VCE Theatre Studies
Advice for teachers 2019–2024

Interview on the topic of Dramaturgy

The following is an interview with Jane Miller, writer of *The Yellow Wave* – a play on the 2017 VCE Theatre Studies Unit 3 Playlist. Some production notes are also included to provide context. The process of creating the play, including the dramaturgical process, is explored in the interview.

*The Yellow Wave* was developed from an original 19th-century novel by Kenneth Mackay, through a collaborative process between the actors, writer and director.

The following information was included in the production notes written by Jane Miller.

Mackay’s novel is significant in its own right as an early Australian example of ‘invasion fiction’. One of the defining features of invasion fiction is a narrative that articulates a fear of attack by a foreign or alien power. This genre was established in the 19th century and remained prevalent up to the First World War. *The Yellow Wave* has clear associations with the term ‘the Yellow Peril’ which was coined in the 19th century as propaganda to characterise the perceived threat to European countries by the economic and military growth of China and Japan.

The adapted script and production maintain a surface fidelity to the events of Mackay’s book and use many of the tropes associated with the romantic style and epic scale of a story of this kind.

As a theatrical production, *The Yellow Wave* does not overtly comment within the play text on the relevance of its themes to Australian society of today. However, the framing, dramaturgy and performance style of the production create a subtext that draws parallels and connections, with an intent to stimulate questions, discussion and analyses about issues such as racism, xenophobia and stereotypes in relation to cultural identity.

Critical to the exploration of the stereotypes presented within the production is the decision to feature two Asian-Australian actors playing all of the roles within the show regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. Neither actor changes costume for the duration of the show, despite transforming into different characters continuously, nor do they use any props. The production relies exclusively on the performers using their physicality, vocal and performative skills as the foundation of their different characterisations.

The production also uses a narrator as a means by which to fill in the story elements as the narrative shifts across years and continents. The narrator addresses the audience directly, acting as a guide through the events and changes of character. However, the fundamental premise of the production is two actors playing every role without leaving the performance space at any point. The script and the role of the narrator play a technical and enabling role in facilitating this.

It is not surprising then that the performance style of *The Yellow Wave* is neither naturalistic nor does it attempt realism. The style is explicitly presentational and the production demonstrates an awareness that it exists before an audience. The style has elements of *commedia dell’ arte* and *absurdist* theatre but does not conform exclusively to the conventions of either. The show also owes much to the traditions of storytelling and clowning. There is a considered broadness to the comedy and a heightened, almost melodramatic, aspect that supports and deliberately undermines the epic quality of the performances and production. Again, this enables the text to be free of overt verbal commentary. The narrative and performances reference an audience’s knowledge of archetypes in epic film and theatre and disrupts this familiarity. The production is precise and highly detailed but has a meta-theatrical element in the way it is presented as loose and improvisational.

*The Yellow Wave* uses minimal lighting states, set and sound design, two single props and a one set of costumes. These deliberate stylistic choices demonstrate an application of stagecraft that uses the presence of the performers in the space to suggest location, context, character and sound. The only props, a gong and a novel, bookend the performance and set a structure of a narrator sharing the epic story of a forgotten Australian novel that is enacted by two performers. The performers, with minimal assistance, generate the fabric of what occurs in the, if not empty, certainly minimalist space.

The cast referred to in this interview are the actors Keith Brockett, John Marc Desengano and Andrea McCannon. The director referred to is Beng Oh.

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*Tell me a little bit about The Yellow Wave, where it began?*

Beng found the book about seven years ago and had done a development of the work. Together with a group of actors and another writer, he tried to think about how they could bring it to the stage. They had mixed results and they just kind of left it. And then about four years ago, Beng thought of another way of using two actors – John and Keith. They basically started meeting just the three of them and taking the dialogue parts straight from the book and developing structures around that, and characterisations, with them playing every role. As they continued to work on that they felt that it had some kind of potential so they asked me to come into the room because they thought they needed a writer.

*In terms of your background, what was it about you that Beng Oh thought would be particularly useful in this project?*

Because we are regular collaborators, we work very well together in the rehearsal room. He knew that I would be open to the fact that I wouldn’t be coming into the room as a writer thinking this is my vision for it, that it would be a collective vision but having its origins very much in the work that the three of them had already done. I think he knew that I wouldn’t come in wanting to impose any particular kind of agenda on it. And also because he and I have worked together he knew that I have a sense of comedy, and they were definitely taking a satirical line on this with the characterisations. Largely I think we trust each other’s sense and aesthetic. He knew that I could come into this group who had been working together and fit in as a collaborator with them.

*So when you use the word collaborator what do you mean by that term in this context?*

I think of collaboration in terms of working together. He sent me the dialogue he’d lifted from the novel and I started shaping it. It was huge, the novel is four separate (what the author calls) ‘books’. It’s a huge 400-page novel. There was masses of dialogue. Book one contained about 60 pages of dialogue, which was just too much. So I just started cutting it and shaping it down. When I talk about collaboration, it was literally about me sitting in the rehearsal room, watching what they’d done and working out how to shape that, and what elements were needed.

*So how does that work? Do you write something and then give it back to them?*

It was very much an interactive process. I would bring in some pages, they would go through it on the floor and then I would take it back and edit it or sharpen it up, take things out or put things in. Then we would repeat this process, they would have input. So much of what is in *The Yellow Wave* had improvisations that they would put in. Even on the page, unlike most scripts, the performance and the whole dramaturgy of the production is in the fabric of the show. You can’t just look at one piece of it and say ‘There’s *The Yellow Wave’* because looking at it in isolation doesn’t really give a sense of what the whole show is. All of the theatrical elements are so important. Probably the biggest contribution that I made in terms of the collaboration was the character of the narrator. We threw this around a bit, the idea of the narrator and how we would tie it together. My fear was that the story was so complicated and so huge that people would just get lost, and how we would cut bits out of the narrative and how we would keep the through line. So we came up with the idea of the narrator. I wrote the narrator from start to finish. That character was totally original. Then we got Andrea, who plays the narrator and she worked with what I’d written. That’s the part we reworked least.

*When you say that the dramaturgy process was essential, can you talk that through?*

It is an interesting piece dramaturgically. So much of the depth of it dramaturgically is in the whole of it rather than just the script. Mostly when you think traditionally of dramaturgy you think perhaps of a dramaturg looking at a script and making changes, but I don’t think that process would have worked for this. It was the fact that we were all sitting in a rehearsal room together, all trying out parts of it and seeing what worked. It was a more active form of dramaturgy I think. So much of the show is in the cartoonishness of the performances and how Beng directed it. And so I was writing to that, which I’ve not done before, not so much. Normally you just write, but I was writing very much in the sweet spot of what the boys were doing. If something worked on the floor, I would give that more material.

*When you define dramaturgy in the context of this production, what are the features of the dramaturgical process that you had to bring in?*

For me, it was about the structure and the performance style, because that impacted on the writing. It was certainly about the casting because of the way it’s cast. The content deals with issues of race and cultural identity, and the composition of that cast is absolutely essential to the text. Standing alone, the text reads as a racist, didactic adaptation of a novel. But I had much more freedom being able to do that because I knew that we had two Australian-Asian actors playing every role. So I knew that in theory, in the performance and the way that Beng had directed the show and the way they were performing the show, that my text was fitting in more like a jigsaw to this already formed structure and world. All of that impacted on the way that I wrote. For example, I added this thing from the novel where every time someone mentions someone who’s Chinese they would say ‘Oh Chinese’ but we made that a feature. Whenever they would mention someone who was Asian or Chinese, they would mention it about four times, and so we sent that up. We could only send that up because of the cast we had, because of the director we had. Because we were working with a diverse cast and director.

*How much of the process meant contextualising, looking at when the book was written, looking at the time now?*

A lot of it, but we made a really firm decision at the beginning that we wouldn’t express in the text any judgement of the book. We all judged the book, but we didn’t want to have a cynical narrator who comes on and says ‘Look at this terrible book’. We wanted to present the show with an enthusiasm for this book and let the audience make the decisions based on the frame. And that was a very conscious decision. We removed anything really that judged the book or the characters. There are a couple of times where the narrator judges Heather a little bit but that is largely because Heather as a character is quite ineffectual. But even though we all acknowledged that racism, fear and xenophobia run a very strong current through the book, we made the decision not to prejudge that for the audience.

*So all of those things, xenophobia, fear, that ran through the time when the book was written, how much of that did you see being relevant in that you were performing it today?*

Beng was trying to get this show up in one form or another for a number of years, and in a way it’s unfortunately been the right time. I think it’s never been more relevant. The fear of the other has really come up again in the conversation around asylum seekers, but we didn’t want to draw those parallels overtly in the text. We thought it already did that, the show just does that.

*So dramaturgically you were aware of where it had come from, you were aware of all the issues that were going to be presented and dramaturgically you made the conscious decision not to deliberately …*

…explicitly do it, but the fact that we have two Asian actors and an Asian director presenting this show, otherwise I would not be comfortable presenting this show. For example, I had a real reluctance to represent this show. It would not be appropriate, when we were publicising the show, to have me as the face of the show. It was always Beng and the two male actors who did that because in my opinion it is very inappropriate for a white female writer to come along and say ‘Here’s this story’. For me, that undoes all the dramaturgical decision we’d made. I wrote it but it’s very much driven by the fact that we have a diverse cast.

*So you were bringing your skill set as a writer rather than as a female writer or a middle-aged white writer or whatever … you wrote what was presented in the rehearsal room?*

With the narrator I did do that, but most of it was generated by collective decisions we’d made. Even though I wrote the narrator from start to finish I was influenced by all the work we were doing and the style of the show.

*The choice to bring in a narrator, you talked about that as being a thread for the story, is that a device you’d used before?*

No. We tossed it around, we really agonised about it. We chose deliberately not to have a man and then we really agonised over the ethnicity of the narrator and honestly there is nothing in that narrator that suggests that it couldn’t be a non-white actor as well. We just knew that we wanted it to be a woman. We thought that the point the show is making would be undone by having a white male telling the story. But then in a sense that was completely undone anyway because the way the show is played out, the two actors in a sense control the show and not the narrator. The way that Andrea, the two boys and Beng have framed that, is that she keeps them on track but they’re telling the story, she’s not telling the story.

*Is there any historical framework from which that style of narration comes?*

We very much framed it as if they were doing a Sovereign Hill type of tour. The sense of it in a meta-theatrical sense is that they are performers in some sort of a historical situation. The narrator comes in and greets the audience, she breaks the fourth wall, she has a badge that says ‘narrator’. It’s shown in her dress and the way that they’re all dressed. Beng didn’t want it to become a series of character changes by costume, so they’re dressed in that oldie-worldly kind of way to give the impression that it’s some kind of Yellow Wave theme park or tour and you are there to have the colonial experience. It’s framed as if you are on a trip back in time to historical Queensland.

*How long was the journey from you coming on board until Andrea came on board?*

I came on board in April of 2015, and we had our first production in November, so around six or so months. Andrea came on board in the last four months. For the first couple of months I sat and watched the boys and Beng work, bringing bits and pieces in. Then we got into the Poppyseed Festival but Andrea wasn’t on board then. We went along to the Poppyseed Festival pitch day, and I wrote the pitch with the narrator, and that was the first time we used it. It was like a trailer. We had a bunch of the sequences, but we had to hold it together in ten minutes, so I wrote a narration and Beng and I read the narration and the boys did their stuff. And we realised this was the way to do it, but with one narrator.

*How much of the process of research, rehearsal and writing, was improvised or organic?*

Much of it. We stuck to the storyline, we cut almost nothing of the storyline. We cut characters but kept the major events. So the structure of the narrative is from the novel. It’s the stuff that we did within that. For example, when they were doing the improvisation, Keith started identifying cartoon characters for each of the characters, so they would work with them to give them a sense. For Heather Cameron they had Elsa from *Frozen*, they took her characterisation from that. Count Zeneski is the Count from *Sesame Street* – the ‘Ah, ah, ah, ah’ is from that. For Keith’s character of Mr Musgrave he did the voice of Snagglepuss with those kind of phrases like ‘You’ve killed me, murdered me even’. Because I knew that he wanted that characterisation for Musgrave I wrote the text for Musgrave in that voice.

*All of that requires the dramaturgical process because you’re researching the cartoon characters as well. In that sense dramaturg for this production was an embodiment of all the people involved?*

Yes, there was textual dramaturgy and there was performance dramaturgy. This show, more than any other performance I’ve worked on, has the text and the performance tightly woven together. You almost can’t get the sense from the script of what this show is. You need to see it.

*What are the things that the audiences have found particularly striking about this production?*

The performances and the transitions between characters, how seamlessly they do it without props. That’s the other really deliberate decision that Beng made. There are no props in the show apart from a bench, the costumes, a gong and the book. And the only sound in it is generated by the actors. That’s what they found really fascinating – that we created the world with really just the craft of the actors. Also, it came through really strongly that if it was framed in a particular way so that if it had another casting composition, it would completely change it, make it seem racist. It would undermine one of the key reasons for doing the show, which is to explore a set of social and racial attitudes inAustralia of that time, including a fear of ‘the other’.

*As a writer how important do you see the potency of the cast working with text – in today’s theatrical society?*

It’s really important. For me as a writer developing a work I have absolutely no judgement of where I am at with the work until I hear actors read it. Writing for performance means it’s meant to be performed and I can sit there as a writer and look at it and think it’s great but for me it’s like music, it’s only when I hear it that I can hear where it’s completely out of tune. And that’s only because of what actors are doing with it. I’m a writer that loves working with actors. I write quite rhythmically because I love to hear actors work like that and so an actor that has a great facility with rhythm is brilliant.

*Have you ever written or seen anything where the casting was incorrect because of the race of gender of the characters?*

There is a real discussion about colour-blind casting, and I have a real problem with that. Colour-blind to me means that you are overlooking something, whereas for me I feel that it needs to be reflective casting that reflects the diversity of our society. When we audition for a show, when I write a show, we never have any preconceived idea, except for this one of ethnicity. We would never have a brief that describes ethnicity; I would never want that. The challenge for us as theatre makers is that we are casting great actors and every show should be diverse. As a company we have a genuine and ongoing commitment to diversity and reflection.

*What was Beng looking for specifically that he found in Keith and John?*

They are extraordinary shape-shifters. Both have an improvisational background. Keith has a huge history with improv. Keith and Beng had worked together before. Keith can turn on a dime. I see the way he transitions and it’s almost like he’s dancing. They both have such a physicality, that fantastic stage actor’s physicality, where they occupy the space but everything about their performance is all about their body as well as vocal. They are both clowns. They really have a great relationship and their clowning has a real sense of fun because they get along so well.

They have worked together before?

In the initial development Beng got together a bunch of actors that he liked and said ‘Come and work for a week’. He saw the two of them and the spark between them and thought ‘This is what I am looking for’. The show has a lot of clowning, there is so much slapstick in it, and they do that so well. They are both fantastic improvisers in the sense that you give them something and they just go with it.

*The written word – the script – how do you reflect that slapstick in the script?*

I don’t really. With any script I write I put in very few stage directions. Largely that’s because I have the luxury of working with a regular collaborator/director and I would never presume to tell him. There are very few stage directions in anything I write and he knows that even if there are, he’s not bound to them. I have no ambition to direct and he has no ambition to write. I don’t have the eye that he has of being able to see how something is in the space.

If you read the script you would have no idea. It says things like ‘battle sequence’. How could I describe what they do on stage? All of that came from Beng’s work with the actors in the space.

*Your job is to make sure that the language being used works?*

Depends on the project. There are two types of projects we do, there’s the project where I will come in with the script I’ve written and we will put it on. And then there’s the other where I am working with what the actors are doing and I am part of it, like a creative development process. My job is different in both those things. In this project my job was to capture and shape the great things they were doing in the room and capture that in the text and shape the original source material in a way that reflected that. This is a different process to when I come up with an idea and a concept and I write that narrative from start to finish. Both types involve a lot of active collaboration in the rehearsal room, which is the way Beng and I love to work.

*Describe the word ‘shape’ in the context of Yellow Wave.*

It would be about looking at each of the four chapters, what happens in the four books in the novel, and looking at what events to leave in and what events to leave out and which characters. How do I consolidate parts of the narrative so we still have the event happen but so that it doesn’t take place over 60 pages? We knew we wanted an hour-and-twenty-minute-show, it probably should be only an hour but if I were to unpick that narrative any more it would be like a Jenga tower, it would collapse. So for me, shaping is about giving a consistency to the voice. Making sure the voice of the narrator is consistent and is consistent with the tone of the performances of the others.

*And does that then also include structure?*

There was a lot text in the book where they went to Fort Mallarraway and then to another fort and they got blown up. I decided to change that because we only needed to have one fort blown up. We had all these events going on, I would choose one and then build the drama around that. I cut characters. There were about 70-odd characters in the book and I cut this back to 20 in the end.

Every scene in this play had to have a joke. Beng would ask, What’s the joke in this scene?’ On the floor we found we had a couple of jokes that were similar, so we cut a scene. Beng said ‘We’ve already done that joke so we don’t need to do it again’. We always looked for what was the punchline, the humour in it, to keep it moving.

It had to be through the lens of comedy because the play is looking at issues of race. It’s so serious and to some people really confronting, so we wanted to do it through comedy to keep it accessible. The feedback from teachers and students was that because it was comedy, it meant that they felt able to engage with it. Whereas if you have a serious story about all these racist people that were being horrible about the Chinese, they might feel like they were from the cohort that are depicted as incredibly racist, which may alienate them from the show. If you can laugh at it, it gives you a whole different access to it. It enables you to reflect on the serious elements of the work and your place as an audience member in the context of it in a totally different way.

*So how did you make sure that the comedy wasn’t racist? That it didn’t go to the next level?*

That’s a really difficult thing. I was very conservative but the boys and Beng really pushed, which is completely appropriate. There were some things that they added in during improvisation that I would have felt comfortable to have said or written. There are some things that aren’t in the written script that are on the stage because they are things they came up with. I felt much more reluctant to push the race parody to the extreme because it wasn’t appropriate.

*Do you think that would have been different if you’d been an Asian writer?*

Yes. I like that seeing the work made me uncomfortable, that I was made to look at my whiteness. The comedy lets you do that, enables you to do it. An Asian writer might have done that or maybe not. Who knows? It works with the combination of all of us, the five of us, this combination of voices. Beng, Keith and John had no problem pushing stuff, which is how it should be. I never said as a writer, ‘Don’t add lines’. It was part of how we collaborated to make the show. We would joke about it. They might ask ‘What’s the line?’ but I would say ‘Why worry about it; you haven’t said what I wrote for the last six months’. But it never bothered me in any way because I was part of a process of shaping material that they had come up with over a long period. Another writer might have felt differently, but then they would have been the wrong writer for this project. The collaboration in this project was alive and active from start to finish and that includes the audience. It is part of what makes this show unique.

*How do you define dramaturgy?*

On a show, I would be thinking about the text, the performance and the stagecraft and how they are framed; how that aesthetic is and how they work together. How the stagecraft of the direction and all of those elements facilitate the text or how the text is facilitating aspects of the performance.

If I was thinking of a dramaturg on a script I would be thinking of structure.

On a show, I would be thinking about how all the elements fit together and how they impact on each other and what was the overall aesthetic.

*So how’s that different from a director in your eyes?*

For me, the dramaturg is thinking about those things with an outside eye. You are talking to the director about the choices they make and how I think that is working and the impact of that and the director sets that.

The director creates the show and then the dramaturg asks ‘Have you thought about this? Is that what you are wanting because this is what I am seeing.’ Or ‘This reminds me of this’.

On a script, I would look at the order of events to see if that works – chronological or otherwise. For example, structuring the work in themes or chapters based on events or so forth. And that can mean quite an intervention on the script structurally although not necessarily on the text. And this might be done to leverage the drama, rather than just the writing. Sometimes chronological scripts seem written more like a memoir, and a dramaturg helps make it a play – more theatrical, a performance text.

*Thank you Jane.*