MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY – EDUCATION PACK PART B –

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Notes prepared by Nick Tranter Lead Designer Emma Wagstaff Production photography by Rob Maccoll

Welcome



In all my years working in live performance, there are few – if any – stage works that have matched the pure joy audiences get from watching *Noises Off.*

So if you've ever wondered why people are mad for this play, all will be revealed over its two and a half hours. It is a work of greatness that is unashamedly entertaining and full of laughs that flow freely and frequently.

The brilliance of *Noises Off*, and indeed the reason it has endured as a contemporary classic, lies in the precision of Michael Frayn's script – so meticulously constructed and considered but equally demanding of actors to perform with the exactness and physicality required to make the comedy appear so effortless.

We're thrilled to bring this production to Victorian audiences in collaboration with our friends at Queensland Theatre. I hope you enjoy analysing and discussing the incredible work of everyone involved.

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Brett Sheehy AO Artistic Director

About this resource

Part B of the *Noises Off* Education Pack is designed to help you analyse the production in relation to your VCE Theatre Studies curriculum. This is a post-show resource, and is best used in combination with Part A of the Education Pack. Revisit Part A for information about the synopsis, structure, setting, characters, contextual information, theatrical styles, and the playwright. While this pack is intended to support your study, teachers and students should consult the VCE Study Design and VCAA documents for information about assessment tasks and examinations.



MTC 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.

Cast and Creatives



Simon Burke Lloyd Dallas



Emily Goddard Poppy Norton-Taylor



Libby Munro Brooke Ashton



Ray Chong Nee Garry Lejeune



Hugh Parker Frederick Fellowes



James Saunders Timothy Allgood



Louise Siversen Dotty Otley



Steven Tandy Selsdon Mowbray



Nicki Wendt Belinda Blair



Sam Strong Director



Richard Roberts Set & Costume Designer



Ben Hughes Lighting Designer



Russell Goldsmith Composer & Sound Designer



Nigel Poulton Movement Director



Leith McPherson Associate Director & Voice Coach



Caroline Dunphy Assistant Director

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Direction

Many aspects of *Noises Off* that you will discuss and analyse are the result of decisions made by the director, Sam Strong. He has led the creative team (including set and costume designer, lighting designer, composer and sound designer, movement director, and voice coach) in making artistic decisions along the journey of creating this production.



Acting and direction

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Sam Strong (Director)

'We had a wonderful creative team on the show who helped with the physical and vocal challenges of the show. Movement director **Nigel Poulton** worked with the cast daily. He attended to all the specific physical choreography (like the stair fall and the axe fight) but also trained the actors in Biomechanics as a way of creating a tight ensemble. Associate Director and Voice and Dialect coach **Leith McPherson** was also a full time presence in the rehearsal room, working with the actors to make choices around their on and off stage accents (which are vital to the comedy and rhythm of the production).'



Discuss collaboration

Make a list of what the 'physical and vocal challenges' are in this production. Plan a rehearsal schedule for one day that includes time with some of the other creatives Sam mentions above

The interrelationship between direction and the actor-audience relationship



Sam Strong (Director)

'If the set is another character in *Noises Off*, so is the audience. We have been continually evolving the show together with the responses of an audience, clarifying when they are not following and most importantly creating room for them to laugh!'



Discuss the impact of the audience

Discuss how the audience's responses in *Noises Off* might impact the performance. How does the audience's involvement in the production shift throughout the performance?

Directing the actors

This production of *Noises Off* is a co-production with Queensland Theatre. Sam Strong is also the Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre. This production rehearsed in Brisbane and completed a season at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) before travelling to Melbourne. The cast of *Noises Off* reflect on working under the direction of Sam Strong:



Hugh Parker (Frederick Fellowes)

'Sam is detailed but allows a sense of play and exploration. He said at the outset of rehearsals that the process would be a balance between fulfilling Frayn's text and of us, as a group, finding the funniest version of what we offer. I particularly enjoy being given a long leash of experimenting before locking choices down. Sam facilitated this and I truly welcomed that approach.'



Libby Munro (Brooke Ashton)

'I think that a great director is very specific about moments in a play and then has to also manage all the creative aspects of a show beyond just the performers – Sam does all of this with a cheeky grin on his face and endless energy and positivity.'



James Saunders (Timothy Allgood)

'I think only certain directors would take this play on... it's enormous. And I would imagine many would run screaming from it. You have to have a mind that can both allow something organically to happen on stage, allowing actors to bring their own comedic abilities to bear, but while having an almost computer-like brain to keep everything that this play requires in your head at the same time. It's not for the faint-hearted. Sam has both things going on simultaneously... and that's rare.'



Discuss directing

From reading the actors' comments above, what can you surmise about the rehearsal process for this production? What qualities do the actors admire in Sam's direction?

Playwright

Revisit Part A to learn more about the playwright, Michael Frayn, and his inspiration for writing this play.



Listen to the MTC podcast to hear more from celebrated playwright Michael Frayn about his classic comedy and its enduring appeal. Visit **soundcloud.com/melbtheatreco**

Theatrical Styles

The main theatrical style used in *Noises Off* is farce. There are many conventions of farce that can be seen in this production, most notably the ongoing state of tension, and always being on the precipice of crises. Lloyd delivers many witty lines with sparkling fluency, while Selsdon repeatedly misses cues, mishears, and forgets his lines. Repetition is used throughout, in the overall structure, but also in moments with sardines and burglars.



Emily Goddard (Poppy Norton-Taylor)

'During rehearsals we spoke about farce being tragedy at a thousand revolutions a minute...or was that a second? I love that we can laugh at and play and make ridiculous the catastrophes these people find themselves in, there's huge joy in that. The flipside of that is that the timing has to be so technically precise that it sometimes feels like there's less room for inventiveness within it. We have to stick very closely to what the script prescribes.'



Discuss farce

Discuss Emily Goddard's comments about farce and the script being 'technically precise'. Analyse the way the actors worked within the theatrical styles used in this production.

There are also many examples of slapstick comedy and heightened physical gags throughout the show. Ray Chong Nee falling down stairs, Libby Munro colliding with a window, and an axe-wielding Louise Siversen, to name a few.



Libby Munro (Brooke Ashton)

'I have to claim that I get great satisfaction every night when I collide with the window in Act 2 and the audience cringe and shudder with pain and delight in unison. That is a very satisfying moment when I land that stunt properly.'

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Spot the conventions

Revisit Part A of this Education Pack and refresh your memory of the conventions of farce. For each, make notes about one or two examples from the production. For example, the moment Libby Munro describes above could be one example of exaggerated physical comedy.





Actor-audience relationship

Underneath its deceptively simple premise, the comedy in *Noises Off* makes use of a constantly changing and evolving actor-audience relationship. These transitions are neatly summarised by cast member Emily Goddard:



Emily Goddard (Poppy Norton-Taylor)

'Act 3 of *Noises Off* is the only act where there is a 'real audience' for *Nothing On*. In Act 1 the theatre is theoretically empty and in Act 2 we see everything from backstage... so the third act is the only time the fourth wall is broken in any way. It would be easy to assume then that in the first two acts, the actor-audience relationship is relatively simple – they are simply observing the chaos. However, in comedy and I think particularly in a farce like this the audience become a really big part of our experience. For the story and hilarity to unfold in the way that it should we use the laughter and audience responses as a gauge – timing is paramount. It's a very joyful relationship with the audience once it all kicks off.'



Discuss actor-audience relationship

Analyse Emily Goddard's comments about actor-audience relationship: how is each act different?



Three members of the cast unpack moments in each of the Acts to highlight the importance of the actor-audience relationship in this production:

Act 1



Simon Burke (Lloyd Dallas)

'I really love being in the audience with the microphone for all of Act 1 and only coming onstage when I need to deal with the actors. I get a chance to watch *Nothing On* every night as a director and often make mental notes of what Lloyd would say to the actors about their performances – though I wouldn't dare say it to my actual fellow actors!'

Act 2



Libby Munro (Brooke Ashton)

'I am ashamed to say that we rely heavily on the mood and feel of the audience. It is an actor's Achilles heel I think... that we rate a show's quality on the reaction of the audience. Particularly a comedy. It feels sensational when the audience are laughing their guts out and snorting and clapping, then it feels not so great when they are a bit quiet even if we do a really good show. It's hard not to feel connected in that way. I think with such a challenging production, the pay-off is in making the audience laugh. All of the stunts and the running around and the precision feels worth it when the audience come with you.'

Act 3



James Saunders (Timothy Allgood)

'My favourite moment for me (Tim) is when I come on to address the audience directly at the beginning of Act 3 – it's a rare moment when (even though everything is going disastrously wrong) I can get a real sense of the audience, and rise a bit of their wave, as well as our own. It's a moment of intimacy in a show that demands a lot from us and is about the very nature of performance.'

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Evaluate the actor-audience relationship

Using one or more of the three examples above, write a succinct paragraph that evaluates how the actor-audience relationship was manipulated in this production.

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Analyse the characters

Status

The characters in *Noises Off* each have a different status. At one end of the spectrum, Lloyd has lots of power as the Director. At the other end, the ever-stressed Poppy has a lower status.



Status hierarchy

Organise the characters in *Noises Off* in order of status. Between each character, make a note about where the difference in status or power lies (e.g. age, class, fame, relationship etc.).



The 'actor' characters in *Noises Off* also vary in terms of status. Sometimes this is connected to relationships (e.g. love triangle), the importance of their *Nothing On* role, or their class in the broader sense of British society.

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Ray Chong Nee (Garry Lejeune)

'Accents can delineate social status and characteristics, and that is true of this show. Garry has been developed with a cockney accent, and this allows particular traits to differentiate him and Roger, who is in high-end real estate and uses Received Pronunciation. The script takes care of the rest.'





Learn Received Pronunciation

Search YouTube for a video tutorial about how to speak in RP, the standard accent of English based on educated speech in southern England.



James Saunders (Timothy Allgood)

'Tim is a Scouser (a person from Liverpool) so with that came some great vocal challenges and offers up some great choices in terms of his class/ background in contrast to some of the actors in *Nothing On*. I felt that this choice allowed a bit of delineation between the crew and cast, and gives Tim a great challenge to rise to in Act 3 when he continually has to rescue the show.'





Listen to Scousers

Search YouTube for videos that showcase Scouse, an accent and dialect of English closely associated with the city of Liverpool.



Steven Tandy (Selsdon Mowbray)

'Selsdon is a sheer delight to embody, both physically and vocally. Being a veteran thespian brought up in the "old" tradition, he loves to indulge in grand, proper "RP" dialect, and his efforts to "play down" in class by resorting to a more common, rougher way of speaking almost verges on pure "cockney" which, at one stage, was the way we were heading with him. Physically, he uses his arms constantly in an exaggerated manner, particularly so when mounting the stairs or holding a plate of sardines aloft. He walks slowly and deliberately as a result of his advanced years. He is, after all, a septuagenarian (and a deaf and alcoholic one at that!)'





Discuss status

Analyse the actors' comments above about status and voice and discuss how these character traits are demonstrated on stage.



Hear more from the cast

Head to the Backstage section of our website to read more about how the actors describe their characters: mtc.com.au/backstage



Motivation

The characters in *Noises Off* are motivated by a variety of things, including love, lust, fame, dedication, addiction, and reputation. The driving force behind character behaviours is also the topic of conversation for the play within the play:

FREDERICK: I've never understood why he carries an overnight bag and a box of groceries into the study to look at his mail.

GARRY: Because they have to be out of the way for my next scene!

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l want...

In pairs, adopt the personas of characters in the play and unpack their motivation. Begin with 'I want...', and also explain why.

Characteristics

Many of the characters in *Noises Off* and *Nothing On* are variations on archetypes, or stock characters. You may identify similarities between some of their characteristics and those of commedia dell'arte stock characters.



Annotate characteristics

Beside each of the characters below, make notes about their characteristics using specific adjectives to describe their personality, mannerisms, habits and behaviour.







Brooke Ashton

Frederick Fellowes

Dotty Otley



Inner animals

Think about each character in the play and describe their characteristics in animal terms. For example, Poppy might be described as a nervous rabbit, with the coordination of newborn calf.

Acting Skills

The actors in *Noises Off* use expressive skills (including facial expression, movement, voice, gesture, stillness and silence) to embody their characters. For most, they also use these skills to embody additional *Nothing On* characters.





Louise Siversen (Dotty Otley)

'I work in a range of methods as an Actress, so it is a long process for me to inhabit and embody any character. But for something like this play where I am switching from one character to the other in the one scene, I need a very clear and delineated inhabitation to make it clear for the audience what is happening. I use a whole range of methods to reach the physicality of each character. In more recent years I have been studying Alba Emoting and Michael Chekhov's work in the U.S., so that work combined with a form of work called Dropping which I have used for years provides me with a way in amongst many other prompts and techniques. I stumble around in my imagination until something seems to stick. It can be something simple like the idea of weight in a part of the body or a tilt of the head, a portal opens and then you are off and running.'

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Research acting techniques

Investigate some of the techniques and practitioners that Louise Siversen mentions above. How might you incorporate these techniques in your own interpretation of these characters?



Simon Burke (Lloyd Dallas)

'Because my character is first introduced as a disembodied voice, I started with the character's voice and accent. Because the audience hears me for quite a while before they see me. Lloyd's sardonic humour and great patience and intellectualism seemed to demand a very particular Oxford or Cambridge educated English accent. Also in the way he looks I was thinking of specific British theatre directors of the 1980s like Trevor Nunn and Richard Eyre.'



Evaluate voice

Write a paragraph evaluating Simon Burke's use of voice to create the initially unseen character of Lloyd Dallas. Incorporate phrases from the quote above, and add your own adjectives to describe the expressive skill in detail.



Libby Munro (Brooke Ashton)

'I have actually based a lot of what I do on Wendy Richard's character Miss Brahms from Are You Being Served. When I was looking at British Comedies of the era, I found her to be the most similar to Brooke - naive, untrained, earnest, sexy, kind of daft but not annoying. When we were all searching around for where our characters' voices land amongst the bunch (and what this says about them in an instant) I found this cockney voice that got a lot of laughs (I'm such a sucker!) and it was actually Hugh Parker who told me to look up Wendy Richard. Once I found her it was like striking gold - it all seemed to land from there. Once I have the voice then the body follows quite naturally. I have this song on my Noises Off playlist backstage called 'Come Outside', which is a hilarious track from the 70s sung by Mike Sarne with Wendy Richard's voice featuring on it. That is essentially my warm-up.'



Movement and gesture



Emily Goddard (Poppy Norton-Taylor)

[']Poppy is very out of her depth in her job on *Nothing On*. She constantly feels she is not good enough and would like to disappear. To add to that she is also completely overworked, trying to do too many things at once and she panics very easily. She is in a pretty constant state of stress. For this reason I chose a higher pitched vocal quality for her, one that isn't grounded or certain. Her physical posture, particularly in Act 1, is often a bit hunched as if she wants to make herself smaller. Her gestures are often awkward, she never knows exactly what she should be doing or if she's doing it right. For me everything starts in the imagination, physical choices follow and then need to be heightened for the style of this show and the size of the theatre.'



Discuss expressive skills

Analyse Emily Goddard's comments about voice and posture: how do her physical choices help create characterisation?



Costume design elements can also have a significant impact on characterisation. Cast member Louise Siversen elaborates on the influence of shoes:



Louise Siversen (Dotty Otley)

'The shoes have a big influence for me because they move your spine in a certain way. And the pace and musicality of a character is very helpful ... The body is the best way in to the work for me. That is where I live that is where we all live like it or not. We store everything that ever happened to us in the body and all we have to do is open the portals of the body and we can go anywhere in the universe. And that is what interests me about acting. Going out into the universal imagination.'

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Analyse the shoes

With Louise Siversen's comments about footwear in mind, look through the production photos and pay attention to each character's shoes. How might their footwear affect their performance and contribute to characterisation?



Hugh Parker (Frederick Fellowes)

'Lloyd tells Freddie that acting is all about "looks and gestures". My choices with Freddie are his wishes to impress Lloyd and to avoid conflict. With Philip, he is the owner of the posset mill and is much more confident and happy to take his space.'

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Compare and contrast Freddie and Philip

Thinking about Hugh Parker's comments above, write a paragraph where you compare and contrast how the actor created his *Nothing On* versus *Noises Off* characters.'



Focus



Steven Tandy (Selsdon Mowbray)

'Being a masterfully-plotted and written farce, it becomes clear very early in the piece that the audience is going to take sheer delight in these absurd, eccentric, yet believable characters ,and the stage is set for a great communications of glee and delightful laughter between the actors and the audience. Like most comedy or face, however, it must be played straight by the actors.'

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Discuss playing it straight

Discuss Steven Tandy's comments above, and evaluate the acting skills (specifically focus) used by the actors in this production.



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Stagecraft – Lighting Design

Ben Hughes' lighting design in *Noises Off* cleverly creates a deceptively large number of locations and moods. As the actor-audience relationship changes throughout the performance, these shifts are supported by stagecraft elements such as lighting. The 'backstage' world is partly evoked by using blue gels, while very theatrical effects are used 'onstage' – such as the spotlight when Timothy Allgood addresses the audience in front of the curtain.



Discuss lighting

Answer the following questions after discussing what you remember from the production with a partner. Describe specific lighting states, colours, tones, and lighting apparatus where you can:

- How was lighting used to differentiate between rehearsals/performance of Nothing On and the rest of Noises Off?
- How did the lighting design create a sense of 'backstage' onstage?
- What practical lights were included in the design? E.g. lamps on the set.
- Were the house lights in the auditorium used in the design?



Stagecraft – Composition and Sound Design

Russell Goldsmith's compositions and sound design in *Noises Off* enhance the performance in a number of ways. Some of the 'audience' laughter was actually recorded live at a subscriber event for the production in Brisbane, where the cast improvised to evoke genuine audience laughter for the onstage soundtrack in Act 2. You may also remember music underscoring scene changes.

Recall composition and sound design

With a partner, make a list of every time you heard sound or music in the performance. How did this stagecraft element enhance the production?

Stagecraft – Set Design

Richard Roberts has designed a revolving set with many opportunities for comedy. While other scripts leave the set design open to interpretation, a cursory online search of productions of *Noises Off* will reveal most set designs are very similar. This is partly because the script is very prescriptive in terms of doors for entrances and exits, and necessarily so. Much of the comedy relies on the interrelationship between direction and set design.



Sam Strong (Director)

'The set plays a vital role in the rhythm of the production. The set of *Noises Off* is like a character. So much of the comedy flows from how the set is used. Set and costume designer Richard Roberts and I worked hard to create the idea space - the perfect distance between doors and the optimal configuration of the various rooms. It was also necessary to create the best sightline through the set so you can see just enough of what is going on when we are backstage. All of these visual decisions also have acoustic implications. The sounds of doors slamming is intrinsic to the rhythm of the show so you need to create doors that are robust enough to be slammed for weeks but also make the best sound.'



Libby Munro (Brooke Ashton)

'Watching Ray Chong Nee fall down the stairs each and every night is pretty damn impressive. I am watching him from behind the couch - I just stare at him in awe.'

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Discuss set design

Discuss Sam Strong's comments above. Choose three examples of when 'the comedy flows from how the set is used' – e.g. Garry Lejeune falling down the stairs.





Annotate the set design

Label elements of the set design where you can discuss how it was used in performance. E.g. the location of doors; sightlines to 'backstage'; aesthetic scenic art choices etc. How was this acting space used in the performance?



Louise Siversen, Hugh Parker, Libby Munro, Ray Chong Nee, James Saunders, Nicki Wendt and Simon Burke



Annotate backstage

Label elements of the set design where you can discuss how it was used in performance. E.g. the location of doors; sightlines to 'onstage'; aesthetic scenic art choices etc. How was this acting space used in the performance?



Props



Analyse props

Listed below are several of the props used in *Noises Off*. Make notes beside each of the props about when and how they were used in the performance.

Plates of sardines		
Newspaper		
Cardboard box		
Overnight bag		
Whiskey bottle		
Axe		
Flowers		
Microphone		
Hot water bottle		
Prompt copy		
Telephone		
Bedsheets		
Vase		
Pepper grinder		
Bathmat		
Cactus		

Stagecraft – Costume Design



Annotate costume design

Make notes beside each image to explain how the costume design was used to convey character or support the playscript. Analyse colour, pattern, style, fabric, accessories, etc.



Belinda Blair



Frederick Fellowes



NOISES OFF EDUCATION PACK

Lloyd Dallas

Themes

For a play that on the surface looks like a meta-theatrical exposé of what happens behind the scenes, *Noises Off* is about much more. This production's director, Sam Strong, draws a comparison between the play and another literary masterpiece, while cast member Emily Goddard has witnessed life imitating art.



Sam Strong (Director)

'Some might call it a stretch, but I see *Noises Off* as the functional, funny cousin of *Lord of the Flies*. Golding's literary masterpiece showed us how the wrong environment can bring the less desirable parts of humanity to the surface. *Noises Off* does the same through a theatre production gone awry. What has made the play a classic is that it is not an in-joke - the humour is not reliant on an intimate (or indeed any) knowledge of theatre making. It merely uses that specific context to show us human behaviour we recognise from any work place: the heady commencement and inevitable sour turn of a secret romance; petty and gross acts of sabotage; the moment at which patience and politeness give way to blunt criticism; and the attempt to present a façade of calm through the chaos.'



Discuss the 'funny cousin'

Discuss Sam Strong's comment about this plays connection to *Lord of the Flies*. Where do you see the similarities? Is this play about theatre, or something larger?



Emily Goddard (Poppy Norton-Taylor)

'My favourite moments in rehearsals were when our real rehearsals mirrored the rehearsal in the show. For example, when one of the actors asked me what his line was for when he was asking me what his line was. Someone should make a show about actors making this show! Life imitated art a few more times than we'd probably like to admit!'

Discuss themes

What do you think *Noises Off* is about? Support your ideas with examples from the performance.



Analysis Questions



The following analysis questions are offered to help you unpack the performance and make connections between components of the VCE Theatre Studies Study Design. These questions should be considered as a starting point. Discuss your responses with your peers and explore how other members of the audience may have perceived the performance differently. Make sure you use specific examples and evidence from the production to support your ideas.

Searching for contact lenses

- How did one actor use focus and the acting space in this moment?
- How did one actor use non-verbal expressive skills in this moment.
- How was lighting used to enhance this moment?





- How was one area of stagecraft used to enhance comedy in this moment?
- How did one actor use non-verbal expressive skills in this moment?
- How was one convention of a theatrical style used in this moment?

Timothy Allgood addresses the audience

- How did the actor use two expressive skills in this moment?
- How was one convention of a theatrical style used in this moment?
- How was one area of stagecraft used to enhance this moment?

We have the place entirely...to ourselves

- How did one actor use verbal and non-verbal expressive skills in this moment?
- How was one convention of a theatrical style used in this moment?
- How were two areas of stagecraft used to enhance this moment?













When you visit the theatre, share your experience on Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag #mtcNoisesOff and tag @melbtheatreco



Like MTC Education on Facebook for behind-the-scenes information about our Education Program and discover ways for you to get involved with MTC. **facebook.com/MTCEdu**

Attendance Information

This production contains adult themes, coarse language and theatrical smoke. For further information, please call the MTC Education team on (03) 8688 0974.

Duration

Approximately 2.5 hours including a 20 minute interval.

School groups & students

Go online to read more about visiting with school groups and opportunities for students. mtc.com.au/education

Enquiries

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.