

**SYDNEY
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ON CUE

A photograph of two young women with serious expressions, wearing white, ruffled blouses. They are positioned side-by-side against a dark blue background. The woman on the left has dark, curly hair, and the woman on the right has long, straight brown hair.

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

A play by Tom Wright

Adapted from the novel by Joan Lindsay

Directed by Ian Michael

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Image: Kirsty Marillier and Olivia De Jonge. Photo: Derek Henderson.

Compiled by Kelly Young.

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

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

A play by Tom Wright

Adapted from the novel by Joan Lindsay

Directed by Ian Michael

Cast

Olivia

Olivia De Jonge

Kirsty

Kirsty Marillier

Lorinda

Lorinda May Merrypor

Masego

Masego Pitso

Contessa

Contessa Treffone

Creative Team

Director

Ian Michael

Designer

Elizabeth Gadsby

Lighting Designer

Trent Suidgeest

Composer & Sound Designer

James Brown

Movement Director & Intimacy

Coordinator

Danielle Micich

Fight Director

Tim Dashwood

Voice & Text Director

Charmian Gradwell

Production Team

Production Manager

Alexandra Moon

Stage Manager

Stephanie Storr

Assistant Stage Manager

Mia Kanzaki

Costume Coordinator

Scott Fisher

Backstage Wardrobe Supervisor

Isabella Sigglekow

Costume Day Maintenance

Hazel Fisher

Lighting Supervisor

Jesse Grieg

Floor Electrician

Oscar de Gruchy

Sound Supervisor

Hayley Forward

Sound Operator

David Trumpmanis

Video Supervisor

Michael Hedges

Staging Supervisor

David Tongs

Props Supervisor

Jason Lowe

Set Construction Supervisor

Boaz Shemesh

Scenic Art Supervisor

Ron Thiessen

Drafting

Dallas Winspear

Rehearsal Photographer

Daniel Boud

THIS ADAPTATION OF *PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK* WAS FIRST PRODUCED BY MALTHOUSE THEATRE AND BLACK SWAN STATE THEATRE COMPANY PREMIERING AT THE MERLYN THEATRE ON 26 FEBRUARY 2016, WITH SUBSEQUENT TRANSFER TO THE HEATH LEDGER THEATRE OPENING ON 1ST APRIL 2016.

THIS PRODUCTION OPENED AT DRAMA THEATRE, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE ON 21 FEBRUARY 2024.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE: IAN MICHAEL

1900.

The Eve of Federation.

St. Valentine's Day.

Picnic at Hanging Rock, adapted by Tom Wright after Joan Lindsay's haunting novel, invites us into a world rich with mystery and tension. Set against the stifling heat of the Victorian Highlands, the story follows a group of schoolgirls and their teacher who vanish during what seems to be an innocent picnic, they ascend the monolith, being drawn by some invisible force. At its core, the narrative transcends the enigma of the missing girls. It is a haunting, a meditation on colonial anxieties in early and present Australia, where the land itself becomes a character—simultaneously alluring, feared, and unacknowledged, it forces us to confront deeper questions about repression, identity, and the disruption of unceded land.

Tom's adaptation so skillfully blurs the lines between myth and reality, as we bring this haunting to life through the voices of five present day schoolgirls. These voices are not just characters—they are conduits, possessed by the story, they are present in 1900, yet they are everywhere and nowhere. The girls' disappearance becomes more than a mystery—it becomes a story of horror, a trauma that reverberates through Appleyard College, unsettling everyone around it.



Lorinda Merrypor, Olivia De Jonge, Masego Pitso, Contessa Treffone, Ian Michael, Charmian Gradwell, and Kirsty Marillier

Before it was immortalised in Joan Lindsay’s novel and its film adaptation, Ngannelong—its rightful name—was a significant site of mens ceremony, corroborees, trade, and initiation for the Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri), Dja Dja Wurrung, and Taungurung, the Traditional Custodians of the land, marking the boundaries between the territories of several different clan groups. At its core, this production is a story of disruption—the disturbance of sacred land, the imposition of colonial names, structures, and ideologies upon stolen land disrupts not only the land itself but also its people.

Beneath the surface of the narrative lies the vigilance of colonialism, as well as the repression of young women who are forced to navigate the oppressive expectations of a colonial system. As makers of this production, we have been deeply aware of the absence of First Nations voices in this story and reflect on its implications. Throughout the design and rehearsal processes we drew inspiration from Tom Wright’s provocation, “this land isn’t empty, and never was... a complex web of myths, rites, songs, wisdoms had been spun, so dense the crossover space between human body and land became blurred, unfocused, itself a song”. We have sought to bring to light the intrinsic connection to Country that colonisation seeks to disrupt and to amplify the repression faced by young girls in a colonial society—two intertwined legacies of trauma and disruption that continues to ripple through history, shaping both the past and present.

In the retelling of this story, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* challenges us to confront the disturbing legacies of colonialism and to reflect on our complicity in the violence inflicted upon both the land and its people. In retelling its mysteries, we confront our own ignorance and engage with the unresolved meaning it holds—inviting us to project our interpretations and fears onto a narrative that shapes our understanding of ourselves and the vastness that underpins our time and history.



Olivia De Jonge, Kirsty Marillier, Contessa Treffone, Lorinda Merrypor, and Masego Pitso

WRITER'S NOTE: TOM WRIGHT

Joan Lindsay wrote *Picnic at Hanging Rock* when she was 71.

As a girl she had attended a small private school in the Victorian countryside. It was the soft-focus Edwardian years before the realities of the twentieth century came crashing down at Gallipoli and the Somme; Lindsay was of a generation old enough not only to remember the First World War but life before it as well. And, of course, she came from privilege, that deep privilege of the squattocracy and Victorian mercantile classes. Before marrying into the famous artistic family, she was Joan à Beckett Weigall, her name weighty with men of business, the law, pastoralism, trade. If anyone came from the class that embodied colonisation, it was her.

But *Picnic at Hanging Rock* isn't a book of that era. It might be set in 1900, the cusp of Federation and notional independence, but this is a book of the 1960s. It was written in the same year as *Georgy Girl*, *Dune*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. And, like those novels, it's about more than what can be seen on the surface. It's about language. And patriarchy. And sexual psychology. And metaphysical dread.

And, of course, it is a book about colonisation. What it did to us. What it did to country.

"It's about language. And patriarchy. And sexual psychology. And metaphysical dread."

Lindsay had written over the course of her interesting life. But *Picnic* felt like it came out of nowhere. She had written nothing previously even close to its power, and never would again. And she wrote it quickly, as if some unseen force was telling it through her. As if this story needed to be told and had to find a conduit. It's still white Australia's most disquieting tale of itself.

This stage adaptation attempts to capture that disquiet. The actual events of the picnic only occupies a few pages of the novel, here it becomes a spell-casting, or a recitation, like an assignment for the senior girls, a retelling of a key event that will never be understood. It is as if some silhouettes from a Blackman painting have been possessed, for a while, and play out a myth of multiple worlds. The Old World, with its niceties, corsets, tea cups, poetry. A New World, that they can sense but not describe. And possibly, other worlds, many other worlds, if one slips through a portal...

Learn more about the writing of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* [here](#).

SYNOPSIS

Five girls in school uniforms and hats, indistinguishable from those you would see on a Melbourne tram or in a Charles Blackman painting. They retell a tale so central to Australia's national identity it has mutated into a myth.

St. Valentines Day, 1900. The prim girls of Appleyard College write love poems and prepare for a luncheon at the picnic ground near Hanging Rock in the Macedon Ranges. They've been forewarned to expect a dangerous place with venomous snakes and poisonous ants. Only one student is kept back from the picnic, the strong-willed but sensitive Sara, who refuses to memorise the English poetry that Headmistress Appleyard believes will civilise her.

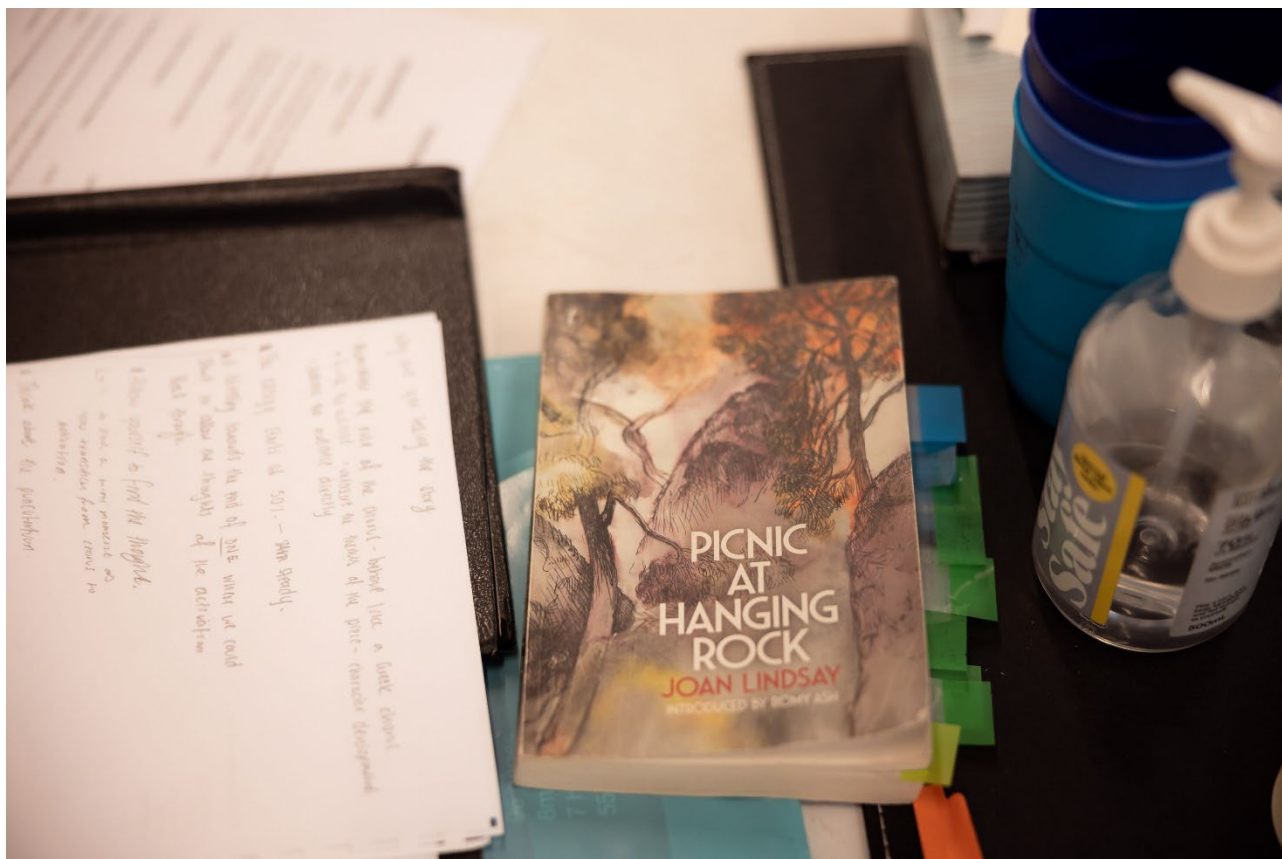
When they arrive, they are confronted by a mineral marvel, a castle of rock suspended in a bright sky. The girls are not of this world. Under the remains of a volcano, they twirl their hair and sip tea.

The sweet and pretty Miranda has a million love notes and an angelic head of golden hair. After lunch, she leads three other girls up the rock: the beautiful Irma, the intellectual Marion and the gauche and babyish Edith. On the rock, time seems to stop.

They are watched by two men; Michael, a young Englishman on holiday in Victoria and his world-weary coachman, Albert. Michael is transfixed by Miranda.

The girls ascend higher and higher in full skirted frocks, compelled by a mysterious force. Edith falls behind and soon runs back down to the picnic screaming for help.

The monolith is silent, and the girls have utterly vanished.



CURRICULUM LINKS

DRAMA

Stage 5

FORM & STYLE

- Monologue
- Heightened Realism
- Gothic Horror

Stage 6

FORM & STYLE

- Monologue
- Heightened Realism
- Gothic Horror
- Australian Drama and Theatre

ENGLISH

Stage 5

- Appropriation of a classic text
- Core Textual Concepts: Genre, Code and Convention, Perspective, Point of View, Literary Value, Context, Character

Stage 6

- Preliminary English Extension 1, 'Texts, Culture and Value'

SUITABLE FOR

Years 9 - 12

THEMES & IDEAS

- Constructions of Gender and Colonisation
- Colonialism
- Time, Dreaming, Space and the Land

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

There are many characters in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. All are played by five actors who transform between them as necessary.

Miranda

Traditionally, the character of Miranda has been imagined as white, blonde, beautiful and willowy – a “Botticelli angel.” (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 6). She is a senior student at Appleyard College and unofficial leader of the students and the object of desire for many of the characters including the other young women at the College, the young men at Ngannelong and the staff at Appleyard. As a model of traditional femininity, her body and beauty are to be admired and then contained and controlled. As an objectified woman, the audience learns little about Miranda’s inner world and our understanding of who she is projected upon her others.

Irma

A beautiful, wealthy young woman with “ink black” (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg.2) curls who, at the start of the play, is invested in the notion of romantic love, the idea of St Valentine’s Day and the associated heteronormative, privileged future that lies ahead of her. At the beginning of the play, she asks Miranda why their beautiful French teacher has foregone the supposed benefits of marriage to be “... a schoolteacher. Of all the dreary things in the world”. (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 6) Irma is one of two survivors of Ngannelong, found by Michael Fitzhubert just days after the others go missing.

Marion

Marion is the scholar of the group, with her interest in Mathematics and Geometry. She is forthright, intelligent and prickly, particularly where Edith is concerned. It is Marion who at the start of the play wishes to make a few measurements at the base of the Rock, is the catalyst for the others to begin their explorations of Ngannelong. It could be argued that it is this imposition of western ways of knowing and being in the landscape that triggers Ngannelong’s energetic response to the presence of white women in a space reserved for Men’s Ceremony.

Edith

Edith is 14 years old at the beginning of the play. She is described as having

“.... gauche ribbons in her hair
Was not in the queue when charm was being distributed”.
(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 3)

Edith is whiny, irritating and somewhat unintelligent and unimaginative. She struggles to grasp her schoolwork and social cues. Traditionally Edith has been contrasted to the beauty and culture of the other young women, unable to fit into the heteronormative middle-class world as the others do. Her lack of physical prowess means that she is unable to follow Miranda, Marion and Irma and, as a result, does not disappear with them.

Sara

Sara is a student at Appleyard College, but unlike the other students, she has been enrolled by her guardian, Mr Cosgrove, because she has been abandoned by her parents. Sara is described by Edith as having romantic feelings for Miranda and by Irma as being a “Baby deer. Never survive in civilisation”. (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 26) Director Ian Michael has described Sara as having a beautiful sense of free thinking and being committed to the value of her own thoughts and opinions. This sets Sara on a collision course with Mrs Appleyard, whose role on an individual and allegorical level is to maintain and perpetuate existing power structures within the college and into the future.

Mrs Appleyard

The Headmistress of Appleyard College. Mrs Appleyard has a strict and inflexible understanding of what she considers to be appropriate for middle- class women and girls. She values middle class ideas of refinement and docility imported from Britain, which she enforces with cruelty. As the mystery of the disappearing girls remains unsolved, Mrs Appleyard’s life begins to fray, and she descends into mental illness and alcoholism, ultimately murdering Sara, who has steadfastly refused to engage in Mrs Appleyard’s educational regime. Mrs Appleyard ends her life at Ngannelong upon realising that her life’s work has been for nothing.

Miss McCraw

A Mathematics teacher who accompanies the girls to Ngannelong on the 14 February. She is lost with the other three girls on the Rock. Mrs Appleyard describes Miss McCraw as:

A woman of the highest propriety
Completely immersed in her mathematics
Calculus.....
To my knowledge she has not a single friend
Or acquaintance
On this side of the world.

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, (pp. 22 - 23)

Michael Fitzherbert

Michael Fitzherbert is a young English gentleman who is having a champagne luncheon picnic at Ngannelong with his relatives when Irma, Miranda, Marion and Miss McCraw go missing. He has been in Australia for three weeks, living with his Aunt and Uncle. Michael Fitzherbert is one of the last people to see the girls and Miss McCraw alive, having watched them begin their ascent as he reads a novel under a tree. He follows them briefly as they walk. By his own admission he is called back to the picnic by Albert and leaves with his family thereafter. During a garden party, Michael Fitzherbert decides to search again for the missing girls, finding Irma on Ngannelong days after her disappearance, at great cost to himself.

Albert

The Fitzherbert's servant. Albert is at the champagne luncheon with his employers, taking care of the serving and clearing of the food and drink. He is a working-class man and whistles at the young women as they walk past the Fitzherbert family.

Ngannelong/Hanging Rock

Ian Michael, director of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* sees Ngannelong, or Hanging Rock, as a key character in the production. Ngannelong is a living entity that has been significant for First Peoples for millennia. With its own energy and agency, Ngannelong's life as a now dormant volcano has had its own journey, travelling over time from Queensland to Victoria, shifting and moving with the Earth's crust.



Contessa Treffone

FORM, STYLE AND CONVENTION

Form

The narrative form of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* reflects the fusion of several theatrical forms and styles, with the linear narrative of the present (the five schoolgirls) and past (the world of Ngannelong/Hanging Rock), constantly interrupting each other as the production moves through time and space. The effect of this choice by the playwright is to explore the layers of time in which stories are told and retold, encouraging the audience to reflect on the dynamic tapestry that makes up modern Australia. The fusion of these narrative structures supports the mood of this production, contributing to a dreamy, timeless space in which First Nations understandings of time merge, dissolve, and emerge alongside Western constructions.

Monologue

A monologue is a performance by one actor. It can be the performance of a long piece of dialogue within a play, or a production such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, that contains only one actor playing a range of distinct roles. The creation of characters in this production uses the technique of transformational acting, in which one actor transforms instantly between characters/roles. Actors change their movement, gesture, physicality, facial expressions, voice, pace, and energy as part of this process. Additionally, the use of the Elements of Production, including props and costume, can aid the actor in signalling this change to the audience.

Style

Heightened Realism and Naturalism.

Realism is the recreation of real life on the stage, appropriate to the context and characters developed in the script. This applies to the way in which actors strive for authenticity in their performances and the ways in which designers use the Elements of Production. Realism is less focused on creating the intricate detail found in Naturalism, particularly in the Elements of Production and the construction of time. Heightened Realism is a more poetic type of Realism in which dialogue, the Elements of Production and acting styles are exaggerated to move beyond the experience of “real life”. The result is an amplification of the emotional experience for the audience.

Naturalism is a strict recreation of the world of the play, involving rigorous attention to the details found in the text, particularly in the case of the Elements of Production (Set) in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

Australian Gothic Theatre

This production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* retains the elements of gothic style from the original novel by Joan Lindsay. Appropriated from 18th Century Gothic conventions, Australian Gothic Theatre emerged in the late 1960s to explore the ugly legacy of colonisation by framing and foregrounding the monstrous behaviour of the British. In the case of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the cultural anxieties held by Australians around invasion, genocide, murder, and cultural destruction can be seen in the uncanny nature of the Victorian feminine contrasted with the masculine purpose of the rock as seen by First Nations culture and lore. In the face of this disjunction language fails, time becomes meaningless, and points to the deep schism between two ways of being in Australia.

“Such theatre and performance works draw their politics and aesthetics from a range of influences, including the more established tradition of Australian Gothic film championed by Peter Weir (*Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Cars that Ate Paris*) and Jocelyn Moorhouse (*The Dressmaker*), from the horror film genre, from the abundant ghostly myths and legends associated with bush, desert and coastal landscapes, and from oral storytelling and musical traditions that focus on violent and spectral events”.

Mary Lockhurst (Accessed 8 January 2025)



THEMES AND IDEAS

Construction of Gender

This production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* explores the complexity of the relationship between gender and colonialism in Australia, delving into the resonances of Victorian constructions of femininity, contemporary constructions of what it means to be a young woman in Australia, and the direct connection between white women and colonisation.

Victorian and Edwardian constructions of middle-class, white femininity valued passive, domestically focused women and girls. Their role in society was to raise children, run the home and provide the unseen labour required to ensure that middle-class men were able to move into the public domain and engage in their careers. Structures in society such as the family unit and the education system ensured that the focus of young girls was directed toward homemaking. This included the practical skills of sewing and cooking, but also the skills coded by society as caring and nurturing, such as playing a musical instrument, singing, and learning poetry. These skills ensured that the lives of children (and husbands) were cultivated appropriately to their class in the home, which was constructed as a place of refuge from the outside world.

Contemporary constructions of femininity have changed somewhat since 1900, however, there is still a direct link to the Victorian and Edwardian values that suggest that women and girls should be quiet, passive, and ultimately responsible for the emotional and physical labour that supports the modern heteronormative family. This choice can be seen in designer Elizabeth Gadsby's costume design choices about the type of school uniform the five contemporary characters wear in STC's production, layered across the top of more traditional Victorian costuming as the characters move between time periods.

Picnic at Hanging Rock begins with the following stage direction, placing the world of the play clearly in contemporary Australia:

"A room.

A girl in a school uniform, with hat. As you would on a Melbourne tram. Or a Blackman painting".

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 1)



Costume Design Reference Images, Elizabeth Gadsby 2024

Designer Elizabeth Gadsby has created costumes that reinforce the audience's understanding of contemporary teenage femininity. Each actor wears a contemporary middle class, private school uniform of a grey box pleated skirt, blue blazer, white shirt, blue school tie and long white socks. Each girl also wears a white school hat, a clear indicator of class and privilege in contemporary Australia. Importantly, the inclusion of a traditional school hat visually references the resonances of Victorian and Edwardian expectations of girlhood, which provides a throughline for our understanding of the continued expectations on young women in Australia.



Appleyard College, the all-girls school attended by the characters in the play, is the site for the importation and imposition of Western constructions of girlhood. At the core of the white, Western education systems, is the dissemination and reinforcement of both imperial economic and patriarchal power. The institution of Appleyard College, owned by Mrs Appleyard, is a place where the cruelties and misogyny of the education process are harnessed to ensure that independent thought, ambition and a wider engagement with the outside world are stifled, ensuring that young middle-class women and girls submit to imperial patriarchal structures. The punishment and death of Sara at the hands of Mrs Appleyard is an allegory for patriarchal control of women, in this case, at the hands of a woman who colludes with the patriarchy for her own personal power.

This production, directed by Ian Michael, explores the benefits white women have derived from their position in Australian society to the detriment of First Nations women and girls. White women and the invading structures that accompanied their arrival, ensured that First Nations peoples were subjected to the hierarchical structures brought with the British in 1788, placing First Nations women at the service of white women (and men). Appleyard College and Mrs Appleyard impose imperial structures and values on the Land around them, banishing First Nations ways of knowing and being through the imposition of power structures into and onto the Land.

The theatrical style of Australian Gothic Horror imagines the physical building of Appleyard College as an energetic presence - a monstrous representation of colonisation – with an ugly and malign energy that contains (and is an allegory for) the unwelcome invasion of the British. The imposed structure of the school building and its decay in tandem with the decay of its owner, Mrs Appleyard, and seen in the abuse and death of Sara, points to the sovereignty of the First Peoples and their resistance. Mrs Appleyard and her college represent the invading forces of Empire. Their unravelling and ultimate destruction by bush fire is an allegory for the failure of colonial society and the power of the Land as it resists the imposition of western power structures. As Mrs Appleyard begins to unravel, so does her college, reflecting the alien and ugly morality of the imperial project:

The old girl looks a fright.
Looks a horror.
A creature from a fable.
From a horrible story
Skin grey.....
She is being eaten from inside
And from without.....
Sprints
Into the abyss
As we all should.
Blackout.

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 65)

Discussion Question

What are the expectations for young women in Edwardian England/Australia? What are the similarities between 1900 and today? Why might there still be similarities between these expectations?



The Impact of Colonisation

“*Picnic at Hanging Rock* compels us to question what happens when we don’t tread lightly and (we) disrupt sacred grounds of ceremony and initiation and impose foreign structures on stolen land”.

Ian Michael, Director. (Used with permission). 28th November 2024.

Imperialism is the way in which one country extends its power and control over another. Imperialism can take several forms, one of which is the process of colonisation. **Colonisation** should be understood as one of several strategies that an imperial power may use to extend its influence over another group of people. A **decolonised** approach to theatre-making is one that prioritises and reframes the traditional imperial narrative that has been widely disseminated and accepted by dominant culture.

The expression of imperial power in Australia can be seen to shift and change in response to unfolding economic, social and cultural contexts. In Australia, the landing of the First Fleet on 26 January 1788 was the official day on which the process of colonisation began in the form of a physical landing – an invasion. From there, tiny outposts of the British Empire were established across stolen land, decimating First Nations traditions and lives. As this process occurred, the outposts became both a site of imperial power and a metaphor for what Western civilization stood for, keeping imperial influence at the forefront of white, local interests and silencing First Nations ways of being. In this way, the power of Empire can be seen as both an overarching, global experience but also a very specific, localised experience.

The global and the local can be seen in the experience of Ngannelong or Hanging Rock. Western agriculture and mining interests were the priority, ensuring that the First Peoples of the area were removed from the land to access their natural resources. Ngannelong, a rock formation located near the traditional boundary between three Aboriginal groups – the Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri), the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Taungurrung (Justin and Menon, 2023) had been renamed by the British as Hanging Rock, Mount Diogenes and Dryden’s Rock (Justin and Menon, 2023). The renaming of Ngannelong, along with the renaming of all other stolen land, reinforced the imperial imperative of Terra Nullius, providing a legal basis for land stealing but also functioning as an erasure of culture and connection to prioritise settler culture.

Jason Tamiru writes:

“At first, I refrained from naming the Rock due to the reality of seeing it listed differently in a number of different places. After speaking to family, the rightful name of Hanging Rock is Ngannelong. Picnic at Ngannelong.

The truth is my people were hit hard during the frontier wars. The Western region is known to us as the Killing Fields. The naming of the Rock is with all those that come in my dreams. Australia is starting to learn that there is a black history in this country that needs to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Long before the 1967 novel 1975 film and the naming of Hanging Rock, Tribes of the Dja Dja Wurrung, Woi Wurrung and Taungurrung would gather at that location for important Men’s ceremony. This is a place where big business was held: Corroborees, Initiation Ceremonies, Songline Ceremonies, trade and relationship building and place where laws were made and passed. The mystique and spiritual essence of the rock has contributed to the story of our Dreaming.” (2016)



Ngannelong (Hanging Rock) Reference, Elizabeth Gadsby

The imperial invaders sought to break the connection between First Peoples, Land and culture so that the process of land stealing and the consolidation of empire might be seen to be a legitimate process. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* takes place a century after the first invasion and explores the result of the imposition of British structures on stolen land over that time.

Ian Michael's production holds up this process for the audience to interrogate, exploring the resonances of our colonial past on the present and future. Decolonising of the myth of the (white) missing child, a cultural trope developed by the British to control the ways in which the Land was envisioned by settlers as they cleared and settled it, challenges the audience to rethink their understanding of this cultural trope. Far from their own land and their understanding of its rhythms, patriarchal and capitalist understandings of Australia encouraged a construction of the bush as a dangerous and hostile place, particularly for non-Indigenous women and children. This view of the land provided the justification in the minds of the settlers (coded male) to move through it, clear it, and settle it, to create a "safe" space for themselves and their families. This thinking has led to the generation and maintenance of a binary understanding of the Land, in which knowable "civilised" (coded white) spaces provide sanctuary from the unknown and feared "other" and the ideological acceptance of taking the Land from its original owners.

Director Ian Michael challenges this colonial construction of the world of the play by shattering these ideas, inverting and breaking the idea of the Land as alien, terrifying and untameable. Michael's *Ngannelong* is majestic, beautiful and alive, boldly rejecting imperial presence through its connection with First Peoples and the relationship between them. *Ngannelong*, feeling its connection to the Dja Dja Wurrung, Woi Wurrung and Taungurung challenged and changed by a century of imperialism, acts through time and space to protect its relationship with the First Peoples and their ancestors.

Discussion Questions

How might the local peoples, the Dja Dja Wurrung, Woi Wurrung and Taungurung, have felt when gates were built around the entrance to Ngannelong? What does this represent for them? For Ngannelong?

How might the young white women of the story be perceived by First Peoples as they climbed Ngannelong – a site of traditional Men's ceremony? What is the production saying about this?



Time, Dreaming, Space and the Land.

Picnic at Hanging Rock's failure to resolve the narrative of the lost girls at the conclusion of the play suggests that the imposed idea of 'Australia' remains contested by Australia's First Peoples and their Land, which in this production is a living, energetic entity with connections to the Dreaming. Director Ian Michael takes Western understandings of time and our insistence on containing, measuring and applying binary logic to the world and places it against an understanding of the universe that rests on the Land and the connection to it held by First Peoples. Ngannelong's resistance to imposed imperial narratives considers story, storytelling, and the layers of connection that have existed across time in Australia and offers the potential to imagine a narrative different to those we are most familiar with.

Western understandings of time, space and the Australian landscape are not complete or universally accepted. In Ian Michael's production, the Land itself rejects its containment into such categories. Western culture, built on Enlightenment thinking, segregates the world into binaries - binaries that have been imported and established in Australian culture post 1788, framing our understanding of ourselves as a nation as colonised/coloniser, male/female, and civilisation/natural world. However, the non-linearity of time, its relationship to Ngannelong/Hanging Rock and the lack of a (Western) resolution at the conclusion of play, suggests that ultimately the Dreaming and its cultural connection to the Land is a powerful site of rupture.

The enormity and unknowability of Ngannelong – its age, its size and its cultural connection to the Dreaming – defies any understanding of linear time and the mathematical measures Europeans use to measure it. In contrast, the Victorian era's equivalent of Ngannelong – Appleyard College – an institution that teaches the immutability of mathematics, including calculus, geometry and measurement, is powerless to explain the occurrence at the Rock and make any real inroads into the mystery surrounding the missing girls. This resistance to Western constructs and their inability to explain and codify time, space, and the spirit of the Land, explodes the idea of knowing into fragments, giving glimpses into the palimpsests of the past and reimagining a contemporary Australia that is completely different to who we understand ourselves to be.

Discussion Question

Why is time so important in this production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Constructions of Gender

Activity 1

Picnic at Hanging Rock is set across several time periods. Each of these time periods has different values and attitudes toward women's roles in society.

- a. How does the casting of the play suggest that modern Australia is different to the 1900s?
- b. How does the costume design by Elizabeth Gadsby suggest similarities?

Activity 2

Tom Wright's script provides the creative team with many visual images of femininity in the play.

The final images included from page. 5 of the script contrasts the young women with the Land:

KIRSTY

They are in muslin, calico, silk

Their skin is not made for this sun

They need parasols

Lest they should turn dark

Sink back into the land.

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 2)

KIRSTY

But Miranda is seventeen

Golden yellow locks

She magnetises the air.

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 2)

OLIVIA

Marion

Spectacles

She is the intellectual

Her father is a QC

She will be the New Woman for the nouveau siècle*.

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 4)

*(The nouveau siècle is the new century. In this case, it refers to the 20th Century).

CONTESSA

And there it is

The mineral marvel

A castle suspended in the bright sky
A fist, clenched
Huddled monsters turning their backs
It is not a gentle, manicured park of reverie
It is a carbuncle in this anti-Eden
The girls are beautiful
That is their role
They are young ladies
With their Saint-Valentine cards
Their thoughts of love
And this corpse of a volcano
It is
It is the other thing.

Sound, from above. Faint. Then silence.

(Picnic at Hanging Rock, pg. 8)

Working in groups of 3 – 4 students, read each extract provided.

Once each group has read and understood each extract, the following activities may be undertaken:

- a. Create three tableaux (frozen images) of the type of femininity explored at the start of the play using the first three extracts included above. Each image should have its own adjective that summarises the intention of the image. Perform each image for the class.
- b. Once each of the tableaux has been performed, repeat the images as another member of the class reads one of the extracts from the script. Once each group has performed, discuss each with the class using the following questions:
 - i. What did the images of femininity suggest to you about what was valued about young women in society, both then and now?
 - ii. Did you learn anything new from the images when the script extracts were overlaid over the images? What did you learn?
 - iii. The final extract, spoken by Contessa, sees the character of Ngannelong responding to the presence of the young women. Choose the most evocative of your frozen images and recreate it for the audience. This time, however, the group should think about the ways that they can include the voice of Ngannelong into the image through soundscape. This could be created through the bodies and voices of group members, or, working as sound designers, find a digital sound that represents the experience of the Rock. There are clues in Contessa's monologue about the energetic response of Ngannelong in this moment and a connection between the dialogue, imagery and soundscape should be found.

Activity 3

Ask students to work in groups of 3 – 4.

Research the original growing place of apples using the following questions:

- Where do apples originate from?
- How might they have made their way to Europe?
- Who brought them into Australia?
- What do apples traditionally signify in Western culture?

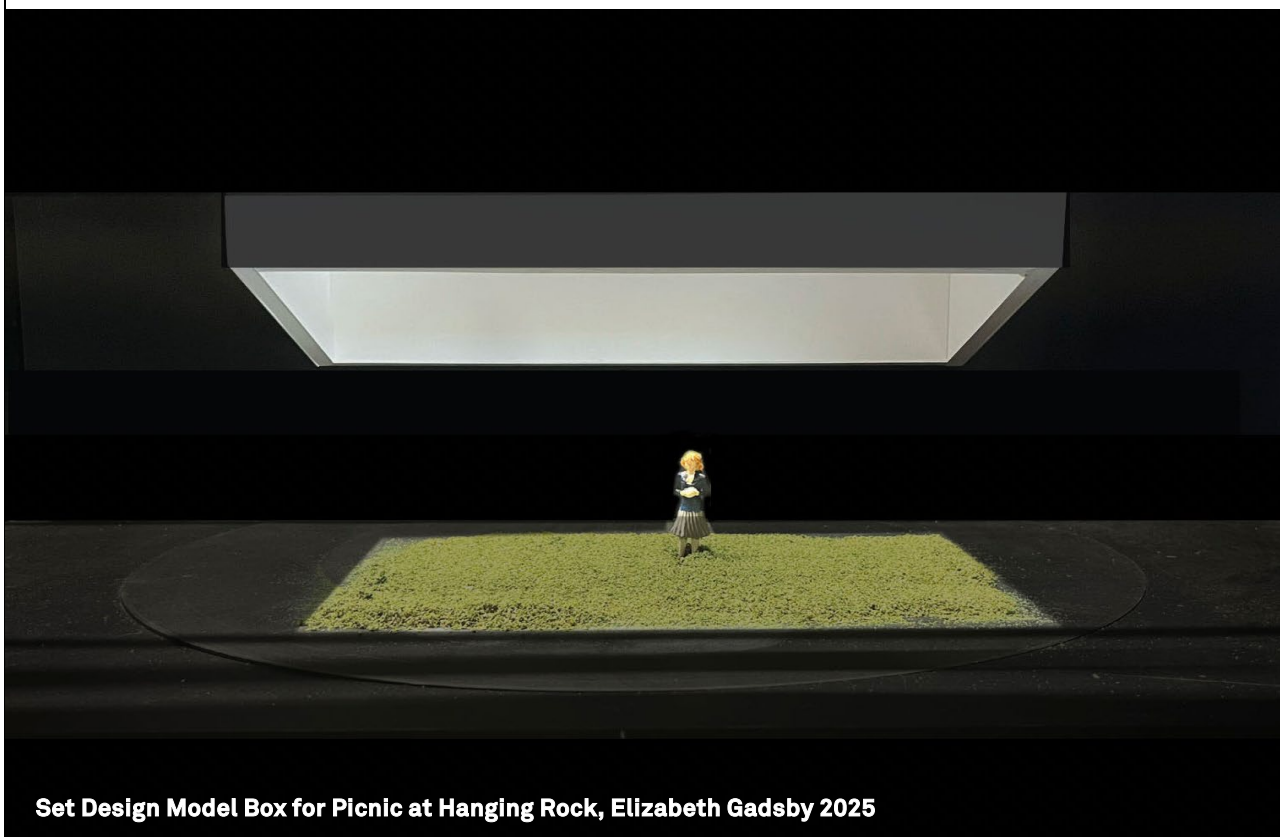
Once each group has explored the questions above, ask each group to use their understanding to create a 60 second performance for the class that answers the following question:

- What is the production suggesting about Appleyard College and Mrs Appleyard and their role in perpetuating white colonial constructions of womanhood in Australia?

Activity 4

Director Ian Michael and Designer Elizabeth Gadsby have not included a physical design of Appleyard College in this production.

Working in the groups above, take on the role of the set designer and design a set that includes Appleyard College. Think about the role of Appleyard College in the production and as the group designs, include the ways that you would present the College at the start of the play and at the end. Present the designs to the class and explain your vision for the set.



The Impact of Colonisation

Activity 1

- a. Use the dialogue from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* included below to improvise and stage the selected moments between Irma and Michael.

Working in groups of 3 – 4, allocate the roles of actor, director and designer so that as the two actors playing Irma and Michael perform, the director and designer can experiment with projected images across the bodies of the actors. These images could include images of Ngannelong juxtaposed with a Victorian garden party, the images from Australian Federation in 1901 found in Pre-Show in the Know, photos of the Australian bush in mid-summer heat, or other images that students would like to experiment with.

Perform for the class audience.

MICHAEL

It is a garden party

The cream of Victoria

They ape home like children playing dress-ups in the nursery

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 34)

IRMA

The doctor said

I mustn't think about the Rock

He says the Rock is a nightmare

And nightmares belong in the Past.

MICHAEL

But perhaps we belong in the past as well

They laugh awkwardly.

(*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, pg. 49)

- b. Once the class has explored these moments, use the questions below to evaluate the issues and concerns being raised. Questions could include:
- What do you think Irma and Michael are suggesting about Australia through their dialogue and its subtext?
 - What effect does the juxtaposition of projected images have on the audience as they watch the performance?
 - Why might these moments be so important for a 2025 production? How does Set Designer Elizabeth Gadsby visually explore the ugly overlay of settler culture onto the land of Australia's First Peoples?

Activity 3

The stone that built Appleyard College is noted (in the novel) as being from the quarry that extracted Castlemaine stone from the Castlemaine area. This is the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung people.

What might the gothic nature of the play suggest about the stone tell the audience about the Land's rejection of the building?

Discuss your thoughts as a class.



Activity 4

As a class, look carefully at Elizabeth Gadsby's design for the set of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, particularly the floor covering, painstakingly made by STC's Props Department.

- Discuss the reasons why Elizabeth Gadsby might have chosen to create this part of the set within the Naturalistic theatrical style.
- How might the actors' bodies impact on the floor covering as they move through the space?
- Why might this be symbolic of the colonial experience?



Time, Space and Land

Activity 1

Picnic at Hanging Rock relies on the theatrical technique of Transformational Acting. Each of the five actors must shift in and out of various characters including across time, age, gender and class. This choice by the playwright supports the vision of the production by defying binaries and creates the fluidity of time and the uncertainty of present or past for the character.

- a. Ask each student to choose three characters from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and three different lines of dialogue. Then, working in groups of three, rehearse these moments and transform between characters. Think about the change of physicality, gesture, facial expression, vocal skills (including pitch, tone and articulation) and pace.
- b. Once each pair of students has experimented with this moment, move back into their groups and make decisions about how we could use lighting, sound and music to enhance these moments of transition for the audience. Rehearse these moments and perform them for the class.
- c. At the end of these two activities, discuss how these choices enhance the dreamlike experience for the audience? Why is this dreamlike quality so important in exploring the telling and retelling of this story for the audience?

Activity 2

The world of the play begins with the following stage directions and monologue:

A room.

A girl in a school uniform, with hat. As you would see on a Melbourne tram. Or a Blackman painting.

Victoria is a thin layer of scum

Floating on a vast volcanic lake.

It is true that in the last few blinks of an eye this crust has held sure

The boiling magma below is forgotten

Or ignored

A truth we pretend we do not know

But quietude is highly unusual in this part of the country

The normal state of affairs is emanations, eruptions,

Puncturing the veneer, spreading ash, pumice, and rock in liquid form.

In a geological sense, we sleep on a sea of flame

And all through our land, there are portals. Gateways to eternal fire.

The doors of Hell.

This is Victoria.

(Picnic at Hanging Rock, pg. 1)

Read this monologue as a class and unpack its meaning together using the following questions:

- a. What is the impact of the contrast between a girl in a room speaking to the enormities of time and space?
- b. Find all the references to memory, time, forgetting, or pretending. What is the monologue suggesting about those of us who might forget?
- c. Show the class the William Ford Painting, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, included below and used by Elizabeth Gadsby as a reference point as she began the process of designing the set:



William Ford, *At the Hanging Rock*, 1875
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

As a class, make a list of the dissimilarities between the Ford painting and Contessa's description of Victoria. Once the list has been completed, draw conclusions about why Ford's visual image of Ngannelong is so different to Contessa's imagery. How might this be helpful in reframing the relationship between the Land and its original owners?

- d. What is the portal? Make predictions about what the class thinks might be being suggested here. Ask each student to write a paragraph explaining what they think the portal is and what might happen to those on the stage if they encounter the portal. As a class, save these and open them at the end of the production.

Activity 3

Scene 9 begins with the projection: **NIGHTMARES BELONG IN THE PAST**. The scene involves a long monologue by Mrs Appleyard, in which she drinks heavily and speaks about her present and her past, as the College crumbles around her.

OLIVIA (Mrs Appleyard)
A school is a world
Of course.
It is a universe
And the forces that compel space
And time
Are here...
Something happened to us
Our people
Our folk
When we came here
We could hear and did not understand
The things that already had names
But we named things that had not been named
Many things that had no name...
(Notices Sara for the first time. Tries to focus on her.)
But you are still here
Sara
Because you have no backstory, no narrative
And therefore
Nowhere to go
You are trapped on this stage.
(Picnic at Hanging Rock, pp 45 - 47).

Over the following scenes various projections and lines of dialogue are spoken, including:

- Sign: HANGING ROCK, DARK, GLITTERING BEAUTY, ROSE BETWEEN THEM.
- KIRSTY (Irma)
I cannot remember a thing. *(Silence)* (pg. 46)
- KIRSTY (Irma)
The doctor said
I mustn't think about the Rock
He says the Rock is a nightmare
And nightmares belong in the Past. (pg. 47)
CONTESSA (Mike):
Perhaps we belong in the past as well. (pg. 47)
- KIRSTY (Irma)
I think am not actually the same person as the one who went up the Rock. (pg. 48)

- Sign: UNKNOWN TO THEMSELVES (pg. 49)
 - KIRSTY (Irma)
The real Sorrento.
In a few days I hope
My parents think it is a good idea to get away from Australia. (pg. 49)
 - CONTESSA (Mike)
No –
Yes of course –
No, all this,
Macedon
Melbourne
Is a replica
Like a stage set,
It isn't real. (pg. 57)
 - CONTESSA (Mike)
North.
Up north.
Deep north,
Where Miranda is from.
(Pause)
You could always come with me. (pg. 57)
- a. Working in groups of 3 – 4 analyse this dialogue to consider the allegorical* meaning of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.
**An allegory is a complete narrative that appears to be about one idea but is about another.*
 - b. Using the dialogue as a stimulus, create and perform a scene for the class in which the group takes the allegory and turn it into a piece of political theatre in which the allegorical idea is now at the forefront of the creation of dramatic meaning.
Perform for the class and discuss the meaning of each performance.

Activity 4

As a class, go back to your original thoughts about the portal and evaluate your initial predictions.

- a. What have you learnt about the importance of space, place and time in director Ian Michael's production?
- b. How might you include the portal into the production if you were the director and set designer?

Extended Response

Answer the following question using your understanding of the play and the practical experiences that you have participated in, including your role as an audience member at the STC's production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

"STC's production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*" offers a way to reimagine Australia's understanding of itself".

How does Director Ian Michael's production communicate this to the audience?

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Rehearsal images courtesy of Daniel Boud

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