

MTC EDUCATION TEACHERS'
NOTES 2016 – PART B

Jasper Jones

based on the novel
by Craig Silvey
adapted by Kate Mulvany



1 August – 9 September 2016
Southbank Theatre,
The Sumner

Notes prepared by Meg Upton

MTC MELBOURNE
THEATRE
COMPANY EDUCATION
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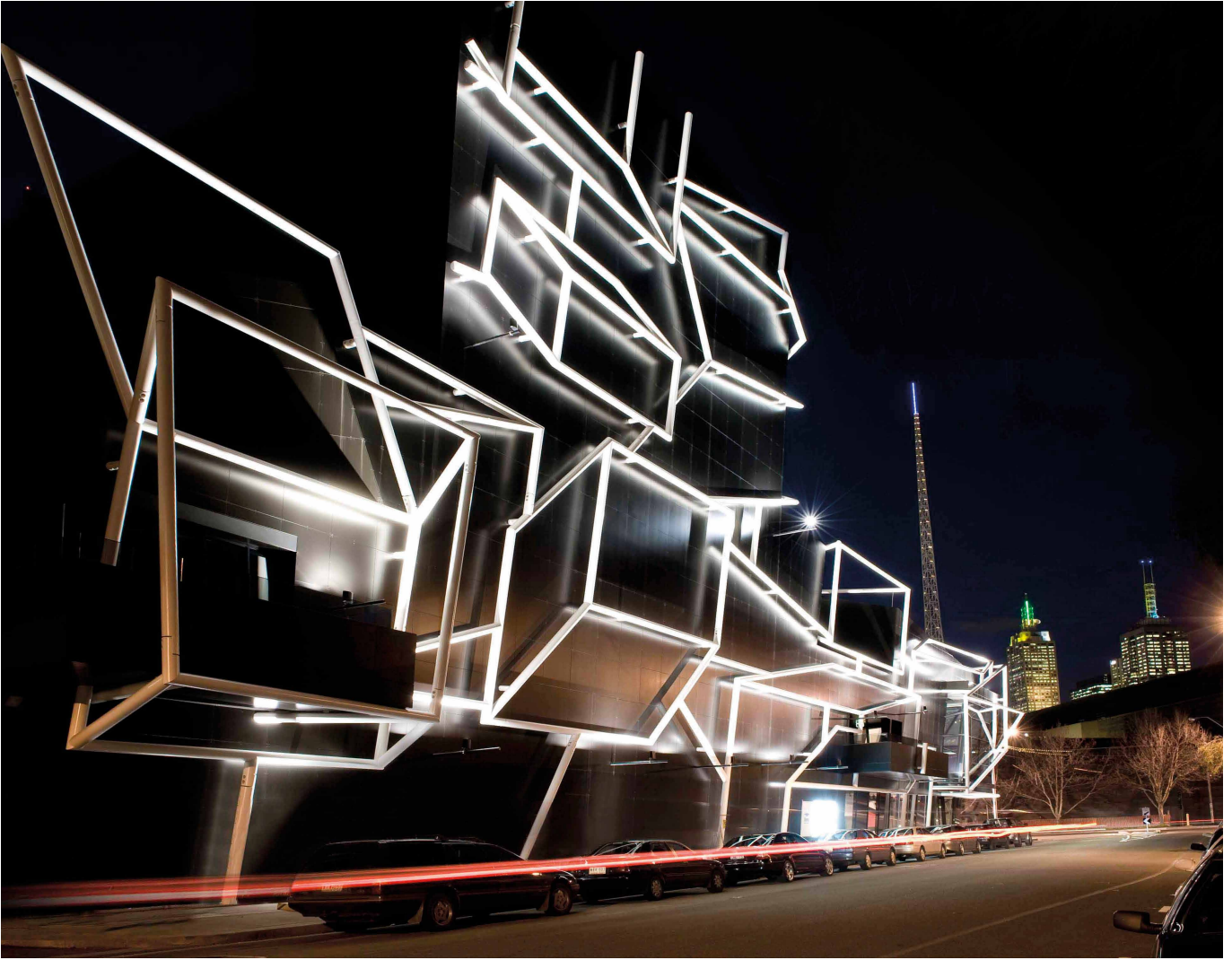
Discuss



Interview



Connect



Melbourne Theatre Company

MTC is Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual mainstage season of up to 12 plays, an annual Education production and diverse learning program, play readings and more. MTC is one of the major performing arts companies in Australia and one of the largest theatre companies in the English-speaking world. Founded in 1953, MTC is also the oldest professional theatre company in Australia and is as a semi-autonomous department of the University of Melbourne.

As Australia changed, MTC has changed with it. We like to think that we have frequently been at the forefront of Australian culture, introducing new ideas and new ways of looking at our lives, our society and the world; helping to explain a swiftly evolving landscape as we moved through it. Today, with Southbank Theatre as our performance home and our headquarters in Sturt Street, Southbank, MTC strives to present Melbourne audiences with the best drama from Australia and overseas to the highest standards.

Our Vision: To enrich lives with understanding and empathy through the storytelling power of the finest theatre imaginable.

Our Artistic Purpose: To produce classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre with style, passion and excellence in order to entertain, challenge and enrich audiences.

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Yalukit Willam of the Boon Wurrung, the Traditional Owners of the land on which Southbank Theatre and MTC HQ stand, and we pay our respects to Melbourne's First People, to their ancestors past and present, and to our shared future.



Jasper Jones On Stage

Because theatre is an ephemeral art form – here in one moment, gone in the next – and contemporary theatre making has become more complex, Part A of the *Jasper Jones* Teachers' Notes offered teachers and students a rich and detailed introduction to the play in order to prepare for seeing the MTC production – possibly only once.

In this second part of the resource we offer you ways to analyse, evaluate, describe and discuss the play in detail for the purposes of writing the performance analysis task. Part B includes interviews with key members of the creative team, production images and a series of detailed prompts and questions.

Importantly, return to Part A of the resource and read it in conjunction with Part B. They are companion parts that make up the whole study of this production.

Theatre Studies Unit 4 – Area of Study 3 – Outcome 3

Students attend a production selected from the Unit 4 Playlist. They analyse and evaluate how actor/s interpret the playscript in the performance and the relationship between acting, direction and design. In doing so students study the character/s in the play and how the actor/s interpreted them on stage.

Key Knowledge

- The character/s in the production including status, motivation and characteristics
- Interpretation by actor/s of a playscript in performance
- Expressive skills including facial expression, voice, gesture, movement, stillness and silence used by the actor/s to realise character/s
- The use of focus and the acting space
- The use of language to convey the intended meanings of the play
- The interrelationships between acting, direction and design
- The establishment and maintenance of the actor–audience relationship
- The interrelationships between acting and theatrical style/s utilised in the production
- Understanding of theatrical terminology and expressions to analyse and evaluate a theatrical production

Key Skills

- Analyse the character/s in the production including status, motivation and characteristics
- Analyse and evaluate interpretation by actor/s of a playscript in performance, including the acting skills used by actor/s to realise character/s, the use of focus and the acting space and the interrelationships between acting, direction and design
- Analyse the use of language to convey the intended meanings of the play
- Analyse and evaluate the establishment and maintenance of the actor–audience relationship
- Analyse the ways that actor/s work within the theatrical style/s utilised in the production
- Use theatre terminology and expression appropriately



The World of the Play

The world of a play could be considered as being the world we witness on stage through the dialogue, action, subtext, direction, and stagecraft/design elements. As an audience, we enter the world of a play at a particular point in characters' lives and exit at a particular point. The world may be a realistic world, a fantastical world, an absurd world, or any number of combinations and permutations of these and others.

The setting for this production is the fictional Western Australian regional town of Corrigan. It is 1965. The action takes place within the town, in the area surrounding Corrigan, on the Corrigan cricket field, and at Mad Jack's house across several weeks.

"[A world where] the characters can clamber through and make discoveries within; one that suits a night-treatment and a day-treatment. One that both oppresses and liberates, excites and terrifies." – Anna Cordingley (Set and Costume Designer)



1960s Australia

Jasper Jones is set in 1965 in rural Western Australia. What references to the 1960s did you see or hear in each of the following aspects of the performance? Make a list with specific examples.

- Language
- Set
- Costume
- Properties
- Music



Guy Simon and Nicholas Denton. Photo by Jeff Busby.



Discuss The Beginning

Discuss the beginning of the performance when the character of Jasper Jones appears at Charlie Bucktin's window:

- What did this evoke for you?
- What did you expect or anticipate when you witnessed it?



Guy Simon. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Interview

In conversation with cast members from *Jasper Jones*.



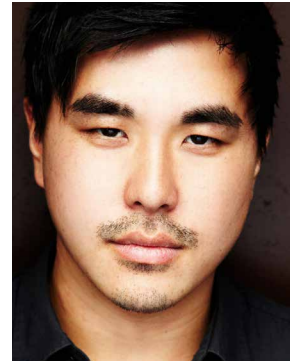
Nicholas Denton



Taylor Ferguson



Guy Simon



Harry Tseng

In a nutshell can you describe the character you play and what sort of person they are?

Guy: Jasper is a 15 to 16-year-old boy, uncertain of his exact age. He is an Indigenous boy who is called a half-caste by the townspeople of Corrigan because his mother is Aboriginal and his father is white. He tends to be known as the town's scapegoat, and trouble-maker. He's pretty cool! He's quite athletic, street smart, and worldly. He's seen a lot and is very aware of the world around him. He knows that his mother died in a car accident when he was a baby, but not the circumstances.

Taylor: I play Laura Wishart and Eliza Wishart. I think Laura is very cool, cooler than Eliza. Eliza is about 13. She loves reading, and is falling in love for the first time. She comes across as quiet and seems a little troubled, but as you get to know her she is actually the opposite. She is quite sensual and has a certain confidence, but she needs to feel a strong sense of trust before she reveals herself. There is no trust in her family. As a result of that she has had to bottle up the truth, has not been able to explain to anyone but has had to deal with things alone. So the difficulties that exist within her family, specifically with regard to her father and Laura, have led to a deep secrecy. This has been made more difficult as she is one of the daughters of Corrigan's Mayor. She knows her life is all a lie and she is waiting to explode.

Nicholas: I play Charlie Bucktin who is a 13-year-old bookish kid from Corrigan. There are a few things I find interesting about Charlie. He is a very smart young man, very much so even for a 13-year-old, but it is mainly in relation to the books he has read – Harper Lee, Jack Kerouac, and Truman Capote. It isn't until he meets Jasper Jones that he begins to experience some of the things he reads first hand – racism, death, sexuality. Charlie has a lot of emotions he wants to share but never has the right way to express them, especially with Eliza who he is smitten with. He has ideas about how things are meant to be, mainly from what he has read in books, but when he tries to take them on in real life, it's a bit of a mess.

He has a very loving father for whom he has a great deal of respect and idolises in a way and is someone who Charlie might like to be. Wesley is a teacher at the high school in Corrigan, is quite liberal-minded and a bit different from others in Corrigan, and he has a great deal of love for his father. Not so sure about his mother, Ruth, who is more interested in leaving Corrigan than staying and they clash a lot.

Harry: Jeffrey Lu is the classic first generation Asian Australian. He struggles a lot with the tension between Australian larrikin-ness and Asian-ness in terms of his family's culture. In the 1960s and, I think even more so now with Asian-Australians, they tend to take on bogan-type behaviour so they can fit in.

I also think every character in this play/story is an enigma. Jeffrey for instance has a seeming false bravado, but he actually has a strong sense of self that we see throughout the play and the novel. He is quite optimistic considering the treatment he gets from the town.

Do you think he feels hurt by that?

Harry: Yes, I think he does, but like a lot of ethnic minorities or marginalised groups he learns to adapt. Cricket is his weapon and his way of fitting in with the local boys and also beating them. He wants to be someone of significance.



Jasper Jones in rehearsal. Photo by Deryk McAlpin.

Possibly all four of the characters each of you play is different in ways that compel them to come together. Would you agree?

Nicholas: Yes. It is really interesting how concepts of difference are explored in the story.

Is this a challenging story to tell? For instance, the issues and experiences the characters have?

Taylor: As an actor it is a whodunit, a mystery. We had a big discussion about the ‘temperature’ of the scenes, especially for Eliza with regard to giving away her part in Laura’s death, what she knows, and what she wants to give away. This is a key subtext and it is challenging.

Guy: As an actor the challenging thing for me is Jasper’s arc as a character; his emotional and mental journey of finding the girl he loves, who is also his best friend, his mother, his sister, his world, his family – finding Laura dead. That highly emotional journey, one that is established at the beginning and then has to be taken through to the end of the play, has a cost. Some of the choices made are emotionally expensive, and having to maintain those choices night after night is really challenging. It is tricky trying to deal with that arc and learning how to get to 100% sometimes quite quickly because I am not on stage all the time like Nick.

In some scenes I have to drop straight into the moment, move out of it and then carry it over to the next scene, while backstage putting on make-up or changing and then jump back in. I find that is one of the most challenging aspects and, at the end, I have to shake it off and turn back into Guy.

Harry: Two things come to mind. As an actor I am not 12-13 years of age so finding the temperature of playing that age without seeming false yet still finding Jeffrey. I think Craig Silvey, the writer, and Kate Mulvany, the playwright, have used Jeffrey to represent some of the little musings and small nothings in the story, like the discussion about Superman and Batman. Jeffrey can be seen as the comic relief, the lightness in the play. As Guy said it is difficult to maintain the arc and to not play Jeffrey on the one note. I think Kate’s script with Craig’s support has given Jeffrey more of an emotional range within the narrative. Jeffrey tells Charlie that his family has been bombed in Vietnam and even though that’s in the past, it is quite relevant to now and it is almost poetic in its currency.

Jeffrey: Spiderman, on the other hand, well, he'd be useless in this town.

Charlie: How do you figure that?

Jeffrey: He's only useful in an urban environment. He needs things to swing between, otherwise he's just a weird-looking guy with snot shooting out of his wrists

Charlie: Fair point.

Nicholas: One thing that stands out for me as an actor and a character (Charlie) is the emotional disconnect within the town and its occupants, and between the characters. We all want to say something to each other but don't necessarily have the right words to do it. So Charlie can't say the right things to Eliza, to Jasper and even to Jeffrey. I imagine that was prevalent in 1965 when people didn't talk about emotions as we tend to do now. There is a scene with Wesley, Charlie's father, where they just don't say what they want to. That disconnect is challenging to play as an actor.

Let's talk now about the set design. Sam talks about it as being a character within the play. How does the set enable you to feel part of Corrigan, and how does it create the world of the play?

Nicholas: Sam has populated the town with a range of different characters so that it is a working, moving town and the audience has been invited in. The set revolves and houses that are distinct to the characters come alive when the characters are engaging with the set. It gives a sense of longevity. So the set provides an insight into Corrigan in a very visceral way. My house is the yellow weatherboard.

Harry: The red brick one is Jeffrey's with its flower-bed and awning.

Taylor: It is so much fun! There is a dam that Laura is put into by Charlie and Jasper and because of the stage revolve we get to travel and to walk around the town. It feels like we are travelling in time and distance.

Harry: I think it is taking things to the next level. Often we are working two-dimensionally and that is usually what the playing space will be. So to have a three dimensional world means it becomes more vibrant and lively. And we get to swing on the houses and there is a scene where Jeffrey and Charlie are on the roof and this elevates the scene because they talk about existentialism and what life is about and they are literally closer to the universe. I think the audience will find that enriching.



Harry Tseng and Nicholas Denton. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Guy: For me the set is fun. In the Belvoir production we had only two set pieces for the houses, and our Corrigan was the audience whom we endowed and got amongst. Now we have a full world that we can have a relationship with, with fences and gardens, and it is great to have these there as obstacles. So the audience gets to see how dangerous it is and how far we travel, which is the great thing about the Sumner.

Something that Theatre Studies students need to consider is the notion of status and motivation. So how might you talk about that?

Harry: I was watching Alain de Botton, the philosopher, on ABC last night and he was saying that in any relationship both parties are teacher and apprentice and neither must deny each other that status. For me, the relationship between Jeffrey and Charlie is true to that and the apprentice and master roles constantly shift. Even within the novel there aren't any interactions between Jasper Jones and Jeffrey Lu. However there is *sassy time* and his new relationship with Charlie when Eliza enters the scene.

Asian characters also tend to be placed in the background. Asians are often treated badly but not badly enough. Historically many Asian cultures don't protest on a major level. In that context their roles in theatre are reliant on writing. What Craig Silvey has done and what Kate Mulvany has done is to foreground Jeffrey Lu.



Discuss Characters

- What does Harry Tseng mean here about the status of other nationalities in the play?
- Do you feel this is reflected in the broader Australian community?
- You may like to refer to events leading up to and post the recent Federal election.

Taylor, how do you consider the status of Eliza in this story?

Taylor: Eliza is a character in the play who has something to hide, and this means she tends to play low status. It hits her on occasion, the enormity of it all, switched on by her visual memory of Laura dying, but she rarely plays high status, perhaps at the end with Jasper and Charlie. Eliza also has Laura's letter, something she must hide, and this generates the powerful sub-text we were talking about before. However, the letter is also something of power if she chooses to use it.

I think Eliza's status is difficult to determine and it is ambiguous because of her need to remain silent. Her status is made more complex by the possession of her sister's letter, and falling in love with Charlie. Maybe her behaviours and actions are more about coping than anything else. Her need to be fathered hasn't been met. To be fathered you are taught to be in the world and to be mothered is to be *nurtured and your feelings considered* but her family circumstances haven't allowed that. Perhaps the act of burning down the family house is her high status moment.



Nicholas Denton and Taylor Ferguson. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Guy: For Jasper it is a complex status play. He is worldly and independent. With regard to Charlie his status is quite high, however, because of his heritage he is an outcast and a misfit so on that level he occupies a low status. You can't play 'outcast' of course. Others need to determine that for you, but I think of a lot of Jasper's qualities make him high status.

He is quite a heroic character, and I think your status is vested in the audience, we decide for you.

Guy: It is a cool thing for the audience to need to grapple with that. I think it is important that an audience gets to decide my status, especially an Australian audience!

I would like to unpack the opening scenes, the suicide image of Laura Wishart. What does that mean to you all?

Taylor: I grappled with it. Whenever I have a harness session everyone is there and I do feel very safe. One thing I was told is that if I do wake up at 3am feeling upset, that is part of the process of depicting this. The harness expert said that he worked on twenty-four theatre productions in one year that required his skills in harnessing, plays that dealt with suicide. He said that many actors find the process really challenging. You put the rope around your neck and you know it is fake but your body doesn't necessarily recognise that.

Nicholas and Guy, your characters, Charlie and Jasper, have to cut Laura's body down. What are the challenges for you?

Nicholas: It is interesting. Not only is Charlie surprised that Jasper has appeared at his window but he also has no idea what Jasper is going to show him. He is overwhelmed and so to take Laura's body down and place her in a dam, then spend two big scenes with Jasper talking about life and then having to go on with your life is very challenging for these two characters. For Charlie and Jasper and, as we learn, Eliza to go on with this knowledge in their heads is very saddening. People do that, they go on living because they have to, but it is always there inside you. Having that happen at the start of the play enables you as an actor to be driven by it but it is, from a story point of view, very sad. However, that is the story and that weight, that heaviness is now forever in these boys and this young girl.

Is there another way that it could have been staged?

Nicholas: It could have been but this provides a very strong, visual impact for both the characters and the audience.

Taylor: I think it needs to be staged like this. We don't open up the discussion around young people and suicide enough. Where I come from in Queensland has very high suicide statistics. My dad told me about one only recently, and it is usually unreported, often out of respect for the family. What this story does is open up difficult topics for conversation. The characters in *Jasper Jones* have to walk around with dark secrets because they don't feel they can speak to the people who are meant to be their parents and carers. In real life young people often have to hide things, so for me this play makes a statement about the need to talk and to acknowledge.

Guy: It is quite tough as an actor. Rehearsal is one thing but as soon as you are in performance and the body of Laura is revealed and you see the make-up and hear the audience gasp, it becomes challenging. You really need to keep focused. But it is higher than you. Telling this story is higher than you. We have to provoke conversation and we need to put it out there in order to talk and we must also listen. Often after such a tragedy you hear people say they wish they had spoken out more, but I think it is more that we need to listen. *Jasper Jones* is really important in highlighting that.

Harry: It is interesting how characters tend to choose you. Jeffrey doesn't encounter any of what the others experience. Growing up I didn't experience anything like this in the same way Jeffrey doesn't. So when you ask the question about how it should be staged, for me it is more about the 'truth' of the moment. To depict that truth is to engage the audience directly with the issue, in a considered and weighted way.



Discuss

- How did you respond to this moment in the play?
- What other moments did you find powerful and possibly confronting? Why?
- Do you think that live theatre has more impact than say a novel or a film? Why?

So to finish on a different temperature, what is the hopefulness, affirmation and positivity in *Jasper Jones*?

Nicholas: I think it is the concepts of courage and bravery, for all the characters who are all outsiders in their own way. How do they show courage in the face of death, discrimination, racism, and violence? Charlie, Jasper, Eliza and Jeffrey are fortunate in being able to make connections that enable that.

Harry: Following your heart and being true, that typical coming of age journey. I also think the characters have love for each other, different forms of love for each other and that supports them and gives them courage. *Jasper Jones* also depicts a side of Australia and its history that we are often not shown.

Guy: It is a good question. I think for Jasper there is a sense of possibility when he leaves Corrigan that he can go anywhere but it is, as the others have said, about being courageous, speaking out and kicking back. There is a fork in the road; he could go either way.

Taylor: The notion of hope is quite small and it is about everyday living. Eliza has been able to connect closely to someone else about coming to terms with the death of her sister, Laura. So for her, the positivity and hope is to find a way to let that lie and to become the person she wants to be.

Charlie: Please don't leave me, Jasper.

Jasper: You're just gonna have to get brave in a hurry now, Charlie. Unnerstand?

Harry: You put it well. It is the small things and that is the power of the play. They have all stepped up in some way, sometimes in very small ways, and that is life. The audience sees themselves in these characters to varying degrees and so they also see the glimpses of hope.

Nicholas: There is that line in the play, "The more you have to lose, the braver you are for standing up". So the play acknowledges that and the need to sometimes take risks.

One of the fears I have for Jasper is the time in Australia in which his life is being played out, the 1960s. He could very well be treated the same in the next town and the next. What are your thoughts, Guy?

Guy: In the Sydney season at Belvoir I was having a conversation with Kate Mulvany, the playwright. We had a show on Australia Day, or Survival Day as I like to call it. After we finished I was really, really feeling upset. I was sitting there, baffled, thinking why are my people so hated? She said to me, "You know what? Jasper is going to leave Corrigan and is going to become one of those powerful, deeply respected Uncles, like Richard Frankland", and that is my hope for him. I feel that is where he will go.

Jasper: I SAID GET OUT OF MY PLACE! This is my place. This here. Not yours. Not yours. Not even Laura's. It's mine. And I'm sick of you people turnin' up and shiftin' everything around and then expectin' me to be able to find my way through it all. *A beat.* This is my place.



Nicholas Denton and Guy Simon. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Expressive Skills

Key Knowledge for Theatre Studies includes analysing and evaluating the actors' use of expressive skills including facial expression, voice, gesture, movement, stillness and silence to realise characters. The following activities will help you unpack the performance.



Characterisation

- Make a list of the **characteristics** you would attribute to each character in the play – personality, mannerisms, behaviours, responses to situations, how they are described by others (particularly Charlie).
- Make a list of the way the actors used their **expressive skills** to convey these and other characteristics.



Discuss Expressive Skills

- How did Nicholas Denton use voice, gesture, movement, and facial expression to convey the character of Charlie?
- How did Harry Tseng use expressive skills to convey the character of Jeffrey?
- As a class discuss specific moments when **stillness and silence** was effective.



Harry Tseng and Nicholas Denton. Photo by Jeff Busby.



Characterisation

- Consider how the actors **describe** their characters in the quotations below.
- Make a list of examples from the production that you can draw upon that might support these descriptions.

“**Charlie** has a lot of emotions he wants to share but never has the right way to express them, especially with Eliza who he is smitten with. He has ideas about how things are meant to be, mainly from what he has read in books, but when he tries to take them on in real life, it’s a bit of a mess.” – *Nicholas Denton (Charlie)*

“**Jasper** is quite athletic, street smart, and worldly. He’s seen a lot and is very aware of the world around him.”
– *Guy Simon (Jasper)*

“**Eliza** comes across as quiet and seems a little troubled, but as you get to know her she is actually the opposite. She is quite sensual and has a certain confidence, but she needs to feel a strong sense of trust before she reveals herself.”
– *Taylor Ferguson (Laura/Eliza)*

“**Jeffrey Lu** is the classic first generation Asian Australian. He struggles a lot with the tension between Australian larrikin-ness and Asian-ness in terms of his family’s culture... but he actually has a strong sense of self that we see throughout the play and the novel. He is quite optimistic...cricket is his weapon.” – *Harry Tseng (Jeffrey)*



Rachel Gordon, Ian Bliss and Nicholas Denton. Photo by Jeff Busby.



Characterisation

- Compare, contrast and evaluate the representation of the characters in *Jasper Jones* with what you experienced, how the actors discuss their characters, and how the playwright thinks about them (see below).
- What specific examples can you draw upon to provide evidence for your analysis and evaluation?

“**Jasper** is our truth, and the legend of our history. He is our angry hero. He speaks the truth and he’s not apologetic about it. And nor should he be. **Eliza** is our damaged heroine. She is speaking for not only herself and her sister Laura, but for young women everywhere - and she has a world of secrets to reveal. **Jeffrey** is our heart. He is exuberant, hopeful, pro-active and empathetic. We have much to learn from him. **Mad Jack** is our past. He is suffering now for the terrible choices he made through ignorance. But he can change, as can we...**Charlie** is our eyes and ears. Through his storytelling, we see ourselves and our society - not just in 1965, but now. He is the portal through which we can ask, ‘What has changed?’ ‘What should change?’ ‘What can I do to change the injustices of my society?’...**Mr and Mrs Bucktin** represent the fact that with love comes great sadness, and that the fairy tale doesn’t always work out the way we plan. Ruth Bucktin in particular, represents a woman rebelling against the protocols placed upon her and who is demanding respect as a woman.” – *Kate Mulvany (Playwright)* See full interview in Part A of the Teachers’ Notes.



Discuss Character Doubling

- In the production some of the actors play multiple roles. For example, Ian Bliss plays Wes Bucktin and Warwick Trent, and Hayden Spencer plays Mad Jack Lionel, the police sergeant and is part of the cricket team. Why do you think these roles are doubled?
- Discuss how the actors created their different characters. For instance how did Ian Bliss switch from 40-year-old Wes Bucktin to 15-year-old Warwick Trent, the town bully?
- Evaluate the effectiveness of portraying different characters in this production.



Ian Bliss, Nicholas Denton and Hayden Spencer. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Interview

Anna Cordingley (Set and Costume Designer) offers the following insights about her vision and realisation of the set and costume designs for *Jasper Jones*.

Sam Strong and Anna Cordingley in rehearsal. Photo by Deryk McAlpin.



What initially interested you about *Jasper Jones*?

I was drawn to the epic, rambling, thrilling nature of the novel as the kids' adventure unfolds – in fact, I loved Silvey's novel first, and reading Kate Mulvany's adaptation felt like all the best elements distilled. I was interested in how a designer might translate that thrill and adventure for stage when clearly so much of the character's discoveries are vast and environmental. A director and designer could so easily fall into the trap of shrinking the story to suit the stage, and Sam and I were desperately interested in not doing that.

What type of world are you seeking to create?

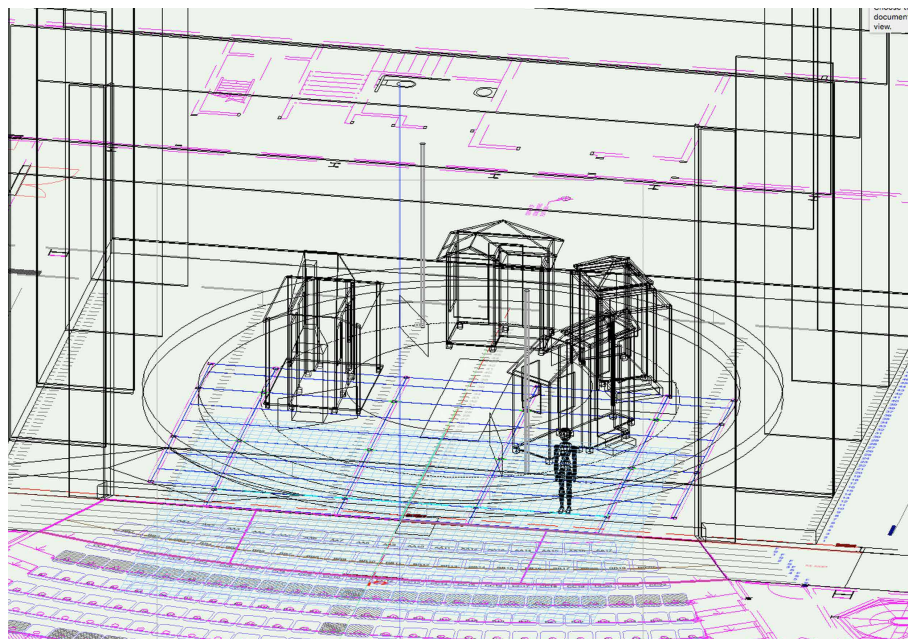
A complex one! One that the characters can clamber through and make discoveries within; one that suits a night-treatment and a day-treatment. One that both oppresses and liberates, excites and terrifies. Very ambitious, actually!

How would you describe the design aesthetic?

This aesthetic is a balance between heightened realism and abstraction. Perhaps it could be called magical realism, if that exists as a design aesthetic! I've tried to emulate reality, at an incorrect scale, with infinitesimal detail, but then at times that detail stops completely and abruptly and gives way to abstraction. Such as the interior of each house; they contain nothing whatsoever but a single, bold colour.

What have been the challenges?

Discovering where the realism ends and the abstraction begins is the biggest challenge, and I'm still discovering that. I've toned the costumes as per the sugary house interiors, to 'pop' the actors against the burnt-ochre detail of the stage floor. And I'll only really know when I see the garments under stage lights how much 'distressing' or 'breaking down' I'll need to do. Do the people live in the abstract world or the dwarfed-realism world? I'm 99% certain it's the latter, but I'm still addressing that challenge!



Technical Drawing by Anna Cordingley



Director Sam Strong talks about the set as being another ‘character’ in the play. Would you agree?

It is a trope of gothic fiction to present atmosphere as a character, and in *Jasper Jones*, the sentiment and atmosphere of the town permeates all attitudes and influences all scenarios. So yes, I’d completely agree. We both wished to present the town as cyclical and hum-drum, concealing its darkness amidst a façade of familiarity, banality and pleasantries. And if we’ve done our job well, the character of the town should stand in stark contrast to the stillness and honesty of Jasper’s wattle grove.

How does the design represent or reflect an Australia of the 1960s?

In a literal sense, we’ve poached many-a-design-feature from reality and occasionally down-sized it to fit within the town. For example, folding plastic lattice chairs, drinking glasses with burnt-orange geometric patterns, frequency-dial radios etc. In a more abstract sense, I’ve taken the candy colours and pastels of the early sixties and extrapolated them – replaced literal detail within each of the houses on stage with slabs of such colour. I’ve done this because the saccharine nature of those colours is the antithesis of the parochialism and bigotry that exists in Corrigan, and sadly existed throughout Australia in the 1960s, especially in regards to Aboriginal affairs and immigration. By using such sickly sweet colours, I hope to highlight the denials of the era.

What are the key ideas that *Jasper Jones* explores? How does the set reflect or represent these?

The set aims to explore the tension between a homely home and community, full of familiarity, love and warmth, and on the other hand stifling small-mindedness. It explores the cruelty of the built environment and the liberation of Jasper’s natural one. And I hope the town is nuanced enough to communicate love as well as the obvious intolerances. In, for example, the scratching of ‘sorry’ across Mad Jack’s Hillman and the upkeep of Mr Lu’s garden bed. And in the manner in which the boys can share moments of discovery, revelation and friendship. A town that can facilitate friendships such as Jeffrey and Charlie’s can’t be all bad.



Set design rendering by Anna Cordingley.



Nicholas Denton, Rachel Gordon, Ian Bliss and Harry Tseng. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Focus, the Acting Space, and Actor-Audience Relationship



Discuss Focus and Actor-Audience Relationship

The design and theatrical styles within the production impact focus and the use of the acting or playing space. Discuss the following:

- How was direct address used in the production? Discuss examples of direct address and how the actors' focus was used to convey this.
- How did particular scenes move between direct address and the re-emergence of the fourth wall?
- Would you agree that the stage revolve acted as a mechanism for shifting the use of the acting space?
- When the stage was revolving, where was your focus drawn and why?
- How did direction contribute to your focus as an audience?
- How did the direction contribute to the actors' focus and use of the acting space?
- How did the design contribute to focus and use of the acting space? For example, consider the dream sequence of Charlie and Eliza in the Manhattan ballroom imagining famous writers.



Nicholas Denton and Taylor Ferguson. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Language

Jasper Jones is an Australian play, which suggests several things about the written and spoken language. Discuss the use of language to convey the intended meanings of the play.



Discuss Language

How would you describe the language used in *Jasper Jones*?

- Is it contemporary or historic?
- Does it convey a cultural identity or class?
- Look at the five scenes offered at the end of these notes for closer analysis and discuss the written and spoken language of the play.
- How is physical language used in the production i.e. movement, gesture, gaze?

Status and motivation



Discuss Status and Motivation

Discuss what insights the following quotes from the actors offer in terms of status and motivation of particular characters:

- What examples can you recall from the performance that highlight the actors' descriptions?

"I was watching Alain de Botton, the philosopher, on ABC last night and he was saying that in any relationship both parties are teacher and apprentice and neither must deny each other that status. For me, the relationship between Jeffrey and Charlie is true to that and the apprentice and master roles constantly shift." – *Harry Tseng (Jeffrey)*

"Eliza is a character in the play who has something to hide, and this means she tends to play low status."
– *Taylor Ferguson (Laura/Eliza)*

"For Jasper it is a complex status play. He is worldly and independent. With regard to Charlie his status is quite high, however, because of his heritage he is an outcast and a misfit so on that level he occupies a low status." – *Guy Simon (Jasper)*



Status and Motivation

Use the five scenes offered at the end of this resource to investigate status and motivation.

- What is motivating each character in the scenes? How do you know?
- Remember to recall the performance as your evidence.
- How would you describe the status between the characters in the scenes?
- What do you recall from the performance that confirms or contrasts with your discussion?



Acting, Direction, Design and Theatrical Styles – The Interrelationships

“As an actor the challenging thing for me is Jasper’s arc as a character; his emotional and mental journey of finding the girl he loves, who is also his best friend, his mother, his sister, his world, his family – finding Laura dead. That highly emotional journey, one that is established at the beginning and then has to be taken through to the end of the play, has a cost.” – *Guy Simon (Jasper)*

“One thing that stands out for me as an actor and a character (Charlie) is the emotional disconnect within the town and its occupants, and between the characters... There is a scene with Wesley, Charlie’s father, where they just don’t say what they want to. That disconnect is challenging to play as an actor.” – *Nicholas Denton (Charlie)*



Discuss Emotion

Discuss the two quotations above:

- What do they suggest with regard to the challenges offered to an actor?
- What do the actors mean by ‘emotional arc’?
- What do you think is meant by ‘emotional disconnect’?
- Analyse and evaluate whether such emotional arcs and disconnects were evident in the performance.
- Which particular moments? How did the performance and expressive skills of the characters demonstrate this?

Set Design

“It is a trope of gothic fiction to present atmosphere as a character, and in *Jasper Jones*, the sentiment and atmosphere of the town permeates all attitudes and influences all scenarios.” – *Anna Cordingley (Set and Costume Designer)*

“The set aims to explore the tension between a homely home and community, full of familiarity, love and warmth, and on the other hand stifling small-mindedness. It explores the cruelty of the built environment and the liberation of Jasper’s natural one. And I hope the town is nuanced enough to communicate love as well as the obvious intolerances.” – *Anna Cordingley (Set and Costume Designer)*

“Do the people live in the abstract world or the dwarfed-realism world?” – *Anna Cordingley (Set and Costume Designer)*



Discuss Set

Discuss the three quotations by the designer, Anna Cordingley.

Also return to Part A of this resource and other aspects where design is considered.

- How did the design of the set impact the way the actors presented their characters?
- For instance how did the mini-houses and the stage revolve relate to the actors’ capacity to portray their characters?
- What were your thoughts when the characters went into their ‘houses’?
- How did the revolving of the set allow the characters to travel through time and location?
- Discuss the notion of what the set might represent with regard to truth and lies.



Set model (from above) by Anna Cordingley.

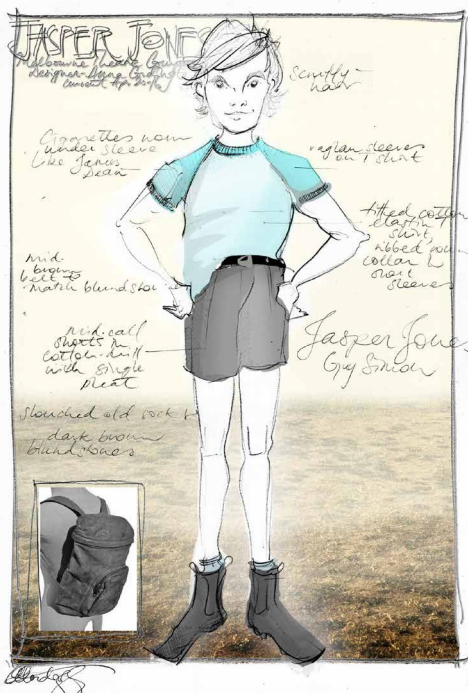
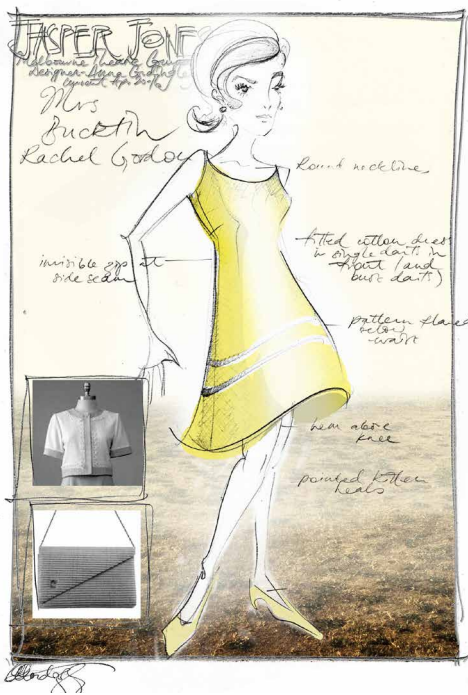
Costume



Discuss Costumes

How would you describe the costumes? What aesthetic? What colour palette?

- Analyse and evaluate how the costumes enhanced the world of the play.
- Discuss how the costumes contributed to the creation of the characters.
- Analyse and discuss how costume reflected the era and period.



Clockwise from top left Costume design by Anna Cordingley; Rachel Gordon, photo by Jeff Busby; Guy Simon, photo by Jeff Busby; costume design by Anna Cordingley.

Music and Sound Design

From the very opening of the production we hear the sound design at play.



Discuss Sound Design

- How did the music and sound design contribute to the production?
- Did particular characters have particular musical scores?
- How did the music and sound design generate mood?
- What particular scenes can you recall where the sound design was effective?

Theatrical Styles

The director, playwright and designer have variously described the theatrical styles in *Jasper Jones* as: **gothic, heightened realism, abstract, comedy, drama, and tragedy**. Revisit Part A of these resources and the interview with the director, Sam Strong, plus the other links to the playwright and author of the novel:



Discuss Theatrical Styles

- What are the conventions of each of the theatrical styles mentioned above?
- Which conventions were evident?
- How were they made evident – through the acting, the set design, the costumes, and the sound design?
- Think specifically about: the cricket scene when Jeffrey is on a winner; the search for Laura; the New York dream sequence.



Discuss Humour

There are some very awkward and funny moments in *Jasper Jones*.

- Discuss how the theatrical style of comedy was evident in the production
- Consider physical comedy, slapstick, comic timing, and juxtaposition.
- What comic moments do you recall and from which characters?
- How did the comic moments contrast with the more dramatic moments?

Themes in *Jasper Jones*

“Ignorance, sexism, adolescence, love, hatred, diversity, belonging, acceptance, courage and hope...[the play] deals with childhood, adulthood, mortality, ignorance and everything in between without talking down to its audience.”
– *Kate Mulvany (Playwright)*

“So when you ask the question about how it should be staged, for me it is more about the ‘truth’ of the moment. To depict that truth is to engage the audience directly with the issue, in a considered and weighted way.” – *Harry Tseng (Jeffrey)*

“How do they show courage in the face of death, discrimination, racism, and violence?” – *Nicholas Denton (Charlie)*

“In the Sydney season at Belvoir I was having a conversation with Kate Mulvany, the playwright. We had a show on Australia Day, or Survival Day as I like to call it. After we finished I was really, really feeling upset. I was sitting there, baffled, thinking why are my people so hated? She said to me, “You know what? Jasper is going to leave Corrigan and is going to become one of those powerful, deeply respected Uncles, like Richard Frankland”, and that is my hope for him. I feel that is where he will go.”
– *Guy Simon (Jasper)*



Discuss Themes

Discuss each of the above quotes about the key ideas in the play:

- What do they evoke for you?
- How were they represented in the production?
- What in particular stays with you in regard to the production? What was most powerful?
- What was the most entertaining?
- Which character/s did you associate with the most and why?



Nicholas Denton, Rachel Gordon and Guy Simon. Photo by Jeff Busby.

Close Analysis

MTC's production of *Jasper Jones* is the third time Kate Mulvany's script has received a professional production in Australia. Each production has been significantly different, with the director and other creative personnel emphasising different elements and making unique artistic choices. You may find the following sections of the script valuable for applying the Key Knowledge areas for Outcome 3. Page numbers refer the 2016 edition published by Currency Press. The script is available for purchase.

ACT ONE: Scene 2

The discovery of Laura Wishart (pp. 6-7)
from

Jasper: Charlie, I promise you, mate—I din't do this.

to

Jasper: Really? And what was the first thing you thought?

ACT ONE: Scene 6

At the Bucktins' (p. 26)
from

Mrs Bucktin: Charlie, if you're going to Jeffrey's today, I'd like you to stay on the street where I can see you, please.

to

Charlie: My Dad, as ever, says nothing.

ACT TWO: Scene 5

At the cricket (pp. 51-52)
from

Eliza Hello, Charlie.

to

Charlie: Hey. Would you rather have a hat of spiders or penises for fingers?

ACT TWO: Scene 9

At Mad Jack Lionel's (pp. 65-66)
from

Mad Jack: Your dad never forgave me.

Never let me see you again.

to

Charlie: Yes, Mad Jack.

ACT TWO: Scene 10

At Jasper's wattle glade (pp. 73-74)
from

Eliza: Why did Jasper stop coming to my sister's window?

Did he not love her anymore? Why did he stop?

to

Jasper: I said get out of my place!



Nicholas Denton and Taylor Ferguson. Photo by Jeff Busby.



Photo by Sarah Walker.



When you visit Southbank Theatre, share your experience on Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag #mtcJasperJones and tag @melbtheatreco. For *Jasper Jones* you can even take photos in the auditorium before and after the show!



Like our MTC Student Hub on Facebook for behind-the-scenes information about our Education Program and discover ways for you to get involved with MTC.

[Facebook/MTCStudentHub](https://www.facebook.com/MTCStudentHub)



Check out our official YouTube channel for exclusive videos, including a short documentary about the making of the set.

[youtube.com/melbtheatreco](https://www.youtube.com/melbtheatreco)

Attendance Information

Jasper Jones contains coarse language and references to violence, sexual abuse and suicide. If you need to debrief with somebody about the themes in *Jasper Jones*, your school wellbeing coordinator is a good person to ask. There are also many helpful mental health resources online.

The MTC website has dedicated pages for teachers and students. Go online to read more about visiting with school groups and opportunities for students. [mtc.com.au/education](https://www.mtc.com.au/education)

Enquiries

For general MTC Education enquiries:

email education@mtc.com.au or contact our Education Coordinator 03 8688 0974.

School bookings:

email schools@mtc.com.au or phone 03 8688 0963

