



# STAGING ASYLUM

EDITED BY EMMA COX

**TEACHER'S NOTES**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b><u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</u></b>	3
<b><u>ABOUT THE EDITOR</u></b>	4
<b><u>ABOUT THE TEXT</u></b>	4
<b><u>EDITOR'S INSPIRATION</u></b>	4
<b>LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM </b>	
<u>The Arts</u>	5
<u>General capabilities</u>	6
<b>WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES</b>	
<b><u>1 Before you begin</u></b>	7
<b><u>2 What is asylum?</u></b>	8
<b><u>3 Advocating for those less fortunate</u></b>	10
<b><u>4 The elements of design in production</u></b>	11
<b><u>5 Complex relationships</u></b>	12
<b><u>6 Playing with genre</u></b>	13
<b><u>ADDITIONAL RESOURCES</u></b>	14
<b><u>GRAPHICS ORGANISERS</u></b>	15

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## ABOUT THE EDITOR

Dr Emma Cox is a Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research interests include the representation and participation of refugees and asylum seekers in contemporary theatre, film and writing in Australia, South Africa and the UK. Emma coordinates the Performance and Asylum Transnational Research Network at Royal Holloway, which brings together scholars, practitioners and stakeholders of refugee theatre for the UK, Europe, USA, Canada and Australia.

## ABOUT THE TEXT

The first of its kind, this timely anthology brings together six contemporary Australian plays that offer a range of narratives and perspectives on asylum seekers. A vexed issue within the Australian community, this collection contributes to Australia's ongoing discourse on unauthorised asylum seekers, immigration detention, border control and the right to belong.

This eclectic collection includes *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* by version 1.0, a smart, ironic verbatim work that deals with the "Children Overboard Affair" and the SIEV X disaster; *The Rainbow Dark* by Victoria Carless, a surreal domestic satire about immigration detention; *The Pacific Solution* by Ben Eltham, which takes armchair cricket commentary as a point of departure for a farce about the Howard government's excision of migration territory; *Halal-el-Mashakel* by Linda Jaivin, which looks at the friendship between two detained asylum seekers; *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* devised by Catherine Simmonds, a series of vignettes based upon the personal experiences of asylum seekers and refugees living in Melbourne; and *Nothing But Nothing* by Towfiq Al-Qady, an autobiographical play about childhood and war.

With a main Introduction as well as separate introductions to each play by Editor and Drama Lecturer Dr Emma Cox, *Staging Asylum* recognises the crucial role that theatre has played—and continues to play—in one of Australia's most hotly debated and urgent contemporary issues.

## EDITOR'S INSPIRATION

This collection came about because I was struck by the fact that, while a number of fascinating, moving and entertaining theatrical productions have, over the last ten years or so, played an important role in responding to Australia's refugee policies, most of the plays haven't been published. I hope that in bringing six plays side-by-side, *Staging Asylum* offers readers some insight into the wide range of stories, experiences and relationships that emerge from this complex, international issue. It is something that involves us all! – Emma Cox

# LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

## The Arts

Improvise with the elements of drama and narrative structure to develop ideas, and explore subtext to shape devised and scripted drama (ACADRM047)

Manipulate combinations of the elements of drama to develop and convey the physical and psychological aspects of roles and characters consistent with intentions in dramatic forms and performance styles (ACADRM048)

Practice and refine the expressive capacity of voice and movement to communicate ideas and dramatic action in a range of forms, styles and performance spaces, including exploration of those developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dramatists (ACADRM049)

Perform devised and scripted drama making deliberate artistic choices and shaping design elements to unify dramatic meaning for an audience (ACADRM051)

Evaluate how the elements of drama, forms and performance styles in devised and scripted drama convey meaning and aesthetic effect (ACADRR052)



This is an extract from the Australian Curriculum.

# General Capabilities

- Investigate reasons for clashes of beliefs in issues of personal, social and global importance
- Analyse the objectivity or subjectivity behind decision making where there are many possible consequences
- Evaluate diverse perceptions and ethical bases of action in complex contexts
- Evaluate the merits of conflicting rights and responsibilities in global contexts
- Use reasoning skills to prioritise the relative merits of points of view about complex ethical dilemmas
- Analyse how membership of local, regional, national and international groups shapes identities including their own
- Critically analyse the complex and dynamic nature of knowledge, beliefs and practices in a wide range of contexts over time
- Understand the importance of mutual respect in promoting cultural exchange and collaboration in an interconnected world
- Present a balanced view on issues where conflicting views cannot easily be resolved
- Recognise the effect that empathising with others has on their own feelings, motivations and actions
- Reflect critically on the effect of intercultural experiences on their own attitudes and beliefs and those of others
- Critique the use of stereotypes and prejudices in texts and issues concerning specific cultural groups at national, regional and global levels
- Recognise the challenges and benefits of living and working in a culturally diverse society and the role that cultural mediation plays in learning to live together



This is an extract from the Australian Curriculum.

# WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

## WORKSHOP ACTIVITY 1

### Before you begin

As a whole class read the poem *Dead Air (for Merlin Luck)* by Jaya Savige found in the preface to the text. After reading the poem, discuss the meaning of each stanza. (Deconstructing the use of metaphor will help students to uncover the meaning.) Divide the class into small groups and complete the following tasks.

- Create a freeze frame for each stanza in the poem.
- Choose a sound or word to accompany each freeze frame.
- Create a transition between each freeze frame.
- Rehearse the performance until the transitions between each freeze frame are smooth.
- Students take it in turns to perform for each other and to critically evaluate each other's work using the elements of drama (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes).
- After receiving their feedback, students reshape their piece where necessary.
- After rehearsing their piece, students record their performance.
- Students watch their performance and critically analyse their own work using the elements of drama.

In their journals, students reflect on how they felt about the pieces they created. They should also think about who the poem is about and discuss any elements of the poem with which they identified.

## **WORKSHOP ACTIVITY 2**

# What is asylum?

Begin with a focus walk. After 30–60 seconds inform the students that you will call out a number of words or phrases. When you call out those words or phrases the students should create a freeze frame until you call out 'walk' at which time they unfreeze and continue with the focus walk. Use the following words and phrases in any order. (You may also wish to add to or change this list.)

- asylum
- seeking
- children overboard
- different
- terror
- terrorist
- oppressed
- oppressor
- xenophobia
- detention
- border control
- safety
- status quo
- misinformation

In small groups, students complete the following task.

- Discuss what they know about the topics 'asylum seeking' and 'asylum seekers'.
- Using a KWL chart (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes) students conduct further research into an area of interest to them. For example:
  - Who seeks asylum and why?
  - The reactions of politicians to asylum seekers.
  - The experiences of those seeking asylum once they reach Australia.
- Using their research students create a short, group-devised play.
- Once they have developed their play, students consider the mood of their piece and create a set design that reflects that mood. For example, if the mood is very sombre they may create a set design using rostra (boxes) and coarse, heavy, brown fabric.
- Students then consider the use of symbol and metaphor and create a costume design for their piece.
- Students conduct a dress rehearsal for another group and receive feedback on their performance framed by the elements of drama (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes).



- Students make appropriate adjustments to their performance based on the feedback and rehearse their piece.
- Students perform their piece for the whole class.

In their journals students reflect on the challenges of creating theatre based on diverse political, social and ethical views. Students should also write a reflective piece, based on their research and experience, about the rights and responsibilities of global citizens in relation to asylum seekers.

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## WORKSHOP ACTIVITY 3

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# Advocating for those less fortunate

*'While the theatre stands up for the despised, Australian culture and decency are not yet dead.'* Thomas Keneally

Theatre has the capacity to represent those in society who are misrepresented and to change the opinions of the public about this group of people. Using any of the plays in the text, in small groups students complete the following tasks.

- Conduct a moved reading of the script, noting the ways asylum seekers are referred to.
- Conduct a second moved reading of the script looking for and noting the use of subtext.
- Choose one section of the text to create a 5–7 minute performance.
- Using the notes taken from the two moved readings students identify the moments of dramatic tension, the moments that reveal subtext and dramatic intent and any other important moment(s).
- Students create a freeze frame for each of these moments as well as one for the beginning of the performance and one for the end of the performance.
- Starting with the first freeze frame, students move through the text pausing at each freeze frame before continuing with the dialogue.
- Students continue to rehearse their piece until the transitions between the freezes and text are seamless.
- Students watch and record all of the performances.
- As a group they analyse their own performance using the elements of drama (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes).

In their journals students reflect on the following.

- Discuss the shared characteristics between those seeking asylum in Australia and themselves.
- Critique how stereotypes are used in the Australian media to portray asylum seekers.
- Reflect on how the performance they created challenged the stereotypes of asylum seekers using the elements of drama as a framework (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes) and making reference to the playwright's use of subtext.
- Reflect on the emotional response they had to developing their performance and how this influenced them as actors as well as any changes that may have occurred in them as people.
- Write a response to the quote above from Thomas Keneally giving examples from their experiences in the workshop.

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## WORKSHOP ACTIVITY 4

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# The elements of design in production

As a class, imagine you are holding a production of one of the plays in *Staging Asylum* in a local venue of your choice. Divide the class into each of the elements of production, for example, a group for stage design and a group for lighting design, etc. Each group completes the following tasks, being mindful of the role of the designer in providing additional clues and support for the audience.

- Read through the play and analyse the script with reference to themes, symbols, meaning and any other important information.
- Conduct research into the venue, including limitations of the venue and venue specifications and any other important information.
- Conduct appropriate research into the historical, political and social influences on the play.
- Conduct research into the materials they will be using for their element of production.
- After conducting their research, each group must create a cohesive design for their element of production.
- Students create a sketch for their element of production and include examples of any materials that they will be using.
- Students present their idea to the rest of the class. During the presentation students should clarify their design concept and discuss how the element of production will assist the audience in their interpretation of the play.

After completing the task, students should reflect on the challenges that a designer faces and how they overcame these challenges. They should analyse the effectiveness of their design and presentation in enhancing the visual elements of the production for the audience.

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## WORKSHOP ACTIVITY 5

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# Complex relationships

Working individually students complete the following activities.

- Choose one of the plays in the text.
- Read through the play being conscious of the relationships between the characters.
- After the first reading write a summary of the relationship between the characters.
- Read through the play again and look at how the playwright has used subtext and how this manifests in the play. For example, what a character says is not always what they feel and what a character doesn't say can reveal more about them than what they do say.
- After the second reading write a description of the playwright's use of subtext.
- Using the knowledge gained from the previous exercises, choose one character in the play and create a 2–5 minute monologue using the script, movement, sound and any other additional text that the students may need to create.
- Rehearse and share the performance with another student, who will analyse the work using the elements of drama as a framework (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes).
- Make the appropriate changes to the performance based on the analysis of the work.
- Perform the work for the class.

In their journals, students write a diary entry as their chosen character, responding to the statement: 'There is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker.'

After completing the task write a letter to your local member of parliament in response to the government's current policy on asylum seekers.

## **WORKSHOP ACTIVITY 6**

# Playing with genre

As a class complete the following tasks.

- Choose one play in *Staging Asylum* based on the predominant genre or style in the play.
  - *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* = verbatim
  - *The Rainbow Dark* = surrealist satire
  - *The Pacific Solution* = farce
  - *Halal-el-Mashakel* = duologue with music
  - *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* = vignettes
  - *Nothing But Nothing* = autobiographical monologue
- Conduct a moved reading of the play staying true to the style chosen by the playwright and record the moved reading.
- Choose a different genre or style for the play, for example, if working with *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* the class may choose to develop a production of the play using physical theatre.
- Develop, rehearse and record a performance of the play in the alternate genre or style.
- Watch the two performances and analyse each with reference to the elements of drama (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes).
- In the role of audience member compare and contrast the ways you interpreted meaning in the two performances (see [graphics organiser](#) at the end of these notes). For example, if working with *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* you may have interpreted meaning by listening to the verbal contradictions as the actors communicated on stage. The same contradictions may have manifested more clearly through shape and tableau in a physical theatre performance or the verbal contradictions may have been enhanced by the use of tableau in a physical theatre performance.

In their journals students reflect on the experience of creating work across genres. They should discuss the similarities and differences in meaning making for the audience and identify how meaning was communicated to the audience in each of the performances.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- 'Refuge and refusal: why theatre about asylum seekers matters', *The Conversation*, 29 January 2014  
<https://theconversation.com/refuge-and-refusal-why-theatre-about-asylum-seekers-matters-21640>
- Interview with Emma Cox on 2SER: 'Can theatre affect asylum seeker policy?'  
<http://www.2ser.com/component/k2/item/7622-can-theatre-affect-asylum-seeker-policy>
- Asylum Seeker Resource Centre  
<http://www.asrc.org.au/>
- Australian Human Rights Commission: Asylum seekers and refugees guide  
<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/asylum-seekers-and-refugees-guide>

# GRAPHICS ORGANISER

## Elements of drama analysis

ELEMENT OF DRAMA	EVALUATION, ANALYSIS, SUGGESTIONS
Role and character	
Situation	
Voice and movement	
Focus	
Tension	
Space and time	
Language, ideas and dramatic action	
Mood and atmosphere	
Audience	

# GRAPHICS ORGANISER

## K.W.L Chart

**TOPIC:**

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<b>K</b> WHAT I ALREADY KNOW	<b>W</b> WHAT I WANT TO KNOW	<b>L</b> WHAT I HAVE LEARNED



# GRAPHICS ORGANISER

## Compare and contrast chart

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ALIKE

DIFFERENT



CURRENCY PRESS  
The performing arts publisher  
[www.currency.com.au](http://www.currency.com.au)