



Cactus
Madelaine Nunn

Teacher Resources
2022

Ideal for Years 9-12

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE.....	3
ABOUT REGIONAL ARTS VICTORIA.....	3
ARTS & EDUCATION.....	4
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM.....	5
BIOGRAPHIES.....	6
SUGGESTED PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES.....	9
SUGGESTED POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES.....	12
FOCUS ON VCE DRAMA AND THEATRE STUDIES.....	13
FURTHER ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE IN THE CLASSROOM.....	19
CURRICULUM LINKS.....	22

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource has been created to provide teachers with curriculum links to the Victorian Curriculum, and includes some preliminary and post show ideas and activities as to how to extend their experience of *Cactus*. The activities are designed to be open-ended and multi-ability. They may need differentiation for your specific cohort.

The performances and workshops included in the Arts & Education program are designed to offer students engaging arts experiences with strong links to the Victorian Curriculum and VCE subjects where appropriate. Each Arts & Education program varies in its purpose and content and as a result the scope for integration across the curriculum varies.

If you have any questions about this resource, its content or its implementation within your classroom please do not hesitate to contact the Arts & Education team at education@rav.net.au

ABOUT REGIONAL ARTS VICTORIA

Regional Arts Victoria inspires art across the state. Through creative facilitation, touring, education, specialised resources, artistic projects and advocacy, we develop and sustain creative communities and artistic practice all over Victoria.

Regional Arts Victoria is an independent, not-for-profit, membership-based organisation working in long-term partnerships with every level of government, fostering contemporary and innovative regional cultural practice across five decades. We advise and impact on decision-making across multiple portfolios and levels of government.

Regional Arts Victoria is the peak body for regional artists and arts organisations, and the leading organisation for regional creative practice in Victoria.

PARTNERSHIPS

Regional Arts Victoria facilitates the partnerships, the organisations and the practices that create new work.

- Regional Cultural Partnerships
- Creative Arts Facilitators
- Membership program
- Devolved grants programs
- Resources, workshops and events
- Sector advocacy and leadership development

PROGRAMMING

Regional Arts Victoria nurtures the experts who foster local artistic experiences and stimulate young minds.

- Arts & Education Program
- Connecting Places
- Touring programs
- Education resources
- Industry development resources and events
- Sector advocacy and leadership development

PROJECTS

Regional Arts Victoria presents major artistic projects that build local artistic leadership and legacy.

- State-wide projects including Creative Workers in Schools, *Small Town Transformations and Artlands Victoria*
- Internal Creative Professional Development programs
- Sector advocacy and leadership development

ARTS & EDUCATION

For over 50 years, Regional Arts Victoria has been the leader in providing educational arts experiences for children and young people across Victoria. Each year we offer a range of performances and workshop programs to schools throughout regional and metropolitan Victoria, with COVID-Safe planning in place across our entire 2022 program.

The Arts & Education program aims to encourage young people to develop their creativity and enhance awareness and participation in the arts through accessible arts learning opportunities. Our program is designed to engage, educate, challenge and delight students from foundation through to VCE using a range of creative approaches. With a selection of high quality, immersive arts experiences, we pride ourselves on providing relevant and exciting activities for children and young people that are complementary to the Victorian Curriculum. To support educator learning we offer professional development opportunities to complement our programs.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM

“Everyone knows that friendships made in bathrooms are ones that last for life.”

Cactus is a brutally funny and heartbreakingly honest new play by one of the country’s most exciting new playwrights, Madelaine Nunn.

SYNOPSIS & OVERVIEW

Cactus follows Abbie and her best friend PB as they navigate the last tumultuous year of high school. It’s going well. Milestones are being met. Exams are drawing near. Freedom is on the horizon. Then Abbie receives unexpected news that turns her life upside down. Can she still share this with her best friend? And what will it mean for the future she hadn’t even imagined yet?

Cactus is a play for and about young people. Centered around a pre-mature dilemma, the work speaks to the contemporary concerns, fears and hopes of our youth. Using an eclectic performance style including naturalism, magic realism, disjointed time and character transformation, *Cactus* tackles the journey from childhood to adulthood with humour and nuance.

“Cactus brings to life the awkwardness and vulnerability of adolescence through well-crafted and vital performance... This would be an ideal introduction to theatre for schools.”
- Cameron Woodhead, *The Age*

Cactus aims to challenge taboos by normalising often-unseen experiences of adolescence and to interrogate the current social views on gender and the societal pressures put on young people as they transition from teenager to young adult.

The performance text operates within three worlds, which are used to further connect the audience with Abbie’s emotional journey by observing the action and events through her eyes. Actors play multiple roles through manipulation of physicality, language, voice and gesture. The play oscillates from everyday colloquial dialogue – including the use of text messaging – to poetic and lyrical language. The colloquial language contextualises the audience and grounds the characters in the real world, whereas the heightened/poetic language is used to create surreal moments, rich in imagery, to reflect the internal struggle of the protagonist. In addition to this, subtext is used throughout as characters often mask their feelings of fear and vulnerability. The set is minimal and uses theatrical devices such as sound, light and character physicality to convey changes in place/time.

Cactus has been developed with **Australian Theatre for Young People**, Australia’s leading youth Arts Organisation and is a work that speaks directly to the issues and fears affecting young people today. Through humour and pathos *Cactus* depicts:

- The struggles of adolescence,
- The desire to "fit in",
- The changing nature of identity; and
- The importance of healthy and supportive friendships.

Cactus was featured at **La Mama Theatre** as part of their Summer/Autumn program. Under the direction of Katie Cawthorne (Previous Artistic Director of Canberra Youth Theatre), *Cactus* has been realised with an all-female creative team of young and diverse artists. This is a positive platform to bring an important work to young people and to hear stories they too may have experienced.

BIOGRAPHIES

Madelaine Nunn – Writer

Madelaine Nunn is an award-winning writer/theatre-maker/actor and a recipient of the highly coveted ATYP Rebel Wilson Theatremaker Scholarship. Since graduating from the VCA in 2015 Madelaine has co-founded the ensemble company, Three Birds Theatre, been shortlisted for the Rodney Seaborn Playwrights Award, nominated for two Green Room Awards and has toured her work throughout Victoria, NSW and the US. This year three of Madelaine's plays are having premiere seasons in Melbourne, Sydney and the Central Coast. Last year, she worked with the Melbourne Theatre Company's Education department in collaboration with Virtual Schools Victoria providing scriptwriting sessions. Previous to that, Madelaine's play, Kinder Surprise was recorded as part of ABC's National Radio Drama Program and was selected to be a part of Cybec Electric with the MTC. Madelaine was also selected to take part in a residency with Arena Theatre co. at the Bendigo Studio.

In 2019 Madelaine's play Unicorn Girl, was a finalist for the Martin Lysicrates Prize and her play Loose Teeth made the shortlist. Madelaine's play, Cactus, which is scheduled to have a season at La Mama in 2021 was also shortlisted for the Rodney Seaborn Playwrights Award (2018). Madelaine's play Bin Chicken is published by Currency Press and was presented at Griffin Theatre Company with ATYP. With Three Birds Theatre, Madelaine is the co-writer and performer of Will This Show Take Off (Nati Frinj, 2019) Enter Ophelia (La Mama, 2018) LadyCake (Poppy Seed Theatre Festival 2016) and Three Birds One Cock, (FRISK 2015; Adelaide Fringe 2016; Metanoia 2016, RAV Regional Tour 2016-19). Some of Madelaine's acting credits include, Daisy in the feature Film, Two Heads Creek (Dir. Jesse O'Brian), Xan in the Red Stitch production of Desert 6:29pm (Dir. Bridget Balodis), 2 in The Three Graces (Dir. Katie Cawthorne) and Maggie in The Mill on the Floss (Dir. Tanya Gerstle).

Lucy Rossen - Actor

Lucy is a 2020 VCA graduate with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting and she is based in Melbourne. While at VCA her theatre credits included Earthquakes in London (Dir: Sarah Goodes), The Seagull (Dir: Budi Miller), King John (Dir: Helen Trenos), Mirror Mirror (Dir: Georgina Naidu), and Jasper Jones (Dir: Candy Bowers). Lucy was also involved in rehearsed readings for both Myopia and Do I look Like I Care (Dir: Samuel Boyd). Lucy has also appeared in various short films while at VCA including Drain Rats (Dir: Grace Dephoff), Baby Genius (Dir: Harry Goodlet), Fright Night (Dir: Grace Dephoff) and Mellow Geometrics to Soothe the Soul (Dir: Samuel Eidelson). Outside VCA Lucy Directed My Mum's Y2K Party for Melbourne Uni Law Revue and well as writing and performing in The Cake, also for Melbourne Uni Law Revue. She was a presenter for the Up Late & Snooze Button Radio show for RTRFM 92.1 and appeared as a performer in Maybe This Time showcase for Be You Inc.

Brynna Lowen – Set and Costume

Brynna is a set and costume designer and maker, interested in creating colourful, comedic environments for both live performance and screen. Graduating from The Victorian College of the Arts in 2016 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Production: Design Realisation), Brynna received the Lionel Gell Foundation Scholarship for excellence in theatre. She has completed work with a variety of Australian creatives including The Ilbijerri Theatre Company, She Said Theatre, Tasmania Performs, Hot Mess Productions, The Guerrilla Museum, Western Edge Youth Arts, Flesh Coloured Panties Productions and most recently director Declan Greene.

In 2020 Brynna was selected to take part in the Melbourne Theatre Company's Women in Theatre Program. Brynna is also one third of the Design Collective, NoMe Studio with Joseph Noonan and Moya O'Brien. A collaborative design house focused on Set, Costume, Objects and Installations founded in 2020.

Daniella A. Esposito – Sound

Daniella is a female-identifying, multi-disciplinary Sound Designer and Composer based in Melbourne/Narrm. She is known for her sound designs and compositions for Theatre, Film, and immersive works, whilst currently studying at the Victorian College of The Arts, BFA, Production. As an advocate of the arts, she creates aural landscapes that ignite a transformative world from hearing to experiencing as an integral element of story-telling and performance. Professionally, her credits include sound design and composition at The Malthouse 2020 Season Launch (2019), Western Edge Youth Arts (2020), Patalog Theatre's critically acclaimed production 'Punk Rock' (2019), 'Slut' by Patricia Cornelius at The Burrow (2020), Three Fates Theatre Company's inaugural production of 'Land' (2020), 'Never Said Motel's immersive theatre experience debut at The Writer's Festival (2019) and OK Motels Festival (2019), as well as completing a Sound Design Secondment with MTC's production of 'Home I'm Darling' (2020).

Ayesha Harris-Westman - Actor

Ayesha was born into a family of dancers and circus performers. In early high school, her first major teen rebellion was to quit circus to spend more time acting. Since making the transition, Ayesha has spent the last decade-ish creating theatre and bringing it to life. In 2014 Ayesha joined the Hothouse Studio Theatre Ensemble. Over the next two years Ayesha helped develop two new works; Letters to the Border and Between the Clouds (dir. Travis Dowling), with the latter having a season at ATYP. Ayesha graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 2019 with a BFA in Acting. While at VCA, her roles included Scribe in Fucking A (dir. Candy Bowers), Karen in August: Osage County (dir. Leith McPherson), Adriana in The Comedy of Errors (dir. Tony Smith), Dog/Rodica in Mad Forest (dir. Sean Mee), and Artemidorus/Cato in It was Greek to Me (dir. Budi Miller). Ayesha spent the very small part of 2020 where we were actually allowed outside to lend her voice to a video game Grip (OneBar Games), and played Lou in production of DNA at Chapel off Chapel.

Claudia Howarth - Actor

Claudia is a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA). While at the VCA, she worked in stage management in a variety of disciplines including theatre, musical theatre, devised works, and contemporary dance – and for her work and achievements was awarded the Lionel Gell Foundation Scholarship for Production in 2018. She completed internships on the 2019 Melbourne season of Calamity Jane at the Comedy Theatre, and Melbourne Theatre Company's Shakespeare In Love. Claudia has worked as assistant stage manager on The Feather in the Web (dir. Declan Greene) for Red Stitch Actors Theatre as part of the 2020 Midsumma Festival, and as assistant stage manager on We're Probably Really Really Happy Right Now (dir. Sarah Vickery) at Theatre Works (February, 2021). During the Melbourne coronavirus lockdown, she learned how to knit, and dedicated time to her photography in her 5km radius. Claudia is looking forward to gigs at La Mama Theatre and the Victorian Opera later in the year.

Rachel Lee - Lighting

Rachel is a Singaporean-Chinese lighting designer and artist based in Melbourne. She works primarily with new writing and is a member of theatre collective, New Working Group. She believes in honouring the process and actively seeks to make accessible work that explores and interrogates the social ecosystem of her cultures. She also branches out in production management and producing capacities. Most recently, she co-produced and designed award-winning 《落叶归根》 (Luò yè guī gēn) - Getting Home (Melbourne Fringe). Design credits include POONA (Next Wave), Hello, World! (The Malthouse Theatre), ButohOUT! Festival, Wannabe a Rabbit? (Weave Movement Theatre), Single Ladies and Ulster American (Red Stitch), She Is Vigilante (Theatreworks), Fallen (She Said Theatre), Love/Chamberlain (Bridget Mackey), The Three Graces (The Anchor), World Problems (Emma Hall), Gender Euphoria (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras), Virtual Intimacy (AsiaTOPA), The Honouring and Blood Quantum (Yirramboi), Romeo Is Not The Only Fruit (Melbourne International Comedy Festival), Truly Madly Britney (Midsumma), Tandem and Bread Crumbs (Poppyseed), Oh No! Satan Stole My Pineal Gland!, Baby Bi Bi Bi and Lou Wall's Drag Race. (Fringe Circuit).

As an associate, she has assisted on Moral Panic (Darebin Arts), Considerable Sexual License (Yirramboi), The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven (Midsumma) and Easy Riders (Rising). Rachel is a current 2020 Besen Family Artist Program participant and is being mentored by MILKE as an emerging producer. She was part of 2019 Melbourne Theatre Company's Women In Theatre Program.

Katie Cawthorne - Director

Katie began directing in 2002, producing work in Melbourne, Mexico, Darwin, Sydney and Canberra. In 2015 she completed her Masters of Fine Arts in Directing at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), after earlier qualifying at the University of Melbourne (Graduate Diploma of Education) and Flinders University (Bachelor of Arts). Katie was the Artistic Director of Canberra Youth Theatre from January 2015 to December 2018 and directed SKIN, The 24 Hour Butoh Project, The Verbatim Project, The Greek Project – Antigone, poem every day, Filtered and Fading with the company.

In 2016 Katie was awarded a Canberra Critics' Circle Theatre Award for Revitalising and Advancing Canberra Youth Theatre. Katie has also directed works for Warehouse Circus, The Public Theatre (Design Canberra Festival), Aspen Island Theatre Company and playwrights Emily Sheehan, Madelaine Nunn and Tracy Bourne. Katie is co-founder of The Anchor theatre company, which has produced work in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. She is a regular teaching staff member at a number of performing arts institutions including the National Theatre Drama School, the National Institute of Circus Arts and the National Institute of Dramatic Arts Open learning. In 2021 Katie Directed Emily Sheehan's Hell's Canyon for a tour of regional Victoria and secondary schools and Madelaine Nunn's Cactus which was presented at La Mama in June/July.

SUGGESTED PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

The following activities are designed for teachers and students to explore before seeing a performance of *Cactus*. The activities explore further the story, themes, form, and choices made by the creative team when they produced and staging the work.

CURRICULUM AREAS: The Arts - Drama, VCE Theatre Studies, Social and Personal Capability, English



Ayesha Harris-Westman (Abbie) and Lucy Rossen (PB) *Cactus*, La Mama 2021– photo by Darren Gill

WHO ARE THE CHARACTERS in CACTUS?

ABBIE - 17 years old. Intelligent, perceptive, strong willed. Trying to figure it all out.

PB - 17 years old. Curious, vivacious and practically lives her life through gossip. A fiercely loyal friend.

ABBIE and PB are in a world full of adults. It's not quite theirs yet.

The actor playing PB also plays: ANESTH DOC. MUM LEADER WOMAN 1 WOMAN 2 WOMAN 3 LACHY THE MUM KEVIN

DISCUSS:

- What do you imagine when you read these descriptions of the characters?
- What do you imagine when you know that the actor playing PB plays multiple character?
- Discuss the above image from the 2021 production of CACTUS. How are the friends depicted in this image?

TITLE OF THE PLAY – CACTUS

Play titles are not a coincidence. Here's an extract from an article that discusses play titles, why they are important, and how they emerge.

“...to that end, I wonder... Does my play choose the title, or does that first title inform my play? At fourteen pages in, who knows what will happen to these characters? Who knows what will happen in this world? I am not a writer who plots anything out, it's all just spewing when it comes to the first draft, tweaking in the second, and figuring it out structurally from then on...A secret from me. The title is so very important. Not because of sale figures, but to the playwright”.

Link: <https://howlround.com/title-play>

DISCUSS:

- What did you think when you heard the title of the play?
- What is a cactus?
- What images come to mind?
- What are the qualities of a cactus?
- What is the plural of cactus?
- Share definitions and understandings
- Why would a playwright call their play *Cactus*?
- If you have read some of the introductory material, discuss how the title of the play relates to the story/characters/themes.

EXPLORE:

The follow links and activities are designed to explore the script, style, structure, contexts and production history of CACTUS before attending a performance.

COMMENTARY ABOUT CACTUS (Drama, Literacy)

WATCH – The trailer for Cactus, La Mama, July 2021:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEEtd1NPDhg>

READ – Review, La Mama, July 2021: <https://www.stagewhispers.com.au/reviews/cactus>

READ – Review, La Mama, July 2021: <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/theatre/grungy-visceral-theatre-shows-us-heroic-young-women-20210627-p584mh.html>

DISCUSS:

- What information do these commentaries offer you?
- How do the reviewers describe the play?
- What aspects do they focus on?

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT:

LISTEN - Radio interview:

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/melbourne/programs/afternoons/madelaine-nunn-on-her-first-play-cactus/13407632>

Some key quotes from the radio interview with playwright Madelaine Nunn are offered below:

Candid coming of age comedy, a nuanced female friendship. Abbie is given some news about her body that reshapes her identity and she has to come to terms with this premature dilemma. Equal parts humour, equal parts heart – Madelaine Nunn

There are such stakes in the last year of high school, at 17, just before you turn 18. Those friendships you don't get them again. How often do you spend six hours a day with your friends, mucking around, trapped...like a team against the world? You really are discovering things. Nothing really matters and everything matters. You've got your foot on the brake and the accelerator, doing burnouts and going in circles – Madelaine Nunn

It's all the about the rhythm, and I'm interested in 'masks' (the faces we wear to hide our true selves) in the theatre as the energy is trapped behind the masks. How will this affect the rhythm? - Madelaine Nunn

I am in the rehearsal room. I am very keen for feedback. I'm like, 'That line sounds a bit naff. Let's get rid of it', and 'You've already said that, let's get rid of that'. I am an actor. I often think, 'What would help me? What do I need to strengthen? Is it the intention? Does the objective need to be tightened up and intensified?'. I try to keep my distance in the rehearsal room but sometimes I think, 'This will help', and I'll offer a little provocation – Madelaine Nunn

Here's another interview with Madelaine Nunn. It's not about Cactus but it is about play writing, to give you a broader context about the style of writing Madelaine Nunn is interested in.

<https://www.mtc.com.au/discover-more/mtc-now/meet-madelaine-nunn/>

DISCUSS:

What further understandings about the story, characters and themes do these quotes from the playwright provide for you?

A DYNAMIC OPENING (Drama, Literacy, Critical and Creative thinking)

The 'not-quite-real' world. Obscured by an omnipresent fog while ash-like spores drift through the air, this is a place sort of like real life only darker and colder. In the dark we hear the crackling of electricity and the low groan of thunder, it's disconcerting and all encompassing. A couple of bolts of lightning flash to reveal ABBIE, alone – The opening stage directions to CACTUS

Working in groups of 3 or 4 devise/create an interpretation of the above stage direction. Have your group work independently from other groups. Steps you could use:

- Brainstorm key ideas and concepts eg what is a not-quite-real world?
- Brainstorm a structure – what might happen first, next, simultaneously?
- Decide on roles – you can depict human characters or represent ideas or elements eg thunder, electricity, fog.
- Focus on imagery and soundscape - How could you use sound (human or from your phone) and movement to create an interpretation?
- Where is your audience?
- Are there any props, costume, or set pieces in the room that could be included (design)?
- What words from the stage directions could you incorporate – if you wanted to?
- Share your interpretations with the rest of the group
- Discuss and analyse the different interpretations and the choices each group made – think about use of expressive skills, use of space, actor/audience relationship, mood and atmosphere, focus and direction. What did you notice? What stood out? What did you want to know more about?
- Reflect in your journal on a) your group's work and b) one other group's work

SUGGESTED POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

(Activities that dissect and expand upon the content of the workshop/performance that the teacher and students can engage in post-performance).

1. Remembering the play - (Drama, Theatre Studies, Critical and Creative Thinking)

- In pairs make some dot points about the main story / stories in the performance – where did they begin and where did they end?
- At what point in the characters' lives do we, as audience, enter?
- At what point in the characters' lives do we, as audience, exit?
- How much time transpires across the play?
- How did the performance make you feel? What did it make you think?
- Who were the characters? What was their relationship to each other?
- What were some of the challenges these characters faced?
- What did each of the main characters want?
- How did you feel about the main characters? Did you have a favourite? Why?
- What other characters are spoken about by the two main characters? What is your impression of these characters (even though we don't see them)?
- What did you notice about the use of costumes, set, props?
- How many different places and locations did the performance take you to?
- Were these places created on stage? What production elements or acting and direction enabled this?
- Did you feel you were asked to take sides in either of the performances? Whose side did you take?
- What key ideas / concepts were being explored in the performances?
- Does theatre or performance need to have a key idea or theme or purpose? Why/Why not?
- How important was audience to the performance? Did you feel you had a role to play? What was that role?
- What types of performance styles/theatrical styles did you see in the performances – try to give specific examples eg Realism, non-realistic, comedy
- What was your overall opinion of the performances?
- If you could ask a question of the creative team, what would it be?
- How would you describe the performances to a friend, a parent, a stranger?

Exploring the themes in Cactus

Identity, Relationships, Societal pressures, Coming-of-age are all themes in Cactus, what do these words suggest? How do you imagine they will be conveyed in a theatre performance? What are some elements that contribute to one's identity? What pressures do young people face from school, family and friends? Think about the future, where do you see yourself in 1 year, 5 years 10 years? Do you have any plans or things you hope to have achieved? Why/Why not?

FOCUS ON VCE DRAMA AND THEATRE STUDIES

The following section of this resource guides teachers and students who may be studying VCE Drama Units 1 and 2 or VCE Theatre Studies Unit 2.

PRODUCTION AREAS/AREAS

Acting and Direction, Character

What do you recall about the production role/area of acting?

Analyse and **evaluate** how the actors playing **Abbie OR PB or Mum or Lachy** established belief, focus and authenticity. Consider:

- Acting and expressive skills such as voice, movement, gesture, facial expression, stillness, silence
- Performance skills such as energy, focus, timing, tension
- How convincingly did actors interact with each other eg Abbie/PB, Abbie/Mum, Abbie/Lachy?
- How would you describe the 'style' of acting? Was it Realistic? Non-realistic? Presentational? Abstract? Story-telling/narration?
- If you have studied the script, you could work in groups and select a small scene as a focus for deeper analysis – there are also some extracts at the end of this resource you could choose.

Verbal and non-verbal language

The use of language in *Cactus*

- Discuss the use of verbal/spoken language in the play.
- What IMPACT did it have on you? What lines, phrases or words stuck out for you? Why?
- Why do you think the characters spoke to each other in the way they did?
- Does the language in the play sound authentic (do teenagers speak this way)?
- Consider the non-verbal language used by the actors – movement, gesture, facial expression, stillness, levels, direction – how effectively was this used to convey meaning or intention?
- Were there scenes where only non-verbal language was used? What other production areas/roles accompanied these eg sound, music, design elements?

Direction

High school bathroom What do you recall about **the production role** of direction in the play?

Consider the opening scene to the play, where Abbie is experiencing a very bad bout of menstruation.

. Stark. ABBIE is alone in a cubicle. The only light should be on ABBIE, it should be narrow and confined to the width of a cubicle. This is the worst moment of her life. There's panic.

- How was this scene directed?
- Evaluate the directorial choices made in this scene to convey the intended meaning.

Consider the two sets of stage directions below taken from the script:

Scene 11: Surgery. Deep in ABBIE's unconscious. The 'not-quite-real' world comes alive. There is the low drone of thunder reverberating and the occasional crackle of electricity. The space is charged. It's both playful and scary. It starts slow and buoyant and picks up in momentum and intensity. ABBIE's chasing something only for it to start chasing her. This world is shadowy. Images to explore include dogs, hospital procedure, babies, isolation. It should be conveyed in staging, lights and sound. There is another figure but ABBIE can't quite tell who it is. It mirrors her movements for a while. Perhaps the figure has the mask of a dog or wears the fur coats from the earlier scenes, perhaps ABBIE sways alone in a gown. The soundscape should pulsate. Perhaps there are flashes of red or howling of dogs heard in the distance. As the images grow, muted

sounds of beeping and muttering slowly infiltrate the space and the vibration of her phone on the table starts to slowly remove ABBIE from this world.

Scene 14: ABBIE does it again even quicker. It should be even punctuations. She does the moves smoothly and efficiently like a boxer would. PB watches, impressed.

S stands for solar plexus.

I is for Instep.

N stands for Nose and

G is for groin!

- How were these stage directions realised / interpreted in the performance you saw?
- Were they exactly as written? Did they differ from the script excerpt?
- Analyse and evaluate the directorial choices made in these moments – did they convey meaning, particularly of the ‘not-quite-real’ world?

Fourth wall or no fourth wall?

The play is structured in a way where Abbie sometimes speaks about people and not to them. Sometimes action happens behind the ‘fourth wall’ with the audience looking in, and sometimes the audience is directly to spoken to.

- Why do you think the playwright made that choice?
- Discuss and evaluate how DIRECTION of these moments and switching between having a fourth wall and then having no fourth wall conveyed the story.

Time in the play

- At what point in the characters’ lives do we, as audience, enter?
- At what point in the characters’ lives do we, as audience, exit?
- How much time transpires within the play?
- How do we know when time has shifted?
- What acting, directorial and design choices assist in conveying shifts in time (and location)?

SET, PROPERTIES AND COSTUME

Set



The image above is from the **original production** of Cactus

FOCUS ON THE IMAGE:

- Does this image reconnect you with the the play you saw in performance?
- How would you describe the aesthetic (feel) of the design presented in the above image?
- How would you describe the textures and colour palette in the image?
- How does the design impact the performance space in terms of how the actors may use the space?

FOCUS ON THE SET IN PERFORMANCE

The set you saw may differ from the set in the image. The writer states “the stage should be spare and abstract rather than naturalistic”.

- How did the design in the performance create a non-naturalistic setting?
- What actor-audience relationships were intended created through the design of the set?
- How would you describe the aesthetic (feeling, texture, tone, mood, palette) of the set in the performance you saw of CACTUS?
- How did the set design contribute to the theatre styles/performance styles of the play?

Properties & Costume



PROPS

Some props that are used in the play include bags, water bottles, school stuff

- What other props do you recall? How did the actors use the props? When did they use them?
- Consider the *symbolism* of these props to the characters and the story – what is important about certain props and for whom?
- Do the props work within the world of the play and the ‘not-quite-real’ world of the play?
- Are the props present in the show reflective of what is mentioned in the script?
- Discuss how the minimal use of props contributed to the theatrical styles of the production?
- Do you think there could have been more props? What type?

The characters remain in their costume throughout the performance with small differences.

- In pairs write a description of the costumes worn by Abbie and PB.
- Consider the image above on the left of the coats – how did these costume pieces contribute to creating characters? How did the performers use these costumes?
- Evaluate the effectiveness of these costumes in conveying the characters
- Discuss how the costumes contributed to the theatrical styles of the play

LIGHTING AND SOUND

NOTE: Lighting will differ in each venue the performance occurs.

Recall the sound and lighting in the performance you saw of CACTUS.

- What specific sounds and lighting states do you recall? Why do you recall these?
- How did they impact on you? Make you feel? Enhance a moment?
- Select two sound/music moments from the play and return to the script
- Compare and contrast how these production roles/areas were used but were not necessarily written into the script – why might they differ?
- Do the same with any lighting states and lighting moments.
- What diegetic sounds (sounds within the world of the play – eg a dog barking) were present in the performance? What sounds appeared to be coming from offstage?
- What sounds and music created the ‘not-quite-real’ world?
- Overall, how did the sound / music and lighting contribute to the mood of the performance and to the world of the play?
- How did sound/music and lighting *dramaturge* the story or provide subtext for the story – what was happening ‘beneath’ the top layer of the story (the spoken text) that helped you to feel or respond to a moment?

THEATRE TECHNOLOGIES (Theatre Studies)

In your own theatre making you can APPLY a range of theatre technologies across all three stages of production – planning, development, performance. In performance analysis you focus on what theatre technologies you see and hear in the presentation stage (the performance) and compare these to what may be suggested in the script.

- What types of theatre technologies were used and were evident in the production of CACTUS?
- How did the use of theatre technologies contribute to the theatrical styles of the performance?
- How do the technologies used in the performance reflect what is suggested in the script?

DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

Climax, conflict, contrast, mood, rhythm, sound, space, tension

- Discuss what you feel was a climactic moment in the performance and the qualities that enabled this eg acting, direction, design elements
- What moments of conflict did you see/hear? Between which characters? Was there a moment for one character eg Abbie – inner conflict? How was this conveyed?
- Contrast the real and the ‘not-quite-real’ worlds and how they were created
- Discuss how mood was established eg, fear, delight, apprehension, relief?
- Consider the rhythm of the language, the rhythm of a particular scene, the rhythm of a movement moment. How was one or more of these conveyed?
- Discuss how sound was used in the performance – human sound (not speech), recorded sound, music, silence – to convey meaning and tell story
- How was the space used by the actors and designed through production areas/roles to create place and time, actor-audience relationship, status?
- Select a moment in the play where tension was particularly important eg between Abbie/PB, between Abbie and her Mum, Abbie and Lachy or other.

ELEMENTS OF THEATRE COMPOSITION

- Consider the elements of theatre composition and how they may be evident within the production. *Cohesion* – Analyse and evaluate how acting and direction contributed to generating cohesion in the production.
 - Did it seem there was **unity and balance**, were the actors in the ‘same world’ and how did a different world upset unity and balance?
- *Motion* – Discuss how the actors used/were directed to use the space, the set pieces and properties effectively.
 - Given the main theatrical style was non-realism, did the movement and use of the space reflect this?
- *Rhythm* – Analyse and then evaluate the pace, timing and tempo of the delivery of the spoken text, the shifts in location and time, the shifts into moments of ‘not-quite-real’.
 - How were these achieved? Are they what you imagined when reading the script?
 - What was one highly effective moment you recall?
- *Emphasis* – What aspects within the production were given particular emphasis? Words, silence, sound/music, lighting, movement?
 - Why do you think these were emphasised?
 - Select two moments and discuss in detail, comparing with the script.
- *Contrast* – The play makes a strong shift into ‘not-quite-real’ as a way of exploring Abbie’s inner monologue and conflict.
 - Discuss how these contrasting moments are created theatrically; in the acting, direction, design elements.
- *Variation* – changes to the dynamics of the interpretation, as may be evident in the use of tension, conflict, intensity, energy and use of the space

- Playwright Madelaine Nunn describes the characters as inhabiting “a world of full of adults. It’s not quite theirs yet”. Further she states “The scenes where the actor playing PB plays other characters should never be staged as naturalism”
- Select two moments from the play that represent these two ‘variations’ in dynamic. How are these moments created?
- Consider expressive skills, intensity, energy, use of space, silence, movement, volume, production roles

AUDIENCE

Actor-audience relationship (Drama/TS) and audience culture (Theatre Studies)

Through the writing, dramaturgy, acting, use of expressive skills, dramatic elements and the elements of theatre composition, the audience is placed in a relationship with the world of the play.

- What actor-audience relationships were established in the production?
- Was there distance between the audience and the performance space? Was it an intimate space?
- How would you describe the style of the performance space? End on, proscenium, thrust, studio?
- What assumptions does the play make about its audience? Eg knowledge of the contexts, language, circumstances, world beyond the play
- What is familiar about the world of Abbie and PB? How do the theatrical styles contribute to this familiarity? – Consider use of language, interaction, use of props.
- Consider the use of TIME in this production – what is now, what is represented as being in the past or in an imagined time, what is suggested will be the future? Are there gaps in time that we are left to imagine?

FURTHER ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE IN THE CLASSROOM

DEEPER EXPLORATION

MONOLOGUES

Three monologues are offered below. This is an opportunity to explore the text in more detail and to make some individual interpretations about the character, motivation, mood/tone, language, audience.

- Drama students can use these to devise a scene
- Theatre Studies students can use these to prepare a monologue interpretation

Monologue 1: PB

Ahh Casey's dad tripped over while he was bringing out the spanakopita and tomato sauce went all over Jez. That was pretty funny. Casey's dad's hot too. He used to be a pro-surfer or like a world champion wind glider or something. He's definitely a DILF. Umm Oh! So you know how Greggje loves animals, well she desperately wanted to pat Casey's cow, I know-it's so weird, I don't even know if cows like to be petted, but yeah, anyway, so she went out the back but it was dark, the sensor light wasn't working and she's like the clumsiest person ever, so of course, there was a ditch and she fell into the barbed wire fence and tore a chunk out of her leg. We told her to pour alcohol on it, meaning vodka or something so she wouldn't get an infection but she just poured a whole bottle of Midori on it instead

Monologue 2: Abbie

ABBIE I run my hand along the side of the house and crouch past the trees to avoid the spider webs. I'd forgotten how unsettling the entrance to a party is. I quickly scout the yard for a group to join but everyone's in the dark. I buy myself time. Plunge my hand deep into the esky. The ice burns my skin. I clutch a can of something and pull it out like a lucky dip. The bubbles burn my throat and make my eyes water. I like that feeling almost as much as I like the way the plastic of the upturned crate digs into my thighs when I sit down next to Kevin.

Monologue 3: Abbie

*It's dark. I go down a one-way street and end up /
Lying in the sun. Playing with their little bundle of joy. They're kissing her feet, NO, they're tickling her belly, NO, they're tickling her feet and kissing her belly. He looks at her, she looks at him and they are a picture of –
Only. She's doesn't look at him. She looks at the dogs. She can't help but look at the dogs. She watches them play. She watches them run around in circles. She wonders why they do that? Why do they do that? All that running and chasing just so they can get a quick bite of each other only to start chasing each other again? It doesn't seem to make any/
She quickly forgets what she was thinking. Distracted by the day. Distracted by the beautiful day. Distracted by all the smiling people. Distracted by the sea of eyes and the whites of teeth enjoying such a beautiful day. She has no choice but to smile.
And then she feels it, slide down her back. She feels the warmth leave her skin as the sun creeps behind the clouds. The grey clouds. And like they were never there everyone has gone. She looks around for her bundle of joy but all she can see are the dogs.
The playful smiling dogs. Only they're not smiling, they're snarling and they're not playing, they're fighting. Then she sees what they've got in their mouths, between their jaws. She screams. But the wind. It whips past her and she chokes. She's choking on the wind. It's caught in her throat. She tries to run but she's stuck watching it happen. She wants to cry but her eyes are seized open. And then it strikes.
Crack of thunder.
And the dogs are after her. Chasing her. Panting for her.
Crack of thunder
She runs between the sky's silver veins shooting down around her.
Crack of thunder.
The sky is splitting the earth to pieces,
Crack of thunder.*

*They're fast, the dogs, they're catching up but
Crack of thunder.
Everything's falling away underneath her
Crack of thunder.
And then she stops.
She looks up.
And the whole world shatters on top of her.
A flash of light.*

SCENES

Three short scenes from follow. They are selected from different parts of the play.

- In this activity work with a partner and select a character
- Based on your knowledge of the play discuss:
 - The relationship between the characters
 - What motivates each character

SCENE 1:

13. *ABBIE's house. In the Kitchen. MUM and ABBIE.*

ABBIE Mum burns herself on the water washing up- she's about to swear but just bites her lip instead. She usually orders me to dry but tonight she doesn't, just tells me to /

MUM Sit down and relax at the table.

ABBIE Why does she always have to make things weird? She's facing the sink when she /

MUM You know you can talk to me. I'm here whenever you need. It's a lot to process at such a young /

ABBIE It must be hard for her. I remember as a kid asking her what she wanted for Christmas or for her birthday, thinking she'd say flowers or jewelry or a new handbag or something but every time she'd say the same thing. Nothing. I've got you. The greatest gift in the world.

MUM And who knows what technology we might have in 15 years. I think if we can colonise Mars we should be able to /

ABBIE All the wonders of the world and she thinks I'm the best thing that's ever happened to her.

MUM And you know Brian and Jedd from down the road have been looking into adopting, now that they've got the money, and Kara's sister /

ABBIE I heard her crying in the shower last night. I just stood outside the door listening, I didn't know what to do, I thought about going in and asking her if she was alright, but then I thought it was better to just pretend I didn't hear it.

MUM Oh and there was a special on at Coles today, so there's cake and ice cream in the freezer. I got chocolate, your favourite.

SCENE 2:

PB Did you know Oprah was only 19 when she started co-anchoring news. And Gloria Steinem revolutionised feminism and she only started school when she was 11.

ABBIE Why are you fact checking these people, do we need to know this for something?

PB There's just so many incredible and influential women out there.

ABBIE Yeah.

PB And so many of them don't have kids.

ABBIE What?

PB Jennifer Aniston, Marilyn Monroe, Joan of Arc /

ABBIE Joan of Arc?

PB She's such an icon.

ABBIE Because she was burnt at the stake.

PB Because she led an army.

ABBIE Why are you doing this?

SCENE 3:

Outside of school. PB half hugs, half jumps on ABBIE's back from behind.

PB Truanting Miss Robertson?

ABBIE What?

PB Skipping English Miss Robertson?

ABBIE Oh.

PB Where've you been?

ABBIE The oval.

PB Was there another fight?

ABBIE No.

PB Oh. What were you doing at the oval?

ABBIE Nothing.

PB Nothing?

ABBIE Just didn't feel like listening to the drone of Mr Blake go on about Ophelia as symbol of sexualized madness or whatever.

PB I think you mean a representation of the fragility of the female mind.

ABBIE Yeah. That.

PB Don't worry. I told him that you had a doctor's appointment.

ABBIE Why would you do that?

PB Because he was going to call the office. So I have your homework and your essay.

Distinction. Very good, as always.

ABBIE As if it even means anything.

PB I know right.

Learning Areas	Capabilities
<p>The Arts - Drama</p> <p>Strand: Drama Practices</p> <p>Practise and refine the expressive capacity of voice and movement to communicate ideas and dramatic action in a range of forms, styles and performances spaces</p> <p>Achievement Standard By the end of Level 10, students develop and sustain different roles and characters to realise dramatic intentions and engage audiences. They perform devised and scripted drama in different forms, styles and performance spaces. They plan, direct, produce, rehearse, and refine performances. They select and use the elements of drama, narrative and structure in directing and acting and apply stagecraft. They use performance and expressive skills to convey dramatic action and meaning. Students analyse the elements of drama, forms and performance styles and evaluate meaning and aesthetic effect in drama they devise, interpret, perform and view. They use experiences of drama practices from different cultures, places and times to evaluate drama.</p> <p>Example of link to The Arts - Drama</p> <p>In this production of Cactus, a single performer plays multiple varied roles, changing gender, status and age. The transformation of the actor into these roles is supported through acting skills, and creative light, sound and costume design. Students will be able to analyse the status, motivation and characterisation of the characters through the changing expression/skill of the performer. A post show activity would be to practice their own character transformation using excerpts of the script.</p>	<p>Critical and Creative Thinking</p> <p>Strand: Meta Cognition</p> <p>Critically examine their own and others thinking processes and discuss factors that influence thinking, including cognitive biases.</p> <p>Achievement Standard By the end of Level 10, students construct and evaluate questions, including their own, for their effectiveness. They demonstrate a willingness to shift their perspective when generating ideas, resulting in new ways of perceiving solutions.</p> <p>Students structure complex valid arguments. They explain and apply a range of techniques to test validity within and between arguments.</p> <p>Students identify, articulate, analyse and reflect on their own and others thinking processes. They use, monitor, evaluate and redirect as necessary a range of learning strategies. Students develop, justify and refine criteria to evaluate the quality of ideas, proposals and thinking processes.</p> <p>Example of link to Critical and Creative Thinking Capability</p> <p>Cactus is a play that demands the attention of its audience to follow and connect with the two main characters. These characters are confronted with complex choices, problems and unfamiliar situations. Students will be given the opportunity to observe the actions and thinking process of these characters and will reflect on their own reactions to similar choices. Questions include: What are the two main characters struggling with? What are the social pressures influencing their decisions? Why do Abbie and PB egg Lachy's house? How do gender expectations affect Abbie's self-worth? What do the characters fear? Students might then experiment with long form improvisation responses to these questions, making physical discoveries around some of these questions, utilising instinct and physical analysis to think critically about the work.</p>

The Arts- Drama

Strand: Respond and Interpret

Evaluate how the elements of drama, forms and performance styles in devised and scripted drama to convey meaning and aesthetic effect. Analyse a range of drama from contemporary and past times, including the drama of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to explore differing viewpoints and develop understanding of drama practice across local, national and international contexts.

Achievement Standard

By the end of Level 10, students develop and sustain different roles and characters to realise dramatic intentions and engage audiences. They perform devised and scripted drama in different forms, styles and performance spaces. They plan, direct, produce, rehearse and refine performances. They select and use the elements of drama, narrative and structure in directing and acting and apply stagecraft. They use performance and expressive skills to convey dramatic action and meaning. Students analyse the elements of drama, forms and performance styles and evaluate meaning and aesthetic effect in drama they devise, interpret, perform and view. They use experiences of drama practices from different cultures, places and times to evaluate drama.

Example of link to The Arts - Drama

As Cactus is a new Australian play written for and about young Australians it offers a viewpoint from an underrepresented demographic and allows students to reflect upon and creatively respond to the production, enabling them to form creative opinions on the work. Post show activities include answering questions such as- What was your overall opinion of the performances? What characters did you like and why? What characters didn't you like and why? What were the three different worlds? How did you feel throughout and why? Where was the highest point of

Personal and Social

Strand: Collaboration. Use appropriate language to describe what happens and how they feel when experiencing positive interactions or conflict.

Achievement Standard

Example of link to Personal and Social Capability

The very nature of watching a performance is a collaborative experience. The audience - performer relationship is very important as they feed off each other energetically as well as emotionally. Students can reflect on their role as an audience member; the tension they felt in their body at varying times while watching the work, where they felt emotional (laughed, cried, felt frustration and anger), how they responded at the end of the play (did they feel elated? Like they'd been part of the story? Like they couldn't stop thinking about it?), and the energy they felt from the other audience members. As students are given the opportunity to perform parts of the script, they must learn to work together to produce a performance. This includes working together to create blocking, deciding on a rhythm, making choices in performance including acting, voice and movement. They will have opportunities to negotiate creative choices in order to develop the final product.

tension? How would you describe the performances to a friend, a parent, a stranger? Were there any moments where you were confused? What key ideas / concepts were being explored in the performances? Does theatre or performance need to have a key idea or theme or purpose? Why/Why not? How important was audience to the performance? Did you feel you had a role to play?	
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Contact the Arts & Education team at education@rav.net.au with further questions or, even better, examples of your work!

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