

# HUNGRY GHOSTS

BY JEAN TONG



MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY  
— EDUCATION PACK PART B —

3—19 MAY

SOUTHBANK THEATRE, THE LAWLER

22 MAY—7 JUNE

REGIONAL TOUR

**MTC** MELBOURNE  
THEATRE  
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**Activity**



**Discuss**



**Interview**



**Video**



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# — INTRODUCTION —

Part B of the *Hungry Ghosts* Education Pack is designed to help you analyse the production in relation to your drama curriculum. This is a post-show pack with information about dramatic elements, expressive skills, performance skills and stagecraft. This resource will help you unpack the MTC production, and is best used in combination with Part A of the Education Pack.



Photo by Earl Carter

# — 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 currently exists 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.

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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.

# — CONTEXT —

*Hungry Ghosts* weaves together three central threads: the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 mystery, Malaysia's 1MDB investment fund scandal, and the experience of immigrating from Malaysia to Australia.

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## Contextual Information

Revisit the Education Pack – Part A for more information about the three central threads.

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## MURDER OF ALTANTUYAA

Shaariibuugiin Altantuyaa (who is mentioned in *Hungry Ghosts* in *Scene: Sedition*) was a Mongolian translator and lover of one of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's closest advisors. According to a report by Eryk Bagshaw in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 'somebody important believed she knew about corrupt payments to government officials that had emerged out of an international submarine deal'.

On October 19 2006, Sirul Azhar Umar (ex-police commando, and former bodyguard to two Malaysian Prime Ministers) met with his police partner Azilah Hadri in downtown Kuala Lumpur. Azilah told Sirul that the pair had been ordered to eliminate Altantuyaa. That evening, the two men abducted Altantuyaa (who was pregnant at the time), and murdered her in the tropical jungle surrounding Kuala Lumpur. Two sets of C4 explosives were used to obliterate any evidence.

Sirul has remained tight-lipped about who issued the order, fearful of the possible consequences of speaking out. Now facing the death penalty in Malaysia, Sirul is seeking political asylum in Australia, insisting that he was 'acting under orders'.

Source: Bagshaw, E. (2015) *Sirul Azhar Umar: Who ordered the brutal murder of Altantuyaa Shaariibuu?* on smh.com.au.

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## Discuss Altantuyaa

Recall the scenes from the play that reference Altantuyaa. What did you think and feel?

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## RED GRANITE PICTURES

One of the highest profile aspects of the 1MDB scandal is the financing of the box-office hit *The Wolf of Wall Street*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio. The film was funded by Red Granite Pictures, a production company owned by Riza Aziz (who is the stepson of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak). 'No-one is left untouched by this corrupting element in the play,' says the director, Petra Kalive. 'Even the audience becomes complicit, as consumers of the film and unwitting participants in a fraudulent system.' Red Granite Pictures is discussed in *Scene: The Wolf On Our Street* in particular, while the performers draw illustrations on the pods.

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## Research Red Granite Pictures

Research the scandal surrounding Red Granite Pictures and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. What was the fallout of the news about the film's financing?

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## PISTOL SHRIMP

The play begins with an explanation of pistol shrimp (*Scene: Animal Kingdom*), a metaphor which runs throughout the play. Director Petra Kalive says ‘Tong uses the metaphor of pistol shrimp to unpack the idea of how one small lone voice, although lost in a vacuum, can have a large impact on the world around it.’ Pistol shrimp are small crustaceans that create tiny bubbles when they snap their claws shut. These tiny bubbles float around in the ocean until they burst, the noise of which is so loud that it interrupts military and scientific sonar.



### Discuss Pistol Shrimp

Discuss moments from the production that you think are examples of this metaphor. What other metaphors are in the text?

## DIEGO GARCIA

Diego Garcia is an atoll in the Central Indian Ocean, and the largest of 60 small islands comprising the Chagos Archipelago. Between 1968 and 1973, the population was forcibly removed by the UK and USA in order to establish an American military and naval base. The local people were deported to Mauritius and Seychelles. The US base is still in operation. Diego Garcia is mentioned in *Scene: Tragedy Porn*, when 2 speculates about the possibility that MH370 landed on the atoll from which people ‘were disappeared in 1971’.

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica (2018) *Diego Garcia* on britannica.com



Bernard Sam and Jing-Xuan Chan

# — THE CAST —

The MTC production of *Hungry Ghosts* includes a cast of three actors: Emina Ashman, Jing-Xuan Chan and Bernard Sam. Although there are no ‘characters’ in the script per se, the actors play a range of different identities throughout the production. At times, the cast play human characters, while at others they represent thoughts, perspectives or possibilities. Director Petra Kalive says ‘the lack of traditional narrative allows the audience to make their own meaning from the disconnected scenes and moments.’ This also represents a challenge for the actors, who must use their expressive and performance skills in a series of scenes, monologues, and other modes. ‘Embodiment is a good word,’ says actor Jing-Xuan Chan when discussing ways of approaching the text in performance.



## Jing-Xuan Chan (Cast)

‘Within each of the strands there are different things we’re going to represent. For me, playing 2, it’s about finding a through line for that character, but even within that there are different embodiments. It has been interesting exploring how to go in and out of different ‘modes’ – what is recollection and what is a full-bodied persona. It’s very different to acting a more linear and naturalistic text.’

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## Bernard Sam (Cast)

‘For me, it all comes from the text. There aren’t clear characters or narrative, but the text is still the springboard that jumps into the work. Jean’s writing is so good because it alludes to bits of character. For example, 3 is a bit snarky and has these really sarcastic jokes, and even though it might only appear once, I can use that as a springboard. It’s always from the text.’

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## Clues in the script

Read through the script and look for clues about character like the ones Bernard describes above.



Bernard Sam, Jing-Xuan Chan and Emina Ashman



### Emina Ashman (Cast)

‘For me, it’s about meeting the text. The text would only reveal so much to me. I also need to acknowledge my personal connection to the piece before working on it. I asked myself, “How was I engaged? Where in the play do I connect with the narrative?” It was important for me to allow words and my personal connection to them to meet halfway.’

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‘What this text does really well is that it plays tricks on you sometimes,’ says Emina. ‘Our initial read of the text was really fast as we felt the layout of text on the page, suggest we read it with a quick rhythm given the way it was written on the page. We later discovered, that the journey ‘from page to stage’ allows room for change, and once other production elements are introduced into the rehearsal room, new layers and different impressions can come out of the script.’

Another challenge of this play for the cast is figuring out how to use expressive and performance skills to make it clear for the audience when they take on different roles. ‘Often the scenes are very short,’ notes Bernard, ‘and although it may not be immediately clear, it’s good to keep in mind that every scene has a purpose. Knowing what each scene is favouring helps a lot in terms of knowing how to approach it as an actor.’

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### Emina Ashman (Cast)

‘When it came to developing personas in the rehearsal room, we discussed how different characters carry different “weights” and this can be embodied physically and vocally on stage. We also experimented with different sensorial engagements (leading through different senses; sight, smell, touch) as a means of exploring ways to get into character. When experimenting with a Chinese Malaysian accent during the rehearsal process, I drew on my own lived experience, and understanding of, and exposure to different Malaysian accents to convey voices that were more “authentic” on stage, in order to create a character rather than a caricature in certain parts of the play.’

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### Bernard Sam (Cast)

‘For me it’s about the perspectives of the “characters” – so if we’re looking at a family dinner scene, what they’re saying in regards to the situation that’s unfolding in front of them, what informs my approach is asking “what is the action in this scene in service of?”. It is about embodying the perspectives of those characters at that point. For example, the family driving to the airport, they’re concerned about being late.’

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### Jing-Xuan Chan (Cast)

‘When you’re doing a more linear play, you have your objectives as your *character*. But in this play, where sometimes we’re playing character 1, character 2, and sometimes we’re one organism, I think it’s helpful to think of the objective of the *story*. Asking “how does this fit into the big picture?”’



Jing-Xuan Chan

In the more abstracted sections, it helped that the cast had gone through a rehearsal process where they created a physical vocabulary of sorts. ‘Petra asked us to choose words from the text that resonated with us in terms of what this play was about,’ explains Jing-Xuan. ‘We chose words like home, loss, grief, family. Then we found a physical gesture for each, a way to have that word manifest through our bodies.’ Each actor had six words, creating a set of six physical gestures that they used to create a shared physical vocabulary. ‘We used this at various points, particularly in transitions or very abstract moments,’ says Jing-Xuan. Together, the cast and director explored how their physical discoveries might complement or serve the text.

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### **Jing-Xuan Chan (Cast)**

‘The motif of hands came up for each of us, which was interesting. Also the gesture of reaching, which helped with moments of suspension, whether that be underwater or in the air.’

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### **Emina Ashman (Cast)**

‘Each image can be read differently by different people, and I think the play does that in general. We’re using a lot of images that can be endowed with many different interpretations. That’s what the writing does as well – it’s all about shifts in perspectives, and how something that was initially so clear, suddenly becomes foggy and discombobulates you in this world where you’re trying to find meaning.’

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### **Bernard Sam (Cast)**

‘We’ve also played with the gestures on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is at its most abstract and 1 is most realistic. You’ve got one move, but you can use it in different scenarios and places along this scale.’

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## **ACTOR-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP**

‘We’re definitely not spoon-feeding the audience,’ says Emina. ‘There’s a lot of space for speculation.’ The production asks the audience to be active, and to piece together the work as it unfolds. In some ways, the experience for the audience mirrors that of the characters. Bernard reflects on the production, saying ‘it’s unlike anything I’ve ever done before.’ The fourth wall is in place at times, but there are also moments of direct address. ‘The questions feel rhetorical, but very relevant,’ says Bernard. ‘It feels like the audience isn’t very distant from us.’

‘The text asks for engagement from the audience,’ says Jing-Xuan. ‘Jean asks questions in her script, but she’s very cleverly woven riddles in too. Passages like “How long is a piece of string if you tie one end to your home country and the other to your heart?” She goes from the personal questions, to the meaning of life questions.’ Emina observes that many sentences in the script start with “I”, suggesting that ‘it allows the audience to put themselves into those shoes, and attempt to see whatever we’re talking about through that lens. Even though we’re saying “I”, it’s a provocation for the audience to ask themselves if they’d ever see things from that point of view.’ Bernard likes that ‘there are no right answers’ to the rapid-fire questions embedded throughout the script.

# EXPRESSIVE SKILLS & PERFORMANCE SKILLS

Each of the three actors uses their expressive skills (facial expression, movement, voice, and gesture) in various ways throughout the performance. For example, at one point Emina Ashman plays the sibling of our unnamed protagonist, and is also part of the contrasting infomercial-style explanation of the 1MDB scandal. The actors also used their performance skills (timing, energy, focus, and actor-audience relationship) throughout the performance of *Hungry Ghosts*.



## Analyse expressive and performance skills

Write succinct responses to the following questions using specific adjectives and examples from the performance:



### Emina Ashman

- Choose one of the transition moments and describe Emina's use of movement.
- What gestures did Emina use when performing as the unnamed protagonist's sibling?
- How did Emina use her voice in two contrasting ways?
- Describe Emina's use of facial expression during the 1MDB 'infomercial' scenes.
- How did Emina use the performance skills of focus and energy in the family dinner scene?



### Jing-Xuan Chan

- Describe Jing-Xuan's use of focus and timing when she's sitting on top of the large curved segment.
- How did Jing-Xuan manipulate the actor-audience relationship when breaking the fourth wall?
- Contrast Jing-Xuan's use of voice in two moments from the performance.
- How does Jing-Xuan use gesture in a climactic moment in the production?
- How does Jing-Xuan use facial expression to create the 'girl' character?



### Bernard Sam

- Describe Bernard's use of gesture in one of the transition moments from the performance.
- How does Bernard use movement in a climactic moment of the performance?
- How does Bernard interact with the set in a moment during the performance?
- Contrast Bernard's facial expression between two scenes in the performance.
- How did Bernard use the performance skill of energy in two contrasting ways?

# — SET DESIGN —

Eugyeene Teh's set design for *Hungry Ghosts* consists of eight curved forms, or pods, in a range of sizes. At the beginning of the performance, these forms are seen in partial darkness amid a smoky haze. 'The opening image suggests an airplane sitting at the bottom of the ocean,' says Eugyeene, 'but the narrative is that of a pistol shrimp – a creature infinitely smaller than the plane, but has the potential for greater force. These devices immediately plunge the audience into our world where possibilities are endless and perception is fluid. The overlay of the pistol shrimp narrative suggests that perhaps this large form on the bottom of the ocean could even be a leviathan (maybe a giant sea creature?) that plagues our minds with myth, fear and mystery.'

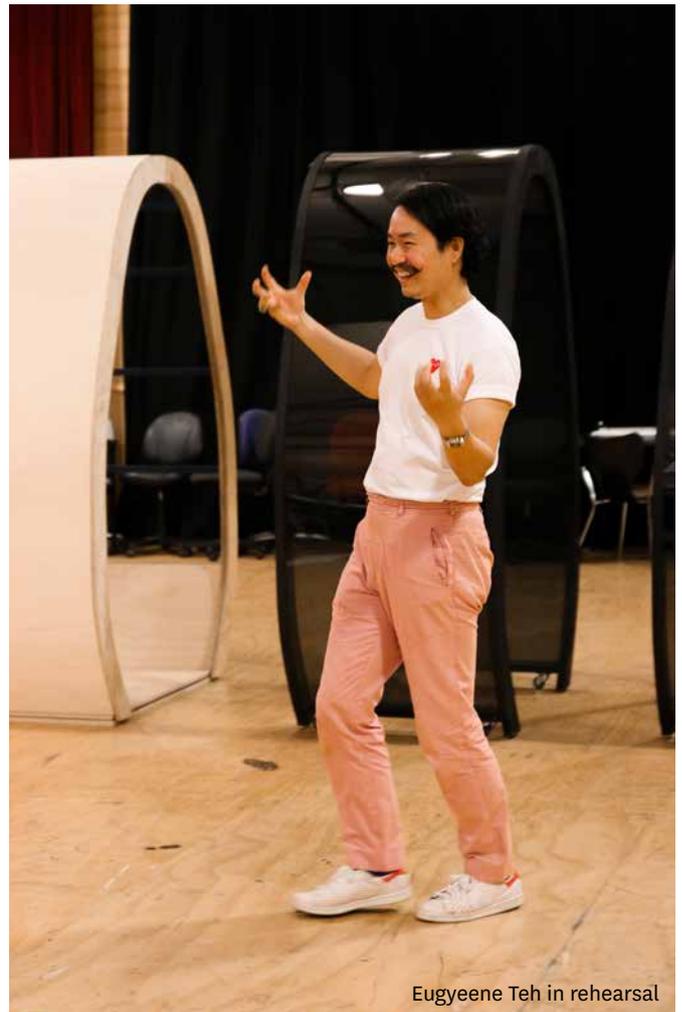
All but one of these are on trucks, and can be easily moved around the stage by the cast. One of forms is fixed to the ground, allowing the cast to safely climb on top of it. Eugyeene deliberately created a set design with the capacity to change and evolve throughout the performance.



## Eugyeene Teh (Set Designer)

'The set design for *Hungry Ghosts* draws its concept and form from the script itself. It is essentially a staccato of various thoughts and ideas that occasionally hone in to become a fully-fledged image, then disperse again to become something else. The fluidity of the design also alludes to the hungry ghosts that appear and disappear at whim. It also becomes as mysterious as a piece of wreckage from an airplane floating in the vast ocean.'

Petra and Eugyeene spoke at length about structures and forms, and what they wanted them to represent. Very early on, Eugyeene had an idea of a radar device that incessantly scans the void. Another very dominant item that they kept going back to was the aeroplane fuselage, which was an instinct of Petra's.



Eugyeene Teh in rehearsal



## Eugyeene Teh (Set Designer)

'I thought about this at length and wanted this form to be as dominant as a large airplane but could also disappear and become something much more mysterious and alive. I started deconstructing this form so that the fuselage is made of many segments that become a kit-of-parts, much like the ones Jørn Utzon used when he was designing the Sydney Opera House. As each piece moves apart, they become smaller objects and shape-shift to form other images. At this early stage of developing the piece, the versatility of this blank-canvas set would become very useful.'

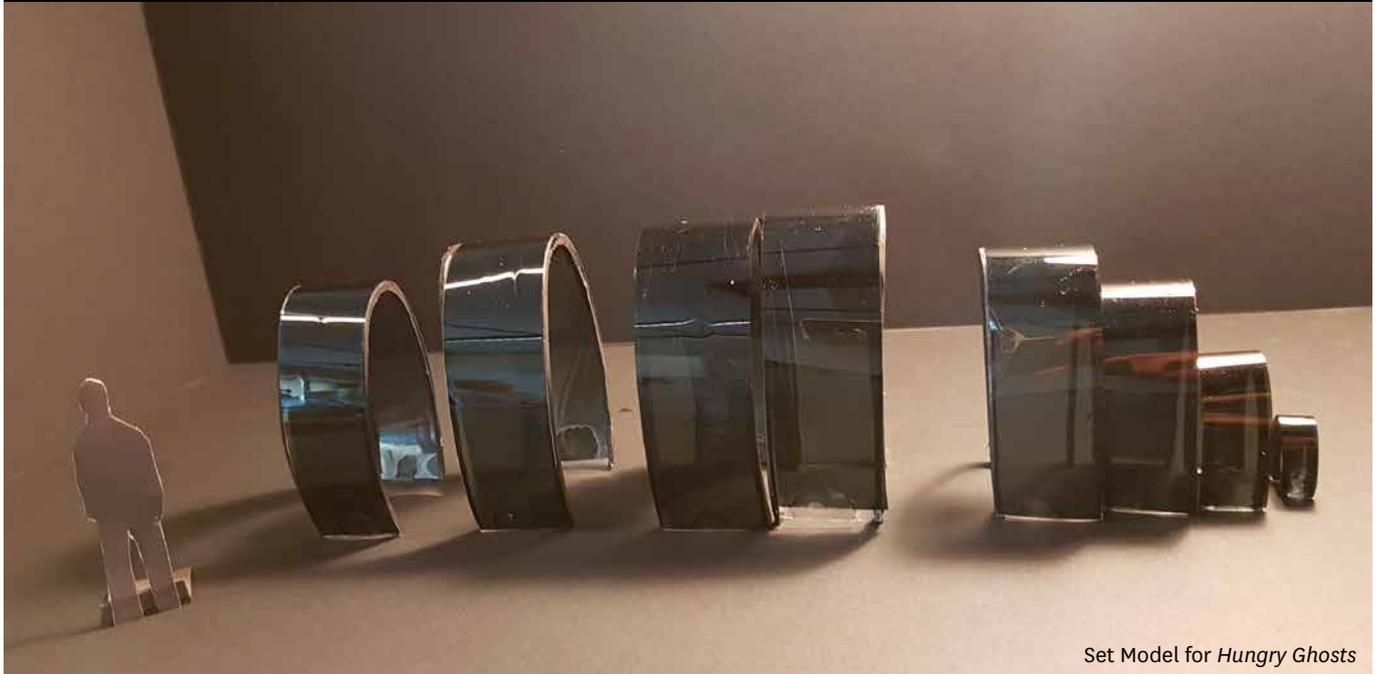


## Kit-of-parts research

Research the Sydney Opera House, and investigate the kit-of-parts design that Eugyeene mentions above. What other buildings or objects use this concept?



Preliminary design concept by Eugyeene Teh



Set Model for *Hungry Ghosts*



### Kit-of-parts devising task

Clear a space in the classroom and arrange eight chairs as the ‘pods’ that you saw upon entering the theatre. Workshop an excerpt from the script using the chairs as the set, and experiment with different shapes and configurations to symbolically enhance your work.

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Eugyeene’s initial design used twelve pods, however practical considerations (including touring) necessitated a modified design. He crated a series of mathematical formulas to calculate the dimensions and curve of each pod, eventually distilling his design down to eight pods. Each pod is covered in a polycarbonate skin, which is transparent but smoke-tinted.



### Eugyeene Teh (Set Designer)

‘The smoke-tinted polycarbonate skins we have used allows the form to disappear into the dark void of the stage, and for the actors to be illuminated and seen when they are inside. This allows for fast-paced changes in keeping with the razor-sharp pace of the script.’



Bernard Sam, Jing-Xuan Chan and Emina Ashman.



### Eugyeene Teh (Set Designer)

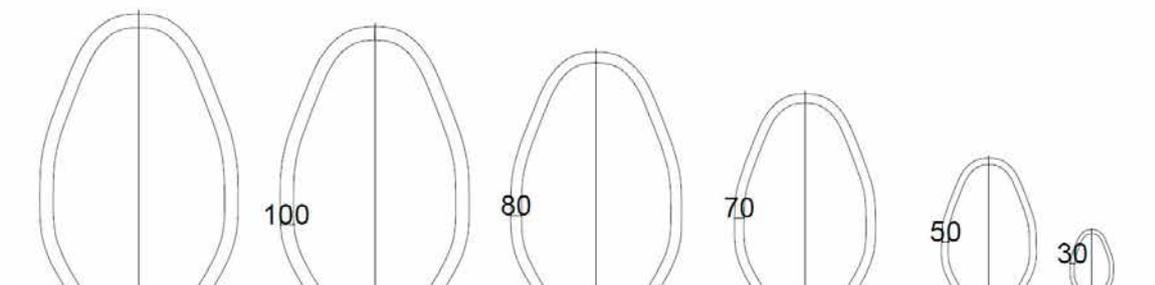
‘During the Hungry Ghosts Festival, a Buddhist and Taoist festival that occurs once a year, we pay our respects to the deceased and help them through this confusing time as they wander aimlessly seeking answers and closure. I often fondly remember the alluring diffused glow of floating lanterns that are meant to guide the ghosts during their time here. Our creative team spoke at length about these lit pods that could at once be read as an airplane cabin, bioluminescent creatures in the deep ocean (like jellyfish, etc.) or spirits wandering aimlessly in a dark world.’



### Hungry Ghosts Festival

Research the Hungry Ghosts Festival and look at images of the lanterns Eugyeene describes above. Choose one image that you find particularly striking, and devise a short performance using it as the stimulus, in combination with your memory of *Hungry Ghosts*.

As the segments break apart, the scale of the set breaks down and relates to the actors on a more human scale and level. Eugyeene explains that as the cast move around the space, which is a dark void not unlike the ocean depths or a world of ghosts, ‘they are often surrounded by these “pods” that light them (lit by Emma Valente) in a way that makes them appear like lanterns.’ One very arresting moment in the play is when the actors pivot a pod each, aligning all the pods on stage. ‘Instantly, the image changes into one of a graveyard of tombs,’ says Eugyeene, ‘as they start speaking about loved ones who have perished in the plane crash.’



# — COSTUME DESIGN —

Sophie Woodward has designed the costumes for *Hungry Ghosts*. Her designs mix contemporary clothing with more conceptual pieces, a combination that reflects the play's style. The costumes for *Hungry Ghosts* evoke the sense of a different world, while still being grounded enough to be relatable. The base layers are very specific tonally, but are made of items that you could wear on a plane and in day-to-day life. In contrast, items like the 'hungry ghost' coats look more like couture than streetwear, taking us out of our own worlds and into the world of the hungry ghosts.



## Sophie Woodward (Costume Designer)

'The layers in the costume initially came from the idea of being able to change from one scene to another very quickly by taking a costume element on or off. It also related to some of the research I had been doing into traditional Malaysian clothing and modern interpretations of this. Through more development into the idea, it also became a way of shedding or peeling off the layers of the costumes in relation to the journey in the layers of the script.'



Sophie Woodward



## From research to design

Look back at the mood board in Part A of this Education Pack. Can you identify images from Sophie's initial research that might have influenced the final design?

Sophie's costume designs evolved over the development and rehearsal period, with more colour being added and some of the layers being refined.



## Sophie Woodward (Costume Designer)

'Initially the costumes were very neutral and monochromatic, but once we added the red undertones it gave us the ability to shed each layer until we revealed the red. It also gave an artistic interpretation to the body of a Pistol Shrimp first mentioned in the scene 'Animal Kingdom'; the transparent neutral outer shell with these bursts of colour and depth through the body.'



Jing-Xuan Chan, Bernard Sam and Emina Ashman



## Discuss red undertones

What do you associate with the colour red? How does this colour influence your interpretation of the design?

Much of Sophie's costume design is made up of layers of purchased clothing items, with each garment selected for its specific tone or texture. Items like the open-weave knit jumper or the linen shirt were chosen because of the texture and the ability to see a hint of the layer underneath. Finding the right materials to use also involved some experimentation.



## Sophie Woodward (Costume Designer)

'When it came to items like the 'wet look' fabric which ended up being a wool crepe, I had to look for fabrics with natural fibre so it would take the dye with more accurate results, but also find a fabric with a weight and drape to it so it would enhance the wet appearance once art finished. In order to make the garment look wet, we started with white fabric and dyed it to a light grey shade, from then layers of dye were built up in different areas to give the appearance of being wet. In order to make water come out of the garment without dripping everywhere we have placed a bladder of water inside the garment and connected it through a release, this means we can choose the moment the water starts to pool in the hidden pocket of the garment to it can then be squeezed out.'

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'I am really excited about the hungry ghosts' coats,' says Sophie, which the team have affectionately named 'prawn coats'. Sophie explains these are an artistic interpretation of the 'hungry ghost', but also connect to the initial scene and the description of the Pistol Shrimp. 'In order to design these coats I did a lot of research into different cutting techniques and garment shapes, along with a lot of trials of different fabrics and art finishing techniques.'

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### Discuss costumes

What images or symbols do the various layers of the costumes evoke in your mind? What do they make you think of, or remind you of?





## Annotate designs

Make notes on the costume designs to label things like colour, fabric, texture, function or symbol.



EMINA



JING - XUAN



BERNARD



EMINA



JING - XUAN



BERNARD

# COMPOSITION AND SOUND DESIGN

Darius Kedros (Composer and Sound Designer) has created an aural environment for *Hungry Ghosts*. At times the sound design evokes a place with diegetic sounds, e.g. airport PA announcements, aircraft noises, radar beeps. At other times, non-diegetic sounds are used to enhance mood. 'The script doesn't have a traditional story arc,' explains Darius, 'and makes minimal use of defined characters, which makes the role of sound somewhat nebulous.' This means Darius has had a lot of freedom to experiment with sound design elements, specifically playback and hidden microphones 'to create atmospheres and sound effects that help the text and action come to life'.



## Darius Kedros (Composer & Sound Designer)

'The concept we've developed for *Hungry Ghosts* is that the play exists on various levels; inside the vacuum created by the snap of a pistol shrimp's claw; inside the mind of the protagonist; and inside the minds of the souls lost in the flight MH370 airplane that disappeared in 2014. These worlds are suggestive, rather than explicit, rarely if ever telling us where we are at any one time, and so the sound design is correspondingly esoteric and stylised.'



Darius Kedros in rehearsal



## Darius Kedros (Composer & Sound Designer)

'The sound design in the play is largely non-diegetic, but with a smattering of identifiable sounds that help shift the place and or pace, and therefore add dynamics to the work which rarely or arguably ever really exists in any single identifiable location. I've made the vast majority of the sounds from my own field recordings, including contact microphone recordings, and various hydrophone recordings from the sea and the Yarra River.'



## Discuss diegetic/non-diegetic sound

Discuss how the stagecraft element of sound was used to enhance the performance. Provide two specific examples from the performance: one moment where diegetic sound was used, and another where non-diegetic sound was used.

After reading the script and talking with the director (Petra Kalive), Darius felt that a stylised and punchy sound design would help support the text, and give Petra tools to assist with blocking the actors' movements by creating energetic dynamics throughout the play. 'I was also keen to explore ways for the actors to activate the sound design through their interactions with the set,' says Darius. 'We spent half a day in the rehearsal room during a week of creative development where we experimented with various types of microphones and speakers to see what might work.'



## Darius Kedros (Composer & Sound Designer)

'I've composed some minimalist pieces that consist of samples and heavily processed sounds and beds. In addition to this there are a couple of sound cues that use licensed lounge tracks that help underpin the dialogue, not in a way that was prescribed by the script, but that responds to the script, adding a certain amount of energetic shift that help give dynamic to the overall work.'



Bernard Sam and Emina Ashman



### Discuss lounge tracks

Which moments in the play do you recall using the licensed lounge tracks that Darius describes above? How did this music enhance the scene?



### Darius Kedros (Composer & Sound Designer)

'We've used a contact microphone hidden in the set that will make that piece of set come alive when it's moved, and so become part of the sound design, but in a non-diegetic way. I'm excited to be playing with that, and I'm also looking forward to working closely with Emma Valente, the lighting designer, to add jarring sound & light elements to the play.'



### Discuss playback versus live

Discuss which moments from the play you think used playback sound versus when live microphones were being used. What is the effect of combining these two types of sound?



### Create your own sound design

Choose a moment from the play and create your own sound design using software like Audacity. Think about how you might incorporate sound that you record yourself, then manipulate digitally. Write a short paragraph explaining your creative choices.

# — LIGHTING DESIGN —

Emma Valente describes her lighting design throughout much of *Hungry Ghosts* as ‘dark and moody’, with the notable exception of stark, bright lighting from LED (Light Emitting Diode) strips and batons embedded in the set (set electrics). Emma has used the LED in two ways. There are visible batons, which are used to represent a horizon line, or a runway. These fixtures are used to create architectural divisions, metaphor and mood. Then there are small strips in the front of the set pieces, which Emma uses to light the actors’ faces. These are more practical fixtures. LED strip is made up of a Red chip, Blue Chip, Green Chip and a cool white chip. This means Emma is able to make almost any colour by mixing the different colour chips.



Emma Valente



## Emma Valente (Lighting Designer)

‘Apart from the set electrics (the LED strip), I’m using side light (from booms), floor light (from the floor), top wash and front light. I am using a hazer, a smoke machine, torches and lights from mobile phones.’



## Mobile phone lighting activity

Turn off all the lights in the classroom and make it as dark as possible. Using the torches in your mobile phones, light a group of actors or a ‘set’ made of classroom furniture, from different angles. Experiment with the various angles Emma describes above, and try using a combination of several light sources and angles. Take note of the shadows on actors’ faces, and the shadows bodies and set pieces cast on the floor and walls.

In rehearsal, Emma also investigated ways to make the pods transform between an aeroplane, a car, a prawn, an airport walkway, a house, coffins and much more. This kind of transformation is a collaboration between all the elements (the performers, the designers and the director).



Bernard Sam, Jing-Xuan Chan and Emina Ashman



Bernard Sam, Jing-Xuan Chan and Emina Ashman



### Emma Valente (Lighting Designer)

‘The play is also very challenging, because there is a lot of information to transmit. This means that the designers need to make sure there is enough going on to make the show interesting without undermining the text, or making it difficult or confusing to understand.’

Emma is particularly excited about the moment where the pods fill with smoke that. ‘I’ve only seen a test in the rehearsal room,’ says Emma, ‘and I’m looking forward to seeing it in the theatre.’ However, Emma has also had to problem-solve various challenges in *Hungry Ghosts*. Emma explains that the pods are very challenging to light, because you can only light them from the inside. When light shines on the pods from the outside, it bounces off the Perspex and into the audience’s eyes.



### Emma Valente (Lighting Designer)

‘I have been inspired by different pictures of being underwater and above the clouds. In my colour palette, I’m trying to conjure these two images.’



### Discuss colour palette

Discuss the coloured lighting you saw in the performance, and how it made you feel. Discuss how the lighting design worked together with the costume design in various moments in performance.

Emma and Darius (Composer & Sound Designer) also sought methods of suggesting the moment of the plane crash in different ways during the transitions. For these moments, Emma investigated the way light acts inside aeroplanes, such as the way fluorescents flickers, how daylight falls through the windows etc.



### Light inside aircraft

Do your own research into the interiors of aeroplanes and make notes about how light behaves in this environment. Analyse the way that Emma replicated and/or enhanced these effects on stage.

# — DRAMATIC ELEMENTS —

There are a range of dramatic elements being manipulated by the actors in *Hungry Ghosts* to shape and enhance meaning. When discussing the dramatic elements that you witnessed, use specific evidence and refer to moments in the performance.

## CLIMAX

There are a range of climactic moments in the play, with some notable scenes of significant tension. *Scene: Testimony*, which includes dialogue reminiscent of a press conference about MH370, manipulates the actor-audience relationship with pathos. This scene is also multilingual, incorporating Malay and Chinese. *Scene: Search / Party*, where Jing-Xuan moves around the stage inside a pod to a soundtrack of radar beacon sounds, also manipulates the dramatic element of climax.



### Discuss climax

Choose a scene from the play and discuss how climax was manipulated.

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## CONFLICT

Conflict is seen throughout the play, particularly the inner conflict of the unnamed protagonist. Her search for belonging and identity underpins many scenes, sometimes demonstrated through direct address, and at other times through dialogue shared among the ensemble. We also witness conflict among the girl and her family, particularly in the car en route to the airport, which is juxtaposed against the notion of losing loved ones in a tragedy.



### Discuss conflict

Discuss the moment when the girl returns home to her family (*Scene: Search / Party*) and how you respond to that reunion while being simultaneously presented with the ongoing search for MH370.

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## CONTRAST

There are many examples of contrast in *Hungry Ghosts*. Consider the contrasting costume designs at the beginning of the performance, between Jing-Xuan's bomber jacket and the 'prawn coats' worn by Emina and Bernard. Think about the contrasting rhythm and mood of scenes like the upbeat, comic *Scene: The Wolf on our Street* and the mournful *Scene: Testimony*. Examine the contrast seen in the transitions, particularly the short, sharp 'glitches' with electrical shock sound effects, and those that reference aircraft, such as the fleeting 'brace position' tableau.



### Discuss contrast

Discuss the moments mentioned above, and unpack how each scene is constructed through direction, performance and design. How is the dissimilar of opposite presented on stage to highlight or emphasise difference?

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## MOOD

Stagecraft and acting are used to manipulate mood throughout the performance. We experience many shifts in mood throughout the production, and often within scenes. Think about how the stagecraft elements of lighting and sound in particular were used to manipulate this dramatic element.

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### Discuss mood

What was your overall feeling or emotion at the conclusion of the performance? Discuss with the class why some people might have responded differently to the play. What would you identify as the most arresting or impactful moment in the production?

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## RHYTHM

Think about the overall rhythm of *Hungry Ghosts*: including the duration of individual scenes, the pace of scenes and line delivery, and the emotional nature of story threads. The rhythm of *Scene: The Wolf on our Street* is starkly different the scene that follows, *Scene: Testimony*. The production also contains a lot of repetition, of words, phrases and movement.

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Jing-Xuan Chan



### Jean Tong (Playwright)

‘Repetition is probably my favourite literary device. We repeat a lot of things people have done before. We learn by repetition. One of the joys of being human is repeating something that’s been done before with a twist. With language, repeated words can become unfamiliar, and that phenomenon is something I’m trying to recreate in *Hungry Ghosts* - when you look at something for too long and it stops making sense. Politicians manipulate language a lot in this way.’

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### Discuss rhythm

Discuss the effect of repetition in the script. What words are repeated? What is the effect of hearing them again and again? Discuss the repetition of ‘sedition’, and the variety of definitions that are described in the text.

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## SOUND

The dramatic element of sound is manipulated by the cast by moving the pods around the stage. The rumbling wheels enhance the performance in various moments, such as the transition between *Scene: Family Dinner* and *Scene: Flight*, which is underscored by the sound of aircraft engines preparing to take off. Petra describes this image on stage as ‘spinning coffins’.

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### Discuss sound

What other examples of the dramatic element of sound did you notice? Discuss these with your peers.



## SPACE

The dramatic element of space is manipulated throughout the performance, with the cast moving set pieces around the stage to create an ever-changing landscape. At times, Jing-Xuan climbs one of the large pods, positioning her above the other actors and evoking the feeling of flying. In another moment, Jing-Xuan is encased in a prison/bubble/tomb, created by three pods in a nesting doll-style configuration, evoking the cavitation bubble that is discussed at the beginning of the performance.



### Discuss space

Discuss the end of the performance, where all but one of the pods are arranged in a corridor on the prompt side of the stage. What does this image conjure in your mind? How is it different or similar to the image you see upon entering the theatre?

## SYMBOL

Symbol is used to create meaning that is not literal, allowing performers to communicate ideas and themes through words, stagecraft and expressive skills. Think about the moments when the cast draw on the pods to explain the 1MDB scandal and Red Granite Productions. Recall the moment when pods are positioned around the stage, then pivoted into alignment to represent a graveyard of tombstones. Also consider the transition moments, when the pods are moved around the stage, or when the cast perform symbolic movements, such as the repeated hand-washing action.



### Symbolic gestures

Choose a scene from the play, and choose three words that resonate with you. For each word, create a symbolic gesture that captures that word. In small groups, present these as a series of three tableaux. Ask observers to respond to the gestures with words they evoke, before sharing the words that inspired the movements.



Bernard Sam and Emina Ashman

## TENSION

In Scene: *Search / Party* the dramatic element of tension is manipulated on stage as we witness the search for MH370 wreckage with suspenseful hope of finding evidence.



### Discuss tension

Discuss with your peers which moments in the production you felt were suspenseful. What was the highest point of tension? Was the release of tension ever used for comic effect?



### Video trailer

Watch the video trailer for *Hungry Ghosts* at [youtube.com/melbtheatreco](https://www.youtube.com/melbtheatreco). Make predictions about what you will see on stage. What symbols can you identify in the video? What settings, characters, mood, time?



### MTC Talks Podcast

Listen to playwright Jean Tong discuss the inspirations behind *Hungry Ghosts* at [mtc.com.au/MTCTalks](https://www.mtc.com.au/MTCTalks). Ask students to jot down key points that they find interesting, and consider what questions they would ask the playwright in an interview.

# — THEMES —

## IDENTITY AND BELONGING

A central theme in *Hungry Ghosts* is identity and belonging, and the fluid nature of identity. How do life experiences, such as immigrating to a new country, influence our sense of self? Consider the following reflections from the cast and creative team about identity in the play:

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### Jing-Xuan Chan (Cast)

'I think it's about identity, about who we are in relation to the place we grew up, our families, our homes, and what it means for us when we leave that. Being able to recreate yourself once you're away from the place that made you who you are. The combination of the joy and possibility, and the pain that brings – that love/hate relationship of all the things that made you who you are. The cringe and that pride – that tension.'

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### Emina Ashman (Cast)

'For me, because I've had a cultural upbringing in Malaysia, the play creates a feeling of 'art imitating life' and vice versa. It really is about cultural identity. Through working on this play, I'm learning a lot about my own relationship with Malaysia. I've realised that those initial attachments and relationships I've had with it can keep changing.'

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### Bernard Sam (Cast)

'I think the play is about the dichotomy between who you are and what you are, and knowing that it doesn't matter because everyone comes from somewhere. Wherever that place is, and whatever your experiences are, it will always be a part of your life, whether you like it or not. To clarify, I think "who" is your personality, what we love, what we hate, while I see "what" as being (for example)Malaysian Chinese. Those "what" labels of course come with their own stereotypes and connotations, but that doesn't necessary define who I am. For me it's a lot about the juggle between who and what I am.'

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### Discuss identity

Discuss Bernard's comments above, and reflect on who and what you identify as.  
Has this evolved over your lifetime?

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### Sophie Woodward (Costume Designer)

'In my opinion *Hungry Ghosts* is about identity and belonging, and the search for quiet in a world of chaos. In order to do this it uses a girl leaving home and her ability to imagine all these different circumstances relating to her country and herself. As we are following the girl who is leaving (Number 2), the costumes needed to give her a slightly different look but also link all three of them together, as though she has created these ghosts in her mind. An example of this is that the 'hungry ghost' coats are made of the same fabric as her bomber jacket.'

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### Eugyeene Teh (Set Designer)

'Ultimately, *Hungry Ghosts* is about identity, and how this is created. Jean poses the question again and again – How is my identity defined, and who defines it?'

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## THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Beginning with the pistol shrimp metaphor at the start of the play, the power of the individual is another theme in *Hungry Ghosts*. We are introduced to characters who have used their power for good and evil, and the story is anchored around the journey of a girl between Malaysia and Australia. The potential within each person is embedded in the work.

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### Jing-Xuan Chan (Cast)

‘What is one person in the grand scope of the universe? What is that one pistol shrimp in the whole ocean? How can my life impact the world?’

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### Jean Tong (Playwright)

‘This play is very conceptual and abstract. The only image I had was a voice coming out of nothingness.’

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### Emina Ashman (Cast)

‘You have to remember, amid the noise of statistics and information, these are humans we’re talking about. These are human experiences. We can easily desensitise ourselves when we hear something that doesn’t feel personal.’

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### Discuss identity

Discuss the comments above from the *Hungry Ghosts* team. Apart from the scripted dialogue, in what other ways was this theme explored in the play?

## TRUTH AND CORRUPTION

A line in the play suggests that we are living in a 'post-truth world', and in the current climate of 'fake news', voter fraud, and social media data being used for corruption, questions about truth are being more frequently asked. The play explores a mystery where the truth is unknown, and also a tale of corruption where the truth is potentially being hidden.



### Eugyene Teh (Set Designer)

'The play is about a series of thoughts that have the ability to frame what reality is. It is about the mind that is so powerful that it is able to bend what we have always perceived as the truth.'



### Discuss truth

How do you know that things you consider to be true actually are? Discuss what sources you consume information from. Which forms of media do you consider to be more trustworthy than others? Can you think of an example from your own experience when your opinion of something or someone was radically shifted?



Emina Ashman, Bernard Sam and Jing-Xuan Chan



### Corruption in the play

Revisit Part A of this Education Pack to learn more about the 1MDB scandal explored in the play.



Emina Ashman

# — ANALYSIS QUESTIONS —



The following analysis questions are offered to help you unpack the performance and make connections between components of the drama curriculum. 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.



## **PRE-SHOW: ANIMAL KINGDOM (Smoke Fills the Cabin)**

- Analyse how one actor used movement and focus in this moment.
- Analyse how the actor-audience relationship was manipulated in this scene.
- Contrast the opening sequence with final moments of the play.
- Evaluate how the stagecraft element of sound was manipulated to enhance this moment.



## **SCENE: GOODNIGHT (Driving to the Airport)**

- Explain how the stagecraft elements of set and lighting were used non-naturalistically in this moment.
- Analyse how one actor used two expressive skills to portray a character in this moment.
- Evaluate how the dramatic element of conflict was used in this scene.
- Analyse how one actor used one performance skill to enhance this dramatic moment.



## **SCENE: TESTIMONY (Press Conference & Families)**

- Discuss how the conventions of a performance style were manipulated in this moment.
- Describe how the stagecraft element of sound was used to enhance this moment.
- Evaluate how the dramatic elements of tension and mood were manipulated in this scene.
- Identify a theme in the play that could be connected to this scene.



## **SCENE: FAMILY DINNER 3 (The Play's Final Moments)**

- Analyse how one actor used one expressive skill to enhance this dramatic moment.
- Identify a theme in the play that could be connected to this scene.
- Evaluate how costume and set were used to enhance symbol in this scene.
- Describe how the dramatic element of contrast was manipulated in this moment.

# HUNGRY GHOSTS

BY JEAN TONG



**MTC** MELBOURNE  
THEATRE  
COMPANY

## THE SCRIPT FOR *HUNGRY GHOSTS* IS NOW AVAILABLE

Studying the script will help your students go deeper in their analysis of the play, and sustain their memory of special moments in the production.

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# — SCRIPT CHANGES —

As often happens with new work, the script for *Hungry Ghosts* by Jean Tong has continued to develop during rehearsals for its premiere production. Below is a summary of significant differences between the published script and the text performed in MTC's production. The page numbers refer to the Currency Press edition.

## **SCENE: TRAGEDY PORN**

(pages 2–6) is performed before **SCENE: TELL-ALL 1** (pages 1–2).

## **SCENE: TALES**

Page 7: omit all speeches from the third speech (3: *He was twenty-three when he was first elected as a member of parliament*) to the sixth last speech (3: *Did they run out of women, or?*).

Pages 7 and 8: omit the last two speeches on page 7 (1: *But.* / 3: *Finally*) and the first eleven speeches on page 8.

Page 9: omit the quote in italics from the film *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

## **SCENE: FLIGHT**

Pages 14 and 15: omit the third and fifth speeches on page 14. Insert the fourth, fifth and sixth speeches on page 15 after the second speech on page 14.

## **SCENE: BLOOD NOSES**

Pages 19 and 20: omit all speeches from the third speech on page 19 (2: *I don't remember much about the goodbye because I never say the words out loud*) to the second speech on page 20 (3: *It doesn't really matter.*)

Pages 20 and 21: omit the last three speeches on page 20 and the first two speeches on page 21.

## **SCENE: THE WOLF ON OUR STREET**

Pages 23 and 24: omit from the fourth last speech on page 23 (3: *Investigators believe that 238 million USD from 1MDB*) to the end of the scene.

## **SCENE: TESTIMONY**

Page 26: omit the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth speeches.

## **SCENE: FAMILY DINNER 2**

Pages 28 and 29: omit the last two speeches on page 28 and the first seven speeches on page 29.

## **SCENE: A FAVOUR**

Page 31: omit from the third speech to the eighth speech and omit the twelfth speech.

## **SCENE: REMEMBER WHEN**

Page 35: omit from the ninth speech to the fifteenth speech.

## **SCENE: WOLF OF PETALING STREET**

(pages 40 – 42): Omit this scene.

**SCENE: SHAME** and **SCENE: BECAUSE** – these scenes, with edits below, are combined.

Pages 48, 49, and 50: omit from the fourth speech on page 48 (1: *Haha, yeah, no, she ...*) to the second last speech on page 50 (1: *A deficiency in the amount of oxygen reaching the heart.*)

## **SCENE: TELL-ALL 2**

Pages 52 and 53: omit the last speech on page 52 and its continuation on page 53.

# — ATTENDANCE INFORMATION —



When you visit Southbank Theatre, share your experience on Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag **#mtcHungryGhosts** 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**

## CONTENT

This production contains coarse language, and mature themes. Recommended for ages 15+. For detailed information, visit our website at [mtc.com.au/production-content-guide](http://mtc.com.au/production-content-guide)

**Duration:** Approximately 60 minutes, no interval.

To read more about visiting with school groups visit [mtc.com.au/education](http://mtc.com.au/education).

## BOOKINGS

### Melbourne season:

Email [schools@mtc.com.au](mailto:schools@mtc.com.au) or phone 03 8688 0963.

### Regional Tour:

Visit [mtc.com.au/education/on-the-road](http://mtc.com.au/education/on-the-road)

## ENQUIRIES

For general MTC Education enquiries email [education@mtc.com.au](mailto:education@mtc.com.au) or contact our Education Coordinator on 03 8688 0974.