

PLAYLAB
THEATRE

B L U E
B O N N E S



BY MERLYNN TONG

EDUCATION SUPPORT MATERIALS

Written and compiled by Stephanie Tudor

Blue Bones

by Merlynn Tong

EDUCATION NOTES



Playlab Theatre



About the Show

When a woman finds scars left by her ex-boyfriend of many years ago etched into her bones, she begins a turbulent journey to unpack her past in order to discover how he got under her skin.

Based on the true story of teenage romance blossoming then warping in the heat of bustling Singapore, *Blue Bones* is a one-woman show told with incredible honesty by Merlynn Tong. Combining multiple characters, song and arcade dance games, *Blue Bones* is a whirlwind of love and loss, violence and courage, with the wreckage continuing to be felt across the years.

This is a work of startling truth and vivacity superbly executed by one of Queensland's most talented young female playwright/performers. A multi-lingual, multi-media production that examines the effects of domestic violence, *Blue Bones* is important new work that embodies excellence, diversity and artistic innovation.

ESTIMATED RUNNING TIME

1 hour 30 minutes

SUITABILITY

Grades 11 and 12.

WARNINGS

Coarse language, adult themes: physical assault, sexual assault, domestic violence, mention of suicide.

THEMES

Family relationships

Identity

Culture

Memory

Survival

Love

Domestic violence

Teenage romance

Power and abuse of power

Curriculum Links

DRAMATIC FORM AND STYLE

Theatre of a Social Comment

Physical Theatre

Contemporary Australian Drama

One Person Show

Cinematic / Mediatized Theatre

DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS

Fluidity of space and time

Breaking out of realist action

Use of multimedia

Stylised movement

Cinematic conventions – actual place

Multiple characters

Dance /Song

Monologue



Direct address

Enactment

Alienation

Gestus

Fragmented narrative structure

Flashback

Non linear narrative

Cast and Creatives

PLAYWRIGHT/PERFORMER	Merlynn Tong
DIRECTOR/DRAMATURG	Ian Lawson
SOUND DESIGN	Guy Webster
LIGHTING DESIGN	David Walters
VIDEO DESIGNER	Nathan Sibthorpe
CHOREOGRAPHER	Neridah Waters

Playlab Theatre

Playlab Theatre seeks to challenge perspectives of Australian culture through Australian Theatre. Uniquely, Playlab does this through developing, publishing and producing new Australian Theatre with the playwright at the centre of the creative process

About the Writer

Merlynn Tong is an Actor and Playwright. Her adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* was presented by Queensland Theatre in 2019. In 2018, Merlynn wrote *Good Grief*, a play for Queensland Theatre's The Scene Project. She has also written two one-woman shows, *Ma Ma Ma Mad*, the true story of her mother's suicide and *Blue Bones*, a semi-autobiography of teenage romance as it blossoms then warps in heat of bustling Singapore. Her work, *Blue Bones*, that she also performed in, has won 6 Matilda Awards including the Lord Mayor Award for Best New Australian Work, Best Mainstage Production and Best Female Actor in a Leading Role. All her works have been published by Playlab Theatre. She is currently developing a new work through Melbourne Theatre Company's Cybec Electric programme.

Some of her recent performances include *White Pearl* (Sydney Theatre Company & National Theatre of Parramatta), *The Shot* (Queensland Theatre, The Scene Project), *Harrow 2* (ABC), *Reef Break* (ABC/M6), *Top of the Lake: China Girl* (BBC & Sundance Films, Jane Campion), *What I'm Here For* (Elbow Room & Flowstate), *The Mathematics of Longing* (La Boite Theatre), *The Lost Lending Library* (Punchdrunk & Imaginary Theatre), *Hotelling* (Bleached Arts), *Bitch: Origin of the Female Species* (Brisbane Festival), *Blue Bones* (Playlab Theatre & Brisbane Powerhouse), *Viral* (Shock Therapy Productions, Gold Coast Arts Centre), *Straight White Men* (La Boite Theatre), *Ma Ma Ma Mad* (Brisbane Powerhouse), *The Theory of Everything* (Brisbane Festival), *The Wizards from Oz* (Taiwan, Taoyuan International Children's Festival) and *Hot Brown Honey* (Judith Wright Centre).



Curriculum Connections

The curriculum connections are provided based on the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) General Drama Senior Syllabus Drama (2019 v1.1).

The curriculum connections provided are based on the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) Drama General Senior Syllabus 2019: Syllabus (V1.1) for Queensland Year 11 and 12 students (see here for more information — <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/senior/senior-subjects/the-arts/drama/syllabus>) and the Australian Curriculum: The Arts / Drama

(see here for more information — australiancurriculum.edu.au/the-arts/drama). Where possible, definitions have been provided for state specific terminology to assist with application across senior courses of study in other Australian states.

GENERAL SENIOR SYLLABUS

UNIT 1 — SHARE

“Students explore the importance of drama as a means to tell stories and share understandings of the human experience in a range of cultures, including those of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and/or those from the Asia–Pacific region. Students study this unit with the purposes of celebrating, documenting, empowering and informing audiences through storytelling as a dramatic form. They manipulate and shape the dramatic languages to explore a range of linear dramatic forms and non-linear dramatic forms through scripted and non-scripted texts. They explore hybridity of conventions and forms in storytelling practices.” (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.26)

Inquiry questions

Unit 1: Share focus question: How does drama promote shared understandings of the human experience?

- How can we use drama to celebrate, document, empower and share understandings of the human experience?
- How can we recreate people’s stories in linear and non-linear dramatic forms?
- How can people’s stories be shared through making and responding to drama as ensemble and audience? (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.27)

UNIT 3 — CHALLENGE

“Students explore how drama can be used to challenge our understanding of humanity over time. Students investigate dramatic styles that are united by social commentary, and that question their world and advocate change. Students explore how dramatic form can be used to express philosophical and political viewpoints in action in society. Students apply, manipulate, structure and interpret the dramatic languages through dramatic contexts that include political, social, philosophical or economic frames. They engage with the purposes of educating, challenging, empowering and informing audiences. In this unit, students develop the knowledge, understanding and skills required to make and respond to dramatic works that aspire to voice the difficult questions of human conscience and challenge our understanding of humanity.” (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.34)

Inquiry questions

Unit 3: How can we use drama to challenge our understanding of humanity?

- How can drama help to educate, challenge and empower us to question society at this time and advocate change?
- How can we shape dramatic languages to communicate and challenge an understanding of humanity at this time?
- How can we make and respond to dramatic works to explore challenges and demands of the human experience? (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.35)

TAKEN FROM QCAA DRAMA 2019 V1.1 — GENERAL SENIOR SYLLABUS



Style and Form

Key theatrical styles, forms and their associated conventions which are evident throughout the play:

Realism: Snapshots of real life seen in real time, use of the fourth wall, authentic, believable and emotionally driven narrative with a central protagonist. The script also features aspects of Heightened Realism, including the use of dream sequences, flashbacks, non-linear narrative, highly stylised moments and symbolic choices.

Physical Theatre: Use of physical storytelling and movement to portray the narrative, which may be symbolic and stylised, use of a physical activity such as dance as part of the drama or stage action. The Asian theatre styles of Butoh and Suzuki Theatre in particular informed the performance and the devising of movement sequences.

One-Person Show: Multiple role-ing, storytelling and memory/story drama, fragmented structure, use of song, music and movement to depict values of culture and character.

Theatre of a Social Comment: Breaking the fourth wall, short and episodic scenes, use of cinematic projections, generic role portrayal, gestus, contrasting and fragmented mood between scenes, multiple role-ing. Unpacking of modern issues of social, ethical, political concern in a dramatic fashion, communication of a political agenda or standpoint including a call to action.

Classroom Links

Style and Form

- Identify examples of conventions used in *Blue Bones*?
- How does the use of these conventions heighten the play's narrative?
- Consider the use of time and place. What are their impacts on the production?
- Consider a convention that you thought has an unexpected use in the production. How was it used effectively? What impact did it have on your understanding of the meaning?
- Consider the range of styles that *Blue Bones* draws upon. Why do you think this is the case?

Mediatised Drama — Cinematic Theatre

The main aim of Cinematic Theatre is to use visual sequences projected onto screens or surfaces in conjunction with set design and live performance to create different dramatic spaces. To achieve a cinematic design that is active throughout the performance, two primary conventions are used: Cinematic Scenes; and Cinematic Transitions. (Jennings, B, Maxwell, S & Pizzica, N, 2014, *The Cinematic Theatre Handbook*, p5)

Mediatised drama conventions can be used to highlight what is occurring onstage, add another dimension to the narrative or provide another character's perspective. These conventions include:

- Actual place
- Narrative
- Transitions — segue and multiple narratives
- Visual conventions — perspective, special effects, mind's eye.

Classroom Links

Mediatished Drama

- What were the importance of the projections throughout the production? What were they of? Who did they involve? How did they impact the characters in the present?
- Think of a symbolic use of the projection vs when we were in actual place. How did both of these contribute to the mood of the scene?
- What effect does the productions inclusion of mediatished drama have on the creation of Dramatic Meaning?
- How does the use of direct address, with the visual imagery, impact your understanding of the characters' journey?
- How do the designer and director change time and place using the projections?
- Describe three moments in the performance when shifts occur from ordinary to the unexpected.

Activities and Resources

Initial Questions

- Have you ever seen a one person show? What do you think some of the challenges would be in creating this type of work? What are some advantages?
- What does the title make you think the play is going to be about?
- Why is it important to share experiences and our own stories?
- Why is it important to create theatre that educates, challenges and empowers the audience?
- The play is described by the director as a 'memory play' what do you think that means? How might that impact the story being told?

Discussion Questions

Discuss these statements. Encourage students to consider both sides of the argument.

- Our perception is our reality.
- Our history makes us who we are.
- Memories can always be trusted.
- Everyone is a product of their upbringing.

Non-linear Storytelling

- In groups, one student tells the others a real-life story. (You may wish to prompt students to help them think of one, e.g. something funny that happened this week; a time when you were scared as a little child.)
- The groups workshop this story, focussing on clear storytelling and using a linear structure.
- Each group is to then rearrange the story parts into a non-linear structure. Workshop this, and then consider the use of additional storytelling devices e.g. direct address, projection, physical sequences.
- Rehearse and present. Reflect and discuss the use of non-linear narrative and the impact on audience engagement and understanding.
- After seeing the production, you can link this activity back to the students understanding of the production through its non-linear storyline.



After You See the Play

Discussion Questions

- What do you believe was the key message of the play?
- How were the changes in time and place communicated?
- Where were the moments that you knew we were not in a realistic time and place? How did you know this? Consider acting techniques as well as plot and design elements.
- Try to recall the plot. What stages led to the eventual climax?
- Recall the moments of strong emotional connection. What led to these moments? Consider acting techniques as well as plot and design elements.
- What do you believe is the best aspect of Blue Bones?
- How does the staging contribute to the production? Discuss the use of minimalistic props and use of AV.
- Consider the use of the projections, both symbol and literal. How did this impact you as an audience member?
- Consider the fact that this is a work that Playlab has brought back. Why do you think this is the case? Why is this an important story to tell?
- The play deals with a lot of important and confronting issues and themes layered with humour. Why do you think this is the case? How did this technique engage you as an audience member?
- How were you as an audience member affected by seeing Merlynn's stories told within such an intimate theatrical space?

Timeline

Create a timeline of the play as well as Merlynn's journey chronologically. This is useful to do directly after viewing the performance, so students understand the narrative and nature of the work. This can also help later when constructing a response or critique. Consider the experiences within the play that define the character journey, the status shifts through the production and how their actions demonstrate their belief systems or their understanding of their situation at that time.

Compare the chronological timeline to the timeline of the play. How does this non-linear structure impact our understanding of Merlynn's journey and experiences?

Extension

As a class identify 5 key moments from the production. Break students up into smaller groups and assign them each a key moment.

1. Have students recreate this moment as series of freeze frames with no dialogue. The movements should be strong and your emotions evident to effectively convey this to the audience.
2. Students are then to add two words per freeze frame. These can be spoke to the other characters or direct address to the audience.
3. Add additional dialogue so the scene is complete.

or

1. Have them consider this a gallery walk through a museum. Have them add a title to each of these freeze frame to direct dramatic focus.
2. When presenting these, one actor must step out of the freeze frame and explain the title and the image, as if they were a tour guide explaining a painting.
3. Have students extend on this by turning each freeze frame into an abstract representation of that moment, focusing on the mood or character emotions portrayed, rather than the plot. Students can bring these moments to life in a movement sequence.



Establishing Time and Place

Have student walks into the space while the teacher gives directions of where they are. Start with simple instructions, you are at school, you are in your bedroom etc. The students are to silently react, using mannerisms and gestures to convey time and place.

When they have explored a few options ask them to consider what mood would be associate or created in that time and place and how this is conveyed to the audience. Start layering a situation in as well for the students to build off.

Have students explore the idea of a 'memory space' or a 'surreal / cerebral place'. How would they convey this through body language and space only? When they have created a number of different times and places have them switch between them considering transitions. Are they

- snapping between the locations and time
- being pulled in or out by a line / phrase or sound
- setting the stage up with two distinct time / place areas

Have students brainstorm other ways they could convey these switches.

Contemporary Political Theatre

Students are to identify the scenes from the play which refer to the actual events which unfolded for Merlynn (as opposed to dream sequences). In small groups, they are to research and investigate relating events, people, places and issues further and to determine an overarching issue of concern and currency to them which is worthy of exposition. Utilising statistics and images sourced through research, along with other alienation techniques (song and dance, gestus, juxtaposition, breaking the fourth wall), they are to select one or more moments in the scripted scene to puncture with segues to communicate the chosen issue. Students may play with the structure of the scene, incorporate the stage directions and utilise repetition, with the original scene the foundation for a scene drawing on aspects of epic theatre and contemporary political theatre.

Memories

The play is written as a memory play. Discuss how this was communicated to the audience by the actor / writer and the director, and the designers.

- Throughout the play Merlynn goes in and out of character to directly address the audience. Consider how she comments on her memories as these happen.

Improvise a scene in which you are enacting a memory

- Layer in tap and talk to reflect on what you feel now about that memory
- Consider having two versions of yourself played by two actors, current you and past you. How does this change the meaning or the dramatic action?
- What were the importance of Merlynn's memories throughout the play? What were they of? Who did they involve? How did they impact her in the present?
- Consider the difference between what Merlynn's memories of her high school experiences at the start of the play to the end of the play. Why are these different and how was this communicated to the audience? Give an example of a moment that reinforces your idea.
- What effect does the play's structure have on the creation of Dramatic Meaning?
- How does the use of direct address impact your understanding of the characters and of Merlynn's journey?
- Memories are the basis for Merlynn's journey in Blue Bones. Discuss the impact memories have on our lives. Discuss how good or bad memories can still have a large impact on people's presents.
- Have students select a memory that they can remember vividly but encourage them to pick something that has occurred at least five years ago. They might choose something from a holiday, a special occasion with their family or primary school. Have the students write down as many details of this memory as possible. Prompt them with ideas about the five senses as they write.



- Choose students to share their memory with the class. Using these memories as stimulus have students in small groups of 3-4 recreate the memory. Show these scenes. Add in direct address, only of the person whose memory it is. How does this change the audience's understanding of the event? What has changed in the three viewings of the memory?
- Students select one of these moments to present.

Extension

- Take one of the memories and have students workshop the telling of this moment as if they are 30 years old, reflecting back on these experiences. They could be telling their friends, be using it as a warning tale, delivering it to an audience, or in a moment of personal reflection as a monologue. How does this change the scene?

or

- Students will then work in small groups to dramatise their selected memory moments integrating this physical activity to enhance the tension created in the moment and to establish the desired mood. They are to consider building in core movements or actions, paying specific attention to the technical execution required for accuracy. Consider aspects of physical theatre relating to movement such as tempo, duration, size, shape, repetition, motif, floor patterns, proximity and more. Students are to observe the impact that confidence and an authoritative delivery of the physical skill have on the overall performance. They are to record observations as both audience and participant throughout the process. They may like to further explore principles of Butoh or Suzuki Theatre to inform their work in this physical approach.

Concept Document

After viewing *Blue Bones*, take a key moment that impacted you and use it as inspiration for a new performance manipulating the convention present within that key moment.

If students are undertaking Unit 1 — Share

Consider how they can create a piece of theatre that:

- Uses conventions of theatre to inform, empathise, chronicle and documents lived experiences
- Reflects the human condition
- Use non-linear forms to tell stories

Consider how you may explore this issue in a new context:

- An outline of the theme / issue to explore
- Brainstorm dramatic conventions you could use
- The dramatic meaning you want to convey to your audience
- Consider how we can explore what it means to be human

Use this information to create a storyboard that conveys your concept.

Workshop these with students.

If students are undertaking Unit 3 – Challenge

Have students complete a stream of consciousness activity where they write answers to a series of questions without stopping to think. Ask them to write each answer on a different post it note.

- What do you have control over?
- What don't you have control over?
- What makes your blood boil?
- When I was 5, 10, 13 I was afraid of ... Right now I am afraid of ... in 5 years I don't want to be afraid of ...



- What does justice mean?
 - What was the last thing on the news that you just couldn't believe?
 - What can we learn from history?
 - What can you learn from your own history?
 - What are you passionate about? What do you stand for?
 - What is a hope for the future that you have?
 - What do we need to start talking about?
 - What do we need to stop talking about?
 - What has been your biggest challenge?
 - What have you tried to forget?
 - If you were in a position of power, what would be the first thing you would change?
 - What does being human mean to you?
 - What do we need to rally behind?
 - What doesn't make sense in our current world?
- Once these are placed around the room students observe them in a gallery style viewing taking one that speaks to them.
 - Discuss why they chose the post it notes they did and what speaks to them about it?
 - Students use this to start brainstorming ideas for their own concept document.

Consider how they can create a piece of theatre that:

- Works to educate, challenge and empower the audience to encourage them to question the society that we live in and continue to advocate for change
- Explores the challenges and demands of being human
- Exposes difficult truths and questions

Consider how you may explore this issue in a new context.

- An outline of the theme / issue to explore
- Brainstorm dramatic conventions you could use
- The dramatic meaning you want to convey to your audience.

Use this information to create a storyboard that conveys your concept.

Workshop these with students.

Elements of Drama Discussion

ROLE RELATIONSHIP CHARACTER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a specific moment of dramatic action that exemplifies one of the characters. How? Why? What dramatic meaning did this communicate to the audience? • How would you describe each character? How are their characters portrayed through the voice and movement of the actors? • How does Merlyn embody a variety of roles over the course of the play? How does she physically and vocally differentiate between them? • How are relationships communicated onstage when there is only one actor?
TENSION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were some of the key examples of tension during the production? • Choose a specific moment of dramatic action that exemplifies one of the characters. How? Why? What dramatic meaning did this communicate to the audience? • How did the tension engage you? • What were you invested in? • How is tension developed during the physical theatre scenes?



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the continual flashes back to the x-ray create tension? • Consider the tension of relationship between Merlynn and Tom. At the start of the play this is very playful but there are key moments where their relationship shifts. How was this communicated to the audience even though there was only one actor onstage.
FOCUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a specific moment of dramatic action that exemplifies one of the characters. How? Why? What dramatic meaning did this communicate to the audience? • How did the focus change between moments between the past and the present? What happened onstage to facilitate this change?
TIME	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When is the play set? • The play is non-linear and includes a range of flashbacks. What impact does this have on the audience's understanding of the characters and the narrative? • Consider the use of Cinematic Theatre to demonstrate time. Discuss a moment where this was particularly effective.
PLACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The script describes the three places the play is set as “a literal hospital space, a memory space and a surreal / cerebral place”. How was this communicated onstage? • The play is set in both Singapore and Australia. How are these two places differentiated onstage? • Consider the use of mediated theatre and voice over to demonstrate place. Discuss a moment where this was particularly effective.
SPACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse the different ways that the stage was used throughout the production. • Being a one woman show there are no other characters to create interesting spatial relationships with, how does Merlynn still use the space in an interesting way? • How did the use of the space help to convey the different settings and locations? • How did the lighting enhance the different use of the space?
MOVEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This production draws upon physical theatre to convey the narrative. Consider how symbolic movement is used to convey feelings and shape mood? • How did Merlynn manipulate her body language and movement to portray multiple characters? • How was movement contrasted by stillness? What effect did this have?
LANGUAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How were words used to create power? • What was the subtext behind some of the memorable lines? • How was language used to shape character? Consider the three different roles Merlynn Tong plays and how the language differed for each. • Subtitles were used throughout the play. What impact did that have on the audience?
CONTRAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe two contrasting moments in Blue Bones. How were these moments created through sound, lighting, voice and movement? • How did the contrast of language shape the production? How did you feel when you couldn't understand what was being said? • Compare the violence of Atlantic beating up the gangs vs Merlynn being abused by Tom. How were these contrasted? What was the impact? • What were the contrasts between the three characters Merlynn embodied? How was this communicated to the audience through the design elements as well as through the acting techniques • Analyse the ways in which contrast is used throughout the play in relation to the range of moods; between humour and fear. • Contrast Merlynn's character at the start of the play and then at the end. What has she realised? How has the experiences she has remembered changed her?



MOOD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss the impact of the sound design and music used to create specific moods. Use specific moments of dramatic action from the show and discuss how they made the audience feel.• Consider how they would've been different if different artistic choices were made, such as alternative lighting or sound, or use of mediatised conventions.• How would you describe the opening mood of the play? How was this mood created?• Consider the mood at the start of the play. How does this contrast with the end of the play?• How did you feel when Merlynn discussed her mother and brother at the end? What performance techniques and skills of the actors were utilised to make you feel this way?• When talking about Atlantis the projected images are drawings rather than photos. What mood does this create?• Consider the abrupt shifts in mood. When did these occur? What do you think was the purpose?
SYMBOL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss the impact of the x-ray as a symbol. How did this impact your understanding of the production and the narrative?• Consider the use of bruises and their colours as a symbol. What does it mean to you? How was this meaning enhanced through the mediatised conventions?• There are strong symbolic references used in the AV. What moments stood out to you? How did these moments impact your understanding of the characters?• Consider the title of the play. What do you think it means and how does it change your understanding of the play?• Why does the production end with Merlynn dancing? What does this symbolise?



Script Excerpt 1

We see Tom and Merlynn traipsing across Singapore from theme parks to Little India and Kampong Glam to a Games Arcade. As the setting changes, the physical activity and engagement to the surroundings of these iconic Singaporean locations also shift, as the highly stylised physicalisation of the physical abuse starts to appear.

The contrast of the act of running and the heightened conflict between the two is then symbolically portrayed through a dance routine at the arcade. This moment is referencing moments earlier in the script where Merlynn recounts how Tom's dancing ability was something that first attracted her to him.

Merlynn is able to utilise dance, which was earlier used to show flirting, and the frenzy of the arcade game to portray the mania incited by Tom's attack and her desire to defend herself. This juxtaposition helps convey the abrupt nature of the violence. This physical choice means that abuse does not need to be actually presented onstage, the impact created by the contrast between being attacked and dancing has a greater effect.

The audience is also able to see Tom's sometime sweet but other times volatile nature, making this a very shocking memory for both Merlynn and the audience to experience. It is in this scene that they are able to see how quickly Tom's interactions with Merlynn could switch and begin to understand the impact on her behaviour and her confusion about their relationship. This is especially evident with her denial and self-blame at the end of the excerpt.

Classroom Links

Performance

- In pairs read the scene aloud.
- Try out extreme possibilities as actors might do during rehearsals.
- Go through the scene twice, trying out two contrasting sets of desires/movement/intentions and share their work.
- How do the circumstances and surroundings affect what is being said? Does the audience pick up on different agendas or attitudes when the surroundings change?
- Layer in Mediatised Drama conventions. How does this change the meaning of the scene?
- Play the scene using Theatre of a Social Comment conventions vs Physical Theatre conventions. How does this change the meaning?
- What changes if we only have one actor playing both parts or even have two Merlynn's onstage. Experiment with a range of ways to present the scene.

Projection of a Theme Park.

MERLYNN

We went to Escape Theme Park and went on a roller coaster inside a dark dark building. Tom is so brave you know, instead of holding the safety bars with both hands, he only used one hand and with the other hand — he held me. We went to Escape Theme Park that day because Tom was upset — he just found out that his mother had committed fraud and was going to jail.

My poor boy.

I borrowed some money from Tom to buy us a red bean ice cream. It was all velvety and sweet, little jewels of delightful bean-iness always calling you back for another suck and another and another ...

TOM

How come you didn't buy me one also?/ Didn't you think that I may want one at this sad time of my life?/ Baby, can you return me the money for the ice-cream? You are committing fraud on me.



How can you do this to me after what happen to my mother? Don't you care for me? All you know how to do is sit there and suck and suck on your ice cream, you slut./ Why are you such a dirty slut? Sometime I just CAN'T FUCKING STAND YOUR ...

A slap. Projection of little india.

You enjoy the food?/ Good. Don't think I didn't notice that other thing./ Don't act dumb. You like the attention right? Wear all this skimpy clothes and all the Indian man stare at you. WHY ARE YOU SUCH A WHORE? YOU ARE MINE YOU UNDERSTAND.

A punch.

Snap Projection of Kampung Glam.

WHY DIDN'T YOU HAVE ENOUGH MONEY FOR AN EXTRA EGG FOR ME?

A kick.

Projection to Niko's "Night of Fire" on the 'Para Para Paradise' Game. Projection of the game screen. The objective is to hit the arrows as they pass, this creates a dance.

GAME

VOICE OVER The Stage is ready for your dance!

SONG: Night of Fire, Night of Fire

MERLYNN /I began to hit him back. And then I run and I run and I feel so powerful!

As the song continues MERLYNN gains strength.

/I run and run but most of the time he catches me. And then ...

Song ends.

I wish I didn't run.

X-rays flash. MERLYNN is back in the Hospital



Script Excerpt 2

At the start of this excerpt Merlynn begins to recount a conversation with Tom where he discussed his memories of physical abuse. He describes in detail the sounds, the smells and what he witnessed in a very innocent and raw manner. The use of the language and its impact makes this moment powerful and enables Merlynn to excuse the abuse she suffers from Tom because of his childhood. It is in this scene that the audience is able to get a glimpse into her rational and how she justifies Tom's actions towards her.

The excerpt also documents Merlynn and Tom's exact words in the interaction at the water park which escalates to another physical attack on her. The very real nature of this exchange demonstrates the way in which perpetrators manage to convince themselves of the victims being 'deserving' of the attack. It also captures the fear Merlynn faced when confronted in these moments as she begs him to stop.

The interaction between Merlynn and Noeleen also allows the audience to see how Merlynn was treated by others and how her experiences of abuse were minimalised. This helps audiences begin to understand the thought process and difficulties that Merlynn faced, as well as the physical abuse.

X-rays flash. MERLYNN is back in the hospital.

MERLYNN How could I forget all this? How come I don't remember he used to do be like that. Maybe because he is more of a good guy than a bad guy. Right? I mean, he has been through so much, he had such a difficult childhood. He once told me.

A memory space.

TOM I am in my room. I hear the door open and he immediately starts to scream and shout because my mother has not finished cooking yet. Then I hear her scream. Scream so loud. I hear whoosh whoosh. I know that he is using his belt on her. Like he uses on me sometimes. I hear our chair fly across the room. One day I want to have a lot of money so I can buy those plastic chair from IKEA and throw away our stupid wooden chair!

Mummy yi zi han yi zi han. [*Subtitle <Mandarin>: Mummy is screaming and screaming*] Then I hear the sound of her flesh and bones banging against my wall. Mummy ah, mummy ah. Bu yao da wo de Mummy, Bu yao da ta. HONG GAN AH! [*Subtitle <Mandarin/Hokkein>: Don't hit my mummy, don't hit her. GET FUCKED!*]

X-rays flash. MERLYNN is back in the hospital.

MERLYNN I can't fathom what it's like to grow up like that. To be always hanging on the edge of security, uncertain if the day would gift you protection or mayhem. Perhaps because of witnessing this, the wires in his brain tangled. Messages gets missed, meanings confounded and actions explode out of his limbs in a wild misguided fury. So it's not really him that is hitting me. My love is the Tom that kisses me, dances with me in the rain and spends hours to win a Giant Piglet for me.

Subtle sound of water. Projection of Underwater World Shark Tank.

TOM How much did you borrow from Noeleen to come here?/ How is that enough for both of us to eat? I want McDonalds/ I thought you in Express Stream you should be smarter. I think the dirt in my fingernail is smarter than you.

MERLYNN feels TOM twisting her wrist and whispering in her ear.

MERLYNN Don't Tom, not here. There is so many people here./ Please/ Tom, our friends are just near by. Please stop./ I'll do anything you want later ok?

AH!

TOM is choking MERLYNN.



I can't breathe/ Tom, stop/ Please/ People are watching us, Tom/ Tom/ Don't lift me, Don't lift me!/
MERLYNN is standing on tiptoes.

I can't breathe!

Please help me/ Please help me/ I beg you, please, please help me.

The largest man in the crowd had big green eyes. He looked at me, lifted a chip and "crunch".

Suddenly Tom's grip softens. I break free and run ...

Projections of Underwater Water World flash.

Right into — Noeleen Lee.

Noeleen, I ran away because Tom, he, he, he hits me.

NOELEEN I know Merlynn, I saw. Shh, Shh, Shh. I'm sure Tom is very sorry. You finish your crying? You remind me of my mother. She also always cry lidat when my father beats her. It is all part of adult relationship. You need to learn how to cope better.

Ok? Stop being childish. Come, let's go join everybody.

MERLYNN is back in the hospital. Xrays flash. She weeps.

Classroom Links

Directing

Imagine you are directing Blue Bones and use the script excerpt to create a vision for the production. Consider:

- The conventions used in the productions
- Mediatized Drama conventions
- What message / idea you want to convey to the audience and how you will achieve this.
- Block your scene with other students, however, experiment with objectives, motivations and subtext for the characters. Which one more closely matches your initial vision and interpretation, and why?
- Consider the conventions and styles you would use to convey this piece. What are the differences in having two characters vs a one person show? How would the scene be different if using realism conventions versus Epic Theatre or Physical Theatre conventions? Experiment with a range of conventions and styles.



Meet the Playwright

The Creative Process ... with Merlynn Tong, playwright and performer.

As Playwright

Below, Merlynn discusses her creative process in response to a series of questions aimed to help illuminate how one turns personal stories into a dramatic work. The questions included; how did you realise the story you wanted to tell? How did you go about selecting which parts of the story to include? How did you determine which aspects of the narrative would work best on stage? How did you decide how to dramatise these in the script (e.g. flashbacks, use of symbols such as the x-ray, multi-role-ing)? How did the various aspects of the editing process (including working with a dramaturg, creative development, editing and rehearsed public sharing) work? What were the final stages required to publish the script and premiere the work?

This story had been lingering in my mind for some time. In fact, in my first play, *Ma Ma Ma Mad*, which is also a one-woman-show, Tom makes a brief appearance. I decided to expand on this monologue for a poetry event at which I was performing. At that time, I had just visited my doctor about some back pain I was experiencing and she pointed out on my X-ray a part of my spine that looked like it had been broken and rebuilt over the last 10 years. I did not have an answer for her at the time when she asked if I had any fall or impact. However once home, it dawned on me. It was from my teenage boyfriend's beating one night on a bridge. From there, my new expanded monologue about a girl searching for her ex-boyfriend in her bones was born.

I was then fortunate enough to be a part of Playwriting Australia and Contemporary Asian Australian Performance (CAAP)'s program Lotus. I had many amazing mentors from the program who helped me to piece this story into a full-length play. Another stroke of luck came when Ian Lawson, Artistic Director of Playlab Theatre, came to a reading of my draft of *Blue Bones*. He approached me about developing the work and we have become a formidable force in our drive to develop this work into what it is today.

Ian filled in the role of dramaturg, director and friend during my writing process. First, we detonated the old script and worked on a structure that was dramatic and appropriate for the stage. With his guidance, I allowed myself to steer away from autobiographical storytelling (as was the case with my first play) and into semi-autobiography. This liberated my writing and the injection of fiction allowed me freedom to integrate even more heart into my writing and performing. Ian also challenged me about how to ignite the story even further, through the use of projections, flashbacks and other dramatic tools. It felt incredible to have those new ideas injected into the process and the work. My creativity was at an all-time high and I have never written faster than I did in that stage.

This was a fairly challenging topic to write about, and I needed about 10 years to pass before I could properly digest, process and ultimately find a creative outlet for what happened all those years ago. I also went through about 10 years of researching to understand domestic violence, its cycles, grieving and reclaiming self-worth. As I was creating the piece, I found that the atmosphere of the time and the flavour of Singapore were essential to the retelling. Or, as one of my mentors, playwright Stephen Carleton, said to me, "it sounds like Singapore is a character in the play".

That was revolutionary for me. The heat, the speed and the vibrancy of the country were all such a vital part of my life at the time, and to my memories of those events, that it had to be included in the retelling of the story. Dance was also a huge part of my life at the time; dancing in arcades, in school and everywhere I could. It made sense to run the storyline of dancing in conjunction with the story of meeting Tom. I also grew up around a 'gangster' culture of sorts, so it was great to have the character of Atlantis to showcase that aspect of my teenage memory space.

We had two public readings which both went very well. They reaffirmed the direction we were taking with the work. Then, as a team, Ian Lawson, Nathan Sibthorpe (Visual Designer) and Guy Webster (Sound Designer) and I travelled to Singapore to collect the images and sound necessary for the authentic reproduction of the work. It was euphoric, surreal and extraordinary for me to get to share my version of Singapore with the team, while also collecting visceral experiences while on the ground. This was a crucial step to fully forming the work.



Right up until the final publication of this script we were still tightening it more and more each week. Once it hits the floor with our team, it will have the chance for theatrical components to bring even greater life and breath into the script. I cannot wait to see where it goes next.

As Performer

For your role in *Blue Bones* you play not only yourself, but also a number of key people in your life who you knew personally and often very intimately. For young performers, what would you say are the challenges and benefits of playing yourself on stage, as well as creating dramatized versions of people often very close to you?

The benefit of playing yourself and people who are or have been close to you on stage is that you know yourself and them very well. However, make sure you still pay close attention to the fictionalised versions of all the characters. I do the same investigative homework as I would if it were a new character; exploring their given circumstances, history, dreams, beliefs and so forth. When you play yourself on stage, make sure you take care of yourself and your psyche too. Reliving trauma each night can be very hard on your heart. I make sure to remind myself that this is a show, not real life.

Warming up and down helps, as does taking extra care of myself with lots of great food and down time. I also have a fabulous psychologist who is there to support me.

When a character is NOT based on a real life human, what are your 'go to' methods or techniques for creating a believable, three dimensional character?

Doing homework on the character is essential. I analyse the script and list as much detail and information about the character as I can. I read the script at least three times, quietly and out loud. I go through my scenes very carefully, trying to uncover the objectives, obstacles and tactics of my character. What are the stakes? Are they high enough? Then I read the script again and I imagine the key lived experiences of my character. I make sure to engage all senses. I repeat this as many times as needed and hopefully when I reach the rehearsal room, I am prepared with a great sense of the character and a strong enough foundation from which I can play and create.

How do you ensure that you achieve a healthy balance of sharing yourself onstage and allowing for some privacy and discretion as an individual?

I take a lot of down time for myself during rehearsals and production. I require quite a lot of alone time to rejuvenate. It helps that I have an extraordinary partner who understands me and takes wonderful care of me when I am doing a work as demanding as this. I make sure that I eat regularly and very well (lots of vegetables and protein). I also meditate daily which helps me relax and feel grounded.

For this production you had to physically challenge yourself in order to depict the dance and attack components of the piece. What are the appealing and intimidating aspects of this for an actor? Do you have any advice for young actors as to how to prepare for highly physical performances to ensure that the delivery is both believable and safe?

I love physical performance, be it to watch or perform. I love expressing via the body. Sometimes words are just not enough and the power of movement can be empowering and incredible to witness. To prepare for performances like this it's great to do training that helps you build awareness of every part of your body. Physical theatre training like Butoh, or even yoga and some kinds of meditation really helps with this. Be honest with your team if you ever feel unsafe. It is not worth pushing yourself too hard and injuring yourself if it results in not being able to perform.

Storytelling is crucial in this style of play as the actor needs to ensure that their story is authentically and accurately captured. What would you say are the most important acting techniques to employ to ensure the performance is sincere, while still being theatrical and engaging?

There are so many acting techniques that I have not learnt yet. I think the most important thing is to be continuously learning new techniques to expand beyond your existing capacity. Reading acting texts, attending workshops, making films with friends ... these things all help you to become a better storyteller, performer and, ultimately, artist.



Meet the Director / Dramaturg

New Writer's Theatre ... with Ian Lawson, director and dramaturg creative development & direction

You have been heavily involved in the creative process for *Blue Bones*. Can you briefly outline the process undertaken by you and Playlab as part of bringing this new work to the stage and to publication?

I first encountered the work in concept form when Playlab supported Brisbane's first Lotus Program for Asian Australian Playwrights in 2015. It was immediately apparent that there was an idea at play that had currency and a unique voice, so Playlab welcomed Merlynn and *Blue Bones* into the Lab Rats program. Merlynn excelled in the development process where we moved from a synopsis, through a beat sheet and into draft form. Due to the impressive draft that resulted from Lab Rats, we invested in a workshop through our Beta Testing Program and spent the better part of a week refining the text further on the floor. At the conclusion of both programs we held a public reading that confirmed for us that we were on the right track.

What was it that originally drew you to this piece?

The currency and potency of the story, Merlynn's charisma and heart, and the ease with which she could make me laugh, then in a moment, turn, and make me cry.

Did you ever consider using a performer other than Merlynn (playwright) in the production? Why, why not?

No. It is her story. The integrity and authenticity of the work would be greatly reduced if we didn't use Merlynn as it is her experience of not only a relationship, but the city of her birth, Singapore. Singapore is a very idiosyncratic place, a collision of cultures on every level; language, cuisine, education, and so on. If we were ever to use another actor, then they would probably have to be Singaporean.

How much changing or altering of the text occurs once rehearsals commence? Does this differ when the playwright is present and also the performer?

The degree of altering that occurs in rehearsal is usually dependent on the development process a work has been through. If you have had the opportunity for the playwright to work extensively on the floor with the actor, you are likely to have prepared the text for rehearsal far better than through just conceptual dramaturgical development. It is testing the work in three dimensions; action, language and subtext, in particular. As mentioned above, *Blue Bones* has been through two readings, which have given us such a great understanding of the work and built a trusting relationship between me and Merlynn. In rehearsal it is much easier when the playwright is also the performer as you are streamlining the process and not having to direct actors, and then have dramaturgical conversations — rehearsals are in theory, about realisation rather than development. In professional processes, playwrights are rarely present all the time at rehearsals due to the fact they are not being paid, so major dramaturgical changes can be problematic, hence often or best avoided.

How important is it, when the playwright is also the sole performer, for there to be an external creative involved, in this case you as the Director?

Critical. It is always important to have external eyes on your work, no matter your role in a process. *Blue Bones* is story with a high degree of difficulty. Theatre is generally considered an actor's and/or a writer's medium, and film more a director's. This theatre work is the closest to a director's piece that I have engaged with in nearly a decade. As such, working with Merlynn to shape the work is something that is vitally important to meet the needs and demands of this script, which requires the character and world to turn in a single, brief moment. This is a memory play that needs to work in real time to challenge and change the character; dramaturgically and performance-wise this is difficult and requires a very nuanced realisation. For me, I have the other creatives (Lighting Designer, Sound Designer and Visual Designer) involved to keep me honest.

As a director, what is the most exciting aspect of working with a new play for its professional debut?

What are the challenges?

Going where no one has been before. Creating something from the ground up is much more fulfilling than just interpretation, because you are aiming to communicate a new idea, and in this instance, an idea of real



currency, to your community to affect change. The most exciting time is generally when you have your first audience; watching them engage with a story and sensing how it is working is very special. There are plenty of challenges as referred to in the other questions, but there is no reward without risk.

In your role as director, how much input did you have regarding the exploration of dramatic conventions such as flashbacks, symbolic use of songs, projections, multiple role-ing and so on? Were these scripted into the play initially, or did they emerge during the creative development period and public showings?

For most of the process I have acted as Dramaturg / Mentor to Merlynn, and so I have had a strong hand in finding and shaping the form of her story. This is because the process began in the Lab Rats program and a large component of it is the development of the playwright's craft. Consequently, we went back to basics starting with articulating the controlling idea and trying to find the most appropriate form through which to express it. Merlynn's initial idea included multiple roles, a song and various symbols, but the memory or flashback form was developed through the process, as was the dramatic structure. The projections were built in from the beginning of this development so as to fully integrate them into the story.

How did you approach the sensitive and personal content of this script in such a way so that the artistic integrity of the piece remained at the core? Was this a challenging task or one that required a mutually determined approach?

Merlynn's first play *Ma Ma Ma Mad* was a biographical story about the suicide of her mother, so I knew she had the ability to go to dark and truthful places. But with *Blue Bones* I wanted to develop her craft and so I challenged her not to be confined by the real events to free her from obligation and encourage dramatic thinking to best express the idea she wanted to convey. Merlynn agreed and rose to this challenge as she usually does with rigour and integrity. So, you could call *Blue Bones* semi-autobiographical. The additional motive for doing this was to create distance between the dramatic world and the real event to help protect Merlynn.

Cinematic projections, lighting and other production elements featured in this work to indicate time, place, relationships, situation and to establish mood. What would be your advice to students (who may not have access to such production or design elements) for directing extracts of the play in class — what do you think are the most important directorial considerations for this particular text?

Having done two readings without the screen, I am confident that it will stand on its dramatic legs by itself. There is very little (if any) direct acknowledgement of the screen by the characters. The screen mostly acts as framing device (along with other functions) establishing the landscape for the audience. So, I'd recommend that the director and actor establish shared images for the environments (and other references or characters) that bring texture and ownership to the performance (if you see it and believe it, the audience will too). Additionally, I would concentrate on the punctuation of moments in a scene and how the "Merlynn" character is connected to what is happening. Within her relationship with Tom in particular you will notice that she starts out in denial of what happened to her and then progresses through stages, consequently revealing what it is doing to her internally. As mentioned, this is a memory play that works in changing the character in real time.

Based on your career experience as a director, what are your best tips for new and emerging young directors, playwrights and performers?

Learn about story first and foremost. All of those disciplines require you to be a storyteller, and so an understanding of the elements and nuances of story will absolutely improve the individual craft of each. Actors will be able to work on their character in relation to the broader narrative if they can pull apart and understand the purpose of their character in relation to others, major and minor turning points, structure and so on. A director has to shape and emphasise meaning and use a style that supports the vision for the story, so clearly a complex reading of a script is necessary. They also have to understand the craft of acting, as they have to work continually with actors to deliver the story; doing this will get better results and make for more efficient progress. In addition to story, playwrights too should also understand the craft of acting, particularly the analysis that various methods use to articulate objectives and actions as this can inform how scenes can work, as it is a powerful reflective tool.



Assessment Ideas

Extended Response

QUESTION 1

Use the key convention of flashbacks and two key elements of drama to argue a position about how the message in Banksy's 'Girl vomiting hearts', represents the dramatic meaning communicated in *Blue Bones*.

QUESTION 2

"This is a memory play that needs to work in real time to challenge and change the character; dramaturgically and performance-wise this is difficult and requires a very nuanced realisation." Ian Lawson

Use the quote above to argue a position about how effectively *Blue Bones* manipulates dramatic focus and time, in conjunction with a key convention, to communicate dramatic meaning.

Concept Document

Working as a theatre-maker, you will view Playlab's production of *Blue Bones*. Using this production as stimulus, you must identify a key convention of Theatre of Social Comment used in this production and devise an original dramatic concept that expresses a political view. In your original concept, you will argue the choices made to communicate dramatic action and meaning in relation to your chosen purpose and context through explanatory paragraphs and annotations of your storyboard.

Your dramatic concept must organise information under the following headings:

Analysis and evaluation (400 words)

- How was the convention manipulated to contribute to the communication of a political view?

My concept (800 words, 10 - 12 images)

Introductory paragraphs that

- identify a chosen purpose and context and synthesise your concept
- make specific reference to the originally chosen convention of Theatre Of Social Comment and other relevant conventions of this style

Develop a storyboard with annotations that document your dramatic ideas and

- highlight purpose and context and synthesise your concept
- make specific reference to the originally chosen convention of Theatre Of Social Comment and other relevant conventions of this style.
- argue how the dramatic languages have been used to communicate dramatic action and meaning



Online Resources

A list of other sources of information to extend learning and discovery

Where Else, What Else?

<https://www.whiteribbon.org.au>

Dedicated to providing information on and access to help for domestic violence concerns

<http://au.reachout.com>

Identifying the situation you are in and strategies to act

<https://www.amnesty.org.au/stop-violence-women>

Amnesty International's global campaign to stop violence against women provides international insights on this issue

<http://www.loveisrespect.org>

Exploring what a loving relationship should and can mean

<http://www.unwomen-nc.org.sg>

The UN's Singaporean chapter for women

<http://www.aware.org.sg/2010/12/domestic-violence>

AWARE – the Association of Women for Action and Research look into violence against women

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/13-amazing-coming-of-age-traditions-from-around-the-world>

A look at different approaches to 'coming of age' in various cultures and countries

<http://cultureandyouth.org/adolescence/research/rites-of-passage-in-adolescence>

Exploring the importance of rites of passage to assist with the transition from youth to young adult

<https://www.ndp.org.sg>

The website dedicated to Singapore's National Day Parade

<http://www.yoursingapore.com>

Find out facts and details about Singapore, including the diverse range of languages spoken, the food and the landmarks as explored in the play

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BSCUxvkKwA>

Watch an example of someone playing the Dance Evolution game in an arcade in Singapore to get a real sense of this activity

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=De4NbsUibmM>

Film clip (with lyrics) for the 2002 National Day Parade theme song 'We Will Get There'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHQ8GsscYVI>

The 2002 National Day Parade performance Merlynn was selected for but did not perform in

<http://matadornetwork.com/abroad/how-to-speak-like-a-singaporean-audio>

Hear audio samples of the various dialects and languages spoken in Singapore and featured in the play

Ilo Ilo is a 2013 Cannes award-winning film which gives an insight into the everyday life of a Singaporean family and the balance of power and gender in their household.

Sandcastle is another award-winning Singaporean feature film which provides greater insights into the adolescent struggles and first romance.

12 Storeys provides an insight into various troubled families living in an apartment building, highlighting a range of family and gender dynamics existing in Singapore in the late 1990s.



References

Queensland. School Curriculum & Standards Authority. (2019). Drama 2019 v1.1

General Senior Syllabus. <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/senior/senior-subjects/the-arts/drama/syllabus>