

A woman with long brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a silver textured cardigan, sits on a bed with her arms crossed, looking towards the camera with a slight smile. To her left, a man in a dark suit is seen from the side, reading a newspaper. The bed has a blue patterned blanket and a white sheet with a blue line pattern. In the background, there is a white wall and a stack of books on a bedside table.

THREE LITTLE WORDS

by Joanna Murray-Smith

Welcome



Relationships and friendships are fruitful sources of comedy and drama and there are few writers who can harness them as expertly and with as much wit and honesty as internationally acclaimed playwright Joanna Murray-Smith.

Three Little Words brings Joanna and MTC Associate Director Sarah Goodes together again to take a gloriously revealing look at how we deal with the unexpected when the seemingly secure becomes insecure and our domestic lives go off-piste.

Three Little Words is also the first of four new Australian plays to have their world premieres in our 2017 season.

Melbourne audiences over the years have been outstanding champions of new Australian work and writers. MTC is committed to fostering new work by commissioning, developing and staging Australian stories not only for Victoria but for stages nationally and internationally.

In the coming months *Melbourne Talam* by Rashma N. Kalsie, *Minnie & Liraz* by Lally Katz and *Vivid White* by Eddie perfect will make their debut, and both *Melbourne Talam* and *Minnie & Liraz* will tour to regional Victorian venues allowing more people to experience these wonderful new Australian plays.

Enjoy this world premiere production.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Virginia Lovett'.

Virginia Lovett
MTC Executive Director

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.



MTC is a member of Live Performance Australia and the Australian Major Performing Arts Group.



MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

THREE LITTLE WORDS

by Joanna Murray-Smith

18 APRIL – 27 MAY

Southbank Theatre, The Sumner

— **Cast** —

Annie Kate Atkinson
Curtis Peter Houghton
Tess Catherine McClements
Bonnie Katherine Tonkin

— **Creative Team** —

Director Sarah Goodes
Set & Costume Designer Michael Hankin
Lighting Designer Paul Jackson

Composer & Sound Designer Kelly Ryall

Assistant Director Elsie Edgerton-Till

Fight Choreographer Nigel Poulton

Tap Choreographer Nathan Pinnell

Dramaturgy Consultant Brent Hazelton

Stage Manager Julia Smith

Assistant Stage Manager Benjamin Cooper

Stage Management Secondment

Amelia Trenaman

Rehearsal Photographer Deryk McAlpin

Production Photographer Jeff Busby

— **About the play** —

Bonnie and Annie and their best friends, Tess and Curtis, have both been together for twenty years. The cosy world of coupledness has insulated them all from the challenges of a complicated world. But at an anniversary dinner Tess and Curtis casually drop a bombshell – they have decided to split up. There’s no way to predict or control the devastation that follows.

Writing that Speaks

Joanna Murray-Smith is one of Australia's most celebrated playwrights. In a recent interview with MTC Joanna said, 'We all want to lead more than one life. We all want to live inside passion.'
For Joanna, that passion exists inside her head.



If you weren't a playwright, what other life would you be leading? What does 'living inside of passion' look like for you?

The world inside my head is my passion. I'm lucky that my fantasies or day-dreams can be extrapolated into a working life. The magic of seeing a flicker of a thought emerge into a fully fledged play, collaborated on with wonderful artists and watched by paying grown-ups is fantastic. I'm excited all

the time by life, by the people I meet, the conversations I have and the things that I read or watch or accidentally fall into. The other life I'd be leading? A life where I could read instead of write. Well, probably Tilda Swinton's life in *I Am Love*. Basically in Italy, married to a rich Italian industrialist and having an affair with my husband.

Can you describe what it's like when you first conceive an idea for a new play? Do you race to your keyboard at any hour of the night to get the idea out, or does it slowly brew in your mind before becoming a first draft?

I usually do recognise the moment a new play is born. It's a thought or something I see or read or hear and there's a kind of internal flash. Then my mind zings around at a million miles an hour trying to work out if it has traction. Can I 'see' it? If the idea doesn't let me go then I know I'm onto something.

What is the most gratifying aspect of writing for the stage?

Working with brilliant people in what is generally a very convivial, kind and energetic workplace. Feeling connected to the people who experience the work is also lovely and something novelists don't get. Sitting in an engaged audience and watching them react to my imagination is always mysterious, terrifying and wonderful all at once.

Catherine McClements, Kate Atkinson,
Peter Houghton and Katherine Tonkin



Where did the blueprint for *Three Little Words* come from?

I would absolutely love to buy an online blueprint for my plays but alas, none available! The structure and tone of a play – and often the ideas and characters – evolve over many drafts. A play can begin as a drama and end up a comedy and vice versa. With this play, I began with the first scene. At a funny, intimate, relaxed dinner between best friend couples, a metaphorical grenade is thrown into a friendship and a marriage. Can I write a play about love and friendship which is very contemporary but also timeless, which is funny but savage, which is fast and furious but also very meditative about marriage? These were the questions I was wrestling with. And on a less rarefied note, I wondered why I felt so upset at other people's break-ups, even people I barely knew. Was it that my own

idealised view of love trembled at other people's unhappiness? Was I jealous of change or emotional adventuring? Was I complacent and could catastrophe be unleashed at any moment, even after twenty years of marriage?

Do you become attached to your characters? Do you ever think your characters represent elements of yourself?

Yes and yes. I lived with my version of Patricia Highsmith in *Switzerland* for a long time and I grew to love her, even though she wasn't very loveable.

Being a successful playwright depends a lot on other people getting it 'right'. What makes you trust a piece of work with a cast and creative team?

Optimism! Most of a collaboration is spent wondering at other people's fascinating ▶



take on the world, their creative instincts, their intelligence, grace and determination. It's an honour to work with them.

Your 2004 play *Bombshells* was written for Caroline O'Connor and was a huge success. Do you often write with actors in mind? Have you done this with *Three Little Words*?

I loved Caroline in *Bombshells* and adored writing for such an immensely talented actress. It's always fun writing to specific actor's skills, and sometimes stretching those skills in new directions for them. But I didn't have anyone in mind for the early drafts. Once the play was cast, I could tweak and re-energise the play

with what I knew and admired in each of the actors.

You portrayed a marriage break-down in one of your earliest plays, *Honour* (1995). What has brought you to revisit this subject 22 years later in *Three Little Words*?

I was married when I wrote that play and I'm still married to the same person. That's a lot of material right on my doorstep.



Go online to see the full gallery of *Three Little Words* rehearsal and production images.
mtc.com.au/backstage

BIOGRAPHY

Joanna Murray-Smith is a Melbourne based playwright, novelist and screenwriter. Her works at Melbourne Theatre Company include *Switzerland*, *Pennsylvania Avenue*, *Songs for Nobodies*, *True Minds*, *Rockabye* and *Ninety*. Joanna's play *Honour*, written in 1995, remains her most successful work to date and has been produced in over two dozen countries. Many of her plays have appeared all over the world, including on Broadway, the West End and at the Royal National Theatre in London. Joanna has won two Victorian Premier's Literary Awards for her dramas *Honour* and *Rapture*. Her 2004 play *Bombshells* won the Fringe Fest Award at Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the London Theatregoers Choice Award the following year. Joanna collaborates with director Sarah Goodes for the world premiere of *Three Little Words*, following their critically and publically acclaimed season of *Switzerland* last year.

*Kate Atkinson and Catherine McClements;
(opposite, from left) Katherine Tonkin, Peter Houghton and
Kate Atkinson; Catherine McClements and Katherine Tonkin*



Director Sarah Goodes with Peter Houghton and Katherine Tonkin, with Stage Manager Julia Smith in background



Speak Low If You Speak Love

Three Little Words asks its audience whether the grass might be greener on the other side, how is it to live with disquiet, and if they were to act on that disquiet, what would the consequences be?

One in three Australian marriages end in 'I don't'. More and more couples, however, are tying the knot than ever before.

Joanna Murray-Smith's new play provides a dynamic meditation on marriage by looking at not just one couple, but two. A four-person, symbiotic duo of relationships, who are each reliant on the other for their social equilibrium. When one individual seeks to disrupt this balance – in the pursuit of their individual happiness – chaos ensues.

MTC Literary Director Chris Mead says *Three Little Words* scrutinises the nature of fidelity, the sacrifices we wear when we are committed to another person, and the chaos that funnels in when a union comes undone.

'There's a certain age you get to, or any age really, where you think people are rock solid in their relationship, but then it crumbles,' Chris says. 'Joanna Murray-Smith wanted to look at the phenomenon of people breaking up and to pose the question: what if it is contagious?'

Chris believes this play is about finding that balance between stasis and chaos. 'Many people will be reflecting on their own lives, and asking 'What is unleashed when one person says, 'I'm done with this.''

'It becomes an elemental, protean struggle – not simply for identity, but a quest for the meaning inside of that.'



Peter Houghton, with Kate Atkinson and Katherine Tonkin in background; (right) Catherine McClements



Navigating marriage and relationships is a subject that intersects all eras of drama, and dates back to the advent of theatre itself in Ancient Athenian plays such as *Medea*. In Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, gender politics are exposed in all their joy and ugliness. One line, 'Tis bargain'd twixt us twain' defines marriage as little more than a business arrangement.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was revolutionary when it opened in 1879 for subverting 19th century marriage norms. The play ends with protagonist Nora taking off her wedding rings and walking out on her husband and children.

Ibsen's later work *Hedda Gabler* similarly disrupted the era's standards of matrimony and raised the deep economic and political challenges of the autonomy of women.

Edward Albee's world famous play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* thrust the viciousness and cruelty of marriage centre

stage in 1962 and asked American families to question their nuclear family ideal.

Decades after these great works premiered, the topic of marriage is as fertile as ever. 'The notion of what a relationship is worth is never ending,' Chris says. 'The value of drama is to ventilate intractable problems and to look at suffering.'

'Here is a woman who is suffering: how does she choose to alleviate that suffering? She identifies that the suffering is her marriage; that it is poison, for her. *Three Little Words* examines a particular version of dealing with that, and then asks who benefits.'

Like most drama, Joanna Murray-Smith's play exists in the gap between what characters want, what they need, and ultimately, what they get. 'Joanna likes to pursue work that examines feminism in all its discontents and opportunities,' Chris says. 'She's unafraid to pursue the ugliness, confusion and difficulty of living in our world – for women and men.'



Embrace the performing arts

The Victorian College of the Arts prepares dedicated young performing artists for future careers in theatre performance, directing and writing, and is proud to see its graduates succeed all over the world. We wish Sarah Goodes (VCA alumna 1998), MTC cast and crew the best for their season of *Three Little Words*.

To find out more about the VCA's upcoming Brecht Season, presented by VCA Acting Company 2017 and VCA Production, visit vca-mcm.unimelb.edu.au/events

A Midsummer Night's Dream, presented by Acting Company 2016 and Production students. Photo by Lachlan Woods.



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Cast & Creative Team



KATE ATKINSON

Annie

Kate Atkinson previously appeared in *Lungs*, *The Waiting Room*, *Rockabye*, and *Away for Melbourne Theatre Company*. Her other stage credits include *Becky Shaw* (Echelon); *Romantic Comedy* (UK Tour); *Serial Killers* (Derby Playhouse); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare under the Stars); *Thieving Boy* (Playbox); *Miss Bosnia* (Black Swan); and *Twisted Universe*, *The Egg*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Seadreams of Isabelle Ismay* (Barking Gecko Theatre). Her television credits comprise *Wentworth*, *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, *Jack Irish*, *Offspring*, *The Dr Blake Mysteries*, *Sleuth 101*, *Rush*, *Synchronicity*, *Sugar Rush*, *Doves of War*, *The Cooks*, *Kath & Kim*, *CrashBurn*, *Temptation*, *Fat Cow Motel*, *SeaChange*, *The Man From Snowy River* and *Blue Heelers*. She appeared in the short films *Trapped* and *The Coat*, and the features *The Jammed*, *Japanese Story*, and *The Hard Word*.



PETER HOUGHTON

Curtis

Peter Houghton is an actor, director and playwright. His recent appearances for MTC include, *His Girl Friday*, *The Joy of Text*, *The Colours*, *The Female of the Species*, *Birthrights*, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, *Misalliance*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. His directing credits for MTC include *The Odd Couple*, *Boy at the Edge of Everything*, *True Minds*, *Hinterland*, *The Recruit* and *Art and Soul*. His other stage work includes performances in *The Beast* for Ambassador Group; *The Trial* and *Travesties* for STC; *The Eskimo*, *Tartuffe*, *A View Of Concrete* and *Normal Suburban Planetary Meltdown* for Malthouse Theatre; *The Graduate* for Kay + McLean among others. Peter directed *Footprints on Water* for Griffin Theatre, *Noises Off* for Marriners and *Day One A Hotel Evening* for Black Swan. He plays *The Pitch*, *A Commercial Farce*, *The China Incident* and *The Colours* have enjoyed seasons with MTC, Malthouse, QTC, Black Swan and have toured nationally and in the UK. His solo show *The Pitch* played over 500 performances in Australia and UK winning Edinburgh Fringe Awards, Stage UK and Age Pick of the Year.



CATHERINE MCCLEMENTS

Tess

Catherine McClements previously appeared for Melbourne Theatre Company in *The Other Place*, *Cruel and Tender* and *Angels in America*. Her other theatre appearances include *The Events* (Belvoir and Malthouse and STCSA); *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Belvoir), *It Just Stopped* (Company B Belvoir and Malthouse Theatre), *Macbeth*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (Belvoir); *The Crucible* (STC); *The Imaginary Invalid* and *Molière* (Anthill); *Phèdre* (Bell Shakespeare); *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Shepherd on the Rocks*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Away* (State Theatre Company of South Australia). Catherine's lead television roles include *Rush*, *Tangle*, *CrashBurn*, *After the Deluge*, and *Water Rats*. Catherine won AFI Awards for Best Lead Actress in a TV Drama Series for *Tangle* (2010), Best Actress in a Guest Role in a Drama Series for *Secret Life of Us* (2001) and Best Actress for *Weekend with Kate* (1990). Her performance in *Redheads* won her Best Supporting Actress at the 1993 Asia-Pacific Film Festival in Japan.

Cast & Creative Team



KATHERINE TONKIN

Bonnie

Katherine Tonkin has previously appeared for Melbourne Theatre Company in *The Cherry Orchard*, *Cloud Nine*, *The Apocalypse Bear Trilogy* (co-produced with Stuck Pigs Squealing/MIAF), and, for MTC Education, *Explorations: A Streetcar Named Desire*. Her other stage appearances include *Elektra/Orestes* (Belvoir); *The Wild Duck* (Belvoir/PIAF); *Conversation Piece* (Belvoir/Lucy Guerin); *You and Me and the Space Between* (Terrapin/Malthouse/MIAF); *Tame* (Malthouse); *The Histrionic and Baal* (Malthouse/STC); *OT: Chronicles of the Old Testament* (Malthouse/Uncle Semolina); *The Eisteddfod* (Malthouse/Stuck Pigs Squealing/B Sharp Belvoir); *I Heart John McEnroe* (Uninvited Guests/Theatreworks); *The Man with the September Face* (Univited Guests/Arts Centre Melbourne); *Smashed* (Griffin Theatre); *Star Chaser* (Arena/Arts Centre Melbourne); *Duets for Lovers* and *Dreamers* (fortyfive downstairs/ Insite Arts); *3xSisters* (The Hayloft Project); *Gilgamesh* (Uncle Semolina/MIAF/Sydney Opera House/Barbican, London); *Jet of Blood* (Ignite Productions/Adelaide Festival Centre); and *Actors at Work* (Bell Shakespeare). Screen credits include *Winners and Losers*, *City Homicide*, *Neighbours*, *Snake Tales*, *Kick*, *Blue Heelers*, and feature films *The BBQ* and *Macbeth*. Katherine is a proud member of Actors Equity.



SARAH GOODES

Director

Melbourne Theatre Company Associate Director Sarah Goodes directs *Three Little Words* following her critically acclaimed direction of *John* earlier this 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.



MICHAEL HANKIN

Set & Costume Designer

Michael Hankin recently designed the set for MTC's production of *Jumpy*. Some of his other stage credits include *The Glass Menagerie*, *Angels in America*, *Ivanov*, *Mark Colvin's Kidney*, *Jasper Jones*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Great Fire*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Dark Room*, and *Fool For Love* (Belvoir); *Tartuffe* (STCSA); *Lake Disappointment* (Carriageworks); *Othello* and *As You Like It* (Bell Shakespeare); *The Aspirations of Daise Morrow* (Brink Productions, Adelaide); *Ich Nibber Dibber* (Sydney Festival); *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (Theatre Royal); *247 Days* (Chunky Move/Malthouse/Netherlands tour); *Ugly Mugs* (Malthouse Theatre/Griffin Theatre); *Songs for the Fallen* (Sydney Festival and New York Music Theatre Festival); *The Peasant Prince* (Monkey Baa); *Rust and Bone*, *The Ugly One* (Griffin Theatre Company); *Miracle City* (Hayes Theatre); *The Lighthouse*, *In The Penal Colony* (Sydney Chamber Opera); and *Deathtrap*, *Miss Julie*, *The Paris Letter*, *Macbeth* (Darlinghurst Theatre). Michael has been nominated for several Sydney Theatre Awards for Best Stage Design, winning twice for independent productions of *Truckstop* in 2012 and *Of Mice and Men* in 2015. He is currently Associate Lecturer of Design at NIDA.

Cast & Creative Team



PAUL JACKSON

Lighting Designer

Paul Jackson's recent lighting designs with Melbourne Theatre Company include *Endgame*, *Miss Julie*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Ghost Writer*, *Ghosts*, *Frozen*, *The Speechmaker*, *Enlightenment*, *Madagascar* and *Private Lives*. He has worked as a lighting designer for the Australian Ballet, Royal New Zealand Ballet, West Australian Ballet, Victorian Opera, West Australian Opera, Sydney Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare, Playbox, Malthouse, Belvoir, Ballet Lab, Lucy Guerin Inc, World of Wearable Art New Zealand, La Mama, Chamber Made Opera, and many others. His work has featured in festivals in Asia, Europe and the United Kingdom, and he has lectured in design at the University of Melbourne, RMIT University and Victorian College of the Arts. Paul has received a number of Green Room Awards and nominations for Lighting Design, as well as receiving a Sydney Theatre Award and a 2012 Helpmann Award. Paul was named in the Bulletin's Smart 100 for 2004 and was the Gilbert Spottiswood Churchill Fellow for 2007. Paul was an Associate Artist at Malthouse Theatre from 2007 to 2013.



KELLY RYALL

Composer & Sound Designer

Kelly Ryall is an award-winning composer, musician and sound designer for theatre, dance and film. Kelly's recent work with Melbourne Theatre Company includes composition and sound design for *Double Indemnity*, *Rupert*, *Peddling*, *The Crucible*, *On the Production of Monsters*, *Return to Earth*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *God of Carnage*, and *Savage River*. His other stage credits include *Title and Deed*, *Kill the Messenger*, *Cinderella*, *Nora*, and *Hedda Gabler* (Belvoir); *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *Phèdre*, *Henry IV*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *The School for Wives*, and *Tartuffe* (Bell Shakespeare); *Boys Will be Boys*, *The Trial* with Malthouse (Sydney Theatre Company); *The House on the Lake*, *Emerald City*, *The Boys* with Sydney Festival, *And No More Shall We Part*, *The Floating World*, *Dreams in White*, (Griffin); *Edward II*, *The Shadow King*, *Dance of Death*, *The Trial* with STC (Malthouse); *Piece for Person* and *Ghetto Blaster* with Nicola Gunn; *Animal* with Suzie Dee; and *Savages* at Fortyfivedownstairs. Kelly's first chamber opera *The Bacchae* premiered to critical acclaim at Melbourne Festival and toured to Dark MOFO.



ELSIE EDGERTON-TILL

Assistant Director

Elsie Edgerton-Till has worked in New Zealand and Australia as a director and actor. She has directed for The Court Theatre, The Ensemble, The Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The Forge and New Zealand Playhouse. Directing credits include a national tour of *Phone A Friend* (New Zealand Playhouse); *The Fairy Queen* (The Sydney Conservatorium of Music), *The Great Piratical Rumbustification*, *Antarctic Adventure* (Court Theatre), *Book of Days* (New Theatre), *Moirai McKenzie's Wheel of Fortune* (World Buskers Festival), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (The Canterbury Young Shakespeare Company); *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* (Canterbury Repertory Society); and *Boys*, *Rausch* and *The Red Shoes* (NIDA). As Assistant Director, she has worked on Opera Australia's touring production of the *Barber of Seville* and Handa Opera on Sydney harbour production of *Aida*; for Sydney Theatre Company's *All My Sons* and *Children of the Sun* as well as assisting with Auckland Theatre Company and Chamber Opera Sydney. Elsie graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in December 2013.

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What's On



WINTER IS COMING ...

This June and July, MTC presents two unmissable productions back-to-back. William Shakespeare's epic tragedy *Macbeth* and Michael Frayn's side-splitting comedy *Noises Off*.

Acclaimed director Simon Phillips (*North by Northwest*, *Ladies in Black*) returns to MTC to direct a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's most popular play, starring international screen sensation Jai Courtney (*Suicide Squad* and *The Water Diviner*), while Sam Strong (*Jasper Jones*, *Private Lives*) directs a superb cast of comedians in *Noises Off* – a hilarious backstage comedy of errors that many have said is the funniest play ever written.

Macbeth plays at Southbank Theatre from 5 June and *Noises Off* plays at Arts Centre Melbourne from 8 July.

INDIGENOUS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Nine young people have been selected to participate in MTC's Indigenous Scholarship Program for 2017. Participants will receive one-of-a-kind learning opportunities with industry professionals, and be supported by teaching artists Lenka Vanderboom and Sermah Bin Saad, to devise their own performance.

Meet our 2017 Indigenous Scholarship recipients at mtc.com.au/backstage



MTC 2016 Indigenous Scholarship recipients Lateisha and Jon-Paul on the set of *Egg*.

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