Lyric

OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD

EDUCATION PACK

For Drama GCSE, A Level &
BTEC Performing Arts students

OVERVIEW & CONTENTS

The Lyric Hammersmith Theatre's Young Lyric department is committed to deepening and nurturing young people's understanding of theatre and the arts. We aim to raise the cultural aspirations of young people and make theatre accessible to all. With this in mind, this education pack is designed for teachers of Drama A Level and BTEC Performing Arts students and is geared towards the live theatre review and practitioner study.

This pack is written from a theatre maker's perspective and we hope it provides some interesting insights into how a production like *Our Country's Good* is created and performed. Within this pack there is information about specific design elements alongside resources and ideas of how you might further explore the themes and issued raised within this inspiring and thought provoking piece of theatre.

"When I first thought of the play, I wanted to write something about the humanising aspect of the theatre"

TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER

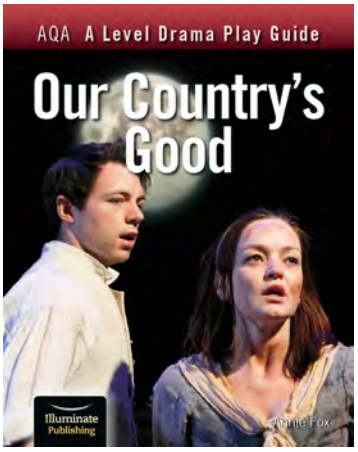
This specific production has had the priviledge of working with the writer Timberlake Wertenbaker to revisit it and update the text. **As a result, this version will be different to texts specified by exam boards, including AQA A Level Drama and Theatre and English Literature, that students are studying for assessments.**

As part of this Education pack, we have collaborated with Annie Fox, Education writer and author of *AQA A Level Playguide: Our Country's Good.* Annie has interviewed Timberlake Wertenbaker, playwright, Rachel

Timberlake Wertenbaker. Photo: Genevieve Girling

O'Riordan, Director, Gary McCann, Production Designer and Ian Michael, First Nations Consultant, to bring you new insights into the creative process involved in bringing this production to the stage. These interviews are available via the links below and QR codes within the pack.

Within the Education Resources section of this pack there are also some exclusive resources provided by the publishers of *AQA A Level Playguide: Our Country's Good* by Annie Fox.



HODDER Education

Content warning

Our Country's Good delves into themes which may be distressing to some audience members. Below is a detailed outline of the content, which does contain **plot spoilers**.

The play is set in the late 18th century and portrays the lives of British convicts and officers in a penal colony in Australia. It explores the harsh realities of that time, with a particular focus on the brutal treatment of convicts and the power dynamics inherent in colonialism and the British justice system.

Throughout the production, audiences will encounter scenes of bullying and humiliation, where characters are subjected to degrading treatment that reflects the brutal social hierarchy of the era. There are also multiple instances of violence, including physical assaults and acts of cruelty, some of which are directed towards women. These scenes are depicted with a high level of realism, including graphic portrayals of wounds and physical harm.

The dialogue in *Our Country's Good* features very strong and degrading language, with racial undertones that reflect the period's attitudes. Additionally, there are references to and implications of sexual violence, though these are not explicitly shown on stage.

The production also touches on the themes of execution and punishment. Gunshots are fired during the performance, contributing to the tense atmosphere. The play's exploration of colonialism and racism, including the subjugation and dehumanization of Indigenous populations, may evoke difficult emotions for some viewers.

Please be aware that the production uses haze, loud noises (including gun shots), and other atmospheric effects to enhance the dramatic experience.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Rachel O'RiordanTimberlake Wertenbaker.
Photo: Genevieve Girling

This production of *Our Country's Good* has been a very special opportunity to revisit this seminal work that asks so many important questions about our attitude as a society around themes including the criminal justice system and the scars left behind as a result of Britain's colonial history.

Written by Timberlake Wertenbaker in the 1980's as a response to the government of the day, spear headed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, *Our Country's Good* used inspiration from historical events to critique cuts in prison education at the time and to highlight the transformative power of the arts, particularly theatre, to positively impact the lives of those involved.

Rachel O'Riordan, Lyric Hammersmith Theatre Artistic Director and director of this production, had a very clear vision that this version needed to keep what was so special about the text, but to revise it for an audience in 2024. The character of the 'Aborigine' was one aspect of the play that O'Riordan felt needed revision, so a conversation with Timberlake Wertenbaker was had about the possibility of making some changes to the original text. Timberlake in partnership with Rachel and a First Nations Consultant, Ian Michael, have worked to update this theatre classic ensuring that the magic and message of the original is still present.

The character 'The Aborigine' now has a name in this production. They are called Killara which is a Dharug word, a dialect spoken by first Nations people in Australia meaning 'permanent', 'always there'.

Here Rachel O' Riordan speaks about her reasons for wanting to bring this special production to the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre.

IN CONVERSATION WITH RACHEL O'RIORDAN – DIRECTOR

THE ORIGINAL TEXT

Timberlake Wertenbaker joined the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1983 and enjoyed success with her production *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, 1985.

In 1988 she was commissioned to write a play that was based on the novel *The Playmaker* by Thomas Kenneally, inspired by the real life events of the First Fleet, the arrival of the first convict ship that arrived from England to Australia in the year 1787. Much of the source material for '*The Playmaker*' was taken from *The Fatal Shore* by Robert Hughes (1986).

Although the play was set in the eighteenth century, Timberlake Wertenbaker was actually writing a text that was making a statement about cuts in education and the arts in the 1980s, under the rule of the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The play, although serious in terms of themes and issues it raises, is a real celebration of the art of performance and theatre. The transformative effect of working with others in a creative space is still very much at the heart of this production.

Photo: Marc Brenner

REVISING THE PRODUCTION

When Timberlake Wertenbaker was approached to revisit *Our Country's Good* it was an opportunity to reflect on the changes with regards to attitudes around the criminal justice system since the first performance in 1988, and also acknowledge how there is still so much work needed to reform and improve the lives of many still trapped in the system.

In addition, it was also an exciting opportunity for Timberlake Wertenbaker to collaborate with First Nations Consultant Ian Michael to develop the character of 'The Aborigine' into the newly named Killara, a Dharug word meaning 'permanent', 'always there'.

Here Timberlake Wertenbaker speaks about her journey revisiting this seminal play.

IN CONVERSATION WITH WRITER, TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER

Photo: Marc Brenner

In Conversation with First Nations Consultant, Ian Michael

IN CONVERSATION WITH FIRST NATIONS CONSULTANT, IAN MICHAEL

For the first time in the history of *Our Country's Good*, a First Nations Consultant was appointed to work with writer Timberlake Wertenbaker and director Rachel O'Riordan to offer a new perspective on aspects of the play, most significantly the role of the 'Aborigine' character. In addition to consulting with Timberlake, Ian Michael was also able to work with performer Naara, a First Nations Australian based in the UK. Historically the character of the 'Aborigine' has been played on stage by a global majority actor, but from a Black African or Caribbean heritage, so this is the second time a First Nation Australian actor has performed this role on a British stage.

Can you explain your role on the production?
This role reflects an experience often encountered by many First Nations artists navigating theatre spaces in some capacity, in essence my role is to serve as a link between the original script, the creative vision and voice of the writer, and the authentic representation of cultural and historical elements throughout the additions to this production. By offering a perspective that integrates both my own lived experience and personal in-depth research, I've collaborated closely with Timberlake Wertenbaker throughout the process of the additions to the script and development of the character Killara and the responsibility through this process has been to ensure that historical events are accurately represented and that the story we are telling remains both truthful and respectful.

Equally vital to my role and to this production has been the engagement and collaboration with Matthew Doyle and Tim Bishop. Together, we've worked to include the rich language and historical perspectives of the Dharug and Dharawal people into the script, and ensure that the engagement infuses the storytelling with genuine presence, while honouring cultural protocols with the utmost respect and accuracy.

How have you found the rehearsal process?
As it is when making theatre or telling any story from colonial perspectives and times in history it requires the collaborators to be open to deep truth listening and the process has and continues to be profoundly challenging and rewarding. Engaging with the themes of invasion and colonialism requires navigating complex and mostly painful histories as the impacts continue to resonate today, and the cultural weight is felt deeply during conversations and through the rehearsal process. This intensity also brings about a profound sense of purpose and connection to the text and production, as we work to honour and reflect lived experiences and historical events.

Photo: Marc Brenner

Photo: Marc Brenner

The conversations in bringing the script forward and close collaboration with Timberlake Wertenbaker and the rehearsal room have been an opportunity and space for meaningful dialogue with the cast and creative team, as we engage in discussions about the historical context and cultural nuances of the story and what it means to bringing this story to to an audience now. There is also a significant sense of empowerment in making productions like *Our Country's Good*, retelling these stories allow us to reclaim our narratives and contribute to a broader understanding of history. It's a process of healing, both personally and collectively, as we bring to light the truths of our past and share them with audiences.

Why is it so important to have a Cultural Consultant on productions such as this?

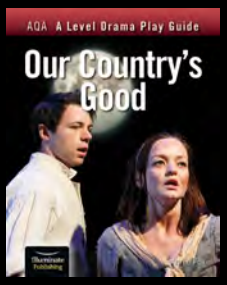
It is vital to include First Nations perspectives and voices in the retelling of these stories, those about colonial histories and in *Our Country's Good*, the story of the First Fleet , the "settlement" and invasion of so-called Australia. As a Cultural Consultant, my role is crucial not only for ensuring cultural and historical accuracy but also for creating a space for respectful and meaningful discourse throughout every stage of the process. In the development of the character of Killara, my work involves engaging deeply with First Nations community leaders as we work through the development process, as well as the inclusion of Dharug and Dharwawal language throughout the text additions, which I have a cultural responsibility to ensure that both the cultural narratives and language are represented accurately and appropriately.

Equally important is my cultural responsibility to Naarah in supporting her throughout the process, as the second First Nations performer ever to take on this role, she bears the significant task of carrying this story through rehearsals and as the only First Nations person on stage each night. It is crucial that she feels culturally safe and empowered within the storytelling and production, one that now includes our voice and contributes truth to an often silenced perspective of history.

Here Ian Michael talks to Annie Fox, author of AQA A Level Drama Play Guide: *Our Country's Good*, and Rima Georges, performer, about his work on this production.

SYNOPSIS

SPOILER ALERT!



A detailed scene by scene synopsis based on the original text is available within the education resources of this pack.

This version of the production has been revised by Timberlake Wertenbaker in consultation with Ian Michael, First Nations Consultant, therefore will be a different version to the one that you might be studying for a specific examination or assessment.

This is a short summary - for a more detailed synopsis scan the QR code.

Photo: Marc Brenner

This play is set in 1787 and the first scene is aboard a ship bound for Australia with a group of prisoners and their prison officers, members of the British Military, on the way to start their new lives at the new colony. It is a brutal opening scene as one of the convicts, Robert Sideway, is being flogged.

Once in their new home of the convict camp there is still brutal treatment of the prisoners with some hanged for stealing food, as rations are running low.

Head of the colony, Governor Arthur Phillip argues that there must be a better way to help 'civilise' the convicts and along with Lieutenant Ralph Clarke, plan to have some of the convicts perform in a production of the Restoration comedy *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar. There is a debate between Governor Phillip and Ralph with other officers of the colony who disagree strongly about this plan and feel that it is waste of time and even immoral.

Despite the protests, Ralph is determined to go ahead and there are many humorous moments as he auditions and starts to rehearse with the convicts.

Throughout the performance we see the relationships between the characters develop and we also learn about the lives of the convicts before they arrived in Australia. One of the relationships is between Midshipman Harry Brewer and convict Duckling Smith. Harry is jealous of the idea that Duckling might have connections with other men within the camp and she is often tired of his controlling ways towards her. There is a scene before Duckling joins the cast of the play where we witness this dynamic.

We learn that Ralph is homesick for his wife Betsey Alicia but as the performance progresses see how he develops feelings for a member of the cast, Mary Brenham, as he spends more time with his band of actors. Major Robbie Ross attends one of the rehearsals out of spite, in a bit to humiliate the convicts and Ralpalph for their endeavours he belittles them and reveals how some of the members of the cast have taken the opportunity to try to escape, stealing food in the process – a hanging offence.

Liz Morden, one of the cast, is accused of aiding the theft of food and is arrested. Although she is innocent, she refuses to speak up and defend herself, despite the fact she is condemning herself to hang.

Although there are humorous moments there is also tragedy, including a scene where Duckling is with a dying Harry and she declares that she does love him before breaking down when she realises that he has already died.

Despite all the drama outside of the play they are rehearsing, the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* goes ahead, offering the cast a brief moment of escape from their reality.

Photo: Marc Brenner

DESIGN ELEMENTS

Set and Costume – Gary McCann

Gary McCann is a world-renowned scenographer (a person who develops the appearance of a stage design), he is used to designing epic sets and costumes for large scale productions, including operas.

In his interview Gary explains his vision and inspiration for his set and costume designs for this production of *Our Country's Good*.

In Conversation with Gary McCann

Costume

Gary McCann has experimented with time periods when it comes to the costume design for this particular version of *Our Country's Good*. There is a deliberate juxtaposition of period costume from the time the play is set in 1787 and the present day. Due to the actors playing both a convict and the role of an officer in the performance, the costumes needed to symbolise this transition between characters, but also convey status and hierarchy. The red military coat and tricorn hats are a used when characters are playing officers, and these are a period element of the costume that represents the past and Britain's colonial history. The more modern items of clothing such as jeans and tracksuits worn by the convicts link the play with issues and themes around the criminal justice system that are very current as well as historical.

The character of Killara is in modern dress for an important reason to symbolise how the colonial past and way Australia as a country was formed still has a present day impact on the First Nations population. Killara represents not only an oppressed culture and people from history, but how prejudice and racism is still very much a reality, as discussed by Ian Michael, First Nations Consultant on the production.

Photo: Marc Brenner.

The simple vest worn by the character is a 'clay' orange colour that blend in with the earthy tones of the set design. This symbolises how Killara is at one with the land as they belong – this in contrast to the incongruous red military jackets – the colour red symbolising the blood spilt. The loose combat style trousers are also in a neutral colour and allow the actor to blend in to the scenery as they look on from afar, observing the death and destruction wrought on the land by the presence of the settlers.

Photos: Marc Brenner.

Lighting – Paul Keogan

The use of lighting in partnership with the set was always in the forefront of designer Gary McCann's vision when creating the set. Paul Keogan has worked to compliment the set design and bring it to life through use of lighting to bring the Australian outback to life.

The use of orange and yellow tones supports the illusion of the heat and the dry earth with the use of low intensity lighting to create shadows and emphasis the trees and landscape of the set design. This is a more naturalistic use of lighting compared to when lighting is used to remind the audience that they are at some point watching a play within a play. In these moments, the audience is actually shown lighting rigs fly down with bright spotlights used to light the actors on the makeshift stage of the Paul Keogan production *The Recruiting Officer*.

Keogan has also used lighting to support change in location at points within the production. When the characters Duckling and Harry are in a boat on looking at the formation of the new colony, the lighting is dark blue that not only indicates they are on water but also supports the emotion portrayed within this scene.

Photo: Marc Brenner.

One of the conventions of this play is that it is a play within a play and at all times the audience is reminded of the theatricality of the performance. The lighting rig is deliberately shown on stage as part of the set design and extra large par can lights are flown into selected scenes that also add light and juxtapose against the more realistic elements of the set – it is an effective combination of the real and unreal.

Photo: Marc Brenner.

Sound and Music

Gregory Clarke (sound designer) & Holly Khan (composer)

Sound is a hugely important aspect of this production from the use of dramatic and atmospheric compositions that take the audience on a journey to a far-away land, to the use of sound effects that support the action taking place on stage.

Diegetic sounds – Sounds that are a part of the world of the performance e.g. bird song

During the performance there are a number of specific sound effects that are used on stage including gun shots, animal sounds and the wind. These are sometimes used on their own, or in some instances over the top of atmospheric underscoring. There is a brutal open scene where there is the sound of a prisoner being flogged, the audience is subjected to the sounds of the whip hitting flesh, followed by howling screams.

Composer Holly Khan discusses her vision and inspiration behind the sounds and music she has created specifically to align with this production.

"When I was first approaching the text I first thought about the instrumentation, what instruments I was going to use? I think there's a version of the play that has probably been done before with classic 18th century snare drums to show the British Empire and also on the flip side digeridoos and native Australian instruments. I wanted to be sensitive to both of these cultures , but also find a new sound and way to display this story and this land that we're discovering. I very much gravitated towards string instruments, strings are emotive because they are the closest instrument to the human voice. When we hear strings we feel a lot, in a more empathic way and alongside this I also wanted to include percussion instruments to the main body of the sound. I wanted there to be a timelessness to it, so there is an electronic sound base and sub base percussive sounds that feel like they belong to the land of the soldiers and lieutenants. I have also included some motifs like those that you might find in a film score so there is romantic motif that follows Duckling and Harry, the play they are rehearsing has a motif which is an energetic string pulse. Ralph has a motif that is single saxophone because a lot of the time he is found alone.

Throughout the piece there are recorded tracks by the actor playing the role of Killara, Naarah recorded lots of improvisations and these grow throughout the piece, so it's a juxtaposition, the more she is kicked off the land by the settlers, the more we hear their voice. It, just like her presence is always there along with the instrumentation, and then in the second act her voice is always present in the transitions and that felt important that this character is embodied through in the physical moments when she is on stage, but also aurally when she is not."

Motif: a musical motif is a series of notes that represent something such as a character, an object, a place or even a relationship.

EDUCATION RESOURCES

Provocations

Below are a series of questions to consider before you watch the production and then again after. Have your thoughts and options changes and developed as a result of watching the production?

- Why is deportation viewed as an effective punishment – both in the time the play is set, but also in the present day?
- How can theatre and creating theatre support people within the criminal justice system?
- The character Wisehammer says in the play 'A Play should make you understand something new. If it tells you what you already know, you leave as ignorant as you went in. 'What do you think he means by this statement?
- There is a debate between the convicts where Dabby argues that she wants to perform in a play that 'shows life as we know it', but conversely the character of Arscott argues that he likes the escapism of playing a character that is totally different to himself. What is your opinion on both points of view?

Photo: Marc Brenner.

In the rehearsal room

Physical drama skills

- Facial Expressions
- Posture
- Gestures
- Gait

Space and Interaction

- Levels
- Eye contact
- Proxemics / distance
- Touch

Task 1

Look at the images from Act 2, Scene 6, the *Science of Hanging* featuring the characters Liz and Ketch.

Describe how the actors are using their physicality and use of space and interaction to communicate their emotions and relationship. Consider hierarchy and status in your response.

Task 2

Look at the images below featuring the characters Mary and Ralph at various points in the production. Consider which point in in the character's relationship each image is depicting based on the actors' use of physical theatrical skills and their use of space and interaction. Justify the reasons for your decisions.

Photos: Marc Brenner.

Multi-role

Within this production the actors, apart from Naarah, playing Killara and Simon Manyonder playing Ralph Clarke, have to play more than one character. Each actor has the challenge of playing both an officer and a convict within the performance, a deliberate decision made by writer Timberlake Wertenbaker. In this production of *Our Country's Good* director, Rachel O'Riordan, made it very clear that she wants the audience to always be conscious of the actors switching roles and to not try to mask or hide this fact on stage.

The actor Finbar Lynch is playing the character Major Robbie Ross and also the role of Ketch Freeman. Robbie Ross in particular is incredibly brutal, but one of the key aspects from the director's point of view was to get the actors to draw on similarities between the characters they are portraying, not focussing entirely on their differences.

Photo: Marc Brenner.

"I'm super excited to be playing three different parts because it's just a challenge as an actor and I'm going from a sort of, well, Meg is described as very old and very smelly and then Mary is an 18-year-old convict girl and then there's the Reverend Johnson who's this quite stuffy character.

It's really fun to be able to just have fun and play with them all, and do something different with each. Our director is trying to also link them , so we're trying to find ways where they link more than they are actually different. I think it's important for this version of the show just because we want it to be naturalistic. We want every character, even if they only pop on for half a page of a scene to be embedded in reality and not to make caricatures of people. Everyone's story, even if it's just a flash of a moment, is important and so many are based on real people. You want to tell that story sensitively." **RUBY BENTALL, ACTOR**

Task

Below is the cast list and which roles are being played by which performers. For each one consider both the similarities and differences between the characters they are portraying:

Actor	Convict Character/s	Officer Character/s
Catrin Aaron	Liz Morden	Lieutenant Will Dawes
Jack Bardoe	John Arscott / Harry Brewer	Captain Jemmy Campbell
Ruby Bentall	Mary Brenham / Meg Long	Reverend Johnson
Nick Fletcher	Robert Sideway	Captain David Collins
Olivier Huband	Caesar	Captain Watkin Tench
Harry Kershaw	John Wisehammer	Captain Arthur Phillip
Finbar Lynch	Ketch Freeman	Major Robbie Ross
Aliyah Odoffin	Duckling Smith	Lieutenant George Johnston
Nicola Stephenson	Dabby Bryant	Second Lieutenant William Faddy

Devising Theatre

The work of William Hogarth was used as part of the initial research by the creative team for this production of *Our Country's Good*. Here are some Hogarth images that you can use as stimulus for devising theatre. Consider the themes and what Hogarth is saying within these images about his view on society.

Image: *A Rake's Progress*, plate 3, 1735 by William Hogarth (1697 – 1764)

Image: *Night (The Four Times of Day)* 1738 by William Hogarth (1697 – 1764)

Image: *Gin Lane* 1750 – 1751 by William Hogarth (1697 – 1764)

Crime and punishment

Discuss the theme of deportation with pupils as a method of punishment. Here are some links to news articles that could be used as a starting point. These are based on a range of recent cases both national and international:

Sky News, 2024 Article One

Sky News, 2024 Article Two

Guardian Newspaper 2019

Theatre Design

Task

Set designer Gary McCann decided to create a set that celebrated the epic landscape of Australia. Consider how you might design a set for a production of *Our Country's Good* in your school / education setting. Explore:

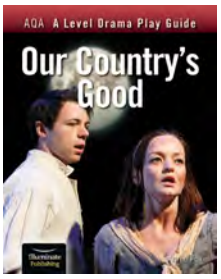
- What colours or textures would you use?
- How might you use the space?
- What props might you include?
- How might you link with other design elements such as lighting in your design?

Tip: Listen to the interview with Gary McCann

Photo: Marc Brenner.

Photo: Marc Brenner.

AQA Theatre Guide by Annie Fox and Resources



Here is a link to a worksheet that accompanies the AQA Theatre guide.

Worksheet

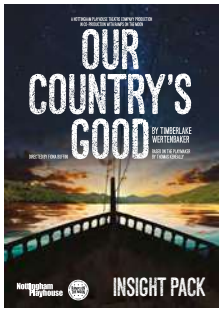
First Nations Discussion Point

Here is an image of the current map of Australia that shows the six states; Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria.

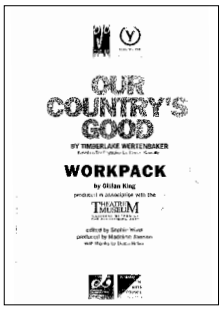
View the map that depicts the indigenous groups and languages of the First Nations people. Consider:

- What do you notice about the difference between these two maps?
- What conclusions can you draw about the impact of the First Fleet on the country?

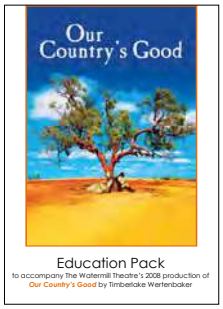
Other Education Packs



Nottingham Playhouse Education pack, 2018



Out of Joint Theatre Company, Resource pack 1998



Watermill Theatre Education pack, 2008

Ian Michael, First Nation Consultant references a play he directed in Sydney for the Sydney Theatre Company called *Stolen*. Here are some education resources from that production, June 2024:

Resource One

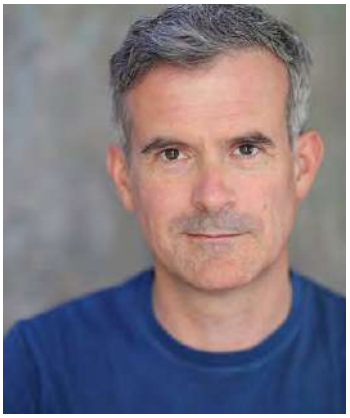
Resource Two

Cast

Liz Morden / Lieutenant Will Dawes
Catrin Aaron

John Arscot / Harry Brewer / Captain Jemmy Campbell
Jack Bardoe

Mary Brenham / Reverend Johnson / Meg Long
Ruby Bentall



Robert Sideway / Captain David Collins
Nick Fletcher

Ceasar / Captain Watkin Tench
Olivier Huband

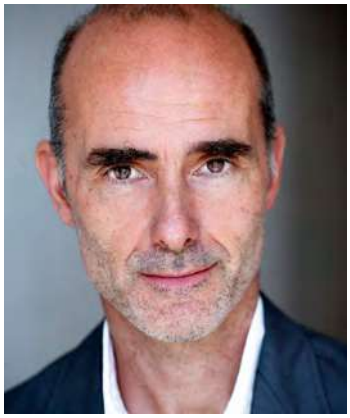
John Wisehammer / Captain Arthur Phillip
Harry Kershaw

Second Lieutenant Ralph Clarke
Simon Manyonda

Killara
Naarah

Duckling Smith / Lieutenant George Johnston
Aliyah Odoffin

Dabby Bryant / Second Lieutenant William Faddy
Nicola Stephenson



Ketch Freeman / Major Robbie Ross
Finbar Lynch

Credits and Acknowledgments

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This education pack was created by Natalie Jim, Education Producer at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre and designed by Hannah Yates. Production photography by Marc Brenner. Thank you to Annie Fox, Sophia Blackwell, Sara Bennett and Hodder Education.

For more information on our education work and to download, other teaching resources please visit **lyric.co.uk/young-lyric/education**

Creative Team

Writer
Timberlake Wertenbaker
Director
Rachel O'Riordan
Set and Costume Designer
Gary McCann
Lighting Designer
Paul Keogan
Sound Designer
Gregory Clarke
Composer
Holly Khan
Cultural Consultant
Ian Michael
Casting Director
Isabella Odoffin CDG
Fight & Intimacy Director
Bethan Clark
Dialect & Voice Coach
Joel Trill
Translator
Matthew Doyle
Assistant Director
Harper K. Hefferon

Australian High Commission
United Kingdom

Supported using public funding by
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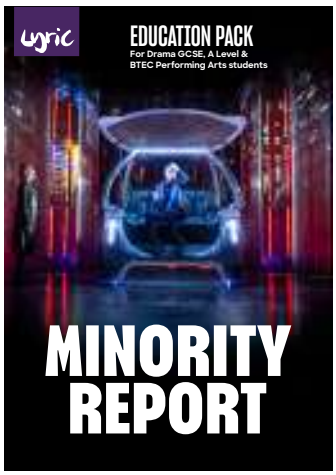
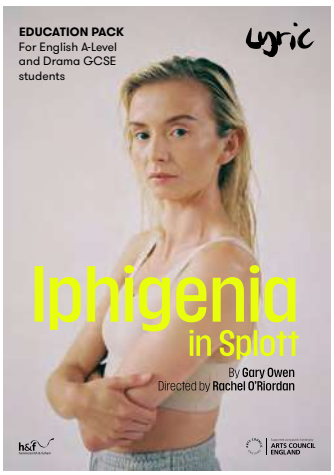
hammersmith & fulham

Take a look at some of our previous Education Packs:





The Lyric Hammersmith Theatre produces bold and relevant world-class theatre from the heart of Hammersmith, the theatre's home for more than 125 years. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Rachel O'Riordan and Executive Director Amy Belson, it is committed to being vital to, and representative of, the local community. A major force in London and UK theatre, the Lyric produces adventurous and acclaimed theatrical work that tells the stories that matter.