



# SLOW BOAT

BY ANNA YEN



**EDUCATION SUPPORT MATERIALS**

Written and compiled by Stephanie Tudor

# **Slow Boat**

by Anna Yen

# **Education Notes**

by Stephanie Tudor



A Playlab Theatre Publication

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These materials have been compiled by Playlab Theatre in conjunction with the premier production of *Slow Boat* by Anna Yen.



## About the Show

To celebrate Victory in the Pacific, five indentured Chinese workers are staging a theatre show at Brisbane's Bulimba Dockyards.

The men aim to weave an epic tale of brotherhood and resilience, charting their journey from poverty and war in rural China, through hard work on the tiny phosphate-rich island of Nauru, to a hasty evacuation from the Japanese to Australia, and all the challenges that they overcame on the way. However, differing perspectives of critical events in their story threaten to derail this display of unity to become the one thing that could tear them apart.

Blending vaudeville, musical theatre, circus, Cantonese Opera and martial arts, *Slow Boat* is inspired by the unexpected arrival in Australia of playwright Anna Yen's father, along with 580 other Chinese men, during WWII.

**Estimated Running Time** 2 x 50 Minutes, plus interval of 20 minutes

**Suitability Grades** 7 – 12

**Warnings** Contains low-level coarse language, depictions of suicide and violence, multilingual (English, Cantonese and Mandarin).

### **Themes**

Power  
Culture  
Loss  
Powerlessness  
Minority  
War (WW2 & Chinese Civil War)  
Refugees  
Culture  
Racism  
Immigrant experience  
Loyalty  
Brotherhood



## Curriculum Links

### **Dramatic Form and Style**

Contemporary Theatre  
Theatre of a Social Comment  
Chinese Opera  
Epic Theatre  
Vaudeville  
Musical Theatre  
Physical Theatre  
Circus

### **Dramatic Conventions**

Narration  
Direct Address  
Movement sequence  
Non-linear narrative / flashbacks  
Retelling  
Song  
Poetry  
Multiple role  
Fluidity of place and time

## Cast and Creatives

PLAYWRIGHT	Anna Yen
DIRECTOR/DRAMATURG	Ian Lawson
ENSEMBLE DIRECTOR	Therese Collie
MOVEMENT DIRECTOR	Anna Yen
MUSICAL DIRECTOR & COMPOSER	Nicolas Ng
DESIGNER	Josh McIntosh
LIGHTING DESIGNER	David Walters
STAGE MANAGER	Elise Baker

*Please note the cast and creatives list will be updated in 2022.*



## Curriculum Connections

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

### 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. In this unit, students develop the knowledge, understanding and skills required to make and respond to dramatic works that use a wide range of dramatic conventions to tell stories in linear and non-linear forms. (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.26)

#### Inquiry questions

Unit 1:

- 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 dramatic linear and non-linear 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. 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

# ACARA

## Year 9 and 10 Band Descriptors

- **Manipulate combinations of the elements of drama to develop and convey the physical and psychological aspects of roles and characters consistent with intentions in dramatic forms and performance styles**
  - Considering viewpoints — contexts: For example — How does the drama relate to its social context in which it was created? What culturally symbolic movements are evident in this drama? What historical influences have impacted on this drama? How are global trends in drama influencing Australian drama?
- **Evaluate how the elements of drama, forms and performance styles in devised and scripted drama convey meaning and aesthetic effect**
  - Considering viewpoints — philosophies and ideologies: For example — How has drama theory been used in creating and performing this text?
  - Considering viewpoints — evaluations: For example — How successful were the actors and director in conveying the playwright's stated intent? How successfully have the design elements been incorporated into the drama?
- **Analyse a range of drama from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their drama making,**





## Style and Form

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

### Chinese Opera

Chinese Opera is one of the oldest dramatic forms in the world. The plays often retold folk stories that were well known by the people and for centuries these shows were the central form of entertainment across China. While they included music, they also included dance, martial arts, acrobatics, and a very specific and heightened style of make-up and costume. Actors played stock characters whose personality traits could be distinguished by their make-up or costumes. Due to the limited space onstage, gestures, costumes and props were often used symbolically.

### Contemporary Performance

Contemporary performance is hybrid work that integrates text, physical theatre / dance, visual theatre, non-linear form, objects, music, costumes, lighting, image, sound, sets, and vocal expression into complex interactive systems (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.59)

#### Classroom Links

##### Style and Form

- Identify examples of conventions used in *Slow Boat*.
- How does the use of these conventions heighten the play's narrative?
- Think about the use of Chinese Opera. How did this add to the production?
- 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 perspectives that *Slow Boat* draws upon. How does this change the audience's view of the social comments that the production makes?



## **Epic Theatre**

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. From the QCAA glossary, this style of theatre is “a form of drama often presenting a series of loosely connected scenes that avoid illusion and often interrupt the story line to address the audience directly with analysis, argument, or documentation; the intention is to appeal to an audience’s intellect by using ‘alienating’ or ‘distancing’ effects, causing the audience to think objectively about the play, to reflect on its argument, to understand it, and to draw conclusions; plays may include songs that support the message of the play, storytellers and narrators, projection, placards, film sequences and actors directly addressing the audience” (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.65)

## **Theatre of a Social Comment**

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.

## **Physical Theatre**

Use of physical movement to aid in the storytelling. This movement is often symbolic and stylised. While this form often uses dialogue as well, there is a larger emphasis on the physical movement to communicate meaning.

## **Vaudeville**

A style that emerged in the 1890s and was popular until the 1930s, Vaudeville is a light form of entertainment that included multiple different acts in one show. Performers, each in a different and unrelated act, would perform after each other, similar to a talent show. Acts might include comedians, dances, circus, acrobatics, trained animals or musicians.

# **Conventions**

## **Direct Address**

Direct address occurs when characters acknowledge and speak directly to the audience. This can allow characters to express their inner thoughts and feelings, to get the audience on their side or to remind the audience they are watching a play. The latter is often used to reinforce a social or political message, having the audience focus on the issues in the play rather than simply creating an emotional attachment.

## **Fluidity of Place and Time**

Telling a story in multiple times and places requires fluid transitions between each time and place. This can be done through a character transformation, costume



changes, or even through design elements such as changes in sets, lighting or mediated elements. Fluidity of place and time is not only used in multinarrative pieces but also in non-linear productions. This serves to allow multiple perspectives to be told but can also be used to distance the audience.

### **Multiple characters**

Actors play more than one role switching between them. This can be done as a symbol, conveying that the actor is telling the story of multiple characters who the same event or issue has had an impact on, to remind the audience that the actor is a storyteller in that moment, serving to alienate the audience and have them focus on the message or statement being made, or simply from a practical point of view. When actors change between characters they need to deliberately change their voice, gesture, stance and facial expressions to allow the audience to distinguish between roles. They also need to ensure the transitions between roles is clear. Symbolic prop and/or costume item can assist here.

### **Stylised Movement Sequence**

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.

#### **Classroom Links**

##### **Conventions**

- What conventions stood out to you as an audience member? How does the use of these conventions heighten the play's narrative?
- Consider what would have been different without the layering of these conventions, how would this have changed your understanding of the production and its message?
- Each actors played multiple characters, what did they do to change quickly between each character?
- What effect does the productions inclusion of these conventions have on the creation of dramatic meaning?
- How did actors convey a change in time and place?
- How did the designer and director change time and place?
- Did the use of the minimal set tell the story clearly enough?
- What other conventions could be included? How would this contribute to the dramatic meaning?



# Pre-Show Activities

## Initial Questions

- What does the title of the play make you think of?
- What excites you about seeing this production?
- Theatre of a Social Comment looks to comment on society and the decisions we make and provoke audience to consider or change their behaviour. Can you think of a play or movie that you have seen that has done this for you? What was the impact?
- Why do you think it's important for theatre to reflect and share stories based on real life events?
- Why is it important to create theatre that educates, challenges and empowers the audience?
- The production includes Chinese Opera, acrobatics and music. How do you think the production will seamlessly integrate these multiple styles/conventions?

## Identity / Culture

- Are you defined by how people perceive you?
- Are we destined to become a particular person based on our situation or environment?
- Can you successfully reinvent your identity or get away from your past?
- How do we hold on to our culture and identity away from home?

## Adversity

- How have you dealt with hardships that you have endured?
- What is the impact of support from others through difficult times?
- How do difficult situations impact relationships?

## Context

- The play is set in Australia after WW2, what do you know about this period of time?
- Where is Nauru? Why is this island well known?
- What do you know about Chinese refugees in Australia?
- What is your impression of the refugee experience?



## Read and Research

Read about this history of Nauru, from its settlement, the phosphate mining as well as the Japanese invasion.

- Dark History of Nauru <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/dark-history-nauru/>
- Japanese Atrocities on Nauru during the Pacific War: The murder of Australians, the massacre of lepers and the ethnocide of Nauruans <https://apjjf.org/-Yuki-Tanaka/3441/article.html>
- Indentured labourers and Nauru in the 1940s <https://redflag.org.au/article/indentured-labourers-and-nauru-1940s>

To gain a better understanding of Chinese Opera watch an excerpt from Fragrant Sacrifice – The Sacrifice of a Princess.

- Fragrant Sacrifice 帝女花 (cover) — Jeremy 赵宝琴 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEHkN8s6gIA>

Learn about the Chinese Civil War

- Chinese Civil War 1945–1949 <https://www.britannica.com/event/Chinese-Civil-War>

Brush up on your Aussie Slang

- Translating Aussie Slang <https://www.queensland.com/au/en/plan-your-holiday/editorial-and-news/translating-aussie-slang.html>

Epic Theatre is the predominate style used in Slow Boat. Use the resources below to find out more about this style and its origins.

- A Syllabus List & Definitions for the Conventions of Epic Theatre <http://www.dramaqueensland.org.au/resources>
- BRECHT Alienation Exercises <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNvPoETpX9Q>
- BRECHT Introduction <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksv4GnTR6l8>
- The Book Of Bertolt Brecht And His Theatrical Style (Epic Theatre) And The Related Theatrical Conventions [http://unit2drama2015.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/6/0/12609164/\\_epic\\_theatre\\_brecht\\_booklet.pdf](http://unit2drama2015.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/6/0/12609164/_epic_theatre_brecht_booklet.pdf) Brecht, interruptions and epic theatre <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/brecht-interruptions-and-epic-theatre>
- Epic Theatre and Brecht <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/3>



## Direct Address and the Narrator

*Slow Boat* is told as a play within a play. Because of this the characters often directly address the audience, narrate what is occurring and come in and out of retelling events. Lead students in a discussion about their understanding of direct address and narration as conventions. How are they different and where is there an overlap? Then use the following task to have students explore what shifts when we see a production that relies on narration and direct address.

1. Form groups of 3-4.
2. Have the group improvise an everyday scene. Ensure that the interactions convey the characters' relationship with each other.
3. Perform the scene.
4. Repeat the scene but have one of the characters have moments where they address the audience and provide insight into their thoughts and feelings. What has changed? How do you view or understand the characters and events differently than you did before?
5. Remove the other characters and have the narrator simply re-enact the scene by playing the other roles and narrating what occurred. What has changed in this version? What has been left out? What has been added?

Repeat the activity with a memory. They might choose something from a holiday, a special occasion with their family or primary school.

1. Have the students write down as many details of this memory as possible. Prompt them with ideas about the five senses as they write.
2. Choose students to share their memory with the class.
3. Using these memories as stimulus have students in small groups of 3-4 recreate the memory. Show these scenes.
4. 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?

Extension:

Ask students to repeat the activity and change the form/style of the scene. They might choose to present the scene in a more heightened manner, as a more serious scene or add theatre of a social comment conventions. After showing the scenes discuss what changed for the audience when the form / style was changed?



## Script Work

Read the opening scene (Scene Excerpt 1). Read this twice. In groups of four have students create this opening.

Encourage them to extend the stage directions adding their own take on the opening. Remind them that this is the opening of the production, they want it to be entertaining and captivating. Don't let them rush the opening, playing with extended movement, tempo and timing.

Show some to the class. Pick a group and workshop this with the class adding further movement techniques and adding stylised movement.

Afterwards have students write down answers to the following:

- What does the set look like?
- What do each of the characters look like?
- What do you notice about the dialogue used by each character? What does this convey to you about each character?
- Write down 5 words that you associate with each character.
- What do you think the play will be about?

## Physicalisation

Movement and physicality are large parts of the production. Consider using the following exercises to explore how different movement can create different characters.

Have students then walk around the space

- Leading with different body parts for example their knees, nose, chest, top of their head. This is making them aware of their own bodies and their centre of gravity. Ask them to consider what type of character would lead with that part of their body. Is it a shy character or someone who is in a hurry, are they trying to blend in or stand out etc. As they walk around the space encourage them to start creating a character. Add a non verbal reaction when they pass another student.
- Then experiment with the weight and distance of their walk. Walk forwards, backwards and sideways. Walk up high on tip toes then walk down low and walk at a medium level. Move with great big steps, stretching your legs and arms far away from each other, move with little steps, bringing arms and legs close to each other. Move through the room making curvy pathways as you walk or make curvy pathways in the air with your arms. Use your walking pathway to draw the letter 's', the letter 'o', a number '8'. Draw



straight pathways using straight movements or try a straight pathway backwards, a straight pathway with big steps sideways. Try a zigzag pathway with knees and elbows leading. Move forward and backward left and right then up and down. Draw big zigzags and little zigzags.

- Explore the difference between smooth and sharp movements. Move with smooth, continuous movements, never stopping, always flowing. Now try sharp movements, movements that move and stop, move and stop, sharp! Make a curvy shape, try a straight shape, a twisted shape, an angular shape, a big curvy shape, a little curvy shape at a high level etc.
- Then using all three exercises combine them to shape a character of various status, situation and role.
- Use these to revisit the script excerpt and shape more physicalised characters.

## Post-Show Activities

### Discussion Questions

- What do you believe was the key message of the play?
- How did the actors communicate changes in scene and action?
- 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 *Slow Boat*?
- How does the staging contribute to the production? Discuss the use of props, set and costumes.
- Why is this an important story to tell?
- How does *Slow Boat* question or make a comment on Australian society and the world? Consider the references to political movements, cultural values, refugees, war and power.
- How did the inclusion of Chinese Opera impact you as an audience member?
- Describe three moments in the performance where you felt strongly about a particular issue or ideal. Why was this the case?
- How did the actors transform between the multiple characters they played?
- The play deals with events that happened in the 1940s, why is it a relevant story for contemporary audiences?
- Consider the design style, how is this different from other productions you have seen?
- What is the impact of the relationship between the Company of Men?





## Key Moments

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 spoken to the other characters or direct address to the audience.
3. Add additional dialogue so the scene is complete.

**OR**

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. Have them consider this a gallery walk through a museum. Have them add a title to each of these freeze frames to direct dramatic focus.
3. 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.
4. 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.

## Timeline

Have students create a timeline of the key events and time periods from the play. Discuss the impact of the play spanning such a long time and traveling to multiple locations. How does this change our understanding of the characters and their journey?

## Character Map

Create a “map” of the main characters. 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 characters’ journey, the status shifts through the production and how their actions demonstrate their belief systems.



### Extension

The production explores perceptions of characters and how these can often be wrong. On your character map add your initial impression of each character, as well as the initial impression conveyed by other characters in the production. Does this shift during the production? If so, what causes this and is this for better or worse?

## Key Themes

Engage students in a discussion about the key themes and concepts explored throughout the production. Ask students which themes were most obvious and what their interpretation of them was. Link this to the manipulation of the dramatic elements and the dramatic meaning.

## Australian Influences

The production includes an Australian folk song that is performed in both Cantonese and English.

- Have you heard this song before?
- Why do you think it was included in the production?
- What was the impact on the audience?
- In *Slow Boat* the song was included in a performance to raise money. Why do you think they chose this song?

During the train ride the Company of Men meet a series of women who use Australian slang of the time. Read the excerpt from the scene below.

- WOMAN 1            God strewth, stone the Crows./Gunna be a big push.
- WOMAN 2            Sarvo's gunna be ding dong./Humdinger. Bonzer bewdy, cobber.
- WOMAN 3            Buckley's chance a big mob comes out woop woop. / Dimkum oil.
- WOMAN 4            Shikkered? Stonkered? No plonk. Rubbadubdub's shut. / Fair suck of the sav!
- When the other women stop: —*
- WOMAN 3            Could kill for a shandy.



- What slang do you understand / not understand?
- With the slang you don't understand, use the text around it to try and work out what the slang means.
- The play is told from the men's point of view. With this in mind, how do you think this changes the dialogue and how the scene is performed?
- The scene is performed in a vaudeville style, try performing it in a realism style. How would this change the text?
- Rewrite the scene not using any slang. How does this change your impression of the characters?

### **Status**

Explorations of status, and power permeate the narrative of *Slow Boat*. Use the below activity as a means of discussing how the actors might approach 'status' using their physicality. Encourage students to pay attention to how the actors compete for higher status when they watch the show. Discuss status with the students, asking them to define status.

- Using a scale of 1-10 scale, 10 being the most powerful person imaginable and 1 being the lowliest creature, have students walk around the room as you call out different numbers. They are to use spatial relationships, movement and gesture to embody that number. Work through 1 – 10 in order then call out the numbers at random.
- Have students then embody a random number between 1 – 10, with the corresponding status. How does this change their interactions with the other in the room? Encourage students to interact by using small gestures and movements rather than vocalising anything.
- Discuss with students when they have felt they have been at a 10, when they had complete power and authority in a situation or when they have felt at 1.
- Continue the activity by secretly giving two students a number from 1 – 10. Have them walk across the stage and interact with each other. Ask the audience to guess what number / the status that the actor is representing. Ask them to justify how they came to that conclusion.
- Discuss where status and shifts in status is evident in *Slow Boat*. Consider how this is in play between the company but also between everyone they meet. Ask students to discuss why the brotherhood has lower status than the rest of the characters throughout the production. What does that communicate to the audience?



- Have students work with one of the script excerpts, exploring the manipulation of status. Layer in the conventions of Epic Theatre to heighten this portrayal of status. Consider the use of didacticism, placards, physicalisation, exaggeration and direct address.

## Epic Theatre

Using the definitions of the conventions and the style have students create a table that compares Epic Theatre to Realism. Have them consider the development of characters, narrative, use of design elements, manipulations of the dramatic elements and creation of dramatic meaning.

Epic Theatre	Realism
Issue Driven	Character Driven
Minimalistic set which is often symbolic	Set is as close to real life as possible
Fluid time and place	Set time and place

Consider the following statement:

*“Brecht wanted his audience to think, compare, question and to see the implication of the play for their own world. His alienation techniques aimed to break the illusion to use devices of interruption, and to keep the emotions in check. However, the central characters of Brecht, when they are well played, can create a high degree of sympathy and identification. It is not cold acting but the interruption by the narrator or by the contrasting scene that sets the characters at a greater aesthetic distance. The goal in Epic Theatre is the better understanding of the actual world, with the hope of improving it”*

(p.171, Kernodle & Kernodle Invitation to the Theatre, 1978, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)

- How are the ideas conveyed in the statement above shown in *Slow Boat*?
- What is the difference between not feeling emotion and distancing emotion? How and when is emotion distanced in *Slow Boat*?
- If the goal is to ‘better understand the actual world’, what do you better understand about the world after seeing *Slow Boat*?
- How are the characters created so the audience could identify them but also sympathise with them?

## Alienation

Discuss the use of Alienation or the ‘V Effect’ in Epic Theatre. Define this with students and watch the videos included in the Read and Research section to gain a better understanding of how this conventions is used in Epic Theatre.



Then use the following exercise to practically explore ways to alienate the audience.

### One Minute Monologue

- Ask students to think of a memorable story that has happened to them recently (funny, eventful, embarrassing etc)
- Choose a volunteer to stand in front of the class and tell their story in first person.
- Ask the same volunteer to then tell the story in third person.
- Ask students to consider “What were the key differences between the stories?”
- Bring students attention to the lack of emotion, hand gestures, no feelings attached, no suspense in the second telling contrasting the emotion and animation in the first.
- This is a form of Alienation.

### Multiple Roles

Actors playing multiple roles is another convention of Epic Theatre used to alienate the audience. Consider how the actors changes their physicalisation and vocalisation to portray the different characters.

Besides the logistical reasons why else do you think the production uses multiple roles?

Use the table below to document the various characters and what the actors did to portray them.

Character	Vocal Characteristics	Movement Characteristics	Relationship	Status	How is this demonstrated?	Other Notes

### Stock Characters

Often Epic Theatre will use stock characters. This helps the audience identify these ‘types’ of people in their own lives and relate to them or understand them. However, because three dimensional characters aren’t shaped, it encourages the audience to look at the wider issues rather than the individual character themselves. In small groups have students create a tableau that shows a courtroom.

- When these are shown to the class ask the audience to identify the ‘characters’ that we would expect to see in this image, the judge, the lawyers, the victim, the defendant, the jury etc. Ask them to consider how



the actors have manipulated their body language, spatial relationships, and facial expressions to portray these stock characters?

- After seeing a few ask students to comment on the similarities between the groups. Do they start to notice a trend about how we portray these characters? Why is that? What assumptions are being made? Discuss how the actors aren't creating three dimensional characters but are 'demonstrating' a character type.
- Ask students to then recreate these images. However, this time, the judge has been bribed, the jury has been rigged and the witness terrified into lying. The accused is innocent. Or the accused is guilty but has a good lawyer and is not worried about being charged. The witness is telling the truth but no one believes them.
- Encourage students to move away from realistic images and create a 'demonstration' of these characters.

Engage students in a discussion about where stock characters and gestus was used in *Slow Boat*.

- Creating easily identifiable gestures and movements is the beginning to using gestus. Gestus is a convention in Epic Theatre that uses a combination of gesture, movement, stance and voice to create a socially recognisable character, attitude and status. Gestus draws on habits and customs which are demonstrated rather than realistically shown. Explore gestus through the following improvisations.
- In small groups devise improvisations of the scenarios below
  - a rock star being met from the 'plane by a group of reporters
  - a protest meeting for saving an ancient tree from being chopped down
  - bullying in the school playground.
- Present these scenes to the class unpacking the characters that were demonstrated and how the audience understood these.
- Challenge students to be able to swap character when the teachers clap. They need to pick up the performance and characterisation exactly where it was left off. This will encourage students to create a more easily identifiable demonstration rather than a realistic portrayal of the characters.
- Rework these scenes so there is a different dramatic meaning being communicated. For instance, if you made the rock star outrageously vain the first time and the reporters as a stereotypical grouping, try making the rock star shy and distressed by the lack of privacy, which should result in a still stereotypical grouping of reporters but ones who are putting over an even more extreme and unlikeable gest. Now try making one of the reporters into a sympathetic character. Debrief these scenes.



## Design Elements

*Slow Boat* is set in many different locations and the set design works to continually transform the space to transport the audience to these multiple locations. This is done both through the use of detailed backdrops and also repurposing simple props and using them in a stylistic way.

- How was the multiple Australian location captured in the set design?
- How was Chinese culture represented in the set design?
- Make specific mention of the dramatic elements, performance technologies used and key narrative plot points — eg. What aspects of symbol were found in the set design? How was the set used to enhance the emotions of the characters? How were the projections used to convey place?
- How was this set design realised?
- How did the actors interact with the set?
- Where was there symbolic or stylistic use of the set vs literal use?

## Shaping Theatre

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

Consider Anna Yen's comment that the playwright's job is, "To tell stories to help create a more aware and compassionate world. To help shine light on our common humanity. To engage the audience in deep conversation with themselves and each other."

In 3 minutes, brainstorm all the things that

- You want to shine a light on
- You think needs to be talked about more, in your community, in your school, in your country
- You think people need to be more aware of

After you have your brainstorm go through what you have written and highlight commonalities. Do you see any trends emerging? If not think about what stands out on the list?

Alternatively, swap your list with someone else and highlight key ideas that stand out to you from their list.



Use the key ideas to begin to consider a new piece of theatre that:

- Creates a shared understanding of the human experience
- Shares, celebrates, documents, empowers or informs audiences

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.

Workshop these.

You may then want to

- Write key dialogue that represents your idea
- Create a storyboard with moments of key action
- Continue to workshop these in the class to create a short scene

## Scene Excerpt 1

KONG SANG            Tomorrow is unknown — but today, let's celebrate!  
Welcome to all guests: US and Australian servicemen and  
women; kind Brisbane folk who've welcomed us wartime  
refugees; our new Bulimba friends —

AH FAAT                *[Off script to back of audience]* Hi Madeleine!

KONG SANG            All our distinguished guests: local councillor, business  
people, Chinese welfare club representatives — thank you  
for coming.

LOONG GOH            *[Off script]* Welcome, welcome.

KONG SANG            And last but not least, I want to make a special shout out to  
our kin, the “Haaahng syühñ lóuh (行船佬), boat walking  
blokes” from Guangzhou, South East China where most  
of us are from. We're the hard-working Chinese men  
evacuated from Nauru and Ocean Island together. A five  
hundred and eighty strong brotherhood.

LIN GIT                 *[Off script, scoffs]* Brotherhood.





- KONG SANG *[Laughs]* The scene you just saw was the Civil War in China between the Communists and the Guomindang, that's the Nationalists ... and then the 1937 invasion by the Japanese, resulting in a truce to resist Japanese occupation.
- Today, we want to tell you our story ... of leaving the occupation to earn money for our families. And some of our adventures along the way —
- LIN GIT *[Off script, grunts]* Ngghh.
- KONG SANG — including how we came to be living here on Bulimba, building ships for the Allies. Today we celebrate how we all survived, through building brotherhood.
- This is also a farewell. Most of us hàahng syùhn lóuh, boat walking blokes, will soon have to return to China, whether we want to or not. Only a few lucky ones will be staying in Australia — those who've found a job, have sponsors, or own a business.
- LOONG GOH *[Off script]* Dear kind business owners, if you are looking for an experienced boilermaker, welder, allow me to present myself for consideration. They say I'm not bad at all. *[Jokes]* And I speak English good.
- WAI TSAI *[Off script]* Yes everyone, Big Brother is good.
- KONG SANG *[To LOONG GOH, Wai Tsai]* Dōjeh. Dōjeh.(謝謝)*[To Audience]* Dōjeh daaihgā (謝大家), thanks everyone, for buying tickets today. The money goes to the War Relief Fund in China to help the millions who need food, medicine and shelter.
- Allow me to introduce my Brothers. Loong Goh, we all know him as Big Brother, a man who's tirelessly helped us survive tough times.
- LOONG GOH *[Off script]* Please donate more money for the survivors of war in China against the Japanese.



- KONG SANG            This is Ah Faat, our Chef. Ah Faat is a philosopher, an educated, humble, wise man and a gifted musician —
- AH FAAT                *[Bows to audience]* I've prepared some tasty snacks —
- LOONG GOH            *[Off script]* — which you can buy at interval. Proceeds go to our fundraiser.
- KONG SANG            This is Wai Tsai. We call him Strongman.

### **Classroom Links**

#### **Performance**

- In groups read the scene aloud.
- Try out extreme possibilities as actors might do during rehearsals such as one actor not moving and one continually moving, using extremes of volumes or emotions etc.
- 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?
- Think about what the stage directions mean, for example how do you show off-script?
- This scene sets up the relationships for the rest of the play. Consider how to best convey these through movement and dialogue.
- Layer in the identified conventions. How does this change the meaning of the scene?
- Play the scene using a heightened or vaudeville style vs Realism conventions. How does this change the meaning?



## Scene Excerpt 2

KONG SANG            On Nauru, We rose before dawn and worked in the baking sun all day, it was tough and dangerous.

*As KONG SANG introduces, the men wake and start a work chant one voice at a time, with KONG SANG joining in last. (See Appendix 1)*

*The men perform an ensemble, synchronised, repetitive physical and vocal scene of the toil on Nauru. Wielding hammers. Breaking up rocks. Hefting baskets on shoulder poles. Navigating gang-planks.*

*They stop only to mop their brows and strip off their tops.*

*When the baskets are lined up, they watch as LIN GIT climbs high above them using a tissu — a long swathe of material used in circus.*

*The men pass baskets up to LIN GIT who tosses the contents down the hold. On the last basket, LIN GIT, scratches his leg, wobbles and falls headfirst into the ship's hold, screaming.*

*SFX — Clanking objects falling, then silence*

KONG SANG            What's that?

LOONG GOH            Someone's fallen down the hold!



### Classroom Links

#### Directing

Imagine you are directing *Slow Boat* and use the script excerpt to create a vision for the production. Consider:

- The conventions used in the production
- What message / idea you want to convey to the audience and how you will achieve this.
- The conventions and styles you would use to convey this piece. What are the differences in having actors play multiple characters? How would the scene be different if using realism conventions versus Epic Theatre or movement conventions? Experiment with a range of conventions and styles.
- 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?

## Meet the Writer

### Interview with Anna Yen

#### How do you begin the playwriting process?

It varies, but in a couple of cases, a central story appears in my life at a particular time, that I feel compelled to follow up. I start digging. This leads me to uncover many more related stories. Questions that awaken my curiosity arise about the central character/s' life, which also resonate with my own life at the time.

#### What inspired you to write this play? Why this play? Why now?

By chance, about 10 years ago, I discovered compelling details about my father's life that I did not previously know. Growing up, I knew my father had been on Nauru during World War 2, but I didn't know why or how. I did ask him once when I was about 14 what Nauru was like. All he said was 'the boats were cool'. I also knew that he was in Brisbane after the war. The only things I remember him saying about his time in Brisbane was that it was 'hard times' and that he 'didn't have two bob rub together'. He told my sister just before he passed away that the first place he worked when he arrived in Australia was 'Hedges Creek' in the Northern Territory (or at least that is what it sounded like in his strongly-accented English). I googled 'Hedges Creek' — nothing. Serendipitously, I was



given a copy of the book “Big White Lie” by John Fitzgerald. In it there was a tiny reference to a group of 580 Chinese indentured labourers who’d been working on Nauru, evacuated to Brisbane during WW2, and then sent to mine wolfram for the Allie’s war effort in Central Australia. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I dug into this story. It turns out my father was one of these men who were later invited back to Brisbane by General Douglas Macarthur to build boats for his Pacific Campaign. I was engrossed.

I felt compelled to tell this largely unknown story of the contribution that these ordinary Chinese men unexpectedly made to the Allies during World War 2 and the circumstances that led these wartime refugees to leave their home in China in the first place, to work on Nauru.

I think that storytelling can help build bridges of understanding between people. Historically, the first major piece of legislation that the newly-formed Australian Government passed was the Immigration Restriction Act, aka the ‘White Australia Act’. Although repealed, there are still resonances of it today. I often hear divisive talk about ‘the Chinese’. When I ask what they mean, people generally acknowledge that they’re talking about the Chinese government’s actions and not about every single Chinese-heritage person. I feel the need to contribute to telling stories which help all Australians recognise our common humanity.

Also, many years ago, I wrote and performed *Chinese Take Away* a one woman show about my grandmother, mother and myself, in which my father, without knowing this part of his story at the time, was portrayed in an unflattering light. Having discovered more about my father’s life and the challenges he faced, *Slow Boat* is an opportunity for me to honour him, and to offer some public understanding on the complexities of his life and times. All the characters in *Slow Boat* are fictitious, but inspired by true events and people.

### **What do you see is at the heart of *Slow Boat*?**

The question at the heart of *Slow Boat* is: How can we survive and thrive when so much is out of our control? E.g. How can we stay afloat when caught in the rip of war? In looking for answers to this question, the power of the arts, community, culture, resilience and forgiveness are explored.

### **The characters’ past experiences are vital to the narrative. How did you create a world where the audience has that sense of what came before without just retelling history?**

One of the exciting discoveries I made when researching this group of real-life men is that: they performed for each other on their one night a week off in Nauru; built a theatre for themselves out of scrap materials in Central Australia; and held concerts at the Chinese Camp on<sup>1</sup> Bulimba in Brisbane. I saw photos

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1. Bulimba was considered an island in those days, hence the use of “on” Bulimba rather than “in”.



of the theatre in Hatches Creek, and of performers backstage on Bulimba. So I was inspired to set *Slow Boat* at a fictitious, celebratory end of the war concert on Bulimba where the five main characters perform their story for the rest of their brothers and invited local guests. In the ‘show within a show’ structure of *Slow Boat*, each scene is intended as a performed ‘story’, a curated, creative version of events. But barely hidden conflicts within the group of men threaten to derail the concert, and truths come tumbling out. The simmering tensions between the characters, reflects the tensions in their homeland, and also in our world today. It helps keep the ‘history’ present, the dramatic tension alive and the stakes high.

**The play includes multiple styles and forms. Did you start out wanting to include specific styles or forms or did it come about organically?**

I wanted to include specific styles and forms to highlight the different locations of each part of the characters’ stories, and to include the artforms that the men themselves would have been influenced by in these locations and specific times. For example the real-life men improvised Cantonese Opera (which integrates heightened acting, gestural movement, acrobatics, song, music, costumes) for each other in their Nauru concerts, so this form is used in the characters’ Nauru based scenes. On Bulimba, working for the US, the men would have been influenced by US film and music of the era, which *Slow Boat* incorporates in these scenes. And vaudeville is used to reflect a popular artform in Australia during that time, and influences the way the characters perform the stories when they land in Australia and travel to the desert.

**The play spans multiple times and locations. Why was it important to you to show all of these times and places?**

The journey of the real-life men winds its way from 1930s China, through the start of World War 2 Nauru in the Pacific, to wartime in Australia, and then to an unknown future. It’s important to reflect the way the men were tossed here and there by the volatile and unpredictable currents of war.

**There are so many historical references throughout. How much research did you do when writing the script?**

A lot. Research began in 2012 and hasn’t ended. There is always more to discover. Even now, more stories and details are emerging.

**The themes do explore incredibly difficult and challenging terrain at times. How do you successfully navigate such terrain without being superficial?**

I think that illuminating a strong central dramatic question at the heart *Slow Boat*, which is a universal human question, helps to deepen this play. As a writer, shaping the stories through this lens i.e. of helping the audience ask themselves: “how can I stay afloat during turbulent times?” and allowing the various answers to emerge through the characters’ journeys, are part of its success.



**The play has a lot of movement sequences. When you write, do you imagine how these look or is it just the general feel you are going for?**

Sometimes I imagine specific movement sequences, and sometimes there is a general 'feel' written into early drafts of the script and the details emerge during the creative development periods. Subsequent drafts of the script are enriched by the discoveries of creative developments. I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the performers and creatives who have contributed to *Slow Boat's* creative developments and helped shaped the show.

**What do you see as being the role of playwrights in our society?**

To tell stories to help create a more aware and compassionate world. To help shine light on our common humanity. To engage the audience in deep conversation with themselves and each other.

## Elements of Drama Discussion

<p><b>ROLE RELATIONSHIP CHARACTER</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose a specific moment of dramatic action that exemplifies one of the characters. How? Why? What dramatic meaning did this communicate to the audience?</li> <li>• How would you describe each character? How are their characters portrayed through the voice and movement of the actors?</li> <li>• How do the 'brothers' relationship change over the course of the play?</li> <li>• How did the use of direct address impact your understanding of the characters and their relationships?</li> <li>• What are the characters key motivations for enduring such horrible conditions?</li> <li>• Who has the higher status throughout the production? When does this power balance shift?</li> <li>• The 'brothers' all come from very different backgrounds. What unites them?</li> <li>• Think about the start of the play, how did this set up the relationships between each of the characters?</li> <li>• How were the relationships shown through body language and movement?</li> </ul>
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<b>TENSION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What were some of the key examples of tension during the production?</li><li>• How did the tension engage you?</li><li>• What were you invested in?</li><li>• How did the changes in time and place impact the development of tension?</li><li>• Consider the use of heightened emotions and performance. How did this create or break the tension?</li><li>• Describe moments of tension of task.</li><li>• Tension of relationship is present throughout the play. What are the most obvious examples of this? Why does the tension develop?</li></ul>
<b>FOCUS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Think about the moments onstage where dramatic focus shifted. What happened onstage to facilitate this change?</li><li>• How were the design elements used to shift the dramatic focus?</li></ul>
<b>TIME</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When is the play set?</li><li>• Consider the intertextual references, how is time relevant in relation to these?</li><li>• The play is told using flashbacks, how does this impact audience?</li></ul>
<b>PLACE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The play is set in multiple locations. How was this communicated onstage?</li><li>• How were the different places differentiated onstage?</li><li>• How were design elements manipulated to communicate the different places?</li></ul>
<b>SPACE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Analyse the different ways that the stage was used throughout the production.</li><li>• How did the use of the space help to convey the different settings and locations?</li><li>• How did the lighting enhance the different use of the space?</li></ul>





<b>MOVEMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider how relationships in the play are communicated through body language and movement. Consider how you can show a relationship without “explaining” it.</li><li>• Was the movement symbolic in anyway?</li><li>• How was movement contrasted by stillness? What effect did this have?</li><li>• How was stylistic movement used to show the passage of time?</li><li>• Think of a movement where stylised movement was used effectively. Why was this the case?</li><li>• How did the actors adapt their movement to portray multiple characters?</li><li>• Consider the use of acrobatics, how did this use of movement add to the creation of mood?</li></ul>
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How were words used to create power?</li><li>• What was the subtext behind some of the memorable lines?</li><li>• How was language used to shape character? Consider the different ways each character speaks / uses language.</li><li>• Think about the use of Australian slang. How much of this did you understand?</li><li>• Why do you think there was the repetition of language, especially Australian slang throughout the train scene?</li><li>• How did the use of Cantonese impact you as an audience member?</li></ul>
<b>CONTRAST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Describe two contrasting moments in <i>Slow Boat</i>. How were these moments created through sound, lighting, voice and movement?</li><li>• Analyse the ways in which contrast is used throughout the play in relation to the range of moods.</li><li>• The brothers have contrasting opinions on life, opportunity and class. Examine how this is communicated and how it impacts their relationship.</li></ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What other elements of contrast did you see throughout the production?</li><li>• Contrast the characters at the start of the play to end. How have their lives changed?</li><li>• How did the actors change their voice and movement to portray a range of contrasting characters?</li></ul>
<b>MOOD</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 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.</li><li>• Consider how they would've been different if different artistic choices were made, such as alternative lighting or sound.</li><li>• How would you describe the mood when they are being evacuated? How was this mood created?</li><li>• Consider the mood at the start of the play. How does this contrast with the end of the play?</li><li>• Consider a moment of intense mood. What performance techniques and skills of the actors were utilised to make you feel this way?</li><li>• How did the use of direct address shift the mood?</li><li>• Why do you think opera, acrobatics and music was used throughout? How did these conventions shift the mood?</li></ul>
<b>SYMBOL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discuss the impact of the symbolic nature of the set. How did this impact your understanding of the production and the narrative?</li><li>• Consider the items that each character unpacks and takes with them when they evacuate. How are these symbolic? What do they say about each of the characters?</li><li>• Consider the title of the play. What do you think it means and how does it change your understanding of the play?</li></ul>



## Extended Response

### Task 1

“Ah Faat: Stories bring comfort. They help us understand our own lives better”

After viewing *Slow Boat*, evaluate the effectiveness of the production by analysing the **on-stage dramatic action** and how the use of the dramatic languages **created dramatic meaning**. In your response consider how the play uses Contemporary Theatre conventions to facilitate the character’s journey. Support your statements with perceptive and thorough evaluation and supporting evidence from key moments in the production. Use appropriate drama terminology throughout your essay.

### Task 2

“I think that storytelling can help build bridges of understanding between people.” Anna Yen

In response to the above quote, you are to write an analytical essay evaluating how the production works to share the stories of Chinese refugees and immigrants. You are to evaluate the success of the production to share understandings of the human experience and how it created dramatic meaning through the manipulation of the two elements of drama and one key convention.

### Task 3

“I think that illuminating a strong central dramatic question at the heart *Slow Boat* ... helping the audience ask themselves: “how can I stay afloat during turbulent times?” and allowing the various answers to emerge through the characters’ journeys, are part of its success.” Anna Yen

In response to the above quote, you are to write an analytical essay evaluating how the audience has been positioned to view the journey of the Company of Men. You are to evaluate the success of the production and how it created dramatic meaning through the manipulation of the elements of character, symbol, tension and mood. You may want to consider the use of the conventions in your response.