

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

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'You know, if we all knew our neighbours, our neighbourhoods would be real communities' – Catherine, Neighbourhood Watch

My Sunday routine is to walk to the Addison Rd Market in Marrickville. As I pass the Mediterranean inspired gardens I smile at the number of different people I walk past, they are a combination of many ages and from a range of diverse backgrounds. When I first read *Neighbourhood Watch* I thought of the streets I walk down on the way to the market and it made me wonder why I never chatted to anyone in their garden or sitting on their porch. We live in a country built on varying unique stories and experiences but how many of them do we take the time to actually hear? In Inner Sydney suburbs we all exist in such close proximity to one another but that doesn't necessarily mean that we know or understand one another. It is easy to be isolated in the suburbs.

Very early on in the rehearsal process the cast and I spoke about how Lally Katz's play is a true representation of suburban communities in Australian cities today. This play paints a picture of the range of cultures and the diverse mix of experiences we have dwelling in our terrace houses, weatherboards and apartment complexes. Katz's play is one example of the many unspoken stories that our country is built on. Audiences could leave this play questioning how involved in their community they actually are.

Upon reading the Belvoir interview with Lally Katz about how this play started, I was astonished to discover that just like Catherine, Lally was out in the street just after Labor won the 2007 election and Kevin Rudd was appointed Prime Minister. From across the street an elderly Hungarian woman called her over and showed her a black and white photo of her younger self. Lally spoke of wondering whether the world would change now that the Labor party had taken over from the Liberals. She talked to the Hungarian woman and wrote down her stories and this woman gave her the hope she was looking for. It is quite fitting for students to be studying *Neighbourhood Watch* today in a time where Trump has just been elected the US president and Britain is leaving the EU. Now, more than ever, is the time to ask if the world can become more hopeful in a time of adversity?

THEMES

It becomes apparent in the first scene of *Neighbourhood Watch* – full of many brief interactions – that the group of people who live on Mary Street have been living in close proximity for at least a year, yet they know very little about one another. Relationships are kept at arm's length. The relationships in this play are what we had aimed to illuminate in our reading of *Neighbourhood Watch*. The relationships between, housemates, lovers, neighbours and strangers are constantly either strengthening or weakening throughout the play. It was important for us to navigate for the audience the way in which Catherine learns about her relationship with herself as well as with her past and present and how she comes out on the other side of it all. An important part of this play is how people can connect without borders – meaning the generational and cultural differences between people does not stifle but rather, strengthens their connection.

Catherine becomes deeply interested in Ana's past as she begins to understand how resilient and strong Ana is living in Australia on her own, in a country that is worlds apart from Hungary. These two women teach each other to let other people into their lives and to know when it is time to move on. From Ana, Catherine learns to not dwell on the past and to connect with people who are there willing to help. From Catherine, Ana learns to trust and accept help from others. Together they confront what makes them unique, their disorders and their hang-ups. There is something touching in witnessing people from different generations teach each other lessons that result in growth.

The main characters in the play have a disease/illness:

- Catherine – eating disorder/depression
- Ken – diabetes
- Ana, Belinda and Ana's husband – cancer

By the end of the play, what each character learns is they cannot survive on their own, they need to rely on the help of others around them. We live in a world today where your friends are from *World of Warcraft*, you can order your groceries online and watch the goings on of the outside world on multiple screens from within your house. This means that people have lost the need to leave their house in order to connect or get by. Yet what we are rapidly missing out on is the face to face contact and storytelling that Catherine and Ana share together. In a world where people have so many fears for their safety and wellbeing and a world where you can become so easily isolated by that, there is strength in standing by and sharing with your neighbours and friends.

PROCESS

We first approached the performance of this play by beginning with a cold read around a table. Next was a step through read of each scene, where we forensically analysed the scenes in order to understand all the nuances of the work and answering any questions we had of the text and characters in them. From there we then stood up and began reading through the scenes with the aim of playing with vocal and physical qualities as well as shaping the dynamics of each scene. During the rehearsal process we have found the biggest challenge being how to both

- a) show difference between characters and
- b) show the difference between present day and flashbacks.

The actors creatively played with ways in which to make their characters distinct. Our answer was accent and vocal work as well as physicality. Annie plays the most characters, some of them coming one after the other. Early in the process Annie brought in costume and played with shifting her character by wearing a different item each time and pairing that with a different vocal tone. It was highly effective. It was important for us in the first scene of the show – the longest scene in the play - to keep pace quick and exciting while also keeping intact the clarity of introducing multiple characters. So finding accents and physicality was crucial to set up from the moment the play begins.

As we stepped through and discussed the scene we all answered questions such as: has Ana ever been in Belinda's house? If this were a suburb in Sydney which one would it be? What is the nature of Ken and Catherine's relationship? When did Catherine begin to skip meals and why? Is the phone actually ringing? We were equally forensic with each scene. This allowed for clarity and consistency to help inform all the decisions made about performance. Something we were careful with was not making up any facts, every decision we made was based on what the characters did and said in the script. Lally leaves lots of detailed clues to assist in bringing these characters to life.

Dynamically we paid strong attention to where there are pauses in the script and wanted to honour the stage directions in order to let certain moments have more emphasis than

others. For example, the pause after Catherine realises that Ken loves her meant that the dialogue that lead to it needed to drive at a fast pace in order to make the pause and realisation potent.

The flashbacks were also challenging for us to stage. We questioned how to shift time and mood with a reading? We decided that by physically altering the blocking it would give a distinct sense of travelling back in time. It was important then to have Ana always remaining facing forward since she is so grounded in her present life. In the flashback scenes she plays the role of narrator and orchestrator. We also wanted to place Catherine within the flashbacks as both observer and participant. The best answer was to have everyone face the audience in present day scenes and turn in to face each other for the flashbacks, making them in profile to the audience. That gave the audience a sense of also participating as voyeurs of the memory, as if they are dreaming it up themselves. An added layer to evoke past memories and signal that we are in a Hungarian flashback was the use of music. Sam hums a tune underneath the flashbacks, this convention is introduced in the Gypsy scene and is an instant way for the audience to be transported to a different space and place throughout the play.

HOW WE WOULD STAGE IT

If we were to stage this play music would play a crucial role, especially when it comes to evoking Ana's past, the busy streets of Hungary. The music would become a motif that transports the audience back in time and can shift through many stages from nostalgic to foreshadowing danger. Costume would also be a crucial design aspect that would assist in distinguishing between characters. I could imagine the world of the street always existing throughout the play, I think the signifiers of the street such as fences, letterboxes etc, should never disappear and the action of the play could shift within it.

The blocking of the actors would shift through different configurations of proxemics. Between individual private moments being highlighted to group street community settings (first scene and Neighbourhood Watch meeting), as well as intimate connections one-on-one between Ana and Catherine, Catherine and Ken and Catherine and Martin.

It would be worth showing each neighbour in solitude. For example, watching Belinda knitting dolls dresses and watching tv screens, or Ana looking at black and white photographs in her living room. Creating an individual moment for each character on the street would highlight their isolation and contrast it to the friendships and connections they have formed by the end. It would demonstrate how through forging relationships the characters now have a hope for the future and for one another.