

10 |

POLITICAL THEATRE: RAISING AWARENESS

WHY STUDY POLITICAL THEATRE?

This chapter explores how theatre can raise awareness about social and political issues. Theatre has an extensive history of playwrights and theatre practitioners creating plays and performance work to challenge the status quo and bring about change. While many forms of theatre can be defined as having a political message or aim, this chapter looks at some types of political theatre and their common characteristics in terms of staging, theatrical techniques, acting style and actor–audience relationship. Through the activities in this chapter, you will learn about some of these dramatic forms and develop skills, knowledge and understanding to help you create your own political theatre performance.

This chapter is divided into the following units:

- 10.1 The purpose of political theatre
- 10.2 Exploring politics, power and justice
- 10.3 Documentary drama and verbatim theatre
- 10.4 Performance task: political theatre

OUTCOMES

In this chapter you will:

- draw on personal stories and historical events as the basis for performance work
- learn about the aims and techniques of Brecht’s epic theatre, and Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and his use of image theatre
- investigate and explore how documentary drama and verbatim theatre plays are created and performed
- devise a political performance using theatrical techniques to engage the audience with questions about social and political issues.





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HINT

'Dialectic' means investigating the truth of opinions through dialogue, debate and discussion. 'Dogma' means a set of principles set out by an authority as true that cannot be questioned.

10.1 The purpose of political theatre

Art that wants to matter struggles to exist ... is threatened ... Dialectic has been usurped by dogma ... fixed opinion for opinion's sake has replaced the individual's ability to reason, and ... this condition of national life has the tendency to stifle the essence of art.

Robyn Archer – Australian performer

'The Myth and the Mainstream: Politics and Performing Arts in Australia Today' (2005)

So far you have explored and experimented with dramatic forms, the practices of playwriting, directing, designing and acting, and watched and thought about the performance work of others. In your performance tasks you have used the elements of drama (in particular the element of focus to frame the action) to find key questions that you wish to explore and a performance intention that you wish to achieve. In this unit you will focus on building your capacity to create theatre that challenges injustice. You will do this through questioning that encourages you to interrogate and to think deeply about issues of power, politics and privilege.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Read the quote at the start of this unit. Write down two or three questions you have about this quote. Share your questions with the class.
- 2 What opinions do you feel you are required to accept? What issues are you prevented from debating and discussing?
- 3 Work in small groups and think about ways in which other art forms such as television, film or literature might discourage dialectic.
- 4 What are your political beliefs? Why do you hold these beliefs?
- 5 What is capitalism, and what are its benefits and its costs?
- 6 Are we born to behave a certain way or do the circumstances of our lives dictate our behaviour?
- 7 Who has the most power in our society? What is your evidence for this? Where does this power come from? How is this power used?
- 8 Who has the least power in our society? Can this be changed? How?

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THEATRE?

Philosophers and theatre practitioners have raised questions about the purpose of theatre and its value for thousands of years. Is its purpose to entertain, to educate, to organise, or some other purpose? Some believe that theatre is a valuable tool for reinforcing social order. Some believe that tragedies serve this purpose as the audience identifies with and feels pity and fear in response to the decisions made by the protagonist. Political theatre practitioners object to this aim as they feel it removes power and freedom to make decisions from the people watching the play.

The influence of context

In your study of drama, you need to become more aware of the influences that help to shape the development of societies and consequently art forms. Studying political theatre is a good opportunity to develop a stronger knowledge and understanding about contexts. This awareness helps you to understand the tensions, needs, aims and intentions of theatre makers. The following table gives examples of some of the contextual background you might consider when making and learning about drama and theatre.

Example of a play's contextual background

SOCIAL CONTEXT	POLITICAL CONTEXT	HISTORICAL CONTEXT	CULTURAL CONTEXT
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In this country, many people work in urban centres.• Most families have more than three children.• There is a large working class population.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The country is run by a military government.• Voting is not compulsory.• Certain groups and their interests are not represented by this government.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Events important in this play happened during the 1950s.• For this country, it was a time of economic prosperity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The population has a strong commitment to a religious faith.• There is a long history of people from nearby countries settling and bringing with them diverse ideas and beliefs.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, significant changes in all aspects of life created certain conditions. During this time, some European theatre practitioners found that realism was not an effective dramatic form to encourage audience members to take action—the fourth wall only allowed for a passive response, and did not encourage critical thinking. These creative and radical theatre-makers wanted their audiences to respond to and take action against issues of injustice, discrimination, intimidation and prejudice.

In the social and political context of this time, many people were facing significant challenges and threats. In particular, the First and Second World Wars had led to incredible losses of life and property. The status quo and a desire for power and control by some led to situations where individual and personal freedoms and liberties were severely threatened.



HINT

'Status quo' means the existing way things are, socially and politically.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

Complete the following tasks in small groups. First, think about the questions individually and record your ideas, and then work with a partner to continue developing your ideas. Share your ideas in a way that is visible, for everyone to see.

- 1 What is the purpose of theatre?
- 2 Think of a theatre performance you have seen. Identify and explain the purpose of this performance. What evidence do you have for your opinions?
- 3 Imagine you are teaching students about theatre. One of your students asks 'Why is theatre an important art form?' How would you respond?
- 4 Complete a table that identifies some of the features of the social, political and cultural contextual factors that influence you and your life.

EPIC THEATRE

What does epic mean?

In literature, the term 'epic' is associated with poems about heroes of importance, and their journeys and great deeds. An epic film also suggests a focus on a heroic character who journeys through visually spectacular landscapes on a particular quest.

In terms of political theatre, German director Erwin Piscator used the word 'epic' in reference to the way that his productions focused on contemporary issues through the use of projection of still and moving images, and through staging that rejected realistic sets and instead used platforms and scaffolding. This was very unusual for its time.

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Bertolt Brecht

Brecht was a Marxist and questioned ideas about how individuals are influenced by social and economic forces rather than our choices and actions simply being the result of who we are. He was a creative rebel who believed that people are able to change and be changed. In Berlin, before the Nazis came to power in the 1930s, he and other playwrights staged a new style of theatre that was very different to what people were used to at the time. Many of his plays are still performed today including *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht was a German playwright of the 20th century and is credited with bringing many of the common features of political theatre together. He termed his style of theatre 'epic theatre', although later in his career he used the term 'dialectical theatre'. As Brecht's theatre was a reaction against realism, he wanted to avoid the techniques that would allow the audience to become passive spectators to the action. He would leave the house lights on and use non-realistic sets so it was clear to the audience that they were in a performance space watching actors representing life and people.

Brecht was born in Germany in 1898. He was a very curious young man who loved to read, think and talk about ideas, and started creating theatre works when he was just 16.



HINT

In the late-19th and early-20th century, theatre had a more powerful influence as this was a time before television and computer technology.



The Drama Teacher – Epic Theatre Conventions
Universal Teacher – Studying Bertolt Brecht

Conventions of epic theatre

PLAY STRUCTURE

- Many scenes have self-contained episodes, each of which is linked to the same subject. This creates the impression of a journey that covers a long period of time. It is also a device to prevent the audience from becoming too emotionally involved in the performance.
- Brecht wanted his audiences to feel emotions but not without the audience thinking about and understanding the forces that have aroused their responses. He believed that knowledge and reason are the forces that drive the spectator to action.
- Brecht wrote some plays where the dramatic action comes from contradictions of economic and political forces rather than from a protagonist's free will.
- A narrator speaks directly to the audience at times rather than the dramatic action happening in the present (as in realism). This convention links scenes and breaks the fourth-wall barrier between actor and audience. The narrator also reflects on the action and presents questions to the audience.
- Songs that carry a political message are included. Often scene changes are bridged with songs. Songs in epic theatre often comment on the action and provoke the audience to question the issues being presented in the performance.
- Conflict is left unresolved, which makes the problems and faults in society clearer to the audience.

STAGING

- Signs, placards and graffiti (for example) are used to give each scene a title.
- Historical film footage is projected to point out the current relevance of the issues to the audience. This is also known as the technique of 'historification'.
- Sets are non-realistic. Platforms, scaffolding, film, slides and half curtains are used.
- On the stage, in view of the audience, characters change costume to become different characters.
- There is the occasional use of masks.
- Minimal props and furniture are used. This allows locations to be suggested, rather than re-created.

EXERCISE

DRAMATIC THEATRE AND EPIC THEATRE COMPARISON

Work in small groups to rehearse the following dramatic and epic versions of two scenes. After you have rehearsed the scenes, choose groups to present their versions to the class.

IN THE STYLE OF DRAMATIC THEATRE

SCENE 1

(The houselights fade. The curtain opens to reveal a lounge room. It is late afternoon and the stage light coming through the window mimics the change of light from afternoon to twilight. The sounds of army aircraft can be heard flying overhead. A young woman enters the room.)

TRACY *(She hears the front door open and close and she calls out.)*

I'm in here.

(Her mother enters the living room. She is clearly troubled and finds it difficult to speak.)

ALICE I didn't think you would be home.

TRACY Why what is it? Is there something wrong?

ALICE Ever since the war began, your father and brother promised they would send whatever they could to help us keep going.

TRACY And they have.

ALICE Yes, but not recently. Tracy, I have to make a difficult decision.

TRACY What?

ALICE I'm going to have to ask you to move out.

TRACY Move out? But where will David and I go?

ALICE I know this is difficult, but I have a business to run and with the rations and demands from the government for me to give more, I just can't make ends meet.

TRACY But what about me? I don't have a job. I can't look after David on my own.

ALICE You will find a way. I'm sorry but I have to do this.

SCENE 2

(The following morning. ALICE is seated on the couch. The sound of the television is a news report about soldiers invading a nearby border. She turns off the television and goes to the mantelpiece. She picks up a photo of Tracy. As TRACY enters the room she quickly puts the photo back on the mantelpiece.)

ALICE Good morning.

(TRACY doesn't respond. She is gathering belongings.)

ALICE I didn't sleep well. I just want you to know that if I could ...

TRACY I'll be gone soon.

ALICE Please, there was no other choice.

IN THE STYLE OF EPIC THEATRE

SCENE 1

(The houselights remain on and there are no curtains or wings. The stage walls are bare brick. A few scaffolding platforms are placed against the upstage wall. The actors sit on the platforms. Suddenly one of them stands. A slide is projected onto a screen—it reads 'A Mother Abandons Her Child'. The actor steps forward and announces the scene. A musician begins to play a melancholy tune. The actor who announced the scene takes a jacket from a coat rack and puts it on. They walk downstage to the audience.)

ACTOR 1 Tracy is the daughter of Alice. She is at home one afternoon.

*(The actor becomes **TRACY** and busies herself. She hears a person arriving home. Another actor takes a different jacket and puts it on.)*

ACTOR 2 I play Alice, Tracy's mother.
*(She becomes **ALICE** and walks into the stage space.)*
I didn't think you would be home.

TRACY Why what is it? Is there something wrong?

ALICE Ever since the war began, your father and brother promised they would send whatever they could to help us keep going.

TRACY And they have.

ALICE Yes, but not recently. Tracy, I have to make a difficult decision.

TRACY What?

ALICE I'm going to have to ask you and David to move out.

TRACY Move out? But where will I go? David is sick.

ALICE I know this is difficult, but I have a business to run and with the rations and demands from the government for me to give more, I just can't make ends meet.

TRACY But what about me? I don't have a job. I can't look after David on my own.

ALICE You will find a way. I'm sorry but I have to do this.

*(Another actor moves downstage as the actors playing **TRACY** and **ALICE** remove their jackets and become soldiers. They join a line of other actors on the scaffolding platform who also represent soldiers.)*

NARRATOR And so a mother's heart must break. A daughter and grandson sent far away. Who is right? Who is to say? In times of war these choices must be made.

SCENE 2

(The soldiers begin to march. A title is projected: 'The Daughter Must Give Up Her Child'. The soldiers chant the title in unison.)

NARRATOR And so for three years the war raged, and the daughter and her son travelled far and wide.



HINT

Brecht wanted his actors to understand their characters rather than emotionally connect with them. He required his actors to represent character types and their feelings, rather than adopt a Stanislavskian approach, which requires actors to become emotionally absorbed in the characters.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

Complete the following 'connect–extend–challenge' thinking routine.

- 1 How are the ideas and information about epic theatre *connected* to what you already knew?
- 2 What new ideas did you get that *extended* or pushed your thinking in new directions?
- 3 What is still *challenging* or confusing for you to understand? What questions, wonderings or puzzles do you now have?



Getty Images/ullstein bild

Brecht's play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, questions greed, materialism and abuse of power.

POLITICAL THEATRE IN THE FUTURE

Political theatre has evolved over time into many other forms, and will continue to do so into the future. This style of theatre has many branches, but the plays and performance works have some features in common, in terms of the presentation of the performance and how the actor–audience relationship is manipulated for a particular effect.

In many of these plays and in contemporary theatre, you can see how the work of early Western political theatre practitioners still has purpose for theatre makers today. For example, contemporary Indigenous Australian plays are political in their aim as they seek to point out issues about race, discrimination and prejudice, and the consequences. The play *Stolen*, by Jane Harrison, uses the acting and staging theories and techniques of epic theatre to encourage the audience to question and consider the consequences of the forced removal of Indigenous Australians from their families, now referred to as The Stolen Generation.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Research one of the following political theatre practitioners: Dario Fo, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bola Agbaje or Adam Brace.
- 2 What films, television programs, blogs, websites and plays are strongly political in their intentions? Why do you think this is?



Cardboard Citizens –
Untold Stories: Cardboard
Citizens' Forum Theatre
at Homeless Hostels
Cardboard Citizens

10.2 Exploring politics, power and justice

In this unit, you will use some of the techniques of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal to work collaboratively and create images that explore and express ideas about politics, power and justice.

AUGUSTO BOAL AND THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Augusto Boal (1931–2009) was a Brazilian actor and director who believed in a democratic theatre that would challenge social injustice and inequity. Boal had a strong social conscience and felt passionate about injustice, and used theatre in his home country of Brazil to help many who lived in poverty and who had not received a basic education. He found that theatre was powerful as a form of communication, and used it to address current social and political issues.

Like Brecht, Boal created new forms of theatre that changed the way the audience interacted with the performance to empower them to be agents of change. Initially, Boal encouraged audience members to discuss plays after the performance. Later, he began to ask audience members to make suggestions for how characters might resolve problems they face in the play. The actors would then apply the audience suggestions to their performance.

According to Boal, he changed his thinking about what a political theatre performance could be when something unexpected happened during a performance. An audience member, frustrated by the way an actor had interpreted her suggestions for how a wife should deal with mistreatment from her husband, suddenly went onto the stage and took the place of the actor to show what she would do in this situation. This moment was very powerful for the audience and revealed to Boal how theatre could empower, educate and transform through the involvement of the spectators. Boal called this theatrical form ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’, and named the participants the ‘spect-actors’ in reference to the ability of audience to both observe and participate in the performance.



Concrete Justice, a troupe of New Yorkers with experience of homelessness, performing *It Could Happen to You*, 2011. Produced by Theatre of the Oppressed, NYC.



International Theatre
of the Oppressed
Organisation

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Research one of the following forms: Theatre of the Oppressed, forum theatre, invisible theatre or image theatre. Report your findings to the class.
- 2 What are the similarities and differences between Brecht's epic theatre and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed?

IMAGE THEATRE: EXPLORING POLITICS, POWER AND JUSTICE

One of Boal's main forms of theatre is image theatre, which explores forms of injustice and oppression through the use of actors in frozen images or tableaux. Boal liked this way of communicating as he felt that everyone was capable of contributing and could express their ideas and feelings through their body. When looking at the images, Boal thought it was important that the spectator was able to observe both subjectively and objectively. This means that sometimes, when we view an image, we see things a certain way because of our experiences, our background or our culture. Boal wanted his participants to develop the ability to be aware of these influences on our interpretation, and to be open to other possible meanings.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

Research definitions of the word 'justice' and consider the following questions:

- 1 What does justice mean to you?
- 2 What issues of injustice in society concern you at the moment?
- 3 Where is there evidence of injustice in our society?
- 4 What are the causes of this injustice?
- 5 Is the justice that is given in the end truly justice for those who are oppressed?

EXERCISE

POLITICS, POWER AND JUSTICE

1 Who is the most powerful?

In this activity everyone, including the teacher, begins seated in the space in a way that everyone agrees represents the most balanced and even distribution of power. Once this has been achieved, one person volunteers to take a new position in the space to make themselves the most powerful. This is then followed by another volunteer who attempts to be even more powerful. The game continues until all participants have had a turn. After the game, reflect on the ways in which power was established and communicated.

2 Great game of power

Augusto Boal developed an exercise that explores how power and status can be exercised through body language, and the use of space and levels. This exercise also explores how performers and their use of levels and space can be visually striking.

- Place six chairs, one table and a bottle in the centre of the room. Individuals volunteer to arrange the furniture to make the bottle the most powerful object in the tableau.





- Next, include six volunteers in the tableau. A seventh volunteer arranges the chairs, table, bottle and participants to make one volunteer appear more powerful than the others. This step can be repeated several times by choosing different volunteers to create new arrangements.

3 Who is Justitia?

From your knowledge of the elements of drama, you are aware of the power of symbol to communicate many messages through one image or object. Look at the following images of the statue of Justitia—the Roman goddess of Justice. Find 10 words or phrases that come to mind on the first viewing. On the second viewing find 10 more words or phrases. Share these with the class.



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Brandon Bourdages; Audrey Flack

Three versions of Justitia

In small groups create a group image of multiple versions of Justitia. The various figures might be arranged to show interaction with each other. Create a 'headline' that sums up the image of justice. Show your image to the class and ask the class to 'read' what they see in your image. After the class has discussed the image, tell the class your headline.

4 Images of injustice and oppression

Individually, think about an area of oppression or injustice that you feel passionate about. Share your ideas with your group. Choose one issue of injustice and create an image to represent the oppression. Make sure you create a clear point of focus for the audience, and use body shape, levels and space to illustrate power relationships.

5 Justice and oppression

- Create a new image that includes the statue of Justitia as represented by one group member. You can adjust the pose and position of the statue in any way you like to further comment on and highlight the issue of injustice. Present your image to the class.
- Create a headline to sum up the essence of your image and write it on A3 paper. The headline can be a question, statement or a title. Re-stage your image and decide whether to show the written headline to the audience before or after you show the image.



HINT

Augusto Boal's handbook, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, contains an excellent range of physical exercises.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

As you watch the presentation of the images, use the following 'see-think-wonder' thinking routine. Write your ideas on sticky notes and place them on a wall or whiteboard afterwards to share everyone's thoughts and ideas.

- 1 What did I *see*? Describe what you saw.
- 2 What did I *think* about what I saw? Begin to interpret the image—be aware that your own background and who you are will influence how you interpret the image.
- 3 What am I *wondering* or what questions do I have? Maybe the image is unclear, or maybe it is very clear to you but makes you ask questions about society or people's behaviour.

10.3 Documentary drama and verbatim theatre

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Documentary drama evolved in Germany in the 1960s. It re-enacts historic events by incorporating the techniques and conventions of epic theatre, and aims to provoke audiences to think about important issues. When devising documentary drama performances, writers use transcripts, letters, oral histories and other documents as material for the performance.

Verbatim theatre, which began during the 1990s, is an evolution of documentary drama. It arose particularly through the work of American theatre companies who used interview and direct testimonies to create theatre performances that gave multiple perspectives on a significant event. *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufmann and Tectonic Theatre Project is one of the more famous verbatim theatre plays. The members of the theatre company travelled to Laramie, Wyoming to interview people about the homophobic bashing and murder of a young gay man, Matthew Shepard, in 1998.

Both documentary drama and verbatim theatre use distinct theatrical techniques and conventions to establish a non-realistic style. The performances incorporate techniques and conventions of epic theatre to achieve the purpose of 'distancing' the audience so they can think critically about the issues in the performance. Although the performance is about a true incident, the performers want to remind audiences that what they are watching is a play in a theatre, not a real-life situation. This approach encourages the audience to be more objective about the issues in the performance.

Often the script uses the actual words of real people, which gives the performance a particular impact as the audience knows that these are the words and thoughts of actual people. The actors in a verbatim performance must be able to draw on their skills of acting to create believable and authentic characters. Often actors will change characters many times in a performance, and each character will need to be equally convincing and believable.

DOCUMENTARY DRAMA PERFORMANCE SKILLS

An actor needs to be energetic and versatile in a documentary drama performance. They must be able to:

- play a variety of characters
- work effectively as part of an ensemble to strengthen the impact of chorus work and background characters
- use heightened movement and voice to represent characters and their responses.

EXERCISE

PERFORMING IN DOCUMENTARY DRAMA

1 Character movement

Performers in documentary drama are not restricted to realistic movements. Try the following character types:

- a soldier carrying a weapon – walk in a menacing way, with heavy, slow, rhythmic steps
- a dishonest, no-good drunk – you are trying to get money from passers-by as they flee from an invading army
- a member of a greedy and selfish royal family – use stylised gestures and mannerisms to convey your high status
- a simple, honest person struggling to get by – you are on a long journey through a war-torn country and are carrying a weak and injured person; as you move through the room, try to convey the illusion of travelling a great distance over a long period of time.

2 Chorus work

The use of a chorus is a powerful technique as it can create atmosphere, establish location, and represent points of view. The chorus may perform synchronised, controlled or stylised movements, or may play various roles, in order to background the main action.

In groups, prepare a performance of the following script extract from the play *Wild Rice*. Consider ways in which the techniques of narration and chorus can be used effectively.

***Wild Rice* (EXTRACT)**

This extract is from the play *Wild Rice* by Huong Nguyen, Phi Hai, Pat Rix and Geoff Crowhurst. In this play, a rebellious teenage boy named Sonny runs away from home to escape the strict rules of his father. The play is a documentary drama as it draws on the stories of Vietnamese Australians, and also employs the techniques and conventions of epic theatre.

The following scene is a re-enactment of the memories of Sonny's sister, Phuong. Sonny is recalling his family's perilous journey from Vietnam to Australia. The memories are heightened due to Sonny being very young at the time the family escaped. Toan, Long, Anne, David, Kim, Dale and Craig are the names of some of the performers who made up the chorus.

WILD RICE

BANNER 4: 'PRECIOUS JADE'

(SONNY enters.)

SONNY Escaping was the best part. It was really exciting. It was around midnight, I think ...

(The rest of the CHORUS come on one by one as if secretly meeting at night. Throughout this escape sequence they show us the story with their movements.)

TOAN Ten o'clock ...

LONG Two a.m. ...

ANNE Four in the morning ...

SONNY ... when Mum woke me up. She started putting three to four pantses on me along with four or five jumpers. Man, I thought she was going nuts. Then out of the blue she gave me a hug, kissed me on the cheek ... strange ... and I was dragged away by my older sister.

The moon was high, the night quiet. I mistook the little river that ran behind our house as a path and stepped into it, pulling my sister along with me. She screamed.

DAVID Ssssh!

KIM Shut up!

ANNE Do you want us to get caught?

TOAN Giu su Maria Giu se. Cái gì đó *(Jesus, Maria, Jesus. What is it?)*

DALE I thought it was the Communists.

CRAIG Here! Grab my hand.

DALE They're all wet!

LONG Sssssh!

(LONG gives DALE a clip around the ears.)

Sorry!

SONNY Man, I was cold! We climbed onto this fishing boat and were led down under the deck of the boat and told to sit down and be quiet.

DALE There's not enough room in here.

ANNE It's too dark. How long do we have to stay in here?

TOAN Two days? Where's my children?

DALE What reeks?

KIM Get off my foot.

LONG Who farted?

DALE I wanna go up on deck for a pee.

TOAN You can't. We've got to stay below. We don't want to look suspicious.

DAVID Who's been eating garlic?

CRAIG How long? Two days.

KIM Two days!

DALE Hey! We're moving.

ALL At last.

SONNY As the night wore on I began to miss my mum and dad and cried.

LONG Shut that kid up!

SONNY I must have annoyed a hell of a lot of people but my sister was so gentle with me. She cradled me in her arms and put me to sleep soon afterwards. The next morning she told me that Mum and Dad were still at home and that we had managed to escape. It was two days and nights under the deck until we were supposedly out of danger and were allowed to go up on top.

ANNE I can stretch at last.

DAVID Fresh air at last.

DALE I can have a pee at last.

LONG Look. Dolphins!

DALE I feel sick.

CRAIG Finally.

KIM It's too bright!

TOAN It's all water.

SONNY Bloody hell. By that time my body was covered in rashes from the sea water so my sister took all my clothes off to ease the pain. Man. Stark naked at six.

On the fourth day we ran out of water, food and petrol. We just drifted for two days. I was so thirsty ... and hot. My sister put me in a cooking pot full of sea water to keep me cool. Maybe that's how I ended up this colour!

Just kidding. Anyway, one kid, my age, started to scull sea water. He died. We found him in the morning all bloated like a puffer fish. His sister went crazy.

(Some of the CHORUS begin to pray while others pick up the dead boy.)

The older men wrapped him up and threw him overboard.

(He is thrown overboard.)

But there wasn't much we could do for his sister.

(The prayer stops.)

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 What is the mood or atmosphere of this extract? How did your group establish an appropriate atmosphere in performance?
 - 2 Describe how you used acting skills to portray your characters in a way that was authentic, but also captured the mood of the piece.
 - 3 Describe how your group used the performance space to engage the audience.
 - 4 How did your group establish a strong and effective actor–audience relationship?
 - 5 What aspects of this play make it political? Can you identify any techniques or aspects of the performance style that suggest the influence of earlier political theatre forms?
-

EXERCISE

VERBATIM THEATRE PERFORMANCE SKILLS

The particular challenge of this form of theatre is to portray the character with authenticity.

Being, not mimicking

Record a family member or friend of the family. Ask them to tell you about a short incident or event that has some significance to them. Once you have recorded the story, play it back to the person and check they are happy with what they have said, and get their permission for you to use it as a Drama exercise.

In class, listen to the story once while seated. On a second listen, try to speak as the person telling the story, using their words. Use your acting skills to develop a connection with the storyteller's mood, personality and feelings they experience as they re-tell the event. On a third listen, adopt the physicality of the character and try to speak along with them as though you are this person. When everyone in the class has rehearsed, present some examples to the class.



HINT

As verbatim theatre asks you to interview people, it is good to be well prepared. Always prepare your questions beforehand. You must also ask the interviewee for permission to use their words for Drama class work.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 What challenges did you find in this activity?
 - 2 What parts of this activity did you enjoy? Why?
 - 3 Research verbatim theatre using the Internet. What do you think about this dramatic form? What questions do you have? How might you explore this dramatic form further?
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PRACTITIONER PROFILE

LINDEN WILKINSON

Actor and writer

Linden Wilkinson graduated from NIDA as an actor in 1976. Since then she has performed with theatre companies across the country and in New Zealand. Linden began writing and publishing plays in the late 1980s, then moved into television series, writing and editing while continuing to perform.

Inspired by the energy generated through cross-cultural performance in a New Zealand drama classroom, as a dramatist and researcher she initiated an investigation on cross-cultural verbatim theatre in the Australian context, using the Myall Creek massacre and memorial as a case study.



Photographer: Sally Flegg

Linden Wilkinson

PERFORMING IN VERBATIM THEATRE

The following extract is from the verbatim play *Today We're Alive*. The playwright, Linden Wilkinson, explains the process and the outcomes in her introduction to the play.

Today We're Alive (EXTRACT)

Introduction

This play is the heart of a doctoral thesis. I wanted to find a reconciliation narrative and so I chose to explore Myall Creek's history, because I knew about the 1838 massacre and I had seen television coverage of the annual memorial ceremony. I wanted to know how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people could come to together and, in their words, share this history.

I approached the Myall Creek Memorial Committee for permission to devise a verbatim play about the Myall Creek story. I explained that verbatim meant I would be using their words and documentary material in the public domain. The members at that meeting gave me permission but wanted the story to be a positive one; they wanted the play to be about healing.

I began the interviews after the memorial service in June, 2011, on a misty, cold and rainy day and from the very beginning I knew this was a wonderful story; I knew from a terrible history something remarkable has happened, not just with the whistle-blowers in 1838 but now, today. Almost like a story from *The Dreaming*, all the participants, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who came forward to be interviewed, held part of the story. This play is testimony edited from those twenty hours of interviews.



HINT

As some of the characters are Indigenous Australians, you need to be conscious of appropriate and culturally sensitive interpretation of the material. Refer back to chapter 6, p. 158 for advice.

When I was interweaving the interviews to create the verbatim text, I focused on the chronology of events—the massacre, the court case, Len Payne and finally the memorial. When I saw and heard the actors perform it for the first time as a reading, it was about much more than history. I heard a story about survival and resilience; I saw on their faces and through their bodies, a story about courage, determination and forgiveness.

This play and Myall Creek, I believe, is only part of another much bigger story about reconciliation. This is, I concluded in my thesis, an acknowledgement narrative. It brings us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians to the table. We know, because of Myall Creek, how to share a history. We don't know yet how to share an equal future. That will come.

Characters

The playwright describes the characters in *Today We're Alive* as follows:

- **Sally** A Kamilaroi Elder, descendant of a massacre survivor; insightful, gentle, instigator of the Memorial.
- **Patrick** A history teacher, non-Aboriginal; reserved, tries not to be emotional but doesn't always succeed.
- **Jayson** An Aboriginal activist, an intellectual, an artist; re-connecting with his culture, his anger sits just below the surface.
- **Peggy** A Bingara resident, non-Aboriginal; vibrant, engaging, passionate about her involvement with the memorial.
- **Jim** A Uniting Church minister, non-Aboriginal; has the calm of understated authority.

TODAY WE'RE ALIVE

SALLY We did a cairn first.

PEGGY I was horrified ... that something as small as that was going to be erected ... I certainly wasn't going to let it pass with just a cairn of stones ... what are you going to do with those stones? ... I said: I'll look after them ... till you need them ... We packed them in the car ... we had them in the boot, under our feet—

JIM So those stones were kept with a view to erecting some sort of permanent memorial.

PEGGY Some people drew attention to the fact that they could have a memorial to World War I but not the massacre.

SALLY Then we called the Elders together. We talked about it, all the other Elders, I asked their permission first. And they gave me the go-ahead and they said they wanted something big.

JAYSON *(Laughs)* Something as big as the hall.

SALLY So we formed a committee.

JAYSON When I got involved I said we have to convince the people of Bingara that there was no people in Bingara, when the massacre took place, and so they've got no need to worry that they're going to be criticised about it. I did it through the press.

JIM In January we decided to push forward the proposal to erect a memorial. We decided a number of significant things at that meeting.

1. We owe it to all Australia to tell the truth of our history, the hard parts and the bad parts, as well as the proud episodes and the good parts of our history. We must tell the truth of our history. We need it to be a part of the national consciousness to know that there were widespread massacres.
2. We want to work together as a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, we have the Aboriginal people who were related to this ... an opportunity to say: look, we want to do this ourselves. Um ... and they were absolutely unanimous ...

SALLY No, this must be something we do together.

PEGGY We decided that as the Committee we would discuss stuff but we would never make any decision until we went back to the big group.

JIM We met several times—I don't know it might have been six public meetings over the next year ... Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together.

PEGGY We agreed to meet in February—at that time I had a very old house, a huge old federation house, a big dining table that seated twelve and we just expected a committee meeting. And the next thing we've got people come knocking at the front door, we've got people coming in the french doors, and I'm saying to my kids: quick! Here! Take my purse *(laughs)*—go over to the shop, get me some more fruit, get me some more tea, get me some this and they'd get back with a supply of food and I'd say: you've got to go again! People kept streaming in and so that was the day we decided that we were going to put a memorial up and where. And that was really wonderful. And we had to ask Sally, because they had a claim over that land and we had to ask permission. And the Reverend said:

JIM Well, Sally, can we have permission to put a memorial on that site?

PEGGY And Sally says:

SALLY Yes.

PEGGY A woman of few words.

SALLY We wanted a memorial. We didn't think it would happen straight away.

PEGGY And it just took off from there and we decided we wanted to have the opening in June, 2000, and I think the Saturday happened to be the anniversary of the massacre ... and we decided who wanted there and no-one wanted John Howard there *(laughs)*.

JAYSON We always met at Myall Creek at the hall.

PATRICK February and that's the first meeting that I went up to. And I had one of the most *um* ... interesting *um* ... spiritual experiences of my life. We were having a ceremony in the memorial hall itself. And it had been sort of grey and overcast all day but there had been absolutely no rain whatsoever. And they started *um* they started ah praying and they're very good the way they pray in terms of Byami, *um* it's a very inclusive sort of ceremony *um* and it's *um* and they had, I think, a couple of children, a couple of Aboriginal children, I think, lighting these candles and *um* the moment these children lit these candles as part of the prayer, it absolutely started bucketing down out of the heavens, absolutely bucketing down and you couldn't hear people over the noise in the roof. And *um* I was absolutely staggered and *um* every time I tell this story I get emotional like I am now. *Um* I was sitting there thinking: this is absolutely amazing. And I said: the test is going to be what happens when they blow these candles out. And they finished this prayer *(laughs)* as loudly as they could, given the noise of the rain on the roof—and then sure enough when they finished the prayer, they then blew the candles out and literally within ten to fifteen seconds, that rain stopped completely. And I walked outside and I was talking to one of the Aboriginal women Elders and I said to her: how amazing was that?! With the rain, while those candles were alight ... And *um* she said to me, she said: that was just the spirit ancestors weeping tears of joy that something is finally going to be done about this. And *um* that certainly stuck with me. It's now what? Fourteen years ago, I remember those words perfectly. And I've a lousy memory *(tears)*. So that was fantastic.

SFX: Sound of rain.

SALLY I remember sitting in the hall and the rain bucketed down.

JAYSON I mean it was one of those meetings when there was really some spiritual dimension going on there that was almost palpable. I mean Aboriginal people have no trouble with this—talking in these terms—

SALLY The tears were of grieving and all this *ah* unresolved pain and loss was coming out; it was like a release with the rain. Tears of joy. Well, grief and joy. We walked outside we could hear the didgeridoos, the old fellas singing.
SFX: Fade up distant sound of singing, didgeridoos.

PATRICK The hairs stood up on the back of my neck.

PEGGY All these white cockatoos just sort of flew up out of everything.

SALLY I believe them old ones' spirits was released, they are released knowing that we haven't forgotten them. Knowing that we carry them on from day to day.
SFX: Fade down distant sound of singing, didgeridoos.

PEGGY But when we first started having the meetings and slowly people started coming into the hall, there would be so much anger. People would start yelling out—and there was this man and he'd come to the door of the hall and scream abuse and then he'd just walk away. He'd just walk away. And none of us said anything. We'd just let it go. And then eventually it was Sally, who just stood up and said:

SALLY We're here to do this for us. So if you can't sit down and listen, then just go away.

PEGGY It took probably three meetings before the anger went away. It was like you were sitting there thinking: oh, gawd, am I doing the wrong thing here? And I can understand why people were angry. People just had to learn to trust, I think. When the anger went away, people started to say: let's get on with it. Then we could move forward, really. But there was a lot of anger and terrible things happened just overnight in their lives.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 What is the mood or atmosphere of this extract? How did your group establish an appropriate atmosphere in performance?
- 2 Describe how you used acting skills to portray your characters truthfully and sensitively.
- 3 There are minimal stage directions in this play. Describe how your group used the performance space to engage the audience.
- 4 How did your group establish a strong and effective actor–audience relationship?
- 5 What aspects of this play make it political? Can you identify any techniques or aspects of the performance style that suggest the influence of earlier political theatre forms?



PERFORMANCE TASK

10.4 Performance task: political theatre

The task

Divide into groups and devise a political theatre performance that explores an issue. An example has been provided for you. Your performance can borrow techniques, processes, acting styles and staging ideas from epic theatre, image theatre, documentary drama and verbatim theatre.

Your performance will aim to encourage the audience to think about an issue. Your group must research and incorporate testimony, factual information about actual historic events and statistics to help create scenes in your play. These can be intertwined with fictional scenes that are set at other times and involve other characters or roles. You will incorporate and utilise a selection of non-realistic epic theatre techniques and conventions to highlight the main issues and concerns.

Your performance must include:

- an actual Australian or world historic event
- narration
- projected film or slides; it may also include songs to make political points
- acting styles to suit the intention of the scenes, including realism or heightened voice and movement, as well as chorus work
- signs to title scenes and to point out issues in your performance, such as projected signs, graffiti or placards; for example, you may write a famous quote on a banner and hang it above your performance space or reveal it at a point in your performance
- minimal use of props, furniture and costumes—changes to role or character are to be made in view of the audience
- consideration of interacting with and addressing the audience to highlight the issues of your drama.

Example of creating and making political theatre

The following examples show how you and your group might apply the steps in the creative process (see chapter 4, pp. 76–77) to the development of your political theatre performance. The first steps in this process are problem finding and acquiring knowledge. Asking questions about the issue or topic you wish to explore, and finding your focus by clearly stating a performance intention will help achieve this.

Focus question: Why are some Australians opposed to accepting refugees and asylum seekers in Australia?

Dramatic intention: To explore reasons why some people have prejudice against refugees and asylum seekers.

EXERCISE

HOW TO ASK GREAT QUESTIONS

Socrates was a philosopher who encouraged his students to think deeply and critically. So that your political theatre performance does not become one sided or seem lacking in authenticity, you need to work hard using your research and thinking skills. Use the following six types of Socratic questions as you work through the development of your play. As you create questions, select the best questions and use these to focus and frame the action of your scenes.

SOCRATIC QUESTION TYPES	POSSIBLE QUESTION FOR THIS EXAMPLE
1 Questions for clarification:	What is the difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker?
2 Questions that probe assumptions:	How can I find out if most Australians are prejudiced against refugees?
3 Questions that probe reasons and evidence:	Why are some people more prejudiced than others? What causes this?
4 Questions about viewpoints and perspectives:	How might someone's beliefs be shaped by their social context?
5 Questions that probe implications and consequences:	If people are allowed to say anything they think about refugees, what might be the impact of this?
6 Questions about the question:	What percentage of Australians are opposed to accepting refugees and asylum seekers in Australia?

Dramatic structure

After problem finding through questioning and identifying your intention, you will need to gather information, generate ideas and allow some 'incubation' time between rehearsals for your ideas to take shape. In the following example, the group has begun to list possible ideas for scenes and discussed a possible order to the scenes—otherwise known as the dramatic structure. As you read through the following scene examples, see if you can identify a question for each scene that might have been used to focus and frame the action of the scene.

SCENE NO.	USE OF POLITICAL THEATRE TECHNIQUES AND EXPLANATION OF INTENTION	DRAMATIC ACTION
1	Use of satirical song to highlight weaknesses in Australians' sense of patriotism. Flag is a symbol.	A chorus holding Australian flag singing in an overly enthusiastic style to make the scene comic.
2	Direct address intended to engage the audience by creating feelings of empathy. Actor shows 'becoming' refugee by adding costume—this reminds the audience of the issues facing refugees. Projection illustrates the extent of the journey.	Direct testimony of a refugee from Afghanistan and his attempt to find safety for his family. #1 Projection of map showing the journey to Australia.





SCENE NO.	USE OF POLITICAL THEATRE TECHNIQUES AND EXPLANATION OF INTENTION	DRAMATIC ACTION
3	Not strictly speaking a political theatre scene in style, but we want to use realism to help the audience identify with the day-to-day conversations about these issues. The use of the flag is symbolic of how we struggle as a nation to deal with this, and the projections represent the voice of the public.	A realist scene where a mother and daughter fold clothing using the Australian flag. As the scene progresses, projections of survey question responses about refugees and asylum seekers appear.
4	As for scene #2.	Direct testimony of a refugee from Afghanistan and his attempt to find safety for his family. #2 Projection of moving waves to show the dangers of the boat journey.
5	Use of direct address also engages the audience in a different perspective. We might use tableaux where performers become friends and family, or maybe actors approach the worker and interact briefly as these characters to challenge them. Provide some comedy—show how viewpoints/perceptions can be very different between people.	A volunteer worker addresses the audience about their work with refugees and how the casual racism and discrimination they hear from their family and friends bothers them.
6	A didactic scene. The use of a classroom allows for the 'teaching' of facts to the audience about the issues. The audience becomes part of the class.	School students in class being instructed by a teacher about the difference between refugees and asylum seekers. Some students care and others don't.
7	As for scenes #2 and #4.	Direct testimony of a refugee from Afghanistan and his attempt to find safety for his family. #3 After some time in detention.
8	The performers become generic people in society. Although each performer uses voice and movement differently to show age, gender, and so on, the intention is to show that most people are concerned about injustice and discrimination.	Chorus line up as voices of the public. Different perspectives given on causes of prejudice.
9	A contrast to the opening scene. The flag now represents how we all share this problem and we all have a responsibility to help make our country the best it can be.	Chorus work to fold and hold out the Australian flag to the audience while singing the National Anthem in a much slower and sadder way than in scene #1.

Use of the elements of drama and theatrical techniques

The final phases of your creative process involve rehearsals where you combine ideas in unexpected ways and select the best ideas to perform. The following script extracts may give you some ideas of how you might use the elements of drama and the techniques of political theatre to make your ideas and questions engaging as political theatre scenes.

THE GREEDY CHILD

(Shouting from a very high window in a big house.)

ACTOR Oi! You down there. Get out of my garden! You're standing on mummy's roses. What? I can't hear you? Speak up! Do you speak ENGLISH? You know there's a storm out there, you'll have to speak up. What? What was that? You're hungry, really? Well maybe you should go next door. They might have some food for you.

(To audience) But I doubt it.

(Sniggers, then annoyed.)

Why do they always come to my house? It's so bloody annoying *(burps)* and I haven't finished eating yet.

Who cares about them anyway? What was that ... ?

Come in? COME IN? Are you serious?

(To mother in forced whisper) Close the curtains!

Close the curtains! They can see inside!

(Back to the hungry people) Sorry we are completely full here ... FULL, I SAID FULL ... No room ... move on, move on.

REFUGEE CAMP VOLUNTEER

ACTOR They don't tell you about what it's like ... I mean they do ... but I guess you can't convey the scale of what you see the first time you arrive. Miles and miles and miles of white tents in the blazing sun. There are 115 000 refugees here ... I mean, can you imagine that? 115 000 men, women and children. How do you get a sense of the number of people in just this one camp? What would that be in Australia? I mean, the people in this camp would fill an Olympic stadium. And despite the attacks, the shelling, the stealing, the traumas, the death ... they still smile, they draw suns, they carry on with their lives ... it's incredible, how they manage to find dignity, dignity in all of this.

Inspiration: Mallawa, S. 'I work in a refugee camp on the Syria-Jordan border – any questions?', *The Guardian*, 19 September 2013

Performance checklist

You and your teacher will evaluate your work individually using a list of criteria. These criteria relate to your achievement in this task. Some criteria will relate to the achievement of the group. The criteria are listed on the evaluation sheet at the end of this chapter and will be used to evaluate your:

- degree of focus and commitment
- ability to use vocal dynamics appropriately and effectively
- ability to use movement appropriately and effectively
- successful inclusion of the techniques and conventions of epic theatre
- effective adaptation and interpretation of the historic event
- ability to establish an appropriate mood and atmosphere
- presentation of a well-rehearsed and polished performance
- effective manipulation of the actor–audience relationship to highlight the issues of the drama.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Outline the strengths of your group's performance. Explain why you felt these aspects of your performance were effective.
- 2 Outline the strengths of your own performance. You may comment on your use of movement or vocal dynamics, your ability to play a variety of characters or your ability to work effectively as part of an ensemble.
- 3 What areas of your own performance did you feel needed improvement? Why?
- 4 Choose another group's performance and discuss the overall flow and cohesion, making special reference to how scene changes were achieved, and the effective use of epic theatre techniques and conventions.
- 5 Choose playback theatre or documentary drama. Discuss the value and purpose of this form. In your discussion, include examples of the ways in which particular performance techniques and conventions are incorporated to influence the audience's perception of the characters and the story.
- 6 Find out more about Bertolt Brecht and about epic theatre.
- 7 Choose one other group's performance. Identify the main question that one group's play used to frame and focus their play and then choose two scenes and identify the question that each scene was addressing.



Performance task: political theatre

Student Teacher

Group names

By completing this task you should be able to:

- draw on personal stories and historic events as the basis for performance work
- devise a performance using the techniques and conventions of documentary drama and epic theatre.

Key learning areas	Level of achievement			
	Beginning	Consolidating	Mastering	Excelling
<p>Creating, making and presenting ideas using skills, knowledge, techniques and processes:</p> <p>Have you prepared for your performance by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • researching a social or political issue, or a historic event, that is of interest to you? • including in your performance testimonies, interviews and/or actual historical events? • using improvisation to explore and develop character or role? <p>Have you incorporated a political theatre acting style by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selecting and incorporating appropriate body language and movement? • using voice to effectively communicate character or role? <p>Have you used skills, techniques and processes to structure a political theatre performance by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • incorporating narration to the audience? • incorporating signs for title scenes and to point out issues in your performance? • using minimal props and furniture to suggest locations? • making costume changes in view of the audience? • sustaining and developing character or role? 				
<p>Responding:</p> <p>Have you used your critical thinking and communication skills to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effectively interpret and adapt an issue and historic event? • effectively use questioning to explore perspectives related to the issue? • show strong knowledge of the purposes and intentions of political theatre performance techniques and the origins of these? 				

Comments
