

Arts Centre Melbourne presents

BLACK TIES

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and Te Rēhia Theatre
By John Harvey and Tainui Tukiwaho
World Premiere Season
Presented as part of Asia TOPA

EDUCATION RESOURCES



WELCOME

A note on the resources

These resources have been designed with students of VCE Drama in mind however they can be adapted to suit all year levels.

It is hoped that these resources will provide teachers and students with starting points, provocations, ideas and 'memory joggers' for analysing and evaluating *BLACK TIES*.

About Arts Centre Melbourne

The land on which Arts Centre Melbourne sits has long been a place of gathering, storytelling, song, ceremony, celebration and commemoration for First Nations people. The People of the Kulin Nations have gathered on the site for thousands of years and continue to do so today. We pay our respects to their elders, past, present and future.

Sitting beneath our iconic Spire, we're Australia's largest and busiest performing arts centre. Each year we stage more than 4,000 performances and public events and welcome over 3 million people through our doors. In fact, as a cultural and architectural landmark in our nation's cultural capital, we've showcased the best of Australian and international performing arts for over 30 years.

About Asia TOPA

This stunning and multi-art form collection of works over the three-month long festival explores the connections between contemporary Australia and its growing diaspora.

The 2020 program is focused on new work creation alongside presentations of iconic and legendary artists and reflects the contemporary imagination and lived experience of artists from the entire Asia-Pacific region. Australian artists, groups and companies have made connections across the region to present collaborations and intercultural works spanning music, dance, theatre, contemporary performance, film, digital, visual art, public talks and more.

Fourteen Asia TOPA Consortium partners and more than 20 Victorian Program Partners have committed to simultaneously program and present contemporary Asian arts and culture across the festival. Their shared vision is to create a change in the Australian performing arts sector and play a critical role in shifting the conservative model of programming on all major stages, both locally and nationally.

Resources written and prepared by Katy Warner, Creative Producer for Schools Engagement at Arts Centre Melbourne

Production Stills by Mark Gambino

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IMPORTANT BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

In her interview with Malti Elliot (for Malti Media, Perth), Racheal Maza explains:

*My father, along with a few other local community members, was a founding member of the very **first modern Black theatre company** based here in Melbourne, **Nindethana**, in the early 70s. And then, a year later, the family moved to Sydney to set up **The National Black Theatre Company in Redfern**.*

My whole world has been immersed on the stages of various theatres over the years ... I really can't separate myself from that world.

*The theatre was intrinsically entwined with the **politics** of the time. So, **theatre as a political tool**. Which informs the way that I work. There's always a hidden agenda within what seems like a perfectly good night out.*

ILBIJERRI was born out of the passion and needs to be able to create platforms for our stories. Opportunities for our actors and our directors and writers.

Nindethana

In an interview with The Pin ([read the full thing here](#)), Uncle Jack Charles talks about how it came about that he and Racheal Maza's father started the first Indigenous Theatre Company –

I was given a grant by the government at the time to start an Aboriginal Theatre. So we started Nindethana Theatre.

I was out of my element, an alcoholic, and at a loss for what to do. So we pulled in Bob Maza to help us find out what we had to do. Bob was instrumental. He could direct, perform and develop some great scripts. We developed the 'Jack Charles is Up and Fighting' series, political reviews and music. We were meant to take it to the Tent Embassy. I said I didn't want to be involved because I was against Black Power, I didn't see the need for it here in Australia. I'm not Black Power, you see. I'm Black Presence. In your face, we're still here, you know!

We did 'Jack Charles is Up and Fighting' at the Australian National University. This was the first time any other Aborigine in the country had seen a full Aboriginal production. Written by Aborigines, performed by Aborigines, in an Aborigine theatre.

The formal objective of Nindethana was 'the performance, encouragement and promotion of Aboriginal drama, music, art, literature, film production and other such cultural activities in the community.'

You should read about the background of Nindethana in *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967-1990* by Maryrose Casey, pages 20 to 41. Available online via Google Books:

https://books.google.com.au/books?id=vw7sv3iMZiEC&pg=PA63&lpg=PA63&dq=Nindethana+theatre&source=bl&ots=E6mqMR7III&sig=ACfU3U3rSmTJ1iKHGjRGEPbz_bzZOYyxXA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiL-tzvjfvnAhUr4jgGHeU2BkUQ6AEwB3oECAsQAQ#v=onepage&q=Nindethana%20&f=false

The National Black Theatre

An opening night review of The National Black Theatre's *Basically Black* in the *Sydney Morning Herald* recognised the performance as a historical event, with critic Margaret Jones writing, "Black political theatre in Australia had its first serious airing this week when Aboriginal actors presented a savagely satirical revue to a packed and partisan Nimrod Street audience."

Basically Black grew out of the fiery combination of political activism and the performing arts that was embodied in the goals of the National Black Theatre (NBT). Spearheaded by actor and activist Bob Maza, who was inspired in part by a visit to the National Black Theatre in Harlem, the NBT advocated a grassroots approach to theatre that involved street performances, demonstrations, dance and workshops, based on a vision of theatre as 'for and by the people' whose struggles it sought to represent. (Basically Black: The legacy of the National Black Theatre by Rowena Potts, NITV)

Watch the videos and read the article from NITV / SBS online: <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/express-yourself/article/2016/06/10/basically-black-legacy-national-black-theatre>

Read more about the National Black Theatre at

- The Dictionary of Sydney: https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/national_black_theatre
- Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Theatre_\(Sydney\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Theatre_(Sydney))

In an interview with RNZ, Rachael Maza explains how Indigenous people have a history of "using theatre as a political tool."

The challenge with theatre, and will continue to always be the challenge of theatre, is how to open those doors and make theatre accessible.

As one of the only three Indigenous theatre companies in Australia we're all having these conversations. How do we take the theatre out to the mob?

You can listen to the full interview here:

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/2018737419/black-ties-co-director-rachael-maza>

ILBIJERRI

(From ILBIJERRI website: <https://ilbijerri.com.au/about>)

ILBIJERRI is one of Australia's leading theatre companies creating innovative works by First Nations artists.

ILBIJERRI creates, presents and tours powerful and engaging theatre, creatively controlled by Indigenous artists. Our stories are provocative and affecting and give voice to our unique and diverse cultures.

Each year we travel to national, regional and remote locations across Australia and the world. Since 2010 we have presented 18 new works, performed 621 times in 312 venues to 99,417 people.

ILBIJERRI is an advocate and leader for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in Australia. In this role we deliver a broad program of Artist Development for new and emerging Indigenous writers, directors, actors and creatives.

Born from community ILBIJERRI has become a spearhead for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in telling our stories of what it means to be Indigenous in Australia today.

We promote discussion and raise awareness of key issues facing the community through the development and touring of issue-based works.

ILBIJERRI is committed to developing our audience and a strong national profile.

Our work possesses the power to reach out and remind audiences of every person's need for family, history and heritage. Our collaborative relationships with communities and artists are at the heart of our creative process and all our work empowers and enlightens our audiences.

ILBIJERRI

BOLD. BLACK. BRILLIANT.

TE RĒHIA THEATRE

Established in 2012, Te Rēhia Theatre is a proudly Māori theatre company, championing Māori playwrights, tikanga Māori arts practice and the presentation of diverse stories. Te Rēhia Theatre, named in honour of the atua of leisure is led by Amber Curreen and Tainui Tukiwaho based at Te Pou – The Auckland home of Māori Theatre. The company is passionate about te reo Māori (the Māori language) in theatre and the exploration of innovative ways of telling Māori stories.



Rachael Maza | Director

Rachael Maza is Yidinji from North Queensland, Meriam from the Torres Strait Island of Mer, and Dutch on her mother's side. Rachael is Artistic Director of ILBIJERRI Theatre Company (2008 – present) and brings with her a wealth of acting, directing and dramaturgical experience, a significant profile, and a passionate vision for Indigenous theatre.

Rachael is widely known for her wealth of acting, directing, and dramaturgical experience across the Australian film, television and theatre industry. Most notably, the AFI (Australian Film Institute) award-winning *Radiance* and the stage production of *The Sapphires*.

A Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) graduate, Rachael's outstanding performances have been acknowledged with a Green Room Award and a Sydney Theatre Critics Circle Award. Rachael has also worked as a presenter for ABC Message Stick and as an acting coach on films such as the multi-award-winning *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

Rachael first worked with ILBIJERRI Theatre Company in 1992, as director of *Stolen*, and in 2008 joined the company as Artistic Director. Since then she has directed *Sisters of Gelam* (2009), *Jack Charles V The Crown* (2010), *Foley* (2011), and *Which Way Home* (2016).

Rachael currently sits on the board of ACMI, is a member of the Circus Oz Indigenous Advisory Panel, the Australian Opera Indigenous Advisory Panel and the Green Room Awards Theatre Company Panel.

Rachael's considerable contribution to the cultural landscape has been recognised through multiple awards, including the Touring Legend Drover Award, 2017, the Inaugural Alumni Graduate Award, Edith Cowan University (2019), and the Australia Council of the Arts Award for Theatre (2019), as well as an Honorary Doctorate of Performing Arts from Edith Cowan University (2019).



LISTEN AND WATCH

Rachael Maza: Australian Council Award for Theatre (2019)

This award acknowledges the achievements of an artist who has made an outstanding and sustained contribution to Australian theatre.

[VIA YOUTUBE](#)

Edith Cowan University 2018 Community Alumni Award Winner: Rachael Maza

ECU's Alumni Awards publicly celebrate and recognise alumni who embody the University's values through their hard work and achievements. The Community Award was created to recognise alumni who are achieving extraordinary impact in the field of equality, diversity and social responsibility, reflecting ECU's commitment to widening participation.

[VIA YOUTUBE](#)

Australian Theatre Forum Keynote Address: Rachael Maza

[VIA AUSTRALIANPLAYS.ORG](http://AUSTRALIANPLAYS.ORG)

Tainui Tukiwaho | Writer + Director

Tainui Tukiwaho has been a company director, producer, director, actor and writer of Māori theatre for a number of organisations over the last decade, leading Te Rēhia theatre, Takirua and Te Pou Theatre.

His most recent directing credits include *Astroman*, presented in partnership by Te Rēhia Theatre and Auckland Theatre Company, Māori language play *He Tūrū Māu* (2018), Albert Belz's *Cradle Song* (2018). He has worked with Albert Belz as director and co-creator over many project since 2008 developing their distinctive comedic style.

From [The Big Idea, Tainui Tukiwaho: Challenging the status quo \(June 2017\)](#)

When Tainui Tukiwaho (Te Arawa/Tuhoe) first graduated from Unitec in 2001, he was adamant that he would not be cast in Māori roles. This was not a rejection of his cultural identity, quite the opposite in fact. It was a rejection of the way that actors who are Māori were pigeonholed into roles of limited scope. "There was a single faceted perspective of what a Māori was. I didn't want to get Māori roles, I wanted to get cast as a person."

Despite best intentions, he faced a single-minded industry at the time. Finding himself constantly referred to as a Māori actor, he decided to change his tact by wholeheartedly embracing the identity and creating theatre that contributed to broadening the perspective of Māori representation. "Instead of fighting against it, I decided to work with it. By building on different facets we challenge people to broaden their perspective of what being Māori actually means. That was the better fight. The other way made it seem like I wasn't proud to be Māori and undermined my culture which wasn't what I wanted to do."



READ

The Big Idea—Tainui Tukiwaho: Challenging the status quo

[READ IT HERE](#)

LISTEN

Tainui Tukiwaho talks about his on stage rom com, *Black Ties*, with Radio New Zealand (RNZ)

[LISTEN VIA RNZ](#)

Immersive Theatre

The most famous type of Immersive or Interactive Theatre is arguably that being created by UK Company, Punchdrunk. Their work includes the hugely successful [Sleep No More](#) (which you have probably heard of or seen it referenced on TV shows like *Law & Order* or *Gossip Girl*) which has been playing in New York City since 2009. Punchdrunk's style of Immersive Theatre sees audiences walk through detailed environments, interacting with props and set pieces and actors as they wish in a sort of choose-your-own-adventure style experience.

However, **this is only way of describing Immersive Theatre.**

There is an abundance of definitions available for the term **Immersive Theatre**. It is a **diverse** style which Gareth White explains in his journal article *On Immersive Theatre* (for Theatre Research International);

It includes performances that are intensely intimate ... as well as those that allow a little distance between spectator and performance.

The work may contain a coherent narrative ... or may be dream-like.

There may be the kind of technological mediation ... or advance communication with spectators.

The work may take place in everyday spaces, in the manner ... or in other found spaces, theatres or galleries.

It is likely to be multi-sensory, making use of exploratory experiences of space and relationships with performers, but sometimes also addressing the senses of touch and smell – which are not normally significantly part of the semiotic equipment of theatre.

Some of the key elements attributed to this style include:

- Breaking the fourth wall
- Bridging the gap between actor and spectator. Varying from performance to performance, participants might be free to interact verbally and physically with actors or to move around the venue as they please.
- Use installations and expansive environments, which have mobile audiences, and which invite audience participation.

The website, New York Theater, further explains these elements as follows:

- Immersive theater creates a *physical* environment that differs from a traditional theater where audiences sit in seats and watch a show unfurl on a proscenium stage with a curtain.
- Immersive theater tends to stimulate all five senses—sight and sound, as with conventional theatre pieces, but also touch, and frequently taste and even smell.
- Immersive theater doubles as an art installation and hands-on museum.
- Immersive theater makes individual audience members feel as if they have had a uniquely personal experience, that they are not just part of the crowd.
- At the same time, immersive productions often emphasize social interactions, either through directed tasks in small groups, or by fostering a looser party atmosphere.
- The most successful immersive theater has a story to tell—and gives respect to storytelling.

(Jonathan Mandell, *What is Immersive Theater?*, New York Theater, October 2019)

DISCUSS AND CONSIDER

How does *BLACK TIES* fit into the Immersive Theatre style? Which definitions and elements above can we attribute to *BLACK TIES*?

Consider how the immersive theatre elements of *BLACK TIES* do not kick in until ACT 2. Why do you think this choice was made? What would have been lost if the entire show was presented in the immersive theatre style? What might have been gained?

The following table distils the key elements (described above) of this style into three main areas that focus on:

- Production areas
- Actor-audience manipulation
- Performance skills
- Conventions
- Dramatic elements



KEY ELEMENTS OF THE IMMERSIVE THEATRE STYLE	EXAMPLES AND MOMENTS FROM ACT II - <i>BLACK TIES</i>
Breaking the 'fourth wall'	Consider <i>performance skills</i> , <i>actor-audience manipulation (direction)</i> and <i>production (set) design</i>
Audience participation	Consider <i>conventions</i> such as <i>asides</i> , <i>song</i> and application of <i>symbol</i> (the 'symbol' of the wedding itself), <i>actor-audience manipulation</i> and <i>dramatic elements</i> (particularly, <i>conflict</i> , <i>mood</i> , <i>rhythm</i> , <i>sound</i> , <i>space</i> and <i>tension</i>)
The performance space and the senses	Consider <i>production areas</i> of <i>sound</i> , <i>lighting</i> , <i>set</i> , <i>props</i> and <i>theatre technologies</i> .

WATCH

This short documentary from The American Theatre Wing, *Working in Immersive Theatre* is available via YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1135&v=C5i6vy3Lyw&feature=emb_logo

Whilst the experiences are for specific shows more in the vein of the work done by Punchdrunk, there are some interesting points made about how to work in this style.

Acclaimed scenic designer **David Korins** (he designed the set for little musical you may have heard of called *Hamilton*) describes his process and practice of creating sets for the immersive theatre production, *Here Lies Love*.

He says it is important to consider:

- What the theatre or the room looks like when you show up
- How it is curated for a certain response or experience

And goes on to explain;

You're not trying to give them the feeling of X, Y, Z, you are *giving* them that feeling. Or the attempt at really and truly giving them that feeling. And you use real tools and real materials and real smells and real things at your disposal to create that. How do we make the audience completely believe they are in this experience or having this experience, fully? If they were really cooking the food on this stove or if they were really being trapped in this room, and you start to talk about 'well, what would that feeling be? What would it look like and sound like and smell like and taste like?' And so, if you want to have an experience where you lock someone in a room, there's the version of it where you push go on a sound cue and you hear a chain lock. And then there's another version where you actually take out the chain and wrap it around the bars of the door and you lock it.

Korins describes his work as;

I get to imagine how worlds that are really the shell and the envelope that the play will take place in.

DISCUSS

- How was the room set-up on your entry to *BLACK TIES*? How did it change after the interval? What sort of response or experience do you feel the designers had curated in creating the look (and feel) of the room?
- What 'real tools and real materials and real smells and real things' were used in the design of *BLACK TIES* to create the belief we were really experiencing this wedding?
- Korins talks about the difference between a sound effect of a room being locked and then the actual locking up a room ... Can you find any similar moments in *BLACK TIES*?

The multi-award winning playwright and theatre producer, **Randy Weiner**, speaks about his experience producing *Sleep No More* (Punchdrunk). Weiner was named one of Manhattan's 75 Most Influential People In the Arts, so we should probably take note of his insights and ideas about Immersive Theatre.

Weiner describes the difference between Traditional and Immersive Theatre as;

You are entering that world you are not sitting outside it, watching it happen through the fourth wall. You're putting yourself into it.

He also makes some very interesting comments about the ways actors need to adjust their **expressive and performance skills** to work in this **style of theatre**;

It's very interesting casting for immersive theatre because what you're taught often as an actor is how to project an emotion across the divide of proscenium theatre. If you're doing a scene like this [*motions hands close together*] with someone it's a completely different style of acting from a scene where, you know, you're facing 1200 people through the proscenium. There's such completely different techniques involved. What seems real onstage to 1200 people doesn't feel real when you're one on one. And you have to find people who are actors, because they have to be able to speak text and connect to emotions, but they have to be able to drop so much of what they've learnt. The actors themselves have to want to try something different.

And he goes on to explain how the **audience-actor relationship** needs to be considered in a different way when performing in this style;

.. all of sudden audience come in and everything is completely different ... The actors can't move. You know, everything is just completely thrown off. Because the actors are dealing with the audience, who are the set. So, without the set, I mean, who knows even what you have?

DISCUSS

- Weiner discusses how audiences in an Immersive Theatre experiences are not outside the experience but put themselves 'into it.' In *BLACK TIES*, you got to experience both – how would you describe the change in your role as audience?
- What do you think Weiner means when he talks about actors 'projecting an emotion across the divide of proscenium theatre'? Why do you think this is less of a requirement in the Immersive Theatre style? Consider the character of Shannon. How did the actor change the way they presented their character in ACT II? Did you notice a change in vocal projection? (Moments of conspiratorial whispers with audience members?) Did you note a change in focus? What else? Why was this necessary?
- Weiner is talking about a very specific show, but the way in which he speaks of the audience as the set could also be related to *BLACK TIES*. There were moments that we, the audience, would have been in the way and affected the blocking of the show (think about people who got up and danced or visited the bar or hugged characters as they were welcomed into the wedding). How did you see, personally, see the actors manipulating that actor-audience relationship? Remember, as is the nature of Immersive Theatre, every audience member would have experienced something slightly different depending on where they sat, who they made eye-contact with or approached etc. It might be nice to share your unique experience with the rest of your class.

Want to read more about Immersive Theatre? Check out these websites and articles:

Immersive Theatre, Theatrecrafts

<http://www.theatrecrafts.com/pages/home/topics/forms-of-theatre/immersive-theatre/>

On Immersive Theatre by Gareth White

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0307883312000880>

What is Immersive Theatre, Contemporary Performance Network

<https://contemporaryperformance.com/2017/12/09/immersive-theater/>

Interactive theatre: five rules of play from an audience perspective, The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/jan/17/interactive-theatre-rules-audience-perspective>

Immersive Theatre Series, HowlRound Theatre Commons

<https://howlround.com/series/immersive-theatre-series>

What is Immersive Theatre? The six elements that define it at its best, New York Theater

<https://newyorktheater.me/2019/10/04/what-is-immersive-theater-the-six-elements-that-define-it-at-its-best/>

ECLECTIC THEATRE + THE ROM COM AND THE WEDDING TROPE

The Wedding is a common trope you would be familiar with from film and television, as well as musicals and plays. In Australia, the most famous well-known centred around a wedding (and not including the recent stage musical adaptation of *Muriel's Wedding*) would have to be *Dimboola*. In fact, the play *Dimboola* by Jack Hibberd is also an immersive theatre experience.

In Australia, the 'wedding reception as immersive theatre' genre was pioneered by the Australian Performing Group at Melbourne's tiny La Mama Theatre in 1969, with Jack Hibberd's Dimboola, set in the Mechanics Institute Hall of the small town of the same name (in Western Victoria's Wimmera region). It satirises and celebrates Australian lifestyles and values by marrying Catholic Reen to Protestant Morrie, thereby rendering the reception a disaster zone. By 1978 it was estimated the play had been seen by over 350,000 people and the claim is made that more Australians have seen Dimboola than any other stage musical, comedy or straight play.

Fun fact: when the APG revived Dimboola at The Pram Factory in 1973, Jack Charles played 'local drunk and wit', Mutton (with Max Gillies as his co-gatecrasher, Bayonet). So after an eventful 47 years – see his memoir, Jack Charles: Born-again Blakfella) – 'Uncle Jack', as he is now known, has come full circle to another wedding reception, this time as an honoured guest.

(John Smythe for [Theatreview New Zealand](#))

The wedding trope is full of dramatic and comic potential which makes it the perfect vehicle for playwrights and theatre-makers.

In the Romantic Comedy genre, the wedding – or the promise of a wedding – is a classic end point. This is not new, the wedding trope was used in Shakespeare's comedies;

Every play-goer knows that Shakespeare's comedies, despite bickering and cases of mistaken identity, frequently end with the promise of a wedding—in some cases, multiple weddings—proposed on stage amidst merriment, feasting, dancing, and song. In short, it's a jolly time for all, with marriage epitomizing the quintessential happy ending and the joy presumably continuing long after the play ends.

(Karen Lyon, *Shakespeare and Beyond*, Folger Shakespeare Library Online)

However, as Racheal Maza says in her interview with Malti Media, "It's a very familiar genre. We're all familiar with the wedding genre and like all wedding genres it's not going to be a walk in the park ... There is nothing original there – this is all the very familiar wedding trope. What you will get, which is a very unique take on the classic wedding genre is that it is told entirely from our perspective, of Aboriginal and Maori perspectives with all these cultural nuances and peculiarities to our peoples and our cultures."

The playwrights and directors manipulate the audience's understanding of and familiarity of the rom com. As Tainui Tukiwaho discusses in his interview with RNZ:

The premise is something we all understand which is a lovely way for us to be able to open a door and invite people who aren't entirely familiar with the Maori culture or one of the many Aboriginal cultures, and invite people in to be part of the family using that trope.

What steps can we take to open people up, to open their hearts and their ears up, so that when these very important moments are being placed before them they are ready to hear them. so we use the humour to get people laughing and then we quickly chuck in some of these very important statements.

Mark Coles Smith, who plays Kane, talks about it from the actor's perspective with the [Sydney Morning Herald](#):

Smith said he and the cast steered away from delivering just pure entertainment through a colonial theatre lens, instead they sought to ensure it had political substance with a cultural celebration and joy.

"The rom-com format is this kind of light transport genre, on the surface it is kind of fun and bubbles along. What is underneath all of that is this intersectional cultural reflection," he said.

Musical director, band and cast member, Brendon Boney (who plays Tony), sums it up perfectly in his interview with ABC Radio:

Every time you do these tales of cultures coming together, all these romantic comedy style stories, it's always in relation to whiteness. It's always an 'other' culture and whiteness coming together. And I think this is really unique, to have two First Nations cultures coming together, to see how this dynamic works.

CONSIDER

- *BLACK TIES* uses the traditional rom com structure in Act I – even the way in which the scenes are presented, with time jumps and flash-forwards, feels like we could be watching a rom com film ... but on stage.
 - What is familiar about this genre and where did the play meet those expectations?
 - Where / when did the play surprise you in its diversion from or inversion of the familiar elements of the genre?

ELEMENTS AND CONVENTIONS

Acting Smart: Drama (Volume 8), includes a very detailed list of the elements and conventions you may see in an eclectic performance style.

The following table highlights the elements and conventions you saw in *BLACK TIES*, with links to the Romantic Comedy genre and Immersive Theatre style. Use this table to jot down more examples and moments from the play ...



ELEMENTS OF ECLECTIC THEATRE	MOMENTS FROM BLACK TIES
Use of flashbacks and flashforwards from a central point in time.	<p>Act I doesn't use a linear narrative. The scenes move back and forth from NZ to Melbourne. In some ways, this is reminiscent of the romantic comedy genre – we know this style of storytelling from our familiarity with film. It also helps build the contrast and comparison between the two families, and rises the tension ...</p> <p>In Act II, while the action plays out in a linear fashion, the audience is given a sort of 'flashback' through the slideshow presentation of photos from the wedding ceremony. This fills in the audience (now 'in role' as the wedding guests) to what happened directly before this scene.</p>
Short scenes placed in a particular order to maximise contrast for dramatic impact.	<p>The playwrights contrast the significant moments for Kane and Hera meeting their future in-laws.</p> <p>Compare the two airport arrivals, for example or the two welcomes the young couple receive.</p>
Minimal reliance on props and set.	<p>Consider the use of AV in Act I to create a sense of place / setting and time.</p> <p>Consider the limited use of set pieces, and props, in Act I.</p>
Places / settings are transformed during the performance in front of the audience.	<p>As above.</p> <p>Consider what this means for the pace of the play in Act I.</p> <p>Consider why we didn't see the transformation of place / setting between Act I and Act II. What was the effect?</p>
A split focus is created for the audience (more than one scene or action happening at the same time).	<p>This happens throughout Act II through the use of an Immersive Theatre style. Consider how events play out on the screens (in bathrooms and hallways and other spaces outside the reception) while we experience what is happening at the wedding reception.</p>

<p>Use of song and dance.</p>	<p>Culturally, the use of song and dance is important, and it could also be argued it is used as an element of the romantic comedy genre. Song and dance occur throughout the play. The band has an important and ever-present role throughout the play.</p>
<p>The relationship between actor and audience is not a naturalistic one (e.g. the audience may be placed in role, they may be addressed directly by one or more character, they may be asked to join in the performance in some way).</p>	<p>The Immersive Theatre style used in Act II means the audience becomes a part of the action – they are the wedding guests. Some audience members may have been asked to help make the guard of honour for Kane and Hera’s entrance, others may have been pulled into Shannon and Althea’s fighting, some might have shaken hands with Uncle Mick as he welcomed them to the reception ...</p>
<p>Anything else?</p>	

Interview with Rachael Maza (co-director)

In the lead up to the Melbourne season of *BLACK TIES*, Rachael generously gave us some time to answer a couple of questions about the show ...

Katy: In VCE Drama, students need to analyse 'how the actor-audience relationship is established, maintained and manipulated.' Could you give us some insights, from a director's perspective, of how you used the actor-audience relationship in BLACK TIES?

Rachael: The very first conversation we had was that we wanted to make a production that our aunties and grandmothers could come along to and have a good night. What are the things that make a good night: laughter, music and food. And that everyone watching would feel like they were all part of the family. SO there was much conversation about how to make everyone feel like family, all special, all having the same immersive experience. We fought hard that there wouldn't be people who paid more to get better seats, if anything it should be our elders that are treated like VIPs. Once we had settled on the idea that at its heart this play was about a wedding between two cultures, then it became obvious that the we would need audience sitting at round tables. There is a very clear delineation between Act 1 and Act 2 where the 4th wall disappears, and this is emphasised by audience re-entering after interval - a whole new space where the rules are different. It was important they are welcomed at the door by the actors who are no longer just on the stage but in amongst the family sitting at tables etc. Audience are referred to as family titles like 'Uncle', 'cousin' etc. In Act 2 the MC talks directly to the audience as family as opposed to Act 1 where they don't exist behind the 4th wall.

Katy: Could you tell us a little about the development and rehearsal process for this show?

Rachael: The development happened over two years, across the two countries which presented the challenge of trying to get the writers in the same room (Originally four: two Maori and two Aboriginal). There were four, one-week developments where the writers would story board, talking about who the characters would be, giving them names, and coming up with a map of the story line. Scenes were then allocated, and the writers would then go away and write the scenes they were given. To be honest working with four writers was crazy and it became clear earlier this year that we needed to streamline and went down to two writers. Even this was challenging as each writer has a different style and way of working. Somehow we got there.

Rehearsals similarly presented another interesting process of the two directors navigating how they would work together (Myself and Tainui). Basically, we had to learn how to be able to make decision while being prepared to change that decision after discussion with the other Director.

The funny thing about Directing is you never actually ever get to see how any other director works! So there is no doubt that I learnt so much from working with Tainui. In particular the amazing way they would start

everyday getting everyone in a circle and checking in to see where everyone was at. Communication was paramount to a healthy working process. The strong feeling of family and trust in the room was phenomenal. It's this feeling of family that translates into their presence on the stage in the play!

Katy: As a director, could you explain how you used transformation (of time or place, character) to tell this story?

Rachael: Act One is told by intercutting between the trip to visit Hera's family in New Zealand and the trip to Australia to visit Kane's family. There was a really pragmatic reason for this – and it's that you wouldn't meet the other characters till half way through the first act. So, the challenge was to make sure our audience wasn't confused as we jumped back and forth in time. This was assisted by the AV which also does an amazing job of giving the audience a visually sensual experience of each other's countries. Also costume helped. Lastly where ever we could weave through little details in the script that when put together would make sense of the time jumping, i.e. when Jermaine gets shot while possum hunting, the audience is told he has been shot in Australia before they see him actually getting shot in New Zealand in the possum hunting scene that happened later in the play.

Katy: What other conventions did you use in the direction Black Ties?

Rachael: Other theatrical devices that are used is the use of the Band that has a magical quality – they can be supporting the scene musically and then suddenly be involved in the scene, ie when they are crossing the back wall in a transition, they stop when they hear the texts projected on the back wall. Then they carry on. Or when they get shot at in the possum hunting scene.

Also most actors are used in various scenes as extras – by putting on different clothes and changing their hair style we are able to throw them in to pad out the scene in crowd scenes, i.e. the Melbourne Airport transition, or the POHIRI.

AV was used to transport the audience to the two different worlds of Australia and New Zealand – there was much discussion about this not being too literal but still 'of the place'. The AV artists Sean Bacon and James Henry were able to achieve this by the hyper reality and heightened colours, the images were never still but rather video - a locked off shot in real time.

Katy: How did you work with the designers in the realisation of the play?

Rachael:

SET: Jacob Nash and myself had many conversations about what the world of the play would be, particularly Act One. (Act Two we knew was in the real world of the reception) There were all the pragmatic challenges of 'somewhere for actors to sit, entrances, able to change scene's quickly, projection surface, address sightline

issues: all of which culminated in it being quite stripped back and open. But the beautiful textures of the floor and wall came from the conversation of the shared values of first nations peoples of the importance of land, of country, and hence the topographical quality, almost like water, aerial view of land etc.

COSTUME: We had a brief discussion about who we thought the characters were and Te Ura did the the rest! Her job was to try and understand what the directors were imaging and also what the actors themselves were thinking.

LX: Jane Hakareia. This is the last person to add their contribution as its not till your bumping in a few days away from opening that you actually have lights. It's always pretty high pressure for lighting designers. Jane's vision was spot on and actually very little changes were made other then making sure the light didn't wash out the AV too much, making sure we could see the actors etc.

Katy: Do you have a favourite moment in the play? What is it and why?

Rachael: There are many little moments! I love the little things that the actors themselves discovered, i.e. When Alethea while looking for Uncle's secret tobacco stash, and has overheard the couple reveal their pregnancy on the roof top, the mum arrives and she leaves and as she is exiting down the ladder – she added the line after Kane says: "Some secrets are best left alone" Alethea: "Oh no, it's not good to keep secrets , you know cancer and all"

Another moment I really enjoyed is the discovery of the balcony all around the Pavilion which made a great entrance for both the wedding couple and Shannon when she is pissed off. I love how you discover new things at every different venue, and rather then it being a problem – it's an added bonus.

CHARACTERS

“Our characters are totally relatable. We write our characters without thinking about educating an audience who may not know our cultures. We’re just going to write the story and write the characters that we know, and that we want to tell. And what has become very evident from our premiere season is how universal and accessible the work is. There’s so much of the story in there that everyone can relate to. It’s a wedding. Everyone can relate to love, to having to navigate each other’s families, to the best friend who always gets in the way, to the mothers who don’t necessarily feel their child has made a good choice. And then we come to the underlying fear of, particularly in terms of cultures, if your child is marrying outside of your culture – what does that mean? For the ongoing culture that will be passed down to your kids. What language does that kid learn? How does that world? All of these really, big, universal themes that everybody can relate to.”

Rachael Maza (interview with [Multi Media for Perth Festival season](#))

DISCUSS

- What, in your opinion, made characters of *BLACK TIES* relatable? Which character / s did you relate to the most? Why?
- Consider the changes to the actors’ performance and expressive skills moving from ACT I into ACT II. Did you feel more of a connection with any of the characters in ACT II due to the immersive style the piece moved into?



FOCUS ON SHANNON

Shannon is played by the actor, **Brady Peeti**.

In his interview with The Stage Show (ABC Radio), co-writer / co-director and fellow cast member, **Tainui Tukiwaho** says:

We actually spent quite a lot of time on the character of Shannon. Brady who plays Shannon is going through a journey at the moment in terms of where she sits in a transgender space and I have self-confessed ignorance around that. So, she's been sitting with me, writing and creating that character, so that we're representing transgender in this show as accurately as possible.



In the same interview, Rachael Maza describes Shannon as 'the character who can say what's on her mind and say it freely.'

In a 2019 interview for Pacific Mornings (ABC Radio) with Tahlea Aualiitia, Brady discusses the role as Shannon.

I've been lucky to have been workshopping this from March. This part, this show, I've been really close to it for almost a year now.

When I first read the script because I was told there's a role for you, written for me, with me in mind, and I went, ok, we'll see – and then when I read it I was like, yes, no, this is me! Cos she is a transgendered woman living vicariously through her beautiful cousin who is the one that's getting married. Although I don't live my life like that, I have friends and family that – with straight relationships and all that sort of thing you kinda through that sort of, 'oh yeah, I'm here to help you, I'm the good friend, I will give you all the advice even though my love life is still' –

Tahlea: You're just everyone's Oprah!

Yeah, everyone's Oprah! And I just really enjoyed the ferocity of the character. She's really funny. It's nice to play trans characters who aren't prostitutes and aren't spooky evil witches.

You can listen to full interview with Michael Cathcart (The Stage Show, ABC Radio) online:

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-stage-show/black-ties-ilbijerri-theatre-company-te-rehia-theatre/11760976>

You can listen to the whole interview with Tahlea Aualiitia (Pacific Mornings, ABC Radio) here:

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificmornings/black-ties/11699536>

Peeti's portrayal of Shannon was as punchy and powerful as many of my queer Pasifika friends and fanau (family), transforming her resilience into a quick wit that, when matched with her physical strength and stature, emanated "don't f**k with me vibes". It's the kind of energy you only build up after years of people doing exactly that, f**king with you, a trait I recognise in my queer Pasifika friends and fanau dealing with prejudice and discrimination, not just in the workplace but often at the hands of their own family who have felt their heteronormativity threatened by the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

Emele Ugavule for Witness Performance

Another mention goes to Brady Peeti, playing Shannon, the sister/cousin of the bride-to-be. Peeti's character replicates the romcom role of the BFF, the sidekick, but her ability to own every one of her scenes (not to mention her singing) makes her a leading light.

Gabriel Faatau'uu-Satiu for Audrey Journal



We first meet Shannon through song.

Shannon is spoken about in earlier scenes but her physical presence isn't felt until **Act 1: Scene 6** (this scene is titled, **Maori Welcome**).

Here's how her entrance and first moments are written in the script:

Robert goes after Jermain but is cut short by a loud scream of excitement from Shannon making her grand entrance. When she starts singing the Maoris start playing their instruments.

SHANNON
Humidity's rising.

JERMAIN
What's going?

SHANNON
Barometer's getting low.

KANE
This is a weird fight.

SHANNON
According to all sources

Shannon starts getting raunchy with the Australians. The kiwis relax.

SHANNON (CONT'D)
The streets the place to go.

JERMAIN
What do we do?

An excited Hera leaps out of her seat to join her bestie in an old fashion song and dance number.

HERA
Cause today for the first time,
just about half-past three/

SHANNON
Yeah right now.

HERA/ SHANNON
For the first time in history it's
gonna start raining men.

Sylvia joins in singing with her girls, so to do the other Maoris. Tama-Girl is filming this whole spectacle.

SYLVIA/ HERA/ SHANNON
It's raining men, hallelujah it's
raining men, amen.

SYLVIA
I'm gonna go out, im gonna let
myself get.

SYLVIA/ HERA/ SHANNON
Absolutely soaking wet.
It's raining men! Hallelujah.
It's raining men!
Every specimen.



The lads are granted an impromptu *pōwhiri*, a Maori welcome ceremony, which becomes enmeshed with the disco classic *It's Raining Men*, sung by the fabulous best friend of the bride, trans woman Shannon (Brady Peeti).

This early cross-cultural moment is a little like that outback scene in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, when didgeridoos and campfire mash with *I Will Survive*. Later, under a disco silver ball and clutching a bottle of red wine, Shannon will bring her own lovelorn drama to the wedding reception; sisters will fight and unite around our tables, but the band will play on.

Steve Dow for The Guardian

CONSIDER

- What is the significance, if any, of the song *It's Raining Men*? Why do you think this song was chosen as Shannon's 'opening number'?
- What expressive skills did you see and hear Peeti use in these first moments? Consider how they used:

VOICE: The **vocal quality**, and **variety**. The 'diva' quality to the performance. The **tone**, **breath control** and **projection**. How Peeti sung her opening number created character.

GESTURE: **Vocal gestures** (the flourishes of voice in the song), **spatial gestures** (leading the women in dance, distance from Kane and Jermain), **part body / full body gestures** (those strong 'diva poses in the performance of the song)

MOVEMENT: The **rhythm**, **tempo** and **dynamics** of this moment.

- How would you describe Peeti's **energy** in this moment?



Think about Shannon's moments with her best friend, Hera, and family in NZ. Consider how the use of **performance skills** such as **focus** and **timing** were used by Peeti to portray her character's **status** in these relationships.

Did you notice any change to these as the play / story progressed?

Think about Shannon's relationship with Blackie (played by Laughton Kora). In this scene, pictured, the audience gets insight into their relationship and Shannon's feelings about the break-up and potential get back together. However, Blackie is usually in the band so not in close proximity to Shannon. Or, as pictured, speaking with her via FaceTime. Consider how Peeti uses **focus** to create this relationship.



In ACT II, the conflict between Shannon and Alethea (played by Dalara Williams) shifts a gear. The tension really grows. Consider how Peeti uses **focus**, **timing** and **energy** to build this **tension** and deepen this **conflict** with Alethea. You may also want to consider how the change in theatre style (from a more 'realistic' to **immersive** style) also affects and impacts the performance style.

And, thinking about the immersive theatre style ... Consider how the **actor-audience relationship** is manipulated by Peeti in ACT II.

How did the audience respond to this when you saw the show?

What skills did you see Peeti use as an actor to build and maintain this relationship with the audience?



FOCUS ON UNCLE MICK

Uncle Mick is played by **Uncle Jack Charles**.

In an article for Time Out Magazine, journalist Stephen Russell spoke with Uncle Jack about his role, the rehearsal process and the show:

Playing Kane's uncle Mick, Uncle Jack's entreaty for peace is a source of calm, the voice of wisdom in a riotous comedy that cleverly broaches race relations and cultural implications. "He's really overjoyed by having his boy marry a Māori girl," Uncle Jack says. "It's enlivened him, given him a new sense of his own spirituality and direction in life."

The deep respect shared by cast and crew for Uncle Jack radiates around the room.

"I'm totally amazed at the way these mob work," Uncle Jack says of the Te Rēhia cohort. "It's opened up my eyes. I consider myself the last surviving grandfather of Indigenous theatre, now that Uncle Bob Maza has passed on, so it's up to me to keep that going. In theatre you never stop learning, as in life."

He believes it's time for First Nations stories to move beyond 'trauma porn'. "It's about spiritual healing," he suggests. "We don't often send ourselves up. We're too serious."



You can read the full article from Time Out Magazine here

<https://www.timeout.com/sydney/news/leading-aboriginal-and-maori-theatre-companies-are-joining-forces-on-a-new-rom-com-010820>

And learn more about Uncle Jack Charles through these interviews and articles (plus much, much more):

Archer Asks: Uncle Jack Charles by Elizabeth Flux, Archer Magazine

<http://archermagazine.com.au/2020/01/archer-asks-uncle-jack-charles/>

Jack Charles: 'Australia is particularly—oddly still—racist against its First Nations people' by Benjamin Law, Sydney Morning Herald

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/jack-charles-australia-is-particularly-oddly-still-racist-against-its-first-nations-people-20191128-p53f0o.html>

Actor Jack Charles: the tumultuous life of a stolen child by Kate Munro, The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/australia-culture-blog/2014/aug/15/actor-jack-charles-the-tumultuous-life-of-a-stolen-child>

Uncle Jack Charles at Tedx Sydney

<https://tedxsydney.com/contributor/uncle-jack-charles/>

Uncle Jack Charles opens up about his life on the streets, NITV

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/living-black/article/2018/08/15/uncle-jack-charles-opens-about-his-life-streets>

Jack Charles: Born Again Black Fella by Jack Charles, Published by Penguin

<https://www.penguin.com.au/books/jack-charles-9780143792222>

And then there is the groom's uncle, played by incomparable Uncle Jack Charles. The importance of his service to the people of this nation is embodied in his role and he radiates charm, wisdom and wit, while cracking the odd joke here and there. His character isn't a man of many words, but is a force to be reckoned with.

Gabriel Faatau'uu-Satiu for Audrey Journal

The wisest heads in the story sit on the shoulders of the Bakers' Uncle Mick (the diminutive, mellifluous, utterly adorable Jack Charles), who knows too much to argue or to judge

David Zampatti for SeeSaw Magazine



In the interview on ABC Radio's The Stage Show, with Michael Cathcart, Rachael Maza explains:

It was really important, actually, that this story which is about our families and our communities and embedding that value of honouring our Elders and our young fellas. And so we've got the age range actually in the show. Fifteen to seventy-five.

CONSIDER

- The role of the Elder and what it means in this play. Research all you can about Uncle Jack (there is a lot out there about this great man). How does the character of Uncle Mick shadow or parallel the real life Uncle Jack Charles?
- The way in which Uncle Mick uses and communicates via technology. This creates quite a juxtaposition between what audiences 'expect' of older people and the reality—i.e. Uncle Mick is tech-savvy and modern in his communication approach. What clues or information does this provide about the character?
- In your research about Uncle Jack you may have found a lot of comments on his voice. In fact, in the first moments the play we hear Uncle Jack's voice as he addresses the audience in a pre-recorded Welcome to Country. (You may also like to consider why in the Arts Centre Melbourne production, Uncle Jack gave a Welcome to Country as opposed to an Acknowledgement of Country. These differences are important.) How would you describe Uncle Jack's voice? What is the effect of his voice:
 - on understanding and interpreting the character of Uncle Mick;
 - in relationship to the other characters; and
 - in understanding the meaning / themes of the play?



“The audience gave a collective gasp, laughed then clapped fervently when he questions colonisation by wiping his dirty shoes with a ‘Union Jack’ hanky. It’s just one of Uncle Mick’s many fantastic comedic scene-stealing moments in Black Ties.” (Theatre People review by Lyn Zelor).

Think of how Uncle Jack Charles uses **focus** and **timing** in these non-verbal moments. Consider the application of **symbol** in this moment. How, as an actor, does Uncle Jack create and hold this moment? Think about his use of **body language**, **facial expression** and **gesture**.

Think about Uncle Mick’s moments with his family.

Consider his **status** in these scenes, and how of **expressive skills** such as **voice** and **movement** were used by Uncle Jack to show this.

Consider how the other actors refer to him and defer to him. Look at this moment between Kane and Uncle Mick. Kane goes to his Uncle for advice and guidance. How is their **relationship** shown through the use of **body language**, **posture** and **gesture**?

How is **respect** for this character shown throughout the play? What does this tell us about Uncle Mick?



Consider how the **actor-audience relationship** is established by Uncle Jack in ACT II.

How did the audience respond to and interact with Uncle Jack when you saw the show?

What skills did you see Uncle Jack use as an actor to **build and maintain this relationship with the audience**?

During the wedding many speeches are made. This includes a Welcome to Country from Uncle Mick and, later on, a speech which is interspersed with ‘behind the scenes’ footage of an argument between the mother of the bride (Sylvia played by Lana Graland) and mother of the groom (Ruth played by Lisa Maza).

In this moment, consider how Uncle Jack uses **timing**, **focus** and **energy** to hit those comedic moments. Consider his **vocal quality** and changes to **tone**, **projection** and **timing**. What is the result?




THE SPACE

Arts Centre Melbourne is home to four mainstages; The Fairfax Studio, The Playhouse, The State Theatre and Hamer Hall. *BLACK TIES* was not performed in any of these traditional theatre spaces.

Instead, it was performed in **The Pavilion**.

The Pavilion is one of the most popular spaces at Arts Centre Melbourne for events and conferences. Not performances! (Although we have, from time to time, been known to produce a show or two in there ...) The Pavilion has hosted many real weddings, parties, cocktail functions and special events as well as meetings and conferences.



The screenshot shows the Arts Centre Melbourne website. The top navigation bar includes the logo, a search icon, a shopping cart icon, and a 'Menu' link. The main image is a large, well-lit event space with round tables covered in white cloths and black chairs. The text '← Spaces for Hire' is visible in the top left of the image area. The title 'The Pavilion' is prominently displayed in the center. Below the image, the text reads: 'The sparkling jewel of Arts Centre Melbourne's event spaces.' This is followed by three paragraphs of descriptive text about the venue's features, views, and capacity.

The Pavilion

← Spaces for Hire

The sparkling jewel of Arts Centre Melbourne's event spaces.

Most popular of all of Arts Centre Melbourne's event spaces, **The Pavilion** features a spectacular domed ceiling, floor-to-ceiling windows, gold leaf interiors and an outdoor wraparound balcony.

The Pavilion boasts magnificent views over the Yarra River towards Melbourne's city centre. Its semi-circular shape makes it perfect for **cocktail, cabaret, banquet or theatre-style events**. Located in the Theatres Building, this spacious light-filled space measures **510 square metres** and can host up to **700 guests**.

Our impressive event venue includes complimentary use of the entry foyer, featuring a range of woven tapestries from the **Victorian Tapestry Workshop**. A **10-seat boardroom** is also included in the package, providing a private meeting area or storage space.

This whole concept was a great idea but much harder to realise in actuality, in terms of the idea that the audience become invitees and guests of the wedding. They become family.

So, suddenly, you have – 'ah, so how is this actually going to work?' If you can imagine how many tables does it take to seat everyone for a reception? You know? It's pretty crazy.

What looked like a good idea has ended up being quite a challenge – in how do you actually stage it? How do you even find a venue that big? It's been massive. Certainly the biggest work for both our companies. The largest scale work that I personally have ever made.

Rachael Maza (interview with Malti Media)

DISCUSS

- Why do you think the team chose The Pavilion over one of Arts Centre Melbourne's traditional theatre spaces?
- What do you think it added to the performance?
- How did space enhance the meaning of the play?
- How did space impact the theatre style/s used in the presentation of this play?
- How did the space impact and influence the performance skills?

PRODUCTION ELEMENTS: SET AND AV DESIGN

There are beautiful audio visuals so you're instantly transported into the two worlds, and it's just done so subtly and poetically by these extraordinary AV artists ... (Racheal Maza, interview with Malti Media)

In ACT I, images are projected onto the large backdrop canvas to convey the different settings. Through the AV images, audiences are transported from the Blue Mountains to airports in NZ and Australia, and into the respective family homes. This simple and effect device allows for quick and easy transitions between the scenes.

The screens also show text messages between characters and FaceTime or video chats. It gives the audience an insight into the characters, through showing us the content private messages we may not ordinarily be privy to.

The AV is supported by lighting. You may notice a change to the tones and colour used for scenes in NZ as compared with Australia.

Everything changes in ACT II.

This is one scene change which does not happen before our eyes. After interval, the audience return to the same room which has transformed to a wedding reception venue.

The backdrop is no longer a blank canvas – it is now tinsel and glitter and red, with a huge heart at its centre. Our tables are no longer empty tables but filled with wedding favours and decorations.

What was the stage, which we had watched from behind the fourth wall, is now the bridal party table. The band are up there, too. And the microphone for the MC to host the event and family members and friends to make their speeches.

The screens around the room show photographs from the wedding ceremony, as well as pre-recorded well-wishes from absent friends and family and some sneaky 'live footage' from Tama-Girl who is capturing the whole event on her camera.

CONSIDER

- The motifs and images used in the scenes that took place in Hera's home and those in Kane's home. What did you notice? How did you know where you were?
- The use of atmospheric lighting in the hunting scene – when Robert takes Kane and Jermain out. What is the effect of the lighting in this moment? How does it play into the comedy, and seriousness, of that moment?
- How does the use of AV enhance the Immersive Theatre style and experience?
- What was your initial reaction to the major shift between ACT I and ACT II?

FAMILY AND PLACE

Major themes in the play include those around family, place, community and culture. In many ways, family is linked to place—the cultural significance of place (or setting, location) and a family's connection and link to it. A connection to Country is incredibly important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As it is to all First Nations people. Read this reflection, and see how *BLACK TIES* uses production elements (in this case set, costume and casting / direction) to communicate meaning.



Tukiwaho, being of Te Arawa and Ngāi Tūhoe descent, wrote this family into his iwi (tribe). Makes sense, because that's what he knows. Writing from your personal perspective as an Indigenous creator is a safe and grounded position, allowing you the space to highlight differences unique to your lived experience.

This is never explicitly mentioned, although Hera's younger sister Tama (played by Tukiwaho's daughter, **Tawhirangi Macpherson**) enters her first scene wearing a **Ngāi Tūhoe t-shirt**. James Henry's (Yuwaalaraay and Yorta Yorta) **AV design** is used to illustrate geographical location (and quirky interactions via messenger and video chat), bringing up **street signs that point to Ruatoki**, and we also hear their ancestral story as descendants of children of the mist delivered as neat, subtle exposition. These are all small but very important signals to Māori (and Pasifika raised in Aotearoa) about **who this family is and how that will inform their behaviour throughout the play**.

What's curious is that Ngāi Tūhoe, infamously, is one of the few tribes that refused to sign The Treaty of Waitangi. They consequently suffered devastating treatment at the hands of British occupation, including confiscation of land, brutal invasions and targeting of Tūhoe leaders.

(from *Black Ties: A Reflection* by Emele Ugavule for Witness)

CONSIDER

- Find out more about Ngāi Tūhoe, and consider its significance as the **setting** for the play.
- Think about the use of colour in the **lighting** and **AV design** when we are in NZ as compared to when we are in Melbourne, or the Blue Mountains (NSW), and even the wedding reception. What did you notice about the tones and **colours** used when **lighting** and creating this **sense of place**?
- When we first meet Tama (played by Tawhirangi Macpherson) she is wearing a Ngāi Tūhoe t-shirt—how does this **costume** choice communicate character?



COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Rachael Maza speak with Malti Media about this major theme of the work:

There are a lot of similarities between the cultures in regards to relationship to Country and Land. Language as the words that hold the meaning and the depth of the meanings of the culture. I live in the language and hence language is critically important.

The critical role in which we all play as custodians of that Country on which you live on. There's values that are shared right across all First Nations people and this is true of our Aboriginal family and of our Maori family. So, there's loads of similarities.

And then there are massive differences.

Historically, politically, the two countries are colonised but in very, very different ways. Even within Australia, there is not one Aboriginal people, as we all know, there were up to five hundred [Language Groups]. And every culture has its own Language, its own cultural rituals, everything. You know? Big, big differences. So, once again, lots of similarities but massive, massive differences at the same time.

The things that tie these two together is their respect for each other's families and that family is important. And that is the big thing that will hold them strong even when the going gets tough and it looks like the wedding may not happen – their respect for each other and their value of family is what holds them strong.

And she discusses the respective mothers' concerns over their children marrying outside their culture, the major point of conflict and tension in the play :

It's that reminder of what's important. Understand why they're scared of their child marrying outside their culture.

If you look at both these countries and all our cultures – and I look at my father's generation and before him, the generations that have gone before us and have fought so hard for recognition within our own countries. For the right to be educated. And to have Legal Aid. The really hard fought for place within this nation that has been colonised for its First Nation people.

There's a whole lot of language reclamation that's happening all over the country, dance groups and culture is being practiced all over – but that's been hard fought for. So, I absolutely understand why there is a lot of fear from both families, the Maori and the Aboriginal, about that all being for nothing if their child turns their back in it.





Consider how the production area of **costume design** helps communicate this theme.

Explore the meaning and history of Hera and Kane's (played by Tuakoi Ohia and Mark Coles Smith) wedding clothing:

- **Possum skin cloak**
(read more here: aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/_possum-skin-cloak)
- **Korowai**
(read more here collections.tepapa.govt.nz/topic/3614)

Consider how the production area of **set** and **props** furthered this themes, especially in relation to the dressing of the **wedding tables**. What was on your table? How were the different cultures celebrated and communicated?



We have already mentioned Tama's Ngāi Tūhoe t-shirt , but we also need to think about Alethea's (played by Dalara Williams) costume—when we first meet her she is wearing an **Aboriginal Flag t-shirt**.

Consider the significance of the flag, and how this costume choice communicates both character and the themes of the play.

You can read more about the history of the Aboriginal flag here: aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aboriginal-flag

FATHERS

... the point that's also made in that particular scene is also the stereotypes of the men. Yes, that's an issue. But also, as big a issue, is the stereotyping of our Aboriginal men which you'll remember with the Bill Leaks cartoon, which depicted that very poorly thought through representation of Aboriginal men as 'useless fathers'. So, the stereotypes that we're countering with and that our young Kane is going 'hello, that stereotype is not me'

Rachael Maza (interview with Michael Cathcart, The Stage Show, ABC Radio)



Throughout the play, there is mention of the 'absent father'. This is keenly felt by Tama-Girl and her relationship with her father, Robert.

Consider what is driving the **character** of Tama throughout the play. What is her **objective**? Her goal? Think back to her moments with Robert ; how does she **interact** with him, how does this closeness between them play out and how does it communicate the **meaning** of the play?

In particular the use of **song** and how this connects father and daughter, and family.



In Act II, Jermain gives a moving best man speech in which he says, "Uncle Mick taught me how to be a proud Black man!"

Consider the **role** of Uncle Mick in relation to the **theme** of 'Fathers' - not only to characters like Kane and Jermain but also Tama.

How does his character help to illuminate the importance of honouring elders in Aboriginal culture?



In ACT I, Kane and Jermain go hunting with Robert and his family. Have a read of this scene in the script excerpt on the following page to remind yourself.

What does this scene **reveal about the characters of Robert and Kane**?

Why do you think the playwrights decide to have this moment happen while the men are hunting? How does comedy juxtapose with the serious issues being discussed?

According to Tukiwaho (ABC Radio interview), " In talking about these things through laughs, enjoying ourselves, inviting them in to see the positive parts of our culture and then still hearing the things that need to change, our allies are strengthened and then their voice they can move further and spread the positive stuff about us as well as acknowledging the things that need shifting."

ROBERT
The point is, I know what you black fellas are like. You are just like us. I don't want my girl shacking up with you only to have you go walk about on her.

JERMAIN
What? Like you did.

ROBERT
And where's your dad genius? Either one of your fathers eh?

PAUSE

ROBERT (CONT'D)
Exactly! I don't want that for my baby or my mokos.

KANE
I am nothing like you. I'd never leave my kids like you did, like my father did, our fathers did. Never.

ROBERT
Easy to say boy.

KANE
You aren't the only one to figure out that our men have been running Mr Tapuwera. I've spent my own nights wondering where my father was, why he ran from us?

ROBERT
And?

KANE
I don't know about you Maori's, but there is a lot of pressure on our men too. Pressure, of what they have to be.

JERMAIN
And what not to be.

BLACKIE
Kia ora.

KANE
Living day to day in a world where everyone's expecting you to be a thief. They expect you to be abusive, to be an alcoholic, beat your wife and kids, leave your wife and kids.

ROBERT/ BLACKIE
Ae.

KANE
A world that was just waiting for you to fuck up so they can say I told you so.

ROBERT/ BLACKIE
Kia ora.

KANE
But If you succeeded you were treated like a dog that's learnt a new trick.

ROBERT/ BLACKIE
Tautoko.

KANE
Of course our men felt trapped and ran.

ROBERT/ BLACKIE
Amene.

KANE
I don't have to worry about any of that Mr Tapuwera. I live in a world where being indigenous opens doors. Our cultural knowledge is beginning to be respected. I don't have any reasons to run.

(MORE)

KANE (CONT'D)
I found someone who completes me Mr Tapuwera and no system exists that can take me from her.

Blackie and Jermain are giving a quiet slow clap and Robert is in tears, moved by Kane's understanding and empathy.

ROBERT
I had someone who completed me too boy. But I ruined it for myself.

KANE
I'm sorry.

ROBERT
I think it might be too late for us now.

KANE
It doesn't have to be.

ROBERT
Eh, what do you know.

KANE
I know, I came to New Zealand to win over a woman who doesn't like me because I'm not Maori.

ROBERT
Good luck winning that fight.

KANE
I don't need to win. I just need to fight, because I love your daughter and she is worth it.

ROBERT
You really aren't like those other black fellas are you?

KANE
Ah, no?

ROBERT
Can you help me boy? Can you help me get my Sylvia back?

KANE
Um, yes?

FOCUS ON THE BAND

The first thing we discussed is that we wanted to make a show that is the sort of show you'd want to bring your whole family to. You want to bring your Auntie or your Nan and she's going to laugh her head off. So, it had to be a comedy. It had to be funny. Live music. If your mob is going to come along, they're going to want live music. Ah, there has to be food. What are the things that we define as a good night out ...

Rachael Maza (interview with Malti Media)



In an interview with RNZ (Radio New Zealand), Tainui Tukiwaho discusses the use of the band:

If you've ever seen the movie Something about Mary, they use this two-piece band in quite random ways.

Interviewer: They just pop as interludes, don't they? As turn-the-page sort of things.

Yeah, that's right. and we're doing a similar thing with music in this play in Act One where this band appears where necessary to either heighten comedy or heighten pathos, relative to what the scene needs. So, they get to break the rules whenever they like. Closest to the band breaking the rules is Shannon. After that, everyone else just sort of fits into the world that we've created. Until Act Two where everything gets flipped on its head.

Musical director, band and cast member, Brendon Boney, speaks with ABC Radio about his role directly:

My character is evolving as the world fleshes out. I've just come in as the musical director and then we wanted to have the music become such a part of the show that we thought, how does this music just kind of stay present? And we're all like, well, everybody in these worlds, all our family and all of our mob, have cousins that can play instruments and sing and we all sing together all the time – so, we just thought we'd keep everybody present. And that's how we've structured it now. So, the musos are actually part of the family; they're cousins, they're brothers, they're sisters. They're just hanging out, always ever present and ready to kinda jump in.

You can listen to the full interview with RNZ here:

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/audio/2018732171/black-ties-not-your-average-rom-com>

In discussing why the production had two directors, Rachael Maza says

That was at the heart of the value and principle that this work was founded on – was this sort of coming together of these two cultures, these two people with both very different histories, very different experience but then lots of similarities.

So, actually, all the way down the line it's half-half.

Half the cast is Maori, half the cast is Aboriginal. Well, you don't have quite half with the band but two of the band are Aboriginal, one is Maori. The two directors – one Maori, one Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander, which is me. The writers? We initially had four writers. Two Aboriginal, two Maori and then that became bit unwieldy so it came down to two writers. The writers are John Harvey and Tainui Tukiwaho. So both cultures are represented and have autonomy and voice within the making of this story.

(Malti Media Interview)

This can also be seen in the music used throughout the production.

In the opening scene, when Kane proposes to Hera, they sing a medley of love songs from New Zealand and Australia. These include the theme songs to quintessential soap operas from both countries: the theme songs from *Home and Away* (Australia) and *Shortland Street* (NZ).

In this moment, the stage directions in the script read: *Band members appear out of nowhere from different places on the scaffold. Neither Hera nor Kane acknowledge their arrival but continue to sing with musical support of the band.*

CONSIDER

- How does this 'mash up' of songs from both cultures communicate themes of the play more broadly?
- What is the role of the band in this moment? How does their sudden appearance at this proposal, in the Blue Mountains, set up the role and function of the band for the rest of the play?

Our friends from New Zealand Festival of the Arts have shared the following about **Tūtira mai ngā iwi**:

Tūtira mai ngā iwi, is sung many times in the performance. The waiata is a song about unity written by Wiremu Te Tau Huata. It is often sung at times when we stand together in strength or support.

Did you recognise this waiata? What do you know about the history and use of the waiata? How was it used in the performance? Why was this song chosen to be included in the performance? How does it relate to the themes of *BLACK TIES*?

	(English Translation)
Tūtira mai ngā iwi, tātou tātou e Tūtira mai ngā iwi, tātou tātou e Whai-a te marama-tanga, me te aroha - e ngā iwi! Ki-a ko tapa tahi, Ki-a ko-tahi rā Tātou tātou e (Repeat) Tā-tou tā-tou e E!! Hi aue hei !!!	Line up together people All of us, all of us Stand in rows people All of us, all of us Seek after knowledge and love of others - everyone Think as one Act as one All of us, all of us All of us, All of us!! Hi aue hei !!!

ASIA TOPA
JANUARY — MARCH 2020

ASIA TOPA CO-COMMISSION
ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE PRESENTS

BLACK TIES

ILBIJERRI THEATRE COMPANY AND TE RĒHIA THEATRE
BY JOHN HARVEY AND TAINUI TUKIWAHO
WORLD PREMIERE SEASON

20–29 FEBRUARY

ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE

2hrs 30 mins including interval



Photos: Garth Oriander

Written by John Harvey & Tainui Tukiwaho
Directed by Rachael Maza & Tainui Tukiwaho

Set Design Jacob Nash
Composition & Musical Direction
Brendon Boney
Lighting Design Jane Hakaraia
AV Design James Henry
Sound Design Laughton Kora
Costume Design Te Ura Hoskins

PERFORMERS

Jack Charles Uncle Mick
Mark Coles Smith Kane Baker
Lana Garland Sylvia Tapuwera
Tawhirangi Macpherson Tama-Girl
Lisa Maza Ruth Baker
Tuakoi Ohia Hera Tapuwera
Brady Peeti Shannon
Tainui Tukiwaho Robert Tapuwera
Dalara Williams Alethea Baker
Dion Williams Jermaine

BAND

Brendan Boney Tony
Mayella Dewis Sarsaparilla
Laughton Kora Blackie

Producers Nina Bonacci,
Amber Curreen, Laila Thaker
Production Manager Nick Glen
AV Mentor Sean Bacon
Audio Engineer Jake Luther
AV Operator James Henry
Stage Manager Casey Norton
Assistant Stage Manager Nazaree Dickerson
Company Manager Jamara Maza
Technical Consultant Paul Lim
Design Assistant Hannah Murphy

PROJECT TEAM

Producer Rebecca Armstrong
Production Manager Holly Wollard

ABOUT THE SHOW

Two families, two cultures... too much!

For Māori corporate hotshot Hera and Aboriginal consultancy entrepreneur Kane, it was love at first sight. Ambitious and career focused, Kane and Hera have their perfect future all mapped out. But there is one thing they can't control... their families!

As the biggest mob get worked up for the blackest wedding ever, reality is sinking in. Fast! Will this international love story bring two strong cultures together? Or will it blow Hera and Kane's world apart?

ILBIJERRI THEATRE COMPANY

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company is Australia's longest established First Nations theatre company. We create, present and tour powerful and engaging theatre creatively controlled by First Nations artists that gives voice to our cultures.

TE RĒHIA THEATRE COMPANY

Established in 2012, Te Rēhia Theatre is a proudly Māori theatre company, championing Māori playwrights, tikanga Māori arts practice and the presentation of our diverse stories.

THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Original concept developed by: Kamarra Bell Wykes, Albert Belz, Amber Curreen, John Harvey, Rachael Maza & Tainui Tukiwaho.

Special thanks to the following collaborators who contributed to the creative developments for *BLACK TIES*: Nelson Baker, Sermsah Bin Saad, Mark Coles Smith, Erina Daniels, Kristel Kickett, Miriama McDowell, Jennifer Medway, Ngaire Pigram, Jarod Rawiri, Melodie Reynolds, Rickylee Russell-Waipuka, Iain Sinclair, Regan Taylor, Maria Walker & Tyler Wilson-Kokiri.

Special thanks also to: Stephen Armstrong from Asia TOPA for his faith and support from the very beginning; Wesley Enoch for his unwavering guidance and support; Louise Gough & Laura Milke-Garner.



ARTIST STATEMENTS



RACHAEL MAZA

Co-Director and ILBIJERRI's Artistic Director

The big highlight for me is that I finally get to work with an all First Nations creative team, and what a team: Jacob Nash, Brendon Boney, James Henry, John Harvey, but especially my old and new whanau from New Zealand: Tainui Tukiwaho, Amber Curreen, Jane Hakaraia, Laughton Kora and Te Ura Hoskins. On and off stage this work is a celebration of who we are as Blackfullas and Māoris: the resilience, the humour, the passion, strong family, culture, thriving despite our shared experiences of colonisation.

I think about the trajectory of black theatre in this country to where we are today and this cocktail of hard hitting/political and the humour has always been there. How else could we have survived?

JOHN HARVEY

Co-Writer

When we started out on this journey we wanted to make a show that our Elders, our Aunties and Uncles – in fact all of our community – could enjoy. And in *BLACK TIES* we have spades of that! *BLACK TIES* celebrates our rich cultures and our connection across the water between our people.

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company is leading the way in creating paths for our stories on an international level and the company was

perfectly placed to embark on a bold First Nations collaboration of this scale, thanks to the support of Asia TOPA and Major Festivals Initiative. I think as First Nations people we often have conversations with our Māori sisters and brothers across the water, but rarely do we embark on these types of collaborations – it's been an amazing experience for me as writer.

TAINUI TUKIWAHO

Co-Writer and Co-Director

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people.

This whakatauki or proverb from home speaks to the importance of people and relationships to ngai Māori. *BLACK TIES* brings these relationships to the stage, blows them up, re-builds them and allows us to love and laugh with our people from both sides of the ditch. We empower our people by bringing our mums, our aunties, our cousins to the stage and sharing what is important for them; it is family, it is laughter, it is music, it is kai! Whether we are fighting for our land and our language, mourning our loved ones or having a party, these same things remain. It is the ultimate act of self-determination for us as first peoples artists to create theatre at the scale of *BLACK TIES* for our people, by our people and about what we think is important. We've started a mean party, can't wait for everyone to join us.

BLACK TIES was commissioned by Asia TOPA, a joint initiative of the Sidney Myer Fund and Arts Centre Melbourne; and has been assisted by the Australian Government's Major Festivals Initiative, managed by the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, in association with the Confederation of Australian International Arts Festivals Inc., Sydney Festival, Perth Festival, New Zealand Festival, Auckland Festival, Asia TOPA and Brisbane Festival. *BLACK TIES* is also supported by Creative New Zealand, The Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts & Cultural Development and the Australian Government through the Department of Communication and the Arts through the Cultural Diplomacy Arts Fund. ILBIJERRI Theatre Company is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia

Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and by Creative Victoria and City of Melbourne.

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and Te Rēhia Theatre Company acknowledge and pay respect to the Country that we travel through and share stories on. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners, Elders, Ancestors, and young leaders. We acknowledge, with full respect, the strength of First Nations people and communities, continuing to practice culture, and connection to Country. We acknowledge, with full respect, the power and excellence of First Nations people and communities fighting to protect and look after Country, Community, Language and Lore, in the face of ongoing colonial interruptions and cultural genocide. Always was, always will be, sacred Indigenous land.

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