

SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION

PRE-SHOW
IN-THE-KNOW

DEAR EVAN HANSEN

BOOK BY
STEVEN
LEVENSON

MUSIC AND
LYRICS BY
BENJ PASEK
& JUSTIN PAUL

DIRECTED BY
DEAN BRYANT

michael
cassel
group

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Photo: Daniel Boud

Compiled by Ellen Osborne.

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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We acknowledge 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

DEAR EVAN HANSEN

BOOK BY STEVEN LEVENSON; MUSIC AND LYRICS BY BENJ PASEK & JUSTIN PAUL
DIRECTED BY DEAN BRYANT

CURRICULUM LINKS

DRAMA

Stage 5 & 6

- **Stage 5** - Dramatic Forms and Performance Styles:
Scripted Drama | Elements of Production
- **Stage 6** - Monologues | Reading and Writing about
Drama and Theatre | Technical Aspects of Production

ENGLISH

Stage 5 & 6

- Stage 5 - Contemporary Possibilities
- Stage 6 - Texts and Human Experiences

MUSIC

Stage 5 & 6

- Stage 5 - Musical Theatre
- Stage 6 - Music 1: Aural Skills

THEMES & IDEAS

- Mental Health and Grief
- Loneliness and Connection

FORM, STYLE & CONVENTION

- Musical Theatre
- Realism/Non-Naturalistic Elements
- Digital Technology

SUITABLE FOR

Years 10 - 12

CAST

Martin Crewes, Verity Hunt-Ballard, Georgia Laga'aia,
Natalie O'Donnell, Carmel Rodrigues, Jacob Rozario,
Harry Targett, Beau Woodbridge

Standbys

Lawrence Hawkins, Jessica Kok, Ariyan Sharma,
Tod Strike, Teresa Tate Britten

CREATIVES

Director Dean Bryant

Set Designer Jeremy Allen

Costume Designer Isabel Hudson

Lighting Designer Matt Scott

Sound Designer Andrew Poppleton

Video Designer David Bergman

Movement Director Shannon Burns

Music Supervisor Laura Tipoki

Resident Director Liam McIlwain

Music Director Zara Stanton

Orchestrations & Additional Arrangements
Alex Lacamoire

Vocal Arrangements & Additional Arrangements
Justin Paul

APPROX. DURATION

2 hrs 30 mins (including interval). Subject to change.

CONTENT

References to suicide and drug use, sexual references,
strong language, and theatrical haze. Subject to change.

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- How do technology and staging work together to create authentic and digital worlds on the stage?
 - In what ways do the characters try to connect? In what ways are they disconnected?
 - How do the actors use performance skills to blend realistic acting techniques with dramatic moments of song?
-

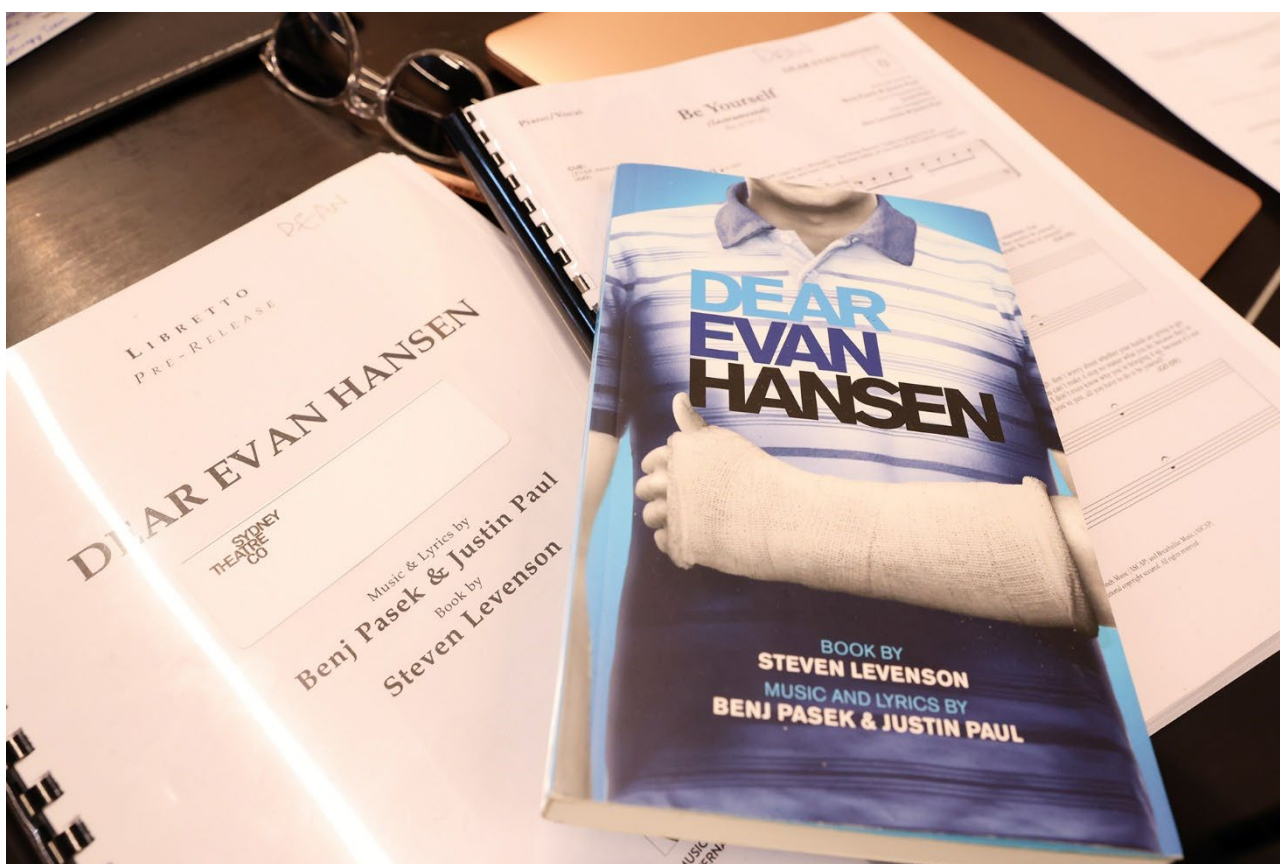


SYNOPSIS

Dear Evan Hansen is the raw, moving and inspiring story of a socially anxious highschooler who is suddenly thrust into the spotlight when he inadvertently invents an important role for himself at the centre of a local tragedy.

Called a “breathtaking knockout of a musical” by The New York Times and the winner of six Tony Awards, including Best Book by writer Steven Levenson, *Dear Evan Hansen* features music from the Grammy and Academy Award-winning geniuses Benj Pasek and Justin Paul (*La La Land*, *The Greatest Showman*) and a story that journeys to the heart of the contemporary teenage condition with a tenderness and wit that will set your heart alight.

In a brand-new production helmed by one of Australia’s great interpreters of musical theatre, Dean Bryant (*Fun Home*, *Hubris & Humiliation*), *Dear Evan Hansen* is an empowering and uplifting experience for anyone who’s ever considered themselves on the “outside, always looking in”.



PRE-TEACHING: CONTEXT

Teachers need to be aware that the story of *Dear Evan Hansen* revolves around the death by suicide of a character early in the production. There are also continued references to suicide, a suicide note, and attempted suicide. Teachers will be best placed to ensure their students are aware of this content and any additional support some students may need. Mature themes and adult language are used throughout the production.

Musicals have long been a crowd favourite for theatregoers in their ability to completely transport audiences through story, dance, song and spectacle. *Dear Evan Hansen* was met with critical acclaim in its on and off-Broadway productions, stretching from 2015 all the way through to 2022. In that time, it was nominated for nine awards, winning six, including Best Musical, Best Book, Best Score, Best Actor for Ben Platt, and Best Featured Actress for Rachel Bay Jones.

Dear Evan Hansen is rooted in contemporary societal issues, especially those affecting teenagers, such as social media, belonging, friendship, family and mental health. It is a truly modern musical where songs are delivered in a conversational tone, and social media is incorporated as a storytelling device. The modern-day setting of a suburban American High School, combined with the intricacies of family dynamics, will allow for a sense of connection for students watching. The musical focuses on a small cast of characters, each of whom is given significant emotional and narrative weight.

One of the central contexts of the musical is the growing awareness of mental health issues among teenagers. The protagonist, Evan Hansen, struggles with severe social anxiety and feelings of invisibility ('Waving through a Window'), representing some of the broader challenges faced by many adolescents today. The musical shines a light on the impact of mental health on young people, particularly the pressures they face to fit in, connect, and find their place in the world. It also highlights the importance of empathy, understanding, and support systems.

The story has since been adapted for a novel of the same name and a film, starring original Broadway actor Ben Platt.

SAFELY ENGAGING WITH THE MATERIAL

When unpacking the themes and issues present in *Dear Evan Hansen*, teachers are reminded that students should be aware of the high prevalence of suicide-related discussion and plot. Teachers are experts in their fields and are best placed to know what is appropriate for their students: the following are some guidelines for before and after exploring the text.

To bring students safely into the text	To bring students safely out of the text
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish a safe space; culturally, emotionally and physically for students• Recognise without silencing or judgement that opinions can be shared• Develop personal awareness of trauma-informed practices• Be aware of and acknowledge students' comfort levels and/or discomfort and unease• Establish processes for students to inform the teacher if they are uncomfortable or to withdraw themselves from the discussion• Enable referral pathways for students experiencing distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Debrief with students, allowing time for discussion and activities such as private journaling, exit cards and thinking routines• Respond to questions thoughtfully and with accuracy• Model an appropriate emotional response• Address problematic attitudes with curiosity rather than criticism• Avoid asking students to 'put themselves in the shoes' of someone who does not share their lived experience• Provide opportunities for action, student voice and agency.• Access the support resources provided and as needed (found in the index of the On Cue magazine)

By understanding these themes ahead of time, students can engage more thoughtfully with the story and participate in meaningful discussions about the complex issues it raises.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Children are taught the negative implications of lying from a young age, but as we grow, sometimes our perspectives shift. We learn that the morality of lying is not always black and white and that perhaps there might be times when it is acceptable—maybe even appropriate—to lie. Is it ever OK to tell a lie?
- Is your online persona the real version of yourself? Why or why not? Do you behave differently on different forms of social media?
- How does a musical differ from a play? Do you have a type of theatre you prefer to engage with? Why?
- One of the songs in the musical is entitled “Requiem”. What is a requiem?
- What are common mental health challenges that teens face today, and how can we support those who are struggling?
- Do you think this American story will resonate with Australian audiences? Why/Why not?

Activity 1 - “So where’s the Map - I need a Clue”

One of the first songs in *Dear Evan Hansen* contains the lyric

“Does anybody have a map / Anybody happen to know / How the hell to do this?”

- a. In groups of 2-3, draw a conceptual map of what it’s like to be a teenager.
- b. Imagine the different paths you can take, the ‘rites of passage’, the pitfalls, and triumphs and mark them on your map.
- c. Share your ideas with the class.

What kinds of similarities were created between the groups?

Are there universal aspects of adolescence that you can see running through each map?

Activity 2 – Shakespeare

In Evan’s first letter, he says,

EVAN: “But also confident. That’s important. And interesting. Easy to talk to. Approachable. But mostly be yourself. That’s the big, that’s number one. Be yourself. Be true to yourself.”

Dear Evan Hansen

Characters in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* also explore this idea in a famous speech,

POLONIUS: “This above all- to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

Hamlet

Centuries apart, the two wrestle with the same issue: the challenge of being who you are.

- a. As a class, discuss - Why do you think two stories so far apart in time resonate with the same questions? What other famous line from *Hamlet* might apply to *Dear Evan Hansen* in its themes?

Activity 3 – Design

Much of the story of *Dear Evan Hansen* takes place on the internet or via digital communication.

- a. Take on the role of a set designer. How would you design a stage to make the space feel digital?
- b. Write down or draw your ideas.
- c. What other media (TV, film, plays) have you seen that portray the digital world in storytelling? How is this usually created?

Activity 4 – Research

Sydney Theatre Company and Michael Cassel Group are renowned for working dynamically with audio and visual designs, which makes them well-placed to bring *Dear Evan Hansen* to life—a show that has traditionally used projection and media as part of the storytelling.

- a. In a small group, research cine theatre productions and note down three different ways that Sydney Theatre Company have used AV in other productions (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one to get you started).

Activity 5 – Watch/listen/create

Watch the clip [Story of a Song: Waving Through a Window](#)

- a. What do you make of the metaphor “waving through a window”? What could it mean?

Extension

Take the following lines from the production and create your own verse, choosing the order in which they appear. You can add your own lines or extra words to really make the piece your own.

- Like I'm waving through a window
 - No I got nothing to say
 - We start with stars in our eyes
 - I've learned to slam on the brake
 - step out, step out of the sun
 - Because you've learned
 - No slipping up if you slip away
 - We start believing that we belong
- a. Share what you have created with your class.
 - b. What is the mood presented in these pieces? Does the character seem content? Anxious?
 - c. What other media (TV, film, plays) have you seen that portray the digital world in storytelling? How is this usually created?

Activity 6 – Perform

In groups of 4-5, take the following lines or song titles and turn them into a freeze frame.

- “Waving through a window”
- “WHEN YOU'RE FALLIN' IN A FOREST / AND THERE'S NOBODY AROUND / DO YOU EVER REALLY CRASH / OR EVEN MAKE A SOUND?”
- “Re.In.Ven.Tion”
- “You will be found”

REFERENCES

IMAGES

Rehearsal images are courtesy of Prudence Upton

DIGITAL

Musical Theatre: The Arts Unit Creative Classes

<https://sites.google.com/education.nsw.gov.au/tau-cc-musical-theatre-drama>

YMI: You Will be Found - Classroom resources

https://ymiclassroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/deh_kit.pdf

Dear Evan Hansen: Study Guide

<https://www.blumenthalarts.org/assets/doc/Dear-Evan-Hansen-Study-Guide-dd17f801f6.pdf>

Story of a Song: Waving Through a Window

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPdsclRrA-E>

We Are Evan Hansen: Danny Mefford

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dvepHxhXD8>

Choreographing Cyberspace, Dance Magazine

<https://www.dancemagazine.com/choreographing-cyberspace/#gsc.tab=0>

Social Media's Role in Dear Evan Hansen, Kassie Meiler

<https://kassiemeiler.medium.com/social-medias-role-in-the-tony-award-winning-musical-dear-evan-hansen-fed53cc00758>

The Existential Subtext of Dear Evan Hansen, Cinemablography

<http://www.cinemablography.org/the-existentialist-subtext-of-dear-evan-hansen.html#:~:text=Evan%20suffers%20from%20an%20unspecified,order%20to%20make%20ends%20meet>

Teenage Mental Health, Health Direct

<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/teenage-mental-health#:~:text=Lifeline%20%E2%80%94%20support%20for%20anyone%20having,can%20call%201800%20595%20212>.

Teens mental health: services, resources, contacts and links, Raising Children.net

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/services-support/services-families-of-teens/teens-mental-health-services>

Mental health services and support helplines

<https://beyou.edu.au/resources/mental-health-services-and-support-helplines>