

**SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
CO  
EDUCATION**

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

A photograph of two young women with serious expressions, wearing white, ruffled blouses. They are positioned 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.**

## KEY INFORMATION

# PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

A play by Tom Wright

Adapted from the novel by Joan Lindsay

Directed by Ian Michael

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### SUITABLE FOR

Years 9 - 12

### CURRICULUM LINKS

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

### THEMES & IDEAS

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

### FORM & STYLE

- Monologue
- Heightened Realism
- Gothic Horror

### CONTENT

Adult themes and depictions of violence.

Theatrical haze and complete black outs.

### APPROX. DURATION

85 mins, no interval

### CAST

Olivia De Jonge

Kirsty Marillier

Lorinda Merrypor

Masego Pitso

Contessa Treffone

### CREATIVES

**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 Coach** Charmian Gradwell

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### THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- What stereotypes of women and girls do you see in the production? What might this be saying about the construction of femininity in Australia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century? How might we experience the effects of this today?
- How do the playwright, director and designer create an uneasy world in which the colonality is placed over the land of First Nations People?
- How does the playwright construct the relationship between time, Land, and humans? Why is this important?



# SYNOPSIS



## Our most beguiling modern myth, boldly reimagined

Five modern teenage girls recount a story burnt into the Australian psyche. In Tom Wright's lyrical and daring adaptation, Joan Lindsay's hypnotic classic becomes a form-shattering mix of storytelling, gossip, and reenactment. Seen through the eyes of STC Resident Director Ian Michael (*Stolen, Constellations*), "the most exciting new director of this generation" (*Limelight*), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* promises an inventive and dreamlike theatre experience like no other.

St Valentine's Day, 1900. In the summertime heat of the Victorian Highlands, four schoolgirls sneak away from their excursion to climb the imposing monolith of Hanging Rock, pulled higher and higher by a mysterious force. All but one disappears without a trace.

With a cast featuring some of this country's finest young performers including Olivia De Jonge (Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis*), Kirsty Marillier (*Home, I'm Darling*), Lorinda Merrypor (*& Juliet*), Masego Pitso (*Is God Is*), and Contessa Treffone (*On the Beach*), this critically-lauded adaptation brings an archetypal mystery into the twenty-first century while preserving the chilling enigma at its heart.

Eerily beautiful, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* cracks wide open one of the most famous fables of contemporary Australia to create a heart-stopping and thoroughly contemporary investigation of innocence, cultural clash, and the enduring power of the wilderness.

# TEACHING THE CONTEXT OF PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

The following content and teaching strategies are designed to develop student understanding of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. It covers the individual, social, political, cultural and artistic contexts of the production.

*Picnic at Hanging Rock* explores the complexities of colonial Australia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Before teaching the text, teachers and students should have a clear understanding of the context of the play, which should be grounded in an understanding of the process of imperialism and colonisation.

**Imperialism** is the way in which one country extends its power and control over another. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is set in 1900, and Australia had been under the imperial control of the United Kingdom for 112 years. In the following year, 1901, Australia became independent from the United Kingdom through the process of Federation, in which the states and territories of the colony amalgamated into a nation, with a Federal Government based in Canberra. The process of Federation shifted imperial power to a less direct expression of this power, but it is important to remember that imperial influence and control continued.

**Colonisation** should be understood as one of several strategies that an imperial power may use to extend its influence over another group of people. In Australia the landing of the First Fleet on 26 January 1788 was the official day on which the process of colonisation began. *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, set on 14 February 1900, explores an Australia that had changed enormously since invasion, with British colonial power at its zenith. Land had been taken and First Peoples dispersed and murdered. The new colonies built around the imported economic, political, and social infrastructure of the British had successfully begun the process of extracting natural resources, while also disseminating imperial culture to ensure continued influence. This process had also impacted on the place known as Ngannelong, or Hanging Rock, where western agriculture and mining were features of the area. Ngannelong, a rock formation located near the traditional boundary between three Aboriginal groups – the Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri), the Dja Dja Wurung 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).

It is important to note that the forces of imperialism and colonisation have been, and continue to be, actively resisted by First Nations peoples across the world, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. (Tuihaiwai-Smith, 2012).

The world of Ngannelong (or Hanging Rock) cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the destructive power of colonisation on the Land, its First Peoples and the radical changes wrought by this process, whilst holding the ongoing custodianship of the First Peoples at its core.

# INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

## JOAN LINDSAY

Joan Lindsay was born in St Kilda, Victoria, in 1898 and died in 1984.

Lindsay was an accomplished writer, poet and visual artist. After completing her secondary education at Clyde Girls Grammar School, which later became the inspiration for Appleyard College, Lindsay studied at the National Gallery of Victoria Arts School. Whilst she was there, she met her future husband, Daryl Lindsay who was a talented artist in his own right. They married in London on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1922.

Throughout her career she wrote articles, essays and poetry for various publications, including *The Age* based in Victoria. Lindsay wrote *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in 1967 when she was 71, including a final chapter for the book that explained the mystery of what had happened at the Rock. Her publisher refused to allow the chapter to be included, which resulted in the conclusion being published in 1987 as a separate book.

"Whether *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves. As the fateful picnic took place in 1900 and all the characters who appear are long since dead, it hardly seems important."  
Joan Lindsay, 1967.

## TOM WRIGHT

Tom Wright is an Australian based playwright, director and actor, born in Melbourne in 1968.

Throughout his career, he has worked as an actor with Barry Kosky and was also an Associate Director at Sydney Theatre Company.

Wright is known for his reimagining of Australian stories, particularly those which have, in the past, contributed to a traditional sense of nationhood.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

#### Activity 1

- a. Research images of Ngannelong/Hanging Rock/Mount Diogenes in the Macedon Ranges on the internet.
  - As a class make a list of adjectives that describe the look of Ngannelong.
  - What are some of commonalities that you can see in these adjectives?
- b. Research the importance of Ngannelong to the Traditional Owners of the area. What was thought to be the purpose of the Rock to the traditional owners? How might this influence the way that you watch the play unfold?

#### Activity 2

**Research** the Greek myth of Diogenes.

- What was the myth and why might Joan Lindsay have been so specific about referencing this name for the Rock in her work?
- Does it impact on the way we interpret the story of Hanging Rock?

### Activity 3

Watch the trailer of the Peter Weir film of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

[Picnic at Hanging Rock \(1975\) - trailer](#)

- Using the visual and aural images from the trailer, draw conclusions about the issues and concerns of the movie.
- Make a list of these as a class and provide the reasons for your thinking.
- Using this list, discuss the early 1970s and the questions that were being asked of Australia's understandings of itself. How were they different to 1900?

### Activity 4

As a class, discuss why Tom Wright might have chosen to explore a staged version of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

What issues and concerns might be included in this production that might not have been explored in the novel and the film? What might this be saying about Australian identity?



# POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

*Picnic at Hanging Rock* begins on 14 February 1900. When the play opens, the colony is 112 years old. By its conclusion, Federation has been established, Appleyard College has been destroyed in a bushfire, and the mystery of the missing girls remains unsolved.

The political and social context of the period of Australian history in which *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is set was characterised by a deep desire to create a sense of nationhood – a shared vision that solidified an understanding of a colonial identity. The idea of a uniquely Australian voice, image or identity is a way of explaining how Australian people experience themselves in the world. This reflects our sense of who we are as a group - both our idealised sense of ourselves and its murky reality. In 1900, when *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was set, these questions were first and foremost in the minds of colonial powers as they sought to bring legitimacy to the newly emerging nation. Lindsay, writing in the late 1960s, interrogated this voice and its values within her own context, bringing the values of the era in which she wrote to interrogate the context of 1900. In his adaptation for the stage Tom Wright is doing the same, with a contemporary lens.

Australian theatre makers recognise that an Australian voice communicates a specific idea about our national identity, perpetuated by power structures in society. Various colonial tropes and motifs grew from the myths of belonging to the land to legitimise white presence in the landscape; these tropes emphasised the inhospitable, alien nature of the bush, and the loneliness experienced by the settlers, who had to endure the vast distance between England and Australia.

Historians suggest that the notion of the hostile land of Australia grew to prominence not because of its accuracy, but rather, because it served the nation-building project underway during the lead up to Federation. The idea of a rough, difficult bush in turn generated the notion of the strong pioneers, largely men, who were able to do battle with the land itself, rather than acknowledge the terrible truth of land clearing and genocide. These men were constructed as Australian heroes who, despite their shortcomings, overcame the difficulties of the land, effectively silencing the truth of the process of pushing deeply into stolen land.

Further, the construction of gender involved in the national project of Federation was also designed to replicate the patriarchal and class-based values of Britain in the newly emerging nation. The establishment of western educational systems, such as Appleyard College, point to the importance of building traditional kinds of femininity in young women. These traditional values develop submissive, compliant, domestically focused middle-class women who would take on the responsibility of running the household and raising children once married. What is not addressed in Lindsay's novel or Weir's movie, but is foregrounded in this production, is the exploitation of First Nations women in the domestic sphere, in which the hard, physical labour involved in raising children and the conditions under which the economy could function was delegated to First Nations and working-class women.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1

Research the process of Federation as a class.

Why was Federation so important to the states and territories? Make a list of these reasons on the whiteboard. What commonalities can you see in the information gathered by the class?

## Activity 2

Working in small groups of approximately 4 – 5 students, use the historical sources from the Parliamentary Education Office to explore the political and social forces that lead to Federation:

[Parliamentary Education Office – The Federation of Australia](#)

The first image on this website was published in *Punch Magazine*, in Britain. It communicates the reasons why the British might have an interest in Australia becoming a Federation.

- i. In small groups, create a 30 second performance that explores the economic and social interests contained within this cartoon. Perform these for your classmates and evaluate your thoughts about the reasons why the British might have supported Federation.
- ii. In the same small groups, investigate the reasons why settlers in each state and territory might want Federation.
- iii. In small groups, use the Parliamentary Education website and scroll down to the heading “Nationhood”. Read the text and, importantly, look at the image from Federation in which Lord Hopetoun is being sworn in as Australia’s first Governor General. (The Governor General is the British monarch’s representative in Australia).
- iv. Create a series of 3 freeze frames in which the group represents the political and social power structures that underpin the image. Perform these to the class and answer the following questions:
  - What is the economic and social class presented in these images?
  - What can you tell about gender roles from these images?
  - Is there any indication of a First Nations presence in this image? Why might this be?

## Activity 3

Ask each group to perform their 3 freeze frames again. Nominate a different member of the class, from a different group, to read the following quote as the freeze frames are re-performed.

“It is His Majesty's [King Edward VII] earnest prayer that this union so happily achieved may, under God's blessing, prove an instrument for still further promoting the welfare and advancement of his subjects in Australia and for the strengthening and consolidation of his Empire.”

The Duke of Cornwall, 9 May 1901

(Later King George V).

As a class discuss:

- What does the inclusion of the dialogue above do to expose the clarity of the political and social power structures imposed by the British?
- What might Australia’s First Peoples think and feel about the imposition of these structures? Why might this be?

Go back to your understanding of the importance of Ngannelong for the First Peoples of the area.

Make a list of adjectives that articulate the clash of worlds that Federation represents.

# CULTURAL CONTEXT

The cultural narrative of “white vanishing” is one that has emerged since 1788 and is the result of the anxiety provoked by being so far from home in an unfamiliar environment. For the British this anxiety resulted in narratives that explored being lost in the bush – particularly focused on the loss of non-indigenous children. These tropes, emerging in conjunction with the narrative of the vast, alien landscape, create a binary in which knowable, ‘civilised’ (coded white) spaces (and those who now own and occupy it), can sit alongside the unknown and feared ‘other’. This demarcation is a process by which settlers assert control over the land they have stolen and deny the genocidal reality of their behaviour, thereby justifying invasion and the colonial experience.

Sydney Theatre Company’s production brings contemporary understandings of Australian nationhood to the 2025 production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. To appreciate the complexity of the layers of meaning within this production, the audience must understand the values of a newly emerging Australia (1900), Lindsay’s context (1967) and contemporary interrogation of stories that contribute to our understanding of what it means to be Australian. Wright’s script and Ian Michael’s direction challenge the audience to explore the tapestry of our complex national identity and uncover the silences in both Lindsay’s novel and Weir’s film.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1

Research the painting “At Hanging Rock” (1875) by William Ford.

This painting is thought to be one of the first images generated by white artists exploring the idea of what it is to be lost in the Australian bush. Elizabeth Gadsby, the set and costume designer for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, has used this image as a reference point for her designs.

As a class, brainstorm what students notice about the image.

Write these thoughts on the white board for students to refer to as they explore the following activities.

### Activity 2

Go back to the images of the Peter Weir film of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* researched in earlier activities.

- What are the similarities between the Ford painting and Weir’s film?
- What are the differences?

Draw conclusions about why this might be and share them with the class.

### Activity 3

Working in groups of 4 – 5 students, research and find other examples of Australian stories that involve the ferocity of the Australian bush.

Create a 30 second performance that captures the essence of these stories, paying particular attention to the ways in which gender and class are represented.

Each group should perform their work.

As this occurs, critically reflect on the following questions:

- What roles do middle/upper class women and girls play in these stories? What does this suggest about their place in Australia?

- What role do working class women and girls play in these stories? What does this suggest about their place in Australia?
- How are Australia's First Peoples represented in these stories? What does this suggest about their place in Australia?

Make inferences about what this suggests about the ways that Australian stories have valued men over time. Ensure that your analysis includes First Nations men, working class men and middle/upper class men.



# REFERENCES

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Rehearsal images courtesy of Daniel Boud

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