

# SET THE STAGE



## **KAT STEWART**

On her love of good theatre

## **A STAR ON THE RISE**

Brodie Murray

## **BEHIND THE SEAMS**

MTC's bespoke costumes

**MTC**  
FOUNDATION

# Welcome

‘I’m proud that my small contribution gives these talented Australian actors and crew a platform to perform and showcase their talent to our local community.’

— MTC DONOR

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. We pay our respects to all of Melbourne’s First Peoples, to their ancestors and Elders, and to our shared future.



We have always known that the MTC community is very special but over the past two years you have shown just how extraordinary you really are. Throughout this time, each and every one of us has felt and appreciated your ongoing loyalty and passion for the Company and our artists.

This year, with our community of donors remaining alongside us – helping us to set the stage – we can start to look forward with growing confidence to a bright, creative future for MTC.

To launch our annual support campaign, we talk to Kat Stewart about her enduring relationship with MTC, shine a spotlight on our incredible costume department and take a look at the development of *Laurinda* – an exciting new work by Diana Nguyen and our Associate Director Petra Kalive. We also meet a recent alumnus of MTC’s First Peoples Young Artists Program, Brodie Murray, and celebrate being back on the road as our Education show, *SLAP. BANG. KISS.*, heads out to regional Victoria.

As you read the stories ahead, I encourage you to reflect on the role MTC plays in your life, and the positive impact your generosity has on our creative community and the cultural life of our state. Thank you in advance for your ongoing support and advocacy for the arts.

**Virginia Lovett**  
Executive Director & Co-CEO



Melbourne is triumphantly coming alive once again and MTC is proud to play its role in re-energising our great cultural city. Welcoming audiences back to the theatre means so much to everyone at MTC including our staff and artists.

Last year we proudly announced our new Artistic Director & Co-CEO, Anne-Louise Sarks, who will lead the Company through its next artistic evolution. Anne-Louise is an outstanding talent and MTC is set for a vibrant future under her artistic leadership.

Our sights are set not only on cementing our position as the top theatre destination in Victoria, but on reaching even greater artistic heights in the future. Philanthropic support remains vital in enabling the Company to achieve its goals and aspirations. Each and every dollar donated by you will directly contribute to bringing world-class theatre to our stages and also to our loyal followers at home through MTC Digital Theatre.

By donating to MTC today, you will also be supporting an important range of new programs and initiatives to be launched over the coming year under the leadership of Anne-Louise. These initiatives are focused on developing opportunities for the next generation of theatre makers, and also on removing barriers to access the power of live theatre. MTC wants to ensure that its productions are accessible to all. With your support, these programs will significantly contribute to MTC’s mission to develop and invigorate live theatre, and continue to be a significant part of Victoria’s cultural landscape.

We are so excited for this next chapter in our history. Please join us on the journey as we enter our 70th year of theatre making.

**Jonathan Feder**  
MTC Foundation Chair

Photography: Front Cover – Jeff Busby  
Inside – Jeff Busby, Charlie Kinross, Tiffany Garvie, Tim Grey, Jacinta Keefe, Sandra Then

# A NEW ARTISTIC ERA

Artistic Director and Co-CEO Anne-Louise Sarks is passionate about continuing to develop MTC's position as the top theatre destination in Australia, for audiences and artists alike. Discover more about her artistic vision for MTC and why one of her goals is to ensure the next generation of artists are offered ample opportunities.



**W**ith more than 30 productions to her name and stints as artistic director of the Lyric Ensemble at the Lyric Hammersmith in London, resident director and associate artist at Belvoir and director in residence at Malthouse Theatre – to name just a few – our new Artistic Director and Co-CEO Anne-Louise Sarks is exceptionally equipped to lead MTC through its next artistic evolution.

Settling into her new role with the Company – which included a move from London, with a short pit-stop in Sydney – Sarks is delighted to be back in Melbourne. 'I have really missed the strong artistic community in Melbourne. Audiences are so engaged with work in Melbourne in a way that's really different to some of the other places I've lived and worked.'

While she was living in London and working back and forth between Australia and Europe, this often played on her mind. 'I'd started to think about how I could engage more with the community ... and I really wanted to participate in the broader cultural conversation.' And then, at the beginning of 2021 while visiting Sydney from London, the perfect opportunity appeared: relocate to Melbourne to artistically lead the state theatre company of Victoria. 'To me, the role

of Artistic Director and Co-CEO is to serve the Victorian community, audiences and artists ... and to really be shaping the kind of conversations we're having about theatre, and about the world that we're living in.'

Since beginning at MTC, Sarks has not only been busy planning and shaping the 2023 season, but also the programs and activities MTC can offer to the next generation of artists. Sarks fondly remembers two opportunities MTC gave her early in her career. In 2010 she was Emerging Resident Director at MTC, and two years later she was offered the opportunity to direct a production of *The Seed* by Kate Mulvany. 'That was my first mainstage job, which was 10 years ago. I never would have imagined that I'd be sitting here now, 10 years later, when I directed that show,' she reflects from her office at MTC HQ.

It's these types of opportunities that Sarks is determined to foster at MTC. 'I really can't overstate the importance of being given those two opportunities as a young woman and being brought into the Company. Those opportunities shaped the trajectory of my career.' After Sarks directed *The Seed* at MTC she became resident director at Belvoir, and worked with Mulvany again on a show that is still her most favourite to date. It was an adaptation of *Medea*,

a retelling of the classic from the perspective of two young children, which she directed and co-wrote with Mulvany. 'That was a really life-changing show because I was really testing something out and Belvoir were generous in letting me experiment.' The experiment paid off. *Medea* won five Sydney Theatre Awards, was nominated for three Helpmann Awards and has since been produced locally and internationally in London, Switzerland, New Zealand, Poland and across the Nullarbor in Perth.

All of these experiences are shaping Sarks's vision for MTC. 'My greatest hope is, when my time at MTC is done, that I have really nurtured and supported the next generation of artists.' She's also determined to build on MTC's reputation as the top destination for artists and audiences. 'I hope that MTC can be the pride of Melbourne; that it is the most exciting place to visit and that we are sharing stories that people can really relate to. I think the more we're able to

make that kind of tourable world-class theatre we can start expanding our reach not just across Australia, but to the rest of the world.'

This is something the entire MTC community will play a part in, but perhaps none more so than our passionate and engaged donors. 'It's everything in terms of the economical

investment,' says Sarks. 'But it's more than that – the work that philanthropists do in Australia to nourish and support artists is just so important and I'm so grateful for it.' When the arts can sometimes feel quite peripheral in Australia – compared to the investment in sport,

for instance – Sarks has been blown away by the support of MTC donors. 'The thing that really excites me every time I get to meet our donors and talk to people who want to support the arts, it's that we have this common love and passion for theatre and storytelling. It's such a delight to be about to share that.'

**'My greatest hope is, when my time at MTC is done, that I have really nurtured and supported the next generation of artists.'**



# For the love of good theatre

Kat Stewart reflects on her return to the MTC stage and why theatre has the tremendous power to not only heal and transform, but to also offer an escape.

**K**at Stewart's award-winning performances on the small screen made her a household name, but for her, it all began in the theatre. 'I didn't have theatre in my life until my late teens, and I remember the spectacle of seeing *Hysteria* at MTC in 1994 and it blew my mind ... just the scale of what was possible at MTC.' And the rest, as they say, is history. After drama school, Stewart joined the Red Stitch Actors' Theatre as an ensemble member for 10 years, appearing in more than a dozen plays. The first time she worked for MTC was in 2006's *Festen* and she's happily been coming back every couple of years, performing in *Frost/Nixon*, *The Speechmaker*, *Disgraced* and *Heisenberg*. 'MTC is very special to me. I love working here.'

In March, Stewart returned to the Sumner for *Admissions*. 'It's pretty hard to ignore a script like *Admissions*. It packs a real punch. It's funny but also confronting and provocative, it's terrifying and exciting all at once.' Stewart played Sherri Rosen-Mason, the head of admissions at a very prestigious high school. 'She's devoted her professional life to progressing an agenda of inclusivity and diversity,' says Stewart. 'She's also a parent, and her real challenge in this play is working out how her instincts as a parent can align with her ideals.'

It makes sense that *Admissions* stood out to Stewart. 'I'm drawn to plays with substance ... to plays with dynamic, full-bodied characters.' Something she feels MTC has a responsibility to support. 'MTC is an important part of Melbourne's culture and has a responsibility to set a standard, not just in scripts and performances, but also in production value.'

Stewart believes that we should support theatre across the board because there's nothing more exhilarating or transformative as a performer or an audience member. 'When it's good, it is unmatched by anything. There's something very special about being in a darkened room with a group of people sharing something simultaneously – without multiple screens the way we consume content at home – something that's alive, breathing and pulsing.'

And it is thanks to the entire community at MTC that such transformative experiences are created. 'I've always felt really supported and warmly welcomed. I'm well aware that there are a whole lot of players that are needed to make this happen, in all the departments. They might be out of our sight, but I know that there's a whole support system in place, and that's really special to be a part of.'

And even though Stewart admits that she can't quite relax after a long absence off stage due to the pandemic – 'I think we're so jumpy, because we've all kind of stopped and started' – she's looking forward to theatre being back stronger than ever because we have so much to unpack. 'As we continue to go through a very unique and strange and profound shift, there's a lot for us to get our heads around.' And what better way to process and explore the last few years than on stage. 'But also to help us to escape a little. We need a bit of that, too,' Stewart smiles. 'Just to be together again. I'm really excited to be both in the audience and on stage.'

(Above) Kat Stewart in rehearsals for *Admissions*



## From page to stage

We talk to MTC Associate Director Petra Kalive and writer and comedian Diana Nguyen about adapting Alice Pung's award-winning book *Laurinda* for the stage.

### Where did the initial idea to adapt *Laurinda* come from?

**Petra Kalive:** A colleague at MTC handed me *Laurinda* – we had been sharing young adult fiction books, searching for a potential adaptation. I read it and got really excited. Funny, moving, thoughtful, sharp and relatable on so many levels. I just needed the right playwright to help me realise it!

**Diana Nguyen:** When Petra asked 'Do you want to write this play?' I said 'hell yes'. Theatre is my first love, and the opportunity to bring to life a story of a Vietnamese teenager fitting in at a private school resonated for me. It wasn't about fitting within a school system, but the bigger picture of the world. There is an urge to fit in, to be seen, to be part of a community, and we witness this journey through the main character Lucy's eyes.

### How has the work developed over the past two years?

**DN:** We began developing this work as the pandemic first hit. We collaborated by going through the book, and discussing how we could shape it into a play. It was exciting to sit in the development rooms, and hear the play read out, line by line, and hearing where it landed. To have Asian Australian actors sharing their stories, and their connection to the play made this an even more important work to present.

### What have been the advantages of developing a new work through the NEXT STAGE Writers' Program?

**PK:** The NEXT STAGE Writers' Program has been invaluable to this play's development. Getting feedback from MTC's in-house literary team and then having the opportunity to hear the text in various developments has meant the play is far richer and more realised than Diana and I could have done on our own. It really has been an act of collaboration. We are indebted to the actors that supported us along the way, so we could really make the home and school feel real.

### Why is investment in new work important to the arts and to telling Australian stories?

**PK:** Stories have a cultural 'ripple-effect' – they improve connection, empathy and understanding and if we're lucky, generate conversation about where we are headed as a culture. New work, or the investment in stories that haven't been told, means that we are continually working to ensure we are in dialogue with the world. We need investment in Australian stories and storytellers so that the cultural identity on our stages is as rich and complex as the Australia we live in.

**DN:** As an Asian Australian playwright and comedian, my work has always focused on 'who' is watching and listening to my work. I have immense pride when diverse Australian

## 'This is an Australian story.'

crowds witness stories that represent them. That is when theatre is important. It allows for connection, belonging and understanding. To have different perspectives and lenses is critical for a multicultural acceptance of the real Australia. It also allows new emerging playwrights including myself to elevate our writing and it's been wonderful to collaborate with Petra on *Laurinda*. I know *Laurinda* will have a profound impact on audiences from all backgrounds. This is not an Asian Australian story. This is an Australian story. Everyone has contributed to Lucy's journey.

*Laurinda* plays at Southbank Theatre from 6 August – 10 September

# BEHIND THE SEAMS

Associate Costume Designer and costume maker John Van Gastel takes us behind the scenes, and seams, of bringing the costumes for Shakespeare's *As You Like It* to life.



Georgia Flood in *As You Like It* (2021)  
(opposite) John Van Gastel in the MTC costume department

**I**t's been a huge job in the making. Far out, man!' John Van Gastel makes short work of summing up the two-year odyssey to bring director Simon Phillips's take on *As You Like It* to Melbourne audiences. 'I started drafting patterns in April [2020], but that was kind of a second start because we did do some initial work prior to the pandemic, in 2019. This has been a *long* time coming.'

Van Gastel was the Associate Costume Designer for the show, on top of his work as the in-house tailor in MTC's costume department. From pearls and rhinestones to Elizabethan finery, Van Gastel was in his element. *As You Like It* was the third Shakespearean (or Shakespearean-themed) show he's worked on for MTC, and his first as Associate Costume Designer. As Alicia Clements, the show's Set and Costume Designer, was stuck in Sydney due to border closures, Van Gastel became her eyes, ears and hands in the room.

The room is the costume department, where Van Gastel and his colleagues sew and construct all the costumes. For this show, the aesthetic was traditional, classical, but not strictly contemporary with the Bard's era. 'We're kind of floating in 1690, in England,' he notes of the sartorial inspiration, 'the comparison is the court of Louis XIV. So it has lots of layers, and very, very heavy coats.'

Elaborating, he explains that the women were in flat-fronted, boned bodices worn with a chemise underneath and long, full skirts that accentuate the hips, while the men were in flared frockcoats with pleating on the side seams and enormous cuffs. 'Under the coats they wore long-fronted waistcoats with buttons from the neck down to the knee, a shirt with a gathered lace cuff and a jabot tied at the neck. Below is a pair of breeches and hose, and then they had the shoe, either a knee-high boot or stacked Louis heel, with square toes and flourishes at the tongue of the shoe.'

Everything was made in the room – 'from the shirt that they wore under the waistcoat, to the waistcoat, the coat, the pants' – except the shoes. Sometimes shoes are obtained from stock at MTC. Failing that, the team rely on the specialised skills of a cobbler. 'We have two people working on our shoes, Claire Best and Brendan Dwyer. Their work is spectacular.'

Cobblers aside, each team member – known colloquially as a cutter – is assigned to look after the clothing for specific actors. 'Having familiarised ourselves with the period, we start with a piece of paper and a pencil. Having the actor's measurements, we analyse the design, we analyse the measurements and physique, and then we will draw our first line to start the drafting of the pattern. We will then mark it up and make a calico toile. A fitting will be booked with the actor and then, once we know that everything's accurate, we will cut into the real cloth.'



**'...the costume staff had to become especially creative at making ends meet.'**

Reflecting on the show's costuming journey, Van Gastel notes that it began with the stark, oppressive black garb of the court before transitioning into more relaxed, earthy and neutral tones in the forest, and then into white and gold for the wedding celebration at the end. To achieve the different tones and styles of these settings a wealth of materials were used, including velvet, brocade, heavy pattern, metal buttons and elegant trimmings – especially for the court, where 'everything is totally luxurious and over the top.'

Of course, luxury costs. And with the financial pressures on the Company after the past two years, the costume staff had to become especially creative at making ends meet. 'We typically start by shopping at home, as we call it,' Van Gastel says, referring to the department's many racks and shelves brimming with fabrics, boxes of lace and trims. 'Then whatever we haven't got, we'll source. For this show, we used as much stock as possible to help keep costs down.'

On the other end of the scale, Van Gastel says they went to an 11, sartorially speaking. 'We've amped everything up, to heighten how it appears on stage,' he explains. 'We're exaggerating, we're turning it up a few notches so that the entire theatre can enjoy those clothes.'

Finally in November 2021, after the world's longest intermission, the entire theatre got to appreciate the incredible effort, creativity and skill that went into making this show a reality. And with the recent release of *As You Like It* on MTC Digital Theatre audiences can continue to enjoy the costumes from anywhere in Australia, allowing the extraordinary work of Van Gastel and the MTC costume department to be seen up close and in detail.

## Set the stage

Help secure a bright, creative future for Melbourne Theatre Company.



Philanthropic support remains essential to bringing our world-class productions to the stage each year.

Your generosity will enable MTC to continue to nurture, develop and produce the very best theatre imaginable for the enjoyment of the broadest possible audience for generations to come.

Learn more and donate online at [mtc.com.au/support](https://mtc.com.au/support)



# On the road again

This year we head back on tour to regional Victoria with *SLAP. BANG. KISS.* by Dan Giovannoni.

**I**t's been a tough couple of years for young Victorians. As if being a teenager isn't hard enough, try doing it in the middle of a global pandemic amidst lockdowns, uncertainty and the challenges of remote learning. In the current global climate, where hope and optimism can feel like acts of rebellion, MTC is excited to bring relevant, in-person theatre designed specifically for a secondary school audience to geographically remote students.

Playwright Dan Giovannoni wants to speak directly to a teenage audience in his new work *SLAP. BANG. KISS.* 'I'd been thinking about the myths we are told about teenagers – that they're all apathetic, apolitical, disinterested. The teenagers I meet are engaged, curious, angry and keen to be listened to. I wanted to write something that rejected the idea of a teenager as a smelly grump sulking in their bedroom.'

Commissioned by MTC as part of its NEXT STAGE Writers' Program, *SLAP. BANG. KISS.* follows three teenagers whose actions transform them into global symbols of revolution. Exploring themes of activism, community and hope, the play seeks to empower young people to change the world. 'There's lots to be scared about in the world. That might always have been the case, but right now this time on Earth feels particularly overwhelming,' Giovannoni says. 'It's easy to feel small in a big world, and easy – especially for young people – to feel small, to feel ignored, to feel like they have to wait until they're adults to become respected members of society with valid opinions that might be listened to ... I wanted the play to be an invitation to young people stepping into the world – an opportunity to see folks like them leading change, demanding their voices be heard.'

The *SLAP. BANG. KISS.* tour aims to reach 1,500 students and educators across four venues in Melbourne and regional Victoria. For many, it will be their first opportunity to attend a professional theatre production. Jeremy Rice, Head of Education & Families at MTC sees this as a key part of what the MTC regional tour has to offer. 'Fundamentally, we facilitate that very first experience. We try and then add value to that experience, so that theatre becomes a part of young people's lives.'

MTC will offer free pre-show talks with members of the MTC Education team and post-show Q&As with members of the cast and technical team, as well as Education Packs to help guide students' learning as part of curriculum activity.

For MTC Executive Director & Co-CEO Virginia Lovett, the integration of the touring production and associated digital resources is key to the meaningful and ongoing support MTC provides to regional students. 'We give them the live [performance] experience but they can also have all of these digital experiences as well, and get backstage [virtually].' Lovett explains, 'We don't want to be that fly-in fly-out presence in regional towns. We want to support and scaffold the young people's experiences that they have with MTC over a longer period.'

(Above) Sarah Fitzgerald, Conor Leach and Tsungirai Wachenuka in creative development for *SLAP. BANG. KISS.*

MTC's regional tour is a vital part of our expansive Education program, generously supported by MTC's Education Giving Circle. To direct your support to MTC Education visit [mtc.com.au/donate](https://mtc.com.au/donate) or call the Philanthropy team on 03 8688 0954.

From participant to playwright:

# Brodie Murray's powerful new voice

Brodie Murray is a Wamba Wamba/Scottish-Australian playwright and performer, with a passion and drive to tell First Nations stories of South Eastern Australia.

**G**rowing up on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, near Castlemaine, Brodie Murray's love of theatre began when he joined the local youth theatre group. He speaks proudly of how his creativity has been influenced and inspired by his talented family and their cultural heritage – his father Ron Murray, a respected Wamba Wamba storyteller/Didgeridoo musician, and his mother, fiddler/vocalist, Sarah James. In fact, the first piece of theatre that Murray saw was at the age of six in 2007, when his uncle, the celebrated actor David James, starred in an MTC/STC produced play *Ying Tong – A Walk With the Goons* about the 1950s British radio comedy program, The Goon Show.

But it was in 2019 doing VCE, when Murray participated in MTC First Peoples Young Artists Program, that theatre became an essential part of his life. 'I was trying to find my confidence. Growing up, I had always loved creative writing and performing. But being accepted into the program by MTC was life-changing. I was among other First Nations theatre makers, and I then knew, theatre is what I am going to pursue. That was when it all changed for me.'

Murray recalls the first time he came into MTC. 'Wow, this is an amazing place. I was a bit nervous ... I was a country boy going to the big city, but straightaway MTC staff welcomed me with real warmth.' Working in the rehearsal rooms, with facilitators Lenka Vanderboom and Declan Furber Gillick, relationships were formed, and the program's alumni have continued to collaborate creatively together. 'They're all brilliant people and it's not like the journey just ends when you finish the program.'

The following year, he continued to be mentored by Furber Gillick, who provided dramaturgy for Murray's first self-written play, *Soul of Possum*, a first contact play set on Wamba Wamba country. The initial idea for the piece was formed during Murray's time at MTC, in which he drew on the stories, traditions and cultural knowledge of his father, Ron and grandfather, Bes Murray. 'A lot of their storytelling and their wisdom have influenced my approach to writing,' Murray explains, 'hearing stories around the campfire.' The play received its world premiere at YIRRAMBOI Festival in May 2021, directed by Beng Oh. Murray's second play, *Billy's Choice*, directed by Rachael Maza with dramaturgy by Geoff Kelso, a play about finding independence, debuted later the same year at Melbourne Fringe and was adapted for film when COVID lockdowns prevented an in-person performance.



Most recently at MTC, Murray rejoined his fellow alumni to work with the 2021 First Peoples Young Artists Program cohort. 'Being a part of that process again was really powerful and seeing the new group coming up with new stories and hearing new voices was pretty powerful. Just to be a part of that was emotional. The program means so much to me.'

**'Being accepted into the program by MTC was life-changing.'**

Now an award-winning artist, including the Australia Council's prestigious First Nations Emerging Career Development Award and the Melbourne Fringe Best Emerging Indigenous Artist and Young Creatives Award, Murray has come a long way from his beginnings in theatre.

Also a graduate of Aboriginal Performance at WAAPA and a current student of Bachelor of Fine Arts (Theatre) at VCA, we cannot wait to see where Murray's passion, creativity and talent will take him next.

MTC's First Peoples Young Artists Program works in partnership with the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development and YIRRAMBOI, and is made possible through the generous support of The John & Myriam Wylie Foundation.

‘We are pleased to be able to support MTC. We have had a lifetime of enjoyment from the Company, and have been delighted to watch as our children have grown to share that enjoyment.’

— MTC DONOR

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