

PREPARED BY CLAIRE CHRISTIAN & SUE PEARN

LA BOITE & STATE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENT

STRAIGHT

WHITE MEN

BY YOUNG JEAN LEE

27 JUL – 13 AUG 2016



LA BOITE
THEATRE COMPANY

STATE SA
THEATRE
COMPANY



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Image by Dylan Evans

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FEATURE TEACHER



SUE PEARN
Drama Teacher
All Hallows' School

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PLAY OR PRODUCTION AND WHY?

I do love Euripides' *Medea*; it's got guts in spades plus it's a great female centred piece (hmm, some more irony given this play I've just jotted some teacher's notes for...). I recently staged it (*Medea*) with my Year 12s and saw La Boite's production last year and I wasn't disappointed with either. On another note, Dead Puppets Society's touring production of *The Last Tree in the City* was perhaps the most beautiful production I've seen.

WHAT'S THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING A TEACHER?

Oh my gosh, students are amazing. I am constantly in awe of their creativity and I love being able to help facilitate bringing their ideas to fruition.

YOUR GO TO WARM UP ACTIVITY?

Hmmm, now that the year is up and running, I'd say it's Ninja, but always with a new group I play "Stop-Go-Now" (at least that's what I call it): it gets them moving, responding and thinking.

WHAT'S SOMETHING YOU WISH THAT ALL OF YOUR STUDENTS KNEW?

Life is not about what result you get for a piece of assessment.

ABOUT LA BOITE

ARTISTIC VISION

“Theatre That Matters”

La Boite holds a unique place in the hearts and minds of artists and audiences in Brisbane. For the past nine decades La Boite has represented the adventurous and alternative. There has always been a strong focus on the development of new work and artists, and today it is no different.

The stories, ideas and voices of our city and country are many and varied and as such La Boite seeks to represent and engage in this beautiful and rich diversity; the diversity of form, of ideas, ethnicity, gender – of identity.

HISTORY

La Boite is a story of people, passion, purpose and place.

People like Barbara Sisley, who in 1916 found herself stranded in Brisbane when her theatrical touring company unexpectedly disbanded. She along with literature academic J. J. Stable formed the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society in 1925 in response to the public's growing appetite for high quality, locally-produced theatre. For twenty years, Sisley and Stable reigned supreme in Brisbane's theatrical community.

After decades of moving between large venues such as the Theatre Royal and Albert Hall, in 1967 the company finally found a home of its own. Company members converted an old Queenslander in Hale St, Milton into a theatre-in-the-round. Hollowed out, the house had the appearance of a box and the name 'La Boite' was born. In 1972, the company moved next door to the Blair Wilson designed theatre, which so many remember with such fondness. This remained home for three decades, before the move to our current Roundhouse Theatre in Kelvin Grove in 2003.

90 years of existence takes resilience and ingenuity. La Boite has survived two World Wars, censorship, public outrage, politically-charged programming, changing tastes, floods and the constant flirting with failure that comes with walking the tightrope between risk and certainty.

Ultimately, La Boite's history is your history. Whether you have been with us for years or are new to the fold, we welcome you to join us as we move into our next 90 years.

THE ROUNDHOUSE THEATRE

La Boite's Roundhouse Theatre is an epic-intimate space and Australia's only purpose-built theatre-in-the-round. It's also flexible enough to be used as a thrust stage with the audience on three sides. This 400-seat home stage offers a distinctive theatre experience.

ABOUT STATE THEATRE COMPANY

State Theatre Company of South Australia is the state's flagship professional theatre company performing an annual season of classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre works at its main performance home – the Dunstan Playhouse. The Company is a major community and cultural resource for all South Australians and is vital to artistic life in the state.

State Theatre Company also plays an important role in the bigger picture of the Australian theatre scene, contributing touring productions and providing employment and career opportunities for artists and technical and administrative staff. We are committed to the development of new works for the stage and to the development of South Australian artists through our creative fellowship programs.

The date of establishment as the state theatre company dates to the State Theatre Company of South Australia Act of 1972, an initiative of Don Dunstan. Throughout our 40 year history, the Company has played a pivotal role in the careers of many of Australia's leading actors, writers and directors, attracting artists of the calibre of Miriam Margolyes, Xavier Samuel, Neil Armfield, Ruth Cracknell, Judy Davis, Gale Edwards, Mel Gibson, Garry McDonald, Geoffrey Rush, Jim Sharman, Hugo Weaving, Jacki Weaver and John Wood.

MISSION STATEMENT

We are a South Australian Company that exists to create great theatre, deliver engaging and illuminating experiences to our audiences, develop our art-form and artists, and to connect our work and artists nationally and internationally.

THINGS TO PONDER

THE TITLE

STRAIGHT WHITE MEN

Straight

White

Men

Aren't there enough? Why should I care about this play? I'm straight, yes, I'm white, yes, but I'm female and I teach at an all girls' school. Am I really going to bother taking my students to see this play? You betcha! (Initially dismissive, it's true, but now I've read the script and I love it and I am keen to take my students)

The title refers to a specific social demographic; what is the demographic of your cohort? Why are you bringing them to this play?

Get your students to brainstorm the title.

Professional writer and blogger, John Scalsi attempts to explain how life works for Straight White Men with this computer game analogy. *Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is* <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/>

CONTEXT, PURPOSE AND THEMES

Sociological, Cultural, Political Contexts

To Challenge

Privilege, Family, Social Justice/Social Action, Masculinity

FORM AND STYLE

Contemporary Political Theatre, Realism, Satire, Modern Tragedy

USEFUL DEFINITIONS

(courtesy <http://www.dictionary.com> and https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/careers/amherst-careers-in/government-nonprofit/picareers/careers/social_activism)

privilege

n. a right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person beyond the advantages of most

noblesse oblige

n. the moral obligation of those of high birth, powerful social position, etc., to act with honor, kindliness, generosity, etc.

social justice

n. the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society

activism

n. The use of direct, often confrontational action, such as a demonstration or strike, in opposition to or support of a cause.

Amherst University has a great approach to Social Activism where they describe it as an intentional action with the goal of bringing about social change. Social action work is a way to meet the goal of social justice. It actually doesn't have to be confrontational; an activist can be a student attending a rally against tuition increase, a politician fighting against international human rights abuses or a mother of a child killed by a drunk driver talking to students about drinking and driving. Social activists consider the larger picture – how can they find ways to end injustice and to create strong communities which encourage economic, social and psychological health.

Social media has also provided a platform for people to get involved in Social Activism in the 21st century. However, how effective are you really being if you simply “like” a post on Facebook? The following article Online activism: it's easy to click, but just as easy to disengage outlines a study exploring the true success of such “armchair” activism. <http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2014/mar/14/online-activism-social-media-engage>

As perhaps the antithesis of ‘armchair activism’ Consider this image which depicts a spontaneous and visible act of defiance. <https://www.facebook.com/Channel4News/videos/10153728342901939/>

RITUALS

Rituals in our daily lives bring us comfort, security and a sense of well being. They can also unite us with others in a shared experience, a shared history or a shared intention.

Consider and share: What are the rituals in your life? Does your family have any rituals at Christmas time?

FREDERICK NIETZSCHE'S THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY

Young Jean Lee has referenced an excerpt from Nietzsche's seminal work and cleverly uses it as parallel allegory to not only account for the plight of the 'straight white men' but also to underscore the play as a tragedy of its own.

What does it mean? (butchered from Spark Notes <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/birthoftragedy/context.html>)

The original work discusses the nature of Greek Tragedy, which Nietzsche claims was born when the Apollonian worldview (ordered, logical, civilised, neat) met the Dionysian (chaotic, emotional and natural), and then goes on to use this model to explain the state of 'modern' culture, both its decline and its possible rebirth. In essence, the Greeks had difficulty reconciling themselves with the suffering of the world. They strove to solve the problem by creating the Olympian gods, but they were mere Apollonian appearances and did not satisfy the soul. Under the influence of Apollo, man was still aware that his destiny was controlled by dark forces, despite the beautiful things with which he surrounded himself.

Nietzsche tells the story of King Midas, who finally caught the satyr Silenus and asked him what was the best of all things for man. His answer was, as Nietzsche puts it, "Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to tell you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is beyond your reach forever: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you—is quickly to die.

Dionysus though, offered real salvation from suffering, not by covering it up with pretty images, but by absorbing the individual into the great community of the unconscious. By embracing a Dionysian world view, [the Greeks] could achieve redemption from the suffering of the world.

Interestingly, Nietzsche goes on to discuss the significance of music which he regards in its highest degree as a universal language. Music surpasses all other arts with its power to access the will directly. It is only through the spirit of music in tragedy that we can experience joy in the annihilation of the individual, for music carries us beyond individual concerns.

Consider: What would Nietzsche have thought of Young Jean Lee's particular incorporation of music?

It could be argued that *Straight White Men* is a modern tragedy.

Pre-show consideration: If there is no death, what might the annihilation of our tragic hero look like? **Post Show consideration:** Do you agree that it is a tragedy?

RAP MUSIC

A style of urban African-American popular music that emerged in the mid 1970s. It is characterised by (often) improvised, sung-spoken rhymes performed to a rhythmic accompaniment. Rap is frequently performed a cappella with sexual, socially relevant or political lyrics. (Baker's student encyclopaedia of music vol 3 (1999))

Consider what place Rap music might have in a play about straight white men.

Pre or post show, get your students to come up with their own raps highlighting the themes of the play.

It's a great excuse to watch and enjoy some of James Corden's "Drop the Mic" antics on the Late Late Show. <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheLateLateShow>

A good resource on how to write your own rap songs can be found here: <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-Lyrics-to-a-Rap-or-Hip-Hop-Song>

ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

- Three brothers. Brainstorm the stereotypes that go along with sibling hierarchy - eldest child, middle child, youngest child.
- After seeing the show, use freeze frames to chart the status journey that these brothers have taken from childhood to the present day.
- Relationships exist not just between characters, but also between characters and ideas and between characters and their environment. How have the characters used Language and Movement to reinforce their relationship with notions of Identity and Masculinity?

MOOD

- What is the emotional atmosphere of the play? Does it change?
- How do certain characters alter the mood?
- How has the playwright used humour to convey the message?

Any good production will have light and shade, if you will; a good comedy needs to have moments of pathos and a good tragedy needs moments of lightness. Without such balance, an audience has little or no respite from a heavy handed exploration of ideas. It could be argued that *Straight White Men*, is both a satiric comedy and a modern tragedy.

Discuss how the mood of the text has been balanced throughout the production.

TENSION

Which of the four types of Tension (*of Task; Of Relationships; of Surprise; Of Mystery*) are present in this text? Identify key moments for each that you nominate.

PLACE

Consider how the set has been used to convey a sense of place and how it underscores the play's title.

SYMBOL

There are both tangible and metaphorical symbols layered throughout the text. See if you can identify at least one of each.

JUXTAPOSITION

Is about placing two things beside or close together for contrasting effect. The playwright has layered many ideas together to create juxtaposition in this text. Try and identify all of these.

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

SUPERHEROES

- In small groups, get students to create and present a series of superhero, sidekick and villain characters:
e.g. Machismo (or Macho) Man, Minorities Girl and the arch villain: Indifference man etc.
Be sure to identify their super powers, their 'kryptonite'; their ambition/goal; slogan/catchphrase.
- Create a 3 minute scene showing their interaction.

RITUALS

1. Handshakes

- In pairs, get students to create their own elaborate handshake;
- Then decide and practice one for the whole class
 - Encourage students to use it every time they come to class and every time they encounter one another in the school grounds.
 - After a few days, discuss any feedback, attitudes, feelings that they've encountered in the grounds or amongst themselves as a result of this interaction.

2. Daily ritual

- In groups of 5 get students to create a movement sequence depicting a daily or family ritual.
- Explore and incorporate Laban's movement efforts, Mime, Formations, Repetition, Unison, Canon and Accumulation

CONTINUUM

- Imagine there is an invisible social continuum line across the length of your classroom ranging from extremely privileged to extremely underprivileged. Ask your students to place themselves on the continuum where they think they individually fit.
N.B. in some cohorts, such an activity may be quite confronting; an alternative would be to give each student a piece of paper with an X on it and ask them to place the piece of paper in their stead and then have them all stand back to observe the placement of paper.
- **Discuss:** What do they notice? Start with objective observations before perhaps moving towards generalised or subjective comments.
- Repeat the process but this time get them to imagine they are:
 - Female
 - Homosexual
 - Indigenous
 - Non-Anglo Saxon
 - White, straight men

A BuzzFeed video about Privilege – including a quiz. A great place to begin.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UmowwMivyU>

Video about The Privilege Walk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD5f8GuNuGQ>

Some questions to use for The Privilege Walk Activity

<https://indypendent.org/2013/08/17/take-privilege-walk>

- Discuss the points of difference.

SET DESIGN

- Using magazines, sketches, fabric scraps etc, create a visual collage depicting what you think the ultimate man's "bachelor pad" may look like. Focus on the "living room".
- Contrast this what you think the ultimate female version may look like.
- Using the synopsis and title as your inspiration, take on the role of set designer and pitch your design idea for the set of *Straight White Men* to the director.

Read the lyrics or listen to Run DMC's "Peter Piper"

<http://genius.com/Run-dmc-peter-piper-lyrics>

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION POINTS

The playwright notes in her script that: The pre-show music, curtain speech, and transitions are a crucial part of this play. They have all been designed to create a sense that the show is under the control of people who are not straight white men.

Discuss - Why do you think this is?

The playwright also notes that: *(If a cell phone rings in the audience at an opportune moment, the actors should feel free to break character and confront the offender.)*

Discuss - Did this happen during the performance that you witnessed? Regardless, why would the playwright have made such a pointed note which would clearly break the fourth wall?

FORMING

Young Jean Lee has said that she often approaches her playwriting by asking herself *“what is the last thing I want to explore?; where is the last place I want to be?”*

Consider for yourselves: From a sociological or cultural context, what or where is the last place you want to be: - Devise a character and/or short scene exploring this.

Teachers, a good starting point, is to use “stream of consciousness” writing. Get your students to write continuously for 1 minute without lifting the pen from the page.

Then get them to choose one idea from that work that they can pursue in another minute of stream of consciousness writing. Here, characters can start to be fleshed out, theatrical imagery explored. Share their ideas with a partner who can question, comment and add.

Workshop the ideas and create a minute's worth of performance. *(N.B. if used for an assessment ask, please check use relevant length and conditions in the syllabus)*

PRESENTING

There is a lovely sense of camaraderie and affection hinged on banter, that emerges throughout the play. In small groups, rehearse and present these scenes. Pay attention to timing in particular.

MATT: Dad's been taking guitar lessons.
DREW: Really?
JAKE: Are you gonna play some Christmas songs for us?
ED: I'm learning "Oh Tenenbaum."
MATT: It's kind of amazing. He's been at it a month, but he sounds like he never picked up a guitar in his life.
ED: Give me a break, I'm old! My mind doesn't retain things the way it used to.

ED: Matt was a prodigy, and he used to work in the yard for eleven hours straight!
DREW: Wasn't it forty-eight hours straight?
JAKE: In a blizzard, with a broken leg—
ED: The most hard-working kid I ever knew.
DREW: So what's it like living with this hardworking prodigy?
ED: It's been really wonderful. Unlike you boys, Matt pretends to care about my life.
MATT: No, I'm the kind of loser who finds you interesting.
ED: Hey, you're no loser. You do a lot. He does so much around the house I hardly have to lift a finger.
DREW: (To MATT) So what are you – you working on something?

ED: He works at a community organization.
MATT: *(In a bragging voice)* Yeah, at a temp job.
ED: Your mom's friend Elaine works there.
MATT: *(In a prissy, Little-Lord-Fauntleroy voice)* Daddy got me the job.
JAKE: Dad and his girlfriends
ED: Elaine is a married woman. And you boys talk an awful lot about girlfriends considering not one of you has one.
JAKE: I just got a divorce, cut me some slack.
DREW: I have a girlfriend!
ED: For how long?
DREW: Two and a half months.

They laugh.

Here, the mood changes, but timing remains important.

DREW: It's not selfish to focus on your own happiness.
JAKE: *(Incredulously)* It's not selfish to focus on your own happiness?
DREW: Jake, I know this may be a hard concept for you to grasp, but what makes me happy is using my abilities in service to something bigger than myself.
JAKE: Oh yeah? And who are you serving?
DREW: My students, my readers, my community . . .
JAKE: Oh come on, Drew, that's just pursuing your ambition. How is being another white guy with tenure making a difference?
DREW: You can be a white guy and make a difference.
DREW gets up and starts playing darts.
JAKE: No, our success is the problem, not the solution!
ED: What are you boys talking about? I can't follow anything you're saying.
JAKE: Drew's trying to tell Matt that he's sad because he's not an ambitious self-actualizer hypocrite.
DREW: That's not what I'm saying!
ED: What? What are you saying? Self-actualizer hypocrite?
JAKE: People who tell themselves that they care about social change, when really their ambition depends on things staying exactly the same.
ED: And you think Matt is that?
JAKE: No, Matt's the only one of us who isn't that!
ED: Wait a minute--how am I that?
JAKE: Well, Dad, what would you be willing to give up to make a difference in the world?
ED: What do you mean?
JAKE: How would you feel about, say, a massive redistribution of wealth that would leave you with less than you started with?
ED: Now we are spiraling into absurdity.

RESPONDING

- Write a 25 word TWEET or FACEBOOK POST that summarises your thoughts about the production.
- In small groups, stage an episode of "Dishin' On Drama" where, as a panel of experts or the creative team, you discuss key moments or features of the production. Be sure to use Drama and Theatre terminology.
- Choose one actor and write a paragraph articulating how he brought his character to life on stage. Consider voice, physicality, timing and action; you may like to explore his characterisation in one moment or scene in depth.
- In written or spoken form, discuss how Tension was manipulated within Act 3. Be sure to identify the relevant types.
- Imagine you have been asked to critique the show, addressing how successful it was in conveying Dramatic Meaning. Write the introduction to your essay, being sure to clearly identify what you believe the meaning to be.

CHECK THESE OUT

Here's some fantastic articles, videos and links that you could use as brilliant starting points for exercises, conversations and classroom activities that relate to the world of *Straight White Men*.

A great article about playwright Young Jean Lee.

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/theatre/2016/04/30/playwright-young-jean-lee-straight-white-men/14619384003174>

I am NOT Black, you are NOT white by writer/artist Prince EA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0qD2K2RWkc>

A great review and reflection by Jai Leeworthy in response to seeing the play.

<http://treetopsreview.tumblr.com/post/144499745702/straight-white-men-by-young-jean-lee-destruction>

A TED talk by Chika Okoro about colourism.

<http://shine.forharriet.com/2016/05/watch-this-standford-grad-student.html#axzz4AIWrXRP>

An article about white privilege.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/white-people-vs-white-privilege/484355/>

If White Characters Were Described Like People Of Color In Literature

https://www.buzzfeed.com/hnigatu/if-white-characters-were-described-like-people-of-color-in-l?utm_term=.qaK9JMKyX#.sqxoXe3EN

VIDEOS:

People Of Colour From Around The World Respond To "Black"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52M2_c42eQY

People Of Colour From Around The World Respond To "White"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZFY0dqCOKs>

If White People Thought About Race Like People Of Color

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RSPRI2R3nY>

Do White People Get Stressed Talking About Race?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX-i11IGj5w>

Tess Asplund – A fist in the face of fascism

<https://www.facebook.com/Channel4News/videos/10153728342901939/>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2016/may/04/woman-faces-300-neo-nazis-in-sweden-video>

A blog response to pre-show music being turned down at MTC.

<http://slapsista.com/play-it-loud/>

A tweet in response to the pre-show music being turned down:

Kim Ho (@roguevibe):

@MelbTheatreCo The most common criticism I've heard about #StraightWhiteMen was that the "black maid" is redundant. You MUST keep the music.



In Person 9am - 5pm, Monday - Friday
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