

Yong

Education Resource

Written by Shane Woon and created in collaboration with
Arts Centre Melbourne and Monkey Baa Theatre Company for the
2025 season in Victoria as part of VCE Theatre Studies

Creative Learning at
Arts Centre Melbourne

*Arts Centre Melbourne present
a Monkey Baa Theatre Company
production*

Yong

Based on the book *Yong: The Journey of an Unworthy Son* by Janeen Brian
published by Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd.

Created in collaboration with Her Majesty's
Theatre, Ballarat and Bendigo Venues & Events.

Image credit: Photos by Tiffany Garvie featuring
performer Wern Mak



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This Education Resource is designed for VCE Theatre Studies, and can be used in conjunction with Monkey Baa's Year 5-8 Learning Pack <https://www.monkeybaa.com.au/learning-packs/yong>

Study Design

Please note that this resource pack has been intended for Unit 4, Outcome 3 of the VCE Theatre Studies Design. However aspects of the resource pack can be used for Unit 3, Outcome 3. Please refer to the VCAA VCE Study Design for a more detailed breakdown of the differences in Key Knowledge and Skills required.

Unit 3: Analysing and evaluating theatre

In this area of study, students attend, analyse and evaluate an interpretation of a script in a production from the prescribed VCE Theatre Studies Playlist. Students analyse and evaluate the relationship between the written script and its interpretation on stage. In doing so, students study ways in which the interpretation on stage draws on and interprets the contexts in the script as well as any recontextualisation choices. This includes the decisions that have been made when interpreting the script, for example decisions about acting, direction and design, and the use of theatre technologies and elements of theatre composition.

Students evaluate the ways in which theatre practitioners (such as the director, actors, designers) and dramaturgical processes have contributed to the interpretation on stage. Students study how the theatre styles and contexts implied in the written script are interpreted when the play is performed to an audience. Students attend the theatre production and develop skills in applying relevant theatre terminology to analyse and evaluate how the script has been interpreted. Their analysis and evaluation of the production is informed by work undertaken in Areas of Study 1 and 2.

Unit 4: Analysing and evaluating a performance

In this area of study, students focus on the analysis and evaluation of the acting, direction and design in a performance of a production selected from the prescribed VCE Theatre Studies Playlist.

Students attend a production selected from the playlist. They study the theatre style(s) evident in the performance and analyse and evaluate how actor(s), director(s) and designer(s) interpret the script for an audience. They consider the interrelationships between acting, direction and design in the performance. In doing so, students consider character(s) in the play, how the actor(s) interpreted them on stage and the contribution of the director(s) and designer(s) to the interpretation and intended meaning(s). They study acting skills used by the actor(s) to portray character(s) to convey the intended meanings of the play and the establishment, maintenance and/or manipulation of the actor–audience relationship.

Students' understanding of the techniques being used by the actor(s), director(s) and designer(s) is informed by techniques they used to interpret the monologue they selected for Area of Study 1. They refine their understanding of the terminology associated with analysing and evaluating theatre performances.

Yong Synopsis

From Monkey Baa Learning Pack

Set against the backdrop of the Australian Gold Rush of 1857, Yong is a new Australian play by Jenevieve Chang.

Mixing historical fact and narrative fiction, Yong takes us on a journey across land and sea, from China to the goldfields of Australia. Yong and his father leave their small village and travel across the seas, hoping to strike gold and find their fortune in the goldfields of Ballarat. However, despite his family's desperate need for money, Yong does not want to be on this journey. On the surface, he appears to be an honourable son, but bubbling beneath is a deepening resentment toward his father and a longing for home. Faced with momentous change, Yong's courage and inner strength are tested, and through overcoming difficult challenges, he discovers a resilience in himself that he never knew he had.





Photo: State Library of Queensland

Context: Understanding the Gold Rush and the World of Yong

For students to understand the intended meaning of Yong, it is helpful to first explore the historical context of the Australian Gold Rush of 1857. During the 19th century, gold was the standard to which the value of currency was determined. As such, the discovery of gold — and the consequential gold rushes — led to major influxes of migration to goldfields around the world. Gold rushes occurred in California, Australia, and South Africa, drawing people from across the globe in search of wealth and the promise of a better life.

In Australia, the discovery of gold in Victoria — particularly in towns such as Ballarat, Bendigo, Ararat, Castlemaine, and Maryborough — triggered large waves of migration, including from China.

For Chinese migrants, the journey was especially arduous:

- They undertook a treacherous sea voyage that could last up to three months, covering up to 8,000 kilometres.
- Upon arrival in Robe, South Australia — chosen to avoid the heavy taxes imposed on Chinese arrivals in Victoria — migrants then faced a 500–600 kilometre overland trek on foot to reach the Victorian goldfields.

Chinese migrants were met with widespread racism, discrimination, and hostility.

Language barriers, cultural isolation, and targeted violence made the journey and settlement even more challenging.

Despite this, the dream of opportunity, prosperity, and the chance to build a better future remained a powerful driving force, demanding immense courage, resilience, and hope — qualities that are reflected throughout Yong.

Classroom Activity:

Using the information on page 6

Research the Physical Journey:

- Using an application like Google Maps, trace the real-world journey Yong would have taken:

From southern China → Across the ocean → Landing at Robe, South Australia → Overland trek to the Victorian goldfields (e.g. , Ballarat).

Create the Visual Journey

- Visualise the journey as a giant map in your classroom or notes.
- Mark key stages and challenges: sea voyage, landing, bushland crossing, and arrival at the goldfields.

Brainstorm Theatrical Interpretation:

How might the different settings and their historical contexts be conveyed through acting, design, and direction?

Setting

The setting of Yong spans a series of harsh and unfamiliar landscapes, beginning not in China, but at sea — nearing the coast of South Australia in 1857.

Settings include:

- The migrant ship, approaching land after a long and dangerous voyage.
- The port of Robe, South Australia, where Chinese migrants disembark to avoid heavy landing taxes in Victoria.
- The Australian bushland, where Yong and his travelling group begin the long and punishing overland trek toward the goldfields.
- The Victorian goldfields, representing both hardship and the hope for a new life.

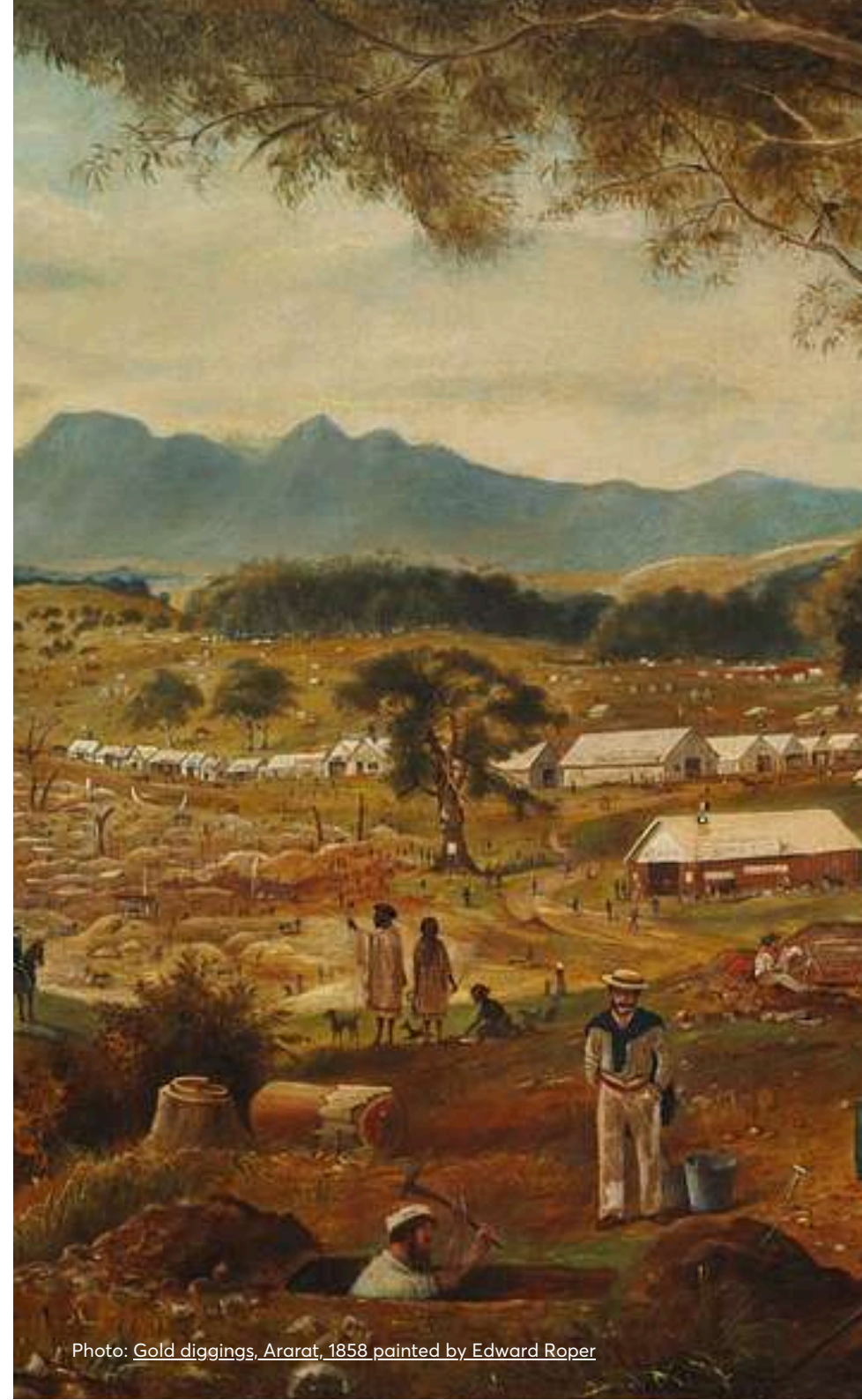


Photo: Gold diggings, Ararat, 1858 painted by Edward Roper

Classroom Activity:

Using the information on page 8

Brainstorm potential characters you might expect to encounter in Yong.

Think about:

- Who would be travelling with Yong from China to Australia?
- Who would Yong meet during his journey by ship and on land? (Family members, villagers, strangers? What shared hopes or tensions might exist between them?)
- What kinds of individuals — travellers, family members, strangers — might shape his experience?

For each imagined character, consider:

- Status: Are they in a position of power or vulnerability?
- Motivation: What drives them — survival, wealth, family, belonging?
- Objective: What are they actively seeking in a given moment?
- Function and Purpose: How might they challenge or support Yong's journey?
- Traits: What qualities (fear, determination, bitterness, kindness) might define them?

In small groups:

Stage how you imagine these various characters could be staged to show their differing status' motivations, objectives, functions and purposes and traits for an audience.

Intended Meaning

Although set in the 19th century, Yong explores themes that remain deeply relevant today. Migration stories — whether driven by hope, survival, political upheaval, or war — often share common threads of displacement, resilience, identity, and belonging. In a culturally diverse nation like Australia, Yong offers a powerful reminder of the personal journeys that continue to shape our communities.

Family Dynamics and Relationships

Yong's journey to Australia is not a choice, but a duty imposed by his father, Ning. Throughout the play, Yong struggles under the weight of his father's expectations while yearning for the comfort and emotional connection of his mother and grandmother, the former who had passed away and the latter who was left behind in China.

Family is portrayed as both a source of pressure and strength: even as Yong resents his father's harshness, memories of his mother's kindness and his grandmother's wisdom give him the resilience to endure.

Identity & Cultural Belonging

- Yong's journey is not only a physical migration but an emotional one: a search for identity in an unfamiliar and often hostile land.
- Cultural belonging is represented through:
- Artifacts of home — small objects carried from China that serve as tangible reminders of family, faith, and tradition.
- Cultural practices — attempts to uphold rituals and values in an environment that is alien and often indifferent.
- Clashes of culture — tensions between Chinese migrants and white Australians reveal not just racism, but profound cultural misunderstanding.

Resilience & Personal Growth

Across the course of the play, Yong moves from reluctant participant to independent survivor.

His resilience is portrayed not as a heroic transformation, but as a quiet accumulation of strength in the face of betrayal, hardship, grief, and isolation.

Migration & Cultural Exchange

Yong explores migration as a complex experience shaped by hope, fear, resilience, and loss. The play also acknowledges moments of cultural encounter: while racism and violence are central obstacles, glimpses of human connection across cultural divides — such as the quiet, respectful encounter with the Aboriginal man and boy — offer moments of empathy and shared humanity.

Classroom Activity

Brainstorm

Expand on each theme. What detailed ideas might sit beneath them?

For example:

- Family dynamics might involve the tension between loyalty and the desire for independence.
- Identity and cultural belonging might involve feelings of displacement or finding ways to connect to home through language, rituals, or memory.

Exploring Possibilities

- Considering the historical context and intended meanings, brainstorm how these themes might be portrayed on stage.
- What acting, design, or staging choices could express these ideas without relying on dialogue?

After the Show

Reflection

- How were the intended meanings you brainstormed expressed in the performance?
- Were there any moments that surprised you?

Analysis

- How did acting, design, and direction work together to create these thematic moments?
- Identify specific examples (e.g., use of props like the scarf or coin, lighting shifts, moments of stillness).

Audience Connection

- What impact did these moments have on the actor–audience relationship?
- How were you positioned emotionally by the performance to connect with Yong's experience?

Evaluation

- How successfully did the performance communicate the intended meanings of the play to the audience?
- Were some themes conveyed more clearly or powerfully than others?

Story Overview



Characters

Though it is a one man show, there are distinct characters throughout that are used to convey the key intended meanings of the play and its context. Therefore, each character has its own function and purpose, objective(s), motivation(s), status and traits or qualities.

Function	The character's narrative role: how they influence the story's action or other characters. (e.g., protagonist, mentor, antagonist, obstacle.)
Purpose	The thematic or emotional reason for the character's existence: what ideas, conflicts, or emotional experiences they represent for the audience.
Objective(s)	What the character wants to achieve — their specific goal or intention at a given moment or across the play.
Motivation(s)	The deeper reason behind a character's objectives — their internal drives, fears, desires, loyalties, or values.
Status	A character's position of power or influence compared to others, often shown through vocal tone, physicality, movement, and interaction.
Traits / Qualities	Key aspects of a character's personality or behaviour, such as resilient, loyal, cautious, bitter, determined, or proud.

Below is a table that can be used as a starting point to break down the characters in terms of their function, purpose, objective, motivation, status, and character traits.

This is not a definitive list — as you watch the play, you may notice additional objectives, motivations, shifts in status, and deeper traits that emerge through performance choices.

After viewing, it is useful to compare your own notes with the table below and reflect on where your understanding aligns, expands, or differs based on your interpretation of the live performance.

Character	Function	Purpose	Objective	Motivation	Status	Character Traits
Yong	Protagonist	Represents the migrant journey and personal growth	To survive, find independence, and honour his family	Desire for belonging, loyalty to family, need for survival	Low (child in an adult world) → Rising (independent survivor)	Resilient, Loyal, Curious
Ning (Father)	Authority figure	Embodies duty, tradition, and family obligation	To lead Yong to the goldfields and secure a better future	Duty to family, cultural expectation, survival instinct	High (father figure and group leader)	Stern, Proud, Determined
Mr Chung	Mentor Figure	Provides wisdom, practical guidance, and emotional steadiness	To survive and support Yong and others	Practicality, group resilience, personal loyalty	Moderate (respected informal authority)	Wise, Pragmatic, Supportive

Character	Function	Purpose	Objective	Motivation	Status	Character Traits
Mr Feng	Symbol of despair	Represents the emotional toll of migration and loss of hope	To survive, though increasingly passive and self-destructive	Grief, addiction, trauma from hardship	Low (isolated, physically and emotionally)	Bitter, Vulnerable, Defeated
George	Antagonist	Represents betrayal, exploitation, and racism	To profit from guiding Chinese migrants	Greed, prejudice, self-preservation	High (initial control over journey) → Falls (loss of trust)	Ruthless, Greedy, Deceptive

Classroom Activity

Building on your exploration of setting, context, and intended meaning, this activity focuses on how a director and designer might make choices to represent character development, relationships, and transformation on stage.

Character Distinction

- How might design elements help clarify the differences between characters?
- How might the use of costume, lighting, props and set aid in creating distinction between the characters?
- How could a director guide an actor's movement through the space to reflect changing relationships or status throughout the play?

Character Progression

- How do different characters change over time in Yong?
- Where in their journey might these changes occur?
- As a director or designer, how might you represent these shifts visually and spatially on stage?

Practical Activity

In small groups, use several actors to block a scene showing the relationships between different characters. Focus on stage positioning, use of space, and symbolic use of design elements to show character dynamics.

Then, reimagine the scene with only one actor:

- How could directorial decisions (blocking, focus, use of levels) and design decisions (use of key props, lighting shifts) support the clear transformation between characters?

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Acting Skills



Throughout the play the actor relies on their acting skills to distinguish between the characters. Below is a table that you can use to describe the various acting skills within the performance.

Acting Skill	Definition	Vocabulary for Description
Voice	How the actor uses tone, pitch, pace, volume, and resonance to communicate character and emotion.	Sharp, hesitant, trembling, booming, lilting, clipped, strained, breathy, steady, urgent.
Movement	How the actor moves their body through space, including speed, weight, flow, and direction.	Heavy, fluid, rigid, tentative, hurried, deliberate, grounded, expansive, collapsing.
Facial Expression	The emotions or reactions conveyed through the actor's face, including eyes, mouth, and tension.	Frowning, wide-eyed, clenched jaw, blank, smiling, furrowed brow, pursed lips, softened gaze.
Gesture	Specific actions or movements of the hands, arms, head, or body to express character or emotion.	Pointing, trembling hands, clenched fists, open arms, twitching, waving, slumping, reaching.

Acting Skill	Definition	Vocabulary for Description
Stillness and Silence	The deliberate choice to pause physically or vocally to create meaning, tension, or focus.	Frozen, suspended, poised, sagging, breath held, weighted pause, deliberate stillness.
Focus	The actor's concentration and attention — where their energy is directed on stage and how it is maintained.	Sharp focus, internal focus, outward focus, direct eye contact, shifting gaze, fragmented focus, unwavering.

Building on the previous activity that focused on directorial and design decisions, this task shifts the focus to acting skills.

In small groups, experiment with using the acting skills listed above to create clear distinctions between characters and to demonstrate transformations during performance.

Character Distinction

- How can changes in voice, movement, gesture, facial expression, stillness, and focus show the audience which character is being portrayed at any given moment?
- Experiment with exaggerating or minimising different acting skills to highlight the differences between characters.

Character Transformation

- How can changes in voice, movement, gesture, facial expression, stillness, and focus show the audience which character is being portrayed at any given moment?
- Experiment with exaggerating or minimising different acting skills to highlight the differences between characters.

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Direction



Directing

Below are insights from director Darren Yap on bringing the story of Yong to life. As you engage with these reflections, consider how the choices in acting, direction and design worked together to interpret the script and convey its intended meanings. These can be used to help shape your understanding of the interrelationship between production roles, the director's intent and how that intent was realised for the audience.

What were the challenges and benefits of staging Yong as a one-actor play?

Eva and I talked about turning this into a one-man show. I was fraught with fear. At first, I couldn't even imagine how that could play with just one actor because the book was so vivid.

It took a lot of faith and trust... but I realised the story became much more meaningful and emotional with just one actor. Somehow, having the actor play Yong and all the different parts made the heart of the story stronger.

How did you and the actor work together to bring each character to life?

Wern Mac was our original Yong, and we spent a lot of time reading the book and talking about the different characters.

We talked about who Yong was, what he was like—and then we played around with all the different voices. Particularly Yong's father and George. We did a lot of workshopping—how would Grandma stand? How would Dad sound? We found each character physically and vocally through rehearsal.

How did you want the audience to connect with Yong as a character?

Genevieve Chang and I talked a lot about making the play feel contemporary. She used language that didn't make it feel like a history play. We wanted Yong to feel like a young person now—not just a character from 1857. I think that's what makes him so relatable, especially to a young audience.

We also explored the anxiety he'd carry—travelling all the way from China, dealing with grief and pressure. That made him feel more human and present.

Directing

What were the key emotional and thematic ideas you wanted the audience to take away?

One of the big emotional climaxes is Yong finding the courage to speak his truth to his father. "I never felt good enough. You never cried when Mum died."

That was very personal for me too. I loved my dad, but I was intimidated by him. I related to Yong needing to say what he had to say.

It's also a rite of passage story—Yong steps into his father's shoes and becomes a leader. That moment where he ties his father's sash around himself is really powerful.

How did you manage the tonal shifts between awe, comedy, brutality, and tenderness?

Honestly, a lot of testing and rehearsing. A lot of experimenting and editing. My job as a director is to make the story clear, but also shape its rhythm and tone.

We used lighting, sound, and physicality to help with that. I worked closely with James Brown, our designer, and Genevieve would often point out moments where we could add wonder or levity—like when Yong finds the coins in the jar.

Is there a difference when directing for young audiences versus adults?

Not really. My job is always to make the story clear. Monkey Baa really taught me not to dumb anything down for kids.

The issues in Yong—death, grief, racism—are very adult. Kids get it. They really do. The only thing that's different is you have to be very specific with your storytelling for young audiences. But the heart of it stays the same.

Do you have a favourite moment in the play?

I love a lot of moments—the different journeys Yong takes up the ladder, across the plank... but my favourite is the end.

When Yong reaches Ballarat, and we see archival footage, and he flies his kite to Max Lambert's music... that's beautiful. You see this boy who's gone through so much and is now thinking of his mum, of his dad, and feeling proud.

What do you ultimately hope the audience walks away thinking about?

I hope they think about their families. About forgiveness—for their parents, for people like George, even for themselves.

I also hope they understand how important history is. This story—Chinese migration during the gold rush—is part of who we are.

And most of all, I hope they feel that while life's journey can be tough, there's peace to be found at the end of it.

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Design



Set Design Overview

The set of Yong is a versatile and imaginative space that allows the performer to move fluidly and reshape the environment as the story unfolds. With a wooden finish, carefully selected period props, and a soft projection screen, the design supports seamless transitions across time and place, capturing both the physical and emotional journey at the heart of the play.

Costume Design Overview

The costume in Yong remains unchanged throughout the performance. The actor wears a blue Tangzhuang — a traditional Qing dynasty jacket featuring long sleeves, a mandarin collar, and frog clasps — paired with grey pants and a cap with a ponytail. While the costume stays consistent, the actor uses elements of it, such as the ponytail, in expressive ways to help differentiate characters and support transformation on stage. This simplicity reinforces the storytelling focus and allows for quick shifts in role and tone.

Lighting & Projection Design Overview

Lighting and projection play a vital role in Yong, helping to transport the audience across shifting landscapes and emotional beats. These elements not only establish location but also evoke temperature, time of day, and mood. As the story unfolds, notice how changes in lighting and projection support Yong's journey — from the brightness of hope to the shadows of grief — and help bring his memories to life. Students are encouraged to observe how these shifts enhance the storytelling and reflect Yong's inner world.

Q&A with the Production Designer James Browne

What were the key emotional and thematic ideas you wanted the audience to take away?

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Sound Design

Overview

The sound design in *Yong* plays a vital role in shaping the audience's experience of both the physical journey and the emotional arc of the story. It blends diegetic sound (sound that exists within the world of the play, like footsteps, weather, or voices *Yong* might hear) and non-diegetic sound (sound used to underscore emotion or enhance atmosphere, like music or ambient tones the characters don't hear).

Through layered Australian soundscapes, subtle effects, and Mandarin voiceovers, the design immerses the audience in *Yong*'s environment — from bustling ship decks to the stillness of the bush. It also reflects his inner world: moments of fear, grief, and resilience are heightened through carefully timed shifts in sound. Students are encouraged to consider how the sound design builds a broader world around a solo performer, enhancing transformation, memory, and cultural identity throughout the play.

Q&A with the Sound Designer

Zac Saric

What inspired the sound design for *Yong*?

Being set in Australia - specifically Victoria - it was very important to have ambience and sound effects that reflected this, and therefore, I was quite specific with sounds used throughout the show.

How did you approach the sound design process?

On initial read of the script I had quite a clear direction to go with the sound design - building Australian soundscapes, etc. Once the skeleton of this was complete it became quite a collaborative task between myself and all other departments ensuring that additional voiceover and SFX played hand-in-hand with the performer and enriched the story.

How did you collaborate with the director and composer?

Darren (the director), Max (the composer), and I worked closely to ensure that the ambience, sound design and music of the ever-shifting landscapes flowed seamlessly. We were all influenced by the actor's performance and the director's vision, always making sure the sound supported the solo storytelling.

How does the sound design reflect the play's themes?

Throughout the show we've used Mandarin narration and voiceovers which I think was a great way to ensure the show was both grounded as a Chinese migrant story and also a great way to signify *Yong*'s family and heritage.

Sound Design

What parts of the story are enhanced through sound but not explicitly stated?

The flashbacks throughout the show. Although we do understand what happens in these at the end of the show, I think it's an effective way to demonstrate the abuse and racism suffered by the Chinese and Asian migrants during that period.

How does the design reflect Yong's journey?

The atmosphere and ambience used throughout the show are a great reflection of the journey gone on. We start with Yong on the boat landing in Australia and as we travel deeper and deeper throughout Victoria the landscape and ambience changes with us.

What is your favourite moment in the show?

The Storm towards the later part of the show. Coming directly after Yong's father's death, I think it's a very powerful moment of courage and resiliency where Yong earns the respect of the travelling party as he takes the place of his father whilst also using his father's voice as a call of courage and power.

What should students listen for during the play?

When we originally opened the production in Ballarat we recorded a Chinese community choir singing Chinese songs, some of which have made the production in various sections.

Classroom Activity

After the Show

As soon as the performance ends, jot down the scenes or moments that stood out to you — especially those where the acting, set, sound, lighting, projection or costume left a strong impression. Be as detailed as possible in your descriptions. Collaborate with a peer and organise your descriptions into a table that shows the relationship between specific moments, the design elements, directorial decisions and acting you observed on stage. In pairs or as a class, compare your observations and discuss how different production elements worked together in those moments.

Organise your discussion into a table or visual map that clearly shows:

- The specific moment or scene
- The acting choices observed
- The design elements (e.g. sound, lighting, set, costume)
- The directorial decisions that helped bring the scene to life
- The impact on the audience or meaning created

This activity will help prepare you for writing analytical responses and deepen your understanding of how acting and design combine to interpret the script and shape audience experience.

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Theatrical Style



Theatrical Style

Considering the context and purpose of *Yong*, it is best described as a historical drama for young people, shaped through the lens of an adventure story.

While the play is based on real historical events — the Chinese migration during the Australian gold rush of 1857 — it's not staged as a realistic or documentary-style performance. Instead, Yong draws on non-naturalistic conventions like direct address, narration, transformation, and flashback to tell the story in a way that is accessible and engaging for a younger audience.

The play follows the journey of Yong, a reluctant traveller, as he moves from China to the goldfields of Ballarat. This structure — a central character moving through unfamiliar terrain, facing challenges and growing in the process — echoes the classic format of an adventure narrative. Framing the story this way allows the audience to follow Yong's physical and emotional transformation as he encounters loss, betrayal, danger, and resilience.

Conventions that can be seen onstage :

- **Transformation of character, place, time, and object** – keeping the storytelling dynamic and allowing the one actor to shift fluidly between roles and settings
- **Direct address and narration** – inviting the audience into Yong's inner world, helping them navigate time jumps and location shifts
- **Flashback** – revealing key emotional memories that shape Yong's motivation and resilience
- **Comedy** – used purposefully to ease tension and balance the emotional weight of Yong's journey
- **Urgency and stakes** – key moments in the story highlight the risks involved and keep the audience engaged in Yong's goal

Post Performance Questions

1. What theatrical style conventions did you see on stage?
2. How were these conventions applied by acting, directing and design?
3. How did the application of the conventions by the various production roles impact the audience?

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Audience Culture



Photo: [Jason Lau](#)

Audience Culture

Monkey Baa is a theatre company that creates work specifically for young audiences.

Their productions aim to balance emotional complexity with imaginative storytelling, recognising that young audiences are capable of engaging with serious ideas when presented in accessible and inventive ways.

Discussion

- What differences in audience culture are there between theatre for young people and adult audiences?
- What considerations would a theatre company need to make when choosing to stage a work for young audiences?
- Monkey Baa consulted their youth advisory council during the creative development of Yong. Through that process it was highlighted that direct address and breaking the fourth wall were important to young audiences so they can connect with the actor and see themselves in Yong as someone of a similar age.
- What other considerations might a theatre company have when staging theatre for young audiences?
- How might the audience culture influence the application of theatrical style?

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Actor Audience Relationship



Actor Audience Relationship

The actor–audience relationship refers to the evolving connection between the performer and the audience across a performance.

It shapes how the audience engages emotionally, intellectually, and imaginatively with the world of the play.

In a solo performance like *Yong*, where one actor embodies multiple characters and guides the audience through a complex emotional journey, maintaining a strong actor–audience relationship is essential not only for tracking character shifts but for highlighting pivotal moments and communicating the intended meanings of the play.

Establishing the Actor–Audience Relationship

Establishing the relationship involves setting clear performance choices so the audience understands the world of the play and their role as observers or participants.

Clear establishment helps audiences understand how to respond emotionally and intellectually to the world they are entering, and frames their expectations about the tone, style, and thematic focus of the work.

This relationship is shaped through a range of acting, directorial, and design choices, working together to create a unified audience experience.

Acting Choices

Actors establish the relationship through performance techniques such as:

- Coding physical traits or gestures to distinguish characters (for example, a stern posture to signal authority or a soft, tentative gesture to express vulnerability).
- Using spatial positioning to either invite the audience closer and create intimacy, or maintain distance to encourage observation.
- Employing focus and gaze: direct eye contact may draw the audience into a character's private thoughts, while an indirect gaze may maintain immersion within the dramatic world.
- Setting the emotional tone through choices in voice, energy, rhythm, and openness — shaping how accessible or guarded the emotional world feels.

These choices provide audiences with clear signals about how to engage with the story.

Directorial Choices

Directorial decisions also play a vital role in establishing the actor–audience relationship:

- Blocking and spatial relationships: a director may position the actor closer to the audience for moments of intimacy, or keep them distant or elevated to create emotional or thematic separation.
- Use of levels and space: moving vertically (sitting, standing, reaching upward) or horizontally (moving downstage or upstage) can subtly control emotional distance and focus.
- Pacing of early scenes: directors may choose to begin with high-energy direct address, or slower, more immersive moments, depending on the intended audience relationship.
- Shaping direct address: directors decide when and how often the actor should directly engage the audience — narrating, confiding, or questioning — and when to withhold that connection to heighten dramatic immersion.

Design Choices

Design elements also contribute significantly to establishing the relationship between the actor and audience:

- Lighting:
 - Warm, open lighting can create an immediate sense of intimacy and accessibility.
 - Cooler, isolated lighting might suggest distance, danger, or emotional withdrawal.
- Set Design:
 - An open, minimalistic set can invite audience imagination and participation in constructing the world.
 - A more detailed, closed set can encourage observation and a more passive, reflective audience stance.
- Props and Symbolism:
 - The use of symbolic objects early in the performance can cue the audience into key emotional themes or cultural references.
- Sound Design:
 - Use of ambient or stylised sound can frame the audience's sensory entry into the world — either heightening realism or signalling theatricality.

Together, these design choices work to either invite the audience emotionally closer to the world of the play or to position them as observers reflecting on the action from a distance

Classroom Activity

How might these elements work together to establish an actor-audience relationship to convey:

- Distinct characters
- Conveying heightened emotional moments
- Key intended meanings



Maintaining the Actor–Audience Relationship

Once the actor–audience relationship is established, it must be carefully maintained across the performance to keep the audience emotionally and intellectually engaged.

Actors, directors, and designers will use different strategies to maintain engagement, drawing on previously coded ideas — such as established character traits, spatial relationships, or design states — but also introducing variation depending on the emotional focus or audience response they want to achieve in the moment.

For example, a moment of grief might evolve into resilience, requiring subtle shifts in performance choices to guide the audience’s experience. Maintaining the relationship involves balancing consistency (so the world remains believable) and adaptation (so the emotional journey remains dynamic and engaging).

Ways to Maintain the Relationship

Acting Choices

- Consistently applying physical and vocal choices to maintain character clarity.
- Modulating energy, stillness, and movement to match the emotional weight of a moment.
- Adjusting focus and gaze — shifting between the audience and the internal world to control emotional proximity.
- Varying vocal tone and rhythm to signal emotional transitions or highlight pivotal narrative moments.

Directorial Choices

- Using stage space to bring the actor closer or further from the audience based on the emotional tone.
- Structuring moments of direct address or immersion to shape audience focus and involvement.
- Framing emotional climaxes visually and spatially to intensify audience connection.

Design Choices

- Supporting emotional shifts with changes in lighting, sound, or set dynamics.
- Highlighting key moments (such as transformation or emotional breakthroughs) through symbolic design choices.
- Using props and set flexibility to maintain visual interest without distracting from character focus.

Creative Learning at
Arts Centre Melbourne

Elements of Theatre Composition



Elements of Theatre Composition

In VCE Theatre Studies, the elements of theatre composition are used by actors, directors, and designers to shape meaning, structure audience focus, and build emotional engagement. Each element of theatre composition has its own specific definition.

Rather than simply naming an element (e.g., "motion"), try to use the language from the definition to describe exactly what you observed.

For example:

Instead of writing "The actor used motion," you might write, "The actor moved in a distinct pattern across the stage to create a visual rhythm, focusing the audience's attention on his emotional shift."

This approach adds specificity to your discussion and shows a deeper understanding of how meaning is shaped in performance.



Elements of Theatre Composition

Element	Definition
Cohesion	The overall unity and balance of an interpretation or of moments within an interpretation.
Motion	The movement, implied movement and/or stillness of actors and/or design features that occur in the space (this may include position, pattern, arrangement, proportion and flow).
Rhythm	The pace, timing and tempo within certain moments or across the interpretation.
Emphasis	Aspects of the interpretation are given a particular focus, importance or prominence.
Contrast	Juxtaposition (two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect) of different or opposing aspects or qualities within certain moments in the interpretation.
Variation	Changes to the dynamics of the interpretation, as may be evident in the use and manipulation of tension, conflict, intensity, energy and space (variation may be gradual and may occur in certain moments or across an interpretation).

Below are some ways in which the elements might appear in a performance

Element	Acting	Directing	Design	Intended Meaning & Actor–Audience Relationship
Cohesion	Maintaining a consistent physical and emotional style across characters and scenes, so transformations feel part of the same world.	Shaping transitions between scenes, characters, and settings to ensure a smooth, unified journey without abrupt emotional or narrative breaks.	Using a consistent aesthetic across set, costume, props, and lighting — such as colour palette or textures — to visually link the different worlds Yong travels through.	Ensures the audience experiences the story as one cohesive emotional and cultural journey, reinforcing the play's major themes without disruption.
Motion	Dynamic changes in posture, direction, or speed to mark emotional states or character transformations.	Controlled staging of actor and objects — motion directed to highlight new settings, relationships, or emotional beats.	Movement of set pieces, props, or visual elements to mirror shifts in journey (e.g., ship → bushland → goldfields).	Directs audience focus, creates emotional momentum, and signals shifts in Yong's inner and outer worlds.
Rhythm	Adjusting speech pace, breath, and movement tempo to create urgency or tenderness in key moments.	Varying scene lengths and transitions — slowing for moments of grief, quickening for moments of danger or decision.	Lighting and sound punctuate changes in tempo (e.g., rapid light shifts during storms, slower fades during reflection).	Shapes audience emotional engagement — holding attention tightly during tension, allowing reflection during quieter moments.

Element	Acting	Directing	Design	Intended Meaning & Actor–Audience Relationship
Emphasis	Focused gaze, vocal stillness, or deliberate gestures to highlight critical emotional or narrative points.	Use of stillness, spotlighting, or staging actor closer to the audience during pivotal revelations.	Minimalistic props or significant costume details (e.g., scarf, coin) spotlighted to reinforce symbolic weight.	Guides the audience to recognise key emotional shifts (e.g., grief, betrayal, resilience) and their importance to Yong's growth.
Contrast	The actor might appear physically small or still against a harsh or chaotic setting, highlighting Yong's vulnerability by contrasting his presence with the intensity of sound, space, or lighting in that moment.	Juxtaposing stillness and dynamic movement, isolation and connection, to highlight emotional oppositions.	Design might place opposing elements—such as colour, texture, or scale—side-by-side within a moment to highlight conflict or imbalance in Yong's world.	Highlights the tension in Yong's journey — between hope and despair, belonging and alienation — deepening emotional stakes for the audience.
Variation	Modulating physical energy, vocal intensity, and spatial use across scenes to keep emotional engagement dynamic.	Structuring changes in tension and conflict — alternating between scenes of high pressure and scenes of relief.	Adapting the use of light, sound, and space to keep audience attention refreshed without overwhelming the story.	Prevents predictability, mirrors Yong's evolving resilience, and keeps the audience emotionally connected throughout the journey.

Scene Analysis



Scene Analysis

We have included some excerpts from Yong to support discussion and guide you to moments that may be valuable to analyse for your SAC and exam preparation.

Use the accompanying questions to guide your analysis both before and after viewing the performance.

Please note:

For Unit 4.3, there is no requirement to quote directly from the script and to know the script in your responses.

However, having a strong understanding of the scene will deepen your ability to analyse and evaluate how it was realised in performance through acting, direction, and design.

Pre- Viewing Questions

- 1.What intended meaning(s) does this moment aim to convey?
- 2.What acting skills (voice, movement, gesture, facial expression, stillness, focus) might be used to create character and meaning?
- 3.How might direction shape the actor's use of space, levels, or rhythm to engage the audience?
- 4.How could design choices (lighting, set, props, costume, sound) support this moment's setting, emotion, or mood?
- 5.Which elements of theatre composition (cohesion, motion, rhythm, emphasis, contrast, variation) might be important in this moment to structure the audience's experience?

Post Viewing Questions

- 1.How were acting skills used to portray character(s) and convey meaning in this moment?
- 2.How did direction shape the actor's movement, focus, and interaction with the space and audience?
- 3.How did design choices enhance or deepen the intended meaning of the moment?
- 4.How did the interrelationships between acting, directing, and design contribute to the audience's understanding and engagement?
- 5.How were the elements of theatre composition used to shape meaning and audience focus across the moment?

Scene Analysis

Script: Page 4

Scene Two

SFX: The alien shriek of seagulls, waves on the shore.

LFX: The bright, harsh glare of the Australian sun.

Boat Owner: (VO) All out! Come on. Out ya get. Out!

SFX: A cacophony of sounds as people disembark.

Yong steps on the shoreline.

SFX English voices get closer and louder.

Yong: I've never heard so much English all at once.
The foreigners look so strange with their bright clothes, pink faces and hairy chins.

SFX Screech of a seagull

Yong: (looking around) The air makes me thirsty just from breathing.
The light of the sun hurts my skin.
It's so different from home,
With its mists and rain and breeze.

Chinese V/O: How far are the goldfields?

Ning: The goldfields are about three or four hundred miles. In the foreigners' measurements.

Yong: What's that in our measurement Father?

Ning: A mile is about three *li*.

SFX: Sounds of disbelief and consternation from the villagers.

Yong: (shocked) Is he serious?
We won't get home for months and months!

Script: Page 12

SFX: Mutt's barking.

George: Alright you lot, let's stop 'ere for the night. But don't none of you start getting rowdy on me.

Yong: My legs weigh heavy like lead.

Today was only our first day. I have no idea how far we walked.

I'm afraid to ask.

Mr Feng is on his soapbox again.

Feng: Don't you know the clouds are different in Australia? That's why it rains here in Autumn!

Yong: But I'm thinking about what Mr Feng said earlier...
Is it true no one else from the village was allowed to bring their son?
Mr Feng's son is a year older than me, a bully.
All the same, he must be missing his dad.

SFX: Mutt growling.

Yong: (looking around) Mutt? Where are you, boy?

Mutt scampers over, panting in excitement. Yong crouches down to pat the dog, but is suddenly bowled over by a looming shadowy figure.

George: (waving a bottle) Get away! Get away! Don't. Touch. Dog. All of you Chinese, keep away. You think I'm gonna let you lot boil him up with your rice? Not on yer life, you hear me? NOT ON YER LIFE!

Screeching sound into...

FLASH FORWARD BEGINS

LX: Strobe

Mr George's bottle morphs into a rifle. He brandishes it wildly.

SFX: Mutt barks.

The cock of the rifle.

Yong's distorted yell.

A CRACK and Thud.

Mr George crumples.

FLASHFORWARD ENDS

Father is burning up. Mr Chung, please get some more water for him!

Let me help with your tunic.

As the tunic is raised over Ning's head, Yong sinks onto his knees and sobs with relief. When he lifts his head again, he is holding Mother's sash with blue and silver chrysanthemums. He lifts the cloth to his face.

Yong folds the sash and places it carefully inside his basket.

Then he takes Ning's hand.

Yong: I was wrong about you Father. You didn't sell Mother's sash.

Ning: *(fumbling)* Mei-ling's sash!

Yong: I have it, it's safe.

Ning: She loved that sash.

Yong: It was mine Father. She gave it to me. You had no right to take it.

Ning: Are you disrespecting...? *(shuts his eyes, comes to a decision)* I should not have taken it. It was yours. Your mother...she loved you...but we thought differently.

I thought you must be tougher to become a man. But perhaps you are tough in ways I do not understand...

Yong: *(feeling his forehead)* Father, your fever has gone. We will keep going all the way to the goldfields. And once we've found gold, we'll go home and help our family and visit Ma's grave.

Ning: You are a good son, Yong

Yong: Imagine Grandma's face when we come home with all that gold...Her eyes will crinkle up and she will brag to everyone, My son did this! My grandson did this..."
Yong gradually falls asleep resting his head against Father's chest during the above.

LX: From night to dawn

Yong wakes up.

Yong: *(to his father, realising Ning has not gotten up)* Bà? *(Pause)* Bà!

He realises his father is gone and begins shaking with grief.

Yong: Bàba...

Glossary

Celestial	positioned in or relating to the sky, or outer space as observed in <u>astronomy</u> .
Guangdong	Guangdong (formerly Canton), a coastal province of southeast China, borders Hong Kong and Macau.

Further information

More information including list of creatives and casts can be found on Monkey Baa's website: <https://www.monkeybaa.com.au/shows/yong>

Further context, activities and interviews can be found in Monkey Baa's Year 5-8 Learning Pack with here: <https://www.monkeybaa.com.au/learning-packs/yong>

Creative Learning at Arts Centre Melbourne

The production of *Yong* is based on 'Yong: the journey of an unworthy son' by Janeen Brian, published by Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney.

Created in collaboration with Her Majesty's Theatre, Ballarat and Bendigo Venues & Events.

This performance season of *Yong* has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand (RISE) Fund and Creative Australia, its arts funding and advisory body. Monkey Baa is supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW.

Queries: schools@artscentremelbourne.com.au

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