

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

**WEST
GATE**

BY **Dennis McIntosh**
DIRECTED BY **Iain Sinclair**

10 MAR—18 APR 2026
Southbank Theatre, The Sumner

EDUCATION PACK PART B

Contents

3	Melbourne Theatre Company
4	Acting skills
16	Lighting design
18	Composition and sound design
20	Theatre technologies
22	Props
23	Script changes

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



Activity



Discuss



Read



Video

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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.

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.

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Acting skills



Steve Bastoni



Steve Bastoni

'Italian is a very musical language, and even though I'm mostly speaking English in this play, the cadence and the rhythm are still very Italian and musical.'

STEVE BASTONI

VICTOR

Played by Steve Bastoni

How do you embody Victor?

Victor is an easy character for me, because his ethnicity is Italian. I was born in Italy, in Rome, and I came to Australia 1973 – after the bridge collapse. I've played a lot of Italians, and one of the great characteristics, which has become a bit of a cliché but it's true, is that Italians are very expressive with their hands and bodies. There's a great lineage of comics and artists who are Italian. They embrace the Italian passion for life through gesture, and Vittorio [the Italian version of Victor] is no exception. It's the old joke – how do you stop an Italian from talking? Tie his hands up. You can communicate a lot in a gesture, much more than you can with words.

How do design elements like costume help you embody your character?

Wardrobe is an expression of the character's personality. The Italians say, 'look at a person's shoes and you will know who they are'. For me, walking in the character's shoes is always where I start. It's important that I'm comfortable in those shoes, and that they represent who Victor is.

In this play, shoes are very important in that he's wearing his father's shoes, which are monogrammed and hand-detailed by his father. My own father had a pair of college penny loafers that I wore for years, so I'm probably going to put the American penny from those shoes into Vittorio's shoes. The shoes speak to generational pride, and family lineage of craftsmanship, which he continues through welding – he welds as an artist. We actually did a welding class with a Welder in the Melbourne Theatre Company workshop. I was the worst – but fortunately, I can act.



Discuss Victor

- Identify a moment in the play where you saw the actor using voice and gesture as described here.
- How are the themes that Steve Bastoni discusses evident in the play?
- Discuss how Victor's shoes are used in the storytelling throughout the play.

Do you consciously experiment with or manipulate rhythm in your performance?

Italian is a very musical language, and even though I'm mostly speaking English in this play, the cadence and the rhythm are still very Italian and musical. Tempo and rhythm should always be dictated by circumstance. You can say a lot by the pace at which you enter a scene – it says a lot about your internal world. For example, if you come in and open a window, the reasons for opening that window will determine how fast you do it, what urgency is attached to it, what emotion, if any, is attached to it. It's all determined by what's going on for the character's internal world, that dictates your speed and pace. A tense person holds themselves very differently to a relaxed person.

You have to be attuned to the other person – respond to what they're giving you and, trust each other and listen to each other's music, because it's a duet, and if it's more than two people in a scene then it's an orchestra. You have to make room for their notes and your notes, have a theatrical awareness of what's happening around you that dictates the rhythm and pace of how you deliver.

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

The big picture for me is the age-old question of progress – or in this case, technology – at the expense of humanity. [Well-known 20th-century American playwright and author] Arthur Miller's work explores that all the time. What's the value of a human heart? What's the value of a man or woman? Miller does that beautifully, creates that empathy for the humanity. People are always chasing achievements at the expense of their own relationships and happiness. And today we face the same challenge with technology versus humanity – everything happening with AI, a tool designed to make our life easier, erasing any possibility of earning a living in that area.

With the bridge, it was about the deadlines, money, creating this mighty testament to manhood and world dominance, ultimately at the expense of 35 lives. If you think about how many people that affected though – they were hundreds of people. To the families who lost those people, it was everything. The loss that they still feel today. This play speaks very loudly about the consequences, and it's very relevant today because it's still happening – we keep putting technology and progress ahead of people with the excuse that it's for the people's benefit.



Acting skills



- How does Young Scrapper evolve during the story?
- What are two examples of how actors use gesture on stage in this play?
- How do the actors use breath when performing scenes as characters who are grieving?
- How are theatre styles evident in the acting skills the cast discuss?



Steve Bastoni

McALISTER

Played by Peter Houghton



Peter Houghton



Peter Houghton

‘I’m also working on his taciturn side. Using silence and thought and stillness as a way of gathering focus and suggesting intelligence.’

PETER HOUGHTON

Tell us about your character.

McAlister is operating blind to some degree, as his superiors in England are not providing him with the information he needs to properly execute his job. And in Australia, the builders are pressuring him for more detail. He’s the man in the middle, and he’ll have to muddle through – but his blind spots will prove fatal.

How do you embody your character?

McAlister is an educated man, but also from a working-class background. He comes from the north of England – I’m giving him a Sheffield accent, Sheffield being a famous steel producing city and a powerhouse in the 19th and 20th century in heavy industry, a crucible of the industrial revolution. Northerners, like Scots, are shape shifters – it’s often hard to pick their social status from their accents but they are distinct from the Southern English and famously more down to earth. Northern England as a cultural cliché is known for grit, determination, stubbornness and resilience. McAlister will stand toe-to-toe with anyone and uses stillness, eye contact and certainty to win arguments and to try and dominate conversations. But I’m also working on his taciturn side. Using silence and thought and stillness as a way of gathering focus and suggesting intelligence. Many of his scenes are high conflict scenes and it would be boring to just shout my way through them. He needs other strategies.

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

Yes, these things are very specific. We’re also in a very specific period in 1970 when fashion was changing quite a lot. Being a middle-aged man, I have to decide whether he’s trying to keep up with current trends or if he’s still wearing clothes from his earlier life. Many of the engineers on the bridge wore suits and ties. But he may have a different view of himself – more contemporary, like the style of the bridge itself. But not as contemporary as the younger labourers. He also needs to communicate authority, but may do this in his own way, with quality or the way he actually wears his clothes. All these thoughts and impressions inform the playing – they tell us how hard a person is trying, and how much room they have to be themselves. If we dress to impress it tells us we need to impress. If we’re more casual it creates an impression of ease. Audiences read these signals subconsciously and form impressions



Discuss McAlister

- Discuss how Peter Houghton uses two acting skills to portray his character in a particular scene from the play.
- How does McAlister communicate authority?

of characters. The set is a character in itself, looming above us like a threat, dwarfing the human scale and suggesting something almost fated about the project. It's possible that no one person can stop the process that's about to go wrong. We are all in some way, slaves to its scale and complexity. The irony with McAlister is that he is, as the designer, supposed to have mastery over its construction. But like many technologies, the complexities snowball until no one person really has oversight. We are grappling with that very issue today with, for example, phones and AI.

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

Sometimes actors will look for cohesion and certainly credible shifts need charting. But it's also really valid to allow inconsistencies. You'll know that what people say and what they do are often two different things. Hypocrisy is a pretty common human foible. But it's not necessarily a negative thing or a malicious thing. We just have trouble lining up our moral universe with our limitations. From the audience perspective there is undoubtedly a desire for a cohesive world, but as actors we might be individually discordant, but form an ensemble that makes sense collectively. If we consider our world as a whole, we may have extremely kind people and a few monsters who inhabit the same spaces – that's the stuff of drama and will create conflict. But characters in good stories also change and grow, creating surprise and dramatic shifts. The writer and director orchestrate those shifts and as actors we need to fill in the blanks. Good drama is different from other art forms in that it centralises conflict. Drama (as it trickled down from the Greek tradition) developed alongside democracy, and both are about argument – the idea that you reach consensus by fighting things out via conflict. You'll hear a lot about 'freedom of speech' in our political discourse these days, and there are differing views about where its limits should be. But on stage, the idea is to play out the anxieties and dramas inside our heads using cyphers (actors) as avatars for those differing perspectives. Drama has a therapeutic purpose as we can work things out without having to have the fights ourselves in the real world. The skill is in allowing that fight to happen and not rigging it to align with your pre-determined view. Good drama allows complexity, contradiction and nullifies the dull conformity or certainties.

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

I think if there is a single big idea it's about communication. Bad things happen when we lose the ability to work through problems cooperatively. Honesty matters and if something feels wrong it probably is. We also live in a world that gives credence to 'credentialed' individuals and often negates the hard-earned experience of the person on the job. If you think of something terrible, like war for example, we hear a lot from generals and politicians theorising from way behind the front line. We hear less from the soldier at the front in the daily battle with the enemy. Experience matters. If you want to learn something, speak to someone who's done it before. My character relies on the reputation of his company ... but the technology he's using is very new, so he should be aware that there will be many new issues – in some ways he's bringing old habits to a new problem. He's not awake to the possibility that he's missing something. It's a fatal flaw.



Rohan Nichol, Simon Maiden, Peter Houghton and Ben Walter

FRANKIE

Played by Daniela Farinacci



Daniela Farinacci



Daniela Farinacci

How do you embody your character?

I always start with the text and note any clues to character and physical impulses I intuit. Then I research madly and continue to follow many rabbit holes, filling myself with 'food for thought'. With this role, there are a lot of images and footage of the collapsed bridge which invited a strong emotional connection to the material in the first instance. I have also found it useful to have immersed myself in images and footage that relate to Italian migrants at the time. I have been listening to a lot of Italian language and Italians speaking Australian English to generate authentic vocal rhythms. Physically, I have explored where Frankie's centre of gravity lives and what animal she reminds me of energetically. This is a wonderful way to start generating 'shapes' she makes in the space.

In general, to fully embody the role, I always warmup physically and vocally so that I am available to all impulses as I work on the floor – making offers and responding to the other actors along with any direction I am given.

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

The reveal of the design (set, costume, sound, and lighting) always gives me a powerful insight into the style of the show I am a part of. This overall vision instructs and informs my acting choices as well as triggering my imagination. These design elements are there to support the actors in the overall storytelling and it is always a breathtaking moment when we move from the rehearsal room into the theatre to fully experience all the elements coming together. It also reminds the actor that they are part of a greater collaborative process.

Developing costume is always a delicate and collaborative art. Shoes, jackets, skirts, shirts, textures, tightness ... all this will and should impact on performance, and a good costume designer will be very sensitive to the unfolding of character for the actor.

Do you consciously manipulate rhythm in your performance? How so?

I am always interested in a scene not playing on a single note, but rather cutting across established rhythms and generating a landscape of peaks and troughs. I hear it like a musical score – lots of different instruments, each having their moment ... but not for too long!

I believe, if an actor concentrates on affecting the other players and all are very present, then a rhythmically dynamic performance is inevitable.

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

Unresolved grief is one of the main themes of *West Gate* that Francesca [the Italian version of Frankie] grapples with. Dealing with the shock and aftereffects of an unexpected catastrophic event. The impulse to blame, a need to understand, and ultimately, forging a path to move forward into an unplanned future – demanding a certain acceptance and bravery.

'I have been listening to a lot of Italian language and Italians speaking Australian English to generate authentic vocal rhythms.'

DANIELA FARINACCI



Discuss Frankie

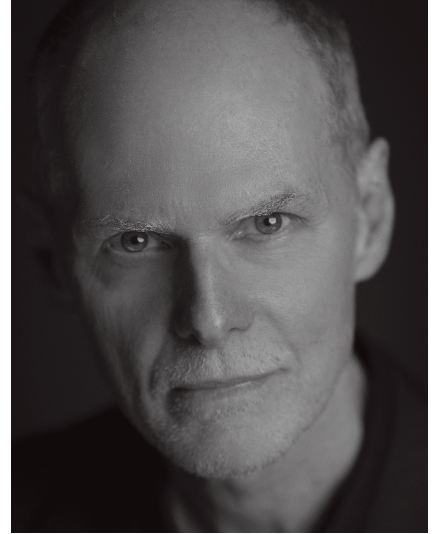
- Discuss how Daniela Farinacci uses two acting skills to portray her character in the first moment we meet her.
- How does Frankie interact with the kitchen set and props? How do these choices demonstrate the character's journey through grief?

STEVENSON

Played by Paul English



Paul English



Paul English

‘For me, this play is about the absolute failure of communication, on multiple levels, and an unwillingness to take responsibility.’

PAUL ENGLISH

How do you embody your character?

Embodiment of a character develops day by day during rehearsals. It’s good not to begin with prescribed, set ideas. Stevenson is middle-class (contrasting very much with the other Englishmen, McAlister and Young Scrapper) so the accent is important; also, there’s a sense of his own status and authority in the way he manages those under him. It all should spring from the text and not be grafted on. Often a slow process. This is the first production of a new play, and that’s special. It often means the script is being refined right up until the last moment!

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

Ongoing conversations with the designer are crucial – design is always integrated into an actor’s performance. The *West Gate* set is not naturalistic, the playing area is vast and the props are few, so the ‘stage language’ we are developing is very particular – for example, a glass of beer in someone’s hand is enough to create the Spotswood Pub! Finding that one prop for a character can be a great help.

Do you consciously manipulate rhythm in your performance? How so?

Rehearsal is all about imagining, experimenting, trying things out (even if they don’t work!). The character’s movement is part of this. In my case it may be his status in the group, his class and education, as well as his state of mind at any point, and sense of his own success, or not!

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

For me, this play is about the absolute failure of communication, on multiple levels, and an unwillingness to take responsibility. Stevenson’s big issue is how the British company designing the bridge was so negligent when it came to supporting the builders who were making their design a reality.



Discuss Stevenson

- Discuss how acting skills are used to portray key information about Stevenson’s character.
- Discuss the example Paul English provides about non-naturalistic staging.

VINNY (B.J.)

Played by Simon Maiden



Rohan Nichol, Simon Maiden and Darcy Kent



Simon Maiden

‘The big idea for Vinny in *West Gate* is his discovery, post injury, that there may be a way forward and a future for him involved in the Union Movement.’

SIMON MAIDEN

How do you embody your character?

My approach to playing Vinny (B.J.) is about how much he listens to what’s going on around him. As the play progresses Vinny suffers some very serious physical injuries which I’m finding exciting and challenging to incorporate.

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

Every new show uses a particular theatrical language. How many props are used, how literal the set design and costuming is. It all plays into how the story of the play will be best told. This show obviously has some BIG design elements so it will be exciting to see them come to life as we move into the theatre!

Do you consciously manipulate rhythm in your performance? How so?

I tend to think of all the discoveries I make in the rehearsal room as the blueprint for how performance evolves. Acting, especially onstage, is all about listening, responding and being completely in the moment. There have been shows I’ve done in the past (particularly on long running shows!) where I have consciously tried to find new things every performance to keep things fresh.

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

The big idea for Vinny in *West Gate* is his discovery, post injury, that there may be a way forward and a future for him involved in the Union Movement. It offers hope and positivity coming out of a catastrophic accident.



Discuss Vinny

- Discuss how the actor uses two acting skills to portray Vinny. How are these skills used differently in Act Two to show the character’s journey?

YOUNG SCRAPPER

Played by Darcy Kent



Rohan Nichol and Darcy Kent



Darcy Kent

‘Vocally and physically, Scrapper wants to be seen as tough and imposing. To reflect this, I made deliberate choices to have him take up space – grounded posture, broad physicality, and confident movement.’

DARCY KENT

How do you embody your character?

I use voice, movement, facial expression, gesture, stillness and silence to explore all the characters I play, but I always begin by identifying a few key facets that act as entry points into the character. For Young Scrapper, that starting point was accent. Born in London and raised in Bethnal Green before migrating to Australia with his father in search of a better life, Scrapper’s accent is a strong anchor for his identity. Accent often informs many other aspects of performance, shaping facial expression, rhythm and movement, so starting there allowed the rest of my physical and vocal choices to grow organically from that foundation.

Vocally and physically, Scrapper wants to be seen as tough and imposing. To reflect this, I made deliberate choices to have him take up space – grounded posture, broad physicality, and confident movement. These external traits help communicate his bravado and loud-mouthed persona.

However, as the play progresses, I felt it was important to explore who Scrapper is when he is no longer ‘performing’ this persona. By softening his voice, reducing physical tension, and allowing more stillness, I aimed to reveal the boy who was not loved in the way he needed to be. These quieter moments will hopefully allow the audience to see past the armour and understand the emotional truth driving his behaviour.

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

Early in the rehearsal process, I made a conscious decision to wear boots while working on the scenes. Footwear radically alters how we move through space – our gait, our posture, the way we occupy ground – and for Scrapper, heavy steel-toed boots would be an everyday reality. Wearing them early allowed that physical logic to seep into my body without me having to intellectualise it. There’s a sense of weight, of being rooted, of gravity pulling you down into the earth. It gives me a grounding that would simply not exist if I were, say, rehearsing in Crocs. Costume, when introduced early, can shape movement unconsciously, and I find that just as valuable as imposing movement choices from the outside.



Discuss Young Scrapper

- Discuss how Darcy Kent uses two acting skills to portray Young Scrapper.
- Compare and contrast the actor’s use of movement in a scene from Act One with a scene in Act Two.
- Reflect on Darcy Kent’s discussion of grief in the play. How is his character’s journey with grief presented using two acting skills?
- Choose one scene from the play and analyse how the actor manipulates contrast.

Props are just as vital to the process. Because this is a story drawn from real life, I wanted the physical world of the play to feel absolutely credible. To that end, we undertook welding lessons to inform the scenes in which our characters are welding. Accuracy in even the smallest moments of work matters enormously to me. Nothing breaks my immersion faster than watching actors pretend to perform a physical task they clearly don't know how to do – actors pretending to play sport or dancing in films are often glaring examples of this.

For me, this attention to detail is about avoiding caricature. Caricature creeps in when research is shallow and behaviour is generic, when a character becomes an idea of a person rather than a lived, embodied human being. Nuance comes from specificity. A simple example: winding up an extension cord. There is a correct way to do it so the internal wiring doesn't twist and degrade – something amateurs often get wrong. But this character wouldn't. He's done it thousands of times. So, if I do it in the show, I'll do it properly.

Do you consciously manipulate contrast in your performance? How so?

I don't tend to think about contrast as a technical device while I'm working. I'm more interested in revealing the full dimensionality of a character, and contrast usually emerges as a by-product of that process rather than something consciously imposed. Strong writing often carries contrast within it already; my job is to stay truthful enough to allow that to surface.

In this play, it most clearly shows up for me in the difference between how a character behaves in public versus in private, or how they move when they're with someone they trust compared to someone they don't. Scrapper, in particular, performs a larger-than-life version of himself in the world. There's a mask he wears, part bravado, part defence, and he knows how to use it. But when he's alone, or when he finds himself unexpectedly vulnerable with someone he trusts, that performance starts to fall away.

The strongest use of contrast in *West Gate* is built into its structure. In Act One, the audience knows the bridge will fall, but the characters don't. There are problems and tensions, yet no belief that catastrophe is actually going to occur. Act Two exists on the other side of that event, shaped by survivor's guilt, trauma and a reckoning with the decisions that led to the collapse.

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

There's a phrase I love: 'you've got to feel it to heal it.' Many of the characters in *West Gate* grapple with this in Act Two, but it's especially true for Scrapper. He avoids his grief by avoiding Frankie, Vittorio's widow, because being close to her would force him to confront what he's been carrying. Scrapper's healing begins when they form a friendship and he finally allows himself to sit with that grief instead of pushing it away.



Daniela Farinacci and Darcy Kent

COOPER

Played by Ben Walter



Peter Houghton and Ben Walter



Ben Walter

‘Cooper’s confidence informs a lot about how one embodies him on stage.’

BEN WALTER

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

In many ways we have tried to lean into Cooper’s youth as something that informs a lot of his choices and motivations. He’s not yet had to reckon with real-world consequences for his actions, and indeed shortcomings. He has never considered the human cost of his mistakes. As such, for him, working on the West Gate Bridge is like an exercise in a classroom. If he can hit the points on the marking rubric, then he’s happy. As he says in his first scene ‘bringing jobs in on time and on budget’ is his clear priority. As he makes clear to McAlister, his no-fault contract precludes him from having a consciousness of consequences for poor decision-making and cowboyish behaviours. That is, until Act Two when post-collapse his naïve worldview comes crashing down as he reckons with his own role in the catastrophe.

How do you embody your character?

As ever, figuring out how a character speaks and moves is a huge part of any performance. I think it all comes back to the traits and the circumstances. As I mentioned above, Cooper’s confidence informs a lot about how one embodies him on stage. He’s confident and moves about the stage/jobsite with ease. All the men in the play are vocally strong and confident so it’s about picking your moments for when to access the vocal power and register you need to cut through the masses. One aspect of dialect that has been interesting is something we call code-switching. That is ostensibly changing the dialect very subtly depending on who you are talking to. For instance, when Cooper is in scenes with the engineers (the other middle-class characters in the show) he can speak with a slightly more refined general Australian accent, whereas with the workers we have shifted his dialect slightly to fit their broader accents. This speaks to in/out group dynamics and wanting to feel in control of the men/situation he finds himself in.

More generally, the gestural and spatial language in this piece has been really important. We’ve worked closely as an ensemble to really paint an image of this construction site mainly through gesture and description rather than necessarily through physical props. This contributes to a fairly distinct style of movement and gesture when talking about technical elements of the bridge.



Discuss Cooper

- Discuss how Ben Walter uses two acting skills to portray key information about Cooper.
- Reflect on the actor’s discussion of theatre styles and how acting skills, design elements and theatre styles interact.
- How did the actor manipulate contrast in the show to show Cooper’s journey?

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

Personally, this is a huge thing for me. Any job I've had, I really feel it comes alive when you add all the elements together. Costume is a big one. I think in regard to Cooper, classic tailoring contributed to posture and movement which can further shade in parts of his character. Also, how his costumes differ to that of the workers, for instance. There is an obvious juxtaposition there which really helps flesh out the power dynamic and class divide.

In regard to the set, I think there's a lot of trust involved in working with a more figurative set like this. In hyper-naturalistic theatre, you have everything at your disposal to ostensibly render reality as you would find it off stage. That's not the case here. Here you have to trust that the audience is naturally filling in the gaps for you. The minimalism, so to speak, and over-reliance on imagined settings can be daunting as an actor, however, I feel, once that performance language and the invisible 'rules' of the piece are set up, then the audience start to play along and can carry an enormous amount of the story telling-weight for you. It's also always an exhilarating prospect as an audience because your engagement becomes active. You are required to partake in the drama on stage to make sense of it all. I feel as though this contributed to that wonderful invisible energy between audience and performer and that's what makes theatre so great.

Do you consciously manipulate contrast in your performance? How so?

Contrast is a really broad term, but I guess the most relevant example of it in my character would be the shift in his demeanour between Act One and Act Two. As I've already mentioned, in Act One Cooper is unflappable, and at times arrogant. He is happy to throw McAlister under the bus if it leads to personal gain, and defy Stevenson if he feels he's justified. After the bridge collapses, he's forced to reckon with all of that and the thin façade comes crashing down and hopefully we see a shell of the man he was in Act One. At least in certain moments.

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

For me the play is about two things. There is the real human side of the story which is carried, for the most part, by the Scrapper/Victor, Scrapper/Frankie story-arcs, and the workers camaraderie. And then there is the far more complex but equally interesting story of how on earth a disaster of this scale could occur. What happened? Why did it happen? And who is to say it won't happen again? I think my story and indeed the other engineers, too, is about the thousand tiny shortcuts, engineering improvisations and interpersonal jibes and scuffles that poke holes in the design and allow error and catastrophe to poke through. The West Gate Bridge did not collapse because of any one person. It did not collapse because of the poor execution, nor did it collapse because of poor engineering. In many ways, the Royal Commission was correctly vague. But then that's hardly satisfying, either. I'm still probably figuring it out myself. Iain and Dennis talk about this disaster as an open wound in Melbourne's history and I can really see why. The story and indeed the play probably leave you with more questions than answers. However, I think it all comes back to our shared humanity. The incredible courage required to forge on in the wake of a massive catastrophe, comes from the same body and brain that is capable of massive neglect, carelessness and obstinance. That's the story we're trying to tell, I think.



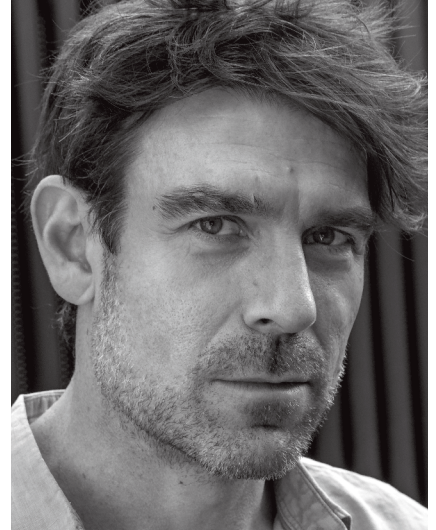
Ben Walter

PAT

Played by Rohan Nicol



Rohan Nicol



Rohan Nicol

‘I need to be economical with my gestures, really wise with the pacing of my speech and my emphases.’

ROHAN NICOL

How do you embody your character?

Pat is persuasive, but he isn't a natural orator. I need to be economical with my gestures, really wise with the pacing of my speech and my emphases. And also expressive with my lips, would you believe.

How do design elements impact your performance?

One prop per scene. The bridge is over us. It's enormous, and our reason for being there. We've got to imbue it with love and reverence. Simple is best.

Do you consciously manipulate rhythm in your performance? How so?

Rehearsal is all about imagining, experimenting, trying things out (even if they don't work!). The character's movement is part of this. In my case it may be his status in the group, his class and education, as well as his state of mind at any point, and sense of his own success, or not!

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

Don't dismiss people without seeing them tested.



Discuss Pat

- How did Rohan Nichol use two acting skills to portray Pat in two contrasting scenes in the play?

Lighting design



Ben Walter, Daniela Farinacci and Paul English

The lighting design in *West Gate* evokes the scale of an epic structure and chaos of its collapse. In this Q&A, Lighting Designer Niklas Pajanti provides insight into the artistic concepts and lighting technologies at work in his lighting design.

What's the world of this show and your lighting designs?

West Gate is mostly grounded in a stressful reality and realism. Each scene takes place in a genuine location, like the bridge construction site; be that under the bridge, in the bridge, or on top of the bridge. Other scenes take place in a pub and in a kitchen. The world is working class 1970's Melbourne. It's 'normal' and 'real' but as the play progresses there is a rising sense of fear, tension, and horror as we watch the inevitable occur. It is perhaps similar in style to old films like *Jaws*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Towering Inferno* or even older films like *The Wages of Fear*. We know what is going to happen and we can't look away as we watch the mistakes pile up.

What's a big challenge in designing this show that you've enjoyed solving?

One challenge is to imply each of these locations through light, without necessarily having a full set in place to realistically indicate that entire world. It is impossible to fit the West Gate Bridge, under construction, on stage. The production design team and the actors must work together to conjure up in your mind the vast scale and danger of this place. I enjoy challenges like this. What is the bare minimum I can show the audience to keep them engaged and following the story?

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

I mostly use different types of LED lights. Colour changing profiles (generally a hard-edged light beam), moving lights that I can point in multiple location throughout the show, and some special effects lights like for the welding flashes and grinding sparks.

Have you lit Frankie's kitchen in a more realistic way?

Not really more realistic, but it may feel that way after all the drama in Act One. I have used a real lighting fixture in the kitchen ceiling and through colour choices I can imply a realistic, domestic setting.

Do you consciously think about emphasis in your work? How so?

Yes, I do, all the time. Most of my job is about visual emphasis. Generally speaking, if I make something brighter on stage that is where the audience will tend to look. Conversely, I can give prominence or importance to something by not lighting it, by subconsciously guiding the audience to imagine it instead.

What's an example of symbolism in your design?

Shadows, lighting angles, and colour choices all work together to symbolise either locations or states of mind.



Lighting Designer Niklas Pajanti

'One challenge is to imply each of these locations through light, without necessarily having a full set in place to realistically indicate that entire world.'

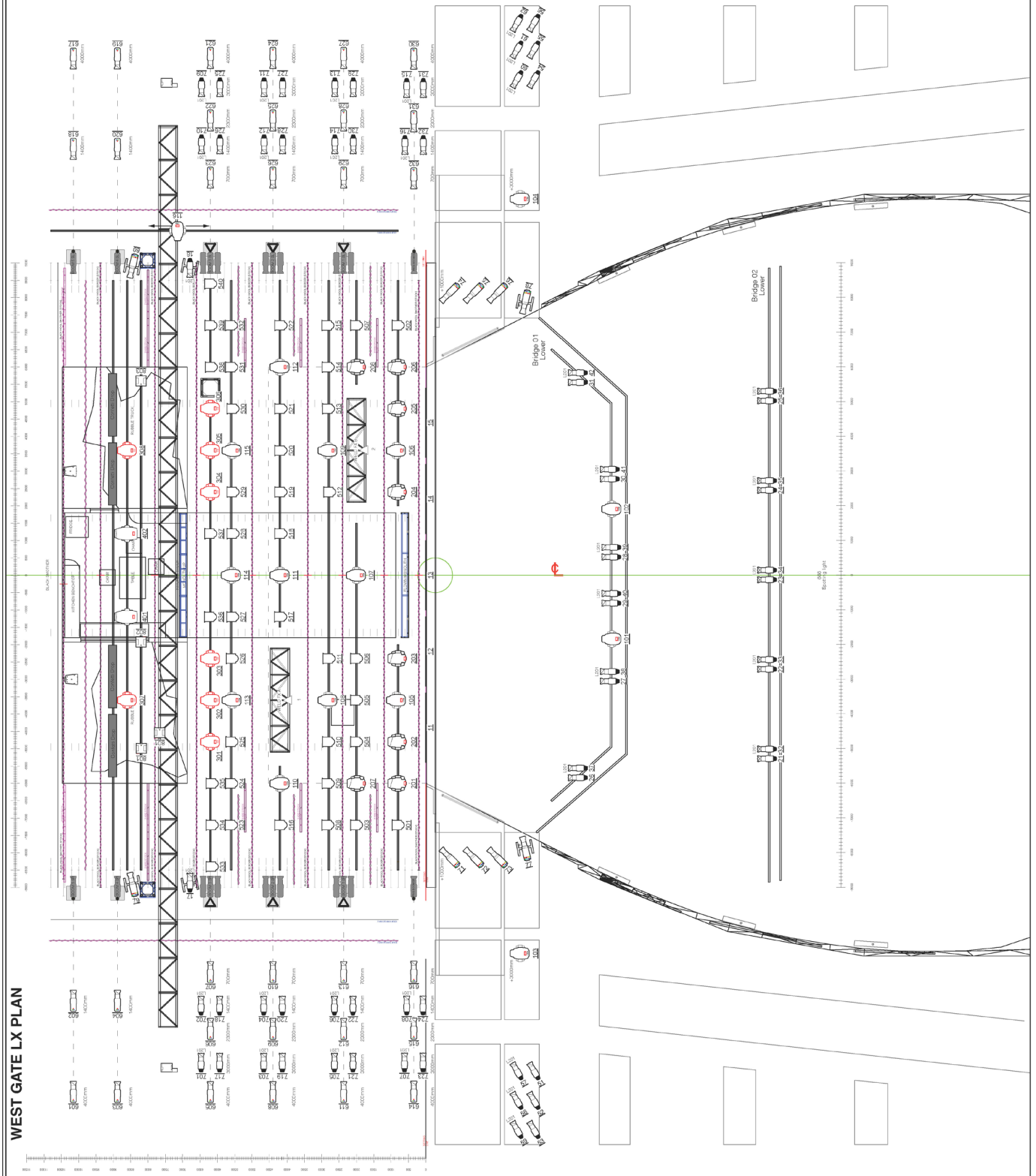
NIKLAS PAJANTI



Discuss lighting

- What are some of the lighting fixtures used in the lighting design?
- How are theatre styles evident in the lighting design?
- How does the lighting design establish place in a scene from the play?
- Compare the lighting plan by Niklas Pajanti with the production photos in this pack and see if you can identify which lights are being used.

WEST GATE LX PLAN



ITEM	DESCRIPTION
1	10000mm
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100	10000mm

LEGEND

	Salvage Arena Theatre Fresnel	40
	ETC Source 4 18deg 750 W	10
	ETC Source 4 36deg 750 W	56
	ETC Source 4 LED 1.8 36deg	32
	ETC Source 4 LED Series 3 1.8 36deg	8
	Marin MAC Encore Wash	8
	Marin MAC TW1 Narrow	8
	Marin MAC Encore Performance WRM	18
	Ayrton Domino TC	2
	MTC Twin Eagles	2
	MTC LED Strip	6
	MagiFX Spantax	3
	USITT Practical Luminaire	3
	Look Solutions Unique 2.1	2

Melbourne Theatre Company
Summer Theatre 2026

West Gate by Dennis McIntosh
Directed by Iain Sinclair
Set and Costume by Christina Smith
Sound by Kelly Ryall
Lighting by Niklas Pajanti
Scale 1:50 @ A1

Composition and sound design



Composer & Sound Designer Kelly Ryall

Composer & Sound Designer Kelly Ryall discusses how unexpected instruments evoke the sounds of steel bending and concrete breaking apart.

What's your role as Composer & Sound Designer?

My role shifts considerably between different productions. Some shows call for a strongly musical score, while others rely on a more abstract soundscape – *West Gate* sits closer to the latter. These approaches are sometimes shaped by the script and at other times by the director's vision. More often, however, I try to let the work itself indicate what it needs, allowing aural decisions to emerge from within the piece. I am a strong advocate for the expressive use of silence, and when a work requires it, I see it as my responsibility to support and protect that choice.

How do music and sound design help build the world of this show?

How do we stage the collapse of a bridge without physically collapsing a bridge on stage? One answer is to place the event in darkness, allowing sound to carry the weight of the moment, so that the audience hears the horror while the mind's eye fills in the gaps. This approach is common in horror cinema, where much of the narrative and emotional labour is carried by the soundtrack: the sound of knives slicing, bones breaking, or the moment of silence that precedes a jump scare.

West Gate is staged in a deliberately minimal way, which means that sound and lighting must work together to construct the world of the play. Sound is used to place heavy machinery in close proximity, to suggest cranes moving overhead, and to situate characters within the enclosed space of a box girder, where steel strains and groans.

In another scene, set in a pub in the 1970s, sound must establish the presence of a crowded room, with voices competing to be heard over one another. Similarly, in moments depicting meetings, sound extends the space by creating the impression of more people than are physically present on stage.

The most complex sequence is the collapse itself: the sound of steel bending, concrete breaking apart, falling debris, and the screams and cries of the workers. My aim in this moment was to make the audience feel as though the theatre itself were collapsing around them.



Composer & Sound Designer Kelly Ryall



Sound design



Watch the video with Composer & Sound Designer Kelly Ryall to see how he recorded some of the ominous sounds in *West Gate* at mtc.com.au/eduhub.



Discuss sound

- What instruments and sounds did you hear in the show? How did they make you feel?
- How does the music/sound shift in Act Two?
- How is music/sound used to manipulate emphasis in a key moment from the show?

How does sound design help with the storytelling?

As with the previous examples, sound plays a central role in constructing the world beyond the production's minimal staging. In the opening scene, the audience is placed within a workers' safety meeting at the site. Although the number of performers on stage is limited, the scene needs to convey the presence of twenty or more voices. To achieve this, the actors will pre-record additional dialogue, each taking on multiple roles, which will then be played back through speakers positioned in the wings. These vocal elements are cued individually, allowing the live performers to respond and interact with them as though a much larger group of actors were present on stage.

Does the musical language shift for Frankie's kitchen in the same way the design becomes more realistic?

The first half of the play contains little to no musical score. This is a deliberate choice, intended to support the realism of the situation, where the inherent drama of the action does not require musical emphasis. When we are introduced to Frankie, however, the focus of the play begins to shift towards a more emotional register. At this point, moments of music are introduced to mark this transition, allowing the audience to fully experience the emotional weight that has been built throughout the first half of the work.

What kinds of sounds/instruments/effects should we listen for in your design?

Listen for the creaks and groans of metal and the snapping of bolts; these sounds are intended to emerge from a deliberately stripped-back piano, prepared to produce the raw, mechanical textures required for the piece.

'Listen for the creaks and groans of metal and the snapping of bolts; these sounds are intended to emerge from a deliberately stripped-back piano, prepared to produce the raw, mechanical textures required for the piece.'

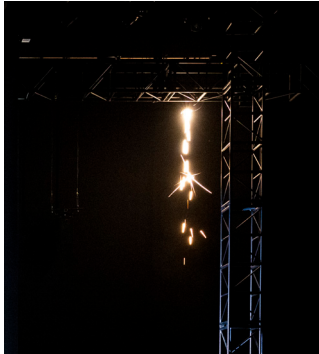
KELLY RYALL
COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER



Steve Bastoni and Darcy Kent

Theatre technologies

Several theatre technologies are used in this production to enhance moments of emphasis, assist with smooth transitions, or as part of a theatre style's conventions. Many of these effects involve stringent safety protocols.



Pyrotechnics

PYROTECHNICS

The grinding sparks are created with MAGICFX Sparxstar devices that create 'cold pyro' (a specialised, indoor-friendly pyrotechnic effect that produces a fountain of sparks cooler than traditional fireworks). Despite being called 'cold', the sparks could still burn you if you're too close.

For safety, these are positioned at least five metres from people and other surfaces, and are set upstage of the monolith to ensure debris isn't blown into the audience when the bridge falls.



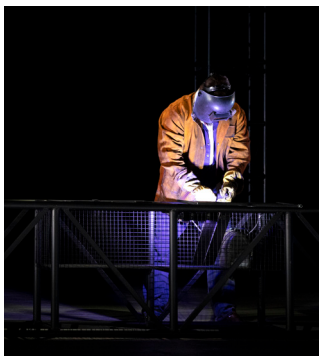
Steve Bastoni and Darcy Kent

FLY SYSTEM

Lighting bars and some set pieces – such as trusses (pictured here) and the downstage monolith that appears in the play's final moments – are flown elements operated using the theatre's powered fly system.

A fly system is a theatre technology consisting of ropes, pulleys, counterweights and bars arranged in lines above the stage, which allows scenery to be 'flown' from the fly tower (a void above the stage) into view of the audience.

Traditional fly systems were hand-drawn, but the fly system in the Sumner theatre is powered, meaning multiple lines can move simultaneously.



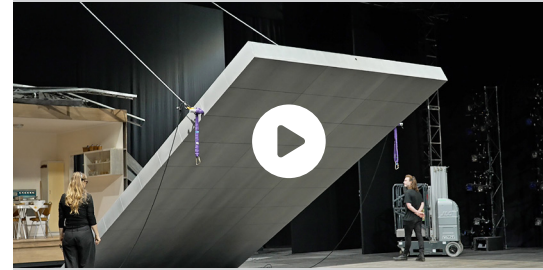
Steve Bastoni

LED 'WELDING'

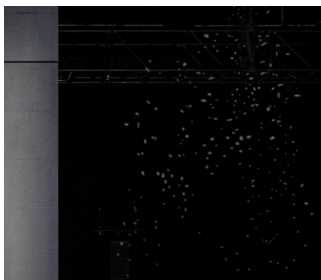
Very bright LED (Light-Emitting Diode) lights are installed inside the flown truss in blue and white colours. These flash to mimic the ultraviolet and infrared light created by real welding. The LED lights are so bright, however, that the actors must wear real welding helmet PPE (Personal Protective Equipment). Crew spot the cast to make sure the PPE is being worn correctly before the lighting cues are triggered. LED lights operate at much cooler temperatures than traditional bulbs, so while the actors also wear costume gloves, the 'welding' is not hot.



Creating the collapse



See how the bridge collapse was staged, and how safe and ethical work practices are applied, in the video with Technical Manager – Electrics, Allan Hiron at mtc.com.au/eduhub.



Flitter

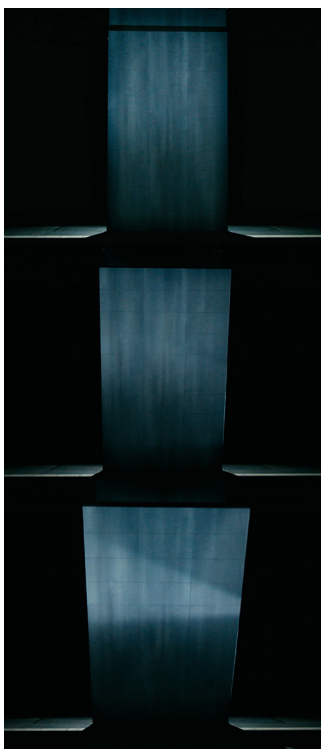
FLITTER

A PVC pipe with holes in it (called a roller) is filled with very lightweight paper called flitter. The roller is fixed to a fly bar above the stage and filled by a hopper (a container that tapers downward). This roller is operated remotely. When the roller turns, grip tape inside drags the flitter and it gradually comes out the holes and gently falls to the ground. This effect is intended to mimic paint flecks falling from the damaged bridge.



Programme

You can read all the names of the workers who lost their lives in the show programme at mtc.com.au/programmes

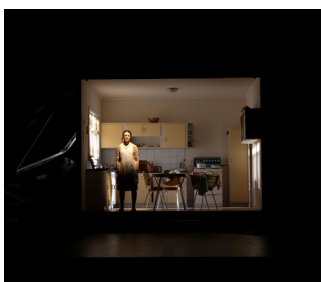


Photos: EINWICK

THE MONOLITH FALL

The monolith is made from polystyrene with a plywood exoskeleton, painted to resemble concrete. The cast and crew follow a safety procedure that must be executed to release the wall. The cast gather in a pen in the wings OP, so the Assistant Stage Manager can do a head count. The Stage Manager and Mechanist press buttons once their area of responsibility is clear. The Automation Operator begins the monolith release when everyone is safe, and the Deputy Stage Manager has called "GO". Pneumatic pins holding the wall retract, and others gently push it forward until gravity takes over. OSC (Open Sound Control) cues – network-based messages used to synchronise systems – then trigger the lighting and sound.

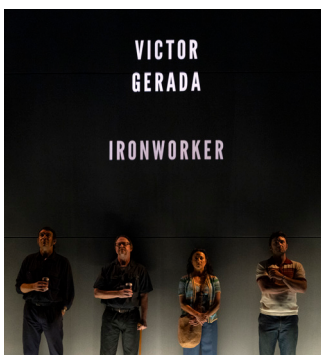
When the monolith falls, audience sitting centrally in the front rows feel a rush of air, and a lip on the edge of the stage directs the wind gush up over their heads to avoid dust in eyes. The wall is hinged to the stage deck so it cannot slide forward. The air cushion that is created as the monolith falls means it rapidly decelerates before hitting the stage deck and does so almost silently. Speakers placed under the auditorium seating bank provide a loud, visceral rumble.



Daniela Farinacci

AUTOMATED TRUCK

Frankie's kitchen is built on a truck (rostra, or platform, on wheels) that moves downstage when an auto-operator tells it to. During Act One, the truck is concealed upstage of a smother (a black wool stage curtain used to completely separate the stage area from the auditorium). In the blackout after the bridge collapses, another smother is flown in downstage while the kitchen truck moves into position.



Rohan Nichol, Simon Maiden, Daniela Farinacci, and Darcy Kent

PROJECTION

In the final scene of the play, the names of the 35 workers who lost their lives in the 1970 West Gate Bridge collapse are projected onto the monolith, which is flown downstage of the one that fell forward in Act One. The projector is positioned on a lighting bridge at the back of the auditorium.

This moment is a theatrical interpretation of the real-life memorial. Upon completion of the bridge, the surviving workers funded a memorial plaque, installed on the base of pier 10, near the site of the disaster.

Props



Daniel Farinacci and Darcy Kent



Discuss props

- Discuss why these props are included, given the set design is so minimal. How do props relate to theatre styles?
- What is the effect of having so many props in Frankie's kitchen, after the minimalism of Act One?
- Do certain props carry more emotional value in the story?
- Why are the props so realistic, often being real or vintage?

There are many props in this production, including consumable props, hand props, paper props and set dressing.

These are the responsibility of the Assistant Stage Manager (ASM). Before each performance, the ASM follows their 'setting list' to place all the props in the positions they need to be, such as backstage props tables, shelves or hooks behind set pieces, dressing rooms or on the set itself.

CONSUMABLE PROPS

Props that get eaten or destroyed in a performance are called consumable props. In this production, Scrapper's meat pie, Victor's salami and bread, and the meatballs Frankie makes (although there is a duplicate, clean casserole dish), are all consumed during the show. A Coca-Cola can is also destroyed when Victor demonstrates how k-plates work. These cans were specially ordered for the production with a vintage label. The beer cans actors drink from are non-alcoholic beverages slipped inside a 'sleeve' with artwork, giving the illusion of a beer and allowing the can to 'hiss' when opened.

HAND PROPS

Hand props in the show include a whistle, wallets, beer glasses (polycarbonate for safety), radio, toolboxes, megaphone, k-plates (separate and welded), flasks, tissue boxes, Melways, car keys, clipboards, cigarette packs, 'Bella Ciao' record, broom, teatowel, washing basket (with clothes inside), kitchen furniture, walking stick. Vintage worksite props include welding shields and gloves, pneumatic drills, Turfer (portable, lever-operated mechanical wire rope winch).

PAPER PROPS

Paper-based props made by the stage management team include union tickets, prepared statements, list of names, job offer letter, reports and an envelope with money.

SET DRESSING

Frankie's kitchen includes several props that actors don't interact with, including a Moka pot, kitchen utensils, bowls, chopping boards, coffee mugs and jars.

Script changes

Summary of differences between the published script (Currency Press 10 Mar 2026) and the performance script (compiled 20 Mar 2026).

The left-hand column shows the scenes in order as they appear in the published script. Shading in the right-hand column indicates a change in scene order in the performance script.

ACT ONE

Order of scenes in the published script		Notes on the position and content of each scene in performance
Page	Scene heading	
1	ACT ONE SCENE ONE 7 a.m., 12 June 1970. West Gate Bridge construction site.	Changes to dialogue; scene starts p 3 in the performance script.
7	SCENE TWO 8 a.m., 2 July 1970. Box girder.	Changes to dialogue (p 13).
11	SCENE THREE Late July 1970. West Gate Bridge construction site.	Changes to dialogue (p 19).
15	SCENE FOUR 4 p.m., 26 July 1970. The pub.	This scene is SCENE 6 in the performance script (p 32).
20	SCENE FIVE 15 August 1970. West Gate Bridge construction site.	Minor changes to dialogue (p 27).
22	SCENE SIX August 1970. Box girder.	This scene is SCENE 4 in the performance script (p 24).
25	SCENE SEVEN Late August 1970. West Gate Bridge construction site.	Scene deleted.
26	SCENE EIGHT 6 a.m. 2 September 1970. Box girder. Sunrise on top of the bridge.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 7 (p 39).
32	SCENE NINE 15 September 1970. West Gate Bridge construction site.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 8 (p 46).
35	SCENE TEN 26 September 1970. Box girder.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 9 (p 51).
37	SCENE ELEVEN 2 October 1970. Box girder.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 10 (p 52).
38	SCENE TWELVE 7 a.m., 10 October 1970. West Gate Bridge construction site.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 11 (p 54).
40	SCENE THIRTEEN 11.49 a.m., 15 October 1970. Box girder (the bridge collapse). END OF ACT ONE.	The bridge collapse. Substantially rewritten scene, renumbered SCENE 12 (p 56); includes one page 'radio play' of the dialogue used in the sound design of the bridge collapse. End of act one.

ACT TWO

Order of scenes in the published script		Notes on the position and content of each scene in performance
Page	Scene heading	
44	ACT TWO SCENE ONE 7 a.m., 12 June 1970. West Gate Bridge construction site.	Changes to dialogue; the action of Young Scrapper returning Victor's clothes to Frankie is incorporated into SCENE 13 on p 62.
45	SCENE TWO PAT starts alone on the stage speaking to the audience.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 13 (p 59) Incorporates ACT TWO SCENE FOUR 27 October 1970. COOPER, STEVENSON.
48	SCENE THREE YOUNG SCRAPPER comes up the driveway. FRANKIE is folding washing.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 14 (p 65)
50	SCENE FOUR 27 October 1970. COOPER, STEVENSON. Engineers convene a meeting on the east side.	This scene is incorporated into SCENE 13 pp 62-65.
53	SCENE FIVE FRANKIE is in the outside laundry.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 16 (p 69). Second part is incorporated into SCENE 18: DRIVING LESSONS pp 54-55
55	SCENE SIX (Cooper, Pat and Stevenson)	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 15: PAT'S JOB OFFER (p 67).
56	SCENE SEVEN Mid-June 1971. Sign on entry gate says West Gate.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 17: PAT, B.J. (p 71); second half of scene (pp 58-60) incorporated into SCENE 19: UNION STRIKE.
60	SCENE EIGHT FRANKIE and YOUNG SCRAPPER meet on the house steps.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 20: FRANKIE GIVES SCRAPPER THE RECORD (p 80)
63	SCENE NINE Morning comes and YOUNG SCRAPPER has fire drums set up, and a rope across the entrance as the picket line.	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 21: THE RETURN (p 83)
66	SCENE TEN YOUNG SCRAPPER, B.J., PAT sitting around looking at the bridge piling in span 10-11. THE END	Changes to dialogue; renumbered SCENE 22: PLAQUE, MINUTE'S SILENCE (p 87) THE END

Script changes:

Scene mapping

The left-hand column shows the scenes in order as they appear in the published script. Shading in the right-hand column indicates a change in scene order in the performance script.

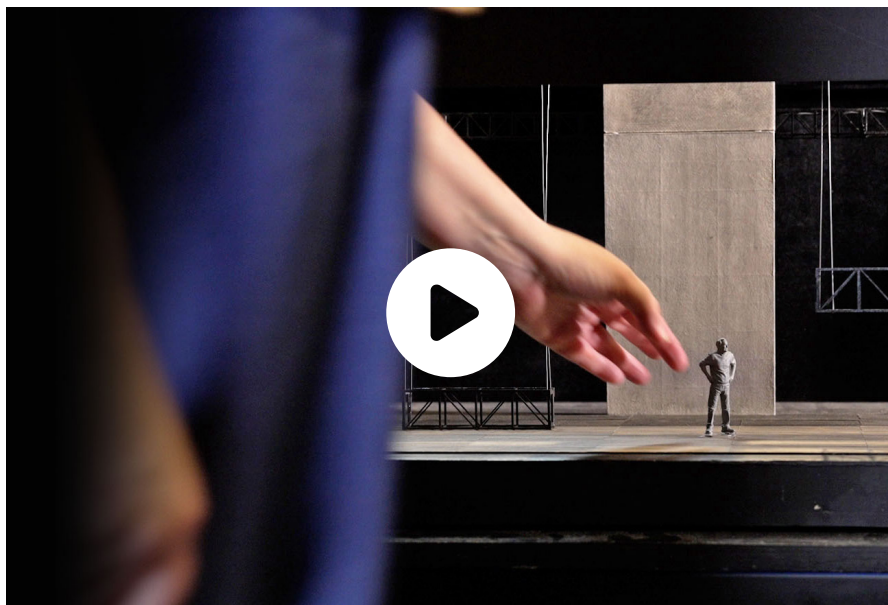
ACT ONE

Order of scenes in the published script		Notes on the position and content of each scene in performance
Page	Scene heading	
3	ACT 1 SCENE 1: WEST GATE BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION SITE	ACT ONE SCENE ONE Starts on p 1
12	SCENE 2: JULY 2 8.00 AM, WORKERS INSIDE THE BOX GIRDER	SCENE TWO p 7
19	SCENE 3: LATE JULY, MCALISTER, STEVENSON AND COOPER MEET ON THE SITE AFTER UNION MEETING.	SCENE THREE p 11
24	SCENE 4: AUGUST, BOX GIRDER VICTOR AND SCRAPPER	SCENE SIX p 22 in the published script
27	SCENE 5: AUGUST 15, WHO IS RUNNING THE SHOW. McAlister, Stevenson and Cooper on site.	SCENE FIVE p 20
32	SCENE 6: 4.00 PM, PUB	SCENE FOUR p 15 in the published script
39	SCENE 7: SEPTEMBER 2, 6.00AM EARLY MORNING START IN BOX GIRDER	SCENE EIGHT p 26 (note scene seven deleted)
46	SCENE 8: SEPTEMBER 15, LIFTING SPAN 10-11	SCENE NINE p 32
51	SCENE 9: SEPTEMBER 26, SPAN 10 WORKING IN BOX GIRDER	SCENE TEN p 35
52	SCENE 10: OCTOBER 2, SECRET MEETING IN BOX GIRDER	SCENE ELEVEN p 37
54	SCENE 11: OCTOBER 10, 7.00 AM MEN FIND A PYRAMID OF CONCRETE	SCENE TWELVE p 38
56	SCENE 12 (The bridge collapse) Substantially rewritten scene; includes one page 'radio play' of the dialogue used in the sound design of the bridge collapse. End of act one.	SCENE THIRTEEN p 40 END OF ACT ONE.

ACT TWO

Order of scenes in the published script		Notes on the position and content of each scene in performance
Page	Scene heading	
59	ACT 2 SCENE 13: PAT DOES A ROLL CALL. MEN SACKED	SCENE TWO p 45 (scene one deleted)
65	SCENE 14: SCRAPPER RETURNS THE CAR AND KEYS TO FRANKIE	SCENE THREE p 48
67	SCENE 15: PAT'S JOB OFFER	SCENE SIX p 55 (Cooper, Pat and Stevenson)
69	SCENE 16: SCRAPPER ENTERS FRANKIE'S HOUSE	SCENE FIVE p 53. Second part (pp 54-55) incorporated into SCENE 19.
71	SCENE 17: PAT, B.J.	SCENE SEVEN p 56
74	SCENE 18: DRIVING LESSONS	Second part of ACT TWO SCENE FIVE (pp 54-55)
77	SCENE 19: UNION STRIKE	Second part of ACT TWO SCENE SEVEN (pp 58-60)
80	SCENE 20: FRANKIE GIVES SCRAPPER THE RECORD	SCENE EIGHT p 60
83	SCENE 21: THE RETURN	SCENE NINE p 63
87	SCENE 22: PLAQUE, MINUTE'S SILENCE THE END	SCENE TEN p 66 THE END

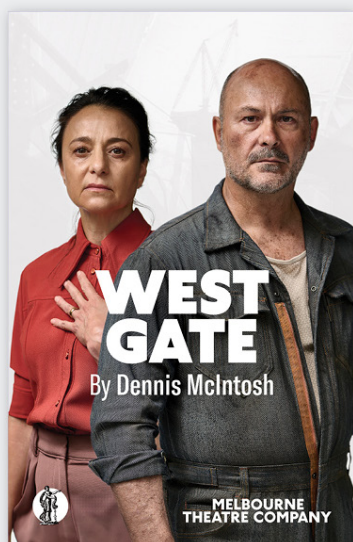
Learn more



Inside the model box

Hear from Set & Costume Designer Christina Smith as she discusses the ideas behind the set design.

Watch the video at mtc.com.au/eduhub



Buy the script

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

Buy the script at mtc.com.au/scripts



Design world

Hear from members of the creative team as they discuss the big ideas behind their choices in designing and staging *West Gate*.

Watch the video at mtc.com.au/eduhub