

1—21 MAR
2025

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

SOUTHBANK
THEATRE



THE ROBOT DOG

BY ROSHELLE YEE PUI FONG &
MATTHEW NGAMURARRI HEFFERNAN

DIRECTED BY AMY SOLE

EDUCATION PACK – PART B

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Activity



Discuss



Read



Video

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Department
of Education

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Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, create and gather. We pay our respects to all First Nations people, their Elders past and present, and their enduring connections to Country, knowledge and stories. As a Company we remain committed to the invitation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for voice, truth and treaty.

About the play



Ari Maza Long and Kristie Nguy

SUMMARY

Bark meets byte in this thrilling tale exploring technology, language and culture in a fast-evolving world. It's 2042 and Australia is more automated than ever before. Janelle, a woman of Cantonese heritage, and her partner Harry, a First Nations man, move back into Janelle's family home after the death of her mother. As they attempt to navigate their work, relationship and job seeking requirements, they find themselves assisted by the quirky AI controlling their home and a robotic therapy dog. Janelle and Harry are quickly swept into a world of augmentations, restrictions and chaos. Does their new hi-tech life help them connect to culture and each other, or does it hinder it? *The Robot Dog* is an intercultural sci-fi comedy with a big, beating heart.

ATTENDANCE INFORMATION

This production contains occasional coarse language, mature themes, the use of theatrical haze and smoke. For detailed information about the production's content, visit our production content guide at mtc.com.au/production-content-guide.

DURATION

Approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes with no interval.



Read the programme

Explore the digital programme for this production to read about the cast and creative team, and see more photos from the rehearsal room: mtc.com.au/programmes

Presented in
association with

ASIA TOPA

Asia TOPA is a joint initiative of Arts Centre Melbourne and the Sidney Myer Fund, supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria, Playking Foundation and the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts.

NEXTSTAGE

Commissioned and developed through Melbourne Theatre Company's NEXT STAGE Writers' Program, with the support of our Playwrights Giving Circle.

Cast and creatives



Jing-Xuan Chan
Dog, Hus, Melanie Chan Wing Lam
陳詠琳



Ari Maza Long
Harry (Tjapaltjarri) Burnett



Kristie Nguy
Janelle Chan Yi Ling 陳依齡



Read their bios

Explore the digital programme to read the biographies of the cast and creatives working on this production:
mtc.com.au/programmes



Roshelle Yee Pui Fong
Writer



Matthew Ngamurarri Heffernan
Writer



Amy Sole
Director



Nathan Burmeister
Set & Costume Designer



BROCKMAN
Lighting Designer



Chun Yin Rainbow Chan
Composer & Sound Designer



Kat Chan
Cultural Design Consultant



Samantha Kwan
Cantonese Consultant



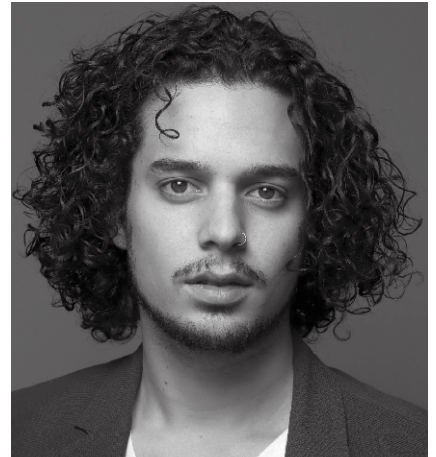
Lavinia Napaltjarri Heffernan
Luritja-Pintupi Language Consultant

Acting

A cast of three actors play five characters in *The Robot Dog*, two of which are AI. Learn more about each character from the cast in these Q&As.



Ari Maza Long



Ari Maza Long

HARRY (TJAPALTJARRI) BURNETT PLAYED BY ARI MAZA LONG

Tell us about your character in a nutshell. What drives them?

Harry (Tjapaltjarri) Burnett is a man in his mid-twenties trying to juggle the complications of living as a Blackfulla in the modern western world. His ultimate goal is to be there for his loving partner Janelle Chan Yi Ling, but through this comes the big question: how can one be there for someone when they can't even fully be there for themselves? Harry must then come to terms with his own discoveries of how we as people reconnect with our stories and culture, especially one that has been passed down as knowledge for countless generations. He must ask himself, is this something that had changed with the growth of technology or are these one of those things that there will only ever be one way to do?

How do you embody your character?

For me, the key to embodying Harry is finding out, through the writing, the truth of the character and exactly how much of that truth already exists within myself. I find one of my most important jobs as an actor is to discover the honesty of the role I am playing. What I mean by this is trusting in the script, the process and my scene partners, and to listen, respond and allow the emotions that come from this to have a role in speaking for themselves. However, there are a lot of factors to also take in. For example, Harry finds himself entering the house of the deceased parent of his partner, Janelle. Innately there is a discomfort that comes with this, which Harry must juggle with still being there as a supportive boyfriend, as well as trying to get a promotion at his corporate job, whilst also trying to reconnect with his culture.



Discuss motivation

Thinking about Ari Maza Long's comments, how would you describe Harry's motivations and objective?

'How can one be there for someone when they can't even fully be there for themselves?'

ARI MAZA LONG

How do design elements like costumes, props and the set impact your performance? What helps and how?

The design elements are crucial to me as an actor. Costume helps reveal how my character is embodied. Even something as simple as the shoes a character wears can influence the way they move through a space. In this play, the boldness of the clothes Harry chooses to wear has had a profound impact on how I see my character's presence in the world. The set, with its intimate size, creates a confined space where the characters can interact. And with props, especially the bags scattered across the stage, the stakes are raised, making the space feel even smaller and more intense.



Ari Maza Long



**Discuss
expressive skills**

Discuss how Ari Maza Long manipulates movement and voice to portray Harry in a particular moment, e.g. phone call with Karen Boss.

‘For me, the central theme of *The Robot Dog* is the blending of two distinct cultures within the modern, Western world of Australia, and how that might unfold in the future.’

ARI MAZA LONG

What is a big idea or symbol in this play, in relation to your character?

For me, the central theme of *The Robot Dog* is the blending of two distinct cultures within the modern, Western world of Australia, and how that might unfold in the future. It raises important questions about connection and reconnection to our cultural identities and stories, especially when we've been distanced from them by society. How do we navigate complex emotions like grief when our families come from such different histories or are those differences even as significant as we think? I believe this play serves as a powerful conversation starter, leaving the audience with a lot of thought-provoking questions to carry with them.



Kristie Nguy



Kristie Nguy

JANELLE CHAN YI LING 陳依齡 PLAYED BY KRISTIE NGUY

Tell us about your character in a nutshell. What drives them?

Janelle is a woman in her mid-to-late 20s who is feeling a bit stuck and lost in life. Living in a new age of technology in 2042, where life is integrated with AI, she is on a journey of self-discovery. In this journey, she is dealing with the loss of her mother which leads her to reconnect with her culture. She is driven by love, and her actions throughout the play stem from a deep love for those around her, even when it might not seem that way.

How do you embody your character?

My main consideration when embodying a character is remaining present. Really listening to my scene partners and reacting to what I receive in the given circumstances is how I bring the work to life. For Janelle's voice, I've consciously lowered my natural pitch to give her more agency and power as a woman in the future. This also changes pre-augment versus post-augment as it unlocks a new side to her – her Cantonese side. There's a common phenomenon in many bilingual people where they have a slight variation in their personality when switching languages. I am playing with that idea, particularly where Janelle post-augment is physically more open and, in a way, more honest, whereas Janelle pre-augment is more guarded and likes to hide pain with humour.

How do design elements like costumes, props and the set impact your performance? What helps and how?

Our fabulous designer, Nathan Burmeister, has been working closely with Kat Chan (Cultural Design Consultant) to include authentic pieces, from the design of the altar to the Cheongsam, the Ininti bead necklace and of course the 'Hong Kong Blackfulla bags' that are from both Janelle and Harry's culture. These pieces really assist us as actors, as it's a vital part in building the world. Being able to touch these objects that hold such cultural significance – to tie ourselves in emotionally to create the story and history between the characters and the objects – is so important in this process as this play is all about how objects hold memories. We also have these super cool futuristic headsets which are representative of current smartphones, which are used as a dramaturgical tool for our characters to tune in and out of the world. The creative use of the bags where we have them in a different configuration for each scene, physically represent both the literal unpacking process as well as Janelle's internal turmoil. For example, on day three in the story, the bags start to scatter everywhere as Janelle starts to reopen the bags both physically and emotionally. It helps inform my choices on blocking and tracking her emotional journey throughout the play.



Discuss voice

Discuss how Kristie Nguy manipulates the expressive skill of voice in two contrasting moments.

'For Janelle's voice, I've consciously lowered my natural pitch to give her more agency and power as a woman in the future. This also changes pre-augment versus post-augment as it unlocks a new side to her – her Cantonese side.'

KRISTIE NGUY

Do you consciously experiment with/manipulate contrast in your performance? How so?

In our explorations of scenes and characters, I like to play with the contrast of push and pull on different impulses between subtext and intention. For example, feeling the pull towards Dog and wanting to be the way they used to be, the way they used to play and make dumplings together like siblings, but feeling the push away from Dog because Dog keeps bringing up memories of them and Wing Lam that are too unbearable for Janelle to deal with. Another example is Janelle's heart centre where her intention is to avoid dealing with anything but internally deep down, she is yearning to reconnect with her mum and her culture.



Kristie Nguy

What is a big idea or symbol in this play, in relation to your character?

A core theme throughout the play that Janelle deals with is grief. Everyone has a different way to process grief, and she avoids dealing with it at all costs. We follow her journey of reconnecting with her culture as a way to bring herself closer to Wing Lam and to figure out for herself how she wants to bring honour to her mother and continue her legacy. The altar and the pink smoke represent Wing Lam and they both become more prominent to Janelle as the play goes on, symbolising her acceptance of her mother's death.



Discuss performance skills

Discuss how Kristie Nguy varies Janelle's energy in two contrasting moments in the production.

'We also have these super cool futuristic headsets, which are representative of current smartphones, which are used as a dramaturgical tool for our characters to tune in and out of the world.'

KRISTIE NGUY



Kristie Nguy and Jing-Xuan Chan



Jing-Xuan Chan



Discuss movement

Discuss how Jing-Xuan manipulates movement as Wing Lam and what informed her creative choices for this character.

‘Playing the two AI characters was a fun challenge vocally as I was hoping to find distinct vocal qualities for each of them.’

JING-XUAN CHAN

DOG, HUS AND MELANIE CHAN WING LAM 陳詠琳 **PLAYED BY JING-XUAN CHAN**

Jing-Xuan Chan plays three characters in *The Robot Dog*, two of which are AI technologies. In this Q&A, she discusses how vocal changes are key to differentiating her characters and how the theme of connection is explored in the play.

Tell us about your characters in a nutshell. What drives them?

I play the characters Hus, Dog and Wing Lam.

Hus is very task oriented and doesn't deviate from what he's been programmed to do. He spends the play trying to ensure Janelle and Harry stay on track with their task of finding jobs and packing up Wing Lam's home. He also monitors Dog to make sure he is facilitating this.

Dog is a therapy bot and is there as a support and companion to his human, Wing Lam. He is driven by his wish to help the humans in his life. As Dog learns and evolves as a result of his interactions with Harry, Janelle and Wing Lam, he begins to question how effectively AI serves humanity.

The character of Wing Lam has passed but her presence, spirit and memory are strong in her home. She has had struggles in her life, and we see her watching over Janelle, wishing for her daughter to know and feel the love she has for her that she may not have been fully able to express while she was alive.

How do you embody your characters?

Playing the two AI characters was a fun challenge vocally as I was hoping to find distinct vocal qualities for each of them. It was also enjoyable exploring various ways to imbue expression or feeling whilst retaining the 'AI' quality/feel as well.

For Hus and Dog, I played with their voices being different in pitch and pace. In rehearsals I discovered Dog had more human speech qualities whereas Hus leant more towards bot.

For Wing Lam, in the rehearsal room we've been working a lot on her quality of movement. There is a design provocation of 'pink shimmering light' linked with Wing Lam in the script and that has been a really evocative image to have in mind while I've been exploring her gesture and movement.

How do design elements like costumes, props and the set impact your performance? What helps and how?

The design is so instructive to the performance as it gives us the mood and tone of the world we're playing in. The costume for Wing Lam, which has lots of flowing fabric, has been informative for her movement in space and has helped me in finding her physicality. What has been most fun for me to see is the futuristic design elements and have that ground me in, and remind me of, the time period of this story.

Do you consciously experiment with/manipulate contrast in your performance? How so?

One layer of the rehearsal process has been exploring subtext and intention, which has helped us become aware of what mood arises for certain characters or within particular moments. It has been useful in the exploration phase of the work to either lean into or push against the mood that comes up and see what that does for the advancement of the story and for the individual journeys of the characters.



Jing-Xuan Chan

What is a big idea or symbol in this play, in relation to your characters?

A major idea in the play is that of connection. Playing the AI characters has made me think more about the role that AI plays in facilitating human connection and to what degree it is actually successful in achieving this. I love that the character of Dog starts to become aware of this over the course of the play and begins to question this with Hus.



Discuss timing

Discuss how Jing-Xuan Chan manipulates timing as Wing Lam moves across the stage.



Discuss voice

Discuss how Jing-Xuan Chan manipulates her voice to differentiate Hus from Dog.

‘One layer of the rehearsal process has been exploring subtext and intention, which has helped us become aware of what mood arises for certain characters or within particular moments.’

JING-XUAN CHAN

Composition and sound design



Chun Yin Rainbow Chan in rehearsal
Photo: Tiffany Garvie



Chun Yin Rainbow Chan

Learn more about music and sounds in *The Robot Dog* in this Q&A with Composer & Sound Designer Chun Yin Rainbow Chan.

What's your role as Composer & Sound Designer? How does music/sound contribute to the storytelling in this work?

As the Composer & Sound Designer, I shape the storytelling by creating atmospheres, underscoring key moments, and using music and sound to represent objects and actions on stage. Sound plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative arc, harnessing its emotional power to convey meaning beyond words. One of my key techniques is using recurring musical themes or motifs for different characters, allowing their sonic identities to evolve alongside their journeys. Another storytelling approach in this production is vocal manipulation, particularly for the characters of Hus and Dog, who are played by the same actor. To differentiate them, I've altered their timbres and subtly shifted their vocal pitches. This technique enhances the actor's performance and highlights the distinct energies already present in the recordings. These digitally modified vocal lines are then triggered live by the stage manager in response to the unfolding action on stage.

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

I like to describe the sound palette of *The Robot Dog* as 'future-folk', drawing inspiration from synth pop and traditional Chinese ritual music. Most of the sounds are created digitally using Ableton, a digital audio workstation, which allows me to quickly adjust elements based on the director's notes and swap sounds in and out with ease. I wanted the music to feel like it belongs to a near-future world – specifically, the year 2042. To achieve this, I've drawn from Cyberpunk-inspired sonic tropes, incorporating metallic synths, electronic drum loops, otherworldly sound effects, and video game-inspired tones. Alongside these synthesized elements, I've integrated recorded samples of bells, glassware, voice, and traditional Chinese percussion. This combination of organic textures and futuristic soundscapes creates a unique sonic world that feels both familiar and forward-looking.

Do you consciously use music/sound to manipulate mood? If so, can you give an example?

Mood can be shaped through underscoring, where music or sound sits beneath the dialogue to enhance the story. This subtle layer of sound supports the actors while drawing on musical conventions associated with specific emotions, guiding the audience's emotional response. Tonality plays a key role in shaping mood, as consonant, open harmonies can evoke a sense of calm, while



Discuss contrast

Discuss how Chun Yin Rainbow Chan manipulates contrast with her choice of sounds and instruments.

'I like to describe the sound palette of *The Robot Dog* as 'future-folk', drawing inspiration from synth pop and traditional Chinese ritual music.'

CHUN YIN RAINBOW CHAN
COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER

dissonant, clashing harmonies create tension and unease. Rhythm also influences emotional impact; slow, droning rhythms establish a meditative, pensive atmosphere, whereas accelerating rhythms – progressing from quavers to semi-quavers and demi-semi-quavers – build a sense of urgency. Timbre, or the quality of sound itself, further enhances mood by evoking visceral responses. For instance, incorporating a rough, gritty texture, such as the sound of rubbing an object against sandpaper, can intensify a scene's tension, making it feel raw and unsettling.



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long

**Do you consciously use music/sound to manipulate climax?
If so, can you give an example?**

One of the most climactic scenes occurs when Dog rebels and short-circuits Hus by infecting him with the 'pink shimmer'. The music builds gradually to heighten this moment. A subtle rumbling sound begins beneath the dialogue, growing louder and faster until it erupts into a rebellious and euphoric soundtrack. This explosion of sound incorporates zaps, bleeps, and bleeps – imagine musical confetti bursting into the air. The chaotic energy of the music mirrors Dog's defiant act, reinforcing the dramatic climax.

Is there a moment in the show where you use music/sound in a symbolic way? If so, can you give an example?

Bells play a symbolic role throughout the show, appearing in transition music, underscore, and technology-driven sound design. Growing up, I was surrounded by the sounds of Taoist temples – ritual music for worship, festivals, and mourning. I find a fascinating sonic crossover between traditional Chinese ritual music and the sleek, meditative sound design of corporate capitalism, such as the chimes used in Apple products. Bells, in this context, become a bridge between seemingly opposing worlds, representing the tension between old and new, past and present, love and loss. One poignant example is a line in the show about the warm echo of Wing Lam's singing bowl, which continues ringing long after it has been struck. To me, this lingering resonance beautifully captures the complexity of grief – a single sound holding both presence and absence. This idea became a foundation for my conceptual approach to the show's sound design.



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long



Discuss the application of symbol

Discuss the symbolism of particular sounds used in the music for this production.



Discuss mood

Discuss how Chun Yin Rainbow Chan manipulates the dramatic element of mood with composition and sound design.

'I find a fascinating sonic crossover between traditional Chinese ritual music and the sleek, meditative sound design of corporate capitalism, such as the chimes used in Apple products.'

CHUN YIN RAINBOW CHAN
COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER

Lighting design



Lighting Designer BROCKMAN, Set & Costume Designer Nathan Burmeister and Director Amy Sole in rehearsal
Photo: Tiffany Garvie



Lighting Designer BROCKMAN



Theatre terminology

Identify theatre terminology from this Q&A that you might use when analysing the lighting design in this production.

Learn more about lighting in *The Robot Dog* in this Q&A with Lighting Designer BROCKMAN.

What's your role as Lighting Designer? How does lighting contribute to the storytelling in this work?

As the Lighting Designer, my role is to shape the visual atmosphere of the production, using light to guide the audience's emotional journey and reinforce the narrative. Lighting can subtly or dramatically shift the tone of a scene, provide focus, and create depth within the stage world. In this work, lighting is an essential storytelling tool, establishing the tension between the physical and spiritual realms. By employing colour, intensity and movement, I help bring to life the energy of the ancestors and the supernatural elements that influence the world of the play. My design choices work in tandem with the performers, set, and sound to create a cohesive, immersive experience that supports the show's themes and emotional beats.

What kinds of lighting fixtures have you used in this show?

For this show, I've used a diverse mix of lighting fixtures to create depth, texture, and atmosphere. Fresnels provide soft, controllable washes, helping shape the overall environment. Conventional profiles with fixed lenses offer precise focus, allowing for strong directional light and defined shadows, which play a key role in shaping the space.

To enhance the architecture and create dynamic shifts in colour and tone, I've incorporated RGBW LED tape, both in an LED extrusion for clean, controlled lines and as recessed lighting to subtly emphasise the structure of the set.

For texture and movement, gobos are used to break up the light and add visual depth. One of the most distinctive elements is the GAM Film/FX, an old-school theatrical effects wheel that creates organic, shifting light patterns – perfect for moments of transformation and energy, such as the pink shimmering light that represents spirit and the afterlife.

'One of the most distinctive elements is the GAM Film/FX, an old-school theatrical effects wheel that creates organic, shifting light patterns.'

BROCKMAN
LIGHTING DESIGNER

Could you tell us about the lighting in a key moment from the show?

A key moment in the show is when Dog emerges in the living room, surrounded by swirling pink light. This effect is created using a Gam VFX Wheel with a half-pink gel, designed to mimic the organic movement of light dancing through trees – fractured, shifting, and alive. The pink shimmer represents spirit and the afterlife, embodying the essence of Wing Lam, whose presence lingers beyond the physical world.

As the pink energy intensifies, it infuses into Hus's interface, represented by a linear line of light that shifts to pink and begins to glitch. This takeover reflects the moment when Wing Lam's essence begins to alter reality, breaking through the digital framework of Hus. The flickering, erratic energy mirrors the organic swirling of the initial light, reinforcing the sense of transformation.

After this moment, the scene transitions into a new landscape, where the environment has shifted, yet Hus continues to glitch pink. The lingering glow suggests that Wing Lam's presence has fundamentally changed the space, leaving an imprint of the afterlife woven into the fabric of the world.



Analyse symbolism

How has BROCKMAN used the colour pink in a symbolic way in their lighting design? What other colours are used symbolically and how?

'The lingering glow suggests that Wing Lam's presence has fundamentally changed the space, leaving an imprint of the afterlife woven into the fabric of the world.'

**BROCKMAN
LIGHTING DESIGNER**



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long

Do you consciously use lighting to manipulate mood? If so, can you give an example?

Lighting is a crucial tool in shaping the mood and guiding the audience's emotional journey. In this production, we begin in a cold, distant environment, using cool tones and isolated lighting to create a sense of detachment and grief. A lot of directional light and single sources will be used to carve out strong shapes, emphasizing shadows and emptiness, reinforcing the feeling of isolation.

As the play progresses and the characters move through their grief, the lighting shifts. Warmer tones gradually emerge, and the landscape becomes more inviting, symbolizing healing and transformation. The use of directional light continues, but it softens, allowing for a sense of connection and warmth to take over. This evolving approach to lighting makes the emotional arc of the play not just something seen, but deeply felt.

**Do you consciously use lighting to manipulate rhythm?
If so, can you give an example?**

Light guides the audience through time, subtly weaving together days and moments in the play's rhythm especially in how we represent the passage of time between scenes. Since the play deals with days unfolding and transitions between moments, the lighting design works to create a theatrical rhythm that seamlessly connects these shifts.

Theatre is all about transitions and the unspoken, and lighting is a key tool in making those transitions fluid yet impactful. To achieve this, we use directional light that gradually pulls and shifts into another look, creating a sense of movement and change. This shifting light acts as a visual bridge, carrying the audience from one moment to the next.

Then, in contrast, we use a sharp snap into the next day, shifting into an open state that clearly marks the reset of time. This interplay between fluid transitions and bold shifts builds a dynamic rhythm, reinforcing the play's exploration of time and memory without the need for words.



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long



Discuss climax

Discuss how BROCKMAN manipulates the dramatic element of climax with their lighting design in the scene where Dog short circuits the secure channel.

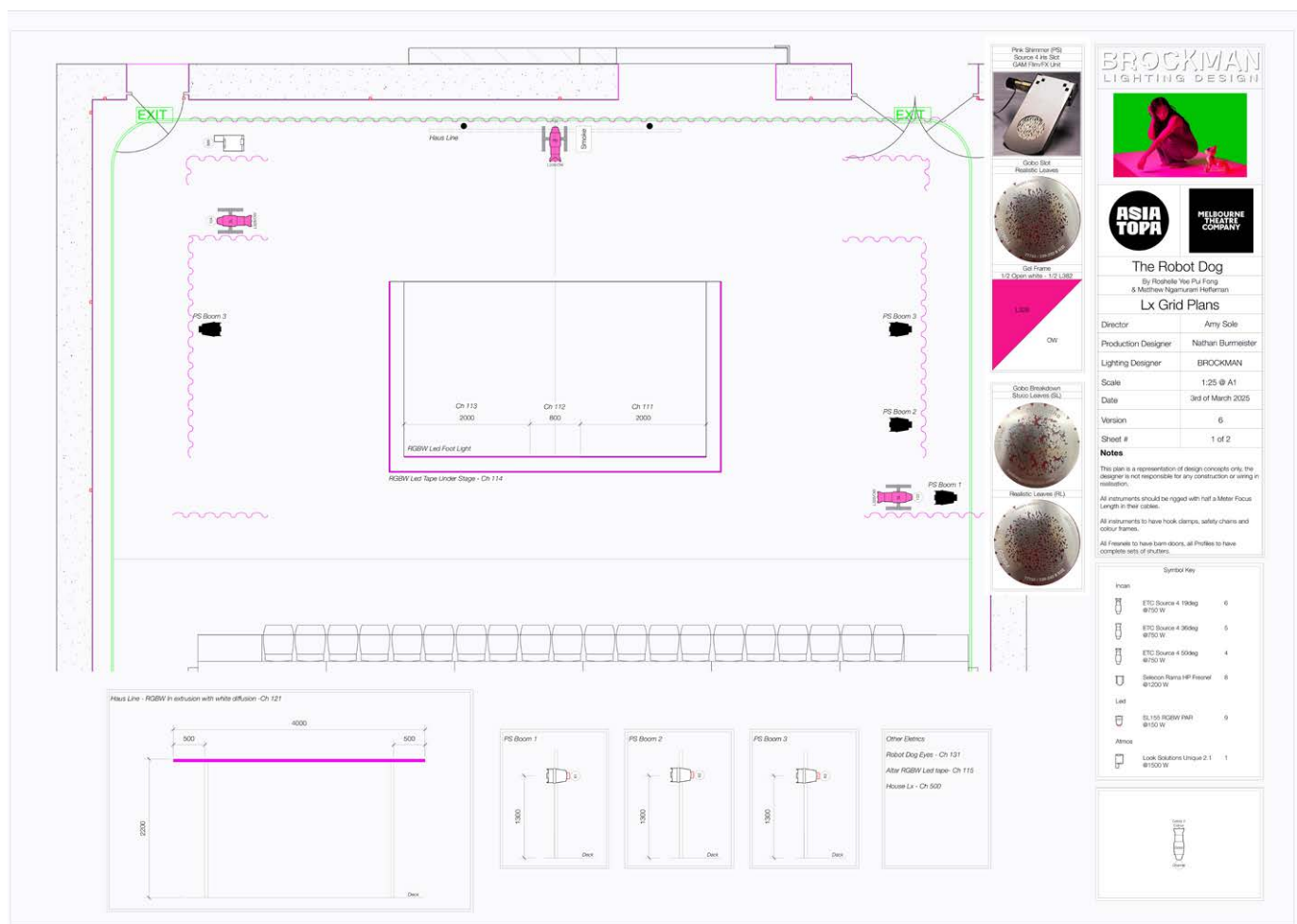
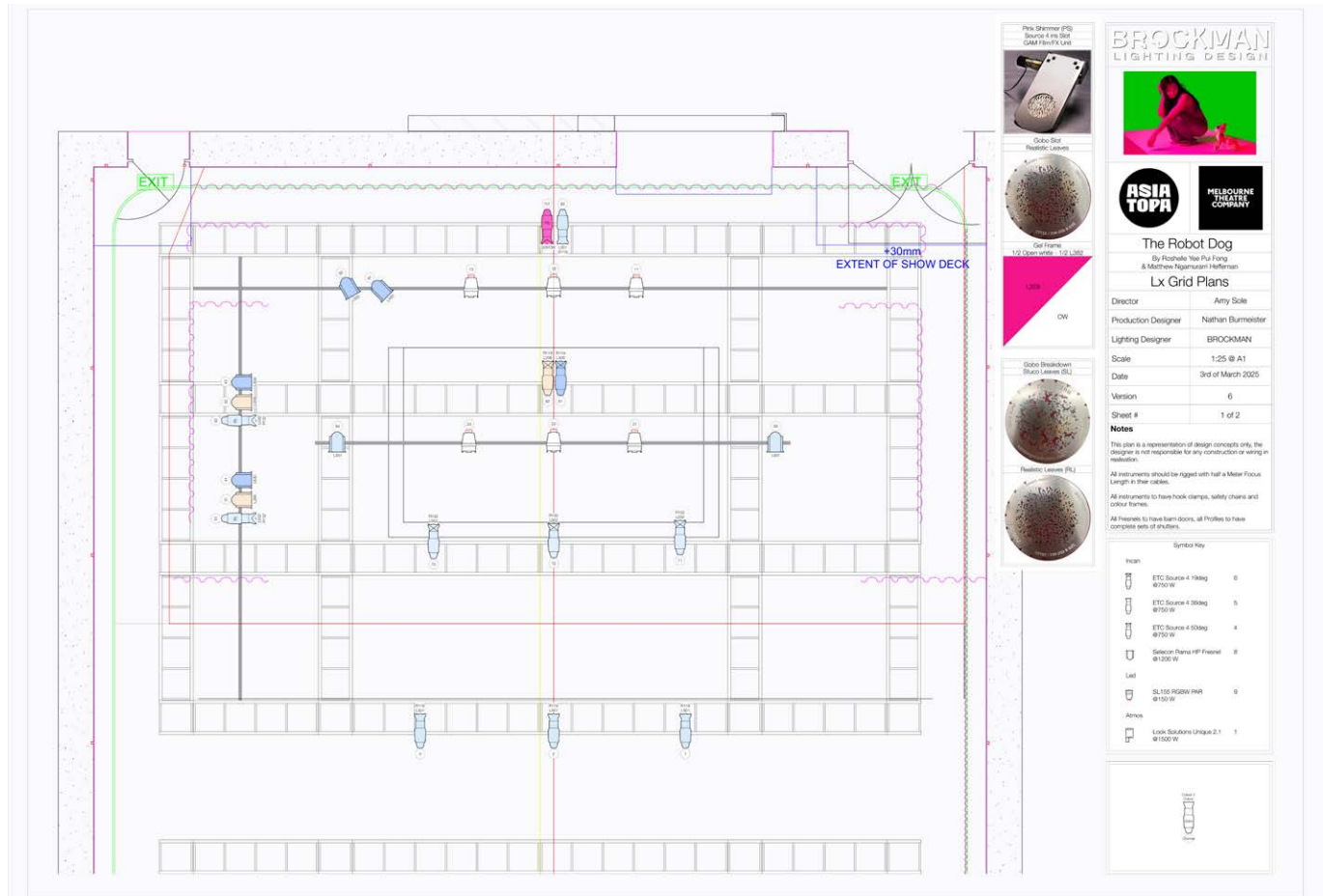


Discuss mood

Discuss how BROCKMAN manipulates the dramatic element of mood with their lighting design in the Hus scanning scene (pictured).

‘Since the play deals with days unfolding and transitions between moments, the lighting design works to create a theatrical rhythm that seamlessly connects these shifts.’

**BROCKMAN
LIGHTING DESIGNER**



Lighting plans by BROCKMAN

Costume design



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long



Set & Costume Designer Nathan Burmeister

Learn more about the retrofuturistic costumes worn by the actors in *The Robot Dog* in this Q&A with Set & Costume Designer Nathan Burmeister.

How do your costume designs connect to the set design and performance style of this show?

I have a personal design philosophy when designing a full world: there should be an equal balance in the production of surrealism and naturalism. This also takes into consideration the style of writing, the story, the directing style and the acting style. I always try to find a concrete element that the audience can connect to, something known and tangible for them.

In the instance of *The Robot Dog*, the set ended up existing in this surreal ethereal world, so the costume needed to become more concrete and real. Especially because the show is set in the future where there are fictional technologies and time jumps throughout the play, having costumes that could feasibly be real allows the audience to return to the realism of the characters objectives, wants and needs.

How does retrofuturism feature in your costumes and why?

It was very useful for us to have a reference point for our future aesthetics. We initially landed on the world of retrofuturism. Retrofuturistic aesthetics are based on what 1950s white America thought the future would look like and what technologies would be familiar or new to them. We can extrapolate that a bit and talk about retrofuturism as creating a future aesthetic based on what the past thought the future might be.

So, with that philosophy, I looked at sci-fi and futuristic movies and designs from the 90s and 2000s. Movies and TV like *The Fifth Element*, *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* were useful points for us. The harness Janelle wears, the visor that Harry has, and the dog's body are all examples of what was pulled into the costumes from this world of 90s futurism. Dog is inspired by a mix of K-9 from *Doctor Who* but also the Volkswagen 1950s cars. Hopefully, these visual reference points might be familiar to the audience and give people something tangible to bring them into our aesthetic world.



Discuss character clothes

Discuss how costumes help communicate aspects of a character. Discuss aspects like fabric, line, accessories and colour.

'I have a personal design philosophy when designing a full world: there should be an equal balance in the production of surrealism and naturalism.'

NATHAN BURMEISTER
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

As a designer, you have creative freedom to interpret many aspects of the script. Tell us about one choice you made that responds to the text, and another where you felt it important to portray something specific that was written.

A really important cultural part of the costume design was the Ininti bead necklace that Harry has. It's an item that holds a significant place for the character and the drama towards the end of the play. It's identified as a costume element in the script and is very specifically made from seeds from the central desert area and crafted by the First Nations artisans of the region. We contacted an artist from the Luritja community, Kukula McDonald, and bought the necklace from her. This was a great connection to make for the show, especially as Kakula is related to and grew up with Matthew Ngamurarri Heffernan, one of the playwrights. Knowing when to take artistic license and when to follow the clearly laid out directions from the script is an important skill when working on a show with deep cultural themes.



Analyse colour palette

Compare and contrast how colour is used in the costumes to differentiate and connect characters.

'Given that Wing Lam is in pink, I pulled small highlights of the pink in Janelle's costume in the harness. This helps connect these two characters in a subtle way.'

NATHAN BURMEISTER
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER



Ari Maza Long and Kristie Nguy

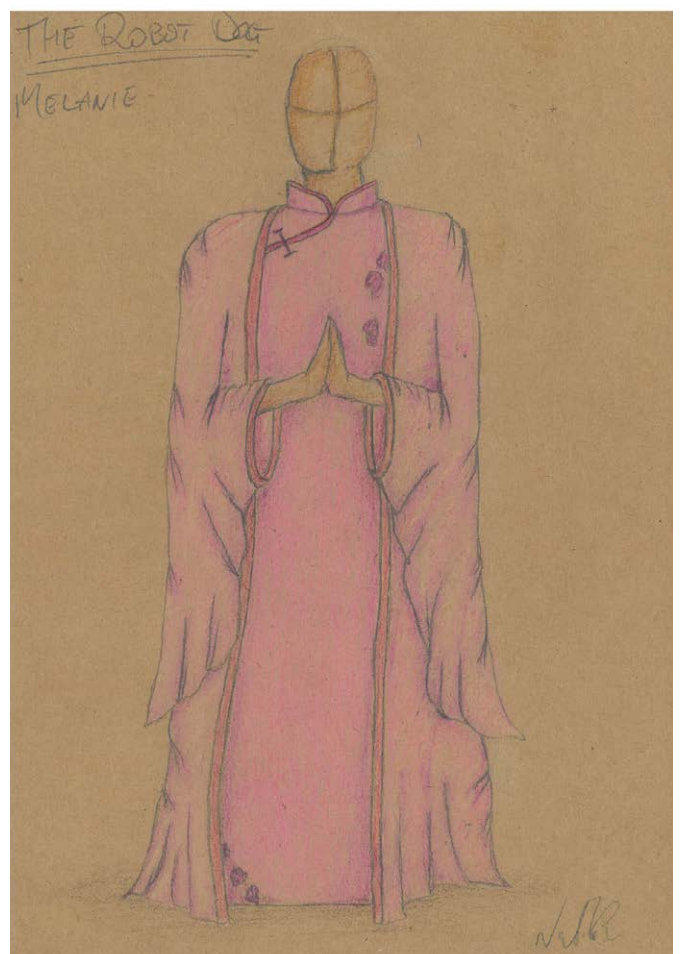
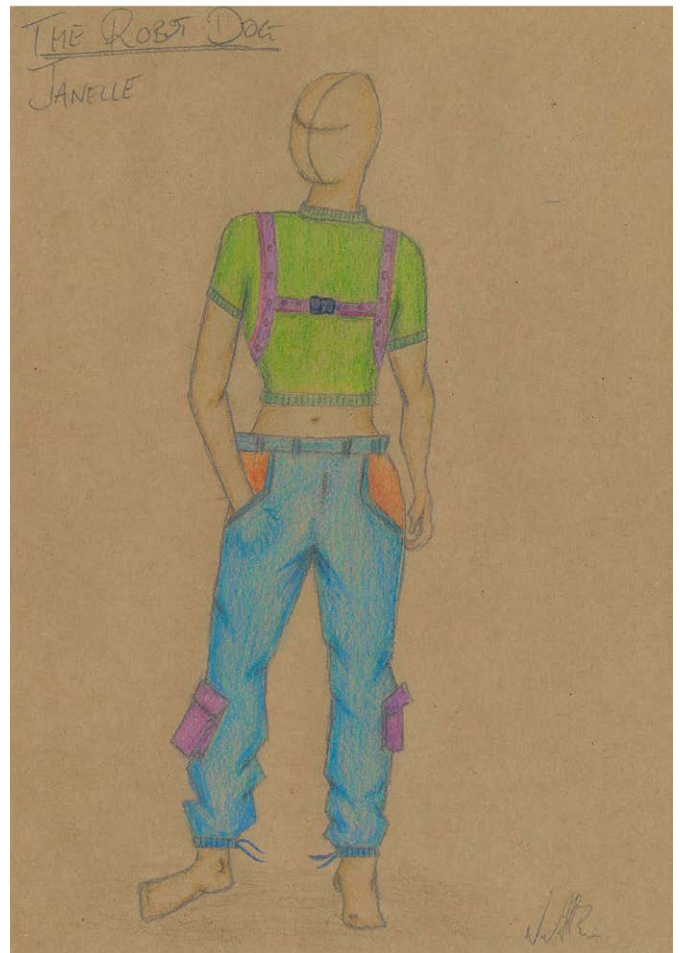
What kinds of fabrics/textures/colours are in your costume designs and why?

For Wing Lam, I really drew a lot of inspiration from classic Chinese garments. The script mentions that she is wearing a Cheongsam for one of the later scenes. I decided to narrow and simplify the imagery by giving her a Cheongsam that could be worn for the duration of the play. It's a bit softer, longer, and looser than the colloquial image of a Cheongsam and feels like a garment she could wear around the house. I paired this with an impressively drapery robe that was directly inspired by the robes that Guan Yin is often depicted in – Guan Yin is the goddess of mercy, compassion and maternal love in Chinese and religious cultural practices and her statue is referred to in the script. We went through a rigorous design process with the wardrobe makers to translate the carved marble statues which were our reference points to an actual fabric garment that is meant to be worn.

Finally, the script very specifically identifies that there is a pink shimmer and light that surrounds the mother and her ghost, so I pulled that specifically into Wing Lam and surrounded her in a soft grey pink, a colour that could be both dulled and saturated by the lighting, depending on what was wanted. Given that Wing Lam is in pink, I pulled small highlights of the pink in Janelle's costume in the harness. This helps connect these two characters in a subtle way.

What are some practical considerations in your costume designs?

There are so many practical considerations that come into play with costume designing. The general concerns which apply to all designs are things like: Do the costumes restrict that actors' movements and prohibit blocking? Are the performers comfortable in the materials that have been chosen? Will the performers get too hot in the garments? Can the garments be easily washed and maintained during the season and the tour? If something breaks or is destroyed, can it be easily replaced? Can the design be achieved on budget and on time? These are some examples of the general concerns of a costume designer.



Costume renders by Nathan Burmeister

Props



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long

Guan Yin statue

The script mentions there is a statue of Guan Yin on the altar. 'I think it is such an anchor to the story,' says Cultural Design Consultant Kat Chan, 'in terms of what it symbolises (Guan Yin is the goddess of mercy, compassion and maternal love). Having her centre stage of the show represents the heritage and mother figure. Janelle has been repressing and the importance of ancestors in Chinese religious and cultural practices.' Set & Costume Designer Nathan Burmeister also mentions that Wing Lam's costume evokes the robes of the Guan Yin statue.

Bags

Actor Kristie Nguy says 'the "Hong Kong Blackfulla bags" are from both Janelle and Harry's culture.' These bags feature throughout the performance and are mostly stuffed with cardboard boxes to give the illusion that they're full of Wing Lam's possessions. Some key props, such as the automatic dumpling maker (seen on TikTok) and the lucky spatula are placed inside the bags.

Set & Costume Designer Nathan Burmeister says the way each character interacts with the bags tells the audience about their state of mind. For example, Kristie Nguy says that 'on day three in the story, the bags start to scatter everywhere as Janelle starts to reopen the bags both physically and emotionally.'

Items on the altar

The framed photo on the altar is of Wing Lam's mother. However, the team didn't want to depict an actual person as the deceased character, so the image is of a fictitious person generated by AI.

Fake food, including a bowl of oranges and a bowl of rice, appear on the altar. There are two versions of each; mouldy and fresh. These are hand-painted plastic props. Also, you may smell incense as you enter the theatre.

Language augment

In the script, Dog describes language augments as 'an easy way to master your mother tongue'. Although the script describes the augment piercing the characters' ear lobes, the team decided to depict the items as wearable devices that attach to the neck. The language augments in this production are 3D-printed plastic props, which actors stick to their necks. Topstick strips, usually used to hold hairpieces to the scalp, ensure the language augments remain attached during the performance.



Explore the props
and set design



Virtual tour by RealTour3D

Explore the virtual tour of the
set design and take a closer look
at the props on the altar.

**'Guan Yin is the goddess
of mercy, compassion
and maternal love.'**

KAT CHAN
CULTURAL DESIGN CONSULTANT

**'Janelle will surround
herself with the bags and
literally plant herself
on them in defiance of
the task.'**

NATHAN BURMEISTER
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

Analysis questions

The following questions are intended to help you analyse how *The Robot Dog* was interpreted onstage through the lens of VCE Drama.



Post-show resource

After you've seen *The Robot Dog* explore our post-show resource and analyse key scenes from the production: mtc.com.au/eduhub



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long

PRODUCTION AREAS

Costume

- Analyse how costume design subtly connected Janelle and Wing Lam.
- Discuss how retrofuturism was shown in Harry's costume design.
- Discuss the symbolism of Wing Lam's costume design.

Lighting

- Discuss how lighting was used to show Hus scanning to 'optimise human-Hus pairing'.
- Describe two lighting technologies used in a climactic moment in the production.

Props

- Analyse how a prop was used symbolically in the play.
- Describe one prop that related to a performance style you identify in the production.

Set pieces

- Analyse the symbolism of the oversized altar set design.
- Discuss the interrelationship between set design and performance style/s.

Sound design

- Using terminology from the Composer & Sound Designer's Q&A, discuss how different instruments were used to manipulate mood?
- Analyse how contrast was used in the music by referring to specific instruments or musical styles.



Kristie Nguy

EXPRESSIVE SKILLS

Voice

- Analyse how Jing-Xuan Chan changed her voice to play Hus and Dog.
- Describe how Ari Maza Long and Kristie Nguy's voice changed when they 'code switch' and speak Luritja or Cantonese.

Movement

- Analyse Jing-Xuan Chan's movement as Wing Lam around the set in early appearances when she crossed the stage, and later when she looked through the bags.

Gesture

- How did Ari Maza Long manipulate gesture when Harry dismissed incoming calls?
- Analyse how one actor manipulated gesture in a moment of tension.

Facial expressions

- How did Kristie Nguy manipulate her facial expression when reacting to Hus telling her to pursue 'less culture forward jobs'?
- How did Ari Maza Long manipulate facial expression to show his disappointment after not getting the promotion?



Kristie Nguy and Ari Maza Long

PERFORMANCE SKILLS

Focus

- Analyse one actor's use of focus to sustain character. Consider eyeline when interacting with Dog and Hus.

Timing

- Analyse how Ari Maza Long manipulated timing to dismiss an incoming call, or how Kristie Nguy interacted with the pre-recorded voice of Dog.

Energy

- Analyse how the human characters varied their energy depending on who they were talking to – on phone calls and in person.

Actor-audience relationship

- How would you describe Wing Lam's connection to the audience?
How about Dog?



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