

**SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
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**PRE-SHOW  
IN-THE-KNOW**



**THE TALENTED  
MR. RIPLEY**

By Patricia Highsmith

Adapted for the Stage by Joanna Murray-Smith

Directed by Sarah Goodes

# CONTENTS

Key Information.....	3
Synopsis.....	4
Teaching the Context of The Talented Mr. Ripley .....	5
Individual Context .....	5
Political and Social Context.....	7
Cultural Context .....	9
References.....	11

Image: Will McDonald. Photo: Derek Henderson.

Compiled by Sophia Small.

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

# THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY

By Patricia Highsmith

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### SUITABLE FOR

Years 11 - 12

### CURRICULUM LINKS

- English Stage 6
- Drama Stage 6

### THEMES & IDEAS

- Identity
- Social Class
- Morality

### FORM & STYLE

- Noir
- Suspense
- Psychological Thriller

### CONTENT

Strong language, mature themes including violence, cigarettes and theatrical blood.

### APPROX. DURATION

2 hrs, no interval

### CAST

Faisal Hamza

Raj Labade

Will McDonald

Andrew McFarlane

Johnny Nasser

Claude Scott-Mitchell

### CREATIVES

**Director** Sarah Goodes

**Set Designer** Elizabeth Gadsby

**Costume Designer** Emma White

**Lighting Designer** Damien Cooper

**Composer & Sound Designer** Steve Francis

**Associate Directors** Tait de Lorenzo & Kenneth Moraleda

**Associate Sound Designer** Madeleine Picard

**Movement Director** Charmene Yap

**Fight & Safety Director** Tim Dashwood

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### THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- How does the production construct Tom Ripley as a protagonist who is both repellent and compelling? How does this lead the audience to question their own moral compass and the allure of charisma? What might this tell us about the qualities we value in ourselves and others?
- How do the playwright, director and designer create a distinction between the American protagonist and the European setting?
- Tom's elaborate lies raise questions about the cost of maintaining a façade, and whether the truth ever really matters if the illusion is believed. Is there ever a justification for deceit, manipulation, and even murder?



# SYNOPSIS



## A magnificent obsession

From playwriting icon Joanna Murray-Smith comes this ravishing adaptation of the twentieth century's most glamorous thriller. Following the triumphant successes of *Switzerland* and *Julia*, Murray-Smith reunites with director Sarah Goodes to masterfully transform this seductive page-turner into an electrifying, world-premiere stage experience.

Will McDonald (*Heartbreak High*) plays Tom Ripley, an orphan and a striver, barely scraping by in 1950s New York. But beneath his woebegone exterior, Tom cultivates certain talents that set him apart: an extraordinary capacity for mimicry and deception. He is a man with a face no-one remembers.

Whereas no one could forget Dickie Greenleaf. He is everything Tom isn't; confident, stylish, and heir to a large fortune. Tom is hired by Dickie's father to bring his son home and so plunges him into a glittering world of luxury, beauty and hedonism on the Italian Riviera. Intoxicated with this new social scene, Tom begins to fashion himself after his target. He begins dancing like Dickie, dressing like him, and drinking like him. Tom begins to imagine another version of himself. A better one... and he'll kill for it.

For 70 years Tom Ripley has captivated readers and cinephiles alike. Now, literature's most alluring confidence man is brought to life before our eyes in the hands of one of our great playwrights and most brilliant directors. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* promises tension, passion and spectacular suspense.

# TEACHING THE CONTEXT OF THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY

The following content and teaching strategies are designed to develop student understanding of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. It covers the individual, social, political, and cultural contexts of the production.

## INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

### PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Born in 1921, Patricia Highsmith was an American novelist known for her psychological thrillers that explore themes of identity, morality, and alienation. Several of her novels have been adapted for the screen and stage, including *Strangers on a Train* (1950), later made into a film by Alfred Hitchcock, *The Price of Salt* (1952), adapted into 2014's *Carol* starring Cate Blanchett, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), which, as well as several other novels featuring Ripley (known as the 'Ripliad'), have been adapted for screen and stage many times.

Highsmith lived much of her adult life in Europe, particularly in France and Italy, which deeply influenced the settings and atmosphere of her work, especially in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Her characters are complex and often morally ambiguous, reflecting the darker parts of human nature.

Personally, she was a private and somewhat reclusive figure, with a complicated personality marked by struggles with her sexuality and relationships. Her experiences as an outsider and her interest in the upper classes shaped her novels, which frequently challenge conventional social norms and explore themes of deception and duality.

"Highsmith's novels are filled with characters who, like Ripley, would look entirely normal if you passed them in the street, yet are consumed by dark impulses, horrible secrets, and the fear of being found out."

Katie Rosseinsky

### JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH

Joanna Murray-Smith is an acclaimed Australian playwright, screenwriter and novelist, born in Victoria in 1962.

Murray-Smith's body of work includes almost two dozen plays which have been produced extensively worldwide. She has gained international recognition for her skilful exploration of contemporary life, morality, gender dynamics and relationships. Her works include *Honour*, performed on Broadway and at London's National Theatre, *Bombshells*, *The Female of the Species*, and *Julia*, based on Julia Gillard's infamous misogyny speech. She has received numerous accolades throughout her career, including the Commonwealth Medal for Services to Playwriting and the Mona Brand Award, and was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 2025 for her significant contributions to the performing arts.

"I have long been invested in The Talented Ms Highsmith and her wildly strange and brilliant mind. The world's most famous serial killer has been waiting for his moment in the spotlight and it's now."

Joanna Murray-Smith

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1: Preparing for the Show

Students investigate the enduring significance of stories over time.

- a. Discuss how classic stories are often reinterpreted to resonate with modern audiences (e.g., gender-swapped roles, contemporary settings, focus on new themes).
  - Students brainstorm examples of classic/canonical texts that have been adapted or appropriated for new mediums such as film or the stage, collected on the whiteboard. How were the original themes and ideas updated for a modern audience?
  - As a class, discuss the reasons why some stories continue to enthrall us across time.
- b. **Discussion & Prediction:** Tom Ripley is a morally ambiguous character: an anti-hero who pursues his desires at all costs and usually gets what he wants.
  - Students research the various adaptations of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.
  - What elements from the original text do you expect will stay the same, and what might change?
  - If you were the director, what specific choices (e.g., character blocking, lighting, music, an actor's performance choices) might you make to encourage a modern audience to see Tom in a more complex or even empathetic light, without excusing his actions? Or conversely, to make him seem even more chillingly contemporary?
- c. Facilitate a class discussion on the ethical considerations for modern adaptations of morally ambiguous characters. Encourage students to predict how the theatrical production they are about to see might lean – will it offer a more traditional villain, or a more nuanced psychological portrait, reflecting contemporary sensibilities?

### Activity 2: Reimagining a Classic Story

Students consider how modern adaptations can explore contemporary relevance or thematic interpretations onto a classic text, considering changes in socio-cultural perspectives. This prepares them to critically assess the choices made in the production they are about to see.

#### Instructions

- How might a modern *The Talented Mr. Ripley* explore the story's existing themes with a different emphasis (e.g., authenticity and identity in the age of the internet/identity theft, wealth disparity in today's world, toxic masculinity)?
- In small groups, students brainstorm and develop a pitch for their own modern adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Their pitch should include:
  - A proposed contemporary setting (e.g., a specific city/country, social milieu).
  - One or two key modern themes they would emphasise (e.g., social media's role in identity, the gig economy, climate anxiety, mental health stigma).
  - How they would update one key character (e.g., Tom, Dickie, Marge) to fit this modern context.
  - One specific scene or element from the novel they would significantly alter to reflect their modern lens.

- Follow-up: Groups present their pitches. Class discussion: What are the benefits of updating a classic story? What are the risks (e.g., losing the original's essence)? How might a modern audience's expectations differ from a 1950s audience?

# POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

*The Talented Mr. Ripley*, published in 1955, is deeply rooted in the cultural context of post-World War II America and Europe, reflecting the era's social dynamics and anxieties. The story explores the tension between old-world European aristocratic decadence and the emerging influence of American wealth and identity during the 1950s. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* explores themes of class, identity, and the elusive American Dream, set against the backdrop of the glamorous yet morally ambiguous Italian Riviera. The story's focus on deception, psychological manipulation, and the fluidity of identity also echoes broader mid-century concerns about authenticity and alienation in a rapidly changing, consumer-driven world.

## THE 1950S: POST WAR AMERICA

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* reveals key aspects of the social, historical, and cultural context of the 1950s through its exploration of class, identity, and morality in a post-war world. The story emerged during the early Cold War era, a time marked by suspicion, shifting alliances, and anxieties about identity and loyalty. Socially, it reflects the growing prominence of American wealth and influence abroad, as well as the rigid class structures and social hierarchies that still defined much of European society, particularly among the wealthy elite. Historically, the novel captures the post-war boom when travel and leisure became more accessible to the wealthy, though the lingering tensions from the war and changing cultural values permeate the narrative.

1950s post-war American culture was characterised by a booming economy, widespread consumerism, suburban growth, increased industrial production and a rising middle class. This era emphasised traditional family values, with clear gender roles often centred around the 'ideal' nuclear family. Politically, the Cold War shaped society, fostering fears of communism and promoting conformity and patriotism. Popular culture thrived with the rise of television, rock 'n' roll, and Hollywood, reflecting both optimism and underlying social tensions. Despite surface prosperity, issues like racial segregation and the beginnings of civil rights activism highlighted deep social inequalities.

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* explores themes of alienation, identity, and the fluidity of morality, challenging the conservative norms of 1950s society, especially around issues of sexuality and social conformity. The novel's depiction of expatriates navigating both the allure and dangers of this era offers a critique of surface appearances versus underlying realities in a rapidly modernising world.

## THE 1950S: POST WAR EUROPE

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* is primarily set in the picturesque and glamorous locales in Italy during the 1950s. This sun-soaked Mediterranean backdrop contrasts sharply with the dark psychological tension of the story, reinforcing the novel's exploration of identity and deception as the beauty and charm of the setting masks the darker undercurrents of crime and betrayal.

Socially, the novel highlights the contrast between the wealthy American expatriates and the traditional European aristocracy, reflecting the growing influence of American affluence abroad and the persistence of entrenched social hierarchies.

The key elements of 1950s post-war European culture include a period of rebuilding and renewal after the devastation of World War II, marked by economic hardship and gradual recovery. Traditional social hierarchies and class structures remained strong, even as modernisation and urbanisation began reshaping daily life. Politically, Europe was divided by Cold War tensions, with Western Europe aligning with the US and Eastern Europe under Soviet influence. Culturally, tension grew between nostalgia for pre-war traditions and a growing interest in existentialism, avant-garde art, and new literary voices questioning authority and social norms. Travel and tourism slowly expanded, especially among the wealthy. Despite ongoing hardships, the era laid the foundation for the social and cultural transformations that would accelerate in the 1960s.

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* probes the era's rigid social norms by presenting characters who transgress traditional boundaries, particularly through Tom Ripley's fluid identity and ambiguous sexuality, subtly challenging conservative 1950s attitudes. Through its suspenseful narrative of impersonation and moral ambiguity, the story critiques the superficiality of appearances and the fragile nature of social status in a rapidly changing, uncertain world.

“In an era that becomes witness to mass production on such a large scale for the very first time, we find a number of crime novel heroes that see themselves confronted with the need to achieve “an upwardly mobile success” in order to avoid staying “a faceless working-class ‘nobody.’”

Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier

# CULTURAL CONTEXT

“For a total psychopath,” writes Carole V. Bell, “Tom Ripley is remarkably popular.” Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* continues to fascinate audiences nearly 70 years after its publication, inspiring new adaptations for the stage and screen. The enduring nature of the story of Dickie Greenleaf and Tom Ripley speaks to the story's exploration of themes that never go out of date, exploring what it means to desire a better life, and the lengths to which one will go to achieve it. Tom Ripley, an anti-hero who is both charming and utterly amoral, fascinates audiences across time, as he navigates a life of deceit and identity theft. The story taps into universal anxieties about class, authenticity, and the seductive power of reinvention, allowing readers to simultaneously condemn Tom's actions while subtly identifying with his desire for a better life. This complex interplay, coupled with Highsmith's taut prose and atmospheric settings, ensures the story's continued relevance and appeal. The subtle examination of queer desire and outsider status challenges conservative social norms, adding layers of complexity to the story's enduring cultural significance.

“Highsmith wasn't the first crime writer to let her hero get away with murdering an innocent man (two innocent men in fact), but it's hard to think of anyone else who makes that scandalously amoral triumph feel like a vision of some higher, truer morality; a morality founded on the radical notion that the Good Life belongs to the person most fitted to appreciate it.”

James Lasdun

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1: Setting and Context

Students explore the contrasting socio-economic landscapes and cultural values of 1950s post-war America and Europe, and how these inform character motivations and themes in the story.

#### Instructions

- Divide students into small groups. Half the class researches the 1950s Post-War American Dream; the other half research the 1950s European (especially Italian/French) Post-War Culture and Aristocracy, focusing on the following questions:
  - What did "success" look like in 1950s America? What were the dominant values (e.g., consumerism, suburban life, conformity)? What opportunities or limitations did this era present? How might someone like Tom Ripley, from a modest background, feel about this?
  - How was Europe recovering from WWII? What was the perception of American wealth and influence? What defined the lives of the wealthy elite (like Dickie Greenleaf) in Italy or France at this time? What role did art, leisure, and a more 'old-world' sensibility play?
- Students share their findings in a jigsaw activity.
- Possible follow-up questions for whole-class discussion to help students understand the societal pressures and opportunities that fuel Ripley's ambition:
  - How might these contrasting contexts influence Tom Ripley's aspirations and actions?
  - How does he exploit the differences between these worlds?
  - What social anxieties or desires of the era does Highsmith tap into?

## Activity 2: Engaging with Moral Dilemmas

Students grapple with the story's moral ambiguity, understand Tom Ripley's rationalisations, and explore the concept of "justifiable" actions. They consider the shades of grey and the psychological justifications that blur moral lines, preparing them to analyse Ripley's actions on stage.

### Instructions

- Present students with a series of ethical dilemmas drawn from the story, such as:
  - "Is it ever acceptable to commit a crime to get what you want?"
  - "If someone 'deserves' something more than another person, does that justify taking it from them?"
  - "At what point does imitation become identity theft?"
  - "When is self-preservation a valid excuse for harming another?"
- For each dilemma, students engage in a quick "agree/disagree" spectrum activity, physically moving to different sides of the room to indicate their perspective.
- Then, in small groups, students discuss their positions, attempting to find common ground or articulate their differing viewpoints.
- Follow-up (individually): Students choose 1-2 dilemmas that interest them. For each, students write a paragraph arguing for and a paragraph arguing against the "morally ambiguous" action, using reasoning that might appeal to Tom Ripley or his victims.



### Cast & Crew of *The Talented Mr Ripley*

Jasmine Power, Chaii Ki Chapman, Tait de Lorenzo, Emma White, Jesse Grieg, Raj Labade, Julia Orlando, Kenneth Moraleda, Simon Porro, Damien Cooper, Elizabeth Gadsby, Andrew MacFarlane, Charmain Yap, Steve Francis, Stephanie Storr Clark, Will McDonald, Johnny Nasser, Joanna Murray-Smith, Sarah Goodes, Tim Dashwood, Faisal Hamza, Sophia Morgan, Jonathan Ware, Claude Scott-Mitchell, Mia Kanzaki

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Photography by Daniel Boud

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