

SYDNEY THEATRE
COMPANY



Image: Googoorewon Knox & Guy Simon. Photo: Daniel Boud

Bennelong in London

By Jane Harrison

Directed by Ian Michael

Wharf 1 Theatre

18 July – 16 August 2026

BENNELONG IN LONDON ON CUE STC EDUCATION

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

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Resources 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 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.

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

CAST AND CREATIVES

CAST

Googoorewon Knox

Guy Simon

CREATIVES

Director

Ian Michael

Designer

Emma White

Lighting Designer

Trent Suidgeest

Composer & Sound Designer

James Peter Brown

Associate Designer

Gelta Goarin

Dramaturg

Jules Orcullo

Cultural Advisor

Matthew Doyle

Fight & Safety Director

Tim Dashwood

Voice & Text Director

Charmian Gradwell

CREW

Production Manager

Julia Orlando

Stage Manager

Bella Kerdijik

Assistant Stage Manager

Sunday Bowes

Costume Coordinator

Scott Fisher

Backstage Wardrobe Supervisor

Chris Harris

Lighting Supervisor

Jesse Greig

Head Lighting Technician

Daniel Barber

Lighting Operator

Sam Scott

Sound Supervisor

Hayley Forward

Sound Operator

David Trumpmanis, Madalyn
Henly

Staging Supervisor

Florian Simonin

Drafting

Andrew Powell

Props Supervisor

Leandro Sanchez

Scenic Art Supervisor

Emily Borghi

Set Construction Supervisor

Boaz Shemesh

Rehearsal Photography

Daniel Boud



THIS PRODUCTION OPENED AT WHARF1 THEATRE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE, SYDNEY ON 18TH JULY 2026

BENNELONG IN LONDON ON CUE STC EDUCATION

SYNOPSIS

Sebastian, a contemporary First Nations actor, is auditioning for the role of Woollarawarre Bennelong, the Wangal man who became one of the most significant figures in the early years of the Sydney colony. As he grapples with how to portray one of this country's most contested historical figures, he is confronted by the man himself. Sceptical of being turned into a character once again, Bennelong strikes a pact with Sebastian: he will help him win the role, but only if he is allowed to tell his story, his way.

As Sebastian and Bennelong work through the audition, they retrace Bennelong's life: his encounters with Governor Arthur Phillip and the fledgling Sydney colony, his relationship with Barangaroo, and his extraordinary journey to England with Yemmerawanne in 1792. Travelling between Eora Country and London, archive and memory, the pair wrestles with competing versions of history and what has been left out of the record.

What begins as an audition becomes a conversation across centuries. As Bennelong challenges the myths that have accumulated around him, Sebastian is forced to confront his own relationship to history, identity and cultural responsibility. Together, the two men grapple with questions of Black masculinity, survival and belonging, and what it means to live within, against, or beyond the ongoing legacy of the colony.



Image: Guy Simon. Photo: Daniel Boud

BENNELONG IN LONDON ON CUE STC EDUCATION

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE: JANE HARRISON



Bennelong was a complex person, with many dimensions, and someone who found himself in an extraordinary, unprecedented moment in time. His written words are few, and the historical narrative we have access to was written by the colonisers, with all their biases and world views, but we can know him mostly from his actions. And he did a lot.

In my writing I seek to write from the Blak perspective in creating my characters, which means reading between the lines and interrogating the written history. In 'playing' with history I don't intend to 'blackwash' it, to make it more palatable – it was often brutal. But 'playing' with history allows me to be inventive and hopefully, surprising. Theatre, I believe, must ask questions and resonate with the lives we are living now.

Bennelong in London began as a commission from STC and has since been workshopped and finessed with the support of the STC 'gang', including Jonathan Ware, Jules Orcullo, Ian Michael, alongside our cultural consultant Uncle Matthew Doyle and our amazing actors Goori Knox and Guy Simon. I thank STC for supporting new Australian work and in particular new First Nations work.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: IAN MICHAEL

It is impossible to think about Bennelong without thinking about the story that has been carried before us. His name is familiar to many - connected to the early years of the colony, to a place, and to a history that has been handed down through generations. But behind that name was a man; intelligent, strategic and adaptable, living through a time of collision, negotiation and profound change.

Much of what we inherit about Bennelong comes through records shaped by the perspectives and assumptions of the colonisers. The gaps in those records invite us to consider what has been remembered, what has been overlooked, and how we understand a person whose life was witnessed and documented largely by others.

From the beginning of rehearsals, we have been sitting with these questions. How do we ensure Bennelong is portrayed in all his humanity, while acknowledging the violence and disruption of colonisation? How do we understand the choices Bennelong made as he moved between worlds?

Bennelong in London sits within these questions. Through the meeting of Bennelong and Sebastian, a young black man preparing to take on the role, the play becomes a conversation across generations about identity, representation and responsibility. Moving between past and present, the work layers imagination with historical encounter, inviting us to consider not only what happened, but how stories continue to shape who we are.

Although separated by more than two centuries, Bennelong and Sebastian share the experience of navigating expectations placed upon Black people: to represent, to adapt, to survive and to find their place in spaces that have not always made room for them. Through them, we have been exploring masculinity, vulnerability, responsibility and the ways people carry the expectations placed upon them.

I am honoured to bring *Bennelong in London* to audiences on the traditional lands and waters of the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, where so much of this story began. It has been a privilege to work alongside Jane Harrison throughout the development and to continue to bring her powerful and deeply human storytelling to life.

This production asks us to reflect on history, Country, legacy and the stories we choose to carry forward. Bennelong's story continues to be told.



Artistic Director's Note: Mitchell Butel

You're seated in a theatre on a place named by the Gadigal as Ta'ra.

If you boated to the east for 10 minutes or so, you'd find yourself on Bennelong Point, commemorating the location where a small hut was built in 1790 by Governor Phillip for a Wangal man of the Eora nation, a man who is the subject of the play you're about to see.

Well, it's that but it's also a play about a contemporary First Nations man and actor who is trying to forge a life in the theatre and is trying to tell a story about how to tell stories about our past and specifically, the intersection of two cultures. And how we try to reconcile the pain of that clash in order to teach and to grow and to honour.

Woollarawarre Bennelong was born circa 1764 probably near Balmain and died in 1813 near Kissing Point on the Parramatta River, where he is now buried. As Tanya Koeneman writes; "the Bennelong we think of today is a construct of generations of information". Who and what was he? Emissary, facilitator, translator, prisoner, friend, strategist, resister, outcast, survivor, preserver?

It is a thrill to have revered Australian playwright, Jane Harrison (the talent behind iconic works such as *Stolen* and *The Visitors*), back at Sydney Theatre Company to ask some of those questions about one of the most important figures in our country's history in inventive and subversive ways in a production helmed by one of Australia's most gifted, innovative and thoughtful directors, Ian Michael.

It's an equal joy to be witnessing two wonderful actors – Guy Simon, much beloved to Sydney Theatre Company audiences from multiple productions and Googorewon Knox in his Company debut after burning up many a musical stage – spin this tale that begins in a share house but expands to country, to the ocean, to the world.

Jane's play was commissioned by Sydney Theatre Company, and it is an example of the ways in which we are invested in supporting the voices of our country's best playwrights to extend and enrich their practice and to make brilliant theatre for you.

To that end, I'd like to thank Jane for all her work on the script throughout its development and the very valuable contributions of Uncle Matthew Doyle for his deep expertise, knowledge and guidance throughout that process and during rehearsals, as well as Ian Michael, Jules Orcullo, Dramaturg, and Jonathan Ware, Literary Manager.



Curriculum Links

DRAMA

Stage 5

- Scripted Drama
- The Elements of Production
- Australian Drama and Theatre

Stage 6

- Dramatic Forms, Styles and Conventions
- The Elements of Production
- Australian Drama and Theatre

ENGLISH

Stage 5

- 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

- Aboriginal History
- Australian History
- Colonisation, Dispossession, Assimilation, Resistance, Repatriation
- Identity & Culture
- Racism & Stereotyping

CURRICULUM LINKS

- Drama Stage 4, 5, 6 - Aboriginal Voices in Contemporary Theatre
- English Stage 4, 5, 6 - Exploring Aboriginal Identity, Culture & Perspectives
- History 7-10 - Aboriginal Peoples, Colonisation, Contact History (cross-cultural encounters)
- Geography 7-10 - Landscapes and Landforms, Changing Places, Impacts of Colonisation
- Aboriginal Studies 7-10 - Heritage & Identity, Culture & Beliefs, Government Policies
- Aboriginal Studies Stage 6 - Aboriginal Identities, Colonisation, Land Rights
- History Stage 5 - Rights & Freedoms, Aboriginal Resistance
- Society and Culture Stage 6 - Personal & Social Identity in intercultural contexts

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Bennelong

'I am known by many names. Woollarawarre, Wogultrowe, Boinba, and Bundabunda. I am the son of Goorah-Goorah and Gagolh'

Bennelong's story is one that has been taken from him. He is a historical figure of speculation, assumption and myth; however, he was a living Wangal man. In this story he attempts to assert his truth. He speaks with authority and a quick awareness of the differences between himself and Sebastian. He rejects the notion of being judged against contemporary values and ideals, holding fast to his truth despite any moral contradictions it presents in Sebastian's eyes. Bennelong demonstrates his keen understanding of diplomacy and cultural exchange in the recounting of his relationship and encounters with Arthur Phillip. In his cultural survival against a colonial backdrop, he uses his wit and charm to disarm his opponents and claim an existence and role in this new world that he feels befits his status. As the play progresses, we see an anguished Bennelong come to terms with historical accounts that attempt to reduce him to a colonial character. He rejects these half-truths and falsehoods and reclaims his own story in his own words.



Image: Googoorewon Knox. Photo: Daniel Boud

The Actor

Sebastian, 'The Actor' introduces himself to the audience '*I'm Sebastian Anderson, I'm 35 years old, I'm 180 cm tall, I'm a proud Biripi, Worami, Wodi Wodi and Walbunga man*'. He is endearing and warm and instantly relatable. He lives in Parramatta, traditionally known as Burramutta, the place of the eel. He is preparing to audition for the role of Bennelong and will become the conduit for the audience to learn about Bennelong's story. He is self-aware and earnestly questions Bennelong about the past. He navigates the complexities of cultural responsibility and identity in Australia in 2026. This is reflected in his awareness of current issues facing Aboriginal communities and his caution around parts of Bennelong story that may negatively impact perspectives of Aboriginal people. He reflects the struggle for Aboriginal actors to 'get it right' when it comes to telling First Nations stories and perspectives in theatre and the audience see him grapple with this in real time. By the end of the play, he has connected with a deep culturally grounded part of his own identity, and this allows him to step into the role of Bennelong with reverence and authenticity in the final moments of the play.



Image: Guy Simon. Photo: Daniel Boud

FORM, STYLE AND CONVENTION

Bennelong in London explores intercultural storytelling, weaving Aboriginal language and song with colonial records. Through transformational acting the two hander expands the world of the play adding additional historical figures. Elements of the set become symbolic props of both colonial oppression and destruction as well as cultural strength and survival. The non-linear narrative oscillates between the present day and the late 18th century, aided by the metatheatrical landscape/set that further blurs the lines between place and time.

Form

- Nonlinear structure
- Meta-Theatricality
- Blurred narrative

Style and conventions

- Two hander with transformational acting
- Symbolic props
- Physical theatre
- Monologue
- Flash back
- Intercultural story telling
- Aboriginal Language
- Comedy
- Truth telling

THEMES AND IDEAS

Identity

Bennelong in London explores how identity is shaped, disrupted and reclaimed across time. Since invasion Aboriginal People have had to contend with external pressures that aimed to disrupt, disconnect and destroy the fabric of cultural identity and kinship. The forced displacement of people from their ancestral lands creates deep wounds which decimate language and lore. This destruction began early for the clans connected to the Sydney basin resulting in many communities facing the current challenges of language revitalisation, diminished or no access to sacred sights and for some denial of their continued existence. Bennelong's identity is challenged by the colonial world, an initiated Wangal man, he becomes caught between his own culture and English society. He realises quickly what he relinquishes for the experience of this new culture, at times the relationships with his own people. Barangaroo who wants nothing to do with the colonists who take more than they need. His moral intuition is challenged when he travels to England and witnesses the cruelty of invasion and captivity. This experience leaves him longing for his Country and his people. Upon his return he gathers those displaced and attempts to retie fractured cultural lines. The way he is remembered by both sides reflects the disruption of his own cultural identity as a direct result of his experiences with Arthur Phillip and in England. Sebastian Anderson presents the complexities between cultural responsibility and contemporary issues facing Aboriginal communities. He grapples with the past while acutely present when it comes to how he will tell these stories to a modern audience. Sebastian is a proud Biripi, Worami, Wodi Wodi and Walbunga man and wants only to represent his people with authenticity and reverence for the past. The play itself serves as the evidence for the continued survival of language and culture in the face of invasion. Wangal language, a dialect of Dharug Dhalang (language) of the Sydney area is in revitalisation, re-awakening culture and stories of the Sydney area and empowering Aboriginal People connected to this place to continue the custodianship of Culture and Country.

Discussion Question: Sebastian says to Bennelong *"There's so much of our culture that we have lost..."*

How does this moment reveal the tension between cultural inheritance and cultural disruption for First Nations people?

Power

Power is a precarious tool throughout the play; it shifts and changes as the story of Bennelong unfolds. Initially present and evidently unbalanced between Bennelong and Sebastian. As an initiated man of traditional culture and lore, Bennelong has knowledge that Sebastian does not, he asserts an authority as a result and points out quickly that Sebastian is not his equal. As the play progresses and Sebastian's knowledge grows that imbalance is challenged and it is Bennelong who learns from him details of the present and past. The colonial power is ever present in the play, Bennelong is abducted, chained, and washed at the orders of Governor Phillip. He attempts to hold on to his agency through his own kind of diplomacy, cultural exchange and by learning their language and ways of being. This concept of exchange is how Bennelong maintains his agency; he believes that there is something to be gained by his time with the British. Bennelong is intelligent and learns to leverage curiosity, language, and status to influence how he is treated and understood. The relationship between Bennelong and Arthur Phillip is complex and while in parts Bennelong asserts they are equals he comes to learn that Phillip's loyalty was first and foremost with his own political agenda and advancement in the colony. The colonial power is most dominantly asserted in the way history has been recorded and the way Bennelong's life and story has been recorded. It is here that the play itself challenges colonial power with the reclamation of Aboriginal stories in the hands of Aboriginal People with truth telling in all its complexity.

Discussion Question: How does Bennelong use exchange to navigate unequal power structures, and what does this reveal about his agency under colonial rule?

Representation & Legacy

Bennelong in London interrogates who has the authority to represent First Nations stories and the necessity of truth telling to challenge the dominant narratives perpetuated by colonial powers. Bennelong challenges the assumptions made about him by Sebastian and in colonial records and attempts to reclaim his own story. He is determined to preserve his legacy and be remembered for his contributions to his people. Bennelong is burdened by the inaccuracies recorded about him and fights to put his own truth forward. This truth however presents its own complexities against Sebastian's modern moralities. Sebastian is determined to honour his people and culture through his contributions to telling First Nations stories. He desperately wants to 'get it right' and this is evident in his earnest questioning of Bennelong and his reluctance to negatively contribute to the wider stereotypes of Aboriginal People. Through its meta-theatrical structure, the play highlights the tension between performance and authenticity, asking audiences to consider how legacies are constructed, who benefits from them, and what is at stake when a historical figure demands to be seen on his own terms.

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Discussion Questions

'You will judge me; they will judge me. How will your descendants judge you?'

How is this question posed to not just Sebastian but also the audience? What is the audience encouraged to reflect on and consider?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Reflection Questions

After viewing the performance, discuss as a class:

- How did the set change as the play progressed? What purpose did this serve?
- There is a fishbowl placed in the apartment, a specific and purposeful design choice. What do you believe this symbolises
- How did the differentiation of the characters shift towards the end of the play? What was the significance of this?
- Much of the play is challenging a dominant narrative of history, why is this crucial for truth telling when it comes to Australian history?

Identity

Activity 1 Bennelong's Life

Brainstorming

- a. As a class map out the key events of Bennelong's life according to his recounts within the play. Consider and assign emotions to each of these events evidenced by Bennelong's accounts.

Practical Activity

- b. In small groups, create a tableau for each of the key events in his life, focusing on the emotional significance of each moment rather than the literal action. Aim to capture the underlying emotions and relationships that define these experiences. As you develop your tableaux, experiment with physical elements such as levels, use of space, body language, and status to communicate the emotions and dynamics of each scene effectively.
- c. Work on creating fluid physical transitions between these tableaux's
- d. You may choose to add music or simple instruments
- e. Perform your emotional timeline for the class

Post Activity:

- f. Reflect and discuss how the physical choices made help convey the emotional beats of Bennelong's life. Did this exercise help you better empathise with Bennelong's story?

Activity 2 **Physicalising Bennelong and Sebastian**

Brainstorming

- a. As a class, brainstorm adjectives that describe Bennelong
- b. As a class, brainstorm adjectives that describe Sebastian
- c. Record contrasting qualities (e.g., grounded/light, formal/casual, assured/uncertain)

Practical Activity

- d. In pairs, choose 3–5 adjectives for Bennelong. Choose 3–5 adjectives for Sebastian
- e. Experiment with physicality to embody each character
 - Explore status through body language: Who holds power? How is that shown physically?
 - Posture
 - Gesture
 - Weight
 - Pace
 - Use of space
- f. Practise transforming from Sebastian into Bennelong. Aim for a smooth, visible transition that communicates character contrast. Consider how cultural knowledge, confidence, humour, or authority affect the transformation
 - Shift in stance
 - Change in breath
 - Altered focus/eye line
 - Adjustment of weight and rhythm

Post Activity

Reflect on the experience of physically transitioning between characters and how the physical choices helped demonstrate power, identity and the relationship between the characters.

Power

Activity 1

- a. Discuss how physical choices demonstrate Power

Practical Activity

- b. In pairs, choose a moment from the play where power shifts, this may be internally for the characters with the revealing of information previously unknown or externally as in Bennelong's capture or arrival in England or when he asserts Sebastian is not his equal because he is not initiated.

Without using dialogue, recreate the moment using movement only.

- Who holds power at the start
 - How power shifts
 - How status is shown physically
 - How space is used to dominate or retreat
 -
- c. Create three power freeze frames showing:
 - Power imbalance
 - Power negotiation
 - Power reversal

Be sure to use levels, proximity, and body angles to show who controls the moment.

- d. Post Activity Reflect and Discuss
 - What physical choices made power visible?
 - How did status change the emotional tone of the scene?
 - How does power operate between Bennelong and Sebastian?

Legacy and Representation

Activity 1

As stated in the play, one colonial record of the latter part of Bennelong's life recounts;

'For some time after his return, 'it is true, he assumed the manners, the dress, and the consequence of a European, and treated his countrymen with a distance ... but notwithstanding, he has subsequently taken to the woods again, returned to his old habits.' 'Bennelong laid aside all the ornaments and improvements he had reaped from his travels, and returned as if with increased relish, to all his former loathsome and savage habits.'

- Discuss and dissect this recount, whose perspectives and values are reflected and whose are left out?
- Discuss or re-write this recount centring a non-colonial perspective.
- Reflect How does it differ, what is valued?
- Discuss how the dominant values of those in power shape the narratives and accounts of history that are perpetuated from that time.

Activity 2

- In pairs, choose and research a figure from Australian history and compose a script of 1-2 minutes that sees this historical figure in conversation with a high school student in 2026. In your script aim to include:
 - A clear moment of meeting between past and present
 - A shift in status or understanding
 - A moment of conflict, curiosity, or connection
 - A closing beat that shows what each character has learned or realised
- The conversation should explore the figures' values, experiences and historical context. There needs to be clear objectives for both actors:
 - What does the historical figure hope to teach, warn, or question?
 - What does the student want to understand, challenge, or clarify?
 - Let these objectives shape the tension and direction of the scene.
- Consider physicality, status and between the pair. Consider how you will reflect the differing time periods in language and vocal delivery.
- Rehearse and perform your script for your class

SUPPORT RESOURCES

The First Australians (Episode 1 *They have come to stay*) available via SBS

Language resources bayala.net.au

Australian Museum [Aboriginal Sydney Resources](#)

