

Overview of Today We're Alive by Linden Wilkinson.

These notes have been taken from the Education Resources found at the back of the play.

Plot outline of the play

The Myall Creek Massacre of 1838 was a significant event in Australia's history. For the first time, the white perpetrators of the systematic murder of Aboriginal people were tried and convicted of their crimes. *Today We're Alive* is a verbatim play about the efforts, over 100 years later, to create a fitting memorial to this event, which led to a powerful experience of reconciliation and healing for the descendents of the victims and murderers alike.

How is this play different to other Indigenous plays used in classrooms?

Typically, Indigenous plays used in classrooms are written by Indigenous Australians and predominantly feature Indigenous Australian characters, perspectives and voices. *Today We're Alive* is written by Linden Wilkinson, a non-Indigenous Australian, and uses Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal voices to tell the shared history of the Myall Creek massacre and the building of the memorial.

The strictly Verbatim form places the emphasis on the participants as the voices of authority and the playwright as the channel through which these stories are told. In the play, two non-Aboriginal actors become six different characters, while the two Aboriginal actors remain consistent throughout. The demand for six different characters reflects the different roles non-Aboriginal people have in this story, from Committee members to perpetrator descendents, the different ways people have come to accept responsibility and translate that responsibility into action. The two Aboriginal characters reflect the persistent demands for recognition and accountability found in the field.

Verbatim Theatre in this highly politically and emotionally charged context created a net of safety around the text; the words that are said and the spaces between them might have been manipulated by a writer through edited transcripts but they have not been invented. They deliver the truth as understood by involved others; the voices in the play inform, they do not dictate. Without anyone mentioning, racism, it, like our true history, becomes the elephant in the room.

Workshop Activities

1. **Focus:** Aim of the workshop activities

The aim of the workshop is for students to deconstruct Indigenous stereotypes, how they are created and how they can be changed. The second half of the workshop focuses on the Verbatim Theatre form, in particular, how the dialogue is written with room for subtext and intentions to be communicated.

2. **Focus:** How stereotypes are created and can be changed

Part One:

Time: 20 minutes

A definition of a stereotype is discussed with the group. Students watch the video of Laney speaking about an experience of racism. They then are asked to lie on the floor, close their eyes, and listen to the video of Laney again - this time visualizing her story. Following the video their reactions/thoughts/feelings about Laney's experience and the boy are discussed.

Students break up in to groups of 4. In these groups they create three frozen images of where the boy who was racist towards Laney would have acquired his stereotypical perception of Indigenous Australians. Students are encouraged to be animate and inanimate objects. Once the students are up and working, ask them to come up with a caption for each freeze frame. This is a sentence that tells the audience what is happening in the scene. Groups are also asked to designate the person who says the caption for each scene. The caption is said once the image has been frozen in front of the audience. The groups are also asked to choose where they would like their audience to stand/sit to watch their freeze frames for maximum impact.

Students perform these freeze frames using the eyes open/eyes closed convention. Once they have been performed, as a class, students discuss whether these freeze frames are true representations of how stereotypes are passed on and whether there were any that were missed.

Part Two:

Time: 20 minutes

Students in the same group create a realism scene of a moment where the boy in Laney's story could have his perception of Indigenous Australians changed. Students will first need to decide at what age in his life the event takes place.

Students perform these scenes and then discuss whether this moment was a 'big enough' moment to change his perception. Or whether it is just one moment or a culmination of many.

Linden to discuss how the people in *Today We're Alive* had their perceptions changed.

3. **Focus:** Verbatim Theatre

Time: 3 minutes

Discuss with students the Verbatim theatre form and the inclusion of ums, ahs, etc. and why they are important to the play and the story. (This information can be found in the Education Resources section at the back of the play.)

4. **Focus:** Patrick's speech – voices in the head and showing character

Time: 20 minutes

Together as a class students listen to Patrick's speech. One student is chosen to read Patrick's words and one student is chosen to read the nuances and stage directions such as [...], um, ah, [tears] etc. Students are divided up into pairs. Students decide who Patrick is and what type of person he is as the script gives no indication of this. One person in the pair is Patrick and together they must decide on vocal dynamics (pitch, pace, pause, volume, tone, emphasis), facial expressions and body language used in the delivery of the speech. Once this has been decided students are to then start thinking about the use of [...] And the other nuances and stage directions in the speech. The person not playing Patrick will now fill in those moments by speaking Patrick's inner monologue and saying what he is thinking in that moment. The purpose of this is to reveal more information about Patrick's character.

Two-three of these performances are presented to the class. (Time permitting) Students are to then guess what type of person Patrick is and how they knew this. The idea of stereotypes existing everywhere in society not just towards different cultures or races is discussed. The participants discuss how they unconsciously created a stereotype of Patrick.

5. **Focus:** Jayson and Peggy's exchange. How can character intention be portrayed?

Time: 20 minutes

Read the exchange between Jayson and Peggy. Tell students what Jayson's intention is and what Peggy's intention is. (Jayson wants Peggy to take responsibility for her original intention to build the memorial and Peggy wants to feel good about what she has done.) What Jayson wants Peggy to *feel* and what Peggy wants Jayson to *feel* can be discussed.

Students remain in pairs – although can find a different partner this time. Together they are to create the exchange between the two roles. Students are to think about space and proximity, eye contact and body language to show intention. Students must also decide when Peggy leaves and when she leaves, does she come back? And her leaving and possible return means. Students are also encouraged to think about the power of silence and the meaning found in silence.

A few pairs perform their scenes. How intention was communicated is analysed. What made Peggy change is also discussed.

Further analysis of the major themes, ideas, Elements of Drama, the Verbatim form, as well as lesson plans, can be found in the Education Resource at the back of *Today We're Alive*.

Wilkinson, L. (2014) *Today We're Alive*. Brisbane: Playlab.

Script Excerpt

Patrick's Speech

Page. 28-29

Patrick: February and that's the first meeting that I went up to. And I had one of the most *um...* interesting *um...* spiritual experiences of my life. We were having a ceremony in the memorial hall itself. And it had been sort of grey and overcast all day but there had been absolutely no rain whatsoever. And they started *um* they started *ah* praying and they're very good the way they pray in terms of Byami, *um* it's a very inclusive sort of ceremony *um* and it's *um* and they had, I think, a couple of children, a couple of Aboriginal children, I think, lighting these candles and *um* the moment these children lit these candles as part of the prayer, it absolutely started bucketing down out of the heavens, absolutely bucketing down and you couldn't hear people over the noise in the roof. And *um* I was absolutely staggered and *um* every time I tell this story I get emotional like I am now. *Um* I was sitting there thinking: this is absolutely amazing. And I said: the test is going to be what happens when they blow these candles out. And they finished this prayer (*laughs*) as loudly as they could, given the noise of the rain on the roof – and then sure enough when they finished the prayer, they then blew the candles out and literally within ten to fifteen seconds, that rain stopped completely. And I walked outside and I was talking to one of the Aboriginal women Elders and I said to her: how amazing was that?! With the rain, while those candles were alight... And *um* she said to me, she said: that was just the spirit ancestors weeping tears of joy that something is finally going to be done about this. And *um* that certainly stuck with me. It's now what? Fourteen years ago, I remember those words perfectly. And I've a lousy memory (*tears*). So that was fantastic.

Possible edits points for the exercise:

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Exchange between Jayson and Peggy.

Page 23.

Peggy: I was just at home and I really needed to – do a degree. At the end of my degree I did a unit on visual design. And I decided to design a memorial. I wanted to do some design around the Myall Creek massacre. So I thought I'll go down there to where stockyards are and get a feel of the place. Anyway I just climbed the fence and this bull charged me and I thought: right, that's it. So finally I got on to some universities to find out what sort of memorials existed for Aboriginal massacres, and I could find nothing. I could find lumps of granite for soldiers that had died and I could find orange trees in the street, in fact the memorial hall at Myall Creek is our memorial for the soldiers, who had died in World War 1. So here I am surrounded by memorials to dead white men but nothing to Aboriginal people. So then I went to Moree and approached a few Aboriginal people and the Lands Council, and I said: you know, what about putting a memorial up. And they said oh, the Council has tried that, didn't work. Maybe you should talk to the Inverell people, it's nearer them. So I went over there and it was like: no, it's not our place, it's not our place.

Jayson: There's people still into denial. That these things happened.

Peggy: And I thought I can't get anywhere with this. I don't know if I have the energy, the resources, the time, I don't know if I should be doing it, I'm not Aboriginal and whether it's my place to be doing this – so I left it.

Jayson: Everyone was nice and social, politically correct.

Peggy: Yes.

Jayson: Polite.

Peggy: Always.

Jayson: They're doing stuff with yas. But in their absence you're glad to get away from those eyes. Eh? Those eyes – watching. Know what I mean?