



TEACHERS NOTES: THE SUITCASE SERIES / ATOMIC

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Introduction

Welcome to The Suitcase Series for 2018-19 and to our Teachers Notes for our newly commissioned script of **ATOMIC** by Amelia Chandos Evans.

These resources are designed to enhance your students' exploration of the play through a wide range of practical exercises. We encourage students to explore **ATOMIC** on the rehearsal room floor as quickly as possible. Each of the scenes and characters within the play can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, and our suggested activities encourage students to be bold explorers of the script.

You are welcome to vary these exercises as much as you please. Experiment, play and have fun!

There are also video interviews with our writer and director, and a series of discussion points based upon their responses. Plus there are links to Amelia's stimulus materials, which were key inspirations for **ATOMIC**.

We hope that these resources will be useful for you and your students. We look forward to seeing you at the in-theatre days in October and November. If you have any further questions regarding The Suitcase Series program, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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Part A: Getting Started

Sometimes the best way to begin exploring a new script is on the floor, focussing upon small sections at a time. We have put together some introductory activities based upon various stimuli: images, quotes, articles, video interviews and excerpts from the text. We hope that this will help students to connect more deeply with the play as a whole, prior to choosing which scenes they would like to perform, and/or adapt for their own pieces.

Responding to the *ATOMIC* Pinterest board

'What responsibility do we have to the environment? At what point will we act? And what might models of action look like?' - Amelia Evans

Below is a Pinterest board of images that Amelia gathered that relate to themes within *ATOMIC*:
<https://www.pinterest.com.au/ameliachandos/atomic/>

- In groups of 4 or 5 students choose **one** of the images from the *ATOMIC* Pinterest board. From this image they create **three** frozen tableaux. The beginning tableau should represent the stimulus image as closely as possible, the middle tableau should take the image to a new stage, then find a way to create a final tableau.
 - Bring the three tableaux to life for 15 seconds in slow motion, in silence
 - Bring the three tableaux to life for 15 seconds using sound effects
- Look at Gus Speth's quote:
'I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we as scientists don't know how to do that'
 - In groups of 4 or 5 create a one-minute performance using this quote as their stimulus. The piece should have no words, but may make use any of the following: gibberish, heightened physicality, stillness and silence, vocal and percussive sounds.
 - Groups then show their pieces to one another, sharing feedback on what they observed.
- Throughout the term encourage students to create their own Pinterest boards in response to the scenes that they are exploring and creating. Encourage each group to collect images that correlate with the themes and characters within *ATOMIC* as well as images that relate to the new pieces that students are developing.
 - Ask each student to choose their own images to print out, and add them to a class mood board for reference during the development and rehearsal process.



Part B: Responding to the Script – The Chorus of Atoms sections

ATOMIC has four Chorus of Atoms scenes throughout the play: BEFORE, AFTER, WHEN and NOW. Here are some of Amelia's thoughts on these Chorus sections:

'To zoom out and have the history of the universe told by its smallest elements, to disrupt our ideas of time and the dominant narratives of history – and encourage you to seek your own meaning from the past. I believe that when we do that new futures are possible.' - Amelia Evans

PROLOGUE / BEFORE:

Explore this first scene as a choral work with the entire class. Read the scene by going around in a circle with each member of the class speaking one line at a time.

Pay attention to the spacing of the lines as written by Amelia:

- { Before the seven billion billion billion of us atoms, that make up you, walked into the theatre and took your seat
- { Before the seven billion billion billion of us that make up you were standing in the foyer scrolling twitter and read the headline 'scientists agree – this is the last year to save the reef'
- { Before Twitter
- { Before Twitter and Insta and Facebook and Facetime and Snapchat and Tramtracker and Keeping up with the Kardashians!
- { Before you knew what a Kardashian was

- Read through the entire scene a few times. Experiment with building the pace as the piece goes on, starting slow and gradually gaining momentum, or the reverse. After the read through, discuss the following: *Which images were most vivid for you in this scene? What is your understanding of atoms? Why might the writer begin a play in this way?*
- Give groups of 4 or 5 a section each from this scene to work on which they will perform to the rest of the class. For this task there is an emphasis upon the students responding to the rhythm and sounds of the language and creating an aural soundscape to accompany the text. Students are encouraged to experiment with pitch, volume and tone. For the soundscape encourage them to use their voices, body percussion and anything else in the classroom they can find. During each performance, students in the audience are asked to close their eyes and listen to the piece being performed.

AFTER:

- Divide the scene up according to how it is written and ask students to stand in a circle speaking their section of the scene one by one.
- Ask students to build up the pace gradually, maintaining focus throughout.
- Experiment with the volume, starting the piece very softly and building to loud and then soft again by the end.
- Clear an open space and ask students to stand in a circle at the outer edges of the room. Ask them to step in together gradually, as the chorus is spoken in unison, until they meet altogether in a tight circle in the middle. Each of these exercises may take a few attempts to get the timing right. Encourage them to really work together as an ensemble and as a chorus.

WHEN:

- After an initial read-through ask each student to have a chair beside them, anywhere throughout the open space. As each section is spoken, the speaker should step up onto the chair, declaring words dramatically.
- Experiment with having a metronome at varying speeds during the speech. (Metronomes are available via free apps).
- Discard chairs and have all students walk through the space, as if in a busy city, weaving through the space, saying various sections of the Chorus in order.

NOW:

- Speak this Chorus section in unison
- In the activities section, where a whole range of physical activities are to be acted out, experiment with students doing their activities at a range of speeds: slow motion / fast motion / 'normal speed'
- Let the activities build to a crescendo in pace and then have all students collapse to the floor
- Speak the final lines from the floor, in stillness and in unison



Part C: Responding to the Script – The scenes

ATOMIC has a range of short scenes grouped into four different sections: **CRISIS**, **RECKONING**, **REVOLUTION** and **REGENERATION**. Here are some of Amelia’s thoughts on these sections:

‘I wanted to zoom back in, to kitchen tables and beaches and parklands. To people struggling to come to terms with how to act in the face of headlines like ‘Scientists agree this is the last year to save the reef!’, or what to do when a whale beaches itself at your feet. And also to explore ideas of radical change – whether that be quitting your job to devote yourself to a tree, or just picking up rubbish.’

Here are some introductory activities that could apply to any of the scenes:

- Put a selection of props and costume items out for students to choose from (examples might include a pram, a construction vest, a police jacket, a shawl, a child’s toy, a lab coat, a suit jacket, a raincoat, a cricket bat, a loudspeaker, an umbrella, a walking stick). Ask students to work on their individual scene with one of these items and allow whatever item they have to inform their character and context. Try swapping items, and see how it alters the scene.
- Encourage students to experiment with the age and gender of the A, B and C characters throughout the play.
- Ask students to decide who has the most status in a scene. Play the scene accordingly, and then reverse it.
- Choose one character who needs to move a lot, a character who remains still throughout and another character who can do either. Play the scene three times, changing this dynamic.
- Allow students to reflect upon the discoveries that they make through these explorations and which version of the scene they found worked most effectively.

Here are a series of suggested exercises to accompany each of the individual scenes. They are designed to help students explore the scenes, and a range of contrasting interpretations:

PART 1: CRISIS

‘What keeps us inactive when the world seems to be spiralling out of our control?’

Scene 1.1 Banana shortage: *Playing with eye contact*

- Explore this scene with A making direct eye contact, B avoiding eye contact, and C watching both of them – then try reversing this.

Scene 1.2 Flat on the Floor: *Playing with different body positions*

- Have all students attempt to perform this scene lying down. They can move and roll, but must not sit or stand up.
- Now add the element of sitting. The students can go on their knees, kneel and squat down low but they still cannot stand up.
- Experiment with the groups using floor, chair and standing. In this activity, only one student can be at each level at a time. For example, two students cannot stand at the same time, but if the standing student sits, then the sitting student must stand.



Scene 1.3 The Mess: *Playing with contrasting tempo/rhythm*

- A has a heightened, fast-paced, hyper level of energy. B has a much more lethargic, slow, stagnant energy. Play the scene with this contrast in tempo. Then reverse it.

Scene 1.4 Vegan: *Playing with a hot potato focus*

- A starts with a 'hot potato' object. After each line the person with the object must pass it on to the other character. Both characters in the scene do not want the object. Then discard the object and play the scene very still.

Scene 1.5 Bushfire: *Playing with focus*

- Have students speak their lines back to back, then play the scene with both characters facing one another in stillness. Then try the scene with A staying completely still and B moving frenetically. Then reverse it.

Scene 1.6 Beached Whale: *Playing with gestures*

- Explore the shifts in this scene through gesture. Start the scene with a leader, everyone in this scene must mirror the leader's gestures and body movements. Every time the students sense a shift have them change the leader.

PART 2: RECKONING

'Do we deserve forgiveness for the damage we've caused? Have we forgotten that we are ourselves part of the natural world?'

Scene 2.1 The Wildflower and the Chip Packet: *Playing with different performance styles*

- Try playing this scene using a range of performance styles: melodrama, theatre of the absurd, musical, comedy, tragedy etc. Explore the scene playing with the different styles. Then play it as naturalistically as possible.

Scene 2.2 Battling Nature: *Playing with contrasting tempo/rhythms*

- C has a heightened, fast-paced, hyper level of energy. B has a much more lethargic, slow, stagnant energy. A is somewhere in between. Play the scene with this contrast in tempo. Then reverse it.

Scene 2.3 Baby: *Playing with motivation*

- A is very enthusiastic about what they are saying, and becomes increasingly more so as the scene goes on. B is indifferent and impartial.
- Play the scene again reversing this.



Scene 2.4 The Bad Guy: *Playing with space*

- A & B both use very big gestures as they describe the scene, acting out various locations, characters as they speak.
- They sit together on a park bench, discussing their ideas.

Scene 2.5 Crocodile: *Playing with gestures and movement*

- A is highly expressive, using lots of gestures as they speak. B is very still. Then try reversing this.

PART 3: REVOLUTION

'What can we do to get our relationship with the natural world (and so, ourselves) back on track?'

Scene 3.1 Ride: *Playing with age*

- A is 8 years old, and B is 80 years old. Play the difference in age as fully as possible.
- Play the scene a second time reversing this.

Scene 3.2 Protest: *Exploring movement*

- Run through this scene without using any movement whatsoever
- Now do it again with each character being able to move only one part of their body
- Now exaggerate all movement as much as possible throughout the scene

Scene 3.3 Online shopping: *Playing the sock game*

- Play the scene as a game, with A having a sock attached to their waist, tucked into pants, or a belt, or a pocket, with B trying to get it. The game is the key focus, the text is secondary. Once B has the sock, keep going. Run the scene a number of times, continuing the game. When a character retrieves the sock they take great delight in it, so the stakes are heightened as the game continues.
- Then play the scene in stillness with the two characters sitting beside one another.

Scene 3.4 Tree: *Exploring contrasting characters*

- Try playing A as a very earnest and serious character, with B & C as quite light-hearted characters, amused and bewildered by A's ideas.
- Now reverse it: try playing A as very light-hearted, amused and excited by her ideas, with B & C far more serious about the situation.

Scene 3.5 Rubbish: *Exploring prop and objective*

- Person A needs to try and sell an object to person B. Person A must make this object desirable so that by the end of the scene person B wants it.



Scene 3.6 The Mayor: *Exploring character and presentation*

- Characters C & B are very rigid in their physicality, as if in very restricting clothes. Their level of discomfort should increase as the scene continues. A is very free in their physicality and level of comfort. A's confidence should escalate as the scene continues.
- Try exaggerating these differences as far as possible.
- Then try playing the scene more naturalistically.

PART 4: REGENERATION

'What does hope look like? What do we want our future to look like?'

Scene 4.1 New Year Eve: *Exploring environment*

- Allow the characters to be very influenced by the environment they are in – looking up at the expansive sky, responding to the vastness and feel of the ocean, and the excitement of being outside on a warm summer's evening.
- Play the scene a number of times and see how the surroundings can affect the characters' physicalities, vocal qualities and motivations as much as possible.
- Allow the pace of the scene to build as the scene progresses, and also allow the characters' physicality to become more and more expressive as the scene continues.
- Then play the scene with all three characters lying on the ground in complete stillness, speaking their lines as if staring at the stars.

Part D: Interviews with the writer and director of *ATOMIC*

In these two interviews, Amelia Evans, Writer of *ATOMIC* and Sapidah Kian, Director of *ATOMIC* discuss their understandings of the play as well as their advice for the Year 9 and 10 students who will be creating their own performances for The Suitcase Series.

Watch the two interviews and discuss with students any further insights that they have given them into the play. *Were there any things that either Amelia or Sapidah said about **ATOMIC** that surprised you? Have the interviews sparked new ideas on the pieces of theatre that you would like to create in response to the play?*

Let students know that the interviews took place prior to the commencement of rehearsals for *ATOMIC*, so Sapidah's ideas for the stagecraft and design of the show were in their very early stages.

[Interview with Amelia Evans, writer of *ATOMIC*](#)



[Interview with Sapidah Kian, director of *ATOMIC*](#)



DISCUSSION IN RESPONSE TO THE INTERVIEWS:

Interview with writer Amelia Evans:

1. *'I wanted to explore what there is to hope for in the conversation about climate change.'*
 - Do you feel that this play offers hope in relation to climate change?
2. *'The Chorus of Atoms sections are a chance to tell the story of history from something that is impartial, that has seen it all, and has also been part of it all, and that brings us to this moment of now.'*
 - How have you responded to the Chorus of Atoms sections?
3. *'I wanted to have a perspective shift between the grander-scale of the world and the universe, and the atomic: the very, very small. And how everything is in relation with one another. So the big things that are happening are affecting the smaller moments.'*
 - How have you responded to these shifts between the larger-scale events and the more intimate moments within the play?
4. *'I chose not to name the characters, or really give them genders because I wanted the actors to access those characters however they would like to.'*
 - How have you responded to the fact that there are no specific names or genders for the characters A, B and C?
 - Did this allow you more freedom as you explored the scenes?
5. *'We were looking at the idea of the play as a coming of age story for humanity...Human beings waking up to a whole lot of things and trying to take responsibility for them.'*
 - In what ways do you believe the play involves people taking responsibility?
6. *'The CRISIS scenes came about because all of these questions were coming at us, to do with floods and droughts, and we were feeling like it can be too overwhelming, what can I do...But when the crisis is at your feet, how will you act?'*
 - What were your responses to the CRISIS scenes?
7. *'RECKONING was thinking about death a lot and our responsibility and the pessimism that gets thrown about and asking: "are humans inherently destructive?" And wanting to reckon with that idea.'*
 - What do you think of the idea that humans might be inherently destructive?
8. *'REVOLUTION was thinking about wanting to inspire radical acts of love.'*
 - What might some examples of these radical acts of love be (in the play, or in life)?
9. *'REGENERATION was thinking about the future and placing it back in our hands...and thinking about what our dreams are going to be.'*
 - In what ways does the final scene of the play explore dreams of the future?

DISCUSSION IN RESPONSE TO THE INTERVIEWS:

Interview with director Sapidah Kian:

1. ***'The more you work on it, the more you unpack the text of the play the more detail you find in it.'***
 - As you have explored the scenes in the play have you also uncovered new layers and new details?

2. ***'The way the play works with scale is very interesting. Working with big issues and then coming to the everyday.'***
 - How have you responded to the way that the play 'zooms in' and 'zooms out'?
 - Do you also see the play in these terms?
 - Does this shift in form and content help offer new perspectives on climate change?

3. ***'I think that the key questions that the work is exploring are: What responsibility we have to the environment? At what point will we act? And will might models of action look like?'***
 - How do you respond to these three questions?
 - Where do you feel these questions are explored in **ATOMIC**?
 - What are some other questions that the play might be asking?

4. ***'We'd work the scene and then I'd ask the actors to try to do it in a contrasting way, the complete opposite of what they'd been exploring.'***
 - In our suggested activities we have taken on board Sapidah's suggested approach of exploring the scenes with her group of actors. How have you found the experience of playing with the scenes in contrasting ways?
 - Has this helped to open up a range of possible interpretations for each of the scenes?
 - Has it helped you to uncover surprising ways of understanding the scenes?

5. **A summary of Sapidah's advice for students working on this text for the first time:**
 - Get up it on the floor as quickly as you can – don't overtalk it or overthink it.
 - The play will tell you what it needs you to know.
 - Notice where the shifts are – where are the changes in the course of the scene?
 - What dynamic words are used in the scene – and how might they inform the scene?
 - Be an explorer with every scene. Be open to what you might find. Allow yourself to be surprised.
 - Be bold. Make big, bold offers.

Part E: A summary of the stimulus materials

'The seed of the idea for ATOMIC began many years ago. I was researching Australian myths for a devised work and had the idea that one day I wanted to create an epic work about small, seemingly disconnected moments. This seed lay dormant until Mark Pritchard asked me to pitch an idea for The Suitcase Series. It sprouted from there. The following references were the food that allowed it to bloom' – Amelia Evans

Here is a summary of works that influenced Amelia as she wrote and developed the script:

Theatrical works:

- ***Love and Information*** by Caryl Churchill. An epic play about modern anxiety and intimacy, in disconnected fragments.
- ***Private View*** by Vaclav Havel.
- Choreographer Pina Bausch's body of work.

Reference books:

- ***A Short History of Nearly Everything*** by Bill Bryson. A history of the formation of our universe.
- ***Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*** by Yuval Noah Harari. A history of homo sapiens with many fascinating insights – including the concept of myth-making as an integral part of homo sapiens becoming the dominant species, and in the ongoing creation of culture.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sapiens:_A_Brief_History_of_Humankind

Video References:

- ***Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability***. A Ted Talk on shame v guilt, which was a huge influence on Amelia when thinking about humanity's relationship with climate change.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>
- This video on atoms: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqLlglaz1L0>
- Poet and activist **Cleo Wade** being interviewed on how we can all 'be better'.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mkje4zaahs>

Podcasts:

- **Smarty Plants**. An episode of the podcast RadioLab in which they discuss recent scientific discoveries regarding whether plants can hear <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/smarty-plants/>

Articles:

- ***The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age***. An article on the coining of the term 'Anthropocene'.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>

Images:

- Amelia's mood board on Pinterest.
<https://www.pinterest.com.au/ameliachandos/atomic/>

Interviews:

- Amelia interviewed Kyle Berean, a scientist at RMIT
- Amelia also interviewed Petra Stock from the Climate Council. www.climatecouncil.org.au/

Poetry:

The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan,
and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-
The one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth
instead of up and down-
who is gazing around
with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms
and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention,
how to fall down into the grass,
how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed,
how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?



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