

**SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
CO  
EDUCATION**

**ON CUE**



**WHITEFELLA  
YELLA TREE**

**By Dylan Van Den Berg**

**Directed by Declan Greene & Amy Sole**

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Compiled by Megan Sampson.

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**

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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.**

## CAST AND CREATIVES

# WHITEFELLA YELLA TREE

By Dylan Van Den Berg

Directed by Declan Greene & Amy Sole

### CAST

**Neddy**

Joseph Althouse

**Ty**

Danny Howard

### CREATIVE TEAM

**Directors**

Declan Greene & Amy Sole

**Designer**

Mason Browne

**Lighting Designers**

Kelsey Lee & Katie Sfetkidis

**Composer & Sound Designer**

Steve Toulmin

**Intimacy Coordinator**

Bayley Turner

**Associate Composer and Sound**

**Designer**

Daniel Herten

**Dramaturg**

Andrea James

### PRODUCTION TEAM

**Stage Manager**

Isabella Kerdijk

**Assistant Stage Manager**

Tyler Fitzpatrick

**Lighting Supervisor and Operator**

Tim McNaught

**Sound Supervisor and Operator**

Ben Andrews

**Mechanist**

Sam Williams

For Griffin:

**Production Manager**

Damion Holling

**Head Electrician**

Sammy Read

For STC:

**Production Manager**

Joe Fletcher

**Staging Supervisor**

Chris Fleming

**Lighting Programmer**

Sam Scott

**Rehearsal Photographer**

Daniel Boud

THIS PRODUCTION WAS FIRST PRODUCED BY GRIFFIN THEATRE COMPANY ON 19 AUGUST 2022 AT THE SBW STABLES.  
THIS SEASON OPENED AT WHARF 1 THEATRE ON 23 SEP 2025.

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### CO-PRODUCER

**GRIFFIN  
THEATRE  
COMPANY**



# SYNOPSIS

Sometime during the early period of colonisation, at a place between a mountain and a river, two young Aboriginal men are about to lock eyes for the first time.

Ty, sits under the knotted branches of a newly rooted lemon tree. He is learning to be his mob's storyteller, but for now he is a messenger sent to exchange information with a neighbouring clan group. It's Neddy who shows up, a warrior in training, he darts between bushes, rolling leaping, tiptoeing, trying not to be seen.

When they finally look at each other, it's tense, exciting, and strange. Neddy of the Mountain Mob and Ty of the River Mob, try to share stories about the newly arrived whitefellas but they're distracted.

It's a teenage crush: joyous, sweet and puffed up with youthful giddiness. But the boys are poised on the edge of a world about to change.

The lemon tree that marks their meeting place grows quickly. Its branches twist into the sky. Its roots disturb the earth. Ty and Neddy grow into young men, their budding love taking root in Country that is about to be declared 'Australia'.



# CURRICULUM LINKS

## SUITABLE FOR

Years 9 - 12

## DRAMA

### Stage 5

- DR5-MAK-01: Develops and structures ideas for dramatic meaning through improvisation, play building and scripted drama.
- DR5-MAK-02: Manipulates elements of drama and production elements to create dramatic meaning.
- DR5-PER-02: Applies performance skills to convey character, situation and intention.
- DR5-APP-01: Analyses and evaluates how drama conveys meaning for different audiences and purposes.

### Stage 6

- P1.1: Develops acting skills to adopt and sustain a variety of characters and roles.
- P1.2: Explores ideas and situations, expressing them through dramatic action and performance.
- P1.3: Demonstrates performance skills appropriate to a variety of styles and media.
- P2.1: Understands the collaborative nature of drama and theatre.
- P2.2: Understands the contributions of playwrights, directors, designers, and actors to production.
- P3.1: Critically appraises and evaluates, both orally and in writing, their own and others' work in drama.

## ENGLISH

### Stage 5

- EN5-RE1: Responds to and evaluates texts that represent diverse perspectives and contexts.
- EN5-CW1: Creates sustained and cohesive texts for different purposes, audiences and contexts.
- EN5-UAR1: Analyses and explains how language choices shape meaning and influence interpretation.

### Stage 6

- EN12-3: Analyses and uses language forms, features, and structures of texts to shape meaning.
- EN12-5: Thinks imaginatively, creatively, and interpretively to respond to and compose texts.
- EN12-7: Understands and explains the diverse ways texts represent personal and public worlds.

## FORM & STYLE

- Contemporary language in a historical setting
- Linear narrative with lyrical interlude
- Poetic Realism
- Physical Theatre

## THEMES & IDEAS

- Cultural Heritage and Identity
- Colonialism
- Resilience
- LGBTQIA+

# WRITER'S NOTE:

## DYLAN VAN DEN BERG

At the heart of *Whitefella Yella Tree* is a simple question: what happens when first love –messy and awkward– collides with the violence of invasion? Under the branches of a lemon tree, two young Aboriginal boys discover each other with the giddy nervousness of teenagers anywhere. Their joy, their teasing, their tender declarations all unfold in a world that feels as if it might hold them safe. But the colony creeps closer, threatening not just their Country but their very right to love.

It's often hard to pinpoint when the idea for a play comes to you. Usually, for me (mainly because I can be incredibly lazy), it percolates for a bit before I have a sense that there might actually be something there. With *Whitefella Yella Tree*, this was not the case. The premise of this piece was forged in defiant anger after I read a Tweet almost a decade ago. Anthony Mundine said that artistic depictions of queer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander folks are out of sync with culture – forbidden, in fact– and that the Ancestors would be none too happy. I was fairly young at the time, dealing with a decent dose of internalised homophobia, and was still figuring myself out in all sorts of ways. Since then, Mundine has gone on to say things that an older me can, on some level, dismiss as the unfortunate byproduct of a few conspiring social forces... but they still trigger memories of that rotten seed planted.

I wanted to write a play that reclaimed a space for Blak queerness, a space often denied by both colonial history and voices that insist such stories don't belong. What I found, through listening and asking, is that queerness always existed in our cultures. It was cherished. It was part of us. The true interruption - the true obscenity- was colonisation, with its imported homophobia and impulse towards erasure.

"Queerness always existed in our cultures. It was cherished. It was part of us."

So I've written this play in the hope that you might reflect on the rich and real detail of lives that were disrupted when those ships hit the shore. The queer love stories that never got to be written.

Dylan Van Den Berg  
Ngunnawal Country, 2025

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS

## Neddy

Neddy is stoic and fiercely protective, embodying strength and resilience. As the play progresses, he is deeply challenged by the violence and grief inflicted upon his people and carries deep trauma after his sister is stolen. His identity as a warrior drives him to act rather than wait, even when it puts him at odds with his Elders. He is ultimately disconnected from his Country and people, a weight that is evident and heavy upon him. Beneath his guarded exterior lies profound loyalty and tenderness, revealed in fleeting moments with Ty. Neddy represents survival and resistance, but also the cost of colonial violence on kinship and identity. He is softened by his relationship with Ty and ultimately demonstrates that true connection and kinship are worth sacrificing everything even at the cost of his own life.

## Ty

Ty is gentle, poetic, and emotionally open. He is given the responsibility by his elders as a future knowledge holder and storyteller. His identity is deeply rooted in River Country and his cultural knowledge. His vulnerability contrasts with the harshness of the colonial world, at times he seems naive to the world, at least in the early moments of the play. Yet, as the story unfolds, he embodies a quiet strength as he clings to stories and dreams even when displacement threatens to silence him. He is desperate to hold tight the cultural knowledge that has been passed down to him and recognises the invasion of the settlers as a threat to his and his people's survival and that of their culture. Ty is the emotional core of the play, offering hope and connection in the face of loss. He is emboldened through his connection with Neddy and as his feelings for him grow so do his own bravery and resilience.



# FORM, STYLE AND CONVENTION

## Form

Whitefella Yella Tree is a two-hander play set in the early 19th century, on the brink of Australia's most violent historical periods. The intimate structure allows the audience to focus deeply on the emotional and cultural journey of Ty and Neddy, two Aboriginal boys from different mobs. Their relationship unfolds in a liminal space beneath a lemon tree that doesn't belong. Time often feels suspended and history is on the brink of change. The two-hander format intensifies the emotional stakes, placing the audience in close proximity to the boys' vulnerability, humour, and resistance.

The play uses minimalist staging and contemporary costuming to blur the lines between past and present. The lemon tree, a colonial plant, becomes a central symbol both a meeting place and a marker of invasion. Symbolism is woven throughout the play through symbolic prop pieces. Country is evoked through gesture, breath, and poetic fragments. The play's non-linear emotional progression mirrors the characters' internal landscapes, shifting between memory, dream, and reality. Sound design and lighting are used powerfully to evoke mood, mark transitions, and suggest the presence of forces beyond the characters' control. There is a scene created through lighting and sound that the boys exist in an almost dream-like liminal space at times protected from the realities beyond until the end of the play as it fades away.

## Style

The style can be best described as poetic realism, where there is a blend of lyrical dialogue, symbolic imagery, and grounded emotional truth. It is reflective of the creative experimentation of style and form that is often in Aboriginal Theatre. Ty, a holder of knowledge and story speaks in poetic fragments, his language and story often flowing like the river he comes from. Neddy's speech is more restrained, but equally rich in subtext. The boy's speech belies the historical period of the play and nods to the continuation of culture and Aboriginal resilience across time. With their speech and costume they could be of today. The play doesn't consistently rely on naturalistic dialogue; instead, it often uses rhythm, repetition, and metaphor to express what cannot be said directly. It is often tender and surreal, capturing the depth of longing between the characters and the play's dreamlike tone. This style allows the audience to experience the characters' inner worlds while remaining anchored in the reality of colonisation and cultural loss.

# THEMES AND IDEAS

## Cultural Identity

Whitefella Yella Tree explores the complexities of cultural identity through the lens of two young Aboriginal boys, Ty and Neddy, who belong to different mobs, River and Mountain. All they know and who they are is shaped by their connection to their mobs and Country. Their meeting under the lemon tree becomes a moment of cultural exchange, but also a confrontation with colonial disruption. The play highlights how identity is shaped by connection to Country, language, and kinship, and how these are threatened by the arrival of white settlers.

Ty's identity is closely tied to storytelling. He is gentle and expressive, often speaking in poetic fragments that reflect his deep connection to the land. Neddy, by contrast, is more guarded, his sense of self fractured by the trauma of his sister's removal. Together, they represent two ways of holding culture: one through openness and vulnerability, the other through silence and survival. These ideas are explored in scenes where Ty shares stories and dreams, and in moments where Neddy struggles to articulate his grief. Their relationship becomes a space where culture is both remembered and reimagined, even as colonial forces threaten to erase it.

Ty: I have to know everything –  
And if I don't know it –  
I have to ask the question.  
Imagine looking at everything, and either knowing about it, or knowing that you have to know about it,  
eventually.  
(*Whitefella Yella Tree*, Act 1, Scene 1)

Ty's role in his mob is that of a knowledge holder, he is responsible with learning and remembering the stories and intricacies of his Country, passed down to him by his elders.

## Colonisation

The play is set just before the land is declared "Australia," and colonialism is present not through direct violence, but through symbols and silences. The lemon tree itself is a colonial plant unnatural to the landscape yet growing. It becomes a metaphor for intrusion, for something that doesn't belong. Ty and Neddy meet beneath it, and while their bond grows there, it is also the site of tension and loss.

Neddy's trauma is rooted in colonial violence his sister is taken and his world forever fractured. Ty, too, feels the weight of what's coming, sensing that their way of life is under threat. The play doesn't show colonisers directly, but their presence is felt in the boys' fear, in the stories they tell, and in the silence that surrounds what they cannot say.

These ideas are most evident in scenes where the boys speak of the whitefellas, and in the way they try to hold onto their mobs' knowledge. The lemon tree stands as a constant reminder of what's been planted and what might be lost.

Neddy: They brought up all their sheep. And they started stuffin' their faces and stompin' on everything...  
And they chose me to kill 'em.

*(Whitefella Yella Tree, Act 2, Scene 10–11)*

There is an ecological and cultural destruction brought about by colonisation and it forces Neddy into violent resistance. The lemon tree and sheep and references to other invasive species a symbol of intrusion on a balanced eco system.

Neddy: They took a whole heap of us. Rounded 'em up. And they—They took my sister, too. Grabbed her by the hair.

*(Whitefella Yella Tree, Act 3, Scene 2–3)*

This example of colonial violence is explicit and visceral. It names the violence of removal and the fracturing of kinship.

## Resilience

Despite the looming threat of colonisation, *Whitefella Yella Tree* is a story of resilience. Ty and Neddy find strength in each other, in their mobs, and in their connection to Country. Their love is tender and fragile, but it is also defiant, a quiet resistance against a looming force that seeks to erase them.

Ty's resilience is emotional in that he continues to dream, to speak, to hope. Neddy's is physical and internal where he carries his pain but keeps moving forward. Together, they show that survival is not just about enduring it's about finding moments of joy, connection, and truth.

We see resilience in scenes where Ty reaches out despite fear, and where Neddy begins to let his guard down. Their movement between mobs, between silence and speech, becomes a metaphor for the strength it takes to live despite being surrounded by fear and threat.

TY: River's dry up. And stuff stays... dormant. Like, asleep. Baby fish. Plants. Bugs. Whatever. And they sleep sleep sleep, just waiting for a drink. And when it comes – they know what to do.

*(Whitefella Yella Tree, Act 3, Scene 7)*

Country as a metaphor for survival. Culture and People can persevere in the face of insurmountable odds, holding fast that one day their place is known and felt again and that they have always been there.

## LGBTQIA+

Blak queerness is central to *Whitefella Yella Tree*, not as a modern label, but as a lived experience that predates colonisation. Ty and Neddy's relationship unfolds with tenderness and tension, exploring what it means to love freely and without shame or persecution. Their queerness is expressed through gesture, silence, and metaphor never labelled, but deeply felt.

The play challenges colonial ideas of gender and sexuality by placing love between two Aboriginal boys at its heart. Their connection is spiritual, emotional, and physical, and it exists outside the binaries imposed by settler culture.

These ideas are most powerfully seen in scenes where the boys navigate their feelings, express themselves with hesitant touches, poetic confessions, and moments of shared vulnerability. Their love is not just personal, it is unavoidably political. It's a reclamation of space, of story, and of self.

Neddy: I want to be with you for ever and ever and ever. And you want that too... We'll do a ceremony. And we'll be stuck together. It's like glue, but with words.

*(Whitefella Yella Tree, Act 4, Scene 15–16)*

This improvised "wedding" scene embodies Blak queer love as sacred and defiant. The boys hold their own ceremony to signify their commitment and love for each other in pure and joyful expression.



# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## Activity 1: Colonisation *The Lemon Tree Grows*

**Focus:** Explore the symbolism of the lemon tree throughout the play and how physically symbolic images can be created on stage.

### Practical Activity

- In small groups, students will create a physical representation of the lemon tree using their bodies, creating one image together.
- They should then explore how they can show the transformation across the play:
  - Act 1: Small, innocuous, full of blossoms.
  - Act 3: Thornier, roots spreading, tension rising.
  - Act 5: Rigid, dangerous, leaves that are sharp and cutting.
- Layer in sound, this may be breath, whispers, noises that reflect colonial presence like gunshots or sheep bleating.

### Post Activity

Create a yarnning circle to discuss how the tree's growth mirrors the boys' journey and the impact of colonisation?

## Activity 2: Invasion & Colonisation *The Yella Tree*

**Focus:** Exploring how symbolism is used to reflect key themes and historical events of the play

### Discussion

- What is the symbolism behind the lemon tree's presence on Country? How might it reflect the impact of colonisation?
- If you were to stage the play, how would you represent the lemon tree physically or symbolically? Would it be literal, abstract, looming, fragile?

### Practical Activity

- After Neddy's colourful explanation of the yella tree, Ty shares his story of how it came to be, seen in the script extract below. In pairs create your own explanation for the yella tree.
- Evoke the story with movements and gestures and consider your use of space, as if you are sharing the story by a campfire. .

TY: I reckon it's actually a lonely lover, turned into a tree for disobeying a spirit.

NEDDY: Laaaaaame.

She was a beautiful woman – the spirit – and any man who saw her would, like, faint.

And then she'd trap them in the mud.

But one day, two lovers came along, and they only had eyes for each other –

NEDDY: Gross.

TY: And they didn't faint, because she had no power over them – So she turned them into trees.  
And she planted them either side of the river, so they'd just have to look at each other for eternity – but never touch.  
So here's one of them, staring out –  
Waiting waiting waiting -  
Just hoping to catch a glimpse of his lover.  
But knowing he'll never feel a loving touch –  
Or the squeeze of a hand –  
Or the tingle of a whispered secret –  
Or the -

**Post Activity:**

After the activity create a yarning circle to reflect on the activity and discuss the following questions:

- What might the lemon tree represent for future generations? Is it a scar, a seed, or something else entirely?
- How does the lemon tree function as a symbol in the play? What does it represent to Ty and Neddy?
- What do Ty's stories reveal about his connection to Country? How does this shape your understanding of Aboriginal culture?
- How does Dylan Van Den Berg use humour and contemporary language in a historical setting? What effect does this have on the audience?

**Activity 3: Exploring Character**

**Focus:** to explore the inner and outer world of the characters, their pressures and the connection they find with each other through the concept 'role on the wall'.

**Activity**

Draw a large human stencil shape for both characters. Inside the shape discuss and write down the following for both characters:

- Values
- Qualities
- Thoughts
- Feelings

Outside the shapes discuss and write the following for both characters:

- Influences
- Roles
- Pressures
- Expectations

**Discussion**

- What is our understanding of who each of these boys are when we first meet them and how do the external factors change them over time?

#### **Activity 4: Exploring Character Connection**

**Focus:** To explore the connection between the characters and finding ways to use physical theatre to express connection and tension without words.

#### **Set up**

- Play music or sound that adds to the atmosphere of the room
- Students enter the space and begin walking with awareness, neutral bodies, soft focus.
- Introduce vocabulary:
  - Spatial Relationship: How close or far you are from others
  - Tempo: Speed of movement
  - Duration: How long a movement lasts
  - Repetition: Returning to a gesture or path

#### **Practical Activity**

Without speaking or making eye contact, each student chooses someone in the space to be in tension with.

- Their task is to maintain opposite proxemics to that person, if the chosen person moves closer, they move away, if they slow down, they speed up.
- Encourage students to explore levels, angles, and pathways to maintain the dynamic.
- Students should move around the space and without indicating who, choose someone else
- This should go for a few minutes to allow intensity to build
- Students now mirror the energy of their chosen person while maintaining opposite spatial choices.
- Introducing gesture motifs students choose one recurring movement that reflects their character's emotional state.
- Allow pairs to organically find moments of synchronicity and then disconnect.
- Call "freeze" and ask students to observe the spatial relationships around them.

#### **Observation**

- Invite a few pairs to step forward and replay their tension sequence with added intention.
- The audience should observe what is created in terms of connection and tension between the characters.
- Students may layer in text fragments from the play or poetic narration to heighten meaning.
- Students can then turn these pieces into silent or with moments of dialogue realised pieces.

Integrate Stillness and Breath as expressive tools Layer in poetic narration or inner monologue. Use lighting or soundscape to heighten the atmosphere.

#### **Post Activity**

The following questions can be used for provocation of discussion in a yarning circle or for extended response critical analysis, drawing on specific moments from the play.

- How is the relationship between Neddy and Ty initially reflected through the use of space and how does this change as the play progresses?
- How does the play challenge stereotypes about Aboriginal masculinity?
- In what ways does the relationship between Ty and Neddy resist colonial narratives?

- How does the play explore the tension between tradition and survival in a changing world?

### **Activity 5: Culture and Identity *River and Mountain Mob***

**Focus:** Exploring contrasting environments through gesture, movement, and spatial dynamics.

#### **Practical Activity**

Set Up:

Play ambient nature sounds or soft instrumental music to evoke a sense of place. Invite students to find their own space. Students imagine they are beside a river fluid, circular, continuous.

- Create a sequence of three abstract gestures that reflect the river and its surroundings.
- Gestures should have a beginning, middle, and end, flowing seamlessly into one another.
- Encourage use of Laban qualities: glide, float, dab (light, sustained, indirect).
- Repeat the sequence, gradually expanding use of space, levels and tempo until refined.

Shift the imagery:

- Students now imagine themselves in a mountainous landscape structured, elevated, grounded.
- Create a new sequence of three gestures, this time using levels, angles, and weight.
- Encourage Laban efforts like press, punch, wring (strong, bound, direct).
- Repeat and refine, exploring how the body responds to the imagined terrain.

Creating contrast:

- Divide the group in half: one performs the river sequence, the other the mountain sequence.
- Some students may watch and observe how the two energies contrast in space.

Putting it together:

- Pair students from opposite groups.
- In pairs, experiment with order, pacing, and mirroring.
- Create a short movement piece that juxtaposes the two environments but also weaves them together
- Explore spatial relationship, tempo, and repetition.

#### **Post Activity**

After the activity, students should create a yarning circle to reflect and discuss:

- How did you respond differently to the imagery of the river and the mountain?
- How did the contrast between environments help you connect with someone else's perspective?
- How do Ty and Neddy's mobs (River vs Mountain) reflect emotional, cultural, and physical differences and how their relationship bridges those divides?

### Activity 6: Critical Analysis

**Focus:** These questions can be used as provocation for class discussion or for extended response drawing on specific moments from the play to support key arguments.

- How does *Whitefella Yella Tree* use form and structure to convey the impact of colonisation on identity and relationships?
- Discuss how the play positions the audience to empathise with Ty and Neddy's experience of love and loss.
- How does the play engage with the concepts of survival and resistance in Aboriginal storytelling?



Joseph Althouse & Danny Howard

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Production Photos courtesy of Prudence Upton

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