

JOHN

by Annie Baker



Welcome



Welcome to Melbourne Theatre Company's second production for the season, the Australian premiere of *John* by the award-winning playwright Annie Baker.

John is a deeply affecting piece of theatre with extraordinary moments of poignancy and poetry to discover in Baker's dialogue.

This production also marks Sarah Goodes' directorial debut as MTC's new Associate Director, although you have already enjoyed her work last year with one of 2016's great successes – *Switzerland*.

Across the road at Southbank Theatre, our other new Associate Director Dean Bryant kicked off MTC's 2017 season in high style with his production of *Born Yesterday*.

In February, MTC's *Cybec Electric* will be part of Asia TOPA initiated by the Sidney Myer Fund and Arts Centre Melbourne. This is a major new festival celebrating the culture and creativity of the Asia Pacific Region. I encourage you all to grab a brochure and see a show.

As you may have noticed, we have made all our programmes \$2 or free as a digital download. We made this decision so more people can access information about our productions, casts and creative teams. Our new programmes will also guide you to more information and editorial that you may enjoy post show – including podcasts, videos and behind-the-scenes stories.

Enjoy the show.

Virginia Lovett
Executive Director



Programmes can be downloaded for free at mtc.com.au/backstage

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Yalukit Willam Peoples 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 Peoples, to their ancestors past and present, and to our shared future.

MTC is a department of the University of Melbourne.



MTC is assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and by the State Government of Victoria through Creative Victoria.



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MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

JOHN

by Annie Baker

10 FEBRUARY – 25 MARCH

Arts Centre Melbourne,
Fairfax Studio

Cast

Elias Schreiber-Hoffman Johnny Carr
Genevieve Marduk Melita Jurisic
Jenny Chung Ursula Mills
Mertis Katherine Graven Helen Morse

Voice & Dialect Coach Geraldine Cook-Dafner
Fight Choreographer Felicity Steel
Stage Manager Christine Bennett
Assistant Stage Manager Lisette Drew
Stage Management Secondment
(NIDA) Brittany Coombs
Composer & Sound Design
Attachment Jess Keeffe
Lighting Design Attachment Jake Kirby
Rehearsal Photographer Pia Johnson
Production Photographer Jeff Busby

Production

Director Sarah Goodes
Set & Costume Designer Elizabeth Gadsby
Lighting Designer Richard Vabre
Composer & Sound Designer Russell Goldsmith

————— **About the Play** —————

Jenny and Elias arrive late one evening at a kitschy, civil war-themed B&B in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Awkward and harried, they are a couple on the edge. It's a feeling exacerbated by the sensation they're being watched. Not just by Mertis and her eccentric friend Genevieve, but by the countless dolls and figurines that occupy their spooky lodgings. This might not be the right place, or the right company, for Jenny and Elias to mend their fraying relationship.

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*Ursula Mills; (below) Johnny Carr, Ursula Mills,
Melita Jurisic and Helen Morse; (Opposite)
Director Sarah Goodes with Ursula Mills*





From the Director

Director of *John* and MTC Associate Director Sarah Goodes directs a play that honours the movement of time.

When I first read Annie Baker's play *John* I was immediately caught in its spell. I was struck by how it seamlessly soared from the domestic, to the epic. There is an essential mystery inside it that I couldn't pin down; it vibrated with it and that was what I loved most about it.

In the first week of rehearsals, a week of reading and discussions, we realised the play was like one of Mertis' precious birds; the more you tried to pin it down the more you clipped its wings. Our job was to open up possibilities and be alert to its potential, while keeping a keen eye on the carefully observed action of everyday life.

Often described as supernatural realism, *John* is enlightening as it explores our need for empathy and connection, and the grace that will give us freedom from ourselves. When you read the script, Annie Baker includes two quotes which are wonderful to have in your head while reading or watching this play:

"Now, my excellent friend,' said my companion, 'you are in possession of all

you need to know to follow my argument. We see that in the organic world, as thought grows dimmer and weaker, grace emerges more brilliantly and decisively. But just as a section drawn through two lines suddenly reappears on the other side after passing through infinity, or as the image in a concave mirror turns up again right in front of us after dwindling into the distance, so grace itself returns when knowledge has as it were gone through an infinity. Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god."

**Heinrich von Kleist,
On the Marionette Theatre**

'Nunquam minus solus, quam cum solus.'
Never less alone than when alone.

Cicero

Being a play that weaves between worlds – where two couples from very different generations sit gently alongside each other – I knew I needed unique, generous actors to bring this piece to life. ▶



Of course, Helen Morse, one of Australia's great actors of stage and screen, was a perfect fit for Mertis. We began this journey with the beautiful Julia Blake playing the role of Genevieve, but unfortunately, she couldn't continue.

So it was a real challenge to find someone to step into the role. Luckily, I was able to convince Melita Jurisic to join us all the way from Vienna – on such short notice – and as she pointed out – to play a character who has to consume so many Vienna Finger Biscuits. Together with Ursula Mills from Sydney, and Melbourne's

Johnny Carr, this cast have been a joy to work with.

Annie Baker has written a play that truly celebrates storytelling with a focus on the mechanics of theatre, the temporal nature of it, its intimate relationship with its audience and not one, but two intervals thrown in just to remind you where you are.

Set and Costume designer Elizabeth Gadsby and I spoke a lot about how Annie Baker plays with the mechanics of theatre. In lieu of a red curtain we decided to explore the revolves and Elizabeth came up with a wonderful design



*Johnny Carr; (opposite, clockwise from left)
Ursula Mills; Melita Jurisic and Johnny Carr; Helen Morse*

that is able to turn like a clock, tracking Mertis' orchestration of the passage of time through the piece.

Composer Russell Goldsmith and I explored the 'Ken Burns effect' from watching his incredible documentary on the American Civil War – all 7 hours of it. And lighting designer Richard Vabre and myself discussed the transcendental power of light; the sun, candles, lamps and Christmas tree lights. Needless to say, this has been a lighting designer's dream. Geraldine Cook-Dafner has worked tirelessly on the accents for this piece and has been invaluable within the rehearsal room.

In a digital age theatre offers an intimate connection not just with immediate actors right in front of you, but also sitting next to people you may or may not have met before entering an imaginary world of storytelling together. We hope you sit back and enjoy this intriguing journey – one you can only experience in the theatre.



Hear director Sarah Goodes speak about *John* at the Season 2017 Launch.

mtc.com.au/backstage

The Gift of Silence

Annie Baker is one Brooklyn playwright who is unafraid to break the mould.

At a bookstore in New York, celebrating the publication of her Pulitzer-Prize winning play *The Flick* and her Chekov adaptation – a modern *Uncle Vanya* – Annie Baker said she felt inspired to ‘push the boundaries of theatre’ even further.

John, Baker’s seventh professional play, is an attempt to do this and follows the signature tune of Chekov’s work including character introspection and stunted communication.

Baker first appeared on the New York theatre circuit with her series of dramas, ‘The Vermont Plays’. In this anthology lies *Body Awareness* (2008), *Circle Mirror Transformation* (2009), *The Aliens* and *Noctumara* (2010). Both *Circle Mirror Transformation* and *The Aliens* were breakthrough successes, collecting Baker Obie Awards for each and catapulting her into a category of award-winning, contemporary playwrights. Three years later she would pen *The Flick*, cementing her place in America’s most highly respected playwriting circle of Pulitzer Prize-winners.

Baker is part of a movement of new-wave American writers who observe their surroundings with acute curiosity. Her work is slow-moving, much like the real world, which allows her narratives to evolve naturally. The very first stage direction in her play *The Aliens* reads: ‘At least a third – if not half – of this play is in silence.’ Dialogue is frequently paused and conflicts build as they do in real life; steadily rising until they reach boiling point, where they explode in a spectacular display of emotion.



The setting of *John* – the site of America’s most devastating Civil War battle in Gettysburg – is no small coincidence. It was at this place, 152 years before *John* opened off-Broadway, that 45,000 Americans were killed in a three-day massacre; making Gettysburg the biggest ghost town in the country. It is against this backdrop that Baker resurrects the ghosts of her characters’ pasts and explores the end of her protagonists’ relationship.

Baker’s analysis of what it means to be together, and alone, mingling with people

of another generation, makes her voice particularly unique in her own generation.

She's been praised worldwide for her ability to take ordinary people and situations and find extraordinary meaning in what they say. Even more extraordinary is Baker's ability to find meaning in what her characters don't say. Her work is loaded with silent moments, which are almost as crucial as her play's leading lines.

In an interview with *Huffington Post*, Baker said, 'When I'm writing: I'm picturing those bodies in space, moving around. When it does come to hearing the dialogue and sort of transcribing it, it feels a lot like what I imagine writing a musical score is like. The rests and the pauses are part of that too, like stage directions. It's sort of like what you put in italics and what you don't ... to me it is all equally important.'

In *John*, when Baker's characters aren't talking, and the only sounds to be heard are the reverberations of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, the audience are forced to make their own assumptions about each character's role. Mertis and Genevieve act as the adult mentors in this play. They might not necessarily be flawless, or even particularly adept at guiding the younger adults, however

Baker's inclusion of these characters is pivotal, she tells *The New Yorker*.

'The story of their lives might not immediately appear to be exemplary or what the younger character would want,' she explains. 'But there's a kind of transcendence and nobility they embody through having not lived the lives they wanted to.'

Baker doesn't only explore the relationships between her characters on stage, she explores the relationship between herself as a playwright and her audience. In a world where audiences are demanding more feeling, with greater impact, in less time, Baker continues to carve her own path. It's the haziness, the fragility and the subtlety of Baker's text that drives *John* and all of Baker's narratives. To rush through this work would be to miss the point. Baker explores what is expected and what is provided in the ancient forum of theatre, and by doing this, she continues to shape the mode of contemporary drama.



Hear more from the cast of *John* about Annie Baker's play. mtc.com.au/backstage

BIOGRAPHY

Annie Baker grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her full-length plays include *John*, *The Flick*, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, *The Aliens*, *Body Awareness*, and an adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, for which she also designed the costumes. Baker has won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama with her play *The Flick*, a Hull-Warriner Award, a Susan Smith Blackburn Award, three Obie Awards, two Drama Desk nominations and an Outer Critics Circle nomination. Her plays have been produced at over 150 theatres throughout the United States and have been produced internationally in over a dozen countries. Other recent honours include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Steinberg Playwriting Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, and the Cullman Fellowship at the New York Public Library. She is a Residency Five playwright at the Signature Theatre.

"Relax with me"

David Campbell
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Cast & Creative Team



JOHNNY CARR

Elias Schreiber-Hoffman

Johnny Carr graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 2008. His theatre credits include *Edward II* (Malthouse), *The Events* (Belvoir/Malthouse/STCSA) *What Rhymes with Cars and Girls* (Melbourne Theatre Company); *The Dream* (Bell Shakespeare); *The Boys* (Griffin Theatre); *M + M* (Daniel Schlusser Ensemble); *The Suicide* (The Hayloft Project/B Sharp); *Charcoal Creek* (Merrigong) and *Leaves of Glass* and *The Rites of Evil* (Red Stitch Actors' Theatre). Johnny's screen credits include *Stories I Want to Tell You in Person*, *Rush*, *City Homicide*, and the web series *The Greatest Love of All* (Winner of best foreign Web Series NYC WEB FEST 2014) and *Echo Chamber*. In 2013 Johnny received the Marten Bequest Travel Scholarship for Acting, where he trained at Ecole Philippe Gaulier. Johnny has been a proud member of Equity since 2008.



MELITA JURISIC

Genevieve Marduk

Melita Jurisic has an extensive career with many theatre credits in Australia including *I am a Miracle*, *Night on Bald Mountain* (Malthouse); *The Wizard of Oz* (Belvoir); *Macbeth*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Women of Troy*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Tartuffe* (STC); *Poppea* (Sydney Opera House); *The Lost Breath* (Melbourne International Arts Festival) and *King Lear* (Bell Shakespeare). Melita's stage credits in Europe include *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *Tales of Hoffman*, *Das Schloss* (Vienna Schauspielhaus); *Lysistrata*, *Kasimir & Karoline* (Perchtoldsdorf); *In the Jungle of the Cities* (Landestheater Linz); *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Grand Theatre Luxembourg); *Purimspil* (Linz: European Capital of Culture); *Poppea* (Berliner Ensemble/Edinburgh festival); *The Family Table* (Vienna festival); *Middenty* (Nitra festival, Slovakia); *Wiener Laecheln* (Komische Opera, Berlin) and *Das Tortenstueck* (Donau festival, Austria). Melita's film credits include *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Kotlovina*, *Transatlantic*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and *The Tale of Ruby Rose* for which she won the International Critic's prize for Best Actress at the Venice Film Festival.



URSULA MILLS

Jenny Chung

Ursula Mills makes her Melbourne Theatre Company debut in *John*, playing the role of Jenny Chung. Ursula was a member of 'The Residents' at Sydney Theatre Company, there her theatre credits include: *Vs. Macbeth* (Adelaide Festival in collaboration with The Border Project), *Orestia*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *The Mysteries: Genesis*, *Leviathan* and *Comedy of Errors*. In 2015, Ursula received a nomination for Best Actress in a Mainstage Production for *Kryptonite*, a co-production between STC and State Theatre Company of South Australia. Other theatre credits include: *Elektra/Orestes* (Belvoir) and *Betrayal* (Ensemble Theatre Company). Ursula has a series of film and television credits including *Peter Pan* (Universal Pictures) and *Out of the Blue* (Network Ten). She received her formal training at Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), and The Groundlings Theatre and School in 2016. Ursula was awarded the Ian Potter Cultural Trust Grant in 2016 and the Shark Island Institute Award for Emerging Artists in 2012.

Cast & Creative Team



HELEN MORSE

Mertis Katherine Graven

Helen Morse has worked in many productions for Melbourne Theatre Company including *Frozen*, *A Little Night Music*, *Arcadia*, *The Tempest*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Our Country's Good*, *The Crucible*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Europe* and *Twelfth Night*. She played Katherine Mansfield in *Alma de Gröen's The Rivers Of China*; received a Green Room award for de Gröen's play about Anna Akhmatova, *The Woman in the Window*, and played Theodora Goodman in Adam Cook's adaptation of Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*. She recently performed in Daniel Keene's *Photographs of A* (Antechamber/MTC NEON); *Wit* with Artisan Collective, *Dreamers* (Fortyfivedownstairs); and Michael Gow's *Once In Royal David's City* (Belvoir); KAGE's *Sundowner* (national tour); *Love.War.Death*. *BREL* (Adelaide Cabaret Festival); Tim Winton's *Signs Of Life*, Joan Didion's *The Year Of Magical Thinking* (Kate Cherry/BSSTC) and Robyn Archer's *Architektin* (STCSA). Helen's other stage work includes: *Ivanov*, *Duets for Lovers & Dreamers*, *The Rain*, (Fortyfivedownstairs); *Prophet & Loss* (Here Theatre); *Death & the Maiden* (STC/national tour); *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Under Milk Wood* (STCSA) and Nick Enright's *Good Works* (Kim Durban/Playbox).



SARAH GOODES

Director

John is Sarah Goodes' second assignment for Melbourne Theatre Company following her critically and publicly acclaimed direction of *Switzerland* last year. Sarah's reputation as a leading director of new Australian and international work has been built on wide-spread praise and multiple award nominations. Formerly Resident Director at Sydney Theatre Company, Sarah directed *The Hanging*, *Disgraced*, *Orlando*, *Battle of Waterloo*, *The Effect*, *Vere (Faith)*, *The Splinter*, and Edward Gant's *Amazing Feats of Loneliness*. Her other directing credits include *Elling*, *Black Milk*, *The Sweetest Thing*, and *The Small Things* (B Sharp Belvoir); *The Colour of Panic* (Sydney Opera House); *Vertigo and the Virginia*, *The Schelling Point*, *Hilt*, and *What Happened Was* (Old Fitzroy Theatre); and *The Unscrupulous Murderer* *Hasse Karlson Reveals the Gruesome Truth about the Woman Who Froze to Death on a Railway Bridge* (Darlinghurst Theatre Company). In 2015 she was the recipient of the Gloria Payten Travel Scholarship.



ELIZABETH GADSBY

Set and Costume Designer

Elizabeth Gadsby makes her Melbourne Theatre Company debut as Set & Costumer designer in *John*. After a critically acclaimed season as Resident Designer at Sydney Theatre Company in 2016, Elizabeth works alongside MTC Associate Director Sarah Goodes after following their success on *Disgraced* and *The Hanging* (STC). Elizabeth's other theatre design credits include *Cinderella* (Belvoir St Theatre), *A Rabbit for Kim Jong-il* (Griffin Theatre Company), *Fly Away Peter* and *An Index of Metals* (Sydney Chamber Opera). Elizabeth holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting) from National Art School and a Bachelor of Dramatic Arts (Design) from NIDA. She is a recent recipient of an Australia Council 'Art Start' Grant, a William Fletcher Scholar and was resident in the City of Sydney's 2016 'Creative Living Work Space' program.

Cast & Creative Team



RICHARD VABRE

Lighting Designer

Richard Vabre is a freelance lighting designer who has lit productions for Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Belvoir St Theatre Victorian Opera, Windmill Theatre, Arena Theatre Company, NICA, Darwin Festival, Stuck Pig's Squealing, Chambermade, Rawcus, Red Stitch, Polyglot, and Aphids. Richard has won four Green Room Awards including the Association's John Truscott Prize for Excellence in Design (2004). He has also been nominated for seven other Green Room Awards. For MTC, Richard has previously lit *Lungs*, *The Waiting Room*, *What Rhymes with Cars and Girls*, *Top Girls*, *On the Production of Monsters*, *The Water Carriers*, *The Apocalypse Bear Trilogy*, and *The Colours*.



RUSSELL GOLDSMITH

Composer and Sound Designer

Russell Goldsmith is a multiple award winning Melbourne based Sound Designer, Composer, Producer and Audio System Designer. He has a diverse body of work in theatre, film, television, commercial and radio production, live music and installation works. He has worked as the sound designer and composer for Melbourne Theatre Company productions of *Disgraced*, *Lungs*, *Endgame*, *What Rhymes with Cars and Girls*, *I'll Eat You Last*, *The Speechmaker*, *Ghosts*, *The Other Place*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Golden Dragon*, *Don Parties On*, *The Swimming Club* and *Ruby Moon* (for MTC Education). He had his Broadway debut in 2009 with the critically acclaimed season of Malthouse/Belvoir's *Exit The King* at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, where it played for sixteen weeks. Russell has received multiple Greenroom Award nominations, while his sound design for *Exit the King* won the 2007 Sydney Theatre Award, and was nominated for Best Sound Design at both the 2008 Green Room Awards (Melbourne) and the 2009 Tony Awards (New York).



GERALDINE COOK-DAFNER

Voice and Dialect Coach

Geraldine Cook-Dafner previously worked for Melbourne Theatre Company on *The Odd Couple*, *Straight White Men*, *The Distance*, *Birdland*, *The Waiting Room*, *Top Girls*, *The Heretic*, *The Swimming Club*, *The 39 Steps*, *The History Boys*, *All My Sons*, *The Clean House*, *Boy Gets Girl*, *Take Me Out* and *The Glass Menagerie*. She trained at Middlesex University, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and she is an Honorary Fellow in the theatre department at the faculty of MCM. Geraldine also works as a voice consultant in film, ABC Radio, SBS Radio, and for local corporate and government bodies. Geraldine was previously Head of Voice, Head of School of Performing Arts and an Associate Dean at the Faculty of VCA and MCM, University of Melbourne.



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