquely Australian characters and situations on stage. These efforts have not only reflected the Australian culture of the time, but have actually helped to shape it, particularly in the last half of the twentieth century. The aggressively masculine, 'ocker' plays of the 1970s, written by white Australian males, created a stereotype that many young men consciously took as a model. At the same time, these ocker plays were a valid representation of Australian society during this period in our history.

By way of contrast, the last decade of the twentieth century was dominated by the work of female playwrights, and this trend has continued into the new millennium. This section reveals how a succession of powerful plays dealing with relationships and the role of women have not only reflected the way our culture has changed since the 1970s, but have also provided an articulate voice for women—black and white—in Australian society.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

19.1 THE BEGINNINGS

The first theatrical performance in Australia was given on 4 June 1789, just eighteen months after the First Fleet arrived. It was a production of a comedy that had been successful in England, *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar. The performance was acted by convicts in a mud hut with an audience of about sixty people. Admission was paid with whatever the convicts could afford, including wheat, rum, tobacco and fowls.

This first theatrical performance is the subject of Thomas Keneally's book *The Playmaker*, which in turn was the basis of the outstanding modern play *Our Country's Good*, written in England by Timberlake Wertenbaker and performed widely throughout Australia. Wertenbaker's play shows us the convicts rehearsing *The Recruiting Officer*, and explores the way their involvement in theatre changes their lives.

If you get the opportunity, go and see a production of *Our Country's Good*. It is a fascinating account of the beginnings of Australian theatre and of our society, and offers a profound reflection on the relationship between them.

A production of *Our Country's Good* by Theatre by the Lake (UK) in 2008

Some early plays about Australia, written in France and England by people who had never been to Australia, included lions, tigers and hyenas in their portrayals of Australian wildlife!

The first theatre in Australia was opened in 1796 by Robert Sidaway, a convict. The theatre seated 120 people and admission was one shilling. It was closed two years later on the order of Governor Hunter, probably because of the pickpocketing and burglary associated with it. Sidaway opened another theatre in 1800, but it did not survive.

There were two early plays written about the bushranger and convict Michael Howe, who was shot and killed in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1818. For more than a century, bushrangers were one of the favourite subjects of Australian plays. In fact, the very first play written by an Australian resident was *The Bushrangers* by David Burn. The play was first performed in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1829 but was not published or performed in this country until 1971.

In 1833, the first permanent theatre, the Theatre Royal, was built in Sydney by Barnett Levey, with seats for 1000 people. Levey presented nearly 400 shows during the theatre's lifetime, mainly melodramas and farces, with occasional operas and Shakespearean plays. As many as five different plays were performed each week. However, the only Australian play was a short piece staged in 1835. Elsewhere, overseas plays were staged in Hobart from 1833 onwards; there were amateur theatricals in Perth during the 1830s; the first play to be staged in Adelaide opened in 1838; and Melbourne saw its first plays in 1842.

19.2 MELODRAMA

INTERCULTURAL

In the early days of Sydney's development, Aboriginal corroborees were performed regularly, and they became the first form of public entertainment in Perth after it was founded in 1829. This ancient form of dance drama was therefore part of the birth of theatre in Australia.

As in the rest of the world, theatre in Australia was dominated by melodrama throughout the nineteenth century. Plays were written very quickly to a formula (like today's television soaps) and included sensational situations, stereotyped heroes and villains, and tragic events resolved by happy endings. Most of the plays presented in Australia between 1840 and 1870 were imported melodramas that had been successful overseas.

There were some strong Australian melodramas and comedies written in this period, particularly by convicts. Edward Geoghegan in Sydney wrote *The Hibernian Father* and an operetta, *The Currency Lass*, while James Tucker, convict and drunkard, created the comedy *Jemmy Green* in Australia, about an innocent London lass who suffers terrible misfortunes in Australia. There was even an early attempt at tragedy: Charles Harpur's *The Bushrangers* (1853), the first Australian play published in book form in Australia. The play portrayed the notorious bushranger Jack Donahue as a tragic figure, and was written in blank verse in imitation of Shakespeare.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Australian plays became increasingly popular but theatre managers were unwilling to stage them unless they were successful in London first. Nevertheless, Walter Cooper's *Colonial Experience* (1868), Arch Murray's *Forged* (1873) and Francis R.C. Hopkins's *All for Gold* (1877) were all popular. *All for Gold* toured Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada, and was the first play of Australian origin to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain in England.

Hopkins went on to write a number of other successful plays, as did George Darrell whose play *The Sunny South* was immensely popular in Australia and England. Alfred Dampier, who produced and starred in Hopkins's plays, was one of the few managers to consistently stage Australian plays in the 1880s and 1890s, in particular the stage adaptations of the novels *For the Term of His Natural Life* and *Robbery Under Arms*.

The producer of the largest number of plays in Australia at this time was J.C. Williamson, who had moved to Australia from the USA in 1879. His company staged plays throughout Australia and New Zealand, and by 1906 employed 650 people, including 187 actors. However, almost all the plays staged by Williamson came from overseas, and had been successful, especially in London.

As the twentieth century began, theatre was alive and well in Australia. There were five theatres in Sydney, five in Melbourne, three in Brisbane, two in Adelaide and two in Tasmania. The *Theatrical Holiday Book* for 1885 listed sixty-two playwrights in Australia, each averaging two or three plays to their credit, and a number of Australian plays had been successful overseas. The main problem was to get theatre managers in Australia to stage Australian plays.

19.3 EARLY 20TH CENTURY

As Australia became a nation in 1901, there was an increasing desire for a national Australian theatre that reflected the distinctive nature of life in Australia. The *Bulletin* had been running a campaign for years and the emergence of a school of Australian painters, the development of a political consciousness through the trade union movement and the establishment of the Australian Labor Party all encouraged the supporters of Australian theatre.

Australian writers were inspired by the growth of national theatre in other countries, such as Ireland, the emerging 'new realism' of playwrights such as Ibsen and Chekhov, and the work of Constantin Stanislavski. A group of these writers, including Louis Esson, attempted to create a distinctive style of Australian drama, without success. The most popular plays in the early twentieth century were light comedies such as *On Our Selection* by Steele Rudd and *The Sentimental Bloke* by C.J. Dennis. While these plays provided amusing, popular entertainment, they relied on caricature and exaggerations of Australian speech to generate the humour.

C.J. Dennis's poem 'The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke' was turned into a stage musical, first staged in 1961. It became the most successful Australian musical of the twentieth century, with two cast recordings, a television production, a ballet and continuous revivals around Australia for the rest of the century.

An increasing number of amateur theatre groups around the country attempted to stage serious and experimental Australian plays, including the Adelaide Repertory Theatre, the Pioneer Players in Melbourne, and the Community Playhouse in Sydney. The 1920s and 1930s also saw the emergence of the socialist New Theatres in various states.

Another interesting development in this period was the appearance of plays that dealt with events and concerns that were specific to a particular area. Alexander Turner in Western Australia created definite characters in a particular environment, while George Landen Dann in Queensland wrote about the problems confronting Aborigines in that state. His play *Fountains Beyond* was the first Australian play to have an Aboriginal person as its protagonist and to look at the issue of Aborigines as fringe dwellers.

The popularity of radio in the 1930s also led to an increasing number of Australian dramas being broadcast, and the ABC encouraged new playwrights to submit radio plays. There were a number of plays dealing with the Eureka Rebellion at this time—both on radio and on the stage—just as there had been bushranger and Ned Kelly plays fifty years earlier.

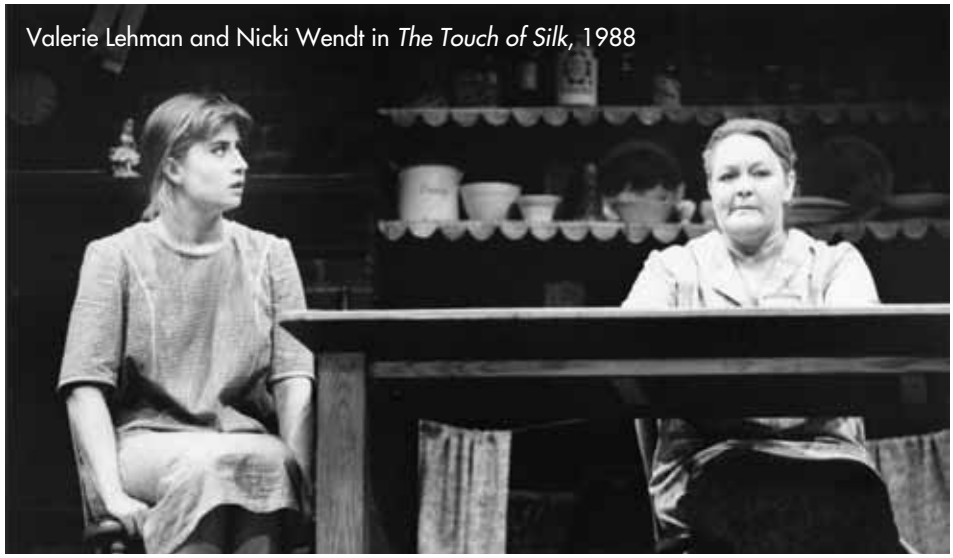
A 1961 production of *The Sentimental Bloke*

19.4 WOMEN WRITERS

In the first half of the twentieth century, women writers in Australia had a much greater influence on the development of their nation's theatre than did their sisters in England or America. Australia's female playwrights provided a range of new insights and perspectives on our culture through their drama.

The Touch of Silk by Betty Roland, first performed in 1928, tells the story of a French girl named Jeanne who meets an Australian soldier in France during the First World War. After the war she comes to Australia to live on his farm. There is a drought, and when Jeanne buys some silk underwear from a travelling salesman, her husband is angry about the waste of money. When Jeanne goes off to a dance with the salesman, her husband follows her and kills the man. In the end, Jeanne confesses to adultery with the salesman to save her husband.

The Touch of Silk was the first of many Australian plays to deal with the clash of cultures between native-born Australians and migrants and refugees. The clash between Indigenous and European culture has been a major thread in contemporary Indigenous plays.



Valerie Lehman and Nicki Wendt in *The Touch of Silk*, 1988

Jeanne is an interesting, believable and complex character, and her dilemma in the play tells us a great deal about Australian attitudes to women in the 1920s. Betty Roland wrote a number of other plays including *Are You Ready Comrade?*, a powerful piece of political theatre, and *Granite Peak*, a play set in central Australia.

Catherine Shepherd, another significant writer, lived and worked in Hobart. All her writing deals in some way with the need for self-realisation. *Daybreak* is set in Hobart in convict times and explores an attempt to rebel against the establishment of the day. *Jane, My Love* is another historical play set in Tasmania with Lieutenant-Governor Franklin and his wife as central characters.

A third playwright, Dymphna Cusack, went to Sydney University before becoming a teacher. Her plays are sharp social commentaries that support the underdog, and therefore have a very Australian flavour. *Morning Sacrifice* is set in a girls high school with an all-female cast: the staff of the school. The school is revealed as elite, snobbish and hypocritical. The play was successfully revived by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1991.

Cusack's plays *Shoulder the Sky* and *Eternal Now* both deal with experiences during the Second World War; not the experiences of the soldiers, but those at home who had to cope with the traumas and dislocations caused by war.

Two important women writers associated with the left-wing New Theatres were Oriel Gray and Mona Brand. Gray's play *Had We But World Enough* deals powerfully with racial discrimination in a small town when a school teacher casts an Aboriginal girl in the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in an Easter play. Brand won international success in 1948 with her play *Here Under Heaven*, which also deals with racism, this time on a sheep station in Queensland during the Second World War.

19.5 AUSTRALIAN THEATRE COMES OF AGE

RUSTY BUGLES

Rusty Bugles by Sumner Locke Elliott was first performed on 21 October 1948, and marked the beginning of a revolution in Australian theatre. It is set in an army camp in the Northern Territory in 1944, and shows a group of soldiers waiting for the war to end—they are bored, frustrated and stressed. The play features strong characters and the conflicts between them, and the dialogue is free-flowing, authentic Australian speech, superbly structured. The play was immensely popular and influential, and was also prosecuted by the police for the use of obscene language!

As a result of the increasing interest in Australian theatre generated by plays such as *Rusty Bugles*, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was set up in 1954. The Trust raised £90 000 from donations and received a grant of £30 000 from the Commonwealth Government. The aim of the Trust was to establish a distinctively Australian artistic scene in drama, opera and ballet. In its first year of operation the Trust achieved an overwhelming success with its presentation of the play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.

'THE DOLL'

On 11 January 1955, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust presented its first Australian production, Ray Lawler's play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. The play had shared first prize in the Playwrights Advisory Board 1954 competition with Oriel Gray's *The Torrents*. *'The Doll'* went on to become one of the most influential and celebrated of all Australian plays. *The Torrents* disappeared into obscurity.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll remains one of the most important plays of the twentieth century. It explores one of the major concerns of modern, realistic theatre: the need for people to have dreams to sustain them, and the way these dreams can also be destructive. Roo and Barney, are two Queensland cane-cutters who come to Melbourne every year during the off season; Olive is the woman who waits for Roo each year. After years of these meetings, Roo has decided that he wants to settle down and get a steady job, which shatters Olive's sense of their relationship. Roo setting down to a city job symbolises the end of the myth of the maverick outback Aussie male. Lawler uses language in a way this is colourful and entirely appropriate to his characters.

It was followed by another extremely successful play, Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart*, which seemed to confirm that Australian drama had come of age. Like *'The Doll'*, *The Shifting Heart* is set in a Melbourne suburb—this time Collingwood instead of Carlton—and deals with an Italian immigrant family. On Christmas Eve the son, Gino, goes to a dance and gets into a fight. He returns home but goes back again, this time carrying a knife. He is badly injured and rushed to hospital, but dies. Maria, his sister, blames all Australians—including her husband Clarry—for Gino's death, because of their prejudice against Italians. However, the play ends with Maria and Clarry being reconciled and naming their new son Gino.

The Shifting Heart is a devastating attack on Australian racism and attitudes to migrants, but it is also full of warmth and humour. The characterisation is excellent and even the more stereotyped Italian characters seem interesting in an Australian setting.

The original cast of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*: from left: Ray Lawler, June Jago, Carmel Dunn (at the piano), Roma Johnston. Noel Ferrier and Fenella Maguire, November 1955.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll was a worldwide success and raised the profile of Australian theatre around the world.

A number of interesting plays followed, including the musical *Lola Montez* by Peter Benjamin and Alan Burke, and *The Slaughter of St Teresa's Day* by Peter Kenna. Plays dealing with Aborigines also emerged at the end of the 1950s, including Oriel Gray's *Burst of Summer*, which was first staged at the Little Theatre (now St Martin's) in Melbourne. The central character in this play is Peggy, an Aboriginal girl who returns to her small country town after starring in a film. The play deals powerfully with racism and its effect on the victims. Other plays to confront the issue of the treatment of Aborigines at this time were Barbara Stellmach's *Dark Heritage*, set in Queensland, and David Ireland's *Image in the Clay*.

WORKSHOP: REALISING A FOUNDATION PLAY

Exercise: Choose one Australian play mentioned in this chapter that has taken your interest. Find a copy of the play or an extract. Generate and realise a performance of the chosen play. In your performance, aim to be true to the style of performance that the play was written in, such as melodrama or naturalism.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

20.1 THE 1960s

In 1960, the Adelaide Festival of the Arts was staged for the first time. It has since gone on to become a major arts festival, held every two years, and has given rise to regular arts festivals in most major Australian cities. Some cities also stage specialist events such as comedy and world theatre festivals.

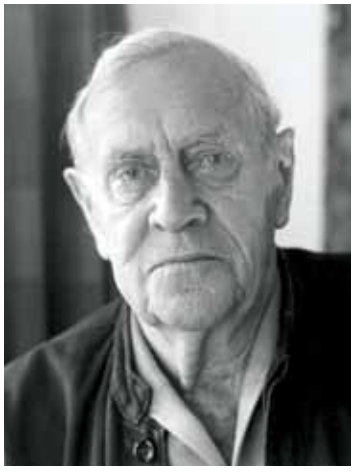
Television broadcasts began in Australia in 1954 and were firmly established by 1960. From the very beginning, the ABC regularly broadcast plays on television, while ABC radio continued to support the writing of new drama.

A play that had been rejected by the Board of Governors of the Adelaide Festival in 1960 became the first major play of the 1960s to achieve international acclaim. *The One Day of the Year*, written by Alan Seymour, opened at the Palace Theatre in Sydney on 26 April 1961. Set in the Cook household before, during and after Anzac Day, the play is a powerful study of attitudes to Anzac Day, to war itself, and to the whole myth of the 'bronzed Anzac'. It is also an exploration of family relationships, which gives it a universal appeal.

The term 'ocker' has been used since the 1960s to describe the stereotype of a rough, loudmouthed male who speaks with a broad Australian accent. The term is a variation on the name Oscar, and originated in a groundbreaking television sitcom from the 1960s, the *Mavis Bramston Show.*

AUSTRALIAN WRITERS

The 1960s saw the emergence of a number of significant Australian writers.



Patrick White

Best known as a novelist with works spanning almost fifty years, Patrick White also wrote more than ten plays between 1935 and 1987, four of which were produced in the early 1960s. All his plays achieve moments of striking, non-realistic drama, challenging our attitudes to sexuality and life, but they are often sketchy and undeveloped as drama.

Thomas Keneally

In 1968 Thomas Keneally, another renowned novelist, wrote *Childermas*, a symbolic play dealing with the plight of children in Vietnam. This was one of the first plays to confront the topic of the war in Vietnam and Australia's role in it.

Dorothy Hewett

Born in Perth in 1923, Dorothy Hewett attended university in Western Australia and was a member of the Communist Party until 1968. Her first play, *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, is a drama of family life containing a moving, affectionate portrait of the alcoholic Laurie, a wife and mother. In 1971, Hewett's play *The Chapel Perilous* caused a furore in Perth with its rebellious, sexually liberated central character, Sally Banner.

Jack Hibberd

The first play by Jack Hibberd, a Melbourne doctor, was *White with Wire Wheels*, a savage comedy about four young Australian males and their sexist, materialist attitudes. Hibberd's wedding comedy *Dimboola*, in which the members of the audience become the wedding guests, has been enormously successful since it was first staged in 1969.

Alex Buzo

Alex Buzo, born in Sydney in 1944, wrote his first play in 1967. In 1968, *Norm and Ahmed* was staged at the Old Tote Theatre in Sydney. This one-act play shows two men meeting on a street at midnight: Norm, a middle-aged Australian, and Ahmed, a Pakistani student. The play ends with Norm attacking and bashing Ahmed, a violent reaction to Ahmed's foreign reserve and different attitudes.

THEATRE ACTIVITY

Alongside the appearance of new playwrights came a rapid growth in theatre activity. By 1965, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was sharing out more than $2 million among the arts in Australia, although only $374 000 went to the theatre. At the same time, the Australian Council for the Arts was established by the Federal Government to distribute money to the arts. A number of new theatre companies were formed, including the Australian Performing Group based at the Pram Factory in Melbourne, and the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation, which was established in 1969 to encourage cultural traditions and arts among Indigenous Australians. The Canberra Repertory Society staged a number of new plays including Ric Throssell's *For Valour*, a tragic portrait of a forgotten hero of the First World War.

In 1966, over a dozen new Australian plays were given professional productions, the most in any year this century. One was Alan Hopgood's *Private Yuk Objects*, a comedy about the prospect of going to fight in Vietnam. Hopgood had previously written a very popular comedy about Australian Rules football, *And the Big Men Fly*.

20.2 THE 1970s

In 1970, the first play by Australia's most successful playwright, David Williamson, appeared. Born in Melbourne in 1942, Williamson lectured in engineering at Swinburne College of Technology before becoming a playwright. *The Coming of Stork* depicts four young people sharing a flat, and was first performed in 1970 at La Mama Theatre in Melbourne, where many new Australian plays were first seen.

In the following year, two major works by David Williamson were staged. *The Removalists* portrays an ageing, cynical police sergeant called Simmonds, and his naive young constable, Ross. They agree to help a woman called Fiona leave her drunken husband, Kenny. However, in a fit of rage, Ross attacks Kenny and beats him to death. To avoid being blamed for Kenny's death, the two policemen bashing each other so that they can claim that they killed Kenny in self-defence. This play is Williamson's most serious work—a powerful indictment of official violence and corrupt authority.

By way of contrast, *Don's Party* is a cynical, black comedy portraying a group of people at a party on the eve of the 1969 federal election. The play mocks the failure of their dreams and ruthlessly depicts the breakdown of their marriages. While the storyline and characterisation are thin, the language is sharp, revealing and very funny.

Williams wrote a sequel to *Don's Party*, called *Don Parties On*, which was first staged in 2011, exactly forty years after the original. The context of this sequel is the federal election of August 2010.

Gary McDonald and Robert Grub in rehearsal for *Don Parties On*

Another Williamson play, *Jugglers Three*, staged by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1972, deals with a returned Vietnam veteran. Violence and the disintegration of marriage are again Williamson's concerns.

Williamson wrote prolifically during the 1970s, producing more plays about family relationships, such as *What If You Died Tomorrow?* and *A Handful of Friends*. There were also some biting comedies about different types of organisations and bureaucracies. *The Department* satirises the workings of a college engineering department, while *The Club* is a hilarious, cutting comedy about an Australian Rules football club. All Williamson's plays were popular successes and a number have been performed overseas.

Meanwhile, a number of playwrights who had emerged in the 1960s went on to become major writers. Alex Buzo produced a number of plays that dealt with the dominance of brute force and materialism in Australian society. In *Rooted*, the rich, virile Simmo never appears on stage, yet he dominates the play. In *The Front Room Boys*, the bosses control the lives of the office workers in the twelve scenes, one for each month of the year, while in *Tom* the real villain is big business. Buzo also wrote *Coralie Lansdowne Says No*, a much more individual psychological study, while *Martello Towers* and *Makassar Reef* are about finding one's place in the world and facing up to the sometimes unsavouriness of life.

The form of play in which there is only one actor on stage who plays all the roles is known as a monodrama, and it has been a major style of stage play in Australia. It was pioneered in the theatre in the absurd works of Samuel Beckett.

Ray Lawler wrote *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times*, which tell the story of Roo, Barney, Olive and Nancy up to the beginning of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. However, these later plays are slight pieces of work in comparison with *'The Doll'*, written more than twenty years previously.

Jack Hibberd's play *A Stretch of the Imagination* was a daring piece of theatre, with just one character on stage, the 80-year-old Monk O'Neill reminiscing about his life. First performed in 1972, this play is often revived, creating an effective portrait of the end of an Australian myth.

The year 1973 saw another Hibberd play, *Captain Midnight VC*, about a part-Aboriginal army officer; *A Toast to Melba*, which premiered in 1976, was an episodic biography of Dame Nellie Melba, the famous opera singer.

New playwrights also emerged in the 1970s. John Romeril, who became writer-in-residence at the Pram Factory, wrote a number of plays, most significantly *The Floating World* in 1974. Set on a cruise ship travelling to Japan, the play evokes the horrors of the Second World War through the memories of its central character, Les Harding. Romeril also created some satirical work, much of it improvised, for the Australian Performing Group.

Born in New Zealand, Alma de Groen lived and wrote in Australia from 1973 onwards. Her play *Chidley*, which premiered in 1976, was based on the life of William Chidley, an eccentric reformer, and is an adventurous, amusing piece of theatre. In contrast, *Going Home* examines the failure of a group of Australians living abroad to find success or happiness.

Jim McNeil wrote a number of plays about life in prison—from prison. Sentenced to seventeen years jail for armed robbery and wounding a policeman, his plays about jail included *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice*, both one-acters, and the full-length plays *How Does Your Garden Grow* and *Jack*. All of his plays deal with believable, interesting characters, and show prison as a reflection of society itself. Sadly, McNeil died soon after his release from jail.

Other playwrights of the 1970s include Barry Oakley, whose work was performed at the Pram Factory, most notably *Bedfellows*, a 1975 domestic comedy about marriage. Ron Blair's monologue play *Christian Brothers* is a marvellous portrait of a Catholic teaching brother, while Peter Kenna returned to Australia from England to create another Catholic play, *A Hard God*. This work examines the gulf between man and God, and between the different generations in a family.

THEATRE MOVEMENTS

Large and small

The 1970s saw a tremendous growth in drama in Australia, both in the size of established theatres and in the appearance of new ones. It was the decade of major expansion in the building of new theatres in Australia. The Adelaide Festival Theatre was the first state arts centre to open, in 1973, followed by the Sydney Opera House. During the 1970s arts centres opened, or buildings were begun, in every state and territory. These new 'palaces of culture' were occupied by heavily subsidised state theatre, ballet and opera companies that received funding from the Arts Council and from state governments, with sums of close to $1 million going to the largest companies by the end of the decade.

At the other end of the scale, small theatre companies blossomed and began performing in a range of buildings converted into theatres, including churches, halls, schools, and cafes. In Ipswich, Queensland, an incinerator designed by renowned architect Walter Burley Griffin became an intimate theatre seating about eighty people; it opened as the Incinerator Theatre in 1969 and is still in operation today.

Theatre-in-education

Children's theatre and theatre-in-education (TIE) became an important part of the theatre scene in the 1970s, with individuals such as mime artists and small companies of actor–teachers visiting primary and secondary schools.

Indigenous theatre

In Sydney, the Black Theatre Arts and Culture Centre staged a number of Indigenous plays, including *The Cake Man* by Robert J. Merritt in 1975. Jack Davis emerged as an important Indigenous playwright during this decade, with four plays: *The Steel and the Stone*, *The Dreamers*, *Bitter Bit* and *Kullark*.

Australian National Playwrights' Centre

Playwrights were encouraged by the development of the Australian National Playwrights' Conference, which began in 1973 and took place each year in Canberra, giving rehearsed readings of a number of previously unperformed plays.

The casualties

There were some theatrical casualties during the 1970s as well. The Old Tote Theatre Company, the largest in Sydney, went into decline and was finally replaced by the Sydney Theatre Company. The Australian Performing Group at the Pram Factory, the actor's cooperative responsible for staging so many new plays during the 1970s, was a spent force by the end of the decade. However, Anthill, the Australian Nouveau Theatre under the direction of Jean-Pierre Mignon, would soon emerge to balance this loss. In retrospect, the 1970s was the most vibrant decade to date in the development of Australian drama.

20.3 THE 1980s

During the 1980s, the established theatres and well-known playwrights continued to flourish; however, a range of new theatres emerged, accompanied by a surge of new writing for the stage.

The large, subsidised theatre companies in each state and territory continued to expand and increase the number of plays performed and the size of their audiences. As well as presenting 'classic' plays (such as an annual Shakespeare and a regular diet of successful, contemporary overseas plays), the state theatre companies also showed an increased interest in staging new Australian plays and in rediscovering plays from earlier decades. The Melbourne Theatre Company, for example, successfully revived Betty Roland's play *The Touch of Silk*.

The standard of acting, direction and design also improved dramatically in the established theatres as new directors, many with overseas experience, were appointed, and visiting overseas companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company challenged levels of local performance. The vitality of the smaller theatres in each state also had a revitalising effect on the larger companies.

ESTABLISHED PLAYWRIGHTS

David Williamson consolidated his place as Australia's most successful playwright. His play *The Perfectionist* (1982) was another savage comedy about marriage, but with a fresh, feminist viewpoint. *Sons of Cain* (1985) focused on newspaper journalists and the menace to Australian society of drugs such as heroin.

Alex Buzo continued to write plays, such as *Big River* (1980), a historical play set at the beginning of the century, and *The Marginal Farm* (1983), set in Fiji and dealing with Australian colonialism and, more universally, with growing up.

Ron Blair wrote *Marx*, a dramatic biography of Karl Marx, as well as a number of other plays, while Patrick White, who had contributed *Big Toys* in the 1970s, wrote *Signal Driver* for the 1982 Adelaide Festival, and followed it with *Netherwood* in 1983. Thomas Keneally continued his concern with the plight of Aborigines with *Bullie's House*, which examines the gulf between white society and Aboriginal life.

Peter Kenna, whose play *A Hard God* had been so successful in the 1970s, produced two more plays about its central character, Joe Cassidy. *Furtive Love* and *An Eager Hope* are both bitter plays about human isolation, the nature of sexuality and, in particular, Joe's homosexuality.

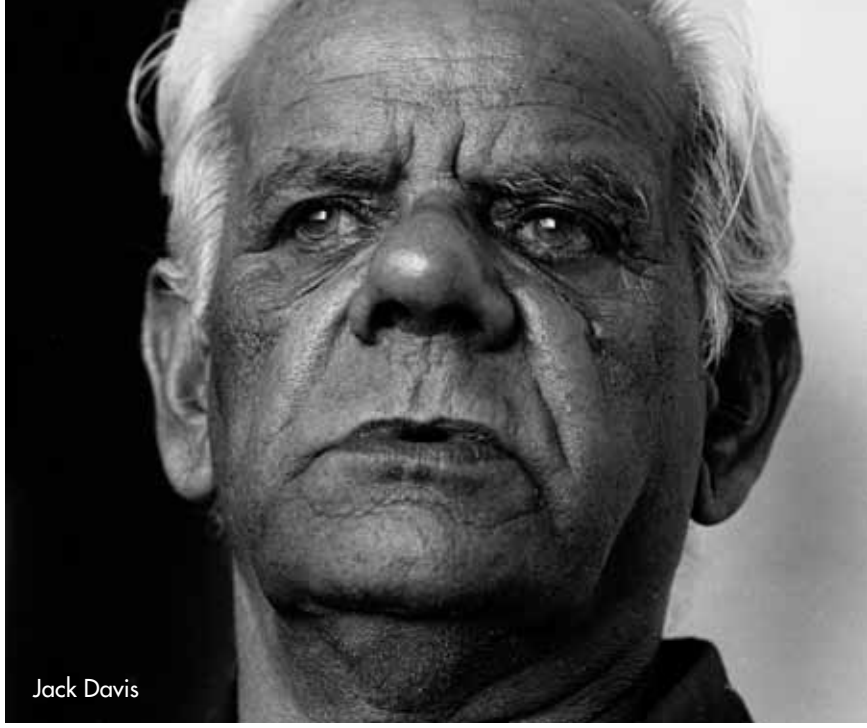
A large number of experimental, TIE and alternative theatre companies developed (and often disappeared) during the decade, across Australia. One of the most interesting was Handspan in Melbourne, a company that utilised puppetry, black light theatre, music, acting and multimedia. Their production of *Four Little Girls*, written by Pablo Picasso and directed by Arietta Taylor, was one of the highlights of Australian drama in the 1980s.

EMERGING PLAYWRIGHTS

Of equal interest and importance was the emergence of new playwrights. Ron Elisha, born in Israel in 1951, came to Australia as a young boy and became a doctor. His plays deal with the Jewish experience of suffering, persecution and the search for identity. His most powerful play to date, *Einstein*, depicts the life of the famous scientist through a series of flashbacks remembered by the old man just before his death, in particular his involvement with the development of the atom bomb.

Jack Davis established himself as a major Indigenous playwright; the staging of his First Born Trilogy of plays—*No Sugar*, *The Dreamers* and *Barungin*—was one of the significant theatrical events of the decade. Indigenous theatre and the work of Jack Davis are explored in more detail in chapter 22.

Born in Melbourne and educated at Melbourne University, Louis Nowra wrote a stream of plays in the 1980s, all of them concerned with power and violence, yet often lyrical and romantic in part. *The Golden Age*, first performed by the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne in 1985, deals with the discovery of a lost group of people who have been living in the wilds of Tasmania for many years. The analogy with the Tasmanian Aborigines is explicit. Francis, the central character, chooses to stay with the last of the forest people rather than return to 'civilisation'.


Jack Davis

Stephen Sewell, a Sydney-born playwright, wrote a number of plays set in other countries including *Traitors*, set in Russia in the 1920s, and *Welcome the Bright World*, located in post-war Germany. *The Blind Giant Is Dancing*, first performed in 1983, is set in Australia and deals with a number of major issues in a huge, rambling play. His next play, *Dreams in an Empty City*, is a savage attack on the greed and corruption of modern Australia.

Many other new plays and new playwrights and a diversity of new and innovative theatre companies contributed to the richness and variety of Australian drama in the 1980s.

After the powerful political plays written by Sewell in the mid-eighties, his play *Sisters* (1991) was a total contrast. It explored the intense relationship between two sisters reuniting after their parents' deaths. This theme of sisters meeting again after a death in the family became the context for a number of major plays including Hannie Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento* and Louis Nowra's *Radiance*.

20.4 THE 1990s

In the last decade of the twentieth century, Australian theatre continued to display the extraordinary growth and dynamism that had characterised the previous two decades. Towards the end of the decade, there was a strong sense that theatre in Australia had come of age, with a richness and diversity in the new and established work being performed.

The beginning of the 1990s was not a promising time for theatre. The worsening economic situation following the financial crash of 1988 led to a serious cut-back in funding and in audiences. The major casualty was the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney, which closed its doors after a long period as one of the most exciting and innovative venues for new theatre in Australia. In Melbourne, the Church Theatre also went dark after more than a decade of providing a venue for both amateur and professional companies to develop and perform their work.

In the face of the economic downturn, the established companies were less inclined to take risks with new local work or avant-garde plays from overseas, preferring to stage the traditional repertoire of 'classic' plays, and plays that had already been successful in London and New York. However, there were signs early in the decade of a new flowering of Australian theatre, which became more evident as the decade progressed.

In 1990, the Playbox Theatre finally moved into its new home in the Malthouse in Melbourne, marking its emergence as a major venue for new Australian plays. Louis Nowra's *Capricornia* (written in 1988) was performed widely around the country in the early 1990s, confirming his status as a major playwright.

Lydia Miller in the Melbourne Theatre Company's 1990 production of *Capricornia,* a play written by Louis Nowra and adapted from Xavier Herbert's epic novel about racial conflict in the Northern Territory in the 1930s

INTERCULTURAL

The 1990s saw the emergence of a number of playwrights were who immigrants, refugees, or the children of new arrivals. They came from a range of countries and cultures, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Russia, Bosnia, Serbia, Iraq and Iran.

The decade also saw the emergence of a number of exciting and original talents including Nick Enright, whose play about rape, *Blackrock*, is specifically targeted at teenage audiences. *Aftershocks* by Paul Brown, also deals with a real event, the Newcastle earthquake, and was originally written for that community. In contrast, Darryl Emmerson's chamber musical *The Pathfinder* is an exquisite biography of the poet John Shaw Nielson, using his poetry as the lyrics of the songs. In every city in Australia, new writers and new plays continued to appear in increasing numbers as the century drew to a close.

THEATRE COMPANIES

During the 1990s, established playwrights including David Williamson, Michael Gow and Stephen Sewell continued to write plays that were staged by the large state theatre companies. These companies increased in size, as did the level of their subsidies, although the need to attract larger and larger audiences limited their ability to take risks. While the major companies survived, some of the smaller, innovative ones did not. The greatest losses were Anthill in Melbourne and The Hole in the Wall in Western Australia, both of which were irreplaceable in terms of the quality and originality of their work.

Part of the new maturity of Australian theatre in the 1990s could be seen in the emergence of new companies working in alternative theatre forms. Some of these were strongly influenced by overseas forms of performance, such as Butoh and Suzuki physical theatre from Japan, but still managed to create a distinctively Australian style. In the genre of puppetry and black light theatre, Skylark emerged in New South Wales to parallel the outstanding work of the established Handspan company in Victoria.

PHYSICAL THEATRE

Physical theatre performance had been strong for two decades in Australia through the work of Circus Oz and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, but took a new lease on life at the end of the 1990s, partly influenced by the extraordinary worldwide popularity of Cirque du Soleil. One particularly interesting company to emerge was Vulcana Women's Circus, a feminist circus troupe in Brisbane. There is no doubt that by the end of the twentieth century, Australian theatre was more diverse, interesting and adventurous than ever before.

EMERGING WOMEN

The most exciting and significant development of the 1990s was signalled early in the decade by the staging of a number of superb new plays by women playwrights, beginning in 1990 with *Hotel Sorrento* by Hannie Rayson and *Diving for Pearls* by Katherine Thomson. This marked the real re-emergence of women playwrights as a potent force in Australian theatre after almost fifty years of male domination. Just as women had created some of the most interesting and powerful drama in the first half of the century, so in the final decade there was an extraordinary explosion of writing for the theatre by women.

While many of the plays of the 1990s have women as their central characters and are strongly feminist in their concerns, they also explore male–female relationships, the nature of Australian society and, ultimately, the experience of being human. They are characterised by their diversity of style, their intense focus on contemporary Australian life and by the sheer quality of the writing.

In *Hotel Sorrento*, Hannie Rayson is most concerned with the nature of family relationships. Three sisters meet again after the death of their father and struggle to come to terms with their relationships to each other and the experiences that have shaped their lives. The play suggests, by implication, that this is a dilemma the whole nation also faces. Katherine Thomson's *Diving for Pearls*, by contrast, is a savage investigation of the impact of economic rationalism on people, and also a study of the inability of individuals to realise their dreams.

Tobsha Learner's play *Wolf*, first performed in 1992, is very different again. The style is a fascinating mix of realism and surrealism, with apparently real people transforming into wolves and the characters of fairy tales. The set is a kitchen, the centrepiece of which is a table that bleeds! The play is an exploration of sexuality—in actuality, and in dreams, stories and rituals. Jenny Kemp's *The Black Sequin Dress* is even more surreal in form, using multimedia techniques to achieve a series of dreamlike sequences that take the audience on a bizarre journey into the interior, emotional self of the central character.

Other major female playwrights of the decade include Joanna Murray-Smith, whose plays deal with individual relationships and the impact of the past upon the present, and are written in elliptical, fractured dialogue that demands intense concentration and builds tension. In Queensland, Margery Forde's writing has been particularly eclectic, ranging from the episodic nostalgia of *Snapshots from Home* to the harsh and confronting story of the death of a girl from a drug overdose, *X-Stacy*. Debra Oswald's *Gary's House* is another contrast in style, the dialogue written as the ordinary spoken language of a group of inadequate and inarticulate people who struggle with the challenges of living, while Judy Bierwirth's *Alive and Kicking* is an affectionate and moving portrait of old age.

A number of women playwrights of the 1990s also produced work from an ethnic background. Tes Lyssiotis draws extensively on her Greek heritage to explore the impact of family relationships in differing cultures in plays such as *The Forty Lounge Cafe*. Anna Broinowski's *The Gap* emerges from her bi-cultural experiences of living in Japan and Australia. The play is written in both English and Japanese and depicts the encounter between an Australian tour guide and a young Japanese woman about to commit suicide at The Gap in Sydney.

One other strand of female writing was particularly exciting and significant in the 1990s, and that was the plays written by female Aboriginal playwrights that were performed throughout Australia. The Sydney Festival of the Dreaming was pivotal in staging some of these plays, including *Black Mary* by Julie Janson and, most notably, *Box the Pony* by Leah Purcell. The superb play *The 7 Stages of Grieving* by Wesley Enoch was originally the creation of the Kooemba Jdarra company in Brisbane, although it has now been seen throughout Australia. These plays gave a new voice to Australian drama that was both passionate and compelling, and their significance is explored in more detail in chapter 21.

Jenny Kemp founded her own independent ensemble called Black Sequin Productions and has continued to create genuinely surreal plays that take us into the minds and the subconscious of her characters in plays such as *Still Angela*.

Box the Pony and *The 7 Stages of Grieving* are monodramas—one-woman plays that use storytelling to convey the experience of being black and female. Both are distinguished by extraordinary performances by the women who co-wrote the plays, Leah Purcell and Deborah Mailman.

Joanna Murray-Smith

20.5 THE 21ST CENTURY

Australian theatre is remarkably alive and well in the new millennium. A 2010 investigation by the Australian Arts Council found that more people were attending live theatre in Australia than ever before. The large festivals held each year in most capital cities are growing and flourishing, providing opportunities both for new work and for a taste of world theatre.

In Brisbane, the opening of the $5 million Powerhouse complex in May 2000 was the forerunner of another new trend in cities and regional towns across Australia: the refurbishment and conversion of old buildings into theatres and arts complexes. To a large extent this trend reflects the new interest in and commitment to community-based theatre and provides essential grass-roots support for the growth of Australian theatre.

Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton became directors of the Sydney Theatre Company.

The large state companies continue to provide a mainstream diet of standard works and popular new plays, but there has also been an increased willingness to support interesting Australian work and to develop innovative approaches. In an interesting cross-over from the film industry, celebrated actress Cate Blanchett and her playwright husband Andrew Upton were appointed directors of the Sydney Theatre Company in 2008. A huge new theatre was built for the company inside an old warehouse on Sydney Harbour opposite the Wharf Theatre. In another significant first for Australian theatre, in 2010 Wesley Enoch was appointed as Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, the first Indigenous theatre worker to direct a major state company.

In terms of opening the doors to international theatre, Andrew Ross, the Artistic Director of the Brisbane Powerhouse, staged the first World Theatre festival in Australia in 2010. This very small scale event was followed by a much larger one on 2011, which brought a range of performance work to Australia from a number of different countries.

The quantity and quality of new Australian work continues to develop, and the range of forms, styles and subject matters confirms the maturity of Australian theatre. There is now, for the first time in our history, a significant canon of Australian plays by a number of Australian playwrights. Diverse voices and cultures are also now being recognised, which is promising for the vitality of Australian theatre.

There is also an interesting trend towards theatre for particular audiences. At its most commercial this can be seen in the growth of corporate theatre, where plays are commissioned and staged at conferences and board meetings. At the other end of the spectrum there has also been a revival of community theatre, with local festivals and plays dealing with local issues becoming increasingly popular once more.

PLAYWRIGHTS

In 2008, *Female of the Species* and *Scenes from a Marriage* by Joanna Murray-Smith were staged in Britain. *Female of the Species* is based on the life of pioneering Australian feminist Germaine Greer.

It is impossible to survey all the playwrights who have made a contribution to our theatre in the twenty-first century. A number of already established authors have continued to produce significant works of theatre, while new writers are also emerging to create interesting and often innovative theatre pieces. David Williamson continues to write popular comedies of manners, including *Let The Sunshine* and *Don Parties On*. Joanna Murray-Smith's recent work has been staged extensive both in Australia and overseas.

Daniel Keene is a contemporary Australian playwright who has established an international reputation, with plays that have been performed throughout Australia and overseas, particularly in France. He has won a number of literary awards for his plays, which include *All Souls*, *Cho Cho San*, *Silent Partner*, *Low*, *Terminus*, *The Architect's Walk* and *The Ninth Moon*.

Andrew Bovell writes for both stage and screen. The film *Lantana*, which was adapted from his stage play *Speaking in Tongues*, won Best Screenplay at the 2003 London Critics' Circle Film Awards and is one of greatest contemporary Australian films. It was performed continually for some years, with seasons in more than 20 countries. In 2008, Bovell's play *When the Rain Stops Falling* premiered at the Adelaide Festival of the Arts and was immediately recognised as major work of theatre.

Another established playwright who continues to create new work is Hannie Rayson. Recognised as one of Australia's most significant playwrights, Rayson's play *Hotel Sorrento* has become an Australian classic that is regularly performed by regional theatre groups and appears in university courses and on high school syllabuses. Her more recent works include *Life After George*, *Inheritance*, *The Glass Soldier* and *The Swimming Club*. Rayson's commitment to plays that engage with social issues was most evident in her controversial 2005 work *Two Brothers*, an attack on the asylum seeker policy of the Howard Government.

The development of Australian Gothic as a significant new theatrical style has been most evident in the work of Stephen Carleton. In particular, his 2004 play *Constance Drinkwater and the Final Days of Somerset* contains all the elements of mystery, supernatural events, isolation, danger and melodramatic action that characterise the genre. It is set 1899 in the Far North Queensland settlement of Somerset, which is collapsing under the battering of storms. A mysterious disease has killed all but two of Constance's children, and the arrival of two strangers leads to a final catastrophe.

Another recent example of this genre is Mary Rachel Brown's 2006 play with a contemporary setting which is actually entitled *Australian Gothic*. In the play, Clair, a political activist, is held without charge and interrogated by an ASIO officer. A sense of danger and isolation combined with an atmosphere of mystery and threat permeate the play.

Among the many newer writers whose work is invigorating contemporary theatre, Noelle Janaczewska has investigated the clash between cultures in Australia in some of her plays. *Songket* deals with the story of a Hmong migrant is accused of raping a young textile designer, and explores different cultural notions of love and cultural diversity. *This Territory* takes as its context the 2005 Australia Day riots in Cronulla between young Anglo-Australians and Lebanese. *Mrs Petrov's Shoe*, about a family of European migrants set in the 1950s, won the 2006 Queensland Premier's Literary Award.

Tommy Murphy is the author of a number of recent plays including *Strangers in Between*, *Holding the Man* (based on the book by Timothy Conigrave) and *Gwen in Purgatory*. His plays are characterised by humour and lively theatricality. He has won numerous awards and there have been productions of his work staged in New York, San Francisco and London's West End.

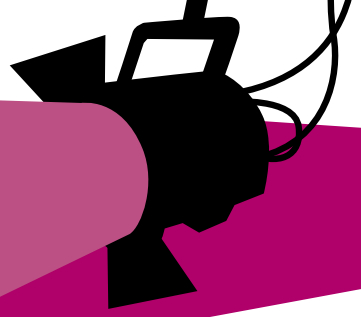
Angela Betzien has also emerged as an interesting new playwright with an individual vision. Her play *Hoods*, which was staged at the Sydney Opera House, tells the story of three children who wait in their car for a mother who never returns. *The Dark Room* is a haunting psychological thriller set at a run-down motel on the edge of a military town.

Lally Katz is another playwright who is pushing the borders of live theatre with her work. She is a core member of Stuck Pigs Squealing Theatre Company, for which she's written *The Black Swan of Trespass*, *The Eisteddfod* and *Lally Katz and the Terrible Mysteries of the Volcano*. These works have toured extensively and won several awards. Her recent plays include *Criminology* (co-written with Tom Wright) and *Goodbye New York, Goodbye Heart,* which premiered in New York.

Australian drama has come a long way since that day in 1789, more than two centuries ago, when a group of convicts stepped onto a makeshift stage in a mud hut. The present state of our theatre promises a great deal for the next 200 years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

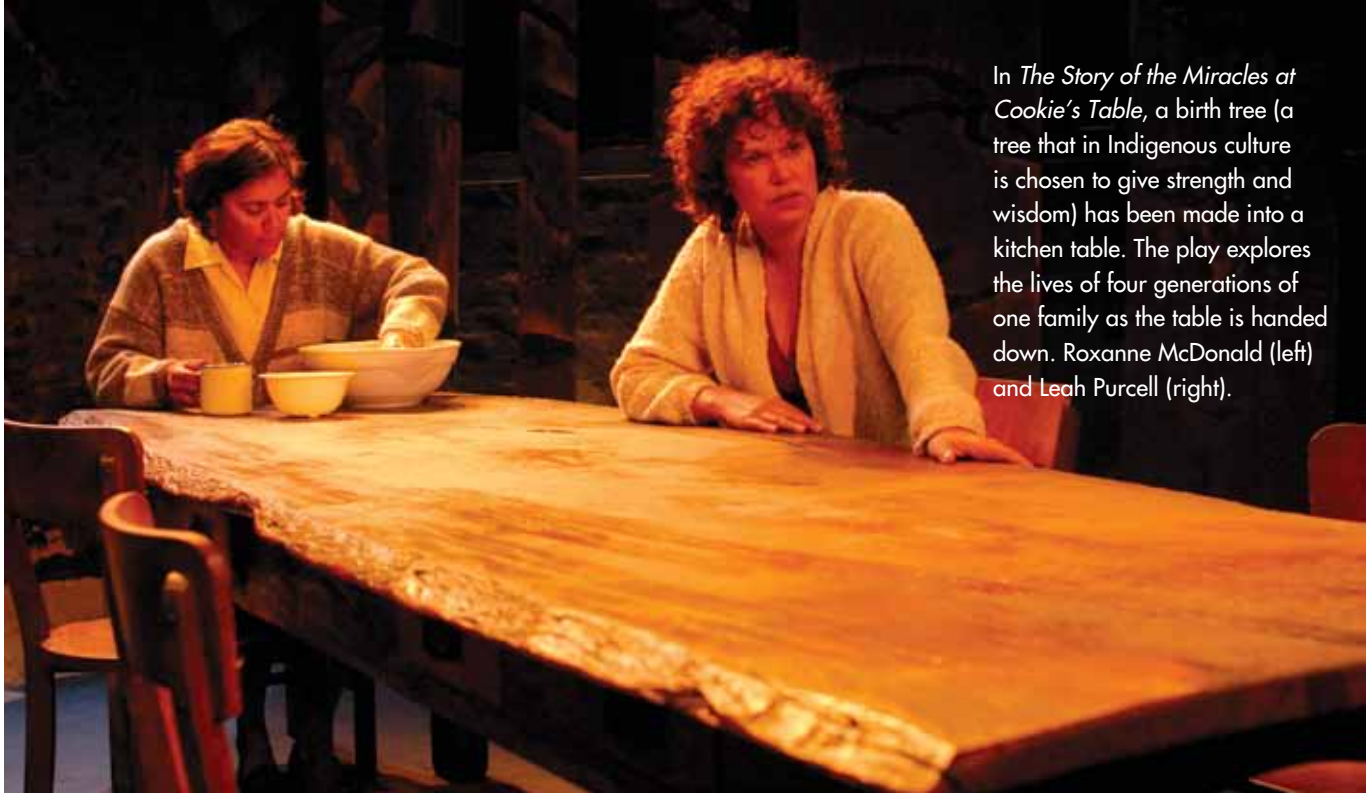


21.1 THE PLACE OF INDIGENOUS THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA

Indigenous theatre has a significant and complex role in contemporary theatre in Australia. Indigenous plays and performances both document and celebrate aspects of Aboriginal history and culture, and make them accessible to all Australians. Plays by Indigenous writers often provide a profound insight into the nature of race relations and the treatment of the Indigenous peoples of this nation. They also remind us of the essential humanity of all Australians, regardless of colour or culture, and challenge the racist attitudes that still persist in Australian society. Most of all, Indigenous theatre is part of the universal art form of theatre, and writers, directors and performers contribute to this essential area of human experience.

The earliest performances occurred thousands of years ago in indigenous communities throughout the world; corroborees have been performed in Australia for perhaps 40 000 years. Contemporary Indigenous theatre, in the form of scripted work staged by companies of performers, really commenced in the 1960s as part of the wave of new Australian theatre. The first Indigenous play to be widely recognised was *The Cherry Pickers*, written by Kevin Gilbert in 1968. Since then hundreds of plays have been written by Indigenous Australian artists, and a number of important playwrights, directors and performers have emerged. More than twenty Indigenous theatre companies have existed during this time and have staged performances throughout Australia and internationally.

One of the dominant concerns of Indigenous theatre is to explore the nature of Aboriginal identity and the connection between traditional and contemporary experience. As an important part of this search for identity, many Indigenous plays have explored the importance of family and community to the individual, and the individual's responsibility to their family and their community.



In *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table*, a birth tree (a tree that in Indigenous culture is chosen to give strength and wisdom) has been made into a kitchen table. The play explores the lives of four generations of one family as the table is handed down. Roxanne McDonald (left) and Leah Purcell (right).

21.2 KEY TEXTS IN INDIGENOUS THEATRE

Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* was first performed in Sydney in 1972, and like many of the Indigenous plays that followed, it was deeply concerned with family and community. The play depicts the lives of a group of itinerant Aboriginal fruit-pickers who return each year to the farm owned by a white family. Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man*, a play about life in an Aboriginal settlement, generated strong empathy for the characters and a belief in the lives of the family. This was the first Indigenous play to receive a main stage production, and in 1982 it was staged at a festival in the USA.

During the 1970s a number of Indigenous performance groups emerged, creating new works and also performing the new Indigenous plays that were appearing. A political revue called *Basically Black* was performed in 1972 at the Nimrod Street Theatre in Sydney and dealt with a traditional claim to land ownership. Out of this performance came the Black Theatre in Redfern, Sydney, which in 1976 staged the tragedy *Here Comes the Nigger* by Gerry Bostock, in which a group of Aborigines are beaten up by two white thugs.

Jack Davis, born in Western Australia in 1917, lived on Aboriginal settlements as a boy, worked as a stockman and later became involved in Aboriginal welfare. His plays are a significant contribution, not just to an understanding of Indigenous perspectives, but to Australian drama overall. *Kullark*, meaning 'home', deals with the early settlement of Perth and the way the treatment of Indigenous people still reflects some of those early attitudes. *The Dreamers* shows us Indigenous Australians living in squalor and despair as their Indigenous past is lost. *No Sugar*, set in the 1930s, depicts Aboriginal people being forced onto reserves. It was first performed at the Perth Festival in 1985 on open ground with the audience moving among the actors as they performed the forced removal of the Aboriginal community. Davis subsequently wrote *Barungin*, which was combined with *The Dreamers* and *No Sugar* to become a trilogy of plays performed together over two nights in Melbourne in May 1988. Entitled the First Born Trilogy, the staging of this trilogy was a major watershed, not just in Indigenous theatre, but in Australian drama.

One the first of the female Indigenous writers to emerge was Sally Morgan, whose play *Sistergirl* toured throughout Australia. The play deals with dying, and the relationship between an old black woman and a decaying Irishwoman who share a hospital ward for alcoholics.

Richard Walley's 1987 play *Coordah* portrays urban Aborigines, or Nyoongars, in conflict with alcohol and the law. Roger Bennett's play about his father's life as a boxer, *Up the Ladder*, first staged in 1990, was performed regularly during the 1990s. Bennett then wrote a musical, *Funerals and Circuses*, which was first performed at the Adelaide Festival in 1992. This musical play is concerned with the consequences of a mixed marriage in a country town and is a mixture of violence and comedy.

Indigenous plays of the 1970s and 1980s dealt with the very real issues of racism, discrimination and deprivation that were faced by Aboriginal people—issues that are still relevant today. Many of the Stolen Generations of children who were taken away from their parents in an attempt to assimilate them into white society are still alive today, and the consequences of those government policies continue to affect their descendants. Discrimination, poor health, land rights and unemployment remain significant issues affecting many Aborigines, or First Nation People.

Whilst most Indigenous plays dealt with hardship, misery, poverty, discrimination and even death, they were not relentlessly grim or tragic. The Indigenous Australian playwrights who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s used humour extensively in their works; the humour balances the seriousness of their plays and actually increases their impact. The humour seen in many of the plays is not contrived comedy, but is distinctively Indigenous, deriving from the performance traditions and skills of Aborigines, particularly mime and impersonation.

Bran Nue Dae

The use of humour is particularly evident in *Bran Nue Dae*. This was the first Indigenous musical, and by far the most famous and successful. First staged in 1990, the musical is set in Broome, Western Australia and tells the story of Willie, a 15-year-old Indigenous boy who is sent away to school in Perth but returns to his spiritual home and his girlfriend in Broome. The play confronts a number of serious Indigenous issues but does so with humour and fantasy. It was written by Jimmy Chi and his band Kuckles. The musical won a number of major awards and was staged throughout Australia.

Bran Nue Dae was made into a film in 2010 and earned more than $7 million at the box office in Australia, making it one of our most successful Australian films of all time.

A scene from the film adaptation of *Bran Nue Dae*

Like *Bran Nue Dae*, the Indigenous plays of the 1990s focused increasingly on the emotional and spiritual life of their characters. A number of these plays were created and performed by Indigenous women, heralding a new era of Indigenous theatre. Eva Johnson's monodrama *What Do They Call Me?* is about three women whose lives have been shaped by the consequences of the Stolen Generations. Another 1990s monodrama, Ningali Lawford's *Ningali*, tells the story of the playwright's search for identity. These women, more than the male playwrights, have used performance to focus upon the healing process.

The 7 Stages of Grieving has been performed internationally and continues to be staged around Australia. In 2010 Lisa Flanagan played the lead role in a State Theatre Company of South Australia production of the play that also toured interstate.

The 7 Stages of Grieving

An extraordinary and compelling play in this new form of Indigenous monodrama was *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, created by Deborah Mailman and Wesley Enoch, then director of the Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts Company theatre company in Brisbane. First performed by Deborah Mailman in 1993, this play was the most innovative in structure of Indigenous plays up until that time, using free verse, film images, a variety of storytelling forms and powerful symbolism.

Lisa Flanagan in *The 7 Stages of Grieving*

Up the Road

An interesting development in Indigenous theatre came with John Harding's play *Up the Road*, first staged in 1991 and further developed by director Neil Armfield at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre in 1997. For the first time in an Indigenous play the protagonist is a successful middle-class Aborigine. When the character, Ian Sampson, returns to his home town after a decade for a family funeral, he is confronted by family issues, the consequences of his actions as a Canberra bureaucrat and the reality of his own Aboriginality.

Box the Pony

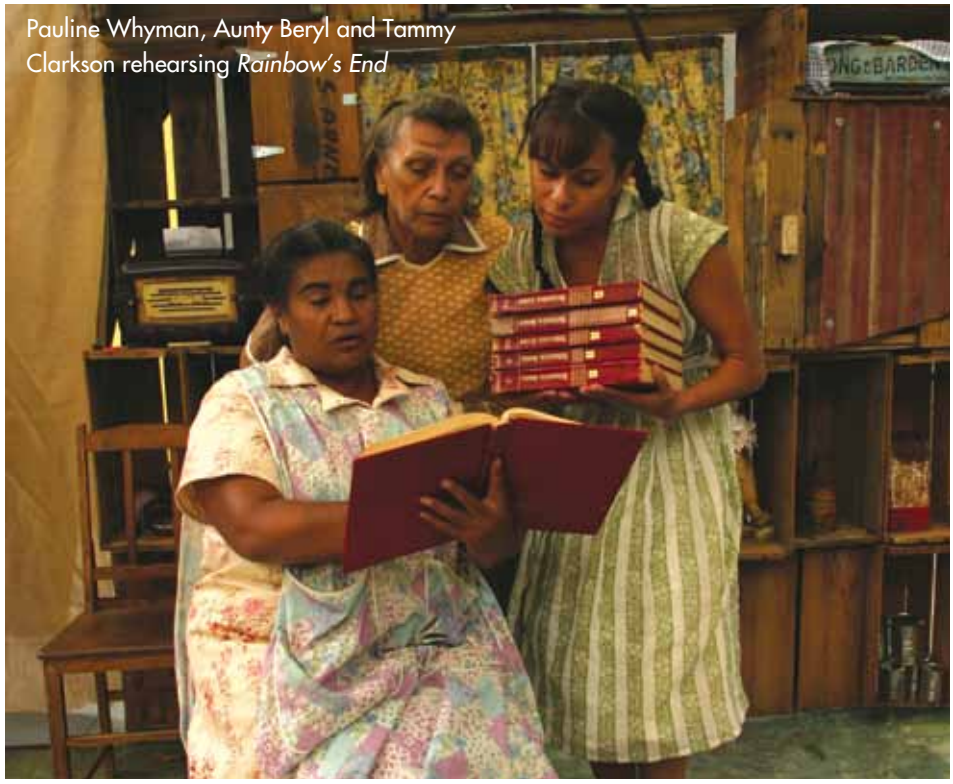
Another extraordinary monodrama created and performed by an Indigenous actor is *Box the Pony* by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin. Although this play was first staged in 1997 at the Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney, its reputation and success continues to grow here and overseas, so that it has become one of the most important Australian plays of the new millennium. *Box the Pony* is the apparently simple story of Leah Purcell's own life as told by her. It is a powerful and moving account of an Aboriginal woman's triumph over her personal past and the past of her people. This means it is also the story of Indigenous dispossession, despair and survival. It uses traditional Aboriginal storytelling, but in exciting new ways, blending songs, transformational theatre and multiple roles. An extract from *Box the Pony* appears on page 246.

Stolen

One of the most powerful Indigenous plays dealing with the Stolen Generations is Jane Harrison's *Stolen*. In 1992, the Ilbijerri Theatre Company commissioned Harrison to write a play about the lives of five Aboriginal people from the Stolen Generations. *Stolen* premiered at the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne in 1998, and has been staged throughout Australia and in the UK, Hong Kong and Tokyo. The play tells the stories of five young Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their parents and placed in institutions where they were trained as domestic servants and for other menial jobs.

Jane Harrison's play *Rainbow's End* tells the story of three generations of Aboriginal women who live in a shack in 1950s regional Victoria. The play celebrates their courage and determination in keeping their families together and raising their children.

21.3 INDIGENOUS PLAYWRIGHTS



Pauline Whyman, Aunty Beryl and Tammy Clarkson rehearsing *Rainbow's End*

INTERCULTURAL

Jane Harrison's *Rainbow's End* and David Milroy's *Windmill Baby* have both toured to Japan.

Jane Harrison

Jane Harrison was born in New South Wales in 1960. Her first play was *Stolen*, which was commissioned by the Ilbijerri Theatre Company in 1992. After writing *Stolen*, Jane wrote *On a Park Bench* and *Rainbow's End (Rumbalara)*. In 2006 Jane won the Theatrelab Indigenous Award for *Blackvelvet*.

Jimmy Chi

Born in Broome in 1948, Jimmy Chi, along with his band Kuckles, is best known for the stage musical *Bran Nue Dae*, which was first performed in 1990 and won the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award in the same year. In 1991 the play won the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Drama Award. When the film version of the play premiered at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009, it won the Audience Award for Best Film. The success of the musical has been credited with being influential in the creation of the Black Swan Theatre Company and in promoting the careers of Indigenous actors Ernie Dingo and Leah Purcell.

The cast of the film version of *Bran Nue Dae* (left to right, front to back) Rocky McKenzie, Missy Higgins, Jessica Mauboy, Dan Sultan and Ernie Dingo

Richard Frankland

Richard Frankland was born in south-west Victoria in 1963. Frankland has worked in film and theatre and was the first Indigenous director to win an Australian Film Industry Award for *No Way to Forget*. The film *Harry's War* (1999) was based on the true story of Frankland's uncle, who was a soldier on the Kokoda Trail in the Second World War.

Frankland has written two stage plays, *Conversations with the Dead* (2002), which was staged at the United Nations in 2004, and *Walkabout* (2005).

No one knows how many thousands of Aboriginal children were taken from their parents and put in homes and institutions during the time the policy operated between 1814 and 1969. Very few records were kept, and many that did exist were destroyed.

Stone Bros., directed by Richard Frankland, premiered in 2009 at the Dungog Film Festival in New South Wales. Left to right: Valentino del Toro, Leon Burchill and Luke Carroll


Dallas Winmar

Dallas Winmar

Dallas Winmar is a Western Australian writer. Her first play, *Skin Deep*, staged in 2000, explores the lives and experiences of two women, one called 'black' the other called 'white'. The play was commissioned by the Kooemba Jdarra company for their 2000 program.

Winmar was then commissioned by Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre in 2000 to write *Aliwa*, which was jointly awarded the Kate Challis RAKA Award in 2002 (together with Jane Harrison's *Stolen*). *Aliwa* tells the story of a family who battle the authorities' attempts to split them up and relocate the children to government settlements. *Yibiyung*, Winmar's third play, follows her quest to discover the truth about her grandmother, who was part of the Stolen Generations.

David Milroy

David Milroy was born in Perth, Western Australia, and was Artistic Director of Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre. His writing includes *King Hit*, *Runumuk*, *Windmill Baby* and *Waltzing the Wilarra*. *King Hit* was written in 1997 with the boxer Geoffrey Narkle, and tells the story of Narkle's life as a fighter and his battle to overcome the exploitation, alcoholism and despair that threatened to destroy him.


David Milroy and Ningali Lawford

Milroy was also musical director for *Sistergirl* and *Dead Heart* for the Black Swan Theatre, and for the Perth Theatre Company's production of *Wild Cat Falling*. He co-wrote and directed Sally Morgan's hit play *Cruel Wild Woman* and Barking Gecko's production of *Own Worst Enemy* for the Festival of Perth. His play *Windmill Baby* won a number of awards, including the 2007 Kate Challis RAKA Award for Indigenous Playwrights and the Patrick White Award. The play is a poetic and humorous story set on an abandoned cattle station in the Kimberley region.

The following extract is adapted from a speech given by David Milroy at the 2011 Drama Australia National Conference.

"I used to wonder why playwright was spelt W-R-I-G-H-T. Then I realised I spend more time musing, sleeping, dreaming and angsting than I do writing. I also spend more time arguing with directors and debating with dramaturges than I do writing. So it's spelt W-R-I-G-H-T because a play is wrought. Just like a piece of wrought iron. Heated, hit with a hammer and bent into shape. Unfortunately, most plays don't last as long as a piece of wrought iron and sometimes at the end it's the writer who feels they've been heated, hit with a hammer and bent into shape.

So how did I become a wroughter of plays? My entry into theatre was serendipitous. That wonderful word that no one seems to really know what it means. I was certain my entrance into the theatre world was serendipitous.

Music was my first love and had come about because of a serendipitous moment in my early life. My mother became the cleaner at my school. So after school I would help her sweep the verandas, empty the bins and on one such day while looking for the bin in the teachers staffroom, I came across the school piano. Once all the teachers were gone I'd sit in the staffroom playing the piano and nicking the odd biscuit. I'd put my foot on the sustain pedal and play on all the white keys. Through that piano I discovered what it was like to be a silver bear sliding down a moonbeam with stardust

in my fur. Music was something that could take me anywhere. The emotions I felt and the journeys I went on would stay with me for life. I took to the recorder with a passion—finally I'd found something at school that I was interested in.

During high school I began playing in bands and I continued to do this. Playing in bands showed me a side of life that many people would never get to experience or see. Fremantle pre–Americas Cup was no bed of roses. At the time I was playing up to seven gigs a week at Cleo's Hotel, which was the Aboriginal hotel at the time. I made many friendships in these early days that I still have now. Those times would influence the plays and themes I would write about in the future. It would be hard to describe some of the brutal and racist acts by police on Aboriginal people in those days.

In the early eighties my first wife gave me an ultimatum which I'm sure a lot of long-suffering muso wives have given in the past. Give up the band or give up the marriage. To keep my marriage afloat, I switched from beer to port and joined the Wanneroo Folk Club and started writing my own songs. Many of the themes were about Aboriginal issues of stolen generations and the general plight of Aboriginal people. This was the early eighties, and many people were completely unaware of what had gone on in this state. The untold history. The folk club wasn't rock and roll, but it was sparking something deep inside of me. Instead of playing cover rock songs, I was writing my own. I could see the power of the song and lyrics, and though my marriage fell apart, times spent at the Waneroo Folk Club were very formative for me.

Around this time I joined up with other Aboriginal musicians to form AB Music—Mark Bin Bakar (alias Mary G) and Lesley Lee and Dave Chesson and other musos. There were very few venues for Aboriginal bands to play at, or for the community to gather. It was a struggle against the powers that be, but we were able to work our way around the racist attitudes of the time to hire halls and get liquor licenses. The money we made we put back into AB Music and paid the bands. I was also the first coordinator of Dumbartung Aboriginal Artists Advisory and with Geoff Narkle, who was the chairperson, we were able to start up the Prisoners Art Fund and do a lot of good things for the community.

The eighties was a good time for Aboriginal arts. There was a softening of attitudes towards Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal art was being recognised all over the world. Geoff Narkle was a big influence on my life and did a lot great things in the arts to help people. He used to be a tent-show boxer, and in the Freo days I'd be playing while he'd be fighting. He became a pastor and I became a playwright. Both theatrical in their own way.

In the late eighties I was trying my hand at different forms of music. This included some small scores for community videos. Black Swan [WA's state theatre company] asked me to do some music for a play called *Sistergirl*, which my sister Sally [Morgan] had written. She'd suggested that they use me. Nothing like a bit of serendipitous nepotism. I got the job then went into a panic attack. I knew absolutely nothing about theatre, let alone theatre music. So I rushed off to see a theatre show to see what it was all about. I bought a ticket to a PTC [Perth Theatre Company] show called *Woman in Mind* with Faith Bandler as the main actor. Faith was fantastic but I left the theatre none the wiser. I just didn't get it. I bluffed my way through *Sistergirl* and then got work with PTC doing music for *Wildcat Falling* and then after that *Dead Heart* for Black Swan. Somehow once again, through attrition, I was being blooded into theatre.

In the early nineties, Yirra Yaakin Youth Theatre had just started doing workshops for Aboriginal kids in outlying suburbs and got me to run a couple of musical workshops. Paul MacPhail was running the company and asked me if I'd like to do music for a play called *Wicked* by Michael Smith. I accepted and into the last week of rehearsal serendipity struck once again.

One of the lead actors who was working for Yirra Yaakin at the time won Lotto—over a million dollars. He decided he'd rather go on a spending spree than go on tour through the Pilbara. In absolute desperation, Paul asked me if I could act, to which I promptly replied 'No'. He told me it paid better than music so I promptly replied 'Yes' ...

So off on tour I went as an actor. On that tour I learnt a couple of big lessons. The first was that I couldn't act, and the second was the power of theatre in telling Aboriginal stories. I'd tried it through song, but here was a form that was really cutting through on lots of levels with both the white and Aboriginal community.

After the tour, Paul offered me a job at Yirra Yaakin and with Lynette Narkle we decided to become a theatre company doing main stage works. Paul said, 'That's great, but who's gonna write the plays?' That was something we hadn't really thought about, so just like how I became a lead guitarist, it was decided I'd write some plays and so would Lynette.

Our ambition was to have an Aboriginal theatre company that had works by Aboriginal writers. We felt many plays that purported to be Aboriginal theatre only had Aboriginal actors on stage and the rest were white people doing the writing, production, directing etc. Paul's next pragmatic question was, 'What are you going to write about?' I said I'd like to write about my mate Geoff, who was a tent-show boxer. This play became *King Hit*. Lyn wanted to do a play about her family. This became *Aliwa*. I did another show about being on tour in an Aboriginal band. And this was Yirra Yaakin's first main stage show, *Runumuk*.

I had no idea how to write a play or direct but we managed to pull it off. On opening night we had the media and ministers all waiting for the show to open. Little did they know the main actor hadn't turned up and I had wandered off down Wellington Street and was banging my head against the army surplus [shop] window. Lou Westbury found me and told me that the actor had turned up slightly intoxicated but he was there. Fortunately he was playing a drunk anyway, so it wasn't too noticeable. A lot of people got behind us after that show and supported the company.

The company learnt a lot in those early years. We struggled to find a home and to get Australia Council funding. We were a company that didn't fit the mould of what a theatre company should be. We confused the funding bodies. Our community was the source of our support and stories but this was difficult to explain to funding bodies. We were told to apply to the Community Cultural Development Fund or the Aboriginal Arts Board, but the Theatre Board seemed to be a no-go zone. In time, that changed and I believe funding bodies started to understand that Aboriginal theatre needed to be looked at in the much broader context of community and protocols. Even with shifts in attitudes, many Indigenous theatre companies still struggle to get funding.

I have been fortunate to have some of my plays published and to tour. One play in particular is *Windmill Baby*, which has toured to many places around the world. Last year I saw the second season of *Windmill Baby* in Tokyo. It was translated into Japanese and they had a Japanese actor playing the lead role. When I wrote the play, I never imagined that this would be possible. I now realise that there are some universal themes to do with humanity in the play that all cultures could identify with. It's the story that counts, not the setting or even the language.

Aboriginal theatre has been an amazing vehicle for telling our stories and history. But there is a responsibility you have to a community or a family in telling that story. This is not something I take lightly. Writers may sometimes write plays about a community that they do not belong to and sometimes they get it right and sometimes they don't. The difference is when you are writing for a community you live in, then you can't just shrug your shoulders and walk away. Getting it right is very important because you are not just representing yourself as an artist but also the aspirations of a community.

I feel I am still developing as a writer. I have what I call my 'bag of tricks', which I am constantly adding to. It could best be described as the craft side of writing. Often a dramaturge will explain to me what I am doing instinctively rather than from an understanding of the craft of what I'm doing. Once I understand it, it goes from the instinct bag into my bag of tricks. I find dramaturges are an essential part of my writing process. The more brutal, the better ... In developing my latest work, I owe a lot to my dramaturge Sally Richardson for teasing out what I wanted to say. It's very easy to get lost in a work. ”

David Milroy, keynote address, 2011 Drama Australia National Conference.

Leah Purcell

"I believe very strongly in Aboriginal spirituality. I believe in my ancestors and I believe that they have given me my ability to be a storyteller, a song woman, a performer."

Leah Purcell, 'Queen Leah', *Australian Story*, ABC Television, June 2002.

Leah Purcell is an actor, playwright, director and musician as well as the artistic director of the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts. As a stage actor, her first role was in *Bran Nue Dae* in 1993. In 1995, Leah became a host on the pay TV RED Music channel, followed by a television acting role on *Police Rescue*.

In 1997, Leah wrote and performed in *Box the Pony* following a successful stage and film career including performances in *The Marriage of Figaro*, *King Lear* and *Nowhere* (on stage) and *Lantana* and *The Proposition* (film).

In 2005, Leah returned to writing and was short-listed for the NSW Film and Television Office's New Feature Film Writers Scheme. Her film, which is about netball, is in development.

In 2008, Leah won a Helpmann Award for her performance in Wesley Enoch's play *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table*.


Leah Purcell

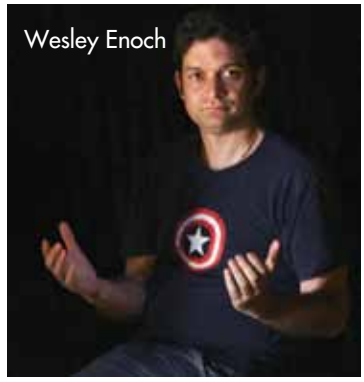
"With my story, 'Box the Pony', I never, ever wanted it to be the therapy ... the therapy lesson that sort of happens when you do write your own one-person show. But of course, when you go through and you have to write about issues, you sort yourself out."

Leah Purcell, 'Queen Leah', *Australian Story*, ABC Television, June 2002.

A timeline of *Box the Pony*

Year	Event
1997	Leah Purcell co-writes *Box the Pony* with Scott Rankin.
	Box the Pony is performed at the Festival of the Dreaming.
	Box the Pony is performed at Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney.
	Box the Pony is performed at the Sydney Opera House.
1999	The text wins the Play Award in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.
	Box the Pony is performed at the Edinburgh Festival.
2000	The text wins the Drama Script (Stage) Award in the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards.
	Box the Pony is performed at the Barbican Theatre, London, as part of BITE (Barbican International Theatre Events).
2001	Leah Purcell is nominated for the Helpmann Award for Best Female Actor in a Play for her performance in *Box the Pony*.

Wesley Enoch


Wesley Enoch

Wesley Enoch is the leading figure in contemporary Indigenous theatre. As a playwright, his works include *The Sunshine Club*, *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (with Deborah Mailman) and *Black Medea*. In addition, he has been artistic director of Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts, artistic director of the Ilbijerri Theatre Company, an associate artist with the Queensland Theatre Company and a resident director with the Sydney Theatre Company.

His play *Black Medea*, first staged at the Sydney Theatre Company in 2000, is based on Euripides' *Medea* but gives the original Greek tragedy an Aboriginal perspective and an Australian setting. A young Indigenous woman leaves her home in the desert, denies her culture and forgets her family to follow her wealthy lover living in the city. She finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage to a drunken husband. When she attempts to leave with their young son, her husband makes her promise that she will never take their child from the house.


Margaret Harvey and Aaron Petersen in *Black Medea*

The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table won the 2005 Patrick White Playwrights' Award. It premiered in Tokyo in 2006 and the following year was produced by Sydney's Griffin Theatre Company and Hothouse Theatre Company. The play is a celebration of four generations of one family and their survival as Indigenous Australians, just as the table in the play survives through the years. Although the play addresses the past of dispossession and the Stolen Generations, it also looks to the future with confidence and some optimism. Another major work directed by Enoch is *RiverlanD*, the story of Indigenous artist Ian Abdulla, written by Scott Rankin. It interweaves the flooding of the Murray River in 1956 with the lives of a contemporary urban Indigenous family. The production celebrates the recreation of the human spirit and a family's sense of place in the land. *RiverlanD* draws its inspiration from the artwork of Abdulla, whose paintings depict the Murray River and his childhood memories of growing up along its banks. In 2010 Wesley Enoch became the Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, the first Indigenous head of a state theatre company in Australia.

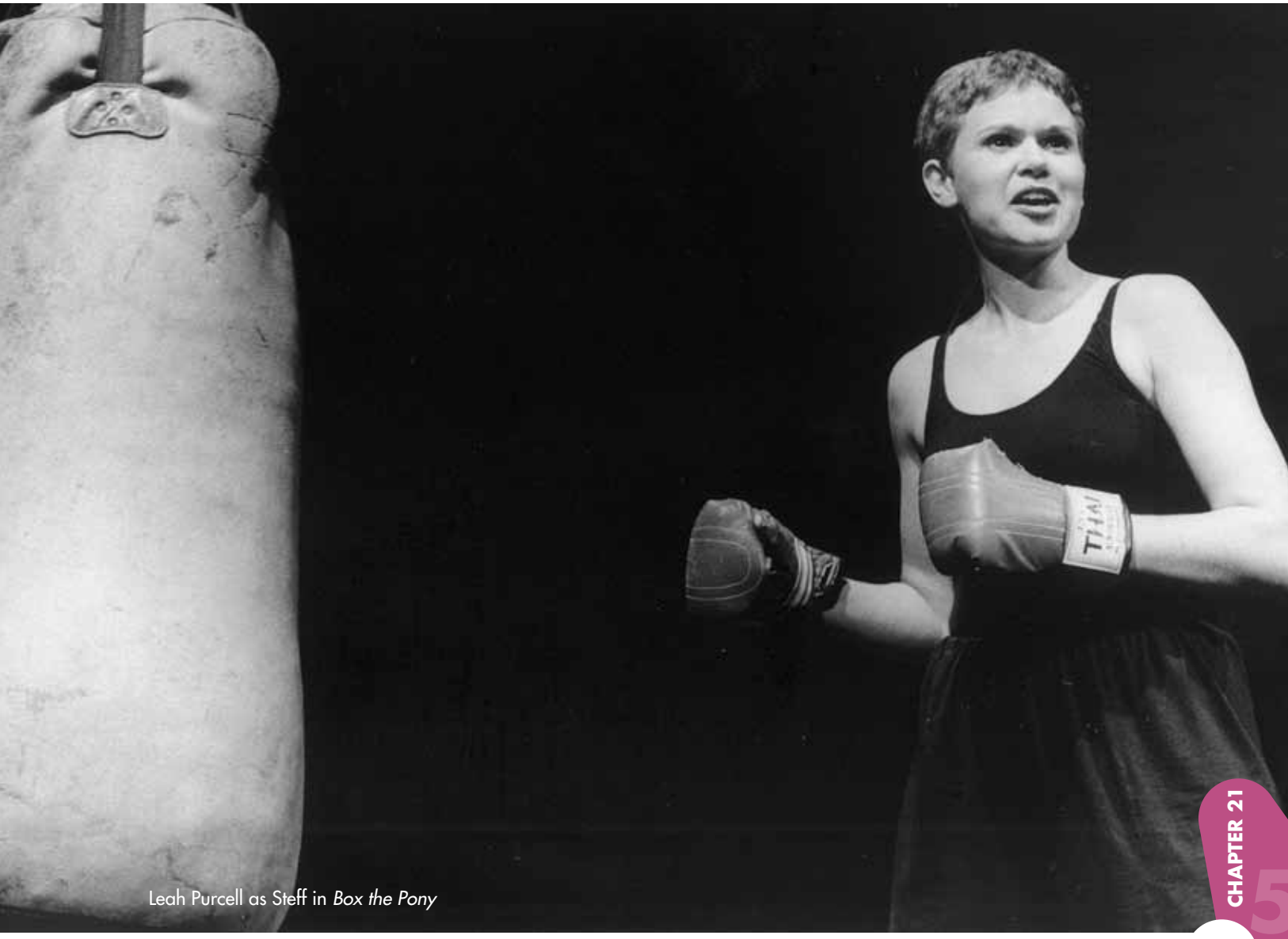
Indigenous Australian theatre is a unique and profound part of our theatre heritage and the contemporary scene, and continues to make an invaluable contribution to the performing arts, to our culture and to our understanding of our society and ourselves.

Box the Pony

by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin

In performance, Leah Purcell is mesmerising, narrating her own story, then telling us the story of Steff, a girl she says she knew but who may well be Leah herself as a girl. As she tells both stories, Leah takes on all the roles, using simple objects including dresses and hats to transform into the different characters. The result is a stunning theatrical encounter that gives us a profound insight into the experience of growing up female and black in rural Australia. The play is, in the deepest sense, about reconciliation between black and white, and between the past and the present.

In the following scene, Steff's boyfriend beats her savagely while her daughter, Jess, crouches in the hall watching. Exactly the same thing happened to Steff and her mother when she was a child. In the scene, the punching bag that has hung on stage the entire time becomes the boyfriend, while the rug on the floor is transformed into Jess. Leah Purcell provides all the voices and performs all the roles.



Leah Purcell as Steff in *Box the Pony*

[The bag swings back and hits her, lifting her. The bag has become the BOYFRIEND. *STEFF holds herself in close to the bag. She is being punched by the* BOYFRIEND, *between each line.]*

BOYFRIEND **You being a smart bitch** *[punch]*, **big notin' your … self** *[punch]*, **little pretty bitch** *[punch]*, **pretty bitch** *[punch]*.

[The BOYFRIEND *hits her, knocks her to the ground. As he yells he tries to get to her face. She hides it from him, protecting herself.]*

BOYFRIEND **Give us your face … give us your face … I said give us your face … give us your face!**

[It dies down, he has obviously left. STEFF *lays there, and then slowly sits up. The bag is swinging menacingly nearby.]*

LEAH **There's a little girl in the hallway. She's crying. She thinks her mummy is dead.**

STEFF **Jess … ssshhh … Jess … Jess, come here bub.**

*[*STEFF *picks up rug as* JESS.*]*

Don't cry baby … have a story eh? Just you and me. We're bare back, riding out from the showgrounds through high grass, just you an' me, eh. Our pony is all lathered, hang on tight. Grass whipping our ankles.

Riding out under the grey old gum trees, bark hanging. Just you and me. Way out, we could lie down, flat on that grass the colour of mustard, under our big blue Queensland sky. And we can talk, eh. Say nothing. Just you an' me.

Jess, ssshhh. He's gone now. Oh Jess, Mummy's so tired. You're gonna have to help me, bub. Help me, Jess, please.

I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Do you forgive Mummy? It's happening all over again. Me and Mum. There's no way out.

*[*STEFF *lies down slowly, with sore ribs, with the rug.]*

Oh Jess, Mummy's tired, I'm so tired … Come on bub, put Mum to bed. Get in bed with Mum. Oh don't kick, Jess, that's Mama's ribs.

If we sleep, we die. Come on, bub, we gotta go. No more drinking.

*[*STEFF *looks up at the punching bag which is still swinging slowly, and cowers away.]*

LEAH **Steff packed her things in garbage bags while he was sleeping it off. She rolls the car down the drive, quiet. But there on the lawn are these blue cranes. They're there for her. 'Fly away, fly away, Bungabura, fly away.'**

Box the Pony by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin, Sceptre Press, Sydney, 1999.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WORKING WITH KEY AUSTRALIAN TEXTS

This chapter contains a selection of extracts from some of the most important Australian plays of the past fifty years. The extracts provide an insight into the unique flavour of each play, and offer you the opportunity to apply everything you have learned about drama in your studies to the performance of some significant texts.

The extracts are arranged in chronological order, beginning with a scene from *Morning Sacrifice* by Dymphna Cusack, one of the first important Australian plays by a female playwright. The plays that follow clearly show the development of Australian theatre decade by decade up to the present.

22.1 THE 1940s

Morning Sacrifice

by Dymphna Cusack

Dymphna Cusack was one of the most important Australian writers of the period around the Second World War, both as a playwright and as a novelist. She was a leading figure in the group of women playwrights who made a major contribution to Australian theatre in the first half of the twentieth century. *Morning Sacrifice* is one of her best plays, and has been republished and revived a number of times since its first performance in Western Australia in 1942.

A scene from Dymphna Cusack's *Morning Sacrifice,* produced in 1991 by the Melbourne Theatre Company

The action of *Morning Sacrifice* takes place in the staffroom of an all-girl high school in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. The action presents the daily routine of the teachers as they go about their work, but the play progressively reveals the personal clashes and viciousness that embroil all the women in a kind of petty warfare that is a warning of the world war to come.

In the following extract, the deputy headmistress, Miss Kingsbury, attempts to force the other teachers to submit their exam results by the next morning. When she meets opposition, she targets Sheila, the youngest and most vulnerable of the teachers. By the end of the play, Sheila is driven to commit suicide by Miss Kingsbury's relentless campaign of destruction, which is motivated by the latter's personal jealousy of the younger woman and her sexual repression, but also by the human desire to dominate and destroy others, which was about to provoke a world war.

[Miss Kingsbury enters, carrying a list. She raps quite unnecessarily on the desk to call their attention, then smiles enchantingly and deprecatingly at them. Miss Bates gallops to her with a chair, which she accepts graciously.]

Kingsbury I am sorry, ladies, to disturb your little chat; Miss Woods is unable to come over herself. I have some information she asked me to give you. The first is about exam results. She would like to have all the exam results in by tomorrow morning. Is there anyone who has not quite completed hers?

[Mrs Macneil and Sheila raise their hands.]

We shall forgive you, Mrs MacNeil. We know you have a good excuse. But what about Sheila?

[Sheila stands. She begins to speak … then stops.]

Sheila I …

Kingsbury *[sweetly and relentlessly]* Tomorrow morning, dear?

Sheila Yes, Miss Kingsbury.

Kingsbury Splendid.

[Gwyn scowls at Sheila as she sits down.]

Gwyn *[whispering to Sheila]* Tell her you can't do it, you little fool.

[Sheila shakes her head. Miss Kingsbury looks up at the whisper.]

Kingsbury Gwyn—dear!

Gwyn Sorry, Miss Kingsbury.

Kingsbury Miss Woods also wishes me to speak about the result sheets. She would like those in tomorrow, if possible.

[General consternation.]

Sole That is rather a rush, isn't it, Miss Kingsbury? People have been so busy with corrections … and now, the inspectors …

Kingsbury It will not affect you, will it, Miss Sole? You have no sheet to do, I think?

Sole No, fortunately—but …

Kingsbury Then perhaps someone more vitally concerned would give us her opinion. Miss Bates?

Bates Oh, yes, Miss Kingsbury, I can have mine done.

Kingsbury Thank you, Miss Bates. Miss Hammond?

Hammond Can't have mine done. Still waiting for Second Year results from Miss Ray.

Kingsbury Oh … I had forgotten. How many others are still waiting for results?

[All except Sheila, Miss Bates and Miss Sole raise their hands.]

KINGSBURY T'ch—dear me. Well, I have just to inform Miss Woods it cannot be done. Of course, it is not a matter of life and death—but—I did hope. Never mind. You will do your best, won't you, Sheila dear?

SHEILA *[murmuring almost inaudibly and her head sinks lower.]* Yes, Miss Kingsbury

[GWYN puts a hand over hers and squeezes it warmly.]

BATES *[whispering virtuously to MISS HAMMOND]* It is a shame to be held up like this.

Morning Sacrifice by Dymphna Cusack, Currency Press, Sydney, 1989.

22.2

THE 1950s

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

by Ray Lawler

As we saw earlier in this chapter, *'The Doll'* is the single most important play in Australia's theatrical history and one of the great plays of twentieth century world theatre.

In the following scene, which is the climax of the play, Roo tells Olive that after seventeen years, he is not going north to cut cane for the winter. He asks Olive to marry him but she refuses, accusing him of destroying her romantic dream of her man flying south with the sun to her each year like an eagle. The scene encapsulates all the great themes of the play. We have the bronzed Aussie hero revealed in reality as an ordinary man. In Olive we see how our dreams can sustain us in our daily lives, but also prevent us from growing and maturing. In the final clash between Roo and Olive, we witness the terrible gulf in communication and understanding that can occur between men and women.

Emma Harris as Olive and Blair Cutting as Roo in a New Theatre production in 2009

OLIVE This is where I collect, ain't it? In cold hard cash, Roo— seventeen years—what are they worth?

ROO *[incensed]* Will you stop your bitching long enough for me to tell you somethin'? Barney's the one that's going Monday, not me. I'm staying right here.

[This quietens her, and he continues with disgust.]

Talkin' money that way. It's rotten!

OLIVE I forgot. You're the sort that likes to leave it on the mantelpiece under the clock, aren't you?

ROO *[shocked and restrained]* Now look, Olive, that's enough. I know you've 'ad a bad spin and I know you're all on edge, but we've never been as low and cheap as that, ever.

OLIVE Well, we are now. Low and cheap's just how I feel.

ROO Because of me?

OLIVE You, Barney, the whole damned season. Even Pearl, the way she looked at me this mornin' when she told me I—I didn't know what livin' was.

ROO That's a fine thing to let worry you, the way Pearl looks.

OLIVE You didn't see her. And it's more than looking—*[this is difficult for her to say]* it's havin' another woman walking around knowin' your inside and sorry for you 'coz she thinks you've never been within cooee of the real thing. That's what hurts.

[Her control gives way and she starts to cry. At first she tries to dam the tears, which results in a choked whisper.]

ROO *[with infinite love and pity]* Oh, hon.

[He moves towards her. The floodgates are opened.]

OLIVE It was all true, everythin' I told her was true, an'—an' she didn't see any of it.

ROO Hon, don't cry now, you couldn't help it.

OLIVE B-but if she could have seen just a little bit, so she'd know.

ROO Maybe she did.

OLIVE *[breaking from him and collapsing into an armchair]* No, no she didn't. It was all different.

[She bursts into hopeless sobs.]

ROO *[awkwardly sitting on the edge of the chair]* Well, that old Pearlie, she couldn't tell anyway, this isn't her cup of tea. Stop your crying now. *[Putting his arms around her.]* We'll just forget that she ever came here.

OLIVE Y-yes.

[She lies against him for a moment and he kisses her hair. Then she struggles up, sniffing.]

I—I ought to have a hankie somewhere.

[She fishes about and finds one in her sleeve, blows her nose sensibly and dabs her eyes.]

ROO *[in teasing warmth]* I never knew any cryin' woman looks worse than you do.

OLIVE It's coz I cry so—so hard.

[She gulps and dabs at her eyes again before speaking repentantly.]

Roo … ?

ROO What?

OLIVE Those butterflies, they—they did fall to pieces when I touched them.

ROO I believe you.

OLIVE But the dolls, I could've put them back. Only I was mad at you, and I wouldn't.

ROO Doesn't matter.

OLIVE Yes, it does. I'll do it after. And—and I might be able to get the birds fixed up a bit.

ROO *[softly]* Y'know, a man's a fool to treat you as a woman. You're nothin' but a little girl about twelve years old.

OLIVE T-try telling that to the mob on a Saturday night.

ROO 'S true, just the same. *[They kiss gently.]* Have you really got to go to the pub today?

OLIVE Yes, I ought to.

ROO *[rising]* Take the day off, and we'll go for a picnic, just the two of us.

OLIVE I'd like to, but there's Pearl away already and I said I'd sling a line to Clintie for her. I just know what I must look like. *[She goes to her bag at the mantelpiece. As she fumbles with the catch she speaks more brightly.]* Why don't you and Barney come down for the afternoon?

ROO He's going to the races with the boys.

OLIVE Oh. *[Inspecting the damage in her purse-flap mirror]* Talk about the wreck of the *Hesperus*. *[Fishing for cosmetics]* Is it the boys he's nicking off with on Monday?

ROO Yeah. Up the Murray for the grapes.

OLIVE *[diverted from her search for a moment]* It'll be funny without Barney around. Can't you get him to stay?

ROO *[negatively]* He won't take a job in the city.

OLIVE Well, I don't blame him for that.

[ROO reacts stiffly. Moving slowly towards him, she enquires somewhat nervously:]

Would you like to—to go up the Murray with him?

ROO No.

OLIVE *[not looking at him]* 'Coz if you would—I mean, I wouldn't mind it for just this once.

ROO Are you tryin' to get rid of me?

OLIVE No, but other times you've always left together; it doesn't seem right.

ROO Olive, I'm staying here with you.

OLIVE *[staring at him now]* Well—how will you meet up together for the season?

ROO Say we don't? Barney'll get along, he doesn't need me any more, he knows plenty of fellers. And this young Dowd, it looks like they're gonna team up together.

OLIVE But you, Roo—what'll happen to you?

ROO Nothin'. I'm not goin' back, Olive. Not for this season or—or any other. *[Moving in to take her stiffened, bewildered body into his arms]* Let me get rid of this for a moment ...*[He takes the handbag from her unresisting fingers and drops it aside on the table.]*

OLIVE *[almost whispering]* You're not going back?

ROO *[tenderly]* Look, I know this is seventeen years too late, and what I'm offering is not much chop, but—I want to marry you, Ol.
[There is a moment of frozen horror and then she pushes herself away from him, almost screaming with quivering intensity.]

OLIVE No!

ROO Olive ...

OLIVE You can't get out of it like that—I won't let you ...

ROO *[appalled]* Olive, what the hell's wrong?

OLIVE You've got to go back. It's the only hope we've got.

ROO Stop that screamin', will yer ...?

OLIVE You think I'll let it all end up in marriage—every day—a paint factory—you think I'll marry you?

ROO *[grabbing her and shouting back]* What else can we do? You gone mad or something? First you tell me I've made you low, and now look—you dunno what you want!

OLIVE *[breaking away, possessed]* I do—I want what I had before. *[Rushing at him and pummelling his chest.]* You give it back to me—give me back what you've taken.

ROO *[grabbing her wrists and holding them tight]* Olive, it's gone—can't you understand? Every last little scrap of it—gone!
[He throws her away from him, and she falls to the floor grief-stricken, almost an animal in her sense of loss.]

OLIVE I won't let you. I'll kill you first!

ROO *[lashing at her, hurting himself at the same time]* **Kill me, then. But there's no more flyin' down out of the sun—no more eagles.** *[Going down on one knee beside her and striking the floor with his hand]* **This is the dust we're in and we're gunna walk through it like everyone else for the rest of our lives!**

[She gives a rasping cry and doubles over herself on the floor as if cradling an awful inner pain. ROO kneels watching her, his breath coming in gasps.]

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll by Ray Lawler in *The Doll Trilogy*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1989.

22.3 THE 1960s

The One Day of the Year

by Alan Seymour

First staged in 1960, this play caused a sensation with its representation of the drunkenness and disorderly conduct that accompanied the celebration of Anzac Day. At a deeper level, it challenged the celebration as a glorification of war. The play also anticipated the gulf which was to grow between parents and their children in the 1960s as a new teenage culture swept the world. The play was particularly significant because it was concerned with the uniquely Australian tradition of Anzac Day, but its social theme was the universal one of the generation gap between parents and children.

In the following scene, Hughie, his girlfriend Jan, his Mum and Wacka, a family friend and original digger from Gallipoli, have been watching Hughie's father in the Anzac Day march on television. Hughie and Jan plan to expose what they see as the hypocrisy of the whole Anzac legend by taking photographs of the drunkenness and bad behaviour that follows the march and publish the photos in their university magazine. The scene clearly shows the conflicting attitudes to Anzac Day and the gulf between the older and younger generations.

Max Cullen and Ron Haddrick in a Sydney Theatre Company production of *The One Day of the Year*, 2003

Wacka Get the walk, will ya? Get the walk on it!

Mum Cocky? Look at him!

[And suddenly they all burst into laughter. Just as suddenly Hughie's laughter stops. He looks at the picture, a battle of feelings inside him, and chokes up. Mum and Wacka don't see. Jan, still laughing, looks up at Hughie as he turns away quickly.]

Mum He's gone. *[She sits back.]*

Jan What is the matter, Hughie?

Hughie Right as rain. *[Covers up quickly.]* Gee, he looked an old idiot, didn't he?

Mum *[who has been laughing to herself, stops]* No, he didn't.

Hughie *[recovering]* Well, you were laughing.

Mum It was just the shock, seeing him, plain as day. I wasn't laughing *at* 'im.

Hughie Well, I was! *[But the feelings are still mixed.]* He looked such a big aleck, marching along as though he'd won both wars single-handed. It was—pathetic.

Jan Oh, they all are.

Mum *[huffily]* Turn it off, Wack.

Wacka Ay?

Mum Haven't y'seen enough?

Wacka *[looks from her to Jan, gets up reluctantly, goes to set]* Oh. Yeah, yes, Dot. It's all the same. *[He switches it off.]* Good seein' yr mates, but.

Mum It was very nice. Pity more people don't appreciate it.

Wacka Oh, they still get a good rollup. Well … *[He stands about uncomfortably.]*

Jan Are we going?

Hughie Suppose so. Do we still want to do this?

Jan I want to do it very much. Don't you?

Hughie *[slight hesitation. Nods.]* It's just not as easy for me as I'd thought. I'll get the camera. *[Moves away, turns suddenly to face her. She has turned to watch Mum and Wacka. He turns and goes to his room.]*

[A silence. Mum sits drumming her fingers on arm of couch. Wacka goes up to windows, pulls up blinds. He begins to whistle softly 'Take me back to dear old Blighty'. Jan watches him, smiles, relaxes.]

Jan Mr Dawson seems bright today.

Mum *[indignantly]* He is not. He 'asn't 'ad a drink.

Jan That's what I mean. The other night he had had a drink and he seemed very quiet.

Mum No one gets a look-in when Hughie's Dad's around.

JAN Mrs Cook … Hughie thought I was rude the other night. I was too. I'm sorry.

MUM *[embarrassed]* Hughie's dopey. It was all right. *[WACKA comes down.]* Hughie's friend reckons she likes you better sober.

JAN *[laughs]* I didn't say that, really. But this is your day, isn't it?

MUM Oh, don't start him on that, get enougha that from Alf.

JAN But isn't it? You *were* there. Do you still remember it, Mr Dawson?

WACKA *[nods shyly]* Yeah.

JAN *[prompting him]* What do you remember?

WACKA Not much. It was a long while ago. *[Silence again.]*

JAN Were you at the actual first landing? On this very day?

WACKA *[nods]* Yeah. Thought about it this morn'n'. Before sunup. Just about the time we started up them rocks.

MUM What was y'thinkin' then, love?

WACKA 'Ow do I know, it was years ago.

MUM No, I mean th's morn'n'.

WACKA Oh. *[To JAN]* I was standin' in that door lookin' at the sky, I was miles away, dreamin' about it. And I 'eard the Last Post. Dinkum, I thought they was comin' for me.

MUM Hughie had the service on on 'is wi'less.

JAN Hughie did? I thought he hated Anzac Day.

MUM Hughie? Hughie hate—? Why should he?

JAN Well, all it stands for. *[She looks at them as though they will understand. They don't.]*

MUM Such as what?

JAN The same old clichés in the newspapers year after year. All the public hoo-ha—it's so damned—

[MUM and WACKA exchange a look. She sees they are not with her, struggles to explain.]

I mean—I'm sorry—but—to us, to the people coming on, there's something quite—offensive in the way you all cling to it. Not Mr Dawson, it really happened to him, he knows what he feels today and why, it's not just because it's expected. But with so many people it's—

MUM It's what?

JAN *[shrugging]* Well, isn't it all rather phoney? *[HUGHIE is back.]*

HUGHIE Right? *[No one speaks. He looks around.]* What's up?

MUM It's on again. *[She looks at JAN with the old disapproval.] [HUGHIE crosses quickly, gets JAN to her feet.]*

HUGHIE Best we get going.

WACKA *[looking at the camera]* Going for a picnic?

HUGHIE What? No. *[Grimly]* A little job. A job I've been promising myself I'd do for years. *[To JAN]* But I'd feel happier if you weren't so—*[He stops.]* Come on.
[They start to go out.]

MUM *[calling after them]* What time'll you be home?

HUGHIE Expect me when you see me. Don't save tea.

JAN 'Bye.

MUM I wish someone in this house'd tell me occasionally where they're goin' and when they'll be back.

WACKA What's the job? What was he talkin' about?

MUM I don't know. What was *she* talkin' about?

WACKA *[shakes his head]* Didn't foller it. Didn't get a word. Never do when she starts.

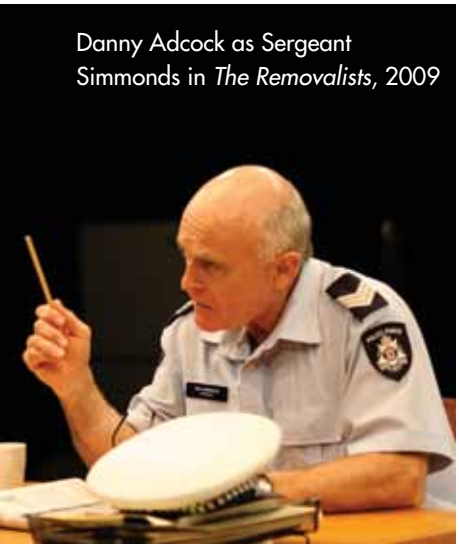
MUM Hughie's the same when he gets goin'.

WACKA Gawd, we must be gettin' old, Dot.

MUM *[grimly]* Either we're old—or they're terrible young.
[Lights fade.]

The One Day of the Year by Alan Seymour in *Three Australian Plays*, Penguin, 1963.

22.4 THE 1970s



Danny Adcock as Sergeant Simmonds in *The Removalists*, 2009

The Removalists

by David Williamson

We have already explored a piece of text from this play in chapter 1. First staged in 1970, the play established Williamson as Australia's leading playwright and is one of the most important pieces of Australian theatre ever written. It is distinctively Australian in its use of language and in its characters, and its portrayal of police brutality and corruption is savage and memorable. It was the next really outstanding Australian play to follow *'The Doll'*, and profoundly influenced playwriting in this country.

In the scene that follows, the climax of the play, Ross, the young constable, has just lost his temper and beaten a man called Kenny very badly. Kenny has complained of pain behind the eyes but appears to be recovering. The cynical, experienced Sergeant Simmonds is lecturing Ross about his temper as the scene begins.

Simmonds I think the first thing you've got to do, Ross, is to take stock of your weaknesses and face up to them. I think it's just as well we've discovered this flaw in temperament of yours at an early stage because now that we know about it we can be sure that we won't place you in a situation in which you'll lose control. At least, not until we know you've got it beaten.

[During Simmonds's speech Ross's eyes pass to Kenny and they fix in horror as he sees that Kenny is sitting bolt upright with a frozen look of terror and pain in his eyes. He has just suffered a massive and catastrophic cerebral haemorrhage as a result of his injuries. His can drops to the floor. Ross gets to him just as he topples off his chair, and lowers him to the floor. Ross and Simmonds are thrown into a state of panic akin to, but worse than, the previous one. Worse still because they enter it from the almost soporific sense of relief that Kenny's death has just shattered. For the rest of the play Ross is hysterical and Simmonds borders on this condition.]

Ross Jesus, Serg. He's dead. He's really dead this time. You can tell. Oh Jesus!

Simmonds You've done it now Ross. He's really dead. I didn't like the sound of it when he mentioned his eye. Pressure at the back of the eye is bad news, Ross. I thought we might've been in trouble.

Ross Why didn't you take him to the hospital then? Why didn't you take him to the hospital if you knew that?

Simmonds They couldn't've done anything for him, Ross. Not a man who dies as quick as that. You must've hit him with a bloody pile driver. He's dead, Ross. There's no doubt about it. He's dead!

Ross I know he's dead! Look at the poor bastard's eyes. He was scared out of his mind. Look at his bloody eyes! We should've taken him straight to hospital, Serg!

Simmonds *[defensively]* They couldn't've done a thing for him. I can tell you that right now. Couldn't've done a thing! Not for someone who dies as quickly as that. He was either very bad or O.K., Ross, and if he's very bad then there's no sense taking him to hospital. Get into casualty with a body on your hands? I'm not crazy, Ross. I'm not callous but then again I'm not stupid and there's an important distinction there.

Ross Let's get a shotgun and make it look like suicide. Shoot his head off. Shoot out his bloody eyes.

Simmonds For Christ's sake, Ross. Don't start that again. You're going to have to face the consequences, I'm afraid. You're going to have to face the consequences.

Ross You've got to help me, Serg! I'm no killer. I didn't join the force to kill. *[Ross pleads, grabbing Simmonds by the collar.]* For Christ's sake, Serg! You've got to help me!

Simmonds *[backing away]* I'm not helping anybody, boy. You did it!

Ross *[pleading, hysterical]* You're in it too Serg! You're in it too! You let him die.

Simmonds *[shouting]* **He would've died in any case!**

Ross *[advancing on Simmonds and pleading]* **You're in it too Serg! You've got to help me!**

Simmonds *[hysterical too]* **I've got nothing to do with it!** *[He pushes Ross away vigorously.]* **I've got nothing to do with it!**

[Ross stands there, momentarily calmed by Simmonds's violence. Suddenly he runs up to Simmonds and hits him.]

Ross *[hysterical]* **Sorry Serg, but you're in it too!**

Simmonds **You mad bastard! What do you bloody think you're doing?**

Ross *[hitting him again]* **If we both get smashed up it'll look like Kenny went berserk!**

Simmonds *[trying to get away]* **You bastard Ross! You cowardly bastard. You'll get a stinking report from me. Mark my words!**

Ross *[hysterical]* **Hit me back, Serg! Hit me back! We'll get off! Kenny went mad and beat us both to a pulp. Hit me where it bruises. Go on Serg! You know how to bruise a man! Go on!**

[Ross advances on Simmonds, attacking him viciously. Simmonds fights back. As the play closes, the fight almost takes on the air of a frenzied ritual of exorcism.]

[End.]

The Removalists by David Williamson, Currency Press, Sydney, 1972.

22.5 THE 1980s

No Sugar

by Jack Davis

No Sugar was first produced in 1985 in Perth for the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. This powerful Australian play exposes the racist nature of white Australians and the ways in which Indigenous Australians were marginalised in Australian society. The play is set in the Great Depression, highlighting the growing inequity between white and Indigenous Australians in relation to power and equality.

The opening scene of Act 1 is set in Northam at the Government Well Aboriginal reserve. In the scene we are introduced to Jimmy Munday, the protagonist, and the Millimurra family.

[Government Well Aboriginal Reserve, Northam, morning, 1929. Sam Millimurra prepares mugs of tea, lacing them generously with sugar. He passes one to Joe who is absorbed in the special centenary edition of the Western Mail*. Gran and Milly sort clothes for washing. David and Cissie play cricket with a home-made bat and ball. Jimmy sharpens an axe, bush fashion.]*

David **Bowl overarm!**

Cissie **I can't.**

David **Well, try.**

[She does, clumsily. Joe bashes the paper into shape and reads aloud falteringly, His father, Sam, listens with great interest.]

Joe **'The—blood—was stirred … as if by a trumpet … by the histor-ical …**

[Cissie bowls again. David bashes the ball out of sight.]

David *Woolah!* **Don Bradman.**

[David and Cissie scamper after the ball.]

Joe **'… Headed by a tab-leau…**

Milly **David, where you goin'? Gimme that shirt, it's filthy.**

[David removes it and inspects it but continues after the ball. He and Cissie exit.]

Joe **'… Commemorating the pioneers whose lives …**

Gran *[To Jimmy]* **James, you put that bucket a' water on?**

Jimmy **Yeah, Mum, boilin' and waitin' for you by now.**

Joe **… 'Were a steadfast performance of duty in the face of difficulty and danger. With them was a reminder of the dangers they faced, in the shape of three lorries … carrying Aborigines.**

[They all stop what they are doing and listen.]

… Aborigines, incong … incongruously …

Sam **Come on.**

Joe **All right! '… Dancing … to a brass-band'**

[Sam laughs.]

Sam ***Koorawoorung*! Nyoongahs corroboreein' to a *wetjala's* brass band!**

Jimmy **Ah! That beats everything': stupid bloody blackfellas.**

Gran **Ay! You … *dawarra* you *mirri* up and get them clothes down the soak, go on!**

[Jimmy gets up, but can't resist a final word.]

Jimmy **You fellas, you know why the *wetjalas* marchin' down the street, eh? I'll tell youse why. 'Cause them bastards took our country and them blackfellas dancin' for 'em. *Bastards*!**

[He nicks his finger with the axe and watches the blood drip to the ground. Gran gives him a piece of cloth for it.]

Milly Don't worry, if you woulda been there you woulda been right with 'em.

Jimmy No bloody fear I wouldn't have.

[He drives the axe savagely into a log.]

Gran Eh! Now you take them clothes down to the soak, you 'ear me?

(Jimmy reluctantly obeys, David and Cissie return with the bat but no ball. David wears his shirt inside out.)

David You're the fielder; you're supposed to chase it.

Cissie Well, you shouldn't hit it so hard.

David Yeah, well it's lost now.

Milly Come on, you two, get to school. *[Reaching into a pocket]* Here's twopence, you can buy an apple each for lunch.

[She gives it to them.]

David Aw, can't I have enough for a pie?

Milly It's all the money I got.

Cissie Aw mum, Old Tony the ding always sells us little shriveled ones and them *wetjala* kids big *fat* ones.

Joe Here's thrippence each.

[Joe flips them sixpence.]

David Aw, thanks, Brudge.

Milly Where's that shirt?

David *[tapping his chest]* 'Ere.

Milly Take it off.

David But it's clean on this side.

Milly Come 'ere.

[She tugs it off him and swaps it for a clean one]

And you go straight down to the soak after school. *[To Sam and Joe]* And you fellas, we got no meat for dinner or supper; you'll have to go out and get a couple of rabbits.

[Gran and Milly exit. Joe continues to read to himself.]

Sam Ba, ba, what else?

Joe 'The page … page … page-ant pre-sented a picture of Western Australia's pre-sent condition of hopeful optimum-optimis-tic prosperity, and gave some idea of what men mean when they talk about the soul of the nation.'

Sam Sounds like bullshit to me. Come on, let's get these rabbits.

[Joe springs to his feet and walks off. Dogs bark.]

Bring Ruffy and Moonie; don't bring Spring, he's too slow.

[Joe returns with a dowak. He picks up the camp oven.]

Joe ***Allewah wilbra, gunny barminy barkiny.***

[He mimes throwing the dowak at a rabbit and runs off after his father.]

---

woolah	**shout of praise**
koorawooroong	**an expression of disbelief**
wetjala	**white person, a corruption of the English 'white fellow'**
dawarra	**bad mouth**
allewah	**watch out**
wilbra	**rabbit**
gnuny	**me, I**
barminy	**strike**
barkiny	**bite**

No Sugar by Jack Davis, Currency Press, Sydney, 1986.

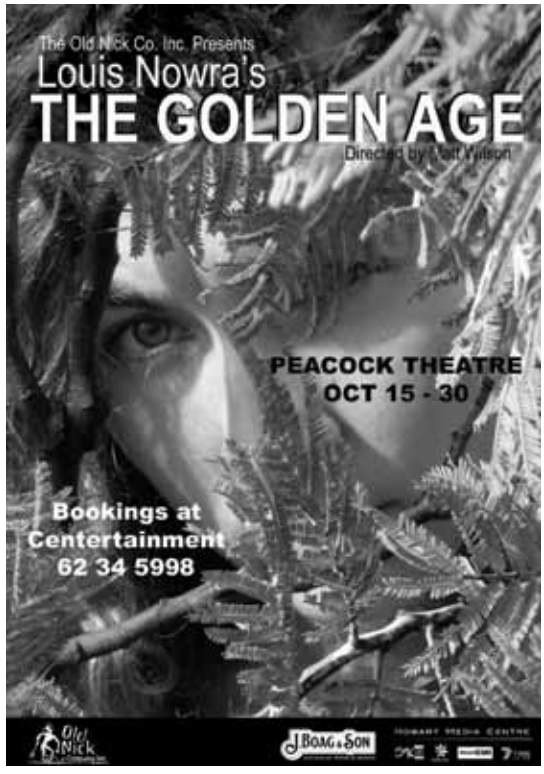
The Golden Age

by Louis Nowra

Louis Nowra's plays remain among the most popular works of Australian theatre and are regularly studied and performed. A number of his plays are light comedies, based on Nowra's own life and experiences. However, *The Golden Age*, first performed in 1985, is very different. It is a powerful, symbolic piece of theatre about the discovery of a lost colony of people in Tasmania. Generations of this colony have been living in total isolation for a century since emigrating from England. *The Golden Age* was one of the first, and most impressive, Australian gothic plays, and it remains a major work of theatre. The treatment of this lost colony is a powerful metaphor for the treatment of Indigenous Australians.

In the play, the people of the lost colony have developed their own language and culture based on the world of nineteenth century England. They are discovered in the year just before the Second World War and are taken back to modern civilisation, where they are unable to adapt. They are placed in an asylum and only one of them survives. In the play, the members of colony are regarded by almost everyone as primitive and even retarded, yet the 'civilised nations' in the play are busy fighting a world war in which millions of people will be slaughtered.

In the following scene, Francis, the young man who has just discovered the lost colony, is starting to fall in love with Betsheb, who later becomes the sole survivor of the colony and returns to the wilderness with Francis. In this early scene, the differences in language and experience between them make it impossible for them to communicate.



A poster from a production by the Peacock Theatre in Hobart. What does this image tell you about the play?

SCENE ELEVEN

[The bush, night. Betsheb sits alone on the ground and examines the contents of a rough cloth bag. Francis enters and watches her surreptitiously. She takes out and examines a watch, then a book and then a small compass; finally she takes out a large lizard. She stares at it intently and hisses at it, her tongue flicking in and out at it. She seems mightily intrigued by this reptile.]

Francis *[quietly]* **Betsheb.**

[Betsheb doesn't turn around. She seems to have already known Francis was nearby. She puts the lizard back in the cloth bag.]

Betsheb *[quietly, almost to herself]* **Francis.**

[He comes over and sits down beside her.]

Francis **I couldn't sleep.**

[Silence. Francis notices the objects.]

These are mine. *[Picking up the watch]* **A watch.** *[Winding it]* **It tells the time, tells us how old we're getting.**

[He holds it her ear.]

See? Can you hear it? 'Tick, tick, tick', like a heartbeat.

[He picks up the compass.]

Compass. See the arrow? *[Indicating]* **North is that way. Somewhere that way is Hobart.** *[Sardonically]* **Somewhere. And this … this is a book.**

[She nods as if she knows.]

The Structure of Single Span Bridges.

Betsheb **Book.**

Francis **You know it's a book?**

[She nods.]

Betsheb *[pretending to read, turning the pages quickly]* **Thy word.**

[Betsheb stands and motions to the sky.]

Rain, rain, go thy way,

Come a-back ne'er a day.

'Ate the olcer sky. No end. No end. Adorate the shiny brocade sky, glommen time. Queenie Ayre say in ancient glommen, King David see the brocade, lubilashings o' shiny in ancient glommen. The sky 'e see, is me goldy brocade. See?

[She stands and spins slowly, staring up at the sky as if intoxicated by it and her words. We hear distant thunder.]

Francis **The last waltz, *madame*.**

[He grabs her. She starts as if woken from an intense reverie.]

Dance. Dancing. Follow me. Arm here. *[Singing waltz melody]* **Da, da, da … That's right, that's right, turn here, now a step here … Right …**

[She quickly picks it up.]

My mother forced me to learn dancing so I would be able to mix in the proper circles at university.

[Suddenly he kisses her. She tries to pull away.]

No!

[He holds on to her roughly and kisses her again. She bites him on the lip. He grimaces in pain. She pulls away. FRANCIS *puts a finger to his lips and spots blood on it.* BETSHEB *is apprehensive.]*

I only wanted to kiss you.

[Pause.]

You do it with Mac, why not with me?

[Silence.]

I want to break through to you and I don't know how. I don't even know if you're stupid or crazy or whatever.

[He walks towards her.]

Don't run away. *[Smiling]* **I can smell my heart burning.**

[She moves towards him and presses her forehead tightly against his.]

BETSHEB **Me burstin' brain. Me burstin' brain. See?**

[He doesn't understand.]

FRANCIS **You're hurting.**

[But she desperately wants him to understand.]

BETSHEB **Break 'n' crack int' thee.**

[She abruptly pulls away and looks at the sky, disappointed by FRANCIS' *lack of understanding. There is a loud roll of thunder.]*

As you can see, Nowra has invented a language for the lost colony. Here is his translation of Betsheb's words.

BETSHEB *[pretending to read, turning the pages quickly]* **Thy word.**
['This is your book.']

'Ate the olcer sky. No end. No end. Adorate the shiny brocade sky, glommen time. Queenie Ayre say in ancient glommen, King David see the brocade, lubilashings o' shiny in ancient glommen. The sky 'e see, is me goldy brocade. See?
[' I hate the sky when it looks dark and threatening. There seems to be no end to the darkness when it's like that. No end. I adore the shiny, starry sky at night. Queenie Ayre says that back in the old times, King David saw shiny, starry sky. There were incredible numbers of stars back in ancient times. The sky they saw is the same golden starry sky I see.']

BETSHEB **Me burstin' brain. Me burstin' brain. See?**
['My head feels like it's exploding. My head feels like it's exploding. See?']

BETSHEB **Break 'n' crack int' thee.**
['I want to crack and break your skull and get directly through to you.']

The Golden Age by Louis Nowra, Currency Press, Sydney, 1985.

22.6

THE 1990s

Hotel Sorrento

by Hannie Rayson

This play, first staged in 1990, is as significant in the development of Australian theatre as *The Removalists* was twenty years before it. It marked the re-emergence of women playwrights as a potent force in Australian theatre after almost half a century of male-dominated work, and established Hannie Rayson as a major and very popular playwright.

Hotel Sorrento investigates the relationships between three sisters who meet for the first time in many years at the Victorian seaside town of Sorrento following the death of their father. Hilary, a widow, has lived in Sorrento with her father until his death. Pippa, the youngest of the sisters, has been pursuing a successful career in New York. Meg has flown in from London, where her latest novel has just been short-listed for the Booker Prize, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the world.

A poster for the Playbox production of *Hotel Sorrento*

There are fierce tensions between the three sisters. Meg's novel is strongly autobiographical and contains intimate details of the lives of the whole family. Hilary is bitter about the lack of help and support she received from her sisters over the years, and the fact that Pippa had an affair with her husband shortly before he died.

The play is an exploration of the attempts by the sisters to accept the past and reconcile the conflicts between them, allowing them to move on in their own lives and in their relationships with each other.

In the following scene, which begins Act 2, the tensions are present between the sisters but are never mentioned. As you work on the text, use your understanding of body language to convey the intense, repressed emotions the sisters are feeling.

Hotel Sorrento, Act 2, Scene 1

[The three sisters are sitting at the end of the jetty. Over to their right, Edwin is paddling in the shallows. The atmosphere is infused with a sense of melancholy.]

Hilary Do you remember the Sorrento fair?

[Both Pippa and Meg nod in recollection.]

Remember the year the fortune teller came?

Meg He wasn't a fortune teller, was he?

Hilary What was he then?

Pippa He was a 'world renowned' palmist and clairvoyant. Punditt Maharaji.

Meg That's right. It was written on the caravan. Punditt Maharaji.

Hilary What did he tell you? Do you remember?

Meg Not really. Something like 'You are going to be rich and famous and travel vast distances across the sea'.

[They smile.]

Hilary What about you Pip?

Pippa Er … rich and famous and travel vast distances. Something highly personalised like that.

Hilary Do you know what he said to me? He said I was one of three.

Pippa That was a good guess.

Meg What else?

Hilary That was it. The Rixon kids threw stones at the caravan and he went off after them.

Pippa I don't think you got your shilling's worth.

[They muse over the memory. In the distance Pippa sees Troy walking alone at the top of the cliff. He is looking out to sea.]

There's Troy.

[The other women look in that direction. They watch silently. There is a change in mood.]

Still looking for Pop.

[Silence.]

Meg Poor kid. The sea will never give up its dead.

Hilary He's a different boy isn't he? He's just clammed up. He loved Dad so much. They had something very special those two. It's not fair is it?

[Silence.]

People are always dying on him.

Pippa He's a survivor Hil. He is.

Hilary Yeah … but at what cost?

[Pause. Meg looks at her penetratingly. Hil looks away.]

PIPPA What do you mean?

HILARY He feels responsible this time.

[Silence.]

MEG Yes. I know what that's like.

[They stare out to sea. MEG waits for a response. None is forthcoming.]

I think I'll go for a walk.

[PIPPA and HILARY say nothing. MEG makes her way over to EDWIN.]

PIPPA She can't concede can she, that anyone else could be hurting as much as she is? She's like a child.

[Silence.]

You think I'm still an angry young thing, don't you? You may think this is bullshit, but I'm different when I'm away. I'm a different person. If you met any of my friends in New York and you said, 'Pippa's such a cot case isn't she?' they wouldn't know what you were talking about.

HILARY I don't think you're a cot case.

PIPPA Oh, I am. I know I am. But only when I'm here.

HILARY Must be in the water.

PIPPA I really did want people to see how much I'd changed. I was really looking forward to coming home you know. But people don't want to see that do they? They don't want to see what's new about you. They're suspicious of that. It's like you've reneged on who you are. And that's fixed. That's immutable. You are who you are and if you try and change, you must be faking. Bunging on an act. But over there people think differently. In fact, if you're not working to make positive changes in your life, they think you're in deep shit.

HILARY Yeah. So I hear.

PIPPA You're cynical about that, aren't you?

HILARY No. I'm just not so sure that people actually do change.

PIPPA Everybody has the potential. It's just whether we choose to take up on it or not.

HILARY Sounds like propaganda to me. I think I'd rather be saying, 'OK, this is who I am. Like it or lump it. May as well get used to it, and make the best of it'.

[PIPPA makes no response. She looks out to sea.]

Hotel Sorrento by Hannie Rayson, Currency Press, Sydney, 1992.

Sisters

by Stephen Sewell

Stephen Sewell was one of the most significant and exciting Australian playwrights to emerge in the last part of the twentieth century. His plays were initially highly political and epic in structure, but his writing has included a range of contexts and styles.

Sisters is one of the most intimate and intense of his plays. Like Hannie Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento*, it deals with sisters meeting again after a long time, following the death of parents. However, the women in Sewell's play are very different. What the two playwrights share is their interest in the lives and experiences of women and the creation of intersecting, complex female characters. This shift from male- to female-centred plays was a feature of Australian theatre in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Sewell's play concerns an encounter between two sisters, Sylvie and Gillian, who meet in the family home after the death of their parents and after more than ten years apart. During the course of the play, the sisters reveal the truth about themselves and their relationship with each other. At the end of the play, Sylvie and Gillian are reconciled with each other and with the traumas that have occurred in their lives.

In the following scene, we see the two sisters together for the first time as they enter the family home.

Sisters, Scene 3

[Gillian puts her bag down and takes her other shoe off]

Gillian **What was holding you up? It's too musty in here.**

Sylvie **I left something in the car.**

Gillian **I hope there's some saucepans I can't remember if we took them back the last time.**

Sylvie **What did you do to your shoe?**

Gillian **I broke the heel—Look at that: they cost me two hundred dollars—I only bought them a week ago—I knew I shouldn't have worn them up there. You've got your bag?**

Sylvie **Yes.**

[Gillian looks at her for the first time]

Gillian **So, we're here.**

[As does Sylvie]

Sylvie **Alright, we're here: what does that mean?**

[Gillian takes a few steps away]

Gillian **Have the room we used when we were kids. I'll sleep in Mum and Dad's room.**

[Sylvie considers the room]

Sylvie Is that where you always sleep?

Gillian We've moved the toilet inside. It's next to the bathroom.

Sylvie What happened to the windows? They used to be lead-light?

Gillian Lots of things have changed.

Sylvie Is the plum tree still in the garden?

Gillian It was struck by lightning. I had to have it torn out.

[Sylvie looks at her with a tone of mocking questioning]

Sylvie You had to have it torn out?

Gillian *[coldly]* Gavin tore it out.

Sylvie Where's Dad's armchair?

Gillian The springs were gone. I threw it out after he died—I told you: lots of things have changed. Are you still using heroin?

Sylvie Do I look as if I am?

Gillian How you looked and how you were were always two different things, Sylvie. Do you need a towel?

Sylvie I brought my own.

[Gillian moves toward her bag]

Gillian The sheets and bedding are in the cupboard. You might have to open the window to air the room.

[Sylvie reacts to the sound of surf rumbling in the distance.]

It's a long time Sylvie: a lot's happened.

[Sylvie seems somehow affected, uncertain as the memories of the house flood in]

Sylvie I …

[Gillian picks up her bag]

Gillian Do you need a lamp?

[Sylvie composes herself and picks up her bag]

Sylvie I know my way.

Gillian Change your clothes and we'll have something to eat.

Sylvie Why should I change my clothes?

Gillian I haven't heard from you for three years, Sylvie; and another ten before that; and then you turn up on my doorstep and tell me you've had an abortion—I don't know if you realise it, but I have a life, too.

[Sylvie moves toward the opposite side of the stage]

Sylvie I'll see you in the lounge room.

Gillian Careful of the stairs: they're a bit rickety.

[Sylvie stops and looks at Gillian.]

SYLVIE **Do you still love me?**

GILLIAN **I'm not sure, Sylvie; I'm not sure that I do.**

[SYLVIE exits]

SYLVIE **I'll see you downstairs.**

GILLIAN **Yes …**

[As SYLVIE moves off into the shadows, GILLIAN casts a glance around the room. She sees something on the floor and moves toward it. Bending, she finds a loose parquet tile. She puts it back, again glances about, and then stands and exits.]

[Light change]

Sisters by Stephen Sewell, Currency Press, Sydney, 1991.

22.7 THE 21ST CENTURY

When the Rain Stops Falling

by Andrew Bovell

A scene from *When the Rain Stops Falling*

This play was first staged at the Adelaide Festival in 2008 and it has already become acknowledged as a genuinely great Australian work of theatre. It has been staged throughout the country, and a production opened in London in May 2010 and another on Broadway in March 2011. *When the Rain Stops Falling* is an extraordinarily powerful and complex piece of storytelling in which the actions of the past resonate into the future and the audience is challenged to reflect on how much control we have over our lives and our destinies.

The elements of time and place are brilliantly manipulated to show us four generations of people on stage at the same time, and the action of the play flows seamlessly between 1959 in London through to 2039 in Alice Springs. At the centre of the play is a young man, Gabriel Law , who is trying to discover what happened

to his father, Henry, who left their home in London to go to Australia and vanished years before. His mother Elizabeth refuses to talk about him. The only clues are some postcards from Australia that Gabriel finds, the last one sent from Uluru. Some of the scenes that flow through the play show us Henry and Elizabeth together, and begin to flesh out the mystery of why Henry left England and disappeared.

Gabriel travels to Australia to solve the mystery of Henry's disappearance, and encounters a young woman called Gabrielle who works in a roadhouse. Her parents have committed suicide—several years apart—after the death of their eight-year-old son. The similarity of the characters' names is significant in the play; Gabriel and Gabrielle form a bond and travel to Uluru together, but Gabriel dies. The tragedy is directly connected to the mystery of the vanished Henry, who was the stranger who actually killed Gabrielle's brother. Gabrielle discovers she is pregnant only after Gabriel's death. In the future we see their son, now grown up and also called Gabriel, waiting in Alice Springs to meet his son Andrew after years without contact.

At different times we see characters of different generations on the one stage, looking through the same window and eating at the same table, so that past and future continually haunt the present.

The play deals with the persistence of suffering, both within families and in the global degradation of our environment. The harm we do each other and the harm we do our world are connected in the forces that drive us to damage the things we should love. The other thread that runs through the play is the search for the absent. All the characters are missing an emotional centre and are looking for lost fathers, husbands, sons and lovers. At the end of the play, all the characters are gathered together on stage in a resolution that is both powerful and exceptionally moving.

The play begins with a bizarre event: on a rainy day in Alice Springs in 2039, a fish falls from the sky. At the end of the play, the rain finally stops. These signs suggest that the pattern of events that began in London in 1959 have finally ended, and that perhaps the harm we have done to our world through the destruction of the environment can also come to an end.

In the following scene, Gabrielle rings Elizabeth to tell her she is carrying Gabriel's child. After years of suffering caused to her by Henry, and the effort of denying and concealing the truth that he was a killer, Elizabeth is incapable of any warmth or care for Gabrielle or her grandson.

When the Rain Stops Falling

[FOUR ROOMS
1968 1988 1988 2013
Each superimposed upon the other. A telephone is ringing.
Elizabeth sits at the table with a bottle of wine and a glass before her as the Younger Elizabeth enters and proceeds to set the table for two.
The Older Elizabeth rises and moves forward to answer the phone.]

Elizabeth **YES?**

[Silence. The Younger Elizabeth hesitates, plate in hand.]

Who is this?

[The Younger Gabrielle enters.]

Gabrielle **My name is Gabrielle York… I'm calling from Adelaide in Australia. There's been an accident … I'm sorry … Gabriel has been killed.**

[A silence between them as she contains the dam of emotion threatening to break.]

Are you there?

ELIZABETH Yes, I'm here … I'm still here

[Beat.]

GABRIELLE They said he didn't suffer.

ELIZABETH Did they? … How would they know? *[Beat.]* He mentioned you in a letter. He said that he thought you were someone he could love and who might love him in return. Did you love him or was it just wishful thinking on his behalf?

GABRIELLE I loved him.

ELIZABETH Did he know that he was loved?

GABRIELLE I don't know … I never told him.

ELIZABETH Nor did I … I often meant to but these things, these moments, they slip away. It's terrible but you reach a time in your life when you realise that you have a very little to say to your children. I had very little to say to Gabriel. Of course having nothing to say is just another way of having so much to say that you dare not begin. *[Beat.]* Could I ask you to arrange a funeral? I don't think I could go to Australia. It is such a long way.

GABRIELLE Yes, I can do that … I know how to do that.

ELIZABETH I'll send money, of course. I have some put away. I think a cremation would be best.

GABRIELLE If that's what you want … I can send the ashes to England.

ELIZABETH I think it's better if they stayed there, don't you? I'm sure you will find the right thing to do with them.

[The OLDER GABRIELLE enters carrying the urn containing GABRIEL's ashes. Through the following she places it on the table and takes a bowl of soup and takes a place at the table.]

GABRIELLE There's something I should tell you … I'm pregnant.

[Beat.]

ELIZABETH Would you like me to send money for you to take care of that as well? … I'm not meaning to be cruel.

GABRIELLE Aren't you?

ELIZABETH How old are you?

GABRIELLE Twenty-four.

ELIZABETH Think carefully before you make your decision. You're very young and bringing up a child on your own is a heavy price to pay for a brief affair with a melancholic English boy. The decision is yours, of course.

GABRIELLE I know that … I wasn't asking your permission. If it's a boy I will call him Gabriel.

ELIZABETH Do you think that's wise? It would be tragic if every time you said your son's name you were reminded of what you had lost.

GABRIELLE I asked him once if he hated you … He said that he tried. But he couldn't. On the contrary, he said … I knew then how strong he was … to love someone who was incapable of being loved.

ELIZABETH Don't presume so much.

GABRIELLE I'm not talking about you. *[Beat.]* I have to ask you about Gabriel's father. *[Beat.]* I had a brother. He was taken from the beach by a stranger in 1968.

[Silence.]

Please.

[Silence.]

Talk to me.

ELIZABETH Did Gabriel know?

GABRIELLE Yes. It was the last thing he knew.

[ELIZABETH slowly disconnects the line.]

GABRIELLE Wait … Don't go … Don't leave me.

[Beat. ELIZABETH walks away from the phone call.]

ELIZABETH I had a fall. In the street. Every woman's worst fear, of a certain age. A turning point into decline. But when I fell I thought I heard a man scream. That's what made me stumble, I'm sure. A scream. And for a moment, I thought it was the future screaming at me. *[Beat.]* Sometimes I feel like I'm getting smaller. Sometimes I feel like I'm just nothing at all. But then I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and I see that I am still here. *[Beat.]* I'm still here. *[Beat.]* I'm still here.

When the Rain Stops Falling by Andrew Bovell, Currency Press, Sydney, 2009.

Mrs Petrov's Shoe

by Noelle Janaczewska

This play, first staged in 2006, won the Queensland Premier's Literary Award in that year. It is one of a number of outstanding modern Australian plays by playwrights with a European background who have made Australia their home. *Mrs Petrov's Shoe* is deeply concerned with the question of cultural identity and what it means to be an Australian with a European heritage. It is also about the political and social issues that have shaped Australia's recent history.

The play begins in the present day, with the main character, Anna Lubansky, winning a major prize for her first novel, *Mrs Petrov's Shoe*. The novel is about a nine-year-old girl named Ania, apparently based on Anna, growing up in 1950s Australia as the daughter of Central European migrants. The play then jumps forward to the 1970s and the 1990s, showing us a very different truth about Anna Lubansky and her novel.

In Act I we are taken back in time to Ania's story as told in the novel. At nine years old she is obsessed with the infamous Petrov affair, an event that took place in Australia in the 1950s involving a Russian diplomat and his wife who were spying on

Australia. Ania thinks her mother and father are spies, and follows her mother when she mysteriously goes out at night to meet a strange, foreign man.

In the following scene, Ania and her friend Wendy follow Ania's mother, Nina, as she delivers a parcel to the stranger. Ania follows the stranger and disappears, and her mother and brother Joe call the police to find her. When she returns, she discovers that her father has been taken away.

Mrs Petrov's Shoe

WENDY Ania ...?

ANIA Yes?

WENDY What do spies actually do?

ANIA They behave suspiciously.

WENDY What else?

ANIA Isn't that enough? Ok, I'll be Z for zebra. What about you?

[WENDY shrugs.]

We need code names, silly. You can be F for fox.

WENDY I don't like foxes. I'm going to be F for foal.

[ANIA pushes WENDY out of the classroom.]

ANIA Let's synchronise watches.

[Lights shift to dusk.]

[NINA leaves the house with her shopping bag.]

[WENDY and ANIA follow, taking care not to be seen. Initially they speak into tin cans attached to a length of string.]

[NINA disappears into the penumbra.]

WENDY She's disappeared.

ANIA What?

WENDY Your mum's disappeared.

ANIA Lift up that manhole cover.

WENDY What?

ANIA She must have gone down there. It's the entrance to a secret tunnel.

WENDY We can't go down there!

ANIA She could have some kind of rocket thing down there. Go on, lift it up.

WENDY What if there are rats?

ANIA She's probably got a radio transmitter hidden there. Or she could be assembling something.

WENDY Like what?

ANIA **Duh—A new design of sputnick, nuclear missiles—anything.**

WENDY *[Looking at her watch]* **I've got to be home in 6-and-a-half minutes.**

[ANIA jumps up, pulling WENDY along with her.]

ANIA **Hurry up, I've got another idea.**

WENDY **Where are we going?**

[The rattle of a freight train.]

[Near the railway line they spot NINA, and hide. NINA opens the box.]

NINA *[Whispering]* **Lothar?**

[Beat.]

Gdzie ty jesteś?

[From the shadows, the silhouette of a man in a gabardine coat (LOTHAR). NINA grabs his hands.]

Jak sie masz?

[They move further into the darkness. Light cigarettes, have a whispered conversation. We can't hear what they say, only the faint murmur of their voices.]

WENDY *[Also whispering]* **What are they saying?**

ANIA **Shh!**

[NINA and the man in the gabardine coat kiss goodbye. He disappears back into the shadows. NINA leaves. Once she's gone, WENDY and ANIA emerge.]

[ANIA climbs on WENDY to reach the box. Goes to open it.]

WENDY **Don't touch it! It might be stuff for blowing up the train. It could be booby-trapped.**

[ANIA opens it anyway. Removes its contents. A pack of cigarettes, matches, sandwiches, chocolate and a silver flask, which ANIA opens and sniffs.]

WENDY **What is it?**

ANIA **Vodka. Do you want to try some?**

[WENDY shakes her head. Picks up a roll of toilet paper.]

WENDY **What do spies want with toilet paper?**

ANIA **It's for secret writing, isn't it? You write your message using a kind of invisible ink, and the agents you're sending it to have special chemicals, so they can read it.**

[ANIA removes a scrap of paper, reads it, hands it to WENDY.]

WENDY **X?**

ANIA **That's all it says. You know what this means, don't you?**

WENDY **That man is—**

ANIA **My mother's X.**

WENDY *[Checking her watch again]* **Oh no! I'm late. I've got to go.**

[They return the items to the box. WENDY races off. ANIA picks up a discarded cigarette butt and puts it in her pocket.]

[Shouts of 'ANIA!' and swinging torch beams. People in dressing gowns searching the street.]

NINA **Where the hell have you been?**

JOE **We called the police.**

NINA **I've been out of my mind with worry.**

JOE **They're out there looking for you now with dogs—the cops.**

NINA **Don't ever do that again, Ania. Promise me you won't do that again.**

JOE **Big dogs—German shepherds.**

[JOE and the search party exit.]

ANIA **Mum—?**

NINA **What?**

ANIA **Where's Dad gone?**

NINA **He's had to go away for a little while.**

ANIA **Is it special government business?**

NINA **No.**

ANIA **Then why?**

NINA **He, uh—**

[Beat.]

—it's all for the best. Trust me, there, uh—there wasn't really any other choice.

ANIA **Is he ill?**

NINA **No—yes—well, there are people who consider it a kind of sickness—** *[Starts to get upset]* **I know it's hard for you to understand, darling, but I had to call—your father is—how shall I put it—**

ANIA **It's all your fault! You told them to come here and take Daddy away!**

[She runs off.]

Mrs Petrov's Shoe by Noelle Janaczewska, in *Collection 7*, Australian Script Centre, Hobart, 2008.

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