

# CHAL- LENGE

Brecht & Political Theatre  
2020 Online Resource



LA BOITE  
THEATRE COMPANY

## POLITICAL THEATRE

Political theatre is any theatre that has the primary objective of educating or challenging its audience, generally focusing on an issue, topic or group of people. Political Theatre is 'Didactic,' which means that it aims to teach the audience a lesson.

Political theatre has evolved over time to reflect changes in technology and society but there are many commonalities between the varying styles and time periods.

### KEY TERMS AND IDEAS

#### **privilege**

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

#### **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.

[https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/careers/amherst-careers-in/government-nonprofit/picareers/careers/social\\_activism](https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/careers/amherst-careers-in/government-nonprofit/picareers/careers/social_activism)

### **Global Citizenship**

Political Theatre calls on our duty to global citizenship, recognising that our actions impact others, even those not immediately around us.

Global Citizenship 'is a way of living that recognises our world is an increasingly complex web of connections and interdependencies. One in which our choices and actions may have repercussions for people and communities locally, nationally or internationally.'

<http://www.ideas-forum.org.uk/about-us/global-citizenship>

### **Culture**

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and art.

The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition goes a step further, defining culture as shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialisation. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group.

<https://www.livescience.com/21478-what-is-culture-definition-of-culture.html>

## Reflection Task: Looking Inwards

Considering the definitions above, answer the questions below:

In your own words, describe your cultural identity?	
In your own words, describe Australia's cultural identity?	
Are there any privileges you have that you can identify?	
Would you consider yourself an activist? Why?	

## Case Study: Straight White Men

Written by Young Jean Lee, *Straight White Men* premiered in 2016, produced by La Boite Theatre Company and The State Theatre Company (SA).

Check out the full production information, production images, trailer and Education Notes here: <https://archive.laboite.com.au/2010/straight-white-men>

### 1. Read the Synopsis:

The widowed Ed welcomes home his three middle-aged sons for Christmas. The eldest, Matt, has moved back in after losing his way, while life also holds its challenges for younger brothers Jake and Drew. They enjoy brotherly banter, the nostalgic re-hashing of childhood pranks, takeout Chinese and some questionable pyjamas. But amongst the hijinks, trash-talk and smart-arse repartee, they must confront a problem that even being a happy family can't solve: when identity matters, and privilege is problematic, what is the real value of being a straight, white man?

### 2. Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKOOgFWi-KM>

3. Now having watched the trailer and read the synopsis, brainstorm what issues/ topics you think would be included in the show.

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4. Conducting your own research, find a recent news article that relates to each word from the title. Provide the link and a quick summary (1-2 sentences) of the article in the table below:

STRAIGHT	
WHITE	
MEN	

5. Enrolling yourself as a theatre maker, creating a play titled Straight White Men, devise how you could create performance content, linked to each of those ideas. Consider Political and Epic Theatre conventions such as (narration, placards, direct address, use of song etc):

STRAIGHT	
WHITE	
MEN	

Extension Task:

During the Melbourne Theatre Company 2016 season of Straight White Men, the company engaged different writers who were not straight, white or male to imagine that they were and write responses. See the links below.



Michelle Law:

<https://www.mtc.com.au/discover-more/backstage/life-as-a-straight-white-man-l-michelle-law>



Rebecca Shaw:

<http://www.mtc.com.au/backstage/2016/05/life-as-a-straight-white-man-l-rebecca-shaw/>



Steven Oliver:

<http://www.mtc.com.au/backstage/2016/05/life-as-a-straight-white-man-l-steven-oliver/>

## Task: Responding to Poetry

1. Read the poem below. First read it from top to bottom, ignoring the spacing but following the punctuation
2. Second, read it from bottom to top, ignoring the punctuation, but following the spacing.
3. Compare and contrast the different meanings.

### Refuge by Jason Fotso.

Turn away the refugees.  
We will not

open up  
our homes and hearts  
for

children.  
Close our doors on  
the weak.  
Only

fear behind  
our  
love can put  
strength in our

hands.  
We cannot let them bleed into our

nation.  
They share the blood of our

enemy.  
Our own  
are endangered by  
the refugees.

We have forgotten  
the words that  
the Statue of Liberty shines.  
In this darkest hour,

terror  
stands stronger than  
our people  
of  
power.  
This

fear  
conquers  
the home of the brave.

## EPIC THEATRE + BRECHT

Epic Theatre is about motivating the audience to think.

Brecht wasn't the only Epic Theatre playwright, but historically is credited to the increased awareness of Epic and Political theatre. In fact, even Brecht had a whole series of collaborators who made his work with him.

Brecht's key focus was to shift away from Realism and Melodrama, both of which heavily rely on emotion-driven plot and escapism.

Epic Theatre is titled so, because of its episodic structure. Brecht's writing utilises progressive scenes with no act divisions, demonstrating the ascending or declining fortunes of the central character. Often these scenes each focus on a central idea or theme, and are bookended with placards or imagery.

Epic Theatre, as well as Contemporary Political Theatre, is about creating a 'call to action,' prompting audiences to change their behaviours or consider someone else's point of view.

### **The Verfremdungseffekt**

The Verfremdungseffekt, often referred to as the 'alienation' effect, aims to distance the audience emotionally, so that they can engage with the work intellectually and objectively. This does not mean that Brecht's work has no emotion. Verfremdungseffekt roughly translates to making things appear in a new light or appear different. Brecht gives the example of a child whose widowed mother remarries, seeing her as a wife, for the first time.

### **Conventions of Epic Theatre**

The conventions of Epic Theatre are listed below. Do your own online research to find definitions and fill out the table.

CONVENTION	DEFINITION
alienation	
didacticism	
multiple role-taking	
narration	
historification	
use of song	
gestus	
direct address	
projected image	
placard	

## EXPLORING IDENTITY

### Task: Charades Battle

1. Pick three words that describe you.
2. Think of three actions/gestures that communicate those words.
3. Record or Perform the three gestures.
4. Your class must guess what your three words are (respond over live video chat or email if recorded).
5. Whoever's performance gets the most correct guesses from the class wins!

### Task: Stereotype Juxtaposition

1. Select a clique group that you would stereotypically see in school (Academic, Sporty, Theatre Kid etc).
2. Create a table (see example below) reflecting on the stereotype versus the reality.

<b>Academic</b>	
Nerd	Focused on their studies, but might like other things too.
Lame	Maybe I just don't know them very well.
No social life	They probably have a different friend group to mine.

3. Using your brainstorm table, create a short script for two performers where Person A represents the stereotype and Person B represents the reality. Use 'I am...' statements to structure your work.

For example:

A: I am a nerd

B: I am a hard worker.

A: I don't like sports.

B: I actually play footy too.

Focus on the juxtaposition of the statements, and what they are trying to convey politically/emotionally to your audience.

### Extension Tasks:

- Consider how you could stage this story in a theatrical setting. What technical elements, staging and conventions could you use to turn this into an engaging scene on stage?
- Re-write the scene, but Person A is the real person and Person B is someone else commenting on them (ie. 'They're such a nerd, I bet they have no friends).