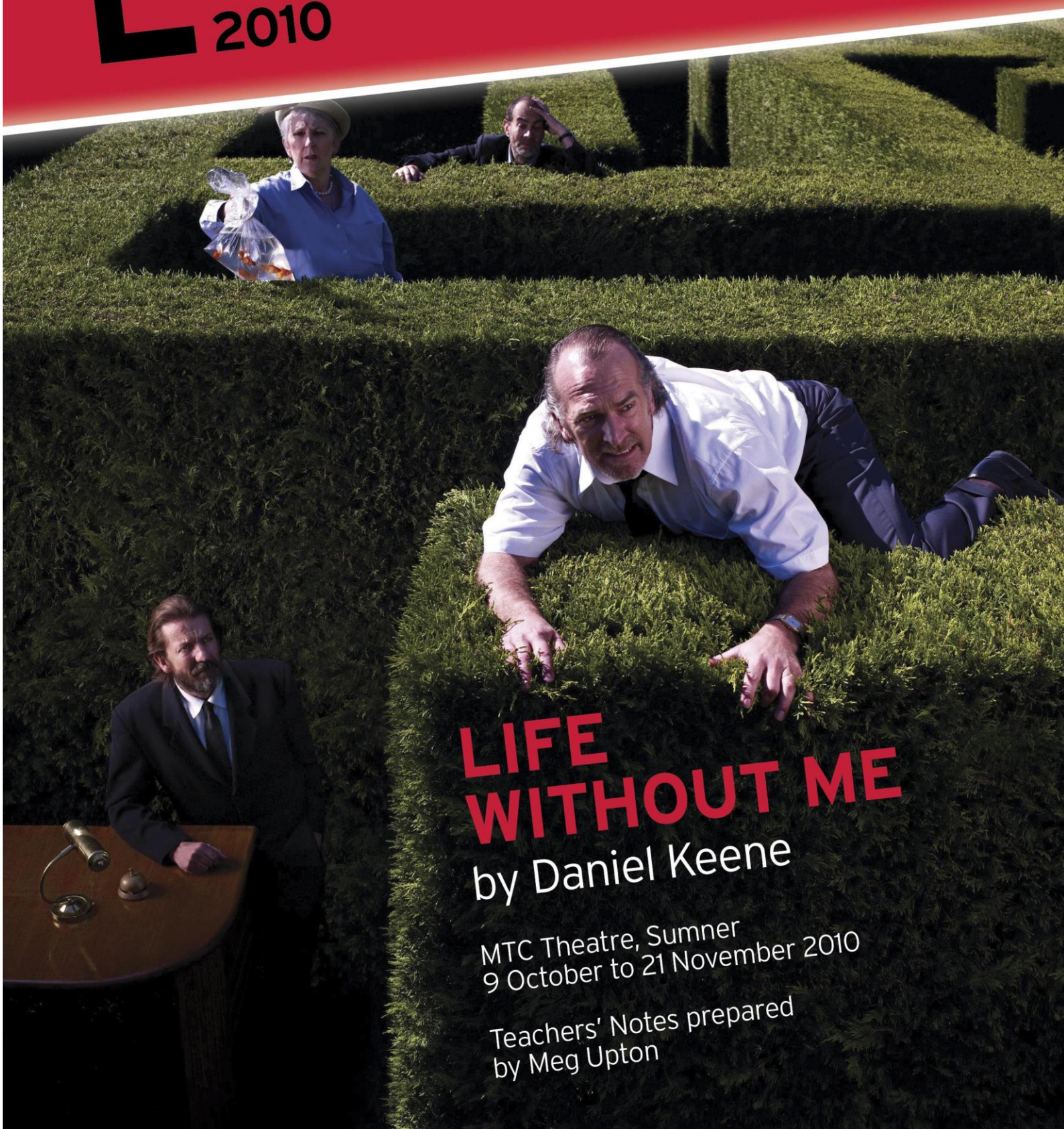


E EDUCATION TEACHERS' NOTES 2010



LIFE WITHOUT ME by Daniel Keene

MTC Theatre, Summer
9 October to 21 November 2010

Teachers' Notes prepared
by Meg Upton

BEFORE SEEING THE PERFORMANCE...

THE EXPERIENCE:

Theatre is live

In the theatre we share stories which differ from TV, DVD, film, books, magazines, podcasts and other media. In the theatre stories are told by real people in real time before a live audience. Each performance of a play is different to any other as it is dependent upon the time, the actors, the technical equipment and, very importantly, the audience. You can't re-read a live theatre performance or copy it to see again and again. Each performance exists only once. The performance you will see of *Life Without Me* will differ from the one performed before and the one performed after, which makes it special and unique. Your role as an audience ensures its uniqueness. As a student of theatre, you are advised to carefully prepare to see the production so that you can capture that unique, one-off experience and be able to reflect on it in detail.

About *Life Without Me*

If you don't know who you are and you don't know where you're headed, you might find yourself spiraling in ever-tightening circles until you come to rest in a nondescript part of town in a crummy two-star hotel, where the service is churlish, the lift doesn't work, the toast is burnt and the pot plants set off your allergies. But keep your expectations low, really low, and, who knows? – you might be pleasantly surprised by how everything works out. A hotel with reservations; an eccentric fable about taking up residence and trying to move on.

Daniel Keene's new play, Life Without Me, is set in a rundown two-star hotel and the set takes advantage of the available height by having two levels - the lobby on the ground level that serves as a public space, and balconies above for private encounters. "Once I had the place where the action happens, I imagined the cast that I wanted", says Keene. It is a surprisingly big play by modern standards, with seven actors including Greg Stone, Robert Menzies, Deidre Rubenstein, Brian Lipson, Kerry Walker, Kristina Brew and Benedict Hardie. The characters gather in the hotel's lobby although not all are guests. They meet by accident and the conceit is a little like (The Eagles' hit) Hotel California. It is difficult to leave and certain things develop because they are stuck together", says Keene.

Extract from *The Age*, September 2010.



Robert Menzies in *Life Without Me*

The setting

The play is set in a two star hotel without a kitchen, a manager or a pen. The lift doesn't work with any consistency and, for some reason; there is a 'no smoking' sign above the cigarette vending machine. The set suggests the 1980s with its parlour palms, glass mirror tiles, and cheap modular furniture but it could be the 1970s or it could be the present. It is a hotel locked in time, perhaps once four-star, but gradually diminished to two-star... and the linen is terrible. *Life Without Me* is an Australian play and the characters and dialogue reflect this.

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY:

The play is set in the lobby of a two star hotel.

- Draw what you imagine the set will look like
- Consider in your drawing that you have to fit the set into a proscenium theatre (albeit a modern and contemporary one)



Brian Lipson and Greg Stone in *Life Without Me*

The characters

The characters in *Life Without Me* have quite simple and recognizable names - Nigel, John, Roy, Alice, Mrs Spence, Tom and Ellen - a little like a sitcom.

Nigel - the receptionist/manager, without a pen, a bed, a kitchen, or a home;

John - a hotel guest who has been trying to leave the city for three days but can't seem to find a way out;

Roy - a manchester (sheets and pillowcases) salesman who has an appointment with Mrs. Spence;

Mrs. Spence - a widow, the owner of the hotel, and Nigel's mother;

Alice - a hotel guest who is waiting for her new apartment to be ready and needed a place to stay;

Ellen - a young woman married to Tom;

Tom - a young man married to Ellen, both decide to play a game of pretending not to know each other.

The language of the play

Daniel Keene's writing has been described as 'sharp, intense and lyrical' and the language of *Life Without Me* is a good example of this description. Listen carefully to the sharp witty humour that develops between Nigel and John, the intensity of feeling expressed by Tom and Ellen and the lyrical words of Roy as he tries to make sense of finding Alice. Despite the fact that she's not really lucid, Mrs Spence speaks words of incredible wisdom, quite like the clown or fool in the classical theatrical tradition.

Performance Space

Daniel Keene wrote the play with the Sumner Theatre in mind, after being invited to do so by MTC Artistic Director Simon Phillips in 2008. 'It was terrifying in one way and terrific in another, because it was so open', says the playwright. *Life Without Me* is performed in a proscenium arch configuration in the MTC Sumner Theatre. The actors are framed within the playing space through the design of the theatre, but also through the set design, in this case a hotel lobby and its upper floors. The design sets up an interesting actor/audience relationship because those in the lobby can't see those above and vice versa; the audience can see and hear both, and this provides an engaging insight into the action and the relationships between the characters, their public personae and their private personae.



Brian Lipson, Kerry Walker and Greg Stone in *Life Without Me*

THE CREATIVE TEAM

Director

Set and Costume Designer

Lighting Designer

Composer

Assistant Director

Stage Manager

Assistant Stage Manager

Peter Evans

Dale Ferguson

Matt Scott

Jethro Woodward

Matt Scholten

Eva Tandy

Vivienne Poznanski



Benedict Hardie and Kristina Brew in *Life Without Me*

THE CAST

Ellen	Kristina Brew
Tom	Benedict Hardie
Roy	Brian Lipson
Nigel	Robert Menzies
Alice	Deidre Rubenstein
John	Greg Stone
Mrs Spence	Kerry Walker

Things to consider before you see *Life Without Me*:

- What does the title of the play suggest to you?
- Have you ever stayed in a hotel?
- Discuss some of your experiences of staying in hotels – where, why, facilities, staff, other guests, problems etc.
- Do you often travel in lifts? Discuss some of your experiences.
- What do you think it's like to be stuck in a lift?
- What is 'manchester' or 'linen' and what types or qualities are there? Why would this be important to a hotel?
- Have you ever kept a goldfish? What do you know about the lives of goldfish? How do you imagine goldfish feature in the play?
- What do you know about Theatre of the Absurd? Do you know which conventions characterise this style? Do you know any other Absurdist plays? Is it common for Absurdist plays to explore themes of existentialism?
- What do you know about physical comedy - conventions, caricatures, origins?
- What are the features of a sitcom?

When you are watching the show, try to heighten your awareness of everything by watching and listening very carefully. If you have time at the end, take down some notes on:

- The things you saw; characters, set items, costumes, lighting states, props.
- The things you heard; music, sound effects, lines of dialogue, words, songs.
- How you felt at different points during the production; perhaps disturbed, amused, mystified, saddened, angry, curious, confused.



Kerry Walker, Robert Menzies, Greg Stone and Brian Lipson in *Life Without Me*

YOU MAY LIKE TO CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES

Look up the following YouTube clip which has a short clip of the ABC production *Mother & Son*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTDeyVp8pp0&NR=1>

Look up the following YouTube clip which has a short clip on *Mr. Bean*, physical theatre by Rowan Atkinson: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3l7G-w3hTY>

Look up the following YouTube clip which features a short look at *Fawlty Towers*, set in a 1970s hotel: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_q4S7lZeik



Robert Menzies and Deidre Rubenstein in *Life Without Me*



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT, DANIEL KEENE

Who are the characters in my plays? They are mostly people without privilege, who have no position, no power. Why do I choose to create characters like this? Because I want them to bring nothing with them, to have no biography, to create nothing to begin with. I want to create characters about whom there is little the audience can assume... I want the characters in my plays to live moment by moment in front of our eyes (they can do nothing else) and to reveal what is within them (they have nothing else to reveal).

Daniel Keene, interview with Stéphanie Müh and Christine Bouvier.

EXTRACT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL KEENE by Anna Lozynski, July 2009

<http://www.australianstage.com.au/200907292744/features/melbourne/daniel-keene.html>

How involved do you like to be with the direction of your work?

My involvement is dependent on the invitation of the director. I like to be at a first reading at the beginning of rehearsals. After that, I'll be involved if it seems necessary and/or helpful.

What attracted you to become a writer and, in particular, a playwright?

As a young man, I was a passionate reader, but I didn't particularly want to become a writer. I did know that I wanted to work in the theatre, I simply had to discover in what capacity. After spending some time acting, then directing, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't very good at either activity. I turned all my attention to writing.

How do you track or compile your thoughts and stories as the basis for any future compositions?

I keep a notebook. I also have a folder filled with 'works in progress'. At the moment I have about twenty-five unfinished short plays. I should add that I abandon more plays than I complete.

What does 'writer's block' mean to you?

'Writer's block' means nothing to me. There are times when I don't write, because I have nothing to write. It's important to spend periods of time not writing, to 'lie fallow' as it were; otherwise it's just a meaningless grind. I don't believe in writing just for writing's sake. For me, the writing of a play is a kind of excavation: I am searching for the raw impulse that caused me to imagine a particular character, a particular situation, an image, or a particular piece of dialogue.

You have been writing since 1979. What do you know now that you wish you had discovered at the beginning of your career?

How difficult it is to write for the theatre, and how beautiful it can be if you get it right.

EXTRACT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL KEENE by Chris Boyd, April 2006.

<http://chrisboyd.blogspot.com/2006/04/interview-with-playwright-daniel-keene.html>

Can I ask you why you write plays? Why not other forms?

I like writing for theatre because - as far as I'm concerned - it has a stringent poetic. And it has serious demands. You can't waffle on. I don't think you should anyway. So you have to be precise. And you have to be clear. And you have to be poetic, I think. It has demands [that] other writing has, but theatre focuses them all in a strange way.

I imagine that you also have to trust that you get to the right audience?

I don't know what a 'right audience' is. If it gets an audience, that's good! That's a start. I suppose it comes from having worked in the theatre on the other side of the curtain, as an actor, in a small way, kind of understanding what that's all about and what it is to say words on stage. When I write I'm very conscious that someone has to speak it. There's also an enormous amount of trust involved in that kind of thing. The actor trusts you to write something they can say; and you also trust the actor to say it in a way in which meaning is created by the expression.

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY:

- Research the work of Daniel Keene;
- Write up what you discover as a Power Point or use PREZI or Glogster to present what you discover.



Kerry Walker in *Life Without Me*

AFTER SEEING THE PERFORMANCE...

SOME AREAS TO EXPLORE:

An Australian Play

Life Without Me, by Daniel Keene is a new Australian play.

- From having seen the production, what do you think is uniquely Australian about it?
- Could this play be set in another country or recontextualised? If so what aspects would need to be changed?

Structure and Narrative

Life Without Me is a scripted play that has several scenes and two acts.

- In a paragraph or a series of dot points write out the story of the play;
- Discuss where the climax of the play is.
- Are there any other climactic points in the play? If so, how has the playwright written them into the action? Examples: the introduction of a new character, an accident, someone leaving, a secret revealed.
- What is the main plot? How many subplots are there?
- Although the narrative is linear in structure, Consider; how much time passes in the play? How do you know? Is each scene a continuation of the previous scene?



Brian Lipson and Greg Stone in *Life Without Me*

The World of the Play

The world of the play is that which the audience is given access to from the time we enter the theatre. Notice that the reception clerk is present on stage before the auditorium lights dim.

- What type of world is this hotel?
- What type of world do you imagine lies outside, beyond the revolving door?
- What aspects of the play contributed to your understanding of this world - dialogue, set design, lighting, sound, entrances and exits, action in the play?

A LOBBY OF LOST STEPS...

The following is an extract from an interview with Daniel Keene for the MTC programme notes for *Life Without Me*.

'I'd had an idea in my mind for a while to write a play set in a public space where private things happen. There's a French phrase that came back to me: "The room of lost steps". [*Le salle des pas perdus*] It's somewhere that lies between one place and another: so, an airport lounge, a railway station, a hotel lobby. I settled on a hotel lobby and then it was literally a matter of doing what I always do once I have my starting point: I just wait. I just listen. Eventually someone speaks.'

'I never know what is going to happen. I just knew there were two characters in the lobby, you know, and they talked and eventually I knew who they were. Then someone else came in, and then someone else, and then someone else, until I began to understand what the play was.'

'I wanted the play to do two things at once, seemingly opposite things. It appears to be a comedy at the start, perhaps a farce. It has two entrances, it has an elevator, it has stairs – the set up is like a farce. I had in mind Feydeau, Ionesco, even Arrabal, who set up in their plays highly artificial environments, absurd elements. I wanted it to be funny, but at the same time I also wanted underneath serious questions, moments and situations.'

'You must strike a balance when the world of the play is not real. This play, it's kind of absurd, kind of strange. But the emotions of the characters are real, truthful - must be. If they cannot be believed by the audience as honest and truthful the play won't work. The emotional truth holds the play together'

Theatrical Styles

The play incorporates aspects of several theatrical styles including elements of Theatre of the Absurd, Heightened Realism, Physical Theatre, and even Sitcom.

- Select a moment you recall from the play and analyse how it used the convention of 'pause' to create a) tension b) pathos or c) comedy
- Describe how the opening scene of the play could be considered 'nonsensical';
- Describe how the opening scene with Nigel and John uses aspects of physical theatre;
- Discuss whether you think there are resonances of television sitcom in this play; Consider, in particular, the cooking scenes and the goldfish scenes.
- What aspects of *Life Without Me* were realistic/naturalistic? What made them so?
- What aspects of the style of the play seemed strange or perhaps slightly surreal? How was this achieved?
- Would you describe the play as 'non-naturalistic'? Support your answer here with specific examples of non-naturalistic elements.

STAGECRAFT

Set Design

Life Without Me was written with this particular playing space in mind. There is a great deal of detail in the set design:

- Reception desk, key and pigeon-hole bureau, office, cigarette machine, elevator, tiled floor, mirror tiles, bin, fish tank, club chairs around a round table, rows of other club chairs, triple-fitted lamps, revolving door, stair doorway. Sketch the set design from what you recall, drawing upon the above list.
- How did the set design create a sense of a very particular world?

- Comment on the colour palette used for the set: beige, pale green, pale blue, tan, cream – why do you think the designer may have chosen these colours?
- The revolving door - discuss how this aspect of the set could be symbolic; what might it represent to the hotel, or to each of the guests?
- The elevator - discuss how this aspect of the set could also be symbolic; why doesn't it always work? When does it work? Does it only work for particular characters?
- Recall how the upper floor of the hotel was represented. Did it surprise you when it was first used?
- Discuss how the upper floor might work as a metaphor within the play - what happens in the scenes played out up there, are they more intimate scenes, more private?



Greg Stone in *Life Without Me*

Props:

- Suitcases featured highly in this play. Recall as many of the suitcases used by the characters as possible. Can you assume things about people by the suitcase they carry? What do you think the suitcases could be symbolic of? Select one character and discuss this in detail.
- Other props such as the broken umbrella, the plant, the reception guest book and the fish, all play particular parts in the play. Select two of these props and analyse how they contribute to the intended meaning of the play/scene. Example: to establish character, create dramatic tension, develop humour, illustrate a theme, advance the narrative.



Robert Menzies and Kerry Walker in *Life Without Me*

Costume

The role of costume is to help create a character, and also to establish the world of the play.

- How does Mrs Spence's costume (fur coat, hat, gloves, silk scarf, small handbag and suit) assist in creating her character? Do you think she looks a little like the Queen?
- How does John's costume, when he first enters (plastic rain coat, broken umbrella and dishevelled suit), assist in establishing his character?
- Discuss the choices with regard to the younger characters', Ellen and Tom's costumes Do you think the designer deliberately gave them more contemporary aesthetic qualities?
- How does the costuming in this play reflect the theatrical styles of the absurd, sitcom, heightened realism, or non-naturalism?



Kristina Brew and Benedict Hardie in *Life Without Me*

Lighting

In the play there were some very specific lighting design choices that helped to establish the world of the play as well as particular moods for certain scenes. Lighting was also used to enhance the drama or comedy, or to segue/transition into the next scene.

- Consider the following lighting states: the fish tank, the light globe changing, the storm, the upper levels in the hotel, the elevator.
- Analyse how lighting was used in each of these moments to generate mood or enhance the action.
- Discuss the relationship between lighting and time in the play.
- How does lighting contribute to the non-naturalistic feel of the play?

Sound

Music and sound design are used extensively in the play.

- What do you recall about the opening music, elevator music, segue/transition music.
- What do you recall about the following sound effects: the storm; the exterior sounds of roosters, dogs barking, traffic, and the sounds we hear at the characters move around upstairs?
- How did you respond to the sound design and music? What mood did it set? What did it remind you of? How did it help establish the world of the play?
- Did you even notice that certain sounds were repeated throughout the play? What effect did this have?
- What aspects of the sound design contributed to the non-naturalistic feel of the play?



Robert Menzies in *Life Without Me*

CHARACTERS AND ACTING

I want to create characters about whom there is little the audience can assume... I want the characters in my plays to live moment by moment in front of our eyes (they can do nothing else) and to reveal what is within them (they have nothing else to reveal)

- Daniel Keene, playwright

- What do you know about each character when they arrive? What do you know when they leave?
- At the beginning of the play, when you first see the character of Nigel on stage, what sort of person do you think he is? Are your assumptions proven to be true?
- Discuss how the actor, Robert Menzies, uses the expressive skills of voice, movement, gesture, facial expressions and stillness and silence to create the character of Nigel. You may like to consider the following scenes: the light globe changing, the guest register, the breakfast cooking.
- How does the character of Nigel reflect the theatrical styles in the play?

"A hotel lobby is a strange kind of place, isn't it? Usually when you're in one, you're either checking in or checking out. You're either not yet properly arrived, or not entirely departed. You're in between." - Mrs. Spence

- What type of character is Mrs Spence? What does the above quote tell us about her?
- Do you think she feels 'in between'? Could her words reflect what she feels about her husband?

"The streets were deserted. Empty. I turned left and right. I don't know how long I've been walking. I don't know how I ended up back here."

- The character of Roy behaves very strangely at times, particularly when he returns from trying to get home. Discuss how the actor, Brian Lipson, portrays the character of Roy in the play. Would you describe his expressive skills as non-naturalistic in style? What does the linen presentation reveal about him?
- Analyse the effect that the character, Alice Jarvis, has on Roy.



Greg Stone in *Life Without Me*

"I didn't mean to come in here. I was blown in by the wind... I've lived a life lit by my own lights" - John

- Describe the moment when the character of John arrived in the hotel.
- John has chosen to live alone. How does the above quote reflect this choice? What do you think the playwright would like us to feel about John?
- What does the above quote reveal about the character of John?

THEMES AND IDEAS

"There are two kinds of people who come in here. Those that know where they are, where they've been and where they're going and those... that don't. I've a very keen observer of people" - Nigel

Read the above lines from the play, spoken by Nigel, and discuss how the idea of a person being or feeling lost is explored in the play.

- You may wish to explore this through certain characters considering John, Roy, and Ellen and their particular circumstances.
- Why do you think these characters feel lost? Is this feeling physical? Emotional? Spiritual? Metaphorical?

"Your face is like a closed door. It's been closed very slowly, very carefully. No one noticed it happening, not even you. And now the key is turning, to lock it up for good" - Roy

Read Roy's lines above, addressed to John in the lobby of the hotel. You may recall that at that moment, John has asked Roy to read his face, after Roy tells him he makes of a hobby of doing this, and inventing lives for the strangers he sees.

- What do you think Roy means by saying John's face is like a closed door?
- Who has closed the 'door', and why? Is it possible that John has closed it himself?
- What makes a person 'close the door'? Do you think it has anything to do with fear? If so, what could John be afraid of?
- Are there any other characters who seem to you to be fearful? If so, what are they fearful of?

"Maybe if more people took the time to avoid what they thought they were supposed to be doing and just did nothing we'd all be better off" - John

Several of the characters in the play talk about how they feel they have been playing certain roles that have been expected of them, both in their past and in their current lives. Roy expresses his desire to have lived a different life, where he never left 'his' Alice. Ellen and Tom decide to pretend they don't know each other to try and recall what it was that first brought them together.

- How does the play explore people's need to fulfil others' expectations?
- Why does John say that we would be better off if we just did nothing? What do you think he means by this statement?

"For a fish there is only now. Imagine that. Isn't that remarkable? A fish can't regret anything, or hope for anything. They must be nature's most fortunate creations" - John

The goldfish occupy a special place in the play. Several moments in the play are devoted to discussing their health, their surroundings and particularly their limited memory - the length of the fish tank. They don't have the capacity to experience regret.

- Discuss how the play explores regret. Consider separate characters' lives and experiences as we know them from the play.
- Recall Roy's speech to Alice on the balcony after they have spent the night together.
- Recall John's speech about meeting his ex-wife at an intersection.



Benedict Hardie and Kerry Walker in *Life Without Me*

"Happiness has always been a memory for me" - Alice

- Discuss how happiness is explored in the play.
- Compare how the characters arrive at the hotel compared to how they leave. Are they any happier?
- Why does Alice express her happiness as being a memory? What do you think she means by this statement?

“A hotel is never empty. And almost every day, there are different people in it. It’s a place for people passing through. If people stop passing through it, it’s not a hotel anymore” - John

- How does the play explore the concept of being a hotel guest?
- Do any of the guests feel at home in this hotel?
- Are there particular behaviours that guests need to adhere to?
- Do the guests have expectations of the hotel staff in this play? Are they met?

Serendipity is ‘the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way’ (oxford dictionary).

- How is this idea of serendipity explored in the play? Consider how Alice and Roy meet and what they discover about each other.
- How do you think Nigel gained from several of the serendipitous moments?



Greg Stone and Brian Lipson in *Life Without Me*

Le salle des pas perdus

In the play, Alice, speaks to Roy about ‘le salle des pas perdus’ which translates to ‘the room of lost steps’. Read the explanation below:

Room of Lost Steps - even in blunt literal translation from the French, the phrase ‘Le salle des pas perdus’ retains its poetry, its tinge of sadness, its tang of mystery. Encountering it for the first time you may wonder what such a place may be: a labyrinth, perhaps; or a room where prisoners await their execution; or - in a more Kafkaesque vein - the lumber-room for a vast bureaucracy. A glance in a good French-English dictionary, however, drops you down to earth. Le salle des pas perdus is simply the French term for the concourse of a railway station or airport, or the lobby in a big hotel, or the reception area in a city hall, law courts or parliament building - Extract from MTC’s Life Without Me programme notes.

- Compare the term ‘lobby’ with ‘le salle des pas perdus’ (room of lost steps). How is a hotel lobby a ‘room of lost steps’? Is this idea explored in the play? Give examples.

Lost love:

- How is the idea of lost love explored in the play? Consider Roy and Alice’s relationship, Ellen and Tom’s Relationship, John’s comments about his ex-wife, Mrs Spence’s comments about her deceased husband.

FURTHER RESOURCES

An Extract from MTC's *Life Without Me* programme notes:

The self ... is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented. Erving Goffman, 2010

Trailing your suitcase on its little wheels, you trek across the expanse of tasteful carpet to the hotel reception desk. You are making your entrance to a little scene called *Checking-in*. Standing behind the desk, impeccably groomed in her company blazer and her tailored skirt is your co-actor in this mini-drama, the hotel receptionist. You have played this role ('Hotel Guest') and this scene before - your business involves frequent trips to other cities - and although you have never performed with this particular receptionist or in this particular hotel, you are confident that you will know your lines. Indeed, you have your first line prepared before you arrive at the desk and you deliver it with confident smoothness: 'Good afternoon. I would like to check-in, please.'

The researcher who devised a dramaturgical model to describe our social interactions, the sociologist Erving Goffman, developed his ideas while staying at a much smaller hotel in the Shetland Islands in the early fifties. He told the owners he was studying the island crofter society, but actually he was studying them. He noted how their behaviour changed depending on the situation and the people in it, especially whether they were 'on stage' in the public part of the hotel or privately 'backstage' with the staff; he noted how easily and swiftly they switched and adjusted their 'roles'; that each little scene they enacted had its own repertoire of appropriate behaviour to which the other performers responded in character. This dramaturgical consistency, this collusion of disparate performers to create a scene, was clearly unconscious. By the end of his stay, Goffman had concluded that it's natural for people to enter a room, instantly read the situation and play their allotted part.



Robert Menzies and Greg Stone in *Life Without Me*

The scenes Goffman noted in the small hotel in Scotland are played out with minor variations in the big city five-star your company has generously booked for your stay. After you have announced that you are checking in, the Receptionist goes through a specific script, not merely written in accordance to the rituals and routines of checking a guest in,

but subconsciously edited and re-written according to the type of guest you are. You are wearing your medium-grey corporate attire and trailing an overnight-sized case - a costume and a prop suggesting a business trip. Had you been informally dressed and carrying more luggage, she might have inferred 'holiday maker' and relaxed her manner somewhat, responding to the holiday spirit with a few general questions about your stay: where you are from, what you plan to do, and so on. But she reads 'businessperson' and so she plays that variation of the receptionist role that is efficient yet courteous, friendly but not familiar.

Although ostensibly the providers of rooms for rent, hotels are actually in the business of what Goffman called 'impression management'. A good impression is what you pay for: the swankier the hotel, the higher the standard of impression and therefore the higher room rate. If you think about it, the provision of a clean, quiet comfortable room costs more or less the same for most hotels, whether two stars or five. The large difference between hotel rates, therefore, is chiefly based on superficial qualities, the level at which luxury, efficiency and professionalism is displayed. As you look around the foyer while the receptionist confirms your reservation, the sense of opulence created by the plush furnishings, the chandelier, the potted palms and all the light, air and spaciousness disposes you to the view that \$400 is a reasonable nightly rate (at least, when your company is paying). Moreover, the impression reflects back positively on you, as the customer, boosting your self-worth. In your scene with the receptionist, your performance may include an air of casualness that implies: 'I am one of those people who take such lush surroundings for granted.'

Casualness is not part of the receptionist's role. She must strictly manage the impression of efficiency and politeness at the level dictated by the hotel's star rating. Any slip, negligent or accidental, will undermine the impression she is trying to create on behalf of the hotel. An inability to find your reservation, a slight computer glitch, the mispronunciation of your name, or a trace of make-up on her collar will all be falls from grace. However, in this instance everything goes according to script: she finds your reservation, confirms the details, answers your questions, hands you your pass key and sends you towards the lifts with an 'Enjoy your stay' - the smile throughout never leaving her voice if not her lips.

Shortly after your little scene together, she retires 'backstage' to take her scheduled break in the small room provided or staff. Windowless, this room is decorated functionally and haphazardly in contrast to the carefully controlled luxury outside. Out of sight of any audience, she drops her role and engages in behaviour which would have created a poor impression if performed 'on stage': she slumps at a table, slips off her shoes, eats a sandwich, sips tea out of a mug with a cartoon cat on it, and flips through a magazine. Her break over, she re-applies her makeup, straightens her dress and her posture, checks herself in the mirror and, as she walks back for the next scene, applies a smile to her mask.



Kerry Walker and Robert Menzies in *Life Without Me*

THE TWO STAR HOTEL

In *Life Without Me*, the hotel is rated as having two stars. Below is a table of how British and European hotels are rated from one to four stars:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_\(classification\)#World_Hotel_Rating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_(classification)#World_Hotel_Rating)

Hotelstar		Excerpt of the catalogue of criteria
★	<i>Tourist</i>	100 % of the rooms with shower/WC or bath tub/WC - Daily room cleaning - 100 % of the rooms with colour-TV together with remote control - Table and chair - Soap or body wash - Reception service - Facsimile at the reception - Publicly available telephone for guests - Extended breakfast - Beverage offer in the hotel - Deposit possibility
★★	<i>Standard</i>	In addition to the single star (*) hotels: - Breakfast buffet - Reading light next to the bed - Bath essence or shower gel - * Bath towels - Linen shelves - Offer of sanitary products (e.g. toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving kit) - Credit Cards
★★★	<i>Comfort</i>	In addition to the standard star (**) hotels: - Reception opened 14 hours, accessible by phone 24 hours from inside and outside, bilingual staff (e.g. German/English) - Three piece suite at the reception, luggage service - Beverage offer in the room - Telephone in the room - Internet access in the room or in the public area - Heating facility in the bathroom, hair-dryer, cleansing tissue - Dressing mirror, place to put the luggage/suitcase - Sewing kit, shoe polish utensils, laundry and ironing service - Additional pillow and additional blanket on demand - Systematic complaint management system
★★★★	<i>First Class</i>	In addition to the comfort star (***) hotels: - Reception opened 18 hours, accessible by phone 24 hours from inside and outside - Lobby with seats and beverage service - Breakfast buffet or breakfast menu card via room service - Minibar or 24 hours beverages via room service - Upholstered chair/couch with side table - Bath robe and slippers on demand - Cosmetic products (e.g. shower cap, nail file, cotton swabs), vanity mirror, tray of a large scale in the bathroom) - Internet access and internet terminal - "À la carte"-restaurant

- How does the hotel in *Life Without Me* reflect the two star rating?
- If you were a hotel inspector what would you rate it?
- What do you imagine the rooms to look like?
- How do the characters speak about the hotel that may give you clues?

In an article for *The Age* newspaper, playwright Daniel Keene mentions the song *Hotel California* by the Eagles when discussing his play *Life Without Me*. Here are the lyrics to that song:

HOTEL CALIFORNIA – THE EAGLES, 1977

<http://www.elyrics.net/read/e/eagles-lyrics/hotel-california-lyrics.html>

On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair
 Warm smell of colitas rising up through the air
 Up ahead in the distance I saw a shimmering light
 My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim
 I had to stop for the night

There she stood in the doorway, I heard the mission bell
Then I was thinking to myself this could be Heaven or this could be Hell
Then she lit up a candle and she showed me the way
There were voices down the corridor I thought I heard them say

"Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place
(Such a lovely place)
Such a lovely face
Plenty of room at the Hotel California
Any time of year
(Any time of year)
You can find it here"

Her mind is Tiffany twisted, she got the Mercedes Bends
She got a lot of pretty, pretty boys that she calls friends
How they dance in the courtyard, sweet summer sweat
Some dance to remember, some dance to forget

So I called up the captain, "Please bring me my wine"
He said, "We haven't had that spirit here since 1969"
And still those voices are calling from far away
Wake you up in the middle of the night just to hear them say

"Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place
(Such a lovely place)
Such a lovely face
They're living it up at the Hotel California
What a nice surprise
(What a nice surprise)
Bring your alibis"

Mirrors on the ceiling, the pink champagne on ice
And she said, "We are all just prisoners here of our own device"
And in the master's chambers they gathered for the feast
They stab it with their steely knives but they just can't kill the beast

Last thing I remember I was running for the door
I had to find the passage back to the place I was before
"Relax," said the night man, "We are programmed to receive
You can check out any time you like but you can never leave

- Think about the mood that is suggested by the song lyrics above, particularly the last verse.
- Compare this to the play. Are there any similarities? Why can't some of the guests leave? What is stopping them?