

E EDUCATION TEACHERS' NOTES 2012

MTC presents a production by The Escapists

BOY GIRL WALL

by Matthew Ryan
and Lucas Stibbard

The MTC Theatre,
Lawler Studio
17 April to 4 May 2012

Notes prepared by Meg Upton



BEFORE SEEING THE PERFORMANCE...

THE EXPERIENCE

In the theatre we share stories which differ from TV, DVD, film, books, magazines, podcasts and other media. In the theatre, stories are told by real people in real time before a live audience. Each performance of a play is different to any other as it is dependent upon the time, the actors, the technical equipment and, very importantly, the audience. You can't re-read a live theatre performance or copy it to see again and again. Each performance exists only once. The performance you will see of *Boy Girl Wall* will differ from the one performed before and the one performed after, which makes it special and unique. Your role as an audience ensures its uniqueness. As students of theatre, you are advised to carefully prepare to see the production so that you can capture that unique, one-off experience and be able to reflect on it in detail.

ABOUT BOY GIRL WALL

It's about string theory, perverted aliens, uncooperative laptops, hell-spawned magpies and asshole bosses. It's about those thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to - most of those shocks involving pieces of paper bearing lots of numbers, which relentlessly drop through the letterbox. It's about making your way through the minefield of modern life, paying the rent, holding down a job, eating right, working out, managing stress, making sure you top up your Go Card, carving out a place in the world - and still somehow finding the time to play and explore the limitless, unfathomable universe of love – from 2011 program notes, La Boite

Story

Side-by-side in a leafy suburb, Thom lives in one flat, Alethea in another. This is not a love story. Okay, it is a love story, but it's not about the love part; more about the story. About countless random happenstances bumping into each other to create one magical moment. About two ordinary lives going nowhere then - bam! - happiness. It's like a particle of light traveling across space for light-years just to hit your eye on starry night. Actually, it's pretty much what it says on the box: there is a boy (Thom), a girl (Alethea) and a wall (who shall remain nameless).

Setting

In *Boy Girl Wall*, the action is constantly jumping from place-to-place. The time is now, the place is Brisbane and the two main characters unknowingly live in adjoining apartments in the West End, divided only by a conspiratorial wall. The play leaps light years back to the beginning of time, fast forwards to the beginning of conception, breezes into Thom's workplace, journeys to Alethea's self-obsessed publisher's office, bounces into the children's story room at the library, and skates the treacherous terrain of Montague Street with its killer magpie.

The Creative Team

Performer	Lucas Stibbard
Script	Matthew Ryan and Lucas Stibbard
Realisers	Matthew Ryan, Lucas Stibbard, Neridah Waters & Sarah Winter
Music	Neridah Waters
Lighting Design	Keith Clark
Redesign	Jonathon Oxlade
Additional Illustration	Sean Dowling

Style & Structure

The production is approximately 70 minutes in length and is a solo performance. Performer Lucas Stibbard, creates and narrates the entire story, a story that consists of twenty-six small scenes or 'episodes' that are titled as follows:

The Scenes/Episodes

1. The magic of theatre
2. This is not a love story
3. Consider light
4. Boy
5. His boss
6. Consider radio waves
7. Girl
8. Her publisher
9. Penelope on high
10. Wall
11. 719 Albert
12. Mural
13. The crack
An interlude
14. Cheese & pickled onion dream #2
15. Consider the expansion of the universe
16. A conspiracy of water pipes
17. Improvised hell
18. Personal growth
19. The singing universe
20. Cheese & pickled onion dream #3
21. The last stand part 1
22. The last stand part 2
23. The last stand part 3
24. A really expensive zombie sequence
25. Suburban power surge blues
26. Fin

The narrative could reasonably be considered linear in structure. The play uses the device of a lecture in order to introduce the world of Thom and Alethea, their circumstances and then the story of how they get together. Along the way there are sub-plots and digressions that cause time to flashback in order to present a parallel, or 'meanwhile', perspective.

PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY: Playing with narration and episodic structure

Working in small ensemble groups of three or four, divide up the scenes/episodes between the groups, for example group one does 1-5, group two does 6-10 etc.

- Appoint an overall narrator who will announce each of the episodes
- Each ensemble group then creates a freeze-frame or tableau for each of their given scenes/episodes; you can interpret them any way you like at this point
- Consider how you will transition between each of the tableaux you create
- Present the tableaux in order 1 to 26, as narrated
- Discuss the interpretations
- Discuss the presentation structure

A brief synopsis of *Boy Girl Wall*

The Narrator appears to introduce the story of a boy, a girl and wall, assuring the audience that 'this is not a love story'. He proceeds to ask the audience to imagine if creatures from out of space were to look back to the Earth this is what they would see. We then meet Thomas Thompson (the 83,333rd in his line with that name) who lives in a small apartment in Brisbane's West End. Thom is a dreamer and a star gazer but during the day he works in IT. Thom has a secret; he has no idea what his company does. His boss, Mel, is keen on Improvisation and fortunately for Thom, less keen on supervising. That's the boy part of the story.

The Narrator then introduces us to the girl, Alethea Jones, who lives in the apartment next door to Thom. Alethea is a children's book author and also something of a perfectionist. She names everything she owns and is painting a mural on her side of the wall that mirrors everything in her apartment. Alethea rides her bike Penelope everywhere and has a love-hate relationship with her computer Dave. We are also introduced to Alethea's publisher, Marco Grisetti, a smooth schmoozer. That's the girl part of the story.

Then we meet a Wall, the wall that separates Thom and Alethea. The Wall is a romanticist who has decided that Thom and Alethea need to be brought together.

What ensues, through the guidance and story-telling of the Narrator, is how Thom and Alethea meet. Across three days of the week, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday (who are characters themselves), we follow the separate lives of Thom and Alethea through work crises, an attack by a killer Magpie and writer's block, until an event occurs that changes their's lives forever.

The Characters in *Boy Girl Wall*

Performer Lucas Stibbard plays numerous characters in order to tell the story. He describes the characters he plays like this:

The Narrator - Lucas in a suit, a free spirit, a raconteur (one who excels in telling stories and anecdotes)

The Alien Observer - lives 30 light years away from Earth and introduces the idea of time travel

Daphne - Thom's mum who appears at his birth, then later urging him to get a proper job

Tuesday - a day of the week that introduces the idea of personification of inanimate objects or abstract concepts, the Clark Kent of days of the week

Thomas Thompson Jr (Thom) - a main character, the 83,333rd Thomas in his family, a dreamer, a star gazer, a deep believer in the power of the universe

Melvin Ellis - Thom's boss, an amalgam of every single boss who is disliked, wants to be your friend but also tries to hold power over you

Demis Papadopoulos - Althea's dad who gives up a lucrative family fishing business, meets Althea's mum while dancing 'the hustle' at a nightclub in 1979

Cathleen Jones - Althea's mum, a nice suburban Australian girl

Alethea Jones - a perfectionist, a pragmatist, a children's book author, she names everything she owns and is painting a mural on her wall that mirrors everything in her apartment

The Crack in the Wall - an imperfection for Althea, a crack in the universe for Thom

Marco Grisetti - Althea's publisher, a smooth talker, cares little for his clients

Dave the Computer - in love with Althea but fears she hates him

The Magpie of Montague Road - based on a real magpie, a rogue bird, a killer

One-eyed William MacCabbie - 78, his eye was plucked out by the Magpie, a cab driver and lay preacher

The Wall - young romantic, put in to subdivide apartments, wants Althea and Thom to get together, has a vested interest in love, tries to conspire with other parts of the apartment to bring the two together

The Power Box - a dreamer and intellectual who lives by himself out the back with the bins, tackles the big questions

Alan the Gothic Librarian Assistant - a medieval recreationist, loves the Velvet Angst and renaissance fencing

The Other Days of the Week - a hung over Monday, an accepting Wednesday, a nothing Thursday, a bogan Friday

The Human Statue

A Grumpy Ceiling

Two Anxious Doors

A Chilled-out Floor

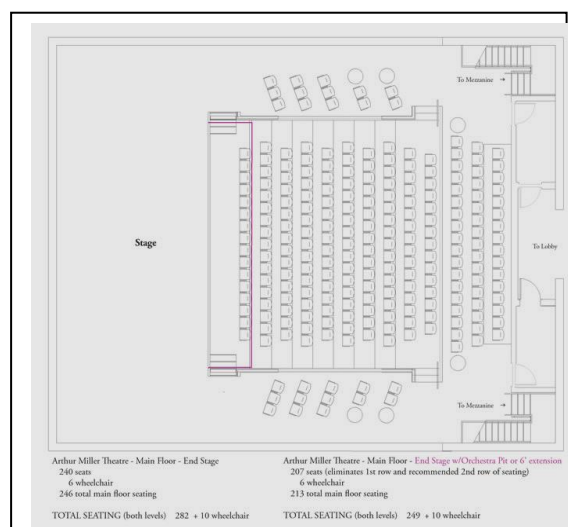
Inspiration/Stimulus

Boy Girl Wall is influenced by the work of Dylan Thomas (specifically *Under Milk Wood*), the one-man shows of Daniel Kitson (*C-90*, *The Ballad of Roger and Grace* a *At 10pm Daniel Kitson Will Be Taking Tea and Blowing Minds*), the methodology of Robert Le Page and the music of Sufjan Stevens. Ok, I know that is four but that's just scratching the surface of what makes this project tick. I would be remiss not to mention the main source of inspiration for *The Escapists* in general - comic books and books about comic books (specifically *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by Michael Chabon) – from *The Escapists*, Drama QLD resource notes, 2011

About The Escapists and the creation of *Boy Girl Wall*

The Escapists is a collaboration of award-winning contemporary independent theatre makers who value strong stories and an aesthetic that remixes traditional approaches to theatre and performance. The Escapists are Brisbane theatre-makers Jonathon Oxlade, Matthew Ryan, Lucas Stibbard and Neridah Waters and any number of guest artists they want to play with. The roles within the group are fluid with decisions being made as democratically as possible and with deference to all collaborators' levels of experience pertaining to the area in question. The Escapists offer a highly stylised and hybridised form of populist entertainment, drawing on an anarchic attitude to bring a startling and adventurous approach to theatre making. Contemporary, unique and exquisite, The Escapists aim to challenge prospective audiences to Rethink Theatre. Working beyond the conventions of the predominant text-based theatre, our aim is to produce adventurous high-quality performances that truly celebrate the imagination, theatricality, and the joy of play.

THE THEATRE SPACE



Boy Girl Wall is being performed in the MTC Theatre, Lawler Studio. This is a flexible performance space whereby the seating bank can be reconfigured to create a range of performance space/audience seating relationships.

In this production the configuration is 'end on' which means that the seating bank ends where the performance space begins [see diagram]. There is no raised stage, instead the seating bank is raked in order to provide appropriate sight lines for the audience.



The Roundhouse Theatre @ La Boite in Brisbane

PRE-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION – The Theatre Space

- Compare the images of the performance spaces on this page and the previous page
- What similarities and differences are there?
- Which space do you think seems to offer the best opportunities for a) the actor and b) the audience
- If you had the opportunity to use one of these spaces for your Ensemble Performance which would it be and why?

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE SEEING THE SHOW:

As a way into the production you may like to discuss and consider the following:

- What do you know about Big Bang theory and the beginning of the universe?
- Do you ever star gaze? Look for falling stars? Do you believe in alien life forms?
- What do you know about the habits of magpies? Have you ever been swooped by one?
- What is physical theatre?
- What is comedy? Slapstick? Clowning?
- What are the conventions of stand-up comedy?
- What is love at first sight? Is there actually such a thing?
- What is a 'Goth'? Where does this term originate?
- Do you know the 'mechanicals' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? How do they create a wall with a chink in it?
- Do you (or have you ever) read comic books about super heroes? Who is your favourite? What the qualities and conventions of comic book super heroes?

When you are watching the show, try to heighten your awareness of everything by watching and listening very carefully. If you have time at the end, take down some notes on:

- The things you saw; characters, action/gesture, set items, costumes, lighting states, props.
- The things you heard; music, sound effects, lines of dialogue, words, songs.
- How you felt at different points during the production; perhaps disturbed, threatened, amused, mystified, saddened, angry, curious, confused.

INTERVIEW WITH MEMBERS OF 'THE ESCAPISTS', LUCAS STIBBARD, MATT RYAN AND NERIDAH WATERS

In the study of Drama Unit 3, students are required to study theatrical styles with an emphasis on non-realistic theatre. How would you describe the theatrical styles that are present in the production of *Boy Girl Wall*?

Lucas: Matt and I were influenced by a lot of things that I had been reading and things I had been watching. One of the main points was the monologue play, the idea of building a monologue play rather in the style of Daniel Kitson. The idea was to create something that bridged the gap between stand-up comedy and theatrical story-telling. There is a long tradition of Irish monologue plays which is generally two or three people sitting around on chairs and telling a story. I really like that kind of story-telling style. I've been fascinated by the one man shows of Daniel Kitson and also by those of Frank Woodley, which I saw about eighteen times and was obsessed about. These two represent the gentle, sitting on a chair story-telling and then the rather crazed physical performance version of story-telling.

So the styles we were going for is a bridge between story-telling and physical theatre performance. *Boy Girl Wall* is performed theatrically but I would actually call it performance rather than theatre. It is straight to the audience and there is no pretension about a fourth wall. In fact there are jokes made about fourth walls throughout the performance. That kind of interaction and the emphasis on that comes from a desire to consider a post-Brechtian style and a post-dramatic style in terms of the way it plays with style.

Neridah: It's also a bit like a lecture I think, the kind you would have from an inspiring teacher whereby the lecturer, Lucas, has a series of blackboards that surround him, including the floor and these are used to draw any props or describe anything else visually.

Lucas: One of the conceits created to frame the show was, imagine if a performer walks in to do a lecture, treating it like a lecture with all the appropriate props, using the idea of science and mathematics, but then taking it somewhere else altogether, almost to the point where it becomes quite ludicrous.

Neridah: Yes, in this show the lecturer, Lucas, almost tells the story with his body as well as through the drawings on the walls, so the audience can read the story through the physicality.

Lucas: Which comes back to Brecht and the idea of the fable and his idea that each of the stage pictures can stand alone without the words attached, that each moment of the story on stage should not be totally reliant on words, and vice versa.

Matt: My thinking as the co-writer is that while Lucas came in with those ideas and styles and influences, I actually came to the piece with a much more structured approach where I see the play as having a three act structure, across three days of the week; Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Lucas, I think treated it as his voice creating all the characters and I approached it as it being a whole cast of characters.

Lucas: Yeah I wrote it as a single monologue that wasn't broken into separate characters speaking, whereas Matthew treated each character as a separate member of the cast.

Matt: It came from a short story by Lucas that he wrote at Uni and then we passed it back and forth as we began to flesh it out and so my approach was very much one of structuring, and Lucas's was one of generating the single voice within the work.

Lucas: Yes, through the development process I kept a list of things that I wanted the narrator to talk about and a list of things that I wanted to perform and so I began to place those along the backbone of what is really quite a simple story; meet a boy, meet a girl, have an obstacle, have them get over and then get together. Within the simple story I wanted to play

with science and super novas and morse code and I wanted to play with other moments and explore where I could be very physical then include something more cerebral such as maths, but then see if I could make that entertaining. So between us we went backwards and forwards, looking at the work through these different approaches, balancing the structure of the writing and then the performance itself. So the tension between those two approaches helped to build the final product.

I'm going to make a call here and suggest that none of the piece is improvised, that it is all quite set? Is that correct?

Matt: No, there is a certain amount of leeway for improvisation within each performance of the show. We left in small pockets where variations could occur if the moment arises.

Lucas: I find that the improvisation occurs when I really listen and can be right in the moment with each different audience and listening to what they are really responding to. If certain things are going well I might riff on those a bit more, whereas if I hit a joke and no one really goes for it then I probably stop and recognise that it's failed. We are, as a company, interested in the live experience and in the discussion between an audience and the performers. I get a bit disappointed where I see an amazing live performance and then I see it again and it's exactly the same. I feel quite disheartened by that. They may be excellent performances but the performers aren't really engaged in any conversation with the audience, more like robots going through the same thing each night, delivering it with the same emphasis and timing each time. I saw a stand-up comedian do that when I was working as an usher for a venue. The thing that impressed me was that he managed to make it seem like it was off the cuff each night but it had exactly the same tone and inflection each night. So there is room within *Boy Girl Wall* where if something is going well and I sense it then I can play with it. For instance if an audience member has a really fantastic laugh I can play with that aspect.

There was an amazing moment at a performance I did where a young boy got up to leave to go to the toilet and he couldn't find his way out of the theatre. I could feel the audience's attention shift and begin to worry about what he was doing and the boy began to look a bit worried. As a performer you need to treat that stuff as real and recognise it. So I kept in the zone but hopped down and helped him leave the theatre. He left and when he came back I filled him in on what he'd missed, then kept going.

Does the play speak to different generations?

Neridah: There is a lot of stuff that our generation will recognise I think.

Matt: We've made sure that the show speaks to Baby Boomers, Generation X and Gen Y. So there's jokes about the *Two Ronnies* (a BBC comedy show from the 1970s), Christian Slater films for the Gen Xers and then Gen Y tend to like humour that is more absurd or takes them by surprise, and pop culture references. Whereas Boomers tend to like word play and puns and they like to see it coming so that they can meet it. We've made sure that we included these types of humour from the development process to the scripting and then the performance itself. We then get to see what sort of crowd is in the audience about ten minutes into the show based on their reactions to the material and the jokes.

Personally I found references in the play to characters and moments from *The IT Crowd* (a BBC comedy show from the last four years). Is this an influence?

Lucas: Yes! Funny I only saw that show after we began to create our show. I think there definitely some characters in that show and situations that resonate. *The IT Crowd* has that premise about not understanding what you do and other people not understanding what you do and the ridiculous situations that ensue. Alethea's publicist is very much like that second boss in *The IT Crowd* and yet I actually hadn't seen the show. The Goth Librarian in

Boy Girl Wall might seem a bit like Richmond, the Goth who lives in the heating room in *The IT Crowd*, but he is actually based on a real person! When I was about sixteen or seventeen I worked at a library in Brisbane and there was a Goth librarian who really was a member of the Society of Creative Anachronisms and had a skull on his computer, walked with a cane and wore black velvet coats to work. Most of the characters in the show are based on real people and there is something in the zeitgeist about how that show and these characters cross over.

It sounds like good advice to young artists to draw on what they know when creating work, yes?

Lucas: Starting from the point of what you know is never going to be a bad way to start.

Would you talk about the character of the Narrator in the play? Who is the Narrator and what is his role?

Lucas: I originally wrote it with my own name in it and Matt, in the first draft, lifted my name out and began to separate the role of the Narrator as being someone who can actually guide you through the story within their world. Then the characters exist within the Narrator's fictional universe. We then played around with the idea that some of the characters are more aware than others that they are in a fictional universe. Mel, Thom's boss, is actually quite aware that he is in a show and will happily perform to the audience as well. So there are spheres of awareness for the characters; who knows they are in a show and who doesn't.

The Narrator himself was originally just me but has become the extension of a showman and the extension of somebody who is not exactly reliable. We wanted to also explore the spheres of awareness but also spheres of 'corrections' that the Narrator can play out. What this means is that the Narrator will begin to tell the story one way but then decide that he needs to be more accurate with that moment, or something will begin to go off on a tangent and the Narrator will have to return both him and the other characters to the relevant moment. Think of it as he is steering the show but then it sometimes gets ahead of him.

Matt: The modern perception of drama is that a narrator is unnecessary and often cheap which I reject as a writer. I think that once someone walks on stage they are a character, and this was an opportunity to show that a narrator can be the only one on stage and still create a very theatrical performance. So, to me this is a rejection of how people generally perceive what is exposition (the act of explaining) and what is character. The entire show is actually exposition, the characters will refer to themselves in the third person as they speak and act, so we were seeking to reset the understanding of what narration and exposition are or can be. Or at least this is what I was thinking as I was writing the various drafts of the play. I sincerely think that there is a theatricality that is not explored through the role of a narrator in contemporary Australian theatre.

Within the non-naturalistic frame of the Drama Study Design, students are required to analyse the 'transformations' or transitions between characters in *Boy Girl Wall*. You use a number of devices to shift between the characters, would you talk about how you arrived at those choices?

Lucas: My whole interest in performance versus acting underpins my approach to *Boy Girl Wall*. For me acting concerns the idea that the actor comes to the role from a Stanislavskian or general method acting approach, one which is based on emotional recall and the concept of truth to character. This is inherently false because the audience is sitting in a room watching someone doing something in a fictitious situation so why would you bother when you can really physicalise a story and have a great time doing it.

In terms of telling the story and playing those different characters, I did draw a little on Laban technique. Laban technique concentrates on time, space, energy and weight, thinking about how heavy a movement may be, whether it is direct or indirect, or is sustained in its length. So combinations of these can help define a character through a certain energy. I tend to think about characters in terms of energy. As well, as I mentioned above, at least a couple of the characters are based on real people and are in fact exaggerated impersonations of people I have met across my life.

One of the two bosses is definitely based on a real person I worked with who was physically and vocally just like that so I pushed his qualities into a performative realm by taking the natural level of that person and quite significantly exaggerating them. Another technique I use is creating very simple postures or ways of holding my body at rest then in movement. This can signal very clearly to an audience that this is a particular character.

One of the other 'tricks', if you like, in this show is voices. I worked at finding voices and accents or ways of helping the audience to recognise a character by creating a distinct voice. Some of the voices have changed across time. For instance the Goth Librarian is sometimes more floating and vague and sometimes he is more aggressive. Some of this is guided by the writing, for instance Thursday is getting heavier and heavier as each different season of the show progresses. A lot of the characters have come through what I associate with them for instance, how do I feel about Thursday? Thursday is generally tired and a bit over it because it's nearly Friday. Tuesday is a bit earnest and has a bit of hope for the week, probably goes to bed early. So I looked at these associations and tried to find human qualities or traits in order to apply them to what are essentially just concepts.

How do the design and stagecraft elements assist the performer and find the characters and tell the story?

Matt: All of those elements sit inside the characters' worlds. When the Narrator talks about Thom's workplace he takes out the overhead projector and puts up statistics. Handwriting and drawing are Alethea's world so we see the beautifully drawn tree and magpie for instance. The stagecraft elements reflect the child-like quality of the show and it's aimed at asking the audience to revert back to childhood play. The chalkboard effect is aimed at Baby Boomers and some Generation X people and the computers more at Gen Y. The world of the play and the set is malleable and can be used for whichever character is there at the time.

Neridah: I think we purposefully chose a very simple and uncomplicated environment so that the actual story is clearer and the audience can focus on the performer. So the stagecraft completely serves the story and the physical telling of that story.

Matt: I think it is very important to leave a gap in order for the audience to insert themselves into the world. We've all seen this show over a hundred times but I tend to forget when I speak to audience members just how much this show happens in their head. By keeping the walls blank and then providing reference points, whether they are design or performative or word references, they allow the audience to imagine and conjure in their heads and that is very rewarding for an audience member who is following the performance very closely.

Lucas: The overall way we approached the stagecraft was that we began with a very simple three character, two-page story about a boy, a girl and a wall. Then the treatment was a man in a suit drawing on a wall to tell that story. The two ideas then moved along together and informed each other throughout the developmental process.

Lucas, as a solo performer what are the challenges of remembering the words and physicality for what is quite a complex show?

Lucas: There are two parts to it. The first is being able to write part of the script myself, and then part two is writing it with someone else who is kind enough to write in the same kind of word and sentence structure that my brain works in. This made it a much easier process.

Matt: And that took a while to work out!

Lucas: Matthew is a very generous writer in that as the script developed, if something was too difficult for me to say in one particular way, he responded. Most writers tend to say, well that's what I wrote so just say it; whereas Matt is kind enough to say, well let's work on a way for this to be able to come out of your mouth so that you can hold it in your head. He is also kind enough to dance for me when I can't remember things. We've discovered that I associate visual memory with events, so if I want to remember things they say to me then they dance while they give me notes and that way I will remember.

Writing in a way that fits the own your own speaking pattern is important. You may have noticed that the way I am speaking now is the way I speak in the show, the length of the thoughts, the length of the sentences and the length of ideas are similar. Often when you are reading other people's plays you find that they have a voice in there, like an authorial voice. Some writers don't necessarily recognise that and sometimes I think that what has been written is incredibly complex and I am going to take a while to get my head and voice around it.

The other part of remembering is muscle memory. I find it very difficult to remember the script if I am not actually doing it. Whereas if I move around in the pattern of the show then words will come to me because I will be in the correct position and will be actually doing the right thing and this will trigger the lines. Unfortunately, the only other way I have discovered is through constant repetition. When I was learning it I would just say it day after day after day. I would hop on my bike and to try and get the lung capacity for the show I would ride the bike while reciting the show out aloud. Out of that process it went into my body and, as well, there is a certain level of familiarity that arises from repetition. So now I can actually do other things while I am saying the lines. I was running the lines last night while writing an email and speaking it aloud while doing other things. That familiarity is important because then you can play with it so much more.

It is a bit of a multi-tasking show would you agree?

Lucas: Absolutely. You need to be able to chew gum and walk at the same time. There are moments when I will have a terrible brain-freeze and not be sure what I am doing next because I have become distracted by something else, like the audience.

Neridah: It's interesting to watch this because I can see Lucas return to a physical action, see his brain recognise it and then be able to move on.

What is the role of the sound design in *Boy Girl Wall*?

Lucas: When we were building the show we wanted to keep all the elements together and allow them to build in concert rather than concentrate on them separately and then layer them in later. We were trying to honour the idea of parataxis (the act of placing side by side), rather than combining them at the last minute. Neridah was there from the beginning and creating sound and playing with music.

So it has been a very collaborative process?

Lucas: Yes, a very collaborative process and out of that process there was a play that went backwards and forwards. When we were rehearsing and developing the show we created a type of writers' room in some respects. Anyone on the team could throw in a suggestion and

we would stop the rehearsal, unless we were doing a serious run, and then I could riff or play on something. We might find a new joke and spend a minute or two playing with that joke and then explore it until perhaps it wasn't funny at all and we might let it go and just return to the main story. It was the same with the music and the instruments whereby we experimented and played and found ways for them to represent certain things or moments in the play.

Neridah: Yeah, one good example is the toy piano which provides a clunky kind of sound and when we bought it I got quite excited because I play the piano and thought it would be fun to have a mini one but it has quite an ugly sound to it. Lucas has the character of The Wall who is a hopeless romantic and also a bit clunky and awkward so with the piano I created a little song for him, a romantic and quite reflective song that on the toy piano sounds quite dodgy, but sits well with the character. On the glockenspiel I have this reflective music that I used to play as a kid and I began to play it with Lucas's character whenever he would consider things such as thinking about outer space or about maths and it seemed to sit well with those moments. There were particular musical choices that were too dominant and they were cut out.

Lucas: Most of the sound choices are organic because they exist as loops in the show. There is room in the show for me to be listening to Neridah and for her to be listening to me and we respond accordingly

The play is set in Brisbane in the West End. Brisbane has a Go Card and Melbourne has a Myki, so is this a universal story?

Matt: Yes. I mean the *Boy Girl Wall* idea goes back to Shakespeare's play within a play, *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as created by the Mechanicals. The show also uses familiar touchstones that have come down to us through literature. There are people who have seen the show several times and pick up on more and more references each time. I think it is universal with regard to audience too. We have had several conversations with different theatre companies wondering if it is a youth show or a mainstream show. I think it is a timeless love story and I think it sets that up at the beginning by saying here are some things you may know about love stories. This show doesn't do the same thing but we will, essentially, end up in the same place.

Lucas: I wanted to set it in Brisbane because it is what I know but also, why not? It needs to be set somewhere so why not set it in a place that you know. I feel a bit frustrated when I see work that is set nowhere in particular or, conversely, playwrights like Tennessee Williams who always set his plays in Southern America, like New Orleans. There are many playwrights and writers who become known for where they set their stories.

Matt: The other thing we were talking about today is that whatever references there are in the play to specific places will have their own resonances for audiences anyway. While the play is set in Brisbane in the West End, the West End will mean something to audiences from other places such as London's West End. There are references to Montague Road which is a very well-known road in Brisbane but if you don't know that you will find your own meaning. So even these specific references are touchstones for other meanings but they still serve the story.

Lucas: When we first performed it in Adelaide we talked about the possibility of maybe changing some of the references but decided not to. We felt that other people know that public transport is a bit annoying, they know Go Cards or their equivalent are dodgy, they know the kind of suburb where you can live in a flat and there might be an artist next door, those special kind of suburbs. Those kinds of things have a universal application when you take the specific names away.

Are there any other aspects of the production that you feel are worth sharing?

Matt: Something I often talk about with emerging and young artists is to pay attention to how little you need to create theatrical magic. Sometimes it is held up to be this ungraspable, budgetary thing and if you make the right choice, you'll make a good theatrical choice. If you reduce something down to how much it costs then you won't be in a theatrical area at all.

Lucas: Things to know about the show is that before *Boy Girl Wall* we created a show whereby we build a ridiculously huge and expensive rock eisteddfod of a show about aliens and science fiction and horror movies with a huge cast and enormous crew - *The Attack of the Attacking Attackers*. We sold it! We were going to actually go out and tour it then the GFC hit and suddenly the idea of touring this thing was far too expensive and the venues started dropping away until the actual touring company dropped away. So we then adopted a sort of bloody-minded approach whereby we made this show and challenged anyone to tell us that we couldn't tour a stick of chalk and one performer.

And probably a locally acquired overhead projector!

Lucas: Absolutely, we wanted to emphasise that this was theatre too. So that approach, making something for nothing and then creating a core vision statement for what we believed in was what we sold. We distilled our vision down to three main concepts – theatricality, imagination and the joy of play – which have become the touchstones that we hold to. This is a very valuable thing to consider when you are devising work. When you start I think you need to create some sort of vision statement that outlines what you want to make and, as you work, continually hold to that and then compare what are you making to that statement. If it does differ too much then maybe your vision statement needs to change, not perhaps what you are making. It is good to be aware of both of those things.

AFTER SEEING THE PERFORMANCE...

This section of the notes explores Drama Unit 3, Outcome 3: Analysing non-naturalistic performance including:

- The representation of characters within a non-naturalistic performance
- The manipulation of dramatic elements and theatrical conventions
- Evaluating the use of stagecraft
- Analysing the non-naturalistic performance styles in the performance.

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

What did you first feel and think when you entered the theatre to see the production?

- What aspects of the production were already apparent?
- What 'world' did you seem to be entering? Was it a contemporary world?
- What was familiar about the world of *Boy Girl Wall*? What was unfamiliar?
- How did the stagecraft elements create a sense of both an earthly world, and an abstract world?

I think it is very important to leave a gap in order for the audience to insert themselves into the world. We've all seen this show over a hundred times but I tend to forget when I speak to audience members just how much this show happens in their head - Matt Ryan, Co-writer

- What do you think Matt means by an audience being able to insert themselves into the world of the play?
- Did you find points where you connected very strongly?

- How much of the performance of *Boy Girl Wall* happened in your head? What did you imagine?

When the Narrator talks about Thom's workplace he takes out the overhead projector and puts up statistics. Handwriting and drawing are Alethea's world so we see the beautifully drawn tree and magpie for instance - Matt Ryan, Co-writer

- Discuss the particular elements in the production that make up Thom's world and then Alethea's world
- Consider, for example, the use of space, the use of light, the use of drawn objects, the use of sound, the types of alarm clocks they have, how they view the wall of their apartment.

The world of the play and the set is malleable and can be used for whichever character is there at the time - Matt Ryan

- What other smaller worlds or 'spheres' were created in the play? Consider the days of the week, the power box, the magpie of Montague Road

We then played around with the idea that some of the characters are more aware than others that they are in a fictional universe. Mel, Thom's boss, is actually quite aware that he is in a show and will happily perform to the audience as well - Lucas Stibbard

- Discuss Lucas' above statement. Did you get a sense that Mel knew he was in a show? What aspects of his focus, use of space, expressive skills created that understanding? Did he directly address the audience?

STRUCTURE AND NARRATIVE

Boy Girl Wall is presented in twenty-six scenes or episodes as listed towards the beginning of this document.

- Were these episodes clearly signposted? How was this achieved? Sound? Light? Narration?
- Do the episodes contribute to a linear narrative?
- Does this production play with the concept of time? Flashback? Parallel time? Spheres of time?

...I see the play as having a three act structure, across three days of the week; Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday - Matt Ryan

- Did the performance feel like it was in three parts?
- How did the 'characters' of Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday introduce themselves and the next moments in the story?

One of the conceits created to frame the show was, imagine if a performer walks in to do a lecture, treating it like a lecture with all the appropriate props, using the idea of science and mathematics, but then taking it somewhere else altogether, almost to the point where it becomes quite ludicrous - Lucas Stibbard

- Discuss the opening of the show which has Lucas Stibbard inside a dodgy cardboard box proscenium arch theatre. How does this introduce the notion of a 'narrator'? How does it set the tone or mood of the show?
- How does the role of the Narrator drive or propel the story? Is he in control? How do you feel about the Narrator as a character?

The entire show is actually exposition, the characters will refer to themselves in the third person as they speak and act, so we were seeking to reset the understanding of what narration and exposition are or can be - Matt Ryan

- Exposition means the act of explaining. Consider how Lucas Stibbard moved between explaining what was happening and enacting what was happening. How did he achieve this?
- What is the difference between explaining and enacting?

THEATRICAL STYLES

Boy Girl Wall is performed theatrically but I would actually call it performance rather than theatre. It is straight to the audience and there is no pretension about a fourth wall. In fact there are jokes made about fourth walls throughout the performance - Lucas Stibbard

- What do you understand to be the convention of a fourth wall in theatre?
- Why was there no fourth wall in this production?
- To which theatrical styles can the convention of direct address be related to?

I think it is a timeless love story and I think it sets that up at the beginning by saying here are some things you may know about love stories. This show doesn't do the same thing but we will, essentially, end up in the same place - Matt Ryan

- In the production there are references to the love stories contained in *Titanic*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Sound of Music*. What are the elements of a love story contained in these films or novels?
- What are the elements of a love story contained in *Boy Girl Wall*?

The idea was to create something that bridged the gap between stand-up comedy and theatrical story-telling - Lucas Stibbard

- What do you understand to be the conventions of stand-up comedy? Consider what aspects of the performance may have been drawn straight from stand-up comedy
- What is theatrical story telling? Make a list of particular moments in the production where the story was told in a theatrical way. You may like to revisit the question above about explaining versus enactment.

...a desire to consider a post-Brechtian style and a post-dramatic style in terms of the way it plays with style - Lucas Stibbard

- What are the conventions of Brecht's Epic Theatre?
- What then may be a post-Brechtian style? Would this be a rejection of those conventions?
- Research 'post-dramatic theatre' as a style, a series of conventions or a particular aesthetic.

In a 'cheese and onion dream' one night, Thom imagines that he is at his own going away party but, strangely, is a sock puppet.

- How does the inclusion of sock puppetry create humour in the performance?
- How does it create pathos?

The production draws on a range of other theatrical styles namely physical theatre, clowning, slapstick, mime and aspects of theatre of the absurd.

- Discuss how Thomas' line of evolution is demonstrated through the use of aspects of physical theatre
- Discuss how the Wall, Doors, Floor and Ceiling use aspects of physical theatre

- Discuss the scene where Demis and Cathleen, Alethea's parents, get together in terms of physical theatre.
- What is absurd about this production? Does the absurdity create humour? How and why? Consider the crazy work scene for Recreation Day and Mel and Thom's conversation using every letter of the alphabet. Consider also the story telling moment at the library where Alan turns a children's book into a horror story
- Compare these aspects of *Boy Girl Wall* with any other Absurdist plays you know How are they similar or different?
- Slapstick traditionally includes prat-falls and accidents. Which aspects of the performance do you believe included aspects of slapstick comedy?
- How is mime incorporated into the production?

CHARACTERS & EXPRESSIVE SKILLS

In these notes twenty-two characters are named; all are played by one performer, Lucas Stibbard. The first character we meet is the Narrator.

I think that once someone walks on stage they are a character, and this was an opportunity to show that a narrator can be the only one on stage and still create a very theatrical performance - Matt Ryan

- Do you agree that the Narrator in this production is a character?
- What are his characteristics? Consider voice, physicality, costume, facial expression and try to create a profile that you think explains or outlines the character of the Narrator.

The Days of the Week. These set up *the personification of abstract concepts*. Tuesday is referred to as *The Clark Kent-like day of the week*.

- Who is Clark Kent and why would Tuesday be associated with these qualities?
- How are the other days of the week portrayed? What qualities and characteristics does the performer endow them with?

The characters of Thom and Alethea are the central characters.

- Would you agree that they have more naturalistic qualities than some of the other characters? Compare them with other characters such as Mel, Thom's Boss and Marco Grisetti, Alethea's boss.

Lucas Stibbard uses anthromorphism as a device in the production. This is the endowing of human qualities on inanimate objects.

- Discuss how Stibbard creates each of The Wall, doors, Ceiling, Floor and Dave the Computer. What expressive skills does he use for each one? How does he manipulate his voice? His facial expression? His movement?
- How does this technique contribute to the non-naturalistic style of the performance?

I pushed...(the) qualities into a performative realm by taking the natural level of that person and quite significantly exaggerating them. Another technique I use is creating very simple postures or ways of holding my body at rest then in movement. This can signal very clearly to an audience that this is a particular character - Lucas Stibbard

- Discuss this comment by the performer with regard to two different characters in the production, for example Mel and Thom, William MacCabbie and Alan the Goth Librarian, Demis Papadopoulos and Cathleen Jones.
- How does Lucas Stibbard 'signal very clearly to an audience' that these are different characters?

A key theatrical convention of non-naturalism is transformation. At this point consider carefully how the performer transformed between characters, when he became different characters and what devices he used. For instance:

- Sometimes he stepped through the space using the new space as a transformational device to change character
- Sometimes he turned from side to side to indicate he was different characters
- Sometimes he stood on the spot and transformed between characters
- Evaluate the effectiveness of these devices in creating the new characters
- What other devices can you think of that allow the solo actor to transform character?

I worked at finding voices and accents or ways of helping the audience to recognise a character by creating a distinct voice - Lucas Stibbard

- Discuss how the performer used his voice very specifically to indicate different characters.
- Give an example of when this was used effectively to clearly indicate a new character.

USE OF STAGECRAFT

Set & Props

Writer Matt Ryan talks about ...*how little you need to create theatrical magic*. The set design for *Boy Girl Wall* is deliberately minimalistic. The set and props tend to be interchangeable.

- Do you agree that very little is needed to create theatre?
- Write a list of the actual set and prop items used
- How does the performer generate his own 'set items'?
- How does the set design reflect the non-naturalistic style of the performance?
- For instance are some of the set items transformed into other things? What does the overhead projector become?
- How is Penelope the Bicycle represented?
- Discuss the use of the projected images of the Magpie, the Tree and the Bike and how they contributed to the theatrical styles in the performance

I think we purposefully chose a very simple and uncomplicated environment so that the actual story is clearer and the audience can focus on the performer. So the stagecraft completely serves the story and the physical telling of that story - Neridah Waters, Musician and Sound Designer

- Discuss the comment above.
- Did you want more set items or props in the performance? If so, what items?
- Did the overall design allow you to focus more clearly on the performer?
- How does this choice enhance the non-naturalistic style of the production?

The stagecraft elements reflect the child-like quality of the show and it's aimed at asking the audience to revert back to childhood play - Lucas Stibbard

- How did the overall aesthetic of the set design remind you of a playground or playroom?
- What particular aspects of the set and props were child-like?

Chalk is a key feature. How does the chalk function as a prop in the production?

- What could the chalk be representative or symbolic of? Consider its potential for permanency or impermanency.

Sound

The Wall who is a hopeless romantic and also a bit clunky and awkward so with the piano I created a little song for him, a romantic and quite reflective song that on the toy piano sounds quite dodgy, but sits well with the character - Neridah Waters, Sound Designer

- Recall the toy piano music in the performance. Did you feel that it adequately represented the Wall?

Consider the use of music in the production. For example the opening 'epic' introduction, the 1979 hit *Hustle*.

- How did these choices affect you as an audience?
- How did they contribute to the mood and atmosphere of particular moments?
- How did they contribute to the creation of comic or dramatic tension?

Lighting

The lighting in the show is all white and much of it is open white light. This tends to sit with the overall black and white aesthetic of the piece (with some exceptions).

- How does light create the following moments - the 1979 disco, the bizarre gothic horror story, the burning of the Magpie, the days of the week, The Power Box?
- Discuss the difference between light that is functional e.g. the overhead and light that is used to evoke mood or atmosphere, the stars and space?
- Were there times when you felt that the lighting was representative or symbolic? Night? Day? Time? Love? Loss? Dreams?
- The performer also uses a small LED torch at one point. What function does this have?

Costume

One performer with one costume so not much to discuss there...except that it is a deliberate choice.

- How does the costume serve to create the main character of The Narrator?
- How does it work throughout the entire show?
- Does it matter that the performer never transforms the costume? For example when he plays female characters.

THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS

Some of the non-naturalistic conventions in *Boy Girl Wall* include:

- Direct Address
- Story-telling
- Transformation of character, place, time and object
- Stylized gestures
- Episodic structure
- Flashback/disjointed time
- Enactment and re-enactment
- Exaggerated movement
- Pathos
- Caricature
- Song

Use the list to guide you as you give examples for each of these conventions.

Now consider other conventions that you decide were evident in the performance and provide examples.

DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

Consider the non-naturalistic dramatic elements of conflict, contrast, climax, mood, symbol, rhythm, timing, tension, focus, space

- You can consider them now, separately, or apply them to the responses you have made to the other areas of the production
- For example how do you relate conflict to specific characters? What types of conflict are evident?
- How is rhythm used by the performer?
- Where is the climactic point? The killing of the Magpie? The meeting of Thom and Alethea?

THEMES IN THE PLAY

Some of the themes in the production are *love, dreams and ambitions, chance and luck, the meaning of life*

- Discuss how each of these were explored in the production through the story, characters, theatrical styles and stagecraft elements
- Consider how both the inanimate and the animate characters embodied the themes
- How do the theatrical styles of comedy and physical theatre contribute to an exploration of certain themes e.g. Dave the Computer, The Wall, The Power Box?
- What other themes or ideas do you think the production explores?

ACTIVITY: Exploring non-naturalistic performance

Using the following extract from the play script for *Boy Girl Wall* create two performance versions of the script

1. An ensemble performance - allocate roles, create characters, block the positions and perform as an ensemble
2. A solo performance - now imagine you must play all the roles yourself, create different characteristics for the characters, block the action and perform as a solo performer

NARRATOR: The wall between their apartments was a young wall. It had been put in to make the building more profitable. And like all young walls, it was a romantic and had decided that these two belonged together. Unfortunately, being an inanimate object, matchmaking was difficult. So it was doing the only thing it could think of. It was going to fall down.

The Wall strains. He stops and catches his breath, then strains again.

CEILING: Hey. What are you doing?

WALL: Who's that?

CEILING: It's me. The ceiling.

WALL: Oh. Hi, Ceiling.

CEILING: What are you doing?

WALL: Nothing.

CEILING: It doesn't feel like nothing.

WALL: I'm going to fall down.

CEILING: What?

WALL: No, no. It's for love

CEILING: I don't care what it's for! Think about me. I'll fall.

NARRATOR: At that moment, the floor chimed in.

FLOOR: Hey, guys. What are you doing?

WALL: Nothing.

FLOOR: Oh. That's right. I'm the floor. Walk all over me.

WALL: I just think these two would be happier if there wasn't a wall between them.

CEILING: That's all very well and good but have you thought about me? My structural integrity?

FLOOR: Hey, Wall. What's that?

WALL: What's what?

FLOOR: That.

NARRATOR: And they all looked at Wall. And Wall looked at himself.
Wall crosses his eyes.

NARRATOR: And there, spreading across him, ten centimeters long and growing, was a crack.

CEILING: Oh, great! We're all going to die! I hope you're happy!

WALL: No, no, no. I can stop it. There. It's stopped. But. I don't think it's going to stay stopped unless you ceiling and you floor and the rest of the apartments promise to help get these two together.

NARRATOR: Thom stared at the wall. The Groombridge 34 binary system of glow-in-the-dark stars trembled in his hand. There was a crack in the universe. And there was light coming from it.

ACTIVITIES: Pencil case puppetry

This activity asks you to use the everyday objects that may be in your pencil case or stationery stash as a 'puppet'.

- The aim is to explore how a simple object can be given anamorphised
- Choose an item and write a list of descriptive qualities as a starting point. Think about the purpose and function of the object, and how these could translate into human wants, needs, emotions, strengths and weaknesses.
- Begin to think about those qualities could be expressed or physicalised
- Take the object and begin with it being asleep
- Slowly allow it to wake, slowly look around
- Allow it to stand or begin to move – how does it move
- Allow to look in the mirror and say something to itself
- Have your object move with more confidence or with the qualities that you are endowing it with
- How does your object speak? Play around with those qualities
- Perhaps work with a partner and devise a short conversation, interaction
- Discuss the process
- How would you take this principle and be that object yourself?
- Develop this on the floor

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Useful/Interesting Links

Welsh writer, **Dylan Thomas's** famous 'play for voices', *Under Milk Wood* can be found as a full script at:

http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/thomasd_under-milk-wood.htm

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay is a 2000 novel by American author Michael Chabon that won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2001. The novel follows the lives of two Jewish cousins before, during, and after World War II. The cousins end up being involved in the comic book industry. The magazine features Sammy and Joe's character the Escapist,

an anti-fascist superhero who combines traits of (among others) Captain America, Harry Houdini, Batman, the Phantom, and the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Read more at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Amazing_Adventures_of_Kavalier_%26_Clay

****BBC TV – *The IT Crowd***

Funniest scenes compilation:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHkYGv6D2Bc&feature=related>

This series is a satire on the IT business and includes some wonderful character types that may remind you of Althea's boss Mel, the Goth Librarian Assistant, and perhaps others

****BBC TV – *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy***

The meaning of life: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aboZctrHfK8>

This series focuses on life, the universe and everything. It is a satire on space, time travel and humanity. What's the meaning of life? Watch this and find out.

Production Images:

Photos by Al Caeiro, Pictured: Lucas Stibbard

















Boy Girl Wall Teachers' Notes
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