

CANBERRA
YOUTH THEATRE

WORK, BUT THIS TIME LIKE YOU MEAN IT

BY HONOR WEBSTER-MANNISON



Education Resource

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TO THE TEACHER

These resources have been prepared to support you in exploring *Work, But This Time Like You Mean It* by Honor Webster-Mannison with your students.

The play is a bold, darkly humorous example of non-naturalistic form and style. It's recommended for Year 11 upwards (please note: it contains some strong language and, as Honor puts it, a gory bit). Characters' pronouns referenced in the play can be changed making it a flexible text for any ensemble.

You can approach the text in full or select scenes and activities to suit your class. The resource provides a range of practical activities to give students hands-on experience with non-naturalistic performance.

By working with a contemporary Australian play that is written especially for young people, students can connect theory to practice while developing their own unique voices.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Work, But This Time Like You Mean It by Honor Webster-Mannison is a darkly surreal comedy about young people's first experiences in the workplace. It's about having a good work ethic on less-than-minimum wage. It's about perseverance when you just want to curl up under the counter and cry. It's an unhinged dive into friendships, forged within the most alienating of circumstances.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Honor Webster-Mannison is a performance-maker and writer based on Wurundjeri Country. Their practice is situated in experimental performance, and often involves multidisciplinary and collaborative methods. Honor is inspired by feelings, dreams, images and other offerings of the subconscious. Their work was chosen for Canberra Youth Theatre's Emerging Playwright Commission, which led to the creation of *Work, But This Time Like You Mean It* (Canberra Youth Theatre). Honor's other credits include *Slippery* (performer, Curtain World); *Deep Breath In* (co-creator, Dead Puppet Society's LAB); *Sometimes It's Hot Like the Sun* (co-creator, Festival of Australian Student Theatre). Honor completed their Masters in Writing for Performance at VCA. Publications of their work can be found through Currency Press and Playlab.



CONTEXT

“A sharp-shooting shot at the employment of young people in the fast food industry. Fast is the word. In fact, frenetic may be more like it... a very clever, witty, surreal satire.” Peter Wilkins, Canberra Critics Circle

Work, But This Time Like You Mean It takes aim at the reality of young people working in profitable fast-food chains: long shifts operating at a relentless pace, and a wage that barely covers the basics. In today’s economy – with soaring house prices, climbing interest rates, and mounting HECS debts – junior rates leave many young Aussies struggling. Often, these companies assume that all young people can lean on family for financial support, an assumption far removed from many realities.

The play examines the fast-food industry through the lens of young workers. It captures the grind of hours spent on your feet, with orders flying in faster than you can fill them. The relentless pace is reflected in the delivery of rapid-fire, overlapping dialogue, with lines often spoken in unison. It has a dizzying effect, making the audience quickly shift focus between character and conversation. These choices immerse the audience in the chaotic rhythm of the workplace. There’s humour and camaraderie among the crew, but it’s undercut by a bleak thread of disillusionment and vulnerability.

The relentless conditions and breakneck pace of the fast-food joint creates a palpable sense of chaos for the audience, mirroring the pressure on the shop floor. Orders stack up and the rush never lets up – making it clear how easily a place like this could put its young employees in real danger. When a young worker is badly hurt, the store grinds to a halt. The stillness is jarring – a rare pause after the earlier scenes, the stillness is striking and allows the audience to feel the weight of the moment. The shift manager is completely out of their depth, the first aid kit is empty, and it’s the staff themselves who suggest calling an ambulance. The Shift Manager’s response: “Everyone stay calm, take a deep breath and – great, now there’s a line in the drive-thru.” Profit over people. Though it goes a little deeper than this. You get the feeling that the Shift Manager’s reaction isn’t cruelty, but cultural conditioning – a product of relentless KPI targets and corporate imperatives.

Work But This Time Like You Mean It thrusts the audience into the deep fryer of the fast-food industry amongst the hustle and sweat. It’s a witty snapshot of life as a young person, on minimum wage working in the trenches of the quick-service sector. It also shines a light on the human cost of cheap convenience, asking audiences to look beyond the counter and see the people – not just the product.

RESOURCES

Unions to campaign against ‘discriminatory’ junior wages by Shalailah Medhora (ABC, 6 June, 2024)

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-06/unions-endorse-end-to-junior-wages/103945336>

WorkSafe Victoria: <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/injury-hotspots-fast-food>

STRUCTURE

Work, But This Time Like You Mean It has a cyclical structure, a convention commonly found in Absurdist plays. The beginning and ending stage directions echo each other with only slight variation. The small differences draw attention to the similarities. The convention of repetitive action can have different impacts. It can highlight a lack of progression or resolution to the play. Repetition can also emphasize patterns of human behaviour, convey a sense of futility or inability to change.

ACTIVITY ONE:

Divide your class into groups of three or four. Put two groups together (Group A and B) and provide them with a set of objects. This could be a stack of chairs, pencils, books – something from the props room – whatever you have at hand.

- Ask Group A to become a working group who arrange the objects in a particular order.
- Once Group A has arranged their items, ask Group B to become another working group who rearrange the objects into another order.
- Ask the groups to find a flow and efficiency in their movements. Each group should get the job done over one count of 8.
- Allow your students to feel a sense of satisfaction at arranging the objects.
- Ask the students to bestow a sense of importance to the action of arranging the objects.
- Group A sets up. Group B rearranges and this should go on in a continual loop.
- Ask each group to express confusion and irritation when they find the objects they so carefully arranged have been moved.

Ask each set of groups to perform.

Now ask the audience watching the following questions:

- How did each performance make you feel as an audience member? Did you find it frustrating? Funny? Futile?
- Did the actions take on a symbolic/metaphorical meaning?
- How do the actions relate to different locations? Eg. School? Work?
- What did the actions (arranging objects) mean to you as a performer?
- What comment do you think this kind of performance makes on society or human behaviour?

ACTIVITY TWO:

Now ask your students to look at the opening and closing stage directions in the text:

Opening

(P. 1) BEFORE THE PLAY

As the audience is being seated the performers are operating as a well-oiled machine, working their butts off, earning their money; pushing through, pumping it out, moving on up, work bitch work.

Closing Scene

(P. 46) NOT WORK:

FOOD PREP joins everyone else. Everyone is packing up, doing what needs to be done. Resetting the stage. They are operating as a well-oiled machine, working their butts off, earning their money, pushing through, pumping it out, moving on up, work bitch work.

Questions to ask the students after reading the opening and closing stage directions:

- What similarities and differences can you identify in the opening and closing stage directions?
- What impact does the repetition of action serve? What did the playwright want to say about the fast-food industry?

As an extension, get your students to take a look at Samuel Beckett's Absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot*. Get them to investigate the repetition in the text:

- Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly take and put on their hats, sometimes swapping them for no particular reason.
- Estragon struggles with his boots.
- Reference to a tree that is almost bare in Act One – then sprouts leaves in Act Two. The slight change hints at the passage of time – but also reinforces the sameness.
- They attempt to leave but make no attempt to move.

Look at the beginning and the ending of *Waiting for Godot* and discuss the impact of a cyclical structure in more detail.

ACTIVITY THREE:

FIND IT IN THE TEXT:

In pairs. Ask students to identify the moments of repetition in the text and list these. This could be repetition of:

- Action/events
- Sound effects
- Dialogue

Ask everyone to share their findings.

Did they identify repetitive moments from the list below?

- The time is always 7.48am until the last three scenes.
- The same nothing song plays at the start of most scenes.
- During the surreal moments in the play – the same nothing song morphs into something else: eg: office sounds and a nightmare version of the song.
- The play is intersected by 4 rest breaks.
- The rest breaks start and end with the sound of an airhorn.
- During rest breaks the action of scrolling and laughing is repeated and performed in unison.

Are there more examples of repetition? (Maybe in the dialogue?)

STYLE

Work, But This Time Like You Mean It is a good example of eclecticism which means that it blends multiple theatrical styles. It incorporates and juxtaposes a number of styles to make a dramatic statement. The play incorporates conventions from Absurdism, Surrealism, Epic Theatre and Realism.

Look up the following conventions from the text with your students.

EPIC THEATRE:

- **Actors play multiple roles.** (p. 16) DEEP-FRYER becomes OFFICE WORKER ONE. This convention was used to remind the audience that they were watching a play – encouraging them not to get emotionally involved.
- **Roles are generic such as,** REGISTER TWO, DRIVE and FOOD PREP. This is intended so that these roles represent all workers – an Epic Theatre convention. This technique also works to dehumanise the people that work in the fast-food industry.
- **Direct Address:** Characters break the fourth wall, speaking directly to the audience to heighten immediacy and impact.
- **Alienation effect or Verfremdungseffekt:** In one of the final scenes (p.45) the actors begin to talk as themselves – not as characters. The playwright notes, so this is non-scripted.

REALISM:

- **Naturalistic language:** Actors aim to replicate a naturalistic intonation, including hesitations, accents and mannerisms suited to individual characters.
- **Note:** In the play, some dialogue is **bolded**. The playwright instructs the creative team to deliver bolded words or phrases in unison or overlapping – this device creates a hyper realistic atmosphere. One of a hectic, fast-food joint. This technique is also used to connect characters, enhance meaning, and switch audience focus.
- **Natural action:** Webster-Mannison states that: the work being performed throughout the play should be real work: activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or result. This suggests that, at times, the action is realistic.

STYLE continued

SURREALISM:

- **Bizarre Characters:** Characters can be non-realistic, non-human, completely illogical. As is the case when an inanimate object, a LITERAL DEEP-FRYER speaks a monologue on (P. 22).
- **Emphasis on the Subconscious:** There are moments in the play when the audience is invited into the subconscious mind of the characters on stage.
- **Nightmarish scenes/exploration of the irrational:** (p. 43) We see the SHIFT manager post the workplace injury. They didn't handle the emergency well. On page 43 we see inside the distressed shift manager's paranoid thoughts. In this nightmare, the GENERAL MANAGER enters, strips them of their achievement award and then eats the severed finger from the workplace accident.

ABSURDISM:

- **Repetitive Actions and Rituals** (See structure) Repetition of action/dialogue/sound. For example, we return to a song: the same nothing song. This creates a sense of the mundane, characters stuck in a loop, inaction.

ACTIVITY FOUR

Excerpt starting from page 16.

SHIFT MANAGER: I sometimes, actually very frequently, actually all the time, imagine that I'm in an office.

Just to calm down.

I'm in an office.

And instead of the counter, there's desks and cubicle walls. And instead of tiles there's grey carpet.

And instead of the drinks fridge, there's a water-cooler. And there's those white plastic cups.

For the water.

For the water that you get from the water cooler. And I have a tie. And I have a team. But nothing like this team. This is a team of office workers.

And I have an ergonomic keyboard and an ergonomic mouse. And someone, maybe someone from my team, but someone says –

DEEP-FRYER becomes OFFICE WORKER ONE. The same nothing song becomes an office version of the same nothing song. The time is now 7.48am.

SURREALIST CONVENTIONS

Ask the students to read p.16 – 18 from, *Work, But This Time Like You Mean It*.

Ask the students to identify the techniques used in the excerpt, to transport the audience into the shift manager's imagination.

- Direct address – SHIFT MANAGER.
- ACTORS transforming into multiple characters in view of the audience – DEEP-FRYER becomes OFFICE WORKER ONE.
- Sound is distorted - The same nothing song becomes an office version of the same nothing song.

THEMES

PROFIT OVER PEOPLE

The play critiques how corporate priorities, speed, KPI's and profit margins override safety and wellbeing of young workers.

Ask your students to look at the NOTES ON TEXT (below) - then read the following excerpt from page 38 using the playwright's instructions. Consider the impact of these instructions and how they help to articulate theme:

NOTES ON TEXT:

- Dialogue in **bold** means that it's said simultaneously or overlapping.
- Indicates an interruption, or breaking-off of thought.
- / indicates the line interrupts
- An indent indicates that the dialogue is taking place in a different area of the restaurant:
 - Front of House
 - Drive-Thru
 - Kitchen.

SHIFT MANAGER:	/We need to be moving faster.
FOOD PREP:	Yep.
DRIVE:	Can you move closer to the speaker.
REGISTER TWO:	The closest thing we have would probs have to be the...
REGISTER ONE:	Mike, a customer wants to talk to you.
SHIFT MANAGER:	We're really behind tonight, team. We need to pick up the pace.
	Where's your hat?
FOOD PREP:	I left it at home.
SHIFT MANAGER:	It's health and safety, mate.
FOOD PREP:	Customers can't even see me.
SHIFT MANAGER:	Health. And. Saaaaffeetttty.
REGISTER ONE enters the kitchen.	
REGISTER ONE:	Mike. Mike, a customer wants to talk to –
	SHIFT MANAGER: (to KIOSK) / We wear heats instead of hair nets here, so it's really important that you remember you hat.
FOOD PREP:	Where's the mini knifey thing.
REGISTER ONE:	Mike. Hello. Mike.
SHIFT MANAGER:	What.

THEMES continued

THE EXPLOITATION OF YOUTH LABOUR

Read the monologue on page 45-46 then ask students the following question:

- What does this monologue say about youth labour?

FOOD PREP: So after this moment The history of this franchise

That's all great big gulping boomingness My finger is reattached

My oboe is sold on Facebook Marketplace The Retail and Fast Food Workers Union I get really into it

I try to organise

The main difficulty is everyone's so temporary and casual and young and tryna deal with every single thing that ever existed I learn how to arrive on time and leave a little later

I learn how to be still for six hours

A year after this incident someone burns their hand with hot oil The manager on shift says to treat it with mustard

Wounds are now dressed and bathed in mustard The Retail and Fast Food Workers Union Makes a Facebook post

About the mustard

We engrave eulogies and love letters to each other In the bathrooms Which are painted over forever and ever After the Facebook post

Staff protest outside this franchise For living wages

Safer working conditions We make banners

The union helps take [REDACTED] to court for failing to give workers their paid ten-minute break that they legally require every four hours I leave

Because I start losing shifts when I turn twenty-three

This monologue highlights how everyone is so *temporary and casual and young*.

- Workers are treated as interchangeable cogs in the machine. The character, FOOD PREP talks about losing shifts once they turn 23. Once a worker is no longer seen as young and cheap they are discarded.
- The incident with the finger and the burn treated with mustard points to the way injuries are dealt with in unsafe ways.

Overall, the monologue critiques the way youth are exploited as inexpensive, disposable labour.

DIRECTOR'S APPROACH

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR - LUKE ROGERS

The work examines young people working in the fast-food industry: focusing on work safety, profit over people and wages for young people. Which theme or issue resonated most with you as a director, and how did it shape your vision for the production?



Work, But... is a darkly absurd dive into the chaos of teenage life behind the counter — endless shifts, repetitive customer service scripts, fluorescent lights that blur into one never-ending, surreal loop. This particular fast-food joint could be any of them, where young workers juggle power dynamics, infuriating customers, and existential questions, finding darkly funny camaraderie along the way.

For me, the theme that really struck a chord was alienation and resilience in these exploitative environments. The underpayment, the exhaustion, the impossible demands — all those things chip away at your individuality, making you feel like you've lost some of your agency, yet you still have to keep turning up day after day. That tension, between being ground down and still pushing through, became central to how we approached the show. It's chaotic, it's messy, and at times it can feel completely dehumanising.

What are your first steps when approaching new work as a director?

This one is interesting, because I was also the director / dramaturg on the play's creative development. So whilst the objectives of the director in the development room are different to the rehearsal room, the process is deeply intertwined. When I'm approaching a brand-new work, in collaboration with a playwright, I think the role of the director shifts a bit from what people might expect. With a finished play, your job is to create a strong production concept and bring it to life. But when the script is still evolving, the focus is much more about supporting the playwright and helping them clarify what they're trying to say.

For me, the first step is always an open conversation: figuring out what the playwright needs, what it is they're wanting to say, how they want to use the form of theatre to best express that. It's important to be really clear about that upfront, otherwise you can get stuck in workshop cycles without much purpose.

I see myself more as a collaborator. I'll ask questions, test ideas with actors, and reflect back to the playwright how their intentions are landing in the room. It's about amplifying their voice rather than reshaping it into mine.

DIRECTOR'S APPROACH continued

At its core, developing new work is about trust. My job is to help create the conditions where the playwright can be brave, experiment, and refine, while keeping an eye on how the work will ultimately land with an audience.

Once we move into production, the objective shifts somewhat, but is completely informed by the development process. At this point in the process, my voice and vision as an artist begins to take prominence; finding a clear concept for the play and then working with the cast and creative team to bring that vision together as one. I always begin with script analysis, digging into the world of the play, the characters, and the relationships, and thinking about what themes I want to draw out and how that might come through in design, sound, and performance. That process really shapes everything, from casting to the overall style and tone.

Whilst honouring the playwright's intent as closely as possible, I use the text as a springboard for my own vision, making sure they connect meaningfully with the audience and the story we're telling.

The work weaves together multiple performance styles – Absurdism, surrealism, realism. How did you assist the actors to navigate the stylistic challenges and shifts?

The structure of the play itself really builds on that sense of alienation. We play with repetition, time loops, and heightened physicality so the audience feels the same monotony and isolation the characters are stuck in. It's like living the same shift over and over, and trying to find tiny ways to stay sane.

The style is darkly comic, surreal, and a little unhinged. We're telling some pretty serious truths, but we wrap them in absurdity and satire so the audience can laugh – even as they recognise the sting of reality underneath.

When Kathleen Kershaw (designer) and I started exploring the set, we wanted a world that was surreal, disorienting, and physically demanding for the actors. We thought about treadmills or hamster wheels, but landed on a ball pit, which grew out of a simple drama game of throwing balls in a circle. It's a perfect metaphor: fun on the surface, but exhausting when you're stuck in it. The steep rake of the set added to that – it literally made the ground unsteady, so even walking upstage requires a lot of physical effort.

DIRECTOR'S APPROACH continued

How did the play's rhythm influence your direction? How did you use movement and stillness to shape audience response?

We built rhythmic, repetitive movement sequences that loop like a never-ending shift, but with small variations to show how even repetition wears you down in different ways.

For the performances, I asked the cast to swing between manic bursts of energy and moments where you can see them about to break, before snapping back into a mechanical routine. That back-and-forth captures both their resilience and their exhaustion. We also leaned into time loops – repeating actions with subtle changes in tone – so you feel both the grind and the strange little shifts that fatigue brings.

What language/approach do you use with your actors so that you achieve efficiency and clarity in the rehearsal room?

We often spoke in musical terms: syncopation in the overlapping dialogue, staccato and crescendo, call-and-response. It gave the work a clear rhythm we could all lock into.

Tonally, it's a mix of the absurd and the deeply human. There are surreal, satirical touches – chicken masks, fever-dream projections, chaotic humour, thousands of balls – but they're punctuated by still moments where a character breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the audience. Those moments cut through all the madness with a kind of vulnerable clarity.

Sound and lighting became their own characters too. The soundscape is a relentless industrial pulse – beeps, sizzles, drive-thru announcements – that never lets you rest. Lighting shifts from the harsh glare of fluorescents to bursts of surreal colour, like the hallucinatory haze of a long shift.

What do you hope audiences will think and feel after seeing this production?

We want the audience to laugh at the absurdity, but also feel the weight underneath. For a lot of young people, this is the reality of entering the workforce. By wrapping it in surreal comedy, people can engage with something that's both painfully real and unexpectedly entertaining.

What I really love, though, is the resilience that shines through. Even when the characters are at breaking point, when you imagine they'd love to curl up under the counter and disappear, they keep going. There's grit there, a refusal to completely give in, and that feels deeply human.

ACTIVITY FIVE

CREATING THE CHAOS - PHYSICALLY:

In groups of 5 or 6 get students to read BEFORE THE PLAY p.1-2. The stage directions state that the performers “are operating as a well-oiled machine, working their butts off, earning their money; pushing through, pumping it out, moving on up, work bitch work.”

- Have some props handy. Anything that could pass for a workplace. If it's easier to consider an office: paper, books, stamps, trolley, tape measure. If you have pots, spoons, cups, salt and pepper shakers, plates, tea towels.
- Every student should have a prop. Get them to explore that prop. Figure out how many ways you can use that prop. What can you do with this object?
- Ask the students to create four movements that make sense to the object they have selected. Eg: 1) picking up the saltshaker. 2) Twisting it. 3) Shaking it. 4) Putting it down. Get the students to find a sense of logic in the movements. Make them big and precise. Make the movement clean. Repeat the movements.
- Explore the rhythm of the movement. How much effort goes into each movement and the differences between them. Are the movements distinct and differentiated from each other, or do they blend into each other?
- As a teacher, count a rhythm. For example, four counts “One, Two Three, Four, One, Two, Three, Four.” Your delivery can be quite robotic. Get the students to perform their actions to your robotic count.
- Add counts and actions whereby the whole group comes together. They may come together over another four counts “Five, Six, Seven, Eight.” By the count of eight, all students must be ready to start their first movement again. For example, they might all move in to smell the items in a pot. Or all converge to look at what is written on a piece of paper that someone lifts.
- See if the group can loop the movements.
- Play with pace. Slow at first. The teacher can count 1 through to 8.
- Play with freezing on a particular count.



DESIGNER'S PROCESS

INTERVIEW WITH DESIGNER - KATHLEEN KERSHAW

The playwright specifies that: “*The work being performed throughout the play should be real work.*” How did this influence and challenge your approach as a designer?



Honor's specification that the cast's actions must be 'real work' was central to how we envisioned the production: everything on stage needed to place genuine physical demands on the performers. They could never simply stand passively; their environment had to require constant effort. That led us to explore different ways of building resistance into the space, and we arrived at the combination of the steep raked stage and the ball pit -elements that ensured the actors' work remained authentic, strenuous, and integral to the storytelling.

This play premiered in Canberra at the Courtyard Studio. What type of performing space is the Courtyard Studio and what practical considerations did you make when designing for it?

The Courtyard Studio is an intimate black box space, very square, compact, and with a low lighting grid. There's limited opportunity to create a traditional backstage area, which actually worked in our favour for this production, as most of the cast remain on stage throughout. The main challenge was the low grid height, which restricted our options for the placement and visibility of the projection screen, so we had to be very deliberate in our design choices, and clever about the placement of video elements, which at times project onto the actors bodies.

It is about to be performed in Sydney at The Rebel Theatre. What changes did you make to adapt the design for touring?

One of the key adjustments we made for touring the show to Sydney was reshaping the ball pit to match the downstage curve of The Rebel Theatre. By following the natural curve of the theatre, the design is more integrated into the architecture of this theatre, and immersive, drawing the audience further into the world of the play.

DESIGNER'S PROCESS continued

What process did you work through to develop your design vision for this show?

The design process began with a series of conversations with Luke, the director, about the details of the script and interrogating what aspects we felt most important to highlight – both thematically and emotionally, and what overall atmosphere we wanted the audience to experience. From those discussions, I spent time brainstorming a wide range of possibilities, some of which were exciting but ultimately too ambitious, either because of budget limitations or the practical demands they would place on the cast. What became most valuable was that back-and-forth between creative vision and real-world constraints: every idea we explored, even the ones we let go of, helped clarify what was essential, and shaped a concept that was both achievable and true to the heart of the story, which is what you see on stage.

What kind of atmosphere were you aiming to create and what choices helped you achieve it?

We wanted to create an atmosphere that felt difficult and even a little dangerous, because that reflects the reality of what these young workers are going through. It shouldn't feel easy or comfortable – the audience needs to feel that tension. There's also a kind of fun, chaotic energy that comes with being young and navigating your first job, and it was important that we captured that as well. So we tried to balance those two extremes, the difficulty and danger, alongside the playfulness and energy, because that contrast really highlights the youth of the cast and the people whose stories we are telling.

How does the set design support the play's themes? What principles of design helped you to achieve this?

The set draws on the aesthetics and feel of the corporations the play critiques, using bright, playful colours, and elements reminiscent of playground equipment. Everything is designed to feel slightly unstable, barely in control, so the cast is constantly negotiating their footing. This precariousness supports the experience of youth in exploitative work environments, the mix of fun and danger highlights both the energy and the vulnerability of the characters.

How will your choices shape the audience's responses to the work?

I hope my choices bring an abstract quality to the play's setting, allowing the audience to connect with the challenges the cast is facing. By moving away from a strictly realistic portrayal, the audience can focus on the story and the characters' experiences, rather than getting caught up in the mundane details of fast-food work.



PLAYWRIGHT'S PROCESS

INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT - HONOR WEBSTER-MANNISON

The work takes a close look at the challenges faced by young people working in profitable fast-food chains; long shifts operating at a relentless pace, and a wage that barely covers the basics. What was your inspiration to write: *Work, But this Time Like You Mean It*?



The first play I tried to write was about a young woman working at McDonalds, and a kid was trying to make a documentary about her because he thought she was a witch. This play was a practice that was never performed. But I see a lot of it in *Work, But This Time Like You Mean It*. When I applied for the commission with Canberra Youth Theatre I was working in catering. I remember the smell of everywhere I've worked, which is the slurry of the contents of the job. I would get very angry at this catering job. I wanted *Work, But This Time Like You Mean It* to contain these bodily and emotional memories. As I was writing I learnt more about growing movements and organisation of young workers and fast food workers.

Last year, workers at a Grill'd held the first-ever fast-food strike in Australia. What!? So I thought about not just depicting some of the ways young workers are exploited, but also the emotions and resistance bubbling under the surface of these spaces.

Can you walk us through your creative process in developing this work?

Part of the commission with Canberra Youth Theatre involved workshopping the play with a group of artists (ranging from I think thirteen to around twenty-five). What came out of these workshops deeply inspired the project. There was one exercise that we did where we went into the city to observe people. I told them to write down their observations – the conversations people were having, what people were doing, how they were interacting, the power dynamics, how they were dressed etc, with a particular interest in the relationships and interactions in workplaces. When we went back to the theatre we used the collected observations to make some short performances. One group made this thing that went something like this: They all went really limp and kinda like zombies and then at the same time they'd all re-animate and put on a big fake grin and say 'how may I help you' and then they repeated that cycle maybe three times. When I was writing the play I used this as a reference point. My creative process also involved having a lot of conversations. People had a lot to say about all the jobs they ever had. A lot of these conversations made their way into the play.

PLAYWRIGHT'S PROCESS continued

The play draws on Absurdist conventions – the repetition of action such as time, rest breaks, the ‘nothing song’ – and a cyclical structure where the beginning and ending echo each other. How do you think this repetition shapes the audience’s response to the play?

Maybe the audience finds this repetition painful. I find the play very overstimulating. When I was writing this play, I read an essay by E.P. Thompson called *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*. The essay looks at the move from task-oriented time to standardised time, as clocks became increasingly accurate and common during England’s industrial revolution. Thompson says “In all these ways – by the division of labour, the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings; the suppression of fairs and sports – new labour habits were formed and new time disciplines were imposed.” I am interested in the temporalities of fast food.

The work is peppered with surreal moments, daydreams, ambitions – even a monologue from a deep fryer. What drew you to include these surrealistic conventions and how did you bring them to life in the writing?

I think growing up you get in trouble for daydreaming or zoning out a lot. At school you have to prove that you're paying attention and absorbing the information. At school and at work there's a lot of forced presentness. But of course everyone fantasises when they're bored. I also think there's references in the play to work manifesting in your subconscious and lodging itself there. So the characters' fantasies drip into their work, but also their work drips into their fantasies. I also wanted this to feel like small stolen moments of depth.

The dialogue moves at breakneck speed – with dialogue overlapping and sharp cuts between conversations. What effect did you hope this pace would have on audiences?

I had some conversations with Luke, the artistic director of Canberra Youth Theatre, about imagining the script as a musical score. Because a lot of the dialogue is overlapping the text becomes more like sound or noise. I definitely wanted to capture a speed. I wanted it to create this orchestral effect. I think as well the overlapping dialogue and the speed has an effect where you’re kind of zoning in and out of what people are saying. You're half listening, sometimes it's just noise. Like the repetition, I think this is about introducing a difficulty to the play, communication is made difficult, your attention is stretched thin over the multiple focus points. So the writing requires small acts of labour from the performers and the audience.

PLAYWRIGHT'S PROCESS continued

Do you have any advice for students studying your play?

More in regards to performing the play... I think about space and looseness when I'm writing. So the text leaves room for the performers, designer, directors, etc. to build the world of the work. So I would encourage agency in how you treat the text and encourage making the text work for you and the world you want to create.



GLOSSARY

ABSURDISM

A form of theatre that highlights the **meaninglessness or illogical nature of human existence**, often using repetition, circular plots, and exaggerated dialogue to show life as chaotic or incomprehensible.

REALISM

A style focused on **everyday life and believable characters**, aiming to present the world as it “really is.” Realistic theatre prioritises natural dialogue, plausible events, and social or personal issues audiences can relate to.

SURREALISM

A style that explores the **unconscious mind, dreams, and illogical imagery**, often combining strange or unexpected elements to create a world that defies reality. Surrealist theatre can feel dreamlike, bizarre, or uncanny.

OTHER PLAYS

Other non-naturalistic plays you may be interested in looking at:

- *The 7 Stages of Grieving* by Wesley Enoch & Deborah Mailman
- *Holy Day* by Andrew Bovell
- *Stories in the Dark* by Deborah Oswald
- *Black Diggers* by Tom Wright
- *Ruby Moon* by Matt Cameron
- *Hoods* by Angela Betzien
- *Neighbourhood Watch* by Lally Katz
- *Disconnected* by Donna Hughes

CURRICULUM LINKS: The Australian Curriculum

DRAMA

Senior Secondary	
Creating and Presenting Drama	Students develop and refine their expressive skills to present drama that conveys meaning and engages audiences.
Analysing and Responding to Drama	Students analyse and evaluate how the elements of drama are used to convey meaning in different contexts. v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au

NSW - HSC		
MAKING	H1.2	Uses performance skills to interpret and perform scripted and other material.
	P2.4	Performs effectively in a variety of styles using a range of appropriate performance techniques, theatrical and design elements and performance spaces.
	P2.6	Appreciates the variety of styles, structures and techniques that can be used in making and shaping a performance.
CRITICALLY STUDYING	P3.3	Appreciates the contribution that drama and theatre make to Australian and other societies by raising awareness and expressing ideas about issues of interest.

WA - WACE		
UNIT 4	This unit focuses the approach to and interpretation of drama texts, contexts, forms and styles.	• Antonin Artaud • Frantic Assembly • Jerzy Grotowski • Conventions of selected performance styles.

DRAMA

VIC - VCE		
UNIT 1	Introducing performance styles and contemporary drama practices.	• Performance styles from a range of contexts relevant to historical and contemporary drama practices. • Conventions of selected performance styles. • Exploration of character(s) in a range of performance styles.
AREAS OF STUDY 2		• Application of symbol and transformation of character, time and place. • Incorporate relevant conventions from selected performance styles.

ENGLISH

SENIOR SECONDARY	
UNIT 1	Students explore how meaning is created through the use of language and stylistic choices in texts. v7.australiancurriculum.edu.au
UNIT 2	Students examine different perspectives and how they are represented in texts.

YEAR 9-10	
ACELT1633	Interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issue, event, situation, individuals or groups are constructed to serve specific purposes in texts.
ACELY1741	Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content and multimodal elements to influence a course of action.

LITERATURE

SENIOR SECONDARY	
ACELR021	Analyse and reflect on how the choice and combinations of mode, medium, and form transform texts. v8.australiancurriculum.edu.au
ACELR020	Analyse and reflect on the relationship between conventions of genre, audience expectations, and interpretations of texts. v8.australiancurriculum.edu.au
ACELR007	Analyse and reflect on the relationships between authors, texts, and contexts.
ACELR040	Evaluate how authors represent Australian culture, place, and identity to Australians and the wider world. v8.australiancurriculum.edu.au+1v8.australiancurriculum.edu.au+1

This education Resource was developed by Education Consultant, Donna Hughes from Australian Plays Transform, in collaboration with Canberra Youth Theatre.