The Secret River

Arts Centre Melbourne presents
a Sydney Theatre Company production

VCE Teachers' Resources - Written by Sam Mackie

Years 10 - 12
The Secret River
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Starting Points

Starting Points – About this resource

These notes have been designed with a specific focus on the key skills and knowledge for VCE Theatre Studies, Outcome 3.3 and End-of-Year Written Examination. They are a supplement to the STC’s Ed. Pack– ‘On Cue’ (see links) - which offers a wealth of background material that I have not sought to replicate. It offers insightful exploration of themes, ideas and characters, terrific images of the new cast in rehearsal and links to valuable production material. It is worth noting that in the latter sections some key educational Drama terminology is used differently to how we apply it in VCE Drama and Theatre Studies.

I have endeavored to provide detailed tables of information that can be the building blocks for further exploration. Teachers should critically study them. A link to a recent interview with Neil Armfield about the revival of this production mentions experimentation with aspects of the production. So, as with all theatre, what happens one night may not happen the next; that’s why we love it. Consequently, some descriptions may vary to the students’ experience. That’s a good thing too; it encourages them to focus on their own recollections and interpretations and challenge mine.

These are not the answers. They are just one person’s gathering of materials and ideas, combined with his reading of the play and performance. The aim is to give everyone a few starting points. There is so much to this production. I am sure there is so much more for your students.

Sam Mackie

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Putting *The Secret River* on the stage was one of the early initiatives of Artistic Directors Andrew Upton and Cate Blanchett when they took the helm of STC back in 2008 (then a 30 year old company central to Sydney's theatre scene). But the genesis was a patient one and it would not see the lights of the stage for another 4 years.

To ensure they did justice to Grenville's award-winning novel they assembled some of Australia's most creative theatre talents, including directors Neil Armfield and Stephen Page, playwright Andrew Bovell, set designer Stephen Curtis, and eventually an ensemble cast of 22, a number rarely seen in contemporary theatre.

It premiered in January 2013 at the Sydney theatre before touring Canberra and Perth. Reviews were full of praise. At the Helpmann Awards the production took 6 of 11 nominations, including Best Play, Best New Work and Best Direction.

In 2016 it returns to Sydney before touring to Melbourne and Queensland. The cast retains many original members although several key roles have been recast, including Dhirrumbin, Sal and Slasher Stevens.

*Approximate running time: 2 hour & 45 minutes (inc. interval)*

*Note - All photographs courtesy of Heidrun Lohr and the STC (unless otherwise stated)*
About Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*

There are too many people who are far more qualified than I am to discuss the merits of this extraordinary novel. But I’ll have a go.

Inspired by her participation in the Reconciliation Walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000, and her own ignorance about her links to the past, Grenville began researching her ancestry, specifically Solomon Wiseman, her great-great-great-grandfather, who settled Wiseman’s Ferry on The Hawkesbury River, in the early 1800s. What began as a piece of non-fiction became – twenty drafts and five years later - ‘The Secret River’, a multi award winning literary success selling half a million copies and being shortlisted for The Man Booker Prize.

It was not without controversy. Literary and history academics began The History Wars’ and argued over the merits of historical novels that seemed to garner more historical credibility than genuine historical texts. Grenville’s novel seem to find itself in the maelstrom. Grenville would go on to write ‘Searching for the Secret River’, a piece of non-fiction which tracks the research and writing process behind ‘The Secret river’.

The novel begins with ‘Strangers’ an encounter one night in Sydney Cove between recently transported convict William Thornhill and a man ‘as black as the air itself,’ but who wore ‘his nakedness like a cloak’. Thornhill, who felt ‘skinless as a maggot’ fanned his rage and demanded the man leave. He disappeared. Thornhill returned to lie with his family in a hut ‘that offered no safety, just the idea of it.’ This short 6 page prologue of sorts ensures that we understand where the focus of the novel is.

Part One – London’ provides an extended exposition, as we trace the slum-ridden life of William Thornhill from childhood to Newgate Prison. We read of he and his family’s broken efforts to survive. We read of him marrying Sal and mastering the Thames as a river man. We see his determination to provide downtrodden by misfortune and misjudgement until he is arrested for theft. Only the efforts of the literate Sal commutes his death sentence to life in the penal colonies. She follows him, child in tow and another on the way.

Part Two – Sydney – traces their efforts to start anew in this strange land. While the pair of them find success in Sydney, trading in liquor amongst other things, Thornhill’s skills with a boat soon provide new opportunities. A trip up the Hawkesbury with Blackwood kindles Thornhill’s yearning for his own land with his own name to it.

It is from here that Andrew Bovell’s adaptation picks up the thread. Part Three – A Clearing in the Forest, Part Four – A Hundred Acres, Part Five – Drawing a Line, Part Six – The Secret River, and
the epilogue – Thornhill’s Place, 210 pages of evocative, visceral, intricate writing, is transformed for the stage.

There was some questioning over Grenville’s decision not to give voice to the Dharug people whose land is procured. In Bovell’s words, ‘For a number of very sound reasons, Kate felt she could not step over that line. And that line, the pre-contact Aboriginal world, has been historically very difficult to fictionalise.’ Bringing the story to the stage would not merely enable them to have a voice, the form would demand it, and Grenville was one of the first to support that.

When I read the novel I was submerged into another time and place. I saw, heard, smelt, tasted and felt something new. I had been educated, challenged, awoken. Prior to this I had not truly considered the actions of simple men in a new land ultimately enacting atrocities that we still have not dealt with. In William Thornhill, Grenville’s protagonist, I saw a man who simply wanted to make good for his family and his own name. In London and – more significantly – on the Dharug people’s land he is confronted by choices that seem beyond him. Misunderstanding leads to missed understanding leads to inaction and ultimately actions that are silently dealt with. Is he a monster? He could well be one of my ancestors.

When I finished the novel I could not see how it could be transformed to the stage. Andrew Bovell and Neil Armfield showed me how.
‘Sometimes the best approach to adapting a novel is simply to get out of its way.’ (Andrew Bovell – Introduction to ‘The Secret River’ an adaption for the stage)

Andrew Bovell is one of Australia’s most highly regarded playwrights having successfully written for the theatre, film and television. He first rose to prominence just under thirty years ago years with After Dinner. (1988). Speaking in Tongues (1996) would prove a success both here and overseas. He would follow up with the screenplay adaptation Lantana, which received much critical acclaim. Other award winning plays include Holy Day, Who’s Afraid of the Working Class, and When the Rain Stops Falling.

Bovell’s adaptation of Kate Grenville’s internationally acclaimed novel The Secret River begins from a fresh perspective. The play begins on the Hawkesbury: London - part 2 of the novel - will only figure as backstory in memories and visions. Yalamundi, a Dharug leader, stands silently over his family, as they laugh and play around a fire. It is their land. He breaks into a mourning song ‘calling out to country’, and ‘as if called by the song’, Dhirrumbin, our narrator emerges. She takes us into the minds of two men whose paths will weave the play’s narrative to its tragic conclusion:

He saw the smoke from the nearby ridge. He knew what it meant. Someone was coming. They’d heard the stories passed down the river. Of strangers. And trouble. They’d seen the boats passing. This way and back. This way and back. And the old man, Yalamundi felt the pain in his chest. Because he knew something was about to change. And he didn’t know how to stop it. He wanted to. He wanted time to stand still.

While away from here, some thirty miles down the coast, another man sees a chance to be something more than what he is and a woman waits as she watches over her kids and sings a song from some far-away place. (pp 2-3)

What follows are 32 scenes that flow and weave as effortlessly as the river itself. They chart the life of William Thornhill, recently pardoned, and his efforts to settle his family on 100 acres of land on the Hawkesbury River. As Wesley Enoch describes so well:

Bovell does that wonderful thing of ‘getting in late’ and ‘getting out early’ to every scene. He cuts to the barest necessity for dramatic action without the need for extensive scene set up—‘getting in late’ — and then once he has hit the dramatic
Bovell peeled away the politics that surrounded Grenville’s work and distilled it down to a simple story that needed to be told: ‘…about a piece of land with two people claiming it to be theirs’ (The Australian, 2012).

Bovell was originally interested in exploring the novel laterally through Dick, the younger of the two Thornhill boys, because of his connection with the Dharug people and his ultimate departure to live with another ex-convict Blackwood, who understood and respected the indigenous people far more than his own father. He imagined future generations of Thornhills on different sides of the tracks. But he was convinced to come back to the story, to confront the material at hand.

First of all he went straight to the conflict skipping Thornhill’s experiences growing up in London. This part of Grenville’s novel shapes him and provides a powerful backstory to his character and Bovell uses it that way. It becomes a source of discussions between him and his wife, especially during her illness, and is manifest on stage through a chance meeting with Captain Suckling in Sydney (when he goes to collect his on convict workers) and the more expressionistic appearance of the Newgate Turnkey prior to the final climactic boat trip. London is perhaps most powerfully symbolised in the simple Nursery Rhyme ‘London Bridge’. Early in the play Sal sings it as a nursery rhyme with her children, a gentle reminder for her about the land that she sees as home for her family, something her husband is very much aware of. In stark contrast it becomes a destructive anthem, a ‘terrifying song of war’ that the men chant as they enact their most horrific crime; where ‘wood and clay will wash away’ while they ‘build it up with bricks and mortar … iron and steel’.

And so he grounds the play in the one location, The Hawkesbury River.

Secondly, Bovell brought in the perspective of the indigenous people. He understood Grenville’s reasons for not going there but knew that on stage it would be impossible not to give them a voice, an attitude, a point of view. And so he enlarged the Dharug clan lead by Yalamundi, the perfect dramatic counterpoint to Thornhill. He built the play around two families, not one, with the ‘underlying principle ... to reveal what these two groups of people share, their shared humanity as opposed to their clear cultural differences’ (The Australian, 2012).

Somewhere along the process it was agreed that the play would be bilingual. Richard Green, an indigenous expert on the Dharug language, helped translate a language that was still very much alive in his eyes. From the prologue onwards we can read the Dharug language on the page and its translations. We can see so much humour, understanding and tragically more and more misunderstanding and missed opportunities. Yet none of this will be revealed on stage except in the rest of the actors’ body language. The audience is as ignorant as Thornhill himself. But, Bovell has artfully revealed the shared humanity through the structure of his play. Boys play and are called in by their mothers. They sing.

Thirdly, Bovell created the perfect narrative voice in the character of Dhirrumbin. She is the bridge between the two families, between the two cultures, between the stage and the audience. Make no mistake. She is the river. Yalamundi summons her and she appears. Dhirrimbim speaks or sings in both Dharug and English. Other than Blackwood and Dulla Dyin, the only example of harmony, and the most powerful final words to a play by Ngalamalum, she is the only one who fully comprehends the importance of the words. And they are for us to comprehend too. She speaks the hearts and minds of both Thornhill and Yalamundi, as they stand face to face failing to understand each other. She evokes a mother’s loneliness, children’s shared happiness, and a mob of settlers’ unadulterated hate. She describes the massacre itself like a Greek tragedy’s chorus. And she cries a song of mourning.

Bovell’s skill here is in not only expanding the storytelling and conversational landscape but creating a mechanism for working in more of Grenville’s poetic detail. He does it through Dhirrumbin but also in his extensive stage directions. They are unique. They remind us that this is Grenville’s work. They not only detail the actions of the characters, but gives subtext to inaction, proffers given circumstances and suggests motivation. He prescribes more than the landscape, the setting. He gives it breath, atmosphere, a role. All of this gives the director, designer and actor so much more to explore. The play is a gift.
Bovell sets the stage for a struggle for understanding, both verbal and spiritual. This is great theatre on a grand scale - bold, compassionate, visceral, and demanding. Bovell demonstrates why he is one of Australia’s master storytellers, tackling the tragedy at the heart of our national story with tenderness, fluidity, poetry and pace. The final scene is a heartbreaking call to the better part of all of us.


He talked about leaving room in a playscript for the actors to complete the work. That playwrighting was a not a literary art but an extension of play making where the playwright is not a writer but a craftsperson who, like a blacksmith shaping wrought iron, wroughts a play from words and staging, design description, song and instructions to the players.

Wesley Enoch on Andrew Bovell
Starting Points into Theatre Studies Outcome 3.3

Theatre Studies – Study Design & Assessment Handbook

Accreditation Period – 2014 – 2017

Outcome 3.3

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse and evaluate the interpretation of a written playscript in production to an audience.

To achieve this outcome the student will draw on key knowledge and key skills outlined in Area of Study 3.

Key knowledge

- The contexts of the interpretation of a written playscript.
- Decisions taken that were evident in the production to interpret the written playscript for performance.
- The application of acting and other stagecraft to develop the written playscript for performance.
- Theatrical styles in the written playscript and in the play in performance.
- Terminology and expressions used to describe, analyse and evaluate a theatrical production.

Key skills

- Analyse ways in which the contexts of a written playscript were interpreted through performance to an audience.
- Evaluate the interpretation of the written playscript for performance.
- Analyse and evaluate the application of acting and other stagecraft to develop the written playscript for performance.
- Discuss similarities and differences of theatrical styles between the playscript and the play in performance.
- Use appropriate theatrical terminology and expressions.

Effectively, the skills are what you are able to do with the knowledge. Always think in terms of the skills and knowledge Theatre Studies is trying to give you. Then, and only then, apply those skills into addressing the criteria.

In the case of the SAC and the written examination that means how you apply the skills in writing.

Below, I have tried to look at each criterion and what it might mean for ‘The Secret River’.

The Criteria

When we look at the assessment criteria for the SAC (3.3) in the Assessment Handbook, this is what the good responses will provide:

- Highly perceptive analysis and comprehensive evaluation of ways the performance interprets the contexts of the written playscript.

The first thing we must do is understand the context of the written playscript, in this case Bovell’s adaptation of ‘The Secret River’. Being an adaptation, our understanding will be stronger if we look at Grenville’s original novel and recognize what Bovell has brought to the page. ‘Contexts’
implies historical, cultural & social contexts – essentially the world of the play as it exists on the page. Be very clear about this: you must know the play and then look at how we see it on the stage.

- Detailed and comprehensive evaluation of how the written playscript is interpreted within and through the performance.

Now we are interested in the production, in this case Neil Armfield’s production staged at Arts Centre Melbourne’s Playhouse in March 2015. What the STC has brought to the stage? What sort of world has Armfield created? Has he adhered to the world of the playscript or has he re-contextualised aspects of it? In this case, we have a simple response. Armfield’s production in Sydney, 2013, was the premiere production developed in collaboration with Bovell. The page and the stage should be the same. The production we are seeing is the same production, revived several years on, where only some of the actors have changed. Where we might compare with other interpretations, here we have only one.

- Complex analysis and insightful evaluation of how acting and other stagecraft contributes to the presentation of the performance as an interpretation of the written playscript.

This asks us to look at how assorted stagecraft – any of acting, direction, set, costume, make-up, properties, sound, lighting and/or theatre technologies – contribute in some way to Armfield’s production. First of all we must understand what is in Bovell’s playscript – dialogue and stage directions – that these contributors have to work with. Then, we must be able to clearly describe what we see on stage. Finally, we must be able to analyse how it contributes meaning to the interpretation.

For me, I focus in on the stagecraft that matter, the ones that give me something clear to write about. I am looking for how one stagecraft – in isolation or collaboration – ‘contributes’ to any of the following:

1. Context
2. Character
3. Style
4. Theme
5. Mood/atmosphere.

In the case of Armfield’s production, they are all worth consideration. Acting and direction offer limitless discussion. Stephen Curtis’ set design works so closely with Mark Howett’s lighting to give them the landscape of this tale. Iain Grandage’s live soundscape is integral to the mood of the whole production, yet suggests so much more. While Tess Schofield’s costume design, blended with earthy make-up, deftly defines the world of the play (and its characters) without explicitly adhering to it. Props do likewise.

- Comprehensive discussion of the similarities and differences of the theatrical styles used in the performance and the written playscript.

In this task there is a requirement to discuss the style which is implied in the writing as well as that which is presented to you on the stage. This seems obvious when we choose plays from the past, the theatrical canon, which we can define, be it as Ancient Greek Tragedy, Neo-classical French Comedy, or Theatre of the Absurd. Contemporary writing is often not so easily classifiable and gets billed as eclectic. Do not seek to define if it is not there. Simply identify the features of the writing – the conventions – that move it beyond straight realism (or call it that if that is all it is). Bovell’s play offers so much in its structure, form and language.
This must be applied to the staging as well. Sometimes a production seeks to replicate a given theatrical style in its purest form. However, I would encourage you not to delve deeply for a theatrical style if it is not there. Many contemporary theatre practitioners do not think of style in such a manner. They pick and choose or follow the conventions that allow them to achieve their intended meaning.

Essentially this means you are looking on stage for specific conventions applied by the director, actor or designer within the production. This may begin with conventions of realism: the portrayal of three dimensional, psychologically considered characters, dressed in historically accurate clothes, playing out their lives in seeming real-time, amongst fourth-wall sets and properties to the diegetic sounds of their world. On top of this (or instead of) there may be conventions that heighten some aspect of the intended meaning of the play: the use of song, direct address, heightened use of language, comedy, caricatures, biomechanical movement, the verfremdungseffekt, and so on. It could be features of a given stagecraft used a given way: exposed lighting, stylized make-up, incongruent soundtrack, exaggerated props. Theatrical blacks, exposed transitions form one scene to another by actors in neutral role.

As discussed above, given that in this case the playscript was developed in collaboration with the director and theatre company, we would expect few differences and a lot of similarities. Your job is still to identify those similarities and the points where Armfield has moved beyond those conventions implied in Bovell’s script.

- Comprehensive use of appropriate analytical and evaluative theatrical terminology and expressions.

Hopefully, this one is clear. We need to use the language of the theatre. We need to know our aprons and cycloramas, prosceniums and flats, soundtrack and sound effects, resonance and amplification, washes and specials, breeches and pleats, foundations and highlights, direct address and internal monologue, stillness and silence, transitions and transformations. You should be building a glossary of key terms aligned to each area of knowledge.

Some off you will find it easier to consider these in isolation. More developed responses will see the integration of ideas across the criteria. Either way works. Do what works for you.
2014 exam Section 1

How were two or more areas of stagecraft applied to interpret the written playscript in the production?

In the analysis, refer to:

• the script excerpt from the play (see pages 3–5)
• other parts of the playscript
• the play in performance.

I have selected an excerpt from the playscript

Excerpt – from Secret River – the Prologue

Yalamundi’s Song

Nura–Da Nura---Da Nura---Da Nura---Da Nura---Da (Country)
Nura–Da Nura---Da Nura---Da Nura---Da Nura---Da
Guwuwi Guwuwi Nura–Da Nura---Da Nura---Da Nura---Da Nura---Da.
(Calling out to country)

DHIRRUMBIN (as the song ends) He saw the smoke from the nearby ridge. He knew what it meant. Someone was coming. They’d heard the stories passed down the river. Of strangers. And trouble. They’d seen the boats passing. This way and back. This way and back. And the old man, Yalamundi felt the pain in his chest. Because he knew something was about to change. And he didn’t know how to stop it. He wanted to. He wanted time to stand still.

While away from here, some thirty miles down the coast, another man sees a chance to be something more than what he is and a woman waits as she watches over her kids and sings a song from some far away place.

Sydney Cove. The Thornhill’s Hut.

Sal Thornhill sits by the light of a lamp. Her sons, Willie and Dick have fallen asleep at her side.

SAL (singing softly) London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down. London Bridge is falling down, My fair lady.
Who has stole my watch and chain, Watch and chain, watch and chain; Who has stole my watch and chain, My fair lady.

Off to prison you must go, You must go, you must go; Off to prison you must go, My fair lady.

William Thornhill enters.

SAL    They wanted to wait up… Couldn’t keep their eyes open in the end.

Thornhill looks upon his sons. He cares more for them than he has the words to say. He lifts Dick and lays him in the bed and then Willie as Sal covers them with a blanket.

2013 Exam

This question relates to the 2013 Unit 3 prescribed play list.

Answer one of the following questions.

2013 THEATRE STUDIES EXAM

In your response, you should use appropriate theatrical language, terminology and expressions.

Compare one or more theatrical styles implied in the playscript with how they were applied in the production.

OR

Compare two or more areas of stagecraft implied in the playscript with how they were applied in the production.

OR

Compare two or more key images and ideas implied in the playscript with how they were interpreted through direction in the production.

OR

Compare acting and one or more other areas of stagecraft implied in the playscript with how these were applied in the production.
2012 Exam

Question 1

This question relates to the 2012 Unit 3 prescribed play list.

Answer one of the following questions.

In your response you should

• refer directly to both the written playscript and the play in the performance

• use appropriate theatrical language, terminology and expressions.

Evaluate the decisions made when interpreting the written playscript in one or more of the following areas of the performance.

• direction

• design

• acting

Or

Evaluate the contribution of an individual(s) working in one or more areas of stagecraft to interpret the written playscript in the performance.

Or

Evaluate how the performance drew on and/or changed the context(s) of the written playscript.

2011 Exam

Analyse the interrelationships between the play in performance, the written playscript and one or more of its contexts.

Or

Analyse how the theatrical style(s) implied in the playscript was (were) interpreted in the performance.

Or

Evaluate the interpretation of the written playscript in the performance.

Or

Analyse ways in which two areas of stagecraft were used to interpret the playscript in the performance.

In your response you should

• refer directly to both the written playscript and the play in performance

• discuss the style(s) implied in the playscript and the style(s) used in the performance

• use appropriate theatrical language, terminology and expressions.
Starting Points in Direction (Style and theme) - before

As every student would be discovering directors can approach plays from a myriad of perspectives. Their starting point (note how I’m working it in!) could be context based, character based, mood based, theme based and/or style based. Directors can be actor-driven or stagecraft driven. It could be a combination of any of these. It may be explicit in their thinking or it may simply evolve the more and more they delve into the text.

Your job is to look into the script for any of these. Given the other sections covered in this guide I have approached this in combination with performance style.

As discussed in the section on Outcome 3.3, it is not essential to try and categorise a playscript into a specific style. It can happen. A musical is a musical. Brecht wrote epic plays. But contemporary plays often defy definition. The best approach is to identify the features of the writing that invite the application of theatrical conventions for realistic and non-realistic effect.

Here are some of Bovell’s features in ‘The Secret River:

- The use of narrator (Dhirrumbin & on one occasion – Thornhill)
- Bilingual script (English and Dharug)
- Actors playing dogs and kangaroos
- Actors picking up multiple roles
- Episodic structure
  - Prologue
  - Act 1 – 13 scenes
  - Act 2 – 19 scenes
  - Epilogue
- Classically structured, the play too aches. It has an arc structure that we understand – almost post-morality play, with a touch of Shakespearean tragedy (Review, The Australian 2013)
- Extensive, and often poetic, stage directions
  
  *As the shadows of dusk creep across the river and push up the length of the point, the Hope remains stuck fast in the mud with Sal still on board among their bundles of provisions and belongings. The air is thick with sound. Birds are settling for the night and a chorus of insects fills her ears. She remains very still as if to move would be to acknowledge that she had arrived.*

- Use of song & nursery rhyme
- Split scenes (end of Act One and ‘Little Fish’)
- Improvised action (start of Act Two and the boys playing)
- Flashbacks (crowds of London pass and the Newgate Turnkey)

The dialogue of all characters is realistic, replete with pauses, interruptions, repetitions and colloquial and coarse expression. It is honest, raw, human. It is delivered through the gamut of emotional states.

Only through Dhirrumbin’s voice do we move from the descriptive to the prescriptive, the starkly informative to the hauntingly poetic. But she is talking to us.

**Task**

How might you direct the use of narrator across the production?

Look over Dhirrumbin’s role across the script and discuss how she could:
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Direction, Style and Theme

- Be voiced.
- Direct her words (to audience, characters or both?)
- Use the stage
  - Confined to a single space
  - Around the perimeter, outside the world.
  - Wandering freely through it.
  - Engaging with the characters
  - Characters aware of her presence?
- Be supported through stagecraft
  - Costume
  - Sound
  - Lighting
  - Props

**Task**

Beyond all of this the many staging challenges proffered by stage direction or descriptions of stage action within the narration.

As a class discuss how you could stage the following scenes/sequences, giving thought to particular acting or stagecraft conventions:

- End of Prologue: To Dhirrumbin’s narration the Thornhills travel up the Hawkesbury on The Hope.
- Act One Scene 1 – Thornhill helps her down from the boat and she steps shin deep into mud.
- Act One Scene 2 – Thornhill and the boys set to work …
- Act One Scene 8 – Dick and the boys and playing down at the river.
- Act One Scene 9 – Smasher’s place and the savagery of snarling dogs through to the smell of burning flesh (narration).
- End of Act One – Dharug sing a song of home … settlers singing Little Fishy … room quietens … frightened … Dharag song rises up over the ridge.
- End of Act Two Scene 3 – Crowds of London pass…
- Act Two scene 8 – The Dharug are burning the landscape…the rain … black to green … the kangaroos… gunshot
- Act Two Scene 14 – Darkey Creek
- Act Two scene 18 – The Maid of the River … on the boat … Sagitty … word travelled fast … Smasher’s story … Newgate Turnkey … like a knot in old rope … back on The Hope … London Bridge.
Task


Close analysis – read and annotate Appendix III – the first face-to-face encounter between Thornhill, Yalamundi and those around them. Consider how you would approach the scene as a director and how you would deal with characterisation and relationships, style, possible themes, mood and context, as they relate to:

- Dialogue in two languages language (and the importance of understanding and misunderstanding)
- Stage directions
  - character focused – ‘Thornhill swallows … as if this would convince someone he wasn’t too worried.’
  - elements of nature – ‘up in a rive oak …’
  - poetic qualities - ‘The moment is his’
  - specific action – ‘breaking, digging, turning the soil (an important symbol).
- Where are the different tensions can be found.

Rehearse it. Direct it. Design it. Present it.

Themes & Symbols.

As a class discuss what themes and key symbols seem to emanate from Bovell’s script.

Come up with a short list for each. A list of symbols are offered as starting points:

- The fireplace
- London Bridge
The Secret River is a difficult story to tell. For all the beauty, dignity and depth of this tale, it keeps leading into dark places.

(Neil Armfield – notes from Perth Season program 2013)

Starting Points in Direction (Style and theme) - after

Neil Armfield’s production of ‘The Secret River’ is sublime. He has embodied the beauty, the dignity and the depth of this tale into the vessel we call the theatre. While he has ensured that this is a triumph of content over style Armfield’s direction is full of style. He has deftly woven every stagecraft into layer upon layer of the staging of this story, and yet it feels so simple in the telling.

Reviewers have seen aspects of Greek tragedy in the fatally flawed journey of Thornhill, an historical drama, elements of Brechtian Epic staging (consider the plays structure, the functional and exposed stagecraft and the almost white-walled ghost gum backdrop), contrasted by the raw Poor Theatre realisation of place and character. Ultimately it is a piece of story-telling and it feels very, very real. He never lets us forget that this is a piece of theatre and yet we are drawn so deeply into the emotional journey. The message is firmly delivered but the experience is more intrinsically felt. These juxtapositions are what makes this theatrical experience so special and so intriguing to explore.

Task

Four weeks into rehearsal, it is hard to direct with your eyes stinging with tears. It takes us back to a moment in our country’s narrative when a different outcome, a different history, was possible.

(Armfield)

Below are excerpts from my descriptions of the 2013 production (see Appendix I). Use them to do the following:

1. Identify the array of theatrical devices/ conventions Armfield has employed in creating this production, both acting and stagecraft based.
2. Expand) and build (or indeed crush and rebuild) this list with your own description, analysis and interpretation.
3. Look for possible connections to key themes:
   - Connection to the land, to home, a sense of place
   - Shared humanity
   - Mis-sed-understanding.
   - The importance of names.
4. Try and identify key thematic symbols, manifest in words, action, objects, sounds, or other forms.

Assorted production notes:

- Prologue - **Dhirrumbin** (narrator) steps across and taking them from Sal’s arms lays both boys (who give over their weight) down to sleep. Eg. The narrator has entered the acting space to help the transition
- End of Prologue - “They bought The Queen …” p13 – **cello** and flute/recorder (and more?) creates the sea journey – a folksy maritime feel. A rope from beyond and above the apron becomes the spine of ‘The Hope’. The actors all grasp onto it and ‘sail’ up the Hawkesbury; simple hoist and pull and swaying motions in near darkness.
- Act 1 scene 1 - The rest of the family surround as **Thornhill** steps ‘into’ the boat to help her out. She struggles to stand with sea-legs. **Dhirrumbin** walks past and places a single bucket beside the boat as Sal steps out and into it. Actor’s voice **sfx** of squelches she steps ‘knee deep into the mud’ and walks up to the fire. Symbol – her muddied steps leave their mark on stage. The boys laugh and slide and hop (Dick .. clues in physicality) across the ‘sand’.
- Act 1 scene 2 - **Thornhill** – direct address – narrates to the audience as he scales his land. Two actors help create the bush that he slashes his way through. **Sound** – **piano** is more classical, tuneful, English as it lifts with his classical, tuneful, English as it lifts with his
- Act 1 scene 3a - Darkness descends. 7 spears descend from above like shooting stars surrounding **Thornhill** and **Dhirrumbin**. They touch the ground and lean, swaying gently …
- Act 1 scene 7 **Dhirrumbin** (standing USC) or Gilyagan sings as she sweeps a patch of ground clean with a twist of reeds bound together as a broom. Narrabi and Garraway feed the fire with twigs. It is a reflection on the **Thornhill’s** own camp, literally in staging terms.
- Act 1 – scene 8 - Transition occurs as **Dhirrumbin** talks of Dick. He stands DSL watching beyond the audience. **Sound** – **piano** and recorder is innocent, melodious, hopeful.
- Act 1 – scene 9 - Smasher’s place – blue lighting transforms to evening as the mothers sit. **Sound** – quick rhythm guitar and **cello** create sense of harmony and pleasure and freedom as the boys run around. They pour out a large pale of water and slide down stage through water and dirt. Real. Carefree. **Lighting** transforms to evening as the mothers both call their children in. The similarity is not lost on **Dhirrumbin** – ‘neither knowing they were calling for the same thing.’
- Act 1 scene 11 **Thornhill** and Willie meet Captain Suckling. As the father remembers his status, Willie is taught it with his cap and a ‘sir’. **Thornhill** chooses Dan Oldfield who remembers him from a line of four roped convicts, and unties him,. He too is reminded of new status between men. **Dhirrumbin** narrates **Thornhill**’s desire never to return to London as the stage goes into tableau.

Random observation - We see glimpses of authority figures and hear snippets of William Thornhill’s life back in London but we never really have to enact whole scenes. Turnkey (p83) and Suckling (p38) are two characters who conveniently mirror each other in the play telling us of an unspoken history.

Untranslated language - There has been no effort to translate the Dharug language. No surtitles. We are as ignorant as Thornhill.

Random observation - Those who sit and those who squat. The comfort of those to sit on the ground, squat or look for something to sit on reflects directly on that character’s connection to the land, an indigenous connection.
The Secret River
VCE Teachers’ Resources – Written by Sam Mackie
Direction, Style and Theme

- Act 1 scene 12 - Thornhill unwraps the gun. Multiple transitions as Yalamundi appear USL and USR. Thornhill is left DS and Sal CS. The split scene emphasises Sal’s barb ‘Depends what you’re firing at Will. Sound - plucked notes of discomfort. The isolated pools of light are broken by a band of neighbours dancing through them all, arriving in a blue light that surrounds a neat square warmly lit ‘interior’ space.

- Act 1 scene 13 - Loveday is requested to sing ‘Little Fish’ (trad. With piano) and the rest gradually join in. It becomes more tuneful and sombre. Light fades leaving them isolated, ghostlike. Slowly the sounds of indigenous voices singing with rhythm sticks emerges. They emerge from the light and slowly circle the hut. Their shadows writ huge on the backdrop/escarpment. The combination does not jar. It becomes harmonious. The hut becomes a still portrait as their sound fades out. The piano supports a single female indigenous voice (Dhirrumbin?) as they all slowly disperse, her final cries are almost mournful.

- Beginning of Act 2 - Dick, Narrabi and Garraway – ‘naked’ (shorts) – play (‘improvise’) grandma’s steps (grandma facing the tree-cyc USC), as the audience returns. House lights dim. Acoustic guitar is light and easy a playful folksy tempo; the cello joins in. playing with them as they freeze, like dreamtime animals, or slide with joy. Willie stands SL, watching ‘wanting to be one of them, wondering why he can’t’. The boys run off leaving Willie. The last notes of the cello remain leaving the mood as a quietly brooding one, transforming us back to …

- End of Act 2 scene 3 - A classical piano riff in a minor key, and the occasional English bell combine with Dhirrumbin’s narration into Thornhill’s mind. He stands alone centre stage, a defiant silhouette. Behind him, silhouettes of his London past cross the stage, in a dull, plain white English light. The piano mellows as his thoughts of a changing world ‘made him gentle’.

- Act 2 scene 8 - Lighting transforms day into night as the Dharug mob come onto stage. Other actors settle SL to add to the sound track, an air of mystery, driven by plucked strings from the piano. Three collect long sticks that smoke and tap the ground here and there (leaving trails of smoke in the air like sparklers), while others fan and beat the ground with branches, fillig the stage with smoke: it is a fire, their fire, controlled ‘… a small tame thing’. The Thornhills rush on and watch warily. The pianist throws a lizard onto stage (there is no disguise – this is theatre). It is beaten and claimed triumphantly. A snake follows. Thornhill look on trying to understand – and misunderstand – the meaning of these actions.

- Act 2 scene 9 - Slow transition to night through Dhirrumbin’s storytelling as two actors bring on a chair and lean two planks upon it to create Sal’s bed CS

- End of Act 2 scene 9 - The rest of the stage becomes a tableau. Lights turn to cool blues. We have stepped out of time. Thornhill offers recompense to Dull Dyin but there is only one thing she wants: ‘You can go William Thornhill … out of our place’ but ‘I [he] can’t.’ – This is the turning point – the tragic hero and his fatal flaw.

Random observation - scene transitions are seamless. There is no effort to disguise the setting or clearing of the stage, the end or beginning of a moment. And yet so many run fluently from one across and into the next.
The Secret River
VCE Teachers’ Resources – Written by Sam Mackie
Direction, Style and Theme

- Act 2 – scene 11 – Dhirrumbin’s calm voice belies the torment in Thornhill’s mind and soul – ‘the animal in him’. He stands alone and still CSL, almost back-lit, hunched, a pathetic beast, staring hopelessly as Dhirrumbin tenderly removes the rope from Murali’s neck, something he did not do. The cello captures the tragic overtones.

- Act 2 – scene 17 - Deep notes from piano and other sounds guide Ngalamalum’s steps across to SR where he drives the spear in to the proscenium wall. In that instant the lights come up: Sagitty stumbles and cries out – the victim, collapsing whilst holding the implied spear.

- Act 2 scene 18 - Smasher mimes the storytelling form Dhirrumbin captures, taking over eventually with contrasting aggression and bravado; a crass poetic delivery. They all drink the rum. They continue to noiselessly talk and point and laugh and drink.

- Act 2 scene 18 - Smasher, DSR narrates the boat’s return journey. Loveday and Dan exit. Thornhill has not moved from his seat, in the middle of ‘The Hope’ that Smasher outlines with a charcoaled stick. The other two return and they form the boat. Smasher hands a tin around and each takes a handful of ash – symbol - ammunition. They ‘slid[e] over the side’ of the boat and move to the back of stage. Almost silence, except for the occasional delicate note from the piano.

- End of Act 2 scene 18 – The climax - The sound of the first gunshot: a deep resonant drum beat resounds. Each of the men fire a puff of smoke ahead of them – blowing through their own cocked and clenched fists that are raised as if holding a rifle - It glows in a sliver of light. They begin to sing ‘London Bridge’ and step forward as a line. Assorted sounds add to the march, especially discordant deep piano chords. Verse by verse they come closer, singing becomes screaming, rounds of gunfire eschew, their bodies and powdered warrior-ghost faces gradually lit by the apron footlights. They stand on the apron, arms beside them, their defiant, hate-filled bodies stand over their own massacre. They stare at us.

- Epilogue – time as passed. The massacre is re-told by Dhirrumbin. Strong white lights from SR cast long shadows of the lighting trees. The shadows sway. The Dharug women come on from SR. As each killing is described the women toss a puff of ash over their heads and behind them, echoing the action of Thornhill and the other men. A different perspective.

- Epilogue - ‘No!’ Jack pronounces, simply, truthfully, ‘This me ... my place. Dhirrumbin’s voice chants as Thornhill walks to the back of stage and boldly brushes a series of bold vertical strokes and a horizontal stroke. He repeats this over and over across the backdrop. A fence? His initial? His name? As lights slowly fade, Dhirrumbin crosses the stage and exits. Ngalamalum exits. The chanting stops. Darkness, Silence.

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The graph of dramatic tension across the production is worth graphing. Armfield seems to have let us run against and with the tide in a relatively gently ebb-and-flow first act. But the tempo lifted in Act Two and the steadily rising tension led us to a perfect climax and denouement. It was never overwrought.

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Gilygan and Buryia offer a gift to Sal Thornhill, as Dhirrumbin watches.
Starting points – characters and actors - before

The pioneering characters of ‘The Secret River’ are best captured on the pages of Grenville’s novel. She had 330 pages and 100,000 words to produce every nuanced and explicit thought, feeling and deed. Bovell’s play does several very important things to both expand and contract Grenville’s masterful writing.

First of all he gives voice to the indigenous characters of the Hawkesbury, the Dharug people (see section on Bovell) and whilst we may struggle as much as Thornhill and others to understand them we very much see and hear them (although it is interesting that there is a full translation of what is said in Bovell’s script). Secondly, he gave us Dhirrumbin, the narrator. She is both the river and the bridge. She gives voice to the indigenous experience, she seems to be past, present and future (like Grenville’s dedication at the start of her novel) and her words are colonial English, and we must listen. This also gives Bovell a chance to get into the heart and soul of Thornhill and others as she also becomes their internal monologue, deftly working Grenville’s own captivating language.

So where does the actor begin? They can extract descriptions like these for Blackwood and Smasher Sullivan from Grenville’s work:

Blackwood was a big man, bigger even than Thornhill, with a lighterman’s brawny calves and arms. He had a kind of rough dignity about him, a closed in quality, like a bag drawn up tight around its contents. He ran deep and silent, his face always turned away, his eyes always elsewhere. His few words were broken by something like a stammer. (p94)

Smasher Sullivan had a face that the sun had burned piebald like a botched bit of frying. The sandy hair retreated from the red dome of forehead, the eyes were small and naked-looking e without eyebrows. He gripped The Queen’s gunwale and looked up with a strained eager grin that showed gaps where his teeth were missing. (p103)

And Thornhill himself has a backstory in London 70 pages long that cannot be ignored. Bovell knows the novel is there and so his initial character listings are simple: Willaim Thornhill – an emancipist settler … Yalamundi – a Dharug Elder Man … and so on. He does list a string of characters that must be played by the cast – a doubling up of roles – and finishes the list off by indicating that ‘Dogs and kangaroos are also played by the cast’.

From a Theatre Studies perspective we, like the actor, are looking for clues in the playscript to each character. We want to find their:

- Given circumstances
- Characteristics
- Motivation
- Status & relationships.

The Sydney Theatre Company Education Pack offers strong character summaries. These are strong starting points. You can go further with various study guides on Grenville’s novel.

However, your job is to know the playscript, so go back into it and see what is there.

Task

Below are some key moments for some of the characters - starting points to character analysis, be it through their words, the words of others, the words of Dhirrumbin, or stage directions from Bovell. Use them to build your own character summaries, ensuring you embody the key terminology above. Do not be limited by these choices. There is more than enough to explore in the likes of Smasher Stevens and Blackwood, Dick Thornhill and Dan Oldfield.

William Thornhill – an emancipist settler
- Dhirrumbin - While away from here, some thirty miles down the coast, another man sees a chance to be something more than what he is (prologue).
- Thornhill looks upon his sons. He cares more for them than he has words to say (prologue)
- Sal – You’re a river man. Will. You’ve got river water for blood (prologue)
- Dhirrumbin (about he and Sal) – They never tired of one another’s touch. And any trouble between them could always be settled beneath the blanket (prologue)
- Dhirrumbin – He kept his eyes forward and saw only a blank page on which a man might write a new life (end of prologue)
- Thornhill (to Dick)– You hit your child once, deserved or not, he’ll never feel quite the same way about you again … if one beating don’t stop you, another won’t do it neither. That’s one lesson my old man never learned (Act 2 scene 6)
- Thornhill (to Dick) You got the whole lay of the place here, boy. One day we will build our house up here. And not just a thing of bark. A house made from stone. With rooms for all. A parlor. A sitting room. A fire place in every room. And here… a place to sit and watch the river pass… Only don’t tell your Ma. She don’t see it yet (Act 2 Scene 6).
- Dhirrumbin - As he boarded the Hope and turned for home, he thought of the woman… He had imagined it It was no more than a single hot instant; the animal in him. Smasher knew it was there…. He tries to believe that he is a better man and yet he doesn’t turn the boat around. He left her there and sailed on wondering if a man decides that he did not see a thing… whether he could make it true. (Act 2 scene 11).
- Dhirrumbin remains holding the boy.
- Dhirrumbin - He wanted to go, to leave this place, to let someone else find it. But the boy would not stop looking at him so he held him in the silence, wanting a sound, a bird’s call, the wind in the trees anything but even the mosquitoes had abandoned the place. He knew he would never share with Sal the picture of this boy. It was another thing he was going to lock away in the closed room in his memory, where he could pretend it did not exist (Act 2 scene 14)
- He raises his hand to strike her. She does not flinch.
- Sal – Hit me if you want. But it won’t change nothing.
- He lowers his arm. In that moment his life was a skiff with no oar.(Act 2 Scene 17)
- Dhirrumbin - And he thought of everyman who had ever stood over him. Judges and Gentleman. Governors and Captains (Act 2 scene 18)
- Dhirrumbin - He felt something in him slow down (Act 2 scene 18)
- Thornhill enters. He wears a fine coat now and a pair of new boots that gives him the walk of a man of substance (Epilogue).

This barely scratches the surface. Build your own.

Sal Thornhill – his wife

- Dhirrumbin - and a woman waits as she watches over her kids and sings a song from some far-away place (prologue).
- Sal – You’re free William … WE can go home (prologue)
- She remained very still as if to move would be to acknowledge that she had arrived (Act One Scene 1)
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- Sal looks around for something she might recognise. Something that might tell her that someone could live here (Act One Scene 1)
- Sal never spoke of her loneliness to Thornhill… (Act One Scene 10)
- Sal and Willie wince at the sound of each strike (Act Two Scene 4)
- Sal – Better poor than dead
  Thornhill – That’s where we disagree Sal (Act Two scene 13)
- Dhirrumbin – By morning Sal had become a woman turned to wood (Act Two Scene 15)
- She stands uselessly with the broom still in her hands
  SAL - They was here… Like you and me was in London. Just the exact same way. You never told me. You never said. Their grannies. And their great grannies. All along. Even got a broom to keep it clean, Will. Just like I got myself (Act Two Scene 16)
- THORNHILL - Your songs and your stories. The names of your streets. They don’t mean nothing. Not to me, not to your sons (Act Two Scene 16)
- Sal enters, ten years older now and no longer pregnant. The child that was born that year is now in the cold earth beneath the weathered stone, which she stands before (epilogue)

Yalamundi – A Dharug Elder Man

- DHIRRUMBIN (as the song ends) He saw the smoke from the nearby ridge. He knew what it meant. Someone was coming. They’d heard the stories passed down the river. Of strangers. And trouble. They’d seen the boats passing. This way and back. This way and back. And the old man, Yalamundi felt the pain in his chest. Because he knew something was about to change. And he didn’t know how to stop it. He wanted to. He wanted time to stand still (prologue)
- Yalamundi cuts across his words as if they were of no more importance than the rattle of wind in a tree (Act 1 scene 3)
- Yalamundi walks towards him and places a hand on his forearm. Authority radiates off the old man like heat off a fire. A stream of words begin to come out of his mouth.
  YALAMUNDI Ngaya biyal wural, ngyini ngarra ngaya. Yalamundi gugarug. (I’m not going to hurt you but you need to listen. I am the law man here. You need to do things the right way.)
- Yalamundi rises… the other men start a different beat with the clapsticks as the old man dances alone, his feet stamping into the ground, so that the dust flies up around him, glowing with light: the pounding of his feet seems like the pulse of the earth itself.
- Thornhill saw the old man and raised the gun. It went off with a puff of blue smoke. He thought he must have missed for the old man was still standing there, with a question on his face. Thornhill thought to answer, if he knew the meaning of the question being asked, before the old man’s legs collapsed beneath him and he sat politely down in the dust. Blood came from his mouth, just a trickle like spit but so red. And then he lay down and kissed the earth with the blood from his mouth. And a great shocked silence hung over the lagoon.

Dhirrumbin – the narrator

- Without warning or fanfare Yalamundi breaks into song – a mourning song. The others fall silent. Ngalamalum and Wangarra take up clapsticks and accompany him.
  As a figure emerges from the river as if called by the song --- Dhirrumbin, our narrator.
- Beyond this, there is little to define this central figure beyond her name. She is the river. She is the past, present and future. What the script does show us is that she understands. She understands us all. Enough to sing a song of mourning at the end of the play.
- Are there other clues to this character that I have missed?
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Characters and Acting

Starting Points – Characters And Actors - After

Once you have seen the production your job is to identify how the actors have brought their characters to realisation on the stage. In doing so you are interested in the following:

- The use of expressive skills
  - Voice (and use of language and silence)
  - Movement (and stillness)
  - Gesture
  - Facial expression
  - This can be expanded into other terminology, such as posture, stance, gait, and more.
- The use of space and focus and timing.
- The application of Performance styles & theatrical conventions.
- Establishing and maintaining an actor-audience relationship

Task

As discussed in the section on Outcome 3.3, I find some of the strongest student writing builds out of key moments to illicit the bigger picture of an actor’s realisation of a character, and not visa-versa.

Use answers to the following questions to build up your pictures for the acting in ‘The Secret River’. Ensure every response comes back to key acting terminology and allows us to see and hear the actor’s work on stage. Be very clear when referring to either the actor or character by name.

1. Describe any of the following moments involving Dhurrimbin:
   a. When she first enters the stage.
   b. Putting the boys to sleep.
   c. Watching Thornhill and his family settle in on the Dharug land.
   d. Watching the Dharug dance with Thornhill.
   e. Removing the rope from Murali’s neck.
   f. Describing the massacre of the Dharug people (note the final descriptions involving Dulla Dyin and where she directs her words))
   g. Her final mourning song and departure.
   h. Other moments of your own choosing.
2. Describe the behaviour of the actors when not central to the action of the scene
   a. As neutral observers on the side of stage.
   b. As accompanists to the soundtrack
   c. As passing characters
   d. As bushes and other parts of the landscape.
   e. In assisting the transition from one scene to another.
3. Describe the actors realisation of both Smasher’s dogs and the mob of kangaroos
   a. The physicality and use of space.
   b. The transition in and out of ‘character’
      i. Note the spontaneous evocation of the dogs when at Thornhill’s hut.
      ii. Note the comic exit of the kangaroo after Thornhill fails to shoot it.
4. Describe the realisation of Smasher Stevens
   a. When first visiting Sal
   b. When haggling with Thornhill and the ‘well of loneliness behind the man’s filthy eyes.’
   c. When parading his ears.
   d. When offering Thornhill his piece of ‘black velvet’
   e. When beaten by Blackwood
   f. When regaling the room with story of Sagitty’s murder before driving them to a brutal act of revenge.
   g. Enacting the massacre
      i. Creating the boat
ii. Handing out the gun’powder’
iii. Issuing instructions
iv. As part of ‘London Bridge’

5. Selecting 5 key moments from your character work above, capture the two actors’ work in realising the complex moods and faces of Sal and Will Thornhill’s relationship.
   a. The prologue (especially the closing moments)
   b. Punishing Dick
   c. Sal Visiting the Dharug camp for the first time and threatening to pack up and go.
   d. The last words after the massacre.
   e. The Epilogue

6. Use any of the moments from the list above to build up Nathaniel Dean’s portrayal of William Thornhill. Try and capture moments of contrast to highlight the complexity of the performance.
   a. Repeat for Sal Thornhill.

7. Use the moment of confrontation (including the first and last) to compare the realisation of two characters with similar intent: William Thornhill (Nathaniel Dean and Yalamundi (Kelton Pell)).

8. Describe the acting of four boys as a sign of possible but ultimately lost conciliation and shared values using the following:
   a. When Dick first meets Narrabi and Garraway leading to water fights and slides.
   b. Playing ‘Grandma’s footsteps after interval.
   c. Watching fire made.
   d. Around the fire with their respective families.
   e. When Garraway is caught stealing the corn.

9. After reading over the translations in the script, analyse the acting of the scenes involving the Dharug tribe and the use of their own language.

10. Describe the realisation of the settlers: Smasher Stevens, Sagitty Birtles and Loveday, comparing them and their attitude to the land and its people with John Blackwood and Mrs Herring.

11. Compare the acting in the exchanges between the settlers and the Dharug people, specifically looking at
   a. The men
   b. The women
   c. The children.
Starting Points – ‘The Secret River’ And Stagecraft

Because we need to consider both the playscript and the production I have divided up each stagecraft study into ‘before’ and ‘after’: before and after you see it. Stagecraft has been my starting point (there it is again) and will pick strands from many other considerations. I have endeavoured not to double up too much, so there may be instances where an idea is covered elsewhere (or I missed it entirely). The important thing for students to do is not look at some aspect of the play or production in isolation: the theatre is about the collaboration of many. Look for how Bovell and Armfield have woven an amazing theatrical tapestry.

Set & The Playscript - Before

This place had been here long before him. It would go on sighing and breathing and being itself after he had gone, the land lapping on and on, watching, waiting, getting on with its own life.”

(From The Secret River – Kate Grenville)

I took my cue from Kate Grenville's Thornhill who on his first night on the Hawkesbury compares it to his experience of a church: "... so big it made his eyes water. He was dizzy, lost in panic... it was a void into which his very being expanded without finding a boundary, all in the merciless light that blasted down..."

(From Stephen Curtis – Setting The Secret River)


The first task is to analyse the set demands that exist in Bovell’s adaptation of ‘The Secret River’ and to what degree the design must add to the intended meaning in respect of context, characterisation, style, theme and mood.

His script is quite clear in establishing the context of the play from the outset:

_The play is set on The Hawkesbury River between September 1813 and April 1814. The Dharug people who lived there at this time knew the river as Dhirrumbim._

He remains absolutely connected to the time and place of Grenville’s novel, although he has left London and much of Sydney behind.

The titles of each scene define the locations that must be catered for on stage. They are simple:

- The River Flat
- Sydney Cove – The Thornhill’s hut
- The River flat and a rough camp
- The Rise above the camp
- The Thornhill camp
- Next morning first light
- Blackwood's Place
- The Dharug camp
- Smasher’s place
- Sydney Harbour, on Government Wharf.
- The Other Side of the Point
- The Dharug camp and the Thornhill camp.
- Darkey Creek
- Sagitty Birtle's place
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Stagecraft

- The Maid of the River
- 1824

Aside from part of the prologue where in Sydney Cove we first meet Sal and Thornhill, and Scene 11 in Sydney Harbour, on Government Wharf, the play belongs on the Hawkesbury. There is a range of character’s huts and camps, indoors and out to be captured, across an ever-changing landscape of light and sound. For the set designer this is a significant number of locations. More than that there is the importance of the land and the river.

The ground itself is paramount, literally and symbolically. In Bovell’s stage directions it must be earth and mud and dirt and rock and corn and yams. It must be dug into, tilled, planted, reaped and raped. It must burn and char and sprout and grow change colour, produce corn and lay waste to multiple atrocities. It must be built upon and fenced. Above all it must be a place where two men believe they belong. One man believes he has won but he will be wrong and will be left building fences to keep the others out. Another will slam his fist into the earth and proclaim with integrity the other will never have, ‘This me … my place’

There is the river itself and the banks and points and bends it snakes its way through. Characters emerge from it, swim in it, collect water from it, sail on it, point towards it, dissect it, disembark and attack from it. Dhirrumbin, our storyteller, embodies it. Her name is the river.

Fire is the third element critical to Bovell’s play. From the outset the Dharug people gather around a smouldering fire. When Thornhill’s family settle in for their first night they too sit by a fire burning with the kettle half fallen into the flames. Ngalamulum will create fire from sticks. The Dharug will cook kangaroo and snake upon it, they will dance in front of it and their shadows will dance around them. Bovell even prescribes a fire be lit that burns the land:

…They watched the fire moving up the slope toward them, but this was not the wild animal of flame that they made when they burned their cleared timber. This was a different thing, a small tame thing that slid from tussock to tussock, pausing to crackle and flare for a moment and then licking tidily on (p84)

And when it is all said and done Ngalamulum will remain seated beside one, as a Dhirrumbin sings a mourning song.

But Bovell sets his scenes with more than titles, capturing the light and shadows and sounds of the landscape in poetically descriptive terms (often letting Grenville’s writing do the work), not typical of most plays. Consider the following stage directions:

As the shadows of dusk creep across the river and push up the length of the point, the Hope remains stuck fast in the mud with Sal still on board among their bundles of provisions and belongings. The air is thick with sound. Birds are settling for the night and a chorus of insects fills her ears.

…

The boys make a path of broken branches before their mother as Thornhill takes a box of provisions from the boat.

They work their way up through the trees to a rough camp in a small clearing. A crude tent their only shelter with a fire burning with the kettle half fallen into the flames. All is quiet except for the sound of the birds settling for the night (pp11-12).

How does the director and designer create a space that meanders through time and place the like the Hawkesbury itself, dances with flames, and yet is as sheer and hard as the earth?
‘From the earliest days of our script workshops I started to imagine a clear light-filled space that extended high out of view; a space in which our Aboriginal family would stand out boldly, and into which our settler family would tread muddy footprints like careless children; a space in which pictures could be drawn as part of the storytelling and the two families could play and play out this wonderful complex and tragic story’ (https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/magazine/posts/2015/september/feature-setting-the-secret-river)

Stephen Curtis’ set design for ‘The Secret River’ is remarkable in its simplicity and depth. Perhaps like Thornhill himself imagines when he sees the land, Curtis saw ‘the blank page on which a man might write a new life’. For the iconic oversized ghost gum that defines the landscape, church-like in its majesty, sits like a sculptured cyclorama, creased and folded, picking up light and shadow throughout the production, working fluidly with lighting to evoke a myriad of times and moods. More than this it allows everything that happens on stage to be more vivid, more explicit. It makes the characters more and less significant in the same breath of wind or ripple of water. Around the fringes of the space eucalypt branches do little to disguise lighting ‘trees’. All the mechanics of the storytelling are there for the seeing: musicians and their instruments, actors and their props lie around watching, or come and go, for this is not a church; it is a place where stories are shared. In front of it lies the whitewashed ground, the blank canvas where everything is played out, leaving marks of joy and understanding, anger and misunderstanding, pain and sorrow and missed understanding, across the passage of the night.

This is my introduction to the STC production stage design, one person’s interpretation that barely scratches the surface of its many elements and applications across the night. Assorted reviews will offer you other readings of Curtis’ work. Your aim is develop your interpretation

Task

Consider the following aspects of Stephen Curtis’ set design as it was manifest on stage, the first list representing features that remain permanent, the second list more transient:

- The backdrop – a giant ghost gum – taller than usual off-white draped with stained strips, creased, folded and shaped, offering crevices and shadows, assorted natural hues.
  - What is the impact of its scale on the whole design?
  - To what degree was it there to create time, place, mood and theme?
  - How many ways were light and colour and shadows used upon it, almost like a cyclorama? Try and describe moments of atmospheric contrast.
  - What is the significance of Thornhill’s final moments on stage? What is he doing?
The Secret River
VCE Teachers’ Resources – Written by Sam Mackie
Stagecraft

- The floor is a roughly painted white-scape that also appears creased and folded, hard and soft, natural. It changes with the show. Describe the different ways the passage of time places and leave its marks upon the surface of the floor? Here are some examples:
  - the outline of the boat (Smasher draws a simple line with a burnt stick around the still and silently seated Thornhill)
  - the water and mud from the boys games,
  - Sal’s first steps through the mud
  - the fish & map drawn in with a charcoal tipped stick from the fire.

- A grate and fire … A single fire burns more or less across the production
  - How important is it that the fire is real?
  - What have they done to control this?
  - Describe the scenes where the fire is an implicit part of what is happening
  - How does the fire help as a point of comparison for the two families? When do we feel this the most?
  - When is the fire extinguished or lit and how are these moments significant?

- The apron is the edge of two spaces, between actor and audience. The white-washed floor does not reach it, as if a neutral space where the storytelling can rest. Think of the different ways the apron is used across the production:
  - Where is the river? Describe moments when actors create this?
  - How does Armfield’s direction help the apron to act as the riverbank?
  - Discuss the use of props by actors along the apron.

- The edges of the stage. Further to what is suggested with the apron, the edges of the space are anything but a façade, hidden or irrelevant. Describe the following and consider why Armfield might want things like this:
  - The 4 lighting ‘trees’ (a theatrical play on words if ever there was) SL and SR, adorned but not disguised.
    - Note the use of their moving shadows in the massacre
  - The Proscenium wall
    - Sal’s calendar
    - Sagitty’s murder
  - The musician sits DSL from the apron, exposed. His piano cello, a few crates and boxes, and a goanna.
  - Other musicians hover SL with their instruments.
  - Actors seem to be visible as they sit or watch or prepare.

- Are there features to the set I have not considered that is worth discussion?

For me, strong student writing captures the set in action and not in isolation.
Task

Analyse – describe and interpret - how Curtis' set and collaborates with Armfield’s direction to achieve the following moments from Bovell’s script:

- **The Next Morning. First Light – p22**
  A heavy mist rises up from the river.

  **NGALAMALUM** (sung) Yilumay (spear) Yilumay (spear) Yilumay (spear)
  (spear)

  As the spears descend.

  Thornhill emerges from the tent. At first it seems as if a ring of new saplings have sprung up overnight until his stomach tightens realizing they are spears. He moves sharply pulling each one from the ground and snapping it in two.

- **The Thornhill Camp and the Dharug Camp**

  The Dharug are burning the landscape.

  Yalamundi walks ahead giving instructions to the party behind. Ngalamalum walks with a fire stick lighting tufts of grass here and there. Buryia, Gillyagan, Wangarra, Narabi and Garraway walk behind holding leafy green branches. Whenever the flame flares they beat it until it subsides. It is like a kind of dance.

  Thornhill is the first to emerge from the hut; the smell of smoke thick in his nostrils, swirling in the air above. One by one they emerge, Dan, Sal, Willie and Dick (scene 8 – p83)

  They walk the length of the carving and at the end of it discover another.  (scene – pp 77-78)

- **He lead him through the bush where there was now the beginnings of a track due to Thornhill having walked it so many times. They climbed up through the trees to the rise above the hut and stood on the flat platform of rock looking over what he called Thornhill Point….**

  … DICK   Well… looks like them lines all join up to make a fish.

  THORNHILL   What fish?

  DICK    Look here, Da… here’s its spine and a tail.

  They walk the length of the carving and at the end of it discover another.  (scene – pp 77-78)

- **The corn stands tall… the cobs ripe for picking** (scene 15 – p105)

- **Consider any scene of your own choice where the set becomes implicit in the storytelling.**

Properties & The Playscript - Before

Bovell’s script directly and indirectly references props that embed the play in time and place and story. Some students are concerned over whether something is a prop or a set piece. In simple terms it doesn’t matter. It could be both. A possible definition worth applying is any object that is portable or movable on set to be used by the actor. Any considered discussion on the use of props would include the different types of props: hand, consumable, perishable, personal, set (dressing), green, manual special effects, manual sound effects (see http://www.props.eric-hart.com/features/categories-of-props/)
Below are some of the diverse props in the script that could be required, implied, symbolic, contextual, suggested, or ignored:

- Sticks
- A Pardon
- Possessions
- Kettle
- The Hope
- Provisions and belongings
- Daisy plant
- spades
- Spears
- Barrels
- Broken tile
- The gun
- Carved carrying dish full of berries and fresh fruits
- Lizard
- Kangaroo
- Branches
- corn
- A calico bag, absurdly white (of flour) – poetic description.
- White cloth for sewing
- Proclamation
- Ears
- China cup
- Bottles of liquor
- Broom

Task

Work through the list, considering the importance of their use. Again, ask to what degree the prop is there to add to our understanding of

- Context – where and when the play is set. Eg The kangaroo.
- Characterisation – is it important to our understanding of a particular character’s behaviour? The ears and Smasher Sullivan
- Style – is it used in a way that emphasises the implied style of the playscript?
- Theme – are there particular themes that are embodied in particular props, making them symbolic. Eg. The broom – in Sal’s eyes as a symbol of shared living missed ‘…Even got a broom to keep it clean, Will. Just like I got myself.’(p109)
- Mood – does the prop become integral to the mood of a given scene? The liquor at the Maid of the River.
Properties & The Production - After

Many props are referenced in the section on set and staging, such is their implicit use across the production.

Task

Work through the list above and consider which props were ignored, given symbolic importance, or enhanced our understanding of character further.

Directorially speaking, the props are interesting. There is sense of practical necessity here. Like the fire itself, almost all the props are real (or look real), functional, practical. And yet there is no sense of creating a realistic environment. Most settings are implied with the simple selection of a few props (an almost Elizabethan idea).

Assorted crates, tubs, buckets and chairs are used throughout the production to help define place, beside and beyond the fireplace. Like the costumes they imply times past but there isn’t a detailed or precise effort to be historically accurate. They are they to help tell the story and help us believe in it. But do they do more than their basic function?

Task

Work through the following considerations:

- How the tubs and buckets help create the sense of the river. Try and recall and describe scenes where real water is used, seen and or heard.
- The way actors use crates, chairs and even the ground helps us understand their affinity with the land. Look to those do not anything but the earth.
- The way settings – especially the huts are established with the arrangement of chairs and the like, how they work with lighting and actors to create spaces that are intimate, isolated, vulnerable, warm, cramped.
  - How props work with sound from actors off stage to create action. Eg digging into the ground with spades.
  - The use of, or lack of, props in the final massacre: the ash from the fire and the absence of weapons. Describe this unique sequence of storytelling. What was the effect of such a heightened representation?

Extension:
Read the description of Brecht’s use of props and consider Armfield’s application of props in ‘The Secret River’.
Brecht wanted his productions to use simple functional objects made out of real material, of wood, iron, hessian and the like. Everything handled by the actors had to have a purpose. Nothing was to be decorative – this was for him the visual grammar of modern theatre.
(paraphrased from Richard Eyre’s ‘Changing Stages’ – BBC, 2000)

Is there a similar approach? Would you consider they may have the same intention?

Costume & Make-Up In The Playscript - Before

Costume and make-up does not feature as much in Bovell’s playscript, but this does not discount it’s significance nor consideration. In fact, it heightens the intention of anything that is prescribed.

The starting point must like all stagecraft return the opening statement and the context:

The play is set on The Hawkesbury River between September 1813 and April 1814. The Dharug people who lived there at this time knew the river as Dhirrumbim.

Secondly we have the cast list: names and simple descriptions. No real clues.
We could step back to Grenville’s novel and find descriptions there but, her emphasis is on the physicality of the characters, rarely what they wear.

So let us look at what is in the playscript:

- Smasher Sullivan has put on his best for the visit; a blue coat with gilt buttons a little tight under the arms … his slow smile reveals a mouth of rotten teeth (scene 5).
- She Buryia) wears Sal’s cap perched on top of her head (scene 7p37)
- Dhirrumbin(about Thornhill)… He’d never seen a naked woman, standing there in front of him (p39)
- WILLIE - It’s Dick … .He’s down with the blacks. Ain’t got no clothes on! (Act II Scene 2 p68)
- Buryia walks with a sway making the skirt swing. Then lifts it higher so that it hangs from her shoulders. SAL Well that’s another way to wear it, I suppose (Act 2 Scene 7 - p81)
- (at the Dharug camp) Black figures passing in dance in front of the fire. They are striped with white, their faces masks in which their eyes move (Act 2 Scene 10).
- ..Sagittty Birtles stands pinned to a tree with a spear in his guts … hi shirt is blood soaked (Act 2 - scene 17 – p111.
- Ngalamalum enters, ten years older now. ...
  Sal enters ten years older now …
Thornhill enters. He wears a fine coat now and a pair of new boots that gives him the walk of a man of substance... (p118 - Epilogue – 1824)

Beyond this we have the characterisation, where the interior can dress the exterior. This offers the designer the chance to play ... with context - the indigenous and colonial dress of the early 19th century ... with theme – the sense of place and belonging in such a landscape ... similarities and differences and missed understandings ... with characterisation – those who adapt their ways to the environment and those who adapt the environment to their way ... with style – and the realism of the tale within a storytelling episodic framework.

Costume & The Production - After

Tess Schofield has deftly embodied the world of Grenville’s novel, Bovell’s play and Armfield’s stage through costumes that evoke a sense of ‘then’ without the need for historical accuracy. Like other stagecraft, content – the story – has guided style and not visa-versa.

Task

Look at the images below (from the 2013 production) and describe the features of specific character's costumes, and if pertinent, make-up.

Then consider the following:

- Compare the costuming of the Dharug people and the colonials: body coverage, colours, materials, foot and head wear, body markings and adornments
- Further to this, compare the use of make-up; for one group part of their ritual, their storytelling; the other a white smear of dirt and foreign ghostliness.
- Examine closely the costume of Dhirrumbin and how it connects to her role as narrator and as the river itself.
- Discuss how Schofield has dealt with the naked appearance of Dick and the other boys, Buryia and assorted members of the Dharug clan, and in his final moments – Blackwood.
- Discuss when costume becomes a point of connection or a point of difference.
- Discuss the importance of costume in the Epilogue.
Sound & the playscript – the before

The significance of sound to Bovell’s telling of ‘The Secret River’ can be read in the opening line of the Prologue:

\[\text{Let us begin with the sound of water as it laps against the riverbank and of birds rising and of the wind gathering in the tops of the trees (p1)}\]

Sound references in the script cover a range of contextual, evocative and symbolic ideas. Some appear to be ambient will others drive the mood and intention of the moment. Here are some references from the script (there are plenty more):

- **Without warning or fanfare Yalamundi breaks into song – a mourning song. The others fall silent. Ngalamalum and Wangarra take up clapsticks and accompany him (prologue).**
- **The air is thick with sound. Birds are settling for the night and a chorus of insects fill her ears (Scene1)**
- **In the silence that follows – rueful bird lets out a long cry of regret (scene 1- later with Sal and Thornhill)**
- **As Loveday sings the settlers join him in the melancholy tune ‘Little Fishy’. The Dharug family are gathered around their own fire; Yalamundi, Buryia, Ngalamalum, Wangarra, Gilyagan, Narabi and Garraway. They sing their own song of home. It comes from someplace deep… from the past, from the earth. It floats out over the water and up the rise to the shack (end of Act 1).**
- **Sal and Willie wince at the sound of each strike (Act 2 scene 3)**
- **But it seemed that for a moment he was back in the crowded cell in Newgate Prison among the moans and cries of men condemned (Act 2 scene 18)**
- **Sound of the first gunshot (Act 2 scene 18)**

**Task**

Look up these and other sound references in the script. Consider:

1. Why Bovell has included it (ie For mood, context, theme, style, character/s)
2. How you might deal with that sound on stage:
   - Real or abstract sound.
   - Pre-recorded sounds
   - Live instruments
   - Foley items.
   - Voices
   - Amplification and other sound processing.
   - Other means?
3. Would you do anything with Dhirrumbin’s voice as she talks and sings?
It is Armfield’s [his] preference to have live music as part of his theatre shows, and with good reason. From my point of view, it allows the score to live and breathe the same air as the actors, and with them make a more complete theatrical telling of the story. Iain Grandage – interview – http://paulandrew-interviews.blogspot.com.au/2013/01/stc-secret-river-composer-iain-grandage.html

(All quotes below are from the same interview)

Iain Grandage is a celebrated and highly awarded performer, conductor and composer who has collaborated with Tim Minchin, Sinead O’Connor, Meow Meow and The Black Arm Band. He has worked with Neil Armfield before on the highly praised ‘Cloudstreet’. His work on ‘The Secret River’ in 2013 won him two Helpmann Awards for original score and music direction.

He is the centrepiece to the live music score that adds so much to the production on every level. He sits stage left, beside the apron, in front of a stripped back piano, alternating between any part of it and his cello. He watches the show. We watch him watching. He even throws a lizard on stage when required. There is nothing hidden. Behind him is a second piano where members of the cast ebb and flow adding layers to the sounds or the silence. The mechanics of this stagecraft are there to be witnessed for they are part of the storytelling.

**Task**

Read the quotes from Paul Andrew’s interview with Grandage in 2013, then consider the questions and tasks that follow

‘The novel fantastically evokes sights, smells and sounds and these were obviously high in my consciousness as I read. But folk songs kept coming to me as well. These were working class people, for whom the European art music of the time (the High Classical/early Romantic world of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven) would have been as foreign as the traditional songs of the Dharug. I was eager to include folk tunes that felt honest and lived-in rather than earnest and learnt, so these became the building blocks for much of the score.’

- How do they create the sounds of
  - The river
  - The wildlife
  - The weather … wind, rain, fire?
- Recall and describe the moments involving the use of folk songs as
  - The primary layer. Eg Little Fishy
A secondary layer. Eg The recorder behind Dhurrumbin’s narration as Dick watches the Dharug boys playing.

For both of these consider: What instruments are used? What mood do they evoke? Is there a pattern to their usage?

“…he (Richard Green) has gifted us a number of Dharug songs to utilize in the show. Starting with these on one hand, and European folk songs on the other, I have tried to create a world where voices are given equal weight. Whilst I play the piano in the show, there is a second, stripped back piano frame that gets bowed and plucked by cast members during the show. For me the piano is a great metaphor for our transplanted European culture here in Australia, and I use it as such in the show. But I was also keen to have sounds that were less recognizably ‘from a culture’. The sounds from piano frame have come to represent (along with Richard’s songs) the Dharug world – both the people and their land.”

- Recall and list the moments when we hear the Dharug voices in song.
  - Describe the points in the narrative and the different moods evoked.
  - What sounds or instruments (and which bits of the instrument) accompany them?
  - How do Thornhills and others respond?
- When does Grandage use the sounds of both cultures at once?
  - Do they sit in harmony or are they discordant?
  - What is the significance of these moments?
- What sort of sounds can you recall that were ‘less recognisably “from a culture”’?
  - Can you describe them?
  - What effect does this have on the landscape of sounds?

“Neil has a wonderful way of creating transparent theatre, where all the aspects of the story telling are knowingly revealed and celebrated. This means that all the actors create not only foley (ocean waves, digging sounds) but also contribute musically on guitars, a clarinet, an acoustic bass, as well as the piano frame already mentioned.

- Describe how the audience was given the transparency of sound in this production … being ‘revealed and celebrated’?
  - Think of what we usually experience in the theatre
  - Think of what you saw and heard.
- How many ‘foley’ sounds can you recall being made?
Describe points in the narrative where you can recall the use of these additional instruments. Eg the vibrant acoustic guitar that accompanied the boys playing amongst the water.
  
  Are there any patterns or connections between instruments, mood or character?

“I have tried to ‘cast’ the musicians to appropriate moments in the play, so for example if there is a narration about Thornhill and intimacy, I’ll ask for the actress playing Thornhill’s wife (the marvellous Anita Hegh) to help underscore that moment. Hopefully this helps reinforce the sense of a world within a world – of a story being created especially for each and every audience member by a troupe of players in a theatrical play pen.”

Can you recall any moments like the one described, where the actor underscoring the scene in some way reflected what it was about?

Are there moments in the production where silence becomes the most powerful sound?
Lighting & the playscript - before

Lighting plays such a significant role in contemporary theatre practice. But what does the playwright consider as they write the work and what does the lighting designer look for in the final playscript?


Bovell’s almost poetic stage directions conjure up not only the assorted times of the day but the very atmosphere of light upon the earth, the encroaching darkness in this isolated environment (depending on whether you are native or a settler), and the evocative shadows from fires that dance and enlarge and literally connect us to our landscape.

Here are some of the stage directions a designer may consider:

- Sal Thornhill sits by the light of a lamp … (Prologue – Thornhill’s hut)
- … the shadows of dusk creep across the river and push up the length of the point (scene 1)
- A slither of moon sits above the ridge (scene 1)
- They creep closer to the light of the fire as the night encircles them. The trees grow huge hanging over them (scene 1)
- Morning sun (scene 3)
- The heat of December (Act 2 scene 1)
- Then the heat returned and overnight the burned patch turned from black to green (Act 2 scene 8)
- Firelight illuminating the trees from beneath, flickering on the skin of the trunks, making a cave of light. Black figures passing in dance in front of the fire (Act 2 scene 10 – ‘A Black night’)
- One blue and silver morning (Act 2 scene 14)
Think about the importance of collaborating with the set designer and how the shadows and changing landscape of colour could be achieved.
Think about how the key lighting elements could be used to achieve different aspects of both context and mood:

- Colour
- Intensity
- Distribution (the shape, size, direction, edge, mix)
- Movement
  (This is based on one design approach; there may be other key terms you would apply).

**Lighting & The Production - After**

Lighting designer Mark Howett seems to have achieved a unique symbiosis with set designer Stephen Curtis in his work for ‘The Secret River’. As one reviewer noted:

“Light plays off the simplicity with surprising agility; the passing of time and shifts of mood are chronicled with a precision that felt effortless.”

Cassie Tongue


Interestingly, the first aspect of the lighting we are drawn to on stage are the four lighting trees: 2 vertical stands SL and SR, adorned with branches but hardly disguised. They both serve the story and are part of the story. In Dhurrimbin’s narration of the massacre a swaying light behind the ‘trees’ casts long shadows across the stage which in turn sway with eerie discomfort; even the lights seem to breathe.
Task

Begin trying to recall moments from the production where you can feel the lighting play a significant role.

Now, seeking more precise impact, can you describe the different lighting states on any of the following?

- The ghost gum that acts almost as a sculpted cyclorama (front and backlit?)
- The lighting ‘trees’
- The ground
- The shadows of people
- The shadows of nature
- Light in darkness – creating the interior space of Thornhill’s hut.
- Characters in isolation.
- Split scenes on stage.
The Secret River – 2013 production notes

These notes are based on a video of the original production – February 7, 2013, at the Sydney Theatre, a single camera from the back of the dress circle. As such I have interpreted some action and stagecraft. Don’t trust anything. Stand by what you experience and simply use this as a reference point for recollections and discussions.

They are here to provide clues. It is by no means exhaustive.

I have highlighted key characters – Dhirrumbin, Thornhill, Yalamundi, Sal, Dharug people - and aspects of stagecraft (especially sound, set, props, costume/make-up, lighting - to make it easier to scan through the document.

I have used staging acronyms to place them. Eg DSR = downstage right CS = centre stage.

Enjoy.

Act One

- Night. Only light appears to be from a small camp fire DSR. Narrator and musician stand DSR & DSL and acknowledge each other before moving. They whistle sfx of ‘the sound of water as it laps against the riverbank and of birds rising and of the wind gathering in the tops of the trees.’(Bovell p1). They move off stage just in front of apron (musician has stripped back upright piano and cello).
- Yalamundi appears. Cello begins – an overlay to the bird whistles. The wind?
- Buriya and the family enter stage and begin to play out their everyday existence (as per stage directions). Language is Dharug (no translation). Shifts ownership of the story?
- When Sal enters with the 2 boys she is singing to them (London Bridge … compare with opening mother/child sequence). Dhirrumbin (narrator) steps across and lays both boys (who give over their weight) down to sleep.
- As the scene between Sal and Thornhill occurs, she sits by the fire and watches them. The lighting is minimal: barely a flicker from the fire (where Thornhill lays the boys to sleep as he talks) and moonlight coming from SL through some of the branches on LX bars.
- When Thornhill mentions the land – the 100 acres – Dhirrumbin rises: the story is happening now. It is her people’s land.
- As he talks of claiming the land Thornhill kneels down beside Sal. It I almost childish, such is the naivety of his claims.
- Thornhill - ‘It’s all been done.’ He pours a drink. This is what gives them strength (and deals with the guilt)
- It’s a chance pet … give it 5 years. Cello begins … harmonics … a mixture of hope and melancholy.
- Dhirrumbin seamlessly takes over - ‘They never tired of one another’s touch. And any trouble between them could always be settled beneath the blanket.’ - as Sal and Thornhill roll into the darkness from a sensual embrace.
- 12.15 – ‘They bought The Queen … p13 – cello and flute/recorder (and more?) creates the sea journey – a folksy maritime feel. A rope from beyond and above the apron becomes the spine of ‘The Hope’. The actors all grasp onto it and ‘sail’ up the Hawkesbury; simple hoist and pull and swaying motions in near darkness.
  - There are others doing things on stage?
- 13.05 - Warm lights up + Sound fx combine bird whistles and cello to give a morning feel reveal the sandy ground with Sal standing inside the simple outline of a boat.
- The rest of the family surround as Thornhill steps into the boat to help her out. She struggles to stand with sea-legs. Dhirrumbin walks past and places a single bucket beside the boat as Sal steps out and into it. Voice sfx of squelches she steps into the mud and walks up to the
fire. Symbol – her muddied steps leave their mark on stage The boys laugh and slide and hop (Dick .. clues?) across the ‘sand’.

- Night falls quickly as they talk around the fire. **Thornhill** helps us see the sites of their London existence in the landscape of the Hawkesbury – beyond the audience. The boys look listen knees up beside the fire. **Sal** is quick to dismiss for a cup of tea. Dick comes over and bobs, emu-like, to her. His connection to the land and its people is strongest.

- **Thornhill** – direct address – narrates to the audience as he scales his land. Two actors help create the bush that he slashes his way through. **Sound** – **piano** is more classical, tuneful, English as it lifts with his hopes for his new land. He finishes **DSC** on the apron crying out to his boys below.

- **Daylight** – Dick and **Sal** play hopscotch (English hopping). **Thornhill** gestures to the scratches in the tree.
  - SL we see cast members sitting watching, Dhirrumbin half-way, – have they always been there?

- Discordant **piano** transforms into the next scene. Bright **lights** capture the heat of the day and the work. **Thornhill** and the boys scrape (**sound** fx from cast at side with pots) ) and dig away in three lines. A couple of yams sit on the apron.

- **Yalamundi** and 2 others emerge from SL. Two hold long spears. No **sound** required to heighten the tension. **Thornhill**’s efforts are conciliatory. So are **Yalamundi**’s but they do not understand each other. Eventually the silence breaks. Realism. Nothing required to heighten the conflict.

- The boys are sent back to the hut (Dick the only one who understands) leaving **Sal** and **Thornhill**. Tension. **Sound** – **cello**’s long haunting notes pre-empts the change in scene … indigenous voices join in pre-empting the scene to follow …

- Actors assemble SL behind the **piano** seeming to prepare.

- Darkness descends. 7 spears descend from above like shooting stars surrounding **Thornhill** and **Dhirrumbin**. The touch the ground and lean, swaying gently. The **cello** fades out like a didgeridoo’s final breath., allowing **Thornhill** to release and break one before placing the pieces onto the fire.

- **Dhirrumbin** narrates through transition to Blackwood’s place. Gentle running water **piano** is adorned with an actor stepping forward and playing the treble recorder – sitting somewhere between cultures.

- Blackwood **costume** is half-dressed (across cultures): bare chest in a worn long jacket and cut of pants, bare feet, as he sits comfortably at ground level, on it or balanced low (where **Thornhill** needs something to sit on). His body is plump but he moves lithely, balanced, quiet. Uses one of the pots as if the river’s edge **DSR**. Meet wife and child.

- 31.00 – Kids and **Sal** transition into next scene – dancing through Blackwood and **Thornhill** – ‘oranges and lemons’. Smasher Sullivan, enters joining in with more sinister playful tones (‘chop off his head’). Physicality of Smasher: low, primal, impish. Part Cockney sideshow, part animal. Wicked laugh. Explosions of rage (My father … The natives …). Language is coarse, throaty,… **Costume/make-up** worth analysing.

- 37.00 ‘Will!’ transform day to night. Intimate blue **lights** around the fire as Thronhill returns. **Sal** with Dick in her arms. Talk of Smasher, Blackwood and the natives. ‘Maybe I Will’. **Sound** – **cello** – prefaces transition into next scene.

- **Dhirrumbin** (standing USC) or Gilyagan sings as she sweeps a patch of ground clean with a twist of reeds bound together as a broom. Narrabi and Garraway feed the fire with twigs. It is a mirror image of the **Thornhill**’s own camp. Buryia drops a snake onto the fire. Talks of ‘heavy foot’ coming.
Thornhill enters and tries to talk … tell (a different tack). Cello – high pitched notes add tension, almost crying. Dhirrumbin narrates his shame at seeing old woman’s naked skin (he felt naked … interesting connection to costume).

Yalumundi and others arrive to deeper notes from cello – ominous notes (almost western like stand-off). Sequence of lost communication (we who have read script have Bovell’s writing translated). Map in the sand. Rejecting the Daisy Yam. Threats. Misunderstanding of consensus.

Brief scene between Thornhill and Sal/Willie played out upstage in white light (ghost like – out of place)

Transition occurs as Dhirrumbin talks of Dick. He stands DSL watching beyond the audience. Sound – piano and recorder is innocent, melodious, hopeful.

Lights up. Dick meets two indigenous boys. They draw him to the river and splash him. Sound – quick rhythm guitar and cello create sense of harmony and pleasure and freedom as the boys run around. They pour out a large pale of water and slide down stage through water and dirt. Carefree. Lighting transforms to evening as the mothers both call their children in. The similarity is not lost on Dhirrumbin – ‘neither knowing they were calling for the same thing.’

Smashers place – blue lighting – night or ghost-like ambience. 3 actors as dogs with long ropes tied to them and tethered SR. One is virtually upright, one crouched, one on all fours. Gestures but no effort to imitate. Smasher brings in barrels of lime as Dhirrumbin describes how he wastes the oysters and smells of burning flesh.

Thornhill and Willie arrive. Smasher is boorish but friendly. Thornhill relents to the ‘well of loneliness …. Behind the man’s filthy smile’ and accepts a tea. Barrels are rolled across stage.

Braniyamala arrives. A moment out of time as he stands. The dogs yelp and pull in silence as the piano plucked and strummed with discordant notes. It is broken by Braniyamala’s words and a torrent of abuse from Smasher. Sound fx of the whip accompany Smasher’s gestures. Braniyamala leaves to a further torrent of abuse and dogs (they are one and the same). Thornhill leaves, disgusted, lifting up the last barrel in a show of strength.

Dhirrumbin narrates us back to Thornhill’s place. Sal marks her days into the proscenium. She and Mrs Herring – aging, coarse throaty voice, bent over, legs apart as she sits, funny – self-effacing. Talk of loneliness and babies lost and a piece of tile from home (sound - melancholy piano).

Sydney – Thornhill and Willie meet Captain Suckling. As the father remembers his status, Willie is taught it with his cap and a ‘sir’. Thornhill chooses Dan Oldfield who remembers him from a line of four roped convicts, and unties him,. He too is reminded of new statuses between men. Dhirrumbin narrates Thornhill’s desire never to return to London as the stage freezes.

Thornhill returns to the river flat. Dan greets Sal with a laugh and a jig but this is cut short with a reminder from Thornhill that his wife is ‘Mrs’. He duly responds with ‘Mr’ and a tip of the hat. Sal tells of ‘family way’ and a meeting at the river.

Thornhill unwraps the gun. Multiple transitions as Yalamundi appear USL and USR. Thornhill is left DS and Sal CS. The split scene emphasises Sal’s barb ‘Depends what you’re firing at Will. Sound - plucked notes of discomfort. The isolated pools of light are broken by a band of neighbours dancing through them all, arriving in a blue light that surrounds a neat square warmly lit ‘interior’ space.

Music piano and singing – trad ‘If I was …’ is rousing – full cast assemble in a close knit space. GC: the ‘party is well on it’s way’. By the time Loveday is ready to speak. The small square of light is isolated in darkness. The costumes seem universally dull, weathered, and filthy: a cloudless colourless scene. The conversation revolves around the natives their thieving and how to deal with them. There is much laughing and shouting and coughing and
ultimately hawking up a gob. It is uncivilised. Thornhill’s family sits centre and below and remain quiet.

- A disturbance outside. Blue lights expose the surrounding space. One actor transforms into one of Smasher’s dogs briefly. Blackwood arrives with gifts. He talks of the yams and giving a little. The rest will not have a bar of it and he leaves.

- Loveday is requested to sing ‘Little Fish’ (trad. With piano) and the rest gradually join in. It becomes more tuneful and sombre. Light fades leaving them isolated, ghostlike. Slowly the sounds of indigenous voices singing with rhythm sticks emerges. They emerge from the light and slowly circle the hut. Their shadows writ huge on the backdrop/escarpment. The combination does not jar. It becomes harmonious. The hut becomes a still portrait as their sound fades out. The piano supports a single female indigenous voice (Dhirrumbin?) as they all slowly disperse, her final cries are almost mournful.

Interval

Act Two

- As the audience return – house lights still on - Dick, Narrabi and Garraway– ‘naked’ (shorts) – play (‘improvise’) grandma’s steps (grandma facing the tree-cyc USC), as the audience returns. House lights dim. the acoustic guitar is playful and easy a playful folksy tempo; the cello joins in. playing with them as they freeze, like dreamtime animals, or slide with joy. Willie stands SL, watching ‘wanting to be one of them, wondering why he can’t’. The boys run off leaving Willie. The last notes of the cello remain leaving the mood as a quietly brooding one, transforming us back to …

- Sal and Thornhill and Willie at the hut, as he dobs in his little brother. Thornhill runs off to get him and the cello sets a new desperate tempo, as a blackout allows the set up of…

- Simple warm pool of light. A tight circle of boys sit around Ngalamalum as he starts a fire with sticks upon a bark. Dick dresses under Dad’s orders but invites him to watch the flames awaken. The cello has the exciting tempo of Ngalamalum’s hands as he rolls the stick between them. They laugh and talk and carry the flame across to the fire where it is rekindled. Thornhill and Ngalamalum try to communicate names (Dick can say them all). The mood is double-edged: moments of comedy – ‘Thornhill’, ‘Christ that’s a mouthful’, Dick pretends to throws a spear - release the tension but it always re-builds. Where a gesture for a handshake creates uncertainty, the boy holds Ngalamalum’s like it was his own dad’s.

- Yalamundi calls them away. After Thornhill’s quiet proclamation to ‘.. give up now .. there’s such a bleeding lot of us’. Foreshadow.

- A classical piano riff in a minor key, and the occasional English bell combine with Dhirrumbin’s narration into Thornhill’s mind. He stands alone centre stage, a defiant silhouette. Behind him, silhouettes of his London past cross the stage, in a dull, plain white English light. The piano mellows as his thoughts of a changing world ‘made him gentle’.

- His family come on with chairs and create a tableaus of the hut behind him. Lights turn to night blues. A final deep note resonates ominously as Dick – separate from the others – is confronted by his actions. A moment or two of comedy as we laugh at old ways - Sal …‘swimming by choice’ – but Thornhill’s acrid tone can be heard as he reminds us they are ‘savages’ (a stark contrast to the wicked laugh at the thought of ‘stripping off his breeches’). Dick is defiant. Thornhill drags him off SL. We hear the cries of the child in between the cracking of the father’s belt. We only watch the stillness on stage and the mother’s anguish. Quit childlike sobs are mirrored in the slightly discordant piano (and the odd English bell a reminder of punishment back in London) as Thornhill re-enters. He and Sal try to understand a ‘way to live with it’. A simple sequence of diminishing chords transitions us into …

- Dan stands on the apron (beside the river) – looking beyond the audience. Dull morning light from SL casts shadows of he and Thornhill who understands his temptation. The sound fx of Dan digging are created off stage by actors with pots. They talk of changing status and the ‘kind of man I am … Mr Thornhill’. Voice is clipped of consonants.
Dhurrumbin watches as Dick sits on floor trying to make fire. **Thornhill** enters. A moment of wariness before a hat on the child’s head says all is forgiven. **Thornhill** has a go but only ‘me bloody hands are burning’.

With simple melodic **piano**, Dhurrumbin narrates the pair as they climb up to **Thornhill** point; a simple walk around the fringe of the stage. Vague images of bush adorn the cye and moveTwo actors holding branches act as the bush, but it is almost comical as they brush the actors’ faces and whack one of them from behind. It is a reminder that this is storytelling – theatre.

At the peak – the apron – **Thornhill** leans over close to his son and enthusiastically shares his magic – his knowledge of rivers. **Dhirrumbin** takes a stick from the fire and uses it to paint onto the stage floor behind them. The **piano** climbs up into the higher octaves; **Thornhill**’s enthusiasm peaks as he imagines (foreshadows) their house made from stone, embracing the whole stage with his gestures; taking over the land. Dick sees the fish drawn onto the ground … and the boat. **Thornhill** is in denial, repeating ‘it ain’t no boat’ to hold onto his feeble claim to this land, where marks have been carved out for years.

**Sal** walks DSR and collects water from the river, pouring from one tin tub to another. Buryia and Gilyagan approach with bush fruits. **Dhirrumbin** watches. The tension is quickly released with the women. The mood is **light** as they exchange words, names, food, goods – **Sal**’s skirt. **Thornhill** returns to a skirtless **Sal** and go ‘dancing’ **SR**.

Dick tells Willie not to go there … ‘they both got their breeches down their ankles’ (but not naked).

**Lighting** transforms day into night as the **Dharug** mob come onto stage. Other actors settle **SL** to add to the **sound** track, an air of mystery, driven by plucked strings from the **piano**. Three collect long sticks that smoke and tap the ground here and there (leaving trails of smoke in the air like sparklers), while others fan and beat the ground with branches, filling the stage with smoke: it is a fire, their fire, controlled ‘… a small tame thing’. The **Thornhills** rush on and watch warily. The pianist throws a lizard onto stage (there is no disguise – this is theatre). It is beaten and claimed triumphantly. A snake follows. **Thornhill**s look on trying to understand – and misunderstand – the meaning of these actions.

**Dhirrumbin** narrates to us from DS as Yalumbi moves them on (‘the shape of the place would put out the fire’) and the **lighting** take us from fire to two days of welcome rain. **Thornhills** take CS as **sound** fx from actors **SL** – rain-stick, guitar, **piano**, other - add to the joy - . A mob of actors as kangaroos emerge as the blackened landscape turns green (**lighting**). Low pitched **piano** (and guitar) strings are plucked like the heartbeat of the animals, scratching away at the ground. **Thornhill** takes aim at the biggest one. The gun shot **sound** is a reverberating amplified beat from one of the actors SL. Comedy – the kangaroo actor stands up and walks away indignantly. ‘You missed it Da’.

Warm **piano** sends the smell of cooked meat across the stage and as they all reminisce and crave **Thornhill** grabs goods for trade and heads off to the **Dharug** camp.

In dappled evening **light** (**lighting**) the **Dharug** cross stage and drop a kangaroo on the fire. Sparse **piano** supports strange local **sounds**. In awkward silence **Thornhill** offers his flour (in white calico bag) and is given the tough foot (‘Not the bit I would have chosen’) in exchange.

In the small **light** of the fire **Dhirrumbin** describes the **Thornhill**’s experience of skinning and cooking and eating … ‘drinking’ kangaroo, as they stand in a diagonal line on stage trying to digest.

**Dhirrumbin** narrates the transition into **Sal**’s illness: daylight- Dick running to **Thornhill** as Mrs Herring plants herself down sewing ‘something pretty to wrap her in if we lose her’.

Slow transition to night through **Dhirrumbin**’s storytelling as two actors bring on a chair and lean two planks upon it to create **Sal**’s bed CS. The boys and Mrs Herring sit around the fire and wait while **Thornhill** tends to **Sal**, talking of learning to write and apologies and times past. Throughout this a slow cross fade lets night becomes day again and the lone **cello** creates a sombre mood.
- **Dhirrumbin** narrates the entry of Smasher, Saggit and Loveday with their gifts (a useless pumpkin) – marching straight across stage and off. The re-emerge along the apron led by Dan as the light turns to early evening. They talk of **Sal** and then **Thornhill**: ‘a bastard made mean by life’ (foreshadow) … ‘just like the rest of us’. In an instant three of them snap into Smasher’s dogs, circling the hut then lining up behind him to violently confront Blackwood & Dulla Dyin. In another instant **Thornhill** snaps out of the interior world of the hut and into the confrontation. They relent and leave and Dulla Dyin moves bedside.

- Slow tender notes on the **cello** (and other **sounds**) match the gentle gestures of one woman upon anther. **Dhirrumbin** as Dulla Dyin narrates her own actions and the inner thoughts of **Sal**. **Lighting** slowly closes in upon them creating the passing of time and a more intimate mood. Everyone else is still with watching. Dawn ‘spills into the hut’ and **Sal** slowly comes good.

- The rest of the stage becomes a tableau. **Lights** turn to cool blues. We have stepped out of time. **Thornhill** offers recompense to Dulla Dyin but there is only one thing she wants: ‘You can go William **Thornhill** … out of our place’ but ‘I [he] can’t.’ – This is the turning point – the tragic hero and his fatal flaw.

- ‘A Black Night’ Act Two, Scene Ten’s title is foreboding. The stage is bathed in night, barely spilling down the creases of the backdrop. A slow chant begins. Clap sticks and ominous deep notes from the **cello** add layers as ‘a big mob gathers’ along the back of the stage. **Footlights** along the apron pick up **Thornhills** – each one isolated - as they line across the stage staring out towards the audience. The conversation is fraught, especially through Dan and Willie who build **Thornhill**’s anxiety, despite **Sal** and Dick’s efforts to ease it. Body language says it all for each one.

- On ‘Shut it’ we hear two beats of the clapsticks and the mob move forward into a corroboree circle. Will turns upstage and moves towards them as the rest exit (transition). To the beat of the clapsticks several of the mob beat the ground with branches and a plume of dust explodes – ‘the pulse of the earth itself’. The chanting returns. We now see they ‘are striped with white, their faces masks (make-up) in which their eyes move.’ **Yalamundi** dances in the middle as the others dance around him. **Thornhill** and Dhirrumbin create a final slow moving outer circle – counterpoints. As **Thornhill** stops behind the fire, his moonlit shadow long from a SL profile, the mob begin to leave. Their chanting resonates. **Yalamundi** is the last to go; his final moves directed in the direction of the spying **Thornhill**, as **Dhirrumbin** reveals – along with his own stance and glazed stare – how much ‘it terrified him.’ Only the deep note of the **cello** remains.

- Transition - Three actors as Smashers dogs cut across stage attached to their ropes. Smasher haggles in true Cockney tones as **Thornhill** tries to buy a couple of his dogs. He drags out Murali, tethered and naked, to offer as an added extra. One of the dogs pulls and jumps against his rope towards **Thornhill**, counterpointed by Murali’s strains in the opposite direction. Smasher offers the rope. **Thornhill** is still – ‘a single hot instant’. The sour notes of the **cello** bend and wail the tragedy of the stand-off, until **Thornhill** turns and runs. The dogs and Smasher’s voice smash the silence. They leave. **Dhirrumbin** enters.

- Her calm voice belies the torment in **Thornhill**’s mind and soul – ‘the animal in him’. He stands alone and still CSL, almost back-lit, hunched, a pathetic beast, staring hopelessly as **Dhirrumbin** tenderly removes the rope from Murali’s neck, something he did not do. The **cello** captures the tragic overtones.

- Transition – **Dhirrumbin** leaves as Mrs Herring enters announcing the attack on George Twist’s place. **Sal** watches from the proscenium edge that marks her time here, her countdown. Things ‘won’t settle down. Not now. Something done to them. Something done to us. That’s how it goes.’

- Transition – dappled (gobo) night as actors assemble at **Thornhill**’s hut, Loveday the only one seated to read the proclamation, allowing them ‘to shoot the buggers whenever we dam well please.’ Note the arrangement and stance of each one. Smasher revolts **Sal** and
provokes Blackwood with his ears on a string. He is beaten. There are threats of reprisal as all but Sal, Thornhill and Dhirrumbin exit. A confrontation between husband and wife she wants to leave—‘better poor than dead’ … ‘That’s where we disagree, Sal.’

- Transition lighting to ‘blue & silver morning’ at Darkey Creek. Thornhill slowly moves across the apron as Dhirrumbin sets the scene. One of the child actors walks slowly across stage before collapsing beside the fire, in foetal pain. Dhirrumbin douses the fire and a plume of smoke erupts. A slow bass line, deep drum and cello evoke the tragedy of the scene confronting Thornhill; the reprisal. Amid small wails mosquito buzzes he sees the moonlit child, the only survivor in the massacre. He tenderly holds the boy, realising ‘the shape of his skull, the same as his own son’s.’ We are told it is another thing ‘he was going to lock away in the closed room in his memory.’

- Bright guitar, cello, mandolin (?) transition us back to the river flat. Bright lighting adorns seven lines of corn that descend from above (like the spears). Thornhill remains seated where he was (the boy actor has gone) while assorted members of the Dharug, including the children raid the corn. Fights break out as Thornhill and others try to protect their crop, corn strewn across stage. The music is stopped (bar the ominous deep cello) by Thornhill’s cries. Only Ngalamalum stands defiantly DSC as others flee. Willie dives his Da the gun. A stand-off. The only movement, the swaying corn (like bodies). One shot into the sky. He cannot… yet. Ngalamalum leaves. Dan brings on Garraway. Staging: Thornhill is caught – centre stage – between Dan’s cries to use the boy as bait and Sal’s cries to let him go. He orders the boy’s release.

- Transition – darkness. Willie and Mrs Herring collect the corn as Sal circles the stage, ‘a woman turned to wood’. To Dhirrumbin’s words she arrives at the Dharug camp, the fireplace, trailed by her husband. She stands over the extinguished fire, ‘They’ve gone.’ She sees the similarities she has never seen, down to a broom that she sweeps forlornly. They fight over what to do. He stand centre stage crying his wants like a child, sputtering and pleading, while she argues from the proscenium wall SR (her marks to departure). The dialogue builds to a climax as he closes in to strike her, but doesn’t; at that moment his life ‘a skiff with no oar.’ It is interrupted by Dan’s announcement of a fire at Sagitty’s. As they storm across stage she offers a final ultimatum and leaves.

- Transition to darkness. A small light from SL captures a single Dharug warrior moving across stage (through Thornhill and Dan) ready to strike. Deep notes from piano and other sounds guide his steps across to SR where he drives the spear in to the proscenium wall. In that instant the lights come up: Sagitty stumbles and cries out – the victim, collapsing whilst holding the implied spear. Dan and Thornhill attend to him and his best china cup (also implied).

- They place him on the (implied) Hope: picking him up through anguished cries and laying him down DSC. Deep blues and greens ripple on stage to the rhythm of the piano, creating the journey down the Hawkesbury. Another tableau – Dan cradling Sagitty as Thornhill half-crouched looks out at us. Dhirrumbin, his internal voice as he fears losing his place.

- Dhirrumbin narrates. They exit SL to the hospital. Others slowly emerge while Sagitty’s cries ring out. A moment of stillness accompanies the silence that recognises his death. The piano’s simple riff maintains the momentum of the scene as time passes. The ‘assembled men’ are centre stage, crowded together on chairs. Thornhill included. Smasher mimics the storytelling form Dhirrumbin captures, taking over eventually with contrasting aggression and bravado; a crass poetic delivery. They all drink the rum. They continue to noiselessly talk and point and laugh and drink.

- Turnkey – an image of his Newgate prison days – appears in isolated light behind them, calling out his name repeatedly. Thornhill only hears and does not see him, but stands amongst the others to respond. They notice nothing; a dream-like moment out of reality. Dhirrumbin returns Thornhill and us ‘back to the crowded bar of the Maid of the River’. Smasher leads the conversation as they all sink into drunken stupors, calling for action and …
'The Hope'. All the words from all the men – ‘the eyes of the room’ - close in on Thornhill, even Dhirrumbin’s, enticing him to the inevitable tragic consequence. Silence. ‘All right then.‘

- Dhirrumbin, DSR narrates the boat’s return journey. Loveday and Dan exit. Thornhill has not moved from his seat, in the middle of ‘The Hope’ that Smasher outlines with a charcoaled stick. The other two return and they form the boat. Smasher hands a tin around and each takes a handful of ash – symbol - ammunition. They ‘slid[e] over the side’ of the boat and move to the back of stage. Almost silence, except for the occasional delicate note from the piano.

- The sound of the first gunshot: a deep resonant drum beat resounds. Each of the men fire a puff of smoke ahead of them – blowing through their own cocked and clenched fists that are raised as if holding a rifle - It glows in a sliver of light. They begin to sing ‘London Bridge’ and step forward as a line. Assorted sounds add to the march, especially discordant deep piano chords. Verse by verse they come closer, singing becomes screaming, rounds of gunfire eschew, their bodies and powdered warrior-ghost faces gradually lit by the apron footlights. They stand on the apron, arms beside them, their defiant, hate-filled bodies stand over their own massacre. They stare at us.

- Transition - Single deep chords reverberate out as the men exit, leaving only Thornhill DSC. His family assemble behind him in their hut. Silence. He returns home. A single warm kiss to Sal. ‘There’ll be no more trouble…. Nothing’s been done.’ Dick asks about the boys. A single sustained cello note. Dick races off. Sal sits as Thornhill walks away. ‘We won’t speak of this again’. He pauses on her reply. ‘Is that it Will? What we have now. Me and you. Silence.’ He leaves. Sal and Willie follow.

- The massacre is re-told by Dhirrumbin. Strong white lights from SR cast long shadows of the lighting trees. The shadows sway. The Dharug women come on from SR. As each killing is described the women toss a puff of ash over their heads and behind them, echoing the action of Thornhill and the other men. A different perspective. Then they collapse. Boys and men follow and do likewise with the precise descriptions of each murder. Blackwood emerges ‘naked’ and is blinded. The cello and other sounds cry and squeal. A woman’s voice begins to wail. Yalamundi emerges SR followed by Thornhill’s shadow and the man himself SR. A final duel with only one weapon. The final killing is slowly re-enacted to the tempo of Dhirrumbin’s description. His body hits the earth with an almighty thud.

- Ngalamalum emerges dressed for the next scene, ten years on. He walks through the strewn bodies as his own injuries are described. But he does not act out the ritual. Rather, he sits beside the fire. The other actors simply rise and walk away. Lights come up slowly as Dhirrumbin walks forward, describing Durra Dyin’s (the role she played) survival, hiding, watching, making herself watch. ‘Someone had to see this’ her final words to the audience before she exits. A message. Why this story had to be told – this piece of theatre made.


- The end.
Appendix II - Other People's Starting Points – Some Links

- https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/community/education/resources/education-resources/the-secret-river-resources series of education support material at the STC website, including:
  - On Cue - features all the essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis and suggested learning experiences.
  - In the Know - Fast facts and handy hints to consider before attending The Secret River.
  - Poster - A poster exploring the importance of The Secret River in an historical context.
  - Sketchbook - A sketchbook showcasing the detailed costume designs for The Secret River
- https://australianplays.org/script/CPD-11 - Wesley Enoch downloadable article on Bovell’s play from Australian plays.org
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WvHdTecH3A
- The Secret River - Festival TV, 2013 – Studio Art Break – pics and clips with commentary from Andrew Bovell, Neil Armfield and Ursula Yovich
- http://www.abc.net.au/arts/blog/Collins/Secret-River-Sydney-Festival-130111/default.htm - Article by Cassie Collins talking to Andrew Bovell about writing process.
- http://jameswaites.ilatech.org/?p=7854 – accessed Jan 2016. – online review site that has interesting review, but even more interesting discussion with Bovell through comments section.
They return to work… breaking, digging, turning the soil, casting the daisy plants aside as they go.
Dick is the first to look up sensing something… like he is being watched.
Three men stand on the edge of the clearing. Yalamundi, Ngalamalum and Wangarra. The two younger men hold spears.

DICK  Da.

Thornhill and Willie look up and see them… As if he has been waiting for this moment Yalamundi steps forward.
The moment is his.

THORNHILL  Don’t move. Don’t say a bloody word.

Thornhill swallows, his mouth suddenly feeling dry. He wipes his hands on the side of his britches and places them in his pockets… as if this would convince someone he wasn’t too worried.
Up in a river oak a bird makes a twittering as if amused. The sound only stretches out the silence.
Unable to bear it any longer Thornhill approaches, speaking as he would to a pack of wary dogs.

THORNHILL  Don’t spear me, there’s a good man. I’d offer you a cup of tea only we aint got none.

Yalamundi cuts across his words as if they were of no more importance than the rattle of wind in a tree. He gestures with a fluid hand down the river, up over the hills and does a flattening thing with his palm like smoothing a bedcover.

YALAMUNDI  Diya ngalaium nura warrawarra. Ngaya
Buruberongal. Ngalaium bembul. Murray murray nura. Durubin Ngayri mulbu. Ngyina ni diya nura. Ngan giyara? Wellamabami? (This is our place. Our country. All around here. The river and beyond those ridges. We look after these places. Who are you? Where are you from?)

THORNHILL  (Trying to make a joke of it) Old boy… bugger me you are making no sense what so ever!

Silence… as if he is waiting for more.

THORNHILL  You aint making no sense to me, mate. Not a blinking word. You might as well bloody bark.

Willie barks like a dog…

WILLIE  Ruff, Ruff, Ruff

THORNHILL  (Sharp as broken glass) Shut your mouth!

Willie steps back, shamed by the harshness of his father’s words.
Yalamundi speaks again as he makes a chopping action with the side of his hand and points to the patch of dug up daisies.

YALAMUNDI

Biyall gama—da jillung midyini, ngyini guwuwi diem
dane dharug. Ngyini maana bulla—bu, yan nin dane ngiyinu. (Don’t dig up those yams. We come here for those. You take some, leave the rest for us.)

NGALAMALUM

Nanu biyal manyuru. Nin yura ngaya ni (He doesn’t understand. The same as the others)