

JASPER JONES

BASED ON THE NOVEL
BY CRAIG SILVEY

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE
BY KATE MULVANY



Currency Press, Sydney

INTRODUCTION

1965 will be a tumultuous year for the small town of Corrigan. The race to the moon is underway. Australia's involvement in the war in Vietnam is being escalated and some of the young men are being conscripted and sent over to fight in it. And fifteen-year-old Laura Wishart has mysteriously disappeared. For Corrigan the last event overshadows the others. What happened to her?

For Charlie Bucktin this summer will be traumatic and life-changing. This play, like Craig Silvey's much-loved 2009 novel on which it is based, starts like a good detective story with the discovery of a body but it soon becomes something else. In the thrilling opening scene Charlie is woken in the night by Jasper Jones, the slightly older and much tougher outcast boy, and taken to his secret place outside town where he has found Laura's body hanging from a tree. For reasons that are shocking but completely understandable they cut her down, weigh her body with stones and sink her in the dam.

It is from that initiating act that the play starts to depart from the detective genre. There are no detectives, only the police who, like the townsfolk, mindlessly blame Jasper for everything bad that happens in Corrigan, and when it comes to the crunch are happy to violently beat him up because he is a 'half-caste'. Only Charlie and Jasper know what has happened to Laura's body, and they keep their secret till the end, hoping to find out the how and the why of it all.

This is a play about trust and courage, especially among the five wonderful central teenage characters. Jasper believes he can trust Charlie, which is why he seeks his help in the first place. Charlie finds to his surprise that he almost instantly trusts Jasper, in spite of Jasper's bad reputation and his own doubts:

CHARLIE: I can't trust anything—liquor, cigarettes. God knows what'll happen when I have sex. At this rate my dick'll probably fall off halfway through. (p. 11)

Charlie also has a close friend, the comically courageous cricket-tragic Jeffrey Lu, the son of refugees from Vietnam. (One of the other major

events of 1965 was Doug Walters' test debut, about which Jeffrey is obsessed.) Their friendship is expressed in a series of cheerfully insulting interchanges that provide much of the play's humour.

One of these is their argument about superheroes, when Charlie is arguing that the mortal Batman obviously has more courage than the invulnerable Superman (pp.14-16). Soon after that they meet Laura's sister Eliza, whom Charlie has a crush on but dare not approach; and then the town bully, Warwick, whose size, strength and attendant goons make it easy to be tough. We admire Jeffrey's clownish bravery, as he faces up to these thugs who are thwarting his attempts to get a place in the cricket team. For all Charlie's pathological fear of insects and his general book-nerd gentleness, we admire his courage as he sticks by Jasper. But in the end we discover that it is Laura who has had to endure the most.

Jeffrey teases Charlie about his infatuation with Eliza ('Sassytime!'). Charlie and Eliza's relationship is a beautifully written first-love story, full of awkwardness, misunderstanding and growing tenderness. It is the awkwardness and misunderstanding that obscures another issue of trust, when we finally learn the truth of what they have been inadvertently keeping from each other.

The fifth teenager is of course the dead Laura. In the novel Charlie is haunted by memories and stories of her. In a play he can be haunted by her ghost. It is one of the many brilliant things about Kate Mulvany's adaptation that she brings Laura on stage in the flesh. Laura visits him in his room while he is sleeping. It is she who points out to him the word 'Sorry' scratched on the tree from which she was found hanging, and later on the old car—such a significant relic of Jasper's unknown past—in Mad Jack Lionel's yard. She visits the Lu's house when the vandals trash their beautiful flower garden. Having her so present in Charlie's journey is very moving.

Another theme explored in the play is the idea of the normal and what lies beneath that banal word. When Charlie and Jasper first come back from the terrible scene of the death everything at first seems ordinary again. The town of Corrigan reacts to Laura's disappearance with fear and anxiety and the young people are locked up, as might be expected, but the novel and the play evoke small-town normalcy—the streets, the cricket ground, the pub, the railway, the river, the farmlands

and the bushland beyond. It is a portrait of a usually quiet community that is suddenly disrupted, like when your country fights an overseas war and sends your young men off to die, or when you drop the body of a hanged girl into the dark waters of a dam.

Mulvany has also given to Charlie's troubled angry mother, Mrs Bucktin, a wonderful speech in which she reveals all her despair about having to live in such a 'normal' country town.

MRS BUCKTIN: I reckon it's set in a town of never-ending fucking silence. Silence and space. Dead paddocks and dried-up dams and a bunch of ghosts covered in dust walking around a place where nothing ever changes. It just doesn't fucking change. Stinking men and bored women and incessant heat and filthy flies and fucking on a back seat. Just to feel something, just to feel anything, just to escape the silence. (p.66)

And what is most shocking of all is our realisation at the end of the play that what has happened to Laura is in fact, no matter how outraged we might be, all too normal.

Then there are the adults who control the teenagers' lives, but whom Charlie, as he grows to some sort of early maturity, gradually realises have troubles and secrets of their own. Most of them do not appear (in fact, the only parents who appear on stage are Charlie's), but are looming presences in the story. His mother's own desperation emerges as a reason for her erratic behaviour. His gently quiescent father—who has given him his love of the books which are the solace of his young life and his point of contact with Eliza—teaches him a lot, but is excluded from his secret. Mr Bucktin himself displays great courage when he confronts the gang who are tormenting Jeffrey's father.

Jeffrey's parents are decent, hard-working, refugee immigrants, facing the hostility, and occasionally the friendship, of the people of Corrigan. In his supreme self-confidence, his cheerful acceptance of all the shit thrown at him by Warwick and his mates, and in his energetic wit and cleverness, Jeffrey becomes a defiant trickster figure whose triumph in the iconic Aussie cricket match is one of the great pleasures of the story.

Jasper's violently drunken father only returns to town from time to time to beat up his son. Jasper's Aboriginal mother is long gone, and we eventually find out why and where. This is the source of his

fierce independence, and the reason why he has his secret place. He is a teenager who needs somewhere to live and survive on his own. This is why, when Laura turns up dead in his special place, he enlists Charlie to help and their trusting friendship begins.

Eliza and Laura's father and mother are supposedly pillars of the community but the revelation at the end demonstrates how alone these children are. Normal life can be a nightmare.

The other adult is Mad Jack Lionel, the supposedly evil killer of a young woman. He lives isolated on the edge of town, a source of mystery, feared and loathed by all the young people. Stealing from his peach tree has become a rite of passage for tough boys trying to prove their machismo. Jasper's personal relationship to Mad Jack, eventually revealed, and Charlie's understanding of this and his final complicity in the splendid peach tree scene, is one the happiest arcs of the story.

But there remains, as we watch these events, the central question: what happened to Laura? This is the tragic arc of the story, in which most of the questions raised about trust and courage are answered.

Mulvany has taken a novel based in first-person narrative, relying for its story on discoveries, and turned it into a drama based in the actions of characters. The interactions between Charlie and Jasper, Jeffrey and Eliza are brought concisely and gloriously to theatrical life. She takes Charlie's painfully introspective library research into the violent crimes with which he becomes obsessed, and gives the story of the torture of Sylvia Likens (p.29) to Eliza to tell to Charlie. This raises the stakes for Eliza and gives the actor something very strong to play:

'The sister. Jenny. Why didn't she tell someone at school? A neighbour? Anyone? She was Sylvia's only ally and she didn't say a word. Why would she do that?' (p.29)

In this exchange neither of them knows that the other knows the truth about Laura, and we, the audience, don't know that Eliza knows what happened to Laura. It makes for a rich subtext.

There are many such scenes of complex dramatic irony. When Charlie has his warm scene with his father and asks if he can join in the search for Laura, Mr Bucktin says they might find something that 'might not be for eyes of children' (p.35). We know that Charlie knows that they will not find anything, that his eyes have already seen more, and that his hands have done something about it.

Kate Mulvany has taken from Silvey's novel the deceptively simple but moving final refrain that the young Charlie reiterates so powerfully and with such a sense of innocent shock, surprise and outrage, as if he cannot believe that this is the way things go in the world. Here he shares it with Eliza, as we learn the truth at last.

'This is what happened ...'

John McCallum
Sydney, 2017

John McCallum is a theatre reviewer for *The Australian*.