

SYDNEY THEATRE  
COMPANY

**PRE-SHOW  
IN-THE-KNOW**



# THE SHIRALEE

By D'Arcy Niland

Adapted for the Stage by Kate Mulvany

Directed by Jessica Arthur

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Image: Ziggy Resnick, Kate Mulvany, Josh McConville, Aaron Pederson. Photo: Derek Henderson.

Compiled by Kelly Young and Kaylee Hazell.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. You can contact the Education Team on **[education@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:education@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

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**Sydney Theatre Company acknowledges the Gadigal of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land and waters on which the Company gathers. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with whom we work and with whom we share stories.**

## KEY INFORMATION

# THE SHIRALEE

By D'Arcy Niland

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### SUITABLE FOR

Years 9 - 12

### CURRICULUM LINKS

- English Stage 5 & 6
- Drama Stage 5 & 6

### THEMES & IDEAS

- Gender and Social Class
- Australian Identity
- Family Relationships

### FORM & STYLE

- Realism
- Magic Realism

### CONTENT

Strong language, mature themes including violence, alcohol and drug addiction.

### APPROX. DURATION

2 hrs 10 mins, including interval

### CAST

Stephen Anderson

Paul Capsis

Lucia Mastrantone

Josh McConville

Kate Mulvany

Aaron Pedersen

Ziggy Resnick

Catherine Vän-Davies

### CREATIVES

**Director** Jessica Arthur

**Designer** Jeremy Allen

**Lighting Designer** Trent Suidgeest

**Composer & Sound Designer** Jessica Dunn

**Dramaturg** Kip Williams

**Assistant Director** Guy Simon

**Cultural Advisor** Matthew Doyle

**Fight & Safety Director** Tim Dashwood

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### THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- How does this production acknowledge the impact of colonisation in 1950s Australia?
  - What are the ways in which working class gender roles are created and explored in the production?
  - What is the production asking contemporary audiences to consider about the importance of family and family connection?
- 



# SYNOPSIS

Macauley is a rugged swagman who roams the rural roads of mid-century Australia, taking on odd jobs to survive.

Buster is Macauley's young daughter, living with her lonely mother Marge in a run-down home in Kings Cross, Sydney.

One fateful night, Mac is compelled to take Buster on the road with him, despite father and daughter barely knowing each other. Chased into the deep outback of New South Wales, Mac and Buster encounter characters and events that will change their lives forever as they wrestle with what it is to be each other's shiralee...



Paul Capsis, Aaron Pederson, Ziggy Resnick, & Josh McConville

# TEACHING THE CONTEXT OF THE SHIRALEE

**The following content and teaching strategies are designed to develop student understanding of *The Shiralee*. It covers the individual, social, political, cultural and artistic contexts of the production.**

*The Shiralee* explores the complexities of Australian national identity at the conclusion of WWII and the early 1950s. Before teaching the text, teachers and students should have a clear understanding of the context of the play. It is important to note that this story occurs on stolen land, which means that analysis of the production should be grounded in an understanding of the process of imperialism and colonisation.

**Imperialism** is the way in which one country extends its power and control over another. *The Shiralee* is set in post-war NSW, fifty years after Federation in 1901. Whilst Australia had been an independent nation since Federation, British influence remained a powerful ideological influence on Australian culture.

**Colonisation** should be understood as one of several strategies that an imperial power may use to extend its influence over another group of people. In Australia the landing of the First Fleet on 26 January 1788 was the official day on which the process of colonisation began. *The Shiralee* explores an Australia that had changed enormously since invasion, the establishment of colonies across the continent and the process of land theft and genocide. The result was to firmly establish imperial culture throughout most of Australia, with disastrous results for First Nations Australians.

*The Shiralee* occurs within the context of an Australia victorious but exhausted by WWII, weighed down by racist beliefs about First Nations people, destructive Western farming practices, white inroads into remote Australia, the working person's struggle to survive, and the dislocation and disenfranchisement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from Country. *The Shiralee* occurs in the middle of the Stolen Generations, a government policy that forcibly removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The depictions of First Nations Australians in *The Shiralee* reflect the devastating impact of approximately 160 years of colonial influence in Australia.

It is important to note that the forces of imperialism and colonisation have been, and continue to be, actively resisted by First Nations peoples across the world, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). The world of *The Shiralee* cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the destructive power of colonisation on the Land, its First Peoples, and the radical changes wrought by this process, whilst holding the ongoing custodianship of the First Peoples at its core.

# INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

## D'ARCY NILAND

D'Arcy Francis Niland was an Australian author who wrote prolifically during his lifetime. He is well-known for his classic novel *The Shiralee*, a best-selling book which has never been out of print since its first publication in 1955. His major interest was in the craft of short story writing. He produced over five hundred short stories published in Australia and abroad.

D'Arcy Niland was born in Glen Innes, NSW on 20 October 1917. He was educated at St Joseph's School in Glen Innes, and it was here that he was encouraged to write by the nuns who saw a literary potential in their young pupil.

Having to leave school by the age of fourteen to help support his large family, he took on varied employment in shearing sheds, potato fields, opal mines, circus tents and boxing shows. He educated himself by reading the dictionary and practised his writing craft when he could.

The Niland family left Glen Innes around 1933, to live in Sydney. D'Arcy Niland worked as a copyboy at the Sun newspaper. He supplemented his small income by working at the railway sheds at Redfern, Sydney.

In 1942 he married Ruth Park, a New Zealander, with whom he had been corresponding for several years about their like-minded goals as writers. Once married, the couple decided to make a concerted effort to pursue their dream to live entirely by writing. They worked in partnership and alone, producing an enormous output of stories, songs, jingles, plays, factual articles, scripts, poems and novels.

In Balgowlah, NSW, they raised their family of five children, whilst juggling writing commitments.

Achieving wider recognition through winning various literary prizes, D'Arcy Niland was awarded £600 by the Commonwealth Literary Fund in 1952 to write a novel.

The result was *The Shiralee*, published in 1955. It was an international success. There have been over sixty-five editions and many translations. It was made into a film of the same name in 1957, starring Peter Finch, and a cast of well-known Australian actors. *The Shiralee* was also made into a popular television mini-series in 1987, with Bryan Brown as Macauley.

D'Arcy Niland continued writing to the end of his life completing his last novel *Dead Men Running* two days before his death on 29 March 1967.

Niland's novels include; *The Shiralee*, *Call Me When the Cross Turns Over*, *Gold in the Streets*, *The Big Smoke*, *The Apprentices*, *Dead Men Running*. His short story collections include; *The Ballad of the Fat Bushranger and Other Humorous Stories*, *Logan's Girl and Other Stories*, *Dadda Jumped Over Two Elephants*, *Pairs and Loners*, *The Penguin Best Stories of D'Arcy Niland*.

## KATE MULVANEY

Kate Mulvany is a multi-award-winning writer, actor and producer. In her 30- year artistic career, she has received the Mona Brand Award, several Australian Writers Guild awards, the prestigious Sidney Myer Award, an Honorary Doctorate from Curtin University and an Order of the Medal of Australia for her contribution to the arts.

As a playwright, Kate's works have been performed internationally and include critically acclaimed adaptations of Ruth Park's *The Harp in the South* and *Playing Beatie Bow*; *Jasper Jones*; *Mary Stuart*; *Masquerade*; and *Medea* (co-written with Anne-Louise Sarks). Her original work includes *The Mares*; *The Rasputin Affair*; *The Danger Age*; *The Web*, the musical *Somewhere* (music by Tim Minchin); the oratorio *Towards First Light* (composition by Iain Grandage) and her lauded autobiographical play *The Seed*.

As a screenwriter, Kate co-created and wrote on the internationally acclaimed TV series *Upright*, the popular ABC series *Summer Love*, the Emmy-winning animation series *Beat Bugs*, and has written two episodes of the upcoming Disney Plus series two of *The Artful Dodger*.

Kate is also an award-winning stage and screen actor. She recently starred as Sarah Bernhardt in *Bernhardt/Hamlet* for Melbourne Theatre Company and won the Best Actress Helpmann Awards for the title role in *Richard III* for Bell Shakespeare and *Every Brilliant Thing* for Belvoir. She has also had critically praised turns as Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*), Cassius (*Julius Caesar*), Dr Stockman (*An Enemy of the People*) and Dorine (*Tartuffe*).

Kate's screen credits include leading roles in *Hunters* (Amazon) alongside Al Pacino; *The Clearing* (Disney Plus); *The Twelve* (Warner Bros); Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* and *The Great Gatsby*, and double AACTA-nominated roles in the films *Better Man* and *How to Make Gravy*. She will soon be seen as Augusta Beecham in the Netflix adaptation Miles Franklin's iconic novel *My Brilliant Career*.

Kate is an ambassador for survivors of Agent Orange, and volunteers as a mentor to emerging playwrights, particularly those with disabilities.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

#### Activity 1

- a. Divide the class into groups of approximately 4 – 5 students. Ask each group, except for one, to find approximately 10 images of outback NSW in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly those mentioned in the script, which include Glenn Innes, Grafton, Mudgee, Menindee, Dubbo, Dimboola and Broken Hill. These images might include the landscape, farmland, shearers at work, women on the land, First Nations people in Missions, and itinerant workers. The group that has been set apart from this research should look for images of Kings Cross in the same period.
- b. Each group, except for the group looking at Kings Cross, should present their images to the class, placing them in a central place either on the floor or on desks gathered in the centre of the room, making a Museum of Images.
- c. Once the images are collected in a central place in the room, ask the class to comment on what they notice, using the sentence starter below:  
*I notice that...*  
As this process is occurring, someone in the classroom might like to create a list on the whiteboard to capture student thoughts.

- d. When the class has concluded this process, the group that was tasked with finding images of Kings Cross should lay down their images alongside those of regional NSW. As the class to comment on the differences and similarities between the images, using the questions below:

*What do you notice about the images of Kings Cross?*

*What are the differences and similarities between these two regions of NSW?*

As this process is occurring, record student thought on the whiteboard.

- e. Ask the class to move back into their groups of 4 – 5 students and make a series of freeze frame that begin in Kings Cross and end in Glenn Innes. There should be at least 5 images for each group. These images should be put together to create a sense of a “road movie” from the city to the country. As each group shows their “road movie”, they should perform with music to accompany the images. This music should be appropriate to the 1940s and 1950s and where possible, students should be encouraged to research their choices.

### **Activity 2**

As a class, discuss why Kate Mulvaney might have chosen to explore a staged version of *The Shiralee*.

What issues and concerns might be included in this production that might not have been explored in the novel and the film?

What might Kate Mulvaney bring to the reimagining of Niland’s novel?



Josh McConville & Kate Mulvaney

# POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

When considering the political and social context of *The Shiralee*, it is important to consider the notion of the concept of “Australia” and the tensions that have surrounded our national identity since British invasion in 1788.

## WWII AND THE COLD WAR

*The Shiralee* is set at the conclusion of some of the most tumultuous years of the 20th Century, including the Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust and the unleashing of atomic power at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For Australians, WWII had been a horrifying experience with the Australian Armed Forces fighting on both fronts – against the Nazis in Europe and against the Japanese throughout Asia. There had been enormous fear of Japanese invasion, with the bombing of Darwin in 1941 and the entry of Japanese midget submarines into Sydney Harbour. Over 30,000 Australians had been Prisoners of War (POWs) during WWII in both Europe and Asia, and the horror of their experiences resulted the return of highly damaged men who were considered a source of unrest as they re-entered a peacetime Australia.

The election of the Menzies Government in 1949 for their second term in office has been seen by contemporary Australians as a slide into a long period of conservatism. Whilst it is true that the Liberal Party, under Menzies’ leadership, did preside over what is now considered a traditional approach to government, the political mood of the time was one of change and optimism. Eager to remove themselves from the leadership of the Australian Labor Party, under the leadership of Ben Chifley who had been in government throughout WWII, the Australian people were interested in exploring a new and different way of exploring national and personal identity. Traditional expressions of masculinity, rooted in working class ideals were eagerly questioned, with a celebration of middle class, entrepreneurial masculinity emerging as an alternative.

Immediately after the conclusion of WWII, the simmering tensions between the USSR and the USA began to escalate into the Cold War. Allies in WWII who struggled to agree on the way that the world should be after the defeat of Germany and Japan, each burgeoning superpower and their allies became locked into a cycle of ever escalating tensions that expressed themselves through frigid diplomacy and the interference of each into other countries around the world. Australia, moving away from Britain and increasingly focused on our relationship with the USA, participated in the Korean War and the Vietnam War as part of the proxy wars that emerged around the world because of the tensions between the USSR and the USA.

## THE 1950S: A PERIOD OF STABILITY?

Politically and socially, the end of WWII was a period of immense instability for the Australian people. The Australian government tried to stabilise the rapid influx of returning soldiers and move the economy to a peace time footing. The process of demobilisation, often called demob, began during the war itself, when the Australian Government set up the Department of Post-War Reconstruction (1942).

Prior to WWII, women had traditionally been excluded from the labour market and were expected to stay at home and look after the family. As WWII progressed, shortages of male workers meant that women were encouraged to move into the workforce, liberating them from more traditional understandings of the position of women in society. This offered them the financial independence that had traditionally belonged to men. Understandably, there were many women who enjoyed the financial and social freedoms that paid work provided and as World War II ended, they hoped to retain their

newly won freedoms. The government process of demobilising was unimaginative, and relied on traditional understandings of gender roles, offering repatriation schemes that attempted to reintegrate and renegotiate the roles of women back into the domestic sphere to allow men their “rightful” position in society.

It is important to consider here that whilst the idea of the work lead, masculine postwar recovery has been seen as the key to Australian economic success and social stability, there were many men who rejected, or were excluded, from the constraints of such definitions of masculinity. Working class men struggled to re-enter the workforce, whilst other men, presented with the notion that life was about being a breadwinner for a young family with a dependent wife, found the idea suffocating. The re-emergence of the bush/city binary that was so important in creating a sense of national identity in the 1890s in the lead up to Federation returned during the 1950s, challenging urban, middle class, “soft” masculinity that emerged in the Menzies era. The result was a decade of conflict over an ideal Australian masculinity, with cultural artefacts of the period (and discussed below) reflecting the contestation between them.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1

Research swagmen, ‘Swaggies’ and itinerant workers in regional Australia from 1930s-1950s. Find some images of swagmen- example page:

<https://www.oldtreasurybuilding.org.au/lost-jobs/on-the-road/swagman/>



[A couple of swaggies | Probably taken somewhere around Nhill... | Mimi\\_K | Flickr](#)

- a. In groups of 4 or 5 imagine you are “swaggies” and setting up camp for the night. In your group sit in a circle and name the items you have in your swag such as “a billy”, “a tucker bag” and some “bully beef”.
- b. Improvise some dialogue with your fellow swaggies about your work that day. Work mentioned in the play includes dagging, docking, prawning, cane crushing, hay baling.
- c. One of your group may also be a “Sundowner” research the meaning and add this character into the scene. How would their dialogue differ from other swaggies?

**Activity 2 - Bush Poetry Soundscape**

Read aloud the poem "The Swagman" by CWL. 1868

Trudging on wearily, heavily, drearily,

Parching with thirst on a hot dusty road;

No one to speak a kind word to him cheerily,

No one to love him, no place of abode.

No change or variety, nought but anxiety

Hangs like a cloud o'er the wanderer's track;

Still he's a link in the chain of society,

Tho' all he possesses is strapped to his back.

Looking forth fearfully, thinking back tearfully

On bright sunny days in his own native land,

When leaving a home, he had manfully, cheerfully,

Started away for a southerly strand;

Hope fondly smiling, and sweetly beguiling

With soft fairy visions his path o'er the sea,

As the waves bore him on to the land he was styling

The labourer's refuge, the home of the free.

Mark him arriving, and uselessly striving

With all his contriving, fair work to obtain;

And often himself of a dinner depriving,

To hang on, in hopes that he his end might gain.

His money has vanished, all hoping is banished

From his mind, which now carries a harassing load;

Sad, dejected, and lonely, dishearten'd, and famished,

He packs up his swag, and is off on the road.

Treat him not slightly, haughty, or spitefully,  
Tho' he is ragged and weary with toil:  
The day may yet brighten when honestly, rightfully,  
He'll stand as an owner and lord of the soil;  
Stout heart and arm linking, will keep you from sinking —  
Stand firm to the blast, 'tis but cowards who kneel.  
There are many roads open to fortune, I'm thinking,  
If a shoulder is manfully put to the wheel.  
  
Trudging on wearily, heavily, drearily,  
Parching with thirst on a hot, dusty road;  
Pass him not jeeringly, chat with him cheerfully —  
A word kindly spoken will lighten his load.  
If you have piety, calm his anxiety,  
Soothing his feelings, so long on the rack;  
For he's still a link in the chain of society,  
Tho' all he possesses is strapped to his back.

C.W.L.

— Southern Argus.

Divide class into five groups. Each group is given one stanza to work with.

- Create a soundscape (using voice, body percussion, improvised sound effects) to bring the poem's imagery to life.
- Consider how your group will perform in the space. Set the scene with characterisation and movement, using levels and spacing that consider your audience.
- Focus on rhythm, rhyme, and the "musicality" of bush verse.

Perform soundscapes back to class.

# CULTURAL CONTEXT

When considering the cultural context of *The Shiralee*, it is important to consider the notion of the concept of “Australia” and the tensions that have surrounded our national identity since British invasion.

## CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND FATHERHOOD

Aligned with Australia’s relationship with the USA and participation in the Cold War, the cultural construction of “nationhood” and “masculinity” began to shift and change.

Previously based on a celebration of working-class culture, the Cold War period saw a shift in Australian constructions of masculinity toward bourgeois, educated rationality reflective of the new world order. Grounded in post-war wealth and the resultant shifts toward longer periods in education, men were increasingly celebrated for their intelligence and earning power over their physical strength. Hierarchies, once seen as something to be challenged by the working person, were incorporated into Australian understandings of itself, leaving working men at the bottom of understandings of status.

This cultural reordering, however, was challenged and contested by the reemergence of the cultural narratives around the importance of the bush as a site of importance for the Australian male. During the 1950s, narratives about rural Australia and manual labour became a way to challenge fears about men becoming “soft”, that is, more feminine, suggesting that misogynistic views about women and their roles was still deeply held in Australian culture.

The rationalisation of the workplace and the emergence of the new type of masculinity prioritises routine, commercial success, time in the public arena and the ability of the male to support a family in the suburbs. This meant that men spent less time with their children, because of long commutes from the suburbs, the demands of their jobs and the cultural expectations about childcare placed even more firmly on women.

For both groups of men, the expectations around care of children were placed firmly in the world of women, with both working class and middle-class women (re) assuming the role of primary care giver, even after the shift in expectations during World War II. The constraints of such rigid gender roles meant that all Australians who hoped for different narratives in their lives, struggled to find the space for difference.

## TRAVELLING TENT SHOWS, SIDE SHOW ALLEY AND RURAL AUSTRALIA

An importation from the fairs and festivals of Europe and England, Australia had its own travelling tent show circuit that offered opportunities to engage in commercial transactions and the pursuit of entertainment and pleasure. Made up of different types of acts and experiences, such as minstrel shows, peep shows, boxing, dancing and freak shows, this world allowed for the exploration of those areas of human experience pushed to the outside of mainstream culture.

In Australia, itinerant show people moved around the various towns and ultimately, once land clearing/stealing had been undertaken and western agriculture established, settled into a routine that involved visiting the annual agricultural show at the local showground. Alongside the agricultural displays, the emergence of a culture of side shows became increasingly important, bringing with it a unique subculture that reflected class and cultural differences. These differences were the object of middle-class suspicion and fascination, allowing types of “otherness” to be consumed by the paying public.

The popularity of travelling tent shows remained strong during the 20th Century and, after the enforced closure of the circuit during World War II, reemerged with enormous popularity in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1

Ask students to gather in a circle in the centre of the classroom, where the teacher has placed images of men and women from the 1940s and 1950s. These images could be taken from historical sources, such as photos and government publications, or generated from the media.

- As a class, sort the images into groups. These groups might be configured around differences between the decades, gender, class and geography. As the sorting process occurs, encourage the students to articulate their thinking. This might include similarities in the images, differences, and the reasons behind these choices.
- Ask the students to think back to their work on the social and political events of this period. What connections can they make to the way that women and men look and are represented?
- Move into groups of 4 – 5 and create 3 freeze frames that represent the differences in understandings of gender, class and geography between the 1940s and 1950s.
- Present these three freeze frames to the rest of the class and analyse the differences that can be seen in each. As each group performs for the class and ideas have been generated, record the differences in a table, such as the one below:

Gender	Gender	Class	Class	Geography	Geography
1940s	1950s	1940s	1950s	1940s	1950s

- As a group, devise a performance that takes the form of a news report that explains the differences between the 1940s and 1950s. This report should be set in the early 1950s, outlining the exciting changes that lie ahead for Australia in the 1950s. Encourage students to incorporate their understanding of the political and social changes of the period.

### Activity 2

*Activity 2 relies on the learning from the news report performance found above in Activity 1.*

In their groups from Activity 1, ask students to discuss and engage with the complexities of women's lives in the 1950s, away from some of the stereotypes now held about women in the 1950s.

Ask each group to reimagine their news reports from Activity 1. Have each group take on the role of a woman in the 1950s, with each group provided with a different demographic for their work. Roles include:

- A young mother in the suburbs
- A working-class woman supporting children on her own.
- A childless professional woman
- A teenager looking to the future
- An older woman who lived through the interwar turmoil of the Great Depression and WWII.

Ask each group to rework their news report to include an interview with their character. This interview might include their experiences in WWII, perspective on the anticipated changes of the 1950s and their thoughts about the Cold War.

# SUPPORT RESOURCES

*The Shiralee* deals with content that some audience members might find distressing. Content warnings include: strong language, mature themes including violence, description of miscarriage, alcohol and drug addiction, theatrical blood, theatrical haze and dust effects, herbal cigarettes, flashing light effects, complete blackout.

**If you or someone you know needs information or support, these organisations are there to help:**

## **1800RESPECT**

Call 1800 737 732 or visit <https://1800respect.org.au/>

24/7 support for people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence.

## **Kids Helpline**

Call 1800 55 1800 or visit <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

Australia's only free, confidential 24/7 online and phone counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25.

## **13 YARN**

Call 13 92 76 or visit <https://www.13yarn.org.au/>

A confidential crisis support line for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping.

## **NSW Domestic Violence Line**

Call 1800 65 64 63

Provides counselling and referrals to women experiencing domestic violence.

## **Alcohol and Drug Information Service**

Call 1800 250 015

This 24/7 support line provides free and confidential information and support for people who have concerns about their own, or someone else's alcohol and/or other drug use.

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