

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

**WEST
GATE**

BY **Dennis McIntosh**

DIRECTED BY **Iain Sinclair**

10 MAR—18 APR 2026

Southbank Theatre, The Sumner

EDUCATION PACK PART A

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Throughout these notes, look out for these icons for opportunities to learn more:



Activity



Discuss



Read



Video

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the support of the Department of Education, Victoria, through the Strategic Partnerships Program.



Department
of Education

Digital Education resources are generously supported by the Ian Potter Foundation



Melbourne Theatre Company's Education activity is generously supported by our Education Giving Circle Donors.

Editor Nick Tranter

Graphic designer Sarah Ridgway-Cross

Rehearsal photographer Charlie Kinross

Cover photographer Jo Duck

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.

Melbourne Theatre Company

At Melbourne Theatre Company we believe theatre is for everyone. We are Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual season of plays created for and about the world today.



Southbank Theatre
Photo: Benjamin Healley

Beyond the stage, we run a range of initiatives that support artist development, champion new writing, invest in future audiences and address underrepresentation across the industry.

OUR VISION

To be recognised as one of the world's preeminent theatre companies, leading the cultural conversation and chosen as a favourite destination for Australians.

OUR PURPOSE

To share remarkable stories that enable people to better understand the world around them.

MTC HQ Virtual Tour

Walk the halls of MTC HQ in this virtual tour and explore the spaces where plays are rehearsed, sets are built, costumes are sewn and wigs are created one strand of hair at a time: mtc.com.au/eduhub

About the play



Steve Bastoni and Daniela Farinacci in rehearsals



Behind the scenes



SUMMARY

On 15 October 1970, dozens of workers were mid-construction on Melbourne's West Gate Bridge when it collapsed in what is still Australia's deadliest industrial accident. Thirty-five men were killed as countless more workers and families were left forever changed.

Young Scrapper is a mouthy labourer born into the construction union. When he's teamed up with veteran welder Vittorio, his attitude starts to improve. But as disquiet mounts about working conditions and questionable safety measures, their lives are put on the line. With increasing pressure to get the bridge finished, the engineers scramble to placate the workers and keep things moving, but none of them have ever built a steel bridge before – let alone one this size. When the structure comes crashing down, who will take the fall?

Award-winning director Iain Sinclair (*A View from the Bridge*) returns to Melbourne Theatre Company to helm this haunting and compassionate new work by Dennis McIntosh – a powerful retelling of a defining moment in Australian history.

ATTENDANCE INFORMATION

This production contains frequent coarse language, racially sensitive language, and mature themes. For detailed information about the production's content, visit our production content guide at mtc.com.au/production-content-guide.

DURATION

Approximately 1 hour 45 minutes, with no interval.

Watch the video above then answer these questions:

- Match the actors in this video to the roles in the character section of this resource. What predictions can you make about the part they play in the story?
- What clues about design elements, e.g. costumes and props, can you see in the video? What can you infer about theatre styles?
- Research the song 'Bella ciao'. What might the song symbolise in the context of this play?

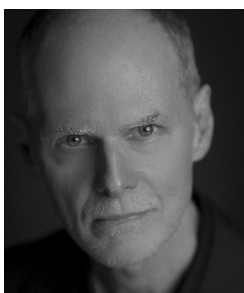
Developed through Melbourne Theatre Company's NEXT STAGE Writers' Program, with the support of our Playwrights Giving Circle.

NEXTSTAGE

Cast and creatives



Steve Bastoni
Victor



Paul English
Stevenson



Daniela Farinacci
Frankie



Read their bios

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



Peter Houghton
McAlister



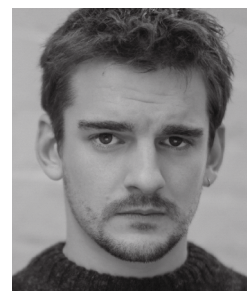
Darcy Kent
Young Scrapper



Simon Maiden
Vinny



Rohan Nichol
Pat



Ben Walter
Cooper



Dennis McIntosh
Writer



Iain Sinclair
Director & Dramaturg



Christina Smith
Set & Costume Designer



Niklas Pajanti
Lighting Designer



Kelly Ryall
Composer & Sound Designer



Anna McCrossin-Owen
Voice & Dialect Coach



Bianca Pardo
Assistant Set & Costume Designer



Laura Ozzimo
Assistant Director



Lyndall Grant
Fight Choreographer



Juliette Hirons
Stage Manager



Annah Jacobs
Deputy Stage Manager

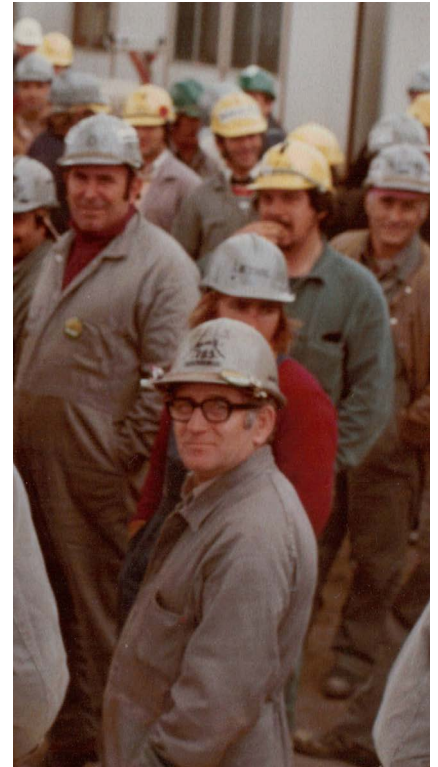


Rain Iyahan
Assistant Stage Manager

Context



Wreckage of the collapsed bridge
Photo: Public Records Office of Victoria



Workers at the West Gate Bridge
Photo: Bernard 'The Brute' Domoney

WEST GATE BRIDGE DISASTER

The West Gate Bridge, a vital transport link between Melbourne's western suburbs and the CBD, is one of Victoria's most iconic landmarks. Today, it is one of the busiest road corridors in Australia (carrying over 200,000 vehicles daily), but the bridge also stands as a silent memorial to Australia's worst industrial disaster – a catastrophe that claimed 35 lives and left families shattered.

On October 15, 1970, at 11.50am, the partially constructed bridge collapsed. A 2,000-ton steel span from the western side fell into the muddy ground below.

The events leading up to the bridge's collapse were a perfect storm of engineering failures, poor safety protocols and bad luck. Learn more about how the bridge collapsed in the diagrams on page 7, and explore the journey to completion in the West Gate Bridge timeline on pages 8 and 9.

'Error begat error ... and the events which led to the disaster moved with the inevitability of a Greek Tragedy.'

REPORT OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION
INTO THE FAILURE OF THE WEST GATE
BRIDGE 1970-71

'In August 2013, I began my quest to write this story and let the men who died – who had no justice – tell their story. *West Gate* is that story.'

WRITER DENNIS MCINTOSH

THE WORKERS

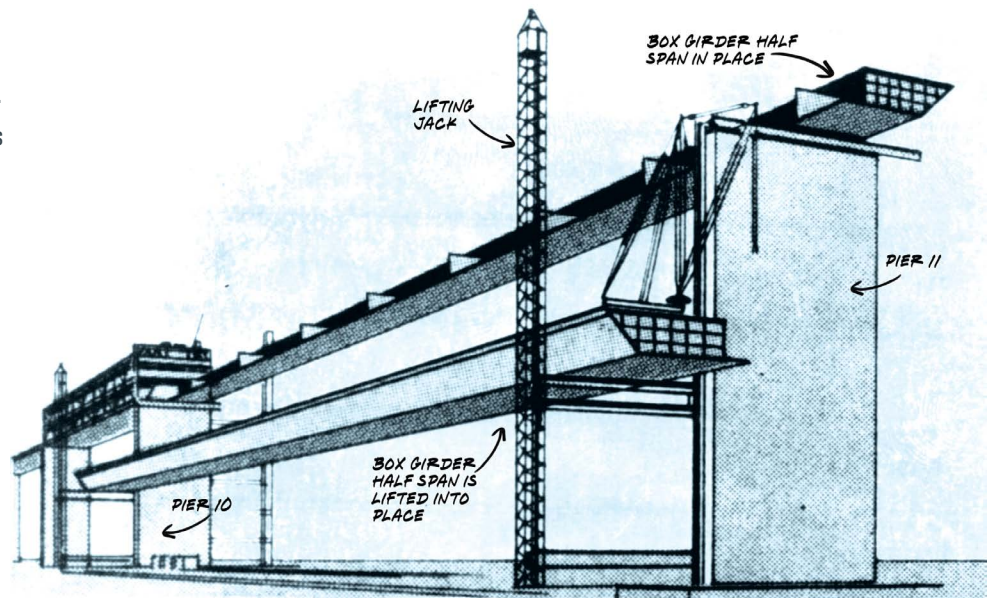
Working on the West Gate Bridge project prior to the collapse looked very different to modern-day worksites. Riggers on the project prior to 1970 worked without harnesses and welders shielded themselves with material made from asbestos (now known to be a highly toxic substance).

Following World War II, large-scale migration and 'displaced persons' settled in industrial suburbs like Footscray and Sunshine, providing the essential labour force for the manufacturing boom. A lot of the men working on the West Gate Bridge were migrants from Greece, Malta, Italy and Spain, as well as English and Irish migrants. Many of those who died were the sole income earners for their households, meaning their loss also had a devastating impact on their families' livelihoods. Many of the victims also left behind wives and young children. Following the collapse, these families often had to rely on inadequate state widows' pensions, with limited immediate support.

In addition to structural design flaws, the Royal Commission identified dangerous construction methods as contributing factors to the disaster. As a result, the construction industry has seen many improvements in workplace safety and compensation. Victoria's Occupational Health and Safety Act, introduced in 1985, was largely informed by lessons learnt from the disaster.

The box girder spans get lifted into place – 50 metres off the ground – using a lifting jack.

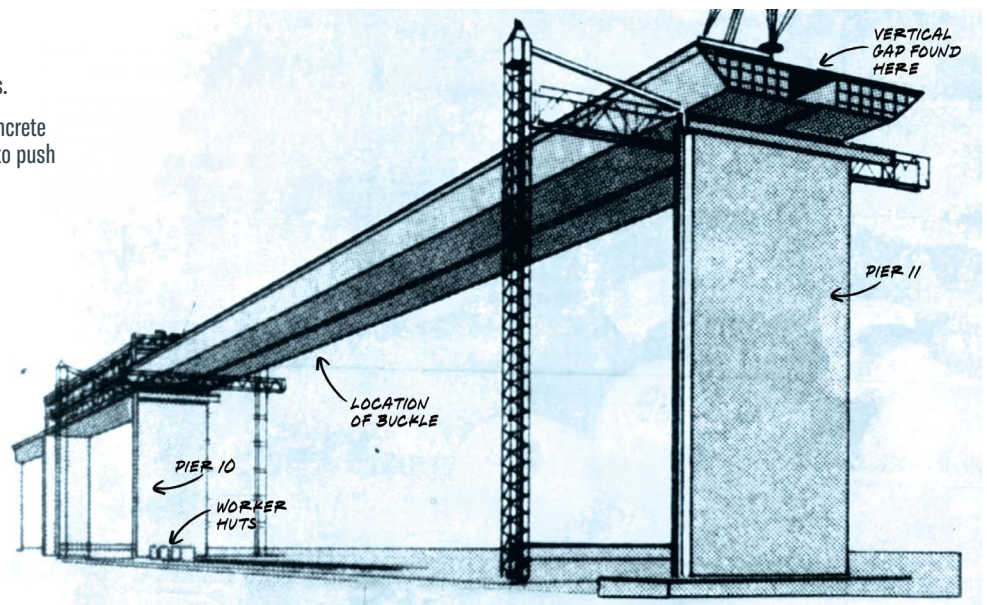
This is done one at a time, with the two halves to be connected once in final position.



Once both sections are in place, a vertical gap of 11.5cm is discovered between the two halves.

In an attempt to close the gap, 25 tonnes of concrete blocks are placed on the higher half, intended to push it downwards so that both halves would align.

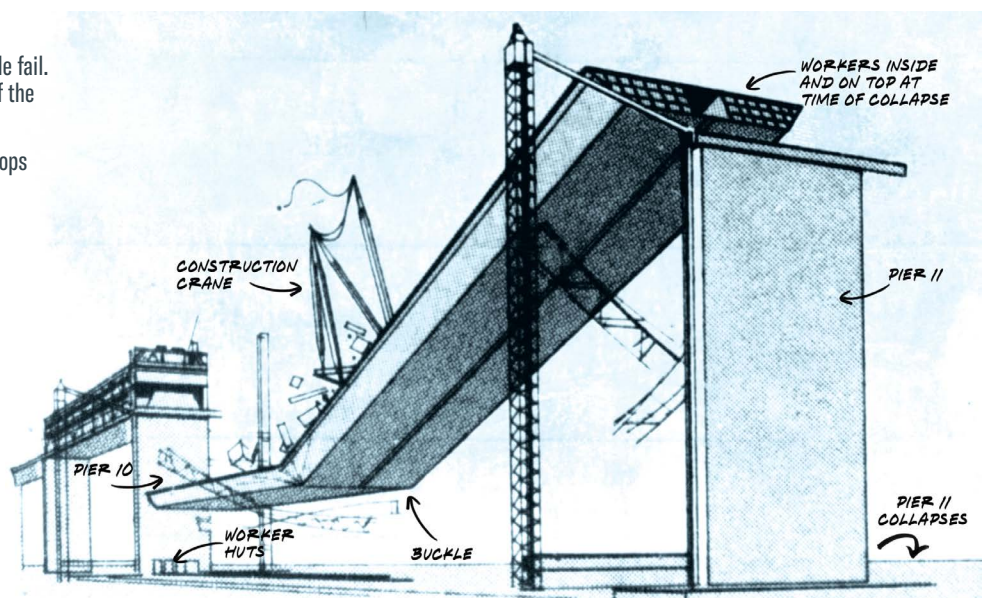
This method uses considerably more weight than the structure can tolerate, and a significant buckle develops mid-span.



On 15 October, attempts to straighten the buckle fail. The box girder span gives way at the location of the buckle, effectively creating a hinge.

The falling span pulls away from Pier 10 and drops downwards in an almost horizontal orientation.

The load then shifts to the other half pulling it down as well. Finally, the falling span strikes Pier 11, causing it to collapse (not pictured).



Timeline: The road to the West Gate Bridge

1922

Commonwealth Oil Refinery (COR) is established in Altona, marking the beginning of Melbourne's west developing as an industrial and refining hub.

POST-WWII

Large-scale migration and 'displaced persons' settle in industrial suburbs like Footscray and Sunshine, providing the essential labour force for the manufacturing boom.

1957

The Western Industries Association lobbies for a new river crossing. They argue for a traffic tunnel to move industrial goods and workers. At that time, the only way to cross the lower Yarra River was via a steam-powered ferry.

EARLY 1960s

The state government favours a bridge over a tunnel, specifically to accommodate petrol tankers and heavy industrial freight more efficiently.

1965

The Victorian Government engages consultants to design the West Gate Bridge.

1968

John Holland and World Services and Construction win the contracts to build the bridge and construction begins linking the industrial west with the rest of Melbourne. The site becomes a 'melting pot' of migrant labour and strong union activism. By this time, over one-third of Footscray's population is born outside Australia.



The West Gate Bridge under construction.

1970

On June 2, the Milford Haven Bridge in Wales (United Kingdom) collapses during construction. Workers on the West Gate Bridge are alarmed by similarities in the box girder design.

On October 15, a 110m section of the West Gate Bridge – a partially completed box girder span between piers 10 and 11 – collapses, killing 35 workers and injuring 18 more.

1971

The Royal Commission report is released, citing structural design failures and engineering flaws as the primary causes of the disaster.

1972

Construction recommences with many of the survivors returning to work on the bridge. Joe Owens, a rigger and union activist, dies in a fall. His death reinforces the union's demands for 'safety first' over 'profit first'.



The nearly-completed West Gate Bridge.

1978

The West Gate Bridge is finally completed.



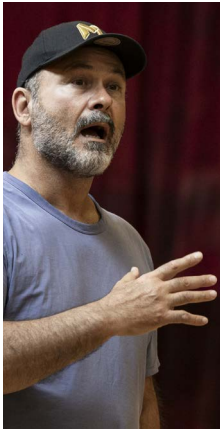
The West Gate Bridge was completed in 1978.

2004

The West Gate Bridge Memorial Park, dedicated to the victims of the disaster, opens at Spotswood. The park continues to serve as a site of pilgrimage for the families and the union movement, ensuring the social cost of the bridge is never forgotten.

Photographs of West Gate Bridge construction and workers taken by the late Bernard 'The Brute' Domoney. Displayed here with permission from his son, Ian Domoney.

Characters



VICTOR Played by Steve Bastoni

‘Vittorio [his Italian given name, derived from the Latin name Victor] is a migrant. He was born in Italy, so he’s a migrant worker. He’s a welder. He’s very committed to his family, driven by the idea of creating financial and social security for his family’s future, his three daughters and now, son. He’s a devoted husband. He’s very principled and has good values. He’s a family man. He’s a hard worker, and he believes in productivity over protocol – to his own demise.’

STEVE BASTONI



FRANKIE Played by Daniela Farinacci

‘Francesca is a post-WWII Italian migrant who came to Australia for a better life. On agreeing to marry Vittorio, she made the courageous and long four-week journey by boat from southern Italy to Melbourne. [She and Victor] live in Altona. They have three daughters and a child on the way. Their future is unfolding. At her core, Francesca has an unashamed strength, vitality and boldness that is tested during this story as she is gripped with fear, uncertainty, and grief.’

DANIELA FARINACCI



YOUNG SCRAPPER Played by Darcy Kent

‘Young Scrapper is a young builder’s labourer working on the bridge in the years leading up to its collapse in 1970. He’s hot-headed, loud-mouthed, and outwardly cocky, using bravado as armour for a deep fear that he’ll never be good enough. With no mother and an absent father, he’s driven by a desperate need for approval and belonging, constantly searching for parental figures to anchor him and give his life meaning.’

DARCY KENT



McALISTER Played by Peter Houghton

‘McAlister is a consulting design engineer, brought out to Australia at short notice to take over that role on the bridge. He comes from a working-class background and has worked his way up the ladder through hard work and talent. But his weakness is over-promising and his need to impress. He is driven by a need to be better than others – but he’s also an expert in his field, at the cutting edge of new bridge design. He’s a man in his 40s or 50s, who has designed many bridges around the world, but nothing of this scale and complexity.’

PETER HOUGHTON

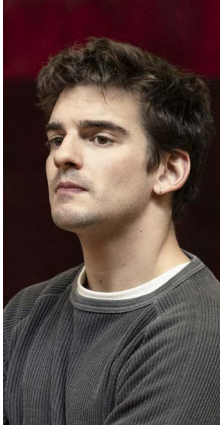


The human story



Watch the video above then answer these questions:

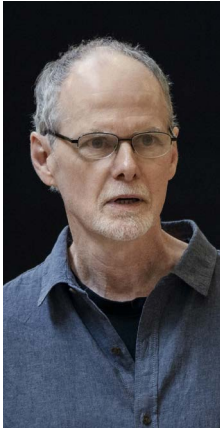
- What can you already observe about how the cast are using their acting skills (e.g. voice, gesture) to portray characters?
- We hear dialogue from three characters – Victor, Frankie and Young Scrapper – in this video. What can you infer about each of them?
- Young Scrapper uses a derogatory slur, ‘I don’t eat wog food.’ This racial slur was commonly aimed at Southern European migrants (particularly from Italy, Greece and Lebanon), primarily used by Anglo-Australians to signify otherness. Why might this language be scripted?



COOPER
Played by Ben Walter

‘Cooper begun life as an amalgam of characters from previous drafts. However, over time we’ve fleshed out a character with his own distinct beliefs, motivations and traits. It was not uncommon in the late 1960s and early 70s for younger engineers, fresh out of university, to find themselves in positions of authority over working-class labourers, who may very well be far more experienced than the engineers. This dynamic informs a necessity for confidence and maybe an air of unpleasant arrogance.’

BEN WALTER



STEVENSON
Played by Paul English

‘Stevenson is an English engineer in his sixties brought to Australia for the West Gate project. His job is to liaise between the Board of the Bridge Authority (overseeing the whole project) and the construction firms building the bridge. He is driven to see each of their contracts completed on time and on budget, while maintaining quality and safety standards. He cares about this. He needs to foster harmony between workers, engineers and management. Easier said than done!’

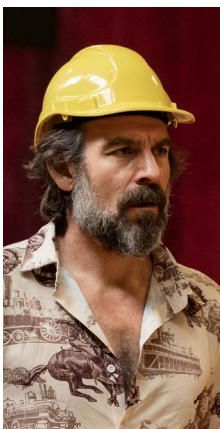
PAUL ENGLISH



VINNY (BJ)
Played by Simon Maiden

‘Vinny is based on a real-life character who was one of the workers building the bridge. He’s an intelligent guy who never quite lived up to his potential – whether through opportunity or his own life choices. When we meet him in the play, he is one of the loudest voices when it comes to union and safety issues.’

SIMON MAIDEN



PAT
Played by Rohan Nicol

‘Pat is driven by loyalty to his comrades, fairness, and pride in one’s work. He has a strong sense of ethical responsibility, and regards due processes on the job, meritocracy, and safety. Pat is persuasive, but he isn’t a natural orator.’

ROHAN NICOL

Playwriting



Writer Dennis McIntosh in rehearsals



Writer Dennis McIntosh

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dennis McIntosh is a playwright, writer and educator whose work explores the politics of labour and working-class life. After a long working life in manual and industrial labour, he returned to university aged 40, an experience he describes as “living life twice.” His academic research has informed his creative practice, including an honours thesis on manual work, family relationships and language; a master’s thesis on shearing and social realism; and a PhD examining tunnel work and representations of blue-collar labour in literature. His published works include *Beaten By a Blow* and *The Tunnel* (Penguin Books), both based on his own memories. His plays include *I Is Maggie*, about migrant women working in an industrial laundry, and *West Gate*, which examines the 1970 bridge collapse that killed 35 workers. Dennis works as a teacher and has taught in remote Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory and Queensland, and now teaches literacy in a diverse learning hub at a multicultural school.

WRITER’S NOTE HONOURING THEIR LEGACY

At 11.50 am on the 15th of October 1970, I was an eleven-year-old boy standing on the netball court on top of the Sacred Heart Primary School in Newport.

I was looking through the cyclone wire fence at the mighty West Gate Bridge that was being built across the horizon. It had just collapsed while under construction and the thud radiated out across the western suburbs of Melbourne.

We were all touched by it in that moment, and it has forever more been burned into my consciousness. The rumours around the school and town at that time were that the bridge was going to fall. Then it did.

My father had the same initials and surname as the resident engineer on the bridge, D.F. McIntosh. As the Royal Commission into the Failure of the West Gate Bridge will attest, D.F. McIntosh wrote several letters of concern about several aspects of the bridge procedures to his London office. What the Royal Commission does not say is that the returning correspondence often went to our house in Schutt Street, Newport. I remember dad opening a letter and proclaiming, “There is something wrong with the bridge.” Hence the rumours were galvanised in my mind. Over the years I wondered what really happened.

In August 2013, I began my quest to write this story and let the men who died – who had no justice – tell their story. *West Gate* is that story. During the years of writing it, I kept photos of the men who had died on top of my computer to remind me never to give up on their story.

A story of this magnitude doesn’t reach production on the back of one person. I had completed my research during COVID, and in 2021 I started writing. With a script in hand, I received a small funding grant from Cairns Regional



Discuss playwriting

- What are the big ideas being explored in this play? How might you describe the intended meaning of the script?
- This play is based on a Melbourne story that exists in the collective conscious of many people and communities affected by the tragedy. How does this play being performed in Melbourne impact the nature of audiences and audience culture?
- What aspects of dramaturgy does Dennis McIntosh refer to regarding the process of writing this play?

‘It is my fervent hope that when this story is performed, those men will once more live again and get to tell their own story.’

DENNIS MCINTOSH
WRITER

Arts Development Funding and staged a development at the Jute Theatre Company in Cairns. Australian theatre director Iain Sinclair read it as a favour to a friend and came on board. Iain is the bridge between this new work and the world of theatre. I have always felt empowered as a writer working with Iain. It is a wonderful feeling to work with someone who believes in you.

Sometimes in life, someone else has the key to the door you cannot open. In the case of *West Gate* that person is Jenni Medway, the Head of New Work at Melbourne Theatre Company, and I will always be grateful to Jenni for the opportunity she has afforded this story. It is my fervent hope that when this story is performed, those men will once more live again and get to tell their own story.

Every writer needs a Woree State High School behind them. As a teacher, I had months off at a time writing drafts, and the staff always took an interest in my work and were warm and supportive. The students are the souls of the earth. Thanks particularly to Renee Krauss, who looked after me over the last few years – thank you. I could not have completed this writing project without your support.

I would especially like to thank Danny Gardiner from the West Gate Bridge Memorial Committee for his help and support in contacting survivors and the children of victims of the disaster. Danny also supported me throughout the process of writing the play.



Director Iain Sinclair and writer Dennis McIntosh in rehearsals

Thank you to Tommy Watson, whom I interviewed in 2013 and who was always generous with his time. Victor Geruda was three months old when his father was killed, and he provided invaluable insights into life for himself, his siblings and his mother in the years following his father's death.

Thank you also to Pat Preston, who was on the ground as a crane driver when the bridge fell. Pat was always available for questions and explanations, offering a firsthand account of the day and of life afterwards for the men involved.

I would also like to thank Vinny Rosewarne, the last survivor of the 18 men who rode the bridge down and lived. Vinny has been a constant supporter of this project and of me. He has attended creative developments and generously shared his firsthand experiences of the day and the years afterwards, living with the disabilities and physical scars left by the disaster.

Finally, to my wife, Maggie, who threatens to divorce me if I write another story. Thank you. At this stage I'm hanging in there with her.

Script notes



Watch the video above to hear from Writer Dennis McIntosh about his process of writing *West Gate*, then answer the questions below.

- McIntosh describes the action in the scene as 'transformative' for the characters – Young Scrapper and Victor. What do you think this means in terms of character and story development across the course of the show?
- McIntosh describes Young Scrapper and Victor as having a battle over hierarchy. What clues in the script tell us this? How would you stage this scene to showcase this power struggle?
- McIntosh discusses his goal in writing *West Gate* as wanting to show the "brutality and the beauty of this story". Based on your interpretation of the script so far, what other scenes or moments best showcase McIntosh's aims?

Directing



Director Iain Sinclair in rehearsals



Director Iain Sinclair

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Iain Sinclair is a graduate of The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and King's College London Master's program in Text and Performance Studies. For Melbourne Theatre Company he has directed *A View from the Bridge*, *Berlin* and *The Beast*. Other select theatre credits include *Our Town*, *Mojo*, *Blood Wedding* (Sydney Theatre Company); *All My Sons*, *Of Mice and Men*, *A View from the Bridge*, *Just!* (Andrew Henry Presents); *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Caretaker*, *True West* (Ensemble Theatre); *The Seed* (Belvoir); *Hamlet* (Melbourne Shakespeare Company); *Milked*, *Burn This* and more recently, *Red* (fortyfivedownstairs). He has won multiple awards, including a Green Room Award for Outstanding Direction for *A View from the Bridge*.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE WHO TOOK THE FALL?

'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.' — Milan Kundera

When Dennis McIntosh first approached me with this play – then titled *Who Took the Fall?* – I knew very little about the collapse of the West Gate Bridge. To my shame, I knew even less about its profound impact on the workers, their families, and the sweeping changes it brought to workplace safety and industrial relations in Australia. It turns out I am far from alone. Far too few Australians are familiar with this story, and remarkably, many young Melburnians are unaware that the disaster even occurred. There are several possible reasons why Australia's worst industrial accident has not fully entered our public consciousness in the way it should have. Perhaps the most significant is our collective preference to forget and move forward – to "Advance Australia Fair" while indulging in a convenient cultural amnesia. We tend to grow vague when confronted with the more difficult chapters of our history, particularly those that reveal the heavy ethical price often exacted by progress.

Another factor drawing attention away from the human dimension is the sheer gravitational pull of the technical, engineering, and bureaucratic details. The Royal Commission report offers a meticulous account of the chain of causation: engineering flaws, industrial relations complexities, union and management interactions, and government oversight. So much detail, so many vested interests, so many words. Yet amid this fascination, one crucial element is frequently overlooked – the one Shane Jacobson so eloquently places at the centre of his documentary: the human cost. Dennis brings a rare authenticity to the voices heard on stage. Drawn from a lifetime immersed in the Australian working-class experience, these voices resonate with truth – much as they do in his acclaimed novels *Beaten by a Blow* and *The Tunnel* (Penguin), which



Discuss directing

- Had you heard about the West Gate Bridge collapse prior to this play? Discuss the idea of 'cultural amnesia' that Iain describes.
- Iain discusses how the human cost of the disaster has been frequently overlooked. How might this perspective be evident in his direction?
- What does Iain mean when he says this production, 'invites the audience's imagination to meet us halfway'? What theatre styles and conventions might you expect to see on stage?

chronicle working life with startling lucidity. That same clarity now commands the mainstage. My task, in collaboration with Dennis, has been to distil this vast, important, and complex story into a two-hour theatrical experience, working within modest resources: a minimal set and a cast of eight actors. Above all, we have sought to ensure that the technical, legal, and industrial narratives do not overwhelm the deeply social and personal one.

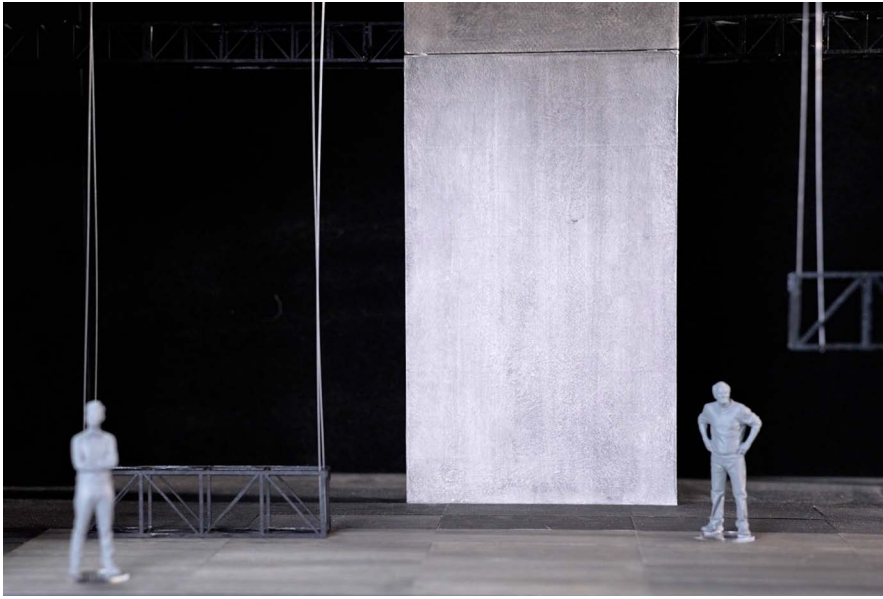


Director Iain Sinclair with some of the *West Gate* cast in rehearsals

It is impossible to literally reconstruct a bridge – or its collapse – while honouring thirty-five individual family stories and fully addressing every critical detail. Instead, we have all worked together as an ensemble with the goal of crafting a language that invites the audience's imagination to meet us halfway. We invite you to do the same work expected of theatre goers in The Renaissance and in Ancient Greece (*"think, when we talk of horses that you see them printing their proud hoofs i'the receiving earth"*). We focus on a few carefully chosen story threads which imaginatively combine many components of real experiences that serve as a synecdoche for the many families irreparably damaged by the tragedy. Our hope is that this approach illuminates the human experience of those affected, allowing audiences to grasp something of the true cost – in stark contrast to the cold, titanic machinery of progress.

The Royal Commission's final report concludes with these sobering words: "Error begat error, and the events which led to the disaster moved with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy." The great Greek tragedies all concern families and the punishments they endure. Who took the fall? Thirty-five workers took the fall, and so did their wives, and their families.

Set and costume design



Set model by Christina Smith



Set & Costume Designer Christina Smith

West Gate Set & Costume Designer Christina Smith and Director Iain Sinclair discuss how to evoke the grand scale of the West Gate Bridge onstage.

Iain: The world of the show, in its most basic sense, is a giant bridge that falls down, and then is rebuilt, which poses a great staging problem. Theatre invites the audience to do half of the work with their imagination. It's something that Set & Costume Designer Christina Smith and I have done before in other shows – in *Berlin* by John Murray Smith and *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller – we invited the audience to come meet us. In this play, there is a suggestion of a bridge here, but you don't always see it. There will be a lot of times when the sound design, the lighting, and the acting itself helps the audience fill in that gap.

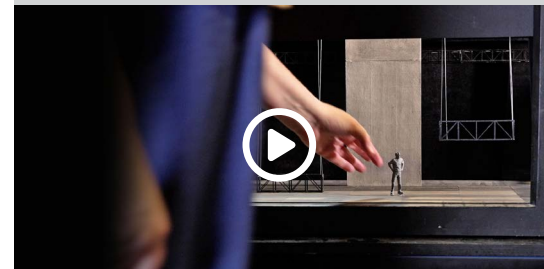
Arthur Miller once said that the two best kinds of theatre come from traditions where there is no set – that's Greek theatre and Elizabethan theatre. Both of those didn't have set or costume, but what that does is it asks the audience to entertain conjecture. It's that kind of theatre, where the audience is invited to imaginatively engage with the work, and we will nudge them and help them along.

We certainly found, with Arthur Miller, that the act of engaging imaginatively means that you also engage emotionally as well.

Christina: The space is very much an industrial space. We talked about wanting the textures to feel real – we want the environment to feel like an industrial environment without necessarily replicating exactly what it was or what we've seen in our research. We do a lot of research, but I often think that my job is actually about getting the actor in the right space at the right time, rather than necessarily providing a museum-like atmosphere. For instance, our wooden playing surface is very authentic. It's got a structural ply like you might find at a building site, but the most overwhelming element is an incredibly large concrete monolith, which is upstage.

We talked a lot about how to show the scale of the bridge, especially compared to the human body, without making it true-to-size. We wanted to give the impression of a massive engineering endeavour happening upstage and above the actors – the scale of it is immense.

Inside the model box



Watch the video above, with Set & Costume Designer Christina Smith, then answer these questions:

- Before watching the full video, what predictions do you have about how the collapse of the bridge will be realised on stage?
- How is scale being manipulated in this set design?
- What terminology does Christina Smith use to describe the design?
- What theatre technologies are being used in this design?
- Based on its design, what elements of theatre composition (e.g. contrast, emphasis, or motion) do you predict will stand out during Act 1?

Iain: In our early conversations, movies from the late 60s and early 70s kept coming up. The West Gate Bridge disaster happened in 1970, and there was something happening around that time. You see it in *Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, where there's something to do with scale – humans are extending so far industrially and architecturally, it becomes hard to imagine how these ants can live in such a giant cathedral – that's the challenge we've had. That's where the idea of the monolith started to emerge.

Christina: In terms of costumes, there's a contrast to the set design in that we are looking at the individual characters as being authentic anchors in this world. We're making sure to be quite faithful to the spirit of the workers of the bridge – that's really important.

We've looked a lot at photographs. There's an enormous number of records available, certainly of the collapse, but when you dig a bit deeper there's lots of photographs of the construction as well. I looked in various places for those, including public records, documentaries and even Facebook groups.

We've got an art finisher on board, whose very specific job is to age and dirty costumes. In terms of sourcing costumes, I actually love sourcing from stock because the clothes already have a story. Wherever I can, I love to go through the Melbourne Theatre Company stock.

We've been assembling the characters with the actors. They're discovering their characters through rehearsals, and we're sort of watching them evolve in the fitting room. There's a lot of individuality in the all the work clothing. It makes you realise how standardised work clothing is now with hi-vis and safety wear, and part of that is because of what happened with the collapse of the West Gate Bridge – a whole bunch of new safety standards were brought in. You really notice, when you look at the pictures of people working on building sites in the 60s, that they wear their own shoes, they make their own jumpers, there's a wide variety of different headwear, jeans, even flares.



Discuss costumes

What contextual information can you already glean from the costume designs about each character? Which garments might be sourced from stock, and which might have to be purchased or made and art finished?

'We talked a lot about how to show the scale of the bridge ... without making it true-to-size. We wanted to give the impression of a massive engineering endeavour happening upstage and above the actors.'

CHRISTINA SMITH
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER



Costume renders by Christina Smith

Theatre styles



The cast of *West Gate* in rehearsals

NATURALISM

This production includes aspects of naturalism, particularly in the acting style, and also in aspects of the design (e.g. costume).

Naturalism attempts to create the experience of real life on stage. Using all available theatrical elements, it aims to create an empathetic and emotional response in the audience. Naturalistic theatre makes use of the fourth wall, inviting the audience to observe the action unfolding on stage. Playwrights associated with naturalism include Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw, while directors associated with the style include Konstantin Stanislavski and Elia Kazan.

RADIO DRAMA

This production includes aspects of radio drama, particularly during the bridge's collapse.

Radio drama is a form of storytelling that uses sound, voice and music to create immersive audio experiences for listeners. Emerging in the 1920s, when radios became a common fixture in homes, the form was popular until television became dominant in households in the 1950s. Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds* (converting H.G. Wells' 40-year-old novel into fake news bulletins describing a Martian invasion) is one of the most famous American radio drama broadcasts.

EPIC THEATRE

This production includes aspects of epic theatre, particularly moments of breaking the fourth wall, and the use of episodic scenes.

Epic Theatre is a theatre style created by Bertolt Brecht in early 1900s Germany. His work had a strong political voice, as Brecht served as a medical orderly during the First World War and fled Germany when the Nazis came to power in 1933. His most acclaimed work is *Mother Courage and Her Children*, often regarded as one of the finest anti-war plays. Brecht sought to distance or 'alienate' his audience from emotionally investing in the characters so they could think critically about the message in his drama. To do this, he used conventions such as breaking the fourth wall, narration, direct address, placards, multi-rolling (an actor playing more than one character), minimal set/costumes/props, montage, and episodic scenes.



Discuss theatre styles

- How might aspects of these styles be evident in the work of different production roles?
- Identify moments in the script that you think might clearly demonstrate aspects of each theatre style.
- How might the director manipulate these theatre styles to convey the intended meaning of the script?

Elements of theatre composition

The following questions are intended to help you consider how *West Gate* might be interpreted onstage through the lens of VCE Theatre Studies.

COHESION

- How might cohesion be seen in the set design across the entire production?
- The script mentions various locations, including areas of the bridge worksite and Frankie's kitchen. How might scenes transition between these locations so that the overall production feels cohesive?

MOTION

- How might lighting (and shadows) be used to imply the movement of workers above the stage?
- With such an open set design, how might the director use position, arrangement and flow to manipulate motion?

RHYTHM

- How might rhythm be manipulated during the transitions between scenes? What role might sound and lighting play?
- How might different characters have their own unique rhythms? Make predictions based on what you already know about each character.

EMPHASIS

- Which aspects of the play would you choose to give a particular focus? From reading Dennis McIntosh's writer's note, what aspects of the real history might this story emphasise?
- How might you describe the big ideas in this play? How might these be given prominence in the storytelling?

CONTRAST

- Can you identify contrasting characters where tension might brew in the story?
- How might the design areas manipulate contrast after the collapse of the bridge?

VARIATION

- How might tension and intensity be manipulated in the lead-up to the bridge's collapse?
- How might space be used differently in Acts 2 and 3, after the collapse?



Darcy Kent in rehearsals



Download Part B

After you've seen *West Gate*, download Part B of this Education Pack to read more from the cast and creative team, see photos from the production, and respond to analysis questions.



Elements of theatre composition

Refresh your memory of the definitions with our elements of theatre composition flashcards at mtc.com.au/eduhub

Sources Callanan, T. (2020) *West Gate Bridge disaster still haunts the men who were there, 50 years on* at abc.net.au; Gregson, S., Humphrys, E. & Wallman, S. (2020) *The bridge that fell: Melbourne's West Gate Bridge collapse 50 years on – in pictures* at theguardian.com; BBC (2019) *Epic theatre and Brecht at bbc.com*; BBC (2019) *Naturalism and Stanislavski* at bbc.com; Schwartz, B. (2015) *The Infamous "War of the Worlds" Radio Broadcast Was a Magnificent Fluke* at smithsonianmag.com; Hopp, G. (2022) *Radio drama on ebsco.com*

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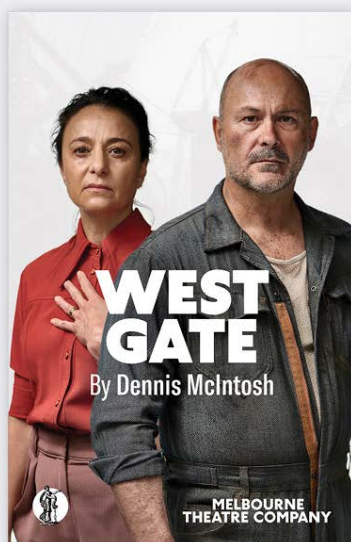
Learn more



Hear from the cast

Hear the cast discuss their characters, themes in the play and how they use acting skills.

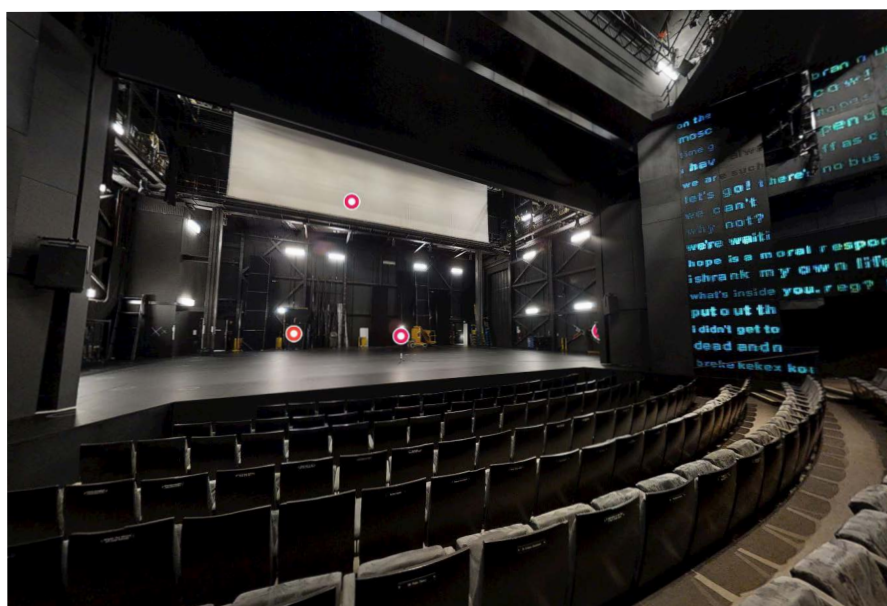
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Read this haunting and compassionate new work by Dennis McIntosh – a powerful retelling of a defining moment in Australian history.

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The Sumner virtual tour

Explore the Sumner at Southbank Theatre, where *West Gate* will be performed in Melbourne, in this interactive virtual tour.

Go backstage at mtc.com.au/eduhub