

**SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION**

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



WHITEFELLA YELLA TREE

By Dylan Van Den Berg

Directed by Declan Greene & Amy Sole

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Image: Joseph Althouse and Danny Howard. Photo: Derek Henderson.

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.

KEY INFORMATION

WHITEFELLA YELLA TREE

By Dylan Van Den Berg

Directed by Declan Greene & Amy Sole

SUITABLE FOR

Years 9 - 12

CURRICULUM LINKS

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

THEMES & IDEAS

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

FORM & STYLE

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

CONTENT

Mature themes including colonial violence, theatrical haze, blinding lights, loud noises and prop weapons.

APPROX. DURATION

90 mins, no interval

CAST

Joseph Althouse

Danny Howard

CREATIVES

Directors Declan Greene & Amy Sole

Designer Mason Browne

Lighting Co-Designers Kelsey Lee and Katie Sfetkidis

Composer & Sound Designer Steve Toulmin

Dramaturg Andrea James

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- How the author juxtaposes modern language with historical context and what this evokes for our understanding of these characters and their experience.
 - The representation of alternative love stories and how this challenges the narratives we are brought up on.
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SYNOPSIS

“And I think about you all the time – Like, all the time.”

First love: joyous, sweet and youthful. Two boys from neighbouring mobs, puffed up with teenage giddiness, poised on the edge of a world about to change. Their budding love taking root in Country that is about to be declared ‘Australia’.

Following a celebrated premiere season at Griffin Theatre Company, this production is the Sydney Theatre Company debut of Palawa playwright, Dylan Van Den Berg. The former STC Emerging Writer’s Group member is fast forging a career as one of this country’s most significant young playwrights, already having won the Griffin Award, the Rodney Seaborn Playwrights Award, the David Williamson Prize, and two NSW Premier’s Literary Awards.

In the early years of colonisation, a young Aboriginal man, Ty, sits under the knotted branches of a 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 to share the news. When they look at each other, it’s tense, exciting, and strange – “as they fall in love with each other, we fall in love with them” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*).

Directed with subtlety and sophistication by Declan Greene and Wiradjuri and Worimi theatremaker Amy Sole, and featuring Pertame and Tiwi actor Joseph Althouse (*The Visitors*), Whitefella Yella Tree is “subtle, clever and straight to the heart” (*ArtsHub*).



TEACHING THE CONTEXT OF WHITEFELLA YELLA TREE

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

Teaching the context of *Whitefella Yella Tree* offers an opportunity to explore the intersection of history, culture, identity, and storytelling. The play is set in the early 1800's, a time when British colonisation was rapidly expanding across the continent, bringing with it violent dispossession, cultural suppression, and the imposition of foreign laws and values on First Nations peoples. Understanding this historical backdrop is essential for students to grasp the emotional and political weight of the story. Aboriginal people were excluded from the emerging nation's legal and social systems, and their relationships to land, language, and kinship were systematically disrupted. At the same time, colonial laws criminalised queer relationships, enforcing rigid gender roles and moral codes that erased diverse expressions of identity. Teaching this context allows students to critically examine how these systems of power shaped and continue to shape Australian society.

Equally important is the cultural context, which invites students to explore the richness and diversity of Aboriginal traditions. The concept of Country, central to the play, is at the core of Aboriginal identity and Culture.

Different Nations across Australia have unique relationships with their landscapes, and these connections inform how people live, relate, and belong. The play also celebrates Blak Queerness, challenging the myth that queer identity is foreign to Aboriginal culture. By reclaiming space for stories that have long been silenced, *Whitefella Yella Tree* becomes a tool for healing and resistance. Through poetic language and intimate storytelling of these two young men, it bridges generations and invites students to reflect on the power of love, land, and legacy. Teaching the context of the play encourages empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the histories and cultures that shape contemporary Australia. The play urges us to challenge dominant narratives and love and it reclaims a rightful place among those stories.



Whitefella Yella Tree rehearsal props

INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

DYLAN VAN DEN BERG

A Palawa playwright from the northeast of Lutruwita/Tasmania. He studied drama at the Australian National University and the State University of New York, and has worked as a performer, playwright, and dramaturg. Van Den Berg's work often explores Blak identities creating characters that embolden marginalised Aboriginal Perspectives. Van Den Berg has spoken about his frustration with the lack of diverse stories on Australian stages, particularly those representing Blak queerness and First Nations perspectives. He began writing plays to challenge dominant narratives and to create space for stories that had been historically silenced. He was compelled to initially write *Whitefella Yella Tree* when a tweet by a public figure asserted that queer Aboriginal identities were not a part of Aboriginal Culture. He wanted to challenge the notion that queer identity was somehow at odds with Aboriginal culture and so set about reclaiming what love stories look like.

He says of *Whitefella Yella Tree*,

"I've written this play in the hope that you might reflect on the rich and real detail of lives that were disrupted when the ships hit the shore."

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Read:

Homosexuality and Aboriginal culture: a lore unto themselves written by Steven Lindsay Ross for Archer Magazine.

- What assumptions about queerness and culture are challenged in this article?
- How does colonialism affect the way people understand and express their identities?
- Why might Dylan Van Den Berg feel compelled to write *Whitefella Yella Tree* in response to these ideas?
- How can theatre help us explore stories that have been silenced or distorted?

Activity 2

- a. In small groups, read the entire or selected quotes from the article.
- b. Create a tableau that contrasts:
 - A moment of traditional acceptance or expression
 - A moment of colonial exclusion or repression.
- c. Bring it to life with gesture, use of space and silence to help create tension between the two worlds
- d. Perform for the class.
- e. Reflect on how these forces might affect characters like Ty and Neddy.

Activity 3

Research one or more of the following trail blazing Queer Blak artists and role models or another you know. Look at their experiences of growing up Blak and Queer. How have they expressed their identity through their art? Discuss why it is important to have these representations in our mainstream media.

- Tiwi Island sistagirls
- Destiny Deacon
- Deborah Chettham
- David Page
- Steven Oliver

Discuss how the very existence of these individuals challenges notions that queer Aboriginal identities are not a part of Culture



POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Whitefella Yella Tree is set in the early 19th century, a time of immense upheaval and transformation in Australia. This period marked the expansion of British colonisation, which brought with it violent dispossession, cultural suppression, and the imposition of foreign laws and values on First Nations peoples. The British declared the land “terra nullius” a legal fiction meaning “land belonging to no one” which denied the existence of Aboriginal sovereignty and justified the seizure of Country without treaty or consent. Aboriginal people were excluded from political and legal systems, denied basic rights, and often forcibly removed from their lands and families. Missions and reserves were established to control and assimilate, severing connections to language, kinship, and cultural practices.

Social attitudes toward Aboriginal people during this time were shaped by colonial racism. First Nations peoples were viewed as inferior, uncivilised, and in need of “saving” through European religion and education. These beliefs were used to justify violence, segregation, and the erasure of Indigenous identity. Aboriginal people were not counted in the census, had no voting rights, and were often portrayed in literature and media as either noble savages or threats to progress. These dehumanising views contributed to policies that aimed to eliminate Aboriginal culture and presence from the emerging Australian nation.

At the same time, colonial Australia inherited British laws and moral codes that criminalised and condemned queer relationships. Homosexual acts were illegal and punishable by imprisonment or death, and public expressions of queer identity were considered immoral and shameful. These laws created a culture of fear and silence around queerness, forcing people to hide. The dominant Christian values of the time reinforced rigid gender roles and heterosexual norms, leaving little room for diverse expressions of identity.

Importantly, many First Nations cultures had long embraced fluid understandings of gender and sexuality. Queer relationships and gender-diverse roles were accepted and often held spiritual significance within traditional lore and kinship systems. This is often without labels or even language that has a western translation. However, colonisation disrupted these cultural frameworks, replacing them with Western norms that erased Indigenous queer identities. The myth that queerness is “not part of Aboriginal culture” stems from this colonial erasure, a belief that *Whitefella Yella Tree* directly challenges.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

In small groups, create a visual mind map showing the social and emotional impacts of colonisation on Indigenous communities.

Include:

- Loss of land and language
- Imposed laws and religion
- Disruption of kinship and identity

Activity 2

Perform:

In pairs or small groups, create a short scene (1 minute) set in early colonial Australia (e.g. 1800s–1901).

Your characters are two people who care deeply for each other but cannot express their feelings openly due to the laws and social norms of the time.

- Use non-verbal communication (e.g. eye contact, small gesture, proximity) to show connection.
- Include a moment where the characters are watched or forced to hide their feelings.
- You may use voice-over narration or internal monologue to reveal what the characters are thinking but cannot say aloud.

For your performance:

- Think about how space and levels can show power or secrecy.
- Use freeze frames to highlight key emotional beats.
- Consider using props or costume pieces to suggest time period and status.

Discussion Questions:

- What emotions were hardest to express in your scene?
- How did the setting influence your characters' choices?
- Why might stories like this have been left out of history books?
- How does *Whitefella Yella Tree* help us imagine and honour these hidden histories?



CULTURAL CONTEXT

Across the Australian continent, Aboriginal cultures are deeply diverse, shaped by thousands of years of connection to distinct landscapes, languages, and traditions. Each Nation holds its own stories, laws, lore and relationships with Country whether it be desert, rainforest, river, or mountain. Country is not simply land, it is a living entity that holds spiritual, ancestral, and personal meaning. It informs identity, kinship, and belonging. For First Nations peoples, Country is a source of knowledge and healing, and the relationship with it is reciprocal; people care for Country, and Country cares for them.

These connections vary depending on the landscape. A river mob may understand Country through water, flow, and movement, while a mountain mob may relate through elevation, stillness, and protection. These relationships are passed down through story, ceremony, and lived experience. They make up Songlines that contain intricate details of Country. Colonisation disrupted these connections, severing people from their lands and attempting to erase the cultural frameworks that sustained them. Yet, despite this, many communities continue to maintain and revive their relationships with Country, asserting sovereignty and cultural continuity

Within these cultural frameworks, expressions of gender and sexuality were in many places fluid and accepted. Many Aboriginal Nations recognised roles and relationships that did not fit into Western binaries. Blak Queerness, queer identity within First Nations cultures is not a modern invention, but part of ancient and sacred cultural life. Colonisation imposed rigid religious norms that criminalised and shamed queer relationships, leading to the erasure of these stories from public memory. Today, Blak Queer artists, writers, and activists are reclaiming space for these identities, challenging the myth that queerness is foreign to Aboriginal culture.

Whitefella Yella Tree draws on these cultural truths to tell a story of love, identity, and resistance. Ty and Neddy's relationship is deeply tied to their connection to Country the River and Mountain mobs they come from reflect different ways of knowing and being. The play uses poetic, contemporary language to bridge generations, making its message accessible while remaining grounded in cultural authenticity. Through storytelling, it acts as a form of healing, reclaiming space for queer Aboriginal voices and reminding audiences that these stories have always existed, even if they were silenced.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Discuss:

- How does storytelling help preserve culture and identity?
- What role does Country play in shaping who someone is?
- How do Ty and Neddy's relationships with their mobs (River and Mountain) reflect these cultural values?

REFERENCES

Homosexuality and Aboriginal culture: a love unto themselves by Steven Lindsay Ross for Archer Magazine

Embracing queer Indigenous Australia By Todd Fernando, Victorian Commissioner for LGBTIQ+ Communities and University of Melbourne

Dylan Van Den Berg's Whitefella Yella Tree is tackling queer love and country by Joseph Guenzler for National Indigenous Times

Black Queerness: A Mutually-Assured Construction By Nate Woodall for IndigenousX
<https://aiatsis.gov.au/>

SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

The links below are organisations who provide support for LGBTQIA+ young people:

Twenty10: <https://twenty10.org.au/youth-services/>

Inner West Pride Centre: <https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/live/community-wellbeing/lgbtq/pride-centre>

Minus18 Youth Groups: <https://www.minus18.org.au/youth-directory/new-south-wales/?srsltid=AfmBOoolswsUpZV1S28lr-AONauvfdJwNtR5iu8QMtEuxfYZ9GC-m2R3&q=&state=NSW&lat=null&lng=null&age=all&proximity=off&online=true>

Qlife: <https://qlife.org.au/resources>

The Gender Centre: <https://gendercentre.org.au/>