

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY
EDUCATION PACK

AN MTC NEXTSTAGE ORIGINAL

BERLIN

by Joanna Murray-Smith

17 APRIL — 22 MAY 2021
SOUTHBANK THEATRE, THE SUMNER

MTC MELBOURNE
THEATRE
COMPANY

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Video

Notes prepared by Nick Tranter **Design by** Helena Turinski

Cover photography by Justin Ridler **Production photography by** Jeff Busby **Rehearsal Photography by** Charlie Kinross

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.

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY



Photo by Benjamin Healley

MTC is Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual mainstage season of plays, and a suite of signature programs including the NEXT STAGE writers' program, MTC Education, First Peoples Young Artists Program, Cybec Electric play reading festival, and more artist access programs.

MTC is one of the major performing arts companies in Australia, and one of the largest theatre companies in the English-speaking world. Founded in 1953, MTC is also the oldest professional theatre company in Australia, and is a department of the University of Melbourne.

As Australia changed, MTC has changed with it. We like to think that we have frequently been at the forefront of Australian culture, introducing new ideas and new ways of looking at our lives, our society and the world; helping to explain a swiftly evolving landscape as we moved through it. Today, with Southbank Theatre as our performance home and our headquarters in Sturt Street, Southbank, MTC strives to present Melbourne audiences with the best drama from Australia and overseas to the highest standards.

Our Vision: To enrich lives with understanding and empathy through the storytelling power of the finest theatre imaginable.

Our Artistic Purpose: To produce classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre with style, passion and excellence in order to entertain, challenge and enrich audiences.



Southbank Theatre Virtual Tour

Explore Southbank Theatre in our virtual tour. Go backstage, see under the stage, and climb up to the fly tower to see where the magic happens.

CAST AND CREATIVES

Charlotte Grace Cummings

Tom Michael Wahr

Director Iain Sinclair

Set & Costume Designer Christina Smith

Lighting Designer Niklas Pajanti

Composer & Sound Designer Kelly Ryall

Voice & Dialect Coach Anna McCrossin-Owen

Assistant Director Alastair Clark

Intimacy Coordinator Michala Banas

Fight Choreographer Lyndall Grant

Movement Consultant Kirsty Reilly

Charlotte (Standby Cover) Myfanwy Hocking

Tom (Standby Cover) Liam Maguire

Stage Manager Whitney McNamara

Assistant Stage Manager Vivienne Poznanski

Production Photography Jeff Busby

Rehearsal Photography Charlie Kinross

ATTENDANCE INFORMATION

This production contains coarse language, sexual references and mature themes. For detailed information about the production's content, visit our production content guide.

DURATION

Approximately 80 minutes, with no interval.



Read the programme

Download the programme for this production to read about the cast and creative team, and see more photos from the rehearsal room.



Michael Wahr, Grace Cummings and Iain Sinclair in rehearsal.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Berlin by Joanna Murray-Smith is a romantic thriller that pits the devastating shadow of history against the promise of true love. Tom is an Australian abroad. Charlotte, a Berliner through and through. After meeting in a bar, sparks fly between them and she invites him to spend the night at her place. As they navigate the ritual of seduction, their desire gives way to secrets that cannot be ignored and questions neither of them can answer. Does young love stand a chance against the suffocating reach of the past? This powerful mix of thriller and romance presents an ethical dilemma that will keep you guessing until the very end.

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Watch the trailer

Watch the video trailer for this production and make predictions about how the story described above will play out on stage. What theatre style/s will be used? Which theatre technologies? How might the play end?

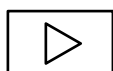
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH

Joanna Murray-Smith's plays have been produced and translated all over the world, in over two dozen languages, including on Broadway, the West End and at the Royal National Theatre in London. Joanna has worked across many forms, from plays to novels, journalism, opera libretti and screenplays. Her plays include *Three Little Words*, *Switzerland*, *Pennsylvania Avenue*, *True Minds*, *Songs for Nobodies*, *The Gift*, *Rockabye*, *The Female of the Species*, *Ninety*, *Bombshells* and *Flame* (Melbourne Theatre Company); *L'Appartement* (Queensland Theatre); *American Song* (Milwaukee Repertory); *Day One-A-Hotel-Evening* (Red Stitch); *Fury* (Sydney Theatre Company); *Rapture*, *Nightfall*, *Redemption*, *Love Child* and *Honour* (Malthouse Theatre). Joanna has also adapted *Hedda Gabler* (for the State Theatre Company of South Australia) and Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* for Sir Trevor Nunn (Coventry/London).

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Joanna Murray-Smith discusses *Berlin*

Watch a video where playwright Joanna Murray-Smith discusses her romantic thriller, and what inspired the play.

CONTEXT

BERLIN, GERMANY

The German city of Berlin is about 780 years old, and in that time the metropolis has experienced frequent, radical change transforming the lives of Berliners. Berlin is Germany's capital city, and its best known landmarks include the Brandenburg Gate (a symbol of German reunification), Reichstag (parliament), and Berliner Fernsehturm (TV tower dominating the skyline).

This play is set in the Berlin neighbourhood of Prenzlauer Berg. Once one of the cheapest neighbourhoods in Berlin, gritty Prenzlauer Berg underwent rapid gentrification in the mid-2000s to become a destination described in travel guides as 'splendidly well-groomed', 'filled with hip bars', and perfect for 'flea marketeering and summertime karaoke'. In the play, Charlotte refers to the neighbourhood's transformation:

TOM: How long have you been here?

CHARLOTTE: Four years. Before Prenzlauer Berg became a Mecca for cashed up hipsters in beanies.

NAZI GERMANY

Following World War I, Germany entered a depression as a result of having to pay war reparations. The demoralised nation with a destabilised economy was exploited by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, who by 1932 were the largest political party in the Reichstag. The following year, Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany, and began dismantling Germany's democratic institutions and imprisoning or murdering his chief opponents. In 1938 Hitler began expanding national boundaries, annexing Austria into Germany, and claiming parts of Czechoslovakia. The following year, German troops invaded Poland, triggering World War II.

The rise of Nazi Germany was insidious, and their extreme ideologies were often instituted in disguise. For example, the Kristallnacht, or 'Night of Broken Glass', was a wave of violent anti-Semitic pogroms (violent organised attacks by local non-Jewish populations on Jews) on November 9 and 10, 1938. A few days prior, Ernst vom Rath, a German diplomat, was shot by Herschel Grynszpan, a Polish Jew (Grynszpan was retaliating to the expulsion of thousands of Jews of Polish citizenship living in Germany from the Reich, his parents among them). German officials announced that Kristallnacht had erupted spontaneously as a public response to the assassination of Vom Rath, but in reality the pogroms were strategically instigated by Nazis. The German government pronounced that Jewish people were to blame for the violence, and introduced anti-Jewish legislation in the weeks that followed. These laws expelled Jewish children from German schools, withdrew the right of German Jews to hold a driver's licence, restricted access to public transport, banned Jews from 'German' cinemas, and more.

THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the genocide of European Jews during World War II. Hitler blamed the Weimar Republic's weakness on the influence of Germany's Jewish and communist minorities, who he claimed were trying to take over the country. One of the most horrific terms in history was used by Nazi Germany to designate human beings whose lives were unimportant, or those who should be killed outright: Lebensunwertes Leben, or 'life unworthy of life'. The Nazis especially targeted Jews.

Nazis murdered civilians en masse. It began with Einsatzgruppen death squads in the East, which killed some 1 million people in numerous massacres, continued in concentration camps where prisoners were actively denied proper food and health care, and culminated in extermination camps – government facilities whose entire purpose was the systematic murder and disposal of massive numbers of people in gas chambers and high-volume crematoriums.

During the course of the war, Nazi forces rounded up and executed 11 million victims including 6 million Jews. Reminders of the city's storied past are ubiquitous in Berlin, and the city has at least 20 memorials to victims of the Holocaust (most notably the concrete slabs of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe).

STOLPERSTEINE

Known as 'Stolpersteine', or 'stumbling stones', there are now more than 70,000 such memorial blocks laid in more than 1,200 cities and towns across Europe and Russia. Each commemorates a victim outside their last-known freely chosen residence. The inscription on each stone begins 'Here lived', followed by the victim's name, date of birth, and fate: internment, suicide, exile or, in the vast majority of cases, deportation and murder. The idea was first conceived by artist Gunter Demnig in Cologne in 1992 as part of an initiative commemorating victims of the Holocaust. 'A person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten,' he often says, citing the Talmud.

NAZI PLUNDER

Throughout World War II, Nazis stole thousands of artworks – by some estimates, over 20% of Europe’s art – partly deriving from Hitler’s desire to open a ‘Führermuseum’ in his hometown of Linz, Austria. Hitler had a penchant for landscape paintings and sculptures of nude figures. Thousands more artworks were hidden by people in efforts to protect them from being stolen. Nazis also stole gold, silver and currency, cultural items of great significance, ceramics, books and religious treasures, and destroyed modern art that Hitler deemed ‘degenerate’.

Many items plundered by the Nazis were done so through devious anti-Jewish legislation. Much of the laws introduced after Kristallnacht enforced ‘Aryanisation’ policy—the transfer of Jewish-owned enterprises and property (e.g. valuable artworks) to ‘Aryan’ ownership, usually for a fraction of their true value.

Sources: *Prenzlauer Berg* on lonelyplanet.com; *Prenzlauer Berg* on airbnb.com; Stephanie Kirchner (2009) *In Berlin, a Gentrifying Neighborhood Under Siege* on time.com; *Welcome to Berlin* on visitberlin.de; *How did Hitler Happen?* on nationalww2museum.org; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC (2019) *Kristallnacht* on encyclopedia.ushmm.org; Alan Taylor (2011) *World War II: The Holocaust* on theatlantic.com; Eliza Apperly (2019) ‘*Stumbling stones*’: a different vision of Holocaust remembrance on theguardian.com; Tori Campbell (2019) *Nazi Plunder: A History of Missing and Recovered Art Treasures* on artland.com; Alex Shoumatoff (2014) *The Devil and the Art Dealer* on vanityfair.com.



Context connections

Choose one of the areas above and research it in more detail. After you’ve seen the production, discuss connections between the play and the information above. What themes can you identify in the play? What is the point of view of each character? What might be the point of view of the playwright?



WRITER'S NOTE

Berlin is a small play about big ideas. In 2015, I visited Berlin with my husband and three children. I expected the children would find the deluge of cultural and tourist destinations in the city overwhelming. To my surprise, they were the ones lingering as I headed for the exits, overwhelmed by the claustrophobia of horror. My children are the grandchildren of an historian and a history teacher, so the past has always been a living presence for them. They are the children of a writer and a journalist, so storytelling is a prominent feature of our life at home. But perhaps more importantly, their adored grandmother Nita arrived in Melbourne as a young Jewish refugee from Poland. Before long, almost everyone she had known in her township – from her teachers and friends to shopkeepers, neighbours and her own grandparents – had been slaughtered. The town was wiped off the map and eventually swallowed by Ukraine. As a teenager, it was daunting to imagine the eradication of nearly everyone who had populated my life. Through my mother, my children and I had a silent but profound connection to Berlin.

While the children went off on their own to find the stadium where, during the 1936 Olympics, Hitler snubbed the great African American track-star Jesse Owens, I became obsessed by the Stolpersteine, the small shining plaques in the residential pavements marking the date and destiny of the Jews who had once lived at each address. What was it like, I wondered, to live in a city so engaged with its own historical crimes, its own human failing? Everywhere we went, history was as much of a presence as the moment we were in. A city so vibrant, so beguilingly cultured, so full of young people from all over the world in seemingly permanent creative celebration, was punctuated at every turn by unambiguous shame.

Then and in subsequent visits, I applauded Germany for its determination to relentlessly examine its own soul. But I have also felt sympathy for the young, who I presumptuously imagine might struggle to find 'the lightness of being'. Should a line ever be drawn? I think I know the answer to that, especially with the recent rise of the Far Right. But surely if the past is so present, it must still collect a toll on our emotions? What suffering, what guilt, what fury is carried on in our DNA and for how long? Is love a viable weapon in fighting for freedom from history?

I owe a debt to my mother here, Nita Murray-Smith, whose stories ensured remembrance, at least in my family. She and my beloved relative Judy Kolt (the Melbourne-based author of the astonishing memoir *Tell it to the Squirrels*) have personified the power of resilience for me. They have embodied, with extraordinary vitality, the will to find and spread joy whilst carrying within them the weight of their own histories. They remain inspirations in their engagement with love, life, culture and children despite what they knew, what they saw and what they remembered.

And thanks, too, to Sam, Charlie and Lucie, who allowed me to experience Berlin through eyes other than my own.

Gratitude, as always, to all at MTC, for its ongoing faith in and support of its artists, to Brett for his excitement about the play, NEXT STAGE and its wonderful donors for its hugely generous support in the writing of the play and to Iain Sinclair, Grace Cummings, Michael Wahr and the wonderful stage managers and designers, the set builders and costume makers and all the other talented folk who have brought this play to life.

Finally, thanks go to the intrepid and generous audiences who have, against the odds, come back to see living ideas in a living medium. On behalf of all the playwrights, directors and actors of the Australian stage, thank you.

Joanna
February 2021



Discuss 'the lightness of being'

Discuss Murray-Smith's musings about suffering and guilt carried in our DNA. What should never be forgotten? What should we move on from? How might we reconcile the two?



Michael Wahr and Grace Cummings.

CHARACTERS

CHARLOTTE

In the script, the playwright describes Charlotte as 'early 20s, beautiful, German.' She is a bartender at the best (secret) bar in the city, and lives in a loft apartment in Prenzlauer Berg. The play takes place inside her apartment. Tom describes Charlotte as 'my dangerous mission', 'a human contradiction', 'cute, imaginative and really beautiful', 'really great in bed' and 'my lodestar'.

Learn more about Grace Cummings' performance in *Berlin* in this Q&A:

What excites you about working on this play? What challenges does it present?

'I suppose the answer to both of these questions are pretty much the same: it is both exciting and a challenge to be in a brand new two-hander. It's a challenge to come back to the theatre to play a German woman after a pretty large break to work as a musician. But also it's so awesome that I am able to do both of those things!'

You were cast in 2019 and have now had a long time to sit with this role. Have your thoughts and approach to the character changed at all over the past 12 months? Who is Charlotte in 2021?

'I have been cast for a while, yes. I think that if I focused on this throughout the 2020 lockdowns I'd go pretty mental so I put it away and was able to come back in 2021 with fresh eyes and a lot of newly acquired patience. Charlotte is the same as she always was, I reckon.'

How do you embody Charlotte – for example, movement, voice, mannerisms?

'I think the most important part is the German accent. It's getting there with the help of voice and dialect coach Anna McCrossin-Owen, who is my favourite.'

Do you have a pre-show ritual?

'I'll have to wait and see what it is for this one I think. I suppose I'll make sure I've seen some sun that day, or gone for a walk. The ritual is yet to reveal itself.'

In a *Sunday Age* interview with literary critic Peter Craven (*Small casts face big challenge*, 2021) Cummings said of *Berlin*, 'Two people have the job of holding up a story as big as this ... having a cast of two people means you can't really hide behind anything ... You can't rely on anything to hold up the show except for yourself.'



Two-handers

Discuss the unique challenges of performing this play, where two actors portray the entire story without leaving the stage. Think about how actors must take care of themselves to maintain their fitness for this marathon performance.



Expressive Skills

Discuss how Grace Cummings manipulated her expressive skills to create Charlotte. Think about her German accent and what exercises Voice & Dialect Coach Anna McCrossin-Owen might've given Cummings. What movements did she use to move around the set? How did she hold props like the knife or beer bottle? How did her facial expression change when revelations were made?



Grace Cummings and Michael Wahr in rehearsal.

TOM

In the script, the playwright describes Tom as ‘early 20s, native English speaker, not German.’ Ostensibly, he is an Australian tourist visiting Berlin. Learn more about Michael Wahr’s performance in *Berlin* in this Q&A.

Who is Tom, to you?

‘For me, Tom is a lot of young people in this country, or in any first-world country: he’s someone that is looking for an identity. But he’s looking for that identity in a world where there’s a lot of division, where the language that is used in a lot of declarations of liberty is seeded in the toxicity of condemnation or cancellation. I think this is breeding resentment in a society where everyone’s looking for their own minority, for a validity to be. So many people seem to have this need to metaphorically and literally put their families’ badges on their shirt, to find an identity. And with Tom, it’s like all of this is crammed into one person: he’s full of so many of these different aspects: trying to find an identity, trying to find purpose, trying to find his own freewill. And amongst all these things that he’s trying to find, he gets hit by someone who he connects with on a level where logic and purpose and reasoning and planning and understanding aren’t related. That’s human connection, and that’s beautiful! The journey Tom and Charlotte go on is life. We ache for them and barrack for them, and we want to condemn them, but where does love sit in all of that?’

How do you embody all this in Tom? For example, via voice or movement or mannerisms?

‘How we find ways to continuously embody our characters comes from how our characters continuously keep each other stimulated, in one room over 12 hours. What happens when you get two people in their 20s – who want to make out – in a room together? If we don’t continue to reinvent stimuli, they’ll just go to bed; they’ll just hook up. Which we don’t want because we’re teasing out so much more in this play. So Jo’s written in so much imbibing and consuming in the show: we’re drinking juice, champagne, beer, wine, tea, coffee, water; we’re consuming words and consuming liquids. As for how we can experiment with that rehearsal-wise, costume is a big thing: shoes on, shoes off, different states of unrobing or robing, as well as the playfulness from our characters being in a private space where we’re not needing to conform to a social culture behaviourally, and what that changes in our bodies: we can behave however we want, as the characters in that space, to keep us stimulated and stop us from just going to bed.’



Michael Wahr and Grace Cummings in rehearsal.

Do you have a pre-show ritual to focus/warm-up?

'A physical and vocal warm-up for me is always the best. It sounds kind of mechanical, but it has a warm-up effect on my thought process as well. It's kind of like yoga, where you focus on your breath and at the end your mind is calm because you've worked your body. That for me is very much a ritual. And I like to do that warm-up on the stage, if possible. I think it's probably more unconscious or subconscious, but as long as I'm in the theatre I'm aware that what we're doing is performing and telling a story, and it's not a therapy session for me! I might enjoy it but it's not for me. These are characters that we have to do justice to and they deserve respect.'

Do you have an example that you can give of a rehearsal technique?

'As I was saying, costume is a big thing for me. And more specifically, shoes. So where possible, I'll wear my character's actual shoes every day to rehearsal because there's an aspect of getting used to the character through them.'

Literally walking in someone else's shoes?

'Exactly, and this is where I love to get cheesy, because it's not just the shoes but the soul of someone else. You've got a different sole on. It's a great access point to a character, I think. You also hear it in yoga classes, where your feet are your first access point to the ground, your connection to the earth. And so with shoes it's about how stable or unstable, how controlled or uncontrolled, you are in whatever you're wearing. Also, a lot of different techniques that are movement-based, such as clowning and bouffon, are about how you discover things through how you walk and move. You can focus on that specifically and do really great work, but you can also just wear the character's shoes and see what they do to you, see what obstacles they present, or how they affect your ease of delivery, what they do to your posture and how that dictates your performance. In this play, we're barefoot a lot of the time or sometimes we're wearing socks but we're lucky enough to have things to play with – carpets and couches and so on. By being tangible, by using your senses, you get so much more information and gold to play with, as an artist, as a creator, as an actor. So that's very much something I try to throw into every rehearsal process.'



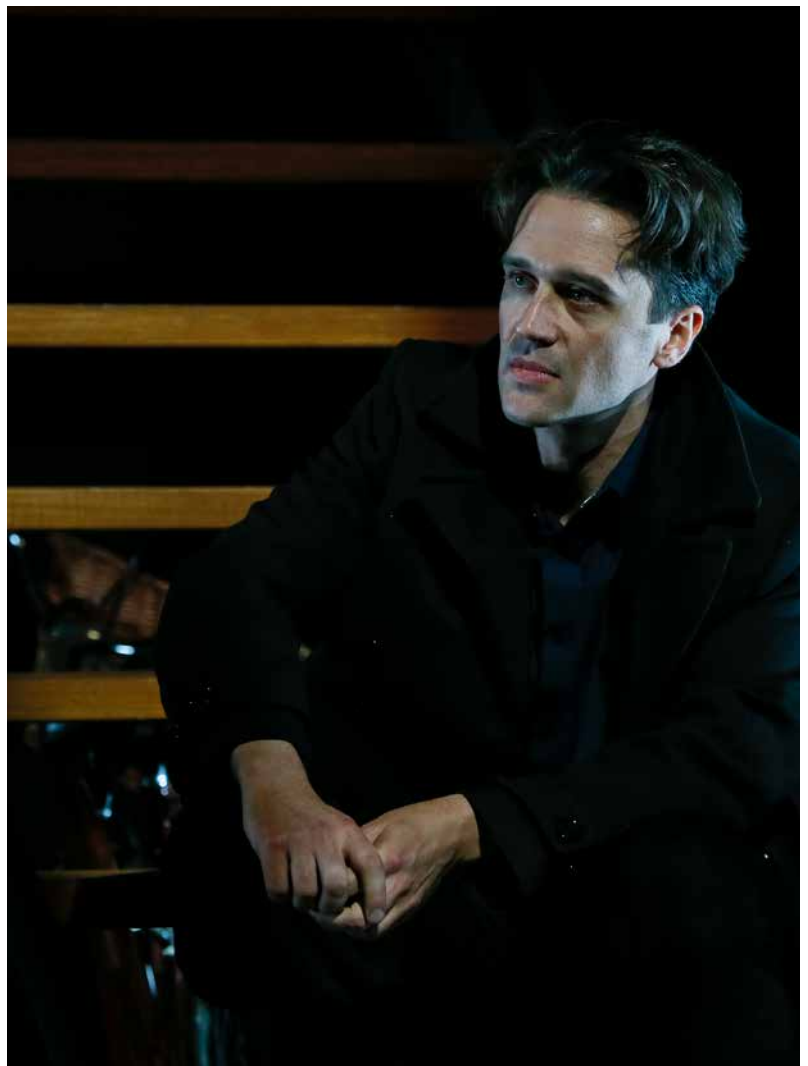
Expressive Skills

Discuss how Michael Wahr manipulated his expressive skills to create Tom. Think about the way he moved around the set. How did he hold props like the orange or his mobile phone? How did his facial expression change when conversation topics became contentious?



Extended Interviews

Read more interviews with the cast on the MTC website.



Michael Wahr



Iain Sinclair in rehearsal.

DIRECTION

Learn more about Iain Sinclair's direction for *Berlin* in this Q&A.

How would you describe the world of this play?

'There are a bunch of different environments for this play. And the first environment, the one that we're putting our primary energy on, is that things are never what they seem. That's actually an environment; some might call it a theme but we're actually treating that as an environment, which is: the man who meets the woman, and the woman who meets the man, both seem to be one thing but actually turn out to be many.

We're using that as the refraction point for everything – for the intellectual conversations, for the emotional journey, for the way that the three acts feel. I'm designing Act One entirely like a murder thriller. So the question is, quite simply, when's he going to kill her? The audience doesn't need to know that, but that's the way we're treating it. So each act has a different genre and a different tone to it, a different perspective on it. With the deliberate choice of making people think 'oh shit there's more to this than I immediately thought.' And that's an environment.

The other environment that's really worth talking about is the collision between the past and the present. This play is a porous set. And the way Christina [Set & Costume Designer] and I have talked about that in the design conversations is that we've decided this flat belonged to a woman called Esther Rosenberg, and she was taken out of that flat

and put it in the ghettos and then sent to the camps. And her Stolperstein is right down below, and so the way we've designed the set, for example, is as if you can see Esther with her family there, even though it's got IKEA furniture and there's a mezzanine that's been plopped in on there as well. But the idea is that the past and the present are happening simultaneously.

I went to a script writing workshop with Andrew Bovell years ago, and something he said that always stayed with me was that one of the magnificent things about theatre is that two things can be can be happening exactly at the same time and be completely different, and yet be unified. And that's certainly something that I think Jo and Andrew have in common: both of those writers give you a great big mystery. So that's certainly another environment: the collision and the coexistence of timeframes and morality frameworks and the eternal-ness of unsolvable problems.'

What's an example of a rehearsal technique that you've used on this play?

'Whenever I read a script for the very first time – especially for a potential job – I take copious notes. And the reason for that is that you only ever get to experience the play for the first time once. The deeper you go into it, the easier it is to forget what that experience is like. I then re-read those first notes again part way through the process; that's one of my professional habits.

As a director I like to taper my rehearsal process. So I usually go through four phases of development. Phase one is very, very open, and that's one of the reasons why I try not to be too much of an expert about everything at the beginning, because as we all know it's a communal art form, and the biggest lesson I've learned as a director – and it took me 12 or 15 years to learn it properly – is that every single person in the room is an artist of equal standing with you. And my job is to just add the objective perspective on it, as opposed to the old-fashioned transactional version where the director was some kind of parent figure. Those days are well and truly over. And so for me the first week is completely about mutual, shared discovery, and the phrase 'hold on tightly let go lightly'.

So when a better idea comes along, you let the Darwinian process kick in and hand over. And that way, by the time we get into week two, when we are beginning to pin things down, we're not pinning down ideas that belong to anybody; we're pinning shared creative exploration. And then we slowly shake it down until eventually it comes into place, but I don't get prescriptive until week four, really. And sometimes the play is still fluid throughout previews. And with somebody like Jo on board, I'm really happy for that to be the case.'

What's an example of symbolism in the play, or in the way that you're directing it?

'There are obvious symbols, and of course the most obvious is the Stolpersteine, Gunter Demnig's brass plaques, but to be frank about it all I don't ever actually think symbolically about it. I feel that what theatre does is to render ideas into behaviour. And sure, there are all of those literary components in it, but in a way everything that we do is symbolic and what we're doing by creating theatre is creating ritual behaviour which is symbolic of real human behaviour.'

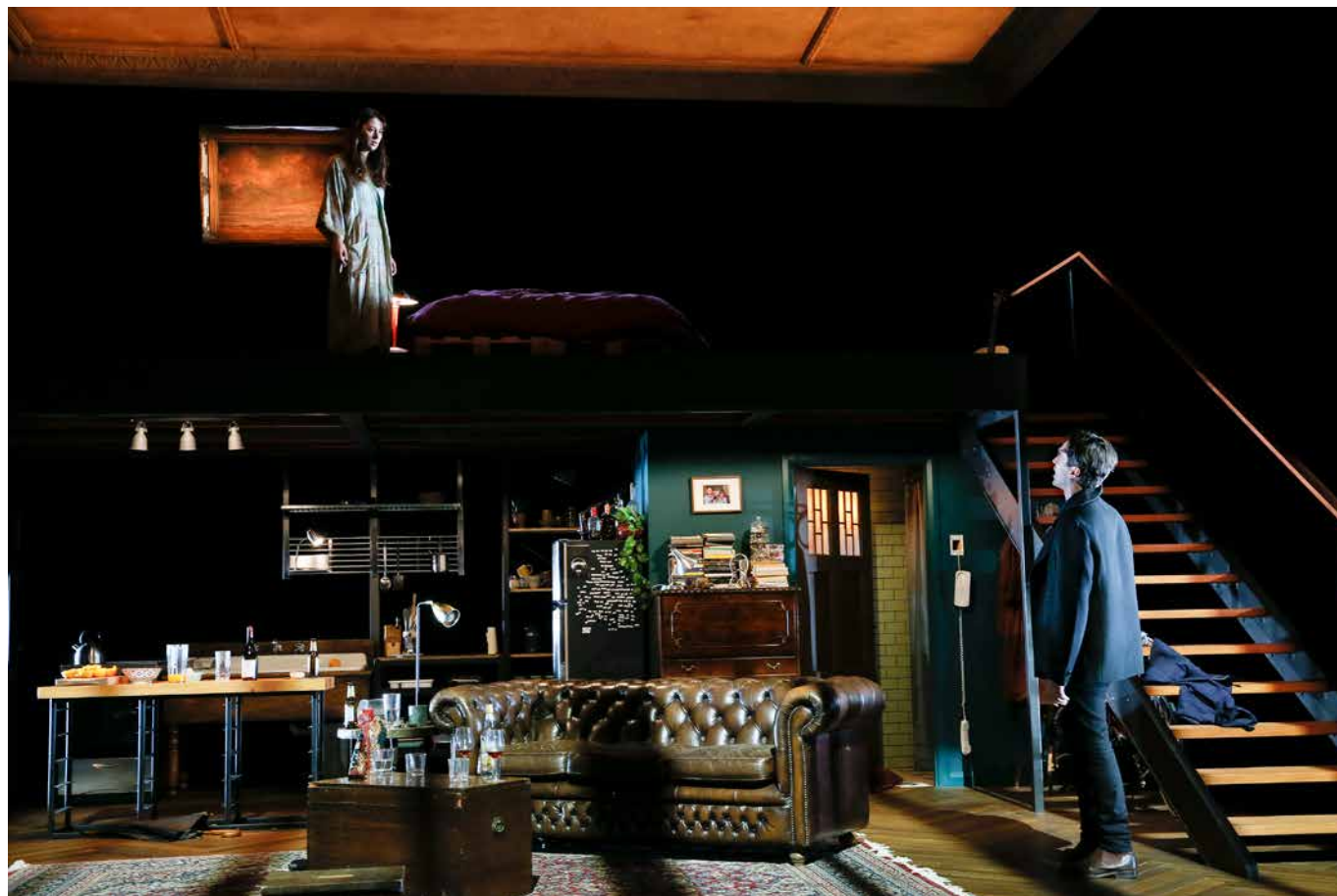
This art form evolved from priests who stopped doing liturgy and started doing something else. And so it still has that component in it, I guess, and of course there are many symbolic elements inside it – and I don't want to give the cheat notes to the lazy student – but I think my answer is that theatre itself, the ritual act of rendering ideas into behaviour, is the symbol. That's the more interesting one for me: there's interpretive space in there for an audience to dream into, and empathise with, and put themselves in those shoes. And for me that's the best form of symbolism.'

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Interview with Iain Sinclair

Read the extended interview with director Iain Sinclair on the MTC website.



Grace Cummings and Michael Wahr.

SET DESIGN



Christina Smith.

Christina Smith has designed the *Berlin* set for the Sumner at Southbank Theatre. The Sumner is a traditional proscenium arch theatre that has a capacity of up to 550. In the script, the playwright describes the setting as follows:

SETTING: Spring. Now. A Berlin studio-loft. Beaten up antique furniture and inherited bits and pieces, supplemented by IKEA and found-objects. Piles of books, pop culture bric a brac, maybe a fish tank, a chest of drawers, an old sofa. It has an idiosyncratic style and charm, elevated by large windows that look over the street down below. Offstage is a bedroom and a bathroom. Very out of place, looms a large 19th century oil painting of a sea-scape with dramatic rain clouds in an ornate frame.

Learn more about Christina Smith's set design for *Berlin* in this Q&A.

What were your impressions when you first read the *Berlin* script?

'I think one of my initial reactions to *Berlin*, one of the really obvious elements of the script, was time – the idea that it happened over the scope of one night. I found the structure of it really striking, and intriguing. The three scenes have very distinct structures: scene one is a seduction, scene two is post-seduction but still in the dead of night, and in scene three it's been written with this idea of the cold light of day. So there was this understanding that the space would need to transform over those three scenes, and be revealed in the end; that I would have a lot of dark corners, and they would actually come to be revealed. The other thing is that it's set in the one apartment, so there was an obvious response that the space would be very contained, firstly in a beautiful and intimate way for scene one, but it almost ends up feeling like you're trapped in there by scene three.'

What inspirations immediately jumped out to you in terms of set design?

'[Iain Sinclair and I] talked a lot about the idea of context, and the idea of memory. We spoke about the idea that even though this particular play is set in a contemporary time, there's a past and a history that the characters can't escape. We also talked about the idea of what it's like to have a relationship built on those pieces of history, so there was an immediate thought that this space needed to have fragments of that history within it.

It needed to be a fragmented space, it shouldn't be a complete space – that was a very strong initial idea. Around the time I was doing this design, there was a Cornelia Parker exhibition in Sydney that I ended up going up to see. She has a very famous work, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, which is literally an exploded garden shed. It's amazing! So that idea of these fragments sort of floating in space provided a lot of resonance.

And in terms of early visual imagery, we also talked a lot about the idea of this piece being almost like a thriller, so I turned to film noir imagery, with the dark long shadows and an air of mystery. We looked at imagery from the film *The Third Man*, for instance, because the space needed to have some mystery to it.'

What does the set tell us about Charlotte?

'When Iain and I first spoke about Charlotte's place, we talked about that sense of mystery when you go back to someone's house for the first time and you're wandering around having a look at everything, wondering where things came from. All of your possessions tell the story of you, and we wanted there to be anachronistic choices in Charlotte's place, for that sense of history but also some



Set rendering by Christina Smith.

intrigue. It needed to feel like an assembly of the 20th century; we didn't want it to be completely from an IKEA catalogue. We also wanted an idea of there also being elements from her family, like maybe she could have inherited some old furniture. And we wanted the old furniture to almost walk a line between 'have you picked that up on the side of the road, or is it actually valuable?' That all tells us a bit about her history.'

What's your favourite part of the set and why?

'There's lots of bits about this set that I really like. I think there's some really tremendous scenic painting on the furniture and the ceiling, and I have a great admiration for the people who did the set construction. It's one of my favourite floors that I've done.



Set model by Christina Smith.

I also really liked the way that Iain has used the set. I confess that I was actually very dubious about the mezzanine level for a long time, and Iain was adamant that we had to have that separation. I eventually came around, and now I love the way in which the set has been utilised, seeing how the different levels come into play both spatially between the two performers and how it almost adds a psychological layer to their relationship – particularly as we go into scene three. I find it quite satisfying that up in the mezzanine they're so close to that ceiling of history crushing them. I also love how up on the mezzanine it's almost like a different space. Downstairs, there's set dressing and there are all the little bits of history to grab your attention, but upstairs it's a painting and a bed and a ceiling of history about to crush you. The stakes get raised up there, and I like that very much.

The other thing is the fact that it is out into the auditorium, which is something I don't get to do very often nowadays because it kills seats. It's been my ongoing quest in that space to try to move out onto the apron because there is something about the idea of the actor being in the same architectural space as the audience, which is such a different feeling to being behind a proscenium. And because this was a two hander, Iain in fact had requested it very early on in the discussion; he felt he needed to get past the proscenium with this particular work, that it was the right thing to do for this play: we needed the immediacy of those two with the audience.'

What's an interesting set component that was made for this production?

'To be honest, I reused a lot of stock elements in terms of furniture, so there wasn't that much. It was a very reused show because of that idea of wanting it to look assembled. But interestingly, the bathroom door was a beautifully built door, made from scratch. You can barely see it in the set, and in fact it was in an entirely different location to begin with, as it was our front door, but we jettisoned it in week two. But there was something about the door that I just couldn't leave alone. So I decided to do a big door swap because I loved it so much!

The most bizarre thing that was made was the bed. It was supposed to be a pallet bed but we couldn't use a real one because of all the splinters, so a 'pallet bed' that looked like something really student-y and thrown together was painstakingly remade. And then when it went into the theatre it had to be padded for the fight choreography. It was supposed to be so improvised and it ended up being probably the most costly!'



Virtual Tour

Explore the set of *Berlin* up-close in our virtual tour. Walk on and around the set as actors do, and click the tags to discover more about components of the design and its manufacture.



Set Design Process

Follow Christina Smith's set design process from page to stage on the MTC website. Explore the research and development process, see sketches from her notebook, and gain insight into the set design process on this production.

COSTUME DESIGN

Learn more about Christina Smith's costume designs for *Berlin* in this Q&A.

What was your inspiration for the *Berlin* costume designs?

'For this particular show, I was loathe to produce costume renderings before rehearsals had started. It was such an intimate piece between two actors, and I wanted to involve them fully in the design decisions. I did compile some initial references that offered various avenues to explore, but ultimately we (the director, performers and myself) decided what the characters would wear collaboratively. In regards to inspirations we explored the idea of referencing mid-20th century silhouettes in the character's clothing choices, albeit quite subtly. The final renderings were actually done a couple of weeks into rehearsal. I wanted to be sure our combined ideas were communicated clearly to everyone in rehearsals as well as the costume department – and a sketch was the most expedient method! This particular suite of renderings was produced entirely digitally using a software called Procreate because of how quickly they can be executed.'

What do the costumes tell us about each character?

'Whilst Charlotte's costume was anchored in a pragmatic approach (she had just finished work at a bar), Tom's clothes needed to have an element of 'costuming' to them. Tom had intentionally sought out Charlotte at the bar, and so his decisions about what he was wearing would have been motivated by that – he is trying to catch her eye, to lure her to him! I had originally thought he might be more 'backpacker', but his appearance needed far more mystery than that idea would allow. We intentionally kept his silhouette quite clean and dark to add an element of danger to him, but also to loosely reference a period film noir silhouette (particularly in the jacket). We also wanted to him to look very Melbourne!'

What practical considerations are in your designs?

'Even though the clothing seems quite simple, there were several practical considerations and alterations that needed to be made. Tom's shirt was in reality four shirts! Each actor has two copies each of Tom's shirt, so that on two-show days they were able to wear a clean shirt during the show – they work very hard onstage and it can get quite hot! Tom's shirt has press studs so that he can remove it incredibly quickly at the end of scene 1, whilst Charlotte's version of the shirt has a different combination of buttons and studs (as well as shorter sleeves). There were also practical considerations and alterations to underwear to ensure it was comfortable, secure, and able to house the microphone packs.'

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Interview with Christina Smith

Read the extended interview with set and costume designer Christina Smith on the MTC website.



Grace Cummings and Michael Wahr.



SCENE ONE
Charlotte
BERLIN



SCENE THREE
Charlotte
BERLIN



SCENE ONE
Tom
BERLIN



SCENE THREE
Tom
BERLIN

COMPOSITION AND SOUND DESIGN



Kelly Ryall

Learn more about Kelly Ryall's composition and sound design for *Berlin* in this Q&A.

How would you describe the sonic world you're creating for *Berlin*?

'The world of *Berlin* is a musical world of shadows, composing in a film noir style with the romance of a string quartet.'

What kinds of sounds/instruments are you using in this play?

'Most of the instrumentation in the score to *Berlin* revolves around the string quartet. So violin, viola, and cello. When I'm writing music I like to choose an instrumentation and then stick to it. I find creating strong parameters or limitations early on allows me more time to make melodic, harmonic and textural decisions.'

In your opinion, what is *Berlin* about? How does your design support the play's big ideas?

'Without giving the game away, *Berlin* contains a mystery which both ignites and shatters the love found between our two characters. The music plays to both romance and mystery. But hopefully keeps us always guessing what kind of play we are in.'

Are you creating *Berlin* beyond the apartment with diegetic sound?

'Absolutely. I think if a place on stage is real, the sounds that come from it need to be from that place and come from within that space. The script calls for a record player, so anytime the characters play a record it comes from the speakers attached to the record player as they would in any apartment or house. I am also a big fan of real domestic sounds wherever possible – in this case a real tap and water to ground the space as a real apartment.'

Could you tell us a bit about your process as a composer/sound designer?

'Every score differs. Given the fast turnaround times on theatre scores (in this case 4 weeks), there is very little time to record real instruments, though I always try to where possible. In a 4-week rehearsal: Week 1 is spent understanding the play and hearing voices read it for the first time. I develop a playlist of potential musical genres and styles so I can start a conversation with a director; Week 2 is spent creating musical sketches once I have narrowed down the genre or style from the playlist and also playing these in the room wherever possible to make sure they'll fit; Week 3 is writing the music; and Week 4 is compiling the music into cues to work with the runs of the play as it moves forward. There's really only a week to compose, so it's very important to get the musical ingredients right first.'

How does a composer/sound designer collaborate with the cast and creative team in rehearsal?

'Lots of conversations with the director and trying things out with the actors in the rehearsal space. There are conversations with the designer in terms of points to add speakers in the set, either diegetic (record players, TV) or non-diegetic (hidden from audience view wherever I can).'



Diegetic and non-diegetic sound

Reflect on Ryall's comments above and identify moments in the play where he manipulated diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. How did this sound design enhance the production?

LIGHTING DESIGN



Niklas Pajanti

Learn more about Niklas Pajanti's lighting design for *Berlin* in this Q&A.

How would you describe the lighting design you're creating for *Berlin*? What is the world of this play?

'The lighting design is a combination of realistic apartment lighting, lamps, kitchen and bathroom lights, fridge light etc. and also a more stylistic form of lighting built on theatrical fixtures using side lights, a very low angle of light more often seen in contemporary dance.'

What kinds of lights are you using in your design?

'A combination of traditional tungsten theatre fixtures and a lot of LED fixtures.'

In your opinion, what is *Berlin* about? How does your design support the play's big ideas?

'*Berlin* is about moral responsibility and the ethics of profiting from the actions of our parents and grandparents. The play is framed a little as a thriller or mystery, so my lighting design is a bit noir-ish, taking inspiration from classic films like *The Third Man* (1949).'

You've used several practical lights in the set design – how are these used differently to lights in the rig?

'The practical fixtures, or pracs, are the realistic lights in the apartment. They provide a mood or aesthetic feel that grounds the play in reality.'

Is there a particular moment in the play that you're especially excited about, regarding your design?

'As the play is new, it has never been put on before, the whole thing is exciting to me. I have no idea really how it will look by the time we get to opening night.'

What has been the most exciting challenge to solve on this production?

'The most exciting challenge has been to actually light people inside the apartment. The set design blocks almost all traditional lighting angles that you would normally expect; the ceilings, stairs, and stage thrust all limit available lighting positions, so working out where I can and can't get angles to light from has been quite a task. In a way this forces my design to be unique, with strict limitations. I find that this sort of restriction often helps create a better lighting design.'



Grace Cummings

THEATRE STYLES

NATURALISM

Naturalism was a theatrical movement in the late 19th Century that aimed to present accurate depictions of ordinary people on stage in realistic settings. Konstantin Stanislavski developed a 'system' for actors to create realistic performances (including techniques such as given circumstances, objectives and emotional memory). Naturalism makes use of the fourth wall, inviting the audience to observe the action unfold on stage.

Source: BBC (2019) *Naturalism and Stanislavski* on [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com).



Michael Wahr and Grace Cummings.

GENRE

ROMANTIC THRILLER

Berlin can be described as a romantic thriller, combining the conventions of the thriller genre (dark, suspenseful, intriguing plot-driven stories), with those of a romance (focusing on the romantic relationship between two people). The tension between these two genres creates drama: the climactic moment of a thriller is typically a murder, while a romance usually has an emotionally optimistic ending.



Theatre styles and genre

Discuss how this production is presented, and the interrelationship between theatre styles and genre. What theatrical conventions can you identify in the production?

ELEMENTS OF THEATRE COMPOSITION

The following questions, provocations and ideas are intended to help you experience and analyse *Berlin* through the lens of VCE Theatre Studies.

COHESION

- How has the set designer achieved unity and balance in Charlotte's eclectic apartment?
- Compare the opening scene with the final scene.

MOTION

- Think about how the actors moved around the set. Which scenes had lots of movement, and which were more still?
- Does anybody leave the stage? When and why?
- How was the furniture arranged to facilitate movement?

RHYTHM

- When do moments of tension and climax occur? How would you describe the pace in these moments?
- Describe moments in the play using musical language like legato, staccato, allegro etc.

EMPHASIS

- How was the Constable painting given emphasis?
- Describe the play's final moments making connections between emphasis and the play's themes.
- How were props used to emphasise moments in the play, e.g. cutting oranges?

CONTRAST

- Compare and contrast Tom and Charlotte in terms of expressive skills and also their objectives.
- How were the genres of romance and thriller juxtaposed in the performance?

VARIATION

- Think about the direction and when the actors used the mezzanine. Did this change the dynamics of the performance?
- Discuss how variation was used in the ebb and flow of tension between the characters.

DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

The following questions, provocations and ideas are intended to help you experience and analyse *Berlin* through the lens of VCE Drama.

CLIMAX

- Which moment would you describe as the climax in this performance? Are there several moments?
- Would you describe the play's final moments as a climactic moment? Why or why not?

CONFLICT

- Discuss each character's objective. What was in their way?
- Discuss Charlotte's internal conflict and make reference to the script.
- What leads to the physical fight between Tom and Charlotte?

CONTRAST

- Discuss the differences between how the actors used their expressive skills to create Tom and Charlotte.
- Discuss the contrast of romance and thriller genres and the impact on theatre styles and conventions.

MOOD

- Describe the overall feeling of the play in three words. Discuss reasons for each, making reference to acting, conventions or production areas.

RHYTHM

- Describe the pace of line delivery in the first scene. Compare this to Scene 2, at 4am when Tom takes a phone call in the darkness.
- Analyse the transition moments between scenes. How did these manipulate rhythm with lighting and sound?

SOUND

- Choose a moment of silence and discuss the effect of this absence of sound.
- Did the actors use objects to make sound during the performance?

SPACE

- Can you identify symbolic use of space in this performance? What happens on the mezzanine level?
- How was the set designed to facilitate movement around Charlotte's apartment?

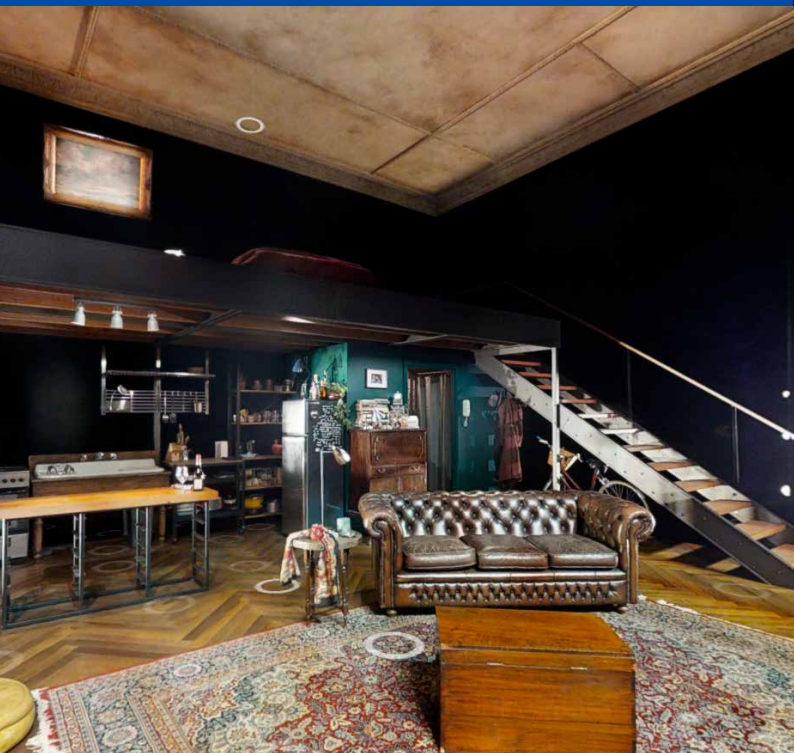
TENSION

- How was tension manipulated as the performance unfolded? How does the playwright build tension?
- Think about the first appearance of the knife – what did you think might happen? Why?

MTC DIGITAL THEATRE

Watch *Berlin* by Joanna Murray-Smith on MTC Digital Theatre, our new on-demand streaming platform bringing the stage to your screen.

Learn more at mtc.com.au/digitaltheatre.



SET VIRTUAL TOUR

Explore the *Berlin* set in 3D and learn more about Christina Smith's design. Walk around like a member of the cast and take a closer look at the props on stage at mtc.com.au/virtual-tours.

BUMP IN TIME-LAPSE

Watch the MTC team install the *Berlin* set on the Sumner stage, with narration from Production Manager Abe Watson.

Watch the time lapse at mtc.com.au/education.

