

PROMPT PACK / EDUCATION RESOURCE

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

THE COOPERS MALTHOUSE
Merlyn Theatre
6 - 15 FEB

**MALTHOUSE
PROMPT**

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A co-production with

BLACK SWAN
STATE THEATRE
COMPANY 

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Prompt Pack created by Vanessa O'Neill for Malthouse Prompt—Malthouse Theatre's Youth and Education program.

COVER IMAGE / Pia Johnson
REHEARSAL PHOTOS / Pia Johnson
DESIGN / Hours After



ABOUT MALTHOUSE THEATRE

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

At Malthouse Theatre we collaborate with local and international artists to create inventive performances that cut to the core of the human experience.

Theatre has the power to interrogate, disrupt and to be an agent of change—and we think it always should. At Malthouse Theatre the work we produce explores the world personally, socially and politically.

Based in a dedicated venue, The Coopers Malthouse in Melbourne, we are a home for live experiences that entertain and provoke a dialogue with and within audiences.

Welcome to Malthouse Theatre.

PROMPT PACK

VIDEO RESOURCES



Director Matthew Lutton discusses Picnic at Hanging Rock

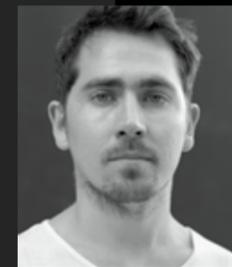


Writer Tom Wright discusses Picnic at Hanging Rock



Actors Arielle Gray, Nikki Shiels and Elizabeth Nabben discuss Picnic at Hanging Rock

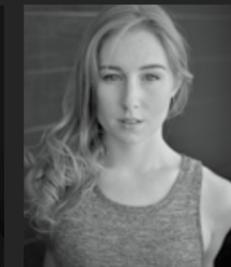
CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM



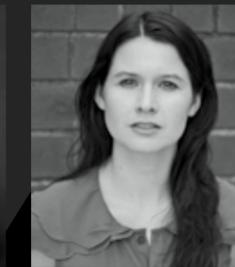
Matthew Lutton
DIRECTOR



Tom Wright
WRITER



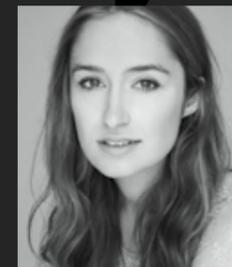
Harriet Gordon-Anderson
CAST



Arielle Gray
CAST



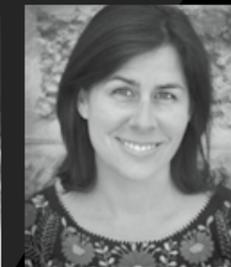
Amber McMahon
CAST



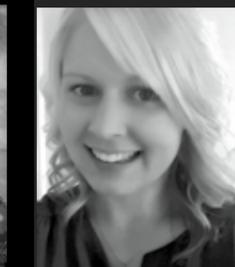
Elizabeth Nabben
CAST



Nikki Shiels
CAST



Zoë Atkinson
SET & COSTUME DESIGN



Tia Clark
STAGE MANAGER



J. David Franzke
SOUND DESIGN



Ash Gibson Greig
COMPOSITION



Lyndie Li Wan Po
ASSISTANT STAGE
MANAGER



Paul Jackson
LIGHTING DESIGN



Joan Lindsay
AUTHOR

Matt Alden / MONASH PLACEMENT, SOUND DESIGN Leticia Brennan-Steers / MONASH PLACEMENT, DIRECTING
Claire Springett / BESEN PLACEMENT, LIGHTING DESIGN Aseel Tayah / BESEN PLACEMENT, SET & COSTUME DESIGN

#PICNICATHANGINGROCK

PROMPT / CUE, INDUCE, MAKE, MOTIVATE, PERSUADE, ENCOURAGE, STIMULATE, IMPEL, INSPIRE.

Welcome to the 2018 Malthouse Theatre Prompt Pack for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. This has been updated from the 2016 Prompt Pack*, which focused on VCE Drama. We have updated this resource so that it also addresses the key knowledge and skills for VCE Theatre Studies.

When an actor forgets a line in rehearsals they may call for a prompt to provide a clue or a cue so that they can keep telling the story. This document aims to provide just that—a next step, a reminder, a series of provocations. It is full of information, but also poses many questions. The Prompt Pack invites us to see how relevant and exciting contemporary theatre can be.

As a resource, these pages are by no means definitive, but we hope they'll keep you travelling through the world of the play well after the curtain call. We encourage you to make particular use of the in-depth video interviews with members of the cast and creative team, as well as our additional written interview with playwright Tom Wright. Many of the questions and discussion points that we have outlined in this resource are a direct response to these interviews. We hope that this Prompt Pack will help you to engage deeply with *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

* Please note that this resource contains production images from the 2016 season. The set items of the wardrobe and trampette are no longer part of the 2018 production.



Vanessa O'Neill /
Youth & Education Manager

DIRECTOR'S NOTE MATTHEW LUTTON



This production of Joan Lindsay's novel is told by five schoolgirls. They know the myth as if they were there in 1900, as if they are schoolgirls trapped in the wrong time. They have access to the mystery, and will play for us the moments we might be able to understand.

The production begins with a recitation of the fateful day in 1900 when Miranda, Irma, Marion and Miss McGraw disappeared. They speak about the malleability of time, of crossing creeks and sleep, and of colonialism, of the white Australian ignorance of what surrounds them, the land we are foreigners in, the land we fail to listen to, the land we have tried to tame with 'Englishness' and 'naming'.

The disappearance of the girls is a horror beyond comprehension for the community at Appleyard College. It is a trauma that all respond to. The girl from the orphanage, Sara, her body contorts from the horror of being left behind. The Headmistress, Mrs Appleyard, insists on more vigilant teachings

of restraint to help Australia 'mature'. The young English visitor, Michael, sheds his 'Englishness' because of an obsession with Miranda, a girl with golden locks, whom he saw only for a moment, hanging in the air, leaping across a creek.

The central character of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* however is nature. It releases and disturbs all the characters. There is no literal representation of the Rock in this production; it is a presence, frequently evoked by language. But sometimes we see nature *thinking* in the sign over the stage, or glimpse a physical manifestation *hanging* in the shadows, or sense its infiltrating presence in the darkness.

Malthouse Theatre invites you into the Australian myth of Hanging Rock, one that has been in our national imaginations for decades, and one that will undoubtedly be retold for many decades to come.

Matthew Lutton /
Artistic Director/Co-CEO



PROMPT PACC

#PICNICATHANGINGROCK

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK BACKGROUND INFORMATION



Picnic at Hanging Rock is a novel by Melbourne author Joan Lindsay, published in 1967. The story begins in 1900 with the disappearance of three schoolgirls and their teacher on a Saint Valentine's Day school picnic. The site of their disappearance is Hanging Rock, an enormous rock formation on the plains below Mount Macedon. The novel explores how the girls' disappearance reverberates through the entire community, as 'the pattern of the picnic continued to darken and spread.'

One of the significant achievements of Joan Lindsay's novel is its ability to blur fact and fiction. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was written implying that what takes place in the novel is historical. Many readers still believe that Lindsay was writing non-fiction. The novel's ability to create a piece of faux Australian history, one that has haunted the Australian psyche for almost fifty years, is a key starting point for the Malthouse Theatre production, adapted by Tom Wright from Joan Lindsay's novel.

It is really interesting the amount of people who think these events actually happened, that people will still ask, 'did they ever find those girls?' For some reason this is one story that people have latched onto, perhaps because they want to believe it. And children did go missing in the Australian bush in the 19th century and early 20th century. And that was a very frightening prospect. But Lindsay made this up. It is a constructed myth. When a story has such power that it is no longer viewed as a fabrication, and it assumes a significance to living, breathing people, then it's no longer just a story and it becomes a myth. — Tom Wright

The novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* concludes with the following newspaper report, purporting to be written thirteen years after the picnic:

**Extract from a Melbourne newspaper,
February 14th, 1913**

Although Saint Valentine's Day is usually associated with the giving and taking of presents, and affairs of the heart, it is exactly thirteen years since the fatal Saturday when a party of some twenty schoolgirls and two governesses set out from Appleyard College on the Bendigo Road for a picnic to Hanging Rock. One of the governesses and three of the girls disappeared during the afternoon. Only one of them was ever seen again. The Hanging Rock is a spectacular volcanic uprising on the plains below Mount Macedon, of special interest to geologists on account of its unique rock formations, including monoliths and reputedly bottomless holes and caves, until recently uncharted [1912]. It was thought at the time that the missing persons had attempted to climb the dangerous rock escarpments near the summit, where they presumably met their deaths; but whether by accident, suicide or straight-out murder has never been established, since the bodies were never recovered.

Intensive search by police and public of the relatively small area provided no clue to the mystery until on the morning of Saturday, February 21st, the Hon. Michael Fitzhubert, a young Englishman holidaying at Mount Macedon (now domiciled on a station property in North Queensland), discovered one of the three missing girls, Irma Leopold, lying unconscious at the foot of two enormous boulders. The unfortunate girl subsequently recovered, except for a head injury which left her without memory of anything that had

occurred after she and her companions had begun the ascent of the upper levels. The search was continued for several years under great difficulties, owing to the mysterious death of the headmistress of Appleyard College within a few months of the tragedy. The College itself was totally destroyed by a bushfire during the following summer. In 1903, two rabbiters camped at the Hanging Rock found a small piece of frilled calico, thought by the police to be part of a petticoat worn on the day of the picnic by the missing governess.

A somewhat shadowy figure appears briefly in this extraordinary story; a girl called Edith Horton, a fourteen-year-old boarder at Appleyard College, who had accompanied the three other girls for a short distance up the Rock. This girl returned at dusk to the other picnickers by the creek below in a state of hysteria, and was unable then, or ever after, to recall anything whatever that had occurred during the interval. In spite of repeated enquiries over the years, Miss Horton recently died in Melbourne without having provided any additional information.

Countess de Latte-Margeury (the former Irma Leopold) is at present residing in Europe.

From time to time the Countess has granted interviews to various interested bodies, including the Society for Psychical Research, but has never recalled anything beyond what she was able to remember after first regaining consciousness. Thus the College Mystery, like that of the celebrated case of the Marie-Celeste, seems likely to remain forever unsolved.

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK MALTHOUSE THEATRE'S ADAPTATION



PHOTO BY GABRIELLE / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

'The Rock is a nightmare, and nightmares belong to the past'

Malthouse Theatre's adaptation of Joan Lindsay's novel, features five female performers, dressed initially as contemporary schoolgirls, retelling an Australian myth, a story that is being revisited. Tom Wright's adaption of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* focuses on communicating landscape and horror through words—there is no attempt to manifest the scale of nature in a literal way. The experience is conjured aurally—primarily through language, music and sound.

This adaptation of Picnic At Hanging Rock isn't designed to be a dramatisation of Lindsay's novel, at least, not in the traditional sense. It's written for five female voices, who retell the story, occasionally playing the roles from the novel, occasionally taking on Lindsay's narrative voice, and often directly addressing the audience. It's as much a play about how we choose to describe our past as it is about annihilation in a foreign landscape. — Tom Wright

Picnic at Hanging Rock taps into our obsession with the mystery genre and inconclusive narratives. Lindsay famously provides no solution to the mystery (one was written, but only published after her death). As such, we

revel in the primal terror that arises when we are unable to rationalise the world. The story speaks to our contemporary need for meaning, our impulse to simplify and comprehend a world that is ultimately incomprehensible, and our fear of engaging with the unknown.

The Australian landscape is a significant aspect of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*—the way it dwarfs us, humbles us, and can never be tamed. All of Lindsay's characters are ill suited to the land they occupy. They are part of a society struggling with change—a society fighting to shake off its 'English' ancestry, its conservatism and naivety. The Headmistress Mrs Appleyard speaks of the need to 'tame', 'cultivate' and 'civilise' this land, through 'restraint', 'vigilance' and 'cleanliness'. But she is no match for the Australian landscape—to which she ultimately surrenders.

Time itself is probably Joan Lindsay's greatest preoccupation. Her writing investigates our ongoing wrestle with time, its subjectivity and fluidity, our desire to control it, and our fear that it is beyond comprehension. Hanging Rock is a place where time literally stops. (The two characters who have watches at the picnic both discover that they have stopped at midday.) In the Malthouse Theatre production, time is deliberately fluid. Different periods of time exist concurrently onstage and are in conversation with each other.

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK TIMELINE

Tom Wright has put together a timeline that charts a number of events and sources that are referenced throughout Picnic at Hanging Rock.

55 million years ago — Bracken evolves

6 ¼ million years ago — Hanging Rock formed from magma seeping from a vent

c. 250 A.D. — Saint Valentine dies

1480s — Botticelli paints *The Birth of Venus*

1687 — Isaac Newton publishes his *Principia Mathematica*

1826 — Felicia Hemans writes *Evening Prayer at a Girls' School*

1836 — Major Mitchell sees Hanging Rock

1842 — *The Wreck of the Hesperus* is written by Longfellow

1843 — Mrs Appleyard born

1844 — Hanging Rock is incorporated into a sheep run

1844 — Hoddle names Hanging Rock Mount Diogenes

1851 — Last Wurundjeri initiation ceremony on Hanging Rock

1851 — Black Thursday fires sweep Hanging Rock

1875 — *At The Hanging Rock* is painted by William Ford

1882 — Miranda born

1896 — Joan Lindsay born

1900 — The picnic, from which everything darkens and spreads

1903 — A pair of rabbiters find a scrap of calico on the Rock

1912 — The volcanic holes and caves of the rock are charted and mapped

1913 — Edith dies

1928 — The gardener, Mr White, dies at the age of ninety-five

1950 — Mademoiselle tells her grandchildren of the unforgettable hysteria of the girls attacking Irma

1966 — Joan Lindsay writes *Picnic At Hanging Rock*

1975 — The film *Picnic At Hanging Rock* is made by Peter Weir

1980 — *The Murders at Hanging Rock* is published by Yvonne Rousseau

1984 — Joan Lindsay dies

1987 — *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, Lindsay's 'missing' chapter, is published



ABOUT THE DIRECTOR MATTHEW LUTTON



Matthew Lutton is Malthouse Theatre's Artistic Director and Co-CEO. Prior to this, he was Malthouse Theatre's Associate Director, and the Artistic Director of Thinlce in Perth. For Malthouse Theatre, he has directed *Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets*, *The Real and Imagined History of the Elephant Man*, *Away*, *Edward II*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *I Am a Miracle*, *Night on Bald Mountain*, *The Bloody Chamber*, *Dance of Death*, *Pompeii*, *L.A.*, *On the Misconception of Oedipus*, *Die Winterreise* and *Tartuffe*. For STC he has directed *The Trial*, *The Mysteries: Genesis*, and *The Duel*. Other directing credits include *Love Me Tender* for Belvoir and *Don't Say the Words* for Griffin Theatre Company. His opera directing credits include *Make No Noise* for the Bavarian State Opera, Strauss's *Elektra* for Opera Australia and West Australian Opera, and Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* for New Zealand Opera.

ACTIVITY / MEET MATTHEW LUTTON

In this interview Matthew Lutton shares his vision for this production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. He discusses the use of theatrical styles, explains the contrasting use of stillness and movement in the show, outlines his vision for the set, lighting and sound design; and discusses how menace, horror and terror are evoked within this work.

vimeo.com/156474386

ACTIVITY / DISCUSSION

1 / THE SHIFTS IN TIME, PLACE AND CHARACTER

'We begin in very contemporary costumes, with contemporary schoolgirls and they are our modern narrators; then as the show progresses, time blurs. The idea at play is that when the narrators narrate returning to the rock, that it opens a portal of time in the show, and suddenly they re-emerge in period costume.'

—MATTHEW LUTTON

- As you watch the play, look out for the use of 'jump cuts' to shift through time and pay attention to the instances when different times co-exist on stage simultaneously.
- The five actors in the production are working with frequent shifts in time, and shifts in points of view. As you watch the play, notice how these shifts are made by the actors, as they move between time, place and character.
- Consider the juxtaposition of contemporary and period costumes. What effect do you think this contrast has?

2 / USE OF DIRECT ADDRESS AND INHABITING CHARACTERS

'This is a piece for language on stage.'

—MATTHEW LUTTON

- How successfully do you believe the actors convey different characters through the use of their voices (accent, tone, pitch, pace, volume) throughout this production?
- Matthew explains that the actors have been asked to embody the quality of a character. As you watch the production, consider how well you were able to understand each character —without necessarily seeing a complete physical transformation.

3 / USE OF STILLNESS AND PHYSICALITY IN THIS PRODUCTION

'The show is staged with the philosophy of doing one thing at a time. We try to gain clarity of the text by asking an actor to be incredibly still. It contradicts naturalism. It is about clearly delivering an idea, moving to shift energy, then clearly delivering the next idea. It comes from the belief that stillness and intensity of text will make an audience want to lean in.'

—MATTHEW LUTTON

- Consider the use of stillness throughout this production. Did it help you to listen more clearly to the complex text?
- Consider the contrasting use of movement and physicality throughout the play.

ACTIVITY / DISCUSSION

4 / EVOKING A SENSE OF MENACE AND HORROR ON STAGE

'The actors' body is really important, particularly in the last third of the show—where their bodies go from moments of stillness to very Artaud like physical gestures, which are often very grotesque—almost Francis Bacon like images and paintings.'

—MATTHEW LUTTON

- How was terror and distress conveyed through the use of actors' bodies onstage?
- How was the menace of the landscape captured?
- How was a mood of suspense and horror evoked through music and sound?
- What were some examples of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty in the physicality of the actors?
- How was lighting used to conjure suspense and mystery throughout the production?
- How did you feel as an audience member being plunged into complete darkness throughout the production?

5 / THE STAGE DESIGN

'The stage design came from the idea of a space with no entrances or exits because a key part of the vision is that there are actors onstage that keep disappearing, just as the girls disappear in the story. The actors appear and disappear without explanation.'

—MATTHEW LUTTON

- There is no rock onstage, no naturalistic landscape—but the large overhanging sculpture is a symbol of the vastness and danger of the Australian landscape. What feelings did this overhanging structure evoke within you during the production?
- Consider the effect of actors suddenly appearing and disappearing onstage throughout the show.

6 / THEATRICAL STYLES WITHIN THE PRODUCTION

'You would call it a post-dramatic production because it uses an eclectic range of styles and the styles change throughout the production... We set up a few styles and then start mashing them all together.'

—MATTHEW LUTTON

- As you watch the production, take note of the eclectic range of theatrical styles. They include: direct address, classicism, heightened naturalism, expressionism, Artaud like physicality—and then towards the end of the play a mash up of all of these styles at once.
- How effectively do the shifts in theatrical styles and conventions work in this production?
- Matthew identifies this work as fitting into the genre of Australian Gothic. This genre is primarily concerned with landscape, the individual and a palpable sense of otherness. At which moments were you most aware of this genre within the production?
- How does the use of theatrical styles and conventions in this production correspond with the theatrical styles suggested by the written playscript?



ABOUT THE WRITER TOM WRIGHT



PROMPT PACK



#PICNICATHANGINGROCK

Tom has written a number of award-winning plays and adaptations, including *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The War of the Roses*, *The Lost Echo*, *Lorilei*, *Medea*, *Babes in the Wood*, *Baal*, *Optimism*, *On the Misconception of Oedipus*, *The Histrionic*, and *Black Diggers*. He was Associate Director of Sydney Theatre Company from 2004 to 2012. He is currently Artistic Associate at Belvoir (Sydney) and has worked as an actor and director at Playbox (now Malthouse), MTC, State Theatre Company SA, La Mama, Company B (now Belvoir), Anthill, Gilgul, Mene Mene, Bell Shakespeare, Chunky Move, Black Swan, and Chamber Made Opera.

ACTIVITY / IN CONVERSATION WITH TOM WRIGHT

This interview with Tom Wright took place at the end of 2017, after *Picnic at Hanging Rock* had been selected for the 2018 VCE Theatre Studies Playlist. The aim of this interview is to address questions specifically relating to VCE Theatre Studies.

You have described the play as a sequence of poems. How do you think that the poetic structure of the language impacts the five actors performing this text?

Actors often respond to text according to its layout. I like the way great contemporary theatre writers like Churchill, Crimp, Koltès, Kane, sometimes lay out text as if it's blank verse, to indicate to the performers that this isn't prose; congruent ideas which flow together, argument, dialectic. Much language in performance is poetic; it works through allusion, through juxtaposition, through elliptical effect. We read Joan Lindsay as poetic text and so the adaptation is designed to be a poetic evocation, an act of memory. The actors are asked to breathe differently, to slow down in a non-naturalistic way on occasions, and to adopt different registers: direct address, monologue, soliloquy, dialogue. They aren't asked to construct character, they're asked to recite a poem. Sometimes that poem possesses them, but that isn't an act of psychology.

In the playscript, you distinguish between narrated text and character's text with the use of italics. Was this done to assist the actors in distinguishing between direct address and the voices of the various characters?

The italics were inserted at the request of the director to speed up the rehearsal process, so it was clear what was narration and what was the voice of the characters inside the story. For Elizabeth Nabben playing Mrs Appleyard, it was a clear sign on the page to change register for example. A script is as much a record of a development and rehearsal process as it is a record of the words and events.

The opening section features the actors onstage in relative stillness. How do you think this staging helps the audience engage with the opening narration?

It's a spell, that asks for concentration and establishes that sometimes myths are things that are told, are heard, and have to be imagined. It's about the pre-history; *Picnic* is a story about history, the events that happened afterwards. The five women tell a myth, ask the questions. It's the poem thinking aloud. It is an act of stillness to create a timelessness. Stillness and darkness are two important presences in the text.

Why was this work written specifically for five female actors?

I prefer writing for the female voice. But also, the key figures in the moment of crisis—those who 'disappear', those who come back like Edith or Irma—are female. Female culture, women's experience, the female voice, the image of the female body within a dominant discourse of colonialism, the idea of woman as 'civilising influence', the Freudian and Jungian ideas of sexuality. The piece is conceived like a quintet, so it's not just written for five female voices, but with five specific voices in mind, like a string quintet. For example, Harriet and Arielle are the violins and the sombre bass lines come from Amber. It's not a place for men. 'Men' are just inventions that the women play. The default position of human beings in this poem is resolutely female.



Why do you use the actors' names in the script rather than the character's names?

In the end the only characters in the piece are the five women who sing it into existence. We could have called them Voice One, Voice Two etc., but actually naming the five cast members makes it quicker to achieve in rehearsal. And any subsequent actors who take on the play will be playing 'Nikki' or 'Harriet'. It becomes a part, named after the actor who first performed it.

How does the quality of each actor's voice help determine which section of the text was spoken by them?

Each actor has a different sound, so that is a factor. Nikki uses her head voice, Harriet likes to put sound through her palette and cheeks, Arielle uses the front of her mouth a great deal. These vocal qualities lend themselves to certain things the script wants. Amber is an actor who can purr a speech and not over-enunciate it, she can also introduce notes of irony and commentary without upsetting the balance. The adaptation is written for these specific voices, their tonal qualities but also the types of intelligence each actor brings. All five women are very smart and very accomplished performers; the concentration needed to 'keep the ball in the air' is prodigious.

How much did you adjust the text throughout the rehearsal period?

The text didn't have major alterations during rehearsals, but went through nine drafts in the lead up to the first season, and these were very different. When the production toured to Edinburgh we changed the exercise scene because we weren't happy with the trampette. Some other alterations were made between first season and second, mostly rhythmic, in the latter third of the play.

Can you speak about your use of language in the play? As well as the poetic language, there are geological terms, Latin terminology and at times very formal language – but there are also those times in the play (such as Scene 10) when the characters cannot find the words to describe their feelings or their experiences.

The Latin terms and similar phrases are about the way European people in their anxiety try to talk down the fear by naming everything. It's putting a name to the unknown, the first step of colonisation, of mapping. Picnic is a work about colonialism. What it does to the white girls; they are being colonised, and they are colonisers. The land is being mapped by cartographers who can't read it. The piece is set in a school, both a literal school but also a figurative one. Knowledge, education, learning, social coding, the seen and the unseen. Language as a map. Language as an attempt to give the indescribable a description.

There is a lot that happens for the audience in complete darkness: the haunting sound design, and occasional movement sequences. How important are these sections between acts?

The blackouts are as much part of the script as anything that's spoken. Matt and I conceived the piece as a totality. (The exception to this is the large stick cloud which looms over the space; that's designer Zoe Atkinson's addition, and of course certain sound and light moments, but otherwise everything you see and hear lies latent in the script). Rhythmically the piece is dependent on the way the blackouts function; in part like an old-style curtain, in part like the audience are fainting on the rock as the girls do, in part to recreate the *horror vacui* of death, or worse.

Your stage directions are quite minimal throughout the playscript. How do you decide when to include stage directions and when to leave them out?

Because the director and I were in constant contact throughout the development and rehearsal periods, stage directions were kept to a minimum. We knew how we wanted to do it. Occasionally I've left in something when it feels like it helps the actors understand what we're getting at, but on the whole there was no need to put stage directions in the script. For example I knew I wanted a doppelganger Michael (to be played by Elizabeth) and we had discussed this, so the script didn't need it. In the visual interludes Matt and I had discussed the idea of getting the performers to make shapes resonant of Albert Tucker images: weird contortions, like murder victims in the half light. If I'd known the play was going to be studied I might have put them all in!

ACTIVITY / DISCUSSION

After you have read this interview with Tom Wright, respond to the following:

- For Tom, '*the adaptation is designed to be a poetic evocation, an act of memory*'. How do you think the poetic structure of the playscript impacted how it was performed onstage? How did you respond to the poetic language? What were the differences between reading the written text and hearing it spoken onstage by the actors?
- Tom describes the five different voices within the production as being like a string quintet. Were you aware of the distinct qualities of each of the five voices as you watched the production? How significant were the range of vocal and tonal qualities for this production?
- Tom describes the language in the production as the attempt to give '*the indescribable a description*'. How did you respond to the different ways that language was used? Which characters were more confident with language and which characters struggled to speak? Why do you think this was the case?
- Tom says that '*The blackouts are as much a part of the script as anything that's spoken*'. How significant were the complete blackouts in enhancing the written playscript? How did the sound design and visual interludes illuminate key aspects of the script throughout this production?



ACTIVITY / MEET TOM WRIGHT

In this interview Tom Wright discusses the process of adapting Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* for the stage. Over the space of twelve months Tom wrote a pre-draft and then wrote nine subsequent drafts of the script, in close collaboration with his director Matthew Lutton. Tom also discusses his use of poetic language in the play, the play's fluid notions of time and place; as well as the use of titles throughout the production.

vimeo.com/155737559

ACTIVITY / DISCUSSION



1 / THE PROCESS OF ADAPTING PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

'Theatre does a great thing when it picks up a story that people feel they are already familiar with. And one of the great things about Picnic at Hanging Rock is that people feel that they know the story and yet at the same time there is also an air of mystery about it. The clash between familiarity and strangeness is something that theatre does really well.'

—TOM WRIGHT

- After you have seen this production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, consider which aspects of the story you were already familiar with (either from the novel or the film). Which aspects were surprising or strange and challenged your ideas about this well known story?
- Tom speaks about the fact that this play opens up some big poetic questions—about landscape, female identity, colonialism and being in an unfamiliar land. Consider which of the plays themes resonated most strongly with you.

2 / THE USE OF RICH AND POETIC LANGUAGE

'The text is designed to have a poetic quality. This isn't a play with a sequence of naturalistic, psychological situations. It is far more a text for a group of actors to wrestle with the idea of what it is to retell the story of Picnic at Hanging Rock. A sequence of poems, and a sequence of language responses to history, to time, to space and to nature.'

—TOM WRIGHT

- As you watch this production, consider how the heightened and poetic language is used to create mood, rhythm, and tension throughout the production.
- Consider the significance of Tom referring to the scenes in the play as a 'sequence of poems'. How does the poetic language work to evoke images and create a sense of the landscape in this production?

ACTIVITY / DISCUSSION

3 / SHIFT BETWEEN DIRECT ADDRESS AND PLAYING CHARACTERS

'The five young women that you see in this play aren't pretending that they are trapped in the world of 1900. They are of the contemporary world and will quite often turn to you as the audience member and start talking to you...But then on occasion, you will also have the actors becoming the characters, and this will constantly shift.'

—TOM WRIGHT

- As the five actors shift between directly addressing the audience and playing a range of characters, what do you notice about how they use their voices, movements, gestures and facial expressions?
- Tom refers to the fact that the tradition of direct address has been used in plays since Greek theatre. Consider the different ways that direct address is used throughout this production.

4 / THE FLUID NOTIONS OF TIME AND PLACE

'Post-naturalistic theatre doesn't exist in any one time. It exists in many different times at once. Good quality contemporary theatre is always wrestling with what the past meant—and in doing so it also drags the past into our world.'

—TOM WRIGHT

- Consider the ways in which this production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* manages to exist within many periods of time all at once.
- The author Joan Lindsay was interested in exploring the notion that time was not only linear. Consider how this production explores many notions of time—for example, geological time, natural time, dream time and memory time.
- Consider the range of places that are evoked within this play—and how they are captured primarily through language.

5 / THE USE OF TITLES THROUGHOUT THE PLAY

'The titles are a deliberate theatrical and writerly device—to draw attention, as we should at all times—to the fact that we are a group of Australians in a room, trying to grapple with what it all means.'

—TOM WRIGHT

- As you watch the play take note of the use of titles on the screens, and consider which of them are factual and descriptive – and which are titles are more mysterious and poetic.
- Consider how having titles during the production affects your experience of the play. What do you think about Tom's suggestion that it also represents the idea of the production 'commenting upon itself'?



PROMPT PACK

#PICNICATHANGINGROCK



ACTING AND CHARACTERISATION



Harriet Gordon-Anderson
CAST

Analyse and evaluate **Harriet's** use of voice, gesture and facial expressions when playing the French schoolmistress—especially in the scene after they return from Hanging Rock.

Take note of how **Harriet** uses her voice, gestures and posture differently when inhabiting the character of Albert.

Every inch of that bloody Rock has been gone over with a toothcomb

What the Hell do you think you can do?



Arielle Gray
CAST

Pay attention to the ways that **Arielle** use her movements and facial expressions to convey the internal feelings of Sara, which can only be whispered, but never spoken aloud.

Analyse how **Arielle's** use of her voice, timing and movements to convey Edith in her hypnotised state, on the Rock, replaying the events of the picnic?

*Oh mercy!
She looks so funny*



Amber McMahon
CAST

Analyse and evaluate the ways that **Amber** uses her voice and physicality to convey Michael exploring Hanging Rock alone at night.

Contrast this with **Amber's** use of voice and movements to convey Michael's disorientation after returning from the Rock, and shock upon realising that it was not Miranda who was found on the Rock.

*I'm an expert on
Nightmares since I came
to Australia...*

*mine are so real
sometimes I can't even be
sure they are dreams.*



Elizabeth Nabben
CAST

Analyse and evaluate the ways in which **Elizabeth** uses her voice, posture, gestures and facial expressions to convey the status and class of Mrs Appleyard—particularly in contrast to the character of Sara.

Compare this with **Elizabeth's** use of posture, focus and gestures as Mrs Appleyard in the final scene of the play

*This country
In its childish state
Its state of nature
You may see
At first it needs taming.*



Nikki Shiels
CAST

Analyse the ways that **Nikki** uses her posture, focus and voice to convey the high status and command of the Policeman in the play.

Consider how **Nikki** conveys the character of Irma, once she has been saved from the Rock, in the scene where she is sipping tea in the garden, through her use of voice, facial expressions and gestures.

*He says the Rock
is a nightmare*

*And nightmares
belong in the past.*

AFTER SEEING THE MALHOUSE THEATRE PRODUCTION OF PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING:

- What are the key similarities and differences between the written playscript and the production?
- How did the use of visual interludes between some of the scenes enhance the written playscript?
- How did the actors use their expressive skills (facial expressions, voice, movement, gestures) to convey different characters?
- How did each of the actors use their performance skills (focus, timing, energy, actor-audience relationship) when narrating the story and directly addressing the audience?
- How did the actors use the acting space—both through their use of movement and their use of stillness and silence?
- What sort of a relationship was established throughout the performance between the actors and the audience?
- What was the effect of having characters appear and disappear throughout the production?

ACTIVITY / MEET THE CAST

In this interview three of the cast members from *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Arielle Gray, Nikki Shiels and Elizabeth Nabben spoke to us during rehearsals. They discuss the challenges of shifting between direct address / narration and inhabiting characters in the production, the key skills that they use to shift between a variety of characters, working with Tom Wright's rich and poetic text, and their use of stillness and movement.

vimeo.com/156662365

ACTIVITY / DISCUSSION



1 / USE OF DIRECT ADDRESS AND PLAYING A CHARACTER

'Moving between direct address and inhabiting a character is one of the most interesting and challenging things about this production. And there is a mid point as well, where you are talking in direct address but very slightly inhabiting the characters.'

—ARIELLE GREY

- As you watch the production, pay close attention to the shifts between direct address and the moments when the actors are inhabiting the characters. What are some of the differences that you notice—particularly in the actors' use of voice and focus?
- Matthew Lutton asked the actors in rehearsals to work towards shifting seamlessly between the different modes of performance. How seamless do you think these transitions were—especially in the first scene of the play?

2 / INHABITING CHARACTERS

'I'm playing a Headmistress. I'm a 26 year old playing a 57 year old. And some of the things that Matthew and Tom have been stressing is to do with posture, status and vocal status—and finding vocal differences.'

—ELIZABETH NABBEN

- As you watch Elizabeth inhabit the character of the Headmistress, Mrs Appleyard, take note of how she uses her voice and posture in different scenes throughout the play.
- One of the particular challenges that Elizabeth faced is that she is in the costume of a school girl, whilst inhabiting the role of the Headmistress—usually with Arielle who is dressed identically to her, playing the young school girl Sara. As you watch the scenes between Elizabeth and Arielle, pay close attention to how they make use of their voice, gestures, physicality and status to inhabit the roles of Mrs Appleyard and Sara.
- Pay attention to the different characters played by Nikki Shiels throughout the play. Take note of the different ways that she uses her voice and movements when speaking as the Policeman as distinct from Irma Leopold.

ACTIVITY / DISCUSSION



PROMPT PACK

3 / USE OF STILLNESS AND PHYSICALITY THROUGHOUT THE PLAY

'The language itself is quite physical. It has got a very muscular energy to it. In the moments of stillness, I'm trying to put all of the energy into my body, into my tongue and my articulation...And then there are moments in the play that are so powerful that language fails you, and physicality replaces language.'

—NIKKI SHIELS

- Pay attention to the moments where physicality replaces language in the play. What is the effect of the characters moving beyond language—or losing the ability to speak?
- Take note of when Arielle as Sara disintegrates into physicality, and channels her internal feelings into extreme and tortured movements.
- Also pay attention to the scene of wild hysteria amongst the school girls in the gymnasium, towards the end of the play, where there is a release of the tension that has been building up throughout the entire play.
- Consider the moments of stillness in the play, where there are very subtle and pared back movements and contrast this with the physical movements that are much more extreme and exaggerated. Why do you think Matthew Lutton has chosen to work with such a contrasting use of physicality in this production?



#PICNICATHANGINGROCK

ACTIVITY / CLOSE SCENE ANALYSIS

Read the following three excerpts from the written playscript of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and respond to the questions about how each of these scenes were staged.

EXCERPT ONE: SCENE ONE

NIKKI	How long do they sleep?		<i>When are we going home?</i>
ARIELLE	There are no words		But Miranda turns Walks away
AMBER	Remember the earth is sleeping too		Marion, Irma behind her
HARRIET	Elements thicken and thin In that time		Ascending the rock Not walking Gliding Over stones Bare feet As if on a drawing room carpet
AMBER	Stars Spin over Australia So rapidly it is a whirring blur		
NIKKI	The blood in their young bodies At full tide—	NIKKI	<i>Miranda!</i> <i>Miranda!</i> Edith cries <i>Come back, all of you!</i> <i>Don't go up there—come back!</i> She is choking Tearing at her frill lace collar <i>Miranda!</i> <i>Miranda! Come back!</i> The last white sleeve Parts the bushes above <i>Miranda!</i> There is no answer
ARIELLE	They sleep for a moment But what is a moment?		
HARRIET	Miranda wakes In colourless twilight Every detail stands out		
ELIZABETH	<i>Everything</i> <i>If only you can see it clearly enough</i> <i>Is beautiful and complete;</i> <i>A bird's nest</i> <i>Marion's torn skirts</i> <i>Fluted like a nautilus shell</i> <i>Irma's ringlets</i> <i>Her lips slightly open</i> <i>Even Edith</i>	HARRIET	Edith screams A scream heard by nobody Screams and runs down the Rock Towards the plain
ARIELLE	Who stirs Whimpering Rubbing red-rimmed eyes She whines <i>Where am I?</i> <i>Oh, Miranda, I feel awful!</i> <i>Miranda, I feel perfectly awful!</i> <i>When are we going home?</i>	NIKKI	There is no answer The monolith is silent And there is no answer <i>Freeze.</i> <i>Blackout.</i>
AMBER	Miranda looks at her Strangely At her But through her Edith Fear rising in her thorax <i>When are we going home?</i>		



- How did you respond to director Matthew Lutton's decision to stage Scene One with all five cast members onstage in almost complete stillness?
- How does the staging enhance the audience's ability to listen to written playscript?
- Consider the actors' shifts between direct address / narration and the use of various character's voices. How effectively was this done?
- Were you aware of the gradual shifts in lighting throughout this scene?
- Towards the end of the scene the overhanging structure of brambles and twigs is clearly lit (whereas at the start of the scene it was in darkness). What effect does this create? What do you think the overhanging structure represents? How does it enhance the written text in this section of the play?
- How did you respond to the fact that the girls were dressed as contemporary schoolgirls, rather than in period costumes?
- What was the actor / audience relationship that was created throughout this scene?
- The blackout is indicated in the script. How did you respond to it being a complete blackout (with no spillage of light anywhere in the theatre)?
- In the blackout there were sounds ranging from discordant cello, to higher pitched violin sounds, as well sounds from nature. What effect did these sounds create, within the complete blackout?

EXCERPT TWO: SCENE TEN



Two chairs, facing each other, some distance apart. One girl in each.

NIKKI (Irma) and **AMBER** (Michael Fitzhubert)

Tea in china cups.

The sound of a clock ticking.

NIKKI It is so nice of you to come and see me Michael
I do hope you don't mind tea out here in the garden?
Do you like *marrons glacés*—the real French ones—I adore them
Deck chairs usually collapse but this one is all right.
My papa is a darling but he refuses to eat out of doors
Calls it 'barbarous'.

AMBER (Awkward). So does mine
My sisters love anything in the way of a picnic—
Oh, heavens
Forgive me Irma
What a tactless idiot I am
The last thing I meant to talk about was a picnic—
Oh confound it, there I go again

NIKKI Oh please, don't look so unhappy
(Silence)
Whether we talk of it or not, that awful thing is always in my mind
Always and always

AMBER And in mine
Silence. They avoid eye contact.

Sign: 'HANGING ROCK, DARK, GLITTERING BEAUTY, ROSE BETWEEN THEM'

Silence. They avoid eye contact.

AMBER I don't suppose anything has ever—

NIKKI I cannot remember a thing
(Silence)
The doctor says I'm like a clock
A clock that
Under a certain set of unusual conditions
Stops
And refuses to ever go again
Beyond a particular point

AMBER We had one like that
At home
Never got beyond three o'clock on an afternoon.
About the Rock—
Did you
See
(Can't find the words)
Silence.

NIKKI I cannot remember a thing

AMBER No

NIKKI The doctor said
I mustn't think about the Rock
He says the Rock is a nightmare
And nightmares belong in the Past.

AMBER But perhaps we belong in the past as well
They laugh awkwardly.

- In the blackout prior to this scene, there is a short visual interlude where three schoolgirls engage in a slow motion version of a child's game, using their hands. How does this contribute to your understanding of the entire play? Why might director Matthew Lutton have chosen to include this interlude (which is not part of the written playscript)?
- In this scene the playwright Tom Wright has included more stage directions than in most of the other scenes in the play. Why might this be the case?
- There is a stage direction that the two chairs are some distance apart. What does this distance signify between these two characters?
- Tom Wright has written that there is the sound of a clock ticking, but the director has chosen to have no sound. Why might this choice have been made?
- There are repeated references to silence. How well is silence used in this scene? What is conveyed by the actors within these silences?
- What is the significance of both Nikki and Amber struggling to finish their sentences within this scene? How does that correspond with the written playscript?
- The theatrical style of this scene is quite distinct to the rest of the play, as heightened naturalism, with a suggestion of a comedy of manners. How effective do you consider the theatrical style of this scene to be? How do you respond to Matthew Lutton's decision to use an eclectic range of theatrical styles throughout this production?
- What is the significance of these two characters being dressed in period costume in this scene? What is the connection between two characters that have been returned from climbing the rock being in period costume?

EXCERPT THREE: SCENE ELEVEN



PROMPT PACK

#PICNICATHANGINGROCK

NIKKI stands, watches for a while.

The girls stop, stare at her.

Tense pause.

NIKKI I have come back to -
To say goodbye

The girls stand, come forward slowly.

GIRLS Where are they?
Tell us!
Where is Miranda?
Tell us
Tell us

*They pull her hair, tear her dress.
It is ungainly, absurd, hysterical.*

*Finally NIKKI breaks away,
her hair a mess, her clothes torn.*

NIKKI (Screaming in fury and disgust
over the music). This country

She stumbles out of the theatre, slamming the
door behind her.

The girls look at each other.

ARIELLE (As if the horror is finally dawning)
They're dead
Miranda and Marion
and Miss McCraw
All dead on Hanging Rock

- Tom Wright has given a very detailed stage direction: *They pull her hair, tear her dress. It is ungainly, absurd, hysterical.* How well are these stage directions conveyed by the actors on stage? Do you believe that the scene reached levels of absurdity and hysteria?
- There is a lot of additional text spoken by Nikki Shiels (in this section of the scene) that is not part of the written playscript. How effectively does the additional text work within this scene?
- Tom Wright has indicated that the actor should *leave the theatre, slamming the door behind her.* What is the effect of the actor leaving the theatre in this scene? Why might the playwright have chosen this stage direction? What is the effect of hearing the door slamming behind her?
- Why do you think Matthew Lutton chose to have Nikki Shiels in period costume in this scene? How does this set the character of Irma apart from the other characters?
- In what ways does the hysterical chaos of this scene act as a release of the tension that has been building up in the previous scenes?
- Arielle's final lines in this scene are not used in the production. Why might that decision have been made?

THEATRICAL STYLES AND CONVENTIONS



As you watch this production of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, keep in mind that Matthew Lutton makes use of an eclectic range of theatrical styles, so throughout the production, the ways that theatrical conventions are used will vary.

THEATRICAL STYLES AND POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

Matthew Lutton refers to this production as having a range of theatrical styles. This eclectic range of styles is typical of 'postdramatic theatre'. Some of you may be unfamiliar with this term. See below for a definition:

The term 'Postdramatic Theatre', has become an increasingly important one since the publication of Hans-Thies Lehmann's book Postdramatic Theatre (German 1999; English translation 2006). It covers a wide range of contemporary theatrical forms, including devised work and live art. Postdramatic plays differentiate themselves from representational theatre by offering actors and audiences theatrical experiences that are not tied to either character or

plot but seek to investigate broader issues, free of drama's limitations. The orientation provided by recognisable characters or plotlines dissolves, and spectators have to negotiate the production of postdramatic plays by working through a new set of conventions. (Source – Drama Online)

In summary, postdramatic theatre is experimental in nature, incorporating a range of performance styles and defying more conventional notions of plot or character.

See the interview with Matthew Lutton for further information about the theatrical styles within this production.

SOME OF THE THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS USED IN THE PRODUCTION

Analyse and evaluate how effectively the use of these theatrical conventions enhanced the written playscript.

DIRECT ADDRESS

Used frequently throughout the production, especially in the first scene of the play: for narration, storytelling, recitation, commentary, reporting, and description.

HEIGHTENED LANGUAGE

Tom Wright's text is rich, complex and poetic. The language is used to evoke the landscape and bring the stories to life. The text is written as a sequence of poems.

STYLISTED MOVEMENT

There are moments when some of the characters lose language or have no words for the enormity of their feelings. They may convey these extreme emotions through their physicality. These stylised movements are at times reminiscent of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

TITLES

Titles appear periodically on a screen above the stage. They are sometimes factual and descriptive, and at other times more mysterious, and poetic.

INTERLUDES

Throughout the production there are occasional visual interludes. They are purely visual, briefly interspersed between blackouts.

STILLNESS

Stillness is used very often by the actor who is speaking the text. This is done to help the audience listen to the rich language.

TABLEAUX

Tableaux are used throughout the production by the ensemble of actors. In the first scene, note how the actors shift their positions very subtly. In other scenes, a group of actors might be upstage in a tableau, whilst actors downstage engage in dialogue.

CONFLICT

Consider the conflict in the production between the natural landscape and the characters that wish to 'tame' and 'cultivate' their environment. Pay attention to the internal conflicts within the characters and how this frequently manifests itself physically.

RHYTHM

The language itself has very strong rhythms. Also pay attention to the varying rhythms of the scenes themselves throughout the production.

SOUND

Music and sound are used constantly throughout this production. Sometimes they operate at a subtle, subliminal level, evoking mood and helping to create a sense of unease and menace. At other times the music is classical and lyrical and at times it is distorted and harsh. Some of the sounds include girls' voices and laughter. If you listen very carefully you will also hear the sounds of nature (some of which were recorded overnight on location at Hanging Rock!)

SYMBOL

Consider the symbolism of the large structure hanging overhead throughout the production, evoking the fears and terror associated with the landscape.

CONTRAST

Contrast is used throughout the production, between stillness and exaggerated movement, in performance styles and in the varying use of sound.

MOOD

Pay attention to the ways in which mood is captured through the use of sound and lighting design in this production.

LEARN MORE

[An interview with author Joan Lindsay](#)

[An interview with director Matthew Lutton for The Saturday Paper](#)

[Malthouse Theatre's staging of an enduring myth](#)

[How Malthouse Theatre plans to bring Picnic at Hanging Rock to the stage](#)

[A note on the Sound and Music in Picnic at Hanging Rock](#)

[Q&A with Matthew Lutton on Picnic at Hanging Rock](#)

[Meditations from Tom Wright on Picnic at Hanging Rock](#)

[ABC Radio Books and Arts Daily interview Matthew Lutton and Tom Wright](#)

[2016 Picnic at Hanging Rock Program](#)

[Picnic at Hanging Rock rehearsal room photos](#)

[Picnic at Hanging Rock production photos](#)



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