

**SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION**

ON CUE

STOLEN

**BY JANE HARRISON
DIRECTED BY IAN MICHAEL**

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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 Public Programs and Engagement team at education@sydneytheatre.com.au for additional information about this resource.

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ABOUT THE RESOURCE

ABOUT ON CUE

STC Ed has a suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season.

Each school show will be accompanied by an On Cue e-publication which will feature essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis, and suggested learning experiences.

For more in-depth digital resources surrounding productions, please visit the STC Ed page on our [website](#).

Such resources include:

- Director documentaries
- Design sketchbooks

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.

ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Over 40 years later, that ethos still rings true.

STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Roslyn Packer Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as its resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community settings; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking, and sociable future by engaging with young people, students, and teachers.

STC has toured work internationally to great acclaim and has worked with many of Australia's internationally renowned artists including Benedict Andrews, Cate Blanchett, Wayne Blair, Rose Byrne, Toni Collette, Judy Davis, Elizabeth Debicki, Joel Edgerton, Barrie Kosky, Ewen Leslie, Deborah Mailman, Tony McNamara, Suzie Miller, Joanna Murray-Smith, Tim Minchin, Richard Roxburgh, Sarah Snook, Andrew Upton, Mia Wasikowska, Jackie Weaver, and Hugo Weaving.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies, and, in recent years, the company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment, development, and advisory body, and by the New South Wales Government through Create NSW.

sydneytheatre.com.au

CAST & CREATIVES

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

STOLEN

BY JANE HARRISON

JIMMY

JARRON ANDY

SANDY

MATHEW COOPER

RUBY

KARTANYA MAYNARD

ANNE

STEPHANIE SOMERVILLE

SHIRLEY

MEGAN WILDING

DIRECTOR

IAN MICHAEL

DESIGNER

RENÉE MULDER

LIGHTING DESIGNER

TRENT SUIDGEEST

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER

JAMES BROWN

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

MEGAN SAMPSON

MOVEMENT DIRECTOR

DANIELLE MICICH

FIGHT DIRECTOR

TIM DASHWOOD

VOICE & TEXT COACH

CHARMIAN GRADWELL

TRAUMA SUPPORT

MARY GOSLET

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

COORDINATOR

NEVILLE WILLIAMS BONEY

PRODUCTION MANAGER

ALEXANDRA MOON

STAGE MANAGER

TIM BURNS

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

JESSIE BYRNE

COSTUME COORDINATOR

SCOTT FISHER

BACKSTAGE WARDROBE

SUPERVISOR

NICOLE ARTSETOS

LIGHTING SUPERVISOR

AMY ROBERTSON

LIGHTING OPERATOR

SAM SCOTT

SOUND SUPERVISOR

PETER HUNT

STAGING SUPERVISOR

CHRIS FLEMING

HEAD MECHANIST

NATE WILLIAMS

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER

PRUDENCE UPTON

90 MINS, NO INTERVAL



SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: IAN MICHAEL

Directing *Stolen* has been and continues to be a process filled with a multitude of emotions. I find it difficult to find the words to express the depth of my gratitude to Jane for trusting me with bringing her words to life; the despair when reading the most recent statistics of our children in out of home care, the overwhelming sadness I feel as I write this on Sorry Day, I'm reminded of the flicker of hope ignited by "the apology", the grief I felt at the age of twenty five when my Dad told me he and his siblings had been taken from their father in the early 1970's. I feel a deep responsibility to honour the truth, pain, tenderness, humour, and injustice within this timeless script; how grateful I am to the artists I've made this production with for their collaboration and care for the work and each other, the desperation in hoping this production might change minds and open hearts. And I could share with you anecdotes about how the play has circled my life, how, when I used the monologue *A Can of Peas* to get into acting school, when I toured a play across the country for four years I would see the names of the original cast and creatives scrawled across theatre walls and dressing rooms, I felt grateful to be walking in the footsteps of some of my biggest inspirations as an artist.

Though it may sound cliché, the process has been bittersweet. The bitterness lies in how resonant the lives of these characters feel today, how there isn't a single First Nations person in this country who hasn't been affected by the government's policies of forced removal. Amidst the bitter, there's a sweetness found in the process too and this production is a testament to the work of the cast and creative team who filled our rehearsal room with endless generosity, possibility, love and dedication in bringing these vital stories to light and demanding they be heard.

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, theatremakers like Jane, Wesley Enoch, Deborah Mailman, Tammy Anderson and Richard Frankland, with works such as *I Don't Want to Play House*, *Conversations with the Dead*, *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, and of course, *Stolen* were playing with form and style while pushing the boundaries of what black storytelling was and could be. They did this while maintaining that they were telling the stories of their communities and what it was to be black in society at the time. Especially significant was the

idea of drawing from both the present and the past which has continued through First Nations theatre in various ways over the past twenty years.

Premiering in 1998 to sold-out seasons across Australia and the world, the play has been revived in new productions for decades, and from the first standing ovation at its Melbourne premiere to today, it has been seen by over 150,000 people across the globe. The legacy of *Stolen* extends beyond the stage. As relevant as the day it premiered 26 years ago, the script interweaves the stories of children forcefully removed from their families, split between five characters, five lives stolen, through Ruby, Jimmy, Shirley, Sandy and Anne. The play begins with them as children and slips between past and present without warning, the nonlinear narrative sketching their memory and experiences of being placed in a repressive children's



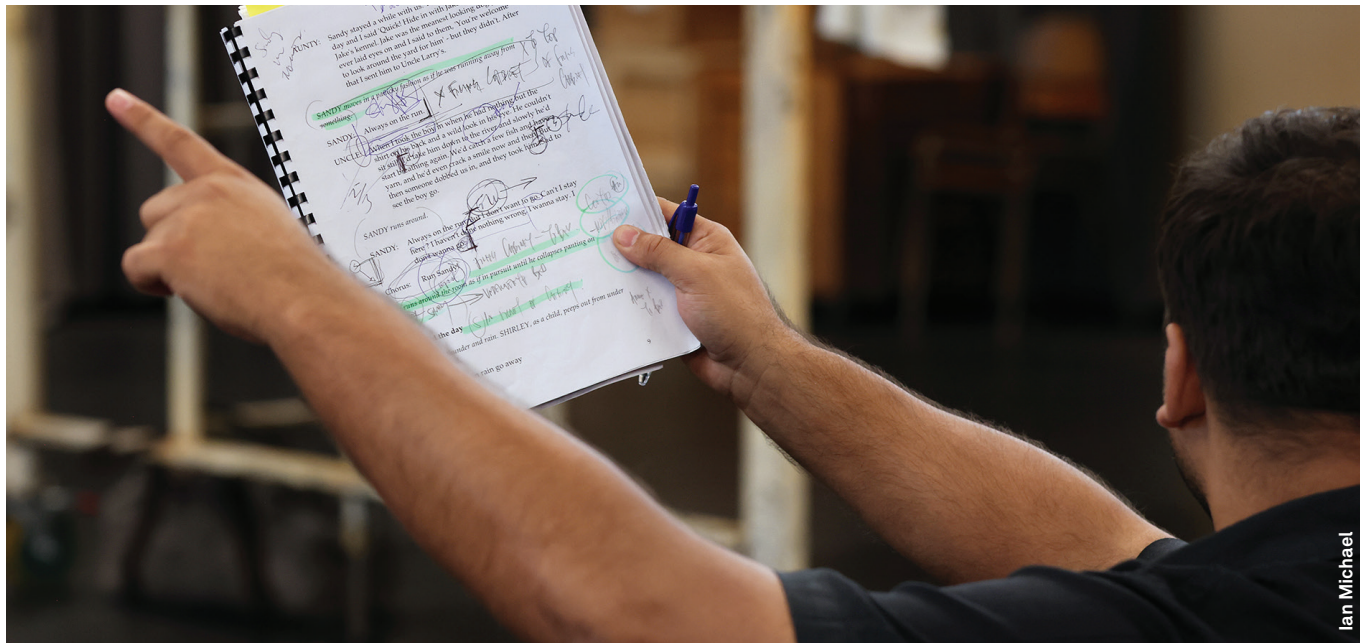
Ian Michael

home and trained for domestic service. In many scenes they interact as though they're in the home together, and throughout we see them navigate their lives as adults, as they struggle to find their way in a world where they have been told to forget their families, their communities and culture.

When thinking of this production early on and what the experience for the audience witnessing this story now might be, I considered the many who probably studied it in high school, are studying it now or have expectations of what a play about the Stolen Generations may be. I held onto the idea that potentially, through design or in the making of the work we could somehow – like the original brief in writing the play – amplify and tell the multitude of stories, that we could honour that original production in 1998 and the people who made it, the ones who laid the path for us to be able to tell this story today. The Setting notes from the original text continue to resonate with me, in particular, *“Five old iron institutional beds alternate across the stage. The beds are the base of the five main characters, representing their homes at various stages of their lives. At times they become, a children’s home; a prison cell, a mental institution, and a girl’s bedroom.”*, and, *“The only other props are a drab green metal filing cabinet, on the far of the stage right”*. It also feels that the world – an almost nightmarish playground of the characters memories and trauma –should be created through the imagination and memories of these characters, transposing across time and locations, both as children and adults. They are now in control of telling their story.

Jane once said *“For audiences, I hope it brings understanding that we are all part of this story, it is part of our history and our present. For the Aboriginal community members in the audience, it is my profound hope that we do your stories justice.”* In dedication to all of the children of the Stolen Generations and the children who continue to be taken from their families and communities, we offer this production in the hope we have done your lives justice.

FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT: JANE HARRISON



Ian Michael

It's over 30 years since I began the process of writing *Stolen*. *Stolen*, for me, began with a small ad in the newspaper in 1991: "writer/researcher wanted for production of *The Lost Children*, no experience necessary". That ad changed my life. It was an opportunity to learn how to write a play, but it was more an opportunity for me to explore my own Aboriginal heritage. I had grown up with an Aboriginal mother and had always known I was Aboriginal but was not connected to extended family or community.

What followed was six years of discovery. I read everything I could about the Stolen Generations, met with community, workshopped scenes with the members of Ilbjerri, some of whom were Stolen themselves. I learnt of the heartbreak and intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generations, but also the burning desire to come back 'home' to family, place and culture. My brief was to tell many stories, not just one, and to not depict Aboriginal people as all having the same experiences. It was a huge privilege and responsibility to be the conduit for the telling of this story and I was supported throughout the writing process by Ilbjerri and all of the actors who workshopped the play throughout those years. We premiered the play the year after the Bringing Them Home report was delivered and the wider public was becoming aware of this terrible period of our shared history.

People were shocked and upset – rightly so. The play was an immediate success – a bittersweet experience for all of us.

Since then the play has been performed around Australia and in other parts of the world including Hong Kong, Japan, UK and with readings in New York and Canada. The play has been placed on English and drama curricula and it is heartening to know that younger generations get to know and understand about this story, as its impacts are still being felt today. In fact, First Nations children are still being removed from their families at much higher rates than the nonIndigenous population, which should shock and dismay us all.

To have a new production almost 20 years after its premiere is amazing but again, the feeling is bittersweet, as it means that this story has resonance at this time. I have been blessed with amazing directors, cast and crew in the telling of this story – the director and cast bring their own rich lived experience to the storytelling and I am again so grateful for this glorious team and thank them for their commitment and craft in allowing an audience to witness this narrative. I thank audiences for opening their hearts and minds, and, in doing so, in a small but symbolic way, paving the way for better future outcomes for First Nations people in our country.

SYNOPSIS



As children, Sandy, Ruby, Shirley, Jimmy, and Anne were all stolen from their families and put in government homes.

Sandy is a traveller, thinker, and storyteller whose early experiences make him feel he never really belongs anywhere.

Ruby is an abused young woman who turns the poor treatment she receives in on herself.

Anne is adopted into a wealthy family and is ambivalent about her Aboriginal heritage until she begins to feel a longing for 'going back.'

Shirley is a stolen child who goes on to watch her own children be taken from her. There is nothing she can do to stop it.

Jimmy is a mischievous boy, turned sullen, angry man with just one ray of hope.

Each of them is forever changed by what happened to them. The result of all that has come before. They will never stop looking for that special place. Home.

SUITABLE FOR YEARS 9 - 12

- Drama Stage 5 & 6
- Aboriginal Studies Stage 6
- History Stage 5
- English Stage 5 & 6

THEMES & IDEAS

- Identity and Disconnection
- Racism in Australia
- Impact of the Stolen Generation

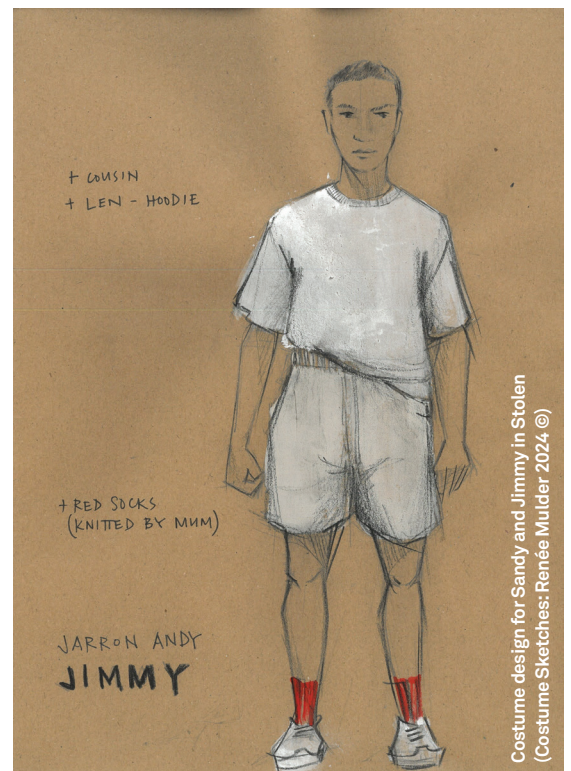
CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SANDY

Sandy is a traveller, a survivor, and a storyteller. He has inherited his mother's sense of humour and maintains a sense of optimism in the cruel circumstances he is in. He is stolen from his mother and family, following many attempts to evade being taken by living on the run and hiding. A can of peas given to his family by the welfare is used against them as the reason for his removal. He maintains an internal light of strength and culture, sharing stories and language in moments throughout the play. We never learn if he makes it back to his family, yet we feel the palpable warmth and pull when he speaks of home.

JIMMY

Jimmy is a boy starved of love after he is stolen from the unconditional love of his mother and family. He holds onto faith that he will be reunited with her one day. Through his institutionalisation Jimmy is subjected to horrific abuse, which erodes his self-worth and all but extinguishes his belief that he will be reunited with his mother. As an adult he is re-institutionalised through the prison system. Going back home he is recognised and is told his mother has been looking for him, but through a cruel twist of fate he is unable to see her before she passes away. His story ends with him in prison, beaten down by a system that set out to destroy him. He takes his own life, his final hope being to end up in the same place as his mother.



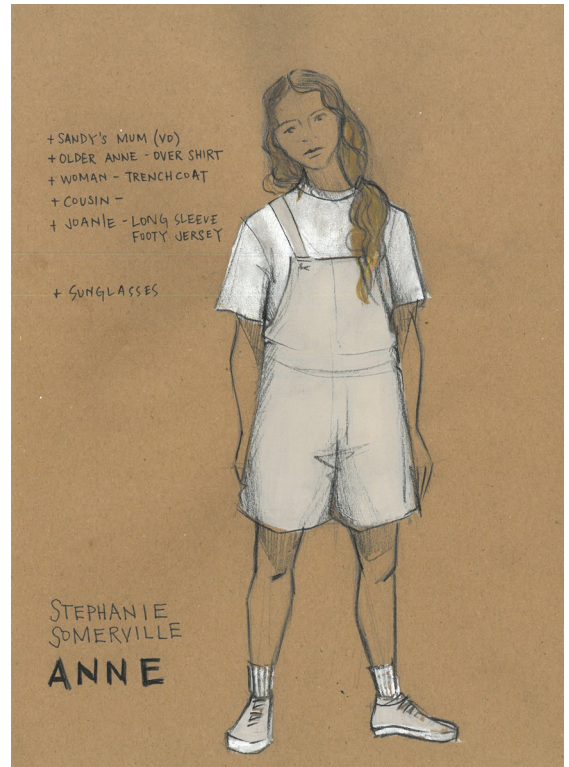
CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ANNE

After being taken from her family and put in the children's home Anne is adopted by a white family. She is told her mother is alive and wants to see her. Her parents, believing they have 'saved' Anne, see her Aboriginality as shameful. She grapples with the complexities of her identity, what it means to be Aboriginal, the colour of her skin, and acceptance within the worlds she is torn between. She attempts to reconnect with her Aboriginal family but finds this leaves her still without a clear answer of who she is: the answer to this question has been taken from her. Instead, she moves forward in the certainty that she loves both her mothers.

SHIRLEY

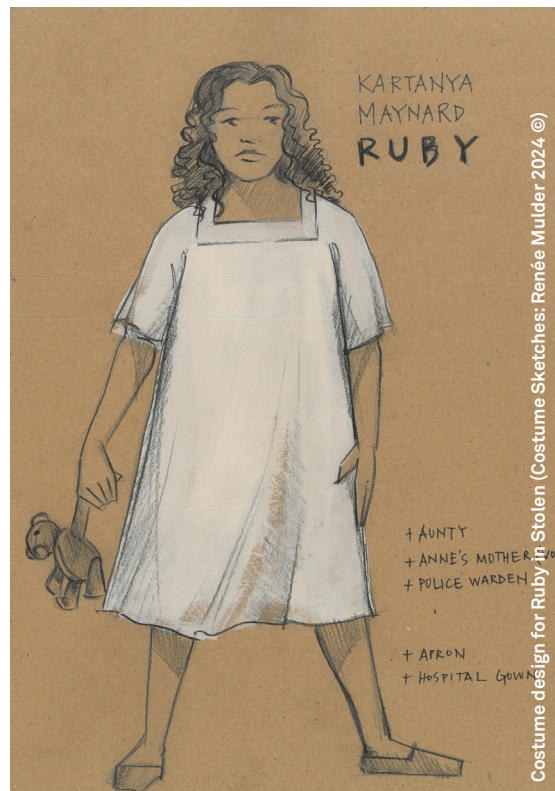
Shirley is stolen as a child and as an adult has her two children, Lionel and Kate, stolen from her. She never gives up hope of finding them. Her perseverance dealing with a broken system is a testament to a mother's love. She knits for grandchildren she has never met, finding somewhere to place the love she has carried her whole life. At the end of the play, we learn she has found her daughter Kate and is preparing to be a grandmother. This is all she has ever wanted: to reconnect with her family and give her love to someone. We never learn if she is reunited with her son Lionel.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

RUBY

Ruby is stolen from her family and placed in the children's home where she faces unspeakable abuse. She is forced into a life of servitude, as was the fate of many young Aboriginal women, where she is subjected to further abuse which breaks her. At the end of the play, we see her lost in the nightmare of all the horrible things that she has endured. Tragically, her family finds her, but she is unable to be fully reunited with them. As a result of years of trauma, she has lost touch with reality and is re-institutionalised in a mental institution.



STYLE, AND CONVENTION

- Monologue
- Chorus
- Split Focus
- Flashback/Flash-Forward
- Narration
- Rhyme
- Soliloquy And Spoken Thought
- Chanting
- Song
- Music
- Sound Effects
- Transformational Acting
- Off-Stage Voices

FORM

- Episodic
- Non-Linear
- Non-Naturalistic
- Post-Modern
- Eclectic Performance Styles
- Blurred Narrative



THEMES AND IDEAS

IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Stolen examines the impact government policies of assimilation and subsequent removal of children had on their sense of identity. Children were stripped of their language and culture with the intention of assimilating them into 'white Australia.' This left those children with a fractured sense of self. With many members of the Stolen Generations never being able to find their way back home, the impact has been an intergenerational loss of culture. For those able to find their way back home, they faced the daunting task of finding their place within their communities or walking between two worlds.

We see these ideas highlighted in the character of Anne (*Scenes: Anne's told she's Aboriginal, Am I black or white?*), and the internal and external conflict of the two worlds she is caught between. We see culture expressed through the character of Sandy (*Scenes: Story of the Mungee, Desert sands*), he holds stories that he shares with the other children, he speaks his language in defiance of the institution.

RACISM IN AUSTRALIA

Stolen explores the racism experienced by Australia's First Nations People. This racism is expressed in government policy, embedded in institutions, and in the views held by members of the public. The play continues to be relevant today, as this issue is still ongoing, and many references in the play have been updated to highlight this.. Consider the scene *Cleaning Routine 2* with its updated lyrics that highlight recent and ongoing acts of racism perpetrated against Aboriginal young people.

Through the character of Jimmy (*Scene: Racist Insults*) we see the impact the derogatory and racist language has on his self-esteem. He is made to feel worthless and unloved and hears the voices of these words echoing within him in his final moments.

IMPACT OF THE STOLEN GENERATION

Each of the 5 characters in *Stolen* represent the vast experiences of those stolen due to the Australian government's assimilation policies. These policies were in effect until 1970; however, Aboriginal Children are still removed from their families at alarming rates. The ongoing impacts of the Stolen Generations are multidimensional: there is the aftermath of the abuse suffered and the ongoing impact that has on survivors, the fracturing of families and communities, and the intergenerational impacts on the children and grandchildren of those who were stolen.

These 5 distinctive stories, encapsulate the commonalities, themes, and emotions of the multitude of stories of the stolen children. Through these characters we see the different impacts on these children as adults: further institutionalisation, the cycle continuing with their children stolen, and others unable to cope with what they had endured.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. PROJECTING ACROSS TIME

Use the following prompts for discussion and reflection. You may choose to place posters around the room to gather students' ideas in the three categories.

Past

- **Map what you think or already know. What do you know about the topics explored in the play?**

Consider:

- The Stolen Generations.
- Racism in Australia.
- Government policies around removal of Aboriginal children from their families.
- The original production/past productions of the play.

Present

- **Reach back in time. How has the topic played out in different forms / contexts / places over the last 10 years? The last 100 years? The last 1000 years?**

Consider:

- Views of the Australian public.
- Positions of politicians and government on the topic.
- In media and the arts.
- The original staging of the production in 1998.
- What steps have been taken forward and back.

Future

- **Reach forward in time. How do you think the topic will play out 10 years into the future? 100 years? 1000 years?**

Consider:

- Make predictions.
- Public perception.
- Government ownership/responsibility.
- How will we look back at the past.

2. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES

The following discussion and extended response questions and practical activities encourage you to consider this specific production in relation to the Stage 6 Drama NSW Syllabus Rubric for Australian Drama and Theatre. You will examine key design and directorial choices that distinguish this production from those before it. You will also examine how you may manipulate the elements of Drama to impact an audience of your own. These discussions and responses may be used to build responses to HSC questions for this topic.

SYLLABUS EXTRACT: RUBRIC AUSTRALIAN DRAMA AND THEATRE

This topic explores, theoretically and experientially, the traditional and contemporary practices of Australian drama and theatre and the various ways in which artistic, cultural, social, political, and personal issues and concerns are reflected in different contexts. Students investigate how different Australian practitioners use dramatic forms, performance styles, techniques, and conventions to convey ideas and influence the ways in which audiences understand and respond to ideas and images presented in the theatre.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

CREATING CHARACTER

Practical Activity

Before

- Read the character analysis as a group and discuss what each of these characters represents in terms of what we know about the social, political, and historical context of the play.

During

- Put on some music to create a sense of atmosphere, you may use songs from the workshop or preshow resources.
- Begin moving around the space. As the character descriptions are re-read choose two or three words that stand out to you, repeating these in your mind.
- Create a physical shape that reflects those words.
- Bring an awareness to where your body language sits, where do you constrict or find tension for each character.
- This will be repeated for each character.

After

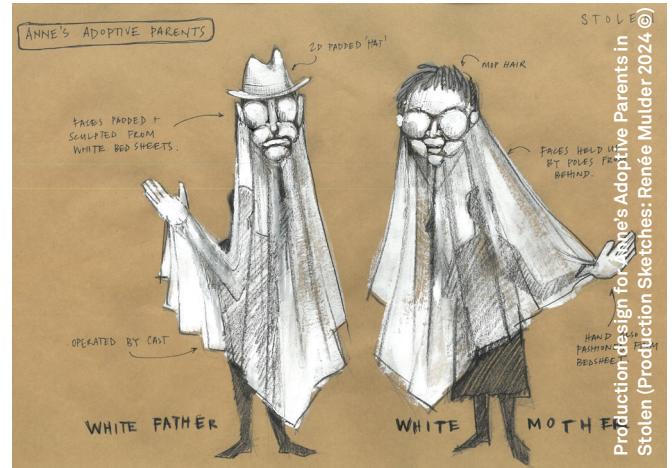
- Discuss how you used physicality, tension and body language, to create a physical embodiment of each character. What do we discover about these individuals from this exercise?

ANNE'S PARENTS: THE PUPPETS

Discussion Question

In this production Anne's parents are represented as large puppets, misshapen in form. They create a nightmarish presence or distorted memory as Anne recalls key moments from her childhood.

Question: *What effect does this directorial and design choice have on our understanding of these figures in this production in relation to Anne and her experience as a stolen child?*



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

THE FILING CABINET

Discussion Question

Question: *What is the significance of the directorial and design choice of the large filing cabinet for the audience's understanding of the enduring legacy of the policies that led to and continue to see Aboriginal children removed from their families?*

Practical Activity

Before

- Discuss what you know about the 'Bringing them Home Report.'
- Reflect on the theatrical choices made in the scene 'Shirley never gives up searching' in this production.
- What was the impact of this scene on the audience?
- What emotions and feelings are evoked?

During

- In groups recreate this scene with the intention of emphasising what you discussed above.
- Consider how you may manipulate the use of voice, employ choral speaking, and use the space to impact an audience.

After

- After staging, discuss how you manipulated the elements of Drama to achieve your intentions.
- What is your intended audience impact? Have you achieved this?



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

THE BED

Discussion Question

Featured in the original script is the presence of 5 metal beds on stage throughout the play. These were to represent the institution the children were in. In this production one large bed is used that pivots throughout the play to create different spaces and environments.

Question: *Discuss how the bed in this production skilfully manipulates the elements of Drama to impact its audience.*

Consider:

- Size, in relation to the actors.
- Transformational uses to create alternative environments.
- References to the original production.

Practical Activity

Before

- Discuss your answers to the questions above.

During

- Select a suitcase or bag and find a place on the floor.
- Reflect on what your most treasured items are. What objects symbolise home for you?
- Mime picking up these items, giving them weight and texture. Place them in your suitcase or bag.
- Pick up your bag and move around the space.
- *Read aloud the following prompts for your students to follow:*
 - Reflect on the notion of the suitcase representing home.
 - Consider you are now carrying your home with you.
 - How do you feel as you pass other people in the space?
 - How does your body language change if you feel protective of your suitcase?
 - How does your body language change if you feel others are trying to take it from you?

- Now place your suitcase down and continue to move around the space.
 - How does it feel to pass your suitcase but not pick it up or go to it?
 - Isolate the physicality and feeling between these two states.
- In small groups now recreate the scene 'Arriving' using the feelings/state captured at the top of the exercise and find a physical transformation into what you experienced later in the exercise.

After

- Discuss how you transformed physically to create your character, using the style of transformational acting utilised in the play.
- How did the suitcase help create a physical embodiment of the characters within the play?



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

THE FINAL MOMENTS

Practical Activity

In the final moments of the play, we see a banner displayed across the stage with the phrase 'Sorry Means You Don't Do It Again' as the recording of Kevin Rudd's 2008 ['Apology Speech'](#) plays. Discuss the significance of this in 2024. You may refer to the director's notes that highlight the current statistics on Aboriginal Children in out of home care.

Before

- Inspired by this production, how else could you stage the final moments of the play to evoke the same meaning for an audience today?
- You may also consider the updated references in the scene '*Cleaning Routine 2*'.

During

- Discuss how you will manipulate the elements of Drama to achieve your intentions.

After

- After staging, discuss how you manipulated the elements of Drama to achieve your intentions.
- What is your intended audience impact: have you achieved this?



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Rehearsal images are courtesy of Prudence Upton.

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