

# ARBUS & WEST

WRITTEN BY STEPHEN SEWELL

**MTC** MELBOURNE  
THEATRE  
COMPANY

# Welcome



Known for their trailblazing, yet opposing, approaches to their artistic ambitions, Diane Arbus and Mae West are two women whom history won't forget. In *Arbus & West*, playwright Stephen Sewell has composed a vivid portrait of these two astonishing women in an imagined account of their infamous, real-life meeting.

At the helm of this world premiere production is MTC's Associate Artistic Director, Sarah Goodes. Off the back of an incredible Season 2018, including her three-time Helpmann Award-winning production of *The Children*, we are so pleased to see Sarah in her newest role at MTC.

MTC is committed to championing more women throughout the theatre sector – in the plays we present, in directing, writing, design, technical production and administration. In Season 2019 you'll meet some extraordinary female characters on stage while off stage

we continue to vigorously support women in furthering their careers in the arts.

We recently announced the 2019 participants of our Women in Theatre Program, with this year's program including dedicated positions for women working in Lighting and Sound Design.

Now in its sixth year, this initiative has supported 56 women in their career development to date, and in 2019 will continue to provide invaluable opportunities for another 15 talented women working in the sector.

We hope you enjoy this new Australian work.

Brett Sheehy AO  
Artistic Director & CEO

Virginia Lovett  
Executive Director & Co-CEO

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Yalukit Willam Peoples of the Boon Wurrung, the First Peoples of Country on which Southbank Theatre and MTC HQ stand, and we pay our respects to all of Melbourne's First Peoples, to their ancestors and Elders, and to our shared future.

MTC is a department of the University of Melbourne.



MTC is assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and by the State Government of Victoria through Creative Victoria.



MTC is a member of Live Performance Australia and the Australian Major Performing Arts Group.



MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

# ARBUS & WEST

WRITTEN BY STEPHEN SEWELL

22 FEBRUARY — 30 MARCH 2019

Arts Centre Melbourne, Fairfax Studio

— About the play —

Hollywood bombshell Mae West built her career on lookin' good – walkin' the walk and talkin' the talk – while legendary photographer Diane Arbus was famous for finding beauty in the everyday. When Arbus turns up at West's glistening LA apartment in 1964 to take her portrait, tensions quickly flare. West's version of herself is very different to the one Arbus wants to catch on film. But whose version wins out when a master of illusion meets a master of truth?

— Cast —

**Diane Arbus** Diana Glenn

**Mae West** Melita Jurisic

**Ruby** Jennifer Vuletic

— Creative Team —

**Director** Sarah Goodes

**Set & Costume Designer** Renée Mulder

**Lighting Designer** Paul Jackson

**Composer & Sound Designer** Clemence Williams

**Voice and Dialect Coach** Jean Goodwin

**Voice of Ben Blue of the Silver Slipper** Richard Piper

**Stage Manager of the Silver Slipper** Meg Richardson

**Stage Manager** Jess Keepence

**Assistant Stage Manager** Meg Richardson

**Directorial Secondment** Mary Angley

**Rehearsal Photographer** Tim Grey

**Production Photographer** Jeff Busby

For information regarding running time, please see a member of the Front of House team.

Media Partner







# THE ART OF EXPOSURE

Mae West and Diane Arbus both had an enormous impact throughout the 20th century. However, their ideologies clashed drastically. Their meeting in 1964 inspired the creation of Stephen Sewell's new play, *Arbus & West*.



**W**hen avant-garde photographer Diane Arbus visited Hollywood trailblazer Mae West at her Santa Monica home in 1964, two forces of feminism collided. It's unknown what exactly transpired during their several-hour interview and photoshoot, however Arbus's eventual portrait and accompanying story indicate it was anything but ordinary.

Both icons of 20th century art in their own right, Arbus and West matured from entirely different generations of Americans, and schools of feminism. Both women grew up in New York and were shaped in similar and dissimilar ways by their city. While Arbus sought to remain invisible – in order to draw the most out of her subjects – West wore a façade of costume and make-up so robust Arbus described it as ‘impregnable shellac’.

They were both driven by their passion for work. For Arbus, this meant leaving the world of commercial photography to pursue photography as art. For West, this meant putting her career above and before any relationship. In an interview with Charlotte Chandler in 1979, West confessed that her deepest, most unbridled love affair – despite the hundreds of affairs she had experienced in her lifetime – was with the stage. She said, ‘Do you want to know about my first love affair? It was when I was five. I made my debut in Brooklyn at the Royal Theatre. It was my first love affair with my audience, and it's lasted all my life.’ In West's interview with Arbus, she admits to never allowing a man to spend the night in her bed. She said no man was ever able to match the adoration she'd found at age five. ‘I ached for it, the spotlight.’



Crossing boundaries was at the core of both West and Arbus's endeavours. West was famous for the way she was seen, while Arbus was famous for the way she saw. West spoke candidly about sex and women's part in it, while Arbus photographed what fascinated her and frightened others. Both were heralded as geniuses and equally shunned as exhibitionists. In 2003, Judith Thurman wrote for *The New Yorker*, 'Looking at Arbus's work, one has that visceral shock of the forbidden. It's creepy not because her

subjects are handicapped, loony, hideous, bizarre, sad, or perverse (though most of them are) but because there is something fundamentally taboo about the way she bares their primitive substance without their seeming to know it.'

Susan Sontag was among Arbus's most famous critics, going so far as to say her suicide was an extension of her persistence to prove that her work was sincere; as if taking her own life was a sure-fire way to dissolve any claim of exploitation or

**They are the proof that something was there and no longer is. Like a stain. And the stillness of them is boggling. You can turn away, but when you come back they'll still be there looking at you.**

*Diane Arbus on photography in a letter to Davis Pratt at the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, months before she died.*

voyeurism behind her lens. The cause of Diane Arbus's death will never be fully understood; such is the nature of suicide. In a letter to her friend Carlotta Marshall, three years before her passing, Arbus wrote: 'And it is so goddamn chemical, I'm convinced. Energy, some special kind of energy, just leaks out and I am left lacking the confidence even to cross the street.'

Among Arbus's supporters, however, was fellow photographer Joel Meyerowitz who described her as 'an emissary from the world of feeling. [Her subjects] felt that [she cared] and they gave her their secret.'

Like Arbus, West spent a large part of her career defending her cause and confronting the hordes of conservatives who spurned her work from start to finish. In 1926, her play *Sex* landed her in prison for 'corrupting the morals of youth', although spending eight days behind bars functioned as an excellent PR stunt for West, whose celebrity only grew in the wake of her incarceration. West's commitment to fight for her sexual freedom and expression cemented her as a unique identity of the women's liberation movement.

Unsurprisingly, West had her critics as well, including publisher William Randolph Hearst, who used his far-reaching newspaper conglomerate to denounce her work and deride her image, asking 'Isn't it time Congress did something about Mae West?'

Given their age gap and dissimilar approaches to artistic expression, it's not entirely surprising that Arbus and West clashed. Of their meeting, Arbus wrote,

'West is nourished by her own legend...She is imperious, adorable, magnanimous, and genteel, almost simultaneously,' showing her conflicted opinion of the Hollywood sex icon. West was said to deplore the finished photographs Arbus took of her and remained resistant to interviews thereafter, especially with female journalists.

One thing Arbus and West seemingly had in common was their ability to ignore those who pilloried them. They were steadfast in creating new art, and both produced large volumes of it, often at great sacrifice to their public image.

Indeed, both women found salvation in their work, clinging to it firmly when the tides of 20th century sexism beat up against their efforts. They were both rumoured to be neurotic, demanding, selfish and self-serving, which prompts questions of how the rampant misogyny of the eras they lived in influenced their practices. Their response? They just kept working. West re-wrote each film-script she was handed, as well as writing dozens of her own original scripts. It's widely believed her films kept Paramount Studios afloat during the Depression. And Arbus went from high-end commercial photoshoots to an increasingly subversive documentation of Americans who'd previously been hidden, helping to document the story of a nation at crucial moments of social change throughout the 20th century.

Regardless of their opposing approaches – Arbus coaxed, framed and re-framed, while West deconstructed, reconstructed and rewrote the rulebook – both women





(Clockwise from top left) Jennifer Vuletic; Diana Glenn and Melita Jurisic; Director Sarah Goodes with members of the Creative Team; Diana Glenn

made art their refuge. By creating the work they did, they provided salvation for millions of followers and fans who also found meaning in their creations. Arbus and West dedicated their lives to exploring the intersection of life and art and celebrated what it means to go against the grain. They took risks, and between them captured a

view of a never-before-seen America. They weren't always careful in their approach, sometimes causing pain in their pursuits as artists and social anthropologists, but both of their legacies are immense and undeniable. ■

*Words by Sarah Corridon*

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# LOOKING AHEAD

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The Victorian College of the Arts prepares emerging artists for future careers in theatre performance, directing, writing and production, and is proud to see its graduates succeed all over the world. We wish Sarah Goodes (VCA alumna 1998), and Jean Goodwin (VCA alumna 2013) and the MTC cast and crew the best for their season of *Arbus & West*

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Cast of Peter Pan (2018), photo by Drew Echberg

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# Cast



**DIANA GLENN**

Diane Arbus

Diana Glenn is one of Australia's most notable leading television actresses having starred in numerous acclaimed productions throughout her career. *Arbus & West* marks Diana's debut performance at Melbourne Theatre Company, with previous theatrical productions including *The Sweetest Thing* at Belvoir and *Tape* at Tap Gallery. Her film credits include a leading role in the Australian thriller *Black Water*, the lead role in *Oyster Farmer* and the acclaimed *Somersault*. Diana's principal roles in television include the title role in the SBS series *Carla Cametti PD*, Showtime's *Satisfaction* and *The Secret Life of Us*. Her more recent work includes *The Slap*, *Killing Time*, *Jack Irish*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Underbelly*, *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, *The Doctor Blake Mysteries*, *True Story with Hamish & Andy* and she is to appear in *Reckoning* later this year. In 2012 she won the AACTA Award for Best Supporting Actress in a Television Drama for her performance in *The Slap*.



**MELITA JURISIC**

Mae West

Melita Jurisic has worked for many leading and alternative theatre companies in over 100 productions. She received the Inaugural Cladan Award for *A Doll's House*, Green Room Awards for *I Am A Miracle*, *Night on Bald Mountain*, *Danny & The Deep Blue Sea*, *Bali Adat* and nominations for *Picnic with Fatima*, *Mother Courage*, *King Lear*, *The Women of Troy*, and *John* for Melbourne Theatre Company. Her most recent performance was in *The House of Bernarda Alba* for MTC. Barrie Kosky invited her to perform at Vienna's Schauspielhaus as the unanimously praised Medea. She has continued to perform in Europe to critical and public acclaim. Film performances include *Mad Max Fury Road*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, *The Tale of Ruby Rose*, which garnered her the International Critic's Prize for Best Actress at the Venice Film Festival, the Croatian films *Transatlantic* and *Kotlovina* and the Austrian film *Murer-Anatomie eines Prozesses*. She is the singer/songwriter of the Viennese band METALYCÉE whose first album *IT IS NOT* was voted one of the ten best Austrian albums of the decade.



**JENNIFER VULETIC**

Ruby

Jennifer Vuletic recently played Calista in *Moral Panic* (Darebin Speakeasy Festival); Mrs Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer* (Red Stitch/Little Ones) and The Nightingale in *The Nightingale and The Rose* (Little Ones). Her credits include *Rivers of China*, *Into The Woods*, *Volpone*, (Sydney Theatre Company); *The Game of Love and Chance* (Queensland Theatre Company); *Capricornia*, *King Ubu* (Belvoir); *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Dainty Consolidated); *Venetian Twins* (SATC); *Mamma Mia* (LWAA); Barrie Kosky's *The Women of Troy*, (Malthouse Theatre /STC) and *The Histrionic* (Malthouse Theatre). She will reprise the roles of Franca/Lisbeth/Dan in Little Ones Theatre multiple-award winning *Merciless Gods* in 2019's Midsumma Festival, appearing later in The Rabble's *My Dearworthy Darling* (Malthouse). Her Baroness Bomburst in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (TML Productions) won her a Sydney Theatre Critics Award (2013). She won a 2017 Green Room Award for her roles in Little Ones Theatre's *Merciless Gods*. *Arbus & West* is Jennifer's Melbourne Theatre Company debut.

# Creative Team



**STEPHEN SEWELL**

Playwright

Stephen Sewell is well-known for his film and theatre work, including his AFI Award winning script of *The Boys* (1989) as well as plays such as *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, *It Just Stopped: Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany* and *Contemporary America*. Sewell is one of the most celebrated and experienced writers in Australia. He chaired the Australian National Playwrights Centre for a number of years and is the recipient of numerous awards, including a two year Australian Council Literary Fellowship and the prestigious ANPC Award for Significant Contribution to Australian Theatre (2004). His directorial debut, the feature film *Embedded*, premiered at the 2016 Sydney Film Festival. Sewell has been Head of Writing at the National Institute of Dramatic Art, in Sydney since 2012. He was awarded his Doctorate from Sydney University in 2017, and is currently the Chief Investigator in a research program looking at Creativity.



**SARAH GOODES**

Director

Sarah Goodes is Associate Artistic Director of Melbourne Theatre Company. She is a Helpmann Award-winning theatre director recognised for bringing over 14 new Australian works to the mainstage. For Melbourne Theatre Company, Sarah's work includes: *Astroman*, *A Doll's House, Part 2*, *The Children* (with Sydney Theatre Company), *Three Little Words*, and *John*. As Resident Director at Sydney Theatre Company, Sarah directed: *The Hanging*, *Disgraced*, *Orlando*, *Battle of Waterloo*, *The Effect*, *Vere (Faith)*, *The Splinter*, and *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness*. Sarah's other directing credits include: *The Sugar House* (Belvoir), *The Sweetest Thing*, *The Small Things*, *Elling*, and *Black Milk* (B Sharp Belvoir); *The Colour of Panic* (Sydney Opera House); *Vertigo and the Virginia*, *The Schelling Point*, *Hilt*, and *What Happened Was* (Old Fitz Theatre). In 2018, Sarah won a Helpmann Award for Best Direction of a Play for her work on *The Children* which also won Helpmann Awards for Best Play and Best Female Actor.



**RENÉE MULDER**

Set & Costume Designer

Renée Mulder's recent designs include: for Sydney Theatre Company, as designer, *Black is the New White*, *Hamlet: Prince of Skidmark*, *Orlando*, *Battle of Waterloo*, *The Effect*; *Perplex*, *The Long Way Home*, *Dance Better at Parties*, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *Marriage Blanc*, *In a Heart Beat*, *The Splinter*, *Actor on a Box: The Luck Child*, as costume designer, *Harp in the South*, *St Joan*, *Top Girls*, *Chimerica*, *Endgame*, *Children of the Sun*, *Vere (Faith)*; as set designer, *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness*; for Queensland Theatre, as designer, *Nearer the Gods*, *An Octoroon*, *Rice*, *Sacre Bleu!*, *Fat Pig*; for Griffin, *The Bleeding Tree*, *The Boys*, *A Hoax*; for La Boite, *As You Like It*, *Ruben Guthrie*, *I Love You, Bro*; for Bell Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*. She was Sydney Theatre Company Resident Designer from 2012–14. Renée is a graduate of National Institute of Dramatic Art and Queensland College of Art. Renee won a Sydney Theatre Award for Best Costume Design for *Top Girls* and the Matilda Award for Best Design for *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness*.

# Creative Team



**PAUL JACKSON**

Lighting Designer

Paul Jackson's recent lighting designs with Melbourne Theatre Company include the Helpmann Award-winning *The Children*, *Gloria*, *Hay Fever*, *Di and Viv and Rose*, *Three Little Words*, *Endgame*, *Miss Julie*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Ghost Writer*, *Ghosts*, *Frozen*, *The Speechmaker*, *Enlightenment*, *Madagascar*, and *Private Lives*. He has worked as lighting designer for The Australian Ballet, Royal New Zealand Ballet, Berlin Staatsballett, West Australian Ballet, Victorian Opera, West Australian Opera, Sydney Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare, Malthouse Theatre, Belvoir, Chamber Made Opera, and many others. He has lectured in design at the University of Melbourne, RMIT University and Victorian College of the Arts. Paul has won a Helpmann Award, a Sydney Theatre Award, six Green Room Awards, 28 Green Room Award nominations; and has won the Australian Production Design Guild Award for Best Lighting Design for the past three years. Paul was Artistic Associate at Malthouse Theatre from 2007–2013. In 2017, he received an Australia Council of the Arts Fellowship.



**CLEMENCE WILLIAMS**

Composer & Sound Designer

Clemence Williams is a director, composer and sound designer for theatre and opera. A graduate of National Institute of Dramatic Art (Directing) and the Sydney Conservatorium (Music), Clemence's work includes: as a composer, *A Cheery Soul*, *Lethal Indifference* (Sydney Theatre Company); *Romeo and Juliet* (Bell Shakespeare); *The Wolves*, *A View From the Bridge*, *The Humans*, *Wind in the Underground*, *Paper Doll* (Redline Productions); *Chapel Perilous* (New Theatre); *Fallen* (fortyfivedownstairs); as director, *Findr* (Eternity Theatre); *Chamber Pot Opera* (creator, Sydney, Adelaide, Edinburgh, St Petersburg); *Unfinished Works* (Seymour Centre); *The Cherry Orchard* (New Theatre); and *Trancience* (KXT); as assistant director, *Saint Joan* (Sydney Theatre Company) and *La Passion de Simone*, *Notes from the Underground* (Sydney Chamber Opera). In 2019, Clemence's work will include: as composer/sound designer: *Banging Denmark* (Sydney Theatre Company); *A View From the Bridge* (Ensemble Theatre); and *The Wolves* (Belvoir); as director, *Chorus* (Old Fitz); *Chamber Pot Opera* (Sydney Opera House). Clemence was nominated for 2018 Sydney Theatre Awards for both Best Original Score for *A Cheery Soul*, and Best Sound Design of an Independent Production for *The Wolves*.



**JEAN GOODWIN**

Voice & Dialect Coach

Jean Goodwin is a Dialect Coach, Actor and Lecturer in Voice at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). Jean is also the Associate Dialect Coach at Red Stitch Actors' Theatre. Previously Jean has worked as a Lecturer in Voice and Speech at the Victorian College of the Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music (VCA). Recent dialect work includes the 2018/19 tour of *North by Northwest* (Kay & McLean Productions); *Suddenly Last Summer* (Red Stitch Actors' Theatre); *Lovesong* (Red Stitch Actors' Theatre); *The Antipodes* (Red Stitch Actors' Theatre); *Venus In Fur* (Lightning Jar Theatre); *HIR* (Red Stitch Actors' Theatre); *INCOGNITO* (Red Stitch Actors' Theatre). Jean is a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music (VCA). She has a Bachelor of Dramatic Art, Acting (2012) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours, Dialect (2017).

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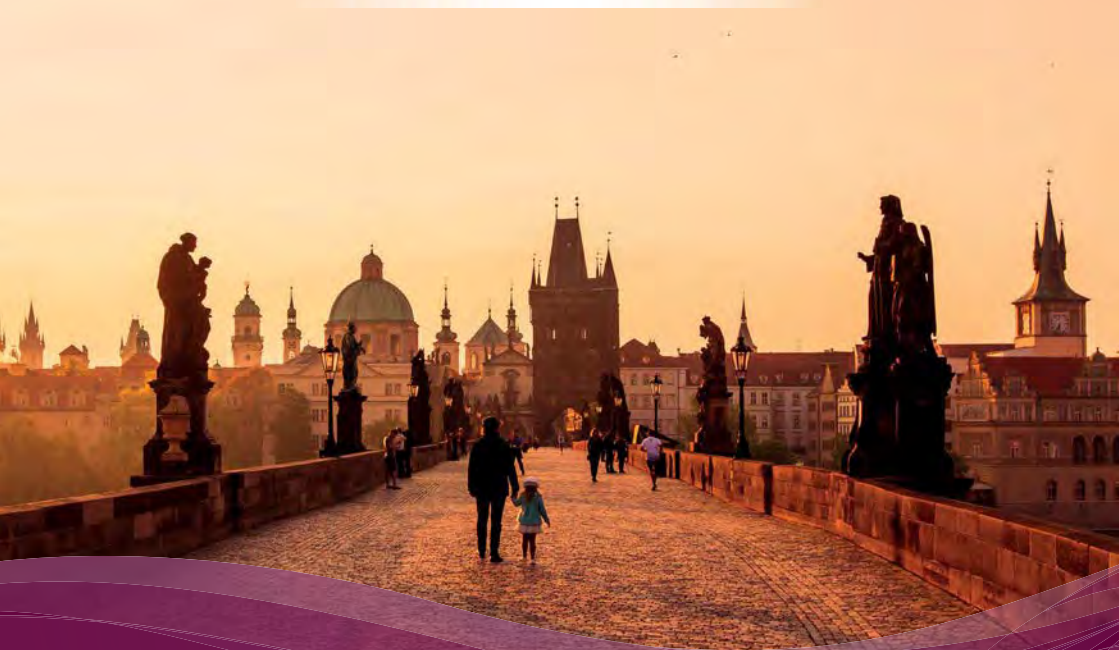
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